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Post-Crisis Brand Image Recovery through Trust, Communication, and Consumer Experience

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ABSTRACT

Reputational crises can disrupt brand associations, consumer trust, loyalty, and willingness to maintain relationships with a company. This article examines how brand image can be recovered after a reputational crisis by integrating crisis response, corrective action, trust repair, customer experience, and the reconstruction of brand perceptions. An integrative literature review was employed to synthesize research on crisis communication, branding, digital reputation, brand trust, electronic word of mouth, brand authenticity, and customer experience. The synthesis indicates that recovery begins with diagnosing perceived responsibility and identifying the dimensions of brand image damaged by the crisis. Appropriate communication must then be supported by corrective actions that directly address the source of reputational harm. Trust recovery depends on renewed perceptions of competence, integrity, authenticity, and care, while consistent customer experiences across communication and service channels provide evidence that organizational change is sustainable. Brand equity and positive associations can subsequently be rebuilt through credible communication, organic stakeholder responses, and repeated satisfactory experiences. Brand image recovery is therefore a cumulative process of organizational learning and relationship rebuilding rather than a short-term promotional effort designed merely to suppress negative publicity.

INTRODUCTION

Brand image is the result of perceptions, associations, experiences, and evaluations that develop as consumers interact with a brand over a period of time. A brand is not merely a name or symbol; it also encompasses visual and auditory elements such as colors, shapes, and sounds that distinguish a product or service from its competitors (Isnaeni et al., 2023). A strong brand can help a company build long-term relationships with customers and foster positive perceptions that influence purchasing decisions (Al Hakim et al., 2022). The importance of brand image becomes increasingly apparent when a company faces a reputation crisis, as negative events can transform associations that previously supported the brand into doubt, disappointment, or rejection. A reputation crisis can stem from product failures, poor service, organizational behavior, ethical violations, communication errors, leadership issues, or negative information that gains widespread attention (Chakraborty, 2023). Coombs (2007) explains that a crisis can pose a threat to a company's reputation, and the communication response must be tailored to the level of responsibility perceived by stakeholders. This perspective indicates that brand image recovery begins as soon as an organization determines how to interpret the crisis, assesses its responsibility, and responds to the affected groups. A response that does not align with the nature of the crisis can amplify the attribution of blame while simultaneously deepening the reputational damage that must be repaired.

The impact of a crisis on a brand varies. Consumers may consider the nature of the breach, its alignment with the brand's core promise, the severity of the incident, and their prior knowledge of the company (Zhang, 2024). Dawar and Lei (2009) demonstrate that the relevance of the crisis to the brand's core associations and consumer familiarity plays a significant role in changes to brand evaluations following a crisis. This perspective suggests that events that directly contradict a brand's core attributes have the potential to cause deeper damage. A security breach will carry particular significance for a brand that previously positioned

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security as its core promise, whereas a breach of integrity will pose serious challenges for a brand that has built its identity on honesty and responsibility. Reputation recovery must therefore begin with identifying which parts of the brand association structure have been damaged and why consumers interpret an event as a violation of the identity the company has promised (Jeon & Baeck, 2016).

A reputation crisis highlights the close relationship between brand image and organizational communication. Consumers tend to be more loyal to companies that have a good reputation and are able to maintain trust (Hardyansah & Jahroni, 2023). When allegations, failures, or negative behavior have garnered public attention, organizations need to explain the incident, demonstrate their stance on the issue, and provide assurance regarding follow-up actions (Schermer, 2021). Benoit (1997), through his theory of image repair, outlines several categories of strategies that organizations can use to address image threats, including denial, avoidance of responsibility, downplaying the offensive nature of the event, corrective actions, and admission of fault. This framework establishes that recovery strategies must be grounded in factual circumstances and the nature of responsibility. Denial when evidence points to a company's mistake can exacerbate credibility issues, while an overly broad acknowledgment of responsibility in unclear cases can create different problems. Image repair is not about generating as many positive messages as possible, but rather a process of aligning facts, the organization's response, stakeholder expectations, and the actions that follow the communication.

Communication alone is insufficient to repair a brand's image if the crisis stems from a genuine disconnect between the brand's promises and the organization's behavior. A product crisis requires product improvements; a service failure requires changes to service delivery; and integrity issues require corrections in governance and accountability (Al-Jenaibi, 2019). Messages not backed by action can be perceived as a superficial attempt to divert public attention. An apology gains credibility when accompanied by actions that address the harm caused and prevent recurrence. Promises of quality improvement must be supported by observable process changes. This situation positions reputation recovery as a cross-functional management process encompassing communication, marketing, customer service, operations, human resources, leadership, and risk management. The relationship between concrete actions and brand messaging becomes crucial because consumers need new evidence to revise the negative perceptions formed during the crisis.

Recovery becomes increasingly complex in the digital environment because the traces of a crisis can persist even after a company has resolved its initial cause. Negative information can continue to surface through search engines, social media, consumer reviews, news reports, videos, forums, and peer-to-peer communications. Another issue is the risk of misinformation or fake news spreading through digital platforms (Issalillah & Hardyansah, 2022). This situation gives rise to two concurrent needs. Companies must address the root cause of the problem while simultaneously managing the reshaping of brand meaning in the public sphere (Hansen et al., 2018). Consumers do not always update their assessments immediately after an organization takes corrective action. Memories of the crisis can serve as a framework through which to interpret every subsequent decision made by the company. A brand that previously enjoyed high levels of trust may become the subject of closer scrutiny (Jung & Lee, 2022). Minor inconsistencies that arise during the recovery phase risk being interpreted as evidence that the company has not truly changed. Reputation recovery therefore requires medium-term consistency across communication, corrective actions, customer experiences, and the quality of interactions that occur once the pressure of the crisis begins to subside.

The literature on crisis communication and brand management has provided insights into the attribution of responsibility, response options, consumer evaluations, and reputation protection. Nevertheless, there remains a need to synthesize this literature into a comprehensive recovery process. Crisis communication theory often focuses on the alignment of response strategies with the nature of the incident, while brand studies emphasize changes in customer associations, trust, experiences, and loyalty. Customer loyalty can be built through trust and positive experiences stemming from satisfaction with a company's products or services (Darmawan, 2022). This separation can lead to a fragmented understanding of recovery. An organization may successfully craft appropriate communications but fail to address the systemic causes of the crisis. Conversely, a company may implement internal reforms but struggle to ensure consumers understand these changes. The research gap lies in the need to explain how reputation diagnosis, communication, substantive corrections, trust restoration, customer experience, and the re-strengthening of brand associations are interconnected as an interdependent sequence.

Reputation recovery must also be distinguished from the desire to restore public perception exactly to its pre-crisis state. Some crises permanently alter consumer expectations and reveal previously unseen organizational weaknesses (Gribas et al., 2018). In such circumstances, a more realistic goal is to build a renewed image based on learning, transparency, competence, and stronger accountability. A crisis can serve as a test of a brand's authenticity, as companies must demonstrate whether the values they have long communicated truly influence decisions when the organization is under pressure. Companies that can demonstrate change can establish a new foundation for their relationships with consumers. Conversely, companies that cling to their old image without addressing the root causes of the damage risk repeated crises. Image recovery ultimately hinges on the alignment between the identity communicated and the behavior actually experienced by consumers following a reputational incident.

This paper aims to provide a synthesis of brand image recovery following a reputational crisis through the interplay between crisis response, corrective actions, trust restoration, consumer experience, and the reshaping of brand associations. Its academic value lies in integrating stages that are often discussed separately into a framework that positions recovery as a shift in perception supported by changes in organizational behavior. Its practical value is to provide a foundation for brand managers to determine that recovery programs must align with the level of responsibility, the nature of the damage, the needs of affected groups, and evidence of change that is acceptable to consumers. Based on these objectives, this study asks: How can the process of brand image recovery following a reputation crisis be constructed through crisis response, corrective actions, trust restoration, and the reshaping of consumer perceptions and experiences regarding the brand?

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs an integrative literature review because the discussion of brand image recovery requires a synthesis of literature from the fields of crisis communication, marketing, consumer behavior, corporate reputation, brand trust, and customer experience. Snyder (2019) explains that a literature review can be used as a research methodology to identify developments in knowledge, connect scattered findings, and generate a conceptual framework from relevant sources. The search focused on publications addressing the themes of brand image recovery, brand crisis, corporate reputation, crisis communication, brand trust, brand communication, customer experience, image repair, consumer forgiveness, brand authenticity, and electronic word of mouth. Sources were selected if they had a direct conceptual relationship with damage to or recovery of brand perception. Articles that discuss only organizational aspects without a traceable connection to reputation, communication, consumers, trust, or recovery were not included as primary material for the synthesis.

The analysis was conducted through concept mapping, thematic clustering, comparison of arguments, and synthesis of the relationships among the components of recovery. Tranfield, Denyer, and Smart (2003) explain the need for a directed review process so that knowledge in the field of management can be mapped and evaluated more systematically. Torraco (2005) positions the integrative literature review as an approach that enables researchers to organize and synthesize the literature to generate new insights. The literature was then grouped into the following themes: diagnosis of image damage, communication responses, corrective actions, trust restoration, creation of new experiences, digital communication, and evaluation of recovery. The additional sources provided by the author are used primarily to enrich the discussion on brand communication, digital reputation, authenticity, customer experience, e-WOM, loyalty, ethics, and organizational adaptation. The analysis does not conduct a meta-analysis or calculate effect sizes but builds an interpretive synthesis regarding the sequence of image recovery following a reputation crisis.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Process of Restoring a Brand's Image After a Reputational Crisis

Brand image recovery begins with a diagnosis that can identify the specific dimensions of reputation that have actually been damaged. Organizations need to understand whether the crisis has primarily undermined perceptions of competence, integrity, caring, quality, safety, or the credibility of their communications (Robson & Farquhar, 2021). Xie and Peng (2009) identify competence, integrity, benevolence, and forgiveness as relevant factors in rebuilding trust following negative publicity. This diagnosis must be integrated with an understanding of brand image and communication. Increasing customer awareness of brand values and image drives companies to convey marketing messages clearly and build a strong, relevant image, as brand equity can influence purchasing decisions, loyalty, and customer trust (Alamin et al., 2021).

Companies' efforts are not only focused on attracting new customers but also on maintaining customer loyalty by strengthening brand image and trust (Irfan & Hariani, 2022). Issalillah et al. (2022) specifically examine brand image and brand communication in relation to brand trust, while Gani and Darmawan (2022) discuss brand authenticity alongside consumer trust and loyalty. This literature broadens the perspective on crises. Damage cannot simply be identified as a "decline in reputation," because recovery programs must understand the structure of the disrupted trust. Damage to competence requires evidence of improved capabilities, while damage to integrity demands accountability and consistent behavior.

Once a diagnosis has been made, the company needs to determine its response based on the level of responsibility perceived by the public. Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke (2010) highlight the importance of tailoring the response to the nature of the crisis and demonstrate the value of a "rebuild" strategy under conditions of high accountability. Adaptation is crucial because companies do not face situations that can be fully anticipated through standard procedures. Arifin and Darmawan (2022) identify an adaptive approach as a key theme in crisis management when organizations are in situations of uncertainty. Adaptation in reputation recovery means that a company is able to adjust the intensity, messaging, channels, and actions based on evolving information without losing moral consistency. Denial may be appropriate when allegations are false, but it is highly risky if evidence has shown the company's involvement. Acknowledgment and correction are more appropriate when the source of the crisis is within the organization's control. Choosing the right response prevents an initial crisis from escalating into a credibility crisis.

An initial response must be followed by a well-planned communication strategy, as the public will evaluate not only the content of the message but also the company's consistency in providing information throughout the recovery period (Bland, 2013). Mardikaningsih and Darmawan (2022a) discuss the design and implementation of communication strategies during organizational change a relevant topic when companies must explain internal corrective actions to various groups. Darmawan, Mendonca, and Isaac (2022) more directly address corporate reputation in the digital age and the challenge of maintaining a positive image through social media as a managerial concern. These two perspectives underscore the need to build communication that goes beyond an initial statement. Companies need to determine key messages, the parties responsible for conveying information, communication channels, the frequency of updates, and the distinction between verified information and information still under review. A structured communication framework reduces contradictions among company representatives and helps consumers understand the progress of improvements without having to rely on external information that may not be accurate.

Ethics determine the quality of recovery communication because strategies that are technically effective do not necessarily build trust if they are perceived as manipulative (Sengar, 2019). Mardikaningsih and Darmawan (2022b) emphasize the role of ethical principles in business decision-making in relation to corporate sustainability and stakeholder relations. This perspective is relevant when companies face the temptation to downplay issues, divert attention, conceal information, or create a positive perception before the root causes of the crisis have been fully addressed. Reputation recovery communication must distinguish between legitimate persuasion and the manipulation of information. An apology, for example, is meaningful only when it is accompanied by an acknowledgment of the harm caused and a commitment to change. The use of empathetic language without action can undermine credibility if consumers perceive a disconnect between the message and their actual experience. Ethically, the success of reputation recovery is not judged solely by how quickly negative sentiment subsides, but by how the company fulfills its responsibilities to consumers and other groups affected by the crisis.

Corrective actions are the stage that transforms communication into evidence. Recovery will be difficult if a company creates a new narrative while the internal processes that triggered the crisis remain in place (Contreras-Pacheco et al., 2024). Mardikaningsih and Darmawan (2022c) discuss business sustainability when organizations face regulatory uncertainty and managerial issues. This concept of sustainability can be applied to recovery by positioning improvements as part of the organization's resilience, rather than as a temporary response to public pressure. Corrective actions may include changes to quality standards, audits, security systems, complaint handling, suppliers, governance, training, or accountability structures, depending on the cause of the crisis (Gottschalk, 2024). Changes must be specific enough for consumers to connect them to the issues that previously occurred. A company that has experienced a data breach, for example, needs to update its security and data governance, not just launch a public relations campaign. The relevance of the actions to the source of the problem is essential for the public to have a rational basis for revising its assessment.

The subsequent restoration of brand trust depends on the alignment between corrective actions and consumers' new experiences (Duile, 2022). Issalillah et al. (2022) link communication and image to brand trust, while Gani and Darmawan (2022) connect authenticity to both trust and loyalty. These two themes indicate that post-crisis trust has both communicative and behavioral dimensions. Authenticity is particularly relevant because consumers can assess whether a company's actions reflect its true brand values or are merely undertaken while public attention remains high. Trust is restored when a company demonstrates consistent behavior after the pressure of the crisis subsides. Consumers need sufficient experience to distinguish structural changes from temporary reactions. In this situation, companies do not need to force the message that the crisis is over (Benavides & Rodríguez, 2022). A more credible approach is to demonstrate progress in making corrections, acknowledge limitations, and maintain the quality of the experience until new evidence gradually reduces the dominance of negative associations.

Customer experience holds strategic importance because a brand's image recovery is ultimately tested through interactions that consumers genuinely perceive as positive. Fared, Darmawan, and Khairi (2021) examine the relationship between e-service quality and customer satisfaction in relation to the intention to repurchase. Loyalty is also influenced by emotional memory, as a single negative experience can leave a deeper impression than several positive ones and affect consumers' perceptions of the brand (Gardi et al., 2022). Image recovery will be fragile if a company improves one channel while another channel continues to generate negative experiences. Consistency across touchpoints demonstrates that corrective measures have become an organizational policy (Waseem & Kamal, 2024). More responsive service, a clear complaint process, and consistent interaction quality can create a series of new experiences that support the restoration of consumer perceptions and their willingness to continue their relationship with the brand.

The reconstruction of brand associations must take into account brand equity and the competitive position remaining after a crisis. Khayru and Issalillah (2022) discuss brand equity in relation to purchase decisions, while Gardi and Darmawan (2022) address the formation of long-term brand equity through perceived value. Darmawan and Grenier (2021) identify competitive advantage and the service marketing mix as marketing aspects related to the creation of market value. The success of marketing through various corporate activities depends heavily on a company's ability to build emotional connections and provide positive experiences to consumers (Cahyati & Mardikaningsih, 2021). These sources help demonstrate that recovery does not merely address fleeting sentiment but must improve brand value in consumer decision-making. Companies need to determine which associations remain credible enough to retain and which attributes must be rebuilt through new evidence. If a crisis undermines a key claim, reusing that claim too soon can generate skepticism (Sulivyo, 2021). A stronger reconstruction stems from proven changes, allowing brand equity to rebuild through consistent quality, experiences, and perceptions of value.

Consumer-to-consumer communication is a crucial part of recovery because companies do not fully control the information that shapes their image (Wang et al., 2022). Putra et al. (2021) examine electronic word of mouth in relation to consumer interest, while Kurniawan et al. (2023) discuss WOM and brand trust in purchasing decisions. The presence of e-WOM means that recovery programs must prioritize experiences positive enough for consumers to discuss them organically. Company campaigns can explain changes, but customer testimonials often provide a different kind of credibility because they stem from the experiences of parties outside the organization (Sun et al., 2023). Companies need to avoid manipulating reviews and fabricating fake support, as such actions can trigger a new integrity crisis. A more sustainable focus is on improving the customer experience, providing adequate resolution of complaints, and offering verifiable information. A shift in the conversation then becomes a result of these improvements, not a substitute for them.

The digital ecosystem has expanded the need for companies to understand patterns of interaction and opinion formation (Şahin-Kazazoğlu et al., 2019). Marketing communication serves as a means for companies to navigate competition while helping consumers obtain relevant information to determine which products or services best suit their needs (Hariani & Irfan, 2022). Darmawan (2021) discusses changes in social interaction within digital society and the dynamics of virtual communities, while Fared and Darmawan (2021) explore the use of consumer behavioral data in personalizing digital advertising. Sinambela and Darmawan

(2021) also position email marketing as part of the digital marketing communications mix. These themes can help us understand that recovery takes place across many digital spaces with distinct characteristics. Social media is suitable for rapid updates and public interaction; email can be used for direct communication with customers; and consumer data can aid in segmenting information needs. The use of data must still adhere to ethical standards and should not be directed toward exploiting consumer vulnerabilities. The personalization of recovery messages should help affected groups obtain relevant information, not create different versions of reality for each audience.

Influencers and parasocial relationships can also influence acceptance of a brand image that is being rebuilt (Beldad & Scholten, 2023). The use of influencers can expand a message's reach, but carries risks if companies treat them as a substitute for substantive solutions. Audiences may perceive a public figure's endorsement as inauthentic if it appears too soon or is not accompanied by evidence of change. Third-party credibility must be built through alignment between messages, experiences, and verifiable facts. During the recovery phase, external support is more useful when it explains genuine changes taking place rather than merely shifting the conversation from a crisis to a promotional campaign. Authenticity serves as the link between brand reputation and the credibility of the parties helping to convey the message.

Recovery communication must also be inclusive, as stakeholders do not share the same levels of knowledge, experience, needs, and access to communication (Ndlela, 2019). Mardikaningsih et al. (2024) identify inclusive public communication in the digital age as a theme that requires attention to audience diversity. Reputation recovery can fail if a company speaks only to its core customers while other affected groups do not receive adequate explanations. Message development must take into account customers, employees, partners, communities, investors, and other groups depending on the type of crisis. Language that is too technical can make it difficult for some consumers to understand corrective actions, while messages that are too simplistic may be seen as avoiding the substance of the issue. Inclusivity means that key information is accessible, understandable, and open to questions from stakeholders. Mechanisms for dialogue must be provided so that recovery proceeds as a process of both listening and explaining, rather than one-way communication aimed solely at shaping perceptions.

Ultimately, recovery must be measured through changes in trust, experience, loyalty, and behavior not merely through the volume of positive media coverage. Sinambela and Mardikaningsih (2023) examine the relationship between brand communication and brand experience in relation to brand loyalty, while Kurniawan et al. (2023) explore the role of brand trust and word-of-mouth (WOM) in consumer decision-making. These relationships highlight the importance of evaluations that go beyond sentiment analysis. Companies can monitor changes in brand associations, trust levels, repurchase intent, retention, satisfaction, complaints, recommendations, and cross-channel experiences. Evaluations should be conducted longitudinally because reputation does not recover at a single point in time. The answer to the research question is that brand image recovery occurs through damage diagnosis, an appropriate response, ethical communication, corrective actions, trust reinforcement, consistent experiences, equity reconstruction, e-WOM management, and repeated evaluation. The image recovers when consumers obtain new evidence that is consistent enough to revise their negative assessments of the brand.

CONCLUSION

Brand image recovery following a reputation crisis is a cumulative process that links communication responses to substantive changes in organizational behavior. Recovery begins with diagnosing the extent of responsibility and identifying the dimensions of the brand image that have been damaged. The organization must then select an appropriate response, provide credible information, and implement corrective actions that address the root causes of the crisis. Trust is restored when consumers perceive consistency between the brand's communication, competence, integrity, and care, as well as the new experiences they receive in their relationship with the brand. In the next stage, brand associations and equity are rebuilt through the quality of the experience, cross-channel communication, e-WOM, and evidence of lasting change even after public attention has subsided. Reputation recovery is therefore not synonymous with erasing memories of the crisis. A more realistic goal is to establish credible new reasons for consumers to be willing to reassess the brand and continue their relationship with it.

Reputation recovery must be situated at the intersection of crisis communication, brand trust, brand experience, brand authenticity, brand equity, and consumer behavior. This perspective broadens the discussion from message selection to a series of changes that link corporate communication and operations. Reputation recovery can be viewed as a process that moves from the attribution of responsibility toward the reconstruction of the evidence consumers use to evaluate a brand. Companies need to establish a cross-functional recovery framework that integrates management, communications, marketing, customer service, operations, and digital channel management. Measures of success should not be limited to a reduction in negative sentiment or an increase in positive exposure. Recovery must be viewed through the lens of renewed trust, consistent customer experience, the quality of e-WOM, retention, loyalty, and the organization's ability to sustain changes once external pressures related to the crisis have subsided.

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