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Keyboard Warriors in Cyberfights: Conflict in Online Communities of Consumption and Its Effects on Community Resources

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Conflicts are very common in Online Consumption Communities (OCC) and prior research indicates contradictory effects on community-related outcomes. We find via qualitative investigation that two types of conflicts operate, with opposing effects. This research builds knowledge of OCC conflict and value formation, helping to better manage heterogeneity in OCC.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Conflicts are very common in Online Consumption Communities (OCC) and numerous expressions have developed to describe them. Prior research indicates contradictory effects on community resources, namely social capital and culture. One stream finds that online conflict dissolves social capital and community culture (cf. De Valck 2007) while another stream finds it enhances them (cf. Ewing, Wagstaff, and Power 2013). Therefore, the effect of OCC conflict on community resources is unclear. In this paper, we (1) investigate conflict in OCC to develop a typology, and (2) delineate how each type of OCC conflict impacts community resources. This research contributes to our understanding of OCC conflicts and to the literature on value formation in OCC.

Conflict is a series of interactions where two or more parties pursue mutually incompatible goals and strive to achieve their goal at the expense of the other. It is generally characterized by three markers: parties, normally two of them, an object i.e. the focus of the interaction, and conflict behaviors i.e. actions meant to be hurtful (Husemann and Luedicke 2012). OCC conflict in particular unfolds publicly so it has a fourth marker: on-lookers.

OCC conflict impacts two types of community resources: social capital, the overall level of trust, reciprocity and voluntarism in the group (Mathwick, Wiertz, and De Ruyter 2008) and community culture, the system of discourses and practices attached to the OCC driving the production of meanings (Seraj, 2012). OCC conflict can create negative emotions and inferences about the event, parties and the group thus damaging social capital (cf. Duval Smith 1999; Wiertz et al. 2010) but also the opposite (cf. Ewing et al. 2013; Hardacker 2010). OCC conflict can question the existing status quo, eroding community culture (cf. Forte, Larco, and Bruckman 2009; De Valck 2007) but can also enact and adapt community culture, reinforcing it (cf. Graham 2007; Schau, Muniz and Arnould, 2009). OCC conflict can thus have opposing effects on community resources, and the reasons for this are unclear.

The research context of our netnography is a British forum aimed at fans of electronica and clubbing with over 20,000 members and 7.4 million posts since its creation in 2001. Context selection and the overall netnographic process follow the standards defined by Kozinets (2010). Data was collected over 18 months. Six interviews (200 transcript pages) were conducted investigating the different meanings of OCC conflict and its consequences. 150 threads were purposefully selected for coding based on their perceived interest and relevance to depict conflict, social capital and/or community culture. "Offline" field notes were taken when the first author went clubbing and "online" field notes were taken when the first author contributed to discussions.

Two types of conflicts with seemingly opposing effects on community resources emerge from the data: authentic and performative conflicts. Authentic conflicts correspond to the general definition of conflict provided in the literature review (see above). Authentic conflicts provoke negative emotions and moods leading to negative inferences about the parties and the group, arguably damaging community social capital. They also question group values and norms, plausibly impacting community culture negatively.

Performative conflicts imitate authentic conflicts so that the imitation is only a symbolic representation of the authentic (Goffman, 1974). Performative conflicts are executed by posters (stage performers) consciously interacting in front of on-lookers (the audience) in a dedicated place at a specific time. Inspired by Schechner (2003 [1988]) we identify three types of performative conflicts: rituals, drama and games. Performative conflicts foster feelings of communitas, entertainment, and personal growth. This builds positive inferences about the parties and the group, nurturing social capital. Performative conflicts also build shared stories and history, contributing to community culture.

Whether conflicts are authentic or performative is ambiguous. Parties can engage in authentic conflicts while the audience frames the experience as performative. A party can also frame a conflict as a performance while the audience and/or the other party experience it as authentic. If the audience frames conflict as a performance, it generally enhances the community's culture and social capital.

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