

# Why Online Consumption Communities Brutalize

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Forthcoming, *Journal of Consumer Research*

Accepted Manuscript  
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14 Jouy-en-Josas, France. Please address correspondence to Olivier Sibai. The article is based on  
15  
16 the lead author's dissertation. The authors gratefully acknowledge the constructive comments of  
17  
18 Linda L. Price, June Cotte, Markus Giesler, Tandy Chalmers Thomas, and four anonymous  
19  
20 reviewers. They also thank Webpreserver Software for their support with data capture, Alastair  
21  
22 Herbert and Dell Zhang for their assistance with text mining, Carolin Eisl and Milos Ivanis for  
23  
24 their help with tables and figures, the marketing faculty at Bayes, Birkbeck, EM Lyon, King's,  
25  
26 Schulich and Sussex Business School for their helpful feedback, and Souraya Chenguelly for her  
27  
28 unfaltering support. The authors declare having no conflict of interests. Supplementary materials  
29  
30 are included in the web appendix accompanying the online version of this article.  
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38 Editors: Linda L. Price and June Cotte

39  
40 Associate Editor: Tandy Chalmers Thomas  
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**ABSTRACT**

Consumers who socialize in online consumption communities sometimes become alarmingly hostile, toxic, and otherwise verbally violent toward one another—a phenomenon known in sociology as brutalization. Research indicates that short-lived, situational outbursts of verbal violence—such as gross insults, harassment, or trolling—are common in online consumption contexts. However, it does not explain why such behaviors sometimes become endemic, turning entire communities into toxic social spaces. To address this question, the authors studied 18 years of interactions in an online electronic dance music community. Their interpretive analysis reveals three constellations of interacting, mutually reinforcing, forms of direct, structural, and cultural violence—sadistic entertainment, clan warfare, and popular justice—that fuel community brutalization in distinct ways. This article introduces these brutalization constellations, substantiates them with empirical data, and discusses their implications for theories of violence in consumption communities as well as the wider social media sphere.

*Keywords:* consumption communities, community management, online harassment, social media violence, trolling, digital historiography

[T]he inclination to aggression ... constitutes the greatest impediment to civilization.

—Sigmund Freud (1961, 69)

Consumption communities are groups of individuals who share a commitment to a product class, brand, activity, or consumption ideology (Thomas, Price, and Schau 2013). Members invest considerable amounts of time, effort, and aspects of their identity to enjoy the intimacy (Nelson and Otnes 2005), social trust (Mathwick, Wiertz, and De Ruyter 2008), and sense of moral responsibility these communities provide (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). Yet, although consumers typically join consumption communities to socialize peacefully, they are no love-fests (Fournier and Lee 2009). Especially, online communities are often riddled with internal verbal slander (Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015), harassment (Seregina and Weijo 2017), trolling (Cruz, Seo, and Rex 2018), hateful flaming (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), and other “avoidable insults to basic human needs” (Galtung 1990, 292).

While consumption communities usually suppress verbal violence over time (Husemann et al. 2015), it can become endemic—that is, a constitutive part of a community—a phenomenon known as brutalization (Beyrau 2015). The online platform Reddit, for example, which hosts about a million communities, has been tagged in the media as the most hateful space on the Internet (Isquith 2015), a toxic space that enables the spread of violence (Marantz 2018). The popular live-streaming platform Twitch has been deemed a dark platform with a toxic community culture (Hern 2022), and the leading mobile gaming community Discord reported having to shut down nearly 30,000 communities across the site for various types of abuse (Allyn 2021). Because prior research has focused on short-lived, situational outbursts of verbal violence, it cannot explain why such behaviors sometimes become endemic and turn entire communities into toxic social spaces.

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4 Endemic verbal violence may only occur in digitally mediated, noncommittal  
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6 consumption settings but it can substantially affect victims. Experiencing violence in front of  
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8 large online audiences, for example, can be emotionally devastating (Marwick and boyd 2014)  
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10 and lead to paranoia, depression, anxiety, feelings of shame, and even posttraumatic stress  
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12 disorder among victims (UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport 2019). It can  
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14 increase consumers' risks of substance abuse, withdrawal from social life, and, in extreme cases,  
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16 self-harm and suicide (UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport 2019). Excessive  
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18 verbal violence can also jeopardize a community's continuity by fostering disengagement (Reid  
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20 1999) or cause collective paralysis (Hemetsberger 2006). Therefore, verbal violence in online  
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22 settings should not be taken lightly.  
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27 Why do online consumption communities brutalize? To address this question, we  
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29 conducted a longitudinal interpretive study of a British electronic dance music community—an  
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31 activity-based, hybrid (on- and offline), enduring consumption community with low barriers to  
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33 entry (Thomas et al. 2013). The community was founded in 2001 by a semi-professional disc  
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35 jockey for consumers to share their passion for hard house—a fast-paced genre of electronic  
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37 dance music with offbeat bass stabs, hoover sounds, and crowd-cheering samples—and lasted  
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39 until 2018. Our longitudinal interpretive analysis captures all 18 years of online consumer  
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41 interactions, augmented with in-depth interviews, ethnographic notes, and archival data.  
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45 To analyze these data, we drew on the work of peace sociologist Johan Galtung (1969,  
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47 1990), whose theory of violence is particularly well suited to disentangle and systematically  
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49 compare complex brutalization dynamics. Galtung argues that three forms of violence—direct,  
50  
51 structural, and cultural—co-exist and reinforce each other. He highlights, for example, that the  
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53 directly violent enslavement of millions of Africans has led to the formation of violent social  
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4 structures that perpetuated the dominance of whites, justified by culturally violent racial  
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6 prejudices (Galtung 1990). This theoretical lens allowed us to identify three distinct  
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8 constellations of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence that promoted the brutalization  
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10 of our focal consumption community in conceptually distinct ways.

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13 To best reveal these findings, we first review findings and gaps in the literature on  
14  
15 violence and brutalization in consumption communities. We then provide an overview of our  
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17 empirical context as well as our data collection and analysis procedures. Next, we present the  
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19 three brutalization constellations, illustrating each with data excerpts. Finally, we discuss  
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21 implications of our study for the literature on violence in consumption communities, explore on-  
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23 versus offline brutalization dynamics, suggest how brutalization can be mitigated, and reflect on  
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25 how our study contributes to understanding brutalization in the broader social media sphere.  
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## 32 **THEORY**

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38 The term brutalization refers to the gradual spread of violence in a social context such  
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40 that it becomes endemic, that is, a constitutive part of that context (Beyrau 2015). To capture  
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42 how verbal violence becomes entrenched, rather than discouraged, in a consumption community,  
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44 we draw on Johan Galtung's (1990) conceptual distinction of three forms of violence—direct,  
45  
46 structural, and cultural violence. Building on his ideas, we define *consumption community*  
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48 *brutalization* as the simultaneous emergence of interacting direct, structural, and cultural forms  
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50 of violence in a communal consumption context.  
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## Direct Violence

Galtung (1990) defines violence broadly as avoidable insults to basic human needs such as well-being, identity, survival, or freedom. He conceives of direct violence as an event consisting of actions that intentionally obstruct the realization of the needs of others (Galtung 1990). Forms of direct violence fall along multiple axes, including their means, their duration, the number of people involved, and their motivation (Warburton and Anderson 2015). The distinction of physical, material, and verbal means of exercising direct violence is central to our analytical purposes. Physical violence involves harming others through force, such as punching, kicking, stabbing, or shooting them (Allen and Anderson 2017). Material violence involves damaging others' property to hurt them vicariously through, for example, arson, slashing car tires, or assaulting others' online avatars (Parrott and Giancola 2007). Verbal violence is hurting others through spoken (or written) words, which includes humiliating, threatening, manipulating, or yelling at them. Although it does not entail physical injury, verbal violence is still a form of aggression that can cause severe emotional harm and impair victims' ability to regulate their emotions, maintain their self-esteem, or even find reasons to live (Allen and Anderson 2017).

In consumption community research, evidence on physical and material forms of direct violence is scant. However, certain forms of physical aggression may be scripted into consumption practices (Thompson and Üstüner 2015), and material violence may occur when consumers compete for scarce resources or moral high grounds (Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010). Consumption contexts in which direct violence may occur include surf spots where "[e]verybody hates everybody else" (Canniford and Shankar 2013, 1061), mountain expeditions where slower climbers prevent faster ones "from achieving [their] goal of standing

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4 on the summit” (Tumbat and Belk 2011, 53), or bikers touching another person’s Harley without  
5 permission, resulting in “violent reprisals” (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, 51).  
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8 Verbal violence, by contrast, is frequent in many online consumption communities.  
9  
10 Online community members harm each other’s feelings, identities, and self-esteem through  
11 verbal slander and abuse (Gebauer, Füller, and Pezzeri 2013; Husemann et al. 2015), flame wars  
12 (De Valck 2007; Hemetsberger 2006; Perelmutter 2013), trolling (Cruz et al. 2018; Phillips  
13 2015), and cyber-harassment, to name just a few practices (Seregina and Weijo 2017; Van Laer  
14 2014). The intensity of these outbursts of verbal violence differs across communities. Some  
15 studies report relatively moderate forms of verbal hostility, such as gossiping uncharitably  
16 (Seregina and Weijo 2017) or posting dismissive remarks (Gebauer et al. 2013), whereas others  
17 document more extreme forms, such as consumers threatening to rape members of a support  
18 community for sexual aggression survivors (Reid 1999) or terrifying female members by  
19 labeling them “potential affair[s], and the community’s object[s] of desire” (Husemann et al.  
20 2015, 278). Prior studies suggest that such occasional bouts of verbal violence fascinate and  
21 attract community members, energize the community’s creative process, and thus contribute to  
22 the continuation of communities (Husemann et al. 2015), rather than jeopardizing them. One  
23 explanation of this rather positive evaluation is that most communities quickly end violent  
24 conflicts by demanding respect for otherness (Husemann et al. 2015), appealing to members’  
25 moral senses (Colliander and Wien 2013), or aligning frames (Thomas et al. 2013).  
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47 Overall, consumer research portrays short-term, situated conflict as the norm in online  
48 consumption communities, rendering verbal violence an almost natural characteristic of these  
49 contexts (Fournier and Lee 2009). However, it does not explain why communities sometimes fail  
50 to tame verbal violence within their ranks and instead allow it to become endemic.  
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## Structural Violence

Structural violence refers to “inequality in the distribution of power” (Galtung 1969, 175) that has exploitation as a centerpiece and engenders unequal life chances (Galtung 1990). Structural violence operates as a social machinery of oppression, ensuring that some social groups are systematically barred from reaching their full potential while others reap the benefits (Farmer et al. 2006). An insidious quality of structural violence is that it often cannot be assigned to an individual agent (Winter 2012); instead, it is built into a wide range of social relations, laws, and cultural habits (i.e., social structures), the violence of which is often invisible to those in power. For those subjected to it, however, structural violence visibly and often drastically thwarts their ability to meet their physical, social, and psychological needs (Christie 2008). In society, structural violence reveals itself in unequal access to employment, medical care, justice, and public representation, for example. In organizations, it manifests in institutional practices that systematically discriminate against certain groups of employees (Hutchinson and Jackson 2015). Because it is so deeply rooted in societies’ and organizations’ social fabric, structural violence is also referred to as systemic and institutional violence (Finley 2006).

In consumption communities, structural violence has not yet been systematically explored. One reason is that it seems unlikely that communities formed around consumption interests rather than stigmatized personal markers (Crockett 2017) can produce unequal life chances (Galtung 1969). Nevertheless, two insights from prior studies suggest that specific forms of structural violence may exist online. First, consumption communities are often heterogeneous, resulting in members arguing about the legitimate “roles played in the community, the meanings derived from membership, and the resources created within the community” (Thomas et al. 2013,

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4 1015). Such conflicts may sediment into forms of structural violence that allow privileged  
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6 members to systematically diminish the consumption opportunities, identities, and well-being of  
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8 the lower status members (Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander 2006). Second, in online  
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10 communities specifically, members with superior administrative and technical power sometimes  
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12 abuse their influence (Reid 1999), distributing roles and favors in discriminatory ways (Smith  
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14 1999), using censorship against members who express negative emotions (Mardon, Molesworth,  
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16 and Grigore 2018), or refraining from protecting vulnerable members (Smith 1999). Thus far,  
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18 while the literature has made occasional reference to structural power imbalances and forms of  
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20 power abuse in online consumption communities, it has not yet systematically examined whether  
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22 structural violence—in the form of serious, systematic inequality rooted in exploitation (Galtung  
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24 1969, 1990)—exists at all in such voluntary social contexts, how it may manifest itself, and  
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26 whether it plays a role in community brutalization.  
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### 33 Cultural Violence

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38 Cultural violence refers to values, beliefs, norms, or narratives that justify the use of  
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40 direct and structural violence by changing “the moral color” of an event, relationship, or  
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42 behavior “from red/wrong to green/right” making them “look, or even feel, right – or at least not  
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44 wrong” (Galtung 1990, 292). In society, cultural violence is considered an invariant that  
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46 essentially stays the same for long periods (Galtung 1990), and, therefore, is difficult to identify  
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48 or change. Like symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1984), cultural violence justifies human  
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50 exploitation by creating hierarchies of worth that put certain people and their way of being and  
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52 doing into the unworthy, immoral category. Unlike symbolic violence, cultural violence does not  
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54 require the dominated to accept their positions (Swartz 2007); instead, it operates in multiple  
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4 directions, allowing oppressed “underdogs” to justify violence against “top dogs” to “get out of  
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6 the structural iron cage” but also dominant groups to portray themselves as victims (Galtung  
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8 1990, 293). Social contexts in which cultural violence looms large are also called subcultures of  
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10 violence (Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967).

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13 In consumption communities, members frequently use demonization narratives to justify  
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15 the use of violence to force out disagreeable, norm-violating, or innovative members or coerce  
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17 them to integrate into the system (Avery 2007; De Valck 2007; Hemetsberger 2006). Such  
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19 culturally violent narratives tend to be rooted in incompatible interpretations of a community’s  
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21 values, norms, and practices (Thomas et al. 2013). In cosplay online communities, for example,  
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23 members circulate hostile narratives about opportunistic fame seekers that exploit the  
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25 community’s playful performances for personal gain and thus encourage “hurtful, scary, and  
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27 gross” harassment of such members (Seregina and Weijo 2017, 149).

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31 Overall, previous consumption research has highlighted the confrontational nature,  
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33 emotional intensity, and disciplinary function of denigrating narratives especially in online  
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35 consumption communities but has not treated these narratives as forms of cultural violence or  
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37 examined their relationship to other forms of violence. Thus, how cultural violence contributes to  
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39 community brutalization remains to be shown.

#### 40 41 42 43 44 45 Interactions of the Three Forms of Violence

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49 Direct, cultural, and structural forms of violence interact in ways that epitomize a  
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51 “(vicious) *violence triangle*” (Galtung 1990, 294, italics in original), where each type of violence  
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53 breeds other types in specific ways. If left undeterred, direct violence can sediment into structural  
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55 and cultural forms of violence that perpetuate discrimination and prejudice long after the direct  
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4 violence has dissipated. Cultural violence, in turn, justifies direct violence and violent social  
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6 structures. Persistent structural and cultural violence can motivate direct, rebellious  
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8 counterviolence on the part of those whose needs are impaired (Breuer and Elson 2017).  
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11 The three forms of violence and their interactions evidently take similar forms in similar  
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13 social settings. For example, directly violent gang-related crime and physical assaults tend to  
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15 occur in low-income neighborhoods where structural violence manifests in poverty, negative  
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17 police prejudice, and broken family relationships and tend to be justified by culturally violent  
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19 identity myths that portray male aggression as a sign of strength, resourcefulness, and courage  
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21 (Anderson 1999; Nisbett and Cohen 1996). We theorize such patterned interactions of direct,  
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23 structural, and cultural forms of violence as *brutalizing constellations*.  
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26  
27 In light of media reports on brutalized online communities (Hern 2022; Isquith 2015;  
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29 Marantz 2018) and research on conflict in online consumption communities (Husemann et al.  
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31 2015), the existence of brutalization constellations specific to online consumption contexts is  
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33 conceivable. Yet, as prior research has portrayed online consumption communities as overall  
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35 rather benign, value-creating social entities, it has not systematically examined why such  
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37 voluntary, leisure-oriented communities sometimes become toxic places where verbal violence  
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39 prevails over months and years—not days or weeks. We aim to fill this gap in knowledge with an  
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41 interpretive study in the consumption context we introduce next.  
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## 48 **CONTEXT AND METHODS**

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53 To address our research question, we conducted a longitudinal qualitative study of an  
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55 electronic dance music community, which we refer to by the pseudonym Hard House (HaHo).  
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4 HaHo is an activity-based (Thomas et al. 2013) consumption community founded in 2001 in  
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6 London by a semi-professional disc jockey.  
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8         Hard house clubbing has its roots in the rave youth counterculture, which is notorious for  
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10 seeking prolonged escapist experiences and promoting the right to escape social norms  
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12 (Anderson 2009). It also has an affinity for the psychedelic trance and LGBTQ+ clubbing scene.  
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14 The use of drugs such as ecstasy and ketamine, which induce feelings of connectedness and  
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16 dreamlike expansiveness, is common in the community's club nights. At the time of our  
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18 ethnographic work, clubbing events were held in London venues as one-off or regular events,  
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20 organized by various members. Typical HaHo clubbing events were attended by 300 to 400  
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22 clubbers, most of whom were in their 30s and 40s and approximately 60% of them being male.  
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24 At the outset, HaHo was a hybrid community whose members also met in a dedicated online  
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26 forum. Online, consumers discussed events, disc jockeys, and music; shared clubbing pictures;  
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28 and advised each other on private matters, including romantic relationships and career choices.  
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30 On- and offline community life was closely intertwined. Members exchanged their online  
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32 pseudonyms at events to connect online. Many also used self-identifying pictures for their  
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34 profiles and commented on each other's clubbing photos.  
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40         The HaHo community offered an ideal context for our theoretical endeavor. For 18 years,  
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42 its website was the leading site for the United Kingdom's hard house scene. HaHo emerged as a  
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44 relatively amicable community in 2001 but by the time of our immersion (2012), it had already  
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46 developed patterns of endemic verbal violence between members, which changed significantly  
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48 over time. The community slowly dissipated in 2018 as the founding members became less  
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50 involved. Overall, HaHo connected about 20,000 members, who generated more than seven  
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52 million posts. This longitudinal set of typed, naturalistic interactions allowed us to analyze when,  
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how, and why certain forms of violence manifested in the community and to distinguish isolated, temporary outbursts of violence from more endemic, enduring forms.

Our case study used a blended historical research design that we call *digital community archaeology*. Data collection followed the protocols of traditional mixed-method netnography (Kozinets 2020) but put greater emphasis on longitudinal archival data. Data analysis was inspired by Tilly's (2002) historiography of violence. Table 1 provides an overview of our data sources and selection purposes.

TABLE 1: DATA OVERVIEW

Type of data	Sources	Data set	Role in data analysis
Discussion threads	Community forum archives (2001–2012) and live observation of community discussions (2012–2018)	170 threads involving violence, representing 27,025 posts, 10,096 printed pages	Naturalistic observation of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence over time; evolution of governance styles; and changes in community culture more broadly
In-depth interviews	Community members and moderators. Interviews ranged from 45 to 160 minutes	7 recorded interviews, 240 double-spaced pages of transcript	Capture members' personal experiences of verbal violence; triangulation and disambiguation of online data; identification of on-/offline violent episodes
Community statistics	Microsoft SQL database	Copy of the community forum, including all communal activities from 2001 to 2013	Observing specific contextual variations, including posting volumes over time
Field notes	Ethnographic observation during 15 clubbing events	26 pages of notes written during and after events in 2013 and 2014	Understanding the community's culture through firsthand clubbing experience; exploring potential offline violence; triangulation
Academic articles and books	Journals: <i>Anthropological Quarterly</i> , <i>Consumption Markets and Culture</i> , <i>Culture and Religion</i> , <i>Durham Anthropology Journal</i> , <i>Journal of Consumer Research</i> , <i>Popular Music</i> , <i>Sociological Forum</i> , <i>Western Journal of Communication</i> Books: <i>Club Culture</i> , <i>The Club Cultures Reader</i> , <i>Keyboard Presents the Evolution of Electronic Dance Music</i> , <i>Electronic Music</i>	4 books, 10 articles	Understanding the history of the broader clubbing subculture and situating the HaHo community within it
Movies and documentaries	Documentaries: <i>Pump Up the Volume: The History of House Music</i> , <i>Rave: The Beat Goes On</i> , <i>The Hacienda Nightclub</i> , <i>Kraftwerk: We Are the Robots</i> , <i>The Berlin Love Parade: Story of Dubstep</i> , <i>insidevideography.com</i> Movies: <i>Human Traffic</i> , <i>Trainspotting</i> , <i>T2 Trainspotting</i>	6 documentaries, 3 movies	Deepening our understanding of the clubbing subculture and how it might affect the community at hand

## Netnography

Following Kozinets' (2020) guidelines, the first author began observing the online forum in June 2012 to familiarize himself with HaHo's consumption culture and interaction style. This step involved following forum discussions, reading monthly newsletters, and reading approximately 5,000 threads. In October 2013, the author disclosed his presence as a researcher and participant observer via a message in the welcome section. Soon after, the first author began collecting violent episodes from HaHo's online history, that is, discussion threads in which two or more participants intentionally hurt others (Tilly 2002). We coded interactions with intent to harm as those in which members openly defended their abuse of others or did not apologize.

The first author used four strategies to locate violent episodes amid the seven million published posts. First, he followed live conversations for seven years (2012–2018) until the community had become dormant and no new violent episodes occurred for a year. Second, he searched the entire forum using indicative keywords such as “trolling,” “flame,” “bullying,” “keyboard warrior,” or “hateful”, selected based on his emic experience with the forum. Third, he sampled historical threads on the basis of recommendations made by interviewees. Finally, the first author developed a Python-based text-mining algorithm (Salminen et al. 2020; Spertus 1997; Xiang et al. 2012) to capture violent episodes that occurred prior to participant observation (2001–2013), the only period for which the forum owner provided raw data. Using these four strategies, he generated a data set of 170 discussion threads published between 2001 and 2018 and that varied in the type, intensity, and duration of violence and harm inflicted. These threads spanned 27,025 posts, or 10,096 pages of PDF text in the forum's original format.

## Ethnography

We complemented our netnographic data set with ethnographic data. Between June 2012 and December 2014, the first author participated in 15 community events—i.e., one community picnic; seven community-centered clubbing nights, including two Christmas parties; and seven clubbing events that were discussed on the HaHo forum. Twenty-six pages of field notes recorded the general atmosphere, notable events, and interactions between the researcher and clubbers and among clubbers. Across the entire observation period, only one case of offline violence (a fistfight) came to light.

The first author also conducted seven in-depth interviews with three forum moderators and three male and one female core members—six in cafés and one over the phone. He recruited interviewees through an acquaintance and then through a snowballing system. All interviewees were regular participants in community events and contributors to the forum with intimate knowledge of HaHo's online and offline interactions and held diverse views on online verbal violence. Interviews focused on members' status in the community, their experience of violent episodes, how moderators and members addressed violence, and how violence affected the community over time. The interviews amounted to 12 recorded hours and 240 double-spaced (12-pt. Arial font) transcript pages.

While the netnographic data served as the primary data source, the ethnographic immersion provided real-world, embodied experiences that facilitated accurate interpretations of online posts. In-depth interviews also offered oral histories (Elliott and Davies 2006) that helped disambiguate archival data and sensitize the research team to the potential presence of cultural and structural violence in the forum. Finally, throughout the study period, the first author



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3 reviewed academic articles, books, documentaries, and movies about clubbing culture to  
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5 contextualize the HaHo community and its transformation.  
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## 10 Data Analysis

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14 To theorize how online consumption communities brutalize, we followed the strategy of  
15 event cataloging, as described by violence historian Charles Tilly (2002). Event cataloging  
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17 consists of defining and organizing evidence of how a phenomenon “leaves traces” and then  
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19 reconstructing “attributes, elements, causes, and effects of the phenomenon from those traces”  
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21 (Tilly 2002, 248). Web appendix A provides an overview of how we engaged with the three  
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23 main analytical moments of event cataloging, i.e., aggregation, incident analysis, and search for  
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25 internal regularities.  
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31 We first analyzed the 120 manually collected threads and built our conceptual model. We  
32  
33 then analyzed the 50 additional threads we identified through text mining to challenge and  
34  
35 triangulate the accuracy and completeness of our interpretations. We coded interactions in which  
36  
37 members verbally hurt others in pursuit of personal or community interests as direct violence.  
38  
39

40 We identified structural violence in relationships characterized by unequal power  
41  
42 distributions and systemic forms of exploitation. We coded narratives that members collectively  
43  
44 harnessed to justify direct verbal violence as evidence of cultural violence. Finally, we started to  
45  
46 look for patterns in the emergence of these violent forms and found systematic co-occurrence  
47  
48 and mutual enforcement, leading eventually to our theorization of three empirically distinct  
49  
50 constellations. Table 2 traces the emergence and dissipation of the three brutalizing  
51  
52 constellations we observed over the 18-year analytical period.  
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## FINDINGS

Our analysis of endemic violence in the HaHo consumption community culminated in a conceptual model that captures three ideal-typical, socioculturally patterned constellations of direct, structural, and cultural violence that evidence community brutalization: *sadistic entertainment*, *clan warfare*, and *popular justice*. We next theorize these brutalizing constellations, illustrate them with empirical data excerpts, and discuss them in light of prior research. To present a rich and detailed analysis, we focus primarily on one violent incident to illustrate each constellation (Thomas et al. 2013). To ensure confidentiality, we use pseudonyms for interviewees, online posters, and the featured clans (Kozinets et al. 2020). Figure 1 provides a graphical overview of our brutalization model.

FIGURE 1: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF CONSUMPTION COMMUNITY BRUTALIZATION

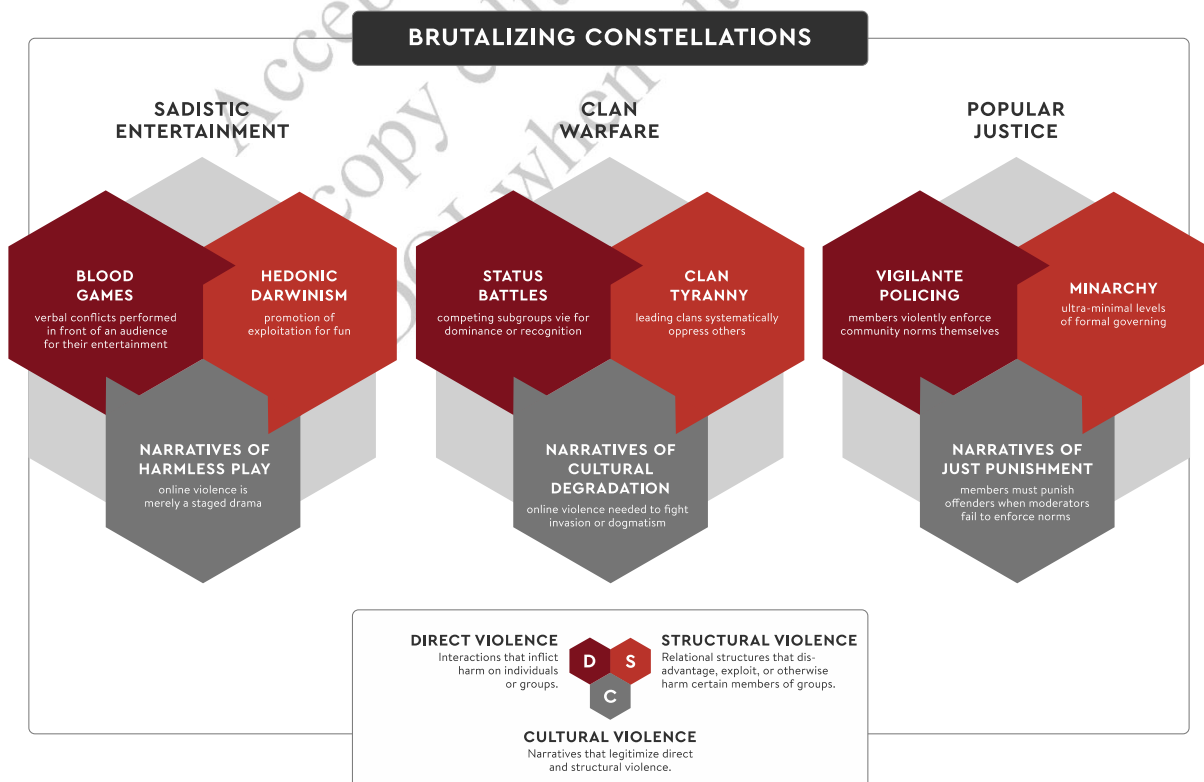
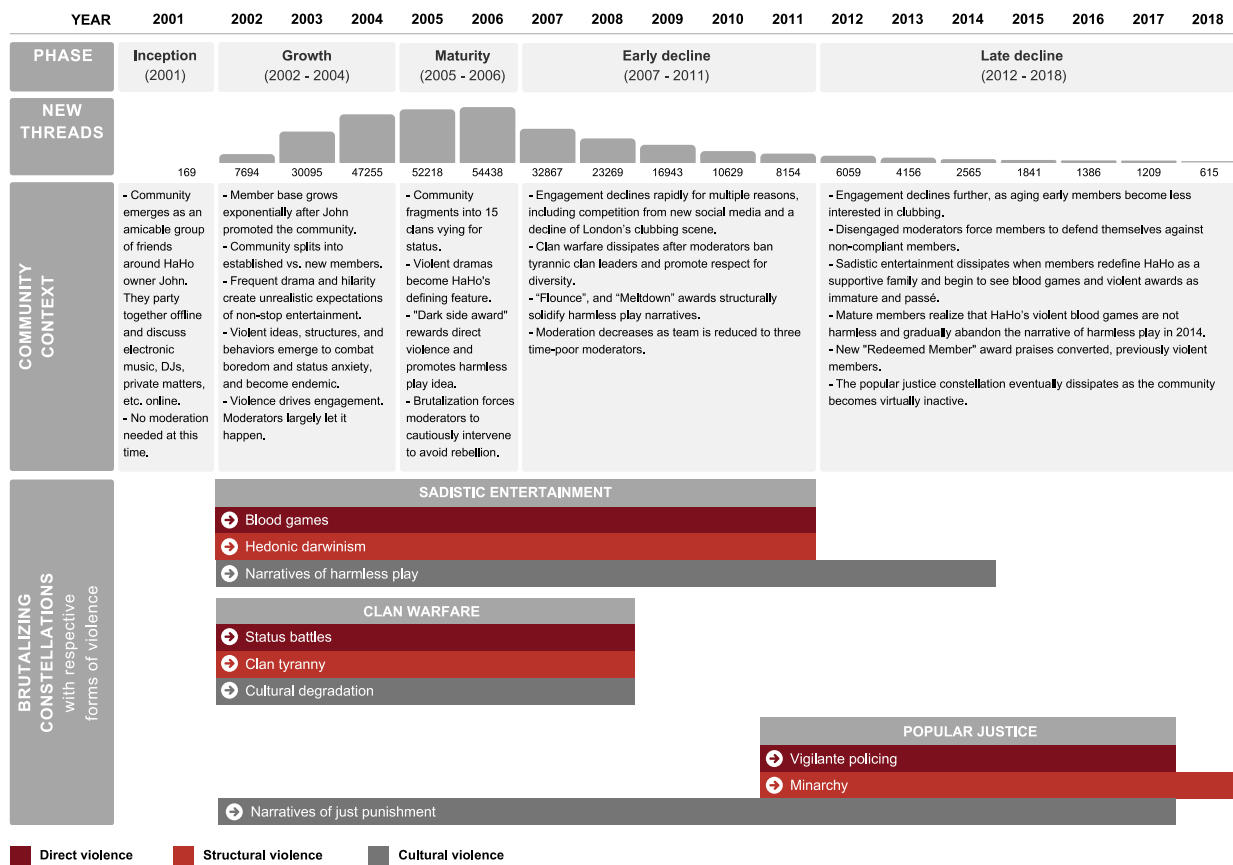


Table 2 provides an overview of key contextual changes in the evolution of the community and how these correspond to the three forms of brutalization. Web appendix B presents additional excerpts from our data set for each conceptual category. Some data excerpts cited herein contain explicit content that some readers may find disturbing.

TABLE 2: THE EVOLUTION OF THE HAHO COMMUNITY



Sadistic Entertainment

Consumption communities thrive on a collective pursuit of entertainment, fun, sociability, and other benefits of leisure-oriented collective consumption (Thomas et al. 2013). However, most communities cannot fulfill these desires at all times, leading to periods in which

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3  
4 members perceive their community as unexciting, exhausting, or tedious. Such frustrating phases  
5  
6 in the lives of consumption communities favor the emergence of a brutalizing constellation we  
7  
8 call *sadistic entertainment*. Sadistic entertainment is marked by the interaction of blood games as  
9  
10 its prevalent form of direct violence, hedonic Darwinism as its focal manifestation of structural  
11  
12 violence, and narratives of harmless play as its defining form of cultural violence. To introduce  
13  
14 this constellation, we focus on the period from July 2007 to the summer of 2011 that we coded as  
15  
16 “early decline” (see Table 2). During this time, the number of new threads decreased by about  
17  
18 two-thirds, complaints about HaHo having lost its “addictive” feeling of participating in a real-  
19  
20 life “soap opera” with its constant whiff of “scandal” (Sergio, thread #96) became more frequent,  
21  
22 and the features of sadistic entertainment were prevalent. The sadistic entertainment constellation  
23  
24 dissipated in the late decline phase when HaHo’s members redefined the community as a  
25  
26 supportive family and deemed sadistic entertainment immature and passé.  
27  
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34 *Direct Violence: Blood Games.* In this brutalization constellation, direct violence takes  
35  
36 the shape of blood games—that is, verbal conflicts performed in front of an audience for their  
37  
38 entertainment. In online communities, blood games function like offline “theatres of cruelty”  
39  
40 (Artaud 2013, 63) that stimulate consumers’ “nerves and heart” (84) by revealing and  
41  
42 intensifying the emotional dangers of community life.  
43  
44

45  
46 The prevalent form of blood game in the HaHo community is best described as a verbal  
47  
48 bullfight. In such fights, one member acts as a torero (aggressor) who baits an often-unsuspecting  
49  
50 bull (victim) in a public arena while the broader community (audience) cheers at the torero’s  
51  
52 baiting and the bull’s escalating anger in utter excitement. Unlike traditional bullfights, toreros in  
53  
54 online consumption communities hurt their victims verbally by pretending to have a normal  
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3 conversation while actually aiming to enrage them for fun. Bullfights are similar to trolling  
4  
5 practices (Cruz, Seo, and Rex 2018; Phillips 2015) but are staged by members to entertain, not to  
6  
7 annoy, their own community.  
8  
9

10 The following vignette from thread #13, which we coded as “Marc vs. Tony,” illustrates  
11  
12 this type of violence. Tony joined the forum five months before this episode, quickly becoming a  
13  
14 leading member. He had already started 305 threads and contributed 8,465 posts, an average of  
15  
16 27 daily posts. Marc joined the community two months after Tony, created 46 threads and  
17  
18 contributed three posts per day on average. As a relatively less experienced member, Marc was  
19  
20 more vocal than a newbie but less skilled in navigating the intricacies of HaHo’s interactions.  
21  
22  
23

24 The following is the first conversation between Tony and Marc recorded on the forum:  
25

26  
27 Marc: I’m in the second year of a business studies degree with two years left, and I really  
28 want to do music technology at another uni. Should I transfer?

29  
30 Tony: No. Idiot.

31  
32 Marc: The thing is I've completely lost interest ... but it's my parents who will be  
33 disappointed as I've dropped out before.

34  
35 Tony: So you are just a quitter then? Change degree, then you can quit that one too. Go  
36 you... Biggest quit evAr. Quit at life.

37  
38 Marc: I am being honest and deciding to do something in which I am not wasting my  
39 time. I am very intelligent but just don't like being told what to do.

40  
41 Tony: Very intelligent. Of course you are.

42  
43 Marc: I don't like work at all, that's why I don't like the world of business.

44  
45 Tony: Are you really 25? Attitude of a 14 year old... He blames his parents for quitting  
46 in the past... What a disappointment he must be to them.... Hope you die.

47  
48 Marc: You are abusive and spiteful and you DO NOT talk to me in such a way.... Never  
49 before has someone I don't know insulted me so badly.... You take so much  
50 pleasure in it which is WRONG.

51  
52 Tony: Didn't daddy love you enough, Dorothy? ... grow some testicles

53  
54 Marc: Listen, don't tell me to die. Do you understand?

55  
56 Tony: Ha, Ha, Ha. DIE.

57  
58 Marc: Just don't f\*\*\*ing take the p\*\*\* out of me. (...)  
59  
60

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4 Tony: If anyone hasn't seen round one of this Click here [posting a link to the discussion  
5 thread where Marc and Tony started to exchange]

6 Francis: OMG!!!! Tony is such a c\*\*\*\* ... OMG I SAY!!!!!!!!!!!!

7  
8 Sirion: Tony you're such a tease.

9  
10 Naomi: 

11  
12 Sami: hahaha how funny is this

13  
14 Francis: This thread is ultimate jokes! Thank you Marc for making my day by showing  
15 that certain human beings are actually more stupid than dyslexic guinea pigs.

16  
17  
18 In this thread, Tony baited Marc like a torero provoking a bull to defend itself and fight  
19 for its life. Tony deliberately chose a personal instead of a consumption matter, as private topics  
20 lend themselves more to staging blood games. He responded to Marc's serious question with an  
21 unprompted insult ("No, Idiot"), cleverly exploited vulnerabilities that Marc revealed in this  
22 interaction ("quitter"), and continued his abuse even after Marc, obviously upset and shocked,  
23 demanded him to stop. Tony added a theatrical touch ("Ha, Ha, Ha. DIE") to his posts to  
24 communicate his intent to experienced members. He also proactively rallied members who  
25 missed the show's beginning ("If anyone hasn't seen round one of this"). Members who  
26 recognized these signals and understood the difficulty of sparking bullfights congratulated Tony  
27 for his sadistic moves, encouraging him to continue. That Tony's skillful provocation of Marc's  
28 intense anger, hatred, and pain is a source of entertainment is evident in 28 members' postings of  
29 popcorn emojis and feelings of excitement ("how funny this is," "ultimate jokes") and even thrill  
30 ("OMG I SAY!!!!!!!!!!!!") across nearly 540 posts. Marc, who posted later that he felt like "a  
31 complete loser" during this exchange (thread #13), stopped posting on HaHo for two months.

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51 These findings show how members deliberately use and appreciate behaviors that carry  
52 the markers of direct verbal violence as a means to regenerate their sense of solidarity  
53 (Chatzidakis, Maclaran, and Varman 2021; Cova and Cova 2002) and togetherness (Hill,  
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3 Canniford, and Eckhardt 2021) at the expense of others. To understand why members encourage,  
4 rather than end, such obviously hurtful blood games requires an analysis of the underlying  
5 structural and cultural forms of violence.  
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13 *Structural Violence: Hedonic Darwinism.* In the sadistic entertainment constellation,  
14 blood games are enabled and often encouraged by a violent social structure we call “hedonic  
15 Darwinism.” Hedonic Darwinism is a relational contract between members that facilitates  
16 exploiting some members for the amusement of others. In Darwin’s vernacular, it is a social  
17 structure that allows only the fittest to survive in a consumption community.  
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25 In our context, hedonic Darwinism revealed itself in two ways. First, we found structural  
26 violence in a deliberate absence of protection for victims in all 18 blood games during this  
27 period. In the “Marc vs. Tony” episode, only one of the 28 active participants condemned Tony’s  
28 behavior but was immediately met with derisive comments, including “nobody’s listening [to  
29 you], it’s more fun without sensible advice” (Katya, thread #13) and “it’s a bit sink or swim ... if  
30 [Marc] can’t handle it he needs to leave” (Sergeant Pepper, thread #13). In all 18 blood games,  
31 even otherwise quite active moderators deliberately refrained from helping victims like Marc. As  
32 HaHo founder and moderator John (interview) recounts: “I have to admit that there were times  
33 when I did not approve of a lot of it, but I just let it run because I knew it was very popular. [I  
34 knew] we will have lots of hits and lots of people signing up and joining in.” John was well  
35 aware of the borderline morality of these fights but instead of following his moral compass (“I  
36 did not approve”), he prioritized community growth over the protection of individuals.  
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52 Second, we found evidence of structural violence in the community’s creation of prizes  
53 that rewarded verbal violence. For example, HaHo annually awarded the “Meltdown of the  
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4 Year” prize to members who maneuvered themselves into the most ludicrous blood games—  
5  
6 throwing “their toys AND pram out of the nursery window” (John, thread #84). They also  
7  
8 promoted the “Member of the Year” award to reward the most “C\*nt” (thread #100) and “most  
9  
10 bastard” (thread #103) HaHo members who exploit other members for the community’s  
11  
12 entertainment. Such awards, stored and endlessly available in HaHo’s institutional memory,  
13  
14 continue to encourage further abuse. Some members went “absolutely ballistic” (John, interview)  
15  
16 about HaHo’s “slag [them] off” attitude (Ikon, thread #158). As John recounts, one member  
17  
18 threatened taking legal action against him for failing to protect vulnerable members. Yet, even in  
19  
20 the face of apparent suffering, members dismissed any criticism of their systematic promotion of  
21  
22 blood games as “pathetic” (Whirlpool, thread #158). This focus on promoting entertainment  
23  
24 rather than social division clearly distinguishes hedonistic Darwinism from structural violence  
25  
26 against stigmatized consumers (Crockett 2017) and minorities (Martin et al. 2006).  
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34 *Cultural Violence: Narratives of Harmless Play.* Blood games and hedonic Darwinism  
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36 thrive in consumption communities that justify and openly promote these forms of violence  
37  
38 through the narrative of harmless play. Communities that widely share this culturally violent  
39  
40 narrative consider online blood games and hedonic Darwinism part of a staged drama, allowing  
41  
42 them to dismiss any apparent human suffering as feigned, self-inflicted, and irrelevant.  
43  
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45  
46 Several members conveyed that HaHo’s interactions were “almost like taking the reality  
47  
48 TV aspect from Big Brother and injecting the drama of [iconic British soap opera] Eastenders”  
49  
50 (Shanti, thread #25), equating their violent blood games with the staged “confrontainment” and  
51  
52 conflict talk known from UK television (Lorenzo-Dus 2008, 83). This idea allowed our  
53  
54 informants to accuse the victims of not understanding the game (“The ones who think HaHo ‘IS’  
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4 life get way too serious about it”, Dancing Queen, thread #139) and “taking the internet way too  
5  
6 seriously” (Gary, thread #37). As serial torero Paul explained in our interview:

7  
8 I never set out to hurt anybody’s feelings.... It’s always a case of having a bit of banter,  
9  
10 having a laugh. If I genuinely thought I’d upset you ... I might [still] make a few more  
11  
12 jokes, just to see how far I can push it.  
13

14  
15 Paul conveys that blood games are merely innocent “banter,” a way of having fun with  
16  
17 friends, rather than acts of verbal violence—merely vexing victims’ egos rather than seriously  
18  
19 attacking their identity. Thus, even when he sees a proverbial bull seriously hurt (“If I ...  
20  
21 genuinely ... upset you”), Paul deems it acceptable to rub more salt in the wound (“a few more  
22  
23 jokes”) because for communities that celebrate the idea of harmless play emotional pain on  
24  
25 display cannot, and should not, be real. Interviewee Katya, another skilled torero, agrees with  
26  
27 Paul that blood games are not actually violent but “amusing.” However, later in our interview  
28  
29 she admits that blood games are “only funny if it is not you or your friends” being attacked.  
30  
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32  
33 In summary, a sadistic entertainment constellation forms when members experience  
34  
35 boredom as a threat to their community’s continuity and resort to violent blood games as a  
36  
37 remedial lust gain (Bogerts 2021). Indeed, offline studies have shown that violence can be  
38  
39 “fascinating and emotionally arousing,” produce euphoria, and even alleviate pain (Ebert,  
40  
41 Weierstall, and Schauer 2010, 100). In online consumption communities, verbal violence can  
42  
43 similarly energize a community and regenerate experiences of solidarity (Fournier and Lee 2009;  
44  
45 Husemann et al. 2015). However, when direct violence is endemically enabled and justified  
46  
47 through hedonic Darwinism and harmless play narratives, it produces a “toxic atmosphere”  
48  
49 (Jason, interview) where disregard for the reality of inflicted harm (Kozinets et al. 2004) puts  
50  
51 members at risk of becoming humiliated, ridiculed, and sacrificed at the altar of entertainment.  
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## Clan Warfare

Consumption communities are commonly united by a consciousness of kind, shared consumption rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility for one another (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). In their daily lives, however, members often experience challenges to this unity, especially when “divergent views about authenticity, membership, and consumption” gain prominence (Thomas et al. 2013, 1010). Increasing heterogeneity can disturb an established status order and become a breeding ground for *clan warfare*. We define this brutalizing constellation by the co-presence and interaction of directly violent status battles, structurally violent clan tyranny, and culturally violent narratives of cultural degradation.

To introduce this constellation, we focus on the period from 2002 to 2006, which unfolded during HaHo's growth and maturity phases (see Table 2). During this period, HaHo became the leading online community for London's hard house consumers, with up to 1,000 clubbers posting on the forum daily. However, this period was also characterized by significant tensions over the status and recognition of new and established cliques that differed in terms of their class background, musical tastes, or preferred styles of interacting, among others. The clan warfare constellation dissipated in the early decline phase after the moderators banned tyrannical members and forcefully promoted respect for diversity.

*Direct Violence: Status Battles.* In clan warfare constellations, direct violence takes the form of status battles. We define these battles as protracted, verbally violent interactions in which competing subgroups try to impose their views on which consumption practices, norms, and values should (not) be valued in the community. Status battles are usually initiated by two

members accusing each other of unacceptable behavior. Soon, other members join to support one of the two sides, forming or mobilizing opposing clans who argue fiercely over whose views should take precedence.

During HaHo's growth and maturity phases, status battles were the prevalent form of direct violence, accounting for 31 of the 57 episodes recorded. An excerpt from thread #16, which we coded as "Preservation vs. Change," illustrates how such battles unfold empirically. The episode began as a conflict between female members Angel and ClubFairy but within two weeks, 165 members had joined and contributed 2,081 posts:

Angel: Why is it that I find ClubFairy so god damn annoying?... She seems to post annoying things.

ClubFairy: How dare you put a thread up about me and slag me off for no reason.... Have you read yours? Angel's threads are □□□.

RisingStar: Her posts on [HaHo] make me want to cry.

Exilus: The use of colour, man that annoys me!

Stardust: Stardust says nuff respect to ClubFairy! me and de HULLABALOO CREW tink de world of dat lovely lady!

Petroleum: ClubFairy is a cool girl. [She has] infinite kindness and caring for others.

Steph One thing i do hate about this site - how people jump on you for what colour you write in! WTF???

DareDevil: Oh f\*\*\* off. Her posts get on my tits. It's not like I raped her fucking mother FFS. Get over it.

Rising Star: This thread says far more about ClubFairy and her sad little bunch of mates who all have to chip in to big her up like she can't defend herself.... Her posts are fucking dire sometimes.... We're cool and you SUCK! Duh!

ClubFairy: How dare you say that my mates are sad. I can't see any of your sad little mates on here (is it because you dont have any?) Stop being a little prick. Get a life. So what if i write my threads in different colors and put loads of smilies.

Caro: Did someone post round an email or something to all of ClubFairy's friends telling them to come on here and defend her honor?

Animal: So many idiots ... all getting their cyber tangled with their dummies.

Angel: Fair play to you. Standing up to the massed idiot brigade.

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4 This exchange ignited a taste-based status battle over a seemingly interpersonal disagreement  
5  
6 between Angel and ClubFairy. Other members did not consume the quarrel as an entertaining  
7  
8 blood game but stepped in, took sides, and embarked on a lengthy battle with excessive use of  
9  
10 verbal violence (“raped her fucking mother”). On the surface, this battle revolved around  
11  
12 ClubFairy’s ostensibly “lame” and “dire” posts and her use of color—Angel and friends had long  
13  
14 since agreed on using standard black fonts on HaHo to avoid getting caught posting at work.  
15  
16 However, below the surface a more significant tension had lingered for a while: a new group of  
17  
18 clubbers had formed that prided itself on its “kindness and caring for others” (Petroleum) and  
19  
20 condemned offending others “for no reason” (ClubFairy). This new, caring ethos challenged the  
21  
22 values of more established members like Angel, Exilus, and Rising Star, who cherished well-  
23  
24 articulated, witty, and often verbally violent posts as expressions of personal strength and  
25  
26 independence—a quality that ClubFairy appeared to be lacking (“she can’t defend herself”).  
27  
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30  
31 ClubFairy’s defiant rhetoric (“So what if i write my threads in different colors”)  
32  
33 demonstrated that she and her friends no longer accepted the founding members’ dominance and  
34  
35 dared to fight for recognition of their way of consuming and discussing electronic music. Seeing  
36  
37 their leadership in jeopardy, Angel and friends resorted to verbal violence—not to entertain but  
38  
39 to coerce ClubFairy and friends back in line by making them feel “slagged” (ClubFairy #16) and  
40  
41 “faulted” (Jerry Teppy, thread #16) or “look like fools” (Panther, thread #16). This underlying  
42  
43 struggle for recognition and status explains why status battles exude a serious, tense, or even  
44  
45 desperate atmosphere, while blood games are cheerful and exciting.  
46  
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50 Status battles resemble flamewars (Perelmutter 2013), in which culturally distinct but  
51  
52 structurally relatively equal groups negotiate heterogeneity-related tensions (Thomas et al. 2013)  
53  
54 and latent conflicts (Cova, Pace, and Park 2007) about what constitutes appropriate community  
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4 practices and norms (De Valck 2007, Tumbat and Belk 2011). However, as we show next,  
5  
6 flamewars become brutalizing status battles when competing groups are fundamentally unequal  
7  
8 and sustain battles through structural clan tyranny and narratives of cultural degradation.  
9

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13 *Structural Violence: Clan Tyranny.* In clan warfare, structural violence manifests itself in  
14  
15 a type of intragroup relationship that we call clan tyranny. Clan tyranny occurs when members of  
16  
17 higher-status clans exaggerate their mandate to govern and systematically abuse their superior  
18  
19 influence to prevent less influential clans from gaining recognition, authority, and voice.  
20

21  
22 During HaHo's growth and maturity phases (2002-2006), we traced the emergence of 15  
23  
24 clans, including the "Raving Heroes," who considered themselves the most hardcore clubbers,  
25  
26 and the "Flash Ravers," who were fans of the Flash parties in London. Forum owner John  
27  
28 recounts this fragmentation in our interview, explaining that he was "prepared to accept people  
29  
30 from all walks of life and trying to find some way where everyone could co-exist" but soon  
31  
32 realized that "core members didn't want that. They wanted their own community [which made it]  
33  
34 very difficult to get [incoming] cliques to stay."  
35  
36

37  
38 Three cliques of long-standing HaHo members—Team Splendor, the Elders, and the  
39  
40 Core—contributed most actively to the formation of a clan tyranny. They systematically  
41  
42 mobbed, marginalized, and abused opposing clans based on inadequate class backgrounds,  
43  
44 generational affiliation, musical and sartorial tastes, drug usage habits, and styles of interacting.  
45  
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47  
48 A tyrannical clan which formed in the wake of the status battle described above was  
49  
50 Team Splendor. The clan styled itself as the "one drop dead gorgeous clique of being the best"  
51  
52 (Raw Fish, thread #11) clubbers and claimed elite status in the community based on their  
53  
54 outstanding ability to entertain. To sustain their dominance in the wake of the above  
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4 “Preservation vs. Change” episode, Team Splendor initiated a series of highly violent status  
5 battles during which they scared, silenced, and sought to expel opponents. At the nadir of these  
6 battles, Team Splendor member RisingStar posted a shockingly realistic picture of PartyWith, a  
7 ClubFairy & Friends member, lying dead in her blood in a bathtub, staring lifelessly at the  
8 reader. Clan tyranny is evident here not only in Team Splendor’s refusal to abide by community  
9 norms and violently oppressing others but also in their refusal to apologize for transgressions like  
10 RisingStar’s image, believing they can “get away with more” (Stacy, interview). As John  
11 ultimately banned the culprit, his abandoned clan pressured John to “bring back RisingStar”  
12 (Keats, Thread #27) claiming that excluding (violent) high-status members like him jeopardized  
13 HaHo’s entertainment factor, or even survival.  
14

15  
16 Although Club Fairy & Friends, Flash Ravers, and other tyrannized clans vehemently  
17 resisted their oppression in 20 violent status battles, they remained without notable recognition,  
18 authority, and voice. Even members who intentionally exhibited “correct conduct” (DJ Zone,  
19 thread #103) still continuously “await[ed] abuse” (Roadrunner, thread #106) from the tyrannic  
20 clans. Eventually, many oppressed members “couldn’t be bothered anymore” (Katya, interview)  
21 and left HaHo feeling “fed up” (Twista, thread #16) and “hurt” (Liam, thread #23).  
22

23  
24 These findings reveal clan tyranny as a violent social structure that differs notably from  
25 the conflicted relationships of competing groups featured in previous studies (Tumbat and Belk  
26 2011). Because clan tyranny arises from power imbalances, fear of status loss, and violent  
27 resistance to cultural change, it is conceptually more similar to structural violence against  
28 immigrants (Üstüner and Holt 2007) and other stigmatized groups (Crockett 2017; Kates 2002).  
29 However, unlike societally stigmatized consumers, online community members can resist their  
30 oppression or abandon brutalized contexts without putting their entire lives and identities at risk.  
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6 *Cultural Violence: Narratives of Cultural Degradation.* In clan warfare constellations,  
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8 tyrannic clans harness violent narratives of cultural degradation to justify their use of verbal  
9  
10 violence as a means for protecting their culture against unwelcome intruders, while oppressed  
11  
12 clans use it to fight for recognition. Leading clans fuel narratives of intrusion to portray less  
13  
14 established subgroups as uninformed, distasteful, or otherwise unfit for participation. Oppressed  
15  
16 clans perpetuate narratives of dogmatism to denigrate leading clans as bigoted, intolerant, old-  
17  
18 fashioned bullies who cannot handle change.  
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21  
22 The following interview excerpt illustrates how the narrative of intrusion permeated  
23  
24 HaHo's members' conversations in 2005 right after owner John had invited members of another  
25  
26 online clubbing community called "Glow" to join HaHo:  
27  
28

29 When the Glow people came in ... it was predominantly kids. They were quite stupid....  
30  
31 They liked posting with colours, they liked shouting "oi oi oi" and that kind of thing, that  
32  
33 didn't go really well on HaHo. So here they came and suddenly the HaHo members were  
34  
35 absolutely ripping into them. Like "you're a noob, fuck off."  
36  
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38 In this interview excerpt, John recollects a typical situation that we also saw in the "Preservation  
39  
40 vs. Change" episode: established members identified a lack of cultural fit with an incoming  
41  
42 group and resorted to direct verbal violence ("ripping into them") to scare, silence, and expel  
43  
44 them. The reasons for denigrating incoming members as culturally incompatible intruders varied  
45  
46 across cases. Here, HaHo's educated, middle-class adult members dismissed Glow members as  
47  
48 lower-class teenagers ("kids") who lacked wit and taste—"oi oi oi" is a well-known rallying cry  
49  
50 among British working-class youth (Worley 2013)—and "noobs"—a disparaging term for  
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4 newbies who lack the talent or determination to learn—that invaded Haho, posed a threat to its  
5  
6 culture, and deserved to be embroiled in violent status battles.  
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9 When oppressed clans resist such denigrating representations, they accuse tyrannical  
10  
11 clans of dogmatism. The emergence of such violent counterattacks reveals the intense emotional  
12  
13 frustrations that invasion narratives provoke among discredited members. For example, in thread  
14  
15 #2, Team Splendor disparages Stella, a member of the Flash Ravers, for her clan’s unorthodox  
16  
17 grammar and spelling that disrupts the habitual writing style of the leading clans. Stella’s  
18  
19 response traces the contours of the dogmatism counternarrative and conveys its emotionality:  
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21

22 Who the fuck are you? Little internet geeks who sit and read everybody’s posts and  
23  
24 replies getting their kicks out of pickin out spellin mostakes [sic]? ←Ooooooh look there  
25  
26 you go, there's one for you! jeeeeeeeeeeeeeeze get a life, please you look so sad!  
27

28  
29 Stella turns the intruder narrative around, portraying Team Splendor as a group of intolerant  
30  
31 zealots (“little internet geeks”) and “burnt out ex-clubbers” (Charly, thread #16) that mob anyone  
32  
33 whose consumption ethos differs from theirs. By decrying dogmatism, Stella challenges the  
34  
35 superiority of dominant clans (“you look so sad”) and demands recognition for her clan’s  
36  
37 alternative consumption practices.  
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40  
41 In summary, our findings highlight the conditions under which heterogeneity-related  
42  
43 tensions (Thomas et al. 2013) become brutalizing forces. Clan warfare brutalization emerges  
44  
45 from fear of loss of status and cultural cohesion when the membership base expands (Avery  
46  
47 2007). For clan warfare to emerge from such situations, it requires not only violent narratives  
48  
49 through which “true mountaineers” denigrate the “cheaters” on Mount Everest (Tumbat and Belk  
50  
51 2011, 51), for example, but also structural conditions that give dominant groups the power to  
52  
53 withhold recognition, status, and consumption opportunities from less influential groups which,  
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4 in turn, do not accept their symbolic domination (Bourdieu 1984) but fight back (Martin et al.  
5  
6 2006). Finally, while a consumption community riddled by clan warfare hardly generates  
7  
8 unequal life chances at a scale comparable to national war or racism (Galtung 1990), it can evoke  
9  
10 strong emotions, normalize excessive verbal abuse, and perpetuate substantial inequality in  
11  
12 members' ability to consume and contribute according to their preferences.  
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### 16 17 Popular Justice

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21 Consumption communities put great emphasis on establishing governance systems that  
22  
23 align members' interests and ensure stability as well as continuity (Schau et al. 2009; Sibai et al.  
24  
25 2015). However, online consumption communities, in particular, do not always succeed in this  
26  
27 endeavor. Instead, members violate shared rules, abuse reputation systems, and treat each other  
28  
29 disrespectfully, causing widespread anger and frustration (Lampe and Johnston 2005). When the  
30  
31 desire for just and effective social control is frustrated over a long period, it encourages the  
32  
33 formation of the brutalizing constellation we call *popular justice*. This constellation is  
34  
35 characterized by the interaction of directly violent vigilante policing, a structurally violent  
36  
37 minarchy, and the culturally violent narrative of just punishment.  
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42 To illustrate this third constellation, we draw on data from 2012 to 2018, a period we  
43  
44 coded as "late decline" (see Table 2). During this period, several members repeatedly violated  
45  
46 community norms but unlike in previous periods, HaHo's moderators did little to stop them. This  
47  
48 situation repeatedly sparked outrage about "stupid" (Exilus, thread #41), "irritating" (Angela,  
49  
50 thread #37), and otherwise "disruptive" behavior that norm-abiding members perceived as  
51  
52 "killing the site" (Gogo Dance 2, thread #96). The popular justice constellation eventually  
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54 dissipated in 2017 as the community became virtually inactive.  
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*Direct Violence: Vigilante Policing.* In the popular justice constellation, direct violence takes the shape of vigilante policing, in which members without formal governing authority enforce community norms through verbal violence. Members resort to this form of verbal violence when others disregard community norms, and the moderators show no interest in enforcing norm compliance. The most common empirical expression of vigilante policing is verbal lynching. Unlike a physical lynching, in which a mob brutally, extralegally kills a perceived offender of norms, values, or identities (Wendt and Berg 2011), in a verbal lynching a mob attempts to destroy the identity of a perpetrator through ridicule, shaming, and humiliation in order to eliminate them from a community.

The following excerpt from the episode we coded as “Oliviagate” illustrates this violent practice. At the time, established HaHo member Olivia started a plethora of threads that were unrelated to clubbing and, in the eyes of many members, violated the community’s unwritten norm of prioritizing “quality over quantity” (Katya, thread #91). Despite members’ efforts to educate her about this norm, she continued posting “banal threads one after the other,” generating “furore” on several occasions (Daniel, thread #91). As HaHo owner John showed no interest in stopping her, a group of members decided to carry out what member Neon called “a reasoned lynching” later on (thread #92):

Olivia: How Does One Swear In POSH?

Crave: Is this person for real?

Wretch: Who the fuck is this clown?

Botch: Like this: *Normal Person:* Fuck off Olivia you massive boring twat!!!!!! *Posh Person:* Fuck off Olivia, you impossibly boring twat.

Olivia: Mind boggling Mr Botch

Katie: Correction: *Posh person:* Oh, do fuck off Olivia, you impossibly boring twat.

Spanky: Olivia, you hideous cow, take your dullard, gut-wrenchingly boring posts elsewhere, where they may be appreciated. You have the mind of a five-year-old, coupled with the linguistic ability of my toe. Your idiotic approach to life makes you an incurable headcase. In essence, fuck off.

Olivia: Spanky Dory. Now. if You wouldn't mind Peeing Off!! That would be nice. Thank You.

Wretch: That's not even an answer, you fucking mentalist.

Olivia: Yes there is one on the telly.

Katie: You and The Jane [a mentalist in a CBS crime drama] are not quite in the same league of mentalists.

Spanky: She appears to have gone, thank fuck. Finally, the fucking retard has gone. If I was to speculate, I would guess that either Random House [has] offered her a £3m advance for her nonsensical witterings, or MI5 [has] sent her to Afghanistan to speak to the Taliban, knowing that any dialogue with her will make them want to kill themselves.

This excerpt from thread #92 traces a rapid series of verbally violent abuses that 11 members threw at Olivia, a practice called “piling on” in studies on mob violence (Gross 2016, 255). In this emotionally charged episode, no one came to Olivia's defense. Instead, members conspired in the lynching, skillfully hurting the feelings of a member who prided herself on being witty and intellectual by calling her a “clown,” “boring twat,” “dullard,” and “fucking retard.” Members continued to rage against Olivia even after she had signed off, a mob practice known offline as “overkill” (Gross 2016, 256). After initially reporting these lynchings to the moderators, Olivia stopped posting for a year and only posted sporadically thereafter.

A less frequent but equally violent form of vigilante policing is the online terrorist attack. Members who feel falsely accused, mistreated, or lynched by the community or its moderators use it to take revenge and destabilize the community. One extreme form of terrorist attack conducted by a member in thread #58, for example, is bombarding the forum with scatophiliac porn (sex involving excrement) under the guise of harmless titles. Opening such images unprepared can shock members, put them at risk of repercussions from employers that monitor employees' surfing behavior—“Imagine trying to explain that to a boss!” (John, interview)—and

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3  
4 impede the flow of community interactions. The angry atmosphere during vigilante policing  
5  
6 emphasizes that justice matters to consumers, not just entertainment and recognition, even in  
7  
8 online consumption communities (Kozinets, 1999; Sibai et al. 2015).  
9

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13 *Structural Violence: Minarchy.* Vigilante policing emerges within a relational structure  
14  
15 that is best described as minarchy (Rothbard 2006). In consumption communities, minarchic  
16  
17 relationships reveal themselves in ultra-minimal levels of moderator intervention, forcing  
18  
19 members to defend themselves by any means. Minarchies are structurally violent because they  
20  
21 constantly expose members to norm violators as well as self-appointed community vigilantes  
22  
23 who arrogate to themselves the right to punish offenders in the name of justice (Gross 2016).  
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25

26  
27 At HaHo, a minarchy gradually formed in 2011, after eight years of strictly moderated  
28  
29 community life, and persisted until 2018. Moderators spent less time policing because of their  
30  
31 paid work and fading interest in clubbing and took “the back seat” (Stacy, interview). They  
32  
33 moderated only disruptions to the site’s infrastructure and sanctioned behaviors violating the  
34  
35 community’s terms and conditions, such as copyright infringements and commercial spamming.  
36  
37

38  
39 HaHo owner John describes his gradual disengagement in our interview in August 2012:  
40  
41 “As time went on, it became more and more frustrating to deal with the same things again and  
42  
43 again. We started to tell them to sort it out between themselves [...] These days I don’t really care  
44  
45 anymore. I became disillusioned with the whole thing.” The following post from member Ikon  
46  
47 (threads #91 and #92) about the moderators’ inaction during the “Oliviagate” episode illustrates  
48  
49 how such disengagement can promote minarchic structures and direct violence:  
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53 John, I don’t think this situation is ever going to sort itself out. Olivia will not restrict  
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55 herself and people will not hold back from abusing her.... At least you can go back to  
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4 either group and say, “Olivia, it’s you, you’re killing the site, do something about it.” Or  
5  
6 “Look you lot, Olivia was offline for a week and nothing interesting happened and even  
7  
8 taking into account Olivia’s posts, numbers have dropped.... So shut up.”  
9

10 Ikon laments that John ignores a significant community issue that is not “going to sort itself out.”  
11  
12 He pleads without success for John’s intervention to end a violent conflict that harms both the  
13  
14 perpetrator (“people will not hold back from abusing her”) and norm-abiding members who must  
15  
16 continue to endure Olivia’s violations (“then she posts everywhere again”). By minimizing their  
17  
18 policing activities, John and other moderators force members into the disturbing situation of  
19  
20 being protected from neither norm transgressions (Husemann et al. 1015) nor punitive  
21  
22 cyberbullying (Seregina and Weijo 2017). The violence of minarchies, therefore, does not reside  
23  
24 in tyrannical oppression or encouragement of blood games but in the moderators’ systematic  
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26 neglect of “protection and pastoral care” (Fiske 1992, 691).  
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34 *Cultural Violence: Narratives of Just Punishment.* In a brutalized community, in which a  
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36 minarchic governance structure prevails, members harness the narrative of just punishment to  
37  
38 justify their vigilante policing. This narrative bolsters the community’s belief that members must  
39  
40 resort to verbal violence in the absence of forceful official intervention to protect themselves and  
41  
42 their community against norm violations.  
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45 In the “Oliviagate” episode, the narrative transpired through members’ discussions of  
46  
47 how to stop Olivia’s violations since John did not intervene:  
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49  
50 Ikon: She’s not going to attempt to fit in and play nice and she is not going to get  
51  
52 banned so we can give her a load of shit until she leaves.

53  
54 Spanky: She needs to be told just how much of a weapons grade bellend she is. Perhaps  
55  
56 eventually it will sink in.  
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4 Sergio: A few months ago a couple of people had a go at me ... for posting up utter  
5 gumpf and (I hope) I have cut that down a bit. My point being that if someone  
6 points something out it should make you think about changing or cutting back a  
7 bit.

8  
9 Johnny: Serious question/suggestion for the mods/devs. Can we have a whip round and  
10 pay for her hands to be amputated? It won't stop Olivia posting, but it will slow  
11 her down a little bit.

12  
13 In this excerpt from thread #91, established members Ikon, Spanky, Sergio, and Johnny discuss  
14 seriously, though still in HaHo's signature uninhibited style, how to stop Olivia. Their shared  
15 understanding is that she does not care about community norms ("She's not going to attempt to  
16 fit in") or has not yet realized how much her behavior annoys the community. Given moderators'  
17 refusal to intervene, they deem it acceptable to "give her a load of shit" until she leaves or until it  
18 will "sink in" that her behavior must change. Sergio's posting further bolsters the narrative of  
19 just punishment by emphasizing the educational value of some verbal violence ("I have cut that  
20 down a bit"). Johnny's feigned "serious" proposal to amputate Olivia's hands conveys how  
21 members also consider the threat of violence to be acceptable behavior. Members use this violent  
22 narrative to justify both collective lynchings and individual terrorist attacks against HaHo.  
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36 Prior research portrays online policing as a short-lived response to temporary governance  
37 failures. In such cases, more offline "police involvement" (Seregina and Weijo 2017, 149) helps  
38 eliminate "vigilant harassment" (154) of cosplay convention participants, and better feedback  
39 systems help prevent online communities from violently forcing newcomers into conforming to  
40 discussion standards (Lampe and Johnston 2005). Mitigating vigilante policing via feedback  
41 systems will be less effective in online consumption communities where a persistent minarchic  
42 structure and widely shared narratives of just punishment fuel vigilante policing.  
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## DISCUSSION

Why do online consumption communities brutalize? In longitudinal qualitative data from an electronic dance music community and informed by Galtung's (1969, 1990) theory of violence, we identified three specific constellations of direct, structural, and cultural forms of violence that fuel brutalization: sadistic entertainment, clan warfare, and popular justice. These findings challenge the prevailing view of consumption communities as situationally violent but overall prosocial, value-creating social entities (Chalmer-Thomas et al. 2013; Schau et al. 2009) and offer a first foundation for theorizing the dark side of consumption communities. As we have shown, even hedonic online consumption communities can become nefarious social spaces in which the gratification of members' desires for entertainment, status, or justice is pursued in sadistic ways that are harmful to the well-being of consumers and their communities.

In the following sections, we discuss how endemic violence within online consumption communities differs from endemic violence against stigmatized consumer groups, explore why some consumption communities are more prone to brutalization than others, explain why online violence does not spill over to offline contexts, and suggest ways to mitigate community brutalization. Finally, we use our conceptual model to reflect on brutalization in the wider social media sphere.

How Endemic Violence in Online Consumption Communities Differs from Endemic Violence against Stigma-based Communities

To date, consumer researchers have addressed matters of endemic violence primarily in the context of politicized and stigmatized communities (Kates 2002), including black (Crockett 2017), gay (Eichert and Luedicke 2022), plus-size (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), low-income (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013), and migrant consumers (Peñaloza 1994; Üstüner and Holt 2007).

The stigma experienced by these groups includes myriad systemic forms of direct, structural, and cultural violence in and beyond market contexts that create “difficult life conditions” with alienating consequences (Christie 2008, 324; Crockett 2017). In this study, we present evidence of endemic violence in an online consumption community, a context in which the presence of endemic violence seems surprising. After all, membership in such communities is based on interests rather than deep-rooted social categories (Thomas et al. 2013; Galtung 1990), is typically voluntarily chosen rather than ascribed (Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001), can be started and stopped (Cova and Cova 2002), and has usually less impact on consumers’ lives than skin color, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Our study contributes to the theory of violence in collective consumption contexts by highlighting three key conceptual differences.

First, direct violence against politicized and stigmatized communities takes physical, material, and verbal forms (Eichert and Luedicke 2022; Peñaloza 1994). It diminishes a wide range of human needs, including survival, well-being, identity, and freedom (Galtung 1990), as well as consumption-specific needs such as equal access to income, housing, and goods and services (Crockett 2021). Even if violence in online consumption communities is mostly verbal in nature and aimed *only* at members’ digital selves (Schau and Gilly 2003), it can induce paranoia, depression, withdrawal from social life, substance abuse, and even suicide (Marwick and boyd 2014; Schonfeld, McNiel, Toyoshima, and Binder 2023; UK Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport 2019).



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4 While the impact of direct violence in online consumption communities is narrow, its  
5 reach is wide. It affects not only socially stigmatized groups but all members. All it takes to  
6 attract abuse is to inadvertently perform a community's habitual practices in a controversial way.  
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8 While no consumer is immune to online violence, not everyone is and feels affected in the same  
9 way. Further cultural and experimental research could explore these differences and identify  
10 characteristics of vulnerable consumers.  
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17 Secondly, a defining characteristic of structural violence is that it leaves those affected  
18 "with no alternatives" (Galtung 1969, 178). This calls into question whether structural violence  
19 can exist in online communities at all. A key argument against its existence is that, unlike  
20 stigmatized minorities, consumers can leave toxic online communities at any time without  
21 significant impact on their well-being. However, although relationships in online communities  
22 often do not "dominate consumers' lives" (Goulding, Canniford, and Shankar 2013, 815), for  
23 many the friendships, intimacy, and sense of family gained in such communities are emotionally  
24 significant (Mathwick et al. 2008; Schau et al 2009). Future studies should examine the boundary  
25 conditions for members' seemingly masochistic loyalty to brutalized consumption settings,  
26 including the role of an individual taste for violence or the presence of alternative communities.  
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40 Third, cultural violence in consumption communities does not primarily originate in  
41 othering ideologies (e.g., racism), fears (e.g., homophobia), or feelings of disgust (e.g.,  
42 fatphobia) (Crockett 2021; Kates 2002; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013) but in members' unmet  
43 desires for entertainment, status, and justice within their communities. This difference is  
44 particularly evident in the sadistic entertainment constellation, where members not only  
45 intentionally harm others for their entertainment but also encourage them to stay involved so  
46 they can continue the abuse. Future research should examine the extent to which consumption  
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4 communities wage status struggles along class, racial, age or ethnic lines, and thereby reinforce  
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6 structural and cultural violence that already exists in society.  
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## 10 Why Some Consumption Communities Are More Prone to Brutalization Than Others

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14 Previous research suggests, but does not explain, considerable variance in the intensity of  
15  
16 verbal violence in consumption communities. Some studies report only occasional verbal  
17  
18 transgressions (Husemann et al. 2015), while others observe intense and recurring confrontations  
19  
20 (De Valck 2007; Hemetsberger 2006). Our findings suggest that these differences are not random  
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22 but can be explained by different types of communities having different propensities to brutalize.  
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26 First, our analysis suggests that a stronger hedonic consumption orientation is more likely  
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28 to be accompanied by unsatisfied entertainment needs, thus favoring the emergence of a sadistic  
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30 entertainment constellation. Therefore, violence indicative of sadistic entertainment has been  
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32 associated not with problem-solving (Mathwick et al. 2008) or self-help (Scaraboto and Fisher  
33  
34 2013) communities that draw their energy from empathic assistance but with fun- and thrill-  
35  
36 seeking communities that interact on platforms such as Discord, Reddit, and Twitch (Allyn 2021;  
37  
38 Hern 2022; Marantz 2018).  
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42 Second, our findings suggest that clan warfare is more likely to develop in consumption  
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44 communities that put greater emphasis on their homogeneity (Thomas et al. 2013) and  
45  
46 consciousness of kind (Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001). Such communities are predisposed to respond  
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48 to new, nonconformist consumption practices with status anxiety, tyranny, and denigrating  
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50 narratives. Therefore, behaviors indicative of clan warfare constellations have been reported not  
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52 from heterogeneous communities such as American runners that accommodate a myriad of  
53  
54 different running styles (Thomas et al. 2013) but from cooking (De Valck 2007) and open source  
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(Hemetsberger 2006) communities where members exhibit strong, and often incompatible, consumption beliefs, values, and tastes.

Finally, communities that are consumer-owned, highly dispersed, and highly accessible seem particularly vulnerable to the emergence of a popular justice constellation. Consumer-hosted communities like HaHo are prone to minarchy because their private ownership constrains moderation resources. Similarly, behaviors reminiscent of vigilante justice have primarily been documented in dispersed communities spanning multiple (online) spaces (Weijo, Hietanen, and Mattila 2014), and in large online communities with low entry barriers (Thomas et al. 2013), where members come and go easily, and effective moderation is challenging. Brutalization may nevertheless occur in consumption communities that we expect to be less vulnerable based on our analysis. Some authors have highlighted, for example, how new mothers' parenting communities develop a "call-out culture via the internet" (Campoamor 2018) rather than supporting each other. Additional inquiry into such contexts is required to uncover new boundary conditions for our brutalizing constellations or even identify new constellations.

#### Why Online Community Brutalization Does Not Spill Over to Offline Contexts

Sociological research has shown that online and offline violence can be mutually reinforcing in traditional community settings. For example, students who are victims of online harassment are significantly more likely to engage in offline delinquent behavior (Hinduja and Patchin 2007). Offline discrimination, in turn, can spill over into social media wars fueled by polarizing algorithms (Massanari 2015). However, to our knowledge, consumer research has yet to document a case of violence in online consumer communities spilling over into offline consumption contexts. Although we analyzed on- and offline data, we also found no evidence of

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4 such spillover, despite the fact that many HaHo members, including those who fought online,  
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6 knew each other's screen names, and met in person. Informed by our findings, we propose three  
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8 explanations for this lack of spillover.  
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11 First, offline verbal aggressors see their victims, experience the harm inflicted, and face  
12  
13 the risk that their verbal abuse will escalate into physical violence (Reinig, Briggs, and  
14  
15 Nunamaker 1997). Face-to-face interactions therefore make it difficult to maintain the illusion of  
16  
17 verbal violence as harmless play, thus hindering the formation of a sadistic entertainment  
18  
19 constellation. We also assume that offline consumption communities experience less boredom  
20  
21 that could be combated with sadistic entertainment as they have more opportunities to satisfy  
22  
23 hedonistic desires in non-sadistic ways (Schau et al. 2009).  
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26  
27 Second, while offline consumption communities often fragment into heterogeneous  
28  
29 groups, tensions among them are less likely to coalesce into a clan warfare constellation. One  
30  
31 established explanation is that offline communities have higher entry barriers (Lampe and  
32  
33 Johnston 2005), which facilitates the selection of suitable members and "frame alignment"  
34  
35 (Thomas et al. 2013, 1010) early on, thus reducing the likelihood of denigrating narratives and  
36  
37 tyrannic structures to emerge. Further research is needed to identify the conditions under which  
38  
39 reliance on shared resources such as running tracks (Thomas et al. 2013), surf spots (Canniford  
40  
41 and Shankar 2013), or climbing trails (Tumbat and Belk 2011), the existence of dominant clans,  
42  
43 and denigrating narratives about new brand enthusiasts (Avery 2017) can generate offline forms  
44  
45 of clan warfare. The insight that some critics of Hummer SUVs not only gather online to insult  
46  
47 their opponents but also commit material violence against their cars akin to what we theorize as a  
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49 terrorist attack suggests this possibility (Luedicke et al. 2010).  
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4 Finally, minarchic governance is often legally infeasible in offline contexts, making  
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6 vigilante policing unnecessary. Organizers of offline community events such as clubbing,  
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8 conventions, or car races must comply with national laws, obtain permits from authorities, or use  
9  
10 volunteer police forces. Thus, when consumption norms are violated offline, consumers typically  
11  
12 seek support instead of loading their (rhetorical) guns and lynching the culprits themselves.  
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14 Although we found no evidence of spillover in our context, future studies should investigate  
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16 whether it does occur elsewhere, for example, in emotionally charged and poorly moderated  
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18 communities such as unofficial free party gatherings or citizen-consumer protests.  
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#### 24 How Consumption Community Brutalization Can Be Mitigated

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28 Prior research suggests that consumption communities typically mitigate situated  
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30 outbursts of verbal violence by persuading members—sometimes forcefully—to steer clear of  
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32 violent behaviors. In Galtung's (2010) vernacular, this constitutes a security approach to  
33  
34 pacification. In consumption communities, the security approach is evident in frame alignment  
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36 practices (Thomas et al. 2013), as well as censoring, punishing, and banning practices (Sibai et  
37  
38 al. 2015). Although we did not focus empirically on pacification, our findings suggest that the  
39  
40 use of security measures alone does not mitigate brutalization as it overlooks structural and  
41  
42 cultural issues that fuel violent behaviors—a situation that Galtung calls “negative peace”  
43  
44 (Ercoskun 2021, 3). An alternative peacebuilding approach, which sanctions violent behavior but  
45  
46 also induces structural and cultural changes, seems more effective in creating “positive peace”  
47  
48 (ibid.). Such peacebuilding would require action on all three levels of violence.  
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54 To mitigate sadistic entertainment, we suggest that communities first take a strong stance  
55  
56 against directly violent blood games (Sibai et al. 2015). Then they should debunk the idea of  
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4 harmless play as a myth that masks real human suffering and promote alternative forms of  
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6 entertainment grounded in narratives of responsible play, sportsmanship, or mutual care, for  
7  
8 example. Finally, they should identify practices that promote hedonic Darwinism and abandon  
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10 rituals that reward violent behavior or shame victims. In our context, this combination of tactics  
11  
12 seemed to have contributed to pacification. The moderator gradually banned blood games from  
13  
14 most areas of the forum and excluded leading attackers, which challenged the myth of harmless  
15  
16 play and ultimately led to members viewing blood games as an immature, outdated, and  
17  
18 outmoded form of entertainment in 2012.  
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22 Such tripartite approaches seem advisable also for communities afflicted by clan warfare  
23  
24 and popular justice constellations. Mitigating clan warfare would thus require decisive action to  
25  
26 curb violent status battles, replace denigrating with inclusive narratives that celebrate similarities  
27  
28 (De Valck 2007) and show “respect for otherness” (Husemann et al. 2015, 275), and establish  
29  
30 more egalitarian, participatory social structures, such as community assemblies. In our context,  
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32 clan warfare waned in 2007-2008 after moderators banned the most tyrannical clan leaders and  
33  
34 promoted the idea of “PLUR” (peace, love, unity, and respect) in the community. Mitigating  
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36 popular justice brutalization, in contrast, should not begin with curbing vigilante policing but  
37  
38 with abandoning harmful minarchic structures. The new structures should allow for the effective  
39  
40 enforcement of norms, thereby reducing members’ need for violent narratives and behaviors. Our  
41  
42 focal community mitigated popular justice brutalization in 2017 primarily by replacing violent  
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44 punishment narratives with healing-oriented ideas of restorative justice.  
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49  
50 These suggestions have yet to be empirically examined. Attenuating sadistic  
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52 entertainment seems particularly problematic because some consumption communities value  
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54 verbally violent blood games as an entertaining and energizing part of their culture. Members of  
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4 such communities often condemn restrictions to verbal violence as an outrageous intrusion on  
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6 their personal freedom. Further research could explore how communities can curb violence  
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8 without jeopardizing engagement, identify ways to manage cultural change and rejuvenation  
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10 without triggering clan wars, and develop effective strategies to mitigate norm violations without  
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12 harsh policing, for which many consumption communities lack the resources.

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15 We also call for more ethics-based research to discuss whether societies should allow  
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17 such forms of presumably harmless play—especially in communities around violent online  
18  
19 games, for example—or whether policy interventions are needed to at least protect young  
20  
21 consumers. Our focal community mitigated all three forms of brutalization through a mix of  
22  
23 actions aimed at reducing direct, cultural, and structural violence. The community’s dissipation  
24  
25 from 2018 onwards was not due to their inability to curb brutalization but a combination of other  
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27 factors, including the rise of new social media platforms and founding members moving on.  
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### 33 Why Consumers’ Interactions on Social Media Are Prone to Brutalization

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38 Ample evidence shows that verbal violence manifests “particularly frequently on social  
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40 networking sites” such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok (UK Department for Digital,  
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42 Culture, Media, and Sport 2019, 8). On such sites, consumers do not typically perpetuate  
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44 collective identities, shared consumption practices, or enduring relationships that characterize  
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46 communities like HaHo; rather, these sites promote “a publicity-oriented consumer culture,  
47  
48 organized around appearance and visibility rather than identity and belonging” (Arvidsson and  
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50 Caliandro 2016, 727). Despite these important differences, social media sites exhibit  
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52 characteristics that predispose them to brutalize in similar ways to those we theorize.  
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4 Social media interactions are particularly susceptible to sadistic entertainment  
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6 brutalization for three reasons. First, many consumers use these media to find pleasure and  
7  
8 escape their offline lives (Kozinets 2008) but are often less entertained than desired. Second,  
9  
10 social media blur the boundaries between the real and the possible (Mardon, Denegri-Knott, and  
11  
12 Molesworth 2023), allowing posters to play roles rather than interact sincerely (Schau and Gilly  
13  
14 2003). Third, social media are embedded in broader media markets that have themselves  
15  
16 developed a penchant for exploiting emotional pain to boost ratings. Some media brands dismiss  
17  
18 the attention-grabbing abuse of consumers as a problem of the weak and “foolish” (Cefai 2020,  
19  
20 1294) who are unable to take responsibility for themselves—a narrative we call harmless play.  
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22 This tactic promotes “markets of humiliation” (Lewinsky 2015) where the exploitation of online  
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24 drama (Marwick and boyd 2014) and the provocation of “heightened sensations and pleasures”  
25  
26 (Fitchett 2002, 318) appear harmless, and where no feelings are actually hurt. This combination  
27  
28 of unfulfilled desires, ontological ambiguity, and economic reward of attention (regardless of  
29  
30 how it is achieved) is an ideal breeding ground for narratives of harmless play, Darwinist  
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32 structures, and violent blood games. Future research should investigate forms and effects of  
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34 sadistic entertainment in wider consumption contexts, including brutalized brand publics  
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36 (Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016), interactions between influencers and audiences (Mardon,  
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38 Cocker and Daunt 2023), and offline communications that exploit playful violence for attention,  
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40 such as Guggi’s axe-wielding Bad Bunny action figures.  
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47 Social media are also vulnerable to clan warfare brutalization. Their inherent “collapse of  
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49 multiple audiences into single contexts” (Marwick and boyd 2011, 114) blurs familiar social  
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51 categories and boundaries so that consumers struggle to agree on who and “what counts as  
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53 appropriate” in a given online setting (Gershon 2019, 404). The resulting status anxiety favors  
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3 the formation of fiercely competing online clans. Opportunistic brand leaders (Wieser, Luedicke,  
4 and Hemetsberger 2021), influencers, political parties, and platform algorithms (Massanari 2015)  
5 also fuel polarizing narratives and justify tyrannical behavior in the interest of profit or political  
6 currency. Further studies should explore how social media sites, consumption communities, and  
7 brands can generate recognition for defusing such culture wars rather than fueling them.  
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11 Finally, social media interactions also exhibit markers of popular justice brutalization.  
12 Like the internet itself, social media are born out of techno-libertarian ideologies that consider  
13 online worlds anarchistic “techtopia[s]” (Kozinets 2008, 865). These ideologies favor  
14 ultraliberal, minarchic governance structures, which in turn fuel the perpetuation of just  
15 punishment narratives and vigilante policing behaviors on social media sites. Examples of such  
16 vigilante policing include white supremacists abusing ethno-racial minorities during “reactionary  
17 backlashes” (Crockett 2021, 6), consumers shaming of women who fail to conform to gender  
18 expectations (Lewinsky 2015), the hateful “de-celebrification” of personalities perceived to act  
19 deviantly (Mortensen and Kristensen 2020, 89), and customer firestorms in response to brand  
20 transgressions (Hansen, Kupfer, and Hennig-Thurau 2018).  
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38 Existing marketing and media studies suggest that exploitative marketing practices are  
39 the main cause of violence on social media (Cefai 2020; Philipps 2015). Indeed, in our empirical  
40 context, members and moderators sometimes intentionally exploit verbal violence, especially  
41 sadistic entertainment, to increase engagement or simply to prevent the demise of their  
42 community. However, our study shows that online violence can also arise from consumers’  
43 personal, non-commercial attempts to satisfy unmet desires for entertainment, social status, and  
44 justice. As Kozinets et al. (2017, 679) have warned, consumers’ desirous energy can spark  
45 “violence, aggression, and warfare” on social media. Our theorization of consumption  
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4 community brutalization highlights the conditions under which such violent discharges of  
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6 frustrated desires occur and become endemic.  
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## 10 CONCLUSION

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16 The sociologist Norbert Elias (1969) argued that the civilizing process depends to a  
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18 considerable extent on the control of violence. Given the “long-term decline of wars, crimes, and  
19  
20 homicides” (Benadusi 2021, 950) across human history, societies seem to be getting better at  
21  
22 overcoming this greatest impediment to civilization (Freud 1961). The brutalization dynamics we  
23  
24 found in our empirical context, which are also reflected in (social) media culture, seem to  
25  
26 counteract this pacification trend. Although our indignation at these brutalization forces might  
27  
28 shimmer through the pages of this article, we trust in the ability of consumers and community  
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30 moderators to recognize brutalization dynamics and counter them decisively. Perhaps the  
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32 findings from this study will contribute to this endeavor.  
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## DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The first author collected all data between June 2012 and May 2022. The discussion thread data were manually retrieved from the community's online forum. The first author obtained a copy of the entire forum database from the owner. In-depth interviews were conducted in cafés and pubs across London. One interview was conducted over the phone. The three authors analyzed the data together. The resulting article is jointly crafted. The data are currently stored in a project directory on the Open Science Framework.

Accepted Manuscript  
(not copy edited or formatted)  
Use DOI when citing or quoting

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**HEADINGS LIST****1) AUTHOR NOTE****1) ABSTRACT****1) THEORY**

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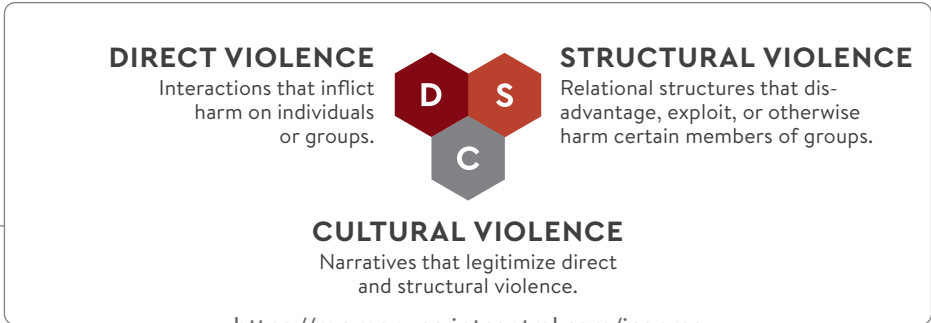
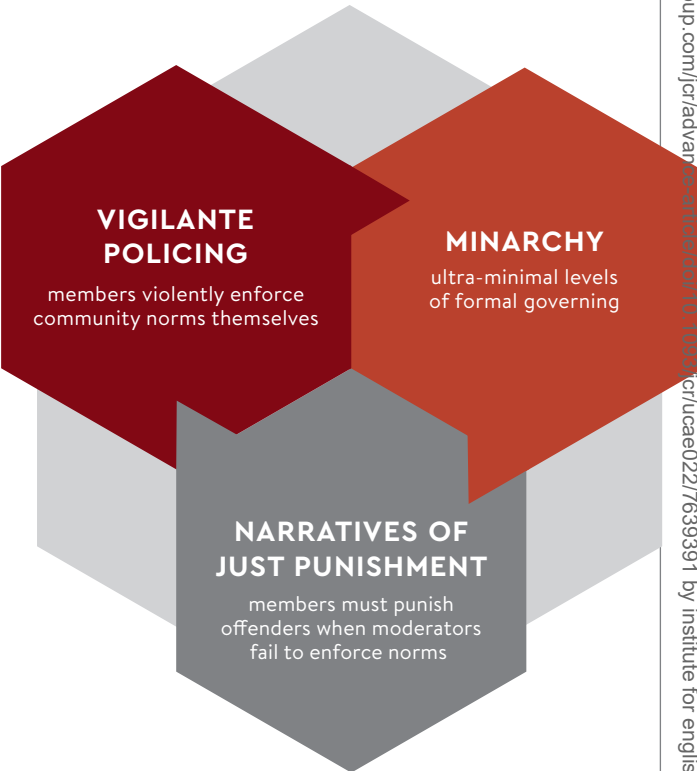
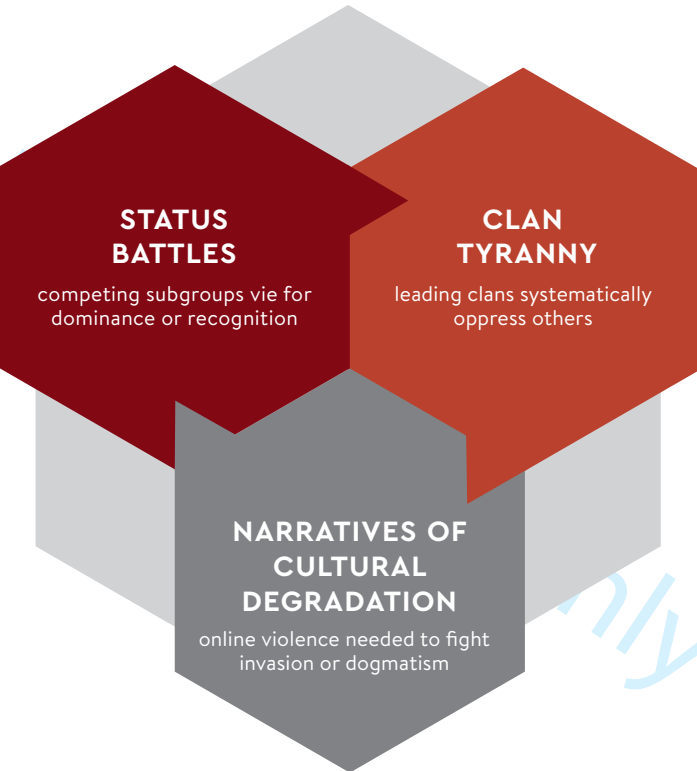
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# BRUTALIZING CONSTELLATIONS

## SADISTIC ENTERTAINMENT

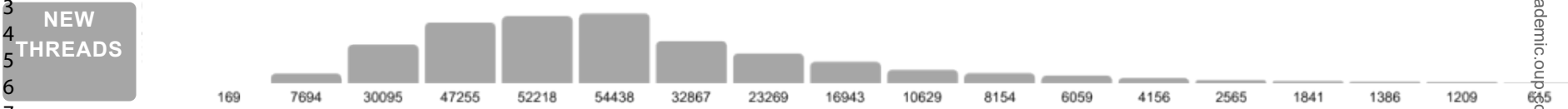
## CLAN WARFARE

## POPULAR JUSTICE



YEAR 2001 2002 2003 2004 2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015 2016 2017 2018

1 PHASE Inception (2001) Growth (2002 - 2004) Maturity (2005 - 2006) Early decline (2007 - 2011) Late decline (2012 - 2018)



3 NEW THREADS

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CONTEXT

- Community emerges as an amicable group of friends around HaHo owner John. They party together offline and discuss electronic music, DJs, private matters, etc. online.

- No moderation needed at this time.

- Member base grows exponentially after John promoted the community.

- Community splits into established vs. new members.

- Frequent drama and hilarity create unrealistic expectations of non-stop entertainment.

- Violent ideas, structures, and behaviors emerge to combat boredom and status anxiety, and become endemic.

- Violence drives engagement. Moderators largely let it happen.

- Community fragments into 15 clans vying for status.

- Violent dramas become HaHo's defining feature.

- "Dark side award" rewards direct violence and promotes harmless play idea.

- Brutalization forces moderators to cautiously intervene to avoid rebellion.

- Engagement declines rapidly for multiple reasons, including competition from new social media and a decline of London's clubbing scene.

- Clan warfare dissipates after moderators ban tyrannic clan leaders and promote respect for diversity.

- "Flounce", and "Meltdown" awards structurally solidify harmless play narratives.

- Moderation decreases as team is reduced to three time-poor moderators.

- Engagement declines further, as aging early members become less interested in clubbing.

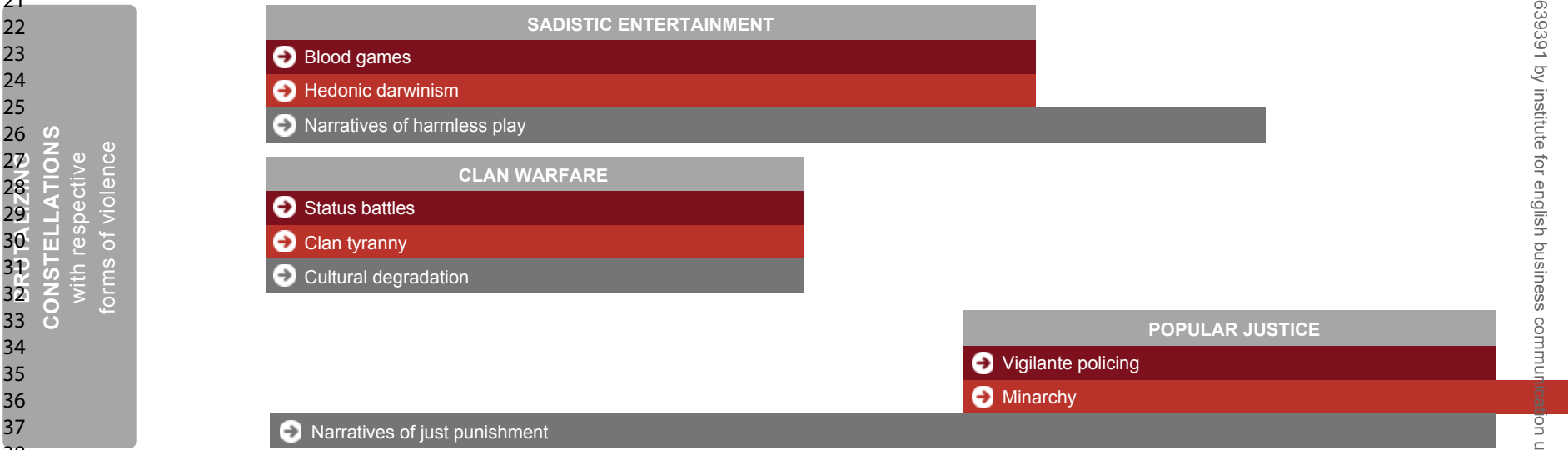
- Disengaged moderators force members to defend themselves against non-compliant members.

- Sadistic entertainment dissipates when members redefine HaHo as a supportive family and begin to see blood games and violent awards as immature and passé.

- Mature members realize that HaHo's violent blood games are not harmless and gradually abandon the narrative of harmless play in 2014.

- New "Redeemed Member" award praises converted, previously violent members.

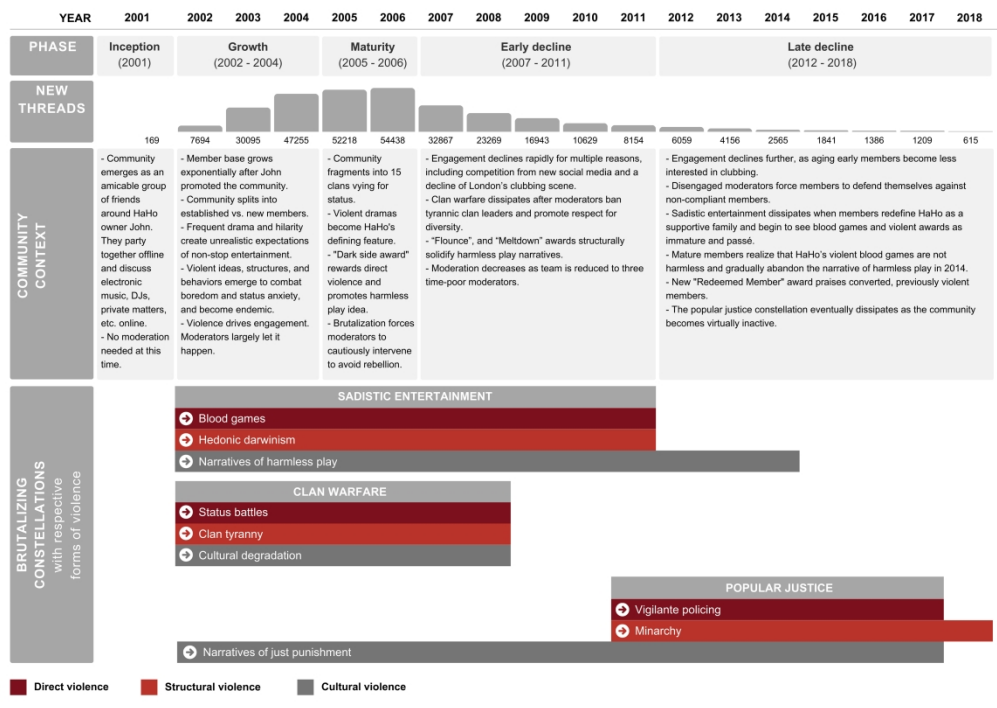
- The popular justice constellation eventually dissipates as the community becomes virtually inactive.



39 Direct violence Structural violence Cultural violence

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