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Innovation Management and information Technology impact on Global Economy
in the Era of Pandemic

Editor

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Brand re/action on COVID-19: An Exploratory Cross-Country Study

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought limitations and change to everyday life like never before. While people were adapting their habits to physical distance, organizations felt challenged to look for alternatives to adapt their business. Brands were forced to see how they could quickly keep the business alive and connected to the new world. This research uses the context of the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) and its spread disease (COVID-19) and intends to explore public perceptions about brands actions and communication during the pandemic, trying to understand how the different approaches to crisis were perceived among the target audiences. A theoretical approach supports an exploratory comparative and cross-border (Brazil versus Portugal) empirical process. This process regards the participation of brands in the discursive phenomenon “we are together”, the hashtag #vaificartudobem (everything will be fine) or “stay home” and how their audiences react to this approach. In April and May 2020, a quantitative method was developed applying a survey. The results of this study suggest that brands have real benefits as their actions are positively recognized by the public opinion (in Brazil and Portugal). Brazilian audiences consider it more important for brands to be present in delicate moments such as the current one and promoting the public’s awareness and consciousness. Female respondents believe that brands that embrace the cause and promote social isolation, improve their image. This sample also recognizes differences in brands and communication changes, during COVID-19, and finds it important that brands embrace the cause and promote social isolation, improving their image.

Keywords: Crisis communication, Crisis management, Brands, New coronavirus (COVID-19).

Introduction

The world is currently experiencing one of its greatest challenges since World War II. The new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), and its disease COVID-19, is affecting every aspect of our lives. In February 2021, 134 035 138 people from 192 countries had already contacted with the virus, of which 2 904 503 died from COVID-19 (Johns Hopkins University, 2021). This pandemic has led to a high number of decisions, with countries, regions, and cities in a complete lockdown. This cross-border and exogenous mega crisis is testing the ability of organizations to respond to an unprecedented health emergency caused by the global pandemic, but also to the impending problems of unemployment, human resource management, risk management and solidarity (Christensen and Lægheid, 2020; Zarco and Cordón, 2020).

In a chaotic moment like the one experienced with COVID-19, companies recognize the challenge of communication, facing in a continuous and committed way in the media. COVID-19 resulted in changes in advertising, marketing, promotion, and media spending, forcing companies and brands to reevaluate their current thinking and the future of advertising and marketing campaigns in order to maintain a steady stream of revenue (DiResta, Williford, Cohen, and Genn, 2020). Likewise, there is also a decline in advertising spending of around 10%, with a decrease in TV spending of 25% (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020). The current COVID-19 has resulted in a wave of advertising and marketing approaches that are based on the commodified concepts of human connection, care, and community in a time of crisis (Sobande, 2020). It has been observed that companies have adapted their goals and launched multi-channel initiatives, designed to contribute to facing COVID-19, with the communication of most companies being more dedicated to their current customers and less to the acquisition of new ones (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020). Brand approaches focused on “How can I help”, “We are here for you” or other adaptations of their communications for these times of social distance and care for others, have marked the advertising in these recent COVID-19 times (Hoekstra and Leeflang, 2020).

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A literature GAP is identified as Pace, Balboni, and Gistri (2017) state that there is little information and knowledge about the effects of crisis reactions by stakeholders depending on their level of exposure to different media. At the same time, Khare and Singh (2020) mention that there are few articles that discuss the effects of COVID-19 on advertising from an empirical perspective. Whitley, Besharat, and Kashmiri (2021) report that it has not yet been investigated how companies use communication channels during the crisis and with what effect, as well as the variation of message communication strategies. At the beginning of the pandemic, the communication tone of some brands was of a certain degree of uncertainty, with time they changed to a more courteous and hopeful tone. They mention that it is not yet known how the tone influences the perception of consumers during the crisis (Whitley, Besharat, and Kashmiri, 2021).

Brands undertook several changes and different types of reactions in the way they communicated with their audiences, changing their logo, signature, speech, among others. This study intends to address brands' reactions to pandemic, by answering the following questions: 1) What is the public perception about brands' mobilization in a crisis/pandemic scenario?; 2) The public perception about brands' actions is influenced by customer characteristic such as sex, age, and nationality?; 3) Does this mobilization process contribute to brands' future image and reputation? Bearing these questions in mind, an exploratory survey is undertaken to better understand the reaction and behavior of the public in the face of these reactions and changes.

The article proceeds as follows. First, with the research background in mind, it deepens knowledge on crisis management. Doing so, allows knowledge of this field to be adapted to this specific context, browsing themes as types and phases of crisis, and adding on communication strategies and practices during crisis. Second, it presents the methods carried out in this phase of the study and clarifies the data collection process. It, also, examines and discusses preliminary results obtained on this exploratory field study to be explored. Finally, conclusions and implications for further research are drawn.

Crisis Management

Organizations operate in highly volatile environments (Spillan and Crandall, 2002). As the environment is becoming increasingly complex, the crisis that organizations face will also increase not only in extent but also in impact (Spillan, 2003). As Mitroff and Anagnos (2001, p. 3) states "crises have become an inevitable, natural feature of our everyday lives".

With the perspective that time allows, one can easily identify today the 60s of the 20th Century as the beginning of the literature about organizational crises (Mendes and Pereira, 2006). One of the first authors to write about this subject was Charles Hermann, in 1963, and his concern was to analyze the consequences that certain disruptive phenomena, which he called crisis, had on the viability of organizations. This author defined a crisis as something that threatens the fundamental values of the organization, allows only a limited period for decision making, is unexpected by the organization and originates in the relevant environment of the organization (Hermann, 1963). Fink (2002, cit. in Wrigley, Salmon, and Park, 2003), one of the leading authors in the field, conceptualizes crisis as something that impacts positively and negatively an organization and as something (time, phase, or event) that is decisive or crucial. Devlin (2007, p. 5) refers that a crisis is "an unstable time for an organization, with a distinct possibility for an undesirable outcome. This undesirable outcome could interfere with the normal operations of the organization, it could damage the bottom line, it could jeopardize the public image, or it could close media or government scrutiny". Seeger et al. (2003, cit. in Jordan, Upright, and Tice-Owens, 2016, p. 162) add on the definition of crisis as "a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals".

Regarding the types of crisis (Table 1), it should be noted that any organization is sensitive to an endless number of crises, and although crises can arise in infinite sizes, shapes, intensity, complexity, uncertainty and magnitudes (Eriksson and McConnell, 2011), in the opinion of Marcus and Goodman (1991) different types of crises can be distinguished, such as: accidents, scandals, product safety and health incidents. Crisis management researchers have classified crisis into 2x2 matrix (e. g. Coombs and Holladay, 1996; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Meyers and Holusha, 1986), through cluster analysis (Pearson and Mitroff, 1993), and by categories (Spillan and Crandall, 2002; Spillan, 2003; Devlin, 2007).

Table 1: Some noted studies on crisis types

Author/s	Types of crisis in NPOs
Marcus and Goodman (1991)	Accidents, scandals, and product safety and health incidents
Pearson and Mitroff (1993)	Technical/economic, nature, and human/social origin
Coombs and Holladay (1996)	Accidents, transgressions, faux pas and terrorism

Spillan and Crandall (2002)	Operational crisis, publicity problems, fraudulent activities, natural disasters, and legal crisis
Wrigley, Salmon and Park, (2003)	1. Accidents: unintentional and internal; 2. transgressions: intentional and internal; 3. faux pas: unintentional and external; and 4. terrorism: intentional and external
Coombs (2006a)	Attacks on an organization, accidents, management misbehaviour
Devlin (2007)	Product issue; negative public perception; financial problem; industrial relations problem; adverse international event; workplace violence; senior executives have died or been killed; disaster at one of organizations locations, including acts of nature, accidents, or intentional acts.
Coombs (2007 <i>cit.</i> in Sisco, 2012)	Victim, accident, and intentional
Patterson and Radtke (2009 <i>cit.</i> in Jordan, Upright and Tice-Owens, 2016)	Emergencies; Controversies

Source: Adapted from Jordan, Upright and Tice-Owens (2016)

The key notion in crisis studies is that one crisis is not similar to another and the reactions to a crisis may be different. One can observe these crisis characteristics from the company's point of view (organizational perspective) or from the perspective of stakeholders (societal perspective) (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015; Pace, Balboni, and Gistri, 2017). Coombs (2014, *cit.* in Falkheimer and Heide, 2015) stresses that a crisis is perceptive, that is, it is the different perceptions of stakeholders about an event that helps to define it as a crisis. Additionally, Coombs emphasizes that while a crisis is unpredictable, it is not at all unexpected. Organizations must know that different forms of crises can emerge (Coombs, 2014, *cit.* in Falkheimer and Heide, 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic is a contamination crisis, that is, a damage that impacts a company/brand through an exogenous, unrelated event (Whitler, Besharat, and Kashmiri, 2021). But it is also a cross-border crisis, a concept introduced by Boin (2009) and which focuses on societal crises and disasters, which can be seen as a consequence of modernity (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015). Cross-border crises spread across functional, geographical and temporal boundaries (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015; Christensen and Læg Reid, 2020). Given the equivocity and complexity of cross-border crises, crisis communication requires more elaborate strategic thinking (Falkheimer and Heide, 2015; Christensen and Læg Reid, 2020). Likewise, a cross-border mega crisis, such as COVID-19, highlights the emotional aspects of reputation management (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2020).

Communication strategies and practices during crisis

The crisis communication literature focuses on crisis management and how stakeholders react to different types of crises and the strategic responses to those crises. However, there is little information and knowledge about the effects of crisis reactions by stakeholders depending on their level of exposure to different media (Pace, Balboni, and Gistri, 2017).

Crisis communication defined as the ongoing dialogue between the organization and its audiences before, during and after the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2002), the objectives of crisis communication are to restore the organization to normality, to influence the public perception and recover and repair the image (Jin, Pang, and Cameron, 2012). The strategies used must be designed to minimize damage to the organization's image (Jin, Pang, and Cameron, 2012). Greyser (2009) and Hugelius, Adams, and Romo-Murphy (2019) consider that crisis communication plays a key role in overcoming crises and is an integral part of responding to a disaster. For decades, business communications have played an important role in building and supporting an organization's identity and reputation (Greyser, 2009; Lee, 2016). The organization's reputation and image management need to take into account the reactions of its affected stakeholders, the political-administrative apparatus, the general public and the media (Christensen and Læg Reid, 2020).

Brand crises can be critical threats to the company reputation's (Wang, 2016). When facing a crisis, appropriate and timely responses from the organization play an important role in restoring brand confidence among consumers (Wang, 2016). According to Zoio (Director of Communication of the Portuguese Psychologists Order), brands and organizations, more than ever, must represent values in which people see themselves and make them feel fulfilled when they interact in some way with that organization or brand (Almeida, 2021). That is why companies that have been working, well, on humanization,

sharing values, promoting social responsibility and sustainability (Almeida, 2021). And in the internal communication that currently assumes a fundamental role. Without communication there is no relationship, without relationship there is no trust and without trust there is no reason to continue (Almeida, 2021). Based on the concept of brand awareness from Aaker (1991), a brand needs to ensure positive communication with consumers, build and frame the message with the aim of the security and trust it offers (Khan, 2020). It is imperative that the brand must be sure that its communication is articulated for all audiences, and, in this pandemic phase, it should not focus on its own interests (Khan, 2020). Given that, during a crisis, information is both essential and limited, the brand must communicate with honesty, frankness, openness, and compassion (Veil and Husted, 2012; Marynissen and Lauder, 2020). Schoofs, Claeys, Wael, and Cauberghe (2019) concluded in their study that empathy minimizes and is a component in the process of repairing reputational damages that can be affected by crisis communication. Zarco and Córdón (2020) state that communications in which the brand shows concern for the victims of COVID-19, or responds to regulations imposed to face the crisis, will have a positive effect on its brand image if they are authentic and if they relate to the brand identity. While brands are currently looking for the right or correct tone to face a health emergency pandemic, there are few articles that discuss the effects of COVID-19 on advertising from an empirical perspective Khare and Singh (2020). Li and Hall (2020) report that the coronavirus pandemic caused a sharp drop in advertising spending. Advertising spending fell by an average of 9% in Europe (Khare and Singh, 2020). Beer (2020) mentions that the major brands have adopted their advertising to address and reflect this unique pandemic situation (using the buzzword "We are together", for example or the combination of action, information, and support).

The contemporary practice of public relations and crisis communication is being challenged by the rise of social media (Freberg, 2012 cit. in Wang, 2016). Value changes and innovations in the media lead to an institutionalization of crisis communication (Wang, 2016). Crisis communication can be done through the analysis of concerns but also in the execution of a crisis communication strategy through press releases, messages on the website and social media, during interviews, etc. (Marynissen and Lauder, 2020). For Coombs (2006b), crisis communication strategies are composed by the form and content of crisis response.

The media has experienced a huge transformation over the past decade (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016; Lee and Atkinson, 2019). Recent statistics indicate that the number of people accessing the internet exceeds 5 billion, that is, 64,2% of the world population (Internet World Stats, 2020). With the growing number of internet users and social media worldwide, it is essential that communication managers understand online consumer behavior (Schivinski and Davrowski, 2016). Social media transformed how crisis information is generated and shared (Zhu, Anagondahalli and Zhang, 2017). Given the change in the media environment and the explosive growth of social media, the choice of the communication platform is a critical success factor in crisis communication (Lee and Atkinson, 2019). The main communication of brands has been moving to digital platforms (Khare and Singh, 2020). Consumers are increasingly using social media sites to search for information and moving away from traditional media (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). The traditional communication that was previously controlled and managed by the brand and marketing managers is gradually being shaped by consumers (Schivinski and Davrowski, 2016). Brands are becoming members of online communities and working on first-hand feedback, applying social sentiment and Google query volume, in the most searched keywords as indicators, to update marketing talent (Khare and Singh, 2020). Not only do individuals and organizations communicate differently during a crisis, but they are also perceived very differently; social media platforms and messaging increase the challenges involved in maintaining the general reputation of brands and companies (Freberg et al., 2013 cit. in Wang, 2016).

Companies must design their social media content to influence the consumer's attitude towards brands, since the quality and credibility of their message is an important factor that affects the individual's behavior after being exposed to it (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Social media communication created by companies does not directly affect brand value, but indirectly influences consumer perceptions of value based on brand attitude (Schivinski and Dabrowski, 2016). Brands are currently designing cautious communications following COVID-19 standards. The ads that come out no longer show people hugging, shaking hands, and celebrating, because all consumers are aware of what brands encourage people to do (Khare and Singh, 2020). Consumers and businesses are demonstrating stronger emotional connections with trusted suppliers in their quest for stability and value. Consumers are also looking for reliable information about COVID-19 and its consequences (Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020). For example, this reflected in greater attention being paid to non-commercial sites and TV broadcasts (Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020).

This specific period of crisis also requires the use of different means of communication: less outdoor advertising, more online and possibly more advertising on television and radio (Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020). Personal approaches focused on 'how we can help you' provide insight into the challenges faced by customers and offer opportunities to help them. However, the "we are here to help you" messages are only effective if they are authentic and accompanied. This does not only affect marketing communication (Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020), but it requires companies to be fully aligned with the customer-centric paradigm, which (yet) is not the case for many companies. The time has come for companies to respond to their customers' immediate basic needs. For example, several suppliers have adapted their communication to these times of social detachment and 'taking care of each other'. Careful use of humor can also help to increase retention of the advertising message (Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020).

Methods

Because the world is still in a pandemic situation, this study focuses on the first brands' reactions that showed concern and an authentic willingness to support populations promoting social isolation, almost mandatory worldwide, and other specific security measures with public health in mind and common well-being purposes. Based on the literature review, an exploratory survey was chosen as the empirical method, and the hypotheses are:

H1: In a pandemic crisis, sex influences the public perception of brands' reactions, in terms of showing concern (a), awareness and consciousness (b), social isolation (c) and future image (d).

H2: In a pandemic crisis, nationality influences the public perception of brands' reactions, in terms of showing concern (a), awareness and consciousness (b), social isolation (c) and future image (d).

H3: In a pandemic crisis, the public perception of brands' reactions, in terms of showing concern (a), awareness and consciousness (b), social isolation (c), and future image (d) differ by age.

To test these research hypotheses, individuals were surveyed including those from the two countries (Portugal and Brazil, for convenience purposes), using Google Forms to prepare the questionnaire.

An original questionnaire consisting of 21 questions was distributed via the Internet using Facebook users over 18 years old during April and May of 2020, in Portugal. Different people, as customers, were essentially asked about their perception of the brand's reaction and activities during COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the customer social and demographic profile was assessed. The scales used to measure the variables were a 10-point Likert type, presenting the limits in a growing scale of response.

Results and Discussion

This results analysis was carried out with the statistics tool SPSS, version 26, to analyze the collected data. The final sample consisted of 239 individuals. Table 2 summarizes the main methodological elements used in the collection of quantitative data.

Table 2: Synthesis of online survey

Temporal basis	Cross-Section
Unit of analysis	Facebook users
Sampling	Convenience
Sample	239
Data collection	Questionnaire survey available online
Date	april and may 2020
Data analysis	Univariate and multivariate

The demographic characteristics of the resulting sample include as dominant gender female. In terms of total respondents, 69,5% are female, and 28,9% male. Regarding the respondents' age group, the age group between 18 and 25 years old was the one that answered the questionnaire the most with 57,33%. The age range with the least responses to the questionnaire was of more than 50 years old with 4,2%. The average age of all respondents is approximately 29. It is acknowledged the sample is more Portuguese than Brazilian in what nationality (58,2% *versus* 37,2%) and country of residence (69% *versus* 29,3%) concerns.

To test the research hypotheses, several analyses were performed, and the sample was scrutinized, although it is a convenience one. As relevant facts, 50% of respondents dedicate, on average, more than four hours a day using social media. Also, most respondents (77%) say they noticed changes in actions and brand images, during the pandemic crisis. As one of the main objectives of crisis communication is to influence the public perception (Jin, Pang, and Cameron, 2012) it is interesting they are aware of brands' actions. As literature supports, this specific period of crisis also requires the use of different means of communication, namely less outdoor advertising, more online and, possibly, more advertising on television and radio (Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020). In the present study, when questioned "By what means did you know about the actions of the brands?" most respondents answered the internet and television in an open question (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Source of information on brands' actions

Considering the scarce knowledge about the effects of crisis reactions by stakeholders depending on their level of exposure to different media (Pace, Balboni, and Gistri, 2017), further inquiries to the data were performed. First, it is interesting to know if age influences the choice of the most used media. The χ^2 statistic is used and Table 3 constructed to illustrate the most used media by age. The conclusion is that the group "More than 32 years" chooses television and the printed press with a higher percentage than the other groups.

Table 3: Media used by age (Chi-square test of independence of the sample)

	18-25	26-32	more than 32	p-value
Television, n (%)				
Yes	61 (44,5)	20 (42,5)	35 (63,6)	0,037
Printed media, n (%)				
Yes	5 (3,6)	3 (6,4)	10 (18,2)	0,002
Internet, n (%)				
Yes	131 (95,6)	45 (95,7)	54 (98,18)	0,688
Radio, n (%)				
Yes	6 (4,4)	3 (6,4)	6 (10,9)	0,241

With the objective of verifying whether age influences the most used social network (Table 4), the independence test was carried out again, which revealed differences in the following social networks: Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The conclusion is that, in this sample, younger people use more Instagram and Twitter, while the older ones use WhatsApp.

Table 4: Social media used by age (Chi-square test of independence of the sample)

	18-25	26-32	more than 32	p-value
Instagram, n (%)				
Yes	121 (88,3)	39 (83)	36 (65,5)	<0,001
Facebook/Messenger, n (%)				
Yes	65 (47,44)	28 (59,6)	31 (56,4)	0,268
YouTube, n (%)				
Yes	59 (43,1)	19 (40,4)	24 (43,6)	0,939
Twitter, n (%)				
Yes	33 (24,1)	2 (4,3)	3 (5,5)	<0,001
WhatsApp, n (%)				
Yes	55 (40,1)	30 (63,8)	49 (89,1)	<0,001

The applied questionnaire had five questions (Table 5) where each answer was evaluated on a Likert scale from 0 to 10 points. In questions 1 and 2, the score 0 corresponds to "Nothing important" while 10 corresponds to "Very important". In the remaining questions, the score 0 corresponds to "Nothing" and the score 10 corresponds to "Very much". The internal consistency of this set of items was verified through Cronbach's Alpha. The obtained value (0,78) reveals a reasonable, almost good, internal consistency between the items. Most respondents consider that it is very important (rated 10) for brands to show concern for the population and to be present in delicate moments such as the current one. Note the weak dispersion of the first four variables around the average (the variation coefficient in these cases is less than 30%).

This result corroborates Zarco and Cordón (2020) arguments stating that communications in which the brand shows concern for the victims of COVID-19 will have a positive effect on its brand image if they are authentic and if they relate to the brand identity. Reinforces that, during a crisis, a brand must communicate with honesty, frankness, openness, and compassion (Veil and Husted, 2012; Marynissen and Lauder, 2020). Seems also important to consider all audiences, instead of focus on brands' interests (Khan, 2020) with the communication tone changing to a more courteous and hopeful one (Whitler, Besharat, and Kashmiri, 2021).

Table 5: Public perception of brands' reactions

	Average	Median	Standard deviation	Variation coefficient
Q1: Do you think it is important for brands to show their concern for the population by promoting social isolation?	9,1	10	1,607	18%
Q2: In your opinion, what is the importance of a brand presence in delicate moments like the current one?	9,01	10	1,849	21%
Q3: In your opinion, to what degree, the brands that changed the way of communicating help to raise the public's awareness and consciousness about the theme?	7,95	8	2,132	27%
Q4: To what degree, the brands that embraced the cause and promoted social isolation, have improved their image?	7,95	8	2,191	28%
Q5: In your opinion, to what degree, the brands that did not react to the theme may in the future have their image harmed compared to the competitors that reacted?	5,88	6	2,81	48%

The Mann-Whitney-U test (Table 6) was used to find out whether the respondents' assessments on the several questions are significantly different between Portuguese and Brazilians.

Table 6: Mann-Whitney-U test for Participants' Gender and Participants' Nationality

	n	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
		Median	Median	Median	Median	Median
		(min-max)	(min-max)	(min-max)	(min-max)	(min-max)
Sex						
Male	69	10 (0-10)	10 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	6 (0-10)
Female	166	10 (0-10)	10 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	9 (0-10)	6 (0-10)
p-value		p= 0,284	p= 0,083	p= 0,18	p= 0,022	p= 0,719
Nationality						
Portuguese	139	10 (0-10)	10 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	8 (0-10)	5 (0-10)
Brazilian	89	10 (0-10)	10 (0-10)	9 (0-10)	9 (0-10)	7 (0-10)
p-value		p= 0,404	p= 0,031	p= 0,017	p= 0,86	p= 0,104

The conclusion is that there are statistically significant differences with regard to the importance of a major brand presence itself in delicate moments like the current one, Brazilians tend to attribute greater importance to this issue (p-value= 0,031). Regarding the importance of altering the communication of some brands in raising public awareness and consciousness on the pandemic issue, they are significantly different between the two nationalities. There are differences in the median between the two nationalities (8 versus 9; p-value= 0,017). Again, respondents of Brazilian nationality valued this issue more. Another important question is to know if there are significant differences between males and female answers. In median terms, only differences are found in the answers to the question "To what degree, the brands that embraced the cause and promoted social isolation, have improved their image?" (8 versus 9; p-value= 0,022). Again, respondents of Brazilian nationality valued this issue more. To the best of one's knowledge, literature does not support the differences found between the two countries under study.

As shown in Table 6, there is a meaningful difference between gender and the future image. Through these analyses it is found that H1 is accepted for d) (future image). H2 is accepted for b) (awareness and consciousness) and c) (social isolation). For this reason, we can accept that in a pandemic crisis, nationality influences the public perception of brands' reactions, in terms awareness and consciousness and social isolation. Kruskal Wallis test was used in order to identify differences in the five questions by the age of the participants (divided into three groups 18-25, 26-32, and over 32 years). For his matter, as $p\text{-value} > 0,05$, in all questions, there are no significant differences between age and the answers, so H3 is rejected.

Conclusions and Future Research

With COVID-19, brands have been forced to understand how to be present and connected with their publics. Their actions were positively recognized by public opinion. This circumstance spurred new trends and accelerated behaviors of "adaptability", "authenticity" and "humanity". This affects marketing communication (Hoekstra and Leeftang, 2020) and requires companies to be fully aligned with the customer-centric paradigm, which is not the case for many companies.

Despite the exploratory nature of these results, most of the arguments of recent literature is confirmed. In what theoretical and management implications concern, most respondents consider that it is particularly important for brands to show concern for the population and to be present in delicate moments such as the current one. They recognize differences in brands' approaches and communication changes, during COVID-19, promoting the public's awareness and consciousness, and, also, find it important that brands embrace the cause and promote social isolation, improving their image. The results of this study allow to suggest that brands have real benefits as their actions are positively recognized by public opinion (in Brazil and Portugal). Brazilian audiences consider it more important for brands to be present in delicate moments and promote the public's awareness and consciousness. Female respondents believe that brands that embraced the cause and promoted social isolation, enhance their image.

This research, besides exploratory in nature, has some limitations, such as not having a balanced distribution of the questionnaires by country, showing a concentration in Portugal. Given the current context, caused by the worldwide pandemic of the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, it was only possible to collect data based on the social media Facebook, with the sample concentrated on individuals between 18 and 25 years old. The sample is not representative of the population. A larger and broader sample, also more diversified in countries could, also, deepen knowledge about this theme.

In the future, it will be interesting to explore, in retrospect, how brands' actions and performance, during the pandemic, were consequent regarding their value, brand image and reputation.

Organic, useful, original content, is relevant, delivers value to channels and consumers. Still, it is not enough to support post pandemic customers in digital, the "good brands" may want to change the content strategy and "talk" with their followers in a more humane way, using social media in a useful and relevant way for each customer, becoming closer to their followers. Brands can guide strategies and invest in the development of websites, making their presence felt in marketplace applications, as, hypothetically, online shopping will continue to be a preference. Moreover, the concept of "omnichannel", linked to e-commerce, goes beyond this as it allows companies to have greater control and knowledge of the purchase journey. Online presence should be consolidated with offline presence, without forgetting the reinforcement of proximity and customer support in post pandemic ways of life.

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