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**THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF NEGATIVE ENGAGEMENT ON TIKTOK:
A STUDY ON THE BRANDS PERSPECTIVE**

Mariana Lopes da Silva Ferreira

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

Universidade Nova de Lisboa

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by

Mariana Lopes da Silva Ferreira

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

Supervised by

Maria do Carmo Barradas Leal, PhD, NOVA Information Management School of Universidade Nova de Lisboa.

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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.

Mariana Lopes da Silva Ferreira [*Lisbon, February 28th, 2025*]

DEDICATION

À minha família, pelo apoio incondicional, pelas oportunidades que me proporcionaram e por serem a base de tudo o que conquistei.

Aos amigos que acompanharam de perto a meu percurso, desde cidade invicta até à capital.

Tudo é ousado para a quem nada se atreve.

(Fernando Pessoa)

ABSTRACT

This research explores the potential of negative engagement as a marketing strategy and its impact on TikTok. While traditionally viewed as a reputational risk, negative engagement has increased its relevance as a marketing tool for a brand's social media strategy. The research examines how brands can leverage negative engagement to increase visibility and awareness reinforce their digital presence. A qualitative methodology was employed by gathering insights from marketing specialists and brand representatives across various industries to comprehend how brands navigate negative engagement in the TikTok platform. The findings reveal that negative engagement increases user interaction more than positive engagement due to the platform's algorithm and participatory culture that amplifies engaged content. This study challenges the conventional crisis management approach, positioning negative engagement as an opportunity rather than an inconvenience. By understanding the strategic potential of negative engagement as a marketing tool, brands can differentiate themselves in social media by reshaping their online narratives.

KEYWORDS

Digital Marketing; Negative Engagement; Customer Engagement; TikTok; Brand Positioning

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CE	Customer engagement
eWOM	Electronic word-of-mouth
NCE	Negative customer engagement
NCF	Negative customer feedback
NF	Negative feedback
UGC	User-generated content

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media has become one of the principal tools of communication and marketing, reshaping how brands and consumers interact in a digital-first world (Spörl-Wang et al., 2025). TikTok stands out as a rapidly growing and globally influential network among social platforms, known for amplifying content by an algorithm-driven personalisation and an engaging culture (Kang & Lou, 2022; Siles et al., 2024). While traditional marketing strategies emphasise positive engagement as vital in any marketing strategy, the possible engagement outcomes offer a new perspective (Leckie et al., 2017; Lim & Rasul, 2022). On TikTok, where content can go viral regardless of sentiment, negative engagement, negative user-generated content, negative feedback and negative electronic word-of-mouth have the potential to increase visibility, reshape brand narratives and create innovative interaction strategies (Walsh et al., 2024).

This research focuses on negative engagement as a strategic tool in digital marketing, challenging conventional views that often dismiss negative feedback as purely harmful. Negative engagement, whether in the form of consumer criticism, complaints, or public dissatisfaction, can serve as a unique opportunity for brands to enhance awareness, refine communication strategies – improving the way marketing strategies are implemented - and foster deeper customer connections. On TikTok, the interactive features of the platform’s viral nature create an environment where brands must not only manage negative engagement but also explore its potential, such as increased awareness and stronger consumer trust (Brooks et al., 2022; Ozuem et al., 2024) from a previous dissatisfactory situation. This research seeks to address the gap in the literature regarding how brands handle negative engagement on TikTok and its implications for marketing success. The study explores the role of negative engagement by providing a framework on effectively understanding and leveraging this feedback in the TikTok ecosystem.

The subsequent chapters of the literature review build upon the foundational overview of TikTok, covering its history, functionality, and relevance. The research then transitions into an examination of negative user-generated content (UGC), negative customer engagement (NCE), negative feedback (NF), and negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), exploring their interconnections and emphasising the significance of brand responses within this framework. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach, detailing the data collection and analysis process. This is succeeded by the presentation of the empirical study, including an overview of the interview findings. The following chapter focuses on the results and discussion, evaluating how they align with the proposed research questions. Finally, the concluding sections present the study’s key insights, addressing its limitations and offering recommendations for future research directions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has become the basis of communication and marketing, deeply impacting how brands and consumers interact (Chen et al., 2023). Over the last decade, the rapid adoption of digital marketing strategies has emphasised the potential of these platforms with influencer marketing being its focus. This marketing strategy is growing daily, indicating a 10% annual growth rate until 2029, making it one of the most relevant and results-driven marketing techniques (Spörl-Wang et al., 2025). Marketing through social media influencers has become essential for brands to achieve their target audience and manage their resources effectively, as it is cheaper and more effective than traditional marketing strategies (Leung et al., 2022).

It is not just the digital influencers that give their opinion publicly. Every day, billions of users share articles, post updates, and engage in real-time discussions with global audiences on online platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram (Chen et al., 2023; Zhou & Chang, 2024), demonstrating the pivotal role social media plays in information consumption and dissemination. However, this level of engagement and content-sharing urge also brings challenges, such as misinformation, including fake news, conspiracy theories, or rumours. This has become a serious issue in the social media landscape, competing for users' attention, influencing public opinion and determining how information spreads (Guinote et al., 2025; Shin et al., 2018).

The main motor of this digital ecosystem is an algorithm, which operates as an invisible mechanism that shapes what users see online, influencing perceptions and driving interactions on social media platforms (Nagel, 2018). On platforms like Instagram or TikTok, algorithms manage a personalised digital identity based on user behaviour, content preferences and the provided personal information (Klug et al., 2021). Social media algorithms have empowered users to become "active collaborators in an interactive value formation process" (Dolan et al., 2019, p. 35), making them essential participants.

2.2. TIKTOK: A GLOBAL PHENOMENON

In the past years, TikTok has emerged as a transformative social media platform (Motta et al., 2024). Launched in 2016 by the Chinese company ByteDance, TikTok's rapid growth from a niche application to a global cultural phenomenon reflects its ability to reshape digital communication and, therefore, its power to dominate the marketing industry (Faltsek et al., 2023; Montag et al., 2021). Unlike traditional social media models prioritising follower relationships and organised timelines (Zhao, 2021), TikTok's algorithm establishes content exposure through its sophisticated "For You" page, where videos are meticulously selected based on previous and continuous user engagement with presented video content through its machine learning and data analytics, ensuring that users recognise interest in the presented content (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020; Klug et al., 2021).

Described as one of the most addictive in the industry, TikTok's algorithm is exclusively designed for people to interact with and through user-generated video content (Chen et al., 2019), employing natural language process to identify textual and audio elements, computer vision, and machine learning to classify video components, analysing hashtags and captions, identifying user preferences within seconds of interaction and even learning the vulnerabilities and interests of a user in less than 40 minutes (Kang & Lou, 2022; Siles et al., 2024). This unique approach ensures that any video, regardless of its creator's follower count, has the potential to go viral, which makes anyone a potential opinion maker. New videos are initially tested with small user groups and then pushed to broader audiences to notice if they generate significant engagement (Matsakis, 2020). As a result, on TikTok, content relevance and quality take over creator popularity, enhancing the platform's appeal. TikTok videos with high user engagement also encounter a high number of views, and vice versa (Klug et al., 2021).

Based on the above, we hypothesize that:

RQ1: Negative engagement on TikTok generates high user interaction and increases brand awareness.

TikTok reshaped the conventional social media. It fosters inclusivity and creativity, empowering users to share authentic moments and connect with others despite social or cultural barriers (Herrman, 2019; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2023). TikTok's design, tailored to youth preferences, contrasts with the static nature of other platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or X, positioning itself as the go-to platform for Gen Z and Millennials (Martinez et al., 2024; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). The platform's default setting - presenting an endless, auto-looped stream of videos - ensures continuous interaction and discovery (Klug et al., 2021) and its recommendation system presents fresh and trending content, enabling users to navigate a mix of high-quality and niche materials, always able to choose within their personal preference. This innovative approach maximises user retention and reinforces TikTok's leadership position in digital media worldwide.

TikTok's videos are mostly created with minimal editing or production and resonate with audiences seeking authenticity (Walsh et al., 2024). This short video format has become a central element of TikTok's identity, it encourages users to share engaging, concise, and visually dynamic stories with features like "react" and "duet", allowing them to captivate directly and authentically, fostering interaction and building an active, participatory community (Martinez et al., 2024). These video formats are among the most popular in the digital age, typically lasting a few seconds to a few minutes (Wang, 2020; Xiao et al., 2023). However, in 2024, TikTok has expanded this range to upload videos up to 30 minutes in length and recently up to 60 minutes long (Breitman, 2024; Lang, 2024), resembling YouTube.

With all its additional features that make this social media platform one of the most complete, the fast-growing massive traffic on TikTok has prompted enterprises to invest heavily in short-

form video ads, leveraging the platform's format to advertise products and achieve desired outcomes (Kułaga, 2024). This type of ads offers distinct advantages like increased engagement, as these videos naturally attract user attention and aggregate traffic, making them highly effective for brand visibility. However, with consumers inundated by countless ads daily, advertising fatigue becomes a significant issue. If a video is not compelling or persuasive, users quickly dismiss it, resulting in low conversion rates (Helberger et al., 2020; Tucker, 2015). This dynamic emphasises the importance of creating original content that generates high engagement rates and aligns with the TikTok's attention-seeking algorithm.

TikTok has successfully blurred the lines between content creators and consumers (Kułaga, 2024). From amateur users to professional influencers, TikTok provides a platform where brands and people can co-exist and easily communicate openly with one another, strengthening relationships and earning new ones even faster than in traditional social media platforms.

2.3. USER-GENERATED CONTENT

User-generated content (UGC) refers to content created and shared by individuals, which is pivotal in shaping consumer behaviour and brand perceptions. It happens when a consumer creates content for a brand without expecting compensation for it (Walsh et al., 2024). This phenomenon aligns with the two-step flow of information theory, where individuals disseminate information within their social networks, amplifying its impact and influencing more than the original brand content (Guinote et al., 2025). While UGC is widely discussed, no universally accepted definition exists. Key areas of debate include whether professionals should be considered users, whether only original content qualifies as UGC, and the scale of content sharing required for it to be classified as UGC, as these distinctions influence how brands perceive UGC in marketing strategies (Qu et al., 2019). Despite UGC offering immense potential for brands to connect authentically with consumers, its unregulated nature needs strategic approaches to manage communication risks that may occur.

When handled effectively, UGC becomes a powerful tool for building strong, lasting relationships between brands and their audiences due to its perceived authenticity. Unlike traditional marketing, which often feels orchestrated, UGC builds genuine experiences, fostering trust and influencing purchase decisions (Christodoulides et al., 2011; Trusov et al., 2009) as content created without sponsorship is perceived as more sincere, enhancing purchase intentions (Mathur et al., 2022). For instance, micro-influencers, with smaller yet highly engaged audiences, are often viewed as more relatable and trustworthy than macro-influencers or celebrities, making them more beneficial in brand partnerships. Sponsored UGC is also valuable, but research shows that audiences do not respond as positively to content from popular influencers when it appears overly promotional (Walsh et al., 2024). Unlike traditional marketing, as UGC is unregulated, allows users to freely decide their content's topics, style, and timing (Starnini et al., 2012).

While digital marketing has traditionally focused on positive interactions, digital negativity has become an increasingly significant study area (Cooper et al., 2019; Shankar et al., 2022). Although negative UGC is considered challenging, it also presents opportunities for brands. When handled effectively, businesses can mitigate harm and even convert negativity into positive outcomes, such as brand trust, lasting relationships with their audiences or identifying areas for improvement (Daugherty et al., 2008; Qu et al., 2019). This phenomenon includes various forms, such as negative customer engagement (NCE), negative feedback (NF), and electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), all of which have the potential to shape brand perception and consumer decision-making. That is why our second research question states that:

RQ2: Negative engagement through UGC on TikTok increases brand perception more than positive engagement.

2.3.1. NEGATIVE CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Negative Customer Engagement (NCE) represents a significant yet underexplored area in consumer behaviour research. Defined by Hollebeek & Chen (2014) as “customers’ unfavourable brand-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviours during focal brand interactions” (p. 63), NCE appears from a misalignment between the customer’s and the firm’s goals (Azemi et al., 2020; Kucuk, 2019; Doorn et al., 2010) and it differs from more passive states of engagement with negative triggers - such as disengagement - as NCE is active, participative, and often public, making it a critical factor in shaping brand reputation and financial performance (Naumann et al., 2020).

NCE can harm a firm’s assets, particularly brand equity, which is considered one of the most crucial financial performance-enhancing benefits (Priem & Butler, 2001; Rahman et al., 2022). Studies also show that NCE undermines brand equity through value co-destruction, declining customer value, and increasing negative electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) recommendations (Doorn et al., 2010; Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Naumann et al., 2020). For example, negatively engaged customers are more likely to share negative WOM, reject the brand, or switch to competitors, reducing loyalty and profitability (Lievonon et al., 2023). NCE can be a stronger driver than positive CE due to its emotional intensity and escalation effect, particularly on social media (Bowden et al., 2017; Juric et al., 2015; Naumann et al., 2020).

Negative engagement shares similar drivers and dimensions (affect, cognition, and behaviour) as positive engagement but operates distinctly based on context (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). For instance, customers may exhibit negative engagement due to unmet expectations or unpleasant surprises, leading to strong cognitive processing of negative information. Behavioural manifestations of NCE often involve collective actions such as complaints, online unpleasant reviews, or anti-brand communities, amplifying the brand's negative impact (Azer & Alexander, 2020; Doorn et al., 2010) and making it particularly challenging for firms to manage, especially in the digital age, where negative feedback can spread rapidly across online platforms (Bowden et al., 2017; Dolan et al., 2016). As consumers increasingly turn to

social platforms to express dissatisfaction, often perceiving informal, user-generated content as more reliable than brand communications (Richins, 1984), it creates an environment where NCE can quickly escalate, leading to widespread reputational brand damage (Li et al., 2021; Naumann et al., 2020).

Given its impact, firms must adopt a strategic approach that promptly addresses complaints, transparently engages with dissatisfied customers, and uses feedback to improve products or services (Azer & Alexander, 2020). Proactive responses to NCE can mitigate its escalation, mediating the relationship between brands and consumers and even converting negative interactions into opportunities for value co-creation (Rather, 2021).

2.3.2. NEGATIVE FEEDBACK

The closeness and omnipresence of social media have amplified the effect of negative feedback (Yu et al., 2022). What may have once been a minor complaint that could be addressed directly with the consumer is now a potential public relations crisis that can be viewed by millions of people within minutes (Peters et al., 2013; Wigley & Weiwu, 2011). The viral nature of negative feedback on social platforms has challenged companies, forcing them to rethink and innovate their crisis management strategies. Even small mistakes, such as an employee making an unfavourable comment or a poorly executed advertisement, can quickly escalate into a significant issue, as the power of social media allows negative reviews to spread quickly and widely.

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram or X and online review sites like Yelp and Amazon have become prime venues for customers to voice their dissatisfaction (Yu et al., 2022). There are two types of negative events: Defensible Negative Events and Indefensible Negative Events. The first type of event is adverse but does not violate any safety standards, rules, or regulations, and the company is not flawed, including external factors, such as natural disasters, that affect the ability of the company to deliver products on schedule. The other type of events involves explicit rules or safety standards violations, such as defective products that cause harm or unethical business practices, like fraudulent advertising or employee misconduct (Fang et al., 2010). In such cases, if the customers expect the firm to take responsibility, it is also generally expected to adopt a more formal, apologetic tone in a direct relation, meaning the greater the problem, the greater the responsibility and seriousness. Violating these expectations, such as responding inappropriately or dismissively, can exacerbate the damage and lead to even more significant customer resentment (Fang et al., 2010). Therefore, understanding the type of negative event and the company's degree of responsibility is crucial, and formulating an effective response is a key aspect of customer negativity management.

2.3.3. NEGATIVE EWOM

Electronic Word-of-mouth (eWOM) is increasingly significant in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviours in the digital era. eWOM refers to “any positive or negative

statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, made available to many people and institutions via the Internet” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39). Research consistently demonstrates that eWOM—particularly negative eWOM—profoundly impacts brand trust, consumer attitudes, and purchase intentions (Cheung & Thadani, 2012; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

Research also highlights that negative eWOM is more influential than positive eWOM due to its stronger emotional impact and a heightened sense of consumer risk. Negative eWOM, which often involves complaints or negative reviews about a product or service, can change consumers’ perceptions of a brand. When consumers hear or read about negative experiences, they tend to place more weight on these negative cues than positive ones, as it is more persuasive (Lee et al., 2009; Park & Lee, 2009). This phenomenon is popularly known in psychology as “negativity bias”, a well-established principle where “negative are more salient, potent, dominant in combinations, and generally efficacious than positive events” (Rozin & Royzman, 2001, p. 297).

Negative eWOM can have a range of unfavourable outcomes for a brand, damaging brand trust, creating scepticism about a product's quality, and reducing purchase intentions. Additionally, as more consumers contribute to the negative eWOM, the cumulative effect can harm the brand’s reputation and financial performance in a significant way (Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018). One of the unique challenges of eWOM is that it is a two-way communication process because not only do consumers spread their opinions, but brands are now part of the eWOM process. Responding directly to negative reviews, offering apologies, explanations, or solutions to address the concerns of dissatisfied customers are visible brand communications to its audience. How the brand addresses the complaint (eWOM) is crucial in this exchange as it can influence potential customers' perceptions: if a brand responds effectively, it can restore trust and mitigate the review's negative impact (Gu & Ye, 2014; Sparks & Browning, 2011).

On the other hand, a poorly handled response can escalate the issue and lead to further negative eWOM. The rise of brand participation in eWOM has created new opportunities and risks. Brands can proactively engage with consumers by offering resolutions and building stronger relationships, but they must also be cautious. Consumers are increasingly sceptical of corporate responses perceived as insincere or self-serving (Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018; Gu & Ye, 2014).

Negative User-generated Content, Negative Customer Engagement, Negative Feedback, and Negative Electronic Word-of-mouth are all concepts of negative social interaction. They are closely related and shape how people interact with or about brands (Table 1).

Electronic WOM (or negative eWOM) includes any statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, especially on online platforms, where content can quickly reach a large audience (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Klug et al., 2021). After a statement has been made, customer feedback through comments in the form of suggestions

(Celuch et al., 2015) or complaints can be encouraged by NCE, which is considered the negative valence of CE and has a detrimental impact on a brand's reputation through customers' negative eWOM (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014; Naumann et al., 2020). User-generated content (UGC) is associated with eWOM (Muntinga et al., 2011), as are its negative poles (negative UGC and negative eWOM), representing the result of a consumer's opinion.

Table 1 illustrates the terms UGC, CE, CF, and eWOM as presented in the literature and how each can be related to the other when considering a negative scenario.

Table 1 - Conceptual overview and related constructs

Term	Definition	Source	Negative term	Connection to other concepts
User-generated content (UGC)	"Content produced and uploaded by consumers rather than companies"	(Muntinga et al., 2011, p. 14)	Negative User-generated content (negative UGC)	Triggered by negative eWOM, reflecting dissatisfaction.
Customer engagement (CE)	"Customers' (favourable and) unfavourable brand-related thoughts, feelings, and behaviours during focal brand interactions." (adapted from Negative Engagement definition)	(Hollebeek & Chen, 2014, p. 63)	Negative customer engagement (NCE)	Considered the negative pole of CE and has a negative impact on reputation through negative eWOM.
Customer feedback	"Positive and negative comments, as well as suggestions for product/service improvements."	(Celuch et al., 2015, p. 281)	Negative customer feedback	Amplified through negative eWOM, often initiated by NCE.
Electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)	"Any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet."	(Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 39)	Negative electronic word-of-mouth (negative eWOM)	It represents a behavioural outcome of NCE, amplifies NCF and triggers negative UGC.

2.4. BRAND RESPONSE

How brands respond to negative engagement is critical to managing brand reputation and encouraging customer relationships in digital platforms. In today's digital world, brands frequently encounter negative engagement, such as critical reviews, complaints, and negative eWOM, which can spread quickly. To address such feedback, brands employ various defensive

and accommodative strategies (Marcus & Goodman, 1991). Defensive responses, such as denial, silence, or attack, aim to deflect responsibility but often risk further turning away from customers. In contrast, accommodative strategies, including apologies and compensation, involve acknowledging the problem and taking responsibility for it, which can effectively rebuild trust and improve relationships (Lambret & Barki, 2018).

Strategic management responses to negative feedback can strengthen customer relationships and enhance brand image. By demonstrating concern and showing that customer opinions matter, brands can reduce dissatisfaction and improve loyalty (Gokce et al., 2024). Effective brand responses also help minimise information errors for potential customers by signalling product quality and additional concern for consumers (Li et al., 2017; Salehi-Esfahani et al., 2023). So, companies that respond appropriately to complaints can rebuild their reputations and often achieve long-term financial benefits (Yu et al., 2022).

Response in the form of justifications, which explain an issue, turns up as beneficial and can decrease perceived negativity, improving consumer perceptions about the brand. However, excessive justifications can be harmful, damaging perceived honesty. It is essential that brands carefully balance mere justifications with sincere apologies (Bolkan & Daly, 2009).

When combined with proactively engaged communication, apologies often help mitigate consumer frustration and restore goodwill, particularly in situations when it is possible to access consumer sentiment in real time. Emotionally intense customer-brand situations often attenuate when proactive actions, such as personalised responses, are taken to address complaints (Lievonon et al., 2023; Surachartkumtonkun et al., 2015). Addressing intense forms of negative engagement, such as public retaliations, requires brands to act with extreme caution and empathy through structured complaint processes. When encountered with a good response strategy, customers can reduce switching behaviours and foster stronger relationships within brands (Azer & Alexander, 2020).

Responding to negative eWOM is another area where brand feedback plays a vital role. Brand responses can send positive signals of care and accountability, increasing trust and loyalty in the community. However, they can also inadvertently legitimise consumer complaints if not handled delicately, leading to potential long-term harm to purchase intentions and post-purchase challenges (Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018). Thus, brands must tailor their feedback strategies based on the type of problem, whether attributed to the product or to external factors, to maximise their effectiveness, which leads us to hypothesise that:

RQ3: The strategic use of negative engagement on TikTok improves brand marketing outcomes when adopting an effective brand response.

Research on crisis management and negative engagement events outlines five primary response strategies for addressing negative incidents: confession, excuse, justification, denial, and silence (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Huang et al., 2010; Kempe et al., 2005; Zhang & Li, 2011). While denial (avoid customer accusations) and confession (admit failures and

apologise) represent the two extremes of the response, proactive approaches focusing on transparency and consumer collaboration, encouraging structured complaints and promptly addressing problems can help brands transform challenges into long-term engagement and growth opportunities, obtaining more positive results (Qu et al., 2019). Following the thinking of these authors, the 4th research question stipulates that:

RQ4: The timeliness and tone of the brand's response shape the positive impact of negative engagement on customer perceptions of the brand.

The rise of digital platforms has brought new challenges and opportunities for brands to manage negative engagement. Negative feedback, negative UGC, negative eWOM, and negative customer feedback have the potential to rapidly influence public perception, making brand response strategies more critical than ever. As previously highlighted, brands can adopt various response strategies, from defensive approaches such as denial or silence, accommodative ones like apologies and compensation or even proactive approaches by actively engaging with the customer in the problem-solving process. Research consistently emphasises that thoughtful, tailored, and transparent responses can mitigate negativity and even foster consumer trust and loyalty (Lambret & Barki, 2018; Yu et al., 2022). Furthermore, brands must carefully address customer concerns and avoid actions that may unintentionally amplify their negative claims. Sincere apologies can preserve customer trust (Bolkan & Daly, 2009) and prioritise responses based on the intensity and nature of complaints, allowing brands to allocate resources more effectively and strengthen customer relationships (Argyris et al., 2021; Lievonen et al., 2023).

Incorporating structured feedback mechanisms and encouraging open communication channels can transform negative engagement into valuable insights for improvement, ultimately enhancing brand resilience and overall customer satisfaction. As digital platforms evolve, managing and responding to negativity effectively will grow and remain a vital component of brand strategy, offering a path for turning challenges into opportunities for growth and customer loyalty.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the role of negative engagement on TikTok and its potential impact on brand awareness, perception, and marketing strategies. Given the complexity of negative engagement, a qualitative methodology allows for an in-depth understanding (Polit & Beck, 2010) of how marketing professionals perceive and manage this digital interaction.

The qualitative approach applied with the semi-structured interview data collection method allowed the participants to reveal their experiences and work cases as well as obtain meaning from patterns that materialize within and between responses (Fawcett et al., 2014). This type of research was more relevant to this specific study, as it is the appropriate approach to test the developed research questions from literature and search for framework improvement (Rutitis et al., 2014).

3.1. DATA COLLECTION

The research focuses on gathering insights through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with marketing professionals experienced in handling TikTok campaigns. A purposeful sampling strategy was implemented to ensure the selection of the most relevant participants for addressing the research questions, as they represented two groups: the brand social media managers from *Terra Nostra* (operating in the food industry, specialising in the production of dairy products, particularly cheese and milk), *Domino's Portugal* (a company operating in food service sector, specifically fast food, specialising in pizza), *Sociedade Comercial C. Santos* (with activity in the automotive sector, serving as an official representative of *Mercedes-Benz* and *Smart* in Portugal) and *Lidl Portugal* (operating in retail sector, focused on food and consumer goods, as part of the international *Lidl* supermarket chain) – and influencer marketing agency representative of *Procter & Gamble Portugal* (a multinational consumer goods company operating in categories such as personal care, household products, and cosmetics), *Pingo Doce* (operating in the food retail sector, a supermarket chain owned by the *Jerónimo Martins Group*) and *AEG* (operating as a manufacturer of household appliances and electronic equipment, part of the *Electrolux Group*). All interviewees who have worked directly with TikTok have at least five years of experience in the field.

The interviews were designed to uncover strategies brands use to handle negative engagement on TikTok. Participants were asked about their experiences dealing with negative UGC, their perceptions of negative engagement as a potential tool for increasing brand visibility and interaction, as well as examples of successful campaigns that addressed negative feedback and to explore how negative engagement shapes brand perception and customer loyalty by collecting recommendations on how it can be effectively leveraged in future marketing strategies. The interview guide comprised only open-ended questions, and its design considered former research findings in the academic literature (Kallio et al., 2016).

All interviews were conducted online for a month period and lasted approximately 20 to 35 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for content analysis. All participants consented to the recording, thereby permitting its use in analysis and ensuring that authentic events were utilized for the study.

This approach allowed the identification of recurring patterns and themes, providing a structured way to interpret the insights shared by participants. The study focuses on uncovering common strategies for managing negative engagement, understanding the role of TikTok's algorithm in amplifying negativity, and identifying approaches that transform challenges into brand opportunities. The qualitative research follows the "RATS" guidelines – Relevance, Appropriateness, Transparency, and Soundness – in the way that the research question is aligned with the theoretical framework and all the data sources, ethical considerations, and interpretative strategies derived from the research questions (Clark, 2003).

3.2. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from these interviews was analysed in three phases using the framework approach. The process was based on a deductive perspective, by classifying the responses based on the researchers' beliefs, and on an inductive perspective by gathering the new opinions that extended the research's literature and create new concepts (Clark, 2003). This approach allowed the identification of recurring patterns and themes, providing a structured way to interpret the insights shared by participants.

After being recorded, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated from the original language (Portuguese) into English through an OpenAI program (Hix.ai, 2025) to facilitate the analysis process. This analysis was structured by identifying key points, concepts, and relevant excerpts, which the researcher systematically extracted (Coelho et al., 2018)

The second phase involved identifying interview excerpts that addressed themes outlined in the existing literature, following a deductive approach (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Additionally, insights not previously documented in the literature were noted. This information was categorized by interviewee and theme, aligning with the corresponding interview questions.

In the third phase, the previously identified information was systematically categorised to align with the study's objectives. Furthermore, certain ideas emerged from the empirical data, which were documented and considered in the final analysis.

4. EMPIRICAL STUDY

To ensure consistency in response formats, professionals were instructed to respond on behalf of the brands they represent. Simultaneously, representatives from influencer marketing agencies responded based on their clients.

According to interviews, brands frequently use Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (Table 2). While TikTok was acknowledged as a utilised platform, it was emphasised that it is not used daily, as it is not seen as a priority, with responses deriving from utilizing the platform weekly or being active (without programmed consistency).

Participants indicated that user interaction on TikTok differs significantly from other social media platforms (Table 3), promoting organic and original engagement, appealing to a trend-driven younger audience, and consequently fostering meaningful follower growth. Engagement was also characterized as occurring faster, resulting in customers impulsiveness when commenting.

In terms of business utility, TikTok effectively raises brand awareness, facilitates new product launches, and enables brands to connect with a larger audience faster. TikTok also fosters brands to adopt a more creative and strategic approach to their content, being one of its most important characteristics (Table 4).

Table 5 illustrates that participants largely agree that negative content obtains more interaction than positive content, both from the type of content on this platform and because historically negative content presented that behaviour. This phenomenon was attributed to various factors such as TikTok's transparency in user interactions, amplifying the negativity, and the tendency for negative content to create awareness in short term, but also to extend a brand's truths that should not be known to customers.

Furthermore, participants acknowledged that negative engagement can significantly enhance brand awareness and visibility (Table 6). For instance, Ryanair has employed a marketing strategy that leverages negative publicity on digital platforms to remain relevant (Figure 1), while Domino's United Kingdom social media campaigns have used humorous and provocative content to obtain high engagement (Figure 2). Prozis, for example, has been caught in controversy through its CEO (Figure 3) yet, months later, managed to regain important brand positioning.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate situations when Ryanair and Domino's United Kingdom TikTok accounts utilized negative engagement or complaints from customers to enhance brand awareness. In figure 1, Ryanair responds to a customer's video with the "stitch" tool by arguing that they have "seen it before" and how the customer is "not special" by pointing out a problem most of the customers already face – buying a window seat but ending up against a wall (Ryanair, 2014). In figure 2, Domino's joins the "hear me out" trend, based on pointing

out something bad and trying to explain it for further audience understanding – in this case, Domino’s UK pointed out on its TikTok account that their biggest “hear me out” is the extended “out for delivery” part of the ordering process (Dominos_uki, 2024).



Figure 1 - Example of Ryanair's marketing strategy using negative engagement on TikTok



Figure 2 - Example of Domino's International marketing strategy using negative engagement on TikTok

Figure 3 discloses Prozis’ controversy, showing Miguel Milhão’s (Prozis CEO) LinkedIn post where he publicly assumes his anti-abortion conviction and, despite being his opinion, the controversy happens to the brand he represents. This figure also shows how Miguel claimed that Prozis “does not need Portuguese consumer’s” support to have success (Coutinho, 2022).



Figure 3 - Prozis' controversy explained on TikTok account

User-generated content has a great influence on customer perception of a brand on TikTok. Participants agreed that UGC always affects a brand, regardless of whether it is positive or negative, as indicated in Table 7. This suggests that while UGC can help brands establish a positive association with consumers, it can also go viral and damage the brand's image. Despite its consequence, participants stressed the importance of customers making videos about a brand organically by describing it as the "best possible outcome".

The participants also expressed that negative UGC has a profound impact on brand perception, as it spreads faster on TikTok than positive UGC (Table 8). The way brands deal with the negativity was pointed out as the most important aspect – rather than if the content is positive or negative – it was once more pointed out that negative content has more exposure than positive content.

Several brands have encountered negative UGC in their marketing campaigns (Table 9). An example of this was the incident involving a Terra Nostra campaign – *Concertos do Pasto* – and how the vegan community did not approve the brand initiative of giving a concert to cows (Figure 4), or how Lidl removed a nest from a store in Madeira Island, resulting in public complaints (Figure 5). Some participant pointed out they had a crisis management team to prevent complications, while others preferred not to intervene directly, allowing events to unfold naturally.

Following this, figures 4 and 5 show negative UGC towards Terra Nostra and Lidl. Figure 4 illustrates an Instagram post made by a Portuguese vegan supporter talking about how the brand's campaign does not respect animals, how the milk industry kills animals and how the

meat industry process is abominable and how the vegan community positively responded to the user public opinion (Vegano, 2024). Figure 5 shows *Jornal de Notícias* and *Pets in Town* newspaper exposed Lidl's stork nest incident, focusing on how customers were not happy and how after a couple encounters with an animal protection organization, the brand offered to install three more nests in the surrounding area but after being accused of the brand chose not to further respond (Pincelli, 2025; Rodrigues, 2025).

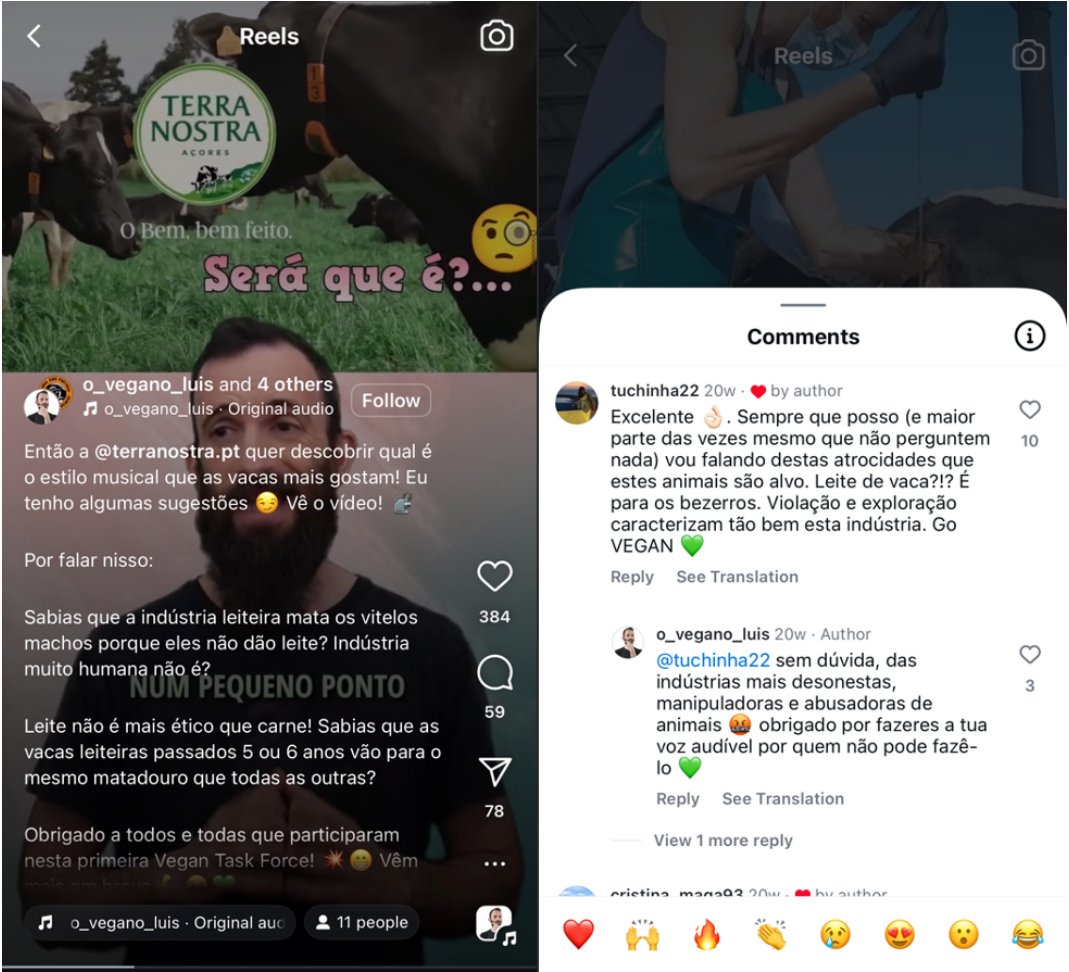


Figure 4 - Negative UGC regarding Concertos no Pasto campaign by Terra Nostra on Instagram

Lidl retira ninho de cegonhas e deixa população de S. João da Madeira indignada

🕒 Leitura: 3 min 11 janeiro, 2025 às 18:54



A zona da antiga fábrica deu lugar a um supermercado Lidl

Foto: Direitos Reservados



Salomão Rodrigues
Jornalista



PIT
PETS
IN
TOWN

Em resposta às críticas, o Lidl argumentou que a retirada do ninho foi feita por “segurança”, visto que a chaminé, localizada no local que é agora o parque de estacionamento do supermercado, precisava de manutenção. Contudo, a IRIS questiona a afirmação: “A estrutura está insegura e mesmo assim abre-se ao público o supermercado e o parque de estacionamento?”. O supermercado argumentou que embora não esteja em “risco de queda imediata”, precisa de ser reabilitada.

A organização partilhou ainda que após ter uma reunião com o supermercado, este demonstrou a “disponibilidade para promover a instalação urgente e imediata de três ninhos alternativos noutras tantas chaminés da envolvente”. Porém, posteriormente, quando o assunto voltou à tona, a IRIS frisou que o Lidl se terá “furtado a assumir a responsabilidade civil por danos ou acidentes, o que motivou a recusa da proprietária” da nova chaminé em aceitar a colocação.

O supermercado, por sua vez, não comentou a acusação. “O Lidl propôs-se voluntariamente financiar a instalação de ninhos adicionais, estando até ao momento a aguardar a identificação, por

NTfm



TLE

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LIVE

Figure 5 - Published news about Lidl Portugal incident with stork's nest

TikTok's participatory culture amplifies the reach of negative UGC (Table 10). Elements such as duets and reaction videos present risks by enabling users to engage with content, amplifying negative narratives. However, these formats can also help shift customer perceptions of brands, transforming negative generated content and engagement into a potential opportunity.

Participants stated that engagement can have positive outcomes (Table 11). Negative engagement can offer brands clear insights into customer opinions regarding their products, functioning as marketing research. However, it is a risky strategy, as it may not align with the brand image, it can negatively impact brand reputation and requires careful management to prevent the worsening of the situation. For example, companies can use customer complaints to enhance their products and showcase its improvements through marketing (Table 12) Nevertheless, a couple of participants noted that negative engagement is rarely used as a marketing strategy, as they couldn't provide an example.

The timing of a brand’s response is crucial in shaping consumer perceptions and reaching positive outcomes. Delayed replies can give the impression of indifference and reinforce customer resentment (Table 13). When a brand responds promptly, it moderates the viral impact of critics and affirms brand’s core values.

Similarly, a respectful tone and transparent message foster empathy with customers, being one of the crucial points to have positive outcomes on marketing campaigns (Table 14). Participants also pointed out that the different approaches in tone – formal or informal – depends on the subject matter but should always be respectful.

Ultimately, a well-structured communication strategy can positively influence dissatisfied customers (Table 15), altering their previously negative opinions. It is essential to actively acknowledge negative feedback by actively listening to the complaint, respond in a personalised manner, and offer solutions such as product compensation when the issue is about a product or service malfunction. Dissatisfied customers must feel recognition and gratitude for their feedback as satisfied ones.

Table 2 shows what social platforms are being used daily by brands from different fields.

Table 2 - Daily use of social media platforms

Question 1	Which social media platforms does your company use daily? (adapted from (Kang & Lou, 2022))
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Brands publish on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and TikTok	"We use Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. TikTok is also utilised on a regular, weekly basis." "We use Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp. Additionally, we are also active on TikTok and YouTube."

Table 3 illustrates how TikTok, despite being a social platform, can differ from others in user interaction purposes.

Table 3 - TikTok differences on interaction

Question 2	Please think about your experience of using TikTok. In what ways do you feel it differs from other social media platforms in terms of user interaction?
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
TikTok encourages organic and creative interactions	"TikTok encourages a more organic, creative, and dynamic interaction with the audience due to its short-form content format, which is largely driven by trends."

TikTok enables rapid engagement and follower growth	"It is significantly easier to gain followers on TikTok, meaning we can reach the same numbers we have on Instagram in a much shorter period. Engagement also occurs at a much higher speed."
Interactions are mostly from a younger audience	"Firstly, engagement originates from a much younger target audience. Secondly, the nature of engagement itself tends to be somewhat less deliberate. In other words, I believe that people reflect less before commenting."

Table 4 shows how TikTok can enhance some business areas and how brands utilise it.

Table 4 - TikTok's impact on businesses

Question 3	Which are the core areas in which TikTok can help boost your business? (adapted from (Pinto Lopes et al., 2021)
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
TikTok increases awareness and it is effective in product launches	"The primary goal is to enhance brand awareness among the audience. Additionally, TikTok proves to be highly effective for product launches."
TikTok help with creativity and strategic content	"What I observe about TikTok is that its greatest value lies in demonstrating the fundamental importance of creativity and strategic capability for brands."
TikTok content reaches a larger audience	"The advantage of TikTok is that content generates significantly more impressions and reaches a much larger audience compared to Instagram."

Tables 5 and 6 refer to negative engagement's popularity and whether it resulted in greater visibility for a brand by providing reasons and examples.

Table 5 - Negative content popularity

Question 4	Would you say that content perceived as negative, for example, content that is the subject of complaints or criticism, generates more interaction on TikTok? If you have noticed this, please give your reasons for thinking that this occurs.
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Negative content generates more interaction than positive content	"I believe it depends on the video itself. Typically, negative content tends to generate more interaction and comments." "Yes. Historically, and throughout the evolution of communication, negative publicity has consistently generated greater public curiosity."

<u>Reasons:</u>	<u>Reasons:</u>
- There is greater transparency in the way people interact.	"There is greater transparency in the way people interact, which in turn amplifies negative sentiment."
- Negative content may generate awareness for an underlying truth about a brand.	"There is a well-known saying that 'all publicity is good publicity,' even when it is negative. I do not entirely agree with this notion. In the short term, negative publicity may generate widespread awareness, which often carries an underlying truth."

Table 6 - Examples of negative engagement resulting in brand visibility or awareness

Question 5	Can you please provide an example of a situation in which negative engagement has resulted in greater visibility or awareness of a brand?
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Negative engagement can result in greater brand visibility	"Ryanair serves as a classic example. From a marketing perspective, it has been the subject of continuous analysis due to the volume of negative commentary it has received" "At an international level, Domino's engages in humour with football clubs and provoke football fans and the reaction on TikTok generated significant visibility"
Brand reputation can be recovered after controversies	"Prozis and its CEO, who became embroiled in controversy. At first, it seemed as though the company had suffered significant damage, but ultimately, it managed to recover."

Table 7 illustrates how negative UGC can impact brand perceptions from the brand's point of view and experience.

Table 7 - Impact of UGC on brand perception

Question 6	What is your view on the impact of user-generated content (UGC) on public perceptions of brands on TikTok?
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
UGC can always impact a brand positively or negatively	"All publicity, regardless of its level of visibility, affects a brand in some way."
UGC has a significant impact on brand awareness	"Having people create videos about your brand is the best possible outcome, when an individual engages with your brand to the extent that they generate content about it organically, that is invaluable."

Tables 8 and 9 refer to the impact of UGC, both positive and negative and, in negative cases, its impact on a brand’s public image.

Table 8 - Negative UGC versus positive UGC impact

Question 7	From your perspective, do negative UGC posts (e.g. critical videos or comments) have a greater influence on brand perception than positive UGC? Please provide reasons for your answer.
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Negative UGC has a strong influence on brand perception	<p>"Even micro-influencers can have a significant impact"</p> <p>"It largely depends on how the brand handles the negative aspect and transforms it into content."</p> <p>"Obviously"</p>
Reason: - Negative UGC spreads more easily than positive UGC.	Reason: "Negative content tends to go viral more easily than positive content in terms of exposure."

Table 9 - Negative UGC's impact in marketing campaigns

Question 8	Have you been involved in any marketing campaigns where negative user-generated content (UGC) has significantly impacted the brand's public image? How did you handle it? (adapted from (Delmonaco et al., 2024)
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Negative UGC is common in marketing campaigns	<p>"We frequently receive both positive and negative comments when launching a product in collaboration with a brand or a public figure. As a result, we are used to handling such feedback."</p> <p>"In our recent <i>Concertos no Pasto</i> campaign, we received a considerable amount of criticism from the vegan community, with numerous videos criticising us. But that is perfectly fine"</p> <p>"There was a recent controversy involving our brand after we removed a stork’s nest that was located near a Lidl store. This had a negative impact on all our communications over the past two weeks."</p>
How it was handled: - No official response was given. - Having a crisis management team	How it was handled: "There was no response from us; we simply let events unfold naturally." "We have a crisis management team, a social media team, and a public relations department that are constantly assessing the situation."

Table 10 shows how TikTok’s participatory culture amplifies the impact of UGC when it is negative.

Table 10 - TikTok’s participatory culture

Question 9	What are your views on the role of TikTok’s participatory culture, as evidenced by features such as 'duets' or 'react', in amplifying the impact of negative user-generated content (UGC)?
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
TikTok’s features amplify negative UGC	"It is a tool that amplifies content visibility, and this is particularly common with negative content." "Well, I believe it helps."
Participatory features can be risky but also provide opportunities	"There is always the risk that a video may be used in a negative context. However, even in such cases, there are often opportunities to reverse the narrative and turn it to the brand’s advantage."

Table 11 illustrates the possible potential and limitations of negative engagement from the brand’s perspective.

Table 11 - Potential and limitations of negative engagement

Question 10	Based on your experience, what potential does negative engagement might have? Also, what are its limitations? (adapted from (Pinto Lopes et al., 2021)
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Negative engagement is an opportunity for brands	"Negative engagement functions much like a market study, it provides valuable insights into consumer sentiment." "I view negative engagement as an extensive brainstorming session. It generates a wealth of insights that can be analysed and leveraged to make improvements." "There is always potential, there are various marketing strategies, and this is undoubtedly one of them." "In fact, they provide an opportunity for a brand to demonstrate its willingness to listen to criticism."
<u>Limitations:</u> - Risky approach - Engagement does not always align with brand reputation.	<u>Limitations:</u> "It is a risky approach." "It is important to distinguish engagement from brand reputation. The two do not always align. Engagement is just interaction, whereas brand recognition and reputation require a more nuanced approach."

- Must be handled carefully to ensure positive outcomes.

"It becomes crucial to be certain that the situation can be turned around with a compelling positive argument."

Table 12 shows examples, provided by brand experts, of negative engagement employed as a marketing strategy.

Table 12 - Negative engagement as a marketing strategy

Question 11	Could you please provide an example where a brand has employed negative engagement as part of a marketing strategy to achieve positive outcomes?
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Brands can turn negative engagement into positive outcomes	"Domino's has previously leveraged criticism regarding the quality of its products to reformulate its recipes. Following these changes, the brand launched campaigns highlighting the specific improvements made to its products." "People had previously discussed the so-called 'bug' involving Mariana or the email incident, but in reality, telling creators that they are free to criticise a brand is something I can only recall Madonna doing"
Negative engagement as a marketing strategy is not common	"I don't know any specific case but I'm sure it happens." "Not that I remember, no."

Tables 13 and 14 refer to the importance of the timing and/or tone of a brand's response when dealing with negative engagement and whether it impacts customers.

Table 13 - Timing of brands response

Question 12	How important is the timing of a brand's response to negative engagement? Do you believe that a delayed response can significantly impact customer perceptions?
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
A brands response creates positive outcomes	"Responding is crucial, and doing so promptly demonstrates the brand's concern and commitment to its consumers." "Delayed responses can give the impression of disinterest or, alternatively, allow negative comments to spread further, exacerbating customer dissatisfaction."
Speed of response is crucial when	"Speed plays a crucial role in mitigating the viral impact and reinforcing the brand's core values."

controlling negative engagement	"Absolutely crucial—in fact, the faster, the better."
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Table 14 - Tone of brands response

Question 13	Do you believe that the tone of a brand’s response plays a role in resolving negative engagement? How so?
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Appropriate and transparent tone fosters empathy.	<p>"It is essential to communicate transparently, as this fosters empathy among followers and can even be considered a proactive approach."</p> <p>"Regarding tone, it largely depends on the subject matter and the nature of the criticism being addressed."</p>

Table 15 shows how a good communication strategy can impact dissatisfied customers positively and how it is or can be achieved.

Table 15 - Importance of a good communication strategy

Question 14	Do you believe a good communication strategy can positively impact dissatisfied customers? If so, how might this be achieved? (adapted from (Pinto Lopes et al., 2021)
Concepts identified	Participants' quotes
Brands should actively acknowledge negative feedback	<p>"There is nothing more effective than demonstrating proximity and empathy by conveying the message: 'I hear you, I understand you, and I acknowledge your perspective.'"</p> <p>"I believe that dissatisfied customers must be acknowledged and addressed appropriately. Just as we appreciate satisfied customers, dissatisfied ones also deserve recognition and gratitude for their feedback."</p>
<u>How it can be achieved:</u>	<u>How it can be achieved:</u>
- Personalization and active listening.	"The strategy should be based on active listening: first understanding consumer feedback and reactions, then responding in a way that is as specific and personalised as possible."
- Respond to comments	"When a customer is genuinely seeking a solution, the brand must, without question, respond in 99% of cases."
- Offering solutions like vouchers or	"Provide exceptional customer service in response"

product
replacements.

"Some issues require a different approach. Not all negative feedback is mere 'hate.' Offering a voucher for a future purchase or replacing a product can help."

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this research we propose to strengthen the conceptual framework on negative engagement, providing insights on how it can represent positive potential on digital marketing strategies. Despite recently gaining some interest from researchers, it remains an underexplored matter in academic research (Cooper et al., 2019; Shankar et al., 2022). With negative engagement as a marketing tool being both subjective and a topic of practical evidence, it was essential to enhance the existing literature and provide a more comprehensive understanding of its implications for brand management, as well as its practical evidence (Polit & Beck, 2010).

The study results corroborate the existing literature, demonstrating that negative engagement presents an excellent opportunity as a marketing strategy. Despite TikTok still not being considered as a priority by brand representatives, it connects audience faster than other social media platforms, fosters creativity and facilitates campaign launches. TikTok also generates more interactions, not only due to its algorithm but also because of its tools that reproduce the content in the feed of thousands of users (Siles et al., 2024). This amplification impact confirms that controversial topics or content subject to criticism tend to provoke consumer curiosity about the brand involved, raising brand awareness (Lee et al., 2009; Park & Lee, 2009). The negative engagement on TikTok is also a result of a younger, trend-driven, impulsive and curious audience that raise content views, leading to this high engagement rates (Klug et al., 2021). Unlike Portuguese brands, international companies are already utilizing negative customer engagement as a marketing strategy producing content, launching campaigns, or promoting products. Knowing how to manage the escalation of negative digital situations effectively is essential and demands careful consideration as well as a strategic approach response.

User-generated content (positive or negative) also has a significant impact on brands on TikTok, increasing the necessity to monitor published content, as even an account with a low number of followers can achieve results comparable to major digital influencers, reinforcing the importance of balancing sponsorship strategies in marketing campaigns by combining micro-influencers with big celebrities (Moulard et al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2024). Although positive engagement is consistently encouraged by brands (Cooper et al., 2019; Shankar et al., 2022), this study reflects that negative engagement has more impact on TikTok, spreads much more rapidly – mostly through TikTok’s participatory culture - and is reported as more credible by audiences (Richins, 1984), confirming the “negativity bias” (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Interviewees pointed out that the most important aspect of UGC is how brands deal with its repercussions rather than trying to mitigate it.

Considering that the current literature on negative engagement on TikTok is still quite limited, there is no universal approach for managing it. Some brands have dedicated crisis management departments to address these situations, while others prefer not to intervene,

letting the situation unfold naturally. Brand representatives agreed that it is vital for consumers to receive a prompt response (Li et al., 2017; Salehi-Esfahani et al., 2023) to their feedback, since a delayed response can come out as brand indifference. By reinforcing brand values with a fast response, brands should also be transparent in their tone - even if the response is formal or informal – maintaining the message respectful and consistent with the brand's identity as well as creating empathy. Although actively dealing with negative engagement is not a widely embraced strategy, failing to respond to negative comments can lead to extremely adverse consequences (Bhandari & Rodgers, 2018; Gu & Ye, 2014). Dissatisfied customers must feel recognition.

The impact of negative engagement remains a significantly debated issue. Despite it's positive outcomes like brand awareness and high user interaction many brands prefer to adopt defensive and commodity strategies (Marcus & Goodman, 1991), choosing not to react to negative engagement, considering its risky impact on brand reputation, and an additional concern with an effective brand response strategy.

Overall, the research results highlight the necessity of deeply understanding negative engagement on TikTok, confirming that it is the key factor to reshape negative brand perception into positive outcomes. A brand's ability to effectively manage negative engagement determines whether it becomes an opportunity for increased visibility or a threat to brand reputation (Lambret & Barki, 2018; Yu et al., 2022).

Table 16 resumes the research findings on the in-depth interviews, comparing the referred research questions with the major opinion of the interviewed experts.

Table 16 - Research findings

Research Questions	Research Findings
RQ1: Negative engagement on TikTok generates high user interaction and increases brand awareness.	Confirmed. Negative content attracts visibility due to TikTok' algorithm, participatory features and audience characteristics, therefore generating more interaction and brand awareness.
RQ2: Negative engagement through UGC on TikTok increases brand perception more than positive engagement.	Confirmed. Negative engagement has more impact on TikTok and spreads more widely, increasing brand perception and is perceived as more authentic, generating more customer curiosity that lead to greater visibility.
RQ3: The strategic use of negative engagement on TikTok improves brand marketing outcomes when adopting an effective brand response.	Confirmed. When adopting an effective response, negative engagement can be transformed into positive outcomes – increase brand digital impact, intensify brand awareness, as well as offering more exposure to products or campaigns.

RQ4: The timeliness and tone of the brand's response shape the positive impact of negative engagement on customer perceptions of the brand.

Confirmed. A rapid response and a transparent and respectful tone are crucial in preventing the escalation of negative engagement to real negative impact and significantly improves consumer trust and empathy toward a brand.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This study provides empirical evidence that negative engagement positively influences brand perception and awareness, fosters customer interaction and, when managed effectively, can turn dissatisfied customers into brand advocates. When faced with negative engagement, brands come across both opportunities and challenges, so learning how to manage customer feedback outcomes and create effective and strategic responses to negative engagement is crucial in determining the result of the customer-brand interactions.

The study's main goal was to explore the potential of negative engagement on TikTok and see whether brands can strategically use it as an advantage. The findings indicate that negative engagement, when well handled, can serve as an incentive for brand awareness and consumer interaction, boosting brand identity and enhancing brand awareness while simultaneously involving the audience. Although negative engagement is often perceived as a threat, this research confirms its potential as a marketing strategy.

From a theoretical perspective, this study broadens the existing literature on negative engagement by presenting it not only as a challenge for brands but also as a strategic opportunity. The research contributes to the field of digital marketing by illustrating how TikTok's unique platform dynamics influence negative engagement perception among its audience, considering how brands behave in digital platforms.

From a practical perspective, the findings indicate that brands need to consider integrating controlled negative engagement strategies into their marketing strategy. Small and controlled controversies implemented by the brands can be effective when aligned with brand identity and positioning, starting healthy discussions and ensuring that the narrative remains managed can be the turning point to boost the effectiveness of marketing campaigns.

7. LIMITATIONS

This study encountered several limitations, the most significant was the sample size. It relied exclusively on insights from marketing representatives of brands across a few industries. As the study focused exclusively on negative engagement on TikTok, responses were often based on professionals' critical analysis rather than actual, real-world cases they had experienced. Also, expanding the research to include both brand perspectives and consumer reactions to negative engagement strategies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of negative engagement behaviour.

Considering the qualitative nature of the study, it is not possible to project the findings from the responses of the professionals in the interviews to the broader population of the present study, given its limitations.

During the interviews, the potential impact of this strategy on brand reputation emerged as a key concern. However, this aspect was not examined in detail in this study, despite its potential to be a decisive factor in determining the implementation of negative engagement in marketing strategies.

8. FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research should include consumer perspectives on the effectiveness and acceptance of negative engagement as a brand strategy to further explore its potential. Additionally, it is vital to collect and analyse data from campaigns that have experienced negative engagement, using a quantitative framework to assess its long-term impact on performance and reputation.

By expanding the scope of negative engagement research, future studies can develop more realistic and accurate strategies that enable brands to leverage negative consumer interactions effectively, further establishing negative engagement as a viable and impactful marketing approach tool.

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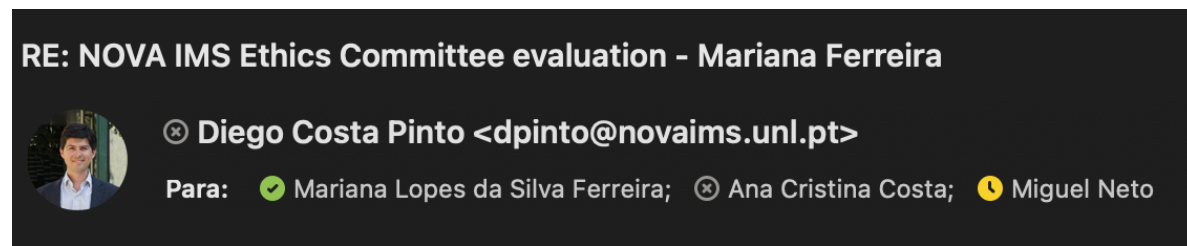
APPENDIX A

Interview questions made to brand representatives:

1. Which social media platforms does your company use daily? (adapted from Kang & Lou, 2022)
2. Please think about your experience of using TikTok. In what ways do you feel it differs from other social media platforms in terms of user interaction?
3. Which are the core areas in which TikTok can help boost your business? (adapted from Pinto Lopes et al., 2021)
4. Would you say that content perceived as negative, for example, content that is the subject of complaints or criticism, generates more interaction on TikTok? If you have noticed this, please give your reasons for thinking that this occurs.
5. Can you please provide an example of a situation in which negative engagement has resulted in greater visibility or awareness of a brand?
6. What is your view on the impact of user-generated content (UGC) on public perceptions of brands on TikTok?
7. From your perspective, do negative UGC posts (e.g. critical videos or comments) have a greater influence on brand perception than positive UGC? Please provide reasons for your answer.
8. Have you been involved in any marketing campaigns where negative user-generated content (UGC) has significantly impacted the brand's public image? How did you handle it? (Adapted from Delmonaco et al., 2024)
9. What are your views on the role of TikTok's participatory culture, as evidenced by features such as 'duets' or 'react', in amplifying the impact of negative user-generated content (UGC)?
10. Based on your experience, what potential does negative engagement might have? Also, what are its limitations? (adapted from Pinto Lopes et al., 2021)
11. Could you please provide an example where a brand has employed negative engagement as part of a marketing strategy to achieve positive outcomes?
12. How important is the timing of a brand's response to negative engagement? Do you believe that a delayed response can significantly impact customer perceptions?
13. Do you believe that the tone of a brand's response plays a role in resolving negative engagement? How so?
14. Do you believe a good communication strategy can positively impact dissatisfied customers? If so, how might this be achieved? (adapted from Pinto Lopes et al., 2021)

ANNEXES

Copy of the Ethics Committee approval by email:



Cara Mariana,

Obrigado pela clarificação. Pode submeter a tese. Obrigado!

Melhores cumprimentos | *Best regards*

Diego Costa Pinto

Director Marketing Analytics Lab | Associate Professor



NOVA Information Management School
Universidade Nova de Lisboa

Campus de Campolide, 1070-312 Lisboa
Tel. +351 213 828 610

www.novaims.unl.pt





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