Brand Communication during the COVID-19 Crisis

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Abstract: - The measures adopted worldwide in 2020, in order to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, changed our way of life and generated major shifts in consumer behavior. Social distancing, confinement and lockdown were used as measures for public health protection, but generated a series of economic and social crisis. Many companies, from various industries, are still unable to produce and market their products or services to the same extent as before the pandemic and are experiencing a drop in sales. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an effect on brands' strategy and performance. The whole situation forces companies and their brands to rethink their strategies in order to cope with this situation and to limit the impact of business interruption. This paper aims to identify the crisis responses and the online communication strategies adopted by brands during the Coronavirus pandemic. Since some of these changes may be temporary, but many may be more permanent, it is important for companies to implement effective brand communication in order to overcome the difficulties in the long term. It is also important to identify the implications of this pandemic, since all these changes pose challenges to brands, but are also opportunities. COVID-19 pandemic offers a great opportunity for brands to shift towards more genuine and authentic messages, to "humanize" brands and make them more relatable to their consumers.

Key-Words: COVID-19 pandemic, Coronavirus, brand, branding, online communication, social media, crisis.

1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a profound impact on brands. The crisis generated by this pandemic has affected many companies and their brands. A series of companies, from various industries, are still unable to produce and market their products or services to the same extent as before the pandemic and are experiencing a drop in sales. The COVID-19 crisis forced them to rethink their strategies and even to reinvent themselves in order to cope with this situation and to limit the impact of business interruption. A suitable option for these companies was to focus on their brand communication in order to remain relevant or become more relevant for their fans and customers (Dias, Pessôa & Andrade, 2020). Brand communication has changed during this period and the main goals of brands were to build awareness, to maintain a favorable image, to gain trust, to help consumers stay positive and overcome difficulties and sometimes to help them with concrete actions. Effective crisis communication is crucial in order to overcome the difficulties. To achieve these goals brands needed to create relevant, credible and appealing content. The content is essential for building and managing a brand community, in which the consumers can feel important and valued as members of that group. Likewise, brands need to communicate strategic values, such as safety and health, and to adopt a more "humanized", social and informative tone in order to gain the trust of their consumers.

During this period, social media platform are privileged platforms for keeping in touch with consumers since "at home, most people have more time, and need, to consume digital content" (Dias, Pessôa & Andrade, 2020). Using social media platforms, brands can integrate more easily into the daily new routine of their followers. Brands can use social media in order to capture consumers' attention and build lasting relationships with them. Using the main features of social media marketing, namely the user-generated content, connectivity, and participation, brands can easily interact and collaborate with consumers and can build trust and attachment (Platon, 2019).

Worldwide "people have shifted into protection mode, focused on themselves, their families, their employees, their customers, and their communities" (Balis, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a new approach based on "commodified concepts of human connection, care and community in a time of crisis" (Sobande, 2020). In this context, the communication strategies adopted by many brands used the idea that this

crisis is a unifying force and the pandemic is bringing people and companies together more than ever (Sobande, 2020).

2 The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on brand communication

The Social Media Trends Report Q3 2020 (Socialbakers, 2020) is a detailed analysis regarding the evolution of social media ad spend during the period September 2019-September 2020. According to this report, "this year the audiences have shifted their attention even more to digital channels" (Socialbakers, 2020) because people have been forced into social distancing and they had significant more time to consume online content. This turned out to be an opportunity for many companies and the ad spend for all brands was higher in 2020 compared to 2019, especially after May 2020, as shown in figure 1.

Fig. 1. Ad spend comparison 2020 vs. 2019
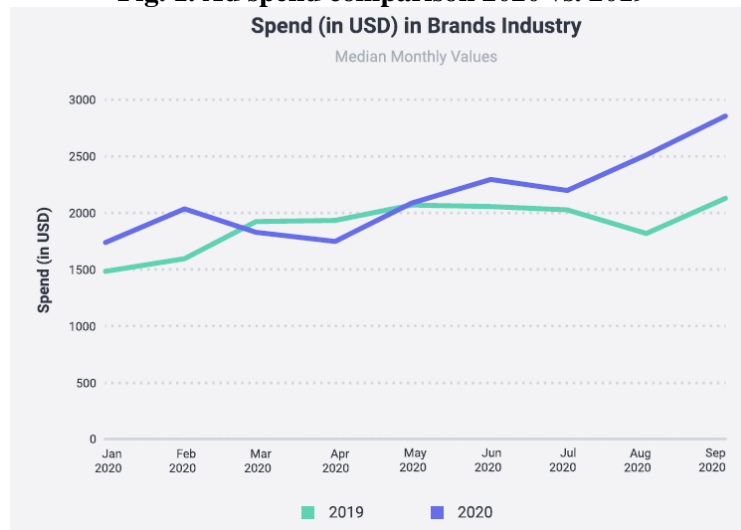
Source: Socialbakers data, 2020 (chart time range: January 1, 2019 – September 30, 2020).

According to the data presented in figure 2, during the period January-May 2020 there was a decrease in ad spend both by region and by industry. The industry that managed to benefit most from this situation was the e-commerce industry, which boosted its ad spend after May 2020.

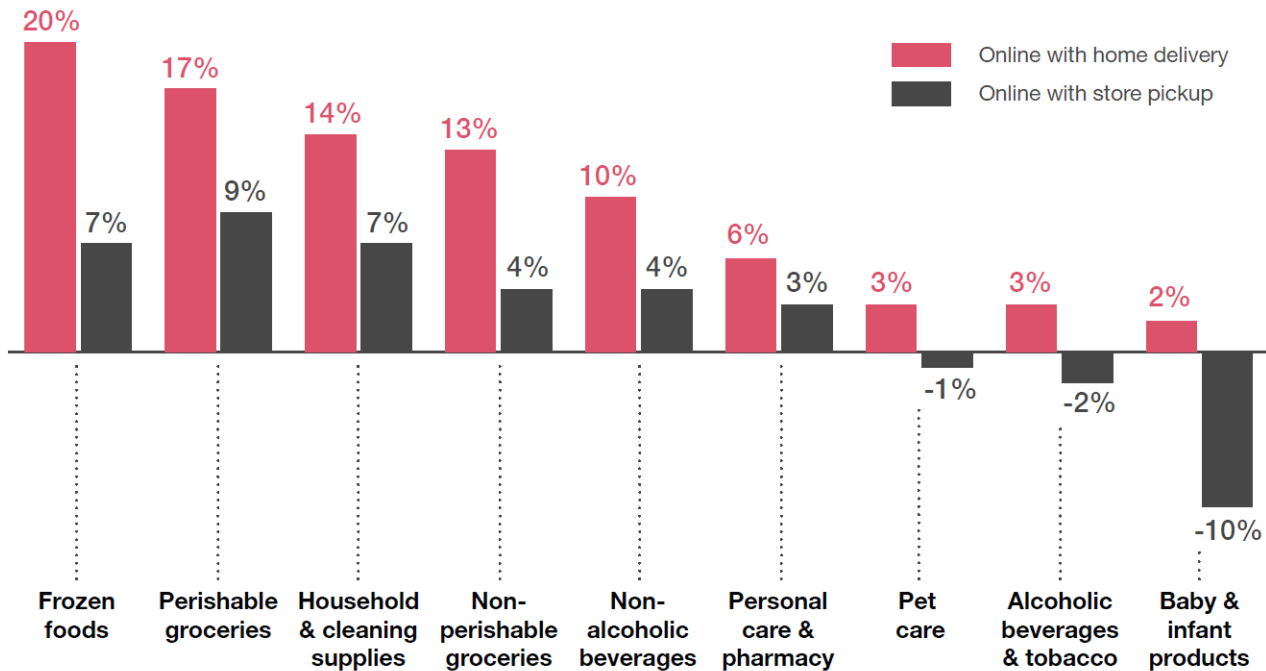**Fig. 2. Ad spend by region and by industry in 2020**
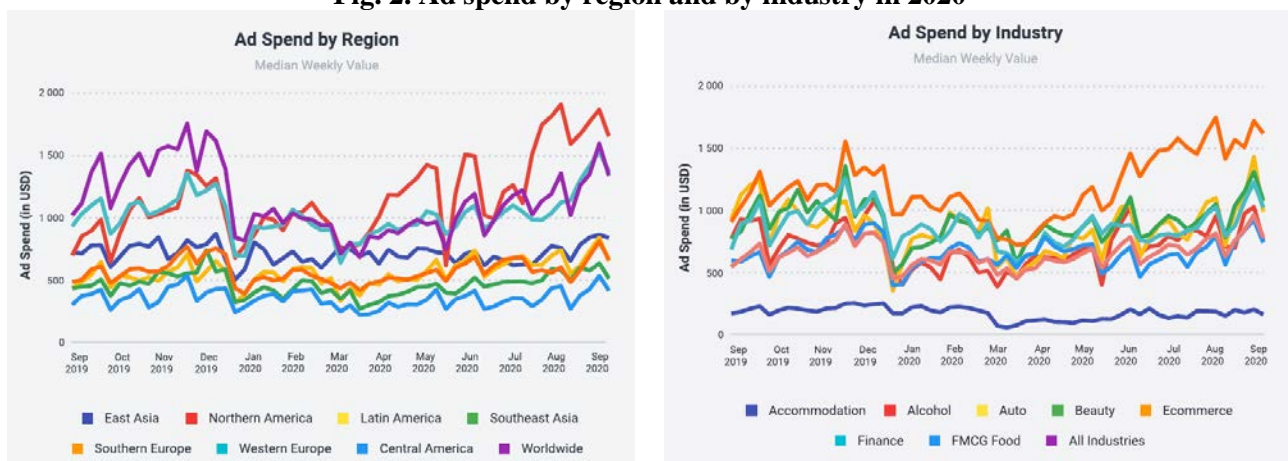
Source: Socialbakers data, 2020 (chart time range: September 2, 2019 – October 4, 2020).

This evolution of ad spend can be correlated with the fact that during the worldwide lockdown, in spring 2020, many companied had to adjust their budgets and readapted their promotional efforts to the situation. After this period, the consumers changed their behavior and started to buy more frequently from online stores, thus the e-commerce industry invested more in ad spend.

According to a study conducted by PwC among US consumers in 2020, the public health and economic crises caused a series of changes in consumer behavior (PwC, 2020). The shopping behavior changed from before COVID-19 and the consumers are now taking mare advantage of online shopping, as shown in figure 3.

Fig. 3. Online shopping behavior

Source: PwC, 2020.

The PwC study also shows that this period turned out to be both an opportunity and a threat for many brands since approximately 50% of the respondents declared that during this crisis they bought and consumed different grocery brands than they used to (PwC, 2020). Thus, the COVID-19 crisis and all the changes it has brought are profoundly influencing the consumers buying behavior, regarding what they buy and how they buy.

Taking into consideration the fact that the consumers have shifted their attention to online channels, brands started to communicate more using social media platform and websites during this crisis. According to the Socialbakers report (2020), even though users are spending more time on social media, the Cost per Click (CPC) decreased, revealing that consumers are engaging rather with organic content and not with advertising.

Analyzing the organic engagement of Facebook and Instagram users with worldwide brand profiles, the Socialbakers report (2020) revealed that the e-commerce industry received the highest percentage of interactions on Facebook, growing by 7.6% from Q2 2019, and the second highest number of interactions on Instagram, growing by 1.8% from Q2 2019, as shown in figure 4.

Fig. 4. Distribution of interactions across industries - Facebook vs. Instagram
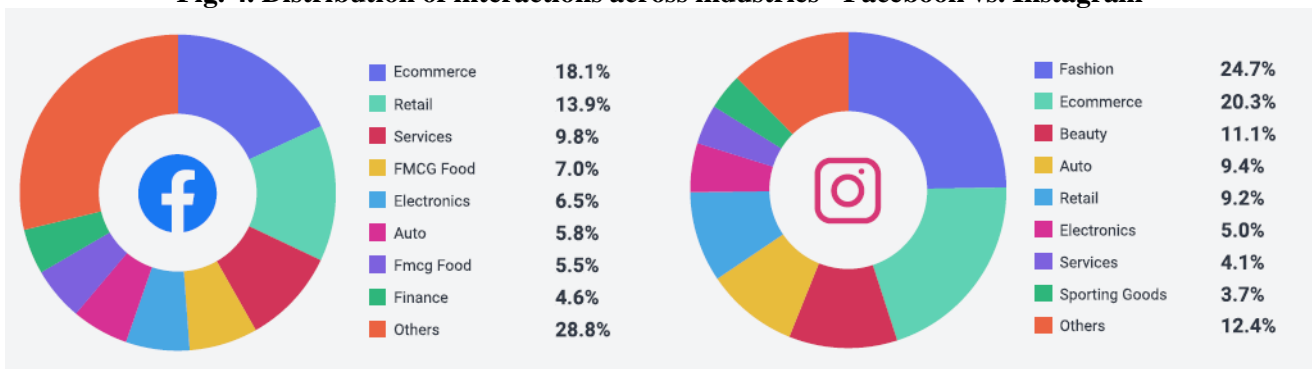
Source: Socialbakers data, 2020 (chart time range: July 1, 2020 – September 30, 2020).

In order to reach their customers, brands had to rethink and adapt their communication strategies. According to the Socialbakers report (2020), brands are following six general online communication strategies, namely:

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- brands are communicating messages that inform the public about how they ensure the safety of their employees, collaborators and customers;
- brands are communicating messages that inform the public about the adaptations in their products or services in order to protect the customers and the communities;
- brands are communicating messages that support health professionals and other persons who are in the "front line" of fighting the pandemic;
- brands are communicating messages of solidarity and are presenting actions directed at fighting the pandemic or supporting vulnerable groups;
- brands are communicating how they contribute to their customers' wellbeing and health and are providing online content that is supportive, hopeful, entertaining and inspiring;
- brands are communicating tips, guidelines and tutorials that are meant to help the consumers and are adapted to "life at home" (e.g. beauty, health).

According to Balis (2020) during this COVID-19 pandemic the nuances of brand voice should be more delicate than ever. The brand messages should be presented with empathy, honesty and transparency. Companies should provide information about what actions can brands take to serve and take care of their customers and to mitigate risk. Brands should be associated with acts of good in a time of crisis because consumers will recognize authenticity and true purpose. Marketers should also consider modifying their media mix and use online media in more agile ways. Brands should increase the level of user engagement and also analyze the conversation across social-media platforms in order to gain better insights from their customers and to better adapt their messaging.

According to Argenti (2020), brands should focus on several online communication strategies and they should try to communicate regularly with customers, focus on what is important to them and also focus on empathy rather than trying to create selling opportunities, providing relief when possible. Companies should rethink advertising and promotion strategies to be more in line with the current situation and should be proactive with communities.

Dias, Pessôa & Andrade (2020) emphasize the fact that digital influencers are pivotal players in the social media landscape during this period. Digital influencers act as mediators between brands and their followers and are empowered to share their opinions and experiences with brands, becoming opinion-leaders. Therefore consumers often trust them more than they trust brands because "the relationship between digital influencers and their followers is based on intimacy, proximity, and identification" (Dias, Pessôa & Andrade, 2020). Consumers are able to relate to influencers on a deep level because they are feeling that influencers are "just like them". Thus, using influencers in order to communicate brand massages is another important component of branding strategy during this pandemic.

3 Conclusions

Even though the COVID-19 pandemic is a major negative event, it offers the chance for companies to actively engage in various favorable initiatives with their consumers during the crisis. All the changes generated by this pandemic pose challenges to brands, but also create opportunities. COVID-19 pandemic offers a great opportunity for brands to shift towards more genuine and authentic messages, to "humanize" brands and make them more relatable to their consumers.

As Mensa & Vargas-Bianchi (2020) emphasize, "in this scenario, emotions may run high and play an important role in the configuration of consumer's attitudes and judgments". Therefore marketers should seek to make the consumers feel positive emotions towards brands. Positive emotions could result in increased brand trust and attachment and could improve consumers' attitudes related to the brand.

The COVID-19 pandemic generated an exponentially increased move to online communications (He & Harris, 2020). Across all industries this change was instantaneous and profound. It is important to continue to analyze whether this change accelerated the on-going trend of developing more marketing activities online than offline.

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