

# The dark side revealed: insights and implications from online brand communities

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to present a comprehensive review of the literature on the dark side of online brand communities, identifying the dominant themes [determinants of the dark side in online brand communities (OBCs)] in the literature and proposing ways to advance the literature in this area.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study reviewed 72 scholarly articles published between 2009 and 2024 in peer-reviewed journals. A descriptive and thematic analysis of dark-side literature is presented.

**Findings** – The contribution of this scoping review lies in identifying the dominant themes in the literature on the determinants of the dark side of online brand communities, proposing management strategies and identifying future research directions for advancing the literature. Six main themes of the dark side of online communities were extracted: information dynamics, group dynamics, unethical practices and brand transgression, provocation and schadenfreude, brand activism and hate and disengagement.

**Practical implications** – Firstly, this study highlights the need for brands to engage in the active moderation of OBCs to maintain information credibility and manage information overload. Secondly, to ensure an inclusive community environment for all members, brands need to foster a balanced forum culture and moderation that discourages heterogeneity.

**Originality/value** – This study is unique in conducting an in-depth analysis of the literature on the dark side of online brand communities, an area that has received little attention. This review offers new insights that would help brands effectively manage negative aspects of customer behaviours in online brand communities. For managers, this review enables brands to improve their image, reputation and customer value.

**Keywords** Online brand communities, Dark side, Branding, Deviant behaviour, Trolling

**Paper type** Literature review

## 1. Introduction

Online brand communities (OBCs) are specialized, non-geographical user groups that form around brands through online platforms to achieve a collective or shared goal (Liang *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Despite the positive or bright aspects of these communities, there is growing recognition of their dark or negative side (Dong *et al.*, 2024). Researchers indicate that OBCs may become platforms for the dissemination of misinformation, cyberbullying and other deviant behaviours (Golf-Papez and Veer, 2022; Gong and Wang, 2022). The “dark side” of OBCs refers to the negative or deviant behaviours customers engage within OBCs. Group dynamics, customer experiences and brand’s actions or policies

are some of the key reasons for customers to engage in anti-brand or deviant behaviours (Behl and Jain, 2023; Özbölük and Dursun, 2017). Unlike the bright side, where positive interactions foster community engagement and brand loyalty (Bilro and Loureiro, 2023), the dark side adversely impacts the trust and cooperation among members (Liao *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, when customers engage in deviant behaviours in OBCs, brands suffer from reduced credibility and higher negative word of mouth (Dineva *et al.*, 2017).

Research on the dark side has identified various customer deviant or negative behaviours that are detrimental to both the community and the brand. These behaviours include both direct and indirect negatively valenced behaviours such as discrediting, deriding, regretting, dissuading, endorsing competitors, trolling and warnings others (Azer and Alexander, 2020; Behl and Jain, 2023; Demsar *et al.*, 2021). While prior

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studies have examined these behaviours in traditional organizational contexts, research focused on deviant consumer behaviours in OBCs remain limited. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the dark side of OBCs, which has not received sufficient attention in the context of online brand communities. For example, recent research has highlighted that the dark side of customer behaviours on brand communities can exacerbate in-group favouritism and out-group hostilities, both of which serve as key social determinants of the dark side within these communities (Behl and Jain, 2023; Liao et al., 2020). These group dynamics present significant challenges for brands, particularly in maintaining group harmony and fostering positive interactions among members in the communities (Behl and Jain, 2023). To effectively manage group dynamics in OBCs and mitigate the dark-side effects of in-group favouritism and out-group hostilities, brands can implement several measures. They should establish clear guidelines and consistent moderation policies in brand-related communities, and therefore, it is of theoretical and managerial importance to test whether such findings are valid in brand-centred online communities (Herhausen et al., 2019).

Identifying the root causes of negative or deviant behaviours in OBCs is crucial to preventing them and mitigating their impact on brand outcomes. Thus, the primary aim of the present study is to identify the factors that lead to customers engaging in the dark side of customer behaviours within OBCs. By identifying these antecedents, brands can engage in proactive measures by preventing negative behaviours before they occur, rather than engaging in reactive strategies that may result in significant harm to brand reputation (Rösner and Krämer, 2016; Wang, 2020). Hence, this scoping review will provide a more structured and nuanced understanding of how these behaviours manifest within OBCs and identify future research directions for advancing the literature. Based on the above discussion, this study is guided by the following research issues: the current state of research on the dark side of OBCs, dominant themes relating to the determinants of deviant or negative customer behaviours within OBCs and discussion of strategic brand implications and future research gaps to advance the literature on the dark side of OBCs.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the details of the scoping review method used in this study. Section 3 presents a descriptive analysis of the literature on the dark side of OBCs followed by the findings of the thematic analysis (Section 4). Section 5 presents the discussion and strategic brand implications of our study. The future research directions presented in Section 6 and the final section (Section 7) presents the implications and conclusion.

## 2. Methodology

The scoping review in this study followed a five-stage process (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005). The stages include:

- 1 defining the research questions;
- 2 identifying studies in the selected research domain;
- 3 selecting the most relevant studies for review;
- 4 organizing and verifying the data; and
- 5 collating, summarizing and reporting the results.

This approach has demonstrated its effectiveness in synthesizing and disseminating research findings, as well as in

assessing the need for systematic reviews. To enhance the rigour of the article section, preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses guidelines were used (Tranfield et al., 2003).

It is useful to conduct scoping reviews as it is valuable for exploring emerging evidence when it is not yet clear what existing research has covered, and for developing specific questions that lead to a more precise systematic review. These reviews present the types of evidence that inform and guide practice within a particular field as well as clarify the research methodologies used (Tranfield et al., 2003). Therefore, we chose to perform a scoping review to synthesize literature that identifies the dark side of deviant customer behaviours in OBCs. As the literature on the dark side is fragmented, a scoping review helps to systematically map this diverse literature to identify key themes, concepts and trends.

### 2.1 Stage 1: Defining the research questions

In the first stage of the scoping review, the research question was carefully developed to explore the dark side of deviant consumer behaviours in OBCs. This process of defining the research question involved reviewing the relevant literature to identify significant concepts or areas such as negative interactions among community members, online negative word of mouth, misinformation, firestorms in communities, group heterogeneity and deviant behaviours, polarization of factions, inability to control brand narrative and exploitation by online communities (Dessart et al., 2020). We developed our research question based on these concepts or topics, focusing on the dark side of OBCs. For example, we have added aspects of how community members interact, what drives their engagement and how negative behaviours can emerge in OBCs.

### 2.2 Stage 2: Identification of studies in the research domain

In the second stage, a systematic keyword search was conducted across two major databases – Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) electronic databases. The search used a combination of keywords/topics to capture the breadth of literature on the dark side of OBCs. The keywords used included “online brand communities” OR “e-commerce platforms” OR “drawbacks of virtual brand spaces” AND “negative consequences of online platforms” AND “antecedents” OR “negative consequences” OR “negative outcomes” AND “spread of misinformation through online brand communities” AND “cyberbullying” AND “harmful behaviours such as peer pressure or groupthink” AND “spread of misinformation.” These keywords were used to identify studies that explored the dark side of OBCs and strategies to mitigate it.

All articles indexed in the business or management categories in both databases were included. The search process was refined to include only articles from journals published in English, across various indices including Sci-expanded version, SSCI, A&HCI, CPCI-S, CPCI-SSH and BKCI-S, specifically focusing on interdisciplinary studies, business management and marketing (WoS categories). The search process concluded on 31 March 2024, resulting in a corpus of articles that were further reviewed in the next stage. This approach ensures a comprehensive identification of articles in the research domain.

### 2.3 Stage 3: Selecting relevant studies

In this stage, the titles, abstracts and keywords of the studies identified in the previous stages were manually screened to identify relevant articles for the scoping review. Studies that were found to be inappropriate and inconsistent with the research topic and questions were excluded. Following this, the remaining papers were meticulously analysed to identify and assess the dark side of OBCs. See Figure 1 for the selection process.

### 2.4 Stage 4: Organizing and data charting

In this study, a total of 1,794 studies were initially identified. After removing duplicates of 21 papers, the abstracts of the remaining papers were reviewed, specifically assessing whether papers focused explicitly on the dark or negative sides of OBCs. This screening led to the exclusion of 1 625 papers, leaving 148 papers in the review process. Further screening of full articles resulted in the exclusion of a further 79 papers. A total of 69 relevant papers remained for the scoping review. Following this, we reviewed recent articles resulting in identifying three additional papers. As a result, 72 journal articles that aligned with the research objectives were included in the scoping review. Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

### 2.5 Stage 5: Collating, summarizing and reporting the results

In this last stage, researchers developed and implemented a strategic approach for presenting the findings of the study. The results were communicated in a structured format through themes, frameworks, gaps and future scope of research. The

thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo and Word Cloud.

## 3. Descriptive analysis: trends, theories and methodologies

A descriptive analysis was conducted on the 72 articles identified for the review. This analysis examined several key aspects of the studies, including the aims, objectives and key findings of the studies; trends in publication by year; the list of journals in which they were published; the theoretical frameworks used; the research approach used; and terminology used to refer to OBCs. The results of this analysis were systematically presented using comprehensive tables, trend lines and graphs. A table summarizing the 72 papers included in the scoping review is presented in Web Appendix.

### 3.1 Publication trends

Journal articles published between 2009 and 2024 were reviewed. While studies on consumer-generated digital anti-branding and negative electronic word-of-mouth existed before 2009, there is no evidence of research specifically addressing these phenomena within the context of OBCs. Since 2009, there has been a steady stream of research, peaking remarkably with 13 in 2020 and 11 in 2021. However, there was a noticeable decline in the number of publications on the dark side of OBCs post-2021 (while a few studies addressed deviant consumer behaviours, they did not meet the selection criteria for such behaviours on OBCs). Figure 2 presents the year-wise publication trend of research on the dark side of OBCs.

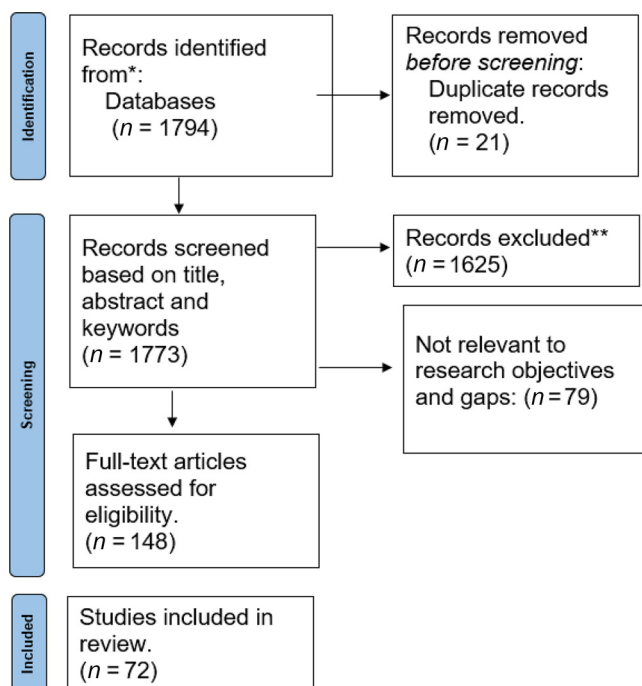
### 3.2 Theoretical frameworks

To explore the dark side of OBCs, scholars have used various theoretical frameworks from diverse disciplines such as psychology, marketing, communication, persuasion, justice, sociology, philosophy and criminology. For clarity, these theories were systematically categorized and coded in Table 2.

The majority of articles employed theoretical frameworks to analyse the dark side of OBCs. This highlights a reliance on established theories to understand the research phenomenon. The articles that used theoretical frameworks used 37 different theories, suggesting a wide range of theoretical approaches. Social identity theory was the most frequently applied theory with seven articles (see code P15 in Table 2), (Ewing et al., 2013; Popp et al., 2016; Kuo and Hou, 2017; Feng et al., 2018; Popp et al., 2018; won Kim, 2018). Following this, social exchange theory was the next most cited theory (see code S2, P13 in Table 2), (Rösner and Krämer, 2016; Kuo and Feng, 2013; Zhou et al., 2019).

There are additional theoretical perspectives used, such as appraisal theory (Delgado-Ballester et al., 2021), balance theory (Popp et al., 2018), brand culture theory (Popp et al., 2018), cognitive dissonance theory (Verhagen et al., 2013), community commitment theory (Zhang et al., 2021), customer compatibility management theory (Bacile, 2020), the elaboration-likelihood model, self-brand connection theory (Liao and Wang, 2020), self-categorization theory (Ewing et al., 2013), self-perception theory (Verhagen et al., 2013), situational crisis communication theory (Rauschnabel et al., 2016), empiricist theory (Ilhan et al., 2018), fairness theory

Figure 1 Data selection process

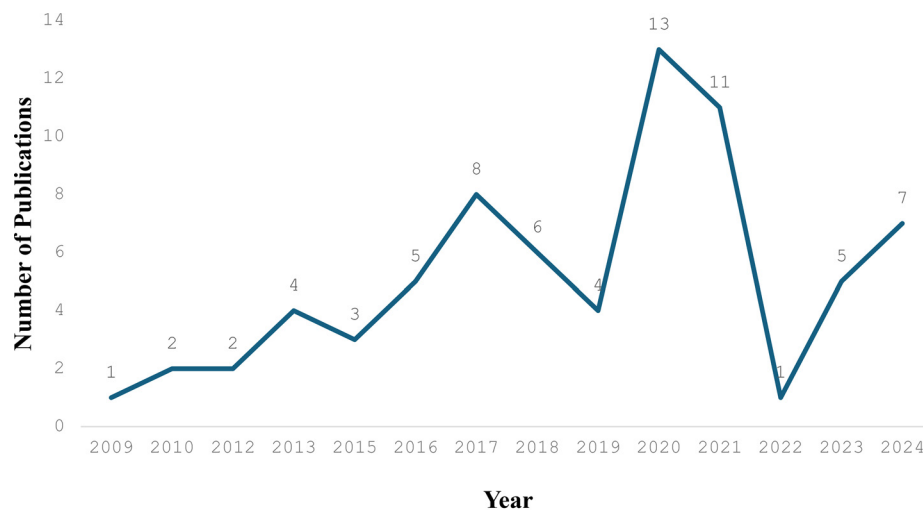


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**Table 1** The inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Studies conducted during the period of 2009–2024	Studies which did not conducted during the period of 2009–2024
Journals ranked B or above in the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) ranking, or Q3 or above in the SCImago Journal ranking	Journals ranked in C in the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) ranking, or Q4 in the SCImago Journal ranking
Journal articles published in English language	Journal articles published in non-English language
Articles published in business management and marketing journals	Articles published in computer science, education and psychology journals

Source: Authors' own work

**Figure 2** Year-wise publication trend analysis

Source: Authors' own work

(Bacile *et al.*, 2018, 2020), goal dependence theory (Relling *et al.*, 2016), justice theory (Bacile *et al.*, 2018, 2020) and other communication theories including the stereotype content model, usage and gratifications theory and the social identity deindividuation effects model (Pantano, 2021; Rösner and Krämer, 2016). Each of these theories offers a unique lens for understanding the dark side of OBCs. Furthermore, it indicates a rich, yet fragmented theoretical landscape.

### 3.3 Research approaches

The studies included in the review predominantly used qualitative methods, with 50 articles adopting this approach.

The qualitative studies used a variety of methodologies. Ethnography was frequently used, providing insights into interactions within OBCs (Ewing *et al.*, 2013; Husemann *et al.*, 2015; Dineva *et al.*, 2017; Burgess and Jones, 2020). Content and text analyses were also common, analysing communication patterns in these communities (Relling *et al.*, 2016; Ilhan *et al.*, 2018; Paschen *et al.*, 2020; García-de-Frutos and Estrella-Ramón, 2021). Other qualitative approaches included interviews, which offered a nuanced understanding of the deviant behaviours (Gambetti and Graffigna, 2015; Bowden *et al.*, 2017; Demsar *et al.*, 2021), case studies that offered comprehensive and contextual insights into the negative behaviours (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010; Cova and White, 2010; Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2016), sentiment analysis used to

measure emotional responses (Pathak and Pathak-Shelat, 2017; Zhang *et al.*, 2021), semiotic analysis to help understanding sign systems of anti-brand communities (Kucuk, 2015; 2016) and the Delphi method for expert consensus on collaborative brand attacks (Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2016).

In the quantitative approaches, structural equation modelling was the most used technique, which helped to identify and quantify relationships between variables (Verhagen *et al.*, 2013; Jayasimha *et al.*, 2017; Bacile *et al.*, 2018; Kuchmaner *et al.*, 2019; Hayes and Carr, 2020). Regression analysis was used by a few researchers to understand the predictive factors of the dark side of OBCs (Kuo and Feng, 2013; Relling *et al.*, 2016). Experimental surveys were also used to examine the causal relationships through controlled manipulation (Feng *et al.*, 2018; Kim, 2018; Bacile *et al.*, 2020; Sarkar *et al.*, 2021). One study also used simulated experiments which allowed for the observation of deviant consumer behaviours in real-time (Zhu *et al.*, 2021). These diverse quantitative and qualitative approaches highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of research on the dark side of OBCs.

## 4. Thematic analysis: key themes and dynamics

The thematic analysis was carried out to identify prevalent themes in the literature on the dark side of OBCs. Six key



Table 2 List of theories

Theories and models	Code	Publication	Theories and models	Code	Publication
Appraisal theory	P1	<a href="#">Delgado-Ballester et al. (2021)</a>	Schadenfreude	Ph2	<a href="#">Hayes and Carr (2020)</a>
Balance theory	P2	<a href="#">Popp et al. (2018)</a>	Self-brand connection theory	P9	<a href="#">Liao and Wang (2020)</a>
Big 5 personality traits model	P3	<a href="#">Yoon Lee et al. (2021)</a>	Self-categorization theory	P10	<a href="#">Ewing et al. (2013)</a>
Brand culture theory	M1	<a href="#">Ewing et al. (2013)</a>	Self-perception theory	P11	<a href="#">Verhagen et al. (2013)</a>
Cognitive dissonance theory	P4	<a href="#">Verhagen et al. (2013)</a>	Service-dominant logic	M5	<a href="#">Cova and White (2010)</a>
Community commitment theory	P5	<a href="#">Zhang et al. (2021)</a>	Situational crisis communication theory	C1	<a href="#">Rauschnabel et al. (2016)</a>
Consumer–brand relationships model	M2	<a href="#">Dessart et al. (2020)</a>	Social comparison theory	P12	<a href="#">Ewing et al. (2013)</a>
Customer compatibility management theory	M3	<a href="#">Bacile (2020)</a>	Social exchange theory	S2, P13	<a href="#">Kuo and Feng (2013)</a> ; <a href="#">Zhou et al. (2019)</a> ; <a href="#">Hou and Zhang (2021)</a>
Elaboration-likelihood model	Pr1	<a href="#">Larson and Salvador (2021)</a>	Social identity deindividuation effects (SIDE) model	P14, C2	<a href="#">Rösner and Krämer (2017)</a>
Empirical theory	Ph1	<a href="#">Ilhan et al. (2018)</a>	Social identity theory	P15	<a href="#">Hickman and Ward (2013)</a> ; <a href="#">Ewing et al. (2013)</a> ; <a href="#">Popp et al. (2016)</a> ; <a href="#">Kuo and Hou (2017)</a> ; <a href="#">Feng et al. (2018)</a>
Expectation–confirmation model	M4	<a href="#">Liang et al. (2020)</a>	Social information processing theory	C3	<a href="#">Wang (2023)</a>
Fairness theory	J1	<a href="#">Bacile et al. (2018)</a> ; <a href="#">Bacile et al. (2020)</a>	Social movement theory	S3	<a href="#">Hollenbeck and Zinkhan (2010)</a>
Goal dependence theory	P6	<a href="#">Relling et al. (2016)</a>	Social sharing theory	P16	<a href="#">Verhagen et al. (2013)</a> ; <a href="#">Abro et al. (2020)</a>
Grounded theory	G1	<a href="#">Özbölük and Dursun (2017)</a>	Sociological theory	S4	<a href="#">Husemann et al. (2015)</a>
Justice theory	J2	<a href="#">Bacile (2018)</a> ; <a href="#">Bacile et al. (2020)</a>	Stereotype content model	P17	<a href="#">Hickman and Ward (2013)</a>
Moral identity theory	P7	<a href="#">Sharma et al. (2020a)</a> ; <a href="#">Sharma et al. (2020b)</a>	Usage and gratifications theory	C4	<a href="#">Relling et al. (2016)</a>
Moral judgement theory	J3	<a href="#">Sharma et al. (2020a)</a>	Value co-creation theory	M6	<a href="#">Gambetti and Graffigna (2015)</a>
Practice theory	S1	<a href="#">Cruz et al. (2018)</a>	Routine activity theory	Cr1	<a href="#">Golf-Papez and Veer (2022)</a>
Regulatory focus theory	P8	<a href="#">Wang et al. (2021)</a>			

**Notes:** Psychology theories (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P16, P17); marketing theories (M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6); persuasion theory (Pr1); philosophical theories (Ph1, Ph2); justice theories (J1, J2, J3); grounded theory (G1); sociological theories (S1, S2, S3, S4); crime theory (Cr1); communication theories (C1, C2, C3, C4)

**Source:** Authors' own work

themes were extracted: information dynamics, group dynamics, unethical practices and brand transgression, provocation and schadenfreude, brand activism and hate and disengagement. These themes represent the determinants of the dark side of OBCs. They also reflect underlying factors that contribute to the customer deviant behaviours and challenges faced by brands in managing OBCs.

#### 4.1 Information dynamics

Two key determinants of consumer engagement in the dark side of OBCs were identified in the thematic analysis: information overload and information credibility (see [Figure 3](#)). OBCs typically include a vast amount of information, including product reviews, discussions, comments and promotional materials

([Herhausen et al., 2019](#)). This overload of diverse information can overwhelm consumers and obscure critical brand information diluting the meaningful content of OBCs ([Rossolatos, 2019](#)). This can foster misunderstandings and misinformation, which results in conflicts and encourages negative or deviant behaviours in OBCs ([Herhausen et al., 2019](#)). In addition to information overload, information credibility significantly influences consumer deviant behaviours in OBCs ([Liao and Wang, 2020](#)).

As information is abundant in OBCs, the authenticity and reliability of information becomes crucial. Misleading or inaccurate information can impact consumer trust and perceptions of brands ([Liao and Wang, 2020](#)). When consumers encounter information that appears deceptive or

**Figure 3** NVivo software-based word cloud map for information overload and information credibility



Source: Authors' own work

inconsistent with their expectations, it can foster negative behaviours such as public criticism, anti-brand activities and brand rejection (Dessart et al., 2020; Krishnamurthy and Kucuk, 2009). As trust is the cornerstone of consumer engagement in OBCs, misinformation or lack of information credibility can lead to brand scepticism and negative behaviours (Noble et al., 2012; Verhagen et al., 2013). Thus, understanding and addressing the challenges posed by information overload and credibility in OBCs is essential for brands to leverage the positive outcomes of these communities.

#### 4.2 Group dynamics

The second key thematic finding involves two crucial group factors driving consumer engagement in the dark side of OBCs: intergroup favouritism and out-group hostility (see Figure 4). The advancement of technology and the proliferation of Web 2.0 applications have transformed consumers from passive receivers of brand communication to active co-creators of brand information (Peeroo et al., 2017). This has significantly

**Figure 4** NVivo software-based word cloud map for in-group favouritism and out-group hate



Source: Authors' own work

increased the role of group dynamics as consumers engage on platforms such as social media, where they share and discuss brand-related information (Liao and Wang, 2020; Liao et al., 2019). These dynamics not only facilitate collaboration and community development but also increase the potential for conflicts between different brand communities (Dineva et al., 2017; Husemann et al., 2015). Thus, group dynamics play a key role in consumer engagement in the dark side of OBCs.

In-group favouritism is the tendency to evaluate one's group more favourably than those of other groups. While in-group favouritism increases consumers' self-esteem, it can lead to bias and competitive behaviour (Ewing et al., 2013; Kim, 2018). Previous research using games such as dictator games has shown how in-group favouritism results in deviant consumer behaviours (Verhagen et al., 2013; Jayasimha et al., 2017). This is because consumers often prioritize the interests of their group over those of outsiders, leading to conflicts and anti-brand activities (Behl and Jain, 2023; Dessart et al., 2020). Few researchers have used games to explore consumer discrimination resulting from in-group favouritism (Zhu et al., 2021). Furthermore, in-group favouritism can evolve into collection actions, resulting in anti-brand activities (Kucuk, 2015). Out-group hostility emerges when the identity and interests of one community conflict with those of others (Hickman and Ward, 2013).

#### 4.3 Unethical practices and transgression

The third key thematic finding explores unethical firm behaviour and brand transgression in OBCs (see Figure 5). Brand actions that are perceived as unethical and transgressions, such as corporate greed, misleading marketing practices or communication, failure to meet consumer expectations, or breach of trust, can adversely impact brand reputation and lead to negative consumer behaviours (Cova and D'Antone, 2016; Kristal et al., 2018; Sharma et al., 2020b). Research has identified several areas where unethical practices are particularly detrimental to OBCs. For example, market concerns, such as unfair pricing and lack of fairness in competition, marketing actions, such as deceptive advertising and misleading product

**Figure 5** NVivo software-based word cloud map for unethical firm behaviour and brand transgression



Source: Authors' own work

claims, and service issues, such as delays in service delivery and failures in product quality (Ilhan et al., 2018; Noble et al., 2012; Peeroo et al., 2017), can increase consumer dissatisfaction, reduce trust and lead to deviant behaviours. These unethical practices and transgressions can evoke strong emotional reactions and significantly impact consumer behaviour in OBCs (Husemann et al., 2015).

#### 4.4 Provocation and schadenfreude

The fourth key thematic finding explores the roles of provocation and schadenfreude in OBCs (see Figure 6). These social factors significantly impact interpersonal interactions, social dynamics and community engagement. While OBCs foster increased consumer engagement and loyalty (Vargo et al., 2024), they also lead to negative behaviours such as retaliation, trolling and aggression (Demsar et al., 2021). Schadenfreude is the pleasure obtained from the misfortunes of others (Bacile et al., 2024). This complex psychological phenomenon has attracted increased attention in the recent past because it is the antithesis of empathy (Demsar et al., 2021; Hayes and Carr, 2020; Behl and Jain, 2023). Previous studies suggest that consumers display varying degrees of schadenfreude in response to the misfortunes of in-group and out-group members (Hayes and Carr, 2020). Thus, schadenfreude leads to negative out-group messages or snark about a competitor brand (Lee et al., 2021).

Provocation in OBCs often emerges from consumers' heightened sense of identity and belonging. Members may display provocative behaviours using humour or parody to hide their antagonistic intent (Larson and Salvador, 2021). While such provocative behaviours may confirm their group identity, they could also increase conflicts, leading to sustained campaigns against rival brands and their communities (Dineva et al., 2017).

#### 4.5 Brand activism and hate

The fifth key thematic finding explores brand activism and brand hate in OBCs (see Figure 7). Consumer activism refers to initiatives or efforts taken by brands to publicly support, advocate or oppose social, political, environmental or economic issues that resonate with their values (Dessart et al., 2020; Hou

**Figure 6** NVivo software-based word cloud map for consumer retaliation and aggression



Source: Authors' own work

**Figure 7** NVivo software-based word cloud map for brand activism and brand hate



Source: Authors' own work

and Zhang, 2021). If brands effectively leverage their activism it can serve as a powerful tool for customer engagement (Dessart et al., 2020). OBCs enable brands to actively communicate their activism initiatives, share progress and engage community members in supporting the causes (Liao et al., 2020). This enables brands to attract like-minded consumers and those who appreciate the value and mission of the brand. However, the social dynamics of these communities can also give rise to brand hate, especially when consumer expectations are not met. According to Kuchmaner et al. (2019), consumers in dense networks are more likely to punish brands perceived as inauthentic or inconsistent in their activism efforts. The impact of brand activism and brand hate is further demonstrated by deviant consumer behaviours in response to perceived brand transgressions (Cocker et al., 2021). When brands do not perform as expected or betray trust, consumers can quickly mobilize and share their discontentment in their OBC. This collective behaviour highlights the critical need for brands to maintain consistency between their values and actions.

#### 4.6 Customer disengagement

Disengagement represents a crucial thematic finding of this scoping review on the dark side of OBCs (see Figure 8). OBCs provide significant opportunities for brands to engage with customers, but several factors can lead to disengagement (Ilhan et al., 2018). Several factors can stimulate disengagement, a process where consumers withdraw their participation due to dissatisfaction or disinterest (Sarkar et al., 2021). However, disengagement can occur when consumers feel their contributions are undervalued or ignored, when their ideas are not rewarded, or when their concerns remain unaddressed (Burgess and Jones, 2020). This lack of closure and feeling of unhappiness can lead to a reduced sense of belonging and commitment. While disengagement may provide some relief for consumers to gather thoughts and feelings to change their future behaviour, it is a maladaptive behaviour that negatively affects consumers' relationship with brands (Zhou et al., 2019).



**Figure 8** NVivo software-based word cloud map for disengagement

Source: Authors' own work

## 5. Discussion and strategic brand implications

This scoping review aims to explore the landscape of research on the dark side of OBCs. This review identified six pivotal themes that shape or determine deviant or negative consumer behaviours in OBCs. The thematic findings highlight the nuanced interplay between information dynamics, group dynamics, unethical practices, provocation and schadenfreude, brand activism and consumer disengagement. Each theme emphasizes distinct challenges and potential risks brands face in managing OBCs. In the following sections, the discussion of each theme along with the strategic brand implications are presented.

### 5.1 Managing information dynamics in the dark side of online brand communities

The thematic analysis identified information overload and credibility as key information dynamics influencing the dark side of OBCs. The vast amount of information available in OBCs often overwhelms consumers, dilutes the effectiveness of brand-generated content and may lead to information fatigue (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2010). Similarly, when the information in these communities lacks credibility, it directly impacts consumer trust and brand perceptions (Liao and Wang, 2020). Such situations trigger a coping mechanism where consumers may create their narratives or create sub-communities where conversations are more manageable (Ilhan et al., 2018; Kuo and Feng, 2013; Verhagen et al., 2013).

### 5.2 Mitigating group dynamics in online brand communities

This study identified the group dynamics of in-group favouritism and out-group hostilities as key social determinants of the dark side of OBCs. These group dynamics reveal significant challenges for brands, especially in maintaining group harmony and fostering positive interactions among members in the communities (Liao et al., 2020). Furthermore, research reveals that these group dynamics could lead to rivalry and conflict between brand communities, which manifests in the form of humour, epithets, ridicule, malice and hostility (Ewing et al., 2013). Social identity and social comparison theories provide a theoretical framework for understanding

how group dynamics lead to potential feelings of envy and hostility towards out-group members (Kim, 2018). These theories suggest that consumers are likely to be prototypical in-group members while stereotyping out-group members as less trustworthy.

### 5.3 Managing unethical practices and brand transgressions in online brand communities

The review of literature on the dark side of OBCs revealed that unethical firm practices and brand transgressions, such as false advertising, misleading claims, exaggerated product claims and failure to meet consumer expectations, create moral dilemmas among the members of OBCs (Peeroo et al., 2017). These unethical practices and transgressions mislead consumers, violate ethical standards and undermine the credibility of the brand (Cova and D'Antone, 2016; Sharma et al., 2020a). It may result in customer dissatisfaction and distrust. Furthermore, the discussion of these factors in OBCs can escalate to public outcry, brand hate and brand boycotts (Kumar et al., 2023). Thus, unethical behaviours and brand transgressions may extend beyond individual negative experiences to affect community-wide engagement and deviant behaviours. Brands should ensure all their communications are accurate and truthful to avoid misleading claims or unethical practices (Yang and Battocchio, 2021).

### 5.4 Addressing provocation and schadenfreude in online brand communities

The thematic analysis revealed that provocation and schadenfreude are key factors influencing negative consumer behaviours in OBCs. Provocation, manifested through trolling and aggression, can cause emotional arousal disrupting harmony within OBC (Demsar et al., 2021). These provocations can cause flame wars, turning OBCs into battlegrounds where constructive brand discussions are sidelined. Similarly, schadenfreude can fuel a hostile community environment, encouraging members to engage in contentious and disruptive interactions. Such behaviours can adversely impact the brand image and community integrity. Furthermore, it is advised to educate community members about the negative outcomes of provocations and schadenfreude and help develop empathy among members (Bacile et al., 2018). Gamifications and rewards can also be used to encourage positive interactions and constructive contributions (Butler and Spoelstra, 2024; Zhu et al., 2021).

### 5.5 Mitigating brand activism and hate in online brand communities

Brand activism can serve as a double-edged sword by attracting customers who share similar values whilst also provoking hate among those who disagree (Sibai et al., 2024). Thus, brand activism may be viewed by some as brand advocacy while others may view the actions as polarizing with their personal beliefs. Thus, brand activism can foster loyalty and hate (Fombelle et al., 2020). To manage the adverse effects of brand activism and resulting hate, brands should present activism as an inclusive strategy that benefits society rather than their cause. They could also foster a culture of open dialogue encouraging members to be respectable in their interactions



and moderate discussions that reduce misconceptions about the brand's activism efforts (Felix, 2012).

### 5.6 Managing customer disengagement on online brand community

Addressing customer disengagement in OBCs is crucial for maintaining brand loyalty. Disengagement occurs when members become less active or completely inactive due to a perceived lack of value or relevance in the interactions in OBCs. Effective management strategies can mitigate this by emphasizing real-time engagement and demonstrating brand responsibility. Brands can share real-time updates and success stories within OBCs to showcase their commitment to community values (Verhagen et al., 2013). Moreover, highlighting tangible outcomes, such as product improvements or price reductions, can increase interest and participation from those who are disengaged. Pathak and Pathak-Shelat (2017) emphasized the importance of creating a community ethos where members feel a shared connection to the brand and each other.

## 6. Future research agenda

A research agenda was developed to identify the management or regulation strategies to understand when customers may engage in deviant behaviours and avoid the dark side of deviance from spiralling out in OBCs. The research questions to guide future researchers are presented in Table 3.

### 6.1 Future directions: theory

Firstly, this study revealed a major deficit in the application of sociological, crime-focused and communication theories. Furthermore, many scholars used constructs from social

identity theory (Ewing et al., 2013; Popp et al., 2016; Kuo and Hou, 2017; Feng et al., 2018; Popp et al., 2018; Kim, 2018). Social exchange theory was the most cited theory after the social identity theory (Kuo and Feng, 2013; Zhou et al., 2019). There is a possibility that OBC members develop a strong sense of identification with their group (the in-group) and are negatively disposed towards members of other groups. As a result, future researchers are advised to use theoretical constructs from social identity theory, social exchange theory and social information processing theory to identify the factors that influence incivility and trolling in dyadic situations (between a brand and a customer). According to social identity theory, individuals who support a brand develop a sense of belonging to its community through participation in it. Participants favour the in-group and view the out-group as inferior to boost their confidence and self-esteem (Schouten et al., 2007). In this study, it was observed that identifying with a brand community influences community members' commitment to the brand and self-brand connection. In the future, higher brand commitment and self-brand connection will result in higher oppositional loyalty.

### 6.2 Future directions: context

When considering the factor of the presence of unlimited information in OBCs, identifying effective strategies for managing the overload of information within OBCs is important as strong brands are more prone to anti-brand websites, thereby impacting brand value (Krishnamurthy and Kucuk, 2009). Using this stream of literature, the present study focused on subjective heterogeneity also referred to as perceived group heterogeneity, which can be defined as the degree to which a person perceives that community members are diverse according to the differences that seem most pronounced (Liao and Wang,

**Table 3** Potential research areas and questions for advancing the field of the customers' dark side within OBCs

Topics	Major themes	Future research questions
<i>Future directions based on the theory</i>		
Theoretical foundation	Interlink with communication theories to evaluate persuasion, memory and recognition skills to assess the factors and effects of electronic word-of-mouth when a firm suffers threats regarding brand activism the consumers' information cognition processes in online product forums based on social cognition theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– How can social psychology theories be extended to explain consumers' information cognition processes in online product forums?</li> <li>– How can consumers' information cognition processes be interlinked with online product forums or online product review platforms?</li> </ul>
<i>Future directions based on the context</i>		
False news circulation through social media	There is a need for more research on a proactive approach to community management within the OBC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Can OBC via e-commerce platforms be affected by factors such as gossip-sharing behaviour, fear of missing out and social media fatigue?</li> </ul>
<i>Future directions based on the method</i>		
Nature of method applied	Need for more research based on quantitative techniques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Can empirical researchers expand the current knowledge of OBC into brand messaging and dimensions?</li> <li>– How does experimental research contribute to the development of brand-related activism strategies?</li> </ul>

Source: Authors' own work

2020). Content-recommendation algorithms, user interfaces or community-driven approaches may be studied to assist members in finding and prioritizing information. Customers increasingly rely on online communities for advice regarding product purchases and service issues in the age of information (Husemann et al., 2015; Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Peeroo et al., 2017). An OBC should be constructed to satisfy consumers' informational needs. OBCs should also be considered by the smartphone industry as group heterogeneity may negatively influence consumers' brand commitment (Husemann et al., 2015; Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Peeroo et al., 2017). Smartphones, particularly luxury models, convey symbolic meanings about their owners as publicly consumed products (Peeroo et al., 2017). These symbolic brands may be greatly influenced by their users. The availability of unlimited information in OBCs creates ambiguity in consumer acceptance. Researchers should investigate how OBC users process information (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). To verify the effect of organizational feedback on the perceived credibility of user-generated content, further research is necessary.

### 6.3 Future directions: methodology

Future research could gather real data on users' information-cognition processes. Qualitative interpretive methods such as in-depth interviews would be helpful. Participants need to have the opportunity to express themselves in their own words, thereby providing nuanced insights that cannot be captured by quantitative methods alone. To investigate how managerial feedback shapes consumers' perceptions of a source, an analytical/empirical design seems ideal. Using a Web-based scenario vignette as a stimulus, followed by a survey questionnaire, could enhance research findings (Peeroo et al., 2017; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Online communities are dynamic and multifaceted environments, and in-depth interviews offer researchers the opportunity to examine the complexities of user behaviour, interactions and relationships within these communities. Researchers can probe deeper into participants' attitudes, beliefs and decision-making processes to understand their underlying motivations and meanings. Table 3 (refer to Appendix) further elaborates the future research questions for this study as follows.

## 7. Implications and conclusion

The contribution of this scoping review lies in identifying the dominant themes in the literature on the determinants of the dark side of online brand communities, proposing management strategies and identifying future research directions for advancing the literature. Six main themes of the dark side of online communities were extracted: information dynamics, group dynamics, unethical practices and brand transgression, provocation and schadenfreude, brand activism and hate and disengagement. The thematic analysis identified information overload and credibility as key information dynamics influencing the dark side of OBCs. By adopting strategies that enhance clarity of communication and ensure information credibility, brands can mitigate the risk of consumers engaging in negative behaviours on OBCs (Sansome et al., 2024). This study identified group dynamics of in-group favouritism and out-group hostilities as key social determinants of the dark side of OBCs. These group dynamics reveal significant challenges

for brands, especially in maintaining group harmony and fostering positive interactions among members in the communities (Liao et al., 2019; Peeroo et al., 2017).

Marketers should take note of the implications of this study as follows: Firstly, while value heterogeneity may damage a brand community, visible heterogeneity may serve as an asset for online brand communities. OBCs should be effectively managed when unethical practices and brand transgressions are committed by brands. To ensure a transparent communication strategy, they must establish rigorous guidelines for advertising and information dissemination. Brands need to ensure that all their communications are accurate and truthful to avoid misleading claims or unethical practices (Yang and Battocchio, 2021). Furthermore, brands should establish a strong moderation system to mitigate the risks associated with misleading claims or unethical practices. The integrity of community interactions can be further maintained by regularly training community managers in ethical practices and crisis management.

The scoping review on the dark side of OBCs makes several key theoretical contributions. Firstly, this review contributes to a nuanced understanding of the dark side of OBCs, considering that the majority of previous research focuses on the positive or bright side of OBCs. While recent research indicates that heterogeneity in these communities can lead to conflicting behaviours and anti-brand activities (Behl and Jain, 2023; Özbölük and Dursun, 2017), it is highly fragmented. This study contributes to this literature by developing a comprehensive understanding of the current state of research on OBCs. Secondly, the identification of specific themes such as information dynamics, group dynamics, provocation and schadenfreude, brand activism and hate and disengagement in the dark side of the OBCs, provides an in-depth understanding of factors driving customer deviant behaviours in OBCs (Verhagen et al., 2013). Finally, this study proposes strategic implications for brands in managing OBCs (Herhausen et al., 2019; Husemann et al., 2015). This enables brands to mitigate consumer conflicts, build harmony and develop community engagement and consumer loyalty.

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## Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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