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# Brand Reputation and its importance on Instagram

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## Abstract

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With technological advancements, particularly in social media, marketing has changed significantly. For companies, this means they need to study how to build and manage a successful brand online. Having a good brand reputation is vital for attracting consumers from social media channels as consumers tend to build trust and relationships with those who have it.

In the era of social media where many factors such as e-WOM can severely damage a brand's reputation, it is important to study how to protect your brand reputation on Instagram. This research is conducted using secondary data, indicating the use of qualitative research methodology. The two case studies analyzed showed similarities in the ways they protected their brand reputation on Instagram.

Brands need to first understand various marketing principles such as consumer behavior, the AIDA model, how to manage a brand reputation online as well as the power of visuals. With brand reputation management using social CRM tools, brands can successfully enhance and protect their reputation with different actions. By undertaking these methods and tools brands can protect and build a strong brand reputation on Instagram.

Keywords: Instagram, Brand Reputation, Marketing, Social Media

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## **Glossary**

E-WOM      Electronical word of mouth

CRM          Customer Relationship Management

# 1 Introduction

In the digital age where we live in today, the use of social media platforms is only expected to increase in the future. Thus, social media platforms have become a significant factor and tool for companies in shaping brand reputations and consumer perceptions. Instagram is one of the most used social media platforms, where its users can share photos and videos. It has become a popular tool for marketers as its global reach and influence keep on growing with its growing number of users. Therefore, this thesis aims to address the research question of how to protect your brand reputation on Instagram.

With the advancements in technology and the spread of social media platforms, marketing activities have undergone a shift as well. It is necessary for brands to better understand what affects consumer behaviour as well as undertake brand management principles on Instagram in order to protect their reputation on the platform. The growing use of social media has also introduced certain difficulties, such as electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). E-WOM is a significant factor in shaping consumer perceptions and decision-making processes towards the brand, as it can be either positive or negative.

This thesis aims to collect factors which affect brand reputation and how to then protect the reputation on Instagram by analysing two known case studies featuring Nike and Airbnb. The research aims to analyse Nike's and Airbnb's challenges, successes, responses to reputational damages, and the impact of these factors on their brand reputation.

Essentially, this thesis serves as an exploration into brand reputation management on Instagram and what affects it on the platform, offering valuable insights as well as recommendations for brands seeking to boost and build a stronger brand reputation on Instagram and resonate with their target consumers in the middle of the ever-evolving digital landscape.

## 2 Literature review

In the developing landscape of the digital age, businesses are navigating the complex dimensions of social media, where the impact of brand image and consumer behaviour is crucial to study in order to protect their brand reputation on Instagram. To understand the concept of brand reputation, it is important to first understand basic marketing, consumer behaviour, and social media concepts.

### 2.1 Marketing

As Instagram has emerged as a vital component of social media marketing strategies for businesses across various industries worldwide (Green et al., 2018), it is crucial to start with understanding the basics of marketing. With the advancements in technology, shifts in the business landscape, and changes in consumer behaviour, marketing has evolved significantly in the digital age. When people think about marketing, they usually picture huge billboard advertisements on television and radio, but there are many more layers to discover in it.

Kotler and Armstrong (2020) define marketing simply as “...engaging customers and managing profitable customer relationships.” More broadly, marketing is the process of creating, delivering, communicating, and exchanging value to answer customer needs and reach organizational goals. This involves for example identifying customer preferences, designing products/services, and securing well-organized delivery. The desired end goal of marketing is building strong customer relationships and customer value creation. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2020).

Molenaar (2011) describes marketing as “bringing products and services to the market”. Meaning that marketing is a business function that shapes the relationship between an organization and its market, with a particular emphasis on cultivating connections with customers, both current and potential. (Molenaar, 2011). Fundamentally the end goal of marketing is to identify the target market

for a product or service and connect with the consumers' interest by directing awareness towards the product or service.

According to Godin (2000), the customer should be at the centre of successful marketing. Therefore, marketers are constantly trying to understand consumer behaviour, the decision-making process, and how to best deliver value to them.

## 2.2 Consumer behaviour

In order to successfully market and sell a product or service, companies need to understand and learn the fundamentals of consumer behaviour and the consumer journey. When understanding the buyer's characteristics and decision-making process, it is easier to answer the central question raised by Kotler (2013), "How do consumers respond to the various marketing efforts the company might use?"

### 2.2.1 Consumer decision-making process

Looking first at the factors influencing consumer behaviour. Kotler (2013) has put together the characteristics which influence the behaviour of consumers. The factors are cultural, social, personal, and psychological.

Cultural factors give an understanding of one's background, values, how they were raised, with which influences they grew up, to which social class they belong, and many other factors about how culture is shaping us. For example, if a child is raised in a family where spending time and money on specific luxuries is normal daily business, the more likely they will continue to do so as an adult also because that is a normal value then. (Kotler, 2013).

Another factor influencing consumer behaviour is different social factors. The influence of reference groups means that consumers are often following the example of someone who does not belong to the same reference group as them. This means that the person admires someone who is living the life they want to achieve someday, but do not yet have. Influence from the family is observed to

have a strong influence on buyer behaviour as within the family, each person usually has certain tasks and responsibilities. These tasks and responsibilities usually determine who is in charge of income and who makes the final purchasing decision. The last social factor is roles and statuses, which are usually guiding the purchases consumers make. (Kotler, 2013).

Word-of-mouth is another social factor (Kotler, 2013) that has a high impact on many consumers' decision-making when making a purchase. Word-of-mouth is described as an action where consumers exchange their experiences and opinions, guiding potential new buyers in the direction or away from particular products, brands, and services. (Litvin, Goldsmith, and Pan, 2008). According to Godin (2000), the notion exists that customers tend to establish stronger relationships with other customers compared to the relationships they have with marketers.

Personal factors shape consumer behaviour firstly by age and life-cycle stage, which means that the wants and needs for different products and services change according to the arc of life. The occupation of the consumer affects the needs for specific working tools and clothing. A farmer could consider buying a new tractor for the field whereas a lawyer might have a need for a representative working outfit. One's economic situation affects the decision-making with choosing the brand, with a high income you might want to go for a luxurious brand but with a low income, you need to settle for a product you can afford. Lifestyle and personality affect the decision-making process at the psychographic and psychological levels. (Kotler, 2013).

Lastly, psychological factors, give the marketer an understanding of a person's motivation behind making certain buying decisions and of their perception which leads them to the selection between products. Psychological factors also give an understanding of a person's learning journey. The learning journey occurs when one learns from past experiences. Beliefs and attitudes are also gained from past experiences and play an important role in influencing buying behaviour. (Kotler, 2013).

Understanding consumer behaviour and the factors affecting the consumer decision-making process is necessary for building successful marketing strategies without harming the brand's reputation. According to Qualman (2012), “companies need to focus on providing content and tools to consumers...”, and in order to do so companies need to understand what consumers need and want.

### 2.2.2 Consumer Journey

Shavitt and Barnes (2020) define the consumer journey as “the steps that individuals take in their path toward relationships with brands or satisfying shopping experiences.”

Consumers experience various journeys during their lifetime depending on their desires. The journeys are shaped by the opportunities, obstacles, and challenges that the consumer is facing at the time. The different standpoints in life direct the consumer to the selection between different products, services, and brands. When understanding the journey of consumers and the process behind their selection, it will help to increase the value provided by companies. (Hamilton and, Price, 2019).

### 2.2.3 AIDA model

The AIDA model (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) is extensively known and one of the most commonly used communication frameworks in the world of marketing to better understand the different stages a consumer goes through before making a buying decision. (Gomez Albrecht, Green and, Hoffman, 2022).

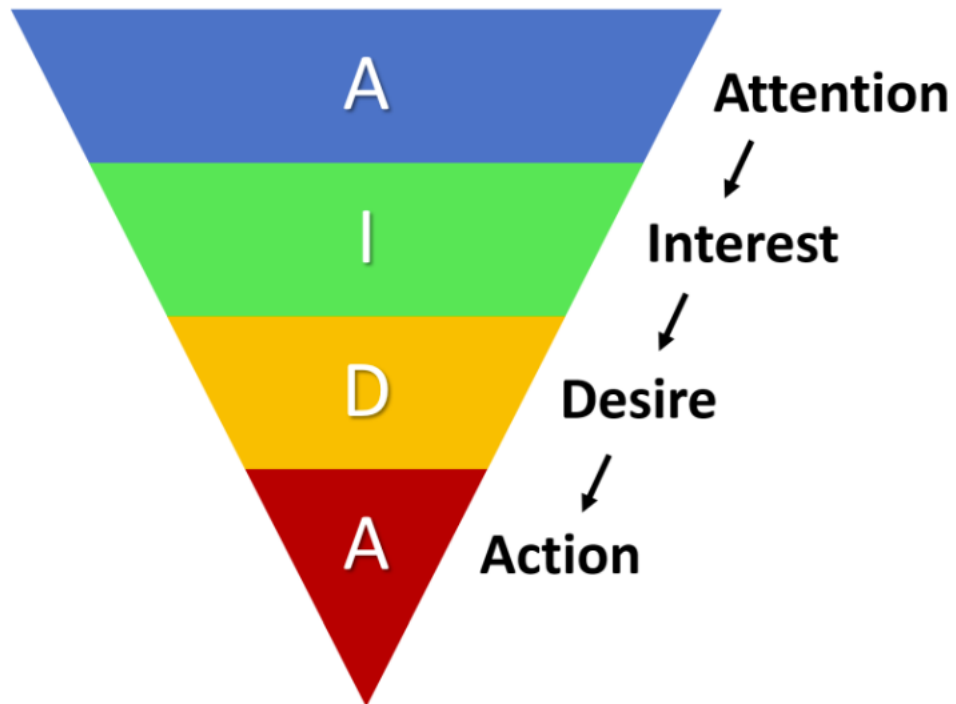


Figure 1. AIDA model (De Bruin, 2019).

The model is straightforward, with just four simple steps to examine the previously discussed consumer journey, from ignorance to purchase. The model was developed in 1898 by St Elmo Lewis. He wanted to discover how personal selling works with the help of this model. (Barry and Howard, 1990). Lewis claimed that the product needs to first attract the attention of consumers, but consumers need to be passionate about the product as well. (Pramita and Manafe, 2022).

Even though the model is old, marketers still use it today to build advertising campaigns. An experienced sales professional “will make sure they are providing stimuli and responses for each of the stages of AIDA.” (Gomez Albrecht et al., 2022)

Attention: the first step of the model, where marketers seek to capture the attention of potential consumers with attractive messages. The messages will capture the attention of the consumers by being remembered, recognized, and appreciated. (Pramita and Manafe, 2022). In order for the message (advertise) to be engaging, it should have appealing visuals and it should be emotionally or

irrationally affecting the consumer. (Belch & Belch, 2004) With these tools, the advertisements will be remembered while making the buying decisions.

**Interest:** the second step of the model, where marketers seek to maintain interest after catching their attention. After the product or service has successfully received the wanted attention from the consumer, marketers need to raise the consumer's interest towards it. As stated by Pramita and Manafe (2022), "the emergence of consumer interest means that the message or information conveyed by marketers caused further curiosity feelings."

**Desire:** the third step of the model, where marketers aim to stimulate the desire towards them. When a consumer has actual aspirations for a particular product or service, they desire to have it. (Ghirvu, 2013). At this point, when the consumer has a desire, the marketer has successfully impressed the consumer with the advertised product or service. When there is a desire, the consumer also has motives or motivations to plan the purchase. (Pramita and Manafe, 2022).

**Action:** the fourth and final step of the AIDA model, where marketers try to encourage consumers to take action towards their product or service. At this point, marketers need to focus on determining the consumer in order to actually finalize the process with purchase. (Ghirvu, 2013).

For companies using social media as one of their marketing platforms, the AIDA model can be used to plan how to attract more potential customers from the platforms. Based on research carried out by Prasadhya et al. (2022), a business account on Instagram can have more visits after the AIDA model has been taken into account when creating content. It means that each post, whether it is a reel, story, or carousel, should be designed with the AIDA elements in mind. By following the steps of AIDA when planning a campaign for social media, a brand can strengthen its position in consumers' minds when it successfully leads them to take action.

## 2.3 Brand

A brand is defined as a “unique design, sign, symbol, words, or a combination of these, employed in creating an image that identifies a product and differentiates it from its competitors.” (van den Braber et al. 2021).

The definition above describes the core idea of a brand, however, the concept has broadened to cover more than the design or a symbol of the brand. (Jokinen, 2016). According to Kingsley (2023), “brands are more than abstractions of things or ideas. They are abstractions of ways of being, ways that may be full of internal contradictions but are absolutely authentic to themselves.”

In contemporary times, brands have transcended their traditional role of solely representing physical products and their attributes. Instead, they now embody abstract concepts such as values, emotions, and lifestyles. (Jokinen, 2016). A brand is also the perception of what consumers have in their minds about a specific product or service. It can be factual and emotional – or both. (McLaughlin, 2011).

Brands also play an important role in making the decision-making process simpler for consumers between the wide range of competing product variants. By offering a unique and recognizable identity, brands give a clear differentiation factor, which guides consumers in selecting the most fitting option for them. This uniqueness not only facilitates alternatives but also stimulates trust and loyalty, as consumers come around to rely on familiar brands that will always deliver on their expectations and promises. (Davis, 2005).

The equity of a brand, meaning what is it worth to a consumer (Tiwari, 2010), is also very fragile. Brand equity can experience a rapid fall if it fails to engage its audience or constantly behaves in ways that fight against its own values and messages. Alignment with stated values and growing engagement are principles for maintaining and growing brand equity over time. When brands fail to keep up with these principles, it is not only a risk to lose the trust and loyalty of its customers, but also damaging their whole brand reputation. (Davis, 2005).

Consumers develop many different perceptions of a brand in their minds based on their experiences and interactions. On the basis of these perceptions, they form a brand image in their mind. (Jain, 2017).

According to Burger (2012), “brand value only describes the financial value of a brand.” This means that the brand can be seen as an asset to the company as brand value is measured with its financial worth. The value of a brand is important for companies as it contributes to their accomplishments and competitive advantage as well as plays an important role in the competitive growth of a global enterprise. (Gehani, 2016). In 2023 the brand value of technology company Apple Inc. was 502 680 \$m, which made it the most valuable brand globally. (Interbrand, 2024). According to Gehani (2016), Apple’s brand value is closely correlated with its evolving innovative capability, thus, its value serves as proof of its ability to continuously deliver successful products to consumers.

### 2.3.1 Brand image

The brand image represents how consumers view a brand in their minds. The image forms from a collective set of beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, meaning that essentially it is the general impression and perception of how consumers view the brand. (Pahwa, 2022).

According to Solomon (2016), brand image is shaped out of many important small details that the company presents to the public, and the presentation of those details is everything. For example, on Instagram, the first things that your potential new customer sees are your ads, profile, stories, and feed. Thus, brands can decide how they want the viewer to see them based on the material they share. (Hellberg, 2015).

However, the brand image goes beyond just having nicely coloured and presented visual elements in your profile. According to Keller (2019), a brand image is “consumer perceptions of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumers’ memory”. After a company has achieved a strong brand

image, it can also achieve customer loyalty as well as create an image with good credibility.

When a company is trusted by providing what the customers want and nothing less, they will also gain the trust of the customers. When customers trust a company, it will increase the chances of them reordering as well as their willingness to more likely recommend the product/ service to their friends and family. (Covey and Merrill 2006). In the digital age, happy customers are also often sharing their good experiences of a company and its products on social media, which will lead to more viewers for the company's site.

Consumers depend on a product's brand image to shape their overall perceptions of a specific product. When a brand has achieved a strong and positive image, consumers are more commonly recognizing the product as having superior quality and value. This relationship between product quality and brand image influences consumers' buying decisions and their decision on whether they are willing to purchase specific products from the brand. (Sallam, 2016).

Ropo (2009) stated that "consistency is key in delivering a successful brand image to the target audience". This is supported by research conducted by Forsyth and Kourdi (2009), where they discovered that developing and maintaining a strong and positive brand image requires significant investment and consideration, both in terms of time and resources. It frequently takes many years for popular brands to prove themselves in consumers' minds.

According to Ropo (2009), as the business landscape evolves, it is crucial for companies to regularly review their branding strategy. It will ensure that the decisions made will be aligned with the brand and that their corporate communications effectively convey the intended brand image as well as consistently keeping up with the brand's promise to the customers.

### 2.3.2 Branding

According to the American Marketing Association (2024), branding is the strategic process of the development and oversight of a corporation or organization's identity, which involves defining the company's mission, values, and culture in a manner that resonates with its desired perception and image. The end goal of successful branding is to create a steady and positive brand image for its customers, employees, investors, and the public. (American Marketing Association, 2024). According to Sammut-Bonnici (2014), "the objective of branding strategy is to create brands that are differentiated from the competitors, thereby reducing the number of substitutes in the marketplace."

Brand positioning can be used as a strategy to differentiate a brand from its competitors. (Weller, 2023). Brand positioning involves the careful creation of its brand image, diffusing it with distinct properties, positive associations, and core values within the minds of consumers. This process aims to establish a recognizable and lasting brand image, where the goal is to gain strong consumer attachment and loyalty. (Fayvichenko, 2018).

The rise of social networks has opened the door for a new era of branding. (Trachuk et al., 2021). Consumers are spending a significant amount of their day online. According to Petrosyan (2024), in the third quarter of 2023, the daily average time spent online was six hours and 40 minutes, as can be seen in Figure 2 below. Along with the growing use of online platforms, social media presence has become a significant tool for companies to build their brand. (Manninen, 2017).

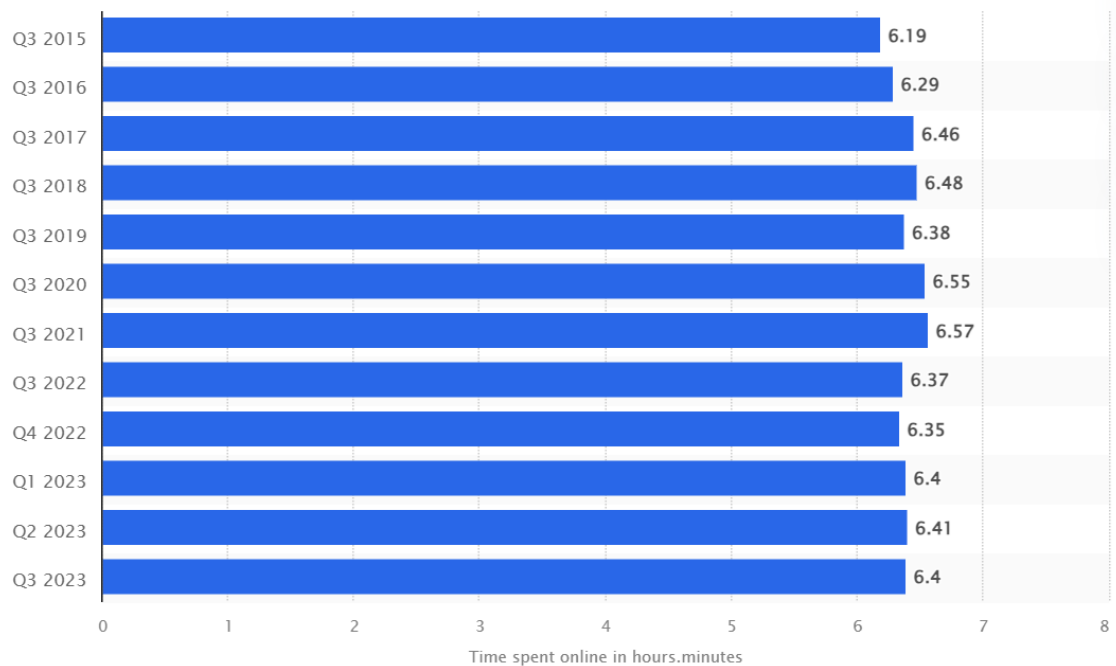


Figure 2. Daily time spent online. (Petrosyan, 2024).

### 2.3.3 Brand Reputation Management

Brand reputation management is crucial for brands wanting to grow their business as a positive reputation builds loyalty between consumers and the brand as well as increases sales and growth. (Azham and Ahmad, 2020). Brand reputation affects the decision-making process of consumers as they often turn to a brand which is known for delivering what it has promised. According to Fombrun and van Riel (2003), “A good reputation acts like a magnet: It attracts us to those who have it.” However, companies can still have a strong brand but a weak reputation. A good example is Nike as it has a strong brand with global awareness but is often in the headlines for producing its products in low-labour countries which negatively affects its reputation. (Fombrun and van Riel, 2003).

Companies should avoid any legal claims in order to protect their brand reputation and keep it positive. Such legal claims might include taking care of employees' health and safety, products labelled with accurate information, and any disclaimers effectively communicated to consumers. (Mogaji, 2021). These are

topics that usually gain a lot of media attention and can backfire fast. A good reputation can create demand for the products/services of the brand as well as nurture positive connections. Brands often collaborate with other favourable brands (company or human) in order to boost their reputation. (Mogaji, 2021). Such brand collabs are popular on social media when for example known clothing brand collaborates with famous artists etc.

Improving brand and brand reputation management is a cross-functional process of social customer relationship management (CRM) (Rainer, 2020), which means that implementing successful social CRM activities will also boost the brand reputation. According to Rainer (2020), social CRM “means applying social media to technologies in the field of customer relationship management (CRM).” Traditional CRM itself is defined as a “process of acquiring, retaining, and partnering with selective customers to create superior value for the company and the customer.” (Parvatiyar and Seth, 2001, cited in Dewnarain, Ramkissoon and Mavondo, 2018). When social media is combined with traditional CRM, it creates more opportunities for companies to manage and create new customer relationships. CRM activities are used in business activities which include contact with customers, e.g. marketing, sales, and customer service. (Rainer, 2020).

Social CRM marketing activities include e.g. campaign and event management on social media. (Rainer, 2020). Campaigns and events can be used to support sales and to create more awareness for the brand on social media platforms. The use of these activities includes but is not limited to monitoring and interacting with customers, analysing campaign reach and success, targeting specific groups, and responding in a short time to consumers. (Rainer, 2020).

## 2.4 Social media

Social media can be defined as “a computer-based technology that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information through virtual networks and communities.” (Dollarhide, 2024). Social media platforms usually lay out content created by their users, which leads to interactions through likes, shares,

comments, and discussions. The platforms are recognized for their part in encouraging connections and community among the users but also criticized for being facilitators of disinformation and a place where it is easy to spread hate speech. (Dollarhide, 2024). However, social media can be a great tool for companies to build their brand image due to the global wide use of different social media platforms. Companies can use the platforms to raise awareness among consumers and reach new potential customers which will contribute to the brand value. (Godey et al., 2016 cited in Ebrahim, 2019). Thus, brands can use social media platforms to influence various elements of brand equity. (Ebrahim, 2019). Brands should take advantage of social media platforms in order to shape the perceptions of consumers towards the brand by interacting and being active on the platform.

#### 2.4.1 The rise of social media

In the developing landscape of the digital age social media has rapidly rotated the principles of performing business for companies. Marketing strategies are increasingly relying on social media as an integral component of their communication tools. (Azoury and Daou, 2020).

MySpace was the first social media platform to reach a million active users in 2004. (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). In the same year, Facebook was launched, and it grew to be a part of everyday life for many people. (Brügger, 2015). Facebook has been growing since and at the end of 2020 it had reached 2.8 billion users. (Richter, 2021). In January 2024 the most popularly used social media platforms were Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. (Dixon, 2023).

The key to why people are so keen to use social media is because it allows users to easily maintain connections with people. (Qualman, 2012). Krombholz, Merkl and Weippl (2012) discovered in research that people are sharing information about themselves growingly over social media platforms. Thus, companies are growing interest in using these social media platforms for marketing purposes. In 2022, there were over 4.59 billion people worldwide using social media. (Dixon,

2023). This number is only projected to increase in the future as can be seen from Figure 3 below.

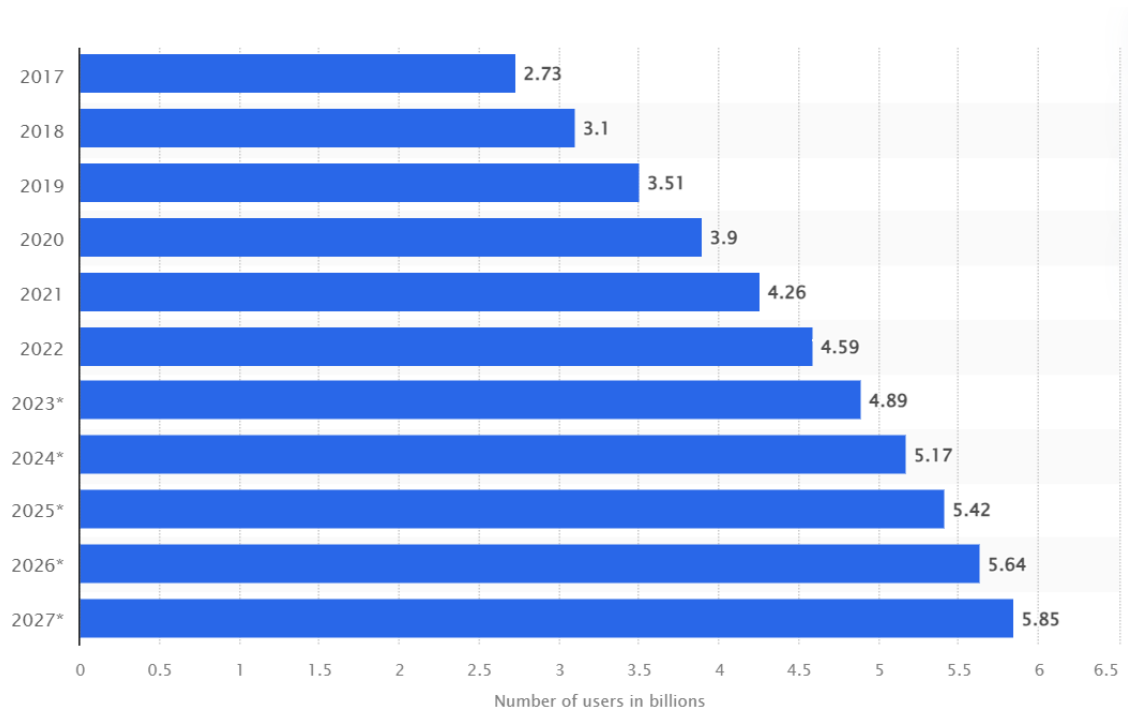


Figure 3. Number of social media users worldwide from 2017 to 2027. (Dixon, 2023).

The rise of social media platforms has enabled companies to create their own brand communities, virtual environments where both companies and users can interact, share effortlessly information about products and services as well as offer the users support. (Chierici et al., 2018). Due to the wide use of social media and the ease of sharing information on various platforms, it is important for companies to maintain a good reputation over the channels. The spread of false or unpleasant information over social media platforms can leave the brand's reputation damaged.

#### 2.4.2 Social Media Brand Reputation

Nowadays, when you wish to find information about a brand you are considering purchasing from, the most normal thing you might do is to check their social

media accounts to see if they are worthy of your money. Among other useful information, you would find out how other people have reviewed the brand and whether it is delivering what it has promised to its customers. According to Keller (1993), these perceptions will lead consumers to associate their feelings about the company with the brand as a whole. These thoughts that consumers gain from online platforms are forming the brand reputation over time. Moreover, positive reputations tend to be linked to higher levels of sales, (de Chernatony, 1999) and this is what most of the companies are aiming towards.

According to Kaul et al. (2016), the increasingly growing use of social media means for companies that “online reputation is your reputation”. This means that it is essential for companies to have a positive brand reputation on online platforms. Customers across various online platforms can discuss there anything they want about a brand. They can share positive or negative experiences and opinions as well as individual sentiments. (Rust et al. 2021).

Shifts in brand reputation are usually caused by specific brand-related incidents and these may include intentional marketing actions and initiatives, as well as unpredictable public events concerning the brand. (Rust et al. 2021). According to David (2016), “the best way to have a solid online reputation is to have a solid offline reputation”. When a brand has achieved a strong offline reputation, it will foster trust and credibility towards the online reputation.

All brands should take action to control their own online reputation or otherwise their customers and competitors will do it. (David, 2016). Managing the online reputation is essential for brands in order to create a positive reputation. To successfully develop the brand reputation, it is essential to nurture loyalty and trust in its products and services, alongside emphasizing customer satisfaction as it significantly contributes to achieving a positive brand reputation. (Shrestha, 2021).

How to manage online reputation will be discussed in more detail in relation to Instagram in the Instagram section.

## 2.5 Instagram

Instagram is a social media platform and application. It was created in 2010 by Mike Krieger and Kevin Systrom and is owned by Meta. (Musonera, 2018). Instagram is used to share photos and videos. Users can edit the content in the application with different filters, add music, and tag different users and places. It offers various features including comments, likes, shares, and reactions to stories. Since Instagram was launched, its popularity has been growing and it is predicted to have 1,4 billion users in 2024. (Dixon, 2023).

Users can decide whether they want to have a private profile so only people they have approved can follow and see their posts or to have a public profile which can also be used for companies. Brands can use the application for marketing purposes by creating a business account. This account allows them to view information of their followers in detail, which brands can then use to their advantage when promoting their products and services on the platform. Brands can use Instagram to engage consumers with a visual marketing approach. (Singh, 2020).

### 2.5.1 The power of visual content

Instagram offers a highly visual nature to its users and allows brands to tell their stories through photos and videos. (Sing, 2020). Nowadays, people tend to be more engaged when information is presented visually rather than in textual format. (Pavel, 2014). According to Eser (2023), “the human brain processes images 60 000 times faster than text.” For marketers, this is important to take into consideration when planning posts on Instagram. They could rather sum up the core message of the campaign in a few sentences and present it visually than write a monologue as a caption under the post. Visuals also tend to leave a long-lasting impression on viewers (Sing, 2020), which is a benefit for brands using visual content for marketing purposes. Their marketing efforts will be remembered when consumers recognize a need for a product or service.

According to Pavel (2014), visual content affects its viewer both cognitively and emotionally:

1. “Cognitively: Graphics expedite and increase our level of communication. They increase comprehension, recollection, and retention. Visual clues help us decode text and attract attention to information or direct attention increasing the likelihood that the audience will remember.”
2. “Emotionally: Pictures enhance or affect emotions and attitudes. Graphics engage our imagination and heighten our creative thinking by stimulating other areas of our brain (which in turn leads to a more profound and accurate understanding of the presented material) ...”.

These aspects can be used to advantage when creating visual content. People tend to like visuals that are affecting them emotionally and brands can use this to their advantage when posting. (Miles, 2019). For example, love and curiosity are emotional triggers that appear to be noticeable in Instagram marketing efforts. (Miles, 2019). People love many things and are curious all the time, so when brands add these emotional triggers to visual content, they are more likely to receive extra publicity for the posts. Visual content can be also inspiring, and brands should use this aspect to their advantage by creating content on how to use the products. (Manic, 2015). This can inspire people to purchase and try it out of curiosity. Figure 4, an Instagram post from Finnish textile and clothing brand Marimekko, represents an example of an Instagram post that awakens feelings of curiosity. Marimekko promoted the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their Unikko textile print in the post. (Marimekko, 2024). The Instagram post shows Unikko print projected onto a building and awakens viewers' curiosity as they might want to go out and see it with their own eyes.

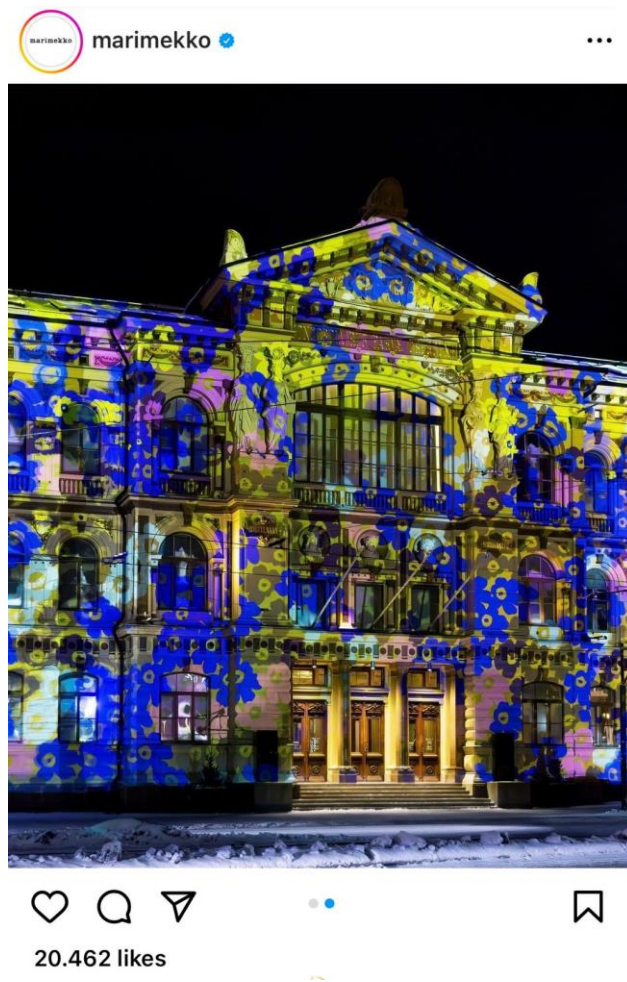


Figure 4. Unikko print projected onto a building (Marimekko, 2024).

Visual content needs to have a high priority for brands hoping to receive more attention on Instagram as this can be used as a powerful tool to gain consumer attraction. However, it is not enough to post attractive pictures and videos alone. Brands also need to have a plan for maintaining their appearance on the platform.

### 2.5.2 How to maintain a brand on Instagram

Each brand desiring to compete with other products and services in social media should have a brand strategy for defining its content and visual identity. (Jurišová, 2020). With these elements, a brand can separate itself from its competitors and be easily recognizable, which will boost its profile visibility. An Instagram profile allows brands to create an identity from which the brands can be instantly recognized. (Jurišová, 2020). In the profile, a viewer can see at first glance the

profile picture, bio-text i.e. short description text, number of posts, followers, and following. According to Singh (2020) “brands that perform best on Instagram are those with visually appealing products and a unique style.” This is supported by Instagram’s purpose to share visuals, but after that, it is up to the brand how well it separates itself.

Singh (2020) mentions five different steps that brands should undertake when building a “winning Instagram strategy”:

1. Select a straightforward promise and convey a sophisticated message. Successful brands go beyond just delivering visuals, they connect to the consumer on an emotional level while making the promise clear on their profile.
2. Develop a unique visual storytelling approach and provide consistent high-quality content.
3. Construct the story on authenticity as consumers want to see real authentic content rather than polished perfect content. Use visuals to attract attention and characters and storylines to create relevant and relatable content.
4. Choose themes that align with the brand’s storyline.
5. Use occasions as they drive the visual storytelling. Occasions are expressions of the brand identity in real life and they are used in picturing moments that represent the brand story.

The approach outlined by Singh (2020), offers an effective Instagram strategy for brands. However, there are multiple different approaches available by other researchers that can provide further guidance on how to implement the points. For example, in research conducted by Lijie and Fei (2021), they suggest that Instagram posts that have product- and customer-centric visuals tend to attract

more attention to areas of interest as well as capture viewers' attention for a longer time than visuals with different topics.

When building and maintaining a brand on social media, it is important to keep in mind the brand's reputation and how it can affect the brand image.

### 2.5.3 How to Manage Brand Reputation on Instagram

As the importance of social media brand reputation has already been discussed, this chapter will cover it from a how-to perspective and first define why brand reputation is important for brands on Instagram.

As defined previously, thoughts that consumers gain from online platforms are forming the brand reputation over time. In Instagram, this refers to how users on the platform view the brand based on the content it is posting. The content that brands share online has a direct impact on their reputation. (Scott, 2015). According to Evans and Bratton (2012), "Building a solid online reputation is essential.", as the reputation will define the results on the platform. Thus, brands need to avoid negativity with their posts as it can damage their reputation and results.

Brands should be active on the platforms where their target market is present (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), however, it matters how a brand is presenting itself on the platform and whether it has a good reputation or not. Having a strong reputation on the platform where the brand's target market is active, will increase the brand's chances of receiving the interest of the market, which will potentially lead to an action.

On Instagram consumers can share their experiences and thoughts about a brand in various ways, meaning that they are spreading e-WOM. (Rasty and Filieri, 2023). The experiences and thoughts can be shared by commenting, posting in a story or feed, forwarding a post to friends, and simply by liking. When consumers share their brand-related thoughts through these activities, they are also making a statement for their followers in which they express what they think

of the brand. (Rasty and Filieri, 2023). E-WOM can be positive or negative and as it can spread fast over the platform, it can affect the brand's reputation. (Ho, Phan and, Le-Hoang, 2021). Thus, it is important to monitor what are consumers saying about the brand over the platform and in which discussions the brand is mentioned. For example, in 2012 McDonald's faced a huge backlash for its campaign when a hashtag it created was started to be used wrong by consumers over social media platforms. (Hill, 2012). The campaign affected McDonald's reputation negatively. The hashtag #McDStories was initially published by McDonald's so that consumers could share stories of their good experiences in the fast-food chain's restaurants. However, the hashtag turned out to be used with horror stories of the brand. (Hill, 2012). McDonald's monitored the spread of the campaign and what consumers were saying about it over social media platforms. McDonald's noticed quickly that the use of the hashtag changed course from what it was initiated for, so they pulled the campaign off. (Hill, 2012). Figures 5 and 6 represent the type of posts on Instagram which are used with the hashtag #McDStories.



♡ ◻ ▾ ◻

14 likes  
rogcox97 Let me find my receipt... did she charge me extra for this UPC? #McDonalds #McDStories

Figure 5. #McDStories oatmeal (Rogcox97, 2015).



22 likes

magazinephotobooth So I waited 20 minutes for two sausage biscuits before work. I seriously hope computers replaces you if you can't get an order right. \$15 minimum wage my ass. #mcdsucks #mcdstories

Figure 6. #McDStories sausage biscuits (Magazinephotobooth, 2014).

Monitoring Instagram events is important for brands as consumers might be spreading false information or other unpleasant information. With careful monitoring of the platform, brands can minimize or mitigate unwanted bad reputation and prepare beforehand effective responses. (Susnea, 2018). According to Susnea (2018), the monitoring can be done by early warning systems, which are specifically designed to gather, store, analyse, and distribute information with the end goal of comprehending and mapping hazards, predicting and monitoring imminent events, delivering clear warnings, and taking prompt and appropriate actions in response to the possible warnings. Beal and Strauss (2008) suggest that monitoring can be simply done with the help of search engines such as Google and Technorati. They also mention that answering directly to consumers about any complaint is a great opportunity to turn the unsatisfied consumer into a brand advocate. (Beal and Strauss, 2008). On Instagram, brands can also monitor their appearance by simply being active and checking all tags and conversations about them.

Instagram allows consumers to engage and share with brands by simply commenting under posts or sending direct messages. Brands should also monitor and engage the consumers by respectively replying to them. According to Evans (2010) by responding to consumers and being active in the conversations on social media, a brand will in return gain respect, trust, and a bit of authority. A negative comment can have a much stronger impact on a brand's reputation than a positive one. By responding to negative comments, brands can show their customers that they care deeply about their feedback and change the negative situation to a positive. (Evans, 2010). According to Sharma (2024), 53% of consumers expect a response from brands to their negative feedback and the response is more appreciated when received within 3 days. The faster the brands respond to negative comments and feedback, the more likely the consumers will come back and even spread the word of mouth of good response from the brand.

In 2018, fashion and design company H&M faced severe criticism for an advertisement where they had a black child wearing a hoodie with a print "the coolest monkey in the jungle." (Baragona, 2018). Many consumers viewed the hoodie on the child to be racist and it led to protests across online platforms and calls for a boycott. H&M had to temporarily close its stores in South Africa as they were attacked by protesters. (Baragona, 2018). By closing the stores in South Africa, H&M faced a loss in revenue and severe damage to its brand reputation, all because it did not think the advertisement carefully through. This case of H&M is one good example of why it is important for brands to carefully manage their online presence and reputation.

The following and final section of the Literature Review evaluates the measurement factors on Instagram which are crucial for brands when evaluating the outcomes and success.

#### 2.5.4 Measurement

In Instagram, the basic success measurement factors are likes, follows, comments, and shares. However, by changing the account suitable for brands

i.e. to a free business account, the profile will include a professional dashboard. The professional dashboard will allow the brand to review the data weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or in a 90-day cycle. According to content market specialist Demeku (2021), brands should track the following metrics: reach, sales, engagement rate, story views, reel engagement, best time to post, growth, traffic, saves, and shares. All these mentioned can be seen from the professional dashboard.

### **3 Research Methodology**

This chapter will cover the explanation of different types of research as well as give a justification for the chosen method used for this research.

Nair (2008) defines research as “the process of collecting, documenting and analysing important, critical and relevant information pertaining to any problem or question.” This means that when there is a problem or question, it implies that research could be done. (Nair, 2008). However, according to Kotler (2016), the process of defining the problem and objectives for the research is the most difficult step in the process. This is because people often recognize a problem without knowing what is actually behind it. The end goal of research is a detailed, objective, and organized study of a topic or issue in order to cover the necessary information. (Nair, 2008). The steps of the research process can be observed in Figure 7 below.

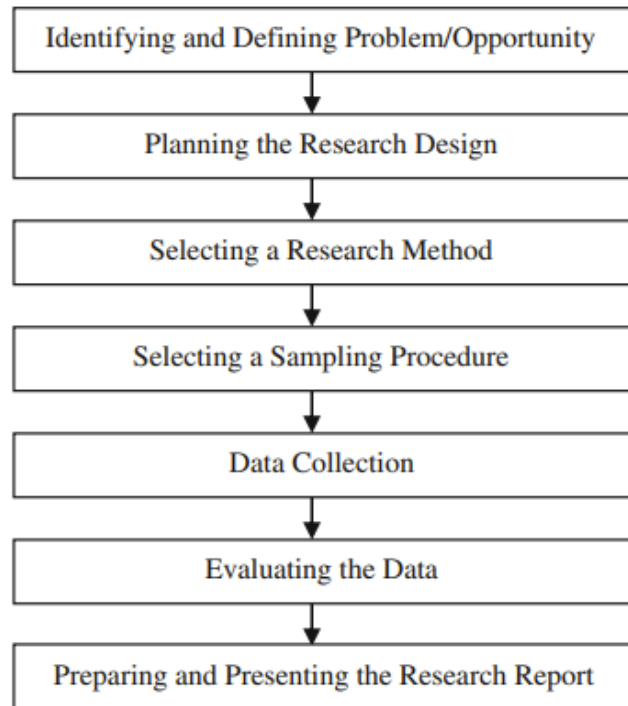


Figure 7. Steps in the research process. (Sreejesh, Mohapatra and, Anusree, 2014).

### 3.1 Types of Research Methodology

According to Kotler (2016), there are three types of research that can be used to achieve the research objectives. Firstly, exploratory research, which's objective is to "gather preliminary information that will help define the problem and suggest hypotheses." Secondly, descriptive research aims to "describe things", for example when exploring the market opportunities for a product or understanding the demographics and opinions of consumers buying it. Lastly, causal research which aims to "test hypotheses about cause-and-effect relationships." (Kotler, 2016).

Any research usually begins by collecting secondary data, which is already existing information that has been gathered for other purposes. (Kotler, 2016). Secondary data can be collected for example from books, online sources, databases, etc. In contrast, information which is gathered for specific needs is

called primary data. (Kotler, 2016). Primary data can be collected for example from surveys, interviews, observations, etc.

When collecting the data for research, there are two different methods which are quantitative research and qualitative research. According to Sreejesh et al. (2014), quantitative research involves gathering data from a pre-designed set of responses whereas qualitative research does not rely on predefined data. The data collected for quantitative research is usually presented in the form of different charts and graphs and qualitative research focuses on uncovering the human experiences, meanings, and perspectives behind the findings. (Sreejesh et. al, 2014). Quantitative research is used to answer questions of what, who, how many, where, and when whereas qualitative research focuses on answering why. (Sontakki, 2009).

### 3.2 The research method chosen for this study

For this study, an exploratory research method will be implemented to acquire useful information in order to answer the research question: How to protect your brand reputation on Instagram? The author will take advantage of existing secondary data, indicating the use of qualitative research methods. The data is collected from two relevant case studies, which will help to understand the relevance of the research question and answer it.

The analysis of selected case studies is the usual way of conducting exploratory research and it means picking up a few example cases as well as analysing them in detail thoroughly. (Sontakki, 2009). The case studies selected for this research closely align with the purpose of this study and its end goal of answering the research question. According to Sontakki (2009), the selection of detailed and intensive case studies could help gain ideas about potential relationships. As mentioned above, in this research the wanted outcome is to find relationships in how brands protect their brand reputation on Instagram and conclude an analysis based on it. With the use of exploratory research, this research aims to find a pattern from the selected case studies, specifically a pattern between consumer

behaviour and brand reputation. Case studies are appropriate for this research as they allow the researcher to analyze the patterns, facilitating a deeper understanding of the relationships between the different cases.

### 3.3 Limitations

Even though secondary data is easy to collect, the main limitations of this study are due to the use of it. According to Kotler (2016), researchers can rarely gather all the necessary data alone from secondary sources. For example, researchers might not be able to find available information on how consumers could respond to a new product or service that has never been on the market. Moreover, even if they found available information it could be that it does not turn out to be helpful with the research. Therefore, it is important that researchers carefully examine all secondary data sources in order to make sure that they actually meet their specific project's needs, are up to date, accurately collected and reported as well as impartially collected and reported. (Kotler, 2016). According to Sontakki (2009), some of the major limitations of using case studies in research are difficulties in developing formal methods for observation and recording, a lack of objectivity in analysis and interpretation, and the findings are difficult to generalize because of the small sample size. This research only uses two different case studies as the source of data which indicates the difficulty of generalizing the research results.

## 4 Research Results

In this section, two different cases are presented and analysed using the theories already covered in the literature review. Even though these cases studied have had a broader effect on the brands' reputation beyond Instagram, this study focuses on the brand reputation on Instagram.

### 4.1 Nike x Colin Kaepernick

#### Case Introduction

In 2018, the sports brand Nike released its 30th-anniversary campaign “Just Do It” in collaboration with NFL athlete Colin Kaepernick. (Nichols, 2021). Nike took a calculated risk by launching the campaign as Kaepernick had just two years earlier disrespected the U.S. flag by kneeling instead of standing during the national anthem in front of thousands of people. With this act, Kaepernick protested against police brutality and social injustice which resulted in public outrage by furious consumers. (Nichols, 2021). Kaepernick posted the Nike campaign on Instagram on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of September 2018 with the quote “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDolt” (Kaepernick, 2018).

By launching the campaign, Nike took a stand to support social justice activism and highlight political issues. The goal of the campaign was to use Kaepernick to draw attention to these important issues as well as encourage consumers to chase their dreams and stand up for what they believe in. (Nichols, 2021).

However, the collaboration with Kaepernick in spreading the word about political issues didn't come without thought and consideration. According to Leduc (2022), multiple polls showed that the individuals against Kaepernick's kneeling during the national anthem were still a minority when compared to Nike's core consumers who mostly consisted of people under the age of 35. This meant for Nike that even though they would face criticism and hate for the campaign in collaboration with Kaepernick, they would still have the support of the younger generation who were on their side. Many columnists shared the same opinion that the campaign was planned carefully, and Nike knew they were getting backlash by some degree but would make a profit at the end of the day. (Leduc, 2022).

### **How the campaign affected Nike's brand reputation**

Nike is known for being associated with multiple debatable practices such as producing a large number of its products in low-labour countries where the employees experience poor conditions for work as well as using child labour. (Leduc, 2022). These actions set Nike already in a controversial position with its reputation and by signing the campaign with Kaepernick they took another reputational risk as Kaepernick was also seen as a controversial figure by many people after his protest.

As Nike had assumed, the campaign stirred a lot of emotions and divided the opinions of Nike's consumers. As a result, it received both positive and negative attention. (Balkam, 2020). After releasing the campaign on Instagram Nike gained approximately 170 000 new Instagram followers and the post became the second-most liked post on Nike's Instagram profile at that time. (Puga, 2018). This described well the campaign's positive impact and consumers showing support for Nike for highlighting important issues. Nonetheless, there were negative consequences as the angry and disappointed consumers started to burn their Nike shoes and share those videos online. (Puga, 2018). On Instagram, the majority of the videos were published with the hashtag "#justburnit" which was inspired by Nike's iconic slogan "Just Do It". This protest against Nike and Kaepernick gained support from consumers on Instagram who were against Kaepernick's previous protest. This led to a 3% decrease in Nike's share in the stock exchange just one day after the campaign was launched. (Ramakrishnan, 2018).

However, the majority of especially young people supported Nike and Kaepernick for standing for what they believe in and said that the ad was successful especially because of its theme and message. (Nichols, 2021). Nike's mentions increased on Instagram by consumers, and they gained more positive publicity. Some celebrities were also publicly supporting Nike. LeBron James, who is a professional basketball player in the NBA, showed Nike support by commenting that the campaign has a positive impact on the brand and its sales. (Goldman, 2018).

After the tension had reduced Nike was able to reach a huge 31% growth in sales (Sweeney, 2018; Martinez, 2018, cited in Leduc, 2022) which was 17% more over the same period than in the previous year 2017. (Sweeney, 2018). The growth proved that even though there was initially a negative impact on reputation, the positive effects overruled this.

The campaign and its outcome were calculated by Nike so that they knew the risk was limited and worth taking. Nike would lose some of its older customers who were burning their shoes already but would still have its younger customers' support. (Leduc, 2022). Thus, Nike went on with the campaign, and neither Nike nor Kaepernick offered any apologies to the raging public which was viewed negatively at first. (Qyqalla, 2023). On Instagram, under Kaepernick's campaign post that was posted in 2018, there are over 62 000 comments as of April 2024, and not a single post from him since has reached that level of engagement. The amount of comments describes well the impact and awareness that Nike and Kaepernick were able to create with just a single visual featured with a strong message.

### **Case Analysis**

Nike purposefully selected a risky 30<sup>th</sup>-anniversary marketing campaign strategy when choosing Kaepernick to be its figure. Nike wanted to differentiate its brand by taking Kaepernick's side. Nike showed a clear understanding of its consumers with their marketing strategy which was making a profit at the end of the day. (Burnett, 2018, cited in Leduc, 2022). As discussed previously in the literature review, companies need to understand and learn the fundamentals of consumer behaviour and consumer journey to successfully market their products. By choosing Kaepernick as the figure of its 30<sup>th</sup>-anniversary campaign, Nike demonstrated a deep understanding of its consumers' values and beliefs as its core buyers are under the age of 35 and supporting brands that stand for social issues. (Novy-Williams, 2018, cited in Leduc, 2022). The campaign successfully created a positive impact with consumers who were supporting Kaepernick in his police brutality and social injustice protests. The important message that the

campaign carried also affected consumers emotionally, which influenced consumers' perception of the brand and guided their decision-making process. The campaign successfully provoked a response, both negative and positive, depending on the consumers' cultural, social, psychological, and personal factors.

The campaign can be analysed with the help of the previously introduced AIDA model. Nike successfully received attention from the public by choosing Kaepernick, a famous NFL athlete, to be the face of the campaign. This immediately sparked interest and raised both positive and negative opinions towards Nike. Consumers who supported Kaepernick and Nike for raising important messages desired to show their support on Instagram by spreading positive e-WOM. On the other hand, the campaign sparked backlash among people who were against Kaepernick's kneeling, resulting in protests against Nike by burning Nike shoes. However, the positive boost towards the brand led consumers to take action and purchase which eventually led to a huge growth in sales as mentioned previously.

As a brand, Nike is globally known for its swoosh logo and slogan "Just Do It" as well as for being associated with multiple controversial practices. (Leduc, 2022). Nike has a strong brand value and is listed in the Best Global Brands 2023 by Interbrand (2024) in place 9 with a value of 53,773 million \$. Nike has been facing allegations of using child labour in its sweatshops and violating the employees' rights throughout its long history. To solve these reputational issues, in 1999 Nike created a code of conduct which set a minimum age and limited working hours. (Mauro, 2014). However, even in 2020, Nike faced allegations of unfavourable working conditions in its factories in China. (Xu, Leibold, 2020, cited in Leduc, 2022).

According to Leduc (2022), it can be argued that Nike is using its "political issue" campaigns, such as the 30th-anniversary campaign with Kaepernick to boost its reputation and is using them as a part of its brand reputation management. Despite all the allegations that Nike has faced, none of them were raised or

pointed out in the articles about the 30th-anniversary campaign in collaboration with Kaepernick. Nike wanted to use Kaepernick's brand's reputation to boost its own as Kaepernick is seen as a person fighting against political issues and social injustice. Nike used tools of social CRM for brand reputation management purposes as the campaign was targeting a specific group of consumers.

When analysed with the "winning Instagram strategy" by Sing (2020), Nike was undertaking all five steps. It presented a straightforward promise with a refined message, developed visual storytelling through the campaign, told an authentic story with Kaepernick, and chose a theme which aligned with the brand. By undertaking these steps the campaign drew a lot of attention on Instagram.

Nike creatively used the power of visuals in the campaign. The image in Figure 8 is very simple with two short sentences and features Kaepernick's face in addition to Nike's logo and slogan under it. It successfully affects its viewers both cognitively and emotionally. The image is black and white which initially awakens feelings of sadness and sympathy when the viewer is familiar with the situation Kaepernick was in. Kaepernick's facial expression seems to be neutral mixed with sadness and frustration which resonates with the sentences in Kaepernick's (2018) Instagram post; "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything."



Figure 8. Nike x Kaepernick campaign. (Kaepernick, 2018).

## 4.2 Airbnb “We Accept”

### Case Introduction

In 2016, the accommodation rental platform Airbnb faced severe criticism following allegations of discrimination made by African-American consumers against the company. (Plautz, 2016). These allegations were supported by researchers at the Harvard Business School as their research results revealed that on Airbnb black hosts charge 12 % less than non-black hosts as well as names which sounded African-American were 16% less likely to be accepted by the rental to rent accommodation. (Edelman and Luca, 2014). These claims later sparked the use of the hashtag “Airbnb While Black”. African-American consumers were sharing their stories under the hashtag of how they were being treated poorly by Airbnb while renting or when trying to rent. (Sheffi, 2020). The hashtag has been used in over 1000 posts on Instagram and it spread a lot of negative e-WOM of Airbnb which was damaging to its brand reputation.

Since the allegations, Airbnb has worked actively against several political issues. In early 2017 the U.S. government announced Executive Order 13769, which was limiting immigration and travel to the U.S. for several countries with a Muslim majority. (Sheffi, 2020). Just one day after the government announcement, Brian Chesky the CEO of Airbnb, wrote an email to all the Airbnb employees where he stated that he deeply disagreed with the order set by the U.S. government and that Airbnb would provide free housing for refugees and all people who have been denied from entering the U.S. (Sheffi, 2020). This event led to the “We accept” campaign that Airbnb published on Instagram on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2017.

The idea behind the campaign was to let people know that they deserve to belong regardless of who they are, where they are from, who they love, or who they worship. (Airbnb, 2017). Through this message, Airbnb wanted to let consumers know that they are a company that does not support any discrimination and is willing to act to support those who face it. The We Accept advertisement was also played at the Super Bowl in 2017, which was a huge audience for the campaign.

(Sheffi, 2020). During the launch of the campaign, Airbnb also announced that it would donate 4 million \$ to the International Rescue Committee as well as offer accommodation for the next five years to 100 000 people. (Gamble, 2019). Airbnb was committed to fighting against the order set by the U.S. government and showing what it truly values.

### **How the campaign affected Airbnb's brand reputation**

Airbnb admitted in the same blog post with the We Accept campaign launch that the consumers of Airbnb have previously experienced discrimination. (Airbnb, 2017). The launch of the We Accept campaign was a statement from the founders that they don't want to be associated as a brand that accepts this but rather as a brand that fights for people's rights and helps those in need. Airbnb also pleads to the public to join the mission of the campaign by offering their homes for those in need or by donating money to different organizations. (Airbnb, 2017). Airbnb wanted to raise as much attention as it could with the campaign on its social media platforms to get more help for people in need.

However, Airbnb has been connected to increasing rental prices for locals in several coastal cities, which has affected the availability of affordable permanent housing for them. The increase in Airbnb accommodation listings has also affected residential neighbourhoods as tourist behaviour has become a concern. (Gurran and Phibbs, 2017). To name a few areas where Airbnb has affected the locals: the coast of Andalusia (Rodríguez-Pérez de Arenaza, Hierro and Patiño, 2022), Sydney (Gurran and Phibbs, 2017), and the coastal areas of England and Wales (Blood and Duncan, 2022). These cases strongly argue with the values that Airbnb is spreading with the We Accept campaign as Airbnb is not particularly helping the locals in these areas but rather making their lives more difficult.

Airbnb first posted a video of the We Accept on Instagram on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2017, followed by 12 headshots of people which were all posted in a span of three days. The video showed people of different races and ages with a message "We believe no matter who you are where you're from who you love or who you

worship, we all belong. The world is more beautiful the more you accept. #WeAccept". (Airbnb, 2017). The headshots were of people from different races and ages featuring a caption written by the person in the photo. In each caption, the person described or told a story of what acceptance means to them.

Two captions from Airbnb's We Accept campaign posts on Instagram describing acceptance:

*"I think now more than ever, it's important for us to speak up and show the world that the idea of acceptance can be a force that unites us. We can show the world that we are one human race, one people."*

*"Acceptance is when someone knows I'm different, but treats me the same. I think it's easy to find differences, flaws, and faults in other people. It's harder to find the thread of divinity within each person, but recognizing that force is what inspires us to become the best version of ourselves."*

With the We Accept campaign, Airbnb wanted to spread the word of acceptance and show its consumers that they show support to all people regardless of their backgrounds. Airbnb wanted to clearly communicate its company values and make it clear to its consumers that it does not support any type of discrimination as its consumers had experienced it before. (Gamble, 2019). The campaign was surrounded by positive e-WOM and gained a lot of positive comments on Instagram which gave a needed positive boost to Airbnb's brand reputation as it had been facing criticism before.

Based on Airbnb's internal tracker, the reactions to the campaign were 85% positive. (Shorty Awards, 2024). This indicates a good success rate as well as a great boost to the brand's reputation. The We Accept campaign was a finalist at the Shorty Awards in 2017 and received Gold Honor in Instagram presence. (Shorty Awards, 2024). The Shorty Awards is a competition where brands, agencies, and organizations internationally can get awarded for their groundbreaking contributions across digital and social channels. The Finalist placement and Gold Honor Award are given based on three criteria which are

creativity, strategy, and engagement. (Shorty Awards, 2024). Airbnb successfully launched the campaign to receive the awards and received a lot of positive feedback from its Instagram community.

## **Case Analysis**

Airbnb selected to market a campaign that would promote its values and stand against the immigration limitation in the U.S. as it affected only countries with a Muslim majority. Airbnb also wanted to communicate its accepting culture and values which stand against discrimination as its consumers had experienced racism previously.

Airbnb showed an understanding of consumer behaviour as the We Accept campaign promoted inclusivity and acceptance at a time when many people were upset about the immigration limitation in the U.S. They also pled to everyone who could help by donating or giving a home and fostered a caring atmosphere. Airbnb connected to consumers on a deeper level and was able to influence the consumers' views of the brand as can be seen from Instagram comments which were full of positivity towards Airbnb. Airbnb potentially affected consumer's decision-making process by differentiating itself from other brands by creating emotional connections by sharing different people's views of acceptance. As stated before, emotional connection can lead consumers to create a strong connection to the brand and affect their perceptions and views of it.

The We Accept campaign can be analysed with the AIDA model. Airbnb received consumers' attention by taking a stand against Executive Order 13769 set by the U.S. government in early 2017 and for setting an advertisement for the Super Bowl which gained a lot of visibility. The We Accept campaign was a statement from Airbnb that it does not support discrimination and wants everyone to feel accepted by it. Airbnb sparked interest with the Instagram posts and consumers showed support for Airbnb for addressing important issues. Consumers may feel a desire to support Airbnb for acting for mutual good and raising awareness of acceptance with the campaign. Airbnb acted by donating 4 million \$ to the

International Rescue Committee as well as offered accommodation for the next five years to 100 000 people. Airbnb also pleads to consumers to take action by donating or giving their houses for good use. The campaign could have also encouraged consumers to choose Airbnb as a host when in need of booking a place where to stay as well as encourage more people to list their houses for rent on Airbnb.

Airbnb's brand is known as a brand offering accommodations for travellers to live like locals. (Lee and Kim, 2016). Through its online rental platform, Airbnb offers unique experiences for travellers all over the world and delivers the easiness of rental for both hosts and quests. Airbnb's brand value is listed 46<sup>th</sup> in the Best Global Brands 2023 by Interbrand (2024) with a value of 16,344 million \$. Airbnb's brand reputation has faced damage from discrimination allegations and by being connected to the troubles of local people in coastal areas where it is offering accommodations.

When looking at the brand reputation management of Airbnb, it is clear that like Nike, Airbnb also used the We Accept campaign to repair its brand reputation. Airbnb had faced allegations which gained a lot of media attention and decided to respond in a way which would also reach a great amount of visibility. For this Airbnb played the We Accept campaign advertisement first on the Super Bowl 2017 and then published it on Instagram. Airbnb applied also Social CRM marketing activities to the We Accept campaign to manage the brand reputation. Airbnb interacted initially with its customers by apologizing for discrimination and later went online with a campaign which was designed to communicate its values of acceptance.

The campaign We Accept took all the steps of a "winning Instagram strategy" introduced by Singh (2020). The campaign had a straightforward promise of acceptance which was presented with a visual storytelling approach, the theme was authentic and aligned with the brand's storyline. Airbnb was able to receive a lot of positive comments from the story and look of the campaign on Instagram.

Airbnb chose to use headshots of different people as visuals for its campaign. All the different people from different cultures in the pictures were symbolizing Airbnb's message of acceptance. The first post for the campaign was a short video with changing headshots and a powerful message: "We believe no matter who you are where you're from who you love or who you worship, we all belong. The world is more beautiful the more you accept". (Airbnb, 2017). The message is a powerful tool for affecting consumers emotionally as many people face feelings of not belonging in a certain environment. With the video, Airbnb promises that it accepts everyone regardless of background. At the end of the video, Airbnb also introduces the hashtag "WeAccept" which was also used by Airbnb in the following 12 posts of the campaign. Airbnb posted 12 headshots in which some of the people's faces were already familiar from the first campaign video. The headshots in Figure 9 were all taken from the same angle and all the people had neutral faces on a black background. The power of visuals is present in all headshots as they affect viewers' perspectives. When looking at the visuals together a question arises what is the idea behind posting these headshots? After opening the post, it is clear as each of the images holds a touching caption of acceptance which resonates differently with each reader.



Figure 9. Headshots from Airbnb's Instagram for the We Accept campaign (Airbnb, 2017).

## 5 Discussions and Conclusion

Brands these days are taking advantage of Instagram as their marketing channel in growing volume as the number of users and time spent online is just expected to grow in the near future. Brand reputation and previous experiences determine which brands the consumers choose from multiple options. This thesis aims to answer to research question of how companies can protect their brand reputation on Instagram. To answer the question, two case studies of known brands were introduced and analysed how they dealt with issues related to brand reputation on Instagram.

With the advancements in technology, marketing has changed for good. For companies, this means they need to study how to build a successful brand and

how to manage it online with a good reputation in order to attract consumers from social media platforms. They also need to understand various marketing principles including consumer behaviour to attract the desired target market with the brand. However, the growing use of social media and e-WOM has made the process more complex. E-WOM can be positive but also negative which can damage the brand reputation.

After introducing and analysing the cases of Nike and Airbnb, where both brands' reputations faced criticism on Instagram, the question of how to protect your brand reputation on Instagram can be determined. Both Nike's and Airbnb's reputations faced negative e-WOM on Instagram. Nike received negativity due to a risky campaign in collaboration with Kaepernick and Airbnb due to being caught up in treating its consumers unequally. Both brands stirred emotions among consumers on social media. Angry consumers of Nike started to burn their Nike shoes as well as posting on Instagram with the hashtag "justburnit". The same occurred among Airbnb's consumers as the hashtag "airbnbwhileblack" was introduced on Instagram by consumers who were sharing bad experiences with Airbnb.

Nike and Airbnb had similar approaches to how to manage brand reputation as both brands released campaigns with themes that would make up for the previous allegations of doing wrong. By publishing the campaigns, both brands wanted to boost their reputation by communicating their values and beliefs to consumers. However, the difference is that Airbnb's campaign was directly linked to their wrongdoing after admitting the accusations of discrimination whereas Nike's controversial campaign can be seen as trying to make up the wrongdoing from throughout its history.

Nevertheless, even after the reputation-boosting campaigns, both brands have been in the news for being criticised for doing the opposite of things they said they would do. One of Airbnb's promises in the We Accept campaign was that they would help people in need, although at the same time, they are making the lives of locals in many tourist cities more difficult which is the opposite of helping.

(Blood and Duncan, 2022; Rodríguez-Pérez de Arenaza, Hierro and Patiño, 2022; Gurran and Phibbs, 2017). Nike promised to stand by and support people facing social injustice. However, after the campaign, it faced allegations of unfavourable working conditions in its factories in China, causing social injustice for the workers in the factories. (Xu, Leibold, 2020, cited in Leduc, 2022).

Protecting brand reputation on Instagram is not easy for brands as it is affected by multiple factors. However, based on the research and the analysis of two different case studies, it can be suggested that brands can protect their reputation on Instagram by undertaking multiple tools and activities. Brands need to have a deep understanding of their target consumers to successfully market and sell their products/ services. With the use of the AIDA model, brands can plan their Instagram posts to guide the consumer to take action which can lead to strengthening their relationship and trust with the brand as well as to spreading positive e-WOM. E-WOM is one of the top contributors to brand reputation on Instagram as could be seen from the cases of Nike and Airbnb where both faced negative e-WOM. By appealing to consumers' emotions through the visuals, and telling authentic stories, brands can be engaging and reach visibility on the platform. With brand reputation management using social CRM tools, brands can successfully enhance and protect their reputation with different actions. By undertaking these methods and tools brands can protect and build a strong brand reputation on Instagram.

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