

Meaning Cocreation and Social Influencers in a Digital Racial Crisis A Social Network Analysis of Starbucks's Racial Crisis in Philadelphia

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The purpose of the research was to explore how the public shaped the race-related discourses during Starbucks's racial crisis in Philadelphia and examine the role of social influencers in the crisis. Using semantic network analysis to analyze race-related social media discourses, this research found that the social media discourses focused on Starbucks's racial training, racial identity, and other celebrities who received racial critiques. Mainstream media, celebrities, and activists were the primary social influencers in the Starbucks crisis.

Keywords: identity, social media, race, social network analysis, semantic network analysis

In recent years, many digital discourses have been driven by racial identities, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #RaceTogether, and #StopAsianHate. Millions of social media users have engaged in racial identity-relevant online discussions. When identity-relevant characteristics become salient to people in crises, individuals tend to develop an emotional attachment to a particular social group and express their opinions regarding their social identities (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010; Novak & Richmond, 2019). When a company is involved in a racial controversy, the company can encounter critiques and boycotts in the digital space.

Social media crisis communication has become crucial for individuals, organizations, and governments (Nganji & Cockburn, 2020). In crisis communication research, three research approaches have been adopted: Organization-centered crisis approach, audience-centered crisis approach, and cocreational approach. The organization-centered crisis approach has dominated crisis communication scholarship for a decade. Scholars have used theories, such as the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) and image repair theory, to help organizations create reactive strategies after crises (Benoit, 1997, 2006; Coombs, 2012a, 2012b; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2010, 2012). The audience-centered crisis approach has been developed with the development of social media platforms. This approach proposes that the public has become the new agenda-setters in crises (Fraustino & Liu, 2017; Seeger, 2006). Some scholars in crisis

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communication believed that relying only on the organization-centered or the audience-centered approach to crisis communication was insufficient to reflect the entire picture of the meaning-cocreation process in the digital era. Thus, the cocreational approach has been applied to crisis communication in recent years (Chewning, 2015; Sanderson, Barnes, Williamson, & Kian, 2016; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013). However, when social identity becomes salient in a crisis, how the public constructs meanings and narratives in social media still needs to be explored.

Another crucial crisis feature in the digital era is that the public tends to trust online influencers as information sources (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, & Freberg, 2011). User-generated content on social media platforms, particularly the content created by online influencers, has become a critical instrument in shaping the public's opinions during crises (Church, Thambusamy, & Nemati, 2020). With the powerful impact of social influencers, many followers trust what social influencers post (Cooley & Parks-Yancy, 2019; Lou & Yuan, 2019). Understanding who speaks what content to whom during crises has become crucial for communication practitioners. Social media influencers extensively impact their followers and play vital roles in digital meaning cocreation. On digital platforms, various influencers impact the public, including journalists and celebrities (e.g., politicians, actors, and actresses). Social media influencers may operate differently than journalists and celebrities because they can create paid sponsorships with corporations. Due to ethical and transparency issues, some paid influencers or sponsorships in crisis communication are not disclosed to the public.

The research explores how social media users construct meaning in a racial crisis, particularly how corporations, online influencers, and the common public cocreate crisis narratives. This research uses the context of Starbucks's racial crisis in Philadelphia to examine social influencers in a racial situation. The following section introduces the crisis context.

Research Context

Crisis Background: The Starbucks Crisis in Philadelphia

According to the report in the *New York Times* (Hauser, 2018), on April 12, 2018, two Black men attempted to use the restroom at Starbucks in Philadelphia, United States. The store's manager approached the two Black men and asked if they wanted to order drinks. They declined to order drinks. Later, the Starbucks manager told these two customers that the restroom was only for paying customers. The manager called 911 and said the two Black men were trespassing. The police arrested the two Black men (Hauser, 2018). The incident immediately went viral. Starbucks received massive criticism given that it was against the spirit of the company's recent campaigns aiming to embrace diversity and engage consumers in a conversation about race. The Starbucks case is a typical example of how the public reacts to an ethical crisis and how social media users and influencers cocreate narratives in a racial crisis. The Philadelphia crisis also contradicts the "third place" value the company has promoted. "The Third Place has never been defined solely by a physical space; it's also the feeling of warmth, connection, a sense of belonging [to] Starbucks" (Peiper, 2022, para. 13).

After the crisis, Pennsylvania's Black Lives Matter chapter gathered outside the Starbucks store to protest at the site (Horst, 2018). Social media users started using #BoycottStarbucks and #ENOUGH to express their anger (Horst, 2018; Van Sant & Dwyer, 2018). On May 2, 2018, the two Black men settled

with Starbucks (Meyer, 2018a). On May 29, 2018, Starbucks closed more than 8,000 company-owned stores in the United States for racial-bias training (Abrams, Hsu, & Eligon, 2018).

Following the crisis, Starbucks changed its bathroom policy in 2018, allowing anyone to use the bathrooms even if they have not purchased anything from the store (Meyer, 2018b; Spence, 2018). In July 2022, Starbucks adjusted its bathroom policy again, allowing stores to close their public bathrooms in case of safety concerns (Starbucks, 2022). The company has also opened more Philadelphia stores with pickup or drive-through services only (Blumgart, 2022; McCarthy, 2022).

Literature Review

In society, crises could be caused by many triggers, such as product recalls, national pride, inappropriate behavior of a chief executive officer (CEO), and many other reasons. However, Starbucks's Philadelphia crisis is a unique case to explore how the public reacted to a social identity-related crisis and who led the public opinion in this specific crisis. In the following section, we will discuss the social identity theory to understand the background of social identity and how it triggered the crisis in this case.

Social Identity Theory

For companies, getting involved in racial crises is not rare. Racial identity-induced crises have occurred in many companies, such as Starbucks's #RaceTogether campaign (Novak & Richmond, 2019), Gucci's clothes with blackface design (Givhan, 2019), Papa John's founder's racial remarks (Kirsch, 2018), and many other cases. However, little empirical research has addressed how the public reacts to racial identity-induced crises in the digital space.

Tajfel (1978) defined social identity as "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). When individuals identify their salient social identities, they tend to compare their social groups and other groups and maintain a positive image of their social groups (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010).

Social identity research has examined various social groups with different demographics, psychological features, and issues of interest, such as different gender groups, age groups, races, ethnic groups, politically partisan groups, and many others (Kim, Lee, & Oh, 2020). A particular racial group tends to make an intergroup comparison when their racial identity becomes salient. Individuals' racial identity is strongly related to self-esteem (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Umaña-Taylor, 2004). Racial identities become salient when group members encounter intergroup comparisons and issues of identity distinctiveness (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). In the Starbucks crisis in Philadelphia, the Black community believed they were discriminated against because of the color of their skin. Therefore, race identity is a critical attribution in crisis communication.

Social identity theory indicates that individuals ascribe to different ethnic groups when they identify that the group identities are significant and salient to them (Tajfel, 1981). The theory focuses on individuals' stereotyped judgment (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963) and intergroup relations (Hornsey, 2008). When intergroup social comparisons occur, individuals are motivated to maintain a positive image and achieve a sense of in-

group cohesion (Hornsey, 2008; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). In the context of the Starbucks crisis in Philadelphia, during the crisis, the two African Americans' experiences at Starbucks resonated with other social media users' experiences and further generated more online discussions.

In the context of the online racial crisis, all the social media users created their interpretations and understanding of the crisis with their tweets, retweets, comments, and shares (Kim et al., 2020). In these processes, meanings are cocreated by all social media users (Kim et al., 2020). Exploring how meaning and narratives were created in the Starbucks crisis is one of the research purposes of this study.

From Organization-Centered Approaches to the Cocreative Approach in Crisis Communication

A crisis is "a significant threat to operations that might have negative consequences if not handled properly" (Coombs, 2007, para. 2). Crises may occur in companies, nonprofits, governments, or other societal entities. For companies, severe crises and inappropriate crisis management may lead to reputational damage, protests, boycotts, or even bankruptcy (Coombs, 2007; Mitroff, Shrivastava, & Udvardia, 1987). Therefore, communication scholars and practitioners need to understand how the public reacts to a crisis and creates meaning when problems occur.

Two crisis communication theories dominate crisis communication: The SCCT and image repair theory (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). The SCCT is derived from attribution theory, which focuses on how individuals determine the cause of a crisis and who should be responsible for a crisis (Coombs, 2012a, 2012b; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2010). The SCCT elaborates on various crises' attributions and the corresponding response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2010, 2012). Benoit's (1997) image repair theory assumes that crisis management is goal-oriented and that communication practitioners should use appropriate narratives to create a positive reputation for organizations after crises (Benoit, 1997, 2006). However, both theories are *organization-centered crisis approaches*, which treat organizations as the center of the public-organization relationships and focus on helping organizations design better strategies and responses. For a long time, crisis communication has focused on organization-oriented and one-way communication, and the public's voices have been ignored.

Heath (1993) claimed that "meaning is created and expressed through discourse" (p. 142). Individuals attach their interpretations to the crises and express their opinions online via tweeting, retweeting, comments, and other interactive activities. Social actors on virtual platforms interact with other social media users and exchange information about the crisis updates (Vargo & Lusch, 2008). When the responsibilities of a crisis are ambiguous, social media users feel suspicious about the cause of the crisis and become critical of the process of crisis treatment (Chewning, 2015). In a crisis, the public is not just a passive information receiver. Instead, the public is an information producer who can challenge the original agenda designed by organizations (Zhao, Zhan, & Jie, 2018). Many scholars in crisis communication claim that communication practitioners should use an *audience-oriented approach* in crisis management and emphasize that the public becomes the new agenda-setters for crisis-relevant messages (Fraustino & Liu, 2017; Seeger, 2006). Even though the public plays a crucial role in constructing crisis narratives on social media platforms, organizations should also recognize their contributions to the narratives. The audience-oriented approach to crisis communication may ignore the role of organizations in crisis communication.

In real life, either addressing how to design effective crisis messages from an organization's perspective (i.e., *an organization-centered crisis approach*) or focusing on the power of the public in crisis communication (i.e., *an audience-centered crisis approach*) is insufficient to capture the whole picture of the formation of online discourses cocreated by organizations and publics. An alternative approach to crisis communication emerged in crisis communication: *A narrative, cocreational approach*, which focuses on analyzing the meaning cocreation process between an organization's crisis messages and the public's crisis narratives (Chewning, 2015; Sanderson et al., 2016; Theunissen, 2014; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

In light of the previous literature, this research examines how the public took part in meaning cocreation through narrative construction in the context of Starbucks's racial crisis.

RQ1: How were meanings cocreated by the public in the race-relevant discourse during the Starbucks crisis in Philadelphia?

Social Network Theory and Social Influencers in the Digital Age and Crisis Communication

Social network theory explains the relationships among social actors, the flow of resources, and the structure of the networked actors (Marin & Wellman, 2011). Social network theory helps communication scholars and practitioners understand how organizations could put themselves in better positions in social networks to get resources and more close-knit internal relationships (Borgatti, Everett, & Johnson, 2018). As Yang and Taylor (2015) indicated, "The network perspective has theoretical, methodological, and practice-based values for advancing a communicative understanding of OPRs" (p. 95). The social network approach reveals the formation of structures and groups in networks (Liu, Sidhu, Beacom, & Valente, 2017), which is suitable for this research.

Furthermore, the social network theory also can be used to explain the role of social influencers. Even before social media's emergence, social influencers' critical roles in information dissemination and opinion exchanges had already been addressed in various communication studies (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Rogers, 1962). Social influence is a process by which "individuals adapt their opinion, revise their beliefs, or change their behavior as a result of social interactions with other people" (Moussaïd, Kämmer, Analytis, & Neth, 2013, p. 1). Social influencers are crucial in shaping individuals' viewpoints and decision-making processes (Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2017). Social network theory indicates that opinion leaders work as brokers to bridge the social boundaries between two communities or groups (Burt, 1999). Two different types of social groups usually lack connections. Structural holes exist between two groups to prevent the information flows from one group to another (Burt, 1999, 2004). Therefore, people who can connect the gaps between two groups grasp more opportunities than the rest, such as getting promoted in jobs and knowing more information. Opinion leadership tends to be established when individuals across social groups' boundaries have more diverse and intergroup connections (Park, 2013). Opinion leaders have higher engagement and awareness of political issues (Keller & Berry, 2003; Park, 2013).

In the digital age, online social influencers attract many followers, develop their expertise in specific areas, and enhance their unique attractiveness through self-generated content (Feng, 2016). The content created by social influencers has persuasive power for their followers (Freberg et al., 2011). Social influencers usually have unique characteristics to separate themselves from others. According to Freberg and colleagues

(2011), participants in the study perceived the social media influencers as “verbal, smart, ambitious, productive, and poised” (p. 91). These positive characteristics of social influencers make them attractive to their followers.

The former research indicated that social media influencers create credibility and trust longitudinally and make their followers trust their opinions (Chu & Kim, 2011; Kapitan & Silvera, 2016). The trust between followers and influencers helps them generate better relationships and even leads to brand endorsement (De Veirman, Cauberghe, & Hudders, 2017; Xu, 2019). Given the importance of the roles of social influencers during Starbucks’s racial crisis, this study explores the following research question:

RQ2: In the Starbucks racial crisis in Philadelphia, who were the leading social influencers?

Method

Semantic Network Analysis and Meaning Cocreation

Semantic network analysis is a research method that uses “network analytic techniques on paired associations based on shared meaning as opposed to paired associations of behavioral or perceived communication links” (Doerfel, 1998, p. 16). This research method allows researchers to examine the co-occurrences of words and understand how individuals create meanings (Shim, Park, & Wilding, 2015; Yang & Veil, 2017). In the context of Starbucks’s racial crisis in Philadelphia, we applied the semantic network analysis to examine when Twitter users used race-relevant words (i.e., race, racial, racists, and racism) during the crisis period (from April 12, 2018, to June 1, 2018) and determine which words co-occurred. Using the semantic network analysis facilitates our understanding of the dynamics of conversations in the research context.

Data Collection

This study focused on analyzing publicly available content from Twitter to address the proposed RQs. Using Salesforce Marketing Cloud’s Social Studio technology, which allows users to harvest social media content, including tweets, through keyword search based on Boolean operations (Salesforce, n.d.), this study collected data for Starbucks’s racial crisis. Keywords, such as Starbucks and Philadelphia, Starbucks and racial, and Starbucks and racism, were used to retrieve the publicly available tweets created between April 12, 2018, and June 1, 2018. The time line reflected when the crisis happened and the ending date with nationwide racial bias training, respectively. More than 524,000 tweets in this period discussed Starbucks’s racial crisis.

A total of 1,000 tweets were randomly selected among all the Starbucks crisis–relevant tweets for the semantic network analysis to answer RQ1. Analyzing “the structure of a system based on shared-meaning” (Doerfel & Barnett, 1999, p. 589), the semantic network analysis is a commonly used methodological approach to reveal how meanings are cocreated in the discourse. This study used semantic network analysis to analyze the ego-network structures of “racial.” For RQ1, the unit of analysis was a word. In the context of the Starbucks crisis, the selected words that co-occurred with race, racial, racism, and racist were analyzed to explore how social media users contributed to meaning making.

To answer RQ2, 50,000 tweets were randomly sampled to examine the network features. For the “retweet network,” using the look-up application programming interface and the tweet ID collected from

Salesforce Marketing Cloud's Social Studio, we found the retweet status or quote status for all 50,000 tweets. If either retweet status or quote status existed, we continued to find the user screen name of the retweeted or quote-retweeted posts. This study continuously attempted to find the retweeted or quote-retweeted posts until the original authors of the tweets were reached. For the "mention network," we attempted to find the sub-strings right after the symbol "@"." Each sub-string was a mentioned user. Overall, this study identified and analyzed 28,861 retweet relationships, 5,148 quote-retweet relationships, and 21,402 mention relationships.

For RQ2, an edge was the unit of analysis. *Edges* are ties that create relationships among people, organizations, and communities. In RQ2, the edges that we examined were the mention and retweet relationships among Twitter users. If one Twitter user (A) mentioned the other user's account (B) in their tweets, retweets, and quote retweets, an edge between A and B was created. In RQ2, by analyzing the ties (edges) among Twitter users who discussed the Starbucks crisis in Philadelphia, this study identified the social influencers who played crucial roles on Twitter.

The Measures of Social Influencers' Centrality

Usually, in social network analysis, three indicators can be used to assess network centrality: Degree, betweenness, and closeness (Wu & Yang, 2017). However, in the Starbucks crisis, millions of social media users engaged in online discussions, and it was hard for the researchers to find social influencers based on all the tweets. According to Costenbader and Valente (2003), if researchers use the sampling technique to analyze samples from all the relationships in a whole network, some network centrality measures are less influenced by the sampling process, including *in-degree centrality and eigenvector centrality*. In-degree refers to "the number of incoming ties received by a node" (Borgatti et al., 2018, p. 339). If a Twitter account has a higher in-degree centrality, it means many social media users are connected to the account in a particular context, and the posts from this account can reach more users. These two centrality measures are less affected by sampling than out-degree and betweenness centrality. In other words, the sampling process may impact out-degree and betweenness centrality. Therefore, this research used in-degree centrality and eigenvector centrality to measure social influencers' centrality. The network data were input to NodeXL for analysis.

Results

Meaning Cocreational During the Starbucks Crisis in Philadelphia

Research Question 1 explored how meanings were cocreated by Twitter users during the Starbucks crisis in Philadelphia. Frequencies and normalized degree centrality (NDC) were calculated for each word shown in the race-relevant network to explore RQ1. Normalized degree centrality allows researchers to "compare centralities from networks with different sizes" (Yang & Veil, 2017, p. 418). It is a valuable measure to identify the prominence of words in a particular network. The higher NDC a word has, the more ties (connections) the word has in a specific network, and then the word with a higher NDC has a more central position than other words in the network (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).

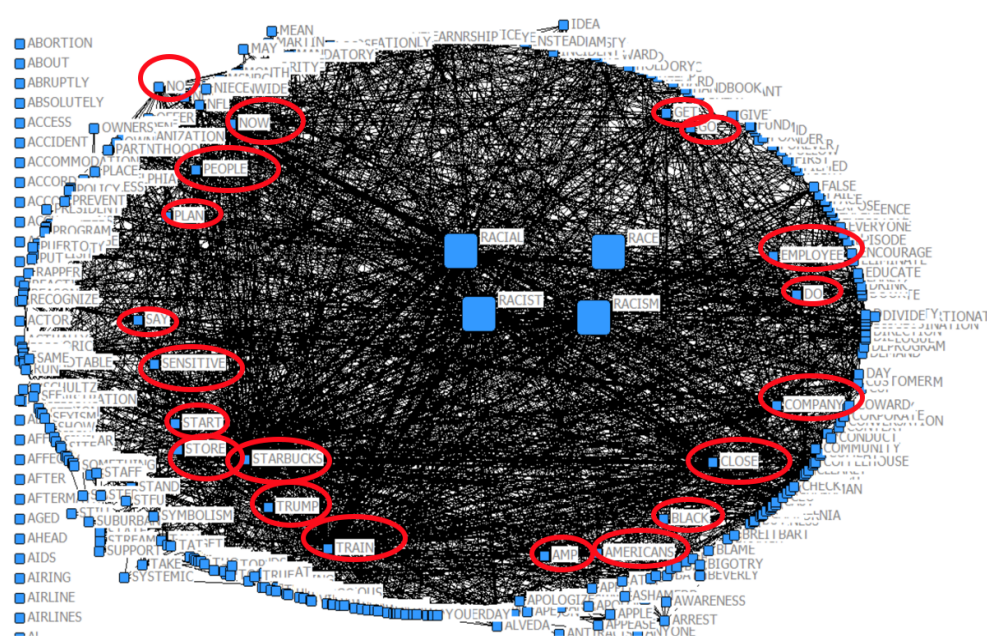


Figure 1. The ego-centered network of race-relevant words.

As shown in Figure 1, the top 20 keywords shown in the race-relevant network included Starbucks ($n = 778$, $NDC = 0.75$), train ($n = 607$, $NDC = 0.58$), close ($n = 313$, $NDC = 0.30$), now ($n = 219$, $NDC = 0.21$), no ($n = 173$, $NDC = 0.17$), store ($n = 164$, $NDC = 0.16$), employee ($n = 158$, $NDC = 0.15$), company ($n = 141$, $NDC = 0.14$), go ($n = 115$, $NDC = 0.11$), get ($n = 111$, $NDC = 0.11$), sensitivity ($n = 111$, $NDC = 0.11$), people ($n = 109$, $NDC = 0.11$), Trump ($n = 105$, $NDC = 0.10$), say ($n = 101$, $NDC = 0.10$), do ($n = 99$, $NDC = 0.09$), start ($n = 95$, $NDC = 0.09$), plan ($n = 94$, $NDC = 0.09$), America ($n = 90$, $NDC = 0.09$), Black ($n = 89$, $NDC = 0.09$), and Roseanne ($n = 89$, $NDC = 0.09$).

On April 17, 2018, after the racial crisis occurred, Starbucks announced that they would close nationwide stores for racial-bias education, and the racial training was conducted on May 29, 2018 (Abrams et al., 2018). For the top words mentioned in the race-relevant network of the Starbucks crisis, the racial-bias training words were shown, including "train," "close," "sensitivity," and "store." "Black" was the word that identified the racial identity of the African American group.

"Trump" and "America" were shown in Starbucks's race-relevant network because, on May 29, 2018, Starbucks's CEO Howard Schultz commented on President Trump and his administration and claimed that they had contributed to the problems of racist behaviors in the United States (Caralle, 2018).

"Roseanne" was shown as the top keyword. Roseanne Barr is an American actress, comedian, television producer, and one of the main actors in the American situation comedy *Roseanne* on American Broadcasting Company (ABC; Barr & Williams, 1998–2018). Roseanne was mentioned in the network of the Starbucks crisis because of a racial tweet she posted previously about Valerie Jarrett, an African American woman and a former

White House adviser with the Obama administration. Roseanne Barr's show was canceled by ABC on the same date (Koblin, 2018). Because of the race factor, when social media users discussed Starbucks's racial issue, they also became critical of other celebrities who had caused similar problems.

In summary, the most co-occurred words with race, racial, racist, and racism in Starbucks's network have three features: Twitter conversations on the Starbucks crisis were related to racial training (e.g., store, close, sensitivity), racial identity relevant (e.g., Black), and related to celebrities who were criticized for their racist biases (e.g., Trump and Roseanne).

Analysis of Social Influencers

Research Question 2 was proposed to identify Twitter social influencers in Starbucks's racial crisis. As mentioned above, this study explored edges, a line connecting two vertices of 50,000 randomly selected tweets that contained Starbucks and racial on Twitter. There are two approaches to developing edges (ties) in the context of Twitter. First, retweeting a tweet is an action to develop an edge between two nodes: The node that initially posted a tweet and the node that retweeted a tweet. Second, the "mentions" of someone in one's tweet also develops edges. This study analyzed both the retweet and mention networks in the network of Starbucks's racial crisis.

In total, 55,413 valid edges were identified in Starbucks's racial crisis, including 43,867 unique edges and 11,546 edges with duplicates. A total of 33,415 valid nodes were analyzed. Duplicate edge means one person (e.g., Twitter user A) retweeted or mentioned another social media account (e.g., Twitter user B) many times in the data set. Unique edge means user A only mentioned/retweeted user B one time. In other words, 11,546 ties in our data sets were Twitter users who created relationships (either by mentions, retweets, or quote retweets) with the other Twitter accounts.

A network with 33,415 nodes was identified. The overall network density was 0.0041%, suggesting the network had low density. As Uysal and Yang (2013) claimed, "a geodesic distance is the most efficient path in terms of transmitting information" (p. 465). For the mention and retweet networks of the Starbucks crisis in Philadelphia, the average geodesic distance was 4.59. It means that one tweet about Starbucks's Philadelphia crisis needs to go through four Twitter users on average to reach another Twitter user. The whole network level of Starbucks's network characteristics is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Network Features of Starbucks's Racial Crisis.

Degree	
Average in-degree	1.38
Average out-degree	1.38
Centrality Measures	
Average betweenness centrality	102226.88
Average closeness centrality	0.05

The top 30 *high in-degree centrality nodes* (actors) in Starbucks's racial crisis network are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. High In-Degree Centrality Nodes in the Network of Starbucks's Racial Crisis.

Twitter Accounts	In-Degree	Out-Degree	Betweenness Centrality	Closeness Centrality
Starbucks (n.d.)	5,694	50	598,817,237.96	0.00
Educating Liberals (n.d.)	2,667	0	153,878,774.94	0.00
The Daily Show (n.d.)	2,284	1	135,696,801.09	0.00
CNN International (n.d.)	1,341	0	74,439,456.92	0.00
MSNBC (n.d.)	1,021	9	38,524,480.43	0.00
Scahill (n.d.)	876	1	46,551,354.32	0.00
Formerly "AM JOY" (n.d.)	840	4	10,334,078.97	0.00
CNN (n.d.)	752	1	40,012,663.87	0.00
McQueen (n.d.)	741	0	40,069,096.60	0.00
GITMO (n.d.)	740	2	37,953,479.49	0.00
King (n.d.)	696	6	15,138,598.97	0.00
Trinity (n.d.)	642	0	34,836,677.98	0.00
Reid (n.d.)	612	5	13,743,974.38	0.00
Hayes (n.d.)	598	3	8,748,063.65	0.00
Ponticello (n.d.)	558	1	27,451,673.71	0.00
Washington Examiner (n.d.)	557	0	29,721,433.34	0.00
The Hill (n.d.)	477	0	24,699,217.30	0.00
NBC7 San Diego (n.d.)	463	0	21,838,412.30	0.00
Woolery (n.d.)	454	0	22,471,337.33	0.00
Jennings (n.d.)	449	0	28,104,995.98	0.00
Raccoon (n.d.)	426	0	20,454,651.51	0.00
Daou (n.d.)	410	0	21,238,075.56	0.00
Rod (n.d.)	360	1	21,669,586.62	0.00
Moore (n.d.)	355	0	17,639,787.68	0.00
AJ+ (n.d.)	308	0	18,657,111.10	0.00
MaggieB (n.d.)	293	5	17,824,530.80	0.00
NBCBLK (n.d.)	283	1	3,899,667.52	0.00
HurricaneRed (n.d.)	280	1	12,281,488.69	0.00
Barr (n.d.)	274	0	9,869,478.72	0.00
Riprock (n.d.)	273	2	12,859,541.71	0.00

As shown in Figure 1, Starbucks Coffee's Twitter account received the highest number of incoming ties. Several media accounts also received many incoming ties, such as CNN International, MSNBC, Washington Examiner, The Hill, NBC7 San Diego, and NBCBLK. Some TV show hosts (e.g., Chris Hayes, Chuck Woolery, Ken Jennings, and Roseanne Barr) as well as activists (e.g., Dylan, Shaun King, and Nicholas

Ponticello) received many incoming ties. Some African American celebrities, such as Joy Reid and Cyrus McQueen, were also high in-degree actors. In this case, the collective accounts (e.g., The Daily Show, CNN International, MSNBC) had higher in-degree centrality than individual accounts (e.g., Joy Reid, Chris Hayes). As explained by Liu and colleagues (2017), "Individuals with high degree centrality are more likely to become opinion leaders because more social ties can mean greater opportunities to receive as well as disseminate information" (p. 3). In other words, the collective accounts had more impact on opinion leaders than the individual accounts in this study.

Eigenvector centrality measures "the principal eigenvector of the adjacency matrix defining the network" (Borgatti, 2005, p. 61). For all the ties in the Starbucks network, the maximum eigenvector centrality was 0.010. The average eigenvector centrality of all the nodes in the network was 0.000. Both numbers indicated that Starbucks's racial issue network was not well-connected.

The top eigenvector centrality nodes included Formerly "AM JOY" (n.d.), Hayes (n.d.), MSNBC (n.d.), NBCBLK (n.d.), King (n.d.), Reid (n.d.), Sena (n.d.), and Starbucks (n.d.). Their eigenvector centrality scores ranged from 0.010 to 0.001. Some of those top actors were media influencers, such as MSNBC and NBCBLK (a Twitter account from NBC News covering the Black community's stories). It was noticeable that Joy Reid, an African American cable television host at MSNBC, used her personal account and the official Formerly "AM JOY" account to support victims in the Starbucks crisis. Other individual influencers with relatively high eigenvector centrality included Shaun King (an American writer and civil rights activist), Chris Hayes (an American journalist), and Devin Sena (a social media coordinator for Live Action and founder of Human Defense Initiative).

In summary, the media influencers in Starbucks's racial crisis included CNN International, MSNBC, Washington Examiner, The Hill, NBC7 San Diego, and NBCBLK. Of individual social influencers in Starbucks's Philadelphia crisis network, many of them worked in media-relevant jobs (e.g., as journalists and hosts of television shows), such as Chris Hayes, Chuck Woolery, Ken Jennings, Joy Reid, Roseanne Barr, and some were activists (e.g., Shaun King, Nicholas Ponticello). Notably, some influencers with African American identities (e.g., Joy Reid and Cyrus McQueen) played a crucial role in the racial crisis online network.

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, this research addressed two aspects of the Starbucks crisis in Philadelphia: How meanings were cocreated by Twitter users concerning the race-related crisis, and who were the social influencers in the crisis. The research results have some implications for organizations facing racial crises.

Social Identity and Implications for Crisis Communication

First, this research adds to the literature on crisis communication by recognizing the salient attribution of racial identity in public discourses. As found in RQ1, three features were identified from the co-occurrence words in Starbucks' Philadelphia crisis. One of the features reflected the identity attribution of the crisis. Even though the public involved in the online discussions of Starbucks's racial crisis came from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, they identified the connection between the crisis and the Black

community. Previous crisis communication studies found that social identity significantly impacts public crisis evaluation and behavioral reactions (Ma, 2019; Shen & Cheng, 2022; Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2019; Zhang, Nekmat, & Chen, 2020). Scholars also found that the public's personal relevance increases if the victims are perceived as the public's in-group members (Ma, 2019). Sha (2006) found that the public is more active in processing the relevant information on race-related crises, such as racial discrimination if the crisis is relevant to the public's personal identities. The identity-related crisis also recalls the public's collective, traumatized memory of past events (Zhang et al., 2020).

This study suggests that crisis managers should identify the significance of diversity, inclusion, and identity-related training in postcrisis management. According to RQ1's findings, Starbucks framed the public discourses on Twitter through its diversity training. To respond to the public's concerns, Starbucks actively changed the company's policies and closed more than 8,000 company-owned stores in the United States on May 29, 2018, for racial-bias training (Abrams et al., 2018). The corporation showed a positive signal to the public that it was ready to change regarding its employee management and diversity policies. Through its diversity training, Starbucks showed us an example of how to facilitate diversity inside the organization. After the crisis, the news team published news releases on its official website addressing the principle of the third place at Starbucks. The company restated its commitment to creating a safe, welcoming, and soft landing space for everyone. It partnered with national organizations to provide a more inclusive experience for customers and employees (Starbucks, 2019, 2020). Starbucks' actions showed the company's efforts to rebuild belongingness and customer loyalty after the race-related crisis.

The research findings support the previous literature that corporations should pay attention to postcrisis online conversations and develop narratives to address diversity issues to meet the public's expectations for corporate social responsibility performance.

Social Influencers in the Starbucks Racial Crisis

The findings indicated that the online discussion went beyond the company and covered other topics and individuals not initially affiliated with the Starbucks crisis. As shown in RQ2, the study revealed multiple players who influenced the social media discourse regarding the Starbucks crisis. Media entities and opinion leaders were identified as the key social influencers. For example, President Trump and Roseanne Barr were mentioned in the context of social media critiques about their behaviors on racial issues.

In the management and marketing literature, this phenomenon is called *spillover effect*, meaning "the extent to which a message influences beliefs related to attributes that are not contained in the message" (Ahluwalia, Unnava, & Burnkrant, 2001, p. 158). When a crisis occurs in a company, the negative impacts become contagious, which could impact an innocent company, individual, or even the entire industry (Balachander & Ghose, 2003; Dahlen & Lang, 2006; Seo, Jang, Almanza, Miao, & Behnke, 2014). This research indicated spillover effects may happen when two entities (e.g., individuals or companies) share the same sociopolitical issue. The result of the spillover effects in the current study urges communication practitioners to design broader crisis strategies to handle reputational damage caused by various attributions of responsibilities perceived by the online public (Seo & Jang, 2021). Previous research also suggested that

companies should monitor the online environment, sociopolitical triggers, and public interactions in the event of more severe crisis spillover processes (Poroli & Huang, 2018).

This study showed that mass media at the international level (e.g., CNN International), national level (e.g., Washington Examiner, The Hill), local level (e.g., NBC7 San Diego), and media accounts of the Black communities (e.g., NBCBLK) played crucial roles in the Starbucks racial crisis. Additionally, some civil rights activists and African American celebrities became social influencers in the Starbucks context. They stood up and criticized Starbucks for misconduct. For example, Joy Reid used both her personal Twitter account and the account of her show *AM Joy* to express her support for the Black community. Opinion leaders from a particular racial identity have impacts on their followers' perceptions. According to the Pew Research Center's report, "Among U.S. adults who use Twitter, the top 25% of users by tweet volume produce 97% of all tweets, while the bottom 75% of users produce just 3%" (Odabas, 2022, para. 6). Twitter has made social media influencers' meaning creation more visible than regular users. Social media influencers have louder voices and higher social capital (Soares, Recuero, & Zago, 2018). These influencers have been called "super-participation (super-posters, agenda-setters, and facilitators)" (Graham & Wright, 2014, p. 625), whose opinions are further shared and reproduced by followers and other online users through selectivity processes (Graham & Wright, 2014). This study provides practical implications for organizations that may have similar race-related crises. Communication practitioners should be aware of how social influencers (e.g., leading mass media accounts, opinion leaders, activists) react to the crisis.

Cocreational Crisis Approach as an Alternative Approach in Crisis Management

Many studies in the field of crisis communication have focused only on companies' responses during or after crises. Classical organization-oriented theories in crisis communication primarily help corporations develop strategic plans to handle negative reputations after crises. This research applied a cocreational approach as an alternative method to demonstrate the importance of understanding how corporations, the public, and online influencers collectively shape online crisis narratives. With the surge in racial conflicts in the United States, corporate managers need to reconsider using crisis management from the public's perspective. Organizations' crisis strategies and the public's reactions to crises in the digital era work together to construct crisis communication discourse.

Limitations and Future Directions

This research has several limitations. The study only examined one racial crisis that occurred in the United States. The results may not be generalizable to a larger population. Additionally, 50,000 tweets were analyzed to explore the ties among social media users who discussed the Starbucks crisis. However, using a larger sample size in the whole network approach could increase the reliability of the research results. Future research should explore different ethnic/racial crises longitudinally with a more comprehensive data set and larger sample size.

Also, the semantic network method was applied to this study. Even though some researchers in communication used the same method (e.g., Doerfel & Barnett, 1999; Shim et al., 2015; Yang & Veil, 2017), we acknowledge that operationalizing the meaning cocreation using the co-occurrence of words may not

capture the richness and subjective meaning of each tweet. Future studies with semantic network analysis could better understand the meaning of social media content using qualitative analysis. The research results were also subject to the database we used or the keywords used to collect the data.

The last limitation of the study was the analysis of the social media discourses created by the general public from different ethnic/racial backgrounds rather than focusing on cocreated meanings by a particular ethnic group (e.g., Black/African American community). By comparing cocreated meanings by one group with those of another group, future research should demonstrate how similar or different social media discourses are within and across ethnic groups. Future research should discuss more ethnic groups' emotional attachment in crisis with the guidance of the social identity theory and explore more about how ethnic groups respond to identity-affiliated crises.

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