Speak up! brands’ responsiveness matters: consumer reactions to brand communications in the early stages of a crisis

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Abstract
Purpose – In an effort to provide insights that nurture the future of brand relationships, this paper aims to examine the impact of brand communications on consumption behavior during critical events that significantly impact the marketplace. Specifically, this research focuses on external crises (i.e. global health crises, natural disasters and regional conflicts) beyond the control of the corporations that govern brands. It does so by exploring the most effective brand communication strategies at the onset of a crisis when brands may shift promotional content to more sensitive, crisis-related content as a means to connect with consumers. Furthermore, this paper seeks to understand which consumer segment will benefit most from brands’ crisis-related content.

Design/methodology/approach – This research introduces two empirical studies (combined sample = 490), using student and online participant samples.

Findings – Results from this work demonstrate that at the onset of a crisis, consumers’ attitudes, brand engagement, and self-brand connections significantly increase after visualizing crisis-related versus non-crisis-related brand messages. Results also reveal that consumers who feel less socially connected will react more favorably to brand communications that contain crisis-related content (i.e. informative or emotional content related to the crisis) than non-crisis-related content (i.e. marketing content aimed to promote and advertise the brand, product and/or services).

Research limitations/implications – While the effect of crisis communications on consumption behavior and the moderating effect of social connections is explored, the underlying mechanism of these effects is not investigated in this study. Therefore, future research might consider evaluating the mechanisms that drive these effects.

Practical implications – This work builds on past research to help establish that during early critical times, marketing managers should include crisis-related content in their communications, which will increase consumers’ positive reactions toward the brand.

Social implications – Another implication of this work is that it underscores the significance of crisis-related brand communications as an inclusive practice because these are particularly well-received among vulnerable consumer segments, such as those who feel less socially connected during critical times.

Originality/value – Proactive communication strategies allow brands to better manage external critical challenges. As brands navigate a postpandemic marketplace, this research highlights the adaptations that managers can make to their communication strategies at peak uncertain times, such as the earlier stages of an external crisis.

Keywords Brand communication, Brand relationships, Brand engagement, Crisis management

Introduction
Brand communications are the strategic processes by which brands engage in a conversation with their consumers regarding their products, services, and/or unrelated topics in an open and interactive format, which contributes to enhancing brand equity, awareness, loyalty, image and strengthening the consumer-brand relationship (Fetscherin et al., 2021; Keller, 2009; Batra and Keller, 2016). Such brand communication strategies require an integrative approach, especially during times of crisis when market changes obligate brand adaptations to help manage rising challenges (Gupta and Nair, 2021; Veloutsou and Guzmán, 2017).

Crises surrounding a brand can be categorized as either internal or external. Internal crises are performance and value-related (Dutta and Pullig, 2011) while external crises include natural disasters, global health crises or regional conflicts (Sheth, 2020). Notably, the initial stage of any crisis is particularly challenging given the uncertainty and lack of information or guidance (CDC, 2019). Therefore, timely dissemination of information at the start of a crisis is crucial to help mitigate the risks associated with it. Related research found that brands that specifically sought to alleviate the worry...
and anxiety caused by the pandemic obtained positive consumer attitudes (Verlegh et al., 2021). Yet, at the initial stage of a crisis, it is unclear whether brands should communicate crisis-related or non-crisis-related content, and which consumer segment might benefit more from either communication type.

This study addresses this gap by focusing on brand communications that occur during the early stages of external crises, which are not under the control of corporations or brands. It aims to provide information that can help build a proactive brand communications contingency plan for brands’ future external crises. In addition, this paper advances prior research by demonstrating that consumers who feel less socially connected during critical times will react more favorably to brand communications that contain crisis-related information as opposed to noncrisis-related information. This work conceptualizes crisis-related as any mention of the existing crisis (whether informative or emotional). Noncrisis-related refers to all other marketing content aimed to promote and advertise the brand, product and/or services. Specifically, this paper explores effective crisis-related versus noncrisis-related messages during the early stage of external critical events using the onset of the coronavirus pandemic (January-May 2020; Zhang and Cozma, 2022; Wang et al., 2021) as context for its empirical examination.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic had widespread consequences on health, society and the economy, compelling governments and health authorities around the world to take decisive action to curtail its spread. Among the early policies implemented were social distancing protocols, including lockdowns, physical distancing guidelines, mask mandates and travel restrictions. These measures were intended to reduce close contact between individuals to mitigate the risk of infection. Although these social distancing policies were necessary for public health, they also gave rise to mental health concerns. Many people experienced reduced feelings of social connections, that led to increased loneliness and social isolation.

As the world navigates a post-pandemic stage, this research reflects on the lessons learned during the coronavirus pandemic from a brand communications perspective to help inform marketers’ crisis communication plans. From this vantage point, it is inevitable to recognize the significant ways this crisis changed the marketplace (i.e. shifts to online business models, workplace settings, consumption behavior and brand communications; Basu and Swaminathan, 2023; Thapa et al., 2022; Krishnamurthy, 2020). The crisis also modified brand communications, which underwent adaptations primarily in response to early social distancing protocols that led to an increased reliance on digital technology. Consequently, digital brand communications rose to the forefront of this crisis, emerging as the prime means for brands to engage with consumers (Pantano et al., 2020). Twitter provides an excellent example. At the earlier stages of the coronavirus crisis (March–May 2020 in the USA), global mentions of the crisis on Twitter amounted to 1.9 billion – that is, 4.5% of all global tweets included a mention of the pandemic (Twitter Insiders Data, 2020). The same study noted that 68% of Twitter users held that brands should continue promoting and advertising their products and services, while 45% of users supported brands sharing information about the crisis and using their communication platforms to uplift the community.

Without clear direction, brands continued actively promoting their products and services while displaying crisis-related messages (that is, messages containing coronavirus references; henceforth, these messages are identified as “crisis-related messages”). As expected, brands were conflicted about which communications type they should adopt at the onset of the crisis – should they share crisis-related or noncrisis-related communications with their consumers? Further, in which instances should brands share either of these communication types? Central to the objective of this research is to empirically assess these questions to better inform marketing managers about the most appropriate type of communication at the start of any external crisis.

Two empirical studies presented in this paper show that crisis-related messages led to increased brand attitudes, engagement and self-brand connections, particularly for consumers who felt less socially connected at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. These insights contribute to practice by allowing managers to reassess their current crisis communications plans and make any necessary adjustments. Findings also contribute to theory by showing that crisis-related communications particularly benefit consumers who feel less socially connected at the beginning of an external crisis.

**Brand communications during a crisis**

Research on brand communications has highlighted the importance of raising awareness of the problem, particularly at the early crisis stages (Jones et al., 2010). For instance, Shi (2020) emphasizes a positive effect on consumer engagement when firms inform the public of their actions and commitment to corporate relief aid in the event of disasters. Given that brands heavily rely on social media to communicate with their consumers throughout a crisis (Islam et al., 2021), it is vital to evaluate the content of digital brand communications. Thus, this work seeks to understand consumer reactions to crisis-related brand messages at the onset of a crisis.

Consumers expect brands to demonstrate crisis awareness along with a genuine concern for consumers’ well-being rather than promoting their brand in a self-serving manner (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020). In fact, 65% of global consumers indicated that brands’ response to a crisis would influence their future brand purchases (Rogers, 2020). Further, related research demonstrates the opportunity that brands have during an external crisis to demonstrate empathy through their communications, thereby building equity among their consumer base (Hesse et al., 2021). Accordingly, the main prediction of this work posits that consumers will react more favorably to brands’ crisis-related messages than to noncrisis-related messages, resulting in more positive consumption consequences. Formally, the first hypothesis of this paper is:

**H1.** Compared to noncrisis-related brand messages, crisis-related brand messages will result in greater brand attitudes, engagement and self-brand connections.

During critical events, brands and organizations have the opportunity to adapt their marketing communications toward a more genuine and authentic approach (He and Harris, 2020).
According to Gibson (2020), organizations can adopt practices of inclusion, copresence, and vitality to help alleviate the loneliness experienced by individuals during social distancing and isolation. As a result of social isolation, consumers may develop coping mechanisms that lead them to seek more social connections (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020). Consequently, consumers are likely to react positively to brands’ authentic communication attempts during social isolation (Balis, 2020), because they perceive these communications help facilitate social connections.

The moderating role of social connections
The lack of social connections leads to social exclusion experienced by detaching individuals from social relations and inhibiting their participation in societal activities (Baumeister et al., 2005; Twenge et al., 2007). Social exclusion has multiple behavioral and cognitive implications, such as increased anxiety, depression and health information avoidance (Howell and Shepperd, 2017; Park and Baumeister, 2015). In contrast, social inclusion reduces depression, helplessness and anxiety while increasing the overall quality of life and well-being (Baumeister and Tice, 1990; Richardson and Barkham, 2020; Yao et al.; 2015).

Social distancing protocols enacted during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic contributed to lower social connections, thereby increasing feelings of social isolation with adverse effects on well-being (Pantano et al., 2020; Cacioppo and Hawkley, 2009). Since the need to belong is a primary human motive (Baumeister and Leary, 1995), when individuals feel their social connections are impaired, they are motivated to seek and maintain social bonds (Walton et al., 2012). One goal of brand communications is for brands to connect and engage with consumers bidirectionally, as one would in human relationships (Fournier, 1998). Thus, consumers who feel less socially connected will react more favorably to brands’ crisis-related messages, as these messages could help facilitate social connections. Formally:

**H2.** Compared to consumers who feel more socially connected, consumers who feel less socially connected will react more favorably to crisis-related brand messages.

Overview of studies
To test the proposed hypotheses, two empirical studies were conducted. The focus of these studies was to compare the differential effect of crisis-related and noncrisis-related messages on consumer brand evaluations across several measures. First, a study with undergraduate students (Study 1) shows the positive effect of crisis-related brand messages on brand attitudes, word of mouth (WOM) and self-brand connections (SBC) (**H1**). To increase the external validity of this research, a follow-up study with an online sample (Study 2) of American adults was conducted to replicate the findings of Study 1 and demonstrate that consumers’ feelings of social connectedness moderate the main effect (**H2**).

In both studies, the stimuli used were selected from real brands’ social media posts (on Facebook, Instagram or YouTube) shared during the early stage of the coronavirus pandemic. Given their active presence on social media (Walter, 2014; Pratap, 2020), the Nike, Starbucks, Walmart and McDonald’s brands were chosen to ascertain that the effect holds across different industries, thereby increasing the generalizability of the findings to diverse product categories. Similarly, the goal in using brands’ posts from different social media platforms helped to ensure that the observed findings hold regardless of the social media platform.

For each brand and social media platform, the content of the selected social media posts was adapted with crisis-related or non-crisis-related content for comparison purposes. Crisis-related messages were always about the coronavirus pandemic while noncrisis-related messages were promotional (i.e. promoting products, advertising the brand, new product launches). Finally, both message types were compared for each brand separately. More details on the stimuli used are provided in the main section of each study.

**Study 1: Consumer response to brand communications during an early crisis period**
This study aims to assess the main prediction (**H1**), that consumers will respond more positively to crisis-related as opposed to noncrisis-related brand messages during the early days of a crisis. For the main stimuli, social media posts were selected and adapted from three brands – Starbucks (Facebook posts), Walmart (YouTube short videos) and McDonald’s (Facebook posts), which initially ran between March and April 2020. These dates are relevant to this study because they represent the early stage of the pandemic when social distancing protocols were enforced in the USA. Given that the study ran during the early period of the coronavirus crisis, participants’ levels of worry, coping and social distancing adherence were included as control variables to rule out alternate explanations associated with high stress and anxiety among the undergraduate student population during this period (Son et al., 2020).

**Main study**

**Participants, design and procedure**
In exchange for course credit, 193 undergraduates from a university in the southeast USA (M<sub>age</sub> = 22.7, 54.4% female) were randomly assigned to a crisis-related or noncrisis-related brand message between-subjects experimental condition. The analysis included all participants.

First, participants were told, “In this first part of the survey, we would like to understand your opinions about some brands used in our community. Please evaluate each brand carefully and honestly.” Next, to assess participants’ general evaluation of the Walmart, Starbucks and McDonald’s brands, they were shown only the logo of each of these brands (one by one, in separate survey pages), where they indicated their attitudes toward the brand (seven-pt Likert scale, 1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree; “Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with the following statements about your attitude and feelings toward the brand,” “I really like it,” “It is very appealing to me,” “My feelings toward it are favorable”), WOM (adapted from Carroll and Ahuvia, 2006; seven-pt Likert scale, 1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree; “Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements: “I (would) recommend this brand to others,” “I say positive things about this brand to others,” “I would tell others about this brand”)...
people,” “I consider this brand my first choice to buy products or services”) and SBC (adapted from Aron et al., 1992; seven choices, 1 = Not very connected – 7 = Very connected; “Which picture best describes your relationship with the brand?”) for each brand. These measures served as pre-message general brand evaluations.

Participants were then told, “In the next page, you will see messages from the three brands you just evaluated.” Subsequently, depending on the condition, the main stimuli for each brand (1) was displayed (one by one in separate survey pages): either crisis-related brand messages (Walmart short video: “To America, from our associates”/Starbucks Facebook post: “Check in with each other. We’ll get through this together.”/McDonalds Facebook post: “A note from our family to yours […] The health and safety of our community is our top priority. We also recognize our role in helping to feed families across America. We are here for you. Sincerely, your neighborhood McDonald’s”). Participants completed post-message brand attitudes, WOM and SBC measures for each of the brands (same measures as pre-message general) upon seeing each of the brands’ social media posts. The difference scores between the pre-message general evaluation and post-message evaluations were calculated to assess the overall change in attitudes, WOM and SBC for each brand. Then, the difference scores in attitudes for each brand were combined to form a composite score of attitudes. The same composite score was calculated for WOM and SBC. All three composite scores of attitudes, WOM and SBC served as the primary dependent variables in this study.

Next, participants answered questions about their general well-being during the pandemic, including worry: (seven-pt bipolar scale, 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very Much; “How much do you worry about coronavirus pandemic?” “How anxious do you feel during this pandemic?” “How stressed do you feel during this pandemic?” “How lonely do you feel during this pandemic?” “How socially isolated do you feel during this pandemic?”), coping: (seven-pt bipolar scale, 1 = Not very well, 7 = Very Well; “How are you coping with the coronavirus pandemic physically?” “How are you coping with the coronavirus pandemic emotionally?”), feelings of social connections: (seven-pt bipolar scale, 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very Much; “How connected do you feel during this pandemic?” “How balanced do you feel your life is now (work/life)”), and their adherence to social distancing protocols: (seven-pt bipolar scale, 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very Much; “Are you practicing recommended social distancing practices?”). Measures of worry, coping, and adherence to social distancing protocols were used as covariates in the analysis. Finally, participants reported their age and gender.

Results

**Difference in brand attitudes**

The brand attitude measures were averaged for each brand to form pre-message general and post-message brand attitude scores. For each brand, the difference between pre-message general and post-message brand attitudes was calculated to form a difference in brand attitudes score. Then, the difference in attitudes score for each brand was combined to form a composite difference in brand attitudes score. A one-way ANOVA on the composite difference in brand attitudes score showed a significant effect of brand message type [$M_{crisis} = 0.48$, $SD = 2.00$, $M_{noncrisis} = -0.49$, $SD = 1.99$; $F(1, 191) = 11.43$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.056$], indicating brand messages that included references to the pandemic increased consumers’ brand attitudes and decreased when not including such references, resulting in lower brand attitudes. Results from this analysis remain statistically significant after controlling for worry, coping and social distancing [$F(1, 191) = 11.16$, $p = 0.001$].

**Difference in word of mouth**

The WOM measures were averaged for each brand to form pre-message general and post-message WOM scores. For each brand, the difference between pre-message general and post-message WOM was calculated to form a difference in WOM score. Then, the difference in WOM score for each brand was combined to form a composite difference in WOM score. A one-way ANOVA on the composite difference in WOM score showed a significant effect of brand message type [$M_{crisis} = 1.25$, $SD = 1.57$, $M_{noncrisis} = 0.44$, $SD = 1.85$; $F(1, 191) = 10.95$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.054$], indicating that messages that included references to the crisis increased WOM and resulted in lower WOM when not including such references. Results from this analysis remain statistically significant after controlling for worry, coping and social distancing [$F(1, 191) = 9.49$, $p = 0.002$].

**Difference in self-brand connections**

For each brand, the difference between pre-message general and post-message SBC was calculated to form a difference in SBC score. Then, the difference in SBC score for each brand was combined to form a composite difference in SBC score. A one-way ANOVA on the composite difference in SBC score showed a significant effect of brand message type [$M_{crisis} = 1.30$, $SD = 2.74$, $M_{noncrisis} = 0.02$, $SD = 2.36$; $F(1, 191) = 12.06$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.059$], indicating that messages that included references to the crisis increased SBC and resulted in lower SBC when not including such references. Results from this analysis remain statistically significant after controlling for worry, coping and social distancing [$F(1, 191) = 10.74$, $p = 0.001$].

**Consumer well-being during COVID-19**

Worry, coping and social distancing measures were used to assess consumer well-being. The worry measures were averaged to form a composite measure of worry score ($\alpha = 0.78$). A one-way ANOVA on the worry score showed a nonsignificant effect of brand message [$M_{crisis} = 5.04$, $SD = 1.39$, $M_{noncrisis} = 5.31$, $SD = 1.41$; $F(1, 191) = 1.67$, $p = 0.198$, $\eta^2 = 0.009$], indicating that participants felt equally worried about the crisis across both conditions.

The coping measures were also averaged to form a composite measure of coping score ($\alpha = 0.72$). A one-way ANOVA on the coping score showed a nonsignificant effect of brand message
Early stages of a crisis

[4.66, SD = 1.47, M_{noncrisis} = 4.57, SD = 1.53; F(1, 191) = 0.162, p = 0.688, \eta^2 = 0.001], indicating that participants mentally and physically coped similarly during the crisis across both conditions.

Further, a one-way ANOVA on the social distancing measure showed a nonsignificant effect of brand message [M_{crisis} = 6.34, SD = 1.05, M_{noncrisis} = 6.16, SD = 1.28; F(1, 191) = 1.20, p = 0.275, \eta^2 = 0.006], indicating that participants practiced similar social distancing measures during the crisis across conditions.

Feelings of social connections

The social connections measures were averaged to form a composite measure of feelings of social connections score (\alpha = 0.58). Moderation analyses using the Process Macro bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates (Model 1, 5,000 samples; Hayes, 2018) were used to test the causal path of the effects of brand message type (X; crisis-related = 1, noncrisis-related = –1) on consumption outcome (Y; attitudes, WOM and SBC), moderated by feelings of social connections (W; low = –1, high = 1). The moderated model was nonsignificant for all variables: attitudes score (b = 0.05, SE = 0.20, 95% CI = –0.3478 to 0.4422), WOM score (b = –0.02, SE = 0.17, 95% CI = –0.3584 to 0.3183) and SBC score (b = 0.27, SE = 0.25, 95% CI = –0.2295 to 0.7712), indicating no support for the moderation hypothesis of social connections (H2).

Similar to related research, a justification for these results might be that this study measured social connection within a few weeks of the introduction of social distancing measures in the USA. Therefore, findings might not completely capture college students’ immediate reactions to social distancing (Folk et al., 2020). Another justification might be the used sample. During the early crisis period, college students were dismissed to return to their homes with friends and family (Cai et al., 2022) and could potentially not have immediately felt the effect of social distancing at the time this study was conducted. Therefore, Study 2 follows up by testing H1 and H2 with a more heterogeneous online sample at a later time (May, 2020).

Post hoc analysis: self-brand connections as mediator

Past research has shown a positive relationship between SBC and brand loyalty, WOM and brand attitudes (van der Westhuizen, 2018; Kwon and Mattila, 2015; Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Consistent with this literature, a post hoc analysis revealed SBC as an antecedent to brand attitudes and WOM, such that SBC mediates the effects of crisis communications on both.

Mediation analyses using the Process Macro bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates (Model 4, 5,000 samples; Hayes, 2018) were used to test the causal path of the effects of brand message type (X; crisis-related = 1, noncrisis-related = –1) on consumption outcome (Y; attitudes and WOM), mediated by self-brand connections. The mediation model was significant for both variables: attitudes score (b = 0.31, SE = 0.13, 95% CI = 0.0980 to 0.5900) and WOM score (b = 0.24, SE = 0.12, 95% CI = 0.0605 to 0.5125). These results indicate a significant mediation of SBC on the effects of brand message type on brand attitudes and WOM. Thus, SBC can account for the underlying mechanism of the observed effects. Future research in brand crisis communications could further explore the relationships among these variables, including the impact of self-brand connection on consumption behavior during external crises.

Discussion

This study supports the main contention (H1) that compared to noncrisis-related brand messages, crisis-related brand messages will result in greater brand attitudes, engagement and self-brand connections. Findings revealed that brand attitudes, WOM and SBC significantly increased after exposure to crisis-related (vs noncrisis-related) brand messages. Importantly, there were instances in which consumers’ brand attitudes, WOM, and SBC declined after exposure to noncrisis-related brand messages, demonstrating an unintended backfiring effect that can hurt the brand. Finally, while the predicted moderating role of social connections (H2) was tested but not significant in this Study 1, a follow-up Study 2 was conducted using an online participant sample from the USA that more closely represents the general population during lockdown, when feelings of low social connections could be more evident.

Study 2: Moderating role of social connections

The main goal of this study was to test the moderating role of social connections (H2), which suggests that compared to consumers who feel more socially connected, consumers who feel less socially connected will respond more positively to brands using crisis-related messages as opposed to noncrisis-related messages. This goal was achieved using an online participant sample from the USA to test Nike and Walmart’s social media messages, which originally ran between February and April 2020. This timeframe represents before and during the enforcement of social distancing protocol in the USA. These brands were chosen due to their active presence on social media (Walter, 2014; Pratap, 2020). Given the use of well-known brands, the need for social connections, and high stress and anxiety among the general population during this time, the following control variables were included: brand familiarity, purchase frequency, worry, coping, social distancing and personality type.

Main study

Participants, design and procedure

In exchange for monetary compensation, 297 Cloud Research participants (M_{age} = 38.01, 58.9% female) completed a 2 (message: crisis-related vs noncrisis-related) x 2 (social connections: continuous, low/high) between-subjects experimental design study. This study was conducted when local home quarantine orders were enforced in the USA (May, 2020). The analysis included all participants.

Like the procedure in Study 1, participants were told, “In this first part of the survey, we would like to understand your opinions about two brands used in our community. Please evaluate each brand carefully and honestly.” Next, to assess participants’ general engagement with the Nike and Walmart brands, they were shown only the logo of each of these brands (one by one, in separate survey pages), where they indicated their likelihood of clicking: (seven-pt bipolar scale, 1 = Not at all likely, 7 = Very likely)
“Usually, how likely are you to click on social media and advertising messages to find out more information about this brand?” and sharing: (seven-pt bipolar scale, 1 = Not at all likely, 7 = Very likely/) 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much so; “Usually, how likely are you to share information regarding this brand with others in your network (friends and family)?” for each brand. These measures served as pre-message general brand engagement on social media.

Participants were then told, “In the next page, you will see marketing messages from the two brands you just evaluated. As you see and read through those marketing messages, imagine that you have personally received these messages from both brands during this time of social distancing amid COVID-19.” Subsequently, depending on the condition, they visualized the main stimuli [2] for each brand (one by one in separate survey pages): either crisis-related brand messages (Walmart short video: “To America, from our associates”/Nike Instagram post: “If you ever dreamed of playing for millions around the world, now is your chance. Now more than ever, we are one team”), or noncrisis-related messages (Walmart short video: “Introducing all new brands at Walmart”/Nike Instagram post: “Pegasus 37 Behind the Design: Something big drops tomorrow and it’s not an egg”).

Participants completed post-message likelihood to click and share measures for each of the brands (same measures as pre-message general) upon seeing each of the brands’ social media posts. The difference scores between the pre-message general engagement and post-message engagement were calculated to assess the overall change in likelihood of clicking and sharing each brand. Then, the difference scores in likelihood of clicking each brand were combined to form a composite score of likelihood to click. The same composite score was calculated for likelihood to share. Both composite scores of likelihood to click and likelihood to share served as the primary dependent variables in this study.

Next, participants indicated brand familiarity (adapted from Simonin and Ruth, 1998; five-pt bipolar scale, 1 = Not familiar at all, 5 = Extremely familiar; “Please indicate how familiar you are with this brand”) and purchase frequency (seven-pt bipolar scale, 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very often; “How often do you buy this brand’s products?”) and reported their general well-being during the pandemic (same as Study 1), adherence to social distancing protocols (same as Study 1), feelings of social connectedness (same as Study 1 and personality type (adapted from EPQ-BV, Sato, 2005). Finally, participants reported their age and gender.

Results

Difference in clicks

The click measures were averaged for each brand to form pre-message general and post-message likelihood to click scores. For each brand, the difference between pre-message general and post-message likelihood to click was calculated to form a difference in likelihood to click score. Then, the difference in likelihood to click score for each brand was combined to form a composite difference in clicks score. A one-way ANOVA on the composite difference in clicks score showed a significant effect of brand message type \( [M_{crisis} = 0.56, SD = 1.27, M_{noncrisis} = 0.18, SD = 1.14; F(1, 295) = 7.29, p = 0.007, \eta^2 = 0.024] \), indicating that brand messages that included references to the pandemic crisis increased consumers’ likelihood to click brands’ social media posts. Results from this analysis remain statistically significant after controlling for worry, coping, brand familiarity, purchase frequency, social distancing and personality type \( [F(1, 295) = 5.79, p = 0.017] \).

Next, a moderation analysis using the Process Macro bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates (Model 1, 5,000 samples; Hayes, 2018) was used to test the causal path of the effects of brand message type \( (X; crisis-related = 1, noncrisis-related = -1) \) on consumption outcome \( (Y; clicks) \), moderated by feelings of social connections \( (W; low = -1, high = 1) \). The moderated model was significant for the clicks score \( (b = -0.24, SE = 0.10, 95\% CI = -0.4320 to -0.0383; Figure 1) \), indicating that crisis-related messages resulted in increased clicks, compared to noncrisis-related messages; this increase happened particularly for consumers who felt less socially connected. Results from this analysis remain statistically significant after controlling for worry, coping, brand familiarity, purchase frequency, social distancing and personality type \( (b = -0.22, SE = 0.10, 95\% CI = -0.4146 to -0.0242) \).

Difference in shares

The share measures were averaged for each brand to form pre-message general and post-message likelihood to share scores. For each brand, the difference between pre-message general and post-message likelihood to share was calculated to form a difference in likelihood to share score. Then, the difference in likelihood to share score for each brand was combined to form a composite difference in share score. A one-way ANOVA on the composite difference in shares score showed a significant effect of brand message type \( [M_{crisis} = 0.67, SD = 1.38, M_{noncrisis} = 0.04, SD = 1.08; F(1, 295) = 18.66, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.059] \), indicating that brand messages that included references to the pandemic crisis increased consumers’ likelihood to share brands’ social media posts. Results from this analysis remain statistically significant after controlling for worry, coping, brand familiarity, purchase frequency, social distancing and personality type \( [F(1, 295) = 18.08, p < 0.001] \).

Next, a moderation analysis using the Process Macro bootstrapping method with bias-corrected confidence estimates (Model 1, 5,000 samples; Hayes, 2018) was used to test the causal path of the effects of brand message type \( (X; crisis-related = 1, noncrisis-related = -1) \) on consumption outcome \( (Y; shares) \), moderated by feelings of social connections \( (W; low = -1, high = 1) \). The moderated model was significant for the shares score \( (b = -0.32, SE = 0.10, 95\% CI = -0.5192 to -0.1161; Figure 1) \), indicating that crisis-related messages resulted in increased shares, compared to noncrisis-related messages; this increase happened particularly for consumers who felt less socially connected. Results from this analysis remain significant after statistically controlling for worry, coping, brand familiarity, purchase frequency, social distancing and personality type \( (b = -0.32, SE = 0.10, 95\% CI = -0.5184 to -0.1163) \).

Results from both moderation analyses (Table 1) support the contention that feelings of social connectedness significantly moderate the effects of brand message type on engagement (clicking and sharing brands’ social media content). Consumers who feel less socially connected are significantly more likely to
Figure 1 Interaction of social connections x brand crisis message type for clicks and shares, Study 2

![Graph showing interaction of social connections x brand crisis message type for clicks and shares, Study 2](image)

Source: Author’s own

Table 1 Results of moderation analyses, Study 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
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<th>Std. Err.</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
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<td>$0.1000$</td>
<td>$-2.3506$</td>
<td>$0.0194$</td>
<td>$-0.4320$</td>
<td>$-0.0383$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connection (Low)</td>
<td>$0.7974$</td>
<td>$0.2149$</td>
<td>$3.7108$</td>
<td>$0.0002$</td>
<td>$0.3745$</td>
<td>$1.2204$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connection (High)</td>
<td>$0.0921$</td>
<td>$0.1952$</td>
<td>$0.4716$</td>
<td>$0.6376$</td>
<td>$-0.2921$</td>
<td>$0.4762$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shares</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>$-0.3176$</td>
<td>$0.1024$</td>
<td>$-3.1014$</td>
<td>$0.0021$</td>
<td>$-0.5192$</td>
<td>$-0.1161$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connection (Low)</td>
<td>$1.1613$</td>
<td>$0.2200$</td>
<td>$5.2783$</td>
<td>$0.0000$</td>
<td>$0.7283$</td>
<td>$1.5943$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connection (High)</td>
<td>$0.2005$</td>
<td>$0.1999$</td>
<td>$1.0431$</td>
<td>$0.2978$</td>
<td>$-0.1849$</td>
<td>$0.6018$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s own
click or share a crisis-related brand message than consumers who feel more socially connected.

**Discussion**

These findings suggest that compared to noncrisis-related, crisis-related brand messages lead to more positive outcomes (H1), particularly for consumers who feel less socially connected (H2). Compared to their brand engagement before the crisis, consumers who feel less socially connected are more likely to engage with crisis-related (vs noncrisis-related) brand messages than consumers who feel more socially connected.

**General discussion**

The road ahead for brands and consumer-brand relationships includes evaluating the lessons learned from a global external crisis that significantly changed the marketplace. A good starting point is understanding the effects of brand communications on consumption behavior at the most uncertain and early stages of a crisis. Timely dissemination of information at the start of a crisis is crucial to help mitigate the risks associated with the crisis at hand. Equally important is to understand the most appropriate brand communication type during external crises that are beyond the control of corporations or brands. To this end, using the start of the coronavirus pandemic as context, two studies evaluate consumer responses to crisis-related brand messages compared to noncrisis-related brand messages. The content of the brand messages used across all studies ranged from informational to emotional and was post and pretested (Studies 1 and 2, respectively) for perceived emotional content to ensure that the observed effects were not dependent on the emotional tone or information type.

Consistent with the main prediction, findings from this research demonstrate that at the onset of a crisis, consumers report significantly greater brand attitudes, self-brand connections and brand engagement (likelihood to click and share brand content on social media) when visualizing crisis-related brand messages compared to noncrisis-related brand messages. Furthermore, compared to noncrisis-related messages, the positive effect of crisis-related brand messages on consumption response was notably stronger for consumers who reported feeling less socially connected than consumers who felt more socially connected. Importantly, these findings replicate across social media platforms, brands and various product and service categories, using American adults and undergraduate student samples. Thus, these findings are generalizable across media types, brands, industries and consumer segments.

In sum, the relevance of this work lies in that it provides such insights and guidance to brands in the immediate stages of an external crisis, which is typically out of the control of the corporations that govern brands. Past research has highlighted the impact of external crises on consumption behavior by exploring brand and product choices (Elhajjar, 2023; Okazaki et al., 2019), firm performance (Grewal and Tansuhaj, 2001), among others (Amujo and Otubanjo, 2012; Sheth, 2020). Findings from the present work contribute to this research area by expanding the current knowledge of how external crises can impact consumption behavior and brand evaluations.

**Theoretical and practical contributions**

Considering the uncertainty at the early stages of a crisis, it has been unclear whether brands should share crisis-related messages or avoid using crisis-related messages to provide as much normalcy to consumers as possible. While related research and many media outlets note that consumers expect brands to share crisis-related content (Verlegh et al., 2021; Biais, 2020; Forbes, 2020), other sources suggest brands continue to advertise and promote their products and services as usual (DiResta et al., 2020). The present research reconciles these conflicting recommendations by providing clear direction to help marketing managers and decision-makers during the onset of critical times.

This work contributes to practice as managers can use the insights from this research to evaluate their current brand communications strategies. First, they can adapt their communications strategy to include a communications contingency plan in which brands can use their digital network to engage in crisis-related conversations. Second, managers can align their brand objectives with social causes using an integrated marketing communications approach across the brand’s ecosystem (Batra and Keller, 2016). Third, marketing managers can develop cohesive brand strategies that support worldwide causes to improve consumer well-being. In general, findings from this research contribute to managerial knowledge by emphasizing the most appropriate brand response and effective marketing communications during a global crisis.

For instance, brands like Marriott and American Airlines engaged with their consumers during the initial stages of the pandemic through crisis-related messages shared on social media. Marriott tweeted:

*We will travel again. Soon, we will step out from behind our screens. We will look each other in the eye—instead of the camera. We will drink glasses. We will exchange hugs. We will travel again. Until then, stay healthy and stay positive. We’ll be waiting.*

American Airlines also tweeted:

*We’re grateful for our loyal customers who remain patient as our Global Reservations team navigates a record number of requests. Your messages of gratitude mean the world to us. Thank you. Your #AATeam’s committed to helping you during this unprecedented time.*

These two examples demonstrate how brand communications can adapt to share crisis-related content, leading to a positive impact on consumer brand attitudes, WOM, engagement, and ultimately, strengthening the consumer-brand relationship.

This work also contributes theoretically by expanding the current knowledge of consumer response to brand communications amid early crisis stages. First, this work emphasizes how brands’ response or lack thereof, is carefully and massively scrutinized. Therefore, understanding consumers’ reactions to brand communications is vital as businesses plan their communication strategies for future critical times (Kutlubay et al., 2023; Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020). Second, findings from this research help clarify that vulnerable consumer segments who feel less socially connected will respond more positively to brand communications that include crisis-related content than consumers who feel more socially connected. Importantly, this work demonstrates that brands should be especially sensitive to consumers who feel the effects of diminished social connections (i.e. isolation, loneliness) during a crisis. In fact, the Surgeon General’s Advisory (2023) issued a report about the epidemic of loneliness and isolation as a result...
of reduced social connections during the coronavirus pandemic in the USA. This report emphasizes the need for strengthening social connections to reduce the negative effects of isolation and loneliness on mental and physical health. Thus, brands and corporations have the opportunity to create a sense of belonging and community with their consumer base by sharing crisis-related content in their communications, especially at the onset of critical events. This finding is relevant to theory as it provides insights into how consumer-brand relationships can be strengthened through brand communication strategies during crises. Finally, these insights can help inspire future research at the intersection of brand crisis communications and consumer well-being, outlined in the next section.

Limitations and future research

While the findings presented in this paper provide important marketing theoretical and managerial implications, they do not speak to the underlying mechanism of the observed effects. However, this work can inspire future research to understand consumption-related constructs or constructs that can explain the mechanism of the observed effects herein. For instance, future research can seek to understand the influence of brand communication type on other related constructs, such as brand love, brand loyalty, brand attachment and consumption-related constructs such as purchase intentions or actual purchases. Additionally, although the empirical nature of this research is limited to a health crisis, findings might be generalizable to critical events in other contexts, such as natural crises, social crises and others. Nevertheless, future research can explore such contexts.

Further, this paper explores the moderating role of feelings of social connections. Although the social connections construct can be related to consumers’ feelings of inclusion and exclusion, the measures used in these studies only capture feelings of social connection. Thus, future research can aim to understand how other societal and psychological variables or traits can be explored across different consumer segments. For instance, understanding how inclusion and exclusion can influence preference for a certain type of brand communication during a crisis can benefit brand communication contingency plans and contribute to consumers’ well-being.

Finally, crisis-related brand communications might experience a plateau – a time in which consumers might want to stop watching the news, social media posts and messages that remind them of any ongoing crisis. If so, it would be beneficial for brand managers to examine the timeline of crisis-related brand messages to increase their effectiveness in the marketplace throughout the extent and duration of external crises. As this work confirms, brand communication at the early stages of a crisis can impact the consumer-brand relationship with significant implications on brand attitudes, engagement, SBC and WOM. It also emphasizes the importance of brand communications that contain crisis-related content particularly for consumers who may be feeling less socially connected at the beginning of an external critical event.

Notes

1 Since for both conditions Starbucks and McDonald’s social media posts include actual logos and images, and Walmart’s stimuli are YouTube videos, these are not included in the article, but are available upon request.

2 Since for both conditions, Nike’s social media posts include actual logos and images and Walmart stimuli are YouTube videos, these are not included in the article, but are available upon request.

References


About the author

Dr Tessa Garcia-Collart is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the University of Missouri-St Louis. Her research areas include brand communications in digital media, culture and consumer well-being, and she is involved in the Transformative Consumer Research movement. Her research has been published in leading marketing journals, and has presented her work in premier marketing academic conferences, as well as in multiple universities and corporations around the globe. Her research has been recognized with multiple awards and fellowships, and has received several grants to fund her research. Tessa Garcia-Collart can be contacted at: tgarcia-collart@umsl.edu

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