



Assessing the Impact of a Product-Harm Crisis on Brand Trust and Brand Image: A Focus on the Listeriosis Crisis

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Abstract

Brand crises endanger companies, and no organisation is immune from them; each has an equal risk of experiencing one. Existing research on crisis brands lists detrimental consequences on the focus brand and experiments with coping mechanisms. Research on the impact of the brand crisis on brand trust and brand image is sparse. This study examines the impact of a product-harm crisis on brand trust and image. A descriptive quantitative research method was used to collect data from 384 randomly selected food retail store shoppers. The findings revealed that consumers continue to trust open and honest brands during a crisis. The research was limited to uMhlathuze municipality; thus, it cannot be generalised. The brand crisis was limited to the Listeriosis case. The study contributes to the current body of knowledge on brand management by providing insight into how organisations can respond after a crisis to regain their consumers' trust. The research concludes that taking responsibility after a crisis outbreak and being open and honest about the crisis can result in consumers' forgiveness, and they end up overlooking the crisis and its negative impacts.

Keywords: *Brand Trust; Listeriosis; Product-Harm Crisis; Crisis Management*

INTRODUCTION

A brand crisis is the kind of situation that instils doubt and negative judgment about a particular brand in the minds of consumers (Haiying & Gouliang, 2013). Brand crises are different, and the way in which they affect organisations also varies. For instance, the H&M crisis, where the company was found to promote racism through a monkey sweatshirt ad (West, 2018), is not the same as Mattel's massive toy recalls in 2007 (Teagarden, 2009) and Toyota's massive automobile recalls since a fatal car crash in 2009 (Andrews et al., 2011). These crises differ in terms of the damage they cause. Mattel's and Toyota's crises are examples of product-harm crises.

The study looks at the impact of a product-harm crisis on brand trust and brand image with a primary focus on the Listeriosis crisis in uMhlathuze municipality. Product-harm crises are among a company's greatest fears (Ndamah-Arthur, 2022). Due to the fact that they are perceived as well-publicised situations when items are revealed to be faulty or hazardous to human health, product-harm crises are notorious for taking over the public and media landscape (Mgoduka et al., 2021). Pangarkar et al. (2022) claim that product damage crises can undermine a company's credibility, reputation, and corporate image. Consumers may begin to doubt their loyalty to the impacted brands because of brand crises. According to Kolehmainen (2020), businesses might choose to ignore the existence of the problem entirely, lessen how irritating it is, or take remedial action in response to it. After a brand crisis, such as a crisis involving product injury, these crisis management tactics may have their own impact on customer brand trust and brand image (Kolehmainen, 2020). Because product-harm situations spread rapidly and readily over the world as a result of globalised markets, there has been an increase in the number of studies on these issues during the past few decades (Yuan et al., 2020). Certain brand crises may pose a threat to customers' safety (Kolehmainen, 2020). For instance, the Ford Kuga incident, in which their vehicles caught fire in the middle of the road, is an instance of product injury that put consumers'

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safety in danger (Hosken & Knowler, 2017).

While Kolehmainen (2020) has also emphasised that brand crises may impair consumer trust towards a brand, Cleeren et al. (2017) hint that the negative impacts of product injury crises may not necessarily be physical and that it is legitimate for customers to doubt brand trust. Product-harm incidents may also be detrimental to the brand's reputation. In order to better understand how a product-harm catastrophe affects brand trust and brand image, this study will explicitly focus on the listeriosis disaster. The theory employed in this current study is the situational crisis communication theory. The situational crisis communication theory is a theory that is aimed at mapping out how crisis response tactics might be employed to maintain reputational assets. The objective of this study is to examine how a brand crisis affects brand trust, adding to the body of knowledge already available on brand management. This study also sheds light on how businesses might react to a crisis in order to win back their customers' trust. Furthermore, the objective of this study is to determine the effect of a product-harm crisis on brand image. The study's goals will be laid forth in the next section. The study will next outline the theory upon which the research question is based and offer a review of the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Situational crisis communication theory

One of the most popular ideas in crisis communication research is situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2017). Benson (1988) made the remark that there was a severe and systematic need to link crisis-response methods with crisis circumstances, which served as the impetus for the creation of SCCT (Coombs, 2017). SCCT is a theory that relates crisis response tactics with crisis categories in a systematic manner (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Furthermore, Dulaney and Gunn (2017) add that the situational crisis communication theory expands on what was once known as image restoration but is now known as image repair and aims to map out how crisis response tactics might be employed to maintain reputational assets. According to Dulaney and Gunn (2017), SCCT makes a relationship between crisis-response methods and crisis categories by using attribution theory.

According to the notion of attribution, individuals look for causes for things, particularly bad things. Events are sometimes attributed to internal or external forces, depending on the circumstances (situational concerns) (Coombs, 2017). SCCT advises crisis communicators to analyse the nature of the crisis and the aggravating variables to determine the likelihood that stakeholders may assign the organisation in crisis with crisis responsibility (Ma & Zhan, 2016). Three groups of crisis types can be identified:

1. Minimal crisis responsibility (workplace violence, natural disaster or misinformation),
2. Low crisis responsibility (technical-error accidents or technical error product harm);
3. High crisis responsibility (human error accidents or human error product harm) (Coombs, 2017).

The Listeriosis crisis, which is of interest to this study, is a high crisis responsibility crisis type. The response of organisations to a crisis has an impact on brand trust. The three categories of crisis response tactics include educating the public, updating the public, and repairing reputations (Kriyantono, 2012). Informational support enables participants to deal physically with a crisis (Coombs, 2017). Examples of modifying information include condolences, remedial measures, details of the crisis occurrence, counselling services, and compensation (Dulaney & Gunn, 2017).

Denial, diminishment, and rebuilding are the three main reputation-repair tactics, according to Coombs (2017). Rebuild methods aim to provide good information about the organisation and include apologies and compensation, while denial techniques try to distance the organisation from the issue. Diminish strategies try to support the idea that the organisation bears little responsibility

for the disaster (Coombs, 2017). Brand trust is affected by how organisations respond to crises.

Brands

Brands can be described as means and ways which allow customers to know the origin and maker of a product and to whom they can ask responsibility for the product if a problem happens to the product (Baek & Kim, 2018). In addition, Maurya and Mishra (2012) assert that a brand is how a person, business, or product is viewed by people who interact with it. A brand is an unmistakable sensation these assets elicit, which is far more than just a name or a logo (Baek & Kim, 2018). Additionally, brands enable customers to recognise and identify items that belong to certain brands (Mgoduka et al., 2021). As a result, brands become extremely sensitive to public image, which makes them more crucial than ever to their owners (Salvador & Ikeda, 2017).

Brand trust

Portal et al. (2019) posit that if a person is willing to depend on another party in the belief that the party will not disappoint them intentionally, that defines brand trust. If a consumer is frequently exposed to and interact with a brand, their knowledge about the brand, which will contribute to the development of trust, increases (Toklu & Kucuk, 2017).

Brand trust is influenced by the organisation's or brand's reliability, intentions and trustworthiness (Toklu & Kucuk, 2017). Consumers give back to organisations they trust by being loyal, which means that they support the brand to its fullest potential. Brand trust is divided into two dimensions; the first dimension of brand trust is associated with the brand's ability along with the willingness to keep the promises made to consumers and to reach their expectations, and the second dimension is associated with the brand having the consumer's best interest at hand regarding their welfare and interests (Toklu & Kucuk, 2017).

Previous research on brand trust differs from current research because Paine (2003) suggests that trust does not only consist of 2 dimensions. According to Paine (2003), there are six dimensions to trust. Paine (2003) views trust as an important component that measures the quality of a relationship. The dimensions of trust, according to Paine (2003), are competence, integrity, reliability, satisfaction, identification and openness, along with honesty.

1. Competence – This deals with the organisation's ability to fulfil its promises. Can the organisation compete and survive in its industry?
2. Integrity – Integrity covers the fact that organisations should at all times be fair and just.
3. Reliability – Being reliable is being able to do what one says one will do.
4. Satisfaction – Satisfaction has everything to do with benefits being more than costs.
5. Identification – Identification measures the common goals and values that organisations have with consumers, co-workers and management.
6. Openness and Honesty – This dimension deals with the sharing of information, which must be done sincerely and appropriately. Previous studies show that brands that are open and honest during a crisis are easily forgiven by consumers (Paine, 2003; Cleeren, 2015; Hegner et al., 2014; Mgoduka et al., 2021).

Negative information about a brand can have a negative impact on brand trust. This is supported by the findings from research undertaken by Yannopoulou et al. (2011) in the UK. The study was aimed at assessing the media amplification of a brand crisis and its effect on brand trust. The finding shows that generalised public images of product crises initiate the public's perception of risk, and that has a negative effect on brand trust compared to the consumer's actual experience. Trust is very difficult to restore after a brand crisis (Gao et al., 2013). This is mainly because brand equity is too fragile due to the fact that it is founded on consumers' beliefs and is outside the control

of management (Gao et al., 2013). Further to this, previous studies show that consumers tend to pay more attention to negative information about a brand compared to positive information. This then damages brand trust because negative information about a brand has a negative impact on brand trust (Yannopoulou et al., 2011). This is supported by Yannopoulou et al. (2011), who posit that brand trust is very sensitive due to the fact that it is highly based on consumers' beliefs.

Brand image

Brand image is characterised by the perceptions or opinions of consumers about a brand, and these perceptions are influenced by the way organisations or brands deliver their promises to consumers (Toklu & Kucuk, 2017). Zia et al. (2021) explain brand image as a mixture of the consumer's insights and convictions about a brand. According to Zia et al. (2021), brand image has been regarded as one of the numerous ways by which a company's appearance is calculated. Brand image is very crucial in determining customer satisfaction (Alhaddad, 2014). Mao (2010) posits that brand image plays an important role in brand building. The findings from a study conducted by Alhaddad (2014) revealed that brand image has a positive effect on brand equity. This was supported by other previous studies, which revealed that compared to brand loyalty, brand image has more effect on brand equity (Juntunen et al., 2011; Mishra & Datta, 2011).

A successful brand image enables consumers to recognise needs, which the brand accomplishes to differentiate itself from competitors and, therefore, improve the possibility that consumers possess the strength of mind to purchase the brand. Brand image may suffer as a result of a crisis for the company. According to Siomkos et al. (2010), a product-harm crisis like the listeriosis crisis can cause harm, including customer injuries, and can ruin a brand's reputation and public image. However, the results of the study conducted by Alhaddad (2014), which examined the relationship between brand equity and brand image and loyalty, demonstrate that brand equity is positively impacted by both brand image and brand loyalty.

Brands In Crisis

A brand crisis is described as a damaging occurrence that jeopardises a brand's reputation (Kolehmainen, 2020). A crisis can jeopardise an organisation's reputation, according to earlier research (Coombs, 2017; Cleeren, 2015; Mgoduka et al., 2021). Crises may be thought of as sudden events that can interfere with an organisation's functioning (Mgoduka et al., 2021). A crisis can put the organisation's finances in danger in addition to its reputation (Hegner et al., 2016). Brand crises are divided into two categories by Kolehmainen (2020), one of which is related to performance and the other to values.

Performance-related crises typically involve flawed products, whereas values-related crises deal with moral or societal issues pertaining to the principles that the brand upholds (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). For instance, the H&M crisis, in which the firm was discovered to have promoted racism through a "monkey" sweatshirt commercial (West, 2018), is a crisis of values, but the Ford Kuga problem, in which their cars were catching fire while being driven, is a crisis of safety (Hosken & Knowler, 2017).

This study focuses on the idea of a product-harm crisis as a brand crisis after taking into account the many notions that have been utilised in the literature. Performance-related crises include the product-harm crisis. A distinct, widely reported incident in which items are revealed to be faulty or harmful is known as a product-harm crisis. Kolehmainen (2020) asserts that product-harm crises are distinct from other kinds of brand crises because they necessitate the existence of a defective product, which frequently but not always results in a product recall. The listeriosis crisis, a product-harm disaster that South Africa experienced between 2017 and 2018, is the primary subject of this study (Van der Vyver, 2018).

Listeriosis crisis in South Africa

The largest listeriosis epidemic in recorded history occurred in South Africa between 2017 and 2018, and it attracted a lot of media attention. [Idas \(2018\)](#) asserts that *Listeria monocytogenes* is a kind of bacterium that may be found in soil, water, and animals like cattle and poultry. The largest risk of *Listeria* is seen in raw vegetables and ready-to-eat processed meats like viennas and polonies ([Donovan, 2015](#)). When contaminated food or water is ingested, *Listeria* causes Listeriosis ([Donovan, 2015](#); [Carpentier & Cerf, 2011](#); [Idas, 2018](#)). Additionally, Sheridan claims that Listeriosis is a condition brought on by *Listeria monocytogene* Sequence Type 6. (ST6).

A brand crisis brought on by the listeriosis sickness is nothing new; other nations have gone through it. The listeriosis virus is prevalent in the USA, and the disease is regarded as the third leading cause of death by food poisoning ([Schweon, 2015](#)). This is because the illness caused 1600 individuals to become unwell, 1400 people to be hospitalised, and 250 people to pass away ([Idas, 2018](#)). Salmonellosis is the main cause of food poisoning-related deaths in Europe, whereas Listeriosis is ranked as the second most common cause ([Idas, 2018](#)). There were 978 lab-confirmed cases of *Listeria* reported to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) in South Africa between January 1 and March 14, 2018, and this figure comprised cases from every province in South Africa ([Idas, 2018](#)). According to a press release given to the media on September 3, 2018, the minister of health announced that the Listeriosis disease was triggered by *Listeria*. Two Enterprise processed meat plants and one Rainbow Chicken Polonia facility both tested positive for the *Listeria* bacteria. The National Institute for Communication Disease (NICD) and the other collaborators they were working with presented this on March 3, 2018. One of the top manufacturers of items using ST6 — the substance that led to Listeriosis — is Rainbow ([Idas, 2018](#)). Due to the incident on March 4, 2018, Rainbow and Tiger brands had their products recalled ([Idas, 2018](#)).

Product harm crises may destroy brand equity, damage a product's reputation, and impair brand loyalty, confidence, and trust ([Mgoduka et al., 2021](#)). When you put your trust in a corporation, you're essentially saying that you take the firm at its word and believe that it will do all in its power to keep its commitments ([Dulaney and Gunn, 2017](#)). The body of literature on brands in crisis focuses on how brand crises affect brand loyalty, details many detrimental impacts on the focus brand, and explores coping mechanisms for individual brand crises ([Idas, 2018](#); [Makoti, 2018](#); [Schweon, 2015](#); [Mgoduka et al., 2021](#)). However, literature on the influence of a brand crisis on brand trust is still sparse, and this study aims to address that gap.

RESEARCH METHOD

A descriptive quantitative research method was used to collect data from 384 randomly chosen food retail store customers in Empangeni and Richards Bay, KwaZulu-Natal, were surveyed as part of a quantitative research strategy to gather data. To increase the chance of a successful study, it is important to choose a study population that is most appropriate for the research at hand ([Zhao et al., 2013](#)). Hence, data for this current study was collected from food retail store customers in Empangeni and Richards Bay. Due to the nature of the study, which needed data to be obtained from the malls, questionnaires were used. The Statistics South Africa census 2011 population figures for the uMhlathuze region is 334 459 ([Statistics South Africa, 2011](#)). Census figures for 2019 and 2020 are not yet available online. However, it was stated by [Stats SA \(2011\)](#) that if the population growth rate were the same as in the period 2001-2011 (+1.46%/year), the uMhlathuze population in 2020 would be 381 230.

Shoprite, Checkers, and Pick n Pay, which are regular customers in Empangeni (Sanlam centre) and Richards Bay (Boardwalk), were surveyed for data. The administration of the Richards

Bay Boardwalk estimates that 1.2 million people visit the Boardwalk on a rotating basis each month, and the management of the Sanlam Centre estimates that 700,000 people visit the Sanlam Centre on a rotating basis each month.

The sample size for this study was determined by the researcher's convenience using the convenience sampling method (Acharya et al., 2013). Due to the nature of the study, which required volunteers from malls, it was impossible to predict the likelihood of participation for every member who visited a mall.

This is corroborated by Archarya et al. (2013), who assert that respondents are chosen in a convenience sampling strategy because they are in the appropriate place at the right time. According to Uma Sekaran's sampling formula, 384 people should be included in the sample if the population is greater than 75,000 (Sekaran, 2003). The number of patrons that frequent Shoprite, Pick 'n Pay, and Checkers in Empangeni is 138 000, 27 129, and 106 454, respectively, according to the shop managers. In Richards Bay, Shoprite has 82,660 regular customers, followed by Pick 'n Pay with 36,400 and Checkers with 15,208. Since the population size was larger than 300, the sample size for this investigation was 384, as the population size was greater than 75,000.

To ensure the validity of this study, the researcher used content validity, where an expert in marketing checked if the questionnaire addressed the research objectives; for this study, internal reliability was used. The coefficient that was used to measure the internal reliability of an instrument is called Cronbach's alpha coefficient and is usually based on inter-item correlations (Maree, 2016). If the items are found to be strongly correlated with each other, their interval consistency is high, and the alpha coefficient will be close to one. On the other hand, if the items are poorly formulated or do not correlate strongly, the alpha coefficient will be close to zero (Maree, 2016).

Data analysis and interpretation

Data analysis was done using SPSS version 24 (Statistical Package for Social Science). Additionally, the researcher employed certain descriptive and inferential statistics. The data were presented using bar graphs, pie charts, percentages, and cross-tabulations after the researcher coded them in SPSS. The analyses were displayed using bar graphs, pie charts, percentages, and cross-tabulations after the data was coded in SPSS. Additionally, the researcher employed statistical mean, mode, and median to analyse the data. To ascertain the significant link and difference between the variables, the researcher further used correlation analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There were 160 male (42%) and 224 female (58%) participants in this study, as illustrated in Table 1 below, from a total of 384 consumers. These findings suggest that most of the shoppers at these malls were females. Furthermore, 30 consumers (7.8%) had primary school certificates, 158 consumers (41.1%) had secondary school certificates, and 84 consumers (21.9%) had diplomas. In addition, 70 consumers (18.2%) had bachelor's degrees, while 42 consumers (10.9%) furthered their studies to the postgraduate level. These findings suggest that though there are consumers who decided to further their studies from diplomas to degrees and postgraduate level, the majority of the consumers have high school certificates (158).

As illustrated in Table 4, the findings from this study also indicated that 204 consumers (53%) reported being unemployed, 23 consumers (6%) reported being partially employed, 120 consumers (31%) were employed, and 37 consumers (10%) reported to be other. This is in keeping with national trends regarding unemployment; for instance, the Labour force survey released by Statistics South Africa for the second quarter of 2018 showed a jump in the unemployment rate from 26.7% to 27.2%, and it is highest among the youth (Runji, 2018).

Table 1. Demographic Data of Consumers

Demographic factors	Categories	Sample size (N)	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		384		
	Male		160	41.7
	Female		224	58.3
Education level		384		
	Primary		30	7.8
	Secondary		158	41.1
	Diploma		84	21.9
	Bachelor degree		70	18.2
	Postgraduate		42	10.9
Occupation status		384		
	Employed		120	31.3
	Unemployed		204	53.1
	Partly employed		23	6.0
	Other		37	9.6
Consumer age		384		
	18 - 25		160	41.7
	26 - 35		128	33.3
	36 - 44		63	16.4
	45 - 59		30	7.8
	60 and above		3	0.8
Level of income		384		
	R0 to R7200		255	66.4
	R7201 to R16500		63	16.4
	R16501 to R33400		57	14.8
	R33401 to R57400		8	2.1
	R57401 and above		1	0.3

From the total of 384 consumers, 160 consumers (42%) reported to be in the age group 18 to 25 years old, 128 consumers (33%) were in the age group 26 to 35, while 3 consumers (1%) reported to be at the age group of 60 years and above. These findings suggest that a large portion of the respondents were Millennials (21 – 36 years old).

From a total of 384 consumers, 255 consumers (66.4%) reported an R0.00 to R7,200.00 monthly income, 63 consumers (16.4%) earned from R7,201 to R16,500 monthly, while 57 consumers (14.8%) earned from R16, 501 to R33, 400. 8 consumers (2.1%) earned from R33, 401 to R57, 400 and only 1 consumer (0.3%) reported a monthly income of R57401.00 and above, as illustrated in table 4.1. These findings suggest that even the employed shoppers do not earn much because the majority (255 consumers) earned from R0 – R7 200 on a monthly basis. Very few of them (57 consumers) earned from R16,501 to R33 400 on a monthly basis. These findings suggest that though these consumers do not earn much, the amount they earn is supported by the National Minimum Wage Act, which was signed by Cyril Ramaphosa. The Act set a minimum wage at R900 a week (900 x 4 = 3 600 a month) (Seekings and Natrass, 2015).

Brand trust

This objective was addressed through a Likert scale of 1 – 5 where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = agree, and 5 = strongly agree.

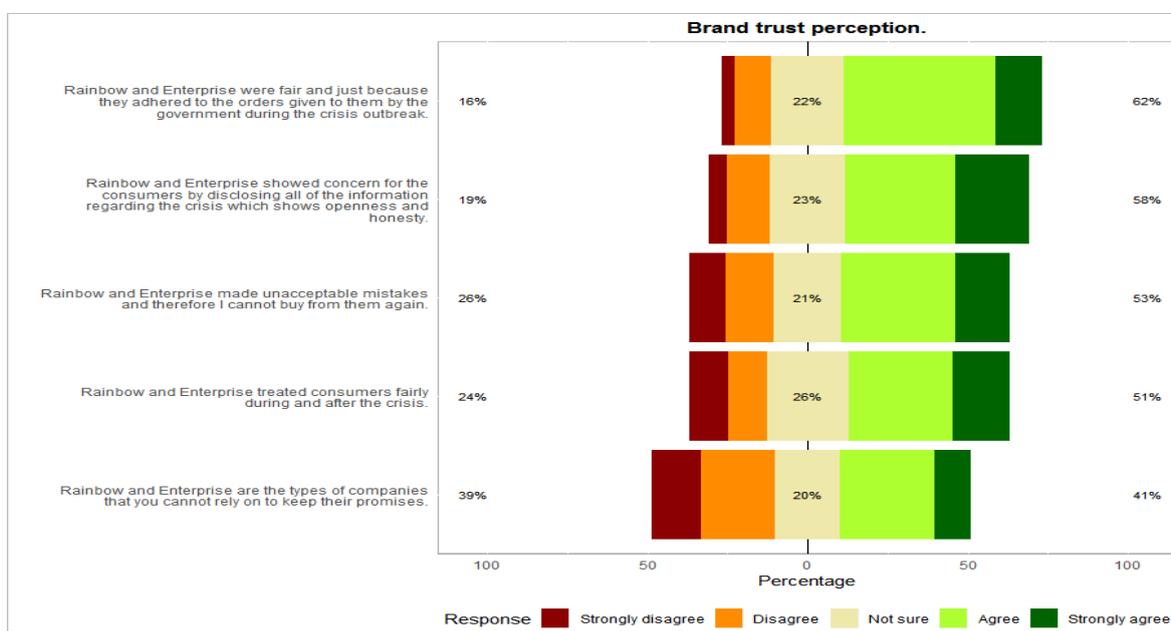


Figure 1. The effect of the Listeriosis crisis on brand trust

Based on Figure 1 above, it can be observed that 239 consumers (62%) felt that Rainbow and Enterprise were fair and just because they adhered to the orders given to them by the government during the crisis outbreak; however, 61 consumers (16%) disagreed with the statement. In addition, 223 consumers (58%) felt that Rainbow and Enterprise showed concern for the consumers by disclosing all of the information regarding the crisis; this shows openness and honesty, and 73 consumers (19%) on the hand disagreed with the statement. About 194 consumers (51%) felt that Rainbow and Enterprise treated them fairly during and after the Listeriosis crisis; 91 consumers (24%), on the other hand, disagreed with the statement. The findings also reveal that 150 consumers (39%) disagreed with the statement, which indicated that Rainbow and Enterprise are the types of companies that consumers cannot rely on to keep their promises; 157 consumers (41%) agreed with the statement. These findings suggest that consumers acknowledge the fact that these brands were at fault. However, they still trust these brands because the majority of them indicated these brands were open and honest about the crisis, along with the fact that these brands treated them fairly during and after the crisis. Further analysis of the impact of Listeriosis on brand trust is provided in the table below.

Table 2. Impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand trust

Items	Label	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)	Mean	Standard deviation
Item1	Rainbow and Enterprise were fair and just because they adhered to the orders given to them by the government during the crisis outbreak.	16	22	62	3.57	1.007
Item2	Rainbow and Enterprise showed concern for the consumers by	19	23	58	3.56	1.145

	disclosing all of the information regarding the crisis, which shows openness and honesty.					
Item3	Rainbow and Enterprise made unacceptable mistakes, and therefore, I cannot buy from them again.	26	21	53	3.31	1.242
Item4	Rainbow and Enterprise treated consumers fairly during and after the crisis.	24	26	51	3.32	1.241
Item5	Rainbow and Enterprise are the types of companies that you cannot rely on to keep their promises.	39	20	41	2.98	1.271

Table 2 observed that all of the mean scores are between 2.6 and 3.5 (item 1: 3.57, item 2: 3.56, item 3: 3.31, item 4: 3.32 and item 5: 2.98). These findings suggest that the majority of the consumers were indifferent to the 5 items that were used to measure the impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand trust. These findings suggest that consumers were defending these brands, and that gives a clear indication that they still trust these brands regardless of what happened. The standard deviation measures how concentrated the data is around the mean; if a standard deviation is small, it means that it is more concentrated around the mean. All of the standard deviation numbers in Table 2 were concentrated around the mean. The tables below present the correlation between the impact of the listeriosis crisis on brand trust and the level of education.

Table 3. Correlation of the impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand trust against the level of education

Impact of the Listeriosis crisis	Level of education	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D	Sig. (F)	Correlation	
							rho	Sig.
Brand Trust	Primary school	1.89	2.00	2.00	0.601	0.027*	0.09	0.06
	High school	2.10	2.00	2.00	0.775			
	Diploma	2.38	3.00	3.00	0.722			
	Bachelor degree	2.24	2.00	2.00	0.661			
	Postgraduate	2.38	2.00	3.00	0.657			

There was no significant correlation between the level of education and brand trust (See Table 3). However, there was a significant difference ($p=0.027$) between the level of education and brand trust. These findings suggest that although there was a significant difference between groups, there was no significant correlation. This means that although brand trust does not intensify as education increases, there was a significant difference between the different levels of education and brand trust. These findings are corroborated by the findings from a study conducted by Yannopoulou et al. (2011), which found that significant differences exist between the various levels of education and brand trust.

Figure 2 showed that 228 consumers (59%) felt that Rainbow and Enterprise are daring brands because they were able to overcome the Listeriosis crisis, and 78 consumers (20%) disagreed with the statement.

Brand image

Moreover, 211 consumers (55%) felt that Rainbow and Enterprise are dangerous brands due to the fact that lives were lost because of the carelessness of these brands, and 92 consumers (24%) disagreed with the statement. It can also be observed that 169 consumers (44%) felt that Rainbow and Enterprise are down-to-earth brands because they were honest; 92 consumers (24%) disagreed with the statement. These findings reveal that, to some extent, consumers did blame the affected brands because they indicated that these brands were dangerous. However, they still believed that these brands were daring and down to earth. This shows that these consumers are loyal to these brands. Further analysis of the impact of Listeriosis on brand image is provided in the table below.

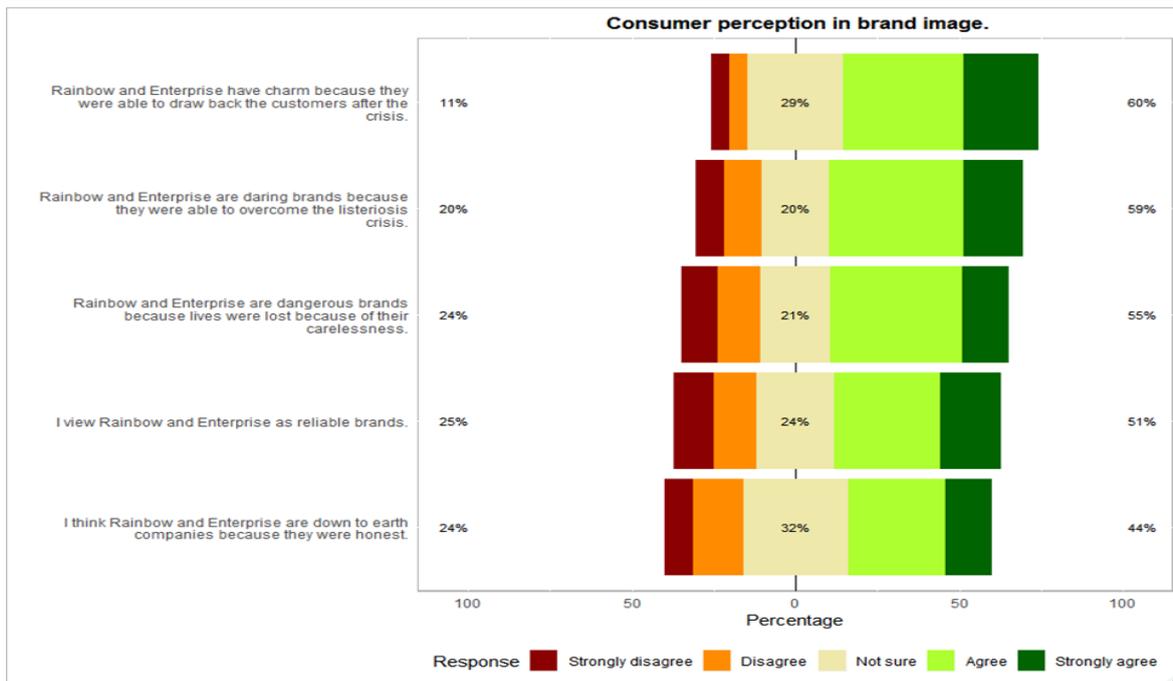


Figure 2. The impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand image

Customers who received a mean score of 2.5 or less were indifferent, those who received a score of 2.6 to 3.5 agreed with the items measuring the impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand image, and those who received a mean score of 3.6 or more were in agreement with the items measuring the impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand image. Item 1 –Rainbow and Enterprise have charm because they were able to draw back the customers after the crisis||, which has a mean score of 3.65, which reflects that consumers were between agree and strongly agree regarding the statement. Item 4 –I view Rainbow and Enterprise as reliable brands||, which has a mean score of 3.32, which indicates that consumers were indifferent regarding the statement. All of the standard deviation scores are clustered around the mean (item 1: 1.068, item 2: 1.169, item 3: 1.198, item 4: 1.258 and item 5: 1.145). These findings suggest that although consumers did blame the affected brands at some point, they still think that these brands are daring and down to earth; this reflects that they still believe in these brands and are loyal.

Table 4. The impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand image

Items	Label	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)	Mean	Standard deviation
Item1	Rainbow and Enterprise have charm because they were able to draw back the customers after the crisis.	11	29	60	3.65	1.068
Item2	Rainbow and Enterprise are daring brands because they were able to overcome the listeriosis crisis.	20	20	59	3.49	1.169
Item3	Rainbow and Enterprise are dangerous brands because lives were lost because of their carelessness.	24	21	55	3.34	1.198
Item4	I view Rainbow and Enterprise as reliable brands.	25	24	51	3.32	1.258
Item5	I think Rainbow and Enterprise are down-to-earth companies because they were honest.	23	32	44	3.25	1.145

DISCUSSION

Brand trust

The findings from this current study revealed that consumers still trust Rainbow and Enterprise regardless of what happened regarding Listeriosis. The consumers (223 consumers out of 384) highlighted that Rainbow and Enterprise showed great concern by disclosing all of the information regarding the Listeriosis crisis, which showed openness and honesty (*see Table 2*). These findings corroborate the findings from a previous study undertaken by [Paine \(2003\)](#), which revealed that brands that are open and honest during a crisis are easily forgiven by consumers. From the findings of this study, it can be observed that consumers had positive prior expectations towards the affected brands. Support for this finding can be found in the study of [Dawar & Pillutla \(2000\)](#), which investigated the impact of a product-harm crisis on brand equity by observing the moderating role of consumers' expectations through a field survey and two laboratory experiments. The finding revealed that consumers interpret firm responses on the basis of their prior expectations about the firm, and that has an impact on their brand trust.

Brand image

The findings from this present study revealed that consumers had positive perceptions regarding the brand image of the affected brands. The findings revealed that consumers highlighted that Rainbow and Enterprise are daring because they were able to draw back consumers after the Listeriosis crisis and overcome it (see Figure 4.19). It was also found that consumers viewed Rainbow and Enterprise as reliable brands. These findings suggest that consumers share a very strong relationship with these brands; hence, the Listeriosis crisis did not have a negative impact on consumers' brand image towards the affected brands. The findings from this current study corroborate the previous studies where it was found that when a consumer is strongly attached to a brand, they can resist negative information about the brand and remain with a positive attitude towards such ([Trump, 2014](#); [Ahluwalia et al., 2000](#); [Ahluwalia et al., 2001](#); [Lisjak et al., 2012](#)).

The findings from this study also suggest that consumers have moved on from the crisis.

Support for this finding can be found in the study undertaken by Vassilikopoulou et al. (2009), which revealed that the effects of a crisis are minimised a few months after the crisis occurs. This is due to the fact that consumers tend to forget about the crisis and its negative effects, especially if the company took responsibility during the outbreak. Moreover, confirming Vassilikopoulou et al. (2009) findings, the results of this present study revealed that the affected brands took responsibility during the outbreak, and consumers were able to forgive the brands; hence, they continued purchasing from them after the Listeriosis crisis. The above findings from this present study answer the last research question, which sought to determine the impact of a brand crisis on brand loyalty, brand trust and brand image.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusively, the study examines the influence of a product-harm crisis on brand trust and brand image, with the main focus being on the Listeriosis crisis. The findings from this study added to the existing body of knowledge on brand management by revealing that taking responsibility after a crisis outbreak and being open and honest about everything regarding the crisis can result in consumers' forgiveness, and they can end up overlooking the crisis and its negative impacts. Therefore, the researcher endorses that brands faced with a crisis should not respond in a defensive manner. Instead, they should take responsibility and be honest about everything regarding the crisis because consumers find it easy to forgive brands that respond to a crisis in that manner. Furthermore, the findings from this current study also revealed that there is a significant difference between the different levels of education and brand trust. However, there was no significant correlation. This means that although brand trust does not intensify as education increases, there was a significant difference between the different levels of education and brand trust.

According to the literature, customers who have close bonds with brands are less vulnerable to crises. The research has demonstrated that customers tend to place less responsibility on brands when they have good prior perceptions about them in the wake of a crisis involving product damage. The researcher comes to the conclusion that businesses should constantly have a good rapport with their clients, which may be achieved by taking part in CSR initiatives. The literature also showed that no organisation is immune to a crisis and that crises always come out of the blue. As a result, the researcher recommends that every organisation have a crisis management team in place. By doing so, the organisation will be better equipped to handle a crisis and reduce its effects.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

For this current study, the brand crisis was limited to the Listeriosis case. Further research can be conducted by covering the strategies that can be used by organisations faced with a crisis to reintroduce their products after a brand crisis. Moreover, the existing body of knowledge on brands in crisis reports several negative effects on the focal brand and tests strategies to cope with one's own brand crisis; however, research on the influence of brand crises towards consumer behaviour is sparse in literature and further research can be conducted on that.

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