

The use of humour as a crisis response strategy

The implementation of humour in crisis communication and the public's reactions

Student Name: Christine Heemsoth

Student Number: 567024

Supervisor: Dr. Yijing Wang

Master Media Studies - Media & Business

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master's Thesis

June 2022

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ABSTRACT

Organisational crises represent a reputational and financial threat to companies which requires organisations to take action and respond. Due to the increasing popularity of social media platforms, organisational crises, especially paracrises, happen more frequently. In current research on crisis communication, there are several existing guidelines on how organisations can appropriately respond to a crisis, emphasising different crisis types and crisis response strategies. Despite these recommended courses of action, organisations struggle to implement an appropriate crisis response suitable for their individual crisis type. Even though humour usually is not the proposed strategy, some companies implement a humorous crisis response as their communication strategy. This research seeks to explore how companies within the European context implement humour as a crisis response strategy on social media and how the public reacts to it. Accordingly, the following research question has been defined: How do companies within the food and hygiene industry in Germany and the UK incorporate humour in crisis response strategies on social media and how do social media users react to it? In order to answer this question, this research was approached through a qualitative content analysis. The study took two perspectives into account: the corporate communication and the public reactions. The data consisted of three corporate responses posted on either Facebook, Twitter or YouTube by the companies True Fruits, Bodyform and McDonald's as well as 450 related comments. The analysis of the corporate communication resulted in seven themes describing the factors constituting a humorous crisis response. These factors entail that the companies' responses followed an open and direct communication, reinforced their corporate narrative, included some sort of argumentation and justification for their behaviour as well as reacted with a form of counterreaction. Naturally, the companies also integrated specific types of humour, namely sarcasm or irony, jokes, word plays, mockery of the accuser or self-defeating humour. The analysis of the comments resulted in seven patterns describing the way social media users reacted. Although users also reacted negatively or neutrally towards the response, a positive emotion was the predominant sentiment. Furthermore, users passed on some personal, or alleged background knowledge, shared their comment or the response by the act of tagging and linguistically framed their comments in a particular way by using a certain choice of words or emojis. Remarkably, the users also made use of humour in the course of their reaction to the humorous response by the organisation.

KEYWORDS: *Crisis communication, humour, social media, paracrisis, crisis response*

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1. Introduction

In contemporary business, organisational crises evolved into the new normal within companies' everyday life (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012). The growth and importance of social media nowadays facilitated crises to spread and expand in a little amount of time (Maal & Wilson-North, 2019). Often, crises mediated through social media can develop beyond the company's control (Kietzmann et al., 2011), as the nature of social media allows every individual to participate and share their thoughts (Gruber et al., 2015). This is why crisis management and the implementation of suitable crisis response strategies represent considerable aspects for an organisation.

According to Coombs (2007, p.164), "a crisis is a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat.". Furthermore, a crisis can negatively affect stakeholders in a physical, emotional or financial way (Coombs, 2007). The term crisis communication entails a crisis response strategy which consists of the organisation's message and action after a crisis, aiming to protect the organisational reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Crisis communication requires that the organisation considers several aspects, such as the different relationships with stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Coombs 2007).

Within the existing literature on crisis communication, researchers propose several definitions of different crisis types (Coombs, 2007) as well as numerous guidelines on how a company could appropriately address a crisis (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Coombs, 2007). The need for guidelines on how to respond to a crisis in a suitable way exists because crises happen more frequently nowadays (Kietzmann et al., 2011) with each crisis having individual and unique communication demands as no crisis is identical to another (Coombs, 2015). For an organisation, it is important to understand the possible influence of communication choices within a crisis situation on the organisation's reputation and crisis outcome (Coombs, 2015). Nevertheless, research confirms that organisations still encounter challenges in approaching a sufficient response strategy (Romenti et al., 2014; Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016).

Even though humour seems to be a controversial tool in crisis communication (Xiao et al., 2018), which generally is not recommended to apply (Vigsø, 2013), several companies implemented humour as their crisis response strategy, especially on social media (Kim et al., 2016; Vigsø, 2013). The use of humour has been researched multiply in regard to advertising (Strick et al., 2013) or politics (Nabi et al., 2007; Baumgartner, 2007), yet less intensively in the context of crisis communication (Xiao et al., 2018; Fraustino & Ma, 2015). Existing

studies often focus on one case or the analysis of the effects of humour (Kim et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2018; Vigsø, 2013). An experimental study by Xiao et al. (2018) for example, examines the effect of a humorous crisis response on the perceived sincerity of the crisis response and the organisational responsibility. In addition to that, a study by Kim et al. (2016) is focusing on a content analysis of a self-mocking crisis response strategy in the Asian context, addressing both the corporate communication and the public's reaction. Generally, the literature states that depending on the context and the type of the crisis, humour can have a negative or positive effect on the perceived organisational reputation (Kim et al., 2016; Xiao et al., 2018).

Eriksson (2018) also addresses some of the gaps and limitations that the existing literature on crisis communication on social media shares. Most social media crisis communication research focuses on the social media platforms Twitter, e.g. Gruber et al. (2015) and Eriksson (2018), or Facebook (Xiao et al., 2018). This is why there is a need for further research focusing on other platforms targeting different countries and generations. Furthermore, there is a primary emphasis on research in Western countries which is why geographical bias needs to be taken into consideration (Eriksson, 2018). Generally, Eriksson (2018) outlined that strategic crisis communication via social media has not been fully explored yet. A study by Mirbabaie et al. (2017) confirms that research in the field of crisis communication is rather focusing on patterns within the communication, the content, and the user structure than incorporating the aspect of social media. Within their study, the authors focus on irony within crisis communication on Twitter by carrying out a survey with Twitter users.

The research gap lies in the analysis of the actual composition of the communication strategy featuring humour as well as the public's reaction to humorous crisis communication within a different geographical context. As aforementioned, the study by Kim et al. (2016) already combines the two aspects of analysing the corporate crisis communication and the audience's reaction, yet the study is solely concentrating on a single case within the Asian context. In contrast to the afore presented literature, this study seeks to address the existing research gap in humour within crisis communication with a focus on three cases in the European context by implementing a qualitative content analysis of the corporate communication and the social media users' reactions. Therefore, this research aims to answer the following research question:

RQ: How do companies within the food and hygiene industry in Germany and the UK incorporate humour in crisis response strategies on social media and how do social media users react to it?

The main research question will be supported by the following three sub-questions focusing on different aspects of the research topic:

Sub-RQ1: What constitutes a (non-)successful humorous crisis response strategy?

Sub-RQ2: How do companies implement humour as a crisis response strategy?

Sub-RQ3: How do social media users react to a humorous crisis response?

The scientific relevance of the current study lies in the fact that there is little research in the field of crisis communication in combination with the implementation of humour. This is why there is a need for further research on this topic, especially in the context of the European market considering different social media platforms. This research will give new insights into what factors constitute a successful or non-successful humorous communication and how companies frame their crisis response message. Furthermore, the research is exploring the social media users' reaction to a humorous crisis response, focusing on the content and the communicated emotions of the audience. The study contributes to the existing literature on humorous crisis communication and is expanding the knowledge within this field. In contrast to existing studies on humorous crisis response strategies, for example by Xiao et al. (2018) or Kim et al. (2016), this research is taking a qualitative approach and is increasing the scientific knowledge by an in-depth analysis setting a different focus than previous studies. Furthermore, the aspect of comparing the humorous response strategies of three different companies makes the research unique and differentiates it from the current literature.

The societal relevance of this study comprises a deeper understanding of society which this research will help to gain by the analysis of public reactions to this specific kind of crisis communication. Through the analysis of comments, the study will help to interpret the demands and attitudes that stakeholders, in this case mainly the public, have and thus indicate how individuals accept a company's crisis communication. The study allows researchers and society to better understand the audience's, in this case, the social media users', reactions which can help to improve a company's strategy when humour is to be implemented within the crisis communication. Research has shown that companies struggle with implementing an

appropriate response strategy (Claeys & Opgenhaffen, 2016). In particular, a study by Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016) states that managers often do not implement guidelines on crisis communication as these are too abstract. Therefore, this research is not only useful scientifically but represents an important contribution to society, for both the companies together with their managers and stakeholders like consumers.

This research is divided into the following sections. First, the theoretical framework is presented which is addressing the relevant concepts within crisis communication on social media and humour in crisis responses. Secondly, the methodology is describing the cases, the sample, and the research method for data analysis. This section is followed by the results which are presented and discussed against the background of the concepts derived from the theoretical framework. The results entail exemplary pieces of data to illustrate the findings. Fourthly, the discussion is answering the main research question and focuses on the theoretical and managerial implications of this research. Lastly, the conclusion section of this paper discusses the findings considering current literature on crisis communication. Furthermore, this section is addressing the limitations of this research and is providing suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

The following chapter will discuss the theoretical framework which is forming the basis to answer the research question. Firstly, this chapter is focusing on current and relevant crisis communication research and theories. Secondly, social media crises and crises mediated via social media as well as the associated communication are explored. Thirdly, this chapter emphasises the concept of paracrisis. Lastly, the crisis response strategy of implementing humour is addressed.

2.1 Crisis communication research

According to Seeger et al. (1998), organisational crises are defined as “specific, unexpected, and non-routine events or series of events that [create] high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization’s high priority goals” (p. 233, as cited in Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012). There are numerous studies covering the communication strategies during crisis situations (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012; Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Coombs, 2015). Veil, Sellnow and Petrun (2012) state that organisations will always be at the receiving end of hoaxes and rumours which result from often groundless criticism towards the company. Nevertheless, a company needs to take action to address the crisis to regain the organisation’s legitimacy (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012). Yet, up to now, companies struggle with establishing the most suitable crisis response strategy for their individual crisis case which takes all the stakeholders’ demands into account (Romenti et al., 2014).

One well-known and established principle to address the challenge of crisis communication is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) introduced by Coombs (2007). This theory offers a set of guidelines to implement an appropriate crisis response strategy in alignment with the type of crisis and the level of crisis responsibility of the organisation, aiming to rehabilitate the organisation’s reputation and compensate crisis damage. Coombs (2007) categorises crisis types into three clusters, as shown in Table 2.1: the organisation being the victim of the crisis, an accidental crisis, and preventable crises which developed based on actual wrongdoings of the organisation. This paper mainly focuses on crises within which the organisation is a victim, such as rumours, and so-called accidental crises, where stakeholders blame an organisation for acting inappropriately. These crisis types cause a weak to minimal crisis responsibility attributed to the company which means that there is a mild or moderate threat in terms of reputation. This paper excludes the type of preventable crises as these are defined as an organisation putting people at risk by disregarding regulations and laws (Coombs, 2007).

Table 2.1

SCCT crisis types categorised in crisis clusters

Victim cluster	Natural disaster
- organisation is a victim of the crisis	Rumour
- mild reputational threat	Workplace violence
	Product tampering/Malevolence
Accidental cluster	Challenges
- unintentional actions by an organisation result in a crisis	Technical-error-accidents
- moderate reputational threat	Technical-error product harm
Preventable cluster	Human-error accidents
- intentional wrongdoing/inappropriate actions	Human-error product harm
- severe reputational threat	Organisational misdeed with no injuries
	Organisational misdeed management misconduct
	Organisational misdeed with injuries

Note. From *Protecting Organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory*, by W.T. Coombs, 2007, p. 168.

The crisis response strategies are clustered in primary, namely deny crisis responses, and secondary, namely bolstering crisis responses (Coombs, 2007), as displayed in Table 2.2. Deny strategies are categorised into the following: attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoat, excuse, justification, compensation and apology. Attacking the accuser means that the person or group accusing the company is opposed. Denial refers to the crisis management stating that there is no existing crisis. Scapegoat represents the management blaming externals as responsible for the crisis. Excuse entails the crisis management to minimise the organisational responsibility by stating that there was no intention to cause harm. The strategy of justification means that the crisis manager downplays the perceived damage. The strategy of compensation implies that there is money or other forms of compensation offered to the victims. And lastly, the deny strategy of apology involves the organisation to apologise, taking on full responsibility and demanding forgiveness (Coombs, 2007).

Bolstering crisis response strategies are categorised into reminder, ingratiation, and victimage. The strategy of reminder entails that the organisations remind stakeholders of its good work and achievements in the past. The ingratiation strategy is similar to the reminder strategy but entails that the stakeholders are reminded of the good cooperation with the organisation in past times. The victimage strategy involves the company reminding stakeholders of its role as a victim in this situation (Coombs, 2007). According to a study by Romenti et al. (2014) on the communication of organisations on social media, SCCT is an efficient tool for guidance regarding crisis response strategies as well as management decisions. The study confirms that the response strategy is dependent on the crisis type that the organisation is confronted with.

Table 2.2

SCCT crisis response strategies

Primary crisis response strategy	Attacking the accuser
<i>Deny crisis response</i>	Denial
	Scapegoat
	Excuse
	Justification
	Compensation
	Apology
Secondary crisis response strategy	Reminder
<i>Bolstering crisis response</i>	Ingratiation
	Victimage

Note. From *Protecting Organization reputations during a crisis: The development and application of situational crisis communication theory*, by W.T. Coombs, 2007, p. 170.

The effectiveness and applicability of the SCCT have been explored in several studies (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014; Barkley, 2020). The study by Claeys and Cauberghe (2014), exploring the influence of crisis involvement and message framing on the success of SCCT, showed that the effectiveness of the SCCT guidelines is influenced by the formulation of the

crisis response and the crisis involvement. However, according to the authors, in case of low crisis involvement, the consumer's attitude towards a company is not influenced by an emotional formulation of crisis information. The authors state that the attitude is also not influenced by the compatibility of crisis type and crisis response strategy, which indicates that generally, a good fit of crisis type and crisis response does not necessarily result in a significant effect on the public's attitude as the individual's crisis involvement plays an important role.

Furthermore, a research by Barkley (2020) on the applicability of SCCT in the Japanese context, states that the theory is only applicable to a certain extent, implying that the SCCT guidelines cannot be universally applied to any crisis type. This is because, according to Barkley (2020), the Japanese assessment of responsibility does not match with Coombs' theoretical guidelines and understanding of crisis responsibility. Along with Claeys and Cauberghe (2014) challenging the theory's effectiveness, Barkley (2020) uncovers complications of applying the theory on a cross-cultural level. Despite the discussed critical assessments, Coombs (2015) addresses this issue by stating that crisis communication guidelines cannot be labelled as best practices since they are not based on uniformity as no crisis exactly equals another.

Besides difficulties in compatibility and effectiveness of the SCCT theory, organisations still encounter complications with the implementation of a suitable crisis response strategy, and this in spite of the fact that inappropriate crisis responses can negatively affect an organisation's reputation, costs and emotions stakeholders have towards the organisation (Coombs, 2015). The companies' struggle to implement the best fitting crisis response strategy is based on an existing gap in theory and practice, which has been identified in a study by Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016). The authors state that practitioners, in this case experienced Belgian senior crisis communication managers, generally trust in their gut feeling in crisis situations as they find that theories on crisis communication are too abstract. Instead, there is a demand for custom-fit guidelines and recommendations. Moreover, another reason organisations struggle to set up a crisis response or do not react immediately is the fact that legal concerns and management decisions need to be considered (Claeys and Opgenhaffen, 2016). In fact, financial and legal interests limit the responsiveness in terms of crisis communication (Fitzpatrick & Rubin, 1995; Tyler, 1997). As suggested by Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016), the aforementioned gap can be overcome by a collaboration of scientists and practitioners exchanging knowledge through seminars or workshops. Despite the gap between theory and practice, the theory of SCCT by Coombs (2007) and its definition of

crisis types and crisis response strategies remain relevant and justified theories within the research field of crisis communication helping to understand a company's crisis response strategy.

In addition to the existing gap between theory and practice, as outlined by Claves and Opgenhaffen (2016), organisations are facing the issue of organisational legitimacy. Due to the social construction of organisational legitimacy, organisations will always be exposed to criticism regardless of how trustworthy and evidence-based their communication is. This results in organisations being responsible for solving a crisis that did not necessarily emerge from actual wrongdoings or failure, as criticism is spread among the public influencing and reinforcing public consciousness and persistence (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012).

2.2 Social media crises and crisis communication

Having defined the term organisational crisis as well as having clarified theories of crisis communication, it is crucial to address the fact that social media crises or crises that are mediated through social media necessitate a dissimilar approach as these crisis types show significant differences compared to traditional crises happening aside from social networks. Social media is often involved in contemporary crisis situations (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Due to social media, crises happen more frequently and have also increased in severity (James et al., 2011), which is why social media is of growing relevance in crisis communication (Maal & Wilson-North, 2019). Through the rise of social media platforms, information spread faster, have a greater reach, and make it possible for every individual to participate (Gruber et al., 2015). In fact, in accordance with the aforementioned characteristics, social media can function as a facilitator by improving the organisation's relationships with stakeholders through a type of crisis communication which can reach out, inform and also motivate the organisation's stakeholders (Lin et al., 2016; Romenti et al., 2014). Organisational crises can have their outbreak origins on social media or outside of social media and then are communicated via social media platforms (Gruber et al., 2015). Numerous social media crises had their origin in issues concerning an organisation's customer service and are therefore not comparable to conventional crises (Coombs, 2014).

A case study by Gruber et al. (2015) on a protest movement initiated by university stakeholders, emphasises the power of social media, especially Twitter, within crisis communication and highlights the fact that local crises on social media can easily turn into national or global crises. The case is an ideal example showing how various individuals are able to participate, team up in groups and initiate a movement that influenced the university's

history. This was made possible by the organisation and distribution of information on the social media platform. However, this case also displays that organisations can easily lose control over the communication and the development of such crises which represents a sincere threat (Fjeld & Molesworth, 2006; Siah Ann Mei et al., 2010).

Regardless of Coombs' (2015) point of view, stating that there is no universally applicable guideline for crisis responses, there are several scholars who established additional sets of guidelines especially tailored for crisis communication on social media (Gruber et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2016; Eriksson, 2018). Within the aforementioned case study by Gruber et al. (2015), the authors developed best practices for crisis communication on social media. The study outlines transparency as an essential aspect of crisis communication on social media. Additionally, besides being interested in the actual outcome of a crisis, individuals demand transparency in the organisation's communication at the start, during and after the crisis, so that they can follow the whole process (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996).

In addition to the recommendations by Gruber et al. (2015), Lin et al. (2016) also developed a set of guidelines for crisis communication via social media featuring aspects such as active engagement in dialogue, investing in cooperation with the public or other organisations, and the monitoring of possible misinformation. The aspect of transparency, as stated by Gruber et al. (2015), can be compared with the concept of actively engaging and initiating cooperation as outlined by Lin et al. (2016). The researchers also highlight that social media comes along with risks, but also offers numerous opportunities that can be used within crisis communication, e.g. having the possibility to directly enter a dialogue with the public (Lin et al., 2016). According to Lin et al. (2016), existing recommendations for crisis communication on social media are not practice-oriented and not well formulated which is why the authors developed their own set of guidelines. However, the authors acknowledge that their set of crisis communication suggestions, which they labelled as best practices, is open for modification and improvement since the field of crisis communication will further evolve and change. However, the opportunities of engaging in dialogue and monitoring information have also been confirmed by a study by Eriksson (2018) reviewing the advice given by researchers on crisis communication on social media.

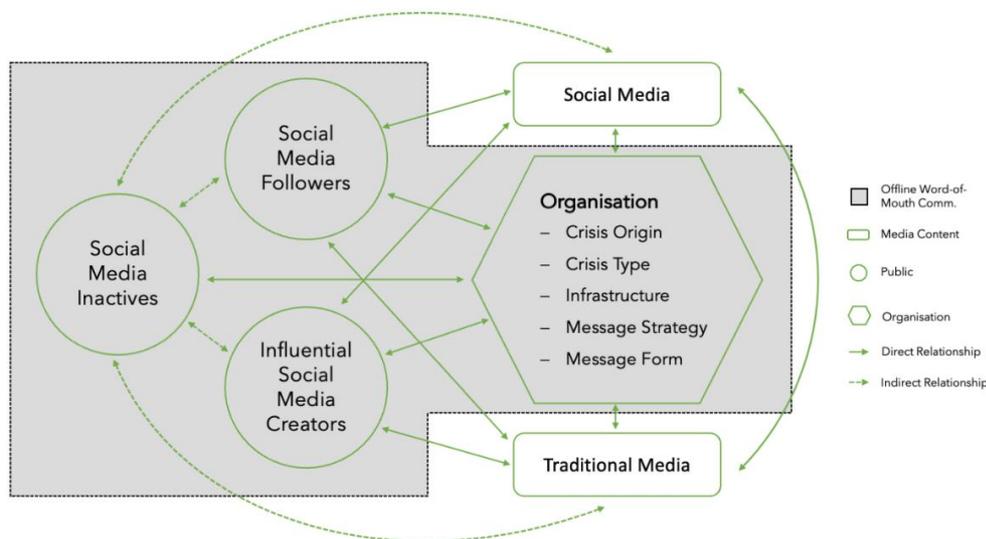
Despite social media's popularity in crisis communication, social media is still not entirely accepted and implemented as an instrument to communicate an organisation's crisis response (Lin et al., 2016). This is caused by a prevailing insecurity associated with the use of social media as it involves certain risks that need to be considered (Lin et al., 2016; Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012). These risks involve an increased vulnerability and the spread of

misinformation or unsubstantiated as well as substantiated criticism, as each individual is able to spread ideas, personal opinions and accusations (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012; Coombs, 2014). The distribution of those messages might then eventually lead to an outbreak of a crisis (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012). This is also why social media is often referred to as a “double-edged sword” (Siah Ann Mei et al., 2010, p.143; Maal & Wilson-North, 2019, p.381).

In recent crisis communication research involving social media, the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model gained in importance and is seen as a dominant theory and predictor of efficient crisis communication responses (Avery et al., 2010; Fediuk et al., 2010). The SMCC model, as shown in Figure 2.1 (Liu et al., 2012), illustrates the communication between an organisation which finds itself in a current crisis and three types of audience groups who represent creators and consumers of information throughout the process of a crisis (Jin & Liu, 2010; Liu et al., 2012).

Figure 2.1

The social-mediated crisis communication model (SMCC)



Note. From Managing turbulence in the blogosphere: Evaluating the blog-mediated crisis communication model with the American Red Cross, by Liu et al., 2012, p. 368.

These groups are defined as social media inactives, followers and creators. With these three groups, the model shows how the distribution of information in crises happens directly or indirectly on social media. Furthermore, the model is displaying two sources of crisis information, namely a third party or the organisation itself and five different aspects

influencing the organisation's crisis communication, namely the origin of the crisis, the type of crisis, the general infrastructure, the strategy for messages and the form of the message (Liu et al., 2011; Liu et al., 2012).

A study by Austin et al. (2012) focused on the SMCC model and the way audiences find information about a crisis and what traditional or social media they rely on. The findings state that the audience, which was composed of college students in this study, relies on social media to seek out insider information in a crisis. The study shows that the source and the type of information about the crisis influence how the public approaches to access and consume information (Austin et al., 2012). Generally, the study by Austin et al. (2012) shows that one should not underestimate the influence of third parties in crisis communication on social media, such as friends, journalists and acquaintances as well as communication happening through word-of-mouth to seek more information. These conclusions are confirmed by previous research which indicates that individuals favour media that meets a great number of their needs and make use of social media as it offers a direct personal link to other people (Urista et al., 2009). Unexpectedly, Twitter, for example, is not described as the most appropriate form to communicate as not all types of audiences can be reached. Furthermore, social media like Twitter or blogs were not seen as attractive sources for crisis information. Instead, audiences were seeking out crisis communication preferably via face-to-face, followed by television, messaging and calling, and Facebook. This shows that traditional media should not be overlooked and should be supplemented by social media in crisis communication (Jin & Liu, 2010; Palen et al., 2010).

A study by Liu et al. (2011), exploring the approval and emotions towards an organisation's crisis response, also focused on the SMCC model. The findings represent an existing significance regarding the match of the crisis response source, meaning the organisation itself or a third party, and the form of media, namely social media, traditional media or word-of-mouth (Liu et al., 2011). Furthermore, the authors state that the source and form of information of a crisis response have an influence on the public attributing emotions, either dependently or independently. Generally, the study's findings show that defensive or ambiguous crisis responses are met with acceptance by the public if the crisis communication is forwarded by the organisation itself (Liu et al., 2011). On the contrary, responses that are supportive are more likely to be accepted by a third party. Overall, this study outlines that the public is favouring traditional media over social media, and social media over word-of-mouth when it comes to crisis communication (Liu et al., 2011). This underlines the importance of incorporating traditional media, instead of entirely focusing on social media.

2.3 Paracrisis

Despite many defined crisis types, according to Coombs and Holladay (2012), crisis risks that appear online are often confused with a real or traditional crisis. This is why the authors emphasise the use of the term “paracrisis”, which refers to a situation that is similar to a crisis but which does not develop into a full crisis yet. They define a paracrisis “as a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p.409). Paracrisis are seen as a crisis threat which requires the organisation to take action as a paracrisis can easily evolve into a sizeable crisis. This threat involves general risks, organisational issues or reputational dangers. In fact, a paracrisis usually equals a reputational threat as there is some type of negative information circulating which can damage the reputation of an organisation. This represents a severe issue for organisations as the reputation is responsible for the way the public perceives the organisation (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

A paracrisis is more likely to emerge on social media because individuals follow specific groups or content and therefore easily come across information that can evolve into a paracrisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Therefore, Coombs and Holladay (2012) developed response strategies to appropriately address a paracrisis, namely refutation, reform, and refuse, which will be defined in the following. The strategy of refutation involves the defence of organisational practices which challenges the stakeholders and results in an intensified conflict. The strategy of reform is when the organisation acknowledges problematic behaviour and is willing to change in accordance with the stakeholders’ demands. The goal of this response strategy is to regain the stakeholders’ support given the fact that the reputational threat dissolved. The strategy of refuse consists of the organisation not acknowledging the issue hoping that the paracrisis is going to dissolve on its own as attention decreases. Another type of the refuse strategy is to bolster the organisation’s reputation. This means ignoring the rumour and counteracting by spreading positive information. The approach is to make people forget about the rumour by feeding them with positive aspects (How, 2011, as cited in Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

When responding to a paracrisis, Coombs and Holladay (2012) also highlight the importance of a good match between the social media channel that has been chosen and the stakeholders that are targeted. According to the authors, there is no added value created when the chosen channel is not able to reach the target of stakeholders. This is why the message needs to be communicated on a platform on which the target audience will consume it. Therefore, the authors defined three rules for paracrisis communication on social media. First

of all, the communication should take place where the action is, meaning that the paracrisis should be addressed where it emerged. Secondly, the authors recommend that the organisation is present and active on social media before the paracrisis happens, meaning that organisations should be careful about addressing the crisis on social media when social media has not been used previously as a fundamental communication channel. Lastly, the authors state to use several communication channels and not solely focus on social media. Generally, the study by Coombs and Holladay (2012) outlines that communication via social media can be improved and designed more effectively if researchers go in-depth on the process online. This is especially important considering the fact that paracrisis will happen more frequently with the increased use of social media (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). As this study has been published in 2012, it is for sure that the occurrence of paracrises increased along with the intensity of social media use.

The concept of a paracrisis, as described by Coombs and Holladay (2012), has emerged into an established and widely used concept in crisis communication research in the context of social media (Lim, 2017; Kim et al., 2016). Following up on the aforementioned definitions and theories of the concept, this research will focus on the analysis of paracrises, including rumours and ambiguous crises. This goes along with Coombs' (2007) definition of crisis within which the organisation finds itself in the position of the victim. These crisis types are accidental crises and rumours with stakeholders blaming the organisation for inappropriate behaviour.

2.4 Humour as a crisis response strategy

Humour is not an easily defined concept because it entails numerous types which are dependent on the receiver's perception (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015). Reyes et al. (2012, p.2) define humour as "the presence of amusing effects, such as laughter or well-being sensations". According to Taecharungroj and Nueangjamnong (2015), the main purpose of humour is to trigger positive feelings or emotions. There are several features that are representing significant aspects of humour, namely surprise (Alden et al., 2000), warmth, resolution, and playfulness (Hübler & Bell, 2003). "Humour is emotional pain that does not hurt; it seems wrong, but the perceivers find it normal and not threatening." (Taecharungroj & Nueangjamnong, 2015, p.292).

Within the literature, there are several approaches to categorise humour into different types (Martin et al., 2003; Ruch et al., 2018; Schmidt-Hidding, 1963). According to Martin et al. (2003), there are four styles of humour, namely affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and

self-defeating. Affiliative humour refers to individuals making use of jokes for the amusement of others and the support of relationships. Self-enhancing humour is characterised as maintaining a humorous attitude on life, meaning to be entertained by situations of bad luck or incongruity. Aggressive humour often entails parts that possibly discomfort others. Lastly, self-defeating humour involves the humour of an individual at its own charge. In the context of this study, affiliative, aggressive and self-defeating humour represent more relevant types of humour as these are more obvious and therefore can be identified with higher certainty. In contrast to this, self-enhancing humour represents a less important type of humour as this humorous attitude on life as outlined above is less clear and therefore more complicated to detect.

In addition to the aforementioned types, there are additional categories of humour that have been defined in relation to print and broadcast media (Catanescu & Tom, 2001). The ones that can be of use for this paper are discussed in the following. The first type of humour as outlined by Catanescu and Tom (2001) is called comparison, meaning that different elements are compared to create a situation of humour. The second type is the act of personification, namely associating attributes of an individual with an animal, object or plant. The third defined type of humour is exaggeration, meaning that something is excessively overemphasised and torn from reality. Pun represents the fourth type and means that language elements are used to create new connotations in a humorous way. The fifth type is sarcasm, meaning that obvious irony is used. Research on the difference and relationship between irony, sarcasm and cynicism states that irony and sarcasm barely show significant differences (Räwel, 2007). Lastly, there is the type of surprise, which means that humour emerged from sudden circumstances (Catanescu & Tom, 2001). In contrast to this, Schmidt-Hidding (1963) outlined the following comic styles: humour, fun, nonsense, wit, satire, irony, cynicism, and sarcasm, which classifies humour as a sub-category of comic styles.

These different categories and forms of humour show that the definitions are far-reaching and extensive, are not always clearly distinguishable and dependent on the audience and situation. This leads to the conclusion, which has also been reached by Taecharungroj and Nueangjammong (2015), that the understanding of humour certainly lies in the eye of the beholder. This is why the understanding and detection of humour within this paper is not limited to a narrow context and takes its different types and forms into consideration in order to disclose different facets used within crisis communication and the public's reactions.

According to Veil, Petrun and Roberts (2012), and Vigsø (2013), humour can be a successful communication strategy in case of an online paracrisis or an online crisis with no

severity, meaning a focus on a reputational threat with no human accidents or morality issues involved. They indicate that, in contrast to traditional crisis communication, humour can contribute to prevent the spread of negative information (Veil, Petrun & Roberts, 2012) as well as minimise the public's impulse to engage in counter-argumentation (Kim et al., 2016; Fraustino & Ma, 2015), and reduce the perceived severity of the crisis (Xiao et al., 2018). However, humour might also result in a trivialisation of the topic or possible consequences (Fraustino & Ma, 2015).

In light of the increased occurrence of paracrises on social media (Coombs & Holladay, 2012), a study by Kim et al. (2016) explored the use of self-mockery as a crisis response strategy in the context of a social media paracrisis. The study combined the methods of qualitative and quantitative content analysis to analyse the corporate communication as well as to analyse the public's reaction by exploring their comments to detect positive, negative or neutral sentiments towards the message and the organisation. The study revealed that the strategy of self-mockery can neutralise external's negative attitudes towards the company. Furthermore, the authors state that using humour as a response strategy demonstrates a kind of self-attack which represents the company's self-defence action. The use of humour in crisis communication works especially effective on social media as the informal online communication style matches the response strategy, which is supported by the use of emoticons and figurative language (Kim et al., 2016).

According to Xiao et al. (2018), exploring the effectiveness of crisis communication on social media featuring humour, on the one hand, the use of humour in crisis situations leads to a decrease in the organisation's reputation and perceived genuineness of the response as well as higher responsibility assigned to the company. This decrease in perceived credibility when using humour in crisis communication has been confirmed by Fraustino and Ma (2015) in their study on humour being a risk campaign on social media. On the other hand, when dealing with rumours, humour has a positive effect on the reputation and perceived severity of the crisis, resulting in lower responsibility assigned to the organisation. The authors define a rumour as "an ambiguous crisis where the culpability and the negative effects are unconfirmed" (Xiao et al., 2018, p.254). A rumour may be less severe, yet it can cause the evolvement of a bigger crisis. However, the public is more likely to tolerate humour in ambiguous crises, as these are less severe, than in crises within which human lives are endangered (Xiao et al., 2018). This refers back to previous findings that crises low in severity, such as rumours, are more receptive to the use of humour (Vigsø, 2013; Kim et al., 2016). As afore mentioned, humour in crisis responses works most effectively on social

media as the informal communication style, making use of emoticons and figurative language, is matching with the crisis response (Kim et al., 2016). Furthermore, Xiao et al. (2018) outlined that a humorously framed message is similar to the human voice which makes the response more likely to be accepted. The results generally show that humour can be an effective tool within crisis communication, especially on social media. Still, its implementation should be done with caution (Xiao et al., 2018).

The above discussed literature leads to the formulation of the three sub-questions of this research that all together answer the main research question. Having the background of general crisis communication research and response strategies as well as humour in crisis responses it is of interest to ask what constitutes a humorous crisis response strategy. With the base of literature, one can identify aspects of the companies' strategies that are similar to those being existent. This sub-question comes along with asking how companies implement humour as a crisis response strategy, meaning, if possible to determine, what kind of humour they try to implement and how the whole messaging is framed. Given the fact that humour does not seem to be the most obvious crisis response strategy, it is of interest to additionally ask how the public reacts to a humorous crisis response. Following up on the research explaining why the public seeks out social media during crises and the SMCC model's crisis information flow, this study seeks to add depth to the understanding of the public reactions, namely if they react negative, positive or neutral and what other emotions and attitudes are shown in response to the organisation's communication. In contrast to the study by Kim et al. (2016) on humour in crisis communication using a quantitative method to analyse the public's reactions, this question will be approached in a qualitative way to explore the reaction's content on social media in-depth.

3. Methods

The following chapter will focus on the methodology that has been applied to this research. First, the research design will be explained with regard to the research method and its suitability for this study. Secondly, the data collection is demonstrated by describing the sample and the sampling method. The third section of this chapter discusses the operationalisation to explain how the concept of crisis communication is operationalised within this research. Fourthly, this chapter focuses on validity and reliability as well as the ethics of this study's research method. Lastly, the process of data analysis is described.

3.1 Research design

This research took a qualitative approach seeking to explore how companies within the food and hygiene industry in Germany and the UK incorporated humour in their crisis response strategy on social media and how social media users reacted to it. Qualitative research is explorative and aims to derive meanings and patterns from the data, which calls for the researcher to actively engage in a sense-making process (Saunders et al., 2015). The research was following a qualitative research design as the research question aimed to explore the implemented corporate communication and strived for a deeper understanding and interpretation of the meanings of how the crisis communication is constructed and how people frame their response and attitude towards the company's response. Overall, the aim for an interpretation and acquisition of deeper understandings of communication patterns such as the company's communication and the public's reactions justified a qualitative research design (Saunders et al., 2015).

The main research question along with the sub-questions was approached by a qualitative content analysis. This method of analysis is an approach to analyse communication messages expressed in a verbal, written or visual way (Cole, 1988). With content analysis, theoretical issues can be tested as well as understandings regarding the data can be developed and extended. Content analysis aims to result in concisely described categories which represent the data and characterise the phenomenon being analysed (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Furthermore, content analysis is a very flexible research method in the sense that it can be used for qualitative as well as for quantitative data and can be conducted either deductively or inductively (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Moreover, content analysis provides additional flexibility in terms of the ability to correct errors throughout the research (Babbie, 2016).

The method of content analysis has been applied to several studies addressing and exploring similar communication phenomena as this research. For example, a research by

Kim et al. (2016) investigated a humorous crisis response focusing on posts and statements and the associated reactions of the public in form of comments. The study combined a qualitative content analysis for the corporate response with a quantitative content analysis for the comments. Furthermore, a qualitative content analysis of comments on a social media platform has already been implemented by Ernst et al. (2017) in the context of political campaigns on YouTube in order to capture the content and deeper meanings in detail. Due to the general heterogeneity of comments on social media, a qualitative analysis was the appropriate approach for the study.

In contrast to the study by Kim et al. (2016), as this research focused on an in-depth analysis of the comments going along with the response, both, the comments and the response, have been analysed by using a qualitative approach. In accordance with the study by Ernst et al. (2017), the heterogeneity of comments justified a qualitative content analysis for this research. The analysis was following a rather inductive and data-driven approach, meaning that categories were derived from the data and compared and tested with theories (Kyngäs & Vanhanen, 1999, as cited in Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Nonetheless, the theoretical concepts from the literature guided the analysis. Generally, the chosen research design, with the two-sided analysis of the corporate communication on the one hand, and the public reactions, on the other hand, resulted in insightful and extensive findings addressing both, the companies' humorous communication strategy and the public's reaction to this type of response strategy, which provided an answer to the main research question.

3.2 Sample and sampling method

This research focused on three companies, two within the food and beverage industry, namely McDonald's and True Fruits, and one company within the hygiene industry, namely Bodyform. All three companies encountered a crisis situation or a crisis-related situation which caused them to publish an official response formulated in a humorous way. The analysis focused on the communication in the German and UK market and took three different social media platforms into account, particularly Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, which have been chosen as each of the crises has been addressed on one of these. The social media users represent the public audience consisting of individuals who are registered on the aforementioned platforms and reacted to the organisation's crisis response with a comment.

The data collection for the qualitative content analysis of the companies' responses made use of purposive sampling, meaning that the sample was based on the researcher's judgement of selecting the most useful and representative cases (Babbie, 2016). This selective

form of non-probability sampling was justified by the fact that this study focuses on deviant cases of crisis responses as only cases involving humour in the response could be included within the sample. The collection of humorous crisis responses was dependent on a thorough internet research and the difficulty of finding appropriate data fulfilling the criteria for this research and a thorough analysis. Although there are numerous crisis responses in general, the proportion of accessible humorous crisis responses is limited as it is not seen as a common strategy in crisis situations (Vigsø, 2013). The selected cases may not represent an exhaustive picture of humorous crisis responses but do suffice as a basis for a general analysis and comparison (Babbie, 2016).

The population consisted of companies' crisis responses on social media within Europe and within the food or hygiene industry. The sample was chosen based on defined criteria, as illustrated in Table 3.1, ensuring the comparability and analysability of the data which is explained in the following. The researcher collected the data on basis of some type of humour included within the message, meaning the presence of irony, sarcasm or a different type of humour. Furthermore, the data could only be collected under the condition of at least 50 direct comments going along with the company's response. Additionally, the response, in form of a post or a video, had to be of a certain length to detect patterns within the responses, meaning videos of at least one-minute length and written responses of at least 500 words. Moreover, the research took not only crises as such into account but also ambiguous crisis responses or responses to rumours and criticism, or paracrises, which, as illustrated in the theoretical framework, demonstrate harm to the company as well and can trigger the outbreak of a crisis. This decision was based on the little amount of accessible and suitable data that has been found in order to approve a wider range of cases.

Table 3.1

Inclusion and exclusion criteria of the data

Criteria	Included	Excluded
Country/region	European countries (focus on Germany and UK)	Non-European countries
Source	Social media	Traditional media
Companies	Food and beverage industry, hygiene and health industry	Other types of industries
Crisis type	Paracrisis, accidental crises (ambiguous crises), victim crises (rumours)	Preventable crises (severe crises)
Crisis response	Statement with incorporated humour	Formal statement with acknowledgement and apology
Length	Min. 500 words (text), 1 minute (video)	Less than 500 words (text), 1 minute (video)
Associated comments	Min. 50 comments with the crisis response	Less than 50 comments with the crisis response

The data sample for the qualitative content analysis of the public reactions, as shown in Table 3.2, consisted of 50 comments for the crisis response by McDonald's, and 200 comments each for the remaining two companies, namely True Fruits and Bodyform. This sample size aimed for a saturation point at which no new insights could be generated anymore (Ando et al., 2014). The selection represents the first comments that have been posted in response to the individual company's statement to display the direct reaction and perception of the public and to exclude reactions that were posted in a later stage and might not be related to the issue anymore.

The data sample of the corporate communication, as displayed in Table 3.2, consisted of three extensive crisis responses: one video by McDonald's posted on Twitter, one video by Bodyform posted on YouTube, and one Facebook post as well as an Instagram post by True Fruits Smoothies. The video by McDonald's, posted in February 2017, is of 1:05 minutes length and is going along with 50 replies to the tweet incorporating the video (McDonald's Deutschland, 2017). The video was posted as a part of a campaign initiated by McDonald's which started in response to some rumours that claimed that there is wood or sawdust processed within the fries which caused bad press in Germany (McDonald's, 2017). Within the video, McDonald's portrays the production of its fries as if they were truly made out of wood.

The video by Bodyform was posted in October 2012 on YouTube, is 1:44 minutes in length and has been commented on by 1.418 users (Bodyform UK, 2012). This video was posted in response to a post on Bodyform’s Facebook page by a man called Richard Neill, who accused Bodyform of deception and giving a wrong impression regarding the women’s period (Neill, 2012). Whether the post was meant sarcastically or not, the post became popular and caused Bodyform to react with a humorously framed video response. Within this video, the presumable CEO of Bodyform, named Caroline Williams, pretends to admit that advertisements have lied and deceived people about a women’s period and now wants to clarify that there is no ‘happy period’ (Bodyform UK, 2012).

The Facebook post by True Fruits was published in February 2019, makes up a length of 1019 words and was commented on by 4.498 Facebook users (true fruits Smoothies, 2019). This post is supplemented by an Instagram post by True Fruits, also published in February 2019, 74 words in length with 3.335 comments (true fruits, 2019). These posts have been published in response to allegations of racism, sexism and accusations of supporting the rape culture. This criticism arose in response to several provocative marketing messages in the course of three campaigns promoted with slogans on the company’s smoothie bottles (true fruits Smoothies, 2019).

Table 3.2

Combined data sample of crisis responses and public reactions

Company	Crisis response	Public reaction
True Fruits	Facebook post (1019 words) + Instagram post (74 words)	200 comments
Bodyform	Video (1:44 minutes)	200 comments
McDonald’s	Video (1:05 minutes)	50 comments
Total	3 corporate responses	450 comments

The selection of companies was based on including any type of company that has been identified with the implementation of a humorous response strategy in the European context and within the food and hygiene industry. The selection did not only focus on one industry sector as the data sample would not have been sufficient enough. Ultimately, the chosen companies include three companies, two of the same and one of a different industry, making it possible to compare the findings but also to show contrast. The food and beverage as well as the hygiene industry, particularly the feminine hygiene market, represent important

industries within the economy (MarketLine, 2020; European Commission, n.d.). Half of the global female population, who in total amount to 26%, are at reproductive age and therefore require feminine hygiene products (Unicef, 2018). Additionally, the food and beverage industry represents the biggest industry in manufacturing in Europe (European Commission, n.d.). These industries are comparable because they both represent consumer goods in humans' daily life. The European context, in particular Germany and the UK, has been chosen since there has not been a lot of research on humorous crisis communication in general but also not in the European context, or in particular with a focus on Germany or the UK, with this kind of research approach. The focus of this research lies on these two countries as they are comparable and therefore provide insights into the crisis communication within Europe.

3.3 Operationalisation

The concept of crisis communication, as defined in the theoretical framework, is operationalised as described in the following. The companies' responses were addressed and interpreted by content and structure, language, the general communication style, and any potential emoticons that have been used (Kim et al., 2016). Additionally, if applicable, the type of crisis communication strategy implemented by the company was examined as well as the identification of the type of humour that has been used. The public reaction was explored by the comments that the social media users posted on the different social media platforms. The comments were analysed according to their general attitude towards the company, meaning the expression of either neutral, negative or positive attitudes and the way users framed their comments in this respect. Furthermore, the analysis of the attitude and the general content of the comments showed if individuals were satisfied with the company's crisis response or blamed the company for its communication. To expand on these attitudes, the research was interpreting the content of the comments more in-depth (Ernst et al., 2017), namely analysing the content, language, and, if applicable, any humour that has been used in response to the humour used in the response.

3.4 Validity, reliability and ethics

In this case of qualitative content analysis, it was of importance for the researcher to consider the reliability and validity of this research and its method. One of the advantages of qualitative content analysis was the possibility to constantly turn back to the data, to code and recode based on new findings, which is strengthening the reliability (Babbie, 2016). This

process of coding and recoding also demonstrates that results can be reproduced.

Additionally, the reliability was ensured and increased through the thoroughness of taking notes throughout the process of analysis. Validity was guaranteed by constantly comparing the findings with existing findings at different stages, as qualitative research is based on several cycles of the collection and analysis of data (Boeije, 2010). Thereby the researcher could make sure that the method was measuring what it was intended to measure and that the research question could be answered.

This research, applying the method of qualitative content analysis, demonstrated certain strengths but also weaknesses regarding the chosen method, as there is a prevailing risk that the chosen approach might be reflected within and influence the findings in a way. Therefore, the strategy of triangulation is a relevant approach to integrate when exploring crisis responses. In addition to the existing approaches within literature analysing crisis responses, it is important to enlighten the theme from different perspectives and test previous findings by making use of several different research methods. However, due to the limited scope of this research, this research made use of solely one research method to further investigate a certain niche of crisis responses, namely the ones incorporating humour. Nevertheless, the results of this research can be juxtaposed and compared with previous findings (Babbie, 2016).

Generally, qualitative approaches present a possible risk of researcher bias (Chenail, 2011), which also demonstrates a reasonable aspect regarding the qualitative content analysis of this research. The possibility of researcher bias could have been decreased through the incorporation of a second researcher. However, due to time considerations and in the course of this small-scale research, no second researcher has been involved in the process of analysis.

Furthermore, ethics play an important role in qualitative research and need to be considered separately from research concerns (Brennen, 2017). The researcher's role has to be assessed regarding the extent to which the research process is intrusive. In the course of this research, there was no direct contact with individuals, implying that participants were not personally harmed, deceived or disturbed, which is why no informed consent was required (Flick, 2007). However, there is an ongoing ethical debate about whether data which is available online on social media platforms can be referred to as publicly available data (Ravn et al., 2020). Scientists argue that content posted online, like pictures or videos, does represent rather personal data (Ravn et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it is still common and widely accepted to rely on the definition of publicly available data when analysing data of online platforms (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Markham et al., 2018). This is why the online content of this

research is regarded as public data, which does not require the protection of the user's privacy, meaning that the usernames were not kept anonymously. This decision is also based on the fact that written comments responding to a post are seen as less personal than images or videos.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data was examined through a thematic analysis which sought to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data (Saunders et al., 2015). Instead of analysing the manifest content, which entails the surface content, the analysis was looking for latent content which involves that the discovered themes describe the underlying meaning of the communication (Babbie, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method of thematic analysis is a very flexible and exploratory process that required a constant movement of going back and forth within the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the steps of the analysis consist of six phases which are described in the following. The first phase was to actively familiarise oneself with the data, which means reading in detail and noting down initial thoughts. In the second step of thematic analysis, the initial codes were generated seeking to code numerous potential themes. This step was followed by the third phase of combining the codes to overarching themes. In the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed, namely broken down or merged. The basis for the fifth step was an extensive thematic map covering all the data within which each theme and sub-theme were defined and described. The last step of thematic analysis entailed the production of the final report of the analysis.

Given the exploratory nature of thematic analysis, the approach is less strict with its coding process. Therefore, the three-step coding process of selective, axial, and open codes was applied for data analysis. This was possible as thematic analysis and the three-step coding process originated from (constructivist) grounded theory have numerous similarities and both aim to result in significant codes and themes, whereas the difference is that theoretical concepts are applied in a later stage with the three-step process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1990) defined the coding process of open, axial, and selective codes. Open codes refer to an initial categorisation of the data capturing all aspects that are observed. Open coding is followed by axial codes which cluster several open codes into a more abstract code. The third step, namely the selective codes, are the main categories which serve to answer the research question and demonstrate the results of the research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Williams & Moser, 2019).

In the following, an example of this aforementioned coding process, which has been applied to this research, is given. One selective code that resulted from the analysis of user comments is for example *positive emotions/attitude towards the company* which represents the main category for positive emotions like *support and enthusiasm, attachment and loyalty, acknowledgement* etc. These aforementioned attitudes and emotions serve as the axial codes. The axial code of *support and enthusiasm* clusters all the open codes which include the findings within the comments that expressed a supportive or enthusiastic attitude. This attitude has been detected by the use of words, such as “love”, “amazing”, “genius”, etc. and the general content that was communicated within the comment, such as the message of supporting the response or this kind of advertising. The complete codebooks, both for the corporate communication and the public’s reaction, are attached in Appendix A and Appendix B of this paper.

4. Results

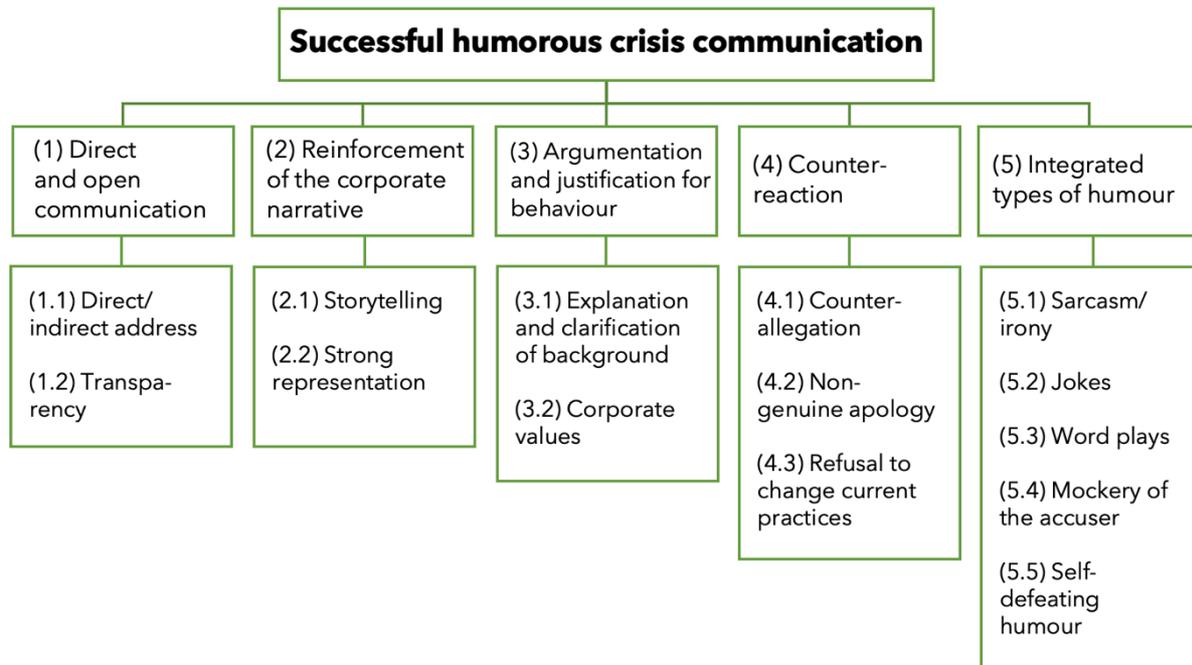
The following chapter is presenting the findings that resulted from the qualitative content analysis. The chapter is divided into three sub-sections, whereas each sub-section is devoted to one sub-question. All exemplary text passages taken from the corporate responses by True Fruits and McDonald's as well as the associated comments which were originally formulated in German have been translated into English.

4.1 The five factors constituting a successful humorous crisis response strategy

The analysis of the corporate crisis communication resulted in five factors that constitute a successful humorous crisis response strategy. The themes that emerged are (1) direct and open communication, (2) reinforcement of the corporate narrative, (3) argumentation and justification for behaviour, (4) counterreaction, and (5) integrated types of humour, which are illustrated in Figure 4.1. Naturally, the importance of each of the themes varies with regard to the company's response. However, the results still allow to draw the conclusion that these themes are relevant aspects companies include to respond in a crisis situation implementing humour. Whether the humorous crisis responses were successful in the three cases of this research cannot be said with full certainty as this is dependent on several factors, such as the interaction rate or the ultimate influence on the company's reputation and financial situation, which were not explored in this study. However, it can be said that the dominant sentiment towards the company was positive which supports the assumption of successful communication.

Figure 4.1

The five factors constituting a successful humorous crisis communication



4.1.1 Direct and open communication

The factor of (1) direct and open communication comes along with the sub-themes of (1.1) direct/indirect address and (1.2) transparency. The theme of (1.1) direct/indirect address emerged from the circumstance that each of the company responses did address the audience. For True Fruits, the direct address was as follows “Dear friends, dear supposedly discriminated [people], dear dumb [people] ...” In the case of Bodyform, the video response directly addressed Richard Neill, who is the man that caused Bodyform to produce and publish their response, with “Hello Richard, ...” The third case of McDonald’s did implement its introduction slightly different as there are no literal welcoming words. However, the response starts with “The people do not know anymore...” which is categorised as an indirect address as the audience is not directly addressed or approached by name. Nevertheless, the formulation includes every individual, meaning that the general public is addressed and every viewer can feel involved and addressed.

The theme of (1.2) transparency resulted from the fact that each of the companies did take up the issue of concern and transparently addressed the criticism in different ways as well as took a position with the content they communicated. True Fruits instantly began its response by stating that there have been messages of criticism and what kind of allegations they were confronted with which is illustrated by the following sequence: “We are currently

receiving some messages and criticism via social networks. We are accused of racism, sexism or even the promotion of ‘rape culture’.” The speaker in Bodyform’s response introduced herself and directly introduced the trigger the video was intended to respond to: “Hello, Richard, I’m Caroline Williams, the CEO of Bodyform. We read your Facebook post with interest, ...” McDonald’s did not address the issue transparently as in directly talking about the topic as criticism or an issue which is why this theme could not be applied to the company’s response.

This theme of direct and open communication can be linked to the findings by Gruber et al. (2015) who outlined transparency as a key element of crisis communication on social media. As Brockner and Wiesenfeld (1996) stated, the public is interested in the whole process of the crisis and is expecting transparent communication from pre- to post-crisis, which, in accordance with the communication efforts, can be examined in this case. This aspect of transparency and open communication has also been confirmed by Lin et al. (2016) who also developed a set of recommendations for crisis communication on social media. In fact, their findings confirm the findings of this study in terms of open and direct communication as they emphasise the importance of active engagement in dialogue, meaning that the company is actively interacting and willing to communicate with the public and to enter a dialogue to address the issue (Lin et al., 2016).

4.1.2 Reinforcement of the corporate narrative

The way McDonald’s is framing the response is by telling a story which also represents the second main factor, (2) reinforcement of the corporate narrative. The company invented a story which is wrapped around the message, meaning that they took the crisis as the origin of the story and made it seem as if the rumour had been a true story all along which they wanted to tell to the public. This (2.1) storytelling represents one theme going along with the category of reinforcement of the corporative narrative. In accordance with McDonald’s, Bodyform and True Fruits also made use of telling a story in form of vivid descriptions and the way the crisis responses were structured. In Bodyform’s case, the video included visual presentations of aspects that were discussed, such as pictures of women doing activities, such as running or inline skating, or the display of supposed research featuring focus groups. For True Fruits, the story wrapped around the response lies in the structure of the post that built one argument upon the other, concluding with the message of being discriminatory towards “dumb” people. Throughout this response, the company pictorially described some of their slogans, such as “shake in case of an accumulation of seeds”.

Bodyform's and McDonald's' responses are similar in their way of (2.2) strong representation, meaning that both responses feature one main speaker or have one primary voice that is communicating the response. As True Fruits has, in contrast to this, a written response, the statement of a prevailing main speaker cannot be made. However, the posts by True Fruits follow a consistent tone of voice, which can also be described as an aspect of strong representation. The theme of reinforcing the corporate narrative cannot directly be linked to previous findings, which could indicate that this theme is a particularity within humorous crisis response strategies as it has been identified in each of the cases. Nevertheless, this theme can also be seen as a kind of response strategy that is intended to bolster the crisis response in the sense that it is strengthening the company's appearance, which indicates a link to Coombs' (2007) definition of bolstering crisis responses.

4.1.3 Argumentation and justification for behaviour

The third factor of a successful humorous corporate response is defined as (3) argumentation and justification for behaviour. This theme is only applicable to the response by True Fruits and Bodyform. First of all, the companies display an (3.1) explanation and clarification of the background of the issue or the crisis. True Fruits explains in detail what the public's criticism is referring to and clarifies the intention and meaning of the campaigns they launched. This is made clear with the following text passage:

This time it's about a best-of of various slogans that date back a few years. This also includes our campaign that we, as a German company, ran in Austria in 2017 with poster texts such as 'rarely makes it across the border anymore' or 'even more bottles from abroad.' (True Fruits, Facebook post 14.02.2019)

With this statement the company explains what aspects, inter alia, the criticism was about. Hereinafter, the company clarifies the intention behind the campaign that has been criticised. This is demonstrated by the following quote:

This campaign was a criticism of Austria's right-wing politics and the possible closure of the Brenner Pass (which would have made it more difficult for refugees to enter the country). That this was a campaign against xenophobia would have become clear at the latest if you had dealt with the campaign and had looked at the third campaign motif, for

example: “ ‘you cannot vote for brown with us’ (because none of our bottles are brown...)” (True Fruits, Facebook post 14.02.2019)

This type of explanation and clarification has been implemented by True Fruits for all the different issues they have been criticised for. The same has been done by Bodyform as the company is clarifying the facts for the public and tries to give an explanation:

And I think it's time we came clean. We lied to you, Richard. ... What you've seen in advertisement so far, isn't a factual representation of events. You're right. The flagrant use of visualisations, such as skydiving, rollerblading, and mountain-biking - you forgot horse riding, Richard - are actually metaphors. They're not real. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this, but there's no such thing as a ,happy period‘. The reality is, some people simply can't handle the truth. In the past we've tried to be more honest in our approach. (Bodyform, YouTube video, 16.10.2012)

Furthermore, the two company responses share their (3.2) corporate values. For example, True Fruits is stating that the company will continue to advertise following their way of communication, meaning that they, to some extent, expect intelligence and the understanding of humour from their audience which is expressed in the following quote: “In principle, however, we would like to point out that we will continue to operate advertising in the future, which will require a certain degree of intelligence and humor.” Furthermore, they expressed their attitude towards racism and discrimination: “We hate racism just like all other forms of discrimination.” Bodyform is also communicating aspects of its values and views stating: “In the past we've tried to be more honest in our approach”, meaning that they consistently aspired an honest communication.

The theme of argumentation and justification for behaviour cannot be directly matched with or confirmed by an existing crisis theory. However, there are parallels with the paracrisis response strategies outlined by Coombs and Holladay (2012), in particular the refutation strategy. Refutation entails the defence of organisational practices which in this case is not done in an intrusive way but more subtly and unobtrusively. The clarification and explanation of the crisis background as well as sharing company views and values is a way of justifying the behaviour and explaining why the company was acting in that exact way, which is generally defending organisational practices (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Furthermore, the primary crisis response strategy excuse is confirming this theme as the explanation of the

background and clarification of the company's behaviour also functions as an element to minimise the company's responsibility due to the company explaining their intentions and displaying that there was no harm being caused (Coombs, 2007).

4.1.4 Counterreaction

Within the responses by True Fruits and Bodyform, the analysis resulted in the detection of some form of (4) counterreaction that the company incorporated within the response. As a part of counterreaction a type of (4.1) counter-allegation, in particular blaming of the accusers and critics, which is accompanied by the denial of actual wrongdoings, was identified within the responses. True Fruits is blaming the people who do not understand the company's message or humour: "So you will always come across this type of communication with us that stupid people might misunderstand." Furthermore, the company indicates that the fault might be found in the critic's minds, which is illustrated with the following passage: "What thoughts are going on in such heads and isn't the supposed problem to be found there?" Bodyform also integrated a counter-allegation in the sense that the company blamed the initial critic, Richard Neill, for his statement triggering the whole crisis: "But you Richard have torn down that veil and exposed this myth, thereby exposing every man to a reality we hoped they would never have to face. You did that, Richard. You. Well done."

Another part of the counterreaction by both companies was a (4.2) non-genuine apology. Regarding True fruit's response, the apology is seen as non-genuine as the company solely apologises to people who agree with the company's views and opinion of seeing the criticism as unreasonable and unnecessary as this quote is demonstrating: "... and apologies to anyone who is also justifiably bored with it." Towards the end of the response, True Fruits apologises that the communication is not made for "dumb" people as illustrated with the following quote: "It [the communication] is just not made for stupid people and never will be, we're sorry about that." With Bodyform, the apology was framed as the following: "And I want to say sorry. Sorry.", which is categorised as non-genuine and hypocritical in this case as the apology is showing no depth, no demonstration of real sympathy or understanding. The way the actress is communicating this apology, meaning her tone of voice and facial expressions, together with the lack of content constitutes the non-genuineness.

Another counterreaction that has been detected with the response by True Fruits is the (4.3) refusal to change current practices as exemplified by the following quote: "You don't like our stupid jokes. In short: you just don't like us. You know what? That's OK ... nobody's forcing you to buy our stuff or follow our entertainment channels." The company

demonstrates no willingness to change current organisational practices due to the criticism and rumours. Instead, the company suggests that people who do not agree with the company's way of communication renounce the smoothies' consumption.

The theme of counterreactions can be linked to the crisis response strategies described by Coombs (2007). First of all, the sub-theme of counter-allegation matches with Coombs' (2007) primary crisis response strategy labelled as attacking the accuser. The company makes use of this strategy in the sense that it opposes the individuals who expressed criticism or accused the company. By doing this, the company is basically stating that the fault does not lie in the company's behaviour but in the public's criticism. The group of people who accused the company of wrongdoings is confronted with allegations against them (Coombs, 2007).

Regarding the sub-theme of a non-genuine apology, one could draw a connection to the primary crisis response strategy of apology (Coombs, 2007). However, this strategy is defined as the company taking full responsibility and demanding forgiveness which demonstrates a contradiction in regard to the analysed cases. Both companies, True Fruits and Bodyform, make use of literal apologetic words. Nevertheless, in the context of a humorous response, the apology does not come across as genuine and is rather framed ironically. Furthermore, none of the companies show the willingness or openly communicate to take full responsibility. Surprisingly, the response by Bodyform does include a demand for forgiveness: "I just hope you can find it in your heart to forgive us." However, as mentioned before, this demand is not communicated in a sincere way which diminishes the actual meaning of the words.

Lastly, the theme of refusal to change can be substantiated by Coombs and Holladay's (2012) strategy to address a paracrisis called refuse, meaning that the company is not acknowledging any supposed wrongdoing or problematic behaviour and is also not willing to change. This is demonstrated in the way the companies communicate that they stick to their way of communication and maintain their point of view. According to Coombs and Holladay (2012), this strategy comes along with the company's hope that the crisis will dissolve.

4.2 The implementation of humour as a crisis response strategy

The question of how the companies implemented humour in their crisis responses can be answered with the theme of (5) integrated types of humour which entails the different types of humour the companies made use of. These are (5.1) sarcasm/irony, (5.2) jokes, (5.3) word plays, (5.4) mockery of the accuser, and (5.5) self-defeating humour. Generally, all three companies had a slightly different approach in how they incorporated humour.

True Fruits made use of sarcasm/irony by saying that they are discriminatory: “Yes, we are discriminatory”, which does not reflect the company’s intentions and values as they make clear at a later stage of the response. Furthermore, the company incorporated topic-unrelated jokes such as: “People who listen to ‘Schlager’ [hits] really shouldn't be allowed to fiddle with the radio.” The company additionally integrated word plays such as “lousy outfit” (ger. Saftladen), which generally connotes a negative term but in the sense of True Fruits is meant as a word play combining the word juice (ger. Saft) and store (ger. Laden). This word play can also be seen as a type of self-defeating humour together with the company calling itself discriminatory, but only towards ‘dumb’ people. Additionally, mockery of the accuser was explored with the company making fun of people who supposedly are not able to understand the company’s humour which is illustrated with the following quote: “... to protect a supposed minority (the stupid ones), with the warning ‘Caution, this advertising could be misunderstood by stupid people!’ ...”

Bodyform also made use of different forms of humour within its response. First of all, the video has a general sarcastic undertone which is why several parts come across sarcastically or ironically: “The flagrant use of visualisations, such as skydiving, rollerblading, and mountain-biking - you forgot horse riding, Richard.” Furthermore, the company’s response included mockery of the accuser. In this case, Richard was presented as being clueless regarding the women’s period and other aspects concerning the women’s body: “[farts] Oh, sorry Richard, you did know that we do that too? Didn't you?” Additionally, the company made use of jokes: “... yes Richard, the blood coursing from our uteri like a crimson landslide”, which is a joke referring to a series of paintings by the artist Erin M. Riley focusing on capturing the women’s period (Erin m. riley, n.d.).

Regarding McDonald’s’ case, the response is framed humorously as a whole. The whole story about fries made out of wood is picking up on the initial rumour and is giving the audience the feeling that this rumour represents the truth. However, the way the video is framed and the way the main speaker is presenting the product makes it clear to the audience that the entire story is meant ironically, not at least because the company might harm itself by stating that their fries are made out of wood.

Generally, the findings by Veil, Petrun and Roberts (2012) as well as the findings by Vigsø (2013), stating that humour can be a successful communication strategy in case of a paracrisis or crisis without severe impact, can be confirmed. The analysed crises can be categorised as paracrisis as they take place on social media and represent a threat and reputational risks to the company requiring the organisation to take action (Coombs &

Holladay, 2012). The crises did not involve severe harm or damage, human accidents or morality issues. Instead, mild potential responsibility and a mild threat are attributed to the company (Coombs, 2007). These factors all together confirm the categorisation of the crisis as a paracrisis.

The integrated types of humour, namely sarcasm/irony and self-defeating humour reappear in the literature on humour (Martin et al., 2003; Catanescu & Tom, 2001), and can be identified as types of humour that are implemented in a humorous crisis communication. Furthermore, word plays have been identified as an element that is used to create a humorous situation which can be equated with a pun, a category of humour identified by Catanescu and Tom (2001). The integration of jokes can be linked to affiliative humour as it is representing the use of jokes in order to amuse others (Martin et al., 2003). Lastly, the theme of mockery of the accuser has been identified as a relevant element of how the company is implementing humour in its response. It can be seen as an aggressive type of humour, as outlined by Martin et al. (2003), which might discomfort others, as in True Fruits' case, calling people, who supposedly do not understand the company's humour, dumb. Generally, Kim et al. (2016) outlined that the use of humour as a response strategy is a kind of self-attack which demonstrates that the company is defending itself. This theory matches with the integrated type of self-defeating humour combined with the justification and argumentation for the company's behaviour which results in a self-defence action. This self-defeating humour in form of self-mockery can contribute to a neutralisation of the public's negative attitude towards the company (Kim et al., 2016).

4.3 The seven factors of the social media users' reactions

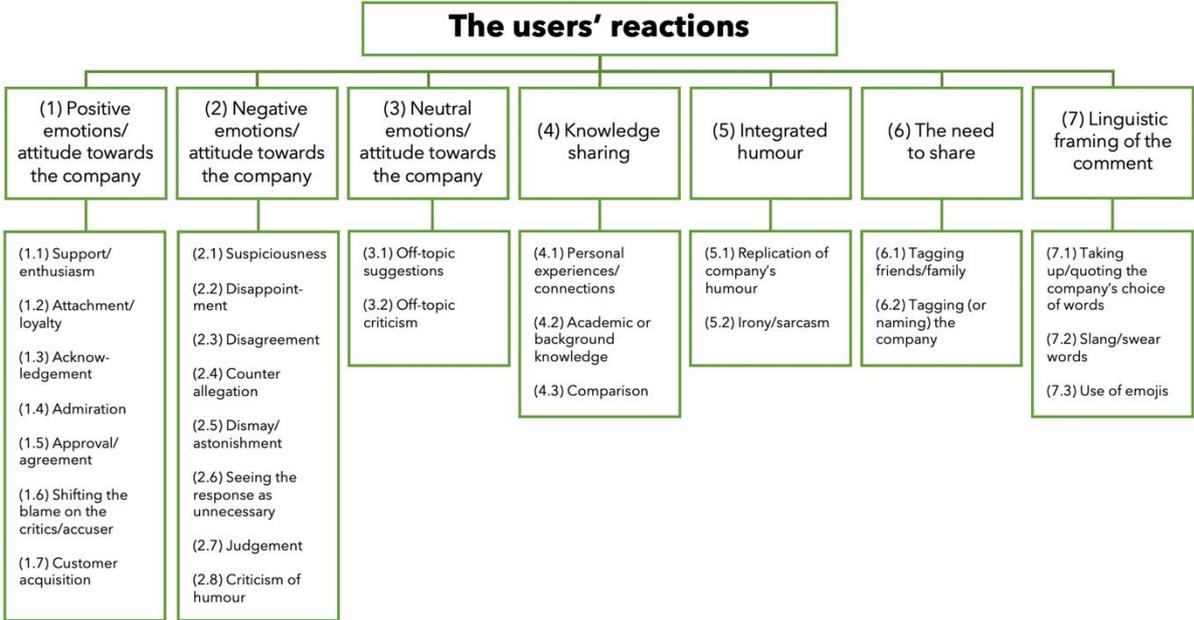
The analysis of the user comments resulted in seven factors describing how the public reacted to the humorous crisis communication. The findings consist of seven main themes, illustrated in Figure 4.2, that help to understand the public's reaction in-depth and to identify which attitudes and emotions were expressed towards the company's response. These factors are the following: (1) positive emotions/attitude towards the company, (2) negative emotions/attitude towards the company, (3) neutral emotions/attitude towards the company, (4) knowledge sharing, (5) integrated humour, (6) the need to share, (7) linguistic framing of the comment.

It can be said that, in two out of three cases, the humorous response by the company was successful in the sense that the dominant sentiment towards the company was positive. In the case of McDonald's' response, the users' attitudes were rather equally distributed.

Positive means that the content of the users’ comments communicated positive reactions such as support, enthusiasm or excitement. Negative comments included comments that reacted to the comment with negative sentiments such as disagreement, dislike or disappointment. Comments categorised as neutral were framed neither positively nor negatively but were still related to the response or the topic in general or included the tagging of other people without showing any attitude towards the response or the company.

Figure 4.2

The seven factors of the users’ reactions



4.3.1 Positive emotions/attitude towards the company

The theme of (1) positive emotions/attitude towards the company is subdivided into several sub-themes which represent different positive feelings that were expressed by the users: (1.1) support/enthusiasm, (1.2) attachment/loyalty, (1.3) acknowledgement (of the conceptualisation of the response), (1.4) admiration, (1.5) approval/agreement, (1.6) shifting blame on the critics/accuser, (1.7) customer acquisition. In the following, examples for each of these emotions expressed towards the company will be given.

(1.1) Support and enthusiasm were expressed by users in all three response cases. This identified feeling towards the company includes enthusiasm and support for the response itself, the company’s humour, or the form of advertising. This is illustrated by a comment by Pascal Färber reacting to True Fruits’ response with “I love you 😂❤️”. A user named Lily

Pink Baker reacting to Bodyform's response expressed support by stating "This is brilliant!" And this comment by Chili-Schaf @Distelfalten illustrates one of the supportive reactions towards McDonald's "I find this video so awesome ...". Generally, users commenting on the responses repeatedly expressed their support by telling the company that it is doing the exact right thing and that they do not have to justify themselves for their behaviour or statements.

Another feeling categorised as positive feelings towards the company is (1.2) attachment/loyalty, meaning that the users expressed their loyalty or attachment towards the company in a way that they have a feeling of pride, identification or trust. A user named Marion Wolf commented on True Fruits' response with "Just for this I will buy a bottle tomorrow" expressing the user's loyalty by displaying a loyal purchase decision of the product. A user named bigpurplesmile expressed his or her loyalty by expressing that he or she is a long-standing customer of the brand's products: "Brilliant!!! I've been using bodyform for years and I'm so proud of this!!!!!!" In McDonald's case, a comment by Mr. Game&Kev @Kev1896 displays an unconditional loyalty, as the loyalty towards the company seems to be stronger than the rumours: "I don't care what they are made of – the fact is that they taste awesome! 😊🍷🍔"

The users also expressed the positive feeling of (1.3) acknowledgement in all three cases of the humorous responses. This theme includes the users' acknowledgement of the company's marketing, advertisement, public relations, or the praise of the general communication. This is illustrated with the following exemplary quotes. Ramona Sogined reacted to True Fruits' response with: "[tagged] Benjamin Weingärtner world's best marketing." A reaction to Bodyform's communication by karmaboi expressed the following acknowledgement: "Fantastic response to a great comment. Surely a marketing awards winner :) Brilliant!" Furthermore, the user named Paul @kli_paul expressed his respect towards the response posted by McDonald's by stating: "Such a message from MC! Remarkable, my respect!"

The positive feeling of (1.4) admiration was found in several comments by True Fruits, meaning that the users, in reaction to the response, admired the company so intensively that they expressed the wish to work for the company. This is illustrated by the following comment by Christoph Ott stating "I am available soon and would like to work for you! 😊" as well as by a comment by Elisabeth Olia stating "Markus Kristen I now know where I want to do my internship 😊". Furthermore, users expressed their admiration and appreciation with gestures communicated through words or emojis, such as applause or the expression of taking

their hat off to them. This form of strong admiration could not be found in the comments by Bodyform or McDonald's.

All three cases received comments entailing (1.5) approval and agreement with the company's opinion and the response they posted. Anni Bee, a social media user who commented underneath True Fruits' response stated: "You are doing it just right. Do not be swayed by others. 🙌 ...". Conall commented on Bodyform's video response with "My name is not important, and I approve of this post!" and thereby expresses his approval. An exemplary comment by SpiRiT @CraCeD_SpiRiT reacted to McDonald's' response by stating: "more realistic than your advertisements 🤔". This shows the user's agreement as he or she finds it more realistic than previous ads or communication by the company.

Another theme identified among the reactions towards True Fruits and Bodyform, which is going along with the positive attitude towards the company is (1.6) shifting blame on the critics/accuser. This is categorised as positive as it supports a positive attitude towards the company while expressing negative sentiments to the people sharing criticism and rumours about the company. In the case of True Fruits, this comment by Shari Ebener exemplifies this blame: "You don't need to justify yourselves for anything. Your advertising is great and those who get it wrong have only themselves to blame...". A comment by bydlomonster illustrates the same sentiment towards the individual(s) that initiated complaints or criticism:

Hilarious. If men can complain that periods are not discussed in explicit terms in ads (ads meant to sell products for women, not men, by the way) I can't wait to see the woman who complains to a condom company that their commercials didn't apprise her of the fact that men are known to engage in a number of crass and unseemly behaviors relating to sexual intercourse, including ejaculation. (bydlomonster)

The last theme that is subordinated to the positive feelings and emotions is the (1.7) customer acquisition meaning that the response was convincing to such an extent that users decided to become a customer of this company. This sentiment was detected among the comments by True Fruits and Bodyform and is illustrated with two exemplary quotes in the following. Marius Kleinerüschkamp stated "I think I will soon become your customer for the first time. I have never heard a better statement from any company. With this kind of authenticity, I have to get to know your products. Hats off! 😊" in a comment reacting to True Fruits' statement. Tobias Wright reacted to Bodyform by specifying: "Since I'm the main buyer of pads in the household. I'm switching. Immediately."

Generally, the theme of positive emotions and a positive attitude towards the company can be linked to previous findings in the literature. Liu et al. (2011) stated that a crisis response that is framed rather defensive or ambiguous is accepted by the public if the organisation initiated and communicated the response itself. In the case of this research, one can say that the responses were partly defensive as well as ambiguous in the sense that they were communicated with the implementation of humour. Furthermore, the companies forwarded the crisis communication themselves. This, in turn, can be a reason for the acceptance and positive reaction by the public. In sum, the major sentiment of the comments was positive towards the company which can be explained by the fact that, according to Veil, Petrun and Roberts (2012), humour can prevent the spreading of negative information. Additionally, the predominantly positive responses can be traced back to the findings by Kim et al. (2016) and Fraustino and Ma (2015) stating that humour can positively influence the public's motivation to engage in counter-arguments. Another factor influencing the positive reactions might be that humour contributes to a reduction of the perceived crisis severity (Xiao et al., 2018). As outlined within section 4.2 about the implementation of humour, the act of self-mockery, which has been identified with the response by True Fruits, can also neutralise and positively influence the public's attitude towards the company (Kim et al., 2016). Generally, it can be said that the public tolerates humour in crisis communication of crises low in severity, meaning that no human lives are at risk, which is the case for all three crisis situations of this research (Xiao et al., 2018). Especially, as the crisis types mostly originated from rumours, the public is accepting the use of humour as a crisis communication strategy (Vigsø, 2013; Kim et al., 2016).

4.3.2 Negative emotions/attitude towards the company

The (2) negative emotions/attitude towards the company subdivide into several emotions which represent different negative feelings or reactions: (2.1) suspiciousness, (2.2) disappointment, (2.3) disagreement, (2.4) counter allegation, (2.5) dismay/astonishment, (2.6) seeing response as unnecessary, (2.7) judgement, (2.8) criticism of humour.

Users commenting on Bodyform's response shared feelings of (2.1) suspiciousness regarding the authenticity of different aspects connected to the response. For example, Dave Milton stated "What's the betting 'Richard' is actually 'Rachel' and works in their PR department." This comment implies that he suspects the critic to be fake or made up by the company itself. These doubts regarding authenticity have, for example, also been expressed by Conor Smith: "I bet the message from 'richard' was created by Bodyform."

Among users reacting to Bodyform's or True Fruits' response (2.2) disappointment has been identified as a significant negative feeling towards the company. This comment by Kai-Uwe Bevc is an example of the users expressing their disappointment: "... I am really disappointed ... Thought you were more sovereign and capable of keeping up the level. ...". An illustrative quote by mistycambridge also expresses disappointment towards Bodyform by saying: "... It is very sad to see that, all tho richard did the thinking all on his own, BODYFORM needed to get in a whole team of consultants ...".

In the cases of True Fruits' and Bodyform's humorous responses users expressed the feeling of (2.3) disagreement which is illustrated with exemplary quotes in the following. Kerrin Meyer expressed her disagreement with True Fruit's response by "... but accusing people of stupidity when being criticised (at the same time saying that you can only understand the slogans with a certain intelligence), that's what bothers me." This comment by Diego Kawasaka @Diego_Kawasaka commenting on McDonald's' response illustrates another example of disagreement: "Your advertising does not reflect reality." In contrast, users commenting on Bodyform's response did not express feelings of disagreement regarding the company's opinion or statement.

In particular, the humorous response by McDonald's triggered users to react with (2.4) counter allegations illustrated in the following text passages. A user called MonaBot @Mconchild reacted to the video response with "why don't you make a video about what your burger patties and chicken nuggets are made of ;)". Another user called Monpa @monpa911 alleged that the fries are made out of carton: "they say they [the fries] taste like CARTON!"

Another negative feeling identified among the comments was (2.5) dismay and astonishment regarding the response and the company's opinion. Anna Katharina, for example, reacted with a comment expressing her astonishment: "[tagged] *Joey Dietrich* 'bottled and taken away' wtf?" This astonishment could also be detected within comments reacting to McDonald's video response. The comment by feddaValle @MysteryValle is illustrating this: "what???? 😞 😞"

The theme of (2.6) seeing the company's response as unnecessary is the sixth negative feeling that has been identified. Bernd Baringhorst did express this with "If you want to provoke, then you must not complain when some people are really provoked." stating that, according to him, True Fruits needs to expect criticism with its marketing strategy and indicates that this statement, therefore, is unreasonable. The same sentiment was detected in a comment by mistycambridge stating "... The only thing that BODYFORM has proved is they

have a very big wallet!! ... They could have handled it very creatively with a simple comment but no they wanted to show that they are the BIG DOG!!”, which expresses that the user did not see the necessity to have this company response being produced.

In addition to seeing the company’s response as unnecessary, users started to judge the company’s behaviour or statement. The comment by Da Vidsbold stated “You do realise that the joke was crap if you are explaining it over umpteen pages? 😊” in response to True Fruits’ statement, expressing (2.7) judgement. Emyll Somar defined the response by Bodyform as a publicity stunt and criticised it as not being up to date: “Damn publicity stunts are getting old. What is next, the pope?”

Lastly, the (2.8) criticism of humour represents the eighth theme going along with the negative feelings shared by the users. Lena Kraus commented: “bottled and taken away does not advocate, of course. But those jokes trivialise ...” stating that True Fruits in this case does not directly show support of rape culture but does trivialise the topic through its slogans. A user called subaman3d stated “the guy's post was funnier than the response ...” in response to Bodyform’s video.

Regarding the negative sentiments towards the company it has to be said that although there has been a number of different emotions that have been identified, the negative attitudes were not predominant in comparison to the positive sentiments. In accordance with the theme of (2.8) criticism of humour and the comment by Lena Kraus addressing a trivialisation of the topic, it can be confirmed that, according to Fraustino and Ma (2015), humour may contribute to a trivialisation of the topic and associated consequences which might result in a reduction of source credibility. Furthermore, according to Xiao et al. (2018), humour in crisis communication can negatively influence the company’s reputation as well as the genuineness of the response which results in the public assigning a higher responsibility to the company which might then result in a negative response. Humour might also decrease the perceived credibility which eventually results in the public having less trust (Fraustino & Ma, 2015), triggering a negative reaction like it is illustrated with the aforementioned examples.

4.3.3 Neutral emotions/attitude towards the company

The theme of (3) neutral emotions/attitude towards the company subdivides into (3.1) off-topic suggestions and (3.2) off-topic criticism. Off-topic suggestions entail suggestions made by users that are connected to the company or the response somehow but do not show any positive or negative attitude. For example, Sasa Helikia stated in his or her comment: “Add bubble tea to your assortment. 😊” Furthermore, an exemplary comment by

Anita Manbadly commented on the response by Bodyform “The only thing this is missing is a gentle whisper of Peter Gabriel's ‘Red Rain’ in the background.” And Salty Fusio Fan @duffman5514 commented on McDonald’s response with “Try using real potatoes”.

Off-topic criticism includes criticism which is also related to the company or the response in some way but is not reacting to the actual content. This is exemplified by a user named videogamenostalgia stating “Dame Maggie Smith is the actual CEO of Bodyform. They had to get an actress in for this video.” As outlined beforehand, the use of humour, in particular self-mockery, can contribute to a neutralisation of the public’s attitude (Kim et al., 2016) which can be an explanation for users having a rather neutral attitude. However, no other connection between theory and the users’ neutral reaction can be drawn.

4.3.4 Knowledge sharing

The (4) sharing of knowledge has been detected as another significant element of the reactions towards the humorous responses. The theme is subdivided into (4.1) personal experiences/connection, (4.2) academic or background knowledge, and (4.3) comparison.

First of all, the users reacting to the company’s responses shared (4.1) personal experiences or a personal connection with the company or its product. This is illustrated with the following text passages. This is a comment by Laura Fleischmann reacting to the response by True Fruits: “By the way, I was a big fan of your ‘inseminated and fertilised’ slogan, especially since I found out I was pregnant shortly after drinking this very smoothie. 😊” The user named bigpurplemile also expressed a personal connection to the products by Bodyform: “Brilliant!!! I've been using Bodyform for years and I'm so proud of this!!!!!!” Additionally, FrauEnte @Frau_Ente published a comment in response to the humorous communication by McDonald’s: “ ‘Just fine, at McDonald’s they have mouse blood...’ Us. In the past. In kindergarten. Still didn't stop anyone :D”. This comment represents an additional example of users sharing personal experiences as this user is sharing childhood memories.

In addition to personal experiences, users also reacted by mentioning any real or alleged (4.2) academic, or background knowledge they have, e.g. about marketing or the company itself. For example, jeisolomon posted an explanatory comment in response to Bodyform’s video: “That's the ‘blue water’ he mentioned they often use in commercials for pads (and diapers).” Margaret commented on the same response by sharing alleged academic knowledge: “... The point of this video is not to make a comeback. I am studying marketing in University and I have read that companies actually respond back to consumer concerns as a way of building relationships with their customers. ...” Additionally, a comment by

sonny.exe @sonny_exe shared alleged knowledge about the ingredients of fries: “right! Neither wood nor potatoes, but shredded eggshells and soil.”

Furthermore, users who reacted to the response by True Fruits repeatedly compared the crisis to another campaign or another brand to share this with other users. The following exemplary comments illustrate the theme of (4.3) comparison. Peter Michael Poniatowski stated “It is like the Lidl bagel campaign. ...” referring to a campaign by the supermarket Lidl. Another comment referring to another brand was posted by Yasmin McMorg saying “You are better than Pick up ...” referring to the brand or a campaign related to the brand Pick up.

The above-outlined theme and sub-themes represent new findings regarding the users’ reaction and behaviour towards the companies’ responses and therefore cannot be confirmed by existing theories.

4.3.5 Integrated humour

The analysis of the reactions towards the humorous responses resulted in a fifth prevailing and meaningful theme, namely the integration of humour. This means that the users responded by using different kinds of humour to react to the humorous crisis response. The overall theme of (5) integrated humour is subdivided into the (5.1) replication of company’s humour and (5.2) irony/sarcasm.

First of all, several comments (5.1) replicated the company’s humour to communicate their excitement and enthusiasm about the humour used by the company. This is expressed with the following exemplary posts. A user named Jaqueline Guetl replicated the company’s address within the response in her comment: “Dear dumb [people] 😂😂 ...”. A comment by Jon L also took up the company’s humour: “ ‘You forgot horse-riding Richard’!!! Classic”. And lastly, a user named CaptainPollutionTV @CaptPollutionTV commenting on McDonald’s’ response took up the joke on wood by the company: “Good crispy fries can only be made from German cast steel oak.”

Furthermore, the users made use of (5.2) irony/sarcasm in their comments. For example, D. Revis Richard stated “Richard do NOT listen to this actor. Girls don't poop. #Fact”, making use of an ironic statement to mock himself about the critic of the company. This comment by Tobias Schaum also illustrates the use of irony: “Dude your texts are way too long, contain way too much information and are way too good ^-^ ...”.

The integration of humour does represent an interesting and important theme of the analysis of the reactions by social media users as it is remarkable and special that users

respond with humour to a crisis response implementing humour. The motivation for the use of humour can possibly be traced back to the fact that the users had a predominantly positive attitude towards the company and therefore felt confident to respond with humour, which links the reasons for the integration of humour to the findings on the theme of positive feelings/emotions towards the company.

4.3.6 The need to share

The sixth feature of the social media users' reaction was the (6) the need to share, meaning that the users tagged friends, family, or acquaintances or named the company within their comments to share their opinion and share the company's response. This resulted in the theme being subdivided into (6.1) tagging friends/family, and (6.2) tagging (or naming) the company. The following comments demonstrate how the users tagged other social media users in their comments in order to share it, recommend to read it, and communicate their enthusiasm or disagreement. Stéphanie Doerr, for example, stated in response to True Fruits "... [tagged] *Steffen*, read [this]!" In response to Bodyform the user DWNtoERTH posted a comment to get an opinion from another user: "@Xello998 lol it's the substitute they use for blood in female hygiene commercials. A lot more pleasing ya think?" And, based on the emojis that have been used, demipe @7hofa12 wanted to share his enthusiasm about McDonald's' response: "@robytoby61 😄😄".

Additionally, users named or tagged the company in their comments. Elisa Gisele tagged True Fruits in her comment to share her support for the company: "[tagged] *true fruits Smoothies* You made my day! 😄👍" Another example is illustrated with the comment by Lori porcellus naming Bodyform in the comment to underline his or her praise "...Good call Bodyform good call....".

This theme of (6) the need to share is demonstrating that users are open to communicate or to enter a dialogue and share information. It also demonstrates the power of social media, as outlined in the study by Gruber et al. (2015), which entails that every individual can participate as well as can encourage others to take part, which facilitates that small issues can easily evolve into a national or global issue. This can also be linked to the findings by Austin et al. (2012) stating that third parties like friends or acquaintances can have a significant influence in crisis communication.

4.3.7 Linguistic framing of the comment

Lastly, the theme of (7) linguistic framing of the comment has been identified as a relevant aspect as there were several similarities in the way social media users framed their comments linguistically.

First of all, the users (7.1) took up or quoted the company's choice of words to emphasise their positive sentiment towards the company and its communication. The following comment by Jennifer Puschner is illustrating this sub-theme as she made use of the word "Saftladen" which has been used by the company True Fruits: "...You are a sick Saftladen, keep up the good work 😎...". The user iarba for example quoted a passage of the response by Bodyform: "the blood coursing from our uteri like a crimson landslide".

Secondly, users made use of (7.2) slang/swear words within their comments to express their feelings. The user named adamdoc80 used the word "fkn" as an abbreviation for "fucking" in the comment towards Bodyform's response. Patrick Ga commented on True Fruits' response with "...sick!...". And the user Buuja @Peter_Hondas reacted with "/WTF" towards the response by McDonald's. This shows that the swear or slang words have been used for the expression of both positive and negative feelings towards the company or the response.

And lastly, to strengthen the sentiment of their statements the social media users made (7.3) use of emojis. This is shown with the following exemplary text passages. Noel Wynder did state "Exceptional :D" in response to Bodyform's video and made use of punctuation and letters to form an emoji. Holly McLane used "...😄👍🍷🍷" to express support and enthusiasm whereas Robin Heitzer @HeitzerRobin1 wrote "bruh 😄😄" to underline his amusement caused by McDonald's response.

As outlined by Kim et al. (2016), the use of humour within crisis communication works very effectively on social media. This is due to the fact that the informal communication style, which is characteristic of social media, is matching the response strategy. This is usually reinforced by the use of emoticons and figurative language (Kim et al., 2016). The comments make use of swear and slang words as well as emojis which matches this informal language style. Furthermore, this form of informal language contributes to the creation of a communication which comes close to a conversation (Kelleher, 2009; Kim et al., 2016). According to Xiao et al. (2018), a humorous crisis response is closer to the human voice which results in a higher acceptance of the crisis communication which might be an additional reason for the predominantly positive reactions.

5. Discussion

The following chapter will discuss the findings of this research. First of all, a summary of the key findings is provided which is answering the main research question and draws a connection to the theories on crisis communication. This is supported by the theoretical implications of this research. The chapter concludes with the societal and managerial implications, presenting how the findings can provide advice for organisations dealing with crisis situations.

5.1 Summary and theoretical implications

First of all, this research aimed to explore how companies within the food and hygiene industry in Germany and the UK incorporate humour in crisis response strategies. The research resulted in five factors constituting a successful humorous crisis response. These factors entail that the companies' communication engages in an open, direct and transparent communication towards the public. Furthermore, the companies are sharing corporate values in terms of telling a story and representing themselves strongly and confidently. Additionally, the results showed that companies implementing a humorous crisis response engage in some type of justification of their behaviour to explain themselves. Moreover, the analysis resulted in the factor of companies engaging in a type of counterreaction to further justify, explain themselves and shift the blame. And lastly, the analysis revealed five different forms of humour that were used to communicate the message in a humorous way.

The existing theories, as outlined in the theoretical framework, can, to some extent, be confirmed by this study. Firstly, as this study is addressing paracrises and crises representing a low reputational threat in particular, it can be confirmed that all three crisis types comply with the definition of this form of crisis. The crisis types of the three different companies match with the crisis categories rumour or challenges defined by Coombs (2007), as the crises attribute minimal responsibility to the company and represent a low reputational threat.

Furthermore, as shown in the results, some of the crisis response strategies described by Coombs (2007) as well as by Coombs and Holladay (2012) do also match with aspects of crisis responses analysed in this research, e.g. the response strategies of excuse, refutation, refuse, attacking the accuser or the type of bolstering crisis response strategy. It is interesting that the response strategy of apology, as outlined by Coombs (2007), has been taken up by the responses of Bodyform and True Fruits but has been implemented in a humorous way, which resulted in a reduction of the genuineness of the apology and also removed the actual goal of apology, namely taking full responsibility and demanding forgiveness.

Overall, the analysis showed that the responses made use of different response elements constituting the humorous response as a whole which does not allow a clear allocation of solely one crisis response strategy to each of the cases. Instead, the crisis responses analysed in this research, represent a mixture of different strategies being combined which together form the message that is communicated. This finding does represent an expansion of existing theories on crisis communication as it shows that companies combine different response strategies and unite them in order to make the response suitable for their individual case.

Generally, the findings of this research do confirm the theories by Gruber et al. (2015) and Lin et al. (2016), stating that transparency and engagement in open dialogue represent important elements within crisis communication on social media, showing that they are also relevant within crisis communication featuring humour. The findings of this research expand on these elements and add reinforcement of the corporate narrative and argumentation and justification for behaviour to the list of important aspects regarding humorous crisis responses.

In sum, the results of this research confirm that the use of humour can be a successful strategy in crisis communication in case of a paracrisis or a crisis with no severity, as it has been stated in research results by Veil, Petrun and Roberts (2012) as well as the findings by Vigsø (2013). This research expanded on this aspect and explored in addition which types or forms of humour worked in the cases of crisis communication and were implemented by the companies. However, it can be said that all three cases of crisis responses did follow a slightly different approach of implementing humour in their crisis response strategy. Whereas McDonald's and Bodyform did frame the whole response rather ironically, True Fruits made use of different humorous elements throughout the message.

In relation to the predominantly positive attitude that has been shown towards the companies, it can be supported that humour, in particular self-defeating humour, and in this case self-mockery, lead to a neutralisation or a positive influence on the public's potentially negative attitude towards the response or the company itself (Kim et al. 2016). Furthermore, the findings of this research confirm that the use of humour as a response strategy represents a self-attack which demonstrates that the company is defending itself, which was shown in the companies' justification for behaviour paired with the implementation of humour (Kim et al. 2016).

Overall, it is interesting to observe that all companies did refuse to genuinely acknowledge actual wrongdoings but still actively addressed the crisis with an official

response. This discovery can be linked back to and can confirm that organisations are in need of addressing and solving a crisis which did not necessarily occur due to actual failures or wrongdoings (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012). This is because rumours and criticism raise public awareness and expectations which results in the organisation being required to act and respond (Veil, Sellnow & Petrun, 2012).

Secondly, this research did seek to explore how social media users reacted to the humorous crisis response. The analysis of comments resulted in seven patterns describing the reaction towards the company's response. First of all, the users either reacted by expressing a rather positive, negative, or neutral attitude towards the company, whereas the major sentiment towards the companies was positive. Furthermore, it stood out that users had the urge to share some kind of knowledge, either personal experiences or alleged background knowledge as well as comparisons to other cases. One remarkable aspect of the reactions was that users made use of humour themselves to respond to the humorous crisis response. Additionally, in accordance with the nature of social media, users were eager to share the company's response or their opinion with others, e.g. friends, family or other acquaintances. And lastly, the analysis of the social media users' reactions resulted in the discovery of patterns regarding the linguistic framing of the comment, namely the choice of words or the use of emojis. These patterns show what reactions a humorous crisis response can possibly trigger.

As aforementioned, the overall sentiment towards the company was positive which is why the results confirm the findings by Veil, Petrun and Roberts (2012) as well as by Kim et al. (2016) and Fraustino and Ma (2015) that humour can contribute to prevent the spreading of negative information and reduce people's impulse to pursue counter-argumentation. Moreover, humour reduces the perceived severity (Xiao et al., 2018), which possibly resulted in users having a more positive attitude. Moreover, the positive sentiment can be confirmed by the finding of the public accepting humour in crisis communication if the crisis is a paracrisis or a crisis with no severity (Vigsø, 2013; Kim et al., 2016). This research is expanding on the existing literature as it shows that this positive sentiment leads to the confidence of the users to respond with the use of humour themselves to the humorous response by the company.

The research could additionally confirm that a humorously framed communication can trivialise a topic and its consequences which has been shown through social media users sharing their disagreement and even mentioning a trivialisation due to the use of humour (Fraustino & Ma, 2015). In accordance with the findings by Xiao et al. (2018) and Fraustino

and Ma (2015), this research could support the theory that humour indeed can negatively influence the company's perceived genuineness and credibility as this is shown through the small number of negative reactions such as disagreement and judgement.

As above mentioned, and outlined by Gruber et al. (2015) and Lin et al. (2016), engagement in open dialogue is a key element in crisis communication. In addition to that, the findings of this research expand on this and show that the public, in this case the social media users, also have the demand to enter a dialogue which is shown through them sharing information with people that are tagged in their comments, which also confirms the power social media has in terms of individuals spreading information and participating (Gruber et al., 2015). As this is additionally showing that third parties, like friends or acquaintances, are also involved in the reaction towards the crisis response, the findings by Austin et al. (2012), stating that third parties have a significant influence on crisis communication, can be supported. Furthermore, when looking at the power and importance of social media as well as the predominantly positive sentiment towards the company, it can be substantiated that humour functions effectively on social media, especially because of the matching informal communication style of the response and online communication (Kim et al., 2016).

All in all, it can be said that, under the right circumstances, humour can be a successful strategy in crisis communication. The study confirmed that humour does work out in specific crisis situations, meaning particular crisis types which are in general crises with no severity, such as paracrisis. Furthermore, the study showed that social media platforms presumably play a relevant role in the success of humour in crisis communication as the communication style is less formal and therefore allows the use of humour and is more accepted by users.

5.2 Societal and managerial implications

In current crisis situations, organisations feel insecure about the most suitable crisis communication. As outlined by Claeys and Opgenhaffen (2016), managers often find crisis communication guidelines too abstract and therefore struggle with their implementation. Therefore, in terms of managerial implications, the findings of this research can help to make crisis communication less abstract and can function as part of a guidance on how to manage different crisis situations. The key findings of this research can make organisations better understand what it entails to implement humour in crisis communication, which types of humour might work, in what crisis situations humour can be an appropriate response strategy and what reactions there are to expect from the public.

Furthermore, this research helps to understand why humour might only work in specific crisis situations, such as the defined crisis type of rumour within the victim cluster, challenges within the accidental cluster as outlined by Coombs (2007), or a paracrisis. The reason why humour works when the company becomes the victim of rumours, for example, is, as outlined in the literature, that these crisis types are not severe, do not endanger human lives and therefore do not represent a substantial reputational threat to the organisation (Coombs, 2007). Humour is accepted by the public as a crisis with no severity results in the public attributing little or no responsibility to the company. Eventually, this means that humour does work in these crisis situations and can be a successful method for crisis communication. Conclusively, in practice, the applicability of humour is highly dependent on the crisis type. On the contrary, if the company is the actual cause or the guilty party within a crisis, humour will most likely not be accepted as this kind of crisis represents a greater reputational threat to the company which also involves that there is a higher responsibility attributed to the company (Coombs, 2007).

In conclusion, this thesis gives insights into when humour works within crisis communication and how it can be implemented successfully. However, the individual crisis situation of a company and the additional variables that could influence the applicability and suitability of a communication strategy need to be considered.

6. Conclusion

The following chapter will present the limitations of this research and provide possible directions for future research in the field of crisis communication.

6.1 Limitations

This research gave insights into the relevant factors companies are implementing to frame a humorous crisis response. Furthermore, it explored and identified different patterns regarding the reactions of the public towards these humorous crisis responses. Generally, the findings contribute to the existing literature on crisis communication and expand on the knowledge on the topic of humorous crisis responses. Nonetheless, this research also has its limitations.

First of all, qualitative research is usually accompanied by the possible risk of researcher bias, which also plays an important role in qualitative content analysis (Chenail, 2011). However, no second researcher has been involved in the process of analysis to possibly lower the researcher bias due to a limited time frame and the small scope of this research. Secondly, it can be said that the comments written by the social media users do not represent the whole public and, in the majority of cases, most likely represent individuals who already followed the respective company on the respective social media channel. Naturally, there certainly were also users who encountered the company's response by coincidence and then shared their opinion. Thirdly, the data sample of the comments by the social media users does not represent the entire scope of reactions as not every single comment is included. Nevertheless, the data sample of the comments does sufficiently represent the reactions towards the companies' responses and could not be expanded further due to the scope of this research.

6.2 Directions for future research

The research does provide a substantial basis on crisis communication, the implementation of humour as a crisis response and the reactions towards such a form of response. Nevertheless, there are several aspects that demand and justify additional directions of further research. Future research on a larger scope could build up on the limitations and include different sources of reactions to provide and explore a more exhaustive representation of the study. Furthermore, in order to reduce the risk of researcher bias, a second researcher could be incorporated into the process of analysis. Moreover, as this research is focusing on cases in Germany and the UK, it would be of interest to expand the research on humorous

crisis communication on a cross-cultural level to explore differences and similarities between the countries to also avoid a geographical bias. For example, as stated in the theoretical framework, Barkley (2020) stated that the SCCT is not fully applicable to the Japanese context. Therefore, future research could set the focus on a comparison of the implementation of humorous crisis responses and the reactions in different cultural contexts. Additionally, the literature on crisis communication could be expanded in terms of incorporating the attitude stakeholders held towards the company before and after the crisis response and if the framing of the crisis response had an influence on the opinion and attitudes they have towards the company. Furthermore, future research could focus on aspects which possibly influence the applicability of humour in crisis communication, such as the general performance and reputation of the company as well as potential crises that happened in the past. In the course of this, future research could also take into account if a humorous crisis response conforms to the usual communication style of the organisation.

In conclusion, this research contributed to existing theories in crisis communication literature and set a focus on humour within crisis communication. Furthermore, it represents a unique research due to the fact that there has not been much research on crisis communication concentrating on the aspect of humour. The research covers a relevant niche on crisis responses and reactions in the European market which represents a research field being relevant to add up on and further explore.

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Appendix A: Codebook corporate response

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Direct and open communication	Direct/indirect address	The company's response addresses the public/users by name or by a circumscribing group name, e.g. friends
	Transparency	The company transparently addresses the topic/issue/criticism and is taking a position
Reinforcement of the corporate narrative	Storytelling	The company makes use of vivid descriptions to address the audience; wraps a story around the rumour/paracrisis
	Strong representation	The company's response has one main speaker or one primary voice; consistent tone of voice
Argumentation and justification for behaviour	Explanation and clarification of background	The company explains the issue of criticism; gives reasons for the company's behaviour; makes its standpoint clear; explains organisational practices
	Corporate values	The company shares its corporate views and values
Counterreaction	Counter-allegation (blaming the accuser)	The company blames the for causing the crisis/problems/ issues themselves (because of misunderstanding etc.); accusers are confronted with their (supposedly) lack of understanding regarding the message and humour; critics are accused of not informing themselves entirely and or arguing superficially

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
	Non-genuine apology	The company is literally apologising by using apologetic words but doing this ironically; no feelings of guilt; feeling sorry for the accusers/public who supposedly do not seem to understand the message/humour
	Refusal to change current practices	The company is stating of not be willing to change its opinion or behaviour
Integrated types of humour	Sarcasm/Irony	The company is making use of sarcastic or ironic humour to communicate its message
	Jokes	The company incorporates jokes to support its opinion, and/or to amuse the public
	Word plays	The company incorporates ambiguous words, such as “Saftladen” (eng. lousy outfit)
	Mockery of the accuser	The company is incorporating humour at the expense of the accuser
	Self-defeating humour	The company incorporates humour at its own charge, e.g. to call oneself a “Saftladen” (eng. pop stand/dumb)

Appendix B: Codebook user comments (reaction to humorous crisis response)

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
Positive emotions/attitude towards the company	Support/enthusiasm	Users are enthusiastic about the response; enthusiastic about the humour; supporting the reaction; supporting the form of 'negative advertising; using words like applause, touché, genius, brilliant, good, bold, well done, fantastic, awesome, win, exceptional, funny, wonderful, amazing, love, nice, cheering
	Attachment/loyalty	Users are proud of the response; are identifying with the message/company values; expressing trust; feeling indifferent about rumours; expressing loyalty towards the company
	Acknowledgement (of conceptualisation of the response)	Users express that the company handled the situation creatively; expressing thankfulness (for consistency), praising the marketing/ad/pr; praising the product; praising the humour; praising the general communication; attribute uniqueness to the company; appreciating how the response is framed
	Admiration	Users express the wish to work for the company; seeing the company as idol or hero; admiring the company's cleverness
	Approval/Agreement	Users are approving the response; agreeing with the company's opinion
	Shifting blame on the critics/accuser	While agreeing with the company's behaviour the

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
		users are blaming the accusers; astonishment about the criticism; seeing criticism as unsubstantiated
	Customer acquisition	Company's response triggered purchase decision of the users to become new customers
Negative emotions/attitude towards the company	Suspiciousness	Users express feelings of suspiciousness; suspecting that the response/crisis or aspects related to the crisis are fake/made up
	Disappointment	Users feel disappointed by the message/behaviour which is causing disloyalty; expressing disappointment with words like sad, disappointing, shame, boring, bad argumentation, weak
	Disagreement	Users disagree with the company's message/opinion; disliking the approach; finding the message discriminating; expressing that communication is down playing the seriousness
	Counter allegation	Users share a counterexample; highlighting other aspects in the company's behaviour or aspects about the product, e.g. actual ingredients
	Dismay/astonishment	Users express shock or astonishment about the company's statement
	Seeing response as unnecessary	Users see the act of framing a message as unnecessary; feel that the issue is made bigger than necessary
	Judgement	Users are judging the act of apology

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
	Criticism of the humour	Users are criticising the company for not being funny
Neutral emotions/attitude /neutral acceptance or reaction	Off-topic suggestions	Users comment with suggestions of new products, slogans, alternative topics for messages, commenting on product range
	Off-topic criticism	Users share criticism about aspects not related to the crisis, e.g. product price, pricing of component parts, product quality, products taken off the market
Knowledge Sharing	Personal experiences/connections	Users share personal experiences related to the product/company/issue
	Academic or background knowledge	Users share general knowledge; studies; knowledge about the company
	Comparison	Users compare the case to another crisis case related to a campaign of another brand
Integrated humour	Replication of company's humour	Users are taking up and replicating the company's humour/jokes
	Irony/Sarcasm	Users are responding with irony or sarcasm in their comment
The need to share	Tagging friends/family	Users recommend to read the response to friends and family; referring back to the company/response as a familiar topic
	Tagging (or naming) the company	Users tag/integrate the company in their response
Linguistic framing of the comment	Taking up/quoting the company's choice of words	Users make use of the company's choice of words such as word plays, or neologisms Users quote the exact words of the company's response to reinforce their statement

Selective Code	Axial Codes	Open Codes
	Slang/swear words	Users make use of slang/swear words to express their enthusiasm or disagreement
	Use of emojis	Users make use of different emojis consistent with the sentiment of their comment to underline and strengthen their statement