

# Facebook Chatter During a Food Industry Product Harm Crisis

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The main goal of the study was to understand the extent to which discussions focused on the contaminated product versus the brands involved (measured by mentions of the cereal and the brands). To contribute to current literature on product harm in general and product harm in the food industry in particular, this study examined 6,894 Facebook discussions during the unfolding Unilever/Telma Salmonella-contaminated cereals 2016 crisis in Israel. During the three-month analysis, 2,894 conversations mentioned the contaminated product, followed by discussions of the role of "Unilever" (2,052) and "Telma" (1,897) in the crisis. While there were practically no conversations about the product or brands prior to the discussed

communication crisis, a spike in the number of conversations occurred when the crisis started. The study attempts to help fill the gap in the literature on studies of social media during unfolding product harm crises and to contribute to image restoration literature. The analysis displays the immediacy and severity of the damage for brands' image in the food industry in social media conversations during product harm crises. It also highlights the strategy of denial as inefficient in reducing attention against the brand facing image crisis.

*Keywords: Telma, Unilever, product harm, image crisis, Facebook*

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**P**roduct harm crisis pertains to cases in which a product is found defective or contaminated, often leading to recalls of the suspected product to prevent harming consumers (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). Not surprisingly, product harm crisis can highly affect brand reputation if not handled appropriately, as consumers sometimes perceive that the defect reflects on other products of the same brand (Laufer & Coombs, 2006). Importantly, the conversations of consumers during product harm crisis are dramatically more potent in the social networks era than in the traditional media era, as social media users' chatter can lead to coordinated consumers activism and sanctions such as initiatives to boycott all products of the brand (Hendel, Lach, & Spiegel, 2015; Shamir, 2017). Moreover, some have argued that in today's social media

environment consumers tell the story of the brand as much as do the brand owners (e.g., Gensler, Volckner, Liu-Thompkins, & Wiertz, 2013). Personal stories of how people or their loved ones were harmed by a company product during product harm crisis can prove disastrous for a brand. Thus, analyses of the social media chatter during product harm crisis are undoubtedly crucial for contemporary understanding of brand management in general and, since most of the product harm cases are in the realm of the automobile and the car industries, to the branding of products in these fields in particular.

So far, only few studies have addressed social media chatter during product harm crisis (e.g., Borah & Tellis, 2016; Hsu & Lawrence, 2016). A recent exhaustive review of product harm studies (Cleeren, Dekimpe, & van Heerde, 2017) highlights that one of the realms requiring significantly more scholarly attention is that of social media responses during *unfolding* product crises (rather than a short-term crises) during *real-life cases* (rather than lab studies). Specifically, these scholars note that while most studies have focused on the pre-crisis period and the post-crisis period, not enough studies have paid attention to what happens *during* the product harm crisis. Thus, they suggest that studies should examine how social media chatters evolves from the eruption of the crisis and throughout its different stages, uncovering different areas of consumer concern.

In addition to product harm studies, the analysis of the management of product harm crisis will also contribute to literature of image restoration theory (Benoit, 2008; Benoit, 2000). Image restoration theory examines which communication strategies are most efficient during image crisis. Beyond Benoit's classic model identifying main image restoration strategies (see below), the literature builds mostly from case studies which best illustrates which strategies work during major real-life crises (Grimmer, 2017; Coombs & Schmidt, 2000). In addition, many studies of image restoration move to examine the relevance of image management strategies on mainstream media to analyses of crisis management on online social networks (Frederick & Federaro, 2018; Ketter, 2016). Thus, our study aims to contribute to both product harm and image restoration theories using a real-life case study of product harm crisis management on Facebook.

Accordingly, this study examines Facebook discussions during product harm crisis throughout the unfolding Salmonella scare in Unilever/Telma breakfast cereals in Israel 2016. This case study is relevant for product harm crisis management in general and in

the food industry in particular. The cereal product was manufactured by a local company called Telma, which is owned by the world's largest consumer goods company, Unilever. Importantly, the specific case study examines a product harm that lasted several weeks, allowing analysis of social media conversations during an *unfolding* crisis. Indeed, initially, Unilever denied the allegations regarding Salmonella contamination in its cereals and admitted guilt only when it was forced to do so. Even then, it reverted to downplaying its magnitude. It was only following public pressure that it later fully admitted guilt and recalled the cereals from shelves, as illustrated in more detail below. Thus, the social media outcry was maintained over several weeks, allowing understanding of which themes appeared at each stage of the crisis and how the themes discussed in online chatter *evolved over time*.

The study examined Facebook conversations during the product harm crisis, analyzing the main themes over the course of three months during the ongoing crisis. One of the central aims was to understand whether these conversations *focused on the contaminated product itself or on the brand*. This might illuminate when and to what extent the food brand's image is damaged during product harm crisis. The analysis was conducted via a social media tracking software that allows analysis of online media chatter on a day-by-day basis during an unfolding crisis (adapted from: Hayat & Samuel-Azran, 2017; Hayat, Samuel-Azran, & Galily, 2016). This method allows understanding the main trends in Facebook conversations during the different stages of the crisis, enabling detection of the stage at which users' discussions centered on the brand versus the contaminated product.

### **Product harm crisis in the food and automobile industries**

Product harm crisis is defined as a crisis that involves suspected or confirmed problems with company products, which may appear damaged and may be hazardous to consumers (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000; Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994). Well-known crises worldwide in the 21<sup>st</sup> century range from the harmful effects of the baby formula Remedix in Israel 2003, which led to the death of four babies, through the 2011 E. coli "cucumber crisis" in Europe, which led to 17 deaths, to the more recent 2016 Samsung Galaxy Note 7 exploding batteries. While the most important aspect of product harm crisis is the potential health hazard to consumers, the brands themselves may also suffer severe

damage from such cases. Accordingly, it is not surprising that marketing literature has addressed the issue of product harm crisis extensively (e.g., Pace, Gistri, & Corciolani, 2016; Wei, Zhao, Wang, Cheng, & Zhao, 2016).

A review of product harm literature by Cleeren et al. (2017) notes that in the last two decades there was an increase in the number of product harm crises due to aspects such as higher scrutiny by consumers, higher complexity of products and product globalization leading to higher quality control measures. They note that the growing frequency of recalls has led to a surge of product harm studies. One of the main areas of studies pertains to the consequences of product recalls, which companies request on their own merit or are requested to by the authorities after the discovery of safety issues or product defects. One of the largest recent studies on the issue, which examined 381 recall investigations in the automobile industry between 1999 and 2012 (Eilert, Jayachandran, Kalaiganam, & Swartz, 2017), found that one of the most important elements affecting the market response to recalls is the timing of the recall. The analysis revealed that in cases that the brand was not quick to respond, the stock markets "punished" the companies for recall delays with dramatic decrease of their market value. Other studies identify other aspects such as the importance of individual differences in determining the response to product harm. Thus, for example, analysis of the response to Volkswagen's decision to recall 400,000 vehicles in China due to a problem in the gearbox found that the interpretation of Volkswagen's part in the crisis depended mostly on the customers' product knowledge as well as their risk perception (e.g., Wei et al., 2016).

Moving from studies of the automobile industry to those on product harm in the food industry specifically, we find that some studies note the importance of the initial attitude towards the brand. Indeed, a study examining the recall of one million chocolate bars by Cadbury-Schweppes (the world's largest confectionary company) due to the possible contamination with Salmonella Montevideo, found that the company was able to return to its pre-crisis market share shortly after the crisis – due to its highly loved brand (Carroll, 2009).

A study by Cleeren, Dekimpe, and Helsen (2008) on the 1995-6 Salmonella suspicion in Kraft Food's and Eta's peanut butter in Australia also found that loyalty and familiarity with the brand decreased the hostility towards the brand following the crisis.

They also noted that heavy users of peanut butter tended to purchase the brand sooner after the crisis. However, an analysis of the same crisis by Van Heerde, Helsen, and Dekimpe (2007) offered much grimmer observations, noting that the crisis harmed the companies' baseline sales and even affected the sales of other products of the brands. Notably, these studies addressed crises that occurred before the advent and ensuing massive popularity of online social networks. The following section reviews more recent studies that do address social media chatter during product harm crisis.

### **Product harm crisis and social media chatter**

Social media chatter has a potential to influence individuals attitudes, and perceptions (Samuel-Azran & Hayat, 2019; Hayat, Galily & Samuel-Azran, 2019). Two major recent studies illustrate the potential damage to brands due to social media conversations during product harm crisis. Borah and Tellis (2016) examined whether online chatter could affect negative spillover – the negative *image of* one product during product harm affecting other associated products, even if those products were not directly implicated in the original recall or withdrawal event. Their analysis addressed the social media chatter during product recall for 48 different products from four different brands in the automobile industry. The analysis identified that negative spillover was in fact massive both to products from the same brand (particularly for strong brands), as well as to associated products from the same category from other brands. The researchers estimate, based on their analysis results, that online chatter amplifies the negative effect of recalls on sales by about 4.5 times. Further, Hsu and Lawrence (2016) examined social media chatter during 185 product recall announcements, revealing that online word of mouth certainly exacerbated the negative effect of product recall on firm value. The authors stress that since online chatter is spontaneous and spreads quickly it can immediately escalate to boycott of the brand if not handled correctly.

Indeed, various cases illustrate the potential damage to brand image in the social networks age as a result of negative chatter (Hayat & HersHKovitz, 2018; Hayat, HersHKovitz & Samuel-Azran, 2019). One of the early famous illustrations of social media power to harm brands is that of the 2009 United Break Guitars video posted on YouTube by Canadian musician Dave Carroll and his band, Sons of Maxwell. The video described how United Airlines employees broke his guitar and showed indifference to his distress.

The video became viral immediately and caused major embarrassment and damage to United Airlines' image, illustrating how quickly ordinary citizens can damage major brands in the social networks era. An equally impressive illustration of consumers' power in the social media era is Facebook members' negative response to Gap's new logo in 2010, which caused the company to return to its old logo (Champoux, Durgee, & McGlynn, 2012). In addition, Champoux et al. (2012) argued that during the high-profile palm oil crisis, where major global companies were blamed for destroying forests and habitats cruelly to produce palm oil, Nestlé, the world's largest food company, failed miserably to address public outrage and deleted posts containing attacks against the brand on social media networks. In addition, the company censored critical comments on its Facebook page, leading to intense online response from furious customers. Indeed, these attacks were so intense that they led to major negative coverage in traditional media against the company and eventually virtually forced the Nestlé page moderators to apologize publicly, in an attempt to mitigate the damage to the company's image. The studies of Borah and Tellis (2016) and Hsu and Lawrence (2016) highlighted that companies' attempts to mitigate the negative effect of chatter on social media during product recall were often ineffective during the crisis, thus showing the importance of addressing attacks on the brand before they ignite major online fury.

Still, some voices (e.g., Gensler et al., 2013) argue that social media chatter does not necessarily have to end up in crisis to brands. Various cases illustrate that brand managers can respond effectively to consumers' concerns on online social networks during image crisis. Champoux et al. (2012) note how in April 2011, after Southwest Airlines was forced to cancel approximately 100 flights for inspection after a hole appeared in the roof of a Boeing 737, the company used Facebook to address the public's concerns by assigning a team that responded personally to the thousands of queries and by admitting publicly the severity of the case, eventually diffusing anger towards the brand. In addition, Pace et al. (2016), addressing brands' response to the above mentioned palm oil crisis, found that in contrast to Nestlé's fiasco, some brands managed, even under such challenging circumstances, to tailor a proper response on social media and diffuse public outrage successfully.

## Image restoration theory

Image restoration theory examines strategies that can be used to minimize damage and even repair the image of an organization during image crisis. The theory aims to uncover based on case studies which strategies protect a company's image and which strategies actually prove inefficient or even damaging. The analysis of any image restoration begins with an identification of a threat on the brand; these can include small-scale threats such as criticism and negative reviews on sites like TripAdvisor or large-scale threats that threaten the whole branding image of a company. The issue of product harm crisis clearly fits the definition of a wide scale crisis as product harm can cast a shadow over the whole brand as untrustworthy.

After identifying the threat on the brand, image restoration theory (Benoit, 1995) offers public relations managers five main strategies to repair the image of a company facing image crisis: the first is denial, where the company reject allegations against its role in the crisis. The second is evasion, where the company management alleges that another body, such as a secondary service provider, is to blame for the crisis. The third strategy is reducing offensiveness by highlighting to the public the positive contribution of the company to society. The fourth strategy is corrective action, where the company is taking actual steps to improve or fix completely the damage caused by its products. The last strategy is mortification, where the company takes responsibility for its actions and publishes a public apology for its misdeed(s).

Different studies aimed to analyze which of these strategies (or which combination of strategies) is most efficient in battling image crisis. For example, Muralidharan et al.'s 2011 analysis of the strategies used by BP during the Gulf Coast oil spill revealed that BP mostly used corrective action, but that the ability of this strategy to stop criticism of the company was limited. Our study will contribute to existing literature by adding an important case study of contemporary image restoration involving a major global company (Unilever) on Facebook, the most popular social network where companies can face major damage to their image due to citizens' coordinated efforts. The threat to brands on Facebook via coordinated citizen actions is real, as will be illustrated below in the context of the Israeli consumer environment.

### **Israeli consumers on Facebook: A force to be reckoned with**

Before the advent of online social networks, the traditional media in many countries including Israel exposed product harms through investigative journalism and led the criticism against brands whose products were found damaged. This was indeed the case of the silicone derivative found in Tnuva (Israel's leading cooperative specializing in milk and dairy products) milk. In 1995, the *Maariv* newspaper published an article showing that Tnuva was illegally adding dimethyl siloxane – a silicone derivative suspected as carcinogenic – to its 1% long-life skimmed milk. Tnuva denied the allegations, and published newspaper ads refuting them. However, the Israeli Health Ministry ordered Tnuva to destroy all of the tainted milk and the company's image was severely damaged (though no consumer boycott was enacted). Tnuva was also ordered by court to pay tens of millions of shekels in compensation to the consumers.

Another high-profile product harm took place in 2003, when the Israeli Health Ministry warned that a breast-milk substitute manufactured by the German company *Humana* and sold in Israel under the brand *Remedia*, contained a much lower quantity of thiamine than required and caused severe vitamin deficiencies in babies. This product defect led to several deaths of Israeli babies relying on the formula in their first months of living as well as caused long-term neurological damages to a dozen other babies. While both *Remedia* and *Humana* blamed each other for the tragedy, the Israeli court sentenced *Humana's* chief food technologist to a 30-month prison sentence for negligent manslaughter in February 2013.

The advent of social media undoubtedly empowers Israeli consumers, as can be illustrated in various coordinated Israeli consumer attacks against companies that started on online social networks. This best example for such an initiative is the 2011 consumers' Tnuva cottage cheese boycott. The boycott began in June 2011 after a Facebook user named Itzik Elrov started a Facebook group that complained that the cottage cheese prices rose dramatically after 2005, the year the product became unregulated to promote fiercer competition between different brands. The Facebook page portrayed Tnuva as a greedy company leveraging its monopoly on milk and other dairy products in Israel to maximize profits. The high price of the cottage cheese was further portrayed as an illustration of the unbearable cost of living in Israel. The response of Zehavit Cohen, the



head of IPEX, the venture capital that owns Tnuva, was that the company would not reduce the price of the cottage cheese. In response, and in light of increasing media coverage of the affair, the Facebook group protest page grew and the admins called on the public to stop buying cottage cheese. Indeed, despite special campaigns designed to tempt shoppers, supermarket chains reported a sharp drop in the purchase of cottage cheese manufactured by all the leading dairy companies, and Tnuva's managers surrendered, announcing the lowering of the price of cottage cheese back to its 2005 price.

Next, in 2014, a Facebook page called Olim L'Berlin (in Hebrew: "Let's Ascend to Berlin") started by an Israeli expatriate who moved to Berlin, challenged Israelis to compare the price of several grocery items sold in Berlin to the same products sold in Tel-Aviv. Most notably, an Israeli product named Milky – a highly loved pudding in Israel – was sold in Berlin at a fraction of its price in Israel, causing uproar amongst the followers of the page. Accordingly, the protest, also known as the Milky protest, grew wider and the Facebook page garnered 17,000 Likes within hours of its posting (Jerusalem Post, 2014, October 6). These cases clearly highlight the potency of social media chatter as regards to Israeli brands.

According to Hershkovitz (2017), these cases illustrated the "prosumption turn," in which consumers are becoming producers who shape the nature of products. Hershkovitz notes that the combination of brands asking the consumers to participate in their branding and product design and simultaneously charging high prices for these products results in consumers' revolts against them. Hendel et al. (2015) notes that these events mark the golden age of Israeli consumers, as their analysis identified that the Israeli consumers indeed punished those brand names that social media users perceived as greedy.

Importantly, it is not coincidental that the protests in Israel took place on Facebook, as Facebook has currently nearly five million registered users in Israel out of a population of 8.5 million citizens (Internet world stats, 2017). Moreover, a 2013 international study found that Israelis lead in the average time spent on Facebook, further illustrating the importance of Facebook chatter to the image of brands in Israel (Epstein, 2013, May 23).

### ***The Telma/Unilever Salmonella-contaminated cereals crisis***

Unilever is a British-Dutch transnational consumer goods company. Its products include food, beverages, cleaning agents and personal care products. Unilever produces over 400 different brands (e.g., Lipton, Magnum), and sells them in 190 different countries. In 2017, the company had a turnover of €53.7 billion (Unilever, 2018). Unilever Israel is among the leading companies in Israel in the field of consumer goods (Unilever Israel, 2018), selling the usual array of Unilever products but also two categories of its own, a breakfast cereal brand called “Telma” and a line of snack foods that are unavailable anywhere else. Anat Gabriel, the CEO of Unilever Israel since 2013, calls them “local jewels” as they account for about a third of Unilever Israel’s business (Ready & Peebles, 2015).

Telma is an Israeli food brand specializing in food products and snacks and is known for leading the local cereal market since 1985 (Cristal, 2014, October 19). The company was initiated in 1947, a year before the birth of Israel, and bought by global conglomerate Unilever in 2000.

### ***The communication crisis***

In July 2016, the Israeli media exposed that Telma was concealing findings from both the public and the Israeli Health Ministry about traces of the Salmonella virus discovered in their factory in southern Israel the month before. Initially, Anat Gabriel, Unilever's CEO in Israel, who was also the "face" of Unilever/Telma during the crisis, insisted that no contaminated product reached the Israeli public, a practice that was referred to as "concealing the existence of salmonella" by some media organizations (see Figure 1).

## Unilever Israel CEO: We didn't want to sow panic



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Anat Gabriel has been explaining why the company concealed the existence of salmonella in Telma's cornflakes and delipecan cereals.

Unilever Israel CEO Anat Gabriel has been explaining why the company concealed the existence of salmonella in Telma's cornflakes and delipecan cereals, which was discovered in the company's production line two weeks ago.

*Figure 1.* Unilever conceals the existence of Salmonella in its cereals (Globes, 2016)

Nevertheless, on August 4, 2016, Unilever admitted that salmonella-contaminated cereals were distributed to the Israeli public. According to Unilever, 643 surfaces and around 150,000 products were contaminated but only 240 products left the factories and were sold to the public. In this announcement, Unilever admitted that the contamination had been discovered by the company already in early June, meaning that the concealment took place over most of June. Subsequently, the Israeli Health Ministry sent out a professional team to inspect the factory, and concluded that the company was negligent but not malicious in its conduct. It temporarily cancelled the Good Manufacturing Practice given to the company (The Times of Israel, 2016, August 7).

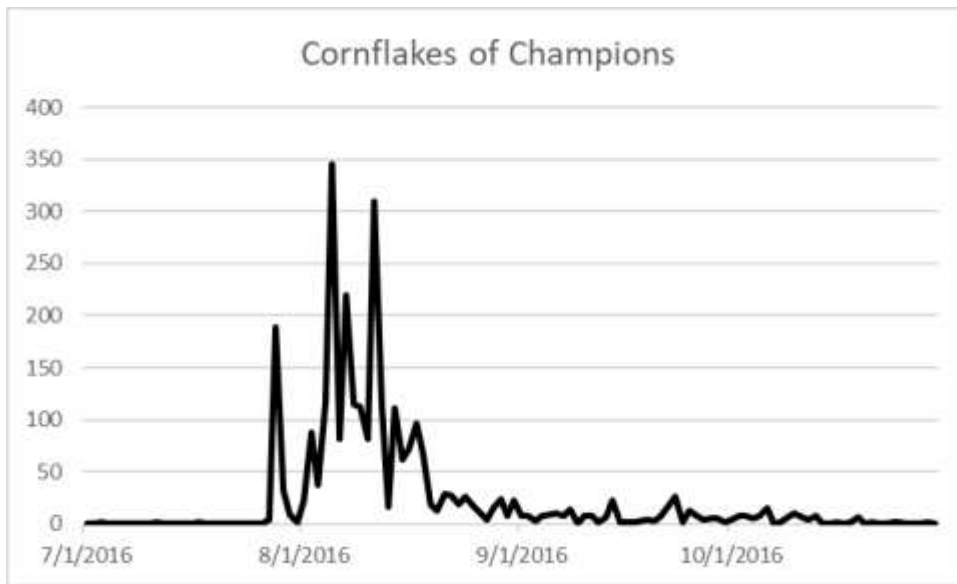
Following the crisis, Unilever published huge ads in the press under the headline, "Telma Cereals are Safe to Eat," asserting that all Telma products in the stores were completely safe. In addition, following the social media outcry, which is the focus of our analysis, Unilever encouraged its 2,500 employees to publish posts on Facebook supporting the company, without revealing that they were interested parties (Hayut, 2016, July 31). Despite these efforts, in the weeks following the scandal, Telma sales of the particular cereals found contaminated plummeted 30% (Hayut, 2016). A year later, a

study found that Telma's cereals sales in the first half of 2017 were still around 20% lower in comparison to the first half of 2016, before the crisis (Dovrat-Meseritz, 2017, July 18).

## METHODOLOGY

In this work, we analyzed the conversations surrounding the salmonella health crisis in Telma cereal's *Cornflakes of Champions* using the Buzzilla console. Buzzilla is an Israeli social media trend tracking company. Buzzilla's tracking system regularly crawls through all social media platforms, collecting millions of responses to articles, forum posts, and blogs, as well as status updates from social networking sites (Buzzilla, 2018). All these data are then stored and documented. The data offer a continuous research tool that enables long-term monitoring of a specific subject in web conversation, as well as identification of the key factors that influence the direction of the conversation (Buzzilla, 2018).

Using the Buzzilla console, we monitored all the online conversations that mentioned "*Cornflakes of Champions*" (the specific product purported to be affected by Salmonella), "Telma", "Unilever", and "Anat Gabriel", the CEO of Unilever Israel who was the main spokesperson of the company in Israeli media. By monitoring these aspects, we aimed to uncover the central issues preoccupying Israeli Facebook members, and thus to illuminate the damage caused to the Unilever/Telma brand during the ongoing crisis. These topics were monitored between July 1, 2016 and October 1, 2016. All in all, 6,894 online conversations were monitored. As shown in Figure 2, during the examined time frame, 2,894 discussions mentioned the product "*Cornflakes of Champions*". The figure also shows that while there were practically no conversations about the product prior to the discussed communication crisis, a spike in the number of conversations occurred when the crisis started (toward the end of July 2016).



*Figure 2.* Conversations about "Cornflakes of Champions" (n=2,894)

When examining the conversations about "Telma" and about "Unilever", (see Figure 3 and 4 respectively), a similar trend appears – i.e., a spike in the conversations as the communication crisis breaks out. Interestingly, while "Telma" is the company that produces the cereal, and is most associated with the "Cornflakes of Champions", only 1,882 conversations during the examined time frame mentioned "Telma", while 2,057 mentioned "Unilever". Furthermore, when looking at conversations mentioning the name of Unilever, we have found that 61 conversations specifically mentioned the name of Unilever Israel's CEO, Anat Gabriel (see Figure 5).

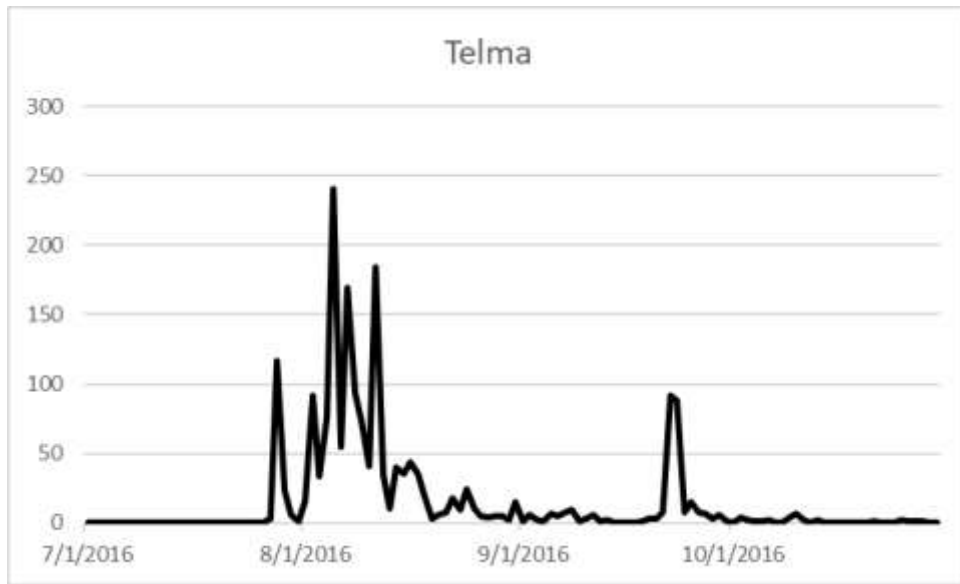


Figure 3. Conversations about "Telma" (n=1,882).

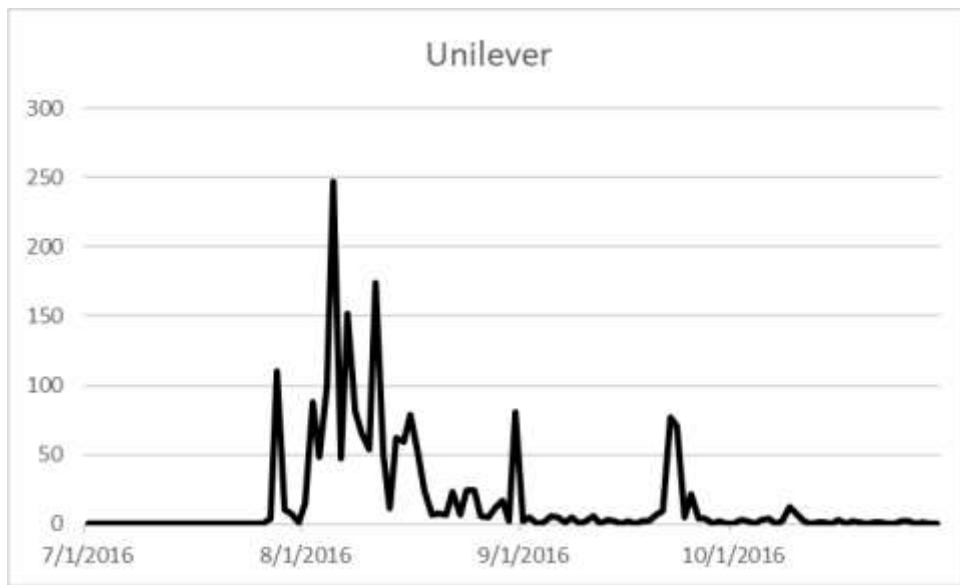


Figure 4. Conversations about "Unilever" (n=2,057).

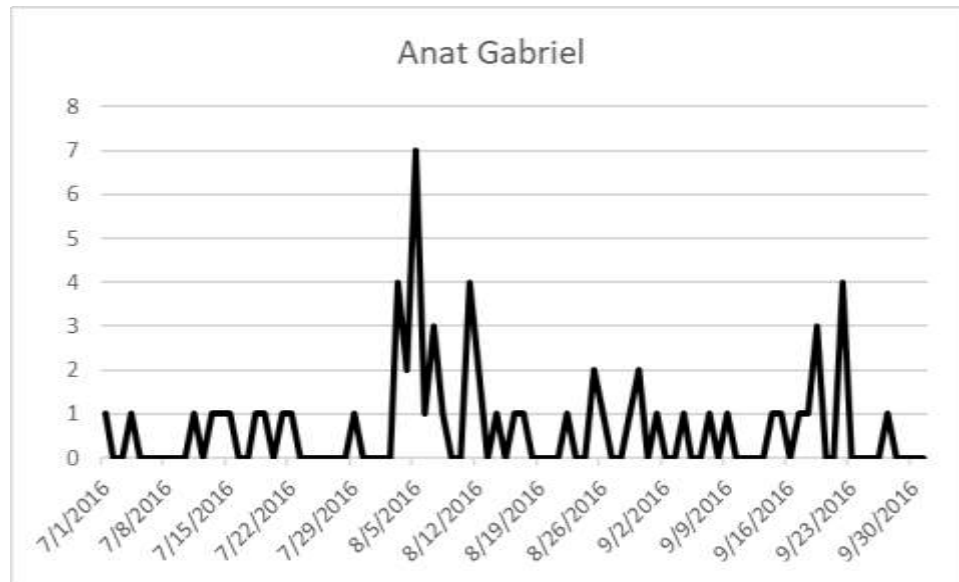


Figure 5. Conversations about "Anat Gabriel" (n=61).

In order to get a better sense of the portion of conversations mentioning each of these topics, we looked at the breakdown of the conversations during the examined time frame. In each of the examined dates, we can see a breakdown indicating how many of the examined conversations mentioned either "Cornflakes of Champions", "Telma", or "Unilever" (see figure 6). We can see that while prior to the communication crisis there is no mention of "Telma" and "Unilever", when the health crisis starts, both "Telma" and "Unilever" are extensively discussed. Hence, the crisis is by no means "contained" and the discourse is not limited to the product itself, but rather expands to incorporate both the company responsible for its production ("Telma"), and the corporation that owns that company ("Unilever Israel").

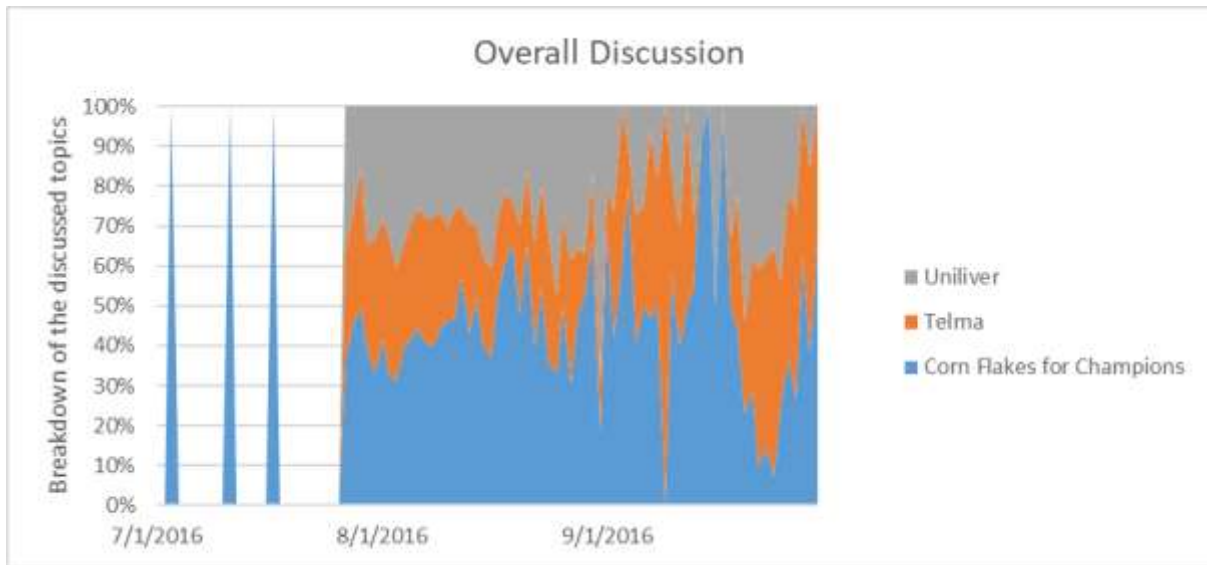


Figure 6. All the conversations conducted during the examined time frame (n=6,894).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The study examines the extent to which discussions on social media during product harm crisis focus on the product suspected in the crisis versus on the brand. It does so via analysis of Facebook conversations during the 2016 Salmonella-contaminated cereals affair in Israel. The three-month analysis of Facebook conversations identified that conversations dealt from the start of the crisis not only with the product but also with the local cereal manufacturer Telma and even more intensely with the international consumer goods company who owns Telma, Unilever. Further, the figures demonstrate similar spikes and lows in the magnitude of Facebook conversations regarding the Unilever/Telma brands versus the contaminated product throughout the three-month analysis.

The findings, then, illustrate that social media users focused on the brand from the start, holding it accountable and discussing it simultaneously with discussions regarding the product behind the health scare. This highlights that social media conversations are highly potent to brands image and leave little if any time of “grace” before social media users target the brand behind the crisis and discuss its role in the crisis. Considering that in the Israeli case, these are the same consumers that organized a boycott on products from Tnuva (Israel’s largest dairy product company) in 2011, as discussed in the literature review section, the findings regarding the increased attention to the Unilever/Telma



brands on Facebook should definitely have been taken seriously by the company's brand managers.

In addition, it is interesting to note that Unilever, the international food conglomerate, was mentioned in the conversations more often than the local producer of the cereals, Telma. This is indeed unusual as Telma is identified in Israel as the manufacturer of the cereals since its inception in 1947 and Unilever is dramatically less known as a cereal manufacturer by Israelis. Evidently, Telma's name appears in central places on the packaging of the Cornflakes of Champions cereal as well as other cereals manufactured by Telma as opposed to the modest mention of Unilever. This aspect further illustrates the potential damage to brands, in this case a major global brand name, in light of the social media conversations during product harm crisis. A likely explanation to the wide mention of the Unilever brand in Facebook conversations is the fact that Anat Gabriel, the CEO of Unilever Israel, was interviewed about the crisis several times in the Israeli media, thus drawing attention to Unilever brands as the main culprit behind the cereal contamination.

Thus, for product harm crisis, the analysis highlights the importance for brand managers to respond to product harm crisis *immediately and honestly*. The crisis at hand, which lasted several weeks and involved denial of the contamination by Unilever, serves as an example of the immediacy that social media conversations act to discuss not only the product harm but also search for the brand at fault. This can lead to ways to "punish" the brand by directly calling for a boycott of its products (an alternative discussed by Facebook members in Israel throughout the crisis though not carried out in the end) or otherwise affecting product sales.

For image restoration studies, the study illustrates that the strategy of denial, which was taken by Unilever initially, did not in any way prove effective to reduce the flames and the volume of Facebook conversations about the product harm. The study clearly highlights the strategy of denial as ineffective and even damaging in this case as it only caused more attention to the crisis. Of the other strategies suggested by Benoit (1995), the strategy of evading responsibility was not relevant in this case as the local cereal manufacturer of the contaminated cereal is controlled by Unilever, and we see that indeed both brands were suffering from a large volume of Facebook conversations regarding their part in the crisis. Thus, future studies should examine whether the more

apologetic strategies of corrective action or mortification would prove more efficient in reducing the volume of Facebook conversations regarding major brands during product harm crises.

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## Funding and Acknowledgements

The authors declare no funding sources or conflicts of interest.

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