Managing relationships on Facebook: A long-term analysis of leading companies in Germany

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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study is to investigate how companies manage relationships with publics on social media. Based on the concepts of functional and contingency interactivity, the study examines the long-term implementation of three interactive strategies derived from research on organization-public relationships: dialogic communication, transparent communication, and informal communication. The study sheds further light on relational outputs and outcomes. The results of content analyses of leading German companies' Facebook pages in 2012, 2015, and 2018 indicate the growing importance of dialogic communication and informal communication. There is a constant relation between dialogic communication and the extent of user interaction, with the analysis suggesting that dialogic communication is used to manage critical user comments. Hence, the long-term study contributes to a deeper understanding of professionalization in corporate social media communication. It provides evidence for PR scholars and professionals that there are effective features on Facebook for managing sustainable relationships.

1. Introduction

Social media has changed the way organizations communicate. It has become the most important tool for communication managers to interact with relevant publics (Navarro, Moreno, & Zerfass, 2018; Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2017). Facebook in particular is a key platform for achieving public relations (PR) goals and managing relationships (Wright & Hinson, 2017). Thus, "it is no longer an issue *whether* organizations should include social media in their communication channels, but *how* they can strategically use social media to engage digital-savvy stakeholders" (Men & Tsai, 2015, p. 89). Subsequently, there has been a professionalization process regarding social media as part of the PR toolkit (Linke & Oliveira, 2015; Navarro et al., 2018), and social media management has become an essential task of PR departments (Cardwell, Williams, & Pyle, 2017; Moretti & Tuan, 2015). However, building and maintaining relationships of trust, as well as coping with the dynamics of the social web, still remain core challenges for PR professionals (Meng, Reber, Berger, Gower, & Zerfass, 2019; Zerfass, Verčič, Verhoeven, Moreno, & Tench, 2019). The question which therefore arises, is to what extent organizations have implemented relationship management strategies on social media in

recent years.

Although there is a broad consensus that interactive and non-promotional messaging strategies are effective for building and maintaining relationships (e.g., Kelleher, 2009; Men & Tsai, 2015; Sung & Kim, 2014), there are still substantial research gaps. Thus, the specific objectives of this article are fourfold: First, traditional relational and dialogic strategies and principles are not consistent with the interactive features of modern social media (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Taylor, Kent, & Xiong, 2019). This study argues for an interactivity-based view of corporate relationship management strategies on Facebook. Second, most of the related studies on corporate relationship management on social media are single snapshots without significance for long-term developments in a fast-changing social media landscape. As strongly encouraged by relationship management scholars (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014), this study extends the existing body of research through a longitudinal benchmarking perspective on how companies have implemented relationship management strategies since 2012. Third, a major part of previous studies on corporate social media communication has applied content analyses and neglected relational outcomes, despite relationships having become a "defining aspect of the identity for general public

relations research" (Coombs & Holladay, 2015, p. 691). This research therefore connects content-related features of corporate communication on Facebook to their relational outcomes. Fourth, there is—as is common in PR research (Jelen, 2008; Macnamara, 2012)—a dominant focus on Anglo-American markets. By examining leading companies in Germany, this study aims to provide the first insights into the fourth biggest economy worldwide after the United States, China, and Japan (Statista, 2019).

Relationship management is defined as "the specific means by which partners manage to sustain long-term, well-functioning relationships" (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001, p. 96). This research sheds light on the use of interactive features by and relational outcomes for companies on Facebook trying to foster long-term relationships with their publics. Therefore, the application of different relationship management strategies on websites and social media platforms is reviewed under the directives of the relational (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998) and the dialogic paradigms (e.g., Kent & Taylor, 1998, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). Based on this review, three waves (2012, 2015, and 2018) of quantitative content analyses of Germany's leading companies' Facebook activities are conducted. The results indicate the extent to which the companies have incorporated different strategies for relationship management (*dialogic communication*, *transparent communication*, and *informal communication*) in recent years. Moreover, as communication value has shifted from output to outcome (Buhmann & Likely, 2018), the strategies' impact on both the output (number of followers, likes, shares, comments) and the outcome (valence) of user interaction are considered. In this way, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of ongoing professionalization processes in online PR. It provides empirical evidence for PR scholars and professionals that relationship management offers effective strategies for engaging with publics on social media.

2. Literature review

Building and managing stakeholder relationships is at the core of modern PR (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Smith, 2012; Toth, 2010). Relationships are expressions of the expectation two parties have regarding each other's behavior based on their previous interaction (Thomlison, 2000). The relational turn in PR can be traced back to 1984 when Mary Ann Ferguson recognized that PR had been too focused on the management and effects of communication (Ferguson, 2018). She therefore called for stronger consideration of the relationships between organizations and their publics. Ledingham and Bruning (1998, p. 62) define organization-public relationships (OPRs) as "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity". OPRs encompass six core factors: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2003). Scholars such as Huang (2001) have provided seminal conceptualizations for measuring OPRs in different contexts and cultures. Since then, research has focused on analyzing OPRs offline and online on websites and social media. An extensive literature review and a synopsis of fundamental findings in the next sections will therefore serve as a theoretical base for examining relationship management strategies on Facebook.

2.1. Online relationship management

Online tools such as social media have often been closely associated with the idea of a more symmetrical and balanced interaction between organizations and their publics. In their influential article on the management of social media in organizations, Macnamara and Zerfass (2012) emphasize the potential of social media for "facilitating relational and dialogic models of communication" (p. 288). It is therefore not surprising that OPR studies are primarily based upon relational and dialogic conceptualizations.

Within the relational paradigm, six strategies prevail: access, openness, positivity, networking, task sharing, and assurances (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2006). Access encompasses the features that foster an organization's reachability. Openness or disclosure refer to the information an organization reveals about itself. Positivity describes the attempt of an organization to establish pleasant relationships, while networking refers to an organization's engagement with active publics. Task sharing describes the joint responsibility for mutual decisions and problems, and lastly, assurances can be understood as an organization's willingness to legitimize and commit to the public's concerns. (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Ki & Hon, 2006)

Within the dialogic paradigm, studies primarily build on Kent and Taylor's (1998) seminal dialogic principles: dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface, and conservation of visitors. Dialogic loop refers to a mutual exchange between an organization and its publics on relevant concerns and problems, while useful information describes the provision of information oriented to the publics' needs. Return visits encompasses measures ensuring that the publics return to the organization's platform, while ease of interface mainly refers to usability. Finally, conservation of visitors involves the engagement of the publics on the organization's own platforms. (Kent & Taylor, 1998)

Previous OPR studies have extensively adapted these strategies and principles as they offer access to an empirical operationalization. With regard to building and maintaining OPRs through social media, Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic theory of PR has become "more popular than ever before" (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018, p. 60). However, its suitability for the investigation of social media communication is increasingly questioned (e.g., Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Taylor et al., 2019). Based on their systematic reviews of literature applying Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles, Wirtz and Zimbres (2018) as well as Ao and Huang (2020) emphasize the need for further development of the framework considering digitalization and the changing features of modern communication environments. In addition, Morehouse and Saffer (2018) as well as Johann (2020) point out that dialogue is frequently considered as a procedural form of symmetrical communication. This leads to a dilemma, as dialogue is a normative concept deeply rooted in philosophy and interpersonal communication. In consequence, scholars have begun to shift the focus to a more procedural view (e.g., Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017; Romenti, Murtarelli, & Valentini, 2014) aiming at an "ideological shift" (Kent, 2013, p. 341) in PR research and practice.

This study aims to contribute to this shift by considering in particular the interactive nature of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) for relational processes. From this procedural perspective, specific focus is on the "interactions between organizations and publics that seek to create mutual respect, mutual understanding, and mutual benefits" (Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018, p. 26). Thus, the article will expand on the concept of interactivity and its potential for building and maintaining relationships between organizations and publics (Avidar, 2013). In this way, it aims to derive specific strategies for corporate relationship management on Facebook through the lens of interactivity.

2.2. Interactive social media strategies

Interactive communication is an essential precondition for relational processes and outcomes (Hallahan, 2003; Kelleher, 2009). However, interactivity itself lacks a single operational definition (Avidar, 2013). In a broader sense, it refers to the transmission of information in a "process of reciprocal influence" (Pavlik, 1996, p. 135) or "the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to, or [are] willing to facilitate, each other's communication needs" (Ha & James, 1998, p. 461). With special regard to online environments, Sundar, Kalyanaraman, and Brown (2003) differentiate two forms of interactivity: functional and contingency. The former describes an "interface's capacity for

conducting a dialogue or information exchange between users and the interface" (Sundar et al., 2003, p. 33), while the latter is rather a process between users, media, and messages, in which "communication roles need to be interchangeable for full interactivity to occur, and interactants need to respond to one another" (Sundar et al., 2003, p. 35).

Looking at the body of research on online OPRs, functional perspectives prevail (Avidar, 2013). In these, researchers have primarily used content analyses to examine organizations' use of relational features on websites (e.g., Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2010; Ki & Hon, 2006; Park & Reber, 2008; Reber & Kim, 2006), blogs (e.g., Cho & Huh, 2010; Waters, Ghosh, Griggs, & Searson, 2014), and social network sites (e.g., Gao, 2016; Koehler, 2014; McCorkindale, 2010; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). Only gradually have scholars been integrating contingency aspects such as the organizations' and users' response behavior into their research designs (e.g., Avidar, 2013; DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; Kim, Kim, & Nam, 2014; O'Neil, 2014; Shin, Pang, & Kim, 2015; Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017; Waters et al., 2014).

In integrating functional and contingency aspects of interactivity on social media, this article sheds light on three major strategies for managing OPRs on Facebook: *dialogic communication, transparent communication*, and *informal communication*. The following sections will clarify the selection of these concepts and the question of to what extent companies can implement these strategies on Facebook.

2.2.1. Dialogic communication

The concept of dialogic communication is at the core of relationship management (Gutiérrez-García, Recalde, & Piñera-Camacho, 2015; Kelleher, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 2002; Theunissen & Noordin, 2012). Looking at the existing body of research, it becomes obvious that Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principles in particular have shaped the investigation of relational processes in different online environments (e. g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Gálvez-Rodríguez, Sáez-Martín, García-Tabuyo, & Caba-Pérez, 2018; Gao, 2016; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2010; Park & Reber, 2008; Sundstrom & Levenshus, 2017).

As mentioned before, social media researchers have often "narrowly viewed dialogue" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 388) and neglected the premise that dialogue is "product rather than process" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 323). To overcome this shortcoming, *dialogue* as a normative paradigm will be distinguished from *dialogic* as a more procedural dimension, which refers to the potential for dialogue (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). In this sense, social media can serve as interactive communication environments where dialogue can be nurtured by dialogic interaction between an organization and its publics (Theunissen & Noordin, 2012). This article subsumes the implementation of functional and contingency features by companies for dialogic interaction under the term *dialogic communication* (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Within the great variety of social media platforms, Facebook is considered to be one of the most important for dialogic communication (Dekay, 2012; Wright & Hinson, 2017). On Facebook, organizations can activate the user post section and provide contact information (functional level). Moreover, they can call for user interaction and reply to user comments (contingency level). Several scholars have shown that the organizations they examined did not fully exploit Facebook's dialogic potential (e.g., Dekay, 2012; Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2010; Kim, Kim et al., 2014; Lee, 2014; Shin et al., 2015). Due to the additional lack of long-term observations on dialogic communication on social media, the research question is proposed:

RQ1: To what extent have the examined companies implemented interactive features for dialogic communication on Facebook over time?

2.2.2. Transparent communication

The idea of open and disclosing organizations is deeply anchored in Hon and Grunig's (1999) and Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) frameworks on OPRs. As a genuine feature of the web 2.0, social media's ability to foster openness is essential for modern relationship management (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Especially in the context of OPRs, openness is linked to transparency, which can be defined as "the deliberate attempt to make available all legally releasable information […] for the purpose of enhancing the reasoning ability of publics and holding organizations accountable for their actions, policies and practices" (Rawlins, 2008, p. 7). It is determined by truthful, substantial, and useful information as well as participating stakeholders and the objective and balanced disclosure of an organization's activities and policies (Rawlins, 2008).

Research has widely adopted the idea of transparent organizations being important for relationship management (e.g., DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Ki & Hon, 2006; Kim, Hong, & Cameron, 2014; Kim, Kim et al., 2014; O'Neil, 2014; Waters et al., 2009). In regard to Facebook, an organization can achieve transparency by disclosing relevant information such as website links, company information, or business data on the pages (functional level) and in its posts and answers to users (contingency level). Previous research on organizational transparency on Facebook indicates that it is the most pronounced strategy among various relationship management strategies (e.g., O'Neil, 2014; Shin et al., 2015). Yet, the studies reveal unused potential (e.g., Kim, Kim et al., 2014; Waters et al., 2009) and they neglect long-term developments. This leads to the following research question:

RQ2: To what extent have the examined companies implemented interactive features for transparent communication on Facebook over time?

2.2.3. Informal communication

Communicating in an authentic and personal way nurtures the relationship between an organization and its publics (Men & Tsai, 2014). Generally, conversational human voice and relational commitment are considered as key strategies for cultivating online relationships (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kelleher, 2009; Men & Tsai, 2015; Sung & Kim, 2014). The former refers to "an engaging and natural style of organizational communication as perceived by an organization's publics based on interactions between individuals in the organization and individuals in publics" (Kelleher, 2009, p. 177), while the latter indicates "a type of content of communication in which members of an organization work to express their commitment to building and maintaining a relationship" (Kelleher, 2009, p. 176).

Since Facebook has become an essential platform for interpersonal communication, publics expect communication with organizations to be authentic and conversational (Sung & Kim, 2014; Vorvoreanu, 2009). On Facebook pages (functional level), organizations can express their willingness to engage in conversations by introducing the communication team. Moreover, they can personalize their posts and comments as well as use informal and authentic language (contingency level). Although positive relational outcomes are associated with these features (Kelleher, 2009; Sung & Kim, 2014), previous research highlights that many organizations fail to adapt their communication and rather use Facebook as a one-way promotional platform (Kim, Hong et al., 2014; Sung & Kim, 2014).

Unlike transparent and dialogic communication, there is no established umbrella term or overarching paradigm in PR research which unifies the different features and techniques to communicate with users in an authentic and conversational style. In this context, marketing scholars have used general expressions such as "brand's tone of voice" (Barcelos, Dantas, & Sénécal, 2018, p. 61) or—more specific—"informal communication style" (Gretry, Horváth, Belei, & van Riel, 2017, p. 77). Leaning on the conceptual understanding of linguistics, the latter can be defined as the "use of language that is common, non-official, familiar, casual, and often colloquial, and contrasts in these senses with formal" (McArthur, 1992, p. 516). Therefore, in the context of Facebook, this article proposes to subsume authenticity, conversational voice, and relational commitment under the term *informal communication*. With the aim of analyzing its long-term implementation by leading companies in Germany, the following research question is posed:

RQ3: To what extent have the examined companies implemented

interactive features for informal communication on Facebook over time?

2.3. Relational outcomes

Relational outcomes mainly refer to trust, satisfaction, control mutuality, and commitment (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001). As these sub-dimensions are "germane constructs in measuring relationships" (Huang, 2001, p. 85), they have often been applied in surveys and experimental designs to assess the effectiveness of online relationship management (DiStaso & Bortree, 2012; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kelleher, 2009; Ki & Hon, 2009; Sisson, 2017). Content analyses, however, have often ignored relational outcomes and focused solely on quantitative output measures such as numbers of likes, shares, and comments (Kim, Kim et al., 2014; Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; O'Neil, 2014; Shin et al., 2015). Although these quantitative measures are suitable indicators for measuring mediated social interaction and the strength of relationship ties (Hall, 2018), they mainly relate to functional interactivity in reflecting the implementation of different social media features (Avidar, 2013). Relational outcomes with special regard to contingency interactivity have largely been neglected. However, since contingency interactivity "may be a key strategy in online communication leading to positive relational outcomes" (Kelleher, 2009, p. 175), this article focuses on both the output and the outcome level from a longitudinal point of view.

While the output level encompasses the numbers of likes, shares, and comments (Hall, 2018), the outcome level can be assessed by integrating valence as a key indicator for the intimacy of online relationships (e.g., Orben & Dunbar, 2017; Park, Jin, & Jin, 2011). Valence can be understood as a form of self-disclosure indicating "to what extent the information shared is positive, neutral or negative" (Orben & Dunbar, 2017, p. 490). Only a few studies have dealt with valence in the context of corporate relationship management—especially from a contingency point of view (Abitbol & Lee, 2017; Colleoni, 2013): "[W]hat is missing from the existing research is a theory-based method to make connections between the community, interactivity, dialogue strategies, and the size and valence of proactive engagement" (Wang, Qiao, & Peng, 2015, p. 198). Studies taking valence into account indicate that a positive valence in posts and comments leads to positive behavioral intentions, thus emphasizing the relevance of a sustainable conversation climate (Clemons, Gao, & Hitt, 2006; Park, Lee, & Han, 2007; Rains & Brunner, 2015; Wang et al., 2015).

Besides relational outputs of user interaction such as the number of likes, shares, and comments (functional level), this article considers the valence of user posts and comments (contingency level) as an indicator for the outcome of the interaction between companies and users. Based on the previous assumptions, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ4a: What is the relation between relationship management strategies (dialogic communication, transparent communication, and informal communication) and the output of user interaction?

RQ4b: What is the relation between relationship management strategies (dialogic communication, transparent communication, and informal communication) and the outcome of user interaction?

3. Method

Based on the state of research, it is assumed that *dialogic communication, transparent communication,* and *informal communication* are major strategies for organizations to build and maintain sustainable relationships with their publics on social media. To answer the research questions, we conducted three content analyses of the official Facebook pages of leading companies in Germany in 2012, 2015, and 2018. Facebook has offered the possibility for companies to use corporate pages since November 2007 (Facebook, 2020). This new platform has enriched the opportunities for companies to reach relevant stakeholders. However, it must be taken into account that changes in communication

are related to major changes in a company's identity: "Until changes sink deeply into a company's culture, a process that can take five to ten years, new approaches are fragile and subject to regression" (Kotter, 1995, p. 66). The year 2012, five years after Facebook enabled corporate communication on the platform, should therefore serve as a starting point for assessing professionalization processes in the light of the proposed research questions. The equal gaps of three years between the individual analyses are expected to reveal insights into long-term developments, the investigation of which is strongly encouraged by PR scholars (Brunner & Smallwood, 2019; Kent, 2013; Uzunoğlu, Türkel, & Yaman Akyar, 2017)

3.1. Sample

The sample of this study consisted of leading companies in Germany ranked by the business journal *Manager Magazin*, these rankings being the German equivalent of the US Fortune 500 List. All official and active German Facebook pages of the listed companies were included (see Appendix Table A1 for the complete list of included companies). The content analyses followed a multilevel approach including all Facebook pages ($N_{2012} = 70$; $N_{2015} = 99$; $N_{2018} = 101$), a random sample of up to 50 posts per company posted in the examined years ($n_{2012} = 3500$; $n_{2015} = 4752$; $n_{2018} = 4949$), and a random sample of up to 50 user posts on each page ($n_{2012} = 2882$; $n_{2015} = 3736$; $n_{2018} = 3343$). In addition, up to ten randomly selected user comments on each company post were incorporated ($n_{2012} = 18698$; $n_{2015} = 23303$; $n_{2018} = 25172$). In the second and third wave, up to ten randomly selected company and user answers to the selected user comments were also included ($n_{2012} = $ n/a, $n_{2015} = 21838$; $n_{2018} = 36804$). This feature was not yet available on Facebook in 2012. We collected and archived the data using the data retrieval tool *Facepager* (Jünger & Keyling, 2018) and further processed the datasets with *SPSS*.

3.2. Coding procedure

Trained undergraduate communications students coded the sample as part of seminars on corporate communications in social media. They had participated in approximately five hours of training before a pretest was conducted to assess coding quality. More specific training and more precise coding instructions resulted from this pretest. Finally, a satisfactory coding quality could be ensured for the main analyses. The coders reached excellent scores (Krippendorf's $\alpha > .90$) for functional interactivity features, for example availability of email addresses, website links, or company and user reactions. Good coding quality (Krippendorf's $\alpha > .80$) was achieved for contingency interactivity features such as calls for participation, various indicators on the post level, or assessment of the informal communication. User post valence was coded with acceptable quality (Krippendorf's $\alpha = .77$).

3.3. Measures

To measure adoption of the strategies, indicators were derived from previous research. If necessary, the indicators were adjusted to Facebook and its features for companies to interact with their publics. They were collected on different levels of analysis representing functional and contingency interactivity features: Facebook pages (main page and all subpages such as the 'About' or 'Notes' page), company posts, user posts, and comments on posts. We coded the measures dichotomously and then aggregated them for the single corporate pages. Finally, a benchmark index for each strategy was calculated to ensure long-term comparability.

As indicators for *dialogic communication* (e.g., DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2018), it was measured on the page level whether the companies offered the functional possibility for user posts (UP), presented an specific email address (EA) and a telephone number (TN) (each with a weight of 1 point). The share of company

		2012*					2015**					2018***				
		post	page				post	page				post	page			
			not available 0 pt.	available 1 pt.				not available 0 pt.	available 1 pt.				not available 0 pt.	available 1 pt.		
user posts (UP)	n		10	60				14	85				18	83		
	%		14.3	85.7				14.1	85.9				17.8	82.2		
email address (EA)	n		53	17				98	1				101	0		
	%		75.7	24.3				99.0	1.0				100.0	0.0		
phone number (PN)	n		23	47				12	87				14	87		
	%		23.9	67.1				12.1	87.9				13.9	86.1		
			<25% 0 pt.	25-50% 1 pt.	50-75% 2 pt.	>75% 3 pt.		<25% 0 pt.	25-50% 1 pt.	50-75% 2 pt.	>75% 3 pt.		<25% 0 pt.	25-50% 1 pt.	50-75% 2 pt.	>75% 3 pt.
call-to-action (CA)	n	766	39	38	3	0	661	78	20	1	0	1462	39	54	7	1
	%	21.9	55.7	40.0	4.3	0.0	13.9	78.8	20.2	1.0	0.0	29.5	38.6	53.5	6.9	1.0
company reaction to user comment (CRUC)	n	862	36	29	5	0	1673	52	18	15	14	2106	40	19	24	18
	%	24.6	51.4	41.4	7.1	0.0	35.2	52.5	10.2	15.2	14.1	42.6	39.6	18.8	23.8	17.8
company reaction to user post (CRUP)	n	1243	27	21	13	9	2506	24	19	17	39	2437	32	12	19	38
	%	43.1	38.6	30.0	18.6	12.8	67.1	24.2	19.2	17.2	39.4	31.7	11.9	18.8	18.8	37.6

* pages $N = 70$; company posts $n = 3500$; comments to company posts $n = 18698$; answers to comments $n = $ n/a; user posts $n = 2882$

** pages $N = 99$; company posts $n = 4752$; comments to company posts $n = 23303$; answers to comments $n = 21838$; user posts $n = 3736$

*** pages $N = 101$; company posts $n = 4949$; comments to company posts $n = 25172$; answers to comments $n = 36804$; user posts $n = 3343$

index dialogic communication DC = UP + EA + PN + CA + CRUP + CRUC

posts calling for participation (CFP) was converted into a 4-point-scale (0–3). If the companies called for participation in 0–25 percent of their posts 0 points were assigned; 1 point represented a share of 25–50 percent; 2 points were achieved if 50–75 percent of the posts contained a call for participation; and companies with a share of 75–100 percent received 3 points. Similarly, the share of company reactions to user posts (CRUP) and user comments (CRUC) was calculated. Hence, the index for dialogic communication (DC) ranged from 0 points to a maximum of 12 points, considering the higher impact of contingency features (Kelleher, 2009) (DC = UP + EA + TN + CFP + CRUP + CRUC).

The extent of *transparent communication* was operationalized by the following categories (e.g., O'Neil, 2014; Shin et al., 2015): website link (WL), company description (CD), company history (CH), corporate structure (CST), business data (BD), trading and sales (TS), and corporate sectors (CS). Two points were added to the index score for each piece of information permanently presented on the general and static Facebook page (functional level). One point was added for the temporary disclosure of these different kinds of information in company posts addressing the users (contingency level). Consequently, the companies could receive a maximum transparent communication (TC) score of 21 points considering a higher weight for permanently available information on the functional level (TC = WL + CD + CH + CST + BD + TS + CS).

As indicators for *informal communication,* it was coded whether the companies personalized their communication (e.g., McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2013) and oriented their conversational tone towards the users (e.g., Kelleher, 2009; Sung & Kim, 2014). In total, 3 points could be achieved. On the functional level, 1 point was added to the index when the companies introduced their communication teams on their static Facebook pages (CT). On the contingency level, the share of company posts with a personal author (PA) was measured on a 3-point-scale (0–2). 0 points were assigned if a personal author was apparent in 0–33 percent of the posts, 1 point was added to the index if 33–66 percent of the posts were personally authored, and two points were added if 66–100 percent had a personal author. Moreover, the shares of both authentic (non-promotional, individual statements) (AL) and informal language (human voice, oriented towards spoken language, use of colloquial expressions, emojis etc.) (IL) were rated on a 4-point-scale (0–3). As before, 0 points were assigned if the indicators were present in 0–25 percent of the posts, 1 point added for 25–50 percent, and 2 points were achieved for a share of 50–75 percent. If the indicators were used in 75–100 percent of the posts 3 points were added to the index. The index for informal communication (IC) could therefore reach a maximum of 9 points (IC = CT + PA + AL + IL).

Regarding relational outcomes, the output of user interaction was based on the number of likes as an indicator for the posts' popularity, the number of shares as an indicator for the posts' virality, and the number of user comments and user posts indicating the users' commitment (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2018). Greater weight was attributed to sophisticated forms of interaction such as sharing (double), commenting (fourfold) or posting (sixfold). The different weights are applied as sharing, commenting, and posting demand increasing levels of commitment as users share opinions on their (dis) agreement with the companies' content (Kabadayi & Price, 2014, p. 207). Together they were collated into an interaction index (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2018).

The interaction outcome was measured by the valence of user posts and comments. Valence is conceptualized as the sum of evaluative core statements towards the companies in the posts indicating online relationship intimacy (e.g., Orben & Dunbar, 2017; Park et al., 2011). It was measured on a three-point-scale from −1 (negative) to 0 (neutral/balanced) to +1 (positive). Following Kleinnijenhuis, de Ridder, and Rietberg (1997) as well as Willemsen, Neijens, Bronner, and de Ridder (2011), positive valence was present if the majority of the core statements in a post rated a company, its representatives, products, or services as good, important, competent, etc. (e.g., 'I think the design of the new model is very beautiful.'; 'Thank you for your quick response and the great service.'). In contrast, negative valence was present if the core statements were predominantly critical, pejorative, assaulting, etc. (e.g., 'It is not acceptable that no one responds to my complaint.'; 'I doubt that the CEO is able to lead the company.'). Neutral was coded if there was no positive or negative core statement (e.g., 'Can you tell me where I can find information on your opening hours?'). This also included posts in which users tagged each other without further comments.

4. Results

In the following sections, the results of the research into each strategy will be introduced by comparing the aggregated usage of functional and contingency interactivity features based on all examined companies. Regarding the functional level, in the sense of an interface's capacity for informational exchange (Sundar et al., 2003), the presence of the specific indicators will be examined on the company's static Facebook pages (e.g., About section). Leaning on Sundar et al. (2003), contingency interactivity encompasses specific features which allow companies to directly exchange information with users, i.e., their posts which are directed at the users will be at the center of the analysis.

Table 2
Distribution of the indicators for transparent communication.

		2012*			2015**			2018***		
		post	page		post	page		post	page	
			not available 0 pt.	available 2 pt.		not available 0 pt.	available 2 pt.		not available 0 pt.	available 2 pt.
website link (WL)	n		1	69		2	97		1	100
	%		1.4	98.6		2.0	98.0		1.0	99.0
company description (CD)	n		29	41		35	64		35	66
	%		41.4	58.6		35.4	64.6		34.7	65.3
company history (CH)	n		12	58		8	91		8	93
	%		17.1	82.9		8.1	91.9		7.9	92.1
company structure (CST)	n		46	24		35	64		63	38
	%		65.7	34.3		35.4	64.6		62.4	37.6
business data (BD)	n		55	15		68	31		87	14
	%		78.6	21.4		68.7	31.3		86.1	13.9
trading and sales (TS)	n		41	29		49	50		54	47
	%		58.6	41.4		49.5	50.5		53.3	46.5
company sectors (CSE)	n		33	37		37	62		50	51
	%		47.1	52.9		37.4	62.6		49.5	50.5
		one company post per page (1 pt.)			one company post per page (1 pt.)			one company post per page (1 pt.)		
company description (CD)	n	109	40		98	34		63	31	
	%	3.1	57.1		2.1	34.3		1.3	30.7	
company history (CH)	n	33	21		81	30		134	50	
	%	0.9	30.0		1.7	30.3		2.7	49.5	
company structure (CST)	n	36	21		32	18		179	36	
	%	1.0	30.0		0.7	18.2		3.6	35.6	
business data (BD)	n	26	19		55	25		56	22	
	%	0.7	27.1		1.2	25.3		1.1	21.8	
trading and sales (TS)	n	42	15		14	7		184	40	
	%	1.2	21.5		0.3	7.1		3.7	39.6	
company sectors (CSE)	n	21	11		39	19		209	41	
	%	0.6	15.7		0.8	19.2		4.2	40.6	

* pages $N = 70$; company posts $n = 3500$; comments to company posts $n = 18698$; answers to comments $n =$ n/a; user posts $n = 2882$
** pages $N = 99$; company posts $n = 4752$; comments to company posts $n = 23303$; answers to comments $n = 21838$; user posts $n = 3736$
*** pages $N = 101$; company posts $n = 4949$; comments to company posts $n = 25172$; answers to comments $n = 36804$; user posts $n = 3343$
index transparent communication TC = WL + CD + CH + CST + BD + TS + CSE

Friedman's ANOVA will be used to evaluate long-term developments over the investigation periods of 2012, 2015 and 2018. In the longitudinal analysis, only those companies that are present in all three conditions will be included (Field, 2018). The relationship of the strategies to relational outcomes will be examined by applying Spearman's rank correlation analysis.

4.1. RQ1: dialogic communication

The first research question (RQ1) refers to the extent to which the examined companies have implemented interactive features for dialogic communication on Facebook (see Table 1). Most companies offered the possibility for users to write posts on their timeline. However, the number has declined slightly. This might be explained by major design changes on Facebook excluding user posts from the timeline to a separate community tab on the page. While nearly a quarter of the companies provided a specific service email address in 2012 (e.g., john.doe@company.de), only one company offered this feature in 2015, and by 2018 all companies offered general company email addresses instead (e.g., info@company.de). The decline might again be explained by changes on Facebook, which introduced the page message feature for companies in 2015 (Facebook, 2015), thus making it unnecessary to shift the communication off the platform. Nevertheless, 67 percent of the companies in 2012, 88 percent in 2015, and 86 percent in 2018 provided the possibility to contact them by telephone. The observations regarding these functional interactivity features might indicate Facebook taking an increasing role as a platform for the dialogic interaction between organizations and their publics.

This assumption is confirmed on the contingency level. Apart from an interruption in 2015, companies in 2018 called more for action and participation than ever before. Furthermore, they significantly extended their response frequency to user comments and user posts. In light of the constantly growing number of user comments and posts, these findings

could indicate a professionalized community management.

The calculated index ultimately confirms that dialogic communication has become increasingly important for the examined companies ($M_{2012} = 3.71$, $SD_{2012} = 1.90$; $M_{2015} = 4.81$, $SD_{2015} = 2.22$; $M_{2018} = 5.36$, $SD_{2018} = 2.41$; $\chi^2(2) = 23.54$, $p < .000$, $n = 59$). Yet, the overall results remain on an average level and indicate unused potential in terms of dialogic communication efforts. With a maximum of twelve points on the scale, there are still considerable possibilities for companies to increase the application for dialogic communication of interactive features provided by Facebook.

4.2. RQ2: transparent communication

While all indicators for transparent communication (RQ2) on the functional level were equally or more pronounced in 2015 than at the beginning of the investigation period, the numbers decreased slightly in 2018 (see Table 2). Compared to the results for dialogic communication, however, functional features for transparent communication are more pronounced. This clearly indicates that the companies have been using Facebook's page features from the beginning to disclose organizational information and to foster transparency.

This observation does not fully apply to contingency features on the company post level. Here, the share of company posts that contain disclosing data about the companies has been examined. Although companies constantly disclosed more and more information about their history and the company sectors, company descriptions are progressively disappearing from the posts that are addressed to users. As most companies have established their presence on Facebook by now, some of this basic information might have become obsolete—especially on the company post level. Besides, companies seem to experiment with the disclosure of other information, such as business and trading data as well as information about the corporate structure, as there are no linear developments in the examined data.

Table 3
Distribution of the indicators for informal communication.

		2012*					2015**					2018***				
		post	page				post	page				post	page			
			not available 0 pt.	*available 1 pt.*				*not available 0 pt.*	*available 1 pt.*				*not available 0 pt.*	*available 1 pt.*		
communication team (CT)	n		49	21				53	17				88	13		
	%		**70.0**	**30.0**				**82.8**	**17.2**				**87.1**	**12.9**		
			<33% 0 pt.	*33-66% 1 pt.*	*>66% 2 pt.*			*<33% 0 pt.*	*33-66% 1 pt.*	*>66% 2 pt.*			*<33% 0 pt.*	*33-66% 1 pt.*	*>66% 2 pt.*	
personal author (PA)	n	382	60	4	6		299	93	0	6		92	99	0	2	
	%	10.9	**85.7**	**5.7**	**8.6**		6.3	**93.9**	**0.0**	**6.1**		1.9	**98.0**	**0.0**	**2.0**	
			<25% 0 pt.	*25-50% 1 pt.*	*50-75% 2 pt.*	*>75% 3 pt.*		*<25% 0 pt.*	*25-50% 1 pt.*	*50-75% 2 pt.*	*>75% 3 pt.*		*<25% 0 pt.*	*25-50% 1 pt.*	*50-75% 2 pt.*	*>75% 3 pt.*
authentic language (AL)	n	2521	4	11	20	35	2864	22	14	16	47	3761	1	16	20	64
	%	72.0	**5.7**	**15.7**	**28.6**	**50.0**	60.3	**22.2**	**14.1**	**16.2**	**47.5**	76.0	**1.0**	**15.8**	**19.8**	**63.4**
informal language (IL)	n	2389	13	8	8	41	2788	29	10	12	48	3308	15	16	16	54
	%	68.3	**18.6**	**11.4**	**11.4**	**58.6**	58.7	**29.3**	**10.1**	**12.1**	**48.5**	66.8	**14.9**	**15.8**	**15.8**	**53.5**

* pages $N = 70$; company posts $n = 3500$; comments to company posts $n = 18698$; answers to comments $n = $ n/a; user posts $n = 2882$
** pages $N = 99$; company posts $n = 4752$; comments to company posts $n = 23303$; answers to comments $n = 21838$; user posts $n = 3736$
*** pages $N = 101$; company posts $n = 4949$; comments to company posts $n = 25172$; answers to comments $n = 36804$; user posts $n = 3343$
index informal communication IC = CT + PA + AL + IL

Table 4
Correlations between relationship management strategies and user interaction.

		number of followers	user interaction	valence in user posts	valence in user comments
2012					
dialogic communication	r_{sp}	**.371****	**.384****	**−.269***	−.036
	sig. (2-tailed)	**.002**	**.001**	**.038**	.779
transparent communication	r_{sp}	**−.290***	−.222	−.128	.189
	sig. (2-tailed)	**.015**	.065	.329	.134
informal communication	r_{sp}	−.001	−.051	−.033	−.060
	sig. (2-tailed)	.996	.675	.803	.637
2015					
dialogic communication	r_{sp}	**.396*****	**.571*****	**−.257***	**−.238***
	sig. (2-tailed)	**.000**	**.000**	**.018**	**.018**
transparent communication	r_{sp}	**−.346*****	**−.281****	−.183	−.064
	sig. (2-tailed)	**.000**	**.005**	.094	.527
informal communication	r_{sp}	**.245****	**.231***	−.035	**−.206***
	sig. (2-tailed)	**.015**	**.021**	.751	**.041**
2018					
dialogic communication	r_{sp}	**.377*****	**.533*****	−.202	**−.205***
	sig. (2-tailed)	**.000**	**.000**	.069	**.040**
transparent communication	r_{sp}	**−.398*****	**−.414*****	.189	.176
	sig. (2-tailed)	**.000**	**.000**	.088	.079
informal communication	r_{sp}	.032	.188	−.175	.092
	sig. (2-tailed)	.751	.060	.117	.358

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

In consequence, the index for transparent communication remains on an average level with a small peak in 2015 ($M_{2012} = 9.66, SD_{2012} = 3.07; M_{2015} = 10.36, SD_{2015} = 3.25; M_{2018} = 9.75, SD_{2018} = 2.92; \chi^2(2) = 3.02, p = .22, n = 59$). However, companies seem to exploit their Facebook presence more for transparency reasons than for dialogic communication. Again, there is untapped potential for the companies in transparent communication, especially on the contingency level.

4.3. RQ3: informal communication

While the above strategies were more pronounced in 2015 than in 2012, informal communication (RQ3) was less noticeable (see Table 3). In 2018, however, the examined companies returned to adapting their communication style, albeit on a different interactivity level. Though 30 percent of the companies introduced their communicators on their Facebook pages in 2012, only 17 percent of the companies integrated similar information in 2015, and three years later this had dropped to 13 percent. The same effect can be observed for the share of personalized company posts on the contingency level. Companies in 2018 only rarely disclosed the personal authors of single posts.

The shares of posts using authentic and informal human voice, however, rebounded in 2018. Companies seem to have tried different conversational approaches on the contingency level over recent years. One must remember that Facebook has not only become a platform for managing relationships but also for promoting products and services. Although both goals are deeply anchored in the companies' strategic social media communication, the results indicate that there might have been a new shift on Facebook towards a user-oriented conversational tone.

Consequently, the index for informal communication has recovered after a dip of almost one point on the scale in 2015 ($M_{2012} = 4.90, SD_{2012} = 2.08; M_{2015} = 3.97, SD_{2015} = 2.09; M_{2018} = 4.63, SD_{2018} = 1.26; \chi^2(2) = 5.28, p = .07, n = 59$). Overall, it remains on an average level.

4.4. RQ4: relational outcomes

A further research question concerned the relation between the particular relationship management strategies and the output (RQ4a) of

user interaction (see Table 4). For 2012, the analysis indicates a positive correlation between dialogic communication and the number of Facebook followers ($r_{2012} = .371$, $p_{2012} = .002$) as well as the user interaction index ($r_{2012} = .384$, $p_{2012} = .001$). These findings can be confirmed in 2015 and 2018 for the number of followers ($r_{2015} = .396$, $p_{2015} < .000$; $r_{2018} = .377$, $p_{2018} < .000$) and for the extent of user interaction ($r_{2015} = .571$, $p_{2015} < .000$; $r_{2015} = .533$, $p_{2015} < .000$).

A constant negative correlation can be observed concerning the interdependence between the number of followers and transparent communication ($r_{2012} = -.290$, $p_{2012} = .015$; $r_{2015} = -.346$, $p_{2015} < .000$; $r_{2018} = -.398$, $p_{2018} < .000$). As the data reveal, this strategy tended to be used by companies with a lower number of followers. Consequently, there is a genuinely reduced user activity compared to more known Facebook pages. That a lower number of likes indeed leads to a decreased level of user interaction or vice versa could only be assumed in the 2012 data ($r_{2012} = -.222$, $p_{2012} = .065$). However, this observation becomes significant in 2015 ($r_{2015} = -.281$, $p_{2015} = .005$) and 2018 ($r_{2018} = -.414$, $p_{2018} < .000$).

Informal communication is only positively related to the number of followers in 2015 ($r_{2015} = .245$, $p_{2015} = .015$), where there is also a positive correlation to the intensity of user interaction ($r_{2015} = .231$, $p_{2015} = .021$). The absence of this finding in the earlier and most recent data might be explained by differing and competing goals of the companies' strategic communication efforts on Facebook. Moreover, previous results have shown that the index for informal communication did not develop constantly. The official pages, however, gained further popularity throughout the investigation period, so other variables might explain the relation between informal communication tendencies and the number of followers.

This study not only considers the relational output of relationship building strategies but also their outcome (RQ4b) (see Table 4). In 2012 ($r_{2012} = -.269$, $p_{2012} = .038$) as well as in 2015 ($r_{2015} = -.257$, $p_{2015} = .018$) there are significant negative correlations between dialogic communication and the valence in user posts. The more recent data from 2015 and 2018 confirm this finding for the relation between dialogic communication and the valence in user comments ($r_{2015} = -.238$, $p_{2015} = .018$; $r_{2018} = -.205$, $p_{2018} = .040$). Other correlations could not be observed. The results therefore suggest that dialogic communication is a common tactic to respond to critical user posts and comments.

5. Discussion and implications

Previous studies on OPRs in social media have been based primarily on relational and dialogic models of corporate communication (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). Relying on traditional principles and strategies, they often conclude that companies fail to exploit social media's potential for building and maintaining relationships (e.g., Bortree & Seltzer, 2009, Men & Tsai, 2012; Waters et al., 2009). These findings might be questionable, as scholars have not fully considered the inherent interactivity of modern social media platforms. The concept of *dialogue* is a striking example of the insufficient application of predominantly symmetrical communication procedures in social media environments (Kent & Lane, 2017; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). With regard to overall theoretical implications, this article suggests shifting the conceptual focus from traditional principles to interactive strategies. Based on functional and contingency features (Sundar et al., 2003), this study shows that the proposed conceptualization is suited to the analysis of interactive relationship management strategies in social media environments such as Facebook.

The longitudinal character of this study, with analyses in 2012, 2015, and 2018, further extends the body of knowledge on OPRs in social media by addressing a substantial research gap (Ihlen & Levenshus, 2017; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998; McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014). The analysis of three different stages of corporate social media communication on Facebook reveals that the examined companies have particularly improved their dialogic communication efforts (RQ1). In view of

the fast-developing social media landscape and changing user expectations towards conversations and engagement with companies (Hidayanti, Herman, & Farida, 2018; Melancon & Dalakas, 2017), the findings indicate a growing professionalization of dialogic communication on Facebook. The results therefore relativize most pessimistic findings of previous studies (e.g., DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013; Shin et al., 2015), although it cannot be denied that there is still potential for companies to exploit Facebook's functional and contingency features for dialogic communication. Compared to the maximum score of 12 points, the index values still range on an average level. This also explains why previous studies repeatedly criticized unused potential (e.g., Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2018; Wang & Waters, 2012; Yue, Thelen, Robinson, & Men, 2019). However, the question arises whether companies really need to react to every single user post and comment. From a strategic point of view, they should at least react to those messages which contain reputational risks. In this context, the results of RQ4b provide first insights that dialogic communication might be a reactive strategy to confront negative user posts and comments. The findings from previous research that a positive communication climate leads to favorable user behavior (e.g., Park et al., 2007; Rains & Brunner, 2015; Wang et al., 2015), might therefore be a driving force for dialogic communication efforts on Facebook.

The long-term observation of the companies' transparent (RQ2) and informal communication (RQ3) reveals diametrically opposed developments. Empirical evidence suggests that the examined companies have been trying different tactics on the functional and the contingency levels in recent years. As Facebook's history as a space for interpersonal communication still shapes user behavior (Sung & Kim, 2014; Vorvoreanu, 2009), the findings indicate that companies use the platform not only for managing OPRs but also for persuasive purposes such as promoting products and services (Theunissen, 2015). Although they might not yet have found the right implementation of these strategies, the recent decrease in transparent communication and the concurrent growth of informal communication might indicate a recent shift towards a more adapted communication between organizations and publics. The positive development in dialogic communication efforts supports this assumption. Overall, simple facts like business data or corporate structure no longer seem to fit to the modern interactive communication environment Facebook represents today. The long-term developments demonstrate that corporate communication on Facebook is in a process of transforming from a simple "outlet for disseminating information" (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2013, p. 10) to a place for dialogic and informal communication between companies and their publics.

Within the examined strategies, dialogic communication is not just the only strategy with constant growth but also the strategy with the most constant and effective relational outcomes (RQ4). Focusing on relational outputs and outcomes, the long-term analysis revealed constantly positive relations between dialogic communication and both the number of followers and the extent of user interaction. The study therefore provides empirical evidence that interactive communication strategies are indeed a precondition for user engagement and relationship building (Kelleher, 2009; Men & Tsai, 2015; Sung & Kim, 2014). Specifically with regard to the outcome level, the findings illustrate that companies are more likely to react to critical user comments. Previous research on corporate communication on Facebook has shown that companies largely missed the opportunity to react to negative comments by censoring and ignoring them (Dekay, 2012). Here again, the current article suggests a revised view on the state of corporate social media communication as companies seem rather to respond in a targeted manner to the users' problems and concerns. This might support the assumption that they have incorporated interactive communication as a pragmatic way to manage relationships with relevant stakeholders (Lane, 2014; Lillqvist & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013).

By examining leading companies in Germany, the aim was to add a different international perspective to a body of research that is dominated by studies of Anglo-American markets. Although the present study

provides a more holistic understanding of interactive communication strategies in the context of OPRs, the main results point principally in a similar direction to previous studies. This has two implications. Firstly, from a theoretical point of view, previous findings are widely validated through the current study. This leads, secondly, to the assumption that corporate communication is increasingly converging due to the dominant role of social media platforms such as Facebook. These platforms provide homogenous infrastructures regardless of cultural, local, or societal market characteristics. The question arises how these top-down mechanisms affect companies' efforts to stay competitive in a communication world that is not only globalizing but also converging technically.

The overall results illustrate that the examined companies have professionalized their communication on Facebook within the investigation period, with dialogic communication in particular playing a key role in their engagement with publics. Nevertheless, they are still not considering the full potential of the platform. From a practical and pragmatic point of view, there might be different reasons for this. On the one hand, limited resources or a lack of specific training might be crucial obstacles (Kent & Taylor, 2002; McAllister, 2012). Companies therefore should be aware of the core requirements for effective social media management before including it in their corporate strategy. On the other hand, the question should be what it really means to exploit the full potential of a platform such as Facebook. It is not necessary to react to every user post out there. In fact, companies need routines to identify crucial influencers and hotspots for relational risks and mechanisms to react in an adequate way.

6. Limitations and future research

Due to the research design, the study faces two major limitations. First, content analysis can neither give insights into the process of building relationships nor into intrapersonal effects. By operationalizing relationship management strategies from a PR perspective, this study does not consider other external factors influencing relational processes, such as existing brand images, corporate reputation, or the users' perspective. Future studies on OPRs in social media should therefore shed more light on the public's perspective. Second, this study cannot explain why companies implement certain relationship management strategies or why they change their application over the course of time. Considering the strategic communication perspective (Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, & Werder, 2018), further research is necessary to understand whether dialogic communication, transparent communication, and informal communication are used intentionally and strategically to manage relationships on social media.

7. Conclusions

As platforms such as Facebook offer more and more features for companies to interact with relevant publics, social media will play an increased role as integrated platforms and focal points for relationship management. Examining the long-term development of interactive relationship management strategies of leading companies in Germany, this study extends the existing body of research and contributes to a deeper understanding of ongoing professionalization processes in online PR. The results of this research provide empirical evidence for PR scholars and professionals that interactive communication on social media offers effective features for building and maintaining sustainable relationships.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1
Examined companies (with an official and active German corporate Facebook page).

company	wave 1 (2012)	wave 2 (2015)	wave 3 (2018)
ABB	X	X	X
Air Berlin	X	X	–
Allianz	X	X	X
Amazon	X	X	X
ARD	X	X	X
Audi	X	X	X
Aurubis	–	X	X
AXA	–	X	X
B. Braun Melsungen	–	X	X
Bahlsen	–	X	X
BASF	–	X	X
Bayer	–	X	X
Bertelsmann	X	X	X
Bilfinger	–	X	X
BMW	X	X	X
BP	–	X	X
BurgerKing	X	X	X
C&A	X	X	X
Citibank/Targobank	X	–	X
Coca Cola	–	X	X
Commerzbank	–	X	X
Continental	X	X	X
Deutsche Bahn	–	X	X
Deutsche Bank	X	X	X
Deutsche Börse	X	X	X
Deutsche Post	–	X	X
Deutsche Telekom	X	X	X
Douglas	X	X	X
Dr. Oetker	X	X	X
Easyjet	–	X	X
Ebay	X	X	X
Edeka	X	X	X
EnBW	X	X	X
E.ON	–	X	X
Ergo	X	X	X
Esprit	X	X	X
Evonik	X	X	X
Facebook	X	X	X
Fiat	X	X	X
Ford	X	X	X
Fraport	X	X	X
Fresenius	–	X	X
Fuchs Petrolub	–	X	X
GALERIA Kaufhof	X	X	X
General Electric	X	X	X
Generali	–	X	X
Gerry Weber	–	X	X
Google	–	X	X
Gruner + Jahr	–	X	X
H&M	–	X	X
Haribo	X	X	X
Heidelberger Druck	X	X	X
Henkel	–	X	X
Hewlett-Packard	X	X	–
Holtzbrink (Handelsblatt)	–	X	X
Honda	X	X	X
Hubert Burda Media	X	X	X
Hyundai	X	X	X
IBM	X	X	X
IKEA	–	X	X
ING Group	X	–	–
Intel	X	X	X

(continued on next page)

Table A1 (*continued*)

company	wave 1 (2012)	wave 2 (2015)	wave 3 (2018)
Jaguar	–	X	X
Kabel Deutschland	X	–	X
Karstadt	X	–	X
Lanxess	–	X	X
Lenovo	–	X	X
Lidl	X	X	X
L'Oreal	–	X	X
McDonald's	X	X	X
Merck	–	X	X
Metro	–	X	X
Microsoft	X	X	X
MTU Aero Engines	–	X	X
Nestlé	X	X	X
Nissan	X	X	X
Nokia	X	–	X
O2	X	X	X
Opel	X	X	X
Otto Group	X	–	X
Peek & Cloppenburg	X	X	X
Pepsi	X	–	X
Peugeot	X	X	X
Philips	–	X	X
Postbank	X	X	X
Procter & Gamble	–	X	–
Renault	X	X	X
Rewe	X	X	X
Ritter Sport	–	X	X
RWE	X	X	X
Samsung	–	X	X
SGL Carbon	–	X	X
Sixt	X	X	X
Sony	X	X	X
Sony Ericsson	X	–	–
Sparkassengruppe	X	X	X
Starbucks	X	X	X
Tchibo	X	X	X
Thomas Cook	X	X	X
Thyssen Krupp	–	X	X
Toyota	X	X	X
TUI	X	X	X
UniCredit	X	X	X
Vodafone	X	X	X
Volkswagen	X	X	X
ZDF	X	X	X
ZF Friedrichshafen	–	X	X

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