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Introduction

There has been over recent years a significant research interest on the consequences of negative events for brands and their stakeholders (e.g. Khamitov et al., 2020) and a corresponding focus on the strategies that marketers can implement to reduce the impact of such events (e.g. Bundy et al., 2017). This trend coincides with a recognition that, beyond the satisfaction of customers' needs and the creation of customer value, a key aim of marketing is also the attenuation of the consequences of negative incidents that involve the organisation directly or indirectly. Developing effective strategies able to attenuate negative responses from stakeholders is therefore a critical responsibility of the marketing department. Consequently, a growing stream of research focuses on how companies can manage crises and the response strategies that can reduce the harm and mitigate the negative outcomes of a brand crisis (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Dutta & Pullig, 2011).

This interdisciplinary endeavour has engaged scholars from different domains examining specific topics such as trust repair (Bachmann et al., 2015; Bozic, 2017), service recovery (Van Vaerenbergh et al., 2019), brand transgressions (Khamitov et al., 2020), or corporate social irresponsibility (Valor et al., 2022). Most of this work has produced relevant insights for brand responses to crises, defined as sudden and disruptive events that have a significant negative impact on a brand's reputation and its market performance (Bundy et al., 2017; Dutta & Pullig, 2011; Klein & Dawar, 2004). The Journal of Marketing Management has in the recent past contributed to this body of work with, among several others, notable studies exploring how consumers might forgive celebrity transgressions (Finsterwalder et al., 2017), how social media responses can address product and harm crises (Nadeau et al., 2020), and on the role of the congruence between the organisation's CSR commitments and a current negative event (Gistri et al., 2019). Papers in this special section continue this important collective task and extend further our analysis of the consequences of brand crises and the management strategies organisations can implement to minimise their impact. We are thankful to the authors for their contributions to this special section and their hard work throughout the review process. We also extend our gratitude to the editorial team and all the reviewers whose judgement we called upon.

This special section

The papers in this special section contribute to advancing our knowledge of the effects of brand crises and the study of how organisations can effectively respond to such troubling events. Kuchmaner et al. (2024) explore how brands can recover and even gain

forgiveness after facing a transgression when they are perceived as co-owners of their brand community. In two field studies and one lab experiment, the authors provide robust evidence that consumers are more likely to advocate in favour of a brand accused of a transgression when they perceive that the brand is a co-owner of the brand community. If the brand actively engages with its brand community, for example through starting the community or hosting it on the brand's website, or through ongoing interactions with the community that indicate commitment or involvement, the brand can easily be perceived by consumers as a member and co-owner of the community. The authors find that perceptions of brand membership and ownership of the community increase consumers' likelihood to help after a transgression via brand forgiveness. This suggests that brands perceived as members and co-owners of their communities benefit from protections derived from ingroup favouritism and expectations of group reciprocity. These relationships are strengthened when the brand is perceived as an active community member through the visibility of its interactions with the community. The authors extend research on crisis mitigation strategies by showing that being a member and co-owner of a brand community can help brand resilience in the aftermath of a transgression. Managerially, they demonstrate that brand involvement and investment in the digital brand community may prove to be an important shield to mitigate the negative effects of a crisis.

The paper by Grappi et al. (2024) addresses a unique and managerially relevant research question in the crisis communication literature: the impact of NGOs on a company's apology effectiveness. In three experimental studies, the authors demonstrate that the exposure of a crisis by NGOs can diminish the efficacy of a company's apologies for moral transgressions. When a moral transgression is condemned by an NGO rather than a newspaper, the apology from the organisation exacerbates consumers' negative responses because consumers perceive the company as hypocritical. The authors also illustrate how consumers' political orientation moderates the mediating role of perceived company hypocrisy. Following crisis exposure by an NGO, liberals tend to develop a more severe perception of the moral hypocrisy of the company involved in misconduct. Conversely, while conservatives generally exhibit less adverse responses towards a company committing a transgression, they are more sensitive to the source of exposure: when an NGO exposes a moral transgression, conservatives' perceptions of the company's moral hypocrisy become more pronounced and align with those of liberals. By investigating the role of exposure by NGOs, this study presents a complex and realistic depiction of a moral transgression environment. In this environment, consumers' responses to a company's apology depend on both contextual cues (such as exposure by NGOs) and relevant individual characteristics (such as political orientation). These results reinforce the importance of exploring the roles of NGOs in moral transgression environments, as NGOs can neutralise differences arising from individual characteristics and guide consumers towards more severe condemnations by reducing the effectiveness of a company's apology.

Scholarship on crisis responses has seldom focused on employees, despite evidence that brand crises may severely affect the emotional ties linking employees with organisations (Hericher & Bridoux, 2023). Against this backdrop, the study by de Villartay et al. (2023) explores the dynamic of trust decline and repair among employees following a crisis. The study shows that a crisis harms most highly identified employees: their

trust in the organisation is severely reduced, even when crises are externally attributed. However, highly identified employees also restore their trust the most when the company deploys any mitigation strategy, including denial. Nonetheless, restored trust does not reach pre-crisis levels. Their work also contributes to understanding the contradicting results on how organisational identification influences responses to crises: some studies found that greater identification buffered stakeholders' negative reactions after crises, whereas others showed that these negative reactions peaked among those highly identified. With their two experiments, this study offers a possible explanation of such apparent contradiction as they demonstrate that those highly identified are more affected both in the decline stage and in the repair stage. Organisational identification does not seem then to provide a bounce-back effect when the crisis occurs; rather, it seems to make individuals responsive to any mitigation strategy undertaken by the organisation.

The intriguing road ahead

Although these studies expand our understanding of how and for whom mitigating responses work, some research questions remain open. The paper by Grappi and colleagues paves the way for a new research line on the role of the intricate network of institutional actors involved in brand crisis mitigation, extending beyond traditional organisational boundaries. Focusing on a comprehensive network approach, future research may seek to understand the collaborative and individual contributions of diverse entities such as NGOs, charities and governments in shaping the outcomes of brand crises (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Schofer & Longhofer, 2020). For example, future studies may conduct a thorough examination of the network of institutional actors involved in brand crisis mitigation, identifying key players, their roles, and interdependencies within the broader network. More broadly, the focus of future research could extend to the investigation of the relative importance and effectiveness of different institutional actors in influencing the trajectory of crises (Baur & Schmitz, 2012). Future studies could also explore possible interactions among actors within the network, considering factors such as collaboration or competition. Understanding how these interactions evolve over the course of a crisis could help to understand the effectiveness of mitigation processes. Imagine a global fashion brand facing a severe sustainability crisis due to allegations of unethical sourcing practices. In this context, environmental NGOs could collaborate with the brand and other actors in the network to assess and address sustainability issues (Burchell & Cook, 2008). Different actors provide expertise, guidance, and support in developing more ethical and sustainable sourcing practices. In contrast, NGOs or activist groups may compete for attention and resources, advocating different approaches to address the crisis and putting pressure on the brand to adopt specific measures. By extending beyond traditional dyadic perspectives to the examination of multi-stakeholder relationships, this research path could offer valuable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and academics, fostering a more nuanced and comprehensive approach to the mitigation of brand crises.

Relatedly, most studies to date have examined the psychological mechanisms underpinning the consequences of crises and the related responses; overlooking the socio-cultural processes whereby different mitigation strategies gain legitimacy in different contextual settings and how the legitimacy of these mitigation strategies is dynamically

negotiated among social actors across distinct social structures (Lashley & Pollock, 2020). Past studies have predominantly studied dyads (how organisational responses influence consumers or audiences); moreover, audiences are assumed to respond homogeneously. Yet, in real life, other actors such as NGOs, the media or regulators, affect how consumers/audiences interpret these responses (Lingo & Elmes, 2019; Wang et al., 2021) and consumers are often divided in their responses to crises (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017). The paper by Grappi et al. (2024) makes some inroads into this issue, but still from a psychological perspective. A sociocultural approach could mitigate the assumption that collective responses result from the addition of individual responses and uncover processual dynamics that have been limitedly addressed.

Another current and relevant future research line concerns the deployment of crisis response strategies on social media platforms, focusing on understanding the most effective strategies and potential pitfalls in the digital environment (Hansen et al., 2018; Mirbabaie et al., 2022; Pace et al., 2017; Rauschnabel et al., 2016). This research path should explore the dynamics of crisis communications on social media and digital platforms, considering factors such as real-time engagement, information dissemination, and member interaction. The paper by Kuchmaner and colleagues shows how consumers, as members of a digital brand community, could help the brand involved in a crisis by leveraging positive interactions and a sense of protection within the community. This suggests that it is essential to develop a comprehensive framework for crisis response strategies on social media and in a digital environment more broadly, taking into account the unique characteristics of digital platforms, such as immediacy, virality, and user-generated content (Hansen et al., 2018). Additionally, evaluating the effectiveness of different crisis response strategies on social media should involve analysing real-world cases (Pace et al., 2017). Furthermore, the same research path could focus on the role of consumer engagement on social media during a crisis (Yuan et al., 2020) and explore how brands can proactively involve consumers and followers, respond to feedback, and shape the crisis narrative in a digital environment. Finally, also, the algorithmic influence could be considered to study how platform algorithms may amplify or suppress certain messages during a crisis, influencing the overall effectiveness of a company's response and the mitigation process.

In this special section, de Villartay and colleagues (2023) examine the influence of brand crisis on employees. Extending further the audiences under examination, future work could focus on the dynamics of job seeker reactions to employer crisis response strategies. It is necessary to provide actionable insights for employers to enhance the effectiveness of their crisis communication strategies, considering also the specific needs and expectations of job seekers (Lin et al., 2012). This future research line may aim to delve into the nuanced interplay between job seekers and organisations during times of crisis, investigating the impact of employer crisis response strategies on job seeker perceptions, decision-making processes, and overall employment preferences. Specifically, this research path could explore how job seekers evaluate potential employers during crisis situations, identifying the role of employer crisis response strategies in shaping their attitudes, preferences, and the ultimate decision to accept or reject a job offer. Also, psychological and emotional aspects deserve further investigation. Factors such as perceived job security, organisational stability, and perceived corporate fairness in crisis management may have a role in shaping job seekers' willingness to apply for a job

(Jones et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2011; Wang, 2013). By undertaking this research line, we could contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving employer-employee dynamics during times of crisis, fostering the development of strategies that promote organisational resilience and employee well-being.

Finally, the field would also benefit from further integrative analyses (Khamitov et al., 2020) and typological studies (Doty & Glick, 1994) considering what really defines different forms of crises. Crises are often, although not necessarily, linked to the perception that the brand has appeared irresponsible and has shown a lack of care and concern for relevant communities or for the environment (Antonetti & Maklan, 2016). The three papers in this special section also rest on these assumptions. Crises are said to be disruptive, although it is not always clear what we mean by that and there is not always clear evidence of such disruption. Traditional crisis types as defined in the communication literature (e.g. Coombs, 2007) – despite their undoubted usefulness and interest for the field – seem to rely on internal, organisational assumptions and are not grounded in the analysis of stakeholder perceptions. Further research could consider clarifying further the fundamental attributes that differentiate specific negative events, and the implications for the subsequent mitigation strategies.

Irrespective of disciplinary predilections and the research questions considered, much is still to do in the study of crisis mitigation. We look forward to reading future, exciting contributions to this field of research and to participating with our own work in such a common endeavour. Given that there seems to be little hope that brands might learn how to avoid crises, let's commit ourselves to the more modest but nonetheless essential aim of acquiring the knowledge and skills to resolve them.

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