



Article

# Fundamental Power of Social Media Interactions for Building a Brand and Customer Relations

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**Abstract:** The spread of social networks and the high level of penetration of digital content and mobile devices have created a society in which consumers expect constant communication from companies. In addition, communication on social media is often accompanied by the hope of being able to interact on an equal footing. In this way, companies hope that the use of social networks will not only increase sales, but also increase attention, brand page traffic, and customer loyalty. The purpose of this study was to provide the grounds for identifying the correlations between the interactive potential of social media based on dialogue-oriented communication and the quality of relationships with online customers. To achieve this goal, an online questionnaire was used in which 604 respondents from Romania participated (204 social media managers and 400 online customers). The results of the study showed that it is particularly important for companies to understand the role of interactive communication in social media and to thus build a bridge between the orientation of communication towards dialogue and relationships with online customers. It was found that the correct use of social networks could also support the achievement of public relation (PR) objectives. In addition, this study has implications for the development of customer-oriented online communication strategies by Romanian companies.

**Keywords:** social media; digital marketing; interactive communication online consumer; brand equity; relationship quality; public relations



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## 1. Introduction

For a long time, companies have realized the potential of online communication [1–4]. This type of communication has become increasingly present in the lives of consumers and is the background on which brand pages are currently built [5–7]. Social networks include the activities and behaviors in user communities that exchange information, knowledge, and opinions online through platforms [8,9]. As a result, the Internet is no longer only used to obtain information, but also to build online communities. In this context, from the perspective of social marketing, social networks can be understood as a recommended form of marketing [10,11]. These networks give companies the opportunity to develop a stronger relationship with the target group (customers) and to strengthen brand loyalty [12,13]. Therefore, social networks are an essential communication tool for companies to remain competitive.

In addition, the behavior of online consumers is constantly changing: consumers are strongly connected to the network through social platforms, and information, opinions,

and ratings spread quickly and almost automatically [14,15]. It should be noted that online consumers with a positive brand experience are much more likely to recommend the brand than consumers without a brand experience, or with a negative experience [16,17]. Therefore, the basic requirements for companies when using social media communication include transmitting valuable, interesting content that involves the consumer. However, most authors consider that the interaction with consumers is crucial, particularly in periods of over-stimulation, because direct dialogue can lead to customer loyalty if properly implemented [13–18]. Therefore, as soon as companies join a social network, they should enter into a direct dialogue with the community.

On the other hand, it has become natural for both consumers and social media managers to be online and available anytime, anywhere. This also means that consumers can express their opinion on social media at any time. Therefore, the power of the consumer to send their own opinions to a large number of potential customers increases and puts an increasing number of companies under pressure. Thus, companies and their strategic communication must face these challenges if they wish to keep up with media changes. Consequently, social media must be treated by social media managers as a place where content is continuously adapted by consumers in a participatory and collaborative manner, so that they can create content, interact, work together, and participate in the process of producing and receiving content.

A fan page is not enough to take full advantage of the potential of social platforms. Continuous activity on platforms is essential; it is the precondition for the interaction between the brand and its community [19,20]. A single like or post comment does not automatically lead to user involvement, because this simply represents a unique interaction and the user pays little attention to this action.

It is also clear that the efficiency and effectiveness of brand management have benefited from digital technological developments and innovations in recent years [21,22]. Thus, targeting technologies and programmatic advertising allow customer-centric brand management unlike that of classic methods, and, finally, multiple tracking possibilities are able to reveal the strategic options necessary for social media managers in order to achieve the improvement of digital brand management [23]. In addition, the use of social media in strengthening the brand and the orientation of communication towards permanent dialogue with customers has recently become imperative for organizations [24,25]. Added to this are the training experiences of communicators who must adapt to the regime of using social media as a communication media for building a brand page [26–28]. Therefore, it is clear that maintaining what is known as brand safety is more than a purely technological challenge.

Despite the established role of social media in daily communication, most companies also face the challenge of keeping up with the dynamic development of digital technologies, as well as building trust and relationships with consumers [29,30]. Given these changes, the issue facing companies is no longer whether they should include social media in their communication tools, but how they can use social media strategically to achieve global corporate goals or to effectively maintain relationships with social media users.

Consequently, theoretical approaches have shown that dialogue as an object of research is a complex construction that can be viewed in different ways, based on principles that have led to the idea that dialogue orientation is a central paradigm of public relations (PR) research and PR practice [31–33]. In addition, there are still heated debates about the use of communication for dialogues on social media, and some authors suggest that organizations are not able to exploit the potential of the Internet [34–36]. However, by incorporating dialogue-oriented online communication in the context of social networks, the often-overlooked general framework for professionalizing communication management should be created.

Against this theoretical background, the present study aimed to answer the following research questions. To what extent do profit-oriented companies operating in social media exploit the potential for dialogue-oriented communication with consumers? What are the

effects of dialogue-oriented communication in company–consumer relationships on social media?

In this context, the purpose of this research was to examine social media communication between companies and consumers oriented towards dialogue, as well as the quality of relationships between them from the perspective of social media managers and consumers. Thus, we started from the premise that brand perceptions can vary between different stakeholder groups (companies and consumers), depending on the various interests and expectations they have about social media dialogue. A quantitative online survey was chosen as the methodological approach to answer these research questions. The results showed that because social media communication is operated by social media managers, these people play a key role in managing relationships and orienting dialogue towards consumers. Their attitudes, perceptions, and subjective values allow conclusions to be drawn about the assessment of the orientation towards dialogue and the quality of the relationships between companies and their customers.

Another contribution of the present study consists of the fact that, in the analysis of the effects of social media marketing on online customer-oriented communication, a central position is occupied by the role of public relations (the field related to digital marketing, but not subordinated to it). This redesign made it necessary for the public relations process to incorporate the brand management process in public relations. Therefore, social media managers or PR technicians play a predominantly operational role and mediate communication between companies and users on social media. Through dialogue-oriented forms of communication, they build long-term relationships with consumers. Finally, the promising opportunities for current and potential direct customer interaction have made online PR more relevant. Almost every social media activity must address a precisely defined and homogeneous group of consumers, in order to minimize the loss in the approach of that group.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 provides a brief presentation of the theoretical background and develops the hypotheses. Section 3 describes the empirical model and the data used in the analyses. Section 4 reports the estimated results of the empirical model. Finally, the study's conclusions are presented, including a discussion of the study limitations and directions for future research.

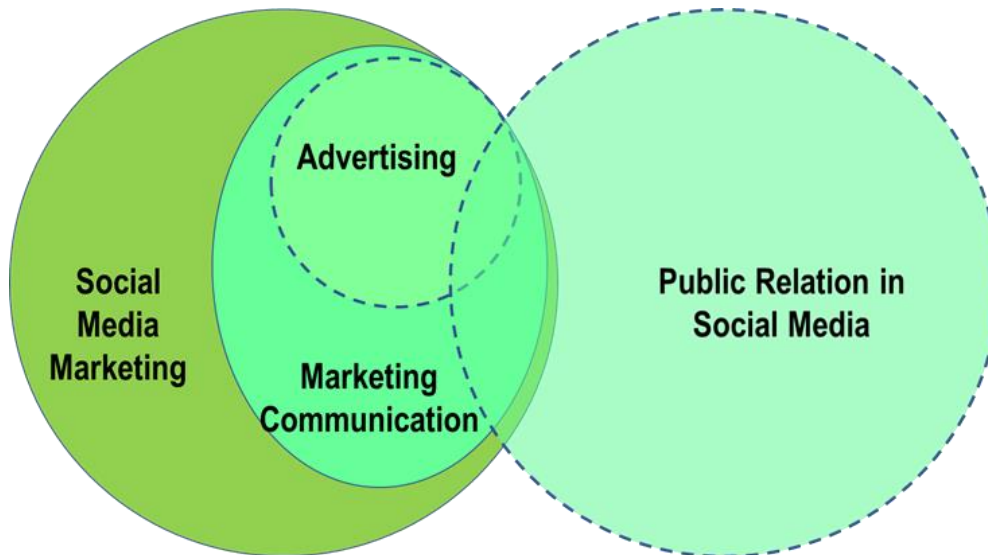
## 2. Theoretical Background

To increase the importance of the Internet as a means of communication, technical progress during digitization, in addition to individual consumer decisions regarding the use of the media, are essential [37–39]. The success of online social networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Chatbots, is, therefore, a consequence of a technologically dictated communicative convergence of society [6,40–42]. In addition, the shift in communication processes in digital environments has also led to the dissolution of communication boundaries.

The theme of dialogue is closely related to symmetrical forms of communication and is essentially based on understanding and equality between communication partners—the company and consumers [43]. In other words, the mutual interaction between those involved in the dialogue is the precondition for a functional dialogue, reflected in the fact that companies mainly use social networks to contact customers and to build and maintain relationships with them [44]. Given this area of tension, the orientation of dialogue can consequently be understood as a kind of concept of connection that is often seen in practice as a tool of symmetrical communication.

Outsourcing and automating a part of communication through digital processes leads to increased flexibility and increased relational network formation. Against the background of these developments, research in the fields of digital marketing and public relations (PR) has highlighted the potential of the Internet as a tool for dialogue and symmetrical communication [45,46]. The theoretical foundations have clearly shown that the orientation of organizations' dialogue towards consumers is a feature of modern social

media communication [47,48]. The reasons for this are especially evident in digitalization, during which communication about products and services creates competitive advantages. This allows for a practice-oriented view of the orientation of dialogue in Internet and social media communication. In this context, the need to approach symmetrical communication-oriented public relations is obvious, and the relationship is presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Areas of overlap between public relations and social media marketing.

According to studies of communication managers, building and maintaining trust and a positive image are key challenges for companies [49–51]. However, there is an obvious discrepancy between the theoretical potential of consumer involvement in brand page content and the effective implementation of dialogue-oriented communication on the Internet. It is becoming clear that dialogue-oriented communication to promote products and brands on social media comprises much more than just the voice of a company. This voice needs to be accompanied and supported by the voice of consumers to contribute to the creation, maintenance, and consolidation of brand pages. Furthermore, the process of bilateral communication, which is possible through the authentic interactivity of social networks, allows for more direct and personal forms of addressing users than is the case with more classic forms of public relations [33,52,53].

It is important to note that previous studies have shown that examinations of the online communication of companies with consumers focus initially on the factors that influence the orientation of the dialogue between companies and users on social media [54–56]. In this context, brand equity is a multidimensional construct based on the organizational value of competitiveness, social responsibility, support, innovation, reward, performance orientation, and stability [12,19,57]. Brand equity has often been included customer brand awareness, customer brand attitudes, and customer perception of brand ethics, but in social media, this is built through brand image and brand awareness [58–60].

Regarding brand image, because they are critical for the choice of communication strategies and, thus influence the communication behavior of social media managers, it can be assumed that brand pages are also relevant for guiding a company's dialogue with their consumers. Other authors have also considered brand pages to be a possible point of contact for further research to investigate why organizations cannot fully exploit the potential for dialogue orientation [5,61,62]. Consequently, a company that is perceived as competent and experienced in its field of activity, and that implements communication oriented toward dialogue with customers on social media, ultimately determines the establishment of a psychological link that contributes to increasing the level of attractiveness for customers. It also becomes essential for an organization to constantly communicate symmetrically a

coherent vision to consumers, and to convey clear and complete information on all social media channels. In addition, virtual space is an influencing factor of real space, and the status of relationships and information have become increasingly important as defining elements of obtaining social recognition.

A number of authors believe that the operationalization of the brand and the credibility of social media communication messages represent a mix between the visual elements that shape the corporate reputation and the aspects that the organization projects abroad and aims to be recognized online [63,64]. Thus, the inter-dependence link between identity and image in the formation of the online brand can be observed. In this sense, it can be said that this dimension contributes to the differentiation of the company in social media by capturing those elements that help it to be recognized and remembered by consumers. However, interaction with companies and brands also plays a role that should not be neglected. In this context, social media communities are gaining increasing influence because brand conversations are more credible than targeted advertising campaigns.

Research and practice show that another digital trend increasingly present on social media is the use of influencers [65]. Influencers report on products and services on social networks and encourage their followers to contact online companies present on social media [66,67]. For campaigns aimed at wide coverage and carried out with influencers, dedicated budgets are needed, which are increasingly based on lump sums for cooperation. Many authors believe that influencers are role models and confidants for the community who can influence customer behavior through certain behaviors [65–67].

This new world of social media marketing challenges companies, while also offering them opportunities for a new approach to dialogue. Therefore, the objectives of using and implementing digital trends are primarily aimed at optimizing the customer experience and increasing their loyalty, and anchoring the brand in the relevant set of consumers. Therefore, the framework conditions of credibility, ethics, and transparency will play a central role in the digital marketing of the future. Moreover, it is important for companies to utilize the many tools (e.g., social media, blogs, and forums) and platforms associated with corporate strategy and to make them fruitful for managing dialogue-oriented communication.

When assessing the quality of the relationship between organizations and the customers through social media, researchers have investigated the movement towards symmetrical communication in the online space and the principles for maintaining a dialogue in the online environment with consumers [68]. Authors have suggested that dialogue-based strategies lead to an increase in consumer engagement and satisfaction for users [69,70]. They have also appreciated that, in assessing the quality of the relationship between organizations and customers, the scale of measurement relates to the following four dimensions: reciprocity of control, trust, satisfaction, and commitment. These dimensions were also considered in the present study. In other words, in the digital age, the basis for building a brand and a reputation in the public space is a unitary perspective on the quality of communication with customers [71,72].

Based on the reasons mentioned above, we propose the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Dialogue-oriented communication in social media has a positive influence on brand equity.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *Dialogue-oriented communication has a positive influence on the quality of relationships between companies and consumers in social media.*

**Hypothesis 3 (H3).** *Dialogue-oriented communication in social media is significantly dependent on characteristics of PR roles.*

**Hypothesis 4 (H4).** *Relationship quality between companies and consumers in social media has important benefits for brand equity.*

In the practice of PR, the new technological possibilities of the Internet were initially understood as tools for the fast and cheap dissemination of information [73–75]. However, with the increase in interactive possibilities in Web 2.0, this perspective has gained additional importance and strengthened the relevance of online PR, which is becoming a form of strategic online communication by organizations. In addition, aspects related to the requirements, the communication effort, and the role of PR in the communication process have been presented. Finally, the goal is the continuous optimization of the information provided, through which not only the formal content, but also the general content, needs to be improved [76,77].

The issue of building the brand using symmetrical communication brings back into discussion an older dispute between the field of digital marketing and that of public relations in social media. According to the literature [78,79], both public relations and digital marketing are considered to be the two key components of the external functions of companies, which can involve the following five states of ideal relationships: (1) separate but identical functions, (2) overlapping but independent functions, (3) marketing as a sub-function of public relations, (4) public relations as a sub-function of marketing, and (5) public relations and marketing as the same function. As social networks and customer support services have evolved and diversified, the public relations mission has been revised to integrate different variables in online consumer communication management with the long-term goal of social media success [80]. To this is added the obsession of social media managers to encourage consumer participation in brand pages. Therefore, achieving a distinct position in the minds of customers through the use of social media is extremely important for organizations, and this is largely due to the specific roles that communicators play in everyday professional life. The roles here refer to the recurring patterns of action of social media managers or PR tacticians, which are related to the actions of others.

In addition, a challenge in online communication often faced by PR specialists is the fragmentation of the environment and the difficulty in coordinating brand building through a variety of social media channels because of the differences between the objectives, audiences, and tools for each communication channel. Authors have stressed that it would be illusory to believe that, in PR with the Internet and social media, there is a definitive change from information and the asymmetric model to the ideal model of symmetrical communication [81,82]. From this perspective, in our research, we considered the change of interactive communication options of platforms, the relevance of dialogue-oriented communication, and the four PR roles that differ in terms of, among other factors, assessing the relevance in terms of dialogue orientation. Accordingly, the subsequent hypotheses are as follows:

**Hypothesis 5 (H5).** *The characteristics of PR roles are associated with a positive impact on relationship quality in social media.*

**Hypothesis 6 (H6).** *The characteristics of PR roles have a positive influence on brand equity.*

### 3. Methodology

To evaluate the effects of social media marketing on online customer-oriented communication, we conducted a quantitative study of the information collected following the development of a four-stage structured questionnaire that took into account the distinct expectations of different consumer groups and social media managers within each of the sampled companies, in terms of orienting the company's communication towards dialogue. The argument for taking into account the different categories of stakeholders in social media communication between the organization and consumers is that an approach that does not distinguish the role of integrated and symmetrical communication in building brand pages based on the audience could only partially reflect the complex meaning of the concept examined.

The main themes tackled in the questionnaire were symmetrical communication considering building and maintaining brand equity, the individual roles of PR in communi-

cation, the importance of communication oriented towards dialogue between company and customers, and the evaluation of the quality of the relationship between them. For example, brand equity is an important independent variable in the context of this study, because it allows for positive effects on symmetrical and dialogue-oriented communication of companies, and on the quality of relationships between companies and the customer. In addition, the role of orienting the dialogue as a dependent and independent variable was examined in the survey through seven items of the questionnaire on a five-point scale (from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”). The quality of the relationship is seen as a dependent outcome variable in this questionnaire and was measured by the following four items: reciprocity of control, trust, satisfaction, and commitment. As an increasing number of company employees speak on behalf of the organization with direct social media communication options, the PR role concept provides a promising starting point for researching communicators’ interaction with consumers. Thus, regarding the measurability of PR roles in connection with the orientation towards dialogue, the following four roles taken from the literature were used in the questionnaire: relationship developers, planning technicians, service providers, and dialogue technicians. These items were adapted for the context of corporate social media communication.

The survey took place between July 2020 and December 2020. Each of the statements contained in the questionnaire contributed to the calculation of the score of the variable. The reliability of the research tool can be confirmed in view of the internal consistency of the scales used in each case using Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ . Table 1 shows that all values were above the acceptance limit of 0.60, which confirms that the values could be assumed to be reliable for the present study.

As can be seen in Table 1, most values are above the recommended threshold of 0.70. Only assurance (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.67$ ), transparency (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.62$ ), relationship creator (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.68$ ), and planning technician (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.65$ ) result in lower values. The number of variables involved really matter for how to interpret an alpha coefficient where the value is 0.6. However, as they are still above the 0.60 acceptance limit, various partial dimensions have been measured in relation to dialogue-oriented communication and PR roles in social media. Thus, values should be assumed to be reliable for the current context based on studies by other authors [83–85].

**Table 1.** Questionnaire items and results of the reliability of the research tool.

Constructs	Item	$\alpha$
Brand Equity [12,60,86,87]	<b>Brand Awareness</b>	0.72
	I am familiar with the history of this brand	
	I know a lot of information about this brand and its online campaigns	
	I can recognize this brand and I am familiar with the products/services offered	0.70
	<b>Brand Image</b>	
	Interaction with this brand page is easy for me	
I have a good experience of this brand	0.76	
<b>Appropriateness</b>		
This brand puts customer expectations first		
Dialogue-Oriented Communication [68]	I think there is a common basis for communication	0.72
	The company complies with the ethical requirements of communication	
	I consider that attention is paid to the content and the form of expression of the message	
	<b>Availability</b>	0.75
	I think it responds quickly to messages	
	There is a type of direct communication	
I know that information is provided in a timely manner	0.75	
<b>Reliability</b>		
I think that communication on social networks is correct		
I think the communication information is credible	0.75	
I have the opportunity to express my opinions on social networks		

Table 1. Cont.

Constructs	Item	$\alpha$	
Dialogue-Oriented Communication [68]	<b>Respect</b> I think there is cooperation between the company and the client The unique value of the customer’s opinion is recognized I think there is a positive attitude despite the different opinions	0.74	
	<b>Empathy</b> I know the company is trying to understand my opinion I think the company will put my needs first I think the company has the knowledge to solve my problems	0.73	
	<b>Assurance</b> I think the company provides information as promised I think the company provides me with accurate communication I think the company will respect my opinions	0.67	
	<b>Transparency</b> I know that the company’s intention is communicated in a transparent manner I know the company is not reinterpreting opinions I believe that there is a transparent attitude in social media campaigns	0.62	
	Relationship Quality [13,69,70]	<b>Reciprocity of Control</b> I believe that there are equal rights in the decision-making process The company is not trying to take control of the customer I believe that feedback is taken into account in the decision-making process	0.80
		<b>Commitment</b> I have a unique relationship for this brand Company is responsive to my needs I am willing to participate in social media campaigns organized by the company	0.74
		<b>Satisfaction</b> I feel that the company meets my needs I am satisfied with the relationship with the company The problems are solved in optimal time	0.72
		<b>Trust</b> I think the company is honest with the customer I think the company keeps its promises I think I am treated fairly compared to other companies	0.70
	PR Roles in social media [88]	<b>Relationship Creator</b> I mediate between the company and the client using social media I ensure a reciprocal exchange on an equal footing between the company and the client I am able to communicate and act to promote the company on social media	0.68
		<b>Planning Technician</b> I am responsible for planning communication I optimally develop and maintain the relationship between the company and customers I provide information and meet online customer requirements	0.65
		<b>Service Provider</b> I am always well informed about online campaigns I initiate and moderate a dialogue with clients on social platforms I follow the opinions of customers online and can intervene if necessary	0.74
		<b>Dialogic Technician</b> I support the company in solving the problems reported by online customers I respond effectively to online messages targeting the company I make strategic decisions about general communication	0.71



The link for the survey was sent to the 204 responsible social media managers within each company in the sample, and they sent the link to 400 consumers selected through their own media channels. A total of 47% ( $n = 284$ ) women and 53% ( $n = 320$ ) men were represented in the sample ( $n = 604$ ). On average, the respondents were 36 years old ( $M = 27.83$ ,  $SD = 8.74$ ), with an age range between 23 and 58 years old. Table 2 shows the sample’s descriptive characteristics.

**Table 2.** Characteristics of the participants.

Age Interval in Years	Online Customers	%
<25	98	24.50
25–30	101	25.25
30–40	105	26.25
40–50	77	19.25
50–60	19	4.75
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>100</b>
Areas of Activity	Social Media Managers	%
Trade	47	23.04
IT&C	61	29.90
Finance	42	20.59
Health	36	17.65
Other sectors	18	8.82
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>204</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Survey data processing by the authors.

SPSS was used to evaluate the survey data, and the data evaluation was based on univariate and multivariate linear regression analyses, as well as Spearman rank correlation analyses, the feasibility of which was previously verified for the corresponding requirements. Then, we entered the data into AMOS software for path analysis via regression analysis for hypothesis testing. The instruments were tested using validity, reliability, and normality tests.

#### 4. Empirical Analysis

The results of the online survey are in accordance with the research hypotheses and questions, and are classified according to the research stage. Furthermore, multivariate linear regression shows a positive influence of support for all of the connection variables. The mean and standard deviation values are calculated and presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Average values of the item and survey variables.

Constructs	Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Brand Equity	Brand Awareness	3.57	0.68
	Brand Image	3.35	0.76
Dialogue-Oriented Communication	Appropriateness	3.55	0.85
	Availability	3.65	0.77
	Reliability	3.43	0.75
	Respect	3.62	0.71
	Empathy	3.55	0.72
	Assurance	3.63	0.66
	Transparency	3.92	0.78

**Table 3.** Cont.

Constructs	Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Relationship Quality	Reciprocity of control	3.67	0.57
	Commitment	3.64	0.61
	Satisfaction	3.62	0.63
	Trust	3.74	0.67
PR Roles in social media	Relationship Creator	3.67	0.48
	Planning Technician	3.59	0.58
	Service Provider	3.65	0.57
	Dialogic Technician	3.69	0.79

The results of the survey show that in the case of the influences of dialogue-oriented communication on brand equity (H1), a significant effect was confirmed ( $F(1, 400) = 44.72, p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, with the increase in attention to brand equity, a greater trend is evident towards online customer-oriented communication. It has been empirically proven that a dialogue-oriented communication climate has a positive effect on brand awareness and brand image if an equal relationship between the company and customer is sought in social media.

In the analysis of the influences of dialogue-oriented communication on the quality of the relationship (H2), the multivariate linear regression analysis confirmed significant effects for this connection. When considering the concrete effects of the models, there were significant influences of appropriateness on commitment ( $F(40, 196) = 3.89, p = 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.444$ ) and trust ( $F(40, 196) = 2, 45, p = 0.020, \eta^2 = 0.332$ ). Moreover, appropriateness promotes reliability between companies and users ( $F(40, 196) = 2.28, p = 0.022, \eta^2 = 0.341$ ) and relationship satisfaction ( $F(40, 196) = 2.48, p = 0.014, \eta^2 = 0.359$ ). This means that the sub-variables of appropriateness, availability, respect, empathy, assurance, and transparency are particularly effective when it comes to managing relationships between companies and users on social media. Therefore, based on the survey data, dialogue-oriented communication is an effective strategy for building and maintaining relationships on social media.

Regarding the connections between dialogue-oriented communication and the characteristics of PR roles (H3), the data show that dialogue orientation can be seen as the result of the work of PR employees (Table 4). The findings thus far are consistent with the view that dialogue-oriented communication on social media has a stronger influence than what was previously found in empirical PR research.

**Table 4.** Correlations between dialogue orientation and public relations (PR) roles.

Variable		Relationship Creator	Planning Technician	Service Provider	Dialogic Technician
Appropriateness	<i>r</i>	0.320 ***	0.298 ***	0.151	0.148
	<i>p</i>	0.000	0.000	0.046	0.067
Availability	<i>r</i>	0.365 ***	0.230	0.123	0.071
	<i>p</i>	0.000	0.017	0.035	0.367
Reliability	<i>r</i>	0.267 **	0.680	0.242 **	0.242
	<i>p</i>	0.000	0.071	0.002	0.002
Respect	<i>r</i>	0.254 **	0.296	0.212	0.097
	<i>p</i>	0.001	0.110	0.020	0.236

**Table 4.** Cont.

Variable		Relationship Creator	Planning Technician	Service Provider	Dialogic Technician
Empathy	<i>r</i>	0.268 **	0.486	0.159	0.205 **
	<i>p</i>	0.001	0.104	0.089	0.010
Assurance	<i>r</i>	0.120	0.443	0.132	0.047
	<i>p</i>	0.135	0.087	0.049	0.535
Transparency	<i>r</i>	0.244 **	0.680	0.880	0.176 *
	<i>p</i>	0.001	0.102	0.167	0.028

Source: Survey data processing by the authors. Spearman correlations. Basis: interviewed social media managers (*n* = 204). \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, and \*\*\* *p* < 0.001.

A different picture appeared when examining the relationships between brand equity and assessing the quality of the communication relationship in social media (H4). The correlation analyses cannot demonstrate significant relationships because the quality of a relationship is something that cannot be judged only unilaterally (Table 5). However, the available findings suggest that the characteristics of PR roles and the perception of the quality of relationships on social media also make a valuable contribution to dialogue-oriented communication (H5).

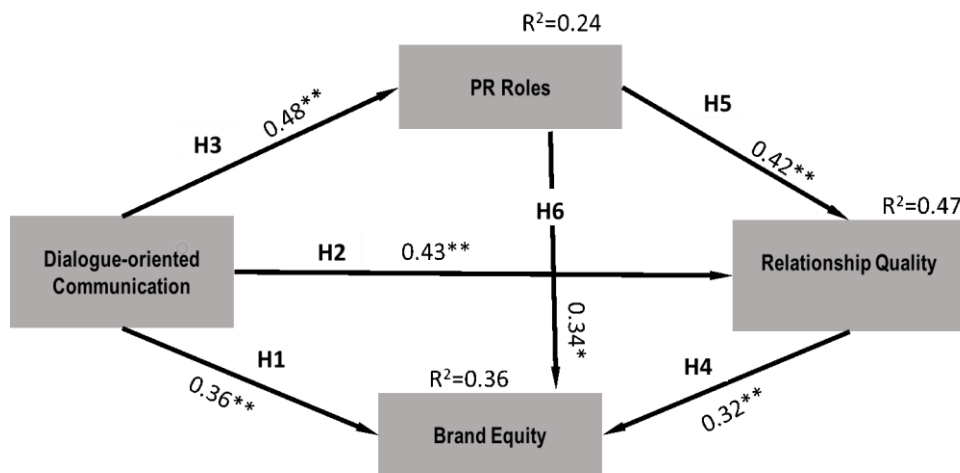
**Table 5.** Correlations between public relations (PR) roles and relationship quality.

Variable		Relationship Creator	Planning Technician	Service Provider	Dialogic Technician
Reciprocity of control	<i>r</i>	0.126	0.118 **	0.058	0.210
	<i>p</i>	0.129	0.008	0.484	0.014
Commitment	<i>r</i>	0.104	0.133	0.025	0.136 ***
	<i>p</i>	0.185	0.012	0.748	0.005
Satisfaction	<i>r</i>	0.134	0.092	0.156	0.157
	<i>p</i>	0.054	0.004	0.051	0.042
Trust	<i>r</i>	0.194 *	0.191	0.011	0.187
	<i>p</i>	0.015	0.017	0.984	0.011

Source: Survey data processing by the authors. Spearman correlations. Basis: interviewed social media managers (*n* = 204). \* *p* < 0.05, \*\* *p* < 0.01, and \*\*\* *p* < 0.001.

In general, it can be assumed that PR roles have changed given the growing importance of social media on brand equity (H6). Moreover, the findings suggest that the characteristics of PR roles are important elements for building and maintaining, in particular, the brand image.

Because of the basic theoretical considerations and empirical findings on the effects presented above, it can be assumed that the model, which is presented in Figure 2, is valid.



Model fit:  $\chi^2 (1, n = 604) = 0.062, p = 0.784, RMSEA = 0.000, SRMR = 0.002$   
 The values given are the standardized beta coefficients.  
 \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$

Figure 2. The proposed research model with hypotheses.

However, the growing need for interaction in social networks could not only mean that social media managers have to pursue an increasing number of operational and strategic communication tasks in social networks, but also that the changing expectations of online customers initiates the continuous development of dialogue-oriented communication. Thus, the results are accordingly consistent with the theoretical assumptions. Because the observed direct influences do not always apply, and it can be assumed that other factors also influence the quality of relationships on social media, it is worth analyzing the indirect effects that dialogue-oriented communication has on the quality of relationships. This means that the quality of relationships and the characteristics of PR roles shape the way communication takes place on an equal footing. In turn, this has a positive effect on the orientation of dialogue towards customers on social media.

### 5. Conclusions

The economic development prospects of the companies of the future are under the sign of digitalization, and the communication between them and consumers will transcend to a communication exclusively through social media. To navigate this mass of information and content, this study supports the understanding of dialogue-oriented communication in social media as an opportunity for managing online customer relationships.

Respondents' responses not only provide important information but also allow for conclusions to be drawn about more complex relationships between dialogue-oriented communication and the quality of social media relationships. In addition, the daily work of social media managers is taken into account with the roles of PR. For this reason, it was useful in this study to analyze social media as the most important transformer of public relations for the potential of dialogue-oriented online communication for social brand recognition and reputation, and related motivations on social media. One can observe both a direct influence and an indirect influence, transmitted through the orientation of the dialogue. In addition, dialogue-oriented communication is a feature that simply exists, or does not exist, within companies, but can help build and maintain lasting relationships with customers on social media.

The results also show that a survey of those responsible for communication promises a comprehensive perspective on the factors that influence a company's orientation towards dialogue with its consumers. In addition, the findings of the content analysis of the quality of business–consumer relationships can be complemented by the individual perception of communicators.

From a strategic perspective, the research results showed that establishing and maintaining individual online relationships with customers and entire networks of relationships that are as sustainable as possible should be seen as a function of brand management in the online environment. In this way, the management of consumer relations makes an important contribution to legitimizing companies' actions on social media, and symmetrical and dialogue-oriented forms of communication with customers are considered to be the key to successfully cultivating these relationships. In addition, this study identified the research gaps related to the management of relationships between companies and customers in social media from the perspective of social media managers, and from the perspective of loyal or potential consumers. Thus, these postulated principles are even more important, particularly in public relations, regarding symmetrical and integrated communication, to understand the reasons/behavior that causes consumers to participate in brand pages; the importance of social media managers as bearers of image; and the correlation of dialogue-oriented communication with the selfie phenomenon.

The theoretical implications of this paper particularly refer to the understanding of dialogue-oriented communication as a process of mutual interactions in social media. When communicating through social networks, in particular, companies often enter a field originally reserved for digital interpersonal communication. In addition, given the dynamics of social media communication, it seems necessary for companies to focus more on the characteristics of PR roles. Furthermore, social media managers can conduct customer segmentation from the customer's side in order to meet customers demand more closely.

In terms of practical implications, the major influence of dialogue-oriented communication on the quality of relationships between companies and customers in social media emerged in this study. This could also be a measure of online reputation management to maintain long-term customer relationships. Moreover, a pragmatic approach to the results of the study would aim at measures to improve staff recruitment, particularly in the management of social networks, which have special requirements in terms of skills and tasks.

This study also has a number of limitations. First, the conditions for dialogue-oriented communication depend to a large extent on individual platforms, and content research on social media faces the problem of content volatility. Second, in terms of measuring interactivity, only the reactions visible to the public were able to be taken into account in the content analysis. The third limitation was that only social media managers from top companies in Romania were selected for the survey.

Opportunities for further research relate to the dynamic verification that appears in the pursuit of communication between individual online customers, by comparing platforms and the role the company's intervention plays in this regard. Long-term perspectives would also be needed in order to demonstrate the stability of the effects over time.

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