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DOCTORAL THESIS SUMMARY

Crisis Communication in the Web 2.0 Era.

Particularities of the anatomy of

content creators' crises in Romania

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Summary

In the Web 2.0 era, the anatomy of crises generated or amplified by social media or by the online environment differs from those specific to traditional media in terms of the triggering features and response strategies. The interactivity, permanent connectivity and active participation of the online users in the discussions about brands, and the collaborative creation and dissemination of content by users are just a few of the most important changes brought by the evolution of Web 2.0 in the field of communication (Abashidze 2017). These changes pose a technological leap for the public relations practitioners, from the existing crisis response norms and recommendations in the classical crisis management theories (Benoit 1997; Coombs & Holladay 2010; Coombs 2015; Fearn-Banks 2002) to the continuous adaptation of the crisis management strategies by means of the power given by the online environment to the stakeholders through the speed of reaction, interactivity, or rapid content generation and distribution (Diers-Lawson 2020). The new communication ecosystem, influenced by the rapid development of the online platforms and media, gives a new meaning to the term "influence", often used in the context of defining the notion of stakeholders (Freeman & McVea 2001). By using the tools and technologies enabled by the online environment, stakeholders have the opportunity to express their own views, perceptions, or attitudes towards a brand or a public figure much more easily, simply by clicking a few buttons. Empowering stakeholders to generate and distribute content in real-time about brands or public figures presents a series of challenges for the public relations practitioners. Personal experiences, online reviews, or feedback shared by stakeholders can act as a double-edged sword when it comes to the reputation of a brand or a public figure. While online reviews, blog posts, or feedback referring to a corporate or personal brand can act as a catalyst for brand awareness and credibility, attracting new customers or supporters, the reverse also holds true. Negative experiences shared online by stakeholders can trigger controversies, scandals, or even crises that can affect the perception of stakeholders regarding a brand's reputation.

Frequent changes proposed by the social media dynamics and by the new communication technologies, as well as the multitude of ways users access, inform, and generate content in social media, become a challenge for public relations practitioners to build predictive crisis management models in these environments (Buzoianu et al. 2022). In this context, the role of this paper is to propose a model for exploring the anatomy of crises in the online environment, based on how the brand promise and stakeholder expectations in a crisis can impact the reputation of online content

creators. By exploring the crises of content creators triggered either by socially undesirable actions (controversial statements) or illegal actions (breaking the law), using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, the relevance of this paper is given by the fact that it draws relevant conclusions regarding the particular evolution of online crises related to the importance of brand promise and stakeholder expectations in influencing the medium and long-term reputation of online content creators.

Thus, in relation to investigating the particular evolution of content creators' crises, this paper is based upon two conceptualizations of the term "crisis" in the online environment: the notions of "trust crisis" and "paracrisis." While the concept of a "trust crisis" refers to an imbalance between a brand's promise, values, and principles and the response the organization or public figure provides regarding the crisis (Yannopoulou et al. 2011), the main characteristic of a paracrisis proposes high negative visibility generated by stakeholder involvement in the crisis (Coombs & Holladay 2012). Both perspectives include elements referring to the triad of brand promise – stakeholder expectations – brand reputation, perceived as one of the elements influencing the evolution of online crises regarding brand reputation (Brodie et al. 2006). In this paper, these concepts are discussed in relation to the triad of brand promise – stakeholder expectations – brand reputation to explore how both user reactions in social media and media framings can amplify or diminish the impact of a crisis on the reputation of content creators.

This paper is divided into three theory chapters, followed by a chapter on research methodology and another chapter discussing the analysed data, as well as the main conclusions related to the paper's goals and research questions. The role of the first chapter, titled "Online Communication Crises," is to provide a framework for defining the concept of crisis in communication, starting from classical definitions in the specialized literature (Bundy et al. 2017; Coombs 2007; Libaert 2015; Ulmer et al. 2017; Ulmer & Sellnow 2000). The discussion of contributions by key researchers who have shaped the field is complemented by highlighting some of the most important differences between the concepts of crisis and risk (Sellnow & Seeger 2013). The second subchapter addresses the relationship between brand promise, stakeholder expectations, and the reputation of corporate or personal brands (Grönroos 2009; Levitt 1981).

The importance of this triad for communication crisis studies has been highlighted through the discussion of the "brand promise triangle" theory (Brodie et al. 2006). The importance of studying the role of brand promise and stakeholder expectations on the reputation of corporate or

personal brands in crises is further accentuated by discussing key theories and perspectives on stakeholder roles (Buzoianu & Bîră 2021; Coombs 2014; Diers-Lawson 2020; Jin 2010; Liu et al. 2012; Mitchell et al. 1997). The end of the chapter addresses the main challenges in defining crises in new communication environments, taking into account factors such as the complexity of classifying all types of stakeholders who can influence the course of an online crisis, the ambiguity and constant change of technologies, algorithms, and the functioning of social platforms, or the rapid circulation of information created or distributed by any user with internet access.

The second chapter of the paper, titled "Crisis Communication in the Web 2.0 Era," is dedicated to the theoretical framework of the concept of crisis in the context of the changes proposed by the Web 2.0 era. Thus, the chapter begins with a presentation of the definition of the concept of "Web 2.0" (Constantinides 2014), followed by a discussion of the history and specifics of the main communication channels, platforms, and media, or the changes that Web 2.0 brings to the communication paradigm. Subsequently, the chapter analyses the current state of knowledge about online crisis communication (Liu et al. 2012; Zhang 2023; Mei et al 2010; Erikson 2012), considering the specific evolution of the main communication strategies and principles targeted by online environments compared to traditional ones (Jin 2010; Heath & O'Hair 2020; Coombs 2015). This chapter also discusses the specifics of the main studies that address the issue of online crises, referring to how they are framed in new media, traditional media, or social media through the theory proposed by Semetko & Valkenburg (2000). The chapter ends by emphasizing the importance of monitoring the online space in the context of preventing or managing online crises (Zhang 2023; Buzoianu et al. 2023; Fogel 2010), as well as highlighting the main limitations and challenges related to the available tools in the monitoring process.

The third chapter of the paper, titled "Crises and Content Creators in the Online Environment," addresses the concept of "online content creator" by defining these individuals (Arriagada & Ibáñez 2020; Abidin 2015; Enke & Borchers 2019; Ghanai 2020; Balaban et al. 2022), exploring their role in the new informational ecosystem, classifying their typologies and characteristics based on the main models in the specialized literature (Poell & Nieborg 2018; Marwick 2013; Audrezet et al. 2018; Liu & Suth 2017; Campbell & Farrell 2020; Saini & Bansal 2023), and highlighting their role in the dynamics of online crises (Balaban & Mustăţea 2019; Khan et al. 2020; White et al. 2009; Um & Kim 2016). The exploration of the role of online content creators also included the concepts of personal branding (Khamis et al. 2016; Whitmer 2019; Liu

& Suh 2017) and influencer marketing (Ghanai 2020; Žák & Hasprová 2020; Balaban et al. 2020; Pervaiz et al. 2023). This chapter also explores the theory proposed by Saini & Bansal (2023) regarding the measurement of the reputation of online content creators.

The fourth chapter of the paper describes the research methodology by arguing the research questions, the mix of qualitative and quantitative methods used, the specifics of the case studies analysed, and the process of monitoring and data collection. The research questions and goals were argued with reference to the relevance of the paper. The case studies were presented and argued both in terms of their relevance and timeliness, as well as their categorization into one of the two operationalized categories in this paper: crises triggered by socially undesirable actions (e.g., the "George Buhnici" Crisis – 2022, the "Corina Bud" Crisis – 2024, the "Sânziana Negru" Crisis – 2024) and crises triggered by illegal actions (e.g., the "Ana Morodan" Crisis – 2023, the "Dorian Popa" Crisis – 2024, the "Selly & Wiz Khalifa" Crisis – 2024). The mix of qualitative methods (thematic analysis and case study) and quantitative methods (content analysis and sentiment analysis) was argued based on criteria such as in-depth exploration of the crisis context, flexibility in data collection and interpretation, understanding the dynamics of online crises, and the specifics of previous academic research. This chapter also presents and argues the main channels used for data collection: new media (news websites, online press agencies, blogs) and social media (TikTok platform). Finally, the chapter describes the specifics of the main online tools used for monitoring and data collection.

The fifth chapter discusses the analysis of the main data resulting from the application of the mix of qualitative and quantitative methods to the analysed corpus in relation to fulfilling the study's goals and research questions. The role of data analysis, tailored to each case study, is to answer the research questions of the paper as follows:

RQ1. How do new media and social media themes (TikTok) refer to the brand promise and stakeholder expectations in the analysed crisis situations?

RQ2. How do new media and social media (TikTok) use the main media frames (Semetko & Valkenburg 2000) when discussing the analysed crisis situations?

RQ3. What is the role of the brand promise and the stakeholder expectations in affecting the reputation of content creators in the analysed crisis situations?

Subsequently, the main conclusions drawn from data analysis using thematic analysis, content analysis, and sentiment analysis methods are discussed in the data interpretation section.

In this section, the conclusions are correlated with the main concepts underlying the study, depending on each research question, as well as the categorization of the case studies (crises triggered by socially undesirable actions or illegal actions). The final chapter discusses the main conclusions and limitations of this study. The limitations section is organized based on the theoretical limitations of defining crises of content creators, the limitations of the case studies, and the limitations related to data monitoring.

One of the most important conclusions highlighted by this paper refers to the impact that both brand promise and stakeholder expectations have on the medium- and long-term reputation of content creators in the six analysed case studies from the categories of socially undesirable actions and illegal actions. In this paper, the measurement of the reputation of online content creators is based on two main indicators: the *likeability* indicator (Saini & Bansal 2023), which measures the appreciation of the content published by online content creators for stakeholders and their identification with it, and the *expertise* indicator (Saini & Bansal 2023), which measures the expertise of content creators in their field, evaluated through the relevance and usefulness of their communicated content, as well as their ability to attract paid collaborations with brands that resonate with their brand promise. This paper identifies a higher degree of reputation damage in the case of socially undesirable actions compared to illegal actions. The main reason for this conclusion is that in the case of socially undesirable crises, the brand promise and stakeholder expectations were violated, which significantly influenced the amount of negative mentions and online references regarding these creators, the loss of followers on social accounts, the decline or stagnation of engagement and reach rates on social accounts (specific to the likeability indicator), and the loss of sponsorships with brands that resonated with the content creators' brand promise or a decline/stagnation of these relationships in the medium and long term. Regarding illegal action crises, this paper highlights that legal violations only affect the content creators' reputation in the short term, measured mainly by the increased amount of negative online references during the crisis. In all the three crisis case studies explored in depth in this category, the likeability and expertise indicators were not affected in the long term. According to the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the main media frames through which both new media and social media (TikTok) discussed these crises, the lack of long-term reputation damage for content creators may also stem from stakeholders' tendency to transfer responsibility for the crisis to external authorities, such as legal courts. Another reason resulting from this paper's conclusions regarding the lack of long-

term reputation damage in illegal action crises is that the brand promises of these content creators did not explicitly include references to combating illegal activities. In all three cases (except for Selly, whose brand promise includes an element focused on educating young generations in Romania), the brand promises of the content creators involved in illegal action crises are more focused on promoting and encouraging a glamorous lifestyle, based on luxury, extravagance, and living life to the fullest.

Regarding the main theoretical concepts discussed in the academic literature regarding online crises, this paper confirms the perspective that serious situations, which present negative consequences over time, tend to escape critical attention in social media or do not receive widespread attention, while less dangerous but more attractive topics provoke strong reactions and emotions (Diers-Lawson and Pang 2016; Pang 2014). In this sense, according to the conclusions drawn from this paper, although the impact of the crises included in the category of illegal actions highlights more severe consequences for public safety (e.g., driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol), these do not affect the long-term reputation of content creators. In contrast, in the case of situations based on socially undesirable actions, the impact on reputation in the medium and long term must be viewed directly in relation to the discrepancy between what the content creator promises and what they do in reality.

Regarding the theoretical framing of online crises as media storms (firestorms) (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley 2013) or paracrises (Coombs 2014), the conclusions of this paper confirm that both the anatomy and particularities of online crises can be associated with the term "media storm." For example, regarding crises in the category of illegal actions, an in-depth exploration of how new media and social media (on the TikTok channel) discussed these crises confirms that despite their significant online visibility, amplified by the negative attacks against the content creators, the medium- and long-term reputation of these content creators was not affected. The conclusions related to the crises in the category of socially undesirable actions, on the other hand, confirm their association with what Coombs (2015) calls a paracrisis: a visible public threat that labels the organization as irresponsible or based on immoral behaviour, with the potential to affect its reputation. The novelty proposed by this paper, however, mentions that in the case of socially undesirable actions that lead to crises for content creators, the impact on reputation in the medium and long term is more closely related to the violation of the brand promise or stakeholder expectations by the respective content creators during the crisis.

Considering that the online environment gives stakeholders the ability to create, interpret, and distribute information in real time during a crisis situation, they can reduce, increase, or ignore the impact of such a situation (Coombs & Holladay 2012; Stieglitz et al. 2018; Diers-Lawson 2019). This paper confirms this theoretical perspective for both categories of crises (socially undesirable and illegal). In this sense, the attractiveness of distributing information about the crisis and the involvement of online stakeholders in the crisis was more pronounced in socially undesirable crises compared to illegal ones. One of the reasons for this opposition is that, in the case of socially undesirable crises, stakeholders were more disturbed by the violation of one or more specific elements of the brand promise during the crisis. The lower media coverage specific to crises in the category of illegal actions is influenced either by pre-existing expectations from stakeholders regarding such actions by content creators or by the fact that they did not consider breaking the law as an integral part of the respective content creators' brand promise on the market.

Moreover, this paper confirms the hypothesis stipulated in the theory regarding stakeholder involvement in crises (Diers-Lawson 2012), according to which in the case of an online crisis, both stakeholder involvement and the determination of the organization's degree of guilt depend profoundly on the history of the respective organization and the personal experiences of stakeholders with that organization. This paper confirms this hypothesis in the case of crises in the category of illegal actions, where the visibility and negative mentions of the content creators involved in the crisis were minimized by their history or prior relationship with stakeholders regarding the issue that generated the crisis. For example, in the case of a crisis where a content creator was blamed for promoting drug use at festivals, their previous involvement in campaigns or initiatives to combat drug use acted as a "shield" against the impact of the crisis on their medium- and long-term reputation.

Regarding the importance of the brand promise on the reputation and credibility of content creators in online crises, this paper confirms Levitt's (1981) perspective that promises involve a deeply interpretive or evaluative criterion from stakeholders regarding a particular brand, which can essentially influence purchase decisions. Regarding online content creators, this perspective can refer to the consequences that a crisis can have on the level of credibility built among stakeholders, as well as the financial losses resulting from the crisis. Thus, the data analysed in the category of socially undesirable crises demonstrate that violating the brand promise is associated with the loss of sponsorships and paid collaborations by content creators, corresponding to their

area of expertise. In other words, violating the brand promise in crises based on socially undesirable actions calls into question both the content creator's credibility and the likelihood of securing future paid partnerships specific to their field of expertise.

Thus, according to the data drawn from this paper, it can be concluded that the reputation of online content creators does not only represent a passive reflection of the values, principles, or promises underlying their identity. Instead, it is an active social construction, continually reshaped by stakeholders through feedback and content generated in the online environment, especially in the context of a crisis. In an online environment characterized by the volatility and dynamics of information transmission, the personal brand no longer represents the only entity guiding communication narratives. For this reason, the indirect pressure exerted by stakeholders on content creators to uphold the promises, values, and principles that form the foundation of their identity becomes more important than ever. Therefore, as the conclusions of this paper suggest, the reputation of online brands can be seen as a dynamic construct in continuous development, influenced by the perceptions of stakeholders expressed in the cultural, economic, and social context in which the brand operates.

The relevance of the topic discussed in this paper is supported both theoretically and practically. From a theoretical point of view, the topic is relevant in two ways. The first refers to the limited number of empirical studies that examine the specifics of online crises by referring to the role played by brand promise and stakeholder expectations in affecting the online reputation of corporate or personal brands. Although there is extensive literature on crisis management and brand promise in analysing crises in traditional media, online crises have not attracted the same interest from researchers in applying these concepts. Thus, the specialized literature includes a limited number of studies addressing how brand promise and stakeholder expectations interact with the reputation of brands and the dynamics of the online environment. The second argument confirming the relevance of the topic refers to academic approaches to studying the role of content creators in online crises. According to the specialized literature, these refer to four basic trends: (1) studying the crisis response in the case of scandals caused by content creators in various fields: Brown et al. (2016); Rowe (2020); Wagner (2020); (2) studying how a content creator can minimize the negative impact of brand crises: Singh et al. (2020); Yadav (2024); Shrivastava et al. (2022); (3) transferring negative visibility from the content creator to the brand they represent: Um & Kim (2022); Wang & Kim (2019); and (4) cancel culture and the effect of this phenomenon on

content creators: Zhang et al. (2023); Tatiana Schwirblat et al. (2022); Cummings et al. (2023). These studies exclusively address how negative mentions in online crises can threaten the online reputation of content creators but do not discuss the "anatomy" behind this impact. In this sense, the role of this paper is to discuss how two key components of brand identity (brand promise and stakeholder expectations) can be correlated with the potential impact of the crisis at a reputational level.

The practical relevance of the topic discussed in this paper takes into account four arguments. First, the paper provides the reason behind the negative visibility and reputational impact in the crises of online content creators, related to their identity (brand promise and stakeholder expectations). The study helps practitioners identify content creators aligned with the brand promise and stakeholder expectations to reduce the risks of negative association. Secondly, according to the "InfluenceMe" study (DataIntelligence 2024), the number of collaborations between brands and content creators increased exponentially in 2024, but the variables of "notoriety" and "purchase intent" following these collaborations have decreased. Thus, this paper helps practitioners better identify collaborations with content creators by aligning their promises with the brand's, aiming to increase the efficiency of online campaigns. Lastly, this paper emphasizes the optimization of brand collaborations with content creators to prevent potential crises. In this sense, the study highlights the importance of continuously monitoring stakeholder expectations in relation to the brand promise. The analysed data and the conclusions drawn help practitioners implement feedback and monitoring systems that allow them to adjust collaborations with content creators in line with brand identity before a crisis arises.

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