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# The Dual Axis Contingency Continuum: A Framework for Understanding Crisis Communication in Context with Digital Social Justice Advocacy

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# **The Dual Axis Contingency Continuum: A Framework for Understanding Crisis Communication in Context with Digital Social Justice Advocacy**

Erin Eckert

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department  
of Communication at Trinity University in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with  
departmental honors.

April 29, 2021

Date

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**The Dual Axis Contingency Continuum: A Framework for Understanding  
Crisis Communication in Context with Digital Social Justice Advocacy**

Erin Eckert

Department of Communication, Trinity University

Honors Thesis

## **Abstract**

In the summer of 2020, the intersection between crisis communication and social justice activism grew as companies responded to the murder of George Flyod, and the call for support of the Black Lives Matter movement. The goal of this project was to understand the new and unique role social media has played in the relationship between public relations and social justice, and how that presented itself in the Black Lives Matter Movement of June 2020. The contingency theory of public relations was the most applicable model to understand and represent the public relations response to the Black Lives Matter movement. To judge the model and see if the contingency continuum was still the best model for analyzing companies' crisis communication plans, responses were collected from major American corporations, categorized by trends in the responses to the BLM protests, and then compared to the existing framework, the contingency continuum, in order to look for discrepancies. While some aspects of the original model seemed accurate, it did not fully describe the behavior presented in the data collected on company responses. The new dual-axis contingency continuum was created to both mitigate the problems with the continuum and better represent the communication environment and strategies present in the time period studied. Examples of company responses used in the project are highlighted at the end of the paper to exemplify how the new model categorizes them as compared to the old model.

*Keywords:* Crisis communication, social media, social justice, Black Lives Matter, brand activism, contingency continuum, corporate social responsibility, CSR

## **Introduction**

In the summer of 2020, the intersection between crisis communication and social justice activism grew as companies responded to the murder of George Floyd, and the call for support of the Black Lives Matter movement. The social media pages of many American businesses and corporations were branded with black squares filled with generic statements of support, promises of money, and apologies of shortcomings. Statements were written, posted, deleted, and rewritten. As a member of the public, the months were emotional and confusing. For public relations professionals, personal ideologies and cultural trends seemed to clash with traditional public relations practices.

This project had the unique affordance of studying this phenomena directly after its occurrence and was well positioned to dissect distinct and unique strategies from the sea of statements made. Ultimately, the goal was to understand the new and unique role social media has played in the relationship between public relations and social justice, and how that presented itself in the Black Lives Matter Movement of June 2020.

## **Public Relations and Social Justice**

One of the core objectives in public relations work is refining and controlling companies' conversations with their communities. In many cases, companies are asked to respond to concerns about social justice and equity. You can trace these occurrences back to the foundations of modern-day public relations with professionals like Ivy Lee, who in the early 1900s reframed Rockefeller's image with hopes that American's would forget his past as an exploitive oil baron. Another example of social justice work tied to public relations is Doris Fleischman, who used her husband, Edward Bernay's, position in public relations to push a feminist agenda of her

own.<sup>1</sup> Companies have always had a responsibility to be aware of societal changes, and have let their public relations teams work to control the response.

## **Public Relations and Social Media**

Initially, social media sites, such as Instagram and Facebook, were built with the intention of connecting individuals with one another. In the letter from Mark Zuckerberg to potential investors, he wrote, “Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission - to make the world more open and connected.”<sup>2</sup> Language like “friends” and “followers” suggested individuals should open their lives to people they knew or people they wanted to know better via the internet. As with many things in the United States, the service was quickly commodified. For example, in 2013, only three years after the launch of Instagram, the company introduced ads in the form of sponsored posts. A year later, they provided a dashboard for companies to track analyzing impressions, reach, and frequency related to ad campaigns and individual ads. Twitter and Facebook were releasing similar tools in this same time period.<sup>3</sup>

Social media users have come to not only be familiar with corporate accounts on social media but actively search for them and rely on them. According to a blog post from Hootsuite by Christina Newberry, published in 2021, “81% of people use Instagram to help research products and services, and 2 in 3 people say the network helps foster interactions with brands.”<sup>4</sup> Statistics

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<sup>1</sup>The Museum of Public Relations. (2015). Public Relations Through the Ages: A Timeline of Social Movements, Technology Milestones and the Rise of the Profession. The Museum of Public Relations. <https://www.prmuseum.org/pr-timeline>.

<sup>2</sup> Sengupta, S., & Miller, C. C. (2012, February 02). 'Social mission' Vision Meets Wall Street. Retrieved April 10, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/technology/social-mission-vision-meets-wall-street.html/>

<sup>3</sup> SOCi. (2019, April 04). [Infographic] the evolution of instagram ads. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.meetsoci.com/blog/infographic-evolution-instagram-ads/>

<sup>4</sup>Newberry, C. (2021, February 03). 44 Instagram statistics that matter to marketers in 2021. Retrieved April 10, 2021, from

provided by Instagram tell us that 90% of users follow at least one business.<sup>5</sup> YouTube and Instagram are two of the largest “search engines” after Google.

As connections grow between consumers and businesses, social media accounts of businesses are often managed by public relations professionals in order to regulate voice and content across communication channels. Public relations professionals are now often on the front line of handling complaints, as social media platforms are also where many consumers will go to complain about a brand or a service and expect a response. Cision found that 59% of small businesses report that facilitating customer service through social media makes it easier to get issues resolved.<sup>6</sup> This matches the audience’s views on the situation, according to a study by Clutch, as “more than three-quarters of people (76%) expect companies to respond to comments on social media, and 83% expect brands to respond to these comments within a day or less.”<sup>7</sup> If those concerns are mitigated quickly and professionally, it can often save a company from having to do more in-depth and costly crisis management in the future. In the same survey, they found seventy-two percent (72%) of people are likely to recommend a company to others if they have a positive social media experience with that company. Direct access to consumers is seen as a blessing to many professionals, but it also means that they can be easily criticized, called out, or called upon to voice their opinion on a tough subject matter. The new level of access leaves little to no room to hide. The cybersecurity researcher Ann Van den Hurk drives home this point

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<https://blog.hootsuite.com/instagram-statistics/#:~:text=81%25%20of%20people%20use%20Instagram,helps%20foster%20interactions%20with%20brands>.

<sup>5</sup> Instagram for business. (2021). Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://business.instagram.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Dougert, B. (2018, August 30). 77 percent of U.S. small businesses use social media for sales, marketing and customer service. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/77-percent-of-us-small-businesses-use-social-media-for-sales-marketing-and-customer-service-300704921.html>

<sup>7</sup> Cox, T. A. (2018, November 1). How social media is Transforming PR and The consumer-business relationship. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://clutch.co/pr-firms/resources/how-social-media-transforming-pr-consumer-business-relationship>

in her book *Social Media Crisis Communications* when she writes “Gone are the days when an organization’s greatest fear was a news crew showing up to ask probing questions. With social media, everyone has a voice and can broadcast it to millions.”<sup>8</sup> She emphasizes that social media can both be a tool to help companies out of a crisis, but it can also be a cause of a communications crisis.

### **The Black Lives Matter Movement**

Black Lives Matter can trace its roots back to 2013. After the acquittal of the police officer who murdered Trayvon Martin, the organization was founded with the purpose of eliminating white supremacy and bringing a voice to black individuals in the U.S., the U.K, and Canada. The organization acknowledges the intersectional experiences of its members, and works to center black success and joy, while also fighting to “affirm their humanity in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>9</sup>

The organization, founded by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors, works primarily through grassroots movements, and by engaging with politicians from all political parties to call out injustice and push for reform. While their work over the past seven years should not be underestimated or understated, there was a distinct change in the public awareness of the organization in 2020. According to an article by Nate Cohen and Kevin Quealy of the New York Times, public support for the Black Lives Matter movement increased as much in the first two weeks of June as it has in the last two years. They cited data from the research firm Civiqs, that a majority of American voters supported the movement with a 28-point margin, which was

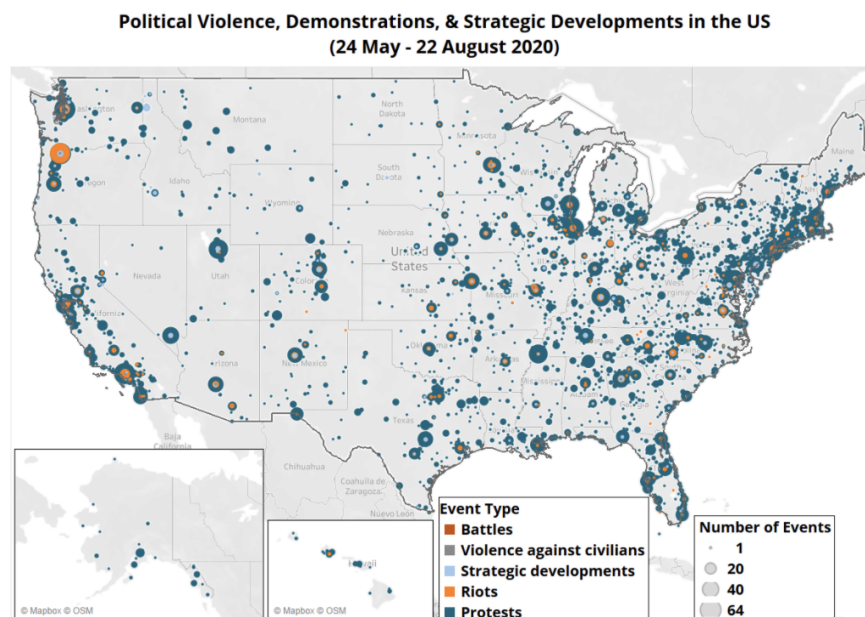
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<sup>8</sup> Van den Hurk, A. (2013). *Social Media Crisis Communications: Preparing for, Preventing, and Surviving a Public Relations #Fail*. [electronic resource] (1st edition). Que.

<sup>9</sup> About. (2020, October 16). Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>



increased from a 17-point margin.<sup>10</sup> On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was a victim of police brutality in Minneapolis. After the video of his death went viral, there were mass protests against police brutality across the U.S., many of them organized by members of the Black Lives Matter organization. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) recorded “over 7,750 demonstrations linked to the BLM movement across more than 2,440 locations in all 50 states and Washington, DC” between May 26 and August 22.<sup>11</sup> Worldwide, ACLED reported “at least 8,700 demonstrations in solidarity with the BLM movement.” It is also important to note that the majority of these demonstrations were peaceful, with fewer than 570, or approximately 5%, involving demonstrators engaging in violence.



<sup>10</sup> Cohen, N., & Quealy, K. (2020, June). How US Public Opinion Has Moved on Black Lives Matter. Retrieved April 10, 2021, from <https://www.gooriweb.org/news/2000s/2020/nyt10june2020.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Kishi, R. (2021, February 11). Demonstrations & political violence in America: New data for summer 2020. Retrieved April 10, 2021, from <https://acleddata.com/2020/09/03/demonstrations-political-violence-in-america-new-data-for-summer-2020/>

The protest quickly became politicized, as many conservative politicians used the group's anti-police sentiments as an excuse to disregard the group completely as 'radical' and 'unamerican.' Former President Donald Trump, further politicized the conversation by sending out inflammatory tweets comparing the group to a terrorist organization, and by threatening violence on protestors if things were escalated.

The public also took to social media and there was a wide variety of responses. Research from the Pew Research Center helps put into perspective the wide public awareness of the movement. According to a study published on June 10, 2020, "on May 28, nearly 8.8 million tweets contained the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag" which was "the highest number of uses for this hashtag in a single day since the Center started tracking its use."<sup>12</sup> In comparison, there were only 86,000 posts containing the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag on May 7, two days after the video of black jogger Ahmaud Arbery's murder emerged.<sup>13</sup> Some people displayed their outrage about the death of George Floyd and tried to educate themselves and others about racial injustice. Some people expressed sympathy for victims of police brutality, but reprimand the protestors for getting too "violent" or causing chaos. Some Americans used social media to defend police officers. And naturally, there were all sorts of responses that fell within the categories above. One clear result was how the social media conversation brought to light the larger issue of racial injustice in the United States' policing system and racial inequities present in society.

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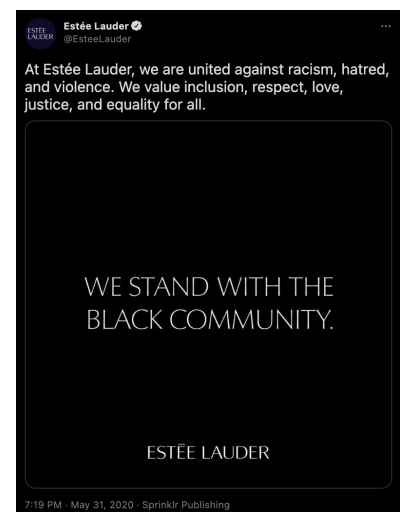
<sup>12</sup>Anderson, M., Barthel, M., Perrin, A., & Vogels, E. (2020, August 28). #BlackLivesMatter surges on Twitter after George floyd's death. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/blacklivesmatter-surges-on-twitter-after-george-floyds-death/>

<sup>13</sup>Anderson, M., Barthel, M., Perrin, A., & Vogels, E. (2020, August 28). #BlackLivesMatter surges on Twitter after George Floyd's death. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/06/10/blacklivesmatter-surges-on-twitter-after-george-floyds-death/>

## Public Relations Response to Black Lives Matter

During the summer of 2020, there was also a massive push for companies to release a statement about their viewpoints on the subject of Black Lives Matter. As explained in an article published on June 13, 2020, by the *Washington Post*, companies were “pushed by employees in some cases, and in others by a fear of losing customers.” but were all “being forced to examine their roles in perpetuating inequalities in hiring, pay and promotion, fostering toxic workplace cultures and consumer discrimination.”<sup>14</sup> The public wanted to know how these corporations were going to act to change things, either internally in their practices or financially by supporting relevant causes.

Most major American companies, and a large number of small to medium-sized businesses, used their social media platforms to make some sort of statement around the subject. Some expressed explicit support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Many also addressed concerns of race within their own businesses, pledged money to relevant organizations, and expressed condolences for George Floyd's family and friends. Some of these responses, such as the ones from Starbucks<sup>15</sup> and Estée Lauder<sup>16</sup> were generic and cookie-cutter; pretty words in white font



<sup>14</sup>McGregor, J., & Jan, T. (2020, June 15). As big corporations say 'black lives matter,' their track records raise skepticism. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/13/after-years-marginalizing-black-employees-customers-corporate-america-says-black-lives-matter/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/Starbucks/status/1267528175870857216>

<sup>16</sup> <https://twitter.com/EsteeLauder/status/1267249275836252160>

written on black background. Other responses and actions were more unique. For example, as noted in the Washington Post, the founder of Reddit, Alexis Ohanian, resigned from the board with the instruction that should be replaced by Michael Seibel, who would become the first black director in the company's history.<sup>17</sup> Netflix also took a different approach in their response, moving over \$100 million dollars into black-owned banks, which in the long run supports lending to the Black community.<sup>18</sup> The scale of the response from corporations was unprecedented and overwhelming. While police brutality is nothing new in the US, this widespread response shocked many people, as companies often failed to make permanent changes after past tragic events that were similar to this occurrence.

While there are many factors into why the response was so different, one thing that is clear: Americans wanted to see a response from businesses and held them to high standards regarding those statements. According to a survey conducted by Mitto in July of 2020, more than half of American's have stated they are unlikely to buy from a brand in the future if they have a negative perception of brands' communication about the BLM movement. 38% of Americans believed that brands fell short of doing so in June of 2020.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> McGregor, J., & Jan, T. (2020, June 15). As big corporations say 'black lives matter,' their track records raise skepticism. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/13/after-years-marginalizing-black-employees-customers-corporate-america-says-black-lives-matter/>

<sup>18</sup> De La Merced, M. J. (2020, June 30). Netflix moves \$100 million in deposits to Bolster BLACK BANKS. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/30/business/dealbook/netflix-100-million-black-lenders.html#:~:text=The%20streaming%20giant%20will%20permanently,allowing%20them%20to%20lend%20more.&text=Netflix%20said%20on%20Tuesday%20that,that%20focus%20on%20Black%20communities.>

<sup>19</sup> Mitto. (2020, July 01). Three quarters of Americans expect public statements around Black Lives matter to be followed by action, yet one Third Believe brands have fallen short in communicating their plans from <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/three-quarters-of-americans-expect-public-statements-around-black-lives-matter-to-be-followed-by-action-yet-one-third-believe-brands-have-fallen-short-in-communicating-their-plans-301086711.html>

## **Contingency Theory of Public Relations**

The contingency theory of public relations is the most applicable model to understand and represent the public relations response to the Black Lives Matter movement. The contingency theory of accommodation was proposed by Glen T. Cameron in 1997 as an alternative to the normative theory, which was a widely utilized theory in communication research at the time.<sup>20</sup> Cameron explains that the normative theory relies heavily on game theory and suggests that in a scenario of conflict, parties could either accommodate their opponent or advocate for themselves. Their asymmetrical or symmetrical responses would then speak to how the resolution would go, and the theory suggests that pure accommodation by both parties is the best method of communication.

Cameron points out two major flaws with normative theory. First, if the two parties have a strong moral stance against each other, then accommodating would mean giving up their own ethics. Cameron used the example of a pro-life group accommodating with those advocating for easier access to abortion. If the pro-life group were to accommodate in this scenario, they would be defying their own ethical principles and defeating the purpose of the communication. Second, crisis communication is more multifaceted than a simple binary between accommodation and advocacy. As it is in most communication, crisis communication requires parties to give and take, and every scenario is different. Cameron quotes professionals' common use of the phrase "it depends" when answering questions about a communications scenario. The phrase "it depends" amplifies the complexity of crisis response, and shows how it is not reasonable to assume public relations practitioners would think about their response in such a linear way.

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<sup>20</sup>Cancel, A. E., Cameron, G. T., Sallot, L. M., & Mitrook, M. A. (1997). It Depends: A Contingency Theory of Accommodation in Public Relations. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9(1), 31–63.  
[https://doi-org.libproxy.trinity.edu/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0901\\_02](https://doi-org.libproxy.trinity.edu/10.1207/s1532754xjpr0901_02)

To mitigate the flaws in normative theory, the contingency theory puts advocacy and accommodation on a spectrum or ‘continuum’ between pure advocacy and pure accommodation. The contingency theory doesn’t suggest that one end of the spectrum is ethically “better” than the other. Rather the theory simply suggests that practitioners would use a variety of variables to determine where their client’s response should be.

Later, in a book titled “THINK”, co-authored by Cameron, in addition to Dennis L. Wilcox, Bryan H. Reber, and Jae-Hwa Shin, they break down the continuum into terms more specific to the actions which would be taken by practitioners. The terms don’t have steadfast definitions, but generally explain the type of behavior a company would be engaged in at each point in the continuum. From pure advocacy on the left, the terms go as follows: competing, litigation, arguing, competition, contending, compromising, avoiding, cooperation, collaborating, compromise, capitulation, apology, and restitution.<sup>21</sup>

### **Methods to Test the Continuum**

The purpose of the project was to see if the contingency continuum was still the best model for analyzing companies’ crisis communication plans, or if strategies had changed in such a dramatic way after the murder of George Floyd that a new model was needed. To conduct the research, responses were collected from major American corporations, categorized by trends in the responses to the BLM protests, and then compared to the existing framework, Cameron’s contingency continuum, in order to look for discrepancies.

The first step was choosing a list of companies. It was necessary to avoid using a list solely based on company income, such as the Fortune 500 list, because a company's profits do not

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<sup>21</sup> Wilcox, D. L., Cameron, G. T., Reber, B. H., & Shin, J. (2014). THINK public relations. Harlow: Pearson Education.

necessarily correlate to whether they are well known by the American public or that their opinions on social issues hold the most weight. The chosen list could have also come from a list of the “best” or most “ethical” corporations, but this would skew the sample towards companies who already had a strong history with communication around social justice, and wouldn’t be the best fit for the posed research question around the spontaneity of the responses in 2020. It was also important that the list be as updated as possible, as the event the research was based on happened recently, in the summer of 2020. Ultimately, the best fit was a list from the brand consultancy firm TENET, entitled “Top 100 Most Powerful Brands of 2020”.<sup>22</sup> According to the website, the TENET list analyzes a companies’ CoreBrand® Index (CBI) which takes into account finances but also high awareness and positive brand perceptions. It is important to note that the list is ever-changing, and the Top 50 companies on this list were pulled in September of 2020 to use for this research. The date the data was pulled is significant in the face of the coronavirus pandemic which started in the same year. The list of companies was pulled before the release of the vaccine, which changed the 2020 rankings substantially, placing some healthcare companies much higher on the list.

The next step was to collect the statements made by each company and make general notes and categorizations along the way. A spreadsheet compiled each of the company’s names, their CBI rank, links to their posts on Instagram and Twitter talking about BLM, and links to any letter or posting on their company websites that talked about the BLM movement. If a company had posted multiple times, that was made note of on the spreadsheet, but only the post that was the most relevant or informative was actually linked.

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<sup>22</sup> Top 100 most powerful brands of 2020. (2020). Retrieved September, 2020, from <https://tenetpartners.com/top100/most-powerful-brands-list.html>

## Results

After collecting the full sample, the company responses to the murder of George Floyd and in the context of the contingency continuum. To begin, the terms “pure advocacy” and “pure accommodation” had to be more formally defined on the continuum in reference to the issue of race in America. This way responses could be purposefully placed between the two points. In the new model, “pure advocacy” would be a company’s claim that they were not racist, or complicit in racist actions. In some cases of “pure advocacy”, the company also cites all of the things that they have done or will be doing, to be anti-racist as an example of their purity. However, this exemplification wouldn’t be a necessary qualification to fall into the category of “pure advocacy”. On the other hand, “pure accommodation” would be categorized as a company profusely apologizing for anything they had done to hurt their BIPOC employees, stakeholders, or customers and then making concrete and thorough plans to ‘repair’ and ‘restitute’ their actions. BIPOC stands for Black, indigenous, and ‘People of Color’. This umbrella term was used regularly during this time to both universally acknowledge the discrimination felt by all these groups, while also acknowledging that their experiences are unique and varied. The promises made by the companies to the public could consist of changed hiring practices, donations to relevant organizations, or mandatory Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity training for employees, just to name a few examples.

After making these distinctions, two major issues arose while trying to work with Cameron’s model. The first issue was the vagueness of the terms. As discussed earlier, the terms were often not detailed or were repetitive (ex, competition v competing, compromising v compromise). Many of the terms seemed frivolous, and poorly described the trends in the data.



The second issue was how the scale failed to provide enough distinction to accurately describe the behaviors of the companies. Often, two companies would be placed on the same point of the spectrum even though their responses seemed very different. This suggested that the existing spectrum wasn't detailed enough to capture the nuances of this situation.

Due to the trouble encountered with the contingency continuum, the next step was to examine the data outside of the bounds of the continuum, and see if any other trends emerged. During this process, the companies were organized into groups according to other patterns of behavior. In total, five general categories of behavior manifested. They were characterized as:

1. "Silent But Deadly" (SBD): This group was for those very few companies that made absolutely no statement on or about the matter in any way. Out of the 50 companies researched, only four were put on this list, Exxon Mobil, General Electric, Whirlpool, and Ford.
2. "Hit It and Quit It" (HIQI): The one-off statements made by the companies in this group lacked a certain authenticity and commitment to the issue of social justice. In many cases, these companies made big donations or promises, or linked to a blog post detailing changes to come, but never followed up with their publics or brought up the concerns again.
3. Life- long learners (LLL): These companies most likely wished they had been in Group Two. However, their original statements were critiqued enough by their publics that the companies had to go back and redo their statements, adding weight and action to their former posts of empty words.

4. “When The Spirit Moves Us” (WSMU): These are companies that made a statement in June about Black Lives Matter and social justice initiatives and have occasionally posted related content since.
5. “Full-Time Fighter” (FTF): These companies used their power and platform to become full-time social justice activists and regularly and strongly speak up for BLM and similar social justice movements.

There was also an interesting trend titled “Company, Not Brand.” In these cases, a company would own so many individual brands that it would make one statement for all of them instead of individually crafting messages for each of them. Take Pepsico. for example; the company owns the Pepsi brand, but also Quaker, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Cheetos, and Tropicana, just to name a few. Each of these individual brands has its own social media account, but instead of posting on all of them, Pepsi posted their statement about the matter on the Pepsi Co. social media account. By doing this, the statement got far less traction, and far fewer views, as the Pepsi Co. Instagram has 71.2 thousand followers, while Pizza Hut and Pepsi have a cool 1.7 to 1.8 million each.

These five groups did a better job representing a new aspect of the continuum but also weren’t fully descriptive of the data. Occasionally, a company would make multiple posts over time, but the content was generic. Likewise, another company would only speak up once, but their impact and actions helped the communities they were trying to serve in bigger ways. Not to mention the discrepancy of using one platform over another, and how missing a platform could account for varying differences in frequency. Overall, while some aspects of both the original

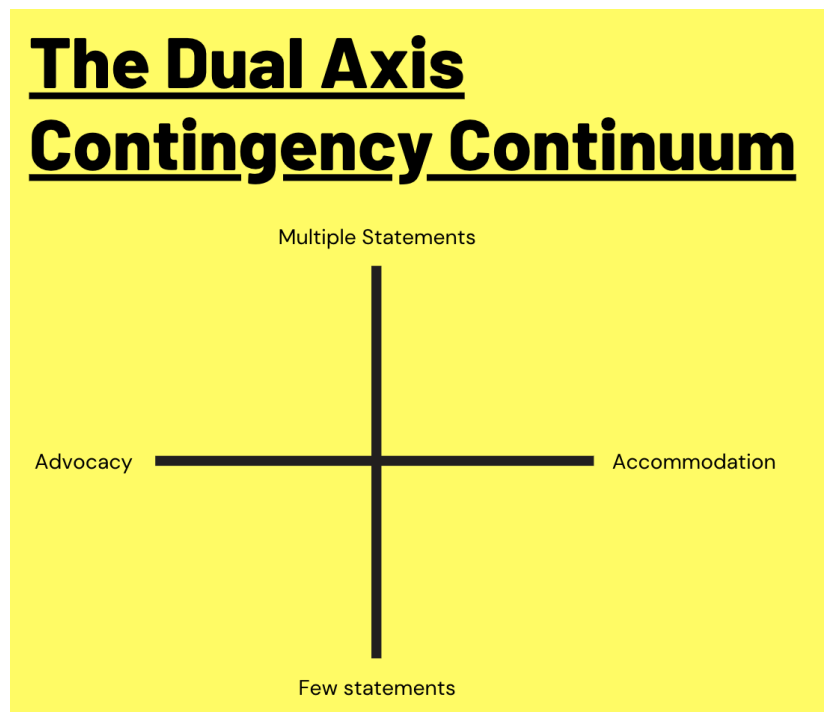
model and the five new groups seemed accurate, neither fully described the behavior presented in the data collected on company responses.

### **Dual Axis Contingency Continuum**

The new dual-axis contingency continuum both mitigates the problems with the continuum and better represents the communication environment and strategies present in and around the height of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. First and foremost, the new model is still a continuum, or gradual scale, as the first model was. This ensures that the original problems with normative theory are still solved, and the suggestions of binary or simple solutions are still dismissed. One change to the original axis is the elimination of the frivolous terms found in the book, “THINK.” They caused more confusion than their intended purpose of helpful guidance and therefore did not get brought along in the new model. The most important

change is the new y-axis, which represents the frequency of messaging. The furthest point down on the axis represents no messaging from the company, and the highest point represents frequent and consistent messaging over time. As seen in the five groups created with the company response data, frequency is an essential aspect of social media

communication, especially on platforms like Twitter and Instagram which have a culture of



active participants and easy access to content both old and new. First of all, it is simple for consumers to go back and see how often a company has posted and makes it an important variable. Furthermore, frequency suggests a certain level of commitment, which is needed when addressing a systemic and long-standing issue such as race and racism. Simply put, the new model adds needed complexity to describe the actions of companies.

### Application of the Dual Axis Model

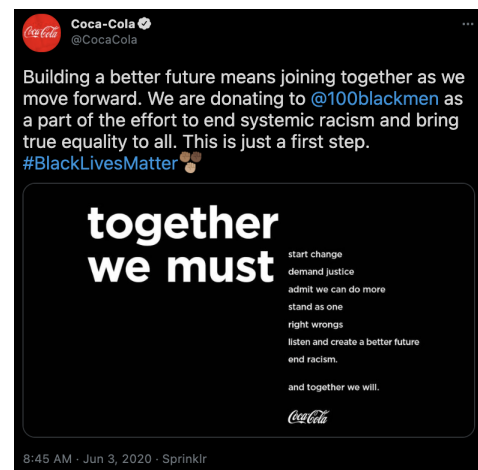
Looking at examples from the original data will help to exemplify the effect that the new dual-axis model has in differentiating company behavior. Companies, which would have otherwise been in the same category in Cameron’s model, but differentiated on the new model, will be directly compared in order to show the variety in different strategies.

#### Coke v. eBay

Coke first posted about racial justice on June 3, 2020, with a post on Twitter that read, “Building a better future means joining together as we move forward. We are donating to @100blackmen as a part of the effort to end systemic racism and bring true equality to all. This is just a first step.

#BlackLivesMatter.” The photo underneath was a black rectangle with white font which in large font on the left side read “Together We Must”. This was paired with a

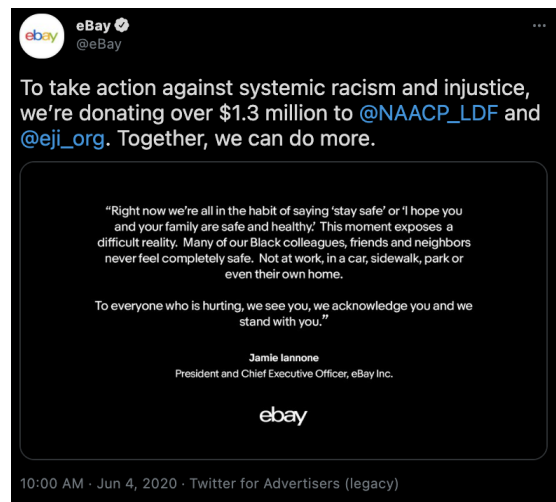
list, on the right side of the photo which in a smaller font listed “start change, demand justice, admit we can do more, stand as one, right wrongs, listen and create a better future, end racism” and then concluded with a statement slightly separated from the list which read “and together we



will.”<sup>23</sup> Over the next month, Coca-Cola continued to post about their “Together We Must” series, highlighting primarily Black and POC voices in the community, and the company, and spoke often of actions that the company was taking.

The original post on Twitter and Instagram was accompanied by a blog post by the chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola, John Quincey.<sup>24</sup> The message was originally shared with Coca-Cola employees during a virtual town hall on June 3, 2020. They posted it on their website as supplemental information to their consumers about what they were doing to make a difference in their communities and speak up on racial injustice. While they admitted their past mistakes in the blog post and did so in a transparent and regretful manner, they did not necessarily apologize. Rather, they focused on the actions they were taking and advocated for how successful Coca-Cola had been and will continue to be to fight racism.

eBay, posted the next day on June 4th. The caption read “To take action against systemic racism and injustice, we’re donating over \$1.3 million to @NAACP\_LDF and @eji\_org. Together, we can do more.” This was also accompanied by a graphic of white font on a black background. There was a quote from CEO Jamie Iannone reading, “Right now we’re all in the habit of saying ‘stay safe’ or ‘I hope you and your family are safe and healthy.’ This moment exposes a difficult reality. Many of our Black



<sup>23</sup> <https://twitter.com/CocaCola/status/1268176865967169537/photo/1>

<sup>24</sup> Quincey, J. (2020, June 3). Where we stand on social justice - news & articles. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/news/where-we-stand-on-social-justice>

colleagues, friends, and neighbors never feel completely safe. Not at work, in a car, sidewalk, park, or even their own home.” The message continued “To everyone who is hurting, we see you, we acknowledge you, and we stand with you.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike Coca-Cola, this was the first and last social media post eBay made on the issue. They also did not publish a blog post or larger company statements.

By inspecting these examples using Cameron’s model, both company responses would be placed on the left side closer to ‘advocacy’. All messaging focused on action (i.e ‘Together We Must’ and ‘Together, we can do more’) and insinuated the responsibility was on the consumers to come “together” with the brand in order to fight racism. They also both took specific action by donating large sums of money to relevant organizations. Ultimately, both companies advocated for the actions of their own brands during a time when American companies were facing scrutiny.

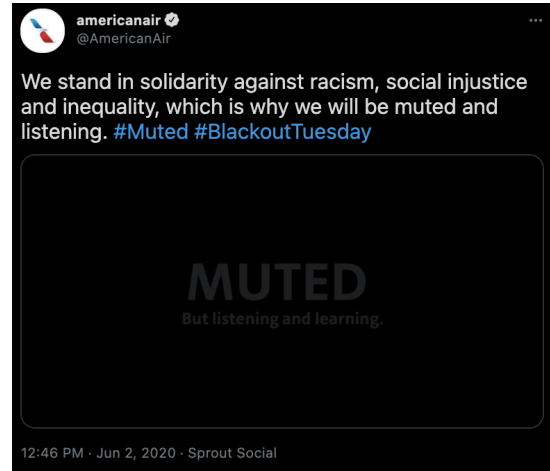
However, this isn’t representative of their communication as a whole. Should Coca-Cola, who committed their social media pages to talk about racism, and are still posting about racial justice and highlighting stories about Black Americans, be equated with the company who made one big statement and donation and then vanished? With the dual-axis model, Coca-Cola would be placed in the top left quadrant, while eBay would find itself somewhere in the bottom left quadrant of the model. This represents that while they had similar messaging strategies, their overall communication strategies were drastically different.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://twitter.com/eBay/status/1268558142259884033>

## **Exxon Mobil v. American Airlines**

A similar discrepancy is found when looking at examples from American Airlines and Exxon Mobil. Exxon Mobil didn't make any sort of statement about George Floyd's murder or about race in America. No social media posts, no blog posts, and no official statements. On the other hand, American Airlines did post but simply stated "We stand in solidarity against racism, social injustice, and inequality, which is why we will be muted and listening. #Muted #BlackoutTuesday". This was accompanied by a black graphic with dark grey text that read "muted but listening and learning."<sup>26</sup>



Once again, on Cameron's original model, both would be placed in the center, as they both avoided the crisis for the most part, and never made claims about their own company's actions. On the dual-axis model, however, Exxon Mobil would be at the bottom of the y axis, while American Airlines would be in the middle for at least acknowledging the crisis was happening.

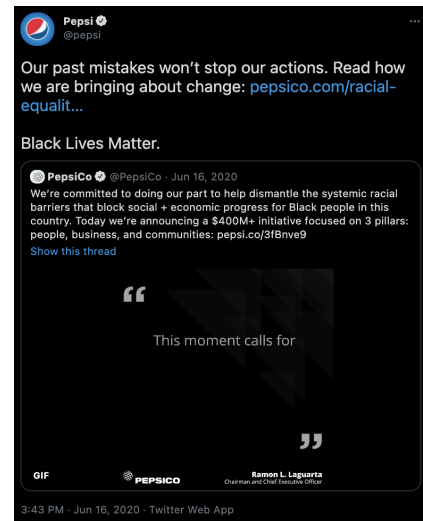
## **Pepsi/Pepsi Co. v. Estée Lauder**

Lastly, this distinction also applies when looking at companies who intended to apologize for their actions. In 2017, Pepsi had a very public social justice flub in the creation of an advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner which was criticized for trivializing the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>27</sup> Even three years later this felt fresh in the minds of the public, and Pepsi Co

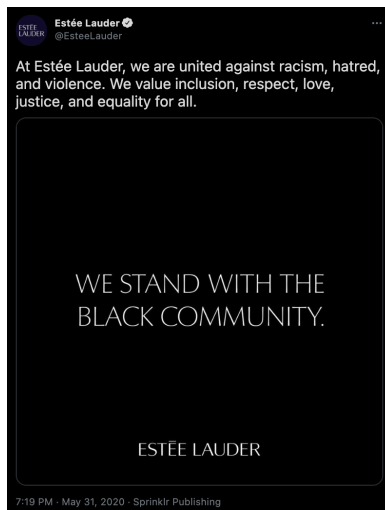
<sup>26</sup> <https://twitter.com/AmericanAir/status/1267875242652958721>

<sup>27</sup> Victor, D. (2017, April 05). Pepsi pulls Ad accused of TRIVIALIZING Black Lives Matter. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html>

strategically took a position of apology when making their statement in June of 2020. Pepsi's Twitter account reposted a statement from the PepsiCo account and added the caption "Our past mistakes won't stop our actions. Read how we are bringing about change [Link]. Black Lives Matter."<sup>28</sup> PepsiCo had posted a long thread outlining all of their many initiatives in order to make reparations for their actions, and help make a change in the future. There was also an accompanying blog post, in which Pepsi CEO Ramon Laguarta brought up past mistakes and the company's need to do more on several occasions. They positioned their actions as a 'journey', not one that they were beginning, but one that they were continuing on and working through.



Estée Lauder made a generic statement on May 31st that read, "At Estée Lauder, we are united against racism, hatred, and violence. We value inclusion, respect, love, justice, and



equality for all."<sup>29</sup> This seemed like it would be their only statement, but like many other beauty brands, Estée Lauder was called to answer "Pull Up for Change Challenge." This challenge was created by Sharon Chuter, founder, CEO, and creative director of Uoma Beauty when she noticed her peers in the industry posting about the Black Lives Matter movement.<sup>30</sup> She called them to share the percentages of Black employees in

<sup>28</sup> <https://twitter.com/pepsi/status/1272993302392995841>

<sup>29</sup> <https://twitter.com/EsteeLauder/status/1267249275836252160>

<sup>30</sup> Feldman, J. (2020, June 15). Pull up for change calls on brands to address their role in white supremacy. Retrieved February 28, 2021, from [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pull-up-for-change-sharon-chuter-uoma-beauty\\_1\\_5ee0cecdc5b6a457582a1539](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pull-up-for-change-sharon-chuter-uoma-beauty_1_5ee0cecdc5b6a457582a1539)



upper-level roles as a measure of their commitment to diversity and inclusion. Estée Lauder was also criticized on Twitter for their CEO's donations to the Trump campaign. After this criticism, Estée Lauder did the challenge, and then made another post that outlined the actions they were planning to take, including a donation to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

On the surface, both companies were apologetic and would have been placed on the right side of Cameron's model. However, PepsiCo was proactive, and they produced a lot more messages about the subject, which would place them in the top right quadrant of the dual-axis model. Estée Lauder was reactionary and posted as few times as possible in order to get their point across, which places them in the bottom right quadrant of the model.

Through these examples, we can see that Cameron's model is not a sufficient tool to understand crisis communication in the social media age and that the dual-axis model does a much more comprehensive job in explaining company behavior.



*Figure showing example companies placed on the dual-axis contingency model.*

## **Take-Aways**

One concern about the longevity of relevance for this theory is the true definition of advocacy. When it comes to traditional crisis communication and Cameron's original model, the line is simple: advocacy means a company is saying that they have done nothing wrong. When it comes to communication about social justice however, the distinction is blurry. Can a business advocate for a cause without advocating for themselves? The project operated under the assumption that any communication from a company is by some means a strategic choice and represents the image of the brand at large. With this assumption a business would not be able to advocate for a cause without it being somewhat of an advocacy of their own brand. However, if public opinion shifts, and there is a popular belief that brands are using their power and wealth for social good without wanting any personal gain, then the model would not accurately depict the distinction between advocacy for a company and advocacy for a cause.

Additionally, the dual-axis model is no substitute for a full and comprehensive crisis communication plan, which all companies should have. Instead, it is a tool companies can use to determine the types of responses they could have, and a framework for company executives and public relations teams to use when deciding on their responses. There is no one right answer when speaking up for what is right, but there is a strategy and thoughtfulness that comes with choosing the correct response for your business.