Research Article

Brand´S Image Perceptions During Crisis: Brazil Versus Portugal On COVID-19

Luisa Lopes[1], Lara Santos[2] and Salete Esteves[3]

[1,3] Instituto Politécnico de Bragança, CiTUR, Campus de Santa Apolónia, Bragança,

[2]Universidade Lusófona do Porto, TRIE, Porto, Portugal

Correspondence should be addressed to: Luisa Lopes; luisa@ipb.pt

Abstract

The future will no longer be like the past as the world witnesses constant changes that affect people's everyday life. In fact, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations were challenged to adapt their business to the changes, and brands were forced to quickly manage their business to survive and be connected to the new world. Several approaches were carried on using different communication strategies. This research intends to investigate public perceptions about brands' actions and communication during the pandemic, trying to understand how the different approaches toward the crisis were perceived among the target audiences. This process is related to the participation of brands in the discursive phenomenon "we are together", the hashtag #vaificartudobem (everything will be fine), or "stay home", and how their audiences react to it. An exploratory, comparative, and cross-border (Brazil versus Portugal) empirical study is developed, though a quantitative method, applying a survey, territorially based on Portugal, in April and May 2020. The results of this study suggest that brands' presence and participation have real benefits as their actions are recognized by public opinion (in Brazil and Portugal). Brazilian audiences consider it more important for brands to be present in critical moments such as the current one and to promote the public's awareness and consciousness. Female respondents believe that brands that embraced the cause and promoted social isolation, improve their image. This sample also recognizes differences in brands and communication changes, during COVID-19, and finds it important that brands embrace the cause and promote social isolation, in order to improve their image.

Keywords: Crisis management and communication, Image, Brands, COVID-19.

_____

Introduction

The world is currently experiencing one of its greatest challenges since World War II. The outbreak of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) has affected every aspect of people's lives. In July 2021, 196.794.025 people from 192 countries had already got infected with COVID-19, of which, 4 202 385 died from this virus (Johns Hopkins University, 2021). This pandemic has been followed by a number of decisions, putting countries, regions, and cities in a complete lockdown. This cross-border and exogenous mega-crisis is testing the ability of organizations to respond not only to an unprecedented health emergency caused by the global pandemic, but also to the impending problems of unemployment, human resource management, risk management, and solidarity (Christensen and Lægreid, 2020; Zarco and Cordón, 2020).

In a chaotic time like the one experienced due to COVID-19, companies recognize the challenge of communication. In fact, COVID-19 resulted in changes in advertising, marketing, promotion, and media spending, forcing companies and brands to reevaluate their current strategies and the future of advertising and marketing campaigns in order to maintain a steady stream of revenue (DiResta, Williford, Cohen and Genn, 2020). Likewise, there is also a decline in advertising spending of around 10%, with a decrease in TV spending of 25% (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020). Moreover, the current COVID-19 has resulted in a wave of advertising and marketing approaches that are based on the commodified concepts of human connection, care, and community in the time of crisis (Sobande, 2020). It has been observed that companies have adapted their goals to the new changes and launched multi-channel initiatives, designed to contribute to facing COVID-19, with the communication of most companies being more dedicated to their current customers and less to the acquisition of new ones (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020). Brands' approaches that are focused on "How can I help", "We are here for you" or other adaptations of their communications

for these times of social distance and care for others, have marked the advertising in the recent COVID-19 times (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020).

However, a literature gap is identified, as Pace, Balboni and Gistri (2017) state that there is little information and knowledge about the effects of crisis reactions by stakeholders depending on their level of exposure to different media. At the same time, Khare and Singh (2020) mention that few articles discuss the effects of COVID-19 on advertising from an empirical perspective. Whitler, Besharat and Kashmiri (2021) report that it has not yet been investigated how companies use communication channels during the crisis and with what effect, as well as the variation of message communication strategies. At the beginning of the pandemic, the communication tone of some brands was of a certain degree of uncertainty, and over time, it changed to a more courteous and hopeful one. Nevertheless, they mention that it is not yet known how the tone influences the perception of consumers during the crisis (Whitler, Besharat and Kashmiri, 2021).

Brands undertook several changes and different types of reactions in the way they communicated with their audiences, such as, changing their logo, signature and speech, among others. This study intends to address brands' reactions to the pandemic by answering the following questions: 1)What is the public perception about brands' mobilization in a crisis/pandemic scenario?; 2) Is the public perception about brands´ actions influenced by customers' characteristics such as sex, age, and nationality?; 3) Does this mobilization process contribute to brands' future image and reputation? Bearing these questions in mind, an exploratory survey is undertaken to better understand the reaction and behavior of the public in the face of these reactions and changes.

The article proceeds as follows: First, considering the research background, this

_____

_____
_

article deepens the understanding on crisis management, allowing the knowledge of this field to be adapted to this specific context, browsing themes as types and phases of the crisis, and adding on communication strategies and practices during the crisis. Second, it presents the methods carried out in this phase of the study and clarifies the data collection process. It, also, examines and discusses preliminary results obtained from this exploratory field study to be explored. Finally, conclusions and implications for further research are drawn.

Crisis Management

Organizations operate in highly volatile environments (Spillan and Crandall, 2002). As the environment is becoming increasingly complex, the crisis that organizations face will also increase not only in extent but also in impact (Spillan, 2003). As Mitroff and Anagnos (2001, p. 3) state "crises have become an inevitable, natural feature of our everyday lives".

Today, one can easily identify the 60s of the 20th Century as the beginning of the literature about organizational crises (Mendes and Pereira, 2006). One of the first authors to write about this subject was Charles Hermann, in 1963, and his concern was to analyze the consequences that certain disruptive phenomena, which he called crises, had on the viability of organizations. This author defined a crisis as something that threatens the fundamental values of the organization, allows only a limited period for decision making, is unexpected by the organization, and originates in the relevant environment of the organization (Hermann, 1963). Fink (2002, cit. in Wrigley, Salmon and Park, 2003), one of the leading authors in the field, conceptualizes crisis as something that impacts positively and negatively an organization and as something (time, phase, or event) that is decisive or crucial. Devlin (2007, p. 5) states that a crisis is "an unstable time for an organization, with a distinct possibility for an undesirable outcome. This undesirable outcome could interfere with the normal operations of the organization; it could damage the bottom

line; it could jeopardize the public image; or it could close media or government scrutiny". Seeger et al. (2003, cit. in Jordan, Upright and Tice-Owens, 2016, p. 162) add on the definition of crisis as "a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals".

Regarding the types of crisis, it should be noted that any organization is sensitive to an endless number of crises, and although crises can arise in infinite sizes, shapes, intensity, complexity, uncertainty, and magnitudes (Eriksson and McConnell, 2011). In the opinion of Marcus and Goodman (1991), different types of crises can be distinguished, such as accidents, scandals, product safety, and health incidents. On the other hand, the Institute for Crisis Management (2021) defines 17 types of crises, namely: casualty accidents, catastrophes, class action lawsuits, consumerism actions, cyber crime, defects and recalls, discrimination, executive dismissal, environmental damage, financial damage, hostile takeovers, labor disputes, mismanagement, sexual harassment, whistleblowing, white collar crime, and workplace violence. Crisis management researchers have classified crisis into 2x2 matrix (e. g. Coombs and Holladay, 1996; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Meyers and Holusha, 1986), through cluster analysis (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993), and by categories (Spillan and Crandall, 2002; Spillan, 2003; Devlin, 2007).

The key notion in crisis studies is that one crisis is not similar to another and the reactions to a crisis may be different. One can observe these crisis characteristics from the company's point of view (organizational perspective) or the perspective of stakeholders (societal perspective) (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015; Pace, Balboni and Gistri, 2017). Coombs (2014, cit. in Falkheimer and Heide, 2015) stresses that a crisis is perceptive, that is, it is the different perceptions of stakeholders about an event that helps in defining it as a crisis. Additionally, Coombs emphasizes that while a crisis is unpredictable, it is not

_____

_____

at all unexpected. Organizations must know that different forms of crises can emerge (Coombs, 2014, cit. in Falkheimer and Heide, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a contamination crisis, that is, a damage that impacts a company/brand through an exogenous, unrelated event (Whitler, Besharat and Kashmiri, 2021). However, in a concept introduced by Boin (2009), it is also a cross-border crisis that focuses on societal crises and disasters, which can be seen as a consequence of modernity (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015). Cross-border crises spread across functional, geographical, and temporal boundaries (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015; Christensen and Lægreid, 2020). Given the equivocality and complexity of cross-border crises, crisis communication requires more elaborate strategic thinking (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015; Christensen and Lægreid, 2020). Likewise, a cross-border mega-crisis, such as COVID-19, highlights the emotional aspects of reputation management (Christensen and Lægreid, 2020).

Communication Strategies And Practices During The Crisis

The crisis communication literature focuses on crisis management and how stakeholders react to different types of crises as well as the strategic responses to those crises. However, there is little information and knowledge about the effects of crisis reactions by stakeholders depending on their level of exposure to different media (Pace, Balboni and Gistri, 2017).

Crisis communication is defined as the ongoing dialogue between the organization and its audiences before, during, and after the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2011), the objectives of crisis communication are to restore the organization to normality, to influence the public perception, and recover and repair the organization's image (Jin, Pang and Cameron, 2012). The strategies used must be designed to minimize damage to the organization's image (Jin, Pang and Cameron, 2012). Greyser (2009) and Hugelius, Adams and Romo-Murphy (2019) consider that crisis communication plays a

key role in overcoming crises and is an integral part of responding to a disaster. For decades, business communications have played an important role in building and supporting an organization's identity and reputation (Greyser, 2009; Lee, 2016). The organization's reputation and image management need to take into account the reactions of its affected stakeholders, the political-administrative apparatus, the general public, and the media (Christensen and Lægreid, 2020).

Brand's crises can be critical threats to the company's reputation (Wang, 2016). When facing a crisis, appropriate and timely responses from the organization play an important role in restoring the confidence in the brand among consumers (Wang, 2016). According to Zoio (Director of Communication of the Portuguese Psychologists Order), brands and organizations, more than ever, must represent values in which people see themselves and make them feel fulfilled when they interact in some way with that organization or brand (Almeida, 2021). That is why companies have been working well on humanization, sharing values, promoting social responsibility, and sustainability (Almeida, 2021). Without communication there is no relationship, without relationship there is no trust and without trust there is no reason to continue (Almeida, 2021).

Based on the concept of brand awareness from Aaker (1991), a brand needs to ensure positive communication with consumers, and build and frame the message of the security and trust it offers (Khan, 2020). A company needs to communicate its image well, as it helps to establish a brand's position, differentiate the brand from the competition as well as improve the brand's performance in the market (Park, Jaworski and Maclnnis, 1986). Brand's image has been defined as a mental representation of the consumer by an offer (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990), including symbolic meanings that consumers associate with specific attributes of that same offer (Padgett & Allen, 1997; Keller, 1993). So, it is imperative that the brand must be sure that its communication is articulated for all

_____

audiences, and, in this pandemic phase, it should not focus on its interests (Khan, 2020). Given that, during a crisis, information is both essential and limited, the brand must communicate with honesty, frankness, openness, and compassion (Veil and Husted, 2012; Marynissen and Lauder, 2020). In their study, Schoofs, Claeys, Waele and Cauberghe (2019) concluded that empathy is a component in the process of repairing reputational damages that can be affected by crisis communication. Zarco and Cordón (2020) state that communications in which the brand shows concern for the victims of COVID-19, or responds to regulations imposed to face the crisis, will have a positive effect on its brand's image if they are authentic and if they relate to the brand's identity. While brands are currently looking for the right or correct tone to face a health emergency pandemic, there are few articles that discuss the effects of COVID-19 on advertising from an empirical perspective (Khare and Singh, 2020). Li and Hall (2020) report that the coronavirus pandemic caused a sharp drop in advertising spending. Advertising spending fell by an average of 9% in Europe (Khare and Singh, 2020). Beer (2020) mentions that the major brands have adopted their advertising to address and reflect this unique pandemic situation (using the buzzword "We are together", for example or the combination of action, information, and support).

The contemporary practice of public relations and crisis communication is being challenged by the rise of social media (Freberg, 2012 cit. in Wang, 2016). Additionally, value changes and innovations in the media lead to the institutionalization of crisis communication (Wang, 2016). Crisis communication can be done not only through the analysis of concerns but also in the execution of a crisis communication strategy through press releases, messages on the website and social media, during interviews, etc. (Marynissen and Lauder, 2020). For Coombs (2006b), crisis communication strategies are composed by the form and content of crisis response.

The media has experienced a huge transformation over the past decade (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016; Lee and Atkinson, 2019). Recent statistics indicate that the number of people accessing the internet exceeds 5 billion, that is, 64,2% of the world population (Internet World Stats, 2020). With the growing number of internet users and social media worldwide, communication managers must understand the online consumer behavior (Schivinki and Davrowski, 2016). Also, social media transformed how crisis information is generated and shared (Zhu, Anagondahalli and Zhang, 2017). Given the change in the media environment and the massive growth of social media, the choice of the communication platform is a critical success factor in crisis communication (Lee and Atkinson, 2019). The main communication of brands has been moving to digital platforms (Khare and Singh, 2020). Consumers are increasingly using social media sites to search for information and moving away from traditional media (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Besides, the traditional communication that was previously controlled and managed by the brand and marketing managers is gradually being shaped by consumers (Schivinki and Davrowski, 2016). Brands are becoming members of online communities, working on first-hand feedback, and applying social sentiment drifts and Google query volume, in the most searched keywords as indicators, to update their marketing talent (Khare and Singh, 2020). Not only do individuals and organizations communicate differently during a crisis, but they are also perceived very differently. Social media platforms and messaging increase the challenges involved in maintaining the general reputation of brands and companies (Freberg et al., 2013 cit. in Wang, 2016).

Companies must design their social media content in a way that influences the consumer's attitude towards brands since the quality and credibility of their message is an important factor that affects the individual's behavior after being exposed to it (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Social media communication created by companies does not directly affect the brand's value, but indirectly influences consumers' perceptions of the value based on the brand's attitude (Schivinski and

_____

Dabrowski, 2016). Furthermore, brands are currently designing cautious communications following COVID-19 standards. The ads that come out no longer show people hugging, shaking hands, and celebrating because all consumers are aware of what brands encourage people to do (Khare and Singh, 2020). Consumers and businesses are demonstrating stronger emotional connections with trusted suppliers in their quest for stability and value. Consumers are also looking for reliable information about COVID-19 and its consequences (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020). For example, this is reflected in greater attention being paid to non-commercial sites and TV broadcasts (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020).

This specific period of crisis also requires the use of different means of communication: less outdoor advertising, more online, and possibly more advertising on television and radio (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020). Personal approaches focused on 'how we can help you' provide insight into the challenges faced by customers and offer opportunities to help them. However, the "we are here to help you" messages are only effective if they are authentic. This does not only affect marketing communication (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020), but it also requires companies to be fully aligned with the customer-centric paradigm, which (yet) is not the case for many companies. The time has come for companies to respond to their customers' immediate basic needs. For example, several suppliers have adapted their communication to these times of social detachment and 'taking care of each other'. Careful use of humor can also help to increase the retention of the advertising message (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020).

Methods

Since the world is still suffering from the pandemic, this study focuses on the brands' first reactions that showed concern and an authentic willingness to support populations in promoting social isolation, which is almost mandatory worldwide, along with other specific security measures in relation to the public health and common well-being purposes. Based on the literature review, an exploratory survey was chosen as the empirical method, and the hypotheses are as follows:

> H1: In a pandemic crisis, sex influences the public perception of brands' reactions, in terms of showing concern (a), awareness and consciousness (b), social isolation (c), and future image (d).
> H2: In a pandemic crisis, nationality influences the public perception of brands' reactions, in terms of showing concern (a), awareness and consciousness (b), social isolation (c), and future image (d).
> H3: In a pandemic crisis, age influences the public perception of brands' reactions, in terms of showing concern (a), awareness and consciousness (b), social isolation (c), and future image (d).

To test these research hypotheses, individuals from Portugal and Brazil, (for convenience purposes), were surveyed using a questionnaire formulated by Google Forms. An original questionnaire consisting of 21 questions was distributed via the Internet using Facebook users over 18 years old, during April and May of 2020, in Portugal. Different people, as customers, were asked about their perception of the brand's reaction and activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the customer's social and demographic profile was assessed. The scales used to measure the variables were a 10-point Likert type, with increasing scales from not important (0) to very important (10) and nothing (0) to a lot (10).

Results and Discussion

This analysis was carried out with the statistics tool SPSS, version 26, to analyze the collected data. The final sample consisted of 239 individuals. Table 1 summarizes the main methodological elements used in the collection of quantitative data.

_____

_____
_

Table 1: Synthesis of online survey

Temporal basis	Cross-Section
Unit of analysis	Facebook users
Sampling	Convenience
Sample	239
Data collection	Questionnaire survey available online
Date	April and May 2020
Data analysis	Univariate and multivariate

The demographic characteristics of the resulting sample include females as a dominant gender. In terms of the total respondents, 69,5% are female, and 28,9% are male. Regarding the respondents' age group, the group that answered the questionnaire the most was the one between 18 and 25 years old with 57,33%. The age range with the least responses to the questionnaire was that of more than 50 years old with 4,2%. The average age of all respondents is approximately 29. It is acknowledged that the sample is more Portuguese than Brazilian in terms of nationality (58,2% *versus* 37,2%), and country of residence (69% *versus* 29,3%).

To test the research hypotheses, several analyses were performed, and the sample was scrutinized, although it is a convenient one. The analysis showed that 50% of the respondents spend, on average, more than four hours a day using social media. Also, most respondents (77%) mentioned that they noticed changes in actions and brands' images during the pandemic crisis. Interestingly, as one of the main objectives of crisis communication is to influence public perception (Jin, Pang and Cameron, 2012), they are aware of brands' actions. As literature supports, this specific period of crisis also requires the use of different means of communication, namely less outdoor advertising, more online, and, possibly, more advertising on television and radio (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020). In the present study, when questioned "By what means did you know about the actions of the brands?", most respondents answered "internet and television" in an open question (Fig. 1).

Fig 1: Source of information on brands´ actions

_____

_____

Considering the scarce knowledge about the effects of crisis reactions by stakeholders depending on their level of exposure to different media (Pace, Balboni and Gistri, 2017), further inquiries about the data were performed. First, it is interesting to know if age influences the choice of the most used media. The χ2 statistic is used, and Table 2 is constructed to illustrate the most used media by age. The conclusion is that the group "More than 32 years" chooses television and the printed press with a higher percentage than the other groups.

Table 2: Media used by age (Chi-square test of independence of the sample)

	18-25	**26-32**	**more than 32**	**p-value**
Television, n (%)	61 (44,5)	20 (42,5)	35 (63,6)	0,037
Printed media, n (%)	5 (3,6)	3 (6,4)	10 (18,2)	0,002
Internet, n (%)	131 (95,6)	45 (95,7)	54 (98,18)	0,688
Radio, n (%)	6 (4,4)	3 (6,4)	6 (10,9)	0,241

In order to verify whether age influences the most used social network (Table 3), the independence test was carried out again, which revealed differences in the following social networks: Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The conclusion is that, in this sample, younger people use Instagram and Twitter more, while the older ones use WhatsApp.

Table 3: Social media used by age (Chi-square test of independence of the sample)

	18-25	**26-32**	**more than 32**	**p-value**
Instagram, n (%)	121 (88,3)	39 (83)	36 (65,5)	<0,001
Facebook/Messenger, n (%)	65 (47,44)	28 (59,6)	31 (56,4)	0,268
YouTube, n (%)	59 (43,1)	19 (40,4)	24 (43,6)	0,939
Twitter, n (%)	33 (24,1)	2 (4,3)	3 (5,5)	<0,001
WhatsApp, n (%)	55 (40,1)	30 (63,8)	49 (89,1)	<0,001

The applied questionnaire had five questions (Table 4) where each answer was evaluated on a Likert scale from 0 to 10 points. In questions 1 and 2, the score 0 corresponds to "Nothing important" while 10 corresponds to "Very important". In the remaining questions, the score 0 corresponds to "Nothing" and the score 10 corresponds to "Very much". The internal consistency of this set of items was verified through Cronbach's Alpha. The obtained value (0,78) reveals a reasonable, almost good, internal consistency between the items. Most respondents consider that it is very important (rated 10) for brands to show concern for the population and to be present in critical moments such as the current one. Note the weak dispersion of the first four variables around the average (the variation coefficient in these cases is less than 30%).

This result corroborates the arguments of Zarco and Cordón (2020), stating that communications in which the brand shows concern for the victims of COVID-19 will have a positive effect on its brand's image if they are authentic and if they relate to the brand's identity. Reinforcing that, during a crisis, a brand must communicate with honesty, frankness, openness, and compassion (Veil and Husted, 2012; Marynissen and Lauder, 2020). Its is also important to consider all audiences, instead of focusing on brands' interests (Khan, 2020) with the communication tone

_____

_____
_

changing to a more courteous and hopeful
one (Whitler, Besharat and Kashmiri, 2021).

Table 4: Public perception of brands' reactions

	Average	Median	Standard deviation	Variation coefficient
Q1: Do you think it is important for brands to show their concern for the population by promoting social isolation?	9,1	10	1,607	18%
Q2: In your opinion, what is the importance of a brand's presence in critical moments like the current one?	9,01	10	1,849	21%
Q3: In your opinion, to what degree do the brands, that changed the way of communicating, help to raise the public's awareness and consciousness about the theme?	7,95	8	2,132	27%
Q4: To what degree have the brands, that embraced the cause and promoted social isolation, improved their image?	7,95	8	2,191	28%
Q5: In your opinion, to what degree may the brands, that did not react to the theme, have their image harmed in the future compared to the competitors that reacted ?	5,88	6	2,81	48%

The Mann-Whitney-U test (Table 5) was used to find out whether the respondents' assessments on the several questions are significantly different between Portuguese and Brazilians.

Table 5: Mann-Whitney-U test for Participants' Gender and Participants' Nationality

	n	Q1 Median (min-max)	Q2 Median (min-max)	Q3 Median (min-max)	Q4 Median (min-max)	Q5 Median (min-max)
Sex						
Male	69	10 (0-10)	10 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	6 (0-10)
Female	166	10 (0-10)	10 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	9 (0-10)	6 (0-10)
p-value		p= 0,284	p= 0,083	p= 0,18	p= 0,022	p= 0,719
Nationality						
Portuguese	139	10 (0-10)	10 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	5 (0-10)
Brazilian	89	10 (0-10)	10 (0-10)	9 (0-10)	9 (0-10)	7 (0-10)
p-value		p= 0,404	p= 0,031	p= 0,017	p= 0,86	p= 0,104

The conclusion is that there are statistically significant differences concerning the importance of a major brand's presence in critical moments like the current one, and Brazilians tend to attribute greater importance to this issue (p-value=0,031). Regarding the importance of altering the communication of some brands in raising

_____

_____

public awareness and consciousness on the pandemic issue, they are significantly different between the two nationalities. There are differences in the median between the two nationalities (8 versus 9;

p-value= 0,017). Again, respondents of the Brazilian nationality valued this issue more. In Fig. 2, these results are visually portraited, in terms of average.
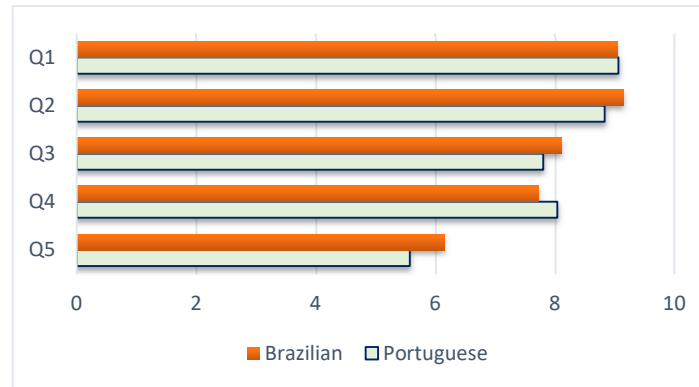

Fig 2. Brazilian versus Portuguese perceptions on brands´ actions (average)

Another important question is to know if there are significant differences between the answers of males and females. As shown in Table 5, there is a meaningful difference between the gender and the future image. In median terms, differences are only found in the answers to the question "To what degree have the brands, that embraced the cause and promoted social isolation, improved their image?" (8 versus 9; p-value= 0,022). Again, respondents of the Brazilian nationality valued this issue more. To the best of one`s knowledge, literature does not support the differences found between the two countries under study.

Through these analyses, it is found that H1 is accepted for d) (future image). H2 is accepted for b) (awareness and consciousness) and c) (social isolation). For this reason, it can be accepted that in a pandemic crisis, nationality influences the public perception of brands' reactions, in terms of awareness and consciousness, and social isolation. Kruskal Wallis test was used to identify differences in the five questions by the age of the participants (divided into three groups 18-25, 26-32, and over 32 years). For this matter, as p-value>0,05 in all questions, there are no significant differences between age and the answers, and therefore, H3 is not accepted.

Conclusions and Future Research

With COVID-19, brands have been forced to understand how to relate to their audiences and act accordingly. Their actions were positively recognized by public opinion. This circumstance spurred new trends and accelerated behaviors of "adaptability", "authenticity" and "humanity". This affects marketing communication (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020) and requires companies to be fully aligned with the customer-centric paradigm, which is not the case for many companies.

In this study, despite the exploratory nature of the results, most of the arguments of recent literature are confirmed. In what theoretical and management implications concern, most respondents consider that it is particularly important for brands to show concern for the population and to be present in critical moments such as the current one. They recognize differences in brands' approaches and communication changes, during COVID-19, promoting the public's awareness and consciousness, and, also, find it important that brands embrace the cause and promote social isolation, in order to improve their image. The results of this study allow suggesting that brands have real benefits as their actions are positively recognized by public opinion (in Brazil and

_____

_____

—

Portugal). Brazilian audiences consider it more important for brands to be present in critical moments and to promote the public's awareness and consciousness. Female respondents believe that brands, that embraced the cause and promoted social isolation, enhance their image.

This research, besides being exploratory, has some limitations, such as not having a balanced distribution of the questionnaires by country, showing a concentration in Portugal. Given the current context in relation to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic , it was only possible to collect data based on one social medium, Facebook, with the sample concentrated on individuals between 18 and 25 years old. Hence, the sample does not represent the population. For future research, a larger and broader sample, also more diversified in countries, could, deepen the knowledge about this theme.

In the future, it will be interesting to explore, in retrospect, how brands' actions and performance, during the pandemic, were consequent regarding their value, brand's image, and reputation.

Organic, useful and original content is relevant, and delivers value to channels and consumers. Still, it is not enough to support post-pandemic customers digitally. The "good brands" may want to change the content strategy and "talk" with their followers in a more humane way, using social media in a useful and relevant way for each customer, and becoming closer to their followers. Brands can guide strategies and invest in the development of websites, making their presence felt in marketplace applications, as online shopping will continue to be preferred. Moreover, the concept of "omnichannel", linked to e-commerce, goes beyond this scope, as it allows companies to have greater control and knowledge of the purchase journey. The online presence should be consolidated with an offline presence, without forgetting the reinforcement of proximity and customer support in post-pandemic ways of life.

References

- Aaker, D. (1991). Managing Brand Equity – Capitalizing on the value of a brand name, Free Press, New York.
- Almeida, F. (2021, February 17). 'Marcas caladas em tempo de crise? «Sem comunicação não há relação, sem relação não há confiança»',*Marketeer*. Available: https://marketeer.sapo.pt/marcas-caladas-em-tempo-de-crise-sem-comunicacao-nao-ha-relacao-sem-relacao-nao-ha-confianca.(Accessed:9 April 2021).
- Beer, J. (2020, March 30). 'We're all in this together? Why brands have so little to say in the pandemic'. *Fast Company.* Available: https://www.fastcompany.com/90483063/were-all-in-this-together-why-brands-have-so-little-to-say-in-the-pandemic.(Accessed: 9 April 2021).
- Boin, A. (2009) 'The New World of Crises and Crisis Management: Implications for Policymaking and Research', *Review of Policy Research*, 26(4). doi: 10.1111/j.1541-1338.2009.00389.x.
- Christensen, T. and Lægreid, P. (2020) 'The coronavirus crisis—crisis communication, meaning-making, and reputation management', *International Public Management Journal*, 23(5). doi: 10.1080/10967494.2020.1812455.
- Coombs, W. T. (2007). 'Protecting organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory', *Corporate Reputation Review, 10*(3), 163-176. https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave. crr.1550049
- Coombs, W. T. (2006a) Code red in the boardroom: crisis management as organizational *DNA*, *Choice Reviews Online*, American Library Association. doi: 10.5860/choice.44-0405.
- Coombs, W. T. (2006b) 'Crisis Management: A communicative approach', in Botan, C. H. and Hazleton,

_____

_____

V. (eds),Public Relations Theory II, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, NJ, 171–197.

- Coombs, W. T. and Holladay, S. (1996) 'Communication and Attributions in a Crisis: An Experimental Study in Crisis Communication', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 8, 279–295.
- Devlin, E. (2007) Crisis Management Planning and Execution. Edited by A. Publications,Taylor & Francis Group, New York.
- DiResta, A., Williford, K., Cohen, D. and Genn, B. (April 20, 2020). 'The impact of COVID-19 on your advertising and marketing campaings',*Holland & Knight Alert.* Available: https://www.hklaw.com/en/insights/publications/2020/04/the-impact-of-covid19-on-your-advertising-and-marketing-campaigns.(Accessed: 9 April 2021).
- Dobni, D. and Zinkhan, G. M. (1990) 'In Search of Brand Image: a Foundation Analysis', ACR North American Advances, NA-17. Available: https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/7005/volumes/v17/NA-17/full (Accessed: 30 July 2021).
- Eriksson, K. and McConnell, A. (2011) 'Contingency planning for crisis management: Recipe for success or political fantasy?', *Policy and Society*, 30(2), 89–99. doi: 10.1016/j.polsoc.2011.03.004.
- Falkheimer, J. and Heide, M. (2015) 'Trust and Brand Recovery Campaigns in Crisis: Findus Nordic and the Horsemeat Scandal', *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 9(2). doi: 10.1080/1553118X.2015.1008636.
- Fearn-Banks, K. (2011) Crisis Communications: A Casebook Approach,4th ed., Routledge, New York.
- Greyser, S. A. (2009) 'Corporate brand reputation and brand crisis management', *Management Decision*, 47(4). doi: 10.1108/00251740910959431.

- Hermann, C. F. (1963) 'Some Consequences of Crisis Which Limit the Viability of Organizations', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 8, 61–82.

- Hoekstra, J. C. and Leeflang, P. S. H. (2020) 'Marketing in the era of COVID-19', *Italian Journal of Marketing*, 2020(4). doi: 10.1007/s43039-020-00016-3.
- Hugelius, K., Adams, M. and Romo-Murphy, E. (2019) 'The Power of Radio to Promote Health and Resilience in Natural Disasters: A Review', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(14). doi: 10.3390/ijerph16142526.
- ICM (2021). 'Crisis Toolbox: The ICM Crisis Database s'. *Institute for Crisis Management.* Available: https://crisisconsultant.com/. (Accessed: 10 April 2021).
- Internet World Stats (2020). 'World Internet Users and 2021 Population Stats'. *Internet World Stats.* Available: https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.(Accessed: 9 April 2021).
- Jin, Y., Pang, A. and Cameron, G. T. (2012) 'Toward a Publics-Driven, Emotion-Based Conceptualization in Crisis Communication: Unearthing Dominant Emotions in Multi-Staged Testing of the Integrated Crisis Mapping (ICM) Model', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24(3). doi: 10.1080/1062726X.2012.676747.
- Johns Hopkins University. (2021). 'A evolução da COVID - 19 no Mundo',*RTP*. Available: https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/mundo/a-evolucao-da-covid-19-no-mundo_i1213866.(Accessed: 9 April2021).
- Jordan, T. A., Upright, P. and Tice-Owens, K. (2016) 'Crisis Management in Nonprofit Organizations: A Case Study of Crisis Communication and Planning', *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership*, 6(2). doi: 10.18666/JNEL-2016-V6-I2-6996.
- Keller, K. L. (1993) 'Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Managing Customer-Based Brand Equity', Journal of Marketing, 57(1), p. 1. doi: 10.2307/1252054.
- Khan, N. (2020) 'Outbreak of COVID-19: Its Impact on Brand Health and Marketing Communications', *Business Review*. Available: https://businessreview.iba.edu.pk/covi

_____

_____
_

d19/articles/nida-v3.pdf.
- Khare, A. and Singh, N. (2020) 'Effect of COVID-19 on Brands Communication Strategy', *International Journal of Research in Business Management*, 8(12), 1–8.
- Lee, S. Y. (2016) 'Weathering the crisis: Effects of stealing thunder in crisis communication', *Public Relations Review*, 42(2). doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.02.005.
- Lee, S. Y. and Atkinson, L. (2019) 'Never easy to say "sorry": Exploring the interplay of crisis involvement, brand image, and message appeal in developing effective corporate apologies', *Public Relations Review*, 45(1). doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2018.12.007.
- Marcus, A. A. and Goodman, R. S. (1991) 'Victims and Shareholders: The Dilemmas of Presenting Corporate Policy during a Crisis', *Academy of Management Journal*, 34(2), 281–305. doi: 10.2307/256443.
- Marynissen, H. and Lauder, M. (2020) 'Stakeholder-Focused Communication Strategy During Crisis: A Case Study Based on the Brussels Terror Attacks', *International Journal of Business Communication*, 57(2). doi: 10.1177/2329488419882736.
- Mendes, A. M. and Pereira, F. C. (2006) Crises: de Ameaças a Oportunidades - Gestão Estratégica de Comunicação de Crises,1ª, Edições Sílabo, Lisboa.
- Meyers, G. C. and Holusha, J. (1986) When it hits the fan : managing the nine crises of business, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Mitroff, I. I. and Anagnos, G. (2001) Managing Crises before They Happen: What Every Executive and Manager Needs to Know about Crisis Management,AMACOM, New York.
- Pace, S., Balboni, B. and Gistri, G. (2017) 'The effects of social media on brand attitude and WOM during a brand crisis: Evidences from the Barilla case', *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 23(2). doi: 10.1080/13527266.2014.966478.
- Padgett, D. and Allen, D. (2013) 'Communicating Experiences: A Narrative Approach to Creating Service Brand Image',

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00913367.1 997.10673535, 26(4), pp. 49–62. doi: 10.1080/00913367.1997.10673535.
- Park, C. W., Jaworski, B. J. and MacInnis, D. J. (1986) 'Strategic Brand Concept-Image Management', *Journal of Marketing*, 50(4), p. 135. doi: 10.2307/1251291.
- Pearson, C. M. and Mitroff, I. I. (1993) 'From Crisis Prone to Crisis Prepared: A Framework for Crisis Management', *The Executive*, Academy of Management, 7(1), 48–59. doi: 10.2307/4165107.
- Schivinski, B. and Dabrowski, D. (2016) 'The effect of social media communication on consumer perceptions of brands', *Journal of Marketing Communications*, 22(2). doi: 10.1080/13527266.2013.871323.
- Schoofs, L., Claeys, A., Waele, A. and Cauberghe, V. (2019) 'The role of empathy in crisis communication: Providing a deeper understanding of how organizational crises and crisis communication affect reputation', *Public Relations Review*, 45(5). doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.101851.
- Sisco, H. F. (2012) 'Nonprofit in Crisis: An Examination of the Applicability of Situational Crisis Communication Theory', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 24(1),1–17. doi: 10.1080/1062726X.2011.582207.
- Sobande, F. (2020) '"We're all in this together": Commodified notions of connection, care and community in brand responses to COVID-19', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23(6). doi: 10.1177/1367549420932294.
- Spillan, J. E. (2003) 'An Exploratory Model for Evaluating Crisis Events and Managers' Concerns in Non-Profit Organisations', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 11(4), 160–169. doi: 10.1111/j.0966-0879.2003.01104002.x.
- Spillan, J. E. and Crandall, W. (2002) 'Crisis Planning in the Nonprofit Sector: Should We Plan for Something Bad If It May Not Occur?', *Southern Business Review*, 27(2), 18-29.
- Veil, S. R. and Husted, R. A. (2012) 'Best practices as an assessment for crisis communication', *Journal of Communication Management*, 16(2). doi:

_____

10.1108/13632541211217560.

- Wang, Y. (2016) 'Brand crisis communication through social media', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 21(1). doi: 10.1108/CCIJ-10-2014-0065.
- Whitler, K. A., Besharat, A. and Kashmiri, S. (2021) 'Exogenous brand crises: brand infection and contamination', *Marketing Letters*, 32(1). doi: 10.1007/s11002-020-09554-4.
- Wrigley, B. J., Salmon, C. T. and Park, H. S. (2003) 'Crisis management planning and the threat of bioterrorism', *Public Relations Review*, JAI, 29(3), 281–290. doi: 10.1016/S0363-8111(03)00044-4.
- Zarco, C. and Cordón, O. (2020) 'Analyzing the communication in social media of the main sustainable brands during COVID-19 crisis: the Spanish vs. Italian cases",*Research Square*. doi: 10.21203/rs.3.rs-50382/v1.
- Zhu, L., Anagondahalli, D. and Zhang, A. (2017) 'Social media and culture in crisis communication: McDonald's and KFC crises management in China', *Public Relations Review*, 43(3). doi: 10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.03.006.

_____