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# CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES USING IMAGE REPAIR THEORY: A CASE STUDY OF PODRAVKA IN CROATIA

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the application of image repair theory in crisis communication strategies, focusing on the case study of Podravka in Croatia to identify effective methods of managing public perception during organizational crises. The study evaluates how Podravka, one of the biggest companies in Croatia's food industry, navigated its crisis by employing image repair strategies. By examining the company's responses and communications during the crisis, this research highlights the significance of maintaining a positive public image and the role of proactive communication in mitigating damage to reputation. This study aims to fill the research gap in the current literature regarding the application of image repair theory in corporate crisis management. It provides insights into effective crisis communication strategies that can be employed to repair and enhance corporate image, particularly in times of public scrutiny.*

**Keywords:** crisis communication, image repair, communication strategies

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

One poorly chosen word or action can risk a company's reputation in a world where organization and information are increasingly interconnected. Whether it is fear of bankruptcy, merger failure, restructuring, or nasty scandal, companies often face stressful situations that must be handled skillfully and quickly. A good reputation makes a company less prone to risks and crises (Griffin, 2014). In a time when companies pay more attention to their image, often, their communication with the outside world is not clear, especially in a crisis (Bland, 2016). William Benoit's (2014) image repair theory outlines various strategies organizations can adopt when faced with a reputational crisis. These strategies can be

categorized into denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. The effectiveness of each strategy depends on the crisis context, the organization's prior reputation, and the public's perception. Podravka is one of Croatia and Southeast Europe's largest food industry companies, known for its high-quality products. The need for this research lies in the fact that, although the Croatian socio-political context strongly influences organizations' communication, there is little research on crisis communication strategies. Therefore, this paper examines Podravka's crisis communication strategies using the image repair theory of William L. Benoit as a framework. The focus is on a multiple case study by Podravka, exploring the effectiveness of image repair theory strategies. Specifically, it examines the application of theoretical frameworks in real-world scenarios by analyzing Podravka's responses to crisis. These objectives are pursued to provide insight into one company's practices and contribute to the broader field of crisis communication by deriving lessons for future practices. The significance of the case study is underscored by its potential to inform and improve strategies among companies facing similar challenges. These considerations shape the approach, focusing on the case study to address more general questions (Baskarada, 2014). The research objectives are as follows: First, to identify effective image repair methods used by Podravka. Second, to analyze the significance of academic theoretical frameworks in their application. Third, to contribute to understanding how local contexts, including political, cultural, and economic factors, shape communication strategies. This research aims to contribute to the field of knowledge regarding the role of communication in crisis management by proposing key strategies that could serve as a model for other organizations facing similar reputational challenges. The study provides important insights into the theoretical and practical implications of the research findings. The focus is on image repair theory as a relevant framework for analyzing a company's response to damage to its reputation and image. Furthermore, the aim is to address gaps in existing literature by exploring the intersection of image repair theory and cultural contexts.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Crisis communication theory**

An organization's projected image is essential to its effectiveness as a social institution. An organization's positive or negative image is critical to its effectiveness as a social institution. Crisis communication theory is significant in how organizations project a particular image to the outside world in a crisis. Mass media is a crucial component of the overall image. The public plays a crucial role in shaping an organization's image. The public's judgment of an organization's action or inaction in a crisis creates either a positive or negative image (Schoofs & Claeys, 2021; An & Gower, 2009). Nevertheless, a crisis is not static but dynamic, emerging, developing, and dissolving over time. Thus, at every stage of a developing crisis, there is a need for a systemic response to the public and the media accompanying the public in shaping an organization's image (Bankins & Waterhouse, 2019; Gilpin, 2010). A crisis can bring either positive or negative publicity to the organization involved in the event (Chen et al., 2021; Sellnow & Seeger, 2021.; Su et al., 2021). Therefore, every crisis provides both a threat to corporate image and an opportunity to learn that a corporate image can be co-created by the public (Maon et al., 2021). The public can be either an ally or an opponent in shaping organizational images (Brewer & Hermann, 1999). When public judgment is favorable, a good image is co-created, but when public judgment is unfavorable, a negative image results. An organization's response affects public judgment. Organizations can choose to respond to the public or remain silent overtly. A covert response happens internally without public knowledge, while an overt response happens publicly to influence ongoing public judgment. A covert response can either deny public judgment or happen without any response to public judgment. In contrast, an overt response directly contests or accommodates public judgment. An organization's choice of response depends on the type of public judgment (positive or negative) and the type of action (covert or overt). The choice of organizational options involves a consideration of public motives. Publics are assumed to act rationally and seek to maximize their

welfare. Therefore, it is assumed that they possess a threat perception when asked to judge an organization's action and will act on it. This emphasis on public perception leads to an implicit understanding of public response. Publics are perceived as social entities whose judgments are shaped by a shared understanding of an organization's actions. The public's judgment is determined by the gap between perceived and actual organizational action (Lee & Li, 2021). This gap triggers either a positive or a negative judgment. When the public perceives an organization as acting beyond expectations, positive judgment results; otherwise, public judgment is negative.

## 2.2. Image repair theory

Many high-profile crises resulting in tarnished public images trigger academic interest in how organizations approach image repair. Image repair theory is relevant for scholarly consideration of those approaches. Organizations anxious to avoid damage often rush their response to a crisis. Such haste can mean that the response does not fit the most appropriate method of image repair and may exacerbate the damage (Khaw et al., 2023). As such, it is worth considering how the methods of image repair selected can best be tailored to specific situations. An organization is motivated to engage in image repair efforts upon discovering a discrepancy between a desired public image and a perceived one. Repair efforts consider the audience's perceptions and partially attempt to reshape them. Focusing solely on preventative measures would ignore that issues will arise even within well-conceived and executed public relations strategies. Repair efforts need to acknowledge the realities of audience perception and focus on recalibrating that perception on the most fundamental level. Discrepancies in public image could be seen as an affront to the audience's understanding of the organization. Thus, considering repair efforts in the context of communication theory is applicable (Chen et al., 2021; Abbasi et al., 2023; Raza et al., 2021). Benoit (2015) created a theory of image repair drawing on rhetorical theory (Crabbe & Makay, 1972). This approach to crisis communication discourse begins with two key assumptions: (a) communication is a goal-directed activity, and (b) the fundamental goal of communication is to maintain a positive reputation. The discourse of image repair is a response to real or perceived threats. Such threats consist of two elements: (a) an offensive act that is (b) attributed to the target (Benoit & Glantz, 2017). Repair efforts can take many forms, suggesting that multiple theoretical models could be utilized to explain them. The three models best describe how an organization might pursue image repair: discourse conformity, re-legitimation, and crisis-as-communication. Considering how these models relate to image repair efforts provides a deeper understanding of the theoretical foundations driving those efforts. Each model's approach is broadly similar but employs subtle differences in focus and methodology that affect how an organization might employ them. Shifting attention to how specific image repair strategies are best employed in context takes on added importance. Academic interest often focuses on strategies and assesses their effectiveness within narrow parameters. For example, an apology strategy can be examined as an isolated response type that takes no consideration of other strategy options. Furthermore, this isolated approach may lead to an incomplete understanding of how apologies function in real-world interactions. By examining apologies in a vacuum, we risk overlooking the broader context in which these responses occur, including power dynamics, social norms, and the relationships between the parties involved. Apologies are not merely standalone acts; they often intersect with other strategies such as excuses, justifications, or expressions of sympathy. Each of these strategies can significantly influence the effectiveness of an apology and the subsequent responses from recipients. For instance, an apology paired with a valid excuse might mitigate its impact, while an expression of genuine empathy can enhance the sincerity of the apology and foster reconciliation. The effectiveness of a strategy often depends on context (Ren, 2018). Moreover, the cultural context must be considered, as different societies may prioritize various aspects of apology and response strategies. In some cultures, a direct apology may be seen as a sign of weakness, while in others, it could be perceived as a critical step towards conflict resolution. Understanding these nuances requires a comprehensive framework incorporating various response strategies and

acknowledging the specific social and relational contexts in which apologies are made. Therefore, a more integrative approach is necessary to grasp apology strategies fully. By analyzing how apologies interact with other communicative moves, researchers and practitioners can better appreciate the complexities of human interaction and the nuanced roles that apologies play in maintaining social harmony and personal relationships. It is essential to consider the implications of these findings for the broader strategic approach to an organization's image repair.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Data collection and analysis**

The methodology consists of qualitative research, which focuses on understanding the meanings of social phenomena and interpreting them from the public perspective. The qualitative research approach uses press clippings as primary and secondary data sources. The documents of Podravka's crisis communication strategies are publicly available. They were obtained through an online search using the keywords "Podravka," "crisis," and Croatian translations of the keywords. The data source comprises publicly available documents, including news articles, Facebook posts, a YouTube video, press releases, and official statements on the companies' websites. In total, 15 documents were considered. Thematic analysis was used to analyze data, a widely used method in qualitative research. It is a systematic process of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within the data. It involves familiarising the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing, defining, naming, and producing the report. According to Braun and Clarke (2017), thematic analysis can be applied across a range of epistemologies and research questions and offers a flexible and accessible approach to analysis. Documents were analyzed thematically in three stages. First, the data was organized by data type. Then, the first analysis stage was conducted, where documents were analysed to identify initial themes. Finally, the second analysis stage was conducted, where themes about the research topic and data source were generated. By interrogating the company's crisis communication strategies using image repair theory, this research contributes to understanding one company's practices. It provides relevant insights for others considering similar external factors. Global market access and public perception bring companies under more scrutiny, especially regarding food quality and safety. The company was selected based on its past crises and the relevance of its practices to other companies.

##### **3.1.1. Company background**

Podravka Group is Croatia's biggest food processing and pharmaceutical company and one of the leading food companies in Southeastern Europe. In 2024, the Podravka Group achieved sales revenue of 766.5 million euros, an increase of 52.7 million euros, or 7.4 percent, compared to the previous year. Revenue growth was recorded in both segments in which the Group operates<sup>1</sup>. The company's most recognized product is its Vegeta brand, a food seasoning and flavor enhancer. In Croatia, food companies are scrutinized as essential providers during crises, leading to increased oversight from government agencies and the public. These companies must navigate complex dynamics in crisis management. A leading Croatian food company is critically assessed for its public communication strategies during crises. This research focuses on Podravka because of its long history, numerous communicated crises, and the interest of Croatian academia in the company. It plays a significant economic and social role as an essential developer and employer with a long tradition. Podravka was founded in 1934. Despite over 90 years of history, Podravka entered the most exhausting and challenging survival period 2011. when the global financial crisis began affecting local economies. Several socio-economic factors limited the company's ability to adapt to the new market conditions. On the one hand, global economic pressures hurt Podravka's

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<sup>1</sup> <https://zse.hr/en>

competitive position in the local market. On the other hand, economic mismanagement by the company's management created a chain of problems that jeopardized its survival. Because of this, Podravka found itself in a challenging position in 2017, being one of the largest companies that could collapse, bringing severe socio-economic consequences to the country. The company headquartered is in Koprivnica, and is publicly traded. In 2022, it generated significant sales, making it one of the largest Croatian companies. Despite its size, the company's rural base presents challenges in public crisis communication compared to city-based companies. In addition to being a case study of a communication approach, Podravka was chosen because of its local significance. Podravka's image and perception of its importance in Croatia differ from the company's global view. This difference is enhanced by Croatian cultural history, which still shapes public opinion about companies. Public perception is crucial during a crisis since it brings different judgments about the company's actions, thus affecting its responses. Consequently, the company's choice also requires studying crisis communication within a specific cultural framework. In addition to the significance of the company, it has also been exposed to several crises that put the need for sound image repair in any communication approach. As communication is vital for a company's public image, the role of well-prepared communication is illustrated through how communication could link a company's resilience and sustainability. In addition to public image, companies struggle to re-establish control over the company's actions. This is often neglected or even not considered in academic research. In compliance with the theoretical framework, the efficiency of communication strategies, considering public and internal control, is analyzed in this sense. The aim is to present how it would be easier to apply theoretical models if there was a local background. After presenting the local background, Podravka's image and the crises it faced, the company's strategy during the selected crisis is analyzed. This analysis deals with how communication strategies were used and adjusted due to the local context. Finally, the concluding chapter brings the need for a broader understanding of a local context if theoretical research is to be applied to local companies (Lee & Atkinson, 2019). To rigorously examine the evolution of Podravka's crisis communication strategies, a case study design encompassing six subcases capturing different crises is employed. A case study design enables an in-depth examination of a complicated and plural phenomenon. These pluralities encompass the realities surrounding the selection and the intricacies of implementing communication strategies Podravka employs during crises. Additionally, a case study approach typically includes the analysis of several cases with common characteristics or circumstances. This research selected six relevant crises with differing characteristics and outcomes that Podravka faced as one case. The selected crises provide a rich context for analysis because of their differences in characteristics, timeframes, communication strategy outcomes, and post-crisis scenarios. The focus is on how contextually contingent factors influence the selection and outcomes of strategic responses to crises. Therefore, it was necessary to design a framework to assess the effectiveness of the communication strategies employed during the addressed crises. The effectiveness assessment model is based on how each strategy influences the perceived intent of the organization in crisis, which subsequently influences the perception of the organization's responsibility and the outcome in terms of damaged trust. A case study design enables flexibility in adapting theoretical lenses to real-world situations. It allows for presenting theory as part of the empirical context and the theory's demonstration in action. The single case study approach can bring unique advantages, mainly when the case is critical, extreme, or unusual, as in this research. In such cases, it is plausible that a rival explanation may not exist, and a single case study is preferred.

### **3.1.2. Podravka's crisis communication**

The case study of Podravka's crisis communication reveals the application of image repair theory in mitigating reputational damage and restoring stakeholder trust during challenging situations. This study examines how Podravka navigated a significant crisis such as product contamination, food poisoning and mismanagement focusing on their strategic communication efforts to address public concerns and media scrutiny. The analysis highlights the key components of their

communication strategy, including social media, press releases, and direct engagement with stakeholders. By employing image repair theory, we can identify the tactics used by Podravka to mitigate reputational damage and restore public trust. This analysis focuses on strategies such as denial, evasion of responsibility, and corrective action, which were employed during key moments of the crisis. These strategies are critical in mitigating damage to the company's reputation and restoring stakeholder trust. By employing denial, Podravka aimed to minimize perceived culpability, while evasion of responsibility allowed them to shift focus away from the crisis. This strategic approach protected their brand image and allowed them to reframe the narrative to align with their core values. Furthermore, by utilizing these tactics, Podravka was able to engage with stakeholders more effectively, fostering an environment of trust and transparency amidst the turmoil. Product recalls and other corrective actions undertaken by the company were the most important image repair strategy in addressing the public's concern about consumer safety. This aligns with the conclusions of Lee et al. (2021), who posit that failing to conduct appropriate actions will cause criticism of subsequent crisis communication efforts. Service improvements were also seen as helpful in fixing a threatened image of competence following the comparative analysis of consumer comments made in response to press releases issued by Podravka. Mortification emerged as a relevant strategy, with apologies being proper from a psychological perspective for consumers who felt personally affected by a crisis and important for rebuilding trust. Generally, mortification appears more effective than other strategies, but its capability to repair an image depends on the context in which a crisis occurs. Culturally resonant messaging was another relevant finding, showing the influence of local cultural values on the effectiveness of communication strategies. This indicates that it is vital to critically examine the communication environment and adapt crisis responses to the local cultural context to achieve the best communicative outcome.

### **3.1.3. Podravka's corrective action**

According to the image repair theory, corrective actions are one of the main components of crisis communication strategies. This chapter elaborates on this strategy as the main action taken by Podravka in its efforts to communicate image repair during the crisis with the beef meat from Brazil. Corrective action means that a company has problems that have occurred during crises, and these problems need to be rectified. Podravka undertook several corrective actions, mainly focusing on product reform and improved service. As a direct consequence of these actions, Podravka tried to regain consumer trust and credibility and ensure safety (Ren, 2018). During the communication of corrective actions, Podravka always emphasized accountabilities for all actions. During food crises, consumers expect food companies to take corrective actions promptly. According to the image repair theory, it is essential to undertake corrective action as one of the components of the communication strategy in a crisis. If a company wants to manage a crisis effectively, corrective actions must be undertaken in a reasonable time frame (as soon as possible). However, the implementation of corrective actions can encounter some obstacles and challenges. A crisis might be a reasonable excuse for problems with corrective actions, but they must be thoughtfully planned. Corrective actions should be undertaken even before they are communicated to the public. The transparency of actions taken by the stakeholders is crucial to successful crisis management. In the case of Podravka, some corrective actions were taken during the crisis. Due to suspected salmonella, Podravka has pulled Vegeta off the shelves in Germany, Austria and Slovakia. Although the bacteria was found in one isolated case, Podravka decided to withdraw products from three countries where products from the aforementioned production series are located as a precautionary measure. However, that was not transparently communicated to the stakeholders, which caused media pressure and raised questions about the credibility of the company's actions. The corrective actions undertaken by Podravka during the animal health crisis were broadly appropriate and aimed at successful crisis management and prevention of crisis reoccurrence. However, the lack of transparency in communicating corrective actions to

stakeholders has compromised public perception and branding image repair. In other words, corrective measures are crucial in a crisis management process.

#### **3.1.4. Podravka mortification**

Mortification pertains to a strategic response highlighting the act of publicly acknowledging, apologizing, or accepting responsibility for a perceived mistake, transgression, or harm done. As significant actors in shaping public discourse, companies often must respond to crises arising primarily from consumer complaints. Accordingly, companies are under pressure to soothe public anger, often heading toward mortification. When employing mortification, a company admits to making a wrong move and explains how it intends to rectify its mistakes. In doing so, the company attempts to humanize its brand by revealing the fallibility of its employees or systems behind the brand, seeking forgiveness from the consumers. Podravka had publicly confessed its mistakes and shared its regrets, trying to prevent the crisis from escalating by employing mortification. During the selected period, Podravka implemented mortification five times, two successfully.

The first incident happened in May 2010, when a company representative publicly questioned the competency of a high school student who had publicly criticized its product on a social media web page. After intense criticism, Podravka's public outreach shifted from denial to mortification, calming the public down. The analysis of the selected discourse demonstrates how a brand's public confession can ease consumers' anger towards the brand, which expectedly prevents the loss of image and sales (Ren, 2018). In Croatia, public discourse and corporate communication reflect certain cultural norms, particularly regarding power distance, collectivism, and respect for social hierarchies. These factors influence how companies and individuals perceive and respond to public criticism and conflict. This example provides insight into the importance of mortification in keeping positive consumer-brand relationships.

The second incident was provoked by an incorrect translation of "cured" for "pregnant" in the product declaration of a baby food product, resulting in fearmongering among the consumers. Like in the first case, Podravka's first response was denial, worded in a manner that further threatened consumers; hence, it escalated the situation. Croatian society ranks relatively high on the uncertainty avoidance scale, meaning people tend to feel threatened by ambiguous or unfamiliar situations. The incorrect translation, which falsely indicated that the baby food product could "cure" pregnancy, created confusion and concern, provoking a fear-driven reaction from consumers. In a high uncertainty avoidance culture like Croatia, where consumers are susceptible to potential risks related to health and safety, this kind of labeling mistake could quickly escalate into a crisis. Fearmongering, especially in baby food, where health is paramount, quickly undermined consumer trust in the brand. Croatian consumers, influenced by collectivist values, place high importance on the safety and well-being of their communities, mainly when it involves vulnerable groups such as children. In this case, the baby food label error touched upon a highly sensitive issue, leading to an emotional and protective public response. Parents reacted with heightened anxiety due to the potential implications for their children's health. The fact that Podravka's initial response was denial only worsened the situation, as it appeared to disregard consumer concerns, thus further eroding trust. Nonetheless, this time, Podravka successfully implemented mortification.

The third scandal happened in Koprivnica. Parents were shocked by the ice cream Podravka gave to Koprivnica elementary school students for City Day. A gesture practiced for years has inadvertently become the subject of discussion and even condemnation. The children received ice cream whose packaging states that it is a product that is not intended for children due to the alcohol in its composition. The management announced that they were sorry for this unintentional omission. As soon as the omission was noticed, the products were automatically recalled and replaced by products intended for our youngest. Croatia's collectivist culture places a high value on family and the protection of children, who are viewed as particularly vulnerable and deserving of communal care and protection. The error made by Podravka—distributing ice cream containing

alcohol to children—directly conflicted with these values, as it posed a perceived risk to the well-being of the youngest members of society. The public's response, characterized by shock and condemnation, reflected the broader societal expectation that institutions, particularly well-established companies like Podravka, must prioritize the safety and well-being of the community.

In 2019, Podravka became the center of a scandal involving three Croatian MEPs and accusations of conflicts of interest. Although the allegations were probably politically motivated, the audio recording that emerged raised many doubts about the work of Podravka's management board, prompting the then President of the Management Board to resign. The emergence of an audio recording raised serious doubts about the integrity of Podravka's management board, ultimately leading to the resignation of the then-president of the management board. This incident demonstrates the critical role of transparency, public accountability, and political influence in crisis management, particularly in Croatia's socio-political landscape. Croatia scores relatively high on the power distance index, meaning there is a general acceptance of hierarchical structures and authority figures. However, this incident revealed the complex dynamics between corporate leadership, political figures, and public accountability. Although the public may typically defer to authority, scandals involving misuse of power or perceived corruption—especially those linked to high-ranking officials—often provoke significant backlash. The allegations against the Podravka management board and the involvement of prominent political figures led to heightened scrutiny and public criticism.

The fifth scandal that emerged in the case of Podravka, a prominent food company, involved allegations of unethical practices and mismanagement. Before the crisis, Podravka had cultivated a reputation for quality and reliability, which made the scandal's impact particularly damaging. Initially, the company employed a denial strategy to refute the allegations and maintain that its practices were above reproach. However, as public scrutiny intensified, it became clear that this approach was insufficient. Recognising the need for a more robust response, Podravka shifted to reducing the event's offensiveness and taking corrective action. They began to emphasise their long-standing commitment to quality and ethical practices, highlighting their history of corporate social responsibility initiatives.

Additionally, the company implemented internal reforms to address the issues that led to the scandal, showcasing its dedication to transparency and accountability. In the aftermath of the crisis, Podravka's communication strategy evolved further. They embraced mortification by openly acknowledging the mistakes and expressing genuine remorse for the impact on stakeholders.

This candid approach not only helped to rebuild trust with consumers but also reinforced their commitment to change. Moreover, Podravka actively engaged with the media and the public, utilising social media platforms to communicate their progress and successes in rectifying past errors. Ultimately, the effectiveness of Podravka's image repair strategies can be seen in the gradual recovery of its reputation. By transitioning from denial to a more proactive and transparent approach, they were able to mitigate the damage caused by the scandal. This case illustrates the importance of adaptability in crisis communication and highlights how a well-crafted image repair strategy can significantly influence an organization's ability to navigate turbulent times. As companies continue to operate in an increasingly interconnected world, the lessons learned from Podravka's experience serve as a valuable reminder of the critical role that effective communication plays in safeguarding reputation and fostering resilience.

Consumer complaints about purchased spoiled goods occur often, especially during the summer months. This is usually due to incorrect storage in stores. Customers and companies are the most sensitive to such complaints. A family of four experienced such a case when they saw a caterpillar several centimeters long in a mixed Podravka salad during dinner. Podravka apologized to the shocked family and offered them gift packages according to their usual procedure. In Croatia, where traditional values around food quality and safety are deeply embedded, consumers hold high expectations of the products they purchase, especially from well-established national

brands like Podravka. Food is central to family life, and contamination or spoilage issues often provoke strong public reactions. The family's experience of finding a caterpillar in their salad would have likely caused significant distress because of the physical contamination and because it violated their trust in a reputable brand.

These six examples illustrate how a brand's public confession can soothe the concerned public. While the first example employs a single mortification, the latter combines denial with mortification. The first case demonstrates that even a single mortification can significantly diffuse a crisis. Nevertheless, the latter case provides insight into the complex interplay of strategies, suggesting that when mortification is worded sincerely, it works more effectively, even in conjunction with denial. Since mortification involves the public confession of an institution's misdoings, the second example illustrates the potential backlash when mortification is not sincerely worded. Moreover, as demonstrated, even a single mortification can effectively calm the concerned public. Overall, while mortification is a powerful tool in diffusing a brand crisis, it involves high risk, as insincere mortification can severely damage the brand's image.

#### **4. RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of Podravka's crisis communication strategies, examined through Benoit's Image Repair Theory. The analysis identified several image repair strategies. The first is denial, evident in cases where Podravka explicitly denied involvement or responsibility for the alleged offensive act. The Podravka also used simple denial or shifting the blame to external factors. The second strategy was evasion of responsibility. It was manifested in situations where Podravka attempted to minimize its responsibility by claiming a lack of information or control over the events. The third strategy was reducing offensiveness in cases where these strategies employed to lessen the perceived severity of the crisis. This is evident in examples of bolstering (highlighting positive aspects), minimization (reducing the magnitude of the negative consequences), differentiation (distinguishing the act from more offensive ones), transcendence (placing the act in a broader, more positive context), and attack the accuser (discrediting the source of the accusations). The corrective action strategy is evident in cases where Podravka took steps to rectify the situation and prevent future occurrences. It can be seen in examples of promising changes in policy or procedures or offering compensation to affected parties. Mortification strategies are evident in situations where Podravka expressed regret or remorse for the crisis—instances of apologies and accepting responsibility for the offensive act. The effectiveness of each strategy varied depending on the specific crisis, the public's perception, and the broader socio-political context. The analysis revealed the significant influence of the Croatian socio-political and economic context on Podravka's crisis communication strategies. Cultural values are evident in how Podravka tailored its messaging to align with Croatian cultural values and norms. Political and economic factors are present in impact of political pressures, regulatory scrutiny, and economic conditions on Podravka's communication strategies. Public expectations and perceptions specific to the Croatian context shaped Podravka's approach to crisis communication. The results indicate that Podravka used various image repair strategies to respond to its crises. The effectiveness of these strategies was influenced by the specific context of each crisis and the broader Croatian environment. The findings underscore the importance of tailoring communication strategies to align with local cultural values, political realities, and public expectations.

#### **5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The analysis of Podravka's crisis communication strategies through the lens of image repair theory reveals significant insights into the effectiveness of their response mechanisms and the broader implications for corporate reputation management. This analysis underscores the importance of timely and transparent communication in mitigating reputational damage during crises. By employing tailored strategies that align with the principles of image repair theory, Podravka

managed to navigate the immediate challenges and laid a foundation for rebuilding trust with stakeholders. This proactive approach mitigated the crisis's negative impact and illustrated the importance of transparent communication in fostering a resilient brand image. Furthermore, Podravka's commitment to accountability and engagement has set a precedent for other organizations facing similar challenges. This approach emphasizes the importance of transparent communication during a crisis, encouraging other companies to adopt similar strategies to bolster their reputations and rebuild stakeholder trust. The analysis of Podravka's crisis communication strategies through the lens of Image Repair Theory reveals several crucial lessons that can be applied to future crisis management efforts. First, the importance of timely and transparent communication cannot be overstated. Organizations must prioritise promptly disseminating accurate information to mitigate rumors and maintain public trust. Additionally, engaging with stakeholders through multiple channels enhances credibility and fosters a sense of community during crises. These lessons underline the necessity of a proactive approach in crisis communication planning. Organizations must prioritize transparency to mitigate damage and maintain stakeholder trust. Building strong relationships with the media can help effectively communicate key messages during a crisis. This can lead to more accurate reporting and a clearer understanding of the situation, ultimately helping to mitigate the crisis's adverse effects on the organization's reputation. Furthermore, implementing transparent communication strategies and engaging with stakeholders can foster trust and reinforce the organization's commitment to accountability during crises. These elements are crucial for mitigating the impact of negative events on the organization's reputation. In the case of Podravka, the lessons learned from past crises highlight the importance of proactive engagement and the role of public perception in shaping recovery strategies. This underscores the necessity of establishing clear communication channels that can be leveraged during a crisis. Moreover, understanding the audience's perceptions allows organizations like Podravka to tailor their responses effectively, mitigating potential damage to their brand image. This proactive approach helps recover the company's reputation and strengthens stakeholder trust in the long run. By implementing these strategies, organizations can mitigate the immediate impacts of a crisis and lay the groundwork for sustainable relationships with their audience. Furthermore, this approach fosters a culture of transparency, enabling the company to navigate future challenges more effectively. By prioritizing open communication channels, Podravka can build trust with its stakeholders and enhance its reputation in times of crisis. This proactive approach can help mitigate potential backlash and foster a more resilient organizational image. The principles of image repair theory can be effectively applied to various organizations facing crises, highlighting the importance of strategic communication in managing public perception. By implementing these strategies, organizations can mitigate damage during a crisis and rebuild trust and credibility with their stakeholders. For instance, companies in various sectors have adopted tailored communication plans that resonate with their audiences, thus reinforcing their commitment to transparency and accountability. Organizations can learn how to manage crises effectively and enhance their public image by analysing their communication strategies. Additionally, the principles of image repair theory can guide organizations in crafting messages that address immediate concerns and foster long-term relationships with stakeholders. By using these strategies, organizations can effectively manage their reputation during crises and ensure that their messaging resonates with the values and expectations of their audiences. Furthermore, organizations can benefit from adopting similar strategies to ensure their message resonates with stakeholders, ultimately fostering trust and resilience in crises. This approach emphasizes the importance of proactive communication and transparency, which are essential for mitigating the impact of crises. Organizations can foster trust and loyalty, even in challenging times, by ensuring stakeholders receive timely and accurate information. This is particularly relevant for companies like Podravka, which must navigate complex public perceptions during crises. Understanding the nuances of image repair strategies can empower these organizations to effectively manage their reputations and restore stakeholder trust during challenging times.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study underscore that crisis communication theories do not operate in a vacuum but are deeply influenced by culturally specific contexts. The case of Croatia's unique socio-cultural dynamics highlights the critical role of tailoring crisis communication strategies to resonate with local values, expectations, and stakeholder needs. This cultural specificity adds a valuable dimension to the broader crisis communication and management discourse, demonstrating that universal frameworks must be adapted to achieve effectiveness in diverse settings. The example of Podravka illustrates how culturally attuned communication strategies can enhance trust and credibility among stakeholders, even during challenging crises. Organizations that adopt proactive and transparent communication approaches, as seen in this case, can mitigate reputational damage while maintaining stakeholder loyalty. This reinforces the importance of empathy, responsibility, and understanding as foundational elements in addressing crises. To build on these insights, future research should explore how tailored communication frameworks can be applied across various industries and sectors, such as healthcare, technology, and food production. Comparative studies examining the successes and challenges of crisis communication strategies across different cultural contexts would further enrich this field. Additionally, investigating the intersection of digital platforms and cultural nuances in crisis communication could provide actionable recommendations for organizations operating in increasingly globalized environments. Finally, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability through effective crisis communication mitigates immediate impacts and contributes to long-term resilience and societal progress. By learning from past experiences and leveraging current opportunities, organizations can inspire future generations to prioritize adaptability, empathy, and collaboration in managing crises. The study reveals that Podravka employed various image repair strategies during crises. The success of these strategies was contingent on the particular circumstances of each crisis and the broader Croatian environment. This underscores the importance of aligning communication approaches with local cultural values, political realities, and public sentiment.

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