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JOURNAL OF

# CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR

## Unleashing corporate communications via social media: A UK study of brand management and conversations with customers

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**Abstract** This paper reports on a small-scale UK based study that explores the impact of social media adoption and use on corporate communications and brand image. The study was structured around an empirical research study including discourse and textual analysis, archival research on social media brand communications, interactions with customers, and a small-scale survey with social media managers. The authors draw upon Habermas' theory of communicative action (the ideal speech situation and discourse ethics) in the analysis. The paper concludes that while some companies and public organisations are beginning to understand the importance of 'real' conversations with customers, only a small number have adopted the 'human brand' approach. Even fewer appear to have strategised for the characteristics of social media communications. Limitations of the study and areas for further work are identified. In raising the contradictory challenges of the immediacy and conversational tone expected of social media communications versus the need to manage the brand image and to control corporate communications, this paper has great academic and practical significance.

**Keywords** Corporate communications, Social media, Brand management, Twitter, Habermas

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## INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the century, when online shopping was a new phenomenon, consumer groups believed that this new channel or ‘newconomy’ (van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009) would even out the power balance and potentially level the playing field, redistributing power between businesses and customers (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002). For many years this remained a myth (McLean, 2008). Websites were used as virtual static shop windows to deliver the corporate line. The only way to communicate with the company was via the ‘contact us’ menu and an email address. The response to an email was invariably from corporate scripts delivering the business line and rarely addressing the individual’s specific question or concern. The playing field did not level; the power balance did not change.

As review sites and forums began to evolve, customers started to gain some notion of power in sharing their views with other customers. However, this was often separated from the ‘official’ company website and could easily be ignored or dismissed as ‘a disgruntled customer’. Customers muttered amongst themselves online, if they had the ability to locate customer forums or review communities, but large companies took little notice and no action (Bailey, 2005). As new communication platforms developed, businesses became social and began to adopt social media such as blogs and Facebook into their corporate communications strategy. The relationship began to change (Argenti, 2011). Other studies have recognised the organisation’s effort to cultivate trust and harvest added value via virtual communities (Ngai, Tao, & Moon, 2015). Colliander and Dahlén (2011) contribute to this discussion with their study of brand publicity versus traditional digital media and found that blogs generate brand loyalty and increased sales. While this new platform of engagement with customers went some way towards changing the company-customer discourse, communication remained scripted and promotion centric and stopped short of any ‘real’ interaction with customers (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Fournier and Avery (2011, p. 3) make the observation that “*early attempts to crash the social media party were largely ignored and rebuffed. When marketers jury-rigged their television advertising and posted ads to YouTube and Facebook, consumers largely ignored them*”.

There have been power shifts away from the marketing machines of corporations as social media has enabled customers, communities and competitors to comment, to like, to share and to upload. Communications about products, brands and services now happen without the permission of the companies in question (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). The only certainty is that corporations need to respond and to manage the social media channel. Evidence suggests that there is a proliferation of new job roles in the management of social media for organisations (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). An on-going debate that social media managers should be under 25 years of age is currently (and very aptly) being played out across social media (Clay, 2012). However, one thing most companies agree on is that they need a social media manager who can respond to communications in a timely and engaging manner. In recent months, there have been notable cases of companies engaging with customers in amusing ‘real’ and unscripted conversations via Twitter. One example is Waterstones bookshop (@WstonesOxfordSt). This brand has amassed an impressive 69.1 K followers on Twitter (February, 2014) through the use of regular, amusing, and intelligent tweets that have an immediacy and relevance. If these tweets were delayed awaiting authorisation from above, they would lose the sense of a ‘tête-à-tête’.

WaterstonesOxfordSt@WstonesOxfordSt (2014, Feb 4). Re: Londoners. We've put together a small selection of books to help you through the HELL that is the tube strike [Twitter message]. Retrieved from <http://www.waterstones.com/blog/2014/02/tube-strike-reads/> ...

Through the company Twitter account, the brand takes on a character and style of communication previously unknown from large conglomerates. For the first time, there is a suggestion that corporate scripts are beginning to be discarded. This will be explored in more detail throughout this paper. To undertake a thorough analysis of this emerging behaviour, the paper has been structured as follows. Firstly, a review of the literature that surrounds this phenomenon is presented looking both at markets as conversations and social media brand management. The two phases of the research and the methodology adopted in each phase are outlined and the appropriateness of the methodology given. Finally, the findings of this study are presented and discussed with future research activities proposed.

## AIMS OF THE STUDY

For the first time, it appears that organisations are beginning to go 'off script' and have real conversations with customers, reminiscent of the marketplaces of the past (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2000). Through an analysis of corporate communications via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the authors critically analyse the evolution of business to customer interactions. Further, the profiles of social media managers and how much control or freedom they have to communicate with customers via social media are explored. The research seeks to extend understanding of how new channels of engagement impact on the relationship between businesses and customers. The contribution lies in describing how power and responsibility for corporate communications is becoming more devolved and unscripted, and in the analysis of how companies are planning and preparing for this. This study aims to explore the impact of social media on the corporate communications landscape. Drawing upon Foucault's (1980) power theory and Habermas' (1981, 1983) theory of communicative action (ideal speech situation and discourse ethics), the power dynamic of marketing communications inside and outside the twenty-first-century corporation is examined.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Markets as conversations*

With the development of the Internet, it was recognised that "*its immense growing popularity will revolutionize marketing practices such as advertising and promotion*" (Ioanas & Stoica, 2014, p. 296). However, it soon became apparent that consumers did not welcome continuous and invasive direct marketing messages or *spam*, and the gulf between what customers wanted and what companies provided increased. Corporate, scripted marketing messages are not enough to convince the customer of the value of online marketing. They merely perpetuate the myth of personalisation and enforce the boundaries and power relations between customers and companies. Kozinets (2002) describes this as a 'cultural battle' with companies seeking opportunities to

use the web to sell to ‘consumers’, and customers uniting online to exert social power and find ways of adopting new technologies in meaningful ways. Customers began to build communities, join customer forums and set up product review sites. They began communicating with each other, sharing experiences, amplifying the effects of word of mouth (WoM) marketing. A poor customer experience could now be immediately shared with others far and wide.

It is generally agreed that “*technology has its most profound effect when it alters the ways in which people come together and communicate*” (Kollock & Smith, 1999, p. 3), and that those who hold the power dominate the communication channels (Habermas, 1981a/1984; Zuboff, 1998). However, at the turn of the century, and with communications technology developing, it was acknowledged that although “*learning to speak in a human voice is not some trick, nor will corporations convince us they are human with lip service about ‘listening to customers’. They will only sound human when they empower real human beings to speak on their behalf*” (Levine et al., 2002, p. 4). This reinforces Searls and Weinberger’s (2001) early pioneering work, which recommends that companies adopt a ‘markets as conversations’ rather than ‘markets at targets’ approach. They argue that corporate voices sounded more like profit-driven machinery than real people engaged in a two-way conversation. This early work on human voices was echoed by Zinsser’s (2001) work encouraging corporations to start using plain talk when interacting with customers.

Over the years, consumer research has attempted to shake off the negative associations of the words ‘consumer’ and ‘consumption’, shifting the focus to a new informed and ‘savvy’ consumer interacting with, rather than consuming, products, and building up knowledge from their experiences. Hirschman and Holbrook (1986) and Woodruffe-Burton (2001) challenge the traditional approach to consumer research, arguing that consumption is not something that people “do to” products, but “*an interactive phenomena*” (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1986, pp.213-251) focusing on customers building their experiences of a product as they interact with it (Woodruffe-Burton, 2001). Further, Slevin suggests that the Internet “*empowers people to make things happen rather than have things happen to them*” (Slevin, 2000, p. 47). The combination of ‘new’ consumerism, ‘new’ knowledge, and the facilities offered by the Internet suggests the potential for consumers to ‘effect some new action’ or empower themselves. This paper argues that such empowerment has remained elusive until now. Recent adoption of social media channels and the new phenomena of the ‘human brand’ having ‘real’ unscripted conversations with customers (Malone & Fiske, 2013) opens up the potential for equity of power between organisations and customers. How companies adopt and manage social media will be key.

### ***Brand communities and social media***

It is acknowledged widely that social media has emerged as a game changer for commerce and repositions the customer back at the centre of the organisation. However, more importantly, social media has provided the tools to engage and encourage customers to connect with the brand (Aral, Dellarocas, & Godes, 2013; Jin, 2012; Smith & Zook, 2011). Unexpectedly, this radical overhaul of marketing in organisations shifts the once distinct set of marketing activities into a central strategic role in a rapidly changing marketplace and forces marketers into the boardroom (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009; Smith & Zook, 2011). Social media has presented organisations with the unique opportunity of directly connecting them to the end consumer, and to the customer journey, influencing consumer perceptions and

behaviour (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). Other benefits that make social media so attractive to organisations are the capacity of increased levels of efficiency compared to traditional communications channels, the ability to gather intelligence on digital footfall, and ultimately its immense popularity, indicated by Facebook recently claiming its 800 millionth member (Kaplan & Haenlein 2009; Laroche, Habibi, Richard, & Sankaranarayanan, 2012). Further, social media brings unparalleled access to data and customers via brand communities (i.e., fan pages, Twitter profiles, YouTube channels) that have emerged on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. A gauge for the significance of these brand communities is Coca-Cola's global 80 million plus Facebook fans, to Oreo's (the biscuit) 35 million fans (Socialbakers, 2014). Twitter brand communities (not profiles) are dominated by Starbucks (with almost 6 million followers) and Coca-Cola, having approximately 2.3 million followers (Socialbakers, 2014). It is worth noting that it was a 'fan' that initiated the first Coca-Cola Facebook fan page, gaining the first 14 million fans (Socialbakers, 2014). The issue of brand control was challenged when Facebook introduced a policy change regarding the ownership and management of fan/brand pages. Coca-Cola had little choice but to co-own and manage the page with the founding 'fan' or take the page down along with a huge fan base. They reluctantly agreed the shared ownership of the page (Fournier & Avery, 2011). There are complex and tenuous relationships between corporations and brand communities; are they managed by external stakeholders or in-house employees? What happens as these communities are constructed and cultivated into a popular brand community? Who owns the community and what happens when the brand community owner goes off corporate script? In 2010, McDonald's was forced to respond to the McRib sandwich Facebook fan community's antics with a public relations (PR) press release announcing, "*There is no connection between McDonald's and any of it's McRib lovers*", removing McDonald's from any legal responsibility but damaging to brand loyalty (Fournier and Avery, 2011). Goh, Heng and Lin (2012) argue that though there is a prevalence of research conducted upon consumers and marketers, minimal attention has been focussed upon the simultaneous engagement of consumers and marketers on social media, and there is a lack of understanding as to whether and how modes of interpersonal communications matter. This study aims to contribute to the understanding and to the academic literature on what is an increasingly complex and 'fuzzy' space of brands conversing directly with consumers. Given the observed power shift, the authors suggest that companies must develop strategies to engage with customers in a conversational, unscripted and timely manner, adopting a 'human brand' approach (Chahal, 2014).

### *Theoretical framework*

The next section introduces the theoretical framework adopted here, namely Habermas' theory of communicative action and discourse ethics (Habermas, 1981, 1983). A growing number of researchers have used a critical social theoretical lens to examine complex issues within the discipline of information systems (IS), especially focusing on the usage, behaviours and power relations associated with collaborative working systems, enterprise systems and email (Cukier, Middleton, & Bauer, 2003; Lee, 1994; Lyytinen & Klein, 1985; Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997; Waring & Wainwright, 2002). These studies have provided an important theoretical contribution in different IS application contexts whilst focusing mostly on an interpretation of Habermas' core work relating to a substantive theory of communicative action (Habermas,

1981a/1984, 1981b/1987, 1983). In most cases, this has been simplified into frameworks utilising the constructs of 'validity claims'. An interpretation by Cukier et al. (2003), based on the work of Forester (1983), uses a framework that comprises: truth (the propositional content is true or accurate); sincerity (the speaker is honest and means what (s)he says); clarity (what is said is intelligible and comprehensible); and legitimacy (what the speaker says is right or morally appropriate with regard to existing norms or values). Judgements on the degree to which a speech act or utterance meets these validity claims leads to a pragmatic utopian situation for communication termed by Habermas (1981) as an 'ideal speech situation'. Following criticism of the concept of the ideal speech situation, Habermas (1983) developed the concept into that of the 'new moral system' or 'discourse ethics' which is more obviously relevant here. Being closer to the ideal, where all parties in the discourse (whether individuals, groups, organisations, spheres of society or public bodies) can communicate fairly, justly and without fear of prejudice or domination, leads to a system that may be considered to be more rational and based on a reflection of norms, values and beliefs which are representative of the participants concerned, in the case of this study, corporate communications departments and customers.

## STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY: PHASE ONE AND PHASE TWO

This qualitative study was conducted in two phases. Phase one focused upon a discourse and visual analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002) of corporate interactions with customers via their social media presence. There was also a need to conduct an archival analysis and look back at historical communications that gained media traction. The study focused primarily on brands' Twitter accounts and YouTube channels, including an analysis of customer interactions and comments on these sites. Larger brands were a natural choice to investigate as they were more likely to have considered and adopted a digital marketing strategy supported by a dedicated social media team. Phase two adopted a small-scale survey with fifteen social media managers; the survey was exploratory in nature with the purpose of exploring social media managers' perspectives and opinions rather than aiming to collect statistical supporting data. This paper discusses the preliminary analysis of both phases of the research.

Phase one consisted of five corporate brand cases: McVities Jaffa Cakes, Tesco Mobile and Yorkshire Tea's interaction; SmartCar; Bodyform; Waterstones Manchester; and Surrey Police. These cases were selected as they have featured as newsworthy topics across different social media platforms and they are established, recognised brands with high numbers of followers. Further, they represent a range of organisations from manufacturers to retailers and public offices. In the research design, the authors considered that there was a need to 'get up close' to the social practices, the text and discursive interactions that could be observed on Twitter between brand and customers. A discourse and textual analysis approach was undertaken rather than digital ethnography as the authors recognised that they were only short-term visitors to the social networking sites. Phase one of the research was emergent and exploratory. The focus was upon the social networks and the use of language and accompanying images and videos which formed the manner of the interactions of the brands with customers (Silverman, 2013). The discourse and visual analysis of the data accumulated for the case studies was undertaken to make sense of the way that



discourse was constructed “*assemblages of words, repertoires and so on put together and stabilise versions of the world, of action and events...*” (Potter & Hepburn, 2008, p. 5). The analytic process was a slow one. The aim was to identify patterns and relationships in the conversations on social media that that would eventually reveal insights and/or discussion points. A manual approach to data analysis was adopted using traditional tools such as Google Docs, screenshot print-outs, colour coding, and then thematising the actual data to reveal any patterns. The authors have, like other academics before (Lotan et al., 2011), included social media platforms as part of the research design, in an attempt to extract any evidence of the selected corporate brands going off script. The authors acknowledge the on-going debate (Boyd & Crawford, 2012) with regard to the relevance (Twitter is not representative of all people) and ethical considerations (just because data is in the public domain does not mean the author has given informed consent) of this mode of acquiring data. However, the cases included in this study are from large corporations’ multi-channel marketing activities that are deliberately pushed into the public domain.

In phase two, the small-scale survey, the respondents were in-house and agency social media managers from a range of sectors including well-known high street retailers and public bodies. The survey was carried out online using snowball sampling, as those within the industry passed the link to colleagues (usually via Twitter). A snowball sampling technique was selected due to its ability to identify, via the initial subject, other appropriate respondents and contacts and so expanding the network of potential enquiry (Atkinson & Flint, 2004). A deliberate short lifespan for the survey was decided upon, to reflect the ephemeral nature of the social media conversations that the research attempted to capture. A reflection offered in conducting this phase of the research was that the survey tool proved ineffectual for accessing the data desired to gain deep insight into those individuals who are brand and communications managers. The reality was that many of the surveys were answered by social media managers who were not necessarily those who held the virtual conversations or those responsible for the tweets. Several respondents agreed to take part in follow-up interviews and it is anticipated that conversations with these respondents will allow a much deeper insight into the evolving phenomena of the human brand communication. This will inform the next stage of the research.

## ANALYSIS

Thematic analysis is reportedly the most commonly used method of analysis for qualitative research, and it is this technique that was adopted for this study. Given the small sample of data, an application such as Nvivo was decided against and the data was again coded manually, ensuring that complexities of meaning were captured effectively.

### *Survey analysis*

As indicated earlier, the response rate was relatively low (fifteen social media managers completed the survey), although participants indicated that they would be prepared to undertake follow-up interviews. Given this, the survey responses will be used to develop interview themes for future research and are not presented as generalisable, representative findings. The online survey collected qualitative and quantitative data. Free text responses offered an insight into the role and responsibilities of social media



managers and echoed the concept of the human brand, characters with words to say and complex stories to tell. Initial analysis shows that 60% of the participants were under 30 years old and had worked for their organisations for less than two years. The majority of participants claimed to have sole responsibility for the company's Facebook (91%), YouTube (64%) and Twitter accounts (82%); Participant 14 for example said "*Everything is done by me. Nothing needs to be approved unless it's a big campaign*", and Participant 9, "*I have full control over what is posted on all profiles*", with Participant 2 adding "*I am the primary person managing social media*". Though a small sample of insights from social media managers, all participants were in charge of the company's social media conversations, or were part of a team, with one participant being under twenty years of age. Participant 14 added "... *Nothing needs to be approved unless it's a big campaign. The only thing I leave to other people is any customer service related queries*". The distinction between customer service-related queries and 'everything else' is interesting. This participant reported her job title as 'social media specialist/manager', however engaging in conversations with customers about service-related queries was not deemed part of her remit. It could be argued that customer service queries held as public conversations require more attention to protect the brand. The adoption of the 'human brand' approach (Chahal, 2014), holding real conversations with customers, is a new way of interacting and demands a high level of skill. Although respondents reported that large campaigns were signed off at strategic level, there was evidence of consultation with peers, rather than managers on day-to-day communications where content may be less 'corporate', for proofreading, or to 'gauge opinion'.

These newly emerging channels, as evidenced in our research, are frequently the sole responsibility of single individuals or small teams and fall outside of any communication strategies.

### *Social media content analysis*

Phase one data suggested three themes: *brand-to-brand interaction*, *unscripted conversations* and *breaking of taboos*. Initial analysis showed an emergence of brand-to-brand interaction via social media. @TescoMobile, @YorkshireTea and @RealJaffaCakes' three way Twitter conversation involving customers attracted much publicity. Even public bodies such as police forces are beginning to engage in brand-to-brand conversations (e.g., Jaffa Cakes and Surrey Police, see <https://twitter.com/realjaffacakes/status/420863247533621248>). This format of corporate communication, the value added (or taken away) from identifying with another brand with such an element of immediacy and lack of corporate control is unprecedented.

The second theme (unscripted conversations) was very prevalent in the data. Examples include the @Johnlewisshare and @johnlewisbear tweets, the John Lewis #findfaith campaign pre-Christmas 2014 (is Faith real or a publicity campaign construct?), and the twitter conversation between Smart Car and a tweeter who noted "*saw a bird had crapped on a Smart Car. Totalled it*". This prompted an 'off script' conversation with @smartcarusa doing the calculations as to how many and what size of bird would be needed to really 'total' the Smart Car (see <http://mashable.com/2012/06/21/bird-poop-smartcar/>). This demonstrates the practice of having real entertaining conversations with customers, not just delivering a corporate script. Adopting a human voice becomes a very effective strategy for brand building and PR. However, unscripted social media conversations are not always positive for organisations. One high profile case was the HMV redundancies announcement

and subsequent blow by blow account on Twitter (see <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/jan/31/hmv-workers-twitter-feed-sacking>). The implication that the Marketing Director had lost control of corporate communications and didn't know how to close down the twitter account to prevent further tweets is significant. The company completely lost control. This wasn't just an 'off script' conversation, but a takeover by disgruntled employees. Organisations need to give consideration to the level of power those with access or control of the social media accounts are trusted with.

The third theme that emerged from the data, that of breaking taboos, is of great interest. For decades advertising and corporate communications have adhered to a code of shared understandings and representations that avoided reference to taboo subjects (Sabri, 2012). Analysis of social media messages in this research shows that organisations are deviating from that shared understanding in social media messages. A very interesting 'off script' and taboo breaking conversation that went viral was prompted by the challenge to Bodyform from Richard Neill via Facebook.

*As a child I watched your advertisements with interest as to how at this wonderful time of the month that the female gets to enjoy so many things, I felt a little jealous.*

*He remembered happy women bike riding and 'blue water and wings' from the Bodyform adverts of the 80s and 90s.*

*Then I got a girlfriend, was so happy and couldn't wait for this joyous adventurous time of the month to happen ..... you lied !!*

*There was no joy, no extreme sports, no blue water spilling over wings and no rocking soundtrack oh no no no.*

Neill continued.

*Instead I had to fight against every male urge I had to resist screaming woaaahhhhh boddyyyyyyfoooooorrrmmm bodyformed for youuuuuuu as my lady changed from the loving, gentle, normal skin coloured lady to the little girl from the exorcist with added venom and extra 360 degree head spin.*

*Thanks for setting me up for a fall bodyform , you crafty b\*\*\*\*r.* (Barnett, 2012)

Bodyform marketing executives thought fast and worked hard with their marketing agency over a weekend to respond in a timely, engaging and entertaining way. They created a response (to Richard Neill) via Youtube (Bodyform, 2012) that went viral, attracting 2.3 million views (Barnett, 2012), breaking the tacit advertisers code that the 'reality' of periods is not made explicit and questioning myths of 'femininity'. They spoke what has been 'the unspeakable' through traditional marketing channels, enabled and facilitated by social media. SCA, the company that owns the Bodyform brand, reflected that they will

*be looking very closely at how they engage with social media platforms in future - having managed to pull off the trick of making people laugh and talk publicly about a subject that's, if not exactly a taboo, then at very least drenched in lashings of sanitised, unreal blue liquid* (Lomas, 2012, p. 13).

Many of the examples given earlier have generally had positive consequences for the companies. However, there are cases where the use of social media has had a negative impact. The potential negative impact for companies resulting from tweets by an

unrestricted social media manager, campaigns that are suspected of being staged by the company (Feloni, 2013) (e.g., Bodyform, John Lewis #findfaith), or posts that could be offensive to some were not looked at in detail in this study. An assumption has been made that the brands included in these case studies acknowledge that not all of their customer base will appreciate these novel Twitter 'conversations'. They are part of an overall marketing strategy that reaches customers that conventional marketing communications may not reach. This assumption is a limitation of the research and highlights an area for future study.

## DATA ANALYSIS AND HARBEMASIAN THEORY

According to Habermas, distortions of these validity claims can lead to disorder, mistrust and a collapse of the legitimacy of a group, organisational or political system. For the ideal speech situation of an 'ethical discourse' to occur the following rules of engagement are necessary:

- 1 Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
- 2a Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
- 2b Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
- 2c Everyone is allowed to express their attitudes, desires and needs without any hesitation.
- 3 No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2).

The key characteristics of 'human era brands' include traits such as being open, honest and even flawed, talking and acting like people, and being exciting and empathetic (Chalah, 2014). There are many aspects of social media communications which do conform to Habermas' rules of engagement for 'ethical discourse'. However, it is important to note that customers are not all engaging with social media. Although everyone is, in theory, 'allowed' to take part, question any assertion, introduce any assertion and express their attitudes, needs and desires, barriers to digital engagement remain in place (van Deursen & van Dijk, 2013). Whilst companies are engaging with customers in a more human and less scripted way via social media, many customers remain 'unconnected' and outside of the ethical discourse. The power shift is not ubiquitous. From a different perspective, corporate managers from more traditional backgrounds and less familiar with 'new media' can be equally disempowered as in the HMV case considered in this paper. Companies who have not adapted their corporate communications strategy to be more responsive and less planned or controlled are not facilitating the ideal speech situation nor engaging in meaningful ways with customers.

**TABLE 1** Illustration of analysis drawing upon Habermas' ideal speech situation and ethical discourse

<b>Rules of engagement for ethical discourse</b>	<b>Applied to corporate communications via social media</b>
1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.	Whoever has access to a social media account (the competence to speak and act) can take part. Commercial organisations, public bodies, celebrities, members of the public, employees, engaging in conversation in previously unknown ways (Sussex Police, HMV employee).
2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.	Richard's challenge to Bodyform. Centuries of metaphor to avoid direct reference to 'real' bodily functions is challenged and torn away in Richard's Facebook assertion and Bodyform's YouTube response Discourse analysis of Jaffa Cakes - are they really cakes or biscuits pretending to be cakes
2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.	During the John Lewis #findfaith appeal. Faith's parents' characters/parenting skills were questioned by tweets - <i>"they seem too strict"</i> , <i>"perhaps they should be checked out"</i> .
2c. Everyone is allowed to express their attitudes, desires and needs without any hesitation.	Employees with responsibility for social media accounts can express their own attitudes, needs and desires via the brand identity without need for approval. Customers can express attitudes, needs and desires to companies in a very public forum, quickly, at any time of day or night, through a channel recognised as reducing inhibition and social regulation.
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2).	Traditional regulation and control of corporate communications (internal coercion) is eroding. Cultural or social norms regulating behaviour (external coercion) are beginning to be transgressed (e.g., Bodyform case, HMV redundancies tweets, Sussex Police humour over drugs haul).

## CONCLUSIONS

Interaction with customers in a less scripted way is welcomed and often has a positive effect on brand image (Colliander & Dahlén, 2011). Practitioners are beginning to speak of the 'human brand' or of being a 'human era brand' (Chahal, 2014). Conversations echo the chat and banter of the marketplaces of the past (Levine et al., 2000). On the other hand, employees who control the corporate social media accounts are given more independence and power than corporate communications employees were ever given over traditional marketing communications. Whilst overall campaigns may be defined and agreed at a strategic level (e.g., John Lewis Hare and Bear twitter accounts) day-to-day fast paced interactions (e.g., tweets) are the responsibility of specific (usually young and lower grade) employees (Aral et al., 2013; Smith & Zook, 2011). From a Foucauldian perspective "*Discourse is created and perpetuated by those who have the power and means of communication*" (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). Recommendations from this research indicate that those employed to take on responsibility for social media accounts and communications

should be appropriately trained and briefed in brand values. Organisations should seek highly trusted employees with conditions and reward packages designed to engender loyalty to the company. Strategies to minimise risk and share responsibility for social media posts should be implemented by companies who will increasingly fall foul of employing those familiar with social media to address a lack of knowledge in the senior management team. Such scenarios allow too much power over the social media discourse to be devolved. As social media has broken down the communication barriers and shared understandings of taboos in the advertising code, there is a need to manage these channels and this will become critical in organisations. Ngai et al. (2015) suggest there is a need to set up workgroups whose primary aim is to manage corporate social media discourse. Marketing agencies should work more closely with clients on instant, responsive mode communications and employees who engage with customers via social media should be given adequate training. Additionally, this study emphasises the need for more research into how the characteristics of social media and the needs of corporate communications strategies can be aligned.

## FURTHER RESEARCH

This work will be extended through deeper analysis of a greater number of corporate social media accounts. Further, several respondents to our survey agreed to take part in interviews about their role and the company's strategy for social media adoption. Interviews will be carried out with social media managers from a range of high street retailers and fast moving goods brands in order to explore the emerging strategy of unscripted corporate communications via social media. Further research will explore and address the phenomenon of brand creation via social media and address the lack of empirical research in this field; de Vries, Gensler and Leeflang (2012) argue that little is known about the factors regarding brand post popularity, the number of likes, or comments on a brand. Further, our future and more detailed study will explore how companies are meeting the contradictory challenges of the immediacy and conversational tone expected of social media communications versus the need to manage the brand image and control corporate communications.

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