

Louvain School of Management

Impact of the Internet on brand sabotage : the case of e-WOM and fake news, potential solutions

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Executive Summary

In our contemporary culture, the Internet has evolved into an indispensable facet of our lives, revolutionizing many areas such as marketing. This qualitative study aims to analyze companies' response strategies to online brand sabotage, encompassing negative electronic Word-Of-Mouth (e-WOM) and fake news. A thorough literature review was conducted to comprehend these phenomena's implications on brand image, financial performance, and customer-company relations. The findings highlight a predominant focus on strategies addressing negative e-WOM, suggesting its greater impact compared to fake news. Accommodative responses aim for customer satisfaction and improved brand image, while defensive strategies are occasionally used in public to mitigate negative effects. The response channel (private or public) varies, influenced by factors such as company size, values, comment credibility, and industry sector. The study emphasizes the preliminary nature of identified strategies, prompting the need for further context-specific investigations. Ultimately, this thesis propose to conduct comprehensive quantitative studies for further exploration to manage negative online comments and combat fake news, exploring unaddressed strategies, considering the ever-evolving digital landscape.

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Introduction

In the past, marketing operated as a unidirectional exchange, with businesses broadcasting messages to consumers. However, the landscape has shifted dramatically. In our contemporary culture, the Internet has evolved into an indispensable facet of our lives. In this new era, the Internet and social media have emerged as pivotal platforms fostering dynamic, two-way interactions between businesses and their audiences. Consumers become more and more involved in brand communication, giving them influence (Thomas, Peters, Howell & Robbins, 2012). While the Internet boasts numerous positive effects and benefits to brand such as the promotion, the speed of communication, giving the opportunity for small businesses to grow... Open and unrestricted online communication also comes with notable drawbacks that affects brands. Because of this freedom of communication, the dissemination of false or misleading information has become a major challenge. These negative aspects can lead to brand sabotage.

While brand sabotage has existed for a long time, causing varying degrees of harm, one might ponder whether the internet has altered its impact. The advancement of modern technology, and more precisely, the features of the Internet, has enabled the swift global dissemination of negative remarks or evaluations about a business, potentially reaching millions of individuals within a matter of minutes. This master's thesis will therefore try to find solutions and strategies facing such attacks on internet.

The objectives of this thesis are manifold. Firstly, it seeks to redefine brand sabotage and its associated aspects (discussed in chapter 1). Secondly, it delves into the Internet's features that potentially influence brand sabotage (explored in chapter 2). Subsequently, the study aims to comprehend forms of brand sabotage through the features of the Internet, such as negative e-WOM and fake news (elaborated upon in chapter 3). The ultimate goal of this thesis is to concentrate on the examination of comprehensive prevention and response strategies (outlined in chapter 4). This approach aims to equip companies with the means to proactively safeguard their brand's integrity and respond effectively, thereby formulating strategies capable of meeting the challenges posed by online brand sabotage.

By conducting qualitative research on these phenomena (negative e-WOM and fake news), the intention is to gather the most commonly utilized strategies employed in real-world business scenarios. Ultimately, this study will lead to providing techniques for implementation or refutation, aimed at strengthening the brand image and counteracting the adverse effects of online brand sabotage.

Part 1 : Review of literature

Chapter 1 : A broader understanding of brand sabotage

1. Definition of brand sabotage

Kähr, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, and Hoyer (2016) define brand sabotage as “*A deliberate behavior by a consumer or non-consumer, who have the dominant objective of causing harm to a brand through the impairment of the brand-related associations of other consumers.*”(p.26).

Kähr et al. (2016) propose a set of five characteristics to deepen this definition. Every brand sabotage systematically includes these five elements :

- Actual behavior : planning or proclaiming a behavior is insufficient. Some action must be taken or considered, involving engagement in a specific activity.
- Involvement of consumers and non-consumers : Both are welcome to participate in brand sabotage, either individually or in groups.
- Deliberate action : purposeful and intentional action with the specific objective of damaging the brand.
- Impairing the brand-related associations of other consumers : create a negative perception of the brand among potential or existing consumers.
- The main goal of damaging the brand : brand saboteurs assume the role of hostile aggressors, intentionally selecting actions they believe will inflict harm on the brand.

This definition emphasizes the intentional nature of brand sabotage, where actions are consciously taken and executed with premeditation.

2. Reviewing the definition of Kähr et al. (2016)

Brand sabotage primarily aims to harm the brand’s image among other consumers (Lambin & de Moerloose, 2021). Previous research (Kahr et al, 2016) has predominantly focused on the physical destruction of the brand. Nonetheless, our thesis seeks to redefine and broaden the concept of brand sabotage by encompassing various forms of negative behaviors going beyond physical destruction. These behaviors, classified as instrumental aggressions, involve aggressive actions with the purpose of achieving objectives such as restoring fairness and relationship, or expressing negative emotions. Concretely, Kähr et al., (2016) identify three

types of negative behaviors such as : boycott, negative word-of-mouth, and customer retaliation. According to these authors, there is a slight divergence between brand sabotage and these aggressions. However, in our investigation of brand sabotage in the digital landscape, we include negative consumer behaviors as part of brand sabotage phenomenon. As a result, the distinct traits of brand sabotage, as elucidated by Kähr et al. (2016) may not always align with these negative behaviors.

Another striking point is that the activities of brand sabotage have an impact on the brand's image, whether occurring online or offline (Kähr et al., 2016). In this study, we want to specifically concentrate on internet-based sabotage. Subsequently, we observe how certain forms of brand sabotage inherent to the Internet's features (see in chapter 2) have emerged, such as electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) and fake news (see in chapter 3).

To sum up, in this chapter, our study leads us to find the main definition of brand sabotage (Kähr et al., 2016) which we decided to extend by including not only physical destruction but also negative behaviors. In the next chapters, we will focus on understanding online brand sabotage, such as e-WOM and fake news. Our aim is to develop effective preventions and solutions strategies to safeguard brand reputation and counteract the negative impact of these online brand sabotage.

Chapter 2 : The Internet's features

In today's world, the contrast between online and offline expressions of brand has become a crucial subject of discussion. Brand sabotage, as mentioned before, involves intentional and malicious actions that harm a brand (Kähr & al., 2016).

With the advent of new technologies, consumers can, now, instantly, and globally express grievances through the Internet increasing this negative impact on the brand (Curina, & al, 2020). Indeed, the Internet's features provide a platform for individuals or entities to share opinions leading to various forms of brand sabotage¹. This Internet's characteristics (which are expected to have an impact) are the following :

1. Anonymity

1.1 Definition of anonymity

Anonymity refers to *"the absence of name or value, occasionally poses a threat, or does not exist."* It is also *"a strategy of protection, prevention, and carries the potential for equality"* (Untersinger, 2014, p.1). In his book, Untersinger (2014) presents evidence of an ongoing and exponential growth of anonymity on Internet showing no signs of slowing down.

The author nuances the perspective of anonymity and introduces the concept of pseudonymity, where individuals may be anonymous to specific individuals while being identifiable to others. For instance, opening a Twitter account without disclosing any personal identifiable information, it might appear that this action may initially seem anonymous. However, the author emphasizes that the access provider can still identify the user to some extent. Indeed, anonymity levels depend upon technological features of the website or service being used (Untersinger, 2014).

1.2 Potential impacts of anonymity on brand sabotage

As recommended by Untersinger's (2014), individuals are encouraged to approach online interactions with companies cautiously, as there are concerns regarding data usage. Notably,

¹ Here and for the following "brand sabotage" terms , we refers to our redefined definition that encompasses negative consumer behaviors.

companies tend to prioritize their commercial interests, which may take precedence over safeguarding individuals' freedoms and anonymity.

By taking the companies' point of view, they may also encounter challenges when dealing with anonymous individuals due to the following reasons :

- Freedom leading to disturbing : anonymity on the internet gives users the freedom to act without revealing their identity, leading to adverse outcomes. Some individuals may engage in disturbing or even criminal behavior without being held accountable for their actions (Iteanu, 2008).
- Facilitating expressions of grievances and negative sentiments : Gelb and Sundaram (2002) also highlight that internet anonymity enables individuals to express grievances and negative sentiments more comfortably to a broader audience.

1.3 Conclusion

To summarize, while internet can be helpful to brands to collect of user's data sometimes (pseudonymity), sometimes anonymity also presents some significant disadvantages such as easy expression of negative sentiments.

2. Speed of communication and network connectivity

2.1 Quick information transmission

The internet has become a crucial way of communication for billions of people, allowing information to be conveyed rapidly and on an unprecedented scale in human history. This speed of communication has transformed social connections and interactions, leading to the rapid spread of information and idea (Information, people, and technology - Chapter 1 Information Sciences).

2.2 Network connectivity

The Internet is essentially a global system of interconnected computer networks. It is like a big web made up of many smaller networks – private, public, academic, business, and government ones that span from local to global levels. These networks are all connected using various electronic, wireless, and optical technologies (Pursel, n.d.).

This definition means that people are constantly connected to each other by a grid called network.

2.3 Potential impacts of quick information transmission and network connectivity on brand sabotage

In the past, complaints were typically conveyed through one-to-one communication, which allowed marketers some degree of control in implementing recovery strategies (Hong and Lee, 2005). By now, this landscape has changed, with complaints spreading across the internet and influencing many other consumers beyond the initial complainant (Van Noort and Will, 2012). Indeed, the interconnected computer networks of the internet have facilitated the emergence of new forms of personal interactions, such as instant messaging, internet forums, and social networking, creating a multitude of interconnected audiences (Pursel, n.d.).

Therefore, brands must, recognize the power of these interconnected audiences, as they have the ability to quickly enhance or diminish a company's reputation by sharing their opinions and experiences with just a click or a tweet (de Vaublanc, 2019). Customers have the convenience of expressing their Rating, Reviews and Recommendations (collectively referred to as the 3R) to companies through online platforms, thereby presenting both positive and negative perspectives (Belleflamme & Peitz, 2019). Thus, this 3R can also make brands vulnerable to sabotage.

Moreover, brands now also face constant and enduring connectivity, shaping both commercial and interpersonal relationships. Delays in reflection, response, or delivery are becoming increasingly intolerable for consumers, leading to reduced patience (Lambin & de Moerloose, 2021).

2.4 Conclusion

To conclude, speed of communication and network connectivity offered by the internet have transformed the way information is shared and ideas are spread among billions of people. While these characteristics have empowered brands to communicate with interconnected audiences and gain visibility, they also expose them to potential risks of brand sabotage. Brands must be vigilant in managing online interactions and addressing complaints to safeguard their reputation in the fast-paced and interconnected digital landscape.

3. Empowerment

3.1 Definition of empowerment, digital empowerment, and consumer empowerment

The concept of empowerment has been subject to various interpretations in academic literature. Fayn & al. (2019), define empowerment as “*a permission given to consumers to control certain product variables*”. Once again, this aspect undergoes further evolution with the advent of the internet.

Mäkinen (2006) as cited by Fayn & al., 2019 defines digital empowerment as *a multi-stage process providing better opportunities for communication and cooperation and increases the competence of individuals and communities to act as influential participants in the information society*. Therefore, digital empowerment refers to the process through which individuals improve their technology knowledge, enabling them to actively participate and exert influence in the contemporary information-driven world.

Expanding on this notion, the term “consumer empowerment” used by the Anglo-Saxons researchers refers to the phenomenon of better informed and educated consumers. These last consumers are therefore in greater capacity to compare brands on their own (Lambin & de Moerloose, 2021).

3.2 The potential impacts of empowerment on brand sabotage

To maintain a good reputation, companies must always pay attention to consumers' emotions and concerns (Fayn, des Garets & Rivière, 2019).

In the digital age, consumer-generated content, which includes consumers' thoughts, opinions, and feeling about brands (Gensler, Völckner, Egger, Fischbach, & Schoder, 2016), empowers consumers. Through this content, consumers can easily shape perceptions of brands, both positively and negatively for other consumers and stakeholders posing significant risks to the brand's image (Siano, Vollero, Palazzo, 2011). However, by embracing empowered consumers as partners, companies can harness their potential and engage with them in co-creating value (Fayn, des Garets & Rivière, 2019). If firms “*listen in*” on consumers, the firms is gaining valuable insights and feedbacks, which can be used to improve their products, services, and overall brand strategy (Gensler et al., 2016).

3.3 Conclusion

In summary, companies and brands should be vigilant in addressing consumers emotions and concerns to maintain a positive reputation. Indeed, consumer-generated content empowers consumers to influence brand perceptions, with potential risks to brand's image. Thus consumer empowerment on internet can hold a significant impact on brand sabotage. However, by embracing empowered consumers as partners and listening to their feedback, firms can harness their potential for co-creating value and enhancing brand strategy.

4. Free access

4.1 Definition of free access

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines free access as *“the freedom or ability to obtain or make use of something which is not costing”*.

The advent of the internet has fostered a culture of free access to information, making it available to everyone. Internet users now enjoy a wide range of services and applications, ranging from search engines and social networks to price comparison sites and entertainment platforms. Internet users even have the ability to freely share information through recommendations and opinions online (Dang Nguyen & Pénard, 2004).

The culture of free access on the internet is however coexisting alongside other economic models, such as commercial activities (Dang Nguyen & Pénard, 2004). While the internet primarily offers free access, it also facilitates various commercial activities, demonstrating the thriving coexistence of both free and commercial elements within the online environment.

4.2 The potential impacts of free access on brand sabotage

Free access can be positive or negative in the sense of network effect : a mechanism which encourages a person to adopt a good (or a service) once they observed others doing the same. This effect can either capture consumers by encouraging others to join or have the opposite by dissuading people to join (Dang Nguyen, Dejean, Pénard, 2013).

Moreover, the internet enabled users to communicate for free, access and exchange information from anywhere in the world, with no restrictions on distance or time (Dang Nguyen & Pénard, 2004). Consequently, negative, or positive communications about a brand can be observed by anyone, anywhere in the world, at any given moment.

This aspect of free communication can moreover give the opportunity to the brands to gain consumers (Dang Nguyen & Pénard, 2004). In other words, the availability of free information can work in favor of the brand by attracting potential consumers who may have become aware of the brand through this accessible information.

4.3 Conclusion

The rise of the Internet has fostered a culture of open access, granting users the freedom to communicate, obtain, and utilize information freely and instantaneously. This open access can yield both positive and negative impacts on brand sabotage through network effects. Additionally, the collection of overall opinions generated by free access can also significantly influence brand's image.

Chapter 3 : Evolution of brand sabotage's type

The concept of brand sabotage has a long history dating back to the inception of brands. Brand sabotage encompasses various types of negative consumer aggressions, which were redefined in Chapter 1 of the study. The emergence of the Internet with its specific characteristics discussed in the previous chapter, has played a significant role in the evolution of different types of brand sabotage. In the upcoming chapter, the focus will be on exploring how specific brand-sabotaging phenomena, like influencers, Word-of-Mouth (WOW), and fake news, have been magnified and intensified due to the characteristics of the Internet. The chapter aims to delve deeper into the relationship between the Internet and the amplification of these brand-sabotaging behaviors.

1. Stronger emergence of influencers

1.1 Definition of influencer

An influencer is “*someone who causes another to adopt a specific point of view or behavior, leading them to change their thoughts or actions in desired direction*” (Gallic & Marrone, 2020, p. 449).

1.2 Internet's feature and the rise of influencers

The notion of influencer has been present even before the Internet era, where certain individuals, such as celebrities, opinions leaders, experts, and public figures, held the power to influence others through their words and actions (Arnocky & al, 2018 and de Vaublanc, 2019).

In today's context, influencers leverage the Internet's features. Indeed, influencers communicate through social networks (network communication) and serve as mediators, exerting influence over consumer decisions and perceptions of brands (Gallic & Marrone, 2020). Influencers play a significant role in shaping how consumers interact with and perceive brands (Chopra, Avhad, & Jaju, 2021). Their aim is therefore to inform for free (free access) and empower their community about brand offerings and related products or services (Empowerment).

In short, this information is summarized in this below table :

	Influencers
Anonymity	
Speed of communication and network connectivity	Influencers seek to educate and thereby empower their audience by providing information about brand offerings and associated products or services
Empowerment	Influencers aim to inform and therefore empower their community about brand offerings and related products or services.
Free access	Influencers aim to inform their community for free.

Table 1 : links between the Internet's features and influencers.

Consequently, influencers have become a rising marketing tool often receiving compensation, such as money or kind, for promoting brands on social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Gallic & Marrone, 2020). Nevertheless, influencers can also have a negative influence on brands and may even become a source of criticism or attack.

1.3 Different types of influencers

News terms such as celebrity influencers, mega-influencers, macro-influencers, micro-influencers, and nano-influencers categorize different types of social media influencers based on their number of followers and perceived authenticity, accessibility, expertise, and cultural capital (Campbell & Farrell, 2020)².

Gallic & Marrone (2020) split the various influencer types into three categories :

- The stars : famous or well-known personalities, which align with the term “celebrity influencer” mentioned by Campbell & Farrell (2020). These individuals have public recognition beyond social media (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).
- The specialized influencers : individuals with a community of more than 10,000 followers, often considered experts in a particular field such as gaming, lifestyle...
- The micro-influencers : individuals with a community of less than 10,000 followers, who are more accessible and focus on niche subjects.

² Refer to the illustration Appendix 1 for a clearer understanding.

1.4 Characteristics of influencers

Individuals recognized as influencers on the Internet have specific characteristics. They are said to be :

- Trustworthy : According to Conick (2018), influencers gain consumer trust over other online sources. (Chopra, Avhad, & Jaju, 2021)
- Intermediaries : between brands and consumers in promoting companies, their goods and/or services (Gallic & Marrone, 2020, p.448).
- Engaging : influencers communicate with their audience on their platforms and therefore foster conversation thanks to their high-quality, real, and unique material (Gallic & Marrone, 2020).
- Experimental subjects : influencers act as testers, give evaluations, and explore products or services originating from brands. This process serves as a source of inspiration for consumers before making their purchasing decisions (Gallic & Marrone, 2020).

1.5 Potential impacts of influencers on brands

The potential impact of influencers can either be positive or negative. Let us first discuss the benefits of influencers on brands :

- Utilizing the right influencers with a suitable content distribution strategy can help brands to reach their target audience effectively (Chopra, Avhad, & Jaju, 2021).
- Adopting a new marketing strategy using influencers can increase attention, engagement, and trust toward brands, reducing the likelihood of brand sabotage (De Vaublanc, 2019).
- Influencers offer companies the opportunity to build stronger relationships with their consumers, leading to increased loyalty and a decreased risk of brand sabotage (Gallic & Marrone, 2020).

However, certain risks must be considered, as they have the potential to transform into attacks like brand sabotage, owing to :

- The harm caused by influencers through negative communications such as public discourse, damaging a brand's image and reputation, spreading rapidly through influencers' large online audiences (Bouchara & Maier, 2021).

- Inauthentic brand perception when influencers do not fit well with the brand story (Chopra, Avhad, & Jaju, 2021).
- Involvement of multiple people in content creation without clear guidelines may dilute brand meanings or deviate from corporate goals (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).
- Negative associations with influencers' personal indiscretions or scandals, along with the use of follower bots to inflate success metrics (Campbell & Farrell, 2020).

2. From traditional word-of-mouth to electronic word of mouth

Word-Of-Mouth (WOM) is an “*oral, person-to-person communication between a perceived non-commercial communicator and a receiver concerning a brand, a product, or a service offered for sale*” (Cantalops, & Salvi, 2014, p.41). As just described, this phenomenon occurs offline, in the context of an oral exchange between humans. With the advent of the Internet, WOM have evolved, and this phenomenon is now found online, and is referred to as electronic WOM, which we detail in this section.

2.1 Definition of e-WOM

Electronic Word-Of-Mouth or e-WOM is “*any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet*” (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p.39).

2.2 Internet's feature and the rise of e-WOM

The evolution of Word-of-Mouth (WOM) into electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM) with the advent of the Internet has brought about notable changes as described below :

- Influential : e-WOM is considered more influential than traditional WOM due to its immediacy, extensive reach, credibility, and public accessibility (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004 cited in Kietzmann, & Canhoto, 2013).
- Information record : e-WOM exchanges, unlike WOMs, are mainly written or recorded on various online platforms, enabling valuable information on consumer opinions and feelings to be stored.
- Facilitative information sharing : e-WOM facilitates the process of information gathering, online conversations, discussion, and the sharing of consumer's opinions about a brand (Nadarajan, & al., 2017).

- Rapid spread : Network technology allows reviews to spread quickly and widely, amplifying their effects (Jalivand, 2012, Balaji et al., 2016; Pfeffer, 2014).
- Accessibility and convenience : consumers can access brand information at anytime and anywhere without the need for physical presence during interactions (Hung & Li, 2007; Hennig-Thurau, al., 2004; Kähr, 2017). For example, consumers can express their opinions about a brand on digital media platforms like brand websites, personal blogs, and social media (Kim et al., 2016). Additionally, virtual opinion platforms such as TripAdvisor, Booking.com, and Amazon.com also provide opportunities for individuals to share both positive and negative experiences about products and services with potential customers (Kähr, 2017).

This below table summarizes the features of the Internet contributing to the rise of e-WOM (electronic word-of-mouth) :

	e-WOM
Anonymity	Anonymity on Internet relaxes social constraints, leading individuals to freely express negative sentiments among a broad audience of Internet users (Gelb and Sundaram 2002).
Speed of communication and network connectivity	Network technology allows reviews to spread quickly and widely, amplifying their effects (Jalivand, 2012, Balaji et al., 2016; Pfeffer, 2014). e-WOM is considered influential due to its immediacy, extensive reach, credibility, and public accessibility (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004 cited in Kietzmann, & Canhoto, 2013).
Empowerment	Technological advancements enabled the rise of consumer empowering, allowing individuals to express complaints and share negative product and brand experiences with a large online audience, often across multiple platforms (Van Noort, & Willemsen, 2012).
Free access	Internet allows individuals to express complaints at lower costs leading to possible costless sharing of negative comment (Van Noort, & Willemsen, 2012).

Table 2 : links between the Internet's features and e-WOM.

2.3 Negative e-WOM

The digital domain has seen an increase in negative content. Due to the ease of expressing opinions on the internet compared to traditional means, bad opinions are more often published. These thoughts are known as negative electronic word-of-mouth (negative e-WOM), which influences consumer perception and brand reputation (Kucuk, 2019a).

Negative e-WOM is defined as “*the expression of complaints, negative feeling or negative experiences about a product or service online to inform a broader audience*” (Van Noort, & Willemsen, 2012; Kim et al, 2016; Grégoire et al., 2010; Ward & Ostrom, 2006).

There are various types of negative e-WOM that can be observed :

- 3 R systems : Negative Reviews, Recommendations, and Ratings (Belleflamme & Peitz, 2019).
- Fake reviews : some consumers may have hidden intentions to manipulate their evaluations and post "fake reviews" (Belleflamme & Peitz, 2019). While some people genuinely express negative feelings or experiences, others may provide deceptive opinions.
- Indirect revenge : individuals use online platforms to publicly complain about a company's misbehavior to create negative publicity (Grégoire et al., 2010).
- Online firestorm : “*a sudden discharge of negative word-of-mouth communication that spread rapidly across social media platforms*” (Lappeman, Patel, & Appalraju, 2018, p.67).
- Anti-brand sites : Online platforms used by oppositional consumer groups to spread negative messages about specific brands. They facilitate expressing dissatisfaction, sharing information, organizing boycotts, and coordinating legal actions against targeted brands, transforming consumer movements on the Internet (Kucuk, 2008).

Not all types of negative e-WOM have the same intention or impact on hurting a brand. Some forms may have a more direct and intentional aim to harm a brand, while others may be more subtle or unintentional.

2.4 Consequences of negative e-WOM on brands

Kähr (2017) identifies three main negative effects of the negative e-WOM : a decrease in perceived service quality, a decline in consumer's attitude toward the brand and, a decrease in purchase intention. These negative effects result in some damage to the brand and company. Previous researches (Chang et al. 2015; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006) have supported these effects, particularly the first two, which significantly influence consumer brand's evaluation. The potential impact of negative e-WOM on brands can be summarized as follows:

- Reputational damage : Any form of negative e-WOM towards a brand or a company is detrimental to its reputation (Lappeman, Patel, & Appalraju, 2018, p.79).
- Brand dilution : Negative online reviews can damage the brand's equity among consumers, resulting in significant brand dilution (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011).
- Impact consumer's relationship with the brand : Negative e-WOM such as consumer comments accumulated online create a pool of negative feedback (Hornik et al., 2015 cited by Hellemans, 2020). This viral spread of negative comments can significantly impact consumers' relationship with the brand (Balaji et al., 2016).

Finally, negative e-WOM, as a trigger event (Malthouse, 2007) may impact every stage of the consumer decision-making process, including brand evaluation, brand choice, purchase behavior, and brand loyalty (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). The same applies to anti-brand hate sites, which significantly influence the identity and image of the brand they target. These sites can hurt the brand through negative consumers purchasing decisions and potentially impact companies market share in the long run (Kucuk, 2008).

3. Fake news

3.1 Definition of fake news

Tandoc et al., (2018) define fake news as “*fabricated stories, manipulated facts, or exaggerated claims*”.

3.2 Internet's feature and the rise of fake news

The characteristics of the Internet have facilitated the emergence of fake news :

	Fake news
Anonymity	Fake news can be generated in both anonymous and non-anonymous ways, contingent on the circumstances and intentions of the creators.
Speed of communication and network connectivity	Nowadays, social media facilitate the rapid and wide spread of the unverified and false information among a larger number of users, thus deeply influencing the global perception and the understanding of events (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019).
Empowerment	The amount and richness of information available on social media transformed the traditional news production and consumption, by empowering the users who become sources and spreaders of information online (Obada, 2019).
Free access	Nowadays, social media facilitate the spread of the unverified and false information among a larger number of users, thus deeply influencing the global perception and the understanding of events (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019).

Table 3 : links between the Internet's features and fake news.

Technological advancements and Internet's features have facilitated the widespread dissemination of fake news (Obada, 2019), leading to rapid propagation of unverified and false information, significantly impacting the global perception (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019).

3.3 Brand and fake news

Flostrand, Pitt, & Kietzmann (2019) explain that brands do not necessarily fear fake news, as they perceive the phenomenon to be primarily linked to the political sphere and do not believe it can significantly impact their brands.

Nevertheless, Berthon and Pitt (2018) argued that fake news is important for brands and their management. Indeed, brands can be linked both directly and indirectly to fake news, being either victims or purveyors of it (Berthon et al., 2018; Flostrand et al., 2019):

	Victims	Purveyors
Direct	Brands can be direct targets of fake news.	Brands have the ability to finance and propagate fake news on popular sites, targeting them based on the information search profiles of potential customers to attract high web traffic.
Indirect	Brands can be inadvertently linked to fake news when their ads appear on websites spreading false information through algorithmic ad placements.	Brands may indirectly fund fake news by tracking customers as they surf from site to site, thus contributing to the propagation of false information.

Table 4: direct and indirect links between brand and fake news.

In the upcoming sections, our focus will shift towards brands being victimized, leading us to understand the negative impacts of fake news on brands.

3.4 Characteristics of fake news

In this section, we identify unique features linked to deceptive information. Thus, the commonly attributed characteristics of fake news include :

- The format : Fake news adopts the writing style and proper image characteristics of genuine news (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018; Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019). In addition, fake news not only mimics the look of real news articles but also utilizes news bots to create a network of deceptive websites, making it appear like they have a wide presence similar to legitimate news sources (Tandoc et., al, 2018; Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020).
- The deceptive intent : Fakes news intentionally spreads false information to mislead readers, leading to a change in public opinion towards the subjects, such as a brand

(Marique and Strowel 2019). This deceptive intent is often malicious involving the creation of fabricated interviews and pseudoscientific content (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019).

3.5 The aim of fake news

The motivation behind creating fake news may vary, but in the context of brands as victims, the aim of fake news is typically to achieve the following negative intentions :

- Competitive interests : Attacking brands, including their competitors (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020).
- Leisure interest : Gratifying individual's informational, social, and leisure needs (Obada, 2019).
- Financial interest : Generating financial gains through clicks and advertising revenue (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).
- Ideological motivations : Spreading ideological discrediting ideas (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

3.6 The potential impact of fake news on brands

The adverse impact of fake news on brands can be summarized as follows :

- Reputation and competitiveness : Fake news can severely damage a brand's reputation, competitiveness, leading to a loss of trust and loyalty among consumers (Obada, 2019).
- Financial losses : The rapid spread of fake content on social media can influence the attitudes, and behaviors of stakeholders and consumers, resulting in financial losses for brands (Obada, 2019).
- Emotional and social aspects : Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) explain the psychological risk and potential social consequences associated with purchasing a brand tainted by fake news. The potential social consequences relate to how their decisions may be perceived and judged by others in their social environment.

Finally, without a wide spread of fake news on social media, the brand's negative consequences would be limited, as stated by Obada (2019).

4. Summary

We have seen three types of brand sabotage that have evolved through the features of the Internet. We would like to summarize why these three phenomena are considered brand sabotage :

Influencers : Based on the broadened definition of brand sabotage, influencers can be considered a type of brand sabotage. Indeed, influencers have the potential to cause harm to a brand through their actions, which involve the impairment of brand-related associations among consumers. While influencers can have positive impacts on brands, such as reaching target audiences effectively and building stronger consumer relationships, they also carry risks that could lead to brand sabotage.

Negative communications, inauthentic brand perceptions, involvement of multiple content creators without clear guidelines, and lastly negative associations with influencers' personal actions can all contribute to harming a brand's image and reputation, making influencers a potential source of brand sabotage.

e-WOM : e-WOM, especially negative e-WOM, can be considered a new type of brand sabotage. Negative e-WOM involves aggressive actions with the purpose of achieving objectives such as expressing negative emotions. Negative e-WOM can cause reputation damage, brand dilution, and negatively impact consumer's relationship with the brand : decrease perceived services quality, purchase behavior, and brand loyalty, all of which can result in damage to the brand and company, making it a potent tool for undermining a brand's image and market share.

Fake news : Fake news originally may not have been specifically associated with brand sabotage. However, the intentional use of fake news to harm a brand through misleading information, as demonstrated by the motivations and potential impacts classifies fake news as a form of brand sabotage. Its instrumental aggression targets brand-related associations to achieve competitive, financial, or ideological objectives. The impact is severe, damaging reputation, trust, and loyalty among consumers, leading to financial losses. Social media's wide reach amplifies consequences, necessitating vigilance and countermeasures. Combatting fake news is vital for brand integrity and societal well-being, requiring efforts from platforms, authorities, and consumers alike.

Chapter 4: Potential solution strategies

In today's digital landscape, as discussed in the previous chapters, brand sabotage poses considerable challenges for brands. To address these challenges, brands must explore strategies of preventions, potential solutions to effectively responses to such sabotage. However, in this study, solutions related to influencers are excluded due to limited research on this rapidly evolving phenomenon. Thus, our primary focus will be on prevention strategies and solutions developed to counter e-WOM and fake news.

1. Strategies for dealing with negative e-WOM

Negative electronic Word-Of-Mouth (NWOM) spreads rapidly and is challenging to control (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Thus, webcare, a new communication strategy tool, allows companies to monitor NWOM on the internet (van Noort, & Willemsen, 2012). This new communication involves "*engaging in online interactions with consumers and actively addressing feedback, such as questions, concerns, and complaints*" (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012, p.133).

As Van Noort and Willemsen (2012) pointed out, we can differentiate between a reactive and proactive webcare strategy.

1.1 Proactive strategy : prevention

A proactive webcare strategy involves companies taking the initiative to anticipate and engage with customers even before they reach out with a query or complaint (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). A way to prevent e-WOM is to actively monitor social media and online platforms (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). This strategy can be human-based or machine-based.

This first, human-based approach, consists of identifying discussions and interactions about their products or services taking place on social media and online platforms. Using social media as a marketing tool allows brands to interact with online customers, convey core values, and foster an online environment that advances positive word of mouth (Lappeman, Patel, & Appalraju, 2018).

Alternatively, a machine-based approach uses software tools like *Sysomos* for active content collection and sentiment analysis to manage brand's reputation (Canhoto, et al., 2015). IT monitoring services help companies track online conversations across social media platforms,

crucial for addressing negative e-WOM found on consumer-generated sites like reviews, blogs, and social networks (Van Noort & Will, 2012). Furthermore, automated chatbots powered by artificial intelligence can also play a role in reducing negative word-of-mouth by quickly responding to common questions and complaints (Agnihotri, & Bhattacharya, 2023). As an example, consider the window that pops up when you visit a brand's website, inquiring if you require any assistance

Finally, the key to successfully preventing negative e-WOM lies in the utilization of both human and machine-based methods. By combining human expertise with the efficiency of automated approaches, brands can effectively identify and address negative e-WOM, ensuring the protection of their reputation and maintaining positive customer perceptions.

1.2 Reactive response strategies

In this reactive approach, companies respond to customer inquiries, complaints, or feedback after customers have published them. In other words, the company reacts to incoming messages or interactions as they come in (Van Noort and Willemsen, 2012). The response strategies can be categorized into two groups: response channel, tone of response. Both of which will be examined in the following section.

1.2.1 Response channel : public VS private

After receiving online reviews, such as concerns or negative sentiments, companies can respond either privately (via direct email) or publicly (by posting on a third-party website) (Zhang, Gao, & Zheng, 2020).

a. Private response :

Private responses are similar to engaging in one-to-one communication with the directly involved parties (Zhang, Gao, & Zheng, 2020).

According to Jameson (2014), private communications involve situations in which “the communicator (the brand) has the power to control to whom a communication is distributed and choose to do so by limiting who comprises the audience.” (p.8)

If the goal is to strengthen customer relationships with the individuals who posted the negative e-WOM, a private response may be more appropriate. Private communications have been found to be more effective in creating a human connection and positively influencing impacting customer evaluations of the company and its actions (Lee & Jang, 2013 cited in Zhang, Gao, & Zheng, 2020). This, in turn, can lead to higher customer satisfaction, improved loyalty, and

reduced susceptibility to price-related considerations (Chang & Chieng, 2006 cited in Zhang, Gao, & Zheng, 2020).

b. Public response :

Public responses refers to situations where “the communicator (the brand) either lacks the ability to control distribution or chooses not to limit the audience” (Jameson, 2014, p.8). Posting a response on third-party platforms is therefore accessible to a wider audience, including potential customers (Zhang, Gao, & Zheng, 2020).

If negative online reviews contain emotional language, expressing consumer’s feelings, responding publicly is recommended (Zhang, Gao, & Zheng, 2020). This allows companies to address not only the individual who authored the negative e-WOM but also other potential customers who may come across the review during their decision-making process. Public responses have the potential to influence these potential customers’ perceptions and purchasing intentions (Zhang, Gao, & Zheng, 2020).

c. Mixed choice between private and public response :

When dealing with negative e-WOM, addressing both the authors and the general public (public with e-WOM access) is important, although in some cases, one approach may be more favorable than other. Thus, the mixed choice between private and public responses to negative e-WOM is a strategic consideration that have the opportunity to impact both individual customers and the broader public perception of the brand.

1.2.2 Tone of response : accommodative VS defensive

Marcus and Goodman (1991) classified response strategies into either accommodative or defensive strategies. Van Noort and Willemsen (2012) identified these two types of responses, which center on the tone used by companies when addressing e-WOM.

a. Accommodative response :

An accommodative response is an apology (Kähr, 2017) or financial compensation (Van Noort, & Willemsen, 2012) from the company, admitting the existence of a problem, accepting responsibility, or implementing measures to address the issue (Marcus and Goodman 1991).

This type of response aims to regain a favorable impression of the organization and to mitigate the severity of a problem (Lee and Cranage 2014). By employing such an accommodative

response, shareholders perceive that the company genuinely assumes greater responsibility towards its customers (Coombs, 2007).

Lee and Cranage (2014) conducted a study and discovered that the level of agreement between complainers and subsequent responders significantly influences the perception of negative electronic word-of-mouth. On one hand, when dealing with a prevailing negative impression, adopting an accommodative approach is advised. This means responding with apologies or taking actions to resolve the issue, with the goal of avoiding further negative shifts in potential consumer's attitudes towards the organization.

b. Defensive response :

A defensive response denies problem or responsibility (Marcus and Goodman, 1991) from the company and may even shifts blame to others or accuse complainer (Lee and Song, 2010).

This type of response is for situations where identifying the source of the problem is difficult (Lee and Song, 2010).

On the other hand, following Lee and Cranage's study (2014), in situations where a negative review lacks full support or is not challenged by subsequent reviews, the study suggests employing a defensive response as the primary strategy. A defensive response is useful in situations where the organization's responsibility appears low. Responding defensively may help mitigate the perception of the organization being solely responsible for the problem, as an accommodating response with apologies could give the impression of full acceptance of blame (Lee and Cranage (2014).

Kähr (2017) explored response choices in relation to the credibility of negative e-WOM. When the credibility of negative e-WOM is low, a defensive response by the company leads to higher brand evaluation and purchase intention compared to an accommodative response.

Other study concluded that adopting a defensive response has a detrimental effect on firm reputation whatever the e-WOM (Chang et al., 2015).

c. Mixed choice between accommodative and defensive response :

The findings of Kähr concerning the credibility of the e-WOM have further revealed that when negative e-WOM is highly credible, the choice between an accommodative or defensive response does not impact consumer's brand evaluation and purchase intention.

All of these previous studies about accommodative and defensive response to e-WOM highlight the importance of carefully considering the appropriate response strategy to negative e-WOM for effective reputation management.

1.2.3 No response from the brand

Lee and Song (2010) propose the adoption of a "no-action" strategy in certain situations. "No-action" strategies entail either maintaining silence or providing superficial and meaningless comments in response to problems (Lee, 2004).

The choice in responding to negative e-WOM depends on consensus conditions : in low-consensus conditions with little agreement among consumers' opinions, not responding is the least effective strategy, whereas in high-consensus conditions with significant agreement, choosing not to respond is a better approach (Lee and Cranage, 2014). When consumers express dissatisfaction with a brand, and the company acknowledges this internally (without making it public), the most effective approach for the brand is often to refrain from immediate reaction.

1.3 Conclusion

A new concept has emerged : the webcare (proactive or reactive). This approach aims to foster engagement, enhance brand attitudes, and manage customer relationship (Sundar et al. (2014) cited in Kim, Wang, Maslowska, & Malthouse, 2016; Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

In various studies, brands are encouraged to respond to negative e-WOM, regardless of the chosen strategy, as it helps showcase their quality to potential consumers, bridge information gaps, and reduce imbalances by providing additional information about the company, staff, and customer service (Sandes and Urdan, 2013; Sparks, So, and Bradley, 2016; Kähr, 2017).

2. Strategies for dealing with Fake news

Dealing with fake news requires a balanced approach that combines prevention and communication strategies, which can help in reputation rebuilding, and restoring consumer trust (Johar et al., 2010). In this section, we will explore effective strategies to combat fake news and protect brands from fake news potential impact.

2.1 Prevention strategy

a. Detection approach based on machine and deep learning :

Machine learning refers to “*systems that can learn from training data to automate analytical model building and perform tasks*”, while deep learning is based “*on artificial neural networks*” (Janiesch, Zschech, & Heinrich, 2021, p.685).

Both of these previous types of learning are utilized to detect fake news, which are prevalent forms of misinformation (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019). Indeed, these advanced learning techniques recognize features linked to fake news, which helps in combating the dissemination of deceptive information.

b. Educational initiatives :

By taking on the responsibility of educating their audience about fake news, brands can actively contribute to preventing the spread of false information. Offering information literacy courses, specifically addressing fake news, proves to be an effective approach to empower individuals to discern and avoid misinformation (Gaillard et al., 2021; Burkhardt, 2017).

c. Collaborating with social network :

The European Commission issued a "code of good practice" in September 2018, involving key stakeholders such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, Mozilla, and advertisers, to combat, collectively, misinformation (Marique & Strowel, 2019). The aim is to inform brands directly, when disputes leading to potential fake news are detected, in order to prevent them from spreading.

However, in February 2019, the Commission observed a lack of adequate deployment of strategies, tools, and resources by online platforms like Facebook, Google, and Twitter to tackle

misinformation. Consequently, platforms must intensify their efforts to combat misinformation (Marique & Strowel, 2019).

2.2 Communication strategy

a. Attacking the accuser :

The "confrontation strategy" involves crisis managers directly confronting and challenging individuals or groups making claims of wrongdoing (Coombs, 2007).

The aim of this approach is to discredit the accuser (the source) and their false claims, often by using aggressive tactics like threatening legal action or publicly discrediting the source (Coombs, 2007; Johar et al., 2010).

Caution is advised as this strategy may be perceived a more defensive and aggressive response by directly confronting and discrediting those spreading fake news (Johar et al., 2010). Brands should pay attention using this response attack. Indeed, an aggressive response behavior may inadvertently make the fake news appear more credible to low involvement individuals, compared to a response that simply denies the accusations (Vafeiadis et al., 2020).

b. Rebuttal strategy :

The rebuttal strategy involves active countering false claims or fake news with evidence, clarification of misconceptions and persuasive communication to protect the brand's reputation during a crisis. For instance, when Pepsi faced allegations of foreign objects in their cans, they responded by releasing a video showing their production process, proving that the accusations were wrong (Johar et al., 2010).

Rather than attacking the accuser, the emphasis is on providing accurate information to counter the misinformation. This approach aims to clarify the truth and to correct any misleading information without resorting to aggressive tactics (Vafeiadis et al., 2020).

The rebuttal response can be effective for crises that may not be very serious at first sight, but that risk could be severe at the end (Johar et al., 2010).

c. Denial :

The denial strategy involves disassociating the brand from the fake news, refuting any responsibility for false accusations, and asserting that the reported transgression did not occur or is unrelated to the brand (Coombs, 2007; Vafeiadis et al., 2020; Johar et al., 2010).

This approach is suitable when the accusations are false, and the brand is not responsible (Coombs, 2007). It is also appropriate when target consumers identify strongly with the brand and the false news is not perceived as serious (Johar et al., 2010).

Credibility is vital concerning this strategy. Strengthening credibility can be achieved by presenting a narrative that completely clears the brand and involving third-party experts (Johar et al., 2010).

d. No response :

Organizations sometimes opt not to respond to false news or rumors about them, confident that these inaccurate claims will naturally fade away over time (Vafeiadis et al., 2020).

3. Overview

Here are two tables listing the different strategies for negative e-WOM (Table 5) and for fake news (Table 6). These form the foundation of the empirical study conducted below.

		Negative e-WOM											
STRATEGIES	Proactive		Reactive										
	1.	Human Based	2.	Machine-Based	3.	Public Accommodative	4.	Public Defensive	5.	Private Accommodative	6.	Private Defensive	7.

Table 5 : strategies against negative e-WOM.

		Fake news											
STRATEGIES	Prevention			Communication response									
	I.	Machine and deep learning	II.	Educational initiatives	III.	Collaborating with social networks	IV.	Attacking the accuser	V.	Rebuttal response	VI.	Denial response	VII.

Table 6: strategies against negative fake news.

Part 2 : Empirical study

Chapter 1: Methodology

1. The objectives

Using documentary research [Part1], we examined three types of brand sabotage : influencers, negative e-WOM, and fake news. As previously explained, we placed particular emphasis on the last two types, as they significantly impact brands and have been extensively studied in the literature. The subsequent sections of this paper will shift their focus to examining potential strategies for companies to address e-WOM and fake news.

A qualitative study is appropriate to achieve this objective, as it will help gather in-depth insights and understanding on the topic.

2. Qualitative method

The qualitative research approach is commonly used in social sciences (Pope, & Mays,1995).We aim to conduct interviews with employees to explore their perceptions and ideas. This qualitative approach allows for better understanding rather than testing various strategies. The insights gained from this study can be further tested in the future, assisting brands in determining whether to implement these or similar solutions.

Following the recommendation of Gavard-Perret et al. (2008), our qualitative study employed semi-structured interviews as they strike a balance between non-directive conversations and structured interviews, offering flexibility and generating rich information for analysis.

The purpose of conducting these interviews is to validate whether employees and professionals endorse the strategies identified in the literature. Our goal is to understand whether the interviewees have already implemented these solutions and the reasons behind their decisions. Additionally, in cases where the solutions have not been implemented, we aim to explore the reasons behind this and whether they have any alternative solutions to address the issues.

Semi-structured interviews typically consist of a set of open-ended questions outlined in an interview guide (refer to section 4 – Interview guide), supplemented by additional questions

that arise during the conversation between the interviewer and the participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

3. Sample constitution

To create our sample, we conducted interviews with seven employees from different organizations, specifically individuals responsible for :

- communications department ;
- marketing department ;
- social media ;
- company manager or director.

These interviewees are well-suited to provide solutions for negative electronic WOM and fake news, as they have expertise and responsibility of their brand's image.

The following table summarizes the information provided by the interviewed participants. Some of the employees' first names have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

Name	Companies	Profession
Frédéric	efa : a well-established financial services firm offering comprehensive fund administration and institutional services since its inception in Luxembourg in 1996.	Head of Marketing and Communication
Joël	Sudinfo : daily newspapers in French-speaking Belgium.	Social Media Manager / Webmaster
Bruno	Siel Voyages / Canada: travel agency	Director
Stéphanie	Cora : supermarket	Head of Marketing and communication
Alain	GNB Béton : A company established in 1999, specializing in the supply of ready-mix fresh concrete.	Director
Lucie	Restaurant brands	Community Manager

Table 7: description of our respondents sample.

4. Interview guide

An interview guide serves as a "*reminder*" (Berthier, 2016, p. 78) and offers the advantage of introducing scientific rigor while allowing flexibility in the sequence of questions for each respondent (Sauvayre, 2021).

In practical terms, the interviews proceeded as follows : we began by reminding the participants of the reasons for the interview (purpose of the study): The interview would involve discussing two tables (see above: Table 5 and 6) presenting different strategies for two types of sabotage. During the interviews, I explained the strategies I had identified in greater detail and aimed to determine if these strategies aligned with the participants' perspectives.

Then, we explained the principles governing the interviews (anonymity and freedom of expression) to establish a bond of trust with the participants. Afterwards, we asked general open-ended questions about the participant's background. We proceeded with the main questions which were :

- Personal experience : Have you implemented these strategies in the past to deal with such brand sabotages? If so, could you tell us about the outcomes of these situations? Would you consider using these solutions if you had not used them before? Please explain your position and the reasons behind it.
- Ranking of solutions : Between the different strategies options, how would you rank them in order of effectiveness, from most effective to least effective ?
- Additional ideas : Do you have any other ideas of brand sabotage that exist or any other recommendations for dealing with this type of sabotage or attack ?

Throughout the interviews, we took care to engage in active listening. At the beginning of each interview, I believe it is important to anticipate that each participant might offer comments or examples that deviate from the basic assumptions of the tables but will be relevant in the subsequent analysis.

Finally, before concluding the interviews, we ensured that the participants had addressed all the topics they wanted to discuss.

Chapter 2 : Findings interviews

After conducting the interviews, our focus shift to thematic analysis, which involves “*examining segments of sentences, whole sentences, or groups of sentences related to the same theme*” (Blanc, Drucker-Godard & Ehlinger, 2014, p.556).

The thematic analysis centers around the themes (strategies) listed from 1 to 7 in the overview table for addressing negative e-WOM, and from I. to VII. for strategies to counter fake news cases. Key quotes from the companies’ interviews are extracted to highlight essential insights, while other quotes from the interviews are placed in appendices to maintain a clear and concise main analysis below. For each strategy (theme), the main quotes from interviewees are categorized as either agreed (item a.) or disagreed (item b.) citations based on their stance towards the strategy. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the themes (in this case, the strategies), facilitating the drawing of conclusions and enriching the findings of the study (item c.).

1. Findings concerning negative e-WOM

1.1 Strategy 1 : Human based prevention

As discussed in Part 1, chapter 4, actively monitoring social media and online platforms can be accomplished through human-based methods.

a. Agreed citations

- efa (Frédéric) : “*Being on social media and talking positively about our brand is a way to pre-counter negative attacks.*”
- Sudinfo (Joël) : “*I try to keep checking (social media, websites), but not all the comments because it's impossible - we get almost 4,000-5,000 comments a day on the site and the various Facebook pages.*”
- Restaurant brands (Lucie) : “*Be on social networks is super positive because it's going to be a kind of showcase for your business. If people are talking about you (the brand), that's cool, so you can pass it on, and it continues to improve your brand's image.*” “*I believe that you can never completely avoid negative comments, but being on social media allows you to maintain a different kind of relationship that still helps you maintain a positive image.*”
- GNB Béton (Alain) : “*We feel compelled to be on social media, simply because if we weren't, people would wonder.*”

- Cora (Stéphanie) : *“Negative comments arise when customers call the reception and receive no response, but the right redirection communication approach helps to prevent such negative feedback.”*
- b. Disagreed citations
- Sudinfo (Joël) : *“We had to discontinue having a dedicated person for responding to comments, especially for financial reasons because obviously it costs to pay someone to do this job.”*
 - Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) : *“If we were to start being present on multiple networks, we would need to manage all of them, which would require time and hiring an additional person. If we had more staff, we could do it.” “The problem is also the dreadful update of Facebook because we don't have the time, and also because I am no longer part of the younger generation.”*
 - GNB Béton (Alain) : *“We are forced to be on it, ...but it doesn't bring anything in terms of return on investment.” “We are too small, there is no social media enthusiast, and as a result, we struggle a lot.”*
- c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy 1)

The importance of monitoring social media and online platforms through human-based methods varies among companies. While some interviewees emphasize its significance, others express disagreement. Based on the citations of some interviewees, monitoring through human-based methods offers several advantages :

- This strategy allows businesses to cultivate a positive environment through promoting positive word-of-mouth, which serves as cost-free promotion (efa, restaurant brands).
- It enables companies to pre-counter negative attacks (efa) and address messages that hold significant importance (Sudinfo).
- Monitoring eliminates doubts about limited presence on social media (GNB Béton). For GNB Béton being present on social media is considered an obligation.

Interviewees who disagree still recognize the importance of monitoring but cite specific reasons for their mixed feelings :

- Financial constraints : employing a dedicated person for monitoring could be costly for the company (Sudinfo and Siel Voyages / Canada). Alain (GNB Béton) even highlights that the returns on investment for such prevention is not particularly beneficial.

- Company size : smaller companies like Siel Voyages / Canada and GNB Béton face more difficulties due to their small size compared to larger enterprises. Restaurant brands (Lucie) agrees that larger companies have more human resources to monitor social media. Nonetheless, she acknowledges the role of social media as an instrumental in the growth of small and medium-sized companies.
- Facebook's updates : Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) finds this strategy hard to keep up with the new versions and updates of Facebook, making it challenging to effectively manage their online presence.
- Time-consuming : The time required for monitoring is seen as a burden for Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno).

1.2 Strategy 2 : Machine based prevention

As discussed in Part 1, chapter 4, actively monitoring social media and online platforms can also be accomplished through machine-based methods.

a. Agreed citations

- Sudinfo (Joël) : *"We can receive comment through alert us buttons."*
- Cora (Stéphanie) : *"You can contact us through the website cora.be, and there is also the Cora application where you have the option to contact us through a button."*

b. Disagreed citation

- Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *"As we are not a huge company, there are not a lot of comments and, since there are only a few of us managing the social media, we don't need such things."*

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy 2)

Sudinfo and Cora mention the use of functionalities like "Alert us buttons" and contact options through their website and application, showing their support for this strategy.

However, the restaurant brands (Lucie) disagrees with the need for machine-based methods, stating that their company is not large enough to require such tools and that their current management of social media is sufficient.

The other interviewees did not mention the use of machine-based solutions to prevent e-WOM.

1.3 Strategy 3 : Public - Accommodative response

a. Agreed citations

- efa (Frédéric) : *“When responding to negative comments on the Internet, it is essential to keep in mind one thing: we must show that we are an open company, ready to solve problems.”*
- Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) : *“We always take responsibility, whether it's on the web or elsewhere.”*
- Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“Firstly, we apologize for their disappointment...each time, we acknowledge the fault, even if we have no evidence (of that fault committed), we apologize. We'll always respond in the customer's favor, never saying it's not our fault, we'll always assume the error, whether it is true or not. Certain individuals have observed our operating practices, and as a consequence, some of them may exploit this to seek compensation from the company as a gesture of apology.”*

b. Disagreed citations

- Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) : *“We should not spend too much time on this because if we do, we will continue to receive new comments.”*
- Cora (Stéphanie) : *“With Google reviews, when you respond, your answer is visible to everyone, and people can react to your comment, which is very difficult to manage for a company. You have to be careful when responding because it's visible to all.”*

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy 3)

Based on the responses from the interviews, a public-accommodative response to negative e-WOM serves the following purposes :

- To demonstrate a positive company image: efa (Frédéric) views this strategy as important and effective for maintaining a positive company image.
- To show commitment in resolving issues : Taking responsibility is seen as a way to demonstrate openness in addressing problems (efa, Frédéric). Moreover, the restaurant brands (Lucie) also employs this strategy to show commitment in resolving issues.

However, Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) disagrees with the idea of spending too much time and energy on responding to negative comments online. Additionally, both Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) and Cora (Stéphanie) express concerns that responding publicly may lead to

an escalation of further negative comments, making it challenging for a company to manage the situation.

1.4 Strategy 4 : Public- Defense response

a. Agreed citations

- efa (Frédéric) : *“We've encountered a comment on Google that was unrelated to our business. Therefore, it's crucial to publicly acknowledge its invalidity and provide evidence to support that.”*
- GNB Béton (Alain) : *“If the comment contains false information, I will directly address it as a non-valid comment.”*

b. Disagreed citation

- Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“We won't start blaming the customer, even though there have been occasional cases of someone abusing the system.”*

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy 4)

Certain respondents (efa and GNB Béton) endorse a public-defense response to clarify misconceptions and safeguard the company's reputation.

The restaurant brands (Lucie) disagrees with the idea of blaming the customer but does not provide a specific reason for this. Perhaps it is in line with a brand philosophy not to do so, or it could also depend on the nature of the brand's business. However, other interviewees did not express their opinions on this strategy.

1.5 Strategy 5 : Private - Accommodative response

a. Agreed citations

- Sudinfo (Joël) : *“In the case where we received a comment such as :[you are doing a poor job], we will contact this person to know the reason of this comment to see if it's related to a particular article. Then we can start a dialogue, at which point the thing deflates a little.”*
- Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) : *“From any channel, we will always take responsibility.”*
- Cora (Stéphanie) : *“Generally, we prefer calling customers because we know that email responses can be easily misinterpreted, and as we are a local, friendly store in the region, it is important for us to call and understand what happened to resolve the issue afterward.”*
Cora points out that the brand must be vigilant with complainers while interacting with them to find an agreement. In particular, she said *“Cora allows to directly communicate with the appropriate person, avoiding intermediaries.”* She also adds : *“We avoid addressing*

issues on social media and prefer resolving them privately through messages or phone calls. In most cases, customers willingly share their phone numbers, allowing us to have effective conversations with them.”

b. Disagreed citations

There is no disagreed citation related to this strategy.

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy 5)

The overall ideas emerging from the interviews regarding Strategy 5 (the private-accommodative response) are as follows :

- To better understand the reasons behind negative comments (Sudinfo, Cora).
- To encourage communication with customers (Sudinfo, Cora).
- To maintain a friendly, local image and relationship with individual customers (Cora).
- To avoid misinterpreted responses (Cora).
- To implement targeted measures to address the issues raised (Sudinfo and Cora).

As seen above, no disagreed citations are provided for this strategy. In summary, Sudinfo and Cora specifically believe that adopting a private-accommodative response strategy allows them to address concerns more efficiently.

1.6 Strategy 6: Private- Defensive response

This strategy was not mentioned by any of the interviewees, indicating that it is not commonly used by these companies. This suggests that the strategy may not be widely adopted.

1.7 Strategy 7: No response

a. Agreed citations

- *Sudinfo (Joël) : “Sometimes, I choose not to respond to comments or messages, if it's not a significant issue and finally, the next day, we have already forgotten about it. Plus responding can generate more discussion about the brand. So, it's better to say nothing and let it go.” “We might let it slide on Twitter if it's a small interaction without a real target audience.”*
- *Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) : “Sometimes, we receive complaints that don't make sense, and we don't feel like responding to them. If we reply once, some people keep going on about*

irrelevant things, so we prefer to leave it there. It's best not to engage with comments that don't make any sense, as responding might lead to more unnecessary comments.”

b. Disagreed citations

- Cora (Stéphanie) : *“I believe that it is always better to respond.”*
- Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“At our company, one thing that we strictly avoid is not responding.”*

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy 7)

No response strategy to certain comments is a point of contention among the interviewees. The agreed citations emphasize that in some cases, not responding to certain comments can be a valid approach. Reasons for not responding include :

- Avoiding unnecessary discussions (Sudinfo, Siel Voyages / Canada) ;
- Letting insignificant issues pass (Sudinfo).

However, some interviewees firmly believe in the importance of always responding, viewing it as a better approach (Cora, restaurant brands).

The decision to respond or not to negative e-WOM depends on the company's perspective and the specific context of the comments received. There is no clear consensus concerning the choice of responding or not.

1.8 Other strategies from the interviewees

During the interviews, various strategies and tips were discussed, and the following three points emerged :

- Proactive strategy - focus on your market and know your customers well

Siel Voyages/ Canada (Stéphanie) : *“ The first thing, which is, for me, the most important, before receiving bad reviews, is to focus on your market and have a good understanding of it, a sort of prevention.”*

- Proactive strategy - employer branding

efa (Frédéric) : *“Employer branding fosters a positive brand image, fostering strong employee engagement and pride. When achieved, employees may defend the company in the face of negative comments, leading to an ideal situation. Cultural variations may influence this phenomenon, as observed between the US and Europe.”*

Employer branding creates a positive brand image, fostering employee engagement and pride. Satisfied employees are more likely to defend the company against negative comments, making it an effective prevention against negative e-WOM.

- Reactive strategy - humoristic response

Cora (Stéphanie) : *“We can add humor to our responses, which often leads to more comments and likes from people.”*

Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“What I sometimes do is use a bit of humor.”*

2. Findings concerning fake news

2.1 Strategy I. : Machine and deep learning

a. Agreed citation

Sudinfo (Joël) : *“We are developing a few small things to prevent false images and videos since I work in an artificial intelligence workshop for the moment.”*

b. Disagreed citation

There is no disagreed citation related to this strategy.

c. Overall idea emerging from these interviews (strategy I.)

Sudinfo indicates that this prevention strategy is still under development, underscoring the challenges of managing online content. However, no other interviewees have mentioned this prevention strategy.

2.2 Strategy II. : Educational initiatives

a. Agreed citations

- efa (Frédéric) : *“Educating on subjects like fake news, I think it's a very good idea.”*
- Sudinfo (Joël) : *“It could be interesting to do a kind of fact-checking of Sudinfo and share all the small regional information that we see passing and which is false.” “We are also subscribed to the fact-checking feed of AFP (Agence France-Presse), and sometimes we share their content on Facebook. It is also a form of education, as people who read the*

article may have a realization when they come across similar false information on the Internet.”

b. Disagreed citation

Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“I don't think it's up to us to communicate what a fake news is; I believe it should be more the responsibility of the media and journalists to do that.”*

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy II.)

The interviewees have diverse opinions on the educational prevention strategy against fake news.

Sudinfo sometimes employs this strategy by sharing the truth about fake news. This strategy offers two benefits : silencing fake news on one hand and creating awareness about fake news on the other. The latter implicitly encourages people to be more vigilant when it comes to information, promoting education and encouraging critical thinking.

However, the restaurant brands (Lucie) disagrees, viewing this strategy as beyond the company's responsibility and believing that educating about fake news is the role of the media.

2.3 Strategy III. : Collaborating with social networks

a. Agreed citation

Sudinfo (Joël) : “A few years ago, Facebook launched the fact-checking system, and there are certain newspapers that are paid by Facebook to do this fact-checking. When newspapers find fake news, they report it to Facebook, and Facebook adds 'this information is false' below it, and then the newspapers provide the article of the verified information.”

b. Disagreed citation

Sudinfo (Joël) : “We tried to establish this job, but Facebook was no longer issuing this type of license for media in Belgium, anyway.”

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy III.)

Based on the cited responses from Sudinfo, the agreed citations highlight the positive aspects of such collaborations, particularly Facebook's fact checking system, where certain newspapers are paid to verify information. According to Sudinfo, this mechanism allows :

- To verify the accuracy of the information circulating on the platform
- To display a warning under the post in question
- To provide reliable link with the verified article

However, the execution of this strategy depends on social networks providing such licenses, which can make it less feasible for brands to apply.

Overall, the idea that emerges is that while collaborations with social media platforms can offer potential benefits in addressing fake news for Sudinfo, there may be obstacles or restrictions.

2.4 Strategy IV. : Attacking the accuser

a. Agreed citations

- Sudinfo (Joël) : *“For us, we’ve never had such a case except for one time, where they posted a fake news about us, but it was resolved differently, through legal actions.”*
- Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) : *“The best thing to do would be to identify the person who created the fake news and confront them.”*
- Cora (Stéphanie) : *“If this could have a very negative impact on customer traffic and, as a result, on the store's revenue loss, then I think Cora could take legal action.”*
- Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“If it becomes real attacks that could seriously damage the brand's image, then I think we can seek the help of a lawyer.”*

b. Disagreed citations

- Efa (Frédéric) : *“One piece of advice I would give is to never be aggressive.”*
- Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) : *“We would not pursue legal action because it would be costly, and as a small business, it would be too expensive for us.” “Identify the person who created the fake news and confront them seems however complicated as it would require first discovering the originator of the fake news, reaching out to them, and trying to understand why they propagated it”*
- Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“Attacking them won't accomplish anything; it will only escalate the situation and lead to further aggression.”*

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy IV.)

The "Attacking response" strategy for fake news generates varied opinions among interviewees.

Through this strategy it is possible to make legal actions, which are seen as a way to protect their brand's image and revenues (Cora, restaurant brands). However, it is important to note that while legal action is considered in certain circumstances, Siel Voyages / Canada expresses

concerns about the potential costs and complexities of pursuing legal actions, especially for smaller businesses.

Others disagree with this strategy for the following reasons :

- It is considered too aggressive and may result in negative outcomes for the brand (efa) ;
- The process of identifying the source of the fake news and confronting them can present challenges and may not yield productive results (Siel Voyages / Canada) ;
- The potential repercussions, which can lead to increased aggression and further problems (restaurant brands).

Overall, while some see legal action as a viable option for protecting their brand, others caution against potential drawbacks and advocate for more strategic and diplomatic approaches to tackling fake news.

2.5 Strategy V. : Rebuttal response

a. Agreed citations

- Efa (Frédéric) : *“You should provide facts to counter fake news.”*
- Cora (Stéphanie) : *“We would like a new article explaining that the fake news is false, giving true facts against it.”*
- Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“ Always try to bounce back from the false news, of course, showing your customers and community that the fake news said is not true, but it's pointless to just say they lied. We need to prove it to them, like filming a video...”*

b. Disagreed citations

- Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno) : *“If responding simply means publishing a contradictory article, then it can become a vicious circle with other contradictory articles, and it can be a waste of time.”*
- GNB Béton (Alain) : *“Engaging in arguments to defend against fake news is pointless since it is not based on truth. I oppose expending energy on something that has no value.”*

c. Overall ideas emerging from these interviews (strategy V.)

Some interviewees emphasize the importance of bouncing back from false information and presenting evidence to prove the refute claims.

They suggest methods such as :

- Publishing new articles that refute the fake news and highlight accurate information (Cora).
- Using videos to demonstrate the truth (Restaurant brands).

The common theme among these interviewees is to focus on presenting evidence and substantiating the rebuttal without engaging in direct confrontations or aggressive responses.

Certain interviewees express skepticism about the effectiveness of the rebuttal response. They raise concerns that responding with counterarguments might :

- Lead to a back-and-forth exchange of contradictory information, which could be counterproductive and a waste of time (Siel Voyages / Canada).
- Give more attention and importance to the fake news than it deserves and could result in unnecessary energy expenditure (GNB Béton).

2.6 Strategy VI. : Denial response

a. Agreed citation

GNB Béton (Alain) : *“If the fake news is more substantial, I would deny it, but I wouldn't start arguing.”*

b. Disagree citation:

There is no disagreed citation related to this strategy.

c. Overall idea emerging from these interviews (strategy VI.)

GNB Béton suggests that in cases of significant fake news, a denial response strategy may be appropriate. He insists that denial allows avoiding engaging in aggressive arguments or responses.

The overall idea emerging from the interviews is that the "denial response" strategy is not widely favored among the interviewees. While one interviewee acknowledges its potential use in certain circumstances, there is no strong endorsement or elaboration on the benefits of this approach.

2.7 Strategy VII. : No response

a. Agreed citation

There is no agreed citation related to this strategy.

b. Disagreed citation

Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“Something we would never do is not respond at all...In my opinion, staying silent won't achieve anything. In the communication field, you need to be subtle, meaning that if you become the victim of fake news, you should respond and bounce back from it.”*

c. Overall idea emerging from these interviews (strategy VII.)

The agreed citation shows that no interviewee expressed support for the "No response" strategy. There is no indication that any participant believes in the effectiveness or appropriateness of staying silent in the face of fake news.

The disagreed citation highlights the strong disagreement from one interviewee, the restaurant brands (Lucie). She emphasizes that not responding at all is something they would never do. According to her: “giving no response to the fake news is like accepting it.”

2.8 Strategy VIII. : Other strategies from the interviewees

Again, various strategies and tips were discussed during the interviews :

- Prevention – automatic filtering

Sudinfo (Joël) : *“In the comments section of the website and Facebook, under a post, automatic filters can be applied to hide certain comments”*

In particular, it is a good idea to hide comments containing the prefixes "http" or "www". This may limit the possibility of sharing fake news and to prevent the spread (Sudinfo).

- Prevention – emphasizing values

Restaurant brands (Lucie) : *“What I would do more to avoid fake news is to communicate how we work, our values, and sharing the DNA of our company.”*

By sharing values, behavior, and ways of thinking, companies enable people to gain a better understanding of their identity. As a result, fake news conflicting with the brand's online image becomes less credible (Restaurant brand).

Conclusion

Our study aim to examine the strategies employed by companies to counter online brand sabotage. To tackle this concern, we redefined the sabotage concept within this thesis to include negative behaviors pertinent to our investigation, such as negative electronic Word-Of-Mouth (e-WOM) and fake news. With the emergence of the Internet, e-WOM and fake news have conformed to the Internet's features. We conducted a study covering a variety of literature articles to gain a profound understanding of these phenomena. This enabled us to delve into the impacts of these adverse behaviors on brand's image, along with the financial repercussions and the consumer-brand relationship. The subsequent part of the literature review explores the diverse approaches that companies embrace when responding to such brand sabotages.

We created a concise table of potential strategies to address each studied sabotage scenario. These tables enabled us to conduct a qualitative empirical study, interviewing six distinct companies. Each company shared its perspective on every strategy, discussing their views on feasibility, usefulness, and reasons for implementing specific approaches in the event of an attack.

Our main observation is that the majority of comments written by companies concern strategies to counter negative electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM). This overarching conclusion suggests that companies are more impacted by negative e-WOM as opposed to fake news.

Firstly, let us draw the conclusions about the strategies mentioned against negative electronic Word-of-Mouth (e-WOM). Preventive strategies are generally formulated through human effort (and to a lesser extent, automated processes). This last can occasionally entail a substantial cost for small enterprises. Emotions assume a pivotal role in this proactive context, exhibiting variance among individuals and displaying unpredictability. Consequently, devising a universal prevention strategy becomes notably intricate due to these factors.

Regarding the response tone, the accommodative strategy is frequently employed to ensure customer satisfaction, thereby enhancing the brand's image in the eyes of the public. The defensive strategy is occasionally utilized in a public setting to absolve the company of any perceived wrongdoing and to improve its perception among consumers. The defensive strategy in private settings was not mentioned in the empirical study, likely due to its perceived lack of value-addition and potential risk of tarnishing the brand's image.

The response channel (private or public) is quite varied, although some brands acknowledge responding to e-WOM both privately and publicly to leverage the distinct advantages of these two channels. To resume, multiple factors thus influence the choice of response type, including the company's size, values, the truthfulness, and credibility of the comment, as well as the industry in which the company operates. During the interviews, two preventive techniques were proposed: "gaining a better understanding of the market and customers" and "employer branding" strategy strengthens the company's image, making it less susceptible to criticism. In conclusion to negative e-WOM, the study emphasizes that the response strategy is carefully examined with the aim of safeguarding and enhancing the brand image.

Secondly, regarding the strategies developed to address fake news, the interviewed companies invest fewer resources in preventive measures against this type of attack, likely due to the lesser prevalence of fake news. Some companies attribute this tendency to geographical (and thus cultural) factors, differences in company sizes, and the nature of their professions. However, a simple preventive measure mentioned is to prohibit typical comments, such as website prefixes. In response to a posted fake news, some opt to confront the author of the fake news. This approach can be costly, particularly for smaller enterprises. Consequently, the latter tend to adopt a more communicative approach. Another strategy, the rebuttal response, is moderately used, wherein reinstating the truth through providing evidence is relatively straightforward and quickly puts the matter to rest. However, to apply this strategy, company need clear evidence against fake news. Strategies such as the "denial response" and opting for no response are rarely employed.

Limitations

It is essential to mention the limitations of this study. To begin, it should be emphasized that the sample of interviewees is not representative. With only six individuals interviewed, it is challenging to claim full coverage of all perspectives and opinions on the studied strategies. Additionally, it is noteworthy that certain interviewees did not express specific views on certain strategies, which may restrict the generalizability of the results.

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that the strategies mentioned in this study are merely avenues of exploration. Although the information gathered from the interviewees offers intriguing ideas and diverse perspectives, it is essential to bear in mind that they do not represent

a definitive or exhaustive solution. The identified strategies can be regarded as starting points for more in-depth and context-specific approaches.

Recommendations

As recommendations for future research, it would be pertinent to consider a more in-depth quantitative study on strategies for managing negative e-WOM and combating fake news. Such an approach would yield more representative data by using a larger sample and analyzing results with concrete figures. This would also facilitate a better understanding of how these strategies translate into tangible outcomes, such as enhancing online brand image or reducing the spread of misinformation.

Moreover, exploring other potential strategies not addressed in this study would be beneficial. Given the complexity of the digital landscape, new approaches may emerge, or existing strategies may need adaptation to address the ever-evolving challenges related to negative e-WOM and online disinformation.

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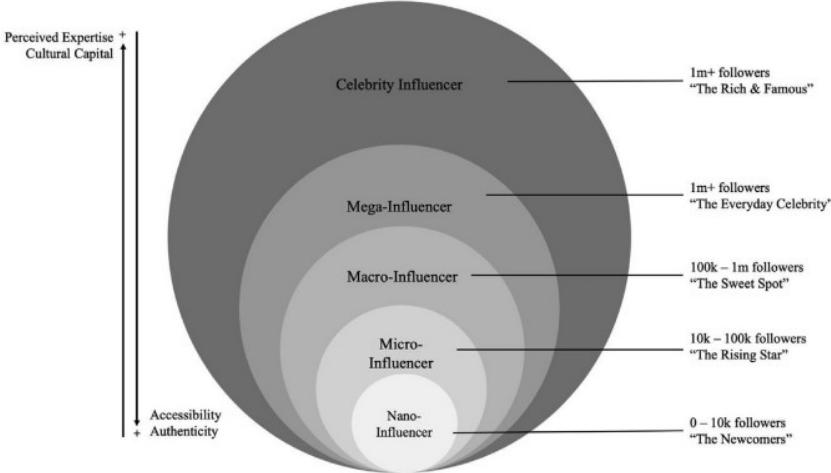
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Appendices

Appendix 1 : Different types of social media influencers



Appendix 2 : Citations from the interviews – e-WOM - Proactive

Companies	Agreed citations	Why ?
efa (Frédéric)	<i>"Being on social media and talking positively about you is a way to pre-counter negative attacks."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To build a positive environment To pre-counter negative attacks
Sudinfo (Joël)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"I try to keep checking (social media, websites), but not all the comments because it's impossible - we get almost 4,000-5,000 comments a day on the site and the various Facebook pages."</i> <i>"We try to check as many messages as possible that we receive via our private Facebook messages. If it is indeed a message that appears important for us to respond to, then we make the effort to reply and engage with it."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To have an overview of the comments To address messages that hold significant importance
Community manager of restaurant brands (Lucie)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"Be on social networks is super positive because it's going to be a kind of showcase for your business. If people are talking about you (the brand), that's cool, so you can pass it on, and it continues to improve your brand image."</i> <i>"I think it is extremely important to have a dedicated communication team to handle dissatisfied consumers. Many small and medium-sized enterprises have also grown in this way."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Showcase for your business To build a positive environment, positive WOM serves as a cost-free promotion To handle dissatisfied consumers
F.N.B Béton Arlon (Alain)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"We feel obliged to be on social networks, yes, simply because if we were not, people would ask questions. However, being a small company, that's our sin. We do it because we have to do it."</i> <i>"We need to develop our website. Therefore, we must ask an external company."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To eliminate any doubts about our limited presence on social networks An obligation or necessity to do be present on social media

Companies	Disagreed citations	Why ?
Sudinfo (Joël)	<i>"It's a choice we had to make (to discontinue having a dedicated person for responding to comments), especially for financial reasons because obviously it costs to pay someone to do this job."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial reason
Siel Voyages/Canada (Bruno)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"If we were to start being present on multiple networks, we would need to manage all of them, which would require time and hiring an additional person. If we had more staff, we could do it."</i> <i>"We are not very present on social media, which is a deliberate choice because we are a small company."</i> <i>"The problem is already the dreadful update of Facebook because we don't have the time, and also because I am no longer part of the younger generation."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time-consuming Financial reason Relatively small company Update on social media are too complicated to handle
F.N.B Béton Arlon (Alain)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"We are forced to be on it, ...but it doesn't bring anything in terms of return on investment."</i> <i>"Regarding Facebook, we have to keep it active, but we don't enjoy it."</i> <i>"We are too small, there is no social media enthusiast, and as a result, we struggle a lot."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does not yield beneficial returns in terms of investment. Not enjoyable Relatively small company

Appendix 3 : Citations from the interviews – e- WOM - Public accommodative

Companies	Agreed citations	Why ?
efa (Frédéric)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“When responding to negative comments on the internet, it is essential to keep in mind one thing: we must show that we are an open company, ready to solve problems.”</i> • <i>“It is essential to be honest and transparent, acknowledge the issue, and offer a solution if necessary, saying things like: You are right, please contact us at this number to resolve the problem.”</i> 	To demonstrate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • our openness • our willingness to solve problems. • our honesty and transparency
Siel Voyages/ Canada (Bruno)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“We always take responsibility, whether it's on the web or elsewhere.”</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To admit the existence of a problem
Community manager of restaurant brands (Lucie)	<i>“Firstly, apologize for their disappointment...each time we acknowledge the fault even if we have no proof, we apologize. We're not going to start blaming the customer, even though we've had the occasional case of someone abusing the system. So, we'll always respond in the customer's favor, never saying it's not our fault, we'll always assume the error if it's true or not.”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritize consumer satisfaction • To show commitment to resolve issues

Companies	Disagreed citations	Why ?
Siel Voyages/ Canada (Bruno)	<i>“We should not spend too much time on this because if we do, we will continue to receive new comments.”</i>	Avoiding : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To waste time • an escalation of comments
Cora (Stéphanie)	<i>“With Google reviews, when you respond, your answer is visible to everyone, and people can react to your comment, which is very difficult to manage for a company. You have to be careful when responding because it's visible to all.”</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To avoid an escalation of comments • Too much public visibility

Appendix 4 : Citations from the interviews – e- WOM - Public defensive

Companies	Agreed citations	Why ?
efa (Frédéric)	<i>"Important to show that this is a fake comment by commenting and stating that we have checked its data and cannot find individuals in our records, thereby indicating that the comment is not valid."</i>	To expose fake comment
F.N.B Béton Arlon (Alain)	<i>"If the comment contains false information, I will directly address it as a fake comment."</i>	To expose fake comment

Companies	Disagreed citation	Why ?
Community manager of restaurant brands (Lucie)	<i>"We won't start blaming the customer, even though there have been occasional cases of someone abusing the system"</i>	To avoid blaming customers

Appendix 5 : Citations from the interviews – e- WOM - Private accommodative

Companies	Agreed citations	Why ?
Sudinfo (Joël)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"Comments such as :[you are doing a poor job], we will contact this person to see why it is worth commenting on, if it is related to a particular article, and then we can start a dialogue, at which point the thing deflates a little."</i> <i>"If we have made a mistake, we question ourselves and discuss it."</i> <i>"If people express disagreement, I will notify the editorial team about the specific reasons, conduct inquiries, and make appropriate changes based on the details provided (after checking the facts)."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To understand the reason behind such comments Willingness to learn from mistakes To encourage communication
Siel Voyages/ Canada (Bruno)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"From any channel, we will always take responsibility."</i> <i>"When things don't go as planned, there is no choice but to acknowledge and take responsibility for any errors made, regardless of the circumstances. Accepting responsibility for mistakes, even when faced with financial constraints, is essential."</i> 	
Cora (Stéphanie)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"Generally, we prefer calling customers because we know that email responses can be easily misinterpreted, and as we are a local, friendly store in the region, it is important for us to call and understand what happened to resolve the issue afterward."</i> <i>"We avoid addressing unrelated matters on social media and prefer resolving them privately through messages or phone calls. In most cases, customers willingly share their phone numbers, allowing us to have effective conversations with them."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain a friendly and local image relationship with individual To have effective conversations To gather more information about the negative point To be clear and not have a misinterpreted respond To implement measures to address the issue.

Appendix 6 : Citations from the interviews – e- WOM – No response

Companies	Agreed citations	Why ?
Sudinfo (Joël)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sometimes, I choose not to respond to comments or messages, even in the context of a bad buzz if it's not a significant issue and finally, the next day, we have already forgotten about it. Plus responding can generate more discussion about the brand. So, it's better to say nothing and let it go.” • “We might let it slide on Twitter if it's a small interaction without a real target audience.” • “Might not respond depending on the level of consumer involvement. (If not, a lot we do not respond).” • “If it has no impact on the brand, we might ignore it.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minor issue for the company • Naturally fade away over time • Do not want to highlight a comment • Minor interactions, minor consumer involvement • Not our target audience
Siel Voyages / Canada (Bruno)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Sometimes, we receive complaints that don't make sense, and we don't feel like responding to them. If we reply once, some people keep going on about irrelevant things, so we prefer to leave it there. It's best not to engage with comments that don't make any sense, as responding might lead to more unnecessary comments.” • “It's not worth spending our time on it because if we do, more such comments may appear.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comment do not make sense • To reduce irrelevant discussions • To not waste time

Companies	Disagreed citations	Why ?
Cora (Stéphanie)	“I am of the mindset that it is always better to respond.”	
Community manager of restaurant brands (Lucie)	“At our company, one thing that we strictly avoid is not responding.”	

Appendix 7 : Citations from the interviews – fake news – Machine and deep learning

Companies	Agreed citation	Why ?
Sudinfo (Joël)	"We are developing a few small things to prevent false images and videos." "I work in an artificial intelligence workshop."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The verification becomes increasingly difficult for human

Appendix 8 : Citations from the interviews – fake news – Educational initiatives

Companies	Agreed citations	Why ?
efa (Frédéric)	"Educating on subjects like fake news, I think it's a very good idea."	/
Sudinfo (Joël)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "It could be interesting to do a kind of fact-checking of Sudinfo and share all the small regional information that we see passing and which is false." "We are also subscribed to the fact-checking feed of AFP, and sometimes we share their content on Facebook. It is also a form of education, as people who read the article may have a realization when they come across similar false information on the internet." "It is very occasional, but if we see false information, we share the correct information." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Raising awareness Aim to empower their audience to become well-informed about fake news To correct information

Companies	Disagreed citation	Why ?
Community manager of restaurant brands (Lucie)	"I don't think it's up to us to communicate what a fake news is; I believe it should be more the responsibility of the media and journalists to do that."	Not our responsibility

Appendix 9 : Citations from the interviews – fake news – Collaborating with social networks

Companies	Agreed citation	Why ?
Sudinfo (Joël)	"A few years ago, Facebook launched the fact-checking system, and there are certain newspapers that are paid by Facebook to do this fact-checking. When newspapers find fake news, they report it to Facebook, and Facebook adds 'this information is false' below it, and then the newspapers provide the article of the verified information."	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verify the accuracy of the information circulating on the platform Display a warning under the post in question Indicating that the information is false and provide a link to the verified article Reliable sources to fact-check the information

Companies	Disagreed citation	Why ?
Sudinfo (Joël)	"We tried to establish this job, but Facebook was no longer issuing this type of license for media in Belgium, anyway."	Facebook stopped issuing licenses.

Appendix 10 : Citations from the interviews – fake news – Attacking response

Companies	Agreed citation	Why ?
Sudinfo (Joël)	<i>"For us, we've never had such a case except for one time with Nord Presse, where they posted a fake news about us, but it was resolved differently, through legal actions."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To attack the individuals or the group making claims of wrongdoings
Siel Voyages/ Canada (Bruno)	<i>"The best thing to do would be to identify the person who created the fake news and confront them. However, this seems complicated as it would require first discovering the originator of the fake news, reaching out to them, and trying to understand why they propagated it, and then responding accordingly. Contacting the individual to understand their motivations and seeking a solution would be essential."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To confront the individuals or the group making claims of wrongdoings To understand the motivation to create Fake news
Cora (Stéphanie)	<i>"If this could have a very negative impact on customer traffic and, as a result, on the store's revenue loss, then I think Cora could take legal action."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To mitigate the significant negative impact on customers traffic. To mitigate the significant negative impact on stores revenue.
Community manager of restaurant brands (Lucie)	<i>"If it becomes real attacks that could seriously damage the brand's image, then I think we can seek the help of a lawyer."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To mitigate brand's image.

Appendix 11 : Citations from the interviews – fake news – Rebuttal response

Companies	Agreed citation	Why ?
efa (Frédéric)	<i>"You should provide facts to counter."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To avoid being aggressive To provide evidence
Sudinfo (Joël)	<i>"As it affects our finances, we believed it was more appropriate to respond by creating an article and clarifying that our advertisements are not placed randomly on the site to explain the situation."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brand safety Provide explanation of why claims were false It can harm our finances if we don't react.
Siel Voyages /Canada (Bruno)	<i>"I think that if dialogue is not possible, we should try to do something that contradicts false information."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication is not possible with the creator of the Fake news
Cora (Stéphanie)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"I think we would ask the article to refute their information, and it would be up to the source to take responsibility for what they said that is not correct."</i> <i>"We would ask them to come to the store, to make again a shopping cart, and display both receipts to show that what they said is false. I believe we would request evidence and ask them to correct the information."</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rectify the truth To provide evidence
Community manager of restaurant brands (Lucie)	<i>"Always try to bounce back from the false news, of course, showing your customers and community that what they said is not true, but it's pointless to say they lied. We just need to come and prove it to them, like filming a video..."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rebound from the false news by convincingly proving its accuracy The objective is to provide tangible evidence to demonstrate that the fake news is unfounded

Appendix 12 : Citations from the interviews – fake news – Denial response

Companies	Agreed citation	Why ?
G.N.B Béton Arlon (Alain)	<i>"If the fake news is more substantial, I would deny it, but I wouldn't start arguing."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not wasting time to argue

Abstract :

In our contemporary culture, the Internet has evolved into an indispensable facet of our lives, revolutionizing many areas such as marketing. This qualitative study aims to analyze companies' response strategies to online brand sabotage, encompassing negative electronic Word-Of-Mouth (e-WOM) and fake news. A thorough literature review was conducted to comprehend these phenomena's implications on brand image, financial performance, and customer-company relations. The findings highlight a predominant focus on strategies addressing negative e-WOM, suggesting its greater impact compared to fake news. Accommodative responses aim for customer satisfaction and improved brand image, while defensive strategies are occasionally used in public to mitigate negative effects. The response channel (private or public) varies, influenced by factors such as company size, values, comment credibility, and industry sector. The study emphasizes the preliminary nature of identified strategies, prompting the need for further context-specific investigations. Ultimately, this thesis propose to conduct comprehensive quantitative studies for further exploration to manage negative online comments and combat fake news, exploring unaddressed strategies, considering the ever-evolving digital landscape.

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