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Social Conflict and Consumption: a Meta-Analytical Perspective

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This study sketches out the conceptual contours of “consumption-mediated social conflict”. Building on theoretical groundwork from sociology and conceptual synthesis of 13 original consumer culture studies, the authors distill three prevalent patterns of social conflict in consumption contexts—emancipatory, ideology-advocating, and authenticity-protecting conflicts—and discuss implications for future conflict research.

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Social Conflict and Consumption: A Meta-Analytical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Social conflict is an important and inevitable part of human relations (Coser 1972 [1956]; Simmel 2006 [1908]). It is commonly defined as an interaction relationship between two or more parties that pursue mutually exclusive or incompatible goals (Kriesberg 1973, 2007; Mack and Snyder 1957). As such, social conflict is a core social mechanism to (re-)vitalize, (de-)stabilize, and cure anything from interpersonal to international social relations (Bonacker 2005; Coser 1957; Dahrendorf 1958).

Social conflict also emerges in consumption contexts, and often with considerable consequences. Consider, for example, the group of fur-trade protesters that occupied the entrance of Burberry's London flagship store last autumn to blame the corporation for its "bloody fur trade" (caft.co.uk); imagine critical consumers spitting at Hummer SUVs to protest against the consumption of "gas-burning monsters" (fuh2.com); or think of Apple computer enthusiasts being denounced by Internet authors as "skinny-jeans wearing Hipsters" and "sickened Yuppies" (stupidedia.org).

Consumer culture research has approached such conflict dynamics from multiple perspectives in studies about consumer movements (Dameron 1941), consumer boycotts (Friedman 1985; Garrett 1987; Simon 2011), consumer resistance (Fournier 1998; Herrmann 1993; Holt 2002; Peñalosa and Price 1993; Rumbo 2002; Ulver-Sneistrup, Askegaard, and Kristensen 2011), consumer emancipation (Kozinets 2002; Murray and Ozanne 1991; Murray, Ozanne, and Shapiro 1994), marketplace drama (Giesler 2008), liberatory post-modern consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1995), new social movements (Kozinets and Handelman 2004), or anti-consumption (Cherrier 2009; Lee, Fernandez, and Hyman 2009; Portwood-Stacer 2012; Varman and Belk 2009). These and many other studies commonly focus on conflicts arising from power imbalances between producers and consumers, and often focus on cases of proactive consumer emancipation or heroic resistance.

However, as Honneth (1992), Simmel (2006 [1908]) and our introductory examples of conflicts circling around the (anti-)consumption of brands such as Hummer and Apple show, social conflict is not limited to courageous individuals fighting against (class) domination, suppression, or corporate exploitation. Social conflict also, and potentially even more so, emerges in mundane interactions between humans that strive for individualization and differentiation (Simmel 2006 [1908]). More recently, consumer culture theorists have begun to address these low profile types of social conflict. Authors explored, for example, competition and conflict in brand communities (de Valck 2007; Ewing, Wagstaff, and Powell 2013; Hickman and Ward 2007; Luedicke 2006; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), studied how consumers fight for consumerist morals (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010), and explained how consumers defend their field-dependent cultural capital (Arsel and Thompson 2011).

The growth of consumption-related social conflict research implies that conflict may be one of the important forces that shape contemporary practices of consumption. In this state of theoretical development, a systematic reflection and theoretical consolidation of existing research may prove useful for structuring and advancing this inspiring field of inquiry.

To contribute to this goal, we first review the classical writings on social conflict in sociology that set conflict research in our field into a broader theoretical perspective. We then use insights from this

first step to propose a conceptual framework particularly suited for analyzing social conflicts in consumption contexts. Finally, we engage this framework for exploring if—and how so—consumption conflicts are socio-culturally patterned. With this three-partite research we hope to contribute a useful next step for advancing theory on social conflict in consumption contexts.

RESEARCH METHOD AND PROCEDURE

We followed a three-step research procedure. First, we traced sociological thinking from Marx and Engel's (2009 [1848]) first works on class struggle, to Simmel's (2006 [1908]) thoughts on "Streit", to Hirschman's (1994) analyses of social conflicts in market societies. From these authors we distilled the common conceptual markers of social conflict.

Second, based on these theoretical insights we developed a conceptualization and analytical framework particularly suited for studying social conflicts in consumption contexts. We refer to this specific type of conflict as "consumption-mediated social conflict."

Third, we identified 27 consumer culture research studies that are broadly related to consumption-mediated social conflict research by means of electronic keyword search (key words: Consumer Movement, Consumer Activism, Consumer Boycott, Consumer Resistance, Consumer Emancipation, Anti-Consumption, Conflict) (mainly) in the *Journal of Consumer Research* and the *Advances of Consumer Research*. After a careful review, 13 of these studies remained that explicitly address consumption-mediated social conflict as defined by our conceptual framework (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Dobscha 1998; Giesler 2008; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Luedicke et al. 2010; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Rumbo 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006; **Üstüner and Holt 2007**; Varman and Belk 2009). We performed a pattern analysis on the conflict-related data that are presented in these 13 studies to identify similar compositions of conflict parties, conflict objects, conflict behaviors, and consumption-mediators. These procedures yield the conceptually synthesized and meta-theoretical findings (MacInnis 2011) that we present next.

FINDINGS

The Sociology of Conflict

The sociology of conflict must be considered a quite mature field of research. Social conflict theory has emerged at the end of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century through the writings of Hobbes, Marx, Weber, and Simmel (Bonacker 2005) and has experienced a second wave of interest in the 1950's and 1960's through Bernard (1957, 1965), Dahrendorf (1958), and Coser (1957, 1972 [1956]). These theorists made inspiring and convincing efforts to advance more holistic theories of social conflict. A third wave of conflict research has evolved during the 1990's and is still rolling. Hirschman (1994), Huntington (1997), and Dubiel (1998), for example, reflect on the types, roles, and (potentially detrimental) consequences of social conflicts in Western democracies induced by individualization, mobilization, migration, and the expansion of mass media communication. Conflict research, today, no longer aims at building one integrative theory of social conflict, but acknowledges that conflict is interdisciplinary and dependent on specific theoretical

perspectives such as politics, sociology, social-psychology, anthropology (Bonacker 2005), and, as we will argue, consumption.

Social conflict is commonly conceptualized as an interaction relationship between two or more parties that pursue mutually exclusive or incompatible goals (Kriesberg 1973, 2007; Mack and Snyder 1957; Simmel 2006 [1908]). From the sociological literature we can distill three key conceptual markers that qualify a relationship as conflictual; that is conflict parties (Kriesberg 1973, 2007; Mack and Snyder 1957; Williams 1970), a conflict object (Aubert 1963; Hirschman 1994; Kriesberg 1973, 2007), and an interactive conflict behavior (Coser 1972 [1956]; Gamson 1968; Kriesberg 1973, 2007; Tyrell 1976; Williams 1970).

Conflict Parties. Social conflict requires two or more conflict parties with at least a minimum of mutual visibility and contact (Kriesberg 1973, 2007; Mack and Snyder 1957; Simmel 2006 [1908]). Conflict has the tendency to occur between two, rather than multiple, opponents. This bipolarization tendency is ascribed to the high degree of attention and energy that must be directed towards an opponent (Mack and Snyder 1957; Tyrell 1976). The opponents can also be, and often are, groups rather than individuals. Conflict groups differentiate themselves and their mutually exclusive or incompatible goals through fostering group boundaries. This occurs through sanctions in form of social rewards and punishments (Mack 1965, 394). Visibility and contact are necessary for conflicts to emerge, but do not have to be “face-to-face” (Mack and Snyder 1957, 218).

Conflict Object. To emerge, social conflict requires a conflict object that typically either has the form of a scarce material resource, or concerns incompatible norms or values (Aubert 1963; Hirschman 1994; Kriesberg 1973, 2007). Sociologists differentiate conflict objects with regards to their underlying goals (Aubert 1963; Kriesberg 1973, 2007). When a conflict revolves around the (re-)distribution of scarce resources such as money, power, prestige, or sexual achievements, conflict parties pursue the same goal (e.g. receiving/keeping power, money, prestige). Conflict parties have a consensus. When social conflicts, in contrast, arise from parties’ different views on the application, standardization, or evaluation of social norms, values, or attitudes, then these parties seek different goals (Aubert 1963; Kriesberg 1973, 2007). Conflict parties have a dissent. A conflict that is based on ideological incompatibilities is typically more difficult to resolve peacefully than a conflict in which parties pursue the same goal. That is why sociologists tend to consider ideological conflicts as more destructive (Hirschman 1994; Huntington 1997).

Interactive Conflict Behavior. Where parties pursue mutually exclusive or incompatible goals, interactive conflict behaviors sometimes follow, and a conflict emerges (Gamson 1968; Williams 1970; Kriesberg 1973, 2007; Coser 1972 [1956]; Tyrell 1976). According to Kriesberg (1973, 2007) one party induces another party to change its behavior, adjust its opinion, or leave its position by coercing, persuading, or rewarding the other party. Coercion refers to behaviors that “injure or threaten to injure” the opposing party (Kriesberg 2007, 96). Persuasion refers to one party convincing the opposing conflict party to comply with the persuader’s interests because (according to the persuader) both parties share the same interests (Kriesberg 1973, 2007). Rewarding conflict behavior refers to positive sanctions. A conflict party pursues its interest by rewarding the opposing party for compliance rather than punishing it for not doing so (coercion).

A Theoretical Framework of Social Conflict in Consumption Contexts

Building on the theoretical knowledge about the sociology of conflict, we next outline a theoretical framework that is tailored for analyzing social conflicts in consumption contexts. For our purposes,

we define consumption-mediated social conflict as *an interaction relationship between two or more (groups of) market participants that have mutually exclusive or incompatible goals regarding certain consumption resources and ideologies.*

Based on this conceptual extension we can argue that consumption-mediated social conflict is present in empirical cases in which we are able to identify conflict parties, a conflict object, interactive conflict behavior, and a consumption-mediator. For a given party, a consumption-mediator can, for example, be a controversial product, a transgressive advertising campaign, an illegitimate corporate behavior, or an unwanted consumption practice. The consumption-mediator is central to the conflict as it brings out the underlying conflict object and gives rise to interactive behaviors aimed at resolving the underlying resource scarcities or ideological incompatibilities.

Except in very specific contexts, the consumption-mediator is typically not the focal object of the conflict (e.g. who of the two parties will get the thing that both want), but rather a proxy for a larger conflict object regarding scarce resources and incompatible ideologies.

Consumption resources such as power, money, or natural resources are typically scarce, but also divisible. Conflict parties strive to possess (or access) these resources and ideally resolve the conflict by distributing it more fairly. The conflict about Hummer driving, for instance, is not about who owns the Hummer, but how other scarce resources such as fresh air, oil, and road security are distributed. Consumption ideologies such as moral views towards certain lifestyles or consumption practices, in contrast, are not scarce and they cannot be precisely quantified. Because ideological conflict objects cannot be re-distributed for settling a conflict, parties often struggle with bearing incompatible socio-cultural beliefs.

Three Patterns of Social Conflict in Consumption Contexts

Our literature analysis and conceptual synthesis of the 13 studies that address—according to our conceptualization—consumption-mediated social conflict reveals three prevalent consumption conflict patterns that we term emancipatory, ideology-advocating, and authenticity-protecting conflict. A conflict pattern is defined by a reasonably similar constellation of conflict parties, objects, interactive behaviors, and consumption-mediators. Table 1 summarizes the markers of the three conflict patterns.

Emancipatory Conflict. The first, and most frequently studied, type of consumption-mediated social conflict is marked by conflict parties seeking to emancipate from, or regain power in, market relations (Dobscha 1998; Giesler 2008; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Rumbo 2002; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Thompson et al. 2006; Varman and Belk 2009). This type of conflict has been investigated under labels such as consumer resistance, consumer emancipation, and anti-consumption and we refer to it as an emancipatory conflict.

Emancipatory conflict tends to emerge between (groups of) discontent consumers/ activists and corporate market agents. The conflict unfolds when consumers feel dominated or exploited by market forces and presumably unethical corporations. These conflicts are typically animated by two related conflict objects. The first is a consensual object, which is typically market power. That is, consumers reach for regaining independence and self-control from corporations that they consider too powerful. This consensual conflict object is informed by a dissensual object, which refers to the participating consumers’ and producers’ different moral positions in the marketplace (e.g. desirability of commercial vs. communal interests in the market). Interactive conflict behaviors that occur in this type of conflict

Table 1: Three Patterns of Consumption-Mediated Social Conflict

	Emancipatory Conflicts	Ideology-Advocating Conflicts	Authenticity-Protecting Conflicts
Conflict Parties	Consumer (discontent consumer, activist, avoider) vs. corporate market agent (market, industry, corporation)	Consumer vs. (non-) consumer of a specific consumption object	Consumer vs. consumers of the same consumption object/practice
Conflict Object	Consensus (money, power, natural resources, labor) informed by dissent (values, morals in the marketplace)	Dissent about moral superiority/ desirability of ideologies in consumption, attitudes towards/ or lifestyle through consumption	Dissent about what constitutes an authentic/legitimate consumption style
Interactive Conflict Behavior	Non-violent and violent coercion	Coercion and persuasion	Violent and non-violent coercion
Consumption-Mediator	Corporate market adversary or its products, styles, etc...	Contested/favored consumption object/practice	Consumption object/practice that parties share

tend to be both violent and non-violent coercion. The consumption-mediator is typically a company or its products, brands, or styles.

To illustrate this description, consider Varman and Belk’s (2009) study of the anti-Coca-Cola movement in India. These authors address a full-fledged emancipatory conflict between anti-Coca-Cola activists and the Coca-Cola corporation (conflict parties). Conflict parties fight over scarce resources such as water, selling prices of the products, wages, number of jobs, and power/ freedom from Western corporatism (consensual conflict object). This consensual conflict object is further informed by an ideological conflict object. Conflict parties have incompatible moral views about Western consumerism and the nationalist Indian ideology of “swadeshi” (Varman and Belk 2009, 686) (dissentual conflict object). Activists distribute anti-Coke pamphlets and booklets, and organize public protests (non-violent behavior), whereas Coca-Cola engages in rather violent responses such as quelling protests or letting off workers involved in the movement. The Coca-Cola corporation is the consumption-mediator of this conflict that would not arise without the company’s activities.

Ideology-Advocating Conflict. Consumer culture researchers have revealed another type of social conflict that revolves around moral-ideological incompatibilities between (groups of) consumers. In this pattern, conflict parties defend a personal consumption ideology against various consumer adversaries (Kozinets 2001; Luedicke et al. 2010; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Üstüner and Holt 2007; Varman and Belk 2009). We refer to this conflict pattern as ideology-advocating conflict.

Ideology-advocating conflict arises between pro- and antagonists of particular consumption practices that are central to the protagonists’ identity, but dependent on a contested moral worldview. The key conflict object that animates this type of conflict is a dissent about the legitimacy of certain consumption (-lifestyles) (Kates 2004). The conflict parties typically pursue their opposing goals by means of coercive and persuasive behaviors. The consumption-mediator is a controversial consumption object or practice, whereas the conflict object is the ideology.

As an example, consider Luedicke et al.’s (2010) study of the opposing moral worldviews surrounding the Hummer brand of vehicles. The conflict arises between consumers that like and hate Hummer trucks (conflict parties). They fight over incompatible consumption ideologies (dissentual conflict object) that, in turn, rely on two different interpretations of the national ideology of “American

exceptionalism” (Luedicke et al. 2010, 1020). Interactive conflict behavior observed in this context ranges from violent coercion (e.g. vandalism), to non-violent coercion (e.g. rude gestures, ridiculing practices), to persuasion. Hummer owners and antagonists use both the Hummer and the Prius brand as mediators to negotiate legitimate vehicle choices and consumption practices. However, the consumption-mediators only make visible and manifest their opposing consumer ideologies.

Authenticity-Protecting Conflict. The third conflict pattern that permeates consumer cultural conflict research concerns conflict that revolves around a consumption object or practice that (groups of) consumers share. In this pattern, consumers fight about how this object is (not) supposed to be consumed. Thus, consumers protect those parts of their identity that are tied to the consumption object (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Kozinets 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). We refer to this conflict pattern as authenticity-protecting conflict.

Authenticity-protecting conflict is particularly evident within consumer communities and subcultures. These conflicts tend to unfold when consumers lay opposing claims to ownership on the same consumption object or practice or when community members use different criteria for evaluating the appropriateness of consumption within the community. In particular consumers who consider themselves core-members of a community tend to protect their field-dependent identity investments against undesirable associations with inauthentic people and practices (Arsel and Thompson 2011). The conflict object is the dissent between (groups of) consumers about what constitutes an authentic/legitimate consumption practice for a consumption object. The dissent is grounded in incompatible attitudes towards the specific consumption object or practice, differences in tastes, or different lifestyles. The interactive conflict behavior tends to manifest in both violent and non-violent coercion. The consumption object/practice that consumers share is the consumption-mediator.

Schouten and McAlexander’s (1995) study of the Harley Davidson subculture of consumption depicts an authenticity-protecting conflict. These authors show how hard-core bikers, sometimes aggressively, defend their Harley Davidson motorcycles and subcultural meanings against “rich urban bikers” (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, 49) that they consider inauthentic free-riders on the Harley rebel brand myth. The conflict emerges between core-members of

the Harley Davidson subculture, the so called “outlaws” (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, 44), and those members who occupy a more peripheral or newcomer status in the Harley Davidson hierarchy (conflict parties). Conflict parties struggle about incompatible ideas about how to pursue an authentic Harley Davidson consumption (life-) style (dissensual conflict object). Facing the thread of diluting identity investments and resolving authenticity of their subcultural consumption, outlaws sometimes draw on violent coercion practices such as motorcycle thefts and physical violence against other bikers (interactive conflict behavior). The Harley Davidson brand and its manifestations operate as consumption-mediators in this conflict pattern.

DISCUSSION

This study offers a conceptual synthesis of sociological conflict theories, a conceptualization of “consumption-mediated social conflict” tailored to the analytical requirements of consumer culture research, and a preliminary answer to the question if consumption-mediated conflicts are socio-culturally patterned. We hope that these reflections contribute four relevant insights to consumer research literature on social conflict.

First, we show that three conceptual markers—two or more conflict parties, a conflict object, and interactive conflict behaviors—are useful for characterizing a relationship as conflictual. We argue that for a specific conflict to fall into the domain of consumer research, the interactive behaviors must have been induced by a consumption-mediator (e.g. a controversial product or consumption practice) and emerge between two or more market participants with mutually exclusive or incompatible goals regarding specific resources scarcities or ideological incompatibilities that the consumption-mediator represents.

Second, our interpretive literature analysis and conceptual synthesis of 13 consumer culture studies reveals that social conflict in consumption contexts tends to unfold in three distinct patterns that we label emancipatory, ideology-advocating, and authenticity-protecting conflict. Emancipatory conflict emerges when consumers feel dominated or exploited by firms or by broader, intangible market forces. Ideology-advocating conflict, in turn, tends to arise between consumers that try to enforce incompatible ideological views of legitimate consumption objects and practices. And authenticity-protecting conflict emerges between consumers that lay opposing claims to ownership on the same consumption object or practice.

Third, our review suggests that consumption has become one focal site for social conflict in cultural realms in which both individual and group identity construction draws largely on consumption practices (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Even though the consumption-mediator is most often a material object (e.g. a product), existing studies rarely report about consumers fighting over the legitimate owner of a desirable object (except on Black Friday in the U.S.). Instead, these consumption-mediators tend to spark conflicts about much broader cultural and material issues that the consumption object represents. For example, American Hummer SUV owners are frequently criticized for contributing disproportionately to resource depletion and American oil dependency, but not for purchasing a vehicle that someone else should own (Luedicke et al. 2010). This intricate and ubiquitous overlap of physical, cultural, and ideological matters turns consumption-mediators into prominent provocateurs of social conflicts in consumer cultures.

Lastly, we found that consumer (culture) theory on social conflict has over time moved from exploring conflicts that are based on resource scarcities (e.g. Dameron 1941; Herrmann 1993) towards conflicts that are induced by ideological or identity-relevant

incompatibilities (e.g. Arsel and Thompson 2011; Luedicke et al. 2010; Üstüner and Holt 2007). This development is only natural in social contexts in which a “capitalism-friendly social reality” prevails (Paulson and O’Guinn 2012, 50) and cultural/identity-based consumption is generally on the rise (Cross 2000). Considering the ideological conflicts’ potential for destructiveness (Hirschman 1994; Huntington 1997) the investigation of their sources, interactions, and outcomes in consumption contexts appears worthwhile.

Our theoretical investigation of social conflicts in consumption contexts illuminates some potentially important paths for future research. For instance, little research has been conducted on social conflicts arising in service consumption contexts (e.g. in contexts of entertainment or tourism industries), or resulting from existential social threats and anxieties (e.g. in contexts of migration or acculturation). Migration dynamics, for instance, have the potential to irritate consumers’ sense of security or identity and thus produce conflicts that might differ in type from the emancipatory, ideology-advocating, or authenticity-protecting conflicts. Identifying conflict patterns is only a first step on the way of gaining knowledge about consumption-mediated social conflict. Further research will have to explore to which extent certain consumption contexts, objects, or parties lean towards provoking more than one conflict pattern (e.g. Kozinets 2001; Giesler 2008; Adams and Raisborough 2010); which conflict patterns are problematic (or productive) for consumers, marketers, and society; which consequences these conflicts have for parties involved; and how conflicts can proactively be used for progressive social change.

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