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THE IMPACT OF THE IMAGE CRISIS ON CUSTOMER ATTITUDE TOWARDS BRANDS BASED ON CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Abstract: Image crises are inevitable in how brands and organizations operate. In the age of instant information and social media, companies face the difficult task of managing the rapid spread of information and opinions to maintain a desired image. This article explores how individual media reports affect brand image and customer attitudes towards the brand, especially for brands offering customer experience-based services. It includes an analysis of existing literature and an experiment, based on the Theory of Planned Behavior method, conducted on two well-established brands in the Polish market.

Keywords: Theory of Planned Behavior, customer experience, brand image

Introduction. The brand image is the outcome of the buyers' impressions, views, and expectations of the brand, so this image may be authentic or hypocritical and may be the result of one's own experiences or heard opinions [1]. In today's world of news and opinions, brand image is influenced by several impacts beyond company control. For that reason, dealing with crisis is crucial in brand management [2].

This paper aims to identify the influence of a crisis on brand image and, as a consequence, consumer behavior. It takes a brand as a combination of a tangible product, name, packaging, advertising, and accompanying distribution and pricing activities created by the manufacturer to evoke an intangible concept in customers' minds [3]. This intangibility of the brand concept influences the possibility of a brand's image evolving fluidly, depending on the actions taken and external circumstances. Thus, brand image is the set of meanings by which an entity is known, and people describe, remember, and relate [4]. Images are public stereotypes, and once a stereotype is formed, people act more under its influence than under the influence of what is behind it [5].

This study is empirically based on an experimental setting that tests the influence of negative brand information on brand image and consumer purchase behavior. It shows how negative information about a brand can influence consumers' confidence in that brand and their intentions to buy and share negative news about that brand.

Theoretical background. Image crises have many other sources, such as internal, external, dependent and independent of the company, and typical and atypical. They also have different effects. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) explains potential customers' reactions to critical events. An individual's chance of engaging in an activity increases as their behavioral intention in a particular event increases. TPB assumes the existence of three determinants of intention: attitude towards behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control [6]. These determine consumer behavior towards brands. While intention makes it possible to predict behavior, it does not allow us to understand the underlying motivational mechanism. It is, therefore, necessary to clarify the behavior itself and the intention based on which it is predicted.

Based on TPB, negative brand information might influence the brand image and consumer purchase behavior. That behavior has two negative facets: decreased buying intention and increased intentions to share negative information. That is reflected in the following hypotheses:

H1: The release of damaging information negatively affects brand trust

H2: The provision of information likely to cause a crisis negatively affects purchasing intention

H3: Providing information likely to cause a crisis has a positive impact on buyer propensity to share negative information

Research. Two well-known Polish brands were selected to verify the hypotheses: Żabka (a country-wide chain of +10000 convenience stores) and Lech Poznań (one of Poland's most reputable football clubs). The study participants were students of three Poznań universities, aged 18-30, living in Poznań daily, and familiar with the brands under analysis. Participants were randomly selected for the control and experimental groups.

The control group received a press release concerning the subject under analysis with neutral overtones. In contrast, the experimental group received a prepared press release with negative overtones relating to the brand under analysis, which did not strike at the critical areas of the brand's activity. In the case of the Żabka brand, it was information on the faulty operation of the loyalty program in the mobile app, which was unfair to customers. In the case of Lech Poznań, it was information on low-quality catering services resulting in the risk of food poisoning.

After reading that news, participants were asked to answer questions about their confidence in the brand (Q1) and their intentions to buy (Q2) and share the news about the brand (Q3) using a 7-point Likert scale (1 - a most negative, seven most positive statement). That procedure followed what is commonly applied in experimental studies based on TPB in psychology [7] and other disciplines [8].

In the study for the Żabka brand, the experimental group (E_Ż) and the control group (C_Ż) consisted of 33 people each. For the Lech Poznań brand, the experimental group (E_L) and the control group (C_L) had 32 people each.

A statistical analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics. The homogeneity of variance was checked using Levene's and T-test for independent samples. For each hypothesis tested, the significance of Levene's test took a value >0.005 , which indicates the homogeneity of the variance and the feasibility of the T-test. The one-sided T-test proved statistically significant differences at $p < 0.05$, marked in bold. The following results were achieved:

For the Żabka brand:

Q1: $av(E_{\dot{Z}}) = \mathbf{2,91}$; $av(C_{\dot{Z}}) = \mathbf{4,33}$;

Q2: $av(E_{\dot{Z}}) = \mathbf{3,48}$; $av(C_{\dot{Z}}) = \mathbf{4,30}$;

Q3: $av(E_{\dot{Z}}) = \mathbf{3,42}$; $av(C_{\dot{Z}}) = \mathbf{1,91}$.

For the Lech Poznań brand:

Q1: $av(E_L) = \mathbf{3,16}$; $av(C_L) = \mathbf{4,23}$;

Q2: $av(E_L) = \mathbf{3,65}$; $av(C_L) = \mathbf{4,29}$;

Q3: $av(E_L) = \mathbf{3,32}$; $av(C_L) = \mathbf{2,35}$

Based on the two cases analyzed, we can confirm that: (H1) providing information that could trigger a crisis negatively affects brand trust; (H2) the provision of information likely to cause a crisis negatively affects purchasing behavior as measured by purchase intention. It should be noted that H3 was confirmed only by the experiment conducted for the Żabka brand so we cannot fully confirm that (H3) providing information likely to cause a crisis has a positive impact on purchasing behavior as measured by the propensity to share negative information.

Discussion and conclusions. The results indicate a trend concerning the influence of brand image crisis on consumer behavior. Irrespective of the subject analyzed, the actual change in consumer attitudes towards brands - although statistically significant - was not drastic. This situation may be due to several reasons. Firstly, it should be remembered that the study concerned large entities that are recognizable in the market. Their reputation and the trust customers place in them result from many years of activities undertaken in the business, operational, and image fields. Reputations and images built up over the years naturally have a higher resilience to single crises, as studies show, especially when the company had been performing well in the past [9], or - as in the case of the survey undertaken - setbacks are not overly spectacular.

This study fabricated information about food poisoning that happened to one person after eating a hot dog at the Lech stadium. Catering activities on match days are only a side issue for

the club; moreover, an external company is responsible for the catering kiosks at Lech's stadium. However, these issues still need to change the fact that; according to the survey, the public's trust in the Lech brand would decrease if a similar situation occurred. It would not matter if Lech were not directly to blame for the problem. It is also essential to notice that a famous person spreads some information, which, according to studies, is likely to improve its scope and impact on people's attitudes [10]. On the other hand, the crisis created by the Żabka study was more drastic than in the case of Lech, as it concerned the suspicion of deliberately depriving customers of privileges due to them. Respondents showed a statistically more significant decrease in trust in Żabka than in Lech and a statistically significant difference in willingness to share information about the crisis compared to neutral information.

The results indicate the need to manage relevant image crises for brands. Although image crises are inevitable in the life cycle of a brand, care should be taken to ensure that they do not affect critical areas of the company's business, as it is their dysfunctions that naturally lead to a more significant loss of customer confidence and a lowering of their willingness to interact with the brand. As a rule, image crises affect how a brand is perceived in customers' eyes [11]. Therefore, in the day-to-day, even if only routine, activities of the company, utmost importance should be given to taking care of a broad spectrum of aspects that influence the company image. Even with due diligence, minor image crises may be unavoidable, and the scale of the crisis in the eyes of the public often exceeds the actual severity of the problem.

Audiences are more likely to share information about image slip-ups than other brand news, so in the age of instant information flow on the Internet, attempts should be made to face and control the crisis [12]. Otherwise, the unwanted information will spread to the public anyway, and the company will have no control over it. It is, therefore, necessary to proactively create messages and media coverage to contain the information already spreading and thus stem the fledgling crisis [13].

Concerning the study's results, it is worth remembering that its limitations mainly stem from the experimental design. We tested reactions to negative news about two well-known brands, so it is hard to predict how consumers would react in case of less known brands. We also tested a short-term, declarative reaction that should not be interpreted in the long-term perspective of consumer reactions.

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