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Branding in the age of social media firestorms: how to create brand value by fighting back online

Joachim Scholz[a] and Andrew N. Smith[b]

[a]Goodman School of Business, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON, Canada; [b]Marketing Department, Suffolk University, Boston, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

Leading research on social media firestorms typically advises managers to quickly quell the backlash by appeasing brand critics. Drawing on crisis communications and branding research, we offer a radically different perspective and argue that brands can benefit from fighting back online. Through a netnography of a moral-based firestorm, we contribute to the marketing and crisis communications literatures by identifying the escalation strategy as a way to build brand value; explaining how brands can activate supporters; and providing guidance on how to assess these morally steeped events. We advance branding research by identifying how managers can provoke consumer-generated brand stories; and uncovering the hidden benefits of negative consumer voices. Finally, we outline a new perspective on how brands are dialogically constructed through a process we call 'flyting'.

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Introduction

Contemporary research in marketing identifies many risks and issues associated with branding in the social media era (Gensler, Völckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013; Grégoire, Salle, & Tripp, 2015; Holt, 2016). One of the most dramatic risks brands face is to be caught up in a social media firestorm, defined as a 'sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks' (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014, p. 117). Research on social media firestorms, and online crises more generally, assumes that they threaten brand value, and that organisations should take steps to quell them (Rauschnabel, Kammerlander, & Ivens, 2016). Managers are thus advised to react fast (Benoit, 2018), keep responses respectful (Grégoire et al., 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011), maintain good relationships with stakeholders via positive media content (Cheng, 2018; Hewett, Rand, Rust, & van Heerde, 2016), and take actions to remedy the contentious issues (Pfeffer et al., 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Schweitzer, Brooks, & Galinsky, 2015).

However, crisis communications scholars also point out that accommodating brand critics is not always necessary or advisable (e.g. Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Coombs &

CONTACT Joachim Scholz jscholz@brocku.ca Goodman School of Business, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON L2S 3A1, Canada

Holladay, 2002). This is especially true for online criticism that is triggered by perceptions that a company has violated some moral norm (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). From a branding perspective, such moral-based social media firestorms are particularly interesting, but under-theorised, market phenomena. Charges of moral misconduct trigger 61% of business-targeting firestorms (Einwiller, Viererbl, & Himmelreich, 2017). Yet, moral issues seem to have a lower impact on brand perceptions than firestorms that are triggered by other factors (Hansen, Kupfer, & Hennig-Thurau, 2018), potentially because the controversy is pushed by a loud minority overpowering a silent majority of people who do not share the same concerns (Lim, 2017). Moral dynamics also underlie many firestorms that form in response to conscious brand management decisions, as recent public outcries over advertisements by Gillette (Smith, 2019), Nike (Draper & Belson, 2018) and Pepsi (Winston, 2017) have demonstrated so aptly. Marketers thus face a dilemma: More and more consumers expect companies to take a social stand, but 79% of CMOs worry that such action would negatively affect their ability to attract business (Marketing News, 2019).

The purpose of our research is to chart a way out of this dilemma by examining how moral-based social media firestorms can provide opportunities for building, rather than destroying, brand value. By integrating the social media firestorm literature with contemporary crisis communications research (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Frandsen & Johansen, 2012) and branding theories (e.g. Gensler et al., 2013; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010), we identify countervailing meaning structures as an underlying explanation for why fighting back against online criticism can present a useful branding opportunity, especially when managers can activate brand supporters to participate in the firestorm and fight back on the brand's behalf. Our research thus explores the following three research questions: What is the potential of various accommodative and assertive crisis response strategies to activate consumers' support for a brand? What are specific tactics brands can employ to successfully enact a response strategy aimed at leveraging a firestorm for brand building purposes? And more generally, how does a better understanding of the dynamics that underlie moral-based firestorms challenge current theories and assumptions about how brands are managed in the age of social media?

We examine these research questions through a netnography of a firestorm targeting Protein World, a UK fitness and nutrition company. The brand's 'Are you beach body ready' advertising campaign, as well as its unconventional and often confrontational responses to brand critics on Twitter, provide us with an ideal context for a netnographic analysis of this moral-based firestorm. We track how the firestorm unfolded with the firm's and other stakeholders' actions, and describe three distinct phases in which Protein World experimented with different response strategies. Only in the last phase was Protein World successful at generating widespread support from other customers, which allowed it to turn a potential brand debacle into a branding opportunity.

Our empirical analysis uncovers four distinct tactics Protein World employed to accentuate moral tensions between both camps and to structure their own and their supporters' counter-attacks on brand critics. These findings contribute to the social media firestorm and crisis communications literatures by identifying the brand-building potential of moral-based firestorms, describing how brand supporters can be activated, and providing guidance on how to assess these morally steeped events.

Furthermore, our research contributes to the branding literature by identifying how brand managers can act as provocateurs to facilitate and coordinate consumer-generated brand stories, as well as by uncovering the hidden benefits of negative consumer-generated brand stories. Finally, our research introduces the concept of 'flyting' – defined as a ritualised exchange of insults between two or more interlocutors – to exemplify a new perspective regarding how brands, in the age of social media, are dialogically constructed in real-time.

Social media firestorms

Social media firestorms are complex phenomena that can be triggered by a variety of events, involve multiple actors, and require companies to weigh the potential of different response strategies. Prior research has typically identified and described these topics in isolation (e.g. Pfeffer et al., 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016), but it has rarely examined the interplay between them. A few more multifaceted studies have modelled the effectiveness of various response strategies for different configurations of actors (Hauser, Hautz, Hutter, & Füller, 2017; Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014); however, these studies have not taken into account how violations of moral standards, as triggers, may impact the viability of corporate response strategies (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2012), or how brands can activate consumer support during morally based firestorms.

In this and the next two sections, we establish a conceptual framework to explore the dynamics and brand building potential of morally-based social media firestorms. Figure 1 provides a roadmap and overview: We begin by reviewing existing marketing research on the triggers, actors and response strategies for social media firestorms (see black round corners of the triangle in Figure 1). By integrating research from the crisis communications literature (see large triangle in Figure 1), we conceptualise moral-based firestorms as ambiguous rhetorical arenas. Finally, we draw on contemporary branding theories (see dark grey trapezoid-like shape in Figure 1) to assess the branding opportunities provided by such arenas.

While social media firestorms can be triggered by a number of events (e.g. Hansen et al., 2018), one particularly important factor is consumers' perceptions that a company has violated some moral norms. Einwiller et al. (2017) analyse news coverage of online firestorms and found that 61% of business-targeting firestorms were triggered by charges of perceived moral misconduct. Rauschnabel et al. (2016) differentiate between firestorm triggers related to core business problems (e.g. poor product quality), communication issues (e.g. poor transparency) and unethical organisational behaviour (e.g. violations of social norms), and find this last class of trigger to be the most common type. Hansen et al. (2018) also identify these types of moral-based causes and suggest that some communication-related triggers may also be related to perceived violations of moral standards (e.g. 'unprofessional' or 'tone-deaf' messaging). On a more individual level, moral arousal and desire to enforce social norms have been found to make consumer participation in firestorms more likely (Johnen, Jungblut, & Ziegele, 2018; Rost, Stahel, & Frey, 2016). In totality, this set of studies suggests both the notable empirical prevalence and conceptual importance of morally triggered firestorms.

Prior research has identified multiple actors who participate in social media firestorms. Actors include those who criticise the brand (Pfeffer et al., 2014; Rauschnabel

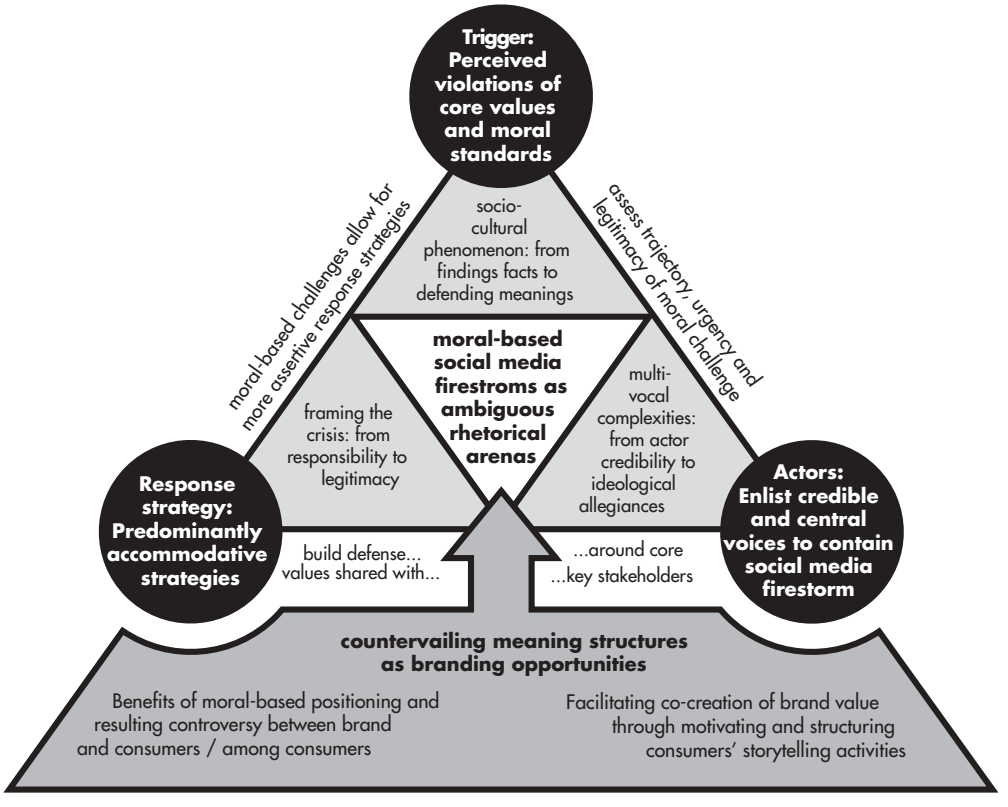

Figure 1. Conceptual framework.

Note: This framework integrates three literatures to conceptualise moral-based social media firestorms as branding opportunities. The marketing literature on firestorms (black circles at the corners of large triangle) highlights triggers, actors, and response strategies as important concepts for understanding firestorms, but has not explored the dynamics that unfold within morally steeped events. Crisis communications research (large triangle) connects these constructs by examining response strategies and the reactions of various actors within the context of moral-based crises (text on the outside of large triangle) and identifies meanings, legitimacy, and ideological allegiances as key aspects of moral-based firestorms (inner grey triangles). These insights allow us to conceptualise moral-based firestorms as ambiguous rhetorical arenas (white triangle in centre). Identifying the existence of divergent cultural meaning systems as an inherent property of rhetorical arenas, we utilise contemporary branding theories on countervailing meaning structures (dark grey trapezoid-like shape) as a lens to examine the brand-building potential of moral-based social media firestorms.

et al., 2016), the target organisation and its agents (Hauser et al., 2017), and external brand supporters who are willing to spread counter-narratives (Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Empirical analyses of how supportive actors can help a company weather a firestorm have been sparse thus far. Using analytical modelling techniques, prior work has shown that companies can reduce negative sentiment during a firestorm by seeding positive information to influential social media users (Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014) and by having a large number of moderators defend the brand in a speedy fashion (Hauser et al., 2017). While these studies point towards the importance of enlisting supportive voices during a firestorm, they merely assume that influential consumers or agents of a firm will come to the company's defence. Since only the type, number and response time of defenders are varied in these models, but not how the targeted brand actually responds to its critics, prior research

does not provide any insights into what content or communicative behaviours can activate brand supporters during a firestorm.

Finally, prior marketing research overwhelmingly advises managers to employ appeasement strategies in response to social media firestorms (e.g. Grégoire et al., 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011; Pfeffer et al., 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). One notable exception is Hauser et al. (2017), who suggest that brands should defend and justify their actions when the aggressor's credibility is low. While this study provides a more nuanced approach on how to respond, its findings are predicated on the assumption that consumers search for the 'correct facts' about an event (Smith, Menon, & Sivakumar, 2005) and thus take into account the critic's perceived trustworthiness and expertise (Hauser et al., 2017). This assumption might not hold for morally infused firestorms. Consumer research has frequently shown how people adopt incommensurable moral viewpoints that lead to persisting conflicts between various moral camps (e.g. Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010). The tendency of firestorms to be opinion-based, rather than fact-based, and characterised by affective, rather than rational, exchanges (Pfeffer et al., 2014) is thus likely to be exacerbated when claims about immoral behaviours are the trigger for social outcry.

In sum, prior marketing research has identified moral-based social media firestorms as an important market phenomenon but has not yet explored in detail the dynamics that unfold within these morally steeped events. Some evidence suggests that firms may be well advised to adopt more assertive response strategies (Hauser et al., 2017), especially when these would enlist brand supporters in defence of the brand (Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014). However, these empirical findings have not taken into account the particularities of moral-based firestorms, and they leave unanswered important questions, such as what criteria other than the aggressors' credibility might determine when more assertive response strategies are feasible, or how a brand could activate its supporters. In the next section, we draw on the crisis communications literature to deepen our understanding of these issues.

Firestorms as morally ambiguous rhetorical arenas

The crisis communications literature examines moral-based firestorms through a variety of related constructs, including 'challenge crisis' (Coombs & Holladay, 2002), 'integrity-based crisis' (Coombs, 2015) and 'paracrisis' (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). A common cause of these crises are claims by disgruntled stakeholders that 'an organization is operating in an inappropriate manner' (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 170), which are often connected to charges of immoral conduct (Coombs, 2007). In contrast to marketing researchers, crisis communications scholars emphasise that assertive response strategies are often more suitable in certain crisis situations (e.g. Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2002), and especially for allegations of moral misconduct (Coombs, 2007; see upper left side of triangle in Figure 1). Rather than always issuing apologies, which would reinforce the perception that the company is guilty of a moral violation, brand managers can adopt denial strategies by asserting that there is no real crisis (i.e. 'denial') and discrediting the accuser (i.e. 'attack the accuser'), or diminish strategies through reducing the severity of the crisis (i.e. 'justification') and denying the intention of doing harm (i.e. 'excuse' in Coombs, 2007; 'good intentions' in Benoit, 1997).

The rise of social media has altered the visibility and dynamics of brand crises (Austin, Fisher Liu, & Jin, 2012; Brown & Billings, 2013; Jin & Liu, 2010), as stakeholders can now directly and publicly challenge a company with ease, for even minor infractions (Cheng, 2018). Companies today are thus more likely to face a paracrisis (Lim, 2017), defined as a 'publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behaviour' (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 409). However, not every challenge will garner widespread support from other stakeholders. Coombs and Holladay (2012) suggest that when assessing a paracrisis' potential to develop into a full crisis, managers should monitor its trajectory (i.e. whether support of the petition is increasing) and the urgency challengers convey through their communicative skills and organisational structures. Most important, however, is to examine whether the accusers can show that the company's behaviour is harmful to society in some way. Evaluating the legitimacy of the critique is therefore the 'foundation for assessing paracrises' (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 410; see upper right side of triangle in Figure 1).

For moral-based crises, the legitimacy of the challenge itself – rather than attributions of whether a company has caused the event (e.g. Coombs, 2007) or how influential and credible accusers are (e.g. Hauser et al., 2017; Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014) – has thus become the central consideration when formulating response strategies. Coombs and Holladay (2012) suggest that companies can refute a challenge when they 'build their defence around core values they share with important stakeholders' (p. 412; see lower side of triangle in Figure 1). Refuting a challenge might even activate stakeholders to support the brand's position through their own communications. For example, Ford Motor Company's refutation of claims that their same-sex partner benefits were immoral gathered widespread support on social media (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Companies are thus advised to assess how legitimate a challenge is and to monitor the trajectory of the challenge to see whether their assertive strategies are successful in mitigating the crisis (see also Coombs & Holladay, 2014).

Overall, the crisis communications literature suggests that assertive response strategies can be successful when faced with moral-based social media firestorms. Successful defence strategies involve framing the crisis event in ways that are beneficial for the company (Coombs & Holladay, 2002); however, moral-based crises differ from competence-based crises or major accidents (Coombs, 2015) in important ways (see inner grey triangles in Figure 1): The shift of focus from attributing crisis responsibility to the legitimacy of the challenge indicates how moral-based challenges represent sociocultural phenomena (e.g. Falkheimer & Heide, 2010; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, p. 12). Stakeholders interpret a crisis in terms of what they consider morally right (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), fair (Roh, 2017), or in violation with their core values and moral standards (Lim, 2017). Different interpretations of the crisis thus inevitably arise, because stakeholders draw on divergent, and sometimes even opposing, cultural meanings systems, ideological allegiances (Frandsen & Johansen, 2012; Heath, 2001; Lee, 2004; Vasquez, 1994; Zhao, 2017) and media environments (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Pace, Balboni, & Gistri, 2017) in their sense-making.

The concept of the rhetorical arena (Frandsen & Johansen, 2012) captures the multivocal complexities that unfold as corporate and non-corporate actors negotiate their interpretations of socially mediated crises. Rather than assuming that various parties interact to ascertain the correct information about an event (e.g. Brown & Billings, 2013;

Cheng, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Hauser et al., 2017; Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014; Tampere, Tampere, & Luoma-Aho, 2016; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013), the rhetorical arena model emphasises that genuine two-way symmetrical communication is by no means the only communicative process that occurs, or even the most likely one: Actors can often spin a crisis into new directions as some actors 'communicate *to* each other, other actors communicate *with* each other, other again communicate *against* each other, and other actors communicate *past* each other' (Frandsen & Johansen, 2012, p. 433, emphasis in original). Thus, rather than assuming that a single type of actor (e.g. the company or brand critics) is able to establish one dominant crisis frame (Coombs, 2007), this model suggests that actors propose competing frames and interpretations of the crisis which co-exist within a morally ambiguous rhetorical arena (see inner white triangle in Figure 1).

Conceptualising moral-based social media crises as persistently ambiguous rhetorical arenas opens up the possibilities for novel crisis response strategies. Crisis literature is typically focused on protecting brand value through containing a crisis and is thus averse to rising volumes of negative word of mouth (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2012). However, brewing controversies that are co-created by consumers from opposing moral camps through their interactions on social media may also provide interesting branding opportunities. In the next section, we draw on the branding literature to examine how companies can leverage this inherently ambiguous moral arena for building brand value.

Countervailing meaning structures as branding opportunities

Contemporary branding theories, through their focus on the co-creation of meanings (Gensler et al., 2013), offer a valuable new perspective on the rhetorical arenas that emerge during moral-based social media firestorms (see dark grey trapezoid-like shape in Figure 1). First, similar to rhetorical arenas, brands are assumed to channel shared cultural meanings, values and ideologies. As Levy (1959) insightfully described decades ago, consumers often purchase products for these meanings rather than functional value alone. Exploiting this knowledge, managers can engage in storytelling that deliberately attempts to imbue their brands with valuable meanings (Holt, 2003, 2006).

Meaning systems often evoke issues of morality or contested cultural values. American Girl, Ben & Jerry's, Benetton, Gillette, Patagonia and many other brands have all deliberately taken morally attuned positions on social and environmental issues that are reflected in their brands (Diamond et al., 2009; Holt & Cameron, 2010; Ind, 2003; Tinic, 1997). They support and convey such positions through rhetoric (e.g. corporate policies and marketing communications) and actions (e.g. resource allocations and employee activities). Holt and Cameron (2010) recount, for example, how Ben & Jerry's 'wed the business to social activism' (p. 75) by donating a percentage of its profits to foundations that fight for environmental and social issues. The brand also communicates these values through its packaging and corporate communications, articulating a clear position to stakeholders.

The branding literature provides a deeper understanding of the dynamics that unfold between different and sometimes contrasting meaning systems. While certain stakeholders may embrace a brand's values and moral-based positioning, others may contest the brand because they consider it to be in violation of their own morals and values.

These latter stakeholders often offer countervailing meanings that disparage brands and depict them as being on the wrong side of moral debates (Thompson, Rindfleisch, & Arsel, 2006). Consumer activists, for example, frame large corporations with evocative language that characterises them as being labour rights abusers and cultural imperialists (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). The creation and dissemination of these morally infused oppositional brand meanings, by consumers and the media, can result in potentially deleterious doppelgänger brand images (Giesler, 2012).

Stakeholders gain value from their role in these meaning-making clashes when they, for example, cast themselves as moral crusaders struggling against a 'rapacious corporate titan' in an 'identity-enhancing morality tale' (Thompson et al., 2006, p. 59). Consumers not only attack brands but also engage in moral crusades against other consumers. Kozinets and Handelman (2004) report that consumer activists denigrate mass market consumers as 'wicked and selfish' for complicity supporting 'immoral' corporations (p. 699), a position with which many consumers would undoubtedly disagree. Brand-mediated moral contestations between consumers can flare up when a brand has hit a cultural nerve that resonates with some consumers but is hotly contested by others. Luedicke et al. (2010) explain how two groups of consumers – Hummer and Prius drivers – draw on different ideologies to claim moral superiority over the other, allowing each to gain identity value from a morality play in which they construe themselves as moral protagonists who defend a moral order against their adversaries, who are cast as immoral antagonists. While these clashes are not stoked by a deliberate brand strategy, they further suggest the managerial benefit of integrating morally infused content into positioning for some brands.

A second new perspective the branding literature offers to social media firestorms as morally ambiguous rhetorical arenas is its emphasis on the co-creative nature of brand narratives (Gensler et al., 2013; Handelman, 2006; Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Holt, 2002). Much of this research has focused on how brand value is co-created in online-mediated consumption communities (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001) and brand publics (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015). Consumers can, for example, evangelise and celebrate their involvement with the brand by creating and disseminating user-generated content which augment the brand story (Cova & Pace, 2006; Muñiz & Schau, 2007; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009).

Crucially, the branding literature provides insights into how managers can facilitate the co-creation of brand narratives through various online and offline activities that motivate and structure consumers' participation. Brand managers can motivate consumers to engage in storytelling activities via contests (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008) and influencer programmes (Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010). Aside from monetary or material incentives, brands can also offer social recognition and exposure to a wider audience through acknowledging and redistributing (e.g. retweeting) consumers' narrative contributions (Zhu & Chen, 2015). Furthermore, brand managers can facilitate the co-creation of narrative through framing activities that motivate consumers to speak up. For example, brands can adopt an 'underdog' framing that emphasises an 'us versus them' mentality between themselves and an opponent (Gensler et al., 2013; Holt & Cameron, 2010), or they can tap into anxieties that percolate in a crowdculture (Holt, 2016) to activate the creation and sharing of consumer-generated content.

Brand managers can furthermore structure the narrative co-creation and dissemination process by, among other things, hosting online community spaces where stories are created and shared (Kozinets et al., 2008), designing and enforcing rules for contributing consumer-generated content during competitions (Berthon, Pitt, & Campbell, 2008), providing brand-created visuals for consumers to leverage (Gensler et al., 2013), and promoting hashtags that focus story framing and help aggregate attention on topics that matter for the organisation (Page, 2012). In each of these cases, the brand's involvement allows it to shape and channel story creation and formats by determining technological affordances and providing directions.

In sum, contemporary branding research suggests that managers can effectively leverage moral oppositions in their brand narratives, as well as engage in activities that motivate and structure brand narrative co-creation. We draw on these insights when examining how Protein World was able to turn a social media firestorm into a brand-building opportunity. Before presenting the details of our empirical analysis, we first outline the context and our methods.

Context and methods

Protein World's 2015 'Are You Beach Body Ready?' campaign for weight-loss supplements, which featured a bikini-clad woman alongside the aforementioned tag line, serves as the context for this netnographic research (Kozinets, 2015). The campaign ran on the London Underground system from 11 April 2015 to the end of that month, and also included some similarly themed content on the firm's social media accounts. The campaign received media coverage from a variety of outlets and faced considerable backlash on the claim that it objectified and body-shamed women: consumers defaced the company's transit ads, organised public protests, signed a petition demanding removal of the ads, made hundreds of complaints to the British Advertising Standards Association (ASA), and criticised the company on Twitter (Millington, 2015; Sweney, 2015). At the peak of the firestorm, April 25, Protein World was mentioned nearly 15,000 times per day on Twitter, a dramatic increase from the roughly 500 daily mentions it typically received before the campaign. Protein World was actively involved in the online firestorm as it unfolded, tweeting multiple times per day, engaging with both critics and brand supporters. For a timeline of events, see Table 1 as well as the Findings section. Since Twitter hosted the heart of the firestorm, we focused our study there, on the communicative actions and social interactions between Protein World and various firestorm participants.

We study the interactions in this particular firestorm because of the brand's evolving and, sometimes surprising, response to the criticism it faced. Conventional crisis and social media management wisdom (e.g. Grégoire et al., 2015; Schweitzer et al., 2015) suggest that Protein World should have taken down their ads and issued an apology in face of the backlash. However, Protein World came to fuel the conflict over parts of the campaign, rather than diffuse it, through purposefully antagonising its critics on social media. While controversial, this approach paid off for Protein World, which increased its Twitter following by more than 15% over the course of the campaign. Protein World also claimed to have gained more than 30,000 new customers and £2 M in new sales in the last week of the campaign (Robinson, 2015). Our aim is to better understand the

Table 1. Timeline of Protein World firestorm.

Phases	Date	Events
Phase 1: Deny	April 11	Start of campaign. Protein World advertisements are posted in the London Underground system. First negative tweet appears in dataset.
	April 12	First negative tweet (Hannah Atkinson) goes viral. About 11% of tweets in our dataset are negative comments about the advertising campaign.
	April 15	*The Guardian* opinion piece issues 'call for resistance' against Protein World's 'sexist advertising'. First tweets about vandalised ads appear in dataset.
Phase 2: Diminish	April 16	Change in Protein World's strategy: Deny to Diminish.
	April 18	Launch of petition against Protein World on change.org to remove advertisements.
	April 21	Launch of anti-Protein World Facebook page. Petition has a few hundred signatures. A few first tweets in support of Protein World begin to emerge, but low volume.
	April 22	Real-world bikini protest of two activists in the London Underground.
Phase 3: Escalation	April 23	Petition doubles signatures from 12K to 24K in about 6 hours. Influential *Huffington Post* article is published. Change in Protein World's strategy: Diminish to Escalate
	April 24	More widespread support for Protein World on Twitter.
	April 26	Model featured in advertisement speaks up against all forms of body shaming on Twitter (both 'fatshaming' and 'fitshaming').
	April 27	Petition to remove advertisements reaches 40K signatures. *Sky News* segment with interview of Protein World Head of Marketing. Protein World claims 20K new customers and M£1 revenue over the last four days.
	April 28	Petition reaches 50K signatures. Open letter by Hannah Atkinson in *The Independent*. Bomb threat to Protein World HQ.
	April 30	End of campaign. Petition closes at >70K signatures. Protein World claims 30K new customers and M£2 sales; tweets image used in campaign with the following in-image caption: 'Welcome to all our new customers joining the Protein World family! #BeachBodyReady'.

potential and dynamics of this type of approach in a morally rooted social media firestorm, rather than to compare it to other strategies managers can employ, which future research may seek to do using different methods than the netnographic technique we employ in this study.

Netnography of a social media firestorm

Netnography is the adaptation of ethnographic research techniques to the study of online communities and computer-mediated social interactions in a naturalistic setting (Kozinets, 2002). Reviewing several netnographic studies, Reid and Duffy (2018, p. 270) note that 'there is no one way to conduct a netnographic approach' and that researchers are often guided by the data that is available to them to examine their research questions. There are potential challenges associated with studying social media firestorms via netnography. For example, they emerge and evolve quickly, and – in our case – featured ideologically opposed crowds. As such, engaging in real-time netnographic immersion (Kozinets, 2015), without offending at least one side of the social media firestorm, would have been difficult to achieve in this context. We thus adopted a non-participatory netnographic, rather than interacting live with informants. However, in order to adhere to the spirit of a more participatory netnography (i.e. better understand the embedded cultural understandings in this context; see Kozinets, 2015), we immersed ourselves in the complete data set and background sources (e.g. newspaper articles). We took on the role of active story interpreters (Reid & Duffy, 2018) by reading the tweets and mini-conversations that were exchanged in Twitter threads, examining the background of the company, visiting the Twitter profiles of over 50 users, and reading articles and watching videos that were linked in tweets. This was a detailed and deliberate process that took more than four months. We discuss how we established and analysed our dataset next.

Data set and analysis

We began collecting an exploratory data set shortly after the social media firestorm occurred in 2015. After initial sense-making, we began to systematically collect textual and visual data through Twitter's advanced search function. We manually searched for the keywords 'Protein World' for every day between the day the campaign launched (11 April 2015) until a few days after it concluded (5 May 2015). This search query provided us with tweets that included the terms 'Protein World' and 'ProteinWorld' without any special characters, as well as mentions of @proteinworld and tweets that included the #proteinworld hashtag. This procedure resulted in a dataset of over 10,000 tweets, archived in over 3,000 pages of text and pictures. To better organise our data, we also created three separate datasets containing tweets that were issued between April 11 and May 5 (one search each) by @ProteinWorld, Protein World's CEO (@arjun_seth), and its head of marketing during this time, Richard Stavely (@stavers). Owing to the size of the dataset, and our interrogation of it, we are confident that we have a rich and sufficiently complete dataset that is appropriate and manageable for qualitative data analysis (Arvidsson & Caliandro, 2015).

Recent research comparing automated with manual analysis of social media conversations (Canhoto & Padmanabhan, 2015) suggests that automated analysis can be unreliable, especially when sentiment is negative, subtle text elements are used (e.g. emoji, pictures), when meaning is implied through the context rather than made explicit, and when social media users employ irony and sarcasm in their tweets. Our preliminary analysis of the exploratory dataset suggested that these conditions were met in the Protein World firestorm, requiring us to engage in a manual analysis, in line with the qualitative analysis of netnographic data, which pays special attention to rich detail and context.

Understanding the context around conversations and retweets is especially important when creating a netnographic understanding of social media data (Kozinets, 2013; Kozinets, Dolbec, & Earley, 2014). Following the maxim that 'context is king' (Reid & Duffy, 2018), we included several sources of contextual data in our dataset: we examined every photo Protein World posted on its Facebook page from when the page was launched on 21 May 2013, to 1 December 2017. These data provide us with a better understanding of Protein World's brand history (e.g. Holt & Cameron, 2010). Furthermore, as we analysed the data, we did so in the context of related tweets and, for central tweets, in the context of the person who posted the tweet (by visiting his or her Twitter profile). We frequently followed links posted in tweets, resulting in the inclusion of 101 online articles and two video interviews with Protein World leadership in our dataset that helped us conduct a more contextually informed analysis of the Twitter firestorm data.

Our data analysis proceeded in two steps. In the first step, we reduced our main datasets to more manageable sizes. We chronologically examined all tweets that included the keywords 'Protein World' and noted tweets related to the social media firestorm and advertising campaign in separate, condensed data files. Through this process, we excluded tweets that featured customer service inquiries, contest promotions, or other issues that were not related to the firestorm. We repeated the same procedure with tweets that were issued by @ProteinWorld, as the brand was the focal actor for our study. Out of the 10,000 tweets in our initial datasets, we purposively selected the 5,374 individual tweets that were relevant to the firestorm for coding and analysis. These tweets were a part of 1,158 tweet threads that varied in length from a single tweet to many tens of tweets.

In the second, overlapping step, we manually coded and took interpretive notes on our condensed data sets as we searched for thematic patterns in the data. For each tweet, we noted its surrounding thread and hashtags, and added our own thoughts and interpretations. We also considered meta-data (i.e. likes, retweets), noting – for example – whether Protein World retweeted certain favourable or unfavourable tweets. We coded individual tweets, which eventually enabled us to recognise patterns in – for example – Protein World's message framing. We also coded tweet threads, as conversations, which allowed us to understand the tone of various exchanges, as well as the type and number of actors involved, and how the structure and tone of those conversations changed over the course of the firestorm. As our analysis progressed, and we tacked back-and-forth between the data and literature on social media firestorms, branding and crisis management, we added some additional codes that were informed by our reading of the literature. Altogether, our coding and interpretive notes resulted in over 59,000 words

of analytical text, which does not include the text produced by social media users in their tweets.

Since the topic of our investigation involves a certain event, we began our analysis with a focus on understanding the timeline of how the social media firestorm evolved (see Table 1), as well as how Protein World – as the central actor in this firestorm – responded to other parties. We examined tweets of the brand, its critics, as well as its supporters in terms of the ideological framing they produced through their content, embedded cultural meanings, as well as tone. Guided by our coding, we noted how Protein World adopted different strategies throughout the controversy, which led us to differentiate between three different phases of the social media firestorm and understand how critics and advocates responded in each circumstance. Throughout this entire analytical process, the authors conferred regularly to discuss emerging interpretations to help enhance the reliability and validity of the findings (Belk, Fischer, & Kozinets, 2012). To help maintain the confidentiality of tweeters involved in the firestorm (other than the brand and its representatives, and a one prominent brand critic who can be considered a public figure) we have used pseudonyms and slightly altered the text of their communications, taking care to preserve the meaning of their original messages; we have also slightly altered some of Protein World's tweets when they appear in conversation with these individuals in tweet threads.

Findings

Protein World adopted three distinct response strategies over the course of the firestorm: After first ironically deflecting its critics (Phase 1: Deny), Protein World switched strategies on April 16 and defended its advertising campaign by referencing its internal motivations and good intentions (Phase 2: Diminish). Criticism against Protein World continued to mount during both phases (see Table 1), and neither strategy managed to meaningfully rally support for the brand. While brand support slowly began to build around April 21/22, it only became widespread on April 24, one day after Protein World adopted what we term the 'escalation strategy' in the third phase of this controversy. In the remainder of this section, we describe the critique levelled against the brand, how Protein World interacted with its critics, and how the brand orchestrated the activities of its supporters throughout the three different phases (see Figure 2).

Critique against Protein World: everyday sexism

Criticism against Protein World began soon after the advertisements were placed in the London Underground system on April 11. By the next day, about 11% of the tweets in our database for the day opposed Protein World's advertisements. Hannah Atkinson's tweet from April 12 was the first to go viral, with over 500 Likes and 550 Retweets by July 2015. Posting a photo showing Protein World's advertisement, she writes:

> 'This advert pretty much sums up everything that I despise about how we treat and value women's bodies.' ~ (@hatkinson_)

This tweet is emblematic of the critique that consumers levelled against Protein World's advertisement throughout the campaign. Critics claimed that the advertisement

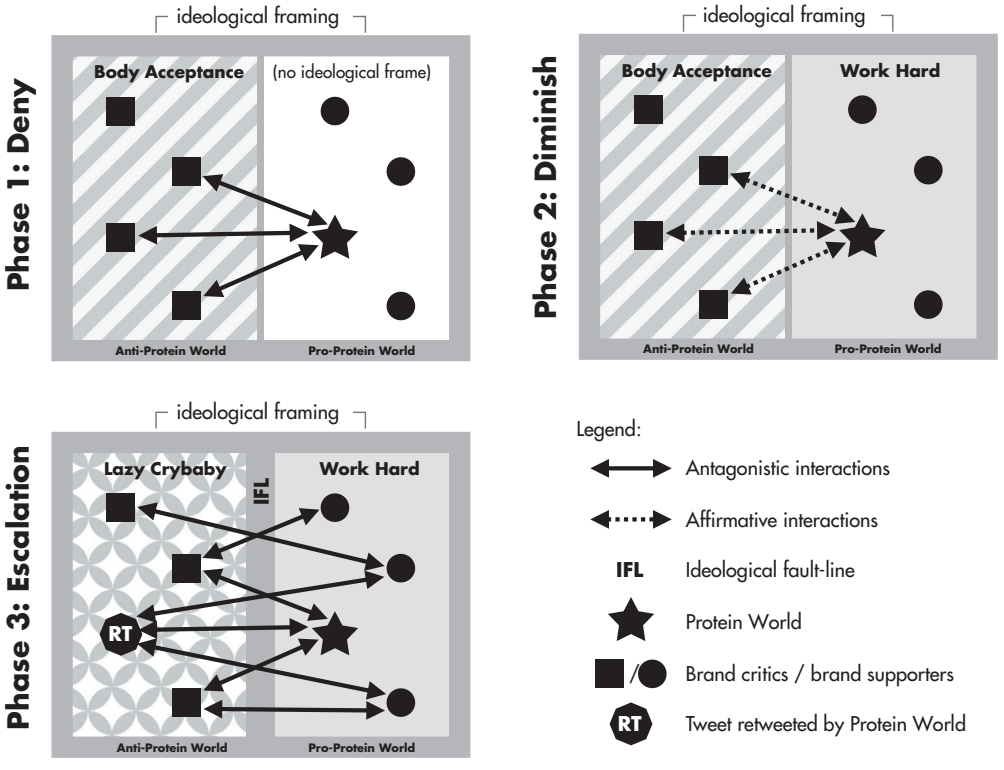

Figure 2. Schematic overview of phases.

portrays an unrealistic body image to satisfy the male gaze, and that it promotes skipping full and healthy meals in favour of consuming artificial substitutes and pills. On April 28, Atkinson (2015) clarifies and expands her charge of 'everyday sexism' in an open letter to Protein World, published in one of Britain's leading newspapers, *The Independent*:

> Being fit, strong and healthy is awesome. Exercise is great. We know this. But the point is that your advert does not express any of those things – it's entirely centred on looks and weight loss. This advert is not about healthy living – it's about looking good, and a very narrow ideal of what constitutes looking good at that. [. . .] It is disagreeable because it's sexist and it contributes to oppressing women.

The core of this critique was later extended to include Protein World's response to its critics on social media, resulting in a moral-based social media firestorm that was triggered both by the original advertisement and the ensuing social media comments. Protein World engaged from the start; however, its response to this criticism, and its ability to activate brand supporters, varied throughout the three phases we describe next.

Phase 1: deny strategy (April 11–16)

Protein World's first response to this criticism was to pretend it did not exist, by ironically replying to complaints with sales pitches. Protein World's exchange with Purvi on

April 14 is one of many examples of how Protein World tries to evade charges of portraying unrealistic body images, which Purvi expresses through her reference to the 'thigh gap', a highly contested ideal for female beauty:

> 'This will help me achieve a thigh gap? Well that's realistic isn't it? @ProteinWorld' ~ (@PurviS)
>
> '@PurviS Buy our Weight Loss products to reach your goals:-)' ~ (@ProteinWorld)
>
> '@ProteinWorld Right? And this isn't photoshopped?' ~ (@PurviS)
>
> '@PurviS Sorry Purvi the image is not altered. Check out the model, Renne [thumbs up emoji]' ~ (@ProteinWorld)

Protein World seems to misinterpret Purvi's tweet on purpose. Her negative position is readily apparent, and Protein World's Twitter activity prior to the crisis did not show any signs of being automated, which might have explained an unintentional gross misunderstanding of tweets. Protein World ironically pitches products to critics multiple times throughout the first phase of the controversy, often adding a direct link to its online store, even when there is little ambiguity about the intention to criticise Protein World:

> 'Screw your beauty ideals @ProteinWorld [fisted hand emoji]' ~ (@SarahJane, April 16)
>
> '@SarahJane Lose 2–4lbs weekly with our Weight Loss products! Work on your beach body- [link to online store]' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 16)
>
> '@ProteinWorld No Thanks. Take your slimming drinks and your offensive adverts and shove them up your arse' ~ (@SarahJane, April 17)
>
> '@ProteinWorld stop shaming women into buying your products by guilt tripping them, YOU ARE TERRIBLE' ~ (@SarahJane, April 17)

In phase 1 of the controversy, Protein World thus employs a deny strategy by ironically misinterpreting its critics' concerns and offering products instead of apologies. This infuriates critics further, as for example @SarahJane's responses from April 17, about 36 h after Protein World's reply, demonstrate. Yet, the exchanges predominantly remain between individual critics and Protein World in this phase, and no meaningful crisis-related support emerged for Protein World. We suggest that this is because the deny strategy does not resonate with potential Protein World allies. Ironically pitching products is annoying for people who despise the brand (see solid arrows in phase 1 of Figure 2), but does not connect to deeper value structures that would motivate brand supporters to step into the fray (e.g. Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Luedicke et al., 2010). Similarly, Protein World defends itself on purely functional terms when simply denying that the image was photoshopped, but it does not adopt any particular ideological frame when responding to its critics (see Figure 2: right side of phase 1), which could resonate with and activate brand supporters. As the crisis unfolded, Protein World changed its response strategy and aligned its tweets with the work hard ideology (see grey shaded right sides in phases 2 and 3 of Figure 2).

Phase 2: diminish strategy (April 16–23)

In the face of growing backlash and vandalised advertisements (see Table 1, April 15), Protein World changed its strategy: it acknowledged the critique but defended its campaign by claiming that its goal was to motivate people to live a healthy lifestyle via regular exercise and healthy eating (i.e. good intentions; Benoit, 1997). This emphasis on being a 'health and wellness' brand permeates Protein World's tweets during phase 2. For example, it is combined with Protein World's insistence that it did not photoshop the model in the advertising campaign. In contrast to phase 1, Protein World combines its 'no photoshop' defence with a positive message of promoting health and wellness:

> '@JolantaZute @Jack_Ashman @RaviGopar We are a health & welling [sic] brand. Believe it or not we have not used photo-shopped on Renee Somerfield.' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 16)

Tweets like these connect Protein World's responses to its overall brand positioning. Since almost its inception, the brand has consistently employed images of sweating and toned bodies, overlaid with motivational statements such as 'BE STRONG', 'YOU CAN DO IT. PUT YOUR BACK INTO IT', and 'STOP SAYING TOMORROW'. Through planned marketing communications like these, Protein World has historically aligned itself with a fitness ideology of continual improvement through hard work (Howes, 2016). In phase 2 of the controversy, Protein World reinforces its connection to this 'work hard' ideology (see phase 2 in Figure 2: grey shaded right side) when responding to critics who share a 'call for resistance' article, published in *The Guardian*:

> 'Good read from @rhiannonlucyc on #bodyshaming ad from @ProteinWorld This ad makes me feel sick!' [Link to *The Guardian* article] ~ (@corrineohalloran, April 17)

> '@corrineohalloran Sorry to hear that, our advert represents a healthy woman who works hard & has achieved her body goals.' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 17)

Protein World shows a new pattern here, which includes reinforcing their connection to the 'work hard' ideology, but also adopting a more sincere and conciliatory tone towards its critics as part of its diminish strategy:

> '.@ProteinWorld your ad is demeaning to all people [photo of advertisement]' ~ (@garethjones, April 17)

> '@garethjones Sorry to hear you feel that way. This is a young healthy woman who has achieved her body objectives. This is meant to be motivational:-)' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 17)

In these exchanges, Protein World shows sympathy to its critics by starting its tweets with saying 'sorry'. The brand even attempts to de-escalate the situation outright in an often-repeated tweet that directly addresses the #bodyshaming critique levelled against it. By acknowledging that all bodies, no matter their size, can enjoy the beach, Protein World affirms its critics' body acceptance ideology (e.g. Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013):

> '@Keppeln Positive Vibes, No offence meant. Enjoy the beach this summer, in the body you love:-)' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 16)

In sum, Protein World employs a diminish strategy in phase 2 by positioning itself as a 'good company with good intentions' (Benoit, 1997). According to its own framing,

Protein World aims to help consumers live healthy and achieve their personal body goals by providing products, advice and inspiration. This phase comes closest to the 'appease and correct' strategy that brands typically adopt when facing a social media firestorm (Grégoire et al., 2015). Yet, while Protein World appeased, it did not correct. No public apology for the controversial imagery was issued, and the advertisements remained in place. Emphasising that they are a 'good company with good intentions' thus did little in the eyes of its critics, and the intensity of the online criticism continued to mount.

At the same time, connecting their responses to the 'work hard' ideology did not generate a lot of support for Protein World either. While some Twitter users praised Protein World's advertising campaign (e.g. 'I love the @ProteinWorld campaign pics [strong arm emoji]'; @jacquesxs; April 21), those positive tweets were outweighed by negative tweets. Most importantly, brand supporters during this stage did not engage with critics directly, as they did in the final phase discussed below. Our analysis suggests that this might be due to two crucial characteristics of Protein World's approach in phase 2: instead of pursuing antagonistic interactions, the brand engaged critics in affirmative ways (see dotted arrows in Figure 2), and Protein World adopted and even affirmed its critics' own ideological framing based on the 'body acceptance' ideology. Both of these aspects changed in the third phase of the controversy.

Phase 3: escalation strategy (April 23–30)

The growing backlash against Protein World reached an inflection point on April 23, as signatures for the change.org petition doubled from 12,000 to 24,000 names in a time span of about 6 h. It was in the wake of this accelerating pace of criticism that Protein World adopted what we call the 'escalation strategy', which involves embracing and fuelling the controversy, rather than mitigating it, by purposefully antagonising brand critics. Whereas widespread brand support was largely missing in the first two phases, the communicative tactics Protein World employed in the third phase inspired brand supporters to enter the controversy and defend the brand through launching their own, distributed, antagonising counter-attacks on brand critics.

Based on our analysis, we describe four different tactics that brands can use to execute the escalation strategy: Protein World construed a dualistic framing that accentuated moral tensions through (1) retweeting hostile tweets and (2) framing itself and brand critics in ways that strengthened the ideological fault line between both camps. Furthermore, the brand structured their own and their supporters' counter-attacks by (3) adopting incendiary and moralistic tones and (4) by employing cultural jujitsu (Holt & Cameron, 2010) as a rhetorical template for interacting with brand critics. Together, these tactics motivated brand supporters to join the controversy and gave them rhetorical weapons with which to fight back. The resulting distributed counter-attacks generated widespread brand support that was largely absent in the previous two phases (see phase 3 in Figure 2).

The first tactic Protein World used to deploy the escalation strategy was to retweet hostile tweets that attacked the brand. For example, Protein World retweeted brand critics who were sharing the change.org petition:

> 'Nearly 15,000 signatures on the @Change petition demanding @ProteinWorld take down its shitty idiotic #beachbodyready ads: [link to petition]' ~ (@rosietoast, April 23)

Retweeting hostile tweets seems counter-productive when caught up in a social media firestorm. And indeed, in the previous phases, Protein World tried to suppress certain negative voices, for example, by blocking individuals who criticised its products or business processes. Yet, this tactic paid off for Protein World because these retweets alerted its, then, almost 60,000 Twitter followers to how the brand was being targeted with a concerted effort to bring it down. In addition, the vulgar tone used by brand critics (e.g. 'shitty idiotic') highlighted the aggressive and emotional nature of the protest (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Through retweeting, Protein World leveraged the vulgar tone of their critics to construct a dualistic framing of the controversy (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) that cast their critics as 'bad' and the brand as 'good'.

This dualistic framing was further developed through Protein World's own tweets. A second tactic Protein World employed to accentuate tensions was to frame (Coombs, 2007) itself and brand critics in moral terms that highlighted and deepened the divide, or ideological fault line, between both opposing camps. Protein World had already aligned its responses with the brand's overall 'work hard' ideology in phase 2. In phase 3, Protein World intensified its own ideological positioning by being unapologetic about its goal to inspire consumers to live healthy and achieve their body goals. Following a supportive tweet of a self-described 'gym nut' on April 21, Protein World introduced a new tag line for its brand on April 23 by embedding 'FITTER/HEALTHIER/STRONGER' in a promotional image on its social media profiles (and later also in its brand logo). The brand further drummed up support by asking fans to 'LIKE' this post if they were 'in the process of becoming fitter, healthier & stronger' (@ProteinWorld, April 23), and they used promotional tweets to remind their target audience to 'be stronger than your excuses' and to start 'their weekend with a workout' (April 25). These actions construed the brand as a moral protagonist (Luedicke et al., 2010) and invited its customers to feel a sense of moral pride that they are also bettering themselves.

More important than honing its own moral framing, however, was Protein World's reframing of its critics' positioning, which turned the opposing side into a – for the brand – more suitable moral antagonist (Luedicke et al., 2010). In the first two phases, Protein World ceded the moral high ground to its critics by implicitly accepting and later even affirming their own 'body acceptance' ideology. In phase 3, the brand engaged in a concerted effort to reframe its critics as being pathologically lazy and weak 'crybabies' who make excuses and long for other people's pity, rather than 'getting a grip' and putting in the same hard work that Protein World aligned itself and it fans with (see different shading in left side of panel 3 of Figure 2). The tweet below is one example of a recurrent pattern, which clearly demarcates the two sides of the controversy and Protein World's role in it: Its job is to motivate those who embrace the fitness ideology of continual improvement (Howes, 2016), not to commiserate those who are too lazy or weak to work hard:

> 'Here to motivate, not commiserate [raised fist, heart, and strong arm emojis] #proteinworld #getagrip #TeamProteinWorld' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 26)

In addition to strengthening the ideological fault line between both moral camps, the brand also actively infuriated its critics through waging direct counter-attacks. Protein World used both incendiary and moralistic tones while engaging in this third tactic of the escalation strategy. Protein World's CEO Arjun Seth, for example, advised a critic to 'get off Twitter and do some work!' (@arjun_seth, April 24), while the brand's Twitter account revived its penchant for ironic responses, but this time with a sting:

> 'The person running @proteinworld handle ought to be ashamed. Not from the ad, but from the sheer conceit in its replies on Twitter.' ~ (@nightfox, April 27)

> '@nightfox [strong arm emoji] – you can cry on this shoulder [blow kiss and heart emojis]' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 27)

In its own tweets, Protein World avoided the foul or vulgar tones it associated with brand critics via selectively retweeting their tweets (see tactic 1). Nevertheless, Protein World's tweets were clearly antagonistic, which had multiple effects: First, they further deepened the ideological fault line between the two, now morally opposed, camps by denying legitimacy from brand critics. Rather than being addressed as concerned members of society (phase 2), critics were now reframed as weak and insecure individuals who make excuses for their 'self-inflicted lethargy' and cry about 'perceived injustice'. Such incendiary tones also antagonised brand critics more directly, who were shocked and offended by the brand's behaviour:

> 'Seeing messages from @ProteinWorld & their CEO to @SallyHanson makes me sick. Their actions are INAPPROPRIATE, just like their ads.' ~ (@RookPlays, April 24)

However, Protein World's incendiary responses also rallied the support of others, who congratulated the brand on not caving in to criticism that was perceived to be unfair – in part thanks to the dualistic framing Protein World established.

> 'Love that @ProteinWorld is battling against their haters! [strong arm and fist bump emojis] #ProteinWorld' ~ (@Paulfroam78, April 24)

Support for the brand was substantial: For example, Protein World's response to @nightfox (see above) outperformed @nightfox's own tweet by about the factor four (159 vs 36 Likes, 46 vs 13 Retweets).

Other counter-attacks employed a moralistic tone to infuriate critics and entrench the moral battleground. These responses cast accusers as vandals or otherwise challenged their moral character. For example, the tweet below aimed to shame Protein World, similar to the tweet by @nightfox above. In this case, however, Protein World engaged on the same moralistic level, shaming and even criminalising the critic by involving London Metropolitan Police's official Twitter account.

> 'Remove your chauvinistic, disparaging shit off our London Underground @ProteinWorld. @TfL [Transport for London Twitter account] you should be ashamed. [picture of vandalized Protein World advertisement, reading "Everybody is beach body ready"]' ~ (@GastonG1970, April 24)

> '@GastonG1970 @TfL Vandalism & cursing! You're the one who should be ashamed. @metpoliceuk' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 24)

In addition to adopting incendiary and moralistic tones for its counter-attacks, Protein World also engaged in cultural jujitsu as a fourth tactic to execute the escalation strategy. Cultural jujitsu is a more sophisticated cultural branding tactic which involves using adversaries' attacks against themselves (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Within the realm of social media firestorms, cultural jujitsu can serve as a rhetorical template for formulating counter-attacks that brands, and their supporters, can use when independently responding to a large number of brand critics. Protein World engages in cultural jujitsu on the hashtag level when countering its critics' #bodyshaming and #fatshaming hashtags with its own #fitshaming hashtag, thus pointing the moral finger back at its critics. We previously described how Protein World's response to charges that the brand photoshopped the model's appearance in the advertisement evolved over time, from a simple 'denial' (phase 1) to a 'denial plus clarification' of Protein World's internal motives (phase 2). In the tweet below, Protein World further evolved its response to neutralise the implicit body shaming critique through a 'denial plus counter-attack' that uses the critics' logic against themselves: If all bodies are equally good, then why is it okay to attack the model for achieving her body goals?

> '@MelissaJoan Hi! We didn't photoshop our model. #gettherightfacts and stop #fitshaming [stop hand emoji] Renee's body is an inspiration & achievable [heart emoji]' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 26)

In phase 3, Protein World thus managed to create a dualistic framing in which the brand and its supporters – who work hard to become healthier, fitter and stronger – could assume moral superiority over critics who were construed as lazy and weak 'crybabies'. Accentuating moral tensions between both sides motivated brand supporters to participate in the firestorm on Protein World's behalf, while the third and fourth tactics Protein World employed (i.e. incendiary and moralistic tones, cultural jujitsu) provided supporters with easy-to-copy templates that they could use in their own distributed counter-attacks.

Brand supporters often launched their own counter-attacks in phase 3 that rebutted or made fun of critics' claims. These distributed counter-attacks were aligned with the ideological fault-line created by Protein World, and further expanded upon the negative framing that Protein World construed for its critics. For example, one user replied to a Protein World tweet ('you are #fitshaming our model Renee. Please stop'; @ProteinWorld, April 27) with an image of a muscular man wearing a t-shirt that reads 'FU*K EXCUSES' and an in-image caption reading 'GET YO BUTT TO THE GYM.' Other users affirmed Protein World's dualistic framing by tweeting:

> 'Complainers whining about adverts, go run or cycle or something else. #fitshaming #whiners #crybabies #eachbodysready' ~ (@RichardSeals, April 26)

> 'Fit is ideal, overweight and unhealthy is not. It's just for motivation, not for you to whine about.' ~ (@Starrrr, April 29)

By reiterating Protein World's own ideological framing (i.e. 'work hard') and the brand's reframing of its critics as 'lazy crybabies', these distributed counter-attacks further intensified the ideological fault-line between both camps and potentially drew in additional brand supporters. While Protein World was often the only actor that engaged with critics in the previous two phases, we observe in phase 3 that brand supporters, like

@denisehive below, defended Protein World through engaging in sustained social interactions across the ideological fault-line (see multiple arrows between brand critics and supporters in phase 3 of Figure 2):

> 'Why are people upset over the @ProteinWorld ads? They're intended to encourage and motivate, and that's what @ReneeSomerfield does!' ~ (@denisehive, April 27)
>
> '@denisehive @ReneeSomerfield #BAM [smiling face with sunglasses emoji] you hit the nail on the head! #BeachBodyReady' ~ (@ProteinWorld, April 27)
>
> '@ProteinWorld @ denisehive @ReneeSomerfield maybe use a model who looks like they actual eat something' ~ (@jilliansteph, April 27)
>
> '@jilliansteph [laughing tears emoji] you need to check into what people look like when they don't eat. They don't look like this' ~ (@denisehive, April 27)
>
> '@denisehive I wouldn't precisely say she looks healthy … … ' ~ (@jilliansteph, April 27)
>
> '@jilliansteph if you checked out her lifestyle you'd realise you're incorrect. You're uninformed if you call someone unhealthy because they're svelte' ~ (@denisehive, April 27)
>
> '@denisehive sorry … it's likely because I don't fall into the skinny bitch class you're clearly in [kiss emoji]' ~ (@jilliansteph, April 27)
>
> '@jilliansteph that was impolite. Irrespective of your physical state, you are also a bitch [kiss emoji]' ~ (@denisehive, April 27)
>
> '@denisehive maybe it's because I'm not a fitness junky or beauty obsessed' ~ (@jilliansteph, April 27)
>
> '@jilliansteph sorry if my love of exercise and beauty items offends you … " ~ (@denisehive, April 27)

Overall, our findings show how the social media firestorm continued to grow in intensity. Protein World experimented with three different strategies until it settled on the escalation strategy in phase 3. Neither trolling critics (Golf-Papez & Veer, 2017) through ironic sales pitches (phase 1: deny), nor trying to appease them by showing sympathy and explaining Protein World's inner motivations (phase 2: diminish) worked to contain the controversy. Rather than continuing attempts to appease brand critics, in phase 3 Protein World poured more oil on the fire to escalate the controversy. Through dualistically framing itself and its critics as moral protagonists and antagonists, respectively, and through launching counter-attacks that adopted incendiary or moralistic tones and employed cultural jujitsu as rhetorical templates for interacting with brand critics, Protein World infuriated critics through its own interactions and, crucially, orchestrated a large number of distributed counter-attacks that turned the social media firestorm from a branding disaster into a branding opportunity.

Discussion

This paper explores branding in the age of social media firestorms through the integration of three separate literatures – on firestorms, crisis communications and branding – and an empirical investigation of a moral-based social media firestorm in which the focal brand

took the unusual step of escalating controversy, rather than appeasing its critics. Despite the risks that firestorms and online crises pose to brand value (Pfeffer et al., 2014), prior research has rarely connected these literatures in any systematic way. Marketing research on firestorms has generally eschewed drawing on the crisis communications literature, mainly because the latter's focus on substantial managerial misconducts and accidents seems at odds with the minor events or actions that often trigger social media firestorms (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). And while the branding literature emphasises consumers' active role in co-creating brand meanings (Gensler et al., 2013) during 'regular times' (Pace et al., 2017, p. 135), it has rarely explored the active role consumers can play during times of brand crises (Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). By connecting all three literatures, our research makes the following six contributions: We (1) identify and describe the brand-building potential of moral-based firestorms, (2) explain how brands can activate brand supporters, and (3) provide guidance on how to assess these morally steeped events. This expanded understanding of moral-based social media firestorms informs theories on managing brands in social media environments. Drawing on the new escalation strategy, we (4) identify how brand managers can act as provocateurs to facilitate and coordinate consumer-generated brand stories, and we (5) uncover the hidden benefits of negative consumer-generated brand stories. Finally, reflecting on the tactics we identify for the escalation strategy, we (6) provide a new perspective on the dialogical construction of brands in the age of social media. More specifically, we introduce the concept of 'flyting' to highlight the real-time dynamics of spontaneous interactions on social media, which have been under-theorised in contemporary branding frameworks and their more static conceptualisations of brand story co-creation (Gensler et al., 2013; Holt, 2016).

Managing moral-based social media firestorms

Analysing the dynamics of moral-based social media firestorms allows us to radically reconceptualise these events: Rather than always perceiving firestorms as brand hazards that should be mitigated (e.g. Pace et al., 2017; Pfeffer et al., 2014), moral-based firestorms can be seen as opportunities to build brand value. This suggestion is not entirely new, as some studies have acknowledged potential benefits from firestorms that can arise when companies 'react quickly and adequately' (Rauschnabel et al., 2016, p. 393). In this more traditional line of thinking, however, marketers are advised to correct behaviour and apologise for misdeeds to quickly quell a firestorm (Rauschnabel et al., 2016), thus producing goodwill from satisfied brand critics (Grégoire et al., 2015; Pfeffer et al., 2014). However, the down side of such appeasement strategies is that caving to brand critics in every situation severely limits companies' control over and ability to manage their brands. What is radically new in our approach is that brand managers can gain positive effects from escalating, rather than mitigating, moral-based firestorms. In our analysis, only the escalation strategy resulted in widespread consumer support that validated the firm in the short-term, and also has the potential to deepen consumer-brand connections in the longer term (Fournier, 1998; Moore, 2012). Protein World's Twitter followership grew throughout and after the controversy; however, we were unable to verify claims made by the company about positive financial outcomes. Future research that examines the long-term financial, reputational and brand loyalty effects of escalating a firestorm would be very fruitful.

Our analysis of the escalation strategy advances social media firestorm and crisis communications research by calling attention to under-researched aspects of how these events can be managed. Prior research on firestorms has demonstrated the benefits of distributed support (Hauser et al., 2017; Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014), but it has provided no concrete insights into what content or communicative behaviours can generate this support. Our research demonstrates that companies can motivate brand supporters to participate in a firestorm by establishing a moralistic framing of the controversy (e.g. via retweeting hostile tweets and ideological framing both sides of the controversy), and that they can structure support by patterning certain communicative actions (e.g. employing specific tones and engaging in cultural jujitsu). In addition to coordinating the responses of multiple employees during a firestorm, these rhetorical devices provide easy-to-copy templates that external brand supporters can apply in their own interactions with brand critics, so that the defence unfolds in similar and beneficial ways for the company.

These findings thus advance our understandings of how crises can be framed, which is a key concept in crisis communications research (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). While prior work has emphasised the importance of framing the company's own actions to reduce responsibility for the event (Coombs, 2007) or to align the brand with core values of important stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), our research highlights how a company can reframe the other side – brand critics and their own ideological positioning – as well. Such reframing offers companies a proactive way to reduce the legitimacy of a challenge, which prior research has identified as being a key factor in determining whether a paracrisis will receive widespread support (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Future research could expand on our analysis by examining other tactics companies can use to reframe its critics or activate brand supporters.

A third contribution of our research is that we provide implications for assessing social media firestorms and paracrises through exploring the dynamics of these morally steeped events. As Coombs and Holladay (2012) point out, managers need to assess an online challenge before selecting the appropriate response strategy. Our findings emphasise that the legitimacy of the challenge (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), rather than the aggressor's credibility (Hauser et al., 2017) or number of connections (Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014), is the foundational criteria for assessing how to respond to a moral-based social media firestorm. Findings from prior research that focused on the sharing and searching for trustworthy information (e.g. Cheng, 2018; Hauser et al., 2017; Tampere et al., 2016; Zhao, Zhan, & Wong, 2018) are therefore less transferable to firestorms that are triggered by perceived moral violations, as these charges cannot easily be discarded as factually incorrect (Mochalova & Nanopoulos, 2014). In other words, our study highlights the importance of 'meanings' over 'information' when dealing with morally based social media firestorms.

In addition, our analysis calls for a more nuanced examination of trajectory when assessing the potential of a firestorm during its early stages. Prior research assumes there is only a single trajectory for a paracrisis: support for the company either grows or plummets. For example, Coombs and Holladay (2012) argue that a refutation strategy is working if 'the trajectory of the challenge shows increased support for the organization' (p. 412). On the flip side, when a paracrisis 'begins to attract more stakeholders (the trajectory increases)', this is taken as 'evidence that the refuse strategy is failing' (p. 413).

However, morally ambiguous rhetorical arenas can produce situations in which support is growing for both the challenge and the organisation, as was the case in our context. Our analysis thus contests the assumption that, eventually, one side will win over the other, and that a dominant and generally accepted interpretation of the crisis will emerge (Coombs, 2007).

Managing brands in social media environments

Social media have challenged marketers' roles as the pivotal authors of brand stories (e.g. Cova & Pace, 2006; Holt, 2016; Kuksov, Shachar, & Wang, 2013), making the coordination of brand stories generated by different sources a paramount concern: As Gensler et al. (2013, p. 243) point out, 'knowledge about how to stimulate consumer-generated brand stories that benefit the brand, as well as how to react to brand stories that may harm the brand, is critical' for managing brand in social media environments. Our research on how Protein World orchestrated the firestorm around its brand provides insights on both of these points.

A fourth contribution of this article, then, is our exploration of the 'provocateur' as a new and powerful role that brand managers can assume to facilitate and coordinate consumer-generated brand stories. Media outlets have recently featured high profile examples of brands acting as provocateurs. These include KFC's casting of a female Colonel Sanders (Karlis, 2018), Nike's celebration of Colin Kaepernick's protest against the systematic oppression of African-Americans (Draper & Belson, 2018), and Gillette's stand against toxic masculinity (Smith, 2019); each case resulted in public backlash. For brands, provoking and orchestrating such moral-based social media firestorms are opportunities to become part of, or even drive, pressing cultural conversations. Branding theorists have long pointed out that aligning one's brand with such cultural conversations allow a brand to stay relevant in the eyes of their customers (e.g. Holt & Cameron, 2010). In the age of social media, this can be achieved through firestorms that play out as cross-media dramas and cultural events (Salek, 2016). Firestorms, and especially the focal brand's responses, are objects of consumption that audiences both gawk at and derive meaning from, similar to how consumers follow the public drama of celebrity scandals (Mills, Patterson, & Quinn, 2015). Brands that are able to deftly negotiate these events can leverage this attention for their benefit and become more culturally relevant.

Additional research is needed to fully understand the provocateur role in brand management. For example, not all brands fight back against their critics with the same intensity as that demonstrated by Protein World. Gillette, for example, acted as a provocateur and then stood behind its 'The best a man can be' ad in the face of a social media backlash. However, rather than further escalating the crisis, Gillette opted for a diminish strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2002) by explaining its 'good intentions' (Benoit, 1997) and conceding that its critics were 'absolutely entitled' to their own point of view (Berkowitz, 2019). In another example, Pepsi quickly pulled an advertisement that caused social media outrage over charges that the ad trivialised the Black Lives Matter movement (Victor, 2017), thus opting for an appeasement strategy (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). The extent to which fighting back against brand critics is a necessary or helpful aspect of being a provocateur is an important empirical question that lies

outside the scope of this article. Further future research could also explore the role brands can play in firestorms that revolve around another brand. In the Protein World firestorm, Carlsberg jumped into the controversy by ironically asking whether the audience was 'beer body ready' (McCarthy, 2015). The ways in which firestorms can give rise to networks of brands (Gensler et al., 2013) in which multiple brands poke fun at and antagonise each other is an interesting topic for further exploration.

Our discussion on the brand-building potential of social media firestorms suggests a fifth contribution of our research. Rather than assuming that negative consumer-generated content dilutes the official brand story and therefore must be curtailed (Gensler et al., 2013), managers should consider the possibility that negative voices can be a powerful ingredient of successful branding. This might seem counter-intuitive, but it is supported by prior work. Thompson et al. (2006), for example, argue that doppelgänger brand images are valuable early warning signs since they indicate that a brand may be losing cultural relevance. Over a dozen years later, the dynamic and real-time interactions enabled by social media expand the potential benefits of brand attacks. More than just a monitoring tool, negative consumer-generated brand stories can serve as points of contrast that bring a brand's positioning into clearer relief. Negative comments on social media are therefore not always noise that dilutes and cuts through an intended brand story. Instead, negative comments can potentially sharpen the brand story.

This may be especially true when brands demonstrate their resolve and convictions by escalating a controversy. Before the age of social media, brands like Ben & Jerry's could dramatise their positioning by fighting back against powerful political movements or corporate adversaries (Holt & Cameron, 2010). Using a similar mechanism of emphasising contrast, brands today can profess their values and commitments by standing firm in the face of backlash from individual social media users. In the current research, we focus on the actions of a brand as it orchestrated a social media firestorm through its framing activities and counter-attacks. Future research can adopt a different perspective and examine the value individual consumers may draw from defending the brand and waging their own distributed counter-attacks. Opportunities to fight for what is perceived to be morally right can provide identity value to consumers (e.g. Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Luedicke et al., 2010) and may offer welcome opportunities to not only consume but also produce 'snackable content' (Babbar, 2014; Marketing News, 2019) that is powerful because of its dramatic nature (Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989; Gensler et al., 2013), yet easier to incorporate into everyday life than, for example, participating in multi-day long brandfests in remote locations (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002).

Dialogical production of brand stories in real-time

Finally, our analysis provides an alternative, dialogical perspective of how brands are constructed in the age of social media. Contemporary branding theories conceptualise brands as being the product of collective and co-creational processes in which several stakeholders contribute with their perspectives (e.g. Handelman, 2006; Holt, 2003). For example, Cayla and Arnould (2008, p. 100) argue that a 'brand's meaning emerges out of consensus and dissensus, between the collective sharing of what the

brand means to all its stakeholders and the active and often conflictual negotiation of such meanings.'

However, even as contemporary branding frameworks emphasise the multi-vocal and co-creative nature of brand stories, they remain committed to a rather static perspective of brand story co-creation. Gensler et al. (2013) describe the coordination of consumer- and firm-generated brand stories as a puzzling together of separate pieces produced independently of one another in separate processes. Holt (2016) likewise emphasises the importance of consumers' voices through the concept of 'crowdcultures'. In his work, brands can gain resonance by diffusing a crowdculture's ideology through brand-generated content that 'passionately capture[s] the ideology of [a] crowdculture' (Holt, 2016, p. 48). While brands thus integrate consumer-generated brand stories into their own storytelling, this model also suggests a static perspective of coordinating brand stories: Marketers align their brands with a crowdculture's ideology to improve their own content; however, content inspiration, production and dissemination are separate processes that take place at different times and don't necessitate direct and immediate interactions between brand managers and consumers. These contemporary frameworks thus preserve elements of a bygone 'plan and execute' era in advertising and branding that foreground the careful creation and dissemination of firm-created content, now based on and in reaction to consumers' own content, without fully acknowledging the real-time and dynamic nature that is emblematic of the social media age (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Outside of marketing, scholars have begun to examine posting, commenting, tagging, linking and other activities on social media as a type of dialogical production of identity between multiple co-tellers of a story (e.g. Gleason, 2018; Page, Harper, & Frobenius, 2013). Our research points to a similar dialogical production of brand stories. Rather than integrating separate pieces of consumer-generated content in the firm's own communications (Gensler et al., 2013; Holt, 2016), we see Protein World's brand story and positioning emerge through micro-debates across ideological divides, propagated by dialogical, in-the-moment and inimical interactions between the brand, its critics, and brand supporters. The brand's ideology here is not diffused via carefully crafted and executed communiqués that originate from separate independent sources, but instead, it spreads in real time through clever interactions between multiple individuals who try to outwit each other in verbal duels, performed in front of an audience, that arise around contentious cultural flashpoints. For example, the dynamic exchange discussed in phase 3 between brand critic @nightfox ('The person running @proteinworld handle ought to be ashamed. Not from the ad, but from the sheer conceit in its replies on Twitter.') and Protein World ('@nightfox [strong arm emoji] – you can cry on this shoulder [blow kiss and heart emojis]') creates brand meanings through the implicit referencing of previous exchanges (sometimes aided by hashtags), the direct (and in this case antagonistic) interaction between two interlocutors, and the evaluation of other Twitter users (via 'Likes' and 'Retweets' that were in Protein World's favour) that signal which interlocutor has outwitted the other.

Our dynamic perspective on branding thus suggests that brand stories are networked narratives (Page et al., 2013) that emerge from these spontaneous and dialogical interactions between the brand and external co-tellers. We believe this dialogical perspective offers an important conceptual lens to understand branding in the age of social media.

Future research is needed to better explicate this perspective. As a first step, we identify and discuss 'flyting' (Parks, 1986) as a new, dialogical technique that brands can use to diffuse their ideological or purpose-based positioning.

Flyting, derived from the Old English and Old Norse words for 'quarrel' and 'provocation' (Holmes, 2016), describes a ritualised exchange of insults between two or more interlocutors. Parks (1986) traces flyting to the epic poems of *Beowulf* and *The Iliad*, and it was a commonly practised pastime at royal courts between the fifth and sixteenth centuries in England and Scotland (Holmes, 2016). In modern times, flyting can be observed in 'The Dozens', a game played in African-American communities in which verbal insults are hurled against each other in a public setting (Lefever, 1981), among college students (Schwebel, 1997), and in rap battles that are displayed in the movie *8 Mile* (Johnson, 2008). Fast-food brand Wendy's has also recently embraced flyting on its Twitter account, for example, when verbally duelling with competitors Hardee's (Cohn, 2017) and Carl's Jr. (Fox News, 2017), or when roasting its critics directly (Beltis, 2017).

Flyting, as a verbal contest conducted in a public space, is a means for participants to establish their identities (Parks, 1986), and is therefore attractive for brands and brand supporters alike. Brands that wish to use flyting for branding can reap rewards through their own wit in these interactions, but also by modelling this verbal jousting for brand supporters who can then practice it for the purpose of their own identity construction. Flyting is based on dialogical exchanges between opposing parties. Our work thus encourages marketing managers to not only seek out contentious issues and cultural flashpoints within the safety of their own ideological camps and friendly crowdcultures (Holt, 2016), but also to engage with opposing sides in verbal contests that allow brands to bolster their ideological brand positioning. Finding the right approach in these stylised battles of insults and wits can be a delicate matter. Parks (1986) differentiates between heroic and ludic flyting, noting that in the latter type contestants do not intend their statements to be literally true. Similarly, sarcasm and irony are also important aspects of 'The Dozens' (Lefever, 1981) and rap battles (Johnson, 2008). We also saw Protein World be most successful when they employed irony in their snarky remarks; however, how to best navigate the line between ludic flyting and taking things too seriously is an important matter for future research.

Managerial implications

Brands face increasing criticism and pressure to adjust behaviour that is perceived to be immoral by certain stakeholders. However, appeasing brand critics can be costly. It is estimated, for example, that Nike paid Kaepernik approximately $5 million for their collaboration (Calfas, 2018). This money, as well as advertising production and media costs, would have been lost if Nike had suppressed its now iconic ad. Our research provides practitioners with important insights into how to manage social media firestorms and, more generally, their brands in the age of social media.

Through tracking the different stages of Protein World's firestorm, we abstract a more general template for how managers can utilise the escalation strategy for their own brands (see panels in Figure 2). A successful application of the escalation strategy involves (1) the framing of one's own positioning and of the opposing side in ways that accentuate the ideological fault-line between the brand and its detractors, as well

as (2) launching counter-attacks that directly infuriate brand critics. These communicative behaviours motivate and guide brand supporters to (3) launch their own distributed counter-attacks in defence of the brand, resulting in consumer-to-consumer interactions across the ideological fault line that further deepen the opposition between both sides.

Deploying the escalation strategy requires different skills and abilities that a company should nourish and promulgate amongst its employees. Establishing a moralistic framing and identifying opportunities to engage in cultural jujitsu require a keen awareness of the socio-cultural environment as well as strategic communication skills. Some ideas can be harvested via social listening, into which marketers should invest. In our context, Protein World's new tag line and some of its tweets that constructed the dualistic framing were crowdsourced from their supporters' tweets. Companies should also look for spontaneity, wit and rhetorical flexibility when hiring for their social media workforce, as these are essential attributes for luring brand opponents into, and winning, flyting matches.

We derived the tactics of retweeting, dual framing, adopting incendiary and moralistic tones, and cultural jujitsu from the context of one particular firestorm. While we think these tactics can be applied in other contexts, they certainly need to be adjusted to match the particularities of each brand. For example, offering a strong 'shoulder to cry on' in a flyting match might suit a brand for protein powder and sport supplements, but not so much for companies that adopt more sophisticated or sincere brand personalities (Aaker, 1997). Such brands might infuse their flyting with more charming or down-to-earth undertones, respectively. However, the basic structure of these tactics is likely to remain the same.

Our research offers practitioners an alternative to appeasing brand critics; however, the escalation strategy might not be the best choice in all situations or for all companies. In this article, we demonstrate how moral-based social media firestorms provide rich opportunities to create brand value, due to the existence of ideological divisions in the marketplace (Holt & Cameron, 2010; Thompson, 2004) that split consumers into different factions of what is deemed morally acceptable. However, firestorms can be triggered for a variety of reasons (e.g. Rauschnabel et al., 2016), and we would strongly advise against escalating a firestorm triggered by a product failure that caused injury or death to human life. Future research may examine when escalating a firestorm will be beneficial for companies. Some product-based triggers may be ambiguous enough to allow for more assertive response strategies. For example, public claims that potato chip manufacturers short-change customers by under-filling their snack bags regularly pop up on social media, and large companies are frequently criticised for dodging taxes through elaborate offshoring practices. The accused companies can often provide some rationale for their 'misbehaviour', such as 'slack fill' to protect the delicate potato chips or a need to compete in a global marketplace. Future research should examine whether or not an escalation strategy would work for such product-based but, nevertheless, ambiguous firestorms. Another type of framing (e.g. the attacker as an uninformed troublemaker, rather than the moral antagonist) might be more suitable in such situations.

We believe that brands of all sizes can employ more assertive response strategies, as long as the brand has created an ideological positioning that resonates with their customers' core values. However, we caution managers to carefully reconnoitre the battlefield

on which the controversy will be fought before committing to the escalation strategy. One key task is to examine whether a large enough group of consumers, who might or might not be current customers, supports the moral position that the brand embraces. In addition to analysing supportive tweets, brands can scan the wider cultural environment and zeitgeist for popular or rising counter-narratives (e.g. Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007) that are suitable to reframe and rebut their critics. For example, Protein World might have recognised how other provocateurs like Milo Yiannopoulos (2017) and fringe media outlets have propagated a certain scepticism about 'overly politically correct social justice warriors' that created a fertile ground for their moralistic framing of the controversy. Future research is needed to better understand the different actors that come together to fight in such brand-mediated battles. In the meantime, marketers should avoid jumping straight into escalation mode. Instead, they should employ deny and/or diminish strategies as low-risk ways to examine the critique, understand the trajectories of the challenge and support for the brand, and hone the brand's ideological positioning. Only if this reconnaissance has shown sufficient potential for brand supporters to engage in distributed counter-attacks, can brands then escalate the firestorm further for their advantage.

Conclusion

In this article, we have reframed moral-based social media firestorms from being a misstep in need of management to being an opportunity ripe for brand building. Online controversies have become increasingly common in today's hyper-connected and polarised societies, creating an urgent need for marketers to better understand how they can forge their brands through the heat provided by social media firestorms. Our research provides such insights by detailing the escalation strategy and how it can be applied. Furthermore, our conceptualisation of moral-based social media firestorms as ambiguous rhetorical arenas allows us to advance current theories on managing firestorms, and more generally managing brands in the social media environment.

In addition to the previously discussed avenues for future research, there are several limitations in our study that should be addressed. Our perspective on leveraging online controversy for brand building purposes poses important ethical questions, such as whether a brand should be allowed to infuriate its critics, or whether critics are right to impose their value structure onto a brand and its customers. We have sidestepped these questions, which require their own careful examination, and instead, present the escalation strategy and theoretical implications for managing firestorms and brands. A second limitation is that our research is based on a single context, and future research is needed to examine how the escalation strategy can be applied to other contexts with different ideological framings. We believe that very similar dynamics would be observed when brands are challenged for adopting more progressive stances that are also frequently attacked on social media. Brand managers face more and more demands to make a social stand (Marketing News, 2019), but their purpose-driven campaigns often result in backlashes. Additional research on when and how brands should escalate the online controversies will help managers to better evaluate the opportunities and risks associated with this branding trend. Finally, our research predominantly focuses on the brand as the focal actor that orchestrates social media firestorms. More research is needed to better understand the dynamics that unfold in rhetorical arenas (Frandsen & Johansen, 2012). This

can include examining the roles and communicative strategies of other actors during a firestorm to identify, for example, differences between brand critics who only voice their anger on social media, versus those who engage in real-world protests. Other research could differentiate between distinct types of actors who support the brand for various reasons and for leveraging different agendas. Furthermore, future research should examine the interplay between different sub-arenas (Coombs & Holladay, 2014) by, for example, examining how the dynamics of the firestorm change as the controversy moves from a social media arena (e.g. Twitter) to a different arena (e.g. brand representatives and critics are interviewed on national TV). Such future research would further deepen our understandings on how to manage brands in the age of social media firestorms.

Overall, social media continue to challenge practitioners and academics to evolve their branding frameworks. This article provides a solid foundation to further examine how marketers can build authentic and resonating brands through dialogical interactions in real time. While more harmonious and consensus-oriented approaches for brand building will certainly not go out of style anytime soon, we nevertheless believe that in the current controversy-laden climate, brands sometimes need to fight back.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Joachim Scholz is an assistant professor of marketing at Brock University. His research explores augmented reality marketing, social media controversies and branding in digitally-infused, hyper-connected and polarised societies.

Andrew N. Smith is an assistant professor of marketing at Suffolk University. His research explores digital and social media marketing, augmented reality, online word-of-mouth and market systems.

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