



Facebook brand page as a relationship management tool

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ABSTRACT

Public relations practitioners and social media professionals have shifted to building customer relationships through social media. A recent study mentioned that PR practitioners should adopt social media as a relationship management tool, yet academic research addressing this remains limited. Apart from the academic research gap, practical problems were identified, where recent research found that practitioners need to understand how to effectively and strategically communicate via social media. Additionally, the geographical research gap in public relations studies in Bangladesh is getting limited attention. To address these gaps, this study used the organisational public relationship maintenance theory to conceptualise social media (Facebook) brand page engagement to understand further how relationships with key public members on Facebook can be maintained. Based on 12 in-depth interviews with Bangladeshi university students, the study found that a relational approach can create significant engagement on Facebook brand pages. The results demonstrate that a relational approach to communication could create social media brand engagement, which will be helpful for practitioners in building sustainable relationships. The study also discusses potential findings, limitations, and future research directions.

Keywords: **Public relations, social media, relationship maintenance strategy, Facebook, brand page**

INTRODUCTION

Today, most organisations communicate with consumers via social media channels (Gómez et al., 2019; So et al., 2014). Thus, social media may affect how consumers receive and engage with organisations' content. Moreover, marketing and public relations have become more integrated due to social media (Sutherland et al., 2020). Instead of focusing on transactional approaches, public relations professionals build consumer relationships (Gómez et al., 2019; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Public Relations (PR) practitioners have now shifted to building customer relationships to ensure satisfaction and loyalty rather than maintaining a transaction-based strategy (Gómez et al., 2019; Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

Recent research highlights the necessity for PR to adopt social media as a relationship management tool, notably for customer service and stakeholder engagement (Namisango & Kang, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2020). Social media brand pages can handle stakeholder concerns and humanise interactions, as well as enhance satisfaction and engagement to foster customer care (Freberg & Kim, 2020). However, studies by Freberg and Kim (2020) as well as Sutherland et al. (2020) lack the conceptual clarity on humanising interactions and interactivity in social media brand engagement. Moreover, it remains unclear how humanised interactions can enhance engagement and satisfaction. Past studies suggest that the organisational public relationship maintenance theory (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Li, 2015) can be a viable theory for this research. Social media gives businesses more opportunities to interact with their customers and replacing the formal, traditional communication styles (conversational tone) of corporate websites with a more informal, humanised tone (Kulkarni, 2019; Men & Tsai, 2012), can be a solution.

Besides, this theory's components, like conversational human voice, relational commitment, responsiveness, and positivity (Kelleher & Miller, 2006), can improve Facebook brand page engagement, encourage sustainable relationships and address research gaps. Moreover, well-maintained social media pages/platforms of organisations and active user involvement help build relationships organically between organisations and stakeholders through interactions like comments, queries, support, and recommendations (Men & Tsai, 2014). In this way, this research considers social media (Facebook brand page) as a relationship management tool.

This research attempts to fill the above-mentioned gaps and explore how a relational approach can enhance social media brand engagement for relationship building. Understanding which relational approaches can enhance social media brand engagement helps practitioners understand the strategic use of social media as a relationship management tool.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Organisational public relationship maintenance theory and social media brand engagement

Relationship maintenance methods and relational outcomes through online communications was explored by Kelleher and Miller (2006). Kelleher and Miller (2006) used the relationship management scale from Hon and Grunig's (1999) study to develop

measures of relationship maintenance strategy. They then used their expanded scale to compare public perceptions of a company’s blogs to its traditional public relations communication (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser, 2010; Sweetser & Kelleher, 2016). This study adopted the relational maintenance strategies by Kelleher and Miller’s (2006) study, which is also known as the organisational public relationship maintenance theory (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Li, 2015).

Public relations academics have studied relationship maintenance strategies in a variety of online contexts, including blogs (Kelleher & Miller, 2006), websites (Ki & Hon, 2006), and social media (Facebook and Twitter) (Dhanesh & Duthler, 2019; Men & Tsai, 2012; Men & Tsai, 2015; Painter, 2015; Sisson, 2017). Nonetheless, from the above references, the use of the relationship maintenance strategy for social media brand engagement (particularly Facebook brand pages) did not get much attention in the public relations literature. Furthermore, even though cultural variations might result in various message designs across audiences, very little of the earlier research looked at relational strategies outside of a Western setting, such as Asian social media contexts (Cucchi, 2019; Huang et al., 2023). This research also wants to examine whether contexts in non-Western countries create any differences in social media brand engagement. Table 1 shows past research on relationship maintenance strategies and social media in public relations literature.

Table 1. Relationship maintenance strategies and social media-related research

Author(s)	Title	Topic	Method	Theory	Findings	Antecedents	Consequence	Platform	Country
Men & Tsai (2014)	Perceptual, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes of organization–public engagement on corporate social networking sites	Public engagement	Survey	Organisational public relationship	Findings underscore the importance of public engagement via social media on enhancing perceived corporate transparency and authenticity, and thereby cultivating strong relationships.	Public engagement	OPR/ Public advocacy	Facebook	USA
Water et al. (2009)	Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook	Stakeholder engagement	Content analysis	Relationship cultivation	Results indicate that nonprofit organization incorporated disclosure, information dissemination, and involvement revealed that disclosure was the most often used strategy. Though components of dissemination and involvement were used differently by the nonprofit subsectors, overall they were largely ignored by the organizations.	No	No	Facebook	

Table 1. (con't)

Author(s)	Title	Topic	Method	Theory	Findings	Antecedents	Consequence	Platform	Country
Men & Tsai (2012)	How companies cultivate relationships with the publics on social network sites: Evidence from China and the United States	Relationship cultivation	Content analysis	Relationship cultivation strategies/ Uses & gratification	Results indicate that companies in both countries (USA, China) employed disclosure, information dissemination, and interactivity and involvement), but the specific tactics vary across the two markets	No	No	Facebook /Renren	USA/ China
Liu et al. (2020)	Developing a multi-level organization-public dialogic communication framework to assess social media-mediated disaster communication and engagement outcomes	Public engagement	Content analysis	Organisational public dialogic communication	The study develops a multi-level framework to assess the dialogic communication level of social media messages.	Media richness, correcting, and confirming message topics	Social media public engagement	Facebook	USA
Dhanesh & Duthler (2019)	Relationship management through social media influencers: Effects of followers' awareness of paid endorsement	Social media influencer	Survey	Organization–Public relationships	Study found that awareness of paid endorsement relates to ad recognition, which is correlated with purchase and eWOM intentions. Study also found that awareness of paid endorsement is correlated with influencer-follower relationship, which is associated with purchase and eWOM intentions	No	No	Facebook /Twitter	UAE
Tsai & Men (2018)	Social messengers as the new frontier of organization-public engagement: A WeChat study	Organisation -Public engagement	Survey	Organization–Public relationships	Publics' social messenger dependency and privacy perception of the medium are found to effectively drive public engagement, which in turn enhances organization-public relationships.	Social media dependency/ Privacy concern/ Perceived social media messengers	Public organisation and engagement / OPR	Wechat	China

Table 1. (con't)

Author(s)	Title	Topic	Method	Theory	Findings	Antecedents	Consequence	Platform	Country
Huang et al. (2021)	Relationship cultivation and public engagement via social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in China	Relationship cultivation	Content analysis	Relationship cultivation strategies	Results showed that both relationship cultivation strategies and disaster social media use effectively increased engagement between Chinese companies and their publics, although on different levels.	No	No	Weibo	China
Saffer et al. (2013)	The effects of organizational Twitter interactivity on organization–public relationships	Interactivity	Survey	Organization–Public relationships	Findings suggest that an organization’s level of Twitter interactivity influences relationship quality.	No	No	Twitter	USA
Painter (2015)	Online political public relations and trust: Source and interactivity effects in the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign	Political PR	Experimental design	Organisation –Public relationship	The results indicate Facebook is differentially more effective than campaign websites at building both citizens’ relationships with the campaigns and trust in government, especially among users who engage in expressive behaviors triggering higher levels of elaboration and self-awareness	No	No	Facebook	USA
Men & Tsai (2015)	Infusing social media with humanity: Corporate character, public engagement, and relational outcomes	Public engagement	Survey	Organisation –Public relationship	The results underscore the effectiveness of a personification approach in social media communication to construct an agreeable corporate character for enhancing public engagement and organization–public relationships.	Public engagement/ Corporate characters / Parasocial interaction/ Community identification	OPR	Facebook	USA

Table 1. (con't)

Author(s)	Title	Topic	Method	Theory	Findings	Antecedents	Consequence	Platform	Country
Sisson (2017)	Control mutuality, social media, and organization-public relationships: A study of local animal welfare organizations' donors	Relationship management	Survey	Organization-Public Relationships	This study examined the role of control mutuality in social media engagement to provide insight for social media strategy creation for non-profit organizations	No	No	Facebook	USA

Studies that were previously conducted reveal that adopting a conversational tone for corporate social media posts increases engagement and favourable outcomes (Sung & Kim, 2014; Vernuccio, 2014). Moreover, a recent study also reveals that organisations should be more open and ensure their privacy by creating engagement through social media brand pages (Freberg & Kim, 2020). Additionally, organisations should initiate organisation-to-customer interaction responsiveness, which captures how engaged customers are with materials shared on social media by an organisation (Lin et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2016). It seems that employing a relational maintenance strategy affects social media engagement. Hence, based on previous literature, this strategy did not conceptualise a particular social media (Facebook) brand page. So, the following research question was formulated:

RQ. How do relational maintenance strategies impact consumer engagement on Facebook brand pages?

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised qualitative face-to-face semi-structured interviews with 12 private university students in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Participants, appointed via purposive sampling, had previous experience engaging with Bangladeshi Facebook brand pages. The interview participants were university students from Dhaka because Dhaka ranks second in active Facebook users globally, and young people (18–34) are the most active users, given the rapid growth of social media in Bangladesh (Ahmed et al., 2021; Hoque et al., 2020; Khalid & Chowdhury, 2018; Serafin, 2018; Storie, 2017). The interviews, lasting 30–45 minutes, explored constructs like relationship maintenance strategies. The interviewer provided the definitions of each construct and asked 3–4 questions to participants, such as, “Have you ever witnessed any of those activities provided in the definitions of the constructs?” The interviewer also asked how much the relationship maintenance strategy helped them engage with social media (e.g., Facebook) brand pages.

After all the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the researcher began looking for recurring themes, in order to begin manual and computer-assisted coding of the transcriptions. The researcher read the transcriptions numerous times, and then underlined in yellow, the portions she believed would be useful, and in green, the passages she thought would be the most beneficial. Themes began to emerge as the researcher collected relevant quotes for the analysis. The researcher used copy and paste to transfer these findings into a new document so that she could compile a list of the topics and make a copy of the participant information for each topic. This provided the researcher the flexibility to analyse the information related to each code and modify words based on the suggestions made by participants while the procedure was ongoing. A summary of the research methodology is given in Figure 1.

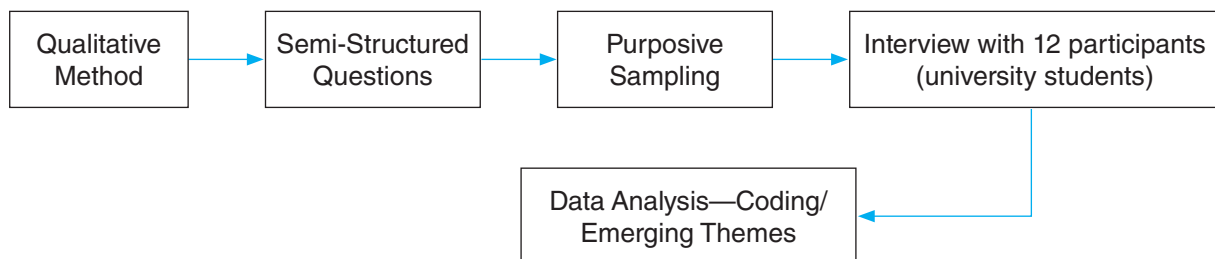


Figure 1. Summary of the research methodology

FINDINGS

Relational maintenance strategy and Facebook brand page engagement

The findings highlight a dominant trend for informal, friendly, and humanistic interactions on Facebook pages in Bangladesh. A key emerging theme is that communication styles that imitate natural human conversations rather than traditional corporate communications in Facebook brand pages create a sense of warmth, genuineness, and relatability, which drives more engagement. Moreover, authenticity and expertise were critical factors that participants appreciated while a casual, helpful tone was maintained when products were demonstrated on Facebook brand pages. For example, one participant stated that:

When I visited their Facebook brand page, the page was very welcoming, and the page also mentioned that if you are stuck or have any difficulties, you can send us a message. I also take screenshots and get replies within a second. Moreover, the contents and captions of the pages are more informal. These are why I was engaged with that Facebook brand page.

Regardless, another participant also mentioned that the lack of brand transparency leads to a negative effect, discouraging participants from engaging with a brand on Facebook. For example, Participant 4 shared that he has had a bad experience with a brand page. He had visited that particular brand page, but they did not show the hidden charges of their products, such as delivery charges and other charges. That discouraged him from engaging further with that brand page.

Another key theme that emerged was that participants cherished brand pages that used humour, informal language, and personalised responses. Such approaches from brand pages foster stronger emotional connections. These themes align with the conversational human voice, where brands that communicate less corporately and more like people are perceived as more approachable. Further, generational aspects of engagement on social media mattered as well. Gen Z prefers brands that adopt their linguistic style and present an environment that feels fun and engaging, rather than purely transactional. One participant stated that:

There are different kinds of brands and industries in Bangladesh. You will find that in certain industries, Facebook brand pages have a more conversational approach, and the rate of interactions is high. Due to this element of warmth, we also feel obliged to be more polite in our responses and ask for information in a positive and friendly manner. On the other hand, we also have many brands catering to Gen-Z. Those brands conversationally speak in fluid Gen-Z linguistics, making Gen-Z feel more relaxed, as if they are talking to a friend. So, these brands develop personalities, and we want to have fun with them and not just have informational conversations with them. It varies from brand to brand. The brand pages that use more conversational and warm language and speak in our (Gen-Z) language or how we speak it easier to communicate with those brands to engage.

The participant's feedback suggests that humanising the brand voice can be a competitive advantage in brand digital communications, strengthening customer relationships and loyalty. The findings highlight that genuineness and transparency are important for encouraging consumer trust and long-term engagement with Facebook brand pages. Participants appreciated brand pages that openly communicated product authenticity, such as showcasing raw materials or incorporating QR codes for verification. One participant shared:

The brand page showed that their products are authentic and their price is higher, and if you do not think it is authentic, you can check through a QR code scan. This is how brand pages communicate relational commitment through the openness and authenticity of their products and services.

This aligns with communicated relational commitment, where brands vigorously exhibit honesty and openness to acquire more substantial relationships with the customer. When brands proactively communicate facts about their products and pricing, buyers are likelier to engage, trust, and build loyalty towards them. Another key theme is the interplay between brand authenticity and consumer loyalty. Participants admitted they would remain loyal and committed if they had transparent and positive experiences with brands on Facebook. One participant highlighted:

I had a bad experience with a brand page. I visited a brand page, but they did not show the hidden charges of their products, such as delivery charges and other charges. That made me not engage with those brand pages. Hence, when I visited other pages where brand pages were authentic and transparent, I became loyal to those brand pages.

The above quote implies that brand communication openness strengthens emotional and behavioural loyalty, while misleading practices corrupt trust, driving consumers toward more credible competitors on social media. This presents an essential significance for brands: maintaining authenticity is not just about short-term engagement but cultivating a long-term, trust-based relationship with their audience.

Responsiveness is also another primary concern for the Bangladeshi consumer. The findings emphasise the key role of responsiveness in Facebook brand page engagement in Bangladesh. This theme suggests that punctual responses build a sense of attentiveness and reliability, directly influencing purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. Participants expressed frustration with delayed responses, indicating that slow communication can lead to disengagement and a shift towards more responsive competitors. This highlights the growing consumer expectation for instant interaction in the digital space, where brands that fail to provide prompt replies, risk losing potential customers. One participant explained that:

Some brand pages respond so quickly. On the other hand, some brand pages respond very slowly, and it takes 2 or 3 days to respond to their customer's queries. When those brand pages provided a quick response, I became more interested in buying products and services from them and felt more engaged with them.

The majority of participants noted that many brand pages in Bangladesh are taking initiatives to show their positivity to their subscribers. The findings highlight the central role of positivity in brand communication on Facebook, indicating that a hopeful and approachable tone encourages more heightened engagement. However, a deeper interpretation implies that this engagement concerns positivity, personalisation, and bold customer service. Participants appreciated cheerful, modest interactions, and a new theme emerged, suggesting that relevant products cater to their needs. This implies a more comprehensive theme of perceived mutuality, where customers feel appreciated when brands focus more on responding optimistically. This optimistic response also strengthens loyalty and interaction. One participant shared:

Whenever I need any suggestions regarding their products, brand pages always provide them positively and optimistically, and whenever I buy any products that are not in stock, brand pages always suggest that I can buy those stock-out products when those products become available, which makes me more engaged with those brands.

Moreover, the distinction between positive and unfavourable brand communication signifies that personality and conversational humanisation are essential to brand engagement. Participants correlated brand interactions with essential human social manners, suggesting that brands that imitate sociable, engaging interpersonal dynamics will thrive more in cultivating long-term relationships. The emerging theme of passionate association through digital conversations also means that brands must go beyond product advertising to formulate noteworthy, trust-based relations that stimulate resumed engagement. One participant highlighted:

This is like basic human interaction. You would not go to the individual who is not open-minded or close-minded; you would go to the person who is open, cheerful, and funny in the room. It's a primary human interaction. Yes, I would go to a better approachable individual than a decisive person. I do not have any experience, but if brand pages employ more enjoyment and positive communication, I will go to those brand pages.

Participants believed providing suggestions, warnings, and solutions to customer queries in a timely manner is something that brand pages owe their customers. Moreover, after these favourable responses, customers not only become engaged but will also share the brand's good services with others, which refers to electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). One participant commented that:

The skincare brand page always gives me whatever I need regarding suggestions, precautions, and other things, which I think are in line with their tasks and responsibilities.

The frequent focus on task completion suggests that engagement is a by-product of interaction and an outcome of brands revealing their responsibility and customer-centric manners. Additionally, after-sales support is a key aspect in maintaining engagement, demonstrating that customer relationships grow beyond the point of purchase. This highlights the evolving anticipation that brand pages express effectively and carry customer concerns, strengthening digital brand presence. Another participant shared:

I ordered a product from a certain brand page but faced a usability issue. However, brand pages send tutorial videos to me that are already posted on their pages. That showed that brand pages are more responsible in fulfilling their tasks.

DISCUSSION

In reference to the research question, which asked, “ How do relational maintenance strategies impact consumer engagement on Facebook brand pages?, the study's preliminary objective was to determine if there is a beneficial impact on Facebook brand page engagement by employing the relational maintenance strategy components. The reason is to manage social media (Facebook) as a more complete relationship management tool,

which academic researchers have yet to address (Namisango & Kang, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2020).

In the past, the direct association between relational maintenance strategy and social media brand engagement received scant attention in public relations literature. For example, conversational human voice is part of the relationship management studies, which however, did not study the direct relationship between social media brand engagement in past analyses (Chen et al., 2021; Dijkmans et al., 2015; Javornik et al., 2020; Kelleher, 2009; Men et al., 2018; Men et al., 2022; Men & Tsai, 2015; Purani & Jeesha, 2023; Schamari & Schaefers, 2015; Sparks et al., 2016). Only one study concentrated on conversational human voice, a function of interpersonal communication that engages people on different social media platforms (WeChat) (Men, 2022).

Communicated relational commitment represents a very small concentration in public relations literature. Previous analyses regarding relational maintenance strategies contradicted Sweetser and Metzgar's (2007) findings, and the research context differed. However, this study's findings align with previous study's findings. The consequences of the previous study suggest that communicated relational commitment is essential for engaging stakeholders to build relationships (Browning & Sweetser, 2020). Further, Sweetser and Tedesco's (2014) study revealed that strong relational commitment can build stronger relationships with respective stakeholder groups (Sweetser & Tedesco, 2014).

Regarding responsiveness, previous studies reveal that businesses and non-profit associations often do not respond to emails from external stakeholders (Avidar, 2013; Harrison-Walker, 2001; Kent et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2001). The lack of response can be categorised as either an absence of responsiveness or a delayed, incomplete, or unhelpful response. This research presents mixed results, with organisation-initiated responses having Facebook brand page engagement but not significant. This is because participants in the interview stated that many organisational Facebook pages did not respond in time, which explains their lack of engagement with those brand pages. Positivity/Optimism is another dimension of the relational maintenance strategy, which suggests that organisations use a positive tone to strengthen their relationships with consumers and brands (Kelleher, 2009). In this research, the qualitative results positively affected Facebook brand page engagement. Task sharing is another important element of the relational maintenance strategy (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). A previous study found that task sharing did not affect online blog posting (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). However, in this study, task sharing improved social media brand engagement.

The above discussion and the research findings indicate that a relational maintenance strategy is needed to maintain relationships. However, in the Bangladesh context, one of the components of the relational approach that was not practised thoroughly was responsiveness. Thus, maintaining sustainable engagement becomes very challenging for the organisation's brand pages due to the lack of timely response. This research demonstrates that employing conversational human voice and communicating relational commitment not only creates brand page engagement, but also shows greater customer loyalty and satisfaction. These findings indicate that future research can be extended by applying a relational approach to social media brand engagement and its outcome. Another new insight from this research is that the Gen Z generation expects more humour from brand pages in Bangladesh. Hence, these findings also raise the question of how

brands counteract informality with professionalism, confirming that extremely casual communications does not damage credibility and trust.

CONCLUSION

This research sheds light on the factors affecting consumers' willingness to interact more with brand pages. Findings from the in-depth interviews show that the relational approach influences the public to engage with Facebook brand pages, which predicts the public's key behavioural intentions. These key behavioural intentions also enhance the understanding of how relationship management should be frequently utilised in social media (Facebook) to build relationships.

This research emphasises the necessity to tailor relational maintenance strategies to diverse customers and industries. Since customer anticipations, communication techniques, and engagement drivers differ across sectors, PR professionals must adjust their strategies accordingly. For example, findings indicate that brands in service sectors may prioritise responsiveness and task sharing to enhance trust. In contrast, lifestyle brands may leverage positivity and conversational human voice to facilitate engagement. Moreover, strategic communication can help organisations achieve certain goals (Abidin et al., 2024), and public relations is an asset for organisational stakeholder relationship building (Barry & Hafiz, 2024).

There are a number of limitations that needs to be acknowledged. The first limitation is that this research is qualitative and has a small sample size. This research's small sample size does not represent the entire population of social media users in Bangladesh. The second limitation is that this research did not focus on any particular brands or industries from Bangladesh. The third limitation is that this research only focused on a particular social media setting, Facebook. The fourth limitation is that this research only focused on the Bangladeshi customer perspective of the relational approach on social media.

While findings from this qualitative study have provided some interesting insights into customer behaviour on social media (Facebook) brand engagement, future research should focus on a quantitative study with a hypothesised relationship between variables regarding relational maintenance strategy and social media brand engagement. Future research should also focus on large sample sizes and various social media platforms (Instagram, X, TikTok). This could offer more richly nuanced insights into the complexities of customer behaviour on different social media. Moreover, future research should focus on particular brands from different industries and country settings, which will enhance this research findings.

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