Title

Reframing online brand community management: Whose responsibility is it anyway?

Denitsa Dineva and Kate Daunt

Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University

Workshop submitted to: “Taking the experiential online: Engaging consumers virtually during Covid-19”

Keywords: online brand community; customer deviance; conflict management; mixed methods research

Social media brand communities are described as groups of consumers who express mutual sentiments about a particular brand, organization or consumption activity (Laroche et al., 2012). The benefits of consumer interactions in these communities are well researched: consumers obtain social as well as functional value, while companies learn about consumer behaviours and market trends (e.g., Dolan et al., 2019). Social media brand communities, however, bring together millions of consumers with heterogeneous engagement motives and brand perceptions, and these differences increasingly lead to consumer-to-consumer (C2C) interactions becoming dysfunctional (i.e., C2C conflict: one consumer verbally attacks another who reciprocates the hostility) (Dineva, Breitsohl & Garrod, 2017). This dark side of social media brand communities has especially proliferated since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Krahé, 2020) due to brands primarily communicating with consumers online. This represents the focal interest of this paper.

Recent research indicates that C2C conflicts may lead to adverse consumer and brand outcomes (Fombelle et al., 2020), while several authors have recently called for future research to better understand this form of incivility and how to best manage it (e.g., Dineva et al., 2020). In response to these research gaps, we put forward four studies that aim to address the
increasingly prevalent and yet under-researched phenomenon of C2C conflict in the social media.

In Study 1, we conduct a six-month non-participatory netnography (Cocker, Mardon & Daunt, 2021) of six social media brand communities from various industries in order to identify and categorise different types of C2C conflict. Based on 276 C2C conflicts, ranging from a minimum of three to a maximum of 160 individual comments, we categorised three main types of C2C conflicts. The remaining studies use this typology to examine the impact of different types of C2C conflicts on consumer and brand outcomes as well as investigate who should be responsible for their management in the context of Facebook. Consequently, Study 2 involves a one-factor between-subjects experiment whereby we test different consumer (e.g., positive and negative emotions, anxiety) and brand (e.g., brand image and attitude) outcomes resulting from participants being exposed to different C2C conflicts taken from Study 1.

Through the lenses of role theory (Solomon et al., 1985), which proposes that successful social interactions depend on whether relationship partners behave appropriately according to their specific social role, we conduct a 3 (types of C2C conflict) x 3 (consumer moderator vs brand moderator vs no moderation) between-subjects experiment (Study 3). In this study, we examine whether the brand (i.e., “Author”), which past research suggests is responsible for the management of adverse online interactions (Naumann, Bowden & Gabbott, 2020) as opposed to prominent community users (i.e., “Top fan”) (Colliander & Wien, 2013) will be perceived as more effective in conflict de-escalation. Lastly, Study 4 takes into account susceptibility to interpersonal influence (i.e., individuals’ tendencies to be influenceable by how their peers behave) (e.g., Sharma & Klein, 2020) that takes place in social media communities. The study, in turn, tests whether a brand moderator is still perceived as more effective in conflict de-escalation compared with a consumer moderator when support from other consumers (in the form of emoji reactions) is introduced.
References:


