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Article

Negative e-WOM Resulting from Political Posts on Social Media: A Case Study of a Small Retailer's Struggle over Time

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Abstract: Consumers have been advocating for a variety of causes, and in turn, retailers are expressing their political opinions through social-media posts in hopes of aligning with their customers' views. This study looks at a single case in which customers reacted to a retailer's political opinion posted on a social media account. Data was collected at the time of the retailer's political post and up to three years afterward. Content analysis was employed to identify themes from the customer reviews posted, and four themes were identified. Of significance, this study found that customers of a retail store typically merge feelings on the retailer's product and political post or the retailer's service and the political post within their social media responses. Thus, a majority of customers in this case were not exclusively focused on battling the political post on social media. Also, a shift in customers' opinions of the retailer shifted positively over time.

Keywords: social movements; digital activism; political posts; social media; negative e-WOM



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1. Introduction

Certain groups of consumers, mainly the young and the wealthy, have expressed interest in the political opinions of retailers (Kwittken 2018). Some retailers have started sharing their political views via social media, as a marketing technique to create a memorable brand personality. In return, consumers who share similar opinions with the brand tend to develop a stronger connection to the brand and have a positive brand attitude, each of which results in an increased purchase intention (Matos et al. 2017). Still, retailers' political expressions may be a risky business strategy. The impacts of political posts can include the loss of profitability and the creation of a negative brand image (Pfeffer et al. 2014).

The posting of political statements by a retailer on social media can cause a crisis for the brand. However, some steps can be taken to counteract a negative post. According to the National Retail Federation's article on "Managing the Reality of Consumers Protesting with their wallets" (2018), retailers who take ownership, respond to customer's concerns promptly, and display loyalty to consumers may be able to survive during a crisis. While larger brands and retailers may be able to withstand negative publicity, small retailers may be at a greater risk of negative impacts, due to limited resources and consumer reach.

To date, most research on political social-media posts investigates the positive and negative impacts on large corporations after the controversial post has been disseminated. However, there is little research on small retailers' backlash after using social media to post their political opinions. Small retailers, defined in this study as a local company that employs less than 50 employees and provides goods or services to consumers (He et al. 2014), have traditionally had a limited social-media impact. Conversely, in recent years, social media has been identified as a new task that has been added to the responsibilities of owning a small business. Small businesses struggle to find the time to keep their social media accounts up-to-date, and some haven't fully invested in gaining knowledge on how to use social media effectively (Son and Niehm 2021; Kraus et al. 2019).

Social media has become increasingly popular, and many customers expect their favorite local retailer to be on social media. Retailers can benefit from social media by reaching a larger target market, creating affordable advertisements, and having the ability to interact with customers (He et al. 2014). Social media ultimately provides a platform for retailers to build a community where followers can feel connected to the brand. However, retailers may need to be careful about how followers will react to the retailer's social-media posts (Paniagua and Sapena 2014). Small businesses have the freedom to relate to consumers at a more personal level through social media, but consumers do not always agree with the owner's views. Thus, social media provides many benefits for a small business, but a single post could ruin the retailer's brand image.

According to Kwittken (2018), 83% of consumers prefer to purchase from ethical retailers and conduct business for the good of society. Brands, such as Tom's and Patagonia support the community, and consumers now want retailers to express their political views (Kwittken 2018). Sharing political opinions can be risky for retailers, as they can lose business if their target market does not agree. Since news spreads across social media quickly, it can be challenging for retailers to control their image.

The research question under investigation is how consumers respond to a small retailer's political post and if the retailer can overcome the crisis. Thus, this study represents a case in which a small retailer posted political beliefs on social media during and after a political protest. Consumers in the local community posted responses to the retailer, and a negative discussion on social media continued to follow. Some consumers demanded the business owner address the issue and apologize, but the business owner did not respond.

This case study took place during the Women's March in 2017, and investigates the crisis that unfolded on social media during and after the post. During this time, many marches took place on a single day worldwide, and the event is known as the largest women's march in history (Heaney 2017b). In response, the researchers set out to explore the consumer responses that arose on social media due to a small business posting opinions during a political time in the history of the United States and how the business was viewed on social media in the years afterward.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media and Politics

Mobile phones and the internet changed the way people receive information related to politics, social issues, and corporate activity (Jetha and Berente 2014). Social media platforms have also paved the way for communication to flow between businesses and individuals. Due to consumer interests, businesses have recently taken a political stand to create a brand personality, as a new strategy to set themselves apart from the competition. However, crises may arise based on what the retailer posts and how consumers respond to the information. Consumer attention on this issue is likely to wane after the crisis, but the consequences may be difficult to recover from (Jetha and Berente 2014).

A negative post on a retailer's website can cause a crisis that may damage a brand's image. Social media experts believe that publicly addressing the issue on social media can help save the brand's image and credibility. Retailers who have had a crisis and have failed to address the issue made their customers feel upset and ignored (Canhoto et al. 2015). Thus, it is important for retailers to address such a problem right away and apologize for their mistakes (Managing the Reality of Consumers Protesting with Their Wallets 2018). Over time, people will forget about the crisis, but the peak of the fallout can be detrimental (Pfeffer et al. 2014). Many retailers do not know how to combat negative posts, but they must handle it right away to save their brand's reputation (Canhoto et al. 2015).

Loyal customers that follow a brand can help it to combat negative posts (Pfeffer et al. 2014). These loyal customers are typically trusted by others and can help maintain a positive brand perception during a time of crisis (Canhoto et al. 2015). Kim et al. (2017) found customers with high brand loyalty often feel empathic and defend the retailer during a crisis. They ignore the negative press and others' opinions, as the crisis doesn't affect

their existing brand attitudes. Consumers that have low brand loyalty and self-monitoring abilities are more affected by the press's opinion on brand attitudes (Kim et al. 2017). Jetha and Berente (2014) believe more strategies on dealing with a social media crisis need to be researched, as current research is too broad.

2.2. Social Media Use

Despite the negative aspects of social media, there are many positive aspects of these interactive platforms. Social media can be an excellent tool for retailers to use for marketing, as the platforms can engage with existing customers, build relationships, and create brand awareness (Taneja and Toombs 2014). Retailers that are successful with social media have loyal customers who are emotionally attached to the brand, share the same interests, and are enthusiastic towards them (de Vries et al. 2012). Loyal customers create positive electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) that potential customers use as trusted sources. Potential customers are more likely to trust word-of-mouth information from their family and friends, in addition to eWOM from social media networks, more than a traditional marketing campaign (Jansen et al. 2009; Taneja and Toombs 2014).

Small businesses may benefit from social media due to its affordability when compared to traditional media. Customization is also possible when advertising to their target market. Overall, social media makes it easy for small businesses to reach out to new customers and maintain their brand image (Taneja and Toombs 2014). Retailers rely more on social media to brand themselves and share eWOM because customers trust real people's opinions more than a marketing promotion (Pfeffer et al. 2014).

Since many people use social media daily, information typically spreads quickly (Managing the Reality of Consumers Protesting with Their Wallets 2018) and continues to grow in volume. The speed and magnitude of information spread on social media travel faster than in previous years (Jansen et al. 2009; Tuten and Angermeier 2013). A simple post or video uploaded by a single user can damage a company's reputation almost instantly since most brands have thousands of followers (Pfeffer et al. 2014). Consumers who see and read the negative comments can be influenced to perceive the brand negatively, which may hurt the brand's sales and customer purchase intentions (de Vries et al. 2012).

2.3. Retailers Taking a Political Stand

Retailers have started sharing their political opinions in recent years to create a more significant impression and memorability of the brand (Matos et al. 2017). Stating their political opinions or making large donations to political organizations can cause controversy among customers (Kim et al. 2017). Retailers take this risk to develop the brand's personality, which can help create a stronger relationship with their customers who share the same values. In the past, retailers have featured celebrities with similar values to create a character for the brand, which has a similar effect of sharing political opinions via social media. Customers who share the same political opinions as a retailer influence brand attitude and purchase intention. When the values are aligned, there is a stronger connection to the brand (Matos et al. 2017). In an attempt to forge a connection and let opinions be known, many retailer posts have been made on various topics, including marriage, firearm control, black lives matter, and women's rights.

Marriage. Retailers stating their opinions for marriage equality or traditional marriage have generated unwanted press to their brands for taking a side. For example, Chevrolet, Guinness, and Honey Maid have made statements supporting marriage equality, whereas Barilla, Chick-fil-A, and The Salvation Army have indicated support for traditional marriage (Matos et al. 2017). Chick-fil-A created a scandal that involved the corporation's Christian beliefs, since their foundation has donated millions of dollars to political organizations opposing LGBTQA+ rights. The LGBTQA+ community organized boycotts at Chick-fil-A locations nationwide, and some government officials encouraged a boycott against eating there (Kim et al. 2017; Wicks et al. 2017). Boycotts are when consumers shop at places that share their values and opinions, such as stores selling cruelty-free products

or brands that pay their workers a living wage (Becker and Copeland 2015). According to a collaborative study by Weber Shandwick and KRC Research (Battle of the Wallets 2017), “83% of consumer activists believe it is more important now than ever to show support for companies that ‘do the right thing’ by buying from them”. This type of consumption is called political consumerism, where educated consumers choose products and producers based on their ethical, environmental, and political practices (Becker and Copeland 2015; Matos et al. 2017; Wicks et al. 2017). The antecedents to political consumerism are education and political interest. Younger individuals who are well-educated and wealthy are most likely to be political consumers (Becker and Copeland 2015).

Firearm Control. School shootings have caused some retailers to think about the type of firearms sold within their retail spaces. The school shooting in Parkland, Florida, also facilitated young students to start a movement to change firearm laws. Some retailers have also revoked their association with the National Rifle Association (NRA) or offer members discounts (Tuttle 2018). For example, numerous car rental agencies (Avis, Budget Rent a Car, Hertz, Enterprise Rent-A-Car, Alamo Rent a Car, and National Car Rental), airline companies (Delta Air Lines and United Airlines), medical companies (MetLife and Paramount RX), and moving-van lines (Allied and North American) no longer offer discounts to NRA members (Kwittken 2018; Wattles 2018). The nation’s largest privately-owned bank holding company, First National Bank, also previously offered an NRA branded card but has since decided to remove the option (Schulte 2018).

Select retailers who sell firearms are also reducing the number of firearms they sell and eliminating select related products. For instance, Dick’s Sporting goods announced that they would no longer sell high-capacity magazines and assault-style firearms. They will also only sell their remaining firearms to individuals over 21 years of age. After a school shooting, Dick’s froze all firearm sales but eventually removed the ban. At this time, Dick’s is planning to no longer sell certain types of firearms and has increased the required age to buy firearms. In 2015, Walmart stopped selling semi-automatic rifles and had stopped selling firearms at one-third of its stores. Bass Pro Shop/Cabela’s is the last large retailer that still sells semi-automatic assault rifles and high-capacity magazines (Tuttle 2018). Pushback has been seen from both sides of this issue for the retailers involved.

Black Lives Matter. The Black Lives Matter movement peaked in June 2020, when approximately 26 million people gathered to protest societal issues in the lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The movement was spurred by the death of George Floyd and became the most attended protest in United States history. Protests were seen across the United States and the world, and were organically organized through social media. Experts have stated that this movement has facilitated significant changes to policy in a very short period of time (Buchanan et al. 2020).

Many large retailers have also responded in solidarity. To support the Black Lives Matter movements and honor Juneteenth, more retailers opted to give their employees a holiday in commemoration or launch philanthropic and diversification plans to support people from different backgrounds. As stated by Busby (2020), “Social awareness has always been a part of retail . . . ” (Busby 2020). However, it has not been clearly documented how many retailers have supported the Black Lives Matter movement and how many discrimination issues happened in retail.

Case Study Context: Women’s March 2017. The Women’s March was America’s largest protest by women, with marches in all 50 states and all over the world (Heaney 2017b). The marches unfolded on 21 January 2017, with the largest number of participants in Washington, DC, on President Trump’s first full day in office (Heaney 2017a; Przybyla and Schouten 2017). Through the marches, protesters demonstrated their support for women and feared that the new administration might set back progress for women in the United States. Protestors also outlined concerns about women’s right to abortion, decreasing funding for Planned Parenthood, and repealing Obamacare. Over 2 million people across the world participated in the protest, with 673 marches taking place in 32 countries (Przybyla and Schouten 2017).

3. Materials and Methods

A content analysis was employed to explore consumer responses during and after a small retailer's political post. The retailer highlighted in this case is an ideal example of a small business located on a Main Street-type setting that attracts a broad target market. Products carried by the retailer include apparel, accessories, and gifts, which are likely to be impulse purchases and not based on personal needs. This case is relevant, as it represents businesses similar to other small retailers across the United States that attempt to use social media to connect with consumers.

Political posts can create a negative brand image for the time of the crisis, in this case during and after the Women's March. In this situation, the retailer commented on Facebook that outlined the desire to remove Women's March participants from the space in front of the store. The retailer's post was quickly removed, and numerous consumer reviews followed. A majority of the consumer reviews were negative and mentioned disrespectful service. Consumers also stated they would not return in the future, also hurting the business. All consumer comments made on social media were identified and coded for themes. Consumer comments were observed during and after the retailer's crisis.

3.1. Content Analysis

Content analysis is defined by Neuendorf (2002) "as a systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics". This method interprets all meanings a message provides and finds patterns among the text (Krippendorff 1980). Thus, a message can have multiple meanings and can be viewed from many perspectives to find knowledge and new insights (Krippendorff 1980). For this study, content analysis was used to find new insights into the impacts of a retailer's political post on consumers over time. This case highlights a retailer that posted an opinion about the local women's march and the subsequent reactions from consumers on one social media platform (the only known platform for the retailer) over three years. Such reactions serve as the data for this case study, and reactions were coded to form themes. The study is bound by the time (Creswell 2005) the political opinion was posted during the Women's March (21–22 January 2017) in the United States. Of note, a majority of the consumer comments disagreed with the retailer's political opinion and expressed that they would no longer spend money there, thus forming a crisis for the retailer.

3.2. Procedures

A set of consumer reactions to a retailer's political post on social media was investigated in this study. A total of 30 reviews posted before, during, and up to three years after the fallout and were coded by two independent coders to identify themes. Six of the reviews rated the retailer negatively by leaving one star with no comment signifying dissatisfaction. Those reviews were not included in the study, as they didn't provide textual content to analyze. Coders determined whether the consumer post represented: (1) positive and negative product reviews, (2) dissatisfaction of disrespectful service by the store staff, and (3) the use of social media for politics and disrespect. Disputes in coding were settled and a high level of consistency was reached. Saturation on the topic was also met. Once coding for all the consumer posts were complete, comparisons were made between codes and extant literature.

In addition to the coding of the reviews, an optical character recognition (OCR) analysis was completed using Gephi. All 30 of the reviews were included in the analysis to show a semantic network of terms used within the consumer reviews. Stop words ('fillers' such as 'the', 'and', etc.) were removed, n-grams (words grouped together to signify information about the topic) were established, and weight demonstrating the importance of each term were determined within the data file. From the data, Gephi was able to map the relationships of terms before, directly after, and years after the retailers' political post had been made.

4. Findings

Initially, consumer reviews were organized around the products, services, and use of social media for political means. However, of significance, this case highlights the cross-sectionality of product, service, and political posts.

4.1. Theme 1: Disappointed by Product + Political Posts

A total of six individuals left reviews about the product the retailer offered, both positive and negative. Negative reviews were posted during the fallout, and two reviewers mentioned positive feedback about the product many months after the fallout. Reviewers who were upset with the political post left negative comments about the product offered. Individuals took out their anger on the selection and assortment provided by the retailer. Many reviewers said that the product was ugly, overpriced, lacked variety, and indicated that they could buy the same thing elsewhere. In addition to the main complaint of using social media for politics, a post highlighted that “... you (the retailer) sell overpriced old junk”.

4.2. Theme 2: Will Not Return Due to Disrespectful Service + Political Posts

The political post by the retailer here examined upset many consumers, as ten consumer posts stated they would not return to the shop. Not returning to the retailer’s store was also influenced by other factors such as the product selection, service received by the staff, and political opinion on social media. Some reviewers stated that they would go to other local shops instead because they did not support the owner’s behavior. According to consumer posts, the lack of help and the attitude of the owner and sales associates made consumers want to stay away from the retailer. Consumers coded into this theme stated that they will not be returning to the store, that there are plenty of other places to shop, and that the retailer was not going to “get my money” due to the retailer’s political post. The owner took the risk of stating her opinion and lost customers with the risky move.

Over half of the reviewers mentioned disrespectful service by the owner and staff. This theme was noteworthy, as seventeen of the thirty reviews mentioned disrespectful service. The word ‘rude’ was used eight times to describe the treatment consumers received, including “very rude in there” and “I found the staff unhelpful and quite rude”. Ten different individuals discussed their opinions on the owner’s actions on social media and how it was bad-mannered, rude, and disrespectful. In direct relation to the retailer’s political post, one consumer post also stated that “the owner is racist and hateful”, while another indicated that the retailer “insulted thousands of women”. Based on these consumer posts, the owner’s behavior impacted the perception of the service and the unlikelihood of these consumers returning to the retailer.

Months after the fallout, two consumers declared the store had a great staff that helped them find new clothes. One consumer comment highlighted how staff helped create a complete look. Another individual recognized the staff for being kind and was pleased with the service she received. Of interest, the only positive consumer comments were posted well after the retailer’s political post had been made.

4.3. Theme 3: Disseminating Negative Word-of-Mouth on Political Posts

Word-of-Mouth. Consumers felt using social media platforms to express one’s political opinions on a retailer’s profile was inappropriate. Five reviewers clearly stated that they believed it was a bad decision for the business, but many discussed how the post created by the owner was unacceptable. During the fallout, all of the comments disagreed with the owner’s opinion and were concerned that the action would affect their business. Consumers believed that the “... owner degrades and curses at a group of people on social media” and the retail owner should “... keep your political beliefs on the back burner”. Another consumer indicated that he was “... disgusted by what I witnessed on social media by the owner” and that the retailer would likely go out of business.

Many consumer responses indicated rage about the retailer's political post and promised to spread negative WOM about the business to everyone they knew. Consumers posted comments that stated that they'd "*make sure everyone I know [sees this]*" and "*I WILL tell everyone I know about this*". These posts indicate that they'll pass along the political posts among their connections.

The Use of Social Media for Disrespect. Five reviewers felt the retail owner negatively used social media by disrespecting groups of people. They were appalled by the behavior and believed it would hurt the retailer in the future. All the reviews were directed to the owner after the political post was made, including how the political post was nasty, rude, hateful and distasteful. One consumer explained that that political post "*degrades and curses at a group of people on social media*". Another consumer highlighted that she was "*disgusted by what I witnessed on social media by the owner*". Yet another consumer stated that she was sad that the political post had been made.

4.4. Theme 4: Positive Reviews after Time

Positive Product Reviews. Months after the fallout, positive reviews were posted about the products offered by the retailer. Some consumers posted that the retailer has "*some of the cutest clothes*", including a "*great selection of clothes and accessories at affordable prices*". Eight months after the fallout, an additional two comments said they experienced a pleasant experience and that the staff was helpful.

Accommodating Staff. Two years after the crisis, two distinct groups of customers were identified. The first group consisted of loyal customers that indicated their support for the owner and staff. Comments from this group include "*... she [the owner] was very accommodating when we had questions*", and "*... add to that the enthusiastic and helpful store staff*". The second group consisted of dissatisfied customers who appeared not to be concerned or aware of the prior crisis. All of the comments centered around the product, including "*Not sure how this is legal in America, but knock off designer brands? ... Poor taste*". Thus, it is apparent that the criticisms are not based on the crisis but the products themselves.

4.5. OCR Analysis

After completing an OCR analysis using Gephi, a semantic network was formed between the positive words found in the consumer reviews and the time in which the review occurred. Figure 1 shows the semantic network for all consumer reviews posted before, directly after, and years after the political post was made by the retailer. The nodes (black dots) represent the terms found in the consumer reviews, and the edges (solid lines connecting the nodes) show the connections made between the time of the review and the term used. The proximity of the dots demonstrates the similarity between terms. Positive terms were primarily detected before the political message was posted, including that the retailer provided the best shopping in the geographic area. Directly after the political post was disseminated, a deluge of negative terms were identified that highlighted a dislike of the products, service, and the political stance of the retailer. Years after the political post had been circulated, more positive terms were found than negative terms. Positive terms included that the retailer carried cute, one-of-a-kind pieces and was considered a fun boutique with helpful store staff. However, a negative term was found afterward, highlighting that the products appeared to be knock-offs of a higher-end brand.

Therefore, the figure further demonstrates how positive reviews are prevalent before and years after the retailer's political post, while negative reviews on products, services, and the retailer's political stance were made directly after the post. Further, small retailers can overcome the crisis of a political post over time, which may take up to three years.

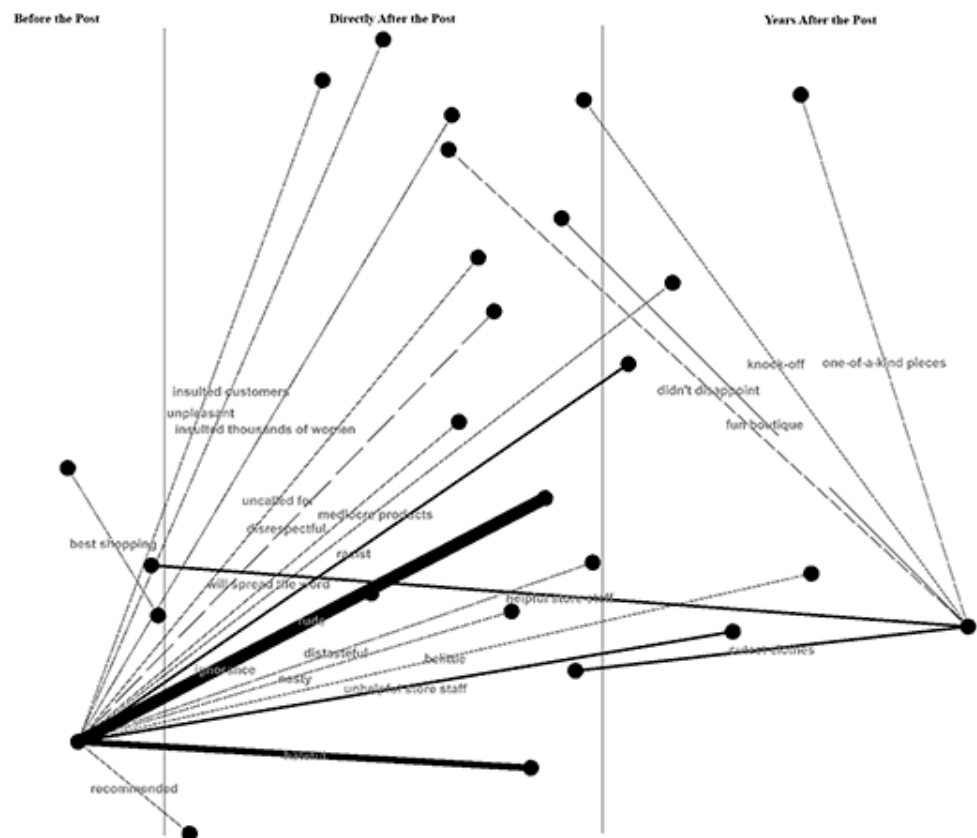


Figure 1. A semantic network.

5. Discussion

In recent years, there have been many political movements across the United States (and the world), including movements on marriage equality, firearm control, racial equality, and gender equality. Many retailers have responded to these movements through messages posted on social media. While posting political views on social media can give a retailer an edge over the competition, it can be difficult to determine if the risks of losing customers who disagree with the post are worth the risk. In this case, the retail owner's view is different from many consumers, and it influenced the overall rating of the store online. Thus, this study demonstrates to small retailers the possible ramifications of posting political opinions on social media and how it can affect consumer feelings toward the retailer, the products, and the service received. The retail industry is competitive, as there are many companies between which consumers can choose. In recent years, retailers have shared their political opinions due to the current political climate, which has led to some disgruntled customers. The backlash received by large retailers has been investigated (Jetha and Berente 2014), but the impact on small retailers continues to warrant exploration. This case helps to provide a foundation for understanding how consumers use social media to voice their displeasure after a retailer's political post.

Before the retailer disseminated the political message, positive consumer reviews about the retailer were posted. Once the political message was shared online and deleted shortly thereafter, negative reviews dominated discussions about the retailer, which included criticisms of the products, service, and political stance. Throughout the crisis, the retailer refrained from commenting on negative consumer reviews. However, about three years afterward, the reviews again turned more positive. Based on how these interactions unfolded, it can be hypothesized that a small retailer's deletion of the controversial post and a lack of response to negative consumer reviews may help to halt additional outrage and negative WOM over the retailer's post.

Negative WOM, loss of sales, and negative brand image are potential consequences of small retailers posting political opinions on social media. Individuals trust and value their peer's opinions, making it difficult for small businesses to recover from negative WOM. Retailers struggle when there is a crisis on social media since social media is a significant aspect of many people's lives. A negative perception can be created by a crisis, impacting sales and potential customers. Retailers who have had a crisis and have failed to address the issue made their customers feel upset and ignored (Canhoto et al. 2015). Consumers who see the negative comments also tend to view the retailer negatively, which results in limited purchase intentions and sales at that retailer (de Vries et al. 2012). However, this case study highlighted that consumers might stop spreading negative WOM after a period of time. While the consumers that posted negative responses to the political post may not be patrons of the retailer in this case, it is clear that other consumers are still shopping at the store. This finding is in contrast to previous literature, as it has been found that most consumers choose to shop at retailers that align with their personal beliefs and are ethical in nature (Kwittken 2018).

Retailers rely on their target market and potential customers to stay in business, therefore negative reviews left on social media may change their mind about patronizing the store. Negative reviews can create a bad brand image for potential and existing customers. Consumers in this study refused to shop at the store, threatened to shop somewhere else, and indicated that they'd tell everyone they know about this incident. The majority of the comments were negative, and it has left a bad rating for the retailer. Interestingly, this case study also highlighted that negative consumer reviews after the crisis included a direct response to the political post and negative reviews about the product or service. This case also contrasted with previous literature in that their loyal consumers did not take to social media to defend the retailer (Kim et al. 2017).

While this case resulted in the continuance of the business, small retailers may need to think twice before posting political opinions on social media. Consumers are well versed at looking up retailers via social media platforms before visiting the brick-and-mortar store. Negative reviews may also impact people's perception of products (von Helversen et al. 2018), leading to potential loss of sales and new customers. These negative product reviews contribute to the negative WOM that can spread quickly, build a negative attitude, and lower intention to purchase (Johnson Jorgensen and Ha 2019). Daily sales are vital to small businesses, as they depend on local customers to stay afloat. Small businesses may also be impacted more by a crisis than a large retailer because they typically rely on a smaller number of local customers and cannot afford to lose sales for a period of time. However, based on this case, the following can be determined: (1) consumers include unhappiness with products and services with their unhappiness toward the political post made by the retailer, and (2) small retailers can survive beyond the crisis of a political post.

5.1. Implications

Businesses need to understand the possible ramifications of posting political opinions on their official social media platforms. Retailers may be trying to distinguish themselves from the competition by creating a brand personality through these posts, but brands can be built in other ways. Offering an experience or services can set them apart, instead of stating their political opinion. Small retailers must be careful of the content posted on social media and need to create a brand without offending customers. Customers who share the same opinions as the company may feel a stronger association to the brand, but a retailer could lose too many customers. Individuals who disagree with the retailer's stance can prompt a negative brand image and crisis that is difficult for a small retailer to recover from. Sales, customers, and brand image can be impacted negatively if their customers disagree with their opinion.

5.2. Limitations and Future Research

This study pertains to a single crisis case study of a small retail business and serves as a foundation for future research on small retailers' political communications and consumers' responses to such statements. The Women's March took place 21 January 2017 and the crisis continued for three years afterward. The post that started the fallout was deleted by the owner, eliminating context for consumers. In contrast, removing the retailer's post may have also allowed future consumers to see beyond the negative consumer posts and support the business. Thus, this study is limited by design, as the case is bound by time and place and has limited generalizability to other retailers. However, this study is significant as it identifies consumer intentions and other characteristics of social media communications after a political post has been made. Findings from this study also serve as a foundation for future inquiry on political posts made by small businesses, which has been very limited in extant literature.

Further research is needed about small businesses expressing or posting political opinions and its effect on their business. With the current political climate, retailers desire to connect with their customers by speaking up, but they must be careful as it can change customer's opinions about the store. Current research focuses on fallouts from large corporations. Small businesses need to be studied in greater depth, as consumers expect more social media interactions regarding the current political climate.

6. Conclusions

Retailers risk posting their political views via social media to create a memorable brand, but there can be many consequences. This case study considered the ramifications of small businesses posting political opinions on social media, given the current political climate in the United States. The main findings through consumer reviews were about how the political post impacted consumer reviews of the product, service, and the retailer's use of social media. The product was mentioned to be average and overpriced during the fallout, but changed to positive features months after. The post upset many consumers who stated they would not shop at the store again and that the staff was rude. Many comments mentioned that using social media to express political opinions was inappropriate and advised retailers not to follow this behavior. Consumer reviews over time indicated that new consumers had discovered the retailer and had positive viewpoints of the retailer.

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