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### Serena, Inc.: Using Instagram to build brand equity after a crisis

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# Serena, Inc.:

## Using Instagram to build brand equity after a crisis

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### **Abstract**

Serena Williams is one of the most successful athletes of all time. In addition to dominating the professional tennis circuit for decades, she has also built a massive business empire while becoming a first-time mother and wife. During this time of transition, Williams experienced a significant crisis moment during the 2018 US Open. Williams did not publicly acknowledge or apologize for the crisis and instead focused on a new sense of direction after living through the experience, much of which is documented and promoted on her Instagram account. This exploratory case study focuses on Serena Williams's use of Instagram as a crisis communication strategy to repair her reputation and protect the value of her brand. The study centers on reputation repair in post-crisis communication, in particular on the rhetoric of renewal, which concentrates on the positive view of an organization's future instead of ongoing discussions about crisis and responsibility. An analysis of 421 of Williams's Instagram posts over a two-year time span revealed that Williams used Instagram primarily to share private family moments, remind audiences about her legacy, and to build a business empire. The six themes that emerged suggest useful lessons for practitioners looking to use Instagram not only to mitigate a crisis but to build brand equity at the same time.

**Keywords:** Instagram, crisis communication, brand equity, reputation management

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## Introduction

Serena Williams is one of the most successful athletes of all time. Having won more Grand Slam titles than any other tennis player (23), she has dominated the sport for decades and in 2019 was — along with fellow competitor Naomi Osaka — the highest-paid female athlete in the world. Her estimated net worth of US\$225m makes her the only athlete on the Forbes list of America's Richest Self-Made Women.<sup>1</sup>

Along with her athletic success, Williams has also established a business empire that includes an investment company, a direct-to-consumer clothing line, partial ownership of sports organizations outside tennis, and multiple corporate partners.<sup>2</sup> Social media outreach plays an integral part in Serena Williams's efforts to build brand equity and subsequent business success off the tennis court. She currently has 12.2 million followers on Instagram, 10.8 million on Twitter, and 5.3 million on her Facebook page. Social media channels provide professional athletes like Williams with a direct line to their fans, in turn providing opportunities for corporate partners to connect with these consumers more directly and meaningfully than via traditional media.<sup>3</sup>

Like most professional athletes, Williams is no stranger to controversies on and off the court, ranging from quitting a match without shaking her opponent's hand to general outbursts of anger and accusations of disinterest in the game.<sup>4</sup> However, in comparison with other athletes — most notably male and white peers — Williams is widely admired for her professionalism and quality as a role model, and the public has argued that as a female African American athlete she is often the victim of other people's double standards.<sup>5</sup> For example, when an argument between her and the chair umpire during the US Open 2018 singles final escalated, a heated debate among sports officials, fans, and other professional athletes ensued, resulting in questions about its meaning for gender, race and power.<sup>6</sup> Her actions also caused speculations about her value as a brand, whether her reputation and image would be permanently damaged, and what implications, if any, the incident would have on her brand equity.

From the perspective of Serena Williams as a brand, the 'meltdown' incident (as it was dubbed by the media)<sup>7</sup> can be characterized as a crisis situation. While athletes have been using social media to build their brand and engage with their fans with considerable success, to

date there has been limited research into athletes' use of social media to control/maintain and increase brand equity after a crisis. This case study therefore sets out to explore how the Serena Williams brand was affected by one of the biggest crises of Williams's athletic career and to analyze the role played by her social media communication efforts in managing her brand, focusing on her biggest platform – Instagram.

## **Serena Williams, Global Brand Icon**

### ***Athletic success***

As of late 2019, Serena Williams has won a total of 72 singles titles, 23 doubles titles and two mixed doubles titles over the course of 24 years as a professional tennis player. Of those successes, 39 are Grand Slam titles, including 23 singles titles, 14 doubles titles and two mixed doubles titles. The four-time Olympic gold medalist has accumulated more than US\$92m in career prize money, more than any other female athlete in the world.<sup>8</sup>

Williams's road to greatness was not an easy one. After winning her first Grand Slam title at the age of 17 in 1999 and stepping into the footsteps of her older sister, Venus, the pressure to perform and win increased dramatically. In the summer of 2002, Williams became the Women's Tennis Association's (WTA) number one ranked player for the first time in her career, a ranking that she has held eight different times over the course of her career so far, for a total of 319 weeks.<sup>9</sup> While her athletic accomplishments are impressive, she has also come under scrutiny on several occasions for her on-court outbursts, which have cost her point penalties, a monetary fine, probation, and criticism from fans, the media and other stakeholders.<sup>10</sup>

Williams is a true icon. Not only is she one of the most accomplished athletes of all time, she has also developed into a full-fledged entrepreneur with multiple revenue streams and passion projects. Her non-athlete roles include investor, designer, parent, and role model for women and professional athletes in general and African-American female athletes and entrepreneurs in particular. Brands line up to partner with Williams, whose level of awareness among US consumers trails only Tiger Woods and Tom Brady.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Corporate partners***

Williams represents many brands across multiple product categories, including long-time partner Nike (sports apparel), Wilson Sporting Goods (sports equipment), Gatorade (non-alcoholic sports beverage), Beats Electronics (technology), JPMorgan Chase (finance), Audemars Piguet (luxury watches) and Bumble (networking app). More recently, she has added Pampers, Axa Financial and General Mills to her portfolio of corporate partners.<sup>12</sup>

Her business experience started at the age of 14, when her father decided to include her in the negotiations of her first business contract with Puma. Other endorsement deals followed and in 2003, shortly after become the highest-ranked female tennis player in the world, she signed a US\$40m sports apparel contract with Nike,<sup>13</sup> which she still represents today. Athletes are no longer passionate endorsers selling their name to corporate partners. They are actively engaged in the marketplace, often pushing boundaries or shining the spotlight on social issues they are passionate about. Williams has been actively involved in shaping her image and appeal as a brand icon by partnering with designers to help her express herself on and off the court. For example, after the complicated childbirth of her daughter Olympia resulted in health issues, she partnered with Virgil Abloh to design an unconventional catsuit to prevent blood clots which was subsequently banned by the French Tennis Federation. Nike supported Williams in her efforts, tweeting, 'You can take the superhero out of her costume, but you can never take away her superpowers. #justdoit'. The tweet was posted on 24th August, 2018 and to date has garnered 285,700 likes and been retweeted 117,700 times. For her appearance in the US Open later that year, Nike followed up with another unprecedented tennis outfit: a tutu.

In addition to her endorsement deals she has also become an investor with the help of 'Serena Ventures', through which she invests in start-up ventures, particularly those owned by African-American female entrepreneurs. More recently, she invested in a ready-to-wear fashion line called 'S by Serena', which represents the everyday woman next door. Williams's business savvy has not gone unnoticed by companies such as SurveyMonkey (an online research survey tool) and Oath (a subsidiary of Verizon), both of which have appointed her to

their board of directors. She is also passionate and highly engaged in supporting those in need, including her work on behalf of the Williams Sisters Fund in support of victims of senseless violence, as a UNICEF international goodwill ambassador, and more recently as a role model for working mothers around the globe.<sup>14</sup>

### ***The crisis***

During the final of the 2018 US Open, Williams faced Naomi Osaka, a shy, 20-year-old Japanese rookie, who had been looking forward to playing her idol. Osaka outplayed the veteran to win the first set 6-2, causing Williams to be frustrated and angry about her performance. In the second set, the chair umpire called a coaching violation against Williams's coach Patrick Mouratoglou, resulting in a formal warning. Williams was caught off guard, and told the umpire that she had not seen her coach trying to help her (although he later admitted to doing so). She also made it clear to the umpire that she would rather lose than cheat. On the next change-over, she and the chair umpire continued the conversation and Williams thanked him for understanding that she was not and never would be a cheat. The match continued and although Williams regained momentum, she lost a point at a critical point in the second set, to which she responded by throwing – and breaking – her racket, which, according to the rules, is an automatic violation. Because this was a second violation, she received a point penalty. Williams started to argue with the umpire, agitated that the initial coaching violation had contributed to her losing a point. Her frustration grew. Fired up by the crowd at Arthur Ashe Stadium, she commenced play, but also continued her confrontations with the umpire, repeatedly telling him that she was not a cheat and that she stood 'for what's right', and that he owed her an apology. The agitation escalated when Williams called the umpire a liar and a thief for 'stealing a point' from her, resulting in another code violation – this time for verbal abuse, costing Williams an entire game.

After realizing she had received the game penalty, Williams called for a referee and spoke with two tournament officials on the court about the incident over a period of about three minutes. During this exchange, she accused the officials of bias against women, suggesting that her behavior would not have been out of place in a men's game,

and that men routinely engage in such behavior without getting penalized. The match continued and Osaka eventually won, beating her idol to claim her first Grand Slam victory. The crowd, however, was still angry and booed as the two players met at the net to shake hands – the new champion visibly upset and unable to enjoy one of the greatest moments of her life. Williams congratulated and hugged Osaka but did not shake the umpire’s hand, as is customary at the end of a match. The presentation of the trophy that followed was awkward and difficult to watch as the crowd was still visibly angry. Williams stepped up and asked them to acknowledge Osaka’s victory and stop booing. The young champion, in turn, addressed the crowd and apologized for beating her idol. In the press conference that followed, Williams addressed the sexism that occurred on the court from her perspective as a player and laid the foundation for what would happen next in her role as a brand, an investor, and role model: ‘I’m here fighting for women’s rights and for women’s equality and for all kinds of stuff’.<sup>15</sup>

To provide some context to the case study, Table 1 summarizes the key events from the study period, to include the events from the year leading up to the crisis, the crisis itself and certain events post crisis.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Brand equity***

Brand equity can be defined as the public’s valuation of a brand based on customer perception.<sup>23</sup> The concept has been studied in a variety of industries and contexts, including in the sport industry and in the context of social media. Brand equity includes a set of brand assets and liabilities, is linked to the brand’s name and symbol, influences the values of the product or service both positively and negatively, and provides value to the customer and the firm itself. In this particular case, Serena Williams is the brand, and the brand includes her persona both as an athlete and as a public person. Brand assets include her star power as number 63 on the World’s Highest Paid Athletes list of 2019 and number 80 on America’s Self-Made Women list – a result of her success as an athlete as well as her business acumen.<sup>24</sup> Liabilities include her emotional outbursts and frustrations on

**Table 1.** Major events in the life of Serena Williams, 2017–2019

Date	Event
1st September, 2017	Williams suffers pulmonary embolism while giving birth to her daughter Olympia, leaving her bedridden for six weeks and delaying her return to tennis <sup>16</sup>
6th November, 2017	Oath, a subsidiary of Verizon, appoints Williams as Chair of its Board of Advisors <sup>17</sup>
16th November, 2017	Williams marries Reddit co-founder Alexis Ohanian <sup>18</sup>
22nd November, 2017	Williams partners with Gatorade to support girls participating in sports <sup>19</sup>
5th March, 2018	First match after eight-month maternity leave from professional tennis
2nd May, 2018	HBO documentary, 'Being Serena' launches
30th May, 2018	Williams launches her own fashion line, 'S' by Serena <sup>20</sup>
4th August, 2018	Williams pulls out of Rogers Cup citing post-partum depression <sup>21</sup>
8th September, 2018	Williams faces Osaka in 2018 US Open Final; racks up penalties in controversial second set and experiences the crisis examined in this case study
11th September, 2018	Mark Knight of the <i>Herald Sun</i> , depicts Williams having a tantrum in a cartoon that is widely considered to be sexist and racist <sup>22</sup>
8th October, 2018	Williams's Instagram account reaches 10 million followers
24th May, 2019	Williams's Instagram account reaches 11 million followers
25th June, 2019	Williams is the second Black female tennis player to feature on the Wheaties box
9th July, 2019	Williams responds to 2018 US Open crisis in her own words via <i>Harper's Bazaar</i> and promotes the story on her Instagram feed

the tennis court, which are often perceived to be negative. However, it has also been pointed out that as a black female athlete who also happens to be a mother, she is often held to a double standard.<sup>25</sup> Williams uses her own name or portions of it for her own businesses, such as 'Serena Ventures' and 'S by Serena Williams'. Her long-time corporate partner Nike routinely designs sports apparel for her that strongly reflects her personality and pushes boundaries, as shown in the catsuit example at the French Open and the follow-up tutu at the US Open. As a brand, Serena Williams produces value for her fans in that she turns personal experiences and challenges into assets for her brand. In her own words:



‘I just feel like sometimes, for whatever reason, anything that I do gets amplified, and so I use it for my brand. I use it for messages that are affirmative, like “you are strong, brave, proud, great” and all those things that I feel like I’m in a position to not only express playing tennis but can also be expressed in my fashion line and other products’.<sup>26</sup>

The main components that build brand equity are brand loyalty, brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and other proprietary brand assets.<sup>27</sup>

Shay and Van Der Horst developed a framework to measure the return on investment of company-initiated social media marketing initiatives through the use of the brand equity concept.<sup>28</sup> The authors found a positive relationship between brand equity and online reach, which means that the larger the audience (follower base), the larger the effect on building positive brand value will be. The authors also found that comments and shares have an indirect effect on brand equity, but likes, hearts and video views do not. Finally, they also established a negative relationship between the frequency of company posts and online reach, which means that over-posting will not necessarily lead to a higher level of brand engagement. Based on the findings of the study, the authors suggest that the quality of posts is more important than the quantity.

### ***Crisis communication***

A crisis can be defined as ‘the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes’.<sup>29</sup> Every crisis consists of six phases: (1) warning, (2) risk assessment, (3) response, (4) management, (5) resolution and (6) recovery.<sup>30</sup> Companies may experience warning signs while developing, producing or delivering products and should prepare response strategies for when these warning signs appear. In the case of sports, warning signs could include emotional outbursts on the playing field, destruction of sporting equipment, or disinterest in the competition. In the second stage, the risk is assessed in terms of the extent to which each stakeholder may be affected. In the response phase,

communicators focus on communicating the crisis to the media, the public and other stakeholders. The fourth phase of managing the crisis is critical because this is where the situation either escalates or where it can be managed effectively. During the fifth stage, the crisis is getting resolved in terms of clearly acknowledging responsibility and also compensating stakeholders for any losses. Finally, in the recovery phase, the organization focuses on rebuilding its reputation and winning back key stakeholders' trust.<sup>31</sup>

Crisis management is a process with three parts, including pre-crisis, crisis event and post-crisis. While pre-crisis work prepares for the actual crisis, post-crisis work responds to the crisis event and helps to prepare for the next crisis.<sup>32</sup> Crisis management can be divided into five categories, including preparation, communication channels, spokesperson training, initial response and reputation repair response.<sup>33</sup> While there was no 'initial response' from Williams regarding the crisis, other than answering reporters' questions, she did use her own social networks to focus on the fifth category of crisis management: reputation repair. Communication channels, including, increasingly, social media channels, play an integral role in providing various publics with important updates regarding the crisis. This is especially true in sports, as athletes can use them to distribute news and updates about themselves without having to rely on reporters. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram can provide fans with direct behind-the-scenes access to their favorite athletes, and athletes can use these networks to build brand equity (defined as the public's valuation of a brand based on customers' perception and thoughts). These two-way forms of communication can lead fans to change their perception of athletes, which in turn can have an effect on athletes' brand equity.<sup>34,35</sup>

Serena Williams was fined US\$17,000 for rules violations during the US Open final against Osaka, but how did the crisis affect her brand equity? As a highly active social media user, how did Williams manage the crisis using her most popular platform, Instagram, while also protecting the value of her brand? How did she leverage Instagram not only to repair her reputation but to position her brand for the future? Which Instagram strategies were most successful and how were they measured?

### ***Conceptual framework***

This exploratory case study focuses on Serena Williams's use of Instagram as a crisis communication strategy to repair her reputation and protect the value of her brand. In the larger context of crisis management, this study focuses primarily on reputation repair in post-crisis communication, in particular on the rhetoric of renewal. The concept concentrates on the positive view of an organization's future instead of ongoing discussions about the crisis and responsibility.<sup>36</sup> Williams did not publicly acknowledge or apologize for the crisis but instead focused on a new sense of direction after living through the experience, much of which is documented and promoted on her Instagram account.

### **Methodology**

A case study approach was used to investigate how Serena Williams's use of Instagram as a crisis response strategy and brand building tool. A case study is a 'qualitative research approach that explores a bounded system over time'.<sup>37</sup> This intrinsic case study focuses on Serena Williams's crisis response to her behavior at the 2018 US Open final. The case is bound in terms of time and space in that it focuses on Williams's most popular social media network, Instagram, over a period of two years: one year before the crisis (September 2017 to August 2018) and one year after the crisis (September 2018 to August 2019). This timeframe reflects the three parts of crisis management: pre-crisis, crisis event and post-crisis.<sup>38</sup> Case studies involve in-depth data collection and analysis often using multiple sources of information. The study uses an embedded analysis focusing on the athlete's crisis response and aspects of her brand equity by primarily investigating Williams's Instagram posts with the addition of select media coverage to round out the case.

Williams's Instagram posts from September 2017 to September 2019 were compiled in a spreadsheet. The number of posts, likes and comments were tabulated. Furthermore, the posts were analyzed and transformed into codes via categorical aggregation related to crisis communication and brand building and then

collapsed into broader themes. The researcher then developed natural generalizations from the data in the form of best practices that practitioners can use to learn from the case and potentially apply in similar scenarios.

## Findings

Williams posted 421 times on Instagram from the beginning of September 2017 through the end of September 2019 (one year before and one year after the crisis). Overall, her posts garnered a total of 126,456,340 likes and resulted in 1,502,394 comments. On average, she posted 16.8 posts per month (ranging from 5 to 31). The average number of likes per month was slightly more than 5 million and the average number of responses was 60,096. The total number of posts and likes were slightly higher before the crisis in September 2018 compared with after the crisis. However, Williams received negligibly more comments the year after the crisis than the year before. The same patterns hold for monthly averages: Williams posted an average of 18.6 times per month prior to the crisis, compared with 15.2 times per month after. Table 2 summarizes these statistics.

In general, Williams used Instagram for three main purposes: (1) to give her audience an authentic view of who she is as a first-time mother, wife and friend; (2) to remind her audience who she is as one of the most successful athletes ever; and (3) to launch and develop her transition into a business entrepreneur. An analysis of Williams's Instagram posts over the specified period of time reveals the themes discussed below.

**Table 2.** Frequencies and averages of Serena Williams's Instagram posts, 2017–2019

	Pre-crisis totals	Pre-crisis averages	Post-crisis totals	Post-crisis averages	Two-year totals	Two-year averages
<b>Posts</b>	223	18.6	198	15.2	421	16.8
<b>Likes</b>	64,283,454	5,356,955	62,172,886	4,782,530	126,456,340	5,058,254
<b>Comments</b>	750,657	62,555	751,737	57,826	1,502,394	60,096

### ***Giving audiences an honest look into her private life***

One clearly emerging theme was that Williams's most popular posts provide glimpses into her private life as a new mother and wife. Interestingly, the most popular posts in this category are all photos (but not videos) of her loved ones. Some of these posts have been published without captions, so the images speak for themselves. Some of these posts are romantic in nature, and show a side of the star athlete that most fans have probably never seen.

Such posts give audiences an authentic look at Williams as she transitions from athlete to wife, mother and entrepreneur, and let the audience experience the ups and downs of her transformation. This is illustrated by two of the most popular posts during the time of this study. The first image Williams posted of her newborn daughter, Olympia Ohanian (13th September, 2017), resulted in 1.1 million likes and 34,700 comments. A year later, Williams posted another image of her daughter, this time without a caption, which received 1.4 million likes and 34,616 comments. Clearly, Williams's Instagram audience is hungry to learn more about her private life and growing family.

In August 2018, just a few weeks before the start of the US Open, it was reported that Williams was pulling out of a preparatory tournament due to post-partum depression.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Williams reflected on this difficult time along with an image of her standing on a beach watching the sunset, which resulted in half a million likes and 11,017 comments:

'Last week was not easy for me. Not only was I accepting some tough personal stuff, but I just was in a funk. Mostly, I felt like I was not a good mom. I read several articles that said postpartum emotions can last up to 3 years if not dealt with. I like communication best. Talking things through with my mom, my sisters, my friends let me know that my feelings are totally normal. It's totally normal to feel like I'm not doing enough for my baby.'

Another top-five Williams post was about a story she wrote for *Harp-er's Bazaar* presenting her side of the 2018 US Open crisis moment. The rare story appeared almost a year after the incident and Williams promoted it on Instagram as follows:

‘I’m proud to use by voice and words to share an essay on the raw feelings I had during a match we may all remember. The essay and unretouched photos are live on @harpersba-  
zaar. Link in bio...’

Throughout her journey, Williams posts about her experience as a first-time mother, including both inspirational and heart-warming images and video (both with and without text), as well as reflections on her struggles and how she feels overwhelmed. As part of this journey, she started using the hashtag #thismama, which quickly became a call to mothers around the world to share their moments of struggle and triumph. One such post (with 278,325 likes and 6,409 comments) included an image of her and her daughter with the following caption:

‘#thismama is tired. Flying with the little one is really a test. #thismama really needs tips. There is nothing I do that seems to work. I don’t want her to use an iPad. Any suggestions? #thismama.’

To this day, the hashtag #thismama is still used by mothers to share their struggles and success stories.

Private reflections also helped Williams overcome the 2018 US Open crisis moment. Her last post before the crisis was an image of Olympia with the caption, ‘Did Momma win?’ (977,215 likes; 24,219 comments), while a couple of days after the crisis Williams posted a picture of her relaxing with Olympia at the New York Palace Hotel (628,458 likes; 6,072 comments). In her post, which included a corporate mention, she admitted to being exhausted:

‘Staying at the @newyorkpalace has been so relaxing. When @olympiaohanian and I watched videos after a long day #thismama passed out. Olympia was clearly not happy but I could not have been more comfortable anywhere else. Thank so much @newyorkpalace for having me. It’s always a pleasure.’

### ***Building a business empire***

Williams has clearly used and continues to use Instagram primarily as a way to build her business empire, ranging from sponsored posts to using her business partners' hashtags to launching her own clothing line, 'S' by Serena. During the period under investigation, her Instagram posts use a variety of techniques to indicate the transition from athlete to business entrepreneur. These techniques include frequent posts with behind-the-scenes access to her family, professional photo shoots, as well as exotic and luxurious travel, in addition to posts with inspirational quotes about herself as an athlete and advocate of passion projects and social issues.

Williams's most successful month on Instagram was May 2018, the month building up to the launch of her clothing line, 'S' by Serena. During this month, Williams posted 31 posts, resulting in 11.5 million likes and the second-largest number of total comments (121,601). This same month also marked her first Grand Slam appearance after the birth of her daughter eight months earlier, as well as the launch of her HBO documentary, 'Being Serena'. This month included a variety of posts, keeping the content fresh and exciting. For example, she provided glimpses into her private life to promote the HBO series, pictures of her daughter Olympia, several selfies with and without captions, sponsored posts for some of her partners (Tempur® and Nike), and reminders of her upcoming appearance at the French Open. Overall, the month of May 2018 truly positioned Williams as an athlete and fashion icon about to launch her next business enterprise: her clothing line. On 30th May, the day of the launch, she posted a reflection describing her life-long passion for fashion, including 'false starts' and rejection as well as hard work and determination – all qualities she had experienced as a professional athlete many times before.

While building her business empire on Instagram, she successfully tapped into existing relationships with long-time sponsors like Nike, Lincoln, Chase and Beats by Dre, with regular posts featuring her in one or more of her roles as athlete, mother or entrepreneur. The most popular post occurred on 24th February, 2019. It was an inspirational quote for long-time partner Nike and garnered the largest number of likes during the two-year timespan: 'If they think dreams are crazy, show them what crazy dreams can do. #justdoit'. The post included a

video of Williams, showcasing her as one of the most-accomplished athletes of all time, and uses a highly successful and well-established sponsor hashtag.

### ***Creating meaningful hashtags***

Williams is an avid user of hashtags on Instagram, including #thismama, #shareyourssunday and #beseenbeheard. Her very first post after the crisis was a repost featuring an image of one of her customers wearing an item of her line with a positive, appreciative comment as well as two hashtags associated with her brand: #shareyourssunday and #beseenbeheard. Both hashtags are part of her consumer engagement strategy, with the former encouraging her customers to share what ‘S’ stands for in their life. This promotion in essence transfers Williams’s iconic message to her customers and empowers them to be heroes in their own lives. The latter hashtag (#beseenbeheard) refers to Williams’s role of advocate and spokesperson for causes ranging from financial abuse to breast cancer awareness to encouraging girls to play sports. She encourages her customers to become voices for others and for themselves expressed through her own brand.

### ***Reminding audiences of her legacy***

Although Williams primarily uses Instagram to build her business, she also regularly (although not as prominently) reminds her audience of her legacy as the most successful tennis player of all time. Some of her posts during maternity leave show just a tennis court, while others provide glimpses into her training along with some #tbt posts with images of past successes. Naturally, most of these posts occurred right before playing in some of the most prestigious Grand Slam tournaments like Wimbledon, the US Open and the French Open, especially those that signaled her ‘comeback’ after maternity leave in May 2018.

### ***Connecting private life with sponsorship opportunities***

Williams has skillfully connected her private life to sponsorship opportunities and promoted them on Instagram, including long-time sponsors as well as new partners. She generally partners with companies



that are meaningful to her as a star athlete, mother, wife and/or business entrepreneur. The most prominent and hence successful sponsored opportunities tend to be those that can attach to Williams on multiple levels. For example, long-time partner Chase, a private banking company, produced a commercial in August 2018 in anticipation of Williams's return to the 2018 US Open after her maternity leave (the same tournament during which the crisis moment would occur just two weeks later). The commercial shows Williams in her new, softer role as mother and wife along with her well-known strength and determination as an athlete. The commercial uses LL Cool J's 1990s hit, 'Mama Said Knock You Out' and starts with the line, 'Don't call it a comeback' to communicate how becoming a mother has made her an even stronger competitor than ever. As she frequently does for all her commercial partners, Williams shared the commercial on her Instagram account (192,451 likes; 6,746 comments) and added a personal note as well as her inspirational hashtag #thismama:

'Lots of people have called this my "comeback". But becoming a mom isn't something I'm coming back from. It's part of who I am. It's been both incredibly amazing and incredibly tough, but it's only made me stronger. Especially because of the love and support you've all shown me. I'll be playing in the US Open for the first time since Olympia and #thismama is gonna give it her all. @chase.'

Nike is another long-time partner that has become even closer to Williams on her journey from athlete to wife, mother and entrepreneur. Nike has been willing to take chances with Williams, who is also a fashion icon and innovator. When Williams married Alexis Ohanian, it supported her with crystal-encrusted sneakers to wear during her wedding and collaborated with her to design the infamous catsuit during the French Open 2018. Williams's last paid post (329,731 likes; 5,986 likes) was for Nike right before the crisis moment of the 2018 US Open: 'My dreams were crazy enough. Are yours? #justdoit.' Williams's Instagram posts also reveal many sponsorships that pertain to her private life, including several hotels in which she has stayed (including her honeymoon), make-up artists who have worked with her on photo shoots, designers (for example, Alexander McQueen) and photographers.

### ***Connecting with sponsors and causes after the crisis***

While Williams often posted sponsored messages before the crisis, her approach shifted after the crisis. Her posts clearly showed that she leaned on her family, particularly her daughter and husband, to re-center herself and focus on her role as a mother. Her most popular post during the time immediately following the crisis was an uncaptioned image of her daughter (1.4 million likes; 34,616 comments) and images of her immediate family with short captions. During this time, Williams also focused on a strategy that had worked for her in the past: aligning herself with causes such as breast cancer awareness and fighting financial abuse, and highlighting them through her Instagram feed. Both of these causes were backed by sponsors (Berlei-Australia and Allstate Insurance), but it was her personal comments about the causes that seemed to resonate with audiences particularly well, resulting in more than 500,000 likes and 12,000 comments. While the cause posts garnered many likes, they did not engage the audiences as much as the personal life posts in terms of comments, which generally signify a stronger level of engagement. Williams also mentioned brands in her posts immediately after the crisis, including lesser known ones as well as individuals.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this case study was to explore whether Serena Williams's brand was affected by a significant crisis in her athletic career and what role social media communication efforts played in managing her brand equity. An analysis of 421 Instagram posts over a two-year time span revealed that Williams used Instagram primarily to share private moments of her family, remind audiences of her legacy, and to build a business empire. The themes that emerged suggest useful lessons for practitioners looking to use Instagram not only to mitigate a crisis but to build brand equity at the same time:

- *Build a strong network of stakeholders before a potential crisis occurs:* Williams's Instagram posts a year prior to the crisis show that she frequently engaged with her sponsorship partners, as demonstrated by her being a good ambassador for Nike, Tempur®, Allstate, etc. She also posted about causes with personal meaning for

her and for which she serves as an advocate. Some of these causes are tied to consumer brands while others are not. Other stakeholders include her fans. She gained their trust by posting family images and videos showing her journey as a new mother and wife, to which many of her fans can relate.

- *Show lived experiences that are in sync with the athlete's values and goals to build authenticity:* Williams posted content that showed all of her identities, including her role as sports icon, new mother and wife, and business entrepreneur. What is most important here is to include wins and struggles instead of carefully curating the content to only show the 'perfect' side of the athlete. Williams has also been recognized as an advocate for preventing financial abuse, breast cancer awareness and empowering female entrepreneurs, among other things. She frequently posts about these causes as an active participant, not just a silent supporter. She has frequently used Instagram to demonstrate her activism visually, thus helping her manage her reputation.<sup>39</sup>
- *Post interesting content regularly and leverage Instagram's visual tools:* Williams's most successful posts include images, especially photos with or without captions. Some of her posts include multiple images and videos although such efforts do not appear to have an effect on audience engagement. What is more important is to provide fresh content at least every other day (Williams's average is 15 times per month) and more frequently if possible. During her most successful month in terms of engagement, she posted an average of once per day, as she had a lot of exciting and diverse content to share that month.
- *Do not use Instagram to respond to a crisis when it hits:* Instagram is primarily a tool for building brands and businesses; the best way to respond to a crisis is with traditional media. Following the crisis moment, Williams responded to reporters during the press conference immediately following the US Open final. However, she did not respond on social media until a year later, when she had written an article about the crisis for *Harper's Bazaar*. Although she linked to the article on her Instagram feed, she refrained from discussing it. This technique allowed her to take control of the story, again showing her authenticity to her audience. Williams's Instagram posts

immediately following the crisis showed how she coped, which was by spending time with her family, especially her infant daughter, resulting in some of her most-liked posts from the two-year period explored in this study.

- *Use Instagram after the crisis for image restoration over time:* During the crisis Williams was criticized by many for her on-court actions during the 2018 US Open final. After her image was tarnished she turned to social media to help restore it. She engaged different stakeholders simply by mentioning them in her posts. For example, she complimented brands on a variety of accomplishments related to her advocacy and increased the number of her own advocacy posts. She also featured everyday people wearing her fashion line, keeping her business visible. Overall, her posts after the crisis had a very positive tone, appreciating her fans, followers and ability to speak on behalf of others.

## Conclusion

This exploratory case study shows that professional athletes can overcome a crisis and continue to build brand equity using social media. Marketplace perception was undoubtedly influenced by Williams's on-court behavior during the 2018 US Open final. She exposed herself to questions from the media head-on in a news conference and later interviews with news outlets and started an important conversation about sexism in professional tennis. She did not continue this conversation on social media. Instead, she focused on building her brand by engaging with her audiences, contributing to passion projects, and keeping her legacy visible. Her Instagram strategy paid off in that the number of followers increased steadily throughout the crisis to more than 12 million.

While it is not likely that Serena Williams actively prepared for a crisis moment like the one that occurred during the 2018 US Open final, she certainly used a variety of communication channels to take control of the situation, including traditional and digital media. Instagram in particular, can play an important role in preparing for a potential crisis as well as for image restoration after a crisis, but during a crisis it is not necessarily the right tool to address the issue directly.

### ***Limitations and suggestions for future research***

While this case study reveals new and important insights into how professional athletes can use Instagram as a crisis communication tool, it is important to note that the data were qualitative in nature, so they cannot be generalized. In the future, other athletes' Instagram posts before, during and after a crisis should be analyzed and compared with the findings of this study. In addition, only Williams's initial posts were analyzed. To gain additional insights, it would be helpful to analyze the comments made by fans to examine the effects of different types of posts.

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