

# Brand crisis and legitimacy

Management  
Decision

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Received 5 May 2024  
Revised 11 November 2024  
10 January 2025  
7 March 2025  
Accepted 13 March 2025

## Abstract

**Purpose** – This research aims to provide a state-of-the-art overview of brand crisis and legitimacy.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research conducts a multi-study systematic literature review where brand crisis and legitimacy are reviewed independently and collectively.

**Findings** – This research provides first-hand evidence to show the paucity of the joint investigation of brand crisis and legitimacy despite their established presence in marketing literature. Noteworthy, this research highlights the richness of brand crisis research, albeit the need for greater theoretical grounding and integration in the field, which nevertheless, could be remedied by the strong theoretical foundations available in the body of knowledge on brand legitimacy.

**Research limitations/implications** – This research demonstrates that brand crisis and legitimacy are two important concepts that hold tremendous promise for developing and safeguarding the relationships that brands foster with their stakeholders.

**Originality/value** – This research offers a seminal state-of-the-art overview of brand crisis and legitimacy, along with promising directions for future research to enrich understanding at the point where brand crisis and legitimacy intersect, thereby safeguarding the legitimacy of brands when they experience a crisis in the marketplace.

**Keywords** Brand crisis, Brand legitimacy, Multi-study, Systematic literature review

**Paper type** General review

## 1. Introduction

Brands are omnipresent and widely studied (Donthu *et al.*, 2022). Brands reflect the reputation that distinguishes one entity from another. Brands are important because they signal the promise of the purpose they stand for and the value they create for both their owners

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Management Decision  
Emerald Publishing Limited  
e-ISSN: 1758-6070  
p-ISSN: 0025-1747  
DOI 10.1108/MD-05-2024-1005

(e.g. companies, shareholders) and stakeholders (e.g. internal and external customers, governments, intermediaries, suppliers, and societies). Therefore, brands engage in actions to enhance or protect their reputation and the legitimacy of that reputation.

Of particular interest in this article is the concept of brand crisis and how it affects the legitimacy of the brand. In essence, brand crisis can be defined as (1) a negative event of (2) immense difficulty or danger that (3) a brand experiences for (4) a period of time, thereby (5) affecting the legitimacy of the brand and (6) necessitating the brand to take corrective actions to protect or restore that legitimacy [1]. In this regard, brand crisis often manifests as highly publicized allegations that suggest that the focal brand's proposition is false or unsubstantiated (Dawar and Lei, 2009), which, in turn, can severely impact a brand's legitimacy, and by extension, the brand owner's profitability and market share (Pace *et al.*, 2017; Zou and Li, 2016).

Generally, the literature categorizes the crises that brands may experience into two types: performance-related (i.e. product or service failures that reduce the functionality or utility promised by the brand) and values-related (i.e. unethical conduct that violates ethical or social norms within the environment where the brand operates) crises (Dutta and Pullig, 2011; Yuan *et al.*, 2020). They are also often used interchangeably with product-harm (e.g. Samsung Galaxy Note smartphone battery explosion) and moral-harm (e.g. the exclusion of females from the Saudi Arabian IKEA catalog) crises (Hegner *et al.*, 2018; Nadeau *et al.*, 2020). While performance-related or product-harm crises have generally received more scholarly attention, scholarly research on values-related or moral-harm crises is emerging (Nadeau *et al.*, 2020). Two recent marketing studies have attempted to review and synthesize the crisis literature. Cleeren *et al.* (2017) systematically reviewed 25 articles on product-harm crisis published in 11 leading marketing journals since 1970, providing an overview of related theories, constructs (i.e. antecedents, mediators, moderators, consequences), as well as methodologies. In contrast, Khamitov *et al.* (2020) systematically reviewed 236 articles on negative events across 21 years, showing how three research streams (i.e. brand transgression, service failure and recovery, and product-harm crisis) can enrich one another. While these reviews have contributed valuable insights into the different facets of brand crises, a comprehensive review linking the concept of legitimacy to crises is missing, indicating a major gap in the literature.

During brand crises, legitimacy judgment emerges as a key psychological mechanism by which stakeholders consider whether to support or challenge the focal brand (Chen *et al.*, 2022). Noteworthy, legitimacy—i.e. a socially constructed perception that indicates social fitness (Suchman, 1995)—provides brands with the resources necessary to build and sustain competitive advantages (Miotto *et al.*, 2020), whereas brand crisis threatens their legitimacy (Hegner *et al.*, 2018), which can be seen through stakeholder evaluations and responses toward the brand (Mafael *et al.*, 2022; Ryoo, 2022; Yu *et al.*, 2021; Zhang and Lim, 2021) as well as the stock market price and value of that brand (Baghi and Gabrielli, 2021; Borah and Tellis, 2016; Eilert *et al.*, 2017; Gao *et al.*, 2015). Despite the value of legitimacy for brands and the importance for brands to manage brand crises to protect and maintain their legitimacy, and by extension, mitigate the negative consequences from legitimacy loss due to brand crises, we observed that the study of brand crisis and legitimacy has been developed almost independently of one another (as evidenced in a later section of this article). With this knowledge gap in mind, this article aims to systematically review the literature on (1) brand crisis, (2) legitimacy, and (3) brand crisis and legitimacy to bring together these bodies of work and to propose a promising future agenda wherein these research streams are integrated. Against this backdrop, this article addresses the following *research questions* (RQ):

- RQ1. What key insights can be drawn from the literatures on brand crises and legitimacy?
- RQ2. How do brand crises and legitimacy intersect with each other?
- RQ3. What are the extant gaps in the literature on brand crises and legitimacy, and what promising avenues avail for their joint investigation?

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We address the research aims and questions using a multi-study review methodology (Lim, 2025). Study 1, Study 2, and Study 3 are systematic literature reviews of (1) brand crisis, (2) legitimacy, and (3) brand crisis and legitimacy, respectively, over a 22-year period (2000–2022). A periodical coverage of recent milestones (e.g. following the new millennium) is in line with the recommendation of Paul *et al.* (2021) for a systematic literature review. In addition, the multi-study review methodology enables us to gain an understanding of the state of the literatures when brand crisis and legitimacy are taken independently and collectively. In so doing, we answer the call by Lim *et al.* (2022) for multi-study reviews whilst providing a better understanding of the current state of the literature and the promising ways forward to enrich it.

This article concentrates on performance-related or product-harm crisis, values-related or moral-harm crisis, and legitimacy in marketing studies only. We exclude articles that do not make an explicit connection to brand crisis, particularly those that solely concentrate on communications or public relations, legislation, organizational behavior, and operations management (Cleeren *et al.*, 2017). We also exclude articles on brand firestorms (Herhausen *et al.*, 2019; Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014), customer satisfaction (Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2016), and negative word of mouth or publicity (Nadeau *et al.*, 2020) because they do not necessarily arise from unexpected and substantial managerial misdeed or mismanagement as in the case of brand crises. We also exclude articles on service failure and recovery as it is a long-standing, well-reviewed stream of research with more than a thousand articles (Khamitov *et al.*, 2020) focusing on individual encounters or experiences (micro) rather than brand crisis (macro). Nonetheless, some of these excluded articles are used where appropriate, to provide theoretical background and understanding of key concepts and relationships.

Our multi-study review contributes to marketing theory and practice in several ways. First, this review offers a comprehensive perspective on a topic of rising significance—i.e. brand crisis and legitimacy—to academic scholars and industry practitioners in a hyperconnected world (Gustafson and Pomirleanu, 2021). An understanding of brand crisis and legitimacy is scant yet crucial for advancing theory and practice of crisis management. Through this multi-study review, we build a bridge between brand crisis and legitimacy, which, until now, were largely represented as independent streams of knowledge. Second, we extend the systematic literature reviews of Cleeren *et al.* (2017) and Khamitov *et al.* (2020) by introducing the psychological mechanism of legitimacy for understanding brand crises, thereby providing deeper insights into crisis management. Third, we offer a comprehensive research agenda to advance knowledge on this topic. We also present the methodological challenges in this domain and recommend various methodological approaches to guide future research. In this regard, we believe this multi-study review will act as a useful resource for both marketing scholars and professionals to retrospect useful lessons and prospect exciting ways forward to protect and maintain legitimacy in brand crises.

## 2. Study 1

### 2.1 Goal

The goal of the first study is to provide a retrospection of the extant literature on brand crisis. This retrospection, in turn, establishes a foundational understanding of brand crisis.

### 2.2 Method

The study adopts a systematic literature review approach (Kraus *et al.*, 2022; Lim *et al.*, 2022; Paul *et al.*, 2021) involving corpus curation and corpus analysis to retrospect brand crisis research.

In terms of *corpus curation*, this study conducts a search for relevant brand crisis research using the following criteria:

- (1) *Search database*: Scopus (i.e. the database with one of the largest collections of scientific documents from sources that have met a stringent set of quality criteria for inclusion or indexing; [Donthu et al., 2021](#));
- (2) *Search string*: (“brand” AND “cris\*” OR “scandal” OR “spillover” OR “transgression” OR “wrongdoing”) OR (“product” AND “harm” OR “recall”) (i.e. keywords were curated through a brainstorming session with experts in branding and crisis management and put together in a search string by scholars who have experience of publishing and reviewing systematic literature reviews; [Paul et al., 2021](#));
- (3) *Subject area*: Business, management and accounting (i.e. the subject area where “marketing” journals reside in the search database; [Paul et al., 2021](#));
- (4) *Search period*: 2000 to 2022 (i.e. most recent period following the new millennium at the time of study; [Paul et al., 2021](#));
- (5) *Document type*: article (i.e. conceptual and empirical are included, but editorials and notes are not due to the lack of peer review; [Paul et al., 2021](#));
- (6) *Source type*: journal (i.e. the source that publishes full-fledge research that have undergone peer review; [Paul et al., 2021](#));
- (7) *Language*: English (i.e. the lingua franca for most academic research; [Kraus et al., 2022](#));
- (8) *Source quality*: articles published in marketing journals ranked “A\*” or “A” by the Australian Business Deans Council (i.e. the highest level of novelty and rigor; a practice in line with recent systematic reviews in marketing e.g. [Lim et al., 2021](#));
- (9) *Content relevance inclusion/exclusion*: Articles where brand crisis take center stage are included, whereas articles where brand crisis is peripheral (e.g. mentioned as a passing remark, not investigated) are excluded. In addition, given the focus on branding and marketing, articles focusing solely on crisis caused by external causes (e.g. environmental, industry, or international affairs) as well as organizational behavior, operations, management, and regulative aspects without explicit linkage to/ study on brands are excluded. Finally, articles on brand firestorms, customer dissatisfaction, defamations, and negative publicity (word of mouth) are excluded due to their conceptual differences ([Herhausen et al., 2019](#); [Nadeau et al., 2020](#); [Rauschnabel et al., 2016](#)) except where there is a clear connection or an examination with regards to brand crisis. These rationales are in line with [Kraus et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Paul et al. \(2021\)](#) on the basis of content relevance.

The search using criteria (1) to (7) returned 1,742 documents and the filtering using criteria (8) to (9) led to the inclusion of 87 documents and the exclusion of 1,655 documents.

In terms of *corpus analysis*, this study carries out a content analysis ([Kraus et al., 2022](#)) of the 87 documents exemplifying contemporary, high-quality, content-relevant research on brand crisis. In particular, the content analysis involves coding of sources, theories, methods, and characteristics (e.g. antecedents, mediators, moderators, and consequences) of brand crisis research in the review. The trustworthiness of the content analysis is assured with an intercoder reliability score of more than 90%, with all inconsistencies resolved with a consensus. The results of the review are presented in the next section.

### 2.3 Findings

The study on brand crises has produced very rich insights. In terms of *source*, 87 brand crisis studies have been published across 24 different journals ranked “A\*” and “A” by the Australian Business Deans Council. Eight of these journals, each with a minimum of five studies, contribute 60.9% ( $n = 53$ ) of the total studies on brand crisis, with the top three most

productive journals being *Journal of Business Research* ( $n = 12$ ), *Journal of Marketing* ( $n = 8$ ), and *Journal of Product and Brand Management* ( $n = 7$ ) (Table 1 Panel A). This finding demonstrates the importance of brand crisis research and its track record of acceptance in premier journals.

In terms of *theory*, attribution theory, which provides a lens to understand how people perceive/evaluate causes of an event, is the most used theory ( $n = 15$ ) for studying brand crisis in premier journals (Table 1 Panel B). Only five theories have been used twice, namely

**Table 1.** Profile of brand crisis research in “A\*” and “A” journals

	Article (s)
<i>Panel A. Most productive “A*” and “A” journals for brand crisis research (n≥5)</i>	
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	12
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	8
<i>Journal of Product and Brand Management</i>	7
<i>Marketing Letters</i>	6
<i>Journal of Brand Management</i>	5
<i>Journal of Consumer Marketing</i>	5
<i>Journal of Marketing Management</i>	5
<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i>	5
<i>Panel B. Theories for brand crisis research in “A*” and “A” journals</i>	
Theories used more than twice: Attribution theory	15
Theories used twice: Construal level theory, Information integration theory, Self-construal theory, Situational crisis communication theory, and Spillover theory	8
Theories used once: Accessibility-diagnostics framework, Agency theory, Assimilation/contrast theory, Associative network theory, Attachment theory, Balance theory, Behavioral theory of the firm, Consumer learning theory, Dissonance-attribution model, Dominance theory, Dual process theory of thinking, Exit-voice theory, Moral licensing theory, Parasocial interaction theory, Persuasion knowledge theory, Protection motivation theory, Prototype theory, Schema change theory, Scapegoating theory, Signaling theory, Similarity theory, Social exchange theory, Social intuitionist model, and Theory of mind perception	24
Studies using no theories	50
Studies using one theory	25
Studies using two theories	12
<i>Panel C. Methods for brand crisis research in “A*” and “A” journals</i>	
Experiment	24
Secondary data	10
Survey	8
Event study	6
In-depth interview	3
Conceptual	2
Case study	1
Focus group	1
Media survey	1
Netnography	1
Observation	1
Qualitative historical analysis	1
Studies using a single method	79
Studies using two methods	8
<i>Panel D. Brand crisis typology in “A*” and “A” journals</i>	
General brand crisis	5
Performance-related (product-harm) crisis	65
Values-related (moral-harm) crisis	25
Studies with performance-related (product-harm) and values-related (moral-harm) crises	8
<b>Source(s):</b> Authors’ own compilation.	

construal level theory, information integration theory, self-construal theory, situational crisis communication theory, and spillover theory, whereas a total of 24 theories have been used once: accessibility-diagnostics framework, agency theory, assimilation/contrast theory, associative network theory, attachment theory, balance theory, behavioral theory of the firm, consumer learning theory, dissonance-attribution model, dominance theory, dual process theory of thinking, exit-voice theory, moral licensing theory, parasocial interaction theory, persuasion knowledge theory, protection motivation theory, prototype theory, schema change theory, scapegoating theory, signaling theory, similarity theory, social exchange theory, social intuitionist model, and theory of mind perception. Noteworthily, 12 studies have used two theories, 25 studies have used a single theory, and 50 studies did not use any established theories. This finding highlights the potential for greater use of theories in brand crisis research, including theoretical integration (i.e. using two or more theories) to provide a multi-faceted viewpoint of brand crisis.

In terms of *method*, experiment, which is a vehicle for obtaining empirical evidence detailing causes and effects of a phenomenon, is the most used method ( $n = 24$ ) for studying brand crisis in premier journals (Table 1 Panel C). This is followed by secondary data ( $n = 10$ ), survey ( $n = 8$ ), event study ( $n = 6$ ), in-depth interview ( $n = 3$ ), and conceptual ( $n = 2$ ) methods. Other methods such as case study, focus group, media survey, netnography, observation, and qualitative historical analysis have only been used once. Most studies ( $n = 79$ ) use only a single method, with only eight studies using a combination of two methods. This finding indicates a strong focus on causal research designs (i.e. experiment) in brand crisis research, which is welcoming given that causality is the highest form of evidence/knowledge (after associations and concepts; Lim *et al.*, 2021; Lim and Rasul, 2022). However, exploratory research methods appear to be lacking (e.g. focus group and in-depth interview), which may limit the discovery of new concepts and relationships. Given the lack of multi-method studies, there is immense scope for combining and leveraging exploratory and causal research methods to deliver both new discoveries and methodological rigor in evidence derived to explain brand crisis.

In terms of *characteristics*, most studies concentrate on performance-related (product-harm) crisis (e.g. food safety, product recall, and user accidents) ( $n = 65$ ) as opposed to values-related (moral-harm) crisis (e.g. brand contamination, infection, and transgression) ( $n = 25$ ) (Table 1 Panel D), which may reflect the magnitude of damage (e.g. immediate, visible) in the former and the scope for further investigation in the latter. The review also reveals a plethora of concepts and relationships relating to brand crisis (Figure 1)[2].

Two broad categories of *antecedents* are often present in brand crisis research: causes of brand crisis (i.e. performance-related or product-harm crisis and value-related or moral-harm crisis) and remedial considerations for brand crisis (e.g. brand profile [e.g. brand attitude strength, brand position], consumer sentiments [e.g. consumer-based disidentification, consumer factors], source of attribute or blame [e.g. internal or external], and remedy choice). While the former lay the context for brand crisis in terms of how the crisis manifest for brands, the latter presents the considerations that brands need to consider when facing and responding to brand crisis. These considerations are typically initial considerations, which need to be revisited when additional considerations emerge (e.g. what outcomes are brands intending to achieve [i.e. consequences], what factors [e.g. mediators, moderators] could potentially modify the impact of implementing considerations to achieve desired outcomes).

Two broad categories of *modifiers* are typically present in brand crisis research: mediators and moderators. While *mediators* reflect the mechanisms through which the antecedents and consequences of brand crisis are related, *moderators* signal the mechanisms that can affect the direction and strength of relationships between the antecedents and consequences of brand crisis. Regardless of whether a mechanism is a mediator or a moderator, that mechanism can be classified either as crisis-focused or stakeholder-focused depending on whether it is related to the crisis or the stakeholder. Moreover, these mechanisms could act as both a mediator and a moderator (e.g. brand authenticity, brand equity), signaling the importance of exploring the multiple roles that a mechanism may play in a brand crisis.

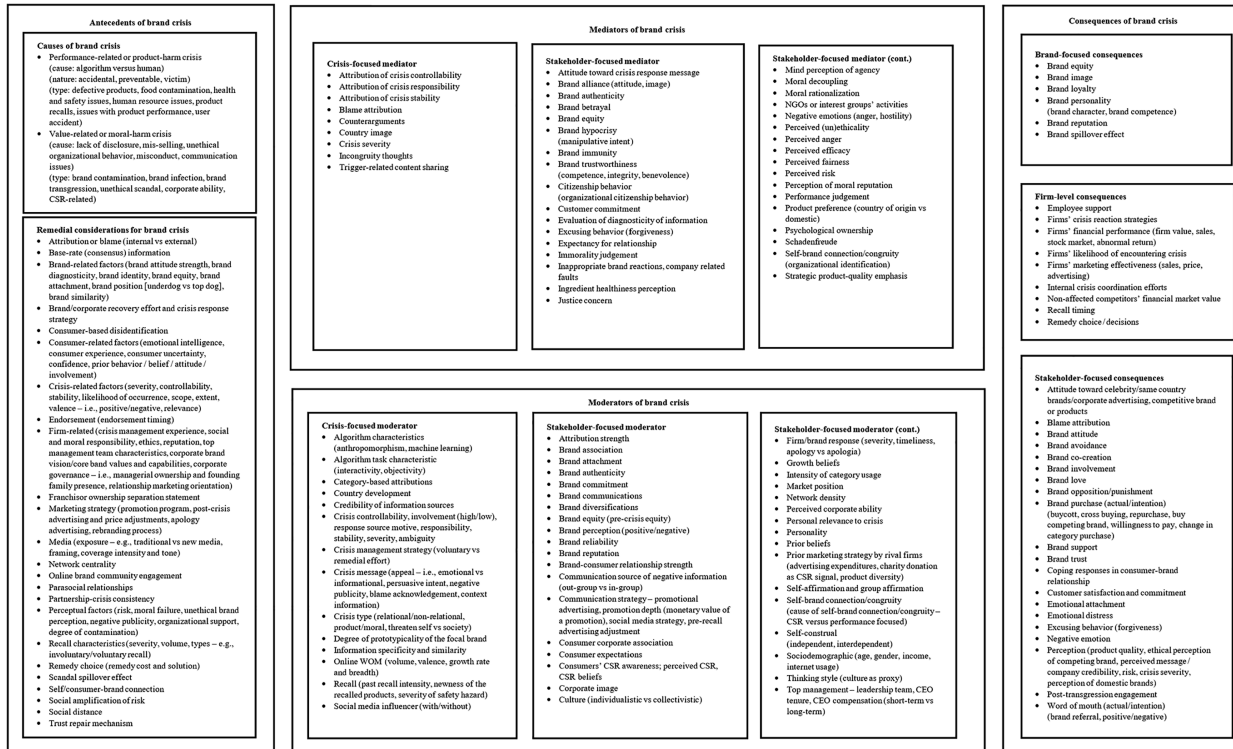


Figure 1. Overview of brand crisis literature. Source: Authors' own illustration.

Through the evaluation of causes and remedial actions taken to address brand crises, three noteworthy areas of *consequences* or outcomes can be expected—namely that affecting brands (e.g. brand equity, image, and loyalty), firms (e.g. employee support, financial performance), and stakeholders (e.g. attitude, support, and trust).

### 3. Study 2

#### 3.1 Goal

The goal of the second study is to provide a retrospection of the extant literature on brand legitimacy. This retrospection, in turn, establishes a foundational understanding of brand legitimacy.

#### 3.2 Method

Similar to the first study, the second study adopts a systematic literature review approach involving corpus curation and corpus analysis to retrospect existing research on brand legitimacy.

In terms of *corpus curation*, this study performs a search for relevant brand legitimacy research using the same criteria as the previous study, with exception of the following changes to contextualize the search based on the focus of the present study:

- (1) *Search string*: (“brand” AND “legitimacy” OR “legitimacy theory”) (i.e. keywords were curated through a brainstorming session with experts in branding and put together in a search string by scholars who have experience of publishing and reviewing systematic literature reviews; Paul *et al.*, 2021);
- (2) *Content relevance inclusion/exclusion*: Articles where brand legitimacy take center stage are included, whereas articles where brand legitimacy is peripheral (e.g. mentioned as a passing remark, not investigated) are excluded. The rationale is in line with Kraus *et al.* (2022) and Paul *et al.* (2021) based on content relevance.

The search criteria returned 117 documents and the filtering criteria resulted in the inclusion of 78 documents and the exclusion of 39 documents.

In terms of *corpus analysis*, this study performs a content analysis (Kraus *et al.*, 2022) of the 78 documents exemplifying the current, high-quality, relevant brand legitimacy research. Like the previous study, the content analysis in this study involves coding of sources, theories, methods, and characteristics (e.g. antecedents, mediators, moderators, and consequences) of brand legitimacy research in the review, and similarly, the trustworthiness of the content analysis is established with an intercoder reliability score of more than 90%, and a consensus is reached to resolve any inconsistencies. The results of the review are presented in the next section.

#### 3.3 Findings

The study of brand legitimacy has a similar level of activity like the study of brand crisis. In terms of *source*, 78 brand legitimacy studies have been published across 25 different journals ranked “A\*” and “A” by the Australian Business Deans Council. Six of these journals, each with a minimum of five studies, contribute 60.3% ( $n = 47$ ) of the total studies on brand legitimacy, namely *Journal of Business Research* ( $n = 12$ ), *Industrial Marketing Management* ( $n = 8$ ), *Journal of Business Ethics* ( $n = 8$ ), *Marketing Theory* ( $n = 8$ ), *Journal of Marketing* ( $n = 6$ ), and *Journal of Consumer Research* ( $n = 5$ ) (Table 2 Panel A). This finding demonstrates the importance of brand legitimacy research and its track record of acceptance in premier journals, including across business (e.g. *Industrial Marketing Management*) and consumer (e.g. *Journal of Consumer Research*) contexts and outlets.

In terms of *theory*, legitimacy theory ( $n = 55$ ), which foregrounds the assumption that a social contract exists between business and society, and institutional theory ( $n = 27$ ), which

**Table 2.** Profile of brand legitimacy research in “A\*” and “A” journals

	Article (s)
<i>Panel A. Most productive “A*” and “A” journals for brand legitimacy research (n≥5)</i>	
<i>Journal of Business Research</i>	12
<i>Industrial Marketing Management</i>	8
<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	8
<i>Marketing Theory</i>	8
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	6
<i>Journal of Consumer Research</i>	5
<i>Panel B. Theories for brand legitimacy research in “A*” and “A” journals</i>	
Theories used more than twice	
Legitimacy theory	55
Institutional theory	27
Theories used twice: Consumer culture theory, Institutional entrepreneurship theory, and Service-dominant logic	6
Theories used once: Actor-network theory, Assemblage theory, Authenticity theory, Discursive legitimation theory, Jakobsonian semiotics, Neo-institutional theory, Network theory, New institutional theory, Organizational identity theory, Practice theory, Resource-based theory, Self-congruity theory, Social impact model, Theory of social influence and power, Stigma theory, Theory of decoupling, Theory of planned behavior, Theory of professionalism, Trust theory, Value co-creation theory, and Whiteness theory	
Studies using no theories	2
Studies using one theory	46
Studies using two theories	27
Studies using three theories	3
<i>Panel C. Methods for brand legitimacy research in “A*” and “A” journals</i>	
Qualitative	40
Quantitative	35
Conceptual	9
Studies using a single method	72
Studies using two methods	6
<i>Panel D. Brand legitimacy (outcome) typology in “A*” and “A” journals</i>	
General	22
Moral/normative	18
Cognitive	15
Pragmatic/Instrumental	14
Social	6
External	4
Internal	4
Regulative	4
Relational	4
Cultural	2
Market	2
Political	1
Territorial	1
<b>Source(s):</b> Authors’ own compilation.	

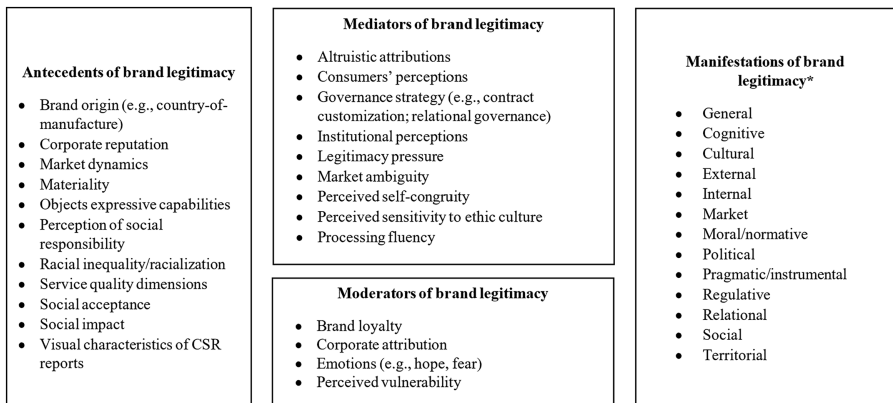
focuses on the institutional environment in which brands operate and gain their legitimacy, are the two most prominent theories for brand legitimacy research (Table 2 Panel B). Only three theories have been used twice, namely consumer culture theory, institutional entrepreneurship theory, and service-dominant logic, whereas a total of 21 theories have been used once: actor-network theory, assemblage theory, authenticity theory, discursive legitimation theory, Jakobsonian semiotics, neo-institutional theory, network theory, new institutional theory, organizational identity theory, practice theory, resource-based theory, self-congruity theory,

social impact model, theory of social influence and power, stigma theory, theory of decoupling, theory of planned behavior, theory of professionalism, trust theory, value co-creation theory, and whiteness theory. Noteworthy, three studies have used three theories, 27 studies have used two theories, 46 studies have used a single theory, and only two studies did not use a theory—one of which focuses on the concept of brand authenticity, the other on sustainable innovations. This finding shows that brand legitimacy research is grounded in theory more strongly than brand crisis research, with a significant portion of studies using two theories, with legitimacy theory and institutional theory being the most prominent duo ( $n = 13$ ). The latter observation could be explained by the centrality of legitimacy in the institutional environment, emphasizing the desirability or appropriateness of a brand's actions with regards to institutional norms (Suchman, 1995).

In terms of *method*, most studies on brand legitimacy have relied on qualitative methods for study ( $n = 40$ ), followed by quantitative ( $n = 35$ ) and conceptual ( $n = 9$ ) methods (Table 2 Panel C). Most studies in the field use a single method ( $n = 72$ ), with only six studies using two methods. This indicates that research on brand legitimacy is highly exploratory, with immense potential for empirical scrutiny using quantitative, and more specifically, causal methods that provide the necessary evidence to establish cause and effect, and thus, forges generalizability.

In terms of *characteristics*, the review finds 13 different manifestations of brand legitimacy—namely general ( $n = 22$ ), moral/normative ( $n = 18$ ), cognitive ( $n = 15$ ), pragmatic ( $n = 14$ ), social ( $n = 6$ ), external ( $n = 4$ ), internal ( $n = 4$ ), regulative ( $n = 4$ ), relational ( $n = 4$ ), cultural ( $n = 2$ ), market ( $n = 2$ ), political ( $n = 1$ ), and territorial ( $n = 1$ ) forms of brand legitimacy (Table 2 Panel D). These manifestations of brand legitimacy accentuate the complexity of brand legitimacy as a concept as it is intertwined with the various aspects of the institutional environment within which brands operate.

In addition, the review also reveals a plethora of concepts and relationships relating to brand legitimacy as an outcome (Figure 2).[3] As mentioned, brand legitimacy can take many forms (e.g. general, moral/normative, cognitive, pragmatic/instrumental, social, relational, cultural, market, external, internal, political, regulative, and territorial). The review finds that brand legitimacy is shaped by peculiarities (*antecedents*) in the institutional environment, which includes the brand itself (e.g. brand origin, corporate reputation), the product (e.g.



**Figure 2.** Overview of brand legitimacy literature Notes: \* In the legitimacy literature, the three main dimensions of legitimacy are Cognitive, Moral/Normative, and Pragmatic/Instrumental, each with various sub-dimensions (see, e.g. Suchman, 1995 for a typology and definitions). It is also recognized in the literature that some aspects of legitimacy overlap and conflict, when it is used as a construct in Institutional Theory and Social Psychology (Tost, 2011). It is beyond the scope of this review to reconcile these differences/overlaps or to create a new typology of brand legitimacy. Thus, this list was based on the type(s) of legitimacy as reported in the 78 studies in Study 2. Source: Authors' own illustration.

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service quality), the marketplace (e.g. materiality, market dynamics), heuristics (e.g. objects expressive capabilities, visual characteristics of CSR reports), and social norms (e.g. perception of social responsibility, racialization, social acceptance, social impact). Apart from the brand's governance strategy (e.g. contract customization, relational governance), the mechanisms that facilitate (mediators) and influence (moderators) the development and protection of brand legitimacy is highly perceptual (e.g. perceived self-congruity, sensitivity, and vulnerability).

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## 4. Study 3

### 4.1 Goal

The goal of the third study is to provide a retrospection of the extant literature where brand crisis and legitimacy intersect. This retrospection, in turn, provides a clearer understanding of available knowledge on brand crisis and legitimacy when taken collectively as well as the progress and scope for knowledge advancement at which the two branding concepts intersect.

### 4.2 Method

The third study follows the first and second studies in taking a systematic approach to review the literature on brand crisis and legitimacy. The study follows the same process for corpus curation and analysis, with the key difference residing in the following two areas:

- (1) *Search string*: “(“brand” AND “cris\*” OR “scandal” OR “spillover” OR “transgression” OR “wrongdoing”) OR (“product” AND “harm” OR “recall”) AND (“brand” AND “legitimacy” OR “legitimacy theory”)” (i.e. these keywords were combined based on those curated through brainstorming with experts in Study 1 and Study 2; Paul *et al.*, 2021);
- (2) *Content relevance inclusion/exclusion*: Consistent with the synthesis of content relevance expectations from the first and second studies, articles are included in third study only if brand crisis and legitimacy take center stage in the investigation. The rationale is in line with Kraus *et al.* (2022) and Paul *et al.* (2021) based on content relevance.

The search criteria returned 12 documents and the filtering criteria resulted in the inclusion of three documents and the exclusion of nine documents. The trustworthiness of the content analysis is ensured with an intercoder reliability score of more than 90%, with inconsistencies resolved and agreed upon by the author team. The results of the review are presented in the next section.

### 4.3 Findings

The study of brand crisis and legitimacy is clearly scarce, with only three relevant studies appearing in premier journals. The earliest study by Guo *et al.* (2017) adopts a decoupling perspective using institutional theory and highlight that brand legitimacy plays a mediating role in facilitating the influence between brand promise and brand trust during a brand crisis. The next study by Guo *et al.* (2018) also adopts institutional theory and showcase the mediating role of brand legitimacy in facilitating brand recovery strategies in repairing brand trust following a brand crisis. The most recent study by Chen *et al.* (2022) also relies on institutional theory and performs three studies (as opposed to the previous two articles that only pursue a single study each) to showcase the mediating role of consumer legitimacy judgment in shaping the impact of perceptions of normalization of misconduct on trust toward brands in an industry following a brand crisis. Taken collectively, these studies highlight the profound role of brand legitimacy as a facilitator (mediator) of the success of remedial actions for brands during a crisis, as well as a lucrative potential for new research due to its scarcity.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

### 5.1 Key takeaways

To this end, the multi-study review herein, which endeavored to take stock of brand crisis and legitimacy research independently and collectively, delivers three important and noteworthy takeaways.

*First*, brand crisis is an immensely rich area of study, though the field has huge potential to ground and strengthen its knowledge foundation in relevant theory(ies), especially when non-exploratory (e.g. conceptual, causal) research is pursued.

*Second*, brand legitimacy is an area that is equally well-published with strong use of theory, including theoretical integration, though its manifestation is fairly complex and varied, signaling that the field needs in-depth research to unpack its multifaceted role in branding, including during brand crisis.

*Third*, research that examines both brand crisis and legitimacy appear to be scant despite the potential of the former to provide a fertile ground to enrich understanding of the latter's role and impact, as well as the potential of the latter to provide a strong theoretical explanation on the causes and impacts of remedial actions in the former.

Given the strengths of each body of knowledge and the promise of their synthesis, this study presents a research agenda that emerge from the readings and reflections of the authors to stimulate new joint research at the intersection of brand crisis and legitimacy.

### 5.2 Extant gaps and promising pathways for future research

*5.2.1 The multi-level process of brand legitimacy formation and maintenance.* Legitimacy is a multi-level process (Aime *et al.*, 2010), and when applied to branding, a brand's legitimacy is built and maintained through a collective effort of actors (Humphreys and Latour, 2013; Suchman, 1995). Past research has demonstrated the role of various actors and their coordinated efforts to legitimizing casino gambling (Humphreys, 2010), American yoga (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2017), and how brand legitimacy can be co-constructed in a non-brand-focused community (i.e. gay men's community) (Kates, 2004). However, less is known about how different/multiple actors viewed brand legitimacy during brand crises and whether (and how) these perceptions influence the trust repair (brand recovery). Moreover, the current literature lacks an overarching and dynamic multi-level model that explains how cross-level interactions within the ecosystem/marketplace influence various actors' brand legitimacy judgment, particularly in a crisis. The issues concerning multi-level (micro, meso, macro) interactions within the ecosystem/marketplace is crucial for understanding brand crisis and perception of brand legitimacy. In this regard, future research could develop a dynamic multi-level model that explains how interactions among actors at different levels influence brand legitimacy during crises. For instance, future research could explore how micro-(or meso-) level engagement with the crisis discourses produces macro-level outcomes reflected in legitimacy judgment manifested in the media, industry, and government agencies. Similarly, future research could examine the process through which macro-level actors (e.g. media frames) affect micro-level actors' (e.g. customers) legitimacy judgment. Trending on this path, future research is encouraged to consider the following future research questions that should enrich insights in this space:

- (1) How do different actors at various levels (e.g. customers, government, media, activists, competitors, firms) engage in restoring a brand's legitimacy following a crisis, and what factors influence the role and level of engagement these actors have on brand legitimacy judgment? Researchers could utilize (net)ethnographic studies or interviews, which may be individual or focus groups, to uncover the motivations and actions of these actors.
- (2) Which actors exert more influence in restoring brand legitimacy during crises, and how does their credibility impact this process? Survey-based methods could assess

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perceptions of credibility while content analysis of media coverage could quantify the influence of different actors.

- (3) How do different actors at micro, meso, and macro levels perceive the focal brand's legitimacy in a crisis situation, and how do they differ in their responses toward why they attribute or deny the legitimacy of the focal brand? Employing comparative case studies or multi-level modeling techniques could help analyze these perceptions and their implications.
- (4) How do various actors at multiple levels influence the practices or activities of brand legitimacy restoration? Methodologies like process tracing or system dynamics modeling could provide insights into these interactions.
- (5) How does actor engagement at a micro level stimulate the engagement at a meso level, causing the legitimacy of a brand in crisis to change? Researchers could conduct longitudinal studies or use (net)ethnography to track these processes over time.
- (6) How do firms resolve conflicting ideologies of various actors within an ecosystem when attempting to restore brand legitimacy post-crises? This could be explored through case studies of crisis management, incorporating interviews with key stakeholders.
- (7) How and under what conditions do corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives help restore actors' perception of brand legitimacy following a crisis event, and how will this process vary across various actors? Experimental designs could test the effectiveness of CSR initiatives on different stakeholder groups.

*5.2.2 Contradictions and synergies among the manifestations of brand legitimacy.* Legitimacy is a multi-dimensional construct comprising several components, including cognitive, normative, relational, and regulatory, that coexist and operate in conjunction with one another (Gustafson and Pomirleanu, 2021). These different types of legitimacy can come into conflict with one another (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2017). One important gap to be filled would be theorization around the contradictions and potential synergies among the various types of legitimacy in crisis situations experienced by brands. Therefore, future research could explore both the synergies and conflicts among various types of legitimacy and its dynamics:

- (1) During brand crises, which types of legitimacy work in collaboration (and in conflict) with one another, and how does this affect stakeholder perceptions? Researchers could conduct in-depth case studies of brands undergoing crises, using thematic analysis to identify patterns of legitimacy interactions.
- (2) What implications can the contradictions and synergies among the various types of legitimacy have on trust repair following a brand crisis? Experimental studies could be designed to test the effects of different legitimacy strategies on stakeholder trust.
- (3) How does the influence of different types of legitimacy on stakeholder sentiments differ across crisis types and contexts? Conducting cross-cultural surveys could help compare stakeholder responses in different contexts while experimental studies may reveal variations depending on the types of legitimacy.
- (4) How do brands deal with multiple and, at times, conflicting demands of the different types of legitimacy? Action research or process studies could observe and analyze brand strategies in real-time crisis management situations.

*5.2.3 Process theorization of brand legitimacy.* The current literature on brand crisis tends to have a short-term focus (Cooper et al., 2015) and overlooks the long-term perspective of how a brand's legitimacy is challenged and how the firm's revitalization strategies contribute to brand recovery following a crisis. Regarding the notion of legitimacy, a line of market-based

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research focuses on examining the process of legitimizing the emergence of minimoto motorcycle market (Martin and Schouten, 2014), casino gambling (Humphreys, 2010), hybrid cultural practice in the context of yoga (Coskuner-Balli and Ertimur, 2017), new innovation (i.e. Botox Cosmetic) (Giesler, 2012), and how French automotive maintain their legitimacy when confronted with corporate environmentalism (Debenedetti *et al.*, 2021). Despite these noteworthy insights, limited attention has been devoted to explaining the processes involved in trust repair and the process through which brand legitimacy is restored in crisis situations (Hewett and Lemon, 2019). Therefore, future research could study the processes by which brands repair stakeholder trust and restore their brand image after the crisis from a longitudinal perspective. This agenda can be achieved by theorizing the process of how firms deal with brand attacks and regain its legitimacy following the crisis, as espoused through the following future research questions:

- (1) How does a brand lose its authority and acceptance in a crisis situation (i.e. theorizing the process of de-legitimization)? Conducting longitudinal studies could track brand perceptions before, during, and after crises.
- (2) How does the process of a brand's legitimacy become challenged and varied across different crisis types and context (e.g. will the erosion of a brand's legitimacy be different across self-inflicted versus exogenously created crises)? Comparative studies could analyze different cases to identify patterns and differences.
- (3) How does the legitimization process of brand restoration occurs following a crisis? Researchers could employ process tracing to map out the steps taken by brands in rebuilding legitimacy.
- (4) Over time, how does the process of losing and regaining brand legitimacy result in the alteration of the focal brand's meaning? Content analysis of brand communications and media coverage over time could reveal shifts in brand narratives.
- (5) What are the legitimacy strategies and practices involved in the process of brand recovery, how do stakeholders perceive these strategies and practices, and which strategies generate more confidence among the various stakeholders? Mixed-methods research combining surveys and interviews could assess stakeholder perceptions and the effectiveness of different strategies.

5.2.4 *Consumers as legitimacy agents.* Consumers have the ability to mitigate negative and leverage positive influences on a brand, given that digital media shift power from companies to consumers (Rauschnabel *et al.*, 2016). However, the literature lacks research examining consumers as legitimacy-granting constituents (Randrianasolo and Arnold, 2020), wherein the role of consumers as legitimacy agents remains underexplored. In this regard, future research could explore consumer agency in the process of (de)legitimization, as follows:

- (1) What role do consumers play in the legitimizing strategies (as part of brand revitalization) adopted by firms, and how does this role vary across different types of crisis and brand contexts? Utilizing (net)ethnographic studies could provide insights into consumer interactions and support during crises.
- (2) What motivates consumers to act as legitimizing agents when a brand encounters a crisis? Mixed-methods research combining surveys and interviews could identify psychological drivers and assess their impact on consumer behavior.
- (3) Why and how do consumers work with brands (co-creation) to regain or maintain brand legitimacy post-crises? Conducting case studies or interviews with engaged consumers could uncover co-creation processes and outcomes.

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5.2.5 *Maintaining brand legitimacy in the digital world.* The society today lives in a hyperconnected era propagated by digitalization. However, little is known about how consumer-to-consumer influence within online brand communities could play a role in (re) shaping brand legitimacy when firms behave badly (Kuchmaner *et al.*, 2019). Similarly, the role of online brand community engagement during a brand crisis remains underexplored, particularly in terms of its influence across the different types of brand crisis (product-harm versus moral-harm crisis) (Yuan *et al.*, 2020). Given that an understanding of how the dynamics of consumer-to-consumer interactions and the influence of online perceptions of brand legitimacy remain lacking, further research is therefore encouraged to move from a reactive to proactive approach to uncover new strategies for brand crisis management, particularly for maintaining brand legitimacy in the digital world:

- (1) Whether and how do consumer-to-consumer (online) interactions influence the perception of brand legitimacy during a brand crisis, and what conditions underlie this influence? Utilizing (net)ethnography, social network analysis, and sentiment analysis could reveal the impact of (online) interactions.
- (2) Can firms capitalize on the power of brand communities to restore legitimacy following a crisis, and if so, how? Case studies of brands engaging with online communities could identify effective strategies.
- (3) In what ways do the dominant discourses present in digital social spaces shape the perception and judgment of brand legitimacy? Employing discourse analysis on social media content could provide insights into narrative shaping.
- (4) Over time, how will the legitimacy judgment formed during brand crises persist or change in the long term, and what role do mainstream and non-mainstream media play in this process? Longitudinal studies could track changes in perceptions across different media platforms.
- (5) How can we understand the de-legitimatization processes in social network communications during a brand crisis? Content analysis and thematic analysis of social media conversations could uncover de-legitimization patterns.
- (6) What is the role of impression management in managing challenges to brand legitimacy during crises, and can firms manage these challenges through a proactive form of impression management strategy, and if so, how? Experimental designs could test the effectiveness of different impression management tactics.
- (7) What marketing strategies help protect and prevent brands from crisis events, and how do the effectiveness of these strategies vary across different types of brand crises? Comparative studies could evaluate the efficacy of various strategies.

5.2.6 *The psychological drivers and responses of brand legitimacy during brand crises.* The psychology of brand legitimacy and its changes during crises is an interesting but underexplored area of research. There remains a gap in understanding the psychological reasons behind why stakeholders would support the brand during brand crises despite unforgivable wrongdoings or mismanagement by the focal brand (Yu *et al.*, 2021). For example, while emotion is closely associated with attribution theory in the context of brand crisis, little is known about the role of emotions (e.g. anger, disappointment, sympathy, hope) in shaping stakeholders' judgment about brand legitimacy (Clauzel *et al.*, 2019), including that during a brand crisis. Similarly, scholarly attention on the prevalent yet under-researched phenomenon of stakeholder arrogance (i.e. the propensity to broadcast one's superiority over others in the consumption domain) (Ruvio *et al.*, 2020) is also another psychological reasoning that should be insightful in enriching understanding of brand legitimacy during brand crises. In this regard, future research could consider applying the dual-process theory (i.e. an account of

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how stakeholders' thoughts can arise because of two different styles of processing: intuition and reasoning) to understand the psychological mechanisms that underpin stakeholder support for the brand in crisis. For example, future scholars could study how stakeholders process information about brand crises using experimental design studies by examining the proposition that brand affection has a significant on stakeholders' evaluation toward the crisis and the focal brand despite the presence of facts about the firm's wrongdoing/misdeed. Similarly, future research could investigate the boundary conditions that activate stakeholder arrogance, which, in turn, may prompt them to defensively process the negative information (publicity) of the brand despite obvious wrongdoings by the firm. These directions are summarized into the following future research questions:

- (1) How do stakeholders use emotions (e.g. anger, disappointment, sympathy, hope) in judging a brand's legitimacy when the brand is under attack, and how does this psychological process vary across different crisis types and contexts? Researchers could employ experimental studies manipulating crisis scenarios and measuring emotional responses to assess their impact on legitimacy judgments.
- (2) How do stakeholders' emotional reactions to crisis vary between victim crisis (i.e. the firm involved in a brand crisis is the victim of the crisis) and preventable crisis (e.g. crises caused by firm misdeeds)? Comparative studies using scenario-based experiments could examine differences in emotional reactions and subsequent legitimacy evaluations.
- (3) How will stakeholders' emotional responses to a brand crisis vary across crisis types and cause attributions, and how will these varying emotional responses affect their brand legitimacy judgment? Structural equation modeling could be utilized to analyze the relationships between emotions, attributions, and legitimacy judgments.
- (4) What conditions under which anger or sympathy have positive or negative downstream effects on the customer/stakeholder-brand relationship during a brand crisis, and how does this dynamic affect customer/stakeholder judgment of brand legitimacy? Moderation and mediation analyses could identify factors that influence these effects.
- (5) What role does stakeholder arrogance play in processing negative information about a brand in crisis, and how does it affect their support for the brand despite evidence of wrongdoing? Researchers could conduct surveys to measure levels of stakeholder arrogance and assess its impact on information processing and legitimacy judgments.

*5.2.7 The role of digital influencers in brand crisis management and restoration of brand legitimacy.* Despite the recent work that associates social media influencers with crisis (e.g. [Aw and Labrecque, 2022](#); [Casais and Gomes, 2021](#); [Singh et al., 2020](#)), an understanding of the role of digital influencers in brand protection in the context of brand crisis situations remains lacking. Specifically, the understanding of digital influencers' behavior and engagement in restoring brand legitimacy following a crisis remains underdeveloped. Therefore, future research is encouraged to explore the following future research questions to fill in these gaps:

- (1) What drives brand managers' decision to adopt digital influencers when managing a brand crisis? Interviews with brand managers could reveal decision-making processes.
- (2) What specific characteristics of brand crisis drive brand managers to use digital influencers for legitimacy restoration, and how does this process unfold? Case studies of brands that have employed influencers during crises could provide detailed insights into strategic implementation.

- (3) In what ways can brand managers capitalize on the power of digital influencers to connect with stakeholders during a crisis, and does this strategy buffer the adverse effects on the brand's legitimacy? Experimental designs could test the effectiveness of influencer involvement on stakeholder perceptions.
- (4) How do digital influencers express their discourses regarding a brand that is under crisis? What narrative strategies do they use to connect with their followers? What are stakeholders' responses to these narrative strategies, and how effective are these strategies in recovering the brand's legitimacy? Content analysis of influencer communications and surveys measuring stakeholder responses could provide insights.
- (5) What underlying mechanisms through which digital influencers shape stakeholder sentiments toward a brand at a time of crisis, and how do the changing sentiments translate into the restoration of brand legitimacy? Qualitative methods such as content analysis or thematic analysis of influencer communications and stakeholder responses can provide deep insights into the narratives and strategies used while mediation analysis could test the significance of underlying mechanisms and longitudinal studies can track changes over time.

### 5.3 Theoretical implications

An overarching observation from our multi-study review is that the current literature on brand crisis and brand legitimacy predominantly relies on established theories, with limited efforts directed toward developing new theoretical frameworks. In Study 1, a significant number of brand crisis studies ( $n = 50$ ) did not utilize any theoretical framework, and among those that did, attribution theory was the most frequently used ( $n = 15$ ) while many other theories were applied only once. This reliance on a narrow set of established theories suggests a lack of theoretical diversity in explaining brand crisis phenomena. Similarly, in Study 2, while legitimacy theory ( $n = 55$ ) and institutional theory ( $n = 27$ ) were prominently employed in brand legitimacy research, there was a wide dispersion of other theories used infrequently, with some studies employing multiple theories or none at all. This indicates fragmentation and potential theoretical saturation within the field, thereby highlighting a critical gap and underscoring the significant potential to explore or develop new theoretical frameworks that better integrate the concepts of brand crisis and brand legitimacy.

The evolving landscape of branding—shaped by digital transformation, globalization, and heightened stakeholder activism (Donthu *et al.*, 2022; Lim, 2023)—requires innovative theoretical models that can capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of brand crises and legitimacy judgments. Future research should endeavor to construct integrative frameworks that transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries, incorporating insights from communication, psychology, and sociology to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how brands can effectively navigate crises and restore legitimacy. To provide concrete guidance for new theory development, researchers should focus on several key areas.

First, developing integrative theoretical models that explicitly link brand crisis management with legitimacy restoration processes is essential. Researchers could create models that map out the stages of legitimacy loss and recovery during brand crises, incorporating factors such as stakeholder perceptions, media influence, and organizational responses while scrutinizing for potential causes of heterogeneity. This approach would offer a more systematic and granular understanding of how brands can rebuild legitimacy after a crisis.

Second, applying emerging theories from related fields to the context of brand crises and legitimacy can offer fresh perspectives. For example, complexity theory could help understand the nonlinear and emergent behaviors in stakeholder reactions during crises (Smith and Graetz, 2006), whereas social identity theory might provide insights into how stakeholder identification with a brand affects legitimacy judgments (Crane and Ruebottom, 2011)

while the theory of behavioral control would shed light behind stakeholders' intention-behavior gaps with regards to brand-stakeholder responses (Lim and Weissmann, 2023). Through the integration of these theories, researchers can uncover underlying mechanisms that traditional theories may overlook.

Third, exploring the influence of digital media is crucial. With the rise of social media and digital platforms (Lim and Rasul, 2022), developing theories that explain how digital communications impact brand legitimacy during crises is increasingly important. Extending the theory of social amplification of risk (Kasperson *et al.*, 1988) to the branding context could help understand how information spreads and influences stakeholder perceptions, for instance, researchers could investigate how online narratives and viral content shape stakeholder judgments of legitimacy.

Fourth, there is a need for cross-cultural theoretical frameworks as brands operate globally. Theories that account for cultural differences in legitimacy judgments and crisis responses could explain variations in stakeholder reactions across different regions. Developing models that incorporate cultural dimensions (Homer and Lim, 2024) can help brands tailor their crisis management and legitimacy restoration strategies to diverse markets.

Fifth, building on stakeholder theory (Mahajan *et al.*, 2023), researchers could develop frameworks highlighting the role of stakeholders as active participants in legitimacy restoration. Theories explaining co-creation and co-recovery processes might offer valuable insights into collaborative crisis management. Understanding how stakeholders can contribute to rebuilding a brand's legitimacy could lead to more effective engagement strategies.

Advancing new theory development also involves methodological innovation. Researchers should consider employing mixed-methods approaches, longitudinal studies, and experimental designs to test and refine new theoretical models. For instance, longitudinal studies can track changes in legitimacy perceptions over time while experimental designs can isolate causal relationships between variables. Emphasizing interdisciplinary collaborations can foster the integration of diverse perspectives and enhance the robustness of theoretical contributions.

The development of new theoretical frameworks should be guided by the complexities identified in our review. Researchers are encouraged to address the dynamic interplay between brand crises and legitimacy, considering factors such as stakeholder engagement, digital media influence, and cultural contexts. Hence, by constructing innovative models and applying emerging theories, scholars can deepen the understanding of brand crisis management and legitimacy restoration.

Such efforts will not only bridge existing gaps but also propel the field toward new horizons, thereby contributing to the advancement of branding literature and practice. Researchers are thus urged to seize this opportunity to advance theoretical insights that reflect the evolving nature of branding in today's complex environment. Engaging in this endeavor should therefore enable scholars to provide valuable guidance to practitioners navigating brand crises and striving to maintain or restore brand legitimacy.

#### 5.4 Managerial recommendations

The insights from our systematic literature review on brand crisis (Figure 1, Study 1) and brand legitimacy (Figure 2, Study 2) offer valuable guidance for managers seeking to navigate the complexities of brand management. Although joint studies on both brand crisis and legitimacy are scarce, with only three relevant studies appearing in premier journals (Study 3), the existing literature provides a good foundation for developing effective strategies.

To proactively manage brand crises, managers must understand the antecedents that can precipitate such events. Performance-related crises often arise from issues like defective products, health and safety concerns, or product recalls, resulting from both algorithmic malfunctions and human errors. Value-related crises stem from communication failures, lack of transparency, or unethical organizational behaviors that lead to moral harm. Recognizing these causes enables managers to implement preventive measures such as ethical compliance

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programs, stringent quality control systems, and transparent communication policies, thereby reducing the likelihood of crises occurring.

In preparing for potential crises, managers should consider remedial factors that influence stakeholder perceptions and reactions. Attribution of blame plays a significant role, wherein internal blame can exacerbate negative sentiments while external blame may deflect some criticism. Strengthening brand-related factors like brand identity, equity, and attachment builds a reservoir of goodwill that buffers against crises. Demonstrating accountability, engaging in timely and transparent communication, and outlining clear remedial actions are essential to mitigating negative impacts.

Understanding the mediators of brand crisis is crucial for crafting effective recovery strategies. Crisis-focused mediators, including attributions of crisis responsibility and perceptions of severity, shape how stakeholders interpret the event. Addressing these perceptions directly by providing clear and factual information reduces misinformation and manages stakeholder expectations. Stakeholder-focused mediators like brand authenticity, brand trustworthiness, and perceived ethicality influence forgiveness and the rebuilding of trust. Managers should focus on sincere dialogues with stakeholders by demonstrating a genuine commitment to rectifying issues and preventing future occurrences.

Moderators can amplify or attenuate the effects of a brand crisis, which imply that managers must navigate these carefully. Crisis-focused moderators such as the credibility of information sources and the nature of crisis messages require strategic management of media relations and messaging. For instance, ensuring that communications are disseminated through credible channels enhances trust. Stakeholder-focused moderators, including brand loyalty, consumer expectations, and prior beliefs, highlight the importance of nurturing strong customer relationships before any crisis occurs. Tailoring responses to account for consumer personalities, cultural differences, and levels of brand attachment enhances the effectiveness of crisis management efforts.

The consequences of a brand crisis extend beyond immediate financial losses to affect brand reputation, loyalty, and stakeholder relationships. Managers should proactively monitor changes in consumer attitudes, brand avoidance behaviors, and negative word-of-mouth. Implementing strategies to rebuild brand loyalty and trust is vital, which may include demonstrating long-term commitment to stakeholders, engaging in community initiatives, and offering compensation or remedies. Internally, supporting employees and enhancing crisis coordination efforts strengthen organizational resilience and ensure consistent messaging.

Enhancing brand legitimacy requires addressing its antecedents and understanding how consumers perceive and validate the brand within societal contexts. Factors such as corporate reputation, perception of social responsibility, and alignment with social values contribute significantly to brand legitimacy. Managers should engage in authentic CSR initiatives and communicate these efforts effectively. Recognizing the influence of market dynamics and materiality assists in positioning the brand favorably within the competitive landscape.

Mediators of brand legitimacy, such as consumer and institutional perceptions, affect how legitimacy is constructed and maintained. Managers should foster positive consumer perceptions by aligning brand values with those of the target audience and demonstrating sensitivity to ethical cultures. Implementing governance strategies that emphasize relational aspects strengthens institutional support and enhances legitimacy pressure positively.

Moderators like brand loyalty and emotions play a significant role in shaping brand legitimacy outcomes. Cultivating strong emotional connections with consumers enhances perceived legitimacy. Managers should address consumers' vulnerabilities and manage emotional responses by fostering positive emotions like hope and mitigating negative ones like fear. Tailoring communication and marketing strategies to evoke appropriate emotional responses reinforces the brand's legitimacy.

Understanding the manifestations of brand legitimacy—including cognitive, moral, and pragmatic dimensions, among others—allows managers to address legitimacy comprehensively. Ensuring that the brand is perceived as beneficial, competent, and ethical

to stakeholders enhances overall legitimacy. Integrating practices that reinforce these perceptions, such as demonstrating tangible social benefits, engaging in ethical business practices, and maintaining high-quality standards, is essential.

Integrating insights from both brand crisis and brand legitimacy studies provides a holistic approach to brand management. Managers should not only prepare for and effectively manage crises but also proactively build and maintain brand legitimacy to strengthen resilience. Aligning brand strategies with stakeholder expectations and societal norms enables organizations to foster long-term trust and support, mitigating the impact of potential crises.

To this end, managers are encouraged to refer to [Figure 1](#) (Study 1) and [Figure 2](#) (Study 2) for a detailed understanding of the various factors influencing brand crisis and legitimacy. Comprehensively addressing the antecedents, mediators, moderators, and consequences outlined in these studies allows managers to develop robust strategies that enhance brand resilience and sustain stakeholder trust in an increasingly complex market environment.

### 5.5 Limitations and suggestions for future reviews

Notwithstanding the retrospective and prospective insights and contributions of the present review, several limitations exist, which could pave the way for alternative reviews in this field.

*First*, the present review is limited to insights on brand crisis and legitimacy research within premier journals (“A\*” or “A”). While this approach prioritizes novelty and rigor in line with the recommendation of [Paul et al. \(2021\)](#), it inherently narrows the literature scope. A broader selection, inclusive of emerging journals and conference proceedings, might yield a more expansive body of literature. Future reviews seeking to address this gap should consider extending their search to additional databases (e.g. EBSCO, ProQuest, Scopus, Web of Science) and sources (e.g. books, conferences, journals). With a modestly expanded corpus (e.g. an increase of 100–200 articles), content analysis remains feasible. However, managing significantly larger datasets (e.g. hundreds or thousands of articles) would necessitate more scalable review techniques, such as bibliometric analysis, to maintain an objective and systematic approach ([Donthu et al., 2021](#); [Mukherjee et al., 2022](#)). In this context, database selection would ideally be limited to those providing reliable bibliometric data (e.g. Scopus, Web of Science) to streamline analysis and avoid extensive manual coding. For combining and refining bibliometric datasets, we recommend consulting the latest procedural guidelines, such as those by [Lim et al. \(2024\)](#). This approach would facilitate efficient and robust data handling for future reviews operating on a larger scale.

*Second*, the present review is limited to a high-level summary of sources, theories, methods, and characteristics (antecedents, mediators, moderators, and consequences) relating to brand crisis and legitimacy research. While this overview is inarguably seminal and state of the art due to its coverage (period, scope) and quality (sources), it does not consolidate any potential contradictions or inconsistencies that may exist among the relationships between the concepts revealed through this review—mainly due to the lack of quantitative studies with a sufficient number of correlations for each relationship (i.e. a minimum of three correlations per relationship is typically needed for meta-analytic aggregation; [Ladeira et al., 2025](#)). With fewer than three correlations, the meta-analysis results may lack statistical power and robustness, making it challenging to draw generalizable conclusions. However, more than three studies is often preferred, especially in fields with high variability in sample sizes and study designs, as this allows for a more accurate estimation of effect sizes and for exploring potential moderators or sources of heterogeneity. In this regard, future reviews that seek to address this gap should consider pursuing a meta-analysis, which is an alternative review technique focused on gathering statistical information required to compute the effect size and establish the direction and significance of studied relationships, including any potential confounds or heterogeneity that may exist ([Kraus et al., 2022](#); [Lim et al., 2022](#); [Paul and Barari, 2022](#)).

Taken collectively, the study herein should serve as a useful starting point to gain a snapshot of the progress and scope of knowledge on brand crisis and legitimacy as well as the promising avenues to advance knowledge in this space using conceptual, empirical, and review methods.

### Notes

1. This is an original, comprehensive definition that (1) the authors propose upfront to set the tone for the conceptualization of brand crisis espoused in this article, and (2) is based on the multifaceted distinctions of brand crisis in the literature exemplified throughout the article.
2. Given the richness in the concepts and relationships in the extant literature on brand crisis, only a high-level discussion is provided based on the overview presented in [Figure 1](#).
3. Given the richness in the concepts and relationships in the extant literature on brand legitimacy, only a high-level discussion of brand legitimacy as an outcome is provided based on the overview presented in [Figure 2](#).

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