Chapter 1

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The emergence of social media has greatly transformed the communication of companies with the public (Moreno, Navarro, Tench, & Zerfass, 2015; Stelzner, 2017). Company communication has become both easier and more complex at the same time. More easy, because of the possibilities to connect directly with consumers and to engage with them. More complex, since social media platforms are no orderly one-way channels for communication, but rather uncontrolled arenas for participation (Aula, 2010) that have shifted power to the individual. On social media, a single unsatisfied consumer can damage long-established brands with a single angry blog post (Tripp & Grégoire, 2011), or cause a large social media ‘firestorm’ in a matter of hours after an incident (Creswell & Maheshwari, 2017). Companies are in the spotlights on the social media stage, and their (re)actions to consumers are closely watched by other consumers and stakeholders.

It has become increasingly difficult for companies to stay out of this arena, since social media use by companies has taken on the characteristics of a commodity for the public. That is, the absence of a company on social media has become more striking to consumers than its presence. During the past decade, consumer expectations have shifted from being positively surprised by receiving a personal reaction to online questions, to just counting on a rapid and appropriate reaction of companies (Casey, 2017).

The professional use of social media by companies has a rather short history, and companies have learned to deal step by step with the new online communication environment, sometimes by trial and error. From a scholarly point of view, the study of corporate social media use is still in its infancy, and has evolved into a completely new area of research. In existing literature overviews on the academic research of company social media use, a considerable number of research opportunities can be identified (see e.g., Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013; Kietzmann, Silvestre, McCarthy, & Pitt, 2012; Leung, Law, van Hoof, & Buhalis, 2013; Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014). For instance, in the study of Aral et al. (2013), an organizing framework for the study of social media use by companies and industries is presented. This study recognizes a substantial number of unexamined research questions related to company social media use, such as how companies should best interact with the public on social media to maximize their benefit, how social media can add value to firms, and which skills should companies develop to optimize their social media activities.

At the start of this dissertation, it is important to demarcate its scope. That is, in company social media use a distinction can be made between enterprise social media use and public social media use. Enterprise social media use is focused on
communicating messages between coworkers or sharing messages with everyone in an organization (Leonardi, Huysman, & Steinfield, 2013). This may be realized via closed/private groups of publicly available sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), via specific software for employee collaboration (e.g., Yammer, Slack), or via private implementations of open source or proprietary software (e.g., Microsoft SharePoint, MediaWiki). Since these solutions are for company *internal* use only, they are not the subject of study in this dissertation. The focus in this work, however, is on *public* social media use, which consists of communication between companies and consumers via publicly available web-based platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

In this dissertation, we will add to the academic knowledge in this field by focusing on research questions in the field of company social media use such as the ones above, with a specific focus on the tourism and travel industry. More specifically, we will study the role of *online interactivity*, *consumer engagement* and *conversational human voice* in the social media communication of companies. We will assess the relation of the aforementioned concepts with important relational outcomes for companies (i.e., corporate reputation, affective customer commitment). Beyond relevance for academia, this dissertation aims to contribute to the knowledge of communication practitioners, and may provide input for online communication strategies of organizations.

In the remainder of this chapter, we will shortly elaborate on the emergence of social media, followed by an overview of the tourism and travel industry which is the focal business sector throughout this dissertation. Lastly, an outline of this dissertation and an introduction of the subsequent empirical chapters is provided.

### The emergence of social media

During the initial decades starting from the 1960’s, the Internet was a relatively unknown phenomenon, connecting ‘geeks’ in academia, a number of large corporations, military organizations, and the government in a mostly text-only type of environment. The initial focus was on sharing computing resources and exchanging information, mostly in a textual form, over e-mail and discussion groups (i.e., Usenet newsgroups). Because the Internet was born out of fear for nuclear attacks during the cold war, the development of this network was largely driven by concerns over resiliency and redundancy: the general ability to continue operating, even if large portions of the network were taken offline. In those early days, the Internet was a complex system to
use and operate, leading to slow user adoption and a somewhat collegial environment where a large part of the community knew each other and worked closely together. The emergence of the technology for the world wide web in the early 90’s of the last century (e.g., HTML pages, HTTP protocol) rapidly extended the applicability of the Internet to non-academic and non-military settings (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Companies and individuals started to develop web pages and sites, and the general public was able to view or download the posted content (i.e., the ‘static web’) (Ricca & Tonella, 2003).

Although the world wide web was a breakthrough in the distribution and availability of information, in the first years of the 21st century a next revolution was imminent: new technology (i.e., ‘social software’) transformed the world wide web into an environment for individuals to easily connect and create online communities. This environment was referred to as ‘Web 2.0’ (O’ Reilly, 2007), to signify the progression from the ‘read-only’ world wide web (retroactively referred to as Web 1.0). With Web 2.0, social aspects became part of the world wide web, and interaction, collaboration and content sharing amongst individuals became easily possible (O’ Reilly, 2007). This gave consumers (and at a somewhat later stage also companies) the power of near-instant communication and connectivity, which – in the subsequent years to follow – would open up a world of new possibilities. It constituted the starting point for the current online landscape, where today social media strongly influence the way consumers and companies daily communicate.

Social media were defined by Kaplan and Heinlein (2010, p. 61) as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content”. Emerging global social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter (founded in 2004 and 2006, respectively), made it possible for individuals as well as organizations to communicate online effortlessly, and have interactive dialogues using their computers (Weinberg & Pehlivan, 2011), and – at a later stage – using mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets. Today, this “social media revolution” has impacted many fields of communication (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson, & Seymour, 2011), such as political, health, and cultural communication – and, not the least, company communication (i.e., between firms and the public), which constitutes the area of study for the present dissertation, more specifically company communication in the tourism and travel industry. Since this industry is the focal business sector in this dissertation, in the next section its background and characteristics are shortly outlined.
The World Tourism Organization (WTO) defines tourism as the process of “consumers traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes – not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited” (WTO, 1995, p. 1). In 2016, the tourism and travel industry directly generated $2,300 billion of revenues, and 109 million jobs worldwide (WTTC, 2017). When also taking into account its indirect financial impacts, in 2016 the tourism and travel sector equaled 10.2% of the world’s gross domestic product (GDP), and is responsible for approximately 10% of all jobs (WTTC, 2017). Tourism is in the top five export earners in over 150 countries, while it is the number one export sector in 60 countries (UNWTO, 2017). Moreover, it is also the main source of foreign exchange for one-third of developing countries and half of the least-developed countries. The sector is therefore considered as crucial for global economic development and job creation, in particular in emerging markets such as in the Asia Pacific region and South America (UNWTO, 2017).

The boundaries of the tourism and travel industry are rather indefinite. At the supply side, it brings together – and strongly influences – segments from a number of different activities with a wide variety of products and services, exhibiting little homogeneity (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004). The total tourism product as finally experienced by the consumer consists of products of several suppliers, such as those of transportation, accommodation, entertainment, dining/drinking, and shopping (Leiper, 1979). Also on the demand side, the tourism product is multifaceted. The focus of consumers’ touristic activity may differ greatly, and a distinction can be made in a broad variety of tourism types, such as (among many others) religious, health, cultural, and sports tourism. In addition, the context of tourism activities is highly dynamic and complex. That is, the touristic product is dependent of numerous global and regional/local political, economic and socio-cultural circumstances (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2004). In sum, the complete tourism system is difficult to demarcate, and is contingent upon the interplay of a variety of different actors and conditions (Leiper, 1979).

As a result of the plethora of involved parties in this sector, it has historically been information intensive (Buhalis, 2003), and the relationship with the information & communication technology sector (ICT) has always been very tight. This already originates from the dawn of computer history at the end of the 1960’s with the deployment of the first computerized reservation systems (Poon, 1993). The evolution of these two industries has almost always been parallel, and – as to be expected –
nowadays ICT still plays a dominant role in tourism and travel organizations. The Internet age has allowed the development of new ways for producing and distributing of tourism and travel products. Web-based approaches and technologies are helping suppliers and agents in exchanging information and reducing costs (Buhalis, 2003). Notwithstanding the beneficial effects of ICT, the rapid developments in online technology also sets high requirements for tourism and travel organizations (Vodeb, 2012), and has also attracted new industry entrants with a background in ICT (e.g., Google Flights, Booking.com, Expedia).

Not only the production and distribution of tourism products presents challenges to the involved organizations; due to the nature of the products this also applies to their marketing and communication. Tourism products are services and thus intangible, which makes a full evaluation of the product before consumption difficult or even impossible (Murray & Schlacter, 1990). Also, tourism product quality is subject to heterogeneity because the product is delivered by people, and human behavior is difficult to control. Performance and quality of tourism staff can vary by time of day, workload, experience, attitude, knowledge, and many other factors. Furthermore, tourism products are considered as a high involvement product category (Josiam, Smeaton, & Clements, 1999), since they have high personal relevance for, and involvement of consumers. These product characteristics foster careful deliberation of consumers in the purchase process, and may easily evoke consumer uncertainty in the orientation phase (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, & Berry, 1990). As a consequence, tourism and travel companies must put relatively high efforts in informing and convincing consumers, to build the required trust that the product will indeed meet their expectations (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Transparent, trustworthy and effective communication is necessary to establish this; nowadays increasingly via social media. The impact of these online media on the tourism industry has already been described as ‘tremendous’ (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015, p. 246). For instance, TripAdvisor has 415 million unique monthly visitors (Tripadvisor, 2017) who are actively seeking out travel information and advice from sources that they trust the most: other tourists and holiday-makers (Nielsen, 2015). Also, online media platforms and their facilitation of effortless communication between consumers gave rise to the ‘sharing economy’, dominated by new tourism and travel players such as Airbnb and Uber (Zervas, Proserpio, & Byers, 2017).

Given the industry characteristics as described above and its reliance on computer technology and social media, the tourism and travel sector constitutes an appropriate
environment for investigating the evolution of online company communication, and its
effects on relational outcomes.

**Outline of this dissertation**

As described, social media have strongly affected communication between companies
and the public, especially so in the tourism industry. The question that so far has
received relatively little attention is whether and to what extent the application of social
media communication by companies has effects on relational outcomes with the public.
At the time of the conception of this dissertation, a number of studies suggested that the
use of social media may be beneficial for firms (see e.g., Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga,
2010; Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011; Qualman, 2010). Nevertheless, a thorough
understanding of the relational effects of company social media use was lacking.
Furthermore, the mechanisms behind these effects were not yet well understood.
One important factor that may play a role to explain (part of) the consequences of
social media use by firms is **interactivity**, which had already proven to be important
for building and maintaining successful relationships with consumers (Kelleher &
Miller, 2006; Liu & Shrum, 2002). To address this research gap, in this dissertation
we therefore focus on interactive behavior of companies on social media over time,
and on the consequences and underlying mechanisms of this interactive behavior. By
presenting four empirical chapters related to this topic, based on two empirical studies,
we contribute to a better scholarly and practical understanding of the effects of social
media communication by companies. The first empirical study (Chapter 2) is based on
the social media data of 33 Dutch tourism and travel companies, covering the period
2011-2016. The second (longitudinal) study is based on KLM Royal Dutch Airlines as
case company, and investigates different aspects of company interactivity (elaborated in
Chapter 3, 4, and 5).

More specifically, in Chapter 2 trends and developments in online interactivity
and ‘humanization’ of company communication during recent years are mapped.
The next three chapters (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) are based on a two-wave survey among
customers and non-customers of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, a major international
player in the aviation industry with a highly (inter)active presence on social media
(KLM, 2016), and considered worldwide as a frontrunner in the corporate use of social
media (Socialbakers, 2016). In Chapter 3, based on the first wave of data, we study the
effects of online consumer engagement – which is associated with interactivity (see e.g.,

Subsequently, Chapter 4 seeks evidence, using longitudinal data, to establish whether consumers’ exposure to company social media activities precedes the perception of corporate reputation over time. This chapter also investigates the mediating role of conversational human voice (CHV) in this relation – an important concept associated with interactive company behavior (Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Park & Cameron, 2014).

In addition to Chapter 4 which examines the relational effects for companies of passive social media use of consumers (i.e., consumer social media exposure), Chapter 5 aims to gain a broader insight in this area by examining the relational effects of active social media use of customers who were actually involved in webcare interactions with KLM. To this end, the relation between customer webcare activities and affective commitment is studied, and the mediating role of CHV in this relation.

The remainder of this chapter introduces the four empirical chapters of this dissertation in more detail. These chapters have each been either submitted to (Chapters 2 and 5), or published (Chapters 3 and 4) in peer-reviewed journals, and presented at national and/or international communication science conferences (see footnotes in this chapter).

Chapter 2: Developments in online interactivity of company communication

In order to gain insight in the evolution of online company behavior on social media during recent years, in the first empirical chapter trends and developments related to interactivity in online communication in the travel industry are investigated. Interactivity was defined by Liu and Shrum (2002, p. 54) as “the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communication medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized”. Interactivity affects relational outcomes such as consumer trust, customer satisfaction, and commitment (Kelleher, 2009; Palla, Tsiotsou, & Zotos, 2013). Social media platforms constitute a suitable setting for companies to have frequent and intensive interactions with consumers, since these platforms adequately meet the three criteria of interactive communication as defined by Liu and Shrum (2002): two-way communication (i.e., a bi-directional flow of information), synchronicity (speed of

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1 This chapter will be presented at the 68th Annual ICA Conference 2018, Prague, Czech Republic.
interaction), and active control (the ability to voluntarily participate in, and influence a communication). The question, however, is to what extent companies actually apply interactivity in their social media activities, and how interactivity has evolved over time. Given the importance of this concept in online company communication and the knowledge gap that exists in researching the evolution of interactivity, we investigate the developments in this field.

In Chapter 2, we map the developments with regard to company interactivity in a real-life setting from an industry perspective over time. The study is based on Facebook and Twitter data from the Dutch tourism and travel industry. Additionally, the developments in 'humanization' and informalization of online company communication were examined (as expressed by the use of emoticons), which are important conditions for successful interactivity (Kelleher, 2009; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). To this end, we analyzed interactivity and emoticon use in over 570,000 Facebook/Twitter messages of a selection of 33 companies active in the tourism industry in The Netherlands, supplemented with the messages of consumers that interacted with these companies, for the period 2011-2016. Trend analyses on these data show increasing levels of online interactivity and emoticon use in company communication during the last six years.

Chapter 3: Online consumer engagement and corporate reputation*

Chapter 2 revealed that companies’ level of online interactivity has increased over the years. Chapter 3 focuses on the consequences of this interactive company behavior, as represented by the effects of online consumer engagement on relational outcomes. That is, higher interactivity levels of a company’s messages lead to higher levels of consumer engagement (Mollen & Wilson, 2010; Sundar, Bellur, Oh, Jia, & Kim, 2016). Consumer engagement was defined by Hollebeek et al. (2014, p. 154) as “a consumer’s positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand interactions”. Higher levels of consumer engagement may – in turn – positively influence relational outcomes, since consumer engagement contributes to deeper and more lasting customer brand relationships (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Sparks, So, & Bradley, 2016).

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Despite companies’ efforts to bring about engagement among consumers, there is no thorough scholarly understanding of the effects of consumer engagement on important relational outcomes such as corporate reputation (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000). Therefore, in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, we investigate whether online engagement of consumers with a company’s social media activities is related to more positive perceptions of corporate reputation.

Additionally, we examine the antecedents of consumer engagement. A likely determinant for consumers to start engaging in a company’s social media activity is consumers’ general social media usage. A study by Leung and Bai (2013) showed that the intensity of one’s social media use and engagement in a company’s social media activities were related. We therefore also study the relation between general intensity of consumers’ social media use and engagement in a company’s social media activities.

In a survey among 3531 KLM customers and non-customers of this company, we measured consumers’ intensity of social media use, consumers’ engagement in the airline’s social media activities, and perception of corporate reputation. We examine the relation between these 3 concepts, and analyze the possible differences between customers and non-customers of the company.

The findings demonstrate that consumers’ intensity of social media use is positively related to their engagement in KLM’s social media activities, especially among customers. Furthermore, we find that consumers’ engagement in the social media activities of companies is positively related to corporate reputation, in particular for non-customers. This shows the relevance of interactive online company behavior (as represented by engaged consumers) for yielding positive relational outcomes for companies.

Chapter 4: Social media exposure, conversational human voice, and reputation

The positive relation between engagement in the social media activities of KLM and the perception of its corporate reputation as found in the previous chapter raises an important supplementary question. That is, does consumers’ exposure to engaging

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Previous versions of the chapter have been presented at the 65th Annual ICA Conference 2015, San Juan, Puerto Rico (awarded with the 2015 Top Paper Award of ICA’s Public Relations division); at ‘Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap 2015’ (NeFCA), Antwerpen, Belgium; and at ICORIA 2015, London, UK.
online company content and interactions precede relational outcomes for companies in time? Since there are indications from existing theory for the occurrence of this (see e.g., Guillory & Sundar, 2013; Lee & Park, 2013), in this chapter we assess whether consumers’ exposure to company social media activities lead to enhanced perceptions of corporate reputation. No longitudinal studies exist that have studied these effects, and this research hiatus is therefore addressed in the fourth chapter.

Additionally, in this chapter we look at the role of conversational human voice (CHV) in the relation between consumers’ social media exposure and perception of corporate reputation. CHV was defined by Kelleher (2009, p. 177) as “an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization’s publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics”. According to Kelleher (2009), a company demonstrates a high level of CHV in its communications if it is characterized by openness to dialogue, using a sense of humor, providing prompt feedback, and willingness to admit mistakes. A CHV in an online company communication context is considered to be a key factor in improving relationships (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Yang & Lim, 2009). Since CHV is related to online interactivity (Beukeboom et al., 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Park & Cameron, 2014), insight in the role and function of CHV may contribute to an improved understanding of interactive behavior of companies in online communication processes. An important question, however, that has not yet been studied extensively, is whether consumers’ exposure to a company’s social media activities affects their perception of CHV, and whether this results – over time – in a beneficial effect on relational outcomes such as corporate reputation. This question is also addressed in the fourth chapter.

In sum, in this chapter we investigate (a) whether consumers’ exposure to KLM’s social media activities over time is beneficial for corporate reputation, and (b) whether CHV mediates this relation. To this end, we used a longitudinal design consisting of two waves, by adding a second wave of data to the first wave that was used for the study in Chapter 3. In the second wave, we reached a rejoin rate of 56%, and surveyed 1969 of the 3531 first-wave KLM Royal Dutch Airlines customers and non-customers.

Results show that, as expected, consumers’ level of exposure to company social media activities precedes perceptions of corporate reputation, thus suggesting a causal relation between these concepts. Furthermore, we demonstrate that CHV mediates the relation between exposure to company social media activities and perceptions of corporate reputation, emphasizing the important role of interactive and ‘human-voiced’ company behavior on social media platforms.
Chapter 5: Webcare interaction, conversational human voice, and affective commitment

In the previous chapters we examined the relational effects of predominantly passive social media use by customers and non-customers of a company (i.e., exposure to company social media activities). Chapter 5 aims to extend the understanding of these effects to situations of active social media use initiated by customers (i.e., customers involved in webcare interactions). Specifically, Chapter 5 studies the relation between customer webcare interactions and affective commitment, and the role of CHV in this relation.

Van Noort and Willemsen (2012) defined webcare, following the description of Hong and Lee (2005) as “the act of engaging in online interactions with (complaining) consumers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback (e.g., questions, concerns and complaints)”. Webcare serves as a support tool for customer relationships, reputation and brand management. Previous studies typically show positive effects of webcare on brand perceptions and relational outcomes (Schamari & Schaefer, 2015; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). However, to date these studies have almost solely been conducted in experimental settings with non-customers (i.e., research participants witnessing webcare interactions), rather than on real customers who are actually involved in these webcare interactions.

Therefore, in Chapter 5 of this dissertation we investigate – using the same longitudinal data as in Chapter 4 – the relation between actual customers’ webcare interactions with a company and changes in affective commitment. We chose affective commitment as dependent variable, since it is one of the most frequently used relational concepts in customer-company relationship studies (Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2003). Affective commitment affects behavioral loyalty, and is crucial for developing and maintaining mutually beneficial business relationships (Harrison-Walker, 2001; Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006; Sashi, 2012). Also, we examine the mediating role of conversational human voice (Kelleher, 2009) in the aforementioned webcare-commitment relation.

The results show that customer webcare interaction is positively related to affective commitment at both survey waves, but not to change in affective commitment. That is, there is no significant direct relation between customer webcare and change in affective commitment. However, there is an indirect positive relation between customer webcare and change in affective commitment via CHV. This last result once more demonstrates

4 This chapter was presented at the 66th Annual ICA Conference 2016, Fukuoka, Japan.
the key role of CHV in successful online company communication, and adds to the knowledge of interactivity in communication.

**Chapter 6: General discussion**

In the last chapter of this dissertation, the results of the empirical chapters are summarized. Furthermore, the main findings and their implications for a better understanding of online company communication processes are discussed. Special attention is given to the pivotal role of CHV in gaining relational outcomes for organizations in online interactions. Subsequently, strengths and limitations of the studies in this dissertation are discussed. Given the relevance of information and communication technology for online company communication, we also pay attention to recent advancements in this field that may influence its (near) future (e.g., the emergence of instant messaging platforms, conversational interfaces driven by artificial intelligence). Lastly, new research directions are suggested that may further extend the knowledge of company social media use, and more specifically the understanding of interactivity in online company behavior.
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Introduction


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