

## Contemporary trends, fashion industry and increasing importance and role of public relations

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### Review\*\*

*The development of new communication technologies and numerous crisis situations affect all aspects of society. Social media are integrated into contemporary world, which means, vast majority of people are exposed to what they see online, especially, when it comes to fashion. It becomes difficult not only for customers to follow trends, but also for companies to advertise and sell their products. Numerous fashion companies are exposed to various threats; above all, the decrease in the demand for specific products. These companies try to find out more appropriate mechanisms to face the consequences of new challenges. Crisis management in a systematic way within a company seems to be one of possible tools in order to reduce the adverse effect of undesired events. Solving any problem mainly depends on the level of public relations development as a recognizable business function. The crucial goal of this study is to highlight the role of public relations from the standpoint of companies that dominate in the fashion industry. The first part of the paper depicts the role of public relations in general. The central part of this paper focuses on public relations practices that deal with the advancement of new communicative practices and crisis situations. The possible communication strategies, developed within public relations field that can help the fashion industry to resolve any problem under conditions of risk, were considered as well.*

**Keywords:** public relations; new communicative practices; crisis situations; fashion industry; customer relations

### Pregled\*\*

#### Suvremeni trendovi, modna industrija i sve veća važnost i uloga odnosa s javnošću

*Razvoj novih komunikacijskih tehnologija i brojne krizne situacije utječu na sve društvene aspekte. Društveni mediji integrirani su u suvremeni svijet, što znači da je velika većina ljudi izložena onome što vide na internetu, posebno kada je riječ o modi. Kupcima postaje teško ne samo pratiti trendove, već i tvrtkama oglašavati i prodavati svoje proizvode. Brojne modne tvrtke izložene su raznim prijetnjama, prije svega, smanjenju potražnje za određenim proizvodima. Te tvrtke pokušavaju pronaći prikladnije mehanizme za suočavanje s posljedicama novih izazova. Upravljanje krizama na sustavni način unutar tvrtke čini se jednim od mogućih alata za smanjenje negativnog utjecaja neželjenih događaja. Rješavanje bilo kojeg problema uglavnom ovisi o razini razvoja odnosa s javnošću kao prepoznatljive poslovne funkcije. Ključni cilj ove studije je istaknuti ulogu odnosa s javnošću sa stajališta tvrtki koje dominiraju u modnoj industriji. Prvi dio rada prikazuje ulogu odnosa s javnošću općenito. Središnji dio ovog rada usmjeren je na prakse odnosa s javnošću koje se bave razvojem novih komunikacijskih praksi i kriznim situacijama. Također su razmatrane moguće komunikacijske strategije, razvijene unutar područja odnosa s javnošću, koje mogu pomoći modnoj industriji u rješavanju bilo kojeg problema u uvjetima rizika.*

**Ključne riječi:** odnosi s javnošću; nove komunikacijske prakse; krizne situacije; modna industrija; odnosi s kupcima

## 1. Introduction

The term “public relations” (PR) refers to the management of relations between one organization and the public, that is, the target public. PR are also a mechanism for positioning the organization in the public. The core of the public relations is comprised of the concepts of communication, organization and public [1]. The essence of the public relations is mainly embodied in the key categories such as “reputation, perception, credibility, trust, harmony and mutual understanding” [2]. The key word in PR is “reputation” [3]. Reputation is being achieved on the basis of “understanding, trust, support, readiness for cooperation and agreement” [4]. Filipović and Kostić-Stanković use 11 key categories to describe public relations: “reputation, image, identity, perception, credibility, trust, charm, mutual understanding, truthfulness and through information” [5]. Wilcox and Cameron believe that the essence of public relations is embodied in the following categories: deliberateness/intention, planning, performance, public interest, feedback/(two-way) communication and management function [6]. Vladimirović believes that PR are “authentic and modern type of interpersonal communication, promotion and growth of the organization, together with its goods and services” [7]. PR are, in a way, “a milder form of winning the favour” of both general and specific segments of the public [8].

Public relations have largely entered a qualitative, new development phase - the digital age. This period is mainly characterized by the introduction of new communication technologies into the practice of PR [9-13]. The development of information technologies has led to an increase in the number of the employees in the information sector. Computers are becoming more accessible to more and more people. Digital public relations, based on the application of modern Internet technologies, help the organization to reach geographically remote publics. The latest stage in the evolution of public relations actually represents “returning the public to public relations” [14]. In the case of traditional public relations, the organization mainly focused on the local and regional market, used mass public relations, and there was a time limit and availability during a certain period. In addition, traditional PR mostly used one-way communication through traditional channels (television, radio and printed media). It was difficult to evaluate the results of traditional PR [7]. Despite the fact that PR became more interactive with the emergence of new media, an accompanying unwanted problem arose – the difficult identification of “electronic publics” [10]. For example, to younger consumers, especially teenagers, TikTok is the most attractive of all social

networks [15]. This is the reason that most of the budget for public relations is allocated for the digital PR, that is, social networks. If the organization decides to use social media, it exposes itself to risks in terms of criticism from various interest groups and the public. Such a potential loss of control over communication also puts the organization in an awkward position and, consequently, creates obstacles to establishing good two-way and symmetrical communication. Intensive communication of the organization with external groups through social media makes it difficult to define a unique voice when addressing the public in relation to the various events.

There is a special form of a crisis situation, caused by the rapid spread of messages through social networks, which is called the spillover crises. This type of crisis situation occurs when some external events, related to a certain company, create doubts, concerns or undesirable perceptions about the quality of products or services and other companies belonging to a certain branch of economy [16]. This type of crisis is increasingly occurring in the fashion industry [17]. Organizations in such situations find various ways to suppress negative perceptions; for example, by strengthening their identity in relation to the competition, by trying to improve the reputation of the entire industry, etc. Due to spreading the negative publicity through social networks, the organization can fall into a special form of a crisis – the so-called Para-crisis. Coombs and Holladay define this form of crisis as “a visible situation that can turn into a crisis during which the organization commits unethical or irresponsible behavior” [18]. Although the organization is not exposed to a real crisis – it is not accused of illegal actions – it is still in a situation where interest groups can make demands regarding behaviour change in order to correct immoral or irresponsible actions [11]. The trouble is that requests sent through social media have a public character and in that sense represent a threat to the reputation of the organization.

## 2. Role of public relations and social media

Technological and social changes, which have significantly transformed aspects of public relations since the 1990s, refer to the perception of the role of the corporation within the global economy, the quality of the environment and the more emphasized role of management in PR. In modern conditions, it is impossible to view separately the national economy of a country or the activity of a company, but rather as part of an integrated global economy. PR professionals are expected to know a lot about other cultures, business practices and languages.

Environmental protection issues are also beginning to take on the international character. Changes in the domain of communication and the public are of equal importance. Along with the increasingly present proliferation of the public and the weakening of mass media, the modern business is being characterized by the rapid spread of new media technologies and the increasing type of communication with individuals instead of mass audiences. PR experts widely use electronic media as the main method of communication, as well as social media. Communication directed towards the user dominates – receiver-driven communication [19, 20]. Instead of the predominance of mass media, characteristic of an industrial society, a global communication network is being established based on mass self-communication in which an individual (1) creates a message, (2) sends it to a potential recipient and (3) independently chooses the content to which the recipient will be exposed [21]. This leads to a narrowing of the concepts of receiver and emitter. Since information and communication technologies promote the “dialogue” with the public, it is necessary to include digital PR, consisting of various methods and tools, in all elements of the marketing mix of the company or organization [13]. This is of course widely applied in the marketing activities of fashion industry companies [22-26].

The basic role of public relations is embodied in the creation of a “bridge of trust” that is built between the organization (emitter), on the one hand, and the public (recipient), on the other. The connective characteristic of this “bridge”, which enables mutual trust, understanding and appreciation of the organization and the public, is the very information that is being transmitted in both directions. The main role of PR in this regard is to prepare and ensure the publication of certain information about the organization. In order for this process to be successful, it is necessary to have knowledge about the business principles of a specific organization, its development history, investment ventures, available capacities, range of new products or services, etc.

Based on previous research, Miočić distinguishes among three roles of public relations: operational-technical, managerial and strategic role [12]. The operational and technical role of PR is reflected in the implementation of communication. The managerial role is not limited only to communication, but also to planning and evaluating communication plans and participating in decision-making processes. The strategic role of PR includes “monitoring the environment, analysing social norms and values, then predicting the consequences of certain phenomena from the environment on strategy and organizational policy, as well as advising top management in relation to these phenomena” [12]. He also empirically tested

and analyzed the application of the model of relations (communication) with the public, with an emphasis on two-way interactive communication and dialogue between organizations and the public. The results obtained from a sample of employees in public relations (n=106) show that the public information model is mostly applied to the Internet (83%), which indicates that the feature offered by the new media environment – interactivity – is not sufficiently appreciated.

### 3. Reputation and market public relations in the fashion industry

Analytical research of the organization's interaction with the external environment focuses on three basic categories: corporate identity, corporate image and corporate reputation. Corporate identity is one of the oldest forms of communication between an organization and its target groups. Reputation refers to the reputation that an organization acquires and maintains thanks primarily to good performance, i.e. the use of organizational resources. A good reputation is harder and slower to achieve than a recognizable identity. A favorable reputation requires more than implementing a formal communication system; a strong identity is needed that is being built by achieving good performance over a relatively longer period of time. Key factors that contribute to a strong reputation include credibility, reliability, transparency, trustworthiness and responsibility. These qualities not only enhance relationships but also establish a solid foundation for long-term success and influence (Fig.1). Presumably, restoration of reputation ought to be considered as a part of crisis communication within the wider communication field. Any crisis may present reputational threats to an

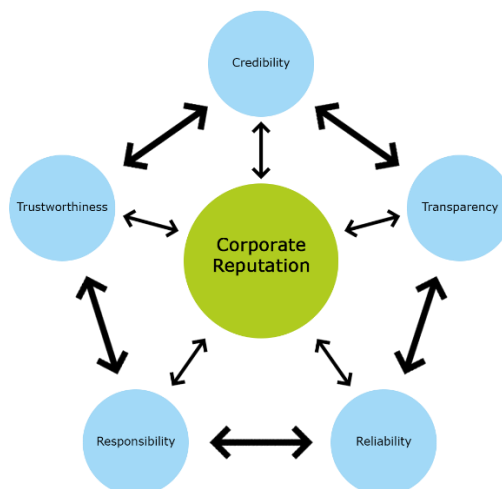


Fig.1 Key factors of a good reputation

organization, and, a subsequent process of exchange of messages (caused by a crisis), represents a specific sub-category of communication – crisis communication. Given the nature of the fashion industry, where customer sentiment, brand image, and public perception are crucial, a brand's reputation may be made or broken by how well it handles a crisis. For instance, H&M received a lot of criticism in January 2018 for an advertisement that showed a Black youngster sporting a sweater that read, “Coolest Monkey in the Jungle” (Fig.2).

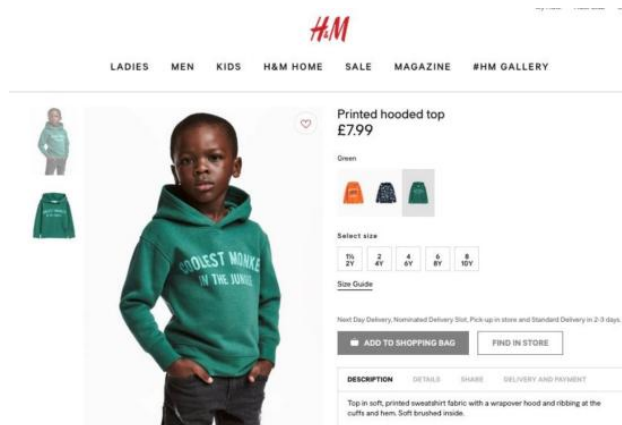


Fig.2 The H&M “Coolest monkey in the jungle” advertisement

The image was widely criticized as racially insensitive and led to protests and calls for a boycott. H&M immediately withdrew the advertisement and issued an apology, acknowledging the mistake and expressing regret for the offense caused. A thorough review of internal processes related to diversity and inclusion was initiated. Meetings were held with representatives of various communities to better understand the issues and improve practices. Although the incident initially damaged H&M's reputation, the company's transparent and swift response helped mitigate long-term harm. H&M's example demonstrates how timely response, transparency, and willingness to make changes are crucial in crisis management. Brands that openly acknowledge mistakes, take concrete steps to improve their processes, and actively collaborate with communities can not only mitigate the consequences of crises but also build long-term consumer trust. Furthermore, many fashion industry companies gained a significant experience in terms of communicative strategies during the COVID-19 crisis, which has transformed consumers' relationship with clothes.

Corporate reputation is not easily quantified given that it consists of various dimensions and attributes. However, there are three dominant approaches when it comes to measuring corporate reputation, that is, concepts based on (1) social expectations, (2) “corporate personality” and (3) trust [27]. The essence of the

first approach is that people evaluate different aspects of the company's operations based on the expected “behavior” of the company in the environment (region or country) in which it operates. Therefore, some attributes appear in all models of corporate reputation, such as “product quality” or “good management”, while other attributes are conditioned by specific economic, social and technological trends, specific to a certain country and period of time. Another point of view of the corporate reputation suggests that the organization, like a person, is characterized with certain “traits” (positive or negative) and, accordingly, the company is evaluated in a similar way as judgments are made about people with whom one interacts. The basic idea behind the concept of trust, which is based on an individual's subjective assessment or feeling that a company will behave in a certain way in a certain situation, is that the reputation is built on trust, which, springs from perceived trustworthiness, sincerity/honesty and benevolence of the company by stakeholders. The concept of trust is close to credibility, especially when it comes to the consumer segment.

Corporate relations with the public take place regardless of the marketing function and are aimed at all target groups. Although PR do not represent a typical promotional activity, their ultimate goal, to a large extent, coincides with the goals of other promotional activities [28]. The part of the communication process that refers to the interactions between the organization and certain elements of the environment (first of all, customers and public opinion) is known as customer communication. Customer PR represent the “process of planning, execution and evaluation of public relations programs, which encourage increased procurement and customer satisfaction, through the establishment of communication (exchange of information and impressions), which identifies companies and their products with needs, desires, concerns and interests of the customers” [29]. The target group of customers is the basic group of customer public relations. The focus of the customer PR is aimed at building a positive image of the product, which should not be regarded as a substitute for the corporate image. These are two separate concepts that in practice, as a rule, support each other. When establishing contact with certain customers, organizations use different PR techniques. Organizations in this sense (1) prepare product notices; (2) establish a plan for establishing and maintaining cooperation with the media as intermediaries in communication with customers; (3) participate in sponsoring events closely related to the target group of customers (for example, fashion shows) and (4) ensure the presence of their products at fairs, exhibitions, etc.

The company's activities in communicating with the target public are aimed at informing, persuading and reminding [30]. The choice of one of the three objectives, as well as the appropriate communication tactics, is aligned with the phases of the product life cycle, among which are introduction, growth and maturity, then maturity and decline. For the introduction of a product to the market, which is the initial link of this cycle, information is important. With appropriate communication tactics, it is necessary to present the product offer, create brand awareness, prepare the conditions for personal selling activities and encourage consumers to try out the products. Informing and persuading is set as the goal of communication in the growth and maturity phase when it is important to create a positive attitude regarding the competitive offer, to cause immediate purchase and to improve the image of the company. Maturity and decline, as the last phase of the life cycle, induces a requirement to remind the target public of the company's product range in order to encourage consumers to buy again, and ensure constant contact with them. In the conditions of modern business, when consumers increasingly use social networks i.e. YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn, X, TikTok, etc., it is justified to single out connection as a special goal of communication [31,32]. It implies the involvement of the consumer in the capacity of the so-called company representatives who promote the brand through their activities on social networks, and which other participants on these media can perceive as an independent opinion. It is important to note that each social network require its own visual identity. For instance, pictures on Instagram and Facebook cannot be the same. The YouTube channel, on the other hand, implies video clips.

Promotional activities are aimed at (1) raising awareness, i.e. consumer awareness (cognitive phase), (2) changing consumer attitudes and feelings (emotional phase) and (3) encouraging consumers to a certain type of behaviour (behavioural phase). This order of promotional activities describes well the situation when consumers show interest in certain categories of products. The main goal of customer relations is to urge the consumers to change their state of ignorance to that of making a decision and towards the action of purchasing. The reaction can be expressed in only one way, but it is preferable that the reaction be on three levels of reaction: acquaintance, interest and behavior [33]. In order to achieve this, organizations use different means of communication that can cause characteristic reactions, including bad ones. Undesirable reactions of the target public can be helpful to the organization in the sense that it modifies the existing or creates a completely different communication strategy.

According to the AIDA model, there are four desirable responses depending on the means used. The acronym AIDA, created from four words (attention, interest, desire and action), refers to attention (cognitive phase), interest and desire (emotional phase) and action (behavioral phase). The most desirable and ultimate level of behavior is action, that is, the decision to purchase a product. There are other ways to gradate consumer reactions, such as distinguishing five stages of influence on consumers: introduction, interest, evaluation, trial and acceptance [34, p. 225]. During the first three phases, the customers are first introduced to the existence of the product or service, and then a certain degree of interest appears among consumers who, in the end, evaluate the given offers. The degree of consumer satisfaction, that is, acceptance of the product, will depend on their perception of the quality of the product, in the trial phase.

Communication based on the use of the Internet, i.e. social media such as social networks (for example, Instagram), blogs, forums, websites for the exchange of images and videos (YouTube) is gaining an increasing role in modern business. Interactivity, characteristic of the Internet, has enabled completely new forms of establishing contacts with market participants. The Internet, in fact, gradually developed "from primarily a communication medium, into a sales and/or distribution channel, and finally into a platform for managing relationships with consumers and virtual social communities" [20]. Instagram is more popular than other social networks and it is mostly used (61.1%) by users aged 18 to 34 [32]. Social media is widely used by the fashion industry for mutual benefit; especially consumers [24-26, 35-37]. Companies rely on three intermediaries to connect with consumers. They can use paid media (including all forms of advertising), acquired media through which consumers, journalists and other interested parties voluntarily express their opinion about the product using "word of mouth" and viral marketing, and their own media, which mostly consist of online marketing communications [38, p. 250]. The world's most famous fashion brands have greatly developed their own media, which, compared to competing companies, makes it easier for them to access consumers. The company's own website can be very well used as a place where media representatives can get reliable and quality information. It is very common for quality websites to have a special section for journalists, where they have at their disposal complete and updated material needed to create one or more articles, as well as adequate contact addresses for additional information. Most fashion companies use similar, but at the same time different and specific strategies when promote them on social media.

Zara, a well-known fashion industry, has profiles on various social networks. The Facebook page, for example, displays fashion items (in the form of videos or photos) that inspire visitors, mostly women, to like and share the content. H&M company, just like Zara, uses the Facebook in similar way. The only difference is that H&M collaborates with prominent influencers and partners.

Social media, that is, online communities and forums, blogs and social networks, represent a significant part of marketing media. In the process of promotion, the company usually decides on one of two strategies: attracting demand or stimulating demand for its products. The first strategy relies primarily on advertising to convince consumers of the need to purchase a particular product. Companies that are leaders in marketing and technology, and have a big share of the market use this type of promotion [39]. The purpose of the second strategy is to stimulate demand for products among customers, but also to motivate various intermediaries (first of all, trading companies) to actively work on creating demand. The choice of basic promotion strategies, pull strategy or push strategy, is influenced by the general conditions of the situation in which the decision is made, the stage of the product's life cycle, the product's properties, the consumer's willingness to buy, the size of the budget for promotion, etc.

Discounts, among well-known promotional methods, have a significant impact on purchasing of fashion industry products. One aspect of consumer behavior that influences decision-making process concerning discount is the perception of value. Namely, consumers, according to Završnik [40], "evaluate the worth of a discounted item by comparing it to its original price". Price comparison, available on specialized websites, empowered consumers to seek the best options, making essential for retailers to offer competitive discounts in order to attract their attention [41].

#### 4. Conclusion

Modern communication technologies are greatly changing the role of public relations in many areas of the economy. The final effect of the development of information and communication technologies will be the creation of media and the types of content they communicate to selectively selected publics. This of course is in contrast with traditional notions of the general public as an undifferentiated passive audience, as new, interactive channels of communication open up new perspectives. Promoting interactive communication is the basic task of public

relations, as confirmed by many experiences from the fashion industry.

The Internet represents the omnipresent leader of the so-called communication revolution. The joint arrival of computing, telecommunications and media in the digital environment leads to "convergence" and the changes it brings in the field of mass media. New media technologies are also changing the practice of public relations. One of the greatest advantages of the Internet as a public relations medium is reflected in the possibility of direct and immediate access to a specific target group. This bypasses journalists and traditional news media. At the same time, the Internet is changing the media landscape in communication between organizations and the public. Through the World Wide Web, an organization can communicate with a massive, global audience.

Finally, it can be stated that public relations in the fashion industry represent a process of strategic management by which a fashion brand is carefully built in order to create a positive image of it in the public and maintain strong connections with consumers. In order to fulfil this overall goal, public relations establish and maintain good relations with the media, prepare brand stories, and manage events such as, fashion shows or fairs. The basis of successful public relations, characteristic of the fashion industry, consists of three pillars: communication strategies, crisis management and coordination of various campaigns.

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