

RESTORATION OF REPUTATION THROUGH CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN FASHION INDUSTRY

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Abstract: *The recent wave of crises caused by various factors, which began in 2020, affects all aspects of society, including economic activities. Many industries, including the fashion industry, are experiencing a number of unfavorable developments, chief among them being the reduction in demand for particular goods, damaged reputation etc. Business operations in the conditions of an economic crisis have forced many fashion industry companies to seek adequate mechanisms to face the consequences of this type of crisis. One potential solution to lessen the negative consequences of these occurrences is to implement crisis management in a firm in a systematic way. Crisis communication helps in crisis management, according to a review of businesses' experiences dealing with such an undesirable occurrence or a sequence of events. The subject of this paper is the role of crisis communication in crisis management, particularly from the perspective of companies that dominate the fashion industry. The first part of the paper addresses the various types of crises that all manufacturing companies must consider. The crisis management process, which includes an analysis of potential communication strategies, will be the central focus of the discussion. The final part of the paper examines the operation of companies under high-risk conditions.*

Keywords: crisis, types of crisis, fashion industry, crisis communication, restoration of reputation.

OBNOVA REPUTACIJE KROZ KRIZNU KOMUNIKACIJU U MODNOJ INDUSTRIJI

Apstrakt: *Nedavni niz kriza uzrokovao različitim faktorima, započeo 2020. godine, odražava se na sve aspekte društva, uključujući i privredne delatnosti. Mnoge privredne grane, uključujući modnu industriju, suočavaju se sa brojnim nepovoljnim razvojem događaja, među kojima se posebno izdvaja smanjenje potražnje za određenim proizvodima, narušavanje reputacije itd. Poslovanje u uslovima ekonomske krize primoralo je mnoge kompanije iz oblasti modne industrije da traže adekvatne mehanizme za suočavanje sa posledicama krize ovog tipa. Jedno od mogućih rešenja za ublažavanje negativnih posledica ovih pojava jeste uvođenje kriznog menadžmenta u poslovanje na sistematičan način. Prema analizi iskustava preduzeća u suočavanju sa ovakvim neželjenim događajima ili nizom događaja, krizna komunikacija igra ključnu ulogu u kriznom menadžmentu. Predmet ovog rada je uloga krizne komunikacije u kriznom menadžmentu, naročito iz perspektive preduzeća koja dominiraju modnom industrijom. Prvi deo rada bavi se različitim vrstama kriza koje sve proizvodne kompanije moraju uzeti u obzir. U središtu razmatranja ovog rada nalazi se proces kriznog menadžmenta, koji uk-*

ljuje i analizu potencijalnih komunikacionih strategija. Završni deo rada obrađuje funkcionisanje preduzeća u uslovima visokog rizika.

Ključne reči: kriza, vrste krize, modna industrija, krizna komunikacija, obnova reputacije.

1. INTRODUCTION

Even though a crisis is a common occurrence in many enterprises, it always appears suddenly and leads to adverse effects. A crisis situation represents an unusual event or a series of events that have an adverse effect on the integrity of a product, reputation or financial stability of an enterprise, employees' health or mood, and a community or society in general [1]. Crises can occur in all kind of types and issues as many companies are conducting business across national borders. Globalization has also increased crisis threat word-wide, as crises do not remain as isolated events but have the potential to expand to broader context. Therefore, every enterprise should consider the possibility of the occurrence of crisis situations. The basic issues with which an enterprise deals under such circumstances are: (1) finding ways to avoid the crisis and (2) taking the advantage of it (if it occurs) [2].

There is an inevitable link between crisis and communicative phenomena. According to Sádaba et al. [3], it is possible to make a distinction between two crucial approaches regarding the relationship between crisis and communication. These authors recognize what they call the "essential link" and "instrumental link". First, because crises are public and detrimental to an institution's or organization's reputation, they inherently include communication from their very nature. In summary, crises always have an impact on reputation and, as a result, include communication. The second approach, so-called "instrumental link" pays attention to a communicative dimension when it takes part in solving crises. Communication is seen as a "tool that help to present and manage the crisis [3, p. 260]. It seems that "essential link", according to a number of recently conducted communicative studies, is more appropriate approach to deal with crises since it focuses on various aspects of public image and institutional reputation, on one hand, and, the role of public reactions in the crisis, on the other hand.

Preasumbly, restoration of reputation ought to be considered as a part of crisis communication within the wider communication field, what Fig. 1 indicates [4]. Any crisis may present reputational threats to an organization, and, a subsequent process of exchange of messages (caused by a crisis), represents a specific sub-category of communication – crisis communication. This type of communication can be defined as "the collec-

tion, processing and distribution of information which is required to address a crisis situation" [5, p. 20]. Crisis communication is motivated by a crisis. Recently, due to rise of social media, companies have had to adopt new communicative practices in order to reach various publics of interest to them; in particular, consumers. When crisis situation happens, social media may be used as an easy tool to quickly restore brand image or reputation. A good reputation is one of the most valuable assets for any individual or organization. It reflects the trust, respect, and confidence others have in you, built through consistent actions and ethical behavior. Key factors that contribute to a strong reputation include credibility, reliability, transparency, trustworthiness and responsibility. These qualities not only enhance relationships but also establish a solid foundation for long-term success and influence (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Position of crisis communication and image restoration within communication [4, p. 4]

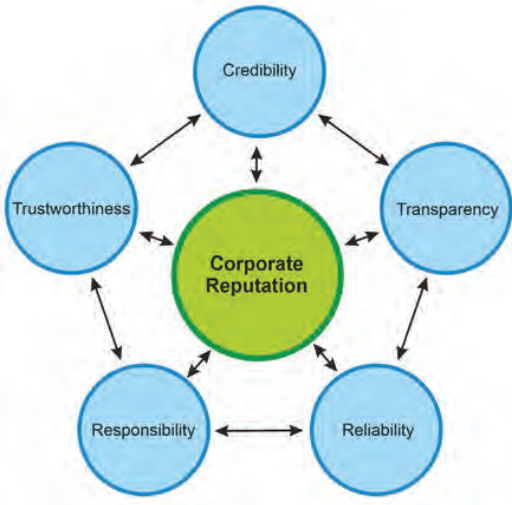


Figure 2. Key factors of a good reputation

Reputation encompasses a number of factors, including perceptions and impressions, and reflects how the firm is viewed by the intended audiences. However, because users can readily produce and share user-generated information that is frequently detrimental to a business, social media may be viewed as a cause of a number of crises. It is hardly unexpected that crisis management and crisis communication have grown in significance during the 1990s and have therefore established themselves as well-known and sophisticated business disciplines. Additionally, there are connections between these two disciplines and the domains of reputation management, risk communication, problems management, and catastrophe communication.

Every one of the aforementioned fields has conceptual overlap and is closely related to crisis communication. Failure in any of these interrelated areas might lead to a crisis and, as a result, the requirement for crisis communication. This study argues that reputation management merits greater focus. Reputation refers to the perception that stakeholders have of a business, which is based on how successfully the business meets their expectations. In any case, a crisis puts a company's reputation at risk. Therefore, it would seem that one of the most important ways to lessen the harm to one's reputation during a crisis is to communicate effectively. In the endeavor to preserve and repair a favorable reputation, it is crucial. According to the notion of image restoration, communication is a goal-directed activity with the primary objective of sustaining a favorable reputation.

This paper will first deal with the criteria for the division of crises. The central part will analyze different aspects of crisis management. The majority of attention is paid to the communication strategies used by large fashion companies during the times of crisis. The described examples from the fashion industry practice emphasize the great role played by crisis communication in the process of adapting companies to the sudden changes in the environment.

One of aims of this study is to present the most important theoretical models dealing with the role of communication in crisis management. This effort is in line with some new research results. Recently (2024), Johnson has conducted a systematic literature approach, reviewing 208 academic articles that contained the search term "fashion industry crises" [6]. The obtained results show a genuine lack of theoretical background, with over 80% of the analyzed articles using no crisis communication theory. Given these circumstances, in this paper the Situation Crisis Communicative Theory is presented as well. The

emergency of various aspects of sustainability has also been noticed within fashion industry. Many companies in this sector, in order to develop the most environmentally brand, frequently are doing mistakes, transforming created brands into greenwashing.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

An abrupt and unforeseen incident that poses a financial and reputational risk to a business and has the potential to interrupt its operations is referred to as a crisis. According to Coombs (2007), a threat from a crisis is shaped by various factors such as (1) initial crisis responsibility, (2) crisis history, and, (3) prior relational reputation [7]. The first factor means that the more responsible the company is for the crisis, the larger the reputational damage will be. Crisis history reveals whether or not the company had similar crises in the past; if so, it could be perceived more responsible, and, the reputation could be at stake. The initial crisis responsibility shows how well an company has or is perceived to have treated stakeholders in other crisis contexts. Finally, if an company has threatened stakeholders badly in the past, the company will be perceived more responsible for the crisis.

Potential crises appear in two basic forms: (1) as the known unknowns type of crisis and (2) the unknown unknowns type of crisis [8]. Crisis situations of the first type are present in many branches of economy, including the fashion industry. Such crises come with a certain probability of the ways in which adverse events (accidents) will take place, sometimes even with a lethal outcome. Although this is known, it remains unknown when such an event may take place. An enterprise can prepare in time to mitigate the adverse effects of such crises by acting preventively. On the other hand, there is no similar opportunity for a company if it encounters a danger that could not have been predicted – a crisis of the unknown unknowns type.

Any company can find itself in a number of crisis situations. And each of these situations represents a specific event, with its own beginning, course and end. Crisis situations occur often in a business environment. Only a small number of crises, in fact, occur as unexpectedly crises [9]. Crises are not single, discrete events. A single crisis scenario instead has the capacity to become a global disaster. Due to the advancement of modern communication technology, the great majority of crises that occur nowadays are worldwide in scope. Even isolated areas have constant access to media, and crisis scenarios are aired globally. Delays between a crucial occurrence and re-

lated media coverage are unusual because of social media, for instance. Furthermore, because crises are dramatic and hence noteworthy, they pique the interest of many media outlets.

3. COMMUNICATION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

The fashion industry companies are evidently affected by different crises. And, every crisis is unique. In each crisis situation one should consider all the relevant factors of the environment. First of all, organisational contexts are different. Contextual factors and situational variables have to be considered; namely, what is appropriate in one industry may have difficulty to apply in another environment. The fashion industry has many obstacles in implementing, for instance, sustainability practices, mostly in the area of environmental protection. On the other hand, there is the lack of comprehensive legislation that addresses sustainability standards in fashion. The very nature of fashion — importance of public perception, brand image and consumer sentiment — implies that management of a crisis effectively can result in break a brand's reputation.

The identification of the occurring crisis can be facilitated if the following basic issues are addressed at the very beginning [10]:

To what extent does the crisis situation affect the accomplishment of the company's mission?

How great is the intensity and the urgency of the crisis?

What values of the company are endangered and will some long-term damage be inflicted?

With which publics are the company's relations endangered?

Crisis situations often lead to disruptions in an enterprise's relations with the media, which in turn opens the door to negative publicity. Therefore, it is necessary to build and constantly improve relations with the media. If these relations were good before the crisis situation, the effects of a potential press conference related to the newly-developed situation will be much better. A possible establishment of a media information center during the crisis will further increase the quality of relations with the media that should be based on honesty [11].

3.1. Crisis and communication strategies

The public's perception of an organization is largely shaped by the communication it does. As a result, when a crisis scenario starts, the media are cru-

cial. All three stages of crisis management — *pre-crisis*, *crisis response*, and *post-crisis* — involve crisis communication. Pre-crisis is concerned with prevention/preparation while post-crisis deals with revision, lessons learned and preparation for following crisis. The most crucial stage is crisis response as it is widely visible to stakeholders and has a large impact on how the organization is responding to the issue and public opinion. A crisis needs a large amount of fresh data, and during a crisis, knowledge and information are disseminated. Therefore, in order to handle a crisis, crisis communication might be viewed as a process that includes gathering, processing, and distributing information to internal and external stakeholders.

The crisis can be overcome, by rule, if the communication with the public possesses a high level of transparency and ensures a quick reaction. Open communication with the media and relevant publics secures the needed credibility. Current information should be shared with target groups in an adequate way – at the right time and in an appropriate form. Experience shows that the manner of reaction in the first 24 hours often determines whether a situation will remain at the level of an "incident" or expand into a real crisis [8].

Crisis situations are normally characterized by a high level of independence and, with that in mind, a lack of confident information on what is going on or has transpired. In such circumstances people become dependent on the media because they constantly seek new information. Hiding from (avoiding to present the situation as it actually is) or misleading the public (which is even worse) are the mistakes that organizations often make when they encountering problems. This is usually characteristic of big multinational corporations [12]. Organizations react in different ways to crisis challenges. Communication strategies in such circumstances can be categorized into two groups: *accommodative* (ingratiation, corrective action, apology) and *defensive* (attacks at those that accuse the organization, denial, excuse). Organizations usually tend to apply defensive strategies. However, if they are deemed unsuccessful in repairing the image or returning to the previous level of market share, then organizations need to consider accommodative strategies as well [13].

Crisis and communication strategies are essential for effectively managing unexpected challenges that can impact an organization's reputation and operations. A well-prepared strategy includes prompt and transparent communication, clear messaging, and engagement with key stakeholders to maintain trust and minimize harm. Proactive planning, such as

having a crisis communication team and protocols in place, ensures that responses are swift and aligned with organizational values, helping to restore confidence and stability during turbulent times. Denial (the negation of the existence of a crisis in general), for example, has weak effects if the organization is considered responsible for the crisis. Therefore, there are six primary crisis strategies that companies may choose in dependence of situational factors (see Figure 3).

However, it is also important to consider communication strategies that companies should avoid in order not to worsen the crisis situation. Coombs (2015) also highlights the need of timely response, especially the importance of “the release of information acknowledging that a crisis exists” [14, p. 144]. Coombs grouped his SCCT-strategies into four clusters of strategies that are presented in Figure 4 [15].

The choice of an appropriate communication strategy is not an easy task: overcoming the crisis demands creativity and decisiveness, that is, new ideas that exceed previous experiences. Moreover, each crisis represents a specific case. When Coombs [14], for instance, developed a guide for crisis communication, he rejected the use of the term ‘best practices’, that would imply a uniform process. Since each crisis is unique and specific, it requires a special combination of communication tools [14, p. 142]. Although

there are similarities among different crises, no crisis has the same characteristics, and, therefore, each case will require a tailor-made crisis communication plan. Despite these theoretical insights, many companies had chosen wrong communication strategy to the crisis they experienced. A typical example represents using “full apology” communication strategy for low- and mid-level crisis. This strategy may even make things more harm than good [7]. In many cases of using full apology communication strategy, the company indirectly takes responsibility for the crisis. This can lead to undesirable consequences such as, for example, lawsuits.

In order to properly connect crisis type with corresponding crisis response strategies to minimize reputational damage, Coombs developed in 2007 the Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The two basis assumptions are exposed in this framework: (1) there is a link between the reputation of an company and its perceived crisis responsibility, and, (2) the extent of the company’s crisis responsibility determines the appropriate crisis response strategy. A chosen communication strategy is based on the type of crisis. The crises are, according to Coombs, divided into three clusters; each one represents a level of crisis responsibility of the company – see Fig. 5 [7].

Level of accommodation	Strategy	Meaning of strategy
Low	<i>Denial</i>	Management claims there is no crisis.
	<i>Attack the accuser</i>	The group or individual making the allegation is confronted by management.
	<i>Scapegoating</i>	Management attempts to place the blame on someone or something outside the company (for example, the company blames a supplier for the issue).
Moderate	<i>Excuse</i>	By asserting that they had no intention of the crisis occurring and/or had no influence over the circumstances leading up to it, management attempts to downplay the organization's accountability for the catastrophe.
	<i>Justification</i>	Managers make an effort to downplay the extent of the crisis's perceived harm and to imply that it is not as severe as it may appear.
High	<i>Full apology</i>	The management pleads for forgiveness from victims and others and openly acknowledges its responsibilities.

Figure 3. Six main crisis strategies [7, p. 140]

Response strategy type	Response strategy subtypes
Denial	<i>Attacking</i> (the person or groups are making the accusation that there is a problem) <i>Denying</i> (statement about the absence of a problem) <i>Scapegoating</i> (blaming someone outside the organization)
Diminishment	<i>Excusing</i> (attempting to downplay an organization's accountability; this may involve claiming that the organization had no influence over the events or denying any malicious intent) <i>Justification</i> (an attempt to minimize the apparent harm; this may involve asserting that the victims deserved what they got or that there were no significant injuries or losses)
Rebuilding	<i>Compensation</i> (the organization gives the victims cash or other presents) <i>Apology</i> (the organization officially accepts complete responsibility for the catastrophe and begs for forgiveness)
Bolstering	<i>Reminding</i> (the organization informs stakeholders of its accomplishments and previous experiences) <i>Ingratiation</i> (stakeholders become aworded).. <i>Victimage</i> (the organization presents itself as an even victim of the crisis situation)

Figure 4. Four clusters of strategies [15, p. 140]

Victim cluster	Accidental cluster	Preventable cluster
• The company is also perceived as a <i>victim</i> of the crisis.	• Actions taken by the company that lead to the crisis were <i>unintentional</i>.	• The company <i>knowingly</i> made inappropriate decisions, placed people at risk.
• Very low level of responsibility for the crisis: <i>mild</i> reputational threat.	• Low level of responsibility for the crisis: <i>moderate</i> reputational threat.	• High responsibility for the crisis: <i>severe</i> reputational threat. • Examples:
• Examples: Natural disasters, rumors, workplace violence.	• Examples: Challenges, technical error accidents, technical error product harm.	• Human error accidents, human error product harm.

Figure 5. Crisis clusters acording the SCCT [7, p. 168]

The Situation Crisis Communication Theory is based on findings from Attribution theory which assumes that when events occur, especially sudden and unexpected events, people have a need to find out reason to the event. The most frequently present emotions in Attribution theory are anger or sympathy.

Naturally, a number of crises, including those involving product quality, ethical difficulties with regard to labor conditions, or environmental disasters,

can have an impact on the fashion business. By creating plans for prompt and efficient reaction, communication specialists — mostly public relations managers — play a crucial part in handling such circumstances. The detrimental effects of a crisis on a company's reputation can be lessened with prompt and open communication with the public and media [8]. This is very important as the world enters the digitalized age which has a quite different way of communication; for

instance, new social media. Rumors and false news and rumors, consequently, have frequently grown in contemporary world. The dissemination of such information has only been helped and hastened by the media and modern information and communication technology, with far-reaching consequences [16]. People are increasingly using social media to get their news from their peers, and conventional media is losing the audience's confidence. In addition to altering the way news is distributed, social media has also called into question long-held notions about what news ought to look like. There is little doubt that this state of affairs cannot continue; in order to rebuild confidence in the media and the information they offer, a new paradigm must be created [17].

In order to recovery reputation, various strategies might be used. Benoit, for instance, identified five image restoration strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action and mortification; see Figure 6 [18].

Fashion brands must openly share their efforts and successes in sustainability and social responsibility due to the growing emphasis on these topics. PR

specialists create plans to draw attention to socially conscious projects, ethical business practices, and environmental efforts, which helps to improve the company's reputation and boost customer confidence [19]. Over the years, the fashion business, which is renowned for its high stakes and fast-paced atmosphere, has seen its share of public relations disasters.

Given the nature of the fashion industry, where customer sentiment, brand image, and public perception are crucial, a brand's reputation may be made or broken by how well it handles a crisis. For instance, H&M received a lot of criticism in January 2018 for an advertisement that showed a Black youngster sporting a sweater that read, "Coolest Monkey in the Jungle" (see Fig. 7). The image was widely criticized as racially insensitive and led to protests and calls for a boycott. H&M immediately withdrew the advertisement and issued an apology, acknowledging the mistake and expressing regret for the offense caused. A thorough review of internal processes related to diversity and inclusion was initiated. Meetings were held with representatives of various communities to better understand the issues and improve practices.

Response strategy type	Response strategy subtypes
Denial	<i>Simple denial</i> (company did not do it) <i>Shifting the blame</i> (some other actors did it)
Evasion of responsibility	<i>Provocation</i> (the act that prompted company to act) <i>Defeasibility</i> (the company lacked sufficient and reliable data) <i>Accident</i> (this was not company's intention) <i>Good intentions</i> (the company intended to act morally)
Reducing the offensiveness	<i>Bolstering</i> (the company has been challenged to make some positive steps) <i>Minimization</i> (the situation is much more better that it was at the beginning of a crisis) <i>Differentiation</i> (other companies act even worse under crisis conditions) <i>Transcendence</i> (the company pays attention to the other problems) <i>Attacking</i> (the accused persons are attacked since they are seen as careless) <i>Compensation</i> (the company will pay for the damages caused by a crisis)
Corrective action	The company obligates itself to overcome the crisis
Mortification	The company is sorry about bad outcomes of a crisis

Figure 6. Image Restoration Theory Response Strategies [18, p. 179]

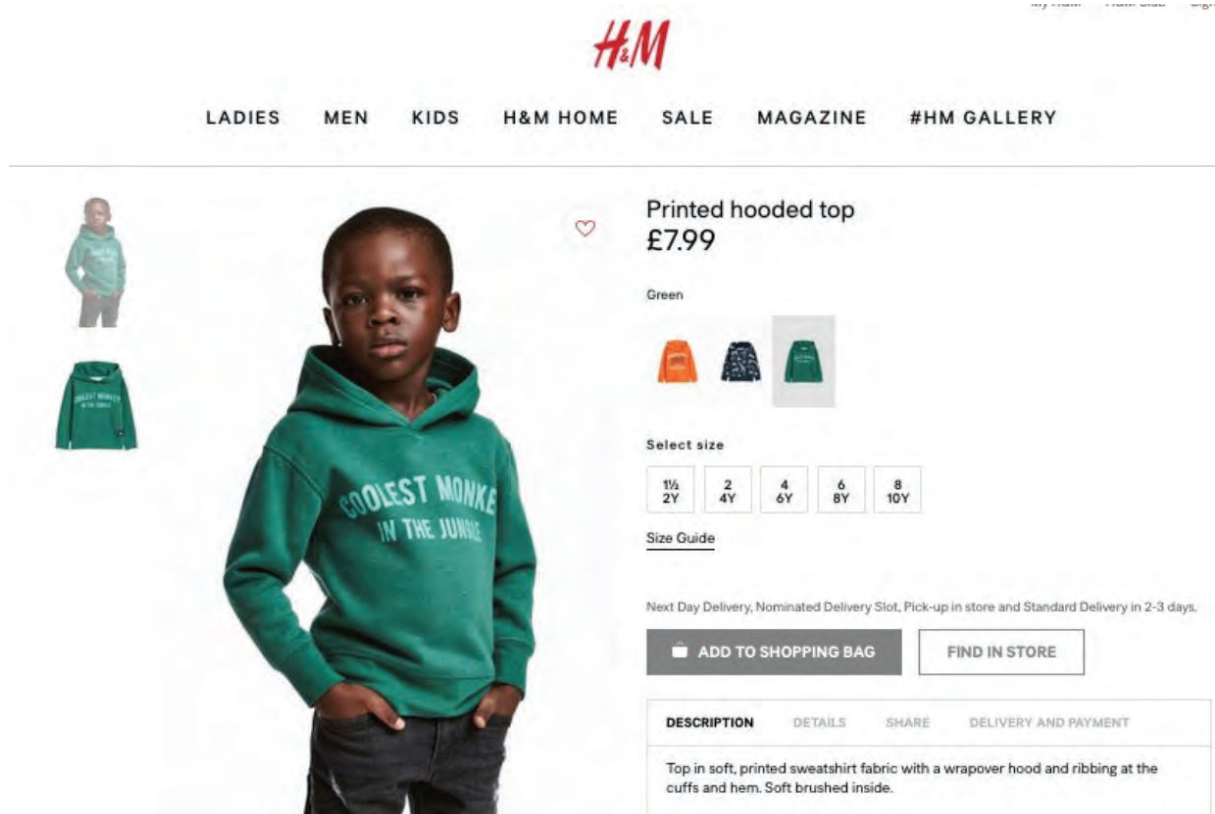


Figure 7. The H&M “Coolest monkey in the jungle” advertisement [20, p. 211]

Although the incident initially damaged H&M’s reputation, the company’s transparent and swift response helped mitigate long-term harm [21]. H&M’s example demonstrates how timely response, transparency, and willingness to make changes are crucial in crisis management. Brands that openly acknowledge mistakes, take concrete steps to improve their processes, and actively collaborate with communities can not only mitigate the consequences of crises but also build long-term consumer trust. Furthermore, many fashion industry companies gained a significant experience in terms of communicative strategies during the COVID-19 crisis, that has transformed consumers’ relationship with clothes [22].

5. CONCLUSION

The fashion industry companies are usually accompanied by unexpected changes in the market that require adaptation to newly-developed circumstances. Due to the increasing probability of the occurrence of a crisis, thanks to the activity of various factors, biggest companies pay more attention to crisis communication in order to quickly restore positive reputation. This is particularly the case in the part of the business function directed towards to conflict management, crisis control and prevention of the

adverse effects of such events on the reputation and business operations of a company. The analysis of experiences of global fashion industry companies show that ill-considered communication with the targeted audiences (especially with consumers) can easily lead to a loss of reputation, which has been built for years on the good performance of the product (brand).

Maintaining a good reputation in the fashion industry is of great importance not only for larger companies but also for small and medium enterprises. These enterprises, which represent 99% of the textile and clothing sector in the European Union, should develop efficient mechanisms for overcoming crisis situations. A higher level of interconnectedness among these enterprises represents one of the ways in which they will be able to better tackle the expected crises in the future.

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