



# The structure of conversations on social networks: Between dialogic and dialectic threads



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## ABSTRACT

The structure of conversations on social networks may affect the users' perceptions regarding the informative value of the conversations. Consequently, to draw the maximum benefit from social networks, companies should understand which form these online conversations take. The paper argues that the conversations on social networks can have two forms: (1) dialogic: users interacting among themselves; (2) dialectic: users interacting with the company. Through three empirical studies, the research suggests that users express some preference for dialogic conversations, and young users have a higher tendency than senior users to consider dialogic conversations more informative than the dialectic alternative. These results suggest that social media managers should shape the layout and design of social media platforms to support dialogic conversations, encouraging horizontal interactions among users.

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## 1. Introduction

Social media represent a radical revolution through which companies redefine the manner in which they conduct business. The new era of the Web is characterized by user-generated content (UGC) and co-creation (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008), and social media are the ideal platform for the co-creation of value. Value creation is no longer the exclusive terrain of the company – offering consumers the final output of its process – and now encompasses the direct interaction between the company and an empowered customer (Antorini, Muñiz, & Askildsen, 2012; Füller et al., 2009; Ritzer, 2014). The typical form of online interaction is that of conversations through which actors create knowledge and value (Kuk, 2006). There is today a renewed need to understand the best structure of conversations on social media so that the company can improve its communications strategy performance and user experiences. The paper argues that conversations in social media take two main forms: dialogic (i.e., horizontal interactions among peers) and dialectic (i.e., exclusively vertical interaction with the source of an input, such as the company's comment initiating the

thread). Through three empirical studies, the paper investigates social media users' preference between dialogic and dialectic conversations, both in general and in a product-related context. The results emerging from the study and managerial implications are then discussed. The paper aims to answer the question of how organizations can effectively and efficiently exploit social media by monitoring and managing the structure of online conversations.

In Information Systems studies, a “growing body of research is examining [...] networks to gain a better understanding of how firms interact with their consumers, how people interact with each other” (Sundararajan et al., 2013; p. 883). The focus of those studies is in the network and its structure, while less is known about the preferences of users for a given conversational structure. By analyzing both the network structure of a conversation and the perception of online users, our work contributes to advance the knowledge on this gap by studying the preference of online users towards a dialogic vs. a dialectic structure of conversations.

## 2. Dialogic and dialectic conversations on social media

### 2.1. Interactions on social media

The variety of social media available for business is striking. Today, collaborative platforms, blogs, virtual worlds, and social networks of any sort offer enterprises of any size a vast repertoire of communication and collaborative tools (Kaplan & Haenlein,

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2010). A key mandate for firms is to integrate all these tools into a common communication strategy (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011). One aspect of this integration is to adopt key performance indicators (KPIs) that would be used as cross-platforms and would thus be viable for any of the many forms of social media.

Winer (2009) assigns a central role to the metrics and measurements of the new ways to interact with customers, especially given that “[t]here is considerable uncertainty about what metrics to use to gauge the effectiveness of the new media” (p. 112). We can distinguish two types of KPIs for business communication on social media. The first is platform-specific, like the number of *Likes* and shares of a post on Facebook or the number of retweets on Twitter. The second type – more interesting for companies and the focus of the present work – consists of communication KPIs that are applicable to all social media uses. In order to develop cross-platform KPIs, it is necessary to unfold the structure of communications in social media. The structure of conversations on different social platforms is a cross-platform KPI, because it may be applied to Twitter, Facebook, internal social media and other platforms.

The extant literature has dealt with a variety of KPIs, such as the size and resilience of an online community (that is the willingness to remain involved with the community in spite of variability in the topics discussed; Butler et al., 2014), the distribution of contributions among participants (whether skewed or flat; Johnson, Faraj, & Kuradavalli, 2014), the presence of a leadership (Faraj, Kuradavalli, & Wasko, 2015). However, less attention has been given to the structure of the conversation, that is how users address their comments and contributions (whether towards other users or towards a company-provided input). Online environments are complex systems made of many factors, including individual traits and technological affordances (Butler et al., 2014; Zammuto et al., 2007). The structure of an online conversation is a synthetic outcome of those factors. Therefore, the structure of conversation is a salient KPI because it can summarize that complex intertwining of factors defining how users interact online.

The vertical interaction between the company and its customers is a distinctive feature of communication on social media. This interaction can extend to other users, thereby creating horizontal conversations among users. It is through these company-customers and customer-customer interactions that value is co-created. To be useful, communication KPIs need to assess the type of structure that these interactions take, whether vertical and horizontal, that is, dialectic or dialogic, as will be illustrated below.

We can consider two kinds of interaction: vertical (between the company and its customers) and horizontal (among customers). The literature has recently shifted from a view that considers the company-customer interaction as the most valuable form of interaction to one in which a wider base of users discussing among themselves has become accepted, thus subscribing to a customer-to-customer form of interaction. The vertical interaction (company-customer) is the oldest kind of contact, born with the development of websites. Companies adopt the vertical interaction to collaborate with lead users. This interaction assumes that few lead users create the greater component of value (Von Hippel, 2005). This view usually observes a power law distribution of contributions online whereby few users account for the most part of the interactions (Johnson, Faraj, & Kuradavalli, 2014). Indeed, in social media, a small number of users account for most of the content, and only a small segment of online users are active in interacting with the company. Mathwick et al. (2008), in their study of a peer-to-peer problem-solving community, find that 25% of the community members do not contribute to the discussion; 60% do it occasionally; and only 12% regularly. These users then interact with the company and co-create value with it.

By moving toward large online platforms, the idea of the company-customer interaction as the best form of co-creation

persists. Many online initiatives by companies to interact with customers involve some form of vote or selection whereby the user is required to select options without much interaction with other users. In this “empowerment-to-select”, a company can “give customers a sense of control over a company’s product selection process, allowing them to collectively select the final products the company will later sell to the broader market” (Fuchs, Prandelli, & Schreier, 2010, p. 65).

Today, social media have unleashed the power of users by adding a horizontal (i.e., customer-to-customer) dimension to the traditional vertical interaction. The development of social media brings a new light to the debate on whether company-customer or customer-to-customer interaction is more valuable. We can distinguish three types of value co-creation: value facilitation occurring in the provider’s domain, value co-creation in the interaction between provider and customer, and value-in-use occurring in the customer domain (Grönroos & Voima, 2013). The current literature emphasizes the latter two elements, exalting the autonomous role of customers, without the company’s involvement. Discussion on social media may start from an input provided by the company and scale up to involve different users in a complex ramification of the conversation. This latter discussion, though not directly referred to the company’s original input, is valuable because it enriches the input and offers a wide repertoire of ideas.

## 2.2. Dialogic and dialectic conversations

We can classify online conversations as either dialectic or dialogic. Dialectic processes follow the logic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. Each party in a dialectic conversation tries to impose his argument over that of others. In online conversations, one can find a dialectic form in the vertical interactions, when the company provides an input (a comment that starts a discussion thread), which seeks comments, votes, or other reactions from individual customers. The company then draws a synthesis from the mass of replies it receives. For instance, the company determines which new product design is preferred by the voters. In this process, there is no real interaction among users. Dialogic conversations are based on the premise that knowledge does not advance by means of opposition of different views. In the dialogic process, the parties reciprocally enrich the position of the other. While the ideas of all participants are meshed together, the final outcome is not a synthesis of the different contributions. Actually, the outcome of a dialogic process may be flexible and never final, distinct from the synthesis of a dialectic interaction, which represents an endpoint. Dialogic conversation is horizontal, involving peers interacting together. Dialogic processes have some more value, as shown by Sennett (2012), who attributes the failure of Google Wave to the fact that its creators framed it as a dialectic process instead of a dialogic one. Google Wave was an online collaboration platform. Each participant could see the stream of content on her screen constantly updated immediately as this new material was put online. Google Wave was dialectic because the contributions that received few direct replies were automatically moved to the periphery of the stream so that content sharing only involved the content with more contacts, rather than the most discussed content among peers. Instead of creating new knowledge through dialogic conversations, this dialectic process tended to create a consensus around extant knowledge (Sennett, 2012).

Social media and online collaborative platforms today are the ideal context to advance knowledge and create value through dialogic processes. For example, Wikipedia articles represent the outcome a dialogic process. Each Wikipedian works on what fellow Wikipedians wrote before, adapting her additions and modifications to the overall article. In the marketing field, word-of-mouth in the era of traditional media (and the first Internet) consisted of

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