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Consumer-to-Consumer Conflicts and Brand Moderation Strategies During COVID-19 Service Failures

A Framework for International Marketers

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Title

Consumer-to-consumer conflicts and brand moderation strategies during COVID-19 service failures: a framework for international marketers

Denitsa Dineva, Jan Breitsohl, Holger Roschk, Masoumeh Hosseinpour

Purpose: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, one dark social-media phenomenon in particular has experienced a significant rise: consumer-to-consumer (C2C) conflicts, i.e., consumers who verbally attack each other in response to COVID-19 service failures. The aim of this paper is to uncover the sources of such conflicts and to gain an insight into the corresponding conflict moderation strategies that international brands adopt.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Our methodology consists of non-participatory netnographic observations of 13 online brand communities (OBCs) on Facebook, using a purposeful sampling approach and a hybrid thematic analysis.

Findings: The paper identifies five C2C conflict sources: brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, brand skepticism, brand contention, and brand defense; these are then classified as having either an individualistic (self-oriented) or collectivistic (other-oriented) orientation. We also uncover several moderation strategies: non-engaging, automated, bolstering, asserting (direct, indirect), and informing (factual, empathetic, apologetic), which are broadly categorized into two levels based on their passive versus active approach and authoritative versus cooperative orientation. The paper further highlights that brands adapt their moderation strategies to specific sources of C2C conflicts, thereby producing a range of OBC outcomes.

Originality: We offer a novel framework to international marketing research, consisting of C2C conflict sources and corresponding moderation strategies that take place in response to

service failures during the COVID-19 pandemic. These insights, in turn, inform international marketers about new ways of transforming the dark side of OBCs into a source of competitive advantage based on real-world brand practice.

Practical implications: Our empirically informed framework comprising sources of undesirable C2C conflict and brand moderation strategies offers a practical tool that can aid marketing managers in nurturing civil customer-to-customer engagement and interactive behaviors in their OBCs. By adopting our framework, brand and marketing practitioners can tailor their communication strategies towards different sources of C2C conflict and minimize their adverse consequences, thus, fostering an overall constructive OBC engagement.
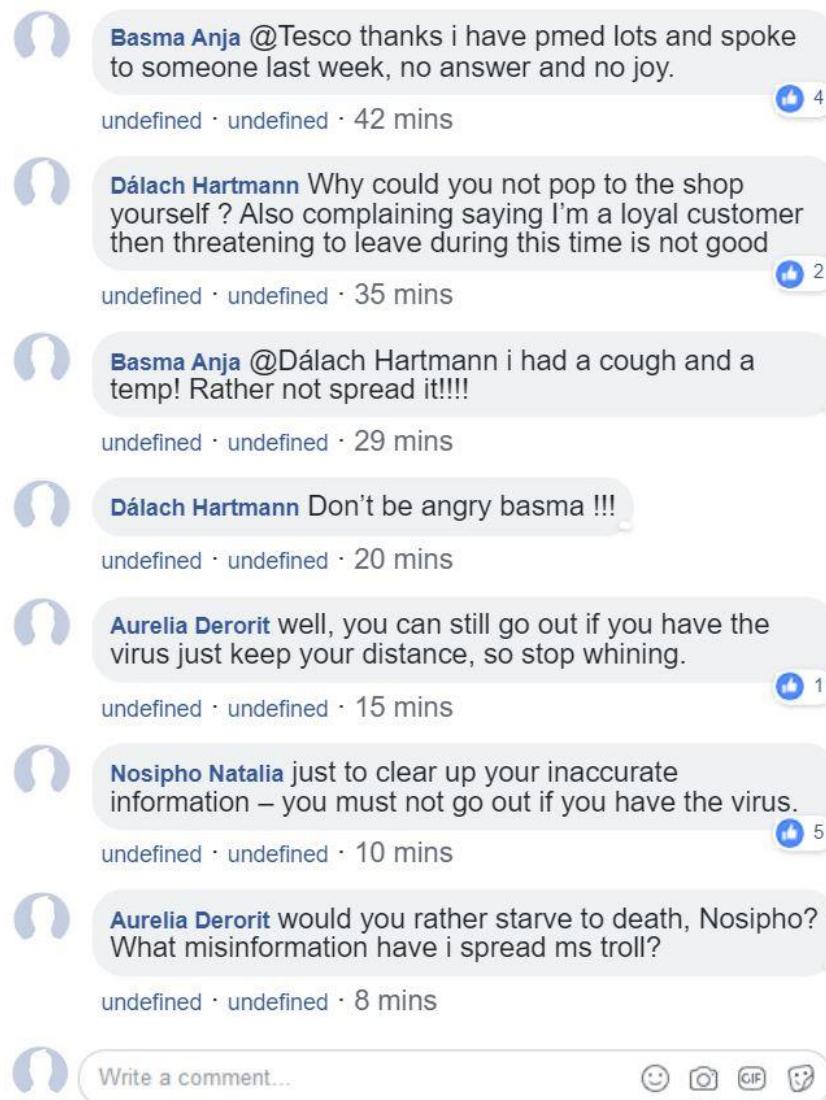
Keywords: *international marketing digitalization; service recovery; consumer conflict antecedents; conflict management; global pandemic; social media*

1. Introduction

International marketing research has thus far focused on understanding the digitalization benefits and competitive advantage gained by firms from social-media-enabled advancements such as online brand communities (OBCs) (Katsikaes *et al.*, 2020; Samiee, 2020; Sinkovics and Sinkovics, 2020). OBCs can, however, backfire significantly during global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. From a consumer perspective, hostile interactions among social-media users have risen by 38% since the beginning of the pandemic (Brandwatch, 2021), with users engaging in increased relational aggression (Ye *et al.*, 2021) and bullying behaviors (Barlett *et al.*, 2021). From a brand perspective, the disruptive nature of COVID-19 represents a service challenge on an unprecedented scale; it has required brands to transform or transition their service provision to online platforms, inevitably increasing the risks of service failures (Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2021; Ozuem *et al.*, 2021). Relatedly, in the absence of opportunities for in-store shopping, in-person socialization, and interactions, consumers across industries have spent more time on social media during the pandemic (e.g., Forbes, 2020). This has increased the likelihood of exposure to product and service shortcomings and subsequent hostile consumer-to-consumer (C2C) conflict behaviors – that is, consumers who verbally attack each other (Bacile *et al.*, 2018). From a broader societal perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected everyone, polarizing global attitudes and belief systems (Bernacer *et al.*, 2021), furthering inter-group division and social conflict (O'Connor *et al.*, 2020), and generating controversy and skepticism regarding brand legitimacy (Hesse *et al.*, 2021).

Taken as a whole, it is evident that the magnitude and polarizing effect of the pandemic have not only amplified C2C conflict on brands' social-media communities in response to COVID-19 service failures, but have also arguably transformed the nature of such conflicts and the essence of their management. The incident presented in Figure 1 from Tesco's Facebook brand community illustrates this phenomenon.

Figure 1 C2C conflict excerpt

> **Basma Anja** @Tesco thanks i have pmed lots and spoke to someone last week, no answer and no joy.
> undefined · undefined · 42 mins 👍 4
>
> **Dálach Hartmann** Why could you not pop to the shop yourself ? Also complaining saying I'm a loyal customer then threatening to leave during this time is not good
> undefined · undefined · 35 mins 👍 2
>
> **Basma Anja** @Dálach Hartmann i had a cough and a temp! Rather not spread it!!!!
> undefined · undefined · 29 mins
>
> **Dálach Hartmann** Don't be angry basma !!!
> undefined · undefined · 20 mins
>
> **Aurelia Derorit** well, you can still go out if you have the virus just keep your distance, so stop whining.
> undefined · undefined · 15 mins 👍 1
>
> **Nosipho Natalia** just to clear up your inaccurate information – you must not go out if you have the virus.
> undefined · undefined · 10 mins 👍 5
>
> **Aurelia Derorit** would you rather starve to death, Nosipho? What misinformation have i spread ms troll?
> undefined · undefined · 8 mins
>
> Write a comment...

Such instances, whereby consumers report a service or product failure on a globally visible digital marketing platform, together with subsequent hostile C2C comments, represent a key challenge for global brand managers. These interactions can diminish consumer perceptions of international brands' social responsibility credibility, significantly decrease service recovery satisfaction, and deviate consumers from positive behaviors such as consumer-to-brand (C2B) engagement, as evidenced by initial pre-pandemic research (Bacile *et al.*, 2018; Dineva *et al.*, 2020).

Nonetheless, research on C2C conflicts in OBCs has reported isolated incidents as sources of C2C conflict (e.g., brand hate; Curina *et al.*, 2020, and brand rivalry; Ewing *et al.*, 2013) and a systematic approach to studying these is a current research gap. The management of C2C conflicts is a related area that lacks insight; conflict moderation strategies are conceptualized as having a single level (e.g., verbal versus non-verbal; Dineva *et al.*, 2017, and passive versus active; Homburg *et al.*, 2015) and no association is reported between the sources of C2C conflicts and the corresponding moderation strategies. Moreover, these emerging phenomena in OBCs have been studied outside of the context of a global pandemic, which we argue has inevitably impacted the content and nature of C2C conflicts. It is therefore an appropriate time to advance the knowledge on why C2C conflicts occur, and how international brands should manage them in order to build more resilient OBCs in a post-COVID-19 world. Our study is guided by the following RQs:

RQ1: What are the sources of C2C conflicts during COVID-19 service incidents?

RQ2: When such C2C conflicts occur, what strategies do international brands deploy in order to moderate them?

Drawing from multidisciplinary fields of research, this article offers two main contributions to the dark side of international marketing digitalization in the context of COVID-19. First, we advance the consumer (mis)behavior research by providing a systematic overview of the sources of C2C conflict in OBCs. Specifically, in a novel typology, we outline that C2C conflicts are generated by five distinct sources (brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, brand skepticism, brand contention and brand defense), some of which are specific to the COVID-19 pandemic (brand skepticism and brand contention), and we organize these into individualistic (i.e., self-oriented) and collectivistic (i.e., other-oriented) drivers. Our second contribution lies in extending conflict management research in OBCs by providing a conceptually refined

taxonomy of brand moderation strategies and integrating these with corresponding conflict sources. We identify five two-level moderation strategies (non-engaging, automated, bolstering, asserting, and informing) that range from authoritative to cooperative and from passive to active in their orientation and approach, some of which (automated, informing, asserting) are exclusively used in the context of COVID-19 service failures.

Our theoretically informed framework comprising sources of undesirable C2C conflict and brand moderation strategies offers a practical tool that can aid brand and marketing managers in nurturing civil customer-to-customer engagement behaviors in their online communities in two ways. First, following our typology of five main C2C conflict sources in response to failures, practitioners are better equipped to identify the causes of uncivil C2C interactions in their OBCs, and whether these stems from self- or other-oriented brand and consumption related concerns. Second, by adopting our conflict moderation matrix, brand and marketing managers can select between two-dimensional strategies (*passive* vs. *active* approach by *authoritative* vs. *cooperative* orientation) to appropriately address C2C conflicts. Combined together, these insights will allow brand and marketing practitioners to tailor their communication strategies towards minimizing the adverse consequences of C2C conflicts and fostering an overall constructive OBC engagement.

2. Theoretical background

International brands have long created global communities on social media in order to engage with their international customer base (Jiao *et al.*, 2018). These OBCs bring together consumers from different cultures and diverse backgrounds, and, ideally, lead to positive C2C as well as C2B engagement behaviors (Makri *et al.*, 2019; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). These OBCs typically provide brands with opportunities to enhance their exposure in international markets, and generate brand loyalty and improved sales (Jiao *et al.*, 2018). However, recent

studies in the international marketing, consumer behavior, and social media research domains have begun to highlight the less desirable consequences of these communities, including hostile consumer interactive behaviors such as C2C conflict (e.g., Chandrasapth *et al.*, 2021; Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Husemann *et al.*, 2015). Few studies so far have investigated why C2C conflicts occur and how brands respond to these; here, we review each research stream in turn.

2.1. Sources of C2C conflict on social media

International marketing research has made some attempts to explain why hostile consumer behaviors occur. In an early study, Riefler and Diamantopoulos (2007) investigated consumer tensions in relation to foreign product purchase behavior and found that animosity can be caused by a number of different factors such as economic, political, religious, or personal. Later, Hollebeek (2018) proposed that in online settings consumers' individual traits can explain how consumers engage with others in different (positive versus negative) ways, thus broadly leading to diverse interactional exchanges ranging from more constructive to more destructive.

The bulk of research into sources of hostile consumer interactions, however, comes from consumer behavior studies. Specifically, scholars have traditionally offered three broad sources of such conflict (Husemann and Luedicke, 2013). First, it was found that consumer resistance and anti-consumption strategies (e.g., consumer discontent towards, activism against, and avoidance of the brand; Thompson and Arsel, 2004) can impede C2C conflict, because consumers who favor a certain brand refuse to accept negative information from another consumer expressing their discontent or complaining about the brand (Ahluwalia *et al.*, 2000). A second source of C2C conflict is oppositional claims to ownership of the same consumption object or activity, or simply using different criteria to evaluate the appropriateness of a consumption process (Arsel and Thompson, 2010; Kozinets, 2001). This source of conflict

may involve differences in personal values or a lack of information; alternatively, it occurs because of different consumer perceptions of the same brand and/or its values. Third, C2C conflict results from defending one's personal consumption ideology against non-consumers of the brand, based on consumer dissent relating to the superiority of a consumer's preferred brand over the rival brand (i.e., brand rivalry, oppositional loyalty; Ewing *et al.*, 2013, or brand hate; Curina *et al.*, 2020). Research confirmed that consumers who identify with and are loyal to a particular brand are more likely to engage in C2C conflict (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2021). At the same time, non-supporters of the brand may engage in trolling behaviors (i.e., intentional aggravation and provoking others, including brands, for their own amusement), which can also trigger C2C conflict (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2018; Dineva and Breitsohl, 2022).

Notwithstanding the contributions of research to date, these have not examined the sources that impede C2C conflict under challenging and polarizing conditions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. These sources are likely to differ for several reasons. During the pandemic, in the absence of in-person interactions, individuals have spent more time online, and research links excessive use of the Internet to aggression (Appel *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have prevented individuals from accomplishing their basic consumption goals (e.g., in-store shopping and returns, socializing with frontline employees), thereby producing negative affective states; hostility is a common outcome of thwarted individual goals (Killgore *et al.*, 2021). The pandemic has further intensified stress and anxiety among individuals (WHO, 2022) and as a coping mechanism for losing agency over one's environment, individuals seek out compensatory control (Shoss *et al.*, 2016). These conditions, in turn, have caused a significant rise in different forms of hostile behaviors online, as evidenced by research during COVID-19 (Barlett *et al.*, 2021; Ye *et al.*, 2021).

Aside from an increase in online hostility, the magnitude and impact of COVID-19 has also impacted the nature and sources of consumer conflicts. The pandemic has polarized attitudes

and belief systems globally, thereby influencing perceptions towards the legitimacy of superior others (e.g., governments, companies, brands) and bringing about the pre-eminence of the individual over the collective (Bernacer *et al.*, 2021). For instance, research has found that inter-group division intensified during COVID-19 (O'Connor *et al.*, 2020). Such societal changes have been linked to increased levels of controversy and skepticism, with brands becoming a bigger target on social media (Hesse *et al.*, 2021).

In sum, we argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has distorted consumers' perceptions about what constitutes an acceptable level of service and communication on social media. It has also magnified the perceived negative impact of service failures (Amankwah-Amoah *et al.*, 2021) and created conditions that challenge brand legitimacy, leading to the emergence of new sources of C2C conflicts.

2.2. C2C conflict moderation strategies

Given that the majority of studies point to the adverse nature and consequences of C2C conflict (e.g., Chandrasapth *et al.*, 2021), a stream of pre-pandemic research has focused on examining approaches to C2C conflict management. These approaches generally range from passive brand roles entailing no involvement or avoidance to more active engagements, including impartial, cooperative, and authoritative strategies (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Dineva *et al.*, 2020; Hauser *et al.,* 2017).

Passive approaches to manage conflicts include non-engaging, avoidance, and passive observation of consumer interactions and these are frequently utilized by brands as shown by past studies (Dineva *et al*., 2017; Homburg *et al*., 2015; Hauser *et al.*, 2017). In this no involvement approach to conflict moderation, the brand takes on an observer role and gathers information about consumer interactions, while refraining from engaging in these or moderating the hostile ones.

In contrast to non-engaging, a common active and impartial approach to moderation includes informational strategies, which comprise of providing further information on an issue causing the C2C conflict in commercial OBCs (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Dineva *et al.*, 2020). In past studies, these have been identified as neutrally oriented strategies in that they neither directly address the brand aggressor nor the brand supporter in a C2C conflict incident.

More relationship-oriented and cooperative approaches, such as bolstering, entail the brand affirming a consumer who defends or supports the brand in a C2C conflict (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Hauser *et al.*, 2017). Research findings further confirm that this approach is used to invoke positive feelings among consumers and encourage them to continue doing what they are being praised for (Schamari and Schaefers, 2015).

Conversely, authoritative strategies include censoring, banning, mobilizing, asserting, and pacifying (Dineva *et al*., 2017; Husemann *et al*. 2015; Sibai *et al*., 2015), and these appear to mostly address the brand aggressor in a C2C conflict incident. Findings point out that censoring, which refers to the sanctioning of undesirable content, is typically infrequently used by brands and exclusively in situations where consumers demand it (Dineva *et al.*, 2020). Likewise, removing users from the community is rare and occurs when the C2C conflict escalates to become transgressive and thus negatively affecting the well-being of the community (Husemann *et al.,* 2015). Mobilizing and asserting represent more dominant verbal approaches and specifically address the aggressor in a C2C conflict incident. Mobilizing enables brands to encourage consumers to change their opinions or behaviors regarding an issue or topic causing the C2C conflict (Dineva *et al.*, 2020), while asserting addresses the aggressor via a more forceful and value-laden statement whereby brand repudiates the hostile comment and re-states its opinion (Dineva and Breitsohl, 2022).

A final authoritative approach referring consumers to the community rules is pacifying, which requests that the brand aggressor changes their conversing style or behavior (Dineva *et al.,* 2017). Linked to this moderation practice, in reviewing secondary data, Chandrasapth *et al.* (2021) concluded that common conflict resolution strategies across different types of OBCs are proactive approaches that refer to formal community rules and encourage adherence to them, while using platform technology to detect and manage hostility, and promote transparency and openness in dealing with conflicts.

Some of these approaches and moderation strategies can be relevant to the present study, but C2C conflict management in past research has been conceptualized as single-level strategies and in isolation from service failures (e.g., Dineva *et al.*, 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has not only demonstrated that service failures and subsequent C2C conflict behaviors represent a complex and interdependent phenomenon, but also intensified the surrounding conditions – perceptions of service-failure severity and corresponding C2C hostility in relation to brands perceived to be at fault. This is particularly relevant for international OBCs and their management, given that service incidents and subsequent hostile C2C interactions are visible to global consumers who can observe, be influenced by, and join in the hostile interactions (Bacile *et al.*, 2018; Jiao *et al.*, 2018). As a result, we argue that C2C conflicts in response to COVID-19 service incidents cannot be adequately addressed via the thus far proposed conventional moderation strategies; further, that new knowledge is needed concerning conflict moderation that takes place in conjunction with service recovery efforts.

3. Research design

To answer our research questions, we used the method of non-participatory netnographic observations, which involved the passive observation and collection of relevant online data (Moen *et al.*, 2003). Netnography represents a qualitative research method that adapts

ethnographic research techniques from anthropology to study relevant consumer and marketer behaviors and interactions within online communities (Kozinets, 2002). Such observational qualitative methods are advantageous for studying cross-cultural research involving aversive topics (Malhotra *et al.*, 1996). Moreover, netnography has been widely utilized among international marketing researchers to study online communities and digitalization initiatives due to its ease of use, applicability to a range of contexts, and robustness, as evidenced by recent studies (Chandrasapth *et al.*, 2021; Diaz *et al.*, 2021; Guesalaga *et al.*, 2016).

Using a purposive sampling approach (Campbell *et al.*, 2020), thirteen OBCs on Facebook were selected due to the presence of relevant data (Kozinets, 2002), as illustrated in Table I. In choosing our sample and to increase the relevance for international marketing managers, we adhered closely to Robinson's (2014) guidance on purposive sampling for qualitative research, intentionally including a heterogenous sample from both idiographic (OBCs with smaller following) and nomothetic (OBCs with large following) contexts. As such, we collected information-rich cases related to our RQs from global, international, and national brands between March 2020, when COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic (WHO, 2020), and September 2021, when the pandemic began to steadily decline (NPR, 2021) and data saturation was reached. The international scope of the brands was determined based on whether the brand operates in most regions of the world (global), only some regions (international) or only in its home country (domestic) (Kogut, 1999). To identify C2C conflicts, we were guided by prior research on their distinct characteristics, including a two-way exchange process during which consumers use profanity, insulting diatribe, negatively framed emojis, capitalization of words/sentences, and multiple punctuation marks (see Dineva *et al.*, 2020 for a full review).
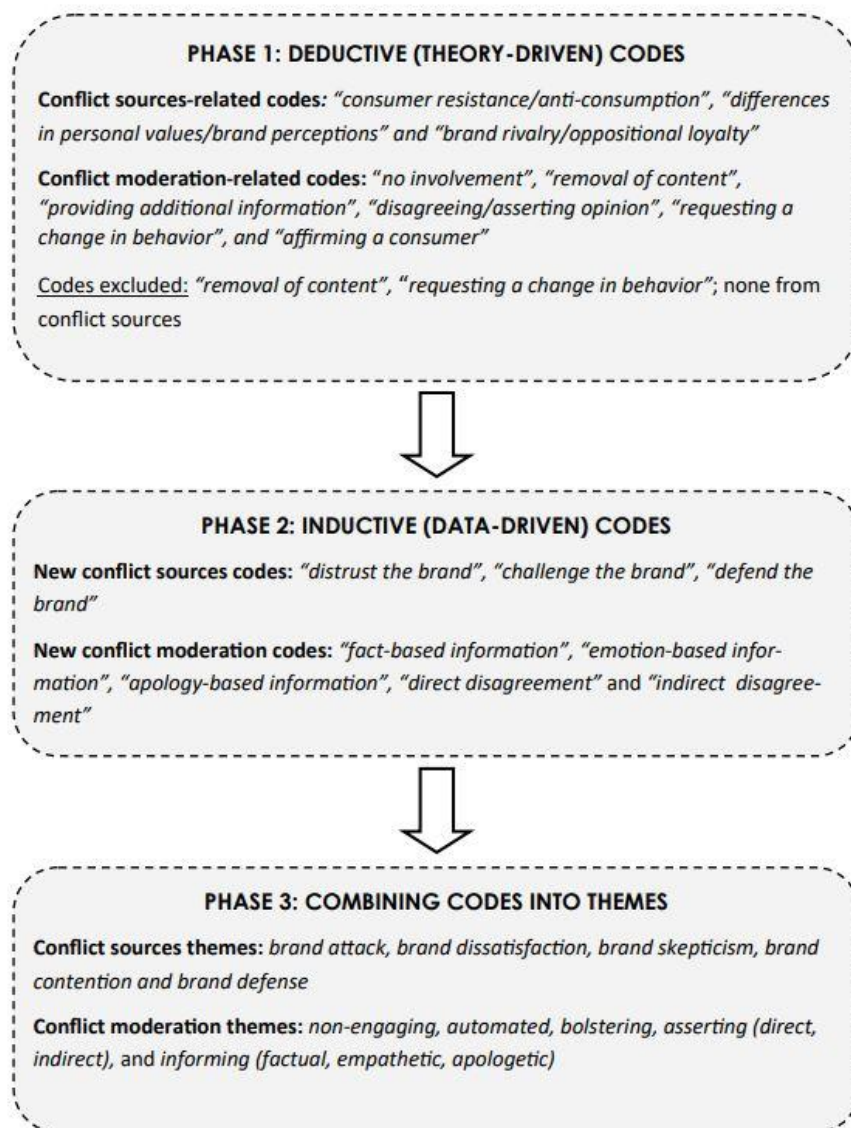
Table I Study sample

Brand	International scope	Description
AstraZeneca	International	Biotech/Pharmaceuticals
		3,919 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/AstraZeneca
Costa Coffee	International	Foods and drinks
		1,751,066 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/CostaCoffee
Domino's Pizzas	International	Foods and drinks/Restaurant
		21,483,694 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/DominosPizza
First Bus	National	Transport service operator
		First Glasgow
		19,488 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/firstglasgow
		First Scotland East
		2,770 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/FirstScotlandEast
HSBC	Global	Banking and financial services
		2,946,753 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/HSBCUK
Moderna, Inc.	International	Biotechnology company
		24,713 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/modernatx

Pfizer	International	Pharmaceutical company
		540,523 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/Pfizer
Primark	International	Clothing
		6,519,945 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/Primark
Royal Mail	National	Postal and delivery services
		228,627 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/RoyalMail
Sainsbury's	International	Retail company
		1,676,566 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/sainsburys
ScotRail	National	Transport system
		94,486 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/ScotRail/
Tesco	International	Retail company
		2,591,751 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/tesco
Vauxhall	International	Vehicle manufacturer
		189,341 followers
		https://www.facebook.com/vauxhall

The data analysis procedure adopted a hybrid approach to thematic analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thematic analysis represents a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within relevant data, here derived from naturalistic observations (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The hybrid approach involved three main stages, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 Research coding procedure

PHASE 1: DEDUCTIVE (THEORY-DRIVEN) CODES

Conflict sources-related codes: *"consumer resistance/anti-consumption", "differences in personal values/brand perceptions" and "brand rivalry/oppositional loyalty"*

Conflict moderation-related codes: *"no involvement", "removal of content", "providing additional information", "disagreeing/asserting opinion", "requesting a change in behavior", and "affirming a consumer"*

Codes excluded: *"removal of content", "requesting a change in behavior"*; none from conflict sources

PHASE 2: INDUCTIVE (DATA-DRIVEN) CODES

New conflict sources codes: *"distrust the brand", "challenge the brand", "defend the brand"*

New conflict moderation codes: *"fact-based information", "emotion-based information", "apology-based information", "direct disagreement" and "indirect disagreement"*

PHASE 3: COMBINING CODES INTO THEMES

Conflict sources themes: *brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, brand skepticism, brand contention and brand defense*

Conflict moderation themes: *non-engaging, automated, bolstering, asserting (direct, indirect), and informing (factual, empathetic, apologetic)*

During the first stage, a coding template *a priori* was developed based on the study's two RQs. Correspondingly with these, the template included two sets of broad theory-driven codes:

one set relating to the C2C conflict source and another referring to the brand moderation strategies. C2C conflict sources consisted of three codes, which were taken from Husemann and Luedicke (2013), while moderation strategies included six codes from prior work on conflict management in OBCs (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Dineva *et al.*, 2020). These codes were applied to the data where appropriate, leading to the exclusion of codes due to their inapplicability to the dataset. The second stage consisted of a data-driven coding approach whereby the data were analyzed inductively, and new codes emerged. In the third stage, the theory- and data-driven codes were combined and collated into final themes (i.e., C2C conflict sources; moderation strategies), as well as being provided with labels and definitions. Five sources of C2C conflict and five moderation strategies emerged, which are discussed in the following section. All names in the illustrative data excerpts that follow are fictitious to ensure anonymity.

4. Findings

4.1. C2C conflict sources

We identified five sources of C2C conflict in response to service failures that lie on a continuum, with individualistic orientation at one extreme and collectivistic at the other: *brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, brand skepticism, brand contention*, and *brand defense,* as shown in Figure 3. The first three occurred least frequently, while brand contention represented the most common source of C2C conflict, followed by brand defense.

Figure 3 C2C conflict sources

Brand attack refers to a consumer attacking the brand's communications or promotional messages. This source of C2C conflict occurs when personal values and/or opinions are infringed beyond mere dissatisfaction or skepticism; the consumer seeks a forum in order to vent their anger, as shown in the excerpt below.

> **Sneha Cannon:** Probably 90% down because of your prices ya bunch of Robbin bastxxxs should be putting more carriages on so less people in carriages [sic]

In another example, a consumer explicitly attacks the brand in response to promotional messages encouraging in-store shopping to ease logistical problems with click-and-collect.

> **Otto Cantrell:** Fat chance of deliveries, you have cancelled my last two deliveries on the day leaving a family who are self isolating (with covid 19 symptoms) without food! Thank goodness for the kindness of neighbours otherwise we would have been stuffed!

In these examples of brand attack, it is evident that the consumer is motivated to express their opinion in a public forum by their own self-interest rather than out of apparent concern for others. As such, we categorized this source of C2C conflict as individualistically oriented.

A less severe, but equally individualistic source of C2C conflict we termed *brand dissatisfaction*, which in our dataset represents a customer expressing dissatisfaction with the brand's product(s) or service(s). The following excerpt demonstrates a typical brand dissatisfaction conflict source in response to poor product experience with the COVID-19

vaccine. In this case, unlike consumer complaining behaviors, the consumer does not request brand remedy, but merely expresses discontent or concern.

> **Fletcher Thompson:** Got the vaccine 3 weeks ago, experiencing severe lightheadedness, headache and extreme fatigue, weakness, shakiness. I'm going through hell. No drs know what to do. [sic]

A similar instance on First Scotland East's Facebook community involves a consumer expressing dissatisfaction with a service and the alleged absence of compliance with COVID-19 guidance, which results in a C2C conflict.

> **Brogan Brewer:** Windows always shut number 1 people no sitting seat suppose to some drivers no bothered [sic]

As evidenced in these examples, brand dissatisfaction is mainly self-oriented and rooted in a personal unsatisfactory product or service experience that does not directly request a brand response; it is categorized as having an individualistic orientation.

Brand skepticism, in contrast, refers to a customer expressing distrust towards the brand, brand practice(s) or its products' authenticity. Below is an example of a consumer implicitly distrusting the efficacy of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine via sarcasm, which showcases this source of conflict.

> **Miles Merrill:** Use your own ammune system you will be amazed how ir works [sic]

In another instance of skepticism, the consumer rhetorically questions Moderna thanking individuals for having confidence in science and their vaccine and, unlike in the previous excerpt, explicitly expresses distrust towards the authenticity of the brand's promotional message on Facebook.

> **Aamna Lowe:** Trust? It's compulsion. You paid off people to make shots compulsory.

We categorized skepticism as individualistic since it is largely self-oriented. It appears that the consumer experiences an internal conflict resulting from distrust towards the brand and/or its promotional messages, which in turn motivates the consumer to express their opinion in a public forum.

The most frequently occurring source of C2C conflict is *brand contention*, where a customer challenges the brand image, practice(s), promotional communications, or employee conduct. This source of conflict can be either collectivistic or individualistic in its orientation. On the one hand, in the excerpt below, a consumer contends a brand's decision to offer free products to certain key workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, instead requesting consideration for other industries and therefore displaying a concern for others.

> **Alysha Parra:** What about delivery drivers who are getting medical supplies and food where they need to go, wheres their appreciation. I don't mean giving them free coffee I just mean a bit of appreciation in general. Post something on Facebook or other social media sites. [sic]

On the other hand, in some instances, consumers challenged the brand or its strategies from a more self-serving perspective, as shown in the following example.

> **Simeon Felix:** A further way to cut costs is remove the "conductor" who just seems to sit in the end of the carriage and doesn't check tickets/people wearing appropriate face masks. What is their purpose at the moment? Totally unnecessary if you ask me!

Standing apart from all the previously discussed sources of conflict is *brand defense,* characterized by a customer showing support for the brand, its communications, or its employees. In the following example, a consumer expresses support for the brand and its compliance with COVID-19 guidance in response to hostile interactions among other consumers.

Cayden Amin: This was not a post to make complaints – this was simply a polite request to customers to wear a mask when entering Branches – what do people not understand? A bit of respect wouldn't go amiss at this very worrying time.

Brand defense can also be proactive, as shown in the excerpt below where a consumer defends the brand in response to Royal Mail promoting government rules to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which in turn sparks a C2C conflict.

Maisha Wolfe: Here come the postie 'knockers' well done posties, you can only do as much as you can do, stuff the moaners.

This source of C2C conflict is other-oriented since consumers display concern not only for the brand or its employees, but also for other consumers as a whole, and is therefore classified as having a largely collectivistic orientation. The five sources of C2C conflicts, their orientations and occurrence frequencies are summarized in Table II.

Table II C2C conflict sources

Source	Description	Frequency	Orientation
Brand attack	Customer attacks brand communications or promotional messages.	10%	Individualistic
Brand dissatisfaction	Customer expresses dissatisfaction with the brand's product(s) or service(s).	14%	Individualistic
Brand skepticism	Customer expresses distrust towards the brand, brand practice(s) or product authenticity.	11%	Individualistic
Brand contention	Customer challenges the brand image, practice(s), communications, promotions, or employee conduct.	44%	Individualistic or collectivistic

Brand defense	Customer defends the brand, its communications, or its employees.	21%	Collectivistic

4.2. C2C conflict moderation strategies

Our analysis further generated five brand moderation strategies in response to C2C conflicts: *non-engaging, automated, bolstering, asserting (direct, indirect)*, and *informing (factual, empathetic, apologetic)*. These strategies are categorized into two levels: authoritative versus cooperative based on their "tone of voice" orientation, and passive versus active based on their communication approach, as shown in our matrix (see Figure 4). Non-engaging represented the most often utilized moderation practice, followed by informing, while asserting and bolstering were less frequently used and automated moderation was the least popular moderation approach.

Figure 4 C2C conflict moderation matrix
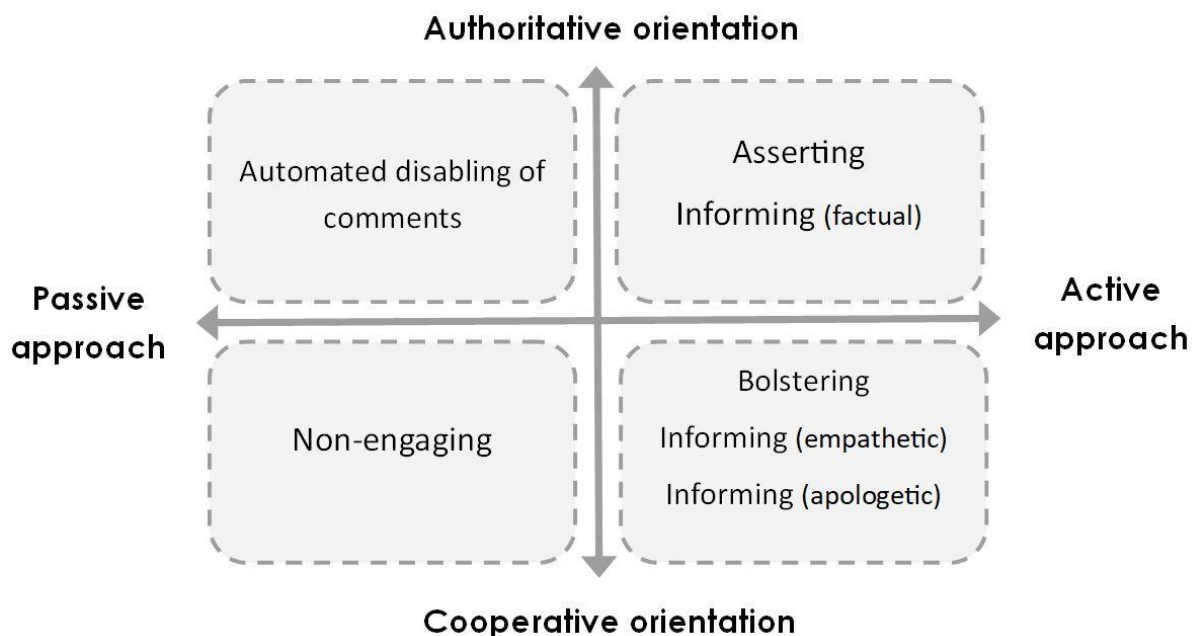
Non-engaging and *automated* moderation are classified as passive moderation strategies due to their lack of direct and verbal involvement in the C2C conflict. On the one hand, *non-*

engaging involves the brand not taking any action to moderate the C2C conflict and can be further characterized as a more cooperative practice. By utilizing a non-engaging approach, the brand takes on an observing role refraining from action (e.g., enforcing community rules) and therefore displaying a degree of obsequiousness. In our observations, non-engaging took place sporadically and not in response to a particular source(/s) of C2C conflict. Moreover, non-engaging generated further hostile exchanges, disagreements, and skepticism between alleged supporters and non-supporters of the brand, causing the C2C conflict to continue. On the other hand, the *automated* moderation practice has an authoritative orientation in that it prevents certain social media users from posting comments in the OBC. We observed this approach in a single OBC, as illustrated here: "Moderna, Inc. limited who can comment on this post." This strategy involves proactively disabling comments from brand non-followers; it can be speculated that in this way the brand automatically limits the occurrence of C2C conflicts initiated by non-supporters/non-consumers of the brand.

Among the more active verbal approaches to C2C conflict moderation, *asserting* represents an entirely authoritative strategy. It shows disregard for consumer posts and reasserts the brand's opinion in response to a consumer post that causes the conflict. Asserting can be further divided into two levels: *direct* and *indirect.* Using an indirect approach, the brand implicitly disagrees with a consumer and expresses its stance in a humorous manner, as shown in the following excerpt.

Samiya Haley: Why do we need clothes when you should not party you all need to get a life clothes is the lest of your worries [sic]

[C2C conflict takes place]

Primark: But we also need confy pajamas to stay in, Samiya. But for now, let's all stay in and keep safe. (winking emoji) [sic]

By contrast, in utilizing the direct asserting strategy, the brand explicitly disagrees with a consumer and adopts a forceful stance.

> **Mikayla Wilder:** Thank you for continuing to run services through out the pandemic and help key workers to work. Great work by the whole team! [sic]

> **Neve Rutledge:** I'd prefer to thank the individuals working than a company who wouldn't give a damn. (thumbs up emoji)

> [C2C conflict continues]

> **ScotRail:** @Neve Rutledge ScotRail's made up of over 5000 individuals who very much give a damn, Neve. We're here to serve the public. ^JE

The example from ScotRail's OBC shows the brand referring to its mission statement, while dismissing the brand aggressor's comment. Asserting approaches were used in instances where the C2C conflict mostly resulted from brand contention. Interestingly, in our dataset the predominant outcome of asserting was the brand receiving further support from consumers in the form of positive comments.

Informing is a moderation practice, which can be either authoritative (i.e., *factual*) or cooperative (i.e., *empathetic* and *apologetic*) depending on the focal point of its content. Generally speaking, the brand provides additional information to moderate the C2C conflict, its discrete levels emphasizing different content focal points and message valence. Factual informing is more authoritative because the brand provides strictly fact-based information to moderate the C2C conflict, as demonstrated below.

> **Anwar Blevins:** How is this essential? Non essential should mean vital to life? Stay home, stay safe and make pizzas from home!!! Shame on you

> [C2C conflict takes place]

Domino's Pizza: Food delivery has been recognized by the government as an essential service during this time, reducing crowds at supermarkets and ensuring fresh meals can be accessed by all. We have made a number of changes to our procedures to ensure we're following all government guidelines.

In response to the hostile comment, the brand provides a factual reply referring to government guidance. A similar approach is used below in response to a consumer post contending a promotional message by Vauxhall regarding free roadside assistance to NHS workers.

Ammar Perez: Nhs again. Bit unfair really. Other key workers depend on their cars

Vauxhall: Hi Ammar, at the moment this initiative is for NHS staff we do offer a range of special offers for Vauxhall partners & key workers as identified by the government. For more information, on the benefits offered to key workers, please go to our webpage. ^John

Our observations showed that in the majority of instances brands use fact-based informing when the sources of C2C conflict are brand attacks and brand contention. In contrast, the empathetic level refers to the brand providing emotion-based information showcasing sympathy while moderating the C2C conflict, which we categorized as having a cooperative orientation. The following excerpt exemplifies this.

[C2C conflict is taking place]

Mathilda Cotton: I'm not on about giving everyone free coffee I'm just on about showing appreciation in general.

Costa Coffee: We're so appreciative of what everyone is doing. We're trying to help as many people as we can. ^Luke

In a similar example, below, the brand uses an emotion-based approach to informing in response to a consumer expressing an opinion that challenges the brand's promotional video.

Jada Gill: I get the point they are trying to make but it's sooooo boring. Last week I discussed merit if mini mince pies over regular ones with family members – yes that's what lockdown does to you – but would not be something I would share with nation as sainsburys trying to do here with gravy! [sic]

Sainsbury's: Over the last years we have always taken a different direction with our Christmas ad, and everyone will have their favourite. Of course this year has been like no other, and we wanted to reflect this in our advertising – we understand it's been a tough year, but people are still looking forward to Christmas with optimism, and hoping they can spend it with their loved ones. Mark

In our data, an empathetic informing approach was used sporadically and irrespective of the source of conflict including during brand defense, brand contention and brand attacks. The apologetic level of informing involves the brand providing an apology alongside additional information when intervening in the C2C conflict, and can therefore be categorized as having a cooperative orientation. In the following example, the brand apologizes in response to a hostile consumer, while providing additional information referring to COVID-19 guidance.

Isobella Sheridan: As someone who suffers from poor circulation can I ask why the windows need to be open? So even when it's cold (let's face it even in summer in Scotland it can be cold) i can't close the windows to keep warm (angry face emoji) (angry face emoji)

First Glasgow: @Isobella Sheridan Hi Isobella, I apologise for the inconvenience this causes. This recommendation means that this offers increased ventilation whilst on board.

In another instance, the brand uses an apologetic approach to informing in order to moderate a conflict produced by a customer's dissatisfactory experience.

Basma Anja: @Tesco thanks i have pmed lots and spoke to someone last week, no answer and no joy. [sic]

Tesco: I am sorry Basma , we are receiving a lot more contact than normal and makes it more difficult trying to help people in the moment.

Brands used an apologetic informing approach to moderate C2C conflicts produced by brand attacks or brand dissatisfaction. The informing moderation strategies led to mixed outcomes, as per our observations. In some C2C conflict incidents the brand received verbal support from consumers, while in others hostile exchanges, disagreements, and/or skepticism continued to occur after the moderation.

The final moderation practice we identified is *bolstering*, which we categorized as entirely cooperative due to its encouraging nature. The brand affirms and/or thanks consumers for their support, as shown in the following excerpt.

[C2C conflict taking place]

Leigha Rennie: Families are kept apart and others have had losses. It's not boring it's what everyone wants, normality again. Lovely advertisement.

Sainsbury's: Thank you for your support Leigha. Shane

Below is a similar instance of bolstering in response to a consumer defending HSBC's promotional message asking consumers to respect staff trying to enforce COVID-19 rules and compliance.

Gloria Mckeown: Well done to your staff they are doing a great job in difficult times as a retail workers iam aware of the abuse staff are getting and want to wish staff all the best [sic]

HSBC: Virtual and socially distanced hug for a fellow key worker, Gloria (hugging face emoji)

Bolstering was deployed exclusively in C2C conflict incidents where the source of the conflict represented brand defense. The observed consequence of bolstering was that the C2C conflict appeared to subside, evidenced in no further comments being added. Table III provides a summary of the moderation strategies.

Table III C2C conflict moderation practices

Moderation practice		Description	Frequency	Outcome
Non-engaging		The brand does not take any action to moderate the C2C conflict.	40%	The C2C conflict does not subside. Hostile verbal exchanges, skepticism and/or disagreements between alleged supporters and non-supporters of the brand continue.
Automated		The brand limits who can post comments.	3%	Comments posted by brand non-followers are proactively disabled.
Bolstering		The brand positively affirms a consumer.	10%	The C2C conflict appears to subside. No further hostile verbal exchanges take place.
Asserting	Indirect	The brand implicitly disagrees with a consumer and exerts its stance in a humorous manner.	7%	The brand receives verbal support from consumers.
	Direct	The brand explicitly disagrees with a consumer and exerts its stance in a forceful manner.	3%	
Informing	Factual	The brand provides fact-based information.	13%	The brand receives verbal support from consumers in some instances, while in other instances hostile
	Empathetic	The brand provides emotion-based information.	10%	

| Apologetic | The brand provides apology-based information. | 14% | exchanges, disagreements and/or skepticism continue. |

4.3. Discussion

Our research aimed to address two questions pertinent to the successful management of international OBCs in the presence of hostile C2C communications following COVID-19 service failures: what are the sources of these and how do brands respond to them? In response, we identified five sources of C2C conflict and five strategies that brands adopt to moderate these. The C2C conflict sources we uncovered lie on a continuum (Figure 3), with brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, brand skepticism having a solely individualistic orientation at the one extreme, brand contention either being self- or other-oriented in the middle, and brand defense being primarily other-oriented at the other extreme. These findings complement international marketing studies theorizing the sources of consumer animosity by showing that this can occur beyond product or service-related factors (e.g., country of origin) or individual traits (Hollebeek, 2018; Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2007) and in response to consumers' individual or collective disposition towards brand failures. Furthermore, we show that sources of consumer animosity in the form of C2C conflict can vary in the valence of expressed sentiment, from more negative brand attacking behaviors (attack, dissatisfaction, skepticism, and contention) to more neutral (or even positive) brand defensive behaviors (defense).

In response to these sources, our research findings show that brands largely adopt five two-dimensional conflict moderation strategies that are either active or passive and more authoritative or cooperative in their approach towards the C2C conflict (Figure 4). Two passive approaches are non-engaging and automated; with the former being more cooperative, while the latter showcasing a level of authority through proactively disabling comments (and thus

conflicts) from occurring in the OBC. Active and cooperative approaches to moderation involve bolstering and informing (apologetic, empathetic), while active and authoritative brand strategies comprise asserting (direct, indirect) and informing (factual). Broadly, we observed that when brand defensive behaviors cause a C2C conflict, brands engage in a cooperative approach and a bolstering strategy specifically, while for brand attacking behaviors, brands mostly respond with authoritative strategies (automated, asserting). With these findings we offer insights to scarce international marketing theory on OBC management that, thus far, focuses on different types of online communities and corresponding conflict, while neglecting the moderation practices used by the community hosts to address the largely adverse phenomenon that C2C conflicts are.

5. Implications

5.1. Theoretical implications

International marketing research to date largely emphasizes the bright side of digitalization and social media advancements for gaining competitive advantage in foreign markets (e.g., Vadana *et al.*, 2020; Sinkovics and Sinkovics, 2020); we provide contributions by exploring its dark side, with the topical focus of a global pandemic. The present research thus advances international marketing theory by showcasing the main sources of hostile C2C interactions in response to COVID-19 service incidents in OBCs and how international brands manage these.

First, our study offers a new holistic typology of C2C conflict sources. Some of these – brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, and brand defense – have been partly discussed in pre-pandemic research (Colliander and Wien, 2013; Husemann and Luedicke, 2013); brand contention and brand skepticism, meanwhile, are novel contributions to the literature and exclusive to the context of COVID-19 service failures. Given recent findings on how the pandemic has brought about a rise in controversy and skepticism (O'Connor *et al.*, 2020), it is

unsurprising that these two new sources of C2C conflict have emerged. Moreover, recent findings suggest that COVID-19 has amplified customer sensitivity (comprising trust and credibility perceptions) towards brand communications on social media (Hesse *et al.*, 2021). Here, we expand this research by showing that COVID-19 incidents exacerbate brand contention and skepticism regarding such messages, which in turn generate C2C conflicts.

Our findings further enrich the customer (mis)behavior literature in international marketing by demonstrating that C2C conflict sources can be either individualistic (self-benefit) or collectivistic (other-benefit) in their orientation. This links to early work on how an individualistic versus collectivistic orientation needs to be recognized in organizational behavior conflict management styles (e.g., Komarraju *et al.,* 2008; Trubisky *et al.,* 1991), and integrated with message framing, according to theorists. They argue that international brands need to utilize self- versus other-oriented communications to encourage desirable consumer behaviors (e.g., Green and Peloza, 2014). Interestingly, our results show that during COVID-19 service failures, C2C conflicts are predominantly motivated by self-serving sources. This finding challenges the notion that consumers interact with others for altruistic purposes, as suggested in prior work on the positive side of OBCs (Marbach *et al.*, 2019); but it is aligned with the idea that based on the polarizing effect of COVID-19, an emphasis on the individual over the collective may take place (Bernacer *et al.*, 2021).

Our second contribution lies in advancing research on brands' conflict moderation strategies, an area lacking sufficient insight in international OBCs (Chandrasapth *et al.*, 2021; Närvänen *et al.*, 2019). We contribute to multi-disciplinary theory-building by conceptualizing five C2C conflict moderation strategies based on their passive versus active approach, and their authoritative versus cooperative orientation. Our framework thus advances theory by adding two-level conflict management approaches to prior, less elaborated observational results and prior results (e.g., Dineva *et al.*, 2017). We specifically reveal moderation strategies that are

novel to the literature (i.e., automated; factual vs. empathetic vs. apologetic informing; direct vs. indirect asserting) and utilized exclusively in response to COVID-19 service failures, allowing us to challenge – and expand – the ongoing debate in online community management research (Katsikaes *et al.*, 2019; Sinkovics and Sinkovics, 2020). Furthermore, we show that some of the approaches noted in other research contexts, namely non-engaging, informing, bolstering, and asserting (Dineva *et al.*, 2020; Dineva and Breitsohl, 2022), may still offer effective means of moderation in the intensified, globally relevant context of pandemic-related service failures.

Further to our second contribution, we provide first qualitative findings that link distinct sources of C2C conflict with corresponding moderation strategies. Past research has focused primarily on conceptualizing conflict moderation strategies irrespective of the sources of conflict (Dineva *et al.*, 2017) or linking these to different types of OBCs (Chandrasapth *et al.*, 2021). In comparison, our findings reveal two notable patterns in how brands respond to specific types of conflict sources. First, when brand defense causes a C2C conflict, brands engage in a bolstering moderation strategy, arguably to reinforce desirable OBC behaviors. Second, for brand attacks, brands mostly use authoritative strategies (automated, asserting), which has been observed in past research findings in consumer-managed communities (e.g., Husemann *et al.*, 2015).

5.2. Managerial implications

C2C conflict moderation should be seen as a firm's online capability enhancing its international marketing orientation because it not only allows brands to show commitment to consumers by ensuring civil and constructive interactions, but also to learn about consumer experiences and interests (Katsikeas *et al.,* 2020; Samiee, 2020). Consequently, international brands can tailor their moderation strategies accordingly to promote brand messages to foreign

customers (Johnston *et al.,* 2018), while moderating C2C conflicts and achieving desirable community outcomes.

As a starting point, during COVID-19 service failures on social media, brand managers must be alert to the possibility of subsequent hostile interactions between consumers, which are largely driven by the following sources: brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, brand skepticism, brand contention, and brand defense. Importantly, the majority of these conflict sources are self-serving, which requires brand managers to carefully consider their communications content framing when responding to C2C conflicts in their OBCs. For example, designing individualistically oriented brand communications may be appropriate when addressing C2C conflicts specific to COVID-19 incidents, and pre-pandemic research evidences the success of self-oriented message framing in encouraging desirable consumer behaviors (Ye *et al.*, 2015).

More specifically, studies emphasize the importance of agility for international brands (Khan, 2020; Khan and Khan, 2021) and we add to this by recommending that they tailor their responses to hostile C2C interactions by selecting suitable strategies – not only depending on the source of the conflict, but also based on the brand communication preferences (passive versus active; cooperative versus authoritative). We show that a non-engaging approach is commonly used by brands across industries – possibly due to its cost-effectiveness – but this is not recommended for international brands, because it results in conflict continuation. An automated approach of restricting comments from non-followers of the brand may be a more appropriate passive approach, which proactively reduces the occurrence of more severe C2C conflicts. However, brand community managers should use this strategy with caution because it limits the diversity of engagement behaviors in the OBC, and it may be negatively perceived by consumers due to its authoritative nature. Another authoritative, but arguably more inclusive option for brands is the asserting strategy, which can be used to address an aggressor directly

or indirectly, while asserting the brand's stance on a topic causing the C2C conflict. Unexpectedly, despite its dominating nature, in our findings this strategy produces further positive engagement from consumers; marketers should, in turn, consider its implementation in accordance with the desired engagement environment of their OBCs.

Informing is another active moderation option that consists of different levels, emphasizing varying degrees of authoritativeness (versus cooperation) and focal points. Brand managers can use any of these based on their desired goals in conflict moderation: further elaboration on the decision-making behind product promotion, compliance, and/or transparency regarding COVID-19 regulations (fact-based); eliciting favorable consumer responses in COVID-19 service incidents where the brand is at fault (apology-based); and displaying cooperation and emotion (empathy-based). Bolstering is a final option that is exclusively relationship-oriented and allows brand community managers to explicitly reinforce like-minded brand supporters.

We recommend that international brand marketers pilot test the identified moderation strategies in response to the specific conflict sources, to ensure these are not only congruent with OBC engagement expectations and objectives, but also compliant more generally with social media governance, policies, and regulations. The results from our findings thus have the potential to inform policymakers regarding the wider public issue of social-media-hate governance. The media suggests that policymaking should largely rely on how social media platforms manage hostility (BBC, 2022), but we encourage policymakers to consider also how individual brands with OBCs on social media address/do not address hostile interactive behaviors. Policymakers should thus turn to brands and, at the minimum, provide informed policy recommendations based on effective brand practice in minimizing hostility, which uniformly guide brands on how to resolve hostile C2C interactions and when to strategically avoid these. More ambitiously, policymakers should incentivize brand collaboration at scale in order to tackle this problem in appropriate and systematic ways across sectors and countries.

6. Conclusion, limitations, and future research

This research set out to understand the sources of C2C conflicts and corresponding brand moderation strategies in international OBCs during COVID-19-related service failures. Owing to the novelty of our work in international marketing theory, there are a few limitations that warrant the need for future research, which we discuss here. First, while the brands utilized in our sample are mostly international, these are predominantly Western brands. A further investigation into global Eastern brands may provide additional insights into sources of C2C conflict and corresponding moderation strategies.

Furthermore, for consistency and homogeneity purposes, our research included OBCs based on a single social media platform (i.e., Facebook). Given the different nature and functions of other channels (e.g., Twitter's character-limiting function, Instagram's visual nature), the moderation strategies that brands adopt on these may vary considerably. In response to this, future studies should replicate the present research to further validate the approaches uncovered here across different platforms. Third, our study sample is largely heterogenous, including brands from different industries and with different numbers of followers. Moreover, this study did not consider the weight of the sectors in which the selected brands operated, which is likely to have influenced the volume and/or nature of COVID-19 service incidents. In turn, we recommend that future research investigates more homogenous sets of brands (e.g., from the same service industries) and compares any cross-industry differences in the sources of conflict as well as the content (informational vs. assertive vs. bolstering) and approach (authoritative vs. cooperative) of brand moderation preferences.

Fourth, social media and digitalization in international marketing research remain under-researched (Sinkovics and Sinkovics, 2020), which calls for more investigation into how content and moderation approaches in OBCs can be further utilized and tailored to international

markets to aid brands in gaining competitive advantage. For instance, Jiao *et al.* (2018) found that collectivistic cultures prefer social value in their social media participation, while individualistic consumers favor content value. This represents an opportunity for research into the effectiveness of the identified moderation strategies adapted to consumers' social versus content value orientation in moderating C2C conflicts. Relatedly, here we provide first insights into which strategies correspond to which sources of conflict, as well as the outcomes of C2C moderation strategies. These should, however, be empirically verified by future research by measuring quantitatively the effect of the identified moderation strategies on online community outcomes for consumers and brands alike.

Finally, more broadly international marketing involves cultivating and nurturing mutually beneficial cross-cultural relationships (Samiee, 2020). There are great opportunities to fill the gap in research exploring the nuances of social media in international consumer relationship development, and the management of C2C and C2B interactions in OBCs.

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