



Dineva, D., Breitsohl, J., Roschk, H. and Hosseinpour, M. (2023)
Consumer-to-consumer conflicts and brand moderation strategies during
COVID-19 service failures: a framework for international marketers.
International Marketing Review, (doi: [10.1108/IMR-12-2021-0368](https://doi.org/10.1108/IMR-12-2021-0368)).

This is the author's final accepted version.

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

Journal:	<i>International Marketing Review</i>
Manuscript ID	IMR-12-2021-0368.R2
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	International marketing digitalization, Service recovery, Consumer conflict antecedents, Conflict management, Global pandemic, Social media

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Title

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

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

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3 marketers about new ways of transforming the dark side of OBCs into a source of competitive
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5 advantage based on real-world brand practice.
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8 **Practical implications:** Our empirically informed framework comprising sources of
9
10 undesirable C2C conflict and brand moderation strategies offers a practical tool that can aid
11
12 marketing managers in nurturing civil customer-to-customer engagement and interactive
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14 behaviors in their OBCs. By adopting our framework, brand and marketing practitioners can
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16 tailor their communication strategies towards different sources of C2C conflict and minimize
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18 their adverse consequences, thus, fostering an overall constructive OBC engagement.
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23 **Keywords:** *international marketing digitalization; service recovery; consumer conflict*
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25 *antecedents; conflict management; global pandemic; social media*
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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.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

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?

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3 Drawing from multidisciplinary fields of research, this article offers two main contributions
4 to the dark side of international marketing digitalization in the context of COVID-19. First, we
5 advance the consumer (mis)behavior research by providing a systematic overview of the
6 sources of C2C conflict in OBCs. Specifically, in a novel typology, we outline that C2C
7 conflicts are generated by five distinct sources (brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, brand
8 skepticism, brand contention and brand defense), some of which are specific to the COVID-19
9 pandemic (brand skepticism and brand contention), and we organize these into individualistic
10 (i.e., self-oriented) and collectivistic (i.e., other-oriented) drivers. Our second contribution lies
11 in extending conflict management research in OBCs by providing a conceptually refined
12 taxonomy of brand moderation strategies and integrating these with corresponding conflict
13 sources. We identify five two-level moderation strategies (non-engaging, automated,
14 bolstering, asserting, and informing) that range from authoritative to cooperative and from
15 passive to active in their orientation and approach, some of which (automated, informing,
16 asserting) are exclusively used in the context of COVID-19 service failures.

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

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11 International brands have long created global communities on social media in order to
12 engage with their international customer base (Jiao *et al.*, 2018). These OBCs bring together
13 consumers from different cultures and diverse backgrounds, and, ideally, lead to positive C2C
14 as well as C2B engagement behaviors (Makri *et al.*, 2019; Okazaki and Taylor, 2013). These
15 OBCs typically provide brands with opportunities to enhance their exposure in international
16 markets, and generate brand loyalty and improved sales (Jiao *et al.*, 2018). However, recent
17 studies in the international marketing, consumer behavior, and social media research domains
18 have begun to highlight the less desirable consequences of these communities, including hostile
19 consumer interactive behaviors such as C2C conflict (e.g., Chandrasapth *et al.*, 2021; Dineva
20 *et al.*, 2017; Husemann *et al.*, 2015). Few studies so far have investigated why C2C conflicts
21 occur and how brands respond to these; here, we review each research stream in turn.
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36 *2.1. Sources of C2C conflict on social media*

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40 International marketing research has made some attempts to explain why hostile consumer
41 behaviors occur. In an early study, Riefler and Diamantopoulos (2007) investigated consumer
42 tensions in relation to foreign product purchase behavior and found that animosity can be
43 caused by a number of different factors such as economic, political, religious, or personal.
44 Later, Hollebeek (2018) proposed that in online settings consumers' individual traits can
45 explain how consumers engage with others in different (positive versus negative) ways, thus
46 broadly leading to diverse interactional exchanges ranging from more constructive to more
47 destructive.
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3 The bulk of research into sources of hostile consumer interactions, however, comes from
4 consumer behavior studies. Specifically, scholars have traditionally offered three broad sources
5 of such conflict (Husemann and Luedicke, 2013). First, it was found that consumer resistance
6 and anti-consumption strategies (e.g., consumer discontent towards, activism against, and
7 avoidance of the brand; Thompson and Arsel, 2004) can impede C2C conflict, because
8 consumers who favor a certain brand refuse to accept negative information from another
9 consumer expressing their discontent or complaining about the brand (Ahluwalia *et al.*, 2000).
10 A second source of C2C conflict is oppositional claims to ownership of the same consumption
11 object or activity, or simply using different criteria to evaluate the appropriateness of a
12 consumption process (Arsel and Thompson, 2010; Kozinets, 2001). This source of conflict
13 may involve differences in personal values or a lack of information; alternatively, it occurs
14 because of different consumer perceptions of the same brand and/or its values. Third, C2C
15 conflict results from defending one's personal consumption ideology against non-consumers
16 of the brand, based on consumer dissent relating to the superiority of a consumer's preferred
17 brand over the rival brand (i.e., brand rivalry, oppositional loyalty; Ewing *et al.*, 2013, or brand
18 hate; Curina *et al.*, 2020). Research confirmed that consumers who identify with and are loyal
19 to a particular brand are more likely to engage in C2C conflict (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2021). At the
20 same time, non-supporters of the brand may engage in trolling behaviors (i.e., intentional
21 aggravation and provoking others, including brands, for their own amusement), which can also
22 trigger C2C conflict (Breitsohl *et al.*, 2018; Dineva and Breitsohl, 2022).
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50 Notwithstanding the contributions of research to date, these have not examined the sources
51 that impede C2C conflict under challenging and polarizing conditions, such as the COVID-19
52 pandemic. These sources are likely to differ for several reasons. During the pandemic, in the
53 absence of in-person interactions, individuals have spent more time online, and research links
54 excessive use of the Internet to aggression (Appel *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, COVID-19
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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

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3 examining approaches to C2C conflict management. These approaches generally range from
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5 passive brand roles entailing no involvement or avoidance to more active engagements,
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7 including impartial, cooperative, and authoritative strategies (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Dineva *et*
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9 *al.*, 2020; Hauser *et al.*, 2017).

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13 Passive approaches to manage conflicts include non-engaging, avoidance, and passive
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15 observation of consumer interactions and these are frequently utilized by brands as shown by
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17 past studies (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Homburg *et al.*, 2015; Hauser *et al.*, 2017). In this no
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19 involvement approach to conflict moderation, the brand takes on an observer role and gathers
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21 information about consumer interactions, while refraining from engaging in these or
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23 moderating the hostile ones.
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28 In contrast to non-engaging, a common active and impartial approach to moderation
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30 includes informational strategies, which comprise of providing further information on an issue
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32 causing the C2C conflict in commercial OBCs (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Dineva *et al.*, 2020). In
33
34 past studies, these have been identified as neutrally oriented strategies in that they neither
35
36 directly address the brand aggressor nor the brand supporter in a C2C conflict incident.
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40 More relationship-oriented and cooperative approaches, such as bolstering, entail the brand
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42 affirming a consumer who defends or supports the brand in a C2C conflict (Dineva *et al.*, 2017;
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44 Hauser *et al.*, 2017). Research findings further confirm that this approach is used to invoke
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46 positive feelings among consumers and encourage them to continue doing what they are being
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48 praised for (Schamari and Schaefer, 2015).
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52 Conversely, authoritative strategies include censoring, banning, mobilizing, asserting, and
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54 pacifying (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Husemann *et al.* 2015; Sibai *et al.*, 2015), and these appear to
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56 mostly address the brand aggressor in a C2C conflict incident. Findings point out that
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58 censoring, which refers to the sanctioning of undesirable content, is typically infrequently used
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3 by brands and exclusively in situations where consumers demand it (Dineva *et al.*, 2020).
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5 Likewise, removing users from the community is rare and occurs when the C2C conflict
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7 escalates to become transgressive and thus negatively affecting the well-being of the
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9 community (Husemann *et al.*, 2015). Mobilizing and asserting represent more dominant verbal
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11 approaches and specifically address the aggressor in a C2C conflict incident. Mobilizing
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13 enables brands to encourage consumers to change their opinions or behaviors regarding an
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15 issue or topic causing the C2C conflict (Dineva *et al.*, 2020), while asserting addresses the
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17 aggressor via a more forceful and value-laden statement whereby brand repudiates the hostile
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19 comment and re-states its opinion (Dineva and Breitsohl, 2022).
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25 A final authoritative approach referring consumers to the community rules is pacifying,
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27 which requests that the brand aggressor changes their conversing style or behavior (Dineva *et*
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29 *al.*, 2017). Linked to this moderation practice, in reviewing secondary data, Chandrasapth *et*
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31 *al.* (2021) concluded that common conflict resolution strategies across different types of OBCs
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33 are proactive approaches that refer to formal community rules and encourage adherence to
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35 them, while using platform technology to detect and manage hostility, and promote
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37 transparency and openness in dealing with conflicts.
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42 Some of these approaches and moderation strategies can be relevant to the present study,
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44 but C2C conflict management in past research has been conceptualized as single-level
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46 strategies and in isolation from service failures (e.g., Dineva *et al.*, 2017). The COVID-19
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48 pandemic has not only demonstrated that service failures and subsequent C2C conflict
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50 behaviors represent a complex and interdependent phenomenon, but also intensified the
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52 surrounding conditions – perceptions of service-failure severity and corresponding C2C
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54 hostility in relation to brands perceived to be at fault. This is particularly relevant for
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56 international OBCs and their management, given that service incidents and subsequent hostile
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58 C2C interactions are visible to global consumers who can observe, be influenced by, and join
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3 in the hostile interactions (Bacile *et al.*, 2018; Jiao *et al.*, 2018). As a result, we argue that C2C
4 conflicts in response to COVID-19 service incidents cannot be adequately addressed via the
5 thus far proposed conventional moderation strategies; further, that new knowledge is needed
6 concerning conflict moderation that takes place in conjunction with service recovery efforts.
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12 13 **3. Research design**

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16 To answer our research questions, we used the method of non-participatory netnographic
17 observations, which involved the passive observation and collection of relevant online data
18 (Moen *et al.*, 2003). Netnography represents a qualitative research method that adapts
19 ethnographic research techniques from anthropology to study relevant consumer and marketer
20 behaviors and interactions within online communities (Kozinets, 2002). Such observational
21 qualitative methods are advantageous for studying cross-cultural research involving aversive
22 topics (Malhotra *et al.*, 1996). Moreover, netnography has been widely utilized among
23 international marketing researchers to study online communities and digitalization initiatives
24 due to its ease of use, applicability to a range of contexts, and robustness, as evidenced by
25 recent studies (Chandrasapth *et al.*, 2021; Diaz *et al.*, 2021; Guesalaga *et al.*, 2016).
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40 Using a purposive sampling approach (Campbell *et al.*, 2020), thirteen OBCs on Facebook
41 were selected due to the presence of relevant data (Kozinets, 2002), as illustrated in Table I. In
42 choosing our sample and to increase the relevance for international marketing managers, we
43 adhered closely to Robinson's (2014) guidance on purposive sampling for qualitative research,
44 intentionally including a heterogenous sample from both idiographic (OBCs with smaller
45 following) and nomothetic (OBCs with large following) contexts. As such, we collected
46 information-rich cases related to our RQs from global, international, and national brands
47 between March 2020, when COVID-19 was officially declared a global pandemic (WHO,
48 2020), and September 2021, when the pandemic began to steadily decline (NPR, 2021) and
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3 data saturation was reached. The international scope of the brands was determined based on
4 whether the brand operates in most regions of the world (global), only some regions
5 (international) or only in its home country (domestic) (Kogut, 1999). To identify C2C conflicts,
6 we were guided by prior research on their distinct characteristics, including a two-way
7 exchange process during which consumers use profanity, insulting diatribe, negatively framed
8 emojis, capitalization of words/sentences, and multiple punctuation marks (see Dineva *et al.*,
9 2020 for a full review).

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20 [Insert Table I here]

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

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35 [Insert Figure 2 here]

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38 During the first stage, a coding template *a priori* was developed based on the study's two
39 RQs. Correspondingly with these, the template included two sets of broad theory-driven codes:
40 one set relating to the C2C conflict source and another referring to the brand moderation
41 strategies. C2C conflict sources consisted of three codes, which were taken from Husemann
42 and Luedicke (2013), while moderation strategies included six codes from prior work on
43 conflict management in OBCs (Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Dineva *et al.*, 2020). These codes were
44 applied to the data where appropriate, leading to the exclusion of codes due to their
45 inapplicability to the dataset. The second stage consisted of a data-driven coding approach
46 whereby the data were analyzed inductively, and new codes emerged. In the third stage, the
47 theory- and data-driven codes were combined and collated into final themes (i.e., C2C conflict
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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.

[Insert Figure 3 here]

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 bastxxxxs 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!

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3 In these examples of brand attack, it is evident that the consumer is motivated to express
4 their opinion in a public forum by their own self-interest rather than out of apparent concern
5 for others. As such, we categorized this source of C2C conflict as individualistically oriented.
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10 A less severe, but equally individualistic source of C2C conflict we termed *brand*
11 *dissatisfaction*, which in our dataset represents a customer expressing dissatisfaction with the
12 brand's product(s) or service(s). The following excerpt demonstrates a typical brand
13 dissatisfaction conflict source in response to poor product experience with the COVID-19
14 vaccine. In this case, unlike consumer complaining behaviors, the consumer does not request
15 brand remedy, but merely expresses discontent or concern.
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25 **Fletcher Thompson:** Got the vaccine 3 weeks ago, experiencing severe lightheadedness,
26 headache and extreme fatigue, weakness, shakiness. I'm going through hell. No drs know
27 what to do. [sic]
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32 A similar instance on First Scotland East's Facebook community involves a consumer
33 expressing dissatisfaction with a service and the alleged absence of compliance with COVID-
34 19 guidance, which results in a C2C conflict.
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40 **Brogan Brewer:** Windows always shut number 1 people no sitting seat suppose to some drivers
41 no bothered [sic]
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45 As evidenced in these examples, brand dissatisfaction is mainly self-oriented and rooted
46 in a personal unsatisfactory product or service experience that does not directly request a brand
47 response; it is categorized as having an individualistic orientation.
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52 *Brand skepticism*, in contrast, refers to a customer expressing distrust towards the
53 brand, brand practice(s) or its products' authenticity. Below is an example of a consumer
54 implicitly distrusting the efficacy of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine via sarcasm, which
55 showcases this source of conflict.
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3 **Miles Merrill:** Use your own immune system you will be amazed how it works [sic]
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6 In another instance of skepticism, the consumer rhetorically questions Moderna
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8 thanking individuals for having confidence in science and their vaccine and, unlike in the
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10 previous excerpt, explicitly expresses distrust towards the authenticity of the brand's
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12 promotional message on Facebook.
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16 **Aamna Lowe:** Trust? It's compulsion. You paid off people to make shots compulsory.
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19 We categorized skepticism as individualistic since it is largely self-oriented. It appears
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21 that the consumer experiences an internal conflict resulting from distrust towards the brand
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23 and/or its promotional messages, which in turn motivates the consumer to express their opinion
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25 in a public forum.
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29 The most frequently occurring source of C2C conflict is *brand contention*, where a
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31 customer challenges the brand image, practice(s), promotional communications, or employee
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33 conduct. This source of conflict can be either collectivistic or individualistic in its orientation.
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35 On the one hand, in the excerpt below, a consumer contends a brand's decision to offer free
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37 products to certain key workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, instead requesting
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39 consideration for other industries and therefore displaying a concern for others.
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43 **Alysha Parra:** What about delivery drivers who are getting medical supplies and food where
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45 they need to go, where's their appreciation. I don't mean giving them free coffee I just mean a
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47 bit of appreciation in general. Post something on Facebook or other social media sites. [sic]
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50 On the other hand, in some instances, consumers challenged the brand or its strategies
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52 from a more self-serving perspective, as shown in the following example.
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55 **Simeon Felix:** A further way to cut costs is remove the "conductor" who just seems to sit in
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57 the end of the carriage and doesn't check tickets/people wearing appropriate face masks. What
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59 is their purpose at the moment? Totally unnecessary if you ask me!
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3 Standing apart from all the previously discussed sources of conflict is *brand defense*,
4 characterized by a customer showing support for the brand, its communications, or its
5 employees. In the following example, a consumer expresses support for the brand and its
6 compliance with COVID-19 guidance in response to hostile interactions among other
7 consumers.
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15 **Cayden Amin:** This was not a post to make complaints – this was simply a polite request to
16 customers to wear a mask when entering Branches – what do people not understand? A bit of
17 respect wouldn't go amiss at this very worrying time.
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22 Brand defense can also be proactive, as shown in the excerpt below where a consumer
23 defends the brand in response to Royal Mail promoting government rules to prevent the spread
24 of COVID-19, which in turn sparks a C2C conflict.
25
26
27
28
29

30 **Maisha Wolfe:** Here come the postie 'knockers' well done posties, you can only do as much as
31 you can do, stuff the moaners.
32
33
34

35 This source of C2C conflict is other-oriented since consumers display concern not only for
36 the brand or its employees, but also for other consumers as a whole, and is therefore classified
37 as having a largely collectivistic orientation. The five sources of C2C conflicts, their
38 orientations and occurrence frequencies are summarized in Table II.
39
40
41
42
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44

45 [Insert Table II here]
46
47

48 4.2. C2C conflict moderation strategies 49

50 Our analysis further generated five brand moderation strategies in response to C2C
51 conflicts: *non-engaging*, *automated*, *bolstering*, *asserting (direct, indirect)*, and *informing*
52 (*factual, empathetic, apologetic*). These strategies are categorized into two levels: authoritative
53 versus cooperative based on their “tone of voice” orientation, and passive versus active based
54 on their communication approach, as shown in our matrix (see Figure 4). Non-engaging
55
56
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60

1
2
3 represented the most often utilized moderation practice, followed by informing, while asserting
4 and bolstering were less frequently used and automated moderation was the least popular
5
6
7 moderation approach.
8
9

10 [Insert Figure 4 here]
11
12

13
14 *Non-engaging* and *automated* moderation are classified as passive moderation strategies
15 due to their lack of direct and verbal involvement in the C2C conflict. On the one hand, *non-*
16 *engaging* involves the brand not taking any action to moderate the C2C conflict and can be
17
18 further characterized as a more cooperative practice. By utilizing a non-engaging approach, the
19
20 brand takes on an observing role refraining from action (e.g., enforcing community rules) and
21
22 therefore displaying a degree of obsequiousness. In our observations, non-engaging took place
23
24 sporadically and not in response to a particular source(/s) of C2C conflict. Moreover, non-
25
26 engaging generated further hostile exchanges, disagreements, and skepticism between alleged
27
28 supporters and non-supporters of the brand, causing the C2C conflict to continue. On the other
29
30 hand, the *automated* moderation practice has an authoritative orientation in that it prevents
31
32 certain social media users from posting comments in the OBC. We observed this approach in
33
34 a single OBC, as illustrated here: “Moderna, Inc. limited who can comment on this post.” This
35
36 strategy involves proactively disabling comments from brand non-followers; it can be
37
38 speculated that in this way the brand automatically limits the occurrence of C2C conflicts
39
40 initiated by non-supporters/non-consumers of the brand.
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49 Among the more active verbal approaches to C2C conflict moderation, *asserting* represents
50 an entirely authoritative strategy. It shows disregard for consumer posts and reasserts the
51
52 brand’s opinion in response to a consumer post that causes the conflict. Asserting can be further
53
54 divided into two levels: *direct* and *indirect*. Using an indirect approach, the brand implicitly
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3 disagrees with a consumer and expresses its stance in a humorous manner, as shown in the
4
5 following excerpt.
6
7

8 **Samiya Haley:** Why do we need clothes when you should not party you all need to get a life clothes
9
10 is the lest of your worries [sic]
11

12
13 [C2C conflict takes place]
14

15
16 **Primark:** But we also need confy pajamas to stay in, Samiya. But for now, let's all stay in and keep
17
18 safe. (winking emoji) [sic]
19

20
21 By contrast, in utilizing the direct asserting strategy, the brand explicitly disagrees with a
22
23 consumer and adopts a forceful stance.
24
25

26 **Mikayla Wilder:** Thank you for continuing to run services through out the pandemic and help key
27
28 workers to work. Great work by the whole team! [sic]
29

30
31 **Neve Rutledge:** I'd prefer to thank the individuals working than a company who wouldn't give a
32
33 damn. (thumbs up emoji)
34

35
36 [C2C conflict continues]
37

38
39 **ScotRail:** @Neve Rutledge ScotRail's made up of over 5000 individuals who very much give a
40
41 damn, Neve. We're here to serve the public. ^JE
42

43
44 The example from ScotRail's OBC shows the brand referring to its mission statement,
45
46 while dismissing the brand aggressor's comment. Asserting approaches were used in instances
47
48 where the C2C conflict mostly resulted from brand contention. Interestingly, in our dataset the
49
50 predominant outcome of asserting was the brand receiving further support from consumers in
51
52 the form of positive comments.
53
54

55
56 *Informing* is a moderation practice, which can be either authoritative (i.e., *factual*) or
57
58 cooperative (i.e., *empathetic* and *apologetic*) depending on the focal point of its content.
59
60

1
2
3 Generally speaking, the brand provides additional information to moderate the C2C conflict,
4
5 its discrete levels emphasizing different content focal points and message valence. Factual
6
7 informing is more authoritative because the brand provides strictly fact-based information to
8
9 moderate the C2C conflict, as demonstrated below.
10
11

12
13 **Anwar Blevins:** How is this essential? Non essential should mean vital to life? Stay home, stay
14
15 safe and make pizzas from home!!! Shame on you
16

17
18 [C2C conflict takes place]
19

20
21 **Domino's Pizza:** Food delivery has been recognized by the government as an essential service
22
23 during this time, reducing crowds at supermarkets and ensuring fresh meals can be accessed by
24
25 all. We have made a number of changes to our procedures to ensure we're following all
26
27 government guidelines.
28

29
30 In response to the hostile comment, the brand provides a factual reply referring to
31
32 government guidance. A similar approach is used below in response to a consumer post
33
34 contending a promotional message by Vauxhall regarding free roadside assistance to NHS
35
36 workers.
37

38
39 **Ammar Perez:** Nhs again. Bit unfair really. Other key workers depend on their cars
40
41

42
43 **Vauxhall:** Hi Ammar, at the moment this initiative is for NHS staff we do offer a range of
44
45 special offers for Vauxhall partners & key workers as identified by the government. For more
46
47 information, on the benefits offered to key workers, please go to our webpage. ^John
48

49
50 Our observations showed that in the majority of instances brands use fact-based
51
52 informing when the sources of C2C conflict are brand attacks and brand contention. In contrast,
53
54 the empathetic level refers to the brand providing emotion-based information showcasing
55
56 sympathy while moderating the C2C conflict, which we categorized as having a cooperative
57
58 orientation. The following excerpt exemplifies this.
59
60

[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)

1
2
3 **First Glasgow:** @Isobella Sheridan Hi Isobella, I apologise for the inconvenience this causes.

4
5 This recommendation means that this offers increased ventilation whilst on board.

6
7
8 In another instance, the brand uses an apologetic approach to informing in order to
9 moderate a conflict produced by a customer's dissatisfactory experience.

10
11
12
13 **Basma Anja:** @Tesco thanks i have pmed lots and spoke to someone last week, no answer and
14 no joy. [sic]

15
16
17 **Tesco:** I am sorry Basma , we are receiving a lot more contact than normal and makes it more
18 difficult trying to help people in the moment.

19
20 Brands used an apologetic informing approach to moderate C2C conflicts produced by
21 brand attacks or brand dissatisfaction. The informing moderation strategies led to mixed
22 outcomes, as per our observations. In some C2C conflict incidents the brand received verbal
23 support from consumers, while in others hostile exchanges, disagreements, and/or skepticism
24 continued to occur after the moderation.

25
26
27
28 The final moderation practice we identified is *bolstering*, which we categorized as
29 entirely cooperative due to its encouraging nature. The brand affirms and/or thanks consumers
30 for their support, as shown in the following excerpt.

31
32
33 [C2C conflict taking place]

34
35
36 **Leigha Rennie:** Families are kept apart and others have had losses. It's not boring it's what
37 everyone wants, normality again. Lovely advertisement.

38
39
40
41 **Sainsbury's:** Thank you for your support Leigha. Shane

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

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3 **Gloria Mckeown:** Well done to your staff they are doing a great job in difficult times as a retail
4 workers iam aware of the abuse staff are getting and want to wish staff all the best [sic]
5
6

7
8 **HSBC:** Virtual and socially distanced hug for a fellow key worker, Gloria (hugging face emoji)
9

10
11 Bolstering was deployed exclusively in C2C conflict incidents where the source of the
12 conflict represented brand defense. The observed consequence of bolstering was that the C2C
13 conflict appeared to subside, evidenced in no further comments being added. Table III provides
14 a summary of the moderation strategies.
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20
21 [Insert Table III here]
22

23 *4.3. Discussion*

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27 Our research aimed to address two questions pertinent to the successful management of
28 international OBCs in the presence of hostile C2C communications following COVID-19
29 service failures: what are the sources of these and how do brands respond to them? In response,
30 we identified five sources of C2C conflict and five strategies that brands adopt to moderate
31 these. The C2C conflict sources we uncovered lie on a continuum (Figure 3), with brand attack,
32 brand dissatisfaction, brand skepticism having a solely individualistic orientation at the one
33 extreme, brand contention either being self- or other-oriented in the middle, and brand defense
34 being primarily other-oriented at the other extreme. These findings complement international
35 marketing studies theorizing the sources of consumer animosity by showing that this can occur
36 beyond product or service-related factors (e.g., country of origin) or individual traits
37 (Hollebeek, 2018; Riefler and Diamantopoulos, 2007) and in response to consumers'
38 individual or collective disposition towards brand failures. Furthermore, we show that sources
39 of consumer animosity in the form of C2C conflict can vary in the valence of expressed
40 sentiment, from more negative brand attacking behaviors (attack, dissatisfaction, skepticism,
41 and contention) to more neutral (or even positive) brand defensive behaviors (defense).
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3 In response to these sources, our research findings show that brands largely adopt five two-
4 dimensional conflict moderation strategies that are either active or passive and more
5 authoritative or cooperative in their approach towards the C2C conflict (Figure 4). Two passive
6 approaches are non-engaging and automated; with the former being more cooperative, while
7 the latter showcasing a level of authority through proactively disabling comments (and thus
8 conflicts) from occurring in the OBC. Active and cooperative approaches to moderation
9 involve bolstering and informing (apologetic, empathetic), while active and authoritative brand
10 strategies comprise asserting (direct, indirect) and informing (factual). Broadly, we observed
11 that when brand defensive behaviors cause a C2C conflict, brands engage in a cooperative
12 approach and a bolstering strategy specifically, while for brand attacking behaviors, brands
13 mostly respond with authoritative strategies (automated, asserting). With these findings we
14 offer insights to scarce international marketing theory on OBC management that, thus far,
15 focuses on different types of online communities and corresponding conflict, while neglecting
16 the moderation practices used by the community hosts to address the largely adverse
17 phenomenon that C2C conflicts are.

38 **5. Implications**

39 *5.1. Theoretical implications*

40
41 International marketing research to date largely emphasizes the bright side of digitalization
42 and social media advancements for gaining competitive advantage in foreign markets (e.g.,
43 Vadana *et al.*, 2020; Sinkovics and Sinkovics, 2020); we provide contributions by exploring
44 its dark side, with the topical focus of a global pandemic. The present research thus advances
45 international marketing theory by showcasing the main sources of hostile C2C interactions in
46 response to COVID-19 service incidents in OBCs and how international brands manage these.
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3 First, our study offers a new holistic typology of C2C conflict sources. Some of these –
4 brand attack, brand dissatisfaction, and brand defense – have been partly discussed in pre-
5 pandemic research (Colliander and Wien, 2013; Husemann and Luedicke, 2013); brand
6 contention and brand skepticism, meanwhile, are novel contributions to the literature and
7 exclusive to the context of COVID-19 service failures. Given recent findings on how the
8 pandemic has brought about a rise in controversy and skepticism (O'Connor *et al.*, 2020), it is
9 unsurprising that these two new sources of C2C conflict have emerged. Moreover, recent
10 findings suggest that COVID-19 has amplified customer sensitivity (comprising trust and
11 credibility perceptions) towards brand communications on social media (Hesse *et al.*, 2021).
12 Here, we expand this research by showing that COVID-19 incidents exacerbate brand
13 contention and skepticism regarding such messages, which in turn generate C2C conflicts.
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29 Our findings further enrich the customer (mis)behavior literature in international marketing
30 by demonstrating that C2C conflict sources can be either individualistic (self-benefit) or
31 collectivistic (other-benefit) in their orientation. This links to early work on how an
32 individualistic versus collectivistic orientation needs to be recognized in organizational
33 behavior conflict management styles (e.g., Komarraju *et al.*, 2008; Trubisky *et al.*, 1991), and
34 integrated with message framing, according to theorists. They argue that international brands
35 need to utilize self- versus other-oriented communications to encourage desirable consumer
36 behaviors (e.g., Green and Peloza, 2014). Interestingly, our results show that during COVID-
37 19 service failures, C2C conflicts are predominantly motivated by self-serving sources. This
38 finding challenges the notion that consumers interact with others for altruistic purposes, as
39 suggested in prior work on the positive side of OBCs (Marbach *et al.*, 2019); but it is aligned
40 with the idea that based on the polarizing effect of COVID-19, an emphasis on the individual
41 over the collective may take place (Bernacer *et al.*, 2021).
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3 Our second contribution lies in advancing research on brands' conflict moderation
4 strategies, an area lacking sufficient insight in international OBCs (Chandrasapth *et al.*, 2021;
5 N rkv nen *et al.*, 2019). We contribute to multi-disciplinary theory-building by conceptualizing
6 five C2C conflict moderation strategies based on their passive versus active approach, and their
7 authoritative versus cooperative orientation. Our framework thus advances theory by adding
8 two-level conflict management approaches to prior, less elaborated observational results and
9 prior results (e.g., Dineva *et al.*, 2017). We specifically reveal moderation strategies that are
10 novel to the literature (i.e., automated; factual vs. empathetic vs. apologetic informing; direct
11 vs. indirect asserting) and utilized exclusively in response to COVID-19 service failures,
12 allowing us to challenge – and expand – the ongoing debate in online community management
13 research (Katsikaes *et al.*, 2019; Sinkovics and Sinkovics, 2020). Furthermore, we show that
14 some of the approaches noted in other research contexts, namely non-engaging, informing,
15 bolstering, and asserting (Dineva *et al.*, 2020; Dineva and Breitsohl, 2022), may still offer
16 effective means of moderation in the intensified, globally relevant context of pandemic-related
17 service failures.

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39 Further to our second contribution, we provide first qualitative findings that link distinct
40 sources of C2C conflict with corresponding moderation strategies. Past research has focused
41 primarily on conceptualizing conflict moderation strategies irrespective of the sources of
42 conflict (Dineva *et al.*, 2017) or linking these to different types of OBCs (Chandrasapth *et al.*,
43 2021). In comparison, our findings reveal two notable patterns in how brands respond to
44 specific types of conflict sources. First, when brand defense causes a C2C conflict, brands
45 engage in a bolstering moderation strategy, arguably to reinforce desirable OBC behaviors.
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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

1
2
3 is not recommended for international brands, because it results in conflict continuation. An
4
5 automated approach of restricting comments from non-followers of the brand may be a more
6
7 appropriate passive approach, which proactively reduces the occurrence of more severe C2C
8
9 conflicts. However, brand community managers should use this strategy with caution because
10
11 it limits the diversity of engagement behaviors in the OBC, and it may be negatively perceived
12
13 by consumers due to its authoritative nature. Another authoritative, but arguably more inclusive
14
15 option for brands is the asserting strategy, which can be used to address an aggressor directly
16
17 or indirectly, while asserting the brand's stance on a topic causing the C2C conflict.
18
19 Unexpectedly, despite its dominating nature, in our findings this strategy produces further
20
21 positive engagement from consumers; marketers should, in turn, consider its implementation
22
23 in accordance with the desired engagement environment of their OBCs.
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29 Informing is another active moderation option that consists of different levels, emphasizing
30
31 varying degrees of authoritativeness (versus cooperation) and focal points. Brand managers
32
33 can use any of these based on their desired goals in conflict moderation: further elaboration on
34
35 the decision-making behind product promotion, compliance, and/or transparency regarding
36
37 COVID-19 regulations (fact-based); eliciting favorable consumer responses in COVID-19
38
39 service incidents where the brand is at fault (apology-based); and displaying cooperation and
40
41 emotion (empathy-based). Bolstering is a final option that is exclusively relationship-oriented
42
43 and allows brand community managers to explicitly reinforce like-minded brand supporters.
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48 We recommend that international brand marketers pilot test the identified moderation
49
50 strategies in response to the specific conflict sources, to ensure these are not only congruent
51
52 with OBC engagement expectations and objectives, but also compliant more generally with
53
54 social media governance, policies, and regulations. The results from our findings thus have the
55
56 potential to inform policymakers regarding the wider public issue of social-media-hate
57
58 governance. The media suggests that policymaking should largely rely on how social media
59
60

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



1
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3 service incidents. In turn, we recommend that future research investigates more homogenous
4 sets of brands (e.g., from the same service industries) and compares any cross-industry
5 differences in the sources of conflict as well as the content (informational vs. assertive vs.
6 bolstering) and approach (authoritative vs. cooperative) of brand moderation preferences.
7
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13 Fourth, social media and digitalization in international marketing research remain under-
14 researched (Sinkovics and Sinkovics, 2020), which calls for more investigation into how
15 content and moderation approaches in OBCs can be further utilized and tailored to international
16 markets to aid brands in gaining competitive advantage. For instance, Jiao *et al.* (2018) found
17 that collectivistic cultures prefer social value in their social media participation, while
18 individualistic consumers favor content value. This represents an opportunity for research into
19 the effectiveness of the identified moderation strategies adapted to consumers' social versus
20 content value orientation in moderating C2C conflicts. Relatedly, here we provide first insights
21 into which strategies correspond to which sources of conflict, as well as the outcomes of C2C
22 moderation strategies. These should, however, be empirically verified by future research by
23 measuring quantitatively the effect of the identified moderation strategies on online community
24 outcomes for consumers and brands alike.
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41 Finally, more broadly international marketing involves cultivating and nurturing mutually
42 beneficial cross-cultural relationships (Samiee, 2020). There are great opportunities to fill the
43 gap in research exploring the nuances of social media in international consumer relationship
44 development, and the management of C2C and C2B interactions in OBCs.
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3 **Figure 1** C2C conflict excerpt
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7  **Basma Anja** @Tesco thanks i have pmed lots and spoke
8 to someone last week, no answer and no joy.  4
9 undefined · undefined · 42 mins


10
11  **Dálach Hartmann** Why could you not pop to the shop
12 yourself ? Also complaining saying I'm a loyal customer
13 then threatening to leave during this time is not good  2
14 undefined · undefined · 35 mins






15
16  **Basma Anja** @Dálach Hartmann i had a cough and a
17 temp! Rather not spread it!!!!
18 undefined · undefined · 29 mins

19
20  **Dálach Hartmann** Don't be angry basma !!!
21 undefined · undefined · 20 mins

22
23  **Aurelia Derorit** well, you can still go out if you have the
24 virus just keep your distance, so stop whining.  1
25 undefined · undefined · 15 mins

26
27  **Nosipho Natalia** just to clear up your inaccurate
28 information – you must not go out if you have the virus.  5
29 undefined · undefined · 10 mins

30
31  **Aurelia Derorit** would you rather starve to death, Nosipho?
32 What misinformation have i spread ms troll?
33 undefined · undefined · 8 mins

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39  Write a comment...    

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g Review

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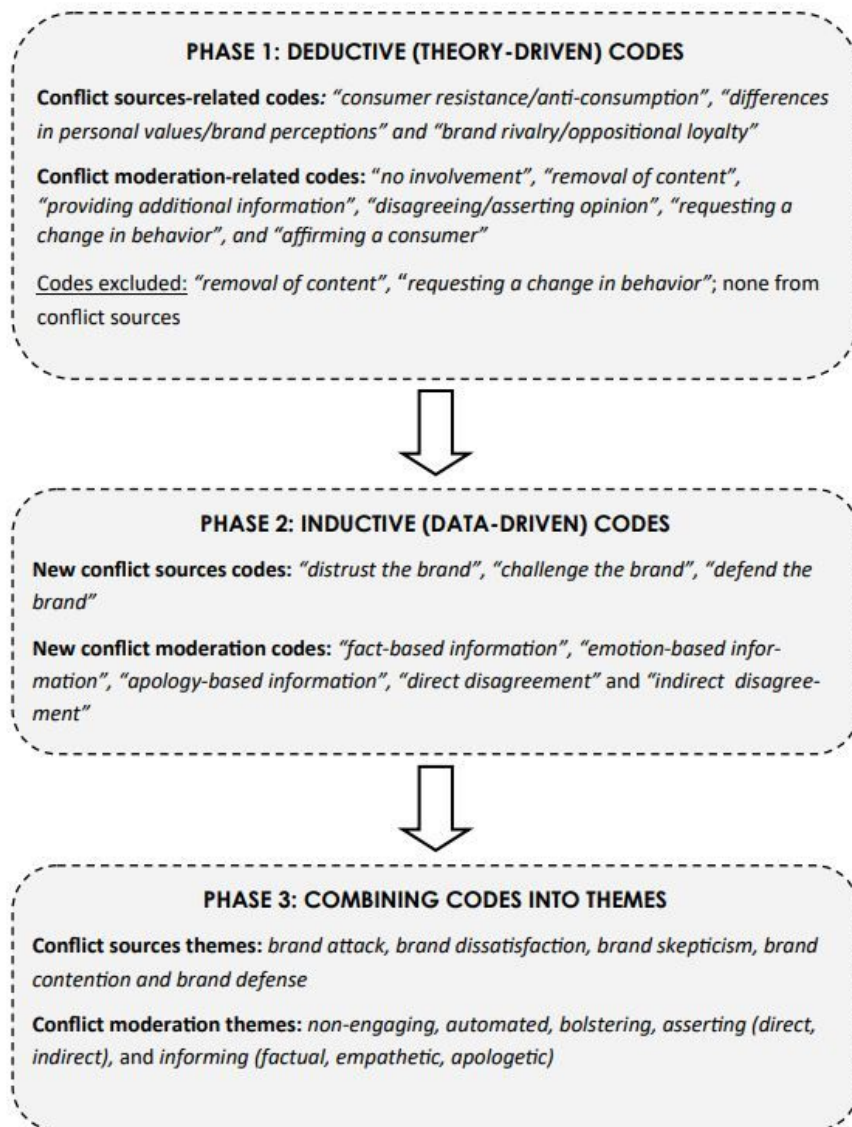


Figure 3 C2C conflict sources

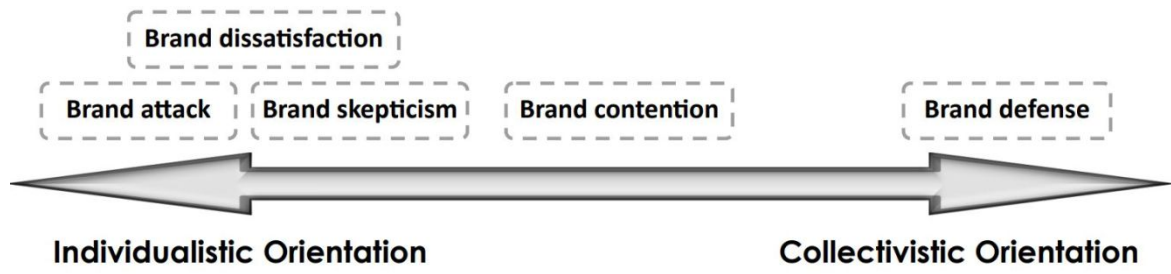


Figure 4 C2C conflict moderation matrix

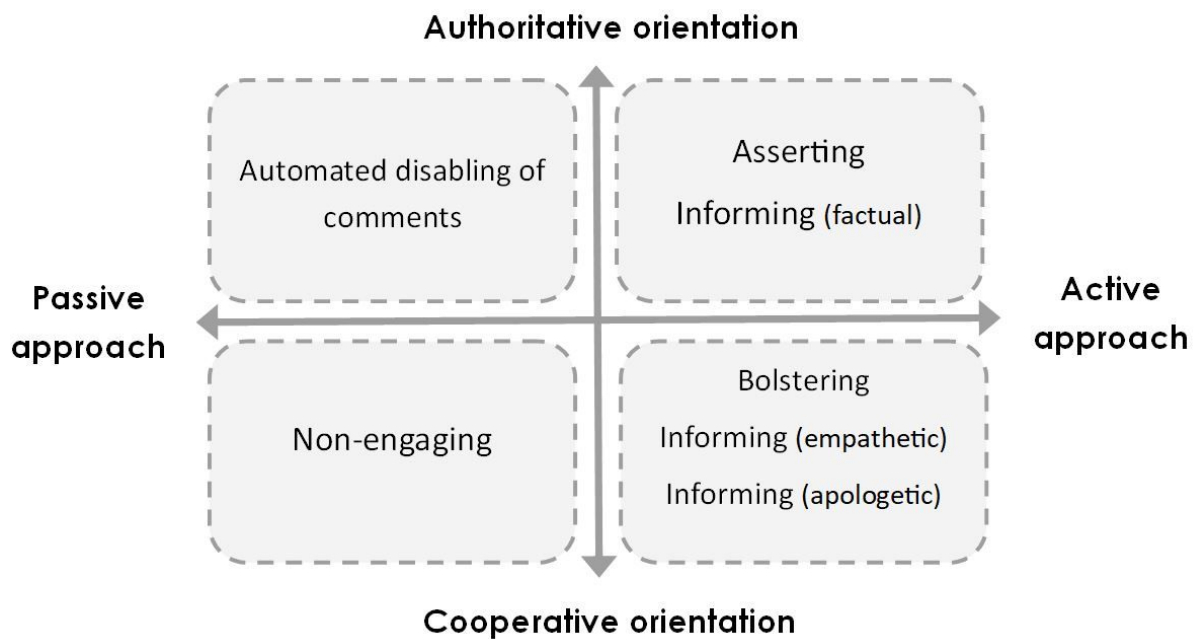


Table I Study sample

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

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

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 exchanges, disagreements and/or skepticism continue.
	Empathetic	The brand provides emotion-based information.	10%	
	Apologetic	The brand provides apology-based information.	14%	

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