

## WHEN REPUTATION BURNS. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF IMAGE CRISIS MANAGEMENT MODELS IN SOCIAL MEDIA

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to assess the effectiveness of reputational crisis management models in the social media environment based on the analysis of real-world cases involving brands and online content creators. The study identifies key factors determining the effectiveness of crisis responses and the process of organizational reputation recovery. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of authenticity, response speed, and communication consistency.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A mixed qualitative–quantitative approach was employed, drawing on empirical research conducted in 2025 among social media users (N = 210). The analysis focused on four high-profile reputational crises: Shein, Budda, Alkotubki, and Pandoragate. Data were collected using an online survey and content analysis of crisis-related communications published on social media platforms.

**Findings:** The findings indicate that the effectiveness of reputational crisis management primarily depends on three factors: response speed, message authenticity, and consistency with the brand's prior image. Respondents perceived apology-based responses combined with tangible corrective actions as significantly more effective than silence, denial, or the deletion of user comments.

**Research limitations/implications:** The study is descriptive and diagnostic in nature and is based on a relatively limited sample of respondents. Moreover, the analyzed cases originate from a Polish-language social media environment, which may constrain the generalizability of the findings.

**Practical implications:** The results provide a foundation for a practical digital crisis management framework. The study recommends responding within the first 24 hours following the emergence of a crisis, avoiding the deletion of comments, combining verbal statements with concrete remedial actions, and adopting an empathetic communication tone. A three-stage crisis response framework is proposed: identification, response, and reputation reconstruction.

**Social implications:** Effective online crisis communication enhances social trust and supports the development of responsible digital practices.

**Originality/value:** This article offers an empirical verification of classical crisis management models within the context of social media.

**Keywords:** crisis communication; reputational crisis management; social media; organizational reputation.

**Category of the paper:** Research-based case study.

## 1. Introduction

The contemporary digital communication environment is characterized by exceptional dynamism, interactivity, and the immediacy of information flows. The Internet—and social media in particular—has become not only a tool for exchanging opinions and promoting brands, but above all a space in which public opinion is shaped and trust is built or eroded (Dharta, Aziz, 2024; Granstedt, 2024; Quinn, 2025). For modern organizations, a presence on social media is no longer optional; at the same time, it constitutes a significant source of risk. In an environment where any user can instantly publish an opinion, recording, or comment, even a single incident may rapidly evolve into a large-scale media crisis (Reuter et al., 2018; Zhang, Vos, 2015).

Corporate image, as one of the key organizational assets, is the result of a long-term communicative process between an organization and its stakeholders (Heugens, 2004; Malara, Sobol-Wojciechowska, 2011). Today, social media serve not only as a space for image creation but also for its continuous verification, as audiences respond immediately to brand actions, compare communicated messages with reality, and interpret any inconsistency between words and actions as a sign of inauthenticity, potentially leading to reputational loss (Menon, 2024; Sohail et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021). As noted by Schwarz et al., a crisis is not merely the consequence of a material event, but a process of social meaning construction in which organizations, media, and audiences negotiate the interpretation of a situation (Schwarz et al., 2016).

Under conditions of instantaneous information circulation, brand reputation has become particularly vulnerable to disruption, and reputational crisis management has ceased to be the exclusive domain of public relations departments—it has become a strategic task for the entire organization (Do, Nham, 2021; Etter et al., 2019). Organizational image constitutes one of the most important elements of intangible capital (Peshev, 2020; Veh et al., 2019). It reflects how a company, brand, or public figure is perceived by its environment, including customers, business partners, employees, and the general public. Image is formed through a long-term communication process and represents the organization's identity, values, and style of operation. As emphasised by (Iwacewicz-Orłowska, 2016) image results not only from marketing communication, but also from how an organisation fulfils its social obligations. Therefore, consistency between declared values and actual practices is crucial for reputational stability. A lack of a clearly defined brand identity leads to communication inconsistencies, which may become a direct source of reputational crises. When organizations fail to control their messaging or provide contradictory information, trust erodes, and even minor incidents may escalate into serious reputational crises (Do, Nham, 2021; Greyser, 2009). Whereas reputational crises in the past tended to develop gradually and could be managed through traditional media, today they are often immediate and unpredictable (Akcan, Merdin,

2025; Hosseinali-Mirza et al., 2015). Their origins may lie in an imprudent statement by a company representative or in false information disseminated by Internet users. A reputational crisis can therefore be defined as a disruption in the balance between an organization's desired image and its actual public perception (Coombs, T., 2013; Heugens, 2004; Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015). Importantly, as Spector notes, a crisis begins only when a public reaction emerges indicating that an organization has violated shared values or norms. The dynamics of online communities, the emotional intensity of user comments, and the tendency toward mass content sharing mean that the timing of a brand's response is critical to limiting reputational damage. Consequently, contemporary reputational crisis management requires not only strategic competencies but also a thorough understanding of communication mechanisms in the digital environment. (Spector, 2019).

Crises often result from communication errors, inadequate information management, or failure to respond to early warning signals (Cheng, 2016; Fischer et al., 2016; Špoljarić, 2021; Wang, Lu, 2020). In social media environments, these factors gain particular importance, as the speed of information diffusion and the emotional nature of user reactions cause even minor shortcomings to quickly escalate. The literature (Coombs, T., 2007; Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015) indicates that a fundamental condition for effective reputational crisis management is the existence of a well-developed communication strategy and a designated crisis management team. As Tworzydło observes, rapid threat identification and the immediate activation of communication procedures significantly reduce the negative consequences of a crisis. Conversely, the absence of an action plan or ambiguous managerial decisions leads to escalation and loss of control over the narrative (Tworzydło, 2022).

Reputational crises may be classified according to several criteria, including duration, point of origin, the type of stakeholders involved, and the level of organizational control over the situation.

**Table 1.**  
*Types of crises*

| Criterion  | Type of crisis | Characteristics                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Time Frame | Rapid-onset    | Emerge unexpectedly and require immediate decisions with limited analysis; typical of social media environments, where responses are expected within hours.       |
|            | Short-term     | Last from several days up to one month; affect selected areas of organizational activity and may be partially controllable.                                       |
|            | Long-term      | Persist for months, leading to sustained reputational damage, for example as a result of recurring scandals or prolonged conflicts.                               |
| Origin     | Internal       | Result from organizational failures, lack of competencies, or improper managerial decisions.                                                                      |
|            | External       | Caused by factors beyond the organization's direct control, such as competitor actions, changes in the social environment, media criticism, or consumer behavior. |

Cont. table 1.

|                                 |                       |                                                                                                   |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Nature of involved stakeholders | Personal              | Concern specific individuals, most often opinion leaders, politicians or influencers.             |
|                                 | Media-related         | Originate in the online media space, often triggered by the publication of controversial content. |
|                                 | Customer- related     | Linked to product quality or customer service issues.                                             |
|                                 | Social                | Involve ethical or moral issues, frequently related to values promoted by the brand.              |
| Level of control                | Controlled            | The organization is able to manage the situation and limit its consequences.                      |
|                                 | Moderately controlled | Partially manageable, though accompanied by difficult-to-predict outcomes.                        |
|                                 | Uncontrolled          | Escalate beyond the organization's influence and lead to significant reputational losses.         |

Source: Author's own elaboration based on: (Al Balawi et al., 2023; Antonetti et al., 2024; Badu et al., 2023; Björck, 2016; Coombs, T., 2007; Lerbinger, 2012; Lim et al., 2025; Mansoor, 2024; Ndone, Kyriakopoulos, 2024; Quamina, Singh, 2023; Yang, Fu, 2025).

Such a classification makes it possible to understand that each crisis is an individual phenomenon, requiring specific actions tailored to its scale, sources, and development dynamics. Reputational crisis management in social media involves planned, systematic, and integrated organizational action (Coombs, T., 2007), encompassing both the prevention of potential threats and rapid responses to crises that have already emerged (Austin et al., 2012; Zheng et al., 2020). It is a multi-stage process (Fearn-Banks, 2016), that requires not only procedural preparedness but also organizational maturity, communicative empathy, and the ability to make decisions under time pressure (Austin et al., 2012). Its primary objective is to mitigate the negative consequences of crises, restore informational stability, and rebuild trust and a positive organizational image in the eyes of stakeholders (Ulmer, Sellnow, Seeger, 2017). The literature on crisis management increasingly emphasizes the role of organizational readiness (*crisis readiness*), understood as an organization's ability to respond flexibly and rapidly to dynamically changing crisis conditions. According to the framework proposed by Jin et al. (2024), readiness constitutes a multidimensional construct that encompasses organizational attitudes, cognitive–emotional adaptive capacity, and a process-oriented approach to crisis management, extending beyond the traditional understanding of organizational preparedness and resilience.

In the context of social media, this process acquires particular significance because communication takes place in real time and user opinions can rapidly shape brand perceptions (Mishra, Maheshwari, 2025). W tak dynamicznym środowisku każde opóźnienie w reakcji, nieprecyzyjna informacja lub brak spójności przekazu może doprowadzić do eskalacji kryzysu i utraty reputacji (Nuortimo et al., 2024). Dlatego skuteczne zarządzanie kryzysem wymaga stałego monitorowania przestrzeni internetowej, analizy nastrojów społecznych oraz umiejętnego wykorzystania narzędzi analitycznych do identyfikowania potencjalnych zagrożeń zanim przerodzą się one w otwarty konflikt (Krysiński, Kowalska-Chrzanowska, 2023).

A crucial role in this process is played by the communication competencies of organizational representatives, including the ability to formulate clear, credible, and empathetic message (Kowalski, Padlowska, 2023). Contemporary audiences expect not only informational responses but, above all, authentic dialogue that entails acknowledging mistakes, explaining the situation, and undertaking corrective actions. Consequently, the effectiveness of crisis response strategies depends on an organization's capacity to engage in communication that is not merely defensive but proactive and oriented toward relationship building (Krawczyk, 2018).

Crisis management, however, is not limited to ad hoc interventions. As indicated in the literature and supported by the empirical findings presented in this study, effective crisis management constitutes a continuous process in which both the pre-crisis and post-crisis phases are of critical importance (Zakrzewska-Bielawska, 2008). In the pre-crisis phase, organizations assess risks, develop response procedures, and train crisis teams; following the resolution of a crisis, they analyze the course of events, draw conclusions, and implement improvements (Starosta, 2016; Vašíčková, 2020). In this way, a crisis may become a turning point in organizational development, contributing to enhanced reputational resilience, higher communication standards, and improved relationships with stakeholders.

Indeed, as scholars of crisis management emphasize (Pahl-Wostl et al., 2023; Pedersen et al., 2020), every crisis carries transformative potential—it may lead to a loss of trust and market position, but it may also catalyze internal change, restructuring of communication processes, or a redefinition of brand values. Organizations that are able to properly interpret crisis experiences often emerge stronger, more self-aware, and more closely aligned with their audiences (Evenseth et al., 2022).

For this reason, reputational crisis management in social media should be understood not merely as a defensive reaction to a threat, but as a strategic element of organizational culture that integrates communication, leadership, and social responsibility (Cheng, 2016). From this perspective, a crisis does not mark the end of reputation, but rather a moment of reflection and renewal, in which transparency, consistency, and credibility become the foundations of long-term brand success.

The effectiveness of reputational crisis management models has been the subject of numerous analyses in the literature on organizational management, communication, and public relations (Dwiedienawati et al., 2021; Tworzydło, Gawroński, 2022). Contemporary scholars emphasize that no single universal model can guarantee effective resolution of every crisis situation (Oscarsson, 2022; Upadhyay, Upadhyay, 2023; Zamiar, Ścibiorek, 2022). The effectiveness of a given strategy depends on the nature of the crisis, the dynamics of its development, the level of organizational preparedness, and the quality of communication with the external environment (Jong, 2025; Zakiri, 2020).

Reputational crisis management may thus be viewed as a multidimensional process that integrates communicative, organizational, and psychological aspects. The effectiveness of crisis response depends not only on the existence of an appropriate response plan, but primarily

on the organization's ability to rapidly interpret the situation, make appropriate decisions, and maintain credibility in the eyes of public opinion. As Kaczmarek-Śliwińska (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015), notes, effective crisis communication requires balancing the need to inform with responsibility for the message, so as not to exacerbate negative emotions among audiences. In crisis management theory, the effectiveness of models is typically assessed on the basis of three groups of criteria, as presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.**  
*Criteria for Effectiveness in Crisis Management*

| Criterion             | Characteristics                                                                               |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Temporal              | Speed of response, pace of decision-making, and organizational readiness for immediate action |
| Communication-related | Consistency, clarity, and credibility of messages communicated to stakeholders                |
| Reputational          | The organization's ability to maintain or rebuild trust after the crisis has subsided         |

Source: Author's own elaboration based on: (Gasana, 2024; Iveson et al., 2023; Nuortimo et al., 2024).

These criteria are mutually complementary: a delayed response weakens communication effectiveness, while an inconsistent narrative leads to the deepening of reputational losses. Therefore, the effectiveness of reputational crisis management should be understood not only in terms of short-term conflict containment, but also in a long-term perspective—as an organization's capacity for learning and for building reputational resilience. Classical literature identifies several models that have laid the foundations for contemporary crisis management practices, as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
*Effectiveness of Crisis Management Models in the Classical Perspective*

| Model                             | Założenia modelu                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| S. Fink's Model                   | Assumes that management effectiveness depends on the accurate identification of crisis phases: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. A key success factor is the ability to detect early warning signals and to respond before the crisis reaches its peak.   |
| I. Mitroff's Model                | Crisis management effectiveness is measured not only by the speed of response, but also by the organization's ability to implement changes and modify procedures based on prior experience.                                                                  |
| Four-Phase Crisis Management Mode | Consists of four phases: prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery. The model emphasizes the continuity of actions and consistency of decision-making. Effectiveness is understood as the integration of all phases into a single, recurring process. |
| Organizational Maturity Model     | Management effectiveness is a function of organizational culture and staff competencies. A mature organization can anticipate potential threats, manage stakeholder emotions, and conduct value-based communication.                                         |

Source: Author's own elaboration based on: (Brito, 2025b, 2025a; Coombs, T., 2007; Howell, Miller, 2006).

All models presented in Table 3 assume that the effectiveness of crisis response does not stem from the mere existence of a plan, but rather from its practical implementation and flexibility in the face of changing circumstances. The effectiveness of reputational crisis management models is closely linked to human factors—managerial competencies, leadership quality, and the organization's communication culture. High levels of internal trust, openness

to dialogue, and willingness to accept criticism facilitate efficient responses and help reduce the scale of reputational losses.

As emphasized by Tworzydło (Tworzydło, 2022), Marcinkiewicz and Nogalski (Nogalski, Marcinkiewicz, 2004) and Jin et al. (Jin et al., 2024) effective crisis management models should not function solely as sets of procedures, but rather as integral components of organizational strategy grounded in risk awareness and communication ethics. This implies that organizational preparedness for crises must begin well in advance through employee education, trust-building initiatives, and the development of empathetic communication capabilities toward stakeholders.

Social media constitute a distinctive communication environment (Abiodun, Nwabueze, 2025; Tworzydło, Gawroński, 2022), in which the boundaries between sender and receiver become blurred. Unlike traditional media channels, this relationship is inherently interactive, as users actively participate in content creation, commenting, sharing, and shaping the opinions of others. Consequently, during a crisis, organizations no longer retain full control over information flows, and their messages are subject to immediate evaluation and reinterpretation (Cheng, 2018). Effective crisis response in social media therefore requires a combination of professionalism, empathy, and authenticity. Contemporary social media platforms further diminish the boundary between private and public communication (Zakiri, 2020; Greś et al., 2022). Users simultaneously assume the roles of information producers and consumers, and their activity directly affects brand reputation. Each comment, video, or post may either escalate or mitigate a conflict.

The so-called “snowball effect” is particularly dangerous in this context, as a single ill-considered publication can reach audiences within hours that exceed an organization’s response capacity (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Accordingly, modern organizations must not only monitor online discourse but also continuously build relationships with audiences based on trust and transparency (Strauss, Nentwich, 2013). This dynamic of emotional escalation in social media is further amplified by algorithmic mechanisms that prioritize content eliciting strong affective responses, which may intensify reputational crises and influence the speed of their diffusion (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Social media can function both as a trigger of crises and as a tool for their resolution. However, their effective use in crisis management requires consistency, rapid action, and an empathetic approach toward audiences. The manner in which a brand communicates during the first hours following a crisis outbreak often determines its subsequent trajectory (Abiodun, Nwabueze, 2025; Kopera, 2022).

Communication plays a pivotal role at every stage of crisis management—from prevention, through response, to reputational recovery (Krynicka-Duszyńska, 2010). Effective communication requires message consistency, informational clarity, and adaptation of language to target audiences. In practice, this necessitates the preparation of a crisis communication plan, designation of spokespersons, and identification of channels through which messages will be disseminated (Elfattah, 2024; Larisu, Zulham, 2024; Mwandembo, 2024).

In social media environments, not only the content of a message matters, but also its tone and timing. Organizations that respond quickly tend to seize the initiative in shaping the narrative, whereas silence or excessive defensiveness undermines credibility. Effective crisis communication therefore rests on four core principles: speed, consistency, empathy, and transparency.

Despite the growing body of literature on crisis communication in digital environments, a noticeable gap remains concerning the perceptual (audience-centered) dimension of communication effectiveness in a strongly platform-specific context. While many studies focus on crisis phases and recommended response strategies, fewer examine how users of different platforms interpret “authenticity” and “credibility” as outcomes not only of message content, but also of form (e.g., video/live versus written statements) and response speed. There is also a lack of integrative approaches that link temporal, communicative, and reputational criteria with expectations of so-called “evidence-based actions,” understood as visible costs and the materialization of apologies through concrete changes or compensatory measures.

This article addresses this gap by presenting the results of a diagnostic–exploratory study (N = 210) based on four widely publicized media crisis cases, and by subsequently proposing a synthesized, three-stage framework for crisis response in social media: identification – response – reconstruction. The contribution of this study lies in:

1. Demonstrating how users assess the effectiveness of communication actions depending on response speed, tone, and message format.
2. Capturing differences in audience expectations across social media platforms.
3. Proposing a response model that integrates the communicative component with an “evidence-based” component that is crucial for reputational recovery in algorithm-driven environments.

## **2. Research Methodology**

The aim of the study was to examine how social media users perceive the effectiveness of communication actions undertaken by brands and online creators during reputational crises. The research adopted a diagnostic–descriptive design, with its primary objective being to identify which factors—such as response speed, communication tone, message format, and attitude toward audiences—contribute to reputational recovery in the digital environment. The main research question was formulated as follows: Which communication actions in social media are perceived by audiences as the most effective during reputational crises? Based on this overarching question, the following specific research questions were posed:

1. How do audiences assess the credibility of brand responses in crisis situations?
2. Which forms of communication (post, video, livestream, official statement) generate a positive reputational effect?
3. To what extent do response speed and message tone influence public perception?
4. Does long-term relationship-building with audiences facilitate reputational recovery after a crisis?

The substantive scope of the study included an analysis of four real-life media crisis cases: the brand Shein, the influencer Budda, the creators of the Alkotubki channel, and the Pandoragate scandal. These cases were selected due to their extensive reach, strong presence in the online environment, and high levels of user engagement in the form of comments and interactions. The study was exploratory in nature and employed a qualitative approach complemented by elements of descriptive quantitative analysis. Data were collected using an online survey (N = 210), which enabled the gathering of opinions and evaluations from social media users regarding the effectiveness of communication actions undertaken by brands and creators during crisis situations. This method provided not only numerical data (percentage shares and response frequencies), but also insights into respondents' motivations, emotions, and interpretations, thereby giving the study a qualitative dimension.

The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended and semi-open questions designed to assess brand responses, audience emotions, and levels of trust following a crisis. Respondents were asked, among other things, about the perceived authenticity of messages, the effectiveness of apologies, and the reception of corrective actions. In addition, a content analysis of crisis-related communications published on social media platforms (X, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) was conducted. The analysis focused on official statements issued by brands and creators in relation to the examined crises.

The study employed a non-probability sampling method (convenience sampling) with defined inclusion criteria:

- 1) age between 18 and 45 years,
- 2) regular use of at least two social media platforms, and
- 3) declared exposure to content related to reputational crises.

The survey was distributed online, participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. While this sampling approach is appropriate for diagnostic–exploratory research, it limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of internet users.

The sample consisted of 62% women and 38% men. The largest group comprised respondents aged 18–30, representing the cohort most actively engaged in online interactions. The questionnaire was developed based on prior studies on user behavior during reputational crises and a review of the literature on social media communication. It included 20 questions organized into four thematic blocks:

1. Respondent demographic characteristics.
2. Frequency and patterns of social media use.
3. Evaluation of brand actions during crisis situations.
4. Perceived credibility and effectiveness of crisis communication.

For analytical purposes, the study adopted operational definitions of key concepts:

- “Effectiveness” was defined as the extent to which brand or creator actions limited crisis escalation and supported trust recovery.
- “Authenticity” referred to perceived sincerity, naturalness, and the absence of an overly “corporate” tone.
- “Empathy” denoted the expression of understanding toward audience emotions and a willingness to engage in dialogue.
- “Consistency with brand image” was understood as the alignment of crisis responses with prior communication style and declared values.

Quantitative assessments reported in the results (M) refer to mean values on a five-point Likert scale (1-5), where higher scores indicate a more favorable evaluation of a given aspect of crisis response. Quantitative data analysis was limited to descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, means, and standard deviations), which is consistent with the exploratory nature of the study. Open-ended responses were subjected to content analysis using thematic coding. Analytical categories were initially derived deductively from the literature (response speed, authenticity, corrective actions, emotions) and subsequently refined inductively based on empirical material by grouping similar meanings and motifs into subcategories.

The study was conducted in accordance with fundamental ethical principles. Participation was voluntary, data were collected anonymously, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, the use of results, and their right to withdraw at any stage. The questionnaire did not include any sensitive data that could enable respondent identification.

Data processing was carried out in four stages, presented in Table 4. This approach made it possible to identify dominant statistical trends while also capturing individual respondent attitudes toward crisis communication in social media environments.

**Table 4.**  
*Stages of Data Processing and Applied Analytical Techniques*

| Stage | Scope of Activities                                                                                    | Analytical Objective                                                                                                  | Applied Tools and Techniques                                           |
|-------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I     |                                                                                                        | Identification of dominant trends in perceptions of the effectiveness of brand and creator responses on social media. | Excel; basic descriptive statistics – means, percentages, frequencies. |
| II    | Thematic coding of responses to open-ended questions; identification of recurring motifs and emotions. | Understanding audience attitudes, emotions, and interpretations toward brands’ crisis responses.                      | Content analysis; thematic coding method.                              |

Cont. table 4.

|     |                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                |                                                                        |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| III | Integration of quantitative results with qualitative observations; comparison of opinions with descriptions of emotions and user narratives. | Obtaining a more comprehensive picture of crisis communication effectiveness and verifying result consistency. | Comparative analysis; cross-tabulations; contextual interpretation.    |
| IV  | Development of conclusions and linkage of findings with reputational crisis management theory.                                               | identification of factors determining the effectiveness of corrective actions in social media.                 | Deductive analysis; interpretation within crisis communication models. |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The empirical material used in this article derives from research conducted in 2025 by D. Szmytkowska under my academic supervision. The research instrument underwent preliminary validation through a pilot study conducted with a group of 15 respondents, which allowed for the refinement of rating scales and question wording. It should be emphasized that the study was not representative in nature, and the results should therefore be treated as diagnostic–exploratory. The objective was not to reflect the opinions of the entire population of internet users, but rather to identify tendencies, attitudes, and emotions accompanying audiences in situations of reputational crisis. Despite these limitations, the collected data enable the formulation of meaningful qualitative conclusions.

### 3. Results

The conducted research enabled the identification of key factors influencing the effectiveness of reputational crisis management in social media. Analysis of the survey data confirmed that respondents rated most highly those actions undertaken by brands and online creators that were rapid, authentic, and consistent with their prior brand image.

The study included 210 respondents, of whom 62% were women and 38% were men. The largest age group consisted of individuals aged 18–30 (71%), who most frequently used platforms such as TikTok (82%), Instagram (74%), and Facebook (61%). The average daily time spent on social media was 3.6 hours (SD = 1.2), indicating a high level of engagement with these platforms.

Respondents were asked to identify the most important factors influencing the effectiveness of actions undertaken by brands and creators during a crisis. The results are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.***Factors Perceived as Key to the Effectiveness of Crisis Communication*

| Factor                                          | Number of Indications [n] | Percentage Share [%] | Mean Rating 1-5 [M] |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
| Response speed                                  | 143                       | 68                   | 4.6                 |
| Authenticity and tone of communication          | 118                       | 56                   | 4.4                 |
| Corrective actions (compensation, apologies)    | 99                        | 47                   | 4.1                 |
| Consistency with prior brand image              | 83                        | 39                   | 3.9                 |
| Transparency and sincerity                      | 71                        | 34                   | 4.0                 |
| Message format (video, post, livestream)        | 68                        | 28                   | 3.7                 |
| Support from brand spokespersons or ambassadors | 44                        | 21                   | 3.5                 |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The data presented in **Table 5** indicate that response speed ( $M = 4.6$ ) and message authenticity ( $M = 4.4$ ) were identified as the two most important elements of effective crisis communication. This suggests that social media users attach greater importance to rapid and credible brand–audience interaction than to formal image-related elements, such as message aesthetics or the use of brand representatives.

Qualitative analysis of open-ended responses made it possible to identify the emotions most frequently experienced by users while observing reputational crises on social media. These findings are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.***Emotions Associated with Reputational Crises*

| Type of Emotion       | Percentage Share (%) | Emotional Valence | Illustrative Respondent Comments                                                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Anger                 | 41                   | negative          | "I can't stand it when brands pretend that nothing has happened."                     |
| Disappointment        | 37                   | negative          | "I used to like this brand, but after what they did, I lost trust."                   |
| Curiosity             | 28                   | neutral           | "I wanted to see how they would explain themselves, whether they would say anything." |
| Supprise              | 19                   | Neutral-negative  | "I didn't expect this from them."                                                     |
| Embarrassment / Shame | 14                   | negative          | "It was embarrassing how they tried to explain themselves."                           |
| Indifference          | 12                   | neutral           | "It doesn't affect me anymore—these kinds of scandals happen every day."              |
| Compassion            | 11                   | positive          | "I feel sorry for the people going through this; everyone makes mistakes."            |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Respondents most frequently indicated anger (41%), disappointment (37%), and curiosity (28%). Only 11% of participants declared compassion toward the brand or creator at the center of the crisis.

Content analysis of open-ended responses and user comments enabled the identification of recurring motifs and emotions accompanying audiences during reputational crises. A thematic coding approach was applied, involving the assignment of analytical categories reflecting similar meanings to individual statements. Based on the literature, four main thematic categories were identified (presented in Table 7): response speed, message authenticity,

corrective actions, and audience emotions. Within each category, specific subcategories were defined, and their frequency of occurrence in respondents' statements was recorded.

**Table 7.**

*Thematic Categories, Subcategories, and Frequency of Respondent Indications*

| Thematic Category                                | Specific Motifs                                                        | Percentage of Respondent Indications (%) | Description                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Brand response speed                             | Immediate response                                                     | 44                                       | Audiences positively evaluate rapid engagement with the situation—preferably within 24 hours. |
|                                                  | Delayed response (2-3 days)                                            | 31                                       | Perceived as a lack of preparedness and associated with a decline in trust.                   |
|                                                  | No response / silence                                                  | 25                                       | The most negatively evaluated strategy, interpreted as disregard for audiences.               |
| Authenticity and emotional tone of communication | Sincerity and naturalness of expression                                | 52                                       | Respondents prefer direct, spontaneous, and “human” communication.                            |
|                                                  | Empathy toward audiences                                               | 46                                       | Highly valued; fosters a sense of understanding and relational closeness.                     |
|                                                  | Personal contact (video, livestreams, comments)                        | 38                                       | Perceived as the most credible form of communication.                                         |
| Type of corrective actions undertaken            | Public apologies                                                       | 57                                       | A key reparative gesture and a prerequisite for reputational recovery.                        |
|                                                  | Compensation or concrete actions (CSR initiatives, procedural changes) | 43                                       | Increase brand credibility and serve as evidence of genuine intent.                           |
|                                                  | Cooperation with audiences / post-crisis dialogue                      | 28                                       | Less frequently indicated but positively evaluated as a form of relationship repair.          |
| Audience reactions and emotions                  | Anger                                                                  | 41                                       | Dominant negative emotion, particularly in the absence of a brand response.                   |
|                                                  | Disappointment                                                         | 37                                       |                                                                                               |
|                                                  | Curiosity                                                              | 28                                       | Stemming from the dynamics and sensational nature of social media.                            |
|                                                  | Compassion                                                             | 11                                       | Emerges toward brands that respond calmly and transparently.                                  |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The content analysis results, based on Table 7, indicate that the most frequently occurring motifs in respondents' statements were response speed (44%) and communication sincerity (52%). Audiences clearly preferred actions that were immediate, emotionally authentic, and consistent with the brand's established image. Among negatively perceived factors, delayed responses (31%) and silence (25%) were predominant, both being associated with disregard for criticism and a lack of communicative responsibility. The frequency of indications confirms that social media users respond strongly and emotionally to reputational crises, and that message authenticity and concrete corrective actions are considered more important than formal language or message aesthetics. The most positive reactions (compassion, understanding) emerged in cases where the brand or influencer responded personally, using simple, sincere language and video-based formats. This points to the growing importance of message humanization in the context of reputational crisis management in digital environments.

The data presented in Table 8 show the percentage of respondents from specific demographic groups (women, men, age cohorts) who identified a given category or subcategory as important for crisis communication effectiveness. Percentages do not sum to 100% across rows, as they refer to shares within each group rather than to the total number of indications for a given category. This approach allows for the identification of differences in perceptions of crisis responses between women and men, as well as between younger and older respondents. It should be emphasized that the comparison presented in Table 8 is descriptive in nature and is intended to identify tendencies within groups, as statistical significance testing of differences between segments was not conducted in this study. The purpose of this comparison was not only to show the frequency of particular motifs, but also to determine which communication elements (response speed, empathy, sincerity, message format) were most appreciated by specific user groups. This made it possible to capture differences in the reception of crisis communication and to better understand the dominant expectations of social media audiences across demographic segments.

**Tabela 8.**

*Structure of Subcategory Indications by Respondent Groups*

| Category / Subcategory                                               | Women (%) | Men (%) | 18-30 years (%) | 31-45 years (%) | Dominant Platforms  |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Response speed – immediate response                                  | 49        | 36      | 52              | 29              | TikTok, Instagram   |
| Response latency – non-response /communication silence               | 19        | 33      | 22              | 30              | Facebook            |
| Authenticity and emotional tone – sincerity and naturalness          | 58        | 42      | 61              | 35              | TikTok, Instagram   |
| Authenticity – empathy                                               | 54        | 38      | 57              | 28              | Instagram           |
| Personal contact (video, livestream)                                 | 44        | 33      | 49              | 25              | TikTok, YouTube     |
| Corrective actions – public apologies                                | 63        | 48      | 60              | 42              | Instagram, Facebook |
| Corrective actions – concrete actions / compensation                 | 47        | 40      | 45              | 36              | Facebook            |
| Audience reactions and emotions – anger / disappointment             | 39        | 44      | 42              | 40              | All platforms       |
| Audience reactions and emotions – curiosity / willingness to observe | 29        | 27      | 31              | 22              | TikTok, YouTube     |
| Audience reactions and emotions – compassion / understanding         | 14        | 7       | 12              | 9               | Instagram           |

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The analysis of the structure of indications presented in Table 8 reveals clear differentiation in perceptions of crisis communication effectiveness across gender, age, and dominant social media platforms. Women more frequently than men emphasized the importance of an immediate brand response (49% vs. 36%), authenticity and naturalness of the message (58% vs. 42%), and empathy (54% vs. 38%), and they more often identified public apologies as a key element of reputational recovery (63% vs. 48%). Men, in contrast, more frequently indicated the absence of a response or silence as a salient—typically negatively evaluated—

factor (33% vs. 19%) and slightly more often reported emotions of anger and disappointment (44% vs. 39%). These differences suggest that women respond more strongly to the relational and emotional dimensions of crisis communication, whereas men appear more sensitive to strategies perceived as avoiding responsibility.

A similar pattern of differentiation is visible in Table 8 across age groups. Respondents aged 18–30 were considerably more likely to expect an immediate response (52% vs. 29%), sincerity and naturalness of communication (61% vs. 35%), empathy (57% vs. 28%), and personal contact in the form of video or livestreams (49% vs. 25%) compared with the 31–45 age group. At the same time, older respondents more frequently identified silence or lack of response as a significant problem (30% vs. 22%) and placed relatively greater emphasis on the necessity of concrete corrective actions and compensation. These findings indicate that younger social media users operate within a logic of rapid, emotionally driven, and highly personalized communication, whereas older users are more inclined to evaluate crises in terms of accountability and tangible remedial actions.

The juxtaposition of the results presented in Table 8 with dominant platforms confirms that the communication channel context plays a significant role in shaping audience expectations. TikTok and Instagram are primarily associated with expectations of rapid responses, authenticity, empathy, and video-based formats, reflecting the dynamics of these platforms and the preferences of younger users. Facebook is more frequently linked to critical evaluations of silence and to expectations of concrete corrective actions and public apologies, while YouTube tends to facilitate curiosity and longer-term observation of crisis development through narrative video formats. Regardless of the platform, anger and disappointment remain the dominant emotions accompanying reputational crises, underscoring the affective nature of crisis communication in social media environments.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of the study was to identify how social media users perceive the effectiveness of communication activities undertaken by brands and online creators during reputational crises, based on four high-profile cases (Shein, Budda, Alkotubki, Pandoragate) and user opinions (N = 210). The results indicate three dominant determinants of effectiveness: response speed, message authenticity, and consistency with the brand's prior image.

The most highly rated factor was response speed (M = 4.6; 68% of indications). In the social media environment, speed becomes not only an operational parameter but, above all, a tool for managing meaning and interpretation of the event. The mechanism of *narrative primacy* (Entman, 1993) suggests that the actor who responds quickly has the opportunity to define the frame of the discussion (causes, consequences, and remedial plan) before this is done by online

communities, the media, or competitors. For this reason, the strategy of silence (Coombs, W.T., 2007; Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015), historically applied in some crises, is interpreted in the digital environment as disregard for audiences (25% of indications for “no response/silence”; among men, 33% indicated this subcategory). Data from Table 8 further suggest that Facebook users are relatively more likely to identify lack of response as problematic (which may result from greater exposure to comment-based discourse and accountability pressure), whereas TikTok and Instagram users place stronger emphasis on immediacy (49% of women and 52% of respondents aged 18-30 indicated “immediate response”).

his finding is consistent with the logic of crisis phase models (four-phase models) (Brito, 2025), while simultaneously pointing to the need for reinterpretation. In social media, the crisis phase may begin and reach its peak within hours rather than days (Austin et al., 2012; Coombs, T., 2007; Coombs, W.T., 2007; Eriksson, 2018). This implies that organizations must have ready-made “response modules” and decision-making competencies that allow communication to be initiated even before a full diagnosis is available. In practice, messages such as: (1) we are aware of the situation; (2) we are investigating; (3) we will return with verified information at time X—may be particularly effective, as they meet expectations of speed while reducing the risk of inaccuracies.

The second key finding concerned authenticity and communication tone (56% of indications;  $M = 4.4$ ; “sincerity and naturalness” 52%, “empathy” 46%). In respondents’ interpretations, authenticity is not a stylistic feature but a signal of intent (Erickson, 2021; Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015; Lee, 2025). Evidence that the sender understands the problem and accepts responsibility. Notably, authenticity was emphasised more strongly by younger users (61% in the 18-30 age group) and by women (58%), and it correlated with a preference for “contact-based” formats (video/live—38% overall; 49% among those aged 18-30). This indicates that in digital environments, form becomes part of content. Video or livestream formats are often perceived as more difficult to “stage,” and therefore as more credible, even when the substantive content is comparable to a written statement.

These results extend classical approaches to crisis communication, suggesting that merely “issuing a statement (Coombs, T., 2007) is no longer sufficient if audiences interpret it as a corporate formula or a damage-minimisation strategy (Badu et al., 2023; Kim, Cameron, 2011; Upadhyay, Upadhyay, 2023). In this sense, the growing importance of humanization and empathetic tone as elements of reputational recovery should be emphasized. At the same time, authenticity remains a perceptual category dependent on prior expectations toward the brand. For some audiences, “overly polished” apologies or excessively formal language may reduce credibility and generate emotions such as embarrassment (14%) or anger (41%).

The third pillar of effectiveness proved to be consistency with the prior brand image (39% of indications;  $M = 3.9$ ). This result demonstrates that audiences do not evaluate crisis responses in isolation; rather, messages are filtered through the lens of prior reputation, behavioral history, and declared values. In practical terms, this means that identical

communication strategies—such as public apologies—may be interpreted as credible or purely image-driven depending on the brand's reputational context and audience expectations (Eberl et al., 2015). In social media environments, authenticity is dynamic and negotiated; audiences interpret messages not only through their content, but also through prior experiences with the brand and the cultural and platform-specific context in which communication occurs. Research shows that authenticity in social media communication is not an absolute attribute, but depends on user perceptions and expectations, which may determine whether a message is received as sincere and responsible or as a calculated damage-control strategy (Chmiel, Korneta, 2025; Gasana, 2024; Wilk et al., 2025).

Respondents identified public apologies as a key reparative gesture (57% of indications; 63% among women), but concrete corrective actions were considered equally important (43%; “compensation/procedural changes/CSR”). The results indicate that social media audiences expect evidence-based crisis communication, not merely declarative statements. Apologies alone do not close the reputational recovery process if they are not accompanied by a visible cost on the part of the responsible actor—such as time investment, real resources, procedural changes, or compensation. The literature emphasizes that costly actions function as credible signals of intent and responsibility, whereas purely symbolic responses are evaluated as insufficient (Eberl et al., 2015). In this context, strategies of denial, comment deletion, or blame shifting are interpreted negatively, as they violate perceptions of procedural justice and intensify anger and disappointment, leading to crisis escalation rather than resolution (Coombs, T., 2013; Kim, Cameron, 2011).

From a practical perspective, corrective actions were relatively more frequently indicated among Facebook users, which may be linked to the platform's distinct culture—favoring longer discussion threads, content archiving, and accountability-oriented discourse (Navon, Noy, 2023; Wilk et al., 2025; Zhang, Nekmat, 2024). On platforms such as TikTok and YouTube, performative responses in the form of video or livestreams play a greater role and are evaluated as more emotional and authentic (Borden et al., 2020; Eriksson, 2018). However, without parallel corrective actions, such performances may easily be interpreted as communicative “spectacle” rather than evidence of responsibility (Bay-Cheng, 2023; Austin et al., 2012). This highlights differentiated audience expectations depending on platform characteristics, which has significant implications for crisis communication practitioners.

The identified emotions (anger 41%, disappointment 37%, curiosity 28%) confirm that crises on social media are strongly affective phenomena rather than purely informational ones. Anger and disappointment facilitate escalation through comments, shares, and the creation of secondary content (memes, duets, reactions), while curiosity functions as an attention-sustaining mechanism. At the same time, the low level of compassion (11%) indicates that the “empathy credit” is limited and emerges primarily when a brand or creator communicates calmly, personally, and transparently. In this sense, crisis effectiveness is not limited to reducing negative evaluations, but involves shifting emotions—from anger and disappointment

toward compassion or at least neutrality. This shift is particularly important in algorithmic environments, where high-intensity emotions increase the reach and lifespan of crisis-related content.

In light of the above, it can be argued that the results support the assumptions of phase-based and organizational learning models, while simultaneously pointing to the need to further specify the platform component of crisis management models:

- The pre-crisis phase in social media should encompass not only procedures and monitoring, but also relationship-building and a coherent brand identity, as consistency functions as a reputational buffer.
- The response phase is more strongly dependent on speed (the 24-hour window) and the choice of format (video/livestream vs. text), making it more operational and technology-driven than in traditional approaches.
- The recovery phase requires evidence of action (compensation, procedural changes), as audiences expect the “materialization” of apologies.
- The learning phase should involve not only adjustments in communication, but also changes in moderation policies and dialog architecture (e.g., how comments are addressed and how update threads are maintained).

In this context, a three-stage crisis response model is ultimately proposed, as presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Three-stage crisis response model.

Source: Author’s own elaboration.

Identification should be immediate (monitoring and early warning signals), the response should be authentic and empathetic, and reconstruction should be grounded in concrete actions and dialogue. It is worth emphasizing that reputational reconstruction in the digital environment may require a longer “evidence period” than in traditional media, as audiences can easily return to archived content and algorithms may re-amplify the issue. The study results reinforce recommendations to respond within the first 24 hours and to avoid deleting comments, while simultaneously suggesting that an effective strategy should integrate three components:

1. Initial communication (speed and narrative control), involving acknowledgment of the issue and an announcement of a subsequent update.
2. Humanized communication (authenticity and empathy), in which personal formats (video/livestream), simple language, and responsibility without evasiveness are crucial.
3. Evidence-based action (reputational reconstruction), in the form of compensation, procedural changes, transparent reporting of progress, and sustained post-crisis dialogue.

From a reputational management perspective, this means that a crisis should not be treated as a one-off “news item” to be covered up, but rather as a process in which audiences expect continuity—from explanation, through repair, to reflection and change—integrating theoretical insights with practical application.

From the perspective of crisis communication practitioners, the findings support three key recommendations. First, organisations should have ready-made procedures that allow for the publication of an initial statement within the first 24 hours, while reducing the risk of errors by announcing a follow-up update at a specified time. Second, message format should be aligned with platform logic and audience expectations: on TikTok and Instagram, “contact-based” formats (video/livestream) may be particularly effective, whereas on Facebook, corrective actions and consistent engagement in comment threads play a greater role. Third, apologies should be supported by evidence-based actions—such as compensation, procedural changes, or transparent progress reporting—because it is the materialisation of actions that ultimately completes the trust-rebuilding process. From a theoretical standpoint, the results reinforce the relevance of phase-based models and organisational learning approaches, while simultaneously pointing to the need to incorporate a platform component as a moderating factor of strategic effectiveness. This implies that classical recommendations regarding speed, tone, and apologies should be interpreted in relation to the interaction architecture of a given platform (content circulation speed, dominant formats, persistence of comment threads, and mechanisms of algorithmic amplification of emotions).

The study was diagnostic–exploratory in nature and relied on non-probability sampling, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the analyzed cases operated within a Polish-language social media environment, where cultural norms may intensify specific expectations toward brands (e.g., understandings of authenticity and pressure for public apologies). Nevertheless, the findings also demonstrate practical applicability in an international context. The dynamics of emotions, the importance of response speed, and the role of message authenticity are consistent with observations of crises in English-language digital environments, suggesting the universal nature of the mechanisms under investigation. One limitation of the study is the descriptive character of platform-based segmentation, as statistical significance tests of differences between groups were not conducted; therefore, interpretations related to specific platforms should be treated as indicative tendencies rather than definitive conclusions. Future research would benefit from a more in-depth cross-platform analysis through the application of statistical testing to identify differences in the perception of crisis communication among users of individual platforms (e.g., TikTok vs. Instagram vs. Facebook). Such an approach would enable a more precise assessment of the impact of platform-specific characteristics on emotional dynamics and the perceived effectiveness of crisis response strategies.

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