

## **DETERMINING THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMPANIES AND CUSTOMERS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS**

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**Abstract.** *The purpose of this paper is to determine the differences between companies and customers from the perspective of using social media networks. Social media networks have a tremendous potential in terms of bringing the companies closer to customers. Through social media, consumers can interact with businesses to get the value they are looking for, whether we are talking about discounts or specific information. Unfortunately, not all companies are aware of customers' needs and do not properly use social media networks to facilitate experiences and collaborative dialogue that customers value. In this regard, the authors used a questionnaire containing 11 items that can be divided into 4 sections: social media networks used by employees and customers, employees' perceptions about the reasons consumers interact with companies via social media, the reasons employees think companies interact with customers via social media, social media networks used by companies to interact with customers for different reasons. Data were collected from a group of engineers who graduate from Politehnica University of Bucharest and who work for companies from different domains. Then, data were statistically analyzed using SPSS 20.0 Software. The conceptual framework contains 3 variables: Customers' reasons for using social media, Companies' reasons for using social media, and Social media networks, each being defined through different items. Our findings indicate that Facebook and LinkedIn are the internet users' favorite platforms for interacting with companies or customers, while unlike other countries, Twitter is one of the social media networks used very little by internet users from our country. The results pointed out that there are positive moderate correlations between why consumers use social media for seeking information and why companies use social media for marketing and social interaction. There are also positive moderate correlations between companies' and consumers' reasons for using social media for communication, and also between why companies use social media for their development and why consumers use social media for improving services/products offered by a company. The results of our study should be interpreted with caution, this study being an exploratory one, with a few limitations. Only the perceptions of the people surveyed have been considered. The people surveyed played a double role in our study: customers who use social media and employees who are working in companies that use social media. Therefore, in the future, the authors want to reconsider studying companies' reasons for using social media by analyzing the managers' responses that are responsible for marketing and online marketing in organizations.*

**Keywords:** *social media; social media marketing; social networks; social media usage; Web 2.0; organizational innovation.*

## Introduction

Social media has started to evolve into a necessary part of our society. According to The Statistics Portal (2018), in the last 6 years, the number of minutes spent on social media by internet users worldwide increased by 50%, daily media usage of social media users being 135 minutes per day. By making a simple calculation, it can be said that an internet user spends an average of 821 hours per year with social media. Furthermore, in 2016, there were more than 2 billion social users all over the world.

Taking into account these statistics and trends, companies have also begun to use social media and its various tools found in this area in order to be as close as possible to users. Thanks to social media, companies can improve customer relationships which allow them to gather more information about customers and adapt their services/products according to the demand. Also, by using social media, companies can increase their brand awareness, a larger audience meaning more potential customers. Unfortunately, not all companies know how to use social media networks to their own advantage, and the time they spend on this activity is wasted in vain. They need to do more research on social media networks, about their customers' needs, then they should establish a strategy and implement it without compromise.

The purpose of this paper is to determine how aligned companies and their consumers are in their intentions when communicating on social media. The authors investigate whether there is a perception gap between the reasons consumers interact with companies via social media and the reasons businesses use social media in their interactions with customers.

## Theoretical backgrounds

In the last decade, social media has entered the marketing and communication mix of companies, its transformation being extremely dynamic. Businesses of all sizes have boosted marketing through social media platforms and their number has increased from year to year.

As indicated by Safko (2010), social media is a collection of sites that are used for communication and social interactions by millions of people from all over the world, but also to reach targeted audiences. Through these social media networks, platforms and tools, internet users can publish or share different type of content (text, photos, videos, music), using as well different functions such as multiplayer games, review of purchases, shopping online, recommendation, event locations, and personal, professional or informal social networks (Cavazza, 2012). Also, Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) defined social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content".

Social media facilitates the communication between internet users and between customers and companies that use social media networks, tools or platforms available on the Internet. Social media has reinvented the ways organizations relate to the economy and society, improving various parts of a business, from marketing and operations to finance or human resource management (Aral et al., 2013).

Social media utilization is a popular research topic, with almost 200,000 results on Google Scholar targeting the last five years. According to de Araújo & Zilber (2016), using social media networks can alter the relationship between companies, their employees, suppliers, customers, and other partners, and also their relationship with people from outside the companies who want to interact with them as job candidates, potential customers or partners.

There are some studies that demonstrate how social media positively influences organizational innovation or organizational performance (Garcia-Morales et al., 2018; de Araújo & Zilber, 2016; Kärkkäinen et al., 2010; Hartono & Sheng, 2016; Palacios-Marques et al., 2015) or studies that analyze how social media influence the customer relationship component (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). Kärkkäinen et al. (2010) presented in their paper that social media can be used by companies for: branding, information sharing, public relations, understanding customers, lead generation, collaborative work, internal communication, sales support. De Araújo & Zilber (2016) mentioned that the relative advantages of using social media can be represented by: improving exposure to the company's brands/products, differentiating the company from its competitors, increasing company revenues, operating in unexplored market niches, improving customer, employee, and supplier relationships, the process of hiring new employees and also increasing the amount of information provided to customers about the products marketed.

In Romania, there are few studies about social media and their degree of usage in companies. According to The Like & Share study - Social media marketing in Romanian companies 2017 (Valoria, 2017), social networks are used by Romanian companies mainly for communication (90%), marketing (75%), sales (39%). Although at some distance, 35% of companies use social networking for recruitment, 32% for customer relations, 27% for research, and 25% for competitive analysis. The most used social media marketing platforms in Romania are: Facebook - 96%, LinkedIn - 70%, YouTube - 44%. The top three places worldwide are: Facebook - 93%, Twitter - 76% and LinkedIn - 67%, both Facebook and LinkedIn having higher usage percentages in Romanian companies than globally.

Another study made by Ernst and Young Romania (2015) analyze the answers of some company representatives from various industries in Romania about how they approach marketing through social networking and the impact that this type of marketing currently has on their work.

In the specialized literature there are also some studies about why consumers use online communities (e.g. Koh et al., 2007; Wiertz & de Ruyter, 2007; Sledgianowski & Kulviwat, 2009). Sledgianowski and Kulviwat (2009) found that playfulness and critical mass attract consumers most, Dholakia et al. (2010) discussed about the consumers' benefits of using social media, while others tried to identify the impact of new media on customer relationships (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010).

Whiting and Williams (2013) mentioned that customers use social media in their interaction with companies for seven reasons: social interaction (communicate and interact with others); information seeking (seek out information or to self-educate); pass time (occupy time and relieve boredom); entertainment (provide entertainment and enjoyment); relaxation (relieve day-to-day stress); communicatory utility

(communication facilitation and providing information to share with others) and convenience utility (providing convenience or usefulness to individuals).

Baird and Parasnis (2011) identified that companies have some misperceptions regarding why consumers interact with them via social sites. For example, their findings show that most of the customers use social media when they interact with a business for “getting discounts or coupons”, “purchasing products and services” and “reading reviews and product rankings”. In contrast, those three activities were at the end of the reasons list that companies believe customers use social media for their interaction. Taking into account the information found in the analyzed studies, the authors decided to determine the differences between companies and customers from the perspective of using social media networks. In this regard, the authors wanted to answer to the following questions:

*Q1: What are the most used social media networks by the consumers and employees from Romania?*

Culnan et al. (2010) presented in their paper that Twitter, Facebook and blogs are the most popular social media platforms used in the US by companies that were presented in Fortune 500's top. Thus, the authors are looking to see if these three social media platforms were also the most used in Romania by both consumers and employees.

*Q2: What are the most used social media networks by the consumers and employees from Romania for: seeking/providing information, social interactions, company development, marketing, promotion, relaxing, entertainment, communication?*

After they will gather information about what are the most used social media platforms, the authors' target is to verify if there is a dominant platform that is used for some different reasons by the Romanian internet users.

*Q3: Why consumers use social media in their interaction with companies?*

In order to get an answer for this question, the authors measured the consumers' perceptions about seeking information, social interactions, company development, marketing, promotion, relaxing, entertainment and communication in relation to social media usage.

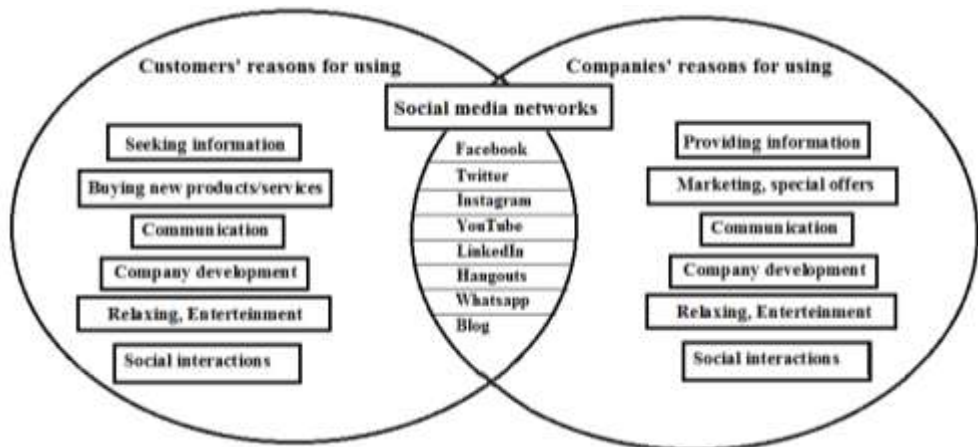
*Q4: Why companies use social media in their interaction with customers?*

In this case, the authors measured the employees' perceptions about why they think companies that hired them use social media. The following factors can be: help their customers with providing information, making social interactions, communicate, getting entertained, contribute to the development of the company or be closer to it.

### **Conceptual framework**

The aim of this paper is to analyze the perception gap existing between the reasons consumers interact with companies via social media and the reasons businesses use social media.

The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1, which shows the customers' and companies' reasons for using social media networks. In this study, we identified three variables. Customers' reasons for using social media can be defined through the following items: seeking information; buying new products/services; communication; relaxing, entertainment; social interactions. The construct Companies' reasons for using social media can be defined through the following items: providing information; marketing, special offers; communication; company development; relaxing, entertainment; social interactions.



*Figure 1. The consumers' reasons vs. companies' reasons to use social media networks*

## Research design and methodology

The research in this paper was an exploratory one in order to have an overview of the perception gap existing between the reasons consumers interact with companies via social media and the reasons businesses use social media when they want to interact with them.

In this case, the authors used the respondents' perceptions. The respondents played a double role. First, they were considered customers who interact with companies, and then they were considered employees of the company where they were working in order to present the companies' reasons for using social media with customers' interactions.

For collecting the data, the authors used a questionnaire containing 11 items that can be divided into 4 sections: social media networks used by employees and customers, employees' perceptions about the reasons consumers interact with companies via social media, the reasons employees think companies interact with customers via social media, social media networks used by companies to interact with customers for different reasons.

For this study, during June 2018, the authors collected data from a group of engineers who graduate from the Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Business Engineering and Management from University POLITEHNICA of Bucharest. The majority of the respondents work in companies with more than 250 employees (43.2%), while 61.4% of these companies are founded at least 10 years ago. This study is an exploratory one,

the number of respondents for this analysis being 44, 79.5% of the respondents being very familiar with the term “social media”.

### Variable measurement

The authors identified 34 variables that can be divided into 4 sections (as it can be seen in Table 1), each variable receiving a code name (CN). Constructs from Sections 3 are defined later in Table 2.

**Table 1. Identified variables and their codes**

Section 1		Section 2		Section 3		Section 4		Section 5	
Variable	CN	Variable	CN	Variable	CN	Variable	CN	Variable	CN
Knowing the term “social media”	SM	Consumers’ perception-Seeking information	RA	Employees’ perception-providing information	FRA	Social media used by company for Providing information	ChR1	Age of the company	Age
Social media used by respondents	SMR	Consumers’ perception-Marketing promotion	RB	Employees’ perception-Marketing promotion	FRB	Social media used by company for Marketing promotion	ChR2	Number of employees	NrE
The most used Social media network by respondents	USM	Consumers’ perception-Communication	RC	Employees’ perception-Communication	FRC	Social media used by company for Communication	ChR3	Domain of company	D
Social media used by company	SMC	Consumers’ perception-Company development	RD	Employees’ perception-Company development	FRD	Social media used by company for Company development	ChR4		
		Consumers’ perception-Relaxing, Entertainment	RE	Employees’ perception-Relaxing, Entertainment	FRE	Social media used by company for Relaxing, Entertainment	ChR5		
		Consumers’ perception-Social interactions	RF	Employees’ perception-Social interactions	FRF	Social media used by company for Social interactions	ChR6		

In section 1, the authors identified what is the people’s surveyed level of knowing the term “social media” (SM), what social media platforms are used by respondents (SMR), what is the most used social media platform by consumers when they interact with a company (USM), what is the most used social media platform by companies when they interact with a customer (SMC). For section 2, the authors analyzed the main reasons a respondent use social media for his interaction with a company, while in section 3 the authors analyzed the employees’ perceptions about why companies use social media when they interact with customers. In section 4 were identified the most used social media platforms by companies for different reasons. In the last section, the authors have analyzed three control variables (age of the company where the respondent works, the number of employees of that company and the domain where the company operates).

**Table 2. Identified variables from Section 3 and their codes**

Variable	Code	Final Code
Provides information about companies, products, services	A1	$FRA=(A1+A2+A3)/3$
Provides information about companies' promotions	A2	
Provides information about companies' events	A3	
Job offers	B1	$FRB=(B1+B2)/2$
Brand awareness	B2	
Sharing information, reviews	C1	$FRC=(C1+C2+C3)/3$
Suggestions	C2	
Complaints and check statuses	C3	
Customer loyalty and sales growth	D1	$FRD=(D1+D2+D3)/3$
Developing new partnership	D2	
Differentiation from competitors	D3	
Relaxing, entertainment	E	$FRE=E$
To be informed about companies' concerns	F1	$FRF=(F1+F2+F3)/3$
To be informed about consumers' concerns	F2	
To be informed about employees' concerns	F3	

A part of these reasons were taken and adapted from Whiting and Williams' study (2013), Baird and Parasnis' paper (2011) and others from de Araújo and Zilber (2016) (who presented some indicators for the variable Relative Advantage that defines Perceived Innovation Characteristics of a company in their paper). The authors used the most known social media networks, where a part of them were identified in a study made in 2015 by Ernst & Young Romania.

For this study, the authors averaged variables identified in section 3 in order to obtain a value for each main reason a company uses social media in order to be in touch with customers. Most of the variables were measuring perceptions of the people surveyed. For the variables identified in section 2 and 3, the items were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

## Results and discussions

All measurements were based on the respondents' perceptions, while data was analyzed using SPSS 20.0 software. First, the authors identified the most used social media networks by companies. As it can be seen in Table 3, 81.8% of the analyzed companies are using Facebook, 45.5% are using LinkedIn, 43.2% WhatsApp and 31.8% Skype.

In Table 4, the authors presented the social media platforms that are used often by users when they want to interact with a company. From this point of view, it seems that LinkedIn is the internet users' favorite platform for interacting with an organization (36.4%) followed closely by Facebook (34.1%). Also it seems that 11.4% of the people surveyed still use the companies' official site for any interaction to the detriment of social media networks.

**Table 3. Social media platforms used by companies in relation with internet users**

Facebook (%)	Twitter (%)	Instagram (%)	Skype (%)	YouTube (%)	LinkedIn (%)	Hangouts (%)	WhatsApp (%)	Blog (%)
81.8	18.2	25.0	31.8	27.3	45.5	2.3	43.2	18.2

**Table 4. Favorite social media platform used by customers in their interaction with companies**

Facebook (%)	Twitter (%)	Instagram (%)	YouTube (%)	LinkedIn (%)	Blog (%)	Official site (%)
34.1	2.3	6.8	2.3	36.4	6.8	11.4

Another aspect tested by the authors was to determine if there is any correlation between the reasons customers interact with companies via social media and the reasons businesses use social media (Table 5), using the interpretations for R-values suggested by Evans (1996).

**Table 5. Correlation matrix among main variables**

	RA	RB	RC	RD	RE	RF	FRA	FRB	FRC	FRD	FRE	FRF
RA	-											
RB	.572**	-										
RC	.409**	.302*	-									
RD	.112	-.033	.528**	-								
RE	.379**	.375*	.297*	.039	-							
RF	.513**	.505**	.372*	.243	.651**	-						
FRA	.353*	.137	.384**	.306*	.133	.178	-					
FRB	.521**	.406**	.322*	.16	.170	.315*	.675**	-				
FRC	.198	.114	.418**	.356*	.041	.252	.683**	.430**	-			
FRD	.206	.103	.341*	.425**	-.029	.248	.590**	.376**	.727**	-		
FRE	.101	-.130	.109	.323*	0	.013	.660**	.443**	.554**	.591**	-	
FRF	.401**	.081	.247	.212	.120	.236	.720**	.487**	.695**	.664**	.603**	-

Note. N=44; \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01

As it can be seen in Table 5, there are some moderate positive correlations across consumer and company uses of social media as follows:

- R=0.521 (p<0.01) between consumer use of social media to seek information (RA) and company use of social media for marketing (FRB);
- R=0.406 (p<0.01) between company use of social media for marketing (FRB) and customer' desire of using social media for buying new products/services (RB);
- R=0.418 (p<0.01) between using social media for communication by consumers (RC) and companies (FRC);
- R=0.425 (p<0.01) between companies use of social media for their development (FRD) and customers use of social media for improving services/products offered by a company (RD);



-  $R=0.401$  ( $p<0.01$ ) between customers use of social media for seeking information (RA) and companies use of social media for social interaction (FRF).

It can be seen that, between some variables which describe the reasons companies use social media, there are strong correlations that are significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed), like:

- $R=0.675$  between providing information (FRA) and marketing, promotion (FRB);
- $R=0.683$  between providing information and communication (FRC);
- $R=0.660$  between providing information and relaxing, entertainment (FRE);
- $R=0.720$  between providing information and social interactions (FRF);
- $R=0.727$  between company development (FRD) and communication (FRC);
- $R=0.695$  between social interactions (FRF) and communication (FRC);
- $R=0.664$  between social interactions (FRF) and company development (FRD);
- $R=0.603$  between relaxing, entertainment (FRE) and social interactions (FRF).

Those strong correlations can be explained by the fact that companies already have some goals for their development and those goals are interdependent. When companies decide to use social media, they also adapt their goals, but they have in mind the main aim of their existence: profitability. This profitability can be achieved only if customers are happy with their interaction with the firm.

After that, the authors wanted to establish what social media networks are used the most by the companies where the respondents were working for the following reasons: providing information, marketing, promotion, communication, company development, relaxing, entertainment, social interactions.

According to our results (Table 6), Facebook is the most used social media network for all of the reasons mentioned before. This network is especially used for marketing, promotion (81.82%), providing information (75%), communication and social interactions (63.64%). It is important to highlight that Google Hangouts is used in a proportion of 27.27% for company development.

Another aspect treated by the authors was the frequency of using social media networks by the customers or by the companies for the main reasons identified before in this paper. In Table 7 it can be observed that customers use social media to interact with companies to seek information (45.5%), to buy new products/services (63.6%), for communication (54.5%), entertainment (56.8%) and social interactions (50%), but they do not really use social media for company development (for example by offering suggestions or recommendations about the company's products or services).

**Table 6. Social media networks used by companies and the reasons of their using**

	ChR1	ChR2	ChR3	ChR4	ChR5	ChR6
	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Facebook</b>	<b>75.00</b>	<b>81.82</b>	<b>63.64</b>	<b>36.36</b>	<b>59.09</b>	<b>63.64</b>
<b>Twitter</b>	2.27	-	2.27	2.27	-	2.27
<b>Instagram</b>	-	-	-	-	4.55	-
<b>Skype</b>	2.27	9.09	-	2.27	9.09	-
<b>You Tube</b>	6.82	-	9.09	6.82	4.55	15.91
<b>LinkedIn</b>	-	-	4.55	4.55	2.27	4.55
<b>Hangouts</b>	2.27	-	6.82	27.27	6.82	4.55
<b>WhatsApp</b>	4.55	2.27	-	-	-	-
<b>Blog</b>	6.82	6.82	13.64	20.45	13.64	9.09
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100	100

**Table 7. Frequency of using social media networks by customers for different reasons**

Frequency of using social media networks	Customers' reasons of using social media networks					
	Seeking information (%)	Buying new products/ services (%)	Communication (%)	Company development (%)	Relaxing. Entertainment (%)	Social interactions (%)
Never	4.5	2.3	4.5	11.4	9.1	6.8
Rare	22.7	11.4	9.1	45.5	13.6	13.6
Sometimes	22.3	22.7	31.8	34.1	20.5	29.5
Frequent	36.4	34.1	29.5	4.5	31.8	29.5
Always	9.1	29.5	25.0	4.5	25.0	20.5

**Table 8. Frequency of using social media networks by companies for different reasons**

Frequency of using social media networks	Companies' reasons of using social media networks														
	Providing information (%)			Marketing. Promotion (%)		Communication (%)			Company development (%)			Relaxing. Entertainment (%)	Social interactions (%)		
	A1	A2	A3	B1	B2	C1	C2	C3	D1	D2	D3	E	F1	F2	F3
Never	0	2.3	13.6	2.3	0	9.1	4.5	15.9	9.1	11.4	4.5	9.1	4.5	4.5	6.8
Rare	4.5	4.5	15.9	9.1	4.5	11.4	22.7	13.6	13.6	20.5	15.9	18.2	27.3	6.8	13.6
Sometimes	25.0	13.6	22.7	27.3	15.9	29.5	25.0	27.3	34.1	27.3	25.0	25.0	34.1	45.5	43.2
Frequent	27.3	43.2	22.7	22.7	15.9	25.0	29.5	22.7	22.7	22.7	31.8	31.8	18.2	18.2	11.4
Always	43.2	36.4	25.0	38.6	63.6	25.0	18.2	20.5	20.5	18.2	22.7	15.9	15.9	25.0	25.0

Besides, looking at our results about companies' reasons of using social media networks for their interactions with customers (Table 8), we can see that for almost every reasons identified, the companies try to use social media network as often as they can, focusing on brand, products and services promotion (always- 63.6%). It is curious to see that companies not really use social media to be informed about other companies' concerns

(at least frequently- 34.1%), customers' concerns (at least frequently -43.2%), employees' concerns (at least frequently- 36.4%) or to develop new partnerships (at least frequently- 40.9 %) and they rarely provide information about companies' events or parties (29.5%).

## Discussions and conclusions

This study presents the differences between companies and customers from the perspective of using social media networks. The results pointed out that Facebook and LinkedIn are the internet users' favorite platforms for interacting with companies or customers, fact that has also been demonstrated in Valoria's study from 2017. On one hand, Facebook is the most used social media networks, being well known by the internet users and also publicly advertised such as in TV commercials. On the other hand, LinkedIn is the professional platform that someone uses when it comes to more serious and official things about the possible partnership between customers and companies.

According to our findings, there are some positive moderate correlations between identified reasons, like those between why consumers use social media for seeking information (RA) and why companies use social media for marketing (FRB) ( $R=0.521$ ,  $p<0.01$ ) and social interaction (FRF) ( $R=0.401$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

Companies should track Google Trends and social platforms to identify the most popular information searched by customers and check through market research or case studies what are the customers' needs in order to improve the company's marketing strategies or their social interactions with the clients. If companies are concerned about these issues, then customers will use social media platforms more often to look for information about products, companies, events, or available jobs.

Furthermore, there are some positive moderate correlations between using social media for communication by consumers (RC) and companies (FRC) ( $R=0.418$ ), using social media by companies for their development (FRD) and using social media by customers for improving services/products offered by a company (RD) ( $R=0.425$ ), all the mentioned correlations being significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

On one hand, companies can use social media to attract customers, to develop new partnerships or to differentiate themselves from competitors, all of these activities contributing to the development of the company, which is also stimulated by the use of social media platforms for purchasing new products or services.

On the other hand, through social media platforms, customers can read or provide reviews of companies' products or services, express their opinions on how to improve existing products or services, which the company can use to develop it. In addition, if companies want to develop themselves through social media, they should organize various contests to stimulate their clients to participate in the company's development process. Thus, the communication between companies and customers will be improved. Our study is an exploratory one, with a few limitations. First, only perceptions of the people surveyed have been considered. The people surveyed played a double role in our study: customers who use social media and employees who are working in companies that use social media. Therefore, in the future, the authors want to reconsider studying

companies' reasons for using social media by analyzing the managers' responses that are responsible for marketing and online marketing in organizations.

Second, the sample was represented only by 44 people, which is why in the future, the authors want to conduct a more elaborate study, on a much larger national sample in order to see if the differences between companies and customers from the perspective of using social media networks will be the same as those identified in this study.

By taking into account the issues presented, companies should carefully consider their social media experience and adapt their every social media network to the needs and preferences of their targeted internet users. In order to do that, companies should start with recruiting digital marketing managers with experience or at least with starting to think like a customer. If companies knew why and how a potential customer uses social media to facilitate their interaction, then they could adapt their strategies to focus on giving customers the value they seek. More important than that, if companies do not know what are the most important things for customers, then they should ask them, making them feel important and contribute to developing new ideas, processes, products or services. Future studies look to present more in-depth recommendations for companies so that they align with their customers' needs when engaging with them on social media.

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