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Social Media Role in Brands Crisis Management:

Investigation of Consumer Perception toward Brand Equity

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Master Thesis

presented as partial requirement for obtaining a Master's Degree in Data-Driven Marketing

NOVA Information Management School
Instituto Superior de Estatística e Gestão de Informação

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SOCIAL MEDIA ROLE IN BRANDS CRISIS MANAGEMENT:

Investigation of Consumer Perception toward Brand Equity

by

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Master Thesis presented as partial requirement for obtaining the Master's degree in Data-Driven Marketing, with a specialization in Marketing Intelligence.

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STATEMENT OF INTEGRITY

I hereby declare having conducted this academic work with integrity. I confirm that I have not used plagiarism, any form of undue use of information or falsification of results along the process leading to its elaboration. I further declare that I have fully acknowledged the Rules of Conduct and Code of Honor from the NOVA Information Management School.

Lisbon, Dec 2,2024

ABSTRACT

Brand crises are unpredictable events that threaten an organization's stability and performance, influencing consumer perception and brand equity. In this research, we investigated how consumer perceptions of brand equity evolve in response to social media-driven crisis management, focusing particularly on COVID-19 as a crisis. We conducted qualitative research using in-depth interviews with consumers from different backgrounds to better understand and highlight the role of social media in shaping perceptions during challenging times. Our findings offer actionable insights for brands to design transparent and empathetic communication strategies on their social media platforms in order to protect brand equity during crisis time, and identify best practices for leveraging social media to enhance brand trust and loyalty during crises.

KEYWORDS

Brand Equity; Consumer Perception; social media; Brand; Crisis Management

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Statement of Integrity.....	i
Abstract	ii
List of Figures.....	iv
List of Tables.....	v
List of Abbreviations and Acronyms.....	vi
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature review	3
2.1 Crises and Social Media	3
2.1.1 Role of Social Media	3
2.1.2 Crisis Management on Social Media.....	3
2.2 Brand Equity	4
2.2.1 definition and dimensions	4
2.2.2 Brand Equity and Crisis Management	5
2.3 Consumer Perception	5
2.3.1 Consumer Perception in Crisis Context	5
3 Methodology	8
4 Empirical Study	9
4.1 Data collection instruments	9
4.2 Data Collection and Analysis	10
5 Results and Discussion.....	12
5.1. Data Results	12
5.1.1 Brands Presence on Social Media during COVID-19.....	12
5.1.2 Brand Equity and Consumer Perception	13
5.2 Main findings.....	15
5.2.1 Brands’ Presence on Social Media during COVID-19 main findings	15
5.2.2 Brand Equity and Consumer Perception main findings.....	16
5.3 Discussion	17
5.3.1 Theoretical Discussion	17
5.3.2 managerial discussion.....	17
6 Conclusions and Future Research	19
Bibliographical References	20
Appendix A	22

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Crisis Situation Model of SCCT	3
Figure 2. Brand Equity Dimensions	4

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Brand Equity impact on Consumer Perception.....4

Table 2. Literature Review Key Concepts.....6

Table 3. Demographical data of the participants.....10

Table 4. Codes per theme.....11

Table 5. Key Insights from Data Analysis.....14

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease of 2019
SCCT	Situational Crisis Communication Theory

1. INTRODUCTION

Brand Crisis is an unpredictable and unexpected situation that challenges organization stability and performance at any time in a business life cycle (Do et al., 2019). Crisis can either be internal such as product failure or external such as pandemic. Both aspects have the power to threaten business presence, however, the management of these events can significantly influence consumer perception, either through increasing or decreasing negative impact on brand equity.

Consumer perception refers to the way customers view and interpret a brand, shaped by their experiences, expectations, and interactions with the brand over time (Keller 2003). During a crisis, brands need to be aware of their response strategies as this will impact consumer perception toward brand equity. As per Coombs (2007), crisis response strategies are employed to restore the brand's reputation, mitigate negative emotions, and prevent undesirable behavioral outcomes.

Crisis Management represents a group of strategies and tools that organizations usually use to handle any negative event that arises suddenly and has the tendency to affect the business. When managed correctly and strategically, a crisis can provide an opportunity to strengthen consumer relationships and even improve brand equity through showing brand commitment to customer care.

Within the digital era that we are encountering, social media has become a vital tool in managing brand crises. It is defined as “Web 2.0 applications enabling the creation, editing and dissemination of user-generated content” (Constantinides, 2014). It can be viewed as a technological platform for sharing media with others and generating consumer-created content.

Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn enable brands to interact and engage with their audience in a real-time manner, meaning that brands are able to communicate with their audience and evaluate their feedback through live interaction. The thing that is providing businesses the ability not only to identify, monitor, and address customers' concerns, but also give them a landscape to communicate and commit to solving an issue when it comes, tailor their response to individual consumer concerns, which ultimately influence audience perception toward the brand helping to build trust and maintain consumer loyalty during challenges times.

In the context of crisis management, social media presents both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, negative content can spread quickly, potentially amplifying the crisis. As per Zheng et al. (2020), Consumers share their negative perceptions of a company in crisis with other consumers. On the other hand, social media can serve as a powerful tool for brands to engage with their community, clarify misunderstandings, and take ownership of mistakes.

Given the central role that consumer perception plays in impacting brand equity during crises, understanding how brands can effectively use social media strategies during such times is critical. Previous research on brand crises has mainly focused on technical aspects of crisis management, yet the impact of these responses on consumer perception and brand equity is relatively new phenomena, and therefore, it has not yet been extensively researched.

Hence the objective of this research is to investigate the changes in consumers' perception toward a brand in response to crisis management on social media, to identify best practices and strategies that can be implemented by brands to maintain their brand equity during such critical times. This research tackled those factors yet spotted light on the external brand crisis namely COVID-19.

The guiding research question of this study is “How can consumers' perception change toward brand equity in response to brand’s crisis management on social media?”

This research question has both managerial and theoretical implications. On a managerial level, the findings can provide actionable strategies that brands can use to manage crises on social media platforms to protect and enhance their brand equity. This can be attained through understanding the influence of timely, transparent, and empathetic crisis responses. And hence, this in turn has the power to guide companies in developing effective communication strategies that enhance trust, maintain consumer loyalty, and protect their reputation. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to enriching the knowledge on crisis management and consumer perception, particularly on social media platforms. It expands the theoretical frameworks related to brand equity and crisis management by exploring how social media can shape consumer perception toward a brand during crisis times.

Pang (2014) highlighted the dual-edged nature of social media during crisis management. Although it facilitates engagement and communication with the audience in real time, it also has the tendency to amplify negative impact if poorly managed.

Based on these studies, we can identify the below key dimension of social media that brands need to take into consideration when managing a crisis:

- Transparency: clear and transparent communication to maintain trust and credibility
- Responsiveness: Engaging with audiences in a real time manner enhance brand reputation
- Empathy: Using empathetic messages to reduce any negative consumer perception

2.2 BRAND EQUITY

2.2.1 DEFINITION AND DIMENSIONS

Brand equity is a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand’s name and symbol that adds or subtracts from the value provided by a product or service to a firm’s customers (Aaker 1991). As per Aaker (1991), brand equity has five main dimensions: brand loyalty, brand name awareness, perceived quality, brand association, and other proprietary brand assets.

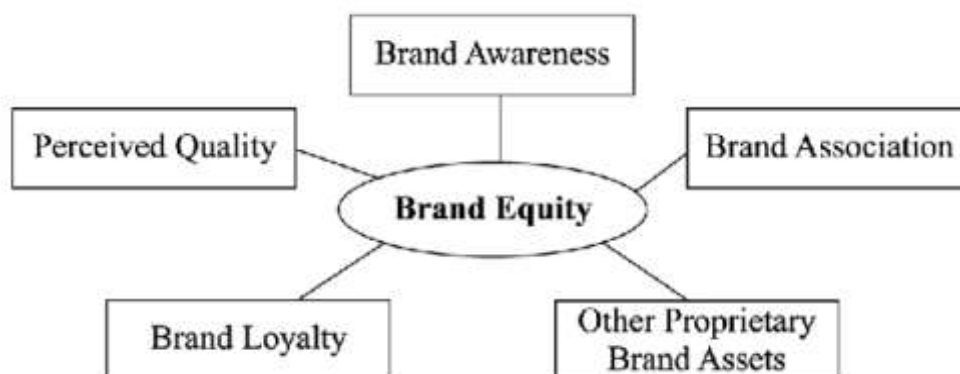


Figure 2. Brand Equity Dimensions (Aaker 1991).

The below table summarizes the several studies that have highlighted the impact of brand equity dimensions on consumer perception:

Table 1. Brand Equity impact on Consumer Perception

Brand Equity Elements	Description	Impact on Consumer Perception	References
Brand Awareness	The degree to which consumers recognize or recall a brand.	Increased awareness can result in a higher probability of consideration and purchase	Keller (2003)

Brand Associations	The associations consumers make between a brand and specific attributes.	Positive associations enhance brand perception and loyalty.	Aaker (1991)
Perceived Quality	The consumer's judgment about a brand's overall quality or superiority.	Higher perceived quality generally leads to stronger brand preference and loyalty.	Zeithaml (1988)
Brand Loyalty	The degree of consumer attachment and repeat purchase behavior.	Loyal customers tend to have a positive perception and are less price-sensitive.	Bisschoff (2014)
Brand Reputation	The general opinion of the brand in the marketplace.	A positive reputation increases consumer trust and willingness to purchase.	Fombrun (1996)

2.2.2 BRAND EQUITY AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Crisis has the tendency to pose a significant risk on brand equity specifically on trust, loyalty, and perceived quality. From here, accurate and effective crisis management strategies are vital to preserve brand equity. Any ineffective behavior from the brand side such as denying responsibility can damage brand equity.

Brands that demonstrate empathy and social responsibility during crises often maintain consumer trust. He and Harris have found that during COVID-19 pandemic, brands that prioritized public health and safety over profit were perceived as more responsible and trustworthy. The thing that highlights the importance of aligning brand response during crisis times with consumer expectations in order maintain positive brand association and loyalty.

2.3 CONSUMER PERCEPTION

2.3.1 CONSUMER PERCEPTION IN CRISIS CONTEXT

Consumer perception refers to how customers interpret and form opinions about a brand based on their experiences, marketing communications, and word-of-mouth interactions. It is affected by many factors and brands need to be aware of its importance toward brand equity. Palmatier (2006) highlighted that social media is one of the channels that can affect consumer perception toward a brand, and emphasized that consumers evaluate brands relationally, meaning their perception depends on trust, and the alignment of brand values with personal beliefs.

For example, Neuborne and Rangan (2020) observed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, consumers were particularly attached to brands that supported employees, customers, and communities. On the opposite, opportunistic behavior or misaligned messaging resulted in negative consumer perceptions.

The main concepts explained in this section are summarized in the below framework table:

Table 2. Literature Review Key Concepts

Section	Key Concept	Description	References
Crises and Social Media	Role of Social Media	Social media allows interactive, two-way communication and information sharing between brands and audiences, crucial during crises.	Kaplan and Haenlein (2010); Austin and Jin (2017)
	Impact on Crises	Enables real-time updates and engagement but can escalate crises due to widespread dissemination and discussion of issues.	Austin and Jin (2017)
	Crisis Management on Social Media	Provides strategies to mitigate the impact of crises; uses frameworks like SCCT for tailoring responses based on crisis type and responsibility.	Coombs (2007);
		Transparency, responsiveness, and empathy are critical for managing crises effectively on social media.	Pang (2014)
2.2 Brand Equity	Definition	A set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that adds or subtracts value for consumers.	Aaker, D. A. (1991)
	Dimensions	<p>Brand Loyalty: Attachment and repeat purchase behavior</p> <p>Brand Awareness: Recognition and recall</p> <p>Perceived Quality: Consumer judgment of quality</p> <p>Brand Associations: Mental links with brand attributes</p>	Aaker (1991); Keller (2003); Zeithaml (1988); Fombrun (1996)

		Brand Reputation: General opinion of the brand	
	Brand Equity and Crisis Management	Crises can threaten brand equity by affecting trust, loyalty, and perceived quality. Effective crisis management strategies can help maintain brand equity.	He and Harris (2020)
	Consumer Trust During Crises	Empathetic and socially responsible brands maintain trust; opportunistic behavior damages consumer perception.	He and Harris (2020)
2.3 Consumer Perception	Influence of Social Media	Social media shapes perception based on trust and alignment with consumer values.	Palmatier (2006)
	Case Study: COVID-19	Brands prioritizing health and safety were perceived positively, while misaligned or opportunistic behavior resulted in negative perceptions.	Neuborne and Rangan (2020)

3 METHODOLOGY

Research methods are techniques that are usually used by researchers to collect and analyze data in order to answer specific questions or test hypotheses. There are two main types of research methods: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research method is to quantify data and generalize results from a sample of the population of interest. It asks questions such as 'how long', 'how many' or 'the degree to which' (Macdonald et al., 2008). Whereas qualitative research method focuses on studying people and their experiences in a more detailed and deep way. Unlike quantitative methods, qualitative research does not rely on statistics and numbers but attempts to understand the meaning behind people's behavior and interactions. It usually asks open-ended questions such as "how" in order to gain insights, generate and explore ideas that help to answer the research question.

The objective of this research aims to find out how, if in any way, consumers' perception changes toward brand equity in response to brand's crisis management on social media. Data collection focused mainly on COVID 19 pandemic to investigate how consumers perceived social media utilization by different brands to manage this external crisis and how this action was reflected on brand equity.

Based on the above, this research adopted a qualitative approach that consisted of in-depth semi-structured interviews with several consumers. The research design that was used is exploratory, which gives flexibility and help in finding answers to the research question by using open-ended questions and probing techniques with the interviewees.

4 EMPIRICAL STUDY

4.1 DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The data collection process focused on COVID 19 Pandemic to investigate how consumers perceive social media utilization by different brands to manage this external crisis and how this action was reflected on brand equity.

There are different methods of collecting data in qualitative research such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and others. The data collection method that will be used in this research is semi-structured interviews. There are three fundamental types of research interview: structured, semi-structured and unstructured. As per Gill (2008), semi-structured interviews are made of several key questions designed to explore the main areas, and gives flexibility for both interview and interviewees to dig deeper into specific ideas or responses (Gill et al., 2008). This research used semi-structured interviews specifically as it provides flexibility for both the interviewer and the interviewee, which allows elaboration of more insights and information, the thing that will enrich the data collection process and aim in answering the research question.

The interviews were conducted online through Zoom application, an online tool for conducting meetings and conferences. The main advantages of using this tool in the data collection are that we can enable transcripts which will facilitate data analysis, it overcomes time and location constraints, and lessens stress levels. The samples will be selected based on a specific criterion depending on their age, background and social media consumption. The interview duration was between 30 to 45 minutes depending on the reactivity of the interviewees. The time period of the interviews was between April and May 2024.

An interview guide was used to shape the questions and drive the conversation. As per the guide, the interview was divided into four main topics: Ice breaker questions, social media consumption, brands presence on social media (general and during pandemic), and post-COVID actions.

First, the interviews started with ice breaker questions to relieve the participants and get them in the right mood so that they can engage more and respond more freely to the coming questions. Then, interviewees consumption of social media was investigated in order to assure that they are relevant samples for data collection which will yield to answering the research question. Later, a dive deeper approach was used to explore the attitude of these participants, being the consumers, toward brands presence on social media in general and focusing more on the pandemic period. The questions of this topic aim to explore how the consumers perceived social media practices of several brands during the pandemic and to collect as much insights as possible to help in achieving our main target which is answering the research question. The last part of the interview focused on post COVID actions that were taken by the participants toward specific brand or brands and to investigate how this has affected consumers perception and behavior toward the brand equity whether on social media and in real life as well.

4.2 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Seven people were formally interviewed online using the Zoom application. The interview style that has been used, as mentioned above, was a semi-structured interview. This type of interviews consists of several key questions that help to define the areas to be explored, but also allows the interviewer or interviewee to diverge in order to pursue an idea or response in more detail (Gill et al., 2008). I decided on using this method specifically as it provides flexibility for both the interviewer and the interviewee, which will allow elaboration of more insights and information, the thing that will enrich the data collection process and aim in answering the research question.

The interviews were recorded after got the approval from the participants to record, and the caption button was enabled in order to allow transcription for data analysis. The length of the interviews was between 25-45 minutes depending on each participant's engagement and interaction. The transcription of data was done through the Zoom application by enabling the caption button, however, data was later cleaned in order to upload it on NVivo for coding.

After six interviews, no additional information was found. So, a decision to conduct one additional interview was taken which confirmed that saturation was reached and accordingly sampling was stopped. The participants were selected randomly and an ID number was given to each participant which will help in the coding process on NVivo by connecting demographical data to each participant.

Table 3. Demographical data of the participants

Participant ID	Age	Nationality	Gender	Title
P1	38	Panama	Female	CGI Specialist
P2	31	France	Female	Pharmaceutical sale representative
P3	31	Lebanon	Female	Accountant and Gluten Free Blogger
P4	36	Lebanon	Female	Travel consultant
P5	30	Romania	Female	Accountant
P6	28	Lebanon	Male	Biology Student
P7	31	Morocco	Male	PHD researcher in marketing strategy

As mentioned earlier, we used NVivo for coding the interviews, then these codes were categorized and themes were developed, all of which will help in answering my research question.

But let's first give a small definition about NVivo and the coding process in general. NVIVO is a software that helps you easily organize and analyze unstructured information, so that you can ultimately make better decisions. Whatever your materials, whatever your field, whatever your approach, NVivo provides a workspace to help you at every stage of your project - from organizing your material, through to analysis, and then sharing and reporting. (QSR International, 2013)

Coding process is essential and vital in qualitative research. This type of research is analyzed by creating a structured, valid, and consistent coding scheme which allows for categorizing,

synthesizing and summarizing the data in order to reach a conclusion that answers the research question.

Coding is the process of identifying sections of data where themes occur and labeling them. NVivo is designed to “file” all the sections of text/audio/video/pictures that you code into your Coding Scheme “folders” (called NODES). The codes for the interviews were generated based on the research question and the ultimate goal to answer it. After coding, we extracted them from NVivo through a codebook, where we categorized them based on their relationship, in order to classify them into clusters. Then, these clusters were transferred back to the system (NVivo) where we developed two main themes that are relevant to our research question and will accordingly categorize the data to help in answering it. And by that the coding approach that we used was the Iterative process.

We were able to identify two themes which are “Brands Presence on Social Media during COVID19” and “Brand Equity and Consumer Perception”. Each theme has a number of codes that were assigned to it respectively. The table below summarizes the codes per theme:

Table 4. Codes per theme

<u>Theme 1: Brands Presence on Social Media during COVID-19</u>	Increased interaction
	Answering followers doubts and questions
	Engaging with followers through games
	Implementing Campaigns
	Updating Customers/ followers constantly
	Posting frequently
	Updating social media pages to provide good users experience
<u>Theme 2 : Brand Equity and Consumer Perception:</u>	Posting valuable posts like guidelines for dealing with the pandemic
	Expressing social responsibility in their posts through encouraging people to stay home
	Supporting frontline workers through incentives
	Showing empathy and provide support to followers
	Maintaining brand value through dominating general benefit above their financial one
	Negative attitude toward brands that were more commercially focused
	Negative attitude toward brands that were not applying remote working

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. DATA RESULTS

Based on the identified themes, we divided the data analysis into two parts in order to analyze each theme separately. The analysis focused on interpreting the results in order to answer the research question which is “How can consumers' perception change toward brand equity in response to brand’s crisis management on social media?”

In the interviews, the main focus was on an external crisis which is COVID-19 to explore the presence of different brands during this difficult time on social media and to investigate how they reacted to maintain their equity and how the consumer perceived this. We chose the pandemic since it is a recent crisis that happened during the social media era, and most importantly, it affected every single person in this world. So, we strongly believe that exploring people’s insights about this topic will help in answering the research question and serve as a means to weave the best practices that can be applied later on by brands, whenever a similar situation pops out.

We started with ice breaking questions to make the participants feel more relaxed so that they can interact more during the interview. All of the seven participants are active users for social media platforms with a duration ranging from a minimum 1 to maximum 4 hours consumption per day. Instagram was the main application used among them, followed by Facebook and LinkedIn. The purpose of using social media was mainly for entertainment, being updated by recent new, and following pages for different interests with travel and tourism, health, and music mainly.

5.1.1 BRANDS PRESENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING COVID-19

In order to better understand the brands presence on social media during the pandemic, we asked the participants to evaluate the presence and the interaction from the brand side.

When the participants were asked to evaluate brands' presence on social media during the pandemic, they agreed that brands were actively posting during that time but their insights toward the content posted was somehow different. Some believed that brands were posting to promote their products and maintain the brand, whereas others said that brands were posting to keep their consumers/followers updated with the recent news. As per the below 2 sample answers:

P1: “when COVID 19 started, I think it was a shock for companies and Brands who were not prepared for such a situation, but later they realized the vital need to adapt in order to be able to promote their products and eventually maintain their brand. So, bigger companies acted first and moved faster than the other ones because they have the resources from technology, budget, and people.”

P4: Some brands were performing very well showing high responsibility toward their customers especially for example United Airlines of Emirates as they were updating their customers about the latest rules and regulations happening in each country minute by minute even before any other competitor brand.

The participants were also asked about how they see the interaction between brands and their followers on social media during COVID-19. Seven out of seven answered that the interaction had increased, however, there were different opinions about the reason behind this increase. Some said that this is a normal thing as “online” was the only way to communicate with the consumer, others said that interaction has increased from brands side to maintain their sales whereas others said that the reason behind this was to answer doubts and questions.

P3: *“The interaction increased in my opinion whether through answering doubts and questions like for example if there will be a refund for an order that will be canceled due to the situation. Also, I can say that some brands started doing games and competitions to keep engaged with their followers.”*

P6: *“They were very interactive which makes sense as they need to maintain sales.”*

5.1.2 BRAND EQUITY AND CONSUMER PERCEPTION

In order to answer how brands can maintain their equity and value during crisis time, we asked the participants about a specific post or campaign done by a brand and influenced them during COVID-19. I also asked them to specify if they have followed or un-followed a specific brand, and if they have any behavioral changes toward it. Then, we investigated if there is still some kind of connection between them and those brands after the pandemic and if they still, till now, see the content of those brands on the same level or not.

When participants were asked about a post that has influenced them during the pandemic, four out of seven answered with yes and they identified the brands along with the post. As per the below sample answers:

P3: *“Yes, I was very impressed by IKEA! Their marketing was very focused on health, meaning they were really putting the target on consumer health. And didn’t even include any of their products in the advertising! They paid and did the Ad just to raise awareness and social responsibility instead of marketing their products”*

P4: *“Actually, Uber campaign was really catchy “Thank You for Not Riding” so they were encouraging people to stay home even if this will be against their financial profit as they won’t be making money since people will not use their service. So, they were more focused on human part and trying to contribute to limiting the pandemic.*

P7: *I remember one example which is a communication that was done by an association in France where they published a song to support people during this critical time and to give them a hope that tomorrow will be a good day. And we need to be. To be strong during this time.*

P1: *Bounty from Procter and Gamble. Their interaction was emotional emphasizing the need for the family to be together*

The answer of participant six for this question was interesting as he was influenced with the way

“Dr. Schar” brand dealt with their frontline workers and how they rewarded them by giving bonus

P6: *“I liked how they were supporting their employees by giving them health guidelines as precautions as well as bonus to keep them motivated”*

The participants were also asked if they decided to unfollow any brand during the pandemic and 3 out of seven answered with yes! Two of them have unfollowed some brands that were focusing more on the commercial part and sales, whereas one of them unfollowed brands that were calling their employees for physical attendance instead of remote working.

P3: *“On the other side, I unfollowed the companies that were putting their employee’s life at the edge by calling them to leave remote working and come back to office”*

Then we asked them if they had any behavioral changes toward the brands in general during COVID-19. 5 out of seven had behavioral changes toward specific brands based on their social media content during the pandemic. They either started or continued following them, whereas, others had some buying behavioral changes toward them depending on whether they were socially responsible or more commercial during that time, as per their point of view.

The last question for the participants was about how they evaluate the brands presence after the pandemic and if they are still connected toward those brands after the pandemic and many of them answered with yes! Below are sample answers for this question:

P5: *“I continue to follow the brands that I started to follow during the pandemic and until now I didn’t notice a change in their speech and the connection that was created.”*

P2: *“Zara. It is currently my favorite brand as I used to buy from them before, but during the pandemic I appreciated how efficient their online page and how much they are user friendly so they were providing me with a very good user experience”.*

P3: *“After the pandemic, the honest brands continued to be socially responsible. This encourages me to buy their products, or choose their specific hospital for my medical visits, or simply travel the world through their airlines.”*

The key insights from the data results are illustrated in the below table:

Table 5. Key Insights from Data Analysis

Key Insights	Consumer perception
Increased Brand Activity during COVID-19	Positive perception for brands showing consistent updates, but mixed views on motives (sales-driven vs. genuine concern)
Enhanced Interaction between brands and followers	Brands that engaged interactively gained attention and maintained relevance
Content Adaptation to Crisis (e.g., health-focused campaigns)	Transparent and consumer-centric content enhanced trust and connection
Social Responsibility and Empathy in campaigns had a lasting impact	Brands perceived as empathetic gained loyalty and positive brand associations

Memorable Campaigns by brands that prioritized consumer well-being over commercial interests	Consumers appreciated socially responsible messaging, fostering loyalty and trust
Behavioral Changes: Consumers unfollowed brands perceived as insensitive or opportunistic	Social irresponsibility led to negative consumer perception and loss of loyalty
Post-Pandemic Perception: Connection persisted with brands that maintained values post-crisis	Sustained loyalty for brands perceived as consistent and value-driven beyond the crisis period
Enhanced Online Experiences strengthened brand perception	Brands delivering quality experiences during the crisis positively influenced consumer loyalty and purchasing behavior

5.2 MAIN FINDINGS

5.2.1 BRANDS' PRESENCE ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING COVID-19 MAIN FINDINGS

One of the most significant findings from the interviews was that brands were very active on social media during the pandemic. All the interviewees agreed that there was a significant increase in the level of interaction between brands and consumers back then. However, the reasons behind this have varied. While some of the participants believed that the increase in engagement by some brands was just to maintain their sales and get an advantage to promote their products, others suggested that some brands were really genuine and cared for their followers in a way that they even used a completely different strategy to increase not only engagement, but also awareness through providing their audience with useful guidelines related to the pandemic.

When digging deeper into these findings, we can identify that brands used some key strategies in order to maintain or even enhance the increased interaction:

- **Frequent updates and Communication.** Brands that were posting frequently to keep their followers and consumers updated on the evolving crisis have gained positive attention. For example, P4 appreciated how accurate and quick Emirates airlines were during the pandemic by updating their customers about the latest rules and regulations happening in each country, minute by minute, even before any other competitor brand, the thing that reflected their transparency and commitment to consumer safety.
- **Engagement through interactive content.** Some participants noted that some brands followed a humanistic and constructive approach to build solid and valuable connections with their audience during that tough time. Some of the ways they used to increase their interaction with their followers was posting games, competitions, and Q&A sessions. As noted by P3, many brands answered questions related to major

concerns for consumers at that time, like the possibility of cancellations or terms of refunds...

- **Adapting Content to the Crisis.** Brands that adapted their content to fit with the crisis time were particularly well appreciated by the audience, such as IKEA and Uber who have adjusted their messaging to the crisis even when this opposed their financial benefits. This form of socially responsible messages strengthened the bond between the brands and their followers, and allowed them to build trust, show empathy, and provide support to their community.

The key findings of this theme are that brands need to be consistent in communication with their audience during crisis time. They also need to be aware when posting on their different social media platforms that their messages and content should suit the sensitivity of the crisis context. These actions can significantly help brands strengthen their relationship with their consumers, and so, maintain or even enhance their brand equity.

5.2.2 BRAND EQUITY AND CONSUMER PERCEPTION MAIN FINDINGS

The second theme "Brand Equity and Consumer Perception" focused mainly on the shift in the consumer's perception towards brands during the pandemic. As a result, consumers considered that the social responsibility reflected by brands is the base of their own willingness to continue supporting them during the crisis.

The key findings of this theme can be outlined as the following:

- **Empathy and Social Responsibility.** Several interviewees marked certain brands, in particular, when asked about "During the pandemic, do you remember any post or story shared by a brand that has influenced you?". To have a remark in their minds, it's pure evidence how these brands were able to influence consumers' attitudes towards them. When diving deeply into the examples they gave, Uber with their "Thank You for Not Riding" campaign, and Procter & Gamble's emotional campaign for Bounty, focusing on family and togetherness, we can see that they share the same values: health, family, and wellness. So, these campaigns were actually translated as brands really care for their consumers, and people in general, by putting them first rather than just focusing on profits. This can be clearly extracted from the note mentioned by P4 when she said: "Uber was more focused on the human part and trying to contribute in limiting the pandemic."
- **Influence of Social Responsibility on Loyalty.** The correlation between brands showing social responsibility during COVID-19 and increased customer loyalty was one of the significant findings from the interviews. Brands that reflected social responsibility in terms of showing compassion through either sharing messages of care and hope, or supporting the front-liners were of more interest to the interviewees. On the other hand, the latter had a negative view towards brands that were getting benefit from the crisis by prioritizing their commercial interests over empathy. As a basis, (P3) shared the following, "I unfollowed companies that were putting their employees at risk by asking them to return to the office rather than working remotely."
- **Changes in Brand Perception Post-Crisis.** The effect of the 2 points discussed above led to changes in brand perception even after the pandemic. Some interviewees when

asked “After the pandemic, how did your perception change toward specific brands or brands?” responded by their continuous engagement and following to brand pages that were supporting them during the crisis. For instance, (P2) continued to follow Zara post the crisis due to its user-friendly online experience during the pandemic. Likewise, some of them kept a keen eye on the brands social responsibility after the crisis, and the ones that still held values were seen as trustworthy and socially responsible, the thing that resulted in ongoing loyalty to these brands by these interviewees.

As a conclusion, “Brand Equity and Consumer Perception” theme highlights how consumers' apprehension of brands' actions and values during a crisis significantly influence brand equity. Once the brand equity is strengthened, through prioritizing social responsibility, empathy and compassion, and following a humanistic approach during a crisis, the consumer loyalty will be maintained on the long-run “post-crisis”

5.3 DISCUSSION

5.3.1 THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

The findings from the conducted interviews supports the literature review concepts through demonstrating that brands leveraging frequent, transparent communication and adapting their content to align with the crisis were positively received. Strategies such as interactive content, timely updates, and socially responsible messaging helped brands build trust and foster meaningful connections with their audiences.

Long-term consumer loyalty was strongly related with brands that showed empathy and social responsibility, and prioritized consumer well-being over commercial gains leads. Ultimately, this underlines the importance of aligning brand actions with consumer expectations during crises, as this fosters trust, enhances brand equity, and creates a strong foundation for lasting consumer loyalty post-crisis.

5.3.2 MANAGERIAL DISCUSSION

The conducted interviews align with the literature review in focusing on key managerial strategies that brands can adopt to navigate crises effectively. The way brands communicate and interact with their consumers on their social media platforms during crisis times can significantly influence trust, loyalty, and long-term brand equity.

One essential strategy is acting with speed and transparency. Brands should be quick when it comes to adapting to an arising crisis. In addition, they have to use social media platforms to keep consumers informed regarding any possible change, either in product availability, or business operations. This act of transparency helps maintain consumers' trust. Similarly, engaging with consumers meaningfully is vital. Brands have to keep a balance between maintaining profits and people. While promoting brands products, consumers have to be engaged through content that means & matters. This can be attained through interactive Q&A

sessions, emotional appeals, and updates. Following this humanistic approach in addressing consumers' concerns is a fundamental element to maintain solid relationships with them.

Focusing on social responsibility is another critical element. During the crisis, consumers tend to show more interest to brands that prioritize social responsibility over business profit. Brands, accordingly, should align with consumers' values and focus on messaging that demonstrates concern for their people's well-being. Campaigns that address health, family, and community centered care can build long-term loyalty.

Consistency in communication is crucial for maintaining credibility and reliability. Consistency in posting and messaging in all means, whether through keeping consumers up to date with the crisis and its impacts, or maintaining a stable level of consumer engagement during the full crisis period, keeps the brand credible and reliable in the consumers point of views. These values of credibility and reliability are the basis of retaining a consumer base.

Finally monitoring consumer perception allows brands to continuously keep an eye on consumers' apprehension towards their activity on social media. Monitoring reviews, social media posts reactivity or comments, and consumers feedback help brands understand how people feel or perceive their messaging and offers an area of improvement and space of proactivity when there's a call to change or adjust their e-strategies.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study aimed to understand how brands can utilize social media during crisis time in order to maintain their brand equity from consumer perception. The findings from the literature review and interviews emphasize that brands must strategically utilize social media platforms to foster transparency, empathy, and responsiveness. Effective social media communication during crises not only strengthens consumer trust but also preserves brand equity in the long term.

The means for a brand to succeed in managing the crisis using social media platforms lies in building solid relationships and maintaining consumers' trust through acting with speed and transparency while engaging meaningfully with consumers and focusing on social responsibility. Following a consistent “yet humanistic” approach, brands not only maintain loyalty during the crisis, but also strengthen their equity and come up with retaining an even longer-term consumer base. The best practices outlined above act as a full equipped package for brands to follow whenever a new crisis arises. These practices ensure that the brand equity remains flawless, and even offers a space for it to get enhanced whenever a sense of bad consumer perception approaches.

To conclude, this study provides evidence that brands can use social media to maintain brand equity during crisis time and even enhance it through putting people first, communicating transparently, and focusing on social responsibility. The best practices explored offer a hand of help not only to manage a crisis, but also to overcome it stronger and more connected to its consumer base.

While this research has offered substantial insights into the role of social media in crisis management and brand equity, it has some limitations and further quantitative validation of findings is recommended to validate statistically the qualitative findings from interviews through conducting large-scale surveys. Also, there is a need for further research to explore industry-specific strategies in order to investigate how social media crisis strategies vary across industries (e.g., retail, aviation, healthcare) and identify tailored approaches for different sectors.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Ice breaker questions	Tell me more about yourself specifying age range and occupation
	What do you like to do during free times
Social media consumption	Do you use social media?
	Can you please specify how much time do you spend per day?
	which platforms do you use the most?
	For which purpose do you use social media?
Brands presence on social media (General and during COVID 19)	Do you usually follow specific brands? If yes, can you please specify why you follow these brands and on which platforms specifically?
	Are you currently or have you ever been member of any brand community on Facebook or Instagram?
	How do you evaluate brands communication and practices on Social Media during the pandemic?
	During the pandemic, do you remember any post or story shared by a brand that has influenced you? If yes, can you please explain why you were influenced?
	How did you perceive brands interaction with their consumers on social media platforms during the pandemic? Where they answering their concerns and questions?
	During the pandemic, have you decided to follow or un-follow a specific brand? If yes, can you please explain why?
Post-COVID actions	After the pandemic, how did your perception change toward specific brand or brands?
	Did this change in the perception created any behavioral change as well toward the brand? If yes, how?
	Being said that there is a brand which had positively influenced you during the pandemic, how do you evaluate its practices after the pandemic? Is there any connection that is still valid between you and this brand till now?

