

POLITICAL POLARIZATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA:
How Companies Can Still Effectively Target Audiences in all American Parties

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Abstract

As social media platforms allow users to become even more guarded from dissenting opinions, companies targeting individuals aligning with opposite political parties are left deciding how to best connect with both audiences. Now, more organizations are being faced with the questions of whether or not to develop a social media conduct guide or stay completely neutral when it comes to anything political. Using semi-structured interviews with experienced communications professionals, this study will explore if companies can participate on social media in today's political environment without risking being the next victim of cancel culture.

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Chapter one: Introduction

Most social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, have become even more divisive among political parties and those who affiliate with them as more and more Americans prefer to consume their news online and users feel comfortable sharing even the most radical of thoughts. Sixty percent of Americans prefer to use digital platforms to access news online, with 23% preferring to use social media (Shearer 2021). Since users can have extreme views on pressing issues and are able to present their level of knowledge of the political scene in America however they see fit, social media has been used as a weapon for misinformation (Barry, Hendrix and Sims 2021).

So, as journalists face the challenges that come with the spread of false information, companies also face interesting questions that must be answered (Barry, Hendrix and Sims 2021). There is a fine line that many companies must walk when deciding whether to be vocal about social injustices, political leanings or opinions on the current landscape of the American government. With so much pressure put on organizations to use their social media platforms for advocacy, communications teams across the country are faced with deciding how to be socially responsible while also not tainting the reputation of their company by leaning too far in one direction.

These decisions are especially complicated for companies that cater to two very diverse audiences. While one segment of their business may be conservative, the other may lean liberal, providing even more complications to the above scenario. Specifically Twitter's algorithm leads to separating users into "echo chambers" with like-minded individuals, usually hiding any content that the user may disagree with, which does not lend well for organizations aiming to appeal to different sides (Bail, Argyle, Brown, et. al. 2018). Is it possible for companies to successfully cater to clients of various political beliefs using a singular social media account?

The questions this research aims to answer is: (RQ1) *How can companies with a wide political range of customers avoid upsetting either side, while also advocating for causes that the organization believes in?* (RQ2) *Is it essential that organizations develop a social media code for interaction with users to ensure that all messaging is consistent when it comes to any sensitive topics or content with political subtleties?*

Impact on profession

As communicators we are often tasked with the responsibility of crafting the “perfect” message that is not only tailored to the social media platform, but also to brand standards. This process becomes even more intricate when speaking about a social justice issue, especially with the current political landscape allowing users to share their sometimes harsh opinions anonymously, thus without any accountability.

Although this research is by no means a complete guide to posting about contentious, politically charged topics, it aims to give some insight into how social media managers and content strategists in the United States of America can avoid claims of performative activism and manage their organization’s reputation on social media. After speaking with seven intelligent and well-rounded communicators working either with an agency or corporation, the findings, I believe, will provide helpful insight into the decision-making process and how to avoid ridicule by the American people on social media platforms.

Chapter two: Literature review

Social media marketing is an area of communications that is continuously changing, at a very rapid pace. Communicators are not only having to monitor several social media platforms but are also responsible for creating content that is relevant and on trend. There is a constant pressure to be posting, which can oftentimes lead to mistakes that result in accusations of being insensitive or unaware of current social or political issues in the United States.

In most strategic communication classes, we hear that segmentation is key and necessary for effective audience targeting through any chosen vehicle. Although hyper segmentation may be possible through web, television or magazine advertisements, owned media outlets, such as social media accounts, do not benefit from the same amount of specificity. An organization, like the one where I completed the professional component, must use the same social media accounts to speak to their whole audience, who may be very different demographically and psychographically. Although it may not be a big deal to use the same social media account to speak to audiences in both the Southern United States and the Midwest region, there are some aspects of a target audience that are not so easily generalized.

Political party alignment is an issue that has been facing social media marketers for several years now. Several social media sites, such as Twitter, only show users content that they believe aligns with their beliefs, whether that's a sports team affiliation, preference of dogs versus cats or political leanings. Users will simply not see content, even from accounts they follow, if the algorithm believes that the user will not relate to the messaging of the post. So, it has become seemingly impossible to post completely neutral content that would show up on all your follower's feeds.

The second prong of this mounting difficulty for social media marketers is the growing importance of social advocacy on social media. Since summer 2020, individuals have been continuously calling out organizations for not only posting insensitive content, but also staying silent. For an organization who is attempting to appease all political party affiliations, it becomes very challenging to know when and how to speak up on issues that are important.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications theory discusses how people use media – such as newspapers, television, or social media – to satisfy their needs. This theory challenges the previously accepted beliefs that media uses people and instead that individuals can use media to learn more about the world, in the way they want to learn it.

There are five needs that are believed to be satisfied in the Uses and Gratifications theory: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension free needs (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018). Cognitive needs are the need for acquiring knowledge or facts, most likely affecting individuals who want to acquire a deeper level of knowledge (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018). Affective needs are used to satisfy the emotions, pleasure, and moods of people (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018). Personal integrative needs are satisfied when individuals use media to reassure their status in society or gain credibility (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018). Social integrative needs are met when individuals use media to connect with close friends or family, whether that’s connecting on social media or discussing their favorite television show. Lastly, tension free needs satisfy people’s need to escape the real world, which relieves the individuals from tension and stress (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018).

This theory shows not only social media algorithm developers the importance of personalized feeds, but also aids organizations hoping to effectively reach their audiences via social media. Social media users have specific needs when using social media and are only using media when it can appease one of the needs stated above. This theory is especially relevant to my topic because it provides some insight into why social media users may not be amenable to social media content that does not agree with their beliefs, especially political ones.

Segmentation

Building a specific and reachable target audience is a task that every strategic communicator must learn whether developing a new campaign, crafting social media strategy or writing copy for a magazine advertisement. By identifying a target audience that is backed by rounds of primary and secondary research, a company is much more likely to reach the consumers who will engage with them through various channels, hopefully leading to a purchase. Increasingly, social media has been the preferable vehicle for making a connection with their target audience.

Social media is an optimal tool for connecting with audiences because of the unique attribute of two-way communication (Pang 2018). Not only can organizations reach audiences based on their self-proclaimed interests on the social channel, but the users can actually show dedicated interest by following, messaging or “@” mentioning a company. This dialogic communication between user and organization not only allows for better targeting, but also opens up the conversation for organizations to hear exactly what their consumer is enjoying about their brand or what improvements can be made (Pang 2018). Social media marketing has continuously evolved and will continue to evolve as marketers become more comfortable with communicating with their consumers directly.

The future of social media marketing is dependent on a smorgasbord of challenges and opportunities. Lack of privacy, use of social media as a political tool and the impact on mental health are all increasing concerns by users (Appel 2019). Users have now become educated enough to realize the potential damages that social media can do to an individual. However the importance of maintaining an online image is still prominent. Nevertheless, there are also notable improvements to daily life that social media brings, such as decreasing feelings of loneliness, integrating customer care and providing necessary information instantly (Appel 2019). Social media platforms, much like the organizations that advertise on them, have listened to what users need to ensure that daily use is a necessity for consumers.

Using online communication networks is a strategy that provides most marketers, regardless of budget, a way to not only get in touch with their target audience, but also to test in a very low-risk manner whether their ideas are viable (Lorenzo-Romero 2012). Currently, social media sites are well integrated into society with a large portion of consumers in the United States having some awareness of social sites. For brands and organizations, social media sites removed the astronomical costs of advertising on traditional mediums and made it more accessible to virtually any business in the market that wants to advertise (Lorenzo-Romero 2012). Although some users may only use social media to stay in contact with close friends or family, the opportunity still exists to engage in a two-way conversation with them, which was virtually unheard of before. Social media advertising is a variably lucrative method for advertising, but the ability for any marketer to use it leaves users inundated by companies on social media platforms.

Corporate Social (Media) Responsibility

As social media has continued to evolve to be a large platform with many engaged listeners, there has been an increased pressure on organizations to speak to that active audience

about social justice issues. It is no longer acceptable for large organizations to sweep their beliefs under the rug or hide policies that may be harmful to others. Advocacy for social justice issues is increasingly becoming a non-negotiable for consumers and a differentiator when choosing between competitors. However, with the current political environment there are virtually no social causes that would not upset someone. So, companies are forced to be extremely specific when deciding which causes they want to outwardly support and weary of how their audience may react to that support.

Corporate social responsibility has been a topic that many consumers are concerned about but was rarely put at the forefront of their decision-making process until the popularization of social media channels (Loureiro 2019). Although it may be fear-inducing for companies to share any sort of politically hinted speech, it has been proven that when an organization does post these beliefs, there is much more notable positive impact (Loureiro 2019). By engaging users with information about an organization's corporate social responsibility policies, word-of-mouth recommendations and positive engagements will increase, as well as reinforcing consumer-brand ties (Loureiro 2019).

Although some organizations are using today's political environment to begin advocacy on social media, a choice few have always believed in having a belief-based business model. For example, Patagonia is notoriously environmentally friendly, provides their workers with fair wages and supports many social justice initiatives around the world. Patagonia has long been an advocate for reducing harm to the environment in an effort to reduce the negative effects of climate change that are impacting the world (Brit). Patagonia not only takes actual action for the causes the organization believes in, but the company also actively advocates and educates users on social media in an attempt for them to realize the importance of what Patagonia does (Brit).

The organization has even gone so far as to endorse political candidates who have a strong belief in protecting what is left of our environment (Brit). Patagonia believes that in order for the world to be better, the issues that we are facing must receive the “airtime” they deserve, so they took the initiative by providing that on their social media channels (Brit). So, if Patagonia can actively discuss and promote topics that may be controversial to some, is this viable for all organizations who do not have similar market share or target audiences?

The growing polarization of political parties is amplified on social media because of the algorithms that force like-minded users onto the same content that they will most likely agree and interact with. When a user gets stuck in an “echo chamber” they will only see news, posts, and multimedia content that the algorithm believes will appease the user. So, users are then stuck seeing the same news outlet report on various topics under the same light (Freiman 2020). This can be damaging and ultimately leads to the “false news” claims that often litter social feeds. According to García-Orosa, our democracy is now informed and influenced about politics by what is shown on our social media feeds, which is obviously a completely new phenomenon (2021). Critical public information is now disseminated through channels that may not demonstrate the whole truth, or present topics in a completely false light, just so that the user agrees with what is being shown on their feed and continues to log on every day (García-Orosa 2021). The algorithms on social media channels allow users to only see content that is agreeable to their beliefs and will not upset them, even if it may be complete misinformation, which is extremely harmful in our polarized political environment.

Impact of interaction

As brands have adopted social media as a vehicle for dialogic communication with their target, consumer interaction has also increased. Brands that use social media as a means to build

interaction often see higher engagement rates whether that is from post interactions, comments or messages (Karpińska-Krakowiak 2014). Consumers have not only begun to develop closer, parasocial relationships with public figures on social media but also with brands. Although this may seem like a positive all-around, brands must decide when and if they are to respond to consumers, how they will do so and what content fits brand standards.

When social media platforms were first established it was originally supposed to be a medium for one-way communication where marketers, public relations specialists and the average user could share information they deemed necessary online. However, as we all know, over the years that has completely shifted to build connections and increase conversations. Although this is the trend that most businesses have followed, United States Government Agencies have not adapted with the change (Waters 2011). Although it is unknown whether the marketing professionals behind U.S. Government Agencies want to interact with users, this is an example of organizations whose social media code limits interaction (Waters 2011). Government agencies have chosen not to engage or interact back with users on Twitter to ensure that their highly professional position remains untouched. Although government agencies do operate in a different sector than traditional businesses, this provides a gray area for their suppliers who aim to use social media in a more lighthearted way.

Whether in-person or online, talking about one's political beliefs is usually reserved for close friends and family. Many individuals are cautious about even liking posts that have political subtleties in fear of upsetting unagreeable distant family members, future employers or even the random trolls that populate the digital space. These fears prevent users from speaking out about social issues, sometimes referred to as the "spiral of silence" (Hampton 2017). Posts with social ties, regardless of poster, are recorded as having lower performance and interaction

from users (Hampton 2017). Unless organizations are targeting individuals with very strong political beliefs, they have very little hope in getting the interaction that is expected from previous, non-political posts.

As social media and technology have become a more pervasive part of our lives, trust in corporations has gone down. Now we are constantly inundated with messaging from brands, which some consumers dislike (Bogdaneris 2016). The distrust that has mounted has not only impacted interaction between corporation and user but has also made individuals more aware of tactics used on social media to target them. (Bogdaneris 2016) It is imperative that any content, but specifically any post featuring social justice topics aligned with a political party, must be genuine to the organization. Companies must be aware that the consumer has many options to choose from if they become unhappy with an organization's practices. Maintaining an honest, genuine, and beneficial relationship on social media is one means of regaining trust from consumers.

Overall questions explored in interviews

For the research component of the professional project, I sought out seasoned communications professionals to answer my two research questions: (RQ1) *How can companies with a wide political range of customers avoid upsetting either side, while also advocating for causes that the organization believes in?* (RQ2) *Is it essential that organizations develop a social media code for interaction with users to ensure that all messaging is consistent when it comes to any sensitive topics or content with political subtleties?*

I completed seven semi-structured interviews that were conducted over the course of three weeks to satisfy this requirement of the professional project. It was beneficial to use the semi-structured interview method to provide the flexibility and freedom for each interviewee to

address the question and expand on their thoughts in their own way, and I believe it provided insightful and unique information from each participant. I started each interview by asking the participants for some background on their current and past roles to ensure that I would ask them relevant information throughout the interview. As the participants got more comfortable, I then began to ask about their experience in posting content discussing social justice issues, what their content approval processes look like and any follow-up questions that came from those questions.

Chapter three: Method and analysis

Method

For this study, qualitative research methods were employed to answer two research questions: (RQ1) *How can companies with a wide political range of customers avoid upsetting either side, while also advocating for causes that the organization believes in?* (RQ2) *Is it essential that organizations develop a social media code for interaction with users to ensure that all messaging is consistent when it comes to any sensitive topics or content with political subtleties?*

Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven individuals working within digital communications roles at their respective organizations. These semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals with ample experience in employing social media campaigns and who have knowledge on connecting with various target audiences using the same account. These participants were located throughout the United States of America, with one participant having some social media management experience in Europe.

Semi-structured interviews were the best fit for this research since questions can be established prior to the interview but allows for deviation if a more interesting route is taken by the participant. This method allowed for flexibility, which is a trait valued highly in qualitative research (Robson 2011).

Semi-structured interviews allowed for a deeper connection to develop between interviewee and interviewer, which allows for the development of a space conducive to reflection, learning and deep thought (Robson 2011). By developing a more meaningful relationship with interviewees, I felt as though I could establish rapport more efficiently and connect as peers in the field, rather than just interviewee and interviewer.

Semi-structured interviews provide a better environment for openness and vulnerability between interviewer and subject, which cannot be established in research methods such as focus groups or observation. This method allowed for more flexibility during the interview process, while still providing the necessary backbone and guidance for successful findings.

Recruitment of participants

Individuals recruited to participate in the interviews met the following criteria: 1) must be working in a communications role at their respective organization; 2) must have ample knowledge of social media algorithms and current political environment.

Originally, I had planned to send out a pre-interview survey to ensure that participants were aware of not only social media management, but also the political landscape in the United States of America. However, after getting into contact with participants, most self-volunteered information about their career which made me feel comfortable that they would provide informed insights for this project. Also, by starting the interviews with questions about their background I would have been able to quickly rule out an individual who did not meet the criteria.

For recruitment, I contacted the University of Missouri School of Journalism's Strategic Communication Chair, Jon Stemmler, to aid in compiling a list of alumni working in social media management in varying roles. After contacting the whole list, I communicated with the participants who had responded to ensure that their experience would be relevant for this research. One participant was not on this list but was a local individual whose experience was also pertinent.

Although I was concerned about recruitment earlier, it could not have gone more smoothly. I was shocked by how many professionals took the time out of their day to complete

the interview and even offered additional time for follow-up questions. I also believe that by using the video conference tool, Zoom, the impact on my participant's schedule was minimized since there was no travel time and I could interview participants, regardless of their location. Lastly, I was fortunate that my supervisor allowed me to conduct interviews during the workday, which I think contributed to the ease of finding participants and scheduling interviews.

Data collection

To ensure accuracy, all interviews were recorded through Zoom and on my cell phone. By using Zoom, I could use the free transcription service provided, which required some edits to ensure accuracy but still saved valuable time.

I did not have any requests to remain anonymous by the interview participants. Although a couple did disclose that they could not talk about specific aspects of their current or prior roles, it had little to no impact on the quality of information provided.

By making the interview process as simple as possible for the participants, I believe I was able to recruit the necessary interviewees with fewer challenges than I had originally thought.

Coding

To begin coding, I determined five common topics that were discovered during interview transcription: avoiding performative activism, relying on diversity, equity and inclusion teams, the importance of social media guidelines, how to decide when a topic is significant enough to take a stance and how to avoid being shadow banned. These topics will be defined and explained in the analysis section of the report.

Within those five topics, I added two or three sub-topics to ensure that all relevant material would not only be included, but also would be properly organized. Next, I reviewed all interview transcripts and pulled relevant quotes into a document organized by theme. I developed

a guide for color coding each quote according to the speaker to ensure that proper attribution would not be difficult. At the end of this process, I had 17 pages of quotes to be used in this report.

By having relevant quotes pulled into one document I believe I not only saved time when completing the analysis and discussion portions of this report, but the process also refreshed my memory of interesting points that were made during the interviews.

Analysis

I spoke with seven communications professionals working in social media management about their experience posting about social justice topics for other brands or individuals. Although each participant had different experiences, advice and opinions on this topic, the general uneasiness that comes with taking a public stance on social justice issues was shared among all seven individuals.

None of the professionals who were interviewed believe it is possible to post anything about a political issue in the United States of America without facing some backlash and losing followers. There are definite nuances to that statement, but every single participant agreed that it is not possible, in today's political climate, to take a stance on even a topic that is supposedly widely accepted like race and gender equality, without upsetting at least some portion of your customers.

According to these communications professionals, companies need to be ready to back up their statements with diversity, equity and inclusion boards, internal reviews and charitable donations before they even consider developing a social media post. Even if brands work tirelessly to avoid performative activism, which is participating in discussion of a cause to better social standing, rather than as an honest show of support, it is still likely they will lose followers

because of their stance. Lastly, with the help of social media platform algorithms, consumers will continue to see the organization's posts if engagement continues. In other words, perceived beliefs or psychographics do not outweigh the significance of a like, comment, retweet or message sent.

In our conversation about weighing the pros and cons of posting about a social justice issue, Gabri Mays (social media manager for Los Angeles based agency Laundry Service) made the following remark, "It's not really a matter of the company. It's a matter of the consumer. So, it's one of those things, does the company want to be good, or do they want to not lose their customers?"

As businesses and individuals alike navigate the ever-changing "rules" of social media, general uneasiness about taking a stance that is even the slightest bit controversial impacts everyday decision-making for those running an account. Throughout the seven interviews, I found there to be five themes of considerations that a social media manager contemplates before deciding the appropriate action when it comes to posting about social justice topics on an organization's social media account. Those themes are: avoiding performative activism; relying on diversity, equity and inclusion teams; the importance of social media guidelines; how to decide when a topic is significant enough to take a stance; and how to avoid being shadow banned.

A business must be able to "walk the walk and talk the talk" when it comes to avoiding claims of performative activism, have airtight social media guidelines to ensure that everyone is on the same page, establish a well-rounded team that is able to consult on challenging topics, realize that a portion of their follower base may disagree with them and continue to engage their audience to avoid being shadow banned. If a business is prepared for the repercussions and

completes their due diligence before posting, it is possible to post about social justice issues and come away relatively unscathed.

Avoiding performative activism

Many companies have been called out over the last two years for participating in performative activism such as simply changing their logo to a rainbow version, posting a black square on “Black Out Tuesday”, or claiming to support a cause that their business model does not reflect whatsoever. Claims of performative activism against organizations have been increasingly prominent with companies like Reformation and the National Football League being forced to course correct and apologize after posting seemingly insincere content. Although these claims can scare some brands into silence, in analyzing what the seven interviewees shared, I identified strategies to ensure that posts containing social justice issues can avoid allegations of negligence.

Although it is easier said than done, the most obvious strategy to avoid being called out is to back up your claims with diversity practices, inclusion on leadership teams and a culture that promotes equality.

“We wanted to participate in the support of Black Lives Matter, but we knew that we had to do it in a delicate way of saying ‘we realize that we are an incredibly white organization, and that we have clearly failed on that level, and are working hard to improve.’ So that for us was not necessarily speaking up right away, but being sure that we took the time to make sure that we had the words to say that were going to be impactful, and we're going to be meaningful,” said Emma Rhyner, when discussing her previous experience for SpotCo as a Social Media Manager for a multitude of Broadway shows.

Brands that post a statement on a polarizing topic online are oftentimes met with backlash if consumers do their research and realize that what the company is claiming is purely for show, and not genuine. Since Hannah Franz has worked for a multitude of organizations and with executives, she understands the potential for repercussions.

“There have been a lot of moments in the past couple years where companies put their foot in their mouths. I think people have stepped back a little bit because there were a lot of executives and companies that thought that they were doing something good, helpful or beneficial, and then, got more information on something and realized that actually wasn't helpful, or actually that made things worse,” she said.

As more and more companies have been called out or lost customers, different strategies have been employed when silence is not always the best option but speaking out from the organization's point-of-view is insensitive. With many organizations having thousands of followers, they can get content out to a sizable audience that many individuals are not able to accrue. One strategy for getting safely involved in a conversation is by turning over your page to influencers or thought leaders on the topic, which one of the interview participants had a positive experience with.

“If we can't do anything ourselves, are there ways that we can elevate other voices that are active in the conversation? Can we turn our channels over to people who know more so that they can use the hundreds of thousands of followers that we have as a brand and give them a platform to speak on that stuff?” said Susan Parsons, Group Director, Social Media and Content at The Integer Group.

There is also something to be said about crowding social media platforms with useless, sometimes baseless statements of support for a cause. Contributing to the conversation is not

always seen as positive, even if done correctly, when individuals are looking for resources or ways to help those who have been impacted.

“I think the best example of this was when the Uvalde shooting happened. As a company we put a full stop on social for the day, just because, as Broadway musicals, we don't necessarily have anything to really add to that conversation. We've found that a lot of times in those situations, if you're not contributing relevant, helpful, and resourceful content, it's best to just not say anything at all,” said Emma Rhyner, when speaking on her previous role as a Social Media Manager at SpotCo.

Lastly, silence is sometimes the best route if your company does not have a vested interest or clear connection to the social justice issue. Although there is mounting pressure for brands to become more human on social media, during the throes of a crisis, consumers are most likely not looking to their favorite fast-food chain to find resources or express their opinion.

As Susan Parsons noted, “There's nobody who's waiting at the edge of their keyboard being like, I wonder what Chick-Fil-A has to say on George Floyd, since it's usually not going to be good. There's some times when being absent is better than inserting a brand voice into a conversation that they don't have business joining.”

For a business to promote content that is conscientious and well-received, internal evaluation must be completed first. There are many factors to consider when choosing the best strategy on social media, including realizing your company's values, weighing if your opinion matters or deciding if joining a conversation will be too harmful based on your consumer base. So, who is responsible for determining if and how a brand joins a conversation?

Relying on diversity, equity and inclusion teams

A diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) team is used in organizations for a myriad of reasons. Whether a company is wanting to improve hiring processes or audit workplace culture,

this team is integral to supporting all aspects of the business. Throughout my interviews, several interviewees cited the importance of having a well-rounded DEI team to brainstorm with and provide training on more controversial topics.

The easiest and most efficient way to avoid catastrophe from a sensitive social media post is to train the social media managers in DEI, so some common mishaps will not even be a possibility. Not only do these trainings make communications professionals better coworkers and citizens, but they are also made aware of some topics that the company should most likely be speaking on.

As Ashley Craft pointed out, DEI training and consultation has become an integral part of her role as a content marketing manager, “In my current position, [DEI] training has become a large part of what we do, and that training helps us evaluate issues that are in the news, whether it's Women's Rights issues, or other things. We are then able to make sure that we're representing everyone equitably when we go to speak, whether it's the proper use of pronouns or changing our marketing tactics to be more inclusive of all audience members.”

Although many of the interview participants go through DEI training on a regular basis, they also stressed the importance of having a dedicated DEI spokesperson that ultimately has the final say in the organization's statements and position on social justice topics.

“Anytime we have a post that is somehow touching the topic of [DEI] we typically loop [VP of DEI] in to ask if it sounds right or if there is anything that we should watch out for by posting this. If it could potentially ruffle some feathers, either internally or with our key audiences, she lets us know. She just very much knows the ins and outs,” said Hannah Franz, Public Relations and Social Media Strategic Leader at Hallmark.

Having a continuous, open dialogue with executives is another means to remove additional risk of upsetting individuals with a controversial social media post, especially employees. By confirming your draft with executives, you are not only getting additional eyes on the content but also making those at the top aware of any potential commotion that may come from a post mentioning a social justice topic.

“It's gone up to leadership to review the story, and then it's come back down and then goes on our website. So, it goes up and down and through the organization, so everybody's had buy-in and has approved this story and then I put it on social media,” said Nicole Knoll, Senior Digital Marketing Strategist for the University of Iowa Center for Advancement.

By keeping a continuous dialogue open among communications team, executives, and members of the DEI team, deciding what social justice topics to speak on becomes more genuine and considerate. Taking a stance on social media should be well thought out and inclusive, but at the end of the day, needs to stay consistent with the brand. Putting out an opinion just for the sake of doing it can be harmful in more ways than one.

“When I worked at TMA in Dallas, I was probably the only black person on the team, and I had to fill those [DEI] roles, which can be irritating. Nine times out of ten, I said we're not posting this, or we're not going to go about it this way, because if I am the person working here, and I'm looking at this and scrunching my face, or reading this and receiving it not the way that it was probably nicely intended to be, then that's not good,” Gabri Mays said.

Having support from not only the executive team but also a DEI expert can ease some of the stress and remove common mishaps that we see when organizations post certain content on social media. Staying on brand and realizing when topics make sense for your organization to speak on can prevent causing confusion or unwarranted anger among your consumer base.

Although it has become increasingly popular for businesses to, at the very least, have a DEI consultant on-call, many social media managers are faced with making those tough calls themselves.

Social media guidelines

Social media guides can be as simple as brand fonts and colors or as complex as outlining exactly what phrases should be used in any given post. Although they are not the same for every organization, creating guidelines and following them was strongly suggested by many of the interview participants.

With many social media managers or marketers working on one account, a guideline ensures not only that brand messaging stays consistent, but that everyone feels confident and able to speak for the company.

“Guidelines are always helpful. In fact, we basically took our social media policy, our guidelines, and turned it into an employee advocacy toolkit. So, we now teach our employees how to talk about our brand, how to represent our brand, and that's just useful for anyone to know,” said Rachel Moore, who helped reinvent the social media guidelines at FerrellGas.

Guidelines provide some protection by educating new members of the social media team on what topics they are allowed and expected to speak on. By ensuring that all members are on the same page, issues that come from confusion will be limited.

“I would love to live in a world where you can give people free reign over social media channels. But you know you can see the downfall of big corporations with one accident or one tweet that went wrong. So, from that perspective, I think it is important to have guidelines and to have protocols in place, and to have, even guiding documents,” Susan Parsons, Group Director, Social Media and Content for The Integer Group, said.

Establishing protocols for how certain topics are handled also limits stress when it comes time to post on social media. Having a plan in place not only reduces the potential for repercussions but removes any emotion when it comes to posting about a social justice issue.

“Having your conscious strategy fully mapped out and getting very specific with the types of content that you're sharing, is something I do in my current role. Coming up with a laundry list of the topics that we potentially post about and prioritizing them and thinking through any of that nuance that you can in a working strategy session. So, when the time comes and something comes up we know if we post about this kind of stuff and if that's actually relevant to what we're trying to do,” said Hannah Franz.

A subsegment of social media guidelines is dialogue on how to handle different types of comments such as incorrect claims, threatening messages against an individual or even a simple question. As organizations move to having a more human-like presence on social media that promotes community management, comment monitoring is a large part in maintaining a positive environment for users.

“We have a decision tree for when to post, or when to reply to certain comments, when we want to delete them and how to respond to certain comments as well,” Nicole Knoll said when discussing the University of Iowa's social media guidelines.

Although it is reassuring to other followers or users to see the organization responding, Knoll sees that her consumer base normally handles the offensive comment and calls the offender out themselves.

“They have a right to their opinion and often people will come to your defense. There'll be more people saying you're disgusting, or why comment on this, than anything else,” Nicole

Knoll, Senior Digital Marketing Strategist for the University of Iowa Center for Advancement said.

Social media guidelines are very beneficial for members of the social media team so that they are not only able to stay on-brand with their messaging, but also feel more prepared when a special circumstance comes about. As brands are constantly scrutinized on social media, having the toolkit to know how to speak on behalf of the brand relieves some of the uncertainty that comes when managing an organization's social media accounts.

There are many tactics that brands can use to avoid a mishap on social media, especially when it comes to taking a stance on social media. However, all these strategies are usually not enough to keep the inevitable social media trolls at bay.

Important stance vs. upsetting your target audience

It has been widely accepted that even the most simple, light-hearted post will most likely offend at least one social media user due to a multitude of reasons. When companies are posting about social justice topics, and especially those that are seen as more controversial, there is an expectation that there will be nasty comments and a loss of followers.

“I think that someone will always be offended. There will always be a group that's offended. I think what you have to do is a cost-benefit analysis of the risk,” Rachel Moore, Digital Marketing Strategist at FerrellGas said.

Going off of Moore's previous comment, an important caveat is added about knowing and accepting your consumer base before deciding what stance the business is publicly taking on social media, “If data has shown you that this is what your primary customer base believes in, and you come out of left field with the opposite belief, you should have the expectation that

you're going to lose a lot of customers. So, there's a risk-reward that you have to do before you make any decision like that,” she added.

So, businesses are oftentimes faced with the debate of doing what they believe is morally correct by supporting a cause even when it creates risk of losing their consumers. Optimistically, this risk can be mitigated if the customers you lost are replaced by new ones whose beliefs align better with the businesses’. Gabri Mays highlighted this risk versus reward discourse when posting content about a social justice issue when she recalled a discussion she had in a previous role.

“What is the right thing to do? Is it to write this post because it's important, and we should believe in this, and encourage our consumers to do so? Or is it right to just not say anything and not help and still have these consumers who obviously don't believe in those same things? It's either you're going to do it, and you can gain a new following and gain a new audience that really [agrees] with that and really appreciates that solidarity, or you can just say nothing,” said Mays.

These considerations impact most businesses. However, an interesting point about the exemption to these “rules” for juggernauts like Amazon was brought up by several interviewees.

“I think of them as just basically printing money at Amazon. They’re always going to do well. I can't think of what they could do that could make people not want to buy stuff from Amazon, so they have a certain invincibility complex because at the end of the day everyone is still going to order stuff off Amazon. They can take a stance,” Hannah Franz, Public Relations and Social Media Strategic Leader at Hallmark said.

One arguable strategy for taking a stance and potentially guarding certain members of your target audience from seeing the content is through paid media. The interview participants were divided on whether this approach should be applied since it could lead to a crisis.

“I think you could use dark paid media, so nothing is appearing publicly on your social channels. But I think there's a huge risk of authenticity and being called out if there's no action organically, or the website doesn't address it in any capacity. As people do research, they're going to say, ‘this is fake news,’” Susan Parsons, Group Director, Social Media and Content for The Integer Group, said.

In theory this strategy would work but as social media platforms, such as Facebook, tighten up their political message targeting options, the likelihood of this tactic being executed correctly is low.

“I know from everything I do in paid advertising just how much regulation there is about political messaging in advertising. So if there's money behind it, you’re probably not going to be able to even push it out,” Rachel Moore, Digital Marketing Strategist at FerrellGas, said.

Facing blowback on social media in the form of hateful comments, spiteful messages or losing followers is amplified when businesses post about social justice causes on social media. A cost-benefit analysis must be completed prior to posting this type of content as businesses must weigh if taking a stance on a topic is worth losing a percent of their consumer base. Although some strategies have been suggested to avoid upsetting any portion of your followers, it is nearly impossible to do so. A more intricate and social media-centric concern when it comes to posting about a social justice cause is the fear of being shadow banned from your consumer base if the algorithm believes the organization’s values do not match the users.

Shadow banning

As mentioned earlier in this report, Twitter (and other social media platforms) separate its users into “echo chambers” to optimize their experience and only show content the algorithm believes the user will enjoy. If a business takes a stance on Twitter, whether that be a more liberal or conservative one, the question is raised whether the organization’s post will even be seen by their follower base.

“I think that it has gotten to this point where there is such a wide schism, and that people are being pulled down paths so deeply. Algorithms are trying to feed them the content that they think they want, and the information that they wind up with is what they already thought and it’s really hard to blend differing viewpoints together,” Susan Parsons, Group Director, Social Media and Content at The Integer Group, said.

Although organizations obviously do not have control of the algorithms, followers that engage with a profile, will continue to get content from that organization. Engagement is the best measure of interest and will usually beat out the algorithm’s beliefs about a user.

“I don’t have great insight, but a strategy for beating the algorithm I think comes with consistency. I think it comes with small, consistent messaging over an extended period of time,” Rachel Moore, Digital Marketing Strategist at FerrellGas, said.

By producing content that is engaging and interesting to your target audience, any potential for shadow banning will most likely be nullified, even if the organization takes a stance on the topic that is different than the user agrees with.

Chapter four: Discussion

Throughout the interview process I sought to answer these questions: (RQ1) *How can companies with a wide political range of customers avoid upsetting either side, while also advocating for causes that the organization believes in?* (RQ2) *Is it essential that organizations develop a social media code for interaction with users to ensure that all messaging is consistent when it comes to any sensitive topics or content with political subtleties?*

While answering these questions, there were many surprising and expected insights shared. Although so many of the participants had similar views, there were also some who had different opinions on the topics. Just as the participants had differing and consenting opinions, there were also a few discrepancies and consistencies between what was found during primary and secondary research. Throughout all seven of my interviews, I not only learned so much about the research topics, I also gained a lot of insight into the communications industry. All around, this process made me aware of all the nuances and differences that come with social media strategy and among roles in the industry.

First, one of the differences that I found between my primary and secondary research is the expectation that companies must speak up about social justice issues to appease their audience. In secondary research, I found that there was a mounting pressure on companies that they had to take a stance on an issue or risk losing a portion of their consumer base. However, during interviews many participants mentioned that silence is sometimes the best strategy when it comes to social justice topics. After comparing both insights, I feel as though there are good points made in both arguments and the resolution is that companies should speak out on issues that are important to them. As mentioned earlier, it is usually a lot worse for a company to insert themselves into a conversation where it does not belong or post a message that is not backed up

by action, than it is to just stay silent. However, I do believe there are times when it is worse for a company to remain silent, such as when a cause is being discussed that they have already aligned with. All in all, after completing primary and secondary research, I do not believe there is a hard and fast rule as to when companies should take a stance on social media, but it is so nuanced based on many factors such as industry, target audience and business practices.

Another difference I found between my two methods of research was the importance of algorithms and echo chambers. During secondary research, I found a lot of literature on how Twitter, specifically, separates users into “echo chambers” so they only see content the algorithm believes they will agree with and enjoy. This finding raised the question of whether a user would even see content from their favorite brand if the message did not align with their beliefs or politics. When asked about this question, the interview participants disagreed with this theory. Several of them agreed in their views that engagement is the best indicator to an algorithm to keep showing content. Regardless of whether someone has a strong political view, previous engagement will indicate to the algorithm that the user wishes to keep seeing that content. Although I do believe there is some truth to both statements, I do agree that engagement wins over perceived psychographics. Users are only shown content that the algorithm believes they will enjoy, but if a user continues to share or like one account’s posts, that would be a tell-tale sign they agree with it.

One distinct connection I did find between my primary and secondary research was that people did use media to affirm their beliefs, which is from the Uses and Gratifications theory. It was often brought up in the literature review and throughout interviews that people enjoy social media when they are shown content that aligns with their beliefs. Users do not want to see content that makes them uncomfortable or angry, but would rather learn more about topics they

already have an interest in. This theory is additional evidence of why posts featuring a social justice topic can spark outrage, if the user is used to only seeing content that is highly specific to their interests and beliefs. I thought that this connection was quite interesting and clearly seen in both primary and secondary research.

Throughout the interview process, I expected to learn a lot about my topic, but did not expect to learn so much about the communications industry and different social media management roles. By interviewing individuals working in so many industries, it was interesting how much everyone's role varied even with all graduating with similar degrees. The most notable difference I realized was between those on the corporate versus agency side. Although this had been discussed in previous classes, it was very interesting to see the stark differences between individuals who may even have the same job title but work in different sectors. I found that the participants working for an organization through an agency oftentimes had a longer review process, which at times took some of the pressure off when it came to posts featuring social justice topics. However, they did not have as much utility to use their creativity or state their opinions since they did not directly work for the organization. On the other hand, the participants that worked for the corporation they were representing found it easier to represent the brand voice and make suggestions since they felt more connected to the brand. However, there were not as many resources, like diversity, equity and inclusion teams, which was a pain point. All the insights from the interview participants were truly helpful, and it was an added bonus that I was able to learn more about their roles as well.

Chapter five: Conclusion

While conducting primary and secondary research, I believe some helpful guides were established with the insights of established scholars and seasoned communications professionals. Although social media is constantly evolving, there are some trends that have remained true and will continue to remain true. My expectation for this project was that I would not only get to learn more about how social media communication works through the professional component, but also how to handle difficult conversations on social media as they grow in popularity.

As I suspected when I began, there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to communicating on social media. Although one strategy worked for one corporation, those same tactics may not be useful to another. After speaking with seven interview participants and completing a literature review, I know now with 100% certainty that is the truth.

As brands continue to be personified and held to the same standards as any user, the stakes continue to be raised for social media managers. Although my research did find that it is impossible to not offend at least one individual with a post on social media, the pressure to not make a mistake continues to mount as users continue to ostracize brands that are not perfect.

All in all, I hope that these findings can aid in establishing best practices that can be established at virtually any organization with a social media presence. With this research, I believe I provided beneficial knowledge about a segment of the communications industry that continues to grow and that is oftentimes overlooked in academic research.

Appendix

1. Participant biographies

Susan Parsons is the Group Director, Social Media and Content for The Integer Group in Denver. The Integer Group is an advertising services company that is highly focused on data-driven intelligence to improve organization's capabilities such as social commerce, retail experience design and brand communications. She has been with The Integer Group since 2017 and worked as a freelance social media consultant prior.

Emma Rhyner is a Marketing and Content Strategist for the American Massage Therapy Association in Chicago. Prior to this role, she worked for SpotCo as their Social Media Manager where she managed various social media channels for Broadway shows in New York City.

Ashley Craft is the Content Marketing Manager, specializing in agriculture, for Woodruff. Woodruff is a full-service marketing and communications agency based in Columbia, MO. In this role she is responsible for planning and execution of marketing strategies for clients and the agency. She also contributes to the "Taste of the Wild" blogs that give pet owners helpful tips.

Rachel Moore is a Digital Marketing Strategist for Ferrellgas in Kansas City. She has been in this role for nine months and was a main contributor to the organization's revamped social media guidelines. Before she was promoted, she worked as a Social Media Analyst for a little over a year.

Hannah Franz is the Public Relations and Social Media Strategic Leader for Hallmark in Kansas City. She has been in this role for six months and worked as a Strategic Communications Supervisor at Two Rivers Marketing prior to her current role.

Gabri Mays is a Social Media Manager at Laundry Service based in Los Angeles. Laundry Services is a full-service agency with many notable clients. Gabri works with Amazon Prime Video in the horror, thriller and action department.

Nicole Knoll is the Senior Digital Marketing Strategist for the University of Iowa Center for Advancement. She has been in that role for almost five years and worked as a Digital Marketing Strategist for the three and a half years before that. She also has a master's degree in Business Analytics.

2. Weekly field notes

Week one: August 8-12, 2022

Although I started my position with Crystal Group in May, this was the first week I started to actively work on gathering sources for interviews and where I was not completely busy with other tasks. At this point, I have become very comfortable with HootSuite and TalkWalker, which are both social media tools that the company utilizes for scheduling posts and social listening. I have also written quite a few blogs and gotten comfortable with adding new products to the website. The most challenging software that I have finally started to figure out has been Salesforce/Pardot. Although it has been difficult, I have been receiving training once a week on how to build dynamic lists, execute drip campaigns and create landing pages. The company has also hired an account-based marketing firm to implement a new sales strategy that requires a lot of content that I will be primarily responsible for. The main lesson I have taken away so far from this experience is that as a communications professional you must be willing and able to work on projects that weren't necessarily in your job description or what you specifically studied in school.

For my project this week, I have contacted Jon Stemmler, who is working on helping some interview participants who will be relevant to my questions. After I informed Professor Stemmler of the requirements for my interview participants, he informed me that he will have some contacts to reach out to early next week. I also reached out to members of the Iowa City community via email that I believe to fit my criteria for a participant. To prevent bias, I will only choose one participant from the pool, but I am hoping to get in at least one in-person interview.

Week two: August 15-19, 2022

This week was a little slower at my internship since we were moving our offices and the marketing closet. Since we are developing an account-based marketing campaign for all the industries and government prime contractors that we work with, it was decided that it would make more sense for marketing and sales to sit next to each other on the first floor. This week was also a little bit slower with our social media platforms, so I am trying to get in the mindset of producing content that is not necessarily always tied with new blogs, products, or videos on the website.

As for my project, Jon Stemmler emailed me back earlier this week with a list of some Mizzou alumni who he believed would be relevant for me to interview. I worked on crafting a message to send to these potential interview participants and plan to reach out to them on Monday. I am also going to continue searching LinkedIn to find interview participants. I am very hopeful that I can start interviews at the beginning of September. Also, to stay ahead of schedule, I asked my

supervisor to complete her evaluation and originally gave her a deadline of the end of September to complete it, but she returned it to me this week.

Week three: August 22-26, 2022

This week I have been working mostly on digital marketing initiatives on the website and vendor portals. My supervisor did a complete overhaul of the corporate website last spring, so there are naturally some components on the website that still need to be completely fleshed out and updated as time has gone by. I was tasked with updating some blurbs on the website about current deployments of Crystal Group products for the Marines and Coast Guard. I interacted with many members of the sales team to ensure that I did not post any information on the website about these branches of the military that was not intended to be public. Also, I worked within two portals for Unmanned Systems Technology and Defense Advancement to publish products and documents that would be beneficial to those using these resources. Since the portals were created by outside organizations, I wanted to be sure that all the messaging matched Crystal Group's website. Lastly, I worked on converting a news article and an internal video that was posted last year into a blog that will be used in paid digital advertisements through the account-based marketing campaign.

This week has also been a busy one for my project. I sent emails to 15 individuals off the list that Jon Stemmler provided and have already received three responses. One participant asked to schedule an interview for next week, so I plan to finalize my interview questions this weekend and early next week, so I am completely prepared for the interview. Two out of three of the individuals who responded included some very insightful background information into their positions that will aid in my interview question creation.

All around, it was a very productive week, and I am looking forward to starting interviews next week. I am very hopeful that I will find at least three more participants who meet the qualifications and are willing to be interviewed.

Week four: August 29-September 2, 2022

This week I wrote a lot of copy for new features of the Crystal Group website. For example, I did some research on call-to-action buttons in marketing resources and compared to our competitors. I was able to suggest two different options to the web designers for A/B testing based on what I felt would be most impactful and like verbiage used in the past.

I have had a very busy week with starting interviews. I had one interview this week and scheduled five more over the next two weeks. I am really excited to start interviewing participants, so I am able to get more ideas on what questions I still need answered and start

getting some insight into my findings. Since all my interview participants provided some background information on their experience with social media and politics, I do not believe that I need a pre-interview survey at this time. Combined with the information that they chose to disclose prior to the interview and Professor Stemmler's thought that these interview participants would be relevant, I do not see the survey as necessary at this time especially since the participants are already taking the time to interview.

Week five: September 5-9, 2022

This week was a jam-packed week since Crystal Group was closed on Monday for Labor Day. I have been working on content and copy for the website heavily this week since the account-based marketing campaign for autonomous vehicles launched on September 12. I specifically worked with our web designer to build and design a new page on the website about Crystal Group's 30-day free trial program that is going to be used for digital advertisements. There are also two trade shows happening this week, so I have been posting on social media to increase booth visits and interest in visiting with the team at the show. Lastly, I started writing a blog about the U.S. Air Force's 75th anniversary and am compiling quotes from the sales team that works with this branch of the military and veterans. This is my first experience with writing quotes for individuals, so it has been challenging finding an authentic voice for the quotes.

I have also had a very busy week with interviews. I have done three interviews so far this week and it has been interesting to already see some similarities coming from the participants. An unexpected bonus from the interviews is the deeper understanding and insight into the communications industry and just how much the same role can vary in different organizations. So far, my participants have all worked at agencies, so I believe it will be interesting to compare their opinions to those who work directly for the company they are representing on social media. I have been very impressed with everyone's insights and look forward to beginning transcription. I am taking the day off from work on Friday, September 9 since there is an event for most of the afternoon and will begin looking through the automated transcriptions that Zoom provides and adjust as needed. I have also been taking notes during the interviews to highlight when especially insightful comments were made, so I am hoping that will be helpful.

Week six: September 12-16, 2022

The beginning of this week was very hectic as my supervisor was preparing to take PTO for most of the week. I was looped into a lot more projects because of her absence, so it was a nice change of pace to take on some new responsibilities for the few days she was gone. I worked with Crystal Group's website developers a lot this week to edit our cookies agreement banner and optimize some pages, so they were more user friendly. For the pages to not be so text heavy, I added in some forms for customers to get more information and connect with a member of the

sales team. Next week I am going to attend a GDPR workshop with a United Kingdom law firm to ensure that the website passes all the regulations, which I'm sure will be interesting and educational. My major project for this week was working on a blog for the U.S. Air Force's 75th anniversary and working with the graphic design intern to make an infographic. I have really enjoyed getting to write a more conversational and less technical piece.

As for my project this week, I completed two interviews, which brought me to six total. I am still waiting on a response from a seventh participant, but I feel relieved to have completed the number of interviews I determined required for validity. I want to interview a seventh participant, so I can have a more even spread of corporate and agency participants since there has been a noticeable difference between the two groups. Over this week I started organizing the recordings and transcriptions to ensure that I have everything saved onto a hard drive as well as in Zoom. I plan to refer to the Graduate School Canvas page this weekend to determine next steps in the process and will get started next week.

Week seven: September 19-23, 2022

I had a slower week of work this week since my supervisor was on vacation last week and I get most of my duties from her rationing some of her responsibilities. I feel as though I am finally back on track with social media content and have ideas or content to fill up the week, which has significantly improved analytics. Next, I would like to take a deeper dive into what is posted on each social media channel and adjust based on the platform. As of right now, the same content gets posted on every platform, which I know is not effective. This goal is just one of many I have thought of during interviews as my participants have brought up insightful comments that I believe relate to Crystal Group's digital marketing efforts too. My main project for this week is to start developing and designing an email drip campaign through Salesforce. Currently, Crystal Group sends prospects their requested collateral through email, with no marketing follow-up. With some help from the Salesforce consultant I have been training with, I'd like to implement a campaign so that the prospect can be sent additional marketing materials via email for about two months after their initial download. By taking the reins of this project, I hope to present my boss a finished, well-executed drip campaign at our quarterly review next week.

This week I conducted my seventh interview with a participant working on their own corporation's social media accounts. Although the seventh interview was not required for validity, I believe it was very helpful and provided even more great points to use in my research. We were able to broach the topic of comments and how to handle negative ones, which none of my other participants had experience with. I am hoping to transcribe at least two or three more interviews this week so that I can get started on writing my analysis, sooner rather than later.

Week eight: September 26-30, 2022

This week was a bit more hectic than last with lots of projects for me to work on. I posted and wrote two blogs and had a full week of social content to produce. I also met with a couple members of the sales team with my supervisor to discuss potential co-marketing with a reseller. Although I have been given a lot of free reign to write and produce content the way I want to, there has never been a lack of guidance when I have needed it, which I really appreciate. Lastly, the marketing department has our third quarter review and fourth quarter planning meeting on Friday that I will be attending. I am hoping to get some better insight into the brainstorming process and how a lot of the content plan is made in these meetings.

For my project I have been working on transcribing interviews and plan to have them all completed by Tuesday. My main goal for this week is to finish transcription and build a calendar with deadlines for when I need to complete portions of my project report. By starting next week, I will have about five weeks to finish my report, which I believe is attainable. I have already noticed some similarities and differences in the remarks made by my interviewees so I am confident that coding will not take long, and I will be able to have a rough draft soon.

Week nine: October 3-7, 2022

My tasks have picked up this week at work with writing a blog every week for the next three weeks and creating content for upcoming trade shows. One of the most notable tasks I had this week was writing a social media post about Hurricane Ian and Crystal Group's decision to pull out of a substation conference in Orlando. Not only did I have to craft the message that was going to be posted, I also had to decide how to handle the post that was already published stating our attendance at the show. In the end, I decided that I wanted to take a more human approach to the post and show that the organization was thinking of the people of Florida and included the decision to pull out of the conference at the end. This was a great learning opportunity for me since Crystal Group does not usually take a stance on current events and I did not want to post anything that made management even more weary to post in the future. The other notable project I worked on was creating a "September recap" email that was going to be sent to about 2,500 prospects in SalesForce. This was somewhat daunting since it was sent to so many individuals who had been identified as customers. All in all, this week was great for becoming more confident in my abilities as a marketer and getting experience in duties that I normally don't do.

As for my project this week, I have made a lot of headway. First, I finished proofing my transcripts and then met with Brett to discuss next steps, as well as his requirements for the project report. After this meeting I felt a lot more prepared to start tackling coding my interview transcripts. After pulling five themes from the interviews, I sorted quotes from all my participants related to those themes to make pulling quotes while writing the analysis section

much more efficient. I then started an outline to plan out the report based on what is required from the School of Journalism and Brett. Lastly, I started writing the report and pulling in portions from my proposal. After making some adjustments I have completed chapter one, two and the method section of three. I plan to start working on the analysis section this weekend since I know that it will probably be the most time-consuming and needs to be completed before the discussion chapter.

Week 10: October 10-14, 2022

This week I have been focused heavily on paid social media content. Right now, we are working with an account-based marketing firm to put out social media ads targeting the autonomous vehicles, oil and gas and electrical utilities market. In each market we are running about four different ads linking to content that I usually have written or must write the month before. So, I have been writing the social lead-ins, headlines, and call-to-actions for each post. This project took up a lot of my week as I was making edits and researching best practices for all these things. I also wrote a blog this week that we will be using for one of November's electrical utilities ads. It has been a busy week, but I am appreciative of getting more experience with different tasks and trying something new.

As for my project, I have also been busy working on that. So far, I have completed more than half of my analysis chapter, which I believe will be the longest. I am planning on finishing that up this week, which will leave me with only the discussion and conclusion chapters left. I was a bit anxious that I would not get everything done in time when I started working, but I feel like I am on schedule to deliver a draft to my committee about 10 days before my defense.

Week 11: October 17-21, 2022

This week, my main tasks have been to develop two PowerPoint presentations for a customer visit and write two blogs. Making the PowerPoint presentation is not a task that I normally complete, but it has been nice to work on something a little different this week. I worked on several revisions of these PowerPoints to reduce the number of words by replacing them with photos or graphs. For the blogs, they were both based on previous content that had been developed (a news article and video) so they were quite simple to execute. I have had a lot of meetings this week, so I believe I'll be very busy next week as I start working on new projects. The most notable meeting is a content brainstorm with members of the sales team so that we can tailor our content strategy to what they are hearing our target audience talk about at tradeshow.

As for my project, I completed the analysis chapter this week. Since this chapter was the longest, my goal was to have it done before this weekend so then I have plenty of time to make edits before I need to submit the final draft to my committee. Next, I am going to work on the

discussion section, which may be challenging, but I do not foresee it being more than four or five pages. I hope to finish this section throughout next week and complete the conclusion next weekend or early the following week.

Week 12: October 24-28, 2022

This week has been increasingly busy as I have been assigned more tasks. This week I worked on writing one blog and gathering information for two solution briefs. I also met with my supervisor and one of our web developers to go over the call-to-actions on the website to ensure that they are performing well and what changes should be made. After the meeting I was tasked with adding all the action items into our organization app, Asana, since our web developers are not in-house. Lastly, I audited the test standards portion of our website since I realized we had the incorrect phone number listed on every page and looked through the blogs to make sure all the information was still correct. Through the account-based marketing campaigns that are being run, there has been a lot of internal review of previous content that needs to be reviewed, which is the perfect opportunity to take a deep-dive into older work.

As for my project, this week I completed the discussion section of the paper. For that section I reread my literature review since it had been quite some time and compared my findings from the interviews. I found two obvious differences between the two and focused the chapter on those. I wrapped up the discussion section with some insight into what I learned, beyond my research, from my interview participants. I will be working on my conclusion this weekend and early next week so there is plenty of time for review before my defense.

Week 13: October 31-November 4, 2022

One of my main tasks for this week was organizing, collecting, and purchasing patches for our Veteran's Day display. This was a great project because I not only got to meet some individuals that I had not met before, but it was also a nice break since there has been a large influx in my writing assignments. Another major project I started working on was developing an email drip campaign to send to leads after they download a spec sheet on the website. I worked with our Salesforce team to express my ideas for each email and started working on copy. Over the last couple weeks, I have been trusted to manage some of our external teams, so ensuring they are staying on deadline has also taken up some time.

During this week I completed all writing for my project, including some of the content in the appendix like the self-evaluation. I did a lot of double-checking with the Canvas page and with examples to be sure I was on track and had all the necessary components included. I plan to spend the weekend and early next week reviewing the report and plan to send it to the committee by mid-week.

Week 14: November 7-11, 2022

This week I worked on writing copy and compiling images for a request from a member of the sales team. He was hoping by having this “one sheeter” he could provide a potential customer with all the important information needed to trigger a meeting. I also wrote a blog this week on how to clean the products, which meant I also created a social media post and email to send to subscribers.

For my project this week, I completed my last edits and read through the report a few times to check for errors. I also double checked that I named the report correctly and have all the documents needed for submission. Lastly, I sent the final copy of the report to my committee to ensure that they had enough time to review it.

3. *Supervisor Evaluation*

Position Overview

Crystal Group's Marketing Intern assisted the Digital Marketing Specialist and Communications Manager in all aspects of marketing: content, corporate website, spec sheets, social media, and event marketing.

Responsibilities:

- Manage social media channels: writing, posting, monitoring, and reporting on each platform.
- Update spec sheets as needed, formatting document in InDesign and updating all information on the corporate website
- Assist in competitive analysis and research
- Participate in weekly department meetings
- Other duties as assigned

Ellie Gretter's Performance Review

Ellie joined our marketing team at a time when we were a mighty team of two, barely keeping our heads above water. We wasted no time putting her to work. Our social media presence was next to nothing when she started. I asked her to completely own it and Ellie did just that. She wrote engaging content and created attention-grabbing graphics that brought life back into our social channels. I know that this was quite the undertaking and she made it look easy.

We started a new blog series that explained how our products solved our customers problems. Ellie worked with engineers on every level (Technical Director to Executive Vice President of Engineering) to get the whole story of what we were asked to create and how we got to the end product. These blogs were extremely technical and she was able to write them in a way that was easily readable and relatable for everyone.

Trade shows had not fully bounced back yet, some were in-person and others were still virtual. Ellie helped research our virtual shows, set up our profiles, and promote our presence at each show. She even helped us clean out our tradeshow warehouse!

Ellie took on every challenge we gave her with grace. All her hard work was noticed by many of our executives, and they all agreed that she is an asset to our marketing team. In addition to our social media strategy, Ellie continues to take on more digital marketing tasks, including web strategy and maintenance, lead assignment using Sales Force, and marketing automation through Pardot.

Jessica Joyce, Marketing Manager
jessica.joyce@crystalrugged.com
319.731.3008

4. Self evaluation

While working at Crystal Group, my main tasks were to manage all the social media channels and write content such as blogs, new copy for the website or paid social media advertisements. As time went on, I was continuously given new responsibilities and bigger projects to work on.

Since Crystal Group operates in such a unique market, there is definitely a learning curve, especially when you are tasked with representing the brand on many external channels. As time went on, I became much more confident in my understanding of the industry, which I believe allowed me to take on extra tasks.

Working to understand engineering and computer hardware terminology was the most significant challenge I faced when in this role. At first, it was very difficult to comprehend most of the topics that were discussed, making producing content very difficult. However, with time and lots of exposure I was able to get a better grasp on some of the topics that engineers found interesting and writing became much easier.

While working at Crystal Group, we started account based marketing campaigns for the “commercial” side of the business. So, starting in August there were social media and remarketing advertisements running for the autonomous vehicles, electrical utilities and oil and gas industries. These campaigns required a lot of new and repurposed content so there was a sharp uptick in content. It has been challenging trying to continue to post content focused on the military market when there is such a high demand elsewhere.

As for anyone tasked with running an organization’s social media accounts, there were a few instances where I referred back to lessons I had learned about audience management. During this semester, there were two separate occasions where a troll commented on a piece of content,

obviously intending to start an argument. Although it was suggested to just delete the comment and let it be, I remembered that community management is one of the main tasks of managing an organization's social media accounts. So, I drafted a response to the troll that I believe was firm, yet not abrasive, so that it did not seem we were backing away or ignoring the claim. In another instance, I had to involve the president of the company because the claims were much more serious. By asking for guidance from others I felt much more secure in my decision, since it was my first time dealing with such a claim.

Lastly, all the experience I got with using platforms such as Salesforce, Hootsuite, WordPress and even the Office suite I believe will be very helpful in the future. Although I had some experience with these platforms before, I have spent a lot of time working in them over the last few months, which has made me a lot more efficient and knowledgeable of the platform.

Since I was working with such a small marketing team, I got to complete lots of different tasks that I may not be able to in a larger department. In that same vein, I feel as though I was able to learn a lot more from my peers since we acted more as equals.

All in all, I believe I have learned a lot about digital marketing and social media management while working at Crystal Group and the experience definitely added value to the research component of this project.

5. *Interview questions*

- a. Introduction to work background
 - i. Tell me how you ended up in your current role.
 - ii. How long have you been in your current role?
 - iii. Why did you want to work in communications?
 - iv. Describe what a typical workday looks like for you.
 - v. On a scale of 1-10 how comfortable are you with social media communication?
- b. Deeper dive into social media background
 - i. How long have you been working with your company's social media accounts?
 - ii. How have you had to adapt your marketing skills to fit social media over the years?
- c. Tell me about your thought process before posting on social media.
 - i. Does this vary based on the platform?
 - ii. Is there a "social media code" that you refer to?
 1. On the organizational level?
 2. On a personal level?
 - iii. Are there different processes for content that mention social justice issues?
 1. Disabling/replying to comments
- d. Have you ever been in a situation where you have been told not to post content because of its relation to social justice or sensitive topics?
 - i. Describe what that was like.

- e. Do you believe that you can use one social media account to successfully target audiences of different political identities in today's climate?
 - i. If yes, how do you think you can do this?
 - ii. If no, why do you believe that?
- f. Have you had any experience in posting content about social justice topics and how did you handle that?
- g. How can organizations still post about social justice initiatives that are important without offending their consumer base? Is this possible?
- h. Do you think an organizational social media code should be employed so that social media managers know what is allowed to post and what is not?
- i. Ideal social media behavior
 - i. If you were to choose exactly how any business represented themselves on Twitter what would that look like?
 - ii. Do you think it is expected for companies to speak out on all social justice issues or only ones that they believe impact them?
 - iii. Do you think that posting on social media about social justice issues will become normalized in the future?
 - iv. Are there any companies that you believe do a good job of advocating for causes they believe in?

6. Project proposal

Introduction

As Twitter has become a platform that more and more Americans prefer to consume their news on, advocacy for social justice issues has become the norm.

Sixty percent of Americans prefer to use their digital devices to access news, with 23% preferring to use social media (Shearer 2021). Since users may have intense views due to their political affiliation and are able to present their level of knowledge of the political scene in America however they see fit, social media has been used as a weapon for misinformation (Barry, Hendrix and Sims 2021).

So, as journalists face the challenges that come with the spread of false information, companies also face interesting questions that must be answered (Barry, Hendrix and Sims 2021). There is a fine line that many companies must walk when deciding whether to be vocal, especially on Twitter, about social injustices, political leanings or opinions on the current landscape of the American government. With so much pressure put on organizations to use their social media platforms for advocacy, communications teams across the country are faced with deciding how to be socially responsible while also not tainting the reputation of their company by leaning too far in one direction.

These decisions are especially complicated for companies that cater to two very diverse audiences. While one segment of their business may be conservative, the other may be liberal, providing even more complications to the above scenario. Twitter's algorithm leads to separating users into "echo chambers" with like-minded individuals, usually hiding any content that the user may disagree with, which does not lend well for organizations aiming to appeal to different sides (Bail, Argyle, Brown, et. al. 2018). Is it possible for companies to successfully cater to clients of various political beliefs using a singular social media account?

The questions this research aims to answer is: *How can companies with a wide political range of customers avoid upsetting either side, while also advocating for causes that the organization believes in? Is it essential that organizations develop a social media code for interaction with users to ensure that all messaging is consistent when it comes to any sensitive topics or social justice issues?*

Professional Component

I plan to complete an internship to fulfill the professional component of my project. I will complete the internship in Hiawatha, IA at Crystal Group, a computer hardware manufacturer. This internship is directly related to my project because I will be managing their social media channels, where they are often challenged with appeasing the varying political views of their target audience. The organization does business primarily with customers from the U.S. Department of Defense but has a growing portfolio with autonomous vehicle manufacturers. Generally, these two markets have different ideals, especially when it comes to politics, which puts Crystal Group in a difficult situation when deciding on what content is appropriate to post.

Working as the marketing intern, I will get an inside look in to the possibility of using one social media profile to connect with their whole audience, while also still posting social justice content that is important to the organization. Working in Iowa will fulfill my requirements for interview participants by giving me access to professionals working in social media throughout the Midwest region of the United States of America.

Review of relevant material

Social media marketing is an area of communications that is continuously changing, at a very rapid pace. Communicators are not only having to monitor several social media platforms but are also responsible for creating content that is relevant and on trend. There is a constant pressure to be posting, which can oftentimes lead to mistakes that result in accusations of being insensitive or unaware of current social or political issues in the United States. Since I already have a small amount of experience with social media marketing, I believe that it is a profession that is not represented enough in academic research. We see lots of psychological research papers on the effects of social media on young minds, our attention span and really anything in between. However, the stress that is put on those who are responsible for their organization's social media pages is hardly represented. I believe that even this discrepancy is enough to prove why my research is necessary in the communications field, but I believe that my research could also help professionals in social media marketing.

In most strategic communication classes, we hear that segmentation is key and necessary for effective audience targeting through any chosen vehicle. Although hyper segmentation may be possible through web, television or magazine advertisements, owned media outlets, such as social media accounts, do not benefit from the same amount of specificity. An organization, like the one where I will be interning in the fall, must use the same social media accounts to speak to their whole audience, who may be very different demographically and psychographically.

Although it may not be a big deal to use the same social media account to speak to audiences in both the Southern United States and the Midwest region, there are some traits a target audience may have that are not so easily generalized.

Political party alignment is an issue that has been facing social media marketers for several years now. Several social media sites, such as Twitter, only show users content that they believe aligns with their beliefs, whether that's sports team affiliation, preference of dogs versus cats or political leanings. Users will simply not see content, even from accounts they follow, if the algorithm believes that the user will not relate to the messaging of the post. So, it has become seemingly impossible to post completely neutral content that would show up on all your follower's feeds.

The second prong of this mounting difficulty for social media marketers is the growing importance of social advocacy on social media. Since summer 2020, individuals have been continuously calling out organizations for not only posting insensitive content, but also staying silent. For an organization who is attempting to appease all political party affiliations, it becomes very challenging to know when and how to speak up on issues that are important. I truly believe that all the issues that I have presented in this framework are reason enough to pursue academic research in this area. I think that social media marketers are oftentimes not represented in research because of the ever-changing landscape of American politics and social media algorithms, leading to a lack of support and answers.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications theory discusses how people use media, such as newspapers, television, or social media, to satisfy their needs, instead of previously accepted beliefs that media uses people. People can use media to learn more about the world, in the way they want to learn it.

There are five needs that are believed to be satisfied in the Uses and Gratifications theory: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension free needs (2018), according to the Uses and Gratifications article. Cognitive needs are the need for acquiring knowledge or facts, most likely affecting individuals who want to acquire a deeper level of knowledge (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018). Affective needs are used to satisfy the emotions, pleasure, and moods of people (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018). Personal integrative needs are satisfied when individuals use media to reassure their status in society or gain credibility (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018). Social integrative needs are met when individuals use media to connect with close friends or family, whether that’s connecting on social media or discussing their favorite television show. Lastly, tension free needs satisfy people’s need to escape the real world, which relieves the individuals from tension and stress (“Uses and Gratification Theory” 2018).

This theory not only shows social media algorithm developers the importance of personalized feeds, but also organizations hoping to reach their audiences via social media. Social media users have specific needs when using social media and are only using media when it can appease one of the needs stated above. This theory is especially relevant to my topic because it provides some insight into why social media users may not be amenable to social media content that does not agree with their beliefs, especially political.

Segmentation

Building a specific and reachable target audience is a task that every strategic communicator must learn whether developing a new campaign, social media strategy or writing

copy for a magazine advertisement. By having a target audience that is backed by rounds of primary and secondary research, a company is much more likely to reach the consumers who will engage with them through various channels, hopefully leading to a purchase. Increasingly, social media has been the preferable vehicle for making a connection with their target audience.

Social media is an optimal tool for connecting with audiences because of the unique attribute of two-way communication (Pang 2018). Not only can organizations reach audiences based on their self-proclaimed interests on the social channel, but the users can show dedicated interest by following, messaging or “@” mentioning a company. This dialogic communication between user and organization not only allows for better targeting, but also opens the conversation to hear exactly what your consumer is enjoying about your brand or what improvements can be made (Pang 2018). Social media marketing has continuously evolved and will continue to evolve as marketers become more comfortable with communicating with their consumers directly.

The future of social media marketing is dependent on a smorgasbord of challenges and opportunities. Lack of privacy, use of social media as a political tool and the impact on mental health are all increasing concerns by users (Appel 2019). Users have now become educated enough to realize the potential damages that social media can do to an individual. However, the importance of maintaining an online image is still prominent. Nevertheless, there are also notable improvements to daily life that social media brings, such as a decrease in feelings of loneliness, integrated customer care and providing necessary information at your fingertips (Appel 2019). Social media platforms, much like the organizations that advertise on them, have listened to what users need to ensure that daily use is a necessity for consumers.

Using online communication networks is a strategy that provides most marketers, regardless of budget, a way to not only get in touch with their target audience, but to even test if their ideas are viable or not in a very low-risk manner (Lorenzo-Romero 2012). Currently, social media sites are well diffused into society with a large portion of consumers in the United States having some awareness of social sites. Social media sites removed the astronomical costs that come from advertising on traditional mediums and made it more accessible to virtually any player in the market that wants in (Lorenzo-Romero 2012). Although some users may be more introverted, and only use social media to stay in contact with close friends or family, the opportunity still exists to engage in a two-way relationship them, which was virtually unheard of before. Social media communication is a highly competitive and variably lucrative method for advertising, but the simple ability for any marketer to use it leaves users inundated by companies on social media platforms.

Corporate Social (Media) Responsibility

As social media has continued to evolve to be a large platform with many engaged listeners, there has been an increased pressure on organizations to speak to that active audience about social justice issues. It is no longer acceptable for large organizations to sweep their beliefs under the rug or hide policies that may be harmful to others. Advocacy for social justice issues is increasingly becoming a non-negotiable for consumers and a differentiator when choosing between competitors. However, with the current political environment there are virtually no social causes that would not upset someone. So, companies are forced to be extremely specific when deciding which causes, they want to outwardly support and weary of how their audience may react to that support.

Corporate social responsibility has been a topic that many consumers are concerned about but was rarely put at the forefront of their decision-making process until the popularization of social media channels (Loureiro 2019). Although it may be fear-inducing for companies to share any sort of politically hinted speech, it has been proven that when an organization does post these beliefs, there is much more notable positive impact (Loureiro 2019). By engaging users with information about an organization's corporate social responsibility policies, word-of-mouth recommendations and positive engagements will increase, as well as reinforce consumer-brand ties (Loureiro 2019).

Although some organizations are using today's political environment to begin advocacy on social media, a choice few have always believed in having a belief-based business model. For example, Patagonia is notoriously environmentally friendly, provides their workers with fair wages and supports many social justice initiatives around the world. Patagonia has long been an advocate for reducing harm to the environment in an effort to reduce the negative effects of climate change that are impacting the world (Morse 2020). Patagonia not only takes actual action for the causes the organization believes in, but the company also actively activates and educates users on social media in an attempt for them to realize the importance of what Patagonia does (Morse 2020). The organization has even gone so far as to endorse political candidates who have a strong belief in protecting what is left of our environment (Morse 2020). Patagonia believes that to improve the world, the issues that we are facing must receive the "airtime" they deserve, so they took the initiative by providing that on their social media channels (Morse 2020). So, if Patagonia can actively discuss and promote topics that may be controversial to some, is this viable for all organizations who do not have similar market share or target audiences?

The growing polarization of political parties is amplified on social media because of the algorithms that force like-minded users onto the same content that they will most likely agree and interact with. When a user gets stuck in an “echo chamber” they will only see news, posts, and multimedia content that the algorithm believes will appease the user. So, users are then stuck seeing the same news outlet report on various topics under the same light (Freiman 2020). This can be damaging and ultimately lead to the “false news” claims that often litter social feeds. According to García-Orosa, our democracy is now informed and influenced about politics by what is shown on our social media feeds, which is obviously a completely new phenomenon (2021). Critical public information is now disseminated through channels that may not demonstrate the whole truth, or present topics in a false light, just so that the user agrees with what is being shown on their feed and continue to log on every day (García-Orosa 2021). The algorithms on social media channels allow users to only see content that is agreeable to their beliefs and will not upset them, even if it may be complete misinformation, which is extremely harmful in our polarized political environment.

Impact of interaction

As brands have adopted social media as a vehicle for dialogic communication with their target, consumer interaction has also increased. Brands that use social media to build interaction often see higher engagement rates whether that is from post interactions, comments or messages (Karpńska-Krakiwiak 2014). Consumers have not only begun to develop closer, parasocial relationships with public figures on social media but also with brands. Although this may seem like a positive all-around, brands must decide when and if they are to respond to consumers, how they will do so and what content fits the brand.

When Twitter was first established it was originally supposed to be a medium for one-way communication where marketers, public relations specialists and the average user could share information they deemed necessary online. However, as we all know, over the years that has completely shifted to build connections and increase conversations. Although this is the trend that most businesses have followed, United States Government Agencies have not adapted with the change (Waters 2011). Although it is unknown whether the marketing professionals behind these government agencies want to interact with users, this is one example of organizations whose social media code limits interaction (Waters 2011). Government agencies have chosen not to engage or interact back with users on Twitter to ensure that their highly professional position remains untouched. Although government agencies do operate in a different sector than traditional businesses, this provides a gray area for their suppliers who aim to use social media in a more lighthearted way.

Whether in-person or online, talking about one's political beliefs is usually reserved for close friends and family. Many individuals are cautious about even liking posts that have political subtleties in fear of upsetting unagreeable distant family members, future employers or even the random trolls that populate the digital space. These fears prevent users from speaking out about social issues, sometimes referred to as the "spiral of silence" (Hampton 2017). Posts with social ties, regardless of poster, are recorded as having lower performance and interaction from users (Hampton 2017). Unless organizations are targeting individuals with very strong political beliefs, they have very little hope in getting the interaction that is expected from previous, non-political posts.

As social media and technology have become a more pervasive part of our lives, trust in corporations has gone down. Now we are constantly inundated with messaging from brands,

which some consumers dislike (Bogdaneris 2016). The distrust that has mounted has not only impacted interaction between corporation and user but has also made individuals more aware of tactics used on social media to target them. (Bogdaneris 2016) It is imperative that any content, but specifically content about social justice must be genuine to the organization. Companies must be aware that the consumer has many options to choose from if they become unhappy with an organization's practices. Maintaining an honest, genuine, and beneficial relationship on social media is one means of regaining trust from consumers.

Method

For this study, qualitative research methods will be employed to answer the two questions posed above. Specifically, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with six to 10 individuals working within digital communications roles at their respective organizations. These semi-structured interviews will be conducted with professionals with ample experience in employing social media campaigns with knowledge on connecting with various target audiences using the same account.

Semi-structured interviews are the best fit for this research since questions can be established prior to the interview but the method allows for deviation if a more interesting route is taken by the participant. This method allows for flexibility, which is a trait valued highly in qualitative research (Robson 2011). At the beginning of the research process, semi-structured interviews can be used to obtain a general understanding of the research topic. Later in the research process, this

qualitative method can be used for obtaining in-depth, thought-provoking revelations, just the same as structured interviews (Robson 2011).

Semi-structured interviews allow for a deeper connection to develop between interviewee and interviewer, which allows for the development of a space conducive to reflection, learning and deep thought (Robson 2011). By developing a more meaningful relationship with interviewees, the researcher can ask questions that result in more impactful findings or rich data.

Semi-structured interviews provide a better environment for openness and vulnerability between interviewer and subject, which cannot be established in research methods such as focus groups or observation. This method will allow for more flexibility during the interview process, while still providing the necessary backbone and guidance for successful findings.

Recruitment of participants

This research will consist of six to 10 semi-structured interviews with professionals in the communications industry, specifically those who are familiar with social media for businesses. The individuals participating in the interviews must meet the following criteria: 1) must be working in a communications role at their respective organization; 2) must have ample knowledge of social media algorithms and current political environment.

To ensure that the selected participants are knowledgeable of both social media practices for businesses and the American political environment, I will send out a pre-interview survey asking about their prior experience in social media marketing and understanding of politics. This short introductory survey will help me not only understand participants but prepare a more specific interview guide tailored to their experiences.

I plan to begin recruitment by looking at social media sites such as LinkedIn to get an initial set of participants for the interviews and ensure they have ample experience in social

media. After I have a few participants who provide insightful findings for my research, I will be using snowball sampling to obtain more participants for this study. This sampling method will be helpful for finding multiple participants, since prior participants give recommendations for additional participants (Research Office 2017). This technique will allow for a larger number of participants to be found, based on prior successful and insightful participants.

I believe that the greatest challenge that I will face in recruiting participants is the lack of time that professionals have during work hours for non-work activities. I think it will be difficult to get marketing professionals to want to participate in an interview since it can be slightly stressful and time consuming. I'm hoping that by assuring interview participants that their insights will simply be used in academic research and will not be extrapolated beyond what they said, they will be more willing to spend their time in an interview. I will also share all my findings with participants, so as to hopefully help them in their jobs. I also can use Zoom or other video conferencing software to connect with interview participants who may live in different states that would normally require travel.

Data collection

The interviews will take place during the summer and fall semesters. I will start contacting potential interview participants during the summer to get a head start on establishing interview times and leaving plenty of time for any necessary follow-ups. Professionals may be less busy during the summer months as more of their colleagues take vacations, which will hopefully make them more willing to interview. I believe that by starting early, I will have a higher chance of success and will be able to conduct the interviews on a realistic timeline and use my findings to adjust future interview questions and procedures.

To ensure accuracy, all my interviews will be recorded. If the interview is conducted in-person, I will use a recording device such as a smartphone and jot down notes to make transcription easier. If I conduct an interview virtually, I would prefer to use Zoom since they provide a free transcription and recording service. Either way, I will record all interviews to make sure that no important insight is forgotten and to assess my interview skills throughout the process.

I believe that if I work to make the interview process as easy as possible for participants, I will be successful in recruiting a large group of participants that meet my requirements. I do not think there is a need for the interview participants to remain anonymous since I do not project that there will be any sensitive information that will come from the interviews. However, if a necessary participant requires anonymity, I do not believe that will impact my analysis. By using the resources available to me and staying consistent with communication to participants, I believe I will be able to find six to 10 participants who are fit for my research project.

Interview questions

I have included a few sample sets of interview questions that may be asked during the semi-structured interviews; however, prior I will ask common demographic questions to better understand the background of all participants.

1. Introduction to work background
 - a. Tell me how you ended up in your current role.
 - i. How long have you been in your current role?
 - ii. Why did you want to work in communications?
 - b. Describe what a typical workday looks like for you.

- c. On a scale of 1-10 how comfortable are you with social media communication?
2. Deeper dive into social media background
- a. How long have you been specifically working in social media marketing?
 - b. How have you had to adapt your marketing skills to fit social media over the years?
 - c. Tell me about your thought process before posting on social media.
 - i. Does this vary based on the platform?
 - ii. Is there a “social media code” that you refer to?
 - 1. On the organizational level?
 - 2. On a personal level?
 - iii. Are there different processes for content that mention social justice issues?
 - d. Have you ever been in a situation where you have been told not to post content because of its relation to social justice or sensitive topics?
 - i. Describe what that was like.
 - e. Do you believe that you can use one social media account to successfully target audiences of different political identities in today’s climate?
 - i. If yes, how do you think you can do this?
 - ii. If no, why do you believe that?
 - f. Have you had any experience in posting content about social justice and how did you handle that?

- g. How can organizations still post about social justice initiatives that are important without offending anyone? Is this possible?
- h. Do you think an organizational social media code should be employed so that social media managers know what is allowed to post and what is not?

Data Analysis

I will conduct data analysis in several rounds during the research process. After each interview, I will look over the transcription and my notes to pull any interesting insights that I believe can be used in the project report or to aid in future interviews. I will do this by loosely sorting or coding my findings based on themes found in my research questions. Some ways I can sort my findings is by differences in social media platforms, social media code, methods for being an advocate on social media and any other categories I may discover during the interview process. I will continue to analyze the data while conducting all my interviews in hopes of finding new themes or commonalities between participants.

During analysis I will be looking for commonalities between the participant's insights, not just looking for them to prove any preconceived ideas I may have about my research questions. By asking open-ended questions, I hope to receive some valuable insights that provide some clarification on my research questions. During analysis I will look for similarities between participants and differences, while equally evaluating both.

Publication

Since the topic of my research is very industry based, I believe that altering my project into a white paper would be the best method for disseminating any information I find. I am

anticipating that my findings for this project will not only be relevant, but also helpful for professionals working on their organization's social media channels, so having the paper easily accessible through a white paper would be ideal.

However, if I did want to also publish in relevant trade journals, I could also use the information that I find to write an article. An article would be more likely to be published and read, instead of a multi-page report that will be required for my project. Some examples of relevant trade journals for the article would be Advertising Age, Ad Exchanger, Direct Marketing News and Multichannel Merchant. All four of these professional publications would be a great resource that professionals who value continuous education in their field would consult. This is the right direction because the content of my project will be best received through a traditional platform for strategic communicators, such as the ones listed, instead of a more academic route, considering the topic. Although I have these ideas listed, I am open to exploring other publication opportunities, especially those suggested by my committee.

Potential Interviewees

Haley Nelson- Social Media Marketing Specialist for GreenState Credit Union

Haley has been working at GreenState Credit Union for over three years in North Liberty, IA. She started at the organization as an Executive Assistant/Public Relations Specialist but was then promoted to Social Media Marketing Specialist after a year in that position. Prior to coming to GreenState, she worked in the administrative assistant role for two other companies, with both positions also based in Iowa. She attended Hawkeye Community College and earned an associate degree in General Studies.

Haley would be a great interviewee because GreenState is a large corporation in the Midwest that caters to a wide range of consumers. She would have a great understanding of the dos and don'ts of posting any politically charged content and how her organization deals with that challenge. Her experience in social media marketing over the last two years would be helpful since so much has changed in the industry during that time. Since Nelson also held other positions before transitioning into social media marketing, it would also be interesting to hear how she figured out how to navigate each social media platform.

Gina Vo- Senior Social Media Manager, Emerging Platforms at Target

Vo has been working at Target for over three years, and in her current role for one. She started working at Target as a social strategy manager for TikTok, Target Beauty and Black Beyond Measure. Vo has been working in the digital advertising field since 2013 when she graduated from University of St. Thomas with a Bachelor of Arts in Marketing Management. Vo stayed in the greater Minneapolis-St.Paul area after graduation and held quite a few jobs in the digital marketing industry.

Vo would be a great interview participant because of her wide range of experience in the industry and her experience working with Target. I believe it would be interesting to speak to someone working on Target's social media team because of their unique advertising positioning. Target has long been a leader in progressive and inclusive advertising, whether it be on television commercials or via their social media accounts, which provides an interesting take on my research questions. Vo would provide insights into what it is like working for an organization that cares more about their code of ethics, than what others may think, which I believe is rare in business.

Ryan Gavin- Social Media and Community Specialist for Veterans United

Gavin has been working at Veterans United for almost two years now as a Social Media and Community Specialist. Prior to working at Veterans United, Gavin held many positions at the University of Missouri, including the Strategic Communications Manager: Division of Inclusion, Diversity and Equity. Gavin graduated from Mizzou in 2007 with a Bachelor's in Journalism degree and has mostly worked in the Columbia, MO area since.

Gavin would provide interesting insights into my research since he has worked in social media marketing for close to a decade. He has witnessed some changes in the industry in his time working, so I believe it would be helpful to hear his thoughts on those. He would also provide helpful insights into some of the challenges that come about when posting any content that may have political subtleties because of his experience working in the Division of Inclusion, Diversity and Equity office.

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