Dealing with Negative Publicity in Social Media

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# Abstract:

While not replying to negative publicity often leads to consumers’ negative attitudes increasing, it has also been found that replying can in some cases lead to greater negative attitudes than not replying (Rhee & Yang 2014). The aim of this study is to analyse how companies deal with negative publicity in social media. In order to facilitate the purpose of the study a deeper understanding about negative publicity in social media and how it can be prevented and responded to is also sought after.

The theoretical framework in this thesis is focused mainly on how to communicate in social media, what should be considered when determining if, how and when to respond to negative publicity in social media, as well as on presenting other options for action instead of responding directly. A qualitative method and deductive research approach is used in the study conducted for this thesis. The study consisted of inquiries and in-depth interviews, and was conducted in February and March of 2015. The inquiries were done in order to be able to distinguish and find the cases that were believed to be the most relevant and revealing for the aim of the study.

The results of the study conducted in this thesis indicate that negative publicity in social media can be dealt with either in a more reactive or proactive way. Essential aspects of both approaches are constant monitoring of social media, as well as being open and honest. It can also be concluded that when it comes to responding to negative publicity in social media companies need to evaluate incidents on a case-by-case basis in order to determine if it is better to respond or not, while taking into consideration for instance who wrote what, when, and where.

**Keywords:** Social networks, negative publicity, monitoring, responding, inactivity.
CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
  1.1 Research problem ......................................................................................................... 3
  1.2 Aim of study .................................................................................................................. 5
  1.3 Delimitations of the study ............................................................................................ 7
  1.4 Structure of the thesis .................................................................................................. 8
  1.5 Key terms used in the thesis ........................................................................................ 9

2 COMMUNICATING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA ....................................................... 10
  2.1 Electronic word of mouth ............................................................................................. 10
  2.2 Defining social media .................................................................................................. 11
  2.3 Using social media to the company’s advantage ......................................................... 13
    2.3.1 Surveillance tool ...................................................................................................... 15
    2.3.2 Considerations when using social media ............................................................... 15
  2.4 Choosing the right social networks for the company .................................................. 17
    2.4.1 Facebook ............................................................................................................... 18
    2.4.2 Twitter .................................................................................................................... 19
    2.4.3 LinkedIn ................................................................................................................ 19
  2.5 Gaining visibility through blogs ................................................................................... 20
  2.6 Sharing media content through content communities ................................................ 21
  2.7 Providing free information through collaborative projects ........................................ 21
  2.8 Business-to-Business communication in social media ............................................... 21

3 MANAGING NEGATIVE PUBLICITY .......................................................................... 24
  3.1 Social Media Strategy .................................................................................................. 24
  3.2 Online reputation management .................................................................................... 25
  3.3 The occurrence of negative publicity in social media .................................................. 27
    3.3.1 Impact of negative publicity .................................................................................... 28
    3.3.2 Different forms of negative publicity ...................................................................... 29
    3.3.3 Different reactions to negative publicity ................................................................. 29
  3.4 Responding to negative publicity in social media ....................................................... 30
    3.4.1 What to consider before responding ..................................................................... 31
    3.4.2 What to consider when responding ....................................................................... 32
    3.4.3 Responding to different types of negative publicity in social media ..................... 35
      3.4.3.1 The good .......................................................................................................... 35
3.4.3.2 The bad.............................................................. 36
3.4.3.3 The ugly.......................................................... 37
3.4.4 Other options for responding to negative publicity in social media...
3.4.4.1 Takedown procedures .............................................. 39
3.4.4.2 Inactivity ............................................................ 39
3.4.4.3 Deleting entries ...................................................... 40
3.4.4.4 Legal action .......................................................... 40
3.5 Responding to a crisis in social media............................... 41
4 SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK .................. 44
5 METHODOLOGY ................................................................ 47
  5.1 Choice of research method ................................................. 47
  5.2 Strategy for design and sampling ........................................ 49
  5.3 Collection of data ........................................................... 49
  5.4 Design of the interview guide ............................................. 52
  5.5 Analysis of data ............................................................. 52
6 PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS .................................... 54
  6.1 The pre-study – inquiries made to companies not interviewed ....... 54
  6.2 Company A ................................................................... 55
     6.2.1 Monitoring social media .............................................. 56
     6.2.2 Cases of negative publicity in social media ..................... 56
     6.2.3 Responding to negative publicity in social media ............... 57
     6.2.4 Repercussions of negative publicity in social media .......... 58
     6.2.5 Preventing and controlling negative publicity in social media .. 59
  6.3 Company B ................................................................... 59
     6.3.1 Monitoring social media .............................................. 61
     6.3.2 Cases of negative publicity in social media ..................... 62
     6.3.3 Responding to negative publicity in social media ............... 63
     6.3.4 Repercussions of negative publicity in social media .......... 66
     6.3.5 Preventing and controlling negative publicity in social media .. 66
  6.4 Company C ................................................................... 67
     6.4.1 Monitoring social media .............................................. 68
     6.4.2 Cases of negative publicity in social media ..................... 68
     6.4.3 Responding to negative publicity in social media ............... 70
     6.4.4 Repercussions of negative publicity in social media .......... 72
FIGURES

Figure 1  Different factors to consider when determining the possible risk of negative publicity in social media ......................................................... 82

Figure 2  Two possible approaches for dealing with negative publicity in social media .................................................................................. 85

Figure 3  Actions to be taken before, during and after to successfully deal with negative publicity in social media ......................................................... 89
1 INTRODUCTION

The world has changed dramatically during the last few decades, mostly due to technological advancements, the most notable one being the development of the Internet. These changes can be seen in both the consumer and business landscapes. (O’Connor & Galvin 2001:14; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:17) In this new technologically advanced reality the customers have become less loyal and forgiving, as well as more critical and demanding. Since customer sophistication and the business landscape have changed, it is imperative for companies to embrace these changes and adapt to them in order to be able to meet the ever-increasing demands of the customers on increasingly competitive markets. (O’Connor & Galvin 2001:3-4, 25)

The tools that existed previously in marketing have to a large extent been replaced by newer and more cost efficient versions; for instance e-mail and social networking have for the most part exchanged direct mail and focus groups, as also websites have largely replaced billboards (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:17). Companies need to understand how to use these new tools in a way that will benefit them.

Social (online) media is a phenomenon that has emerged and grown rapidly during the 21st century. Social media is defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that allows individuals to create, collaborate, and share content with one another” by Thackray, Neiger and Keller (2012:165). Social media was founded to enhance, with the help of technology, our human experience, by satisfying fundamental aspects of humanity such as wanting to be heard and satisfying our curiosity, in a quick and easy way (Russell 2013:6). While the world’s population is currently approximately 7.18 billion people, in the year 2014 the number of people actively using social medias surpassed 2 billion for the first time (Kemp 2014). Of all Internet users around 75 percent have joined at least one social network (Pick 2014).

Accordingly, in today’s world, social media plays an important role in most people’s lives, and this presents businesses with new challenges that they did not have a few decades ago, but also with unprecedented new opportunities since communication with millions of consumers has never before been possible so immediately (Evans Jennings, Blount & Weatherly 2014; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:17-18). Most companies have been pressured into joining social media networks by now because everyone else, meaning the competitors, seem to be doing it. Companies often rush to join social networks only to neglect the management of them once the profiles have been established.
Many companies are trying to use the same strategies that they have used in other mediums also on social media sites. However, this is rarely successful since customers are often used to quick and direct interaction on social media, which are not common factors on mediums such as print and television. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:135-136) No matter the space corporations operate in, due to its rapid expansion among Internet users, all companies can benefit from learning more and taking an interest in the revolutionary trend of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

Social media, with the right dedication and knowledge, is relatively cheap to create and maintain (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:18-19). The main negative aspect to it is that it is hard to control due to the fact that the reputation of a brand is not defined anymore by the message in its advertising, but instead by the dialogue occurring online (Klara 2011). Since social medias are active around the clock everywhere in the world, one can be certain that something is constantly happening (Shaw 2012). Companies can expect brutally straightforward and uncensored feedback from customers on this forum, which is often visible to the world. The Internet and social media have led to the power having moved away from the companies and being given to the customers. A link that gets shared on Facebook 100 times could reach hundreds of thousands of potential customers in an instant, and if the message is negative the impact on the company’s image or bottom line could be significant. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:14-18, 135-136)

Negative publicity can be defined as negative news or comments about a company or its products, and it can occur in for instance mass media, through word-of-mouth, and on social media (Matos & Veiga 2005). Reidenbach, Festervand and MacWilliam (1987:9) define negative publicity in a business context as “the noncompensated dissemination of potentially damaging information by presenting disparaging news about a product, service, business unit, or individual in print or broadcast media or by word-of-mouth”. Customers’ attitudes about a company or brand can be strongly influenced by negative information, which in turn can change the customers’ behaviours. It has been found that negative publicity in most cases has a greater influence on customers than positive publicity has. (Matos & Veiga 2005) Negative publicity on social media can be seriously damaging to companies; the result can, for instance, be damage to the trust and image that consumers have of a brand or company, declined sales due to customer relationships ending, or a damaged reputation (Aula 2010).
1.1 Research problem

While negative feedback is a natural part of business, the feedback has never previously been so publicly displayed for all to see with the possibility of spreading worldwide, without traditional media having played a part in it, as it is on social media. Therefore, it is important for companies to protect their reputation on social media without seeming too forceful, and also to know how to respond to online attacks that can effortlessly go viral and start trending worldwide. (Smith, Sutin & Kanef 2012) The most relevant question that will be examined in this paper is therefore how companies can manage negative publicity occurring on the channel of social media. The answer to this question is essential because it can help shed light on how to deal with negative publicity in social media in the most beneficial way, and the possible consequences of managing the matter unsuccessfully.

Social media is widely used by both companies and individuals. It is imperative for companies to have an understanding of what the purposes with the different forums are, what the appropriate use of them is, and also whom they are addressing on each one. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:137) Posts made by companies or employees that at a first glance seem harmless or even beneficial can quickly turn into a disaster with severe consequences. This can happen for instance if information, either by accident or on purpose, is released that in some way is damaging to the company itself or other organisations or people. (Evans Jennings, Blount & Weatherly 2014) Therefore, it can be stated that companies need to consider how, when and where they communicate using social media since careless or insufficiently organized communications can lead to negative publicity in social media.

Companies also need to know how to respond to negative publicity since answering in the ‘wrong’ way (for instance defensively) may lead to the original entry being noticed even more and further enraging the writer of the entry as well as other readers online (Fitzgerald 2011). This is an important aspect to consider since a good response is a crucial step in dealing with negative publicity online. It is also beneficial to consider if traditional ways of dealing with negative publicity in other channels can also be used in handling negative publicity occurring in social media, or if entirely different approaches have to be established. The demographics of the people who are on the site, as well as the idea behind the site itself are also examples of important considerations to keep in mind for companies when communicating on social media sites. As in all communication, it is important to carefully consider whom the company is communicating with,
what channel to use, and what the response should contain when responding to negative publicity in social media.

Negative publicity in social media may not always be severely damaging on its own; however, popular topics are often picked up by mass media, which in turn casts a whole different kind of spotlight on the subject (Aula 2010). Negative information about companies can vary in severity and come from many different sources, such as the company itself, its employees, customers, competitors, organizations, or any number of other sources (Evans Jennings, Blount & Weatherly 2014). These aspects (source and severity) are only a few of the possible different aspects of negative publicity that companies may need to take into consideration when responding to negative publicity online.

Due to the fast moving nature of social media, it is important for companies to be prepared for the occurrence of negative publicity in social media and have a strategy in place for how to handle the situation so that the company can respond as quickly as possible in a productive and non-harmful way (Shaw 2012). However, when it comes to large companies it may not be possible or feasible to imagine that all negative publicity is reacted to. If a company gets mentioned negatively around 50 times a day in social media forums, perhaps it is not productive or possible to respond to all of the entries. However, if some of the entries are of a more serious matter and have the potential to develop into a crisis, companies should most certainly respond to those, preferably as quickly as possible.

Since customers are responsible for creating a company’s income, they are considered to be the most important stakeholders. However, other stakeholders’ importance is not to be forgotten, and it is important to note that negative publicity online can impact other stakeholders’ image of a company even greater than it impacts customers. This can be seen in the fact that the ones that are not customers, and have no or only a limited amount of direct experience with a company or its brand, are more likely to be affected by indirect experiences with the company, those for instance being activities and conversations in social media. (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015) Therefore, when considering the problem of negative publicity in social media it is important to note that the one creating the negative publicity may not always be a customer, meaning negative comments from people who directly have nothing to do with the company can also affect it (for instance if an individual writes negative content about a business-to-business company even though he does not use or buy their products).
Business-to-business (B2B) companies are the types of companies with the most online transactions, while business-to-consumer (B2C) companies’ online transactions are generally talked about more (Smith & Chaffey 2005:10). In previous research, a few different areas of focus can be discerned regarding the area of negative publicity in social media. Some literature focuses mainly on the responses of the company, while a larger part focuses on the reactions of the consumers. The clear majority of the literature is focused on consumer brands.

So the problem that companies are facing is not only to discern which entries are responded to and which ones are not, but also how to respond to them. The problem in this thesis is a relevant one, since not knowing how and which online negative publicity to answer to can have negative consequences for organizations, due to the fact that research has found that not responding to negative publicity most often results in higher negative attitudes among consumers (Rhee & Yang 2014). However, Rhee and Yang (2014) also found in their study that some responses might have a greater negative impact, than not responding at all, on consumer reaction. Therefore, companies need to know which negative publicity is the most important to respond to and how it should be responded to, so as to diminish the occurrence and increase of negative attitudes among people.

1.2 Aim of study

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse how companies handle negative publicity in social media. This will be achieved by determining how companies respond to negative publicity in social media, and what the possible actions are to take against negative publicity occurring in this particular channel. In order for this to be possible it is important to also gain a deeper understanding about what the different types and sources of negative publicity in social media are, as well as if and how companies can prevent and counter them. This thesis will not only examine the possible responses to negative information in social media, but also try to determine how and what negative publicity is responded to and what is disregarded.

Based on the purpose, it can be stated that the main research questions in this thesis are:

- How can companies respond to negative publicity in social media and what are the different possibilities for responding?
What can companies do to prevent negative publicity in social media from occurring and to control it?

What should companies take into consideration when responding to and preparing for negative publicity in social media?

This matter should be researched because companies and individuals use social media as a communication tool more frequently today than ever before, and understanding how to use it productively instead of harmfully is essential for organizations. The results are beneficial for companies by helping them understand how they can communicate with customers in social media to prevent negative publicity from occurring, as well as manage different problems regarding negative publicity in social media.

An important question that is still unanswered is what actions companies can take to prevent or lessen negative publicity in social media from occurring. While for instance Leinonen (2014) studied in her thesis different crisis management strategies, and which actions should be taken during a crisis in social media, preventive actions were not examined in more detail. In view of this, this thesis has the aforementioned unanswered question included as one of the research questions, and also includes the matter in the study in order to get a comprehensive answer to it.

After an examination of existing literature (Aula 2010; Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015; Jaser 2012; Klaassen 2009; Monga & John 2008; Ott & Theunissen 2015; Rhee & Yang 2014; Sharma 2014; Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012; Smith 2012) it has been found that the research done regarding negative publicity in social media has been more focused on companies with consumer brands and how they should manage the issue, while industry companies in business-to-business settings have much more seldom been the study subjects. Therefore, this thesis aspires to include in the study mainly business-to-business companies (or companies that are both B2B and B2C) that are active in less researched areas, such as construction, fuel, energy, and manufacturing. This is done in order to reach deeper results that can be applied to a larger variety of companies than simply companies with consumer brands, thereby attempting to help fill the existent research gap. The problem is therefore, in addition to being a practical one also a theoretical one.
1.3 Delimitations of the study

This thesis focuses on the problem of how companies handle negative publicity in social media, meaning the focus lies on the consequences for and actions of companies, not the consumers’ thoughts, opinions or reactions, which are not included in the research scope of this thesis. Both the theoretical framework and the empirical study are approached from the company’s point of view. The consumers’ opinions and reactions are only included to the degree needed so that the company can better understand and make decisions regarding the matter. Negative publicity in social media can stem from both internal (for instance employees) and external (for instance customers) sources. However, since these two areas are both so wide, complex and differ so greatly from each other, this thesis will focus only on the negative publicity that originates from sources outside the company.

Social media is a diffuse term, and different professionals include different parts in the term. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) include six different parts into their definition, and two of these categories are different virtual worlds (virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds). However, in chapter two, virtual worlds will not be presented at all since they are not relevant for the focus of this paper. Instead this paper will focus more on the four other categories included in the term social media, and exclude virtual worlds from both the theoretical and practical analysis.

Different companies use social media for different purposes. Some companies create profiles on social media networks and use them to interact with their customers, others buy ads on social media, and many companies do both. The relevant part for this thesis though, is communication through content posted on profiles in social media networks and blogs, and especially how that is used to combat negative publicity occurring in social media. In order to support the empirical study, theory specific to business-to-business communication in social media will be included. However, business-to-consumer communication separately will not be included due to the fact that the theory brought up is applicable to it. However, the majority of the theory included in the theoretical framework is applicable to both business-to-business and business-to-consumer companies.

The empirical study will focus on the impact and management of negative publicity in social media of both B2B companies, and companies that are active on both B2B and B2C markets. However, no companies strictly operating on the B2C market will be
used. This delimitation of the case companies will strengthen the validity of the findings and facilitate a more reliable analysis. The companies included in the empirical study will all be large companies (more than 250 employees) or middle-sized companies (50-250 employees), meaning that no small businesses will be included. This delimitation was done because small businesses most often differ in many ways from larger corporations (such as less resources, less presence on social media). Because of the mentioned differences, including small businesses in the study would likely have resulted in the results being less comparable and reliable. All of the companies that will be included in the study will be active in more than one country.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

In the introduction chapter to this thesis the reader is familiarized with the challenges companies face in dealing with the occurrence of negative publicity on social media. The relevant problems and main questions concerning the subject are brought up in the discussion of the research problem, which is followed by the presentation of the aim of the thesis. The delimitations of the study are presented next, which have been made to ensure the reliability of the study. The last part of this chapter clarifies the differences between some of the key concepts used in this thesis.

The theoretical framework is made up of chapters two, three and four, with chapter two being about existing theory concerning communication through online sources, with a focus on social media. Relevant social media categories are presented and theory about what companies should consider when using the different types of social medias, is brought up. This information is relevant because it provides an understanding of how social media works and how companies can use it and act on it in order to be able to counteract negative publicity in social media.

Chapter three focuses on the concept of negative publicity in social media and how to deal with it, such as for instance what factors to consider when responding and what the different types of possible responses are. Chapter four summarizes the most relevant theory brought up in the two previous chapters. These three chapters bring up the most relevant existing theory regarding the subject, and work as a transition to the empirical part of this thesis.

Chapter five presents the methodology used in this thesis, meaning a comprehensive presentation of the research method that was used and how the research was complet-
ed. In chapter six the results of the empirical study are presented, first by presenting the findings gotten from the inquiries and then presenting the results from all of the individual interviews. The following chapter, which is chapter seven, analyses the findings of the empirical study, and then analyses, discusses and compares the results with the existing theories presented in the theoretical framework. The reliability and validity of the study is also considered in chapter seven. Chapter eight is the final chapter, and it consists of a summary of the conclusions reached in this thesis.

1.5 Key terms used in the thesis

There are a few key words and concepts used in this thesis that need further clarification. The words consumer, customer and user are all used frequently, and since they are so similar yet still have somewhat different meanings in this thesis, it is worth clarifying what the different meanings are. According to Cambridge Dictionaries Online (2015a) a customer is “a person who buys goods or a service”, while a consumer is “a person who buys goods or services for their own use” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online 2015b), and a user is “someone who uses a product, machine, or service” (Cambridge Dictionaries Online 2015c).

In this thesis all those that buy or have previously bought products or services from a company are considered to be customers (regardless if the buyer is buying it for themselves, for someone else, or as a representative of a company). Consumer on the other hand, is considered to be everyone that buys products or services for their own use (meaning that the individual or company does not sell it forward). The word user is a broader classification, and encompasses all those that use something (be it social media or a service), and therefore encompasses non-customers, customers, and other stakeholders.
2 COMMUNICATING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

The duration and severity of negative publicity regarding a company is often greatly dependent on the company’s response to it (Henthorne & Henthorne 1994; Rhee & Yang 2014). Therefore, before companies try to respond to negative publicity in social media it is first important to understand the medium on which it takes place and how companies can use social media to respond. Companies can through communication minimize the occurrence and severity of negative publicity (Henthorne & Henthorne 1994). That is only possible if companies first understand and can properly use and communicate through social media, which is what the information in this chapter aims to give the reader an understanding about.

Electronic word-of-mouth and why companies should take note of it is presented first. The information presented in this chapter then gives insight into what social media is all about, how companies should use and communicate on it, as well as how it can be used for monitoring what is being said about the company. Four different types of social media forms are also presented, and the most important platforms used today are brought up briefly. The last part of the chapter delves into business-to-business communication in social media, which is brought up due to the focus of the empirical study being business-to-business companies and companies that are both business-to-business and business-to-consumer.

Online sources have become more and more common for businesses to use as a communication channel when communicating with their customers or other parties. However, when choosing the media type companies should not focus simply on what is the most convenient, but instead on what media type will allow them to reach the customers they wish to reach, what the costs are, what would be the most fitting channel when regarding the product, and also what kind of media would be best suited for the message that the company wants to convey. (Schultz & Barnes 1999:321)

2.1 Electronic word of mouth

According to Henning-Thurau, Gwinner, Walsh and Gremler (2004), research has shown that word of mouth (WOM) greatly influences customers’ purchasing decisions. The development and rise of the Internet has given customers an entirely different platform than they had before to voice their opinions about brands, companies, and their products and services, as well as the opportunity to find out what other customers’
opinions are. This means that the word of mouth process has developed on the Internet, into something that is called electronic word of mouth (eWOM). (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004) EWOM communication is defined by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004:39) as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”.

Due to the specific characteristics of eWOM, companies should pay close attention to it. These characteristics are the fact that eWOM is anonymous, available for the foreseeable future for anyone to see, and has the potential to reach a large number of people (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Research has also shown that eWOM can be used to gather information and solve problems, and that it can affect both customers’ online and offline purchasing decisions. While positive eWOM can be a much more effective marketing tool than advertising, equally negative eWOM can be a source of negative publicity and lead to the damaging of images and reputations of brands and companies. Electronic word of mouth is a growing trend among consumers, and therefore companies should develop strategies for how to manage this when it comes to responding to and learning from both the negative and positive parts. When used right eWOM can be a powerful means of being able to listen to and interact with customers to get an improved understanding of their needs. (Chan & Ngai 2011) A substantial amount of the eWOM found online is provided by social media platforms, such as for instance blogs, Twitter and Facebook (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015).

2.2 Defining social media

Initial signs of social media started to develop as early as the end of the 1960s, but it was only towards the end of the 2000s that they started their immense growth in their current form. Characteristics such as flexibility, interactivity and accessibility on an unparalleled level has since elevated social media to a powerful media genre with a worldwide reach that is even beginning to overshadow conventional mass media, which include channels such as television, radio and newspapers. (Wisniewski 2013) However, it is important to note that social media is simply the tool used for conversations, and that it is people who are interested in sharing and connecting with other people and companies around the world (CIPR & Waddington 2012:5-6). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010:61) define social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation
and exchange of User Generated Content”. The classification and definition for social media is constantly changing since the sites themselves are continuously evolving, and new sites emerge every day. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Wisniewski 2013)

According to Wisniewski (2013) four key categories in social media can be discerned, and they are blogs, content communities, social networking sites and collaborative projects. However, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) state that there are six different categories of social media, and that they include the same ones as previously stated, and in addition virtual game worlds and virtual social worlds. With the exception of the two types of virtual worlds, the rest of the categories will be presented in more detail later on in this chapter.

Mass media and social media are similar in many ways; however, there are a number of features that distinguish social media from mass media, and these features include:

- **Popularity**: while the number of active daily users of social media has reached booming numbers, for instance traditional newspapers are declining both in numbers and in circulation (Wisniewski 2013). However, some newspapers are still very popular while newspapers online are increasing, meaning that the production and usage patterns of traditional media are simply changing (CIPR & Waddington 2012:32).

- **Accessibility**: social media are in most cases free to use, while conventional media are often more costly (for both consumers and advertisers) due to costly equipment and the need for professional employees (Wisniewski 2013). However, many online newspapers are free and easily accessible (CIPR & Waddington 2012:32–33).

- **Credibility**: since no one controls or scrutinizes what is posted on social media beforehand, the risk of false information, mistakes and omissions being published is significant. However, social media is also outspoken and uncensored in ways that few other channels of communication are (Wisniewski 2013).

- **Permanence**: Content in social media can easily and continuously be edited, but can be difficult to erase completely, while content in traditional media cannot usually be changed after publication (Wisniewski 2013).
• **Democracy**: Social media can be argued to be a more democratic channel since human individualism is what essentially drives it, while in contrast conventional media sources are driven by the inescapable corporationism (Wisniewski 2013).

• **Timeliness**: reaction time in social media is almost instantaneous and information can be posted without much formalism, while the process is much more time consuming in traditional media where information is gathered, confirmed, and processed before being distributed. However, social media more rarely publish major news stories first. (CIPR & Waddington 2012:34; Wisniewski 2013).

Many of the characteristics mentioned above, such as the accessibility, popularity and timeliness of social media, can be both advantageous and harmful when it comes to battling negative publicity occurring on the channel. On the one hand the popularity and swiftness of the Internet may cause the negative publicity to spread to a large number of people quickly. On the other hand, companies also have the opportunity to engage in the discussions and respond quickly and directly to negativity in ways that traditional media does not offer. (Wisniewski 2013)

### 2.3 Using social media to the company’s advantage

Social media is one of the greatest communication tools that companies have today for interacting with a large number of customers cost effectively, therefore making it relevant for organisations of all shapes and sizes (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Many companies rush to join social medias without taking the time to research the medium thoroughly and how best to use it to their advantage (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:136-137). Before joining, companies should research the laws and regulations that affect social media, like for instance copyright laws, privacy laws, as well as the terms and conditions of the different sites (Gordon 2011:343-344).

On social media companies can, not only interact directly with their customers and other actors, but also monitor conversations being had about the company or its brand (Close 2012:134; Gordon 2011:338; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:56-57). Customers now have the possibility of easily sharing their experiences about a brand or company on a worldwide basis, while companies have the possibility to establish with their customers an easy two-way communication channel (Close 2012:xii, 134; Gordon 2011:338-339). These aspects give companies unique insight into how customers see their brand, what is being said about it, as well as reactions and reviews about products,
campaigns and so on. The possibilities are practically endless. (Close 2012:135; Gordon 2011:338-339; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:56-57) It is also important to note that all customers’ opinions may not be positive, but that social media offers companies an excellent way to directly engage with the source of the negativity if they wish to do so.

It is important for companies to remember to listen carefully to what is being said on social media before responding, as well as keep in mind what people expect from companies on social media. The whole idea behind social media is for people to be able to connect with other people. Therefore, when it comes to social media, one of the most common errors that corporations make is to, in communicating with others, use the same corporate approach that they use on other media, meaning they sound like companies in their conversations. However, since people wish to interact, not with companies, but with other people, this strategy is not a wise one. Instead companies should strive to bring forth the representatives of a company, meaning its employees, so that the customers know who they are talking to and can form a more personal connection. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:143-144)

When it comes to handling negative content online (such as negative feedback or complaints) non-customers consider it to be of additional value for a brand when its employees answer negative publicity in a conversational human tone of voice (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015). This means that again, companies could benefit from bringing forth their employees in their communications when responding to negative publicity. Being honest and open in conversations is said to also improve familiarity and trust, and all of the aforementioned aspects can influence both the customers’ and other stakeholders’ perception of the company’s reputation and image (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015).

According to the study done by Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom (2015), a company’s social media activities have an impact and are positively related to the company’s reputation, especially when it comes to non-customers. While customers usually expect engagement in social media, non-customers often pay more attention to it (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015). Although interactions on social media can never substitute the authenticity that interpersonal interactions have, social networking can instead reinforce existing relationships, or create interest for a previously unknown brand (Close 2012:xvii).
2.3.1 Surveillance tool

As mentioned earlier, people are often very straightforward and not afraid to voice their honest opinions on social media. They are not thinking about what companies want to hear, as may be the instance if they were to participate in for instance a survey or focus group. This is why social media is an incredibly valuable tool for companies to not only communicate with their customers, but also listen to them and get uncensored opinions about the company or its services and products, and then take the either positive or negative feedback and use it to improve the customer’s experience. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:145) If companies want to respond to the either negative or positive feedback that is given online it is important for them to monitor what is being said online so that they can react while the discussion is still on going.

Tools are accessible that can observe the online chatter for companies, and most of them are free. Companies need only specify keywords that the program then can scan the social medias for mentions of. Some programs offer companies the choice between real-time alerts or receiving e-mails daily, weekly or monthly when one or several of the keywords are mentioned. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:160-161) In order to prevent information overload, since generic terms should result in alerts more frequently, one should choose more rare words when using monitoring programs if the aim is to get updates more infrequently. Other programs might offer a more wide-ranging assessment of the situation. Depending on what companies want to accomplish and what kind of information is important, the different programs offer different solutions. For example, Google offers these types of services with their Google Alerts and Google Reader programs. With these programs companies can monitor what customers are saying about products or companies, using their specific names in the searches, or by using generic terms in searches to check what is being said about the industry as a whole. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:160-161)

2.3.2 Considerations when using social media

It is important for companies to consider that it might be more suitable to not be overly active when communicating through social media, since not all consumers appreciate it. It is important that the content not be too repetitive, frequent or boring, since this may cause the consumer to stop following the company or brand. Hence, it may be advantageous to develop a plan for communicating online so that the customers’ social media experience can be enhanced without being intrusive. A well-executed plan may
lead to an interest in and spreading awareness of the brand, or further developing the relationship with the customer. (Close 2012:xviii, 210)

There are many different recommendations for using social media. However, the ten most relevant recommendations for this thesis are presented below, meaning those that can help the company use social media to avoid and possibly prevent the occurrence of negative publicity in social media, as well as increase visibility and enhance two-way communication. In the end, companies have to trust employees to handle themselves on social media, and while good guidelines are not a guarantee that social media mis-haps will never happen, they can help point employees in the right way when it comes to preventing them (CIPR & Waddington 2012:43).

When using and being active on social media companies should carefully:

1) **Choose the right platforms.** Companies should research the different options and choose the right forum depending on the message that is to be conveyed and the group of customers that are to be contacted (since it is not economically sustainable to be active on all of them). (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

2) **Make certain to align all activities.** Companies should align their activities on different social media sites with each other. The use of multiple channels can be a useful and lucrative strategy; however, it is important that the messages on the different channels correspond with each other. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

3) **Integrate the media plans.** Companies should integrate their traditional media and social media communication so that the same corporate image is projected in both. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

4) **Have clear instructions.** Companies should have clear instructions when it comes to which actions require approval and which ones the employees can take immediately in compliance to other guidelines. (CIPR & Waddington 2012: 42)

5) **Make it clear who is in charge of social media activity.** It is important for someone to always be in charge of managing social media accounts, and also for them to know who has the ultimate responsibility for it so that they know who to raise concerns or questions to. (CIPR & Waddington 2012:43)

6) **Avoid sounding overly professional.** Companies should strive to blend in among others in social media and try to avoid sounding overly professional.
This makes them seem more relatable and approachable, which can facilitate communication. However, employees should still always remain polite, and the company should make it clear for them what type of behaviour is suitable when representing the company. (CIPR & Waddington 2012:42-43; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).

7) **Be active with posting new content.** In order to create and maintain a relationship with other users it is important for companies to be active by participating in conversations (not limited to replying to negative comments) and ensuring the content posted is new. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

8) **Be honest, but clear on legal issues.** Companies should strive to be honest and follow the rules. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010) In addition, companies should also be aware of legal issues, such as for instance the privacy rights of employees (CIPR & Waddington 2012:43).

9) **Be interesting.** Companies need to give their customers incentive to engage with them by first listening to the customers so they are able to find out what they want to hear, talk about, find interesting, entertaining and valuable. Thereafter, content to fit their wishes can be created and posted. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

10) **Be humble.** Companies should spend time studying the basic rules and the history of the applications before entering and participating in them, instead of believing that they intuitively know how to use them. To simply post press announcements and existing TV spots on different social media applications is an assured way to failure. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

### 2.4 Choosing the right social networks for the company

Social networks are comprised of different kinds of applications that enable companies to connect and network with employees and customers through personal profiles. These profiles consist of personal information in different forms; such as text, audio files, video, photographs and blogs. Many sites also feature e-mail, instant messaging or other communication options. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Wisniewski 2013)

An essential part of establishing a successful online presence through social networks is to create a suitable and enjoyable profile. Companies should keep in mind five general guidelines when creating profiles for the firm, as well as for their services or well-
known characters. First, companies should use their own name when setting up a profile. Since people want to interact, not with businesses but with people, companies should also allow their employees to use their own personal accounts to interact on behalf of the firm. The second rule to remember is to keep the usernames across all platforms consistent, since it assists people in finding profiles on different sites. Employees using their profiles for company use should use a picture, and a picture with both the logo and the employee would be ideal. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:148-150)

Companies and representing employees should also consider cross-linking their profiles whenever possible, since it encourages users to engage with the company on the forum that they wish to and also increases the exposure of the posted messages. (Gordon 2011:344; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:150) The fifth thing to consider is writing a good bio. Since many users find profiles by doing searches with keywords, companies can benefit from identifying and incorporating these keywords into the bio. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:151-152) Social media networks often have a specific demographic or goal in mind. Therefore, it is important for companies to research who is where, so that they do not end up wasting time and energy on setting up their business on sites with the wrong target demographic, reach or goals. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:137-138). Companies with an online presence on social media sites should also remember to go where the audience is, and to move to newer social networking sites if the customers are doing so (Lontos 2010).

Companies should, in addition to an official social media page, also register a user name for their core trademark. This will inhibit others from doing so and using it in an unfavourable way that the company cannot control. However, some of these pages, set up by consumers, can also provide insight into public opinions about the brand or company, and therefore be valuable sources of information. It might be advantageous for companies to in some way participate in the discussions on these pages. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)

2.4.1 Facebook

Facebook was launched in 2004 (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:140). By the year 2013 the number of Facebook users who where active monthly had grown to over 1 billion, with over half of them being active each day on the site. Facebook is by far the most popular social media network at the moment in regards to the number of users. (Russell 2013:45) On Facebook companies can create pages, comparable to the ones indi-
viduals have, where they can upload pictures, videos and messages. The important thing to note is that the cost of setting up these profiles is free; meaning the only cost for companies comes from time spent. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:39, 140) Different types of companies use Facebook for different objectives; however, what the businesses who manage to use the site successfully all have in common are: clear strategies for their page, a comprehensive understanding of what the audience wants, as well as distinct and well-defined goals for the usage of the site. (CIPR & Waddington 2012:68)

2.4.2 Twitter

Twitter was launched to the public in 2006 and is a micro-blogging service, which means that people using the site can subscribe to and post brief messages (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:141). The site had over 500 million registered users in 2013, of which 100 million of them were monthly active (Russell 2013:7). The site can be a very good marketing tool for businesses, which is what many businesses have recognized (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:141). Users often talk freely both positively and negatively about companies and products on the site, which gives companies a unique opportunity to monitor as well as participate in those conversations. (CIPR & Waddington 2012: 73-74; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:141-142) While the occurrence of negative complaints regarding a product can be harmful on the forum, a good response can lead to the opportunity of positive word-of-mouth (CIPR & Waddington 2012:74).

2.4.3 LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a site that targets professional networks specifically, and it was launched in 2003 (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:139). In 2013 the number of users was approximately 200 million (Russell 2013:336). While Facebook may be the leader of social networking platforms in business-to-consumer settings, LinkedIn is the equivalent in the business-to-business market. The leading professional network in social media today, LinkedIn is currently considered to be one of the most important forums for communication and engagement in the online business-to-business setting. (CIPR & Waddington 2012:80-83) The idea on LinkedIn is for users to build a large network by connecting online, not with just anyone, but with acquaintances such as business partners or colleagues, who in turn may introduce them to their co-workers and other acquaintances, and so on. This approach is unique, and differs from most other social media sites. The objective is for professionals to use the site to find jobs, to help develop rela-
tionships in the workplace, as well as to help build or strengthen business-to-business relationships. (Russell 2013:89; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:139-140)

2.5 Gaining visibility through blogs

Blogs can be defined as “Websites portraying the life experiences of individuals or groups and presented in textual, pictorial or audiovisual forms” (Wisniewski 2013:455). An astounding number of approximately 156 million public blogs existed in February 2011 (CIPR & Waddington 2012:8). In 2014 it was calculated that blogs are read by 77 percent of all Internet users (Ajmera 2014). Popular blogs get a great deal of visitors and comments, and an example of a well-known blog is the news blog The Huffington Post (CIPR & Waddington 2012:8; Wisniewski 2013). Blogs show entries on websites, marked by dates, and are normally shown in reverse chronological order. They come in many different varieties, with everything from summaries of a specific subject to personal diaries. Blogs are in most cases maintained by only one person, but the possibility of posting comments offers users the option of interaction. (CIPR & Washington 2012:93; Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

Blogs maintained by the companies themselves, can help companies enhance website visibility through increased traffic, communicate with stakeholders, and also keep employees informed (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Wisniewski 2013). There are also certain risks with blogs that can in some way be harmful for companies. The first of the two common types of risks that occur with blogs (either maintained by the company itself or other parties) are protest blogs formed by dissatisfied customers who use the blogs to express their dissatisfaction and make complaints. The second type of risk is the possibility of employees posting negatively about the company. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

Benefits that companies can attain by establishing and maintaining blogs are for instance search engine optimisation (making the blog appear higher in search results) and raw web traffic (appealing to the attention of search engines and audiences by using social strategies and central terms). To be able to gain social capital and recognition as an expert is another possible benefit, and this can be achieved by publishing accurate and expert content on a specific topic or event. Through blogs companies can also have direct engagements with customers and other parties in a participative setting, as well as encourage readers to take action, either by doing something (for instance attending a lecture or buying a book) or engaging in the discussion online. (CIPR & Waddington 2012:94-95)
2.6 Sharing media content through content communities

Content communities are platforms used to share media content amid users, and the media content can be photographs, audio-visual content, or content in other formats (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Wisniewski 2013). Examples of content community platforms are for instance Flickr and Youtube (Wisniewski 2013). Companies can distribute free content through these platforms, which in turn can enhance their cross-selling potential and marketing efforts (Wisniewski 2013). In addition to communicating with their customers, this type of channel can also be used to communicate with investors and employees by making announcements and sharing recruiting videos. One of the risks for companies is that copyright-protected materials are easily distributed through content communities, regardless of the rules in place that are meant to prevent this. Despite their negative aspects content communities are, due to their popularity an appealing channel for companies to communicate through. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

2.7 Providing free information through collaborative projects

There are two different types of collaborative projects. The first one is wikis, which are “websites allowing users to add, remove or alter web-based content” (Wisniewski 2013:455), the most well-known being Wikipedia. The other type of collaborative project is social bookmarking, which is a “group-based collection and rating of Internet resources” (Wisniewski 2013:455), and one example of this type is Reddit. Collaborative projects provide Internet users with free admission to information; and also make it possible for them to dispute copyrighted content, develop resource transparency, and improve socioeconomic efficiencies. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Wisniewski 2013) It is important for companies to know that for many Internet users collaborative projects are heading in the direction of becoming their central source of information. Although all information found on collaborative sites such as Wikipedia is not true, more and more people believe it is. This can be vital for companies to know, especially considering the fact that collaborative projects often show up high in search results. (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010)

2.8 Business-to-Business communication in social media

According to Brennan, Canning and McDowell (2007:171), the overall features of communication are effectively the same regardless if the company is communicating to a consumer or business market. One of the most important things to remember in com-
munication is that the message sent to audiences should be consistent, no matter the channel used (Brennan, Canning & McDowell 2007:171). Previously business-to-business (B2B) companies mainly used marketing channels such as trade shows, expos and trade publications to meet new customers and gain visibility on the market. Since these options are all quite expensive, large businesses with more capital had a significant advantage. However, with the evolution of the Internet the playing field has been evened since the two largest obstacles of cost and reach have been all but decimated. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:18-19)

Nowadays in both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) situations, almost everyone start their information searches online (Sarin 2010:158). However, the usage of social media tools in the business-to-consumer environment is much more common than in business-to-business, where the implementation of such tools is still in its early stages. This is mainly because corporations in this environment struggle more with matters regarding confidentiality, security, efficiency, and content ownership associated with business social media usage. (Kho 2008) It is also due to the fact that many B2B companies believe that social media use is better suited for B2C companies, which simply is not the case (Qualman 2012:238). The fact remains that since social tools can help develop relationships and increase credibility they may actually be of greater benefit to B2B companies than to B2C firms. This can be deduced from the fact that in B2B companies credibility and relationships are essential factors in decision-making and have a tendency to be of higher monetary value, be stronger in nature, and have a more long-term impact than they do in B2C markets. (Kho 2008; Qualman 2012:239)

Social media platforms designed for usage by B2B firms are becoming more common. They have the specific goals of assisting with quick replies to feedback, revealing information that was previously problematic to uncover, and making the sharing of information within the business setting simpler and quicker than before. In the business-to-business environment social media is growing in importance and the demand for these tools is increasing consistently. The challenge for companies will be to choose the technologies and applications that are consistent with and seem sensible considering the company’s business strategy and values. (Kho 2008)

Most social media guidelines can be applied to both B2B and B2C companies. There are, however, some tactics that need be adjusted to better suit the B2B environment. First of all, in B2B the importance of face-to-face meetings is still great and cannot be
lessened by social media as much as it has been in B2C companies. It is also important to take into consideration that not all companies, especially in the B2B setting, can benefit equally from the use of social media. Nevertheless, companies should strive to achieve their maximal potential, regardless of how small or great it may be, since there is always some potential there. Another thing to pay specific attention to is that social media offers B2B companies the opportunity of not only being able to listen to what their clients are saying about them, but also what their client’s customers’ are saying. Social media can be a very valuable tool in finding out what the end-customer’s preferences are. (Qualman 2012:238-241)
3 MANAGING NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

This chapter deals with how companies should manage negative publicity, meaning how they should prepare for it and how they can respond to it. The problem is looked at from the customer's perspective in the sense that what customers' different reactions are to different types of negative publicity and responses are presented, and from the company's view in terms of how they should react and respond to the negative publicity. The subject of negative publicity is also presented, as is what can be done to control what is said online by creating a social media strategy, as well as how to manage the company's online reputation. The chapter concludes with presenting how companies can manage a crisis occurring in social media.

When a customer is dissatisfied they usually choose one of three different behaviours; they can remain loyal and continue the relationship with the company, they can exit the relationship by choosing another company instead, or they can demand some form of correction by voicing their opinions. A fourth option is also possible, and something that companies should strive towards, which is for the actors involved to through collaboration solve the problem in a mutually beneficial way. In the case of companies' wrongdoings it is important for companies to not only correct the mistake, but also correct it in a way that is constructive, and therefore can help strengthen or re-establish the long-term relationship between the customer and the supplier. However, this is not always so simple since all customers have different expectations and demands that vary depending on the situation. (Gummesson 2002:112-118)

When solving issues with dissatisfied customers it is important that the person handling the matter has the authority to make the necessary decisions and solve the problem constructively. Companies who invest in taking care of customer complaints constructively are making a real investment in the long-term relationship with the customer, not just paying for the repair costs. (Gummesson 2002:112-118) When a customer chooses to voice their opinions about a company or brand on social media platforms the result is the occurrence of negative publicity when the message is negative.

3.1 Social Media Strategy

Fitzgerald (2011) advises companies to construct a social media strategy, regarding how to better control what is being said about the company or brand online, by using the following five advices:
1) *Create a time management plan.* The understanding that social media takes time is essential, and companies should be constantly and consistently active in social media forums to be able to develop and maintain meaningful relationships. (Fitzgerald 2011)

2) *Secure the sites.* To be on the right platforms is one of the most important considerations. Different customers can be found on different sites, therefore it is important for companies to establish where their customers are so they can join them there. (Fitzgerald 2011)

3) *Establish a method.* The people responsible for maintaining the company’s social media platforms should be consistent and have an understanding of the company’s message, mission and end goals in social media. (Fitzgerald 2011)

4) *Understand that the response greatly influences the outcome.* How companies respond to negative comments largely determines the longevity of a comment. For instance answering defensively may lead to the post being noticed and shared by people that otherwise would not have taken notice of it. Therefore, companies should have a positive action plan in place for responding to negative comments. (Fitzgerald 2011)

5) *Use social media tools for competitive advantage.* Companies can use social media platforms to affect the competition on the market by controlling search terms within the industry with other search words than the company or brand name. This will improve the visibility of the company in industry related searches, and this can be achieved by thinking innovatively with creative posts on for instance blogs, Youtube, and Facebook. (Fitzgerald 2011)

### 3.2 Online reputation management

Social media and online communication have given the upper hand in regards to brands’ and companies’ online reputations to the customers. However, there are certain actions that companies can take to fight back. Although a problem such as an accusation of wrongdoing may be solved, it will probably not disappear online. Over half of all consumers start their buying behaviours by doing a search on the Web, while almost one third reveal they may reject products based solely on what they read on social media about a company or brand. According to research, almost all consumers (around 90
percent) trust what other people are saying online regarding a brand. Sometimes the people posting the negative content are customers; sometimes they are disgruntled former employees or competitors. (Klara 2011)

Online reputation management is a complex process that was defined by Jones, Temperley and Lima (2009:934) (cited by Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015:59) as “the process of positioning, monitoring, measuring, talking, and listening as the organization engages in a transparent and ethical dialogue with its various on-line stakeholders”. Managing the content of what is said and the overall reputation of a company or brand online has become increasingly more difficult due to social media and the ease with which Internet users can post content, especially considering that comments can also rank highly in search results. After all, not all publicity can be considered to be good publicity. (Smith 2012)

It is also important to consider that people often use other search words than just company or brand names, such as for instance ‘women’s jackets’. Therefore companies should strive to control search results by having abundant and high-quality content easily available. The information should have a purpose and be helpful to the user, not only be created for the benefit of search engines. A natural way of making sure that a company or brand dominates search results is to have several social media pages, since these often rank highly, and if they for some reason do not, companies should take action by paying for it to ensure that they do rank highly in relevant searches. This is also a way to control the message since the company itself creates and maintains social media pages. Furthermore, positive content can help companies control and drown out the negative content, especially in regards to complaints. (Smith 2012)

Negative information may linger online for years, and also appear high in search results, which is therefore what many people first see when they search for the brand or company online. The number of firms specialising in the field of online reputation management has grown significantly during the last few years. It has become evident that a cohesive reputation is essential, since the online world has become more and more integrated into people’s lives. Online reputation management firms have become, as mentioned, much more usual. Although they cannot guarantee a result, the success depends greatly on the specific case and the severity and reach of the negative reputation. What these firms essentially do is try and hide the negative information by creating or bringing to the forefront positive information instead. By getting many backlinks from trusted sites the positive content may get moved up in a search. However, this is
especially difficult and probably will not be sufficient if the negative publicity is too defamatory or sensational. Online reputation management firms also most often create social media pages for the companies if they do not already have them, and then later companies can manage them themselves. (Klara 2011) All in all, it can be stated that “Managing reputation through search is undoubtedly getting more complicated and will continue to require more resources, but brands certainly can’t afford to just ignore the issue.” (Smith 2012:45). One part of online reputation management is tackling negative content that is found online (Dijkmans, Kerkhof, Beukeboom 2015), which is why negative publicity and how to address it will be delved into in more detail in the next parts of this chapter.

3.3 The occurrence of negative publicity in social media

Many companies hesitate to join social media in part because they do not have sufficient knowledge about how to handle it and the possible negative side effects that it may bring, such as negative publicity (Fitzgerald 2011). Social media makes news travel very rapidly, making it nearly impossible for companies to control (Gordon 2011:275). However, companies that lack a presence on social media and do not monitor the conversations being had there are letting other people control what is being said about the company or brand online (Fitzgerald 2011).

First impressions are often the most powerful, and by establishing an effective strategy for how to control the message on social media (meaning what is being said about them, what impressions the information gives about the company), companies can try and prevent negative information from being the first and perhaps only thing that many customers read about the firm. However, a simple presence on social media platforms does not count as a strategy. It can even make it easier for other users to find a place to post negative comments about the brand or company. Instead companies should strive to post new and fresh content about the company regularly, such as accomplishments, growth updates, event listings, and achievements. (Fitzgerald 2011)

Communication through social media is a subject that only a small number of people have had formal training in. Though most people can sufficiently use social media for personal use, that competence is in all likelihood not proficient enough for using social media in a professional capacity. Many firms have acknowledged the importance of social media, and therefore implemented some form of policy for the use of social media for their employees. However, there is no consensus on what a good social media
policy really is. (Evans Jennings, Blount & Weatherly 2014) Nevertheless, companies can reduce the number of problems on social media platforms and manage them more easily if they only have one official account for each product category or brand, on each site. The company, meaning a team of employees, not an outside contractor or single employee, should manage the accounts. Training on what the business goals are, how to properly use trademarks, what the preferred brand message is, and also information about public relations guidelines for how to manage unsuitable and unfavourable comments made by users should be given to the employees. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)

According to Nisula (2015) companies should always respond when they receive negative feedback. Negative feedback on social media is something that almost all companies will receive at some point, if they have not already. Therefore, companies should have a strategy in place for when this does occur, since customers need to see that they are appreciated and that the company is honest and sincere when making promises. It is also important to note that this strategy should be in place before negative publicity occurs, not after. (Nisula 2015) To summarize, companies should establish plans for dealing with negative publicity in social media, and also if they have one adapt their existing plans for crisis management to fit crises that may develop in social media (Gordon 2011:275).

3.3.1 Impact of negative publicity

Research has found that people in the process of evaluating information have a so-called negativity bias, meaning that they pay more attention to negative information than they do positive (Henard 2002; Matos & Veiga 2005; Monga & John 2008; Reidenbach, Festervand & MacWilliam 1987). This is in part due to the fact that most of the information that people face in their daily lives is of an either neutral or positive type, while negative news is more unpredicted and unique. It simply stated grabs their attention more efficiently, and also stays on people’s minds longer. Even if the negative information is disproved, some negative bias still remains for people in most cases, which is also the reason for negative publicity being so powerful. (Henard 2002)

Eisingerich, Rubera, Seifert and Bhardwaj (2011) studied the effects of corporate social responsibility in the use of trying to reduce the damage of negative publicity. No particular marketing activity can protect companies against all negative publicity, but different activities can simply shield the company against particular negative information.
Making the company and its image more service quality oriented has been found to be more effective in reducing the effects of negative publicity when the negative information is service related, while CSR (corporate social responsibility) would in such cases be less effective. CSR on the other hand is more effective in countering negative information that is related in some way to corporate social responsibility. Companies need to be particularly aware of the fact that whatever actions they take to battle the effects of negative publicity, they should be prepared to keep their promises, since if they are perceived to be insincere it could potentially cause significant damage to their image. (Eisingerich et al. 2011)

3.3.2 Different forms of negative publicity

Negative publicity in the business world can come in many different forms and degrees of severity, such as a company merely being mentioned in a press release among other companies in a negative light, to being the sole focus of a full-scale media campaign with a specific target against a specific brand or company. One example of a more serious case of negative publicity would be the organisation Peta's (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) movement against the use of beef in Burger King restaurants. The repercussions of negative publicity naturally also vary, with everything from temporary inconvenience to long-lasting damage to image and finances. The severity of the consequences greatly depends upon how well the situation is handled. An important part for companies to know when considering how to manage negative publicity is to have the knowledge of how the public sees and responds to the matter. (Henard 2002)

Negative publicity can be divided into two general divisions, and these are value-related or performance-related. It has been found that negative publicity concerning moral aspects (for instance company values, ethical or social issues) influence people more and is considered to be more important and of more value than negative publicity concerning company performance (for instance product attributes or ability to offer useful and working benefits). (Eisingerich et al. 2011; Matos & Veiga 2005)

3.3.3 Different reactions to negative publicity

Research has found that non-customers are more likely to be influenced by negative publicity than loyal customers are. In fact, loyal customers are not only likely to reject the negative publicity, but also devise counterarguments against the information given in it. Nevertheless, loyal customers can also to some degree be unfavourably affected by
negative publicity. (Henard 2002) This means that companies can lessen the effects of negative publicity by creating better relationships with their customers and strengthening their image of the company, thereby making customers more loyal and less likely to be susceptible to negative publicity (Matos & Veiga 2005). Companies can also make themselves less susceptible to negative publicity through for instance public relations events, advertising and other activities that build the company or brand’s image, since it has been found that companies can lessen the effect or repair the damage, made to the image by negative publicity, with the aforementioned activities (Cho 2005; Henard 2002).

3.4 Responding to negative publicity in social media

Before social media became popular and widely used, the majority of disappointed customers chose not to complain after a bad experience since the potential advantages of complaining were not believed to exceed the cost. However, this has changed drastically due to the emergence of social media. Customers have been empowered like never before due to social media that gives them the freedom to easily complain and vent their negative sentiments online if they wish to do so. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

Research shows that customers also care about the companies’ responses, since a study has found that “88% of consumers are less likely to buy from a company that ignores online customer complaints” (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014:1). By responding, companies can influence how the public perceives and reacts to the negative information. Due to the fact that negative information is noticed more than positive, it is important for companies to react in some way and try to lessen the impression caused by the original negative information. (Henard 2002) Responding to negative publicity is important not only to prevent the negative message from spreading, but also in order to show the customers that the company is caring, as well as potentially prevent further complaints from occurring since answering may help others with the same problem or concern (Acevedo & Karraker 2011).

Negative comments about companies are something that will always occur; social media is simply another communication channel for it (Fitzgerald 2011). Both positive and negative information about a company is natural; the key though is to monitor social medias so that the negativity does not get a chance to build and influence customers. (Fitzgerald 2011; Rhee & Yang 2014) Loyal customers who like the company or brand often defend it if it comes under attack by other users on social media, thereby, negat-
ing the company’s need to interfere. Companies should not be afraid of heated discussions online, even if they do have negative comments mixed in. It is simply a natural part of a conversation. (Acevedo & Karraker 2011)

The well-known saying of ‘Perception is reality’ is never truer than when it comes to complaints made by customers in social media. Sometimes the complaint is genuine; sometimes it is a case of for instance a disgruntled former employee or dissatisfied client that wishes to get revenge for a professed slight. Nevertheless, the source of the negative information or the complaint itself is not the main issue. Once the negative information is out in social media it will be seen by others, and the issue is no longer just between the company and the objector. The company needs to act swiftly and handle the situation before it reaches a larger audience and has a chance to further develop into a crisis. (Wollan, Smith & Zhou 2011:174) Therefore, a strategy, that features the ideal responses to different forms of negative publicity online, is something all companies should try and establish. Not all complaints are worth responding to, which is why the response should be determined based on a plan implemented on a case-by-case basis. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)

3.4.1 What to consider before responding

While it could be said that people seeing complaints, made by customers about an organization’s products or services, affect their perceptions of the organization negatively; studies have also revealed that people’s perceptions of a company are positively affected by seeing the company respond to negative comments or complaints made by customers in social media (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015). However, other studies have also shown that not all responses to negative publicity garner the same reaction from the public. In fact certain responses may have a larger negative impact than not responding at all. Companies should therefore, when negative publicity occurs on social media, try to publicly stay silent if plausible, and instead defend themselves clandestinely on social media. Taking the time to assess the situation and figuring out the right way to respond is vital. (Rhee & Yang 2014)

The first thing for organisations to do is to monitor their social media pages meticulously with regular intervals. This can be done for example with the help of the surveillance tools discussed in chapter 2.3.1. When negative content concerning the company is found, the most suitable way to tackle that specific problem should be decided. It should also be taken into consideration that not all responses have to be in public, since
some are better addressed one-on-one. It is important for companies to remember to acknowledge the importance of all feedback, and to try and resolve the situation by finding a solution to the grievance. After all, being too straightforward, too forthcoming and too accessible with customers have hardly ever been reasons for criticism. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)

It is important to monitor social media to be able to swiftly delete inappropriate discussions, and address negative comments. If the matter is handled correctly the negative situation can be turned into a positive one, and can lead to meaningful exchanges with particular customers. (Kho 2008) Companies should remember that making mistakes is natural, and not something to be ashamed of. Instead they should see this as an opportunity to be able to admit to and correct the mistake. Some firms have actually found that customers who have experienced problems that have been solved are more likely to return than customers that have not had any problems at all. According to Qualman (2012:241), companies should consider mistakes and negative feedback simply as “opportunities to exceed a client’s expectations”. (Qualman 2012:241)

### 3.4.2 What to consider when responding

According to Henard (2002) there are three different rules for companies to follow when responding to negative publicity, and they are the following:

1. “Understand the Dynamics of the Situation.” (Henard 2002:11) Companies should keep in mind that people react to negative publicity in different ways. As previously mentioned in this chapter, loyal customers are more resistant towards changing their opinions of the company or brand based on negative publicity than non-loyal customers are. Therefore, it can be beneficial for companies to remember that observing and gaining an understanding regarding the undercurrents of the situation is important since it allows them to clearly evaluate the circumstances and form a strategically effective response based from a well-informed viewpoint. (Henard 2002)

2. “Always Respond to Negative Publicity.” (Henard 2002:11) Loyal customers that are the least susceptible to negative publicity are also the ones who will pay attention to a company’s response to it. Therefore, to minimize the effect of the negative publicity companies should always strive towards responding to it, and
also plan their response strategy according to which group of customers they want to reach and influence with the message. (Henard 2002)

3. “Plan Ahead.” (Henard 2002:12) Companies have two possibilities when planning ahead. The first one, which is also the more traditional one, is to assess the market and then in advance try to create a response strategy for potential negative information that may arise in the case of possible negative publicity situations. The other way to prepare for negative publicity is to try and make more customers into loyal customers and also by improving the company’s image, thereby making them more resistant towards the effects of negative information. (Henard 2002)

Companies need to remember, when responding to negative publicity on social media, to keep from being provoked and simply keep their cool, no matter how the customers sound or what they say. Other essential aspects are to try and see the matter from the perspective of the customer, and to try and respond as soon as possible. Being genuine and offering some way to try to solve the problem and make it up to the customer is also important; a simple general apology is not enough. Even though the customer may not always be right, he or she should nevertheless be treated courteously, and the information corrected in a gentle and respectful manner. These aspects of responding are something that companies that deal with negative feedback in a constructive way have in common. (Nisula 2015)

When responding to more serious issues of negative publicity in social media the first thing to do is to communicate on the same platform as the customer used. This is the best way to reach both the person who made the complaint and other people who may have seen it. If the company is active on other social media sites too, the company should reply the same message on those channels, as well as through their call centres, salespeople and so on. This may sound exaggerated to some, but it is not, since serious issues have to be handled as swiftly and thoroughly as possible. By doing this, the company ensures that others who face the same problem are informed and the customer who made the original complaint knows that they have been listened to and that the problem has been acknowledged and resolved. (Wollan, Smith & Zhou 2011:167)

Several different factors determine what the response should be. However, before determining the response there are a few aspects to first consider. As previously mentioned, the first thing to do when negative publicity in social media occurs is to try and
gain an understanding about or the reason for the issue. When the reason for or nature of the problem has been determined, the company needs to decide which negative feedback to concentrate on (if the company cannot or does not want to respond to all of the negative publicity). When deciding this, companies should take into consideration three key factors: 1) **risk** (the potential damage of the negative publicity and how severe that damage might be), 2) **value** (what the value of the client making the complaint is), and 3) **reach** (how many people could the complaint potentially reach). These factors can better help companies evaluate the situation and solve the most critical and important cases first. (Wollan, Smith & Zhou 2011:165-166)

When an organization chooses to respond, the response can either be a more direct one or a qualified one. A response that is **qualified** is one that to some part acknowledges part of the negative information while also presenting positive information. The negative publicity that is acknowledged is often thought to be of less significance to people. A way of giving a qualified response is to give a general rejection of the main message in the negative publicity, yet also admit to the validity of some aspect of the negative information. Companies often acknowledge that there is some aspect of truth in the negative information when giving a qualified response, and the public often perceives this as a more trustworthy and honest answer. (Henard 2002) A qualified response is often more effective when trying to reach non-loyal customers (Ahluwalia, Burnkrant & Unnava 2000).

A **direct** response on the other hand makes an assertion that is supportive in regards to the organization. A way of giving a direct response is to simply refute or deny the negative publicity. Since a direct response does not fortify the negative publicity in any way, and works as well for loyal customers as a qualified response, it is often seen as the best response, especially when trying to reach loyal customers. (Henard 2002) This sentiment is echoed by Ahluwalia, Burnkrant and Unnava (2000), who state that when trying to reach loyal customers a direct response is more appropriate since loyal customers often establish counterarguments themselves, and therefore the company does not need to provide any more, as is not the case with non-loyal customers. However, Monga and John (2008) state that direct refutations are in most cases ineffective, and instead suggest building strong brands and creating loyal customers who can make counterarguments by themselves. This indicates that a qualified response in most cases may be better after all since it targets those customers who do not make counterarguments for themselves.
3.4.3 Responding to different types of negative publicity in social media

According to Grégoire, Salle and Tripp (2014) there are six different types of complaints that occur online. These sources of negative publicity can in some cases also quickly develop into major crises if not managed correctly. The different types can be divided into three categories: the good, the bad, and the ugly. It should be noted that complaints do not always stay in one category, but instead can start out in one, and depending on how the company responds, lead to another. The more severe types usually ensue only after the company has failed in both its primary service situation and the recovery from the service failure. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

The first category of social media complaints is categorized as good, due to the fact that these types of complaints present the company with opportunities. One of the best parts of social media is in fact that if the company succeeds in the service recovery there is an opportunity to use social media to generate positive publicity regarding the company. The second category is seen as bad, since these complaints are the ones that signify risks for the company. The third and last category that the six different types are divided into is seen as the ugly, since these are the complaints that are deemed to represent the greatest threats for companies. Next the six different types of complaints within the different categories will be presented in terms of what identifies them. Before responding to anything, companies should identify what type of complaint they are dealing with. Adequate financial and human resources should also be dispensed so that the company can find negative publicity on social media and address complaints as they find them. How companies should react and respond to each of these types will also be presented. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

3.4.3.1 The good

1) The first type is called directness, which means that the company is contacted directly online by the customer with the grievance, for instance on the company’s official Google+ or Facebook page, with the intention of trying to reach a solution to the service failure. Complaints of this type are characterized by the fact that customers contact the company directly online. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

Response to complaints of this type (directness) should be made swiftly online by acknowledging the problem that the customer has faced and then focusing on correct-
ing it. Timing is crucial in these instances. These situations are an opportunity for the company to give the customer excellent service, exceed their expectations and stop the matter from evolving into a bigger problem. It is generally said that an hour is an acceptable timeframe for the first contact, meaning acknowledging the problem. Depending on the severity and nature of the issue, further contact can be made either publicly or privately. More severe and difficult problems should be solved and communicated about privately. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

2) The second type is called boasting, which occurs when a customer is satisfied with how the company solved the initial complaint and spreads positive publicity on social media sites by talking about it. This kind can be very beneficial for companies, since even though the initial fault is publicized, so is also the company’s willingness and ability to correct it. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

**Boasting** is an excellent opportunity for companies to benefit from unexpected communications from satisfied customers that share their stories online. To capitalize on this kind of excellent positive publicity, companies should, through their social media pages, thank the contributors and also share articles or posts that are customer-driven and tell the stories of the customers’ experiences. However, the stories should feel genuine, not artificially orchestrated. Companies should also take care so that they do not overpublicize these types of stories, since this could be perceived as false or dishonest and the entire effort could backfire on the company. Therefore, the stories should always originate from the customers, not from the company. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

3.4.3.2 The bad

3) The third type is called badmouthing, which is characterized by the customer spreading negative publicity in the form of negative word-of-mouth, through their own social media accounts or pages, after a service failure but without ever making contact with the company. This is an especially problematic situation for the company since they have no control over the message that is being sent or the situation, due to the fact that they are not given the opportunity to correct their mistake. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

Customers that do not contact the company at all before badmouthing (spreading negative information) about a service failure online may not be interested in correcting
the problem, and instead more motivated by causing trouble for the company. However, in these cases it is up to the companies themselves to make contact with the customer. The different steps in this process are identifying the person behind the negative word-of-mouth, followed by publicly making contact with that person, acknowledging the problem, and then privately trying to resolve the matter through discussion and negotiation. Companies should also point out that they were not aware of the problem, in order to show their good intentions. The matter should be resolved by posting on social media about the outcome of the problem, no matter if that outcome is positive or negative. It is also important to note that if the customer is wrong or unreasonable, the company does not have to give in to their demands, and often in these cases the public opinion sides on the side of the company. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

4) The fourth type is called **tattling**, which is when customers after both an initial service failure and a failed recovery complain about their troubles to a newsletter, blog or third party website (such as consumerfairs.com or bbb.org). Even though this type of complaint can expose the company and its poor actions further, it is most often not motivated by revenge, but instead by the customer simply wanting reparation for the initial service failure. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

**Tattling** is a type of complaint that is preferable to a viral complaint, and therefore again, companies should see this as an opportunity to resolve the problem in a constructive way. The customer also most likely has a just cause if a third-party organization chooses to help them. Due to the trouble that these customers have gone to for some kind of resolution, they are unlikely to give up; therefore, the company should deal with them before they take to more extreme measures. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

3.4.3.3 **The ugly**

5) **Spite** is the fifth type of customer complaint in social media, and it occurs when the company flops in their initial service and also in their response to the initial service complaint leading to the customer becoming enraged and starting to spread negative publicity (in the form of negative word-of-mouth) online through user-generated media (such as YouTube). These kinds of messages are the ones with the highest likelihood of going viral. With these kinds of complaints the customer’s motivation is revenge, with the intention of causing prob-
lems for and punishing the company. Due to the possibly devastating consequences that these types of complaints can have, companies should try to prevent and avoid them at all costs. It is also very difficult for companies to redress the situation and regain the trust of its customers in these situations, since they will most often remain sceptical towards the company and their intentions. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

Customers that retort to the spite option may consider it to be their only option left for restoring justice. Research has shown that around 96 % of those who retort to this option have tried to solve their grievances through the companies’ communication channels first. This type of complaint is extremely difficult for the firm to control and therefore the best strategy for handling this is to simply prevent it from happening in the first place. However, mistakes happen, and if such a situation were to occur, companies should still respond, but mostly focus their activities on damage control. They should, as in several of the other cases, identify the threat and acknowledge the situation. Further than that they should also contact the customer that made the complaint directly and try to come to a solution, as well as say something about the matter publicly in order to reach the rest of the public to assure them that the problem has been fixed, otherwise people will assume that it has not been. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

6) The sixth, and last type of complaint is called feeding the vultures, which also occurs after, in cases when the company has failed in both the initial service and in the recovery attempt. What happens in these cases though, is that a competitor takes advantage of the situation by amplifying the mistake in social media to try and garner more negative publicity for the company and also steal away more of the company’s customers. These types of situations are among the worst for the company and also with the most severe consequences. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

**Feeding the vultures** is a type of complaint that is one of the worst possible for companies. Nevertheless, there are also ways of turning things around. For instance when a French online clothing company’s mistake in one of its online fashion magazines quickly went viral, one of its top competitors quickly capitalized on and took advantage of the matter by using the mistake in its ads. However, the clothing company turned things around by inviting its customers to seek out other mistakes and offered a promotion for it. This resulted in the company gaining as much as over 100 000 Facebook fans and a 70 % increase in traffic on their website during the contest, as well as over a million
dollars in profits. The lesson to be learned here therefore is that opportunities can be found even in desperate situations, and that especially in the world of social media there is always a way to turn the situation around to one’s advantage. (Grégoire, Salle & Tripp 2014)

3.4.4 Other options for responding to negative publicity in social media

According to Smith, Sutin and Kaneff (2012) there are four concrete alternatives for action, instead of directly responding to an online attack. These options are: to take heavy legal action, use the takedown procedures offered by the platform, to be masterly inactive, or to erase the messages. Before choosing a response tactic, several factors need to be considered, such as PR, practicalities, and identity of the aggressor. If the attacker is a disgruntled customer a public response may change the narrative and turn the situation from a negative one to a positive one, whereas attacks from competitors or former employees often require tougher action. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)

3.4.4.1 Takedown procedures

One option for dealing with negative publicity in social media is takedown procedures. Nevertheless, taking down the content is not a guarantee that the attacks will stop or that more comments or copies regarding the subject will not be published. For instance, the company Nestle triggered the takedown procedures of YouTube when Greenpeace infringed on some of the company’s copyright material, which only resulted in the material that was infringed being uploaded again by other users who uploaded thousands of copies of the original. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)

3.4.4.2 Inactivity

Inactivity is in certain cases the best choice. New content comes along so quickly that minor issues often disappear in the sea of messages quite rapidly. Companies should be prepared to receive some negative criticism online and not take offense at everything. To take it down or ignore it are the two easiest ways to handle negative publicity online. However, to ignore the customer may not be advisable since this leads, in many cases, to the customer only voicing their concerns more since they become enraged by the lack of response. Their focus also often switches from the initial matter to the apathy shown by the organisation. This is something that many other customers may sympathise with, which could lead them to share the post on their own pages, therefore making the
circle of influence expand. (Smith, Sutin & Kanef 2012) Similarly, Henard (2002) states that being inactive or not responding to negative publicity in any way should in most cases be avoided, since research shows that not addressing the matter can cause customers’ opinions about a brand or company to be significantly lowered. According to Nisula (2015), it can further be stated that choosing to not respond to negative feedback on social media looks bad, no matter how you look at it.

3.4.4.3 Deleting entries

Deleting messages may be appealing, however, users on social media often notice this, and if they consider their freedom of speech to have been challenged they are quick to create uproar (Smith Sutin & Kanef 2012). Rules should be established and made clear on companies’ and brands’ social media pages regarding content that is offensive or derogatory, and then companies should delete comments that violate those rules (Acevedo & Karraker 2011; Smith, Sutin & Kanef 2012). Privacy and legal issues should also be adhered to (Acevedo & Karraker 2011). However, all criticism should not be deleted since it might affect the readiness of consumers to further engage on those pages (Smith, Sutin & Kanef 2012). The activity of deleting posts should be an exception, not an everyday occurrence. Deleting entries can also be interpreted as if the company has something to hide and will therefore give the impression of the company being untruthful. (Acevedo & Karraker 2011)

To delete or take down the negative content (for instance comments or posts) is another easy way to deal with negative publicity online. However, this is not, in most cases, an advisable option. These actions will not go unnoticed and will most likely cause the customer to either voice their opinions again on some other site; only on this site the company will not be able to access or control the content. This will probably only lead to the negative message being spread further. (Smith, Sutin & Kanef 2012) Kho (2008) and Nisula (2015) also state that negative feedback should not be ignored or deleted, and that this is only appropriate when the content is illegal or offensive.

3.4.4.4 Legal action

The last resort in the case of responding to online attacks is naturally legal action. In some cases legal action is necessary in order to be able to identify who the anonymous user is who is responsible for the online attacks. Sometimes the only effective reaction, especially in particularly damaging and malicious movements, may be legal action.
However, negative publicity online happens so often that in most cases it is not plausible to take this kind of action against everyone. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)

3.5 Responding to a crisis in social media

Lastly this chapter will present how companies are recommended to act when a crisis situation occurs in social media. There are many different descriptions of what constitutes as a crisis. According to Steven Fink (cited by Wilcox, Ault & Agee 1998:179) crises can be defined as “forewarning situations that run the risk of escalating in intensity, falling under close media or government scrutiny, interfering with normal operations, jeopardizing organizational image and damaging a company’s bottom line”. A crisis is a form of negative publicity, but it is brought up separately since a crisis is when negative publicity has escalated to the point that it affects the company in a more significant way, and often requires more effort than negative publicity that has not escalated. For instance a negative comment on social media can be seen as negative publicity, while it only turns into a crisis if it for instance starts a widespread discussion that draws significant attention.

If managed in the right way a crisis can be turned into an opportunity. The key aspects of managing a crisis are according to Williams (2004) the following three principles: 1) Showing concern, 2) Acting quickly, and 3) Exceeding expectations. This is especially true if a company means to turn the crisis into an opportunity. What it comes down to is for the company to show that they care for their customers and that the customers are more important than financial gain, as well as to communicate what they are doing, and how they are going to prevent similar problems from happening again. An exemplary response can improve the company or brand’s image significantly. (Williams 2004)

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter can quickly broadcast news to a large audience; therefore when negative publicity occurs in social media it can quickly escalate to a full-blown online crisis, which can cause damage to the company’s reputation and credibility in the eyes of the customers and other stakeholders (Klaassen 2009). A crisis online usually leads to a clear increase in engagement by the viewers, in the form of shares and comments that are for the most part negative in nature. Therefore it is important that the company monitors social media and what people are saying about it and its brands so that an accurate and consistent response to the
crisis can be formulated immediately. (CIPR, Brown, Waddington & Solis 2013:160-165)

According to Ott and Theunissen (2015) companies should, during a crisis, provide interested parties with a forum where they can discuss the matter. There should be a clear policy about what constitutes as offensive or abusive content that will not be tolerated, and only that content should be deleted. However, deleting posts that are negative in nature in the hopes of trying to control the message and reputation of the company are likely to lead to feelings of anger and mistrust, as well as raising suspicions that the company has something to hide. Instead it may be a good idea for companies to give up some control in order to make it possible for loyal supporters to defend the company, since they often do so, and also since this type of defence is perceived to be more genuine and authentic than corporate announcements are. (Ott & Theunissen 2015)

The six guidelines to follow according to Klaassen (2009) if a crisis transpires in social media are:

1) **Listen to who is talking and what they are saying.** Questions to ask are for instance, how widespread the situation is and how angry the messengers are. (Klaassen 2009)

2) **Answer simply ‘We do not know’ if that is the case.** It is an acceptable answer, and therefore that answer is sometimes preferable, since a too simple answer, or to plainly blame a malfunction in the system is often too vague to satisfy the crowds, and can lead to further antagonise people. (Klaassen 2009)

3) **Address the problem on the platform where the masses are gathered.** Instead of changing the communication channel, the problem should be addressed and solved on the forum where it originated and people are talking about it. (Klaassen 2009)

4) **Consider the tone used.** The tone of the reply matters and should match the persona of the brand. A cold-sounding response at odds with an image of a friendly brand could lead to the revaluation and deterioration of the brand image. People do not expect perfection from companies; however, they do presume them to want to communicate with consumers and to be committed to solving any
problems. They also expect them to relay this in the same tone of voice they are accustomed to hearing from that company. (Klaassen 2009)

5) *Explain how the problem will be prevented from reoccurring.* The company should in its communication address how future pitfalls will be avoided so that the problem does not happen again. (Klaassen 2009)

6) *Invest now and prevent problems in the future.* Strong brands most often recover from crises better than less known brands, since consumer goodwill that has developed over several years, insulates them from more long reaching damage. Therefore it is beneficial for companies to invest now in strengthening their brand image in order to prevent future problems. (Klaassen 2009)

According to Benady (2012), a crisis is rarely where the story ends, instead it is said that companies should focus on what to do next. It is further pointed out that crises can be turned around into successes by acknowledging the problem and then addressing it in creative ways. It is also important for companies to make sure that they deal with crises in a respectful way, thereby re-establishing relationships with the customers and other stakeholders. While it is true that social media can be the origin of negative publicity and crises, it can also be the treatment used to quickly and creatively react and prevent the situation from escalating further. (Benady 2012)
4 SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter shortly summarizes the two previous chapters, which make up the theoretical framework. Thereby, all of the information brought up in this chapter has already been previously introduced.

Social media is one of the most used communication channels today, and the channel has distinguishing features, such as widespread popularity, easy accessibility, and being more democratic than most other channels, which separate it from other communication channels. Companies can use social media to monitor what is being said about the company, their industry, or their products and services. Social media can also be used to communicate directly with customers and other parties (for instance by using social media as a service channel, engaging in discussions with customers and other parties, or by using the channel more for one-way communication). Companies should use different tools to monitor what is being said about them online so that they not only know what people think of them but also are able to participate in certain discussions when it is beneficial. Companies should plan their communication online, by carefully considering how they act on social media applications. Recommendations for them to remember are for instance to be active, interesting, humble, honest, and avoid sounding too professional.

The four key categories of social media that are included in this thesis are social networking sites, content communities, collaborative projects and blogs. Social networking sites make it possible for companies to engage and communicate with customers and other parties with the help of personal profiles. Blogs can be maintained either by groups or individuals, and they can depict almost any topic. Companies can use (self-maintained) blogs to communicate with employees and customers, as well as help increase traffic to their websites. Content communities are used to share different types of media content, and companies can use them in marketing and to communicate with different stakeholders. Collaborative projects on the other hand are an important source of information for many Internet users, but the information found there might not always be accurate, which is important for companies to know since if the information is negative it can be harmful to companies and their images.

It is important for companies to have a clear set of goals and plans for the different social media channels that they use, so that they know which ones to use, how and with whom to communicate through them, and what they hope to accomplish by using
them. When the company has a clear understanding of these aspects they can use social media to facilitate positive communication and perhaps even diminish the occurrence of negative content on social media.

The general characteristics of communication in business-to-business and business-to-consumer markets are generally the same. Nevertheless, social media is used far less in B2B markets than it is in B2C, even though B2B companies can also greatly benefit from the use of social media. Even though most of the guidelines for using social media are applicable to both B2C and B2B companies, there are a few considerations that B2B companies should pay special mind to. These considerations are the importance of personal meetings, and that not all companies can benefit to the same degree from social media but that they should nonetheless try to maximize their potential. A third consideration is that companies should try and listen to what the client’s customers' think and feel about them, in addition to their direct customers' opinions.

Negative feedback is a natural part of doing business, and it can occur also in social media in varying forms and degrees of severity. However, the repercussions are largely dependent on how the company deals with the situation. An important reason for responding is the fact that research has shown that electronic word of mouth can influence customers’ image of the company or brand and affect their purchasing decisions. Negative eWOM can be a source of negative publicity for companies, especially considering that expressing negative opinions or experiences online to others about a company or brand has become increasingly more common during the last few years. EWOM is something of a common occurrence on social media platforms, which is why companies should prepare for the occurrence of it beforehand so that they know how to act if and when it happens to them.

Negative publicity can either be performance-related (for instance concerning products or services) or value-related (for instance concerning company values or ethics). It has been found that value-related negative publicity influences customers more and can in most cases be more damaging. It has also been found that loyal customers are influenced less by negative publicity than loyal customers are, meaning companies can counter the effects of negative publicity by improving the company's image and strengthening their relationships with their customers.

When it comes to online complaints, it has been said that there are six different types, and they are called directness, boasting, badmouthing, tattling, spite and feeding the
vultures. The approaches to handling the different cases are somewhat different, but in all cases companies should respond quickly, acknowledge the problem and then turn their attention to finding a solution for it. Companies should also always search for opportunities to turn things around by for instance owning up to their mistakes and making amends in some way.

When it comes to negative publicity on social media companies should always evaluate the situation on a case-by-case basis, and remember that responding is not always the best way to proceed. Instead they should take the time to carefully consider the situation and all the contributing factors before taking action. These factors are for instance the risk (potential damage) associated with the message, the value of the author, and also the potential reach of the message. In order to be able to do this, it is important for companies to monitor social media sites regularly so that they are immediately made aware of any negative publicity regarding them.

In addition to directly responding to negative publicity online, companies also have four other alternative actions that they can take and they are: taking legal action, using takedown procedures that the different social media platforms offer, being inactive by simply not responding or acknowledging the message in any way, or erasing messages. When considering which option to choose companies should take into consideration the aforementioned factors of risk, value and reach, as well as how people will react to a certain action. For instance, social media users in many cases notice if messages are deleted, which often can cause an even louder noise than the original message. However, derogatory and offensive messages should be deleted.

When negative publicity in social media progresses to the point where it garners a large audience and a lot of attention it can be seen as having developed into an online crisis, which can also reach other communication channels. However, by handling a crisis in the right way companies can turn it into an opportunity to exceed their clients’ expectations. There are six general guidelines that companies should follow when it comes to handling crises in social media, and they are: 1) Listen to what is being said and by whom, 2) Give the answer “We do not know” if that is true and then go about finding out the facts, 3) Use the same platform where the conversation is to address the situation, 4) Match the tone of the message to the persona of the brand, 5) Explain how the company will prevent the situation from reoccurring, and 6) Strengthen the brand image beforehand to prevent problems from occurring in the future.
5 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter the methodology used in the study for this thesis will be explained in its entirety. First the choice of research method is presented and motivated. This will be followed by the explanation of the sampling strategy, meaning why the specific companies were chosen, as well as shortly presenting facts about the individual companies that participated in the study. The next part presents how and when the data was collected, which is followed by the last part, which presents how the interview guide was constructed. The results of the findings will then be presented in the next chapter.

5.1 Choice of research method

There are several different research approaches that can be used, the most common ones used in business studies being induction and deduction. Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005:16) define deductive reasoning as “the logical process of deriving a conclusion from a known premise or something known as true”, while inductive reasoning is defined as “the systematic process of establishing a general proposition on the basis of observation or particular facts” (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2005:16). When using a deductive research orientation the theory comes first and the rest of the research process is influenced by it (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2005:15). Therefore, this thesis can be said to use a deductive research approach, due to the fact that the empirical study was created on the basis of the theoretical framework. According to Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005:16) most scientists and researchers use both induction and deduction in their research since they include elements of each other and are not totally exclusive. Therefore, though this thesis uses a deductive research approach it also uses an inductive analysis method, which is explained in more detail in the last part of this chapter.

The choice of which research method is most suitable for any given study depends on the aim of the study as well as the research problem. The option is to choose between quantitative and qualitative studies. Quantitative research methods are characterized by for instance a critical and logical approach, with an emphasis on testing hypothesis and verification. Qualitative research, on the other hand, has a more explorative orientation with an emphasis being put on understanding. (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2005:109-110) In order to fulfil the aim, the study conducted for this thesis used a qualitative research approach. A qualitative research approach was deemed more appropriate than a quantitative because the aim of this thesis is to get a better understanding of the subject
of negative publicity in social media, and when the aim is to “understand a phenomenon about which little is known” (Ghauri & Grønhaug 2005:110-111) better, a qualitative research method is more suitable.

To fulfil the aim of the thesis, the study explored how a number of companies communicate through social media, as well as how they respond to and think of negative publicity occurring in social media. The research methods used were inquiries and in-depth interviews. According to Patton (2002:342), when it comes to interviews, there are three different basic types. Option number one, which is the informal conversational interview, is an interview where questions are made spontaneously during the course of the interview. The second option, meaning the approach of the general interview guide, is when the issues to be covered during the interview are outlined before the interview and serve as a checklist during the course of the interview to make sure that no relevant topic is forgotten. The third option, which is the standardized open-ended interview, is an interview where the interview questions are carefully arranged and worded beforehand. This last option leaves somewhat little room for flexibility, and is utilized when the importance of asking quite similar questions to each participant is significant. (Patton 2002:342)

In this thesis the standardized open-ended interview approach has been used, since it was preferred to receive answers that could be compared to each other, and to some degree to the theoretical framework. However, there was also some degree of flexibility involved in all of the interviews since different follow-up questions were asked in each of the interviews, due to the fact that the follow-up questions were created spontaneously depending on the answers given to the other questions by the participants.

All companies that participated in the study were promised confidentiality, which means that their names or the companies’ names will not be included anywhere in this thesis. Instead they will be referred to with alphabetical letters that will be introduced later on in this chapter. However, the size and type of the companies will be included in order to be able to form a better analysis and provide more transparency regarding the participating companies. The interviewees were all employees that tackle problems regarding negative publicity in social media in business-to-business companies, or in companies that are active in both business-to-business and business-to-consumer markets.
5.2 Strategy for design and sampling

As previously mentioned, the study conducted for this thesis was qualitative in nature, and consisted of both inquiries and in-depth interviews. The design strategy used in this thesis was purposeful sampling. This means that the cases that were studied in-depth were chosen because they were considered to be highly informative and illuminating (Patton 2002:40) regarding negative publicity in social media, which was the phenomenon that was studied. Purposeful sampling was used, not to be able to make a generalization, but instead to garner results that could provide insight into the subject that was studied (Patton 2002:40). Hence, the inclusion of the inquiries was made in order to make sure that the cases that were studied more in-depth through interviews would give interesting and revealing answers regarding the matter. Therefore, the companies that were picked for the inquiries were selected because they were thought be potentially interesting cases.

A total of 18 companies were contacted for the inquiries, of which four were interviewed. The inquiries had two specific purposes. The first one was to determine which companies would be suitable for interviews, and the second one was to get a more general picture of how companies view the matter of negative publicity in social media, and how current it is for them. When using a purposeful sampling design strategy, Patton (2002:243-244) lists sixteen different possible sampling strategies that can be used. The type of sampling strategy used in this thesis can be categorized as intensity sampling, which is when participants in the study are chosen because they are considered to be “Information-rich cases that manifest the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely” (Patton 2002:243). For this study companies that had had problems with negative publicity in social media several times were asked to participate. Unfortunately, two of the companies that were contacted met the criteria for the sampling strategy, but were unable to participate due to a lack of available time in their schedule.

5.3 Collection of data

The data for the study was collected in February and March of 2015 by phone, e-mail or face-to-face contact. All companies that in any way participated in the study did so voluntarily and without receiving any kind of compensation for it. The inquiries and the interviews that were done were all conducted in either Finnish or Swedish. However, since the interviewer, who is also the author of this thesis, is bilingual and knows both Finnish and Swedish fluently, no language obstacles were encountered during the data
collection process. In the first step in the data collection process, 18 different companies were contacted (by phone or e-mail) that were thought to potentially have experience in dealing with negative publicity in social media. Firstly the subject of the phone call was stated, and the caller introduced. They were then asked if they had had problems in their respective companies with dealing with negative publicity in social media. If they had had experience to a degree that it seemed like they would be suitable candidates for participation in the study, they were asked if they would be willing to participate with the promise that their names and the company’s names would remain confidential.

Table 1  Types of companies interviewed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company code</th>
<th>Time of interview</th>
<th>Industry type</th>
<th>Business type</th>
<th>Areas of activity &amp; Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>09.03.2015 12.00-12.30</td>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>12.03.2015 9.00-10.15</td>
<td>Manufacturing of industry products</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>17.03.2015 13.00-14.00</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>B2B &amp; B2C</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 18 companies that were contacted six companies could not be reached, since they did not respond to either phone calls or e-mails, meaning 12 companies were reached. Of these twelve, six were deemed suitable candidates for the study. The four companies that were able to participate were interviewed using the standardized open-ended interview approach, as previously mentioned. Using a recorder during an interview gives the advantage of being able to listen to the interview multiple times, getting the exact wording of phrases and expressions used by the interviewee, as well as giving the interviewer the ability to concentrate on listening instead of taking notes (Trost 2010:74). In all interviews permission was given by the interviewees to record the interview, on a voice-recording app downloaded to a smartphone. This was done in order to ensure that the interview could be replayed later and important facts would not be missed or misunderstood, as well as for the previously mentioned benefits of recording.
While company A was interviewed by phone, all three other interviews were done in person. After the end of each interview the participating individuals representing the four companies were thanked for their contribution to and participation in the study.

The four companies that participated in the study by being interviewed are given codes in Table 1. The table also shows which type of industry they are primarily active in, where they are active, what size they are, as well as when the interviews took place. All of these four companies can be deemed to be large companies since they all have over 1000 employees. Whether the companies are business-to-business or business-to-consumer or a mix of both is also illustrated.

Table 2  The six companies that were reached but were not deemed suitable or not available for interviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company code</th>
<th>Industry type</th>
<th>Business type</th>
<th>Area of activity &amp; Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Fashion</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>B2B &amp; B2C</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Software</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Manufacturing of industry products</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Energy</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Middle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Consumer goods</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
<td>Elevator &amp; escalator</td>
<td>B2B</td>
<td>International, Large</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The six companies that were deemed not being suitable candidates for the study, nonetheless contributed to the study by giving an important broader comprehension of how companies perceive the subject of negative publicity in social media, as well as how big of a problem it is for companies nowadays. Five of the six companies were business-to-business companies, while only one was both a business-to-business and a business-to-consumer company. They were also all contacted and discussed with by phone. The different answers that they gave will be presented in further detail in the next chapter. However, their business type, industry type, and area of activity and size, is presented
in Table 2, along with the two companies who declined to participate (E & F). Companies with more than 250 employees are considered large, while companies with less than 250 but more than 50 are deemed middle-sized.

5.4 Design of the interview guide

When designing an interview guide (appendix 1) it is important to have a clear purpose and understanding about the subject that the interview is about. If different interview guides are used for the interview they do not necessarily have to be identical, but should be similar and comparable nonetheless. The guide should be constructed so that it fits the situation and the interviewer. (Trost 2010:71-72) These guidelines were followed when constructing the interview guide for this study, meaning that the purpose and theoretical framework were used to beforehand carefully consider which areas of interest and questions should be included. The interview guide does not always have to be followed in terms of for instance the order of the questions asked (Trost 2010:71-72), which was the case in some of the interviews conducted for the study since some questions were in some instances left out (when the interviewee had already answered them) and the order of the questions was changed in certain interviews.

The interviews all started with questions regarding the companies’ presence on social media (how long, which ones, and why these ones), after which they went on to be about what kinds of negative publicity they have encountered in social media, how they have handled these occasions, as well as what their strategy is (if they have one) for handling it. It was also asked which factors affect their decisions of how to respond to negative publicity in social media. The interviews concluded with questions regarding how companies feel negative publicity in social media can be lessened, controlled or prevented. The interview guide in its entirety can be found in appendix 1.

5.5 Analysis of data

There are several different analysis strategies that a researcher can use. The one used in this thesis is that of an inductive analysis with a creative synthesis, which can be explained as “Immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships; begins by exploring, then confirming; guided by analytical principles rather than rules; ends with a creative synthesis.” (Patton 2002:41). This means that the analysis done in this thesis will begin by analysing specific observations, after which the analysis moves toward finding general patterns. The
important analysis dimensions will be allowed to emerge from the research findings, instead of having predisposed notions of what they are going to be simply because the theory part was completed before the data was collected. (Patton 2002:55-56)
6 PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

In this chapter the results from the four different interviews will be presented individually. The companies’ answers that participated in the inquiries will be presented first, followed by the four interviewed companies. Since the companies that were interviewed will all remain anonymous, they will instead be referred to with code names as companies A, B, C and D, as presented in the previous chapter. These results will then be further analysed and compared in the next chapter.

6.1 The pre-study – inquiries made to companies not interviewed

The companies presented in table 2 in the previous chapter will now all be shortly presented in terms of what their responses were when asked if they had encountered negative publicity in social media and also whether it was a topic that was current for them. Companies E and F had, as previously mentioned, both had experience with negative publicity in social media, but were unfortunately unable to participate in the study.

Company G stated that they had had a few cases of someone posting a single negative comment on social media about the company, but the cases had not required any actions to be taken. The company further stated that everyone has a right to their opinions. Company H said that they monitor social media and what is said about them very carefully, but that even though some occasional negative discussions had arisen; it was not something that had escalated into a crisis. They also shared that even though the company had had some kind of crisis at some point, the crisis did not show in any way in social media.

Companies I and J both stated that this is not something that they view as current, and that they have so far not had any cases of negative publicity in social media. Company I revealed that they are not even on Facebook, and that they use social media more in a strictly official capacity, while company J said that they use social media more for one-way communication instead of interaction.

Company K, which is a very large globally active consumer goods company, surprisingly said that this is not something that is current for them at all, at least not in the domestic subsidiary. The last company, which is company L, on the other hand stated that they monitor what is being said about them and their industry on social media. Even though there have been a few negative discussions on an industrial level, the company’s name
is very rarely mentioned, and therefore they have not really had any cases of negative publicity in social media. Despite this, they stressed the importance of having local expertise (both on social media and mechanics) available in all the countries that they are located in; since if something happens when they are asleep in another country it may be all too late when they do get notice of it.

Based on the answers given by the different companies (not including the ones interviewed) during the inquiries it can be stated that while only two of them have had several cases of negative publicity that required some kind of action to be taken, three more companies said that they had had negative publicity in social media occur to them in some degree but had not taken any action in response to it. When including the interviewed companies into the statistics, it can be seen that of the 12 companies, nine had to some degree encountered negative publicity in social media. This highlights the fact that negative publicity in social media is something that more and more companies in today’s business world have to deal with. It can also be stated that it is important for companies to monitor what is being said about them or their brand online so that they can decide whether or not they should take any actions (like the three companies that knew of negative publicity in social media having occurred but having chosen not to respond to it).

### 6.2 Company A

Company A has been active on their social media pages (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Youtube) for about three to four years. They are active on different social media platforms in different countries, but in Sweden (which is where the company’s headquarters are) they are active on the four aforementioned sites. They use their social media platforms to post messages that support what the company sees as important. For instance they post about projects that they have accomplished and partners that they are proud of, as well as other undertakings that they participate in that contribute to the development of communities and society. They have different target groups for the different social media platforms. For instance Facebook is more targeted towards a younger target audience and potential future workforce, while LinkedIn is used to advertise the company for potential new employees. The messages that are posted on the different sites are meant to assist in reaching the different target groups. However, most of the content posted is shorter news with links to the company’s website, since the company aims to guide all traffic to their website.
6.2.1 Monitoring social media

Company A monitors what is being said about them on social media in different ways. For instance, through Facebook, they get notified if someone has commented or posted anything on the company’s site, and there is also an app regarding this so that the person responsible for responding gets a notice to their phone immediately. The company also uses the service of Meltwater to monitor what is being said about them in all media, not just social media. Meltwater sends the company daily reports about what has been said regarding the keywords that company A has selected. These keywords include the company’s name, certain people within the company, the company’s subsidiaries, but also certain branch specific information.

6.2.2 Cases of negative publicity in social media

When it comes to encountering negative publicity on social media, company A has not encountered that much during the last few years with really negative content or that could constitute a crisis. However, there have been some incidents of discussions or negative comments being posted. For instance, there was someone who questioned as to why the company does some of their noisy work activities during the night, or so early in the morning that they disturb people who are sleeping. There was also a case where an organization that promoted the well-being of cats, were irritated by the company driving away cats from one of the company’s construction sites. The situation was that the cats were very many in number, and some people from the organization would come to feed them. In the end the site became too dangerous for people to be at because of the abundance of cats and therefore the company had to shut the place down for a while and drive the cats away. This resulted in some discussion and criticism towards the company regarding the matter on Facebook.

Another incident, which was a larger one that garnered more attention, was an incident several years ago when the company had a large construction project in the centre of a large city that was delayed due to different circumstances. The delays led to a pretty heated discussion about the subject on their Facebook page. Company A responded to the matter by opening an additional Facebook account, where all the dialogue concerning the matter was moved so that all the questions could be answered in one place and all of the infected negative debate was in one place. This new account was used only for the discussion of the project and for answering any questions that were asked. The account was established so that the negative communication could be moved to a single
place where it could be handled separately, and no longer take all the focus away from everything else that the company wished to communicate through the social media platform. The negative attention was going for a while, but as the project was finished and the matter became less and less current, the dialogue gradually died out on the new Facebook account. When the company noticed this they closed the new account since it was simply no longer relevant to keep around.

6.2.3 Responding to negative publicity in social media

All of the incidences where company A has encountered negative publicity in social media have so far been on Facebook. And so far there have been no cases of crises or negative publicity from other medias spreading to social media. When it comes to responding to negative publicity in social media overall the company tries to respond as correctly as possible, which is done by finding out all the facts, and answering why the company does things in one way or another. It was also pointed out that it is important to remember to not let oneself be dragged into a heated discussion, but instead always remain professional and answer only direct questions, and also refrain from responding to posts where there is not a clear question. In other words, the company should simply handle it as a customer service matter.

Company A has a strategy for dealing with negative publicity in social media. It is a very basic strategy that is not very assertive, since there are not many people in the company that work with these issues and there are limited resources available. The strategy describes which social media channels that the company has and why, how comments and posts are responded to, and also how the company communicates. It was a former colleague that came up with the strategy, and when it comes to dealing with negative publicity in social media according to the strategy the key things to remember are to: be professional, always respond to concrete questions (if they are relevant to the company), and to not engage in inflammatory discussions where no concrete questions are asked. The company always tries to respond to negative publicity that arises, especially if there are inaccuracies in questions or statements, or if there are concrete questions. However, at times negative publicity occurs that is more in the form of general opinions or statements that can be difficult and sometimes unnecessary to respond to. Depending on what the message contains the company will either answer or not.

When it comes to contributing factors in responding, company A stated that it does not matter who posts something or about what. As long as the company feels that it is their
area of responsibility then they have to respond, meaning that who asks the question has in fact no pertinence on the matter. However, if there is a discussion on social media about a service that includes the company’s services, but it is the city or county that buys the services from the company that the critique is aimed at, then the company will simply let the discussion proceed. On the other hand, if someone asks a concrete question of why they do things in a certain way, then they naturally have to answer, and if a negative discussion arises regarding that then the company has to go in and face it in some way.

Company A stated that offensive or discriminative posts, as well as posts that go against the company’s ethical principals are deleted from the company’s social media pages if they occur. However, the occurrence of these types of posts is very rare. Negative posts are never deleted as long as they are politely expressed, since the company’s communication is characterized by transparency and openness. It is after all a democratic society that we live in, and freedom of speech is something that the company respects.

When it comes to response time, company A admits that they are all too slow to respond to negative publicity on social media, but that they try to answer as quickly as possible. Unfortunately since they are so few employees who work with these issues, they often do not have time to respond as quickly as they should. At the moment there is only one person responsible for the company group’s social media pages, while the subsidiaries and other countries where the company is present have their own pages that others take care of. A general aim should be to respond during the course of a workday, but this is not always accomplished.

6.2.4 **Repercussions of negative publicity in social media**

The company does not know of any concrete way that negative publicity in social media has affected them, with the exception of the work effort that has to be put in when it occurs. It was though also said that negative publicity in social media has the potential to influence one’s brand if it spreads to a wider audience. However, this has not happened to them, yet at least, since the negative publicity that has occurred has not been that widespread and has not had that big of an impact just because it has occurred in social media. The company would not want to speculate how much of an impact negative publicity in social media will have on them in future. However, it was stated that no matter what, it is imperative to be present and answer questions on this forum since it is a new arena that more and more people will start using in the future. Therefore,
companies cannot disregard what happens on social media, but instead are forced to be there actively, as well as answer skilfully and quickly any questions that may arise.

In the same way that the company can be contacted by phone, it was stated that it is important that company A also responds to questions quickly through this communication channel. Social media, which was not available a few decades ago, is an opportunity to encounter and engage in a dialogue with the environment, which is considered to be very important for companies now and in the future. So it is very important to take it seriously and respond to questions that are asked, because if that is not done, then it can really have a negative impact on one’s brand and image.

### 6.2.5 Preventing and controlling negative publicity in social media

Company A does not believe that negative publicity in social media can directly be prevented, controlled, or lessened the effects of. Instead the most important thing is to act in a good manner since that means there is less negative publicity overall. And the best one can do is to listen to what is being said, and simply answer professionally in a calm and collected tone of voice to the best of one’s abilities, to not let oneself be provoked, as well as to answer with the correct facts and simply be accessible. The question will die down and become irrelevant eventually.

### 6.3 Company B

Company B has what they call a digital ecosystem, meaning that all online communication channels are meant to support and complement each other. All digital channels have a carefully thought out target audience and aim. Company B is a subsidiary of a large company active in many different countries on several continents. When it comes to social media channels (that are part of the digital ecosystem), the company’s domestic branch is active on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Slideshare, Issue and blogs.

All of the social media channels have carefully been planned in terms of who the target audience is with each channel, what the target audience expects and appreciates, what type of tone will be used on each channel, what type of specific content the company will publish on each channel, and also what the company expects to achieve with each channel. For instance, the company tries to be more relaxed on Facebook than they are on Twitter. Then every year the company looks back, and considers how they can develop their presence on social media in the future.
Company B has been active on Facebook about three years, and they mainly aim to reach students with the channel, hence it is mostly human resources that manage this particular channel. The site is used mainly for posting the biggest news and press releases. The company’s communication department’s task is then to support the human resources department in managing the channel. Twitter has been used by the company for approximately two years, and it is currently the company’s most important social media channel. This is partly due to the fact that since company B is a subsidiary it cannot have its own LinkedIn page, something that only the group as a whole can have, therefore making its Twitter account all the more important.

Twitter is used for press releases, news, and for communicating all of the company’s core values and messages. The content published on Twitter is planned and considered very carefully, and its main aim is to support marketing communication and sales. Originally the plan was to update perhaps two to three times a week, but as they have learned to use the channel and be more social, as well as due to the importance of the channel growing, it has lead to new content being updated to Twitter approximately two to three times a day. Ever since the beginning they have noticed that they get around one new follower every day, meaning that they now have around 750 followers. Company B uses Twitter to communicate with customers, media, students, their own employees, and also other stakeholders.

Another social media channel that the company is active on is Youtube, where they have been present for about two years. The company makes several different kinds of videos for the channel, but one example is an instruction video, that is meant not for regular consumers, but for the businesses that buy and install the company’s products. The channel is also used to communicate large messages deemed important by the company. Target audiences with the channel are therefore potential employees, customers, and certain partners and stakeholders.

Company B is also active on Slideshare, and has been for approximately three years. It started with the company wanting the articles that are published in the company’s customer magazine to be available online so that the company’s sales personnel could use them during presentations when meeting potential clients, and practically have a finished presentation ready for them on the site. However, nowadays the site is also used for other purposes, for instance if the company’s experts have presentations during events then the presentations can be uploaded to Slideshare and the experts can tell the audience that they are available for viewing there. During the last few years Slideshare
has become increasingly important for the company, and though the company was somewhat hesitant when first joining Slideshare, the company has come to find the platform to be an extremely helpful and useful tool to use. Company B also has an Issue account, which they use to simply upload an electronic version of the customer magazine online.

Company B has also established a blog, and has had it for around 18 months. The company has a group of top experts (that are employees of the company) that blog, which results in around 15-20 blog writings a year, with each blogger writing once a year. These bloggers communicate through their writings the company’s core messages about topics that they deem important. The target groups with the blog are customers, potential customers, partners, media, the company’s own personnel, and also societal influencers. The company has put a lot of effort into the blog, in terms of communication resources and trying to occasionally nudge the writers in order to reach as many readers as possible. The blogging has so far been successful and highly appreciated especially within the company.

6.3.1 Monitoring social media

Monitoring what is being said on social media is extremely important according to company B, and they use two different tools for it. Even though there are monitoring options available on most social media platforms, in order to be able to monitor the entire digital media it is important to have other monitoring tools as well. The company is in the middle of changing their monitoring program during the spring, and can only stress the importance of having a good monitoring system regardless of if one is present on social media channels or not, since not being present “does not mean that nobody is talking about you there” [own translation]. Company B monitors not only what is being said about their company and its CEO, but also for instance what is being said about the industries and business areas that are important to the company. In total the company has over 20 search words that they monitor the use of. This is done in part to be able to see how well the company has managed to relate their core messages, and also to see if they or other companies are part of the discussions.

At company B someone is constantly keeping an eye on what is being said, and there is always someone who looks after the monitoring system and what is happening online. When it comes to monitoring tools, the critical element is getting updates in real-time, since it is imperative for the company to know immediately about negative publicity in
online environments in order to be able to prevent or counteract it and possibly stop it from becoming a crisis. For instance if the monitoring system has a one hour delay, then it is much too late to be notified of something since things are constantly happening and companies need to be able to react in real-time. In that aspect social media has brought out a new kind of requirement on response time, since expected reaction times in social media have an entirely different expected timeframe than for instance print media.

6.3.2 Cases of negative publicity in social media

Company B has occasionally encountered negative publicity in social media. To the most part it has been a question of cases of individual people with individual comments of a negative nature. There was one case last year where the negative publicity started to escalate, and it lead to a negative discussion among several people that lasted for several days and was a pretty significant negative situation. It can even be categorized as a crisis. Several different stakeholders participated in the discussion, but none of them were customers. This is the only time that the company has encountered negative publicity on social media of this magnitude. Negative discussions are something to take very seriously since negative comments can remain visible for a long time, which can lead to it spreading also later on. For instance, mass media often takes content in the form of comments from social media, and they might see a negative discussion and then decide to write about or simply mention that ‘this is what people are saying regarding this company’ long after the discussion has ended, which is something that has happened to company B.

In the case of when the negative discussion escalated and the discussion went on for several days, a group of the company’s employees sat down and planned a more extensive action plan. The first thing to consider in these types of situations is who are the different participants in the discussion, and how much knowledge they might have about the subject. The company gathers a group of employees, which may include for instance someone from not only the communications department, but also an expert on the topic, as well as someone from the legal department. No matter the issue, it is important to have people that represent and look at the problem from different angles so that all angles are covered when considering how to respond, where to respond (using which channels), and who will respond (which employee). The group then makes several different scenarios about what might happen, meaning possible outcomes if the
company acts in a certain way, and possible outcomes if they act in another way. This is important since these scenarios help the group consider not just the immediate response, but also what the response may lead to further on. Naturally there can still occur surprises, and therefore it is important to name one or a few employees responsible for monitoring or possibly responding to the crisis in real-time, thereby keeping an eye on how the situation is progressing. A possibility in a situation like this is to have an own discussion about the subject on the company’s own social media pages instead of engaging in a discussion elsewhere, thereby making sure that the company’s view on the matter is visible on the company’s own channels of communication.

When it comes to the types of negative publicity on social media that the company has encountered, the topics have so far never been about the company’s products or services, at least to their knowledge. Instead the negative conversations or comments have been mainly about topics concerning the company’s operation practices. Since the company is solely a business-to-business company, they do not usually encounter negative feedback from private individuals, while that is instead something that some of their customers (who install and sell the products to consumers) might encounter.

6.3.3 Responding to negative publicity in social media

When it comes to responding to negative publicity in social media, company B reacts in different ways. In the cases of negative individual comments the company simply considers the comments on a case-by-case basis. Firstly the company considers if there is a question directed towards them. If there is a question, then the company naturally answers. If not and it is more of an opinion, then the company assumes that they are not necessarily expected to respond, since naturally people are entitled to their opinions. Then it is evaluated if the topic is such that the company should answer and bring forth their view on the subject in a public place. Several times the company chooses not to respond. It is also important to remember the following: “if you engage in a discussion you also have to be prepared to have that discussion” [own translation]. Simply because someone from the company expresses their opinion, they should not expect that to be the final word on the matter. Instead it can lead to matters escalating and the discussion even taking a turn for the worse. This is why the company considers very, very carefully which types of discussions that they engage in and which they do not.

The structure of large companies can be somewhat of a challenge when dealing with crises since the knowledge is so divided and spread out over many different depart-
ments. But that is simply the reality of large corporations such as company B. That is why the company has devised separate plans for how to manage crisis situations; in order to make sure that the company is as prepared for them as possible. The premise in all of the company’s communication, as well as the starting point in crisis communication, is to be as open, available and consistent as possible, and in addition making sure that all of the company’s communication is based on facts, not speculations or personal opinions, while also respecting that people have a right to their personal opinions. Company B would be less likely to participate in an escalated discussion on social media or the Internet in the maelstrom of things, but instead it is more likely that the company will use their own social media pages or website to bring forth their views on the topic since they see this as a more constructive approach.

The company has a good crisis management plan and crisis communication plan that social media is a part of. Nowadays they are pretty well prepared, and to ensure that they stay that way the company organizes exercises every two years, with scenarios for a crisis that the employees rehearse in actuality regarding what to do when for instance the phones start ringing or there are all kinds of discussions on social media. They had one during the spring and will later on have a wrap-up session for it where they sit down and discuss how it went.

As mentioned, the company’s crisis communication strategy has parts regarding social media. Within the company there is a core group of employees that during a crisis take care of or lead the situation. In practicality it means that the group is gathered, and the nature of the crisis determines which departments are involved, while some are fixed members (for instance the communication department). Then all target groups have to be considered and how the company will respond to for instance customers, media, on social media, to societal influencers and so on. Certain members of the group then take care of certain target groups or communication channels. It also has to be considered who the spokesperson is, what the company’s statement will be, who will monitor the situation constantly and report about it. Often during a crisis the group has to be flexible and rethink their plans on the basis of what comes up. They also imagine different scenarios and prepare for how they will react in the different scenarios. Company B also stresses that during a crisis it is important to take into consideration the company’s own employees and make sure that they know the company’s view on the matter. The crisis management plan that company B uses has been developed by its parent company, and all subsidiaries use the same plan.
Company B considers it important to respond to negative publicity in social media, but there are different ways of responding, meaning that the company does not necessarily have to go respond on the forum that the conversation takes place on. In the case of individual comments it is considered to be less important to answer since people have a right to their opinions, but in cases where the situation has escalated it is very important that the company's opinion is available somewhere. This also helps the communications department immensely since they can then easily guide those who ask about the matter to the place where the company has given their statement about it.

Company B wants to respond to negative publicity in social media quickly. But the actual response time depends largely on the topic, meaning if the topic is such that an easy answer can be given quickly, or if it requires more time and effort to come up with a response. A response can be given in a few hours, but definitely has to be given during the same day if they are to respond. Response time also depends greatly on where the key persons are that are needed to formulate the answer. If it is a situation that demands the company's response, and their response is delayed it can lead to the situation escalating if there is only silence on the part of the company.

There are several factors influencing how the company responds to negative publicity in social media. First of all, what the topic is of the negative publicity matters greatly. When it comes to negativity regarding matters of the company’s core business then the company may want to bring forth their view of the matter. However, if someone complains about wages, then the company would be less likely to engage in the discussion. In the situations that have arisen so far, who the writer has been has not influenced the response in any significant way. But there have been situations where prominent political influencers have somehow been involved, and the company has then chosen not to engage in the discussions on social media, but instead invite the political influencer to the company where they can share their view on the matter and discuss it further. This is also an excellent way to create relationships with them. In some cases where there have been wrong facts as a basis for an argument, the company considers it important to give them the right information (especially if they are an influencer of some kind) so that they do not pass the false information on to others. In the end, the company does not start researching whom it is that has written something, but only take the persons identity into consideration in situations where it is someone well known or a political influencer of some kind.
So far the company has not had any need to erase any messages from their social media pages. Offensive remarks might be erased if they occurred, but so far none have. The company does carefully consider if they should respond, especially in cases where someone is merely stating an opinion. There is one individual that continuously writes or comments about something regarding the company. It has though been noted that this individual has business ambitions as the reason for their behaviour, but when it happens continuously it takes a lot of the employees’ time. At some point they started to wonder if it pays off to respond, since no matter how they try he still continues. So it is not an easy thing to determine how and when to respond.

In all matters of communication, company B strives to be open, and in matters of negative publicity on social media they have thus far mainly used their own channels to bring forth their own view. But the company still considers every case separately and if it is better to use their own channels for the response or if they should engage in the discussion where it is taking place. No matter what, it is important to constantly monitor what is being said so that the company “can know what they are not taking a stand on” [own translation].

### 6.3.4 Repercussions of negative publicity in social media

So far negative publicity on social media has not had any severe consequences for company B. Social media is nowadays a communication channel and companies simply have to accept this and have strategies, tactics and plans ready for dealing with it in case anything negative about the company arises. Mainly the negative publicity in social media that company B has faced has led to them fine-tuning their plans and tactics for dealing with the situations. Naturally the incidents that they have had have demanded resources, and when it comes to monitoring, the company has learned the importance of it. The company hopes to avoid negative publicity in social media in the future, but also believe that they have learned a lot from the small-scale crises that they have had and are at least more prepared for it than they were before. They have come to the realization that “it could happen to us too” [own translation].

### 6.3.5 Preventing and controlling negative publicity in social media

Company B believes that negative publicity in social media can be prevented to some degree by being as open and believable as possible, and also by acting according to their words, basing the communication on facts and being reachable. When it comes to
communication it is important to communicate also the more negative matters in an honest way. For instance furloughing happens in many companies, and mentions of it can show up in social media, but that is not something that can be prevented in any way. The most important thing is instead to have an open communication behind one’s actions so as not to appear to want to hide something.

The company feels that the effects of negative publicity can be lessened by communicating effectively internally, and using all the communication tools that are at one’s disposal, especially in regards to larger issues and crises. It is also equally important to have good relations to media, societal influencers, customers and other stakeholder, if the company wishes to lessen the effects of negative publicity. Although the company feels that the previously mentioned actions may help to lessen the effects of negative publicity in social media, they also believe that it cannot be controlled. The only way to deal with it is to be open and believable, and if they want to influence it in any way it is imperative to have both the monitoring system and crisis communication plans in excellent working order.

### 6.4 Company C

Company C is active in several different countries, and in the different countries they are active on different social media sites. They have had to carefully choose which social medias to join and be active in, since they cannot join all of them. They have carefully considered these choices, and are still continuously considering which new one to join next. When it comes to Finland, they are mainly active on Facebook and Twitter. These two social media platforms have been chosen for specific reasons. Facebook because it is so popular and everyone is there, including the company’s customers who are the main target group for it. Twitter, on the other hand, has only recently been taken more actively into use because the company noticed that a lot of their important stakeholders, such as politicians and media, are present there. These two channels are their main social media channels since they are utilized the most and are the most important.

Company C is also active on LinkedIn domestically, but not to the same extent as they are on Facebook and Twitter. LinkedIn is used more by the human resources department, but to some extent also the communications department. LinkedIn is used mostly to communicate with potential employees, the company’s own employees, colleagues in the same field, as well as students. They are currently keeping an eye on Instagram, which is growing rapidly at the moment, and considering if it would become suitable
for them to join at some point. Slideshare is also in consideration for being the next social media that the company joins. In some other countries company C is also present on Pinterest, Slideshare, Instagram, as well as on some other social media sites.

Company C uses social media to communicate with other parties, in some way almost every day. The monitoring of social media is always on going, but if they receive questions (which happens quite a lot) they strive to answer them immediately. They also post content themselves, usually a few times a week (on Facebook and Twitter), in the form of for instance press releases and competitions. They also use social media to answer and discuss different topics with their customers. However, they more rarely start discussions themselves, but instead try to engage people by occasionally organizing competitions. Facebook is used more for fun and light content, while Twitter is used for more serious matters.

6.4.1 Monitoring social media

Company C uses several different tracking services that they buy from other companies. The reason for using several different tracking services is to make sure that all the channels and all relevant communications are monitored. The main search word used is the company name, but sometimes also other search words are used (such as specific parts or themes regarding the energy industry). For instance, during the current election they also have monitoring for specific energy related themes that are relevant for the company, in order to stay aware of what is being said regarding these themes. The company always has someone on duty seven days a week from 8 am to 8 pm, that serves as media officer and whose job it is to follow, and also react if required, to the activity on the company’s domestic Facebook and Twitter accounts. Unfortunately, due to a lack of resources they do not have the time to answer everything that is brought up in social media. This is something that the company struggles with, meaning knowing how much resources they should put on social media.

6.4.2 Cases of negative publicity in social media

The company joined Facebook in 2010, but it was not until 2012 that they started using it actively. The reason for this is that during a large storm that raged in 2011, a few hundred thousand of their customers were left without electricity, which led to people starting to use Facebook to contact and ask the company for information. This was a kind of crisis that forced the company to start using social media, and in particular Fa-
cebook, much more actively since the normal communication channels largely did not work. During this crisis the company started a specific Facebook account called ‘the Eye of the Storm’, which was used solely to answer people’s questions regarding the matter. It was a large crisis for the company, and it took a long while for it to be over, but the company feels that it was through their Facebook communication, which was their main communication channel during the crisis and where the customers and the company found each other, that they got people to calm down. They could express their apologies for the inconveniences and give them whatever relevant information they had regarding the matter. Company C saw this as a great opportunity to continue to communicate with their customers since they had gotten thousands of followers during the crisis, and so they kept the site, renamed it and started using it as their official domestic Facebook account. So sometimes crises can lead to opportunities and beneficial new ideas, which is what company C considered happened to them.

The most negative publicity regarding one subject that they have received was the energy outages during the big storms that were previously mentioned. That particular instance can even be deemed a crisis. But other than that example, the company has not faced any other large-scale negative publicity on social media. However, there have been some other notable cases worth mentioning. For instance, during the end of 2014, there was a website that someone (they are not sure exactly who) started that encouraged people not to buy the company’s services or products. This venture also had a Facebook account, and it was created after the company made an announcement that they were considering joining a certain project. The venture did not support the project and wanted to rebel against company C for considering participation in it. But the interesting thing about it was that the facts that were presented on the website and Facebook page were not accurate.

The venture did get several hundred likes on Facebook and a dozen or so re-tweets on Twitter, while company C monitored the situation through their accounts and customer service. The venture lasted a few weeks before it started to die down in excitement. The company carefully considered during the time that the venture was really active how they should respond and even made preparations for responding, but when the topic started to stagnate they decided that they would not respond in any way since responding at that point might only bring the matter to the forefront again. They also found that they did not lose any customers due to it. However, they have the answers that they formulated ready at hand in case the matter resurfaces. The company states that these
types of incidents are very common, meaning when they monitor a certain activity or discussion, and then in the end decide that it is better to not participate or respond to it in any way.

Another incident that caused a lot of discussion on social media was when the company announced that the bonuses for the board of directors were going to be raised. However, in these types of situations the company cannot respond even should they wish to, due to the fact that the matter is not the company’s decision, but the stockholders decision. So in these types of matters the company has no choice but to stay silent, and that is unfortunately the reality for a listed company such as company C.

Another topic that is very current is taxes, and there was a TV-series that included segments in a few of their programs about company C’s taxpaying practices. Company C knew when these programs would air and prepared themselves by writing tweets that could be used during the course of the program or after in case a discussion emerged about it. These tweets were given to the media officer on duty those nights, and they were needed the first time, but not the second. This is something that the company also does in other matters, meaning preparing answers (for instance tweets) to be used if a discussion arises after, for instance a press release is issued or if an issue that is known to be relevant arises. If many people ask the same question in a short period of time, the company may give them all a joint answer, or publish an answer that answers the question publicly.

6.4.3 Responding to negative publicity in social media

Company C stated that not all content on social media is responded to. Most content and especially questions that are matter-of-fact are answered to, while argumentative or non-courteous content is left alone and not responded to. Current matters that are talked about a lot often get responded to with for instance a link to the company’s website where more information regarding the matter can be found. The discussions, nevertheless, have a tendency to die out rather quickly, which is why it is often too late to answer in the morning to conversations started in the evenings after 8 pm. The company mainly receives negative publicity on social media in the form of negative feedback, which they get continuously on both Facebook and Twitter. Maybe not every week and certainly not every day, but still this happens with regular intervals. They have found that this is particularly true due to fact that they are in the energy industry, and energy is something that interests people.
Company C does not have a concrete strategy for handling negative publicity on social media. But what they do have are guidelines for how social media should be handled, that include among other things the previously mentioned approachability, media officer, and preparing for potential negative messages with answers beforehand. Then the company also has crisis and communication directions that include social media. The company has also practiced what they would do in case a large-scale negative crisis was to develop in social media.

In the end when it comes to dealing with negative publicity in social media, company C more often than not try to wait things out and see if the matter dies down before responding, especially in regards to negative general discussions. The things they always consider are if it makes sense to join the discussion or not, as well as if it is a large matter or not. They consider themselves to be quite careful when it comes to engaging in negative discussions, which is mostly due to the fact that the company is a listed company, and do not want to bring more publicity to negative matters. How widely a matter has spread, who is asking, as well as the topic, are the factors that influence company C’s answers the most when responding to negative publicity in social media. If there is an easy answer, then the company naturally responds, but if it is a more difficult question or comment that needs more explaining then it is also a question of if it is worth responding to or not. Worth meaning in this case if the answer will add fuel to the fire so to speak, or calm the situation down by responding. Naturally, the company admits that if they do not respond to something it may also give the impression that the company is cold and distant.

When it comes to the tone of voice used on social media when responding to negative publicity company C always tries to be either neutral or positive, and thank the person for their feedback or question. Messages containing curse words, as well as anonymous messages are not responded to. If the messages are considered to be offensive they may be deleted, but they cannot remember a single case where that would have been done. Instead abrasive messages are simply ignored so as not to further engage the aggressor. Another thing that the company has noticed is that nowadays if someone posts rude messages other users do not like this, and it is somewhat frowned upon in social media. It has also been noted that the company very rarely receives negative feedback regarding their products, with the exception of prices, and instead the negative publicity in social media is more often focused on the moral and ethical aspects of the company’s choices. Negative feedback about prices on the other hand is more seen as overall feed-
back, and not necessarily a negative thing since they give an insight into the customers’ views and opinions. For instance the company monitors how many ‘likes’ that the different messages that they post get, as well as how many followers they have.

6.4.4 **Repercussions of negative publicity in social media**

Negative publicity in social media has strongly influenced company C to become more active there (mainly the crisis in 2011) and also taught the company what an excellent channel social media is for communicating with and being close to customers. In this channel the company can communicate in the same way as other parties, meaning that for instance on Facebook the company’s employees answer with their own first names, use smiley faces and other similar things for the company to be more approachable and seem more humane, as well as show people that a limited company can communicate in other ways than just through more official channels such as press releases. The company also believes that social media has improved their customer service since they can easily answer customers through this platform, but also get a sense of peoples’ opinions regarding certain topics. In recent years social media has become one of the most important communication channels for company C.

6.4.5 **Preventing and controlling negative publicity in social media**

According to company C, negative publicity in social media cannot necessarily be altogether prevented, but companies can try to refrain from adding fuel to the fire so to speak, and also try not to bring forth such topics that they know will not produce positive discussions. For instance, company C does not announce the raising of prices, since they know that it will result in negative discussions. However, the company also tries to be consistent, and also not announce the decreasing of prices, since they have simply chosen not to use social media for that type of communication. Instead they try to focus on matters that they believe will interest and engage the company’s target audiences. What is said through other channels and places cannot be prevented, instead the company can only monitor and follow what happens in social media as a result. Company C very rarely goes to other sites and starts discussing there (like for instance in the case of the mentioned website that encouraged people to boycott the company), but instead uses their own channels and platforms to correct the misinformation.

Company C believes that negative publicity in social media cannot be controlled, but that its effects can be lessened by for instance being proactive and telling the audience
about the positive things that are being done, due to the fact that they have found that positive discourse clearly lessens the appearance of negative discussions. When there are negative aspects or discussions, the company avoids going on the defensive and instead simply tries to tell their side of things. The company also believes that taking into account the target audience in your speech, for instance by incorporating first names and smiley faces, as well as considering the tone of voice used can help. Because in the end, that is largely why they are there, to communicate with different parties and bring forth the positive matters.

6.5 Company D

Company D has different accounts on social media in different countries, but domestically (in Finland) the company has an account on Facebook, several accounts on Twitter, a LinkedIn account, an Instagram account, two YouTube channels and blogs. The Facebook account is directed towards the consumer clients, and those customers that use the company’s products and fuel station network. The company has had the Facebook account for at least six years, but it is not an official customer service channel. The company’s two Twitter accounts were established around two to three years ago. One of the accounts is the entire group’s Twitter account, and it is in English. It is directed towards media, industry media, influencers, and people who are interested in cleaner traffic solutions and renewable energy. The other Twitter account is in Finnish, and it focuses on matters regarding employer image. The account is mainly used for posting job advertisements and other subjects associated with working at the company.

The company’s LinkedIn account is also English; it is used internationally and has been active for around 18 months. The account is used, mainly on the business-to-business side, by representatives who buy products for their companies. Its purpose is to facilitate the communication between company D’s sales employees and B2B customers, so that the sales people can through the site share company D’s updates, what is happening in the company and bring forth those matters that are considered to be beneficial for the clients to know as well. Although the LinkedIn account also affects and is used for employer image, the site is currently not used for advertising job vacancies. Company D has an Instagram account that is currently not being used actively, but its introduction into use is being planned. The two Youtube channels have different target groups. The first one is meant for the Finnish fuel station network’s customers, and the second one is an international channel.
Company D has used blogs for at least the last five years, and the different blogs have different purposes. The company uses blogs a lot internally, to for instance communicate about different projects. The company currently uses two blogs that focus on different subjects to communicate with external stakeholders. Different experts, some of who are company D’s own employees and some who are not, write the blogs. The company uses the blogs to communicate about things in a more relaxed way, and also to be able to bring forth people’s experiences and deal with topics that generate conversation.

Through blogs the company has the possibility to bring forth their own view on for instance a current conversation and also create conversation about topics that the company regards as important. Through the different blogs the company tries to reach, for instance customers, players in the field, and people (both internal and external) interested in the topics brought up. Blogs are used to create a more personal image of the company, in addition to other communication channels that are also used for this purpose. Nevertheless, blogs are one of the channels that the company uses and believes to be a good channel for dealing with complicated matters in a more personal and pondering way.

The social media channels are communicated through daily, with activities, announcements and news about for instance marketing campaigns that they have, events that the company has participated in, news that have been published about the company, as well as competitions where the customers and other stakeholders can participate.

6.5.1 Monitoring social media

The employees who monitor the company’s social media sites monitor if comments or questions arise through them. In addition, the company monitors the rest of social media by using a media monitoring tool that gives them a daily report about what has been said about the company, and also gives them the opportunity to go online at any time and see or engage in these discussions about the company. This means that Company D monitors all of their visibility in social media, not just in their own channels, and whenever the company’s name is mentioned in a conversation on social media the company monitors them.
6.5.2 Cases of negative publicity in social media

Company D has received negative publicity in social media several times, but it is not something that happens regularly, only occasionally on Facebook or Twitter so far. One example of such an incident is when Greenpeace campaigned against company D's use of palm oil. There have been incidents when Greenpeace has either launched a campaign against the company, mentioned the company’s name in a press release or post on social media, or simply commented (regarding the company’s use of palm oil in the production of a product) on a update about a product made by company D on Facebook or Twitter. The full-fledged campaigns have often been very visible in social media, since Greenpeace is very active there. During the campaigns, the environmental organization has encouraged their followers to send company D a prepared message or tweet about the use of palm oil, which naturally results in a very high amount of identical or similar messages about the subject from different users.

Another example of a type of negative publicity in social media that company D has encountered is questions or feedback regarding a customer service situation that has happened at one of the gas stations in the company’s fuel station network. The negative comment could be related to for instance broken dishes, a running fuel line, or something to do with the car wash. These have occurred on both Twitter and Facebook, even on the English Twitter account that is not meant for dealing with these types of things and is not a customer service channel. But nonetheless, all the feedback that the company receives from these channels is dealt with in cooperation with the customer service department. Responses are not signed specifically by employees since the company’s name is already evident when using the company’s page, but also because the person handling the sites changes and it is not an official customer service channel so the company has not considered it to be that important to sound so personal. This is perhaps something that will be considered in the future.

Another source of negative publicity in social media that can also be seen as critique is when users complain about the price of fuel, which is always considered to be too expensive. These types of comments have mostly occurred on Facebook and are mostly just the comments of individual people that do not seem to have much other reason for commenting than giving criticism. However, it was stated that sometimes “people just need to comment and unload their frustration on something” [own translation].
6.5.3 Responding to negative publicity in social media

Company D does not have any kind of policy that all/no negative publicity should be responded to, and therefore, the different cases are dealt with on a case-by-case basis. In cases of negative publicity where there is a clear question the employee responsible for the management of the channel will bring the matter up for a discussion among the people in the external communications department. It will then together be decided what action the company will take and the answer will be sought. When there is a clear question the company always tries to respond in some way since they assume that the writer wants one, especially in cases when the question has clearly been directed to the company. But for instance in cases such as the Greenpeace campaign, the company will not start responding to a large number of similar or identical messages, but instead update on social media an answer meant for everyone. However, if there is not a clear question or the content is in some way inappropriate then the company may not answer at all.

Sometime on Facebook, users can behave in a way that is not in accordance to the company’s values, for instance by swearing, or using language that is otherwise inappropriate, discriminating or offensive. These discussions or comments are not necessarily engaged in and can sometimes even be deleted, since the company has clear rules on their sites stating that discussions have to take place in a way that is respectful to everyone and those that are not may be deleted. However, this has happened very rarely.

If it is noticed that the person asking a question may not have all the information about the subject that they should have or that they even have false information about it, then company D tries to give them the correct information by for instance telling them where they can read more about the subject or how the matter really is. In the end the company has decided that since they do not have that many cases of negative publicity on social media it is more beneficial to handle them on a case-by-case basis (with the exception of the campaign-generated comments) than start making general rules or guideline for them.

Company D does not have a strategy for handling negative publicity in social media, simply the plan that the media representatives bring forth cases as they come by, as previously mentioned. When it comes to negative comments or questions the most important aspect is not a quick answer, but instead the company tries to carefully consider how they should respond, since many subjects due to their complicated nature can be
very difficult to summarize in a short reply. However, they do try to respond as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, it is not only important to carefully consider what the response will be but also what tone should be used, to make sure that the information given is correct, and also be in contact with an expert about the subject that will be needed if the discussion about it continues. If it is a matter of customer service then the communications department makes sure that they have been in contact with the customer service department about the subject before replying or taking any other action.

The company takes several things into consideration when considering how to respond to negative publicity in social media. They mainly look at who the person that they are responding to is, how active he/she has been on social media, if they have a lot of friends/followers/likers, if it is possible that the person will start spreading the message further, how they have previously acted on social media, and also if their profile reveals something about what kind of tone or style to use with them when responding. Style is important because it may be hard for a young person to understand the answer if the company were to answer using a lot of corporate jargon and the company then strives to answer in a more familiarly way, while instead an expert in the field may require more intricate answers. These are some of the aspects that may be considered, as it is also considered in communication in general whom it is that one is talking to.

6.5.4 Repercussions of negative publicity in social media

Negative publicity in social media is not considered to affect the company in any considerable way on its own, but naturally it plays a part in influencing the company’s reputation and image. This in turn, in the end, influences if customers buy the company’s products or not, and also if people want to come work for the company and if the current staff is satisfied.

6.5.5 Preventing and controlling negative publicity in social media

Company D tries to prevent negative publicity in social media by being as open as possible, and letting the public know about things themselves both when it comes to positive and negative matters. If the company knows that something, which they consider to be negative, is becoming public knowledge then they try to prepare for how to handle it in social media beforehand, and then when it becomes relevant they try to give information and be proactively present on social media when needed. They also try to prevent negative publicity by taking into consideration basic matters, such as behaving
according to their standards and ethical principals. Even though their communications may sometimes sound somewhat bureaucratic, the company always has to act in accordance to their values and basic principles for communication, meaning that they do not lie or present things in any other way than the way that they actually are. The company is also careful about not letting themselves be provoked by others engaging in more hostile or judging discussions, but instead it is good to try to remember to stay calm and remember to act in accordance to the company’s values. Being honest and transparent already helps with most things.

According to company D negative publicity in social media can be lessened, by responding as quickly as possible before the discussion or news start to spread. The company has not set a time for how fast they have to respond since social media is not an official customer service channel in the same way that e-mail and the phone are. Nonetheless, the company still strives to handle matters as quickly as possible.

Company D believes that negative publicity in social media is very hard to control, and that nowadays any type of media cannot really be controlled and if one tries too hard to control it, it can lead to a very dire situation. However, it can surely in some ways be prevented. In the end though, companies perhaps simply have to “accept what they get” [own translation], since most information is yesterday’s news soon anyway, and topics come and go very rapidly. Of course companies have to still monitor social media and be on top of things, meaning not underestimating their value without overreacting to matters either. The preferable thing to do is to monitor the situation and then react if necessary, which is considered a good rule by company D. They further say about the matter that “if we have made some kind of mistake or something else then we also very openly apologize for it” [own translation], instead of hiding by not saying anything at all, but instead participating in the conversation to the degree that is necessary without overreacting.
7 ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The research results will now be analysed and compared to each other in order to be able to achieve the purpose of the study. The results will be used to create a model for how companies deal with the appearance of negative publicity on social media, as well as to create a model presenting the factors to take into consideration when considering whether or not to respond to negative publicity in social media. The results from the analysis will then be compared to the theoretical framework, and the implications of the study and analysis will be presented. Lastly the chapter will discuss the validity and reliability of the study.

7.1 Analysis of the results

The different companies that were interviewed are active on different social media platforms, but all of them are on both Twitter and Facebook. Three of them are on LinkedIn (the fourth company’s parent company is on it), three of them are on Youtube, two have blogs, and then some of them are active on a few additional sites. What can be derived from these statistics is that companies of varying industries are often active on at least the most popular social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). While Facebook is often used in a more fun, light way and also to try influence employer image, Twitter is where companies more often find important stakeholders, such as media and societal influencers. The case companies find their corporate customers mainly through Twitter, LinkedIn or blogs. The different channels all have different aims and target groups, and the type of communication that is done on each channel is planned accordingly.

An analysis of the results of the study show that negative publicity in social media happens most often on Facebook and Twitter, while channels such as LinkedIn and Instagram are hardly ever the source of it. This can be attributed to the fact that Facebook and Twitter are channels where users are accustomed to speaking freely, and are not afraid to voice their opinions, while for instance LinkedIn has a much more professional setting where expressing opinions freely is not as common. LinkedIn is also used for more professional purposes, while channels like Twitter and Facebook are more used by individuals for recreational purposes.

Although Facebook and Twitter is the place where negative publicity occurs, the case companies do not let it affect their willingness to participate and be active on the sites
since absence from a site does not mean that negative publicity will not happen, but simply that the company has more difficulty responding if they choose to do so. According to the results of the study, it is imperative for companies to be available to answer questions quickly and skilfully on social media, since this is where an increasing amount of communication between people happens, and not being present can make a company seem unreachable and distant, as well as have an overall negative impact on brand image.

The importance of monitoring what is being said on social media and online in general cannot be overstated. The case companies stated that whether a company is present on social media or not, monitoring gives valuable insight into what customers and other stakeholders think about the company, if the company is mentioned in discussions about relevant topics, how well the company has managed to relay their core messages, how they are perceived, as well as what is being said about competitors and important business areas. Through meticulous and constant monitoring, companies can learn about negative incidents as soon as they happen, thereby having a chance to start making plans for what actions to proceed with. Consequently, according to the study, companies should always have an employee, at least during work hours that monitors and responds to questions on social media, and can take the matter forward if the need arises. Real-time updates are critical, since the case companies believe that they need to know immediately about negative incidents if they are to have a better chance of stopping them from escalating, and if they want to formulate a quick and suitable answer. However, negative content is not altogether a bad thing, since negative feedback can be helpful by giving a company insight into people’s opinions and views about the company or brand.

Among the companies interviewed, negative publicity about the companies’ practices as well as ethical and moral aspects, were clearly the most common type of negative publicity in social media. In particular, strictly B2B companies (company A and B), had not had any cases of negative feedback in social media about their products or services, while the two other companies (C and D, who are both B2B and B2C) had had some negative feedback regarding their products and services, but the clear majority for them was still negative publicity regarding moral aspects or their practices.

It is important to remember that negative content on social media is visible for a long time afterwards, and can start spreading again later on or be used by mass media, thereby garnering additional attention. Accordingly, companies need to carefully con-
sider how they deal with negative publicity in social media. Deleting posts is something that the case companies do very rarely, and only in cases when the content is offensive or discriminatory and go against the company’s values or principles. However, to clarify what is and is not allowed behaviour on a company’s social media pages, clear rules that also state the consequences for breaking them should be clearly visible on the pages. Negative comments (that are conveyed in a respectful manner) should never be deleted, and they never are by the companies interviewed.

Instead of deleting, most negative publicity in social media is dealt with in one of the two usual ways, meaning to either ignore it by being inactive or give a response in some way. Based on the study, this is one of the most difficult questions when it comes to dealing with negative publicity in social media, meaning whether or not it is worth it for companies to answer. Whether they are simply further enraging the participants by engaging in negative discussions, or seeming cold and unapproachable by not answering is a constant dilemma. While the situation can in some cases, be dissolved by giving a good response, in other cases responding can lead to the situation escalating further. In view of this companies need to consider very, very carefully before responding to negative publicity in social media. Nevertheless, it is important to take into consideration that responding also gives companies an opportunity to present their point-of-view on the matter. In view of this, one valid option if a topic garners a larger discussion in another place then the company’s own social media pages, is to still address the matter using the company’s own pages, as several of the case companies stated that they usually do in these cases. This way the interested parties can find the company’s point of view should they be interested in it, yet the company simultaneously refrains from engaging directly in the inflamed discussion.

According to the study, when a company considers whether or not to give a response to negative publicity in social media, there are several factors to consider. It is worth considering who wrote the negative content, where it was posted, how far it has spread and is likely to spread, what the topic is, and how relevant that topic is for the company. When considering the identity of the author of the negative publicity, their influence and motivations should also be looked into and considered. The different aspects that can be taken into consideration, when considering if companies should respond to negative publicity or not, are illustrated in figure 1. All of the different aspects should be considered, and then based on a thorough assessment of the situation companies can consider if the risk of responding (that can escalate the discussion further) outweighs
the risk of not responding (which can further aggravate users and damage the image of the company). It has also been underlined that even though a company gives a response, they should be careful not to let themselves be dragged into heated conversations or in any way start debating with anyone. Since companies have to react quickly when negative publicity occurs, they can benefit from preparing answers beforehand to topics that they believe might become relevant, or in preparation if they know negative news will be published.

Figure 1 Different factors to consider when determining the possible risk of negative publicity in social media

When formulating a response, the case companies consider the tone of voice they use and keep in mind to always be honest. As previously mentioned, companies have different target groups on different social media platforms, which is also something that should be taken into consideration when choosing the tone of voice to be used when responding to negative publicity in the different channels. While it is appropriate and can help make the company seem more approachable and humane if employees use their own first names and smiley emoticons when responding on for instance Facebook, it is less suitable on for instance LinkedIn. When considering whether to use emoticons and first names the most important consideration is whom the message is directed to. Nevertheless, whether it is appropriate to remain strictly professional or more approachable, the writer should always remain polite and honest.
The case companies respond to negative publicity that concerns them, but when the negative publicity is not directly about them (for instance in B2B companies when the customer’s customer complains about something that is up to the company’s customer) the best choices are to leave the matter either unanswered or direct the end customer to the right place. However, if it is something that is up to the company, they should naturally answer. All case companies agreed that especially when someone asks the company a direct question, it is particularly important to answer, since the person asking the question likely expects an answer. Even if the question is asked in a negative way or regarding a negative aspect, the company should thank the person for their interest (or question/inquiry; whichever is best suited) and either give the answer right away, or promise to find out the answer and contact them again when they get it.

Negative publicity is something that the four interviewed companies agree cannot be directly controlled since this is a free society and people have a right to their opinions. However, all interviewed companies emphasized the importance of being open and honest in their communications. Although negative publicity in social media was not believed to be directly prevented, it was stated that it could indirectly be at least partially prevented by being open, available, believable and honest in both negative and positive matters. Other things that are believed to be able to help companies prevent negativity in social media from occurring and spreading, are to behave according to the company’s standards and ethical principles, keep their promises, as well as not aggravate inflamed situations, or bring forth negative discussions or topics.

Negative publicity was believed to be able to be lessened, at least partly, by having good relations and communications with own employees, media, customers, and other stakeholders, as well as by being proactive on social media and bringing forth positive matters (so as to drown out the negative ones). Other actions to lessen the impact and occurrence of negative publicity considering the target audience are to consider the tone of voice used in communication (for instance with students, emoticons and employees’ first names could be used), respond quickly, as well as act in a good manner overall.

From the results of the study it can be deduced that companies strive to be as open and honest, in their communications on social media (and overall), as possible. The important thing to remember is that negative publicity in social media, even on a larger scale, can be turned into an opportunity to turn things around for the better. In the findings emerged one particular instance when the company had managed to do just
that. This was when company C moved all of the negative publicity during a crisis to another Facebook account (which they set up particularly for this incident, and which company A also did during one of their incidents). By doing so a company can free up the original page for positive information, and also gathering all the negative publicity regarding the incident in one place makes it easier to answer to and less likely to spread further. The company got a lot of followers on this new page, and they were able to communicate more efficiently and faster with the concerned parties and handle the situation in a constructive manner. The company realized the opportunity they had to keep communicating with them when the crisis had passed, and they capitalized on it by changing the new page to their official Facebook page. Though some of them were said to have stopped following the company shortly after, a large part remained. This is an excellent example of being creative and turning the outcome into the company’s advantage.

7.1.1 Approaches for dealing with negative publicity in social media

Based on an analysis of the results of the study, two different approaches for dealing with negative publicity in social media can be discerned, as shown in figure 2, and they are a reactive approach and a proactive approach. While for instance company A can be categorized as having a more reactive approach and company B a more proactive approach, company C and D are more proactive in some regards and more reactive in others. The meaning with dividing the approaches is to simply show how companies can handle negative publicity in social media in different ways. The characteristics of the two approaches are presented in table 3 and explained in more detail hereafter.

The case companies using a reactive approach, monitor their own social media channels closely, but focus their other social media monitoring mainly on the company’s name, brand and key employees. They have general guidelines for handling negative publicity in social media, but no strict rules of conduct (meaning no designation of who does what in the case of matters escalating). When using a reactive approach, companies consider cases as they come along, and when they do find out the necessary facts they respond quickly, taking into consideration mainly the topic of the question. Clear questions are responded to, while matters are considered on a case-by-case basis. A similar, professional tone of voice is used in all communication. Companies', that have a more reactive approach, main objective in responding to negative publicity in social
media is to calm the situation down and stop it from spreading by being as open and honest as possible.

**Figure 2** Two possible approaches for dealing with negative publicity in social media

According to the study, the case companies with a more proactive approach for dealing with negative publicity in social media have close, constant monitoring of all social media with regards to the company’s name, brand, key employees, as well as relevant topics and industries. They have explicit strategies or guidelines that clearly state the course of action to be taken when negative publicity in social media occurs. They also prepare for it by practising, and by making statements or answers beforehand if they believe a negative topic is about to become relevant. When a situation occurs they make several plans of action for different scenarios of events, but adapt their behaviour as needed as things unfold. When considering whether to respond to negative publicity or not companies that have a proactive approach carefully weigh the pros and cons of responding and not responding before taking any course of action. Plans of action to be taken if a situation escalates are often made first, and then the company waits and sees how the situation progresses before going in and joining the conversation. When responding, the source and their possible range of influence, as well as the topic and placement of the negativity, are taken into consideration. The tone of voice used is considered and modified in accordance to the target audience. Companies with a proactive approach to dealing with negative publicity in social media try to be open and honest in their communications, but are also creative in searching for ways to transform the situ-
ation into a positive one that is an opportunity for the company to for instance better their image or foster their relationship with customers or other stakeholders.

Table 3  The characteristics of two approaches for dealing with negative publicity in social media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reactive Approach</th>
<th>Proactive Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having monitoring focused on company name and brand</td>
<td>Having close, constant monitoring of name, brand, relevant topics and industries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having general guidelines</td>
<td>Having explicit strategies or guidelines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering cases as they come along</td>
<td>Doing extensive preparation beforehand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Considering mainly what the topic is when responding</td>
<td>Considering source, place, range of influence and topic when responding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using a professional tone of voice</td>
<td>Considering the recipient in tone of voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responding to clear questions</td>
<td>Weighing the pros and cons of responding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to stop the situation from spreading by being honest</td>
<td>Trying to turn the situation around to an opportunity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.2 Implications and inferences

The most important implications and inferences that have been reached in this thesis will now be presented. First of all, the importance of constant real-time monitoring is extremely significant for companies, since it allows them to keep track of and engage in negative discussions concerning the company before things have a chance to escalate, but also because it gives important insight into how well the company's core messages are received, as well as how people feel about and perceive the company and its communication. Although companies' presence on social media is important, they should choose the platforms carefully so that they suit the needs of the company and make it possible for the company to reach the desired target audiences.
Next the implications corresponding with the research questions posed in this thesis will be presented. The first research question in this thesis is **how companies can respond to negative publicity in social media and what the different possibilities for responding are.** While there are several different ways of handling negative publicity, the ones that the companies that were studied stated to have used were inactivity, responding and deleting posts. Deleting posts should be done only in extreme cases when the post is offensive in some way that breaks the rules of behaviour that companies (should) have for their social media pages. Responding by giving a reply and being inactive on the other hand are the two most common responses, and which option is the better one can only be decided after a thorough assessment of the situation.

The second research question was **what companies can do to prevent and control negative publicity in social media.** In essence, negative publicity in social media cannot be controlled, since people have a right to express their opinions and companies should not interfere with that. However, companies can lessen negative publicity in social media for instance by first being available (meaning present on social media) so that they have an opportunity to respond and interact with users, as well as be open, honest and consistent in talking about both positive and negative matters. In addition companies should also be believable, meaning that they should keep their promises and act according to their ethical and moral principals.

There are several different actions to be taken by companies before, during and after the occurrence of negative publicity in social media, which are illustrated in figure 3. These contain the answer to the third research question asked in this thesis, which is **what should companies take into consideration when preparing for and responding to negative publicity in social media.**

First of all, before negative publicity occurs, companies should invest in their brand image in order to make people less susceptible to negative publicity. They should also construct answers beforehand to negative topics that they believe might become relevant in the near future. These can then be slightly adjusted and used to respond with quickly yet thoughtfully. Guidelines or strategies for responding to negative incidents in social media should be established so that when it occurs everyone knows what they are supposed to do. Companies should then practice using them, for instance by planning and carrying out what they would actually do in different scenarios. The last part, and one of the most important parts, is to constantly monitor social media in order to be
able to detect negative publicity as soon as it happens, and have a chance to respond as quickly as possible.

The first thing to do when negative publicity has occurred in social media is to react quickly and investigate the source of the negativity (who), on what forum and how large the possible reach is (where), what the topic is (what), and if possible try to determine the reason for it (why). After getting an understanding regarding the scope and dynamics of the situation, the company has to consider whether inactivity or giving a response to it is the better course of action. It is important to consider that if giving a response the company has to be willing to also participate in further discussion about the matter, while not responding means that the company does not have the opportunity to present their point of view on the matter.

If the company chooses to respond they should carefully take into consideration who they are responding to, as well as who will do the responding on behalf of the company. In addition, they have to consider when (at what point) they will respond, where (using which channels) they will respond, and also what exactly they will include in the response. The tone of voice that is used should also be considered, meaning that if they are responding to a younger individual they might consider using the employee’s first name and perhaps even emoticons in order to seem more relatable and approachable, while a more professional approach is better when responding to other companies and societal influencers. It is important for companies to keep monitoring the situation while the matter progresses, since a situation that initially seemed like it did not require any actions to be taken can quickly evolve into something much more serious that requires immediate attention. No matter what the situation, companies should regardless try to use creative ways of turning the situation into an opportunity by acknowledging the problem and finding imaginative ways of addressing it and turning it to the company’s advantage.

After the negative situation has passed companies still need to monitor social media and keep watching to see if the issue resurfaces. This is possible due to the fact that posts online are visible for a long time, and discussions that have died down can become reignited if for instance the topic becomes relevant again. Nevertheless, companies should start focusing on the next step relatively quickly and trying to bring forth positive matters again. As before the negative publicity occurred, companies should continue to invest in making the brand image and relations to customers stronger than ever before.
Figure 3  Actions to be taken before, during and after to successfully deal with negative publicity in social media

Companies should not be frightened by the prospect of negative publicity in social media. Instead they should see this as an opportunity to get constructive feedback, to communicate directly with a large audience including a number of stakeholders, as well as a chance to be creative and further strengthen relations with all parties. Whether a company is present on social media or not, people are still going to talk about it if they want to. But at least if the company is present they have an opportunity to present their point of view and turn things around. In the end, a good response can make all the difference in the world. One thing to remember though is that dealing with negative publicity in social media is an on-going process, where companies should continually try to learn from their previous experiences in order to strengthen their abilities to handle negative publicity in social media in the future. They should, simply put, evaluate the effects of their previous actions and learn from them in order to be able to find more innovative and successful ways of dealing with negative publicity in social media.
7.3 Reliability of the study

The term reliability (especially in quantitative research) refers to the extent of which a research instrument (for instance a questionnaire, that is used more than one time) in a study will give the same answer or results if carried out again at a different time. However, in qualitative research the same results being achieved twice is unlikely due in part to the fact that a interviewer cannot be fully objective, as well as because change (in for instance behaviour, feelings etc.) and new information is exactly what qualitative studies are trying to uncover. (Daymon & Holloway 2002:89-90; Trost 2010:131-132)

Consequently, reliability in qualitative research is instead measured by the detailed description of the data, decisions and methods used in the study. This provides a way for other researchers to use the same process and try to replicate the study. It also assists in clarifying for readers the decisions made during the process, allows a means of ascertaining and specifying the study’s quality, as well as provides a way to evaluate the qualitative study as a whole. (Daymon & Holloway 2002:90)

Keeping in mind the measurement of reliability for a qualitative study, the study conducted in this thesis can be seen to be quite good, due to the fact that the methodology chapter contains a meticulous description of how the study was conducted, and therefore it could, in theory, be replicated. The methodology also gives the reader an understanding of how and why the study was conducted in the way that it was conducted. However, due to the nature of the subject studied (how negative publicity social media city is handled by companies) constantly changing and evolving as people’s behaviour on social media does, there is no guarantee that the same results would be reached at a later time if the study were replicated. Nevertheless, since all interviews were conducted in a similar fashion, and the interviewer tried to maintain as much objectivity as possible during the process as well as conduct the analysis in a methodical way, it can be concluded that the quality and reliability of the study are relatively high.

7.4 Validity of the study

In quantitative research, validity refers to if the techniques, approaches and methods used are appropriate and manage to measure what the research is meant to discover (Daymon & Holloway 2002:90; Trost 2010:133). In qualitative research validity refers to how credible the descriptions, explanations and conclusions are in a study. The term validity is more relevant in qualitative research than the term reliability is. There are
three different aspects of validity that are relevant for qualitative research, and they are relevance, internal validity and generalizability. (Daymon & Holloway 2002:90)

*Relevance* is an aspect of validity that regards whether a study is appropriate and helpful in solving problems encountered by people active in the field (Daymon & Holloway 2002:92). The study in this thesis can be seen to have a high degree of relevance, since dealing with negative publicity in social media is becoming an increasingly more current problem for many companies, and they often do not know how much resources they should invest in social media and battling the negativity that may occur there. Accordingly, this thesis presents, on the basis of the findings in the empirical study, a framework for how negative publicity can be managed by describing actions that can be taken before, during and after the occurrence of negative publicity in social media. Companies should invest resources to the degree that they manage to do at least some of the actions recommended in the implications part of this chapter.

*Internal validity* in qualitative research is “the extent to which the findings of a study are ‘true’, and whether they accurately reflect the aim of the research and the social reality of those participating in it” (Daymon & Holloway 2002:90). The internal validity of the study conducted in this thesis can be considered to be high, due to the fact that the results gathered in the study reflect the aim and purpose of the thesis accurately and also the reality of the companies that deal with the issues in the field.

*Generalizability*, which is also called external validity, refers to whether it is applicable to apply the results and implications of a study also on other comparable situations and populations. However, this can be problematic in qualitative research, such as the one conducted in this thesis, when purposeful sampling is used to find atypical and interesting cases. (Daymon & Holloway 2002:90-92) The generalizability of the study in this thesis is further compromised by the fact that only four different case companies were explored in more detail, thus making it more difficult to make a generalization to fit most companies. As a result, in order to strengthen the external validity of the study in this thesis, ‘theory-based generalization’ was implemented in the implications and inferences section of this chapter (Daymon & Holloway 2002:91-92). According to Daymon and Holloway (2002:91-92), that means that the results of the empirical study were related to the information in the theoretical framework in order to reach the theoretical model and recommendations that were stated in the implications.
8 CONCLUSION

This thesis has presented and compared different ways of dealing with negative publicity in social media. It can be stated that knowing if and how to respond to negative publicity in social media is not easy, and often requires careful consideration. This statement is supported by the results of the study where it was stated that several companies said that knowing if and how to respond are perhaps the most difficult questions regarding the matter. The purpose of this thesis was to analyse how companies handle negative publicity in social media. It was also stated that the thesis would try and gain an understanding regarding if and how companies can prevent the occurrence of and diminish the effects of negative publicity in social media.

The method used in this thesis was a qualitative research method conducted using a deductive research approach. The study was conducted by first making inquiries in order to find interesting and relevant case companies, followed by four in-depth interviews with four different companies. The material that was used for the study was gathered in February and March of 2015 by telephone, e-mail or in person.

Based on an analysis of the findings of the study presented in this thesis, it can be concluded that negative publicity can be dealt with by using either a reactive or proactive approach. The reactive approach considers cases as they come along, and is mainly focused on minimizing the occurrence of and damage done by negative publicity in social media by being open and honest in one’s actions and communication. The proactive approach on the other hand has clear guidelines or strategies for dealing with the issue, and is more focused on turning negative incidents into opportunities by being honest, approachable and creative when using social media. The research questions posed in this thesis were answered by analysing the empirical findings as well as the theoretical framework presented in this thesis, and therefore the aim of the thesis can also be said to have been fulfilled.

In future research it could be studied how much resources companies of different sizes and types should put on social media and dealing with negative publicity in social media, since this is something that many companies, as evidenced by the study, struggle with. Another possible research area could be how consumers perceive the different responses that companies give to different cases of negative publicity.
It can be stated that when considering what type of approach to take for dealing with negative publicity in social media, companies should assess their own needs and resources, and consequently choose the approach better suited for them. In conclusion it can also be stated that companies should try to be as open, honest, available and believable in their communications in social media, and in general, as possible in order to possibly prevent negative publicity in social media from occurring in the first place.
**SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING**

Hanteringen av negativ publicitet i sociala medier

**Inledning**


Motivering av studien

Negativ feedback är en naturlig del av affärsverksamhet, men feedbacken har aldrig tidigare varit så offentlig som den är på sociala medier. Därmed är det viktigt för företag att skydda sina rykten utan att verka för kraftfulla, samt även att veta hur man skall reagera på attacker på nätet som utan ansträngning kan spridas globalt. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012) Den mest relevanta frågan som studeras i detta arbete är därmed hur företag kan hantera negativ publicitet som inträffar på sociala medier. Svaret på denna fråga är viktigt eftersom det kan hjälpa till att belysa hur företag kan hantera negativ publicitet i sociala medier på ett fördelaktigt sätt, samt vad de möjliga konsekvenserna är om negativ publicitet hanteras misslyckat.

Innan företag går med på sociala medier är det viktigt att de har en förståelse om vad syftena är med de olika sociala medierna, hur de kan användas samt vem de kan nå på de olika sidorna (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:137). Det är viktigt att ha en förståelse för dessa faktorer eftersom slarvig eller bristfällig kommunikation på sociala medier kan leda till negativ publicitet i sociala medier. Företag behöver veta hur de skall svara på negativ publicitet eftersom de genom att svara på ett dåligt sätt (till exempel defensivt) kan dra ytterligare uppmärksamhet till det negativa inlägget, vilket i sin tur kan leda till att skribenten och andra läsare på nätet blir uppretade (Fitzgerald 2011). Hur företag skall svara på negativ publicitet är således en viktig aspekt att ta i beaktande eftersom ett bra svar är ett kritiskt steg i hanteringen av negativ publicitet på sociala medier.

Negativ information om företag kan härstamma från flera olika källor och variera i allvarlighetsgrad (Evans Jennings, Blount & Weatherly 2014). Dessa aspekter (källa och allvarlighet) är bara några av de saker som företag bör fästa uppmärksamhet vid när de funderar på ifall och hur de skall svara på negativ publicitet på nätet. I vissa fall är det kanske inte möjligt (tidsmässigt eller ekonomiskt) att svara på all negativitet, och då måste företagen bestämma vilken negativ publicitet som är viktig att svara på och vilken som kan bortses från. Så problemet som företag har är inte bara att urskilja vilka inlägget som ska reageras på och vilka bortses från, utan även hur negativa inlägg skall svaras på (vem, var, när och vad). På grund av att forskning har visat att inget svar på negativ publicitet ofta leder till högre negativa attityder bland konsumenter, kan det konstateras att problemen i detta arbete är relevant eftersom att inte veta hur och vilken negativ publicitet på nätet som det lönar sig att reagera på kan ha negativa konsekvenser för organisationer (Rhee & Yang 2014). Emellertid fann Rhee och Yang (2014)
också i deras studie att vissa svar kan ha en större negativ inverkan på konsumenters reaktioner än att inte svara överhuvudtaget. Därmed behöver företag veta vilken negativ publicitet som det är viktigast att svara på och hur den ska formuleras för att förhindra förekomsten och ökningen av negativa attityder bland människor.

**Syfte**

Syftet med detta arbete är att analysera hur företag hanterar negativ publicitet i sociala medier. Detta kommer att uppnås genom att studera hur företag svarar på negativ publicitet i sociala medier, samt vilka de möjliga åtgärderna att ta är. För att detta skall vara möjligt är det också viktigt att få en djupare förståelse om vilka de olika typerna av och källorna till negativ publicitet i sociala medier, samt om och hur företag kan förebygga och motverka negativ publicitet. Detta arbete utforskar inte bara vilka de möjliga åtgärderna att ta mot negativ information på sociala medier är, utan ämnar också belysa hur och vilken negativ publicitet som bör svaras på och vilken som kan bortses.

Baserat på syftet kan arbetets viktigaste forskningsfrågor fastställas, och de är:

- Vad borde företag ta i beaktande när de svarar på och förbereder sig för negativ publicitet i sociala medier?
- Hur kan företag svara på negativ publicitet i sociala medier och vilka är de möjliga åtgärderna som kan vidtas?
- Vad kan företag göra för att förhindra och kontrollera uppkomsten av negativ publicitet i sociala medier?

Presentation av tidigare forskning

Varaktigheten och allvarligheten av negativ publicitet angående ett företag är ofta starkt beroende på företagets respons till det (Henthorne & Henthorne 1994; Rhee & Yang 2014). Därmed är det viktigt att förstå hur sociala medier fungerar och hur företag kan använda kommunikationskanalen för att svara, förebygga och minska på uppkomsten av negativ publicitet i sociala medier.

Företag kan använda sociala medier inte bara för att kommunicera med kunder och andra intressenter, utan även för att övervaka konversationer och reaktioner om företaget, dess varumärken samt produkter och tjänster (Close 2012:134-135; Gordon 2011:338-339; VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:56-57). Trots att alla åsikter troligtvis inte är positiva, är det viktigt att lägga märke till att sociala medier erbjuder företag ett yrkerligt tillfälle att direkt delta i konversationer med källan av negativiteten ifall företag så önskar. Ifall företag vill svara på den endera positiva eller negativa feedbacken som uppstår på nätet är det viktigt för dem att konstant bevaka (med hjälp av bevakningsverktyg) vad som sägs på nätet så att de kan reagera snabbt medan diskussionen fortfarande är aktuell.

När företag är aktiva på sociala medier är det viktigt för dem att minnas vad människor förväntar sig där, vilket är att kommunicera med andra människor och inte företag. Därmed borde företag sträva att ta fram sina representanter (alltså sina anställda) och använda en mindre formell ton i sin kommunikation på sociala medier så att kunderna (och andra intressenter) vet vem de pratar med och kan möjligtvis forma en mera personlig förbindelse. (VanRysdam & Goldfarb 2010:143-144) Detta gäller också när man svarar på negativ publicitet i sociala medier (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom 2015).


Mediasamhällen är plattformar där användare kan dela sig av mediaminhåll, såsom video och bilder (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Wisniewski 2013). Exempel på populära mediasamhällen är Youtube och Flickr (Wisniewski 2013). Denna typ av social media kan användas för exempelvis kommunikation med intressenter och andra marknadsföringsåtgärder (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Wisniewski 2013). Samarbetsprojekt kommer i olika former, men det mest världiga samarbetsprojektet är Wikipedia (Wisniewski 2013). Samarbetsprojekt ger Internet-användare gratis information (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010; Wisniewski 2013), men företag bör notera att inte all information som finns på samarbetsprojekt är korrekt fastän fler tror att den är det (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010).


Fastän negativ publicitet i sociala medier är något att försöka undvika, är svaret inte för företag att avvika från att gå med i eller bevaka sociala medier, eftersom detta endast leder till att man låter andra personer kontrollera vad som sägs om företaget eller varumärket på nätet (Fitzgerald 2011). Eftersom negativ feedback är något som nästan alla företag räknar ut för i något skede, bör företag förbereda sig för den negativa publiciteten genom att ha färdiga strategier så att när de räknar ut för det, kan de reagera snabbt och effektivt (Nisula 2015). Det lønar sig inte att svara på alla klagomål eller uttalanden, vilket är orsaken till att företag borde utvärdera varje fall skilt (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012).

Det första som organisationer bör göra när det gäller hanteringen av negativ publicitet i sociala medier är att regelbundet bevaka vad som sägs på sociala medier. När negativ publicitet angående företaget uppkommer bör de fundera ut det bästa sättet att hantera situationen. I alla situationer när företaget väljer att svara bör de erkänna vikten av all feedback och försöka lösa situationen genom att hitta en lösning på problemet som gynnar båda parterna. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)


Förutom att svara direkt på negativ publicitet finns det också vissa andra åtgärder som företag kan vidta. Enligt Smith, Sutin och Kaneff (2012) finns det fyra andra konkreta alternativ istället för att ge ett direkt svar. Dessa alternativ är: rättstliga åtgärder, nedtagningsproceduren (erbjudna av sociala plattformar), att vara inaktiv, samt att radera
meddelanden. Innan företaget gör ett val bör flera saker, såsom PR, praktiska saker samt de tre tidigare nämnda faktorerna, noggrant övervägas. (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012)

Inaktivitet är den bästa lösningen i vissa fall, eftersom nytt material uppkommer så fort (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012). Dock säger Henard (2002) att företag borde undvika att vara inaktiva eftersom forskning visar att kunders åsikter om ett varumärke eller företag kan signifikant sjunka på grund av inaktivitet.

Företag bör ha klara regler för sina och sina varumärkens sidor på sociala medier över vilken typ av innehåll som är kränkande eller nedsättande och därmed inte tillåts. Innehåll som bryter mot reglerna bör sedan raderas. (Acevedo & Karraker 2011; Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012) Dock bör inte all kritik raderas eftersom det kan påverka personers villighet att engagera sig i diskussioner på dessa sidor (Smith, Sutin & Kaneff 2012).

Om situationen hanteras på rätt sätt kan företag förvandla en negativ situation till en positiv sådan, samt även leda till meningsfulla utbyten med kunder eller andra intressenter (Kho 2008). Företag bör minnas att det är naturligt att göra misstag och att det inte är något att skämmas för. Istället bör de se på detta som en möjlighet att erkänna och korrigera misstaget. (Qualman 2012:241)


Val av metod och material och genomförandet av undersökningen


De kvalitativa metoderna som användes för att samla in data var förfrågningar och djupgående intervjuer. Målmedveten provtagning användes för att välja ut deltagarna i studien. Detta innebär att förfrågningar gjordes för att säkerställa att de fall som valdes att studeras mera noggrant genom intervjuer skulle vara intressanta och relevanta med tanke på ämnet. Därmed valdes också företag till förfrågningarna för att de ansågs vara potentiellt intressanta fallföretag. Intervjuguiden konstruerades genom att noggrant se igenom syftet och den teoretiska referensramen för att fastställa vilka områden och frågor som skulle inkluderas. Intervjuguiden hittas i sin helhet på engelska i bilaga 1.

Materialet för undersökningen samlades in i februari och mars 2015. Först kontaktades 18 olika företag (endera via telefon eller e-post) som ansågs vara potentiella case företag. Dessa företag frågades bland annat om de hade erfarenhet av att hantera negativ publicitet i sociala medier, hur de såg på saken samt om de ansåg ämnet vara aktuellt för dem i nuläget. Ifall de uppgett att de hade erfarenhet med det till den grad att de ansågs vara lämpliga kandidater för deltagande i undersökningen, frågades de ifall de ville delta med det löftet att deras namn eller företagens namn skulle förblir konfidentiella. Av de tolv företag som nåddes ansågs hälften (6 stycken) vara lämpliga kandidater för undersökningen. Dock hade endast fyra företag möjlighet att delta och dessa intervjuades under mars månad (1 via telefon, 3 ansikte mot ansikte). Alla dessa fyra företag är verksamma internationellt och kan anses vara stora företag eftersom de alla har över 1000 anställda. De sex andra företagen som inte ansågs vara lämpliga case företag för undersökningen, bidrog dock till undersökningen genom att ge en bredare förståelse för hur företag ser på negativ publicitet i sociala medier samt hur stort problem det är för dem i dagens läge.
Resultatredovisning

De fyra företagen som intervjuades var alla aktiva på olika sociala medier, men alla var med på både Facebook och Twitter. De olika kanalerna har olika mål och målgrupper, och den typ av kommunikation som utförs på de olika kanalerna planeras med detta i åtanke. Medan Facebook används för mera lätt sam kommunikation, används Twitter mera för att kommunicera med viktiga intressenter såsom media och samhälleliga påverkare. Negativ publicitet i sociala medier förekommer främst på Facebook och Twitter, medan det nästan aldrig händer på kanaler såsom LinkedIn och Instagram.

Betydelsen av att bevaka vad som sägs på sociala medier och på nätet överlag kan inte överskattas. Vare sig ett företag är närvarande på sociala medier eller inte, ger bevakning företag värdefull information angående vad kunder och andra intressenter tycker om företaget, ifall företaget nämns i relevanta ämnesdiskussioner, hur bra företaget har lyckats kommunicera sina viktigaste meddelanden, hur företaget uppfattas, samt vad som sägs om konkurrenter och viktiga affärsområden. Bland de företag som intervjuades var negativ publicitet angående företagets värden helt klart den mest vanliga typen av negativ publicitet som uppkom i sociala medier.


Negativ publicitet är något som alla företagen är överens om att kan inte kontrolleras eftersom det här är ett fritt samhälle och människor har en rätt att uttrycka sin åsikt. Fastän negativ publicitet i sociala medier inte ansågs vara något som man direkt kan förhindra, framfördes det att det indirekt kan förhindras åtminstone till viss del genom att vara öppen, tillgänglig och ärlig angående såväl negativa som positiva aspekter. Andra saker som tros kunna hjälpa företag förhindra negativitet i sociala medier är att bete sig enligt företagets värderingar och etiska principer, samt att inte förvärvara inflammerade situationer eller frambringa negativa diskussioner eller ämnen.

Det konstaterades också att företag kan minska effekten av negativ publicitet i sociala medier åtminstone till viss del genom att ha bra relationer och kommunikation med
sina anställda, media, kunder såväl som andra intressenter. Andra faktorer som ansågs hjälpa företag att minska effekten av negativitet är att vara aktiv på sociala medier och ta fram positiva saker, att ta i beaktande tonfall när man kommunicerar (exempelvis genom att använda anställdas förnamn och symboler när man kommunicerar med studeranden), att svara så snabbt som möjligt, samt även att uppföra på ett bra vis överlag.


Avslutning

Detta arbete har presenterat och jämfört olika sätt att reagera på negativ publicitet i sociala medier. Det kan konstateras att det inte är enkelt att veta om och hur man skall svara på negativ publicitet i sociala medier, samt att det ofta kräver ordentlig eftertanke. Detta uttalande stöds av undersökningens resultat där det kom fram att flera företag anser att den kanske svåraste frågan angående ämnet är att veta ifall man skall svara och hur man skall svara på negativ publicitet i sociala medier. Syftet med detta arbete var att analysera hur företag hanterar negativ publicitet i sociala medier. Det upplades också att man skulle försöka få en förståelse för om och hur företag kan förhindra uppkomsten av samt minska effekterna av negativ publicitet i sociala medier.


Baserat på resultaten och analysen som presenterades i arbetet kan det dras slutsatsen att negativ publicitet kan hanteras endera med ett reaktivt eller proaktivt tillvägagångssätt. Det reaktiva sättet utvärderar fall allt eftersom de uppstår, och är huvudsakligen fokuserat på att minimera uppkomsten av och skadan gjord av negativ publicitet i sociala medier genom att vara ärlig och öppen i sitt agerande och i sin kommunikation. Det proaktiva sättet har klara riktlinjer för hanteringen av frågan, och är mera fokuserat på att förvandla de negativa företeelserna till möjligheter genom att vara ärlig, tillgänglig och kreativ i användningen av sociala medier. De tre forskningsfrågorna som ställdes i arbetet svarades genom att analysera resultaten från den empiriska undersökningen samt den teoretiska referensramen som presenterades i arbetet, och således kan det även konstateras att syftet har uppfyllts.

I framtida forskning kan det studeras hur mycket resurser olika slags företag i olika storlekar borde sätta på sociala medier och på hanteringen av negativ publicitet i sociala medier, eftersom detta är något som många företag, såsom flera i arbetets undersökning, är osäkra på. Ett annat möjligt forskningsämne är vad konsumenter anser om olika svar som företag ger på olika fall av negativ publicitet.
Det kan konstateras att när företag funderar på vilket tillvägagångssätt de borde använda i hanteringen av negativ publicitet i sociala medier, borde de uppskatta sina egna behov och resurser, och välja det sättet som passar dem bäst i enlighet med det. Avslutningsvis kan det också konstateras att företag borde försöka vara så öppna, ärliga och trovärdiga i sin kommunikation som möjligt för att förhindra negativ publicitet i sociala medier från att uppstå.
REFERENCES

Books


**Theses**


**Articles**


Websites


APPENDIX 1

Interview Guide

- How many employees do you have?
- Which industry are you active in?
- What social media sites are you active on?
  - Since when have you been active on the social media platforms and why did you join these ones in particular?
- What types of messages or activities do you have on social media and how often?
- With who do you communicate through the different social media channels?
- How do you monitor what is said about you, your products and services, or your industry on social media?
- How often and where have you encountered negative publicity in social media?
- What types of negative publicity have you encountered in social media?
  - Can you tell me more about specific cases?
  - How did you react in the different cases?
- What have been the reasons for the negative publicity in social media?
- Which types of sources have been behind the negative publicity in social media?
- How has negative publicity in social media affected you?
- How do you believe negative publicity in social media will affect you in the future?
- Do you have a plan or strategy for handling with negative publicity in social media?
  - Can you tell me about it and the different parts in it?
  - How did you come up with this plan?
• (In case the answer is no) Why do you not have a plan or strategy, and do you have plans to develop one?

❖ What determines how you react to negative publicity in social media?

❖ What are the different factors that you take into consideration when responding to negative publicity in social media?

❖ What are the different possible actions that you might take in reaction to negative publicity on social media?

❖ Do you believe the occurrence of negative publicity in social media can be prevented?

  ✓ (If answer is yes) In what ways do you try to prevent the occurrence of negative publicity on social media?

❖ Do you believe that the effects of negative publicity in social media can be diminished?

  ✓ (If the answer is yes) In what ways do you try to diminish the effects of negative publicity on social media?

❖ Do you believe negative publicity in social media can be controlled, and if so then in what way?