

Reputation Management: How to deal with reputation threats in social media

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides the reader with a review of current findings on how managers should react on reputation threats originating from social media. Various, singular advices to avoid and respond on reputational threats are described, analyzed and their strengths and weaknesses are discussed. Up to now a structured uniform rescue action plan is missing in the literature. This thesis presents a new model, namely the pandemic model, which aligns singular advices and adds new advices resulting in an six phases emergency action plan. The phases of the emergency action plan are: origin, frustration, going public, pandemic, end of pandemic, post-processing. This plan is structured like a pandemic rescue plan and exploits correlations to a pandemic known from health care. The pandemic model enables to emphasize advices found in the literature and the emergency action plan can be seen as a best-practice tool to solve reputation threats for managers. The content of the paper is meant for managers, leaders and employees in the reputation department of a multinational company that can benefit from using the authors model to decrease a threat through social media attacks.

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Keywords

Social Media, Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, Reputation Management, Shitstorm

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Reputation threats in social media

A customer of United Airlines had a problem with the company because they damaged the musician's expensive guitar during a flight in 2008 and refused to compensate him. As a reaction, the musician wrote a song called "United Breaks Guitars" and produced a video that is portraying United Airlines in a very unfavourable light (Kietzmann, Silvestre, Hermkens, & McCarthy, 2011). Within days the video has been seen by millions of people, spread over the Internet via blogs and other different social media networks (Aula, 2008). According to Kietzmann et al. (2011), over 9.5 million people have watched the video in the year it was released. Currently, the video has been seen almost 14 million times from users around the world (see Youtube.com, 2014). According to Kietzman et al. (2011), this online attention led to a brand and public relations crisis for United Airlines, since the video was spread globally and various other passengers that know the frustration of airline service failures expanded this issue. Even though the Airline offered a settlement after the video was released, the company suffered a reputation loss (Aula, 2008).

Up to now reputation threats by a shitstorm are topical, as the Veet case illustrates. Veet, a company for cosmetics for women, released a commercial in April 2014 where a not perfectly shaved woman was depicted as a hairy man, lying next to her partner. The intention of the commercial was that Veet's products promise smooth legs that last for a long time. Immediately after the commercial was released, a shitstorm via Twitter and Facebook started and blamed Veet to be sexist and homophobic (Esser, 2014). The latest case demonstrates the importance of this paper due to the fact that shitstorms did not decrease and still occur on a regular basis.

On the one hand, this example illustrates the potency of customer's discontent by spreading messages via the internet's social media services extremely fast. On the other hand, it shows how ill-prepared firms can be in dealing with social media conversations being helpless in prevention (Kietzman et al., 2011).

The tremendous power of today's consumers is based on their world wide networking. During the last decade the number of networking customers and especially the amount of information increased dramatically (Romero, Galuba, Asur & Hubermann, 2011). In a time when more than every 7th person in the world has a Facebook account (Facebook.com), social media and other content sharing sites, blogs and wikis have a high impact on consumers (Kietzman et al., 2011). Five out of the first ten most viewed websites in the world are social media related websites (Alexa, 2014). These websites have extended the power of consumer-to-consumer conversations, sharing ideas, opinions and even critiques with other users around the world quickly and with little effort (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Therefore, businesses are looking for ways how to benefit from this potential, especially how to utilize the opportunities websites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter are offering for the companies' marketing departments and reputations (Hutchings, 2012). As can be seen in the example above, social media can not only be an exploitable opportunity for firms but – if done wrong – a disaster for a firm's reputation, sales and even its survival (Kietzman et al, 2009). In the academic world there are several aspects that will be listed and discussed in this thesis.

This thesis, conducted as a literature review, approaches the key words of the topic of social media, current theories and shows off strengths and weaknesses of these theories. Furthermore, the

thesis outlines the framework of grievance, the psychological aspects that motivate people to attack firms online. The author develops an own model, namely the pandemic model showing off similarities between a shitstorm like attack of a company endangering its reputation and a pandemic. Based on this the author presents a 6-phases emergency plan that describes the six phases of a shitstorm from the beginning to the end in combination with advices on how to act at each phase of the shitstorm. Therefore, this thesis' research question is stated as follows: *"How can managers act in the best way and at every stage of a threat concerning their reputation management related to social media?"* This thesis adds both, a theoretical contribution for the literature and a practical contribution for companies. Although various, singular advices are published a uniform model is still missing which describes the process of reputation attack via social media and a consequent deduction of appropriate advices is missing. Therefore the presented model fills a crucial gap.

1.2 Definition of key terms

In the following, the author shortly defines the key terms of this paper, namely: Social Media, Reputation Management and shitstorm as threat of reputation.

Social Media:

According to Kietzman et al. (2011) social media contains "mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content" (p. 241). Kaplan and Haenlein (2009; 2010; 2011) define different categories of social media: collective projects like Wikipedia, blogs, e.g. via tumblr, microblogs like Twitter, content communities like YouTube, social networks like Facebook and virtual worlds or games like Second Life. Social media are important for companies since these offer substantial and pervasive changes regarding communication, especially between organizations, communities and individuals (Kietzman et al., 2011). Hahn, Rohm and Critenden (2011) add the companies' perspective when they state that social media has transformed the internet "from a platform for information, to a platform for influence" (p.272) and that this media marketing is of high importance for companies, regardless independent of size and industry, concerning their marketing strategy. For the discussion of reputation management the most important social media categories are listed:

Social Network (e.g. Facebook)

Facebook is the worldwide largest social network site with more than 1 billion users in 2014 (Piskorski, 2014). The social network can be defined as a (1) web-based series that allows individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of their users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by other users within the system (Ellison, 2007).

Facebook allows people to meet strangers, find old friends and make contact with them. Additionally, the website offers the user the possibility to either leave messages on their friends' profiles by making 'comments', which can be seen by all the friends of the person receiving the comment, or by writing private messages, which can only be seen by the sender and receiver. Furthermore, a gadget of Facebook is that users are able to share photo and video capabilities. Besides other social media websites, the user has the possibility to decide on his or her own if strangers can see private information about the user or not, by adjusting the right configurations in their settings.

Microblogs (e.g. Twitter)

The microblog is different to a social network: in contrast to Facebook, Twitter's main focus lies on spreading information, preferable worldwide (Cha, Benevenuto, Haddadi & Gummadi, 2012). Each user has an own account which can be personal or anonymous using a fake name. This constitutes a major difference to Facebook, which claims their users to use their real name. The major intention is to spread information either in form of real information or gossip or the own opinions of the users. The content of the posts can be seen by the followers the user has and also all members of Twitter that are into this topic, as long as the user is using a hashtag (#) symbol in front of the keywords of the respective post. By setting a hashtag in front of the keyword, the post will be part of the topic and be spread over the whole Twitter community that is also discussing this issue (Romero, Meeder, & Kleinberg, 2011). Besides reading the content of other private users, each user is able to "follow" the sites of famous institutions as magazines, famous people or organizations.

Blogs (e.g. via tumblr)

Blogs are special types of websites, displaying date-stamped entries in opposed chronological order (OECD, 2007), where users can personally or anonymously enter content, mostly in form of texts similar to letters to the editor in classical newspapers. The technical platform is provided by companies like tumblr. The most recent entries are published first and are written in a personal and conversational style (Heinonen, 2011). These blogs are normally administered by only one person, but allocate the opportunity of interaction with others through the addition of comments (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Content communities (e.g. YouTube)

Content communities like YouTube enable every user posting, viewing and sharing video clips. This is an additional channel to spread messages via movies which can carry compact and emotional information (Kietzman et al., 2011).

Reputation Management

According to an online business dictionary (BusinessDictionary.com), Reputation Management can be defined as; "the process of identifying what other people are saying or feeling about you or your business; and taking steps to ensure that the general consensus is in line with your goals." Others define reputation as "the evaluation of a firm by its stakeholders in terms of their affect, esteem, and knowledge" (Deephhouse, 2000, p. 1093), or as intangible asset is part of the firm (Hall, 1993). Reputation is built "not just by words but also, and perhaps more importantly, by deed" (Caudron, 1997). A well defined measure of the degree of reputation does not exist (Heinonen, 2011).

Shitstorm

For the following discussion of reputational threats due to social media the term "shitstorm", typically used in German language but also known internationally, is suited. It is the phenomenon of a widely spread issue over social media networks. It starts with a complaint by an individual person either as a blog entry, a Facebook comment or a video clip on the company's bulletin board or a tweet (Steinke, 2014). Similar to a viral infection, the number of complaining users increases like an avalanche resulting in a public attack and threat of the respective company's reputation.

This thesis is ordered as follows: in chapter 2 the author will present current findings on how to deal with reputation

management threats and judge them on their abilities and features in chapter 4.1. In section 3.1 the author defines his pandemic model and sets coherence between the development of a shitstorm and a pandemic, underpinned with two cases from the business world, followed by section 3.2, where the author presents a new plan that provides solutions concerning shitstorms for a manager on a basis of different phases and consumer types. Finally, the paper will be completed by the discussion in chapter 4 and summarized by the conclusion in chapter 5.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter gives a review on the present findings, models and approaches concerning reputation threats. The information used in this critical literature review is based on previous studies in academic literature retrieved using Google Scholar and the Web of Science. Except for a few articles, the focus lies on the most recent literature, beginning from the year 2006. The most common sources of this literature review come from the publisher Elsevier or from various business or information-technology related journals as for instance the International Journal of Media Management or the Journal of Consumer Behaviour.

2.1 Consumers social media behaviour

For understanding consumers' actions with respect to reputation threats the consumers' motivation has to be considered. Recent research concerning consumer activity in social media has evaluated the motivations for using or not using social media as a tool (Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009). This research has identified the motives of social media activities and, more importantly, examined different types of motivations behind these activities. The paper by Heinonen (2011) discusses and examines three different papers on this topic of consumers' motives for engaging in social media. According to Stafford, Stafford and Schkade (2004), there are three motives for using the internet, namely information, entertainment, and social aspects. Further research has expanded these motivations by community development, self-actualization and self-expression (Courtois et al., 2009; Shao, 2009). According to Krishnamurthy and Dou (2008), the motivations for online participation can be assigned very briefly to two main groups which are rational persons, focusing on "knowledge-sharing and advocacy (p. 1)", and emotional persons, focusing on "social connection and self-expression".

To prepare an emergency action plan for an appropriate response to attacks in social media one has to understand the process and structure of consumers protest via social media. This is described in detail by Ward and Ostrom (2006) using the term 'frame' according to descriptions in sociology to understand the reasons for consumers' grievance (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). The process develops in six steps, which are named and explained in the following.

Users who want to convince other users to eschewing a particular firm first of all "present commercial failures as betrayals of customer rights worthy of public outrage" (Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p.220). Secondly, this person enhances the seriousness of his damage, affected by the firm. Thirdly, the firm executives will be personated as the "evil betrayers of trusting consumers" (Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 220). Next, the betrayed user indicates similar complaints made by other users that encumbered about the firm earlier to exacerbate the complaint. The complaining user presents himself as a 'crusader' who is "fighting for the respect due all customers" (Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 220). Finally, the user tries to

stimulate other users to form a united group in order to be stronger in fighting against the opponent, respectively the firm.

The organization of customers' grievance is described by three 'sub frames' by Ward and Ostrom (2006), such as injustice, identity and agency and will be described in the following.

Injustice

As related to a grievance of a customer, this sub frame is meant to explain, that the customer is able to identify an existing social condition of life and define it as "unjust, intolerable, and deserving of corrective action" (Snow & Benford, 1992). When the protesters have found such a condition, they usually argue that these conditions are unjust "because they violate a social, political, or religious standard of morality" (Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 221), e.g. that "ignoring customers' complaints is unjust because it violates customer's rights to be heard" (Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 221). To emphasize their emotional harm to the 'audience', protesters often tell terrible stories about how much they had to suffer.

Identity

Besides the aspect of identifying what the unjust is, protesters also identify who is responsible for the injustice. Usually, the protesters target the managers or leaders of firms or institutions as their source of injustice and not only accuse them for being wrong or mistaken but being evil (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). This demonization of the leader "increases the audience's anger towards, and intention to act against the target of the protest" (Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 221).

Agency

According to the premise of 'what can a single person achieve under those circumstances', the protester's objective is to mobilize the public to work against an injustice (Ward & Ostrom 2006). In order to do so, the protesters usually encourage collective efficacy (Gamson, 1992) to gain the advantage to command over collective power.

2.2 Psychological Aspects and Types

The above mentioned two main groups, defined as "rational" and "emotional" users by Krishnamurthy and Dou (2008) are further differentiated by Beal and Strauss (2008). They define the following 5 types: the a) Virgin detractor and b) Platinum detractor who can be seen as the above described rational complaining consumers. The c) Determined detractor is an extremely emotional type fighting against the company by irrational reasons, e.g. revenge. The d) Undermining detractor is a competing firm and the e) Professional detractor can be a blogger, a journalist or a podcaster who is acting rational showing up the nuisance of a firm.

Various reasons for fighting against a firm via social media exist. Important reasons are dissatisfaction and frustration of protesting customers resulting from refusal of repair or compensation of their claims concerning products and services perceived as wrong (Gregoire & Fisher, 2008; Tuzovic, 2010; Ward & Ostrom, 2006). The user either resigns or starts to fight for his rights against the firm (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). In literature three motives for keeping this fight are found, namely betrayal (Ward & Ostrom, 2006; Gregoire, 2008), frustration (Tuzovic, 2010) and playing the good crusader fighting the evil (Ward & Ostrom, 2006) which are described in the following:

Betrayal

Betrayal can be understood as when one party trusts another to follow crucial relational norms but the other party violates these

norms, often to their own advantages (Fitness, 2001). If the customer believes that the firm has intentionally violated what is normative in the context of their relationship he feels betrayed (Elangoan & Shapiro, 1998; Gregoire & Fisher, 2008). According to Gregoire and Fisher (2008) a consumer's reaction is highly emotional and his retaliation targets at the firm to punish and tarnish the firm's reputation a behaviour described as "love becomes hate" (p. 247) where the authors see betrayal as key motivation.

Frustration

In accordance to Anderson and Bushman (2002) frustration is defined by Tuzovic (2010) as the "blocking or prevention of potentially rewarding or satisfying act or sequence of behavior" which "involves a high degree of emotion" (p. 37) strongly related to anger and rage. This emotion in turn leads to exhaustless aggressive protest (Strauss et al., 2005). Customers' frustration typically results from refusal of claims or reduction of rewards which have been promised within a contract (Tuzovic, 2010).

The good crusader

As mentioned in section 2.1 some consumers, protesting for their rights in social media against a firm typically presents themselves as the good crusader which are fighting the evil company (Ward & Ostrom, 2006). Their objectives are punishment of the evil just beyond repair or compensation of their originally technical or service related claims. Persons with such character need the open forum of social media as ego boost by sweeping "rituals of vilification" (Ward & Ostrom, 2006, p. 225). Therefore, a rational discussion is perceived as more or less impossible. Note, that the above mentioned "Professional detractor" (Beal and Strauss, 2008) seems to act similar to the good crusader but he is open for rational arguments.

These facts, namely betrayal, frustration and playing the good crusader are the most important reasons for protesters keeping the fight against firm's reputation as will be shown in the following. An emergency action plan as presented in section 3.2 has to address these items.

2.3 Advices concerning reputation threats

2.3.1 Ten Pieces of advice for companies which decide to utilize social media by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010)

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) developed a series of ten advices for companies that want to start in the social media world (Kaplan, 2010). The authors divided their ten advices into two segments: Five advices on the media-component and five on the social-component. According to the authors, these ten advices are crucial for companies to have a guideline when planning to enter the social media world. In the following, the ten terms are summarized since these are used as a base for the authors emergency action plan presented in chapter 3 and for the discussion in chapter 4.

a) The first advice is to choose carefully for an adequate social media application. The key term here is to know what the target group is and on what type of social media this target group is presented the best.

b) The second advice is about picking or making an own application, i.e. a social forum which enables users to communicate and share content.

c) The third advice concerns the corporate appearance and corporate language. The company's need to reach a large group of people leads to the use of various social media platforms. In this case, it is vital to ensure that the company's "social media activities are all aligned with each other" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 65).

d) The fourth advice deals with the integration between social media and traditional media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) suggest to integrate social media content or to use positive experiences made in social media with regular advertisements since it will lead to a reputation growth.

e) The fifth and last advice of the media category approaches with free and full online access for all employees. All employees of the company should have access to the company's social media application(s). This might enable a collective defense of all employees in the case of an attack via social media.

f) The sixth advice is to be active in social media to prevent attacks. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), it is advisable to take the lead and be active to develop a good relationship with the consumer. The firm is supposed to use their social media application to communicate and discuss issues with the consumer rather than using it for advertisements.

g) Advice number seven is about being interesting as a company. Most important is an individual treatment, i.e. the company needs to listen to the consumers to figure out what they want to hear, see or talk about. In a next step this knowledge has to be transformed into practice by posting the content the respective consumer is asking for.

h) The following advice for a company becoming active on social media is to be humble since the company acts like a newcomer. Most of the users that will 'follow' or 'like' the firm's site have been on the platform before the company. Therefore, the content operators of the company first of all take the time to discover the social media domain and learn about its basic rules.

j) The ninth advice by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) is to act unprofessional. According to them, this attitude is comparable to a Hollywood blockbuster, where rather the clumsy and charming guy ends up with the girl, not the handsome guy. The authors suggest, that the company should "avoid overly-professional content offerings" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 67) but rather go with the role as an underdog.

k) The last of the ten advices is to be honest. Besides being honest it is crucial to respect 'the rules of the game' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) and not trying to force a way into the social media world. The company should not act anonymously or under a fake account. If this comes out, the reputation of the company will suffer.

2.3.2 Response: Six lessons by Gaines-Ross

Lesly Gaines-Ross (2010) concentrates on strategies how managers can "fight back against new-media snipers" in six lessons (p. 3-7). This model focuses on possible responses and the way to respond by applying six different lessons. These are subsequently briefly described in order to provide the reader with the necessary background information for application in the authors action plan (chapter 3) and discussion in chapter 4.

a) Avoid disproportionate shows of force: An arrogant attitude harms the company's position. Gaines-Ross (2010) states that "The battle over reputation does not always favor the parties with the deepest resources" (p. 3), but the one with the

better approach. The author claims that the company acts best, when acting in self-defence.

b) Don't let bureaucracy get in the way. Respond at high speed: As the heading already outlines, the second lesson by Gaines-Ross (2010) is to respond on a high speed to reputation threats. Especially bigger companies have the problem that bureaucracy can slow down decision making, also concerning responses to consumer updates on Facebook, Twitter or various blogs. Gaines-Ross (2010) states that it is important to prepare employees for such situations and train them with a so-called new-media tool kit so that the employees can quickly respond without friction.

c) Empower your team to help tell your organization's side of the story: Gaines-Ross (2010) believes that the "public is more likely related to workers on the front lines than to those in the highest ranks" (p. 4). Therefore, his third lesson recommends to empower employees who are in charge of the company's social media sites- to post content or respond to posts on their own. However, Gaines-Ross (2010) realizes the need of limitations for the employees; e.g. the dissemination of client information or discussions of products under development.

d) Go rogue: New media can be your friend: Gaines-Ross (2010) says that social media can also easily serve the company's position. Hence, he refutes the statement of 'Bullets and Blogs' which noted that new media are "often treated as a threat, rather than an asset" (Gaines-Ross, 2010, p. 5). He discusses two real life examples of attacked companies that succeeded by responding roughly and by telling their own side of the stories.

e) Find sympathetic third parties to serve as "force multipliers": Lesson number five by Gaines-Ross (2010) is to find sympathetic third parties that emphasize your good reputation and help out in difficult situations, so called 'force multipliers'. Even when the company is able to fulfil the above mentioned lessons, it will be useful to have a third party which acts as fire service by certifying your good intentions and providing the social media users with positive information about the attacked company.

f) Stockpile credentials now for use in battles ahead: In case of an attack upon a company's mistake a lot of proofs for benefaction should be stored for a quick response. In this lesson Gaines-Ross (2010) suggests to store references of the company: Credentials that can show off the company's good work can help the company to gain the benefit of the doubt in a situation where the facts are in dispute.

2.3.3 Repairing your online reputation: Beal and Strauss

Beal and Strauss (2008) give additional advices from which only those are listed, which present new ideas with respect to the above listed advices.

a) Make a response from the top: the response should come ideally from the senior chief or someone from authority.

b) Admit mistakes and apologize: don't discuss and explain but directly admit your mistakes.

c) Cleaning up the mess: remove all negative contents from the social media.

3. AUTHORS MODELS AND ADVICES

In section 3.1 the author develops an own model to describe the process of a shit storm. In a next step (section 3.2) the author develops an emergency action plan of how to face reputation threats in social media presenting own ideas combined with the findings of the literature review presented in chapter 2.

3.1 Treating reputation threats in social media like a pandemic

Following the principles of benchmarking (Vorhies & Morgan, 2005) the author adopts the concepts and ideas of controlling a pandemic, which are common in health policy (Doshi, 2011). A strong analogy between infection, spread and treatment of a virus or disease and the reputational damage can be shown and partially a transfer of solutions is discussed in sec. 3.2 as well as limitations of the proposed model in sec. 4.2. Section 3.1.1 describes briefly the pandemic model and the respective analogues of healthcare and social media. Section 3.1.2 discusses cases which prove these analogues by one negative and one positive example.

3.1.1 Definition of the pandemic model

Virus: A pandemic is defined as the world wide spread of a virus or a contagion which infects the human population in a large scale. Analogous the virus or contagion is the negative message. After infecting the user or customer the virus creates a bad attitude which in turn leads to the creation and spread of negative messages. Note, in this model the infected and diseased person is the customer but the sufferer is the company (Doshi, 2011).

Spread: Characteristic for a pandemic is the extremely rapid spread. In healthcare the spread of the virus is accelerated by the contact of an infected person with a crowd, e.g. classes in schools. In social media this contact is virtual via a blog, YouTube, Facebook or Twitter but efficient as well leading to the infection of a large number of users (Doshi, 2011).

Source: People get infected if a new virus type grows up which the human immune defence does not know. As a consequence the human immune defence works imperfectly leading to the disease. Analogous, the bad message must be new to infect the user leading to post a respective message in social media. On the other hand, the human body acts well if a known pathogen occurs. In this case the human's purpose is to get cured of this contamination. Analogous the user wants to dissociate him-self from the bad (news) because of ethic reasons. As a proof of his purity his defence of the bad (news) must be shown in the social media to everybody.

Prevention by immunization: this means preparation of the human body for an upcoming attack of a new virus by an inoculation using a vaccine, i.e. an artificially produced virus which is similar to the upcoming virus but less dangerous. This enables the human body to create a stock of antibodies to be used in the future. For each virus the development of an appropriate serum is necessary which supports the human body defending the virus. Analogous the social media user must be prepared by preventive information to defang the bad news. Note that a medical vaccine cannot be prepared for a virus which does not exist. Analogous 'immunization' of social media users by appropriate information cannot start before the origin of the bad news, i.e. the correspondence to the virus. As a consequence 'immunization' of social media users means to clarify the critical point before the user is infected by the bad news, something which is in principle impossible. This lack of

time demonstrates the dangerousness of being infected by a virus or a bad message.

Prevention by quarantine: this means breaking the process of spreading the virus e.g. by physical isolation of the infected human. Analogous this would demand the isolation of the social media user to prevent spreading the bad news. While this procedure works even hardly in healthcare it is almost impossible in social media since a strict isolation of the 'infected' person from the electronically connected user crowd is impossible. However, to prevent a worldwide pandemic the bad message must be posted in a language which is restricted to local area. Up to here the presented model treats the social media users as the entirety, but this is not completely true since the social media users constitute only a part of the whole population. A real pandemic would develop if the virus, i.e. the bad message would infect to all classical media such as television, radio or newspapers and would thus reach the complete population. This jump in the spreading process must be avoided.

Preparedness plan: The World Health Organization (WHO) has developed a global influenza preparedness plan listing a definition of various phases of the pandemic and instructions for repression (Kawaoka 2006). Analogous to the preparedness plan an emergency action plan for treating reputation damage will be presented by the author in section 3.2

3.1.2 Alliance to real life cases

In order to establish a link between the above mentioned pandemic attributes/phases with the topic of a social media threat, the following part merges the mentioned aspects from the pandemic model with real life cases from the business world. For a better understanding, the author will shortly introduce two cases and afterwards related these cases to the pandemic model.

The Nestlé case: On March 17th 2010 UK Greenpeace released a parody video similar to a regular "Kit Kat –Take a break" ad, showing an office with several employees, where one of the employees is chewing on an orang-utan's finger instead of a real Kit Kat and the other workers in the office stare at him with disgust. The intention of this ad by UK Greenpeace was to force Nestlé stop buying products from SinarMas, one of their suppliers, which destroys south-east Asian rainforest where orang-utans are domiciled (Totz, 2010). The campaign took off globally over the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter and Youtube.

According to the first paragraph in section 3.1.1, the video was a threat that caused bad reputation for Nestlé and 'infected' the population in a large scale like a virus. It worked like a pandemic spreading the negative message worldwide. The virus, i.e. the bad message, is that Nestlé supports a company that is destroying the habitat of the orang-utans in south-east Asia. Typically for a pandemic, this spread ensued extremely rapid via the above mentioned social networks. A lot of the users dissociated Nestlé itself from the bad news because of ethical reasons. Thus the reaction of a human body to a virus attack and the user's refusal in the Nestlé case worked similar. The users of Twitter, Facebook and Youtube acted the same way when they shared the video, tweeted about it or commented on the video directly at Youtube.com. Thereby, the users revealed their consternation about this issue spreading the video to their Facebook friends or followers on Twitter to heat up the discussion. When the company was faced with the video and angry users on their social networks, Nestlé deleted the messages and responded with angry comments about the video.

The result was a public backlash for handling their social reputation badly (Totz, 2010). Both, the spread of a virus and the spread of this bad news could not be stopped. Nestlé did not realize this analogy to a pandemic and failed to react adequately e.g. by providing the users with their side of the story.

The second example shows how as shitstorms ended in a positive way for the company preventing a pandemic. This is illustrated by a case of the German food producer 'Du darfst' who concentrates on diet related food (Du-darfst, 2014).

Du darfst case: In April 2012 the company released a new advertisement in which they called on their customers to do what they want in their lives and told them to not stop things they like, especially concerning eating (Du-darfst case, 2013). The advertisement ends with the slogan "fuck the diet" (Du-darfst case, 2013). It is to mention that the company itself polarizes this message even in its company name, which can be translated by 'You may eat' or 'You are allowed to eat', more importantly; the company is producing and selling successfully low fat products, not anything that would be hazardous to health.

As comparable to every shitstorm, this one also spread a negative message and 'infected' the users via the social media networks, especially via Facebook. The 'source' of this shitstorm was the word 'fuck' in the advertisements slogan, which led to the 'disease' and people posting negative content on the company's Facebook-wall. Similar to the Nestlé case, this shitstorm was caused by ethical reasons, which in this case were that the incensed users feared their children to hear swearwords.

In contrast to Nestlé, the company "Du Darfst" did not try to isolate the users from the content by deleting the video or users' comments. What they did was to wait for 5 days to react with a statement. In order to solve the issue, the company argued in its statement why they chose this slogan, namely because they want to fight against diet mania, and also argued that they tested this idea and advertisement with several women from different age groups and obtained approval. This action was similar to a medical test of a group in order to see which reactions could appear. Due to this statement and the close contact to the users and by presenting clarifying arguments which worked as vaccine the company could immunize the users and slow down the pandemic.

3.2 Emergency Action plan

With this emergency action plan the author presents a strategic and timed plan for general managers, CIO's or employees in the social media department of a firm. The action plan adopts the pandemic model of the spread of a virus (section 3.1.1) describing six phases of degree of contamination and spread. Each phase approaches the customers' situation, the companies (former) reaction and an advice on how the company should operate in this particular phase. The devices are related to the consumer's frame of grievance (section 2.1), his psychological aspects (section 2.2) and assumes fitting advices given by Kaplan and Haenline (2010) (section 2.3.1) and Gaines-Ross (2010) (section 2.3.2). The author designed Fig. 1 to illustrate the development of these six phases and the interaction of users/customers with the firm and the environment via social media.

Phase 1: The origin

I) Rational customer: A technical problem due to a product or service failure by a particular company arises. The customer takes the customary way by either going to the shop where he bought the product or calls the producer's service hotline. The

further development depends on the reaction the customer experiences now. If the customer can be helped by the employee or service workforce the good relationship with the firm will be rearranged. If the customer gets ignored or unfairly rejected, phase 2 starts (see Fig. 1, top).

Action: Speak with the consumer and try to compensate him as early and good as possible and treat him respectfully.

II) Emotional user: He feels like the good crusader and searches for an ethical reason, i.e. the virus, to charge any firm. He is in contact with the environment which can be infected by spreading the virus but he is not in contact with the firm like the rational user, thus directly jumping to phase 3 (Fig. 1, top).

Action: Act humble. Do not provoke or provide the protester with another target.

III) The "professional detractor", e.g. a blogger, a journalist or a podcaster (see Beal and Strauss, 2008) seems to act like the emotional user, i.e. contacting the environment instead of the firm. But he is acting rational since he makes money with showing up the nuisance of a firm

Action: try to contact him directly and discuss his accusation.

Phase 2: Frustration

I) Rational customer: This phase can be seen as a crunch time, either the customer does not care enough to invest further time and energy in this project or he will start to fight for his right to receive the product or service he has paid for.

Action: Depends on the way the consumer decides; if he or she gives up, the company does not need to take actions. If the consumer enhances the purpose on starting a fight, it is best to keep the contact and compensate the customer as early and good as possible and to treat him respectfully. It's the last chance to avoid the creation of a new virus.

II) Emotional user: The main intention of this type is to harm the company without concrete technical reclaim. So he skips phase 2 directly going to phase 3 since he is already infected and seeks to spread the virus.

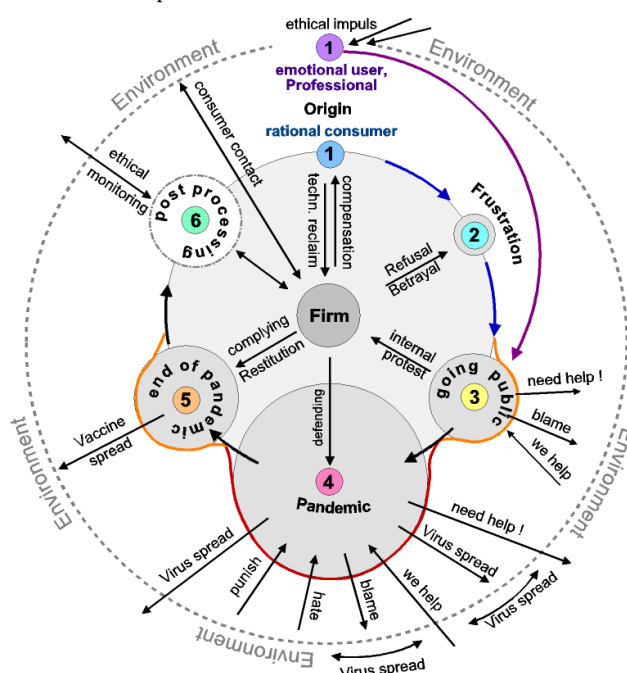


Figure 1: Illustration of the authors emergency action plan according to the 6 phases of the pandemic model.

Phase 3: Customer goes public

I) Rational customer: In this phase, the rational customer continues his internal protest to the firm via the social media site of the affected company, e.g. he writes something on the company's Facebook wall or makes a critical tweet about the company on Twitter by referencing the company's name via a hashtag. The aim of the customer is to organize help from the environment, i.e. users of the social net. Therefore, he applies to the company with the benefit of millions of other users being able to read his or her complaint. By exercising this pressure on the company, he or she is hoping for a fast and fair solution for his problem. He hopes for support by other users who may further promote his complaint. At this stage the virus, i.e. the bad message is born and starts to spread (see Fig. 1)

Action: This is the very last chance for the company to prevent the begin of a shitstorm; it has to be interested in the customer, it needs to be humble, it definitely needs to be honest with the customer the whole time, the company should avoid shows of force and always respond quickly because the customer is looking for attention by the company.

II) Emotional customer: In phase 3 the emotional customer's aim is to mobilize the public to work against the company and to give him-self the role of the good crusader who fights against the evil company. The aim is to spread the story as far and wide as possible and to ultimately harm the company in return for its betrayal.

Action: The company is supposed to act similar to the steps taken by a rational user but with a special attention to be interested in the user and his emotional problem and to be honest. Furthermore, it can help to tell the user the companies' side of the story and confirm this story by force multipliers.

III) The "professional detractor", see phase 1.

Action: try to contact him directly and discuss his accusation.

Phase 4: Pandemic

Both, emotional users and customers will act emotional. In this phase the pandemic is at its maximum which is the most threatening phase for the company (see Fig. 1). From a formerly singular problem between customer and firm a worldwide fight against the firm has evolved. The virus is spread uncontrollably by the users via blaming the firm and calling for fellows. The users act as good crusaders fighting the evil with the goal to blame and punish the firm.

Action: A mix of responses is suggested by the author:

- i) Let the employees / workers present the firm's view of the contentious point to fight the bad information in social media.
- ii) Present positive images about the firm and benefications from the past as a vaccine to fight the virus.
- iii) Search for public help of firms or groups with a high reputation.

In case of no success within a short time of e.g. two weeks, the firm must end the pandemic, described in phase 5.

Phase 5: End of pandemic

In this phase, the pandemic must be slowed down by positive signals and offers to the users which in turn may spread these vaccines.

Action: Complying and restitution are necessary. Respect the user, clarify and solve the problem via the social media. The company should be transparent, admit mistakes, apologize and

promise to learn from these mistakes as well as improve in the future.

This should be announced by the company's authority.

Phase 6: Post processing

This phase starts when the pandemic is over, respectively when the problem with the customer is solved. Here, the company needs to examine what exactly the problem was and how to avoid such a situation and pandemic in the future.

Action: Intensify the personal contact to the consumers to avoid conflicts resulting from a technical reclaim. Hereby, advanced educational programs for employees can be a helpful tool.

Start a monitoring program for the mainstream to detect crucial ethical topics and ethical development of the environment which might create conflicts in the future.

Install a personal exchange program to keep in contact with journalists to be informed with current ethical and political topics.

4. DISCUSSION

In section 4.1 the weakness and strength of the findings in the literature review section 2 is discussed. In section 4.2 the author discusses his pandemic model presented in chapter 3.1 together with his emergency action plan, presented in section 3.2.

4.1 Discussion of findings in the literature

4.1.1 Strengths & Weaknesses of the 10 recommendations proposed by Kaplan

The following numbering is in accordance with the listed points in section 2.3.1.

The first four advices a) – d) address the technical and organization related aspects of installing social media access of the firm and choosing the adequate social media application to get in contact with users and consumers. This can be seen as requirement to enable users to find information or to contact the company (Berthon, Pitt, Plangger & Shapiro, 2012). The advice to connect social media content with traditional media as television, radio or newsletter seems to be important (Dutta-Bergman, 2004) since it highlights the company's innovativeness and creativeness. However, these advices are of minor importance for solving reputation threats.

The fifth advice e), concerning free and full access for all employees for the company's social media applications is seen as an important point. Related to the reputation of the firm it is necessary that the user has the impression that none of the employees is forced to post positive content about the company anonymously in order to sugar-coat the company and therefore improve its reputation. Due to the fact that this should be a normal issue concerning an ethical behaviour of a firm, this can only be seen as a weakness if this advice is handled badly. In the case that an employee anonymously posts positive feedback or fake messages about the company and people find out, this could provoke a shitstorm towards the company.

The sixth advice f) on being active as the company is very important since it treats the personal relationship between company and customer. The more a company is active online and develops a good relationship with the customer through a steady and positive communication, the more the user will appreciate it (Pine, Peppers & Rogers, 2010). If a company is less active and posts less content, this will have no big influence

on the consumer's opinion about the firm (Ang, 2011). This only refers towards "not being active"; Responding to customer requests or questions is unalterable and needs to be done as soon as possible by the firm in order to provide the customer with answers and to maintain the positive reputation (Ang, 2011).

The seventh advice g) to be interesting online is comparable to the former advice f). When the company is able to implement the suggested steps as listen to the consumer, to figure out what they want to hear, see or talk about and transfer the gained knowledge from it to act like the users want to see it, this will be a strength for the company. This can also be a competitive advantage for the firm (Baird & Parasnis, 2011).

The next two advices h) on being humble and j) acting unprofessional are similar and offer more strengths than weaknesses for a firm. If the company would act boastful, this can cause a reputation loss due to a damage of its sympathy. To be humble will avoid attacks by the good crusaders (see section 4.2) on their way to identify the evil firm. The advice j), to act unprofessional like an 'underdog' leads to benefiting from a "puppy license". This can avoid the good crusaders to attack the infirm.

The last advice k), to be honest and treat customers with respect is seen by the author as the most important behaviour to prevent attacks by the good crusaders and avoiding the outbreak of a pandemic.

4.1.2 Strengths & Weaknesses of 6 lessons proposed by Gaines-Ross

The following numbering is in accordance to the listed points in section 2.3.2.

a) Lesson one by Gaines-Ross (2010) says that a company should avoid disproportionate shows of force. This advice is definitely a strength. By staying humble, in particular while being attacked, companies may slow down a pandemic or prevent provoking emotional users (see sec. 3.2 phase 1, phase 3). This advice is also supported by advice h) of Kaplan and Haehnlein (2010)

b) Lesson two by Gaines-Ross (2010) is that companies are supposed to respond to threats at high speed. If a company is able to respond quickly to potential threats in the correct manner, this is definitely a strength, as speed is of importance in the fast moving environment of the internet. Therefore, responses to threats also need to be fast in order to take up a position to scotch negative posts online (White, 2011) (see sec. 3.2 phase 3).

c) Lesson three by Gaines-Ross (2010) is to empower the company's team to help tell the company's side of the story from its own perspective. The user is more likely to believe the workers in the front line than the top managers. Therefore, this is a strength if the front line workers are able to provide the user with their personal side of the story. This works like a vaccine immunizing the users and being spread in social media networks (see sec. 3.2, phase 4). On the other hand the firm has to take care for a corporate language (advice c of Kaplan and Haehnlein (2010)) because reputation loss may appear if contradicting content is spread over different channels (Kirtiş & Karahan, 2011).

d) This advice, to go rough is in contrast to the first advice a) and thus seems to be inapplicable. To go rough can increase the pandemic and the fight of users against the company.

e) Advice five by Gaines-Ross (2010) comprise to find sympathetic third parties to help out the company in difficult and threatening situations. If a company is able to have these

third parties that are willing to support, this is definitely a strength for the company. These external supporters can argue in an unbiased way about the company which will definitely be good for the reputation (see sec. 3.2, phase 4).

f) The last advice is about being prepared. The company should develop a portfolio with positive images about the firm and benefications in the history. This will definitely be a strength for the company because this offers the possibility to answer quickly according to advice b) and in particular with the correct respond. This works like a vaccine to fight the virus (see sec. 3.2, phase 4).

4.1.3 Strength and weakness of advices by Beal and Strauss

a) The first advice of Beal and Strauss (2008) suggests to respond from the top. The strength is that a respond from the authority shows that the point is important for the company. It will convince rational users. The weakness is that emotional users will not be convinced by the top since they are attacking the top as the evil.

b) The advice to admit mistakes and apologize shows strength since the complaining user is accepted as the winner.

c) The advice to remove all negative contents from the social media after the end of the attack is not applicable since a huge amount of negative contents exists. Further on forcing users to remove these contents would lead to new complains in the social media as shown by the Nestle case (see sec. 3.2.1, Totz 2010).

In the following section the author's pandemic model and the proposed advices of the emergency action plan are discussed and compared with respect to the above discussed advices found in the literature.

4.2 Discussion of the authors model and the emergency action plan

Before discussing the authors model emergency plan it has to be noted that the pandemic model serves as a guidance to understand the characteristics of reputation threats in social media. It is not a summary of solutions or advices but it allows companies to adopt analogue solutions from the field of health care. The good agreement has been shown in section 3.1.2. The Nestle case demonstrated the pandemic like spread and infection of a vast community by a bad message and the impossibility to stop the spread by restrictive measures (Kietzmann et al 2011). On the other hand the "Du darfst" case illustrated the role of immunization by appropriate information and clarifying the critical point. In the following the authors six phases of the pandemic model (Fig. 1) and the corresponding advices are discussed.

Phase 1: in the case of complaining rational users the advice to speak with the customer and compensate him as early (see 2.3.2.b, Gaines-Ross 2010) and good as possible and treat him respectfully is in accordance with Kaplan and Haehnlein (2010) (see 2.3.1 e, f, k). It also agrees with the advice b) of Beal and Strauss (2008) to admit and apologize (see sec. 2.3.3).

Like in a medical pandemic it is extremely important to prevent the creation of a virus, i.e. bad news about the firm. This in turn prevents to fight the spread of a virus which is the most challenging task in fighting a pandemic in both fields, in health care and social media. For any treatment of a pandemic you have to cure individually the infected person, i.e. the customer. This individual treatment demands a personal contact which

must not interrupt. Therefore to act correctly in phase 1 is most important in particular to prevent the consumer to go to phase 2.

In contrast to the described rational user, the emotional user is not in contact with the firm but with the environment which can be infected by spreading the virus, i.e. the bad news. The authors advice to act humble and not to provoke or provide the protester with a target is in accordance with Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) (see 2.3.1 h, j) and with Gaines-Ross (2010) (see 2.3.2.a). However, the implementation of this advice is difficult since the company needs to know the mainstream (see discussion of phase 6).

More difficult is the “determined detractor”, defined by Beal and Strauss (2008). Since this is an extremely emotional type fighting against the company by irrational reasons, e.g. revenge (see sec. 2.2) he never will be satisfied by any above mentioned action.

To speak directly with the professional detractor seems to be successful since he is rational which is in accordance with Beal and Strauss (2008). The main limitation in adopting this advice is, to figure out who is the emotional and who is the professional in phase 1 since both do not seek the contact with the firm. So the firm probably cannot act before phase 3.

Phase 2: The advice intends to prevent a frustration and an interruption of contact between the rational customer and the firm: It's the last chance to avoid the creation of a new virus which results from unjustly treatment (see sec. 2.1, Snow & Benford (1992) and Ward & Ostrom (2006)) or the betrayal of a customer (see sec. 2.2, Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998; Gregoire & Fisher, 2008). As a result, frustration occurs which leads to an emotional behaviour (Strauss et al. 2005). Therefore, the company's employees related to the customer service have to be trained and have to act according to the author's advice which is supported by that of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) (see 2.3.1 e, f, k).

Phase 3: The author's advice for the company is a mix of several things in order to prevent the beginning of a shitstorm. This is the very last chance to win the consumer back. The firm has to be interested in the customer (see 2.3.1g), it needs to be humble (see 2.3.1 h, 2.3.2.a), it definitely needs to be honest (see 2.3.1k) with the customer the whole time, the company should avoid shows of force (see 2.3.2a) and always respond quickly because the customer is looking for attention by the company (see 2.3.2 b). If the firm does not succeed the rational user acts as an emotional user must mobilize the public by spreading the bad news to gain public support (Fig. 1). At least the only chance to prevent a pandemic is to satisfy the frustrated formerly rational consumer as soon as possible.

The emotional customers aim is to spread the bad news or story as far and wide as possible and to ultimately harm the company. In this case the advice to be honest (see 2.3.1k) is weak. The advice to tell the organization's side of the story (see 2.3.2 c) may help as seen at the case of “Du darfst” company (sec. 3.1.2). The advice to confirm this story by force multipliers according to Gaines-Ross (2010) (see 2.3.2 e) seems like to grasp a straw since the bad attitude of the attacked firm would rub off on the supporting company.

In this phase the identification and direct contact and discussion with the professional detractor seems reasonable since he works as a journalist efficiently in spreading news. It is important to eliminate him as a multiplier in spreading the bad news.

Phase 4: Now the pandemic is at its maximum which is the most threatening phase for the company (see Fig. 1). The users act predominantly emotional as good crusaders fighting the evil

company with the goal to blame and punish the firm (see sec. 2.2; Ward & Ostrom, 2006; Strauss et al., 2005). The danger of the pandemic arises from the motivation of most members of the community which is self-actualization and self-expression (Courtois et al., 2009; Shao, 2009). Therefore the author's advices aim for the presentation of the company's good side in an emotional way. The advice to let the workers present the firm's view of the contentious point is also suggested by Gaines-Ross (201) (see 2.3.2.c). It could help since the “evil” and anonymous management is separated from the sympathetic workers who might be associated with the company. The advice to present positive images about the firm and benefications from the past is in accordance with Gaines-Ross (2010) (see 2.3.2.f). This might convince attacking users to change their mind leading to a slow down of the pandemic and is seen as the most effective advice in this phase because the good image works as a vaccine to fight the virus. Secondly, according to the preparedness plan of the world health organization a fast action is important (Kawaoka 2006). The last advice, search for public help of firms or groups with a high reputation seems to be weak, as discussed above for phase 3.

Phase 5: In this phase the company has lost the fight and must accept this fact. Fighting further on would lead to further reputation damage (see Nestle case sec. 3.1.2, Totz 2010). Therefore the advice is to slow down the pandemic by apologize and by positive signals and concrete offers. Positive signals in turn may be spread as positive vaccines. Therefore the authors advices are complying and restitution with respect the user (see 2.3.1.k, 2.3.3.b). It is necessary to clarify and solve the problem via the social media necessary since the company must be transparent (Beal and Strauss 2008). At least the company has to accept the victory of the users which typically ends a fight. To demonstrate this the companies authority should do this announcement.

Phase 6: This phase is close to phase 1 but now the company knows its misbehaviour. The goal must be a prevention of further pandemics. Therefore the advices focus on prevention and monitoring the mainstream to detect crucial ethical topics and ethical development in the environment which might create conflicts in the future. However, to detect upcoming trends is a big challenge and a detailed plan cannot be given in this thesis. This is a weakness of the advices concerning phase 6. Nevertheless the 6 phases showed that a personal, respectful contact to the users is the key to avoid and to solve problems. Therefore the suggested advices i) personal contact to the consumers and ii) contact with journalists, i.e. the professional detractor (Beal and Strauss 2008), may to be seen as a guideline.

The 6 phases of the pandemic model showed that the prevention of a pandemic has first priority since the terminating of a pandemic is extremely difficult. Further on every pandemic leads to reputation damages in a short time while the repair of the reputation costs time and money (Aula, 2008; Heinonen, 2011; Caudron, 1997). The limitation of this model is listed in the following conclusion.

5. CONCLUSION

The reputation of a company is one of its most valuable assets and therefore must be protected by the firm. This paper investigated the topic of social media threats due to consumers protest and attack concerning the reputation of a firm and how these threats need to be treated in order to solve or avoid them. Hence, the research question of this paper was “*How can managers act in the best way and at every stage of a threat*”

concerning their reputation management related to social media?”. In order to answer this question the paper collected several aspects from a literature review concerning the process and structure of consumer protests, attacks, psychological aspects and motivations of attackers as well as various advices for a company being active in social media, and on how to deal with threats in social media. To evaluate and order the variety of advices the author developed the pandemic model. It describes the process of public attack via social media leading to a shit storm in six typical phases. Thereby the concepts and ideas of controlling a pandemic, which are common in health policy, are adopted and a strong analogy between infection, spread and treatment of a virus or disease and the reputational damage could be shown. In a next step an emergency action plan was presented of how to face reputation threats in social media presenting own ideas combined with the findings of the literature review.

The main result is that after the outbreak a control or termination of a pandemic without damage of the firm's reputation is hardly possible. Therefore the prevention of a pandemic is the primary task. The procedure of both, the attack and firms response depends on the two typical types of users or consumers. The rational users or consumers seek direct contact to the firm in case of complains. In this case a respectful treatment like partners is obligatory and a fast compensation of the customers' reclaims seems to be the best protection against public attack via social media and resulting reputation damage. In contrast the emotional user is seeking for points of attack to blame the company. To prevent such attacks the company should train employees to monitor the mainstream to detect crucial ethical topics and ethical development in the environment which might create conflicts. As for the case of a pandemic break out efficient advices are presented for the emergency action plan to slow down the pandemic. To conclude, with this pandemic model and the deduced advices of the emergency action plan the thesis' research question has been answered successfully.

6. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An empirical proof of the pandemic model exists only for the health care sector. Future research has to investigate the applicability of the model to the business field. Further on the proposed pandemic model and advices are limited to the business to consumer field. Thus, this model might be extended to the field of business to business.

Some further questions are still open: a measure for reputation and reputation damage has to be developed to prove the feasibility of the presented emergency action plan by further empirical studies. Therefore, various multinational firms would be necessary to prove the practicability of the model. However, such empirical study would overexcite the scope of this paper. Therefore it must be worked out in future literature studies.

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