

Frozen Meat Against COVID-19 Misinformation: An Analysis of Steak-Umm and Positive Expectancy Violations

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Abstract

COVID-19 has forced many businesses to adjust their communication strategies to fit a new reality. One surprising example of this strategy adjustment came from the company Steak-umm, maker of frozen sliced beef. Instead of finding new ways to promote its products, the company shifted its focus to the public's urgent needs, breaking down possible approaches to navigating information flow during the pandemic. This resulted in overwhelming praise on social and news media, including almost 60,000 new Twitter followers within a week. Drawing on expectancy

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violation theory, this case study examines Steak-umm's strategy, the content of social media responses, and why the approach was successful.

Keywords

misinformation, COVID-19, expectancy violation, Twitter, brand communication

COVID-19 forced businesses to adjust their communication strategies to fit a new reality. Among the most notable examples of such adjustment came from Steak-umm, the producer of frozen sliced beef. Taking on the role of science communicator and "coronavirus misinformation watchdog" (Vranica, 2020) instead of simply promoting its products, the company shifted its focus to the urgent needs of its publics, breaking down possible approaches to navigating information flow during the pandemic.

In this article, we examine Steak-umm's strategy and its outcomes through the lens of expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & Jones, 1976). We discuss the case and thematically analyze relevant Twitter posts to study the associated strategic and technical communication. Thus, this study contributes to our understanding of how texts produced by corporate organizations might "function as agents of knowledge making, action, and change" (Rude, 2009, p. 176) and engender public support for the brands at the same time.

Steak-Umm and COVID-19

In 2015, the Steak-umm organization hired marketing agency Allebach Communications to run its social media accounts in order to promote its products to a younger public (Andrews, 2020). According to Allebach Communications, they adopted a "human-brand integration style" and took down "the fourth wall" by focusing on transparency, the brand's self-awareness, and discussions of relevant social issues (Bradley, 2019). Although the strategy attracted a younger audience, Steak-umm's public reaction to COVID-19 took the volume of the brand's support to a whole new level.

On April 6, 2020, on behalf of Steak-umm, the agency published a Twitter thread discussing what counts as data and how to distinguish between true and false information about COVID-19 (Masnik, 2020), stating the following:

Friendly reminder in times of uncertainty and misinformation: anecdotes are not data. (good) data is carefully measured and collected information based on a range of subject-dependent factors, including, but not limited to, controlled variables, meta-analysis, and randomization.

This thread received thousands of reposts and earned Steak-umm the titles “voice of reason” (Masnik, 2020) and “beacon of truth” (Zafarris, 2020) in the media. Within the next week, Steak-umm thanked its followers for amplifying its messages and shared five more threads addressing science communication, misinformation, and critical thinking. Meanwhile, the company demonstrated self-awareness by acknowledging its bizarre new role, apologizing for anthropomorphizing the brand and admitting that its ultimate goal was to sell its products (Masnik, 2020).

The strategy resulted in overwhelming praise on social media, including multiple retweets from opinion leaders with “verified” accounts, almost 60,000 new followers, and 160 million potential impressions within a week (these numbers are based on data that we gathered using Crimson Hexagon, 2020, a social media data collection and analysis tool owned by Brandwatch). Moreover, the brand reached thousands more through earned mainstream media discussing its unusual approach to social media during the pandemic (e.g., Andrews, 2020). Taking advantage of its public attention, Steak-umm raised thousands of dollars for Feeding America and offered its social media platform to direct attention to frontline workers and researchers.

A number of communication experts credited the brand’s authenticity and conversational tone as major drivers of its success (e.g., Andrews, 2020). Indeed, strategic communication scholarship demonstrates the positive impact of authentic communication on public attitudes and word-of-mouth intentions (Oh et al., 2019). But this feature of Steak-umm’s communication strategy does not necessarily explain the volume of public support during the pandemic. If the brand had been communicating authentically for several years, why did we see such a spike in followers now?

To examine another possible factor contributing to the success of Steak-umm’s response to the pandemic, we analyze the case through the lens of expectancy violations theory (Burgoon & Jones, 1976), which predicts how individuals will respond when others communicate in unexpected ways. Although expectancy violations can be positive or negative depending on the situation, research has shown that positive expectancy violations resulting in positive communication appraisals and outcomes can happen when publics are pleasantly surprised by an entity’s communication (e.g., Yim, 2019).

Although many other contextual factors might also be at play, this theory offers one potential lens for explaining the media coverage that Steak-umm received and consumer reactions. Based on this theory, then, we pose this question: What themes are reflected in consumer tweets about Steak-umm and to what extent do reactions reflect positive expectancy violations?

Consumer Reactions

To address this question, we conducted a thematic analysis of posts that replied to or mentioned Steak-umm. We used Crimson Hexagon (2020) to obtain a random sample of 1,000 tweets posted from April 1, 2020, through April 14, 2020, limiting them to those from U.S. Twitter users posting in English. We followed Smith's (1995) five-step process to develop and collapse themes. The most prominent themes we found were praise, leadership, surprise, and product mentions.

Praise

One of the most prominent themes was praise for Steak-umm and its content. Responses to their watchdog posts were overwhelmingly positive, such as one that stated, "You are amazing. Thank you [heart emoji]" (Nellie, 2020). Other users posted to share Steak-umm's content with their followers, express gratitude toward Steak-umm, or praise the content through endorsing the messages related to critical thinking, media literacy, and science communication. For instance, one said, "I want to know the story of how @steak_umm became such a great educational source for media literacy" (Manriquez, 2020).

Leadership

Another related theme was leadership. This theme was seen in several posts comparing its communication to that of President Trump. For example, one post said, "When you get more responsible information from a frozen meat than from the President of the United States . . ." (Toots the Red, 2020). It was also seen in posts saying Steak-umm, or the person behind the posts, is a hero, should run for president, or be nominated as vice president by presidential candidate Joe Biden. Examples included, "Umm, thank you, @steak_umm, for your sound reasoning. Exceptional read and quite right. Wanna run for President?" (Rau, 2020), and "Can we drop Biden and choose the @steak_umm intern instead?" (Wilson, 2020).

Surprise

Surprise, confusion, and observations about the strangeness of 2020 were also prevalent. This came in the form of commenting on how it is odd that a frozen meat company is taking on this role and how that is a reflection of the strange reality of 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exemplar posts included, “Can’t believe I’m retweeting @steak_umm but these are strange times we’re living in” (Woods, 2020), and “@steak_umm being the voice of reason is peak 2020” (Jamie Plus a 6 Foot Radius of Empty Space, 2020).

Product Mentions

Most immediately related to company success were posts that endorsed Steak-umm products or explicitly stated purchase intentions. For instance, “The only way I can thank Steak-umm for the truth bombs is to buy some Steak-umm, so I’ll make some cheesesteaks soon, yo” (Valholla, 2020). Some of these tweets reflected nostalgia for the brand and referred to childhood or college. One such tweet said, “I haven’t had @steak_umm since I was a wee lass but I’m definitely getting some next grocery trip because I’m in love with their social media presence right now” (Liliana, 2020).

Discussion

Findings from our thematic analysis reflect that Steak-umm’s content resulted in positive expectancy violations. This finding was evident across the themes and through the use of humor in posts. People explicitly indicated that it was strange or unexpected for a frozen meat brand to take on this role of watchdog and media literacy educator and praised them for doing so.

In addition, the results highlight the benefits of brand authenticity and the use of conversational human voice in online communication. Having conversations with Twitter users and addressing their pressing concerns allowed Steak-umm to connect with its publics, even leading some to inquire about the true identity of the person tweeting. Following its long-term strategy, Steak-umm removed the “fourth wall” and was praised for being on the same page as its publics during the crisis.

This case study provides several takeaways for strategic and technical communicators. First, the study demonstrates that companies should not be afraid to surprise their publics and show a human side. Showing humanity might be especially relevant for communicating complex matters such as

misinformation or other science communication topics (Steiner, 1999). In this case, that involved a professional communicator not only communicating complex information but also providing followers insight into the technical communication process in a way for which communication practitioners and scholars are uniquely situated.

Second, previous authentic communication demonstrating the commitment of a company to its values might be a foundation for ensuring positive outcomes of expectancy violation. This takeaway demonstrates that “values [are] important in our organizations of classrooms, workplaces, and situations beyond these settings in which texts are used to establish or change policies and priorities” (Rude, 2009, p. 182). Shared values mediated through Steak-umm’s texts were clearly more important for the brand’s stakeholders than was the established decorum that dictates certain behavioral norms for organizations in a crisis situation.

Finally, the study demonstrates the role that brand communication can play in enacting social change. Steak-umm’s case highlights the benefits of active commitment to public good for organizations, which is confirmed by the social justice approach in technical communication (Colton & Holmes, 2018) and corporate social responsibility research (Barić, 2017). This case demonstrates that not only does such a commitment make the world a better place, but it might also bring brands public support.

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