

# Assessing Consumers' brand loyalty after a brand crisis: A case of Listeria in KwaZulu-Natal

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## ABSTRACT

Brand crises are unexpected and any organisation can be exposed to a brand crisis. Existing research on brands in crisis focus mostly on the effectiveness of the organisation's response. However, there is limited research on the effect of a brand crisis on consumer's brand loyalty. This study aims to examine the impact of a brand crisis on a consumer's brand loyalty, with the Listeriosis crisis used as a case study. A quantitative research method was used to collect data from 384 randomly selected food retail store shoppers at Empangeni and Richards Bay in KwaZulu-Natal, through the use of questionnaires. The findings reveal that females and males differ significantly and high-income earners expressed loyalty to Rainbow and Enterprise even after the Listeriosis crisis because of their reliability, the unique products that they offer, and the fact that they satisfy their customer needs. Findings also showed that customers remain loyal even after a brand crisis. The research was limited to uMhlathuze municipality thus it cannot be generalised. The brand crisis was limited to the Listeriosis case. This study contributes to the literature on brand management by examining why consumers remain loyal to certain brands even after a crisis. This study also provides insight into how organisations can prepare for a crisis because there is no organisation immune to a brand crisis. The research concludes that because of the strong relationship that consumers have with brands, the former is less affected by crises. Moreover, the positive prior beliefs towards brands faced with a product-harm crisis, lead to less blame from consumers. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that brand loyalty far outweighs temporal crises. Organisations should build strong and positive relationships with consumers through engaging in corporate social responsibility activities and should also have a crisis management team to handle product-harm crises.

**Keywords:** Brand loyalty, Listeriosis, product-harm crisis, crisis management

## INTRODUCTION

The pertinent question is why do consumers remain loyal to brands even after a brand crisis? Brand crises are always unexpected and no organization is immune to a brand crisis. Every organization has an equal chance of going through one (Holmes, 2011). The most important point to note when it comes to brand crises is that they are all different and they affect organisations in different ways. For example, the H&M crisis, where the company was found to promote racism through a 'monkey' sweatshirt ad (West, 2018) is not the same as the Ford Kuga crisis where their cars were catching fire while on the road (Hosken & Knowler, 2017). These two crises are different, and the damages

they cause differ. The H&M crisis is a value-related crisis. A value-related crisis does not directly involve the product instead it involves the social and ethical issues surrounding the values exposed by the brand (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). The Ford crisis is a product-harm crisis, and this type of crisis occurs when products are found to be defective or dangerous. A product-harm crisis can cause major revenue and market-share losses, and it can also lead to costly product recalls. The Ford crisis and the Listeriosis crisis are both product-harm crises. Product-harm crises are problematic because they can result in serious damages such as injuries to consumers (Idas, 2018).

Product-harm crises can destroy the organisation's public image along with its reputation and they can also result in the lack of consumer's confidence in the affected brand (Idas, 2018). Product-harm crises are known for dominating the public and media space since they are seen as well-publicised incidents where products are found to be defective or dangerous to human health (Yannopoulou, Koronis & Elliott, 2011). A crisis like this can harm the brand equity of an organisation by weakening brand confidence and reducing the likelihood of brand consideration and choice (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). This crisis is similar to a competence-based crisis propagated by Votolato and Unnava (2006, cited in Li & Wei, 2016). This emanates from companies' competence in making a product. For example, using cheaper raw materials which result in product failure. The main focus of this study is the Listeriosis crisis, a product-harm crisis that South Africa was faced with between 2017 – 2018 (Van der Vyver, 2018). According to Idas (2018), *Listeria monocytogenes* is the kind of bacteria found in water, soil and in animals such as poultry as well as cattle.

Uncooked vegetables and ready-to-eat processed meat products like viennas and polonies have the highest risk of *Listeria* (Donovan, 2015). *Listeria* translates to Listeriosis disease when contaminated foods or water is consumed (Donovan, 2015; Carpentier & Cerf, 2011; Idas, 2018). A *Listeria* bacterium was found at two Enterprise processed meat factories and at one Rainbow Chicken polony factory. This was presented on the 3rd of March 2018 by the National Institute for Communicable Disease (NICD), along with the other partners they were working with. The Listeriosis crisis resulted in consumers falling ill, and it destroyed the public image along with the reputation of the organisation (Idas, 2018). Moreover, the Listeriosis crisis resulted in market-share losses and it also led to costly product recalls which Rainbow and Enterprise had to embark on. A crisis like this, has a negative impact with regards to marketing the brand. Branding is an aspect of marketing, and marketing is all about creating customer value and satisfaction (Kotler et al., 2015). This is supported by Drummond and Ensor (2005) who posit that the most crucial aspect of marketing is that the needs of the consumers must be met and understood mainly because this is where the success stems from.

Consumers play an important role when it comes to brands because the strength of every brand is highly influenced by the perceptions that the consumers have about that particular brand (Sago, 2014). The perceptions of consumers about brands are based on the experiences they have had with the product or service (Sago, 2014). Through social media, consumers have a major influence on marketing content (Heinonen, 2011). Moreover, Heinonen (2011) states that consumers consume content, share knowledge with other consumers and participate in discussions. Negative information about a brand can cause changes in consumer's attitude and emotions and that can damage brand equity (Joen & Baeck, 2016). Branding is an aspect of marketing that entails creating a bond between a consumer and the brand, meanwhile, brand trust is considered as the main ingredient for this bond (Yannopoulou et al., 2011). A brand crisis, therefore, poses a threat to brand trust, brand loyalty and brand image (Park & Lee, 2013).

Eventually, consumer behaviour is also influenced by a brand crisis (Yannopoulou et al., 2013). Thus, the objective of this study is to understand why consumers remain loyal to brands even after a crisis. The next section of this study will present the review of the literature as well as spell out the theory upon which the research question is anchored. Following this, the study will then present the research methods that were used to collect the data as well as the methods of data analysis. This section will then be followed by a discussion of the data, and we will then present the results drawn from the findings.

## **Research objectives**

- To investigate the impact of the listeriosis crisis on brand loyalty.
- To investigate whether or not consumers continued to purchase from the affected brands after the Listeriosis crisis occurred.

## CONCEPTUAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Attribution theory*

The attribution theory states that individuals are motivated to search for the causes of unexpected and negative events, and these attributions of responsibility can involve negative emotions and reactions (Bundy et al, 2016). Through the use of the attribution theory, Coombs & Holladay (2005) found that sympathy and anger are salient emotions in crisis management. These two emotions have a direct link to perceptions of responsibility after a product-harm crisis. Previous studies have confirmed the importance of attribution theory in crises. One of those studies includes the study conducted by Gistri et al, (2018) which adopted the attribution theory to investigate the interaction effect between brand identification and personal crisis relevance on consumers emotional reactions to a fashion brand crisis. Xie & Keh (2016) also adopted the attribution theory and reveal that brand reputation impacts the effects of promotion programs on consumer response to a product-harm crisis. Moreover, Whelan & Dawar (2016), found that the attachment style of consumers which can either be fearful or secure affects the attributions of blame in cases of a product-harm crisis.

Emotions play an important role in the attribution theory (Gistri et al, 2018). They affect the consumer's intention to act. For example, angry consumers can act against the company responsible for a crisis by decreasing their intention to buy its products, increasing negative word-of-mouth, and developing a more negative attitude towards the company (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Consumers that share a strong positive relationship with brands affected by a crisis defend the brand and they continue to purchase from those brands even after a crisis.

### *Brands*

The most valuable asset that an organisation possesses is its brand. Organisations must manage the value of those brands, and make it the entity's top priority. Brands are known to be the carriers of information because they provide consumers with information concerning the quality and origin of the brands (Mishra, 2011). Brands also make it possible for consumers to be able to identify and recognise products that belong to particular brands (Mishra, 2011). This then makes brands very sensitive when it comes to the perceptions of the public which now more than ever makes them very important to their holders (Salvador & Ikeda, 2017).

Pike (2017), posits that the observations of manifestations by consumers assist consumers in understanding brands better. The past experiences that consumers have with particular brands serve as a reminder of those brands, and these past experiences influence the consumer's decision to purchase in future (Reddy, 2017). The past experiences that consumers have with brands can either be positive or negative. The positive experiences ensure that consumers purchase from the same brand in future (Reddy, 2017). A brand can also be defined as something that is known to have a unique design, symbol, word or sign that organisations use to differentiate their products or services from other products or services (Pike, 2017).

### *Brand loyalty*

When the needs of consumers are satisfied in a manner that best reaches their desires to the fullest potential, this results in brand loyalty (Toklu & Kucuk, 2017). Besides, Hongwei, Yan & Lloyd (2012) explain brand loyalty, by indicating that when a consumer makes purchases of the same brand for some time due to the satisfaction of their desired needs, the reward that the consumer gives to that organisation results in the continued support for a long period. The findings from a UK study conducted by Veloutsou (2015), which had a sample size of 189 respondents, shows that the strength of the consumer-brand relationship is a very strong predictor of brand loyalty.

Exposure to negative information about a brand can have a negative influence on brand loyalty, corporate credibility and corporate asset values (Park & Lee, 2013). When consumers are loyal to a brand, it means that they become attached to the brand; a crisis can have a negative influence on brand attachment. This is supported by a study that was conducted by Park & Lee (2013) in Korea where 480 questionnaires were collected from people who purchased from grocery brands that were once faced with a crisis. One of those crises happened in 2008 when rat heads were found inside Shrimp snacks. The other one was the melamine crisis where industrial plastics chemical was added during milk processing which resulted in 296,000 children falling ill after consumption of such milk. The findings from

this study reveal that when a crisis occurs, consumers who are emotionally attached to a brand feel more betrayed and disappointed compared to the consumers that are not attached to a brand (Park & Lee, 2013).

Moreover, the findings from a study conducted in Australia by Matzler et al, (2006) which aimed at investigating the moderating effects of some consumer characteristics on the value-brand trust-brand loyalty chain, reveal that consumers' brand loyalty is important for companies to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage. This is because it gives companies some protection from competitors. The study of Matzler et al., (2006) further reveal that the impact of brand trust on purchase loyalty is significantly stronger for women. It was also found that, for women, other trust-building factors such as product knowledge or interaction with the salesperson are more relevant when it comes to brand loyalty (Matzler et al, 2006).

Besides, the study undertaken by Matzler et al, (2006) also demonstrated that brand loyalty is strongly influenced by consumer involvement, price consciousness and brand consciousness. During a product-harm crisis, competitors interfere and they make it a point to weaken the affected products by increasing their advertising while some competitors even reduce their prices, this can have a negative influence on brand loyalty (Siomkos et al, 2010). Attribution theory states that people attempt to understand the behaviour of others by attributing feelings, beliefs, and intentions to them. Consumers may be angered or feel sympathy when a product does not perform its function. The attachment style of consumers (whether fearful or secure) affects the attributions of blame in cases of a product-harm crisis Gistri, Corciolani & Pace (2018). Thus, customers who remain loyal to a brand do so because they sympathise with the brand and are comfortable with the company's previous performance.

According to Yannopoulou et al., (2011), trust increases brand loyalty and leads to commitment in a business-to-business situation. Further, Yannopoulou et al, (2011) indicate that trust becomes operational only when the trusting parties are vulnerable; and for this to happen the parties are to be involved in risk-taking behaviour for the vulnerability to exist. Consumers' trust is put to the test when an organisation is faced with a crisis. Research in interpersonal relationships reveal that simple denials after a brand's crisis are less effective when it comes to restoring consumers trust in the brand (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Moreover, the research also reveal that an apology and explanation has a positive impact on restoring trust regardless of whether it is weak or strong (Dutta & Pullig, 2011).

### *The effect of corporate social responsibility to brand loyalty*

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was first defined by Carroll in 1979 (Lacap., Cham & Lim 2021). Carroll (1979) proposed four responsibilities that businesses should fulfill – economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic (Lacap et al, 2021). Economic responsibility refers to the idea that a company needs to achieve its shareholders' profitability, Legal responsibility is the fulfillment of legal requirements for a company's financial activities (Carroll, 1979; Khan and Fatma, 2019). Ethical responsibility means that a firm must behave appropriately and function based on society's expectations and philanthropic responsibility is the obligation of a firm to participate in society's welfare (Carroll, 1979; Khan and Fatma, 2019). CSR is regarded as a good strategic marketing tool and it has a significant impact on consumer behaviour (He & Lai, 2014). Recent studies have highlighted the importance of CSR to enhance a long-term competitive advantage for the organisation (He & Lai, 2014; Lacap et al, 2021; Akbari, Nazarian, Foroudi, Seyyed Amiri, & Ezatabadipoor, 2021 ). Moreover, previous literature reveal that CSR has been regarded as an important publicity tool that directly impacts brand loyalty (Werther and Chandler, 2005). In marketing, brand loyalty has been considered as one of the significant desired outcomes for many of the firms due to its positive impacts on organisations. A study conducted by (Lacap et al., 2021), which aimed to investigate the relationship between CSR and brand loyalty show that CSR positively and significantly influences brand loyalty.

### *Brand equity theory*

The research is also based on the brand equity theory (Keller, 1993) which indicates that consumers derive functional and symbolic benefits from a brand. Brand crises can thus emanate from performance-related crises/ product-harm crises and values-related crises. This research is based on a product-harm crisis that emanates from products that are defective or dangerous thus reducing the ability of a brand to provide functional benefits (Li & Wei 2016). Brand equity is something that is known to reside within consumers instead or residing within a brand (Raggio

& Leone, 2007). On the other hand, Sago (2014) defines brand equity as a bond that is found to exist between the brand and its customers, and is highly influenced by the level of loyalty that consumers have towards the brand. This is supported by the findings from the research undertaken in Syria by Alhaddad (2014) which had a sample size of 204 students which reveal that brand loyalty has a positive effect on brand equity. Brand equity is too fragile because it is founded on consumer's beliefs and is outside the control of management (Gao et al, 2011). Therefore, negative information about a brand can have an adverse influence on an organisations brand equity (Yannopoulou et. al, 2011). Previous studies show that a brand crisis can harm organisations brand equity by weakening consumers' brand confidence, reducing the likelihood of brand consideration and choice, which ends up harming the growth, profit and survival of an organisation (Yannopoulou et. al, 2011; Park & Lee, 2013; Dutta & Pullig 2011).

### *Brands in crisis*

The kind of situation where a consumer starts making negative judgements about a particular brand while becoming suspicious at the same time is known as a brand crisis (Haiying & Gouliang, 2013). Brand crises have an impact on organisations. Furthermore, Yannopoulou, et al., (2011) indicate that crises in organisations are defined as unexpected and unfortunate events waiting to happen. Moreover, Salvador et al., (2015) indicate that a brand crisis does not only affect organisations financially; it also affects the stakeholders of the organisations emotionally and physically. It has become extremely difficult to deal with a brand crisis due to the easy circulation of information that consumers share. Brands have become sensitive to the perceptions and opinions of consumers since they possess the power to potentially destroy them (Salvador & Ikeda, 2017).

The things that might initiate a brand crisis include design errors, defective products, product recalls, and manufacturing faults along with marketing mistakes (Yannopoulou et al., 2011). All of this, results in consumers being exposed to negative information about brands (Joen & Baeck, 2016). Negative information about a brand can damage brand equity by changing the consumer's attitude and emotions (Joen & Baeck, 2016). The findings from previous studies reveal that negative information about a brand can result in negative corporate associations (Idas 2018; Einwiller et al., 2006; Joen & Baeck, 2016). However, there are different types of brand crises and they all impact organisations differently.

### *The Listeriosis crisis in South Africa*

*Listeria monocytogenes* is the kind of bacteria found in water, soil and in animals such as poultry as well as cattle (Idas, 2018). Uncooked vegetables and ready-to-eat processed meat products like viennas and polonies have the highest risk of *Listeria* (Donovan, 2015). *Listeria* translates to Listeriosis disease when contaminated foods or water is consumed (Donovan, 2015; Carpentier & Cerf, 2011; Idas, 2018). In the United States, Listeriosis disease is regarded as the third leading cause of death by food poisoning (Schweon, 2015). In Europe, the Listeriosis disease is rated as the second leading cause of death by food poisoning while Salmonellosis is the leading cause of death by food poisoning (Idas, 2018).

In South Africa, an outbreak of Listeriosis, a serious foodborne disease has been ongoing since the start of 2017, between 1 January 2017 through 14 March 2018 (Idas, 2018). From 1st January 2017 to 14th March 2018, it was confirmed that there were 978 lab-confirmed cases of *Listeria* reported to the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and the number included all of the provinces in South Africa (Idas, 2018). According to Idas (2018), the statistics show that the majority of the cases were from 3 provinces, namely: Gauteng with 581 people (59%) while Western Cape came second with 118 people (12%), 70 (7%) people came from KwaZulu-Natal and lastly, the remaining 978 cases came from the other provinces in South Africa. According to Van der Vyver (2018), when the Listeriosis outbreak ended on 4th July 2018, there were 1 056 cases of ill people recorded and 214 people died. According to the media statement issued by the Minister of Health on 3rd September 2018, the Listeriosis disease was triggered by *Listeria*. A *Listeria* bacterium was found at two Enterprise processing meat factories and one Rainbow Chicken polony factory.

A brand crisis has an impact on brand loyalty (Ruan, 2016). Brand loyalty has been endorsed by literature and marketing experts as an intangible asset for an organisation. According to Ruan (2016), the most crucial questions

to be addressed after a crisis are: what kind of role does brand loyalty play during a crisis? Does strong brand loyalty help or harm a company going through a crisis? Ruan (2016), posits that professionals believe strong brand loyalty can empower a company to overcome the crisis. However, the author also argues that in some cases, strong brand loyalty does not shield a company from a crisis, instead it can become a liability because high expectations of loyal customers were not met.

Outbreaks of listeriosis have caused fatalities, massive well-publicized recalls, costing the food industry heavy financial losses and a damaged reputation (Walpuck, 2018). The aforementioned outbreak is an example of a brand crisis in the form of a product recall. Product recalls in the food industry are faced with different reactions. Research on the impact of Listeriosis on brand loyalty indicate that food safety reputation (in terms of confidence and consumers' expectation) is strongly correlated with food category and its mainly related to ingredients and presence of a certification (Cane, 2018). Research conducted on food product recall show that loyal customers tend to stay with affected products while delaying repurchases of these products (Byun et al., 2020). Consumers are more forgiving, tolerant and less scared when recalls are for heavily processed products rather than on organic or healthy products as such products are regarded as high risk (Cane, 2018). Another school of thought posit that product recall can improve a company's image if the company adopts a socially responsible attitude and is consistent and coherent in its communication, and transparent in its relationships with media and consumers (Cane, 2018). Strong brand loyalty does not shield the company, however, it can become a liability to the company as customers have high expectations (Roan, 2016). On the other hand, the strength of brand loyalty a company possesses determines the potential of overcoming a brand crisis.

Product harm crisis can ruin brand equity, tarnish product reputation, affect brand confidence, brand trust and brand loyalty (Cane, 2018; Haslam, n.d). Moreover, Cane (2018) posited that product recalls not only harm brand confidence but the public's general perception of the food industry as a whole, where food products are involved. The reaction or response of a company during a brand crisis plays a role in increasing or decreasing brand loyalty (Smith et al., 2016; Cane, 2018). Companies that react promptly, positively and efficiently during a brand crisis can maintain brand loyalty or may suffer less brand damage even after a serious brand crisis (Haslam n.d; Smith, et al. 2019). Alternatively, companies that react negatively may experience brand erosion as experienced by Tiger brands who were considered to be defensive in their reaction, thus leading to their reputation being tarnished. Tiger Brands remained in denial for a long period before they accepted accountability, this caused an uproar on Twitter (van der Vyver, 2018). There is therefore the need for more research on how brand crises have an impact on brand loyalty.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a quantitative research approach through the use of survey questionnaires from customers of food retail stores in the uMhlathuze region. The data was collected from 384 respondents who are shoppers at Empangeni centre and the Richards Bay malls respectively; with the main focus being on three food retail stores which are: Shoprite, Pick 'n Pay and Checkers. The reason for using questionnaires was due to the nature of the study which required data to be collected from the malls. The questions in the questionnaire were closed-ended because it was quicker and easier for consumers to complete the questionnaires since malls are very busy and as a result, people do not have much time to spend on something that they think will not benefit them.

According to Statistics South Africa census 2019/2020 figures, the population for the uMhlathuze region is 384 449 (Stats S.A, 2020). The population for this study was based on the shoppers that frequently visit Shoprite, Checkers and Pick 'n Pay at Empangeni (Sanlam Centre) and Richards Bay (Boardwalk) respectively. According to the Richards Bay Boardwalk management, an estimated 1.2 million customers frequent Boardwalk on a rotational monthly basis and according to the Sanlam Centre management, 700 000 customers frequent Sanlam Centre rotationally every month.

This study employed a convenience sampling approach where the sample size is chosen based on the convenience of the researcher (Acharya, Prakash, Saxena & Nigam, 2013). This was done because the nature of the study required participants from the malls and it was not realistic that every member that visited these malls was going to have a known chance of being selected. The sampling unit for this study is the food retail store shoppers at Empangeni (Sanlam Centre) and Richards Bay (Boardwalk mall). The respondents were 18 years of age and above.

With reference to Uma Sekaran's sampling table, if the population size is more than 75 000, the sample size should be 384 (Sekaran, 2003). According to the store managers at Empangeni, the population of customers that frequent Shoprite, Pick 'n Pay and Checkers is 138 000, 27 129 and 106 454 respectively. At Richards Bay, Shoprite has 82 660 while Pick 'n Pay has 36 400 and lastly Checkers has 15 208 customers that frequent their stores every month. Consequently, the sample size for this study was 384, as the population size was greater than 75 000.

### Data analysis and interpretation

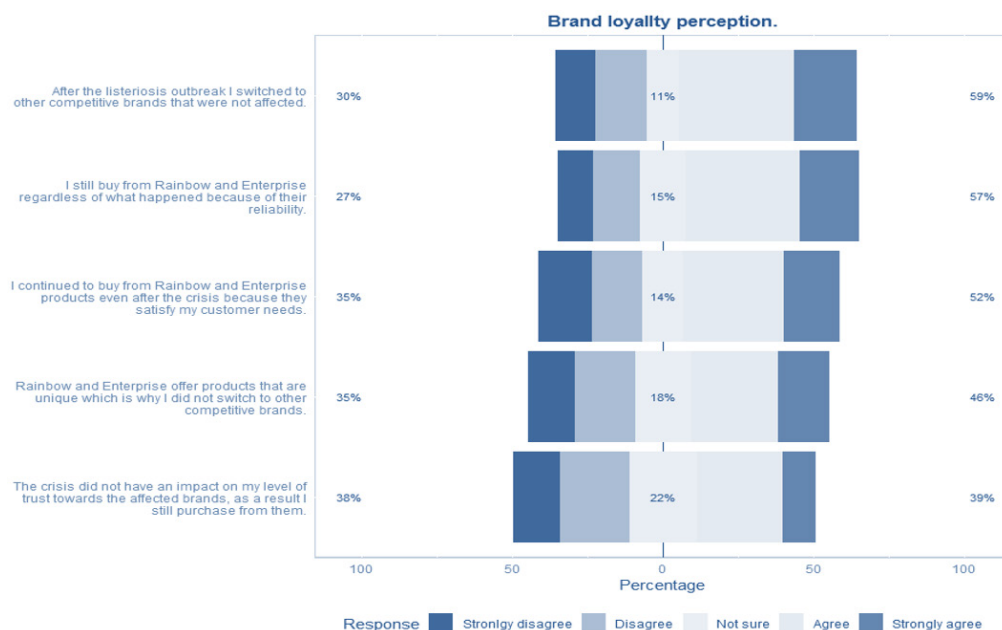
The researcher used the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 24 to analyse data. The researcher made use of descriptive and some inferential stats. According to Maree (2016), statistical inference is when the findings from the sample data are used to generalise or draw conclusions about a particular population. The researcher coded the data on SPSS and the analyses were presented using bar graphs, pie charts, percentages and cross-tabulations. The researcher also used statistical mean, mode and median in the data analysis. The minimum and maximum values were also outlined. Moreover, the researcher also employed Correlation analysis to determine the significant correlation and the significant difference between the variables.

## FINDINGS

Objective 1: To investigate the impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand loyalty.

This objective was addressed through a Five-point Likert type scale of 1 – 5 where 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = not sure, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree

**FIGURE 1**  
**THE IMPACT OF THE LISTERIOSIS CRISIS ON BRAND LOYALTY**



Five statements were used to address the research objective in terms of brand loyalty, as illustrated in Figure 1 above. Based on Figure 1, it can be observed that 198 consumers (52%) indicate that they continued to buy from Rainbow and Enterprise after the Listeriosis crisis because they felt these brands satisfy their needs, while 133 consumers (35%) disagreed with the statement. The findings also reveal that 152 consumers (39%) felt that the crisis did not have an impact on their level of trust towards the affected brands, and as a result, they still purchase from them. However, 147 consumers (38%) disagreed and strongly disagreed with the statement. These findings suggest that consumers are still loyal to the affected brands hence some indicated they still purchase from them because of their reliability, albeit that the majority is not in overwhelming agreement. It may also suggest that customers' loyalty towards the brand was not affected because the product in itself may be regarded as heavily processed thus, customers in a way expected the product to be high risk (Cane, 2018).

**TABLE 1**  
**IMPACT OF THE LISTERIOSIS CRISIS ON BRAND LOYALTY**

Items	Label	Low (%)	Medium (%)	High (%)	Mean	Standard deviation
Item 1	After the listeriosis outbreak, I switched to other competitive brands that were not affected.	30	11	59	3.34	1.339
Item 2	I still buy from Rainbow and Enterprise regardless of what happened because of their reliability.	27	15	57	3.38	1.283
Item 3	I continued to buy from Rainbow and Enterprise products even after the crisis because they satisfy my customer needs.	35	14	52	3.18	1.387
Item 4	Rainbow and Enterprise offer products that are unique which is why I did not switch to other competitive brands.	35	19	46	3.12	1.338
Item 5	The crisis did not have an impact on my level of trust towards the affected brands, as a result, I still purchase from them.	38	22	39	2.97	1.252

According to the grading in Table 1, if consumers obtained a mean score of 2.5 and less, it indicates that consumers were between disagree and strongly disagree concerning the items measuring the impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand loyalty. Meanwhile, 2.6 to 3.5 indicate that they were neutral, while 3.6 and more, indicate customers were between agree and strongly agree to the items measuring the impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand loyalty. According to Table 1 above, it can be observed that all of the mean scores are between 2.6 and 3.5 (item 1; 3.34, item 2; 3.38, item 3; 3.18, item 4; 3.12 and item 5 2.97). These findings suggest that the consumers were indifferent to all of the 5 items used to determine the impact of the Listeriosis crisis on brand loyalty. These findings suggest that consumers were affected by the crisis. However, they are still loyal to the affected brands. Although the respondents would have been expected to have negative sentiments to the brand crisis, the mean scores of the items above suggest that consumers were indifferent. This may be a sign of existing and prior loyalty to the brand.

Research objective 2: To investigate if consumers continued to purchase from the affected brands after the Listeriosis crisis occurred.

A large portion of consumers (75%) indicate that they still purchase from Rainbow and Enterprise. Meanwhile, 25% of the consumers indicate they no longer purchase from Rainbow and Enterprise. These findings support the above assumptions regarding loyalty to these brands after the crisis. They reveal that consumers still purchase from the affected brands even after they knew what transpired. This could be a result of the company's positive reaction during a brand crisis.

The tables below present the correlation of the impact of the listeriosis crisis on brand loyalty against gender, level of income and the level of education.

**TABLE 2**  
**CORRELATION OF THE IMPACT OF THE LISTERIOSIS CRISIS ON BRAND LOYALTY AGAINST GENDER**

	Male		Female		Sig. (F)	Correlation	
	Mean	Std. deviation	Mean	Std. deviation		Rho	Sig.
Brand loyalty	2.06	0.849	2.25	0.782	0.019**	0.115	0.024**

Based on Table 2, it can be observed that there was a positive ( $\rho = 0.115$ ) significant correlation of (0.024) between gender and brand loyalty. Moreover, it can also be observed that there was a significant difference ( $p=0.019$ ) between gender and brand loyalty. These findings suggest that there is a difference in brand loyalty between males and females.



**TABLE 3**  
**CORRELATION OF THE IMPACT OF THE LISTERIOSIS CRISIS ON BRAND LOYALTY AGAINST THE LEVEL OF INCOME**

Impact of the crisis	Level of income	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D	Sig. (F)	Correlation	
							rho	Sig.
Brand Loyalty	R0 - R7200	2.10	2.00	3.00	0.807	0.001***	0.150	0.003***
	R7201 - R16500	2.13	2.00	3.00	0.871			
	R16501 - R33400	2.47	3.00	3.00	0.758			
	R33401 - R57400	2.50	2.50	2.00	0.535			
	R57400 and above	3.00	3.00	3.00	0.000			

The findings reveal that there was a positive ( $\rho = 0.150$ ) significant correlation of (0.003) between the level of income and brand loyalty. Moreover, it can be observed that there was a significant difference ( $p=0.001$ ) between the level of income and brand loyalty. From these findings, it can be observed that the correlation is positive and this suggests that as income increases, brand loyalty also increases. Correlation of the impact of the listeriosis crisis on brand loyalty against the level of education is displayed below in Table IV.

**TABLE 4**  
**CORRELATION OF IMPACT OF THE LISTERIOSIS CRISIS ON BRAND LOYALTY AGAINST THE LEVEL OF EDUCATION**

Impact of the Listeriosis crisis	Level of education	Mean	Median	Mode	S.D	Sig. (F)	Correlation	
							rho	Sig.
Brand Loyalty	Primary school	1.67	2.00	2.00	0.500	0.035**	-0.024	0.635
	High school	2.15	2.00	3.00	0.802			
	Diploma	2.39	3.00	3.00	0.791			
	Bachelor degree	2.13	2.00	3.00	0.808			
	Postgraduate	2.09	2.00	3.00	0.883			

The findings reveal that there was no significant correlation between the level of education and brand loyalty. However, it can be observed that there was a significant difference ( $p=0.035$ ) between the level of education and brand loyalty. This means that although brand loyalty does not increase as education increases, there was a significant difference between the different levels of education and brand loyalty.

## DISCUSSIONS

### *Brand loyalty*

The findings from this study reveal that consumers were affected by the crisis because some consumers stopped purchasing from the affected brands after the crisis, however, majority of the consumers are still somewhat loyal to the affected brands. Consumers highlight that they still purchase from the affected brands (Rainbow and Enterprise) after the Listeriosis crisis because of their reliability (221 consumers), the unique products that they offer and the fact that they satisfy their customer needs (see Figure I). This may display loyal customers' willingness to forgive or tolerate a strong brand because of the type of products it produces, a heavily processed brand (Cane, 2018). The findings from this present study also reveal that although consumers were affected by the Listeriosis crisis, they are still loyal to the affected brands hence they continued purchasing from them. This supports the argument that loyal customers tend to stay with affected products while delaying repurchases of these products (Byun. et al. 2020).

These findings also suggest that the respondents had a strong relationship with the affected brands. Moreover, confirming the findings of this current study, the findings from a UK study conducted by Veloutsou (2015) reveal that the strength of the consumer-brand relationship is a very strong predictor of brand loyalty. It was observed that the

strong connection or relationship that consumers had with the affected brands resulted in brand loyalty. Rainbow and Enterprise were able to build brand loyalty through satisfying the needs of the consumers and being reliable, paying attention to customer care and staying honest with the consumers (Wiese, 2014). Perhaps, the main reason why consumers are loyal to Rainbow is that the organisation is a relationship-based enterprise hence they make a serious effort towards ensuring that they participate in corporate social responsibility and they do that through social investment programmes which include education and health (KZN-top-businesses, 2012). This may have been the reason why consumers were marginally positive in their reactions to these companies.

The loyalty of these consumers towards these brands can be explained by the fact that Rainbow developed a Corporate Social Responsibility(CSR) by supporting secondary school children from disadvantaged schools, funding them in improving Mathematics, Science and English along with providing their families with nutrition in the form of chicken (KZN-top-businesses, 2012). Moreover, Tiger Brands (Enterprise) supports transformation by advancing Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) along with the other initiatives. This confirms Cane's, (2018) argument that product recall can improve a company's image if the company adopts a socially responsible attitude and is consistent and coherent in its communication and transparent in its relationships with media and consumers.

In this present study, it was also found that there was a positive significant correlation between gender and brand loyalty (see Table II). Moreover, the findings also revealed that there was a significant difference between gender and brand loyalty (see table II). These findings suggest that there is a difference in brand loyalty between males and females. This is following the findings from a study undertaken by Matzler, Grabner-Krauter & Bidmon (2006) in Australia which aimed to investigate the moderating effect of some consumer characteristics on the value-brand, trust-brand loyalty chain, and revealed that the impact of brand trust on purchase loyalty is significantly stronger for women than men. The findings also reveal that for women other trust-building factors such as product knowledge or interaction with the salesperson are more relevant to create brand loyalty (Matzler et al, 2006). Although the statistical test does not support this, this could be the same for this study.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study aimed to examine why consumers remain loyal to brands even after a crisis, the main focus was on the Listeriosis crisis. The information was gathered from the literature that the consumers' response to a brand crisis is determined by the relationship they share with the brand along with the prior expectations they had about the brands. The literature shows that the stronger the relationships that consumers have with a brands the less affected they are by a brand crises. Moreover, the literature also indicates that positive prior beliefs towards brands faced with a product-harm crisis lead to less blame from consumers towards the brand.

The researcher concludes that organisations should always build a positive and strong relationship with their consumers and media and that can be done through engaging in corporate social responsibility activities. This is because crises are unexpected events that any organisation can be faced with; therefore, a positive relationship with the consumers can serve as a shield that deflects the potential reputational damage from a crisis. The literature also reveals that crises are always unexpected and there is no organisation immune to a crisis. Therefore, the researcher recommends that every organisation should have a crisis management team in place, in that way the damages caused by a crisis will be minimized because the organisation will be prepared for the crisis.

## **MANAGERIAL RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the findings contained in this study, it is suggested that although consumers stopped buying these brands immediately after the crisis, they continued to buy the products of these companies when it was all over, suggesting that this exhibited some sort of loyalty to the company. The literature suggests that building loyalty could be a significant contributor to insulating companies from permanent harm during a crisis. Therefore, organisations must emphasize loyalty-building programmes and invest in these so that when a crisis hits, it will only be a temporary short term setback. Also, how this crisis was handled will build more loyalty going forward. That is, when consumers perceive the organisation to have handled the crisis well then the more trust and confidence they will place on the

brand, all of these things combined lead to greater brand loyalty. Protocols need to be put in place to ensure that there is a blueprint for action should such a crisis besiege any organisation or entity in the future.

Organisations should build strong and positive relationships with consumers through engaging in corporate social responsibility activities, in that way consumers will even go to the extent of defending the brand during a crisis.

When responding to brand crises, organisations should at all-time present themselves as apologetic instead of being defensive, because consumers' response to a crisis is highly influenced by how the affected brands respond to a crisis. Additionally the company should be prompt, positive and efficient when responding to a brand crisis. Failure to do so may tarnish their image and reputation.

Considering the increase in crises, especially product-harm crisis, every organisation must have a crisis management team in place to act swiftly in the event of a potential brand crisis which may threaten the image and reputation of the organisation.

## FURTHER RESEARCH

Data from this study was sourced from a single province in South Africa (KwaZulu Natal which only had 70 cases of Listeriosis resulting in 7% of the cases), the Listeriosis crisis affected all of the provinces in South Africa. Consequently, biases may be introduced as a result of this approach. Therefore, an opportunity exists to extend the research approach to other affected provinces in South Africa like the Western Cape which had 581 cases of Listeriosis resulting in 59% which is far more than KZN. A multiple regression analysis could be used to indicate which factors have the greatest influence on consumer brand loyalty during a brand crisis.

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