

Summary

The professional use of public social media by companies has a rather short history of 10 to 12 years (i.e., the most-used social media platforms for company communication – Facebook and Twitter – were founded in 2005 and 2006, respectively). Also from a scholarly perspective, the study of company social media use is still in its infancy. This work aims to advance this field of study. More specifically, it investigates the role of online company interactivity, consumer engagement and conversational human voice. The effects of these concepts on the reputation of companies is examined, as well as their consequences for customers' affective commitment with companies. The specific focus in this dissertation is on the tourism and travel industry, a sector that is considered as crucial for global economic development and employability, in particular in emerging markets. As a result of the characteristics of the tourism product (e.g., an intangible, high-involvement product), this sector has been highly affected by the emergence of social media.

In the first empirical chapter (Chapter 2) of this dissertation, trends and developments in online interactive behavior of the largest Dutch tourism and travel companies with a presence on social media are mapped, and the level of emoticon/emoji use in their communication during recent years. We observe increasing trends in company interactivity on both Facebook and Twitter over the period 2011-2016, as indicated by the proportion of reactions in the total message volume of companies. Furthermore, we find growing levels of 'human voice' in online company communication, as visible in an increased use of emoticons and emoji. This is an important finding, since previous research showed that online company interactivity and a human-like style of communication are crucial factors for improving relational outcomes for companies, such as loyalty and commitment.

The next three chapters (3, 4, and 5) of this work are based on a two-wave survey among customers and non-customers of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, a major international airline company with a highly (inter)active presence on social media, and worldwide considered as a frontrunner in the corporate use of social media. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 investigate different aspects of company interactivity, and their effect on relational outcomes.

In Chapter 3, based on the first wave of data of the KLM study, the relation between consumers' intensity of social media use and their engagement with a company's social media activities is investigated. Furthermore, the association between consumer engagement and perception of corporate reputation is examined. Additionally, we study the differences in the nature of these relations between customers and non-customers. The results show a positive relation between consumers' intensity of social media use

and engagement with a company's social media activities, especially among *customers*. An explanation for this result is that customers have more direct benefits of using/following the social media channels of companies (e.g., for customer service, product information). A second important finding of this chapter is that consumers' level of engagement with companies' social media activities is positively related to their perception of corporate reputation, especially for *non-customers*. This implies that non-customers are an important target group for the social media activities of companies. They may play a role as online influencer, and may – in the future – more easily turn into customers, since perception of corporate reputation is an important antecedent for purchase intentions.

Subsequently, Chapter 4 assesses – using both waves of data from the KLM study – whether consumers' exposure to company social media activities precedes perceptions of corporate reputation. This chapter also investigates the mediating role of conversational human voice (CHV) in the aforementioned relation. CHV is an indicator of a company's 'human' and natural style of communication with the public, and is considered as a key factor in improving relationships. We find evidence that consumers' exposure to engaging company social media activities precedes more positive perceptions of reputation. Since corporate reputation plays an important role in the achievement of company goals, attaining high levels of exposure for their online activities is therefore highly relevant for companies. Another key finding from this chapter is that the perception of a CHV in a company's communication mediates the effects of consumer social media exposure, resulting in higher perceived levels of corporate reputation. This provides evidence that in order to enhance perception of corporate reputation, applying a CHV is essential.

Lastly, Chapter 5 provides a broader insight in the relational effects for companies of customers' active social media use. It examines the relational effects of customers' webcare interactions with KLM. To this end, the relation between customers' webcare interactions and their perception of affective commitment with the company is studied, and the mediating role of CHV in this relation. CHV once more proves its relevance for online company communication, since we find a significant *indirect* relation between webcare interaction and changes in affective commitment through mediation of CHV. It enhances the level of 'humanness' of communication, which has a positive effect on attitudes toward the company. In contradiction with existing studies, however, we find that there is no *direct* relation between having webcare interactions and changes in affective commitment.

Summary

In sum, the findings of this dissertation advances insights – both theoretically and practically – into company social media use, and its effects on relational outcomes. The results provide insights for social media strategies of companies, in particular for those in the travel and tourism industry. We showed that companies have developed higher levels of interactivity on social media over recent years. In particular for companies that are highly devoted to the use of social media (such as our case company KLM), this higher interactivity – via consumers’ exposure to the interactive activities of companies and their engagement with these activities – has positively affected relational outcomes. The use of a ‘human voice’ by companies has contributed substantially to the achievement of these improved outcomes.