A COLD, HARD LOOK: FOCUS GROUP ANALYSIS OF THE ALS ICE BUCKET CHALLENGE

By

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ABSTRACT

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was a social media craze that took over social media in the summer of 2014. It was vastly successful movement, raising over $100 million for ALS organizations and spreading awareness about Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, a progressive neurodegenerative disease of the brain and spinal cord. The reasons for the campaign’s success are very intriguing, and might offer practical knowledge for communication strategists looking to use social networking sites to spread messages and gather support.

Through focus group sessions conducted at UNC-Chapel Hill, this study attempted to understand the movement in relation to college students. The study sought to discover college student’s general opinions towards the campaign, to learn what reasons motivated participation (or non-participation) in the challenge, and ideas about what factors contributed to the campaign’s virality. Results indicated that the social nature of the campaign gave way for not only its success, but also its primary critiques. Future research might consider how social activism online is changing the function of social networking sites and could have impacts on the types of users that remain online.

To Vivian Connell,

for being a constant inspiration and friend to your students. Wishing you strength and encouragement in your fight against ALS.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all my friends who supported my decision to take on the challenge of writing an honors thesis and gave me support along the way. It may not be the Ice Bucket Challenge, but it was almost as hard! I’d also like to extend a huge thanks to Dr. Johnston for her patience, constant support of not just my project, but all her honors students’ projects. I’d also like to give thanks to Dr. Hester for chairing my committee and being a friendly and supportive mentor throughout the whole year. Thanks also to Dr. Saffer for being on my committee and giving me an inspiring conversation about public relations to help spark my project. Finally, thank you to Dub, for all your cuddles and love.

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CHAPTER 1

**Introduction and Literature Review**

**Introduction**

“Am I the only one who thinks it's weird to show people you'd rather have ice-cold water dumped on you than donate to charity?”(Ross, 2014). This tweet appeared on my Twitter timeline on August 12, two weeks prior to the peak of success of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, a social media phenomenon in which individuals make a video of themselves dumping ice over their heads and nominate others to do the same by tagging them in the original post. The catch is this: if you don’t create your own video within 24 of being nominated for the challenge you have to donate $100 to ALS research. Slight variations of the spectacle arose over the course of the month in which millions of social media users participated in the craze (donate $10 and make a video, or donate $100 and don’t make a video at all, was one such variation), but the overall gist was the same: dump ice, or dish out the cash.

Mr. Ross was not, in fact, the only one who thought it was weird to dump ice over one’s head instead of donating to charity, and rebuke of those who did partake in the movement popped up all over social media and in news headlines. Despite the haters, the hundreds of thousands of videos continued to be produced for the challenge. With over $100.9 million in contributions given to the ALS Association (and thousands more dollars donated to other ALS organizations) by August 29, however “weird” the act of the challenge may have been, people were still taking part in the challenge by the thousands, millions of people were learning about the disease, and hundreds of millions of dollars were being contributed to ALS organizations.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as ALS or Gehrig’s disease, is a disease of the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord that controls voluntary muscle movement. Scientists have known about ALS for over 70 years, but there is no cure for the disease. There are an estimated 30,000 people in the United States currently suffering from the condition. The Ice Bucket Challenge became connected with ALS when a former Boston College baseball player, Peter Frates, participated in a video challenge to dump ice over his head. While variations of the ice bucket challenge existed prior to July and August of 2014 in relation to other causes and movements, when Peter Frates took part in the craze and challenged his friends to “strikeout ALS,” the movement went viral.

**Literature Review**

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge presents a unique opportunity for exploration of the cross-section of social media and public relations. While research has already defined in many instances the role of social media for marketers and public relations practitioners, social media platforms are constantly evolving and thus creating new opportunities for individuals to engage with brands and causes. Themes in word-of-mouth marketing research reveal the value of getting individuals to engage with each other online and the factors that influence these relationships (Shu-Chuan and Yoojung, 2011). Research relating electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) strategies to public relations has proposed theoretical guidelines for creating engaged online communities (du Pleiss, 2010). In addition, studies have looked at the effects of social media and electronic communication on charitable giving for public relations campaigns (Weberling, 2012), as well as celebrities’ impact on public relations through their charitable giving decisions (Hwang, 2010). Studies on individuals as content creators (playing the roles of public relations practitioners) were among the least succinct research, yet exploring individual content creators is most relevant to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. For this reason, there is the opportunity to expand upon these research topics and explore new themes of organically initiated online campaigns.

*Defining the Role of Social Media for Public Relations and Marketing Campaigns*

The ultimate purpose of strategic communication has always been to communicate *x* message to *y* person. A variety of tactics have been used over the years to fulfill this purpose. Traditionally, the easiest way to disseminate messages to the desired persons has been through mass media. With the introduction of platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, though, social media has changed the game for strategic communicators. Social media is “all about the people” (Marken, 2007). By creating social media properties, brands and corporations are able to create relationships and engage in dialogue with their targets. The value in this relationship has led to a boom in social media as a segment of public relations, marketing and even advertising. Even in the earliest stages, message dissemination among social networking sites has been an essential tool for marketers, PR practitioners and advertisers alike. Social networking sites opened a new portal for corporations and causes to listen to stakeholders, respond to them and improve their experiences. With these channels came a need to measure the intangible and tangible value of social media. Research has been conducted to define metrics for customer influence value (CIV) and customer influence effect (CIE) (Kumar, Bhaskaran, Mirchandani & Shah, 2013). Other research has proposed theoretical guidelines for using social media tools to construct branded communities that will help build brand equity and product determination in the long run (du Pleiss, 2010). The importance of branded communities is not to be overlooked in PR strategy, even in creating the communities around beyond just products, but also around causes and ideas.

In a study to articulate the overall meaning of what social media is, Cohen reframed our understanding of social media calling it a “social energy” that can be used to find commonality among differences (2012). In trying to understand these commonality patterns from the lens of public relations, this “social energy” can be encoded as a tool in amplifying the need for social change. In terms of the ALS Ice Bucket challenge, we might frame our understanding of the campaign’s discourse as a “social energy,” all the while keeping in mind the need to also examine the campaign’s discourse through a more universal understanding and definition of social media.

*Online Attitudes and Public Relations Strategy*

After first understanding social media as a useful tool, it is necessary to further examine the specific attitudes and behaviors that are exhibited in regards to social media. Social media can be a useful tool in disseminating news and information. The public has generated specific attitudes about the press and mass media and its role as an agenda setter, but with the power of news dissemination changing hands to social media users in this emerging era of “citizen journalism,” receivers of this data have the opportunity to form opinions through a different perspective on the information being disseminated as well as the disseminators of that information. One case study observed the effects of types of attribution messages in the aftermath of a Haitian earthquake, and how the types of messages affect action online (Jeong, 2010). This study saw that controllable attribution messages and uncontrollable attribution messages changed the public’s willingness to support victims of the earthquake (a controllable attribution message being that Haitians had poorly constructed buildings despite earthquake warnings, an uncontrollable attribution message being that an earthquake was larger and more destructive than usual). The takeaway from the research showed that when designing fundraising messages, practitioners should provide information on uncontrollable actions. The study showed that more funds raised were directly linked to uncontrollable attribution messages. However, be it controllable or uncontrollable attribution messages were used, emotional response generally remained the same, and people still had pity for victims and would pass on a message or video, thought they may not donate to relief efforts. In terms of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, having ALS in an uncontrollable attribution. It’s worth exploring the connection between ALS and attribution messages, and how it may have led to the success of the movement.

Nekmat (2012) explored the simultaneous impact of message reception and expression on social media for products and campaigns, finding that individuals who have both received a message and crafted their personal thoughts learned the most from a message and had the greatest attitudinal changes, if even just creating short-term action. A new insight from that study challenged existing marketing research, finding that the nature of the audience receiving a message doesn’t much change deliverable outcomes (attitudes), thus pre-existing attitudes of a message expresser towards a topic or subject of a campaign matter more. Though a message expresser may disseminate a more emotional message to a homophilous audience (i.e. on Facebook, whereas an example of non-homophilous environment would be a more professional platform like LinkedIn), Nekmat’s research revealed that ultimately a person’s pre-existing ideas about a campaign have more of an effect on actionable attitude than the type of audience.

Other research has examined the types of personalities that are the most worthwhile for PR practitioners and marketers to target in the initiation stages of a campaign (Dominic Yeo, 2012). The study showed that relational-oriented customers make the best target as opposed to “early adopters” of new products or information.

Research done on consumer attitudes towards interactive digital advertising provides a good framework for understanding the types of attitudes that are commonly developed around online marketing content (Ming-Sung Cheng et al., 2009). The study observed three key attitudes that have surfaced: an ad is either informative, entertaining or irritating. While interactive digital advertising is a new field, are these attitudes also applicable to campaigns and causes (not just products and corporations)? The research is informative in helping to understand online internet-based attitudes, but limited in that it only looked at interactive digital ads and only explored these attitudes in the context of Taiwanese college students.

*Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) Behaviors*

Word of mouth marketing encompasses any behavior in which one person shares their opinion about a product or service to another person. While the motives behind word of mouth behaviors have yet to be fully understood, research has shown that word of mouth is substantially more effective in influencing consumer decisions than traditional paid advertising (Berger 2014). While the value of traditional advertising techniques are not to be ignored, the motives of a customer are rooted in the conversations we have with others. Channels of communication are only increasing as technology continues to advance and social networking sites create clever new ways to connect people. Our conversations online about products, services and ideas, or our electronic word of mouth (eWOM) behaviors, create a new field of study and a new tool for marketers and strategic communicators to tap into.

The research on eWOM behaviors is both informative and cumbersome. The most prominent areas of research have focused on the kinds of people that have heavy influence online as well as the kinds of topics that are heavily conversed about online. Research has explained the principle that ideas living online are asynchronous, or not occurring at the same time (Berger & Iyengar, 2013). As opposed to face-to-face interactions in which a topic begins and ends, online conversations can take place over many hours or days before they are no longer referenced, but can be brought back to life or relevance if someone is to make a simple Google search about the idea or re-comment in a forum. Colliander and Wien (2013) determined in their study six different defensive styles that individuals employ online in defending a product or brand: advocating, justifying, trivializing, stalling, vouching and doubting. The enhanced space and time online for such conversations gives way to the thoroughness with which people can discuss their ideas. Though this study only focused on defense styles of brands and products, the enhanced space and time is also available for causes and campaigns enacted by public relations communicators. Overall, companies have the capacity to be direct observers of these eWOM conversations, and have much to learn from them. An important conclusion from Colliander and Wien’s study demonstrated the value in letting consumer defense forces act as a primary buffer against negative word of mouth online. In the same way that paid advertising is not as powerful in facilitating opinion change as word of mouth behaviors are, the natural defenses by consumers that surface online are more powerful than a corporate entity intervening their voice to influence opinion. The natural conversations that arose in defense of the Ice Bucket Challenge campaign demonstrate this principle and are worth further exploration.

Research has also looked at which factors are present in messages that contribute to their virality. In terms of viral video viewing, one study identified enjoyment, involvement and awareness index as factors that, if present, would positively predict viewing volumes (Southgate, 2010). The formula for increasing viewing volumes or an inclination for a message to be passed on is not cut and dry by any means. The types of people that distribute messages are one factor that marketers have tired to use to increasing a message’s popularity. Some have taken an approach of using well-known individuals or targeted influencers to co-produce messages (Kozinets, deValck, Wojnicki and Wilner, 2010). Others have examined which individuals among our natural networks of online “friends” have the most influence on our actions. One study showed that there are four factors that characterize social relationships and influence electronic word-of-mouth dynamics: tie strength to an individual, homophily, trust of that individual, and that individual’s amount of interpersonal influence (Shu-Chuan & Yoojung, 2011). A campaign like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge should consider which factors, including these four, may have facilitated engagement with the campaign online. The factors of age and generational difference are also important to consider when looking at patterns of message sharing online. A study showed that Generation X and Generation Y do not respond to advertising messages in a distinctive way in which marketers could create generationally targeted eWOM effects and viral outcomes. In addition, the study showed that there was a cross-generational tendency to “gravitate towards the mean,” or for each respective generation to be more inclined to pass messages along to its own generation. However, Generation Y’s tendency to communicate “perpetually with one another through online social networks, text messaging, peer-to-peer videos and tweets,” can make or break a campaign’s or message’s popularity online (Struggon, Taylor & Thompson, 2011). The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge bridged generations, though. It included all kinds of people will all kinds of “factors.” The way these kinds of factors interacted to create the virality of the movement could be extremely useful in understanding the concepts of electronic word of mouth behaviors.

*Charitable Giving*

Healthcare research in particular relies heavily on charitable dollars to fund projects. Thus, the marketers who raise money for health causes are almost as important as the researchers themselves. Research on charitable giving has attempted to understand why people donate so that these behaviors can be tapped to provide implications for marketing strategy. The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, with its huge success, is a topic that marketing research cannot afford to overlook.

Research on monetary charitable giving has indicated that motives are most often not altruistic; motives more often range from a desire to promote one’s career, receive tax benefits or improve self-esteem. In addition, the target market for monetary donations is generally older people with more assets (Dawson, 1988).

Similarly to how strategic communicators must consider the influential individuals that can enhance messages electronically, they must consider how certain people can help drawn in more money for a cause. Research on celebrities and charitable giving shows the mutually beneficial relationship that donating money can have for both the organization/cause and the famous individuals. As charitable giving adds to positive perception of celebrities and their credibility, so too people are encouraged to give in the same way to the same organizations (Hwang, 2010).

On a deeper level than being influenced by a spokesperson to give, motivations for charitable giving can come from a desire to better one’s self-esteem. Focus group research on the Avon 3-Day Walk for Breast Cancer showed that women participated in the campaign to meet personal needs that had nothing to do with breast cancer, such as building self-confidence or feeling better about a divorce (Edwards and Kreshel, 2008). Interestingly enough, women in these focus groups noted that the fact that Avon was a sponsor of the event had little effect on them, but it would have had Avon done a poor job with the event. The implication of this study has meaning for brands who which to sponsor charities to enhance their image.

Another consideration for charitable giving marketers is the way that they attempt to raise funds electronically and how they frame their messages. Weberling studied the online agenda of fundraising for breast cancer by looking at the emails sent by an organization in a 365-day period (2012). Emails constructed to be either advocacy emails (employing political messages), fundraising emails (emotionally-oriented), or e-Newsletters (intellectual and informative) were observed for their different impacts. The framing of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge employed a combination of advocacy, emotional and informative messages, as each message was crafted by a different individual for a different audience.

*“Citizen PR Practitioners”*

Considering all the research discussed thus far, while related to online attitudes, marketing and public relations, we must understand the difference between the nature of these campaigns and brands and the nature of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. The Ice Bucket challenge began as an organic effort in a video produced by an individual, not by the ALS Foundation. While the ALS Foundation and other such organizations quickly jumped on board and enhanced the campaign with intentional public relations strategy, the status of the challenge as an organic movement requires that this case be observed with scrutiny in applying certain research principles. A citizen journalist is one who, “contributes to democratic conversation through the production and posting of blogs and news articles (Nah et al., 2013). Thus a “citizen journalist” is any non-professional individual who produces content to report on ideas and events. Applying this idea to non-professionals who advocate for certain causes and campaigns, we can think of those persons, like the participants of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, as “citizen PR practitioners.” The idea of citizen journalism is discussed as a basis for comparison to “citizen PR practitioners.”

To illustrate this idea of citizen participation in media activities, we can look at a case in which non-professionals took part in and created conversation surrounding a disastrous earthquake in Haiti. By analyzing the response on Twitter to the earthquake, Smith observed two key online relationship strategies: communicated commitment and conversational human voice (2010). In the aftermath of the crisis Twitter was noted for being a critical tool conveying candor and real-life perspective in a way that organizations could not. The role of non-organizational publics also amplified the need for assistance and funding in a way that just organizations could not. The messages on social media were expanded because of their ease of sharing (functional interactivity) and the “relevance of the message to an issue community (contingent interactivity).” Virality of certain messages was dependent upon well-articulated points. The study also showed that self-promotion on Twitter was evident in the aftermath of the earthquake. Overall, this case study demonstrated the need for a revised understanding of what a stakeholder is. Previously, stakeholders were defined as those who are affected or may be affected by organizations’ decisions. With social media, though, stakeholder can be those who participate in online conversation about an event have a social stake in the organization or issue. While the power of disseminating information from non-organizational publics brings the risk of negative or incorrect attention, these individuals are also working off a need to remain credible, informed and respected information sources. We saw these principles in action in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, as non-traditional stakeholders joined the conversation and amplified the campaign to a viral level.

The field of citizen journalism has many benefits to society. The practice has blurred the distinction between producing news and consuming news, and in turn has transformed the ways that newsrooms interact with audiences. By combining the practices of citizen journalism with social media, especially in oppressed regions in the Middle East, it has contributed to efforts for democracy and collective activism by raising awareness and providing a platform upon which protests can be organized (Hänska-Ahy & Shakour, 2013). Citizen journalism can contrast with mainstream media in its ability to unite communities, especially communities that have been physically broken by natural disasters (Farinosi and Treré, 2014). A study on college students who engaged in citizen journalism activities for a semester showed the ability of user-generated content to enhance social capital such as trust, satisfaction and engagement with communities (Nah et al., 2013).

Social media developed “without central planning and without government regulation, censor or sanction” (“Conversations With,” 2012). While companies, non-profits and causes have utilized social media as an effective tool in reaching consumers and stakeholders, the flow and discourse of social media are ultimately controlled by the individual user. This makes “citizen public relations practitioners” important, emerging factors to consider in message dissemination.

*Social Psychology and Online Environments*

Theories of social psychology have attempted to explain the ways in which our environment, particularly the people within environments, can shape our actions and performance. Theories of social facilitation propose that even passive audiences can have an impact on a subject performing a task (Markus, 1977). Some scholars believe that the mere presence of an audience will have an impact on a subjects’ performativity (Zajonc, 1965). Others agree that an audience can have a significant impact on how a subject performs, but only if that audience has the active ability to evaluate a subject’s performance (Cottrell et al., 1968). These audiences have always been considered in the context of face-to-face, real time interactions, though. How do these theories that explain action then translate to the online environment of audiences? Research has yet to fully take these principles and apply them to the Internet and social networking sites, but it’s worth considering if the underlying truths of theories of social facilitation apply in the same way.

One might consider a virtual world, or a computer based simulated environment, the gap between real life and social media sites. A virtual world allows for participative behaviors to occur in similar ways to real time, real world communications, but obviously is still markedly different from traditional face-to-face interactions. However, research done on virtual worlds supports the salience of social facilitation theories in these contexts (Goel, Prokopec & Junglas, 2013). In looking at the Internet and social networking sites, the theories have not extended this far.

Especially before the advent of social networking sites, traditional forms of online communication (like e-mail) lacked nonverbal cues from which you could form an opinion about another (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Without the non-verbal cues that come with face-to-face interaction, extending the principles of social facilitation theory and audience effects to online communication would be a real stretch. However, social networking sites and other new media technologies have evolved our communication and relationship-building styles completely. Prior to the popularity of social networking sites, research indicated that relationships could be formed on deeper bases such as shared values and beliefs because of the lack of nonverbal cues. However, with the ability to create an online persona, upload pictures, accumulate likes and more, the issue of no nonverbal cues transforms into the presence of digital indicators of popularity. In the same way that nonverbal cues can change behaviors and performance in face-to-face interactions, research has shown that our perceptions of others can strongly be influenced by cues on their social media profiles (Scott, 2014). Especially as social media sites and online connectivity only continue to surge in popularity, the idea of an online environment in which certain actors can have more influence than others is crucial to strategic communicators. With the rise of online endorsements by Internet celebrities and traditional celebrities, it’s clear that this idea has already been picked up on. However, it’s not new knowledge that someone with fame will have clout in our decision-making. Theories of social facilitation indicate that audiences continually influence our performativity and decision-making (Zajonc 1965). In what ways, though, does the reality of having an audience change the way we behave online, and which everyday, non-famous persons in particular are influencing our behaviors? In the context of the ALS Ice Bucket challenge, these questions are particularly relevant in attempts to understand who made the posts that helped the campaign go viral, and who were the audiences that were listening that may have influenced a poster’s decision to fulfill the challenge.

**Research Rationale**

Because of the vast success of the ALS Ice Bucket challenge, it is important to take a look at what factors and attitudes contributed to the organically initiated campaign’s efforts. Through the lens of public relations, how did these individuals essentially do the job of public relations practitioners better than the professionals, and how can these successes be reworked to employ future, similar successes? While research has covered a number of topics in social media, charitable giving and eWOM communication through the lens of public relations’ efforts, can those same principles be understood and applied to individual “citizen practitioners?” Current research has yet to attempt to understand such principles.

This study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do college students feel about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge?
2. What reasons do college students cite for their (lack of) participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge campaign?
3. What factors do college students perceive to be the reasons for the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge’s success?

CHAPTER 2

**Methods**

**Method**

In order to understand individual’s attitudes and thought processes in regards to the ALS Ice Bucket challenge, talking to people was an essential part of my research. For this reason, I conducted three focus groups at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill at Carroll Hall.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups are approximately one-to-two hours discussions among 6-10 participants that are led by a moderator. I served as the moderator for my focus groups. Previous research has named five characteristics of focus groups: (1) people, who (2) possess certain characteristics, (3) provide qualitative data (4) in a focused discussion (5) to help understand the topic of interest. As applied to my research, these five characteristics are: (1) three groups of 6-10 people, male and female, who (2) are college-aged, social media users who are familiar with the challenge, who will (3) share their opinions and ideas (4) in a one hour moderated discussion session (5) about the ALS Ice Bucket challenge, reasons for participation in the campaign, and factors that made the campaign such a success (Krueger, 2009).

**Researcher**

To provide background on myself as moderator of these focus groups, I am a social media user with accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Tumblr. My sister nominated me for the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge on August 16. I did not make a video, nominate anyone else for the challenge, or donate to any ALS organizations.

**Sample of Participants**

Focus group 1 comprised of eight individuals, focus group 2 comprised of 10 individuals, and focus group 3 comprised of nine individuals. I originally intended to split participants into groups based on their participation behaviors in the campaign, but complications with weather and scheduling resulted in me not dividing the groups in any particular way.

I used a snowball sampling technique to contact potential participants. I recruited through emails and posts on Facebook. The only condition I screened for when recruiting participants was whether or not they were familiar with the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

The groups comprised of 14 females and 13 males, ranging in age from 18-23 years old. All focus groups participants were students at UNC-Chapel Hill. All undergraduate years were represented, as well as one graduate student. The geographical location was chosen because of its proximity to me. College students were chosen because of their heavy use of social media: A study in 2013 of 260 college students showed that 95% of the sample use Facebook and 80% use Twitter, the main platforms across which the Ice Bucket Challenge was produced and distributed (Viner, 2014). My sample’s familiarity with social media trends was an important component necessary for participating in discussion.

**Focus Group Procedure**

The focus groups sessions took place on campus for the convenience of participants. The sessions lasted approximately one hour. To open each session, each participant was given an informed consent form to review and sign. In addition, all were given a pre-focus group questionnaire to fill out to gather some basic information about social media use and participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge (see Appendix A).

The focus group discussions flowed from a set of 10 of pre-determined questions, which the participants were not exposed to before hand. Each focus group session discussed the same questions. The questions were open-ended but structured so as to fairly analyze responses across separate sessions. Discussions deviated slightly from the guide at times to allow for further exploration of certain themes. Additionally, I added in questions at times to get certain participants to clarify or elaborate on a certain idea.

The opening questions asked generically about social media behaviors to get participants comfortable speaking within the group. The next phase of questions, the introductory questions, contextualized the conversations about social media to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. The discussion then transitioned into key questions, where the bulk of the discussion and opinion sharing took place. The sessions concluded with ending questions to summarize and synthesize perspectives (See Appendix B).

**Equipment**

I used an audio recording device that I rented from the university’s undergraduate library to record the focus group sessions. I also recorded the sessions using audio-notes on my laptop as a backup measure.

**Incentives**

I incentivized participation in the study by providing lunch catered by Chipotle Mexican Grill.

**Confidentiality**

Each focus group participant reviewed and signed a consent form. They were informed that the recordings were being used just for research and would not be shared with anyone outside my honors thesis committee. The participants were asked not to share what was discussed during the sessions after the discussions concluded.

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym on a separate spreadsheet document. The pseudonyms were used in lieu of names on all transcripts to protect the focus group participant’s confidentiality. The questionnaires had participants indicate their names, but the anonymity of this information was not essential to the research. All documents were either with me at all times or stored and locked in my private residence.

All electronic data (the session transcripts and the session audio files) were stored on my personal, password-protected laptop, which is not connected to a public network.

**Data Analysis**

After the focus groups were conducted, I transcribed the audio files myself. I then uploaded the files to an online data analysis service, dedoose.com, to code for themes and concepts.

I read through each transcript thoroughly before beginning to make any notes. I then read through each transcript line-by-line and used an open coding system that analyzed specific words and phrases to determine the main ideas of comments. I then began to look for themes relative to the research questions. After identifying the larger themes, I went through the transcripts again and reconsidered if certain ideas had been overlooked or misinterpreted. I determined the relationships between comments and explored the meanings of comments from the perspective of many themes.

CHAPTER 3

Findings

This chapter presents the results of the focus group discussion. The section is organized around the research questions set forth in the literature review: How do college students feel about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge? What reasons do college students cite for their (lack of) participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge Campaign? What factors do college students perceive to be the reasons for the campaign’s success?

**Sample Demographic**

There were a total of 27 college students that participated in three different focus groups for this study. Of those students, 52% identified as female and 48% identified as male. The average age across the focus groups was 20.4 years (SD=1.15). Table 1 lists each group’s participants (coded by pseudonyms) and their age and year in school. Table 2 summarizes the demographics and compares the groups to each other.

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Table 1

*Focus Group Participants*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 |
| Paul, 21, senior | Harry, 18, first year | Lilly, 20, junior |
| Sean, 19, sophomore | Carrie, 20, junior | Greg, 21, senior |
| Lisa, 20, junior | Lindsey, 19, first year | Karen, 21, junior |
| Lizzie, 21, senior | Gary, 23, grad student | Laurie, 20, sophomore |
| John, 22, senior | Peter, 21, senior | Anna, 21, senior |
| Nick, 21, senior | Sarah, 19, sophomore | Helen, 19, junior |
| Adam, 21, senior | Alisha, 19, sophomore | Cynthia, 19, sophomore |
| Jerry, 21, senior | Elizabeth, 21, senior | Chip, 19, sophomore |
|  | Brittney, 22, senior | Ethan, 21, senior |
|  | Michael, 20, sophomore |  |

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Table 2

*Sample Demographics*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Group 1  N=8 | Group 2  N=10 | Group 3  N=9 | Total  N=27 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Average Age | 20.8 (SD= 0.9) | 20.2 (SD=1.5) | 20.1 (SD=0.9) | 20.4 (SD=1.15) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Gender |  |  |  |  |
| Female | 25% | 60% | 67% | 52% |
| Male | 75% | 40% | 33% | 48% |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| Grade |  |  |  |  |
| FY | 0% | 20% | 0% | 7% |
| So. | 12.5% | 30% | 33% | 26% |
| Jr. | 12.5% | 10% | 33% | 19% |
| Sr. | 75% | 30% | 33% | 44% |
| Grad | 0% | 10% | 0% | 4% |

**Social Media Behaviors**

The focus group participants provided information about their general behaviors on social networking sites (SNSs). Table 3 illustrates on which platforms participants had accounts and approximations of how many hours participants spend on each account daily. One hundred percent of respondents had Facebook accounts, averaging about 86 minutes of daily use. The next most popular SNSs based on account ownership was Twitter (75%), then Instagram (50%) and YouTube (50%).

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Table 3

*SNS Accounts and Daily Usage*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Have Accounts  % (N=27)\* | Average Daily Usage in Minutes\*\* |
| Platform |  |  |
| Facebook | 100% | 86 |
| Instagram | 50% | 56 |
| Twitter | 75% | 29 |
| Vine | 12.5% | 4 |
| Tumblr | 12.5% | 26 |
| YouTube | 50% | 30 |
| *Note. \**Percentages do not add to 100% because participants may have more than one social media account. \*\*Averages taken from self-identified approximations of those who have an account. | | |

*Passive Social Media Usage*

All focus group participants said that they spend at least one hour a day on SNSs. Despite using SNSs daily, the majority of the students said that they are passive users of social media, especially when it comes to Facebook. They might like other peoples’ posts or click on their links, but they won’t make posts of their own.

Um, yeah I don’t remember the last time I shared anything on Facebook, literally at all. Um I guess within specific groups I guess I’ll post, but to like the wider Facebook community, nah I don’t post anything. –Greg, 21, senior

Depending on the outlet, people said that their behaviors might differ. Many said that they post occasionally to Twitter or Instagram, but hardly ever on Facebook.

So for me I think it depends on which outlet it is. So for Facebook I’m not an active user. I definitely am more passive and I look at other peoples’ posts. But for Instagram I typically post more, and then for twitter I don’t really tweet. I just look at other peoples’ tweets. –Cynthia, 19, sophomore

Peter, a 21-year-old senior, said that he avoids SNSs like Twitter and Instagram purely because they “require that you post stuff normally to actually succeed.” Every single focus group participant had a Facebook account, though, for reasons such as keeping in touch with old friends and family, keeping up with what’s going on, belonging to groups on the site, and boredom.

*Social Validation and Social Perceptions*

Focus group participants mentioned the idea of ‘getting likes’ on a number of occasions. Carrie, 20, junior, said that on Instagram she will, “try to like everyone’s pictures so that they’ll like [hers] eventually.” To many, getting ‘likes’ offers validation because it is a visible and quantifiable measure that someone else approves of what you are doing or what you have posted on an SNS. The concept of people doing things on social media simply to receive ‘likes’ annoyed many of the focus group participants, especially when it came to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. Simultaneously, a few participants said that they would avoid posting on an SNS altogether to avoid feeling the disappointment of an unpopular, or under-‘liked’, post.

I don’t want to like put something out there and then be like, oh man like no one liked it, which is stupid in the first place, but I don’t really want to have to deal with that. – Lily, 20, junior

If not just for fear of not getting ‘likes,’ many participants said generally that they were careful about what they post so as not to annoy others. This reflected the idea that people think they should be conscious of the way other people are using an SNS and should to act in a similar manner.

It used to be like a thing to post everything you’re thinking on Facebook, but then for some reason it just like stopped being like that, so now if you were to like continue doing that a lot it’s just like, ok, calm down, and like, what are you doing? And kind of the same thing with Instagram. You have to pick only like one picture, you have to like narrow it down to like the perfect moment, spaced out over the week, it’s just kind of weird… --Carrie, 20, junior

Many of the focus group participants agreed that one way in particular that you can be annoying on social media is by posting too frequently. Jerry, 21, senior, gave a name to this idea, calling it “bleeding the feed:”

It’s just when someone posts so much that you see their stuff all the time and they don’t give like a good time gap between their posts, so sometimes you just get of tired of looking at their stuff. Yeah, so, for example people that are posting a ton of pictures of their kids or like their babies on Facebook…I don’t want to see that. So if it’s like all the time I have a tendency to unfollow them because they’re bleeding the feed.

**Feelings Towards the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge**

Regardless of participation, the ALS Ice Bucket challenge gathered a lot of opinions, negative and positive. As of August 18, 2014 on Facebook alone over 28 million people had participated in the conversation through posting videos, commenting, or liking a challenge post (Facebook.com, 2014). Focus group participants expressed both negative and positive thoughts about the craze. These negative and positive thoughts were coded for and broken down further into specific categories.

Negative Thoughts

Across the three focus groups, there were 82 instances when comments were made carrying negative opinions of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. The comments are broken down by category and shown in Figure 1.

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*Negative Comments Made About the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge*

The most general negative comments about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge were simply that it was “dumb” or “annoying.” These comments were usually made in combination with one of the other categories of negative comments. In addition, many participants said they became very overwhelmed by how oversaturated their newsfeeds were with posts about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, and at that point, they just wanted it to stop.

*Attention Seeking*

During the focus group sessions, the most common negative opinions about that ALS Ice Bucket Challenge were that people did it just for attention. Participants said that they were annoyed by the fact that people were using a charitable cause as a way to get ‘likes’ and fulfill their need for social validation.

Like, people want to post a video of themselves and have that validation of people liking it, and you know, my friend from high school wants to show off her abs and do it in her sports bra… so that’s like a little bit of a, self, like narcissistic part there. –Lilly, 20, junior

“Narcissism” was a word thrown around a lot. Many participants expressed their frustrations that people needed to be thanked for doing something good. Not only that, but once people who did the challenge started becoming self-righteous and acting superior because of their participation, the whole campaign became even more of a turn-off.

I felt like people who were nagging about it felt like because they dumped it on their head they were so much, like, so much superior, like they had done this great thing, and had done their part to society, and I was just kinda like, I don’t know, there’s a huge power difference right now and that doesn’t need to be there, because just because I didn’t pour ice on my head like doesn’t make me a terrible person. –John, 22, senior

*Avoiding Donating*

Playing into sentiments of frustration with attention seeking, many focus group participants didn’t like how people chose to make a video (for the attention) rather than to donate money:

It’s terrible that somehow getting this attention is for not donating? Like, somehow not donating and having ice dumped on your head…like somehow you get rewarded for not donating. So I guess the point of it was to donate or you get ice dumped on your head, but obviously people want the attention of dumping ice on your head. –-Helen, 19, junior

*Slacktivism*

A common critique of the ALS Ice Bucket challenge is that it was ‘slacktivism,’ a portmanteau of the words ‘slacker’ and ‘activism.’ The idea is that you’re not actually doing any long-term good for a cause or charity just by making a social media post. Not only does slacktivism keep people from donating, because they believe that their social media post is just as valuable, it also keeps people from doing other charitable acts, as they already feel good about themselves. A few focus group participants argued that the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was slacktivism, as people thought they were doing great things for society and for ALS, but really they were just dumping ice over their head.

It tapped into like that super lazy but condescending part of us that’s like oh yeah, I did this thing, y’all don’t do this thing, I’m better than y’all. And we recognize that the way it did it, we have problems with that. –Adam, 21, senior

*Diluted Focus on ALS*

Another common theme from the focus group participants was that the Ice Bucket Challenge didn’t focus enough on ALS. People just did it because it was trendy and a fad, and a lot of the videos made little to no mention of ALS at all. “I just felt like people who did it didn’t really understand what ALS was, it was just like the cool thing to do,” said Cynthia, 19, sophomore. Many of the focus group participants said that it took them a long time to connect the Ice Bucket Challenge with ALS, again attributing this flaw to people’s tendency to blindly follow trends.

Cause people would tell me, “Ice Bucket Challenge,” nobody would mention ALS, and nobody would mention, like, the point of pouring the ice, what the point was. So I think like, uh, the aspect of it that was like, “do it, tell people about it,” that caught on real fast, but maybe the message was a little slower. –Sean, 19, sophomore

*Other Criticisms of the Ice Bucket Challenge*

In addition to the common criticisms of the challenge, a few focus group participants talked about how wasteful of water it was. People also mentioned how they wish that some of the money had gone elsewhere, since ALS is not as common of a disease as things like heart disease and breast cancer. One participant feared that because people may have donated to ALS it might keep money from going to other important causes:

A lot of people will, you know, just, they have a set amount of money that they donate each year, to some sort of charity. So did any of those other charities funds, you know, lose that money? –Lizzie, 21, senior

Positive Thoughts

There were 60 instances when comments were made during the focus group sessions held messages of positive opinions of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. These comments are broken down into categories and illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2

*Positive Comments Made about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge*

*The Success of the Campaign*

Though there were many criticisms of the challenge during the focus group sessions, most negative comments were paired with some sort of allusion to the fact that, ultimately, the movement accomplished its goal. People noted the success of the movement for raising a “ridiculous amount of money” (Sean, 19, sophomore), as well as getting the word out about ALS.

It was dumb, but it worked. It raised tons of money. You know people don’t know in-depth what [ALS] is, that’s a great point, but people know what ALS…like they know the name, which is half the battle most of the time for a lot of diseases. It was dumb, but hey, it caught on. –Karen, 21, junior

As an example of how successful the whole thing was, focus group participants kept mentioning the fact that we were in a room talking about it to be a good gauge of the craze’s success. “I think the reason we’re even like discussing it is because everybody recognizes that it did do what it set out to accomplish,” said Adam, 21, senior.

Beyond just doing good for ALS, many focus group participants praised the campaign for being able to inspire other movements. In response to the success of the ice bucket challenge movement, things like the beast mode challenge, the raw egg challenge, and the Twizzlers challenged emerged in support of various causes and charities.

Some guy had some video, and said he was dumping like, yeah, I forget what it even was, but it wasn’t water. And then he gave a speech about how, like, water is also a limited resource and we shouldn’t be wasting it. And then it like sparked a…actually it probably didn’t like spark a whole new thing, but it kind of like brought new things into the discussion, which I think is cool. –Brittney, 22, senior.

*Unique Nature of the Campaign*

Discussion at points also centered on how purely unique and creative the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was. Not only did it put a fun twist on social media activism, it was able to create an activity that was social, that was humorous and entertaining, and that united the nation, even the world in some senses, around a common topic.

It was cool that every single person on my newsfeed, like whatever it was, Twitter, Instagram or Facebook, were taking part in this, so it was cool that it was a very, you know, widespread campaign. –Lizzie, 21, senior

Additionally, there was the extra twist that the pouring of ice over your head was supposed to simulate the sensation of what losing control of your body is like when you have ALS. The group liked this idea, even though many were unfamiliar with it, and wished that it had been promoted more as part of the campaign’s message.

**Participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge**

The focus group participants had a wide variety of experiences with and opinions of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. Of the 27 participants, 24 were nominated to do the challenge. Only 29% percent of those nominated actually completed the challenge by making a video of themselves dumping ice over their head and posting it on an SNS. For those who did not complete the challenge, some participated in the campaign in other ways, but most did not participate at all and ignored the nomination altogether. Table 4 summarizes the participatory behaviors of the focus group members in the challenge.

Table 4

*Participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Participation % (N=24)\* |
| Task |  |
| Created a Video | 29% |
| Dumped Ice Over Head | 29% |
| Donated Money to ALS | 29% |
| Helped Another Make a Video | 33% |
| Nominated Others | 25% |
| Shared Articles/Videos | 17% |
| Other | 4% |
| *Note*: \*Percentages add to more than 100% because participants could participate in more than one task. | |

Reasons For Not Participating in the Ice Bucket Challenge

By “participating in the challenge,” I refer to any activity listed in Table 4 other than donating money to an ALS organization. By “completing the challenge,” I refer to anyone who chose to make a video for the campaign and post it to an SNS. For the focus group participants who chose not to participate in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, they cited many reasons to support their choice. After coding the transcripts for these reasons, there were 87 instances in which comments were made to explain why someone chose not to participate. These instances were further broken down into the categories of passive reasons and active reasons of nonparticipation, which were then broken down even further into different themes. The counts of the reasons for nonparticipation are illustrated in Figure 3 and Figure 4.

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*Passive Reasons for Non-Participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge*

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Figure 4

*Active Reasons for Non-Participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge*

*Passive Reasons for Non-Participation*

A passive reason for non-participation is any reason that is absent a true opinion, particularly a negative opinion, about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. Thus general apathy towards the whole movement is considered a passive reason for non-participation. The most common passive reason given during the focus group discussions was that nominees did not feel the social pressure to complete the challenge. Be it they didn’t have a close relationship with the person who nominated them, or they didn’t feel held accountable to complete the challenge, the social pressure was not on.

I was nominated by my cousin that I just do not have a close relationship with at all. He’s kind of just like one of those members of my family that I see at holidays and we say hey and it’s like kind of awkward […] I mean I got tagged in it, and as soon as I got the notification that uh, “You were tagged in so and so’s video,” I was like, this is it, this is totally it, I know what this is. Like I saw the video, I saw them standing there in their bathing suits, and I just didn’t even think twice about it. I went back to my homepage and just, kept moving. –Sean, 19, sophomore.

Some participants just didn’t feel like making the effort of dumping ice over their heads. For some, donating was just an easier option. “I, you know, I’d just rather donate money for a cause than have to take another shower,” said Lizzie, 21, senior.

Two focus group participants thought that their post just wouldn’t make a difference in the grand scheme of the whole craze. Similarly, a number of the participants felt that they were nominated either too early in the campaign, before they really understood what was going on, or too late in the game after the craze had already died down.

For several participants, their decision of non-participation was not out of dislike or malice for the movement. Rather, they felt like they had no personal connection to ALS or that there are other causes that they already care about and put time into.

So I don’t know anyone who has been impacted by ALS, um, I did donate, I just didn’t choose to dump ice on my head, but if it was, if it came down to some sort of, you know, illness or, you know, concern that had to deal something that you know a family member or a friend that has gone through, I’d be more inclined to participate. – Lizzie, 21, senior

Ultimately, the logistics just didn’t make dumping ice over your head and filming it 24-hours possible for everyone. A number of the focus group participants said that they would have completed the challenge, or at least considered the idea more, if they weren’t busy, travelling, without a bucket, etc. The craze was more or less very accessible and easy to complete. However, without the right resources, it just wasn’t worth the effort for several of the focus group members.

My house doesn’t have an icemaker, also, so I would of like had to, like we have the trays, so it would have been days…days, and I mean I didn’t really want to spend money on ice to like pour it on the ground. –Nick, 21, senior.

*Active Reasons for Non-Participation*

The active reasons for non-participation were those that took an active stance against the Ice Bucket Challenge or the ideas that it represented. For example, some of the focus group participants expressed that they felt social pressure not do to the challenge because their friends thought it was dumb. “I remember that [my girlfriend] was like really against it, and she would like rant to me about the ice bucket challenge being so dumb, and I was just like yeah, it’s pretty stupid, you know,” said Sean, 19, sophomore.

One of the biggest critiques of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge discussed was that people did it just for attention. Thus, the most frequent active reason for non-participation in the movement was to avoid that associated narcissism:

I kind of just felt like if I was going to do a video it wasn’t really going to be about ALS, it was going to be about me, and so I like donated on my own, but I just didn’t really say anything about it because I felt like most people on my social media had already heard, and so I didn’t like feel really morally obligated to like say, ‘Oh I donated this much money,’ when I could just like do it, and they still get the money. –Laurie, 20, sophomore

Several focus group participants had a generally negative opinion of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, which was enough of a reason for them not complete the challenge or to participate. For a few of the focus group members, they were turned off or annoyed by the attitudes of those who had done the challenge, especially the superiority complexes they seemed to develop.

And they were like, ‘oh I nominated you, and I was nominated first, and then, then I shared it with you, so I’m, like, I’m so kind. And also like, I’m so kind, I’m doing this thing for charity…’ like even if you’re just passing it along and not really donating. I feel like it’s just sort of like –- and maybe that’s just a pessimistic view—but it’s just going towards your own self-assurance. –Lilly, 20, junior.

From a more logistical standpoint, wastefulness (of water) was cited as a reason for non-participation. In addition, one participant said she didn’t participate because she’s generally skeptical towards things that go viral on social media.

Focus group participants generally cited a combination of active and passive reasons for not participating in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. There were a multitude of things that kept these participants from accepting their nominations and completing the challenge.

Reasons for Completing the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge

During the focus groups, there were 32 instances in which comments were made to explain why someone chose to complete the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. These comments are broken down into categories and are illustrated in Figure 5.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Figure 5

*Reasons for Completing the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge*

Every focus group participant who completed the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge cited social pressure as a reason for his or her decision. Be it from not wanting to disappoint the friend who nominated you, being held accountable by someone else making a video, or the social validation of receiving a nomination and getting to nominate others, the social aspect of this campaign was a clear reason for its success.

So I got nominated by my brother, but my brother also nominated my boyfriend, so it was kind of like I had the pressure from my brother and then also from my boyfriend because he was gonna do it, so he was like, oh, well if I’m gonna do it, you have to do it. So I think it was almost like double the pressure. –Sarah, 19, sophomore

In addition to the social pressure, a lot of the focus group participants said that a really strong reason for their completion of the challenge was simply because everyone else was doing it. It was a trend, and they made the choice to play into it. “I made a video pretty much because pretty much everyone was making videos,” said Carrie, 20, sophomore.

The fact that the whole thing was so visible was also cited as a reason for completing the challenge. A lot of the focus group members felt that getting a nomination and getting tagged in a post put you on the spot, and the 24-hour time period only enhanced the eyes on you to get the challenge done. Several participants feared that they might look bad by not completing or ignoring the challenge. “Like not only can people see you’re nominated, but if you don’t do it, you’re kind of going to look bad. So that kind of played into it,” said Carrie, 20, sophomore.

The Ice Bucket Challenge was, in a lot of ways, fun. It was a social activity that connected people, it was humorous, and it was entertaining. The simple fact that the challenge was fun was a good enough reason for a couple of the focus group participants. Letting go of all the criticism and complaints about the whole process, they were able to just take the campaign at its surface level enjoyment value, or to simply ask themselves, “why not take part in this?”

I was like why not? You know, this is how trends get started, this is how things, like, this is how it became global, this is how millions of dollars got donated to it, so why not? –Karen, 21, junior

In the same way that those focus group members who chose not to complete the challenge or participate in the campaign had a variety of combinations of reasons for their decision, so too did those who chose to complete the challenge. These folks were not absent their negative opinions about the craze, though. All seven of the focus group members who actually completed the challenge at some point in the discussion voiced a frustration or negative opinion that they had of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. Albeit, they still felt compelled enough to complete the challenge for any mix of the reasons mentioned.

**Factors of Success of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge**

There were a lot of dimensions to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. After considering opinions toward the campaign and behaviors of participation, the discussion also lent itself to discussion about why the campaign got so big and what factors specifically played into its success. There were 53 instances over the course of the focus groups in which comments were made about why the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge got so popular. These comments are broken down by category and are summarized in Figure 6.

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Perceived Factors of Success of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge

*Social Factors*

During the focus group discussions, the fact that this campaign was filled with social pressure surfaced as one of the main justifications for its success. The social pressure to appease those who gave nominations was fueled by the visibility of the campaign in public social media posts. “I think what kind of motivated, like the motivation was kind of like, because you’re being nominated on this very social, visible site, you’re kind of being held accountable,” said Carrie, 20, sophomore. One focus group member admitted that she was a source of social pressure and accountability for those she nominated for the challenge:

I think I had, like, the same kind of friend pressure, but it was like I was giving it to people. Because I like talked to the people that I nominated and was like ‘Hey, I didn’t see you post a video. Did you donate?’ And a couple of them actually did, so it actually worked out. –Alisha, 19, sophomore

Because the movement got so big and it seems like everyone was doing the challenge, the idea surfaced in discussion that there was social validation from getting nominated similar to the kind of validation you get from receiving ‘likes’ on a social media post. Many focus group members felt that the social validation factor pushed the movement forward, as once someone receives a nomination, they will be more likely to express that they were given that social validation and incentivized (through their desire for attention and acknowledgement of their social validation) to make their own post. Even for those focus group participants who had no intention of ever completing the challenge, some admitted to having at least a desire for a nomination for that sense of social validation.

It’s like you want to be cool enough to be invited to parties even like when you don’t, like, intend on going, cause like, you just want to feel wanted, you know? So to some extent I was, like, uh hoping I would get nominated even though I never actually intended on doing it. –Greg, 21, senior

*Logistical Factors*

Several focus group members felt that the rules of the challenge themselves made way for the success of the movement. Firstly, the challenge was accessible. All you needed was a bucket and some ice. “It was just very easy to do…I mean, if you had a bucket,” said Jerry, 21, senior. Many focus group participants also cited the other rule of the challenge, that you complete it within 24 hours, as a key to the movement’s size and momentum.

The 24-hour limit definitely helped it get so big. You know, if it was just do it whenever you get around to it, then if wouldn’t have been so big, it wouldn’t have blown up as quickly as it did. It wouldn’t have raised as much money as it did. –Karen, 21, junior

In addition to the time constrains of the actual challenge, a few focus group participants mentioned that timing of the campaign in the middle of the summer as another added reason for its success. “I also think cause it was the summer, people were like willing to just dump water on their heads because it was hot out too, so I just think the timing was really well done,” said Jerry, 21, senior.

*Other Factors*

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was a movement that had never been seen before. Though it may have had some predecessors, none got so big as this viral level. Several focus group members cited this novelty and uniqueness as a key in the campaign’s success.

I think the thing that I would pin as to why it was so successful is that it was really creative […] I’d never really seen anyone do anything like that, and I think that that’s the reason. It was like a fun thing for people to do. – Elizabeth, 21, senior

Several focus group members also expressed that there was a humorous/entertainment value to the videos that kept people watching them:

I think the main reason it got, like, so, and obviously like when it got going like the social aspect and the validation kept it going, but I think it got popular and got big because like the ice bucket in and of itself is mildly entertaining, --Harry, 18, first year

While these individual factors might make up any number of campaigns, they all converged to make up the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. The concept of virality, is important because people don’t have any kind of formula for making something go big. Many people perceive virality to be purely luck. In regards to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, many focus group members attributed luck to be an additional, if not the ultimate factor in its success.

I think that companies spend millions upon millions of dollars trying to, like, create viral campaigns everyday, and there’s certainly factors that go into what made the ALS ice bucket challenge successful, but ultimately it was pretty much lightning in a bottle, and like its not like this was so uniquely crafted that it was guaranteed to be a success. It’s just like, things happen. – Greg, 21, senior

There may never be an answer to cracking the code of virality, but it is certainly worth analyzing things as paramount and unprecedented as the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge.

CHAPTER 4

Discussion

**Main Findings**

In the summer of 2014, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge took over the Internet. It was a phenomenon with many dimensions, many critiques, and many praises. This study sought to uncover college students’ perceptions of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, why people chose to participate (or not participate) in the campaign’s activities, and to identify which factors college students thought were the reasons for the campaign’s success. At its core, most of these questions could be addressed by recognizing that the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was a very social movement. The focus group discussions showed that people had negative opinions towards the campaign primarily for its social dimensions (the narcissism and attention-seeking nature of the movement). Thus, most reasons for non-participation boiled down to distaste for those social dimensions. Simultaneously, the most popular justifications for participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge were social reasons. The factors that were most cited by the focus group participants as the reason for the campaign’s success were the social pressure and the social validation that the campaign provided.

**Discussion**

The focus group discussions hosted more negative comments and opinions about the campaign than positive ones. Overall, the least appealing dimension of the campaign was that it catered so much to narcissism and attention seeking, as well as the fact that people completed the challenge for non-altruistic reasons. Despite all of the positive outcomes of the campaign in terms of money raised and awareness spread about ALS, most of the focus group participants could not look past this. Ultimately, it influenced many of their decisions not to participate in the campaign at all. As discussed in the literature review, Dawson’s study in 1988 and Edwards and Kreshel’s study in 2008 suggest that the most popular reasons for charitable actions and charitable giving are those that meet personal needs such as promoting one’s career or improving one’s self-esteem. This pattern of giving or participating in causes for non-altruistic reasons has persisted, and yet people are still very critical. Given this idea, a challenge moving forward for strategic communicators will be convincing people of how beneficial charitable giving and actions are in any capacity, if even not for the most altruistic reasons. If communicators could reconcile this conflict to the publics’ minds, it could generate many more successes for philanthropic activity.

Other issues with the campaign stemmed not from any inherent principles of the challenge, but rather in how big it got. Again, despite the good it did for society, then general attitude towards the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge from the focus group participants was that it was too big, it was obnoxious, and it was annoying how much it took over social media during the summer.

The focus group sessions were held approximately six months after the craze hit its peak. The attitudes of the majority of focus group participants in all three sessions started with skepticism, distaste and negativity. As conversations moved along throughout the sessions, though, and people were reminded of the good impacts of the movement, the participants warmed up to these idea and ended conversations on high notes about the campaign. That’s not to say that the focus group sessions changed anyone’s opinions about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, nor was that the intention. Rather, this pattern reflected that after several months to forget about the campaign, when reminded of it and prompted to discuss it, it initially elicited many negative opinions. Nekmat suggests that those who create messages have the greatest attitudinal changes (2010). Given this, it’s likely that the reason for such negative sentiments and attitudes towards the challenge are closely related to the fact that most focus group participants did not complete the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. Additionally, a lot of the conversations in support of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge stemmed from those who did complete it. Though those who completed the challenge had their own skepticism and critiques, Nekmat’s research would suggest that their long-term attitudes in support of the challenge came from the fact that they crafted their own messages to participate in the movement.

Regardless of completion of the challenge, many focus group participants wavered between negative and positive opinions about the craze. Negative comments were often followed up by a positive remark about the campaign’s success. Not a single person from any of the three groups had a firmly positive or firmly negative opinion about the craze. The campaign was obviously controversial. It had many dimensions and many reasons to be both praised and critiqued. The participants were able to see merits on both ends of the spectrum. Although certain ideas were pushed back on, no one vocalized vehement disagreement with anyone about their opinions.

Coinciding with the idea that no one was radically outraged by the campaign, most of the reasons that focus group participants gave for non-participation in the movement were passive. People were apathetic, if anything, about the movement, which was what kept people from participating, rather than an active and outward stance against the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. For those that were less apathetic and more disapproving of the movement, they gave a combination of both passive and active reasons for their non-participation. The most prominent active reason for non-participation in the campaign was to avoid the narcissism and attention that creating a video or post entailed. Participants were very turned off by the notion that something presumably for a social good could be used for selfish reasons of social validation and attention seeking. The reasons given by participants for their decision to complete the challenge in many instances affirmed the concerns of non-participants. A few non-participants expressed their distaste with the idea that people made videos just because it was trendy, all the while, multiple people who completed the challenge cited the fact that “other people were doing it” as one of their reasons. Similarly, many non-participants in the challenge criticized the idea that people made videos to avoid donating money, all the while, four of the seven focus group participants who completed the challenge did not donate money.

Ultimately, social perception played a large role in the decision-making process of participation in the campaign. While non-participants in a few instances argued that it is dumb for people to do something simply because of the social perception of looking good, their reasons for non-participation also reflected heavily a desire to be perceived well socially. Many chose not to participate to avoid looking or being perceived a certain way (narcissistic, disingenuous, etc.). These ideas affirm theories of social facilitation that indicate that audiences continually influence performativity and decision-making (Zajonc, 1965). Shu-Chuan and Yoojung cited their own factors that they believe characterize social relationships and influence electronic word-of-mouth dynamics: tie strength to an individual, homophily (having the same interests), trust of an individual, and an individual’s amount of interpersonal influence (2011). Two of Shu-Chuan and Yoojung’s reasons (tie strength to an individual and an individual’s amount of interpersonal influence), surfaced at multiple points in the conversations. Participants talked about how they did (not) complete the challenge because of who nominated them and how close they were to them, as well as how popular an individual was and if they felt the need to do something for his or her validation.

The viral nature of the campaign is what people nationwide could not stop talking about. After the media picked it up, it was inescapable. You couldn’t log onto an SNS, read the newspaper, or watch television without hearing some mention of the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. Though the campaign was not officially funded or sponsored by a specific organization, it operated like a fully strategized public relations campaign. It’s worth considering the fact that it was not strategized, though, and that perhaps this may have had something to do with its success. The notion that the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge started as a grassroots movement was not mentioned a single time in any of the three focus groups. I expected there to be praise for the fact that an idea that got so big started innocently with a community of people looking to give support to someone suffering from ALS. When I brought this point up at the close of the sessions, people were mostly unaware that that was what had happened.

In looking at what specifically made the campaign go viral, the focus group participants cited many factors that they believed made the success possible. Again, the social dimension to the campaign surfaced as one of the leading factors. The social nature is now something that other organizations and causes are trying to emulate on SNSs in their campaigns. The entertainment value, the accessibility, the timing, the creativity, and the fact that it was for a good cause were other reasons given by the focus group participants for the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge’s success. These elements, though, are present in a number of other social movements. Focus group participants strongly emphasized that it was not just one factor that led to the campaign’s success, but rather a combination of all these things and other unseen factors. Something simply being “for a good cause,” is no longer reason enough for it to sustain support. There are so many organizations and causes competing for time, space, money, and attention. One focus group participant wondered if anything could ever come close to doing what the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge did, or if it was a one-and-done scenario that could only ever be followed by copycat movements.

While considering the factors that led to the movement’s success, several focus group participants voiced the futility of such a discussion. They cited luck as a reason for the movement’s success, and that’s something that just can’t be recreated. If not just luck, focus groups said that the success of the campaign was simply a convergence of factors in the right place at the right time, again alluding to the fact that there is no set formula for making things go viral. Another focus group participant voiced that he hopes no one ever figures out such a formula:

I really hope they don’t figure out how to make things viral. Like, I hope nobody ever figures out what makes things viral, cause I don’t know, it’s fun to see what people let surface. –Adam, 21, senior

**Implications and Future Research**

The focus group discussions about the ALS Ice Bucket challenge gave a good window into millennials’ thought processes about navigating SNSs. SNSs are a resource of increasing value to different brands and causes in capturing millennials’ attention. An overall takeaway of the discussion about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is that college students are not necessarily averse to the idea of using social media for social good or activism campaigns. However, you would be hard-pressed to develop a campaign that meets the needs of a diverse group of people such as college students. There might be certain ways in which a cause could direct its efforts to reach particular types of users, but the divisions in thought surrounding the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge speak to the fact that people are very critical, and not everyone is able to be appeased.

It’s also worth considering that people are naturally critical of novelty. Using SNSs for social activism and social good is a relatively new concept, as SNSs have more traditionally been used for communication and meeting social needs. In Cohen’s 2012 study, he encouraged people to reframe their understand of social media as a “social energy that can be amplified in the need for social change.” This is an idea that has been met with resistance. As SNS users warm up to this idea of using social media for social good, general resistance towards campaigns like the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge might break down. I see a real challenge in the future for organizations that want to use SNSs to reach people being the ability to retain SNS users. For those who are resistant to the idea that SNSs might expand their function to be a tool for social good and advocacy, as the “social” nature of social networking sites becomes removed, they may no longer feel a need to use them. Thus, this may exclude a very valuable potential pool of people as targets for support. These ideas should be looked into further as causes toy with the idea of using SNSs to promote their platforms.

Though the focus groups are purely a qualitative means for analyzing data, it’s worth considering that of those that completed the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, six out of seven identified as females. Gender and social media use is an interesting area of research that could reveal some key insights to public relations professionals and campaign planners.

In terms of further research about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, more quantitative analysis of the statistics of the campaign could be helpful in determining how and why the campaign got its momentum. Particularly, data about the phases and timing of the campaign, the influential people who pushed the movement furthest, and demographics of the campaign would be helpful information. My focus groups only looked at college students’ opinions of the movement. Looking at both younger and older populations might tell a much different story, though.

Finally, one factor that was not discussed in any of the three groups was how algorithms on SNSs can have a large impact on what SNS users view and engage with online. There was no discussion on if the way the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge physically appeared on users’ newsfeeds impacted their attitudes towards the movement or their decision to participate. This is particularly interesting if you consider how incentivized users are by getting ‘likes.’ Facebook in particular grouped posts about the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge at the top of peoples’ newsfeeds. The fact that the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was so “inescapable” can largely be attributed to these algorithms. This is a huge area of research that should be considered in the future, especially ideas concerning how public relations practitioners might use these algorithms to effectively reach SNS users.

**Limitations**

While focus group discussions can elicit in-depth thought and provide many helpful insights, these findings are not indicative of the population as a whole. Each focus group session had a few people who dominated the conversations as well as participants who hardly said anything unless directly engaged. This was my first time moderating a focus group, and my inexperience may have made the discussion less fruitful than it could have been. One way in particular I could have improved as a moderator would have been to ask questions without leading or fishing for certain answers. Ultimately, the groups did well to follow a natural flow of discussion, and I learned tips from each session that allowed me to do better in the leading the following sessions.

Another limitation is that many of the focus group participants knew each other and knew me. There was a tendency to make jokes about the subject matter because of this. The joking nature of some of the comments is hard to articulate in reporting findings. Additionally, jokes are more often made for their ability to make others laugh than because of a true sentiment felt by its speaker. Because many of the focus group participants knew each other they may not have been completely truthful in the discussions for fear of what their true opinions might make others think of them.

I originally intended to have focus groups divided based off of whether someone did or did not complete the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. This division was intended to keep people from trying to argue their positions against one another. Because of limitations in time and weather issues, this was not possible. Ultimately, though, the groups worked without these divisions. Additionally, it was difficult to find people who had completed the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. I am unaware if this reflects that most college students who were nominated did not complete the challenge, or if it was coincidental. If it does not reflect the larger population, results may be slightly skewed.

Additionally, this study was carried out in a limited geographical location, as it only included college students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Further research would be beneficial to see if similar results were found at other universities across the nation.

**Conclusion**

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was an important movement that saturated SNS feeds in the summer of 2014. Over $100 million was raised for the ALS Association, just one of the many charities that supports activities and research for ALS. In 2013 in the same time period that the Ice Bucket Challenge had its moment, the ALS Association only raised $2.8 million. That’s an increase of 3,500% in one year, and it can indubitably be attributed to the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge (Diamond, 2014). To say this movement was insignificant or inconsequential would be to ignore some serious statistics.

SNSs are a major up-and-coming source for revenue and awareness for many important causes, ideas, and brands. Successful public relations professionals and other communications entities cannot ignore the potential of SNSs and expect to stay afloat. As researchers and professionals look into the best ways to navigate this field, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge in an incredible reminder of the potential impact of a simple social media post.

**Appendix A:** Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire:

**1. Do you have an account on any of the following social media sites? (Circle all that apply):**

Facebook Instagram Twitter Vine Tumblr YouTube

**2. For each account that you circled, estimate how many hours per day you spend on each site:**

Facebook Instagram Twitter Vine Tumblr YouTube

**3. During this summer (June-August 2014), did you notice a social media craze called the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge?** Yes/No

**4. If yes, how did you first find out about the challenge?**

Social media news feed Word of mouth Newspapers/online news articles

Other (please specify)

**5. Were you nominated for the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge?** Yes/No

**6. Did you participate in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge by (please select all that apply):**

[ ]Creating a video for the challenge

[ ]Dumping ice over your head

[ ]Donating money to ALS research

[ ]Helping someone film or complete a challenge

[ ]Nominating others for the challenge

[ ]Sharing videos/articles to promote the challenge

[ ]Other (please specify):

7. If you were nominated for the challenge, who nominated to you and what is their relationship to you? (please be as specific as possible)

8. If you participated in the challenge and nominated others, who did you nominate and what is their relationship to you (please be as specific as possible)

9. If you participated in the challenge by posting a video to social media, on what platform did you make your post?

**Appendix B:** Focus Group Guide

Investigator will collect consent forms.

**For focus groups:**

“Welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group.”

“The purpose of this research study is to understand better why public relations campaigns have success online, what contributes to their success and virality, and what incentivizes people to give to charitable organizations through these campaigns.

Many college students participated in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. The millennial generation played a large role in the success of the movement. As such, in an attempt to understand the reasons for the success, I am going to talk to you about why you chose to participate (or not to participate) in the movement. In order to have a full picture about your thought processes, I will also ask you about your general behaviors on social media as well as your general habits of charitable giving.”

**For focus groups:**

“We’d like to remind you that to protect the privacy of focus group members, all transcripts will be coded with pseudonyms and we ask that you not discuss what is discussed in the focus group with anyone else.”

“The focus group/interview will last about one and a half hours and we will audiotape the discussion to make sure that it is recorded accurately.”

“Do you have any questions for us before we begin?”

**Question Guide:**

Ice Breaker Question: What is your favorite social media site and why?

Engagement Questions:

(1): When using social media, how would you describe the type kind of user you are (active poster, passive observer, etc.)?

(2): When scrolling through your timeline/social media feeds, what kinds of posts draw your attention to click on?

Exploration Questions:

(3): Think back to when the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge started. What were your first impressions?

(4): How did you feel about the craze when it started to take over social media sites?

(5): Did your thoughts about the challenge change from your initial impressions?

(6) If you participated in the challenge, why? If you did not participate in the challenge, why not?

(8) How extensive was your knowledge of ALS before the craze? Do you feel like you know more now that the craze happened?

Exit Questions:

(9) Be it you participated or not, do you have any criticisms of the challenge? Praises?

(10): Do you have any other thoughts you’d like to add regarding the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge?

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