Hashtags, laughs, and criticism: Humor in social media crisis management
Investigating best practices through qualitative research

Student Name: Amy van Creveld
Student Number: 499450

Supervisor: Sergül Nguyen

Master Media Studies - Media & Business
Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication
Erasmus University Rotterdam

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, due to the increased use of social media and the growing sphere of influence audiences have in crisis management, a growing amount of research has focused on the topic of social media in crisis management. Organizations are using social media more and more in their crisis management strategies, but struggle when it comes to using it efficiently. A new emerging practice within social media crisis management is humor. This is becoming increasingly relevant due to the social nature of the platform, as well as the humorous element users expect when using social media platforms. As such, crisis management and humor are becoming increasingly relevant to consider in relation to social media. However, the use of humor in social media crisis management remains to be investigated in-depth. This is mainly due to the pre-existing conceptions that humor in this context is primarily negative - a double-edged sword that can only be used in highly specific contexts. Additionally, within the research conducted, social media crises remain to be considered through emphasizing organization-public relationships. These research gaps lead to the main goal of this thesis – investigating the use of humor in social media crisis management. Specifically, by analyzing three case studies of accidental crises faced by KFC, IHOP and Crockpot, this study aims to develop a better understanding of the use of humor in social media crisis management. As such, the main research question considered was *What role may humor play in the crisis and reputation management of a company?* This was investigated by analyzing company and user tweets surrounding the crises through qualitative content analysis. Twitter was selected for analysis as it marks a highly popular platform in the field of crisis management. A total of 836 tweets were selected, of which 677 were user tweets and 159 company tweets. The emphasis on user tweets comes from the need to better understand users to develop efficient standard practices. Results suggest that humor is an efficient crisis management tool that remains to be investigated more in-depth. However, initial suggestions stemming from the analysis suggest that humor can be effective when used in the right context, depending on the type of crisis the company finds itself in, its' previous reputation, as well as the preferred humor of the target audience. Furthermore, findings related to audience preferences revealed that audiences are not only using Twitter to share and discover new opinions, but also to engage in social media norms by sharing information, creating potentially viral content, and playing an increasingly important role in the success of the social media crisis management of the company.

KEYWORDS: Crisis management, Humor, Social media, Audience reactions, Crisis

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1 Introduction

"Why didn't the chicken cross the road? Because KFC was on the other side". Or, as the fast-food chain KFC put it, "The chicken crossed the road… just not to our restaurants" (KFC, 2018). Struggling to get chicken into their restaurants in the United Kingdom in 2018, KFC engaged in what can be considered a prime example of humor in crisis communication. Not only making an obvious joke about the situation but also changing the letters KFC to spell out "FCK" (Rozemeijer et al., 2020), the brand made consumers around the world smile at their strategy, leading them to win an award – a gold Cannes Lion for their highly successful crisis management campaign (Degun, 2018).

KFC is not the only successful brand having engaged in humorous crisis management on social media, with brands such as the slow cooker company Crockpot and the American pancake chain IHOP worthy of sharing the spotlight. When a beloved character in the series *This is Us* died because of a Crockpot, for instance, the brand created a strategically humorous and award-winning response and hashtag - #CrockPotIsInnocent - defending the brand and reminding the world of its' innocence (Hornsby et al., 2020; Shorty Awards, n.d). Finally, IHOP took a leap of faith in changing its' name to IHOB to promote its new burgers on the menu, which users misinterpreted as a removal of their favorite pancakes (Baskin et al., 2020). Through humorous replies and a play on words, the brand managed to achieve success in going viral by promoting their new product in this controversial way (Diaz, 2019). Specific examples of these approaches will be elaborated upon in upcoming sections.

As illustrated by these three cases, social media is changing the crisis management landscape, with users playing an increasingly important role and organizations needing to adapt to this increased influence and importance of social media in the crisis management sphere (Jahng et al., 2017; Martínez-Rojas et al., 2018). As such, organizations are increasingly using social media in their crisis management strategies, but some still find it challenging when it comes to effectively using social media in crisis management (Cheng, 2016; Roshan et al., 2016; Valentini et al., 2018; Zheng et al., 2018).

A limited number of studies have investigated the use of social media in crisis management, specifically in a real organizational context (Jahng et al., 2017; Roshan et al., 2016). These limitations are similar to studies investigating the use of humor in crisis management. Initial research on the topic has investigated the use of humor in crisis response strategies and found that humor negatively affects crisis management efforts by companies due to the decreased perceived sincerity of the organization (Xiao et al., 2017).

According to this research, humor in crisis management is effective solely in the rumor stage of a crisis, meaning that details of the crisis have yet to be confirmed (Xiao et al., 2017).

With humor mainly being considered from a negative perspective, and researchers labeling it as a double-edged sword (Xiao et al., 2017), the question arises if the concept of humor in crisis management is universally negative. As such, more research needs to be conducted on the use of humor in crisis management on social media, specifically by focusing on a crisis that is not in the rumor stage. Additionally, the effects of using humor in social media crises need to be considered by emphasizing organization-public relationships (Roshan et al., 2016). This is what this thesis aims to do. Specifically, the findings aim to provide relevant suggestions for the use of humor on social media in times of crisis, as this platform has proven to be quite relevant due to the nature of the platform – informal, personal, and humoristic (Frandsen et al., 2020).

Within the scope of this thesis, crisis management was largely considered from the perspective of Coombs (2007) in the sense that a crisis is defined as an impactful threat to operations if not adequately handled. In terms of crisis management, the definition of Coombs (2004) was also considered. This means that for each type of crisis, a corresponding crisis management strategy can be suggested. One type of crisis considered especially relevant in the context of this study, as each company selected for analysis was faced with it, is the *Accidental crisis,* defined as a crisis considered uncontrollable by an organization, leading to minimal attribution of responsibility by audiences (Coombs, 2004). Closely related to crisis management is reputation management, in which reputation is defined as a collective perception of a company created by its stakeholders through the interactions and experiences stakeholders have with the organization (Liehr-Gobbers et al., 2011a). Finally, the concept of humor was considered in the context of social media, defined as bringing together various concepts or situations unexpectedly and surprisingly to create a feeling of warmth and playfulness (Taecharungroj et al., 2017). This humor was considered from the perspective of the types of humor typically used in a social media context: personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness, and surprise (Taecharungroj et al., 2017).

Considering gaps in the previously elaborated upon research, this research project aims to develop new findings by investigating the use of humor in social media crisis management efforts, and how the public reacts to this strategy. Through the question *What role may humor play in the crisis and reputation management of a company?* the practices of three companies having used humor in their crisis management will be investigated, as well as the audiences' reactions to these crisis management efforts. This last idea will be

investigated through the sub-question *How do audiences react to humorous content used by a company during a crisis?* Finally*,* as each of the selected crises can be categorized as belonging to the same crisis cluster, the sub-question *How can companies going through an accidental crisis use humor to communicate with their audiences?* was also considered relevant within this research project.

Marking the practical relevance of this study, three case studies of organizations belonging to the same crisis cluster and engaging in humorous crisis management practices on social media were considered. This was done to develop a clear idea of existing practices in successful humoristic crisis management strategies on social media, making this thesis practically relevant as it can help in providing guidelines for companies wanting to use humor in their social media crisis management. Case studies were considered relevant as they have been proven useful in practice-oriented fields (Starman, 2014).

Finally, the social relevance of this study is grounded in the emphasis placed on user tweets, as findings related to this can contribute to general society. This particularly holds true for raising awareness for users of Twitter. Indeed, this study can help users better understand their role in modern crisis management, which is of growing importance due to the nature of social media (Jahng et al., 2017; Martínez-Rojas et al., 2018). By raising awareness of the level of influence users have, individuals can then take advantage of this influence in helping their favorite brands that are in a crisis for instance.

The selection of the case studies was carried out with certain criteria in mind, such as the use of humor as well as the need for the case to be successful. Similarities were then identified in the three found case studies, making them relevant to analyze within the same study. Indeed, each of these case studies belongs to the *Accidental crisis cluster*, meaning that the crises involved similar stakes and led to a similar attribution of responsibility from the audience, making the comparison of their crisis management approaches highly relevant. Additionally, although the original KFC crisis management message was published in a newspaper, this crisis, as well as the others, mainly took place and was resolved through social media. Finally, the three case studies took place in the United States and the United Kingdom. This choice was largely motivated by the size of the companies, as well as the highly available data on the crises. Therefore, this thesis contributes to developing an initial idea as to how companies can best use humor in their crisis management strategy on social media.

The specific social media platform considered within this research project is Twitter, relevant within the analysis as it has a high amount of approximately 313 million active

users monthly (Martínez-Rojas et al., 2018). The relevance of this platform is further noticeable through the great potential it offers in helping organizations provide information to their consumers in an efficient way, as the platform allows users to quickly share information and interact with each other (Martínez-Rojas et al., 2018). Additionally, Twitter was deemed most relevant for analysis due to its shown effectiveness when it comes to managing a crisis on social media (Triantafillidou et al., 2020).

Another element deemed important within this research project is the in-depth analysis of collected content to develop suggestions as to how a company can best engage in humorous social media crisis management. The method considered adequate in this case is qualitative content analysis, considered an ideal tool for the analysis of textual data in a systematic way, by describing and analyzing the meaning of qualitative data through coding (Bengtsson, 2016; Schreier, 2013; Vaismoradi, 2013).

Following, elements relevant to the research project will be elaborated upon. Specifically, relevant theories that helped analyze company and user tweets will be discussed in chapter two, where an overview of relevant theories in the field of crisis management, humor and reputation will be considered. Following, chapter three will provide in-depth information on the methodology chosen – qualitative content analysis. Here, details related to how data was collected and analyzed will be presented. Once the method has been elaborated upon, results stemming from the analysis will be presented, leading to the final part of this research project in which findings related to theory will be discussed. Finally, in chapter five, a conclusion will be given followed by an acknowledgment of the limitations of the study as well as suggestions for future research.

2   Theoretical framework

In investigating how organizations can use humor in their reputation management, a few core theories were considered, relating to crisis and reputation management, but also the use of social media, humor, and audience habits. These will be elaborated upon in the following section.

2.1   What is a crisis?

In essence, a crisis can be defined as an impactful threat to operations if not adequately handled (Coombs, 2007). Consequences stemming from a crisis include threats to public safety, financial loss and reputation damage. In extreme cases, crises can result in injuries or even a loss of life. In each crisis, an organization's reputation is at risk, and each threat needs to be handled sequentially in order for an organization to engage in effective crisis management (Coombs, 2007). This also largely depends on the type of crisis the organization is confronted with, as it will ultimately impact the kind of crisis communication the organization engages in, which will be elaborated upon in the upcoming section.

In discussing different types of crises, one approach is that of Coombs (2004), called Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), a concept that will play a large role in the current research project. SCCT argues that an organization's crisis history affects the perceptions of its current crisis, in terms of reputational and general damage (Coombs, 2004). This is strongly linked to attribution theory which attempts to understand how individuals make judgments about a crisis, specifically related to deciding who is responsible for the crisis. For instance, if stakeholders have reason to believe that an organization could control the crisis, they will hold the organization responsible for it (Coombs, 2004). Taking this into account, Coombs (2004) developed an extensive list of crisis types categorized by clusters, in which the following crises are identified - the *Victim Crisis Cluster*, the *Accidental Crisis Cluster* and the *Intentional Crisis Cluster.*

By understanding what type of crisis it is faced with, an organization can take the appropriate steps and maximize the protection of its' reputation (Coombs, 2007). However, this is not the only factor to take into account as the initial crisis responsibility, the crisis history of the organization and prior relational reputation each impact the reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). Further elaborating upon the types of crises, within the *Victim cluster* the organization is often viewed as the victim, leading stakeholders to attribute low responsibility to the company in crisis. Any *Accidental cluster crisis* is considered

uncontrollable by an organization and leads to a minimal attribution of responsibility from audiences. Finally, any crisis in the *Intentional cluster* is considered purposeful, thus leading to a strong attribution of responsibility (Coombs, 2007). Similar to the different types of crises, there are also different types of crisis response strategies that an organization needs to take in order to limit the reputational damage, these constitute the crisis management strategy of organizations (Coombs, 2004; Coombs, 2007).

2.1.1   *Crisis communication*

According to Coombs (2007), solving a crisis can best be achieved through engaging in crisis communication, where a crisis management team collects and disseminates information as part of a strategy (Valentini et al., 2016). Developing a crisis communication strategy is essential for an organization to avoid reputational damage, loss of resources, customers, or credibility (Frandsen et al., 2020).

Within the field of crisis communication, several authors have described what they believe to be the best practices if an organization wants to engage in successful crisis communication (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 1995; Coombs, 2007; Eriksson, 2018; Frandsen, 2020; Seeger, 2006). Coombs (2007) takes a more traditional approach and explains that crisis communication is not a simple concept, but rather a process that can be divided into three phases. These phases are pre-crisis, crisis response, and post-crisis.

The pre-crisis phase involves the attempt to reduce the chance of any risks that could potentially result in a crisis. This could potentially consist of creating a plan and testing it so that the organization is prepared when a crisis hits. The crisis response of an organization needs to be highly strategic and quick, meaning that the organization needs to respond in the first hour after the crisis has occurred. This response must be clear and concise in telling the company's side of the story before others get the chance to do so, as remaining silent would allow others to gain control of the situation (Coombs, 2007). Once the crisis has been effectively managed, the post-crisis phase begins, mainly consisting of improving the reputation of the organization (Coombs, 2007).

In addition to these initial steps, crisis communication experts also suggest the need to express concern or sympathy for any victims of the crisis (Coombs, 2007). This is one of the many strategies in the field of crisis communication. Although Coombs (2007) plays an important role in the field of crisis communication with many works citing his research and using a similar definition of crisis communication years later (Roshan et al., 2016; Triantafillidou et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2017), other, more updated crisis communication

approaches will be explored to understand how the field is evolving.

2.1.2 *Perfecting crisis management practices*

As previously stated, although findings by Coombs (2004) provide relevant strategies in terms of crisis management, it is important to acknowledge that these findings are nevertheless outdated, as they do not include social media or the use of humor for instance. Emerging research has thus started to emphasize new platforms and strategies within modern crisis management. Interesting to note is that although these new theories include new platforms and strategies, some are similar to theories developed by Coombs (2004) such as the pre-crisis communication step. For instance, Eriksson (2018) explains that organizations should use social media in their crisis management strategy to scan what users are saying in an attempt to prepare for any potential future crises.

This means that social media have begun to complement the already existing channels of crisis management, in maintaining some of the previous strategies, but also giving organizations more opportunities. For instance, social media gives organizations the ability to easily communicate any crisis-related information to a large audience, thus leading to a potential decrease in misinformation spread by users surrounding the crisis (Eriksson, 2018; Jahng et al., 2017; Roshan et al., 2016). Additionally, similar to SCCT, Jahng et al., (2017) argue that prior brand attitudes on social media can change the way individuals perceive an organization during a crisis. Each of the former crisis management recommendations applies to the field of corporate crisis management as established by Frandsen et al., (2020), where the focus is not on citizen safety or political power, but on the reputation of a company. This is strongly linked to the reputation management of a company.

2.2 Reputation management

Over the past few years, the media landscape has experienced some changes, eventually resulting in organizations having to adapt their strategies accordingly (Liehr-Gobbers et al., 2011a). With a new generation using a computer before they could read or write and using the internet as their social platform, organizations found themselves having to rely on more than traditional media in their approaches (Liehr-Gobbers et al., 2011a). Facing new challenges, organizations needed to find ways in which they could effectively interact with stakeholder groups as these interactions ultimately impacted the reputation of the organization. This is especially important considering the strong role users have come to play in the social media crisis management of a company (Zheng et al., 2018).

Oftentimes, reputation is used as a term that defines a wide range of activities, ranging from corporate communication to public relations or media relations in general. However, managing the reputation of a company is a practice on its own, requiring more than solely measuring and the future activity planning of it (Liehr-Gobbers et al., 2011b). As such, reputation can be defined as a collective perception of a company created by its stakeholders through the interactions and experiences stakeholders have with the organization (Liehr-Gobbers et al., 2011a). A few theories exist on the topic of reputation, some considering the more traditional side (Benoit, 1997) and others integrating social media in their recommendations (Zheng et al., 2018). Although different approaches exist, there seem to be some similarities in the sense that reputation is agreed to be something that needs to be continuously managed by an organization in relation to the perceptions of stakeholders.

2.2.1   Benoit's image repair theory

Reputation plays a central role in Benoit's image repair theory and explores how crisis response strategies can protect an organization's reputation, much like Coomb's SCCT (Frandsen et al., 2020). Assuming that communication is goal-oriented and maintaining a favorable reputation is one of the key goals of crisis management, Benoit's image repair theory creates a list of five main strategies and nine sub-strategies in which recommendations are given on how a company can manage its reputation (Frandsen et al., 2020).

Benoit (1997) explains that when a crisis occurs, perceptions take center stage, meaning that it is not important whether the business is responsible for the offensive act, but if stakeholders consider the organization responsible for the offensive act. In other words, as long as stakeholders have reason to believe the organization is at fault, their reputation is also at risk. Judgments made on the severity of the crisis also impact the organization in the same way if the audience believes the organization is at fault (Benoit, 1997). Consequently, during a crisis, an organization must first understand not only the nature of the crisis but also identify relevant audiences, identifying any accusations or suspicions in order to respond appropriately. Additionally, an emphasis needs to be put on understanding how severe the alleged offense is. In short, by analyzing the crisis in-depth, the organization can respond accordingly (Benoit, 1997).

As a result, Benoit (1997) discusses five image repair strategies based on the accusations an organization is faced with. These are *Denial, Evasion of responsibility,*

Reducing offensiveness of event, Corrective action and *Mortification.* Within these categories, Benoit (1997) provides subsections in which a key characteristic of the nature of the crisis is also provided. For instance, within the strategy of *Denial*, an organization can engage in *Simple Denial*, meaning that it did not perform the act they were accused of, or it can *Shift the blame*, with the act being performed by another. Furthermore, within the category *Evasion of responsibility*, an organization can use the strategy of *Provocation* in responding to an act of another. Alternatively, the organization can use *Defeasibility* due to a lack of information, can qualify the crisis as an *Accident* in saying the act was a mishap or qualify it as having *Good intentions* - the organization meant well in the act.

Having multiple subcategories, Reducing the offensiveness of an event can involve *Bolstering* by stressing the good traits of the organization, or *Minimization* by qualifying the act as not serious or perhaps as less offensive by using *Differentiation*. The organization can also use the strategy of *Transcendence* in illustrating more important considerations. It can also *Attack* the accuser by reducing their credibility. Finally, it could offer *Compensation* by reimbursing the victim. The last strategy suggested by Benoit (1997) is *Mortification* in which the organization simply apologizes for the act. Important to note is that these strategies are not mutually exclusive and can be used together.

Interesting to consider within the scope of this research project is that none of the reputation management strategies mention the use of humor. As a result of this, the question arises of how popular this approach is, and when it might be most suitable for use. The effectiveness of these strategies on social media is also a question to consider. This is investigated by Zheng et al., (2018).

2.2.2   *How does corporate reputation impact secondary crisis management?*

As previously discussed, social media has modified the way individuals interact with a crisis, as they can now actively participate in the process, thereby also complicating the way an organization can recover from a crisis (Zheng et al., 2018). This is especially relevant to consider in light of this research project, as audiences have often been overlooked in crisis management research, being seen as passive receivers of crisis communication (Zheng et al., 2018).

With the increased use of social media by users, more research has slowly started to emerge thereby investigating why individuals use social media during crisis communication. Reasons found for this were the desire to get timely updates and communicate with others around the crisis (Zheng et al., 2018). This communication of crisis information amongst the

public is defined as secondary crisis communication (SCC), which is investigated by Zheng et al., (2018) in attempting to understand how social media has changed the reputation management of companies. Results of this study show that the more the public likes a firm and is loyal to it, the less likely they are to engage in any SCC that might negatively affect the firm. Opinions of users also appear to be shaped by SCC with individuals often following the crowd – when seeing a congruent public opinion on social media, the likeliness of engaging in SCC is higher. This can potentially have implications on how users use social media in times of crisis, leading us to wonder what other changes are taking place on these platforms, and how this might impact the crisis communication of organizations.

2.3   New opportunities in crisis management: Social media

With the emergence of social media, information has become increasingly available for individuals, giving them the possibility to interact with information and other users almost effortlessly (Valentini et al., 2016). Due to these new possibilities, social media - defined as a platform on which individuals can interact through sharing ideas and opinions - has come to play an important role in crisis management. This is especially true considering users can now easily spread any information they might find on a company online, regardless of if that information is true (Valentini et al., 2016). As a result, social media has increasingly been investigated within the context of crisis management, leading to developments helping organizations understand how to best use social media in their crisis response strategy.

Within the multiple suggestions on how to best use social media in crisis management, many scholars recommend the use of social media as a monitoring tool. This means that organizations should use Twitter to monitor what users are saying about their company to anticipate any potential future crises, and also respond to any user questions or concerns (Eriksson, 2018; Roshan et al., 2016). In terms of the actual crisis management message, contradicting suggestions exist on the matter. Certain authors suggest apologizing and sympathizing with those affected by the crisis instead of simply providing information on the crisis to generate trust (Schultz et al., 2011). On the contrary, others suggest using informational messages on social media rather than apology messages, as this would increase the secondary crisis communication process, thus leading to a greater acceptance of the crisis (Eriksson, 2018).

Despite the existing research on the topic, companies continue to struggle when it comes to effectively using social media in their crisis management strategies (Roshan et al.,

2016). This poses a problem for organizations as users tend to increase their social media usage during a crisis, and at times even perceive social media as being more credible than traditional sources (Jahng et al., 2017; Valentini et al., 2016).

Social media, particularly Twitter, then become an important tool to master for organizations, with Twitter considered one of the more efficient tools according to many scholars when it comes to crisis management (Eriksson, 2018; Jahng et al., 2017; Roshan et al., 2016). However, this finding is contradicted by some stating that Twitter is not a popular platform for crisis management, as it is not frequently used by individuals (Austin et al., 2012). Questions then arise on the applicability of these findings as the authors further state that social media is sometimes considered more credible than traditional sources when it comes to crisis management, similarly to the findings of Jahng et al., (2017). Further findings supporting these claims mention that Twitter has been shown to generate more positive user reactions than if it had been done through traditional media (Schultz et al., 2016). This can potentially be linked to the perceived credibility of social media from users, and the high engagement rates that the platform offers (Jahng et al., 2017; Triantafillidou, 2020). Users can then be considered as playing an important role when it comes to the crisis management of an organization, but how are they affecting it?

2.3.1 *User effects on crisis management*

The effectiveness of using social media in crisis management can largely be linked to the bond and positive reputation these platforms allow organizations to create with audiences (Schultz et al., 2016). However, these are not the only ways in which an organization can engage in effective crisis management, as many factors come into play when audiences consider the crisis management of a company to be successful or not. This is highly important for an organization to take into consideration as the comments users post on social media often say two things about the organization in crisis. Firstly, these comments indicate whether users have accepted the crisis response of the organization (Coombs, 2014). Secondly, these comments shape the way the organization is perceived after its' crisis (Coombs, 2014). Knowing that audiences play such an important role in the crisis management of an organization, it is only logical to develop an in-depth understanding of how users make use of social media in relation to organizations.

Generally, users tend to follow brands on Twitter to fulfill their need for first-hand information such as updates on the brand, but also to create a relationship with the brand (Kwon et al., 2015). This means that users will interact with brands similarly to how they

would in their social relationships, with each interaction strengthening the relationship between the company and the consumer (Kwon, 2015). This has significant implications for organizations as creating a positive relationship with its' consumers can lead to a higher tolerance when it comes to the crisis management efforts of the company (Coombs, 2014; Read et al., 2019).

Specifically, Twitter may enhance the extent to which individuals identify with a brand, almost turning it into a relational partner (Kwon et al., 2015). As such, the more a brand helps in resolving consumer problems or responding to consumer questions, the more the brand will be perceived as providing high-quality customer service to its' followers. This will generate an overall positive evaluation of the brand, leading to rewarding behavior for the company, with users willing to promote the brand as they feel a strong sense of positivity towards it (Read et al., 2019). This goes hand in hand with the crisis management of a company. If an organization is involved in a crisis, individuals with a positive impression of the brand will most likely maintain their positive view or openly be supportive of the organization during their crisis management strategy (Coombs, 2014).

The individuals that hold positive attitudes toward a company by repurchasing products from that company or recommending the product to others are what can be considered loyal individuals (Nisar et al., 2016). This can potentially be linked to the idea of the favorably predisposed public, who are often the advocates for brands in their crisis management processes. Loyalty is however not limited to the repurchasing of products, or the spreading of positive information, it is also heavily impacted by the online environment and manifests itself in different ways (Nisar et al, 2016). The specific concept explaining how loyalty has evolved in the social media sphere is e-loyalty, where a customer continuously displays a favorable attitude toward an electronic business (Nisar et al., 2016).

This is further seen through the feelings an individual has toward an organization, which impact the degree of loyalty that individual will attribute to that organization. Knowing that Twitter can help organizations enhance the extent to which individuals identify with a brand, this platform then becomes essential in terms of creating loyalty as well as promoting an effective crisis management strategy. However, with new developments taking place, these are not the only elements to take into consideration for crisis management. As such, the question of how strategies such as humor could potentially change the crisis management of an organization becomes central.

2.3.2   The use of humor in crisis management

Within the field of crisis management research, there is very little research on the effectiveness of using humor in crisis management, making the few articles written on the topic even more valuable. Within the existing research on humor, it has been established that there are different types of humor that an organization may use in its' crisis management and that the effectiveness of this humor may depend on the preferred humor of each individual (Kim et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2017). Overall, there are four different types of humor: *self-enhancing, affiliative, self-defeating,* and *aggressive* (Taecharungroj et al., 2017).

Although these forms of humor are relevant in a more traditional context, they have been adapted within the social media context. Within this context, seven types of humor have been identified. These are *comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness* and *surprise* (Taecharungroj et al., 2017). *Comparison* refers to the comparison of two or more elements producing a humorous situation, *personification* the attribution of human characteristics to objects, plants or animals. Furthermore, *exaggeration* is when something is put out of proportion, *puns* create humorous meanings using elements within language, *sarcasm* creates an ironic response to a situation. Finally, *silliness* corresponds to the making of silly faces in situations and *surprise* is when humor arises from an unexpected situation (Taecharungroj et al., 2017).

These different types of humor help in generating a modernized definition of what humor is in times of social media and can help organizations develop a better idea as to how they can use humor in their crisis management strategies, or their general social media communications. Within the context of social media, humor is defined as a discourse bringing together various concepts or situations unexpectedly and surprisingly, creating a feeling of warmth and playfulness (Taecharungroj et al., 2017).

Although the definition of humor seems clear, applying it in the context of crisis management is a complicated matter, with some even considering it a double-edged sword (Xiao et al., 2017). However, some patterns can be identified in the best ways to use humor when it comes to crisis management. Firstly, it seems that humor is believed to be a strategic tool as it can enhance the likeability of the company (Kim et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2017) although this seems to depend on a multitude of factors. For instance, the success of the use of humor may depend on the brand image. In other words, if the company has previously been perceived as light-hearted and friendly in its communications, humor may be a good match (Kim et al., 2016). Similarly, the type of crisis the organization is involved in may impact the effectiveness of using humor in its' crisis management. As such, it is believed that

if the organization is involved in a crisis that does not involve casualties, moral issues, or is in a crisis that is in the rumor stage, humor can be considered an appropriate tool (Kim et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2017).

Generally, the use of humor in crisis management is a debated topic, with the effectiveness of the strategy being questioned in the limited research available on the matter. However, one thing is certain – humor appears to be highly relevant in the context of social media (Kim et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2017). This is due to the nature of the platform - being perceived as more informal, personal, and interactive (Xiao et al., 2017). Interesting to consider within the debate on humor in crisis management on social media is the perceived use of social media by audiences during a crisis. Specifically, users tend to turn to social media during a crisis due to the humor appeal of the platform (Austin et al., 2012). This potentially could justify the use of humor in social media crisis management, as users are expecting this when engaging with the platform. Taking into consideration each previously developed theory, it then becomes relevant to consider how companies are putting these ideas into practice.

2.4   Crisis response strategies

In investigating the crisis management strategy of KFC, IHOP and Crockpot, theories of Coombs (2004) and Benoit (1997) need to be considered as they help in understanding what kind of crisis each company is faced with, and what kind of response strategy they need to engage in. Each of the crises selected for analysis can be categorized as belonging to the *Accidental crisis cluster*, meaning that each crisis represents a moderate reputational threat as audiences attributed minimal blame to the company (Coombs, 2004). Specifically, each crisis is recognized as being accidental as the organizations involved in the crises were not seen as meaning for the crisis to happen, or had little control over the situation (Coombs, 2004). In short, the audience perceives the organization as being less guilty in the overall crisis, by believing that accidents happen. This categorization is logical when we think about the fact that one crisis occurred due to supply chain issues, another due to an episode of a television series, and another due to a misunderstanding between the company and consumers.

Although each crisis is similar in the overall categorization that can be attributed to them, each crisis nevertheless has taken a different crisis management approach within the framework of Benoit (1997). Although these traditional crisis management strategies work within the context of social media, the nature of social media leads to the question of how

effective these traditional strategies can be. Specifically, due to the interactive nature of social media, many new actors come into play within the context of crisis management such as individuals who have become increasingly influential through their actions in shaping the discourse of the crisis (Kim et al., 2016). Additionally, the time in which an organization needs to reply to a crisis has become almost immediate (Kim et al., 2016). As such, the question of how social media is impacting the crisis management of organizations becomes relevant and can be investigated through the three case studies selected for this research project.

2.4.1 IHOP: International House of Panic

When it comes to the IHOP crisis, it can be classified as belonging to the cluster of *Challlenges* meaning that the organization was considered to be operating inappropriately, thereby being morally judged by the public (Coombs, 2004). Specifically, IHOP took a controversial approach in changing its name from IHOP to IHOB to promote its new burgers. Although the change was temporary, individuals did not perceive it as such. Fearing pancakes would completely be removed from the menu, a crisis started online where the public judged IHOP for the decision they had made.

Overall, it can be said that IHOP used the strategy of *Good intentions* (Benoit, 1997) by showing that they meant well in their actions through the use of humor and a play on words in their initial crisis management message. This strategy was complemented by their numerous replies to users. These humorous replies were mainly directed at users that were asking them questions or expressing concern. IHOP replied to these users by using humor, specifically puns, to continue promoting their new burgers while helping customers. This was not the only approach used, as they also appealed to users emotionally by offering them comfort and support.

2.4.2 Crockpot: Pleading innocent

Crockpot found itself in an interesting situation, where the company was seen as being guilty of the murder of a fictional character. This led it to be in a crisis, which can be described as being a *Technical error accident* (Coombs, 2004), meaning that due to a failure in equipment – the malfunction of a Crockpot - an accident was caused. The specifics surrounding this crisis illustrate that it is not a traditional crisis. For this thesis, it is important to note that users reacted to the death of a fictional character in the series *This Is Us* as if it was real. As such, individuals took to Twitter to mourn this character and blame

Crockpot for causing a deathly accident. Therefore, although this accident was entirely fictional, the crisis generated adopted the characteristics of *Technical error accident*, due to audiences considering it as a non-fictional accident.

Crockpot took a strategic approach to deal with the accusations they were facing from dedicated fans, by adopting the strategy of *Simple denial* (Benoit, 1997) in explaining that they were not responsible for the accident that happened in the series, reinforcing their innocence through the hashtag #CrockPotIsInnocent as well as the video featuring the actor playing the character that died in the series.

2.4.3 KFC: Kentucky Fried Crisis

The KFC crisis management strategy took more of a traditional approach, by publishing its message in the newspaper rather than on Twitter. However, the rest of the crisis management took place entirely on social media, making it an interesting case to consider. This crisis was purely related to the supply chain of the company, leading to the categorization of the crisis as a *Technical error accident*, where, due to technology, or in this case delivery issues, an accident occurs (Coombs, 2004). The accident, in this case, is that restaurants were unable to serve customers their main menu item: chicken.

Although KFC found itself in a similar crisis as Crockpot, the company nevertheless took a different approach to manage the crisis. Specifically, the company simply applied the *Mortification* strategy (Benoit, 1997), meaning that they apologized, which is noticeable throughout the entire advertisement, with words such as "huge apologies", "we're sorry", and "thank you for bearing with us". Humor also played a large role in this crisis management strategy, an approach that can be investigated in light of developments surrounding social media crisis management.

2.4.4 Humor and crisis management in practice

Changes in crisis management practices become clear when we consider that organizations are no longer using social media for crisis management in the way that previous research may suggest. This is shown by Roshan et al., (2016) who conclude that organizations are not providing status updates about crises as is recommended. Additionally, organizations involved in an accidental crisis used an apology or compensation strategy, although this is not the recommended approach (Roshan et al., 2016). Interesting to note is that this also occurred in the crises investigated in this research project.

Continuing the debate on the use of humor in crisis management, it is also apparent that

the companies within this research project turned to humor for their successful crisis strategy, although previous research may not have predicted or agreed with this success. Indeed, it is noteworthy to consider that organizations are using humor in their crisis management knowing that humor can decrease the perceived sincerity of an organization, put the organization in a negative light or convey a non-serious attitude (Xiao et al., 2017). Interesting to question then is how organizations use humor in their crisis management strategies and question when the use of such a strategy is most effective. This is what will be investigated in the following sections through qualitative content analysis.

3   Method

3.1   Chosen research method

Qualitative content analysis is considered an ideal tool for the analysis of textual data, as it systematically describes and analyses the meaning of qualitative data through a process called coding, where parts of the material are assigned to categories within a coding frame (Bengtsson, 2016; Schreier, 2013; Vaismoradi, 2013). Taking this into consideration, qualitative content analysis is highly relevant for the current study which aims to understand how companies use humor on social media in times of crisis, and how audiences react to this. Additionally, qualitative content analysis remains relevant when considering a similar study by Roshan et al., (2016) who investigated how organizations use social media during a crisis in interacting with their followers through content analysis.

In expanding upon the previously mentioned research, this research project aimed to not only build an understanding of how companies can best use social media and humor to their advantage within a crisis but also to understand how this technique is received by users, and thereby generate an idea of the best general practices. This was best achieved through the analysis of tweets, with Twitter being considered the most relevant social media platform in times of a crisis, being the first platform on which information about an emergency generally appears (Martínez-Rojas et al., 2018). Additionally, with approximately 313 million monthly active users, Twitter has become a platform that offers a great amount of potential in helping organizations provide information to their consumers in an efficient way and engage in effective crisis management (Eriksson, 2018; Triantafillidou et al., 2020).

Within the multitude of existing qualitative analysis approaches, the selected approach for this research project was qualitative content/text analysis (Kuckartz, 2014; Schreier, 2013). This method was deemed most appropriate as it provides a detailed description of the material under investigation and considers the more latent meaning of a selected text (Schreier, 2013). Additionally, it is a strong method when it comes to reducing the amount of data and focusing on specific elements within this data (Schreier, 2013). Considering the large number of tweets collected within this study, qualitative content analysis is then highly relevant when considering the goals of this paper.

Due to the systematic nature of qualitative content analysis, the analysis of the data followed a highly consistent approach in investigating each part of the data considered relevant to answering the research question (Schreier, 2013). This systematic approach manifested itself by following a strict set of steps standard to any study following qualitative content analysis. These steps played a large part in the coding as well as the analysis of the

data, both of which will further be elaborated upon in upcoming sections.

3.2 Data collection and sampling

A total of 836 tweets were collected with the software snscraper36. Of these 836 tweets, 677 were user tweets and 159 company tweets. More user tweets were collected due to availability, but also to fill a gap in research by understanding how users react to humorous crisis management strategies on social media. Tweets were selected based on the date on which they were published, and the content included in the tweet. In other words, tweets were considered relevant if they mentioned the company in a crisis or used a hashtag related to the crisis.

Related to user tweets, these were selected based on specific criteria related to a crisis. For instance, in the KFC crisis, the hashtags #KFCClosed and #KFCCrisis as well as the dates (February 16th, 2018 – February 26th, 2018) during which the crisis took place were criteria mentioned in the scraping of tweets. Related to the IHOP crisis, tweets were found based on the criteria that the tweet included the hashtag #IHOB and was published during the crisis as well (June 4th, 2018 – July 9th, 2018). Finally, for the Crockpot incident, tweets were also selected based on a hashtag - #CrockpotIsInnocent, and the dates of the crisis were also considered important (February 3rd, 2018 – March 1st, 2018). Determining the dates of the crisis was done through the reading of articles discussing the occurrence of the crisis, and the following crisis response (Brownsell, 2018; Reslen, 2018; Tobin, n.d).

User tweets were given priority in terms of the number of tweets selected, as the goal is to expand upon previous research in investigating user responses, as it has not yet, or to a limited extent, been investigated. However, these are not the only tweets selected, as those by the three selected companies were also considered. This means that tweets from @KFC_UKI, @CrockPotIsInnocent and @IHOP were selected for analysis. Specifically, for each company, replies to tweets related to the crisis and using a crisis-specific hashtag were considered. This was done to assess to what extent the company used humor in its' crisis response strategy aside from the original crisis management message. For the IHOP and Crockpot incidents, the original crisis response was published on Twitter and was therefore also selected for analysis in analyzing the type of humor used in the original tweet, and the replies stemming from that tweet. For KFC, although the crisis management took place on social media, the original crisis response message was published in a newspaper, marking a small difference when analyzing the crisis management of each company.

Further related to the selection of tweets, relevance sampling as described by

Krippendorff (2019) was used in selecting the tweets. Also referred to as purposive sampling (Krippendorff, 2019), this means that texts, or in this case tweets that contribute to answering the research question were selected. The selected tweets therefore represent a relevant population of texts, excluding any text that is not deemed relevant for the project. Although an appropriate sampling technique for this project, it is nevertheless important to consider the limitations of this technique such as the large electronic database that is the internet, where irrelevant texts are numerous (Krippendorff, 2019).

3.3   Operationalization

Within the research question, *what role may humor play in the crisis and reputation management of a company?* two main concepts emerged that played a central role in the analysis and selection of tweets. These concepts are crisis management and humor. Crisis management was largely considered from the perspective of Coombs (2007) who defines a crisis as an impactful threat to operations if not adequately handled. Furthermore, three crisis management steps are elaborated upon - the pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis response. As such, crisis management was recognized and considered in the tweets as any message shared by an organization during a crisis as explained by Roshan et al., (2016). However, the analysis of crisis management was not limited to this as it was further considered from the perspective of Coombs (2007) by analyzing the different crisis management stages as well.

Furthermore, an important concept to define is humor, as it was a concept that needed to be identified when selecting relevant tweets for analysis. Identifying a humorous message was done from the perspective of Xiao et al., (2017), who define a humorous message as one in which elements are manipulated in relation to humor. These humorous elements, specifically the type of humor used in the tweets were identified through findings of Taecharungroj et al., (2017) who suggest that seven types of humor are typically used in a social media context: *personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness* and *surprise*. Identifying the type of humor was done to develop an understanding as to which strategy would work best when using humor in a crisis.

Specifically, tweets were analyzed in terms of the humor used and the reactions following the tweet by the company. This was done in the context of answering the sub-questions - *How can companies going through an accidental crisis use humor to communicate with their audiences?* and *How do audiences react to humorous content used by a company during a crisis?* Further elements investigated by Xiao et al., (2017) include the effectiveness of humor in crisis management, as they hypothesize that the use of humor

may in fact be a form of distraction from the actual message that is being created.

3.4   Analysis

The analysis of company and audience tweets largely followed steps discussed by Schreier (2013) and Kuckartz (2014) in conducting coding within qualitative content analysis, defined as a process in which segments of data relating to an idea, theme, or category are linked together to be retrieved by the researcher at a later stage. As such, a research question was first created, after which the material was selected, and an initial coding frame was built (Schreier, 2013). The initial coding frame was built by gaining an initial understanding of the text keeping the research question in mind (Kuckartz, 2014). Initial codes within this research project included *Positive feeling, IHOP as smart, KFC as funny* or *Feeling of shock*.

Following the initial readings, a more in-depth coding process took place. This largely followed the steps provided by Schreier (2013), starting by structuring, and generating the data, meaning that categories and subcategories surrounding the data were created. After categories had been created, the defining stage took place, meaning that the categories were defined in a table, including the category name, a description of the meaning of that name and examples as recommended by Schreier (2013). Additionally, within this research project, it was considered relevant to also include the frequency of each code occurring in the dataset.

Once the coding frame had been created, it was revised and expanded, meaning that the coding frame was revised to make sure all aspects of the data had been covered (Schreier, 2013). This also referred to the segmentation of the data, meaning that the material was divided in a way that ensured each unit fit into exactly one (sub) category of the coding frame (Schreier, 2013). Ensuring that categories were mutually exclusive, this led to the categorization of initial codes such as *Defending Crockpot, Expressing loyalty, Forgiveness, Positive crisis management, Positive feeling* and *Humorous crisis management* as belonging to the larger category of *Positive crisis management*.

After segmentation, the trial coding step took place, applying categories from the coding frame to the material during two rounds of coding over 14 days, as suggested by Schreier (2013). Results of the trial coding were then evaluated in terms of the validity and consistency of the results to ensure that created categories adequately described materials and concepts within the research question (Schreier, 2013). Finally, marking the last step within the analysis, the main analysis took place. Specifically, any remaining parts of the

material were divided into coding units, which were then assigned to categories identified in the coding frame. Results of the main coding were then added to a code tree where categories were also clearly defined (see Appendix A).

The analysis of the data was further conducted keeping recommendations of Kuckartz (2014) in mind. Particularly relevant to consider was the combination of inductive and deductive approaches within qualitative content analysis. Specifically, as Kuckartz (2014) explains, within inductive and deductive approaches many similarities apply, with the same rules and standards being of relevance regardless of whether categories have been developed inductively or deductively. In this study, a mixed approach was applied, dominated by a deductive approach, but also considering the inductive approach within the coding process. This means that categories were derived from pre-existing data such as theories or hypotheses (Kuckartz, 2014) but were not limited to them. Taking an inductive approach as well, categories were also developed by directly using the data to develop categories (Kuckartz, 2014). For instance, codes such as *Positive crisis management* or *Negative crisis management* were considered relevant within the theory of acceptance or rejection of crisis management by audiences (Coombs, 2014). Furthermore, the code of *Promotions and witty* replies led to new developments in the field of humor and crisis management research.

The coding process was facilitated using the software Atlas.ti, as this program assisted in building an overview of the data, and therefore helped with the coding process. Specifically, tweets were uploaded to Atlas.ti on which the initial coding process took place. Although a large part of the data analysis took part on Atlas.ti, the creation of categories related to the coding frame was done by hand due to personal preference, with the help of Atlas.ti to create the initial codes during the analysis.

The previously described coding process was applied to both the company and user tweets in order to develop an understanding of how companies were managing their crisis and how users were reacting to this. Although two of the crisis management approaches took place entirely on Twitter, one crisis took a more traditional approach, leading to the analysis of a different type of content than tweets. This was the case for KFC, which published its' crisis management advertisement in the newspaper. Although a different platform, the analysis in essence remained the same, applying qualitative content analysis to understand the approach of the company. These results were included in the coding process of the other content and thereby were considered in the creation of the final codebook.

3.5   Validity and reliability

When considering the concepts of validity and reliability, in theory, the definitions and the application of these concepts are quite simple. However, this is not the case in practice. As Babbie (2016) states, reliability, in theory, can be defined as the yielding of the same result each time a technique is applied to an object, and validity is the extent to which a concept is adequately measured. The complexity of these two concepts is however clear when we consider the numerous definitions that exist, differing in qualitative and quantitative research. For instance, the two definitions stated earlier are more straightforward to apply to quantitative research, as these numerically based studies are often easier to replicate (Babbie, 2016).

In the case of qualitative research, reliability and validity are often a more complex matter due to the potentially subjective nature of qualitative analyses (Babbie, 2016). As such, within qualitative analysis, validity reflects that the results truthfully represent the phenomena that are being studied (Bengtsson, 2016). Reliability continues to refer to the idea that the measurement used within the study would yield the same results when observing an element several times independently (Babbie, 2016).

This then leads to the question of how to ensure reliability and validity in a qualitative study. Considering reliability, researchers suggest making the research process as transparent as possible and clarifying the theoretical stance from which the analysis is taking place (Silverman, 2011). This suggestion was applied in this research project, in which reliability, in theory, is relatively high as the subject of analysis was text. As texts are already available, it is theoretically more reliable than observations (Silverman, 2011). Important to take into consideration is that texts can also be forged (Silverman, 2011). It was therefore of utmost importance that the categories in this study were developed in a standardized way.

Considering validity, transparency continued to be a priority within this study, following the suggestions from Bengtsson (2016) who recommends having a colleague not involved in the study read the original text and results to judge if the conclusions are reasonable or not. This was achieved by asking a fellow student to read the results and indicate whether the findings were reasonable or not. Rigour was further ensured by using Atlas.ti as software within the analysis, useful in analyzing the data at a highly specific level (Bengtsson, 2016). The trustworthiness of the study was further enhanced through the use of double coding as discussed by Schreier (2013) within qualitative content analysis. Specifically, this means that the coding process was carried out twice to test the quality and

the replicability of results found in the first coding process.

Important to take into consideration within the validity and reliability of this research project is the interpretation of the evidence, which could potentially have been interpreted differently had different theories been considered or had the approach been entirely deductive or inductive. As this research project focused on investigating the use of humor in crisis management, it is logical that findings were oriented towards this topic and the theories considered. As this study took a mostly deductive approach, theories played a central role in the analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). However, considering an inductive approach as well, an open mind was withheld throughout the analysis in creating categories by directly analyzing the data without any preconceptions. Logically, all data did not confirm specific suspicions within the research project, related to the use of obvious forms of humor for instance. Specifically, the humor used by companies in their crisis management was not as straightforward or easily identifiable as expected. This was accounted for by further investigating the use of humor by companies on social media, significantly differing from traditional uses of humor (Taecharungroj et al., 2017).

4   Results & discussion

Following the analysis of the collected user and company tweets surrounding the topic of different crises, relevant results were found contributing to the goal of this research paper. Indeed, it is through analyzing company tweets that an overall idea was generated as to how each company was using humor to present itself in times of crisis, thereby helping to understand their crisis management strategy.

Analyzing user tweets was done to understand how users reacted to the strategy of the company, and what implications this had for the use of humor in crisis management. Overall, findings suggest that although each faced with an accidental crisis, the companies selected for this study used humor relevant to their crisis in their crisis management practices. Additionally, users generally reacted positively to this communication when having a strong relationship with the brand, while others needed more convincing. An overview of these findings can be found in the code tree generated from the analysis of company and audience tweets (see Appendix A).

4.1   Audiences on Twitter in times of crisis

In understanding how a company can best use humor on social media in times of crisis, audience reactions to humorous crisis management tweets are firstly important to consider. This was done by analyzing 741 audience tweets to identify patterns which will be discussed in the following section.

4.1.1   *Positive brand/consumer relationships: Leading to more positive perceptions*

Firstly, a pattern related to positive user reactions was developed following initial codes developed from reading the tweets. The categories developed from the analysis of user tweets portraying overall positive emotions were *Expressing loyalty* and *Remaining supportive.* These were identified by analyzing each tweet in terms of the language used, and the emotions that were being portrayed through this language. Related to the expression of loyalty, individuals often expressed this in various ways, such as defending the company by stating that they were not at fault or expressing enjoyment of the product. Within the core category of *Positive brand/consumer relationship* and the subcategory *Expressing loyalty* and *Remaining Supportive* this led to the development of codes such as *Positive crisis management, Defending Crockpot, Liking burger* and *Craving KFC.*

These codes are highly recognizable when we consider tweets related to each crisis. For instance, when a user tweeted "@CrockPotCares I never blamed you for Jack's death. I

love you too much and could never part with my 3 crockpots. It was the fault of that fictional hoarding neighbor -- not yours" it was established that this user was expressing loyalty to the brand by defending it in its' crisis. This occurred in 20 of the 74 user tweets expressing opinions on the crisis and crisis management of the company. This loyalty is further noticeable in a tweet directed at IHOP: "I was skeptical on the #ihob campaign but now I know for a fact that it was the right move". Here, the user is expressing their doubt about the company change, but admits to liking their burger, thus expressing positive emotions toward the brand. This occurred in 25 of the 40 user tweets analyzed in relation to the IHOP crisis, meaning that the promotion of their new burgers was relatively successful.

Finally, loyalty was considered through a different lens when it came to KFC, as users often expressed their fondness of the brand through their love of its' food, with users mentioning how much they were craving the chicken they did not have: "Desperately seeking fried chicken". Although users were expressing loyalty through their craving for fried chicken, this pattern was less frequent, with only 2 of the 159 user tweets considered in the KFC crisis mentioning their cravings. Loyalty or the success of the crisis management was then potentially expressed differently within the KFC crisis. Each of these tweets serves as an example of how a loyal customer interacted with each brand during their crisis and crisis management stages.

4.1.2   *Through thick and thin: Remaining supportive of the company*

Furthermore, loyalty and a positive brand/consumer relationship were illustrated through the support expressed by certain users during the brands' crisis. It was assumed that if a user expressed positive feelings toward the brand during its' crisis management, they were most likely a loyal user. This was particularly apparent when a user expressed positive emotions related to the brand's crisis management.

The analysis of these tweets led to the creation of the code *Positive crisis management*, which largely referred to a positive perception of the company in how it was managing its' crisis. This is noticeable in tweets to each company during their crisis management. For instance, in the case of Crockpot - "I too am a huge fan of *This is Us* - Kudos to Crock-Pot for a perfect real-life response to a fictional problem". For IHOP, tweets were similar, for instance - "@Wendys You were aight til @habitburger kicked your burger's buns. Good job tho on the IHOP slams. 100% to ur PR team". Similar findings apply for KFC - "What does KFC do when they run out of chicken? They do something magical. Great example about how to handle a situation.". Within this analysis, it was clear

that users expressed a strong liking for the crisis management of KFC, with 118 of the 159 tweets applauding the crisis management strategy of KFC. The main success of this campaign thus expressed itself through these tweets. This is a relatively high number in comparison to the other two companies, with 2 of the 40 tweets complimenting the crisis management of IHOP, and 27 of the 74 tweets doing the same for the crisis management of Crockpot. Although these tweets reflect a positive assessment of the crisis management of each company positive perceptions of the brand in times of crisis were not the norm, with users also expressing negative emotions when it came to the brand or its' crisis management.

4.1.3 *They may need some convincing: Negative user perceptions*

A pattern was also identified when it came to the more negative perceptions of the brand or its' crisis management, where it appeared as if a user's unwillingness to be understanding of the brand or appreciate its' crisis management strategy seemed to stem from an overall disliking of the company or loyalty that was oriented elsewhere. In terms of negative user perceptions, initial codes developed included *Negative feelings, Reference to episode, KFC as unhealthy or Confusion about name*. Combining these codes due to similarities led to the creation of the category *Negative user perceptions.*

Each crisis involved a different set of negative audience reactions. For IHOP and Crockpot, it seemed that the negative reaction stemmed from users' loyalty lying elsewhere. For instance, in the case of Crockpot, it seemed as though users generally had a negative reaction to the crisis and crisis management of the brand if they were fans of the series *This is Us*, frequently referring back to the episode or to the character that died in the series due to a Crockpot (27 of the 74 tweets) - "My little brother left the crockpot on at home while we were out and when I came home and saw it I almost started to cry. I miss Jack".

Related to the IHOP crisis, users expressed confusion and disappointment when it came to understanding the new name IHOB, fearing that they no longer served pancakes and not accepting the new burgers (4 of the 40 tweets) - "I was craving pancakes... but somehow ended up at this random burger joint". Other negative user reactions were related to the overall perception of the brand, particularly for KFC. In this case, negative perceptions were related to the overall quality of food of the fast-food chain, claiming that they had run out of chicken years ago, or that individuals were being protected from unhealthy food (3 of the 159). A tweet illustrating this is as follows: "KFC has run out of chicken for their burgers? Thought that had happened 20 years ago!!".

Reflecting on these findings, the question if the crisis management of each company was rejected or accepted can be considered. Within the selected crises, this was done by considering the number of positive and negative user reactions to each crisis management strategy. Based on user responses to each crisis, and the frequency at which negative or positive responses occurred, the crisis management was considered as accepted or rejected, following the theory developed by Coombs (2014). For instance, in the IHOP crisis, of the 71 tweets sent by users characterized as judging the company's crisis, 41 were negative, and 30 were positive. As such, this crisis management was generally rejected, which was not the case for the other two crises investigated. This was highly noticeable in the KFC crisis management, with 118 of the 200 tweets related to the crisis management strategy being positive, meaning that it was highly accepted by the public. Similarly, in the Crockpot crisis, of the 103 tweets judging the crisis management, 66 were positive while 37 were negative. As a result, this crisis management was also considered as accepted by the public, thus making it successful. Considering the frequencies of positive or negative user tweets discussing the crisis management of each company, it can then be stated that KFC and Crockpot had an overall more successful crisis management approach than IHOP.

4.1.4   Do it for the likes: Users' neutral takes on crises

Although there appears to be a strong divide between those supporting a brand and those disagreeing with it, a middle ground was also identified, with users remaining relatively neutral, or embracing the situation in creating potentially popular tweets. This could mean that these users were not particularly loyal to the brand in crisis and did not have a negative perception of this brand either. Potential goals of publishing these tweets could then be relatively personal, in wanting to go viral, or simply sharing information, illustrating the growing role of influence users have on the crisis management of companies.

Within the category of *Neutral takes on crises*, codes included *Play on words* and *Discussing crisis management*. Within these tweets, users often expressed no opinion when it came to the brand or the crisis they were in but seem to have taken advantage of the interactive nature of social media in developing a humorous tweet that users could reply to or like. Although not frequent, this is noticeable in the IHOP crisis for example, with users adopting the mindset of the company in changing the letter "p" to a "b" in their tweets (9 of the 40 tweets): "I came here for Bancakes". Not all users were humorous in their neutral tweets, however, with some simply informing others on the situation the company found itself in while remaining neutral on the topic: "KFC Responds

to U.K. Chicken Shortage Scandal With a Timely 'FCK'". This was a frequently occurring pattern, with 36 of the 159 tweets discussing the crisis management in such a manner.

4.2 Organizations' use of Twitter in times of crisis

Once patterns related to the use of Twitter by audiences had been developed, it was essential to understand how companies were using Twitter and humor in times of their crisis to assess whether this approach had worked. A total of 159 company tweets were analyzed to develop a general idea of how KFC, IHOP, and Crockpot were using Twitter and humor in their tweets and replies. This sample size is significantly smaller than that of user tweets, due to the priorities of this study, with an important goal being to understand user reactions as a tool for developing an idea of best practices. Stemming from the analysis of company tweets are three main codes: *Promotions and witty replies, Appealing to users* and *Keeping it professional*. The development of these codes as well as the analysis of these tweets can be found in the following section.

4.2.1 Promotions and witty replies: IHOB and KFC

Firstly, a pattern related to the use of humor or clever replies was identified once the initial codes had been developed within the analysis of the tweets. Within the category of *Promotions and witty replies*, subcategories included *Announcing reopening* and *Promoting IHOB*. Mainly identified in the tweets of IHOB and KFC, the tweets belonging to this category were generally considered light-hearted or very straightforward in the sense that they were providing users with information or promoting a new product to these users.

In terms of the rebranding of IHOB, it seems that their approach was strongly related to the promotion of their new item on the menu – burgers. It can be suspected that it is for this reason that they engaged in a play on words, changing the "p" to a "b", and consistently promoted their new burgers to users while reminding them that they are staying true to their roots with their pancakes. This can be noticed in this tweet for instance – "Burgers burgers burgers and pancakes pancakes pancakes all under one blue roof at #IHOb". This content as well as similar tweets were coded as *Promoting IHOB* and constituted 10 of the 30 tweets.

KFC took a more informational approach, in regularly keeping its' customers informed through Twitter, informing them that the crisis was almost resolved for instance. This can be considered a promotion, as the brand was most likely encouraging users to revisit their restaurants now that they had almost entirely solved their delivery issues. Coded as *Announcing reopening*, this tweet illustrates the informational approach of the company -

"Good news for all involved, 85% of our restaurants are now back open!". Important to mention is that this strategy occurred in 3 of the 62 tweets, meaning that it played a relatively small role in the crisis management approach of KFC.

4.2.2   Appealing to users: Humor, love and comfort

In creating a positive brand/consumer relationship, brands also engaged in interactions with users by using humor or expressing love and giving comfort to consumers. This led to the creation of the category *Appealing to users*, within which codes such as *Personalized response* and *Expressing lov*e were developed. Responses to users also depended on the nature of the tweets, with brands responding in a humorous way if the user was being humorous as well. If a user appeared to be concerned or needed to be comforted, the brand adopted this role in sending more personalized responses.

Through the analysis of these tweets, it appeared as if each brand attempted to create a positive relationship with consumers by offering them comforting replies, such as Crockpot in 3 of their tweets "Lisa, we get it. It was a heartbreaking episode. But we're glad you still trust us. Thanks for the #CrockPotLove". KFC also attempted to create a positive brand/consumer relationship with personalized responses in 35 of the 62 replies, for example: "We'll never leave you. May take a vacation for a couple of days but that's it, promise!". Finally, IHOP comforted its' consumers with reminders that they were not going to change in 18 of their 30 replies: "Don't worry, Pancakers. We still love pancakes. We're just expanding our burger horizons". Humor was also included within this category "@IHOB: "We don't want any beef with you, we just want to share our beef with the world".

4.2.3   Keeping it professional

Although some replies emphasized the creation of a positive consumer/brand relationship, others remained quite professional in their responses. This led to the creation of the categories *Answering user questions* and *Standard replies* within the larger category of *Keeping it professional*. In answering user questions, a standardized response was usually the norm in keeping users informed and addressing any of their doubts. For example, a tweet from KFC - "The majority are back open now, we would never stay away too long. Check the website to see if yours is". The approach of standard replies played a minimal role for KFC, with this approach occurring in solely 5 of the 62 relevant company replies analyzed.

Standard replies not only applied to questions, but also to tweets from users in general,

generally related to a complaint. For instance, in the case of Crockpot: "@CrockPotCares: Hi Katy Mary, Please send us a DM so that we can take care of this for you ASAP.", this was recognized in 3 of their tweets.

KFC took a similar approach in responding to complaints with a standardized reply:

KFC_UKI: Hi Antonietta, we're so sorry that we had no Chicken when you visited today in Dunstable. We deliver our chicken fresh to our restaurants and have had a few hiccups but the Colonel is working on fixing it. We hope to see you again soon.

These replies were further recognized when a company replied to user content they found interesting, such as in the case of IHOP, although this only occurred in 2 of their tweets: @IHOP: "Good choice! Thanks for sharing your IHOb burger love with us, check your DM's! We've got something burgerin' good waiting for you!" Each of these results provided interesting insights into the topic under investigation. However, questions remain surrounding the implications of these findings in relation to theories considered relevant.

4.3   Discussion

The objective of this present research project was to develop an initial understanding of how organizations can best use humor in their crisis management strategies. Through the qualitative content analysis of user and company tweets, results leading to interesting developments within theories of crisis management were created. Overall, many theories surrounding the topic of crisis management were confirmed, while others were expanded upon.

Crisis management on social media

Related to the crisis management strategies of each organization, theories surrounding the type of crisis an organization was involved in (Coombs, 2004) and the appropriate crisis response strategy (Benoit, 1997) applied to a certain extent. This can particularly be linked to the crisis response strategy of the organization, as the frameworks provided failed to consider any humorous elements. For example, as each of the crises was considered to be part of the *Accidental crisis cluster*, each organization was, in theory, presented with a set of crisis response strategies that were considered applicable for their situation (Coombs, 2004). Although these solutions were applied by each organization to a certain extent, how the organization used humor in its' crisis management strategy failed to be made apparent within existing theories (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2004).

The way in which companies interacted with users during their crisis management on social media was then considered most relevant from the perspective of Roshan et al., (2016), who suggest that companies engage in several activities when managing a crisis on social media. Some of these patterns were recognized in the tweets selected for analysis such as *Replying to stakeholder messages* by replying to questions or suggestions, *Providing information* or *Replying to messages intended to be funny.* This is recognized when we consider the codebook resulting from the company tweets analysis (see Appendix A). A pattern that was not frequently recognized within the tweets selected for analysis is *Providing status updates*, as it seems these only appeared within the KFC crisis, although this may also be linked to the nature of the crisis. Following the analysis conducted within this paper, this framework can be expanded upon, specifically in terms of the nature of the replies, with companies sending humorous replies to users or appealing to the emotions of users to build a positive brand/consumer relationship.

The role of humor in crisis management

Further recommendations stemming from this research project are related to the use of humor in crisis management, in following the types of humor developed by Taecharungroj et al., (2017). In applying this to the crises considered within this research project, the type of humor used within the IHOP crisis management was *Puns*, by replacing the "p" with a "b", similarly to the strategy used by KFC by reorganizing the letters of the existing company to spell "FCK" in reference to an obvious slang word. In the case of Crockpot, the humorous element of surprise was used in creating an unexpected humorous element within a crisis that many considered highly emotional.

Within these crises, although each of the traditional crisis management strategies applies to the selected management technique, each of them is better understood and becomes more specific when considering the role of humor. This means that elements of Benoit's image repair theory (1997) and the types of humor of Taecharungroj et al., (2017) are apparent within the company tweets selected for analysis. For instance, within the IHOP crisis management tweet, the strategy of *Good intentions* can be noticed - explaining they meant well with the act - while using puns - adding an element of humor to the tweet - "The blan was to get people talking about our new burgers. And it worked. Look at us, two silly pancakes talkin' about burgers". The case of KFC is similar, using the strategy of *Mortification* to apologize for the crisis, while creating a pun by reorganizing the letters of the company to spell "FCK", thereby adding a humorous element. Finally, Crockpot, engaged in a strategy of *Simple denial* - they did not perform the act they were accused of – and created an unexpected link by using the character that died to bring individuals together while creating a humorous hashtag #CrockPotIsInnocent.

Considering the use of humor by each organization in their crisis management strategy, it is then relevant to revise theories developed by Xiao et al., (2017) within crisis management. Indeed, the authors suggest that the use of humor is more effective within crisis management when the crisis is still in a rumor stage, meaning that the crisis has not yet officially been confirmed. Findings within this research project suggest otherwise, with humor successfully being used by organizations as what appears to be a crisis management strategy, meaning they are using it after the crisis has occurred. Considering the high number of positive tweets previously elaborated upon in most of the crisis management strategies, humor can be considered an effective crisis management tool, especially when it is accepted by the target audience.

As the use of humor in crisis management remains an underdeveloped topic, the

analysis contributes to the literature in several ways. Firstly, of the existing theories on humor in crisis management, a few were confirmed. For instance, the idea that humor is most successful in a crisis that involves no casualties or is highly consequential (Kim et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2017), held true, as the majority of the crisis management approaches were successful, and the crisis each company was involved in was low risk. Additionally, theories relating to reputation were also generally confirmed. For instance, following the tweets analysis and looking at previous Twitter content from each company, it can be confirmed that previous interaction on social media from a brand impacts the way in which the organization is perceived, thus making the use of humor appropriate or not (Kim et al., 2016; Jahng et al., 2017).

Interesting developments took place related to how each organization made use of humor in its crisis management strategy. Particularly interesting to note is that this humor was not always obvious but did correspond to the types of humor such as *Puns* or *Surprise* as identified by Taecharungroj et al., (2017). The use of humor by each organization can be recognized as belonging to two categories: the initial crisis response and replies to users. In terms of the initial crisis response strategy, humor played a different role within each crisis, this mainly being linked to the medium used to broadcast the message. For instance, within the KFC crisis, the humorous aspect played a role in the initial crisis response message in quite an obvious, humoristic manner. Related to the replies to users, humor generally played a big part if the message sent by users to the brand was also humorous.

Crockpot and IHOP took a more subtle approach in using humor. For instance, IHOP strongly played into the idea of using puns by consistently changing the letter "p" to the letter "b" in order to promote burgers at a pancake place. This is a strategy that not only applied to the original crisis management strategy but remained consistent throughout their replies. Crockpot also opted for a more subtle approach when using humor, by creating an element of surprise with the beloved character of *This is Us* asking everyone to unite. Additionally, they created quite a humorous hashtag #CrockPotIsInnocent as well as an entire account dedicated to the cause. This also played into elements of surprise as Crockpot was almost being characterized as a person. In terms of the replies, IHOP appears to have been most consistent in the use of humor in their replies. This can potentially be linked to the nature of the crisis as well as the strategy used to manage it, as IHOP mainly turned to humor when it came to sending replies to users, while Crockpot and KFC focused their efforts on the main crisis management message when using humor.

From the generally positive reaction of audiences and the media, it can be theorized that the subtle use of humor within the social media crisis management of an organization is quite an effective approach for organizations facing a crisis classified as belonging to the *Accidental crisis cluster* developed by Coombs (2004).

Audiences in crisis management

In considering the role audiences play in the crisis management of an organization on social media, multiple theories related to the use of social media as well as the potential impact of this use were investigated. Overall, it can be said that these theories were confirmed, as well as expanded upon following the results of this research project. For instance, it can be agreed upon that Twitter is a platform used for the forming of opinions by users, as well as the sharing of these opinions with others (Read et al., 2019). This was noticeable in the majority of tweets, where users were expressing their opinion on the brand or the crisis, by agreeing with the brand for instance or clearly showing their disapproval.

Other confirmed theories revolved around the relationship a consumer builds with a brand on social media. Indeed, Kwon et al., (2015) state that consumers similarly interact with brands as they would with an individual they have a personal relationship with. This was particularly noticeable when an individual would express loyalty toward a brand almost forgiving the brand as if it were a human being. It thus appears that audiences take brand/consumer interactions on social media quite seriously. This might lead one to wonder how serious the actions of an audience can impact the crisis management of an organization. This was particularly relevant in developing an idea as to how a brand can most effectively engage in crisis management on social media.

As stated by Coombs (2014), the responses of crisis message receivers tend to indicate whether the crisis response strategy has been accepted or rejected. This theory can generally be confirmed, as is noticed within either negative reactions to the crisis management, or positive reactions to the crisis management. This is an important element for organizations to take into consideration, as audiences have gained importance when it comes to shaping the organizations' reputation within their crisis management attempts. Within the analyzed data, it seems as though audiences' replies were indeed negative or positive when it came to expressing an opinion on the organization's crisis management strategy. When a user expressed a relatively neutral opinion on the crisis management strategy, the tweet was categorized as being purely factual or attempting to get likes on the social media platform. Interesting to consider within the selected crisis management

strategies is to what extent each of them was accepted or rejected. Indeed, this can help in developing patterns surrounding effective crisis management practices. Considering the statement that the responses of users indicate whether a crisis management strategy has been accepted or rejected (Coombs, 2014), one can assume that the more positive user reactions a crisis management approach has, the more successful it is and vice-versa.

Based on the analysis conducted and the developed codes, while KFC and Crockpot received what can be described as an overall acceptance of their crisis management, IHOP struggled a bit more in convincing audiences to accept their crisis management strategy. This can potentially be linked to the perceived level of change the company was going through, with individuals believing the company was completely rebranding itself. Audiences were therefore expressing a preference for the original IHOP with the majority not accepting the crisis management of the company. Although IHOP engaged in all the suggested crisis management strategies, it was ultimately the audience perceptions that made it more difficult for the brands' crisis management to be accepted. Important to also mention is that not all reactions were negative, with some continuing to support the brand and expressing acceptance toward their crisis management. However, important to consider is how users decide if they are supportive of a brand's crisis management efforts or not.

Coombs (2014) has suggested that favorably predisposed publics could potentially be more accepting of crisis messages than other publics since they supported the organization before the crisis. This theory was generally confirmed but can also be expanded upon. Specifically, the concept of loyalty can be integrated into this idea, related to the idea that a consumer continuously displays a favorable attitude toward a business (Nisar et al., 2016). Results indicated findings similar to previous theories, as it was often observed that if a user was loyal to the brand, they also were supportive of its' crisis management. This was confirmed as users expressing negative emotions towards the crisis management generally mentioned something negative about the brand overall. Related to KFC, users would express how unhealthy the brand was. For Crockpot, they would often pick another side, revealing their preference for the series *This is Us*. Finally, for IHOP, users would quite clearly reject the newly established brand, staying loyal to the original IHOP rather than IHOB. It can therefore be theorized that loyalty plays an important role in the acceptance or rejection of a brand's crisis management, with users expressing acceptance of the brand despite the issues they are facing or staying true to the company by rejecting the new.

Neutral crisis response messages

Although the findings of Coombs (2014) were generally confirmed in terms of the acceptance/rejection of the crisis management through positive or negative comments, this theory failed to consider neutral crisis responses from audiences. These responses were found within this research project and constituted interesting findings in terms of how audiences interact with crisis management messages on social media. Specifically, within the neutral response category, individuals were either reporting on the crisis, informing the public on what had happened, or they were playfully engaging with the crisis by creating a tweet that could potentially go viral, thus engaging in what might be called social media habits.

Audiences were therefore not only expressing their acceptance or rejection of the organizations' crisis management but were also playing an important role in the spreading of information on social media and creating entertaining content. This to the question if audiences continue to purely use Twitter to build an opinion on a brand or share their opinion with others, as other elements such as meme culture potentially come into play. This thesis thus theorizes that audiences may be using Twitter to form opinions and share their opinion with others (Read et al., 2019), but also to engage with others by creating humorous content or playing an informational role in providing updates surrounding the crisis taking place.

Success factors in humorous crisis management

Following the previously elaborated upon developments, questions might arise related to the implications for companies in their crisis management efforts. As humor played a large role in this project, it is interesting to consider the chosen theories from a more critical perspective, with only Xiao et al., (2017) focusing on the subjectivity of humor. The subjectivity of humor refers to the idea that everyone has a different type of humor that they prefer over others. As such, it can be assumed that not every individual can be appealed to in the humorous crisis management efforts of a company. This could then explain the reason why although the crisis management efforts of KFC can be considered successful, some individuals felt offended by the use of profanity and mentioned that this campaign would potentially not have been as successful in the United States.

Further reflecting on the subjectivity of humor, questions arise around the effectiveness of the #CrockPotIsInnocent campaign, in if the success depended on if an individual was a fan of the series *This is Us* or not. Is there a difference in how a fan and

non-fan of *This is Us* perceived the advertisement? Was it more effective for one than the other? Noticeable is that those who were not a fan often expressed their disapproval of the reaction of the fans, stating that Crockpot could not be blamed for something that had been written in a script. This leads to the question if the #CrockPotIsInnocent campaign was successful for fans due to the actor present in the video and if it was successful for non-fans due to the strategic use of humor.

These questions can further lead to a discussion surrounding the crisis management efforts of IHOP - although funny, were the puns suitable for comforting an audience worried that they would lose their beloved brand? The success of the KFC and Crockpot brands can potentially be linked to the type of humor that they used in their crisis management efforts. It can be theorized that they used a type of humor that appealed to a majority of their target audience, thus making the campaign successful. Hence, if IHOP had used a different type of humor that appealed more to their target audience, would their efforts have been more successful? This could potentially lead to the reconsideration of humor as a double-edged sword (Xiao et al., 2017) with humor having the potential to boost crisis management efforts in creating a positive audience reaction, but also creating the potential for an opposite effect if the humor is not appreciated by the majority of the target audiences. Important to note is that the crisis management efforts of IHOP were not a complete failure, but the improvement of the campaign is interesting to reflect on in terms of how the company could have boosted its' approval rates. Considering the entirety of these questions, we can then begin to reflect on the answer to the main research question *What role may humor play in the crisis and reputation management of a company?*

5   Conclusion

Through the analysis of company and audience tweets in the context of three crises, conclusions were drawn surrounding the potential role of humor in the crisis and reputation management of a company. This was best achieved through qualitative content analysis due to the ability of this method to develop in-depth understandings of a phenomenon under investigation (Bengtsson, 2016; Schreier, 2013; Vaismoradi, 2013). Following the analysis of the collected tweets, new findings potentially providing relevant guidelines for companies were developed. Although these relied on established theories to a certain extent, the current study expanded on these theories in developing new findings relevant to developing an initial idea of effective crisis management practices.

As such, in answering the main research question of this study - *What role may humor play in the crisis and reputation management of a company?* - results suggested that in modern crisis management practices, humor can be considered an effective crisis management tool. However, the effectiveness of this tool depends on a multiplicity of factors, that if taken into consideration, can lead to a successfully humoristic crisis management campaign. For instance, in relation to established theories, the organization needs to be well aware of the type of crisis they are faced with, as this will ultimately determine the crisis management approach they need to take (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2004).

The organization must also consider audiences in its' approach, by reflecting upon the overall reputation audiences have created of the brand, as if the majority of the audience has a favorable attitude towards the company, its' crisis management efforts will most likely be successful (Coombs, 2014). New developments generated from the findings within this study also indicate that the type of humor the target audience prefers is an important element to consider as if the target audience likes the humor, the more likely they are to accept the company's crisis management strategy.

This research project can thus conclude that humor acts as a complementary tool within crisis and reputation management strategies, and just as previous reputation and crisis management tools, needs to be used accordingly. In mentioning that humor needs to be used accordingly, this, in part, is referring to the type of crisis the organization is faced with. As the three crises investigated had overall positive crisis management approaches, recommendations on the practices of companies finding themselves in an *Accidental crisis* can be developed, thus answering the question of *How can companies going through an accidental crisis use humor to communicate with their audiences?* Within this crisis cluster, the use of humor can be considered an effective approach, due to the nature of the

crisis as it has not posed any severe threats to individuals (Coombs, 2007). Additionally, the success of the use in humor may also in part be linked to the medium through which the crisis management is being communicated.

For instance, within the KFC and Crockpot crises, the two highly effective cases, the crisis management was communicated through a newspaper and a video. In this case, it can be theorized that using visual elements to support the humor used in the crisis management strategy is an effective approach. This can be linked back to the IHOP crisis, less effective, which mainly relied on textual elements with the occasional promotional video. Findings of this study also reveal that the replies a company sends play an important role in the success of the crisis management strategies. In this case, a company can use humor to respond to tweets from users that are also humorous. However, the company must find a balance, in providing clear answers to questions or giving an individual comfort when necessary. In short, humor cannot stand alone within the crisis management approach of a company, as its' use depends on multiple factors when it comes to the success of the approach. Humor in crisis management can then be reconsidered as a double-edged sword in potentially increasing the acceptance of the crisis or decreasing the acceptance when the humor does not align with that of the audience.

Best practices for the use of humor in crisis management were further developed based on audience reactions to the use of humor in crisis management efforts. This led to a better understanding of how audiences use Twitter and created an idea of how companies should use humor when it comes to communicating with audiences during a crisis. This helped in answering the question of *How do audiences react to humorous content used by a company during a crisis?*

Theories surrounding the use of social media by audiences during a crisis were generally confirmed, with individuals either expressing a positive or negative opinion on the crisis management of a company, thus being interpreted as the acceptance or rejection of said case (Coombs, 2014). The use of Twitter by audiences in a crisis can however be considered from a new, non-mutually exclusive perspective. Indeed, as audiences were also engaging in neutral behavior on Twitter in sharing information on the crisis or attempting to go viral or gain likes by using humor, new insights were revealed. As such, it was theorized that audiences are no longer using Twitter solely to share or form opinions about an ongoing crisis but, they are also using it to engage create engage in social media habits by appealing to meme culture, creating viral content or attempting to get likes.

Limitations & suggestions for future research

Although this study provided interesting findings in terms of best practices for an organization using humor in its' crisis management efforts, the limitations of the study remain essential to acknowledge. Firstly, as this study was qualitative, it is difficult to generalize the findings, which perhaps would not have been the case had the study been quantitative. Additionally, due to time restrictions, the number of tweets could be considered limited, with potentially more content being collected had the study been spread out through a longer time frame. However, saturation was being reached with similar content being identified within the collected tweets, thus leading to the questioning if more content needed to be collected at all. Furthermore, only crises in the United States and the United Kingdom were investigated, meaning that findings are potentially only applicable to English-speaking countries. This doubt could be addressed by investigating the use of humor in crisis management in other countries.

Overall, findings of this study suggest that humor needs to be considered from a new perspective in crisis management, in understanding that each user has a different type of humor, and a company can attempt to appeal to that humor by understanding its' target audience. Rather than considering humor from a relatively negative perspective in solely investigating if it will work (Xiao et al., 2017), this study suggests the need to expand on existing research in the field of humor and crisis management as humor can, despite many perceived uncertainties, be the dark horse within crisis management practices. This is especially due to the interactive nature of social media, but also the reason most individuals turn to social media in times of crisis – humor (Austin et al., 2012). Interactions between individuals on social media platforms remains an interesting topic to investigate more in-depth in the context of crisis management. The way individuals form opinions on the crisis management of a company can for instance be further investigated by considering the social influence individuals may have on each other when it comes to forming opinions on social media.

Although findings within this study suggest that humor is an effective tool within crisis management practices, different types of crises remain to be investigated to understand in which context humor works best. This could perhaps be investigated through a quantitative experiment in which individuals are exposed to more extreme crises in which an organization uses humor. More generalizable, this could potentially lead to new developments within the field of humor in crisis management research. Once again taking a qualitative perspective, other developments could be generated by investigating why

organizations might want to use humor in their crisis management strategies through expert interviews.

Finally, although considered relevant due to the nature of the platform, Twitter is the only social media platform that was considered for investigation within this study. Findings related to this platform leave room for questions related to the efficiency of humor in crisis management on other platforms. As such, another suggestion for future research is to explore the efficiency of humor in crisis management on other social media platforms. This could lead to interesting developments in investigating how suitable humor in crisis management is on other platforms, and potentially lead to more findings that could expand on existing research in the field of crisis management.

Theoretical and managerial implications

The goal of this research project was to create initial findings in the field of humor and crisis management. From a purely theoretical standpoint, findings of this study helped in expanding on existing crisis management theories, by including the element of humor, which was often lacking in traditional theories developed by Coombs (2014) and Benoit (1997) for instance. This research contributes to improving theoretical understandings of humor in crisis management on social media. However, the goal of this study was not purely theoretical.

Within this research project, multiple results had implications for organizations finding themselves in a crisis and wanting to use humor in their crisis management strategies, discussed in the summary of findings. Findings will potentially prove to be especially useful for companies finding themselves in an accidental crisis cluster, as best practices were derived from the three case studies considered, and audience social media habits were investigated in-depth. It is hoped that this study has contributed to existing literature on the topic of social media crisis management and the use of humor - an important topic as it is believed that this will increasingly become a relevant tool for companies.

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The following code tree includes main categories, subcategories, as well as codes and their frequencies. Findings are organized based on the two main topics investigated in this thesis: audience reactions on Twitter and organizations' use of Twitter in times of crisis. Codes in this table serve as examples within each subcategory.

Audiences on Twitter in times of crisis			
Category	Definition	Example	Number of times coded
Positive brand/consumer relationship: Leading to more positive perceptions	Positive brand/consumer interactions were considered as leading to a more positive relationship due to the loyalty felt by individuals towards the brand.		
Users as loyal customers - expressing loyalty	Considering loyalty from the perspective of e-loyalty (Nisar er al., 2016) where a customer is loyal if they continuously display a favorable attitude toward an electronic business.		
Codes			
Defending crockpot	Individuals loyal to Crockpot defending its' innocence.	"@CrockPotCares I never blamed you for Jack's death. I love you too much and could never part with my 3 crockpots. It was the fault of that fictional hoarding neighbor -- not yours" (p. 315)	20
Liking burger	Individuals loyal to IHOP were open to trying the new product and even promoted it.	"I was skeptical on the #ihob campaign but now I know for a fact that it was the right move" (p. 369)	25
Craving KFC	Individuals loyal to KFC expressed their frustration of not being able to eat fried chicken.	"Desperately seeking fried chicken" (p. 221)	2
Through thick and thin: Remaining supportive of the company	Individuals that were supportive of the company engaged in the acceptance of the crisis management strategy as discussed by Coombs (2014).		

Positive crisis management (KFC)	Mentioning positive aspects of the crisis management or praising the PR team were ways in which individuals accepted the crisis management strategy of the brand.	"What does KFC do when they run out of chicken? They do something magical. Great example about how to handle a situation." (p. 11)	118
Positive crisis management (IHOP)		"@Wendys You were aight til @habitburger kicked your burger's buns. Good job tho on the IHOP slams. 100% to ur PR team" (p. 492)	2
Positive crisis management (Crockpot)		"I too am a huge fan of 'This is Us' - Kudos to Crock-Pot for a perfect real-life response to a fictional problem" (p. 138)	27
They may need some convincing: Negative user perceptions	These negative user perceptions were mainly considered through the lens of rejecting the crisis management of a brand as discussed by Coombs (2014).		
Loyal to a series: RIP Jack	Individuals were rejecting the crisis management of Crockpot due to their loyalty to *This Is Us* characters.		
Codes			
Reference to episode	Referring to the episode to remind others that Crockpot is what killed the *This Is Us* character.	"My little brother left the crockpot on at home while we were out and when I came home and saw it I almost started to cry. I miss Jack" (p. 258)	27
The good old days	In the case of IHOP, the unwillingness to accept the crisis management stemmed from a strong bond to the old brand.		
Codes			
Pancake reference	By referring to pancakes, users expressed a preference and negatively	"I was craving pancakes... but somehow ended up at this random burger joint"	4

	spoke about the burgers.	(p. 351)	
Negative brand perception	Negative brand perceptions were considered as pre-existing to the crisis.		
Codes			
KFC as unhealthy	KFC was perceived as unhealthy, leading to comments on the quality of their food and the crisis.	"KFC has run out of chicken for their burgers? Thought that had happened 20 years ago!!" (p. 290)	3
Do it for the likes: Users' neutral takes on the crises	Not all users expressed acceptance or rejection of the crisis management as mentioned by Coombs (2014). Some remained neutral.		
Embracing the humor of the situation	Taking advantage of the situation to create humorous content.		
Codes			
Play on words (IHOP)	Following the brands' approach on humor by switching letters.	"I came here for Bancakes" (p. 209)	9
Discussing crisis management (KFC)	Sharing relatively neutral information about the crisis management.	"KFC Responds to U.K. Chicken Shortage Scandal With a Timely 'FCK" (p. 128)	36

Organizations' use of Twitter in times of crisis			
Promotions and witty replies: IHOB and KFC	Expanding on theories of Xiao et al., (2017) on how a company can use humor in its' crisis management strategy.		
Rebranding: IHOP to IHOB	Tweets in this subcategory were mainly sent by IHOP in raising awareness about the new company name and products.		
Codes			
Promoting IHOB	Promotions identified through the mentioning of burgers or IHOB in replies to users.	@IHOP: "Burgers burgers burgers and pancakes pancakes pancakes all under one blue roof at #IHOb" (p. 4)	10

The chicken crossed the road	Another subcategory focused on tweets sent by KFC when they started reopening.		
Announcing reopening	Tweets announcing KFC had restocked with chicken and was now open again.	@KFC_UKI: "Good news for all involved, 85% of our restaurants are now back open!" (p. 4)	3
Appealing to users: humor, love, and comfort	Starting from the assumption that if an organization creates a positive bond with its' consumers, the tolerance of their crisis management efforts may be higher (Coombs, 2014; Read et al., 2019).		
Building a positive brand/consumer relationship	This subcategory looked at any brand tweets in which the brand was making a joke, a play on words or comforting users.		
Codes			
Expressing love	Expressing gratitude in thanking users for their support throughout the crisis.	@CrockPotCares: "Lisa, we get it..it was a heartbreaking episode. But we're glad you still trust us. Thanks for the #CrockPotLove" (p. 3)	3
Personalized response	Responding to specific user concerns by referring to the exact doubts they might have.	@KFC_UKI: "We'll never leave you. May take a vacation for a couple of days but that's it, promise!" (p.8)	35
Keeping pancakes	Comforting users that their favorite brand is here to stay.	@IHOP: "Don't worry, Pancakers. We still love pancakes. We're just expanding our burger horizons." (p. 310)	18
Keeping it professional	Tweets responding to user questions or concerns, but in a very professional way.		
Answering user questions	Tweets including a clear answer to a user question.		
Codes			
Answering question		@KFC_UKI: "The majority are back open now, we would never stay away too long. Check the website to see if yours is."	19

		(p.7)	
Customer service: standard replies	Tweets answering user questions or comments.		
Codes			
Standardized response (IHOP)	Response not referring to specific elements of the user question or concern. Could apply to any user tweet.	@IHOP: "Good choice! Thanks for sharing your IHOb burger love with us, check your DM's! We've got something burgerin' good waiting for you!" (p.1)	2
Standardized response (Crockpot)		@CrockPotCares: "Hi Katy Mary, Please send us a DM so that we can take care of this for you ASAP." (p.1)	3
Standardized response (KFC)		@KFC_UKI: "Hi Antonietta, we're so sorry that we had no Chicken when you visited today in Dunstable. We deliver our chicken fresh to our restaurants and have had a few hiccups but the Colonel is working on fixing it. We hope to see you again soon." (p. 16)	5