Chapter 6

General discussion
Introduction

Social media have showed to be a resounding success in terms of adoption and usage level during the last 10 to 12 years (Chaffey, 2017b). They have caused a paradigm shift on how consumers connect and communicate with each other, on how they express and share ideas, and on how they engage with products and companies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Also from a company’s point of view, the rise of social media has greatly transformed communication strategies and processes. Today, company-consumer communication via social media has become mainstream, and the presence of companies on these platforms has more or less turned into a necessity in their contacts with the public (Stelzner, 2017). From an academic perspective, however, there are still several knowledge gaps with regard to the effects of online company activities, for instance on relational outcomes.

The main aim of this dissertation was therefore to contribute to the knowledge in this field. More specifically, this work focused on the developments in online company interactivity, and on its relation with consumer engagement and conversational human voice. The effect of consumer engagement and conversational human voice on corporate reputation was investigated, as well as their consequences for customers’ affective commitment with companies. The specific focus in this dissertation was on the tourism and travel industry, a sector that is considered critical for global economic development (UNWTO, 2017), and that is substantially impacted by the rise of social media (Xiang, Magnini, & Fesenmaier, 2015).

In this dissertation, we conducted two empirical studies, elaborated in four empirical chapters. The first empirical study (Chapter 2) is based on Facebook and Twitter data of 33 large Dutch tourism and travel companies, comprising the period 2011-2016. The second (two-wave) study is based on KLM Royal Dutch Airlines as case company, and examines different aspects of company interactivity and its consequences (Chapters 3, 4, and 5). In this final chapter, we first present a summary of the findings of the four empirical chapters. Subsequently, we evaluate the key findings and discuss their implications for theory and practice, followed by an overview of the strengths and limitations of the conducted studies. Next, given the impact of the developments in information & communication technology on online (company) communication, we will discuss the practical advances in the field of company social media use. Lastly, we suggest a number of new research directions for the progress of the scholarly research in this field.
Summary of the findings

Summary of Chapter 2: Developments in online interactivity of company communication.

Online communication technology has rapidly developed during the last decade, and the opportunities for companies to interact with the public have significantly increased (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). Therefore, in Chapter 2 we started with investigating how online interactivity of companies on their social media channels has evolved over time, for the period 2011-2016. In addition, we examined trend patterns in the use of a specific form of communication in social media – emoticons and emoji – that can be regarded as an indicator of the level of humanization of online company communication. We analyzed interactivity and emoticon use in over 300,000 public Facebook and Twitter messages of 33 companies from the tourism and travel industry in The Netherlands, supplemented with the messages of consumers that interacted with these companies. The results showed increasing trends of company interactivity on both Facebook and Twitter.

Another finding from this chapter is that the level of humanization of company communication – as expressed by the use of emoticons and emoji – has grown. By adding informal and affective cues such as emoticons/emoji to their online communication, companies’ relations with consumers may be more easily evaluated as interpersonal relationships by consumers. Furthermore, these cues may add to the perceived level of a companies’ conversational human voice (CHV), which is an important mechanism for effective company communication in social media (Kelleher, 2009; Park & Cameron, 2014), and may have positive effects on relational outcomes (Kelleher, 2009; Ott, Vafeiadis, Kumble, & Waddell, 2016).

In conclusion, Chapter 2 provided a macro perspective on the developments in company interactivity. It revealed trends in the online landscape, where tourism and travel companies are increasingly utilizing the capacities of social media platforms to engage in interactive and conversational dialogues with consumers.

The question is, however, whether these increased levels of online company interactivity affect consumers’ perception of the quality of the relationship they have with a company. Previous studies showed that higher levels of interactivity on social networking sites may foster positive attitudes toward the firm (Dou, 2013; Saffer, Sommerfeldt, & Taylor, 2013), and may result in increased loyalty, commitment and consumer satisfaction (Ballantine, 2005; Cyr, Head, & Ivanov, 2009; Guillory & Sundar, 2013; Kelleher, 2009; Lin, 2007; Palla, Tsiotsou, & Zotos, 2013). The next three chapters
(Chapters 3, 4 and 5) therefore focus on the potential relational consequences of the higher levels of online company interactivity. These chapters are based on data of respectively the first wave (Chapter 3), and the first plus second wave (Chapter 4 and 5) of a large survey among customers and non-customers of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines.

**Summary of Chapter 3: Online consumer engagement and corporate reputation.**

The study presented in Chapter 3 was the first of three chapters focusing on the consequences of online company interactivity. It investigated whether online engagement of consumers with a company’s social media activities (e.g., sharing interesting news and information, offering entertainment, providing webcare) is beneficial for an important relational outcome for companies: corporate reputation (Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever, 2000). This study was conducted on a large sample of over 3500 customers and non-customers of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines. Using an online survey, we measured consumers’ general intensity of social media use, their engagement with the airline’s social media activities, and their perception of corporate reputation. General intensity of social media use was measured by asking the respondents how often they used Facebook and Twitter for reading others’ messages, as well as for posting messages themselves. Engagement with the company’s social media activities was operationalized as a combination of (a) respondents’ level of familiarity with the company’s social media activities and (b) the online following of these activities. For assessing perception of corporate reputation, we used a revised version of the ‘Reputation Quotient’ methodology (Fombrun et al., 2000), consisting of 6 dimensions.

A first finding – regarding the reach of a company’s social media activity – was the positive relation between consumers’ intensity of social media use and their online engagement with a company. The higher a consumer’s intensity of social media use, the more likely s/he will become a ‘follower’ of the company’s online activities, and become engaged with the company (see also Leung & Bai, 2013). A second main finding of this chapter was that consumers’ level of engagement in a company’s social media activity was positively related to perceptions of corporate reputation.

Looking at the differences between customers and non-customers, we found that the positive relationship between intensity of social media use and engagement was stronger among customers, who have more direct benefits of using/following the social media channels of companies (e.g., for customer service purposes; receiving relevant product information; service updates). The positive association between consumer engagement and corporate reputation proved to be more pronounced among non-customers. In other words, non-customers are (from a relational perspective) more sensitive to the online
activities of a company than customers; most likely as a result of the more remote and indirect relationship they have with the company compared to customers. This suggests that companies should not only actively target their social media efforts to customers, but also to non-customers. Since non-customers may play an important role as online influencers (Shamma & Hassan, 2009), the importance of engaging non-customers should not be underestimated by companies. Furthermore, non-customers may – in the future – turn more easily into customers since perception of corporate reputation is an important antecedent for purchase intentions (Keh & Xie, 2009).

In conclusion, Chapter 3 showed a positive relation between intensity of consumers’ social media use and their engagement with a company’s online activities, especially among customers. Furthermore, we demonstrated a positive association between consumer engagement and corporate reputation, particularly among non-customers.

**Summary of Chapter 4: Social media exposure, conversational human voice, and corporate reputation.**

Chapter 3 was based on the first-wave data from a large survey among customers and non-customers of KLM. Subsequently, a second wave of data was collected, using the same survey questions, resulting in a sample of 1969 respondents. The study in Chapter 4 therefore had a longitudinal design, and sought evidence to suggest a causal relation between level of consumers’ exposure to company interactivity on social media, and their perception of corporate reputation. The study indeed shows that differences in exposure to company social media activities precede changes in corporate reputation over time: high exposure at t1 is related to positive changes in reputation at t2, which provides evidence for a causal effect. Therefore, pursuing high exposure levels on social media is highly relevant for companies, since it positively affects corporate reputation – an important intangible asset for companies (Fombrun et al., 2000). This finding emphasizes the potential benefits of company social media use in gaining positive relational outcomes with the public.

Furthermore, we studied the role of a conversational human voice (CHV) in the aforementioned causal relationship. The study showed that perceptions of CHV in a company’s communication can reinforce the effects of consumers’ exposure to company social media content. That is, the results demonstrated that CHV mediates the relation between consumers’ level of exposure to company social media activities and their perception of corporate reputation.

In explaining this positive effect of CHV, we took two considerations into account. First, applying a CHV in communication strengthens perceptions of interactivity (see
also Kelleher, 2009; Park & Cameron, 2014), which has positive relational consequences
(as also outlined in Chapter 2 and 3). Second, CHV may contribute to perceived
social presence (Horton & Wohl, 1956) and parasocial interaction (Short, Williams,
& Christie, 1976). Theories on these two concepts argue that the impact of (online)
communication depends on the degree to which the counterparty in a computer-
mediated communication environment is perceived as a ‘real’ person. By applying
a CHV as a company, this perception may be strengthened and thus contribute to
improved relational outcomes.

In conclusion, Chapter 4 provided important evidence that company social media
use positively and causally affects corporate reputation. Furthermore, it emphasized
the pivotal role of online interactivity for companies, and the use of a ‘human voice’ on
social media platforms.

Summary of Chapter 5: Webcare interaction, conversational human
voice, and affective commitment.

Chapter 3 and 4 studied the consequences of social media engagement of consumers
with KLM (i.e., operationalized as combinations of customers’ and non-customers’
general familiarity level with KLM’s social media activities and their online ‘following’
of these activities). In addition, Chapter 5 specifically focused on the effects of active
social media use of customers (i.e., operationalized as having webcare interactions y/n)
on another important relational outcome for companies: affective commitment (see e.g.,
Bloemer & Odekerken-Schröder, 2007; Evanschitzky, Iyer, Plassmann, Niessing, &
Meffert, 2006).

While research focusing on primarily passive social media use (i.e., observing
and reading social media interactions of others) showed a positive effect on brand
perceptions and relational outcomes (see e.g., Schamari & Schaefers, 2015; van Noort &
Willemsen, 2012; Vendemia, 2017), the effects of active use (i.e., customers engaging in
webcare interactions) might be different. Thus, we aimed at contributing to the existing
literature by testing the effects of having webcare interactions by customers on their
affective commitment with the company. Furthermore, we examined the mediating role
of CHV in this relation, like we did in the previous chapter. To this end, we analyzed the
data of 763 customers (of which 128 were involved in webcare interactions) from our
two-wave survey among customers and non-customers of KLM.

An important finding of this chapter was the significant indirect effect of webcare
interaction on changes in affective commitment through mediation of CHV. In line
with the findings of Chapter 4, it emphasizes the relevance of CHV for yielding positive
relations with customers. CHV enhances the level of ‘humanness’ of communication, which has a positive effect on attitudes toward the company (Guillory & Sundar, 2013; Kelleher, 2009; Li & Li, 2014). That is, in situations of negatively oriented interactions (e.g., complaints, criticism, dissatisfaction) CHV may act as a buffer against adverse relational effects, and in the case of positively oriented interactions (e.g., compliments, gratitude, enthusiasm) it may act as a ‘booster’ of favorable relational outcomes. Furthermore, in this chapter we observed significant positive direct associations between webcare interaction and CHV, and between CHV and affective commitment. However, in contrast with previous research – generally showing positive effects of witnessing social media interactions between companies and consumers on relational outcomes (see e.g., Schamari & Schaefers, 2015; van Noort & Willemsen, 2012; Vendemia, 2017) – we found no direct effect of customers’ active social media use (i.e., of webcare interaction) on affective commitment.

In sum, the findings of Chapter 5 provide evidence that for companies involved in webcare activities and seeking for optimization of its effectiveness, using a conversational human voice plays a crucial role.

**Evaluation of the key findings**

Studies prior to the formation of this dissertation showed that company social media use may enhance brand awareness and popularity (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011), increase sales (Rishika, Kumar, Janakiraman, & Bezawada, 2012), and affect levels of commitment and trust (Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Furthermore, earlier research demonstrated that CHV was related to relationship characteristics such as trust, satisfaction and commitment (Kelleher, 2009). Also, there were indications that company interactivity may promote favorable attitudes toward a company (see e.g., Dou, 2013; Guillory & Sundar, 2013; Kelleher, 2009; Sicilia, Ruiz, & Munuera, 2005).

This dissertation built upon these findings, and – more importantly – extended the knowledge of social media use by companies and its consequences. That is, in this dissertation, we have demonstrated that interactivity and humanization of online company communication – more specifically in the tourism and travel industry – have increased over the last years (Chapter 2). Furthermore, we showed that higher intensity of consumers’ social media use is positively related to higher levels of online consumer engagement with a company’s online activities (in particular among customers), which
in turn is positively associated with enhanced perceptions of corporate reputation (especially among non-customers) (Chapter 3). Subsequently, we demonstrated that exposure to the (interactive) activities of companies on social media causally and positively affects perceptions of corporate reputation (Chapter 4). CHV proved to be highly relevant in establishing this effect, as shown in Chapter 4 and in particular in Chapter 5, where a significant indirect relation was found between webcare interaction of customers and their affective commitment through mediation of CHV.

Contradictory to previous research, however, we found no direct effect of customers’ webcare interactions on affective commitment with the company (Chapter 5). In explaining this difference, we take the following into consideration. First, earlier research focused almost exclusively on the effects of consumers witnessing and assessing webcare interactions of others (i.e., reading, observing), instead of on the own webcare experiences of actual customers. When these customers engage in webcare, they have likely had previous direct experiences with the company (e.g., employees delivering the service, sales representatives, call center agents), the webcare interaction being just one of them. Our findings from Chapter 3 indeed showed that, compared to non-customers, customers’ evaluations of their relationship with a company may be less influenced by a single event (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, & Beukeboom, 2015; see also Zauner, Koller, & Fink, 2012).

Second, the nature of webcare interactions in daily practice is very diverse (e.g., complaints, questions, suggestions, compliments), as is also visible in our sample. Although we did not specifically analyze it, a substantial part of the webcare interactions in our sample is likely to be associated with consumption/service experiences. The resulting positive/negative emotions that may have induced the webcare interaction, may have overruled the effect of the webcare interaction itself.

Lastly, the customers having webcare interactions in our sample already showed higher starting levels of affective commitment than those not having these interactions (i.e., before webcare interaction). Highly committed customers have high expectations of the company, in particular in the case of service failures (see e.g., Iglesias, Singh, & Batista-Foguet, 2011; Leenheer et al., 2007; Mattila, 2006). Increasing the level of affective commitment after webcare interaction among already highly committed customers may therefore be difficult to attain for companies (Bejou & Palmer, 1998; Goodwin & Ross, 1992; Grégoire, Tripp, & Legoux, 2009; Kelley & Davis, 1994; McDougall & Levesque, 1999).
In the remainder of this section, two key findings will be further discussed and evaluated: the importance of online interactive behavior for companies, and the crucial role of CHV in this online interactivity.

**The importance of online company interactivity**

A first key finding of this dissertation was that our results emphasize the importance of company interactivity on social media for improving relational outcomes. Interactivity of companies was operationalized in different ways in this dissertation: from a company perspective (i.e., in Chapter 2 as the proportion of reactions in the total number of company social media messages), and from the perspective of consumers in their relation with the company (i.e., in Chapter 3 and 4 as consumer engagement with a company’s interactive activities / consumer exposure to these activities; in Chapter 5 as webcare interaction of customers with the company).

Apart from its positive effects on relational outcomes (e.g., on reputation, and – via CHV – on affective commitment), interactive behavior on social media may also yield additional benefits for companies. First, interactivity of companies with consumers may act as a counterweight against the loss of control in brand building in the online environment, as noted by Aula (2010). In a situation of ‘open brands’ (Fournier & Avery, 2011) or ‘negotiated brands’ (Gregory, 2007) – as is the case in a social media environment – the company behind these brands is no longer the key actor in the process of brand building, but consumers increasingly contribute to this process in a publicly visible way (Aula, 2010). By interacting with consumers on their social media channels, and participating in existing conversations (preferably using a CHV), companies may be better able to manage consumers’ perceptions of the company.

Second, interactive company behavior on social media channels may contribute to the creation of value. Unlike the traditional value-creation process where communication moved exclusively from the company to the customer, companies’ online interactive activities with consumers increasingly entail continuous dialogues, in which both parties are active, which co-creates joint value for both parties (Blasco-Arcas, Hernandez-Ortega, & Jimenez-Martinez, 2014; Grönroos, 2008). Via these interactivity driven co-creation processes on social media, companies can gain new competitive advantages. For example, it can help companies to better understand the needs and preferences of consumers (Lusch & Vargo, 2006), deliver up-to-date information on market developments in a quick, easy, and relatively inexpensive way, and thus support the development of new products while saving time and costs. It
emphasizes the need to implement communication strategies that indeed actively encourage interactive behavior of companies.

A third additional benefit of online interactive behavior of companies is that it may reinforce their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts, which have greatly gained in relevance during recent years (Mögele & Tropp, 2010). Godfrey and Hatch (2007) noted that CSR is based on the idea that “corporations have obligations to society that extend beyond mere profit-making activities” (p. 87). On social media, companies may be publicly confronted by consumers pointing to these CSR ‘obligations’ (Wilburn & Wilburn, 2015). To anticipate inconvenient online discussions, companies increasingly use their social media channels to proactively refer to their societal and/or ecological commitment (Golob, Verk, & Podnar, 2015; Wilburn & Wilburn, 2015). On a strategic level, companies’ marketing and communication policies with regard to CSR are affected (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010). This has induced a new era of marketing that Kotler et al. (2010) call the era of society and of creative collaborative marketing (‘Marketing 3.0’). Where Marketing 1.0 was targeted on the product, Marketing 2.0 is focused on the customer, and Marketing 3.0 on values. Increasingly, consumers seek solutions that improve the world, as well as companies that meet their deeper needs and contribute to social development, economic security, and environmental protection (Kotler et al., 2010). In the current value-based marketing era, products and services are generated to account for what the consumer thinks, feels, and needs, such that the offerings address those wishes and needs. In this approach, the relevance of activities that result from dialogic communication and interactivity between company and consumer is emphasized. Kent and Taylor (2016) argue that the dialogic capabilities of social media (and thus interactivity) can yield more committed and stronger company-public relationships, and contribute to CSR. Go and Bortree (2017) explored how organizations can build credibility of their CSR communication in social media, and found that message interactivity leads to higher perceptions of credibility. Through social media, companies can move away from advertising, marketing, and brand promotion, and focus more on the social and humane aspects of doing business (Kent & Taylor, 2016). In that sense, the interactive features of social media may also have great potential for fostering CSR.
The role of CHV in online company interactivity

Another key finding of this dissertation was that for companies employing social media activities and seeking for optimization of their effectiveness, applying a CHV plays a crucial role (see Chapter 4). By using a CHV, companies can show their humanness, and are able to show that they encourage dialogue by communicating in an informal and non-corporate voice (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Locke, Searls, Weinberger, & Levine, 2001). By using a CHV, online relations between companies and consumers may be evaluated more easily as relations in real life by consumers, building on the concepts of social presence (Short et al., 1976) and parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

CHV may also contribute to *media naturalness*, a concept proposed by Kock (2001), stating that synchronous face-to-face communication has been the primary mode of communication in the evolutionary history of mankind. This implies that human beings are biologically ‘optimized’ for face-to-face interaction. According to media naturalness theory (Kock, 2005), all communicative cues (e.g., audible, visible, textual) that contribute to mimicking face-to-face interaction are perceived as more natural for humans. Using a human voice, colloquial language and emoticons/emoji may all contribute to perceived media naturalness, and may thus facilitate optimization of communication.

Furthermore, CHV may add to perceptions of a ‘human brand’, a concept introduced by Malone and Fiske (2013). Following earlier studies in this field (Aaker, Vohs, & Mogilner, 2010; e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005), Malone and Fiske (2013) argue that our perceptions of brands and companies arise from spontaneous judgments of two dimensions: *warmth* (i.e., the intentions brands/companies have toward us) and *competence* (i.e., their capability of carrying out those intentions) – the same two factors that also determine our impressions of people. Therefore, Malone and Fiske (2013) argue, consumers see brands and companies the same way we automatically perceive, judge, and behave toward one another. As a result, to attain positive relational outcomes, companies should build and maintain ‘human’ relationships with consumers. To create these relationships in an online communication setting, an organization’s *warmth* has more effect than its *competence*, as shown in a recent study of Bernritter, Verlegh and Smit (2016). That is, perceptions of warmth proved to be the key component in consumers’ decision to ‘like’ a company on Facebook, and also – in the case of continued interaction between company and consumer – for ongoing endorsement of the company (Bernritter et al., 2016).
Although we did not specifically investigate it, in an online communication setting companies may contribute to perception of their competence by demonstrating timeliness, reliability and expertise (i.e., aspects mainly related to messages’ content and timing). Companies may add to impressions of their warmth by showing openness to dialogue, understanding and empathy (i.e., aspects related to their messages’ tone of voice). A realistic assumption therefore is that applying a CHV as a company contributes in particular to perceptions of warmth, which may reinforce the impact of their social media activities, and may indirectly improve relational outcomes.

Strengths and limitations of this dissertation

To put the findings in this dissertation into perspective, in this section we will discuss the strengths and limitations of the studies in this dissertation.

A first strength of this dissertation is that the conducted studies are based on real-life data, collected from actual consumers and customers in their relations with real companies. More specifically, the data for the study in Chapter 2 on the development of interactivity and humanization in communication are obtained from Coosto (a Dutch social media monitoring company) (Coosto, 2017). The data for Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are collected from customers and non-customers of KLM Royal Dutch Airlines via the research panel of Motivaction (a Dutch market research company). The deployment of this (representative) panel resulted in a large number of respondents in this study, which is another strength of this dissertation. That is, data of over 3500 respondents were available for the analysis in Chapter 3, of almost 2000 for the one of Chapter 4, and of over 750 for Chapter 5. This large sample of actual consumers and customers contributes to the robustness and the validity of the studies and their findings.

A second strength of this work is the longitudinal design of the studies in Chapter 4 and 5, which enabled us to draw conclusions with regard to the causal order of the relations in the respective conceptual models. For example, whereas the correlations within waves in Chapter 5 suggested a positive direct relation between customer webcare interaction and affective commitment, the longitudinal analysis did not confirm this hypothesis.

As any research, the studies in this dissertation also have limitations. First, the data for the studies are related to the travel and tourism industry, a sector greatly impacted by social media (Xiang et al., 2015), and more in particular related to KLM (i.e., in three of the four empirical chapters in this dissertation). Since KLM is considered as a
global frontrunner in corporate use of social media (KLM, 2016; Socialbakers, 2016), it does not represent ‘average’ company social media use. The question is therefore whether the observed effects in our study would be similar for organizations that put less effort in their social media activities, that are much smaller and not so well-known, or that are active in less appealing business sectors than the tourism and travel industry. These organizations may be affected in a different way and to a different extent by the use of social media. Research by John, Emrich, Gupta and Norton (2016), for instance, found – in an experimental study focusing on soft drink brands – that mere ‘liking’ a brand on Facebook had no positive direct effect on consumer attitudes. This contrasts with our findings in Chapter 3, and with other studies (e.g., Beukeboom, Kerkhof, & de Vries, 2015). The differences between the study results may be related to the product type category, the general appeal of the industry, and/or the tone of voice that is commonly used in a particular sector (see Aaker et al., 2010; Bernritter et al., 2016). For example, for healthcare or governmental organizations (e.g., hospitals, municipalities, tax authorities) it may be important to first and foremost demonstrate earnestness and professionalism in their communication, which may be more likely to be accompanied by a ‘corporate voice’ (Locke et al., 2001) than a ‘human voice’. Consequently, the social media activities of these types of organization may result in less pronounced effects on relational outcomes (such as reputation and affective commitment) as the ones reported in this dissertation.

A second limitation is that the definition of ‘customer’ in our KLM study (more specifically in Chapter 3 and 5) may be contested. That is, since there was no set standard from the perspective of the industry or the case company, we determined the cut-off point for being regarded as a customer ourselves (i.e., defined as using the services of KLM in the two years prior to filling out the survey). This may have resulted in an over or underestimation of the reported effects on customers as well as on non-customers.

Thirdly, the definition of consumer engagement – a relatively new concept in academic literature – was under scholarly debate at the start of writing this dissertation, and still is today. Extensive literature reviews (Brodie, Hollebeek, Jurić, & Ilić, 2011; Hollebeek, 2013) studied and summarized over 10 different consumer engagement definitions by various authors, and similarities were drawn with concepts such as involvement, participation, flow, and commitment (Brodie et al., 2011). In these reviews, existing definitions were categorized on the presence of three dimensions (i.e., a cognitive, and/or emotional, and/or behavioral dimension). Definitions vary from
very broad (i.e., including all three dimensions) to very narrow (i.e., covering only one dimension).

Not only the inclusion of the dimensions, but also the operationalization of the dimensions is still subject to discussion. For instance, in the behavioral dimension-based engagement definition of Men and Tsai (2013), a distinction is made between passive engagement (i.e., consuming of social media content, e.g., reading, watching, observing) and active engagement (i.e., contributing to social media content, e.g., posting, reacting, conversating). However, in later studies, ‘passive engagement’ tends to be regarded as a *contradictio in terminis*, since active and contributive behavior is increasingly considered as a precondition for engagement (see e.g., Barger, Peltier, & Schultz, 2016; Calder, Hollebeek, & Malthouse, 2018; Calder et al., 2018; Calder, Malthouse, & Maslowska, 2016; Hollebeek, Glynn, & Brodie, 2014; Isaac, Calder, & Malthouse, 2016; Islam, Rahman, & Hollebeek, 2017; Oh & Sundar, 2016). This evolution in the operationalization of consumer engagement also affected its conceptualization as included in this work. In Chapter 3, we defined consumer engagement at its basic level, and operationalized it as a combination of (a) consumers’ level of familiarity with a company’s social media activities and (b) the online following of these activities. In Chapter 4, using the same operationalization, we defined it more specifically as exposure to a company’s social media activities. Although this approach is debatable, it reflects the progress (and controversies) in the scholarly study of engagement, where active online consumer behavior (e.g., contributing, posting, etc.) has gradually evolved into an established part of operationalizations of consumer engagement. Recent attempts in literature to unambiguously define the engagement concept produced a wealth of new insights, but did nevertheless not result in an undisputed definition (see e.g., Barger et al., 2016; Calder et al., 2018, 2018, 2016; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Isaac et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2017; Oh & Sundar, 2016).

As a fourth limitation, CHV (a concept included in Chapter 4 and 5) is a general measure that may be affected by other interactions than only via social media. In other words, the level of CHV as measured in our studies may have also been influenced by company-consumer contacts via other channels (e.g., call center representatives, company employees when using the services of the company, company spokesmen on television or radio). In our studies, we cannot disentangle the effects of interactions via these various (online and/or offline) channels on perception of CHV. Further research into the relevance of each communication channel in the formation of perception of CHV may contribute to a better understanding of the background and drivers of this important concept.
Lastly, we mention the dynamism of the field of study in this work. Social media use by companies is a rapidly evolving field, and is subject to continuous change. For example, during the writing process of this dissertation, new global social media channels emerged (e.g., more graphical oriented platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest) and existing ones disappeared or marginalized (e.g., Hyves, Myspace, Google+). Additionally, new technological opportunities make it difficult to keep up with the actual state of company social media use. This may affect the practical applicability of the findings in this dissertation. The next section will focus in more detail on the impact of these new technological opportunities.

**Impact of technological developments on company interactivity**

In this dissertation we studied the relational effects of interactive behavior of companies on social media platforms. This field, however, is far from static but subject to impetuous and sometimes disruptive developments. As indicated, social media platforms come and go, as could be witnessed with ‘Hyves’, a social media platform in The Netherlands founded in 2004 with a userbase of two thirds of the Dutch population in 2010, declining to nearly zero in a matter of a few years as a result of the rapid growth of Facebook and Twitter (Abramov, 2016). Also, progress in the capabilities of information and communication technologies may impact options for companies to engage in interactive conversations with the public. Given the importance of technology for the area of study in this work, in this section we will discuss current emerging technologies, and evaluate their potential for the communication of companies.

A first development is the rapid emergence of instant messaging (IM) platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat (Casey, 2017; Kemp, 2017). These platforms have shown a high growth rate over the last years, recently taking over the lead of ‘traditional’ social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) in terms of number of users, growth and user engagement (Business Insider, 2016). The emergence of these IM platforms may again revolutionize the way consumers connect with companies, more specifically for webcare, customer service, and consumer engagement. For instance, WhatsApp – with its 55 billion messages sent every day by more than 1 billion daily active users (Kahn, 2017) – might evolve from a consumer-to-consumer driven platform into a viable business-to-consumer medium. Recently, WhatsApp revealed...
how companies will be able to communicate with consumers via ‘Verified Business Accounts’ (WhatsApp, 2017). This platform is particularly interesting from a customer service perspective since it has a large user base, integrated messaging and calling capabilities, as well as enhanced privacy offered by its end-to-end encryption. At this moment, the professional use of WhatsApp is still experimental for a small number of companies participating in a pilot program (KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, the case company in this dissertation, is among the pilot companies), but is expected to be made available for a growing number of companies in the near future.

In that sense, the already present functionalities of WeChat – a large Chinese platform for instant messaging with almost 900 million monthly active users (Penguin Intelligence, 2017) – may be an example for WhatsApp’s and also Facebook Messenger’s future. That is, WeChat already offers a wide variety of additional services in a single integrated environment (such as reserving a taxi, ordering food delivery, buying and paying movie tickets, checking in for a flight). KLM, for instance, has recently started to use WeChat and Facebook Messenger for providing additional services to customers, such as sending booking confirmations, check-in notifications, boarding passes, flight status updates, and payment services (only via WeChat) (KLM, 2017). In sum, the rise of IM applications adds to the service portfolio of companies and offers new ways for companies to engage and interact with consumers. On the other hand, given the predominant one-to-one setting of interactions via IM applications, these platforms are expected to make company-consumer interactions less publicly visible, posing less reputational risks for companies.

A second noteworthy development in company-consumer interactions is the rise of conversational interfaces driven by artificial intelligence (AI) (McTear, Callejas, & Griol, 2016). For instance, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines has taken a next step into social media use innovation by starting a pilot program during which it will determine how AI technology fares in handling customer service requests on social media. This technology will help KLM to deal with its more than 100,000 social media mentions and 15,000 conversations per week (Azfar, 2017). The AI system has been trained on more than 60,000 questions and answers KLM has experience with, and continues to learn from the webcare employee’s modifications. That is, the webcare agent uses his or her ‘human’ expertise to first screen the proposed answer of the AI system, adjust it if necessary and then send it across the appropriate social media channel. In turn, the AI-suggested responses will improve, which should ultimately require a decrease in modification by employees. Subsequently, this should decrease message response time and improve the quality of webcare by better aligning with individual consumers’
background and specific needs. The question is, however, whether the presence (or at least the intervention) of a ‘real’ human being in company social media activities stays a necessity for invoking perceptions of the ‘human brand’ (Malone & Fiske, 2013) (e.g., warmth, empathy, authenticity), or that these effects can also be established with fully automated chatbots. Furthermore, it may be questioned whether the positive relational effects of CHV as reported in this dissertation will also occur if consumers are aware that they are only interacting with an artificial agent, powered by AI. Further research should shed light on these questions.

Although customers will initially welcome and, at a later stage, maybe even expect these new AI-supported service types, companies should take into account that their customer relations are precious, and that poorly functioning interactional interfaces with inferior ‘human voice’ capabilities may damage consumer engagement, and – as a consequence – negatively affect perception of corporate reputation and/or other relational outcomes. Particularly, artificial conversational agents that are ‘anthropomorphized’ (i.e., try to resemble a human being) (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007) such as ‘Anna’ (Ikea) and ‘Julie’ (Amtrak) carry an increased risk of causing negative relational effects if inappropriately designed. Since the resemblance of a computer-generated conversational agent to a human (i.e., an anthropomorphized agent) evokes increased expectations of their intelligence, trustworthiness, and persuasiveness (Nass, Isbister, & Lee, 2000), negative experiences with such anthropomorphized agents can aggravate downward effects on consumers’ perception of company performance in comparison to non-anthropomorphized interfaces (Puzakova, Kwak, & Rocereto, 2013). Nevertheless, a careful and well-considered implementation of conversational interfaces powered by AI (whether or not anthropomorphized) has the potential to bring company-consumer communication and interaction to the next level.

A third notable trend with regard to global social media platforms is the rapid growth of graphically oriented platforms among consumers and also among companies, such as Instagram, YouTube and Snapchat (Stelzner, 2017). Conversely, Twitter use – a predominantly text-oriented platform – is considerably decreasing, in particular among younger target groups (Casey, 2017). The increase of graphical content use is driven by the growth of social media use on mobile devices (Chaffey, 2017a). As more consumers engage with social media via smartphones, taking a picture ‘on the go’ using a smartphone is faster and easier than typing a text on a small keyboard. Furthermore, the impact and engagement of graphical content is higher than of text-only social media messages (Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015). As a result, companies have intensified
their presence on graphically oriented social media platforms (Stelzner, 2017), and they intend to invest more in sharing graphical content via social media (Lewis, 2016).

Lastly, for the somewhat more distant future, the possibilities of human-robot interaction (HRI), combining streaming real-time video and voice interaction via the web, and teleoperation via remote controls (Shi, Ma, Zhao, & Liu, 2017), may result in new opportunities. This might also add to better customer service experiences, and to higher perceptions of media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986), social presence (Short et al., 1976) and parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956) in the years ahead of us.

In conclusion, a continuing and substantial impact from (online) technology on the evolution of online company interactivity and social media use is expected. The rise and fall of social media platforms may, in the near future, lead to considerable changes in the nature and number of company-consumer interactions. As described above, developments in company social media use point, in general, towards less publicly visible, less textually oriented and less (real) human-controlled interactions. Although these developments and their potential effects are not explicitly covered in this work, we nevertheless expect that the main findings of this work with regard to the role and consequences of company interactivity and ‘humanness’ of communication will also prove to be valid for recently emerged social media platforms. The specific constraints and affordances of the emerging social media platforms may, however, change the nature of interactive company behavior and its specific consequences. For instance, the predominantly one-to-one oriented communication via WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger may on the one hand contribute to stronger personalized experiences, and thus to increased consumer engagement and perceptions of ‘human voice’. On the other hand, these interactions are likely to reduce consumers’ exposure to the social media interactions of other consumers with the company (i.e., the chance to encounter others’ interactions as a ‘bystander’ will decrease), which may lead to lower engagement and decreased perceptions of CHV. The net result of these opposite effects on engagement and CHV for relational outcomes is difficult to predict.

Providing new types of service via emerging technological developments (e.g., using IM applications supported by AI to provide boarding passes, buy tickets, delivering personal assistance) give companies new opportunities to interact and engage, and to apply a CHV in these interactions. It will not only generate new communication opportunities for practitioners, but also new research directions for scholars. The latter will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.
Directions for further research

The rapid developments in online company communication not only affect the daily practice of communication professionals in the field, but also have important theoretical and methodological implications for research of company social media use. This dissertation contributes to the advancement of company social media research in two ways. Firstly, it shows the relevance for companies to express interactive behavior on their social media channels, and to pursue engagement with consumers (in particular with non-customers) for enhancing relational outcomes. Secondly, it demonstrates the importance of applying a ‘human voice’ by companies to strengthen the impact of their online communication. This section elaborates on the implications of this dissertation for the scientific study of company social media use and interactivity, and suggests a number of directions for further research.

First, in the introduction of this dissertation – following the definition of Liu and Shrum (2002) – two-way communication (i.e., a bi-directional flow of information), synchronicity (i.e., speed of interaction), and active control (i.e., the ability to voluntarily participate in, and influence a communication) were presented as the three dimensions of interactivity. In this dissertation, we mainly focused on the two-way communication aspect of interactivity. The other two dimensions may shed a broader light on the effects of interactivity. Future studies into the effects of synchronicity (e.g., the sequence and timing of company responses) and active control (e.g., whether or not responding by the company; see van Noort & Willemsen, 2012) may contribute significantly to the knowledge of interactive behavior of companies on social media.

Second, in the study in Chapter 2 of this dissertation we analyzed the role of emoticons/emoji as an expression of humanization of communication. Including a broader range of such expressions, however, may provide additional insights, such as the use of interjections or colloquial language. Also, the role of empathy (Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2007) and ‘mirroring’ of emotions (Iacoboni, 2009) may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of humanization of online company communication. Empathy and mirroring of emotions have proven to positively affect communication in offline settings, and may also improve the ‘human face’ of companies in an online environment.

Thirdly, increased interactivity and humanization of company communication may add to perceptions of social presence, which can transform mere online relationships into relations that are perceived as real interpersonal relations. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) argued that the critical factor in a communication medium is
its social presence, and defined this as the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p. 65). This means the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication. The capacity of the medium to transmit information about facial expression, tone of voice, and nonverbal cues – such as by the use of emoji in interactive online communication – may contribute to the degree of social presence of a communications medium, which in turn may positively affect the perceived quality of the company-consumer relationships. Additional research is needed to improve the understanding of the relations between these concepts.

Fourth, and as already indicated in the previous section, progress in online (communication) technology and the emergence of new social media platforms open up a variety of new research perspectives. The field of company social media use is highly dynamic and permanently ‘under construction’. This will lead to numerous future research opportunities and directions. For instance, research may shed light on the relational effects of company use of the recently emerged graphically-oriented social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Pinterest, Snapchat) compared to the predominantly text-oriented ones (e.g., Twitter, Facebook). Also, in the near future, research will be necessary on the effects for companies of new ways to interact with consumers, such as via automated conversational interfaces powered by artificial intelligence, interaction with chatbots (see e.g., Shi et al., 2017), and the use of IM applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat).

Lastly, as described earlier, the concept of consumer engagement – its definition, scope, antecedents and consequences – is subject to ongoing academic debate and study, and offers many opportunities for further research. A key conclusion from a study of Schultz and Peltier (2013) was that consumer engagement is an elusive construct and that scholars needed to better define, conceptualize and operationalize this concept. In doing this, they argue (see Schultz & Peltier, 2013), researchers should also take the ‘bigger picture’ of the company-consumer relationship into consideration (e.g., differences between consumers, between industries). A number of researchers took up this challenge, resulting in several new perspectives that may be taken into account in future studies of consumer engagement.

For instance, Isaac, Calder and Malthouse (2016) argue that the problem with developing a universal scale for engagement measurement is that the items must be so generic that such a scale cannot capture the specific individual *experiential qualities* that underlie the engagement concept (see also Calder et al., 2018). That is, applied to our case company KLM, an airline enthusiast’s online engagement behavior with KLM
may arise from positive discovery experiences, while a KLM frequent flyer’s online engagement behavior is more likely to emerge from positive support experiences. These context-specific experiential qualities may affect the level and nature of consumer engagement (Isaac et al., 2016).

In another study, Calder, Malthouse and Maslowska (2016) argue that consumer engagement arises from experiencing a brand or company in relation to higher-order personal life goals or values. They note that some companies in certain industries are more easily associated with higher-order life goals than others (e.g., an airline company versus a toilet tissue company), and therefore they argue that life goal-specific items related to a company/industry should also be taken into account in the study of consumer engagement.

Subsequently, Islam, Rahman and Hollebeek (2017) argue that consumer personality traits may play an important role in the formation of online engagement. That is, traits such as extraversion and self-congruity showed to be important predictors of consumer engagement (Guo, Zhang, & Wang, 2016; Islam et al., 2017), and may thus impact the reach and properties of consumer engagement.

As a last recent development in engagement research, Barger, Peltier and Schultz (2016) introduce the concept of ‘firm engagement’ (p. 277), as a company equivalent to consumer engagement. That is, in the same way that companies hope that consumers will engage with their online content, consumers hope that companies will engage with their user generated content (UGC). The firm engagement concept takes the interconnectedness and interwovenness of the communication between consumers and companies into consideration; that is, consumer engagement and firm engagement are two complimentary and mutually reinforcing processes. Following their introduction of the firm engagement concept, Barger et al. (2016) propose to define social media engagement as “a mutually beneficial process through which firms and consumers co-create brand-related content and social experiences on social media.” (p. 279). Given the progress in the scholarly study of consumer engagement in recent studies (Barger et al., 2016; Calder et al., 2018, 2016; Isaac et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2017; Oh & Sundar, 2016), future research of engagement may include a broader range of measures than the ones used in this dissertation. (For a recent overview of additional areas for future consumer engagement research, see also the recent study of Barger et al., 2016, p. 281).
To finalize, the findings of this dissertation contribute to a better understanding of company social media use and its consequences. We showed that companies have developed higher levels of interactivity on social media over recent years, which has – via consumers’ exposure to the interactive activities of companies and their engagement with these activities – positively affected relational outcomes. The use of a ‘human voice’ by companies has contributed substantially to the achievement of these improved outcomes. From a company’s perspective, the evolution from product-oriented monologues in traditional media towards consumer-engaging dialogues on social media has delivered positive results, and is likely to have great additional potential for the future of online company communication.
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Chapter 6


Chapter 6


