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The Power of Apology: How Crisis Communication Practices Impact Brand Reputation

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For Max and Sandy. Thank you for your endless love and support.

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Summary

During April 2017, Pepsi launched its tone-deaf Kendall Jenner commercial, United Airlines dragged a passenger off of Flight 3411 and the public responded to both incidents with "online firestorm[s]" (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014). The purpose of this thesis was to use the aforementioned events of April 2017 as a case study for how crisis communication practices impact brand reputation. While there is an abundance of literature written on what the best communication practices are in crisis situations, there is little that depicts the direct, real-life ramifications that these practices have in regard to brand reputation specifically. This thesis aimed to contribute to the filling of the void. Social media data, as gathered through Crimson Hexagon's ForSight software, was relied on heavily in measuring public sentiment regarding the brands in questions. Lessons and application for future crisis communication practices are discussed.

Introduction

April 2017 was a month chock-full of public relations crises that trended on Twitter and dominated the news cycle. On April 4th, Pepsi ran an in-house-produced advertisement in which Kendall Jenner, a model and reality television personality, resolved a stand-off between protesters and police by handing one officer a Pepsi soda can. The public responded with an online firestorm. Critics of the commercial, including Martin Luther King Jr.'s daughter, Bernice King, thought that Pepsi trivialized the Black

Lives Matter protests that occurred in the months before the ad debuted. The next day, Pepsi pulled the ad and issued a statement apologizing for the commercial.

Then, on April 9th, a passenger was forcibly removed from an overbooked United Airlines flight from Chicago O'Hare to Louisville, Kentucky. Agents could not find volunteers willing to be rebooked on a later flight and, consequently, randomly selected four passengers to be removed (*United Airlines Passenger Violently Removed From Flight*). David Dao, a 69-year-old Kentucky doctor, was one of the passengers selected at random. Agents forcibly removed him from his seat and physically dragged him down the aisle of the aircraft, which was documented on video by fellow passengers.

United Airlines initially responded to the incident on April 10th, issuing a statement apologizing for "having to re-accommodate" passengers. After facing an ongoing backlash from the public, a plethora of negative media coverage and the looming threat of a boycott, the airline shifted its crisis response strategy and issued a second apology statement during the week following the initial incident. In addition, United's CEO, Oscar Munoz, appeared on *Good Morning America*, met with the Chinese consulate located in Chicago to discuss "the possible impact to bookings" (CNBC). This meeting was a reaction to the concern that the removal of Dao was racially-motivated, a sentiment which was voiced by many Twitter users. Ultimately, Munoz approved a change in the airline's overbooking policy.

This thesis aims to use the aforementioned events of April 2017 as a case study for how crisis communication practices impact brand reputation. While there is an abundance of literature written on what the best communication practices are in crisis situations, there is little to none that depict the direct, real-life ramifications that these

practices have in regard to brand reputation specifically. The research conducted for this thesis aims to contribute to the filling of the void.

A three-pronged methodology was utilized in the research. First, the crisis communications strategies used by Pepsi and United Airlines brands were examined based on the following criteria: 1) Whether a statement or apology regarding the misstep was issued, 2) the content thereof, 3) the medium in which the statement or apology was issued, 4) the amount of time that elapsed between the misstep and the response and 5) any additional communication campaigns or policy adaptations that were launched subsequently. These criteria were assessed largely using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as a framework. Second, the impact of crisis communication strategies on brand reputation was measured based on social media buzz that occurred on Twitter. This included the total volume of consumer tweets posted regarding the brand's misstep and subsequent responses to the crisis, the emotional tone of the tweets, the most common words used in the tweets and the quantitative change in net sentiment regarding the brand in question. Crimson Hexagon, a social media monitoring and analytics software, was used to gather this data. It should be noted that financial data, such as stock prices, were also considered in the assessment of long-term brand reputation. Third, the effectiveness of the post-crisis communication strategies was evaluated based on the summation of the information gathered in prongs 1 and 2.

In turn, this thesis addresses the following questions: 1) What communication practices do contemporary, well-known brands employ in response to crises? 2) What trends, if any, are evident in the way the brands respond to each of the crises selected? 3) How do the chosen communication practices impact the way the consumer public views

and talks about a particular brand, as exemplified through the Crimson Hexagon Twitter data? 4) How do the chosen communications practices impact the profitability of a particular brand, as exemplified through financial data? 5) What factors other than crisis communication practices could skew brand reputation? 6) Based on correlations between brands' responses to crises and metrics that indicate brand reputation, what are the best crisis communication practices to use in order to maintain a favorable brand reputation?

Methodology

Crises Selection

Crises were selected for inclusion in this thesis based on several factors to allow for a focused and interesting final product. While there are countless corporate reputation crises that occurred in recent years, the United Airlines and Pepsi missteps were chosen for 1) the substantial amount of social media attention that each received, 2) their close temporal proximity to one another, 3) the contrast in the companies' respective crisis communication strategies and 4) that enough time had elapsed since April 2017, when the crises occurred, to evaluate their long-term effects on brand reputation.

Crimson Hexagon

Crimson Hexagon, a social media monitoring and analysis platform, was used in order to support this thesis with quantitative data on the public reaction on social media to the Pepsi and United Airlines April 2017 crises. Crimson Hexagon's ForSight software analyzes the textual content from all public posts on Twitter and then classifies the

content by identifying statistical patterns in words. The technology is based on an algorithm created by Harvard University Institute for Quantitative Social Science professor Gary King (Hitlin, 2015).

Within the Crimson Hexagon software, a monitor, or individual query, was created for each of the respective crises in question. Once the monitor was created, a specific timeframe was selected. For the Pepsi crisis, the timeframe was April 3rd, when the initial misstep occurred, to April 8th, just before social media refocused its attention to the United Airlines crisis. For the United Airlines crisis, the timeframe was April 9th, when the Flight 3411 incident occurred, to April 21st, the point at which public outcry finally died down.

In addition to timeframe selection, key search teams were entered into the monitor so that the Crimson Hexagon software could select the appropriate content from its Twitter database to analyze. The terms entered for the Pepsi crisis were 'Pepsi,' 'Kendall Jenner,' and 'ad.' Crimson Hexagon then delivered data derived from user-generated Twitter content that contained at least one of those words or included the Pepsi logo. For the United Airlines crisis, the key search terms were 'United,' 'passenger,' 'dragged' and 'plane.' With these specifications, Crimson Hexagon zeroed in on Twitter content that contained one or multiple of the aforementioned terms and, in turn, provided data on public sentiment.

The data provided by Crimson Hexagon included volume trends, including total potential impressions, Twitter author demographics, sentiment and emotion analysis, and in-depth topical breakdowns, such as topic wheel, clusters and word cloud. According to Crimson Hexagon, total potential impressions is the calculation of "the total potential

impressions for a topic on Twitter by summing the followers of each Twitter author for a specified topic and time period." Sentiment analysis "categorizes posts based on the occurrence of terms generally perceived as positive or negative." Similarly, emotion analysis "categorizes post based on the occurrence of terms generally falling into one of the following six categories; Anger, fear, Disgust, Joy, Surprise and Sadness" (Crimson Hexagon).

Limitations

One limitation of this thesis is that Crimson Hexagon's Artificial Intelligence (AI) system has "up to 97% accuracy" (Crimson Hexagon). This means that all social media statistics included in this work should be taken with a grain of salt, as should any AI-provided data, because they are not 100% accurate. Additionally, another limitation of utilizing Crimson Hexagon was that only English language Twitter content was taken into account.

Literature Review

Crises and Crisis Communications

Before one can evaluate a crisis, the term crisis itself must be defined. What constitutes a crisis has been synopsized in a variety of ways. Fearn-Banks qualifies a crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization as well as its publics, services, products, and/or good name. It interrupts normal business transactions and can, as its worst, threaten the existence of the organization" (as cited in Ma, 2018, p. 375). Other literature utilizes "a non-routine,

unexpected and sudden event that creates uncertainties, threatens organizations' priority objectives, and that may cause financial losses and erode corporate reputations" (Salvador & Ikeda, 2018) as a working definition of crisis. Scholars have further defined crisis by stipulating that crises "typically result in negative publicity, which may harm corporate images." Crises can also harm stakeholders—be it physically, financially or emotionally (Salvador & Ikeda, 2018). Reputational damage associated with crisis can stem from a multitude of sources. Greyser (2009) noted nine common sources of crisis, including social responsibility gap, corporate misbehavior, executive misbehavior, poor business results, spokesperson misbehavior, death of symbol of company, loss of public support and controversial ownership.

The way that organizations respond to a crisis or crises is referred to as crisis communications. Like crisis, the term crisis communication has been defined in a variety of ways in the literature. For the purposes of this research the scope of crisis communication is defined broadly as being "typically defined by high levels of ambiguity, fluid conditions, and a diversity of informational needs (Hagen, Neely, DePaula, & Robert-Cooperman, 2018).

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory

To understand the basic principles of crisis communications, perhaps the most helpful framework is that of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). SCCT is a dominant theory in the field of crisis communications (Zheng, Liu, & Davison, 2018). It provides structure and guidance for preserving organizational reputation by means of post-crisis communications (Zheng et. al, 2018). SCCT is grounded in

attribution theory and image repair theory (Ma, 2018), proposing that situational factors are the basis for how an organization's stakeholders react to crisis. These situational factors include attribution of responsibility and pre-crisis organizational-public relationships (Coombs, 2007). Attribution of responsibility refers to the SCCT's three categories of crisis based on the amount of responsibility placed on the organization for the crisis at hand (Coombs, 2007; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). The first of the three categories is the victim cluster, which involves weak attributions of organizational responsibility. An example of this would be product tampering. The second category is referred to as the accidental cluster, meaning that there is a present but minimal level of responsibility attributed to the organization. A technical-error product harm would fall in this cluster. Third is the preventable cluster. This category contains crises that have high perceptions of organizational crisis responsibility, such as "organizational misdeed with injuries" (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). According to the SCCT, the reputation of an organization increasingly suffers with the more responsibility that consumers attribute to it regarding the crisis (Coombs 2007; Ma 2018). Organizational-public relationship (OPR) is "a multi-dimensional construct that includes satisfaction, commitment, trust and control mutuality" (Ma, 2018).

Corresponding with the levels of responsibility attribution, the SCCT includes three clusters of recommended crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007). The first of which is the deny strategy. In this strategy, the organization "rejects all responsibility" for the crisis. The second cluster is that of the diminish strategy. The diminish strategy entails minimizing the the organization's responsibility for the crisis or the damages done. Finally, the third cluster is referred to as the rebuild strategy. In this course of

action, organizations admit full responsibility. The SCCT advises organizations to utilize the deny strategy when the crisis falls into the victim cluster, the diminish strategy in the event of an accidental crisis and the re-build strategies in the case of a preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014).

The Power of Web 2.0 and Twitter

While the SCCT establishes the framework for how organizations should respond to crises, the way in which organizations interact with their publics following crises has evolved. In traditional crisis communications research, the public was treated as passive receivers (Zheng, Liu, & Davison, 2017). With the invention of Web 2.0 and the proliferation of social media, two-way communication has boosted interaction between consumers and brands, as well as between consumers themselves (Salvador & Ikeda, 2018). The advent of social media changed the public's role "from passive receivers to active content creators and opinion generators" (Zheng et. al, 2018). The rise of user-generated content (Salvador & Ikeda, 2018) has diminished the control of information that brands once held. "Social media have become vital crisis communication tools, creating new possibilities" for organizations and individuals to "produce their own content, monitor potential crisis issues and engage in decentralized and speedy communication (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). Before social media, the dissemination of the public's negative opinions in crisis situations took more time and was diffused due to restrictions of time and space. On social media platforms, however, crisis communication messaging can be formed and propagated via thousands or even milions of people within hours, a phenomenon Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley (2014) termed an "an online

firestorm" (as cited in Zheng et. al, 2018, p. 57). The importance of social media to crisis

communication practitioners is demonstrated by the fact that a "majority of them perceive

coping with the digital evolution and social media to be the most important strategic

communication issue of today…" and the near future (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016).

 Twitter, in particular, possesses tremendous power in the crisis communications

realm. "...although people still talk about newspaper articles, tweets had the most popular

effect on secondary crisis communication and reactions" (Schultz, Utz, & Görtiz, 2011).

Twitter is a social media platform "characterized as an asymmetrical, one-way micro

blog network that primarily enables users to follow friends, experts, celebrities and

breaking crisis news" (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). Bruns and Burgess described that the

social network has three layers of usage: the microlevel of interpersonal

communication, the mesolevel of follower-followee networks and the macrolevel of

hashtag-based exchanges. They also argued that the ability to use a topic-based hashtag at

the macrolevel is a critical capability of Twitter in regards to crisis communications (as

cited in Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). In turn, this specific feature makes Twitter a suitable

platform for organizations to distribute information in times of crisis and for citizens to

participate in the conversation—both helping to further the dissemination of crisis-related

information. In this context, Twitter is often seen as an extension of an organization's

press room and is viewed as much faster than traditional press releases (Eriksson &

Olsson, 2016).

 Crisis and crisis communication practices—including those involving Twitter and

other social media platforms—impact brand reputation. Brand reputation, a term

synonymous with corporate reputation for the purposes of this thesis, refers to the

public's overall evaluation of a firm (Walsh & Beatty, 2007) or a perceptual representation of a firm's past actions and future prospects (Eriksson & Olsson, 2016). Other scholars, including Finwiller, Carroll, & Korn (2010) have defined corporate reputation as an attitudinal construct consisting of cognitive (knowledge-based) and affective (emotions-based) components (as cited Zheng et. al, 2018). Similarly, Schwaiger (2004) established affective and cognitive reputation as likeability and competence. Brand reputation is often thought of as a fragile asset which can be "easily eroded by destructive forces" (Zheng et. al, 2018). Of course, brand reputation is a public-centered term. As Gotsi and Wilson (2001) defined it, corporate reputation is "a stakeholder's overall evaluation of a company over time. This evaluation is based on the stakeholder's direct experiences with the company, any other form of communication and symbolism that provides information about the firm's actions and/or a comparison with the actions of other leading rivals" (Gotsi and Wilson, 2001).

Defining and Measuring Brand Reputation

Just as there are numerous ways to define brand reputation, public relations practitioners and scholars have developed numerous ways to measure it. In his book *Corporate Reputation and Competitiveness*, Fombrun (1996) cites several quantitative ways to measure brand reputation, the first of which is Fortune magazine's annual survey of America's most admired companies (and similar rating systems present in other magazines in six other countries). Fombrun also listed social rating agencies like Kinder, Dave's Corporate Personality Scale and the Reputation Institute's Reputation Quotient (as cited in Turk, Jin, Stewart, & Hipple, 2012). For the purposes of this thesis, Crimson

Hexagon will be used to measure the net sentiment of consumers, as measured by analyzing positive and negative language regarding the crises at hand on Twitter. Crimson Hexagon is an AI-powered consumer insights company (Crimson Hexagon).

Many factors coincide in the making of brand reputation as it pertains to crisis. According to Greyser (2009), these factors are 1) brand elements, 2) crisis situation, 3) company's initiatives and 4) results. Brand elements refers to corporate favorability prior to the crisis. The crisis situation includes the seriousness of the situation and its threat to the brand's position. Company's initiatives are the way the organization responded to the crisis in order to mitigate or resolve the problem that caused the crisis. Results denote the effectiveness in terms of recovery or re-launch, restoring brand meaning and favorability (Greyser 2009). On the same line of thought, Fombrun and his colleagues developed a six-part diagram that shows the factors that collaboratively create an organization's reputation: vision and leadership, social responsibility, emotional appeal, products and services, workplace environment and financial performance (Fombrun, Gandberg & Sever, 2000).

Brand reputation is of the utmost importance to companies and organizations. Good reputation is always something that organizations should aspire to (Turk, 2012). Lyon and Cameron (2004) found that reputation "profoundly affected publics' attitude and behavioral intentions toward an organization involved in a crisis situation." In the midst of a crisis, good company reputation decreases customers' anger (Ma, 2018; Grappi & Romani, 2015). A plethora of scholars and professionals have articulated this fact. Greyser (2009) coined the term reputational reservoir, which refers to a strong foundation for corporate reputation that a company can draw from in times of crisis. Bill Margaritas,

who served as FedEx's head of corporate communications for sixteen years, described the same sentiment: "A positive reputation is like wind in your sails during good times, and a life preserver during bad times" (Turk et. al, 2012). As a foil, Coombs and Holladay (2001) found that an organization's negative reputation prior to a crisis shows what they call a "velcro effect," meaning "it attracts and snags additional reputational damage" (p. 353) regardless of efforts that may be made to control the immediate incident or misstep.

<div align="center">**Pepsi's Tone-Deaf Kendall Jenner Commercial**</div>

Initial Social Media Reaction

On April 4th, 2017, the day that Pepsi launched its Kendall Jenner ad, the company's mentions on social media increased by more than 7,000% (Roy, 2017). There were 1,163 original tweets that included the words 'Pepsi,' 'Kendall Jenner,' and 'ad,' or a combination of the former (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 1). Of the individuals that tweeted about Pepsi's misstep, 45% were female and 55% were male (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 2). Those thirty-five and above were responsible for 58% of the tweets, followed by the twenty-five to thirty-four age range, which sent 18% of the total tweets. The demographic of seventeen-year-olds and below published 13% of the 1,163 tweets and eighteen to twenty-four-year-olds were accountable for the remaining 12% (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 3).
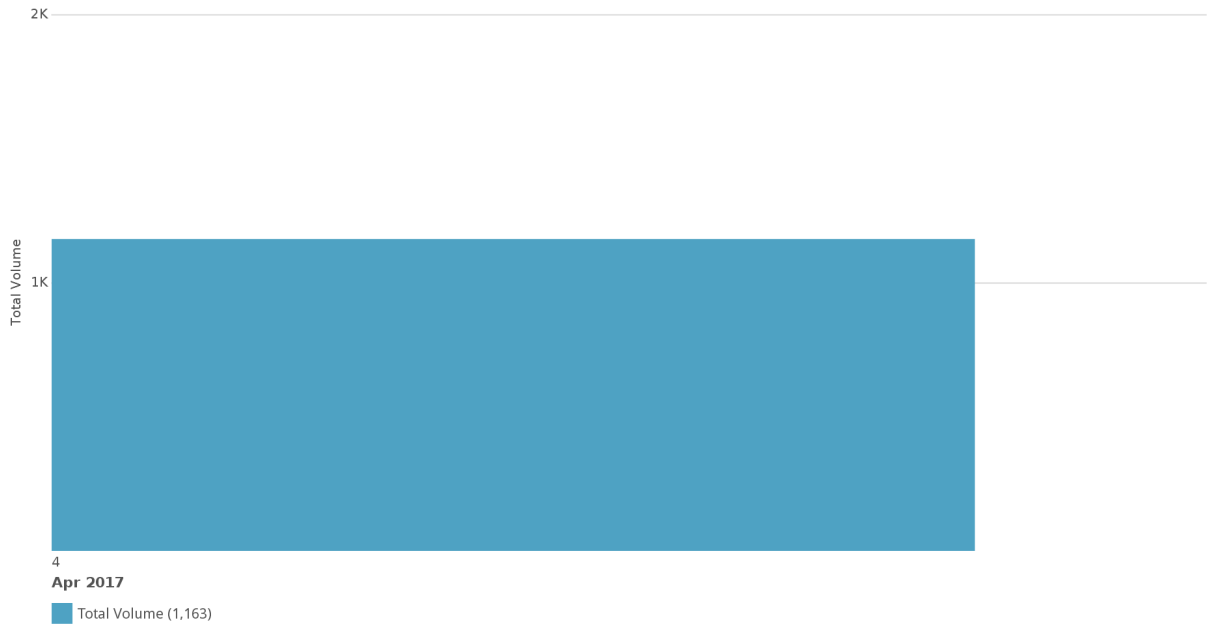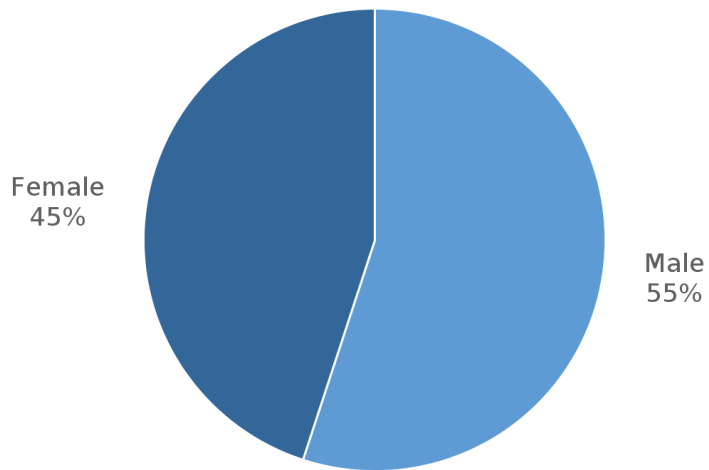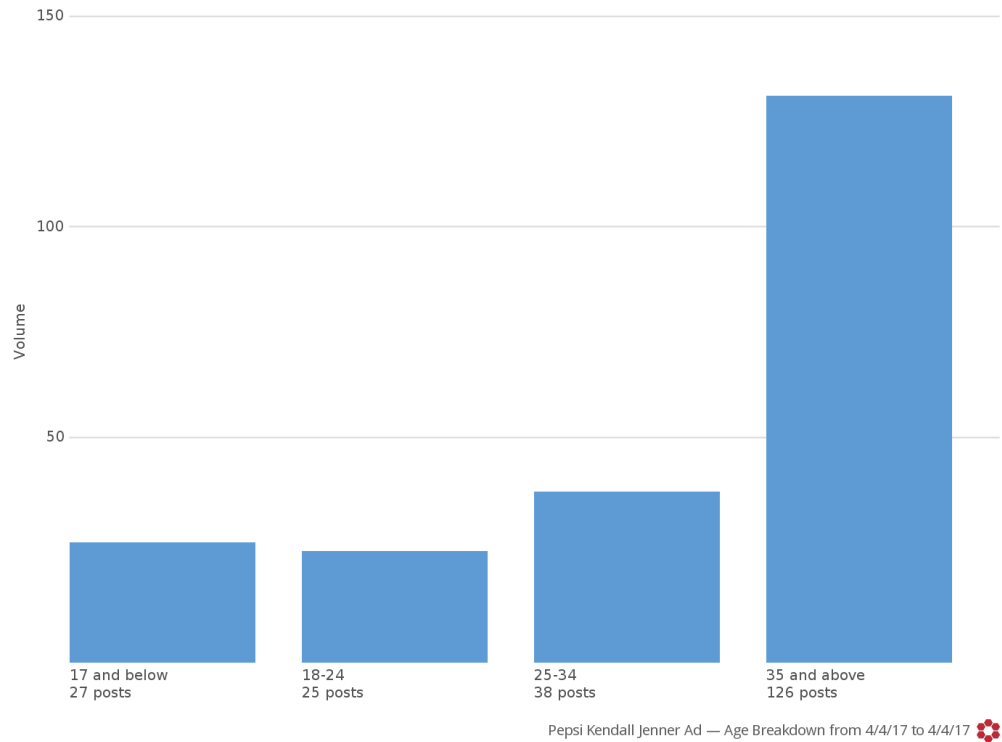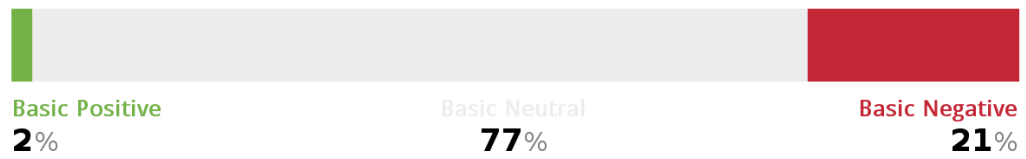
Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

The public's sentiment towards Pepsi in light of the Kendall Jenner commercial was reflected by the tweets published. Over one-fifth of the tweets that pertained to the misstep contained a basic negative sentiment. On the contrary, only 2% contained a basic positive sentiment (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 4). However, at this point in the Pepsi crisis timeline, the overwhelming majority of related tweets were not emotionally charged. Ninety-eight percent of the 1,163 tweets were comprised of emotionally neutral content. Of the emotionally-charged remaining 2%, anger, disgust and joy each made up less than 1% of the total body of tweets (Crimson Hexagon, Figures 5 and 6).
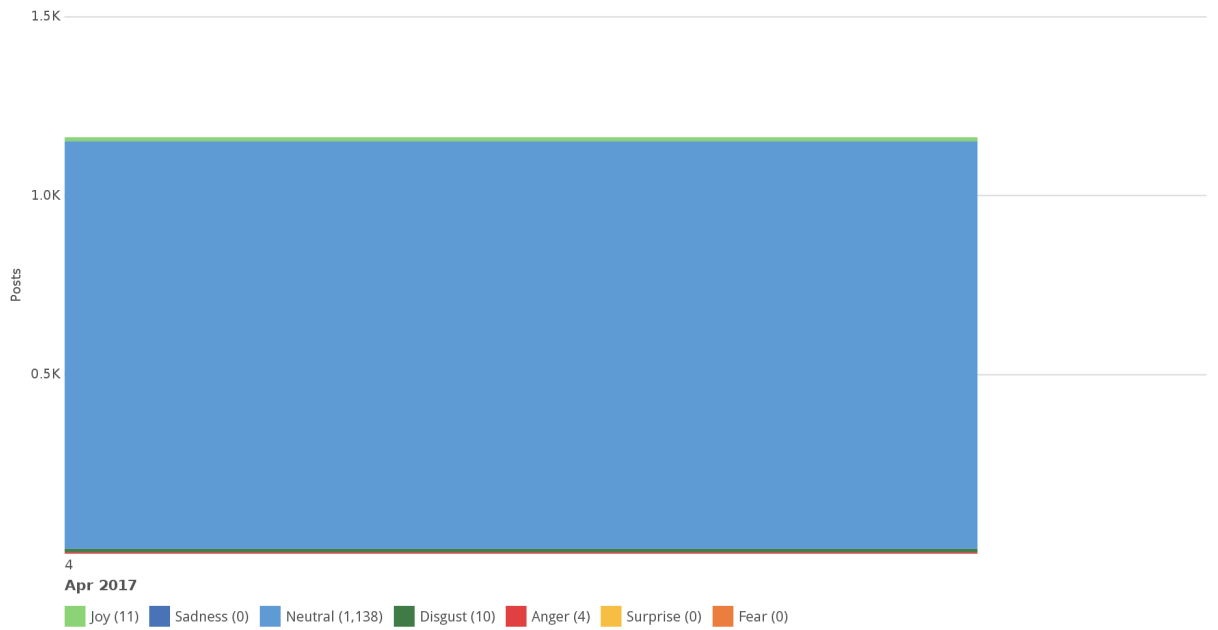
Basic Positive
2%

Basic Neutral
77%

Basic Negative
21%

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Basic sentiment from 4/4/17 to 4/4/17

Figure 4

1.5K

1.0K

Posts

0.5K

4
Apr 2017

Joy (11) Sadness (0) Neutral (1,138) Disgust (10) Anger (4) Surprise (0) Fear (0)

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Volume of Posts (Emotion) from 4/4/17 to 4/4/17
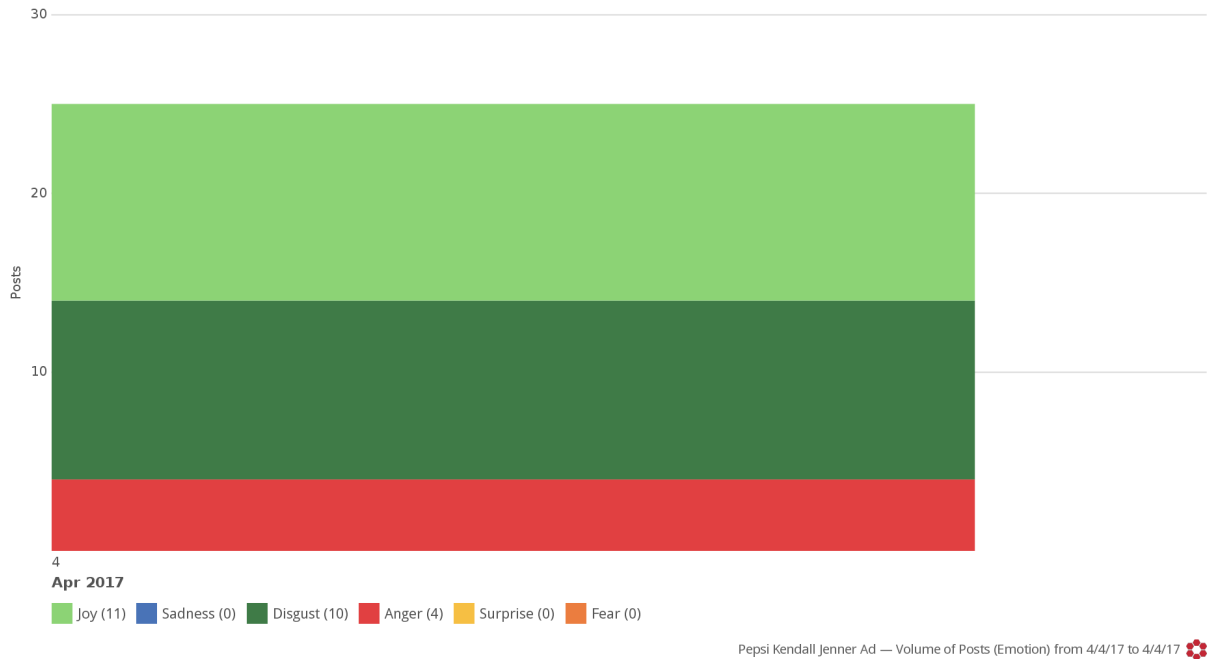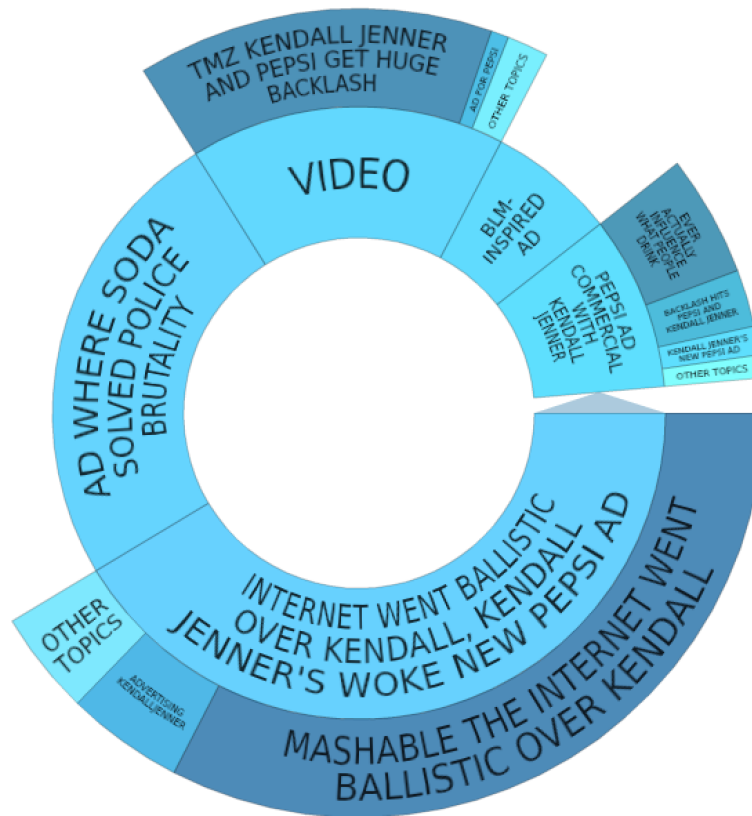
Figure 5

Figure 6

On April 4th, there were frequent and prevalent themes in the social media

conversations surrounding Pepsi. One such theme centered upon the phrase "ad where

soda solved police brutality." The 176 tweets posted using this particular verbiage, taken

from the caption to an article tweeted by Fader Magazine (Crimson Hexagon), said the

many people who believed that the Pepsi commercial made light of real-life police

brutality protests, such as those orchestrated by Black Lives Matter, also known simply

as BLM. In accordance, "BLM-inspired ad" was another prevalent theme in

conversations on Twitter during April 4th (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 7).

Within this theme, the image of Kendall Jenner approaching a line of police

officers was frequently compared to a photo of Ieshia Evans, an African American female

who participated in a police brutality protest in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, during July 2016

(Victor, 2017). One such tweet, which was accompanied by a side-by-side photo

comparison of Jenner and Evans and shared by user @mayaelysee, read: "The best

example of white and economic privilege/ignorance I've ever seen. Never forget Ieshia

Evans. #Pepsi." The tweet was liked over 700 times and received 565 replies (Twitter,

Figure 8). Similarly, numerous Twitter users commented on the need for brands like

Pepsi to hire more persons of color in their advertising and public relations departments

so that future missteps could be avoided. For example, Twitter user @YeahItsWilly

shared an article about the controversial Pepsi commercial, captioning it, "Brands need to

hire more POC in PR. Prime example" (Twitter, Figure 9).

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Topics from 4/4/17 to 4/4/17

Figure 7

Figure 8

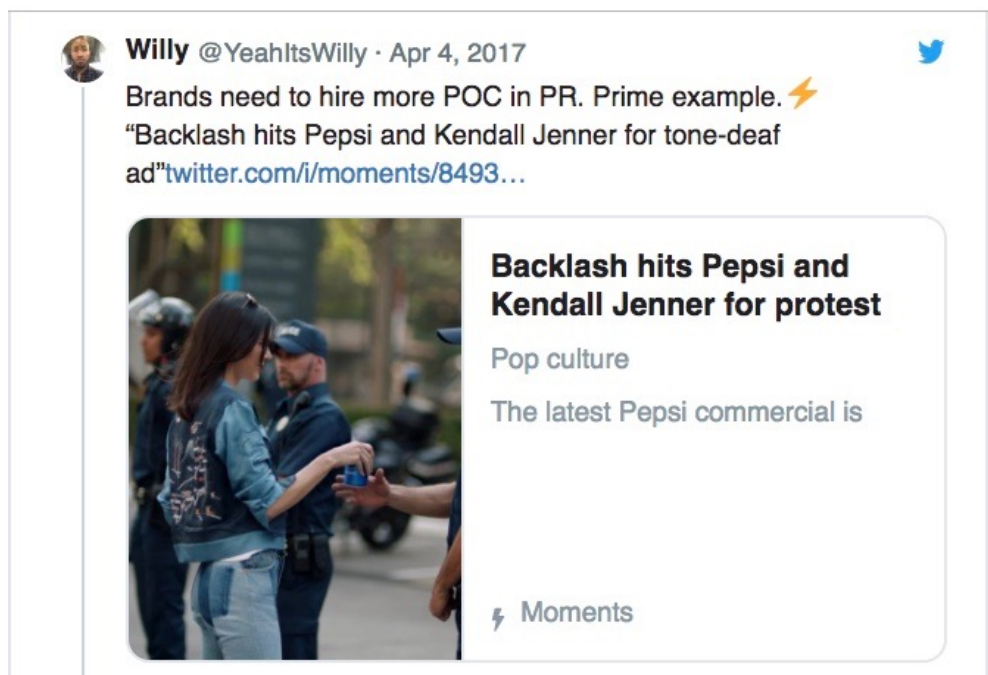*Figure 9*

In addition to conversation themes, the 1,163 tweets published about the Pepsi misstep on April 4th contained common words that provided insight on public opinion. Excluding 'Kendall,' 'Jenner,' 'Pepsi,' 'ad' and 'commercial,' there were seven clusters that contained the most common terms used by Twitter users. Four of the clusters originated from the language used by entertainment companies, including TMZ, Teen Vogue, Fader and Mashable, which was then shared repeatedly. This sharing amplified numerous words, including 'ballistic,' 'internet,' 'controversial,' and 'backlash,' and phrases, such as 'soda solves worlds' problems.' Additionally, the names of the entertainment companies were amplified in the tweet sharing process (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 10).

The remaining three clusters of commonly used words were perhaps more indicative of public opinion regarding the controversial Pepsi commercial. One such cluster mirrored the sentiment of the "ad where soda solved police brutality" and "BLM-inspired ad" Twitter conversation themes, as evident in the frequent presence of the terms 'police,' 'brutality' and 'blm.' Likewise, 'blavity' was a word that came up repeatedly. Blavity is a self-described "tech company for forward thinking Black millennials pushing the boundaries of culture and the status quo" (The Community for Black Creativity and News). In addition, the words 'tone deaf,' 'problematic' and 'wtf' were among those most often used on April 4th (Crimson Hexagon, Figures 10 and 11).
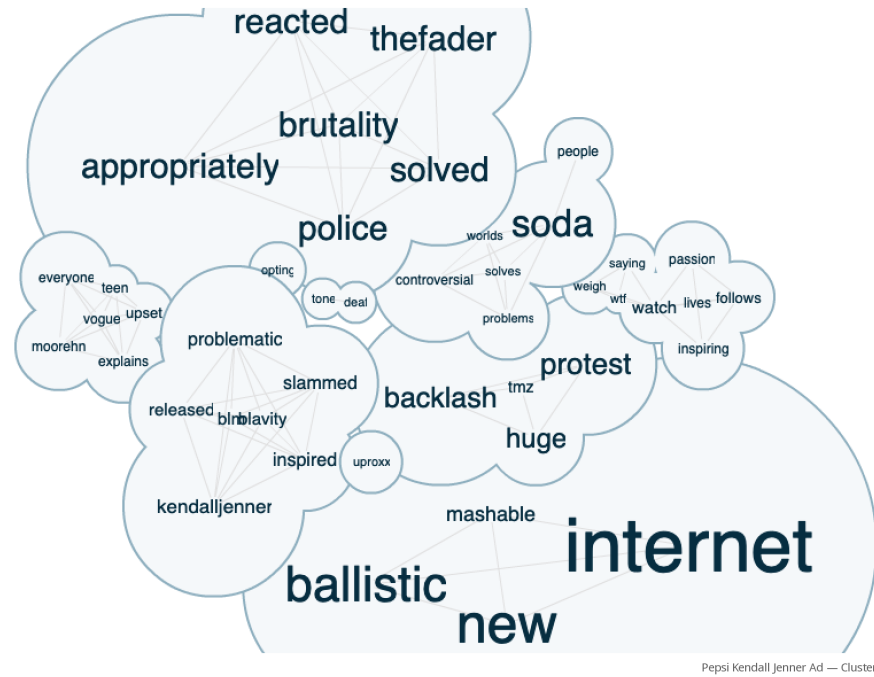
Figure 10

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Words from 4/4/17 to 4/4/17

Figure 11

While there was some conversation about the Pepsi commercial on Twitter on April 4th, the topic skyrocketed on April 5th. At 9:15 am, Bernice King, the daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., took to Twitter to weigh in on the issue. She tweeted a photo of her father and fellow protestors being physically pushed backward by a line of police officers with the caption, "If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi" (Twitter, Figure 12). King's tweet was retweeted 147,065 times. It also was liked 277,890 times and spurred over 1,600 replies.

Figure 12

Apology Issued

Throughout April 4th, Pepsi's company Twitter account actively tweeted but was radio silent in regard to the controversy building around the Kendall Jenner commercial. Then, on April 5th at 10:44 am, one day after the initial misstep, Pepsi issued a statement on their Twitter account. It read:

> Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are removing the content and halting any further rollout. We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position (Twitter, Figure 13).

Pepsi's statement was retweeted 12,660 times. It received 24,004 likes and approximately 4,500 replies on Twitter.

In response to the Kendall Jenner commercial misstep, Pepsi chose to utilize the power of apology as part of the brand's crisis communications strategy. The company took responsibility and fully admitted wrongdoing, saying, "Clearly we missed the mark…" Pepsi then went a step further by including, "…and we apologize." This apology was first published on the brand's Twitter account and was then shared on the press releases section of the company website.

Through the lens of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework, the Pepsi crisis fell under the umbrella of the preventable cluster, meaning that there was a high perception of organizational crisis responsibility (Claeys, 2014). Particularly since the Kendall Jenner commercial was produced in-house, Pepsi had no one to blame but itself. In accordance with the SCCT framework's recommended course

of action for preventable crises—that of the "rebuild" strategy—Pepsi took full responsibility.

Although outside of the scope of the SCCT, Pepsi's key publics in the crisis are also worth analyzing. As aforementioned, many Twitter users interpreted the Kendall Jenner commercial as disparaging the police brutality protests of activists groups such as Black Lives Matter. Yet Pepsi did not directly address this key constituency in their apology messaging. Rather, the company included a blanket statement, stating, "We did not intend to make light of any serious issue." While Pepsi did not acknowledge Black Lives Matter by name, the company did specifically include Kendall Jenner in its apology. The final sentence in Pepsi's statement was, "We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position."
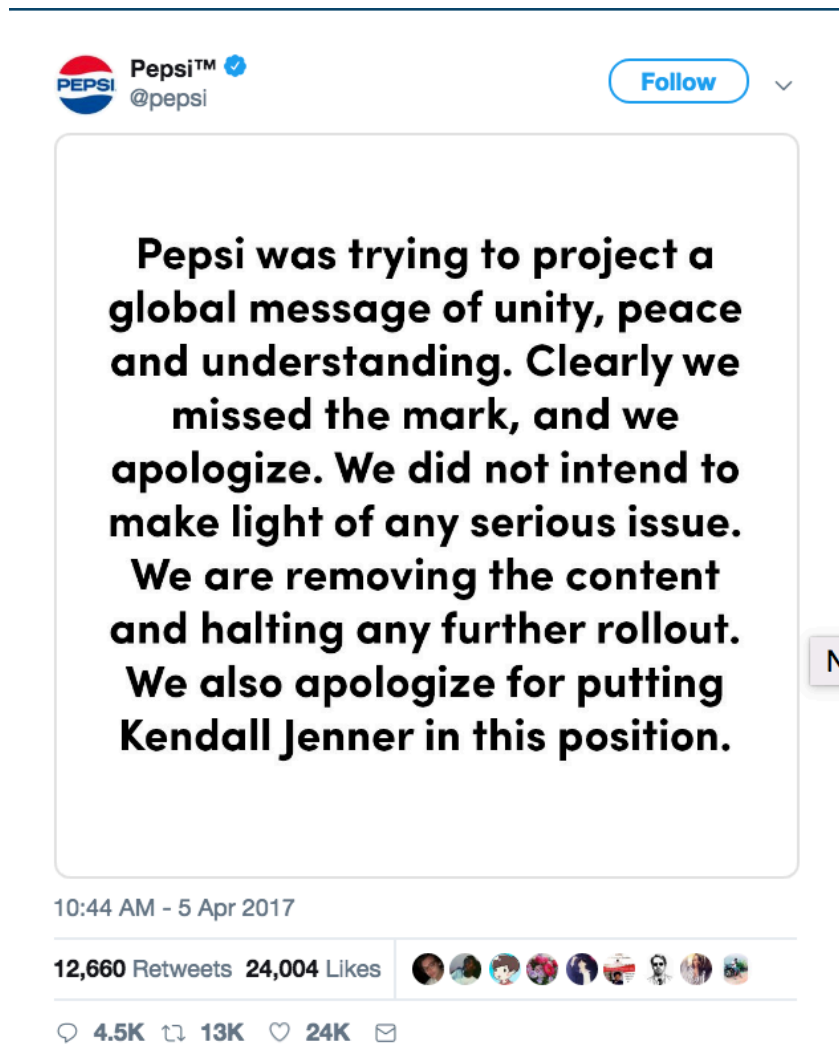
Figure 13

Twitter's Take on the Pepsi Apology and a Response to Bernice King

Pepsi's apology, intended to diffuse the crisis, only inflamed Twitter more. On April 5th, there were 3,865 original Tweets published that included the words 'Pepsi,' 'Kendall Jenner,' and 'ad,' or a combination of the former. These tweets, in turn, created 131 million total potential impressions (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 14), meaning that the 3,865 tweets reached as many as 131 million individual Twitter timelines.

There were 3,590 Twitter authors during April 5th that on average tweeted 1.08 times about the Pepsi crisis (Crimson Hexagon). Similar to the demographics on April

4th, 47% of the authors were female and 43% were male (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 15).

Those 35 years of age and above were responsible for 63% of the total posts, a 5%

increase from the day before. Twenty-five to 34 year-olds made up the next largest

category at 17%, followed by 17 and below with 11% and 18 to 24 with 9% of the total

posts (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 16).

In terms of sentiment, 69% of the content was basic neutral, 4% was basic

positive and 27% was basic negative (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 17). The basic negative

increased by 6% from April 4th to April 5th. With respect to emotion, 93% of the tweets

about Pepsi's misstep were neutral. This was a 4% decrease in neutrality from the

previous day. The remaining 7% was emotionally-charged content (Crimson Hexagon,

Figure 18).

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Volume from 4/5/17 to 4/5/17

Figure 14
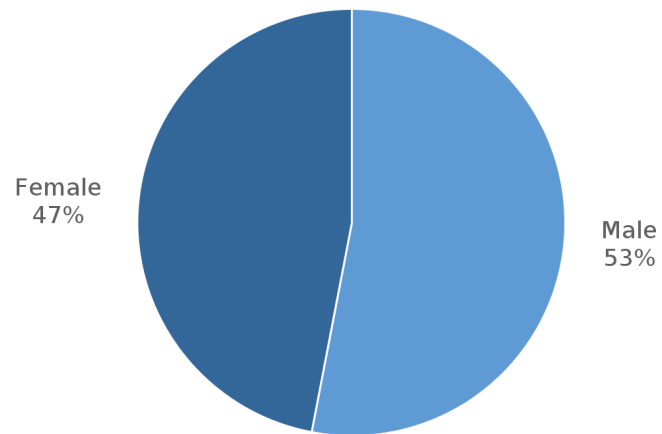
Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Gender Breakdown from 4/5/17 to 4/5/17

Figure 15

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Age Breakdown from 4/5/17 to 4/5/17

Figure 16

Basic Positive
4%

Basic Neutral
69%

Basic Negative
27%
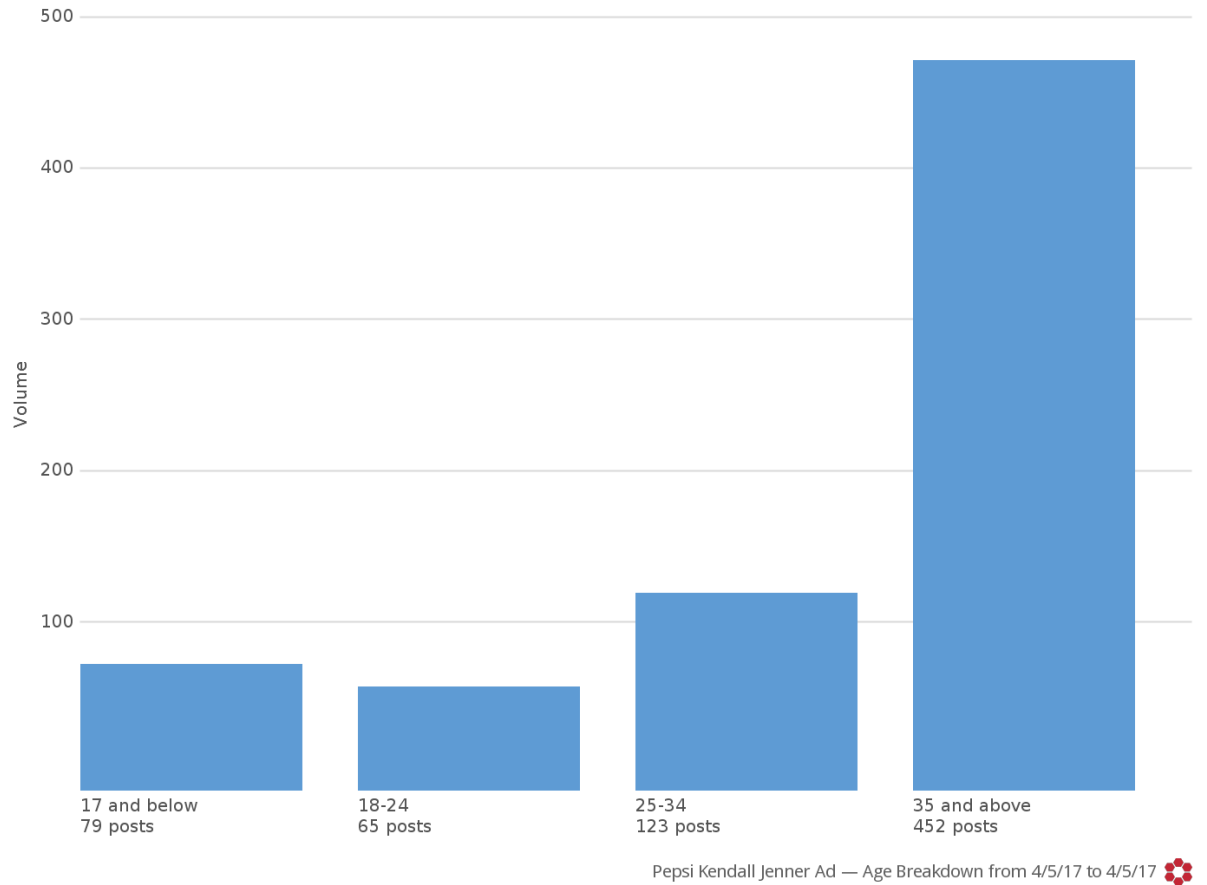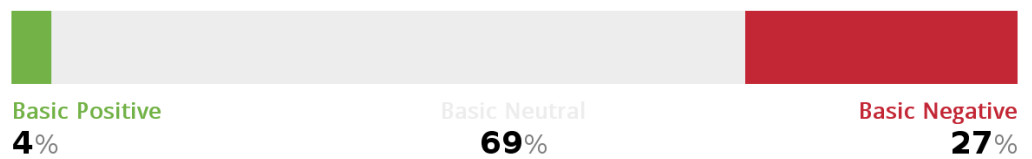
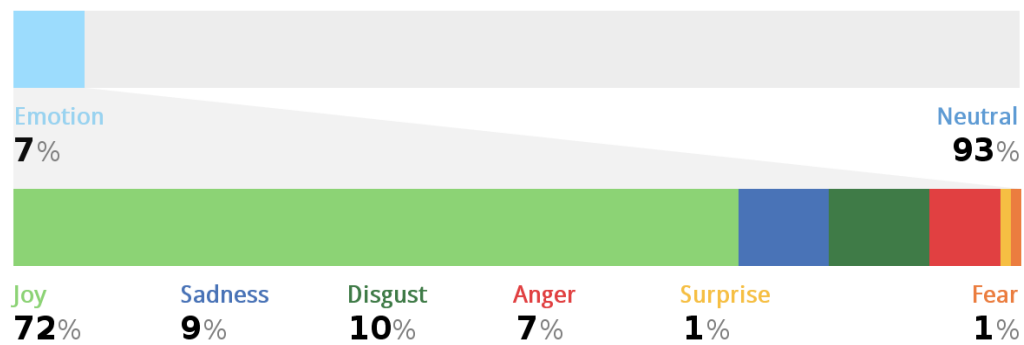Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Basic sentiment from 4/5/17 to 4/5/17

Figure 17

Emotion					Neutral
7%					**93**%

Joy	Sadness	Disgust	Anger	Surprise	Fear
72%	**9**%	**10**%	**7**%	**1**%	**1**%

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Emotion from 4/5/17 to 4/5/17

Figure 18

Within the 3,865 Twitter posts, there were common themes in conversation. Largely, Twitter chatter focused on slight variations of the same three topics. The first was Pepsi pulling the ad, as seen in the iterations 'Pepsi pulls,' 'pulling,' 'Pepsi pulls Kendall Jenner's protest,' and 'Pepsi pulls controversial Kendall Jenner.' The second prevalent conversation theme centered on shot-by-shot dissections of the commercial, evident in the data as 'scene-by-scene dissection' and 'shot-by-shot dissection.' Finally, the third recurring theme on Twitter during April 5th that gave insight into the mind of the public was that of 'Kendall Jenner had no creative involvement in Pepsi,' (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 19) referring to TMZ's article that stated Jenner did not participate in the ideation of the commercial (Kendall Jenner Had No Creative Involvement in Pepsi Ad).

In addition to conversation themes, the tweets published on April 5th contained commonly-used clusters of words that, when analyzed, provide a peek into the public's perception of Pepsi at the time. In harmony with the conversation theme of Pepsi pulling

the advertisement, one of the clusters contained the words 'pulls,' 'apologizes,' 'mark,' and 'clearly.' Another cluster matched the commercial dissection conversation theme, including the terms 'dissection,' 'shot,' and 'scene.' A third cluster also mirrored that of the prevalent theme of Kendal Jenner's creative involvement or lack thereof, as evident in the presence of 'involvement,' 'tmz' and 'creative' (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 19).

Differing from the conversation themes on April 5th, one of the clusters of commonly used words seemed to carry over from April 4th. This cluster contained words indicating a Black Lives Matter sentiment, apparent through the inclusion of 'controversial,' 'appropriating' and 'blacklivesmatter,' naturally. Additionally, one cluster, made up of the words 'tone,' 'deaf,' 'gets,' 'truly' and 'deserves' (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 19) pointed to the amplification of a spoof video with the title "Pepsi's tone-deaf Kendall Jenner ad gets the parody it truly deserves" (Mashable).

Similar to clusters, the most commonly-used words themselves provide insight into public opinion at the time of Pepsi's crisis. In accordance with both the conversation theme and cluster, 588 of the 3,865 tweets sent on April 5th included the word 'dissection.' Likewise, 'pulls' was used 777 times and 'creative' rang in at 187 mentions. Nearly 300 out of the included the word 'deaf.' Three-hundred and twenty-six used 'tone.' Fifty-one contained 'problematic.' Conceivably most impactful on brand reputation, 593 of the tweets incorporated '#Pepsi' (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 20).
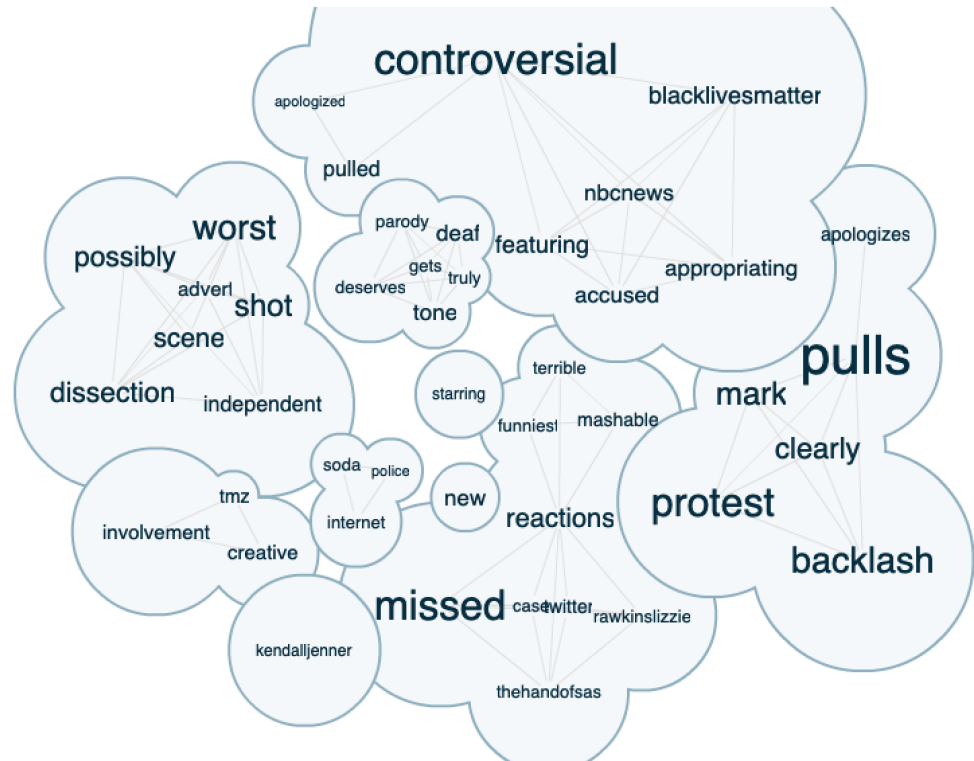
Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Clusters from 4/5/17 to 4/5/17

Figure 19

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Words from 4/5/17 to 4/5/17

Figure 20

Throughout April 5th, a multiplicity of Twitter users expressed disdain about how Pepsi apologized to Kendall Jenner but did not mention the Black Lives Matter activists that were offended by the advertisement. Deray McKesson, a leader of the Black Lives Matter movement, tweeted at 11:45 am, "It's incredible that @pepsi apologized to Kendall. She chose to be a part of that ad. Pepsi needs to apologize to the protestors" (Paquette, 2017). McKesson's tweet garnered over 5,000 retweets and 14,000 likes and sparked debate that led to 181 replies (Twitter).

After Pepsi's initial apology did not defuse the crisis, the company spoke out again, this time responding to Bernice King. At 12:52 PM, Pepsi tweeted,

"@BerniceKing We at Pepsi believe in the legacy of Dr. King & meant absolutely no disrespect to him & others who fight for justice." Additionally, in this reply, Pepsi included an image of their first statement. The tweet received 1,073 retweets, 2,358 likes and 398 replies (Twitter, Figure 21).

At this point in time, Pepsi reached the peak of social media attention received regarding the crisis. From one o'clock to two o'clock in the afternoon, there were 566 tweets published using the words 'Pepsi,' 'Kendall Jenner,' and 'ad,' or a combination of the former, accounting for nearly 15% of the day's aggregate volume. Twitter users continued to post about Pepsi at a high level throughout the afternoon until the trend tapered off around 5 pm (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 22). On April 6th, there were a total of 1,248 tweets published about the crisis. On April 7th, that number dwindled to 271 (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 23).
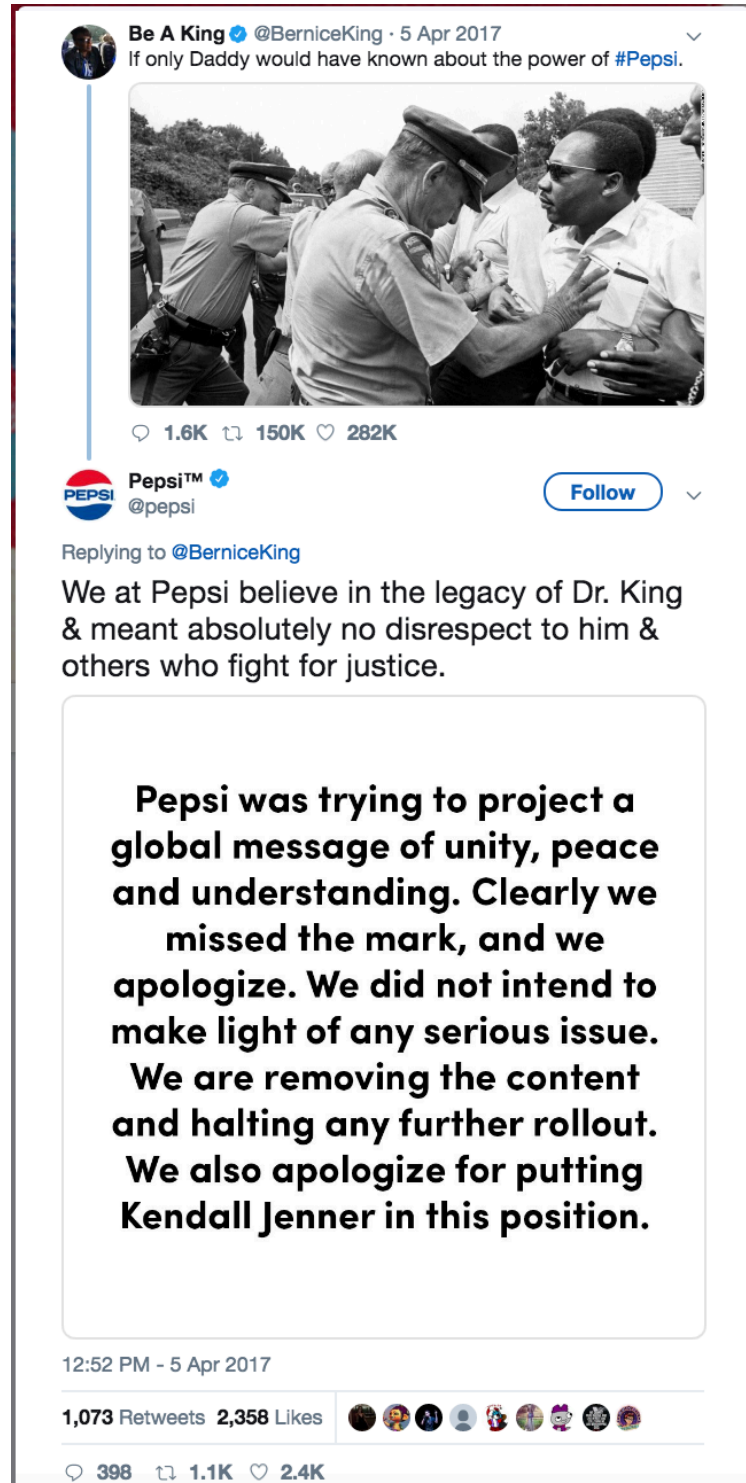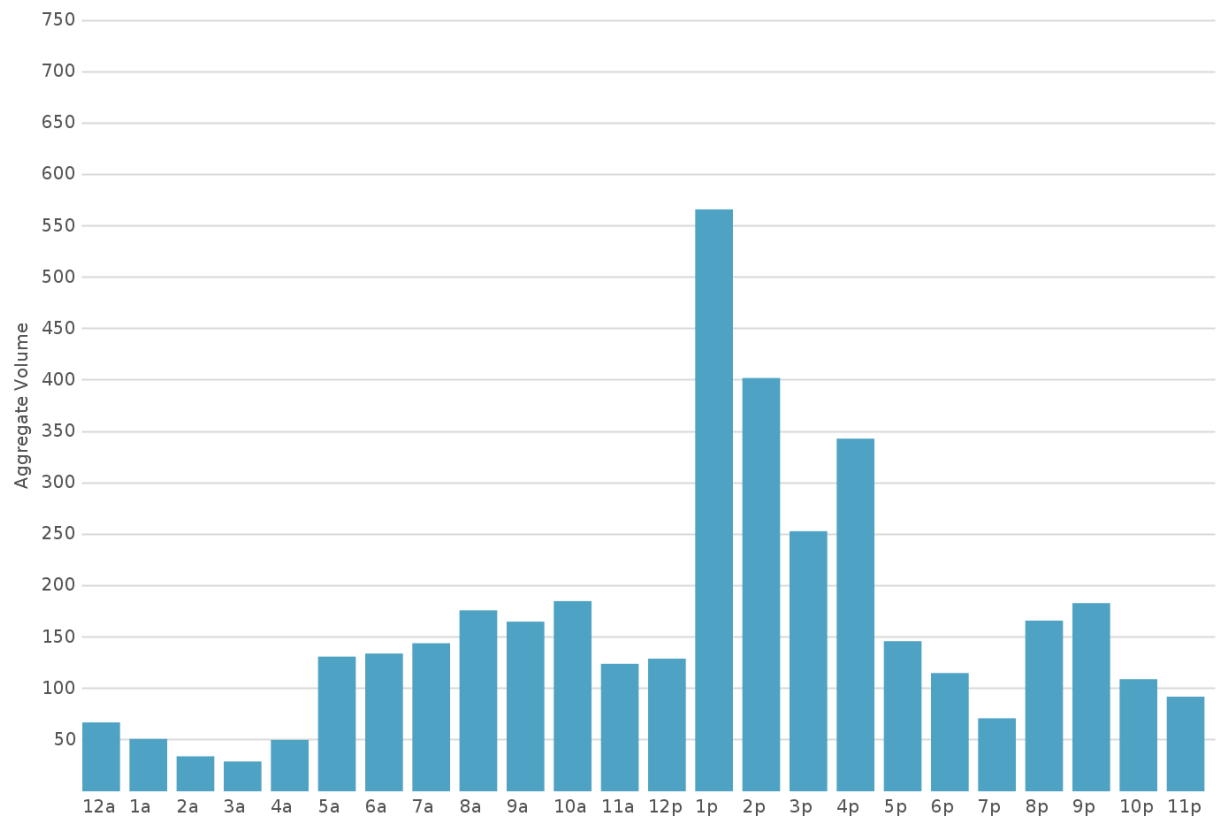
Figure 21

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Day and Time from 4/5/17 to 4/5/17
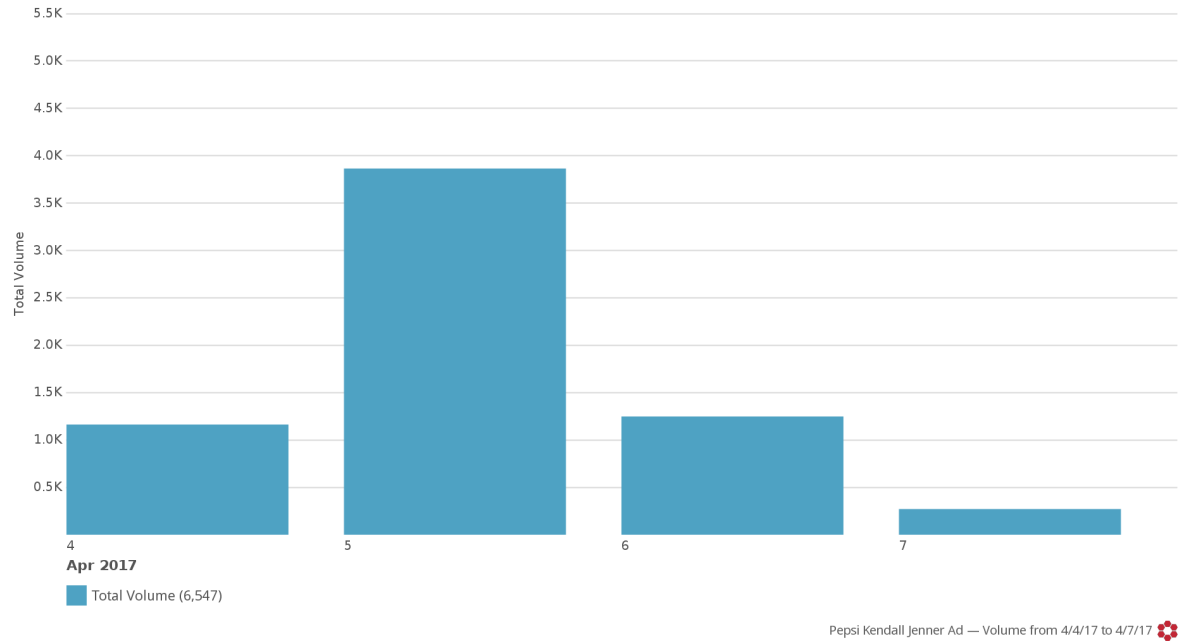Timezone: Dashboard Time

Figure 22

Figure 23

The Impact of Pepsi's Crisis Communication Practices on Brand Reputation

From April 3rd to April 8th, there were nearly 2.5 million posts about Pepsi on Twitter (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 26). As of April 3rd, 2017, the day before the Kendall Jenner commercial went live, Pepsi had a 2% net positive sentiment on Twitter. With 67% of content about Pepsi being basic neutral, the remaining was 17% basic positive and 15% basic negative (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 24). However, by April 8th, the company's net sentiment had dropped by fourteen percentage points, sitting at -12%. Of the content pertaining to Pepsi on that day, 62% percent contained a basic neutral sentiment, 13% basic positive and 25% basic negative (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 25), a far departure from Pepsi's reputation on Twitter prior to the crisis.

The reputations of organizations are particularly threatened when a crisis calls into question the legitimacy of a brand's defining characteristic (Ma, 2018). One of Pepsi's defining brand characteristics is its social awareness. In 2012, Pepsi global executive Brad Jakeman told Ad Age, "Pepsi has long presented itself as the hip, fashion-forward, culturally aware, live-for-the-moment alternative to its bigger, more classic rival Coca-Cola. Coke is timeless and Pepsi is timely" (Schultz, 2017). Consequently, the Kendall Jenner commercial threatened a key component of Pepsi's brand identity.

However, Pepsi did have a number of factors working in its favor for successfully recovering from the crisis. First, one must take into account Pepsi's brand elements, or reputational reservoir (Greyser, 2009). Founded in 1898, Pepsi is one of the most well-known brands in the world. According to Forbes, Pepsi is the 29th-most valuable brand in the world, with an estimated worth of over $18 billion (The World's Most Valuable Brands). With a legacy such as Pepsi's, it often takes more than a tone-deaf commercial

to bring down an entire brand empire. Here, the "halo effect," a phrase coined by Ulmer, comes into play as well. The "halo effect" is the idea that a favorable pre-crisis reputation can protect an organization from any reputation loss after a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). "The halo as shield explanation argues that stakeholders will focus on the positive aspects of the organization and ignore the recent negative information created by the crisis," explained Coombs and Holladay (2006). The halo effect is rooted cognitive in cognitive dissonance theory and it "occurs when bias spills over to other evaluations" (Kim, 2017). Put simply, the halo effect is explained by the idea of benefit of the doubt. If a public thinks highly of a company, then this positive perception "may affect the extent to which the public attributes crisis responsibility to the organization." In turn, this creates less reputational loss from the crisis (Kim, 2017; Fombrun, 1996). In the case of Pepsi, the company's positive, century-long legacy served as a metaphorical halo, or shield for its brand reputation amidst the company's crisis.

Additionally, the company's strategic decision to apologize, pull the commercial and halt further rollout positively contributed to the maintaining of a favorable brand reputation. By reacting and apologizing in a timely fashion (less than a day), Pepsi prevented the crisis from being drawn out further. The crisis appeared to be largely resolved to the mainstream media, allowing Pepsi to largely fall out of the news cycle—a factor that undoubtedly helped the company's reputation recover. It also helped that another crisis—that of United Airlines—took the spotlight away from Pepsi's misstep. This will be discussed further in the next section.

Although Pepsi's reputation took a beating from he tone-deaf Kendall Jenner commercial, the strength of the brand ultimately prevailed. The beverage company

successfully bounced back from the crisis. Just five months after the initial controversy,

Pepsi's consumer perception level was back to normal in September 2017 (Hiebert,

2017).

Basic Positive
17%

Basic Neutral
67%

Basic Negative
15%
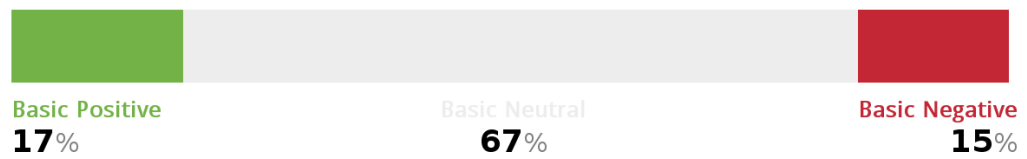
Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Basic sentiment from 4/3/17 to 4/3/17

Figure 24
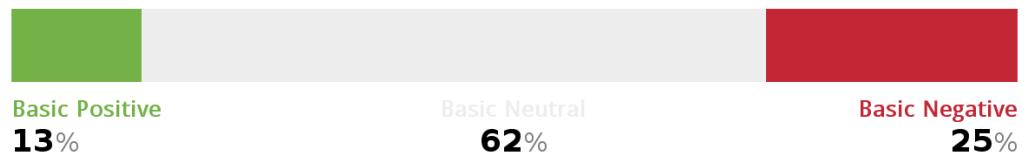
Basic Positive
13%

Basic Neutral
62%

Basic Negative
25%

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Basic sentiment from 4/3/17 to 4/8/17

Figure 25

Pepsi Kendall Jenner Ad — Volume from 4/3/17 to 4/8/17
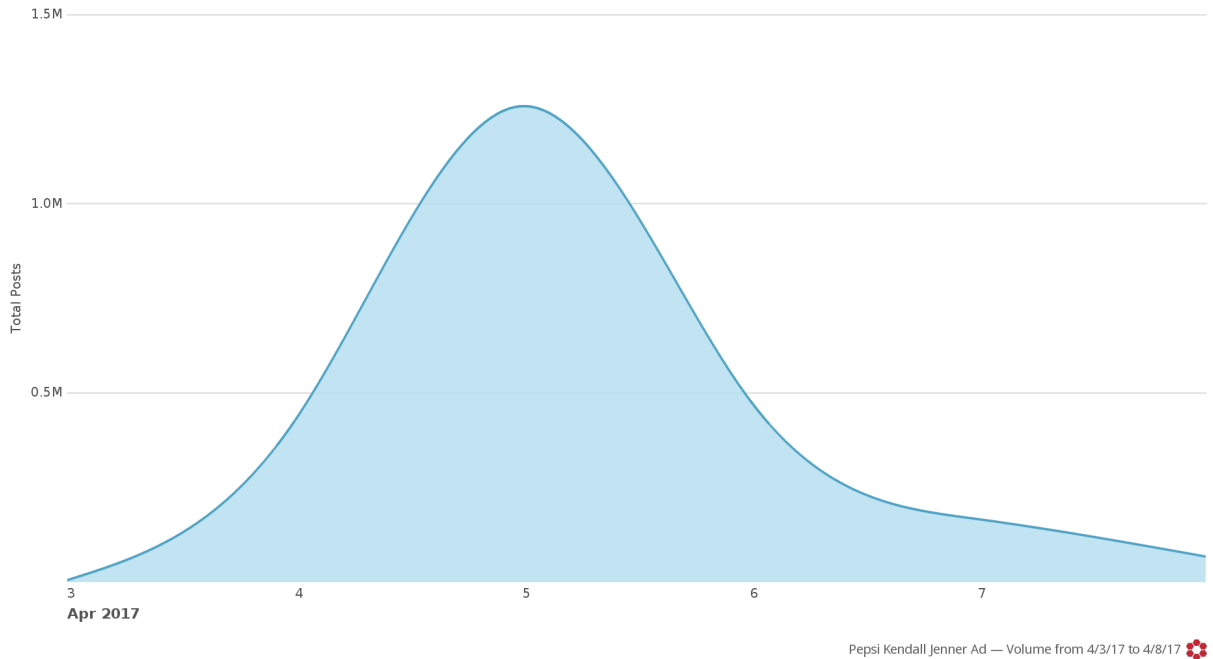
Figure 26

United Airlines Drags Passenger off of Plane

Initial Social Media Reaction

On the night of Sunday, April 9th, shortly after passenger Dr. David Dao was dragged off United Airlines flight 3411, initial buzz about the incident began to build on Twitter. During this time, there were 178 tweets posted about the United Airlines crisis that included the words 'United,' 'passenger,' 'dragged' and 'plane,' or a combination of the former (Crimson Hexagon, Figures 27 and 28). Of the 178 tweets, 25% had a basic negative sentiment. The remaining were 66% basic neutral and 8% basic positive (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 29). In terms of emotion, 44% of the tweets carried an emotional connotation, featuring anger (28%), fear (28%), disgust (15%), sadness (15%),

joy (12%) and surprise (1%) (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 30). During this time, one of the most common themes in the tweets posted was the tagging of news outlets to get their attention about the story. CNN and Fox News, in particular, were frequently mentioned (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 31).

These trends continued on the morning of April 10th as the story gained steam. Between seven and eight o'clock, 842 tweets were published using the words 'United,' 'passenger,' 'dragged' and 'plane,' or some combination thereof. From eight o'clock to nine o'clock, another 3,314 tweets about United's misstep were sent (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 32).

Figure 27

United Airlines Crisis — Day and Time from 4/9/17 to 4/9/17
Timezone: Dashboard Time

Figure 28

Basic Positive
8%

Basic Neutral
66%

Basic Negative
25%
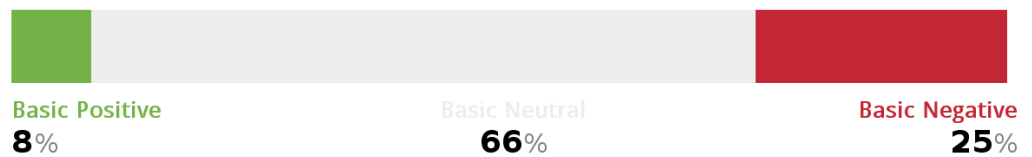
United Airlines Crisis — Basic sentiment from 4/9/17 to 4/9/17

Figure 29

Emotion
44%

Neutral
56%

Joy
12%

Sadness
15%

Disgust
15%

Anger
28%

Surprise
1%

Fear
28%
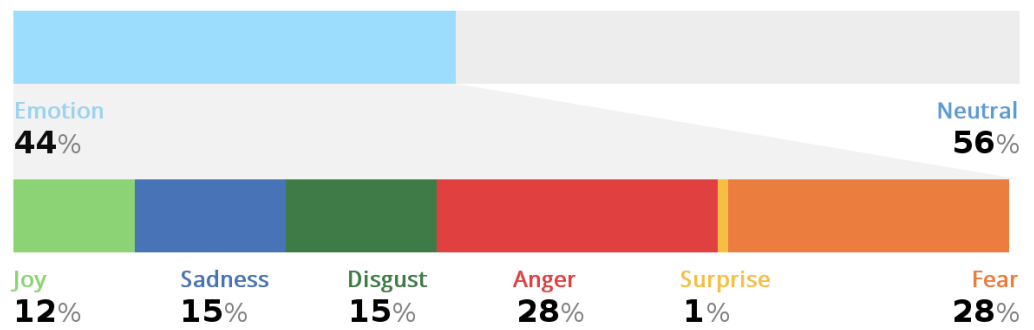
United Airlines Crisis — Emotion from 4/9/17 to 4/9/17

Figure 30
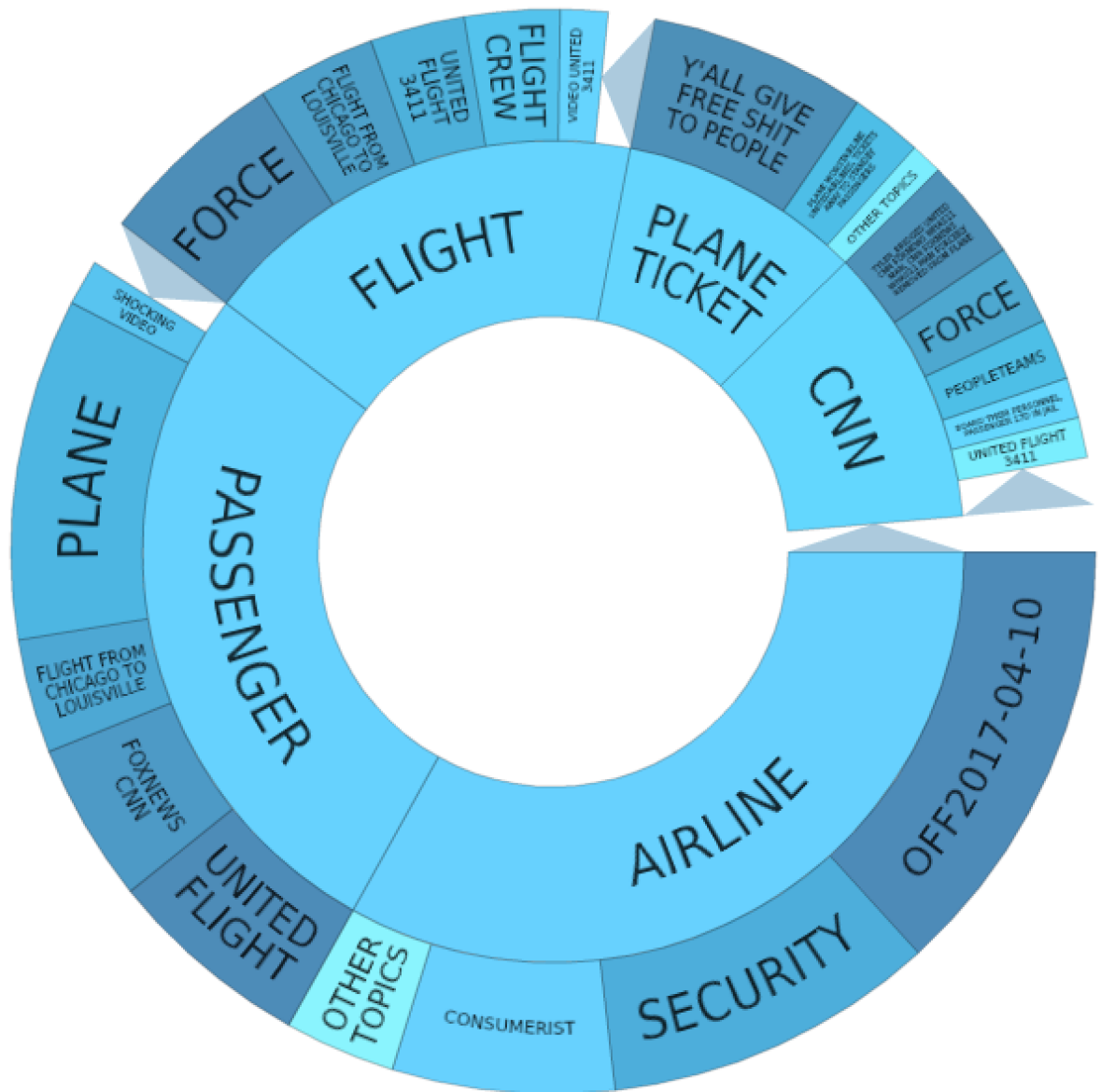
United Airlines Crisis — Topics from 4/9/17 to 4/9/17

Figure 31

United Airlines Crisis — Day and Time from 4/10/17 to 4/10/17
Timezone: Dashboard Time
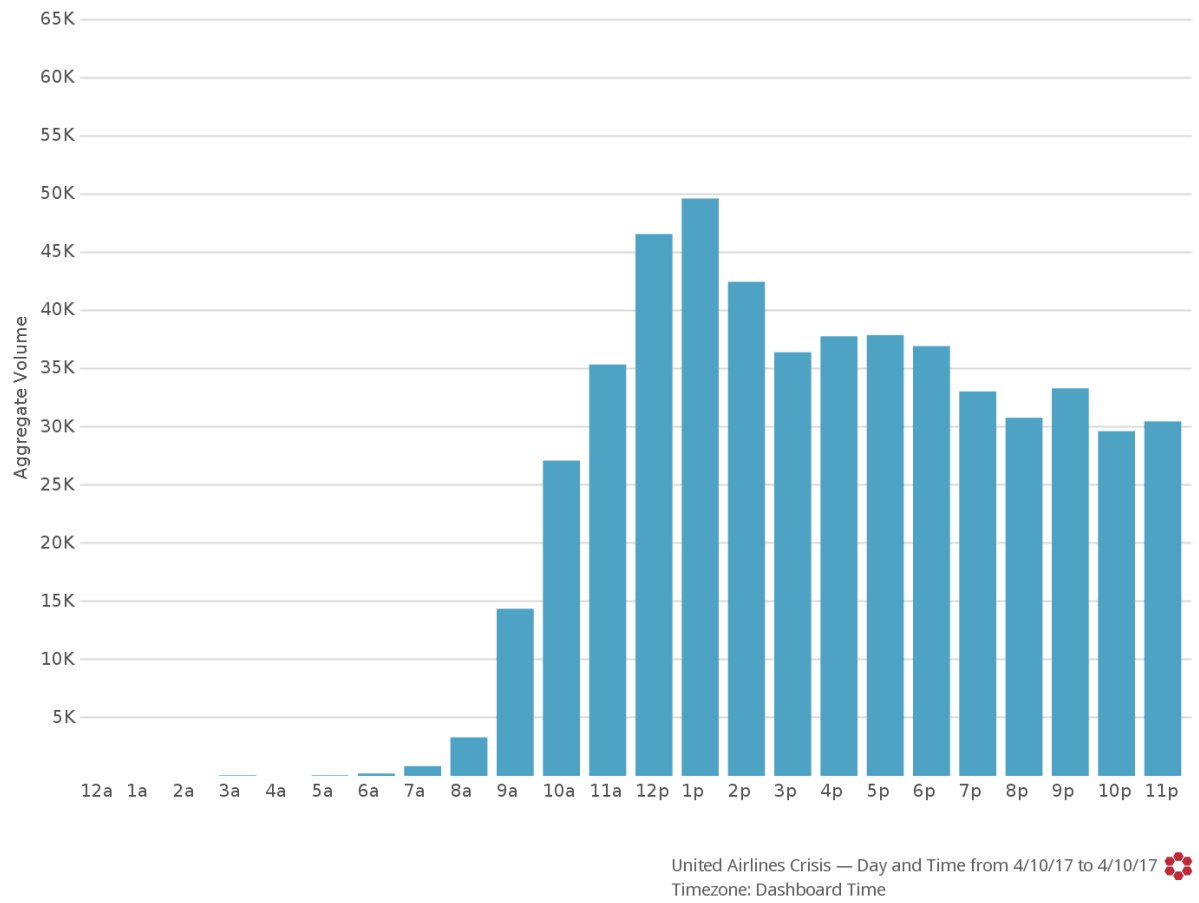
Figure 32

Apology Issued

Just as the story of Dao being dragged off of flight 3411 was gaining momentum during the morning of April 10th, United Airlines issued a statement from their company Twitter account at 9:27 am. The tweet included an image of a statement from United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz, which read: "This is an upsetting event to all of us here at United. I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers. Our team is moving with a sense of urgency to work with the authorities and conduct our own detailed review of what happened. We are also reaching out to this passenger to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation." The image of the statement was captioned, "United CEO response to United Express Flight 3411." The tweet received over 19,000 retweets, 7,000 likes and 57,000 replies (Twitter, Figure 33).

As part of United's crisis communications strategy, the company chose to harness the power of apology. This was evident in the statement when Munoz included "I apologize…" Unfortunately for United's reputation, "I apologize" was followed by "for having to re-accommodate these customers," rather than acknowledging that physical violence that Dao endured. Consequently, the company's apology fell short in the mind of the public, as demonstrated by the Twitter data from Crimson Hexagon.

United failed in addressing its key publics through the statement released. The airline did not apologize to Dao, as previously mentioned, or to the other passengers who were certainly traumatized by witnessing the violent incident. United also failed in terms of adequately complying with the Situational Crisis Communication Theory's recommended framework. Per the SCCT guidelines, the Flight 3411 crisis fell under the preventable cluster, just like Pepsi. The public had a high perception of organizational

crisis responsibility, maintaining that the physical dragging of Dao could have been prevented by United. In order to adhere to the corresponding SCCT response suggestion, the airline should have pursued a rebuild strategy. In the rebuild course of action, an organization admits full responsibility (Claeys, 2014). While United did apologize, it is clear to see that the company did not take full responsibility in its initial statement regarding the incident. The language "…having to re-accommodate these customers" was not an accurate portrayal of the incident that occurred, nor an appropriate measure of taking responsibility for the physical harm that Dao suffered.
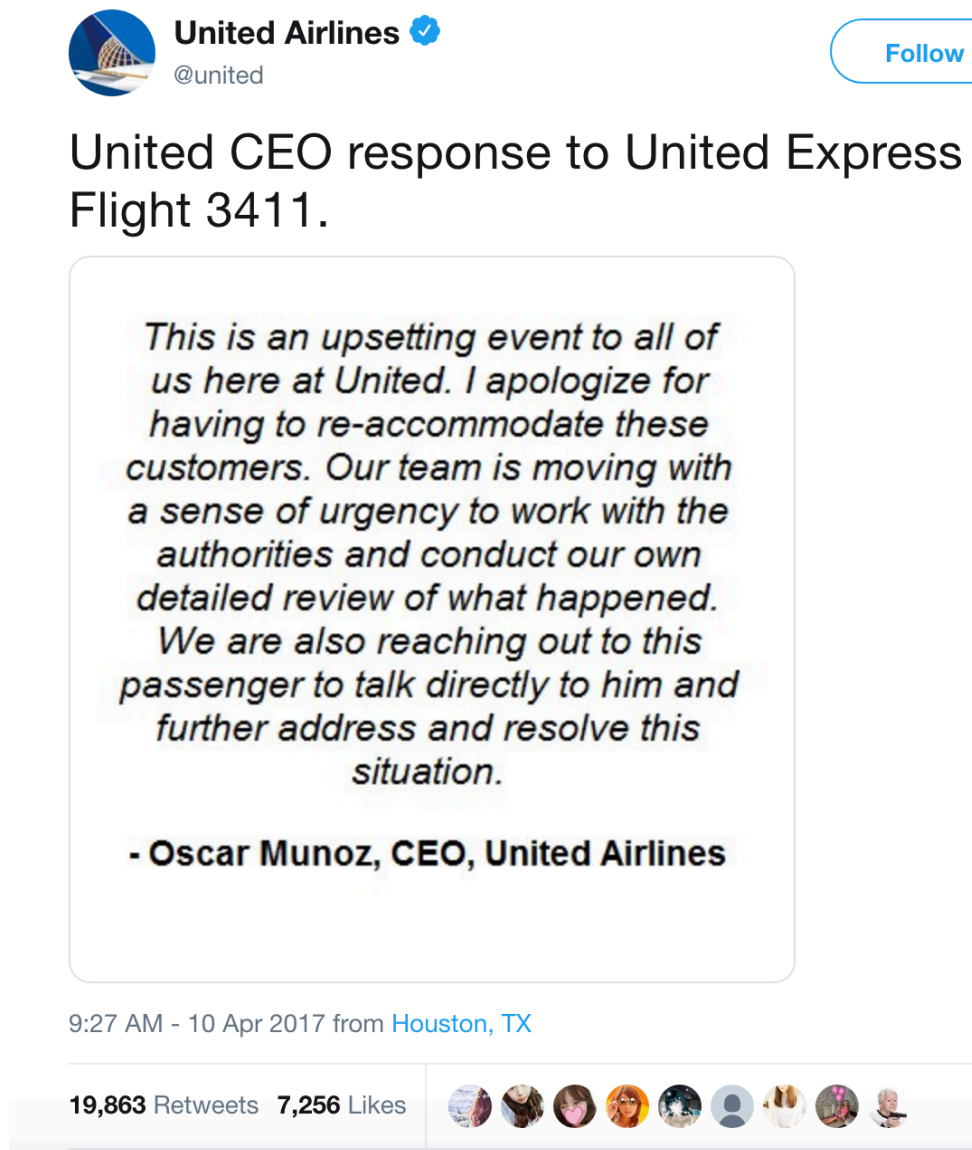
Figure 33

Twitter Responds to United's Apology

Once United Airlines issued their statement regarding the Flight 3411 incident during the morning of April 10th, Twitter erupted with the news. That day, there were over half a million tweets published about the United Airlines crisis that included the words 'United,' 'passenger,' 'dragged' and 'plane,' or a combination of the former (Crimson Hexagon, Figures 32 and 34). Twitter authors tweeted about the incident at an

average of 1.02 times each. Forty-five percent of the authors were female and 55% were male (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 35). Sixty-one percent of authors were 35 years old and above, followed by the 18 to 24, 17 and below and 25 to 34 demographics, contributing 15%, 13% and 12% of the Twitter content published, respectively (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 36).

Of the 526,069 tweets sent on April 10th, one-quarter carried a basic negative sentiment. Only 3% carried a basic positive sentiment, with the remaining 72% having a basic neutral sentiment (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 37). In addition, 24% of the tweets published were emotionally-charged. The emotions present included disgust at a staggering 50%, as well as anger, (14%), joy (14%), fear (10%), sadness (9%) and surprise (2%) (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 38).

Beyond emotional content, there were also prevalent themes within the conversation on Twitter. For one, 'video' was a common topic that was discussed, referring to the cellphone video taken by a fellow passenger that depicted Dao being dragged off of the aircraft. Other topical themes, such as 'paying customer,' 'innocent customer' and 'assault,' denoted the public sentiment that Dao was unfairly treated by United Airlines. Similar themes were also evident in clusters of the most frequently used words from April 10th. One such cluster included 'customer,' 'innocent,' 'trauma' and 'fly.' In addition, overlapping clusters contained the words 'paying,' 'dragging,' 'beat' and 'bloodied' (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 39). The word selections of Twitter users pointed to their shock over how Dao was physically harmed by the incident as well as their outrage about United Airlines' actions. In accordance with this sentiment, some of the most-used individual words—outside of the obvious 'passenger,' 'flight,' 'plane,'

etc.—were 'disgusted,' 'shocking,' 'bloodied,' 'assault,' 'shame,' and 'monsters.'
Additionally, an emoji displaying a frown, slightly raised eyebrows and eyes looking to
the side was frequently included in the 526,069 tweets published on April 10th (Crimson
Hexagon, Figure 40).

Within the 53,000 direct responses to United's statement, many Twitter users
expressed their dissatisfaction with United's so-called apology. User Doug Ulman
(@dougulman) wrote, "What a terribly [worded] statement/response. Just watched the
videos. Wow. Shameful." Ulman's tweet received 1,489 likes and 82 retweets (Twitter,
Figure 41). Another user, @MeganSchmegan, expressed a similar opinion. "What a crap
apology. Apologize specifically to the man who was bloodied while being dragged &
thrown off of your aircraft. U need a new CEO!" she wrote (Twitter, Figure 42). Other
Twitter authors vocalized their intent to boycott the airline. For example, Roland Austinat
(@austinat) tweeted, ".@united From now on, I'll pass on #United & will recommend
friends & family the same…" Austinat's tweet was liked over two-thousand times
(Twitter, Figure 43).
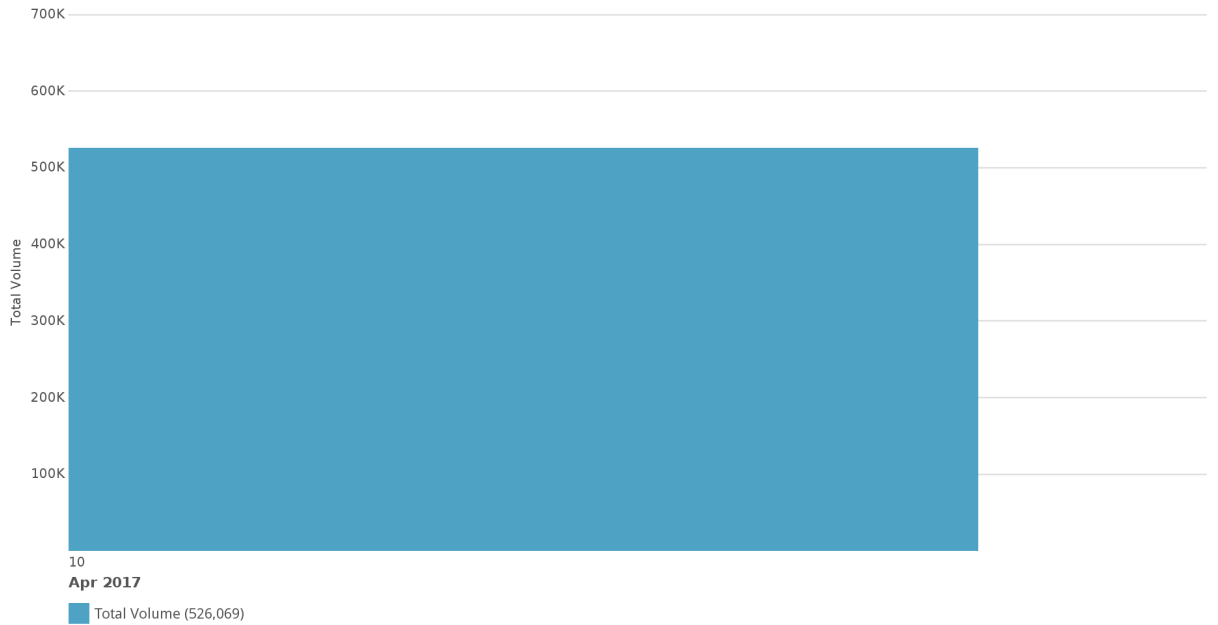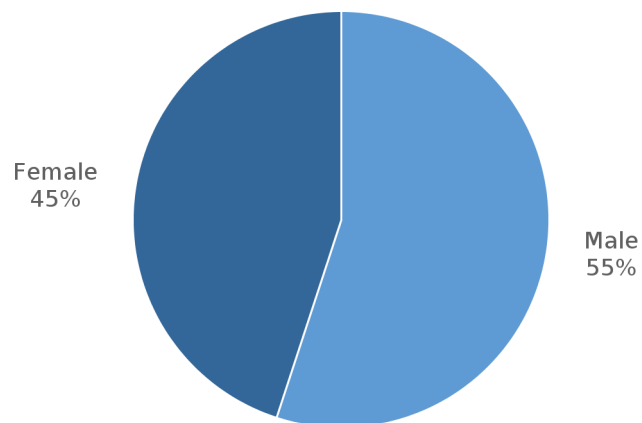
Figure 34

Figure 35

United Airlines Crisis — Age Breakdown from 4/10/17 to 4/10/17

Figure 36

Basic Positive
3%

Basic Neutral
72%

Basic Negative
25%

United Airlines Crisis — Basic sentiment from 4/10/17 to 4/10/17

Figure 37

57
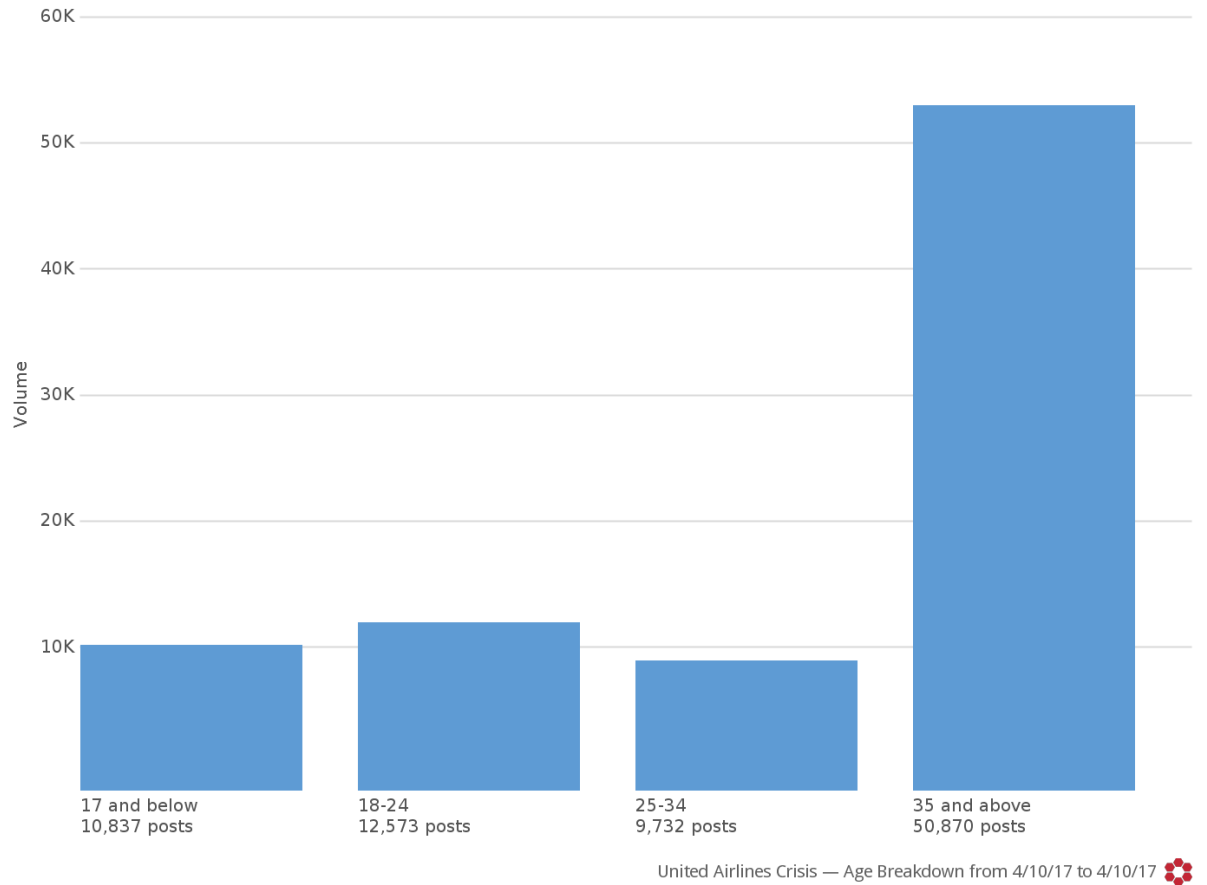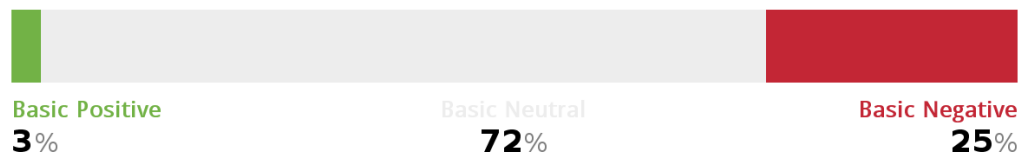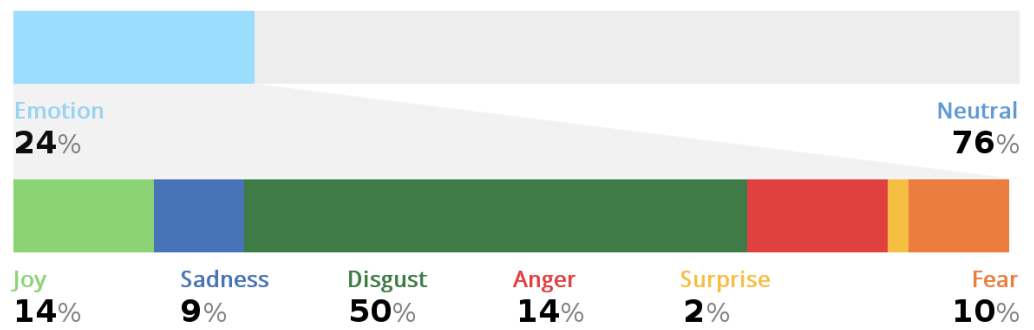
United Airlines Crisis — Emotion from 4/10/17 to 4/10/17

Figure 38
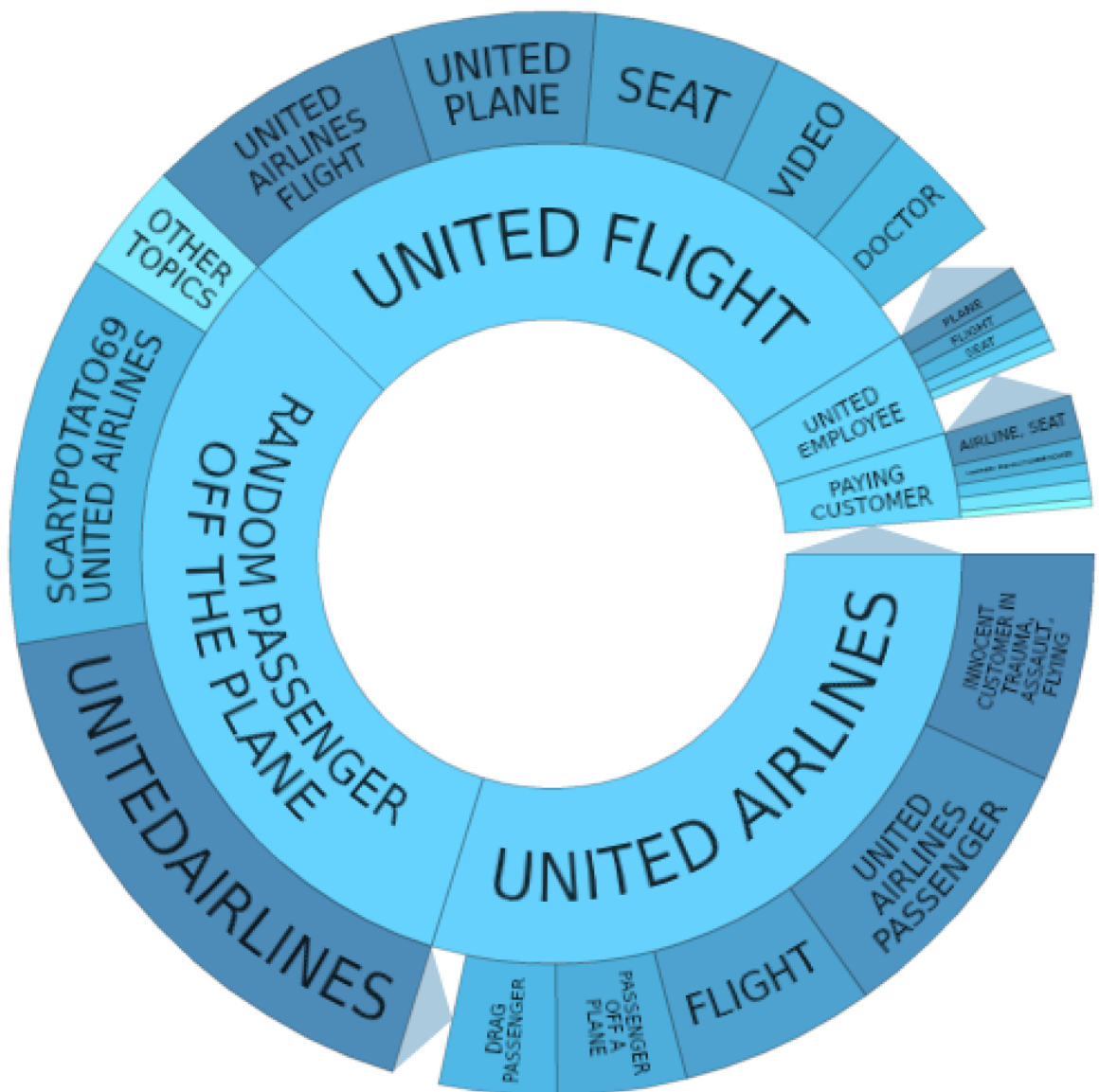
United Airlines Crisis — Topics from 4/10/17 to 4/10/17

Figure 39
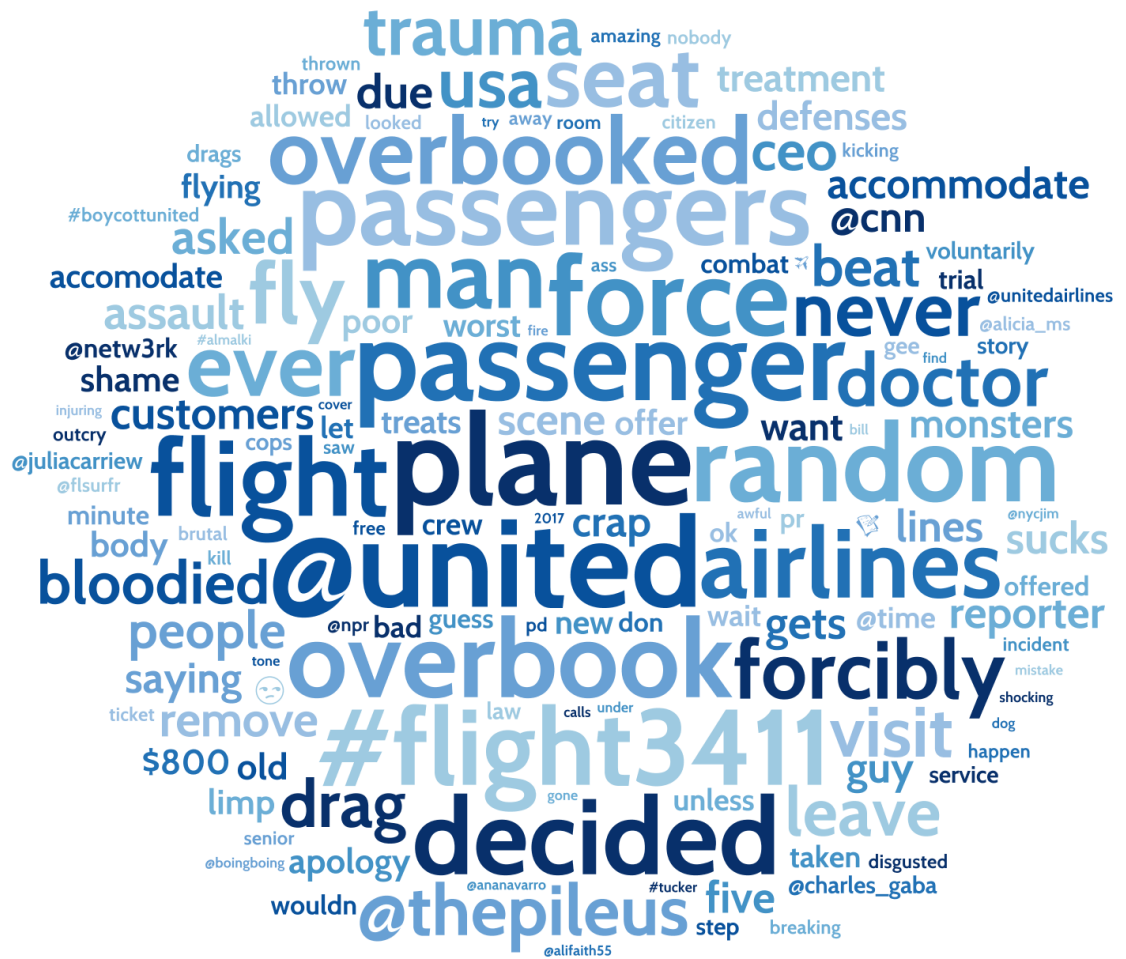
United Airlines Crisis — Words from 4/10/17 to 4/10/17

Figure 40

Doug Ulman ✔
@dougulman

Follow ⌄

Replying to @united

what a terribly statement/response. Just watched the videos. Wow. Shameful.

7:13 PM - 10 Apr 2017

82 Retweets **1,489** Likes

💬 13   🔁 82   ♡ 1.5K   ✉

Figure 41

Megan @MeganShmegan · 11 Apr 2017   ⌄
Replying to @united

what a crap apology. apologize specifically to the man who was bloodied while being dragged & thrown off of your aircraft. u need a new CEO!

💬   🔁   ♡ 8   ✉

Figure 42

Roland Austinat ✔ @austinat · 10 Apr 2017   ⌄
Replying to @united

.@united From now on, I'll pass on #United & will recommend friends & family the same. Why not check in the crew FIRST? Or on the next flgt?

💬 47   🔁 135   ♡ 2.2K   ✉

Figure 43

United Apologizes Again and Shifts its Crisis Response Strategy

After social media erupted on April 10th in outrage over the dragging of passenger Dr. David Dao off of Flight 3411 and dissatisfaction with United's response, United Continental Holdings, the parent company of United Airlines, opened on Wall Street with nearly $1 billion "axed from its market value" (Czarnecki, 2017). In an attempt to redeem itself after this financial blow, the airline issued another statement via Twitter during the early afternoon on April 11th. The statement, signed again by CEO Oscar Munoz, read:

> The truly horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment. I share all of those sentiments, and one above all: my deepest apologies or what happened. Like you, I continue to be disturbed by what happened on this flight and I deeply apologize to the customer forcibly removed and to all the customers aboard. No one should ever be mistreated that way. I want you to know that we take full responsibility and we will work to make it right. It's never too late to do the right thing. I have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what's broken so this never happens again. This will include a thorough review of crew movement, our policies for incentivizing volunteers in these situations, how we handle oversold situations and an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement. We'll communicate the results of our review by April 30th. I promise you we will do better.

United's statement garnered 2,889 retweets, 4,613 likes and an overwhelming 16,000 replies (Twitter, Figure 44).

The airline's second statement more closely aligned to the suggested framework of the SCCT. Per the crisis falling under the preventable cluster, the rebuild strategy was an appropriate selection by United. This time, the airline better utilized the power of apology by taking full responsibility for the events that occurred on the evening of April 9th, as evident in the inclusion of, "…I deeply apologize to the customer forcibly removed… No one should ever be mistreated that way. I want you to know that we take full responsibility…"

Also, unlike before, United addressed their key publics: Dao, the other passengers on Flight 3411 and the rest of the airline's customers. While Dao was not mentioned by name in the airline's statement, he was referred to as "the customer forcibly removed." The other passengers on the flight were acknowledged in the statement via the words "I deeply apologize to…all the customers aboard." Finally, United addressed their other customers—those with purchasing power who naturally were a key public in the crisis— by the inclusion of the airline's plans to re-evaluate its overbooking and re-accommodation policies, as well as the partnerships with airport authorities and local law enforcement.

Paired with the second apology, United adopted other measures as part of a strategic shift in the brand's crisis communication response. For one, Munoz promised open communication with the public on the results of the review that the company planned to conduct, even setting an explicit deadline for said communication. He wrote, "We'll communicate the results of our review by April 30th."

Furthermore, Munoz appeared on *Good Morning America* on April 12th. When asked about what he thought when he first saw the video of the incident, he responded,

"It's not so much what I thought. It's what I felt. Probably the word…shame comes to mind" (*United CEO felt 'shame' after seeing passenger dragged off plane*, 2017). In this interview, Munoz also commented on United's inadequate first apology, alluding to the brand's change in response strategy. He said, "…my initial words fell short of truly expressing what we were feeling. And that's something that I've learned from. The expression of apology and specific to folks I mentioned before [Dao] is an important part of a conversation…" (*United CEO felt 'shame' after seeing passenger dragged off plane*, 2017). Later, following a press conference hosted by Dao's attorney, United reiterated its second apology.

Outside of Munoz's more visible public presence, United also changed its social media strategy in an interesting way. In contrast to Pepsi's crisis, in which the company Twitter account only replied to Bernice King, United responded to many Twitter users who expressed their problems with the company. For example, user D. Red Peridos (@reidperdios) tweeted in response to United's initial statement on April 11th, lamenting on his own troubles with the airline. He said, "I travel with my service dog and we are routinely treated poorly at the ticket counter and on board." In response, United wrote, "This is upsetting to hear. Can you please DM us further details? ^RD." In a similar manner, the airline also responded to Twitter author Lori T Garcia (@LoriTGarcia) after she tweeted a response to United's second statement, saying, "I always have a problem when I fly @united. They have made me miss my connecting flights on my last 3 trips ☹." United tweet back at her, writing, "That's saddening to hear Lori. Has this been on one particular route or several? ^NJ" (Twitter).

The crisis dragged on for more than a week after United's second apology was issued on April 11th. On April 15th, United confirmed media reports that it changed its overbooking policy to no longer allow crew members to remove passengers who are already seated (Czarnecki, 2017). Then, on April 19th, Munoz met with the Chinese consulate in Chicago in response to social media users across the United States, China and Vietnam calling for a boycott of United Airlines. Many believed that the removal of Dao, an Asian man, was racially-motivated (Jeffrey, 2017).

United Airlines ✓
@united

Follow

United CEO Oscar Munoz: I'm sorry. We will fix this. uafly.co/XuR1Bs

> The truly horrific event that occurred on this flight has elicited many responses from all of us: outrage, anger, disappointment. I share all of those sentiments, and one above all: my deepest apologies for what happened. Like you, I continue to be disturbed by what happened on this flight and I deeply apologize to the customer forcibly removed and to all the customers aboard. No one should ever be mistreated this way.
>
> I want you to know that we take full responsibility and we will work to make it right.
>
> It's never too late to do the right thing. I have committed to our customers and our employees that we are going to fix what's broken so this never happens again. This will include a thorough review of crew movement, our policies for incentivizing volunteers in these situations, how we handle oversold situations and an examination of how we partner with airport authorities and local law enforcement. We'll communicate the results of our review by April 30th.
>
> I promise you we will do better.
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Oscar

12:10 PM - 11 Apr 2017 from Houston, TX

2,889 Retweets 4,613 Likes

16K   2.9K   4.6K

Figure 44

The Impact of United Airlines' Crisis Communication Practices on Brand Reputation

From April 9th to April 21st, there were over 1.3 million tweets posted that included the words 'United,' 'passenger,' 'dragged' and 'plane,' or a combination of the former (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 45). According to Crimson Hexagon, as of April 8th,

the day before the initial incident, United Airlines had a 10% net basic negative sentiment

on Twitter. Seventy-eight percent of the content tweeted contained a basic neutral

sentiment, while 6% contained a basic positive sentiment and 16% contained a basic

negative sentiment (Crimson Hexagon, Figure 46). By April 14th, the brand's net

sentiment dropped by three percentage points, with 14% of Twitter content having a basic

negative sentiment and only 1% having a basic positive sentiment (Crimson Hexagon,

Figure 46). Clearly, the crisis had taken a toll on United Airline's brand reputation.

One of the reasons that the Flight 3411 scandal resonated with the public and

shook the foundation of United's reputation was because the crisis called into question

one of the brand's defining characteristics—that of safety. Any airline's primary

objective is to transport passengers safely to their destinations. United failed to deliver on

this front when the company brutally dragged Dao off of the aircraft. Therefore, it is no

wonder that the airline lost trust from the public.

In addition to the crisis posing a threat to one of the brand's defining

characteristic, United had a number of other factors working against it making a seamless

recovery. The first was simply that the company butchered its initial response to the

crisis. As discussed in the 'Apology Issued' section, United did not accurately describe

the situation or take full responsibility for its misdoings, nor did it appropriately

acknowledge its key publics, including Dao and the other passengers. A second factor

working against United was that the company did not have a "reputational reservoir"

(Greyser, 2009) to draw from. As the Crimson Hexagon data demonstrates, the general

public on Twitter already held a negative sentiment towards the airline prior to the Flight

3411 crisis. Without the "halo effect" (Coombs & Holladay, 2006) that softened the blow

of public outrage for Pepsi, United suffered far worse consequences from its misstep. The crises of Pepsi and United Airlines also differed in that Pepsi benefitted from the mainstream media changing their focus to the new crisis—United's—after a couple of days. United, in contrast, was not saved by a fresh crisis stealing the spotlight.

Due to the factors aforementioned, United Airlines experienced severe financial and reputational ramifications during this timeframe. As previously mentioned, on April 11th, United's parent company, United Continental Holdings, opened on Wall Street with nearly $1 billion "axed from its market value" (Czarnecki, 2017). Additionally, United Airlines lost $250 million of its market value (Kottasova, 2017). In terms of reputation, negative perceptions of United's corporate reputation increased by 500% and 42% of U.S. consumers surveyed during the time said that United had a "bad" or "very bad" reputation (Harris Poll, 2018).

United Airlines Crisis — Volume from 4/9/17 to 4/21/17

Figure 45

Basic Positive
6%

Basic Neutral
78%

Basic Negative
16%

United Airlines Crisis — Basic sentiment from 4/8/17 to 4/8/17

Figure 46

Basic Positive
1%

Basic Neutral
85%

Basic Negative
14%

United Airlines Crisis — Basic sentiment from 4/14/17 to 4/14/17

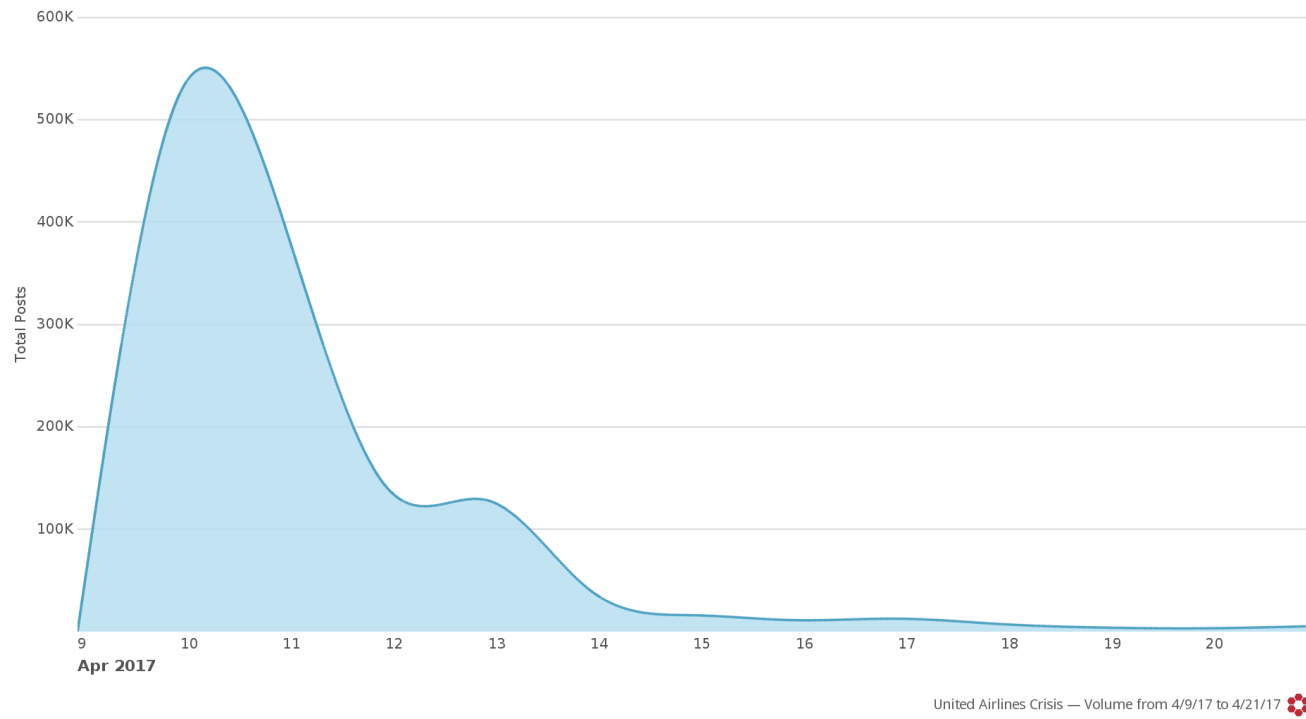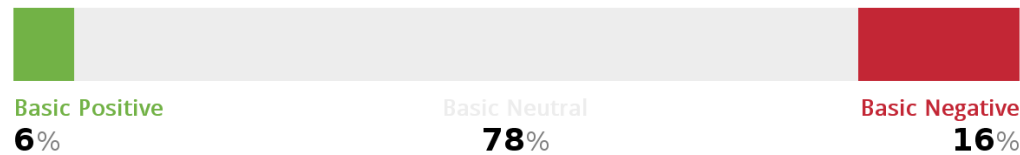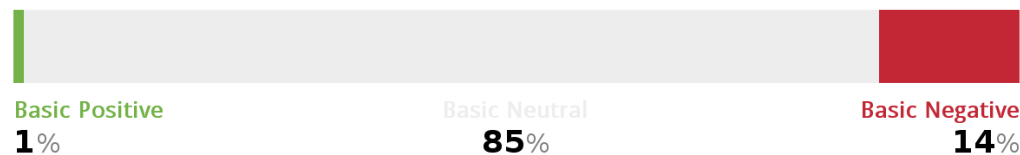*Figure 47*

Discussion

A Comparative Look at the Pepsi and United Airlines Crises

Throughout April 2017, the Pepsi and United Airlines crises dominated both the mainstream news cycle and social media conversation. Given the proximity of the crises to one another, it is only fitting to take a comparative look at the two. Pepsi and United Airlines' respective crises and subsequent responses were similar in their Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) framework categorizations, the tremendous amount of traditional and social media attention they received and the omission of key publics within both of the brands' apologies. However, Pepsi and United Airlines crisis response strategies differed in important ways, namely initial response time, content of apologies and social media strategy. In turn, the long-term implications of the crises on Pepsi and United Airlines' brand reputations also differed. Other external factors, such as pre-crisis reputation and media coverage, also contributed to these outcomes.

Operating within the SCCT framework, both Pepsi and United Airlines' missteps were classified as preventable. Pepsi could have prevented the public relations crisis surrounding its Kendall Jenner commercial had it employed focus groups to test the ad's messaging. Likewise, United Airlines could have avoided the crisis pertaining to the removal of passenger Dao by proactively evaluating its overbooking and removal policies. With preventable crises comes high attribution of responsibility to the brands in question. The public blamed Pepsi for the tone-deaf Kendall Jenner commercial because it was produced in-house. Similarly, the public negatively attributed the physical removal of Dao off of Flight 3411 to United Airlines, as opposed to airport security, the police or Dao himself.

Another similarity between the Pepsi and United crises was that both received tremendous attention in traditional and social media. As previously mentioned, between April 3rd and April 8th, 2017, there were nearly 2.5 million posts about the Pepsi crisis on Twitter (Crimson Hexagon). During the same period, the crisis also garnered widespread traditional media coverage. *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, *The Atlantic*, *Harpers Bazaar*, *CNN* and a plethora of other news outlets and magazines reported on the story. Correspondingly, from April 9th to April 21st, 2017, there were over 1.3 million tweets posted that included the words 'United,' 'passenger,' 'dragged' and 'plane,' or a combination of the former, of course referring to United's public relations crisis (Crimson Hexagon). In traditional media, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *CNN*, *NPR* and many others ran stories about the ongoing crisis.

The third similarity between Pepsi and United Airlines' crises was the omission of a key public in each brand's initial apology. In Pepsi's first official statement, there was no mention of Black Lives Matter protestors or other activist groups, which was an egregious error on the part of Pepsi given how many people believed that the Kendall Jenner commercial made light of real-life police brutality protests. Only later, in response to Bernice King's articulate "If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi" tweet, did the brand finally address civil rights activists as a key constituency. On Twitter, Pepsi responded directly to Bernice King, writing, "We at Pepsi believe in the legacy of Dr. King & meant absolutely no disrespect to him & others who fight for justice."

Like Pepsi, United also omitted key publics in its initial crisis response. The airline's original apology, signed by CEO Oscar Munoz stated, "I apologize for having to

re-accommodate these customers." As aforementioned in the *Apology Issued* section, the statement gave no mention of Dao, who was physically dragged off of the aircraft, thus irrefutably making him a key constituency in the matter. In like manner, United also did not address the other passengers on the plane in its remarks. In camera phone videos taken of the incident, emphatic expressions such as "this is wrong" from fellow passenger are audible in the background. Clearly, the incident was an emotional experience for those who witnessed the forcible removal of Dao. Due to this, those passengers were another key constituency that United Airlines should have addressed.

While Pepsi and United had numerous similarities in their crises, they also had distinct differences, both in terms of response strategies and the corresponding long-term implications on brand reputation. The first distinct difference was that of initial response time. Pepsi's Kendall Jenner commercial went live on YouTube on April 4th. Just 24 hours later, at 10:44 am on April 5th, Pepsi published an apology. In contrast, United had a quicker reaction time to its crisis. The Flight 3411 incident occurred in the evening on Sunday, April 9th and the airline responded on Monday at 9:27 am.

The second notable difference was the content and messaging within the apologies. While United did respond more rapidly, Pepsi's statement of apology closer aligned with the recommended course of action given in the SCCT framework. As discussed in earlier sections, brands with crises that fall within the preventable cluster— as both Pepsi and United's did—should respond to said crises with a "rebuild strategy." In this strategy, organizations admit full responsibility for their wrongdoings. Pepsi adhered to this protocol, accepting all the blame for the tone-deaf Kendall Jenner ad. This

was evident when the brand's statement expressed that the brand "missed the mark" and then went on to apologize to Kendall Jenner, freeing her from potential blame.

Unlike Pepsi, United Airlines did not comply with the SCCT framework in its initial crisis response. Veering away from the "rebuild strategy," United did not take full responsibility for its misdoings. Rather than admitting that the forceful removal of Dao was wrong, the airline only apologized for "having to re-accommodate these customers." This is where United truly failed in its crisis communications. And ultimately, the brand paid the price for not getting its apology right the first time, which will be discussed in more detail later.

In addition to response time and the contents of the apologies through the lens of the SCCT framework, the third difference between Pepsi and United Airlines' crises was their social media strategies. Pepsi only took to Twitter twice during the entirety of its crisis. The first time was to issue the initial apology statement. The second time was to respond to Bernice King. Outside of these two instances, Pepsi was silent on the platform and did not respond to any tweets from the public. On the other hand, United Airlines tweeted numerous times throughout the company's crisis. Like Pepsi, the airline did tweet its initial apology, as well as its second apology. However, unlike Pepsi, United shifted its social media strategy and began responding to Twitter users who mentioned the company in their tweets. The brand replied to individuals who expressed their own negative experiences flying with United, including a customer with a service animal and another customer who had frequent flight delays. The tweets from United were signed with initials, indicating which customer service representative or communications professional wrote them.

Just as Pepsi and United Airlines' crisis situations and responses differed in many ways, so did the long-term impacts of the crises on their respective brand reputations. United Airlines is still enduring consequences left from its Flight 3411 crisis. In fact, the crisis resurfaces in the news cycle from time to time. Recently, *CNN* and other news outlets ran stories about Flight 3411 on the second anniversary of the initial incident. In addition, another long-lasting impact of the crisis was that United Airlines CEO Oscar Munoz did not receive his planned promotion to chairman of United Continental Holdings, United Airlines' parent company (Meier, 2017). Beyond Munoz's career trajectory, the crisis deeply affected the airline's brand reputation. According to a Morning Consult poll conducted on April 12th, 2017, 79% of people who had heard of the Flight 3411 incident stated they would choose an American Airlines flight over an identical United Airlines flight. Moreso, 44% of those polled said they would select the American Airlines flight even if the United option was less expensive (Nichols, 2017). The negative impact of the crisis on brand reputation was also reflected in the company's financials. On April 11th, United Continental Holdings opened on Wall Street with an almost $1 billion decrease in its market value (Czarnecki, 2017). Since the Flight 3411 incident, United's brand reputation has never fully recovered. Although there was a gradual positive increase in the airline's net favorability from April 2017 to February 18 (Nichols, 2017), United was plagued with yet another crisis in March 2018, causing their brand reputation to suffer once again. As a result of both crises, United still has a negative brand reputation. According to Crimson Hexagon, as of March 2019, the airline has a 9% negative net sentiment on Twitter.

A stark contrast to United, Pepsi recovered well from its' Kendall Jenner commercial crisis. According to a poll conducted by Clutch, 58% of consumers surveyed were willing to buy Pepsi prior to the Kendall Jenner commercial. Immediately following the crisis, that number dipped down to 55%. However, seven months later, it was back up to 56%. Of that 56%, 26% said that "they have simply always bought Pepsi and the news coverage didn't bother them." The remaining 30% said that "though the commercial bothered them at first, they have since moved on" (Seter, 2017). Part of Pepsi's recovery can be attributed to the brand's timely response and the content of the apology issued. However, it should be noted that other, external factors, such as pre-crisis reputation and media coverage, also contributed to Pepsi's successful outcome. Through its century-old history, Pepsi has established itself as one of the most well-known and valuable brands in the world. With this positive pre-crisis reputation, Pepsi was able to recover in part by tapping into its "reputational reservoir," (Greyser, 2009) or known by a different name as the "halo effect" (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). In combination with this, Pepsi was spared from more severe consequence partly thanks to the United Airlines crisis. Twitter and the mainstream media diverted their attention away from Pepsi and towards United from April 9th onward—a saving grace for the beverage brand.

Lessons & Application

Based on the comparative look at the Pepsi and United Airlines crises, there are fundamental lessons that can be derived and applied to future crisis communication practices. The first lesson is that **prevention of a crisis is easier than handling the crisis itself**. As aforementioned, both of the crises addressed in this thesis were preventable.

Pepsi could have conducted focus groups to test how the public would receive the messaging in the Kendall Jenner commercial before the ad ever went live. United Airlines could have proactively evaluated and adjusted its overbooking and passenger removal policies. Certainly taking these precautionary steps would have been easier, in terms of both monetary costs and the reputational costs, than enduring and trying to recover from the crisis itself. All companies and organizations can apply this lesson to their own practices by proactively looking for potential liabilities and addressing those internally before a crisis occurs.

The second lesson is that an organization must **get the messaging right in its crisis response the first time**. This lesson was evident in the comparison of the Pepsi and United Airlines crises. Part of the reason that Pepsi recovered so well from its misstep is that the brand successfully conveyed appropriate messaging in its crisis response. In the apology statement issued on Twitter, Pepsi communicated three things: the company's intention, an apology and a description of the further actions they took to make things right. Pepsi described its intention for the commercial by writing, "Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding." Then, the brand accepted full responsibility for the tone-deaf commercial by including the line, "Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue" and then deflecting blame away from Kendall Jenner. Finally, Pepsi's messaging described what further actions the company took to make things right. This was apparent when the messaging, as published on Twitter, included, "We are removing the content and halting any further rollout." While admittedly Pepsi's apology was not perfect, as it omitted any mention of social justice activist groups, the messaging did tick most of the

boxes that it should have. In combination with Pepsi's tweet responding to Bernice King, the brand largely got its messaging right the first go-around, thus leading to its successful crisis recovery.

In contrast, United did not bounce back from its crisis as well as Pepsi did in part because the company butchered the messaging in its initial apology. While Pepsi accepted full responsibility for its misstep, United did not. In its first statement on Twitter, CEO Oscar Munoz wrote, "I apologize for having to re-accommodate these customers." Here, the messaging missed the mark because the word choice 're-accommodate' did not accurately portray the physical dragging of Dao off of the aircraft. Further adding to the faux pas, the messaging also missed the mark in describing what other large-scale actions United was taking to right its wrong. Rather than addressing that the airline would be changing its overbooking and passenger removal policies, Munoz simply stated, "We are also reaching out to this passenger [Dao] to talk directly to him and further address and resolve this situation." Eventually, United issued a second apology statement that was exponentially more appropriate in its messaging than the first. However, it was in the minds of many, too little too late. Because United did not get its crisis response messaging right the first time, the brand's reputation suffered. For those in the communications line of work, this lesson is applicable no matter the company or organization. It is worth taking a little bit more time—remember that United responded to its crisis quicker than Pepsi did—to draft appropriate and compelling messaging. In the long run, a well-worded apology will serve an organization better than a slightly faster response of lesser quality.

The third lesson that can be taken from these two crises and applied to future practices is **the power of new media** and Twitter, in particular, as it relates to crisis communications. New media has the advantage of speed. Today, Twitter is viewed as a digital press room, one which is faster than traditional press releases and conferences (Erikson). With this speed also comes the ability for the public to talk back to brands rapidly in a two-way communications model. Due to this, "tweets had the most popular effect on secondary crisis communication and reactions" (Schultz et. al, 2011). Between Pepsi and United, there were collectively 3.8 million tweets published about the brands' missteps (Crimson Hexagon). In the context of the Pepsi crisis, one can see how public outcry on Twitter led the brand to apologize, halt the rollout of the commercial and then, when the public still was not satisfied, specifically acknowledge those who fight for justice. Looking at the United Airlines scandal, the same power possessed by Twitter was evident. Public disapproval, as expressed on the social media platform, led the company to issue a second apology and change its overbooking and passenger removal policies. The lesson of the power of new media, with special emphasis given to Twitter, can be applied to all communications contexts. Communications practitioners need to be fully aware of the influence that new media can have on their organization's brand reputation. Therefore, they should act accordingly, prioritizing new media as part of their crisis communications response strategies.

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