



UNIVERSIDADE  
CATÓLICA  
PORTUGUESA

BRAND PERSONALITY AND PROVOCATIVE CRISIS  
COMMUNICATION – A CASE STUDY ON TRUE FRUITS

Dissertation submitted to Universidade Católica Portuguesa  
to obtain a master's degree in Communication, Marketing &  
Advertising

By

Alexandra Neumaier

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## **Abstract**

Provocation is a commonly used strategy in advertising to get a target group's attention. Recently, communication practitioners have observed that some brands implemented a provocative approach to crisis communication. However, little is known about the effectiveness of this type of strategy, and its consequences for a brand's reputation. This dissertation explored this phenomenon through a scientific case study on the German smoothie brand true fruits, which repeatedly implemented a provocative crisis communication strategy in the past. The aim of this research is to explore consequences, risks, and opportunities through a comprehensive literature review on relevant theories and a methodological case study approach, which combined several methods. Notions from the fields of relationship theory, brand personality research, provocative communication, and crisis communication were reviewed and combined to establish a theoretical framework and relevant concepts were identified. The case of true fruits was investigated through the methods documentation, survey interviews with consumers, and interviews with industry professionals. After establishing the context of this case, the data collection and analysis was conducted. Through this, the relationships and relevancy between each concept was explored. By doing so, the dissertation identified several relevant success and risk factors, which can serve as a basis for future research and go into consideration for the communication planning process, such as brand personality, brand relationship quality, polarization, anti-brand activism, and duration of execution time.

*Key words: provocation, crisis communication, brand personality, relationship theory, communication strategy, anti-brand activism, case study research*

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## **Introduction**

### **Research purpose**

Burger King, BMW, Calvin Klein, Nike, Reebok, Bacardi – what do all of these brands have in common? One way or another, they all utilized provocative advertising to promote their products. Provocation is a common tactic to gain a target group’s attention, which can be found across all industries. But what happens when provocation is further utilized during crisis communication? The German brand *true fruits* takes it one step further. The startup sells high-quality smoothies – but their main brand proposition *is* to be provocative, regardless of the consequences: They provoke the public, resulting in brand crises, and then craft a response to offend even more. Since their founding in 2015, the brand has been accused of sexism, racism, and promoting rape culture – to name a few incidents – and has gained a reputation because of it. Their response to the self-inflicted public outrage is usually characterized by crude language and ridiculing any critics. Through this behavior, the brand has reached the front page of German newspapers many times. The result in consumers is polarizing: Either they celebrate the brand for being unconventional, or boycott true fruits all together. Communication practitioners have acknowledged similar cases in industry publications. For instance, in an article for the International Public Relations Association, McCusker (2020) raises the question: “Is being shameless a widely accepted strategy?”. However, there is no conclusive answer if this strategy is a best practice or will harm the brand’s reputation in the long run. Although scholars emphasize the need for comparative studies in the relatively young field of crisis communication, cases like these can help us identify more variables worth investigating (T. Coombs, 2013). Thus, the case of true fruits provides an opportunity to explore consequences, risks, opportunities, and success factors for provocative crisis communication strategies such as this one.

### **Scientific positioning**

Initially, the underlying assumptions and goal of this research need to be stated. The perspective through which the researcher will approach the dissertation is interpretivist. This philosophical orientation aligns most closely with the researcher’s fundamental views and assumptions about this particular dissertation topic. According to Daymon & Holloway,

(2011), interpretivism follows the belief that reality is socially constructed. Interpretivist researchers acknowledge the existence of multiple truths and acknowledge the role of investigators, participants, and the context of research that influenced the production of the results (p. 102). Whereas positivism is rooted in the belief that reality is objective and generalizable (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 101).

This perspective is most aligned with the research goals, which aim to understand a specific phenomenon: the crisis communication strategy of True fruits and its effect on the consumer-brand relationship. The objective is to understand the brands' motives behind their strategy, their execution, as well as the consumers' perception of the events and take into account their personal beliefs and experiences. Moreover, to gain a holistic picture of this case, it is crucial to take into consideration how industry professionals evaluate this strategy and its execution. However, the purpose of this dissertation will not be to draw generalizable conclusions. Mainly, because it is centered around one particular case and its participants. Although some of the information that will be gathered is more factual, for instance how the brand executed their crisis communication, it is also important to understand what the participants think and do. In this case, how do consumers perceive the brand's actions, what they think about it, how it affects their opinion of the brand as well as their purchase behavior. Moreover, how industry professionals assess the strategy, its execution, its risks and opportunities, based on their personal expertise and experience.

Because of the arguments mentioned above, this dissertation merely aims to gain new insights through an exploratory approach that can deliver impulses for future research to be examined in multiple settings. One-case-studies rarely generate results that are applicable to a wide variety of other situations. Especially in communication practice and research, many outside factors have to be considered. The type of product, brand, and country of operation can have a huge impact on the success of communication. Finally, this leads me to mentioning the advantages and disadvantages of the approach. It should be considered that there will be great room for bias on the behalf of the researcher and therefore, interpretation of the results. The fact that the insights from this study will hardly be generalizable was already mentioned. However, an interpretivist perspective will allow to gain more in-depth information, which is important when conducting exploratory research.

## **Research question and methodological considerations**

After stating the research purpose and scientific positioning, the objective needs to be defined more closely. True fruits' strategy is unique in the sense that it utilizes provocation to communicate during crises. From a communication perspective, it is an opportunity to gain deeper insights into this polarizing strategy. By taking into account what constitutes good crisis communication and fosters strong consumer-brand relationships, it is the aim of this dissertation to explore the consequences, risks and opportunities of provocative crisis communication strategies. The lack of scientific research on this specific phenomenon justifies the investigation of the following overarching research question: *How does a provocative approach to crisis communication affect the consumer-brand relationship? (RQ).*

Because the aim of this dissertation is to explore this phenomenon more closely and to connect multiple research perspectives with one another, it will follow the protocol of Yin (2018) for case study research. This type of approach is appropriate if the research questions are of explanatory nature ("why" and "how"), and the case of interest is connected to a real-world context that cannot be manipulated by the researcher. Therefore, the first step will be to provide an understanding of the context in which the brand operates. Then, documentation will provide evidence to support the claim that true fruits' crisis communication is in fact provocative. After, more data will be collected through consumer survey interviews and interviews with industry professionals. Subsequently, all collected data will be analyzed and interpreted to answer the research question at the end of this dissertation.

## **Thesis outline and structure**

Initially, theoretical background is provided which serves as a basis for this research project. This step is divided into three chapters. A chapter on consumer-brand relationships will provide lenses through which the impact of communication tactics can be analyzed. By exploring the relevancy of relationship management and quality, relationship outcomes such as polarization will be explained. Especially the concept of brand personality will be

explored as one possible factor for the success of true fruits' approach, that will be explained in detail. Moreover, the second chapter defines and discusses the use of provocation in communication strategies, along with its effectiveness as well as consumer reception risks. The theoretical chapter ends with a chapter on brand crisis and its consequences, such as anti-brand activism and boycotting. Fundamental concepts on crisis management and communication will be presented and connected to brand personality research. The methodological part will explain all decisions and procedures regarding the collection and analysis of data in detail. Finally, all findings are discussed and related to answer the research question in the end.

## **1 Consumer-Brand Relationship**

Digital marketing experts estimate that the average American citizen is exposed to 4000 to 10000 ads in one day (Simpson, 2017). While these numbers are mere speculation and likely vary widely in different regions of the world, it is undoubtably clear that brands imbue our lives. However, despite their omnipresence, it is important to acknowledge that many authors have attempted to define the brand construct, but have produced many contradicting results. Wood (2000) points out that this diversity can be traced back to differing underlying philosophies and stakeholder perspectives. For instance, a brand may be defined from the consumers' perspective, the brand owner's perspective, in terms of their purpose, or be described by their characteristics (p. 664). Nevertheless, it is widely recognized that brands provide an opportunity for differentiation from competitors, and as such can impact the success of a company (Wood, 2000, p. 662).

In order to understand the significance of branding from a communication perspective, it is important to define commonly used terminology, as well as to consider the state-of-the-art research that illustrates what role brands play in the communication process. Thus, the following chapter explores the main notions in this field of research in order to clarify the use of the term brand, as well as important brand variables for this dissertation. Furthermore, this chapter aims to understand how consumers relate to brands, and why some brands are preferred to others and evoke strong emotions, such as love or even hate. For this purpose, this chapter will explore these mechanisms from a consumer-brand relationship and brand

personality perspective, which will serve as a framework for the case study analysis of the empirical part of this dissertation.

## **1.1 Definition and function of brands**

According to the American Marketing Association, a brand is defined as the “name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (AMA, 2017). However, scientific literature has yet to produce consensus regarding more complex definitions. Scholars have long acknowledged the complexity behind this term, because “each expert comes up with his or her own definition, or nuance to the definition” (Kapferer, 2008, p. 9).

Many existing definitions in scientific literature can be categorized by their underlying philosophies: Either they emphasize a brand’s benefit to the brand owner or the consumer (Wood, 2000, p. 666). Nevertheless, both perspectives are relevant to gain a holistic understanding on the meaning of brands. The idea that a brand generates added value, as a separable asset on a balance sheet or as the sum of associations and attachments by consumers, is described by the term *brand equity* (Wood, 2000, p. 662). This notion implies that for companies, a brand name is linked with the added business advantage it generates. Previous research has established that a high brand equity can lead to higher consumer preferences and purchase intentions (Cobb-Walgreen et al., 1995, p. 37) and higher stock returns (Aaker & Jacobson, 1994, p. 199). Further, it can be linked to successful brand extensions, resilience to survive difficult times, and creation of barriers to competitive market entry (Farquhar, 1989, p. 26). More precisely, a strong brand can allow a company to make advertising and promotion more effective (f. e. by allowing better segmentation and targeting), to help secure distribution, to insulate a product from competition, and to facilitate growth and expansion into other product categories (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 745). Thus, the development of a strong brand positioning can establish competitive superiority (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 740).

However, scholars ultimately agree that added value only exists, if a brand adds value for the consumer. Keller (1998) expresses this in his definition of brands: “A brand is a set

of mental associations, held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service” (p. 299). Thus, to understand the full scope of how brands add value, it is crucial to understand how a brand is established in the mind of a consumer. According to Keller, if these associations are unique, strong, and positive, they can affect the decision-making process regarding a purchase (p. 301). Taking upon this notion, research on brand effects on the individual consumer commonly refers to the term *customer-based brand equity*: the “attraction to – or repulsion from – a particular product from a particular company generated by the nonobjective part of the product offering, i. e. not by the product attributes per se” (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 745). Such attachments and associations beyond the product can be formed over time through activities like advertising or usage experience. Although many studies suggest that these perceived attributes do not require inherent value of a product or service (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 745), it should be noted that through their purchases, consumers decide which brands have more equity than others (Villas-Boas, 2004, p. 142).

Further, a strong brand does not only benefit the brand owner. Studies show that for consumers, brands can “simplify choice, promise a particular quality level, reduce risk, and/or engender trust” (Keller & Lehmann, 2006, p. 740). It has been demonstrated that brands enable consumers to identify products more easily, reducing the search costs (Ward & Lee, 2000). For consumers, brand name is one the most relevant attributions taken into consideration when making a purchase decision (Kardes et al., 2004, p. 373) or inferring product quality (Olson & Jacoby, 1972) - amongst price, packaging, and color. Hence, a brand is a definite factor of the decision-making process upon a purchase.

However, this does not mean a strong brand alone can carry the success of an organization. Kapferer (2008) points out that brands are conditional assets, because they need to work in conjunction with other assets, such as production facilities, to deliver their benefits (p. 10). The notion that brand management should follow a holistic long-term perspective in accordance with other operations maintains popularity amongst scholars. For example, marketing activities should always support the brand message: “This approach rejects, for example, discounting as a short-term sales promotion for a premium brand” (Wood, 2000, p. 666).

In conclusion, it is in an organization's interest to establish strong brand associations in the mind of the consumer, because they can ultimately affect business-success. As the number of brand definitions implies, this process can be explored through a variety of perspectives. When reviewing marketing literature, one will come across many different variables through which the success and impact and marketing activities on a brand can be measured. Dependent on the aim of a study, researchers must make an informed decision through which perspective they want to approach their work. Thus, the following paragraphs will introduce relationship theory and within it brand personality as the theoretical framework for this dissertation, and present arguments on why the focus of this thesis is placed on these concepts.

## **1.2 Relationship theory**

From a communication perspective, brands are often conceptualized through the relationship theory. For some decades, marketing scholars have maintained the idea that consumers build and cultivate social relationships with brands by ascribing meaning and human-like characteristics to them. The perceived quality and strength of these relationships was found to directly influence a consumer's intention to repurchase, amongst other consequences, as a result. Susan Fournier (1998) was one of the first researchers to observe that this paradigm shifted away from short-term exchange notions in marketing literature and practice (p. 343). Based on this idea, she further developed the relationship metaphor in the consumer-brand context and proposed a framework that serves as an assessment tool characterizing the relationships between brands and consumers. Approaching brands through the lenses of the relationship theory allows for a holistic view on the marketing variables that are, otherwise, often examined detached of one another, such as brand attachment, purchase behavior, or consumer experience. Further, it is aligned with the previously introduced idea that brand management should follow a long-term approach. Because it provides this inclusive framework, researchers and marketing practitioners have maintained a strong interest in consumer-brand relationships to this day: what they are, why they form, how they evolve, and what impact they have on consumers and the market, and when and why they do not exist. This subchapter is dedicated to providing a state-of-the-art

perspective on what is known about this area of research and exploring how this perspective is applicable to the case study of this dissertation.

Firstly, it is important to understand how the relationship metaphor is applicable to the consumer-brand context. The starting point for this is defining what is meant by a relationship. Literature identifies three main constituents of interpersonal relationships in general: both partners' personalities and the interaction between the individuals (Huber et al., 2010, p. 1114). Through this interaction, both partners collectively affect, define, and redefine the relationship between them, through which they create interdependence (Hinde, 1979, as cited by Fournier, 1998, p. 344). According to the relationship theory, brand and consumer are also partners in a relationship, each one inheriting a unique personality.

The premise that consumers can form and maintain relationships in general is easily accepted. But research also supports the idea that consumers develop this kind of bond with brands: they buy brands to build their own self-concepts and to establish self-brand relationships. For instance, it has been established that consumers often assign personality traits to inanimate brand objects (Aaker, 1997, p. 347) and think about brands as if they were people (Fournier, 1998p. 344). This suggests that consumers are willing to accept brands as vital members of a social relationship dyad and many studies have been conducted to explore this dynamic in a variety of contexts.

Like interpersonal relationships, the outcome of such relationships is determined by the interaction of both partners. Therefore, it is important to understand how brand can also be active, contributing participators in these relationships. From a brand's perspective, marketers play an important role in this process. Through communication and other related activities (f. e. corporate social responsibility programs), a brand can actively establish its own meaning in the mind of the consumer. However, relevant factors in this process can also include other stakeholders (f. e. retailers, the media), the general external public, and consumer groups. Therefore, the extent through which brands embody their intended meaning is dependent on a number of parties and circumstantial factors (MacInnis et al., 2009, xi).

Moreover, scholars found that relationships between consumers and brands can take many forms. Considerable research has focused on advancing knowledge on these

underlying processes, trying to understand and describe the different types of relationships consumers have with brands. A large body of literature approaches the categorization of these relationships based on their intensity. For instance, concepts such as brand attachment, brand commitment, brand love, brand loyalty, and brand trust remain popular. Although all of these inherit a relationship component, scholars often investigate them as independent variables when conducting their research, instead of applying a holistic perspective. This is why some authors argue that these concepts actually embody the possible outcomes of consumer-brand relationships, and are therefore not sufficient to reflect on their full complexity and meaning (Reimann & Aron, 2009, p. 65). Consequently, this chapter will not elaborate on every single one of these concepts, but rather focus on the notion that is accepted by the majority of authors: that the relationship theory should integrate these different outcomes and enable a holistic perspective.

An alternative approach to categorizing consumer-brand relationships was proposed by Susan Fournier, who is considered to be a predecessor in this field by her peers. A decade after her first publication in this field and reviewing the insights of conducted research, she proposes that a broader lens should be applied to understanding the functions of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 2009, p. 5). Essentially, she adapted the perspective that brands can also serve as means to reach higher-level goals for consumers, which go beyond forming identity (e. g. expanding one's network, capturing the present, staying adventurous, gaining comfort through routines and rituals, symbolizing accomplishments). Depending on how well a brand can resonate with these varying needs and goals, it will define the intensity and outcome of its relationship with consumers. Her research implies that the complexity of these relationships can be characterized through over 50 dimensions and take various forms. For example, these relationships can be emotional or functional, deep or superficial, productive or destructive, positive, neutral, or negative (Fournier, 2009, p. 12). While many marketers tend to focus on positive and strong brand relationships, she reinforces that “a fully enabled perspective on consumer-brand relationship behavior must lose its false optimism and incorporate dysfunctional relationship forms” (Fournier, 2009, p. 11). Moreover, she emphasizes that the nature of these relationships is always evolving and argues that research in this field should move from merely describing consumer-brand relationships to understanding how they can be measured and impacted through marketing (Fournier, 2009, p. 16). The following paragraphs will describe relevant tools to assess these

relationships, established maintenance strategies, and key drivers that research identified over the years.

### **1.3 Brand Personality**

The previous subchapter introduced the idea that brands can be perceived by consumers as relationship partners, based on the premise that brands also inherit their own personality. Prior research has shown that relationships are influenced by the personalities of both partners involved (Robins et al., 2000, p. 247). Brand personality (BP) is a framework that helps to understand more precisely how a company or organization can shape the way people feel about a brand through communication activities. BP is broadly defined as “the set of human characteristics associated with a brand“ (Aaker, 1997, p. 347) and originated as a way to capture the essence of a brand that was “not bound to the product’s use, performance, benefits, attributes and so on” (Azoulay & Kapferer, 2003, p. 145). Instead, it includes product-related and non-product-related factors in which a consumer experiences the brand directly or indirectly (Sung & Tinkham, 2005, p. 336). Han et al. (2018) provide an example for BP by comparing why people consume *MTV* and the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)*: “*MTV* can be described as exciting and trendy, while *WSJ* can be perceived as trustworthy and competent” (p. 801). This concept has been established based on the findings that consumers can use brands to express his or her own self (Belk, 1988), an ideal self (Malhotra, 1981), or specific dimensions of the self (Kleine et al., 1993) through the use of a brand. Additionally, findings do support the idea that consumers think about brands as if they were people (Fournier, 1998, p. 367) and congruity between the personality traits of an individual and a brand can impact consumer preference (Aaker, 1997, p. 348). Therefore, BP has become a popular subject in marketing research in order to understand the antecedents and consequences of BP, as well as how it can be measured, and utilized. The following paragraph examines more closely established frameworks and the current state of research in this field.

Over time, brand personality was defined and refined by many authors, often with contradicting outcomes. As a result, there is still a lack of agreement on how to measure and conceptualize BP. However, a bibliometric analysis of publications in this field revealed that

the work of Jennifer Aaker inspired the majority of research on this subject until today (Lara-Rodríguez et al., 2019, p. 269). Aaker (1997) developed a framework that was based on the Big Five dimensions of human personality which are widely recognized by psychology research: *Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism*. Her BP scale includes 44 items in total and identified five dimensions of brand personality: *Sincerity, Excitement, Competence, Sophistication, and Ruggedness* (p. 352). Table 1 depicts Aaker’s original BP items in regard to each of the five dimensions.

BP Dimension	Facets	Traits
Sincerity	Down-to earth	down-to-earth, family-oriented, small-town
	Honest	honest, sincere, real
	Wholesome	wholesome, original
	Cheerful	cheerful, sentimental, friendly
Excitement	Daring	daring, trendy, exciting
	Spirited	spirited, cool, young
	Imaginative	imaginative, unique
	Up-to-date	up-to-date, independent, contemporary
Competence	Reliable	reliable, hardworking, secure
	Intelligent	intelligent, technical, corporate
	Successful	successful, leader, confident
Sophistication	Upper class	upper class, glamorous, good looking
	Charming	charming, feminine, smooth
Ruggedness	Outdoorsy	outdoorsy, masculine, western
	Tough	tough, rugged

Table 1: Aaker’s BP scale (based on Aaker, 1997, p. 354)

Aaker concluded that there is an asymmetric relationship in the structure of the brand versus human personality: Even though three of the BP dimensions relate to the Big Five (she argues that *Agreeableness* and *Sincerity* both represent warmth and acceptance; *Extroversion* and *Excitement* connote sociability, energy, and activity; *Conscientiousness*

and *Competence* encapsulate responsibility, dependability, and security), the other two BP dimensions (*Sophistication* and *Ruggedness*) differ from the Big Five (p. 353). In Aaker's opinion, this indicates that BP dimensions influence consumer preference for different reasons, not only their congruity with one another: "For example, whereas *Sincerity*, *Excitement*, and *Competence* tap an innate part of human personality, *Sophistication* and *Ruggedness* tap a dimension that individuals desire but do not necessarily have" (p. 353). Over time, many authors challenged the validity of Aaker's framework and found that it has limitations. For example, Austin et al. (2003) found that it cannot be applied to compare the personalities of brands across different product categories and suggested to direct future research towards developing a more comprehensive scale (p. 90). Azoulay & Kapferer (2003) argue that a clear distinction of brand personality from other components of brand identity – personality only being one of them – is needed in order to ensure validity (p. 153). Grohmann (2009) explored how consumers can perceive demographic attributes like gender through BP.

Additionally, considerable research has been conducted on the question how Aaker's approach to BP can be applied to different cultures and research objectives. Psychology research has shown that the Big Five personality traits can be used to describe personality structure across a wide variety of cultures. However, this seems not to be the case for Aaker's approach to BP: Differences can be found in the number of dimensions extracted, and their ascribed meaning (Bosnjak et al., 2007, p. 305) and many authors explore what dimensions of BP can be found in different countries (e. g. Aaker et al., 2001, explored Japan and Spain; Ferrandi et al., 2000, explored France; Sung & Tinkham, 2005, explored Korea). Thus, authors conclude that the established measures of BP remain inconsistent throughout the conducted studies and need to be adapted for different geographic regions and research contexts (Lara-Rodríguez et al., 2019, p. 269). Bosnjak et al. (2007) conducted research in the German cultural context: They identified *Drive*, *Conscientiousness*, *Emotion*, and *Superficiality* as relevant dimensions. They proposed a 20-item instrument to measure brand personality attributions in the German cultural domain (p. 314), as depicted in Table 2.

BP Dimension in English (and original German)	Facets in English (and original German)	Traits	
		in English	original German
Drive (Antrieb)	Boredom (Langeweile)	small-minded bourgeois boring old-fashioned	spießig kleinbürgerlich langweilig altmodisch
	Excitement (Erregung)	exciting adventurous spirited saucy	aufregend abenteuerlustig temperamentvoll frech
Conscientiousness (Gewissenhaftigkeit)		competent orderly reliable	kompetent ordentlich zuverlässig
Emotion (Gefühl)		loving cordial sentimental	liebepoll herzlich geföhlpoll
Superficiality (Oberflächlichkeit)		selfish arrogant hypocritical	egoistisch arrogant scheinheilig

Table 2: Dimensions of BP Attributions in Germany (modeled after Bosnjak et al., 2007, p. 310)

Malär et al. (2012) found that a brand's perceived personality is not only the result of a consumer's personality and prior brand attitude. By conducting a dyadic empirical cross-industry study, they identified the singularity of the brand's personality profile, the competitive differentiation of the brand, and the credibility of brand-related communication activities as essential drivers for BP (p. 737). Thus, a brand's personality is transported through the way it communicates and behaves. This raises the question, how exactly a brand can achieve that stakeholders perceive its intended BP. Wee (2004) states that BP can be achieved through the manipulation of brand name, signs, symbols, logos, imagery, music, type of endorsers, lay-out, or use of humour and provocation. Aaker (1997) believes that advertising plays an important role when communicating BP, and figures of speech can play a significant role in this (p. 348). For example, Ang & Lim (2006) found that the use of metaphors in ads led to perceived Sophistication, but less Sincerity and Competence (p. 50). Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer (2013) found that intended BP dimensions are effectively established, when communication is less complex, more consistent, and containing hedonic benefit claims (p. 214). However, some communication channels are only indirectly under a

marketer's influence. Robertson et al. (2019) explored how employer reviews on social media contribute to the BP dimensions of business-to-business firms and recognize that employees' experiences with a brand contribute to a brand's personality by word-of-mouth communication (p. 115).

It is theorized that the consumer-brand relationship can impact the consumer in ways that are directly relevant to business success, which is why this concept received so much attention from researchers. This so-called *BP-Effect* is defined as "the direct influence that brand personality will have on a variety of consumer-driven outcomes" (Freling & Forbes, 2005, p. 1). Since this concept evolved, many scholars have examined this effect on different brand success variables, for example, customer loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009), consumer-brand relationship-building (Fournier, 1998), perceived quality (Ramaseshan & Tsao, 2007), consumer affection (Sung & Kim, 2010), and purchase intention (Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer, 2013; Freling & Forbes, 2005). The following paragraphs will review literature on the interplay of BP, crisis and purchase behavior.

### **1.3.1 Brand personality and purchase intention**

Consumer behavior research often studies behavioral intention rather than actual consumer behavior, because the actual behavior is not always measurable (f. e. in the context of a field experiment). Consequently, the focus of this dissertation also lies on behavioral intention, which can generally be defined as "the person's motivation in the sense of his or her conscious plan to exert effort or carry out a behavior" (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 168). Behavioral intentions function as indicators which show whether a consumer will remain with or defect from a company (Zeithaml et al., 1996). As a research instrument, it can be derived through several items. Favorable behavioral intentions indicate that a consumer intends to form or strengthen a bond with a company. They are captured through measuring loyalty, retention, repurchase, word of mouth, cross buying, saying positive things, spending more money, and paying price premium (Wang et al., 2004; Zeithaml et al., 1996). Whereas unfavorable behavior intentions indicate that a consumer dissociates from a company or brand, which can be predicted by measuring items such as expressing negative things, switching to another company, and complaining or engaging in less business activities with a company (Zeithaml et al., 1996). The prediction of consumer behavior is extremely

relevant for companies in order to maximize their own performance in the long-term and ensure their own competitiveness (Vogel et al., 2008). It is especially important for companies to predict the behavior of current customers, because it is more financially sound to retain them rather than acquire new ones (ZeithamI et al., 1996). Nevertheless, especially young companies aim to increase the total number of their customers. Consequently, analyzing which factors influence the behavioral intentions of potential customers can also be of great interest.

A consumer's purchase intention is a complex decision-making process that is related to the behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes of consumers (Mirabi et al., 2015, p. 268). Generally, studies on this subject aim to understand the underlying motivations and external determinants of a purchase. For instance, Gogoi (2013) found that this decision-making process is influenced by price, perceived quality, and value of a product (p. 82). Moreover, Mirabi et al. (2015) executed a survey to investigate the factors affecting purchase intention. Their results indicated that perceived product quality, but also brand advertising and name had a high impact on customers' purchase intention (p. 271). Thus, recognizing the relevance of brands in the consumer decision-making process. However, the underlying internal motivations for buying a product might differ strongly for different product categories and situations. Due to this complexity, this interplay of personal attitudes and purchase decision is likely highly dependent on the specific scenario, and results can hardly be generalized. Furthermore, no established scale to measure purchase intention exists. The literature review on this subject reveals that a variety of different instruments exist, and no single measurement was established.

As mentioned above, consumer-brand relationships are often compared with interpersonal relationships, and scholars suggest that this relationship can impact the consumer in ways that are relevant to business success. However, this thesis aims to understand influences on the consumer purchase intention of the brand True fruits, which is why this paragraph will review this topic in particular in more detail. The experimental research design conducted by Freling & Forbes (2005) explored how BP influences consumers' purchase decisions of bottled water, a product that is hard to distinguish from competing products by its physical attributes. Their findings indicate that a strong brand personality – regardless of which personality dimensions a brand inherits – can have a

positive influence on product evaluations, brand attitude, and purchase intentions (p. 409). Therefore, in such product categories, this may provide a basis for differentiation and influence consumer perceptions and preferences. Moreover, they were not able to associate the perceived importance of personality traits and their significance for purchase decisions. To illustrate, the results of their study showed that consumers perceived the *Sophistication* dimension as less critical than the *Competence* dimension. Nevertheless, *Sophistication* correlated with higher purchase intentions (p. 410). Thus, this implicates that not only the presence of any strong BP will affect consumer buying decisions, but also the presence or absence of specific BP dimensions. For instance, Eisend & Stokburger-Sauer (2013) investigated antecedents and consequences of Brand Personality and found that *Competence* had the most substantial impact on brand success variables, including purchase behavior (p. 211). However, results like these have yet to be replicated and tested in different contexts and for different product categories, in order to fully understand which BP dimensions influence purchase behavior in what way. Additionally, Freling & Forbes (2005) conclude that potential moderators of the BP effect on purchase decisions have yet to be examined: Factors like familiarity, involvement, product type, and nature of the good might limit or enhance the BP effect (p. 410).

#### **1.4 Relationship quality**

Measurement scales of consumer-brand relationships allow researchers to assess as well as to identify relevant drivers of strength and quality of consumer-brand relationships. As one of the earliest available measurement tools, Susan Fournier developed brand relationship quality (BRQ) to assess the overall strength and quality of the consumer's relationship with the brand. Conceptually, this framework is much richer than overall brand evaluations or behavioral intentions, because it further embodies the strong emotional connection with the brand and allows to combine a range of variables of special interest for marketers and characterize any given consumer-brand relationship. Moreover, relationship quality offers the potential to organize this wide field of research. Although it doesn't include the entire range of variables of special interest in the relationship field, the construct arguably captures many central notions. Leveraging ideas from interpersonal relations, this concept includes several multifaceted components such as affective and socio-motive attachments, behavioral

ties, and supportive cognitive believes (Kim, 2014, p. 592), which will be elaborated in the following paragraphs.

Fournier (1998) originally suggested six relevant facets of BRQ: (1) love/passion, (2) self-connection, (3) interdependence, (4) commitment, (5) intimacy, and (6) brand partner quality (p. 363-365). Combining these components together can foster strong and lasting consumer-brand relationships. However, scholars have yet to reach consensus on how BRQ should generally operationalized. Additional components of BRQ have been empirically validated over the years. Furthermore, research indicates that the relevance of drivers can vary largely depending on the industry. Consequently, this dissertation will only consider additional the referred facets that have been implemented in studies about consumer products. Despite the lack of consensus regarding facets, based on previous studies it can ultimately be argued that combining these components together will increase the likelihood of fostering strong and lasting consumer-brand relationships. Table 3 displays the mentioned facets with definitions.

<b>BRQ Dimensions</b>	<b>Definition</b>
(1) Love/passion	“Strongly held brands were characterized as irreplaceable and unique to the extent that separation anxiety was anticipated upon withdrawal. Feelings of love ranged from warmth and affection to passion, infatuation, and selfish, obsessive dependency.” (Fournier, 1998, p. 364)
(2) Self-connection	“the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of self.” (Fournier, 1998, p. 364)
(3) Interdependence	“Interdependence involved frequent brand interactions [...], increased scope and diversity of brand-related activities [...], and heightened intensity of individual interaction events [...].” (Fournier, 1998,p. 656)
(4) Commitment	“Commitment in its various forms fosters stability by implicating the self in relationship outcomes [...] and by encouraging derogation of alternatives in the environment.” (Fournier, 1998, p. 656)
(5) Intimacy	“elaborate knowledge structures develop around strongly held brands, with richer layers of meaning reflecting deeper levels of intimacy and more durable relationship bonds” (Fournier, 1998, p. 365)

(6) Brand partner quality	“The strong-brand stories suggest five central components of brand partner quality: (1) a felt positive orientation of the brand toward the consumer [...]; (2) judgments of the brand’s overall dependability, reliability, and predictability in executing its partnership role; (3) judgments of the brand’s adherence to the various ‘rules’ composing the implicit relationship contract; (4) trust or faith that the brand will deliver what is desired versus which is feared; and (5) comfort in the brand’s accountability for its actions.” (Fournier, 1998, p. 365)
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Table 3: Definitions of studied BRQ facets

Although Fournier was able to prove validity of her original scale, she later notes that it is subjective to the bias of marital relationships and should be more adapted to the specific types of relationship (Fournier, 2009, p. 9). Thus, its applicability and scope are restricted to specific scenarios. Despite these limitations, BRQ is commonly used in marketing research to this day, through which scholars were able to identify important components and drivers when evaluating the consumer-brand relationship. Ultimately, the question of how consumer-brand relationships are measured best remains unanswered at the moment, because researchers continue to identify new variables that they find relevant. Also, the media and marketing landscape will continue to change and evolve. Therefore, existing and new scales should regularly be adapted to the new communication dynamics. Nonetheless, the previous explanations show that these scales are useful to reflect on consumer-brand relationships and identify key drivers.

Scholars found that BP is an important moderator of BRQ. Thus, confirming its relevancy in building strong consumer-brand relationships. Smit et al. (2007) conducted consumer interviews about brands from different product categories and were able to confirm that consumers relate more easily to brands with outspoken personalities, regardless of involvement intensity of products. Consequently, they recommend utilizing perceived personality traits in their marketing strategies, in order to build stronger relationships with them (p. 632). Furthermore, Tho et al. (2016) were able to prove through an empirical test with 477 consumers that brand personality can provide emotional benefits for consumers, which as a result, benefits the relationship building process (p. 320). Lastly, it should be noted that the operationalization of BRQ slightly differs in each of the precedingly mentioned studies, due to the reasons that were presented in previous paragraphs.

For the scope of this case study, the mentioned insights regarding consumer products are particularly relevant. Furthermore, because True fruits' social media communication will be an important aspect in the research of this dissertation: chapter 3.3.2 will address existing research in this setting more closely and chapter 3.2 will further address how crises can affect BRQ.

## **1.5 Relationship management**

Based on the previously mentioned findings, scholars have developed relationship maintenance or cultivation strategies, usually regarding BRQ as a crucial factor in assessing their successfulness. Focusing on relationship stability, relationship maintenance is an essential tool to achieve positive long-term relational outcomes. Canary & Stafford (1992) defined maintenance as a stage of relational development, but also the dynamic processes involved in relating. From a communication perspective, maintenance strategies can be considered a means to an end, because they provide a guideline on how to communicate with the public.

One commonly referenced strategy was established by Grunig & Huang (2000) who proposed a strategy based on research about conflict resolution. They recommend developing communication tactics which preserve the relationship quality long term by resolving conflicts (or postponing, if necessary). If successful, this leads to relationship outcomes such as control mutuality (parties agree on who has the rightful power to influence on another), trust (confidence and willingness to be open to the other party in the relationship), satisfaction (favorability towards others because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced), and commitment (extent to which parties believe the relationship is worth spending energy to maintain and promote) (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

The most established framework is relationship maintenance theory (RMS), which takes many premises from interpersonal relationships. The concept originally investigated physical interactions and evaluated relationship maintenance through five dimensions: positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and task sharing (Canary & Stafford, 1992, p. 243). Further, they developed equity as a key concept in relational maintenance: if the ratio of inputs to outputs is equal, then the relationship becomes equitable. If the ratio is not

equal, then the partner who has the most favorable outcome is over-benefited (Canary & Stafford, 1992). Later, the concept was applied to investigate the effectiveness of online communication, which is far more relevant to the consumer-brand interaction.

<b>RMS Dimension</b>	<b>Interpersonal</b>	<b>Between organization and public</b>
Positivity	attempts to make interactions pleasant	making the relationship more enjoyable for public audiences
Openness	direct discussions about the nature of the relationship and setting aside times for talks about the relationship	providing information about the nature of the organization and what it is doing
Assurance	communicating the continuation of the relationship	assuring the public that they are legitimate
Social network	interacting with or relying on common affiliations	building networks or coalitions with the same groups their publics do
Task sharing	performing one's responsibilities	Sharing projects or solving problems of mutual interest

*Table 4 Qualities of relationship management strategies: their meaning in the interpersonal context (according to Canary & Stafford, 1992) and between organizations and the public (according to Han et al., 2018)*

RMS has been commonly applied to investigate the effectiveness of online communication in the context of corporate websites, corporate blogs, and social media, the latter being most relevant for this dissertation. For instance, openness and transparency were found popular relationship cultivation strategies on corporate websites and blogs (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Ki & Childers, 2006) as well as positivity for blogs (Cho & Huh, 2010). Moreover, a study on U.S. retail companies found that Twitter is an important channel for corporate communication and relationship maintenance, with access being the most widely employed strategy, followed by assurance and positivity (Li, 2015).

## **1.6 Polarization as a relationship outcome**

The outcomes of brand relationships are numerous and complex. Researchers found a number of relationship outcomes that can be categorized in psychological or behavioral, as well as ranging from weak to strong and from positive to negative emotions (Alvarez & Fournier, 2016). Understanding the nature of the consumer-brand relationship and its impact

on the brand is of strategic importance to managers because it is a new way for consumers and brands to interact in the current environment. While positive relationship outcomes emphasize the potential of relationship building, it is also important to observe and understand negative outcomes. This is especially relevant, because negative emotions towards a brand can translate directly into actions against it. According to Fonberg, (1986), emotions are the key components of understanding human behavior, because they shape and sustain our actions.

Current studies confirm that consumers engage differently with brands, depending on their brand feelings (Hollebeek & Chen, 2014). For example, positive feelings toward a brand are considered beneficial, because they stimulate positive word of mouth (Albert & Merunka, 2013), increase consumer loyalty (Veloutsou, 2015), lead consumers to forgive misbehaving brands more easily (Hegner, Fenko, et al., 2017), and make them more willing to pay a premium price (Albert & Merunka, 2013). Whereas it is commonly perceived that consumers' negative feelings toward a brand are bad for the company, because they can increase complaints (Zarantonello et al., 2016), negative word of mouth (Hegner, Fetscherin, et al., 2017), and cause protests (Zarantonello et al., 2016).

Osuna et al. (2019) points out that many brands simultaneously have a significant number of lovers and a substantial group of haters. Moreover, studies show that this is common in various sectors where self-expression is important, such as sports teams, political candidates, artists, or religious organizations. However, this phenomenon has also been observed in the food, petrochemicals, and news media industries (Rozenkrants et al., 2017). Often, polarizing brands can be very successful. For example, the *Trump Hotels*, *CNN* and *NBC News*, *McDonald's*, *Starbucks*, and *BP* are reported to have large numbers of supporters and opposers. Others, for example *Facebook*, are featured on most loved *and* most hated brands lists (Osuna et al., 2019). These types of brands are considered to be polarizing brands (Jayasimha & Billore, 2015).

Research on polarizing brands is still limited at the moment and because of this, widely accepted definitions do not exist yet. Osuna et al. (2019) made an important contribution to this problem by reviewing existing conceptualizations from political science, social psychology, and marketing. They concluded that brand polarization is

“an affective phenomenon where beliefs and emotions of a significant number of people induce a simultaneous move to the extremes involving passionate positive and negative feelings and convictions toward the brand, like-minded consumers and opposite-minded consumers” (p. 620).

Moreover, the authors explore possible advantages of brand polarization based on 22 semi-structured interviews. Their findings identify three parties that benefit from brand polarization: the brand managers, the brand as an entity, and the engaged consumers. The passionate engagement of the consumers creates value for all three of these parties: The authors argue that because polarizing brands evoke strong emotions, passion, and engagement, they achieve high levels of awareness, recognition, and associations. Thus, polarizing brands are usually strong brands, because consumers are not indifferent to them – serving consumers as a clear direction to know whether they identify themselves with a brand or not. Although these brands receive strong criticism as well as approval, this is merely a sign that a brand’s meaning is well-established. Therefore, polarization is a way for brands to distinguish themselves in the market and enhance their person-like characteristics. As a result, the brand’s personality is perceived to be stronger and more distinctive, providing a direction for future marketing tactics and consumer decision making. Thus, brands are actually incentivized to behave distinctively and lean into the polarization (Osuna et al., 2019).

However, these findings have yet to be confirmed by other studies in this field. Moreover, existing literature does not address how exactly polarization is created, or what happens when brands go ‘too far’. For instance, the risks of experiencing crises, and consumer activism are not considered. This leaves the question of until what point polarization is an effective marketing strategy. The following chapters will explore how provocation might be a tool to create distinctive, possibly polarizing, brands and what obstacles brands face if their disapproval spills over into consumer actions against them. However, a clear theoretical correlation between the two concepts could not be revealed through the literature review.

## **2 Provocative communication**

As the marketing landscape continues to get more complex and stakeholders are flooded with information, it becomes more and more essential for organizations to be noticed and stand out. This can be achieved through a more memorable and distinctive and, in this sense, also more effective communication strategy. The previous chapter discussed how organizations can differentiate themselves through creating a distinctive and polarizing brand personality, which is established to a large extent through a company's communication tactics. This chapter is dedicated to understanding provocative communication, a frequently applied strategy to captivate the attention of target groups and stand out, and further drive brand personality (Wee, 2004), as this strategy is heavily applied by the object of this case study, True fruits. Furthermore, this chapter aims to understand the risks and opportunities of such a strategy as well as which circumstances benefit its success. Further, this chapter explores the interplay of provocative communication and brand personality, and how this strategy can be utilized to frame it.

### **2.1 Communication strategy**

Before reviewing literature on specific communication strategies, it is necessary to clarify what this term includes. Broadly defined it inherits the idea that communication is executed purposefully to advance an organization's mission. For instance, this can include but is not limited to coordinating administrative functions, product promotion, or relationship building. Thus, strategic communication examines various communication disciplines, which focus on presenting and promoting itself through intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners. Literature identifies six specialties, which are commonly found within organizations, each addressing a specific organizational purpose: management communication, marketing communication, public relations, technical communication, political communication, information/social marketing campaigns. These disciplines are differentiated primarily by the different tactics through which they are executed, e. g. choosing different communication channels, messages, and addressing different target groups (Hallahan et al., 2007, pp. 4-6). Regardless of the communication specialty within an organization, their purpose is usually achieved by

executing the following steps: situational analysis, goal setting, strategy formulation and implementation, and finally evaluation (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 12).

As previously established, this dissertation adapts a consumer-brand relationship perspective. Therefore, it aims to understand how provocative communication can affect the relationship with consumers. Of all communication specialties mentioned in the previous paragraph, marketing communication primarily deals with this objective. According to (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018) marketing is “the process by which companies engage customers, build strong customer relationships, and create customer value in order to capture value from customer's in return” (p. 29). Understanding the customer’s needs and wants is the first step to creating value for customers. Then, the marketing department should develop a strategy that enables the company to deliver superior value.

In today's multi-media environment, marketing communication is often carried out through various offline and online channels (Keller, 2001). The main promotion instruments are advertising (print, online, mobile, etc.), sales promotion (coupons, discounts, events, etc.), personal selling (sales presentations, trade shows, etc.), public relation (press releases, sponsorships, events, etc.) as well as direct and digital marketing (e-mail, social media, online, mobile, etc.) (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). The specific combination of selected activities a company implements is called promotion mix or marketing communication mix (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018).

Moreover, because consumers receive marketing messages through a number of channels, the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC) has gained increasing importance. IMC refers to the necessity to establish clear, consistent and compelling messages about the company and its products or services throughout all channels and activities in order to engage consumers (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Scholars stress that the consistent distribution of messages across all channels is essential to meet communication objectives. (P. R. Smith et al., 1999, p. 166) explain IMC by consulting three definitions:

(1) “Management and control of all market communications.”

(2) “Ensuring that the brand positioning, personality and messages are delivered synergistically across every element of communication and are delivered from a single consistent strategy.”

(3) “The strategic analysis, choice, implementation and control of all elements of marketing communications which efficiently (best use of resources), economically (minimum costs) and effectively (maximum result) influence transaction between an organization and its existing and potential customers, consumers and clients.”

An effective integrated communication strategy involves several steps and procedures. The key elements are defining a target audience, defining communicating objectives, and selecting media channels. Furthermore, it is crucial to know if and how the intended messages are perceived. Therefore, collecting feedback from the audience is another important step in any communication strategy (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). Because marketing communication is consumer-oriented, their expectations and preferences should be considered when designing a communication strategy. While the marketer’s perspective is also important, because it assesses the market environment and possibilities, the combination of both constitutes an encouraging approach in order to establish a high-quality marketing communication strategy (Tropp, 2019).

For the purpose of this case study, it is further necessary to understand which appeals are commonly used in marketing communication. *Rational appeals* emphasize the audience’s self-interest and concern for a product’s or service’s quality, its economic value or performance. *Emotional appeals* motivate purchase through emphasizing feelings that arise from the consumption of a product or service. *Moral appeals* address the audience’s sense of morality, such as environmental or social causes (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018).

## **2.2 Provocation as a communication strategy**

Fundamentally, advertising aims to attract attention, evoke emotions, convey information, and encourage consumption (Dahl et al., 2003). However, consumers can only remember 11% of the advertisements they have encountered each day, which further fuels the competition for their attention (Lee et al., 2020). Among the multitude of execution strategies employed in marketing are those designed to stir up emotions. Several have been identified in academic literature, some of which include horror, warmth, sexual arousal, irritation, and fear (Vézina & Paul, 1997). A strategy that recently gained more popularity

in practice and research is utilizing provocation to evoke strong emotions such as shock in the audience. Although the potential for shock has always been acknowledged by scholars, provocation has only recently been used as a full-fledged communication strategy. Moreover, even though the different emotional appeals in communication are closely related, scholars recognize that it is important to distinguish provocation. This chapter aims to define and contextualize provocation as a communication strategy, and review what is known about consumer perception from an empirical standpoint as well as review the risks and opportunities of this type of communication.

Broadly defined, provocative communication is a strategy which is intended to shock particular segments of the population (Vézina & Paul, 1997). Further, a provocative communication appeal is one that typically deliberately startles and offends its audience. This is usually achieved through the violation of norms, extensive transgression of law or customs, breaches of moral or social code, or things that outrage the moral of physical senses (Dahl et al., 2003). Thus, this deliberate use of provocation is sometimes also referred to as “shockvertising” by scholars (Parry et al., 2013). The aim to stand out from the crowd is identified as a fundamental principle for this type of communication by scholars. Commonly used tools to achieve provocation include, but are not limited to, disgusting images, sexual references, profanity/obscenity, vulgarity, impropriety, moral offensiveness and religious taboos (Dahl et al., 2003).

The norm violation aspect of shock appeal is believed to play a crucial role in the success of such campaigns. It enables a brand to break through the clutter of advertising and capture the attention of a potential audience. Norm violation derives from the shared expectations of acceptable and unacceptable behavior that people develop through the process of social learning (Baron & Byrne, 1977). These acceptable behaviors defined by norms are then used to evaluate objects, people, actions, and ideas (Sherif & Sherif, 1969). As a social object, advertising is often considered offensive when its content breaches the standards for decency, good taste, aesthetic propriety, and/or personal moral standards (Day, 1991). It should be noted that this is also the reason why the degree of perceived provocation can vary so largely between different cultures and when reviewed at different points in history. For example, the use of sexual images in marketing messages is often classified as provocative because sexual topics are classified as taboo to varying degrees worldwide (Vézina and Paul,

1997). Furthermore, in Western literature, racism and sexism are two provocative appeals that have attracted much attention (Boddewyn, 1991).

Although provocation bears close resemblance to other appeals, scholars argue that a distinction is necessary and to acknowledge the nuances and contrast between those strategies. For instance, sexual appeals or nudity in the context of marketing communication have the potential to shock parts of the audience, depending on the country and culture. However, provocative appeals usually utilize sexuality in a context that is unrelated to the key message: “using a picture of a nude model to sell soap is not as provocative as would be a similar picture used to advertise a brand of toothpaste or a car” (Vézina & Paul, 1997, p. 3). Further, provocative appeals encompass much more than sexual appeals, because they often also refer to political or racial issues. Moreover, it has been hypothesized that provocation has similar effects as humor, fear or sex on the consumers, because all three strategies are highly effective in attracting attention (Vézina & Paul, 1997). Moreover, provocative appeals also have a close resemblance to irritating ads, because they also tend to trigger negative emotions. However, the negative emotional reaction from irritation usually stems from either the product or the execution tactic (D. A. Aaker & Bruzzone, 1985). Although the similarities to other appeals and provocation exist, it is considered to be an original and distinctive execution strategy by the scholars mentioned above.

### **2.3 Components of effective provocation in marketing**

In order for provocative appeals to succeed, research identifies three important elements. Firstly, distinctiveness is very important for its success. As consumers tend to get used to particular types of provocation, one of the most challenging tasks for marketers is to maintain the originality of their campaigns. If it is perceived as similar to other ads, it may dilute the effect of its provocativeness (Vézina & Paul, 1997). Therefore, it can propose a challenge for marketers to keep renewing their provocative approach. Several authors conducted experiments and have confirmed the relevancy of distinctiveness for success. Not only does this apply to marketing stimuli (e. g. size, color, position, movement of an advertisement; Childers & Houston, 1984). The results of these experiments support the notion that distinctive stimuli, such as those that are memorable and have a positive effect on attention,

can influence the degree to which a brand is perceived. Moreover, the need for distinctiveness applies also to the marketing message. Heckler & Childers (1992) were able to prove that incongruity significantly influences the memorization of the presented content of the communication.

Even though distinctiveness is very important for provocative marketing, it is not sufficient enough to elicit provocation. Ambiguity refers to the degree of influence of marketing messages on various interpretations and intentions, if not the content itself, at least the intentions of marketers (Vézina & Paul, 1997; Pope et al., 2004). Studies have shown that more vague advertisements achieve a higher level of awareness. Therefore, marketers should strive to create advertisements that allow ambiguous interpretations and associations (Stafford & Stafford, 2002). Marketing messages that are open to various interpretations can further cultivate and provide opportunities for aesthetic experience (Pope et al., 2004). Companies often apply strategic ambiguity by consciously creating abstract advertisements, thereby creating the possibility of multiple interpretations. Individuals with different preferences (Atkin et al., 2008). Moreover, provocative marketing messages that do not hold any ambiguity are more likely to be immediately rejected by the audience. Although it should be noted that a degree of comprehension is necessary for persuasion to occur (Vézina & Paul, 1997). This presents a challenge for marketers to employ the right degree of ambiguity in their communication.

Even if a marketing message inherits distinctiveness and ambiguity, it cannot be considered provocative without transgression (Pope et al., 2004). For instance, Childers & Houston (1984) argue that provocation is more likely to occur when the content of the marketing message refers to topics that are widely considered taboo. Several authors even consider transgression to be the most important component for provocative marketing (De Pelsmacker & Van Den Bergh, 1996; Vézina & Paul, 1997). As previously described, norms are formed through social interaction in groups and ultimately define what is considered a violation against ethical and moral values. If the content of a marketing message is perceived as taboo by the receiver it can be classified as provocative (Childers & Houston, 1984; Vézina & Paul, 1997).

## 2.4 Consumer reception and its risks

Ultimately, previous research on provocative communication strategies is inconclusive in regard to its impact on the consumer. For instance, Dahl et al. (2003) pointed out that studies often focus on potentially offensive products (e. g. advertising for feminine hygiene, alcohol, and underwear) than on offensive advertising messages. Although many studies explore the types of content that people consider offensive (e. g. racist, sexist, indecent language; Waller, 1999), fewer studies explored how they respond to those types of ads. For instance, it has been shown that some product categories are intrinsically irritating for consumers. And that some advertising execution tactics (e. g. contrived situations and personal put-downs) increase irritation (D. A. Aaker & Bruzzone, 1985). However, there is no indication that irritation automatically causes offense or how it impacts consumer behavior.

Most advertisers justify the use of shock appeals in advertising to get people's attention (Vagnoni, 1999). The concept of attracting attention and other elements of cognitive processing are outlined by advertising-information processing models. According to Meyer et al. (1991), surprise initializes the processing of advertising information and is therefore a major part of the advertising process. Further, empirical findings suggest that surprise leads to higher levels of attributional thought about an event (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1981). According to Greenwald & Leavitt (1984), this enhances the comprehension (literal understanding of the message) and elaboration (production of product/message-related thoughts). The research of Dahl et al. (2003) supports this assumption: their findings suggest that shocking content in advertising significantly increases attention, benefits memory, and even has the potential to positively influence consumption behavior.

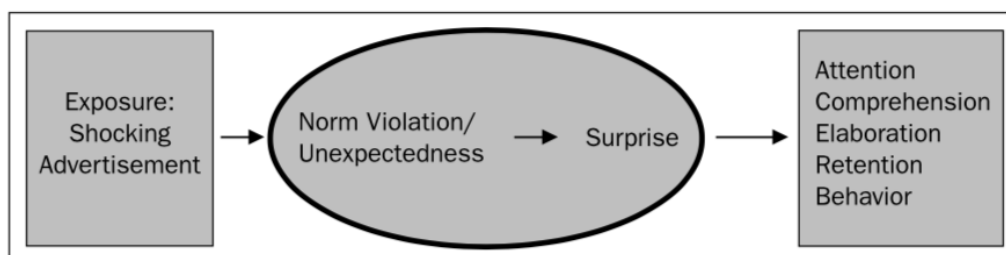


Figure 1: A preliminary model of consumer reactions to shock appeals (modeled after Dahl et al., 2003, p. 271)

Having a correct understanding of how provocative marketing can affect a company's potential consumers is extremely important when implementing such communication strategies. Especially profit-seeking companies need to be aware of risks that are associated with it, because their success can largely be affected how they are perceived by the general public and consumers. An attempt to shock or provoke can potentially result in high levels of awareness, but also lead to a high level of disapproval (Vézina & Paul, 1997). A larger body of research specifically attempts to understand which factors moderate the effectiveness of provocation in marketing. For instance, aspects such as involvement, attitude and demographics have been identified to likely trigger different reactions and perceptions amongst individuals towards provocative marketing (D. Waller et al., 2005).

#### **2.4.1 Degree of involvement**

The level of involvement from individuals can have an effect on the degree to which distinct stimuli are processed when receiving a provocative marketing message (Andrews et al., 1991). Research indicates that recipients with a high degree of involvement are more likely to process information, form strong opinions based on the content and information in marketing messages, and remember the company better. Therefore, involvement can be defined as “the degree of perceived relevance and personal importance accompanying the choice of a certain product or service within a particular context” (Dens et al., 2008, p. 253). When applied to the context of provocative marketing, researchers found that individuals with high levels of involvement tend to develop counterarguments to provocative marketing messages and are more likely to reject them as ‘cheap tricks’ to evoke attention. The more involved an individual is in the processing of a provocative marketing message, the more elaborate their interpretations are. Moreover, being involved also enhances their understanding of the message (Huhmann & Mott-Sternerson, 2008). In contrast, individuals with low levels of involvement tend to let their emotions determine how they perceive the provocative marketing message (Dens et al., 2008). For instance, when individuals have low levels of involvement, they tend to use their feelings as information when evaluating a provocative marketing message, because they believe their feelings are related to the marketing message (Geuens et al., 2011). These emotional responses can either be positive or negative. For example, advertisements containing nudity often evoke embarrassment

(Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006). Laadhar & Romdhane, (2013) found that emotions evoked by provocative communication can affect the recipient's perception and behavioral reaction to it.

#### **2.4.2 Previous attitudes**

An individual's attitude towards a particular company can vary depending on their circumstances and the experience they have with that company. Pope et al. (2004) stated that an attitude toward a company can be defined as the complete impression that the firm makes in the mind of its customers. Individuals interpret advertisements in regard to this previous impression, in order to decide whether the company lives up to their expectations about the company or not (Hansen & Riis-Christensen, 2007). The following paragraph reviews literature that studies the relevancy of previous attitudes towards companies and advertisements.

As previously established, provocative marketing appeals can be effective in capturing attention. However, research indicates that if a company is already established on a market, provocative marketing techniques may inherit a bigger risk, because they could potentially harm their already existing reputation (Dens et al., 2008). Further, existing knowledge about the company in general could affect whether recipients interpret a provocative marketing message favorably or unfavorably. For instance, how the company treats employees or how it positions itself about social issues could be relevant factors for the evaluation (Javalgi & Traylor, 1994). The risks of provocative marketing are also higher for profit-seeking companies, because they are known to apply provocative marketing appeals to maximize profit (C. R. Taylor, 2014). Whereas 'social marketing' in the non-profit sector usually aims to alter a target group's behavior for 'the greater good' (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). The difference in these underlying motives can affect the interpretation of provocative appeals of profit-seeking companies, because the general public could potentially view this as more unethical in comparison (Dahl et al., 2003).

It should be mentioned that individuals can not only hold preformed attitudes towards companies and organizations, but also towards a specific type of advertisements. A person's attitude towards an advertisement can be defined as a tendency to respond in a favorable or

unfavorable manner to a specific marketing stimulus (e. g. provocative marketing appeals). This attitude can be attributed to various emotional responses that an individual can produce when subjected to a specific advertisement during a specific occasion of exposure (MacKenzie et al., 1986). These attitudes on how specific marketing message are presented have been the subject of various studies (Hansen & Riis-Christensen, 2007; Pope et al., 2004). Moreover, it has been hypothesized that these attitudes are commonly linked with specific demographics, which will be discussed in the following point.

### **2.4.3 Demographical factors**

In order to understand how and why individuals interpret and evaluate provocative marketing messages, demographic factors need to be considered. According to researchers in the field of provocation, these factors include age, generation/group, and gender (Dens et al., 2008), as will be reviewed ahead.

In the marketing segmentation process, age is a commonly considered criteria. It is well established in marketing literature that “human morphology, tastes, attitudes, perceptions, and lifestyles change significantly over a lifetime, leading to a substantial changes in buying behaviors” (Chaney et al., 2017, p. 180). Consequently, many companies target a specific age group or diversify their strategy in order to create a marketing mix for each age group. However, age-based segmentation is commonly criticized for being too simplistic and, therefore, ineffective in addressing consumer needs (Chaney et al., 2017). While age can hold much information about consumers, later research is moving to a generational perspective. Members of a generation can connect through their shared experiences, which include events and conditions that occurred during the formative years of their lives. Due to these experiences, cohorts develop which connect individuals of a generation through their preserved values and life skills specific to them (Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, 2006). This concept has gained popularity over the years, because studies were able to identify stronger generational than age effects in several consumption contexts (Chaney et al., 2017). In regard to the research objective of this dissertation, both Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes, (2006) and (Sabri, 2012) found that the way people are presented with provocative marketing messages can vary depending on their generation. For example, several researchers agree that

provocative marketing appeals are less offensive to individuals who belong to Generation Y and generally more accepted amongst younger generations. This conclusion is based on the fact that younger generations have been presented with this tactic during their forming years, and therefore, making them less critical towards this technique (Dens et al., 2008).

Moreover, researchers are divided in the question whether gender influences the perception of provocative appeals. For instance, a study by Latour & Henthorne (1994) revealed that there is no significant difference in how woman and men view provocative marketing. However, newer research identified several differences when provocative imagery was implemented. Dens et al. (2008) found that woman have stronger reactions towards provocative ads that depict disgusting images. Further, Manceau & Tissier-Desbordes (2006) found that woman react more hostile than men when it comes to imagery with sexual content. Pope et al. (2004) suggest that women are more likely to question the motives of the provocative message, whereas men are more inclined to the peripheral effects of an image. Lastly, Putrevo (2008) found that women are more likely to approve of sexual appeals when there is a strong link between the message and the company. In contrast, men do not care if there is a connection or not.

#### **2.4.4 Long-term effects**

In any case, companies need to consider the long-term effects of provocative appeals that go beyond captivating attention. Controversial marketing techniques always bear the risk of affecting the intended message and a firm's reputation. In some cases, research even suggests that their long-term exposure could lead to the company's downfall. For instance, the long-term use of provocative marketing may be associated irretrievable with the sending company (Hastings et al., 2004). Prolonged exposure to this type of content could result in individuals becoming defensive and avoid being exposed to such messages. The use of provocative tactics could result in a misplaced focus, which could lead to the sending company becoming the center of attention instead of the intended message (Jasperson & Fan, 2002). The recipient may view a profit-seeking company as offensive and negative, and thus, it is important that these companies understand the long-term effects of their provocative marketing tactics. Because of this risk, provocative marketing is more efficient when used in short time periods than in longer ones (Fry, 1996; Hastings et al., 2004).

Moreover, Hastings et al., (2004) found that prolonged exposure to provocative marketing can diminish the shocking effect of its message. Thus, if this strategy is employed long-term, it runs the risk of becoming predictable, uninteresting, and even laughable, causing the technique to lose its effectiveness (Hastings et al., 2004; Tanner et al., 1991). Ultimately, these insights should be considered when implementing a provocative communication strategy to develop a brand in the long term.

## **3 Brands in Crisis**

### **3.1 Definition and types of crisis**

Any organization is at risk of experiencing a so-called crisis throughout the duration of their operation. This can manifest in many different ways: Natural disasters, environmental concerns, cybersecurity, or employee misconduct can be some examples of events that can put an organization in need to explain themselves to a public audience and manage the situation to protect their own reputation. Moreover, provocative communication appeals always bear the risk of causing high levels of disapproval, which can potentially lead to public outrage. As Timothy Coombs wrote: “We must accept that no organization is immune from a crisis anywhere in the world even if that organization is vigilant and actively seeks to prevent crises” (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). Due to this risk, an increasing number of organizations implements crisis management at some point of their lifetime, which includes communication as an essential part of this process. This chapter is dedicated to defining relevant terminology surrounding this area of research, unfolding types and dimensions of crisis, and exploring relevant theories on crisis communication.

With the aim to understand crisis and how it can affect a brand, it is important to establish a definition that can serve as the foundation of this research. Coombs (2010) defines crisis as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (p. 19). This definition implies that a crisis has the potential to generate negative consequences for an organization. Further, a crisis is “unpredictable”, an unusual occurrence or anomaly, but something that is ultimately expected to happen. Hence, many organizations implement crisis management before one has occurred. Inherently, the stakeholder’s

perception of an event is at the center of Coombs' (2010) definition: The public's evaluation of an event's significance and meaning is what differentiates a crisis from a mere incident or event. A lack of public outrage or interest for an event diminishes the need for a company to invest extraordinary resources in managing it. This evaluation is usually determined by the stakeholders, as the scholar illustrates with the following example: "Consider the following stakeholder expectations: trains should not derail, milk should not sicken children, and tacos from restaurants should not contain e. coli" (Coombs, 2010, p. 20). Although not explicitly stated in the previously mentioned definition, it becomes clear through this example that a crisis can pose a threat to the physical, emotional, or financial wellbeing of stakeholders and as a result, pose a financial and reputational threat to an organization (Coombs, 2007, p. 164).

However, not all authors agree that the consequences a crisis will set off for an organization must be negative. Fearn-Banks (1996) describes a crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization", that "interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization" (p. 1). Just like Coombs (2010), this definition expresses an explicit focus on a negative outcome. However, it does simply state that it can, but not must, be a threat. Other definitions do not acknowledge this as an inherent characteristic of a crisis at all. Mitroff & Anagnos (2001) merely describe it as "an event that affects or has the potential to affect the whole of an organization" (p. 34). On the contrary, some authors even imply that a crisis can be an opportunity: Friedman (2002) points out that a crisis "is not necessarily a bad thing. It may be a radical change for good as well as bad". Fink (1986) writes that it can be a "turning point for better or worse" (p. 15). This points to the idea that a crisis can merely be seen as an incident with high impact, though consequences that are neither inherently good nor bad. Rather, specific circumstances and crisis response strategies can also impact the outcome for the organization, as will be discussed more closely in the following chapters.

For the purpose of this research, it is necessary to specify the meaning of brand crisis. Dawar & Lei (2009) define it as "instances of well-publicized claims that a key brand proposition is unsubstantiated or false" (p. 509). For instance, the scholars refer to Denmark, where reports showed that Procter & Gamble's Wash & Go shampoo causes hair loss. Because this event damaged the core brand association of "hair protection", it led to a drastic

75% drop in market share. Further, Dutta & Pullig (2011) describe brand crises as “unexpected events that threaten a brand’s perceived ability to deliver expected benefits thereby weakening brand equity” (p. 1281). Both perspectives align with Coombs' (2010) observation that a crisis is determined by the stakeholder’s evaluation of an event, regardless of whether it is a rumor or it truly happened. Although the consequences of a brand crisis are understood to be related specifically to brand capital, but in such, also directly affect an organization’s success (p. 1282).

A list of possible crisis events would likely never be complete, as every organization operates in an individual business context and faces unique challenges. Additionally, as innovation occurs and societal norms change, whether an event is considered a crisis is dependent on the context in which it occurs. However, scholars have developed clusters that allow us a categorization. Coombs (2007) classifies crises based on the responsibility that is attributed to an organization: The victim cluster implies a low attribution of responsibility (f. e. in the case of natural disasters), the accidental cluster has minimal attributions of responsibility (f. e. in the event of a technical-error or an accident), and the intentional cluster has very strong attributions of crisis responsibility (f. e. in the case of organizational misdeed) (p. 167). Whereas the classification by Dutta & Pullig (2011) states that brand crises are either performance-related or values-related. Performance-related crises usually question the functionality of specific product attributes, while values-related crises call into question a brand’s ability to deliver symbolic or psychological benefits (p. 1282). An example for the latter could be the revelation of sexual harassment or racial discrimination issues, that affects a consumer’s ability to reflect their self-image through purchasing a brand (Pullig, 2006, p. 529). Both classifications are valid assessments of crisis. However, this shows that the analysis of crises allows for different perspectives, which should always be considered for the research process of this dissertation.

### **3.2 Consequences of a crisis for a brand**

The previous chapter established that consequences constitute a relevant dimension of crisis, for the stakeholders, as well as for the organization. Subsequently, this segment is dedicated to the consequences of a crisis for brands.

Christensen & Kohls (2003) point out that crises are characterized by a high magnitude of consequences. However, they identified several aspects that influence the outcome of a crisis, such as: the crisis type, the perceived value of potential loss, its probability, the pressure of time, proximity, concentration of effect, the number of stakeholders affected by a decision, as well as their power and legitimacy. For these authors, the magnitude of these consequences is what ultimately affects if a situation will be seen as a crisis or merely a problem.

The threat for a brand's reputation is commonly mentioned in literature. Because crises can harm stakeholders physically, emotionally, or financially, they give people reasons to think badly of the organization and damage its reputation. However, a brand's reputation is "widely recognized as a valued resource" (Coombs & Holladay, 2002, p. 166). It is defined as "the overall estimation in which a particular company is held by its various constituents" (Fombrun, 1996, p. 37). Moreover, according to Coombs, (2007), "a reputation is an aggregate evaluation stakeholders make about how well an organization is meeting stakeholder expectations based on its past behaviors". In the view of this author, there are many benefits of facilitating a good reputation, which is widely considered a valuable intangible asset: "reputational assets can attract customers, generate investment interest, improve financial performance, attract top-employee talent, increase the return on assets, create a competitive advantage and garner positive comments from financial analysts" (p. 164). Thus, a crisis can impose a risk on these assets, indirectly affecting business success.

In addition to reputation, it is widely established that brand misconduct can negatively impact the consumer-brand relationship-quality and as a result, also a consumer's purchase intention. Although the understanding of negative relationship outcomes is still limited, researchers found that negative emotions towards a brand, as they are often caused by transgression or crisis, can translate into actions against it. For instance, propagating negative word-of-mouth, avoidance, and vengeance (Khatoon & Rehman, 2020). The following segment explores two phenomena in detail, consumer activism and boycott, which are extremely relevant for the case study of this dissertation.

### 3.2.1 Anti-brand activism

When consumers experience negative feelings such as hate in response to a brand's moral misconduct, they are sometimes motivated to engage in anti-brand activism. Consequently, these behaviors can even further impact a brand's reputation negatively (King, 2008). The participation in such activities can take a number of forms, including boycotting, culture jamming, or online activism (Romani et al., 2015).

Consumers may engage in anti-branding activities because they perceive injustice in the market and attribute the brand and its parent company to "exploitation" or "immorality" (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). Injustice, dishonesty, and unfair advantage are the core motivations of individuals. Under these conditions, anti-brand activism is a common result. Often, consumers or society, as a whole, are perceived as the victims of corporations and their brands are the perpetrators of wrongdoings. For example, companies and their brands are sometimes classified as labor rights abusers, monopolistic threats to competition, morally bankrupt, or unusually greedy (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; N. C. Smith et al., 2010). These negative images and all corporate violations related to them are usually the result of news reports and word-of-mouth, which trigger consumer hatred (Keen, 1986; Sternberg, 2003). Moreover, Romani et al. (2015) found empathy to be an important moderator of brand activism. Based on their conclusions, they recommend for companies to "focus on the prevention of any type of consumers' perceptions of brand moral violations" (p. 669). By monitoring and reporting company behavior that can be perceived as controversial or negative, companies can plan effective response strategies (e. g. communication campaigns, public relations activities) that focus on providing convincing explanations. According to their research, these messages should be tailored to leverage consumers' empathy.

Anti-brand actions have received, until now, limited attention in consumer research. Existing research has commonly observed this phenomenon targeting strong global brands (Kucuk, 2008), such as Starbucks (Thompson & Arsel, 2004), McDonalds (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010), and Nike (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004) although any brand can experience this phenomenon. Also, specific types of consumer reactions, such as negative word-of-mouth, brand switching, and avoidance behaviors have yet to be explored. Moreover, no

research has been conducted on consumer boundary conditions (e. g., under what circumstances or for which types of people do such effects occur).

### **3.2.2 Consumer boycott**

A specific form of anti-brand activism is consumer boycott. As the public pays more attention to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the vulnerabilities of brands and corporate reputations increase, boycotts are becoming increasingly relevant for management decision making (Klein et al., 2004). Friedman (1985) defines consumer boycott as “an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace” (p. 97). Klein et al. (2004) also describe boycotting as a collective act, similar to voting. Usually, consumers utilize their “purchase votes” to favor corporations with preferred societal impacts (Klein et al., 2004, p. 92). According to their interpretation, boycotting is therefore a form of prosocial behavior in which the individual benefit appears to be limited. Consequently, boycotts are an extreme manifestation of consumer behavior, in which purchase decisions are affected by social and ethical concerns, such as environmentalism. However, a better understanding of boycott participation is not only useful in itself but may also help to understand the impact of ethics on general buyer behavior. According to the literature reviewed in the preceding segment, consumer boycott can be classified as a form of consumer activism, which specifically affects the (re-)purchase intention. Companies who experience a boycott are at risk to experience a substantial loss of sales. However, scholars also observed that brand image can be harmed among both non-boycotters and boycotters (Klein et al. 2004). Therefore, keeping consumers from becoming boycotters is a key consideration for firms.

Thorough research has been conducted on the variables influencing boycott participation. Initially, a trigger event engenders a negative arousal. In response, this prompts the evaluation of relative costs and benefits to participate in boycotting. The boycotter may have important motivations to change the behaviors of the target company and/or to indicate the need for appropriate behavior to the company and others (Klein et al., 2004). The perceived severity of corporate actions is an important predictor of boycott participation. Moreover, the consumers need to believe that boycotting is an appropriate and effective response, meaning that they will make a difference regarding the perceived injustices.

Consumers must believe that participation in boycotts will improve their self-esteem (Klein et al., 2004). Therefore, the perceived success likelihood of boycotting is an intention factor, because consumers want to experience the boycott as a success story. Because of this, the perceived participation of others strongly effects boycott participation. For companies, calls that go viral on social media are particularly harmful, because they allow consumers to immediately measure engagement through statistics such as views or likes (Albrecht et al., 2013). On the other hand, important potential costs of boycotting for consumers include constrained consumption of preferred goods and doubts whether participation is necessary (Klein et al., 2004).

How a company responds to boycotts is another important factor for the outcome of a boycott. The key strategic decisions companies have to make is whether to ignore or address the boycotters' demands, and how. Firstly, it should be noted that previous efforts in brand building and promoting a socially responsible image can be used as a form of "insurance" to offset information about brand misconduct. Furthermore, it should be noted that communication should be directed at non-boycotters and boycotters to reduce perceptions of misconduct, thereby protecting brand image and reducing boycott participation. Little is known about how a company's capitulation or ignorance of demands affects their brand. However, authors theorized that an early and easy capitulation could signal weakness. Whereas the dismissal of boycotters' demands will probably increase the enragement and could potentially harm brand attitudes in the long run (Klein et al., 2004). The following segments will elaborate on crisis response strategies.

### **3.3 Crisis management and communication**

Due to the unpredictability, yet risk of high impact, a need for crisis management has emerged as a discipline in research and practice. It can be defined as "a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted" (Coombs, 2010, p. 20). Seen as a process, it includes "preventative measures, crisis management plans, and post-crisis evaluations" (Coombs, 2010, p. 20) and can be divided by the following categories: *Pre-crisis* actions pursue the prevention of crisis and all efforts to prepare for crisis

management; *crisis* means the response to an actual event; and *post-crisis* actions have the purpose to learn from the crisis event (Coombs, 2010, p. 20).

Crisis communication is an inherent part of this process that touches all three phases of the crisis management process. It can be broadly defined as “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (Coombs, 2010, p. 20). It is considered the essence of crisis management, because through communication, information is gathered, processed into knowledge, and then distributed. Coombs (2010) points out that “each phase of the crisis management process has its own demands for creating and sharing knowledge” (p. 25). The author further differentiates that crisis communication always falls into one of these two categories: *crisis knowledge management* or *stakeholder reaction management*. Crisis knowledge management is the strategic process through which sources are identified, information is collected, analyzed, and shared. Whereas stakeholder reaction management involves communicative actions which intend to influence how stakeholders perceive the crisis, the organization in crisis, and its response (W. T. Coombs, 2010). The most widely studied area of crisis communication involves the latter. This discipline focuses on developing effective crisis communication strategies that are designed to address the varying stakeholder reactions.

### **3.3.1 Crisis communication theory**

Literature identifies several co-existing streams of research, which demonstrate different perspectives through which crisis situations can be examined and explained. One prominent framework is image restoration theory (Benoit, 1995), which outlines strategies that can be used to restore image in a reputation damaging event. The theory identifies five major ways to achieve this: denial of the negative event or the assumption that it is caused by the firm or brand in question, reducing offensiveness of the event by de-emphasizing negative consequences, accepting responsibility and promising corrective action, or accepting responsibility and apologizing (Benoit, 1995, 1997). This framework has been used in many studies to compare the effectiveness of crisis response strategies. One important learning is considered that the nature of the crisis is a very important factor. For instance, for performance-related crises, corrective action has been found to be the most effective

response. Whereas for values-related crises, corrective action is not more effective than reduction of offensiveness (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Moreover, for some years, apology has been promoted by crisis communication research as the ideal response. However, Coombs & Holladay (2008) were able to confirm that the public reacts similar to any victim-centered/accommodative strategy. By comparing the outcomes of many brand crises situations, Greyser (2009) concluded that “forthrightness in communications and substantive credible responses in the form of behavior are most likely to restore trust and rescue a brand in crisis” (p. 590).

The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) was later proposed by (W. T. Coombs, 2007) to provide additional guidelines on how to match crisis response strategies to crisis types ideally and achieve the best crisis outcome. According to SCCT, four elements should be considered to make this assessment: crisis type, damage severity, crisis history, and relationship history. In this framework, four possible response strategies are suggested: The denial strategy claims that there is no crisis or that the organization is not responsible for it. The diminishing strategy believes that the crisis is not as serious as people think, nor does it minimize organizational responsibilities. The reconstruction strategy provides compensation or an apology for the crisis. The strengthening strategy highlights the organization’s past good deeds and strengthens the organization’s belief that it is worthy of sympathy. Manager should chose the strategy that’s most appropriate as a crisis response (W. T. Coombs & Holladay, 2009). The research of Claeys et al. (2010) provides empirical evidence for the SCCT model and shows that preventable crises have the greatest negative impact on organizational reputation, and rebuild strategies lead to the most positive reputation restoration.

The premise for choosing an appropriate model for this case study is that it must take social media into account. Prevalent theories such as SCCT and image repair theory do not acknowledge how information form (e. g., traditional media, social media, or offline word-of-mouth communication) impacts publics’ crisis communication behaviors. However, more recent research suggests that information form may be as crucial as the actual crisis response message (Jin & Liu, 2010; Schultz et al., 2011). In addition, publics increasingly consider the internet as the most reliable source of news (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007; M. Taylor & Perry, 2005). Its ability to provide them with quick and accurate information is very beneficial for

organizations dealing with crises. Moreover, during crises, social media usage increases (Thelwall & Stuart, 2007). This is because during the initial stages of crisis, people tend to assign higher levels of credibility to social media outlets than traditional mass media coverage (Procopio & Procopio, 2007; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Thus, the channel should be taken into consideration when making a strategic crisis communication decision or conducting research.

### **3.3.2 Managing crisis involving social media**

The rise of social media has challenged the traditional practice of public relations. The rise of digital media has created an environment where people can connect and communicate in ways that they never have before. Increasingly, publics consider the internet “to be the most reliable source for news” (Wang, 2016, p. 59). Not only do people and organizations communicate differently when dealing with a crisis than they used to, they are also perceived differently. Scholars strongly suggest that social media platforms contribute to the challenges of maintain a brand’s overall reputation (Freberg et al., 2013). Moreover, Schultz et al. (2011) experimentally analyzed the effects of social media and traditional media on the recipients’ perceptions of reputation and their secondary crisis communication reactions. They found that the medium actually affects the recipients’ perceptions more the message. Thus, although social media communication holds a lot of potential and added benefits to maintain stakeholder relationships – if executed correctly – it also increases the risk of experiencing a crisis. Both because an organization’s social media output itself can generate negative feedback and because of the two-way-communication with stakeholders. Some authors argue that so-called social media firestorms should be considered a sub-category of crisis types (Scholz & Smith, 2019).

Specifically, the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model describes the interplay between organizations in crisis and the public in this changing media landscape. The model provides (1) answers to the question of how the source and form of crisis information affect organizations’ response options and (2) recommends social-mediated crisis response strategies. The model depicts the interaction of an organization experiencing a crisis with three different types of publics: influential social media creators (individuals or

organizations), which create crisis information to consume, social media followers who consume the crisis information, and the social media inactives, who potentially consume influential social media creators' crisis information indirectly through offline word-of-mouth and/or traditional media. The center of the model is the specific organization in crisis. This categorizes available information sources into either descending from the organization itself or from a third party, as can be seen in Figure 1. The model further describes how five factors affect how organizations communicate information before, during, and after crises: crisis origin, crisis type, infrastructure, message strategy, and message form (Fisher Liu et al., 2011).

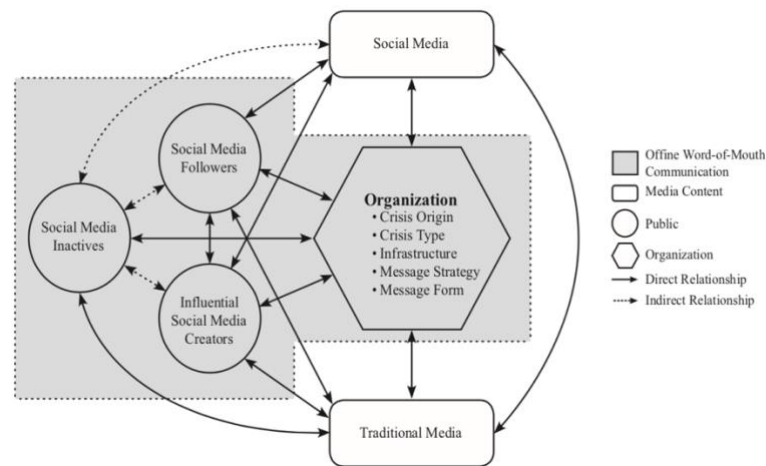


Figure 2: Social-mediated crisis communication model (modeled after Liu et al., 2011, p. 347)

Freberg et al. (2013) analyzed the impact of the new messaging system on crisis messages. They developed a baseline model that shows how a good crisis message should appear. According to their research, a good social media crisis response includes integrated multimedia and links into updates, proper use of hashtags and tagged keywords, and a balance between official and conversational updates. Moreover, a framework by Romani et al. (2015) shows that dialogue can be considered an alternative method of communication for crisis management in social media. Thus, enhancing the effectiveness of their crisis responses.

### 3.3.3 Relevancy of brand personality for crisis communication

With regard to the specific research objective of this dissertation, the following paragraphs aim to understand the interplay of BP, crisis, and purchase intention. Several authors integrated BP concept in their crisis communication research. For instance, T. J. Kim et al. (2020) investigated how the personality congruency between consumers and brands affect attribution of blame and brand evaluation in a product-harm crisis. Their results show that personality congruency had a negative impact on both variables in this specific context, because these consumers feel more disappointment towards the brand (p. 656). Other authors explored how BP can be utilized as a stylistic device in crisis communication. Nadeau et al. (2020) conducted four crisis case studies focused on brands' Twitter platforms with the purpose of understanding the process of attitudinal changes toward a brand in crisis and its communication. They conclude that brand personality can be a powerful lens to frame their crisis communication for consistency with the values of the brand. However, they found that crises also inherit the risk of resulting in a shift of active BP dimensions. With reference to D. A. Aaker (1996), they argue that this should generally be avoided. A BP shift can lead to cognitive dissonance by consumers, unless the brand management aims to adjust the brand's image over a longer period of time. Therefore, a brand with a distinctive *Competency* dimension wants to emphasize their ability to deliver a functioning and safe product or service in their communication. Whereas a *sincere* brand should focus on fostering transparency with their stakeholders. For brands who lack these dimensions of BP and want to emphasize them further, a crisis can even provide an opportunity to do so (p. 1049-1050). Furthermore, results of a longitudinal field experiment investigating the evolution of consumer-brand relationships showed that relationships with *sincere* brands are generally more likely to deepen over time, while relationships with *exciting* brands stop. In times of transgression, however, relationships with *sincere* brands suffer more, while relationships with exciting brands show signs of reinvigoration. Their results suggest that transgression disconfirmed consumers' expectations about the brand (e. g., "this brand is not as concerned about me as I thought"; J. Aaker et al., 2004, p. 13).

In conclusion, scholars acknowledge the relevancy of BP for crisis communication in their research. It can be noted that BP dimensions are relevant factors for the outcome of a crisis, that crises have the potential to shift BP dimensions, and that crisis communication

should be framed according to a brand's BP, in order to maximize the alignment with a brand's perceived meaning.

## **4 Main conclusions of the theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework explored provocative communication strategies and its consequences. Firstly, it was necessary to derive relationship theory as lenses through which the consumer-brand relationship can be examined. In this stream of research, brand personality receives a significant amount of attention, because it is considered to be a crucial factor on a variety of consumer-driven outcomes for brands, including the purchase decision-making process. Having a strong BP is beneficial for brands, because consumers can relate more easily to brands with outspoken personalities. BP is also the base for building strong consumer-brand relationships, which can have a variety of positive or negative outcomes. For instance, positive emotions are considered beneficial, because they stimulate positive word of mouth, increase consumer loyalty, lead consumers to be more forgiving with misbehaving brands, and increase the willingness to pay a premium price. Whereas negative emotions bear the risk that they can translate into actions against brands, such as complaints, negative word-of-mouth, or protests.

Moreover, brands which have many lovers *and* haters amongst consumers are considered polarizing. Research on these type of brands shows that they can still be very successful, although they have a substantial number of haters and are, therefore, at risk of experiencing negative relationship outcomes. This is likely because passionate engagement benefits brands by increasing brand awareness, recognition, and associations. The literature review was able to show that polarization can be an indicator of strong brands: Because their meanings are well-established, consumers are almost never indifferent to them. Whether they love or hate them, consumers have a clear opinion. Because of this, it is theorized that a brand's personality is distinctive and can be utilized to further increase the effectiveness of their communication tactics.

The literature review was able to show that provocation, as it is also frequently utilized by true fruits, can serve as a means to achieve a polarizing, distinctive brand personality, because a brand's personality is transported through the way it communicates and behaves.

Provocation tactics aim to grab the attention of target groups by shocking or offending their audience and stand out from the competition. However, research in this field is inconclusive on the advantageousness of this strategy. It can potentially result in high levels of brand awareness, but also lead to high levels of disapproval and public outrage. Specifically, studies found that the risk of disapproval increases depending the level of consumer involvement, previous attitudes that are held towards the brand or company, and demographical factors in the audience. Therefore, scholars suggest that such strategies should be applied rather short-term than long-term.

Moreover, the moral offensiveness which often leads to the desired effect of provocation, also bears the risk of spilling over into a moral-harm crisis for brands. Not only is this a threat to reputation, a brand's most valuable asset, but it can also lead to further action against a brand. For instance, consumers might be motivated to participate in anti-brand activism or boycott the brand. To turn provocation into a successful marketing strategy, marketers need to keep these factors in mind and apply nuance and sensitivity when receiving negative feedback from the public. Ultimately, previous research on provocative communication strategies is inconclusive in regard to its impact on the consumer-brand relationship and how effective this marketing strategy really is.

If a brand's reputation is too damaged, it could lead to its downfall. If brands experience crises, whether they are triggered by a provocative communication strategy or not, can be a key factor that can influence the future of a consumer-brand relationship. Furthermore, a crisis may be a negative consequence for brands, but potentially also provides an opportunity to further frame its BP and gain points through crisis management. The literature review has shown that the SMCC model is an appropriate framework to study this case, because it takes the interplay of organization and public on social media into account. Lastly, the literature has shown that there are many factors that can be taken into account, when evaluating the success and effectiveness of one's crisis response, whether it is a brand's reputation, sales, social media feedback, or news reports. Therefore, it ultimately depends on a brands' individual objectives when assessing these situations in hindsight. For instance, if a brands' objective is merely to gain attention, fostering public outrage also does the trick. However, a brand that aims to maintain long-term relations with a variety of stakeholders might be keen on pleasing as many stakeholders as possible and minimizing negative feedback.

## 5 Research Methodology

Grounded on the notions derived from the literature review, the following chapter describes the methodological procedure to gather and analyzing the empirical corpus that will allow to reach the research objectives and attain relevant conclusions. By implementing the chosen methodology, data will be collected in order to answer the research questions comprehensively. Firstly, the object of this case study will be introduced. Then the research questions will be derived. The scientific conditions of the implemented research method case study will be briefly introduced, before its specific execution is described. Additionally, the collection and analysis of the data will be presented. To ensure a complete understanding of the conducted research, validity, reliability, and objectivity will be discussed.

### 5.1 Case background: About the brand true fruits

Before elevating on the methodological details, it is necessary to introduce the brand True fruits and give more context on its history, products, market, and communication tactics. The following paragraphs will utilize brand materials and independent sources to do this. It is extremely important to understand how True fruits wants to be perceived and what its position in the market is. Moreover, it was mentioned consistently throughout this dissertation that true fruits' crisis communication approach is provocative.

The startup was initially founded in 2006 by three students: Inga Koster, Marco Knauf, and Nicolas Lecloux. The development and production of their product began during a research project at the Bonn-Rhein-Sieg University. The true fruits GmbH introduced their products for the first time in November 2006. The following year, the company already generated a revenue of 43 Million Euros. Today, the company employs 34 workers. Their products can be purchased in Germany, Austria, Spain, France, and Switzerland. Points of sale include restaurants, bars, some clubs, and their online shop. The company's philosophy is "*true fruits – no tricks*". This slogan refers to their promise of not using additional ingredients in their smoothies, such as sugar or concentrates it is simply fruit. Additionally, their guiding principles are *healthy, honest, and sexy*. Moreover, this is reflected in their

minimalistic product design and open, direct communication of the brand. Through this, they want to convey their company concept, which is to position true fruits as a premium product in the market. According to the company, true fruits does not want to target a specific group: they want to be accessible for everyone. However, they state that it came to light that the brand appeals to quality-conscious, lifestyle-oriented people, who are willing to pay more for a premium product. Although, it can be pointed out that this is a logical consequence of their strategy: They prioritize pretty packaging and premium price over accessibility to people with less purchasing power. Today, their product range includes eight types of smoothies, four juices, and two ginger shots (*True fruits*, 2020; *True fruits. Marketing Im Saftladen*, n.d.).



Figure 3: true fruits' permanent product range: smoothies, juices, and ginger shots (image taken from: *True fruits. Marketing Im Saftladen*, n.d.)

Lastly, it should be mentioned that true fruits positions itself very sustainably. A tactic that makes true fruits unique in the German market is their upcycling solution. Every *true fruits* product is packaged in a glass container. Glass inherits several disadvantages when used as a packaging material: it is heavy, can break, and expensive. However, according to the founders, glass is “the best packaging material. Glass is like a safe: dense, tasteless, stable, and protects the color of the products. Also, it’s simple and beautiful. Or would you drink good wine out of a carton?” (*True fruits. Marketing Im Saftladen*, n.d.). Additionally, the glass can be recycled. This was turned into an upcycling campaign by the company: true fruits is offering twelve different attachments in their online shop that can turn an old true fruits product into a lifestyle product. For instance, an old smoothie bottle can turn into a storage container, salt and pepper shakers, or a soap dispenser. This initiative has turned true

fruits into a trend object: bottles, especially special editions are traded amongst fans of the brand.



Figure 4: Examples of true fruits' upcycling solution (image taken from: True fruits. Marketing Im Saftladen, n.d.)

### Development of revenue and market shares

Since the founding of true fruits in 2006, the smoothie market segment drastically changed. Initially, the company experienced a large growth rate and was able to gain market share, while other competitors (such as *Valentina*, *Granini*, *Chiquita*, and *Schwartau*) drastically lost. Up until today, true fruits' biggest competitor in the market is *Innocent* (see figure 5).

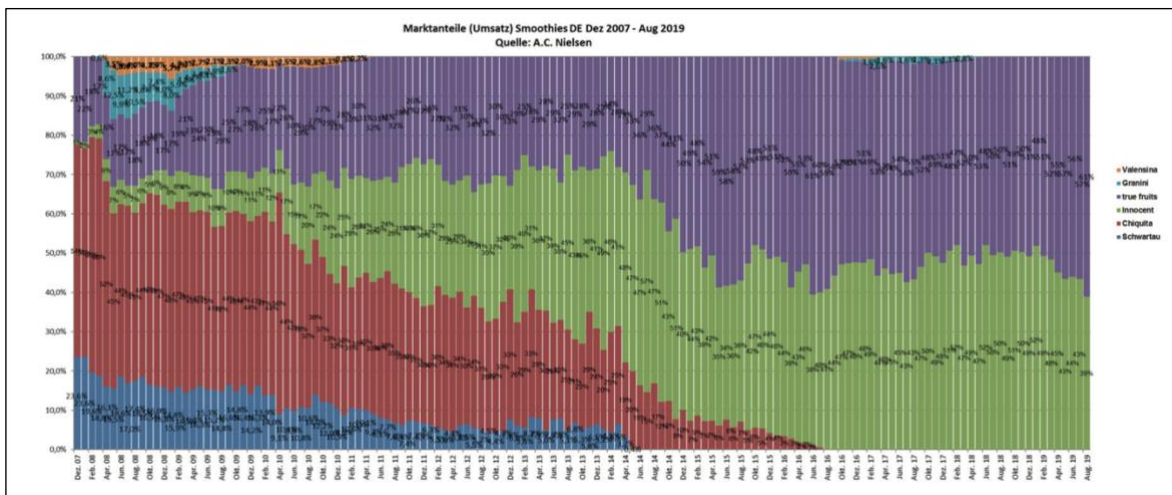


Figure 5: Market shares of smoothie products in Germany during the years 2007 to 2019 based on revenue (True fruits. Marketing Im Saftladen, n.d.)

Using publicly available data, true fruits' exact revenue can only be traced back to the year 2015. A significant growth can be seen between the years 2015 and 2016. However, the following years show consistent numbers, in the sense that not much growth can be observed (see **Error! Reference source not found.**). In their annual financial reports, true fruits argues that this is due to a price and product war with retail brands, and a reduced product range. The growth in 2016 is justified with entering new markets, introducing new products, and bigger marketing tactics (true fruits GmbH, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019).

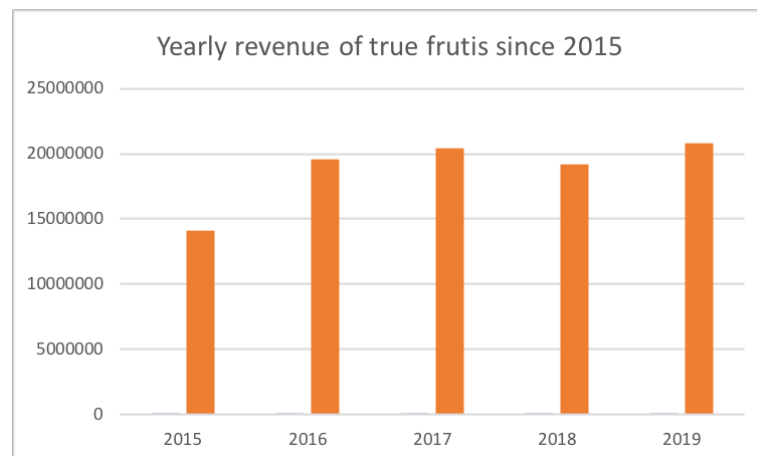


Figure 6: true fruits' yearly revenue between 2015 and 2019 (true fruits GmbH, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019)

### **True fruits' communication strategy**

Upon the researchers' request, no representative of true fruits was available to answer further questions regarding their communication strategy. Therefore, this information was gathered through sources that were available online, such as the brands' communication channels, or interviews that were given by its founders. Generally speaking, the brand describes their marketing philosophy as the following on their website: "Good things are often well-behaved. Well-behaved is boring. We ask ourselves, why can't a healthy, high-quality product also be sexy?" (True fruits, 2020). Moreover, co-founder Nicolas Lecloux elaborates on their marketing principles in an interview with *Business Punk*<sup>1</sup>. He states that their original goal was to "be the most desirable drink in the market". From the beginning, true fruits did not intent to sell simple groceries. They want to sell "a luxury product".

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.business-punk.com/2017/02/true-fruits-marketing/>

Lecloux further states that consistency is important and that this positioning carries through all their communication tactics. According to Lecloux, this is also the reason the brand consistently declines all sponsoring deals: “Buying our products needs to hurt the people. Desirability is not created by giving it out to anyone”. Furthermore, Lecloux states that other companies are often operating too formally, whereas true fruits represents the founders behind the product: “we do all communication inhouse: packaging, community management, influencer marketing, social media”. Their marketing is supposed to be a “mirror of the people behind the product”. Because of this, their marketing also reflects many of their personal opinions. Instead of trying to appeal to everyone, true fruits aims to be authentic: “Not being liked by everybody is a good thing. We are authentic and that’s why we will develop deep, long-term friendships with our consumers”. Lastly, Lecloux states that their marketing is never intended to manipulate into consumption. Instead, it is supposed to entertain: „If we wouldn’t share it with our own friends, we wouldn’t publish it” Interestingly enough, this is apparent in all their communication output. Even their financial reports contain little jokes and humor. Lastly, Lecloux emphasizes that the most important component *is* their product: “The product needs to deliver its promise, or the marketing is useless anyways” (*Das Steckt Hinter Der Genialen Kommunikationsstrategie von True fruits*, n.d.).

Further, true fruits utilizes a variety of communication channels to promote themselves and their products. Aside from their website and their newsletter, they actively manage accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok. Their content can be described as humoristic, suggestive, and ambiguous, often referencing pop culture. Common visuals include their products in bold and colorful settings. Often, their jokes are aimed to be provocative (for example, see Figure 7). Moreover, the brand has created several poster campaigns in the past (*True Fruits. Marketing Im Saftladen*, 2019).



Figure 7: This slogan illustrates the brands' provocative sense of humor (True fruits. Marketing Im Saftladen, n.d.)

## 5.2 Research questions

As previously observed, companies who employ a provocative communication strategy achieve very polarizing reactions in their consumers: they react with strong positive or negative reactions. The aim of this study is to understand the risks and opportunities of these strategies regarding a brand's relationship with consumers during crisis. This will be achieved by combining the perspectives of consumers and experts and comparing them to the insights of the literature review. In order to achieve this objective, it is necessary to define precise questions which break down the different areas of interest.

The overarching research question was derived from the theoretical framework and the current state of research and will be answered by the outcome of this case study: *How does a provocative approach to crisis communication affect the consumer-brand relationship?* (RQ). The aforementioned research question will be answered by exploring the following sub-questions.

- *What are the consequences of provocative crisis communication?* (RQ1)
- *What are the risks and opportunities of implementing provocative crisis communication?* (RQ2)
- *How relevant is a brands' personality for their crisis communication approach?* (RQ3)

## **5.3 Research Approach**

The research design will be based on a case study. Although scholars emphasize the need for comparative studies, especially in relatively young fields of research, case studies can help identifying more variables worth investigating and connecting multiple research perspectives and draw conclusions for communication practice (T. Coombs, 2013). According to Creswell (2009), a case study is a “strategy of inquiry in which the researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals” (p. 13). The following paragraphs will introduce this terminology and how this specific research scenario will be realized.

### **5.3.1 Qualitative research methods**

Based on the underlying research paradigm, a qualitative approach was chosen for this dissertation. Qualitative research is a method in social science research that aims to understand the phenomena in a specific context, understand behaviors and beliefs, identify processes, and explain human behavior. This approach collects and analyzes non-numerical data, usually through in-depth interviews or focus group discussions. By targeting specific parts of the population or places, this approach seeks to understand social life and interpret meaning. Usually, this approach is further contrasted by comparing it to quantitative research, which is typically focused on working with numerical data to identify trends by employing statistics and determining causal and correlative coherences between pre-defined variables. Whereas qualitative research analyzes meanings, interpretations, symbols, or social cohabitation. The aforementioned small-group discussions can uncover peoples’ beliefs, attitudes, concepts of behavior. Semi-structured interviews are adequate for investigating focused topics, to understand a condition, experience, or event from a personal perspective. Usually, the analysis of texts and documents (e. g. government reports, media content, websites or diaries) can contribute to this as well (Hennink et al., 2020).

However, qualitative research is often criticized for lacking scientific substance, poor justification of the adopted tactics, lack of transparency in the analytical procedures, and being biased by personal opinions. Therefore, clear research goals need to be established and the research process must be planned and executed in a structural and strategic manner, to

limit personal bias as much as possible. Qualitative research has the potential to answer complex open questions that can not be explained by simple linear correlations. In this case, it will be used to understand the complex effects of True fruits' communication strategy.

### 5.3.2 Case study design

In order to answer the research questions, a suitable research method is required. If the given research questions are of explanatory nature and aim to answer *how* and *why*, the use of a case study, historic research, or an experiment are usually the preferred research methods (Yin, 2018). However, case studies are “preferred when the relevant behaviors still cannot be manipulated and when the desire is to study some contemporary event or set of events” (Yin, 2018, p. 12). Therefore, in this situation a case study is the most fitting to answer the research questions.

A more extensive definition of case studies is provided by Yin (2018), who proposes a two-fold definition and marks out the scope of case studies. The scholar states that a case study “investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident” (p. 15). Moreover, case studies often cope with situations in which more variables of interest than data points exist, they benefit from prior theoretical propositions to guide the research design, and often rely on multiple sources of evidence.

As previously mentioned, this method of research is preferential and capable for specific research objectives. However, there are some major concerns about case study research that need to be addressed. For instance, there is a great need for case study researchers to execute their research design rigorously. Many criticize that case studies are at risk of being carried out unsystematically. Also, the evidence that is collected can not be equivocal without a doubt. Moreover, case studies are sometimes used outside of the research context. For example, this includes case studies which “serve teaching or professional development functions [...], appear in the popular literature and media [...], or appear as an integral part of various administrative archives [...]” (Yin, 2018, p. 19). Although non-research case studies can inherit their own value, it is integral for research case studies formally describe and execute their methodologies. In order to overcome these obstacles, it is necessary to

highlight the methodic procedures of this dissertation and report all evidence thoroughly and carefully. Frequent concerns also include the risk of becoming all-encompassing and introducing too much evidence to the analysis, which results in complicated and long conclusions. However, this can be avoided by defining clear research objectives and crafting the research design accordingly. Ultimately, the execution of a case studies presents unique challenges (as does any research method) that need to be addressed. However, if these concerns are taken into account when crafting a case study design, the research can be greatly improved (Yin, 2018).

From the beginning, it was decided that this dissertation would focus on the case of True fruits. Therefore, an embedded single-case study design will be adapted. In case study research, several rationales for choosing a single-case study exist. It is commonly applied for critical, unusual, common, revelatory, or longitudinal cases (Yin, 2018). In the case of this dissertation, the case study of True fruits’ crisis communication strategy appears to be an unusual best practice, which justifies it as an object of interest. This means, that the research design will analyze this case and its context in which it exists. Therefore, aside from data that will be collected, circumstantial factors will also be reviewed. Moreover, single-case studies may involve units of analysis at more than one level. For instance, aside from reviewing and reflecting on True fruits’ strategy, data from the perspective of consumers and brand managers will be collected.

<b>Research question and propositions</b>	<b>What information is needed?</b>	<b>How will the information be gathered?</b>	<b>Why is the method appropriate?</b>
<i>How does a provocative approach to crisis communication affect the consumer-brand relationship? (RQ).</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of the relationship between true fruits and their consumers</li> <li>• Assessment of true fruits’ crisis communication</li> <li>• Understanding of true fruits’ crisis approach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of survey interviews with consumers</li> <li>• Analysis of interviews with industry professionals</li> <li>• Analysis of documentation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumer survey interviews provide insights in the quality of their relationship with true fruits and its perceived personality, their personal views on true fruits’ actions, ethical brand behavior, and their</li> </ul>

<p><i>What are the consequences of provocative crisis communication? (RQ1)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of consumer perception</li> <li>• Assessment of industry professionals</li> <li>• Assessment of publicly available KPIs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of survey interviews with consumers</li> <li>• Analysis of interviews with industry professionals</li> <li>• Analysis of documentation</li> </ul>	<p>perception of true fruits' crisis communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews provide an assessment of the brands' crisis communication from a practitioners' perspective, risks and opportunities, in accordance with the brands' strategy</li> </ul>
<p><i>What are the risks and opportunities of implementing provocative crisis communication? (RQ2)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of potential risks and opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of survey interviews with consumers</li> <li>• Analysis of interviews with industry professionals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentation will provide specific details about the context of true fruits and their crisis communication approach</li> </ul>
<p><i>How relevant is a brands' personality for their crisis communication approach? (RQ3)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of the brands' personality</li> <li>• Assessments of the interplay of crisis communication and brand personality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of survey interviews with consumers</li> <li>• Analysis of interviews with industry professionals</li> </ul>	

Table 5: Research plan

## 5.4 Data collection methods

The implemented data collection methods were used to gather information that will be necessary to answer the research questions. The choice of methods was made based on how the relevant concepts can be measured. Moreover, the methods' potential strengths and weaknesses were considered, as presented in Table 6. The table's content was based on the work of Yin, (2018), who considered several data collection methods for his case study protocol.

Source of Evidence	Strengths	Weaknesses
Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable- can be reviewed repeatedly</li> <li>• Unobtrusive – not created as a result of the case study</li> <li>• Specific – can contain the exact names references, and details of an event</li> <li>• Broad – can cover a long span of time, many events, and many settings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retrievability – can be difficult to find</li> <li>• Biased selectivity, if collection is incomplete</li> <li>• Reporting bias – reflects bias of any given document’s author</li> <li>• Access – may be deliberately withheld</li> </ul>
Interviews / Survey interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Targeted – can focus directly on case study topics</li> <li>• Insightful – provides explanations as well as personal views</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bias due to poorly articulated questions</li> <li>• Response bias</li> <li>• Inaccuracies due to poor recall</li> <li>• Reflexivity – interviewee says what interviewer wants to hear</li> </ul>

Table 6: Potential strengths and weaknesses of the chosen methodology (based on Yin, 2018, p. 114).

#### 5.4.1 Documentation of true fruits’ crisis communication

With the aim to provide a complete and representative picture of the case, complementary data about true fruits’ crisis communication approach will be collected. It was decided to focus a crisis response that would serve as an illustration and explanation of the previously made statements: that true fruits is in fact employing a provocative crisis communication strategy. The selected crisis is representative of other instances in which the brand utilized provocation for their crisis response strategy. Moreover, their statement was published in written form and can still be easily accessed online. Because it received a lot of media attention, much information can still be found to provide sufficient context.

According to Yin (2018), documentary information is “likely to be relevant to every case study topic” (p. 113). This type of information can take a variety of forms, such as emails, notes, agendas, announcements, administrative documents, or news clippings. With the previously mentioned weaknesses in mind, it should be stated that documents “must be carefully used and should not be accepted as literal recordings of events that have taken place”. Therefore, the researcher must always make sure that admitted evidence is not contradictory and is treated as opportunity for inferences, rather than definitive findings.

Moreover, the systematic search for documents is an essential part of any data collection plan for case study research. Additionally, the purpose and audience that the evidence was written for, should always be considered during the analysis of documents. In the case of true fruits, all of the collected documents will be retracted through internet search, because true fruits did not agree to provide any further information or answer the researcher's questions. Therefore, it should also be noted that some essential information could have been deleted by now (Yin, 2018). Documentation includes evidence from the brands' website, their social media accounts, and news outlets, and was collected through a thorough internet search.

#### **5.4.2 Consumer survey interview**

Because this study aims to gain insights from consumers alongside the experts, survey interviews were conducted. According to Yin (2018), interviews are "one of the most important sources of case study evidence" (p. 118). In some cases, it can be useful to conduct this in the form of a structured questionnaire:

"This type of survey would follow both the sampling procedures and the instruments used in conventional surveys, and it would subsequently be analyzed in a similar manner. The difference would be the survey's role in relation to the other sources of evidence" (Yin, 2018, p.121).

The qualitative data that will be produced will then be reviewed in relation to other case study evidence, as suggested by Yin (2018). The focus of this dissertation is to assess consumers' perception of the brand true fruits and their relationship to the brand, their opinion about the brands' crisis response, and their personal motivation for this. Consequently, a qualitative approach is applicable in this study. Therefore, an online survey will allow to gain consumer insights within the scope and of this dissertation, which can later serve as a basis to discuss in interviews with brand experts.

Surveys are an appropriate way to "collect data [...] [and] obtain information from respondents about knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors on a post hoc basis" (Gunter, 2012, p. 242). The aim of this survey is to identify and collect "current conditions or states of affairs" about peoples' opinions of true fruits and its crisis communication perception (Gunter, 2012, p. 242). Although surveys often aim to test pre-defined hypotheses

based on a representative sample, the intention of this survey is to gain new insights in understanding the consumer perception of the crisis communication. The data will be collected through an online questionnaire, which each respondent has to answer independently by themselves.

There are several criteria that make online questionnaires a suitable and popular research method. Firstly, they are built and structured to be self-explanatory, allowing respondents to answer the questionnaire whenever and wherever they are, as long as they have access to the internet. Moreover, online surveys should not be too time consuming, in order to ensure that a sufficient number of respondents will be willing and able to participate. Online questionnaires are also cost-effective, because they do not require additional resources to collect the answers. Multimedia content can easily be implemented. Moreover, filter questions can automatically eliminate people who do not belong to the target sample population. And lastly, online questionnaires guarantee anonymity, can be distributed regardless of geographical distance, personal bias can be avoided, and the data input is transferred automatically into numbers from the survey tool, minimizing the need for resources (Brosius et al., 2016; Gunter, 2012).

However, this method of gathering data also inherits some challenges. For instance, it can be difficult to get a sufficient response rate in contrast to in-person questionnaires. Much effort has to be invested in distributing the survey and finding voluntary participants. Consequently, gathering the desired sample size can take longer. Additionally, there is the risk of misunderstandings and incomprehensible language or instructions. However, this risk can be slightly reduced by conducting a pre-test. Moreover, the environmental factors that participants face while responding cannot be controlled and therefore not be considered when analyzing the responses. This requires that participants have the necessary means (e. g. a sufficient terminal and an internet connection) to answer the survey in the first place (Brosius et al., 2016; Gunter, 2012). This could mean that groups who are statistically not as represented on the channels of distribution (which are all online), are unintentionally excluded from answering the survey. Furthermore, it is more difficult to get a balanced sample in terms of social and demographic attributes (Gunter, 2012). While it is almost impossible to entirely eliminate these risks, they should be taken into account when designing and analyzing this survey.

## **Survey structure**

Before the actual questionnaire begins, the respondents are welcomed and vaguely informed that they will be answering questions regarding true fruits. The detailed objective of the study is purposefully vague to avoid bias. Then, the estimated time that is needed to answer the survey is specified. In addition, it is pointed out that the participation in the survey is voluntary and they are assured that the collected data is anonymous and only used for scientific purposes. On the second page of the survey, participants are initially asked to confirm if they know the brand true fruits and a photo of their products is displayed to increase the recognizability of the brand. This filter question is used to ensure that only people who know the brand well enough will answer the whole survey. Participants who do not recognize the brand, and therefore do not fulfil the necessary criteria of the sample population, are immediately directed to the end of the survey. The next page aims to understand the participants' perception and relationship with the brand, using scales that were previously reviewed in the literature. First, they are asked to answer items to indicate their BRQ based on Fournier's (1998) framework which was introduced earlier. Furthermore, they are asked to answer items to indicate how they perceive true fruits' brand personality based on the scale Bosnjak et al. (2007), validated for Germany. The next page of the questionnaire focuses on the participants' willingness to participate in anti-brand activism. First, they are given a brief explanation of the term. Then, they are asked if, based on this definition, they have ever participated in anti-brand activity – in general or against true fruits. The participants are then further asked to explain their motivation in an open question. Furthermore, the participants are asked to state how important ethical behavior of brands is to them, and how important it is in their purchase decision-making process. The second-to-last page begins by briefly stating the accusations and controversy surrounding true fruits. Then, the participants are instructed to read true fruits' crisis response. The example that was used for this questionnaire is the same example that will be explicated in this thesis (chapter 5.5.1). Subsequently, the participants are asked how the brands' response makes them feel, if they believe it to be sufficient, and why. Further, the participants were asked to indicate their future purchase intention of the brand. The last part of the questionnaire collects the participants' profile: age, gender, and level of education. After

completing the survey, the participants are thanked. The researchers' email is provided for further inquiries. The complete survey can be found in Appendix B.

### **Survey distribution**

The online tool Survey Monkey was used to compose the questionnaire. The survey was then distributed online through different social media channels: LinkedIn, Instagram, and Facebook. The survey was not only distributed on the researcher's personal accounts, but also posted on true fruits' official company pages. This way, also social media followers of the brand could be reached. Where possible, the snowball principle was applied, as the participants were asked to repost and share the survey with others. Additionally, the survey was distributed to various WhatsApp groups and contacts. To minimize the bias of only reaching a homogenous population sample (e. g., demographic and psychological characteristics), the survey was posted and shared across diverse platforms to reach as many communities as possible.

### **Sampling**

Often, surveys are developed as a quantitative research measurement. In this case, it would be desirable to reach a representative sample size. However, this dissertation is aimed to develop an in-depth understanding rather than generalizable conclusions. Therefore, the sample of this study is a non-probability sample, because it is not "selected according to mathematical guidelines" (Gunter, 2012, p. 243). The aim is to get as many responses as possible for the survey and include these insights in the expert interviews which will be conducted subsequently. However, it is a recognized problem in qualitative research that the discussion about sample sizes tends to be simplistic and relatively uninformed (Boddy, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to provide criteria by which respondents are admitted.

This dissertation will only admit participants to the survey who speak German (and therefore understand *true fruits*' German communication strategy) and who know the brand in question. This will be ensured, because the questionnaire itself is in German and through

a filter question on the first page. Moreover, all gender groups (male, female, diverse) will be included in the sample, because anyone can potentially use true fruits' products and be familiar with the brand. Because of this, no age group will be excluded. On the contrary, it could be very insightful to compare how true fruits is perceived by different generations. However, as previously mentioned, it is unlikely that the age range is very diverse due to the nature of the online questionnaire. The goal for this survey was to reach as many responses as possible, and to get as many insights and opinions as possible. The questionnaire was open between the September 15<sup>th</sup> and October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Due to the short investigation period, the survey can be defined as cross-sectional. In contrast to longitudinal studies, these types of investigations gather data that is valid at this specific point in time (Gunter, 2012).

### **Scales and Items**

Where possible, scales and items were derived from existing research works. In the beginning, participants are asked to indicate their BRQ, using items that were based on an established framework and tested for reliability and validity in previous studies (Fournier, 1998). It should be pointed out that these items had to be translated from English to German. Moreover, the participants were asked to indicate their perception of the brand's personality, using the BP scale of Bosnjak et al. (2007) for Germany. To evaluate the items, different scales were applied. Nominal scales were used to measure the participant's profile (filter question, age, gender, education, participation in anti-brand activism, awareness of controversy). Therefore, the answer options do not indicate a specific order. Ordinal scales were used to assess the items that measure BRQ, BP, importance of ethical behavior, and purchase intention. For these, 5-point Likert scales were applied: totally disagree, disagree, neither disagree nor agree, totally agree (Brosius et al., 2016).

<b>Variable / Theoretical foundation</b>	<b>Measurement scale</b>
(V1) Familiarity	Nominal (yes, no)
(V2) BRQ (Fournier, 1998)	Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree)

(V3) BP (Bosniak et al., 2007)	Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree)
(V4) Participation in anti-brand activism	Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree) Nominal Open question
(V5) Importance of ethical behavior	Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree)
(V6) Consumer Reception	Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree) Open question
(V7) Purchase Intention	Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree) Open question

*Table 7: All variables and measurement scales that were used in the survey interview. Where possible, the theoretical foundation for used items is indicated. The complete questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix A*

### 5.4.3 Interviews with industry professionals

Additionally, it was decided to make use of semi-structured interviews to gather insights from industry professionals. This method was selected, because it allows to get deeper insights into perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and nuanced issues. According to Yin (2018), interviews can be “especially helpful by suggesting explanations (i.e., the ‘hows’ and ‘whys’ of key events)” (p. 118). To achieve this, case study interviews usually resemble “guided conversations rather than structured queries” (p.118). This approach also allows to respond to individual topics and suggestions that were not anticipated by the interviewer beforehand. Based on face-to-face interaction, information will be transmitted between an interviewer and an interviewee. An interview guide will be utilized to categorize topics that are being covered, and to provide a guideline, ensuring that no important themes are missed in any of the interviews (Brosius et al., 2016).

## **Interview guide**

The following questions serve as the interview guide. It is important to note that it is possible to derive from these questions and it is not necessary to follow them meticulously. The main goal is to guide the respondents' answers towards answering the research questions, without giving it away of creating a personal bias. Moreover, it is necessary to state that not every question needs to be asked in every interview. If the answer has been provided through a different statement by the respondent, the response will be viewed as sufficient. A pre-test was conducted to ensure the efficacy of the interview guide. Additionally, it was concluded that the interviews were estimated to have a duration of 30-35 minutes. This scope was decided to be sufficient, to not exceed a time limit that will deter possible participants.

### *Preliminary questions:*

- *What is your name?*
- *What is your age?*
- *Which company do you work for and what is your position?*
- *What is your educational background?*

### *What are the risks and opportunities of implementing provocative crisis communication?*

#### *(RQ1)*

- *Please elaborate what defines good crisis communication in your opinion?*
- *How would you describe true fruits' crisis communication?*
- *Please explain the relevancy of communication channels (especially social media) to good crisis communication?*
- *What are the risks and opportunities of this strategy?*
- *In your opinion: why do consumers react positively to this strategy?*
- *In your opinion: why do consumers react negatively to this strategy?*

### *How effective is provocative crisis communication? (RQ2)*

- *Do you believe their provocative approach to crisis communication is appealing to all consumers?*
- *Do you believe this strategy can weaken or strengthen the brands' relationship with the consumers?*
- *How do you evaluate the effectiveness of their strategy, considering that there is a trend towards cancel culture and corporate social responsibility?*
  - *Is provocation still a timely strategy?*
  - *How dangerous is activism and boycotting for a brand like true fruits?*
  - *Should anti-brand activism and boycotting be prohibited at any cost?*
  - *Are there positive consequences that stem from anti-brand activism and boycott?*

*How relevant is a brands' personality for their crisis communication approach? (RO3)*

- *How would you explain True fruits' brand personality in your own words?*
- *Please explain the relevancy of brand personality in regard to good crisis communication.*
- *Do you believe their crisis communication strategy is well-chosen and executed in regard to their brand personality?*
  - *In what way is their crisis communication positive or negative for the shaping of the brand's personality?*

## **Sampling**

To ensure that the respondents will be able to give sufficient and adequate answers to the interview questions, several considerations were made in the selection process. The most important criteria were that each respondent is familiar with the brand and its controversies. Furthermore, each participant must inherit experience in a role that is relevant to the field of crisis communication, in order to ensure their understanding of the material. During the selection process, it has been highly weighed that the participants have thorough experience and that they are in a position to make decisions in regard to crisis communication.

Furthermore, it was the aim, during the selection process, to find interview partners from varying industries, to avoid a one-sided perspective and bias.

<b>Name (Age)</b>	<b>Current Position</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Organization</b>
Joseph Schweitzer (32)	Head of Communication & Public Relations	Political Science	Technology	Ethereum Foundation
Annabel Schewe (29)	Public Relations Consultant	Media and Communication	Communication	Scholz & Friends
René Schultz (33)	Head of Creative Strategy	Marketing & Business Administration	Communication	Lingner Marketing
Jonas Larbalette (35)	Communication and Branding Consultant	Literature, Media & Communication	Communication	Freelance

*Table 8: Respondent schema*


## **5.5 Data analysis**

The following paragraphs are dedicated to analyzing the data that was gathered for the empirical research conducted for this work. True fruits' approach to crisis communication will be presented. The results of the survey, as well as the interviews are described comprehensively. At the end of this chapter, the findings are connected to existing research in this field.

### **5.5.1 Analysis of true fruits' approach to crisis communication**

To provide a foundation for our analysis, the chosen crisis situation will first be contextualized, a description of the crises that occurred, and the impact that this had for the brand. The information that will be submitted to this analysis was collected online, through several sources. Over the years, true fruits gained a reputation for its provocative communication strategy. The brand faced several scandals and was criticized for a number

of actions. In Germany, the brand has frequently earned headlines with this behavior. Moreover, the German advertising council published an official complaint for being too vulgar and too provocative<sup>2</sup>. Many consumers publicly declare their boycott for the brand on social media, others celebrate them for being unconventional. Subsequently, some of the brands' critics organized the publication of an official petition against the brand, which is aimed to boycott the brand due to their "sexist, ableist, misogynistic, and heteronormative discrimination of marginalized groups"<sup>3</sup>. The creators of the petition further claim that true fruits is "instrumentalizing socially disadvantaged groups for profit" and demand that trade partners and resellers stop doing business with them. Until the 29<sup>th</sup> of October, 2021, the petition had been signed by 66.925 supporters. In order to provide context for the crisis response, several examples of true fruits' controversial ads will be admitted into evidence, as displayed in Table 9. Though it is difficult for the researcher to remain unbiased in the interpretation of the following ads, it should be pointed out that these are merely accusations, and that it is impossible to know how *true fruits* truly intended for these ads to be interpreted. To understand the controversy, each of the slogans will be translated, and cultural context will be provided to grasp the full meaning. Subsequently, the response of true fruits to the public outrage will be presented.

Advertisement and translation	Context and critique
<p data-bbox="300 1451 727 1485">(1) "Even more bottles from abroad"</p>  <p data-bbox="288 1608 456 1760">Noch mehr Flaschen aus dem Ausland.</p> <p data-bbox="288 1783 424 1805">true fruits smoothies #getzisterrechts true-fruits.com</p>	<ul data-bbox="826 1487 1382 1827" style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accusation: promoting racism</li> <li>• This ad was part of a billboard campaign in Austria, which promoted the introduction of new smoothie flavors to this market</li> <li>• "Bottles" can also be a derogatory term; thus, this ad can be understood as a joke at the expense of immigrants</li> <li>• Context: this ad was published in 2017, while Europe was facing the refugee crisis</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> <https://werberat.de/werberat-spricht-nachtragliche-beanstandung-aus-social-media-werbung-von-true-fruits-uberschreitet>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/truediskriminierung-und-sonst-nichts-nehmt-true-fruits-aus-dem-sortiment>

(2) “Doesn’t make it often across the border”



- Accusation: promoting racism
- This joke can be understood as a joke at the expense of people in need (refugees)
- Reduction of people in humanitarian need to their racial profile
- Context: this ad was published in 2017, while Europe was facing the refugee crisis

(3) “Our token black guy”



- Accusation: promoting racism
- “token black guy” is a term commonly used to imply that said person of color is only present for representation; thus, this term is often used in a derogatory way to imply that someone did not earn its own right to be there
- Additionally, many people took offense, because the comparison to a smoothie is objectifying to people of color
- Published:

(4) “Filled up and taken away”



- Accusation: promoting rape culture
- This sentence carries double meaning: it can refer to the smoothie bottle that can be re-used as a water bottle; moreover, it can refer to getting a person drunk (“filled up”) and subsequently picking them up (“taken away”)
- Published: 2019

(5) “Oral consumption – you can’t enjoy your semen faster”



- Accusation: sexual indecency
- The sentence carries double meaning: semen refers to the ingredient chia seeds, but can also be a sexual reference (seeds and semen are synonymous in German)
- This ad was not approved to be published in some German cities and thoroughly discussed in the press
- Published: 2016

Table 9: A selection of true fruits’ controversial ads which are mentioned in their crisis statement.

True fruits' response to their self-inflicted outrage is usually characterized by crude language, humor, and taking a strong stand against critics. To analyze their crisis response and reflect on it, insights from the theoretical framework were consulted. Firstly, it should be considered when, and in which context, this response was given. This statement was published on the 14<sup>th</sup> February, 2019. The brand itself points out that the occasion for this statement are several ads which were published over the course of several years. Some of the mentioned ads even go as far back as 2016. Why the brand chooses to respond now, is not further explained. The introduction of the SMCC to the theoretical framework showed the significance of the channel in which the crisis response is published, and how this is executed. One challenge is, that it is not possible to know how many followers this page had in 2019. Although it is likely that this platform was chosen by the brand because (1) it allows to publish long written statements, and (2) because it is one of their biggest communication channels (for comparison: on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021, the Facebook page has 533k followers, whereas their Instagram page only has 142k followers). As far as it can be noted now, the brand did not engage in any further dialogue underneath this posting. Until the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 2021 the Facebook statement analyzed in the following had generated 25.908 reactions, 4.572 comments, and was shared 3.618 times. The complete statement can be viewed in Appendix A.

In the analysis of the statement, three types of strategies could be identified. A strong theme in their statement is the diminishing strategy. Initially, the statement begins by addressing all "supposedly discriminated people", implying that this is not actually the case. The term rape culture is exclusively mentioned in quotation marks, as if it were not a real concept. Additionally, their critics' accusations are being invalidated with the argument that "stupid people clearly exclude our way of communication". Aside from that, a denial strategy is applied. For instance, when the brand says, "we hate racism as much as any form of discrimination", the very thing they are accused of. The brand simply claims that it would be absurd if the accusation were to be true: "to seriously believe that a public corporation our size might be interested in engaging in racist propaganda in order to capitalize on it shows little intelligence". To support their claim of denial, they mention that the German advertising council initially did not publish a complaint about them (the complaint mentioned earlier was published later that year, on 30th August 2019). To ensure that their actions are interpreted accordingly, the brand states that their black smoothie sales did not

stop because of the criticism, but because “it has sold too poorly”. A strengthening strategy was applied whenever the brand is framing itself in a positive light. For instance, they refer to their “black token guy” ad point out that this was actually a political statement “about the introduction of a quota for women in management positions in companies. In our view, the quota is the real form of discrimination”. Thus, true fruits can claim that their ad is simply misunderstood, and that their real intention was to fight for a good cause. However, this context is impossible to derive from the billboard, without reading this additional statement. Further, it is highly subjective whether the quota on women in management is discriminating or progressive. Moreover, they point out that the understanding of their ads requires “a certain degree of intelligence and humor”. To imply that they have the public’s support as well, they point out that their smoothie sales have “increased enormously” after publishing this statement (likely, this statement was added to the Facebook post at a later time).

In this statement alone, several instances were found that can be perceived as provocation, based on the definitions provided in the theoretical framework. The analysis of this statement showed that true fruits commonly utilizes offensiveness (“dear stupid ones”, “this stupid group of people”, “shows little intelligence”, “intelligence is difficult to send”, “this advertising could be misunderstood by stupid people”, “a supposed minority (the stupid)”, “we are discriminatory towards stupid people”). Moreover, their statement includes strong profanity (“what a sick fool it must be to read an advocacy of rape in it”, “It is simply not made for fools and never will be”, “you sweet piss cloves”, “fuck you”). Lastly, the previous paragraphs explained the ambiguous statements the brand presents, which led to transgression. Subsequently, these factors point to the conclusion that this statement qualifies as provocative.

### **5.5.2 Analysis of consumer survey interview**

The collected dataset is stored by the tool SurveyMonkey. The responses were automatically converted into numerical data, which allowed to easily export them to the statistics software SPSS. Using this tool, the data was analyzed using descriptive techniques. During the collection period, a total of 92 responses was achieved. Some of the respondents were excluded, because they either did not complete the entire questionnaire (17 cases), or

they were excluded by the filter question (7 cases). After the data was cleaned up, 67 responses remained to be analyzed. From the total of 67 valid responses, 50 participants are female, 16 are male, and one person identified as diverse. Moreover, the participants range from 19 to 60 years old. Based on these results, age groups were derived: 19.4% of participants are between the ages of 18-24 years old; 65.67% are between the ages of 25-34 years old; 7.46% are between the ages of 35-44 years old; 4.48% are between the ages of 45-55 years; and 2.99% of people are between the ages of 55-60 years old (see Figure 8 and Figure 9).

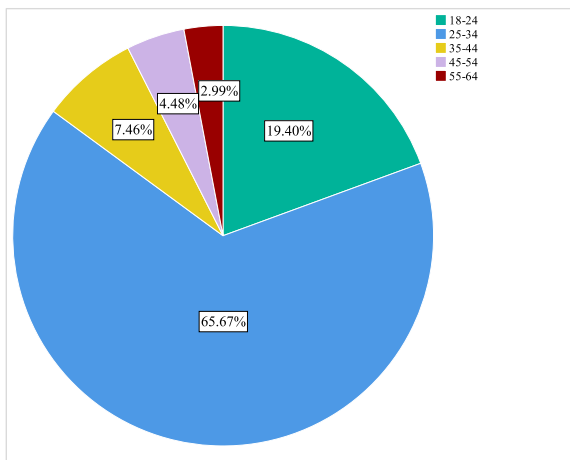


Figure 8: Age distribution of participants in %

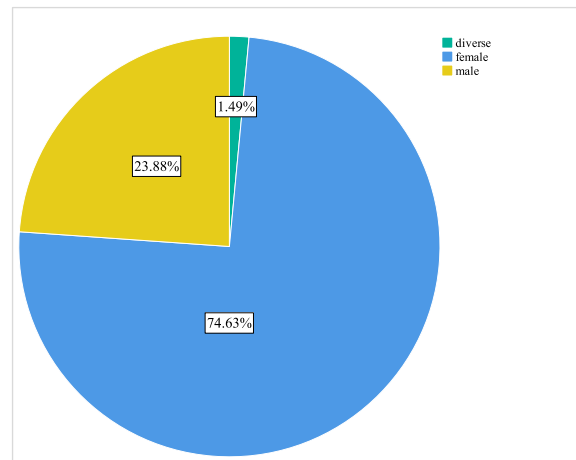


Figure 9: Gender distribution of participants in %

Also, 88.06% of respondents indicated that they graduated from university, 4.48% indicated that they graduated from high school (*German Abitur*), 2.99% have a technical diploma (*German Fachabitur*), 2.99% completed trade school (*German Ausbildung*), and 1.49% graduated with an intermediate maturity certificate (*German Mittlere Reife*).

Consequently, the respondent profile is slightly unbalanced in terms of gender, age, and educational background (see Figure 10).

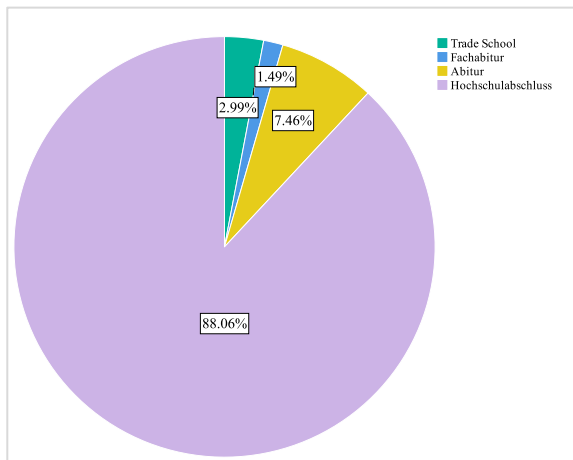


Figure 10: Educational background of participants in %

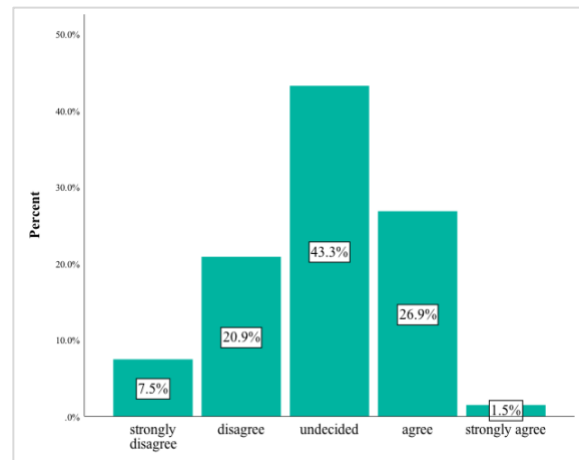


Figure 11: Distribution of BRQ (Mean) in %

To understand how true fruits is perceived by the people that constitute this sample and what their relationship with the brand is like, BRQ was analyzed. While BRQ is just one of many indicators for the quality and strength of consumer-brand relationships, it is one that can be measured and that is well-established.

The aim to include this variable in the survey was to gain leads based on which individual responses can be analyzed in-depth. For example, the researcher can take a closer look into the respondents who either have a very strong or weak BRQ score as a subsequent step. BRQ was calculated by evaluating the mean of each item. If respondents agreed very strongly with each of the given items, it indicates they experience a very positive and that they have a strong connection with the brand. Whereas disagreement indicates the opposite. To calculate the final score, the *Mean* of all BRQ items was evaluated for each participant. In total, 26.87% of participants agreed and 1.49% strongly agreed on average with the given statements, 43.28% were undecided, 20.9% disagreed and 7.46% strongly disagreed. Overall, the spectrum of BRQ in this sample is balanced (see Figure 11).

To analyze BP, the average of each item (*Mean*) was evaluated separately. Out of 17 items, participants disagreed the most with the items *small-minded* (*Mean*=1.57), *bourgeois* (*Mean*=1.72), *boring* (*Mean*=1.54), and *old-fashioned* (*Mean*=1.55) to describe true fruits. For most other items, respondents felt somewhat undecided. The items that received the

highest ratings were *exciting* (Mean=3.48), *spirited* (Mean=3.55), *adventurous* (Mean=3.55) and *saucy* (Mean=4.06). This means that the personality trait which is most distinctive for this brand is *Excitement*.

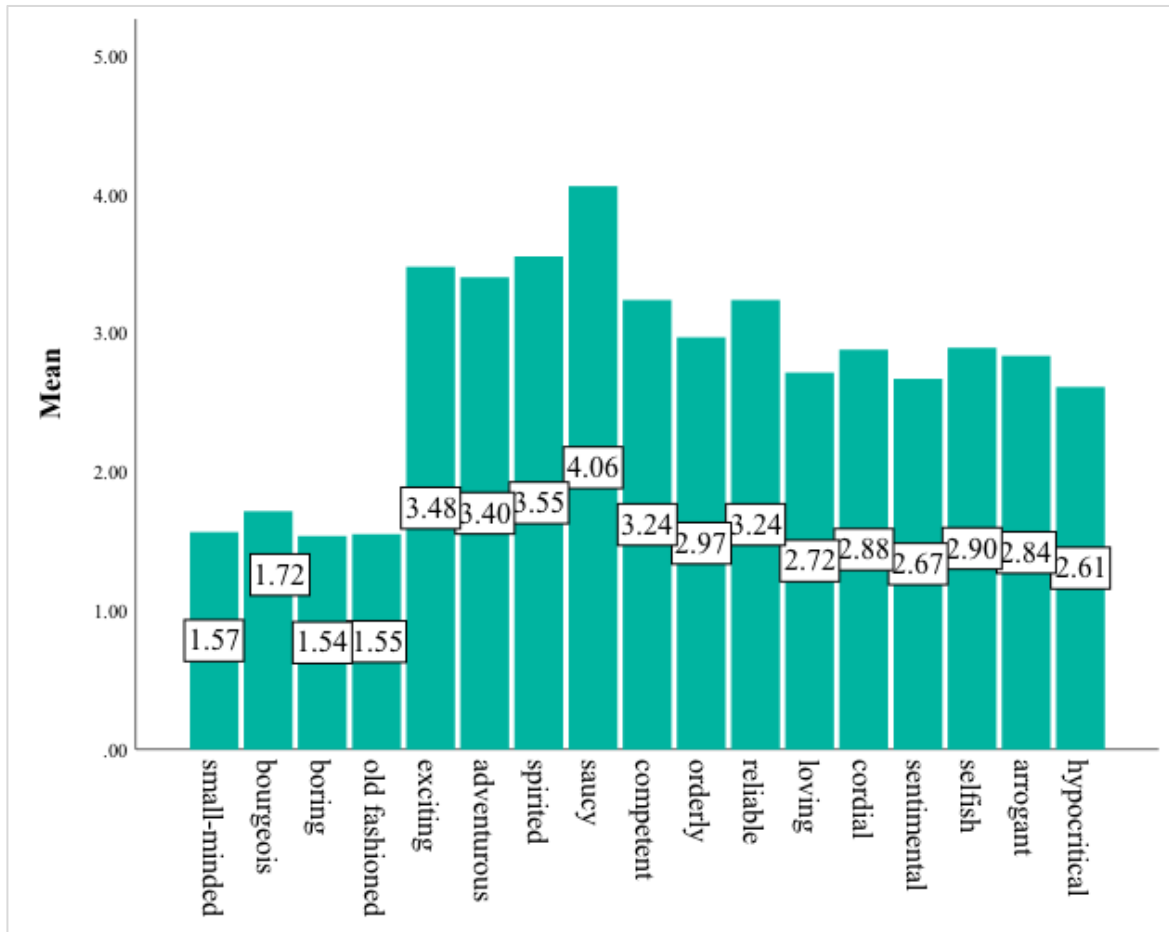


Figure 12: Score of each BP item (Mean)

Of all participants, an overwhelming majority of 76.12% responded that they never participated in anti-brand activism of any kind. Only 20.90% responded that they did based on the provided definition (see Figure 13). When asked for their motivation, only 16 people gave further information. Their reasons included unfriendly staff, the company being in a monopoly position, environmental concerns, animal testing, and just generally unlikeable behavior.

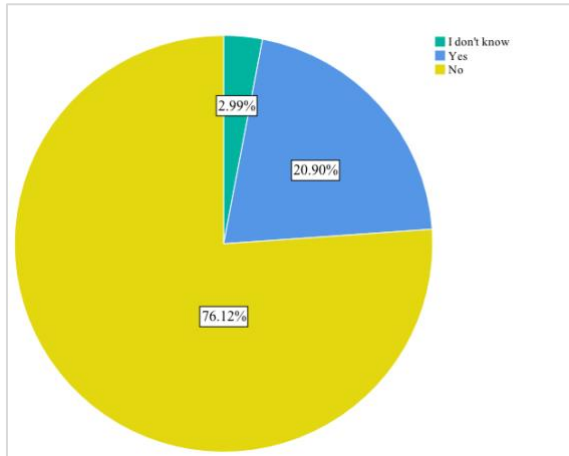


Figure 13: Participation in anti-brand activism in %

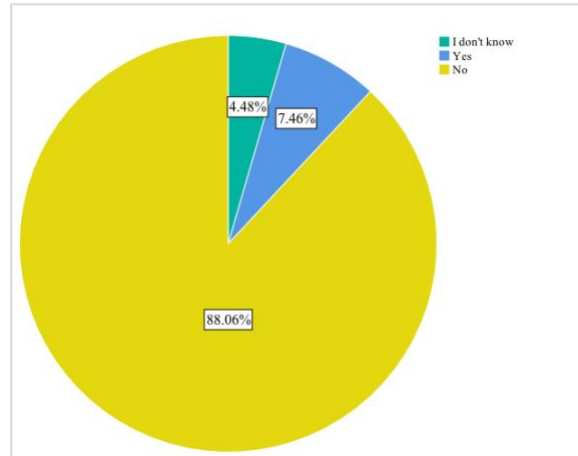


Figure 14: Participation in anti-brand activism towards true fruits in %

Due to the low participation rate in anti-brand activism in general, it is not surprising that only 7.46% responded that they participated in some form of anti-brand activism directed at the brand true fruits (see Figure 14). When asked for their motivation, these participants specifically mentioned racism and sexism as reasons, referring to the most famous scandals of the brand. However, none of the responses hinted at additional motivations to boycott the brand.

Furthermore, whether ethical behavior of brands is important to the participants was evaluated based on the Median that both items achieved. The statement “it is important to me that brands behave ethically” scored higher on a 5-point Likert scale (*Mean*=4.23) than the statement “ethical behavior of brands is an important factor in my purchase decision” (*Mean*=3.82). These results could be interpreted to mean that most people believe that brands should behave ethically, but that it is not a necessity. Especially, when it comes to their personal sacrifice: Many other factors probably rank higher when it comes to the purchase-decision making process, for example, one’s purchasing power.

Regarding the brands’ crisis response example, the participants were asked their belief that this statement is sufficient. On a 5-point Likert scale, this item scored a *Mean* of 2.6. While some people praise the brand for this statement, others are more critical. For some people, the jokes and slogans provide high level of entertainment and novelty. Their focus is on the execution of humor and provocation, not the actual issues discussed. Aligned with

this positive notion, some of the respondents recognized it as a great self-promotional strategy. Some responses even indicated that this statement gained their support for the brand in the first place: “but from now on I’ll be a fan”. Contradictory, other responses are more skeptical. They point out that it the brands’ provocations are “a see-through strategy” that had “already been done before”, and recognize it as bad marketing. Very few respondents focus on the actual arguments presented by the brand. But the ones that do, refer to them as “weak” and “illogical”. Moreover, they state that the criticism is well-deserved and demand that the consumers’ voices should be heard.

Lastly, the participants asked how likely it is that they will purchase true fruits’ products in the future, while keeping the controversies in mind: this item scored a *Mean* of 2.6 on a 5-point Likert scale. The participants were then further asked for their personal motivation in regard to their repurchase intention. To analyze these answers, the researcher read and categorized them based on their key message and connotation. Subsequently, some direct quotes will be included to illustrate the opposing positions. Responses that had a positive connotation towards the brand, emphasized that the brand is young, fun, and cool: “Their provocation is a marketing strategy that reflects the spirit of the young generation, and not racism in the traditional sense”. Furthermore, the biggest motivation for participants was that they like the product. Additionally, participants pointed out that they believe the brand is authentic, fostering interesting debates, and that the brand’s critics are overreacting: “I believe it is exaggerated when people get so offended by marketing”. Interestingly, some people interpret the brand’s controversial statements as satire, or a having a positive intention that is misunderstood by people. Although, this is often ultimately in the eye of the beholder. One person replied “their marketing wouldn’t stop me from buying their products. Only if truly racist actions would be uncovered. Otherwise, I view it as a dumb provocation to gain attention”. Moreover, some people pointed out that they need additional information to decide, that they only buy the brand on discount, that they prefer other products, or that they never tried the brand before in the first place. A large portion of people said that they do not want to support the brands due to the controversies, but also specifically because of their response to the criticism: “Not only is the brand sexist and racist, but they also don’t reflect on the feedback they receive”. Another person wrote “brands should listen to their consumers and position themselves responsibly and sustainably. True fruits does not manage to do that”. Moreover, the participants pointed out that the brand’s communication is too

provocative for their personal taste, acting unauthentically, and that marketing should not be so provocative in their opinion. One person wrote: “I don’t want to support companies who actively distribute discriminating messages. Personally, I think it’s very problematic and ignorant, especially because it’s just for marketing”.

Lastly, BRQ was further investigated in regard to its relationship with the participants’ perception of the crisis statement and future purchase intention. Participants with a good BRQ score (responded on average *agree* or *strongly agree*) showed a slightly higher approval rate (*Mean*=2.89) of the crisis statement than their counter parts (*Mean*=1.74; participants who responded on average *disagree* or *strongly disagree*). However, an obvious contrast was found when the future purchase intention was evaluated for each group separately: the group with a good BRQ score was clearly more likely to repurchase (*Mean*=4.1) than the group with the bad BRQ score (*Mean*=1.74).

### **5.5.3 Analysis of interviews with industry professionals**

The following paragraphs will focus on analyzing the raw interview data and gaining a deeper understanding of relevant themes and patterns. This dissertation will follow an approach that was offered by Daymon & Holloway (2011), who suggests the following steps: transcribing and listening, organizing the data, coding and categorizing. Especially the latter is a central step: “not only does it help to organize the overwhelming amount of data, but it is also integral to the task of interpreting public relations and marketing communications phenomena” (p. 306). Codes can serve as labels that represent an idea or phenomenon in sections of text that have a similar meaning. Through the coding the transcriptions presented in Appendix C-F themes were identified that will be presented and critically analyzed. Table 10 describes the coding frame that resulted from reviewing the raw data.

<b>Themes / Subthemes</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>(T1) Crisis communication</b>	
(T1.1) Fundamental decision-making factors	Identification of all contextual information that interviewees consider when crafting a crisis response
(T1.2) Priorities	Identification of objectives that interviewees consider very important for their crisis strategy
(T1.3) Relevancy of communication channels	All information that considers the relevancy of different communication channels
<b>(T2) true fruits' approach to crisis communication</b>	
(T2.1) Characteristics	Identification of all characteristics that were used to describe true fruits' approach by interviewees
(T2.2) Opportunities	All potential positive consequences that were identified by interviewees
(T2.3) Risks	All potential negative consequences that were identified by interviewees
(T2.4) Timeliness	All information that captured the interviewees assessment of the strategy in today's political climate
<b>(T3) Relevancy of brand personality for crisis communication</b>	
(T3.1) BP perception	Identification of all characteristics the interviewees use to describe true fruits' BP
(T3.2) Interplay of crisis communication and BP	All information that evaluates the relationship of BP and crisis communication
(T3.3) Role of anti-brand activism	All information that assesses the role of anti-brand activism in the context of true fruits strategy
<b>(T4) Outcomes for the consumer-brand relationship</b>	
(T4.1) Positive outcomes	Identification of all positive outcomes true fruits' strategy has on the consumer-brand relationship
(T4.1) Negative outcomes	Identification of all negative outcomes true fruits' strategy has on the consumer-brand relationship

Table 10: Data analysis coding frame

### (T1) Crisis communication

The interviews began by discussing the interviewees' take on what makes good crisis communication in general. All respondents pointed out that several fundamental factors (T1.1) need to be considered to craft an appropriate crisis response. When dealing with a crisis, they initially consider that the crisis type defines the degree of information that needs to be released. For example, Joseph Schweitzer described how the crisis type can require taking to different target groups, and therefore, employ different crisis communication tactics:

“Whereas, if you're an organization that's dealing with something... let's say you're a food company and one of your products contained lots of poisonous material. I guess the question is who's the recipient of the message. Is that the user or is it just a potential scandal sort of situation where you want to do enough to say that you answered the situation, but without needing to, uh, cause a stir so on and so forth.” [04:22]

During the interviews, it became clearer which factors the interviewees consider priorities for crisis communication (T1.2). All interviewees agree on the importance of taking responsibility during a crisis, either by “being willing to admit faults” [Annabel Schewe: 00:15] or “making ethical decisions to inspire and regain trust of the stakeholders” [Jonas Larbalette: 00:15]. Moreover, all participants mentioned fostering transparency as a top priority: “The words and actions coming from the organization must be totally aligned and transparent” [Jonas Larbalette: 00:15]. Some of the interviewees also pointed out the importance of a “timely reaction” [René Schultz: 00:25]. A quote from Annabel Schewe summarizes the consensus perfectly: “I believe the most important things are creating transparency and taking responsibility, and act quickly” [00:15].

Jonas Larbalette points further out that “depending on the crisis offering, an open conversation can be helpful” [00:15]. Both interviewees are also aligned in their opinion that the degree of information that is provided to the public is crucial for the success of crisis communication: “And my go-to personally is don't provide an answer that creates more questions than it does to, you know, help to alleviate the ones that were already out there” [Joseph Schweitzer, 00:34]. However, it became clear during the interviews that this is also dependent on the organization's positioning on the crisis issue, as stated by Joseph Schweitzer:

“So, in the case where let's say a member of the organization was caught in a embarrassing scandal of some type, you have to answer the questions of, is it true or is it not true? Are we standing with the person? Are we not standing with the person will be announced that this person is no longer part of an organization or do they deserve their day in court?” [00:34]

Further, all interviewees mention tonality as a key factor. Annabel Schewe and René Schultz stressed the importance of striking a serious tone in most cases. Whereas Jonas Larbalette adds that it is generally important to “effectively convey positive messages” [00:15]. Further, Annabel Schewe believes that “it is important to show that it’s just people. Humanize as much as you can” [00:15]

The industry professionals were also asked for their opinion on the relevancy of the communication channels used and specifically social media (T1.3). All of them agreed that choosing the right channel is a fundamental decision that can have a big impact on the further course of the crisis: “It makes such a difference to just read a press statement or actually see a person explaining what happened, and how it’s dealt with. But yeah, of course, it also doesn’t leave a big timeframe for preparation” [Jonas Larbalette: 03:22]. Thus, the way that the messages are delivered can have a huge impact, although the time pressure demands quick decision. Further, the right choice of channel depends on who the organizations want to reach. Joseph Schweitzer and René Schultz both point out that all relevant stakeholders should be communicated with efficiently: “it’s probably a question of magnitude and also the audience that crisis communications should be addressed to” [René Schultz: 04:16]. Joseph Schweitzer suggests that the channel should reach the minimum amount of target groups that are necessary to act responsibly, but not draw further attention towards the issue:

“So as far as their, uh, communications channels are concerned, you know, you could use a blanket to kind of press release. Provided in, you know, a copy and pasted email. The general rule is that when facing a negative situation, let’s say the average user might not have to come in touch with it at all. But the press has it if they need it. Hopefully it’s even too boring to print, but you did the bare minimum of not ignoring the situation. Whereas, if you’re an organization that’s dealing with with something... let’s say you’re a food company and one of your products contained lots of poisonous material.” [Joseph Schweitzer: 4:25]

Specifically, the advantages and disadvantages of social media were discussed in the interviews:

“the level of transparency doesn't really leave any room to hide from a crisis, but rather requires immediate action, which can be good, especially channels like Instagram, give the opportunity to not only communicate directly to the customers or followers that can also offer a personal level, which can help regaining trust.” [Jonas Larbalette: 3:22]

Additionally, René Schultz and Annabel Schewe agreed: while it is a great tool to foster dialogue, it “can be difficult to control the narrative there” [Annabel Schewe: 04:05].

### (T2) true fruits' approach to crisis communication

When asked to describe the characteristics of true fruits' crisis communication strategy (T2.1), there was a clear consensus on the fact that true fruits' strategy is provocative. The following quote summarizes their feedback perfectly:

“So, the first words that come to my mind are young, provocative, and hip. They don't mind being controversial. In many ways, um, I guess you could say they're innovators. Although provocation is not a new strategy in itself, they're doing many things really really well. Specifically, how they communicate during a crisis. They don't lose their sense of humor and I think that alienates a lot of people, but it also makes them stronger. It's like they're untouchable. Um, yeah. Also, I think it is mainly the combination of provocation and humor that works well. It gives them a plausible excuse for their faults.” [Annabel Schewe: 18:57]

Annabel Schewe mentions during this segment what the other interviewees agree on as well: that the brand is provocative and causes controversy but does so with a prevalent sense of humor. Aside from these characteristics, consistency was mentioned by far the most by all interviewees. They referred to the brands alignment of communication with their personality. When asked to describe true fruits' crisis communication, Joseph Schweitzer simply stated: “In line with their brand identity. Period” [02:09]. Moreover, it was pointed out by multiple interviewees that true fruits is also consistent in never apologizing. Annabel Schewe points out: “I would go so far to say that it's not really crisis communication. I guess you could say it's more of a frontal attack“ [01:56]. Joseph Schweitzer explains that this is strategy which has been successfully used by certain politicians as well and named Donald Trump as an example: “it's sort of amazing how a certain subset of the population that wants to believe something will, uh, have the cognitive dissidence to believe it, as long as it's not admitted to” [02:15]. Additionally, especially Annabel Schewe and Joseph Schweitzer

focused on the brands' political positioning as a success factor of their strategy: "brands from a completely different segment [other than politics] can stand out through politization" [Annabel Schewe: 13:53]. Joseph Schweitzer explains the relevancy of the term "wedge issue" in this context:

"So, there's a term though, the wedge issue, it's something that everybody wants to talk about. It's just societal irrelevant. It's like a pop culture issue almost. Um, and you have issues of, uh, social safety nets, civil rights. You know, reproductive rights, everybody has, everybody has an opinion on some issues that are meant to be divisive, but then you get put into the camp of loving a thing or hating a thing. " [Joseph Schweitzer: 18:32]

As one of Annabel Schewe's previously mentioned statements already refers to plausible deniability, which was a repeating theme throughout the interviews. This is what allows true fruits to push the limits of acceptable behavior but giving critics' not actually enough ammunition to have legal consequences, for instance. Additionally, the interviewees agreed that the industry is an important factor to consider when implementing this type of strategy. The fact that true fruits' product is seemingly unassuming and inherently unproblematic probably gives them more freedom in terms of marketing: "I mean, it would be different if it turns out, um, true fruits is engaging in, um, bad labor practices, which lead to fatal, uh, death of little children in Bangladesh, for example. [...] I mean, at the end of the day, we're talking about smoothies" [René Schultz: 17:55]

The interviewees were also asked to assess the opportunities (T2.2) of this strategy. The most commonly mentioned opportunity was by far that the brand gets attention and stays relevant. All interviewees pointed this out on several instances during their interviews: "I think the opportunities are very clear. It's a quick way to grab attention" [Annabel Schewe: 06:34]. Aside from that, the interviewees mentioned increased engagement from their audience, and displaying strength, also in regard to their brand personality. However, this will be elaborated more during the analysis of (T3). As of risks (T2.3), the interviewees mentioned losing credibility and customers. Additionally, the interviewees are critical of the long-term applicability of this strategy.

"Probably at some point a normalization effect will occur, as it usually does with provocative strategies. Um, this is because the strength of the effect decreases over time, and the attention goes elsewhere. That's the worst possible outcome for any brand. But if they were to suddenly change their

strategy, they could lose authenticity and harm their brand personality, because that is the core they want to protect.” [Annabel Schewe: 12:24]

Consequently, it is risky to employ this type of strategy long-term, but also risky to abandon it and harm their own brand in the process: “But of course this puts them also in a corner. They can never back off or otherwise they hurt their own brand and authenticity, and then the trust would be gone“ [Annabel Schewe: 23:30]. However, not all interviewees agreed with this.

Lastly, the interviewees were asked to assess if this type of strategy is still timely (T2.4) during a political climate of cancel culture and demand of corporate social responsibility. This question led to disagreement amongst the interviewees. While some point out that “in the context of awareness and political correctness of younger generations, the brand may be too blatant” [Annabel Schewe: 11:34]. However, Joseph Schweitzer points out: “I think that depending on one's politics, it could be more timely right at the time when everybody else is acting politically correct“ [Joseph Schweitzer: 16:19].

### *(T3) Relevancy of brand personality for crisis communication*

When asked to describe the brand’s personality (T3.1), the interviewees mentioned young, provocative, hip, fun, clear, honest, colorful, uncompromising, and strong. Also, “they don’t claim to be taken too seriously” [Annabel Schewe: 01:56].

The interviewees’ opinions on the interplay of crisis communication and BP (T3.2) can be summarized by the following statement: “A good branding helps to master crisis. A bad brand can break down due to a crisis“ [Annabel Schewe: 21:01]. All interviewees agree that “good crisis communication should be aligned with the brand personality to make“ [René Schultz: 33:20]. The interviewees also had a general consensus that the brand’s strong BP results from the way they handle crises but is also a relevant factor in managing it. This co-dependent relationship is described further by Annabel Schewe:

“But I believe that their consistency no matter what’s happening around them is a very strong core for their brand personality. But of course this puts them also in a corner. They can never back off or otherwise they hurt their own brand and authenticity, and then the trust would be gone. I already

mentioned this, but in many ways they navigated themselves into a corner, that they also can't leave.”  
[23:30]

Lastly, the role of anti-brand activism and boycotting (T3.3) was discussed. The interviewees disagreed whether anti-brand activism imposes a significant threat to the brand. Jonas Larbalette pointed out that “in general, that can lead to a very bad image and reputation” [10:05]. Joseph Schweitzer believes that in true fruits’ case, the opposite could be true: “I think that because, and only because there's nothing impactful on the line to society, it's a fruit juice. Uh, it does more for them than it takes away. [...] So I would say it's beneficial to them, but I wouldn't frame that as a positive for anyone they're just lining pockets” [09:26]. Annabel Schewe points out that “as long as they're getting attention and can underline their attitude” [10:31]. Thus, it can be concluded that anti-brand activism could potentially reinforce the provocative brand personality, which generates them more benefits than harm. Annabel Schewe even goes as far as to say: “They could even use this as inspiration for future campaigns or start a dialogue with new target groups“ [10:58].

#### (T4) Outcomes for the consumer-brand relationship

The interviewees all agreed that true fruits’ strategy can create positive outcomes (T4.1) for their consumer-brand relationships. The interviews pointed to the idea that polarization is a powerful effect and can serve as a form of segmentation in addressing a target audience:

The people aren't open to any arguments, like an actual discussion, but they just want to be reinforced in the opinion. They already have that it's all in wrong, that it's sexist, that it's, um, making, turning, turning, rape into a laughingstock and everything. So getting a backlash like this is probably going to reinforce them even more in their opinion” [René Schultz: 9:59]

By reinforcing supporters and critics in their opinions, the brand strengthens both the negative and positive relationships, which leads to increased engagement with their audience. Even though their haters exist, their supporters will be “forced into their camp and become more loyal customers. And this must be something that was planned for” [Joseph Schweitzer: 08:35].

However, all interviewees see a great potential of negative outcomes (T4.2) regarding the brands' long-term perspective: "short version is it strengthens relationships with current supporters, but I would personally wonder where their long-term strategy was" [Joseph Schweitzer: 12:32]. Aside from the previously mentioned risks of long-term execution of this strategy, the interviewees point to the risk of their politization not appealing to the coming generations:

"I think the bigger, the bigger problem for them might be in trying to strengthen the relationship with those that aren't their consumers. They need to add touch on this in previous questions about, for example, this is stereotyping, but young male supporters, they need to continue to bring people into that. [...] If you had, for example, amongst boomers, let's say that split was 65/35 in their direction. And among gen X, maybe it was 50/50. And amongst millennials, maybe it was 40/60 in the other direction. And among gen Z, you know, if it's a quarter 75% in the other direction, then the brand only lasts so long" [Joseph Schweitzer: 12:32].

## **5.6 Research validity and limitations**

In order to reflect on the results of this dissertation more accurately, methodological limitations and weaknesses must be pointed out. Each of the applied methods inherits their own weaknesses. For instance, documentation carries a big risk of researcher bias during the selection and interpretation of evidence. Moreover, it is likely that some evidence was missed, because it was either not accessible online anymore, or because the internet search was not thorough enough. Additionally, it was not possible for the researcher to conduct a deeper analysis on the consequences of the selected crisis response, because a complete content analysis (for example, of the amount and types of feedback in Social Media or news outlets) was out of scope for this dissertation. Further, only publicly accessible documentation could be admitted to evidence. It would have been of high interest, what kind of insights and documents true fruits itself could be provided, but upon request they chose not to participate in this dissertation. For instance, their personal indicated meaning of some of the ads, their strategy, and objectives would have been of great interest and benefit for this dissertation.

Some weaknesses have also been identified for the survey interviews. The respondents' sample is not representative, and the results are likely biased because of that. Also, not all survey items had been tested for validity by previous studies. Therefore, they provide a basis

for the interpretation and discussion of the results but this study should not be blindly replicated, and the conclusions should not be broadly generalized. Additionally, the translation from German to English should be considered when interpreting the results.

Lastly, the interview sample is relatively small and does not cover a wide range of industries. All interviews were conducted through Zoom or Google Meets, which dominated the interview situation. The researcher was not in charge of creating a focused and comfortable setting on the interviewees end. Additionally, interviews also carry a high risk of bias, because of the social situation: the interviewee might be inclined to say what they believe wants to be heard. Some information might have been withheld to protect the interest of their organization or themselves. Also, there is the risk that the questions have been misunderstood. Although the interviews were conducted in English, it is the only second language to three out of four interviewees. This should be pointed out, because some of meaning can get lost in translation.

## **5.7 Ethical considerations**

To provide a complete evaluation of the methodology, some ethical considerations should be made. The researcher attempted to provide an accurate and complete image of the evidence. Therefore, some materials were admitted to this dissertation that are, at the very least, to be questioned from a moral point of view. Some of the brands' marketing material contained profanity, but more importantly, insults and slurs used to discriminate against certain groups in society. Thus, the discriminating statements were hereby reproduced and further distributed. It was very important for the researcher to remain neutral during this investigation, and not bias the analysis through personal opinions. However, it should hereby be pointed out that the researcher does not agree with the discrimination of these groups or the jokes at their expense.

## **6 Findings and Discussion**

After having presented the results of the analysis in the previous sections, this chapter will summarize the key findings of the analysis and confront them with the research

objective. The information will be presented and structured by answering the research questions, consulting the data generated through the previously described documentation, survey interviews, and interviews. Open questions and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

*What are the consequences of provocative crisis communication? (ROI)*

It was discovered through the analysis of true fruits' crisis communication, as well as the interviews, that true fruits' crisis communication qualifies as provocative. Their messages are ambiguous, include a decent amount of profanity and offensiveness. But most importantly, they lean into the transgression, which the literature review revealed to be considered one of the most important traits of provocative communication. Additionally, this claim was supported through the interviews. In addition to provocation, the industry professionals accounted for humor, consistency, and the alignment of communication and brand personality as characteristics and likely success factors of the brands' crisis communication. When confronted with the interviewees' views regarding crisis communication in general, true fruits' approach does not meet their criteria. For instance, the interviewees listed taking responsibility and owning up to mistakes, transparency, and a quick reaction as their top priorities. Additionally, they recommend a serious tone as well as positive and humanizing messages. However, it can be observed that true fruits' crisis approach does not meet these conventional criteria. Possibly, this is the reason the approval by the survey participants was not very positive. On average, the participants leaned between *undecided* and *disagree*, when asked if they believe true fruits' statement to be sufficient.

One important consequence to consider is the consumers' future purchase intention. It was discussed in the literature review that the purchase decision-making process is complex and affected by several factors. Also, the motivations to buy a certain product can differ strongly depending on the product category and the situation. Therefore, the results of the survey regarding the consumers' future purchase intention should be presented with this in mind. When asked if it is important to them that brands behave ethically, the average participant agreed with the statement. However, when asked if ethical behavior in brands is important for their purchase decision, the average participant agreed less. This can be seen

as an indication that other factors outweigh transgression by brands and that it does not necessarily lower a consumers' motivation to purchase a product or not. Furthermore, when asked if they plan on purchasing true fruits' products in the future, the average participant leaned somewhere between *unlikely* and *undecided*. Their motivations revealed that the participants consider the brands' personality and the product significantly when making their purchase-decision, because both were commonly described when participants were asked to describe their motivation. However, the brands' approach to crisis communication was also commonly mentioned as a reason not to purchase their products in the future. Therefore, purchase intention can definitely be partially tied to the consequences of provocative crisis communication. Nevertheless, many also considered that they do not believe that the brand did anything wrong, despite communicating provocatively. More importantly, it also became clear that this outcome likely depends on a consumers' previous relationship with the brand: survey participants who scored high on BRQ were on average more likely to purchase their products in the future.

The brands' public records displayed that their annual revenue remains consistent, yet their growth is slightly stagnant during the relevant years. In their financial reports, the brand provides explanations for this that are unrelated to the crises situations they have lived. However, it is impossible to tell if there is a correlation without the brands' unpublished data. One key performance indicator (KPI) that can be observed is their social media engagement. Whereas normal posts on Facebook range between 50 and 1000 reactions, the crisis response that was analyzed in this dissertation generated over 3.400 reactions, 4.500 comments, and 3.600 shares. Although this could not be measured precisely by the researcher due to the scope of this dissertation, it additionally generated headlines in media outlets. Therefore, it is safe to say that their strategy, at the very least, gets the brand a lot of attention and increases engagement. However, engagement can also reflect the lack of approval and negative emotions that consumers experienced due to the brands' crisis response, which was indicated – as mentioned in the previous paragraph – by the survey responses. The following paragraph will elaborate on all identified risks as well as opportunities.

*What are the risks and opportunities of implementing provocative crisis communication? (RQ2)*

Due to the broad exploratory approach, yet limited scope of this dissertation, there were many variables that could not be directly observed by the researcher. However, through the interviews with industry professionals, it was possible to get more insights into the risks and opportunities of true fruits' strategy. As briefly mentioned previously, the interviewees pointed to increased amount of attention and engagement this strategy generated for true fruits. Additionally, they pointed out that it is an opportunity to display strength and further frame their brand personality. Further, their provocative communication can serve as a segmentation of their audience based on politization: the interviews with industry professionals revealed how the brand uses political issues to provoke. For instance, one interviewee identified that the brand utilizes so called "wedge issues", a term which refers to political or social issues which split apart a demographic or population group. Moreover, this allows the brand to pick their political standing based on the positioning that receives a higher approval rate within the population. Thus, creating controversy, but hoping to never lose the support of the like-minded in the audience.

However, losing credibility and customers was identified as one of the biggest risks of this strategy. This is also aligned with the survey results on purchase intention. Moreover, the interviewees are critical of the long-term applicability of this type of strategy. As revealed by the literature review, any effect caused by provocation likely decreases over time, because "shock-value" only occurs when a taboo is broken. However, if it happens all the time, it stops being taboo. But not only would the effectiveness of this strategy decrease over time. The literature revealed that the "normalization effect" could occur due to prolonged exposure to provocative marketing. Thus, diminishing the shocking effect of its message. In the case of true fruits, it has the potential to hurt their brand on a more serious level: If the brand stops to publish provocative statements as a response to crises, it could make them look inauthentic and cause them to lose trust. Consequently, it is highly questionable if this type of strategy is sustainable over a longer period of time, because it will hurt their brand regardless. Additionally, the interviewees raised the concern that it could be difficult to survive with this strategy due to societal change. Although they disagreed whether this crisis strategy was timely or not, it was pointed out that it will be

difficult for the brand to generate new consumers, if the coming generations lean differently politically speaking.

Moreover, the risk of anti-brand activism and boycotting was investigated. While there is an activist movement that formed against true fruits, its threat towards the brand may be limited. Although generally speaking, these movements can negatively impact a brand's reputation, this might not be so significant in the case of true fruits. The interviews suggested that, as long as their actions are not considered too impactful by society, it generates them more benefits than harm. For instance, they receive more attention and press, for example by utilizing so-called wedge issues, if they do not cross certain boundaries and remain within a legal grey area. This notion can be illustrated by one of the survey responses: "Their marketing wouldn't stop me from buying their products. Only if truly racist actions would be uncovered. Otherwise, I view it as a dumb provocation to gain attention".

*How relevant is a brands' personality for their crisis communication approach? (RQ3)*

When asked to assess the brands' personality, the survey participants' consensus implied that the brand is likely *exciting*. Although this result cannot be viewed as final, due to the qualitative nature of the study, it was underlined by the interviewees who described the brand as young, provocative, hip, fun, clear, honest, colorful, uncompromising, and strong. The literature review showed that specifically exciting brands usually have more short-term relationships with their consumers but show signs of reinvigoration during times of transgression. Additionally, the data revealed that true fruits' crisis communication approach is aligned with their brand's personality. However, a shift in BP can commonly occur during transgression and should be avoided, according to scholars. Consequently, true fruits seems to follow this advice.

Although none of the industry professionals mentioned BP as one of their top priorities during their initial decision-making factors when dealing with crises, they point to its significance when asked specifically. The interviewees agreed that a strong brand can be beneficial during a crisis and that an effective crisis communication strategy should be aligned with the brand's personality. At the same time, it was pointed out that a strong brand

personality can result from crisis communication: the literature review and the interviews suggested that a brand's behavior during a crisis can impact their brand strongly, because crises have the power to confirm or disconfirm consumers' expectations about a brand. At the same time, it was revealed that it is unfavorable for brands to shift their brand personality during a crisis. Therefore, the interviews suggested that crises can serve as an opportunity to lean into existing consumer expectations and, through this, strengthen their brand. Therefore, the responses indicated that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two variables.

**RQ: How does a provocative approach to crisis communication affect the consumer-brand relationship?**

When asked to assess the implications for the consumer-brand relationship specifically, the interviewees pointed out that true fruits' strategy indeed has a polarizing effect. According to the literature review, these types of brands evoke passion, strong emotions, and engagement. Through this, they achieve high levels of awareness, recognition, and associations. The industry professionals underlined that this is a powerful effect when addressing the audience: by reinforcing supporters and critics in their opinions, the brand strengthens both the negative and positive relationships. This is supported by the survey participants with a high BRQ score, which indicated that they were more likely to purchase true fruits' products in the future after reading their crisis statement. However, the interviewees see a great risk associated with negative relationship outcomes in the long-term. While this type of strategy can strengthen the brands' relationships with current consumers, this type of strategy may not appeal to the younger, following generations. Therefore, much consideration should be taken on the brands' side to aligning its own values with their target group, now and in the future.

*Open questions and suggestions for future research*

The data left some open questions that need to be addressed. As previously mentioned, true fruits' crisis communication strategy was classified as polarizing by industry professionals. However, a causal link between provocation and polarization cannot be

clearly established. Neither the literature review, nor the methodology of this dissertation, could shine a conclusive light on this relationship, also due to the qualitative nature of this dissertation. Therefore, this could be addressed in future studies. Additionally, the long-term perspective of this strategy needs further investigation. By exploring other theoretical perspectives, alternative predictions and effects might be found.

Moreover, possible solutions to avoid the “normalization effect” (see p. 96), yet to not lose authenticity, could be produced, since this strategy seems to be very successful in the short-term. Additionally, several variables could become the focus of future research, to better understand their role. It was established through interviews that communication channels play a significant role in the crisis communication process. However, the relationship between communication channels, brand personality, crisis communication, and the consumer-brand relationship was merely explored superficially due to the scope of this dissertation. Therefore, it was not possible to draw more comprehensive conclusions. Lastly, this dissertation explored many relationships between variables from a qualitative perspective. However, for future research, it will be necessary to confirm the conclusions through generalizable studies, considering different brands, contexts, industries, and markets.

## **Conclusion**

The scope of this dissertation was to investigate true fruits’ provocative crisis communication strategy. Aside from risks and opportunities, the aim was to understand its consequences for the consumer-brand relationship, taking into account notions and insights from a brand personality perspective. The objective was to explore this specific case more closely and to connect these research perspectives with one another. The goal was not to draw a final conclusion whether this strategy is a best practice or will negatively impact the brand’s reputation in the long run. Rather, the goal was to gain a deeper understanding on

the relationships of these aforementioned variables and to provide a basis for future comparative research.

After the main theoretical constructs were discussed in the literature review, several research questions were defined. The overarching question *How does a provocative approach to crisis communication affect the consumer-brand relationship? (RQ)* served as a starting point for this exploration. After providing the context on the brand true fruits and case study research, the data collection methods documentation, survey interviews, and interviews were introduced and executed. Moreover, the insights were analyzed through a qualitative approach. Finally, the findings were discussed and structured to answer all research questions accordingly.

This process enabled the researcher to explore the role of several variables for implementing a provocative crisis communication approach. True fruits' crisis communication approach was analyzed to identify its characteristics, consequences, risks, and opportunities. It was found that true fruits' approach was not sufficient according to the industry professionals' conventional approaches and priorities, and the consumers' evaluation. However, it seems to be effective in its own way, for different reasons. Especially the brands' consistency stood out as a success factor. At the very least, true fruits' strategy generates attention and engagement in the public. Moreover, it presents an opportunity to further frame their personality and target their audience based on political positioning. Losing customers and experiencing a "normalization effect" in the long-term were identified to be the biggest risks. Interestingly, the results of the data pointed to the idea that anti-brand activism and boycotting are likely not to be very impactful on brands like true fruits.

For brands like true fruits, it was found that crises are an opportunity to further frame and even reinvigorate their personality. Based on the conducted research, it seems that BP is not a top priority for professionals who manage crises. However, there seems to be great potential for brands when it incorporated in the strategy: the data supported the notion that crisis communication should be aligned with the brand's personality to maximize the outcomes and seize crises as an opportunity to generate positive consequences. Ultimately, the relationship between crisis communication and brand personality was found to be a reciprocal one.

The idea that this type of strategy has a polarizing effect on the consumer-brand relationship was further supported. This means that true fruits achieves high levels of awareness, recognition, and engagement through their actions, even though they activate their supporters and critics at the same time. However, one novelty of this dissertation was the perspective on utilizing this type of effect in the long-term: the data revealed that it could be a great challenge to build strong relationships with future generations, due to the changing societal norms and value.

Further investigation is needed on the links between polarization and provocation. Although the literature review and the data of this dissertation pointed towards a strong connection, a conclusive answer cannot be given at this point. Additionally, future studies could focus on creating generalizable studies that focus on single aspects of this exploratory research. For future research, it will be necessary to confirm these relationships through generalizable studies, considering different brands, contexts, industries, and markets. The role of anti-brand activism and the relevancy of crisis communication channels could be explored more thoroughly. Moreover, it would be especially interesting to further investigate the long-term effects of provocative crisis communication and innovate potential solutions for brands to avoid negative consequences.

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## Appendix

### A. True fruits' crisis statement

Dear friends, dear supposedly discriminated people, dear stupid ones,

We are currently receiving some news and criticism via social networks. We are accused of racism, sexism or even promoting “rape culture”. We are used to the regular lament of some compulsive outragers and apologize to everyone who is also rightly bored of it. This time it's about a best-of of different slogans from a few years ago. This also includes our campaign, which we ran as a German company in Austria in 2017 with poster texts such as

- “Seldom makes it across the border”
- "Even more bottles from abroad"

This campaign was a criticism of Austria's right-wing politics and the possible closure of the Brenner Pass. That dies a campaign against xenophobia war, would also have become clear if one had dealt with the campaign and had looked at, for example, the third campaign motif: "With us you cannot choose a brown" (because none of our bottles are brown ...). Instead, individual motifs are copied out without meaning or understanding and sent around with exaggerated polemics, agitation and insults towards us. Sigh.

Another social media motif from 2016 is at the center of the criticism: Specifically, it is about a picture of our range with the black bottle in the middle and the headline “Our token black guy”. The reason for this was the omnipresent discussion about the introduction of a quota for women in management positions in companies. In our eyes, the requirement for a quotation is the real discrimination. Because if one assumes with common sense that all people are equal and also want to promote exactly that, it IS ridiculous to treat any group of people as unequal by introducing a quote. We find racism as sucks as all forms of discrimination. Except for people who listen to hits, they really shouldn't be allowed to fiddle around with the radio. But to seriously believe that a public corporation our size might have an interest in engaging in racist propaganda in order to capitalize on it shows little rubbish. Finally, we are accused of sexism and the promotion of “rape culture”. For the first, our

campaign motifs from 2016 for the introduction of chia seed juices are used. We had four slogans back then:

- "Oral consumption - you won't be able to enjoy semen any faster" (because chia is ready to drink)
- "Inseminated & fertilized" (logical: contains seeds and fruit)
- "Shake if the seeds are jammed" (unfortunately, chia always settles on the bottom of the bottle)
- "2 sperm donors from a good home" (there were two delicious varieties)

Even then, all four slogans were submitted to the German advertising council as complaints. And he decided that while it was provocative advertising, it was clearly not sexism. The accusation of rape culture is primarily based on an advertising motif for our drinking attachment for the 750ml True Fruits bottle. The claim "bottled and taken away" relates to the continued use of our bottle including the drinking attachment. Sure, we are playing with a sexual ambiguity here, but the ambiguity arises in the reader's head, a glass bottle is clearly depicted that can actually be refilled and taken with you through the tightly closing lid. We seriously wonder what a sick fool it must be to read an advocacy of rape in it. What thoughts are going on in such heads and is the supposed problem not possibly to be found there? But there is one point, we have to admit, that we are apparently discriminatory! We are discriminatory towards stupid people because stupid people clearly exclude our art of communication. SHE is simply not made for stupid people and SHE WILL never be either, we're sorry. And when exactly this group of stupid people (regardless of whether they are white, black, female, male, heterosexual or homosexual, with wooden legs or speech defects) thinks to go with a burning pitchfork on the digital barricades with a burning pitchfork when and like a riot To instigate a mob against us, then we'll just send them a strong "Fuck you!" What else should we do, because intelligence is difficult to send! Basically, we would like to point out that we will continue to operate advertising in the future that will require a certain level of intelligence and humor. You will come across this type of communication with us again and again, which stupid people could misunderstand. But we

don't just want to divide, we have dealt constructively with the criticism. Hence, we have decided that in the future, to protect a supposed minority (the stupid), all communications that we conduct will be labeled with the warning “Warning, this advertising could be misunderstood by stupid people!”.

We hope to live up to our duty of care as a good juice shop and try to defuse this kind of discrimination.

Greetings from Bonn, your true fruits team

PS: Of course, the black smoothie is not thrown out of the range because we are accused of racism, but because it has sold too poorly. There's no biz like juice biz baby ...

PPS: The sales of our smoothie white in the black bottle have increased enormously in the last few hours! Yippiyeah and thank you all very much for that.

PPPS: Let's be honest, we already know what this is really about: Everyone wants to be seen and understood with their needs. It seems to us that the actual outcry is not due to our stubborn way of communicating, but to the fact that we don't want to kiss you, the indignant ones, on the buttocks. We understand you ... you don't like our arrogant manner. You don't like our stupid jokes. In short: you just don't like us. You know what? That's OK. It really isn't a problem. Our serious tip: Instead of getting upset and helping us with marketing, punish us with something that would really hurt us - withdraw your attention, stop following us, stop buying us and make your smoothies and juices and bowls yourself.

We live in a free, happy consumer world, nobody forces you to buy our stuff or to follow our entertainment channels. Your pulse will thank you and we will have our peace. Karma does the rest and everything will be fine. Namaste, you sweet piss cloves \*.

(\* no discrimination against carnations or other carnation plants intended!)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from:

<https://www.facebook.com/true.fruits.no.tricks/photos/a.157492230913/10156203682195914/?type=3&source=57>

## B. Consumer survey interview

Variables	Questions	Scales
<b>Introduction</b>	<p>Thank you for being interested in this research project at Universidade Católica Portuguesa. The objective of this project is to learn more about the perception of the brand true fruits by the public.</p> <p>The survey is being conducted as a part of the master thesis and will take approximately 7min to answer.</p> <p>Your participation is voluntarily and will be treated confidential. Your answers are collected anonymously. Your data will only be used to scientific research. It will not be able to trace the answer back to you.</p> <p>Thank you for your support!</p>	
<b>(V1) Familiarity</b> (Filter question)	Q1: Are you familiar with the brand true fruits?	Nominal (yes, no)
<b>(V2) BRQ</b> (Fournier, 1998)	<p>Q2: Please checkmark what applies: If true fruits was a person...</p> <p>They would be play an important Role in my life.</p> <p>They would treat me well.</p> <p>They would do their job well.</p> <p>I could rely on them.</p> <p>They would know a lot about me.</p> <p>We would be close friends.</p> <p>I would express strong feelings towards them.</p> <p>I would understand them and their thoughts.</p> <p>I would want them to keep me company.</p>	Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree)
<b>(V3) BP</b> (Bosniak et al., 2007)	<p>Q3: Please checkmark what applies: true fruits is...</p> <p>Small-minded</p> <p>Bourgeois</p> <p>Boring</p> <p>Old-fashioned</p> <p>Exciting</p> <p>Adventurous</p> <p>Spirited</p> <p>Saucy</p> <p>Orderly</p> <p>Competent</p> <p>Reliable</p> <p>Loving</p> <p>Cordial</p> <p>Sentimental</p> <p>Selfish</p> <p>Arrogant</p>	Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree)

Hypocritical		
<b>(V4) Participation in anti-brand activism</b>	<p>Negative experiences with companies can motivate some people to participate in anti-brand activism. This type of activism can take on many forms. To name a few: consumption boycott, protests, or spreading awareness on social media.</p> <p>Q4: Based on the description above: Have you ever participated in anti-brand activism?</p> <p>Q5: Please explain the motivation for your previous answer.</p> <p>Q6: Have you ever participated in anti-brand activism against true fruits?</p> <p>Q7: Please explain the motivation for your previous answer.</p>	<p>Nominal (yes, no, I don't know)</p> <p>Open question</p> <p>Nominal (yes, no, I don't know)</p> <p>Open question</p>
<b>(V5) Importance of ethical behavior</b>	<p>Q8: Do you agree with the following statements?</p> <p>It is important to me that brands behave ethically. Ethical behavior of brands is an important factor in my purchase decision.</p>	<p>Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree)</p>
<b>Context and Crisis response</b>	[Summary of controversies and crisis response that was analyzed in chapter 5.5.1]	
<b>(V6) Consumer Reception</b>	<p>Q9: Do you believe this response is sufficient?</p> <p>Q10: Please justify your previous answer.</p>	<p>Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (strongly disagree – strongly agree)</p> <p>Open question</p>
<b>(V7) Purchase Intention</b>	<p>Q11: After reading true fruits' response: How likely are you to purchase their products in the future?</p> <p>Q12: Please justify your previous answer.</p>	<p>Ordinal: 5-point Likert scale (very unlikely – very likely)</p> <p>Open question</p>
<b>Respondent Profile</b>	<p>Q13: How old are you?</p> <p>Q14: What is your gender?</p> <p>Q15: What is your education?</p> <p>Never graduated Hauptschulabschluss [German school type] Mittlere Reife [German school type] Trade school Fachabitur [German school type] Abitur [German school type] University degree</p>	<p>Nominal (answers were grouped later)</p> <p>Nominal (male, female, other)</p> <p>Nominal</p>

## C. Transcript of the interview with Joseph Schweitzer

[00:00:00] **Alexandra Neumaier:** What makes good crisis communication?

[00:00:34] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Hmm. So, this is subjective. Less is more, clarify an organizational stance and do no further harm. And my go-to personally is don't provide an answer that creates more questions than it does to, you know, help to alleviate the ones that were already out there. So in the case, where let's say a member of the organization was caught in a embarrassing scandal of some type, you have to answer the questions of, is it true or is it not true? Are we standing with the person? Are we not standing with the person will be announced that this person is no longer part of an organization or that they deserve their day in court? Or will you just say that you're aware of the situation and are monitoring no further comment at this time, please stay tuned to official channels? But, yeah, these sort of initial discussions are quite important.

[00:02:01] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you describe true fruits' crisis communication?

[00:02:09] **Joseph Schweitzer:** In line with their brand identity. Period.

[00:02:13] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Okay. And if you had to put more words to it?

[00:02:15] **Joseph Schweitzer:** In short, it's extremely polarizing, but, by never apologizing you harden and polarize the supporters, more highly activated. And yeah, again, dissociating from everybody else, but the higher level of activity among the supporters can offset those that weren't really interested anyway. I'll try not to harp on this term too much, but I would say Trumpian, the strategy was always never, ever, ever apologize. very odd lead placed, pop culture reference, but, Shaggy's, it wasn't me, is sort of, it's amazing how a certain subset of the population that wants to believe something will, have the cognitive dissidence to believe it, as long as it's not admitted to. and to those that are ready to... it only extends the conversation when no shame is felt and the controversy continues, you know, a sincere apology for something, with a plan to improve, probably hurts brand awareness, or as a big middle finger to the camera and a promise to continue will be taken by a lot of people as bold or strength while those that dislike, it will be talking about it for a long time to come, possibly providing free marketing.

[00:04:22] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In what way are communication channels relevant to good crisis communication?

[00:04:25] **Joseph Schweitzer:** So in any sort of an organization that's facing some sort of crisis. You may receive outreach from all types of media, print and other that they would otherwise be begged to receive attention from. It's sort of the only situation, unfortunately, where they don't want the attention. But what's not the right thing to do is to do nothing. Because ignoring the situation is creating more questions, than you are providing answers. Silence can be dawning. it can look irresponsible if the situation is not being dealt with accordingly. So as far as their, communications channels are concerned, you know, you could use a blanket to kind of press release. Provided in, you know, a copy and pasted email. The general rule is that when facing a negative situation, let's say the average user might not have to come in touch with it at all. But the press has it if they need it. Hopefully it's even too boring to print, but you did the bare minimum of not ignoring the situation. Whereas, if you're an organization that's dealing with something... let's say you're a food company and one of your products contained lots of poisonous material. I guess the question is who's the recipient of the message. Is that the user, or is it just a potential scandal sort of situation where you want to do enough to say that you answered the situation, but without needing to, cause a stir so on and so forth. So, yeah, when it's not public facing channels might be preferably boring as possible. But yeah, different, different, medi different strategy.

[00:06:43] **Alexandra Neumaier:** So, should or can specifically social media be utilized as a channel in such a situation?

[00:06:46] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Yeah, of course. Cause it's direct to user. So let's say any product is found to be dangerous and requires a recall. That is absolutely not the time to release a quiet copy and paste email or to leave social channels blank. this is sort of the, you know, so our users are aware everybody that attended a conference has tested positive for COVID. While if you know, again, on the other side of the coin, that the chief technology officer has been arrested for financial fraud... Yeah, we probably want to go with that. You'd probably want to go with organization is aware of the situation and is monitoring for further details. but we're not going to go to Twitter with the news.

[00:07:22] **Alexandra Neumaier:** What are the risks and opportunities of their strategy?

[00:07:25] **Joseph Schweitzer:** The advantages I previously stated. So I'll lean on the past answer. The risks could just be shrinking your potential consumer base. Because whereas, a product line, as simple as a fruit drink might appeal to a great majority of the population. if more than half of the population boycott something on politics alone, there are potential disadvantages, but at the same time, you know, you have to, they'll be doing the numbers. What percentage of the population is older, more conservative and will go out of their way to buy this. How does that line up with the average brand that might just be less known, and therefore receive fewer sales? What percentage of customers might be, let's say young male, that might enjoy the innuendo and then buy it yeah. Get some kind of arise out of the others around them. so I think that there's statistics would probably show them the answer to this, but yeah, the risks are quite clear. Okay.

[00:08:31] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Do you think that, people who are. Protest the brand and who boycott it, present a danger to brands like true foods.

[00:08:35] **Joseph Schweitzer:** I don't think it's so cut and dry. It's not, binary, but I would tend to err toward the side of thinking that it's beneficial to their brand. I would think that, because. It's not a one-off they've successfully positioned themselves as controversial. And, the people, negatively interpreting the boycott are sort of forced into their camp and become more loyal customers. And this must be something that was planned for there's a, you know, you sometimes see religious.

[00:9:21] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Are there any positive consequences that stem form anti-brand activism and boycott?

[00:09:26] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Positive and negative might be subjective. I think that because, and only because there's nothing impactful on the line to society, it's a fruit juice. it does more for them than it takes away. If, if it were a nonprofit, you know, or some good works product. it might be a net negative might harm society, but they're using shock value to sell drinks and whether they were in an alcohol manufacturer or futures manufacturer, anything sort of in the food and beverage industry. you know, they're not discriminating against say people that are, trying to live in a certain state or stay in a certain type of hotel. you know, beneficiaries of like a social good. they've just probably found that it helps their

bottom line. So I would say it's beneficial to them, but I wouldn't frame that as a positive for anyone they're just lining pockets.

[00:10:55] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Is this provocative approach to crisis communication appealing to all consumers?

[00:11:05] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Not to put the controversial ads, but maybe with the colorful ones, the deniability is, again, it's kind of like a powerful thing. If you like a brand, because of either the product or the normal marketing, then the counterintuitive kind of marketing can appeal to the out-crowd. So to speak fiddled by it because something different while the ones that might've had a bias toward liking it for different reasons, can plausibly deny. You know, the contentious marketing. So, I haven't seen any specifically inclusive advertising. So, I guess it's hard to say all parties, but then it begs a question of, do you need to, I'll just use a somewhat strong word. Do you need to pander to every potential group? in order to appeal to all parties. I don't know the answer. Cause it could potentially be said that, you know, if all ads that are not specifically offensive, maybe all encompassing or appealing.

[00:12:25] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Do you believe this strategy can weaken or strengthen the brands' relationship with the consumers?

[00:12:32] **Joseph Schweitzer:** So I think it would increase the strength of the relationship with their consumers. That's exactly what they're doing there. They're boxing the consumer into the consumers, essentially in a relationship with this brand. They agree with them ideologically. they're, they're, you know, what's the word anti-fragile in their nature. I think the bigger, the bigger problem for them might be in trying to strengthen the relationship with those that aren't their consumers. They need to add touch on this in previous questions about, for example, this is stereotyping, but young male supporters, they need to continue to bring people into that. Because if for example, there were appealing to through tactics like this, I mentioned antifragile, or you might say conservative or right leaning or politically incorrect, you know, whatever the strategies might be. If you had, for example amongst boomers, let's say that split was 65, 35 in their direction. And among gen X, maybe it was 50 50. And amongst millennials, maybe it was 40, 60 in the other direction. And among gen Z, you know, if it's a quarter 75% in the other direction, then the brand only lasts so long. And as population statistics change, they would see that this is sort of a short-term trade-off. but I

would assume that they have those metrics in terms. So, yeah, short version is it strengthens relationships with current supporters, but I would personally wonder where their long-term strategy was. And if, yeah, that was continuing to grow with different consumers of different age, age brackets, or if they were seeing sort of weakness in those sorts of other realms.

[00:15:01] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy, taking into consideration the trend towards cancel culture and corporate social responsibility?

[00:15:08] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Thinking more long-term, I think that relevancy is what all entities seek, right? Again, back to the very first answer they wanted to be known. and of course they want to be relevant. There's a story in the news. I'm not sure when this might be used, but there's a story in the news. Facebook is looking to change their corporate name, not necessarily the product Facebook, but Google became alphabet, some number of years ago. And they fear becoming irrelevant. All things, all creatures, fear becoming relevant, right? So if they are, if they're, if their level of controversy becomes stale, then that too can become less relevant. But if managed correctly, Every couple of years, they bring themselves back into the conversation and you lie low in between. then, then this could remanufacture for the long-term.

[00:16:15] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Is this type of strategy still timely?

[00:16:19] **Joseph Schweitzer:** I think that depending on one's politics, it could be more timely right at the time when everybody else is acting politically correct. This is sort of what we're seeing in politics today. there's more of a push than ever to be more accepting than ever. And something that goes against the grain. might have just been standard the racism in, in decades of the past, their standard sexism. you know, when you get home and your wife is cooking dinner, you know, you'll want to try band-aids. But, but you know, in today's day and age, the kind of things that would have never caught someone's eye. Yeah. But in today's day and age, You know, let's say I'm going to completely make up a statistic and say that, you know, you have a product that should appeal to most of the population, but you, you have 5% of the population has heard of the brand. And nobody really cares about to prefers you to something else. But if you have a group that's perceived as let's say. Highly misogynistic and 35% of the population is highly misogynistic. They might just make the

judgment that, you know, if they can get some large subset of these people to start purchasing the brand that can help their numbers and pivot five years down the road, when they spin off a subsidiary to, you know, with that project under the same name and the parent company changes the name and logo to something brand new. So on and so forth, but, yeah, it could work, in today's day and age. I don't know what their numbers look like, but if the controversies keep coming, I wouldn't be surprised if they did. Where I grew up, you've got, you know, a fast food restaurant owned by a more conservative religious group. They, they don't open on Sundays. They donate to anti LGBT causes. you know, there's a home goods store. one just sells magnets in paperwork, you know, thick paper to, to do artwork on. the other one sells the same thing, but they are usually in court suing to make sure that they don't have to provide their employees with birth control. but everybody knows who they are. And if you are of that level of, let's say the conservative side of that faith, you probably only shop there. so. I would say that it arrives toward being somewhat more successful because they've positioned themselves as controversial in the right way. Again, they're not controversial in my opinion, in the sense that they have the staff that kept getting accused of, you know, embezzlement of funds or did the food company that comes to coming up with the cockroach infestation. They're just the brand that's constantly talked about because they do things that. 14 year old boys might find funny, but you know, you need, students might try defensive and that's just conversation.

[00:18:30] **Alexandra Neumaier:** So you already mentioned a couple of times that you think one's personal politics are very important, whether the brand is appealing or not? Are there any other reasons you can think of that? True fruits specifically, gains a lot of lovers or haters with this strategy.

[00:18:32] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Yeah. So there's a, the term though, the wedge issue, it's something that everybody wants to talk about. It's just societal irrelevant. It's like a pop culture issue almost. and you have issues of, social safety nets, civil rights. You know, reproductive rights, everybody has, everybody has an opinion on some issues that are meant to be divisive, but then you get put into the camp of loving a thing or hating a thing. Most brands just begged to be known. If it's folks, wagon, most people are generally aware of it anyway, but if it's a bubble gum company and you can get, you know, 80% of the population to be aware of the bubble of. The company and half of them, are devoteesthen you probably

sell a lot of bubble gum. So it's, it's, it's just a leverage mechanism, I guess, in something to generate product awareness.

[00:19:55] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you describe true fruits' brand personality?

[00:20:32] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Colorful. for my limited experience, you know, in, in paying attention to any one brand over another. I guess my personal view is that sometimes brands get a little bit, I don't want to say desperate so to speak, but, so there's controversy over some of the advertisements. But I can't help but wonder. What percentage of advertisements might be controversial because if you were to go through a, let's say, series of promotion, if they did something all of the time, they lose the shock value. so, I guess my perception would be that they are a, an organization that sometimes chases the shock value. but the there's an interesting sort of second through line seemingly to the average consumer. so it provides a level of deniability, which is kind of interesting right now. We're just the friendly neighbor with the colorful eyes. but yeah, questionable.

[00:22:15] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In what way is brand personality relevant to doing good crisis communication?

[00:22:20] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Okay. I will say that it depends. On how frequently a brand speaks as the brand. So if there is, for example, a clear contrast between what is normal response and crisis response, then it could negatively affect the brand. For example, if a group that's known for never apologizing apologizes, it's a clear contrast. If a group that's usually sarcastic and witty in their response, puts out a very formulaic statement. You know, it was probably written by legal. These things are like taken more seriously. whereas a brand that always plays it safe as a boring response, doesn't it doesn't really make impact. So I guess if I were trying to sum up the answer, it would be that it matters in the sense of how it differentiates from the normal. because any, let's say large corporation, a crisis response would be read as relatively neutral. when I say large, I mean, you know, boring press releases from Mercedes-Benz, so, yeah.

[00:25:02] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Okay, great. So basically, you already kind of answered this, but just to clarify. You believe their crisis communication strategy is well-chosen and executed in regard to their brand personality?

[00:25:10] **Joseph Schweitzer:** Yes. Some to some extent, this comes down to one's politics because in some ways you might be able to frame it as appropriate or inappropriate in almost all industries. And if I were going to sort of respond to it in a way, just a touch back on an earlier question, it would be to say that, it would be sort of a historic moment for them, right? A response was anything else, right? it imagine the response of the strongest supporter or those that usually follow on and wait for the next little bit of snark. If they came out and formally, formally apologized for something and went back on statements or apologized for campaigns, it, it turns the crisis communication to just another day at the job. and I think that that's probably a best case scenario for them. so politically I'm left of center, but there was one of the common threads of the extreme right over the last number of years in the United States was to come as close to the line as possible without crossing it and to move the boundary of what's deemed to be crossing the line by constantly coming up to it. And this allowed, you know, this individual to always be in at the top of the news for the shock value of something to always be greater than the day before to exhaust the people that may have exhaust a supporter while constantly enraging the rest of the public into talking about the thing. It can be a very powerful tool, whether or not they're fans of it personally.

#### **D. Transcript of the interview with Annabel Schewe**

[00:00:00] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In your opinion, what defines good crisis communication?

[00:00:15] **Annabel Schewe:** I believe the most important things are creating transparency and taking responsibility, and act quickly. Providing insights to the public is very important, even if there is not much to tell yet. But they should feel included in the process. In many cases, not all, I would also say seriousness, but I already know which brand this interview is about. In general, listen, stay calm and level with your stakeholders. It's better to think long-term when you communicate, think beyond the crisis and learn from the mistakes. A good error culture can be super important. If the company is not willing to admit faults, it will look very bad. And when the basics are covered, I think it's also important to show that it's just people. Humanize as much as you can. yeah. I think that's it.

[00:01:45] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you describe true fruits' crisis communication?

[00:01:56] **Annabel Schewe:** Hm. I guess unusual is the best word for it. They remain true to themselves by always choosing a clear and honest stance. Sure, they like to provoke. But they also own it, you know? They're uncompromising when they address the public. They don't claim that they should be taken too seriously. I would go so far to say that it's not really crisis communication. I guess you could say it's more of a frontal attack. Unabashed is the word I am looking for.

[00:03:58] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In what way are communication channels relevant to good crisis communication?

[00:04:05] **Annabel Schewe:** Choosing channels is one of the fundamental decisions you have to make during a crisis. It depends on many factors, especially on the type of crisis and how much attention it's gaining already. Social Media is a great tool to be in dialogue with your audience and to show face. But it can be difficult to control the narrative there. On the other hand, it's probably better to be a part of the discussion instead of denying yourself the possibility to do so.

[00:06:29] **Alexandra Neumaier:** What are the risks and opportunities of their strategy?

[00:06:34] **Annabel Schewe:** I think the opportunities are very clear. It's a quick way to grab attention. But it could affect their sentiment and cause negative social mentions. It could also be that the success of this kind of strategy is short-lived. Even if it can be viewed as initially successful based on social KPIs or whatnot.

[00:07:45] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Why do you believe consumers react positively or negatively to this strategy?

[00:07:51] **Annabel Schewe:** Probably because it humanizes the brand. It's refreshing to read, regardless which side you're on. But at the very least, it's emotional, for the supporters and the critics. I think this is quite clear, actually. Like any political issue, it depends on people's personal involvement in an issue. It's an attack on some people's moral standards.

[00:8:06] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How dangerous is anti-brand activism for a brand like true fruits?

[00:8:11] **Annabel Schewe:** Well, maybe some of my colleagues would disagree. But personally, I think it's not dangerous at all for true fruits. Brands in general want to protect their reputation. But they can increase their recognizability. I would say that as long as their brand personality is not endangered, they have nothing to worry about. It underlines their positioning if people spread the word. But, other brands, for example something conservative, it would be a much bigger deal.

[00:10:28] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Should anti-brand activism and boycotting be prohibited at any cost?

[00:10:31] **Annabel Schewe:** No, as long as they're getting attention and can underline their attitude. Also, if true fruits tried to take any measures against this movement, it would hurt their own authenticity.

[00:10:49] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Are there any positive consequences that stem from anti-brand activism and boycott?

[00:10:58] **Annabel Schewe:** Sure. I am repeating myself, but I think attention is super important for them. If I think more about it. Hm. They could even use this as inspiration for future campaigns or start a dialogue with new target groups.

[00:11:28] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Is this provocative approach to crisis communication appealing to all consumers?

[00:11:34] **Annabel Schewe:** No, definitely not. But I can see that they have components which attract different types of people. If I had to guess, their humor and provocation repel the older demographic. But in the context of awareness and political correctness of younger generations, the brand maybe too blatant.

[00:12:19] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Do you believe this strategy can weaken or strengthen the brands' relationship with the consumers?

[00:12:24] **Annabel Schewe:** I guess it depends. Probably at some point a normalization effect will occur, as it usually does with provocative strategies. This is because the strength of the effect decreases over time, and the attention goes elsewhere. That's the worst possible outcome for any brand. But if they were to suddenly change their strategy, they could lose authenticity and harm their brand personality, because that is the core they want to protect.

[00:13:45] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy, taking into consideration the trend towards cancel culture and corporate social responsibility?

[00:13:53] **Annabel Schewe:** I think what they're doing is brave, but also risky. I mean, I think for them it works really well. But if we're talking about this strategy in general, it completely depends on the context. For some brands, I would say to avoid this at any cost. Everything in the realm of politics for example. But brands from a completely different segment can stand out through a strong politicization, because that's what they're doing essentially. They're polarizing, because they trigger as many sensitive subjects as possible, and the people react to that immensely.

[00:15:38] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Is this type of strategy still timely?

[00:15:42] **Annabel Schewe:** It's a difficult game, it might still be for now, but that could change in the future. Right now, they're still able to get attention. You mentioned Cancel Culture before. But even now, our society has few taboos, and I am sure they're working very hard to make sure that they're always, playing with this line before they conduct a serious offense. Never cross it but get as close as possible. But, who's to say that provocation will still be effective in some time. It will be interesting to see if they change lanes once it doesn't work anymore.

[00:18:49] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you describe true fruits' brand personality?

[00:18:57] **Annabel Schewe:** So, the first words that come to my mind are young, provocative, and hip. They don't mind being controversial. In many ways, I guess you could say they're innovators. Although provocation is not a new strategy in itself, they're doing many things really really well. Specifically, how they communicate during a crisis. They don't lose their sense of humor and I think that alienates a lot of people, but it also makes

them stronger. It's like they're untouchable. yeah. Also, I think it is mainly the combination of provocation and humor that works well. It gives them a plausible excuse for their faults.

[00:20:51] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In what way is brand personality relevant to doing good crisis communication?

[00:21:01] **Annabel Schewe:** A good branding helps to master crisis. A bad brand can break down due to a crisis.

[00:21:15] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Do you believe their crisis communication strategy is well-chosen and executed in regard to their brand personality?

[00:21:22] **Annabel Schewe:** I said earlier that I do think it is a risky strategy, in the sense that it repels many people. But from a branding perspective, they probably don't care about that. As long as they get the attention, they're willing to navigate the minefield of political correctness. But the secret of success is incongruence. They master this very very well. And personally, I will admit that I think it's courageous and authentic. At least they're leaving their comfort zone, which many brands are afraid to do.

[00:23:24] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In what way is their crisis communication positive or negative for the shaping of the brand's personality?

[00:23:30] **Annabel Schewe:** I mean, I am not familiar with all their communication output. But I believe that their consistency no matter what's happening around them is a very strong core for their brand personality. But of course this puts them also in a corner. They can never back off or otherwise they hurt their own brand and authenticity, and then the trust would be gone. I already mentioned this, but in many ways, they navigated themselves into a corner, that they also can't leave.

## **E. Transcript of the interview with René Schultz**

[00:00:12] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In your opinion, what defines good crisis communication?

[00:00:25] **René Schultz:** So I think what defines could crisis communication is, in my opinion, I think there are certain steps along the process. So the most important part in my opinion is that there is a time that a timely reaction, even if it's just saying something along the lines of, at this time, Yeah, the ring, all the information and try to investigate further, giving you an outlook. Look when to expect the next update on the subject matter. because in the beginning, from, from the side of the company, most of the time there's hardly anything to say, but at least giving the public. the idea that something is being done and that the matter is taken seriously. apart from that, I think it's important, to be honest, and to communicate what is actually being done so people can relate. To ask about the matter is taken seriously and refrain from, you know, putting out just general phrases. that basically means nothing. So Yeah, these, from my point of view, The most important things, reacting in a timely manner involving people in the process, showing them what is being done and then confronting them with the results.

[00:02:013] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you describe true fruits' crisis communication?

[00:02:024] **René Schultz:** From my point of view, eh, it's not a typical approach on the one hand, but also on the other hand it is. So what I'm trying to say is that at a first look everything seems really hands-on, you know, staying true to the brand personality and some kind of way. But if you look at the structure, you can see how much effort has been put into this. Like there, it's very well structured in terms of, well, these are the three ads people are taking issues with, so let's address them one by one, referring into independent organizations like the German Advertisement Council so all this mixed together with this, yeah, very, very casual tone. And also. Turning things around and also being a little bit confrontative about it. That's, what's remarkable about this because usually in terms of crisis communications, it's like, well, maybe we've done something wrong, but we don't think we really have. So here is why and, yeah, let's just be friends. And this is, this is what differentiates true fruits crisis communication. because they are an edgy brand and they are protecting the edge, which is remarkable from my point of view.

[00:04:10] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In what way are communication channels relevant to good crisis communication?

[00:04:16] **René Schultz:** Regarding the relevancy of communication channels, especially in social media, with regard to good crisis communication. I think it depends on what the actual issue is or where the crisis originated. For example, if you're talking about Volkswagen and the whole diesel gate thing, but this is something that's a structural problem rooted deeply within the company itself. And it also affects shareholders. So this is something that would also. Or should be at risk through the more conservative media channels, speaking of, you know, the press relations office and putting out press releases and talking to journalists, whereas in the case of true fruits, it's, from, from what I know, it's like a classical situation where it originated on the internet. So who's gonna see it. People who are active on the internet, you know, maybe certain echo chambers, which within the different social media platforms. So in my opinion, This limits it to the communication channels that should, be reacted upon. So let's say it originated on Facebook. People share it on Facebook. Well, it's probably enough to put out a statement on Facebook. If it's something bigger that also concerns people that are not using this type of media, then it's probably wise to choose other channels as well. also depending on how much control the company has over those channels. So it's one thing, holding a press conference. And invite journalists and, allow them to ask questions or depending on the matter visiting at a talk show to talk about that issue. So it's probably a question of magnitude and also the audience that crisis communications should be addressed to.

[00:08:03] **Alexandra Neumaier:** What are the risks and opportunities of their strategy?

[00:08:10] **René Schultz:** I'm not really sure if I get the question, but I think that in, in times of, you know, fast-paced media, like social media, where people would have just kind of, yeah, instant morality expectation, and everyone can. What's the address, the issue of finding a platform for the issues. sometimes things might in the beginning seem bigger than they actually going to be. And with the company reacting immediately, this gives the whole issue of validity. So. Sometimes it's probably risky taking everything too serious. And with this is kind of risk because people expect an immediate response, which leaves the company. Hardly any time to, dig deeper and find out what this is really about, where is it even birth, putting the effort into everything. So it's, kind of resource-intense in terms of monitoring stuff and everything. And also sometimes making things bigger than they are by giving it a lot of gravity where it's not that important actually.

[00:09:54] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Why do you think that consumers react positively or negatively to this strategy?

[00:09:59] **René Schultz:** So why do customers react positively to the strategy? Well, in, in times, like these it's more and more important that, In communication and gender, a little marketing, for example, that, brands should have a purpose in terms of, why do we do this? there's more to it than just making money because we want to make the world a better place. Generally speaking. so. True. Fruits is known for having this kind of edgy brand personality, which you can see in the media or the advertising activities they're engaging in. So what they're doing is they're staying true to themselves, which fans of the brand are going to appreciate because they are actually standing up to something they believe in, and this gives them credibility and likeability because they are staying true to what they're doing. So, This is a huge benefit because it reassures customers that already love the brand. And are not, not pushed away by advertising like this, or simply don't care that they are sticking with the right brand that makes them even more loyal. And. That's what I think makes people react positively to the strategy. On the other hand, why do consumers react negatively to the strategy about it's those people that have been put off or offended by the advertising? It's gone off them even more because I think in many cases, The people aren't open to any arguments, like an actual discussion, but they just want to be reinforced in the opinion. They already have that it's all in wrong, that it's sexist, that it's, making, turning, turning, rape into a laughingstock and everything. So getting a backlash like this is gonna. Probably going to reinforce them even more in their opinion, that it's a bad brand and they're not willing to learn anything, even though they are trying to give plausible reasons for why they think it's not that bad at all. And it's just people being upset because they want to be upset and not going further behind to stuff. So at the end of the day, this is the risk that their negative images reinforce. But is it that bad because those people would not have bought probably not explored the true food products anyways. Not losing anything located from this point of view.

[00:13:57] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How dangerous is anti-brand activism for a brand like true fruits?

[00:14:09] **René Schultz:** Well, in general, generally speaking, it's not good, but looking at the magnitude of this, like where's this discussion actually taking place it's taking place in

the social web. And this, from, from my point of view every week, there's a new scandal and boy, this boat got that. these actually the people that the brand, Needs like, does, does it make a difference if people start saying, well, true fruit is bad. don't buy true fruits. Okay. I think with a company like that, they have excellent panel data. And if you look at the. The accusations it's like certain at that have been out there for quite a while. So if in the beginning, the first ad that was controversial would have caused significant damage to sales. They would know about this because they're getting statistics like everyday from dependent data and everything. So they wouldn't have done something like this anymore. And also it's like, it seems like it's a cough, the front identity. So at least just sticking with it. so. I don't think they're doing this lightheartedly. So I don't really think it does have that much effect, especially in the long term. Because these other things coming up, and, if one would be strict about all of this is hardly anything you could buy any more. Given the prerequisite tare that you actually know about this discussion. And I think that. Rather limited amount of people that are actually aware of why this type of advertising could be seen as critical.

[00:17:02] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Should anti-brand activism and boycotting be prohibited at any cost?

[00:17:09] **René Schultz:** So it should anti-brand activism be prohibited at any cost. Again, it all depends on the magnitude of the topic. So let's say you're talking about a handful of social media activists. I mean, it's ridiculous in itself. Is it, does it really matter? going, going back to folks that are going, for example, yeah, this is a whole another magnitude. This is not, some people are offended by some ads. They, that don't fit that mindset, but it's these people.

[00:17:49] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Should anti-brand activism and boycotting be prohibited at any cost?

[00:17:55] **René Schultz:** Actually, so it all depends on the topic. I don't think there's a general rule of thumb as to where you can say, well, this is your blueprint for, if something comes up, this is what you're going to do. it all depends on. The actual matter and the magnitude, I mean, it would be different if it turns out, true fruits is engaging in, bad labor practices, which lead to fatal, of little children in Bangladesh, for example, So, what I'm trying to say is that people, these days, in my opinion, get way to offend it way easily. I

mean, at the end of the day, we're talking about smoothies. So, I mean, it sounds a lot like what about autism? But if you look at the fact that they're also presenting in this statement, it's kinda on the edge and just putting it out there provoking and, Not giving it any context in terms of, why are we putting ads out like this? it's a little bit, I don't know how to say it. I mean, if you, if you, if you have, have to explain your ideas behind your ads in the marketing business, that usually means it's not a good idea. So yeah, it's just. I didn't say anything about, well, how would you go, oh, it didn't rape people or something. It's just picking up on things that are, current topics and the topics. they use that to gain attention and that's basically it.

[00:20:22] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Are there any positive consequences that stem from anti-brand activism and boycott?

[00:20:27] **René Schultz:** So might that even be positive consequences to the whole thing? like, I mentioned earlier, I actually do think so because pupil that, when we're ready to fence off the brand and not put off by this type of communication, It ties to them even closer to the brand because it reinforces them in terms of, well, we have these kinds of odd laws and we're fighting against those. yeah, but like kind of people that just, when I get angry for the sake of getting angry and taking everything to serious, And once again, the having the factual arguments will on their side. So ideally this could result in, you know, that they intensify their consumption and, or are going to stay true to the brand. Even if competitors come up or. Other things like that. furthermore, if you're looking at the products that were in these advertising campaigns, these always seemed like new products, like the Kia C stuff and their black, addition and everything. So people hear about this controversy. And then heading to the supermarket to the point of sale, and then they're seeing the actual product and they already know it like, oh, this is the thing that everybody has been talking about. Good way or bad way. it doesn't matter at this point, but they're going to recognize it because they're already aware of it. So do smile even. Trigger them in terms of giving the product a trial and seeing what is all the fuss about. so does this going to help with, you know, brand recognition and everything and DSL also important, the measure is when it comes to how much space the supermarkets has, keeping products in their shelf, basically. So if you have a brain study and say, well, this product has a, it's recognized by people in 60% of the cases. does this going to be an interesting product for you? They're gonna put it on the shelves. So yes, yes,

certainly. Positive aspects to all of this, especially if you look at the mechanics that are in place in this type of industry.

[00:25:03] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Is this provocative approach to crisis communication appealing to all consumers?

[00:25:24] **René Schultz:** So is this provocative approach to crisis communication appealing towards consumers? I mean like the word provocation already implies not everybody's going to like it, but again, the question does everybody have to like it? Are you gonna gain something or are you going to be able to. With a different type of communication. Would you be able to actually generate sales from this? Because at the end of the day, this is all that matters. If the answer is no, then does it even matter? I mean, talking a lot about. Ren personality, brand identity. nobody can be everybody's stalling. And if you want to be a brand that's recognized and wants to stand out, you just can't please, everybody. So this is all just, very concise. But the brand stands for, and these are important factors. These days that I'm just showing that brands are showing a strong personality.

[00:26:37] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Do you believe this strategy can weaken or strengthen the brands' relationship with the consumers?

[00:26:41] **René Schultz:** So do I think that this strategy can weakness strengthen the brand's relationship with the consumers? as I've already mentioned, I think it strengthens the relationship with the people that already like on a loft, the brand for what it is, and. Most certainly not going to weaken the relationship with those people. I can see why you have, honestly. and why is the versa? Is it gonna keep putting off people that don't like the brand probably. Yeah. does it matter? Probably not.

[00:27:17] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy, taking into consideration the trend towards cancel culture and corporate social responsibility?

[00:27:29] **René Schultz:** So, how would I evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy considering that there is a trend towards cancer coach and corporate social responsibility? I think I've covered this in the points before. And the facts as to where to, well, I'll tell you like it or don't, it's basically nothing wrong with these ads, which, and then the independent

institution has officially, stated that's, I don't think that there's an issue there and I think it's highly effective because people that choose this. The I was not aware of just crowd and the did just like the juices and the other ones that like the brand, because it has ad shows provocative. it's going to reinforce their loyalty. So evaluating the effectiveness. From my point of view, it's highly effective.

[00:29:28] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Is this type of strategy still timely?

[00:29:33] **René Schultz:** Is provocations still a timely strategy. I think there is two parts to the answer. First, generally speaking with the, the ad campaign in on itself, I'm sure. Sure. I mean, do you want to have the most, well-regarded ads in this kind of way from a sixth, the whole advertising agency, industry. So overall sure. What gets the attention and just because it's pro bowl king, you can still do that with good taste, as long as it's not actually sexist or ridiculing things like, right. Is it a timeless strategy before regards to the reaction of truth fruits? yes, because like I said earlier, I don't think that it does much harm in terms of putting people further off. Not using the product anyways, but strengthening the tires between the already loyal customers. And once again, the tone. Yes, it's provocative. But like I said, in the beginning, it's very well crafted. So, probably a lot of people that are not looking further into this, I think it's relevant. they're just being funny. Like they've always been, but like I said, it's very spot-on, craftsmanship with how they built up the whole thing.

[00:31:11] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you describe true fruits' brand personality?

[00:31:13] **René Schultz:** Well, what is true for its print personality? I mean, they, what, what, what I find interesting about this, that usually in a statement like this, you would have a spokesperson or the CEO or the. You know, someone who's in charge of the CSR stuff or the ethical committee or something like that. But the, the statement is issued by true fruits and they're consistently using, the first person pleura. like they always say we, and. It's this brand, the just closely connected to the product. Like it's not about the people behind the brand, but it's simply just the product. And as in dead, it's a, you know, it's a solid product and they're not taking themselves too seriously. That kind of makes sense, because at the end of the day, this is a lone Wolf and FMCG product. like they do this, how are they acting on the outside? But given their whole well-crafted statement that they're actually paying a lot of attention to what they're saying and what they're not saying. So. Just coming, coming,

coming back to the question, but a step personality. Well, it's a, it seems like a fun brand in terms of, well, we are here to give you nice smoothies. Fear about fun and yeah, it's a, it's a, I think yeah, fun brand that doesn't take itself too seriously. So because it's, it's smoothly as a hospital you're talking about, is this what I think their print personality is?

[00:33:12] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Can you please describe how brand personality is relevant to good crisis communication?

[00:33:20] **René Schultz:** Well, generally speaking, a brand should always stay true to itself in terms, being believable. This differs if there's actually been some serious misconduct, the structure of the misconduct talking about for the, but then again, they're also trying to stay true to their brand personality because there are people who love the brand a lot. The brand that everyone can rely on. So it's good to have those values and integrate them in the crisis. Communication, like being aware of it, true fruits, being a fun brand that doesn't take itself too seriously. so by, by, by taking this, The unique approach, once again, staying true to themselves because obviously there's nothing they've really done wrong, like in a grave matter. so yeah. Good crisis communication should be aligned with the brand personality to make. Actually seem relevant on the outside because this, this helps the believability because it makes makes 'em, that's how people know the brand. And they're still acting consistently with the brand identity in terms of crisis communication. It seems like they're taking this matter seriously in a way. Just they aren't, they're not trying to be someone with.

[00:34:44] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Okay, thank you. Last question. Do you believe their crisis communication strategy is well-chosen and executed in regard to their brand personality?

[00:34:49] **René Schultz:** So, so crisis communications, well-chosen and executed in regard to the Brent personality, I guess I've answered this already use. And also in a, like from a craft man ship point of view, also very precise and, very well executed and. Stick crisis communication positive for negative for shipping of the brand's personality. You, think of also addressing it before it surely helps to sharpen the brand's personality. You stay assets they already have. And, yeah. Strengthening them even for.

## **F. Transcript of the interview with Jonas Larbalette**

[00:00:04] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In your opinion, what defines good crisis communication?

[00:00:15] **Jonas Larbalette:** So, regarding good crisis communication. In my opinion, first of all, Crisis can be a threat to the corporate brand's reputation. And of course, there are so many different kinds of crises, which makes them hard to manage, especially on a communication level. however, I think crisis, many crises cannot be prevented, but organizations can be prepared to manage them a better, have to be prepared to manage them again. So, in my opinion, it is fundamental that the organization acts with integrity makes ethical decisions to inspire and regain trust and to regain trust of the stakeholders is therefore absolutely crucial. The words and actions coming from the organization must be totally aligned and transparent. In my opinion, it is necessary that the leader of the organization or the spokesperson communicates effectively conveys positive messages and, profound and necessary information. Also, depending on the crisis offering an open conversation can be helpful. But in general, I think, the highest priority is to act aligned and action and words. And of course, crisis can also be seen as an opportunity for major learning. And the preconditioned for that is probably resilience and reflection. But if that is giving, drawing learnings from what have happened, how it happened can be beneficial for the organization in order to prevent similar situations in the future.

[00:02:22] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you describe true fruits' crisis communication?

[00:02:25] **Jonas Larbalette:** How I would describe true fruits crisis communication in short, I think not really existent from what I know true fruits does not really engage with our stakeholders in a way to find common ground within a crisis. they never really back off from what caused the crisis and do never really apologize much more. I remember that they more or less say, if you can't deal with it, it's not a problem.

[00:03:14] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In what way are communication channels relevant to good crisis communication?

[00:03:22] **Jonas Larbalette:** Okay. So, I think social media within crisis moments can be a curse and a blessing at the same time, the level of transparency doesn't really leave any room to hide from a crisis, but rather requires immediate action, which can be good, especially channels like Instagram, give the opportunity to not only communicate directly to the customers or followers that can also offer a personal level, which can help regaining trust. It makes such a difference to just read a press statement or actually see a person explaining what. And why on how to deal with it. But yeah, of course. it also doesn't leave a big timeframe for preparation. So again, organizations really should be aware of potential crisis and be prepared for it in the very best case.

[00:06:12] **Alexandra Neumaier:** What are the risks and opportunities of their strategy?

[00:06:18] **Jonas Larbalette:** So, in the case of true food strategy, I think press is press in the end. And we all know that. So of course, if they have major for pass or like, crisis, everyone will talk about it. And the brand itself is very public. So that can be an opportunity on the other hand, going from an apologetic strategy, definitely conveys high risk of losing customers and stakeholders.

[00:07:49] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Why do you believe consumers react positively or negatively to this strategy?

[00:07:53] **Jonas Larbalette:** So, reacting positively to the strategy. probably has to do with a lot of humor in this case. I mean, some costumers probably think it's very bold and funny that what they do and celebrate that. And I guess the play playful way to deal with current political or social issues and the way that tree fruit is doing it. It could also be seen in a way to bring more attention to these topics, especially for people who don't really question these topics normally. So in a way, their passive communication strategy during a crisis can also be seen as a way to just point out the problems and then leaving it with the customers of society to deal with it and to think about. Yeah. On the other hand, I believe for many customers, of the very, some of the very provocative actions of true fruits can be over the top and lead to a really negative brand image, especially content that refers to racism or gender discrimination can lead to very negative reactions of the, on the customer side, mainly because they're not further discussed or explained by the brown.

[00:10:01] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How dangerous is anti-brand activism for a brand like true fruits?

[00:10:05] **Jonas Larbalette:** Boycotting is of course dangerous for a brand like true fruits. If I remember right, there were even petitions against them and activists asking to stop buying the product. So, in general, that can lead to a very bad image and reputation.

[00:10:41] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Should anti-brand activism and boycotting be prohibited at any cost?

[00:10:48] **Jonas Larbalette:** In my opinion, no, I think anti brand activism and by cutting, shouldn't be prohibited through the transparent brand ways. Businesses are working these days that it's more than natural to receive bad reactions. And in my opinion, brands have a certain responsibility, especially through the transparency and of costumers and society believes some actions are not appropriate. It's their right to speak up and also to share their opinion on.

[00:12:59] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Are there any positive consequences that stem from anti-brand activism and boycott?

[00:13:07] **Jonas Larbalette:** Positive consequences could be seen. As I said before, our press is press it's an old game, but it's yeah, the good and the bad will probably led to more visibility and reach of the brand. And one way or the other, I don't think the provocative approach is suitable for all costumers. It's tricky though. I think even though that a big percentage of the customers do not agree with their approach and might even find it inappropriate, I'm sure if they actually think about, I'm not sure if they actually think about it in the supermarket aisle, maybe they. And then still think, ah, that's a funny slogan on this bottle or, yeah, I might buy it and maybe they don't question the bigger picture of it after all.

[00:14:51] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Is this provocative approach to crisis communication appealing to all consumers?

[00:14:56] **Jonas Larbalette:** So, it should probably be differentiated between the actual customer who ended up buying the product and the audiences on social media, for instance,

who spend like much more time thinking and questioning their communication without being in the process of buying it in the supermarket. So, yeah.

[00:15:39] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Do you believe this strategy can weaken or strengthen the brands' relationship with the consumers?

[00:15:45] **Jonas Larballette:** So, it should probably be differentiated between the actual customer who ended up buying the product and the audiences on social media, for instance, who spend like much more time thinking and questioning their communication without being in the process of buying it in the supermarket. So, yeah. I rather think the strategy can cause damage on the brands' relationship with the customers since they don't do the step of clearly transparently explaining why they choose a slogan or caption or whatever, customers potentially lose their trust.

[00:17:29] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you evaluate the effectiveness of this strategy, taking into consideration the trend towards cancel culture and corporate social responsibility?

[00:17:32] **Jonas Larballette:** Regarding the effectiveness. I'm not sure that's safe to say that true fruits is very well known in the German market, especially considering that it's a simple product. They are all, that they are selling in terms of branding. They surely did a great job. If you want to think about it in that way. So if you think of smoothie brands and a German supermarket, you think of true fruits. So that clearly worked. The ethical side of it I'm not really sure.

[00:19:19] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Is this type of strategy still timely?

[00:19:25] **Jonas Larballette:** Provocation in my opinion will always be a timely strategy. It makes people think and question the status quo. And that will probably always cause attention. I do think though that it should be aligned with further actions and it should make sense why an organizational culture. It's provocative. Meaning why is a brand, the center of a provocative message? What actions will follow after drawing attention to a political or social issue? What's the meaning behind it? So to answer this, yes, provocative provocation is still a relevant strategy, but our, that are very transparent society and business

world asked for proof of content and contribution to actually solving these issues. If that is given it can work. Perfect. True for his brand personality.

[00:23:06] **Alexandra Neumaier:** How would you describe true fruits' brand personality?

[00:23:08] **Jonas Larbalette:** I would say that they are provocative showcase black humor and simply do what they want. They are like reckless.

[00:23:16] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Okay. In what way is brand personality relevant to doing good crisis communication?

[00:23:20] **Jonas Larbalette:** For me, the relevancy of brand personality in regard of crisis communication lies in consistency. The way a crisis is being managed has to align with prior showcase, core values and actions. And also, with few exceptions only if the brand stays authentic and true to the core values while maybe apologizing for mistakes or explaining them in a transparent way, trust can be regained.

[00:25:14] **Alexandra Neumaier:** Do you believe their crisis communication strategy is well-chosen and executed in regard to their brand personality?

[00:25:19] **Jonas Larbalette:** Hmm. That's a tricky one. I personally think that the approach, true fruits is choosing and their crisis communication could be a lot better instead of saying that that's just their human, everyone simply has to deal with it. They could also admit that some parts were just truly over the top and not appropriate. On the other hand, none of these crises came unexpected to them. so they know exactly what they will cause and maybe dealing with it in their way they do meaning ignoring it basically. also makes sense in the way they build up their personality it's unapologetic. So, it is in a way very coherent to which degree this is an ethical and responsible way to draw attention to social topics. yeah, it's just another question.

[00:27:21] **Alexandra Neumaier:** In what way is their crisis communication positive or negative for the shaping of the brand's personality?

[00:27:25] **Jonas Larbalette:** It can be seen in both negative and positive ways. I think in general they're moving on thin ice with some of that campaigns, in my opinion, maybe the ratio would have to be considered so that the overall reputation remains positive and not only

are too much over the top because otherwise at some stage, they risk that they will lose credibility.