

# MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES IN A SOCIAL MEDIA CRISIS



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The evolution and accessibility of the Internet grants consumers the freedom of expression, including the opportunity to instantly share experiences, feedback, and opinions with any entities present in the online world. When there is a flood of negative messages online about a brand, a social media crisis, known also as an online firestorm, can be born.

This thesis aims to investigate possible situations in which a company could experience a social media crisis, and potential strategies to mitigate it, to attempt to reduce the brand damage and perhaps bring benefits for the company. The literature used in this research is about social media, word-of-mouth, brand crisis management, and online firestorms. The main research methods used are qualitative: previous research studies, observations, online content analysis, secondary data collection, case studies, and expert interviews.

Some of the main findings of this thesis are: electronic word-of-mouth is considered very reliable by the end consumer, online backlash has the means of escalating and spreading quickly, companies should have specialized departments and custom approaches when dealing with a brand crisis; and the ability to adapt the response strategy to a specific crisis as it unfolds, the consumer-brand relationship is key and should represent a priority in brand crises; there are potential hidden opportunities to benefit from in brand crises. This information could supply corporate representatives and other interested individuals with suggestions and directions on how to recognize and decrease a social media firestorm, as well as how to potentially take advantage of the situation to benefit the brand.

Keywords social media, online firestorm, branding, crisis management, word-of-mouth.

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## 1 Introduction

Along with the creation and evolution of the internet, starting in the 1950s, human interaction and communication have had an exponential transformation, aided by the constant innovation of technology and the increasing demand for new applications. These changes have affected people's lifestyles, consumer behaviour, industries, as well as businesses and the way they operate, as they had to adapt rather swiftly to a new and unknown territory, so as not to become obsolete (Cohen-Almagor, 2013.)

In present, social media is one of the most important parts of almost every individual's life and enterprises' existence. In simple terms, it can be considered a metamorphosis aided by technology of the traditional word-of-mouth networks, which have always been a powerful and credible system of propagating information. Through these means, a person can be part of social media networks, if they are an internet user, no matter their location or other aspects. Therefore, social media represents an instrument which companies should capitalize on for their brand and position in the market, especially from a marketing point of view, to be able to use it to their advantage in maintaining their reputation and longevity. Previous research and real-life cases have shown that when a company faces a crisis, for example, the use of this tool is the swiftest and most straightforward approach to obtain public sympathy and support, and to manage the situation (Wang, 2016, pp. 56-57; Sajithra K, 2013.)

Known figures and businesses that are in the public eye and present in the online communities and platforms have the responsibility to be attentive to their actions and words, especially on social media networks, as any post made on the internet can almost never be fully removed once other users have seen it. This is crucial in maintaining their reputation and credibility, since even the slightest blunder can be taken out of proportion by critics or irritate a fellow internet user, and momentarily incite intense and hostile emotions, which can lead to negative word-of-mouth dynamics and transform into an online firestorm. This is possible in the virtual world even if body language and other nonverbal communication cues are absent, as words on their own still hold a lot of meaning and importance. One of the downsides of being able to communicate so freely on the internet at

any time, from any place, is that the receiver interprets each message they receive in a personalized way, without the help of nonverbal communication, and often, it can lead to misunderstandings much easier than in real life (Rost et. al, 2016, p. 1.)

However, no matter how cautious a public figure or brand is with their online and offline interactions, it is human nature to make mistakes and expected that at some point something will happen that will immediately be scrutinized and criticized by the public. This includes all types of stakeholders that a brand has, even non-customers, who can transform the situation or event into an online firestorm, which can either lightly or gravely affect the company's image and revenue. Through the eyes of Gabriel Beltrone, "a surprising number of brands seem to have missed the memo: Tread lightly – you're just a visitor here (online)". For this reason, businesses must listen to their stakeholders and to invest resources in developing a proper brand crisis management strategy and a competent marketing team, primarily for managing their online presence and maintaining their reputation (2012, pp. 38-39.)

Due to the advancement of technology in the past decades and the rapid transition of practices in marketing, companies must adapt quicker and be more flexible. The level on which stakeholders have influence over brands in the current day causes plenty of newfound pressure for companies, which already invest their resources in updating their activities accordingly to any changes that occur in the industry and environment they perform in. If a brand is faced with a crisis, the company's marketers and executives have to analyse the situation and decide swiftly on a fitting approach to solve the situation, with as little damage as possible for the brand. They can either put in practice a traditional technique or an out-of-the-box concept, which can hold uncertainty, but could also prove to be a lot more effective. They have the urgent task to discover the most advantageous scenario for the brand as the situation unfolds, detecting possible opportunities even in the antagonistic opinions or actions displayed by the public (Beltrone, 2012, p. 38-39; Klaassen, 2009, p. 24.)

Through this bachelor thesis, the author tries to investigate possible situations in which a company can find itself involved in a digital brand crisis, and with the help of what strategies it could mitigate the situation to possibly minimize the brand damage and even benefit the company. It is fundamental for any business that they uphold their values, transparency, and

credibility in the best way possible in such detrimental circumstances. Therefore, this paper attempts to find potential answers to the following research question: How can a company take advantage of negative publicity in a social media brand crisis?

The author will provide a literature review of existing research and theory related to the paper's subject, including theoretical background of: the concept of social media, its origin, contemporary significance and implications for consumers and companies; word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth, and their importance in brand advertising and crises; brand crisis management; the concept of social media firestorms, their characteristics, examples, and possible strategies of detection, prevention, and mitigation. The author will also analyse case studies, conduct expert interviews, and present the relevance of this research by indicating the damages a social media brand crisis can inflict upon the affected company and the necessity of finding potential response strategies for digital brand crises, known also as social media firestorms, with the help of which the company could create brand value.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Social media**

The starting point for what we know as social media today was in the beginning of 1970s, with the invention of email by computer engineer Ray Tomlinson. The current concept of social media has been through many developing stages after that, with quite a few important milestones marked by the creation and expansion of different applications which facilitated internet users to share information, to have live interaction with a large group of people that had internet access from different geographical points, and to communicate easier and quicker their knowledge and thoughts (Sajithra K, 2013.)

The social media phenomenon represents the ability of internet users to utilize numerous types of platforms, such as blogs, sharing and social networking websites, wikis, to generate, edit, share, and review content online. This comes as an extension to the options that were available in the past, to only search and consume information on the internet. Thus, through social media, consumers have been offered more freedom in the virtual world, and as a result, they gained more influence over a company's existence. In this sense, some firms

have adapted quicker or slower to the current trends and swift change of consumers' behaviour, while others are still living with old concepts and disregard or refuse to learn new information and are reluctant to readjust their practices and strategies to the current demand. Often, this results from either lack of interest, ignorance, or ability to comprehend the meaning of social media, and how to use and engage with it. However, the latter have become rare cases in recent years, as in present, both consumers and companies are quite aware of the importance and impact of the online world, and especially of the social media ecosystem (Kietzmann et. al, 2011.)

In a survey from January 2021 published by Joseph Johnson, there were 4.66 billion active internet users worldwide, which translates to 59.5 percent of the global population, from which 4.32 billion accessed the internet through their mobile devices. Social media has a great influence over this significant number of internet users across the world, as they have been found to spend on average 144 minutes per day navigating social networking platforms. This results in countless opportunities for global brands to infiltrate in that time, on the screens of the consumers, advertisements promoting their products and services, as part of social media marketing (Tankovska, 2021.)

Tuten defines the concept of social media marketing as "the utilization of social media technologies, channels, and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for an organization's stakeholders" (2020, p. 19).

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, have removed all barriers from open communication online in various forms, which gives brands a real liberty of reaching their customers directly, with a speed and impact which was not possible before, even though that was their main goal since the beginning. It has revolutionized the existing marketing, communications, and selling/purchasing strategies, giving much more importance to the experience of buying and utilizing a good or service and to the consumer's feelings and feedback (Agresta et. al, 2010, p. 3.)

However, this online accessibility and freedom also presents some risks for brands, apart from all the opportunities. In present, there are around 4.2 billion active social media users (Johnson, 2021), who follow, post, share, comment and engage regularly with each other, as

well as with companies which are present online, and with their brands. Social media networks' virality, visibility, interactivity, and imminence, which are main characteristics, can bring both advantages, for example publicity, channels for advertising, building the brand's image and reputation, or gaining customers and fans, and disadvantages, such as negative publicity, public complaints, negative reviews, boycotting, or brand crises. Mennie classified the types of risks a company/brand may experience on social media in five broad categories: reputational, operational, information security, financial, and regulatory compliance (2015, p. 23-27) (Cooper et. al, 2019, p. 686.)

The reputational and operational social media risks pose the greatest and most direct threat to a brand's image and position in the market, out of all five categories, considering that unfavourable feedback expressed online has the tendency to spread quicker and on a broader scale. Inadvertent or ill-natured posts, deficient plan development or execution, and hashtag or account hijacking represent a few examples of reputational risk. Product or service failure, as well as the company's moderation procedures for posts on social media platforms are some examples of operational risk (Cooper et. al, 2019, p. 686.)

Because of the accessibility from anywhere in the world, at any time, and the unlimited sources of information, which can be credible or not, social media users are being bombarded with endless messages constantly and come across various types of advertisements for every product or service, which are usually available to purchase online. This excess of information typically overwhelms an individual, and their brain automatically filters the messages and chooses which to pay attention to and which to ignore. As a result, many internet users do not interact almost at all anymore with many of the brands that are present online. Instead of taking into consideration the usual targeted, vehement advertising and marketing communication, and using it in their decision-making process when buying a product or service, they prefer to resort to alternative and more casual methods. One of these, which receives the most trust from customers and influences their decision process considerably, is word-of-mouth (Lowenstein, 2011.)

## 2.2 Word-of-mouth (WOM) and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)

Differentiating itself from the traditional forms of one-way communication media channels, social media incorporates two-way communication, between the brands and consumers, which is a crucial aspect to take into consideration when creating marketing strategies for the online environment, compared to the offline one (Pan & Crofts, 2012, pp. 73-75).

Consumers have the freedom to express their opinions in an easy and effective way online about any aspect of a company, starting from their products and services, down to their presence in the online world. Therefore, when considering social media marketing practices, the classic, but highly efficient advertising and decision-making process of word-of-mouth (WOM) has been revived and transformed through social media, resulting in the concept of online or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). Even if they are based on the same theory, eWOM is considerably different from the offline WOM: the latter mainly occurs individually, in face-to-face communication, between a customer and the company or a small number of people, and if not recorded, the oral messages are succinct and short-lived. Meanwhile, the electronic word-of-mouth is more flexible, visible to the parties involved depending on the direction of the message, it is usually automatically recorded, hence it is enduring, the participants can be protected by anonymity, the messages can adopt various forms in text, image, video, or recording, and the communication type is always bidirectional or multidirectional (Barreto, 2014, pp. 635-638.)

Ana M. Barreto defined the concept of word-of-mouth as “an oral or written communication process between a sender and an individual or group of receivers, regardless of whether they share the same social network, with the purpose of sharing and acquiring information on an informal bases” (2014, p. 647).

WOM is a convenient way of saving time on a day-to-day basis, as it grants individuals the chance to exchange opinions and knowledge on different products or services, after they have been able to try them out and analyse their experience (Barreto, 2014, p. 639). This proves to be a trustworthy source to most consumers, as they hold it in high regard compared to other sources of information on a product/service: two-thirds of all consumer goods sales are believed to be influenced by word-of-mouth marketing (Tuten, 2020, p. 83).

WOM is believed to hold such importance in the customer's decision-making process of purchasing something also because it is part of human nature to feel the need to communicate with your peers and share your experiences or exchange information regarding common interests. It can be driven by the need to fit in the community, to be relatable, to show a sense of altruism and friendliness, or to seek compensation and retaliation. One important aspect is that the need for WOM may come from the desire to reduce the possible risk involved when purchasing a product/service an individual has not tried before, thus seeking the approval of other users and collecting other relevant information. Hence, based on previous research, the reasons for which consumers engage in brand WOM can be classified in three major types of motives: social, emotional, and functional (Barreto, 2014, p. 640; Lovett, 2013, p. 428.)

Currently, eWOM represents a powerful source of gathering customer experiences, which influence other consumers and their purchasing behaviour through their credibility. To illustrate this influence, according to a Local Consumer Review Survey from 2020 conducted in the US, 87% of consumers are interested in and search for online reviews for local businesses, 92% of consumers are less likely to purchase from a business if it has numerous negative reviews, for 79% of consumers online reviews are as important direct recommendations from friends or family, and just 48% of consumers would consider purchasing from a business that scores less than 4 stars on review websites (Murphy, 2020). In general, consumers are interested in searching and reading electronic WOM to be able to compare products or brands, to assess the quality of a product or brand, to support their decision when purchasing a product, to find people with similar interests or concerns, or just for entertainment purposes. Moreover, consumers are motivated to write and share eWOM due to a few main reasons: the intention to help others, the need to offer the company feedback on the product or service, a feeling of justice and authority, the satisfaction or disappointment with their purchase, reasons related to self-esteem, the expectation and desire for compensation of a negative purchasing experience, the wish to express their positive or negative feelings (Nam et. al, 2020.)

In the context of marketing, word-of-mouth can be categorized as positive or negative, for brand representatives to be able to determine in which category their customers engage more, why, and how it affects the brand. It has been observed that consumers will engage in

WOM regardless of if they are satisfied, with positive WOM, or dissatisfied, with negative WOM, with how a product or service performed. Accordingly, one might conclude that positive WOM is more likely to come from loyal customers who would act as promoters of the brand (Barreto, 2014, pp. 641-642.)

Contrary to that belief, the consumers who might be considered loyal to a brand tend to engage more in negative WOM rather than positive WOM, as they feel more affected by their dissatisfaction with a favoured brand's product or service performance and feel the need to discuss it with others. It is more often negative WOM than positive WOM as they became loyal to the brand because they were always satisfied with the value offered by that company. Therefore, in most cases, satisfaction influences positive WOM more than the loyalty of a consumer (Barreto, 2014, pp. 642-643.)

One of the disadvantages of WOM marketing is that marketers have no control over what kind of message spreads and how, as people have the tendency to alter the original message or meaning when they broadcast it to others. However, this could also strengthen the credibility of the message to prospective customers, as they perceive it being more honest and organic. Nonetheless, from a marketing perspective, understanding the phenomenon of WOM and being able to recognize the reasons for its manifestation can help remarkably in improving the advertising and operating strategies of a company which wants to achieve specific referral targets (Barreto, 2014, pp. 645-648.)

The accessibility of social media platforms has opened new prospects for people to participate in public dialogues, which include new forms of protest in the digital sphere. Thus, an online firestorm can be born, when an online protest escalates and there is an incursion of opinions and actions in the form of posting, liking, or sharing messages which contain negative word-of-mouth and condemning demeanour (Gruber et. al, 2020.)

### **2.3 Social media firestorms: digital brand crises**

Pfeffer, Zorbach, and Carley define firestorms as "the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks" (2014). Online firestorms are collective activities, which

include elements such as hostile, offensive, or profane expressions, and hate speech (Gruber et. al, 2020).

Social media firestorms can represent a modern, digital manifestation of the brand crisis phenomena. The reasons and causes of a traditional brand crisis coincide with the ones of a social media firestorm, as they are linked to fundamental human tendencies and are less affected by the circumstances and ways in which a brand crisis emerges. A traditional brand crisis can develop due to a harmful product, the deficiency of a service, a corporate social responsibility failure, or a company's negligence in communication. Likewise, the scale on which a crisis unfolds depends on its severity and the reaction of the responsible company (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

One of the main differences in calamity between a traditional brand crisis and a social media firestorm is due to the evolution of the word-of-mouth in the digital space. Before the use of social media networks became a common method of sharing consumers' opinions and experience, usually journalists' contributions were the main drivers behind a brand crisis in the traditional mass-media. Currently, though, online firestorms are frequently prompted by consumers through electronic word-of-mouth, and they are spread and kept ablaze by the brand community, who shares and comments the initial message on the social media platforms, which reach a far wider audience in a considerably shorter time compared to the traditional media forms, such as TV, radio, print, or direct mail (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

### **2.3.1 Detecting the onset of digital brand crises, the potential triggers and characteristics, and the effects on consumers and brands**

According to common knowledge, consumers who belong to online brand communities in which negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) circulates should first investigate the source of those messages prior to endorsing and sharing them further. These individuals, however, may not ponder over the claims in depth due to being swamped by information, a typical feature of interactions on social media platforms. Therefore, in the majority of these cases, they may turn to heuristic processing. Researchers have also found that regarding virality of negative eWOM in online brand communities, it seems to increase when the message contains words that have high emotional arousal, rather than low emotional

arousal. Additionally, virality is higher, as well, when the structural connections between the originator of the negative eWOM and the recipients are more substantial (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 3.)

Hansen, Kupfer, and Hennig-Thurau devised a conceptual model (Figure 1), classifying several social media firestorm elements into trigger characteristics, that can be recognized immediately at the start of the crisis, and firestorm characteristics, that develop throughout the crisis (2018). By observing and analysing these characteristics that occur at various times, the authors concluded that the primary trigger features, such as diverse motives or vividness, may likewise impact the delayed firestorm features, such as strength, length, and breadth. They also connected trigger and firestorm features to the short- and long-term impact on brands, as determined by brand perception alterations, and on customers, as determined by consumers' memory patterns. With the consumer behaviour's elaboration likelihood model (ELM), Hansen, Kupfer, and Hennig-Thurau use prior brand crises and social media literature to determine the features and analyse their impact on memory and brand perceptions (2018.)

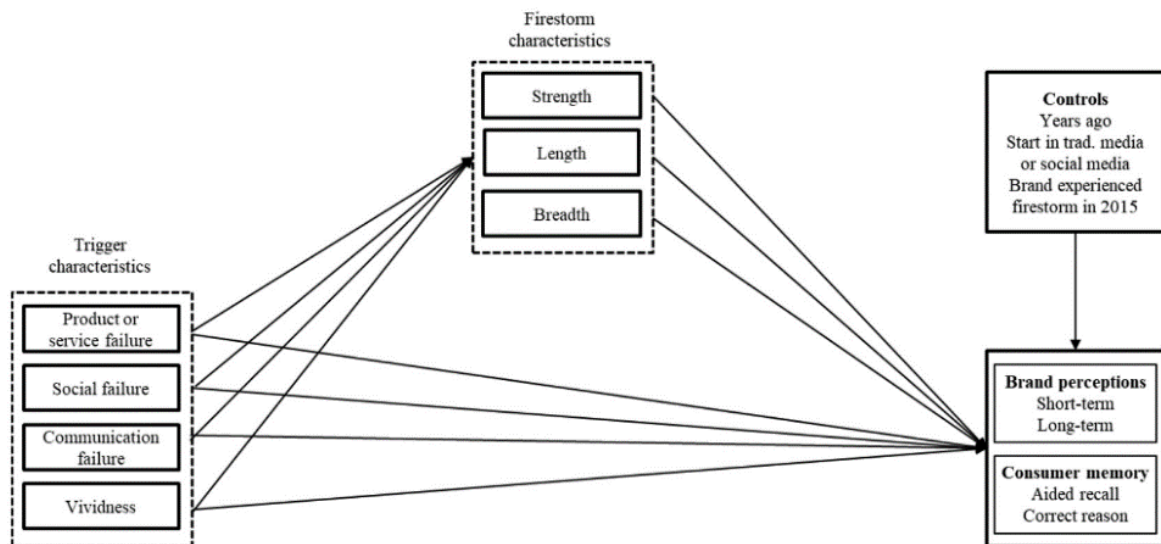


Figure 1. Conceptual model (Hansen et. al, 2018).

The ELM and its extensions argue that the probability of elaboration, meaning how deeply a person thinks about an argument, is influenced by the consumers' motivation, capacity, and convenience to process information. If these factors are high, based on the ELM, consumers

process information through a central pathway, as in high elaboration, but if they are low, consumers will instead process information through a peripheral pathway, as in low elaboration. In the short-term, information processed through both pathways can cause attitude shifts, which can result in brand perception shifts. Nonetheless, shifts induced by central pathway processing, meaning information understood thoroughly, are more lasting and durable, resulting in enhanced memories of essential brand information, such as the name or claims of a brand or product. Therefore, based on this model, Hansen, Kupfer, and Hennig-Thurau suggest that “certain firestorm characteristics will have short-term effects (i.e., negative changes in brand perception that occur directly after the firestorm) and also long-term effects (i.e., negative long-term changes in brand perceptions and consumers’ enduring memory of firestorms)” (2018.)

In accordance with the ELM, the more relevant the cause of a crisis is to the consumer, the more motivated he will be to elaborate his message. An event becomes relevant on a personal level when individuals believe it can have a significant impact on their lives. Consumers tend to concentrate better and analyse more thoroughly when developing an opinion about the event when personal relevance increases, so they will be more driven to expand rationally on their message (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

There can be numerous causes for the outbreak of a social media firestorm, each of them possessing a different level of personal importance for consumers and this should influence consumers’ willingness to interpret the firestorm information individually. Traditional brand crises studies have found many unique deeper causes for a brand crisis, which could also be relevant in the case of an online firestorm. Based on previous studies of traditional brand crises, the cause of a social media firestorm could be performance-related or value-related. Some examples of causes of a performance-related crisis are product failures, for example Toyota vehicles that had defective brakes (Business Wire, 2020) or service failures, for example when a United Airlines passenger was violently dragged from his seat on an overbooked flight (Lartey, 2017). On the other hand, a value-related crisis is not explicitly linked to the product or service, but rather to social or ethical conflicts involving the brand, such as Amazon Inc’s inadequate work environment (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). A value-related crisis can also be caused by a communication failure, such as offensive, discriminatory, or racist messages from a brand, as it was the case with the racist messages

about Chinese people of designer Stefano Gabbana of Dolce & Gabbana (Tranova, 2018) (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

The level of personal relevance and impact on consumers of a brand crisis will differ according to the cause of the firestorm and a person's background and experiences, and, as a result, this should prompt diverse motives for each consumer to comprehend the information of the event on an individual level. However, there are a few general types of reactions to an online firestorm determined by the initial trigger, no matter the background or experiences of each consumer (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

A performance-related social media firestorm, when a product or service fails, causes distrust in the brand's capacity to offer essential functional perks, which leads customers to consider them severe difficulties. This is because a product or service failure generally possesses a greater risk to be or lead to a life-threatening event than a social or communication failure. In the case of a social failure, a society's norms or core values are contravened by a company, meaning their brands are not able to properly fulfil their role in the society and deliver benefits of symbolic and psychological nature to customers. Even if most social failures do not have a direct and personal impact on consumers, they may still allow for the possibility of serious repercussions for other individuals, such as child laborers (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

Subsequently, people's daily lives ought to be the least affected by a brand communication failure, as these types of firestorms may be considered the least intense and personally meaningful to consumers. A brand's morally problematic communication, for example when Bud Light beer's "Up for Whatever" campaign had the controversial slogan "The perfect beer for removing 'no' from your vocabulary for the night." (Strom, 2015), may upset individuals, but it has less of an impact on their daily lives than a product, service, or social failure. Consequently, communication failures are expected to have the lowest impact since they diminish consumers' incentive to analyse information. This trend should remain true in both cases of short-term and long-term impact on a brand, based on the increase in unfavourable impressions of the brand and customers experience (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

In general, social media messaging can be text-based, a combination of text and pictures, or a combination of text and videos, as well as posts that only contain pictures, videos, or other types of media. These are all considered visual cues, and the widespread use of them in social media networks suggests that vividness, meaning the intensity with which a brand's message stimulates the consumer's senses, is presumably significant in the context of social media brand crises. The more vivid the visual cues are in the context of an online firestorm, the more durable and impactful the crisis information is going to be in consumers' memory and their brand perceptions, both on short- and long-term (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

Moreover, other important characteristics of a social media firestorm that influence on short- and long-term the consumers' memory and their brand perceptions are the strength, length, and breadth of the brand crisis. An online firestorm will remain more vividly in the consumers' mind as time passes, if it has a severe cause, many shares, comments, and messages from numerous participants, is not taken care of swiftly by the affected company and goes on for days or weeks, and it reaches a level on which it expands from the social media networks and it is also covered by traditional media. All these aspects strengthen the damage that can be done to the affected brand by the firestorm and give the opportunity to the consumers to process the information of the event in depth, which can have a more powerful, probably negative impact on their opinion on the brand, the company, and their products or services (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

### **2.3.2 Examples of prevention strategies for potential digital brand crises**

Managerial and academic interest in business recovery measures that might minimize the spread of negative electronic word-of-mouth has been piqued by the increasing popularity of online reviews on consumer behaviour. Nevertheless, a consumer's issue and a company's recovery actions are public to thousands, or more, of other consumers, which, in the case of digital brand communities, makes the recovery process unique. Therefore, successful recovery must effectively restore the dissatisfied consumer's relationship value and limit the broadcast of negative eWOM to other consumers in the digital community. The efficacy of popular recovery techniques, such as reacting empathically, apologizing, compensating, or providing explanations, has been studied mostly in scenarios where communication between the company and the consumer is bilateral. Researchers resorted to theories

regarding emotion regulation methods to acquire additional insight into the applicability of these techniques for decreasing the emotional contagion in negative electronic word-of-mouth and hypothesized that a company's reactions to negative eWOM could be categorized as disengaging or engaging (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 4.)

Instead of formulating an appropriate reaction, a disengaging method of emotion management entails behaving in ways that prevent or inhibit elaboration. Prior studies and experiences imply that remaining silent, meaning the absence of a response, and evading the unfavourable eWOM is the most inadequate means to control its virality. Companies could also attempt to cease an ongoing public discussion in the online brand communities by proposing an alternative channel of communication. While this type of route shift proposal may be useful in directing clients to the appropriate channel, the way in which members of the digital brand community would respond to being removed from the ongoing discussion is unpredictable. Another common approach, the efficiency of which is debatable, as well, is compensating the dissatisfied client. Although some previous studies have implied that limiting additional elaborations is an adequate approach to restore the brand's image, other researchers concluded that the strategy of compensating the displeased customer may not always be beneficial and might instead hinge on other response aspects (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 4.)

An engaging reaction to negative eWOM from the company is considered more suitable than a disengaging approach. Researchers have identified two basic response styles in the actions taken by a company to address a product or service failure - empathic or explanatory, which reflect active firm-customer communication. To illustrate an empathic response, an organization may try to sympathize with the client or switch to a more positive perspective. A response which transmits a high level of empathy offers a better chance of improving the affected customer's and the rest of the online brand community's sense of fairness in interaction, while also expressing respect and kindness, thereby potentially reducing the rapid spread of negative eWOM. When a company formulates an engaging response, they could also provide justifying explanations, which if are higher in number have a stronger impact than their content would on the final results. The reason for this is that the brand community members' impressions of the quality and effort a company has put in their response seems to improve if it contains more supported explanations, which, in turn, can

help the company improve assessments of their recovery attempt (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 4.)

In essence, based on previous research, it appears that for minimizing negative eWOM which contains more exhaustive high emotional arousal, the performance of increased justification in the company's responses exceeds the one of increased empathy. Conversely, to minimize negative eWOM which contains more exhaustive low emotional arousal, the performance of increased empathy in the company's responses exceeds the one of increased justification (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 4.)

### **2.3.3 Examples of mitigation strategies for potential digital brand crises**

The perceived accuracy of an unfolding digital brand crisis, which is sustained by the spread of negative eWOM from members of an online brand community or other individuals, should improve with the help of observational learning methods. Consumers will be more observant of the unfavourable eWOM and develop new expectations of how the event should be handled by the company in question. Consequently, when the flood of negative eWOM transforms into a digital brand crisis, the company is required to offer numerous responses, paying great attention to their structural components, in order to be able to mitigate the online firestorm's damaging effects (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 5.)

According to former literature, succeeding online messages enhance one another, meaning that the representatives of a company should not focus solely on the performance of each message they broadcast to the public, but should also pay attention to the interplay between all the messages and their overall effect on the audience. This is a crucial aspect especially in the case of the company's responses to an online firestorm, as the order in which they are delivered can influence their performance relating to influencing consumers, boosting brand equity, and generating revenue. Another aspect brands should take into consideration when devising their online communication strategy is cross-message dynamics, which might contribute to understanding how to manage a growing digital brand crisis (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 5.)

Additionally, researchers have found that sharing the same marketing message repeatedly on social media networks reduces consumer engagement, instead of enhancing it. In the case of an online firestorm, as an example, the company could diminish the virality of the unfavourable eWOM, if in their first response they show sympathy to the client's situation and try to empathize with them, following with a second response that offers justified explanations, instead of iterating their sympathy, which could generate further annoyance. Therefore, a sequence of cross-messages, which contain different depths of empathy and explanations, could assist in subsiding the virality of unfavourable eWOM and mitigating the unfolded digital brand crisis (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 5.)

Based on digital newspaper articles, blog posts, and articles, the author of this paper identified a few additional possible strategies that companies can take into consideration when mitigating the virality of negative eWOM. The proposed approaches are to: (a) give a clear and appropriate statement about the cause of the crisis in the shortest time possible since the first appearances of the firestorm's triggers and characteristics, (b) have the CEO of the company make a public statement regarding the full-fledged firestorm, which could be confessional, apologetic, explanatory, and (c) analyse the situation and detect a potential opportunity to fight back if the context allows it, but only if it appears to be beneficial to the brand image and there is a reduced risk of backfire (Aschermann, 2021; Scholz & Smith, 2019b; Vega, 2013.)

In the case of approach (a), the company should use tools for social media monitoring, software which collects and offers audience and competitive insights, such as Hootsuite (<https://www.hootsuite.com/>), Talkwalker (<https://www.talkwalker.com/>), Nexalogy (<https://nexalogy.com/>), Mentionlytics (<https://www.mentionlytics.com/>), Reputology (<https://www.reputology.com/>). Additionally, they could also use tools for social listening, a process of tracking a brand's online communities for mentions and conversations related to it, such as Hootsuite Insights (<https://www.hootsuite.com/products/insights>), Advview (<https://www.advview.com/>), ReviewTrackers (<https://www.reviewtrackers.com/>), Synthesio (<https://www.synthesio.com/>). With the help of a social media monitoring or social listening tool, a company can keep track of mentions, hashtags, conversations, and keywords related to their products, audience, brands, industry, competitors, and obtain information about their social share of voice, social sentiment, social ROI, relevant hashtags and keywords, or

trends. This information can be used to facilitate the company's consumer engagement, relevance, and crisis management, as well as to keep track of competition, discover the company's weaknesses, identify potential brand ambassadors, and discover business leads. By utilizing monitoring and listening tools, a company could prevent and manage online firestorms more efficiently, as they can track the online brand sentiment in real time and set up alerts to notify unusual rises or decreases in online sentiment and activity (Cooper, 2021; Tran, 2020.)

In the spring of 2013, China Central Television (CCTV), a television controlled by the Chinese state, indicted Apple Inc of corporate misconduct, in the form of a breach of customer's rights, for apparently providing discriminatory after-sales services in China. According to CCTV's statements, Apple failed to provide to Chinese clients identical services to the ones offered to consumers in other regions. This affected the brand's reputation in China, as the state media and consumers were not pleased with the first response, which was considered superficial and boastful, and the lack of immediate action from the US-based company. Since the digital brand crisis escalated on the Chinese social media networks and it presented serious risks for Apple's sales, the company's CEO, Tim Cook, got involved personally in the situation. He apologized to the Chinese consumers for the way that the situation was handled, while promising to improve the company's services and policies and solve the problems that have been raised to the company's attention, which helped to mitigate the online firestorm. This was an example in which approach (b) seemed to have a better result than continuing to have a disengaging response strategy (Aschermann, 2021; Owens, 2013.)

An example of what proved to be a suitable approach to digital brand crisis management was Nike's quick and appropriate reaction to mitigate the online firestorm prompted by the explosion of a basketball player's Nike branded shoe during a game broadcasted on national television in the US, in 2019. The company's stock fell shortly after, which lowered their market capitalization by at least US\$1.1 billion at that moment (Gibson, 2019), and various social media users shared their negative feelings of Nike over this incident on the internet (Figures 2, 3). However, the company's representatives assessed the situation quickly and started mitigating the online firestorm by replying to consumers' messages online, releasing an official statement about the incident the following day (Figure 4), and, finally, offering the

affected basketball player an advertising deal. The author provides context of the situation and further analyses the case in section 3 of this paper (Tran, 2020.)



Figure 2. Twitter user comments on the Nike shoe explosion incident (DJ Ekin, 2019).



Figure 3. Twitter user comments on the Nike shoe explosion incident (Joseph, 2019).



Figure 4. Nike’s official statement about the shoe explosion incident (Rovell, 2019a).

#### **2.3.4 Assertive response strategies and the success potential of a counterattack approach in a crisis**

There is a limited number of practical studies on how auxiliary actors may be able to assist an organization endure a crisis. Substantial evidence suggest that organizations may minimize negative sentiment amid a digital brand crisis by allocating positive marketing information to social media influencers and having numerous moderators advocate swiftly for the brand via analytical modelling techniques. These past findings emphasize the necessity of recruiting helpful voices in a crisis, but automatically presume that powerful clients and online influencers or corporate representatives will willingly defend the company. However, earlier literature does not supply any information on what type of content or communication patterns might ignite brand advocates while an online firestorm is unfolding since these frameworks mainly present fluctuations in the type, reaction time, and number of supporters, but don’t expand on how the affected brand addresses its critics (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, pp. 1103-1104.)

Existing marketing studies have highlighted social media firestorms that are based on moral misbehaviour as a significant market occurrence, but it has not investigated the processes that develop inside these morally charged incidents in depth. Certain research shows that companies would be wise to employ more assertive response strategies, particularly in the cases where these could mobilize brand advocates to defend the business (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, p. 1104.)

Confident and aggressive response approaches to a potential online firestorm could lead to better results in the short- and long-term for the affected company in certain situations, notably in the case of moral misconduct accusations. In this type of situation, the brand can choose between two strategies: either deny the accusations, stating that the crisis does not exist, and questioning or dismissing the complainant's claims; or subside by lowering the magnitude of the crisis, while declining that any harm was intended. As stated beforehand, there is no guarantee, though, that consumers and other stakeholders will advocate for the brand in an online firestorm, even if it employs these strategies (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, pp. 1104-1105.)

To be able to somewhat predict if a situation could transform into a full digital brand crisis and the potential support a brand would receive in this case, corporate representatives should survey its course, as well as assess the urgency expressed by the complainants and its effect on the public. A crucial aspect, though, is to inspect if the complainant has proof or can demonstrate that the firm's actions are detrimental to the community or environment in any manner (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, pp. 1104-1105.)

When developing reaction tactics for crises caused by moral misconduct accusations, brand managers should have in focus the validity of the issue itself to begin with, rather than trying to determine if a firm instigated the incident, or the sway of the critics and their level of credibility. Based on former analysis, when the organization's key values on which the brand was built resonate with and are similar to those of their influential stakeholders, the brand managers can assemble a defence strategy around that, in order to have higher chances of rebutting the dilemma. Therefore, when brands are confronted with moral-based digital brand crises, assertive reaction tactics can be effective in diminishing the potential brand damage and even yield benefits for the company. When online firestorms caused by moral misconduct can be regarded as being rhetorical and continuously enigmatic scenes, innovative response tactics become viable. Studies on crises are often concerned with preserving brand equity by gaining control of or limiting a crisis, and therefore wary of escalating quantities of unfavourable WOM. Yet, festering disputes produced collaboratively via online interactions by individuals who have averse moral principles could supply intriguing opportunities for branding (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, pp. 1105-1106.)

For instance, Disney's commitment to portray minorities and include diversity as much as possible in their productions has been met each time with a lot of positivity from the public, but also criticism from some individuals. This is especially true in the case of LGBTQ+ community representation in their entertainment projects and events or manifestations at their theme parks, for which critics accuse the company and its brands of LGBT propaganda and not being suitable for families. However, Disney continues to hold their promise, as they have already introduced to the public various characters who represent minorities, with plans for more diversity representation in future productions. Moreover, CEO Bob Chapek stated, at a company shareholders' meeting in March 2020, that "We want to represent our audience. [...] We want to tell stories that our audience wants to hear, that reflects their lives.", in response to complaints about the increased frequency of LGBTQ+ characters portrayal in their movies and shows. The company's stance on this matter has been met with an abundance of positive reactions and support from the majority of consumers. ("Disney promises LGBT 'commitment'", 2020)

Consumers are prone to follow and invest more in brands that are relatable to them, with which they may share moral and ethical principles, core values, or cultural understanding and customs. These aspects of a brand are usually portrayed, directly or indirectly, in their products and services, to which customers pay considerable attention, consciously or not, apart from their interest in the operational benefits. Therefore, brand managers ought to participate in co-creation with their stakeholders, in order to generate meaningful content for both the company and the consumers, and to build a narrative which would help the brand in a potential crisis. Individuals pay great attention to organizations' actions and adherence to the norms and laws, especially regarding human rights and environmental issues. Various businesses, such as Ben & Jerry's, Patagonia, Starbucks, Procter & Gamble, Oatly, are aware of their social and environmental responsibility and influence, and therefore manifest their moral and ethical position on these matters through their brands. As an illustration, Nike is making a continuous effort of displaying their support for fighting against racism, through its brand campaigns, social media accounts and internal corporate changes. One of their most successful recent campaigns was in May 2020, related to the death of George Floyd and the "Black Lives Matter" movement, and consisted of several online posts, with powerful messages which urged their audience to fight against racism. Nike reinterpreted their renowned motto "Just Do It." and titled this anti-racism campaign

“For Once, Just Don’t Do It”, its main message being “For once, don’t do it. Don’t pretend there’s not a problem in America. Don’t turn your back on racism. [...] Let’s all be part of the change.” (Figure 5). The public reacted positively to the campaign and found it to be genuine and empowering (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, p. 1106-1107; Gilland, 2021; Ace Metrix, 2020.)

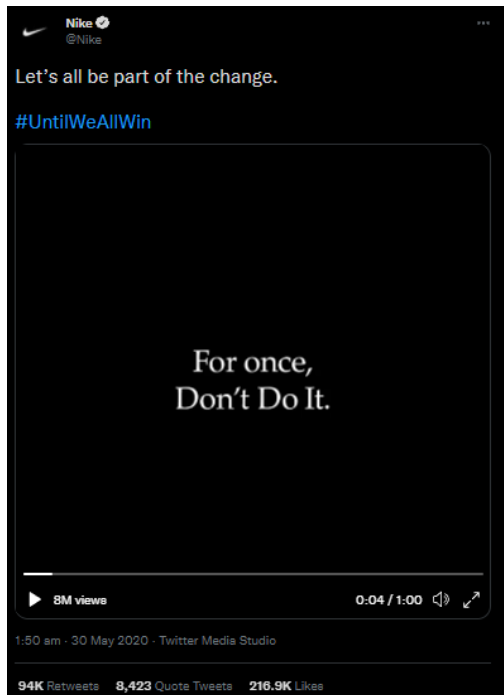


Figure 5. Nike’s Twitter post about the “For Once, Don’t Do It.” anti-racism campaign (Nike, 2020).

A case in which a brand successfully mitigated an online firestorm, and even benefited from it financially and in popularity, is Protein World’s “Are You Beach Body Ready?” controversial campaign, from 2015. Protein World is a lifestyle nutrition brand, and their main type of products are vitamins and protein supplements, meant for maintaining health, losing weight, and having a balanced nutrition (Protein World, 2021). The campaign included posts on social media platforms and displayed billboards and banner advertisements in crowded locations, including London’s Underground system, in which a slim, fit woman dressed in a bikini is portrayed, along with the title/tag line of the campaign, mentioned previously (Figure 6). The campaign took place in April 2015, for approximately a month, and garnered an exceptional high level of attention, both online and offline, with media coverage from different parts of the world. A considerable amount of this attention was negative, however, with numerous critics alleging that the advertisements were discriminatory by objectifying

and body-shaming women, and people vandalizing the outdoor advertisements, boycotting the campaign and the company. The critics also created a petition which demanded the removal of the ads and filed hundreds of grievances to the British Advertising Standards Association (ASA). This led to Protein World finding themselves in the middle of a full-fledged online firestorm, reaching approximately 15,000 mentions a day on Twitter at the culmination point of the crisis, when before the start of this campaign, the number of mentions would have been around 500. The brand has taken action since the beginning of the firestorm and continued to do so until the end, “tweeting multiple times per day, engaging with both critics and brand supporters” (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, p. 1108-1110.)



Figure 6. Protein World 2015 campaign banner advertisement (Wylie, 2015).

Researchers have found that Protein World applied three different approaches in total, at different stages of the social media firestorm, for mitigation: denial, diminishing, and escalating. In the first approach, the brand adopts an attitude of irony and disregard, misunderstands on purpose the critics’ messages and, instead, promotes their products in their replies to the complaints (Figure 7). During this incipient stage of the firestorm, the interaction is mainly between Protein World and particular disputers, with no sign of supporters (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, p. 1112-1114.)



Figure 7. Twitter interaction between a consumer and Protein World (Dominici, 2015).

In the second phase of the crisis, Protein World switched to a different tactic, due to the escalating outrage and advertisements defacement: recognizing the criticism, but advocated the advertisements, asserting that its aim was to encourage a healthy lifestyle through frequent physical activity and proper nutrition. The brand opts to emphasize health and wellness in their replies (Figure 8), which aligns with the image the brand has promoted up until this point. The new strategy depicts the brand's adjusted tone, being more candid and appealing, as well as sympathetic and correct to the consumers (Figure 9). However, not many brand advocates were motivated by this tactic, as the number of negative messages was surpassing the positive ones by a lot more. According to researchers, this could be attributed to the following critical aspects of the brand's new strategy: Protein World changed their attitude to a more positive and docile one, and embraced, as well as supported the critics' statements and views on the body image concept (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, p. 1115-1116.)



Figure 8. Protein World’s Twitter reply to a consumer about not using photoshop to alter the ad model’s body (Protein World, 2015a).



Figure 9. Protein World’s Twitter sympathetic replies to consumers (Protein World, 2015b).

In the third and last phase, Protein World changed its response strategy, once again, to escalation, which entails purposely antagonizing critics in order to accept and feed the dispute instead of alleviating it. Although there was a lack of extensive brand support previous to this phase, Protein World’s third response approach incited more of their fans to join the conversation and advocate them by initiating their own antagonizing retaliation (Figures 10, 11). Ultimately, through their messages and exchanges, Protein World enraged brand critics and, essentially, instigated a multitude of disperse retaliations, which converted the digital brand crisis “from a branding disaster into a branding opportunity” (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, p. 1116-1120.)



Figure 10. Consumer supporting Protein World on Twitter (Cartledge, 2015).

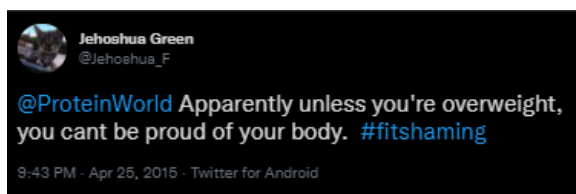


Figure 11. Consumer supporting Protein World on Twitter (Green, 2015).

## 2.4 Brand Crisis Management

A brand's reputation or position in the market can be affected by multiple types of reasons, which can be sudden or a result of long-term bottled-up problems, no matter if the brand has foreseen the crisis or not. The most important steps for organizations to be able to handle and solve the crisis, though, are knowing what generated the issue and who is involved as main actors in the situation (Greyser, 2009.)

According to existing studies, there can be various types of individuals or entities that participate as actors in a brand crisis, especially in one that unfolds in the social media networks. A few types of social media firestorm actors are critics of the product, service or brand, the affected company and its representatives, and external brand allies or foes (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, p. 1103.)

### 2.4.1 Types of brand crisis' causes, with examples

The reasons behind the onset of a brand crisis are diverse, but they can be summarized in some main categories, as determined by Greyser: product failure – hoverboards, which in 2015-2016, started bursting into flames; social responsibility gap – Amazon, accused of questionable working conditions; corporate misbehaviour – Samsung, accused of bribery charges; executive misbehaviour – Renaud Laplanche, CEO of Lending Club Corporation, accused of fraud and corporate malfeasance; poor business results – Blockbuster, which failed to transition towards a digital model; spokesperson misbehaviour and controversy – Harvey Weinstein, Weinstein Co. film producer, with multiple sexual assault accusations; death of symbol of company – Apple's Steve Jobs; loss of public support – BlackBerry, when in 2016 it stopped manufacturing its own phones, and had a rapid decline in demand;

controversial ownership – see Venezuela and CITGO Petroleum Corporation in the USA (2009).

In 2015, an article published by The New York Times with the title “Inside Amazon: Wrestling Big Ideas in a Bruising Workplace”, written by Jodi Kantor and David Streitfeld, gave a deeper insight on the working conditions in Amazon Inc. offices and warehouses, based on information obtained through interviews with past or current employees of the company, from different departments and seniority levels, who mainly remained anonymous. The article presented the workplace in a negative manner, with aggressive competition between the workers being encouraged from the first day of employment, working until late hours, and holding workers to very high standards. The interviewees also mentioned that very often you could see people cry at work, as it is a productive but harsh work environment, that the salary is regarded as competitive, and that in the company’s warehouses a computerized system supervises the employees in order for the company to guarantee that they meet their quota of packed boxes per hour.

Amazon has also been accused in the past that they do not ensure that workplace safety measures are respected in all their warehouses. One of these incidents happened after in a company’s Pennsylvania warehouse, in 2011, due to lack of a proper air-conditioning system, employees were working in over 37-Celsius degrees heat, with ambulances on stand-by to transport them to the hospital when they would lose consciousness. Past and present employees of Amazon Inc. who shared their experiences with the writers of The New York Times article also pointed out some advantages of working for the big corporation, such as being able to push and overcome their limits, to thrive, to have the freedom and means to create, to kick-start their careers on a higher level, and to be part of the Amazon phenomenon (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015.)

Six years later, in June 2021, The New York Times has published a new article investigating the Amazon warehouse working conditions, with the title “The Amazon That Customers Don’t See”, written by Jodi Kantor, Karen Weise and Grace Ashford. In this editorial, the writers aim to portray the current work environment of the corporation, with a focus on the JFK8 supersize warehouse, located on Staten Island, New York, and in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The information in the article is based on interviews with former and

current employees, the writers' research of company records, legal paperwork, government files, and warehouse feedback boards, where workers post their concerns, issues, or appraisals.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, which was officially declared by The World Health Organization on 11 March 2020, almost all business sectors have suffered from it one way or another, especially with human and monetary resources, as everyone had to adapt to the official guidelines and to the impact the rapid spread of the virus had (McKinsey, 2020, Briefing note #3). Despite that, Amazon was more prepared than others, regarding technology development and implementation, and took it as an opportunity to expand its business and thrive in a world where everything had to suddenly advance towards and adopt digitalization, social-distancing, and spending as much time as possible at home or away from other people. As one of the results, the corporation created an astonishing number of new jobs in a short period of time and hired 1,298,000 full-time and part-time workers throughout 2020 (Chevalier, 2021), with the help of a digitalized hiring system (Kantor et. al, 2021.)

According to The New York Times' review of company records regarding JFK8, however, Amazon still had problems with their people management style, some of them similar to the ones uncovered in the previous article published six years ago. The employees were mass-managed with the help of technology, through a system that intended to reduce the need of human contact, but it proved to be unbalanced and faulty, firing various employees by mistake, hindering communication, and suspending benefits incoherently, among other errors. Moreover, Amazon did not disclose to their employees or to the health officials until November 2020 how many active cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed among the workforce over the course of the year. The previous mentioned computerized system of tracking the work hours of employees was still in place, registering how many boxes they pack or how many breaks they take, and when the productivity decreased, the computer would assume it was the workers' fault, leading to poor performance reviews and even dismissals. Even if the company created numerous new workplaces, their turnover rate was approximatively 150 percent a year (Kantor et. al, 2021.)

Taking everything into consideration, Jeff Bezos declared in a letter addressed to Amazon's shareholders that "we need a better vision for how we create value for employees – a vision for their success. We have always wanted to be Earth's most customer-centric company", now "we are going to be Earth's best employer and Earth's safest place to work" (Kantor et. al, 2021.)

These New York Times articles and other publications which offered a better understanding of Amazon's practices in the workplace, beyond what is portrayed by the brand, were met with a substantial response from the public. The company and its founder, Jeff Bezos, received intense criticism over the working conditions and treatment of the laborers, turning into an issue for Amazon, which can be considered a brand crisis caused by a social responsibility gap (Greyser, 2009). Amazon's tactic of managing the crisis was answering to the barrage of critique with detailed measures it has taken to improve the workplace environment, safety measures and employees' work life. Some of the measures were adopting over 150 substantial process adjustments, provide special stations meant for testing against the Coronavirus, properly sanitize its locations, raise employee compensation, as well as reinvest money in assuring employee safety and other Coronavirus related expenses. These statements seemed to have appeased at some level a part of their critics, but the public is now waiting for Amazon to put the promises it has made into action. That is the most important part for the employees, the consumers, and the company's stakeholders, as for the corporation to make up for its mistakes and avoid a bigger brand crisis (Yohn, 2020.)

#### **2.4.2 Brand crisis management recommendations**

A few recommended approaches by specialists for brands in situations similar to Amazon's brand crisis caused by their inadequate working environment are to: connect with their frontline workers by asking their feedback and opinions on solving problems or taking decisions that affect them or the company; give employees multiple opportunities to express their concerns and needs, to share feedback and assure transparency in the company's communication with them and the stakeholders; improve or modify the performance measuring system and the interpretation of success for the staff; clarify the firm's expectations on employees; provide an integrated experience of the staff that meets all of

their rights and needs; share accumulated knowledge in employee engagement with more organizations; reflect on advancements and defeats, such as new product launch performances (Yohn, 2020.)

Depending on the reason that caused the brand crisis and who is involved, it can be a fleeting situation, or it can reach a point where it proves itself lethal to the company. The closer the crisis is to the soul of the brand, the more dangerous it is for the brand's reputation and the rank of the company. According to Greyser, a few main factors that companies affected by a brand crisis should investigate are: brand aspects – status in the market, including before the crisis started, the core of the brand's values, the assets and shortcomings of the brand, in relation to competitors; the context of the crisis – the gravity of the event, the crisis' impact on the brand positioning; the company's actions – the organization's activity, demeanour and tone of voice in the conversation, how they affect the brand in the context of a crisis; short- and long-term outcomes – the initiatives' performance considering the brand's health, restoration of its essence, and its popularity with consumers and stakeholders (2009.)

Brand management has undergone a lot of changes in the past decade and was put to the test, due to the challenges posed by the most influential megatrends, such as digitalization, developing values and new business strategies, which raised fresh queries. Some of these changes include: the external stakeholders losing some of their influence on the brand, due to the appearance of new concepts - brand co-creation, electronic word-of-mouth, online firestorm, brand hate; the transformation of a customer's journey, with both online and offline touchpoints; new technology and digitalization integrated in the brand and its products, such as augmented reality, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, chatbots, voice assistance; the issue of legitimacy of profit-driven business structures and virtue signalling, especially regarding social movements, political movements and influences, brand purpose; modern forms of collaboration, such as influencers, art and brand collaboration; and creating new brands and business models - more entrepreneurs, start-up businesses, various product alternatives available to the public, platform brands (Baumgarth et. al, 2020.)

### 3 Nike's "ShoeGate" case study

During college basketball season in the US, on 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2019, in the first minute of one of the most awaited games, one of Duke University Blue Devils' team players suffered a knee injury due to a shoe malfunction. Zion Williamson, who was 18 years old at the time of the incident and on the course of becoming the top pick at the National Basketball Association (NBA) draft that year, experienced a shoe malfunction when one of the Nike branded sports shoes he was wearing ripped open completely from the attachment point of the material to the shoe sole (Figure 5). This accident led to his withdrawal from the rest of that game and from the sports events that followed in that month (RockDove Solutions, 2019.)



Figure 12. Williamson's immediate reaction to his shoe breaking (Kinnan, 2019).

The men's college basketball game of Duke University's team versus North Carolina University's team gathered a total audience of over 4.34 million viewers (Negron, 2019), including American film director Spike Lee and former US President Barack Obama in the stands of the Cameron Indoor Stadium (Fares & Tennery, 2019). Therefore, many of the game's viewers took to social media platforms to express their reactions and concerns over the incident and Williamson's well-being, as well as criticism for Nike and the PG 2.5 shoe model that malfunctioned. (Figures 6, 7, 8). Some of the users also mocked Nike, their products, and their manufacturing practices, as well as comparing the brand to its competitors (Figures 9, 10, 11). According to a Reuters article from 2019, by Fares and

Tennery: “Nike’s social media sentiment dropped following the malfunction, according to social media analytics firm Zoomph. With 1.6 billion impressions and a reach of 170 million users, people were twice as likely to express negative sentiment about the athletic apparel maker, Zoomph data showed.”

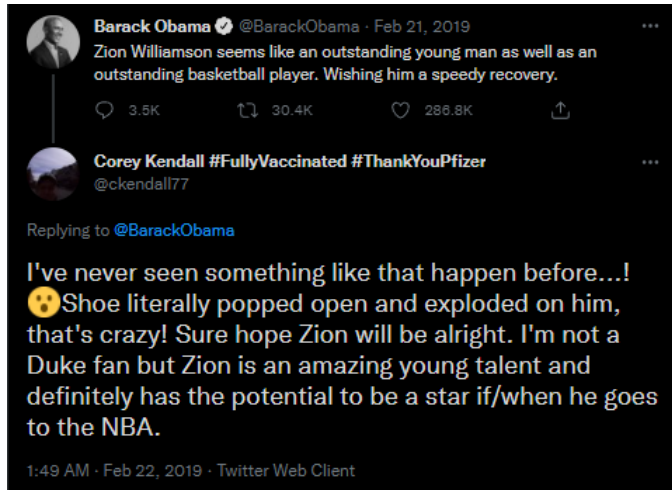


Figure 13. A Twitter user's reply to Barack Obama's tweet about his concern for Zion Williamson (Kendall, 2019).



Figure 14. Twitter user commenting on Nike shoes' quality and responsibility for the shoe malfunction (Thorpes, 2019).



Figure 15. Twitter user's comment about the Nike shoe malfunction (Rovell, 2019b).



Figure 16. Twitter user's comment about the hit that Nike took as a brand due to the shoe malfunction (Shawnasaurus Rex, 2019).



Figure 17. Twitter user posts a joke regarding Nike and their manufacturing factory (Shan, 2019).



Figure 18. Twitter user's joke about the Nike shoe malfunction and their competitor Adidas (Will K, 2019).

The negative electronic word-of-mouth expanded quickly, and the situation, as well as the audience's reaction, prompted the use of the hashtag #ShoeGate in combination with the brand name Nike on social media platforms, especially Twitter (Figures 12, 13). The incident caused interest for many individuals and media outlet, as it can be observed through Google Trends when analysing the interest shown in the web search terms "Nike" and "Zion Williamson" between February 1 and March 1, 2019, worldwide, in all categories (2021). There was a sudden increase starting on February 20, from the previous a drop in interest for Nike, which continued strongly until February 25, when it started to decline, and a sharp surge in interest for Zion Williamson starting on 20 February and decreasing considerably towards February 26 (Figure 14). The highest number of searches related to these terms were from the United States, while the most popular related queries to Nike and Zion Williamson, excluding these two search terms, were "nike shoe blowout", "zion nike shoe", "nike shoe explodes", "zion shoe blowout", and "nike stock", which were considered as breakouts by Google Trends, meaning they had a tremendous increase in popularity (2021).



Figure 19. Twitter user asks Nike for explanation (Cloues, 2019).



Figure 20. Twitter user posts a joke about Nike's situation with #ShoeGate (Katherine, 2019).

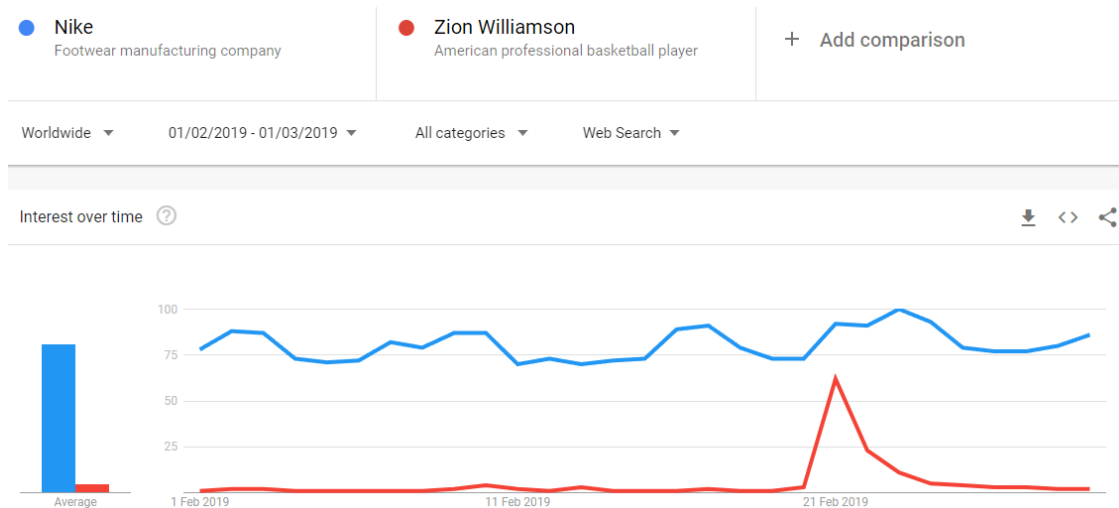


Figure 21. Google Trends comparison of interest shown in February 2019 for the search terms 'Nike' and 'Zion Williamson' (Google Trends, 2021).

Zion Williamson's shoe malfunction was a negative incident for the Nike company, especially since the basketball player suffered an injury. At the time of the accident, it was not yet known officially how serious the player's injury was, which put a lot of pressure on Nike's corporate representatives, because in case it was serious, it could have been considered a product-liability case and the sports equipment manufacturer could have faced legal repercussions, according to Paul Edelstein, a known US lawyer who represents athletes in disputes related to sports and injuries. However, soon after the accident happened, Duke University representatives confirmed that the knee sprain was a mild injury (Novy-Williams & Sellers, 2019.)

In addition to the ridicule and criticism Nike received online, the company also suffered financial damages in terms of market value, with an immediate drop of 1.6 percent in the stock price from Wednesday, 20th of February, to Thursday, 21st of February, which translates to around US\$2.14 billion loss for the company's market capitalization. Economist Scott Kaplan analysed if the drop in Nike's stock price directly correlates to Williamson's shoe malfunction by first comparing Nike's, Adidas', and Under Armour's stock prices evolution by hour from February 20 to February 21 (Figure 15), with the vertical red line representing the moment of Williamson's accident (2019). He chose Adidas and Under Armour since they are two of Nike's biggest direct competitors in terms of basketball shoe brands. He also compared Nike's stock price trend to the average trend of the two

competitors mentioned previously, to confirm if the trends were similar before the shoe malfunction happened, and if there are considerable differences after, in the short-term, between February 20 and February 21, as well as in the long-term, between February 12 and March 15 (Figures 16, 17).

After analysing these trends and changes in the stock price for Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour, Kaplan observed that there was a big drop in Nike's stock price compared to the other companies immediately after the incident happened and that it had both short-term and long-term effects, since it seemed that before the shoe malfunction, all three companies had similar stock price evolution trends (2019). Even if Nike's stock price appears to resume its course and rise in the following days after February 21, there is a significant difference when compared to the other two companies' higher growth, which can translate to the negative effects the accident had on Nike. Kaplan further confirmed these effects by using the linear regression method to calculate the magnitude of the shoe malfunction on Nike's stock price, comparing it to the average stock price of Adidas and Under Armour (Figure 18). In Figure 18, the first column reveals the short-term impact on the stock price, while the second column reveals the long-term impact. The dependent variable is represented by the log of Stock price, while the independent one is represented by the Post explosion \* Nike, resulting in a comparison of the differences in the effect of the shoe malfunction on Nike's stock price and the average of Adidas and Under Armour stock price. This calculation's results reveal that Williamson's accident produced an immediate decline of 1.6 percent and a decline of 2.5 percent on a longer term in Nike's stock price, which are significant losses, but could not be necessarily considered disastrous for the company, as they seemed to be able to recover in a longer period of time.

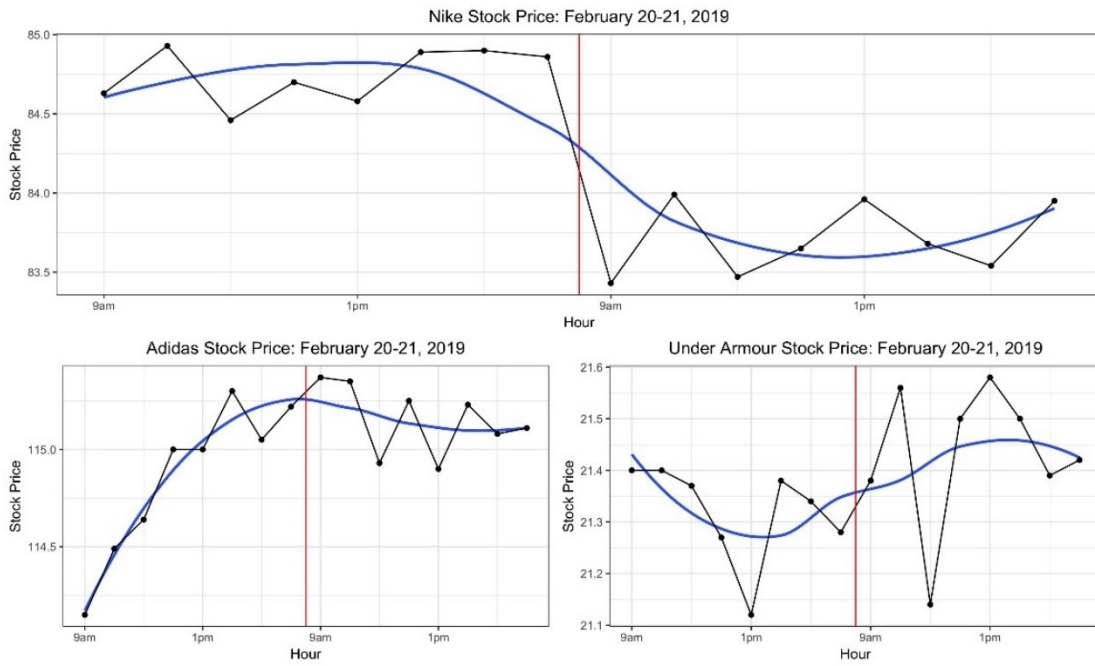


Figure 22. Analysis of hourly stock prices changes for Nike, Adidas, and Under Armour (Kaplan, 2019).

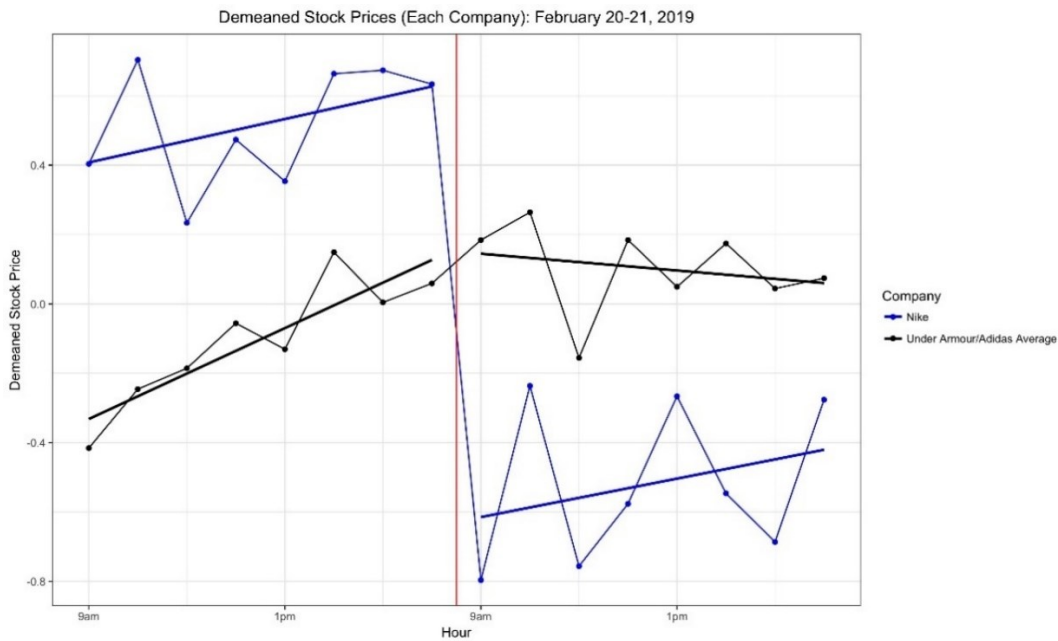


Figure 23. Analysis and comparison of Nike’s stock price trend and the average trend of Adidas and Under Armour, in the short-term (Kaplan, 2019).

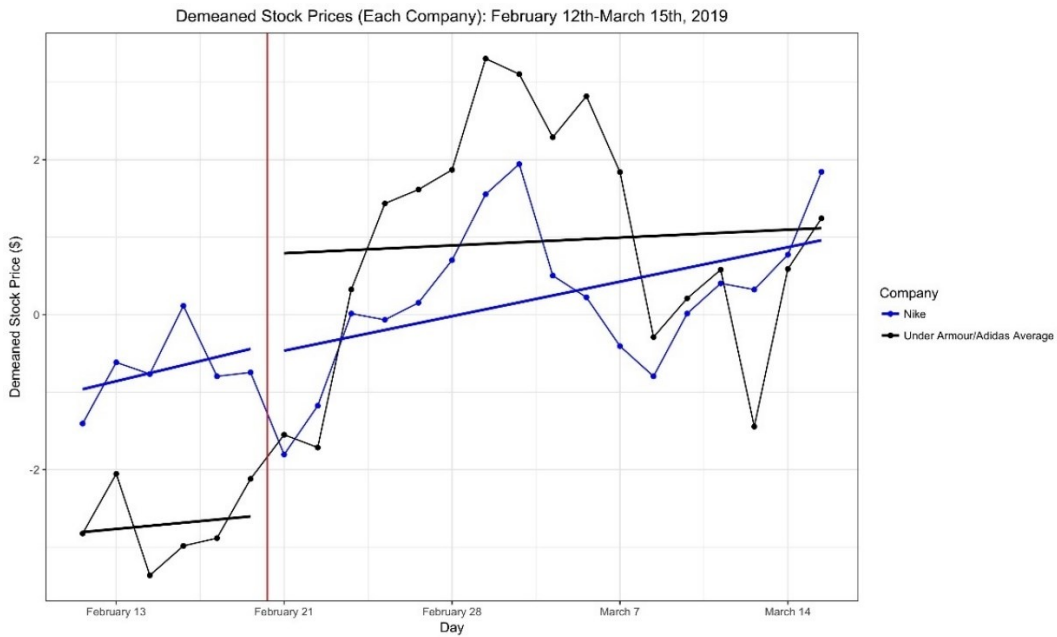


Figure 24. Analysis and comparison of Nike’s stock price trend and the average trend of Adidas and Under Armour, in the long-term (Kaplan, 2019).

Dependent Variable: log(Stock Price)		
	Zion (Immediate)	Zion (Long-Term)
	(1)	(2)
Post Explosion	0.002 (0.002)	0.031*** (0.010)
Time Trend	0.0002 (0.0002)	0.0005 (0.001)
Post Explosion * Nike	-0.016*** (0.002)	-0.025** (0.012)
Company Controls	UA/Adidas	UA/Adidas

*Note:* \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Figure 25. Calculation of the magnitude of the shoe malfunction on Nike’s stock price, comparing it to the average stock price of Adidas and Under Armour, using the linear regression method (Kaplan, 2019).

Nike’s response strategy to Zion Williamson’s shoe malfunction and injury was to quickly issue an official statement the next morning after the incident happened (Figure 4), in which

they expressed their concern over the player's injury and wished him a fast recovery, reminded that their products' quality and performance are one of their top priorities, and that they would investigate the problem, declaring that this was an isolated episode (Rovell, 2019a). However, some consumers and media outlets pointed out that this might not be exactly considered an isolated incident (Figure 19). There have been other occasions in the past in which athletes experienced wardrobe malfunctions with Nike products, such as basketball player LeBron James' Nike jersey tearing after being grabbed by another player during a game in 2017 (Rovell, 2017), or Nike shoe malfunctions experienced during basketball games by players Manu Ginobili and Andrew Bogut in 2014 (West, 2019). Nonetheless, among all the critics, there were also some Nike brand supporters present from the start of the social media firestorm, who defended the company, and some consumers who were confused by the extensive media coverage this incident received (Figures 20, 21). The official statement issued by Nike diminished some of the customers' concerns and negative eWOM (Figures 22, 23), but others still criticised their response and demanded they take responsibility in a proper way (Figure 24).

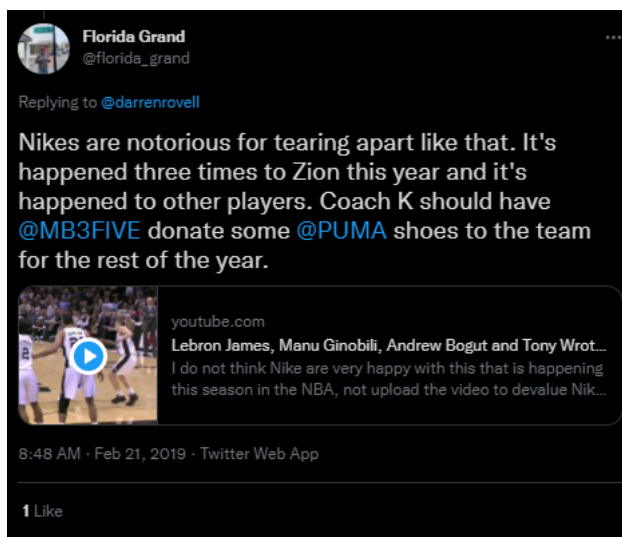


Figure 26. Post in a Twitter thread, in which a user points out other athletes' wardrobe malfunctions with Nike products (Florida Grand, 2019).



Figure 27. Posts from a Twitter thread, in which users are questioning the extensive online reaction to the shoe malfunction incident and supporting the Nike brand (EasyMoneyKris, 2019).



Figure 28. Posts from a Twitter thread, in which users show support for the Nike brand regarding the shoe malfunction incident (BBallFan2k21, 2019).

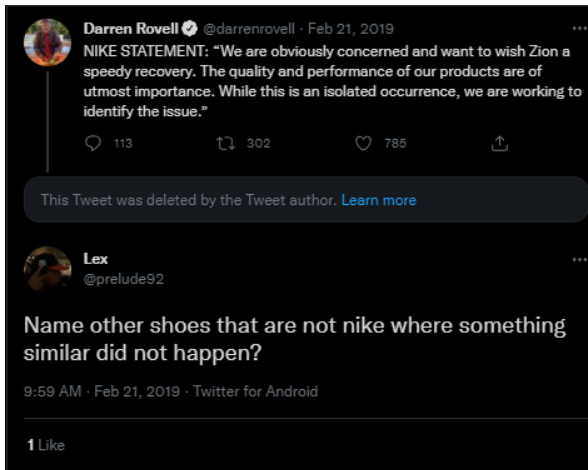


Figure 29. Post in a Twitter thread, in which a user is pointing out that other sportswear manufacturing companies had similar shoe malfunctions, as well (Lex, 2019).



Figure 30. Post in a Twitter thread, in which a user shares his experience with Nike sports shoes with foam-based soles but points out he is a loyal customer (Dillon, 2019).



Figure 31. Post in a Twitter thread, in which a user demands Nike to do better in taking responsibility for the incident (Zach, 2019).

As part of their social media brand crisis mitigation strategy, Nike also answered concerned customers' messages online, and the next day after the incident occurred, the company sent representatives to the city in which the basketball game took place, to examine the broken shoe (Tran, 2020; Wolken, 2019). Afterwards, they took custom measurements to engineer and manufacture a pair of shoes suitable for Williamson's figure, style of playing, as well as the amount of force he was using during games (Wolken, 2019). After the basketball player recovered completely from his knee injury, missing six games because of this, he started to play again in the middle of March (Hladik, 2019). Nike reacted to this announcement by releasing a statement online, expressing the company's delight to Williamson's return, and confirming once again that the shoe malfunction incident from February was isolated and that they are constantly working to ensure the quality of their products (Figure 25; Hladik, 2019). Later that year, in July 2019, the Nike company offered a Jordan brand deal to Zion Williamson, which the player accepted and signed, but no information was disclosed by either party about the contract terms (Reuters Staff, 2019).



Figure 32. Nike's statement about Williamson's return to the basketball court (Rovell, 2019c).

In Nike's case, this social media brand crisis from 2019 was performance-related, as result of a product failure. The cause of this crisis proved to be very relevant to the consumers, since

many of them believed that it could pose a significant impact on their lives, and therefore, they were motivated to elaborate their messages. Since the product failure happened during a highly broadcasted basketball game, with billions of viewers watching closely, the impact was strong and immediate on consumers, and the widespread use of videos and pictures of the event in traditional media and social media posts increased the vividness aspect of the online brand crisis. Due to the extent of the situation, and the reactions and emotions it aroused from consumers, the probability is higher for the information about this social media firestorm to be more durable and impactful in people's memory and their perception of the Nike brand (Hansen et. al, 2018.)

The brand's approach to mitigate this online firestorm followed more of the traditional guidelines in managing a brand crisis, by acting quickly, releasing a public official statement about the incident, in which they acknowledged the problem, apologized, portrayed concern and sympathy, reiterated their core values, showed accountability, and promised to investigate the problem. Their crisis management strategy could not be necessarily considered opportunistic or out of the ordinary – it did not use disengaging, assertive, or counterattack methods, such as silence, deflection, denial, diminishing, or escalation, since it was a clear product failure. Therefore, in this case, they chose to implement a more traditional crisis management strategy, since they seemed to be aware of the problem's magnitude and its implications, including the health and safety of consumers, and their brand reputation. Nonetheless, all the swift actions the company took to mend the shoe malfunction incident and its repercussions, combined with Nike's popularity and long-standing reputation, helped the company mitigate and pass this social media brand crisis, even if not completely unscathed (Hansen et. al, 2018, Herhausen et. al, 2019.)

#### **4 Methodology**

The aim of this research is to investigate concepts, interpret experiences and gather in-depth knowledge about different potential approaches to handling or solving a brand crisis which is unfolding online. Therefore, the data used for this study are mainly qualitative and were collected by previous research studies, observations, sentiment analysis, user-generated content analysis, secondary data collection, analysis of case studies, and expert interviews (Bhandari, 2020; Baumgarth et. al, 2020.)

By collecting data through observational research, trends, methods, and patterns can be identified and yield the information required for drawing accurate conclusions. As such, if done at different points in time, multiple observations of brand crises, online posts from brands and consumers before, during and after the crisis takes place, as well as of the techniques used by the brands to handle these situations and other relevant insights facilitate the process of writing a thorough report (Rogelberg, 2008, Chapter 8, pp. 173-174.)

Sentiment analysis represents a modern method of quantitative research, in which with the help of digital sentiment extraction tools, user-generated content available on social media platforms can be analysed and used to calculate with approximation the human mindset metrics, such as positive, neutral or negative overall feeling, based on satisfaction, awareness, consideration of the social media users, that can be detected through analysis of the use of language and words written in the online posts. This research method can be considered part of social listening, which is defined by Stewart and Arnold as “an emerging type of listening and as a means of attaining interpersonal information and social intelligence that can empower relationships and influence the way we listen to and communicate with one another through increasingly popular mediated channels” (2018). Some examples of international social listening and sentiment analysis tools, available for purchase or for free, are HubSpot’s Service Hub, Repustate, Lexalytics, Social Mention, MAXG (Baumgarth et. al, 2020; Fontanella, 2021.)

In this research paper, case studies are a valuable source of information for analysis, comparison, and evidence of previous tested methods of brands mitigating or solving online firestorms in which they are the affected party. In the words of Yin, case studies represent “an empirical inquiry that (1) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when (2) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which (3) multiple sources of evidence are used” (2009, p. 18). From the analysis of the case studies, more specific information and patterns can be found, such as possible similarities in crisis management between brands activating in the same industry or sector of the market, the importance and impact of the brand’s tone of voice during a crisis, which methods have a higher success rate, innovative approaches, and best practices.

For the Nike “ShoeGate” case study, the author collected systematically textual and visual data through the advanced search function on the social media platform Twitter, extracted relevant information from media outlets articles and blog posts, as well as data from social media analytics firms and tools. The reaction of the consumers to the incident and mitigation strategy implemented was documented by the author beyond the information found in previous news or blog articles, by analysing directly over 1000 social media posts. The author performed several manual searches on the Twitter platform, with various combinations of the keywords “Nike”, “Zion Williamson”, “Zion”, “Williamson”, “shoe”, “explosion”, “malfunction”, “basketball”, “shoegate”, in different periods of time, starting from the day of the incident, February 20, 2019, and the furthest to June 1, 2019. The mentioned time interval was chosen since later in the year, it was considered that the online firestorm had passed, and there were very few or no posts about the incident anymore. The searches were also limited to the English language exclusively, since it was most relevant for this thesis and since the event took place in the US, so most of the posts about this event would have been made by English-speaking consumers.

The results of these search queries included posts from consumers, media outlets and other brands or companies, which mentioned any combination of the previous keywords, usernames of the Nike company’s Twitter profiles (@Nike, @nikebasketball), as well as the keywords as hashtags (#nike, #zion, #shoegate, #basketball, #shoe, #explosion etc). This process resulted in a high volume of tweets that the author analysed manually, from which a few conclusions were deducted, and some screenshots of the most relevant posts were chosen to be included in this paper as proof or exemplification. The author used the same keywords for extensive inquiries on search engines, which resulted in news and other types of media articles, as well as reviews and blog posts about the case. The amount of data collected and analysed manually for the case study research was rich enough and manageable for qualitative data analysis. Therefore, it was sufficient to provide context of the situation with specific details, a timeline of events related to the initial shoe malfunction incident, the main actors in the event and social media brand crisis, their actions, the effects on the brand and company, and the outcome and conclusions.

For this research, the author also conducted semi-structured individual interviews with experts (Appendix 1), preparing a set of fifteen predetermined questions and additional

follow-up questions, based on the theory, information, and Nike case study analysed previously in this paper. The main goal of the expert interviews was to gather field professionals' insights regarding their knowledge, advice, and experience with brand crises management, with focus on social media crises, as well as their views on the Nike "ShoeGate" case, and in relation to the literature analysed in this thesis. The main themes of the set of questions were brand crisis management plans and policies, experts' experiences regarding social media brand crises, and best practices based on professionals' knowledge and experience. This type of research method allowed the author to collect rich and valuable information about the experiences of individuals, in connection to the topic of the thesis, to analyse, compare to, and confirm theories and to offer new information on the research subject and question.

To find interview participants, the author searched on the LinkedIn platform for individuals who, in the past or currently, had a senior-level position in a company's departments of Marketing, Communications, or Public Relations, or other relevant work experience, and looked deeper into information about the people who seemed most suitable in this case, and approachable. The author also asked people in her network for recommendations of possible candidates for the interview and received contact details on them. Afterwards, the author compiled a list of eleven professionals from different industries and geographics, who could potentially provide valuable knowledge and deeper insights for this research, and who did not have any type of previous personal relationship to the author.

The author contacted the individuals between November 9 and 11, 2021, through LinkedIn direct messages, email, and phone, introducing herself and the purpose of contact, providing information on the research and its aim. She also requested, in the case they agree to participate in the expert interview, for the interview to be conducted in the following few days, if possible, for the author to fit the finalisation of the thesis in the time granted by the supervisor. Seven of them, with whom she had connections in common on LinkedIn and offline, answered on the same day in a positive way to the request and confirmed their potential participation, since the period allocated by the author for the answers was short, and their time was limited due to their positions and work volume. The other professionals contacted, unfortunately, declined the request on basis of lack of sufficient time or other personal reasons. For time efficiency, the interviews were conducted through email, with

the author sending the professionals, at the same time, an English version of the Finnish Data Protection Act, a privacy notice regarding the research and the personal data of the respondents, a consent to processing the personal data document, and the interview structure.

In total, six out of the seven experts participated in the interview and answered all or most questions, each working in different companies and positions in present, all of them with many years of experience in industries such as fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), banking, healthcare, retail & distribution, automotive, digital services, and e-commerce. Unfortunately, one of the seven experts could not participate after all in the interview, since some work-related and personal problems which occupied all her free time have arisen unexpectedly, and she had to leave the country immediately. The six respondents sent the author the completed and signed legal documents, as well as their answers to the set of interview questions through email between November 12 and 13, which then the author centralized in a personal folder, and then analysed. Some of the respondents did not offer answers to all of the questions or more details to some of their answers, because they either did not possess that information, or by sharing it in this interview, they would have breached the confidentiality of the company they worked for. The author thanked all the experts for their time and effort, as well as for offering valuable insights and experiences in the interview answers.

The professionals who answered the interview questions are: Veronica Mircea, District Leader at Philips Health Systems, currently responsible for sales and overall health systems business in 16 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, with 20 years previous experience in marketing and communication; Lucian Lazarovici, General Manager for Russia, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Israel geographies at S.C. Johnson & Son Inc., with over 20 years previous experience in FMCG industry and in brand and trade marketing; Viorel Ruse, Marketing and Communication Director at First Bank Romania, with over 14 years of experience in Marketing and Communication; Andrei Hutanu, entrepreneur, founder and responsible with sourcing digital talent at Silverbacks, with over 10 years previous experience with software, new media, and social media; Viorel Ognean, Managing Director for South-Eastern Europe Cluster at Lantmännen Unibake, with over 38 years of experience in marketing, communications, PR, and commercializing consumer branded

goods across several European markets; and Ali Asad, Head of Marketing at Quiz Clothing Pakistan, with over 7 years previous experience in marketing, social media, digital media buying, PR, and branding.

When planning and conducting the interviews, the thesis author followed the EU's Data Protection Regulation (General Data Protection (EU) 2016/679, 2016) and the Finnish Data Protection Act (Data Protection Act 5.12.2018/1050, 2018), by supplying the interviewees before the interview took place with a copy translated in English of the Finnish Personal Data Act (523/1999), a privacy notice document, and a consent to processing personal data document. The privacy notice included a description of the processing of personal data for scientific research purposes, with information on the research, thesis and legal grounds, based on consent given by the research subjects, data about the controller and researcher of this study, the rights of data subjects. The consent to scientific research and processing of personal data document was created based on the previous aspects mentioned in the privacy notice and was completed and signed by the interview respondents on their own accord, prior to the collection of any data.

The limitations of this qualitative research method utilized by the author are as follows: the constraint of time in the given situation, due to the planning of the author; the limited number of participants, to gain a more comprehensive view over the subjects discussed about in the interview; conducting the interview through email correspondence, rather than face-to-face, or on video/phone call, because of time efficiency and logistics, which would have given the author the opportunity to get to know better the subjects, analyse their body language, and have the chance to expand even more on some topics during a freeform conversation.

Overall, the author had a non-consequentialist approach to the qualitative research conducted in this thesis, giving consideration in all stages of research to ethic and moral beliefs, and following principles regarding people's rights, such as voluntariness, informed consent, confidentiality, beneficence, and integrity. In the case of the expert interviews, for example, the main principles respected by the author before, during, and after the whole process of gathering data were the subjects' uncoerced participation, freely given consent to processing of personal data for the purpose of research, and avoidance of risks regarding

personal data. Before the author gathered any data through the interviews or otherwise, the subjects were given comprehensive information on the context, purpose, and implications of the research, as well as on the way the personal data will be collected, processed, stored, and used (Wiles, 2012, pp. 13-29.)

The reliability and validity of the process of collecting and analysing qualitative data are always some of the primary concerns for in-depth research. These aspects contribute greatly to the credibility of the information and conclusions, and for that reason the researcher has the responsibility to uphold these elements and be as objective as possible when doing qualitative research. The above-mentioned research methods are the most fitting for writing this thesis, to devise and present a clear analysis of the topic, based on relevant literature, case studies from internationally known brands, and expert interviews (Rogelberg, 2008, Chapter 8, pp. 177-178.)

## **5 Discussion and findings**

The aim of this study was to identify potential mitigation strategies for digital brand crises, through which the affected company could minimize the damage to its reputation, positioning, or market value, and possibly maximize benefits for their brand. The author investigates brand crisis management strategies and potential branding opportunities in the context of a social media brand crisis by incorporating theory, insights, and exemplifications based on existing literature about social media, word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth, online firestorms, branding, and crisis management, as well as observations, real-life cases, and expert interviews.

### **5.1 Previous literature and case studies**

Following the accelerated evolution of technology in the past decades, social media networks were conceived, removing all barriers from open communication on the internet, in multiple forms, which offered consumers freedom in the online sphere (Agresta et. al, 2020, p. 3). This altered the power play in the consumer-brand relationship, as brands obtained the real liberty of reaching their clients directly online, while consumers gained more influence over a company's existence (Agresta et. al, 2010, p. 3; Kietzmann et. al,

2011). According to statistics, in present there are roughly 4.2 billion active social media users (Johnson, 2021), who spend on average 144 minutes per day navigating social media platforms (Tankovska, 2021), time in which they engage regularly with each other, and with the brands present online. Online networking platforms' key features - virality, visibility, interactivity, and imminence, present opportunities and advantages for companies, along with risks and disadvantages (Cooper et. al, 2019, p. 686). These risks can be broadly classified as reputational, operational, information security, financial, and regulatory compliance, from which the first two types pose the most direct and serious threat to a brand's image and position in the market, owing to the rapid and extensive spread of negative feedback expressed online (Mennie, 2015, p. 23-27; Cooper et. al, 2019, p. 686).

The word-of-mouth marketing tactic has evolved in the online world, as well, into electronic word-of-mouth, which represents a reliable source of information to most consumers, as they hold it in high regard compared to other sources (Tuten, 2020, p. 83). Two-thirds of all consumer goods sales are believed to be influenced by word-of-mouth marketing, while in the US, a study found that for 79% of the surveyed people, online user ratings and feedback are just as important as personal recommendations from friends or family (Tuten, 2020, p. 83; Murphy, 2020). Moreover, Barreto stated that satisfaction influences positive word-of-mouth more than the loyalty of a consumer, when it comes to writing online feedback, reviews, and ratings (2014, pp. 642-643).

However, in the case of a high amount of negative electronic word-of-mouth, digital brand crises can be born, known also as online or social media firestorms, which are collective activities including hostile, offensive, or profane expressions, and hate speech (Hansen et. al, 2018; Gruber et. al, 2020). Hansen, Kupfer, and Hennig-Thurau found that the primary brand crisis' triggers aspects can impact the delayed firestorm aspects, and that the more relevant the crisis' cause is to the consumers, the more motivated they will be to elaborate their message (2018). Furthermore, in time, consumers will remember in more vivid details a social media firestorm which has a severe cause, is big in size of participants, virality and length, is not handled quickly by the affected company, and is even covered by traditional media outlets (Hansen et. al, 2018).

For a brand crisis recovery to be considered successful, it must efficiently rebuild the relationship value of the disgruntled consumer and minimize the spread of negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) to other consumers in the digital community (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 4). A company's reaction to the unfavourable eWOM could be disengaging, which entails behaving in ways that prevent or inhibit elaboration, or it can be engaging, which is considered more suitable and entails empathic or explanatory conversational elaboration between the company and the consumer (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 4). It is advised against employing a response strategy of avoidance, in which the company remains silent and ignores the negative eWOM, as it is considered the most inadequate means to control virality (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 4).

When the flood of negative eWOM transforms into an online firestorm, the company is required to offer numerous responses, while paying great attention to their structural components, in order to manage the situation and limit its effects (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p.5). Additionally, brand managers should follow the interplay between all the messages they broadcast and their overall effect on the public, and not only their individual performance (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 5). Researchers have found that using cross-message dynamics, containing varying levels of empathy and explanations, in the brand's online communication strategy could assist in minimizing the virality of unfavourable eWOM and mitigating the firestorm (Herhausen et. al, 2019, p. 5).

Other types of strategies that can potentially aid in the mitigation of a social media firestorm are giving a clear and appropriate statement about the cause of the crisis, as quick as possible; having the CEO or other company leaders make a public statement regarding the crisis, such as apologetic, explanatory; analysing the situation and detecting a potential opportunity to counterattack (Aschermann, 2021; Scholz & Smith, 2019b; Vega, 2013). Companies may also minimize negative sentiment during an online firestorm by allocating positive marketing information to social media influencers and by having a substantial number of moderators advocate swiftly for the brand (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, pp. 1103-1104).

Companies could employ more assertive response approaches, as well, especially when it could motivate brand advocates to defend the business. In certain cases, such as when a

firm is accused of moral misbehaviour, a confident and aggressive response to a possible online firestorm could result in better short- and long-term benefits for the afflicted organization. In these circumstances, the brand has two options: dispute the charges by claiming that the crisis does not exist, as well as questioning the complainant's claims, or subside by diminishing the severity of the crisis and declining that any harm was intended. Brand managers can assemble a defence strategy around the shared key values of the brand with those of their influential stakeholders, to have higher chances of rebutting the problem. Based on previous literature, brand managers should also participate in co-creation with their stakeholders, to generate meaningful content for both the company and the consumers, and to build a narrative which would help the brand in a potential crisis (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, pp. 1104-1107.)

As presented previously in this paper, a successful case of online firestorm mitigation was done by Protein World in 2015, regarding the digital brand crisis created by their controversial campaign "Are You Beach Body Ready?". The brand has taken constant action since the beginning of the firestorm until its end and utilized three different approaches for mitigation throughout the crisis duration, at different stages: denial, diminish, and escalation. In the first approach, the brand adopted an attitude of irony and disregard, misinterpreting on purpose the critics' messages, and promoted their products in their replies to the complaints, which did not attract potential allies of the brand to take part. In the second approach, the brand recognized the criticism, but advocated the advertisements, stating that their aim was to encourage a healthy lifestyle. This strategy depicted the brand's changed tone, as they were more candid and appeasing, as well as sympathetic and correct to the consumers, but it did not motivate many brand advocates either. In the third approach, Protein World adopted an escalation strategy, in which they purposely antagonized critics, in order to accept and feed the dispute, instead of alleviating it. This strategy incited a lot more of their fans and supporters to join the conversation and advocate them by initiating their own antagonizing retaliation. In this particular social media firestorm, a branding disaster was converted into a branding opportunity successfully (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, pp. 1108-1120.)

Further research is required, however, to analyse in depth and understand the motivation of the brand advocates to join the dispute and support the brand, as well as the company's

decision of employing such strategies. Nevertheless, brand managers are not necessarily advised to rush and adopt immediately the escalation approach, but rather start with denial or diminishing techniques to investigate the criticism, understand the dynamics of the dispute and endorsement for the brand, and refine the brand's conceptual posture. Brand managers can try to escalate the crisis to their benefit only after these investigations have revealed enough promise for brand advocates to join the counterattack measures and support the organization (Scholz & Smith, 2019a, p. 1128.)

## **5.2 Expert Interviews**

The expert interview structure consists of a set of fifteen main questions, with additional follow-up questions for expansion and clarity of the answers. In total, there were six respondents, all professionals with vast experience in the fields of Marketing, Communications, or Public Relations, and who have worked or are currently working in different important positions for companies operating in various industries, from different geographical regions: fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), healthcare, banking, digital services, e-commerce, retail, distribution, automotive. The main themes of the set of questions and answers were brand crisis management plans and policies, experts' experiences regarding social media brand crises, and best practices based on experts' knowledge and experience.

### **5.2.1 Brand crisis management plans and policies**

Social media networks have altered the consumer-brand relationship. Companies can reach large numbers of consumers instantly and directly online, while stakeholders have gained more influence over companies' existence and the brand's journey. Social media gives companies the opportunity to monitor closely and understand better consumers' behaviour, as well as improve their communication tactics and product proposition (Agresta et. al, 2010; Kietzmann et. al, 2011; V. Ruse, V. Mircea, V. Ognean, Expert Interviews, November 2021.)

In case of a brand crisis, each company could have different departments or corporate positions who are responsible for handling communications and public relations, but some

examples from the expert interviews' answers are: a specific department, such as Corporate Communication, which could work closely with the Marketing department in handling major crises and general brand PR, and report directly to the CEO; the Marketing and Communication team; a specialized Public Affairs department, led by a Senior Director; the Marketing Manager, or an external PR service; or in the case of a B2C company who operates mainly with in-store retail, a trained Customer Excellence department, which works closely with the Marketing team (V. Mircea, V. Ognean, V. Ruse, L. Lazarovici, A. Hutanu, A. Asad, Expert Interviews, November 2021.)

Regarding the Nike "ShoeGate" case study, their response and mitigation strategy of the brand crisis, and possible alternatives to strategies that would have potentially worked or yielded better results than the one used by Nike, the experts offered the following insights: the majority of them considered Nike's approach to be common, but correct, suitable, and professional, with good or expected results; one expert suggested, if in line with their online presence, image, and their audience/target group, after confirming the severity of the situation and the player's injury, the company could have potentially "created a bit of self-humour about this case" (V. Ruse, Expert Interview, November 2021); additional to the implemented strategy, the company could have put more focus in their communication on the products' general performance, high-quality, and the brand's commitment to fulfil their promises, as well as their product innovation and benefits (V. Mircea, L. Lazarovici, A. Hutanu, V. Ognean, V. Ruse, Expert Interviews, November 2021.)

### **5.2.2 Experts' experiences regarding social media brand crises**

In many cases of a brand crisis, there are chances to identify possible ways in which the company could benefit from the situation or advertise their products and services. However, brand crises usually happen unexpectedly, and due to the rapidly spreading effects they have on the company, and the corporate representatives' haste to mitigate and surpass it without receiving lethal damages, these branding opportunities could often be overlooked in the most important moments and noticed too late. Nonetheless, there are occasions in which some companies have seized the opportunity, and through that tried to reach a more positive brand crisis outcome than expected (L. Lazarovici, V. Mircea, V. Ruse, A. Hutanu, A. Asad, Expert Interviews, November 2021.)

From five different cases of brand crises that the interviewees experienced, there were four in which the corporate representatives identified, during or after a brand crisis, the opportunity of branding, and one case in which it was taken advantage of and contributed to a more positive outcome of the crisis. In this latter case, the cause of the brand crisis was a product failure/misuse for a customer, and the company had a timely reaction, both online, communicating with the public, and offline, by identifying the real cause of the problem and approaching the affected customer directly. According to Lucian Lazarovici, the expert who experienced this situation, the negative crisis effects on the brand had a short-term impact, with online negative comments being limited after the company's intervention, and the affected customer returning with positive comments on the online platform after a week. The company took the opportunity to send the customer, for trial, several household products from their portfolio, including the one that was previously misused and caused the crisis, as courtesy and compensation for the initial negative perceived experience, possibly gaining a new consumer for the company's other brands as well. According to the interviewee, after three months "the negative comments were below 5% of total comments measured in that period" (L. Lazarovici, Expert Interview, November 2021), and the crisis was considered fully mitigated (V. Mircea, V. Ruse, A. Hutanu, A. Asad, L. Lazarovici, Expert Interviews, November 2021.)

In another brand crisis experienced by Viorel Ruse, one of the interview respondents, while working in the banking sector, the cause was a service failure: the central system of the financial company stopped working for several hours during the day, and almost all the clients were affected directly, since they could not make payments, did not have access to their accounts, resulting in a social media crisis fuelled by negative comments and feedback, as well as media outlets neutral or negative coverage of the event and company. The company implemented a classic mitigation strategy of communicating permanently with their customers and the public, in a clear and transparent way, and using media monitoring tools, as well as brand tracking reports. This included communication on social media platforms, all employees contacting clients directly through the phone and email, and appointing primary clients as brand ambassadors, while investigating the problem and making efforts to solve it as quickly as possible (V. Ruse, Expert Interview, November 2021.)

According to Ruse, this strategy has helped mitigate the crisis and improve the public's perception of the brand. The main negative effects of the crisis on the brand had a short-term impact and were represented by low social media engagement, declining brand awareness, and declining consideration. However, the outcome of the crisis mitigation strategy implemented by the company in this situation was considered better than expected, since some decisions taken on the spot were different from the company's pre-approved crisis management plan, and there was no major long-term impact on the brand. In the opinion of the expert, some of the positive aspects of the outcome were the involvement of loyal customers as brand ambassadors to support the company, and the high-intensity media coverage for several days of the brand, which, even though it was neutral or negative, created visibility (V. Ruse, Expert Interview, November 2021.)

One of the interviewees, Veronica Mircea, offered an example of identifying an opportunity of marketing for the company in a brand crisis, later, after the crisis has passed. The participant experienced a temporary brand crisis caused by a voluntary product recall, because of the potential fire hazard risk of a baby monitor, since the battery could have overheated while the product was plugged in (Marcus, 2020). In this case, the company's focus was, at all times, consumer safety, and decided to voluntarily recall the product, after investigating and discovering the potential safety risk. To mitigate the crisis, the company communicated continuously in a simple and clear manner, providing information about decisions taken and the procedure customers should follow in this situation, to return the product and receive back money. The company also momentarily halted the advertising of the whole product category and provided extensive training to salesforce for good communication with retailers and clients. The brand's reputation was impacted on a short-to medium-term, by decline in sales, negative comments on social media, decrease of retail orders, and shops in which the product was delisted, but the company's stock market value was not affected by this event (V. Mircea, Expert Interview, November 2021.)

The decisions in this product recall and brand crisis mitigation were taken by the global team, which was managing the product in question, regarding the recall, and local teams regarding the recall mechanism and social media management. In one year after the brand crisis happened, the company's volume of sales reached the level it was on before the product recall, and the online negative comments and product reviews stopped. In this

situation, however, the participant considers that there were no positive outcomes registered. Overall, the impact and outcome were “in line with the company’s expectations” (V. Mircea, Expert Interview, November 2021), and the company returned on track. In the interviewee’s opinion, during the brand crisis, there could have been an opportunity to promote to the affected clients other products from the company, by organizing “a trial program of products that help mothers” (V. Mircea, Expert Interview, November 2021.)

Other ideas offered by some of the experts for seizing the opportunity of marketing for the company in a brand crisis were: in the case of a hacking incident of a company’s social media page, which immediately caused a crisis and inflicted great damages, the company in question could have documented the crisis and create a short video to raise awareness of unethical hackers, and the lack of power, in this case, for a company to solve this issue; in the case of another brand crisis on social media, the company could have taken advantage of the jokes and memes circulating on the internet, and through them, make a spin on their narrative, as this social media content is very popular, relatable, and “it’s a good source for marketing ideas” (A. Hutanu, Expert Interviews, November 2021), after assessing the potential risks of this strategy and handling it carefully (A. Asad, A. Hutanu, Expert Interviews, November 2021.)

### **5.2.3 Best practices based on experts’ knowledge and experience**

The companies that get involved in social media should pay attention to their online content and behaviour, and accept the risks associated with their presence on the internet, since these aspects also influence the customer’s behaviour and their opinion of the company (V. Ruse, A. Hutanu, V. Ognean, L. Lazarovici, Expert Interviews, 2021). According to one of the expert interviewees, the way a brand communicates online, and their type of content are important factors which can influence a consumer’s purchasing decision; therefore, “regardless of the type of channel, ‘word of mouth’ is the king when you choose a brand” (V. Ruse, Expert Interview, November 2021).

The consumer-brand relationship is key and “companies should put consumers first in their strategy” (V. Mircea, Expert Interview, November 2021), as well as constantly evaluate their products, ensure they deliver on the promises they make, listen to customer’s feedback and

criticism, as well as use social media to the company's advantage. Companies should hire highly qualified professionals for handling and devising proper strategies for their social media presence, since their behaviour and content they post online has great influence over consumers' behaviour and brand perception. Social media platforms offer consumers the liberty to access any information, have visibility, and the ability to provide feedback or share their experiences with a brand to masses of users in a few seconds. According to one of experts, "a good approach, that works at scale for global companies, is to be present and accept the risks associated with your presence in the internet jungle" (A. Hutanu, Expert Interview, November 2021). A company's communication on social media related to their brands, products or target consumer groups should be closely monitored and constantly improved, to build a strong online presence (V. Mircea, L. Lazarovici, V. Ruse, V. Ognean, Expert Interviews, November 2021).

The experts' advice on the detection, prevention, and mitigation of an online brand crisis, to obtain a positive outcome from it, includes: never underestimating the consumer and their feedback; conducting "strong quality checks on product design and manufacturing process" (V. Mircea, Expert Interview, November 2021) as often as possible; the company's main focus should be product quality and performance, and their consumers' needs; "defining a clear strategy (with clear objectives, a pre-defined plan and course correction actions as we further evolve) for communication on digital media" (L. Lazarovici, Expert Interview, November 2021); if possible, acquire and constantly use monitoring tools which help identify in time potential brand crises; involve influential "existing customers in protecting the brand to prevent an intense situation" (V. Ruse, Expert Interview, November 2021); communicate clearly and transparently about the situation, decisions taken, and actions to solve the problem; "align the team with strong values" (A. Hutanu, Expert Interview, November 2021); know the company's stakeholders' and their needs, and incorporate that knowledge in the products and services they offer, to build and maintain brand reputation (V. Mircea, L. Lazarovici, V. Ruse, A. Hutanu, V. Ognean, Expert Interviews, November 2021.)

The author analysed the brand crises the interviewees experienced in correlation to the theory, based on causes, context, impact, mitigation strategies, outcomes and reached the following findings and conclusions:

- Most companies monitor on a daily or weekly basis all information posted online regarding the consumers' opinions, feedback, and reactions to their products, services, and brands, with the help of specialized software, tools, or dedicated specialists. Therefore, the author considers that this is the first and must-have action.
- Most companies have intervention procedures and mitigation strategies, to quickly stop and reduce the impact of the crisis on the brand, based on their own experiences of online brand crises. In the author's view, this is an objective approach, which could potentially be based as well on market research, conducted by the company's specialists. A plus for companies would be to analyse the competition and learn from their successful or unsuccessful experiences.
- Most of the experts admitted that no matter how prepared they believe they are to manage a crisis, and how much attention they pay to the consumers and non-consumers' online reactions, there is always a major risk for the situation to get out of control. In the author's opinion, if the initial mitigation plan implemented did not work, all companies should have a backup plan prepared for diminishing the negative electronic word-of-mouth. Additionally, only after the situation is somewhat under control, specialists could start investigating and implementing potential opportunities of advertising during such an event.
- One of the interviewed experts reached the conclusion that "sometimes advertising in social media is like throwing gasoline on a fire when a brand crisis emerges" (A. Hutanu, Expert Interview, November 2021). This can also be confirmed by the Protein World brand crisis (see thesis section 2.3.4) and the three different mitigation strategies the company adopted in turn. In the first approach, the company skipped the stage of crisis acknowledgement and mitigation actions and jumped directly to the advertising opportunity, which turned out to be a wrong choice. Therefore, the author believes that companies and their corporate representatives should follow a few key steps when responding to an online brand crisis. The first is to acknowledge the brand crisis and intervene, followed by actions to diminish its impact on the company and the flow of negative reactions. After that, companies could investigate

possible advertising and branding opportunities. Finally, conduct an analysis of the event and adjust company's procedures and strategies accordingly.

- In the author's view, based on the experts' answers and previously analysed situations, an important aspect to take into consideration is that companies should conduct an analysis on all the brand crises they experienced, and readjust or improve their mitigation strategies accordingly. Moreover, most companies should have designated corporate representatives or specialized departments, which monitor daily the consumers' activity online in relation to their products and brands. There are two key reasons for this: to be prepared in advance to intervene in case of a potential brand crisis, and to identify opportunities of advertising and branding, and implement them immediately.

The author mentions that the research findings and personal conclusions should be treated subject to the fact that the research was conducted on a limited number of respondents and case studies.

## **6 Conclusion**

This thesis attempted to find potential answers to the following research question: How can a company take advantage of negative publicity in a social media brand crisis? The author has gathered insights on how a social media firestorm can be transformed from a dilemma requiring handling and correction, into an opportunity for boosting and strengthening the brand. In modern societies, individuals are highly connected, and, at the same time, sharply divided and contrasting to each other, and to their environment, thus necessitating a greater appreciation of the ways in which marketers may shape brands in the turmoil caused by a digital brand crisis. Therefore, this research gathered valuable observations on this topic by investigating and describing detection, prevention, and mitigation strategies for online firestorms, including assertive and escalation methods, and the ways in which they could be implemented.

The main research findings are the following: the consumer spectrum is more complex in present; social media networks have altered the consumer-brand relationship, and offer

both opportunities, such as publicity, channels for advertising, wide consumer reach, and risks, such as negative publicity and reviews, public complaints and criticism, brand crises, boycotting, for companies; electronic word-of-mouth, such as online written reviews and feedback, is considered very reliable by the end consumer; online backlash has the means of escalating and spreading quickly; companies should permanently monitor consumers and non-consumers' online reactions; companies should have specialized departments and custom approaches when dealing with a brand crisis, backup plans, as well as the ability to adapt the response strategy to a specific crisis as it unfolds; the consumer-brand relationship is key and should represent a priority in brand crises; companies should conduct an analysis on all the brand crises they experienced, and readjust or improve their mitigation strategies accordingly; there are potential hidden opportunities to benefit from in brand crises, which specialists should investigate and implement at appropriate times. Nonetheless, this research has limitations, as many other studies and further research on this topic should be conducted.

First, this paper's research question addressed quite a broad area of study, resulting in more generalized findings. The author studied previous literature and analysed practical examples, thus gathering relevant theory about social media, word-of-mouth and electronic word-of-mouth, online firestorms, brand crisis management. This resulted in the collection from multiple sources of relevant strategies, information, solutions, and approaches to detecting, preventing, and mitigating digital brand crises, which focused on minimizing as much as possible the damage to the brand. The author also investigated and conducted a limited number of case studies and expert interviews, to compare and correlate them to the previous literature. For ampler results, future research could be more particularized and maybe narrowed down to specific events, entities, or industries. Moreover, other types of research methods, either qualitative or quantitative, could be utilized to obtain various information on the topic from relevant sources. This could aid in finding deeper insights and new response and recovery strategies for an online firestorm.

Second, there is a deficit of extensive research on methods through which brands could take advantage of negative publicity in a social media brand crisis, as well as a limited number of real-life case studies of brands retaliating against their detractors in a successful manner, which have been documented properly. Moreover, a deeper investigation is recommended

to thoroughly grasp the concept and position in brand management of the provocateur in a company's retaliation, since each can have a different attitude.

All things considered, practitioners and scholars continue to be spurred on by social media to develop branding, online presence, and marketing strategies. This thesis offers a set of strategies for tackling a potential social media firestorm, which marketers can incorporate in the company's brand crisis management plan and implement when needed, according to the context and situation. Additional investigation is recommended into how brand managers may create brand resonance and genuineness via live interpersonal communication between brands and consumers. When building a brand and managing an online brand crisis, corporate representatives generally are advised and prefer to adopt more peaceful and congruent techniques. Nonetheless, occasionally, brands should be encouraged to retaliate when the opportunity presents itself, and there is a greater potential for benefits than disadvantages.

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## Appendix 1: Expert Interview Structure

This document contains an expert interview structure created by Sorana-Brândușa Rida, for the research conducted in her bachelor's thesis titled "Marketing opportunities in a social media crisis".

The scientific goal of the research conducted in this bachelor's thesis is to investigate situations in which a company could experience social media brand crises, and find potential strategies to mitigate it, attempting to reduce the brand damage and bring possible benefits for the company. For a thorough analysis, the use of research methods such as expert interviews are needed, to discover valuable information from professionals, attested by their experience and knowledge in this field. Therefore, the collection and processing of personal data, resulting from the participation and interview answers, is needed. Please find the Privacy Notice document and the Consent to Processing Personal Data document attached to the email/message you received from Sorana-Brândușa Rida.

Expert Interview Questions:

- 1) Please shortly introduce yourself, with focus on your experience in the field of Marketing, Communications or Public Relations.
- 2) Please introduce the company you are currently working for and your position.
- 3) Which department or corporate positions in your current company is responsible for handling communications and public relations in the event of a brand crisis?
- 4) Does your current company have a mitigation plan/policy in place in case of a brand crisis? If possible, please briefly explain it.
- 5) Considering your experience, what are the most common challenges in terms of brand management and handling social media crises?
- 6) During your professional experience, were you ever involved in the handling of an online brand crisis? If the case, could you please explain it in more detail?

7) What was the company's approach in handling the brand crisis previously mentioned?

- a) What was the response strategy and mitigation methods?
- b) How were they implemented?

8) How did that brand crisis affect the company and brand regarding reputation, positioning or valuation in the short-term and long-term (e.g., variations in number of followers on social media platforms, social sentiment of the brand/company, the company's stock market value, revenues etc.)?

- a) How were the crisis effects measured or evaluated?
- b) How did the company react to the crisis?
- c) Who was involved in the decision making of the company's strategic choices?

9) What was the outcome of that brand crisis, after the implementation of the brand crisis management strategies?

- a) How did the outcome compare to the company's expectations?
- b) Which were the most positive and negative aspects of the outcome, and how were they influenced by the crisis management strategy used, in your view?

10) What is your professional opinion on the crisis management strategy applied in that situation by the company? Do you consider it was successful or not, and why?

11) Do you believe that in that specific brand crisis, there could have been an opportunity of marketing for the brand or company? Which were the positive outcomes after the brand crisis faded out?

12) Thinking back on that brand crisis incident, what would you have done differently, considering your current experience and knowledge?

13) Below, please find a brief overview of a social media brand crisis example of a worldwide known brand, its effects on the company/brand and their response and mitigation strategy at that moment.

On February 20, 2019, during the first minute of a highly anticipated college basketball game between Duke University and North Carolina University, one of the star players of Duke's team, Zion Williamson, suffered a shoe malfunction. While performing a rotation, his left sports shoe ripped open completely from the attachment point of the material to the shoe sole, causing his foot to go through completely, and led to a mild right knee injury (Figure 1). This, in turn, resulted in his withdrawal from the rest of that game and from the sports events that followed in that month. The sport shoes he was wearing at that time were manufactured by Nike, and the 4.34 million viewers took immediately to social media platforms to express their shock, concerns, and criticism of the Nike company. Due to the extensive amount of media coverage and negative word-of-mouth, the situation transformed in a social media crisis for the brand. In addition to this, the company also suffered damages to the Nike market value, with an immediate drop of 1.6 percent in the stock price over one day. (RockDove Solutions, 2019; Negrón, 2019; Kaplan, 2019)



Figure 1. Williamson's immediate reaction to his shoe breaking (Kinnan, 2019).

The company's representatives assessed the situation quickly and started mitigating the online firestorm by replying to consumers' messages online, releasing an official statement about the incident the following day (Figure 2), and, finally, offered the affected basketball player an advertising and brand deal. The social media crisis eventually faded in the next few weeks, but Nike received negative media coverage and publicity for the next few months, as well.

Additionally, in the longer-term, the company suffered a decline of 2.5 percent in the stock price, however, other aspects might have also impacted the stock. (Kaplan, 2019; Tran, 2020)



Figure 2. Nike's official statement about the shoe malfunction incident (Rovell, 2019a).

Please give your professional opinion on the situation and on the Nike company's approach to this brand crisis. Could you give some examples of possible alternatives to crisis management strategies that you believe would have worked in that situation or would have yielded better results than the one used by that company (if you have any)?

14) What is your view and overall professional opinion on the modern B2C relationship, and the influence consumers or other stakeholders possess over a company's success on social media? How do you think that affects the content a company posts online and their probability of experiencing social media crises?

15) What advice would you offer to other individuals or companies regarding the detection, prevention, and mitigation of an online brand crisis, to obtain a positive outcome from it?