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Exploring Generational Differences in Consumer Responses to Brand Representatives' Political Views

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Abstract

This study is about the influence of brand representatives' political statements and opinions on brand image and consumer behavior of different generations. For this research, the example of Theo Müller, owner of the brand "Müller", and the leader of the German party "Alternative for Germany" (AfD), Alice Weidel were chosen. Their friendship created uproar in German newspapers in the end of 2023. In the beginning of 2024, Theo Müller gave a Swiss newspaper, Neue Züricher Zeitung, an interview stating that he and Alice Weidel are friends and meet privately on a regular basis.

To examine the influence of political views on consumer behavior and brand image of different generations, an exploratory research design was chosen. Three expert interviews were conducted and used as the basis for an online survey. This thesis includes a literature review of relevant theories and models related to the topic including corporate social responsibility (CSR) and corporate social advocacy (CSA), as well as consumer behavior, brand image and perception. Additionally, background information on the generations in Germany and events that impacted them is provided.

As this dissertation is part of the fulfilment of the MSc in Management with Specialization in Strategic Marketing, the research was limited in terms of time and resources.

Title: Exploring Generational Differences in Consumer Responses to Brand Representatives' Political Views

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Abstrato

Este estudo trata da influência das declarações e opiniões políticas de representantes de marcas na imagem da marca e no comportamento do consumidor de diferentes gerações. Para esta pesquisa, foram escolhidos como exemplo Theo Müller, proprietário da marca “Müller”, e Alice Weidel, líder do partido alemão “Alternativa para a Alemanha” (AfD). A amizade entre ambos gerou polêmica nos jornais alemães no final de 2023. No início de 2024, Theo Müller deu uma entrevista ao jornal suíço *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, afirmando que ele e Alice Weidel são amigos e que se encontram regularmente em âmbito privado.

Para examinar a influência de opiniões políticas no comportamento do consumidor e na imagem da marca em diferentes gerações, foi escolhido um design de pesquisa exploratório. Foram conduzidas três entrevistas com especialistas que serviram de base para uma pesquisa online.

Esta dissertação inclui uma revisão de literatura sobre teorias e modelos relevantes ao tema, incluindo responsabilidade social corporativa (CSR) e defesa social corporativa (CSA), além de comportamento do consumidor, imagem e percepção de marca. Adicionalmente, são fornecidas informações sobre as gerações na Alemanha e os eventos que as impactaram.

Como esta dissertação faz parte da finalização do Mestrado em Gestão com Especialização em Marketing Estratégico, a pesquisa foi limitada em termos de tempo e recursos.

Título: Exploring Generational Differences in Consumer Responses to Brand Representatives' Political Views

Autor: Marie-Joel Büter

Palavras-chave: Imagem da Marca, Comportamento do Consumidor, Posicionamentos Políticos, Representantes da Marca

Preface

This paper is part of the graduation process at Católica Lisbon School of Business & Economics in the study of management with specialization in strategic marketing.

The aim of this thesis is to determine the influence of the political orientation of company representatives on customer perceptions and purchasing behavior. An exploratory research design was chosen to accomplish this.

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List of Abbreviations

AfD	Alternative für Deutschland (Engl.: Alternative for Germany)
CSA	Corporate Social Advocacy
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DDR/ GDR	Deutsche Demokratische Republik (Engl.: German democratic republic) Emerged from the former soviet occupation zone after Word War II
SA	Sturmabteilung (Engl.: Assault department) The SA was formed in the early 1920s and was a paramilitary group belonging to the NSDAP (Hitler's political party). They terrorized political enemies, Jews, and anyone who had different believes and opinions. From 1933 to 1945, the SA was one of the biggest support systems of the NS Regime (Siemens, 2020).
SIM	Strategic Issues Management
SFH	Stop Funding Hate

1. Introduction

For some time now, there has been a shift to the right in several European countries. Many conservative parties have made significant inroads into the political sphere, including in Germany (Deutschlandfunk, 2024).

The “Alternative for Germany” has been active in German politics for the past ten years (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022). The party belongs to the political family of European right-wing populism. Since its founding, the party has shifted its focus from a market-liberal orientation and predominantly Euro-related themes to issues surrounding asylum and refugee policies. The AfD advocates for very traditional family values and socially conservative positions (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022).

The brand Müller produces dairy products such as yogurt, milkshakes, and desserts (Müller, 2024). It has been family-run since its founding and is one of the largest dairy producers in Germany (Statista, 2024).

At the end of 2023, uproar arose in the German business press after Theo Müller, the owner of the brand "Müller“, and Alice Weidel, the leader of the AfD, were seen having dinner together at a fine-dining restaurant in France (Schneider J. , 2024). After this incident, Theo Müller gave an interview in a Swiss Newspaper, Neue Züricher Zeitung, calling Alice Weidel a friend and admitting that they meet privately on a regular basis (Serrao, 2024).

Based on these events, the question arises: *“How does Theo Müller's friendship with AfD leader Alice Weidel influence the perception of the brand "Müller" and the consumer behavior of different generations?”*

This paper explores the topic of the influence of brand representatives' political stances on consumer behavior across generations with the example of Alice Weidel and Theo Müller. To answer the main research question, four sub-questions were defined and will be answered throughout this thesis. To answer them most efficiently, an exploratory approach was chosen. Three semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with the aim of gaining topic-relevant insights into the subject of brand representatives, their political responsibility, and their impact on consumer behavior. The following chapters will explore the party and its background, as well as the brand and the head of the brand's relationship with the AfD.

Chapters three and four include the research questions and the limitations and scope of this study.

The literature review in chapter five provides the foundation for the primary research and this thesis by explaining and defining the concepts of corporate social responsibility- and advocacy, consumer behavior, and brand image. Additionally, it introduces different generations in Germany and describes events that have shaped them, serving as a basis for interpreting and explaining the survey results.

Based on this information, chapter six outlines the hypotheses and methodology employed in this research.

The analysis of the expert interview findings is presented in chapter seven. Strategic recommendations are also derived from the qualitative content analysis of the interviews.

In chapter eight, the analysis of the online survey is presented, followed by an overview of the key findings and a discussion.

Finally, a conclusion and critical review of the study is provided, along with relevant insights and recommendations for future research.

2. Brand and Party Description

This chapter provides background information of the brand “Müller” and the political party “AfD”.

2.1 Müller

Müller products have been a staple in many German households for decades. The company was founded in 1896 and is now run in third generation by Theo Müller who is head of Müller since 1971 (Müller Molkerei, 2024). Müller produces a variety of dairy products such as yoghurts, drinks, and deserts. The brand belongs to the Theo Müller Group, which had a revenue of €8.8 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2024). Müller products are distributed all over Germany and sold in several supermarket chains including Rewe, Edeka, or Lidl. Over the years, the brand has adapted to trends and new demands from consumers, for example, by adding vegan and high protein products (Appendix 1) to their portfolio (Müller, 2024).

2.2 The AfD and its political views

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) was founded in 2013 to oppose the euro policies of the German government at the time. The party's original goal was to make Germany more independent from the European Union after the former Chancellor agreed to the bailout package for Greece in 2010. Due to electoral successes in eastern Germany, there has been a shift to the right within the party, which continues to this day (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022). Since the large influx of immigrants in Germany in 2015 (2,137,000), the AfD has gained significant approval and support (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2016). The combination of migration in 2014 and 2015, along with the terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, and later Berlin (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022), unsettled many citizens. On December 16, 2016, Anis Amri, a member of the Islamic State, drove a stolen truck into a Christmas market in Berlin, killing twelve people and injuring 67 others (Zeit Online, 2020). Islamist terrorist attacks, particularly by the Islamic State, along with the political decisions at the time, led to the AfD steadily gaining support and establishing itself in German politics. Alexander Gauland, former chairman of the party and still honorary chairman today, referred to the 2015 refugee crisis as a *"gift"* for his party (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022). In addition to the aforementioned reasons for the party's rise, there is also the factor of social inequality in Germany. The new federal states, which were part of the former GDR and thus governed under a socialist-communist system, still face economic disadvantages today. Compared to the West, people in the former GDR earn €824 less in gross monthly income.

Furthermore, only 4.3% of executives in the economy come from the East (ZDF, 2024). Due to these factors and the fear that refugees might take jobs from Germans, leads to the AfD being particularly strong in the East. This was clearly demonstrated in the September 2024 elections in Thuringia (32.8%) and Saxony (30.6%) (Tagesschau, 2024). To highlight the political views represented by the AfD, the following paragraphs will address individual representatives' statements and events: Björn Höcke, the AfD chairman in Thuringia, was fined with €13,000 by the Halle Regional Court in May 2024 for using an SA slogan at a campaign event: *"Everything for our homeland, everything for Saxony-Anhalt, everything for Germany."* He was convicted again three months later for using this slogan at another event (Zeit Online, 2024). Additionally, in 2023, the Frankfurt public prosecutor's office decided that Björn Höcke could be referred to as a "Nazi" by protesters. Moreover, a 2018 ruling had already established that Höcke could be labeled a fascist (Majić, 2023). In 2018, Alexander Gauland made a statement during a speech in the German Bundestag:

"Yes, we acknowledge our responsibility for the twelve years. But, dear friends, Hitler and the Nazis are just a small blot in our 1,000-year history." (Alternative für Deutschland, 2018).

In May 2023, Alice Weidel, leader of the AfD parliamentary group in the German Bundestag, decided not to attend the celebration of the victory over Nazi Germany at the Russian embassy. She did not cite Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine as the reason, but rather stated:

"Celebrating the defeat of one's own country with a former occupying power is something that I have personally decided against – also due to my father's history of fleeing." (Spiegel Online, 2023).

In Baden-Württemberg, the state association led by Alice Weidel has been monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution since summer 2022 as a "right-wing extremist suspected case" (Schneider J. , 2024). Furthermore, the AfD is monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in several federal states and is classified as securely right-wing extremist in Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt.

2.3 Alice Weidel and Theo Müller

In December 2023, there was a stir in the German media when it was revealed that Theo Müller had privately met with Alice Weidel in a luxury restaurant in France (Schneider J. , 2024).

In an interview in the "Neue Züricher Zeitung", a Swiss Newspaper, he speaks about his friendship with the politician and mentions that they meet regularly to discuss politics. He confirms that he and Alice Weidel are friends.

In the interview, he emphasizes that he does not agree with all points of the AfD's policies, nevertheless, he does not want to distance himself from the party (Serrao, 2024).

Despite the events and statements from Alice Weidel and other AfD politicians mentioned in the previous subchapter, Müller maintains the view that as long as the party is not banned and thus remains legal, there is no need to distance oneself from it (Serrao, 2024). In an interview with "Handelsblatt", a German business newspaper, he also confirmed the meeting with the AfD leader and stated that he could find *"not the slightest indication of Nazi ideology"* in the party's program (Kaspar, 2024). This closeness to the AfD had consequences in March 2024 when one of the top managers from the Müller Group resigned from his position (Schäfer, 2024).

3. Main Research Question and associated sub-questions

This research aims to determine to what degree the political standpoints of company representatives impact consumer behavior focusing on the example of Theo Müller and Alice Weidel. To answer the following main research question: „*How does Theo Müller's friendship with AfD leader Alice Weidel influence the perception of the brand "Müller" and the consumer behavior of different generations?*” will be divided into the following sub-questions:

1. Are there significant differences in reactions to Theo Müller's friendship with Alice Weidel among different generations?
2. Will consumers stop buying products from Müller due to the friendship between Theo Müller and Alice Weidel?
3. What is the impact on consumer behavior due to that friendship? Would there be a significant difference in reactions between the generations if Theo Müller would distance himself from the AfD and Alice Weidel publicly?
4. If there is no significant change in consumer behavior after Theo Müller distances himself from the AfD and Alice Weidel publicly, what would be the possible reasons?

4. Scope and Limitations

This research aims at determining to what degree the political standpoints of company representatives impact consumer perception and behavior using the example of the brand “Müller” in Germany. Consequently, the results might be very market specific. Further, for this paper an exploratory research design in form of three expert interviews and an online survey were used to identify the consumer perspective. As an online survey is a quantitative approach, deeper and more detailed insights will not be provided.

The first interviewee is the Head of Consumer & Trade Marketing Household Products at Melitta, a German manufacturer for household goods. Secondly, a junior brand manager from SC Johnson. The third interviewee is a PR-Consultant from a German strategy consulting company specializing in company- and brand communication.

5. Literature Review

This chapter provides the theoretical background for this research. It includes information about corporate social responsibility and advocacy, consumer behavior, brand perception and different German generations and events that impacted them.

5.1 Corporate Social Responsibility und Corporate Social Advocacy

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become increasingly relevant in recent years. Many people are paying more attention to this topic and are drawing their own conclusions from a lack of CSR. Due to its growing importance, the topic of Corporate Social Responsibility has also increasingly come into the focus of the academic world (Clemensen, 2015).

A study by Mohr et al. (2001) shows that consumer behavior regarding a company's CSR activities depends on the knowledge level of the customer. This means that the more a customer knows about social or political situations, the more the company's engagement is factored into the purchasing decision (Mohr, Webb, & Harris, 2001). This result is also supported by a study conducted by Cone Inc. in 2006. The focus of this study was on Millennials and their purchasing behavior regarding CSR. The study was conducted online with 1,800 participants, and the findings revealed that 61% of the participants feel the need for acting responsibly. Additionally, the study showed that 79% of Millennials believe that companies are also obligated to behave responsibly. Based on a company's social or non-social behavior, Millennials will either reward or punish them accordingly (McGlone & Winters Spain, 2011). In addition to the increasingly well-known CSR, there is also Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA). Dodd and Supa (2015) describe the two areas as follows: Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) involves adapting behavior to meet goals expected by stakeholders. These actions, however, have a clear connection to the company itself. Therefore, as long as CSR actions are credible, they rarely lead to controversy or public outcry.

In contrast, Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), which emerged from the fields of CSR and Strategic Issues Management (SIM), goes beyond issues directly relevant to the company. CSA can lead to controversy as it involves the company engaging in social or political discussions that are not directly linked to the business (Dodd & Supa, 2015). This means that companies take a stance on social or political issues that do not have immediate relevance for them. For example, if a company like IKEA engages in reforestation efforts, that would be CSR. If they would be engaged in women rights movements, it would be CSA.

There are three main characteristics of CSA: Firstly, social-political issues that organizations support, which are not directly relevant to the organization. Secondly, this engagement can lead to controversy, attracting new customers on one hand but potentially alienating current customers on the other, which can have an economic impact on the company which is the third criteria (Dodd & Supa, 2015).

The potential unrest that CSA activities can cause became evident this year with the German supermarket chain "Edeka". Before the elections in Thuringia, Brandenburg, and Saxony, the company launched a campaign against the Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Appendix 2).

The campaign emphasized that diversity is important and beneficial, and it needs to be protected. The AfD, represented by the color blue, was described as poison for harmonious coexistence, similar to toxic blue fruits and vegetables (Rentz, 2024).

The campaign generated a lot of attention on social media. Many people supported the campaign and shared it on their channels. Others felt attacked and began filling shopping carts in Edeka supermarkets with blue foods and leaving them in a cart without buying them. This included frozen products that had to be discarded in some cases. There was also dissent and unrest within the company, a branch manager in Saxony spoke out against the campaign, stating that he did not want to support it. He justified this by saying that he is a grocery retailer and does not want to interfere in political debates (Schneider P. , 2024).

Even though Corporate Social Advocacy can also bring disadvantages, it can lead to positive reactions as well. This is highlighted by the previously mentioned study by Dodd and Supa (2015), which found that CSA is a strong indicator of purchase willingness. However, it is not only relevant to consider the influence of Corporate Social Responsibility on companies but also how the opposite can affect them.

CSR can contribute to a company's perception, yet socially critical statements can have the reversed effect. The "Grab Your Wallet" campaign which was launched in 2016, was started during the presidential election campaign in the United States. This campaign gained significant traction on X (former Twitter) (Colli, 2020). The boycott was developed to harm companies associated with Donald Trump. One effect of this boycott was that Nordstrom removed the Ivanka Trump fashion line from its inventory (Clemensen, 2015). In July 2018, Ivanka Trump completely ended her fashion line. Although she did not explicitly state that this decision was due to the consequences of the boycott, in 2017 her sales had fallen by 27% compared to the previous year, and in the following year, they decreased by another 55% (Colli, 2020).

Another boycott that has changed corporate behavior, which began in August 2016, is "Stop Funding Hate".

The background for this campaign was the rise in hate crimes during the Brexit referendum and the growing anti-migrant sentiment in three major British newspapers: The Daily Mail, The Sun, and The Daily Express. The peak of hate speech was reached when one of the newspapers referred to migrants as "cockroaches". To harm these publications, an indirect strategy was chosen: participants and supporters of the campaign began to boycott companies that advertised in these papers.

This boycott occurred both online, with companies being contacted via Twitter, and traditionally offline, where individual firms were targeted over a longer period (Colli, 2020).

Now the question arises as to why consumers are interested in the political positions of companies and their representatives and how this influences their purchasing behavior.

5.2 Consumer Behavior

The primary reason we buy and consume is survival. Besides basic motivations like hunger and thirst, the human need for belonging and power also drives consumption. There are many psychological models explaining why and how we consume, with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, published in 1943, being the most well-known. Although this model is now considered outdated, it is still true that as prosperity grows, consumption behavior changes accordingly (Fichter, Ryf, & Basel, 2018).

In 2023, a meta-study was conducted focusing on the Theory of Consumption Values (TCV). A total of 82 studies with 297 effect sizes from 34 countries were analyzed. The Theory of Consumption Values explores the idea that consumers view their purchases through five different lenses or values, that influence their buying behavior (Mason, Oduro, Umar, & Zamparo, 2023). The first is the functional value a product brings - does it meet expectations, how is the price-performance ratio, etc., an example would be the battery life or the processing speed of a computer. The second value is about how a product makes a consumer feel, this includes joy, excitement or even the feeling of belonging. For example, buying a piece of clothing from a brand that can increase the feeling of self-esteem or the taste of candy someone used to eat when they were a child. The third value is connected to how a product positions a customer in a social group. One example of a brand is Abercrombie & Fitch when only skinny or sporty people could buy the clothes as they were tailored for specific body types. Wearing items from this brand showed that the person fitted into the beauty standards at the time. The fourth aspect is the epistemic value of a product or service. It relates to the possibility of learning or experiencing something new.

This can get illustrated by the example consumers who like to buy new technological gadgets to understand the technology and explore the way it functions. Lastly, there is the conditional value which relates to a specific need at a certain time due to particular circumstances, a common example is an umbrella. The value of an umbrella increases exponentially when it is lashing rain outside (Mason, Oduro, Umar, & Zamparo, 2023).

This meta-analysis showed that the emotional value of a product is the strongest indicator of purchase-intend out of all these factors (Mason, Oduro, Umar, & Zamparo, 2023).

This study emphasizes the importance for consumers to buy products that align with their self-image. One area in where this relevance has been observed is the market for sustainable products. Consumers are willing to pay for eco-friendly products if it makes them feel good about themselves (Mason, Oduro, Umar, & Zamparo, 2023).

5.3 Brand Image and Perception

The term "Brand Image" has numerous definitions that have evolved and been adapted over the decades (Patterson, 1999). Across different definitions and concepts, it can be summarized as

“The perception of a brand's performance across several criteria, both functional and non-functional, created in the consumer's mind”.

This perception assists consumers in their purchase decisions and influences their consumption behavior (Patterson, 1999). Brand Image is shaped by several factors, including packaging, experiences with the brand, marketing activities, and observing other consumers purchasing the brand's products (Patterson, 1999).

Two key factors influencing brand Image are brand personality and user image (Patterson, 1999). The first of these two factors arises from consumers attributing personalities to brands or associating them with specific traits. Therefore, the brand personality and the consumer's personality should align. This is why choosing a brand can be described as a *“manifestation of one's values and lifestyle”* (Lannon, 1992). One of the most widely recognized and accepted models on Brand Personality was developed by Jennifer Aaker (1997). This model comprises five dimensions (Figure 1) to which brands can be assigned. The second factor, user image, refers either to actual customers or to idealized users, such as models in advertisements or brand ambassadors (Aaker D. , 1996). The user image is most often described in relation to lifestyle or demographic factors (Patterson, 1999).



Figure 1: Brand Personality Framework based on Aaker (1997)

5.4 German Generations and their Differences

Generaciones (2016), a collaboration of multiple scholars, researching intergenerational relationships and their concepts. They define generation as:

“The interplay of actions and social relationships connected to belonging to specific demographic groups, family structures, membership in organizations, or the experience of historical events. The focus is on the thinking, feeling, willing, and acting of individuals, as well as the lifestyles and developmental paths of collective groups. “
 (Generaciones, 2016).

Currently, there are six generations born between 1928 and 2025 (Table 1): Generation Silent, Babyboomer, Generation X, Generation Y/ Millennials, Generation Z, and Generation Alpha.

Name of the Generation	Years of Birth
Generation Silent	1928-1945
Babyboomer	1946-1964
Generation X	1965-1980
Generation Y/ Millennials	1981-1996
Generation Z	1997-2010
Generation Alpha	2011-2025

Table 1: Overview of different Generations (Knichel, 2023)

All generations have been shaped by the time in which they grew up and influenced by the political and social circumstances of that era (Knichel, 2023). It should be noted that the following descriptions of the generations refer to people who were born and raised in Germany since this research focuses on a German company and a German politician. Therefore, the survey will also focus on the opinions of Germans, as background knowledge of the politics of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) is relevant for answering the questions. The oldest living generation is the Generation Silent, consisting of people born between 1928 and 1945.

This means that many experienced their childhood and adolescence under Hitler's regime (1933-1945) and during World War II (1939-1945). This generation values hard work and tends to view those who don't work as lazy. Additionally, early family formation and respect for authority are important to them (Knichel, 2023).

After the end of World War II, Germany's main goal was to rebuild the destroyed cities and achieve economic recovery. Key to this was the Marshall Plan, a European reconstruction program, and the policies of the then Minister of Economics, Ludwig Erhard (Schneider & Toyka-Seid, 2024).

The rising prosperity and increasing well-being of the population led to a rise in birth rates. Due to this significant increase, the Babyboomer generation has formed the largest group in Germany for decades (Menning & Hoffmann, 2009).

Menning & Hoffmann (2009) predicted that even in 2028, the Babyboomer generation will still be the largest group in Germany in terms of numbers. This forecast is also supported by a statistic from Statista (2024) (Appendix 3). The Babyboomers are characterized by having followed traditional career paths and having a loyal attachment to their employers. For them, an 8-hour workday is considered "normal" (Knichel, 2023).

The third generation includes people who are currently between 59 and 44 years old. They are considered technology-savvy and disciplined. According to Prof. Martin Klaffke, Generation X was primarily shaped by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification. For them, freedom, globalization, and increasing technology were the important topics. However, they also faced issues such as rising youth unemployment. Uncertain future prospects and the expectation that performance must be rewarded have shaped these individuals (Gelowicz, 2024).

According to Klaffke, this generation serves as a transition between the more traditional, performance-oriented generations and the technology-oriented, modern generations. Currently, they have to juggle many different roles: on one hand, they need to support and care for their parents, and on the other hand, their children are not necessarily financially independent, which leads to a double private burden (Gelowicz, 2024).

Millennials were particularly shaped by the 9/11 attacks and the financial crisis of 2007 and were the first generation to grow up with mobile devices and the Internet. These inventions significantly transformed the way information is obtained and communication takes place (Knichel, 2023). According to Dr. Klaus Hurrelmann, a researcher in childhood and youth studies, Millennials are more educated than any generation before them. Having grown up with computers, they are not afraid of new technologies, which influences their behavior both in private life and in the workplace (Rheinische Post, 2020).

Despite the good education and technological skills of the generation, jobs after training were not guaranteed, and some had to settle for unpaid internships. Even when they secured a job, it was often temporary. The professional uncertainties, coupled with the aforementioned global economic crisis, had a lasting impact on Millennials (Rheinische Post, 2020).

With Generation Z, a significant change came to German society as they have new demands regarding their professional lives. Career advancement and professional fulfilment are not as important to them. The focus is on work-life balance and financial security, with individual wealth losing priority.

This generation has been greatly shaped by the COVID-19 crisis, the war in Ukraine, and climate change, says Dr. Klaus Hurrelmann (Stumberger, 2023). This influence and the relevance of climate issues were also evident in a 2023 survey, where Generation Z clearly preferred the German Green Party over other political parties (Appendix 4) (Statista, 2024).

Generation Z has, due to their early exposure to technology, the expectation to apply it and benefit from its advantages. They criticize the status quo of society concerning the working world and politics (Scholz, 2014).

The last generation is Generation Alpha, which spans from 2011 to 2025. Since this generation is still relatively young, there is not yet a lot of information available about them. They are the first generation to grow up entirely in the 21st century, with some members not yet born (Knichel, 2023). The psychologist and founder of the Institute for Generational Research, Rüdiger Maas, conducted the first German study on Generation Alpha (Seitler, 2024). In this study, he surveyed 1,231 educators, gathering data from over 600 parents. Children and adolescents of this generation are overwhelmed with gifts and demand incentives for everything they are supposed to do. They also find it very difficult to concentrate and are easily distracted by digital devices. Due to their early use of smartphones and tablets, they may lack social skills (Seitler, 2024). As they are still very young with the oldest being 13 years, they will not be part of this study as political knowledge is required.

6. Hypotheses and Research Methodology

6.1 Hypotheses

Main Research Question: How does Theo Müller's friendship with AfD leader Alice Weidel influence the perception of the brand "Müller" and the consumer behavior of different generations?

Sub-Research Question 1: Are there significant differences in reactions to Theo Müller's friendship with Alice Weidel among different generations?

H1.1: Younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) are more likely to react negatively to their friendship than older generations (Generation X – Generation Silent)

H1.2: Older generations (Generation X – Generation Silent) are more likely to react negatively to their friendship than younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z)

Sub-Research Question 2: Will consumers stop buying products from Müller due to the friendship between Theo Müller and Alice Weidel?

H2.1: A significant number of consumers of belonging to younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) will stop buying Müller products compared to those who will keep buying

H2.2: A significant number of consumers of belonging to older generations (Generation X – Generation Silent) will stop buying Müller products compared to those who will keep buying

Sub- Research Question 3: What is the impact on consumer behavior due to that friendship? Would there be a significant difference in reactions between the generations if Theo Müller would distance himself from the AfD and Alice Weidel publicly?

H3.1: Younger generations (Generation Z and Millennials) would react more positively to a public distancing from the AfD.

H3.2: Older generations (Generation X – Generation Silent) would react more positively to a public distancing from the AfD.

Sub- Research Question 4: If there is no significant change in consumer behavior after Theo Müller distances himself from the AfD and Alice Weidel publicly, what would be the possible reasons?

H4.1: Lacking authenticity of the statement.

6.2 Research Methodology

There are many different definitions for research, as there are many different types that can be used to collect data. All of them suggest that research is a systematic way of gathering data aiming at enhancing one's knowledge about a certain field (Almalki, 2016).

Dawson emphasized the relevance of having a clear and precise research aim, he suggested that if the topic cannot be summarized in one sentence, the topic is too broad (Dawson, 2002). Hence, this research consists of one main question and four related sub-questions. These questions will be answered by implementing three different ways of data collection: Secondary research and primary research, more precisely: an exploratory research design consisting of a qualitative research in form of expert interviews and a quantitative research in form of an online survey

Secondary research also referred to as "Desk-Research" includes all data collecting methods which aim at discovering and implementing already existing data. As this information is researched in a different context, the results are already interpreted in a certain way (Fichter, Ryf, & Basel, 2018).

According to Fichter et al. (2018), desk research should be collected in the following five steps:

1. Define research aim
2. Define data sources
3. Collect and prepare data
4. Analyze collected data
5. Results and Implementation

Additionally, Armstrong and Kotler (2018) suggest that the first step is to define the research problem and the results objectives. Afterwards, a research plan needs to be designed and implemented, afterwards, the data has to be collected and analyzed. Lastly, the results need to be interpreted and summarized.

Even though, secondary research has several benefits such as being less time- and cost intense, it needs to be considered that there are also disadvantages. As mentioned previously, secondary data has been collected in a different context (i.e., different research aim), thus the results are interpreted in a certain way. Consequently, the provided information might not be as specific as required. Additionally, secondary data is not necessarily up to date, hence it might not include the latest trends, cultural changes, or other factors that can change over time. Therefore, this paper will include a combination of primary and secondary research where already existing data provides the basis for primary research by supporting to understand the current state of the researched field.

As well as desk research, primary research also referred to as field research offers different ways of data collection. This approach can be divided into two categories: quantitative and qualitative (Table 2). The most relevant difference is the focus of the research. As the names suggest, qualitative studies are defined by their highly descriptive and detailed nature whereas quantitative research focuses on the number of participants and representativeness of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Aspect	Qualitative	Quantitative
Focus	Quantity (how many, how much)	Quality (essence)
Goal	Control; Prediction; Description; Testing hypothesis; Confirmation	Description; Discovery; Understanding; meaning; Generating hypothesis
Design	Structured; Predefined	Evolving; Flexible
Sample	Large; Random; Representative	Small; Non-random; Theoretical; Purposeful
Way of collecting Data	Inanimate Instruments (e.g., scales; questionnaires; tests)	Researcher as instrument (e.g., observations; interviews)
Mode of Analysis	Deductive; Statistical	Inductive; Constant comparative method
Results and Findings	Precise; Numerical	holistic; Expensive; Descriptive

Table 2: Characteristics of Quantitative and Qualitative Research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) Own Illustration

Quantitative research can be implemented in several different ways. Commonly used are telephone-, personal- or written interviews and online surveys. All methods have their advantages and disadvantages, for example, personal or telephone interviews increase the risk of the interviewer bias, meaning that the interviewee could be directly or indirectly be influenced by the interviewer. Yet, these two options allow to clarify misunderstandings thus increase the value of the information collected. Contrary to that, online surveys do not involve the risk of the interviewer bias, however no clarification questions can be asked during the process (Fichter, Ryf, & Basel, 2018).

Conversely to quantitative research, qualitative research has a stronger focus on getting a deeper and more detailed understanding. It places emphasis on the participants' knowledge, experiences, and opinions (Creswell, 2014). For this paper, an exploratory research design, which is a combination of qualitative research and quantitative research is chosen.

The qualitative research will take place in form of three semi-structured expert interviews and quantitative research in form of an online survey.

The online survey will be shared across various social media channels to reach as many participants as possible. These are mainly closed-ended questions, meaning that the answer options are already provided for the participants, and they will select the most suitable one. The three conducted expert interviews provide complementary and topic-specific insights.

6.3 Research Design

To be able to answer the main research question, primary research in form of an exploratory study will be conducted, this means that quantitative research (i.e., online survey) will be based upon the previously mentioned expert interviews. As this research focuses on a German company and it requires background knowledge about a German party and its policies, the questionnaire focuses on German participants. Furthermore, this study includes the generations born between 1928 and 2010. Therefore, filter questions in the beginning of the survey will be implemented and the survey will be published in German.

The online survey (Appendix 13) consists of 13 questions, of which three are filter questions and five are deep-dive questions to explore the background of previous answers. This means that not all participants will be asked all the questions, and therefore, the number of participants may vary. The survey is divided into several sections (Table 3). The first section consists of a question regarding generational belonging. As mentioned earlier, Generation Alpha is excluded from the survey due to their age.

The second section includes two questions that generally relate to changes in consumer behavior due to the political stances of brands and their representatives. These were included to get a comprehensive overview of opinions on the topic. They were also included to prevent individuals who are unfamiliar with the AfD and the brand "Müller" from distorting the results of the case-specific questions. Yet, they might be familiar with other parties or brands that have had political controversies, hence they can answer general answers about the topic. Therefore, two additional filter questions were included. Participants who state that they have no knowledge of either of the two areas (i.e., AfD/Alice Weidel and Müller/Theo Müller) are excluded from the survey. The case-specific section includes seven questions aimed at investigating customer behavior and its underlying reasons. Some of these are deep-dive questions based on the answers provided earlier, hence the number of responses may vary. The survey concludes with one demographic question about gender.

The semi-structured expert interviews with the brand managers consist of nine questions (Appendix 5) with the goal of capturing their experiences and knowledge in the areas of brand image and consumer perception. They focus on their expectations in the case of Müller, how customers from different generations respond and how they personally handle such situations. For the interview with Lisa H., a different questionnaire was developed due to her qualifications and relevant experiences and insights. This questionnaire consists of 18 questions (Appendix 10) and focuses on her recommendations for companies dealing with crises and issues in corporate communication.

Clusters	Questions
Filter question generation	1. To which of the following generations do you belong?
General questions about political influence on consumer behavior	2. On a scale from 1 = not important at all to 5 = a very important purchasing criterion for me, how important is the political position or orientation of a brand or its representative for your purchasing decision? 3. To which degree do you agree with the following statements? (1 = I don't agree at all / 5 = I completely agree)
Filter question case	4. Do you know the brand Müller (products include Müller Milch, Froop Yoghurt, Joghurt mit der Ecke)? 5. Do you know who Alice Weidel is what her party, the AfD, stands for?
Topic Introduction	<i>At the end of last year, some magazines reported on a meeting between the owner of the Müller brand, Theo Müller, and the chairwoman of the AfD, Alice Weidel. The two met privately in a luxury restaurant in France. In February 2024, Theo Müller gave an interview to the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and confirmed that Alice Weidel is a friend. Although he does not agree with all points in the party's program, he would describe himself as someone between observer and sympathizer.</i>
Case-related questions	6. Based on the information you just read, would you say that your position towards the 'Müller' brand has changed? 7. (Follow up question 6) You just indicated that your opinion about the brand 'Müller' has not changed and remains the same as before. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1 = I do not agree at all / 5 = I fully agree) 8. (Follow up question 6) You just indicated that your opinion about the brand "Müller" has changed. In what way and to what extent? 9. (Follow up question 8) You just indicated that you now find the brand 'Müller' less likable than before. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1 = I do not agree at all / 5 = I fully agree) 10. Assuming Theo Müller publicly apologizes for his behavior and distances himself from the AfD and Alice Weidel, how likely would you be to purchase 'Müller' products? 11. (Follow up question 10) You just stated you would consider buying "Müller" products if Theo Müller would publicly apologize for his closeness to Alice Weidel. Would you indicate why? (Open answer possible) 12. (Follow up question 10) You just stated you would not consider buying "Müller" products if Theo Müller would publicly apologize for his closeness to Alice Weidel. Would you indicate why? (Open answer possible)
Demographics	13. What gender do you identify with?

Table 3: Survey Question and Cluster Overview

For the analysis of the three semi-structured expert interviews, Mayring's qualitative content analysis was chosen. This method allows qualitative text material to be reduced and analyzed to highlight the most relevant statements (Weber & Wernitz, 2021).

The data used in this analysis was specifically collected for this paper, meaning that the source and origin source of the presented information are known. The data implemented are transcripts from three expert interviews that can be found in the appendices six, eight, and eleven. After defining the data analyzed, it needs to be determined whether a deductive or inductive approach will be used. Deductive approach means that the categories are defined before analyzing the data material, based on existing literature and empirical research. In the inductive approach, the categories are derived from the material and are thus defined during the analysis (Weber & Wernitz, 2021).

In this process, statements with similar content can be grouped together. Once relevant information can no longer be assigned to a category, a new category is created (Meier, 2014). According to Mayring (1991), the next step is to determine the unit of analysis. Mayring distinguishes between coding units, context units, and evaluation units. The first one refers to specific sentences or words from the interview. The context unit is a theme that runs through the entire interview. Finally, the evaluation unit is determined, as it refers to all the conducted interviews (Weber & Wernitz, 2021).

Afterward, the analysis technique for the process must be determined. The qualitative content analysis provides three options: summarization, explication, and structuring (Mayring, 1991). For this inductive analysis, summarization is chosen (Figure 2). The final three steps involve a review of the category system, ensuring that the selected categories are suitable and identifying any similar categories that may be combined. Once the categories are finalized, the analysis can proceed, focusing on the main research question, including examining the frequency of each category within the data set (Mayring, 1991).

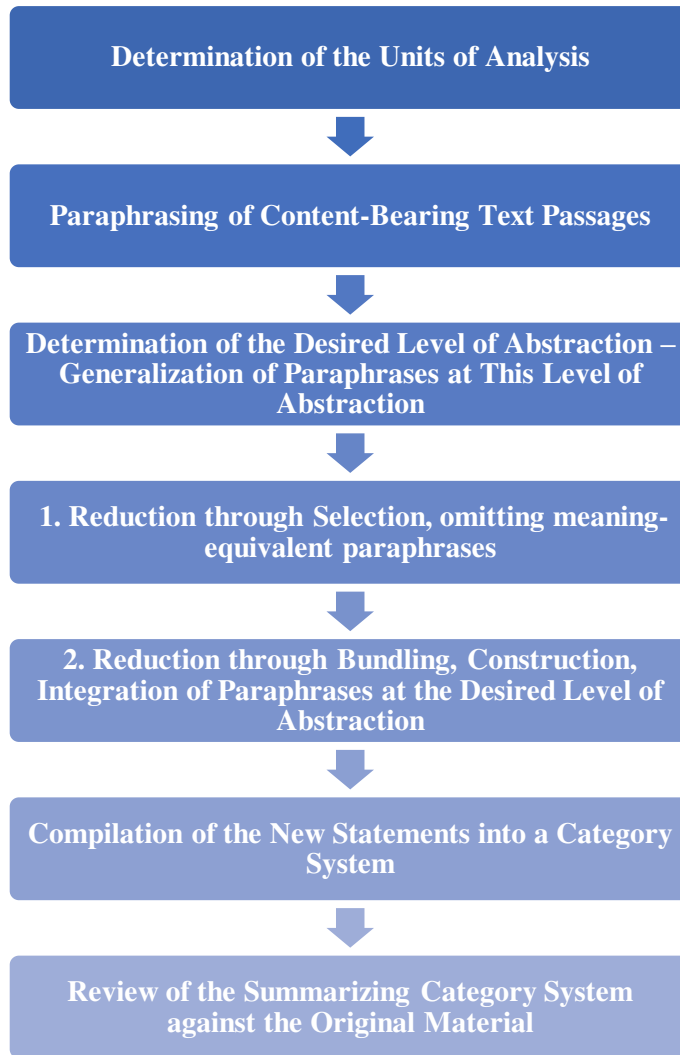


Figure 2: Process Model of Summarizing Content Analysis (Mayring, 1988)

7. Analysis of the Expert Interviews

Before conducting semi-structured expert interviews, it is crucial to create a guideline of questions ensuring to cover all relevant topics. All questions were formulated as open-ended to ensure that the interviewees could respond with all their knowledge and expertise. The three participants agreed at the beginning of the interviews to be recorded and that the transcripts could be included in this paper. As mentioned in Chapter 6.3, the interviews were analyzed using Mayring's qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach, meaning that categories were defined after reviewing the material and tailored to the topic addressed in this paper. An overview of the frequencies as well as the key statements from each interviewee for every category are presented in figure 4 after subchapter 7.3.

7.1 Interview with Caprice Larrard – Junior Brand Manager DACH at SC Johnson

This interview was conducted in person on November 10, 2024, and lasted 21 minutes and 52 seconds. The pre-formulated questions, which served as a general guideline, can be found in Appendix 5. Additionally, the transcript (Appendix 6) and the interview analysis (Appendix 7) are available. During the review, four categories were identified: (1) *obligations of brand representatives*, (2) *interdependence of brand and representative*, (3) *generational differences*, and (4) *internal consequences*.

The first category "*Obligations of Brand Representatives*" encompasses the responsibilities brand representatives have toward the company. It was found that representatives strongly influence consumer perception, and their political statements can quickly be associated with the brand, giving it a political face. It is essential that political statements are not made on behalf of the brand, and overall, maintaining neutrality is crucial. This extends not only to political views but also to affiliations, such as sports clubs, to avoid alienating consumers who might support rival teams and risk losing them as potential customers. The analysis highlights that the influence of brand representatives is sometimes underestimated, emphasizing the importance of carefully considering public statements or refraining from making them altogether.

The second category "*Interdependence of Brand and Representative*" examines how much consumers can differentiate between the two. The analysis revealed that brand neutrality is vital, as a representative's political statement can strongly impact perception, making it difficult for consumers to separate the two. Many people are likely to form opinions about both the statement and the brand. For Müller, this underscores the importance of distinguishing the brand from Theo Müller. However, in family businesses, where family members act as representatives, this differentiation is even harder for consumers to make.

Unlike representatives in paid partnerships, family ties cannot be easily severed, suggesting that the stronger the association between a brand and its representative, the greater the potential consequences.

The third category "*Generational Differences*" explores how consumer behavior related to political positions and statements varies by age or generation. The interviewee believes younger generations (Gen Z and Millennials) are more likely to engage in discussions and take stronger positions on such topics than older generations. However, it is also likely that, besides non-buyers, there will be an opposing group that becomes even more enthusiastic about the brand. This is attributed to a rightward shift among younger Germans, some of whom are AfD voters. In contrast, older generations are expected to remain more neutral or indifferent:

"I think there's more apathy in that demographic. Their sense of justice and their understanding of what's happening and what it means aren't as strongly represented."

The fourth category "*Internal Consequences*" pertains to the outcomes at SC Johnson if brand representatives or employees make politically problematic statements.

It is mandatory to report incidents involving racist, misogynistic, or similar remarks. Consequences can range from warnings to termination.

In conclusion, one can say that companies should not become political, as this can alienate customers. Furthermore, representatives should be cautious with their statements and always keep the brand's well-being in mind.

7.2 Interview with Frank Serocka – Head of Consumer & Trade Marketing at Melitta

This interview was conducted via Microsoft Teams on November 8, 2024, and lasted 30 minutes and 9 seconds. The pre-formulated questions, which served as a general guideline, can be found in Appendix 5. Additionally, the transcript (Appendix 8) and the interview analysis (Appendix 9) are available. Due to the fact that Caprice Larrard and Frank Serocka both work in brand management, they were presented with the same set of interview questions. The analysis of this interview revealed six categories: (1) *Obligations of brand representatives*, (2) *Interdependence of brand and representative*, (3) *Shift in consumer mindset*, (4) *Personal experience*, (5) *Social responsibilities of brand representatives*, and (6) *Generational differences*. The first category, "*Obligations of Brand Representatives*" as defined in chapter 7.1, refers to the responsibilities a brand representative has toward the brand or company. This interview also emphasized that brand representatives should be aware of their responsibilities, particularly regarding statements made in the brand's name. An example is a post on the business platform LinkedIn.

When publishing on such platforms, the representative must ensure their statements align with the brand's values. Furthermore, whenever a brand makes any political statement, the brand should anticipate criticism and be well-prepared for it.

The second category, *"Interdependence of Brand and Representative"* also mentioned in the previous chapter, deals with the relationship between the two.

This interview highlighted that the influence of a representative on brand perception strongly depends on the degree of association between them. The more consumers associate a person with a brand, the stronger the positive or negative impact on the brand's perception. According to the interviewee, the connection between Theo Müller and the Müller brand is currently not strong enough to significantly influence consumers:

"I wouldn't know what he looks like, actually." In contrast, brands like Trigema and its founder Wolfgang Grupp demonstrate a much stronger link. The founder Wolfgang Grupp, who is very present. The brand really doesn't exist without the owner."

Because of this strong association, a critical statement by Grupp would have a greater impact on brand perception compared to Theo Müller.

The third category, *"Shift in Consumer Mindset"* relates to changes in consumer expectations and behavior. Expectations have shifted significantly in recent years.

In the past, consumers were satisfied if products were of good quality and the brand's image aligned with their identity. Today, consumers expect companies and brands to represent the right values. Topics like sustainability and diversity are now critical and influence purchasing decisions. Consumers also have new sources of information to learn about brands and their practices:

"The demand for a brand is no longer just about what kind of product it is, how you're positioned, what your image is, but also, what's your stance on certain issues."

The fourth category, *"Personal Experience"* relates to personal experiences regarding political statements and opinions. At Melitta, for example, there is an assessment to ensure applicants' values align with the brand's. This helps to identify compatibility with the brand early on. Furthermore, Melitta has measures in place to prevent politically sensitive or contradictory values from being communicated on behalf of the company. Only employees in leadership positions are permitted to make public statements in the name of the brand, reducing the risk of polarizing or brand-damaging remarks.

The fifth category, *"Social Responsibilities of Brand Representatives"* focuses on the obligations brand representatives have toward society. Companies and their representatives are expected to speak out during crises and communicate their values to take a clear stance.

This was illustrated with an example: Following elections in Thuringia and Saxony, the company added a tagline to email signatures to demonstrate its values to employees and business partners. However, it is not feasible for companies to address every political development.

The last category, "*Generational Differences*" mentioned previously in chapter 7.1, explores differences in consumer reactions based on age or generation. The interviewee also believes younger people are more likely to react strongly to Theo Müller's friendship with Alice Weidel compared to older generations. Younger people are more active in protests and comfortable using social media platforms, with a stronger desire to voice opinions on issues that matter to them. In contrast, older generations may already be somewhat desensitized.

Ultimately, it can be said that society has evolved, and it is important for companies and brands to stay informed about societal and political changes and resulting consumer demands. Brands and their representatives play an important role in society and should fulfil this role during political or social crises.

7.3 Interview with Lisa H.– PR-Consultant

This interview was conducted via Microsoft Teams on November 15, 2024, and lasted 35 minutes and 24 seconds. The pre-formulated questions, which served as a general guideline, can be found in Appendix 10. Additionally, the transcript (Appendix 11) and the interview analysis (Appendix 12) are available. During the review, seven categories were identified: (1) *Obligations of brand representatives*, (2) *Crisis Prevention*, (3) *Interdependence of brand and representative*, (4) *Theo Müller's Behavior*, (5) *Internal Challenges*, (6) *Generational Differences*, (7) *Social Responsibilities of brand representatives*.

As described in the previous chapters, the first category, "*Obligations of brand representatives*", refers to the obligations a brand representative has toward the brand or company. Compared to the interviews in Chapters 7.1 and 7.2, the interviewee places particular emphasis on employees. It is highlighted that there is a risk of employees distancing themselves from the company, which was also the case at Müller in early 2024, when one of the managers announced his resignation. It is further noted that investors could withdraw their support, potentially leading to significant financial consequences for the company. While there are Germans who have no issue with Theo Müller's statements, crises triggered by such remarks can still result in a sharp decline in customer loyalty and sales. If enough of these events occur, it can lead to existential problems for the brand.

The second category, "*Crisis Prevention*", is closely related to the first category, but due to its relevance, it was created as a separate category.

Crisis Prevention refers to measures and strategies that should be implemented to minimize the consequences of a crisis or avoid it altogether. It became clear that the first step should be to temporarily stop all planned marketing activities and corporate communications related to the brand representative in order to address the issue that could lead to a crisis and refocus the company's messaging on that issue. An internal discussion about the topic is also necessary, meaning that a conversation with the brand representative should take place. If the representative is an influencer, the termination of the collaboration should be considered. Additionally, it is important to consider the political views and earlier statements of the representative when making a selection. This is particularly relevant in today's digital age, as old statements can resurface years later through the internet and social media, potentially leading to negative reactions. It is crucial to avoid any statements that could be legally prosecuted and if necessary, to end the collaboration. However, there is an exception if a criminal history is necessary for credibility.

For example, when companies engage in organizations that support people who want to leave or have left illegal organizations, such as Nazi groups. In these cases, it can be crucial to work with a former member of one of these groups to increase authenticity and credibility. In such cases, the distinction must be clear, and the risks should be carefully considered.

The third category, "*Interdependence of brand and representative*" has already been discussed in the previous chapters and refers to the mutual dependence of the reputation of the representative and the brand. Like Frank Serocka, Lisa H. is also convinced that there is a strong interdependent relationship between the representative and the brand, meaning that the behavior of one influences the perception of the other. Yet, a strong association between the two is important for a cooperation. To increase the likelihood of a positive collaboration, it should be ensured that both parties share similar political views. This is important for two reasons: firstly, it increases the credibility of the collaboration and makes it appear more authentic to consumers, and second, representatives should not be forced into making political statements that conflict with their personal beliefs. Brands should therefore ask themselves: "*Do we want to consciously remain neutral, or do we want to actively engage in political discussions?*" The answer to this question should be a key factor in choosing a representative. For consumers, a clear stance is important, as customers who strongly identify with companies and brands that hold political views may see their statements and actions as "expert opinion" or advocacy, which strengthens customer loyalty.

In contrast, for brands that are otherwise neutral, making political statements can lead to negative feedback, as customers may feel attacked by such actions. This was also illustrated by the Edeka example in chapter 6.

The fourth category, "*Theo Müller's Behavior*", refers to a quote from the interviewee about their thoughts on the behavior and statements of brand owner Theo Müller:

"I think a lot of ego plays a role in situations like this, and a lot of not wanting to understand or just not keeping up with how the world is changing and that it actually has changed, and that it's just a different situation."

The fifth category, "*Internal Challenges*", refers to difficult topics and situations that brands must deal with internally. Discourses within a company can be beneficial in the long term if they are conducted on equal terms and in a factual manner. They can help brands move forward, develop, and adapt to new challenges. However, if political views harm the brand's image, consideration should be given to whether changes are necessary:

"But if political convictions trigger a brand-damaging controversy, then something must be wrong. Either the political conviction should be reconsidered, or the brand needs to be reconsidered."

The sixth category, "*Generational Differences*", was also mentioned in the previous chapters and concerns the expected differences in reactions from people of different generations. In contrast to Caprice Larrard and Frank Serocka, Lisa H. does not assume a clear distinction between the generations, but she does suspect that older generations may be generally more neutral towards politicization. However, she would not say that younger generations react more negatively than older generations, so no clear line can be drawn.

The final category, "*Social Responsibilities of brand representatives*", was also mentioned in the previous chapters and refers to the responsibility of brand representatives towards society.

The relevance of this responsibility can be summed up in the following quote:

"But I'm simply convinced that companies are part of society and operate in the public sphere, and therefore have an obligation to take responsibility. This responsibility is met with a certain level of regulation."

In conclusion, it is important for brands to find the right balance between responsibility and control. Representatives should not be pressured into making statements or expressing opinions that do not align with their personal views, which makes the careful selection of the representative crucial. An open internal discourse can help ensure that a brand meets the expectations of society and its stakeholders in the long term, thus remaining competitive.

Category	Definition	Caprice Larrard		Frank Serocka		Lisa H.		Total Frequency
		Frequency	Key Statement	Frequency	Key Statement	Frequency	Key Statement	
Obligations of Brand Representatives	Responsibilities brand representatives have toward the company	3 (4:20 - 5:23)	"For me, it's important that politics, in any form, has nothing to do with a brand. This means I would never push political statements or support in the name of the brand..."	2 (3:27 - 4:29)	"...So, if someone publicly expresses an opinion and does so under their company name if I were to express myself on LinkedIn, for example—I would, of course, be careful to ensure that it aligns with Melitta."	2 (0:28 - 1:28)	"...I would say they have a responsibility towards their stakeholders. First and foremost, this is towards their employees. They could turn away in response to critical statements. That would be something that, hopefully, would not be desirable for the individual..."	7
Interdependence of Brand and Representative	Examines how good consumers can differentiate between the two and what is required for them to be able to do so	4 (6:32 - 6:47)	"... In family-owned businesses, the representative is often irreplaceable, making it nearly impossible to separate them from the brand..."	4 (27:52 - 28:09)	"The more he becomes associated with the brand and the more this connection is made clear to the general public, the harder it would be for political statements to be separated from the brand. These statements would inevitably be linked back to the brand..."	5 (1:41 - 2:37)	"...There's a strong dependency relationship, and therefore, I think it definitely influences it. Brand ambassadors act in the public sphere, and the statements they make publicly affect the brand..."	13
Generational Differences	Examines how consumer behavior related to political positions and statements varies by age or generation	1 (10:28 - 13:05)	"...When we look at it generationally, I'd say the younger generations would drive much of the discussion..."	1 (24:13 - 25:04)	"When thinking in terms of target groups, I would assume that the younger generation is more likely to take action because they also have the means to generate a certain level of noise..."	1 (28:39 - 29:55)	"...I actually fear that you can't really draw a big difference and don't have to. I also know people from all generations who react to this kind of thing..."	3
Internal Consequences	What happens in the companies where the interviewee works to brand representatives who behave politically controversial or against the brand's	1 (7:48 - 8:54)	"So, for us, it's essentially mandatory to report something like that if you witness it..."	0	N.A.	0	N.A.	1
Shift in Consumer Mindset	Changes in consumer expectations and behavior	0	N.A.	1 (9:04 - 10:27)	"...Nowadays, consumers also ask what the brand actually stands for. That wasn't necessarily the case before..."	0	N.A.	1
Personal Experience	Personal experiences regarding political statements and opinions	0	N.A.	3 (19:27 - 21:09)	"I don't think Müller would be someone I would apply to, because it's important to me where I work and who is ultimately behind it..."	0	N.A.	3
Social Responsibilities of Brand Representatives	Obligations brand representatives have toward society	0	N.A.	3 (13:38 - 16:29)	"...We produce in Germany, our employees are here in Germany, we are a German company. So, it's not indifferent to us what's happening socially or politically..."	1 (12:26 - 14:16)	"...But I'm simply convinced that companies are part of society and operate in the public sphere, and therefore have an obligation to take responsibility..."	4

Crisis Prevention		0	N.A.	0	N.A.	3	(3:03 - 4:16) <i>Well, first of all, the initial reaction, I think, would be to stop all planned publications, like social media posts or press releases, for example. This is to first assess and understand what has just happened. What are the consequences, and does this affect our brand or communication in any way? Then, it would definitely be important to have a personal conversation..."</i>	3
Theo Müller's Behavior		0	N.A.	0	N.A.	1	(15:42 - 18:23) <i>"...I think a lot of ego plays a role in situations like this, and a lot of not wanting to understand or just not keeping up with how the world is changing and that it actually has changed, and that it's just a different situation..."</i>	1
Internal Challenges		0	N.A.	0	N.A.	1	(20:12 - 21:30) <i>"...If political convictions trigger a brand-damaging controversy, then something must be wrong. Either the political conviction should be reconsidered, or the brand needs to be reconsidered..."</i>	1

Table 4: Frequency and Answer Overview of the Expert Interviews

7.4 Conclusion

Today, consumers have different and more complex expectations of the brands they choose to purchase. Beyond good quality, potential customers also expect brands to represent values that align with their own.

This includes aspects such as diversity and sustainability, as well as political orientations and views. Therefore, it is essential for brands to reflect on their own position and societal responsibility. Additionally, it becomes clear that selecting a brand representative is a significant strategic decision for a company and can have a lasting impact on brand perception, thus consumer behavior. This is because brand representatives who are closely associated with a brand can significantly influence its image and how it is perceived by customers. To ensure a positive collaboration, companies should consider the following steps:

1. Conduct a thorough analysis of the potential brand representative's history. This is necessary to prevent future crises, as past statements and actions are often digitally traceable.

2. Foster open communication from the beginning. This means companies should clearly communicate their political stance before entering a partnership to assess the degree of alignment and avoid negative discourse. This also means that brands either choose to remain entirely neutral or take a clear political position. For a collaboration to be authentically sustainable, there should be a natural alignment of values.
3. In the event of a crisis triggered by a political statement, conduct an in-depth internal review. This should occur in two steps:
 1. Suspend all planned marketing activities and corporate communications involving the representative.
 2. Engage in open communication to understand the context and, if necessary, take action. This could involve reassessing the brand's values or limiting or terminating the partnership.

8. Survey Analysis

This study is a quantitative analysis addressing the research question: „*How does Theo Müller's friendship with AfD leader Alice Weidel influence the perception of the brand "Müller" and the customer behavior of different generations?*” The survey was created using the software "Qualtrics" and distributed via a link on several social media platforms. Participants could respond within a fixed period from November 18, 2024, to December 10, 2024. The dependent variable in this study is the change in consumer behavior, while the independent variable is the generational affiliation of the participants. A detailed definition and categorization of the generations can be found in chapter 5.4 and the complementary overview (Table 1).

8.1 Sample

The study included German participants born between 1928 and 2010. Additionally, in order to be allowed to participate respondents had to be familiar with the brand "Müller," as well as the politician Alice Weidel, her party, and her political views. The survey was distributed across various social media platforms, including Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, and Snapchat.

The survey was anonymous, and all participants were informed about this on the first page to encourage honest and authentic responses. Participation in this study was voluntary and without any compensation.

8.2 Descriptive Analysis of the Sample

In total, 332 people participated in the survey and 267 People completed it ($n= 149$ female, $n= 116$ male, $n= 2$ non-binary). For the descriptive analysis of the sample, only those participants who completed the survey will be considered. Since the survey was published only in German, only people who speak German and thus have knowledge about the country were able to answer the questions.

	n (N= 267)	Share %
Gender		
female	149	56%
male	116	43%
non-binary	2	1%
Generation		
Generation Silent	0	0%
Baby Boomer	29	11%
Generation X	90	34%
Generation Y/ Millennials	48	18%
Gen Z	100	37%

Table 5: Descriptives of the Study

8.3 Hypotheses Testing

H1.1: Younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) are more likely to react negatively to their friendship than older generations (Generation X – Generation Silent)

H1.2: Older generations (Generation X – Generation Silent) are more likely to react negatively to their friendship than younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z)

To conduct a t-test, it is first necessary to check the required assumptions. The dataset at hand shows independence of measurements. The dependent variable is interval-scaled, as the reaction to the friendship between Alice Weidel and Theo Müller was measured using a 4-point Likert scale. The independent variable consists of two groups: younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) and older generations (Generation X - the Silent Generation). Since participants were able to select their respective generation, the data were recoded and grouped into "young" and "old". To test for normal distribution, the Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted, which yielded a significant result ($p < .05$), indicating that the two groups are not normally distributed. However, t-tests are considered robust against violations of normality when the groups under consideration include at least 30 participants each (Bortz, 2005), which was given (n (young)= 69; n (old)= 50). Outliers were identified in the analysis. Since these do not stem from measurement errors or missing data, but rather represent normal fluctuations in society (Hemmerich, 2016), they were not removed from the dataset. To check for homogeneity of variance (homoscedasticity), the Levene's test for equality of variances was conducted, which yielded a significant result ($p < .05$), indicating that homogeneity of variance is not met. Based on this result, the Welch test was used. There was no statistically significant result in the negative reactions to the friendship between Alice Weidel and Theo Müller between the young and the old, $t(112,957) = 1,945, p = .054$

Due to this non-significant result, H1.1 and H1.2 must be rejected.

Furthermore, two χ^2 tests were conducted. The first was to determine the frequency of negative and very negative reactions in the two groups (young and old). The independence of measurements and the nominal scaling of the variables are met. All cells have an expected frequency greater than five. There was no statistically significant relationship between generational affiliation and the intensity of the negative reaction; however, a small effect in the strength of the relationship was observed. $\chi^2(1) = 3.571, p = .059, \phi = .173$

The second χ^2 test was conducted to identify the frequency of attitudes toward the brand Müller (no change and negative change) after the friendship became known in the two groups (young and old). It is important to note that no positive change was found in the dataset after the information about the friendship, so only neutral and negative reactions are considered. The dataset was combined into two groups to simplify the analysis. Additionally, participants who were unsure about their opinion of the brand "Müller" after reading the information about the friendship were removed from the dataset. The independence of measurements and the nominal scaling of the variables are met. All cells have an expected frequency greater than 5. There is no statistically significant relationship between generational affiliation and the change in the perception of the brand "Müller". $\chi^2 (1) = 1.88, p = .664, \phi = .029$

A descriptive analysis clearly showed that the association with the AfD brings no benefits for the brand within the sample and only results in negative developments when consumers are informed about the friendship. 43% of the participants stated that their opinion of the brand did not change after being informed about the friendship. However, 41% indicated that their opinion of the brand changed negatively. 16% were unsure at the time of participation whether their opinion had changed. The SPSS Output can be found in Appendix 14.

Reaction to the friendship	n (N= 270)	Share (in %)
Opinion about the brand has not changed	117	43%
Opinion about the brand has changed negatively	111	41%
I don't know	42	16%

Table 6: Change in Opinions about the brand after Information about the friendship

H2.1: A significant number of consumers of belonging to younger generations (Millennials and Generation Z) will stop buying Müller products compared to those who will keep buying

H2.2: A significant number of consumers of belonging to older generations (Generation X – Generation Silent) will stop buying Müller products compared to those who will keep buying

A χ^2 test was conducted to examine the purchasing behavior of the two groups (young and old) after reading the information about the friendship between Theo Müller and Alice Weidel. Participants who indicated that their opinion had not changed (i.e., they continue to buy) and those who indicated that their opinion had changed negatively were included. A distinction was made between those who continue to buy or not.

For this, the results of the Likert scale were summarized, with the responses "I will definitely stop buying" and "I will most likely stop buying Müller products" being combined and recoded. The same was done for the responses "I will definitely not stop buying Müller products" and "I will most likely not stop buying Müller products," which were recoded and summarized. To include only meaningful responses, neutral answers, and the response "No answer" were removed from the dataset. Additionally, Generation Z and Millennials were grouped together as the "young" group, while Generation X through the Silent Generation were grouped together as the "old" group. Both variables are nominally scaled, and the independence of measurements is met. All cells have an expected frequency greater than 5. There is no statistically significant relationship between generational affiliation and the willingness to purchase Müller products after learning about the friendship between Theo Müller and Alice Weidel.

$$\chi^2 (1) = 0.57, p = .881, \phi = .017$$

The SPSS Output can be found in Appendix 15.

In total, 80 people indicated that they would no longer purchase Müller products, with 38 of them belonging to the older three generations and 42 belonging to the younger generations. 126 people stated that they would continue to buy Müller products, with 62 from the older generations and 64 from the younger generations (Table 7).

Keep Buying Müller Products		n (N= 126)	Share (in %)
	Old	62	49%
	Young	64	51%
Stop Buying Müller Products		n (N= 80)	Share (in %)
	Old	38	48%
	Young	42	53%
Young		n (N= 106)	Share (in %)
	Keep Buying Products	64	60%
	Stop Buying Products	42	40%
Old		n (N= 100)	Share (in %)
	Keep Buying Products	62	62%
	Stop Buying Products	38	38%

Table 7: Comparison of the Generations – Willingness to buy

H3.1: Younger generations (Generation Z and Millennials) would react more positively to a public distancing from the AfD.

H3.2: Older generations (Generation X – Generation Silent) would react more positively to a public distancing from the AfD.

A χ^2 test was conducted to examine the differences between the groups (young and old) after a public apology and distancing. For this, the dataset was summarized to obtain ordinal scaled variables. Participants who indicated that it was likely or very likely that they would purchase Müller products after a public statement were combined and recoded. The same was done for participants who indicated that it was unlikely or very unlikely that they would purchase Müller products after a public statement. Participants who chose the neutral response option were excluded from this analysis. The independence of measurements is met, and all cells have an expected frequency greater than 5. There was no statistically significant relationship between generational affiliation and the willingness to purchase Müller products after a public apology and distancing, although a small effect in the strength of the relationship was observed.

$\chi^2 (1) = 2,848, p = .091, \phi = .128$

The SPSS Output can be found in Appendix 16.

H4.1: Lacking authenticity of the statement.

For H4.1, a descriptive analysis was conducted using a crosstab. A total of 116 people ($n = 116$) indicated that they would not buy Müller products after a public apology. Of these, 54 people ($n = 54$) belong to younger generations, Millennials and Generation Z. 62 participants ($n = 62$) belong to the older generations, Generation X and Babyboomers. None of the younger participants stated that their reason for not purchasing Müller products was due to sympathies for the AfD. In contrast, 3 people from the older generations stated that their sympathy for the AfD was the reason for not buying Müller products after a public apology. In both generations, the lack of authenticity of a public apology was the main reason for not purchasing Müller products (young = 55.6%; old = 54.8%). "Other reasons" was the second most common reason for not purchasing Müller products in both generations (young = 44.4%; old = 40.3%). The SPSS Output can be found in Appendix 17.

It should be noted, however, that some of the open-answer responses closely resemble the reason "lack of authenticity of a public apology":

„My attitude remains largely the same and is more deeply rooted in me than a subsequent apology that does not lead to any actions. If the Müller brand were to plan corresponding counter-initiatives (CSR initiatives or clear corporate values that align with mine), this could possibly change. However, the first impression is decisive for my purchasing decision. “

„Anyone who does not clearly distance themselves from the AfD and only apologizes for publicity should not be taken seriously.”

„The apology would only be for appeasement and publicity, but people with this attitude do not change, and one will search in vain for any insight.”

Additionally, some participants indicated that they had been aware of Müller's political orientation for a longer time and had therefore not purchased Müller products even before participating in the survey:

„I haven't bought Müller products for many years due to the owners' connection to right-wing parties.”

„I have been aware of the political background of Müller for many years, which is why I have been boycotting the brand for years. An apology would not influence me now, as my trust in the brand is permanently damaged. “

Generation * Reason for not buying after apology Crosstabulation

			Reason for not buying after apology			Total
			Like the AfD	Lack of Authenticity	Something else	
Generation	Young	Count	0	30	24	54
		Expected Count	1,4	29,8	22,8	54,0
		% within Generation	0,0%	55,6%	44,4%	100,0%
		% within Reason for not buying after apology	0,0%	46,9%	49,0%	46,6%
		% of Total	0,0%	25,9%	20,7%	46,6%
	Old	Count	3	34	25	62
		Expected Count	1,6	34,2	26,2	62,0
		% within Generation	4,8%	54,8%	40,3%	100,0%
		% within Reason for not buying after apology	100,0%	53,1%	51,0%	53,4%
		% of Total	2,6%	29,3%	21,6%	53,4%
Total	Count	3	64	49	116	
	Expected Count	3,0	64,0	49,0	116,0	
	% within Generation	2,6%	55,2%	42,2%	100,0%	
	% within Reason for not buying after apology	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	2,6%	55,2%	42,2%	100,0%	

Table 8: Crosstab from SPSS – Reasons for not buying Müller Products after public apology

9. Key Findings and Discussion

The aim of this thesis is to identify the reactions of consumers to the friendship between the representative of the brand "Müller," Theo Müller, and the AfD chairwoman, Alice Weidel, with a focus on generational affiliation. To achieve this, the research question was formulated as follows: *"How does Theo Müller's friendship with AfD leader Alice Weidel influence the perception of the brand 'Müller' and the consumer behavior of different generations?"*

Hypotheses H1.1 and H1.2 assume that there is a difference between younger generations (Generation Z and Millennials) and older generations (Generation X - Silent Generation). However, analysis of the hypotheses revealed no statistically significant correlation between generational affiliation and the reaction to the friendship. This contradicts the assumptions of the two interviewed experts, Caprice Larrard and Frank Serocka, both of whom had predicted that the reaction of younger people would be significantly more negative.

Hypotheses H2.1 and H2.2 postulate that there is a generational difference in willingness-to-buy after participants are informed about the friendship between Alice Weidel and Theo Müller. These hypotheses cannot be confirmed, as both groups show a similar distribution of responses. In addition to the reaction to the friendship, reactions to a potential public apology were also tested.

Hypotheses H3.1 and H3.2 assume that there is a difference in reactions concerning generational affiliation; however, this could not be confirmed based on the survey results. Both generational groups showed tendencies toward "I would buy again" and "I would not buy again."

As a follow-up hypothesis, hypothesis H4.1 assumes that consumers would not buy because a public apology and distancing would not appear authentic. 55.2% indicated that a lack of authenticity was the reason why they would not purchase Müller products even after a public statement. Similarly, in the open-response section (42.2%), participants frequently mentioned that they would stop purchasing the products due to perceived lack of credibility. Example quotes can be found in Chapter 8.3. These results are also consistent with the study by Lim & Young, which found that perceived credibility is the strongest predictor of brand perception (Lim & Young, 2021).

Consumers are increasingly paying attention not only to the sustainability of products and companies but also to their political stance and that of their representatives. Brands must become aware of their political orientation and responsibility, as this is a decisive purchasing criterion for some consumers.

Contrary to the expectations of two experts, there is no clear generational trend, meaning that both younger and older consumers consider it important to support only brands that share their values. In summary, political orientation is becoming an increasingly significant factor that brands must take into account.

10. Conclusion

Overall, nearly 40% of participants stated they would stop purchasing the products based on the information about the friendship. Furthermore, 55.2% of participants indicated that they would not buy Müller products even after a public apology due to the perceived lack of credibility of the apology.

Based on the analysis of the online survey, it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between generations regarding the responses to the friendship between Alice Weidel and Theo Müller. A similar number of members of both groups (young and old) stated that they will stop buying Müller products. Additionally, both groups had similar proportions of consumers who will keep buying Müller products.

This contradicts the expectations of two of the experts, who had anticipated that younger consumers would react significantly more negatively to the friendship, which was not confirmed. Consumer expectations of brands have changed over the years and must be considered in decision-making processes. This applies particularly to the selection of representatives, as they represent the values of brands and, therefore, influence consumer perceptions. As the quantitative research has clearly shown, this does not only apply to younger generations but also to individuals belonging to Generation X and Babyboomers. Members of all generations have stated that they would stop purchasing Müller products due to the friendship between Theo Müller and Alice Weidel.

In summary, it can be concluded that political affiliations influence consumer perceptions and thereby also affect purchasing behavior yet there is no significant difference between older and younger generations.

11. Critical Appraisal and relevant Aspects for future Research

In this chapter, the writing and research process is critically reflected. It includes points of improvements and aspects that could be included in future research.

One important point to consider when reading this thesis is that only very limited qualitative research was conducted, and it was primarily used as a supplementary source to gain insights on specific topics. Since only two experts from the care market were included in this research, more interviews with experts from other markets could be considered. Additionally, further expert interviews with consultants in the field of image management could be conducted. This could lead to more concrete strategic recommendations for companies that want to behave differently than Theo Müller.

In addition to supplementary expert interviews, focus groups could also be employed, which would help explain the results of the quantitative research and allow for deeper insights into consumer behavior. It is important to ensure that people from different age groups are invited and that the number of participants is evenly distributed across these groups to give equal weight to all.

Although an online survey was conducted, further quantitative research could be carried out to confirm or complement these results. Since this paper is limited in length, only the specific example of Theo Müller and Alice Weidel (AfD) was considered. Therefore, the findings from this survey cannot necessarily be generalized to brands in other markets. In addition to that, there might be different tendencies in different German states, another online survey with more participants could be conducted. This research should ensure that the same number of participants from each German state should be included. Additionally, it is recommended that further research focusing on other product categories should be included.

Based on these points of improvement, the following suggestions for upcoming research can be formulated:

1. Implementation of further quantitative research: Setting longer time frames for online surveys to get more opinions and feedback.
2. Use of additional qualitative research: Conduct more expert interviews as well as focus groups to get a better understanding of consumer behavior.
3. Conduct similar research in regard to different product categories to ensure the overall representativeness.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Müller Products



Source: <https://allesmuelleroderwas.de/produkte?type=all>

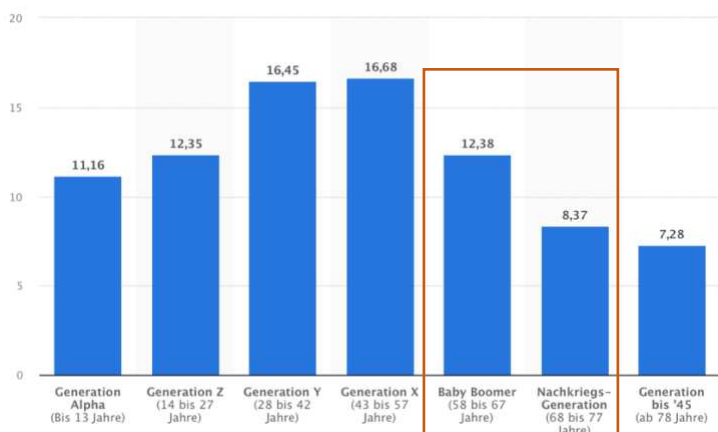
Appendix 2: Edeka Campaign



Translation: Evolution has taught us: Blue (*the colour of the Afd party*) is not a good choice. And while we're on the topic of elections: blue is not only the natural enemy of healthy diversity when it comes to fruits and vegetables. In Germany, 'the blues' already represent the greatest threat to a diverse society. So, let's read the warning signs correctly in the state elections in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg this September – and ensure a harmonious coexistence. Because: we love diversity.

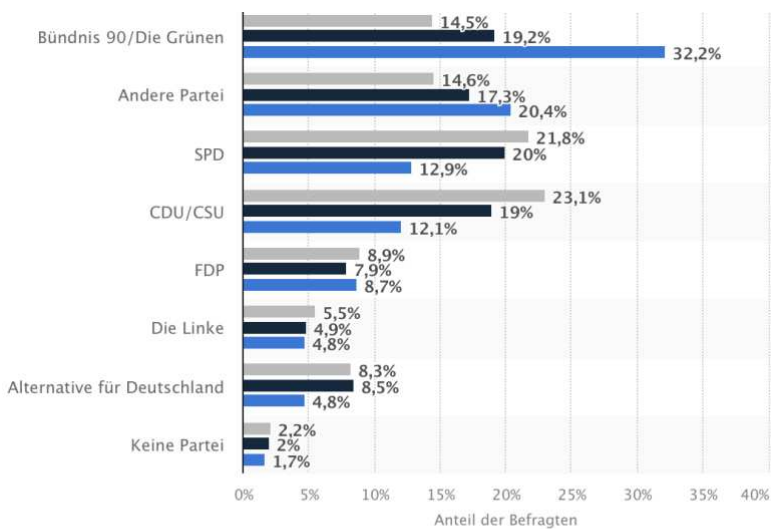
Source: <https://www.lebensmittelzeitung.net/handel/nachrichten/landtagswahlen-im-osten-edeka-positioniert-sich-gegen-die-afd-179549>

Appendix 3: Number of Inhabitants by Generation in Germany



Remark: In this paper Babyboomers are defined as people born between 1946 and 1964.
 Source: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1130193/umfrage/bevoelkerung-in-deutschland-nach-generationen/>

Appendix 4: Generations in Germany and the most favored parties in 2023



● Generation Z (14-27 Jahre) ● Generation Y (28-42 Jahre)
 ● Generation X (43-57 Jahre)

Bündnis 90/ die Grünen= Green party
 Andere Partei= Other parties
 SPD= Social democratic party
 CDU/CSU= Christian democratic union/ Christian Social union
 FDP= Free democratic party
 Die Linke= Left Party
 Alternative für Deutschland= Alternative for Germany
 Keine Party= None of the parties

Source: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1139062/umfrage/umfrage-zu-sympathischsten-parteien-der-generationen-in-deutschland/>

Appendix 5: Interview Questions for Caprice Larrard and Frank Serocka

1. What responsibility do brand representatives have regarding their political statements and views?
2. Do you believe that the political views of a brand representative should influence the brand's image? Why or why not?
3. How do you personally manage the responsibility of aligning your personal values and political views with your brand representation?
4. Do you think brand representatives have a duty to keep their political beliefs private to avoid controversy?
5. How do you deal with the political views of leaders in your company? Would a statement like Mr. Müller's be a reason for you to leave the company?
6. How is politics handled in the company where you work? Is everyone allowed to express any political view, or is there a boundary that cannot be crossed?
7. How do you think reactions will vary across different generations?
8. Do you think customers are able to differentiate between the "Müller" brand and the person Theo Müller?
9. What is your personal opinion about Theo Müller's statements and behavior?

Appendix 6: Transcript Interview with Caprice Larrard

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/am82eiebtsey0q7cp47m/Transcript-Caprice-Larrard.pdf?rlkey=3epg5c3uqqgtrhpavs27doth2&st=pcwazscl&dl=0>

Appendix 7: Analysis of the Interview with Caprice Larrard – Junior Brand Manager at SC Johnson

Quote	Paraphrase	1. Reduction/ Generalisation	2. Reduction/ Category
(0:24 - 1:03) I believe that when brand representatives express themselves politically or otherwise in public, they definitely influence the shoppers of that brand. I think their responsibility is extremely high because, in my opinion, they automatically give the brand a political face.	Brand representatives have a strong influence on consumers when they make public political statements. Their responsibility is high, as they give the brand a political identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives influence on consumers • Responsibility for the brand 	Obligations of brand representatives
(1:13 - 2:15) For me, brands should never become political. They should be kept separate. However, if a brand representative expresses political opinions, as I mentioned earlier, the brand inevitably adopts those views in some way. You can't separate the two	Brands should remain apolitical and separate from politics. However, when a brand representative shares political views, the brand inevitably reflects those opinions. While some may argue otherwise, I believe it's not entirely possible to keep them separate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The brand reflects representative's statements • Difficult to differentiate 	Interdependence of brand and representative

completely. I think many people might say you can, but I would argue it's not necessarily possible. So, in my opinion, they should be kept separate.			
(2:19 - 2:58) Customers should try to separate the two somehow. However, I believe that from the customers' perspective, this can be very, very difficult. Most people will think something about it.	Customers should try to separate the two, but it's often difficult. Most people will form an opinion about it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customers cannot differentiate the two • Opinions will be formed 	Interdependence of brand and representative
(4:20 - 5:23) For me, it's important that politics, in any form, has nothing to do with a brand. This means I would never push political statements or support in the name of the brand. I would never associate the brand with any cause. This doesn't even have to be political—it could be, for example, supporting a specific football club. I would always strive to keep the brand neutral, without aligning it with anything specific.	I believe politics should never be linked to a brand. I would avoid making political statements or supporting any cause, even something like backing a football club. My goal would always be to keep the brand neutral and unaffiliated.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid political statements • Stay neutral • Avoid favoring groups 	Obligations of brand representatives
(5:33 - 5:41) From a branding perspective, I'd try to keep them separate. But as a customer, it's hard to keep them apart.	From a branding standpoint, I'd keep them separate, but as a customer, it's difficult to do so.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult to differentiate for consumers 	Interdependence of brand and representative
(5:51 - 6:24) Yes, I think the influence of brand representatives is often underestimated. Some statements can have a huge impact, and I believe you should think it over 30 times before saying anything. If you're not sure how it will be received, it's better to stay silent.	Brand representatives' influence is often underestimated. It's crucial to think carefully before speaking; if unsure, staying silent is better.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underestimation of influence • Better staying silent 	Obligations of brand representatives
(6:32 - 6:47) Yes, definitely. If it's a big company, a CEO can be replaced if needed.	Yes, in large companies, a CEO can be replaced, but in family-owned businesses, the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No CEO-replacement in family-owned businesses 	Interdependence of brand and representative

<p>But in family-owned businesses, the representative is often irreplaceable, making it nearly impossible to separate them from the brand.</p>	<p>representative is often irreplaceable, making separation from the brand difficult.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separation is more difficult 	
<p>(7:48 - 8:54) So, for us, it's essentially mandatory to report something like that if you witness it. Whether you're directly affected or just a bystander, it's a top priority for us to report such incidents. Then, you'd be called into the HR office, and the consequences would be discussed. Either—well, I can't say for sure since I've never personally witnessed it—but I imagine it could range from warnings to termination. I think there has been a case like that in our company before.</p>	<p>Reporting such incidents is mandatory for us, whether you're directly involved or a bystander. Afterward, HR would address the consequences, which could range from warnings to termination.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory reporting • HR-involvement • Range of consequences 	<p>Internal consequences</p>
<p>(10:28 - 13:05) I definitely think it would spark a significant discussion, especially now, because the Müller brand is incredibly well-known. Its brand recognition is probably around 90–95%, maybe even 100%, which is remarkably strong. That means anything involving this brand would inevitably get widespread media coverage. When we look at it generationally, I'd say the younger generations would drive much of the discussion. I think there would be two very distinct sides with strong opinions. I don't see much room for a middle ground here. I can easily imagine one side being completely against Müller, saying,</p>	<p>The Müller brand, with its near 100% recognition, would certainly spark widespread discussion if involved in any controversy. Younger generations would likely lead the debate, with two clear sides: one calling for a boycott, the other supporting it. We've seen this divide with groups like young AfD supporters. Older generations, however, might be more indifferent, viewing it as a non-issue, with less concern about its implications.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High brand recognition • Younger generations might be more critical • Older people care less • Differences in consequences 	<p>Generational differences</p>

<p>“We won’t buy from them; let’s boycott them.” But then there’s likely another side that would support it, saying, “Well, that’s great.” We’ve seen how many young people are voting for the AfD these days. So, among the younger people, I think there would be clear divisions—some strongly supporting and some strongly opposing. For the older generations, like Boomers, I think they’d be more indifferent. Like, “Come on, seriously? They just had dinner together.” I think there’s more apathy in that demographic. Their sense of justice and their understanding of what’s happening and what it means aren’t as strongly represented, in my opinion</p>			
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Appendix 8: Transcript Interview with Frank Serocka

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/6ciameo5fzwy4uffgyvvt/Transcript-Frank-Serocka.pdf?rlkey=k1ueertamampqa79a19so0byx&st=13ekwz11&dl=0>

Appendix 9: Analysis of the Interview with Frank Serocka

Quote	Paraphrase	1. Reduction/ Generalisation	2. Reduction/ Category
<p>(3:27 - 4:29) “...So, if someone publicly expresses an opinion and does so under their company name—if I were to express myself on LinkedIn, for example—I would, of course, be careful to ensure that it aligns with Melitta. I would think about the fact that it’s not just about me personally, but also about the company, Melitta, and possibly the brands. So, someone</p>	<p>If someone shares an opinion publicly under their company’s name—like on LinkedIn, they should ensure it aligns with the company’s values. Representing a brand comes with responsibility, so it’s important to distinguish between personal and professional expressions. I would definitely draw a clear boundary in such situations.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differentiate between personal and professional statements. • Clear boundaries are needed 	<p>Obligations of brand representatives</p>

<p>who can be associated with a brand as a representative must be aware of this responsibility. Especially if they are not speaking privately, I would certainly set a boundary there.”</p>			
<p>(5:04 - 6:09) “Well, with him it's a bit tricky. He is the owner of the entire company and, of course, the brand creator. But I would argue that in the broader public, he is not as strongly associated with the brand as someone who deals with the topic might think. So, when people think of the Müller brand, they probably think of the little hunger character, that little figure that runs around. When people think of their favorite product in that area, but most people—at least the general public—I wouldn't even know what he looks like. I don't know if you've dealt with that in your work, but I wouldn't know what he looks like, actually. It's different with other brand representatives...”</p>	<p>With him, it's a bit nuanced. While he's the company owner and brand creator, the general public likely doesn't associate him strongly with the brand. When people think of Müller, they think of the little hunger character or their favorite product, but not necessarily him. In fact, most people wouldn't even recognize him. This contrasts with other brand representatives who are more publicly identifiable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theo Müller is not as strongly associated with the brand compared to other owners • Cartoon figure in advertisements might be more associated with the brand 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>
<p>(6:11 - 7:58) “The founder Wolfgang Grupp, who is very present. The brand really doesn't exist without the owner, because he appears in the commercials and is constantly sitting on some podium somewhere, presenting the brand. With Theo Müller, I'm not so sure. I've never seen him on a talk show or anywhere else. And he probably knows that too...”</p>	<p>Founder Wolfgang Grupp is highly visible, frequently appearing in commercials and at events, making the brand inseparable from him. In contrast, Theo Müller remains low-profile, rarely seen publicly, which he's likely aware of.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theo Müller is not as strongly associated with the brand compared to other owners → Goes hand in hand with previous point 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>
<p>(9:04 - 10:27)</p>	<p>Yes, I think so. The focus has shifted from</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumers make decisions 	<p>Shift in consumer mindset</p>

<p>“Yes, I do think so. At least, the development is definitely heading in that direction. In the past, it was important to offer a high-quality product. And that, in combination with a brand image that the consumer liked. Nowadays, consumers also ask what the brand actually stands for. That wasn’t necessarily the case before. But today, you can inform yourself much more about companies than in the past. I can interact with the brand via social media, which didn’t exist before. As a result, the demand for a brand is no longer just about what kind of product it is, how you’re positioned, what your image is, but also, what’s your stance on certain issues. Like, how do you stand on sustainability, how do you stand on diversity? These are actually things that consumers now consider when buying products...”</p>	<p>simply offering high-quality products and a likable brand image to addressing what the brand stands for. Today’s consumers can easily research companies and engage with them via social media. This has added new expectations—brands are now judged not just on products and image, but also on their stances on issues like sustainability and diversity. These factors influence buying decisions more than ever.</p>	<p>differently these days</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New expectations • Social media has impacted consumer behavior • Not only the quality of the product is important 	
<p>(10:47 - 13:06) “Well, I remember, I’ve been with Melitta for three years now. I went through an assessment center at the time, a relatively elaborate process, where they test if I align with the company’s values. Of course, they also test whether I meet the qualifications to perform the job. But there was also a part that checked whether my values aligned with those of Melitta. It was very much about leadership qualities and views on leadership. ... Racism or such things are also mentioned.</p>	<p>I’ve been with Melitta for three years and went through an extensive assessment process to join. It tested not only my job qualifications but also whether my values aligned with Melitta’s, focusing heavily on leadership qualities and perspectives. Topics like racism are addressed, which I</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company checking applicants compatibility • Values are crucial in assessment process • Addressing critical topics like racism 	<p>Personal experience</p>

<p>That's definitely in there. And I feel good about it. So, it definitely plays a big role in the choice of the company. That's important to me."</p>	<p>appreciate. It plays a significant role in my choice of company, as it's something important to me.</p>		
<p>(13:38 - 16:29) "I believe it was after the elections in Eastern Germany, in Thuringia and Saxony, where the AfD received such high percentages. We thought about how we could position ourselves. What can we do? Because, as a company, we do have a responsibility. We produce in Germany, our employees are here in Germany, we are a German company. So, it's not indifferent to us what's happening socially or politically. Therefore, one of the measures that came out of this was that we decided to temporarily include this in our tagline, to all employees, to also communicate this externally and send a signal to our employees about where we stand. We don't do this for every political issue that comes up. Not everyday matters. But in this case, we thought it made sense..."</p>	<p>After the Thuringia and Saxony elections, where the AfD gained support, we felt a responsibility as a German company to take a stand. We temporarily added a message to our tagline to show our stance internally and externally, focusing only on issues we deem significant.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social actions • Taking a stand • Internal communication and external communication about values 	<p>Social Responsibilities of brand representatives</p>
<p>(13:38 - 16:29) "...There was a shortage of masks at one point. And we tried to help a bit. So, in short, yes, we do make political statements, but not on daily topics. Only on the really big issues where we say, we need to take a stand because we have responsibility."</p>	<p>At one point, there was a mask shortage, and we tried to help. In short, we do make political statements, but only on major issues where we feel it's our responsibility to take a stand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support others • Stand together in crises 	<p>Social Responsibilities of brand representatives</p>
<p>(16:55 - 17:22) "...I think it's more the company that needs to</p>	<p>The company should speak out, deciding whether under the brand</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility to speak out 	<p>Social Responsibilities of brand representatives</p>

<p>speak out. And then, they can decide whether to do so under the brand or under the company's name. That would have to be considered. But of course, there is a responsibility, definitely."</p>	<p>or its name, but there is definitely a responsibility.</p>		
<p>(17:55 - 19:01) "...So, you can't say that it can't be done. You just have to think it through carefully. In that case, they had to expect to get criticism from a certain corner. You need to be prepared for that, so you can steer through it properly. But yes, I wouldn't rule out that we could speak out as a brand."</p>	<p>It can be done, but it requires careful consideration. In that case, criticism was expected, so you need to be prepared to handle it. I wouldn't rule out speaking out as a brand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being careful of what to say 	<p>Obligations of brand representatives</p>
<p>(19:27 - 21:09) "I don't think Müller would be someone I would apply to, because it's important to me where I work and who is ultimately behind it. And if I felt that the values represented by Jero Benz didn't align with my own values, I would definitely be very thoughtful about it. Because I spend a lot of time in this job." (21:32 - 21:45) "...And if he's being private and it doesn't align with my personal views, which in this case it wouldn't, then it would definitely give me something to think about."</p>	<p>I wouldn't apply to Müller because the company and its values are important to me. If Jero Benz's values didn't match mine, I'd carefully reconsider, since I invest a lot of time in my job. If his personal views don't align with mine, which in this case they wouldn't, it would definitely make me reconsider.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values need to align with his • Müller would not be a brand he would apply to • If he worked there, he might reconsider his position at the company 	<p>Personal experience</p>
<p>(22:06 - 23:22) "So, we have a communication rule that only executives are allowed to speak publicly. That's not the case in every company, and sometimes I think it's a bit unfortunate. But that's an example of how the company tries to</p>	<p>We have a rule that only executives can speak publicly, which isn't common in every company. I sometimes find it limiting, but it's the company's way of controlling its external representation. As a large company, allowing everyone to</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only executives are allowed to speak in the name of the company 	<p>Personal experience</p>

<p>control who represents the company externally. We're a relatively large company, and if everyone were to make statements under the Melitta brand, it would probably be a bit difficult. I'm allowed to speak..."</p>	<p>speak under the Melitta brand could cause issues. However, I'm permitted to speak.</p>		
<p>(24:13 - 25:04) "When thinking in terms of target groups, I would assume that the younger generation is more likely to take action because they also have the means to generate a certain level of noise. They are very familiar with social media and know how to raise their voices there. They are also more likely to take to the streets and are much more active than older people. And they are typically more politically outspoken, wanting to express their opinions when something doesn't sit right with them. The older you get, the more desensitized you might become. So, it's likely that the younger generation would be louder than the older generation." "</p>	<p>The younger generation is more likely to take action, as they're skilled with social media and more politically outspoken. They're also more active in protests, while older people tend to become more desensitized. So, the younger generation is generally louder.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The younger generation is more likely to take a stand • Younger people are more active • Older people are desensitized 	<p>Generational differences</p>
<p>(26:45 - 27:26) "...I actually assume that in this specific situation, a large part of the consumers would make a distinction. Because he is not so present in the brand communication. If he were as present as in the examples I mentioned, then a distinction wouldn't be possible at all. But I believe that in this case, consumers would filter that out. As you said, depending on where it's communicated, if it's</p>	<p>I believe in this case, many consumers would make a distinction because he's not very prominent in the brand communication. If he were as visible as in the examples I mentioned, they wouldn't be able to separate it. However, I think consumers would filter it out, depending on where it's communicated (e.g., in a business magazine). Even end consumers likely wouldn't connect the two.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is not so well known • Level association is not very high • People could differentiate between the person and the brand due to lacking connection/association 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>

<p>more in a business magazine. But also the end consumer. I don't think the vast majority would connect them together.”</p>			
<p>(27:52 - 28:09) “The more he becomes associated with the brand and the more this connection is made clear to the general public, the harder it would be for political statements to be separated from the brand. These statements would inevitably be linked back to the brand, making it difficult for consumers to distinguish between the person and the company. This kind of visibility could result in the brand facing public scrutiny, especially if the opinions or actions of the individual contradict the values or expectations associated with the brand.”</p>	<p>The more he's tied to the brand, the harder it is to separate his political statements from it. This could lead to public scrutiny, especially if his views clash with the brand's values.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If association increases, the consumers' ability to differentiate decreases • Increasing visibility result in higher scrutiny 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>

Appendix 10: Interview Questions for Lisa H.

1. What responsibility do brand representatives have regarding their political statements and views?
2. Do you believe that the political views of a brand representative should influence the brand's image? Why or why not?
3. How should a company respond if one of its brand representatives makes controversial political statements?
4. Should companies consider the political views of potential brand representatives when selecting them?
10. How can brand representatives express their personal opinions without negatively impacting the brand?
11. Do you think brand representatives have a duty to keep their political beliefs private to avoid controversy?
12. What are the risks and opportunities when brand representatives openly engage in political matters?
13. Do you find it problematic when brand representatives support social or political movements that could be polarizing?
14. In your experience, have public expectations around brand representatives and their political neutrality changed in recent years?
15. Do you think there are certain political topics on which brand representatives should speak out or rather remain silent?

16. Even though Mr. Müller has not explicitly taken a political stance, his friendship with Alice Weidel could be seen as an indicator of his political views. How do you think customers would react if this became more widely discussed?
17. How do you think reactions will vary across different generations?
18. Do you think customers are able to differentiate between the "Müller" brand and the person Theo Müller?

Appendix 11: Transcript interview with Lisa H.

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/t4zlijwq8f31x7fp6fkwl/Transcript-Lisa-H..pdf?rlkey=6fg4vnpjl05b0lbsg9a946c5v&st=jzkyggwr&dl=0>

Appendix 12: Analysis of the Interview with Lisa H.

Quote	Paraphrase	1. Reduction/ Generalisation	2. Reduction/ Category
<p>(0:28 - 1:28) “Exactly, I’ve been thinking about this. I would say they have a responsibility towards their stakeholders. First and foremost, this is towards their employees. They could turn away in response to critical statements. That would be something that, hopefully, would not be desirable for the individual. Then, for example, there’s the financing side, like banks and investors, who could withdraw their support. It’s also important to consider politics and administration, meaning political actors and decision-makers in the administration, who might withdraw their support for projects or similar matters, or for any decisions that fall under administrative or governmental control. That could be a possible consequence. And, of course, customers who might turn away.”</p>	<p>They have a responsibility to their stakeholders, especially employees. Critical statements could lead to undesirable consequences, such as losing support from employees, investors, political actors, or customers. These groups might withdraw backing or turn away, impacting projects or decisions under governmental control.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibility for stakeholders • Impact on others • Consequences of behavior 	<p>Obligations of brand representatives</p>

<p>(1:41 - 2:37) “I believe that if the political views influence the brand's image, it indicates a strong or good identification of the brand ambassador with the brand. There’s a strong dependency relationship, and therefore, I think it definitely influences it. Brand ambassadors act in the public sphere, and the statements they make publicly affect the brand...”</p>	<p>If a brand ambassador’s political views influence the brand’s image, it shows a strong alignment between them and the brand. This dependency means their public statements inevitably impact the brand’s perception.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong association • Public • Relation between the brand representative and the brand 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>
<p>(3:03 - 4:16) Well, first of all, the initial reaction, I think, would be to stop all planned publications, like social media posts or press releases, for example. This is to first assess and understand what has just happened. What are the consequences, and does this affect our brand or communication in any way? Then, it would definitely be important to have a personal conversation... However, there are also brand ambassadors who, for example, are influencers. In that case, too, it’s important to have a personal conversation and then decide whether to continue the collaboration. Is this within the scope of what we can represent, or do we need to end the collaboration?”</p>	<p>The initial step would be to pause all planned publications, such as social media posts or press releases, to assess the situation and its impact on the brand. A personal conversation is crucial, especially with brand ambassadors like influencers, to determine if the collaboration aligns with the brand’s values or if it should be terminated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stop current plans • Consequences for brand representative 	<p>Crisis prevention</p>
<p>(5:22 - 7:04) “Yes, I consider it advisable in terms of crisis prevention. There has been a lot of experience in recent years that highlights this. Especially with social media, a lot of</p>	<p>Yes, it’s advisable for crisis prevention. Recent experiences, especially with social media, show how historical information can resurface. Brands should be mindful of this and, depending on the</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of old statements and activities 	<p>Crisis prevention</p>

<p>historical information can be uncovered. One should definitely be aware of this. Depending on how important political aspects are for the brand, certain positions can then be excluded.”</p>	<p>importance of political aspects, exclude certain positions accordingly.</p>		
<p>(5:22 - 7:04) “...And I believe that any criminally relevant activities should, unless there is a credible distancing from them, be strictly avoided. However, there are exceptions, for example, when it comes to former neo-Nazis who have participated in a deradicalization program and are credibly working on educating others. That could still be acceptable for a brand. It's not entirely excluded, but I believe it should be examined in terms of crisis prevention.”</p>	<p>Criminal activities should be strictly avoided unless there's credible distancing from them. Exceptions might include cases like former neo-Nazis who have undergone deradicalization and are actively promoting education. Such cases could be acceptable but should be carefully assessed from a crisis prevention perspective.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choosing representatives carefully • Every brand is different, thus needs different representatives 	<p>Crisis prevention</p>
<p>(7:21 - 8:13) “Well, the fit between the brand and the representative obviously needs to be right, and ideally, it should come naturally. The representative must definitely know the values that the company stands for, in my opinion, and ideally incorporate them into their communication to create added value for the company. But simple, blatant value communication, like when it's just recited, is obviously not effective. That's why it's important that there's a fit from the outset, because the more authentic it is, the better the external perception will be.”</p>	<p>The brand and its representative must align naturally. The representative should understand and authentically reflect the company's values in their communication to add genuine value. Forced or superficial messaging is ineffective, making an authentic fit from the start crucial for positive external perception.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural alignment of representative and brand • Values should fit • Superficial communication can cause backlash 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>

<p>(8:25 - 10:00) “I would definitely call it a matter of personal choice, so it should be up to the individual whether they want to take a political stance or remain neutral. And depending on the brand, I think it makes sense to either approach it neutrally or to actively choose not to be neutral and take a clear political position. It depends a bit on the brand.”</p>	<p>It’s a personal choice whether to take a political stance or remain neutral. Depending on the brand, it might make sense to stay neutral or take a clear political position. The approach should align with the brand’s identity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not forcing anyone to represent specific (political) standpoints 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>
<p>(10:16 - 11:03) “Definitely, yes. I strongly believe that. However, it’s somewhat dependent on the media attention. As soon as that fades, I think the importance of other factors in the purchasing decision comes to the forefront...”</p>	<p>Absolutely, I believe that. However, it does depend on media attention—once that fades, other factors in the purchasing decision tend to take priority.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consumers react to political views • Dependent on media attention • Attention can fade 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>
<p>(12:26 - 14:16) “...But I’m simply convinced that companies are part of society and operate in the public sphere, and therefore have an obligation to take responsibility. This responsibility is met with a certain level of regulation. This could involve simply ensuring that applicable laws are followed...”</p>	<p>I believe companies, as part of society and the public sphere, have a responsibility to act responsibly. This includes adhering to applicable laws and meeting regulatory requirements.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Companies should have an opinion • They are part of society 	<p>Social Responsibilities of brand representatives</p>
<p>(15:42 - 18:23) “An off-the-record, mean answer would be 'old white man.' And actually, I think a lot of ego plays a role in situations like this, and a lot of not wanting to understand or just not keeping up with how the world is changing and that it actually has changed, and that it's just a different situation. I could also imagine that the brand is somewhat</p>	<p>An off-the-record, blunt answer would be "old white man." I think ego plays a significant role in situations like this, along with a reluctance to understand or adapt to the changing world. The situation has evolved, and the brand may start distancing itself from this mindset.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ego plays a role • Not understanding that and how the world changes 	<p>Theo Müller’s Behavior</p>

<p>moving away from this personality...”</p>			
<p>(20:12 - 21:30) “I think discourse is definitely desirable. One can express things and can also cause friction if it’s done on an equal footing, factually, and as concretely as possible. That can provide added value for the company, especially if they’ve maybe gone off track with a position and the brand representative criticizes that. It could positively affect the brand if they then course-correct because the representative criticized it in a factual manner and they engage in dialogue on equal terms. But if political convictions trigger a brand-damaging controversy, then something must be wrong. Either the political conviction should be reconsidered, or the brand needs to be reconsidered. I think something there has to be either unpopular but desirable, or I don't know how to put it.”</p>	<p>Discourse is valuable if it's respectful and factual, as it can help a company realign if needed. If political views cause harm to the brand, either the stance or the brand itself should be reassessed. There must be a reason behind the controversy, whether it's an unpopular but necessary position or a deeper issue.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict can be beneficial • Engage in discussions 	<p>Internal Challenges</p>
<p>(21:44 - 22:51) “Yes, it depends again on the brand and the expressed opinion. Some brands, products, or services are so politicized that such a statement can be understood as advocacy or an expert opinion. That can lead to customers who feel represented by it building a stronger connection. So that can be an opportunity, or it can also be a case of questioning positions or actions, as I said. With more neutral brands, I believe there are risks,</p>	<p>It varies depending on the brand and the opinion shared. For some brands, particularly those with strong political associations, such statements may be viewed as advocacy or expert insight, potentially strengthening customer loyalty. However, for more neutral brands, making political statements can backfire, as customers with differing views may feel alienated or uncomfortable, which could harm the brand.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some products are very politicized • Some opinions can be perceived as advocacy • Statements can create stronger connections • For neutral brands, it can hold risks, if some customers, who have different views, are confronted with it 	<p>Interdependence of brand and representative</p>

<p>because customers who hold a different opinion may turn away or at least find it inappropriate that any political statements are being made, which could already have a negative impact.”</p>			
<p>(28:39 - 29:55) “Yes, I do believe that unfortunately the demographics of the AfD voter base don’t really allow for that, because they actually have shockingly high poll results in the younger generation as well. And without being able to scientifically prove this, I would assume that a generation born well before 1968, meaning this whole politicization of things, doesn’t carry the same weight for them, so they might see less of a connection between purchasing behavior and political positioning. But I think from a certain generation onward, well, the '68ers were already 20 at that point, but from a certain year group, I could imagine it’s stronger than with the very early generations, who are now in their 80s or so. And otherwise, yes, because I actually fear that you can't really draw a big difference and don’t have to. I also know people from all generations who react to this kind of thing.”</p>	<p>I believe the demographics of the AfD voter base make this difficult, as they show surprisingly high support among younger generations. While I can't prove this scientifically, I think older generations, particularly those born before 1968, may not see the connection between political views and purchasing behavior as strongly. However, for younger generations, especially those born after 1968, this link seems more pronounced. That said, I fear that the distinction isn't as clear-cut, as people from all age groups can react to these issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Older generations are not as political in their purchase decisions as young people • Many younger people like the AfD • Can lead to lacking differentiation 	<p>Generational Differences</p>
<p>(34:09 - 35:11) “Yes, it depends a bit on what the majority situation is, to be honest. Unfortunately, I believe that there is a significant portion of people in Germany who wouldn’t have a problem with it... But generally speaking, there is simply an escalation of</p>	<p>It depends on the majority's view, but communication crises can escalate, affecting sales, customer loyalty, and employee retention. For a company like Müller, this could lead to an existential threat if investors, customers, or employees pull away.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There might be many Germans who do not have a problem with it • Consequences from employees and consumers can get threatening for the company 	<p>Obligations of brand representatives</p>

<p>communication crises that can lead to sales declines, changes in purchasing behavior, or changes in employee loyalty, and so on, which could extend to an existential threat. A company can get into a precarious situation due to such a communication crisis, if investors pull out, if customers turn away, or if employees leave. Eventually, this could threaten its existence, and for a company like Müller, that is definitely a possible scenario. One cannot rule that out.”</p>			
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Appendix 13: Questionnaire Online Survey

Introduction: Dear participant, this survey is part of a thesis seminar the Católica Lisbon School of Business & Economics. Thank you for taking the time to participate. Your insights and opinions are incredibly valuable for this research. This survey will take approximately 6 minutes to complete.

Please be assured that your responses will remain confidential and only used for the purpose of this research. Your honest input and truthful opinions will be appreciated.

If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at s-mbuter@ucp.pt

Thank you for your participation!

Clusters	Questions																																																													
Filter question generation	<p>1. To which of the following generations do you belong?</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>1</td><td>Generation Silent (1928-1945)</td></tr> <tr><td>2</td><td>Babyboomer (1946-1964)</td></tr> <tr><td>3</td><td>Generation X (1965-1980)</td></tr> <tr><td>4</td><td>Generation Y/ Millennials (1981-1996)</td></tr> <tr><td>5</td><td>Generation Z (1997-2010)</td></tr> <tr><td>6</td><td>Generation Alpha (2011-2025) -> end survey</td></tr> </table>	1	Generation Silent (1928-1945)	2	Babyboomer (1946-1964)	3	Generation X (1965-1980)	4	Generation Y/ Millennials (1981-1996)	5	Generation Z (1997-2010)	6	Generation Alpha (2011-2025) -> end survey																																																	
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General questions about politics and its influence on consumer behavior	<p>2. On a scale from 1 = not important at all to 5 = a very important purchasing criterion for me, how important is the political position or orientation of a brand or its representative for your purchasing decision?</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>1</td><td>not important at all</td></tr> <tr><td>2</td><td>not as important</td></tr> <tr><td>3</td><td>neutral</td></tr> <tr><td>4</td><td>important</td></tr> <tr><td>5</td><td>very important</td></tr> <tr><td>6</td><td>I don't know</td></tr> </table> <p>3. To which degree do you agree with the following statements? (1= I don't agree at all/ 5= I completely agree)</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>1</th> <th>2</th> <th>3</th> <th>4</th> <th>5</th> <th>I don't know</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1</td><td>Politics is a relevant factor in my purchasing decision.</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>2</td><td>I make my purchasing decision mainly based on the price.</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>3</td><td>I make my purchasing decision based on the brand and its image.</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>4</td><td>I make my purchasing decision mainly based on the quality.</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>5</td><td>I make my purchasing decisions based on the values of a brand and if they align with mine.</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> <tr> <td>6</td><td>If I am not satisfied with the views of a brand or its representative, I also inform other people about it.</td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td></tr> </tbody> </table>	1	not important at all	2	not as important	3	neutral	4	important	5	very important	6	I don't know		1	2	3	4	5	I don't know	1	Politics is a relevant factor in my purchasing decision.						2	I make my purchasing decision mainly based on the price.						3	I make my purchasing decision based on the brand and its image.						4	I make my purchasing decision mainly based on the quality.						5	I make my purchasing decisions based on the values of a brand and if they align with mine.						6	If I am not satisfied with the views of a brand or its representative, I also inform other people about it.					
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Filter question case	<p>4. Do you know the brand Müller (products include Müller Milch, Froop Yoghurt, Joghurt mit der Ecke)?</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>1</td><td>Yes</td></tr> <tr><td>2</td><td>No -> end survey</td></tr> </table> <p>5. Do you know who Alice Weidel is what her party, the AfD, stands for?</p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>1</td><td>Yes</td></tr> <tr><td>2</td><td>No -> end survey</td></tr> </table>	1	Yes	2	No -> end survey	1	Yes	2	No -> end survey																																																					
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Information about Alice Weidel and Theo Müller	<p>At the end of last year, some magazines reported on a meeting between the owner of the Müller brand, Theo Müller, and the chairwoman of the AfD, Alice Weidel. The two met privately in a luxury restaurant in France. In February 2024, Theo Müller gave an interview to the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and confirmed that Alice Weidel is a friend. Although he does not agree with all points in the party's program, he would describe himself as someone between observer and sympathizer.</p>																																																													

	<p>6. Based on the information you just, did your opinion about the brand "Müller" change?</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td>1 Yes -> Q8</td></tr> <tr><td>2 No -> Q7</td></tr> <tr><td>3 I am not sure -> Q10</td></tr> </table>	1 Yes -> Q8	2 No -> Q7	3 I am not sure -> Q10																																
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Case related questions	<p>7. You just indicated that your opinion about the brand 'Müller' has not changed and remains the same as before. To what extent do you agree with the following</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>1</th> <th>2</th> <th>3</th> <th>4</th> <th>5</th> <th>I don't know</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1 I believe that the owner's behavior is not directly connected to the brand, and therefore the products can still be purchased.</td> <td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>2 As long as the products are of good quality, I will continue to buy them.</td> <td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>3 I have been aware of the owner's connection to Alice Weidel for a long time, and since I share her views and positions, I will continue to buy the products.</td> <td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>4 I have been aware of the owner's connection to Alice Weidel for a long time, and my purchasing behavior has not changed.</td> <td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		1	2	3	4	5	I don't know	1 I believe that the owner's behavior is not directly connected to the brand, and therefore the products can still be purchased.							2 As long as the products are of good quality, I will continue to buy them.							3 I have been aware of the owner's connection to Alice Weidel for a long time, and since I share her views and positions, I will continue to buy the products.							4 I have been aware of the owner's connection to Alice Weidel for a long time, and my purchasing behavior has not changed.						
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	<p>8. You just indicated that your opinion about the brand "Müller" has changed. In what way and to what extent?</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td>1 I find the brand significantly less likable than before. -> Q9</td></tr> <tr><td>2 I find the brand a little less likable than before. -> Q9</td></tr> <tr><td>3 I find the brand a little more likable than before. -> Q10</td></tr> <tr><td>4 I find the brand significantly more likable than before. -> Q10</td></tr> </table>	1 I find the brand significantly less likable than before. -> Q9	2 I find the brand a little less likable than before. -> Q9	3 I find the brand a little more likable than before. -> Q10	4 I find the brand significantly more likable than before. -> Q10																															
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<p>9. You just indicated that you now find the brand 'Müller' less likable than before. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (1 = I do not agree at all / 5 = I fully agree)</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>1</th> <th>2</th> <th>3</th> <th>4</th> <th>5</th> <th>I don't know</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>1 I will stop buying Müller products.</td> <td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>2 I will inform acquaintances about the political views of the owner of the brand 'Müller'.</td> <td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>3 I will raise awareness on social media about the behavior of the owner of the brand 'Müller' so that fewer people shop there.</td> <td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td><td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		1	2	3	4	5	I don't know	1 I will stop buying Müller products.							2 I will inform acquaintances about the political views of the owner of the brand 'Müller'.							3 I will raise awareness on social media about the behavior of the owner of the brand 'Müller' so that fewer people shop there.														
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<p>10. Suppose Theo Müller publicly apologized for his behavior and distanced himself from the AfD and Alice Weidel. How likely would you be to purchase 'Müller' products?</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td>1 Very unlikely -> Q12</td></tr> <tr><td>2 Somewhat unlikely -> Q12</td></tr> <tr><td>3 Neither likely nor unlikely -> Q13</td></tr> <tr><td>4 Somewhat likely -> Q11</td></tr> <tr><td>5 Very likely -> Q11</td></tr> </table>	1 Very unlikely -> Q12	2 Somewhat unlikely -> Q12	3 Neither likely nor unlikely -> Q13	4 Somewhat likely -> Q11	5 Very likely -> Q11																															
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Demographics	<p>13. What gender do you identify with?</p> <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td>1 female</td></tr> <tr><td>2 non-binary</td></tr> <tr><td>3 male</td></tr> </table>	1 female	2 non-binary	3 male																																
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<p>Thank you for participating in this survey. You may close the window now.</p>																																				

Appendix 14: SPSS Output Sub Research Question 1

Case Processing Summary

	Q1	Cases					
		Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent	
Q9	1	69	100,0%	0	0,0%	69	100,0%
	2	50	100,0%	0	0,0%	50	100,0%

Tests of Normality

Q1	Statistic	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
		df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.	
1	,388	69	<,001	,623	69	<,001	
2	,471	50	<,001	,530	50	<,001	

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Independent Samples Test

Q9		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Significance		Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						One-Sided p	Two-Sided p			Lower	Upper
	Equal variances assumed	15,309	<,001	1,903	117	,030	,060	,497	,261	-,020	1,015
	Equal variances not assumed			1,945	112,957	,027	,054	,497	,256	-,009	1,004

Group Statistics

Q1	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
1	69	2,22	1,484	,179
2	50	1,72	1,294	,183

Q1 * Q9 Crosstabulation

Q1	Jung	Count	Q9		Total
			deutlich unsympathisch	ein wenig unsympathisch	
Jung	Count	41	28	69	
	Expected Count	45,8	23,2	69,0	
	% within Q1	59,4%	40,6%	100,0%	
	% within Q9	51,9%	70,0%	58,0%	
	% of Total	34,5%	23,5%	58,0%	
Alt	Count	38	12	50	
	Expected Count	33,2	16,8	50,0	
	% within Q1	76,0%	24,0%	100,0%	
	% within Q9	48,1%	30,0%	42,0%	
	% of Total	31,9%	10,1%	42,0%	
Total	Count	79	40	119	
	Expected Count	79,0	40,0	119,0	
	% within Q1	66,4%	33,6%	100,0%	
	% within Q9	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	66,4%	33,6%	100,0%	

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3,571 ^a	1	,059		
Continuity Correction ^b	2,867	1	,090		
Likelihood Ratio	3,650	1	,056		
Fisher's Exact Test				,077	,044
Linear-by-Linear Association	3,541	1	,060		
N of Valid Cases	119				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 16,81.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-,173	,059
	Cramer's V	,173	,059
N of Valid Cases		119	

Generation * Reaktion Freundschaft Crosstabulation

		Reaktion Freundschaft		Total	
		1	2		
Generation	1	Count	62	62	124
		Expected Count	60,4	63,6	124,0
		% within Generation	50,0%	50,0%	100,0%
		% within Reaktion Freundschaft	55,9%	53,0%	54,4%
		% of Total	27,2%	27,2%	54,4%
	2	Count	49	55	104
		Expected Count	50,6	53,4	104,0
		% within Generation	47,1%	52,9%	100,0%
		% within Reaktion Freundschaft	44,1%	47,0%	45,6%
		% of Total	21,5%	24,1%	45,6%
Total	Count	111	117	228	
	Expected Count	111,0	117,0	228,0	
	% within Generation	48,7%	51,3%	100,0%	
	% within Reaktion Freundschaft	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	48,7%	51,3%	100,0%	

Generation: 1= Young; 2= Old

Reaction Friendship: 1= perception changed; 2= perception has not changed

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	,188 ^a	1	,664		
Continuity Correction ^b	,091	1	,763		
Likelihood Ratio	,188	1	,664		
Fisher's Exact Test				,691	,382
Linear-by-Linear Association	,188	1	,665		
N of Valid Cases	228				

a. 0 cells (,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 50,63.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	,029	,664
	Cramer's V	,029	,664
N of Valid Cases		228	

Appendix 15: SPSS Output Sub Research Question 2

Generation * kaufen oder nicht kaufen Crosstabulation

		kaufen oder nicht kaufen		Total	
		still buying	5		
Generation	Young	Count	64	42	106
		Expected Count	64,8	41,2	106,0
		% within Generation	60,4%	39,6%	100,0%
		% within kaufen oder nicht kaufen	50,8%	52,5%	51,5%
		% of Total	31,1%	20,4%	51,5%
	Old	Count	62	38	100
		Expected Count	61,2	38,8	100,0
		% within Generation	62,0%	38,0%	100,0%
		% within kaufen oder nicht kaufen	49,2%	47,5%	48,5%
		% of Total	30,1%	18,4%	48,5%
Total	Count	126	80	206	
	Expected Count	126,0	80,0	206,0	
	% within Generation	61,2%	38,8%	100,0%	
	% within kaufen oder nicht kaufen	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	61,2%	38,8%	100,0%	

5= not purchasing

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	,057 ^a	1	,811		
Continuity Correction ^b	,009	1	,924		
Likelihood Ratio	,057	1	,811		
Fisher's Exact Test				,886	,462
Linear-by-Linear Association	,057	1	,812		
N of Valid Cases	206				

a. 0 cells (,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 38,83.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-,017	,811
	Cramer's V	,017	,811
N of Valid Cases		206	

Appendix 16: SPSS Output Sub Research Question 3

Generation * Reaktion Entschuldigung Crosstabulation

		Reaktion Entschuldigung		Total	
		1	2		
Generation	1	Count	55	34	89
		Expected Count	60,2	28,8	89,0
		% within Generation	61,8%	38,2%	100,0%
		% within Reaktion Entschuldigung	47,0%	60,7%	51,4%
		% of Total	31,8%	19,7%	51,4%
	2	Count	62	22	84
		Expected Count	56,8	27,2	84,0
		% within Generation	73,8%	26,2%	100,0%
		% within Reaktion Entschuldigung	53,0%	39,3%	48,6%
		% of Total	35,8%	12,7%	48,6%
Total	Count	117	56	173	
	Expected Count	117,0	56,0	173,0	
	% within Generation	67,6%	32,4%	100,0%	
	% within Reaktion Entschuldigung	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	67,6%	32,4%	100,0%	

Generation: 1= Young; 2= old

Reaction Apology= 1= (very) unlikely purchase again; 2= (very) likely purchase again

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2,848 ^a	1	,091		
Continuity Correction ^b	2,326	1	,127		
Likelihood Ratio	2,866	1	,090		
Fisher's Exact Test				,105	,063
Linear-by-Linear Association	2,832	1	,092		
N of Valid Cases	173				

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 27,19.

b. Computed only for a 2x2 table

Symmetric Measures

	Value	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	-,128
	Cramer's V	,128
N of Valid Cases	173	

Appendix 17: SPSS Output Sub Research Question 4

Generation * Reason for not buying after apology Crosstabulation

		Reason for not buying after apology			Total	
		Like the AfD	Lack of Authenticity	Something else		
Generation	Young	Count	0	30	24	54
		Expected Count	1,4	29,8	22,8	54,0
		% within Generation	0,0%	55,6%	44,4%	100,0%
		% within Reason for not buying after apology	0,0%	46,9%	49,0%	46,6%
		% of Total	0,0%	25,9%	20,7%	46,6%
	Old	Count	3	34	25	62
		Expected Count	1,6	34,2	26,2	62,0
		% within Generation	4,8%	54,8%	40,3%	100,0%
		% within Reason for not buying after apology	100,0%	53,1%	51,0%	53,4%
		% of Total	2,6%	29,3%	21,6%	53,4%
Total	Count	3	64	49	116	
	Expected Count	3,0	64,0	49,0	116,0	
	% within Generation	2,6%	55,2%	42,2%	100,0%	
	% within Reason for not buying after apology	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	
	% of Total	2,6%	55,2%	42,2%	100,0%	