

# MASTER'S THESIS

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Is gaming always fun? Social conflicts  
in online consumption communities.

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents and analyze consequences of social conflicts in six online consumption communities among amateur computer gamers playing online multiplayer games. Our study applies multiple qualitative methods such as interviews, netnography through participatory observation and archival data. We show how subjective and emotional facets influence the experiences of consumers in online consumption communities, and consequently how they cope with conflicting practices within and in-between communities. Prior Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research has focused on the homogeneous factors that bind consumption communities together while our findings point at the importance of a more dynamic view that emphasize the role of heterogeneity in consumption communities. We further illustrate that cultural tensions in a socio-historical context exist between casual- and competitively- oriented gamers which separate the culture into two distinct ideological approaches that compete for legitimacy. We discuss how hedonic consumption in online multiplayer gaming communities is not always filled with the positive demarcations of ‘fantasies, feelings and fun’ that quickly dissipate when communities experience divisive disputes and tensions in a competitive atmosphere.

## Preface

This masters-thesis is written as a concluding part of the study program Master of Science in Business at Nord University within the specialization International Business and Marketing. This thesis has been demanding, challenging and frustrating at times but has also taught us a lot. We decided to write our thesis as an article along with an introductory chapter instead of a traditional masters-thesis. This is done with the intention of making the content more readily available for the reader and to publish the article after our thesis has been graded. We have had a lot of great support and help throughout the work on this thesis. We would like to thank our supervisor, Frank Lindberg for his contribution with a high level of competence, knowledge and ideas throughout the entire process. Our thesis would not have been the same without you. We would also like to thank our family, friends and fellow students for support along the way.

We have chosen *Journal of Consumption Markets & Culture* as publishing journal, and the article is therefore written under the journal's guidelines.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=gcmc20#refs>]

## **Sammendrag**

Dette studiet presenterer og analyserer konsekvensene av sosiale konflikter i seks online-forbrukssamfunn blant amatør-data-gamere som spiller flerspiller-spill på nett. Vår studie anvender flere kvalitative metoder som intervju, netnografi gjennom deltagende observasjon og arkiv-data. Vi viser hvordan subjektive og emosjonelle fasetter har virkning for opplevelser for konsumenter i online-forbrukssamfunn, og hvordan de håndterer motstridende praksiser innen og mellom samfunn. Tidligere forbruker-kultur-teori- (CCT) forskning har fokusert på homogene faktorer som sammenbinder konsumsamfunn mens våre funn peker på viktigheten av et mer dynamisk syn som understreker rollen heterogenitet har i forbrukssamfunn. Videre illustrerer vi at kulturelle spenninger finnes i sosio-historiske sammenhenger mellom gamere med lavt kontra høyt konkurranseinstinkt som deler kulturen til to distinktive ideologiske tilnærminger som konkurrerer for legitimitet. Vi diskuterer hvordan hedonistisk konsumering i online flerspiller-gaming-fellesskap ikke bare har positive avgrensninger for 'fantasi, følelser og underholdning' som fort forsvinner når fellesskap opplever splittende bestridelser og spenninger i en konkurransefylt atmosfære.

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# Introductory chapter

## Theoretical framework

In this chapter we present the theoretical framework of our article, which also forms the theoretical foundation for our empirical findings. We have used theories from consumer behavior, specifically Consumer culture theory (CCT) and literature from game studies. We start by going through theories related to Consumption in hedonic communities, connection it to social conflicts and then we introduce literature on Game studies to emphasize the link between our two theoretical fields.

### *CCT*

Consumer culture theory (CCT) was launched by Arnould and Thompson (2005). CCT addresses the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption, focusing on consumer identity, marketplace cultures, sociohistorical consumption patterns and marketplace ideologies (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007, 2015, 2018). CCT is built on a long academic tradition of consumer research, going all the way back to the 80s, where some of the most iconic pieces of CCT literature was created. Such as Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) study of the phenomenon of experiential consumption, which emphasized the importance of symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic meaning. Later McCracken (1986) put forth a substantial contribution on the understanding on cultural meaning, where he argues that '*cultural meaning moves first from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods and then from these goods to the individual consumer*' (71). In the early years of CCT discourses constructed consumers as emotional self-directed individuals seeking meaning and self-actualizing experiences (Belk 1988). The extensive focus on the individual as the primary unit of analysis has been criticized by Moisander, Penalosa and Valtonen (2009) for limiting the understanding on a cultural level. Causing more recent research to have pivoted in a collective way of thinking of consumption. The new perspective of consumption communities also produced some iconic pieces of research, like Schouten and McAlexander (1995) research on Harley Davidson research on subcultures of consumption, soon followed by the perspective of neo-tribes (Cova 1997) and brand communities (Muniz and O'Quinn 2001). Consumption

communities are usually defined by shared communal practice, but recently there has been a bigger focus on heterogeneity within seemingly homogenous communities. Below are subfields that goes under the umbrella-term of CCT and explains central concepts mentioned here.

### ***Community***

Community is a central concept within social thought. While there are many definitions of what a community is, there is more of a consensus of what characteristics a community needs to be perceived as a community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). There are three core characteristics of a community:

The first characteristic is 'Consciousness of kind' which is the intrinsic connection that members feel towards each other and a sense of differentiation from people that are not a part of the community. It refers to a shared consciousness and a way of thinking that is not just shared attitudes and perceived similarity. The second characteristic is 'shared rituals and traditions' which serves as a way of transferring the community's culture, history and consciousness. Rituals '*serve to contain the drift of meanings: ...[they] are conventions that set up visible public definitions*' (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, 413) and social solidarity. The third characteristic revolves around moral responsibilities and a sense of duty towards one's community and its individual members (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Moral responsibility creates collective action when a community is threatened.

A community can be understood in various way. It can be a geographically situated group of people, it can be a group of individuals with similar interests and it can be a group that share their view on how consumption of activities, ideologies or products (even games) should be consumed.

### ***Consumption***

Consumption is described as the use of goods and services. Consumption is a part of everyday life and revolves around most decisions we make every day from what we want to eat to what we want to watch on the tv to where we decide to live. Decisions are based on our values and routines, and by the attitudes, meanings and habits of other consumers (Ekström, Ottosson and Parment 2017).

### ***Consumption communities***

A consumption community is a group of consumers who share a common interest in a consumption activity and/or ideology (Kozinets 1999). Research on consumption communities have evolved into three different perspectives: ‘brand communities’ (Muniz and O’Quinn 2001), ‘subcultures of consumption’ (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and ‘neo-tribes’ (Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2002; Cova and Pace 2006)

Brand communities are specialized, non-geographically bound communities based around structured sets of social relations among followers of a brand (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001). Brand communities develop around all kinds of brands such as car brands (Ford, Saab, Hummer e, technology firms (Apple, Microsoft, Samsung) or game producer brands (Activision Blizzard, Valve, Riot Games).

Subcultures of consumption are distinctive subgroups of society that self-select, based on shared commitment to particular product classes, brands or consumption activities (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Their research on the Harley-Davidson motorcycle owners subculture of consumption led to theoretical advancement on the understanding of modern consumer culture and its link to marketing institutions.

Neo-tribes are collectives that consume. They can be commercial and non-commercial. Cova and Shankar (2012) explains tribes through a set of three main features: collective identification; shared experiences, passions and emotions; and the ability to engage in collective action (Cova and Shankar 2012). According to Maffesoli (1997) neo-tribes are ‘*Characterized by fluidity, occasional gathering and dispersal*’ (76).

Hedonism is described as the idea that seeking pleasure while avoiding suffering is the ideal way to live. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) defines hedonic consumption as ‘*those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product usage experience*’ (92). Early research on hedonic consumption traces back to other fields of behavior sciences such as sociology, philosophy, and psychology. In marketing, it stems back to the stream of research on motivation research which began in the 1950s. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) also talk about consumption experiences in an experiential view with a focus on the ‘*symbolic, hedonic, and esthetic nature of consumption*’ (132). Hedonic communities consist of consumers seeking communality based on shared experiences, emotions and identities. It is communities that consume products or activities to achieve hedonic pleasure through their fantasy, their senses or their emotions.

### ***Consumption-mediated social conflicts***

Husemann and Luedicke (2013) reviews social conflicts within consumer research. Their definition of consumption-mediated social conflicts as '*an interaction relationship between two or more parties that pursue mutually exclusive or incompatible goals*' (355). Husemann and Luedicke (2013) talk about three patterns within consumption-mediated social conflicts: Emancipatory, ideology-advocating and authenticity-protecting conflicts. Emancipatory conflicts are conflicts where parties of conflicts attempt to get away from or to regain power from each other. It is a way to describe conflicts where corporate actors act unfairly towards customers by exploiting their customers or make unethical choices. Ideology-advocating conflicts are conflicts about ideological and moral perspectives of consumption. How an object or practice is consumed creates controversy. Different worldviews that fail to align between consumers is at the conflict's core. Authenticity-protecting conflicts are conflicts where consumers argue about how not consume the object. Consumers will protect the identity they relate to the consumption object or practice. Consumers will agree with people with similar consumption-practices as them but will feel threatened when by consumers with different consumption-practices.

Previous studies on consumption communities such as running (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013), climbing (Lindberg and Mossberg 2019) and Harley Davidson (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) communities all look at heterogeneity or social conflicts within consumption communities. Researchers want to look at similarities and differences within consumption communities which is where the research currently is.

### ***Social identity***

Social identity is described by Tajfel (1979) as a person's perception of who they are based on which social groups they are members of. Social identity comes from the scientific field of psychology but has been adapted to consumer behavior research. Research on intergroup dynamics by White, Argo and Sengupta (2012) show how belongingness becomes a focal point when individuals are exposed to threats to their social identity (White, Argo and Sengupta 2012). Distinction from other people's choices is common for when consumers want to display their desired identities (Berger and Heath 2007). Social identity is closely linked to social conflicts because these conflicts occur in social contexts.

## ***Game studies***

Game studies as a standalone academic field is fairly new. Journal of Game Studies was established in 2001 and DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association) in 2003 are seen as early formative steps into the institutionalization and legitimization of games as an academic study (Mäyrä 2006). Academic studies involving games is not a new venture, mostly driven by lone scholars with an interest for gaming or fields that seek to use games as a means to learn something about their proper subject (Mäyrä 2006). Game studies had been mainly focused on how people learn by playing games (Mäyrä 2006), but also approaches focusing on aspects such as how gamers are thinking, gender issues and gaming and children (Shaw 2010). However, lately there has been a great deal of cultural work done on gaming, where Shaw (2010) attempted to find a unified definition of game culture, but ended with three definition based on 'who plays', 'what they play' and 'how they play'. The situation today is not much different Ellmerzy and Wimmer (2018) noted and in their own attempt created a framework for understanding game culture on a micro, meso and macro level, which they hope could work as a framework for future studies into game cultures.

In a special issue in journal of consumer behavior Seo, Buchanan-Oliver and Fam (2015) urged for an interdisciplinary venture of consumer behavior and game studies. Focusing on experiential and consumption aspects of playing computer games. Seo, Dolan and Buchanan-Oliver (2019) further noted the subject as not sufficiently detailed or theorized yet and suggested a transcultural perspective to experiences and practices within online and mobile game consumption as subjects for future studies.

In game studies the 'gamer' is often depicted in a casual / hardcore dichotomy (Chess and Paul 2018). Based on what games they play and how they play. Games that require low level of commitment and have simple game play are often considered as a casual game. The literature on casual games is diverse, but six common characteristics are broadly agreed upon: Appealing design, ease of access, ease of learning, minimal required expertise, fast rewards and temporal flexibility (Johnson 2018). But there are differences among those who play casual games, on mobile (FarmVille) don't have the same 'cultural capital' as someone playing on a console (Halo, Metal Gear Solid or FIFA), yet console gamers are seen as casual gamers by those who play games on a computer (DOTA2, WOW, LOL or CS:GO) (Chess and Paul 2018). Giving rise to cultural memes such as 'pcmasterrace' which praise the superiority of the computer as a gaming platform (knowyourmeme.com). Chess and Paul (2018) criticize the use of casual and

hardcore within academia, because of its derogatory associations but also because it excludes many games.

## **Methodology**

This chapter is made to give a more in-depth explanation of the methodological approach to our study on social conflicts in online consumption communities.

### ***Method design***

Our ontological view of the nature of reality is that there are many truths that manifests through the interaction between an observer and a subject. This means that different constellations of observer – subject can see different truths based on the same situation. Basically, the truth is a subjective interpretation in the ‘eye of the beholder’, which is characteristic of the relativist ontological view (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, Jackson and Jaspersen 2018). The epistemological approach of social constructionism is a result of the inadequacy of the positivist approach in the social sciences that stems from the view that ‘reality’ is objective or exterior, which becomes almost impossible when the main object of study is the human consciousness. We believe truth is the product of a systematic interpretation of human experiences based on social constructionist methodologies. Our research is qualitative with a netnographical inspired methodological approach, where data is gathered through interviews, participatory observation, and archival data.

When choosing method design it is important to have a clear understanding of the framework used for gathering primary data. Which epistemological approach is deemed most appropriate, and to which degree one should be involved or detached from gathering of empirical data, are aspects important to take into consideration. An Ethnographic approach is the strongest form of involvement, where the researcher immerses himself into a setting and becomes part of the group that is being studied (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). A netnographical approach is an extension of the ethnographical approach as it combines the words ‘internet’ and ‘ethnography’, and is used to research culture, online communities and social media, in order to understand consumer behavior (Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley 2014). It is a newer method for gathering data.

Conducting research in a cultural context means that the researcher must be immersed in the culture and behave as a normal participant, but still function as an observer. What degree of observation depends on the epistemological approach to information gathering, and if the researcher believes that he or she can obtain the objective truth between the researcher and the object or if the truth comes from a detached researcher – object relationship. There are different conceptual levels in which the epistemological aspects need to be considered because ethnography (and netnography) as a strategy is situated well into the constructivist discipline, which inherently believes that the truth is between people. The researcher – object participatory data gathering methods must go through an epistemological consideration of involvement-approaches.

Since we are studying online gaming communities on the meso level, we will have to enter the virtual world and play these games with the communities in order to participate and to understand features of the various online gaming communities' rituals and language. By participating and being immersed in the virtual world with these communities, we have gotten glints of their gaming culture, their social structures and how they interact. Netnography (or what sometimes is called virtual ethnography) is a way of conducting this observational research. Our research is qualitative, and our interviews have therefore been supplemented with this netnographical approach of participating observation, by playing games and interacting with some of the communities in order to be able to verify what we have been told by the informants in our interviews.

In the method chapter of our article we start by talking about the research design. Then we talk about the different data collection methods we have used, which constitutes our empirical foundation. Then we move on to discuss the reasoning behind our sampling. Interviews are a big part of our empirical data, so we designate following part to the interview methodology. The analysis of our data are after the interviews. Further, we talk about the quality and validity of our data to increase the strength and reliability of our research results. In the last part we will reflect upon and critique problems with our choice of methodological approach and possible flaws in our research.

### ***Data collection***

Our method design and area of research is the foundation for our choice of data collection methods. We have gathered data through primary (empirical data) and secondary data.

Creswell (2013) describes data collection as series of coherent activities with the intent to obtain relevant information to answer research questions. *‘The process consists of gaining permissions, conducting a good qualitative sampling strategy, developing means for recording information both digitally and on paper, storing the data, and anticipating ethical issues that may arise (156).*

Qualitative data are pieces of information that are gathered in a non-numeric form through interaction and interpretation. The most common resource of qualitative data is various information obtained through research participants words and actions; interview recordings and transcripts, written notes of observations and images, videos, and documentation. The term data collection implies that the researcher develops throughout the process, where for instance interviews must be prepared for, conducted and transcribed, pictures must be taken and field notes must be written (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018).

### Primary data

The gathering of primary data has been the most time-consuming part of our research but has also given us a clear direction of where our research should be heading. Our primary data has mainly been gathered through interviews and participatory observation. Informants for our research were chosen based on three criteria; they were required to (1) have belonged to an online multiplayer gaming community for several years, (2) be a desktop (computer) gamer, and (3) play and engage on a weekly basis with their communities. Out of our 16 informants and the 6 communities they make up, 5 of the communities have had more than one informant, enabling us to extract consistent answers and data from the interviews. We will go deeper into the sampling strategy in the next sub-chapter. The advantage of doing interviews is the ability to adjust our questions and approach to the subject throughout the process, in order to obtain information of a higher degree of relevance. This allowed the informants to explain more in-depth and offer valuable personal reasoning and opinions. Even though we had considered doing interviews remotely, we initially conducted traditional in person interviews. This however was changed to remote interviewing using Discord (an online chatting program) due to the outbreak of COVID-19, consequently turning substantial parts of our empirical data into netnography rather than ethnography. Remote interviewing is generally considered to be harder to interpret because it gives the interviewer less control than in traditional interviews (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Our interviews were qualitative interviews which are directed

conversations with questions and answers around specific topics (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). More specifically, the interviews were semi-structured and in-depth interviews.

Observational research is based on observation of research participants in a specific setting (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). There are four ways of doing this; the first way is as *complete observers* that maintain a detached distance from the research participants during the observation. The second way is *observers-as-participants*, which is when researchers participate in activities with the participants but with minimal impact of their presence to avoid disruption of activities. The third way is *participant-as-observer*, where researchers are in more direct interaction in the research field. The fourth way is as *complete participants* which is when researchers acts as participants as their main role (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Complete participants might even decide not to give information that they are doing the research, which can give better results but is arguably an ethical issue. This can both be seen as a methodical approach and as an ethnographic approach. However, methodological approaches are usually just done a few hours at a time, whereas with an ethnographic approach, the research takes place over a longer period where you also use other methods (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Most of our interviews took place over a three-week period, and after that we participated within several of the communities (participant-as-observer) to be able to verify some of the data that we had collected. We informed the informants that when we interacted and participated in their communities, we would be using it for our research to verify how they act within the community and how they handle their conflicts when they occur. Participatory observation is an effective tool for achieving a deeper understanding and capturing the intricacies within the culture or phenomena researched, which made it a highly desirable addition to our toolkit for this research (Easterby-smith at al. 2018).

Participatory research uses several methods such as qualitative interviews and participant observation to create understanding of the data between participants and researchers. Through these methods they become ‘tools for thinking’ (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018), which is intended to help with discussion and reflection, so that both researchers and informants can understand the issues better. The general way in which an online multiplayer gaming community functions was already familiar for us as researchers, but the specific communities we have included as our informants for this research were less so. It was therefore helpful for the following process of transforming theory into empirical data, to have been able to participate in some of the communities.

## Secondary data

Secondary data has been gathered through netnography and archival data. As earlier explained, netnography is a combination of the words ‘internet’ and ‘ethnography’, so in terms of netnography as a source of secondary data, it is a description for data found online (Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley 2014). Creswell (2013) talks about the number of qualitative sources of data being ever-expanding and uses that as a reason to suggest researchers to use newer and innovative methods for gathering data. Archival data used includes research articles, research journals, course literature, previous student work and thesis, internet articles and other relevant articles. We have used several literature databases such as google scholar, Scopus, Oria, Web of Science, JSTOR, Brage Nord, Oria, ResearchGate, Sage and Taylor and Francis.

Secondary data is useful for us as researchers because it saves us time and effort. Secondary data can also serve as a source of credibility for empirical findings through the use of triangulation. Triangulation is essentially a way of increasing the confidence and credibility of your research by combining research methods or sources of data, to improve the reliability and consistency of your findings and conclusions drawn (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). We will go deeper into this in the subchapter dealing with quality. Disadvantages of secondary data include that ensuring a good fit with the research may prove challenging, and the way the research question is formulated can potentially further complicate the search for such (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Through our work on this article, we have adjusted our research question several times, but fortunately have not had problems with finding secondary data because of this. With our research on online multiplayer gaming communities we have been able to use many different sources of secondary data as mentioned in the previous paragraph.

## ***Sampling***

A sample is ‘a subset of the population from which inferences are drawn based on evidence’ (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). The sample strategy has been important for us to get right and it was a source of discussion from we started with the research. The sample strategy is important because it increases the representativeness of the empirical data of our research. Since our empirical data mainly comes from interviews, we aimed for a sample that would be possible to generalize. According to a report posted by the Norwegian Media Authority through Telia (a Norwegian internet provider) in April 2020, 76% of girls between the ages 9-18 years old play

video games whereas 96% of boys in the same age play video games (Telia.no). Our informants' age ranged from 24 years old to 31 years old, but the point is that gaming clearly is for both males and females regardless of their age. So, we wanted to get a sample size that included both genders and ended up with 16 informants where 14 were male and 2 were female from a total of 6 communities.

We initially approached individuals that we knew belonged to an online multiplayer gaming community to get the strategic sample of informants (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). To find more informants we used a snow-balling technique (Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljaie 2017), where we asked our initial informants about other potential informants within their communities or within other communities that they knew of and thought would be relevant for us to talk to next. We selected a set of three criteria for choosing representative informants for our sample, that included that they (1) had belonged to an online multiplayer gaming community for several years, (2) were a desktop (computer) gamer, and (3) played and engaged on a weekly basis with their communities.

It was important that our informants met these three criteria, because asking an informant questions related to belonging to a community when he or she does not play with a community would not yield the same relevant answers as an individual that plays and interact with their communities on a weekly basis. We also wanted to focus on desktop (computer) gamers since we perceive this gaming platform as the more popular platform, as well as it being of personal interest. Looking into gaming communities from all platforms (mobile, PC, console, tablet) would give more inconsistent results because there would be a vast increase in variables to take into consideration.

### ***Interviews***

Interviews are our main source of primary data. Due to our research on online multiplayer gaming communities being qualitative, semi-structured interviews was a natural choice since it is the most common of all qualitative research methods (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). Semi structured interviews involve prepared questioning that is guided through identified themes in a systematic manner. Semi structured interview guides greatly vary from very structured to relatively loose (Dumay 2011). Semi-structured interviews are popular because they are flexible, accessible, and intelligible, and can find important and hidden information and behavior (Dumay 2011). Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) explains that the goal of conducting

qualitative interviews is to gain information regarding the meaning and interpretation of phenomena from the informants' worldview.

We had the seven stages of an Interview Inquiry (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) in mind while preparing for the interviews. These stages go along with the rest of the method chapters, with the first three stages available in the interview subchapter. The fourth stage starts in the data analysis subchapter along with the fifth stage. The sixth stage can be found in the quality subchapter. The seventh stage is reporting the findings of the study itself, which is done through our research and this introduction chapter. The first stage of this process encompasses thematizing the interview, which had already been done throughout the research leading up to that point. In the thematizing phase it is essential for researchers to acquire an understanding of “the why”, “the what” and “the how” of the interview. “The why” is connected to the research question, “the what” is connected to what is investigated, and “the how” is linked to what interviewing methods to apply to the empirical data.

Preparation for the interviews included creating and designing (second stage) an interview guide (Appendix 2), that was tested on each other as an attempt to check if it covered everything we deemed essential in order to obtain the intended information. Moral implications of the study are important to consider here. We worked closely with the literature and theories as we made the interview guide to identify effective questions to ask.

The third stage is the interviews. Our approach to the interviewing process was relatively loosely structured because we aimed to achieve open-ended conversations. It contained general themes about background information, their communities on a personal level, their communities on a community level and various problems within the community. We constructed general questions (appendix 2) such as who the informants play with, what genres of games they play and so on. We started our interviews in a relaxed manner where we informed them about ethical guidelines we are required to follow, that the interview would be recorded and that we would ensure the anonymity of all informants. Our first questions were of an uncomplicated nature in order to ease the informants into the interview setting and aid them in being comfortable with us as interviewers (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). We made an in-depth guide for follow-up questions and comments (as part of our interview guide), that includes terms specific for various games, which made our posteriori knowledge and experience within the world of online gaming particularly valuable. We nudged the conversation in the direction of our interview guide, but still enabled our informants talk freely. We also followed up with

questions such as ‘could you please explain’ in order to verify if we understood what they said or meant (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Through many of these in-depth follow-up questions we were able to identify various conflicts and in turn managed to extract helpful information. We would end our interviews, asking if there was anything the informants would like to add.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 26 minutes to 1 hour and 23 minutes where most of them lasted roughly 50 minutes. The first four interviews we did were either very short or very long and we made some adjustments to our interview guide after the first four interviews. We also became more comfortable with interviewing informants through the experience we gained from the first interviews and we feel that the quality of our interviews increased after this adjustment. We conducted our interviews in Norwegian since our informants were Norwegian and are therefore able to give more accurate explanations for their thoughts and opinions in the language, they are comfortable with. We kept interviewing informants until we felt that there was no new information to gain from conducting more new interviews.

### ***Data analysis***

The fourth stage is transcribing where we transcribed the interviews into English since our research would be written in English. After the transcription, we had about 100 pages of transcribed text that we needed to cut down to a manageable amount. We decided to go with a combination of meaning condensation to make our data more manageable, and hermeneutic interpretation of meaning to understand and to analyze our data. ‘Meaning condensation normally builds on coding and entails an abridgement of the meaning expressed by the interviewees into shorter formulations. Long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words’ (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). A hermeneutic interpretation is an ‘*interpretation of textual data that proceeds through a series of part-to-whole iterations*’ (Thompson, 1997, 441). It is a two-stage process to go through texts such as an interview transcript where you go through the entire text to gain an overview of the whole in the first step. The second step is to look for patterns and differences in various interviews. These two steps are helpful because you can gain insight from interviews that are far into the interpretation process and then reconsider earlier interpretations and understandings. This process is meant to create a holistic understanding (Thompson 1997).

The data we have analyzed is empirical data from our interviews, ethnographic sources through playing with some of the communities (participatory observation) and a posteriori

knowledge from the online gaming world. We have used this data to identify conflicts within these online gaming communities to propose the findings of our research.

We analyzed our data by transcribing all interviews into a 100-page document where we wrote down every comment that seemed useful for us. Next step was to make smaller formulations out of these statements and then to compare them with formulations from other informants. Through this process we were able to identify similarities in statements from different informants. We have analyzed the data, part by part of each interview in a multifaceted strategy of interpretation and have gained a holistic understanding of our informants and their communities (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015).

### ***Quality***

The sixth stage is verification of our research which is tied up to the quality of the (qualitative) research and the quality criteria. Well-prepared data is important for a researcher. A proper qualitative study is systematic and thorough. A researcher that stops his research before analyzing all his or her data, does not meet the required quality criteria (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Qualitative research should to the degree possible, but not necessarily have unconditionally meet all standards within qualitative research, such as objectivity, statistical generalizability and replicability, to be considered as valid research. However, if the research is not unique, it is not considered as qualitative research. (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018)

Kvale (1994) wrote about a set of ten critiques for qualitative research interviews; *'it is not scientific, not objective, not trustworthy, not reliable, not intersubjective, not a formalized method, not hypothesis testing, not quantitative, not generalizable, and not valid'* (147). When these critiques are turned around, they act as a way of strengthening qualitative research by improving the design of the research. To strengthen our research, we have kept these ten critiques in mind to make sure we would not get these critiques directed at our research. When we talk about the quality criteria, we are talking about generalizability, validity, and reliability (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Generalizability is an expression about the whether the research can be generalized from a specific observation into broader observations of the general population. Validity is the extent in which measures and research findings provide accurate representations of what they are supposed to be describing (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Reliability is whether someone can repeat the research and yield the same results (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018).

To make sure our research would be reliable we recorded and documented our empirical data, which enabled us to go back into our own recordings if we were unsure of certain statements made by our informants. Our analysis of the empirical data was done as detailed as possible, considering we had to think about the wordcount in regards to journal guidelines about word limitation. This is important because interviews (and data) can have multiple interpretations (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015). However, when you approach the data in a methodological way such as what we did with the meaning condensation and the hermeneutical interpretation of meaning, the data becomes much more reliable and should be repeatable. We have also made this section in the introductory chapter with a very detailed and through explanation of how we have approached our methodology from start to finish. We still have all our empirical data which can be obtained through requests to either of the authors of this research. We have told our informants that we would be keeping the recorded interviews for up to 6 months after the interviews for ethical purposes and then delete them. We will not delete the transcription of those interviews.

Sandberg (2000, 14) talks about the validity criteria in phenomenological research, which is research that focuses on the commonality of lived experiences within specific groups. He talks about two criteria for validity: Communicative validity and pragmatic validity. *Communicative validity* is an ongoing dialogue where alternative knowledge is debated throughout the research. Alternative knowledge is discussed in an ongoing dialogue. *Pragmatic validity* means testing knowledge that is produced in action. By testing this knowledge, you are more likely to be able to confirm it as true knowledge, which means that you observe whether the knowledge is true or not (Sandberg 2000). Communicative validity is something we have done through this documentation of the methodology and our thought process through our research. We have also been communicating back and forth as researchers to debate with each other whenever one of us felt that there was an alternative understanding of any of our empirical data. Pragmatic validity was done through participatory observation to confirm as many statements as we could while engaging and interacting with the different communities in their own environment.

### ***Methodological reflection and criticism.***

Researcher effects such as biases during interviews needs to be considered. Often during interviews, the informant will try to impress the interviewer or answer in a way that the interviewer will seem to prefer. One of the biggest problems with interviews is that an interviewer cannot do the 'needed' background check regarding the informants personal motivations for answering questions in a certain way (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). In our first

four interviews it became apparent that our lack of experience in conducting interviews resulted in leading and pointed questions. However, these four interviews were done in the two biggest communities (two in each) where we had two other informants in each community that we got a much more un-biased conversation with. We were able to verify questions that we thought were tainted with an interviewer bias. In other words, we were able to use triangulation to cross-check information from the informants' answers that possibly had been answered with a confirmation-bias by asking other informants about the same situations.

Another limitation with our research is that we only interviewed Norwegian gamers. Our data might not be representative for other geographical locations as a result. We did interview people from several different cities however, so from a national perspective, our data might be representative for an intracultural perspective of Norwegians.

Our sample-size was mostly males, which is a weakness. Fourteen males and two females are not a true representation of the population, nor is it a true representation of the sample size of Computer-gamers. As mentioned earlier, we know that there are more male gamers than female gamers, but a ratio of fourteen to two is not a fair representation. In theory, this representation should not matter, but it is still a flaw in our research.

We could also have gotten a bigger sample size in general to be able to get more generalizable results. With 16 informants in total, the results could be heavily skewed because we happened to talk to 16 people with strong opinions in one direction, which might not be representative for the average population. As an example, we identified that six out of our sixteen informants would be identified as casual gamers whereas ten of them would be classified as competitive gamers. We do not have numbers that show that this is representative for the average gamer.

Sample regarding the amount of communities we interviewed should also be higher to get generalizable results. We talked to 6 communities, and the opinions of core members in these communities have likely been inherited to the other members of these communities. It is therefore logical to get a higher number of communities involved when conducting this type of research.

Our informants are amateur gamers who play online games. These games are inherently competitive by nature. The context that we have interviewed people might be a factor regarding our findings. If we did the same kind of study on other consumption communities regarding social conflicts, the results could be different because of a context that is less competitive.

However a consumption community that collects stamps, might not show competitiveness as such a decisive factor.

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## Scientific article

# Is gaming always fun? Social conflicts in online consumption communities.

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### Abstract

This paper presents and analyze consequences of social conflicts in six online consumption communities among amateur computer gamers playing online multiplayer games. Our study applies multiple qualitative methods such as interviews, netnography through participatory observation and archival data. We show how subjective and emotional facets influence the experiences of consumers in online consumption communities, and consequently how they cope with conflicting practices within and in-between communities. Prior Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) research has focused on the homogeneous factors that bind consumption communities together while our findings point at the importance of a more dynamic view that emphasize the role of heterogeneity in consumption communities. We further illustrate that cultural tensions in a socio-historical context exist between casual- and competitively- oriented gamers which separate the culture into two distinct ideological approaches that compete for legitimacy. We discuss how hedonic consumption in online multiplayer gaming communities is not always filled with the positive demarcations of ‘fantasies, feelings and fun’ that quickly dissipate when communities experience divisive disputes and tensions in a competitive atmosphere.

**Keywords:** Social conflicts, Game studies, Casual, Competitive, Consumption community, Neo Tribe.

**Wordcount:** 10 047

## Introduction

Multiplayer computer gaming has become a major part of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century cultural zeitgeist among youth consumers. Aesthetic play is an intrinsic part of any culture and gaming culture has changed the way we become entertained (Shaw 2010). Traditionally play have been physically limited but has to a greater extent moved over to digital platforms. Popular game genres and games include: Massively multiplayer online role-playing game (World of Warcraft), first person shooter (Counter Strike), multiplayer online battle arena (Defense of the Ancient 2, League of Legends) and real time strategy (StarCraft 2). These games can be played as an amateur or as a professional. For amateur gamers, video gaming is a hobby that they love and are passionate about. A professional is someone that earns money by playing videogames through winning sponsored competitions or through entertaining an audience. The purpose of this study is to gain understanding of amateur gamers within the sub cultural phenomenon of online multiplayer gaming.

Most of the academic research on game studies has been preoccupied with learning (Mäyrä 2006) but other approaches focus on aspects such as how gamers are thinking, gender issues, and gaming and children (Shaw 2010). Recently there has been calls for more research on gaming consumption related to consumer behavior and marketing (Seo, Buchanan-Oliver and Fam 2015; Seo, Dolan and Buchanan-Oliver 2019). In an early study, Kozinets (1999) argues that gaming offers an important space in which collective consumption of fantasy experiences are created. Later, Buchanan-Oliver and Seo (2012) referred to game consumption experiences as a complex fusion of interactive narrative storytelling and play. Ellmerzy and Wimmer (2018) created a framework for understanding gaming consumption on a micro, meso and macro level, calling attention to the socio-cultural dimensions of consumption. This illustrates the need for more research on gaming communities within game culture.

Virtual worlds, much like ‘real-life’, contain communities of all sorts. It is natural to seek belonging with those that are likeminded, where autonomous individuals seek to resonate with overarching social dynamics. A community is commonly defined through three characteristics (Muniz and O’Guinn 2001): The first and most important is ‘consciousness of kind’, highlighting the intrinsic connection that members of a community feel towards each other, and a sense of difference regarding non-community members. The second characteristic is the ‘presence of shared’ rituals and traditions that preserve and reinforce a community’s shared

history and culture. The third characteristic revolves around ‘moral responsibilities’ and a ‘sense of duty’ towards one’s community and its individual members.

Consumption communities are comprised of consumers who share a commitment to a product, class, brand, activity, or consumption ideology (Thomas, Price and Schou 2013). In recent times three dominant perspectives on consumption communities have emerged; ‘Subcultures of consumption’ (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), ‘brand communities’ (Muniz and O’Quinn 2001) and ‘Neo-tribes’ (Cova 1997). We have adopted the neo-tribe perspective that is ‘*Characterized by fluidity, occasional gathering and dispersal*’ (Maffesoli 1996) to our research. Neo-tribes have conceptually been developed into consumption community thinking (Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2002; Cova and Pace 2006). It is mostly used to explain the idea of impermanent groups (O’Reilly 2012), which emphasizes the need for attention on intergroup dynamics and conflicts as the norm (Lindberg and Mossberg 2019).

In a review study of social conflicts and consumption, Husemann and Luedicke (2013) defined consumption-mediated social conflicts as ‘*an interaction relationship between two or more parties that pursue mutually exclusive or incompatible goals*’ (355). Research on social conflicts in a consumption context has traditionally revolved around resource scarcity and power-imbalances between consumers and producers. Recently there has been an increase in research on consumption mediated social conflicts that focus on ideology- and identity- induced incompatibilities (Huseman and Luedicke 2013). In previous consumption community research, consumers are characterized by their pursuit of social bonds and communality. However, research has revealed that heterogeneity within communities question ‘*the authority of the hegemonic perspective*’ (Schouten, martin, and McAlexander 2007, 74). Despite this, there is a lack research covering consumption-mediated social conflicts (Lindberg and Mossberg 2019; Husemann and Luedicke 2013; Thomas, Price and Schau 2013) and the roles of such tension (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013), especially in the context of virtual consumption communities (Seo, Buchanan-Oliver and Fam 2015; Seo, Dolan and Buchanan-Oliver 2019). Therefore, the following research question is formed: What role do social conflicts have among consumers in online gaming communities?

The subject of our study is gamers that belong to amateur online multiplayer gaming communities. Our informants choose to spend their leisure time together in an online environment, practicing their shared passion of video gaming. Our research falls under the theoretical perspective of consumer culture theory (CCT) which was launched by Arnould and

Thompson (2005). CCT addresses the sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption, focusing on consumer identity, marketplace cultures, sociohistorical consumption patterns and marketplace ideologies (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007, 2015, 2018). This article contributes to a broadened understanding of the role of social conflict and the induced consequences on consumption communities. It is relevant for extending the theoretical body of community research within CCT and gaming consumption studies with a nuanced view on neo-tribal thinking in marketing studies.

## Theory

### *Consumption in hedonic communities*

Research on consumption communities have evolved into three distinct concepts: ‘brand communities’ (Muniz and O’Quinn 2001), ‘subcultures of consumption’ (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) and ‘neo-tribes’ (Cova 1997; Cova and Cova 2002; Cova and Pace 2006). In the early developing years of CCT research, Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) argued for a focus on the subjective and emotional facets of experiences through ‘fantasies, feeling and fun’. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) They defined hedonic consumption as ‘*the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product usage experience*’ (92), where consumer relationships towards ‘*persons, places and things in which one feels attached*’ (Belk 1988, 141) strengthen and complement their sense of self (Lindberg and Østergaard 2015). By combining consumption communities and hedonic consumption, we get an understanding of what it means belong to a hedonic community.

In a study of rave culture, Canniford (2011) showed how a shared passion for music, profound affectual experiences, and a need to escape everyday life is what bring consumers together. These consumers only indulge in a temporal escape from ‘real-life’, while ‘lifestyle’ climbers (Lindberg and Mossberg 2019) and hardcore Harley Davidson bikers (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) permanently indulge in their consumption practice in pursuit of escaping ‘real-life’ (Goulding, Shankar and Canniford 2013). Escapism and varying degrees of commitment are no different in online consumption communities. Chess and Paul (2018) reflect on the hardcore – casual demarcations within game culture and how these terms need to be studied in a broader academic sense.

In Maffesoli's (1996) work on 'neo-tribes' he characterizes them by '*fluidity, occasional gathering and dispersal*' (76). Further Cova and Shankar (2012) argue that there is no such thing as the individual, '*whether aware of it or not, we are always members in a variety of tribes at any one moment, with some of the affiliations having more significance and meaning than others*' (Cova and Shankar 2012, 179). The neo-tribal approach to community-formation and practices show the dynamic and ephemeral nature of how consumers of online multiplayer games move between games, genres, brands and cultural practices to best fulfill their needs. In contrast, subcultures of consumption exclude commonalities and apply a rigid protagonist cultural framework (Bennet 1999). Brand communities are characterized as explicitly commercial, forming around a focal brand and less ephemeral than consumption tribes (Muniz and O'Quinn 2001). Even if there is no consensus on the three conceptual consumption communities (Cova and Pace 2006), they have common characteristic in that they are emotionally loaded, where consumers seek emotional bonds through common rituals, providing symbolic, hedonic, and esthetic meaning to consumption (Arnould and Price 1993).

McCracken (1986) argues that '*cultural meaning moves first from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods and then from these goods to the individual consumer*' (71), which is relevant for consumers that develop a very intertwined relationship with a consumption object. Immersion '*reduces the distance between the experience and the consumer*' (Caru and Cova 2006, 6) to the degree that they '*get so involved in an activity that nothing else matters*' (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 4). This transformation may face as a challenge for consumers and especially for unskilled consumers that lack the ability to cope with the requirements of a new and 'foreign reality' (Lindberg and Østegaard 2015). In these situations, emotional and imaginal resource allocation regarding hedonic utility shape consumer engagement in the consumption process. The imaginal and emotional expenditure is disproportional to the hedonic reward where consumers may avoid or refuse such an investment (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). The consumption practice of playing games forces participants to be active and social, and to engage their body and mind (Shaw 2010). With a growing influence on mainstream culture, '*gaming is changing us: our technology, our art, how we learn, and what we expect from the world*' (Copeland 2000, 1). This in turn affects identity on a micro level, where consumers are autonomous market actors with the ability to engage in collective actions. On a cultural level, consumers are community members belonging to tribes imbued with structures, constituted by cultural meaning reflecting their identity (Østergaard and Jantzen 2000).

Moisander, Penalzoza, and Valtonen (2009) have criticized CCT research for focusing on the individual as a primary unit of analysis which limits the understanding on a cultural level.

To sum up, hedonic consumption communities in a neo-tribal perspective consist of consumers seeking communality based on shared experiences, emotions and identities. This allows consumers to circumvent socio-structural conditions that are typical of postmodern society, in pursuit of a therapeutic existence (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007).

### ***Types of social conflict***

Husemann and Luedicke (2013) argue for three patterns of consumption-mediated social conflicts: Emancipatory, ideology-advocating and authenticity-protecting conflicts. First, emancipatory conflict call attention to parties of conflicts who attempt to break free from- or to regain power from each other. It is a consumption mediated conflict where the relation between actors of power is central and there is an imbalanced position of a corporate/market actor versus consumers, where the latter feel disenfranchised or exploited by market powers or perceived unethical corporations. For example, Gisler's (2008) article on marketplace drama between downloaders of music and the possessive music industry illustrates the power dichotomy between different market actors and consumers; *'Shameless capitalist oppression and greed beyond the veil of a music industry that claims loyalty to possessive ideals. Music managers are seen as slave drivers, and the time has come to liberate innocent artists and consumers from their stranglehold'* (745).

Second, ideology-advocating conflicts cover conflicts regarding ideological and moral perspectives of consumption. The consumption mediator is a controversial consumption practice or object, and the conflict's core is incompatible moral worldviews. This is demonstrated in research on brand mediated social conflicts between Hummer-owners (Schulz 2006) and critics done by environmentalists and moral protagonists (Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler 2010). Schulz (2006) argue that people who spend too much money on a commodity such as a Hummer will create contempt and disdain towards themselves from other people because it indicates a selfish way of self-spoiling. More importantly, it is a vehicle that heavily pollutes the environment more than other cars such as a Prius. Hummer owners argue that they do not choose their car to show off or to damage the environment, but that it is a symbol of American nationalism, which causes this ideology-advocating conflict. Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler (2010) show how ideological differences are the source of conflict and the Hummer

is merely an object for a deeper ideological battle of ideas and a moral identity between consumers.

Third, authenticity-protecting conflicts revolve around a consumption object or practices which are '*particularly evident within consumer communities and subcultures*' (Husemann and Luedicke 2013 357). Consumers that consider themselves core-members of a community with a high level of identity investment around an object or practice of consumption tend to protect their identity from undesirable associations or unauthentic people and practices (Arsel and Thompson 2011). O'Leary and Carroll's (2013) research on online poker subculture show that consumers that fail to adhere to the community's ethos and respect for hierarchical structures result in social sanctions through sarcastic forum replies and mocking of novice members. Similarly, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) show how 'hardcore' consumers of the Harley Davidson brand create conflict with novice bikers, because hardcore Harley Davidsons brand members are perceived as brutal and barbaric by novice members. This threatens hardcore Harleys Davidsons brand members and subsequently threaten their identity investment.

Research on intergroup dynamics by White, Argo and Sengupta (2012) show how belongingness becomes a focal point when individuals are exposed to threats to their social identity. Distinction from other people's choices is common for when consumers want to display their desired identities (Berger and Heath 2007). By being together as a group or a community and consuming in the same fashion, consumers co-create meaning and desired characteristics. Entities come together and create meaning to build bigger social groups but avoid other individuals and groups that display contrasting characteristics (Berger and Heath 2007). These identities and characteristics are generally linked to authenticity-protecting conflicts. Thomas, Price and Schau's (2013) study on a running community found that community actors were '*dependent on each other for social and economic resources from which they derive benefits that reinforce belonging*' (1026). Despite experiencing social conflicts, the running community manage their problems by preserving their unity and communal values such as belonging and stability. However, problems with preserving a community might arise when the conflicts are ideology-advocating and immoral.

In sum, the three patterns for social conflicts mentioned by Husemann and Luedicke (2013); emancipatory conflicts, ideology-based conflicts and authenticity-based conflicts might be relevant for our research. Individuals come together to co-create and maintain a common identity, while diverging from opposing identities. In addition, previous studies on consumption

communities such as the running community (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013), climbing community (Lindberg and Mossberg 2019) and Harley Davidson community (Schouten and McAlexander 1995) all identify conflicts within their communities, but they are able to avoid fragmentation because of resource dependency. This goes against existing consumer research highlighting fragmentation of communities as a persuasive outcome (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013). Identifying these conflicts in multiplayer computer gaming communities and their consequences thus become a focal issue.

## **Method**

### ***Data collection***

Our research on multiplayer computer gaming communities is nethnographically inspired. The data has been gathered through conducting interviews, participatory observation and use of archival data. Nethnography is described by Kozinets, Dolbec and Earley (2014) as a newer method for gathering data and is a combination of the terms; internet and ‘ethnography’ and is used to research culture, online communities and social media, to understand consumer behavior (Kozinets, Dolbec, Earley 2014). Participatory observation was done through direct interaction and participation by playing games with communities we have interviewed. Participatory observation is a strong tool for a deeper understanding of informants (Easterby-smith, Thorpe, Jackson and Jaspersen 2018). The archival data we have used includes research articles, research journals, course literature, previous student work and thesis and internet articles. Most of our interview-data have been collected over a period of three weeks. The interviews ranged from 26 minutes to 1 hour and 23 minutes, however most of them lasted roughly 50 minutes. We have done most of them through *Discord* (online voice-chatting-program). Our informants belong to online gaming communities who already are using this application (Discord) as their main form of communication in addition to the games they play together. We believe our research has benefitted from the perceived increase in comfort exhibited by the informants, likely caused by the familiarity of the platform used. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian and transcribed in English. In order to enable us to identify conflicts within our informants’ online communities, the interview design was of an in-depth and semi-structured nature. It was hard for our informants to describe situations of tensions and conflicts, highlighting the importance of our prior knowledge about games, especially those games our informants play. This enabled us to ask questions that helped the

informant recall situations of relevance for us. We would ask follow-up questions to keep them on track with what we wanted to know (how, where, when, what, why). We asked about their communities, common goals, and why they enjoy each other's company despite disagreements. Apart from interviews, we participated in some of these communities through participant observation as mentioned earlier, by playing games and talking with these communities during consumption and in that way absorbing the atmosphere within the group (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Conducting participant observation has enabled us to verify informants' statements. We have also been able to observe actual consumption practices (Holt and Thompson 2004) of different communities.

All of the 16 informants interviewed were Norwegian. We initially approached gaming communities based on a strategic sampling strategy (Easterby-Smith et al. 2018). Further, we used a snow-balling technique (Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljaie 2017) where we asked our initial informants about other potential informants within their community or within other online gaming communities that they knew of. We had three criteria for our sampling strategy: They needed to (1) have belonged to an online multiplayer gaming community for at least several years, (2) be a desktop (computer) gamer and (3) play and engage weekly with their community. We made sure the informants always met these requirements. The informants' age ranged from 24 years old to 31 years old. We have interviewed fourteen males and two females. Most of the informants have been gaming with their communities since before their adulthood.

Table 1. List of participants

(Abbreviations for game-genre terms and game-names are explained in Appendix 1)

Description of community (abbreviations for communities in text: comm. 1-6)	Pseudonym	Community belonging	Age	Level of skill (Competitive rank)	Education level	Occupation
<b>Community 1</b> is what we will consider to be a casual community and we have four informants from this group. Their preferred game within the community is LoL, so mainly MOBA games.	Arnold	Core community only	29	30%	Univ	Unemployed
	Joe	Core community only	28	30%	Univ	Full time work
	Calvin	Core community and several non-core communities	28	50%	Univ	Full time work
	Jaina	Core community only	28	30%	Univ	Student
<b>Community 2</b> is what we will consider to be a competitive community and we have three informants from this group. Their preferred game within the community is T6S, so mainly FPS games.	Luis	Core community only	24	70%	Univ	Student
	Jon	Core community only	24	70%	Univ	Student / part time work
	Brendan	Core community only	26	70%	High school	Full time work
<b>Community 3</b> is what we will consider to be a competitive community and we have four informants from this group. Their preferred games within the community are WoW and Dota, so mainly MMORPG and MOBA games.	Jacob	Core community and one non-core community.	31	80%	High school	Full time work
	Oscar	Core community only	30	85%	High school	Student / part time work
	Phillip	Core community and one non-core community.	31	80%	Univ	Full time work
	Tanner	Core community only	31	85%	Univ	Full time work
<b>Community 4</b> is what we will consider to be a competitive community and we have one informant from this group. Their preferred games are Dota 2, CS:GO, OW and WoW, so a wide variety of genres.	William	Core community and several non-core communities	25	85%	High school	Student / part time work
<b>Community 5</b> is what we will consider to be a casual community and we have two informants from this group. Their preferred games are CS:GO, CoD and OW, so a variety of different FPS games.	Nicolai	Core community only	33	75%	High school	Full time work
	Lina	Core community and one non-core community.	26	75%	High school	Full time work
<b>Community 6</b> is what we will consider to be a competitive community and we have two informants from this group. Their preferred games are Wow and CS:GO, so mainly MMORPG and FPS games.	Noah	Core community and one non-core community.	30	85%	High school	Full time work
	Abel	Core community and one non-core community.	30	80%	High school	Full time work

### ***(Table explanation)***

Table X provides information about the 16 informants we interview for our research.

'Community-belonging' is an overview of how many communities our informant is a part of. All informants have been asked to talk from the perspective of their core-community, and those that only have one community are marked with 'Core community only'. Those that are marked with 'Core community and one non-core community' have one optional community they participate in, but less frequently. Those that are marked with 'Core community and several non-core communities' spend most of their time with their core community but have affiliations with multiple communities. Informants seek other communities because they play different games that their core community doesn't want to play. 'Level of skill' (competitive rank) illustrate our informants' skill compared to all other players of that game. A 30th percentile in level of skill means that you are better than 30 percent of players who play that game. Most online multiplayer games have a way of measuring level of skill. Level of skill is always measured on an individual level, but if you only play with a group, everyone's level will be displayed as roughly the same. 'Education' and 'occupation' are meant as indicators for available time.

### ***Data analyses***

The interviews were recorded, and all meaningful statements were transcribed. We have approached the analysis with a hermeneutical interpretation of meaning (Thompson 1997) which involves a back-and-forth process between parts and the whole. We analyzed our data by making smaller and more condensed formulations of statements made by the informants. After making smaller formulations of the statements we were able to compare them with statements from other informants. Through this hermeneutical interpretation we have gained a holistic understanding of the communities and have been able to analyze the data, part by part of each interview in a multifaceted strategy of interpretation (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015).

We have analyzed the data through our interviews (primary data), netnographic sources (primary and secondary data), and our a posteriori knowledge about the field of online gaming to identify conflicts within multiplayer online gaming communities. The findings that we propose have been found through meaning condensation (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015) and a hermeneutical interpretation of meaning of our interviews.

## Findings

We answer our research question by organizing the findings into three parts. First, we identify characteristics and tensions of the online multiplayer gaming culture. Second, with empirical data from various gaming communities we are able to identify five underlying social conflicts on two levels: between individuals within a community, and between different communities. Third, by highlighting differences that cause social conflicts, which situation they occur in, and how these conflicts shape the consumption practice among online multiplayer gamers.

### *Multiplayer game culture*

Game culture has evolved from Dungeons and Dragons board games, to online ‘*behemoths*’ that occupy the biggest stages of mainstream culture. The video game industry generates higher revenues than the movie and music industry (Seo, Dolan and Buchanan-Oliver 2019). It is enabled by devoted gamers that spend a lot of money on a range of different functional products, ranging from hardware and software to symbolic virtual artifacts that change your avatar’s appearance. To get these virtual artifacts, gaming companies have created online shops where it is possible to exchange real money for virtual artifacts. This is called ‘micro-transactions’, which is a major source of revenue and controversy for gaming companies (Howtogeek.com). Micro-transactions are controversial for many reasons. Our informants point at how marketing towards young gamers is problematic, because they do not have the same ‘immunity’ to marketing of micro-transactions as older gamers.

*‘Younger gamers get more affected by artifacts, because having a certain artifact is a way of symbolizing that you have money and that you play this character often’ - (Jaina - comm. 1)*

The symbolic value of a virtual artifact also extends into real life, as Noah (comm. 6) explains: *‘I spend substantial amounts of money on my son’s virtual artifacts (...) having certain artifacts give status within their community and it is much worse now compared to when I was young, it’s crazy...’* The growing importance of virtual artifacts, with symbolic value in the real world and the cynical targeting of young gamers in pursuit of profit, is viewed as immoral and greedy.

Immoral actions taken by large gaming corporations are often discussed within gaming communities and often lead to consequences for the company as well as within communities. In 2019, Ng Wai Chung (‘Blitzchung’) a Chinese Hearthstone (HS) player from Hong Kong, talked in support of the ongoing protests in Hong Kong (TIME.com). Because of pressure from

the Chinese authorities, Blizzard (publisher of HS) had to act against Chung, by banning him from playing professional HS for one year and all his prize money was withheld. Blizzard's decision sparked a public outcry, not only among gamers but industry titans and politicians alike. The decision of economic interest before free speech did not bode well and even affected some of our informants. Lina and Nicolai's (comm. 5) community decided to boycott Blizzard's games because of their actions, but not everyone within their community wanted to boycott them, which resulted in their community to temporarily divide into those who played Blizzard games and those who boycotted them.

Cultural information, norms, ideas and conventions of the gaming world mostly comprise of online resources. Mediums such as Videos/streaming platforms (Twitch.tv; Youtube.com), various forums and imageboards (Reddit.com; 4chan.org) are sites where famous cultural 'memes' are born. A meme is an element of culture or system of behavior passed from one individual to another by imitation. Usually internet memes are images, videos, pieces of text, etc., typically humorous of nature, which are spread rapidly by internet users (Lexico.com). The popular web forum '/r/pcmasterrace' (reddit.com) has 3.6 mil members and is the home of the 'PC master race' meme (knowyourmeme.com). On this web forum users praise the 'superiority' of playing video games on a personal computer while looking down on alternative ways (such as consoles or smartphones) of playing videogames. The 'filthy casual' meme is used to describe gamers that only play easy games with simple gameplay that require low levels of commitment (knowyourmeme.com). Memes are a major part of internet culture and by extension online game culture.

A significant part of game culture is the subcultural phenomenon of 'online multiplayer gaming', which can be divided into amateurs and professionals. The online multiplayer gaming culture has grown parallel to the development of the internet. Better connection has enabled gamers to free themselves from physical and geographical limitations, by entering an always-online virtual space where time and activities belong to a specific fantasy world. Consumer-ideology systems tend to be formed by actions that '*channel and reproduce consumers thoughts and actions in such a way as to defend dominant interests in society*' (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 874) consisting of three main characteristics: '*their goals, themselves and their adversaries*' (Kozinets and Handelman 2004, 691). Within the frame of online multiplayer gaming, communities form around shared approaches that reinforces their view of how gaming should be practiced, such as ranked and unranked modes of play.

Our informants emphasize that an amateur online multiplayer gaming community is confronted with two choices: ranked or unranked. Each approach has different appeals, depending on goals. *Ranked* gaming appeals to the competitive mindset, of wanting to measure performance against other players. Through a rating system performance is quantified into a rank that increases by winning and decreases by losing. Achieving a high rank gives status within competitive gaming communities. A high rank is symbolic of hard work and dedication, but also a depiction of talent. These are desirable traits for competitive gamers, resulting in a higher degree of tension between gamers in a competitive environment because winning is the goal. *Unranked* gaming appeals to the casual, social gamer, with no desire to measure themselves up against others. Community, social aspects, escapism, and a safe virtual space to practice their preferred leisure activity is the goal. *'Playing games is relaxing and a way to disconnect from everyday life. It is a stress-free zone and a place to have fun'* - (Jaina - comm 1).

### ***Ideological conflicts: Disagreement about competitiveness***

Ranked and unranked games split the online multiplayer culture into two separate ideological creeds, each with different views on how gaming should be practiced. Thousands, even millions of tiny communities operate within the sphere of online multiplayer culture, and willingly or not partake and cope with overarching cultural ideologies. Through managing their relationship with the community and cultural ideologies, tensions within and in-between communities flair up.

*'The few times we decide to play ranked together, the group's focus changes because winning becomes the only goal. Causing a negative atmosphere, where disagreements occur more often. The group doesn't like this "winning" mentality and therefore avoids ranked games'* - (Joe - comm. 1).

Group 1 has a casual approach to playing online multiplayer games (see table 1). When playing online multiplayer games group 1 seek a safe virtual environment, free of stress and negativity associated with playing ranked games. Jaina (comm. 1) explains how they used to play ranked games more often but have moved away from it because *'focusing on winning and prioritizes that over enjoying the game, ruins the atmosphere of the group.'* Changes in a community's approach to online multiplayer gaming causes ideological tension between those in the community that want to play ranked and those that do not.

*'I was more competitive before. I mainly played ranked games alone, but eventually got tired of playing alone and the rude behavior of other players, so I quit the game for several years.'* - (Calvin - comm. 1)

When a community's approach changes, its members must adapt. Calvin (comm. 1) tried playing alone but did not enjoy it, eventually leading to him conforming with the new approach the group had adopted. Joe (comm. 1) describes Calvin (comm. 1) as *'previously being a very competitive gamer but has "matured" in his approach to gaming'*. This statement indicates how casual gamers seek to get away from stress and discomfort associated with ranked gaming, whereas gamers with a competitive mindset find meaning in being able measure themselves against other gamers by playing ranked.

*'For me, everything is competitive. That applies to games, work, climbing, training and everything I do basically. If I don't have anyone to compare myself to, I compare with my own previous performance. It is depressing if there is no progress'* - (Tanner - group 3).

To progress in a virtual competitive milieu, gamers must win more than they lose. Every ranked game adds or subtracts points from your rank. When stakes are high and not everyone has the same desire to win, conflicts emerge. Oscar (comm. 3) explains how he likes playing ranked but dislike it when *'others don't invest as much time and effort as I do.'* In order to increase the chance of winning, personal vanity must subside. Tanner (comm. 3) says *'how we feel getting there is not important, only that we don't hurt our chances.'* Gamers in a competitive community have incommensurable ideas about the value of their time commitment, which causes conflicts. Jacob (comm. 2) explains *'I try to get the best rank I can, based on the limited time I have'*, illustrating the scarcity of time but also that gamers have real life responsibilities, which limits the time they can commit to games.

*'Me and my partner have a limited amount of time, our game time, is what "normal people" call tv-time. Our commitments in real life, limits how good we can be'* - (Lina - comm 4).

### ***Vertical and horizontal tension: How 'Skill' cause tensions***

Within online multiplayer gaming communities there are differences in how good gamers are and through our interviews it became apparent that 'skill' is a measurement of this. Skill is gained through practice over time and can be divided into two forms: mechanical skill and theoretical skill.

Mechanical skill is practical and means pushing the right combination of mouse and keystrokes, eventually resulting in automated muscle memory. Theoretical skill is acquired by experiencing and educating oneself about the game. By gaining a deeper understanding and by playing a game more, gamers learn how to play more efficiently. By focusing on these two aspects of 'skill', a gamer's competitive rank will increase.

*'In our gang I and a few others were very skilled, but not everyone in our community were as skilled. This resulted in our community of real-life friends to virtually split into two communities. (...) Those with high skill could not bear playing with our friends that where less skilled. This caused conflicts that affected both our virtual communities and real-life friendships' - (William - comm. 4).*

In this community of real-life friends, a divergence of 'skill' caused conflicts between the higher and lower echelons of the community. Noah (comm. 6) stated that *'by being skilled you claim respect from your peers'*, showing how skill is a way of asserting your position within a community. Gamers of low skill often face social sanctions such as criticism, down-prioritization and exclusion.

*'People have left the community because of "loot council" decisions. In fact, someone left our community last time we raided because of it' - (Abel – comm. 6).*

A *'loot council'* is a council of respected members of the community that make decisions on behalf of the community. 'Loot' is a virtual artifact that you get when you slay virtual monsters called NPC's (Non-Playable Character's) and in order to slay virtual monsters, a group of 10-30 members of a community meet online to 'raid'(defeat) an NPC. These virtual artifacts do have functional value and makes your character more powerful, which also increases the overall power of your 'raiding' community. The loot council's mandate is to distribute artifacts in a utilitarian manner based on how the community benefits the most. Those that are assigned the artifact are often those of high skill within that community, which causes lower skilled members to get disenfranchised by a council system that they have no control over. Communities have a vertical conflict dichotomy between those of high and low skill, but also horizontal conflict within the echelons between those of equal skill.

*'Gamers have different views about what the correct course of action is in "in-game" situations. Some might think we can take this 5 versus 5 fight, but others think that we need more time to build the strength of the team, especially in DOTA2. There is a constant exchange of information, which creates thousands of possible outcomes' (William – comm. 4).*

Situations like the one William (comm. 4) mentions are very common. Gamers with equal skill have different opinions about what is the correct course of action, resulting in lengthy discussions based on theoretical understanding of the game. These conflicts become very hypothetical and almost impossible to recreate, because the situations are either in the past or might happen in the future. More theoretical knowledge and experience within the game means you have more situations to resonate from.

Most of our informants that play World of Warcraft (WoW) mention how 'logs' is a major source of conflict. Logs is an application that records and quantifies every action, and gives extremely detailed statistics, graphs and charts over performance. Logs are commonly used by highly skilled gamers to learn and 'finetune' their own performance, but also to check how other gamers in the community perform. If performance is lower than required, tensions and arguments emerge as described below:

*'There were two gamers within our community that often "went at each other" over logs. Both had good logs with minimal mistakes, but they still argued over each other's logs. This resulted in a bad atmosphere within the community where one of them eventually got so frustrated that he left the community' - (Noah - comm. 6).*

### ***Game style conflicts: Individual vs. collective style***

Game style conflicts are conflicts that occur because gamers within the same community have different ways (or styles) of how they play. The gamer's action depends on their style. If a gamer has a defensive style or risky and aggressive style, it will influence his or her decisions in the game. In WoW there are two different ways of playing the game: playing against NPCs as a group, called PvE (Player versus environment) and playing against other players, called PvP (Player versus Player).

*'He doesn't see the value in going around killing other players in the game. Every time I talk about PvP and how fun it is, he says that I'm just wasting my time and the time of the people I kill. He thinks I'm a douchebag for doing it' - (Tanner - comm. 3).*

Tanner (comm. 3) enjoys playing versus other players, whereas the other member of the community Tanner talks about here prefers to fight NPCs and thinks that is a much better way of spending his time. Both styles are generally accepted but there are tensions between which one is more authentic. When playing versus other players (PvP), gamers have made a choice which makes them accessible to be attacked by other players. Playing against NPCs (PvE) will

not have a negative effect on other gamers by wasting their time. It is therefore considered closer to the hedonic approach.

In communities where winning is important, there are frequent arguments around wrong decisions. Our informants state that these issues in general are ‘in the heat of the moment’-type of arguments and not something that last for long:

*‘We don’t always agree on things when playing. We might not always listen to each other, we start playing more individualistic instead of as a team (...) which lead to short-term disagreements within the group, but nothing that lasts for long’ - (Luis - comm. 2).*  
*‘Different skill-levels and playstyles can cause discussions’ - (Brendan - comm. 2).*

Comm. 2 is a competitive community and they play to reach a higher rank in Rainbow Six Siege (R6S). Members of comm. 2 has the same priorities and goals, but they have different styles when playing, where some have an aggressive style while others have a defensive style. R6S is a game where you want to have different styles when playing because of the strategic nature of the game, so different styles is not always a bad thing and can work to your advantage. Being unpredictable as a team is seen as an advantage and makes winning a more likely outcome. Luis (comm. 2) states that gaming-sessions where they win everything can easily lead to playing for 6 hours straight. Loosing means the atmosphere quickly goes from good to bad and they can stop playing after 30 minutes or even less.

*‘A situation where one of us wanted to rush in aggressively and we told him we weren’t ready (...) this person still runs in and gets mad when he dies because we didn’t follow him. His aggressive playstyle often causes a negative atmosphere’ - (Lina - comm. 5).*

Situations where gamers act selfish rather than playing for the team is often a source of conflict. Multiplayer games are team games, to increase the possibility of winning everyone must act as a team and put vanity aside, as explained by Abel, (comm. 6): *‘The individualist would be so much better players if they just played as a team and followed tactics, instead of individual performance, for praise and recognition’.*

### ***Immoral behavior: Transgressions in a virtual world***

Real world moral principles do not necessarily correlate with actions taken in a virtual world. Some gamers take their moral principles very seriously and apply the same principles to how they act in a virtual environment. ‘I see my virtual character as an extension of my real-life persona’ - (Tanner - comm. 3). Others see an opportunity to test the boundaries of moral

principles and act differently than they would in real-life. Tensions between those with 'high moral standards' and those who simply do not see the need for moral standards in a virtual environment polarizes communities. When members of a community perform an immoral action, severe sanctions from their community often follow. Depending on the severity of this immoral action and who it affects might cause communities split or fragment, or if it is an individual gamer, he or she might be ostracized by their community.

*'After "Eric" went too far and stole an [artifact] (...) I got annoyed, because I don't think its ok to steal from others. My moral principles are the same, even though we are in a virtual world. It was especially bad because he stole from friends' - (Tanner - comm. 3).*

This caused a severe reaction from one of the community's members. Tanner (comm. 3) explains that there was a divide within their little sub-community because of this stealing, leading to one of the community's members to distance themselves from 'Eric'. The most substantial conflicts are when gamers with insurmountable moral principles encounter each other as stated below:

*'We are principally different persons with a totally different moral structure (...) I don't want to spend time with those kinds of people, I might come off as a bit intolerant... I am intolerant of intolerance, because that's where we are at. Sexism and racism are something I don't accept! I believe it is a bad way to act' - (Tanner - comm. 3).*

*'Their humor went a "bit too far", jokes with a racist and sexist undertone(...) felt more real when they said it(...) if you tell a very racist joke, but afterwards come with a racist statement, then you're not just using dark humor anymore. There is an ideological backdrop behind the joke, which is uncomfortable' - (Oscar - comm. 3).*

Faced with a non-core community where racism and sexism were more accepted, Tanner and Oscar (comm. 3) couldn't accept this behavior and decided to abandon this non-core community even when they knew that those who uttered these immoral statements were not representative of the whole community. They knew the community had other members that they respected and enjoyed gaming with.

### ***Implementation conflict: Strategy and game roles***

At the core of every game is a role decision. In some games the choices are between playing a healer (keeping teammates alive), a tank (making monsters attack you rather than your teammates) or a damage dealer (deals more damage to monsters than other roles). In other

games roles are divided into different positions. In DOTA2 the positions are given numbers from 1 to 5. Each position has specific tasks that they are responsible for doing throughout the game. If every role is done correctly the chances of winning will increase. Each of these roles have different utility and usage for the team. In order to be as skilled as possible, gamers spend time to specialize in these roles. Generally, people are much better at one role than they are at the others, and they will therefore prefer to play this role. Since there are several roles, not everyone gets to play what they prefer playing, which can result in conflicts.

*‘Often disagreements emerge in the picking phase [strategy phase], where choices about what avatar to play and what roles (position 1,2,3,4,5) people should have’ – (Jacob – comm. 3).*

In DOTA2 there is a position system, where some positions are less sought after than others. The role of position 4 or 5 is solely to support and help those in position 1,2 and 3 to be stronger, which for some are perceived as less desirable or fun. Position 1-3 are considered more fun to play, which causes tensions between players wanting to play those roles, because there are three of those roles, but 5 gamers per team. After the ‘picking phase’ (pre-game) when roles have been designated, the game starts (during game). Now tensions regarding how one should play a certain role becomes the issue. Jaina (comm. 1) often plays a supportive role and explains her frustration for when someone else plays a supportive role but doesn’t take it seriously: *‘When you have a supportive role, you need to support the team. Often this includes sacrificing yourself for more important roles to live longer’*. Sacrificing yourself for the team is a responsibility when you play a supportive role. Failing to live up to those responsibilities causes tensions to flare up. When someone is designated position 1 which is the most important role, they get to choose what avatar they want to play (DOTA2 has hundreds of different avatars with unique traits that work better with some avatars than with others). The rest of the team is further limited by this because they need to synergize their choice of avatar with position 1. If the game is lost (post game), position 1 is often blamed, causing post-game discussions in the tone of this example: *‘If I could have played position 1, I would have picked a character that is better for the overall setup, which I would have played better, because I have more time and knowledge on this character’* - (Jacob - comm 3).

### ***The role of social conflict***

Our research shows five different types of conflict that occur in online multiplayer gaming communities. Each conflict type has a ‘conflict object’ at its core and is triggered by a plethora of situations in an online environment, which we call conflict context. There are some important contextual distinctions to ‘when and where’ the conflicts occur. We have divided these contexts

into five. The first three are ‘pre-game’, ‘during game’ and ‘post-game’, which illustrates phases that lay high claims on a gamer’s attention. The fourth is ‘Outside of game’ and involves situations where gamers are active in chat and voice communication with their community but are not playing any game. The fifth is ‘Within game’ and is related to situations where gamers are idle within the game, but not engaging or taking part in actions that require commitment. The frequency for conflicts in these contexts is generally high among gamers but differ in their severity. In table 2 we summarize our findings by showing each conflict type and the important markers that affect or are the result of each conflict.

Table 2. Conflict types in online consumption communities

<b>Conflict type</b>	<b>1: Ideological conflicts</b>	<b>2: horizontal and vertical tensions</b>	<b>3: Game style conflicts</b>	<b>4: Immoral behavior</b>	<b>5: Implementation conflict</b>
<b>Description</b>	Authenticity protecting of desired/favored Consumption practices	Tensions because of a hierarchical divide.	Dissent regarding individual play styles.	Dispute over Incommensurable moral principles	Quarrel regarding responsibilities and execution in-game roles
<b>Conflict context</b>	Outside of game and within game	Within game, during game	During game, post-game	Outside of game and within game	During game, pre-game, post-game
<b>Consumption-mediator (game)</b>	DOTA2, LOL, CS:GO, WOW, APEX	DOTA2, LoL, WoW	DOTA2, WoW, CS:GO, Apex	WoW	DOTA2, LoL
<b>Conflict object</b>	Competitiveness	Skill (Mechanical and theoretical).	Play style	Theft, sexism, and racism	Expectations
<b>Conflict parties</b>	competitive vs. casual gamer(s)	High skilled vs. low skilled gamer(s)	Aggressive vs. defensive gamer(s), individualist vs. team player	Virtuous- vs Apathic gamer(s)	Gamer(s) with Sufficient vs. insufficient understanding
<b>Communities involved</b>	1, 2 and 3	2, 3, 4 and 6	2, 3, 4, 5 and 6	3	1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6
<b>Level of conflict</b>	International game culture	Within and between communities	Within communities	(Between and within communities) vs. Corporate actor	Within communities
<b>Frequency of conflict</b>	Low	Medium	Very high	Low	Very High
<b>Consequences</b>	Fragmentation of online multiplayer culture	Good – Bad gamers, Hierarchical divide	Negative atmosphere	Fragmentation of community	Negative atmosphere

Interestingly, 'Game style conflicts' (3) and 'Implementation conflicts' (5) happen frequently but span over a shorter duration and with modest consequences. These disputes typically occur 'pre-game', 'during game' or 'post-game' and is often dealt with quickly. When gamers play, they immerse themselves into the game, gaining a state of flow. During the game everyone has the same goal of winning and arguments are counterproductive to that goal. Gamers compromise by not engaging in arguments to avoid negativity that affect their chances of winning: *'Some gamers disable all sources of communication (in-game chat and voice communication) to avoid a negative atmosphere'* - (Jaina - comm. 1). Compromises can re-emerge and become confrontational after losing a game, where discussions about what went wrong and who is to blame often leads to a negative atmosphere. Confrontations based on 'style' and 'expectations' can cause gamers to leave a 'gaming session' abruptly but will not result in them leaving the community.

'Horizontal and vertical tensions' (2) are commonly dormant and builds over time, but eventually they must be dealt with. These tensions are triggered by a negative event within the virtual world or because of tensions over time. Skill level is always relative to the context in which it is being measured. Talent and time devotion are the main factors that help in developing one's skill levels. Being confronted and told you are not good enough is hard to handle for gamers and especially so if their time investment is substantial. Consequentially, skill-based conflicts lead to segregated communities where those that are roughly on the same skill level aggregate around each other forming their own communities.

'Immoral behavior' (4) leads to severe consequences for communities in an online multiplayer environment. Our empirical findings show that communities fragment or end up going separate ways because of immoral behavior that is incommensurable with moral principles of a certain segment in the community. The actor who is responsible for the immoral action is sanctioned. Immoral actions function as a catalyst for moral debates within the community that polarizes the community into those who want to sanction the behavior and those who are apathetic towards immoral behavior. If the moral divide is too large, gamers with a high moral conviction seek to protect their identity investment by detaching themselves from those they perceive as immoral actors. Moral conflicts, in contrast to the conflicts mentioned (2, 3 and 5) do not require immersion, opening for more than goal specific conversations. Conflicts of this type are lower in frequency but leads to harsher social sanctions.

'Ideological conflicts' (1) are the most significant conflicts within online multiplayer game culture. Ideological conflicts are rare occurrences, but they exist as latent tensions that permeates and divides the online multiplayer culture into those who seek a competitive milieu and those who seek a safe social environment (casuals) to enjoy their leisure activity. We see competitiveness as the underlying factor in every conflict with an exception for moral conflicts. Online multiplayer games are inherently competitive and revolves around winning in some way. Casual gamers choose to play unranked, not because they do not like games that are about winning, but because they do not like the associated pressures of focusing on winning. By adopting an attitude of not caring about the outcome, casual gamers avoid negativity and uncomfortable confrontations. Communities we categorize as casual (1) and (5) have a lower frequency of conflict because the group values an 'conflict-averse' ethos. Competitive communities are not characterized by the same aversiveness since confrontation and emotional expressions of frustration is normal behavior. Although more susceptible to conflicts, severe consequences are rarely invoked in competitive communities. Competitiveness is not discussed explicitly or openly but is expressed through choices and actions gamers within communities take. Gamers form around a shared and common practice, with projecting symbolism that resonates with their identity.

## **Discussion**

During our investigation we have attempted to broaden the understanding of the role of social conflicts and the induced consequences on consumption communities. Our research is an extension on the theoretical body of community research within CCT and game literature, and to a nuanced view on neo-tribal thinking in marketing. We have identified patterns and underlying markers for social conflicts within and between consumption communities. Competitiveness is a key point for understanding the frequency, severity and consequences, which range from some negative atmospheres to community fragmentation. Finally, we conclude and indicate areas of interest for future research.

### ***Game culture and consumption***

Most of the academic research on game studies has been preoccupied with learning (Mäyrä 2006) but other approaches such as thinking, gender and children (Shaw 2010) have also been studied. In a special issue in 'Journal of Consumer Behavior' Seo, Buchanan-Oliver and Fam (2015) emphasized that there is a gap in the literature regarding gaming consumption based on

consumer behavior and marketing perspectives. Later reinforcing their previous notation Seo, Dolan and Buchanan-Oliver (2019) called for an interdisciplinary theorization of experiences and practices within online and mobile games consumption. Our research contributes to the individual oriented game culture literature by introducing a CCT perspective on communities. Specifically, the consumption community perspective of a neo-tribe (Cova 1997), which releases the conceptual ‘community’ from limiting characteristics and replaces it with a more open-ended description of *‘fluidity, occasional gathering and dispersal’* (Maffesoli 1996, 76). We believe that the neo-tribal perspective contributes to nuancing the view of how gamers engage in relationships with multiple communities and cultural belonging on meso and macro levels, although with fluctuating affiliations. An neo-tribal perspective is in line with Mäyrä’s (2006) notion that ‘game culture’ is more than singular, and *‘there are several of them, as visible and invisible sense-making structures that surface not only in games themselves, but in the language, practices, and sensibilities adopted and developed by groups and individuals’* (Mäyrä 2006, 103). Our results show that gaming communities form around collective action, based on collective identification, shared experiences, passions and emotions (Cova and Shankar 2012).

Chess and Paul (2018) criticize academic game studies for a less nuanced view on casual gamers and that academia is contributing to mainstream’s definition of the ‘casual gamer’, which is closely associated with the meme ‘filthy casual’ where filthy casual describes casual gamers in a demeaning and sarcastic way. Through our study of communities that play online multiplayer games that are intrinsically competitive we extend literature on the ‘casual gamer’ characterization. Normally the ‘casual gamer’ is described in opposition to the ‘hardcore gamer’ or within a context of playing ‘casual games’ (Chess and Paul 2018). We focus on the casual gamer in a competitive dichotomy, showing that casual gamers want to partake in games that are inherently competitive, but do not want or partake in ostentatious and masculine practices, riddled with confrontations and negativity. Our research shows the ‘casual gamer’ in a context of playing a ‘non-casual game’ extending the academic understanding of the ‘casual gamer’ both in game studies and consumer behavior.

Our review of hedonic consumption communities indicates positive connotations as a dominating influence of understanding in pursuit of communality and consumption practices that fulfills their multisensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). Kozinets (1999) noted that computer game consumption offered a collective space for fantasy and experiences. Buchanan-Oliver, Margo and Seo (2012) further describe computer

consumption experiences as a ‘complex fusion of narrative storytelling and play. We criticize the positive focus on hedonic consumption in online multiplayer gaming communities and suggest broadening this view based on social conflicts.

### ***Social conflicts in-between and within consumption communities***

Thomas, Price and Schau, (2013) studied consumption communities where they identified several dimensions where communities vary. Further, they indicate under-researched dimensions, where heterogeneity was implicated as not fully explored. Lindberg and Mossberg (2019), and Huseman and Luedicke (2013) further suggest research on social conflicts within consumption communities, emphasizing the circular role of social conflicts. Our findings show that consumers of the same consumption object/practice have incompatible ideas and views on what constitutes an authentic practice. They seek to protect their identity investment from undesirable associations and practices, where identity is closely linked to symbolic game culture markers such as a specific skill rank (competitive) or the lack of a rank (casual).

Our study shows large variation in types of conflicts and how competitiveness is an underlying and triggering factor for social conflicts within and between amateur gaming communities. We see that arguments, tensions and discussions are common in a virtual gaming environment and that it is filled with potential situations for confrontational criticism. Coping becomes an everyday task that barely influences the competitive gamer but becomes insufferable for the casual gamer. It is evident that some conflicts occur more frequently (Game-style and implementation conflicts). Situations that require a high degree of focus and immersion (Pre-game, during-game and Post-game) lay higher claims on emotional resources that casual gamers feel is disproportional to the hedonic reward they seek through gaming (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982). Interestingly, the conflicts with severe consequences have different characteristics. ‘Immoral behavior’ (4) conflicts are triggered by specific cases and are characterized by swift and harsh judgements. On the contrary, ‘ideological conflicts’ (1) are effects from the accumulation of cases, the frequency of conflicts and the subsequent atmosphere associated with winning as quintessential. For example, the meme ‘filthy casual’ describes the divide between casual and hardcore gamers, which illustrates a socio-historic cultural tension, loaded in a masculine ethos, where one side accepts and partakes in rituals of ostentatious display of competence, status and prowess (Lindberg and Mossberg 2019; Lindberg and Østegaard 2015).

These results have similarities to Lindberg and Mossberg’s (2019) example of the proliferation of pre-bolted climbing routes, where hardcore lifestyle climbers do not approve of the casual

nature of bolted routes because it dilutes their identity. In the same way, playing ranked games is not void of social risk, partaking means that gamers accept a display of competency, which alternately also means an acceptance of displaying a lack of competency. In their iconic piece on the Harley Davidson subculture, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) connect indulging in masculine activity as a compensation for self-doubt and lack of competency in other aspects of life. The connection between masculinity and competitiveness in online consumption communities and the consequential conflicts leading to cultural division is interesting. Fragmentation of communities because of conflicts are in line with previous assumptions on consumption community research (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). However, our evidence shows a more nuanced view, where less frequent conflicts such as ‘ideological conflicts’ (1), ‘Immoral behavior’ (4) are the most severe results of social conflicts. ‘Horizontal and vertical tensions’ (2), ‘game style conflicts’ (3) and ‘implementation conflicts’ (5) are ‘Superficial’ conflicts of high frequency that rarely leads to fragmentation but can lead to a short-term halt in communal consumption that normally only last until the next day.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we ask the following research question: What role do social conflicts have among consumers in online gaming communities? Our findings show that hedonic consumption in online multiplayer gaming communities is not always filled with the positive demarcations of ‘fantasies, feelings and fun’ traditionally associated with hedonic consumption (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). We show how fun quickly dissipates when communities experience divisive disputes and tensions in a competitive atmosphere. Previous research is conflicted on the heterogeneous outcome of social conflict, some suggesting fragmentation as a pervasive outcome (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007) while others highlight the importance of resource dependence (Thomas, Price and Schau 2013). Our research show that hedonic utility (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982) is the decisive factor for how severe the consequences of social conflicts are. The most severe consequences in our study are fragmentation or splitting of the community, which occurs when the hedonic utility in a high degree does not match the emotional expenditure of incommensurable ideologies and moral principles. Interestingly conflicts of high frequency often occur when the consumer is highly immersed. These disputes and tensions often dissipate as quickly as they arise. The consequences are negative atmospheres where emotional expenditure generally is low. However, frequent conflicts of this type can lead to gaming sessions ending temporally. Further research on online consumption

communities regarding tensions and disputes is needed, going beyond the context of online multiplayer gaming communities, to broaden the understanding of social conflicts between and within communities and the consequences that follows. Our research illustrates how the tension between the casual and competitive approach to gaming is culturally constituted and closely connected to a masculine ethos. We suggest further research as an interdisciplinary joint venture of consumer research and game studies regarding online consumption communities and how they are formed, what experiences and practices they share, and the consequences of heterogeneity within and between communities.

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# Appendix

## Appendix A

### Overview of game genres and games

Game genres and games	Description
<b>Real-Time Strategy (RTS):</b> StarCraft 2 (SC2), Warcraft 3 (WC3), Age of Empires (AoE).	Real-time strategy games are games where the player control units to collect and maintain resources while controlling and building a base to make combat units to defeat the opponent. Generally played versus one other player but can also be played in bigger teams.
<b>Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA):</b> League of Legends (LoL), Defense of the Ancients 2 (Dota 2), Smite, Heroes of the Storm (HOTS), Heroes of Newerth (HoN).	Multiplayer online battle arena games are games where players control a single character in a team vs another team. The player works with his team to defeat the other team's base, through strategic choices and usage of resources to make the character he/she controls stronger.
<b>First-Person Shooter (FPS):</b> Rainbow Six: Siege (R6S), Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO), Call of Duty (CoD), Halo, Overwatch (OW).	First-person shooters are played in a first-person point-of-view of the character you control and is generally played in teams against other teams of players. One team will have the mission of planting a bomb in certain zones while the other team must prevent the bomb from blowing up.
<b>Battle-Royale (BR):</b> Fortnite, Player Unknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG).	Battle-royale games are games where you see your character from behind in a third-person point-of-view. You fight against a high number of other people with guns and weapons you pick up in a large map that gets smaller and smaller as the game goes on until only one person is alive.
<b>Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG):</b> World of Warcraft (WoW), The Elder Scrolls Online (ESO).	Massively multiplayer online role-playing games are games with hundreds or even thousands of different players interacting with each other in a virtual world, working towards a goal. In these games, you can either choose to fight versus other players or you can also fight against monsters within the game, rather than against other players.

**Appendix B**  
**Interview guide**

Theme	Questions	Follow-up questions / comments / note for interviewers (gamer-terminology)
<b>Background information</b>	Do you play online video games?	
	How old are you? Are you a man or a woman? Where do you live? What is your current occupation?	
<b>Community personal</b>	Who do you play with?	- Real life friends? Online friends? Family? etc. - Do you frequently play with the same people? - Why do you choose to repeatedly play with the same group of people?
	What genre of games do you play?	- FPS, RTS, MMORPG, MOBA, etc.. - Which games do you play within each genre?
		- Does all members of the community have roughly the same amount of time available?
		- Does wasted time (making other people in the group wait) when they don't really have time to wait cause problems?
	What is your relationship to the different genres and why do you play?	- Casual? competitive? just for fun? real life escape? To pursue a career?
	Do you adhere to only one genre or jump in between different ones?	- If so, why/why not? personal preference? the people you are playing with?
<b>Community level</b>	If we consider different genres as communities, how would you describe the communities you relate to the most?	- How the interviewee sees the overall culture of different communities
	Describe the groups you play the different games with	- On a group level, not individual - Need to help the informant here
	Does your community learn from each other? Is that a contribution to the enjoyment of playing together?	- Learning by getting better at the games they play or that they get ideas for new ways to play games
<b>Problems in the community</b>	Reasons for disagreement within the community? Can you come with examples of disagreements while playing?	- In Games there are different "roles" or assignments within the same game and people often want to switch around between these roles or assignments. Does your community split up this in a fair way or does tension, discussions

	and other problems occur because people want to do different things?
	- Does your community often have more than the maximum amount of people that wants to play together? How do you resolve this issue?
	- Is the attitude of the people you play with the same? I.e. just playing for fun, trying to improve and become better, focusing on the fun of the whole group or just oneself?
	- What are highs and lows when playing with a group?
	How do you resolve issues within the community when it is necessary?
	- Do you choose not to play together sometimes because of tension within the group?
Has there been arguments within the community lately?	- Let the informant talk freely
Do you have an example of a negative situation because of how someone in the community practices the consumption?	- Are there differences in the way a community consumes a game?
Do you think that there is tensions or dislike towards corporations (game producers) in the community?	- Does companies affect whether you buy/play a game or not?
Do you have examples of situations during gameplay that caused discussions and frustration?	- Examples of situations that cause problems in a game within the community: # 'Standing in fire' - Putting yourself in bad positions and getting 'ganked' # Teamplay oriented or selfish orientation # Building team or building one's own character # Time involvement # Incompatible styles: Defensive Vs. Offensive # Trying out new strategies # Blame game # Not following the "plan" strategy chosen # WoW - class divide - Gear/class/dps # Not following the meta