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Impression Management After Image-Threatening Events: A Case Study of JUUL's Online Messaging

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Abstract

E-cigarette use is a public interest issue and has received increasing attention over the years. JUUL, the biggest brand of e-cigarettes, has been singled out in what the FDA calls a youth e-cigarette epidemic. This study uses impression management theory to examine how JUUL engaged in positive impression management online in response to these image-threatening events. Employing a thematic analysis, this study examines changes in JUUL's website between April 1, 2018, and October 9, 2019, and Twitter posts between April 28, 2018, and October 18, 2019. Results suggest that JUUL made both textual and visual changes in its messaging over time to engage in positive impression management, while using the impression management tactics of self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Introduction

Electronic cigarettes or e-cigarettes were designed as a safer alternative to smoking cigarettes or other tobacco products (Cahn & Siegel, 2011). This sentiment has been echoed by governmental agencies such as Public Health England, which found that these products are comparatively healthier than regular tobacco cigarettes (McNeill et al., 2015). It is no wonder then that one of the most frequently cited reasons for e-cigarette use among adult smokers is to quit or cut down on smoking regular cigarettes (Patel et al., 2016; Pepper et al., 2014). Although e-cigarettes were designed for adult smokers who want to quit smoking, the product has found its way into the

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lives of youth. Currently, e-cigarette use among adults stands at 3% (Arrazola et al., 2015). However, this percentage quadruples to 13% in high school students (King et al., 2015). E-cigarettes are the most commonly used tobacco product among high school students, overtaking regular cigarettes (CDC, 2015). This situation is worrying because, although some governmental organizations might be fervent advocates that e-cigarettes are safer than traditional cigarettes, the long-term effects of their use are largely unknown. Furthermore, there is a potential risk of a gateway effect where youth might transition to combustible cigarettes after using e-cigarettes (FDA, 2018a).

With these concerns, there has been increased attention on e-cigarette companies such as JUUL Labs (hereinafter referred to as JUUL). JUUL was first singled out by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for its role in youth uptake April 24, 2018, when the FDA announced that it has been “conducting a large-scale, undercover nationwide blitz to crack down on the sale of e-cigarettes—specifically JUUL products—to minors at both brick-and-mortar and online retailers” (FDA, 2018b, para. 8). On September 12, 2018, the FDA issued letters to five e-cigarette manufacturers including JUUL to provide a detailed plan, which includes specific timeframes, to address and mitigate use of e-cigarette products by minors in 60 days and threatened to remove e-cigarettes off the market if this plan was not submitted in a timely manner (Gottlieb, 2018). Then, when JUUL, the biggest player in the e-cigarette market, announced that Altria, one of the world's largest tobacco producers, invested \$12.8 billion into the company for a 35% ownership (Burns, 2018), even more suspicions on JUUL's marketing intentions were raised. Most recently, on September 9, 2019, the FDA also accused JUUL of violating the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, citing evidence that JUUL had misleadingly marketed its products as a safer alternative to children in school (FDA, 2019). Due to the possible health consequences of e-cigarette use and the numerous marketing campaigns around the product, scholars have begun to look at e-cigarettes from the perspective of public interest communications (e.g., Kim et al., 2019). This is also part of the broader attention on health communications as an integral area for public interest communications (Demetrious, 2017; Downes, 2017).

E-cigarette use is a topic that can further extend research on public interest communications since it is a public health issue. In this paper, I investigate how JUUL's messaging has evolved over time to meet the needs of its stakeholders after the many image-threatening events that it faced. This then can help inform the messaging strategies of prosocial organizations that may have public interest at the heart of their operations but could potentially face such image-threatening events in the future. Furthermore, JUUL is an interesting case study because it is an organization that can be seen as both promoting prosocial (helping adult smokers quit traditional cigarettes) and non-prosocial (youth uptake of e-cigarettes) behaviors. This paper will use Impression Management Theory (IMT; Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990) to qualitatively illustrate how the organization has engaged in positive impression management through its evolving visual and textual messaging on its website and social media accounts as a consequence of these image-threatening events since April 2018. It will also show that JUUL has

embedded the impression management tactics of self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication in its current messaging to maintain and construct a positive image.

Literature review

E-cigarettes and JUUL campaigns

Research on e-cigarette campaigns has been very limited. Most of the research conducted on tobacco control has been focused on traditional tobacco smoking cessation campaigns (e.g., Davis et al., 2009; Mudde & De Vries, 1999; Niederdeppe et al., 2008; Siegel & Biener, 2000). However, research on e-cigarette campaigns is far more uncommon. The few studies conducted in this subject area can be categorized into two groups, one that focuses on campaigns by manufacturers and the other on campaigns by policy makers. Scholars who study campaigns by manufacturers have analyzed general e-cigarette advertisements and their effects on people's attitudes to the product (Reinhold et al., 2017), specifically television advertising (Duke et al., 2014) and social media advertising of e-cigarettes (Chu et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2019). Those who have studied campaigns by policy makers tend to focus on feedback to their anti-vaping campaigns on social media (Allem et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2014; Zhan et al., 2018).

There have been even fewer studies on JUUL, with most research conducted on individuals' knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to JUUL and not so much on JUUL itself as a brand. The studies on JUUL are limited to a survey on youth and young adult recognition and knowledge of the product (Willett et al., 2019), conversations about JUUL on social media (Allem et al., 2018; Kavuluru et al., 2018), and JUUL use patterns and the reasons for consumer use (Leavens et al., 2019). Although public recognition and perceptions of JUUL are important to study, there is also a need to analyze JUUL from the organization's point of view to better understand its messaging strategies since this can inform governmental regulations.

From the brand's perspective, only two studies have been conducted to date. Laestadius and Wang (2018) studied the sale of JUUL products on eBay prior to the FDA's request to remove JUUL's listings in April 2018, while Huang and colleagues (2018) studied JUUL's retail sales, marketing, and promotion. Huang et al. (2018) found that JUUL does most of its marketing via social media, which provides a glimpse into JUUL's advertising strategy. However, with the FDA's request to work with JUUL to take steps to prevent sales to youth (Gottlieb, 2018) occurring after Huang et al. (2018) published their study, their analysis was unable to take into account the changes to JUUL's online marketing and messaging. Furthermore, after Altria Group, one of the world's largest producers and marketers of tobacco and cigarette products, acquired a 35% stake in JUUL, another letter was issued by Gottlieb (2018), former commissioner of the FDA, February 9 to schedule a joint meeting with Altria and the FDA. It is evident that since Laestadius and Wang (2018), as well as Huang et al. (2018), published their studies, there has been an unfolding of multiple events that could directly impact JUUL as an

organization. As such, this paper aims to analyze JUUL from the lens of its brand, in light of these new developments and to provide a qualitative approach to understanding the changes in JUUL's messaging in response to these events.

Impression management theory

Particularly relevant to this study is IMT (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). IMT can be originally traced to Goffman's (1959) discussion of the importance of self-presentation in defining one's place in society, setting the tone of an interaction, and how one should perform in public and social interactions. Arguing that Goffman focused primarily on the role self-presentation plays in the construction of social reality, Leary and Kowalski (1990) centered their discussion on self-presentation to others by defining impression management as "the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them" (p. 34). Leary and Kowalski (1990) conceptualized IMT into two processes: impression motivation and impression construction. Impression motivation consists of 1) goal-relevance of impressions, 2) value of desired goals, and 3) discrepancy between desired and current image, while impression construction is comprised of 1) self-concept, 2) desired and undesired identity images, 3) role constraints, 4) target values, and 5) current or potential social image.

JUUL is arguably highly motivated to engage in impression management because of the potential penalties that come with its current practices. According to IMT, the motivation to engage in impression management stems from the desire to maximize expected rewards and minimize expected punishments (Schlenker, 1980). With the FDA's unequivocal statement that noncompliance "could mean requiring these brands to remove some or all of their flavored products that may be contributing to the rise in youth use from the market," (FDA, 2018a, para. 10) the expected punishment is especially high for JUUL, which holds the largest market share. As such, more than ever, JUUL is motivated to maintain or build a positive impression so as to minimize the punishments that could come with governmental intervention.

Not only is JUUL motivated to engage in positive impression management, this paper also contends that this organization is highly strategic in its impression construction. According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), "People tend to convey impressions that are biased in the direction of their desired identities" (p. 40) and "try to ensure that their public image is consistent with (or at least is not inconsistent with) the role demands of a particular situation" (p. 41). With the FDA's allegations that JUUL is contributing to the rise in youth use of e-cigarettes, JUUL is in a position that requires the company to reconstruct its desired identity and to live up to the image it wants to portray—an organization that helps adults quit cigarette smoking. Additionally, IMT predicts that individuals construct their impression based on the target values of their audience by "select[ing] from a myriad of possible self-images that are most likely to meet with approval or other desired reactions" (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 41) and that "the impressions people try to create are affected both by how they think they are currently regarded by others and by how they think others may perceive them in the future" (p. 41). Impression construction based on the

target's values and current or potential social image are inherently linked for an organization such as JUUL because its social image is shaped by the FDA, and it has to make sure it meets the approval of the FDA's values.

To strategically construct a positive impression, there are number of impression management tactics that an organization can take (Jones & Pittman, 1982). First, *ingratiation* refers to ways in which individuals seek to achieve likeability. Second, *intimidation* is where one seeks to appear dangerous or threatening. Similar, but conceptually distinct from ingratiation, the third tactic is *self-promotion*, which is to portray oneself as being competent. Fourth, *exemplification* is to portray oneself as being honest and respectable. Last, *supplication* is to present the self as weak and vulnerable to evoke pity.

Although mostly used to study interpersonal communication, IMT has recently been used to study how organizations attempt to construct a positive image after an image-threatening event. Some scholars have studied how organizations manage their public image using prosocial claims (McDonnell & King, 2013) or how they inform consumers of data breaches that will reduce the damage to organizational reputation (Jenkins et al., 2014). Other scholars also have studied how organizations use impression management tactics after a crisis (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Marcus & Goodman, 1991). For example, Allen and Caillouet (1994) studied 799 statements of one organization in crisis to identify the impression management strategies it used. However, within the communication literature, limited research has been conducted using IMT as a theoretical framework to study an organization's impression management online after image-threatening events. As such, this paper poses the following research questions:

RQ1: How has JUUL's messaging changed on its website and social media accounts to engage in positive impression management since the FDA's investigation into its marketing and sales of e-cigarettes to youth?

RQ2: What impression management tactics are embedded in JUUL's current messaging on its website and social media accounts?

Method

This paper employs a thematic analysis to answer its research questions. This is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It is a qualitative type of analysis that can produce insightful and trustworthy findings. The benefits of conducting a thematic analysis are that it "can highlight similarities *and* differences across the data set" and also "usefully summarize key features of a large body of data, and/or offer a 'thick description' of the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide for conducting a thematic analysis, I 1) familiarized myself with the data,

2) generated initial codes, 3) searched for themes, 4) reviewed the themes, 5) defined and named the themes, and finally, 6) produced the final analysis.

Data collection

Data were collected using Internet archival service *Wayback Machine* between April 1, 2018, and October 31, 2019. JUUL's website was compared on seven dates that had available archival data on *Wayback Machine*: [April 1, 2018](#), [May 27, 2018](#), [September 1, 2018](#), [October 31, 2018](#), [February 20, 2019](#), [August 7, 2019](#), and [October 9, 2019](#). April 1, 2018, was chosen as the start date of the analysis because it represents JUUL's messaging prior to any FDA media releases that have named JUUL in promoting youth e-cigarette usage. The subsequent dates were chosen because they were either one month before or after a FDA media release that mentioned JUUL. For the purpose of this study, the bulk of the analysis was conducted on JUUL's homepage over the seven dates. This is because most web users are unlikely to look beyond the first few pages of a website that they go to (Thompson, 2004) and can be considered the "most important page for every website because it is a company's face to the world of the internet" (Huang & Yang, 2011, p. 381). Changes to the website over time, including new tabs and sections that were linked from the main homepage, were analyzed. On social media, JUUL's Twitter account was compared on four relevant dates for which archival data were available: [April 28, 2018](#), [January 30, 2019](#), [August 28, 2019](#), and [October 18, 2019](#). Because JUUL's Facebook and Instagram accounts are no longer active as of November 13, 2018, with all posts deleted except for the announcement of page deactivation, they were removed from this analysis. Screenshots of the website and social media posts then were integrated into a Word document for analysis.

Data analysis

With the two research questions in mind, I took a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) using constant comparative coding to establish emergent themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I first reviewed all the screenshots and noted initial themes and observations based on the textual messaging. Additionally, since the texts on both JUUL's website and social media posts were often accompanied by visuals, I used an iconographic qualitative approach (Müller, 2011) to analyze the visual messages, taking into consideration the social, cultural, and political context of that time (Müller & Özcan, 2007). For example, there was an outbreak of lung injury associated with vaping between August and September of 2019 (CDC, 2020), which increased public and governmental scrutiny. Similarly, when the FDA publishes a press release referencing JUUL, how JUUL is perceived socially, culturally, and politically, would also be vastly different than the months prior. I took these events into consideration when analyzing the data collected in these months. I then used the themes that emerged from both the textual and visual messages to continue analyzing the data in following rounds of analysis with a focus on refining the initial

themes and noting new ones that related to previous themes. Once no new themes surfaced and the final themes were adequately explicated, I concluded the data analysis process.

Results

RQ1 asked how JUUL's messaging has changed to engage in positive impression management since the FDA's investigations. The four main changes were: 1) (de)emphasis on bulk sales, 2) nicotine warning, 3) age requirements, and 4) muted colors and images.

(De)emphasis on bulk sales

The first change was a shift in the emphasis of bulk product sales. JUUL's website on April 1, 2018, had a banner stating, "[f]ree shipping when you spend \$34 or more," and a section that was dedicated to publicizing its "[a]utoship" scheme where users could sign up to have refill pods shipped to their doorstep at a discounted rate. However, the banner was later changed to "Learn about our youth prevention efforts," and the "Autoship" section was completely removed from the website by May 27, 2018. Interestingly, this "Autoship" section resurfaced again by August 28, 2019. On JUUL's Twitter page, a post for a promotion of its referral program (where referring someone to purchase a JUUL product gives a \$15 discount to both parties) was present in the April 28, 2018, data set, but this post was removed by January 30, 2019. This reduced emphasis on sales quantity can be said to be JUUL's attempt to shape its current or potential social image. When the FDA publicly alleged that JUUL had a part to play in the youth uptake of e-cigarettes, it damaged JUUL's image as an organization, compelling it to counter or repair the damaged image (Goffman, 1955). The company then attempted to rebuild its existing social image—an organization that was merely concerned with the sales of their products regardless of who (and how old) its customers were. By removing their promotions of "free shipping" or "15% off every order" and focusing instead on their mission to "improve the lives of the world's one billion adult smokers"—a message prominently featured on its website since May 27, 2018—JUUL is not only repairing its existing social image, but also ensuring that that its stakeholders would perceive its potential social image to be one that is positive and prosocial in nature through the promotion of its products' benefits for adult smokers.

Nicotine warning

The second change was seen in the explicit messaging that JUUL products contain nicotine. Prior to September 1, 2018, its website had no messaging that JUUL contained nicotine except for a tiny disclaimer at the bottom of the page that states "WARNING" accompanied with "This product contains nicotine. Nicotine is an addictive chemical." Then, the same disclaimer was bolded and shifted to the top of the homepage, in a large, highly contrasted white font over a

black banner that web users would likely immediately notice. According to Leary and Kowalski (1990), IMT predicts that individuals will appeal to other's target values and "tailor their public images to the perceived values and preferences of significant others" (p. 41). In the case of JUUL, the significant other is the FDA as it has direct control over JUUL's sales. As previously mentioned, the FDA has in the past threatened to pull JUUL's products off the market. The FDA's concerns that youth are attracted to JUUL products, which "have high levels of nicotine and emissions that are hard to see," (FDA, 2018b, para. 5) are not unfounded. This argument is in line with research conducted by Alexander et al. (2019) who found in their qualitative research of 43 youth between the ages of 14 to 17 that "awareness of nicotine's negative health effects were high, even while they erroneously believe that e-cigarettes produce only harmless water vapor" (p. 96). Similarly, it has been found that 63% of JUUL users who are between the ages of 15-24 do not know that JUUL products always contain nicotine (Willett et al., 2019). As such, JUUL's decision to prominently highlight that its products contain nicotine appeals to the FDA's values, ensuring that any allegations that it is promoting e-cigarettes under the guise of nicotine-free flavors are seemingly unjustified. This decision is also a move to build a desired identity image as well as a positive potential social image. JUUL's intentions are clear in that it wants to build a desirable identity image, of being a company that is not trying to mislead youth into picking up nicotine products. Furthermore, JUUL also wants to ensure it projects a positive potential social image by being transparent that, although its products contain nicotine, they should only be used by adult smokers to reduce their nicotine intake.

Age requirements

The third change was JUUL's decision to increase the age requirement to subscribe to the organization's email list and to follow its Twitter account. On April 1, 2018, to sign up for JUUL's email newsletter, users needed to be at least 18 years old. However, from May 27, 2018, onward, users had to be at least 21 to sign up for the email list. Additionally, on Twitter, followers were not warned that they must be "21+ to follow" prior to April 28, 2018, but this was included in their profile by January 30, 2019. This change, of course, is a symbolic move in constructing a positive image in that there is an expectation for JUUL to take on the role of a gatekeeper of sorts, where youth are kept away from picking up e-cigarettes. The age verification and age requirement to receive information from JUUL are symbolic gestures because there is no way in which the company can enforce such a restriction. Users of any age can merely enter their email address and receive information about JUUL even if they are minors by choosing a date of birth that corresponds to the company's age requirements. The decision to increase the age requirement from 18 to 21 could possibly be because of the role constraint that JUUL faces as a prosocial company. As IMT posits, "People try to make their social images conform as closely as possible to prototypic characteristics of the role they are playing" (Leary & Kowalski, 1990, p. 41). Raising the age limit shows that the company is "committed to preventing underage use." While JUUL is unable to truly stop underage web users from perusing its website, this strategy is

still a part of its efforts to construct a positive impression based on people's expectations of the organization.

Muted colors and images

The fourth change can be seen in the shift in colors and images by JUUL to favor one that is more muted. In April 2018 (see Figure 1), the choice of colors on JUUL's website had more variety, using different shades of green, blue, white, and gold. The background of the website had an image of a JUUL product on a white table with a potted plant, and a green book, a minimalistic and pastel visual design that is in line with contemporary trends in millennial aesthetics that appeal to the young (Fischer, 2020; Thorlacius, 2007). However, by February 2019 (see Figure 2), the website became far more muted, with the background colors limited to only black and white, and the only images being of the product itself or the faces of users. Similarly, on Twitter, in April 2018, the header image was identical to the background image on JUUL's website in the same month. The social media posts then also had more images and colors that drew users to read the company's posts. In January 2019, the background header image changed to a black banner with a white elongated hexagon shape, and posts with images were largely removed, leaving only black and white abstracts of the company's media releases.

The move toward just black and white color schemes without visual imagery can be seen as a form of positive impression management, by appealing to the values of the FDA and maintaining its role as a prosocial company. JUUL explicitly stated on its website that it will "not feature images or situations intended for a youth audience." This change parallels the push for "plain packaging" of tobacco products, which has been found to be less attractive to tobacco users and increases the noticeability and effectiveness of health warnings (World Health Organization, 2016). JUUL's choice to change its color scheme and use of images to one that is more monochromatic mimics the plain packaging found on some tobacco products, which has the effect of reducing its website's appeal. This update maintains JUUL's image as an organization that markets its products to adults, which would in turn appeal to expectations of the FDA.

Figure 1

JUUL's Homepage on April 1, 2018

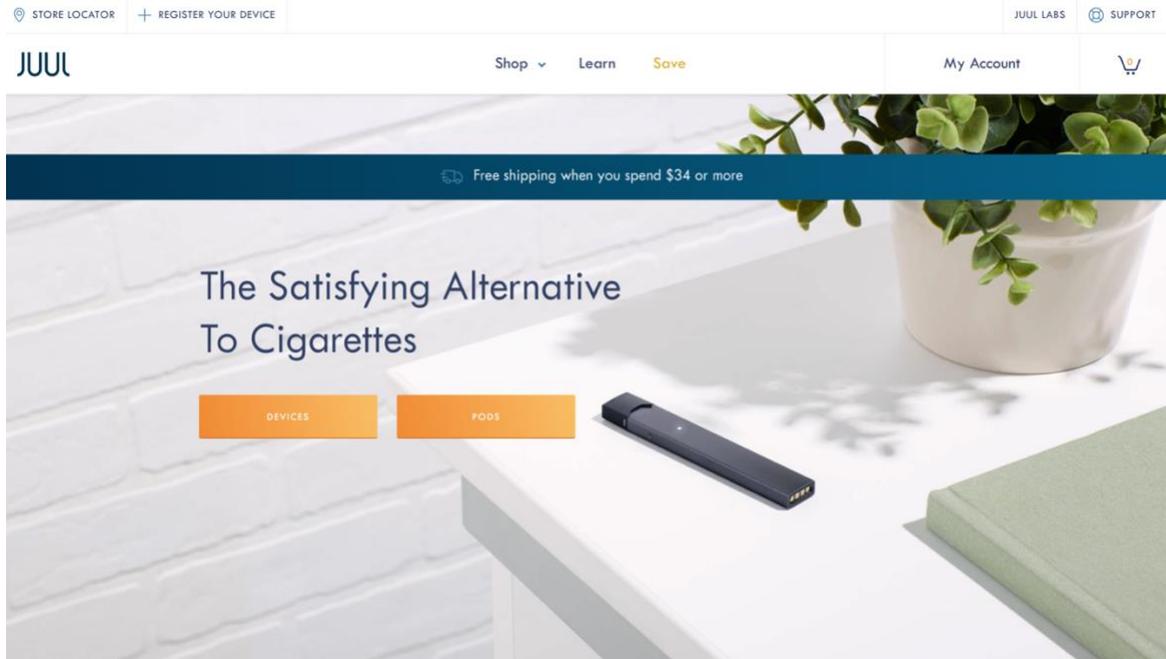
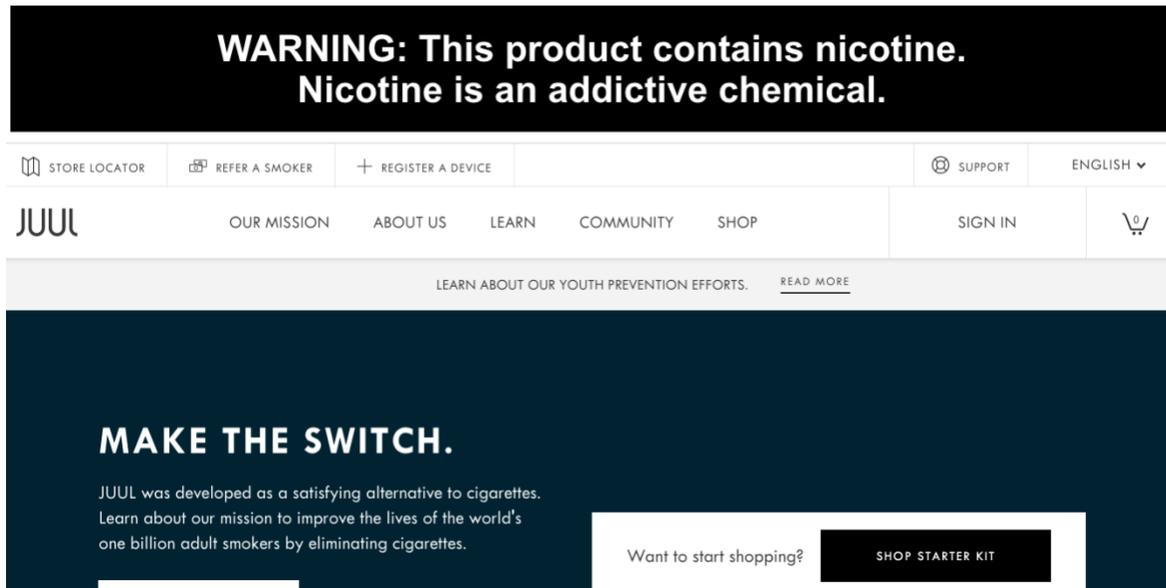


Figure 2

JUUL's Homepage on February 20, 2019



As JUUL's messaging evolved over time to engage in positive impression management, it is useful to explore some of the impression management tactics that are embedded in its messaging after the FDA's interventions (*RQ2*). JUUL's current messaging is limited to its media releases that are posted on Twitter as well as its website. Three tactics were identified: 1) self-promotion, 2) exemplification, and 3) supplication.

Self-promotion

JUUL engages in self-promotion by showcasing its success as an organization that helps adult smokers quit smoking. Self-promotion occurs when the messenger intentionally seeks the attribution of competence (Jones & Pittman, 1982). JUUL's mission is to help the world's one billion cigarette smokers quit the habit. For the organization to be seen as "competent," it will need to show how it is achieving its mission. JUUL does this by featuring testimonials of its customers switching to JUUL's products in a section called "The JUUL Community." In one testimonial, a customer states, "I'm constantly encouraging people to use this and not smoke cigarettes," exemplifying how the organization has achieved its goals. In this particular quote, it is clear that JUUL is trying to influence its stakeholders (whether they are the FDA, the general public, or its board of directors) that it is indeed competent in helping adult smokers quit their cigarette addiction. The use of headshots puts a face to the people whom JUUL is helping, which increases levels of trustworthiness and persuasiveness (Newman et al., 2012). Similarly, customer quotes serve not only to increase JUUL's credibility as an organization, but also to bolster its level of competence.

Exemplification

JUUL also uses messages that project integrity and moral worthiness by promoting how it is proactively ensuring that its products do not reach the hands of youth. Since the FDA's allegations, there was a deliberate attempt on JUUL's part to act in an exemplary manner. This change can be seen on the company's website where a tab under "About Us" brings users to a page titled "Our Responsibility." Not only is there a statement regarding regulation and public policy and JUUL's marketing and social media code, JUUL also provides educational resources for smokers. In this way, JUUL is making a statement of how serious it is in curbing youth uptake of its products. JUUL does so by reiterating that its marketing and social media outreach are not targeted at youth and that its products are for adult smokers who are already trying to quit smoking. These strategies help JUUL to portray itself as an organization that is proactively limiting its target audience to adults, has integrity, and is acting morally.

Supplication

JUUL's social media posts display elements of supplication where it positions itself as a victim. Although most of its previous social media posts have been deleted, JUUL retained a retweet from *Washington Examiner* titled, "The crusade against JUUL and other vaping products is childish, even for tobacco control" (Blair, 2018). By retweeting the article, JUUL shows support for the sentiments shared by Blair, and by extension the sentiment that it has been "demonized" in what is called a "crusade" against its organization (Blair, 2018, para. 10). The diction used in this article casts JUUL as a victim in the FDA's investigations. Leveraging this perception of victimization, JUUL engaged in supplication, using its vulnerabilities to solicit support (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Clearly the article is significant to JUUL because, despite it being retweeted April 9, 2018, this article is atypical from the rest of JUUL's social media feed.

Similarly, JUUL's media releases also share the same tone of victimization. In a media release posted on Twitter in December 2018, JUUL tweeted that it has "taken dramatic action to contribute to solve this problem." The problem in this case was the Surgeon General's (2018) advisory that publicly named JUUL as e-cigarettes that "have a high level of nicotine" and that parents, teachers, and health professionals should advise youth against using JUUL's products. Since JUUL was the only company that was named by the Surgeon General, JUUL's response sounds almost exasperated, in that it has "taken dramatic action" yet is still being singled out. Both these examples illustrate the company's desire to portray itself as a victim amidst the allegations.

Discussion

Since April 24, 2018, JUUL has been a target of governmental and public scrutiny due to allegations that its products are being marketed and sold to youth. Despite JUUL being the largest player in the e-cigarette industry, research on JUUL has been rather limited with even less research analyzing how JUUL communicated with its audiences after the numerous FDA investigations. To fill this gap, and to inform public interest communications, this paper shows that since the FDA's investigation into JUUL's marketing and sales of e-cigarettes to youth, much of JUUL's messaging on its website and social media accounts has evolved to engage in positive impression management. JUUL's shut down of its Facebook and Instagram pages is a gesture illustrating its desire to move away from the image of being *that company* that sells tobacco products to youth. Shifts in JUUL's messaging by reducing the emphasis on bulk purchases and referrals, including a nicotine warning, increasing the age requirements to receive information from the company, and using muted colors and images represent attempts at curating a positive impression of the organization in accordance with the FDA's numerous threats. Although it can be argued that changes such as the inclusion of a nicotine warning label on JUUL's website are part of its legal obligations to the FDA, rather than merely appealing to the

FDA's values, the size and placement may not be. The sheer size of the warning on JUUL's homepage can be said to be a conscientious attempt at appealing to the values of the FDA. Additionally, finding support that the impression management tactics of self-promotion, exemplification, and supplication are embedded in JUUL's current messaging provides evidence that IMT is an appropriate theory that can be used to analyze an organization's impression management online after image-threatening events.

Theoretical implications

IMT has infrequently been applied to an online, organizational communication setting or to such a unique product category such as JUUL. IMT was originally conceptualized to apply to interpersonal communication (Leary and Kowalski, 1990) and was later applied to organizations to understand how they construct a positive image after image-threatening events or crises (Allen & Caillouet, 1994; Jenkins et al., 2014; Marcus & Goodman, 1991; McDonnell & King, 2013). What is unique about this study is that JUUL is an organization that is paradoxical as it can be seen as both promoting prosocial and nonprosocial behaviors. Although JUUL presents itself as an organization that wants to help its users quit their addiction to traditional tobacco cigarettes, nicotine is still present in its products and is a substance that is still addictive. JUUL products are in no way healthy but have been argued to be healthier than traditional tobacco cigarettes by some governmental organizations (McNeill et al., 2015). At the same time, with allegations that JUUL was marketing its products to youth, whether the company is truly a prosocial organization is also questionable. The use of IMT in such an unprecedented product category extends IMT and its applicability to a variety of organizational types that are engaging in positive impression management.

Although there has been some headway in applying IMT to organizational communication, there has been scant research on digital platforms. This paper shows that impression management tactics also are embedded in online communication. Individuals who want to find out more about a company or its products tend to go to the organization's website or social media pages. This tendency reflects the importance of how an organization presents itself online to the public. As one of the first studies to analyze organizational impression management and construction online, this study contributes to the literature on IMT by suggesting other communication platforms for theory building especially in the context of public interest communications.

Practical implications

This case study also offers strategies for organizations that might face image-threatening events. First, there are many ways an organization can engage in positive impression management. For JUUL, reassuring the FDA that the company is trying to ensure that its products do not reach the hands of youth was shown in both explicit and implicit gestures. The plastering of the warning sign that JUUL's product contains nicotine represents a grand and explicit gesture, while the

move to muted colors in its online presence is far more subtle and implicit. So, this finding suggests organizations have a variety of choices that they can make online that can communicate, to varying effects, their dedication to engage in positive impression management. Second, this result provides organizations with examples of how impression management tactics are employed within an organization's online communication for preemptive measures. Knowledge of these examples would allow for prosocial companies to adopt some of these tactics in their campaign strategy if faced with similar image-threatening events.

The findings from this study also bring to both the public and government's attention how JUUL is actively changing its messaging strategy. It is impossible to, through this study, make a causal association that JUUL is in fact making these changes to positively influence its stakeholders. However, it is clear that these changes were not coincidental. Highlighting these changes can provide consumers with some contextual knowledge when making their own assessments of the ethics and authenticity of JUUL's efforts. Similarly, this study can help governmental organizations reassess the extent to which they are investigating and regulating JUUL's online presence and its potential impact on the public's attitude not just to JUUL's brand, but to the use of e-cigarettes overall.

Limitations and future research

This study is not without limitations. Due to the lack of available crawled data, this study was unable to access the social media data of JUUL on Instagram and Facebook. Instagram is primarily an image-sharing platform, which would presumably have different impression management tactics embedded as compared to Twitter. Similarly, Facebook differs from Twitter because it does not have a 280-character limit, which means messaging on this platform may vary. Future research should attempt to recover deleted posts by collaborating with the social media managers of JUUL to identify changes in the company's social media messaging over time across these two platforms.

This study primarily looked at JUUL's homepage, but since JUUL is selling a product, it might be useful to conduct an in-depth analysis of its website under the tab "SHOP," which has information on JUUL's product packages and the JUUL pods that consumers are able to purchase. It has been found that prior to making a purchase online, consumers tend to make their decisions based on both the website characteristics (such as the scope and functionality) as well as the product characteristics (Mallapragada et al., 2016). In other words, specific to making online purchases, consumers might look through an organization's website more precisely to look for cues when making their purchasing decisions. Therefore, future research should look at analyzing other aspects of the JUUL website that might provide additional insight into JUUL's impression management.

It also would be useful for future research to study how these changes in messaging and the use of impression management strategies and tactics by JUUL influence stakeholders' impression of the organization. Empirically testing how public perceptions change based on the

impression management used by an organization could show causal relationships between impression management and its effectiveness, which would add to the public interest communications literature on promoting positive behavioral change. Additionally, comparing JUUL and a related company (e.g., Altria or Blu) also can uncover whether these messaging changes are unique to JUUL or shared by other companies in the same product line.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that governmental investigations and regulations to taper JUUL's influence on new and existing e-cigarette users were met with changes in JUUL's messaging strategies to subvert the negative publicity it received. Although some of these strategies and tactics may be adapted by prosocial companies should they face image-threatening events, the findings also can spark further conversations about the ethics of such forms of public communication. As a qualitative case study of the largest e-cigarette brand, this study also elucidates an area of public interest communications that has very rarely been studied.

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