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DEPARTMENT OF ADVERTISING/PUBLIC RELATIONS

SOCIAL MEDIA IN A CRISIS: MITIGATING BRAND IMAGE

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ABSTRACT

Inconclusive patterns of results are found consistently throughout literature regarding a company’s digital crisis communication and its impact on a brand and brand perception. This thesis aims to close some of these gaps by conducting a content analysis of 2,693 Facebook posts made by consumers during three companies’ respective crises.

The results of the study show that the type of feedback companies receive on their social media during a crisis is related to the type of crisis that the company is experiencing. Three major crisis categories have been identified: company values crisis, compromised social media crisis and product/service offering failure crisis. The overwhelming majority of comments are negative, while the intended recipient of these posts varies according to the type of crisis. The size and history of the company is believed to have an impact on the social media feedback as well. Lastly, these results were then used to create a social media in a crisis framework.
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INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly one of the biggest topics in marketing and public relations today is social media. The spectrum of ways that companies can leverage social media is broad and continuously evolving, but its uses also need to be constantly re-evaluated. Studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of social media in branding, communicating with customers, impacting sales and more. Yet, there appears to be one area that the power of social media has not been fully tested or explored: crisis communications.

Traditional crisis communications principles simply no longer apply in the realm of the digital age, and therein lies the need to take a closer look at how social media should be utilized in crisis situations. Consumers can find out information and subsequently distribute that information far and wide before companies have the chance to arrange a plan of action on how to respond. Preparing before a crisis actually occurs is no longer an option for companies, but rather is a necessity.

This thesis takes both a qualitative and quantitative look at how social media has been used in recent crises. Case studies were conducted that examined the background, progression and outcome of the crises. A content analysis also measured the attitudes of customers commenting on company Facebook posts. These findings were then compiled into creating a social media in a crisis framework that is designed to assist companies in planning out a course of action in the event of a crisis.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Evolution and Definition of Social Media

Since the 1960s, nearly every ten years witnessed a technological advance that furthered the evolution of social media to where it is today. In the 1960s, the earliest form of email was introduced, although the Internet was not available to the public until almost thirty years later (Edosomwan et al. 80). The 1970s saw the development of MUD, or multi-user domain, “a real-time virtual world with role-playing games, interactive fiction and online chat” (qtd. in Edosomwan et. al 80). Precursors to the World Wide Web, Electronic Bulletin Board Systems were created in 1978 that enabled users to log in, upload or download information, read news or exchange messages with other users (Edosomwan et. al 80). Shortly thereafter, the Usenet was created. This international discussion system allowed users to post public messages (Kaplan and Haenlein 60). With the 1980s came multiple creations such as The WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), Genie (General Electronic Network for Information Exchange), Listserv and IRC (Internet Relay Chat). All four of these systems fostered communication or information exchange between users in some way (Edosomwan et. al 80).

The first web page on the World Wide Web was posted in August of 1991 (Siricharoen 1). The first social networking site, SixDegrees.com, launched in 1997. Users could create profiles, add friends and eventually search their friends’ lists of friends as well. It was during this time that web logs (blogs) also began to surface (Boyd and Ellison, 214). As high-speed Internet became more accessible to consumers, the number
of social media sites would grow in the coming years (Kaplan and Haenlein 60; Boyd and Ellison 212; Figure 1). Notable in the launch dates of major social network sites are the founding years of Myspace (2003), YouTube and Facebook (2005) and Twitter (2006).

Figure 1: Launch Dates of Major Social Network Sites

![Launch Dates of Major Social Network Sites](image)

Source: Boyd and Ellison

Pertinent to a discussion of the history of social media is the difference between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0. Web 2.0 was proposed in 2005 “as a new type of value creation by websites whereby the users, rather than the website managers, generate the content as was previously the case with Web 1.0” (qtd. from Hung, Seng & Heng 1). Web managers for Web 2.0 sites are responsible for troubleshooting the platform and enhancing the
users’ experiences instead of simply providing users with information, as was the case with Web 1.0 (Hung, Seng & Heng 2).

Just as availability to high-speed Internet fostered social media growth, a few factors enabled Web 2.0 to materialize. These factors were an economy that allowed access to the creative tools needed to create content, coupled with an emerging generation of technically savvy computer users (Kaplan and Haenlein 61). Although the emergence of Web 2.0 is not representative of a specific technological advance, many consider it to be “the platform for the evolution of social media” (qtd. from Kaplan and Haenlein 61).

The distinction between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 provides a background for the definition of social media. According to Kaplan and Haenlein, social media is “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 (UGC)” (61). UGC spans the wide variety of media available online that has been created by users and is publicly viewable by other users.

The following table based off statistics compiled by Digital Insights (Table 1) demonstrates the ubiquitous nature of two of the most popular social networks, Facebook and Twitter, as of November 2013.
Table 1: Facebook and Twitter Usage Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of registered users</strong></td>
<td>1.15 billion+</td>
<td>500+ million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of active users</strong></td>
<td>264,500,000 log on 5 times/day</td>
<td>288 million monthly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of users on mobile devices</strong></td>
<td>751 million</td>
<td>300 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Daily engagement</strong></td>
<td>350 million photos uploaded</td>
<td>400 million tweets sent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Digital Insights

Social Media and Marketing

Social media marketing has been defined as “the intentional influencing of consumer-to-consumer communications by professional marketing techniques” (Cvijikj & Michahelles 8). Utilizing social media is becoming a standard practice for marketers. McKinsey Quarterly conducted a survey that revealed 39 percent of companies use social media services as their primary way to reach customers, a number that is projected to increase to 47 percent in the next four years (Saravanakumar 4445).

Social media offers companies the opportunity to communicate with and listen to their customers in a way that was not possible with traditional media. Blackshaw and Nazarro coined a term, “consumer-generated media,” that looks at UGC in terms of marketing. CGM is defined as “a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities, and issues” (2).
Social Media and Branding

Marketers spend a significant amount of their time building the brand of their companies or products. Branding focuses on how to develop a meaningful relationship with a customer and enhance the customer experience (Gronlund 3). Gronlund defines a brand as “a promise with relevant benefits” (qtd. from Gronlund 4).

Today, much of a brand’s personality is derived from its online presence. Companies, brands and products have Twitter accounts, fan pages and channels on YouTube. Given the interactive nature of social media and Web 2.0, more consumers are directly engaging with brands through such channels (Dennhardt 67). “Because of the social function of brands, consumption and preference of a brand can help in building relationships and forming a sense of community” (qtd. from Dennhardt 71).

The benefits of social networking tools for a brand are similar to the benefits of in-person networking. They include “acquiring new customers, gathering feedback from your customers or community, raising awareness of your community efforts and connections and building your community network” (Blakeman & Brown 49).

Dennhardt creates a concept known as social brand value (SBV), “defined as the perceived value consumers derive from the exchange and interactions with other users centered around the brand” (qtd. from Dennhardt 68). Her study was conducted to determine the influence this social brand value on consumers’ willingness to become an apostle of the product and to pay a price premium. SBV has three dimensions: sense of community, informational value and identity value. The analysis revealed that SBV impacts the direct relationships between perceived quality and price premium, and
between perceived quality and brand evangelism. This impact holds steady across all 91 brands included in the study (Dennhardt 88).

When a company decides to utilize social media for branding, integrating the online presence with traditional media is crucial. In the eyes of the consumer, these two spheres are the same and represent a brand or company’s image (Kaplan and Haenlein 65).

**Traditional Crisis Management**

“Crisis management represents a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damage inflicted” (qtd. from Toombs 5). Tactics of traditional crisis management include “news releases, news conferences, fact sheets, memos and letters to stakeholders, legal advice, third-party endorsements, and monetary compensation” (qtd. from Perry et al. 210).

The literature shows that one of the most cited crisis management frameworks is Steven Fink’s four-stage model. He compares the crisis life cycle to the emergence of a medical issue. The first stage is prodromal (clues or hints of a potential crisis begin to surface), the second stage is the crisis breakout or acute (a triggering event occurs, as does the consequential damage), the third stage is chronic (the effects of the crisis linger as efforts to clean up the crisis continue) and the final stage is resolution (there is some clear signal that the crisis is no longer a concern to stakeholders) (Toombs 7).

Another model is the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), which was created to fill the lack of situational approaches for selecting crisis response strategies.
The response is selected based on the amount of potential reputational damage the crisis might inflict (Coombs & Holladay 168). There are four response options: deny, diminish, rebuild and reinforce. Each option comes with strategies laid out in Table 2 below (Coombs & Holladay 168).

Table 2: Situational Crisis Communication Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deny</th>
<th>Diminish</th>
<th>Rebuild</th>
<th>Reinforce</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Attack the accuser</td>
<td>Excuse: limit organization’s responsibility</td>
<td>Compensation: financially support crisis victims</td>
<td>Bolstering: highlight past good deeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Denial: state that the crisis does not exist</td>
<td>Justification: explain why crisis occurred</td>
<td>Apology: express regret for crisis</td>
<td>Ingratiation: praise stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Scapegoat: state someone else is responsible for the crisis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Victimage: organization claims to be a victim</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Coombs & Holladay

Crisis Communication in the Digital Age

Digital communication for purposes beyond crisis management is becoming more and more ubiquitous. According to Taylor and Perry,

“Online communication is an innovation that is diffusing to various types and sizes of organizations. It will influence how organizations will communicate with the media and publics. Rogers (1962, 1995) identified diffusion as ‘the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels overtime among the members of a social system’” (209).

Innovations are becoming personalized by their users, and consequently being adopted for uses different from what they were intended. In terms of crisis management
in the digital sphere, the speed of the diffusion is critical. The rate of adoption follows an S-shaped curve; diffusions of any change start out slowly and then suddenly accelerate (Taylor and Perry 209).

Liu et al. created a theoretical framework referred to as the Social-mediated Crisis Communication Model (SMCC). This model proposes that publics utilize social media during a crisis for three main reasons: issue relevance, information seeking/sharing and emotional venting/support (Liu et al. 345). Figure 2 below illustrates this model and its interaction with the organization experiencing the crisis, social media, social media influencers and followers and traditional media.

Figure 2: Social-mediated Crisis Communication Model

![Social-mediated Crisis Communication Model](image)

Source: Liu et. al

SMCC fills gaps in other crisis communication models by highlighting the importance of strategically matching crisis information form and source when organizations respond to crises (Liu et al. 350). This has become especially relevant with the advent of Web 2.0 and social media.
Liu et al. carried out an experiment to test how disseminating information over different mediums affects the way that information is received. The results showed that “publics are more likely to accept defensive, supportive, and evasive crisis responses via traditional media than via social media and word-of-mouth” (qtd. from Liu et al. 350).

Conversely, a different study, conducted by Schultz et al. found that “crisis communication via Twitter led to less negative crisis reactions than blogs and newspapers” (qtd. from Schultz et al. 25). This study also determined that the medium the information is delivered through matters more than message.

This conflicting pattern of results is found consistently throughout literature regarding digital crisis communication. It is not entirely conclusive as a result of its constantly evolving landscape and recent emergence in the communications field. This thesis aims to further close some of the gaps that exist concerning this topic.
BACKGROUND

Crisis Case Study: Chick-Fil-A

Company Background

Truett Cathy started what would become Chic-fil-A in 1946 when he opened a single restaurant, Dwarf Grill, in Georgia. In the next two decades, Chic-fil-A would open inside malls and eventually expand to become the second-largest quick-service chicken restaurant chain in the United States.

The company’s most prominent product offerings are variations of the boneless chicken sandwich that Cathy is credited with creating. Chic-fil-A also serves wraps, salads, deserts and breakfast items.

While Chic-fil-A is a privately held and family-owned company, for an initial commitment of $5,000, it is possible to become a franchiser, or “Operator,” as Chic-fil-A refers to them, of a restaurant. As of 2012, there were more than 1,700 restaurant locations in 39 states and annual sales were over $4.6 billion. This represents a 14 percent increase from sales in 2011 (Company Fact Sheet).

Chic-fil-A emphasizes its value of “giving tradition” through superior service. Per Chic-fil-A’s website, employees are trained to treat every customer with “honesty, dignity and respect” (Company Fact Sheet). Giving back also includes local franchises engaging with the community through volunteerism and generosity.

The other aspect of Chic-fil-A’s corporate culture is its Christianity. The restaurant is closed on Sundays. Per Chic-Fil-A’s website, the company’s founder
“believes that all franchised Chick-fil-A Operators and their Restaurant employees should have an opportunity to rest, spend time with family and friends, and worship if they choose to do so. That's why all Chick-fil-A Restaurants are closed on Sundays” (Why We’re Closed on Sundays).

The Crisis

Chic-fil-A first experienced backlash when one of its Pennsylvania stores donated food to a marriage seminar. The seminar was presented by one of the most outspoken groups against gay marriage in the state. The charitable division of Chic-fil-A, WinShape, gave almost $2 million to groups opposing gay marriage in 2010. The Cathy family also donates generously to conservative groups (Cline).

In July of 2012, much news coverage and social media attention surrounded Chic-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy’s statement to a Christian news organization that “Chic-fil-A supports the biblical definition of a family unit” (Severson). When asked if he was against gay marriage on an Atlanta radio program, Cathy replied “guilty as charged.” He went on to say: "I think we are inviting God's judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at Him and say, 'We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage’” (Severson).

The comment may have gone unnoticed had one former customer in New York not called for there to be a same-sex kiss-in staged on August 3, 2012. She urged homosexuals to go to the restaurants and protest on this day (Severson).

There was support for Chic-fil-A as well. Former presidential candidate Rick Santorum and former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee took to their respective
Facebook and Twitter pages to express support for Chic-fil-A; with Huckabee dubbing August 1 “Chic-fil-A Appreciation Day” (Severson).

The issue continued to unfold. The Jim Henson Co., which supplies Muppets for toys in Chic-fil-A’s Kids’ Meals, publicly left its partnership with the company, although Chic-fil-A claimed to have parted ways with The Jim Henson Co. first. The mayors of Boston and Chicago “expressed opposition to new Chick-fil-A outlets opening in their cities.” The Boston Mayor took to his Facebook page to post a letter written to Cathy about his “prejudiced statements” (Cline).

More backlash arose when Chic-fil-A was accused of creating fake Facebook profiles that defended the chain’s decision to stop carrying the Muppets (Wasserman). Refer to Figure 5. Chic-fil-A denied the accusation.

Despite negative attention, Chick-Fil-A sales in 2012 were up 12% to $4.6 billion from $4.1 billion in 2011. The chain also opened 96 new stores (Stafford). QSR Magazine reported that in 2012 Chick-Fil-A also surpassed Kentucky Fried Chicken to become the number-one chicken chain in the United States market. This was despite Chick-Fil-A having one-third of the number of stores that Kentucky Fried Chicken has (Lukovitz).

The Company’s Social Media Response

The company almost entirely utilized its Facebook page to communicate with the public regarding the controversy.
Figure 3: Initial Chick-fil-A Facebook post response to the controversy. July 19, 2012.

Figure 4: Chick-fil-A Twitter post. The link at the end refers to the Facebook status in Figure 3. Twitter was not utilized after this tweet to address any aspect of the crisis. July 19, 2012.
Figure 5: Consumer Facebook post accusing Chick-Fil-A of creating a “fake profile.” July 25, 2012.

Figure 6: Chic-fil-A Facebook post regarding the potential fake Facebook. July 25, 2012.
Crisis Case Study: KitchenAid

Company Background

KitchenAid is one of many brands owned by Whirlpool Corporation. Whirlpool, the largest manufacturer of kitchen appliances in the world, also owns brands such as Maytag, Jenn-Air and Amana. Whirlpool’s three principal company values are pride, passion and performance.

Whirlpool started out as a family-owned business in Michigan in 1911. Exactly one hundred years later, Whirlpool had annual sales of $19 billion, 68,000 employees and 66 manufacturing and technology research centers around the world (Our History).

KitchenAid was established in the United States in 1919 with the launching of its first product, a stand mixer. Whirlpool purchased the KitchenAid division of Dart and Kraft in 1986 to further its countertop kitchen appliance offerings (Our History).
Today, KitchenAid’s product offerings include major appliances such as dishwashers and refrigerators; countertop appliances such as blenders and food processors; and smaller-sized kitchenware (About KitchenAid).

The Crisis

During a presidential debate discussion in 2012, President Barack Obama was reflecting on his childhood with his late grandmother (Lee). A rogue tweet was sent from the KitchenAid tweet account (Figure 8) that sparked controversy for its insensitivity. “The initial post was deleted, but not before it was retweeted by several Twitter users, along with comments like ‘Wow,’ ‘yikes’ and ‘Stay classy, KitchenAid’” (Lee).

Apologies were then issued by the head of the KitchenAid brand, Cynthia Soledad. She apologized directly to President Obama and the White House. Soledad also reassured followers that the person who had sent the tweet would no longer be tweeting for the brand. She then tweeted from the @KitchenAidUSA account at multiple media outlets and asked for the opportunity to go on the record and explain what had happened.

Lastly, Soledad issued a written statement that said, “During the debate last night, a member of our Twitter team mistakenly posted an offensive tweet from the KitchenAid handle instead of a personal handle. This tasteless joke in no way represents our values at KitchenAid” (Lee).
The Company’s Social Media Response

Figure 8: Rogue tweet sent from the KitchenAid USA Twitter account. October 3, 2012.

Figure 9: KitchenAid Facebook response to the crisis. October 3, 2012.
Figure 10: KitchenAid USA Twitter response to the crisis. October 3, 2012.

KitchenAid @KitchenAidUSA 11h
That said, I take full responsibility for my team. Thank you for hearing me out.
 Expand

KitchenAid @KitchenAidUSA 12h
It was carelessly sent in error by a member of our Twitter team who, needless to say, won’t be tweeting for us anymore.
 Expand

KitchenAid @KitchenAidUSA 12h
I would like to personally apologize to President @BarackObama, his family and everyone on Twitter for the offensive tweet sent earlier.
 Expand

KitchenAid @KitchenAidUSA 12h
Hello, everyone. My name is Cynthia Soledad, and I am the head of the KitchenAid brand.
 Expand

KitchenAid @KitchenAidUSA 14h
Deepest apologies for an irresponsible tweet that is in no way a representation of the brand’s opinion. #nbcpolitics
 Expand
Crisis Case Study: Buffer

Company Background

Buffer is a technological start-up that launched in founder Joel Gascoigne’s United Kingdom bedroom in January of 2013. Buffer has grown from seven employees to 13 in the past year.

Buffer is designed to provide users a “personal, more efficient solution to handle sharing on social media” (All About Buffer). Users can schedule content from multiple
accounts and social networks, in addition to receiving analytics about their posts. The product can be utilized by consumers or businesses, although it is primarily used by businesses. As of December 18, 2013, Buffer had almost 1.2 million users who had collectively used Buffer to share more than 113,000,000 posts.

Buffer’s philosophy is that of honesty and authenticity. The company believes that “providing the best value for your particular situation is far more important than a quick sale of our product” (All About Buffer). Buffer also places a strong emphasis on consistent support and improvement. Their website states that 80% of emails are answered within six hours of receiving them.

The Crisis

On October 26, 2013 a portion of Buffer users began to send out spam about weight loss posted from their accounts on Facebook and Twitter. This was a result of someone hacking Buffer. It was later discovered that about 30,000 Facebook accounts were compromised, which is 6.3% of Buffer users. However, all of Buffer’s users were alerted of the breach through an email.

While the company immediately took steps to improve its security within Facebook and Twitter once realizing what had happened, Buffer also had to temporarily ask its customers to stop using the product on certain sites until it gradually became safe to use again.

Monday, October 28, Buffer discovered the origin of the breach. Hackers had stolen the access tokens to users’ accounts on these networks. These tokens were stolen when one of Buffer’s partners, MongoHQ, experienced a security breach as well. The hacker stole the password of a MongoHQ employee and was able to view all of Buffer’s
database information this way. However, had Buffer encrypted the access codes before MongoHQ was compromised, Buffer customers would never have experienced the problem.

*The Company’s Social Media Response*

Figure 12: Initial Buffer Facebook response to crisis. October 26, 2013.
Figure 13: Buffer Facebook post updating consumers on the situation. October 26, 2013.

Figure 14: Buffer owner Joel Gascoigne responds to consumers. October 27, 2013.
Figure 15: Buffer owner Joel Gascoigne shows team is responding to crisis. October 27, 2013.
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Studies that have been conducted (i.e. Schultz et. al, Liu et. al) regarding social-mediated crisis communication prove to be inconclusive because the conflicting nature of the results. As a recently developed form of communication, much research is to be done on how social media can be utilized in a crisis to mitigate brand image so that companies can recover from the crisis and maintain strong relationships with its consumers.

This research aims to examine past crises and the response that consumers had to social media communication regarding those specific crises. The type of response, the recipient of the response, and the length of the response consumers had to posts made by the company referencing the crisis were evaluated. This then allowed for a framework to be created that provides guidance for companies looking to effectively utilize social media in different types of crises.

The questions this research addresses are:

• What type of response do the comments of consumers on crisis-related Facebook posts have?

• Who are the comments of consumers on crisis-related Facebook posts directed toward?

• What is the length of the average comment of consumers on crisis-related Facebook posts/how much time are consumers taking to voice their opinion on the crisis?

• How can this information help companies decide how to respond to future crises?
METHODOLOGY

The crises of three different companies were examined: Chick-fil-A, KitchenAid and Buffer. The data of the research comes from consumer comments. The initial Facebook post addressing the respective crises was the source of the comments. A sample size of 5% of comments from each post was drawn (Table 3). The sample was selected by having the company’s Facebook page load close to double the amount of comments needed and selecting every other comment for analysis. Comments load in multiples of 50, so the number of posts loaded for Chick-fil-A, KitchenAid and Buffer were 5,200, 100 and 31 (the total number of comments) respectively.

The analysis was conducted from January 27, 2014 to February 8, 2014. The comments from the Chick-fil-A Facebook page were dated from the time period of August 5, 2012 to January 26, 2014. Comments from the KitchenAid Facebook page were dated from the time period October 4, 2012 to October 8, 2012. Comments from the Buffer Facebook page were dated from the time period October 24, 2013 to October 26, 2013.

Table 3: Sample Sizes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample size n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chick-Fil-A</td>
<td>2,591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KitchenAid</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buffer</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A content analysis that categorized each comment based on the following parameters was conducted (Tables 4 and 5).
Table 4: Content analysis parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Post</th>
<th>Intended Recipient of Post</th>
<th>Tone of Post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 sentence or less</td>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-4 sentences</td>
<td>Consumer with conflicting view</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 paragraph (5 sentences)</td>
<td>Consumer with similar view</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 1 paragraph</td>
<td>No specific audience – expressing opinion</td>
<td>Humorous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Sarcastic and negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Further explanation of content analysis parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>Company name is explicitly addressed in comment</td>
<td>I will continue to eat at my local Chick-fil-A.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumer with conflicting view</td>
<td>Consumer with a view that differs from another consumer commenting on the post</td>
<td>@Joe, how can you justify continuing to eat at Chic-fil-A?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No specific audience – expressing opinion</td>
<td>Comment is not directed at anyone specifically; potentially starts a new conversation</td>
<td>I think this is one huge misunderstanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Agreeing with the original post and/or the post of another consumer commenting</td>
<td>I couldn’t agree more, @Joe. Key words: thank you, agree, appreciate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Disagreeing with the original</td>
<td>@Joe, how could you be</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
An individual analysis of each post was completed. Aggregate totals were then computed, as the results section shows.
RESULTS

Table 6: Length of Posts (Chick-fil-A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of Posts</th>
<th>1 sentence</th>
<th>2-4 sentences</th>
<th>1 paragraph</th>
<th>&gt; 1 paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts</td>
<td>1030</td>
<td>1106</td>
<td>311</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of posts</td>
<td>39.75%</td>
<td>42.69%</td>
<td>12.00%</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: Intended Recipient of Post (Chick-fil-A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intended Recipient</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Consumer(s) with conflicting view</th>
<th>Consumer(s) with similar view</th>
<th>No specific audience – expressing opinion</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts</td>
<td>174</td>
<td>1669</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of posts</td>
<td>6.71%</td>
<td>64.41%</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>17.56%</td>
<td>4.86%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Tone of Post (Chick-fil-A)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tone of Post</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Sarcastic/Humorous</th>
<th>Sarcastic and negative</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of posts</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>1665</td>
<td>329</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of posts</td>
<td>14.74%</td>
<td>64.26%</td>
<td>12.70%</td>
<td>1.54%</td>
<td>5.56%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9: Length of Post (KitchenAid)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 sentence</th>
<th>2-4 sentences</th>
<th>1 paragraph</th>
<th>&gt; 1 paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>28</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>28.00%</td>
<td>39.00%</td>
<td>19.00%</td>
<td>14.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10: Intended Recipient of Post (KitchenAid)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Consumer(s) with conflicting view</th>
<th>Consumer(s) with similar view</th>
<th>No specific audience – expressing opinion</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>62</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>62.00%</td>
<td>20.00%</td>
<td>2.00%</td>
<td>15.00%</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Tone of Post (KitchenAid)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Sarcastic/Humorous</th>
<th>Sarcastic and negative</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>12.00%</td>
<td>73.00%</td>
<td>9.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>5.00%</td>
<td>1.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12: Length of Post (Buffer)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 sentence</th>
<th>2-4 sentences</th>
<th>1 paragraph</th>
<th>&gt; 1 paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: Intended Recipient of Post (Buffer)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Consumer(s) with conflicting view</th>
<th>Consumer(s) with similar view</th>
<th>No specific audience – expressing opinion</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 14: Tone of Post (Buffer)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Sarcastic/Humorous Sarcastic and negative</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 15: Length of Post (Total)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1 sentence</th>
<th>2-4 sentences</th>
<th>1 paragraph</th>
<th>&gt; 1 paragraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>1059</td>
<td>1146</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>39.32%</td>
<td>42.55%</td>
<td>12.25%</td>
<td>5.87%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 16: Intended Recipient of Post (Total)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Consumer(s) with conflicting view</th>
<th>Consumer(s) with similar view</th>
<th>No specific audience – expressing opinion</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>238</td>
<td>1689</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>10.04%</td>
<td>64.00%</td>
<td>6.40%</td>
<td>17.80%</td>
<td>4.81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 17: Tone of Post (Total)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Sarcastic/Humorous</th>
<th>Sarcastic and negative</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of posts</strong></td>
<td>396</td>
<td>1738</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of posts</strong></td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>64.53%</td>
<td>12.18%</td>
<td>1.49%</td>
<td>5.53%</td>
<td>1.19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**DISCUSSION**

While there are some similarities in data across the three different crises, the data reveal that the type of crisis that is occurring ultimately dictates the response consumers have to company social media posts. Developing and understanding the classification of the three crises is crucial to understanding the relevance of the data.

The first classification is a company values crisis. Chick-fil-A experienced this crisis when consumers perceived a misalignment between their personal values and the company’s values. Characteristics of the subsequent social media posts include consumers taking a moral stance against the company, in tandem with expressing political and religious views as they pertained to the debate on gay marriage.

The second category is the compromised social media crisis, an increasingly frequent crisis in today’s digital environment, as KitchenAid witnessed. This crisis is defined as a third party posting views on a company’s social media that are not representative of the views of the brand. In these types of crises, it is clear the social media post did not originate from the brand and is generally unrelated to the brand’s product or service offering. Consumers commenting on subsequent social media posts are generally offended and either defend continuing or threaten ending their loyalty to the brand.

The final type of crisis is a product or service offering failure crisis, as Buffer experienced. This crisis is defined as a crisis that occurs when a defect or issue with a product offering that negatively impacts customers’ experience with that product or company. Potential results of this crisis include a loss of trust in the company and
consumers switching to competitors. Social media posts in this situation generally express frustration with the break in service and ask questions about when issues can expect to be resolved.

It was with these classifications in mind that the data was evaluated. The most obvious result of the content analysis is the overwhelming majority of Facebook comments by consumers (70.06%) were negative, regardless of the type of crisis. It is important that social media managers anticipate this backlash whenever they post an update in regards to a crisis. However, this statistic does not dictate that a decision to utilize social media in the face of a crisis is the wrong course of action.

In the case of Chick-fil-A, 64.41% of the negative posts were directed toward another consumer, compared to just 6.41% of posts that were directed toward the company itself. It appears that in a situation where company values are in play, providing consumers with the opportunity to express themselves does not necessarily result in a direct attack on the company, but rather allows consumers to voice their opinions. By commenting on a post directly related to an ongoing issue, consumers feel they are being heard. The next largest group of commenters across all three companies (17.80%), are consumers who were not addressing anyone in particular but wanted to express their opinion, further supporting the idea that customers appreciate feeling like they are being given a forum to address the situation. In Chick-fil-A’s case, these commenters represented 17.56% of those commenting, the next largest group.

The Chick-fil-A post does not directly address a wrongdoing and accept any culpability in the situation. Rather, it reiterates Chick-fil-A’s core values and bows out of the conversation regarding gay marriage the company had previously been involved in.
The conversation in the Facebook posts then turns to more of a political and religious discussion, as is often the case in company values crises.

KitchenAid takes the opposite approach. The head of the KitchenAid brand, Cynthia Soledad, issues a personal apology and acknowledges the rogue tweet that was issued from the KitchenAid USA Twitter account. Perhaps this direct approach is what causes the discrepancy in the intended recipients of the post between Chick-fil-A and KitchenAid. In the case of KitchenAid, 62.00% of comments were directly for the company. The second-most intended recipient of posts were consumers with conflicting views (20.00%). Furthermore, a rogue tweet is often a less contentious topic than a company values crisis, leading to less vitriol among consumers.

Buffer takes a similar approach to KitchenAid with its transparent acknowledgment of being hacked. The sample shows that not only did consumers respond directly to the consumer, they also responded positively. This is a huge difference between the large corporation crises and the smaller business crisis, something that could be attributed to customer loyalty. With a small startup such as Buffer, there are more vocal brand loyalists that stand out compared to global companies.

The breakdown of the length of the posts provides insight into the amount of time consumers are taking to comment regarding the crises. Of the posts, 81.87% were less than a paragraph (five sentences) long, indicating that consumers did not put a huge amount of time into posting.
Limitations and Further Studies

One limitation was only being able to analyze Facebook comments, as opposed to being able to analyze Facebook comments and tweets in tandem. However, finding tweets from even two years ago proved difficult and prohibited Twitter from being included in the analysis. Having the opportunity to be able to explore these two central forms of social media communication would evolve into a more comprehensive framework. Many consumers are turning to Twitter to engage in personal conversations with brands even more than Facebook. In further studies, a completely integrated framework that encompasses traditional media and multiple social media sites would be beneficial for companies and brand managers.

There were also factors that prohibited the widest range of Facebook comments to be analyzed. Comments could have been deleted, marked as spam, or reported as abusive and removed. There is no way to know the number or the content of comments that had originally appeared on the post but were no longer there at the time this research was conducted.

Lastly, while the three companies’ crises selected to be analyzed were selected for their diversity in both size and type of crisis, the discrepancy in the sample size of the comments on Buffer’s social media compared to KitchenAid’s and then Chick-fil-A’s could have limited the research. In future studies with more resources, exploring crises of similarly sized companies across various industries would provide even greater insight.

The final idea for future research would be to conduct the same analysis, but as the crisis is occurring instead of after the crisis is over. Tracking how the comments and
consumer perception evolves throughout the crisis would be immensely helpful for future crises. It would also presumably allow for the vast majority of social media comments to be accounted for as they are posted, therefore addressing many of the limitations that were presented when this research was being conducted.
CONCLUSION

All of these results have enabled the creation of a framework companies can reference during a crisis (Figure 15). One of the main purposes of the framework is to provide companies with an already-prepared set of guidelines in the event of a crisis occurring.

Figure 15: Social Media In A Crisis Framework
The outcome of the research suggests that there are the “three Rs” companies need to take into consideration when utilizing social media in a crisis: recognition, responsiveness, and restoration.

**Recognition**

In all three of the crises in this case study, companies acknowledged there was a problem. While every crisis needs to be evaluated on its own, the majority of times utilizing social media as a tool to recognize the current situation will benefit the company. It helps establish transparency rather than the image that something is being swept under the rug, or even worse, not handled internally at all.

Failing to recognize a crisis on social media can result in consumers looking elsewhere to express their concerns about the company. Instead of having a controlled environment and forum for customers to vent, such as a single Facebook post addressing the issue, consumers will turn to third parties to express themselves. This results in two consequences: not being able to control what is being said and not being able to monitor what is being said. Gauging customer sentiment is huge for taking any step forward in alleviating the effects of a crisis.

**Responsiveness**

As the research and the framework subsequently demonstrate, taking time to evaluate whether or not a response from the company is needed is crucial. In many types of crises, negativity is directed not necessarily at the company but at other consumers with conflicting views. Taking the time to respond to every customer’s concern for a company values crisis or compromised social media crisis is risky; the chances of being able to change a customer’s mind over their political or religious beliefs are very slim.
Furthermore, the more frequently a company communicates beyond a single statement or press release, the greater the chance of losing the message that needs to be conveyed. Keeping a clear, consistent and concise message is imperative in crisis situations. A company altering its message even in the slightest allows consumers to poke holes in what the company truly values and further erodes the company/consumer relationship.

In the case of a product/service offering failure crisis, however, the opposite approach is best taken. The majority of the time, companies should respond to customers on an individual basis. There is less risk of the message getting lost. Instead, social media can be utilized as a customer service tool for customers who want instantaneous responses.

*Restoration*

The final R, restoration, focuses on rebuilding the relationship between the company and the consumer. A crisis often results in consumer’s loss of trust in the company, and social media can be utilized to correct that.

There are a few different methods to restoring trust. First, companies can bow out of a conversation and acknowledge that they should stick to their core company values, as Chick-fil-A did. Admitting what the company does not do best creates a human side to the issue which customers will ultimately appreciate as the crisis becomes less and less of a hot topic.

The other way to restore trust is to discuss the steps that are being taken to prevent a similar crisis from happening again. Real-time updates, such as the ones Buffer posted, show not only that the company values fixing a problem, but also values the customer
being informed as well. Making consumers feel important is key in restoring trust in the relationship.

Ultimately, preparation and communication are of the utmost importance in a crisis. Utilizing a framework such as the one in this thesis allows companies to better anticipate potential crises, as does referencing case studies of lessons that other companies have learned. Knowing the impact of what is being communicated and how it will be perceived by consumers will provide guidance when the crisis does occur. Lastly, taking steps to prevent the crisis from happening again, and letting company stakeholders know this process is occurring, will help mitigate brand image in the eyes of the consumer.
WORKS CITED


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Bachelor of the Arts in Advertising/Public Relations
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Thesis Supervisor: Steve Manuel

Honors and Awards
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Phi Kappa Phi Honors Society
Pennsylvania State University President’s Freshman Award
Achieved Dean’s List _ semesters

Leadership
Public Relations Director for THON 2014
Public Relations Captain for THON 2013
Media Relations Captain for Penn State Homecoming 2013
Supply Logistics Captain for THON 2012

Experience
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JP Morgan Chase Marketing Internship | Wilmington, DE | June – Aug. 2014
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