

Husemann, K.C., Ladstaetter, F. & Luedicke, M. K. (2015). Conflict Culture and Conflict Management in Consumption Communities. *Psychology and Marketing*, 32(3), pp. 265-284. doi: 10.1002/mar.20779



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Original citation: Husemann, K.C., Ladstaetter, F. & Luedicke, M. K. (2015). Conflict Culture and Conflict Management in Consumption Communities. *Psychology and Marketing*, 32(3), pp. 265-284. doi: 10.1002/mar.20779

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Conflict Culture and Conflict Management in Consumption Communities

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Abstract

This study explores conflict culture as a distinct and influential element of a consumption community's broader culture, and explores how communities initiate, perform, manage, and resolve intra-community conflicts. A four-year interpretive study of the Premium Cola consumption community reveals two sets of formal and informal elements of conflict culture; explains how community members perform routine, and manage transgressive conflicts; shows how members garner positive and negative practical, identity, and relationship value from these two types of conflict; and documents how a community's conflict culture develops through inventing new conflict behaviors to resolve transgressive conflicts. The study thus contributes new theoretical insights to the literature on social conflict in online consumption communities, discusses managerial implications, and initiates a discussion about conflict culture.

Keywords: consumption community, online community, conflict culture, social conflict

Consumption communities emerge from consumers nurturing a shared passion for specific brands, products, activities, or ideas collectively (Mathwick, Wiertz, & de Ruyter, 2008; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Chalmers Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013). Consumers have built communities for centuries, but the emergence of online communication technologies, consumer-company co-creation projects, and relational marketing activities have rendered consumption communities substantially more interesting for consumers and in consequence more relevant for marketers (Prügl & Schreier, 2006; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Von Hippel, 2005).

Consumption communities exist in different spheres, scopes, and intensities. Subcultures of consumption, for example, emerge as distinct, self-selected subgroups of society that form on the basis of shared commitments to activities such as motorcycling or running (Chalmers Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Brand communities, in turn, emerge as structured sets of social relations among admirers of one specific brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Consumer tribes result when consumers temporarily flock together in casual, isolated encounters around activities such as joint roller skating (Cova & Cova, 2001). Consumption communities like the Jeep brandfests, for example, draw their appeal primarily from physical togetherness (McAlexander & Schouten, 1998), whereas communities for collective problem solving (Mathwick, et. al., 2008), for example, thrive entirely on online communication.

Consumers join consumption communities to perform shared rituals and traditions (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), to enjoy a sense of community with like-minded others (Kozinets, 2001), to express their creativity (Gebauer, Fuller, & Pezzeri, 2012), to give voice to ideological criticism (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010), and to garner identity value by distinguishing themselves from other consumers (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013). In their consumption communities, consumers also perform a variety of roles such as mentors, heroic role models, or talent scouts (Fournier & Lee, 2009) and engage in a range of value-creation

practices, such as documenting, customizing, and evangelizing (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Performing these roles and practices gives rise to a shared sense of “Gemeinschaft” (Tönnies, [1887] 1957), “community ethos” (Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001, p. 421), “linking value” (Cova, 1997, p. 297), “bonding together” (Kozinets, 2002a, p. 832), and of the particular type of social obligation known as “social capital” (Mathwick, et. al., 2008, p. 832).

The majority of consumption community researchers thus focuses on exploring how community consumers and marketers produce feelings of kinship, togetherness, and harmony. More recently, however, a small, but growing group of consumer researchers has begun to explore how, when, and why consumption communities become sites of boiling tensions and overt social conflict. As the perpetuation, success, and “continuity” (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013, p. 1011) of their communities is of utmost importance for consumers as well as marketers, these studies contribute important knowledge of how conflict affects consumption communities.

This emerging literature already offers fascinating insights into conflict sources (Hemetsberger, 2006; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), conflict resolution practices (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013), and outcomes of consumption community conflicts (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001). Yet, none of the existing studies explores the possibility and consequences of communities developing a distinct and dynamic conflict culture, i.e. a specific set of values, roles, artifacts, and behaviors that community members draw on when performing, managing, and harnessing value from intra-community conflicts (Swidler, 1986).

To address this gap in theoretical knowledge, the authors conducted a four-year interpretive study in the context of the Premium Cola online consumption community (see www.premium-cola.de). The study reveals formal and informal elements of the Premium community’s conflict culture, explains how members perform routine conflicts, use conflict management techniques to end transgressive conflicts, and harness positive and negative

value from conflicts. The study also reveals how the community's conflict culture develops over time. Through these findings, this research advances the literature on the dynamics of social conflict in online consumption communities, develops the concept of conflict culture as a distinct element within a broader community culture, and offers practical insights for conflict cultivation and community management.

The paper is organized as follows. First, it outlines the relevant literature on social conflict in consumption communities and highlights prevalent gaps in theoretical knowledge. Second, it reviews sociological conflict theories that inform the empirical analysis of conflict culture. Third, it describes the research context—the Premium Cola community—before it, fourth, presents key empirical findings on Premium's conflict culture. The paper concludes with discussing theoretical and managerial implications of this study for consumption community and conflict research and practice.

Social Conflict in Consumption Communities

Consumer researchers have studied social conflicts in two kinds of communities that we distinguish conceptually as “communities in a broad sense” and “communities in a narrow sense.” Communities in a broad sense emerge where consumers build loosely-knit, weak, or entirely imagined social ties based on their shared commitment to a product class, brand, activity, or consumption ideology (Anderson, 2006; Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013, p. 1012; Granovetter, 1973; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Members of these communities predominantly feel connected because their individual identity projects rely on similar brands, material, and symbolic resources (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013), rather than on actual social relationships. The broad and largely anonymous community of “people who snowboard,” the community of 44 million American runners (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013), or the community of contributors to virtual problem solving communities (Mathwick, et. al., 2008) can be considered such communities in a broad sense.

In online spheres, communities in a broad sense often emerge in the periphery of communities in a narrow sense. Communities in a narrow sense emerge from individuals fostering closely-knit, enduring social relationships that are more akin to what Tönnies calls “Gemeinschaft” (Tönnies, [1887] 1957). In these communities, members pursue a shared mission over an extended period of time, take responsibility for their joint projects, make key decisions collectively, and solve important problems together. Examples of communities in a narrow sense are the close communities of people who identify themselves as “snowboarders” (vs. “people who snowboard”) and meet regularly at a particular mountain site to snowboard together, or the community of outlaw bikers that meets in a specific city, or the core community of members of online gardening or cooking communities that fosters close and enduring relationships with each other (de Valck, 2007; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). In these more closely-knit social settings, consumers perform community by continuously building, maintaining, and actualizing actual social relations rather than consuming imagined community membership based on the consumption of similar resources.

Conflict in Consumption Communities in a Broad Sense

Consumer and organization research on communities in a broad sense provides valuable insights into three sources of community conflict, one conflict management practice, and several types of conflict outcomes. A first notable source of conflict is disagreement about a community’s symbolic meaning and status in a broader social context. Brand community members, for example, fight with members of oppositional brand communities about the social and cultural meanings of their brands, about legitimate consumer ideologies (Ewing, Wagstaff, & Powell, 2013; Hickman & Ward, 2007; Luedicke, 2006; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001), and particularly about the related question of whether these brands and their consumption practices are righteous or ridiculous (Kozinets, 2001; Luedicke, et al., 2010). A disagreement between core and peripheral community members about how to genuinely consume focal community objects or services is a second known source of conflict (Chalmers

Thomas, et al., 2013; Kozinets, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Members of the North American long distance running community, for example, often rely on the same market resources, but pursue different identity goals. Conflicts emerge among these heterogeneous runners, for example, when faster runners feel disturbed in their practice by slower runners who block their racing routes (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013).

A third influential source of conflict in consumption communities in a broad sense is a competitive mindset. While members of co-creation communities, for example, work together to co-create encyclopedia entries or commercial designs (Gebauer, et al., 2012; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008), they also compete for recognition, argue over the validity of certain information, and sometimes try to undermine each other's reputation.

Thus far, the study of Chalmers Thomas et al. (2013) is the only one to explicitly address the question of how consumers manage conflicts that have the potential to harm the community and jeopardize its continuity. These authors find that members of the American long distance running community rely on "frame alignment practices" (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013, p. 1010) to resolve conflicts between loosely connected participants that share key community resources. Such practices include, for example, defining different starting times or separating routes for slow and fast runners.

Conflicts in communities in a broad sense are known to produce various important outcomes. For example, social conflicts are known to foster individual and collective identity projects (Luedicke, et al., 2010; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), fascinate and attract new community members, and energize the community's creative process (Gebauer, et al., 2012; Humphreys & Grayson, 2008; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Prior consumer research also explains that, and why, conflict is an important element in the continuation of communities in a broad sense.

However, in these communities, social relations are likely to be more accidental than deliberate (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013); more temporary than enduring (Gebauer, et al.,

2012); and more grounded in competitive than community mind-sets (Humphreys & Grayson, 2008). It seems that because these communities in a broad sense are less interested in nurturing, protecting, and developing lasting personal relationships and pursuing communal projects, conflicts tend to affect these communities positively. In communities in a narrow sense, however, conflicts can also yield detrimental effects.

Conflict in Consumption Communities in a Narrow Sense

At present, de Valck's (2007) study of an online community of food enthusiasts, and Hemetsberger's (2006) work on a free/open source software development community are the only two consumer research projects to directly address conflicts in more closely-knit consumption communities. Both authors study communities in which members foster intense and enduring personal relationships, interact on a regular basis, and contribute to a shared community goal.

In her food community study, de Valck (2007) finds three prevalent sources of conflict: Members contest each other's expertise; they fight about the legitimacy of certain behaviors, practices, and norms within the community; and they fight about diverging views on specific food consumption issues. Hemetsberger's (2006, p. 499) F/OSS open source community study, in turn, finds that members predominantly, and continuously, fight on a more abstract level over the question of whether "idealist" or "pragmatist" values should define the community's mission and which values should prevail when making important decisions.

These studies paint a more ambiguous picture of conflict outcomes for communities in a narrow sense, than studies on consumption communities in a broad sense. De Valck (2007), for instance, points out that intra-community conflicts contribute to shaping participants' individual profiles relative to other community members, and to developing a collective identity. Yet, she also notes without further specification that "too much" conflict can destabilize the community and potentially undermine its spirit (p. 272). To manage escalating

conflicts, food enthusiasts, for example, share stories about their culinary practices such as “first cooking experiences” (p. 269). This particular conflict management practice directs members’ attention back to celebrating their similarities and shared purpose and thus prevents community conflicts from turning sour.

Hemetsberger (2006) similarly argues that in the more closely-knit corners of software co-creation communities, conflicts tend to energize and revive community life. In these settings, conflicts tend to produce an “oppositional energy” (p. 496) that fuels community discourse and reflection, which is an essential part of what makes online co-creation appealing. However, Hemetsberger’s work also points at negative side effects of social conflict in close-knitted communities. She argues that “extremely controversial issues” need some form of relief to prevent the community from “paralysis” (Hemetsberger, 2006, p. 499). One way of managing conflicts over such extremely controversial issues is “cultivating a sense of humor” (Hemetsberger, 2006, p. 499).

In summary, community practices such as bringing members’ attention back to similarities rather than differences (de Valck, 2007), or cultivating a sense of humor (Hemetsberger, 2006) are highly indicative of a more systematic way in which consumption communities in a narrow sense perform and manage social conflicts. In fact, these findings suggest that online consumption communities may not accidentally fight in these particular ways, but perform conflicts based on a specific set of values, roles, artifacts, and practices. That is, online consumption communities may develop a conflict culture that shapes the ways in which intra-community conflicts unfold.

Because prior marketing and consumer researchers have not yet directly studied conflict culture, or traced the development of conflict culture over time, the existing literature leaves five important questions unanswered: (1) Do (online) consumption communities perpetuate a conflict culture as part of their broader community culture? (2) What is such a conflict culture made of? (3) How do consumption communities perform and manage social

conflicts? (4) Which outcomes do social conflicts produce for these communities? (5) And how does community conflict culture change over time?

To be able to address these questions requires to first gain a comprehensive theoretical understanding of what social conflict is, and how social conflicts can impact social relations more generally. The primary source of such knowledge is the sociological literature on social conflict.

Sociological Theory of Social Conflict

In sociological research, conflict is commonly conceptualized as an interaction relationship of individuals and groups with incompatible goals (Kriesberg, 2007), or simply as an “encounter of differences” (Levy & Zaltman, 1975, p. 67). In popular culture, social conflicts have a reputation for being destructive and disintegrating, whereas academia recognizes social conflicts also as a mechanism for relationship rejuvenation and development (Coser, 1956, 1957; Dubiel, 1998; Hirschman, 1994; Simmel, 1964). Sociologists, in particular, consider conflicts a source of socially progressive and socially integrative outcomes for society and its sub-groups (Bonacker & Imbusch, 2010). Sociological theory of socially progressive conflict outcomes argues that social conflict is an impetus for—not a consequence of—broader social changes (Bonacker & Imbusch, 2010; Marx & Engels, 2009 [1848]), and that conflict prevents a society from stagnation and loss of creativity (Coser, 1957, p. 197). Sociological theory of socially integrative conflict outcomes, in turn, proclaims that conflicts have a capacity for “achieving some kind of unity” among conflict parties (Simmel, 1964, p. 13). According to this line of thinking, conflicts within groups strengthen solidarity, group cohesion, and group identity by forcing conflict parties—despite incompatible goals and hostile feelings—to reflect on each other’s viewpoints and their shared boundaries; by passing both parties through crisis and struggle; and by clearing a tense atmosphere from anger (Coser, 1956; Hirschman, 1994; Simmel, 1964). Between groups, conflicts are particularly influential for strengthening group identity, raising group

boundaries, preventing group members from leaving the group, producing a consciousness of kind, and mobilizing energies (Coser, 1956; Kriesberg, 2007).

One of the most important puzzles for conflict sociologists is the question of what makes a conflict productive versus destructive. Sociologists tend to argue that conflict outcomes depend most notably on the conflict parties' ability to tame, refine, and thus "cultivate" their conflict behaviors (Coser, 1956; Dubiel, 1998, p. 210; Sarcinelli, 1990). Thus far, researchers have highlighted seven practices that characterize such refined, cultivated conflicts: Conflict parties (1) embrace plurality and heterogeneity, and invite conflict as part of their group culture; (2) perform conflicts visibly, transparently, and democratically; (3) develop and comply to a minimum set of consensual values and rules for enacting their conflicts; (4) remind and force others to adhere to this consensus, (5) practice self-restraint, step back from opinions, and respect opponents; (6) tame emerging aggressions by changing the mode of argumentation (e.g. from using coercion to using humor) or re-directing aggressions away from the original target (e.g. from internal to external targets); and (7) focus on negotiating the terms upon which both parties can agree, rather than on defeating the opponent (Coser, 1956; Dubiel, 1998; Kriesberg, 2007; Laureys & Simons, 2010; Sarcinelli, 1990). Such conflict practices can be imagined as routinized behaviors that emerge as a nexus of particular doings, images, competences, meanings, and objects, i.e., as "Praktik" rather than "Praxis" (Reckwitz, 2005, p. 253).

Sociological research on conflict culture tends to advance a normative conceptualization of conflict culture. Our study, in contrast, conceptualizes conflict culture descriptively. Such a descriptive lens allows us for empirically exploring, rather than normatively assessing, the specific styles, roles, and behaviors that constitute a particular community's conflict culture. Based on Swidlers' (1986) early conceptualizations of culture, we imagine a community's conflict culture as a toolbox stocked with relevant skills, habits, and styles for performing community conflicts in constructive ways.

Consumer research on social conflicts confirms many of the sociological insights on social conflict. For example, consumer research emphasizes that conflicts foster community identity and vitality (de Valck, 2007; Hemetsberger, 2006; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), that conflicts contribute to community boundary maintenance (Ewing, et al., 2013; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), or that communities use humor for taming aggressions (Hemetsberger, 2006). However, consumer researchers have yet to explore if such behaviors are manifestations of a more systematic conflict culture, what such a conflict culture would be constituted of, how community members perform and harness social conflicts, and how consumption community conflict culture changes over time. From a managerial perspective, it is also of interest to explore which role conventional, hierarchical conflict management behaviors (Amason, Thompson, Hochwarter, & Harrison, 1995; Rahim, 2002) play for consumption communities.

Research Context and Methods

Our empirical approach for addressing these questions involved the observation and analysis of the German activist consumption community Premium Cola. The Premium Cola community—or Premium—emerged in 1999 when a group of frustrated cola fans' attempted to bring back their beloved "Afri Cola" drink. The reason for the nascent community's agitation was not so much that the German Mineralbrunnen AG had bought the Afri Cola brand, but that the new owner had changed the Cola's recipe to please a more conventional consumer taste (e.g. more sugar, less caffeine).

After two years of unsuccessful lobbying, the group came to realize that their resistance would not prove successful or elicit a change in recipe. Overwhelmed with frustration by the new owner's disregard for their calls, group members decided to "do their own thing" (emic term). In this respect, members obtained the original Afri Cola recipe from a former Afri Cola bottler and launched the "community brand" called Premium Cola (Füller, Luedicke, & Jawecki, 2007). From day one, it became imperative for the community to

evolve and develop a more ethical business model and organization than those of the Mineralbrunnen AG, which they had initially protested. Community members began to run their own operations as a democratic community. This meant that everyone—e.g. consumers, bottlers, distributors, or barkeepers—could take part in the Premium Cola collective and be included in its organization and decision-making. For its first two years, Premium Cola existed as a local community in Hamburg, Germany. After two years, Premium's sales had spread past the borders of Hamburg reaching shops and bars throughout Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. As a result, the widely dispersed community members were no longer able to meet face-to-face on a regular basis. Since community members wanted to maintain the transparency of their internal communications and allow members to participate in the community's decisions, the community moved its communications to a mailing list. Since 2003, the mailing list has been the primary platform for conversations between community members (in February 2014, "the list" (emic terms) contained about 16.000 emails). In 2009, the community decided to develop and market a beer under the Premium brand, which was followed by a Premium coffee in 2011. Members pursued these product line extensions as a means for demonstrating that they were able to successfully market other products—not just a Cola—while still adhering to the ethical standards defined by their operating system. In 2012, Premium Cola sold more than one million units of Premium cola, beer, and coffee throughout bars and selected shops in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland.

Legally, Premium Cola is a non-profit association. Organizationally, the community is run by three paid staffers, about 60 proactive voluntary contributors, and about 120 community 'lurkers' mainly from Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. The community outsources its cola, beer, and coffee production as well as parts of its distribution to external companies that are carefully tested for their adherence to the community's ethical standards. Community members perform organizational tasks, make strategic decisions, discuss communication issues, and personally sell Premium products to local scene bars and clubs.

The community makes all strategic decisions collectively, but three paid staffers perform most routine tasks.

As a result of their consumer enthusiasm for a particular soft drink, their anti-corporate mission, and their production activities, the Premium Cola community oscillates between logics of consumption and production. Akin to free and open source communities (Hemetsberger, 2006), the burning man organization (Chen & O'Mahony, 2008; Kozinets, 2002a), the community supported agriculture system (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007), and online peer-to-peer problem solving communities (Mathwick, Wiertz, & Ruyter, 2008), which also consume and produce their own core products and services collectively, Premium Cola faces a range of internal tensions that result from their particular hybrid position. As in the other consumption communities, Premium members consume their own products, ideologies, and lifestyles, but are also responsible for making decisions, interacting with external partners, and allocating routine tasks collectively. This particular combination of structural and ideological features renders the Premium community an ideal context for studying conflict culture in online consumption communities.

The second author began his data collection on the Premium Cola community in 2009, performing a netnographic investigation of the community's website and various other on- and offline sources referring to the Premium Cola brand (Kozinets, 2002b). He then immersed himself in the community, closely following Premium's mailing list and engaging in personal conversations with community members. He conducted 15 phenomenological interviews with members of the community, attended three Premium Cola conventions (October 2010, May 2011, and June 2012), and participated in four "core team meetings" (emic term) via Skype conferencing in June and July 2012. This first research phase provided the authors with extensive knowledge of the community's history, ideology, and organizational background.

A first round of data analysis, categorization, and interpretation revealed that social conflict was an essential part of Premium's larger community culture. The first and second

author therefore embarked on a second round of netnographic data collection to directly search for, identify, and extract community conflicts. The fact that the Premium Cola community predominantly communicates through its mailing list facilitated this endeavor. This process produced a data set of 18 discussions. The authors then studied these discussions more thoroughly and excluded four discussions that did not explicitly include conflict behaviors. The final data set consists of 14 discussion threads containing 1,006 emails (see Table 1). As selection criteria, the authors only considered conflicts that had at least five participants and comprised at least six messages. In a final step of analysis, the authors conducted an interpretive content analysis with inductive and deductive categorization. This allowed the authors to structure the data set with regards to formal and informal conflict elements, patterns, as well as outcomes (Mayring, 2002). The results of these analyses are provided below.

Findings

Our empirical analysis of social conflicts in the Premium Cola community yields a range of important insights into the conflict culture of a community in a narrow sense. To best reveal these findings, we first document the key formal and informal elements of Premium's conflict culture. Then, we conceptualize and illustrate two different types of conflict patterns. And lastly, we show how these two types of conflict produce positive and negative practical, identity, and relationship value to the Premium Cola community and its conflict culture.

Formal and Informal Elements of Premium's Conflict Culture

Premium's conflict culture is part of a broader cultural " 'toolkit' of habits, skills, and styles" (Swidler, 1986, p. 273) that members use when performing community. Some elements of Premium's conflict culture are formal and explicit, whereas others can be rather informal and hidden between the lines of the community's everyday communications. Corresponding to their different degrees of formalization, we conceptualize the community's

mailing list as well as its operating system as formal elements of Premium's conflict culture, and the community's conflict-specific roles and behaviors as informal elements.

The list. The community-managed mailing list, referred to in emic terms as "the list," is the medium by which the community performs most of its social conflicts. This text-based, asynchronous form of communication enables members to stay updated on ongoing conflicts as well as contribute ideas and opinions at any time. The list not only allows all community members to participate in the same conflict, but share opinions on multiple topics in parallel. Our data indicates that conflicts in the list can last up to several months, engage dozens of community members, and produce hundreds of messages (see Table 1).

Using this particular medium has four important implications for the Premium community's conflict behaviors. First, unlike human memory the list stores each and every posting accurately. Therefore, members are able to go back to older conflicts and remind themselves of how they had resolved or undeliberately led to the escalation of similar conflicts in the past. This behavior aids members' collective learning and development of conflict culture. Second, because the list is a quasi-public space, members feel obliged to exercise a higher-than-usual degree of self-control, reflexivity, and responsibility when posting their opinions (Berry, 2006). Third, communication in such online media occurs without physical encounters between community members. In fact, most Premium community members only know each other through writing. The absence of physical encounters, body language, and audible tone of voice deprives Premium's discussions of multiple communication elements that prevent and subdue conflicts in unmediated communications (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). As a result, Premium members tend to perform their conflicts in a more precise, factual voice and show a higher sensibility for potential misunderstandings, ambiguities, irony, and humorous statements than one would expect in typical offline encounters (Berry, 2006). However, fourth, the list not only fosters more constructive conflict practices but, at times, also provides a stage for indiscretion, defamation, and abuse (Berry,

2006; Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Wandering off in such abusive territories prolongs conflicts that would not have emerged, or had long been settled, in offline contexts. The mailing list thus constitutes a key formal element of Premium's conflict culture by both limiting and extending the ways in which members can initiate, perform, and manage social conflicts.

The operating system. Throughout its 14 years of community continuity, the Premium community has collectively developed an elaborate notion of how businesses should be run, and which values should govern the economy behavior. Premium members condense, conserve, and promote these shared understandings in a written text called "Das Betriebssystem" (operating system). This operating system is publicly available on Premium's website (www.premium-cola.de/betriebssystem, in German language only).

As a formal collection of the community's beliefs, values, and legitimized business practices, the operating system serves as a constitution for the community and as its repository for legitimized conflict behaviors. The operating system, for example, formalizes the idea that "all people involved shall be able to have an equal say on all matters of the organization – including the end customers, because they are also involved" (02. Modul "Kollektiv"). When community members argue about issues of internal organization, power relations, demarcation from mainstream market actors, or political correctness, for example, they cite passages from the operating system in order to defend their positions. Community members most often refer back to the operating system when trying to resolve conflicts, particularly conflicts imperative to the very nature and mission of the Premium Cola community. Such practices of engaging with and extending the operating system are a key part of Premium's conflict culture.

Conflict-specific roles. Community members typically develop and perform a wide range of informal roles, which play an important part of community culture (Fournier & Lee, 2009; Schau, et al., 2009). At Premium, we found two informal—i.e. unarticulated, yet visibly enacted—roles that are an important part of the community's conflict culture.

The first role is that of the conflict moderator. Typically, community members initiate, perform, and resolve their conflicts collectively, guided by the principle of equality. The community member who adopts the role of the conflict moderator, however, accepts a particular responsibility for conflict behavior in the community. The conflict moderator more often and more systematically nurtures and manages conflicts compared to other members. In the empirical data, community member Ulrich has performed this role as conflict moderator since the onset of the list. Ulrich is the community's founder, its "central organizer" (emic term), and the legal owner of the Premium brand. As the primary interface between external partners and the community, Ulrich is most often the first to see new market opportunities and arising threats. As conflict moderator, Ulrich does not ignore potentially controversial topics or respond to them directly. Instead, he most often "throws" these topics as questions out "into the list" (emic terms) inviting members to contribute their views and ideas to the issue at hand. As the conflict moderator he also works proactively to ensure that conflicts do not get out of hand or terminate before the community has arrived at a well-reflected collective decision (even if this is not his preferred decision). In this role, Ulrich frequently synthesizes incompatible views to foster approximation, or asks critical questions to elicit controversy among community members. Through these behaviors, Ulrich nurtures and cultivates the community's conflict behaviors as a member among equals, rather than trying to end conflicts from a superior power position. However, at times, the conflict moderator uses his technological possibilities and authority as the respected founder of the collective to intervene in conflicts that transgress the boundaries of legitimate conflict behavior. In these rare cases—e.g. two out of 14 in our data set—the conflict moderator engages in decidedly authoritative structural and processual interventions to terminate conflicts that threaten community continuity. In one particular example, Ulrich manages (rather than nurtures) a conflict when he single-handedly excludes an obstinate troublemaker from the list. Such deliberately managerial interventions of a conflict moderator happen rarely as well as reluctantly at

Premium. This is due to the fact that hierarchical interventions fundamentally contradict Premium's self-understanding as a democratic community of equals.

The following data excerpt illustrates Ulrich's unease after forcing a conflict to an end by using his authority position to exclude a rogue member from the list. Despite his reluctance, Ulrich intervenes structurally to end a controversy that lasted for months, had consumed extensive community resources, and thus had threatened to damage community relationships and continuity.

Ulrich (12. August 2012): "Hello, yesterday I logged Hendrik out of the list, that feels very very (not to say very) strange. However, it also feels right [...] For many of us it was very annoying to follow this discussion. Sorry from my side for that. However, unfortunately that was necessary in order to not foster a collective by the grace of Ulrich, but to have a conflict culture under a collective watch [...] and now? Concerning myself: finally getting work done with less negative thoughts and more energy. Discussing here [in the list] fact-bound and calm again. The entire thing blocked so many resources [...]."

As we show below, this atypical act of authoritative conflict management by the conflict moderator not only resolves a transgressive conflict, but also contributes to advancing the community's conflict culture by introducing a new formal element to the operating system.

The second conflict-specific role in the Premium community is the lead agitator. Whereas the role of the conflict moderator has thus far only been adopted by Ulrich, the lead agitator role has been performed by different community members over time. Community member Carlos adopted this role from about 2004 to 2011 and member Hendrik from 2011 until 2013. The lead agitator takes on the important task of challenging, unsettling, provoking, and pushing the community in order to arrive at better and more collectively supported decisions. Members performing the role of the lead agitator typically push against the community becoming too commercial, market-oriented, or "mainstream" and to think again

before readily accepting changes that have a potential to affect the community and its brand.

In this capacity, the lead agitator is a representative of less outspoken community members, as well as the first person to address and argue with. Despite efforts to formulate criticisms in ways that do not attack other members personally, and to not become overly annoying, destructive, or hypocritical, lead agitators sometimes become collectively disdained as destructive troublemakers rather than recognized as important agents in a community. In our empirical case, the two members who have performed the role of the lead agitator in the past have eventually left the Premium community after having fallen from grace and finding themselves unwilling to cope with the community's accusations any longer.

Routinized conflict behaviors. When analyzing the Premium community's conflicts, we found that the community's conflict culture involved a limited set of routinized and recurring conflict behaviors. Members use behaviors such as inviting conflict, showing respect for otherness, or releasing aggressions to argue different topics, but use them in similar ways. Many of these behaviors are known from normative conflict sociology as conflict cultivation practices, i.e. routinized behaviors that conflict parties use to perform conflicts in civilized and productive, rather than destructive, ways (Coser, 1956; Dubiel, 1998; Laureys & Simons, 2010). Through inventing, selecting, abandoning, enacting, or improving such routinized conflict behaviors, Premium community members are able to produce value rather than destroy value through uncontrolled or abusive conduct. As we show below, engaging in such productive conflict behaviors not only creates practical, identity, and relationship value, but also contributes to developing trust in the community member's ability to argue productively, and to respect the mutually agreed upon borders of legitimate conduct. To illustrate this point, we outline Premium's three most prevalent types of routinized conflict behavior below, e.g. inviting conflict, showing respect for otherness, and releasing aggression.

Inviting conflict. It is commonly assumed that (consumption) communities tend to avoid rather than invite conflict. However, our analysis reveals that Premium members proactively embrace certain types of conflict as part of their routine community activities. By “throwing a topic into the list” (emic term), for example, members deliberately initiate discussions about decisions that will have important implications for the community’s market behaviors, branding position, and overall moral integrity provided in their operating system. As these discussions turn into encounters of differences (Levy & Zaltman, 1975), community members invite more alternative viewpoints and pose critical questions to prevent the conflict from ending before a satisfactory consensus is found. For example, during a conflict involving Premium’s decision for accepting or rejecting an agency’s offer for free advertising (conflict No. 3 in Table 1), conflict moderator Ulrich proactively invites conflict by encouraging community members to share their oppositional views. Such behaviors also serve to steer conflicts into directions that the email author considers important, as well as, away from topics that he or she considers irrelevant.

Ulrich (5. May 2006): “*But do we really want that, is it too big for us, or does it all depend on if it fits the Premium (anti) ad?*”

Conflict moderators, lead agitators, and ordinary community members engage in such conflict invitations to elicit critical reflections about important topics. This is done until the community agrees that the situation has sufficiently been assessed from all relevant perspectives and an informed decision can be made. Such behaviors of inviting and encouraging of conflicts serve as important parts of Premium’s informal conflict culture.

Showing respect for otherness. A second key set of conflict behaviors at Premium can be summarized as showing respect for otherness (Dubiel 1998; Laureys and Simons 2010; Sarcinelli 1990). Showing respect for otherness is part of the community’s minimal values and rule consensus and a routinized behavior that Premium members rely on when performing conflicts (Dubiel, 1998; Laureys & Simons, 2010; Sarcinelli, 1990). In the list,

members often and proactively express respect for alternative viewpoints even if this may require additional rhetorical and emotional effort or run counter to their factual differences. Members know—sometimes from firsthand experience at Premium—that disrespecting diverging viewpoints can cause destructive tensions. One specific recurring rhetorical pattern to avoid such outcomes is to emphasize an amicable relationship before attending to topic-specific disagreements. Valentin, for example, writes as part of conflict No. 2 (in Table 1):

Valentin (3. March 2005): “My dear Roman, I’m looking forward to seeing you in April, but what really interests me right now is why you’re investing such a great amount of energy in preventing us from going to this presentation? Does it violate the Premium philosophy in your opinion? In fact, I don’t really get it”.

Distinguishing between factual disagreements and personal relationships allows members to make productive use of individuality and otherness and, thus, resolve even highly emotional conflicts without frictional losses. Another way in which Premium members acknowledge otherness is by practicing self-restraint (Dubiel, 1998). Practicing self-restraint within the Premium community includes, for instance, that convicted offenders are expected to hold back on their own viewpoints in order to avoid obstructing community progress.

Releasing aggression. Despite all cultivation efforts, community conflicts sometimes evoke anger and aggression. To protect the community from the detrimental effects of such feelings, members release their aggressions in two ways. Through humor, members relax the conflict parties emotionally and physically (see also Hemetsberger, 2006). And by redirecting negative emotions from internal to external targets, community members are able to act out aggressions without jeopardizing in-group identity or relationships (Coser, 1956).

In summary, the key elements of Premium’s conflict culture include: using the list, working with the operating system, adopting conflict roles, and engaging in routinized conflict behaviors. Our analysis reveals that Premium community members combine these formal and informal elements in unique ways for any given conflict situation.

Next, we show that, and how, members perform conflicts in two distinct patterns that we call ‘routinized’ and ‘transgressive’ conflicts.

Routinized Conflicts

The first and most frequent conflict pattern that we observed in the Premium community is what we call routinized conflicts. Routinized conflicts are conflicts that the community performs in controlled, habitual ways. At Premium, members engage in such routinized conflicts over a wide range of topics, including their relationships to competitors, the moral legitimacy of advertising, the expansion into new markets, and various aspects of political correctness or personal sensibility (see Table 1). When performing routinized conflicts, members skillfully mix and match elements from their formal and informal conflict cultural repertoire to collectively find and legitimize answers to controversial issues. Members automatically or deliberately engage in conflict behaviors, such as inviting conflict, citing the operating system, or emphasizing amicable relationships, to ensure that their conflicts stay within the realms of routinized, controlled, and thus engaged behavior.

Performing routinized conflicts. The following data excerpts illustrate how such routinized encounters of difference tend to unfold in the Premium community. This particular conflict occurred in 2005 after the community had received an invitation for a talk to be given at a prominent German business gala (No. 2 in Table 1). The messages below include turning points in the conflict, which lasted two months and contained 92 individual messages.

Ulrich (22. February 2005): “[...] Either they have misinterpreted our ideology as a simple marketing concept, or they want to use us as a counterpoint. If we understand Premium not only as pushing Cola-crates around but also as a statement about business policy, this [gala event] would be a platform to present our ideas. The so-called “big shots” would listen and hopefully (partly) understand. On the other side, we may not want to give them more insights into our way of thinking, so they cannot ensnare us more professionally in the future? Hmm. ... What do you think? Do it? I would be up for showing up in skater gear

among all these suits and explain to them very analytically why we wish that the rest of the world had values similar to ours.”

Roman (23. February 2005): *“We should go there all together and splatter around with water guns filled with pig’s blood [...] they are all idiots.”*

Reinhard (24. February 2005): *„Guys guys!! ... Pig’s blood, what’s going on? This could be quite ridiculous in this context.”*

Valentin (1. March 2005): *“With this presentation we get the chance to present Premium. And there is no “too small”. After all, Premium is not about how big or how far or how profitable we are. I really see no reasons for not going there – except maybe fear. And fear does not count. Without the necessary courage Premium wouldn’t even exist!”*

Roman (2. March 2005): *“It’s of no use to go there. Why should we care if two or three of these guys at the gala get it?”*

Carlos (2. March 2005): *“Hey Roman. At the beginning of the 90s the moog opened in Barcelona (first club in Spain for sophisticated electronic music) in a small alley next to the Ramblas [...] Today the alley is full of clubs. I’m thinking of something else in the context of this business gala. Just let 2-3 people understand that there is another way of doing business. Just let us transmit the basic message. We want more firms to join us. The more the better, only then can an alternative economy develop. Like the small alley in Barcelona. If more firms are successful in an ethical way the message will be easier to pass on. That’s why I’m in favor of it.”*

Valentin (3. March 2005): *“My dear Roman, I’m looking forward to seeing you in April, but what really interests me right now is why you’re investing such a great amount of energy in preventing us from going to this presentation? Does it violate the Premium-philosophy in your opinion? In fact, I don’t really get it”.*

Roman (3. March 2005): *“Hi Valentin. I’m also looking forward to see you in April. Concerning the presentation topic I’m so enraged because I think that you guys are wasting*

your precious energy. You overestimate the whole thing. That gets on my nerves. But I will not block what has already been decided. That's why I will stand down from now on."

In his role as the community's formal contact person and its informal conflict moderator, Ulrich initiates this conversation. He offers two potential responses to the opportunity: to use the gala for making a political statement and thus disseminating Premium's ideology, or to avoid the meeting for not falling prey to corporations taking unethical advantage of their ideas. At the end of his initial email, he offers a potential solution, but also invites discussion.

With Roman's posting, the discussion turns into a conflict about whether Premium should stay true to its identity of a protest brand (e.g. "splatter pig's blood") or start a conversation with corporate agents to teach them the Premium way of doing business. Roman aggressively advocates the protest positioning, whereas Carlos and Valentin try to convince him otherwise. Their exchange is replete with evidence of routinized conflict behaviors. Roman uses redirection of aggressions to discredit the community's enemies and a respectful tone towards community members. In the last posting, Roman responds to Valentin's email (cited in the conflict behaviors section above) by emphasizing amicable relationships and separating factual and relationship levels. The last posting shows how Roman exercises self-restraint to not run against decisions that have already been made. The encounter illustrates how these members negotiate diverging viewpoints in a comfortable and engaging mode of routinized conflict. Ten out of 14 conflicts that emerged in the Premium mailing list, from its initiation until today, unfold as such routinized conflicts.

Harnessing routinized conflict. Our research reveals that Premium members tend to garner practical, identity, and relationship value from these routinized conflicts.

Practical value. As a democratic community and proactive market participant, Premium depends on its ability to respond intelligently and collectively to emerging market challenges. The community is forced to revisit its existing practices, assumptions, and moral

positions to make appropriate decisions, for example, about presenting Premium's ideas at a business event (see above), offering larger bottle sizes, expanding across Europe, or producing a Premium beer. Through performing routinized conflicts, community members openly and critically, yet nevertheless in a controlled way, reflect on the pros and cons of their community brand's market status, update their perceptions about the business environment, and decide which new business practices are worth pursuing. Because members' positions and goals are often incompatible, performing conflicts forces participants to envision alternative solutions for emerging problems, challenge these solutions, and refine them until the community eventually arrives at an agreement. Through the pursuit of routinized conflict, community members are able to decide and collectively legitimize new market practices, create new products as well as engage with new audiences; practices which might not have been possible in the absence of conflict (see Table 1).

Identity value. Since the Premium community is on a moral mission, its factual decisions are always firmly connected to the community's core identity. Even ostensibly simple practical decisions, such as offering or not offering larger Cola bottles, affect how the community understands itself and its role in the broader competitive scheme. The above conflict regarding the invitation to a business gala illustrates how Premium members not only argue about branding practicalities, but also about their community identity. In this instance, members suggest, for example, that they may consider understanding "Premium as a business policy statement" (rather than a Cola maker) or advance the notion that "Premium is not about how big or how profitable" the brand is. These ideas have far-reaching consequences for Premium's identity as well as its market practices. Through the business gala conflict, for example, the community transformed its identity from a community Cola maker to a political movement that proactively critiques conventional businesses and shows, by its own good example, how business should be done. Because routinized conflicts force members to

intensively reflect upon, negotiate, and articulate in written text the community's key purpose and moral values, these conflicts help to shape and rework the community's social identity.

Relationship value. At Premium, routinized conflicts also produce relationship value. Despite the fact that member fights can get quite passionate at times, these conflicts predominantly pursue and contribute to a collectively agreed moral mission. Moreover, using behaviors such as "emphasizing amicable relationships" strengthens members' relationships and manifests their ideal that relationships are always more important than topical disagreements. Our observations illustrate the Premium community's ability to express relational sympathies while at the same time fight passionately about specific subjects, which is indicative of strong social ties (Coser, 1956; Dubiel, 1998; Laureys & Simons, 2010; Sarcinelli, 1990; Simmel, 1964). Premium's intra-community conflicts not only actualize relationships between members, but also strengthen relationships between individual members with the Premium brand because in phases of social conflict, members intensively engage with Premium's ideological foundations and its resulting brand image.

In summary, the analysis shows that members engage in a broad repertoire of formal and informal conflict culture elements to perform routinized intra-community conflicts. Because these conflicts remain bounded by the norms of Premium's conflict culture, they tend to produce positive practical outcomes, energize social relationships, and foster community identity.

Transgressive Conflicts

However, not all conflicts are equal. Our analysis also surfaces a second type of conflict that we conceptualize as "transgressive conflict." In contrast to routinized conflicts, parties involved in transgressive conflicts tend to break with cultural norms, stepping over boundaries set by the community's legitimized conflict culture. In such transgressive conflict phases, the community enters an ambiguous, almost liminal (Turner, 1973), state in which members can no longer rely on their existing conflict practices to resolve a conflict at hand. In

such states of disorientation, members tend to negate or contest many features of routinized conflict behavior (Thomassen, 2009; Turner, 1973). In transgressive conflicts, members often articulate and challenge Premium's deepest held values, but also invent new conflict behaviors that eventually enrich the community's conflict culture (Thomassen, 2009).

Our analysis shows that four out of 14 conflicts begin as normal routinized conflicts, however, eventually turn into transgressive conflicts once members begin to cross multiple borders of routinized conflict behavior. At Premium, transgressive conflicts propel members into unprecedented emotional heights and evoke highly abusive interactions. These interactions revolve around unacceptable norm violations by other members, community brand contaminations, and relational issues. When routinized conflicts turn transgressive, the substantial problem that initiated the conflict tends to take a back seat and emotions take over. In such situations, existing conflict cultivation behaviors no longer suffice to subdue the conflict. Instead, the community becomes overly passionate and temporarily unable to end the conflict. In times of such conflict escalation, the use of the electronic mailing list no longer mitigates, but rather instigates further aggression, abuse, and frustration. This is due to the fact that posted materials cannot be removed once on the list. In this instance, abusive content becomes used over and over again spurring the conflict even further.

Performing transgressive conflicts. To illustrate these insights, we next trace the trajectory of a particular transgressive conflict that emerged in 2010 in the wake of some sexist comments of community member Nico (conflict No. 9 in Table 1). The data excerpts illustrate how multiple members cross multiple conflict culture boundaries, how members eventually regain control over their conflict behaviors, and how a transgressive conflict results in the invention of new formal and informal conflict cultural elements.

The conflict begins just like most conflicts in the Premium mailing list, as a routinized conflict. Community members quite enthusiastically exchange their diverging views about the idea of employing Clarissa as an intern. Since Premium has never hired a paid intern before,

the decision is considered important for the community. Ulrich supports the idea of employing Clarissa—who is a trained food analyst—and offers to pay her salary from his personal budget. Other community members, however, are worried that the practice of hiring interns would move the community too close to conventional businesses or even associate Premium community with images of ruthless exploitation that internships tend to evoke in Germany. The following data excerpts illustrate how such a conflict progresses through three phases; 1) boundary crossing, 2) conflict escalation, and 3) conflict resolution and the extension of conflict culture.

Phase one: crossing boundaries. The following data show how community member Nico violates several key norms of the community's conflict culture and how Per tries to use the routinized conflict practice of peer-to-peer policing to re-gain control over Nico's rhetorical outburst. We begin with Nico's second contribution to this conflict, in which he already refers to criticism that he has received for his earlier email.

Nico (12. June 2010): *“Hi guys, if Ulrich wants to have a [female] intern and if he even pays her with his own money; if his girlfriend doesn't mind sharing their bed with the intern, and that the intern will probably be the next Premium-girl [Note: Nico makes reference to a an imaginary Premium pin-up calendar here]: please let him do whatever he wants, for God's sake. Not your money, not your problem, not your girl :-)* Yes, I'm sexist again – go complain about it!”

Carlos (14. June 2010): *„If Ulrich can do with his money what he wants, I can also do what I want. I can produce and pay for a flyer that say's ‚Fuck Premium!’ It's about that we as a collective should decide together and not just one individual person. Just because someone thinks he's right, doesn't mean he can start doing things on his own. From my point of view Ulrich sacrifices himself more than enough for Premium Cola. He shouldn't have to give the few bucks that he gets to the intern.”*

Nico (14. June 2010): „Hi, the comparison is not appropriate Carlos. What Ulrich wants to teach an intern, where, and how is his own business. Hiring an intern doesn't have any external implications for us and therefore it's not our right to voice our opinion on it. Do you also want to tell him with whom he can share his overnight train cabin? Go, get yourself your own intern.“

Per (22. June 2010): “Hi, I have received complaints from readers that some posts about the potential intern are unacceptable. I would like to ask you to keep your countenance in the future, and to discuss about Premium's next pin-up boy in private.”

The data illustrate how practical, cultural, and identity themes overlap in these members' conflict about the internship issue. Nico uses the intern issue to argue for individual freedom as a staple notion of Premium's identity, whereas Carlos insists that collective decision-making is the more important element of Premium's identity. These two members also argue simultaneously about practical issues such as work efforts and reimbursements. Per's post is the first to address the sexist comment and to introduce the notion of political correctness into the conflict, which also plays an important part in Premium's identity and conflict culture.

In his subsequent posts, Nico continues to use suggestive language and—despite explicit support for Ulrich's work—continues to frame the intern as Ulrich's seducer, potential affair, and the community's object of desire. Such behavior overtly violates the rule of showing respect for otherness. Although Nico seems to use irony and humor, which are known as aggression release behaviors, other members perceive his comments as deliberately provocative and inappropriate. At this point, however, the conflict has not yet turned into a full-fledged transgressive conflict. Insular border crossings such as Nico's occur frequently in the community's routinized conflicts, but members have no difficulties in guiding the offender back into the boundaries of legitimate conduct.

Phase two: conflict escalation. The next excerpt shows how and why this conflict eventually turns into a transgressive conflict. Nico's ostensible awareness of, and provocative insistence on, making sexist commentaries ("Yes, I'm sexist again – go complain about it!") raises the tension. When he then refuses to respond to Per's border-policing attempts, he escalates the conflict into a realm where known routinized conflict behaviors fail to subdue the conflict. With Nico's next comment, the conflict subject changes from hiring vs. not hiring Clarissa to accepting vs. punishing political incorrectness. As this change occurs, multiple community members adopt a disrespectful tone and violate multiple norms.

Nico (24. June 2010): „[...] Well, great. My comments have agitated a few Swiss, vegan Emma-readers [Note: Emma is a first-wave feminist magazine]. Maybe we need a sign that warns readers of our freedom of expression; or a committee that censors such posts; or someone just kicks such stubborn people like me out of the list [...].”

Ulrich (24. June 2010): „Hi, [...] I want to note that I find this discussion very embarrassing. Clarissa [the potential intern] probably reads these mails. How do we look in her eyes now? Is she still willing to do the internship at Premium? What will she tell her friends about us? [...].”

Nico (25. June 2010): “[...] I may be allowed to address my opponents as a “group of vegan Swiss women” because it was unprejudiced and I have done it only because I don't like addressing an anonymous audience.”

Carlos (25. June 2010): [Nico is] “Resistant to advice“

Nico (25. June 2010): „Kisses for you, my ardent Latino [Carlos]. Now I'm racist AND sexist.”

At this point in the conflict, Nico initiates the process of conflict escalation when he ignores his fellows' attempts at putting him in his place. He provokes other community members further by not taking their complaints about his sexist comments seriously and by further insulting female Premium members. Later on, Nico proclaims that he did not intend to

harm anyone. He receives some support by others, including Ulrich, but insists on his freedom of speech. Criticism continues, more parties get involved, and Nico is asked to apologize, which he refuses. Anger and mutual accusations still dominate the discussion and overshadow respect of otherness:

Felix (6. July 2010): "It seems like as long as one performs well at Premium in terms of business, one is allowed to be a moralistic asshole."

Ulrich (6. July 2010): "Hi, let us please start kicking out distributors [Note: like Felix] who denounce others in their absence and call them 'assholes'."

In this transgressive conflict phase, other community members begin to also transgress conflict cultural boundaries. Felix, for example, accuses Nico of being a "moralistic asshole" and accuses the Premium community of hypocrisy, retaining unethical members merely for financial reasons. Ulrich also responds unusually aggressively on this occasion, suggesting the expulsion of members like Felix from the list. Until this point, no community member has yet suggested a viable road for resolving this conflict. Eventually, Nico decides to leave the list and, thus, the Premium community.

Phase three: conflict resolution and the extension of conflict culture. While members continue to struggle with finding an acceptable way of ending this transgressive conflict, Ulrich draws attention to the disillusioned atmosphere in the list, to the practical losses that will be suffered from the exit of Nico, and to the necessity of dealing better with individual differences. In the following data excerpt, Ulrich provides a diagnosis of positive and negative conflict outcomes formulated in ways that suggest he is trying to end this conflict:

Ulrich (28. June 2010): "Hi, this topic has expectedly boiled over with rage [...]. [But] New boundaries were drawn regarding intolerance against young, female people, and people who are sensitive against subtle discrimination [...]. With all respect for Nico's work, his views did not reach consensus. Thus, Nico is withdrawing from the list. All in all, a good

result, because this shows that the list can do without general terms and conditions, and without anti-discrimination-guidelines [...] Among all conflict parties, including myself, [the controversial topic] now ranks higher on the sensitivity-agenda. [...] [and we] can continue to trust in our own ability to sort out conflicts. [...] Prohibitions do not solve the problem; change must occur in people's minds. In the current case this has certainly happened."

In this excerpt, Ulrich analyzes the conflict and educates Premium members about the lessons that (he thinks) the community has learned by going through the unpleasant experience of fighting this particular conflict. Yet, Ulrich's post not only wraps up and gradually brings the conflict to an end, but it also introduces several new elements to Premium's conflict culture. For example, Ulrich invents the notion of a proverbial "sensitivity-agenda" as a new vehicle for sensitizing members to the emergence and avoidance of topics such as sexist language. This agenda is not yet formalized in written word, but presented by Ulrich as an imaginary list of topics that community members should keep in mind when performing future conflicts. Ulrich also states that the conflict has produced new boundaries regarding intolerance, which should help community members better spot moral transgressions in the future. By going through a period of transgressive conflict, the community thus develops a new informal conflict behavior that we call "raising awareness for conflict potential." This behavior extends the repertoire of informal conflict behaviors that the Premium community has at its disposal. However, we also observed that transgressive conflicts not only produce informal conflict behaviors, but also formal conflict cultural novelties. This is illustrated in another transgressive conflict (e.g. No. 14 in Table 1) when Premium member Hendrik is accused of stealing money from the community (e.g. by claiming extra hours and faking expenses for his Premium sales activity in southern Germany). Towards the end of this conflict, Ulrich proposes to exercise an "emergency exclusion" of this member.

Ulrich (8. August 2012): „I was often asked where the border is? [It is] Deliberately compromising Premium. Breaking into the till, claiming to work on a job for months without being able to deliver any details about the results. That beats everything. This is where the border is. Where should it be instead? What else should happen before kicking someone out? [...] I will formulate a respective module [of the operating system] more precisely“.

The emergency exclusion of a member who had massively violated community norms had been a module—i.e. a topical section—of the community’s operating system before this particular conflict. However, Ulrich uses the conflict about Hendrik’s fraud as an opportunity to not only exercise, but also further specify and formalize this new conflict resolution behavior into written form. Similar to the new informal elements shown above, this new formal conflict cultural element emerges from a transgressive conflict that forces community members to find new or refined ways to resolve their disagreements.

As our analysis reveals, Ulrich performs his role of the conflict moderator initially in the usual mode of nurturing a routinized conflict. He monitors the conflict, provides feedback on its trajectory, and suggests new ways of moving forward. He performs this function from the position of one member among equals and carefully avoids violating the norms of collective, democratic decision-making. As the conflict turns transgressive, however, Ulrich turns to using conventional conflict management behaviors. In line with Amason’s et al. (1995, p. 29) finding that the leader of a group often holds the “responsibility for managing conflict”, Ulrich uses his elevated position as the central organizer of the community and legal owner of the list to manage the conflict course using hierarchical intervention. In this atypically managerial mode of conflict moderation, Ulrich proactively and powerfully intervenes to prevent the community, which is lost in emotional uproar and escalating transgressions, from accumulating further damage. Such managerial behavior is rare at Premium as it contradicts the community’s norms of equality and democracy. The example above illustrates that in transgressive conflicts, conflict moderation is less about nurturing

productive conflicts and more about resolving harmful conflicts as soon as possible, even with non-democratic means. However, an authoritarian conflict management practice such as Ulrich excluding a member from the list is used only once in the data set. After a first “emergency” act (emic term), the community tends to collectively discuss and then formalizes such a behavior as a new, legitimized element of their conflict culture.

Harnessing transgressive conflict. Our analysis reveals that transgressive conflicts not only have the ability to create, but also to destroy practical, identity, and relationship values within the community.

Practical value. Our analysis reveals that Premium members use routinized conflicts as a powerful tool to adjust community practices to changing market environments. Transgressive conflicts, in contrast, rarely produce practical outcomes and sometimes even jeopardize the community’s progress in a way that Hemetsberger (2006, p. 499) describes as “paralysis.” The mechanism by which such paralysis occurs is that transgressive conflicts first direct attention away from important practical matters towards identity and relationship matters, and then contaminate these conflicts with unpleasant emotions and escalating accusations. For example, the conflict about hiring vs. not hiring Clarissa as an intern moved from a conflict about the practical matter of hiring an intern to a conflict about sexist language in the community. The conflict had thus led to the loss of a community member (Nico), to frustrations among other members, and to Clarissa eventually not being hired as an intern.

Identity value. During phases of transgressive conflict, engagement with other members and with the Premium identity can become quite intense. As with routinized conflicts, transgressive conflicts also produce identity value through addressing, negotiating, and expanding the community’s ideological norms and values. For example, the transgressive conflict about sexism and discrimination in the list bolstered the notion that Premium does not want to be seen as a community of rugged, sexist men, but as a community that accommodates and pays respect to a broad range of cultural sensibilities.

However, transgressive conflicts can also produce negative identity value for the community, for example, by intimidating individuals and producing feelings of embarrassment for being a member of the community. These feelings can hurt individual as well as collective identities. In the transgressive conflict about sexism and discrimination, for example, community members proclaim that they feel embarrassed when reading how members insult the prospective intern (individual identity) and worry about reputational damages done to the Premium brand (collective identity).

Relationship value. Lastly, our analysis shows that transgressive conflicts, as opposed to routinized conflicts, can produce higher emotionality and, in their aftermath, stronger relationships among the remaining community members. After community members have struggled collectively through a phase of destabilization, they believe their relationships with fellow community members are stronger and better than before (Coser, 1956; Simmel, 1964). However, such emotional intensity also results in ending valued relationships with members that reveal undesirable character traits in transgressive situations, or end because members realize that they fundamentally disagree with the collective. Both Nico and Hendrik, for example, were highly active and appreciated Premium members before the transgressive conflicts described above. These members deliberately (Nico) and undeliberately (Hendrik) cut their ties with Premium in the wake of the sexism and fraud conflicts, respectively. The social process that eventually induces members to leave the community proceeds as follows: first a member is placed under proverbial community fire, then the member increasing experiences social isolation in the community, and eventually the member capitulates to the type of peer pressure that Premium members call “list pressure.” List pressure emerges particularly from proverbial trials in which members collectively name and shame one specific member. These transgressive behaviors contribute to members losing trust in the community’s shared ethos and fellow member protection.

Overall, transgressive conflicts tend to discourage members more than encourage enthusiasm and participation. In particular, towards the end of their life cycle, transgressive conflicts tend to dominate the list and absorb its members' energies to such an extent that it eventually causes "collective exhaustion" (emic terms). Other members zoom out of the discussion and (temporarily) leave the list. The following excerpt illustrates this dynamic. Ulrich signals empathy with members that went through a transgressive conflict together and then announces that we would like to bring those members back that were left frustrated along the way.

Ulrich (12. August 2012): "For many of us it was very annoying to follow this discussion. Sorry from my side for that [...] I will now try to bring back those people that got lost on the way."

Discussion

This four-year study conducted in the context of the Premium Cola consumption community explores the concept, focal elements, social dynamics, and value outcomes of a consumption community's conflict culture. The interpretive findings garnered from this research contribute the following four theoretical insights to the existing literature on consumption communities and social conflict.

First, the study shows that social conflicts in consumption communities are not always accurately understood as aberrations from a community's usual practices (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013; Kozinets, 2001; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), but are more likely a vital, acquired, nurtured, and proactively developed part of a community's broader culture (de Valck 2007; Hemetsberger, 2006). The study documents that in a community in a narrow sense, community members proactively draw on and enhance a proverbial toolkit of formal (i.e. mailing list, operating system) and informal (i.e. conflict roles and practices) conflict culture elements to initiate, prevent, tame, resolve, manage, and harness social conflicts for the benefit of the community (see Figure 1, Culture as Toolkit).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Second, the study reveals that consumption community conflicts unfold in routinized and transgressive ways. Ten out of 14 conflicts that were studied in this paper were identified as routinized conflicts, in which members drew on established conflict cultural elements to negotiate controversial standpoints. Four of these conflicts were classified as transgressive conflicts, placing the community into a state in which members were unable to resolve escalating tensions with existing cultural means (see Figure 1, Conflict Patterns). The analysis shows that a community stabilizes its conflict culture through routinized conflicts, but advances it through transgressive conflicts, where members are forced to extend their repertoire of conflict cultural elements (see Figure 1, Transgressive Conflict challenges and extends Conflict Culture). These findings suggest that conflict behaviors such as using humor (Hemetsberger, 2006) or directing members' attention on shared experiences (de Valk, 2007) are not pre-configured, universal, or even static properties of all consumption communities. Instead we propose that these conflict behaviors are part of a larger set of acquired, tested, and collectively refined elements of community conflict culture.

Third, the research provides novel answers to the question of whether conflicts harm or benefit a consumption community's social relations and its continuity. Our findings show (and confirm) that routinized conflicts tend to result in productive and democratically legitimized decisions, contribute to strengthening individual and collective identities, and foster social relations among members who contribute to the collective mission (see de Valck, 2007; Hemetsberger, 2006). Transgressive conflicts, in turn, tend to leave practical problems unresolved, members offended and frustrated, and the community temporarily in a state of despair. The present empirical account provides a sense of the conditions under which social conflicts can be harmful for a consumption community. Even though transgressive conflicts can help a community to advance its conflict culture and strengthen internal relationships

(Coser, 1956), such conflicts also often result in the loss of highly regarded members, as well as subdue members' enthusiasm for the community's cause.

Fourth, this research shows empirically how conflict culture exists and emerges in communities in a narrow sense (i.e. communities in which members perform enduring relationships and where membership is earned). These findings suggest, however, that communities in a broad sense (i.e. communities in which members largely imagine their connections to others and where membership is self-determined) are less likely to develop such systematic ways of performing conflicts. It seems that because members of the American running community, for example, get into fights about situational resource access and practical privileges rather than about their social relations and shared mission (Chalmers Thomas, et al., 2013), these communities encounter fewer reasons, or opportunities, to develop a conflict culture.

In turn, these findings illustrate that consumption community research can benefit from empirically analyzing practices that consumers engage in, in a given realm (Schau et al, 2009), rather than assuming ex ante that the practices that they observe are governed by community interests and relationships. This study shows that consumers who decidedly coordinate as a community tend to invite, perform, and harness social conflict more often and more systematically compared to consumers that join a community of 40 million North American runners who predominantly coordinate as a *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies, [1887] 1957) or even as a market.

The theoretical findings garnered from this research have four practical implications for marketers working with consumption communities, and particularly with communities like Premium Cola that try to drive social change by example.

First, the study suggests that an analysis of the extent to which a community performs, cultivates, and harnesses social conflicts can be used as diagnostic tool to assess the strength of the community's social ties. The more advanced a community's conflict culture, the more

likely members are engaged with the community's cause and the people who pursue it.

Committed community members spend more time with other members, share more of their creative ideas, and engage more with particular practices and social causes. Such behaviors are, in turn, desirable for managers interested in connecting communities with their brands. Diagnosing an absence of conflict culture, in contrast, is indicative of a weaker community commitment and a lack of an inspiring community mission.

Second, the study shows that conflicts in consumption communities like Premium are not managed in a similar fashion as hierarchical organizations. In these communities, conflicts are subtly and collectively nurtured by all members and particularly by the person who adopts the role of the conflict moderator. In this context, conventional conflict management and hierarchical interventional practices are to be treated with particular care. This is due to the fact that conventional managerial interventions such as an emergency exclusion run counter to the community's core values of inclusiveness and consensual decision making. Managers interacting with consumption communities in a narrow sense are therefore advised to use their superior power position only in situations in which the community runs into transgressive conflicts, and finds itself unable to resolve a conflict other than with hierarchical intervention. In all other cases, managers may blend into the community, contribute their voice in routinized conflicts, and act as conflict moderators at most.

Third, the study shows that routinized conflicts tend to be beneficial for the community. Managers may therefore encourage and nurture such conflicts rather than suspending them. Transgressive conflicts, in contrast, can severely harm the community and its progress. Diagnostic behaviors for such transgressive escalations include situations in which members violate more and more norms of routinized conflict behavior or begin to put list pressure (emic term) on one individual member. Experiences of individual members being named and shamed by the community shatter other members' trust in the community members' morals, their conflict culture, and the competence of the conflict moderator.

Managers should therefore try to lead conflict parties that are crossing the boundaries of routinized conflict behavior back to the initial subject matter. Where conflicts escalate nevertheless, managers should intervene, but afterwards bring members back by emphasizing that the intervention was an exception from the shared rule, and by summarizing what the community has learned from this conflict.

Lastly, the study highlights the benefits of formalizing a community's conflict culture in a living and breathing text, like the Premium's operating system. Such a key document allows the community to shape and summarize its collective purpose as well as its collectively legitimized conflict behaviors. The operating system appears to be more influential and useful than conventional code of conduct or netiquette documents, because the operating system derives conflict behaviors from the community's particular culture and purpose, rather than from universal conventions of respectful communication. Installing, referring to, and continuously developing such a community constitution seems to help community members to stay focused on their collective mission, and to resolve social conflicts in more productive ways.

Limitations and Further Research

The insights gained from the Premium Cola case are inevitably idiosyncratic, but potentially illuminating for understanding the conflict cultures of consumption communities with similar structural features and moral ambitions. Premium Cola is a particular empirical case because the community formed as an offline, local protest group and switched to online communication only two years later. The present research therefore does not provide insights into the origins of Premium's conflict culture, but explains on how the community's conflict culture developed in the online sphere. More research will be needed to explore how conflict culture emerges in native online consumption communities and how physical encounters among community members affect a community's conflict culture. Premium is also a particular case, because its members have successfully pursued their collective mission for

more than ten years without falling prey to internal conflicts or external challenges. This remarkable success might, in part, be due to the community's strong, well-behaved conflict culture, but also to its members' unabated passion for consuming Premium Cola and building an ethical business. Further research will have to clarify how and whether conflict culture emerges in consumption communities with different moral ambitions, structural conditions, national backgrounds, and topical foci. Such research might shed more light on the particular conditions under which consumption communities develop productive conflict cultures rather than burning themselves up in internal flame wars.

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Table 1.

Routinized and transgressive conflicts in the Premium community between 2005 and 2012

No	Date	General Subject	Number of Messages	Content	Main Outcomes	Character
1	01/2005	Competitor Fritz Cola	6	Community members discuss about their competitor Fritz Cola. They disagree whether they should act aggressively towards Fritz Cola or not.	Practical Value: Norm development: what are members allowed to do and not to do in relation to competitors? Identity Value: Further articulation of Premium's self understanding in comparison with its competitor.	routinized
2	02/03/04/2005	Advertising and Communication	92	Premium gets the offer to present its ideology and business concept at a big business price gala. Members disagree if they should accept the offer.	Practical Value: Public presentation of Premium, which leads to a big increase in popularity and in consequence market share. Identity Value: Self image change—from introverted protest brand to extraverted activist, for moral business.	routinized
3	05/2006	Advertising and Communication	21	The community debates about an offer from an advertising agency to design a campaign for Premium and participate in an advertising competition.	Identity Value: Advertising is not compatible with Premium's values. New distinction between "push" and "pull" communication. The latter describes the process in which people actively search for information (i.e. look at the homepage). Members agree that this kind of communication is compatible with Premium's values.	routinized
4	02-08/2007	Sales and Scope	129	Members discuss a possible move from selling its soft drink only in hand-selected bars and clubs of the indie music scene to selling also at retail stores.	Practical Value: Premium moves into special, handpicked retail stores. Identity Value: Diversification—From sales only at handpicked bars and clubs to selling also at special "correct" retail stores.	routinized
5	07-11/2007 04-11/2008	Product Line Extension	198	Pros and cons of producing and marketing beer under the Premium brand.	Practical Value: Premium starts to produce beer. Identity Value: Self-understanding changes—Premium as a "special way of doing business" (following its operating system) and less as a cola producer.	routinized
6	02-04/2008	Sexism	63	The community gets criticised by community outsiders for printing a sexist art piece on the backside of its bottle label. The ensuing discussion revolves around the question if the critique is to be taken serious and if the community should react to it.	Negative Relationship Value: Three members leave the community because they are annoyed.	transgressive
7	11/2008	Business vs. Protest Logic	27	Premium members discuss about whether they should grow their business operations, start hiring people, and communicate more aggressively.	Identity Value: Members articulate very clearly the down-sides of their situation in-between business and protest.	routinized
8	09-12/2008	Advertising and Communication	115	A bar starts to design and display its own advertising posters for Premium products. The community first debates if a bar should be allowed to do this. Later on the discussion revolves around Premium's information and communication policy in general. There is big disagreement within the community about its communication policy.	Practical Value: Norm development—Premium does not allow individual bars and clubs to produce its own communication material. (Negative) Identity Value: Members struggle with grey areas in their "push vs. pull communication" distinction. Negative Relationship Value: Members voice frustration because of endless discussions about the communication topic.	transgressive
9	06/07/2010	Sexism	89	An individual member posts a sexist statement in the list. Other members attack him. Soon he leaves the community. Afterwards members debate about whether Premium's core is defined by its product or its political correctness.	Negative Relationship Value: Agitator leaves the community. Members voice frustration about recurring discussion. Identity Value: Intense reflection of and sensitisation for tone of discussion, communication policy, and political correctness.	transgressive
10	06/2010; 03/2011	Product Line Extension	28	One community member proposes to sell Premium's cola not only in 0.33l bottles but also in 1l bottles. He argues that this would increase sales and therefore also spread Premium's ideology. Other members argue that Premium should stay true to itself and not orient its actions to market demands.	Practical Value: Premium extends its product line and also produces a 1l bottle. Identity Value: Move towards market orientation.	routinized
11	09/2010	Comparison and Success	13	Members discuss about a possible comparison with competitor Fritz Cola.	Identity Value: Reflection process about success-criteria.	routinized
12	10/2010	Advertising and Communication	48	A distributor offers Premium to use its minivans as an advertising surface. The offer restarts the old advertising vs. communication discussion.	Practical Value: Decision to promote the operating system more aggressively.	routinized
13	02/2011	Competitor Fritz Cola	27	Fritz Cola tries to aggressively push Premium out of the product line in some bars and shops. The community struggles about whether it should make this public on its blog or not.	Practical Value: Decision not to push back aggressively, but to talk directly to Fritz Cola executives.	routinized
14	03-09/2012	Transparency vs. Protection	100+	Two community member intend to create a new product for Premium. Inconsistencies appear and the discussion revolves about reporting obligations, transparency issues, and individual protection against accusations.	Negative Relationship Value: Exclusion of two community members. Identity Value: Reflection process—transparency vs. individual protection dilemma.	transgressive

Figure 1.

Conflict Culture Toolkit, Conflict Patterns, and Conflict Outcomes

