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STRATEGIC BRAND MANAGEMENT:  
MASTER PAPERS

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STRATEGIC BRAND MANAGEMENT

MASTER PAPERS

Seventh Edition

Student Papers

2021  
September - October

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# Managing brand crisis caused by unfounded rumors on social media: effective corporate communication strategies and time frame applications

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** To examine which communication strategy is effective and should be adopted when organizations face brand crises generated by the spread of unfounded rumors on social media.

**Methodology:** This study was based on secondary data, based on the comparison of different case studies.

**Findings:** Since the spread of unfounded rumors through social media represents a new threat and can lead to brand crisis, we recommend companies to face the problem following a three-step approach.

**Originality/Value:** While certain crises could be avoided by monitoring internal and external information from the managerial perspective, crises generated by the spread of unfounded rumors on social media most of the time are unpredictable. Nevertheless, they can be identified in their early stages.

Therefore, to contribute to the expansion of academic knowledge, this paper considers three different fields of study: brand management, crisis management, and social media communication theories have been compared to expand the concept of brand crisis management.

**Keywords:** Crisis management, brand reputation, unfounded rumors, social media.

**Paper type:** Research paper.

## 1. Introduction

Literature about crisis management usually deals with effectively managing crises that can damage your corporate reputation (Coombs, 2007; Dawar & Lei, 2009; Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Greyser, 2009).

In this regard, a series of multiple factors that can lead to a brand crisis have been previously categorized by Greyser (2009).

But what if the crisis is caused by rumors?

As brand rumors often occur unexpectedly and cannot be controlled by the organization, they can cause substantial damage to a brand, including loss of reputation, reduced sales, damaged corporate credibility, and lower stock

prices (DiFonzo and Bordia, 2007; Kimmel and Audrain-Pontevia, 2010).

The brand rumor resembles a natural disaster because it is uncontrollable and can have an enormous negative influence if the response of the affected company is inefficient or inappropriate (Coombs, 2007).

Considering the fact that social media are facilitating the rapid spread of misinformation that can distort events and tarnish an organization's image (Gonzalez-Herrero and Smith, 2010; Liu et al., 2011), it is worthwhile to examine how consumers respond to a brand rumor circulated via social media, without certainty as to facts.

After an in-depth consultation of previous literature, we found out that a few studies have been dedicated to brand rumors and how companies should act during these situations. Many of them mainly focused on a variety of response strategies in terms of brand communication.

For example, Coombs (2007) found that the *denial* and the *attack the accuser* strategies seemed to be the most effective in a brand rumor situation. Other studies found that *denial* is not enough to recover a tarnished brand reputation and highlighted the need to disassociate the rumor from the targeted brand (Kimmel, 2004; Braun-LaTour et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is to provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, with a significant emphasis on the consequences caused by the spread of false rumors on social media and how companies who have already been through this situation have dealt with the problem, analyzing the different communication strategies applied.

Therefore, in this paper, we will consider five practical case studies and connect them to findings from previous literature.

Furthermore, managerial implications on how to tackle false rumors are discussed.

On a practical level, our results offer brand crisis managers valuable guidance in choosing the most effective response strategies in a brand rumor context.

On a theoretical level, understanding different situational factors that affect consumers' evaluation of a brand, following a brand rumor and the response strategy adopted by the company, enriches brand management literature.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Brand image

Brand image has become a well-established

concept; thus, multiple statements defining the term and its components already exist.

For example, Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) classify these definitions into five categories, including broad definitions and definitions focusing on symbols, meaning or message, personification, and cognitive or psychological elements.

Early definitions like Newman (1957) describe a brand image as "*everything people associate with the brand*" (p. 101) to give a more general opinion about the concept.

According to Kotler (2001), brand image is defined as "*the set of beliefs, ideas and impressions that a person holds regarding an object*" (p. 273).

On the other hand, Pohlman and Mudd (1973) delineate brand image as a concept that offers the owner of a product an additional symbolic benefit in addition to the actual use. According to the authors, this prestigious symbol improves the product's worth in the eyes of owners and other persons.

Hatch and Schultz (2001) describe an image as the external view or impression various Stakeholders, including customers, have about the brand.

Furthermore, they mention that the vision, culture, and image need to be aligned to avoid gaps between the interaction of each factor.

In the context of the aim of this work, one statement seems to be of particular relevance.

In this respect, Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) represent the concept of brand image with the following words "*...the perception of reality is more important than reality itself is a theme which underlies most conceptualizations of brand image.*" (p. 111).

Furthermore, the authors argue that a brand image develops neither from physical nor functional product attributes but from marketing communication and the individual perception of the recipient (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990).

Building on this idea, Melin (2002) adds that a positive and strong brand image influences perception and significantly impacts consumers' preferences regarding brands and products.

In this regard, the call to boycott Nestle's products based on claims that their products harmed babies was unsuccessful because its good image protected Nestle. Indeed, it was unthinkable for the public that Nestle could be involved in something like this (Kapferer 2004).

Nonetheless, the majority of authors seem to agree on the definition of brand image as the perception of a brand in the mind of the customers (Urde, 2013; Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990).

Summarizing all the different definitions, it is clear how brand image influences the perception of a brand massively.

## *2.2. Brand reputation*

Brand reputation is one of the elements constituting the brand assets in terms of sources that influence the brand.

More specifically, Wartick (1992) defines brand reputation as an aggregate evaluation by stakeholders, including consumers, and reflects how well an organization is satisfying stakeholders' expectations after considering the organization's past behaviors.

In addition, Kapferer (2012) focuses on the series of attributes, benefits, competence, and know-how perceived by the consumer when buying a particular brand product and can most likely influence his choice.

Therefore, it is clear how the main indicators referring to the brand's controllable variables should be constantly monitored and analyzed for business management (Biesdorf et al., 2013).

This statement is highly relevant and has to be taken into consideration when it comes to

defining the parameters of the crisis, such as those referring to the competitive scenario, to the price elasticity, to the distribution and quality of the product on display, and to the evaluation of current advertising campaigns (Cleeren et al., 2013; Kalaignanam et al., 2013).

Therefore, brand and corporate reputation must be monitored.

Nowadays, one of the most effective ways to do so requires the use of digital research tools. Indeed, they can signal the beginning of movements outside the standards of normality, thus enabling anticipation to a crisis.

## *2.3. Brand crisis management and communication*

Crisis is a non-routine, unexpected, and sudden event that creates uncertainties, threatens organizations' priority objectives, and may cause financial losses and erode corporate reputations (Cleeren, Heerde, & Dekimpe, 2013; Coombs, 2007; Siomkos et al., 2010).

Organizations' attitudes facing a crisis directly influence society's perceptions and to whom it attributes responsibility (Siomkos et al., 2010). As stated, it is clear that sometimes routine procedures could not be enough to overcome these events, typically resulting in negative publicity, which may harm corporate image and stakeholders physically, financially, or emotionally (Coombs, 2007; K. Kim et al., 2017).

In this regard, it has been demonstrated how corporate brand crises can be caused by one or multiple factors that can be considered internal to the organization.

These factors have been categorized by Greyser (2009) considering the following aspects:

- *Product failure*
- *Social responsibility gap*

- *Corporate misbehavior*
- *Executive misbehavior*
- *Poor business results*
- *Spokesperson misbehavior*
- *Death of symbol of a company*
- *Loss of public support*
- *Controversial ownership*

In this regard, Greyser (2009) also states that some of these crises became life-threatening to the organizations involved, as they affected the *brand essence*, which can be defined as the set of distinctive attributes and/or characteristics most closely associated with the brand's meaning and success.

Therefore, when it comes to brand crisis management, organizations should focus their analysis on four primary areas to highlight the most relevant issues that can threaten their brand reputation (Greyser, 2009).

These are the following:

- *The brand elements* - Which brand element is the crisis affecting (brand strength/weaknesses, brand essence, brand's marketplace)?
- *Crisis management* – How serious is the situation? Is it affecting many people?
- *The company initiatives* – In which way are we going to face the crisis?
- *The results* – Is that being effective?

Some studies also found that, following a brand crisis, brand equity can play either a positive role, referred to as buffering (Hess et al., 2003; Oliveria-Castro et al., 2008), or a negative part, referred to as amplifying (Aaker et al., 2004; Gregoire and Fisher, 2008).

Nonetheless, when it comes to reacting to a crisis caused by brand rumors, it is not relevant whether the company has high brand equity or

not, a crisis communication response strategy urgently needs to be applied in every case.

In this respect, previous studies have explored a variety of response strategies to brand rumors.

In particular, Choi & Seo (2021), suggest two different approaches:

- *Denial approach.* If a rumor is not related to alleged wrongdoing by the company, the company should deny the rumor immediately (Campion-Vincent, 2017). This denial strategy relies on basic persuasion: it attempts to contradict the rumor by stating that it is not true (Tybout et al., 1981). A lack of response – silence – on the part of the company tends to generate public speculation about the rumor's plausibility and does nothing to diminish belief in it, both of which will eventually negatively affect the company's reputation (Aditya, 2014);
- *Proactive approach.* More specifically, Aditya (2014) found that a company's denial of a brand rumor was insufficient to eliminate the rumor completely, and did not help the company regain lost business, especially in the case of well-known brands. As highlighted in earlier studies, brand rumors involving companies with high brand equity are more likely to capture the public imagination and become strongly connected with the brand itself. Thus, for high brand equity brands, simple denial may not be enough to distance them from negative association with the rumor.

Therefore, during a storm caused by rumors, customers need to regain trust towards the brand.

The most effective way to express authenticity is through the organization's communication channels.

Therefore, we can state that most of the literature authors agree on how an effective communication strategy is crucial when reacting to a brand crisis.

Nevertheless, it is still unclear which strategy is best to adopt when unfounded rumors cause a brand crisis.

#### 2.4. Unfounded rumors on social media

Social media has become a significant part of numerous consumers' daily lives.

In 2020, over 3.6 billion people were using social media worldwide, and the average time spent amounted to 145 minutes per day (Statista 2020).

Although many definitions for social media already exist in the literature, in this paper, social media can be broadly defined as "*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and allow the creation and exchange of user generated content*" (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

Nowadays, the most popular social media worldwide are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, and TikTok (Statista, 2021).

As also consumer brands want to benefit from this intense usage, almost all of them are present on social media, and social media is increasingly emerging as one of the essential parts of the overall digital strategy.

The forms of brand presence on social media are diverse and include paid display advertising, published branded content, and branded engagement opportunities for

consumer participation (Ashley and Tuten, 2015).

A key topic concerning strengthening one's brand presence is brand communication in social media.

In this specific case, brand communication can be defined as a component of brand-related communication that is distributed with the help of social media and "*enables internet users to access, share, engage with, add to, and co-create*" (Alhabash, Mundel, and Hussain 2017).

In this context, it is clear how rumors, which have always been an issue for companies, represent a significant threat.

Indeed, nowadays, they can spread through social media channels faster than ever before and sustainably damage the brand.

The Cambridge Dictionary (2021) defines the term briefly and describes rumors as "*an unofficial interesting story or piece of news that might be true or invented, and quickly spreads from person to person*".

Furthermore, DiFonzo (2008) defines two different types of rumors: they may either aim to pursue a particular goal or represent a type of propaganda.

Rumors never refer to the past and can be updated to sound relevant again (Kapferer, 2004).

The author continues on how rumors often start through word-of-mouth and gain strength when they reach several media.

In this respect, he defines a *rumor* as a multidimensional concept, which contains the following four facets:

- Rumors develop before all other noises and need a certain level of attention to be noticed;
- Rumors process through time and media;
- Rumors contain information that any legitimate source has not officially proved;

- Rumors contain yet unknown secrets or information.

Pal et al. (2017) define three different response message types users might post during the development of a rumor.

The first message type supports the rumor by adding personal and emotional involvement of the recipient to the rumor, which are significant factors to spread successfully (DiFonzo 2008).

The second type is about denying the rumor by posting counter-rumors, including words like *false* or *hoax*. Counter-rumors are especially effective when they are based upon authentic sources and facts (McGreadie et al., 2015). Finally, the last type of reaction questions the rumor and asks for more information to reduce the uncertainty (Pal et al., 2017).

According to Kapferer (2004), rumors need to reach a certain level of attention to be noticed. Therefore, it is clear how once the rumor is spread, the clock is ticking.

In this regard, avoiding and diagnosing rumors before they grow is vital.

The sources of how people get their information and knowledge have changed.

For example, 65% of U.S. adults get their news from search engines like Google and 53% from social media (Shearer, 2021).

Furthermore, a survey detected that traditional media and search engines are the most trusted sources, while social media was considered the least trustworthy platform (Watson, 2021). However, more than 80% trust recommendations of friends and family, meanwhile two-thirds consider online consumer opinions and brand-managed channels as a trusted platform (Nielsen, 2015). In general, there is a downward trend in trustworthiness to which rumors, who have wrongly believed, contributed.

A survey regarding the share of adults who have wrongly believed in unfounded rumors

showed that 58% of the surveyed South Koreans had been affected by misinformation (Watson, 2018).

After considering these data, it is clear how rumors can be threatening to brands in today's digitalized world.

While on the one hand, this dissemination of brand content via social media has provided brands, marketers with helpful tools to better engage with consumers, it also poses new challenges.

These challenges will be explained more in-depth in the following section.

### *2.5. Particular challenges with rumors in social media*

Although the easy and ubiquitous exchange of information benefits brand marketers, the underlying mechanisms can also lead to severe problems for brands.

Not only are brand marketers free to publish any content they deem appropriate and justified, but so are all other social media users. Since the published content is not subject to extensive editorial review, this feature makes it easier to transmit unfounded rumors and fake news about brands (Chen & Cheng, 2020). Traditionally, rumors and fake news were mainly spread by means of word-of-mouth and printed media.

However, the widespread use of the Internet and social media has resulted in the consequence that there is now a simple way to disseminate them on a large scale (Burkhardt, 2017).

This situation is even aggravated by the role of the algorithm on social media.

Indeed, it allows accounts to address like-minded individuals based on their user behavior and, thus, to spread rumors and fake news that matches their own social environment and beliefs (Chen & Cheng, 2020).

A big problem here is that the original information source becomes irrelevant in many cases and that the unverified information gets then shared by numerous other sources. Since the algorithm also makes posts with high popularity more prominent, the unproven information is increasingly distributed and falsely perceived as correct by the recipients (Lokot and Diakopoulos, 2016).

If brands are affected by such rumors and fake news, this can lead to customers losing trust in them and to reputation being damaged.

## 2.6. Crisis response strategies

Once crisis managers identify which channels to monitor during a crisis, they must decide which response strategy to adopt.

Existing crisis management literature can be applied in our study.

Therefore, we took into account situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) by Coombs (2007) as the most relevant crisis management theory outlining options for response strategies.

In this regard, we discuss only SCCT's crisis response strategies, which are divided into four categories: deny, diminish, rebuild, and reinforce (Coombs 2007; Heath & Coombs 2006).

SCCT's *deny* response option includes three strategies: attack the accuser, denial, and scapegoat (Heath & Coombs, 2006).

Organizations attack the accuser to confront the person or group that claims a crisis exists. Denial occurs when organizations state that a crisis does not exist while scapegoating is used when organizations state that someone else is responsible for the crisis.

SCCT recommends that organizations use denial strategies to respond to rumors and unwarranted challenges (Coombs 2007).

SCCT's *diminish* response option includes two strategies: excuse and justification (Heath & Coombs, 2006).

Organizations excuse by providing an explanation for the crisis that limits the organizations' responsibility, while justification happens when organizations explain why the crisis occurred.

SCCT recommends that organizations use diminishment strategies for two crisis situations: (a) accident crises when there is no crisis history and no unfavorable prior reputation and (b) victim crisis when there is a crisis history and or unfavorable prior reputation (Coombs, 2007).

SCCT's *rebuild* response option includes two strategies: compensation and apology. Compensation occurs when organizations financially support crisis victims, while an apology is used when organizations express regret for the crisis.

SCCT recommends that organizations use rebuilding strategies for any preventable crisis (Coombs, 2007).

Finally, SCCT's *reinforce* response is supplemental and must be used with at least one of the other response options (Heath & Coombs, 2006).

This option includes three strategies: bolstering, ingratiation, and victimage (Coombs, 2007; Heath & Coombs, 2006). Bolstering occurs when organizations highlight past good deeds. Ingratiation is used when organizations praise stakeholders, while victimage occurs when organizations state that they are victims of the crisis.

## 3. Methodology

This paper is based on a qualitative research approach, which includes an extensive literature review in the research area.

The existing literature is then linked to five different case studies, using in particular an adjusted version of the model proposed by Coombs (2007) to understand the actions of the companies in each case study.

Our literature review aims to enlarge the focus of research in this domain by considering the most critical contributions from previous works.

Besides the topics of brand image, brand reputation, and brand crisis management, the main focus of this study was the phenomenon of unfounded rumors and the extent to which social media can exacerbate the associated problems for brands.

Subsequently, it was also examined how brands can overcome these problems.

The literature review revealed which areas require additional investigation and where there is currently still a gap in the existing literature.

On the one hand, this gap lies in the fact that unfounded rumors are still not fully incorporated into brand crisis management theories and frameworks, despite the high risk that social media poses for their spread; on the other hand, there is little research in the literature to date on

Within our qualitative research methodology, we used case studies to explore the phenomenon of how unfounded rumors in social media affected brands and how they responded.

To gather substantial information on the case studies, we focused on secondary textual data in order to investigate these case studies in their naturally occurring context while considering this context to reveal multiple facets of the underlying phenomenon.

The structure of the case studies is designed in such a way that we first present the initial situation and then describe the measures and reactions of the affected brands.

The case studies studied were found through online research.

The main focus for selecting the case studies was to show how easily unfounded rumors can influence the brand image and reputation of companies on a large scale.

To illustrate our case studies, we have determined to answer the following questions: what was the unfounded rumor about, and what was it addressing? How did the rumor spread in social media, and what range did it achieve? How did the company respond to the rumor, and what measures were taken by the company?

The case studies presented show both appropriate and inappropriate responses to the crises generated after spreading brand rumors on social media.

Furthermore, only globally known companies were examined as examples to demonstrate that basically any company can be impacted by such a crisis.

After introducing the case studies, we analyzed them in the discussion part of this paper to highlight similarities and differences in the response strategies put in place by the companies concerned.

This analysis was mainly based on the third part of the SCCT model proposed by Coombs (2007), which considers responsive strategies to face brand rumor crises.

In our case, the model has been applied considering the context of social media.

Founded on this analysis, we finally developed managerial implications in our discussion for brands on dealing with unfounded rumors in social media.

In this respect, we can state the overall goal of this research is to emphasize two relevant aspects: on the one hand, the necessity to embed unfounded rumors in social media as an integral part of brand crisis management and, on the other hand, how companies can proceed to protect their brand reputation and brand

image when affected by the spread of unfounded rumors on social media.

## 4. Case studies

### 4.1. *The Corona Extra Case*

The following case study focuses on one of the most valuable beer brands in the world, Corona Extra, and their crisis management regarding unfounded rumors.

Since 2013, the company has been part of Anheuser-Busch InBev SA/NV group, the world's most giant multinational drink and brewing company owning global brands including Budweiser and Stella Artois (Corona, 2021).

The Mexican beer company began domestic distribution in 1925 and developed to be the number one beer import in the U.S. (Conway, 2019).

The iconic blue and yellow beer brand is not merely a beer but rather a relaxing philosophy of living, encouraging beer drinkers to enjoy the beach, sun, the connection between people, and self-expression (Corona, 2021).

Corona had been a victim of several unfounded rumors, which caused multiple crises in the past.

In this regard, one of the most relevant was related to rumors about the brand for its beer to contain human urine.

After being introduced to the U.S. market in 1979, the beer became an immediate hit, the most imported beer, and it seemed that nothing could stop the rise of Corona.

As early as 1986, Corona dominated around half of the American beer market. Unexpectedly, sales dropped to 80% in some U.S. regions, and several stores stopped selling the product entirely (Smallwood, 2019).

The trigger for this negative development was a rumor that Corona beer contained human urine.

The rumor, whispered by rival beer companies, that Mexican workers in the brewery urinated in the beer bottles was rapidly spread. Therefore, the yellow pale in the clear bottle was the perfect factor to support this claim (Smallwood, 2019).

To refute the assertion, Corona's importer investigated the topic, and later on, a Nevada-based distributor of Heineken was sued for spreading the rumors.

In addition, the company invested more than one million dollars on ads, informing the public and consumers that the bizarre rumor was unfounded, and entered talk shows to clarify the misinformation (Smallwood, 2019). The company tried to settle the rumor with facts and informative corrections.

However, although the rumor turned out to be untrue, Corona experienced financial and economic harm and damage to the brand image, which took years for the company to recover and slowed down conquering the US Market (Smallwood, 2019).

In this respect, Corona still gets associated with the term *Mexican Piss Water* as a disparaging name and pops up on the first page of Google search results (Zapata, 2016).

### 4.2. *The Metro Bank Case*

Based in the United Kingdom, Metro Bank experienced the unpredictability and fast spreading of unfounded rumors in 2019.

The news is typically shared through public feeds, posts, hashtags, or personal connections on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram.

The content is usually easily accessible for the general public and can also be viewed without an account. Thus, rumors can be easily detected.

Nevertheless, other channels such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and similar are private

and encrypted messengers, and it is impossible to detect or measure the range of possible rumors spread (Edwards, 2019).

The number of hashtags, posts, tweets, and search results can give a reference point of how widespread news is, but getting a precise indicator for messengers in a short amount of time is nearly impossible.

This social media structure makes it even more difficult for a brand to react.

On a Saturday morning, a false rumor started spreading on WhatsApp: the chain message, disguised as a BBC article and forwarded multiple times, contained the news that Metro Bank was facing financial issues and going insolvent (Katwala, 2019).

Furthermore, people had explicit instructions to withdraw and empty their lockers to keep their belongings and money safe (Edwards, 2019). People began to panic after reading the WhatsApp message.

Therefore, several bank branches were flooded with dozens of people demanding their money and belongings back a couple of hours later.

In addition to the disturbance at the physical representation, Metro Bank's stock dropped 9% (Edwards, 2019).

The financial and reputational damage the brand has experienced cannot be denied.

As a response, a Metro Bank spokesperson tried to deny the rumor, stating the company was aware of what was happening and that the bank was profitable, without mentioning any data (Katwala, 2019). They did not act with a certain plan, and it was unclear if they were further investigating the source of the rumor.

#### *4.3. The KFC Case*

KFC is an American fast-food restaurant chain that specializes in fried chicken. On June 11, 2015, an American Facebook user posted a photograph on the social media platform

showing a deep-fried rat found in a box of his KFC meal (Pal et al., 2017).

The photo was posted followed by a comment stating: *"Don't eat fast food!!! I went to KFC yesterday and bought 3 pieces of chicken tender. As I bit into that I noticed that it was very hard and rubbery which made me look at it. As I looked down at that I noticed that it was in the shape of a rat with a tail. It sent deep chills throughout my whole body! I've been feeling weird ever since. I bought this in Compton, CA on Wilmington and 120th. I've never seen chicken like this before it is sick!!!"*

The photo and the message went viral after the user posted it, and it became one of the most trending topics on Facebook at that time as more than 100,000 people shared the post (Willett-Wei, 2015).

Following the event, KFC immediately responded to the allegations by sending out pictures that showed how the fried chicken is cooked, stating that the original photo of the Facebook user clearly showed white meat and thus cannot be a rat (Bolton, 2015). Furthermore, KFC manager wanted the publicly known Facebook user to come back to the restaurant with the rat-shaped product so that it could be further investigated.

A third-party independent lab conducted a DNA test, and it was confirmed that the product was chicken.

As a result, KFC wanted the Facebook user not only to stop spreading false rumors but also to apologize.

Finally, informed by the result of the DNA test released at different news and social media websites, KFC and other Facebook users started to spread counter-rumor messages (Pal et al., 2017).

#### *4.4. The Olive Garden Case*

Olive Garden is an American restaurant chain specializing in Italian-American cuisine.

During Trump's reelection campaign in 2019, the hashtag #BoycottOliveGarden became trending on Twitter due to unverified information that the company is funding his reelection in 2020 (Reuters, 2020).

The rumor gained popularity, especially when a seemingly trustworthy source, a California college professor, mentioned it in a tweet (Daniel, 2019).

Her message commented ironically: "It would be terrible if you shared this and Olive Garden lost business."

Within 48 hours, her message was retweeted more than 250,000 times, including food blogger Chrissy Teigen, who has 11.5 million followers.

The social media and P.R. team of Olive Garden quickly went into action and responded to dozens of the users sharing the hashtag stating, "We don't know where this information came from, but it is incorrect. Our company does not donate to presidential candidates." (Carman, 2019).

Furthermore, they referred to OpenSecrets.org, the Center for Responsive Politics database that tracks campaign contributions, to prove that Olive Garden has not made donations for the 2020 campaign.

Rich Jeffers, a spokesman for Olive Garden, published in a statement an excerpt of the top of the OpenSecrets.org page, which declares: "The organization itself did not donate, rather the money came from the organization's PACs, their individual members or employees or owners, and those individuals' immediate family members." (O'Kane, 2019).

#### *4.5. The Kurkure Case*

Kurkure, part of PepsiCo, is a coated potato chips product offered in India and is especially popular amongst children.

The product was faced with the claim that it contains plastic and is hazardous for health.

The consumers burned the chips, creating a black mass and claiming that it was plastic (Vaas, 2018). Videos made of this process were shared on social media platforms and spread widely. Although this rumor and incident did not produce any evidence, many consumers have questioned the product (Vaas, 2018)

To counter this rumor, PepsiCo used different activities. In 2017, PepsiCo invited several bloggers and influencers to its manufacturing plants to show that they have nothing to hide. This transparent process was not their only activity (Kurkure, n.d.).

Furthermore, they educated people about the black mass after the burning process.

The black mass does not arise because the product contains plastic but rather starch and fats (Kurkure, n.d.).

In addition, PepsiCo has taken its brand size and removed thousands of posts from social media platforms by using legal means. Users and social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, were sued because they supported the circulation of false statements damaging the company (Christopher, 2018).

Using several campaigns, PepsiCo was able to contain the widespread rumor and the damage.

## **5. Discussion**

As there is still a lack of information regarding suitable measures for handling brand reputation crises caused by unfounded rumors on social media in the existing literature, it is useful to take into consideration theories that have already dealt with similar problems in the past.

Therefore, in order to consider the best way to respond to unfounded rumors we took into account the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) framework proposed by

Coombs (2007), and then tried to adapt it to the particular context of social media.

Based on this model, we will consider two interesting aspects as outcomes, and then present them in more detail below.

These are: monitoring rumors relevant to an organization's reputation and responding strategies.

In this regard, we will apply this framework to the broader world of social media.

### 5.1. Monitoring rumors spreading on social media channels

Before managers can deal with issues that may lead to brand crises, they first have to identify which social media are the most relevant in terms of public awareness.

Identifying and prioritizing such channels is crucial as brands cannot control all the events happening on their social media.

In this regard, we can consider three popular types of measurement: outputs, outtakes, and outcomes (Gillin, 2008).

Outputs measure how many people pay attention to a particular channel. Outtakes, in

turn, measure the social capital and social networking associated with each social media channel. Finally, outcomes measure how social media affects people's behaviors and relationships.

### 5.2. Strategies to respond to external influencing rumors on social media

Once brand managers have identified influential external rumors happening on their social media, they should routinely monitor their channels using the discussed metrics.

Therefore, they must decide which approach to keep while adopting the responding strategy.

In general, brand managers can apply different response methods depending on the phase of the crisis situation.

In this regard, we considered the rumor's duration over different time frames, analyzing three different stages: pre-rumor, current, and post-rumor.

Brand managers can use the following model to plan actions to effectively prepare for the impending crisis caused by unfounded rumors (Figure 1).



Figure 1: responsive strategies according to different time frame

### ***Pre - rumor stage: Generation and Development of the rumor***

During this phase we recommend to:

- *Create a strong brand image*

To reduce the damage a brand reputation may encounter through a rumor; it is significant to have a strong brand image;

- *Threshold Management*

According to Farrell (2019), leader of one of the world's top corporate communications agencies, thresholds are indispensable to manage a brand through upcoming crises because they "... allow brands to respond quickly because there is no debate internally about whether you should or not..." (Farrell, 2019). Metro Bank did not seem to be prepared for the situation and accordingly acted in an uncoordinated manner;

- *Analyze*

In order to take the proper steps against rumors, it is crucial to analyze whether the rumor addresses the essence of the brand and thus represents a life-threatening challenge (Greyser 2009). Trying too hard to prove innocence can lead to people believing the rumor and accusing the company (Kapferer, 2004). Therefore, understanding the content and set a benchmark when the rumor reaches a crisis level is vital.

Alert systems which analyze and measure social media traffic and variables, including the number of likes, tweets, and hashtags, can be used to define the seriousness of a rumor (Daniels, 2019).

In this regard, Metro Bank could not detect the rumor on WhatsApp and had to experience complex consequences.

### ***Current stage: Dealing with communication***

Olive Garden's example shows that acting immediately is highly relevant.

After analyzing the previous case studies, we can state what underline few key points:

- *Deny*

Facing unfounded rumors with proven data is one of the most efficient ways to deny them. KFC and Olive Garden used information based on facts proven by verified institutions to counter the rumor.

The result of this action confirms the statement of McCreadie et al. (2015) that counter-rumors are most effective when they are based on verified facts.

In contrast to these positive examples, Corona Extra has not disproved the allegation that its beer contained human urine with proven facts;

- *Communicate facts*

Spread the results on all social media channels as soon as data is available.

The use of all available social media channels is vital to reach a broad audience with their counter.

Furthermore, they addressed the author to prove his rumor on a personal level.

Metro Bank suffered when the rumor was linked with personal instruction, and this adds to the first message types of rumors.

The authors try to spread the rumor widely by involving the recipients on a personal and emotional level;

- *Legal actions*

Take legal actions if the brand identifies the source.

The example of PepsiCo shows that the use of legal measures can prevent the spread of rumors.

Nevertheless, this also depends on the size of the brand concerned;

- *Counter-rumors*

PepsiCo was able to contain and eliminate the rumor through its transparent and authentic appearance. Inviting bloggers and other influential players to investigate the rumor's origin shows that the company has nothing to hide. These actors can then be used to spread counter rumors that correct the original rumor.

### ***Post – rumor stage***

During this stage we recommend to focus on:

- *Rebuild & Reverse SEO*

Although the company can manage to go through a crisis caused by rumors, articles might still show up in search engines regarding keywords related to the brand, resulting in ongoing damage to the brand reputation and image.

The above-mentioned Corona Extra case makes us reflect on this issue.

Furthermore, some brands will get out of business, but the front-page splash will still be there as what is on the Internet will stay there. Although most of the time it is not possible to delete them, companies can require repositioning and, sometimes, even the suppression of the shameful post or article.

Google data makes the significance more obvious: while most web traffic takes place on page one, the second page already generates only 6% of all website clicks (Shelton, 2017). Because it is nearly impossible to delete rumor search results, a brand needs to act like they want to reach the top of the page and follow the rules of Google.

Instead of removing harmful content, a company needs to move the content down by creating a more relevant substance, superior to the page they need to move down.

This process is called Reverse SEO.

The quality of each page is measured through an expert score: new content must outscore the old one.

Optimizing the entire site, gaining authority, and focusing on links is one option, according to Shelton (2017). Furthermore, adding new active social media channels, blogs, creating quality content, leaving comments are just a few options (Chierotti, 2016).

In this regard, several advertising agencies are already providing services in this field.

- *Create own media*

Nonetheless, although the public's trust in the media is falling, people will still be interested in the truth.

Instead of relying on pure news media, the brand itself can become a media platform because trust in owned media, against the trend, is stable and increasing (Marialetizia 2021).

Brands can create their own news channels because no one has more insights and information than the company itself.

Credibility, authenticity and the courage to admit mistakes can help create trustworthiness.

In this regard, Greyser (2009) also highlights four contexts of authenticity that should be involved within the communication strategy, when it comes to recovering brand reputation.

These are the following:

1. Talking authentic;
2. Being authentic;
3. Staying authentic;
4. Defending authenticity.

For instance, the German food company Frosta has an extra subpage called "Product Cemetery" on its website, where all failed products are listed (Frosta, 2021).

Adapting this idea concerning unjustified rumors or crises allows the company to act and clarify using its own media.

Unfounded rumors present the company with a challenge, but they can also be an opportunity to strengthen the brand and its reputation.

## **6. Limitation and further research**

The influence that unfounded rumors can have on brands and possible solutions approaches for responding to them were examined and presented.

The paper contains limitations regarding the generalization of the results and recommendations. The results are based on the analysis of a few case studies and can therefore not be transferred to all brands. In addition to

differences in the segment, the brand size also influences the results.

It would be essential to subdivide brand types for further research and determine differences when a brand with a positive or negative image confronts rumors.

In addition, rumors are dynamic, and they are different from each other. For this reason, the nature of rumors cannot be generalized. The results can only be viewed as temporarily valid as social media platforms change and new ones emerge. In order to be able to measure the effectiveness of the recommended steps more precisely, the brand reputation must be examined before and after a crisis.

Furthermore, it should be noted that not all rumors go through all the steps as some rumors may never go beyond the first phase, and others may never reach the rebuilding phase.

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