

## **We want drama! The effect of online conflict on social capital in online communities of consumption**

### **Abstract**

Online communities (OC) are an expanding social phenomenon gaining increasing interest from marketing practitioners. Community managers thus aim to increase OCs' social capital. Diversity of individuals interacting in OCs provokes a lot of conflict. However, the influence of online conflict on OCs' social capital is not clear as research indicates both positive and negative effects. The research aims to explain these contradictory effects by conceptualizing conflict as drama and developing a typology of online conflict. Based on netnographic investigations of a forum, four types of conflicts are thus distinguished depending on valence of emotions and the type of members involved. The research contributes to literature on OC dynamics and is of particular interest for community managers working in any company or organization.

**Keywords:** *Consumer drama theory, Online community, Conflict*

**Track:** *Consumer Behavior*

## 1. Introduction

Online communities (OCs) of consumption are an expanding social phenomenon gaining increasing interest from marketing practitioners. 60% of Fortune 1000 companies with a website will be connected to or hosting an OC by 2010 (Gartner, 2008). Adoption of social software to support community management practices will grow from \$370 million in 2009 to \$2 billion by 2014 (IDC, 2011). A key objective of community managers is developing OCs' social capital, community characteristics like group identity, network size and interactivity which provide value to members (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Mathwick, Wiertz and De Ruyter, 2008). Providing members value leads to increased engagement in the OC, increased brand engagement, positive WOM, advocacy, loyalty and increased consumption (Kozinets et al., 2010; Schau, Muniz, Arnould, 2009).

OCs bring together diverse populations of individuals with various interests and values. In online OCs individuals are united by a common interest for consumption activity. Diversity in a social system is a direct, inevitable source of conflict (Pelled, Eisenhard and Xin, 1999). From critical messages, to rivalry status fights, to stigmatization of illegitimate insiders, to bullying campaigns, conflict is an unavoidable element of OC dynamics (De Valck, 2007, Kozinets, 2001). However, the influence of conflict on OCs' social capital is not clear. Most online conflict authors have focused on conflict preemption and resolution (e.g. De Valck, 2007, Wiertz et al. 2010), assuming that conflict has only negative consequences. However, some research indicates that conflict nurtures an OCs' identity (e.g. Campbell, Fletcher and Greenhill, 2009; Schau et al., 2009; Schwob, 2011). To address this shortcoming, this research classifies the effects of online conflict on social capital by developing a typology of online conflicts.

Based on empirical qualitative work, we argue that the effect of online conflict on social capital is mediated by the valence of emotions triggered by conflict, and moderated by the types of actors (e.g. lurkers or posters). Because traditional conceptualizations of conflict (e.g. Jehn, 1995) cannot account for individuals deriving positive emotions from conflict, we conceptualize online conflict as drama, borrowing from consumer drama theory (e.g. Holt and Thompson, 2004; Deighton, 1992; Giesler, 2008) and literature theory (Baroni, 2007).

The research contributes to the literature on OC dynamics by explaining conditions under which conflict affects OCs' social capital positively or negatively. For practitioner, who aim to protect and increase their OC's social capital, this research identifies how and when conflict destroys or bolsters social capital in OCs.

## 2. Literature Review and Theory

### 2.1. *Conflict as drama*

Existing literature on conflict in OCs defines conflict as a series of states in which two or several parties have incompatible goals and act to achieve their respective goals at the cost of others (e.g. Duval Smith, 1999; De Valck, 2007). Parties are described in the literature (e.g. Jehn, 1995) as experiencing negative feelings of anxiety, frustration, fear and uneasiness as well as psychological or physical withdrawal. However, conflict in OCs has also been associated with positive emotions such as thrill (e.g. Campbell et al., 2009) and fun (Schwob, 2011). Conflict in OCs is also a source of entertainment, which current conceptualizations of conflict struggle to explain.

The experience of negative and positive emotions during online conflict can be articulated if conflict is conceptualized as drama. In consumer drama theory, drama is a

narrative created by two or more individuals with an audience (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Deighton, 1992; Giesler, 2009). Valence of emotions triggered by a narrative depends on the narrative's ability to surprise the audience (Baroni, 2007). Conflict as a narrative is entertaining when it repeatedly disconfirms the audience's expectations, creating mystery and suspense. Conflict is boring when expectations are confirmed and the audience already knows the story. Discussions in OCs are public and can be read by the whole community. Protagonists of online conflict therefore strive to create an effect on the audience as much as on other protagonists. The logic of the narrative is thus more akin to drama than a book.

Online conflict is a series of events, rather than discourse about events, and is not narration. However, we argue that members of OCs perceive conflict as narrative due to online environment specifics. Textuality of interaction, physical distance with interlocutors, archival of conversations (enabling re-reading or skim reading), and ability to leave the computer and interrupt the experience unilaterally facilitate narrativization of interactions. Defining online interactions as narrative is consistent with prior definitions of online space as "digital virtual" (Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010). Digital virtual space is somewhere between the imagination and the material. Its combination of characteristics from such space prompts individuals to experiment playfully with "abnormal" roles such as wizard, criminal, producer, and entrepreneur. Individuals in digital virtual space thus tend to perceive real interactions as narratives. To conclude, our research builds on Denegri-Knott and Molesworth's ontology of online space, consumer drama theory, and Baroni's narratology to explain why positive and negative emotions are associated with online conflict.

## *2.2. Online conflict and online communities' social capital*

OCs' social capital is an "intangible resource embedded in and accumulated through a specific social structure from which instrumental and expressive benefits will flow" (Mathwick et al., 2008). It is therefore a set of community characteristics which provide benefits to members. Schau et al. (2009) label it "community health". OC member benefits can be informational, social, hedonic, transformative or a combination of the four (Kozinets, 1999). Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) identified three dimensions to it. First, the cognitive dimension - characteristics of the group which contribute to the construction of the group's identity such as shared language and codes, narratives, or vision. Second, the structural dimension - characteristics of the network of ties in the group such as number of contacts, density of connections and network morphology. Third, the relational dimension - the qualities of connections between group members such as trust, reciprocity, norms of interaction. The stronger the community's identity, member relationship quality, network size, density and shape, the more value members derive from the community.

The effect of conflict on social capital in OCs has not been directly researched. However, research indirectly investigating the issue has contradictory effects. One stream indicates that conflict weakens bonds between parties, and between parties and the rest of the group (De Valck, 2007; Duval Smith, 1999; Wiertz et al., 2010). It also dilutes the group's norms and identity (e.g. Forte, Larco and Bruckman, 2009). In contrast, conflict favors the development of a shared vision of the social structure (Campbell et al., 2009), shared narratives (Schau et al., 2009), and contributes to the group's values (Pongsakornrunsilp and Schroeder, 2011) and identity (Schwob, 2011). Conceptualizing conflict as drama enables reconciliation of both perspectives.

Conflict as drama triggers positive emotions when the drama is well constructed and negative if the story is ill constructed. Positive (negative) emotions create positive (negative) associations about the other party. Such associations spill over to the community at large. Members enjoying the experience will interact more with the community, strengthening

existing relationships and creating new bonds - and vice versa. Enjoyable conflict attracts comment (Schau et al., 2009), creating shared narratives and defining members' roles (Campbell et al., 2009). Displeasurable conflict creates confusion about the meaning or purpose of the community and weakens its identity. Valence of emotions thus mediates the effect of conflict on social capital.

Online drama involves two types of actors: protagonists (posters) and audience (lurkers). Valence of emotions can differ between the two types. Kontour (2009) argued that when gamers are highly involved and reach a state of flow, the barrier between actual reality and virtual reality disappears and the virtual reality is experienced as actual reality. We argue that protagonists reach a state of flow when conflict becomes intense, and experience interaction as reality. Online conflict then becomes hurtful for them while it remains drama (boring or entertaining) for the audience. The audience's emotions have a stronger impact on social capital because the audience is more numerous than protagonists. Therefore, a conflict experienced negatively (positively) by the protagonists but positively (negatively) by the audience impacts social capital positively (negatively). The theory is visualized in Figure 1.

### 3. Research Method, Analysis and Findings

Given the exploratory nature of our work, a case study approach was chosen to get an in depth understanding of the processes at stake. The research context is a British online forum aimed at fans of electronica and clubbing. The forum, moderated by six individuals, has gathered over 20,000 members and 7 million posts since its creation in 2001. It thus provides a large variety of members and contributions. We are inspired by netnography, using Kozinets' guidelines (2010) for data collection, analysis and interpretation, and ethics. Three interviews with the site owner, a moderator, and a former core member have been conducted. Interviewees identified conflict in specific forum threads. Threads labeled online as "conflictual" or "fight" by community members were also considered as conflict manifestation.

The preliminary typology is based on iterative content analysis of interviews and threads. Conflict types were sought by looking at similarities between conflict themes (conflict objects, conflict parties, conflict form). The effect of conflict on social capital generally depended on the meaning associated with conflict. Types of meanings associated with conflict were thus more exhaustively listed (playful, warlike). Axes potentially organizing the types of meaning were made to make types of meaning fit in the relevant cells. New axes were created and tested until all meanings fitted the two axes. The full typology is visualized in Figure 2.

Online conflict is experienced as drama, a narrative taking place before an audience. The word "story" was often used by the moderator to describe conflicts. Interestingly, a core member who is particularly conflict-seeking signs every post with a quote from comic book Calvin and Hobbes: "A little rudeness and disrespect can elevate a meaningless interaction to a battle of wills and add *drama* to an otherwise dull day". The website owner also stressed that "getting publicity" is a common motivation for starting a fight in the community, indicating that conflict protagonists (posters) seek an effect on the audience as much as on other protagonists. According to all interviewees, dramatization of interaction online is related to specific characteristics of computer mediation (physical distance, written format, archival).

Valence of emotions triggered by conflict is determined by the narrative's ability to create meaning through a playful process of disconfirmation of the reader's expectations. Interviews reveal the playful practice of "baiting", where members provoke other members on issues known to be sensitive to them in the hope of starting an argument. In "baiting"

practices, members derive pleasure from the uncertainty of whether and when a fight will take place and how it will unfold. By contrast, when the reader feels that the whole story is known his expectations are constantly confirmed, and he becomes bored. “It may be fun once, but for a moderator who is dealing with someone who has done that 10 times – it takes the fun out of it” explains the website owner commenting on member-moderator conflict.

During an encounter, protagonists (posters) and audience (lurkers) can experience different emotions. A conflict the audience enjoys but which hurts the protagonist appears akin to *gossip*. The moderator compares it to a tabloid narrative: “It is like if a celebrity does something stupid - it's exactly the same thing: oh my God! Did you see that?” Such conflict was reported by the moderator and website owner to bring about “a massive page hit”. A conflict the protagonist enjoys (thrill) but the audience does not (boring) was described by the core member as a “*broken record*” syndrome where the protagonist returns “and says the same things every week”. Conflict enjoyed by both audience (fun) and protagonist (thrill) is a *game of banter*. A formal game of abuse was organized with the title “Abuse the member above you” where each contributor abused the previous contributor. In a similar vein, a thread was named “Here's your opportunity to say you hate a certain someone”. Those two threads were later archived as classic threads, building shared narratives in the group. We call conflicts which no one enjoys “civil war”. The website owner reports bitter discussions about who should be accepted in the community, where several core members bullied and chased out new members, finally creating a competing, more elitist community, inflicting a significant drop of membership in the community studied.

Data collection will stop once theoretical saturation is attained, although conducting 20 interviews and analyzing 100 conflictual threads is planned. Identification of conflict will follow the process described but will also use software for automated content analysis, to mine more posts. So far, the effect of conflict on social capital was determined indirectly on the basis of interviewees’ accounts. However, direct measures of social capital will be obtained through social network analysis. Measurements of social capital will be developed using web analytics provided by the forum owner and forum information about “who interacted with whom and when”. The effect of conflict on social capital will be determined qualitatively by looking at changes in measures of social capital after the start of major conflicts.

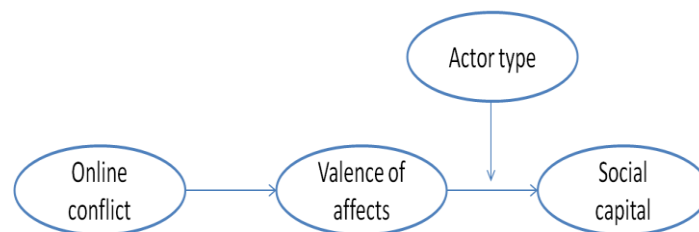
## **5. Implications and Further Research**

By reconceptualizing conflict as drama, valence of emotions (positive vs. negative) and type of actor (protagonist vs. audience) were identified as two main organizing mechanisms explaining the effect of online conflict on OCs’ social capital. We contribute to the literature on OC dynamics and community management by providing an explanation for the apparently contradictory effects of online conflict on OC’s social capital. This research is the first addressing that contradiction and thus answers Schau et al.’s (2009) call to unpack a broader set of practices creating value in market-mediated communities. It also refines our understanding of the processes linking practices and value creation. For community managers, contrary to intuition and arguments in practitioner oriented books, conflict should not necessarily be avoided. While broken record syndromes and civil wars should be avoided, games of banter and gossip-like conflict strengthen consumers’ engagement in the community. This engenders positive consequences such as WOM, advocacy, loyalty and increased consumption (Schau et al., 2011).

A limitation of this research is the volume of data analyzed. Theory will be more robust once more conflictual threads have been analyzed and more interviews conducted.

Methodologically, tools distinguishing conflict from discussions, arguments and jokes should be refined. Textual characteristics distinguishing fun and thrilling conflicts from boring and hurtful ones and measurements of social capital need to be finalized. Quantitative text mining could be conducted on this basis strengthening validity of findings. Finally, investigating the research question in communities hosted on different technological platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, World of Warcraft...) would increase generalisability of findings.

Investigating how the structure of the OC's social network (ratio of core members:peripheral members) moderates the impact of conflict on social capital represents an interesting avenue for further research. Core members are needed in OCs but so is a regular flow of new members (Wiertz et al., 2010). Preventing core members from being hurt in conflicts could be more important than entertaining the audience in communities with very few core members. However, the loss of new peripheral members may be more important than the entertainment of core members in communities lacking new blood. A second avenue of research is to investigate whether or how online conflict seeded by community managers differs from "naturally grown" online conflict and what techniques community managers could use to leverage the potential of online conflict.



**Figure 1: Analytical Framework**

		Audience (Lurkers)	
		Fun	Boredom
Protagonists (Posters)	Thrill	Banter Game ++	Broken Record Syndrome -
	Pain	Gossip +	Online War --

**Figure 2: Preliminary Typology**

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