Shift?

A qualitative text analysis of the crisis communication in The Volkswagen Sustainability Magazine 2016

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ABSTRACT

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The Volkswagen emissions scandal is one of the largest CSR crises in recent times given its scope and severity. From the outset, the manner in which Volkswagen has addressed the crisis and how it is going to be solved has been subject to public scrutiny. This study set out to examine the crisis communication in Volkswagen’s sustainability magazine Shift from 2016 featuring Volkswagen together with some of its internal and external stakeholders like the management and customers to find out what strategies were used by the company to repair its reputation and to assess the success of these strategies. Additionally, of interest was to compare the viewpoints of external stakeholders to that of Volkswagen, while also to investigate what kind of actors and opinions of the crisis that were presented. To answer these questions, a strategic selection of texts from the magazine were analysed through a qualitative text analysis. The theoretical perspectives consisted of the two crisis communication theories of image repair theory and situational crisis communication theory.

The findings of the study indicate that the strategies used by Volkswagen to address the crisis do not seem very successful in general. Even if the most common strategy by Volkswagen is to discuss potential solutions to the crisis, these solutions are mainly oriented towards solving the crisis in a long-term perspective through a development of new vehicles. The biggest difference in comparison to external stakeholders is that they instead seem more concerned with solving the crisis in a shorter perspective through increased compensation to customers, for instance. Another finding is that a preference for more elitist stakeholders in the magazine could be due to a strategic choice by Volkswagen to avoid unfavourable reviews and use leaders as a tool for inspiring change. The main conclusion of the study is that work still needs to be done before Volkswagen can claim to have achieved a shift in the company’s sustainability communication. To do so, Volkswagen needs to take more responsibility for the crisis and to pay even more attention to the opinions of its different stakeholder groups.

Keywords: Crisis communication, image repair theory, situational crisis communication theory, qualitative text analysis, sustainability magazine, corporate social responsibility, Volkswagen emissions scandal
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1. Introduction

An organisational crisis can be defined as “the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization’s performance and generate negative outcomes” (Coombs, 2014: 3), while crisis communication is “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation” (Coombs, 2012a: 20). The importance of an efficient crisis communication response following a crisis cannot be overstated as it can, when done correctly, restore the senders’ public reputation, or, when managed poorly, further damage their image. Still, however successfully they are handled, different forms of crises are bound to happen sooner or later, whether they are large or small and whether they are found in the contexts of specific people and organisations or constitute more overarching problems for the world at large.

Arguably, one of the most urgent global challenges facing humanity to date is that of climate change. With a growing number of reports pointing to how our modern way of living has had, and continues to have, a negative impact on the environment, seen for instance through rising temperatures and sea levels, it is evident that the time for action is upon us. The general consensus of what is needed in order to overcome these problems is for the leaders of the world’s nations to agree on measures that could minimise our ecological footprints, of which perhaps the most promising initiative thus far is the UN’s Paris Agreement that was implemented in 2016 with the aim of reducing greenhouse gases (UNFCCC, n.d.).

Therefore, in the light of the climate change issue and subsequent negotiations, it is not difficult to understand why the Volkswagen emissions scandal, or ‘dieselgate’ as it has commonly been referred to, quickly became one of the biggest CSR crises in recent times. The scandal erupted in September 2015 when the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) brought to the public’s notice that the German car manufacturer Volkswagen Group had intentionally manipulated the engines in some of their diesel car models to emit lower levels of pollution in laboratory testing than during real driving conditions to make them seem more environmentally friendly than they in fact were. Worldwide, a total number of about eleven million cars were said to have been affected, of which approximately 500,000 were found in the US, during the years of 2009-2015 (EPA, 2015; Volkswagen, 2015). Since the crisis started, Volkswagen has promised change and that affected vehicles will be fixed. However, recent developments like new allegations of that certain Audi models, which are part of the Volkswagen Group, being rigged (Boston, 2016) and the charging of seven executives (Carey & Shepardson, 2017) suggests that the crisis could still be far from over.
How the communicative response is handled after crises such as this one then becomes an important field of study on a societal level as the messages that are constructed by organisations and individuals facing threats to their reputation can be critically examined for the way in which they seek to steer public opinion. In addition, as in this case with Volkswagen when it comes to crises that deal with different aspects in relation the environment, such reviews can be important to rule out instances of greenwashing.

In this study, a qualitative text analysis will be done on Volkswagen’s crisis communication following the emissions scandal to investigate what strategies are used to repair their reputation. To do so, Volkswagen’s sustainability magazine Shift from 2016 will be used as the data for analysis, where both internal stakeholders, like the Volkswagen management and other employees, together with external stakeholders, such as customers and executives of outside organisations, made their voice heard on the topic of the crisis. A strategic selection of articles from this magazine will then be analysed through the crisis communication theories of image repair theory (IRT) and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) to assess whether the strategies seem successful or not. Attention will also be paid to if any differences can be found in the perspectives of internal and external stakeholders about the crisis, and if certain actors and opinions of the crisis are presented rather than others.

1.1 Disposition

In the next section, a background will be given to Volkswagen and its emissions scandal, which is the case that will be studied. Thereafter, the aim and research questions of the study will be presented. In the following section, the research field of crisis communication in which this study belongs will be outlined, as will previous research within this field and the research gap that the current study hopes to fill. After that, the theoretical frames and concepts that will be used in the study will be described, which consist of Benoit’s image repair theory and Coomb’s situational crisis communication theory. Afterwards, the study’s method of qualitative text analysis and material in the form of Volkswagen’s sustainability magazine will be accounted for. Next, the analysis and result of the study are presented, which is followed by a conclusion about the study’s results.
2. Background

In this section, a background will be given both to the Volkswagen Group as a company and to its emissions scandal.

2.1 Volkswagen Group

The Volkswagen Group, or Volkswagen Aktiengesellschaft in German, is one of the largest car manufacturing companies in the world and the leading car manufacturer in Europe. With headquarters in Wolfsburg, Germany, the company operates 120 production plants in a total of 31 countries, 20 of which are in Europe and the remaining 11 spread out in North and South America, Africa, and Asia. Worldwide, Volkswagen has 626,715 employees that produce about 43,000 vehicles every weekday, which are then sold in 153 different countries, or work with other vehicle- and business-related tasks. The Group consists of twelve brands that come from seven European countries: Volkswagen Passenger Cars, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, Audi, Porsche, and MAN from Germany; SEAT from Spain; SKODA from the Czech Republic; Bentley from England; Bugatti from France; Lamborghini and Ducati from Italy; and Scania from Sweden. Aside from regular cars, the Group manufactures other vehicles such as motorcycles and buses, as well as other products like chemical reactors. In 2016, the Group’s revenue totalled €217 billion (Volkswagen AG, n.d.).

2.1.1 Volkswagen emissions scandal

The scandal became public on the 18th of September 2015 when EPA issued a notice of violation of the Clean Air Act in the US to the Volkswagen Group as it was found that a defeat device had been installed in Volkswagen and Audi diesel cars during model years 2009-2015 to cheat emissions testing. The disclosure was the result of previous investigations made by EPA, the organisation of the International Council on Clean Transportation (ICCT), researchers at West Virginia University, and the agency of the California Air Resources Board (CARB) who had tested Volkswagen vehicles in order to make sure that they conformed to the strict emissions standards that are present in the US (Ewing, 2017; Reuters, 2017).

However, the underlying problems behind the scandal date back much longer as Volkswagen had started to develop its defeat device already in 2006 to make their vehicles more competitive in the US and then falsely promoted the release of their new diesel car models as environmentally friendly options. This defeat device had been installed to lower the amount of nitrogen oxide (NOx) that was emitted during testing, which would increase up to 40 times on the road. Later, it was found that the irregularities also concerned CO2 emissions values in some cases and that the affected vehicles consisted of other models in the Volkswagen Group (Boston, 2016; Gates et al., 2017; Ewing, 2017; Reuters, 2017; Tovey, 2017).
As a response to the accusations, Volkswagen at first attempted to deny responsibility and provide alternative explanations for the testing results. While doing so, Volkswagen has later confessed to providing US regulators with false, misleading information and to have destroyed incriminating documents. After the crisis was made public, however, Volkswagen admitted to deception and apologised to the public. Still, the management of Volkswagen has continued to shift the blame first to a group of rogue engineers and later to lower-ranking employees as the real culprits of the crisis (BBC, 2016a; Ewing, 2017; Reuters, 2017).

Another part of the crisis response has been how Volkswagen has issued repair programs to fix the tampered vehicles and/or offered to buy them back and to provide compensation for them, the success of which so far seems to vary between countries dependent on their laws. For instance, car-owners in Europe, such as in the UK, have still had a harder time to get some kind of compensation compared to their counterparts in the US as Volkswagen has maintained that the defeat device is not illegal under the laws of the European Union. Instead, Europeans have been given the option of turning in their vehicles for repair as part of Volkswagen’s vehicle recall. As a result, Volkswagen is currently facing lawsuits from consumers who want compensation for the scandal or are unsatisfied with the compensation they have been given. Moreover, several different countries have launched investigations of Volkswagen in relation to the crisis (BBC, 2016b; Ewing & Boudette, 2017; Tovey, 2017).

Furthermore, due to the crisis, Volkswagen has seen some changes among its employees. For example, two of its former CEO’s have resigned: former general CEO Martin Winterkorn, who was replaced by former Porsche CEO Matthias Müller, resigned in September 2015 shortly after the crisis started and former US CEO Michael Horn resigned in March 2016. In addition, other employees have quit or been fired and suspended as a fallout of the crisis (BBC, 2016a; Carey & Shepardson, 2017; Reuters, 2017).

In March 2017, Volkswagen pleaded guilty to the emissions scandal for the first time in a court settlement that was previously reached with the US Justice Department in January, where the company agreed to pay $4.3 billion in civil and criminal penalties. The charges consisted of fraud, obstruction of justice, and falsifying statements. At the same time, a total of seven executives were charged for their alleged roles in the scandal, whose faith still remains quite uncertain. As part of the settlement, Volkswagen agreed to take part of reforms and being supervised by an independent monitor for the next three years, as well as to offset the excess of emissions that was caused by the scandal and to invest in over a decade’s worth of zero emission vehicle infrastructure and accompanying awareness programs (Carey & Shepardson, 2017). As a final result of the crisis, Volkswagen announced in November 2016 that the company would end all sales of diesel vehicles in the US (Reuters, 2017).
3. Aim and research questions

The following section will present the aim and research questions of the study. In addition, there will be a motivation of the aim.

3.1 Aim

This study aims to critically examine the crisis communication strategies used by Volkswagen in their sustainability magazine while trying to save their reputation after the emissions scandal. In doing so, the main goal is to assess whether these strategies seem successful or not based on the crisis communication theories of IRT and SCCT. Of interest is also whether internal and external stakeholders have different perspectives of the crisis, and what kind of actors and opinions of the emissions scandal that are presented over others in the magazine.

3.1.1 Motivation of aim

The research gap that the aim of this study strives to fill lies in its choice of material, namely the sustainability magazine as it is a communication channel that does not seem to have been researched extensively before in relation to the field of crisis communication. In the Volkswagen case, the importance of further research becomes evident as this sustainability magazine named Shift is a clear example of how Volkswagen is now trying to rebrand and promote an image of themselves as a company that is undergoing a change for the better by learning from their past mistakes, which creates a need for examining to what extent that really is so. In this case, it will be judged by how the emissions scandal is addressed by Volkswagen in general as well as among its internal and external stakeholders to see what kind of sentiments about the crisis that are allowed to be voiced, which can then be linked to the crisis communication strategies that are put forward in the theories of IRT and SCCT.

3.2 Research questions

In the study, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. RQ1: How can crisis communication strategies be applied to what Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders say about the emissions scandal? Do the strategies seem successful or not?

2. RQ2: How can crisis communication strategies be applied to what Volkswagen’s external stakeholders say about the emissions scandal? How does their perspective differ from that of Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders?

3. RQ3: What kind of actors and opinions of the emissions scandal are presented? How and why are certain actors and opinions presented rather than others?
4. Previous research

This section will outline the field of crisis communication, in which the current study is situated, and previous research within this field. The research gap will also be described.

4.1 The crisis communication field

Crisis communication is a broad and continuously expanding research field within the media and communication field that is a subcategory of the public relations field and has several other closely allied fields such as issues management. The field is largely case-based and qualitative as studies have often focused on specific crisis situations, for instance, to evaluate the communication strategies that are used. This knowledge has then been intended to set up guidelines that could help organisations and individuals to avoid similar crises themselves (Coombs, 2012a: 22-24; Coombs, 2012b: 61-62; An & Cheng, 2012: 69, 80-81). For example, one case which has often been cited as a successful crisis communication response is Johnson & Johnson’s handling of the Tylenol tampering crisis in 1982 and 1986 (Benson, 1988), while an unsuccessful one is the Exxon Valdez oil spill crisis in 1989 (Williams & Treadaway, 1992), which will both be returned to later. Even though case studies seem to be the dominant method, the field contains some methodological variety with other examples such as textual analysis, content analysis, and experimental research. Two of the most common theories within crisis communication research are image repair theory (IRT) and situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), while other examples include attribution theory and theories of apologia (An & Cheng, 2012: 76, 80-81; Coombs & Holladay, 2012: 91).

4.1.1 The Volkswagen case

To begin with, it seems like there have been quite a few earlier studies that have addressed the specific case of the Volkswagen emissions scandal and different aspects related to this crisis. For instance, one study by Zhang et al. (2016) dealt with how the CSR crisis was communicated on the social media platform Twitter. The study used issue arena theory to analyse different actors’ postings on Twitter. The main focus was to capture how the crisis evolved over time, which stakeholders that were active and what sentiments that were expressed by them, as well as how Volkswagen responded to the crisis. It was found that the crisis had received very much attention on Twitter after it had erupted, with sentiment analysis showing negative peaks when any further news was released about the case, to which Volkswagen had responded with apology and compensation. One conclusion from the findings was that such crises can endure for a long time as they are fuelled by strong and diverse sentiments from different stakeholder groups. In addition, the study pointed to the risk of not living up to stakeholder expectations as it can lead to loss of reputation.
4.1.2 Other crises in the automotive industry

Another study about a crisis in the automotive industry, as in the Volkswagen case, was made by Choi and Chung (2013) about the Toyota recall crisis in 2009-2011 where cars were recalled due to unintended acceleration and brake failure. The study was theoretically based on SCCT and examined the relationship between the crisis response strategy of apology and customers’ product involvement and purchase intentions through an experiment. It was concluded that an apology could effectively restore the organisation’s reputation for participants that were highly involved, while it did not boost their purchase intentions.

In contrast, one case study of a not so successful crisis communication response was made by Blaney, Benoit and Brazeal (2002) about the Bridgestone/Firestone and Ford tire crisis in the 1990s and early 2000s, where tires were found to have an unusually high failure rate that was linked to the death of 270 people by a US federal investigation. In the study, rhetoric and image repair theory were used to assess the success of the crisis communication. It was found that Firestone had made many mistakes in their communicative efforts, such as shifting the blame on Ford and providing insufficient corrective action, which also arrived too late. Another conclusion of the study was to support the idea of that certain image repair strategies do not work very well together, as mortification and bolstering were seen to be undermined by denial and corrective action, which had been suggested in previous research.

4.1.3 Other environmental crises

Additionally, there has been previous research of crisis communication in relation to other environmental crises, such as in this case with Volkswagen. For example, there is the beforementioned failed crisis communication in the Exxon Valdez oil spill crisis in Alaska in 1989 that was studied by Williams and Treadaway (1992). The study reviewed the communication strategies used by Exxon after the crisis, which were found to be unsuccessful based on criteria for effective crisis communication found through a survey of literature. For example, instead of having a proactive stance, Exxon was reactive as they had a slow initial response. Moreover, Exxon used strategies of burden sharing and scapegoating to shift the blame for the crisis to other actors, while not taking enough responsibility themselves.

A more recent study of a similar corporate crisis has been done by De Wolf and Mejri (2013) about the BP oil spill crisis in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, which was another large marine accident. The study examined whether the crisis communication of BP should be regarded as a success or failure since experts had differing views, while largely intending to highlight potential failures. In the study, a content analysis was made on secondary data from different sources such as newspapers and annual sustainability reports. The theoretical framework consisted of effective crisis communication models such as in SCCT. Among the conclusions
were that BP’s efforts were not enough as they lacked a clear crisis communication plan, proactive response, and continuous dialogue with affected stakeholders.

Goosen-Botes and Samkin (2013) made a further study about the BP oil spill case. It was focused on the posture BP adopted following the crisis. The theoretical perspectives included rhetorical aspects of image repair discourse, organisational legitimacy, Hearit’s strategy of corporate apologia, and semiotics. The study pointed to the importance of taking into account the context in which corporate apologia is situated. As the material consisted of both annual and sustainability reports, it was found that such reports, especially sustainability reports, could prove useful to understand how organisations can respond to legitimacy challenges.

Another study where the crisis was found on the topic of the environment has been made by Benoit and Henson (2009) about President Bush’s image repair discourse following Hurricane Katrina that struck the US in 2005, where he had been accused of giving a slow and poor response. The study found that the image repair strategies Bush used consisted mainly of bolstering, defeasibility and corrective action, but that these strategies were not very successful due to several reasons. For example, Bush had waited too long before visiting the affected area, and denied having committed any mistakes in the handling of the crisis.

4.1.4 Other crisis contexts

In addition, there has been crisis communication research that involves other topics altogether. One example is Benson’s (1988) study of the second phase of the Tylenol tampering crisis in 1986, which was mentioned earlier as an example of a successful crisis communication case. The study found that among the reasons for Johnson & Johnson’s success when handling the crisis was that they made a quick, pro-active response as it was found that their drug Tylenol once again had been tampered with in a store by an unknown assailant, which previously had claimed seven people’s lives in Chicago in 1982. Plus, Johnson & Johnson made sure that their communication to the public was continuous and consistent as they issued communication events and limited their number of spokespersons.

A further case study with image repair theory was made by Veil, Sellnow and Petrun (2012) about Domino’s YouTube crisis in 2009. The crisis happened in the US when two employees at the pizza restaurant uploaded a YouTube video showing them tampering with food which they claimed was going to be served. One important conclusion from the study was the importance of responding to the crisis in the same medium as it had arisen in, which in this case was YouTube, as it would make sure that it would reach out to the same audience.

Schwarz (2012a) made another case study about the Love Parade disaster in Germany in 2010, where 21 people were suffocated to death during a music festival. It was based on the
theories of SCCT and attribution theory, which were tested for external validity. The study set out to investigate how the crisis communication response by the festival organisers was perceived by the public, and how the public used social media to discuss the crisis soon after it had happened. To do so, a content analysis was done on a total of 1847 postings on two message boards. The study found that the festival organisers gained mainly negative evaluations by the public as they denied responsibility and shifted the blame to others, which supported the idea of attributions of cause and responsibility as important factors for public evaluation of crisis response. In doing so, the study found external validity for the theory of SCCT. Additionally, among the conclusions were that social media could be very useful when monitoring crisis contexts and addressing stakeholders, for example.

A somewhat similar study was made by Liu, Austin and Jin (2011). It tested the social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC) model through an experiment with 162 college students at an American university. The focus was on how public perceptions of crisis response and public emotions are shaped by crisis communication form (traditional media, social media, or word of mouth) and source (third party or organisation). The study concluded that there is a clear strategic importance for organisations to match the correct form and source when responding to a crisis. For example, it was found that the public was most likely to accept defensive, supportive or evasive responses when coming from traditional media over social media and word of mouth, and that defensive responses were best received when coming from the organisation itself rather than a third party. Moreover, the choice of form and source was found to have an effect on the public’s emotions, seen for instance in how it was reported by the public that information from traditional media with a third party source generated the most attribution independent emotions.

Another study focusing on the public’s emotions during a crisis was done by Jin, Pang and Cameron (2010), where the integrated crisis mapping (ICM) model was presented and tested for viability. This model seeks to understand the connection between organisations’ crisis response and the primary public’s emotional reactions to crises. A content analysis was done on 239 stories in mainstream US newspapers covering five crisis cases. It was found that the model seemed theoretically viable, although there was room for refinements. The findings revealed that people who were directly involved in crises related to damages to reputations, technological breakdowns, industrial matters, labour unrest, and regulation/legislation tended to react with anxiety, anger, and sadness, while also to engage in conative coping.

Schwarz (2012b) introduced an additional theoretical perspective in the covariation-based approach to crisis communication. In doing so, Harold H. Kelley’s covariation principle from attribution theory was added to SCCT. This model set out to give answers to questions of if
and how stakeholders are likely to covary organisations with the causes of crises and how this, in turn, would affect stakeholders’ perceptions of organisations’ responsibility and reputation. The study was validated through an experiment that was done with stakeholders of a German university, which showed that there was a link between covariation information patterns and causal attributions. Furthermore, the findings supported the idea of organisations’ responsibility as mediating the effect causal attributions have on reputation.

Additionally, to illustrate the diversity of contexts to which crisis communication research has been applied, Benoit and Brinson (1999) made a study about the image repair strategies of Queen Elizabeth after Princess Diana’s death in 1997 as the British royal family was accused of not showing enough grief. Findings included that the queen mainly used the strategies of denial and bolstering, as well as a smaller degree of defeasibility and transcendence, to rebut these claims, which were deemed to be largely successful.

Similarly, Benoit (2009) made a study about the actor Hugh Grant’s image repair strategies after he was arrested for using the services of a prostitute in Hollywood in 1995. It was concluded that Grant used the strategies of mortification, bolstering, attacking the accuser, plus denial to a lesser extent, in order to repair his image in what seemed to be a generally successful manner. The study also found important contextual differences from corporate and political image repair, such as that people in the entertainment business may not find it as difficult to confess to wrongdoings as politicians might do for fear of losing constituents.

4.2 Research gap

To sum up, previous research within the field of crisis communication has addressed important areas such as what does and does not tend to work when organisations and individuals respond to crises, how different communication channels can be used for these responses, and how the public can react to them. What this study hopes to bring to the bulk of knowledge in previous research is more empirical knowledge about how suitable sustainability magazines are to assess the crisis communication strategies of organisations, as exemplified here in this case with Volkswagen’s sustainability magazine Shift. To my knowledge, crisis communication in this particular kind of communication channel has not been studied very much before, although sustainability magazines are similar to sustainability reports which have been studied earlier, for instance by De Wolf and Mejri (2013) and Goosen-Botes and Samkin (2013). Still, what is new here in a magazine such as this one is an added focus on the inclusion of viewpoints from both internal and external stakeholders, even if the magazine is still published by the organisation itself.
5. Theoretical frame and concepts

The section below will account for the theoretical perspectives that will be used in the study. As mentioned earlier, they consist of Benoit’s image repair theory (IRT) and Coomb’s situational crisis communication theory (SCCT). There will also be a comparison of the two.

5.1 Image repair theory

Image repair theory was first introduced by William Benoit in 1995 and was previously known as the image restoration theory. The theory is based on research on apologia from rhetorical perspectives as well as accounts and excuses from the perspectives of sociology, which deal with how one can defend and provide explanations for one’s actions. In the theory, a set of strategies are presented which can be used by people or organisations to mend their public image after a crisis. The name change can be attributed to how it may be more fitting to describe this process as efforts to repair the image instead of hoping to restore it back to its former state completely, even if that is the ultimate goal (Benoit, 2014: ix-x).

The theory is founded on two core assumptions: “[f]irst, communication is best conceptualized as a goal-directed activity. Second, maintaining a positive reputation is one of the central goals of communication” (Benoit, 2014: 14). Essentially, it means that all communication, when broken down, strives to achieve certain aims and that people will try to achieve these aims through their communication. Plus, one of the most important of such aims of communication is to have a favourable public reputation (Benoit, 2014: 14-20).

In addition, there are two components whose presence is fundamental for the theory. The first one is that “for one’s reputation to be threatened, a reprehensible act must have been committed” (Benoit, 2014: 20), while “[t]he second element of an accusation is that the accused must be held responsible for the occurrence of that reprehensible act by the relevant audience” (Benoit, 2014: 21). The essence of these statements is that for crisis communication discourse to take place, a crisis situation must have occurred and there must be an actor who is responsible for this situation judged by the audience that is affected.

The crisis communication strategies themselves in image repair theory are divided into five main categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Some of these categories are then further divided into subcategories. First, denial is made up of both simple denial and shifting the blame. Second, evasion of responsibility consists of provocation, defeasibility, accident, and good intentions. Third, reducing offensiveness contains bolstering, minimisation, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the accuser, and compensation (Benoit, 2014: 22-25).
Moreover, aside from these strategies, there are some further guidelines for crisis response that are mentioned in the theory. For example, from an organisational point of view, these suggestions include the importance of having people in charge of crisis situations whose task it is to prepare for potential crises and act in case a crisis occur. The same is said about analysing the specific crisis, accusations and audience(s) in question in the event of a crisis to tailor the crisis response accordingly, as well as identifying the relevant audience(s) that are affected by a crisis for the crisis response (Benoit, 1997: 182-183).

5.2 Situational crisis communication theory

Situational crisis communication theory was also started to be developed in 1995 by Timothy Coombs (Coombs, 1995). It is founded on attribution theory, which asserts that as people search for the causes of events and attribute responsibility to the actors they believe to be accountable, particularly when it comes to negative or unexpected events, they will react emotionally, which can then influence their actions. SCCT builds upon attribution theory by estimating the level of reputational threat that is caused by different crises and by offering crisis response strategies to be used primarily by organisations (Coombs, 2007: 165-166).

The theory proclaims the crisis situation as the deciding factor in which strategies to use in each case and for assessing the severity of the reputational threat. The reputational threat is decided by three factors: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation. Consequently, the more likely stakeholders are to believe organisational actions as responsible for a crisis, the more crises an organisation has encountered in the past, and the more stakeholders that have previously been treated badly by an organisation, the worse the threat. Initial crisis responsibility is assessed by dividing crisis types into three crisis clusters that have rising levels of responsibility attributions and accompanying reputational threat: the victim cluster with weak responsibility attributions and mild reputational threat such as in natural disasters, the accidental cluster with minor responsibility attributions and moderate reputational threat like in technical-error accidents, and the preventable cluster with strong responsibility attributions and severe reputational threat present in human-error accidents, for example (Coombs, 2007: 166-169).

There are four main categories of crisis response strategies in SCCT: the primary strategies of denial, diminish, and rebuild followed by the secondary strategy of bolstering. These categories are then divided into subcategories: denial strategies consist of attacking the accuser, denial, and scapegoating; diminish strategies contain excuse and justification; rebuild strategies are made up of compensation and apology; and bolstering strategies are divided into reminder, ingratiating, and victimage (Coombs, 2007: 170).
Additionally, among the general advices for effective crisis communication that are put forward in the theory include the value of responding quickly to crises, being consistent in the response and speaking with ‘one voice’ when addressing the crisis, as well as providing an open and transparent response to crisis situations (Coombs, 2014: 130-136).

5.3 Comparison

While the two theories are related to each other, they do have some differences and will thus both be used to analyse Volkswagen’s crisis communication strategies from a broader perspective than relying on just one or the other. A brief summary will be given here regarding their similarities and differences and how the theories will be used in this study. To put it simply, there is some overlapping in the strategies themselves, while the suggestions for how they should be used differ, as do their theoretical roots and common areas of use.

First, similarities as well as differences can be found in the sets of crisis communication strategies as some strategies like denial, for instance, can be found in both theories, while other strategies such as provocation in IRT and ingratiation in SCCT are specific for one of the theories. Also, some strategies are known by different names but essentially carry the same meaning, which is the case regarding the strategies of shifting the blame in IRT and scapegoating in SCCT, for example. Plus, another version is when a strategy in one theory is divided into two or more different strategies in the other theory, which can be seen regarding the strategy of excuse in SCCT and the strategies of defeasibility and good intentions in IRT.

Second, even if the strategies may appear to be quite similar, the theories have differing views regarding how and when the specific strategies should be applied. Essentially, it all comes down to that SCCT is more situation-based regarding how the strategies should be used as the different crisis types mentioned earlier are used to decide which strategies that should be employed in each case, which means that the success of the strategies is seen as being more varying from situation to situation as it is more dependent on the circumstances of the crisis.

Third, the theories of IRT and SCCT have some separate influences in their theoretical framework as they were founded on apologia and accounts theories and attribution theory, respectively. Fourth, another difference between the two theories can be found in their areas of use as SCCT, in contrast to IRT, does not appear to have been commonly applied to personal crises besides organisational ones. SCCT might then be viewed as a more corporate centred theory, while IRT has often been applied both to individuals and organisations.

In this study, both sets of crisis communication strategies and suggestions for their usage will be employed as analytical tools, which will be returned to in the methods section. There, the strategies and suggestions will be further defined and exemplified.
6. Method and material

This section will describe the method and material that were used in the study. There will also be a description of analytical tools and sampling, as well as reliability and validity regarding problems that were encountered in the study and how they were solved.

6.1 Qualitative text analysis

A qualitative text analysis was used in this study to analyse the data. This method is used to analyse data from different kinds of textual and visual material that involves some level of interpretation on the part of the researcher to assign it meaning. A text analysis means that it is the content of this material that is studied, while it being done qualitatively refers to how the focus is on the occurrence of analytical objects in a certain context. In contrast, quantitative research, which is the other dominant research tradition in media and communication studies next to qualitative, is instead more focused on the extent to which its data takes place in different contexts (Esaiasson et al., 2017: 211-213; Jensen, 1991: 4). The method of qualitative text analysis was seen as suitable as what is of interest here is to investigate how and why certain textual statements about the Volkswagen emissions scandal are presented by different actors in a specific manner, and what potential effects could result from this presentation. Thus, the importance here is the manner in which something is said and the reasons behind it, rather than measuring how many times it is said, for instance.

6.1.1 Analytical tools

The articles from Volkswagen’s sustainability magazine were analysed based on the textual statements about the emissions scandal that were presented by different actors. Initially, the articles were analysed separately and then together to investigate what could be said on a general level regarding Volkswagen’s crisis communication in this magazine. First, the crisis communication strategies in the theories of image repair theory and situational crisis communication theory were used as analytical tools to find out what strategies were used by Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders to address the crisis, and what strategies were mentioned by its external stakeholders. Second, the accompanying suggestions for how these strategies should be put to practice were used to assess whether the strategies that were used in the magazine could be viewed as successful or not. Hence, when analysing the data, the following analytical tools were used, which consist of the crisis communication strategies and the suggestions for how they should be used that were proposed by Benoit in IRT and by Coombs in SCCT. This information will be presented as tables that were gathered from a literature review, where all but the suggestions for IRT consist of original tables. As no table on this matter was found, a new table was created for this study. When multiple tables were found on the same topic, the most extensive and/or up-to-date one was selected.
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 6.1: Image Restoration Strategies</th>
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</table>

Source: Benoit, 1997: 179
Table 6.2: Suggestions for Effective Image Repair Discourse

1. Because image restoration rhetoric is a form of persuasive discourse, suggestions for effectiveness can be derived from our understanding of persuasion generally.
   a. Avoid making false claims.
   b. Provide adequate support for claims.
   c. Develop themes throughout a campaign.
   d. Avoid arguments that may backfire.

2. A company that is at fault should probably admit this immediately.
   a. Attempting to deny true accusations can backfire.

3. Those accused of wrong-doing may, in fact, be innocent.

4. At times, it is possible to successfully shift the blame.
   a. However, shifting the blame cannot be viewed as a certain solution to image problems.

5. If factors beyond one’s control can be shown to have cause the offensive act, this may alleviate responsibility and help restore a tarnished image.

6. It can be extremely important to report plans to correct and/or prevent recurrence of the problem.
   a. This would be especially important for those who admit responsibility.
   b. Even those who are innocent of wrong-doing can benefit from plans for preventing recurrence of the problem.
   c. Corrective action cannot assure success.
   d. There is a risk that this strategy will fail—if not backfire—if one’s actions do not fulfill one’s promises.

7. Minimization cannot always be expected to improve one’s image.
   a. Trying to make a serious problem seem trivial can create a backlash.

8. Multiple strategies can work together.
   a. Defeasibility may identify causes of the problem that corrective action can resolve.

9. The powers of persuasion are limited.

Comment: This table was compiled word-by-word, with small modifications for grammatical clarity, from the section “Suggestions for Effective Image Repair Discourse” in Benoit, 1997: 183-185.
Table 6.3: SCCT crisis response strategies

Primary crisis response strategies

Deny crisis response strategies

*Attack the accuser*: Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.

*Denial*: Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.

*Scapegoat*: Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.

Diminish crisis response strategies

*Excuse*: Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.

*Justification*: Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

Rebuild crisis response strategies

*Compensation*: Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.

*Apology*: Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.

Secondary crisis response strategies

Bolstering crisis response strategies

*Reminder*: Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.

*Ingratiation*: Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.

*Victimage*: Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.

Source: Coombs, 2007: 170

Table 6.4: Situational Crisis Communication Theory Recommendations for Crisis Response Selection

1. Provide instructing information to all victims or potential victims in the form of warnings and directions for protecting themselves from harm.
2. Provide adjusting information to victims by expressing concern for them and providing corrective action when possible.
   
   Note: Providing instructing and adjusting information is enough of a response for victim crises in an organization with no crisis history or unfavorable prior reputation.
3. Use diminishment strategies for accident crises when there is no crisis history or unfavorable prior reputation.
4. Use diminishment strategies for victim crises when there is a crisis history or unfavorable prior reputation.
5. Use rebuilding strategies for accident crises when there is a crisis history or unfavorable prior reputation.
7. Use denial strategies in rumor crises.
8. Use denial strategies in challenges when the challenge is unwarranted.
9. Use corrective action (adjusting information) in challenges when other stakeholders are likely to support the challenge.
10. Use reinforcing strategies as supplements to the other response strategies.
11. The victimage response strategy should be used only with the victim cluster.
12. To be consistent, do not mix denial strategies with either the diminishment or rebuilding strategies.
13. Diminishment and rebuilding strategies can be used in combination with one another.

Source: Coombs, 2014: 152
6.2 Material

The case that the study is based on is the Volkswagen emissions scandal as mentioned in Volkswagen’s sustainability magazine from 2016. One reason for why this material prompts an analysis of the communication strategies that are used is that the magazine incorporates views of both internal and external stakeholders, thus allowing for a consideration of the communication from both of their perspectives regarding the crisis. Even if such views could be found elsewhere in different sources, they are here incorporated alongside one another purposely by Volkswagen, which makes it possible to question the motives behind why some views might be foregrounded while others may not be as present.

The magazine itself, “Shift. The Volkswagen Sustainability Magazine” (Volkswagen AG, 2016a), is a 58-page magazine in both print and online versions that was published by the Volkswagen Group in connection with the release of the sustainability report from 2015 in November 2016. Its main purpose is to address the company’s sustainability mission after the emissions scandal. While the two show some similarity, and some facts and figures in the magazine are taken from the report, the magazine is more similar to a regular magazine with interviews, essays, comment pieces, debates, reports, pro and contra items, and infographics etcetera compared to the report that contains more facts and figures (Volkswagen AG, 2016b). The magazine is divided into two sections: the first one, ‘insight’, is centred on the crisis as it is described as “[l]earning lessons from a scandal – dealing with mistakes openly”, while the second one, ‘outlook’, is more focused on Volkswagen’s forthcoming plans as “[e]lectrification, digitalization, and automation point the way to the future” (Volkswagen AG, 2016a). Hence, other than the crisis, further topics that are addressed in the magazine include ideas for the cars of the future. In the magazine, there is a mixture of texts showing the voices of Volkswagen in general as well as its internal and external stakeholders. The internal stakeholders are mainly made up of higher-ranking employees with leading positions, aside from one lower-ranking employee, such as the CEO, Head of Political Communication, Head of Public Affairs and Sustainability, and members of the Board of Management. For example, the external stakeholders consist of a customer, a car dealer, an investor, and present and former executives of governmental agencies such as EPA and non-governmental organisations like ICCT (Volkswagen AG, 2016a; Volkswagen AG, 2016b).

6.2.1 Sample

The texts that were chosen as the data to be analysed in the study then consist of different kinds of texts sampled from this magazine. In total, the magazine contains 25 texts including one introductory editorial, of which 13 are in the ‘insight’ section and 11 in the ‘outlook’ section. After studying the magazine in its entirety, the chosen texts were strategically
sampled based on their ability to address the crisis, which means that the texts that most clearly address the crisis were first selected followed by other texts that do so somewhat less clearly and that some texts that address other topics altogether were left out. For this reason, the majority of the texts were sampled from the magazine’s ‘insight’ section as it deals more directly with the crisis. In doing so, a total of 20 texts were selected for analysis, which consist of the introductory editorial plus all 13 texts from the ‘insight’ section and six texts from the ‘outlook’ section. The sampled texts were organised into four different categories: (1) general, (2) internal stakeholders, (3) external stakeholders, and (4) mixed to reflect whose voice is heard. In the first category, the texts show the voice of Volkswagen in general as there is no specific spokesperson featured from the company. The following two categories bring forward the voices of internal and external stakeholders, respectively. In the last category, there is a mixture of voices coming from both internal and external stakeholders.

6.3 Validity and reliability

One common problem in a qualitative text analysis, as in all social science research, is that the interpretation of a text may be subject to bias as people can come to different conclusions regarding the same text due to their previous experiences (Esaiasson et al., 2017: 228). For instance, given the controversial nature of the Volkswagen emissions scandal, the analysis of statements in this context could be influenced by personal opinions. The current study has tried to mitigate this problem by judging the statements through the crisis communication strategies and suggestions on how they should be used that were put forward in the theoretical perspectives of IRT and SCCT. For the same reason, a certain level of caution was necessary when drawing any general conclusions from the results. Another problem deals with sampling since the total population sampling technique may be the most accurate one as it incorporates all units in a given population for the broadest possible perspective of the issue at hand without the risk of losing valuable information by choosing some units over others (Esaiasson et al., 2017: 226). Due to the limited scope of the study, this was difficult both lengthwise and since not all articles in the magazine deals directly with the crisis as some are instead more focused on other topics, such as what future cars might look like. This problem was neutralised by sampling articles for analysis that most clearly address the crisis, which, after all, is what the study set out to investigate. With these problems in mind, the validity and reliability of the study are still assessed to be acceptable as there is a common thread throughout the study, and where there were no greater difficulties in answering the research questions as well as using the chosen method and analytical tools in practice without any significant measurement errors. Also, in terms of validity, it can be seen as the study measured what it had intended to through the analysis of the texts and regarding reliability, it is seen as it is assumed that the study could be replicated with relative ease.
7. Analysis and result

This section presents the analysis and result of the study, where the texts in the magazine are analysed by category.

7.1 General

7.1.1 “A year marked by crisis”

In this infographic, a timeline is presented of key events during the emissions scandal. While it seems to be done in an orderly manner at large as the events are summarised with reference to facts and figures, there are some instances of phrasing worthy of consideration.

First, throughout the text, examples are given of actions taken by Volkswagen to tackle the crisis. For instance, corrective action (IRT) can be seen in the mentioning of the vehicle recall in Germany that began in January 2016. Also, compensation (IRT/SCCT) can be found regarding the announcement of various compensative measures in June 2016 as part of US settlements. For example, it is noted that Volkswagen was currently undergoing negotiation with 44 US states about consumer protection lawsuits to be settled with over $600 million.

Second, when discussing the claimed success of the first meeting between the new CEO Matthias Müller and representatives of EPA in the US in January 2016, it is stated that “[i]n the media, this success, which is so important for future developments, is overshadowed by reports about a radio interview.” This statement might be read as an example of the strategy of attacking the accuser (IRT/SCCT) where the media is attacked by Volkswagen as the media had previously been critical of the radio interview in question with Müller on the American radio service National Public Radio (NPR) where he had claimed that Volkswagen did not lie about the emissions scandal, but instead blamed it on a technical problem originating from a misinterpretation of US laws.¹ Third, the strategy of transcendence (IRT) can be found as it is declared that the German Federal Motor Transport Authority (KBA) “also finds differences between laboratory and road values in vehicles from other automakers” in April 2016, thus putting the crisis in a broader context as other automakers are at fault as well.

7.1.2 “Unsparing scrutiny”

This text shows remarks given by Volkswagen regarding the investigation of their misconduct that is carried out independently by both the public prosecutor’s office in Braunschweig,

¹ NPR, 2016
Germany and by lawyers from the US law firm Jones Day. The most noticeable strategies that are used here are defeasibility (IRT) and excuse (SCCT) as Volkswagen claims to be unable to explain how the crisis could occur, while instead leaving the responsibility of providing answers over to the investigations. For example, it is stated that “it still isn’t clear how the deception transpired in detail, or who was responsible for the development and use of the software” and that “the course of action in clearing up the situation is determined largely by the investigative authorities.” In addition, corrective action (IRT) is used as it is noted that “[w]ith the help of an internal audit, Volkswagen is working intensively to shed more light on the situation”, for example through a close examination of the legality of “the processes of software development for the engine control unit” to rule out tampering or errors.

However, defeasibility (IRT) and excuse (SCCT) can still be seen as it is then claimed that any further answers about the crisis are dependent on the completion of the investigations as “the facts uncovered by the investigation will be made public if and when a full settlement can be reached with the US Justice Department”, which also applies to “[a]n assessment of the results of all efforts to clarify the matter”. Plus, simple denial (IRT) and denial (SCCT) may be viewed as it denied that Volkswagen “thwart the quest for the truth” or hopes that the crisis will solve itself with time since it is declared that “[s]uch assertions are popular, but wrong.”

7.1.3 “Descent and delisting: Volkswagen falls hard”

This infographic details some of the consequences of the emissions scandal for Volkswagen's ratings and partnerships by references to facts and figures. A few examples of bolstering (IRT) and reminder (SCCT) can be found here as Volkswagen’s past achievements are mentioned. For example, it is stated that when the crisis happened, “the company had only just become the proud auto industry leader on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index” and that Volkswagen had previously had the “[h]ighest scores in the industry for compliance, climate strategy, and product stewardship”. It is then noted that in 2015, “the company placed 14th in the rankings” in a leading global reputation study, Global RepTrack 100, while sinking down to the 123rd position the following year. Moreover, other ratings that have sunk or been deleted are listed, as are partnerships that have been ended or suspended due to the crisis.

7.1.4 “A new, better Volkswagen Group”

The infographic can be linked to the strategy of corrective action (IRT) as it lists some of the future initiatives announced by Volkswagen in relation to the crisis that are part of the program “TOGETHER – Strategy 2025”. To begin with, these actions are described as “[i]n
light of the current crisis, our company is making a bold 180-degree turn.” Among the plans are for Volkswagen to transform its core business, which will be done through a streamlining of its current model range and a launching of electric vehicles. Plus, focus will be put on developing autonomous vehicles, or self-driving cars, for example. Next, Volkswagen will develop mobility solutions and provide transportation services aside from the sales of vehicles. For instance, it is mentioned that it will be achieved through having acquired shares in the start-up mobility company Gett. In addition, it is stated that Volkswagen will continue its digital transformation throughout the organisation and plans “to hire around 1,000 new software specialists.” Lastly, it is noted that as a way of securing the necessary funding to implement the changes that are proposed in the “Strategy 2025”, improvements in the whole organisation and “a rigorous commitment to delivering profitable growth” will be needed.

7.1.5 “Facts, figures, and data”

In this infographic, facts and figures from Volkswagen’s sustainability report 2015 are presented under three headings: economy, environment, and people. There is also a section about Volkswagen’s stakeholder management. Some of these facts and figures might be connected to the strategies of bolstering (IRT) and reminder (SCCT), while corrective action (IRT) seems to be used as well. For instance, bolstering (IRT) and reminder (SCCT) can be seen as it is stated that Volkswagen reduced the environmental impact of its production by 21.5 per cent from 2010 to 2015 and that 143,246 vehicles with alternative drive systems were produced in 2015. An example of corrective action (IRT) to the crisis could be that it is showed that Volkswagen has increased compliance training for its staff from 2014 to 2015.

7.2 Internal stakeholders

7.2.1 “Editorial”

In this introductory editorial, Volkswagen’s Head of Political Communication Michael Scholing-Darby sets the tone for the magazine. Initially, when addressing the crisis, he mentions how it had happened to “the world’s largest car manufacturer”, which could be interpreted as an example of bolstering (IRT) and reminder (SCCT) as it points to Volkswagen’s positive achievements in the face of the crisis. Scholing-Darby then resumes to introduce the magazine itself as being a form of corrective action (IRT) to the crisis that reflects Volkswagen’s new approach as it is deemed to be “an initial answer” to the question of “[h]ow can a company that has so flagrantly broken its promise to society talk about

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2 This editorial is not part of any of the sections as it is placed before them.
sustainability again without fear of derision and ridicule?” Plus, further down in the text, the magazine is said to be a “shift in sustainability communications”. Additionally, corrective action can be seen in promises of betterment as he brings up the task of “ensuring that Volkswagen never again commits such a violation of the rule of law and decent behavior.”

However, Scholing-Darby states that this magazine still cannot provide “the promised no-holds-barred explanation of the emissions affair” as Volkswagen “(still) can’t say exactly how these things came about – the law firm appointed to look into the matter has yet to complete its investigation.” By claiming to have a lack of information about what caused the emissions scandal and referring to the investigation instead, this statement can be connected to the strategies of defeasibility (IRT) and excuse (SCCT). Lastly, he presents some of the stakeholders that are featured in the magazine with praising words like “incisive commentary”, “central role”, and “surprising insights”, while also thanking them for their contributions, which might be linked to the gratiation strategy (SCCT).

7.2.2 “Lobbyism and sustainability: Two sides of the same coin”


Here, Dr. Thomas Steg, General Representative of the Volkswagen Group and Head of Public Affairs and Sustainability, talks about the relationship between lobbyism and sustainability. While Steg does not mention the crisis per se, he states that as sustainability and lobbyism can work together, it is assumed “that dishonest methods and backroom deals are taboo.” As the emissions scandal could be seen as the result of these very things, this statement might perhaps be interpreted as Volkswagen is now attempting to denounce the kind of situation in which the crisis had come about, and where the strategies of simple denial (IRT) and denial (SCCT) had previously been used to deny its existence. In addition, Steg notes that “[c]ompanies need a culture of corporate citizenship, now more than ever”, which, although it is not made clear what he refers to, could be interpreted as a slight reference to the crisis.

7.2.3 “Uncovering the truth or just tactics?”


In this text, the Communications division at Volkswagen provides some questions and answers regarding their communication during the crisis. First, to answer the question of whether calling the emissions scandal ‘the diesel issue’ should not be viewed as an example of whitewashing, it is stated that “[t]he misconduct of certain individuals in this context is not compatible with our understanding of ourselves as a company”, and that words like ‘scandal’ would discredit the vast majority who are innocent. This statement can be linked to the strategies of shifting the blame (IRT) and scapegoating (SCCT) as the blame is directed away
from Volkswagen as a company over to just some individuals, even if these strategies might often proclaim the culprit as being someone outside of the organisation in question.

Next, regarding the question why Volkswagen will not admit to fraudulent behaviour, it is claimed that “[f]raud’ implies that the company willfully deceived customers and other stakeholders. So far there is nothing to suggest that this is the case”, which might be read as a form of simple denial (IRT) and denial (SCCT) to the claims of fraud. However, the strategies of mortification (IRT) and apology (SCCT) are then used as it is said that “[t]he fact is that we have disappointed our customers and the general public. And this is something we deeply regret.” Concerning the question why there have been so few press conferences since the disclosure, Volkswagen claims that the company has faced the public and answered queries on a continuous basis, while press conferences have been reserved for news that is considered “worthwhile for journalists to travel to hear.” Later, about the question why Volkswagen has withheld information by citing the ongoing investigation, defeasibility (IRT) and excuse (SCCT) are used as it is stated that “[p]roviding legitimate, reliable information will only be possible after the ongoing, very costly, and complex investigations have been completed.” Finally, to answer the question of why customers were informed so late, Volkswagen counters that customers could check online whether their vehicles were affected soon after the crisis started, which is a form of corrective action (IRT), while personal notifications were not possible until all relevant contact information had been gathered.

7.2.4 “Tough, but fair”


Here, Dr. Francisco J. García Sanz, a board of management member responsible for Procurement who has headed the diesel task force since 2015 and is the leader of Volkswagens negotiations with the authorities in the US, answers questions about the progression of the negotiations. This text can generally be linked to the strategy of corrective action (IRT) as the negotiations themselves can be seen as an example of such. Plus, the strategies of mortification (IRT) and apology (SCCT) are used when García Sanz states that “[w]e apologized on behalf of the Volkswagen Group and signaled our desire to make up for what happened”, even if it might take time for Volkswagen to redeem themselves in the US given how the scandal was seen as particularly severe there based on emissions standards.

After reminiscing about the strain of the hard work that was done during the negotiations, he states that a complete withdrawal from the US market was never an option since Volkswagen are to “play a major future role as an engine of electromobility in the US”, which is another instance of corrective action (IRT). Corrective action, or the lack thereof, can also be seen regarding the issue of whether European consumers will be given the same treatment as
American ones, to which Garcia Sanz makes references to the vehicle recall in Europe to refit cars up to standard, and while the negotiation with consumer advocacy organisations is mentioned, he states that “there is no basis for further claims” or compensative measures (IRT/SCCT). Finally, Garcia Sanz notes that “strict spending discipline” will keep Volkswagen on track, even if the money would rather have been used to develop future products.

7.2.5 “I knew this job wouldn't be a walk in the park”


This text shows an interview with Dr. Christine Hohmann-Dennhardt, a former board of management member who was responsible for Integrity and Legal Affairs at Volkswagen, where she discusses her work in relation to the emissions scandal. First, the strategy of corrective action (IRT) can be seen as Hohmann-Dennhardt notes that she accepted the job offer to help Volkswagen get “back on track” after the crisis and as CEO Matthias Müller seemed “really serious about getting to the bottom of things and changing the company.” Hohmann-Dennhardt then states that her decision to do so was in the interest of “the automotive industry and job security in Germany” at large, which might be connected to the transcendence strategy (IRT) as the effects of the crisis are seen in a broader perspective. Later, when asked about what had caused the crisis, she claims that “I can’t presume to give a final judgment yet”, which can be linked to the strategies of defeasibility (IRT) and excuse (SCCT). However, Hohmann-Dennhardt admits that there were some “factors that favored improper behavior or at least made it harder to expose” as she points to “[t]he hierarchical structures in the company” and that “there obviously weren’t sufficiently clear signals that the Group doesn’t tolerate violations of the law.”

Corrective action (IRT) can then be seen again when Hohmann-Dennhardt lists some initiatives taken by Volkswagen to prevent a similar crisis from happening. For example, she states that company has “developed new guidelines”, made organisational changes regarding compliance, “improved communication and training”, as well as intensified its monitoring, and changed its risk management system “from annual to quarterly reports.” In addition, Hohmann-Dennhardt says that Volkswagen wants “to offer employees more support in difficult situations down the road” and that “[t]he entire board is in close dialogue with employees”, while the whistleblower system also has been reorganised. Plus, she notes that Volkswagen had taken “a very close look at the company departments and processes, especially product safety” as part of the audit and that the function of “Compliance and Legal Affairs are examining whether procedures were transparent and clearly understandable.” On a different note, Hohmann-Dennhardt states that even if one can explain the motivation

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3 Dr. Christine Hohmann-Dennhardt left her position in January 2017 (Volkswagen AG, 2017).
driving those responsible for the scandal, their behaviour was unacceptable given that “compliance and integrity are also economic factors” since the loss of public trust could be the end for a business. To round off the interview, she says that she considers her work with Volkswagen being done “[w]hen Volkswagen’s good reputation has been restored”.

7.2.6 “Making way for good ideas”


In this text, Dr. Karlheinz Blessing, a board of management member who is responsible for Human Resources and Organisation, talks about changes that need to be done at Volkswagen after the crisis, which links it to the strategy of corrective action (IRT). First, an example of bolstering (IRT) and reminder (SCCT) can be seen as Blessing notes that “[t]he Volkswagen Group has been very successful over the past decade – and has been resting on its laurels.” Then, by stating that “[t]he wake-up call in September 2015 was a particularly painful and costly lesson. But the scandal was just a symptom, albeit a dramatic one”, the strategy of transcendence (IRT) can be seen as he explains why the changes that started to be implemented in the company following the crisis were necessary due to a changing market, customer base, and team of staff members, to which Volkswagen fell short in comparison as it was stuck in its old ways. For example, it is mentioned that “the Apples, Googles, and Ubers of this world are uncomplicated, direct, and fast-moving. At Volkswagen, by contrast, processes are sluggish and hierarchies hold sway”, while the entrance of the Generation Y, or millennials, on the market comes with its own set of challenges to take into consideration.

To survive in this new environment, one corrective action (IRT) mentioned by Blessing is to collaborate more efficiently among the different brands in the Volkswagen Group as part of “a Code of Cooperation” that was put into effect in June 2016. As the same principles were then transferred to Volkswagen’s “management and staff development programs”, it is said to “promote a culture that learns from mistakes rather than sweeping them under the carpet.” Moreover, he points to how Volkswagen needs to give up some of their old habits if they are “to create a culture that deemphasizes power and hierarchy” and that the “management must clear obstacles out of the way so that employees can do their jobs well”, which could in turn “unleash creative potential” and ultimately, make Volkswagen an industry leader again.

7.2.7 “Sustainability – getting it right this time”


This text is written by Professor Dr. Gerhard Prätorius, who is Head of Coordination CSR and Sustainability at Volkswagen⁴, and as he lists some further initiatives taken by Volkswagen in

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⁴ ICD Academy, n.d.
response to the emissions scandal, the text can be linked to the strategy of corrective action (IRT). First, when addressing the crisis, it is noted that “September 18, 2015, was a black day for Volkswagen – and a bitter blow for the Group’s sustainability management. The notice from the US Environmental Protection Agency revealed that Volkswagen had broken not only the law, but also a promise to society.” Corrective action can then be seen as it is stated that “[t]he new Chairman, Matthias Müller, promised that Volkswagen would learn the right lessons from the absurd manipulation that had taken place.”

Next, it is explained that some of the necessary changes after the emissions scandal have already been started to be implemented. Among the corrective actions that are put forward are “the need to improve compliance standards” and “the need to strengthen the Group’s sustainability management”, of which the latter is said to be achieved through “an international Sustainability Council that is vested with far-reaching rights of information, consultation, and initiative”. Furthermore, it is asserted that Volkswagen will “redouble its efforts to resume its timeproven stakeholder dialogues and partnerships, and to regain its place in national and international sustainability alliances.” In doing so, of focus is also to integrate all of Volkswagen’s stakeholder groups “into a systematic stakeholder management strategy”, which is part of the program “TOGETHER – Strategy 2025”. Plus, it is mentioned that Volkswagen will develop “targets and indicators that the company will use to measure its progress in three key arenas: business, the environment, and social affairs.” The overall aim of these measures is then said to be “to ensure that, as it moves forward, Volkswagen takes stakeholder expectations into account in a balanced way and keeps its promises to society.”

7.2.8 “Electric, connected, shared – the future of mobility”


In this text, the word is given to Matthias Müller, the CEO of the Volkswagen Group and Chairman of the Management Board, who discusses Volkswagens plans for the future with electric, autonomous vehicles and mobility services. As he notes that a change within Volkswagen being necessary “was clear to many people even before the present crisis, but our situation has opened new doors and the willingness to embrace reform has grown”, these plans can be connected to the strategy of corrective action (IRT). One corrective action mentioned by Müller is to make the internal combustion engine “as clean as possible – using particulate filters in the gasoline engines and the latest and best SCR catalytic converters in the diesels.” An example of the transcendence strategy (IRT) can then be seen as Müller

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5 While the text itself says ‘outlook’, it is placed under ‘insight’ in the magazine’s table of contents.
states that “[t]ake a closer look and you will see: Volkswagen is more than this crisis” when he talks about how the proposed measures will change the company for the better.

7.2.9 “The car of the future is not a car”

In this text, Volkswagens future plans are further explained and exemplified. First, an example of corrective action (IRT) can be seen as it is explained how Johann Jungwirth, who is the Chief Digital Officer at Volkswagen, had made an audience at a conference laugh when declaring that Volkswagen “wants to be a leader in sustainable mobility by 2025” shortly after the crisis started. Second, corrective action can be seen again as Volkswagen’s ideas for “the future of mobility” are said to represent “an opportunity for Volkswagen to improve its ‘triple bottom line’”, which, although it not explicitly stated, has been damaged due to the crisis.

7.2.10 “Room to move in the digital workplace”

This text focuses on the new technology and agile methods that are part of Volkswagen’s future plans. Towards the end, it is noted that Stefan Waschk, Head of Volkswagen’s Agile Center of Excellence, “sees the diesel affair as a ‘huge opportunity’ to focus on agile values.” It could be interpreted as a form of corrective action (IRT) to the crisis as Waschk believes that Volkswagen is often “stuck in processes that are much too rigid” even if under the impression that they have got “the perfect plan”, while ever-changing customer requirements necessitates a faster implementation of these requirements to fulfil customer’s needs.

7.2.11 “We need to learn to understand the richness of diversity even better”

In this text, an interview is conducted with Dr. Thymian Bussemer, Volkswagen’s Head of HR Strategy and Social Sustainability. He lists some corrective actions (IRT) which might be linked to the emissions scandal, even though it is not explicitly stated. For example, Bussemer states that Volkswagen needs “to create more opportunities for skilled workers to discuss issues in their peer communities.” Moreover, he notes that Volkswagen is generally trying to improve its “communications and connectivity within the company.” Regarding the needed cultural changes at Volkswagen, other corrective actions that are brought forward by Bussemer include for the company to abandon its “divisional mindset”, to “get in step with the customer, and focus hard on the value-creation process”, while also “to establish new, agile work cultures that facilitate faster innovation.”
7.3 External stakeholders

7.3.1 “Motor of change”


Here, Professor Dr. Klaus Töpfer, who previously served as Germany’s Minister of the Environment and as Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), gives his views on how the crisis should be solved. Thus, this text can overall be linked to the strategy of corrective action (IRT). For example, it is seen as Töpfer explains how “[c]rises can only be overcome if they are resolutely used as a lever for change” and “the crisis must serve as a starting point for a whole new mindset without taboos”, which requires Volkswagen to introspectively ask themselves “how and why such a drastically misguided decision to manipulate the emissions system was conceived of, acted on, and covered up.”

Plus, he notes that the severity of the crisis makes this task difficult given that “[t]echnical defects can be fixed by recalling cars to the shop, but repairing trust isn’t so simple” as the crisis had originated “from a premeditated circumvention of legal requirements and consequent mass deception of customers”, which, through the transcendence strategy (IRT), led to a loss of public trust not only for Volkswagen but for the whole diesel industry.

Töpfer then presents some concrete actions which Volkswagen should take to redeem themselves. First, to tackle the causes behind the crisis, he calls for a more open corporate culture where every employee in the chain of commands are obliged to report on errors or wrongdoings without fear of retaliation, which could eliminate the kind of cover-up of the deception that had taken place both externally and, in some respects, internally within Volkswagen. Additionally, Töpfer urges Volkswagen to improve its dialogue with society as the company “took a hostile, defensive stance” when confronted by outside actors about the crisis, which can be linked to the strategies of simple denial (IRT) and denial (SCCT), rather than transforming the critique into valuable partnerships for change. Second, he underlines the importance of establishing transparency within the company. It can be achieved by “appointing independent, critical experts to the Supervisory Board and advisory committees”, but also by the replacement of technologically obsolete products, “even if still marketable”, in the favour of more sustainable options for the future, and through a better relationship between manufacturers and regulators with clear, verifiable areas of responsibility.

Third, Töpfer talks about how solutions to the crisis can be developed, which all comes down to replacing diesel vehicles with electric cars as they are a better alternative for the future. Fourth, he goes into more detail regarding how the shift to electric cars should be implemented, such as that the vehicles must be used with energy from renewable sources, which needs to be advocated by lobbying from the automotive industry itself to succeed.
Lastly, as a way of securing the future, Töpfer argues that as the handling of the crisis will be costly for Volkswagen and require funds that otherwise would have gone to future projects, this funding can only be obtained if Volkswagen learns to live without “certain accustomed entitlements”, which could be achieved through cuts to bonuses and financial penalties to people involved in the scandal. Lastly, the transcendence strategy (IRT) can be seen again when the crisis is put into a bigger perspective as it is said that “[t]he collateral damage from this crisis reaches far beyond a single company and industry. It contributes to a larger picture of growing distrust in state institutions in our democracy”, which makes it even more crucial that Volkswagen deals with the crisis “with unprecedented honesty, transparency, and rigor.”

In addition, accompanying the text is an infographic box by Volkswagen where two pie charts and one table are shown. The pie charts show survey answers to the questions “VW is not alone. Other automakers probably also manipulate results” and “I would still buy a VW if I liked the car and the price”, where the affirmative answers among the respondents ranged from 91 per cent to 74 per cent, respectively. These charts could be interpreted as a further use of the transcendence strategy as they urge the reader to put the crisis in a larger context by citing both potential faults of other automakers and the question of pricing. The table portrays the development of the share price between August 2015 and September 2016, which after a dive seems to stabilise, suggesting that it would be back on track.

7.3.2 “You can’t demand trust”


This text shows an interview with Jürgen Gietl, who is a Managing Partner at the firm Brand Trust in Nuremberg, Germany and a brand expert recognised internationally. First, he states that the loss of trust is a more serious issue for Volkswagen rather than the financial aspect of the crisis as “it looks as if they’ve been deliberately cheating their customers for years”, which can be linked to the strategies of simple denial (IRT) and denial (SCCT). Second, Gietl notes that trust is not something a company can demand, but it is built up over time when promises are kept and actions are defined by integrity. Third, on the question of how Volkswagen now can make up for the crisis, he brings up how Volkswagen’s bonuses to board members made the situation worse, as did customer notifications who looked more like “mobilization orders” in his opinion and the fact it is still unclear how much the executives knew about the crisis. Instead, Gietl states that Volkswagen “should accommodate its German customers as well” and provide “[g]enerous compensation payments, like those agreed in the US”, which is an example of the compensation strategy (IRT/SCCT). Further corrective actions (IRT) he mentions are for Volkswagen to implement “on-road testing by independent inspectors”, “to install the best environmental technology”, and to “genuinely focus on its customers.”
7.4 Mixed

7.4.1 “What others are saying”


In this text, the views of different kinds of stakeholders are presented. To begin with, it is stated by Volkswagen that “[t]he Group will intensify its stakeholder dialogue in future, both in person and online” as a form of corrective action (IRT) to the crisis. The first stakeholder is Ingo Speich, a German portfolio manager at the firm Union Investment. He believes that Volkswagen “completely underestimated” the scandal initially, which can be linked to the strategies of minimisation (IRT) and justification (SCCT). While its severity is now known, Speich notes the remaining issue of a lack of transparency. Transcendence (IRT) may then be viewed as he points to the consequences of the crisis extending to the German business area and trademark at large. Corrective action (IRT) can also be noticed as Speich argues that Volkswagen should replace its leadership to regain the trust of investors and that the crisis should be used as an opportunity to deal with internal weaknesses by joint efforts.

The next one up is Wolf-Dietrich Warncke, a German car dealer. He explains how Volkswagen’s misconduct shook his trust in the company and creates consequences for his own business as well. As Warncke notes that other carmakers “were also cheating” since they were allowed to carry out their own testing, transcendence (IRT) may be seen. Additionally, Warncke states that he and his customers were angered by how Volkswagen’s board members got bonus payments during the crisis. He then brings up the need for corrective action (IRT) in the form of a new corporate culture and the researching of “alternative drive-train technologies and mobility concepts”, rather than being passive. This need can be seen as he believes that “[t]he ministry has done little so far to shed light on the scandal.”

Next, Bruno Corigliano, a German pub-owner and former employee at Volkswagen, discusses how the crisis has affected him. Corigliano notes that as most of his customers work for Volkswagen given that his pub is close to a factory in Wolfsburg, he was worried that the crisis would damage his business. While Corigliano has noticed that the employees seem to worry about their future and are disappointed with the management, the mood now seems to have turned “since the company started moving”, which might be interpreted as a reference to Volkswagen’s corrective actions (IRT). Moreover, corrective action is seen as he states that “VW needs to become VW again” with positive references to Volkswagen’s former CEO, Dr. Carl Hahn. Plus, Corigliano believes that it was “[p]robably greed” who led those responsible for the crisis, and while he hopes they will be found guilty, he is not sure that will happen.
The next stakeholder is William K. Reilly, a former Administrator of EPA in the US. He states that “[t]he most critical thing for VW now is to demonstrate a change in culture – the culture that has led to the crisis in the first place”, which can be linked to corrective action (IRT). Reilly asserts that this change must be applied to the whole organisation top-down, where those who are unwilling to change must leave, and that it needs “to be communicated externally in a credible fashion” as well. Furthermore, he believes that the executives who are responsible for the crisis should be dismissed and that the change must be implemented by Volkswagen’s own management rather than an outside consulting firm. Additionally, corrective action can be seen when Reilly advises Volkswagen to implement the agreed environmental compensation, which can also be drawn to the compensation strategy (IRT/SCCT) if the environment is classified as a stakeholder, and to engineer new products.

Thereafter, the floor is given to Klaus-Dieter Weiß, a German employee at Volkswagen and a union representative for IG Metall. He testifies about how he and his colleagues were angered by the crisis, even if they strongly identify with the company and have good career prospects there. Weiß notes that as most members of the workforce were innocent of the crisis, he expects that the guilty ones should take their responsibility to regain the trust of the public, which is a form of corrective action (IRT). Corrective action is seen again when he calls for the need of “a new corporate and leadership culture” that is open to constructive criticism.

Afterwards, Peter Mock, Europe Managing Director of ICCT in Berlin, shares his opinion on the crisis. At first, transcendence (IRT) may be seen as he notes how “the emissions and fuel-consumption crisis has spread to the entire industry”, and that while the underlying problems had been present much longer, it was the topic of penalties that caught the public’s attention. Volkswagen’s corrective actions (IRT) of investing and expanding in e-mobility is then viewed positively by Mock, who “expect the company to push ahead in clearing up the scandal as well.” Plus, he advises Volkswagen to let its engineers develop new solutions for the future, rather than getting “involved in questionable lobbying activities in Brussels”, and “to actively support the legislative bodies in putting the necessary safeguards in place.”

The last stakeholder is Inez Krüger, founder of a German business that uses diesel vehicles. While the company’s own vehicles do not seem to be affected, she expresses her anger over how the scandal could take place and states that she has lost her trust in the company. The strategies of simple denial (IRT) and denial (SCCT) can then be seen as Krüger believes that a big problem lies in Volkswagen’s initial response as she says that she cannot understand “why VW weren’t upfront about it and why they didn’t admit to it from the beginning”, while also noting that “[i]f VW had been honest straightaway and acknowledged the issues, they could have limited the damage.” As the second stakeholder in this text, she brings up being irritated
by the board members’ bonus payments and that the crisis has had a negative impact on Germany’s trademark, of which the latter may be linked to the transcendence strategy (IRT).

7.4.2 “What comes out the back is all that matters”

In this interview conducted by journalist Dr. Elmer Lenzen, the topic of emission-free transportation is debated by Dr. Ulrich Eichhorn, Head of Research and Development at Volkswagen, and Dr. Axel Friedrich, a co-founder of ICCT and one of the whistleblowers in the emissions scandal. This topic of decreasing emissions could itself be seen as a form of corrective action (IRT) to the crisis as it had occurred due to emissions levels that were higher than expected. Another corrective action can be seen when the difficulties of testing emissions values under real driving conditions are discussed and Friedrich states that “[a]bsurd rules have been created here. If anything good has come of Dieselgate, it’s the fact that we can talk about such regulations now”, which implies that the crisis has resulted in that the weaknesses of these regulations are now more openly discussed to find solutions.
8. Conclusion

This section presents a conclusion about how the results of the study can be interpreted in relation to its theoretical framework and previous research. First, the study’s research questions will be answered in turn. Second, the study’s connection to previous research will be detailed. Third, the method that was used for the study will be evaluated. Finally, suggestions for further research on this topic will be given before some concluding remarks.

8.1 Research questions

8.1.1 RQ1: How can crisis communication strategies be applied to what Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders say about the emissions scandal? Do the strategies seem successful or not?

When analysing these texts, one may notice that the most common strategy used by Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders to address the crisis is corrective action (IRT) as efforts to solve and prevent the crisis are listed. In particular, it can be seen as the company’s plans for future vehicles are discussed as a means of circumventing the present crisis, where investments in electric, more environmentally friendly cars and mobility services are key features. Additionally, it is seen by references to measures that are taken to improve the corporate culture within Volkswagen, such as calls for less hierarchy, and, less frequently, regarding initiatives that have been taken in response to external stakeholders like vehicle recalls. Other recurring strategies are defeasibility (IRT) and excuse (SCCT) to lessen the company’s responsibility for the crisis by claiming to be incapable of explaining its origin, bolstering (IRT) and reminder (SCCT) to bring up past achievements that could counterbalance the crisis, and transcendence (IRT) to put the crisis into a wider perspective.

To a lesser extent, other strategies that are used are mortification (IRT) and apology (SCCT) to apologise for the crisis and express regret over its occurrence, compensation (IRT/SCCT) to talk about the issue of monetary compensations to customers, simple denial (IRT) and denial (SCCT) to deny having deceived the public, shifting the blame (IRT) and scapegoating (SCCT) to put the blame on just some individuals within the company rather than the company as a whole, attacking the accuser (IRT/SCCT) to counter allegations made against the company, and ingratiation (SCCT) to put stakeholders in a positive light.

Judging by the theory of IRT, while corrective action in itself is positive, perhaps Volkswagen could have focused even more on what actions that already have been taken to solve the current crisis rather than pointing to their future plans in order to gain more public credibility as it one thing to promise betterment, but another to actually deliver on these promises and it is advised against to make promises that one might not be able to keep. Next,
the use of defeasibility to evade responsibility for the crisis cannot be viewed as very successful since it was not factors beyond Volkswagen’s control that led to the crisis as proposed here, but rather factors that the management was very much in control of, which was shown by Volkswagen’s admission of guilt to charges such as fraud and the charging of several executives in the settlement with the US Justice Department in March 2017 (Carey & Shepardson, 2017), for example. Due the guilt of Volkswagen’s management, the use of simple denial, shifting the blame, and attacking the accuser could not be seen as successful either as it is advised that one should admit to being at fault immediately if that is the case, while also that one should avoid to deny true accusations or make false claims. Moreover, as compensation is used sparingly and American customers seem to be favoured over European ones, no particular success can be drawn to the use of this strategy or to the use of bolstering and transcendence, which are all strategies that seek to reduce the offensiveness of the crisis. Lastly, as the use of mortification is another strategy that is not featured very prominently here, it cannot be said to achieve any great success (Benoit, 1997: 183-185).

When assessing the emissions scandal through the theory of SCCT, it can be categorised as falling under the preventable crisis cluster, given that it was the conscious actions of people at Volkswagen that led to the crisis, which not only violated laws and regulations but also deceived the public and put them at risk. Consequently, such a crisis is said to entail strong attributions of crisis responsibility for stakeholders and present a severe reputational threat for the organisation in question (Coombs, 2007: 168).

To deal with such a crisis, it is argued that one should centre the crisis communication response around the rebuilding strategies of compensation and apology. Therefore, the scarce use of these strategies here could be viewed as unsuccessful. Furthermore, as the strategy of reminder, which is one of the secondary bolstering strategies that should only be used as a reinforcement to the other primary strategies, is actually used more often than any of the rebuilding strategies, it could be viewed as another mistake on Volkswagen’s part that is in contrast with the advices that are put forward in SCCT. Plus, the same can be said about the use of denial strategies together with either diminishment or rebuilding strategies, which is advised against to avoid inconsistency. Here, both of these combinations could be found as the denial strategies of denial, scapegoating, and attacking the accuser were found together with diminishment strategies such as excuse and rebuilding strategies like compensation. However, even if SCCT does not include corrective action among its strategies, it can still be found under the general principle of adjusting information to stakeholders, which is present in the guideline for how the strategies should be used. There, it is mentioned that one should express concern for stakeholders and while Volkswagen seems to do so occasionally, a lack of concern could be seen for instance regarding the non-existent compensation to European
customers. Moreover, it does not seem like any significant success can be drawn to the use of the remaining strategy of ingratiation (Coombs, 2014: 142, 152).

Therefore, when assessing how Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders address the crisis in this magazine through the theories of IRT and SCCT, it may be concluded that while being heavily dependent on corrective action (IRT), which is an important part of image repair discourse, the strategies did not seem very successful in general. If Volkswagen had focused more on how the present crisis will be solved in relation to its stakeholders instead of shifting the focus to the future and accepted more responsibility for the crisis rather than evading it, the company might have enjoyed a more successful outcome. However, Volkswagen’s focus on the future could be regarded as understandable in some sense as even if the crisis does not seem to be over yet, some time has passed since it first erupted and Volkswagen may now find itself in a phase of rebuilding the company. Still, these future efforts should not be made at the expense of solving the present consequences of the crisis, which is what seems to be the case here. Also, as mentioned by both IRT and SCCT, one reason for Volkswagen’s lack of showing responsibility for the crisis can be that such statements could lead to further lawsuits, which explains why defensive strategies like defeasibility, bolstering, and transcendence are more common instead (Benoit, 2014: 38-39; Coombs, 2014: 143).

8.1.2 RQ2: How can crisis communication strategies be applied to what Volkswagen’s external stakeholders say about the emissions scandal? How does their perspective differ from that of Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders?

When analysing the texts with the point of view of Volkswagen’s external stakeholders, both similarities and differences can be seen in comparison to Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders. First, corrective action (IRT) seems to be the most common strategy mentioned by external stakeholders as well as they talk about what changes they would like to see at Volkswagen. However, while engineering and the development of new, better cars are put forward, they generally seem somewhat less focused on future vehicles and more interested in organisational changes at the company and other efforts to solve the current crisis. Second, other strategies mentioned by external stakeholders include transcendence (IRT) to discuss how the crisis has extended to the whole automotive industry and negatively impacted Germany’s trademark, the difference being that as Volkswagen put the crisis in a larger perspective to lessen their own guilt and make the crisis seem less offensive, the external stakeholders did so to point to the negative effects of the crisis. Third, simple denial (IRT) and denial (SCCT) can be found as they criticise Volkswagen’s previous denial of both the crisis itself and having deceived the public, which is in contrast with how it is still maintained by Volkswagen in the magazine that they did not deceive the public, albeit to a small extent. Fourth, compensation (IRT/SCCT) is seen as the external stakeholders call for increased
compensative measures to European customers, for instance, while Volkswagen themselves seem reluctant to do so. Fifth, minimisation (IRT) and justification (SCCT) are found as the external stakeholders criticise how Volkswagen initially had underestimated the crisis, which are two strategies that could not be found among Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders.

Thus, it could be concluded that even if corrective action (IRT) seems to be the most prominent strategy mentioned by Volkswagen’s external stakeholders as well when addressing the crisis in this magazine, the biggest difference between Volkswagen and its internal stakeholders versus its external stakeholders is that the latter generally seem more focused on solving the crisis in a short-term perspective, which can be seen through the urge for compensative measures, for instance, while Volkswagen is instead more preoccupied with solving the crisis in a longer perspective through the development of new vehicles. Additionally, among the sentiments that are expressed, one may deduce that as Volkswagen’s external stakeholders are more or less angry and feel betrayed by the scandal, they now demand change and an explanation of who should be put to blame for the crisis.

8.1.3 RQ3: What kind of actors and opinions of the emissions scandal are presented? How and why are certain actors and opinions presented rather than others?

In this magazine, one may notice that the actors that are allowed to voice their opinion of the crisis mainly consist of higher-ranking employees in various management positions within the Volkswagen Group rather than lower-ranking employees in terms of the internal stakeholders. In fact, only one present and one former employee of that kind are included. In addition, many of the external stakeholders are found in leading positions in their respective areas in society, such as politicians and leaders of various organisations, even if there are some stakeholders that could be viewed as less elitist as well, like a few customers.

One reason for this choice could be due to self-preservation on Volkswagen’s part as it was shown here that lower-ranking employees and customers to an even greater extent than other actors are angry with Volkswagen’s management, although for different reasons. Regarding the lower-ranking employees, their anger is understandable since even though the management by all accounts seem to be responsible for the crisis, they have instead tried to shift the blame to engineers and lower-ranking employees (BBC, 2016a; Ewing, 2017). Similarly, the anger of customers could be explained by that they, like the employees, were more personally affected by the crisis. Hence, even if both lower-ranking employees and customers were actually featured in the magazine, it might have been more difficult for Volkswagen to find somewhat favourable reviews among these actors. Plus, another reason for the preference of more elitist stakeholders is that while such actors also had their reasons
for being angry with Volkswagen, it might have been easier to find constructive criticism among them given how their expertise in their respective fields might make their opinions more similar to that of Volkswagen’s own, which was seen for instance by how the development of new cars was mentioned more often by actors such as executives of organisations like EPA as well. Moreover, another reason for the leader-centric approach of the magazine is that as the most permeating message it conveys is that of how Volkswagen will change for the future, it could be linked to what is called ‘the rhetoric of renewal’ which is a variant of crisis communication that is focused on how an organisation can rebuild itself when moving on after a crisis (Benoit, 2014: 41-42; Coombs, 2014: 142) and is said to be “a leader-based communication form” (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007: 132) since leaders are used as a source of inspiration. Furthermore, even though the actors that were featured in the magazine seem to have been allowed to voice some rather unpopular opinions of the company from Volkswagen’s perspective as faults were pointed out by both internal and external stakeholders, such as about hierarchical structures and Volkswagen’s deception to the public, it is reasonable to believe that Volkswagen would not have published overly critical views of the company, which in turn might have affected the selection of stakeholders that were heard. It becomes evident as the aim of this magazine, after all, is to position Volkswagen as a sustainable and responsible company in the face of the emissions scandal.

To conclude, the most influential actors in this magazine seems to be that of Volkswagen’s own management, and while the voices of external actors such as customers are heard, many of these external stakeholders are found in leading positions in society as well, which seems to be a strategic move on Volkswagen’s behalf as to avoid very unfavourable reviews, even if some were shown in the magazine, and to use leaders as an inspiration for change.

8.2 Connection to previous research

When examining how the findings in this study relate to previous research within the field of crisis communication, a few connections can be seen. First, as shown in the earlier study about the Volkswagen case made by Zhang et al. (2016), it is interesting to note how many different stakeholder groups in society that can be affected by a crisis the size of the emissions scandal. For example, as shown in the current study, it is not only customers who are affected, but also other external stakeholders like investors, governmental and non-governmental organisations, and business owners. As in this previous study, the present study pointed to how stakeholders can react with intense sentiments such as anger due to a crisis, even if the amount of such sentiments were controlled by Volkswagen in this magazine compared to on Twitter as researched in the earlier study. In addition, the observation of how stakeholders that were more personally affected by the crisis such as customers and
employees seemed more prone to react with anger and anxiety can be drawn to the study by Jin, Pang and Cameron (2010), which found that anger and anxiety were two of the most common emotional responses for the primary public of crises resulting from reputational damage and regulation/legislation, for example, as in the Volkswagen case.

Next, another link can be seen regarding the importance of the choice of communication channel for the crisis communication that is presented as put forward here in terms of the sustainability magazine, whose language might inherently be leaned towards marketing. For example, the importance of this choice was mentioned in previous studies in relation to sustainability reports by Goosen-Botes and Samkin (2013), where it was discussed how organisations can use this communication channel to respond to legitimacy challenges. Similarly, one of the clearest links to what was found here can be drawn to the study by De Wolf and Mejri (2013: 54), which showed how BP’s first sustainability report after the oil spill crisis had been widely criticised as being a “greenwashed report” as it had used similar statements showing defeasibility (IRT) and excuse (SCCT) to evade responsibility as Volkswagen did in this case. Moreover, Schwarz (2012a: 436-437) talked about this choice when noting how the communication channel of social media lends itself to crisis communication for organisations when addressing stakeholders, for instance, as did Veil, Sellnow and Petrun (2012) in terms of YouTube. Likewise, the strategic importance of the choice of communication channel for crisis communication was noted by Liu, Austin and Jin (2011) in relation to social media versus traditional media and word of mouth.

In addition, connections to previous studies can generally be seen about Volkswagen’s shortcomings in its crisis communication response. For example, as Choi and Chung (2013) found that the strategy of apology could effectively restore an organisation’s reputation for customers who were highly involved in the organisation in question, one could still question why Volkswagen did not use this strategy more in this case. Another link can be seen regarding how a fear of lawsuits might have influenced which strategies that were used by Volkswagen, which was mentioned Blaney, Benoit and Brazeal (2002: 389) as well. In the same way, Williams and Treadaway (1992), pointed to the risks of evading responsibility instead of taking it when guilty as shown here by Volkswagen. Also, Benoit and Henson (2009) put forward the perils of denying to having committed wrongdoings even if that is the case and that a focusing on strategies such as bolstering, defeasibility and corrective action (IRT) can lead to unfavourable outcomes, which was seen here about Volkswagen.

Instead, Volkswagen could learn from previous research that showed examples of more successful crisis communication responses. For instance, Benson (1988) pointed to how an organisation can benefit from making a quick, proactive response to a crisis, while
Volkswagen’s response to the emissions scandal generally could be argued to be more of the slow and reactive kind as the company first denied its existence until being found out by outside actors. In addition, Benoit and Brinson (1999: 153) detailed how a moderate use of the strategies of defeasibility and transcendence (IRT) can be successful if done correctly, while they can appear overly defensive when dwelled upon, which could be said to be the case here about Volkswagen. Consequently, when comparing the present study to this previous one, one might notice that while a similar set of strategies were found to have been used in both cases, the outcomes of these strategies can be said to have differed dependent on their rhetorical contexts. Plus, Benoit (2009: 263-264) underscored that the strategy of mortification (IRT) may often be the best alternative to repair a tarnished image when one is guilty of the offense, even for corporations who might worry about lawsuits as discussed earlier, which is a something that Volkswagen could have focused more on in this magazine as the apologies that were found were quite few and not given a very central role.

A further connection can be drawn to the study by Schwarz (2012b: 193), where covariation-based communication strategies were put forward as a potential solution to the issue of that organisations may not want to admit guilt out of fear of legal consequences, which was seen here as a possible explanation for Volkswagen’s lack of showing responsibility for the crisis.

8.3 Evaluation of method

All things considered, the chosen method that was used for the study generally worked quite well given that the research questions were able to be answered. However, a few observations of potential problems could be noticed that are worth to take into consideration. The potential problems essentially deal with the issue of making personal interpretations of the data as it sometimes was difficult to know which crisis communication strategy from the two theories that could be seen in the texts when multiple alternatives appeared possible. In such cases, the strategy that seemed most similar to what was said in the texts by Volkswagen and its stakeholders was selected and a hedging language was used to indicate that there was some room for interpretation. Second, this issue became even more palpable for a novice within the field of crisis communication research who did not have any previous experience of using any of the theories in question. Still, even if there would be some instances where the strategies could be applied to the texts in a different manner, it is not expected that it would change the outcome of the study to any great extent. Additionally, the issue became evident in the categorisation of the texts as well when multiple alternatives seemed plausible based on the elements in the texts. For example, it could be seen regarding the description of the text types in the beginning of each analysis. It was dealt with in a similar fashion by selecting the alternative that seemed best suited to what was actually said in the texts.
8.4 Suggestions for further research

Looking forward, this study brings forth some ideas about how the topic of crisis communication can be studied further. First, one alternative is to compare the crisis communication that is offered by an organisation in a sustainability magazine such as this one, or in a similar communication channel, with viewpoints from its different stakeholders that are found elsewhere. In doing so, the views that are expressed among stakeholders like in this case can be complemented with other sources to find a more balanced review of how a crisis is handled with a wider variation of sentiments, which could be found in online forums and social media, for instance. The point of such a study would be to observe if any major differences can be found and to neutralise the organisation’s marketing aim that could influence what kind of actors that are given voice in their own publications. Another idea in relation to the Volkswagen case, or a similar crisis of this scale, is to examine its whole course of events once the crisis could be seen as definitely being over. If done, one could look at how the communication changed from pre- to postcrisis to see if any new lessons could be gained in terms of what seemed to work and what did not. Similarly, as it was interesting to note what kind of language Volkswagen and its management used to talk about the scandal, one could do a longitudinal study about how the crisis communication language has developed over time in general, in a specific organisation, or regarding a specific kind of crisis.

8.5 Concluding remarks

To finalise this study, some concluding remarks are in place. First, based on what was found here, one might assume that while a sustainability magazine can provide a fruitful ground for assessing the crisis communication used by an organisation following a crisis, the content of such a magazine may still need to be viewed with a critical eye in terms of how it intends to market the organisation in question regarding sustainability. Second, the main conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that as opposed to the magazine’s premise, it seems as if Volkswagen still has more to prove before credibly being able to claim that the company has made a shift in its sustainability communication after the emissions scandal. To achieve this goal, some steps in the right direction could be taken by Volkswagen if they would more clearly own up to their mistakes and address how the crisis will be solved in the immediate future in relation to the company’s stakeholders rather than shifting the focus to how the crisis will be solved indirectly further into the future through investments in new, better vehicles, even if such investments are important as well. Furthermore, when addressing the crisis, Volkswagen could make an effort to take into account the viewpoints from an even broader range of its different stakeholder groups to gain more public credibility. Whether Volkswagen will actually do so or not still remains to be seen.
References

Primary source


Secondary sources


