

# **An Exploratory Study Regarding the Brand-Consumer Relationship in Social Media**

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*Abstract: - In the digital era concepts such as social networks, blogs and forums have become integrated keywords in the marketing communication strategies of brands worldwide. The old ways of building an online presence, such as simple websites, have diminished most of their relevance in front of social media tools. The ease of establishing contacts with consumers made out of these new applications propitious communication channels for more and more brands, which became present on sites like Facebook, Twitter or Google Plus, where their audience already gathered in large numbers. Social media offers the opportunity of developing close relationships with consumers and helps the brands to strengthen their awareness and image. The purpose of this paper is to present the consumers` opinions towards their relationships with brands in social media. By knowing this opinions, the brand`s communication process can be optimized and adapted to the specific consumers` needs and interests.*

*Key-Words: - online marketing, online marketing communication, brand, brand-consumer relationship, online customer relationship, social media, social networks, Facebook.*

## **1. Introduction**

The marketing communication activity was noticeably improved along with the emergence of social media. For the brand communication strategy the use of social media tools proved to offer significant advantages and contributed to the development of the brand knowledge. The brand is a valuable long-term asset for any company, which is why it implies strategic management and constant coordination regarding its marketing activity, both online and offline.

The specialized literature suggests that social media marketing can be successfully used in order to manage the brands and to create relationships with the consumers. Social media marketing has “the capacity to engage consumers with the brands in an interactive way” (Platon, 2014, p. 192) through various tools.

This paper presents some aspects regarding the brand-consumer relationship in social media, both from a theoretical point of view and from the consumers` point of view. The importance of this issue appears to be very high nowadays, since many companies are trying to enhance the consumers` engagement with their brands in social media. Building a strong social media presence of the brand it is not enough in order to sustain a long-term customer relationship. The brands must adapt their strategies to this environment and communicate in a specific manner, taking into account that consumers are in control in social media and they select the content that they want to see. In order to clarify this matter, this paper presents an exploratory research regarding the consumers` opinions towards their relationship with brands in social media. The results of this research can be used in the brand`s communication process with its audience.

## **2. The brand-consumer relationship in social media**

Social media applications are technologies that invite the participation of both consumers and brands and that have the ability to maintain the communication and collaboration among its users (Barefoot & Szabo, 2010). Gunelius (2011) defines social media as “the online publishing and communications tools, sites, and destinations of Web 2.0 that are rooted in conversations, engagement, and participation” (p. 10).

It deserves to be mentioned that although the two concepts, social media and Web 2.0, share common features, their relationship does not imply synonymy. The term Web 2.0 is used generically for describing a “fundamental social way of using the Internet technologies” (McHaney, 2013, p. 10). On the other hand, social media represents a precise set of tools, applications and services that facilitates social interactions among different Internet users. The most important aspect to mention regarding social media is that a complete understanding of this concept is possible by integrating its two basic elements: the *social* element and the *media* element. Basically, by combining social processes, derived from the users` interactions, with the technical facilities, offered by this new media channels, results a continuous process of content creation, globally accessible to diverse groups of Internet users.

The concept of social media is used as an umbrella term, which brings together different types of online communication tools and applications. To eliminate any confusion about the tools that may be included under the umbrella of social media, it is necessary to classify and systematize them into precise categories.

One of the most interesting classifications belongs to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). The authors consider that the classification of social media tools can be performed taking into account its two key elements, namely: “media research (social presence, media richness) and social processes (self-presentation, self-disclosure)” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). In other words, social media applications can be classified according to the technical and creative opportunities offered by the media channel and the degree of social participation allowed by it. According to these criteria, the social media tools can be grouped in six categories (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 62):

- collaborative projects;
- blogs;
- content communities;
- social networking sites;
- virtual game worlds;
- virtual social worlds.

The specialized literature offers a variety of approaches regarding the typology of social media tools. For example, Gunelius (2011), structures the variety of social media tools into six categories, namely: blogs; microblogs; social networking; content sharing and social bookmarking; audio and video, and e-books, webinars, reviews and more. Zarrella (2010, p. 3) considers that the social media applications can be grouped into eight categories: blogs; microblogs; social networks; media-sharing sites; social bookmarking sites and voting sites; review sites; forums, and virtual worlds. Miletsky (2010, p. 75) includes among the social media tools and applications the following categories: e-mail; instant messaging; blogs and vlogs (video blogs); forums and message boards; file sharing (music, pictures, videos, games etc.); wikis; social networking sites; virtual worlds; RSS feeds; reviews of products and services, and mashup sites (combining several tools in one application).

Another noteworthy approach belongs to Bădău (2011), which proposes the classification of the social media platforms into four categories according to their role, namely:

- communication: blogs, podcasts, vodcasts, forums, microblogs, social networks, newsgroups, instant communication, events;
- collaboration: wiki, favorite sites, opinions and questions;
- multimedia: photo, video, live casting, online audio;
- entertainment: virtual worlds, online games.

Starting from this latter perspective and integrating the other points of view presented above in this paper, I propose the classification of the main social media tools, depending on their role, as follows:

**Table 1.** The typology of social media

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Communication:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- social networks</li> <li>- blogs</li> <li>- microblogs</li> <li>- podcasts</li> <li>- videocasts</li> <li>- newsgroups and discussion groups</li> </ul>
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- forums
- instant communication

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Collaboration:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- wikis</li> <li>- social bookmarking</li> <li>- reviews and ratings websites</li> </ul>
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Multimedia:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- multimedia sharing websites</li> <li>- live streaming</li> </ul>
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Entertainment:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- online game worlds</li> <li>- virtual worlds</li> </ul>
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Source: Platon, O.E. & Orzan, G., 2015.

This classification does not imply the exhaustive inclusion of the mentioned instruments in just one category, each of them serving to other purposes outside their main scope.

Hence, according to this classification, social media brings together a variety of tools and applications that can help the brands to directly communicate and interact with their consumers. With the help of its tools, social media can be used in order to “build awareness, recognition, recall, and action for a brand” (Gunelius, 2011, p. 10). The companies can decide to build brand-consumer contacts through social networks, blogs, forums, multimedia sharing websites and other social media applications. Managing each of these virtual channels of communication can help the brands to constantly develop and improve their relationship with consumers in the online environment.

“Brands are complex entities, but ultimately they reside in consumers` minds” (Tuominen, 2000, p. 305) and this is why their value for the company is truly achieved only through the contacts with the consumers. Communication is the heart of all the relations with the brand (Ouwensloot & Duncan, 2008, p. 4) and “creating an online presence for the brand should become a part of the communication strategy in order to sustain the long-lasting customer relationship” (Platon, 2014, p. 200)

In social media there is a great degree of interactivity and a wide range of information can be presented to consumers in the form of texts, photos or videos. In addition to using social networks, companies can fully benefit from the advantages of using blogs or content-sharing websites, where consumers can obtain relevant information in an understandable and accessible manner. Although social media tools allow a large transfer of information, it is important to remember that the consumers own the space and they decide what information are of interest for them. In this context, adapting to the requirements and characteristics of the users is an essential aspect for the brands that are engaged in communication through social media applications. Marketing communication in social media is a relational process and the companies should focus on creating connections with consumers and not on trying to persuade them to buy products or services.

Being a strong humanized environment, the most important aspect to remember is that any marketing communication campaign in social media should be based on a good knowledge of the consumers` habits, preferences and interests. In order to be able to turn the consumers into dialogue partners, the companies should not overlook the fact that honesty, credibility and transparency are key elements for the public in social media.

So, the first step in developing effective marketing communications through social media is listening to consumers. Since in social media the consumer is in control and because the consumer is the reference element in evaluating the success of a brand, studying the consumers` opinions should become a priority.

### **3. Consumers opinions towards their relationship with brands in social media**

The purpose of this exploratory research was to study the Romanian consumers` opinions regarding their consented relationships with brands developed in social media. The main objectives pursued throughout this research were:

- identifying the types of social media applications used by the respondents;
- identifying the frequency of use for the three most frequently used social media applications by the respondents;

- identifying the average time of usage per day for three of the most used social media applications by the respondents;
- identifying the ways through which the respondents are relating with brands in social media;
- identifying the categories of brands with which the respondents have established relationships in social media;
- identifying the actions carried out by the respondents in their relationship with brands;
- identifying the socio-demographic profile of the respondents.

The research was implemented both online and offline, through a questionnaire with 14 questions. The questionnaire was administered to 25 consumers, during the period February 23-29, 2015.

The results of the research showed that all 25 participants in the study are currently using social media applications and have developed consented connections or interactions with brands in social media. The socio-demographic profile of the respondents can be described as following: 32% male respondents and 68% female respondents, 48% of the respondents are aged between 18-24 years old, 48% are aged between 25-34 years old and 4% are aged more than 35 years old. With regard to the last level of education completed by the respondents, 48% have graduated high school, 12% have graduated university studies and 40% have graduated post university studies. The socio-professional status of the respondents is: student for 48% of the subjects and employee, without managerial responsibility for 52% of them. The area of origin of the subjects was the urban area for 88% of the respondents and the rural area for 12% of them.

Regarding the types of social media applications currently used by respondents, the research indicated that Facebook is the most used social media application, 96% of the respondents stating that they have a member account on this social network. This is followed by the instant communication applications such as Skype and Yahoo! Messenger, 88% of the respondents stating that they have a user account on them. The third most important application is YouTube, 64% of the subjects having a member account on this site. The social media platforms used by the respondents without having a user account are: Wikipedia (76%), ratings and reviews websites (44%) and YouTube (36%). Google Plus (16%) and Twitter (4%) were cited as applications that respondents do not use, although they have a member account created for this purpose. The applications that have been indicated as not being used by the respondents are: virtual worlds (100%), Twitter (96%) and blog platforms, such as Blogger/Blogspot (96%) or Wordpress (92%).

Regarding the usage patterns of social media applications, the results showed that three of the most commonly used social media applications by the respondents are Facebook, YouTube and Instagram. Facebook was indicated by 96% of respondents, 84% of them stating that they use it several times a day. YouTube was indicated by 68% of the respondents, 24% of them using this site several times a day. Instagram was mentioned by 32% of the respondents, 16% of them indicating that they are using it once per day. The average time per day spent using each of these applications is: under 60 minutes in case of YouTube (with 48% of the responses), 30-60 minutes for Facebook (28% of responses) and less than 30 minutes for Instagram (16% of responses).

The way in which the majority of the respondents (64.9%) are relating with brands in social media is by giving a Like to their official Facebook page. Other methods mentioned are: the subscription to the official YouTube channel of the brand (13.5%) and reading the brand's official blog (13.5%).

The most important categories of brands with which the consumers have developed relationships in social media are: food/drink (7.8%), health/personal care/sports (7.4%), tourism/travel (7%), hypermarkets/supermarkets/malls/stores/online stores (7%) and celebrities/singers/bands (6.6%). In most cases, the support of these relationships is Facebook. Other applications mentioned were blogs and forums. The respondents were asked to indicate examples of brands for each selected category, thus aiming to test the spontaneous awareness of the brands with which the consumers are relating in social media. The most important mentioned examples were:

**Table 2.** Examples of brands mentioned in the research

Category	Examples of brands
Food/drink	Coca-Cola, Fanta, Doncafe, McDonalds, KFC, Savori Urbane, Mazilique, Ferrero Rocher, Nutella
Health/personal care/sports	MedLife, Doctorul Casei, Viața în verde viu, Ciclism.ro, World Class Romania
Tourism/travel	Bora Bora, Booking.com, Turist Info.ro, Marea Agenția de

	turism, Emperor travel blog, Paralela45, Perfect Tour, Ghiduri turistice, Travelmax, Paravion, Momondo
Hypermarkets/ supermarkets/malls/stores/online stores	Auchan, Carrefour, Lidl, Mega Image, eMag, Altex, Cel.ro, De Purtat, OLX.ro, Elefant.ro, Yokko, Ale82, Nissa, MaDame, Bien Savvy, Sideris Organic Shop, Decathlon
Celebrities/singers/bands	Antonia, Adda, Andreea Bălan, Andreea Bănică, Elena Gheorghe, Fly Project, Grasu XXL, Inna, Oana Radu, Beyonce, Jennifer Lopez, Rihanna, Tina Turner, Muse, Metallica, Pearl Jam, Incubus, Garbage, Ashton Kutcher, Mihai Bendeac

Another valuable research result is that the most important actions carried out by the respondents in their relationship with brands are: looking for information regarding various brands (17.2%), voting/evaluating/liking messages of various brands (16.4%), reading the comments of other consumers regarding various brands (15.6%) and viewing photos/videos regarding various brands (13.1%). In contrast, the least mentioned actions were: adding content/articles/posts regarding various brands (1.6%) and participating in group discussions regarding various brands (1.6%).

## 4. Conclusion

According to the research, Facebook is the most important social media application currently used by the Romanian consumers. Within it, individuals manifest and develop mostly of their consented interactions with brands, appreciating and following their official pages or giving permission to be exposed to the messages sent by the brands and their consumers. The frequency of use, the time spent using it by the consumers, along with its specific operating characteristics, make from this social network the best social media application for the brand's marketing activity, offering it the possibility to directly, quickly and easily communicate with its audience.

Other applications that can be considered for inclusion in the communication strategy between brands and their audiences are YouTube, Instagram, blogs and forums.

The main action that the consumers are carrying out in their relationship with brands is searching for information about products and services. This is also the way in which the consumers are initiating the process of relating with brands in social media. Starting from this basis, the relationships between consumers and brands are continuing to develop and to consolidate with the help of the activities that the brands are performing in social media. These actions also contribute to the development of the brand image and create closer ties with the consumers.

The categories of brands with which the consumers are relating in social media are diverse. The fact that individuals can easily cite examples of brands, demonstrates that the presence of brands in social media can contribute to strengthening the brand awareness.

Thus this paper offered some recommendations for brand management, pointing out the main aspects that should be included in the brand communication strategy. Suggestions for further research work include extending the sample of respondents to a representative value so that the research results could be generalized.

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