

# The Impact of Crisis Situation and Communication Strategies: Pepsi Controversial Kendall Jenner Advertisement Turns to Racism

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## Abstract

*This research study examined how Pepsi advertisement affects public perspective toward racism issues and what kind of strategies that Pepsi implement to overcome the crisis. Crises, in almost all circumstances, immediately trigger a deluge of questions from an organization's many different publics. Crisis can have a negative effect on brand image. Crisis communication experts are employed to save an organization's reputation against various threats and unwanted challenges. Crisis communication is an initiative which aims at protecting the reputation of the organization and maintaining its public image. Benoit's (1995, 1997) image repair strategies serve as the model for the foundational research study that analyzed Pepsi's image repair strategies following the controversial advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner that considered as discrimination and racism issue in 2017. In this journal, the researchers gather the data by using library research and case studies method. Based on image restoration theory, we conclude that the crisis response provided by Pepsi was using the mortification strategy, which is they admit their mistake and beg forgiveness by conveying apologies through social media, and delete the advertisement immediately.*

**Keywords:** crisis communication, advertising, racism

## Abstrak

Penelitian ini dibuat dengan tujuan untuk menguji bagaimana iklan Pepsi dapat mempengaruhi perspektif publik terhadap masalah rasisme dan juga strategi apa yang diterapkan Pepsi dalam mengatasi krisis. Hampir dalam semua keadaan, krisis dapat memicu banyak pertanyaan dari berbagai publik. Krisis dapat menciptakan efek negatif pada citra dari sebuah perusahaan/organisasi. Ketika krisis, pakar komunikasi krisis bekerja untuk menyelamatkan reputasi organisasi terhadap berbagai ancaman dan tantangan yang tidak diinginkan. Komunikasi krisis adalah inisiatif yang bertujuan untuk melindungi reputasi organisasi dan mempertahankan citra publiknya. Benoit (1995, 1997) teori pemulihan citra bertujuan untuk mempertahankan citra positif. Strategi ini digunakan untuk pemulihan citra oleh Pepsi dalam iklan kontroversial yang dibintangi Kendall Jenner yang dianggap sebagai isu diskriminasi dan rasisme pada tahun 2017. Dalam jurnal ini, para peneliti mengumpulkan data dengan menggunakan metode studi pustaka dan studi kasus. Berdasarkan teori pemulihan citra, kami menyimpulkan bahwa respon yang diberikan oleh Pepsi dalam menghadapi krisis, menggunakan strategi mortifikasi, yang mana mereka mengakui kesalahan mereka dan memohon maaf dengan menyampaikannya melalui media sosial, dan kemudia menghapus iklan tersebut.

**Kata Kunci:** krisis komunikasi, iklan, rasisme

## INTRODUCTION

A company or organization crisis can be defined as a sudden and expected event that threatens to disrupt the organization's operations and poses a financial and reputation threat. It also harms stakeholders physically, emotionally and financially. In order to avoid or make the situation worse, the public relations will take action called crisis communication. Crisis communication is an effort by a company to communicate with the public and shareholders when an unexpected situation occurs or an event that may have a negative impact on the company's reputation. According to Barton (2001), damage harms reputation and such changes can affect how stakeholders interact with the organization. An

organization's reputation is just as important as any other company's assets, and many organizations have a crisis plan to protect that reputation if something goes wrong.

Crisis communication research has grown significantly in the last few years. In 2017, Pepsi launched an advertisement featuring reality television star Kendall Jenner. Pepsi was launched advertisement under the title "Live Now - Moments" on April 4, 2017, in an attempt to portray Pepsi as a suitable brand for the millennial generation. In the two minutes and 40 second video, Jenner was in the middle of a shooting session when she noticed a protest march making its way into the street. It was not clear what the smiling protesters and the lunatics were upset, and the only clues were that the banners were written on "peace", "love" and "joined the conversation." But Jenner decided to join them anyway, then took off her blonde hair, wiped her lipstick and joined the protesters. Then the highlight of the advertisement came. Jenner went to the quiet front line of protest. She saw an officer and gave him Pepsi. Within 48 hours, the video received nearly 1.6 million views on YouTube and also it became viral on Twitter. The announcement immediately launched the "best example of white and economic privilege" and was judged for play down the demonstrations and serious social issues.

The purpose of this journal is to examine how the Pepsi advertisement affects the public perspective toward racism issues and the type of strategies that Pepsi is implementing to overcome the crisis. This journal is divided into several sections. Section one is the introduction of the research. In the introduction, it reveals some information of crisis in company, crisis communication, the background of the research (including the background of Pepsi ad feat Kendall Jenner), purpose of the journal, and also the literature review that will be used in this journal. There will be an explanation about crisis communication, social media as marketing tool, online advertising, and image restoration theory that relate to the case of study. In the section two, we will examine the chosen research method and the method of data collection. In the section three, we will present the finding and discussion and it will be continued with the conclusion of the research.

### *Crisis Communication*

Crisis communication is an activity aimed at ensuring the reputation of the organization and maintaining its image. The researchers presented different perspectives on the strong impact on crisis communication. Three key actions focused on crisis in corporate communications: Hearit (2006) expressed the idea of crisis communication by apology, and Coombs (2012, 2013) developed situational crisis communication theory.

Communication is an important element in a successful crisis management efforts. Public relations of the company has an important role in this situation, he/she is the one who can handle the crisis that is happening in that company. Organizations or individuals who communicate badly during crisis often make bad situations worse. In almost all circumstances, crises immediately unleash a flood of questions from many different organization. The organization that is waiting to answer questions from the public often suffers from unnecessary financial, emotional and cognitive harm. Clearly, the ability to communicate quickly and effectively is an important element in managing successful and effective crisis.

The crisis can have a negative impact on brand image. Crisis communication experts are hired to save the organization's reputation against various undesirable threats and challenges. Brand identity is one of the most valuable assets of an organization. The main purpose of the Crisis Communication team is to protect the brand identity and maintain the

organization's established position within the industry. Many public relations practitioners develop communication plans to help them provide information to the public in crisis. It contains comprehensive checklists of what to do during a crisis, names and phone numbers of people to communicate with, and plans for different communication tactics and strategies. In many cases, these plans help public relations practitioners manage the immediate and large number of requests for information that accompany the crisis.

### *Social Media as Marketing Tool*

Social media is any content that forms our social networks on the Internet. Social media includes a large number of tools used to communicate over the Internet, such as online messaging, text chat, forums, and social bookmarking. The term "social media" can be derived from two words. Media generally refers to advertising and communicating ideas or information through publications or channels. Social means the interaction of individuals within a group or community. Collectively, social media simply refers to communication or publishing platforms that are generated and sustained through personal interaction between people through a specific tool or medium. Any website that allows the user to share his or her content, views and opinions can be categorized and encouraged to interact and build society as social media. Social media, today, are among the "best opportunities" for a brand to connect with potential consumers. Social media is a means of social communication. These new media win the confidence of consumers by communicating with them at a deeper level.

Kim et al. (2009, p. 228) argues, among other things, that social media can be used for marketing. The companies recognized the marketing of social media as a potential marketing platform and used it with innovations to promote their advertising campaign using marketing through social media. Marketing through social media is marketing using online communities, social networks and marketing via blogs and others. It is also interested in analyzing the social consequences of policies, decisions and marketing activities. Marketing via social media is not just about hitting a social news site. It is a strategic and systematic process to establish the company's impact, reputation and brand within the communities of potential customers, readers or supporters.

### *Online Advertising*

Online advertising is one of those "deep creative destruction" that will reshape many industries and radically change the traditional ways of delivering advertising messages from sellers to potential buyers. Internet advertising is a "two-sided market" (Rochet and Tirole, 2003; Anderson and Gabszewicz, 2005), as in general advertising. Intermediaries work on platforms that facilitate communication between advertisers and consumers. The online advertising began in 1994 when HotWired, a magazine on the Internet, sold a banner to AT & T and posted the ad on its Web page (Kaye and Medoff, 2001). The advertisement was sold based on the number of "impressions" - individuals who saw the advertising. A major feature of online advertising is that consumers are "paid" for content and services to receive advertising messages, while advertisers pay for these messages. The basic question that has not been addressed here is why this structure of prices and rewards is maintained over long periods of time and across many different types of advertising. Among other things, the answer will help to clarify the extent to which advertising is seen as a way to reduce transaction costs between buyers and sellers, or the source of the deficiency that distorts the decision-making process (Bagwell, 2007).

Online advertising offers a more consistent way for advertisers and viewers than offline advertising, and online advertising provides potential economic players. The first promising guess is that online advertising allows the economy to reduce the number of resources allocated to create content for aggregating and categorizing potential buyers. The community may not need to invest as much in magazines, newspapers, and other media as its primary goal is to assemble the right eyeballs for advertisers. Second, online advertising almost certainly increases the accuracy of the match between buyer and seller. The seller has a greater ability to target consumers who are likely to buy, and the consumer is likely to receive useful messages and are less likely to receive messages that are time-consuming but irrelevant. Online advertising may provide more effective match and delivery of advertisement, but it raises the old question of whether advertising provides people with valuable information to help them make better buying decisions, whether people are motivated to buy based on deceptive information or by persuading them. To do things they will regret later.

### *Image Restoration Theory*

The Image Restoration Theory referred to as "image repair theory" in recent literature, which means that the image may be improved but not fully recovered. Addresses the question of what a person or organization can say when accused or suspected of making mistakes. The Image Restoration Theory notes that accusations or suspicions have two components: responsibility (blame) and offensiveness. The image is endangered only when an attack occurs and the person is believed to be responsible for that act. The accused or suspected of committing offenses have five general accountability and accountability options. Denial argues that the defendant is not responsible for the offensive act. A second general option is to evade responsibility (partly to blame), with strategies such as the allegation that the offensive act is an accident, that the person has been aroused in the performance of the act, or that the person lacks the capacity or information necessary to prevent the offensive act. Rather than describing crisis situations or crisis phases, the image restoration theory focuses on message options. This theory offers five broad categories of image reform strategies, some of them with variables that respond to such threats. There are denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification.

The first is denial. It is one of the general methods of image restoration with two different types. First, the form of denial without performing an act. The second is the blame shift. It is the form of denial that one person or another organization is actually responsible for the act.

Secondly, evasion of responsibility. It has four types. The company can say that its conduct was merely a response to another insulting act, and that the behavior could be considered a reasonable reaction to this provocation. Thus, the possibility of entitlement, which means that the company claims lack of information about important elements in the case or control. The third option is to claim that offensive action has occurred by chance. Fourthly, action can indicate that aggressive behavior has been carried out in good intentions.

Thirdly, a company that is accused of wrong actions can also try to reduce the abuse. It has six variants. There is promotion, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attack accuser, and compensation. Another strategy to restore the public image is a corrective action, where the company corrects the problem. This action can take the form of restoring the status quo before the offensive act, and or the promise of preventing the recurrence of

the offensive act. The ultimate general strategy for image restoration is recognition and tolerance. Based on these results, the following research question are:

RQ 1: How Pepsi ad affect public perspective toward racism issues?

RQ 2: What kind of strategies that Pepsi implement to overcome the crisis?

## **METHOD**

This chapter describes the selected research method and data collection method. In this journal, the researchers used qualitative research. The researcher used the qualitative method to analyze and intepret the texts and observation related to the research topic. The qualitative research method seeks to increase understanding of data (Jacobsen, 2000/2002, p. 137-150; Starrin & Svensson, 1994, p. 19-21). Researchers using the qualitative method attempt to make the observed phenomenon understandable (Ryen, 2004, p. 14). The qualitative research method has been developed in social sciences to enable researchers to study social and cultural phenomena: to monitor feelings, ideas, behavior and the belief of the whole society. Specific methods include procedural research, case study research, and basic theory.

The researchers applied library research as the data collection techniques. The library research, a process that analyzes pieces of evidence such as records and historical documents. It means collecting data from library materials that include textbooks, whether published or unpublished academic documents such as journals, conference proceedings, scholarly letters, and theses. Library research also includes information collected from online research. The data collected by the library is classified as secondary data. Secondary data means that data is readily available and used by anyone besides researchers. This means that secondary data is not originally collected but is obtained from published or unpublished sources. Secondary data sources mainly cover government publications, technical documents and corporate annual reports. Secondary data helped verify official information, identify key events, technical details, historical decisions, players and key regulatory roles.

Next, researchers use the case study as a research approach. This approach may help guide practice by clarifying what worked well, what was accomplished, and what issues or dilemmas. Is a kind of research inquiry that examines a real contemporary phenomenon. It is common to use multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2009). Researchers conducting case studies can collect their data by consulting secondary sources. Yin (1994: 13) argues that "the case study allows an investigation to maintain the holistic and purposeful characteristics of real events such as individual life cycles, organizational and administrative processes, neighborhood change, international relations and the maturity of industries." Therefore, the case study is particularly useful in cases where the contextual circumstances of the events under consideration are critical and the researcher has no control over the events as they occur. The case study, as a research strategy, should include specific techniques for collecting and analyzing data, which are guided by clearly stated theoretical assumptions. Moreover, data must be collected from various sources and their integrity ensured.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

PepsiCo is one of the largest food and beverage companies in the world. It manufactures and sells 18 brands of beverages and snacks and generates over \$98 billion in retail sales. PepsiCo has Pepsi Cola, Frito-Lay, Tropicana, Quaker and Gatorade brands and offers products in more than 200 countries. PepsiCo has received numerous awards and

recognitions over the years, including being ranked among the top 25 brands in the world, ranked fourth by Diversity Inc., and Green Award by the Environmental Protection Agency.

In 1931, candy maker Charles Guth, president of Loft Inc., thought-about PepsiCo as a great investment and decided to buy the company. In two years, the company was earning more than \$1 million and was on its way to making history. In World War II, Pepsi Cola was tested with sugar rationing, but Pepsi's marketing campaigns and brand design helped Pepsi pass it through the difficult period. For example, Pepsi changed the colors on the label became red, white and blue to be seen as patriotism and stated that patriotic people drink Pepsi. Pepsi's success allowed it to start marketing internationally in 1945.

In 1950s, Pepsi expanded from a low-cost price leader to a more lifestyle drink approach. For instance, when Americans became more aware of health, Pepsi brought out slogans such as "The Light Refreshment" and "Refreshing Without Filling." Other new ad campaigns included slogans such as "Be Sociable, Have a Pepsi", and "Now Its Pepsi, For Those Who Think Young" to focus on a younger market.

Pepsi once again benefited from the changing environment. Under Pottasch, "Pepsi Generation" campaign was launched in 1963. The campaign was an advertising breakthrough because it helped in setting a new standard for advertising in America. The advertisement described happy Americans who are living the American dream – it certainly photographed with Pepsi in their hand. By linking its brand with youth and excitement, Pepsi-Cola has become a leading lifestyle marketer. Future campaigns to promote this brand image continued with slogans such as "You've Got a Lot to Live. Pepsi's Got a Lot to Give," "Catch that Pepsi Spirit!," "Pepsi Now!," and "Come Alive. You're in the Pepsi Generation!"

Pepsi has adapted its practices and product positioning over the times through its marketing campaigns. In recent years, Pepsi has used famous celebrities in order to be a branding tool to build on the Pepsi brand. In 1980s, Pepsi brought celebrities such as Tina Turner, Michael J. Fox, Gloria Estefan, and David Bowie as endorsers. By far, the greatest celebrity endorser in this time period was Michael Jackson. Another notable achievement in the history of marketing was the inroad Pepsi made in to the Soviet market. Perhaps the biggest (indirect) source of this product was the Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev, who was captured drinking a can of Pepsi at the 1959 American National Exhibition in Moscow. PepsiCo continued to use celebrity marketing during the 1990s until early 2000s, including celebrities such as Cindy Crawford, Ray Charles, and Britney Spears. To attract the sports fans, PepsiCO also tapped into the fame of Shaquille O'Neal, the racer Jeff Gordon. In 2017, Pepsi produced an advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner. Unfortunately, in communicating the advertising message to the public, Pepsi was trying to use emotional marketing to reach the target demographic. They had all the right elements but connected them in the wrong ways.

Pepsi was trying to show a universal message of unity, peace and understanding, but Pepsi's statement came as an insult, and ended up getting criticism from their target market. In the advertisement, we see Jenner with her wig in the middle of a photo session, while the street that close to the place where Jenner is posing, there was a protest march. In the advertisement, the camera cuts between the protesters, mostly they come from the artist. It's an inclusive crowd for sure, with people of all identities joining the march with signs of the symbol of peace.

As the commercial continues, it becomes increasingly clear that Kendall Jenner wants to join the protesters, then she is having an eye contact with one of the demonstrators who persuades Jenner to join by nodding at her as if to say, "Come on." In the exciting moments of advertising, Jenner removes her blonde hair, erases the dark lipstick from her mouth, and filters into the crowd. She looks close to the line of police officers, then handing an officer one cold can of Pepsi. There is a pause, and then the officer immediately opens the can, giving cheers and applause from the protesters. "Live broadcast, louder, live now," fill the screen as the advertisement ends.



Many scenes from the ad considered as racism that humiliates black people, and related to protest march that happened in United States. Firstly, the scene of Kendall Jenner handed a can of Pepsi to an officer, considered as an act of underestimating the struggle of the black community to get justice in the United States. As the evidence, they took the same angle of taking the scene between Jenner faced the officers that similar to the iconic photograph of a 28-year-old nurse, Ieshia Evans standing her ground against authorities during a Black Lives Matter protest.

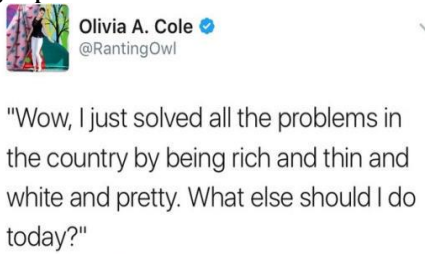


Secondly, it came from the scene which Kendall Jenner took off her wig, then threw it to her assistant without even looking at the woman, just chucks it at her. In people's mind, that scene reflects an act of discrimination between Jenner who comes from white people is having bigger power than the black people.





Thirdly, it came from the scene when Jenner gave a can of Pepsi to the officer that ultimately the end of protest march and Jenner had saved the day. Meanwhile, in reality, it shows the opposite, especially when black people who are the one that handed a drink. As the evidence, a real-life protester took to Twitter to share an image of someone in Baltimore offering a police officer a bottle of water. "Nothing changed."



After the advertisement was posted on YouTube, Kendall's mother, Kris, tweeted the 30-second version of the advertisement right away, congratulated her daughter and thanked Pepsi. It did not take long, and the tweet was removed and many of the tweets that contained criticism began to appear.





In addition, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s youngest daughter, Bernice King, also drew scathing criticism on social media. She posted an image of her father mid-peaceful protest — literally being pushed back by a police line.

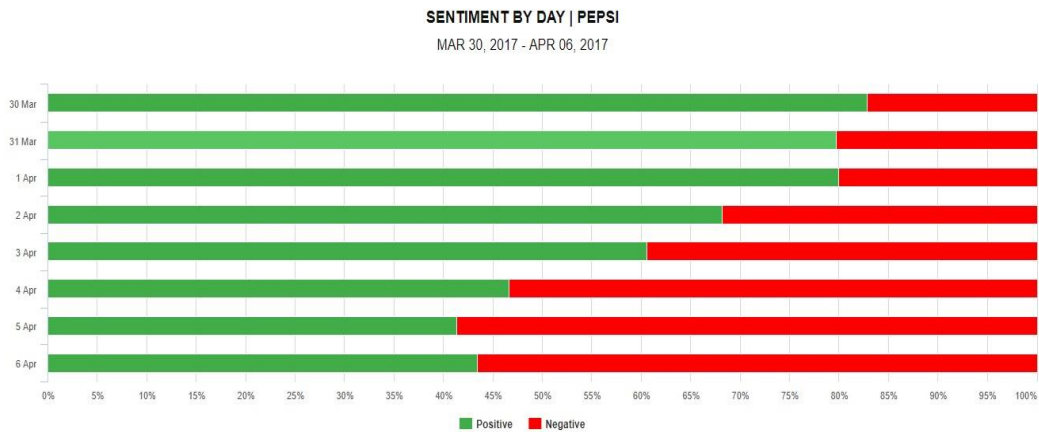


Others mocked the advertisement by inserting cans of Pepsi into famous pictures of protests and instances of police brutality.



Last but not least, people keep criticized the disconnect between the wholesome way Pepsi portrayed a protest by comparing it to actual Black Lives Matter protests and the general racial tension between black Americans and the police.

On April 4, 2017, Pepsi made a new advertisement featuring a famous celebrity Kendall Jenner. When it was posted online for the first time, the advertisement was widely criticized and ridiculed on the Internet by publics. According to data from Amobee Brand Intelligence, digital content engagement around Pepsi increased significantly (366% in one day), but 43% reported Black Lives Matter, 31% rated the commercial as "tone-deaf" and 10% stated that as the "worse ever." Amobee looked at content engagement around the term "tone" in the last day, and 77% of the digital content using the mentioned Kendall Jenner and Pepsi.



Source: Brandwatch

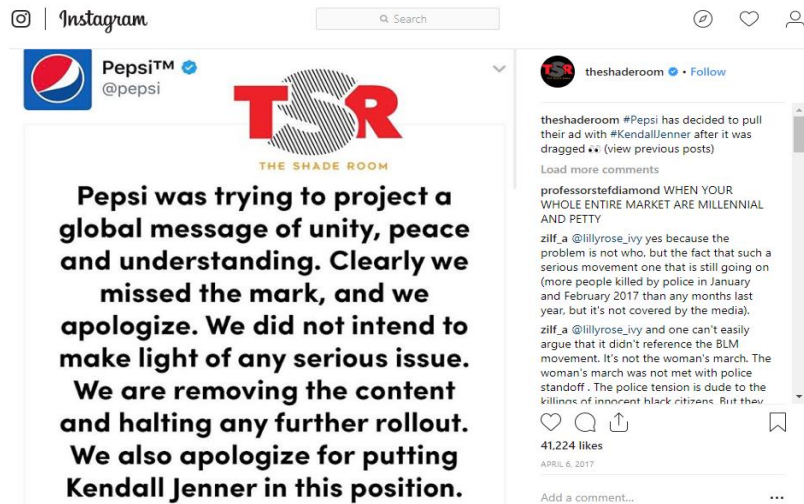
According to a social media monitoring company, Brandwatch, Pepsi drew 1.25 million on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, and 58.6 percents were negative.

Here's a statement I just got from Pepsi about their Kendall Jenner joins the resistance ad (story coming shortly on [@Adweek](#) dot com):

This statement is from Pepsi:

This is a global ad that reflects people from different walks of life coming together in a spirit of harmony, and we think that's an import message to convey.

Pepsi responds quickly to it. Pepsi initially defended the advertisement, saying it conveyed "an important message of harmony."



The next day, Pepsi published an apology through their on social media, "Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace, and understanding". "Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are removing the content and halting any further rollout." They continued: "We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position."

After Pepsi repealed the advertisement, the company apologized for placing Kendall Jenner in an awkward situation. On September, Indra Nooyi, CEO of Pepsi, shared her opinion about the company's controversial advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner. "I've thought about it a lot because I looked at the ad again and again and again trying to figure out what went wrong – because it was a peace march, not a protest march," Indra Nooyi recently told Fortune's Beth Kowitt. "It was people in happiness coming together." She said that she knew that the final scene of the commercial, which Jenner was getting closer to the police officer, caused the most controversy as it "linked back to Black Lives Matter."

"This has pained me a lot because this company is known for diversity, and the fact that everybody who produced the commercial and approved the commercial did not link it to Black Lives Matter made me scratch my head," Nooyi told Fortune. "I had not seen that scene. And I take everything personally."

"The minute I saw people upset, I pulled it," she continued. "And you know what, it's not worth it. There were people on both sides, but at the end of the day, our goal is not to offend anybody."

The last response to the advertisement came from Kendall Jenner. Six months after the controversy, Kendall did not respond publicly. But then the 14th season of Keeping Up with the Kardashians aired. On that episode, The Kardashian family said that Kendall was very upset by the backlash. Through interview with Khloe, it said that "Kendall did a commercial and basically caused a huge controversy. It sucks because Kendall's been taking the blame for it all. Kendall tries really hard to be socially conscious and aware of the jobs that she takes and to really think about how things affect other people, so it weighs really heavy on her heart."

Then, Kendall explained why she put the commercial in the first place - when she got an offer to be the commercial star, she was thrilled to join the list of celebrities who advertised Pepsi, from Michael Jackson to Beyonce to Britney Spears.

"I trusted everyone. I trusted the teams," she said in front of the camera. "But after I saw the reaction and I read what people had to say about it, I most definitely saw what went wrong. I was so stuck, and I really didn't know what to do, that I completely shut down."

"I would never purposely hurt someone, ever," Kendall said with tears. "I just felt so stupid. The fact that I would offend other people or hurt other people was definitely not the intent. And that's what got me the most, is that I would have ever made anyone else upset."

Based on the theory of image restoration, and the way Pepsi responded to the crisis, Pepsi has used the Mortification strategy. The mortification strategy is that the accused recognizes responsibility and requests forgiveness. Mortification strategy is the most effective and appropriate to repair's image. When an offensive action occurs, the person responsible for those who are offended is expected to apologize. If this apology seems sincere, it is likely the public will accept. Pepsi recognized their fault beg forgiveness through social media and deleted the advertisement immediately. Also from a marketing perspective, the impact of the advertising was positive "because the world is talking about it." Pepsi received between \$ 300 million and \$ 400 million in free media coverage of the controversy. But generally classified as a "speed bump" of the brand.

When Pepsi realized that things were not going well, and Pepsi made the right move. Pepsi acted quickly. The slower decisions will only delay the crisis, Pepsi is very smart to see this fact. Pepsi accepted responsibility. At that time, Pepsi challenged by those who criticized, they suggested that Pepsi must respond but they do not point fingers at anyone, but to their own team. The statement included an apology to Kendall Jenner, which a right action. Pepsi admitted the mistake. Pepsi listened to its customers, as well as its top critics, and did not try to save the advertisement or fight for it. Pepsi agreed that they "missed the mark". Unlike the interpretation of global unity, they simply acknowledged the mistake and pledged to improve performance. Pepsi "manage" situation. A good reputation management rule is to fix or solve a potential harm problem to undertake actions as soon as possible. This is often the hardest part because in some circumstances it may affect a product, reformulating or terminating an organization. In this case, the reform was expensive but largely implementable.

## **CONCLUSION**

Crisis communication is an effort by a company to communicate with the public and shareholders when an unexpected situation occurs or an event that may have a negative impact on the company's reputation. This study highlights the result by collecting data from online research, researchers are able to understand the strategies Pepsi uses in facing the crisis, and it helps researchers develop knowledge of how the crisis communication plan plays a significant role in a company.

The findings of this paper are Pepsi, which got the crisis when it dropped a new advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner, and then the commercial was widely criticized and ridiculed online. Pepsi quickly realized that things were not going well, and Pepsi made the decision to admit the mistake and seek forgiveness by conveying apologies through the social media and immediately deleting the advertisement.

Future research should continue to examine how companies deal with their crisis with a better understanding of communication crisis strategies that can be adapted to be more efficient and accurate. It may also be appropriate to explore the effectiveness of the communication strategies used by the company in dealing with the crisis.

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