

## DOCTORAL THESIS

# Communicating and Engaging with Consumers in China's Social Media:A Dialogic Communication Approach

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## ABSTRACT

Adopting the dialogic theory of public relations, the research examined the definition, applications, and effects of dialogic corporation–consumer communication and strategies for and antecedents of corporation–consumer engagement (CCE) in mainland China’s social media when business is as usual. The research employed a mixed-methods approach. First, 36 in-depth interviews—targeting 20 social media managers from large corporations and 16 consumers who had continuously interacted with corporate social media accounts in China—were conducted to explore (1) the definitions of CCDC from both corporate and consumer perspectives, (2) corporate applications of CCDC, and (3) consumer expectations on how CCDC should be practiced. In addition, the interview data were used to modify the conceptual model that postulates how CCDC affects consumer engagement with corporate social media accounts. An online survey with 548 Mainland Chinese consumers who had followed at least one corporate social media account was then conducted to test the causal effects of the revised model using a structural equation model (SEM) analysis.

The research found that Chinese corporations and consumers conceive CCDC when business as usual as *a form of open, interpersonal conversation that most often manifests as social media threads within corporation–consumer message loops*. CCDC, as an ethical communication orientation, was rarely applied among Chinese corporations nor was it expected by their consumers. Instead, they controlled how CCDC unfolds while allowing some degree of *openness* and *mutuality* when practicing it. Their consumers expected CCDC to be a corporate means of *fulfilling*

*consumer needs*, of providing technical and emotional *support*, and of establishing a *social presence*. Effective outcomes of CCDC in China's social media included enhanced organizational effectiveness, improved consumer experience, and strengthened organization–public relationships (OPRs). Such outcomes were facilitated by a sufficient CCDC budget, effective risk management for CCDC, and good collaboration among a corporation's marketing, public relations, and customer service functions. Apart from CCDC, corporations utilized *emotionally appealing messages*, *entertaining content*, and *creating social presence* in social media to engage their consumers. SEM results showed that CCDC enhanced consumer–corporation engagement (CCE) only via consumer–brand identification (CBI). Consumers' gratification obtained by using corporate social media accounts did not affect CCE.

The results of this dissertation project contribute to the public relations literature by providing an in-depth understanding of how corporation–consumer dialogic communication in social media is perceived and practiced in China and why. They also contribute to the literature by identifying the role of consumers' brand identification in mediating the effect of dialogic communication and CCE in social media.

Keywords: *Chinese corporation–consumer dialogic communication*;

*Consumer–brand identification*; *Consumer–corporation engagement*; *Gratifications*;

*Social media*; *The dialogic theory*; *Corporation–consumer communication*