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Relationship maintenance on Twitter: implications from loyalty leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to look into Twitter usage as represented by top US retail corporations in a quantitative manner. This study aimed to determine the dominant purpose of Twitter usage by major US retail companies and to what extent the relationship maintenance strategies were incorporated in Twitter. In addition, the study tested a proposed model that delineates relationship as a precursor of brand loyalty.

Design/methodology/approach – A content analysis was conducted comparing two groups of retail corporations – one came from the “top 100 customer loyalty brand leaders” identified by Brand Keys (2011a), and the other came from the Fortune 500 retailers, but excluded those from the top 100 loyalty leaders list.

Findings – Study results indicated Twitter as an important channel for corporate communication and relationship maintenance. For the retail industry, Twitter was mainly used for consumer relations. Access was the most widely used strategy followed by assurance and positivity. In addition, the brand loyalty leader group retailers were discovered more inclined to use Twitter in a two-way communication manner than the Fortune 500 group. Furthermore, two relationship maintenance strategies were found significantly more frequent in use in the brand loyalty leader group than the Fortune 500 group – positivity and assurance.

Originality/value – As one of the initial efforts to study relationship maintenance strategies using Twitter, this study contributes to the current literature of relationship management theory on social media by adapting the six relationship strategies to the Twitter context and testing them.

Keywords Social media, Public relations, Twitter, Relationship maintenance, Brand loyalty, Relationship strategy

Paper type Research paper

Social media are Internet based applications and technologies that “enable participation, connectivity, user-generated content, sharing of information, and collaboration among a community of users” (Henderson and Bowley, 2010, p. 239). Different types of social media include social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, video sharing sites such as YouTube, blogs, podcasts, wikis, and online virtual worlds. Social media have created a vast connection in the virtual world among the global community with a collaborative and participatory culture (Henderson and Bowley, 2010). They encourage users to “discuss, debate, and collaborate with one another as millions more watch, listen and learn” (McConnell and Huba, 2006, p. x).

In recent years, the increasing popularity of social media, especially Twitter, has changed the landscape of organizational communication. Launched in August 2006, Twitter is a social media platform that allows users to communicate within 140-character messages – tweets. Generally, these types of services are referred to as microblogs or microblogging. Twitter, in addition to its microblogging, also exhibits social networking features (Thoring, 2011). In corporate America, social media have gained popular usage. According to a 2012 social media global study by public relations firm Burson-Marsteller (2012), Twitter is the most popular platform among



global Fortune 100 companies with an adoption rate of 82 percent, followed by YouTube (79 percent) and Facebook (74 percent). Within the past two years, Twitter usage has surged with a nearly 700 percent growth rate. The number of corporate Twitter accounts has increased dramatically as well. In the Netsphere, Twitter is driving online conversations among Fortune 100 companies: there are on average 55,970 mentions per company per month on Twitter, significantly higher than that of any other social media platforms (for blogs, the average number is 19,610; for Facebook, 4,606) (Burson-Marsteller, 2012). Moreover, Twitter was found to have more influence on consumer purchase decisions than other social media platforms. A recent “Online Shopper Intelligence Study” conducted by Kantar Media Compete revealed that 35 percent of the respondents thought Twitter had an influence on their purchase decision, while only 23.5 percent agreed so with Facebook (Marketwire, 2011).

The dominance of social media has brought challenges as well as opportunities to public relations practice. Scott (2007) suggests in his book, *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, that traditional public relations practices do not work anymore. In the social media age, instead of pitching stories to traditional media (e.g. newspapers, magazines, and television news programs) companies can now take ownership and independently publish information that will reach or “pull” a large audience. Public relations, which used to be a function that tried to influence public perceptions dominantly through close media relations, has become more associated with direct public management and engagement in the Web 2.0 environment (Tanuri, 2009).

The impact of social media on organizations can be far reaching. Many unanswered questions arise, such as, how to engage with the online audience within this new mediated context. From a theoretical perspective, the fundamental goal of public relations is to build relationships with key publics (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998). Relationship management has been a central theme for public relations research. As argued by Newell (2011), social media management should be a “relationship strategy,” rather than a “quick-sale strategy.” However, in practice, many organizational social media sites lack the personal connection – in other words, instead of being humane and authentic, many posts on SNS are written in “ad speak” (Newell, 2011). Some scholars have suggested that while corporate communication in traditional media is delivering messages, communication in social media is more about listening, conversing, and building relationships (Drury, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate social media usage of top US retail corporations from a relationship management perspective in a quantitative way. Because of the popularity and dominant influence among global companies, Twitter was chosen as a social media representative for a content analytical study in which two groups of retail corporations were studied and compared. One group came from the “top 100 customer loyalty brand leaders” as identified by Brand Keys (2011c), a New York-based international brand and customer loyalty research consultancy since 1984 (www.brandkeys.com). Brand Keys specializes in customer loyalty and engagement research and provides brand-equity measures that predict consumer behaviors. The company annually publishes its Customer Loyalty Engagement Index and Customer Loyalty Leaders list by examining customers’ relationships with 598 brands in 83 industry categories (Brand Keys, 2011b). The Advertising Research Foundation has conducted a methodological review of Brand Keys’ Brand engagement measurement methodology, which validated this system (Cook, 2007). The other sample group came from the Fortune 500 retailers, but excluded from the top-100 loyalty leaders list. This study aimed to explore how US retail companies maintained

relationships with the online audience on Twitter. In addition, the study summarized the purposes of Twitter usage among leading retail companies. By comparing the findings of the two sample groups, the study result also tested a theoretical model that delineates relationship as a precursor of brand loyalty.

Literature review

Public relations as relationship management

The fundamental goal of public relations is to build relationships with key publics (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ledingham and Bruning, 1998). Relationship management has been a central theme for public relations research. In recent years, the relationship approach has developed into a viable theory of public relations (Ledingham, 2003; Vorvoreanu, 2009). Public relations scholars have identified and developed measures for six relationship outcomes – control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationship, and communal relationship (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Organization-public relationships have since become a multi-dimensional, measurable concept (Vorvoreanu, 2009).

Kent and Taylor (1998) proposed dialogic communication as a theoretical framework to guide the creation and maintenance of relationships between an organization and its publics. It has become one of the mainstream relationship management theories. Dialogic communication is “any negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent and Taylor, 1998, p. 323). Kent and Taylor argued that dialogic communication is a finished “product” of two-way symmetrical communication. It is “not merely about agreement. Rather, it is about the process of open an negotiated discussion” (Kent and Taylor, 1998, p. 325). They identified five dialogic principles: ease of interface, usefulness of information, conservation of return visits, generation of return visits, and dialogic loops. This theory has been tested and supported by a number of scholars on both the traditional and new media platforms (Kim *et al.*, 2010; Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010; Seltzer and Mitrook, 2007; Seltzer and Zhang, 2011).

In addition, Kelly (2001) introduced the concept of stewardship as a final but missing step in the generally known public relations process such as Marston's (1979) RACE model (Research, Action, Communication, Evaluation) and Hendrix's (2000) ROPE model (Research, Objectives, Programming, Evaluation). According to Kelly (2001), stewardship consists of four relationship maintenance strategies that foster relationship growth: reciprocity, responsibility, reporting, and relationship nurturing. Other public relations scholars have also raised the importance of stewardship as a necessary component of relationship management (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ledingham, 2003; Waters, 2009, 2011). Most research on stewardship has focussed on offline behaviors in the fundraising/nonprofit context (Kelly, 2001; Waters, 2009; Worley and Little, 2002). Waters (2011) studied on the implementation of the four stewardship strategies on Fortune 100 companies' web sites and argued that the stewardship strategies can be practiced in all public domains and that the conceptualization of stewardship strategies may be a good presentation of relationship cultivation for virtual behaviors.

This study adopted the six relationship maintenance strategies of Hon and Grunig (1999) as the measure for relationship management. Because of the personalized characteristics of social media, especially Twitter, it is believed that using this personal-communication-rooted theory is more suitable to measure the relationship management on Twitter. The six relationship maintenance strategies are discussed primarily as an organizational public relationship maintenance theory in the following section.

Relationship maintenance strategies

There has been a growing body of literature examining the relationship maintenance or relationship cultivation strategies (Bortree, 2007; Hon and Grunig, 1999; Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Kent and Taylor, 1998; Ki and Hon, 2006; 2009; Men and Tsai, 2012; Seo and Lee, 2009; Waters *et al.*, 2011). Relationship maintenance studies are grounded in interpersonal communication research, the most well-known of which are Canary and Stafford's studies that identified five major relationship maintenance strategies: positivity, openness, assurance, social networks, and sharing tasks (Canary and Stafford, 1994; Stafford and Canary, 1991). Public relations scholars extended the concept and adapted the strategies to organizational communication (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Ki and Hon, 2003, 2009; Seo and Lee, 2009). While early research on this subject focussed on physical interactions, recent studies have examined the application of these strategies in different kinds of virtual settings as well, including organizational web sites, blogs, and Facebook (Bortree, 2007; Kelleher and Miller, 2006; Ki, 2004; Men and Tsai, 2012; Seo and Lee, 2009; Waters *et al.*, 2011).

Specifically, positivity refers to "anything the organization or public does to make the relationship more enjoyable for the parties involved" (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 14). Openness/disclosure is the condition in which both organizations and its publics are willing to share their opinions about problems, concerns, and satisfaction in an open and honest manner (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Ki and Hon, 2009). Sharing of tasks is conceptualized as organizations' efforts in solving joint or separate problems with the publics, such as reducing pollution, managing community issues, and providing employment opportunities (Hon and Grunig, 1999). Networking refers to "organizations' building networks or coalitions with the same groups that their publics do, such as environmentalists, unions, or community groups" (Hon and Grunig, 1999, p. 15). For example, an organization may sponsor a charity group or co-host an event with a local community association. Assurances are indicated when the organization attempts to assure its publics that their concerns are legitimate and to demonstrate commitment to maintaining the relationship (Grunig *et al.*, 2002). Access is a receptive opportunity for both the organization and publics to involve in each other's decision-making process, and each party's willingness to go to the other for complaints or queries (Hon and Grunig, 1999; Seo and Lee, 2009). In this, access is a relationship maintenance strategy analogous to the often-cited two-way symmetric communication model (Grunig *et al.*, 2002; Seo and Lee, 2009).

Trust as a positive relationship outcome

The idea of brand as a person has been studied both qualitative and quantitatively by a number of scholars (e.g. De Chernatony and McDonald, 1998; Fournier, 1998). The assumption is that brand possesses human-like characteristics and consumers can develop a relationship with the brand (Fournier, 1998). In the process of consumer-brand interaction, trust has been identified as a positive relationship outcome by researchers from different disciplines. A number of studies of consumers' relations with corporate brands have proven that brand trust is a signal of relationship quality between consumers and brands (Blackston, 1992). According to these studies, there are two components in successful and positive relationships: satisfaction with the brand and trust in the brand (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003). Morgan and Hunt (1994) explored the connection between relationship and trust from the perspective of relationship marketing. They concluded that successful relationship marketing requires

relationship commitment and trust, both of which were identified as key mediating variables. In the public relations literature, trust has been identified as one of the outcomes and measures of organization-public relationships. Drawing from the ten-year excellence study, Hon and Grunig (1999) developed quantitative measurement scales for assessing six dimensions of an organization-public relationship: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, exchange relationships, and communal relationships.

Brand trust is dependent on many factors. Many corporations strive to build an image of reliability and dependability solely relying on product quality and customer service (Blackston, 1992), assuming these will be sufficient to build a strong brand. However, studies have found that brand does possess some characteristics that go beyond mere product consideration. The adaption of certain interpersonal relationships, such as trust, enforces consumers' recognition of, and loyalty to, the brand (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003).

Brand loyalty

Loyalty is a construct well studied in psychology, business, as well as communication field. In early views, brand loyalty was identified by repeated purchase behaviors (Brown, 1952; Kuehn, 1962). This definition was later enriched by researchers who proposed that brand loyalty should also be measured through the attitudinal dimension in addition to the behavioral perspective (Assael, 1992; Engel and Blackwell, 1982; Keller, 1993). According to Engel and Blackwell (1982, p. 570), brand loyalty is "the preferential, attitudinal and behavioral response toward one or more brands in a product category expressed over a period of time by a consumer." Brand loyalty, then, is "a favorable attitude toward a brand resulting in consistent purchase of the brand over time" (Assael, 1992, p. 87).

Scholars have identified numerous antecedents and indicators of loyalty, including trust. Studies have found that brand possesses certain characteristics that go beyond mere product consideration. Correspondingly, brand loyalty can be achieved through efforts aimed beyond consumers' satisfaction of the product or service functionally (De Chernatony and McDonald, 1998; Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003; Fournier, 1998). The adaption of certain interpersonal relationship attributions, such as trust, enforces consumers' recognition of, and loyalty to, the brand (Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003).

In a study to develop and validate a multidimensional brand trust scale, Delgado-Ballester *et al.* (2003) conceptualized brand trust as a "a feeling of security held by the consumer in his/her interaction with the brand, that it is based on the perceptions that the brand, as a personified entity, is reliable and responsible for the interests and welfare of the consumer" (p. 31). In developing and comparing three models of brand loyalty in which trust played different roles, they found a positive relationship between trust and brand loyalty, suggesting that trust was a major contributor to brand loyalty.

As suggested by Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) findings, brand trust determines brand loyalty, which, in turn, influences such outcome-related aspects of brand equity as market-share and relative price. Similar relationships have been found in a number of other studies that support trust as a major factor contributing to brand loyalty (e.g. Delgado-Ballester *et al.*, 2003; Morgan and Hunt 1994; Sung and Kim, 2010).

Based on theories discussed above, we can deduct the following connections among relationship, trust, and brand loyalty (see Figure 1).

∴
Trust ↑ ⇒ Brand loyalty ↑
Relationship ↑ ⇒ Trust ↑
∴
Relationship ↑ ⇒ Brand loyalty ↑

As such, we can deduct that a well-maintained organization-public relationship should enhance the brand loyalty. Accordingly, if social media contribute to relationship management, it should further contribute to brand loyalty. Therefore, by using effective relationship maintenance strategies in Twitter, companies will gain higher level of brand loyalty. On the contrary, less effective use of relationship-oriented strategies in Twitter will not contribute to brand loyalty. This line of reasoning is the premise for the hypotheses of this study.

This study focussed on retailer brands and excluded product brands from the sample such as Walt Disney, Apple, and Starbucks. The underlying consideration is to minimize the factors that might affect brand loyalty, such as a product's quality and distinctiveness. Based on the preceding literature, three research questions are posed that lead to two hypotheses:

- RQ1. How are the two groups of retail companies using Twitter as a communication tool?
- RQ2. What is the dominant purpose of Twitter use by major US retail industry companies?
- RQ3. How are relationship maintenance strategies implemented on Twitter by top US retail companies?
- H1. The proportion of retail companies in a brand loyalty leader group that adopt each relationship maintenance strategies (positivity, openness/disclosure, task sharing, networking, assurance, access) is higher than the proportion of general retail companies.
- H2. For the tweets that adopted relationship maintenance strategies, the implementation level of each strategy (positivity, openness/disclosure, task sharing, networking, assurance, access) is higher for the retail companies in a brand loyalty leader group than that of the general retail industry companies.

Method

Research design and sample

To obtain data in measurable form, content analysis was utilized with two groups of retail companies. The first group consisted of 11 retailers from the 2011 top 100 brand loyalty leaders list as identified by Brand Keys (2011a). The second sample group

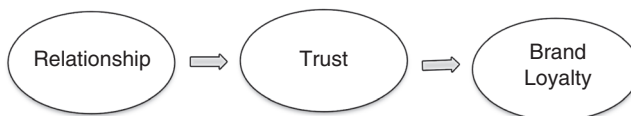


Figure 1.
Theoretical model
about relationship,
trust, and
brand loyalty

contained 11 retailers randomly sampled from the Fortune 500 list, but excluded from the top 100 loyalty list (See Table I). The brand loyalty ranking was measured through Brand Key's Customer Loyalty Engagement Index, which examines consumers' relationships with hundreds of brands in various industry categories based on empirically tested psychological-testing instruments (Brand Keys, 2011b). Its metrics have been validated via a national probability sample in the US and UK, with statistical reliability at the 95 percent confidence level (Brand Keys, 2011c). Further testing of the metrics in 23 countries around the world offers external validity of the measure. The brand loyalty survey data are collected through phone interviews and the raw data are further weighted to generate more meaningful results. Brand Key's annual assessment is based on a large sample of more than 10,000 men and women, aged 16 to 59. In measuring the loyalty construct, assessments of consumers' needs, values and brand perceptions are collected to form an overall evaluation of loyalty for each product category. Brand Key's Customer Loyalty Engagement Index has been cited by industry leaders such as Forbes (Passikoff, 2012) and in peer reviewed journals (Passikoff, 2005).

Content sampling followed the same procedure used in previous research (Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010). In Rybalko and Seltzer's (2010) study, ten tweets of each company were systematically sampled from the latest 20 posts. Due to the relatively small number of companies analyzed in this study, the sample size was doubled to be 20 tweets per company selected from a sampling frame of 40 tweets. Following Rybalko and Seltzer's (2010) suggestions, only those companies with active Twitter accounts were chosen as the final sample group. In this study, a company was considered active if it had at least 40 Twitter tweets or posts and its latest post was made within the past two weeks of the accessed date, to ensure the currency of the data. For each company selected, only one major official Twitter account was selected for this study. The data were accessed from the same computer between 8 p.m. and 9:30 p.m. on the same day. Screenshots were used to capture the homepage and 40 individual tweets of each company. Every other post was coded as a systematic random sampling. The final sample included a total of 22 companies and 440 tweets.

Conceptualization and operational definitions of variables

The variables for relationship maintenance strategies were adapted from previous content analysis studies examining the strategy implementation in online environment (Bortree, 2007; Ki, 2004; Ki and Hon, 2006; Waters *et al.*, 2011; Seo and Lee, 2009).

Table I.
Sampled retail
companies

No.	Brand loyalty group	Fortune 500 group
1	Amazon	CVS Caremark
2	Zappos	Kroger
3	Wal-Mart	Home depot
4	J. Crew	Best Buy
5	Target	Sears
6	Kohl's	Safeway
7	Walgreens	Supervalu
8	TJ Maxx	Staples
9	Ace	Auto nation
10	True Value	Office depot
11	Overstock.com	Penske automotive group

The six variables – positivity, openness/disclosure, tasking sharing, networking, access, and assurances – were adapted to the Twitter environment in the manner discussed below.

Positivity is defined as attempts to make messages pleasant. Indicators include using a positive and cheerful tone, posting smiling face signs, using positive exclamations, and showing of humor. Openness/disclosure is defined as an organization's efforts to make the information process more transparent and to provide information about any changes pertaining to finances, organizational restructuring, and other organizational activities. Different levels of openness are operationalized by different communication models, including one-way communication, two-way asymmetrical communication, and two-way symmetrical communication. Task sharing is defined as performing corporate social responsibility by addressing social concerns or organizational efforts that relate to the problems of mutual interest between the organization and its publics, such as environmental activities, community activities, education activities, and volunteer efforts. Definitions of different engagement levels are adapted from Ki's (2004) research. Networking is defined as an organizations' efforts in building networks or coalitions with the same groups that their publics do, such as environmentalists, unions, community groups, celebrities, and opinion leaders. The RT retweet functions are generally considered as networking. Assurances refer to any efforts by an organization to assure its publics that they and their concerns are attended to and to demonstrate that it is committed to maintaining the relationship. Most tweets for customer services and tweets that generally address availability and willingness to help, as well as those that emphasize on maintaining relationships are assurance. Somewhat different from previous efforts in which access was measured by the presence of contact information (Ki, 2004; Ki and Hon, 2006; Waters *et al.*, 2011; Seo and Lee, 2009), in this study, Twitter in itself can be a form of access for communication. Therefore access is defined as an organization's efforts to foster communication and to provide communication channels or media outlets with other Twitter users. The indicators include posting questions, @reply/mention, providing phone number or e-mail address, and providing links to more information. The complete definitions for all study variables are included in Appendix.

Coding and intercoder reliability

An initial coding sheet and coding book was developed based on previous Twitter content analysis studies (e.g. Edman, 2010; Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010). Researchers further examined the definitions and coding categories over a two-week period and the definitions were next reviewed by public relations scholars as a test of their face validity. Adjustments were made based on the review feedback.

In the final coding sheet, the basic information included the company name, Twitter ID, group number, following and followers numbers, and date of post. The type of post was categorized as original, @reply, RT retweet, RT+comments, and other. The primary purpose of tweet contents were summarized into seven major categories (see Table III) based on previous research (Burson-Marsteller, 2011). For the relationship maintenance strategies, the six variables were coded as either existing (yes) or not existing (no). The levels of implementation were coded on a scale of 0-3, with 0 meaning non-existing and 1 to 3 meaning low, medium, and high. For the variable of access, however, the researchers found it more reasonable to summarize the indicators rather than rank them, so the levels were replaced by indicators, which were coded as either exist (yes) or not (no).

Two graduate students were utilized as coders. A training session was conducted followed by a pre-test. After adjustments were made, 10 percent of the sample contents were coded by both coders independently for a reliability test. Scott's pi was used to determine the intercoder reliability. Reliability scores for all but one variable ranged from 1.0 to 0.70, with most above the 0.80 level. Coding on the networking level, however, was reliable at 0.60. To remedy this situation, the operational definition for this variable was re-examined and adjusted, and coders were re-trained.

Findings

RQ1. How are the two groups of retail companies using Twitter as a communication tool?

The study results showed that the number of Twitter accounts the sampled companies were following ranged from 32 to 34,831, with the mean of 7,571.7 (SD = 8,546.19). The followers' number ranged from 256 to 2,756,494, with a mean of 65,416.9 (SD = 81,671.093). The total number of tweets ranged from 154 to 82,312, with the mean of 8,581.8 (SD = 16,841.695).

The result showed that the number of Twitter accounts that the Fortune 500 retail companies followed ($M=9,060$) was significantly higher than that of the brand loyalty group ($M=6,083$) ($t_{(357)}=-3.7, p<0.000$). Though the difference, the followers' number for the brand loyalty retailers were reversely higher than the Fortune 500 giants ($t_{(438)}=2.04, p<0.05$). The mean value of followers' number was 73,319 for the brand loyalty leader group and 57,515 for the Fortune 500 group. In addition, the total number of tweets was found significantly different between two sample groups ($t_{(245)}=3.90, p<0.000$). The brand loyalty leader group of companies had a mean number of 11,661 tweets, twice as many as the second group ($M=5,503$).

Of the sampled retail companies, the overall major type of post is original tweets (49.8 percent), followed by @reply (36.1 percent) and RT retweet (11.6 percent). When comparing the type of post between the two groups, a significant difference ($p<0.000$) was observed ($\chi^2_{(3,n=440)}=24.125, p<0.000$). For the group of brand loyalty retail companies, the primary type of post is @reply (47.3 percent). Original posts closely followed as the second major post type (40 percent). For the Fortune 500 group of retail companies, the dominant post type was original post (59.5 percent). Only 25 percent of the tweets in the second group were @reply (see Table II):

RQ2. What is the dominant purpose of Twitter use by major US retail industry companies?

Type	Brand loyalty retailers	Fortune 500 retailers	Total
Original	88 (40.0%)	131 (59.5%)	219 (49.8)
@reply	104 (47.3%)	55 (25.0%)	159 (36.1%)
RT retweet	23 (10.5%)	28 (12.7%)	51 (11.6%)
RT and comments	5 (2.3%)	6 (2.7%)	11 (2.5%)
Total	220 (100%)	220 (100%)	440 (100%)

Table II.
Type of post

Notes: $n=440$. $\chi^2_{(3,n=440)}=24.125, p<0.000$

For the purpose of utilizing Twitter, as shown in Table III, the major function was to provide customer service and feedback (35.5 percent), while nearly a quarter (23.2 percent) of the sampled tweets were to provide general information, such as retweets or tips. Tweets for announcing corporate news and organizational activities accounted for 17 percent, slightly higher than advertising and promotional messages (16.6 percent). In addition, no major usage of Twitter for employee relations or job recruiting was observed.

A significant difference ($p < 0.000$) was observed between the two groups when comparing the purpose of tweets contents ($\chi^2_{(5, n=440)} = 29.00$). For the group of brand loyalty retail companies, nearly half (44.5 percent) of the tweets were devoted for customer service, while another 20.9 percent of tweets were to provide general information and tips. Advertising and sales promotion information accounts for 10.5 percent in this group. For the Fortune 500 group, there is no single dominant purpose of tweeting. Tweets for customer service, general information/ tip and advertising/ sales promotion took close portions of the total sample in the group, respectively, 26.4, 25.5, and 22.7 percent (see Table III):

RQ3. How are relationship maintenance strategies implemented on Twitter by top US. retail companies?

A frequency summary was run to examine the six relationship maintenance strategies and five access indicators. As demonstrated in Table IV, the results revealed that access was the most frequently used strategy between the two groups of retail companies. Nine out of ten tweets had at least one indicator of access. Among the

Purpose	Brand loyalty Retailers	Fortune 500 Retailers	Total
Corporate news/information announcement/update	38 (17.3%)	37 (16.8%)	75 (17.0%)
Advertising/sales promotion	23 (10.5%)	50 (22.7%)	73 (16.6%)
Greeting/thanks/chat	7 (3.2%)	17 (7.7%)	24 (5.5%)
General information/tip	46 (20.9%)	56 (25.5%)	102 (23.2%)
Customer service/feedback/support	98 (44.5%)	58 (26.4%)	156 (35.5%)
Other	8 (3.6%)	2 (0.9%)	10 (2.3%)
Total	220 (100%)	220 (100%)	440 (100%)

Notes: $n = 440$, $\chi^2_{(5, n=440)} = 29.00$, $p < 0.000$

Table III.
Primary purpose of
tweet contents

Strategies	Brand loyalty retailers	Fortune 500 retailers	Total
Positivity	80 (36.4%)	44 (20.0%)	124 (28.2%)
Openness/disclosure	42 (19.1%)	39 (17.7%)	81 (18.4%)
Task Sharing	20 (9.1%)	27 (12.3%)	47 (10.7%)
Networking	21 (9.5%)	19 (8.6%)	40 (9.1%)
Assurance	103 (46.8%)	57 (25.9%)	160 (36.4%)
Access	200 (90.9%)	203 (92.3%)	403 (91.6%)

Notes: For positivity, $\chi^2_{(1, n=440)} = 14.553$, $p = 0.000$; openness/disclosure, $\chi^2_{(1, n=440)} = 0.136$, $p = 0.712$; task sharing, $\chi^2_{(1, n=440)} = 1.167$, $p = 0.280$; networking, $\chi^2_{(1, n=440)} = 0.110$, $p = 0.740$; assurance, $\chi^2_{(1, n=440)} = 20.782$, $p = 0.000$; access, $\chi^2_{(1, n=440)} = 0.266$, $p = 0.606$

Table IV.
Relationship
strategies by group
and in total

access indicators, the most frequently applied ones were @reply/mention and link. In addition, more than one third of the tweets exhibited assurance. Of those who presented assurance, 50 percent were in the low level of implementation, and those in the medium and high level were, respectively, 31.9 and 18.1 percent. Moreover, positivity was also a major employed relationship maintenance strategy on Twitter (28.2 percent). Of the tweets that exhibited positivity, 71 percent were in the low level, 21.8 percent in the medium level and 7.3 percent high level. Besides access, assurance, and positivity, the other relationship maintenance strategies were also observable in the study, as shown in Table IV and Table V. The implementation of these three strategies were also mainly in the low and medium levels:

H1. The proportion of retail companies in a brand loyalty leader group that adopt each relationship maintenance strategies (positivity, openness/disclosure, task sharing, networking, assurance, access) is higher than the proportion of general retail companies.

To test this hypothesis, χ^2 tests were run for each variable between two groups and the study result revealed two variables out of six being significant: positivity and assurance. *H1* was partially supported.

In analyzing the existence of positivity in sampled Twitter posts, a significant difference ($p < 0.000$) was found between the two groups ($\chi^2_{(1,n=440)} = 14.553, p < 0.000$). As shown in Table IV, within the brand loyalty leader group of retailers, 80 out of 220 sampled tweets showed positivity (36.4 percent). However, for the Fortune 500 group, only 44 out of 220 sampled tweets were positive (20 percent). In addition, a significant difference was found between assurance and the group numbers ($\chi^2_{(1,n=440)} = 20.782, p < 0.000$): 46.8 percent of tweets in brand loyalty retailer group showed assurance, while the same is true for only 25.9 percent in the Fortune 500 group.

Strategies	Level	Brand loyalty retailers	Fortune 500 retailers
Positivity	Low	53 (66.3%)	35 (79.5%)
	Medium	21 (26.3%)	6 (13.6%)
	High	6 (7.5%)	3 (6.8%)
	Total	80 (100%)	44 (100%)
Openness/disclosure	Low	27 (64.3%)	28 (71.8%)
	Medium	13 (31.0%)	9 (23.1%)
	High	2 (4.8%)	2 (5.1%)
	Total	42 (100%)	39 (100%)
Task sharing	Low	8 (40.0%)	13 (48.1%)
	Medium	11 (55.0%)	11 (40.7%)
	High	1 (5.0%)	3 (11.1%)
	Total	20 (100%)	27 (100%)
Networking	Low	13 (61.9%)	13 (68.4%)
	Medium	7 (33.3%)	6 (31.6%)
	High	1 (4.8%)	0 (0.0%)
	Total	21 (100%)	19(100%)
Assurance	Low	56 (54.4%)	24 (42.1%)
	Medium	24 (23.3%)	27 (47.4%)
	High	23 (22.3%)	6 (10.5%)
	Total	103 (100%)	57 (100%)

Table V.
Three levels of
relationship
strategies by group

Notes: For assurance, $\chi^2_{(2,n=440)} = 10.593$. The distribution is significant. $p < 0.05$

The data detected no significant difference for openness/disclosure, task sharing, networking, and access between the two groups of retail companies. As indicated in Table IV, the number of tweets that presented the above strategies within each group was about the same:

H2. For the tweets that adopted relationship maintenance strategies, the implementation level of each relationship maintenance strategy (positivity, openness/disclosure, task sharing, networking, assurance, access) is higher for the retail companies in a brand loyalty leader group than that of the general retail industry companies.

To test this hypothesis, χ^2 analyses were run between the two groups examining only the tweets that enacted the relationship maintenance strategies. Three possible levels were analyzed: low, medium, and high. The result indicated only assurance levels being significantly different between two groups. *H2* was partially supported.

For assurance, as described in Table V, the brand loyalty leader group had more than twice as many tweets in both low and high levels than the Fortune 500 group. In the medium level, the Fortune 500 group had slightly higher number of tweets. For positivity, in all three levels, the brand loyalty leader group had more tweets than the Fortune 500 group. Though this distribution was not significant, it was in the direction expected. For openness/disclosure, task sharing, and networking, high levels were rarely presented by either group. For the low level and medium level, however, not much difference was observed between the two groups.

Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine the retail corporations' use of Twitter in a quantitative way and to what extent the relationship maintenance strategies are incorporated in Twitter. As one of the initial efforts to study relationship maintenance strategies using Twitter, the study findings offer both theoretical and practical implications.

Theoretical implications

First, this study contributes to the current literature of relationship management theory on social media by adapting the six relationship strategies to the Twitter context and testing them. The study found that access was the predominant strategy, which suggested Twitter as an important communication channel widely utilized by retail industry companies. In previous studies examining the relationship strategies on Fortune 500 companies' web sites and Facebook pages, openness was distinctively found as the most commonly used relationship strategy, though mostly in a one-way communication level (Ki and Hon, 2006; O'Neil, 2012). However, this study presented a different emphasis on relationship strategies by retail companies on Twitter – access. Openness, in contrast, ranked only as the fourth-most frequently used strategy. Several factors might cause the difference. First of all, retail industry might present a different approach in regards of building relationships online. Most of the sampled retailers do not carry products of their own, which might result in less openness about products quality and safety measures. More likely, organizations may utilize different relationship strategies on different media platforms. For example, on corporate web sites, it is more suitable to be open and publish information as regards to the organizational finances, management changes and other organizational activities. It could be difficult to do so on Twitter with a limitation of 140 characters. For the same

reason, there may be more links and other contact information posted in each tweet to direct audience to more detailed source of information, or to provide further assistance.

In addition, this study revealed assurance as another important relationship strategy utilized in Twitter. However, in previous studies, assurance was distinctively identified as the least used strategies (e.g. Seo and Lee, 2009; Waters *et al.*, 2011). Assurance, which shows the organization's efforts to assure its publics that they and their concerns are attended to and to demonstrate that the organization is committed to maintaining the relationship, is an important indicator of two-way communication. Although previous studies analyzed the strategies from different contexts and among different industries, we can conclude that for major US retail companies, Twitter is used as an important channel for relationship maintenance and two-way communication. Moreover, the strategies of networking and task sharing were found not extensively used by top US retail companies on Twitter in this study, which is in line with existing findings (i.e. Ki and Hon, 2006).

The significant findings in the hypotheses testing indicated that the retailers that ranked high on the brand loyalty list had almost twice as many tweets exhibiting positivity as the Fortune 500 group – attitudes do make a difference. Many tweets that showed positivity were also written in a dialogic manner. Similarly, for assurance, the brand loyalty leader group almost doubled the tweets in Fortune 500 group. This hints that the companies in first group were more responsive and attentive to customer concerns online. Consumer service used to rely heavily on traditional channels such as telephone, e-mail, or letters. However, with the growing popularity of social media, increasing numbers of people go to Twitter or Facebook for questions and complaints. In addition, no significant differences were found between the two groups of retailers for openness/disclosure, task sharing, networking, and access. There may be several reasons for this finding. First, task sharing and networking were both rarely used by two groups (about 10 percent). This fact made it less likely to detect a significant difference between two groups. Although being important contributors of relationship cultivation, both sharing of task and networking relate to out-of-the-ordinary corporate activities, which would require more detailed demonstration than 140 characteristics. Some scholars suggested that sharing of tasks could be assessed through the organization's social responsibility reports, which explained the degree of efforts the organizations made to respond to problems and issues related to publics (Ki and Hon, 2009). As for access, both groups applied this strategy intensively with more than 90 percent of their tweets. This made it hard to showcase any major differences.

Moreover, the study findings offer some preliminary evidence for the theoretical model proposed between relationship and brand loyalty. Although trust was not directly measured in the study, the results suggested that the relationship maintenance strategies utilized in Twitter was positively related to brand loyalty.

Practical implications

This study has several implications for the public relations professionals to manage social media in future practices. First, the findings granted full support for the notion that Twitter can be used as an effective platform for relationship building. Despite the limitation of 140 characters, all six relationship maintenance strategies have been identified in the study. This suggests that Twitter has become an important communication channel through which the retail companies establish and maintain relationships with their key audiences. This is especially true for access and assurance

strategies, both of which emphasize the advantage of Twitter for direct audience interaction and two-way communication. For organizations, the voice on the new media should never be neglected. It takes more than having a presence on social media – being interactive is what brings life to the consumer relationships.

In addition, the different Twitter usage patterns found between the brand loyalty leader retailers and the Fortune 500 retailers suggests directions of best practices on social media. In general, the brand loyalty leader retailers tweeted twice as much as the Fortune 500 group; the primary post type for brand loyalty leader group was @reply, while the original tweets were dominant for the Fortune 500 group. The brand loyalty leader group also demonstrated more positivity and assurance than the Fortune 500 group. Overall, these differences suggest that: listening to the public, being responsive, and being attentive to public's concerns are the right way to engage in social media; showing a humane side by adding a personal touch in the conversations, being positive, and being cheerful can win consumer's hearts.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to this research. First, there were problems with inter-coder reliability on one variable, which could have reduced the effectiveness and efficiency of the study. After the pre-test, there was low coefficient value for networking level (0.584), which revealed a weakness in the definition. This variable did not turn out significant, which could be caused by the disagreements between coders. Efforts are needed in future research to further clarify the definition and retest it. Second, the sample size in this study could have been larger. This study analyzed a total of 22 retail companies and 20 tweets from each group. This is partly limited to the fact that only 11 retail companies were identified in the top 100 brand loyalty leaders list. Future research can sample more companies from the Fortune 500 list, which will increase the variation of the sample and thus be more representative of the population. In addition, the study tested the link between relationship and brand loyalty through trust. Although this proposition was supported by the study results, the findings did not imply any causal relationship. Neither trust nor loyalty was directly measured. Future research can evaluate all three variables and test for the mediating effect of trust. Moreover, the study findings are limited to the Twitter context solely. Other social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, were not monitored. To demonstrate the overall impact of relationship maintenance on brand loyalty, future studies need to analyze contents from various social media platforms, as well as controlling for traditional communication channels, such as advertising and public relations campaigns.

The study findings suggest fertile ground for additional research. Efforts remain needed to apply and enrich the relationship maintenance theory to social media. In addition, future research should look into the difference in utilizing relationship strategies between the two groups of retail companies within other social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and corporate blogs. Research that examines the different usage pattern of social media platforms among corporations should also contribute to the findings of this study. For example, research should look into which kinds of companies are more attentive to Twitter and which industries are more Facebook fans or bloggers.

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1. Positivity

Attempts to make messages pleasant. Indicators include using a positive and cheerful tone, posting smiling face signs, using positive exclamations and showing of humor. Most posts expressing gratings, thanks and showing willingness to help fit in this category

Level	High	Messages possessing more than two indicators or showing a degree of humor. Examples: "Ok tweetie pies! I'm out for the day. As always, it's been a pleasure. Enjoy your time with the coolest cat ever, Kevin! =)"
	Medium	Messages possessing two indicators but no showing of humor. Example: "@glamourgir186 That's wonderful! So happy to hear. Thanks for the tweet."
	Low	Messages possessing only one indicator, and not showing any humor. Example: "@joplinquinn @Zappos Thank you for the kind words"

2. Openness/disclosure

An organization's efforts to make the information process more transparent and to provide information about any changes pertaining to finances, organizational restructuring and other organizational activities. Sales and promotional information disclosure shall not be considered as openness

Level	High	Provides information related to organizational finances, restructuring and other organizational activities in a two-way symmetrical communication model. Tweets that disclose information and advocate feedback, and involve the feedback as part of the decision-making will fit in this level. Example: @Walmart: "Go to our Facebook page http://walmarturl.com/rEdQoz & tell us where 2 give \$1.5 million this holiday! Nominate ur fav local nonprofit for a grant!"
	Medium	Provides information related to organizational finances, restructuring and other organizational activities in a two-way asymmetrical communication model. Tweets that disclose information and also advocate feedback or participation (either by @ reply or posting questions) will fit in this category. This kind of tweets is usually focussed on overall organizational goals and ignorant of public needs. This level also includes the cases in which the organization encourages public feedback or participation. Example: @Walmart: "Did you watch our ad, thanking #veterans for their service? http://on.fb.me/vmNEZR Let us know what you think ^PK"
	Low	Provides information related to organizational finances, restructuring and other organizational activities, but in a one-way communication model. Tweets disclosing information in a persuasive or direct way without seeking public feedback will fit in this category. Example: "@Walmart returned \$2.7 billion to shareholders in Q3 through dividends and share repurchases walmarturl.com/s41Xqw ^GR"

3. Task sharing

Performing corporate social responsibility by addressing social concerns or organizational efforts that relate to the problems of mutual interest between the organization and its publics, such as environmental activities, community activities, education activities and volunteer efforts

Level	High	Offers detailed information about the organization's social responsible activities, such as programs, purposes, grants, services, or products; and include an evaluation of programs, reports or teams. Example: "Walmart reused more than 11k tons of fly ash & 2.4k tons of slag in 2011 by putting it in the cement used in our stores ^KL #nolandfill"
	Medium	Offers detailed information about the organization's social responsible activities, such as programs, purposes, grants, services, or products, but does not include an evaluation. Example: "Walmart supports new farmers by making #local mushrooms available to customers in Puerto Rico. http://walmarturl.com/u5dy9D^KL "
	Low	Offers only statement related to social responsibility without providing any detailed account of programs, grants, services, or products; or shows supports for other organizations' social responsibility programs. Example: Marketplace Fairness Act in US Senate: http://h.huginonline.com/m=1562596 "

(continued)

Table AI.
Operational
definitions of
relationship
maintenance
strategies

Table AI.

4. *Networking*

Organizations' efforts in building networks or coalitions with the same groups/individuals that their publics do, such as environmentalists, unions, community groups, celebrities and opinion leaders

Level	High	Identifies partnership with networking groups/individuals, and offer details of cooperated programs as well. Example: "Jeffrey Sachs from Columbia University now talking with our Direct Farm Summit participants via VTC #WMTdirectfarm"
	Medium	Offers statement of partnership with networking groups/individuals, but does not offer details of cooperated programs. Examples: "We're proud to partner with @IAMS Home 4 The Holidays pet adoption program! http://bit.ly/vhcjWd "
	Low	Offers retweets of networking groups/individuals, but does not specify any partnership or collaborations, or any cooperated programs. Example: "Walmart Retweet "TODAY: @WhiteHouse First Lady #MichelleObama joins US Chamber's 4th annual @HireOurHeroes event - http://tinyurl.com/7cl9x5a "

5. *Assurances*

Any efforts by an organization to assure its publics that they and their concerns are attended to and to demonstrate that the organization is committed to maintaining the relationship. Most @ reply posts are assurances. Posts without @ reply yet still fit in this category include those that generally address availability and willingness to help, and those that emphasize on maintaining relationships.

Level	High	Assures helping with the customer's problem by action (such as answering the question, forwarding inquiry to other department, contacting related personal), or demonstrates that the organization is committed to maintaining the relationships. Example: "@michaeldub Hi Michael, thanks for contacting us. We've received your e-mail and passed it along to Customer Relations. They will be in touch."
	Medium	Addresses the customer's concern only by directing them what to do, or advocating feedback or seeking further information by asking questions. Example: "@sfiir Please email social@macys.com and someone will be in touch as soon as possible."
	Low	Replies to another Twitter user's comment/mention by the @ reply function, but without addressing any specific problems; or the posts that generally address availability and willingness to help, or those emphasizing on maintaining relationships. Example: "@AIRFORCE77 Nice! Well I hope she is enjoying it!" "John here for your Twitter needs."

6. *Access*

An organization's efforts to foster communication and to provide communication channels or media outlets with other Twitter users. The indicators include *posting questions*, @reply/mention, providing phone number or e-mail address, and providing link to more information.

* For evaluation of access in retweet posts (both RT @user "[...] copy of original tweet [...]" or direct retweet without any comments), all indicators should be considered in future cases, including the question, @ reply/mention, link, phone number and e-mail

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