

# **STRIKING THE RIGHT NOTE WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH:**

The effects of message framing and crisis communication strategy on consumer outcomes during crises of different levels of severity

**Master Thesis in Communication Science (MSc)**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** With the ever-increasing connectivity through the use of the Internet and social media for the exchange between consumers and brands, brand crises are increasingly becoming virtually inevitable. To minimize reputational damage when confronted with a crisis, brands utilize various crisis communication efforts to maintain positive customer evaluations. Through the rapid dissemination of news and press releases, online newspaper portals pose an important platform for a brands' crisis communication to win public sympathy and support. This study aims to examine the effect of communication strategy and message framing within crises of different degrees of severity on customer's crisis evaluations.

**Methodology:** To provide an overview on how a brand's crisis communication must be conceptualized to obtain positive customer responses, a 2 (emotional versus rational message framing) x 2 (accommodative versus defensive crisis communication strategy) x 2 (low versus high crisis severity) between-subjects design has been made use of. This study reached 217 German participants that were randomly shown one of eight manipulated conditions of a fictitious brand's press release about a production malfunction in an online newspaper. It was thereby interrogated how the use of crisis communication strategy and message framing within crises of different severities influences consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention

**Findings:** For this study, a multivariate analysis of variance has been performed. This studies' results have shown several positive effects of an accommodative communication strategy and an emotional message frame on consumers' crisis evaluations. It has thereby also become clear that when involved in a low as opposed to a high severity brand crisis, consumer evaluations are less strongly negatively influenced. Additionally, findings indicate that during a low severity crisis, a defensive communication strategy, and during a high severity crisis an accommodative strategy leads to more positive consumer evaluations. Additionally, a defensive crisis communication strategy paired with an emotional message frame and an accommodative strategy utilized with a rational frame enables brand communicators to generate more positive customer evaluations.

**Implications:** This study contributes to the field of research by confirming several hypotheses, but also serves to add to the existing knowledge by investigating the interaction effects between the studies variables. Providing recommendations to communicators contributes to improving brand crisis communication approaches to effectively obtain positive customer evaluations.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

As brands find themselves more often in the court of public opinion, the demand for a consumer centric approach in crisis communication to prevent loss of reputation, revenue and brand love during and after a crisis is particularly important. Taking preventive measures and steps to save one's brand from social embarrassment and to be alerted on possible emerging crises can, therefore, be beneficial when trying to avoid financial and reputational damage from a crisis. Reputational damage from a crisis is especially unfavorable as it severely impacts customer and stakeholders' attitudes on the brand. Primarily utilized in order to minimize reputational damage from a given crisis, communication efforts are implemented to maintain customer purchase intention, customer loyalty, trust, and to prevent negative word-of-mouth (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). Although the crises a brand can face are no new phenomenon, with rising interactivity and rapid dissemination of messages on the Internet, the dynamics between consumer expression, mass media and a brands' action significantly shifted. As crises have thereby become virtually inevitable, brands' online communication activities have an important impact on various business metrics as a brand's market share, stock price, as well as its overall reputation can be damaged during a crisis.

During times of crisis, online communication channels pose the most timely and effective way to communicate a brand's standpoints and positions due to their timeliness, effectiveness and wide appeal (Wang, 2014). This makes the use of online channels in crisis communication an important practice to win public sympathy and support when confronted with negative headlines or publicity (Wang, 2014). As for today, an increasing number of brands use online communication channels to manage brand crises (Coombs, 2007). Brands are thereby able to react fast by being able to quickly pick up an issue and by replying to allegations or issues. Releasing a brand statement after an issue arises presents an important opportunity to demonstrate the brand's responsiveness and how much value a brand places on its products and services and additionally enhances customers faith in the brand. When failing to do so, a brand's inaction can be perceived as arrogance or lack of concern for consumers' interests, leading to a loss in consumers' faith and trust.

Depending on the crisis at hand, a brand can utilize different strategies for their communication during a crisis. For this research, the use of an accommodative and defensive crisis communication strategy will be incorporated and studied. Doing that, the influence on consumer evaluations between a brand accepting its responsibility and apologizing for its actions, and a brand defending its actions during a crisis will be studied. However, it is not only the chosen crisis communication strategy that influences consumers' evaluation of an

organization's performance during a crisis. In addition to choosing a strategy for its communication, a brand can also make use of specific message frames while communicating during times of crisis. Playing a crucial role in forming an audience's attitude and subsequent evaluations of a brand's communication effort, message frames can be made use of to highlight certain features of a message and to portray a message in different ways to its audience in order to influence what they think and believe about an issue (Schäfer & Oneill, 2017). As studied in this research, a crisis communication message could therefore be presented either emotionally, by which a brand's compassion, regret and sincerity is being emphasized, or rationally, by which a brand refrains to use emotional elements in order to provide clear and factual information to its audience.

In addition to that, the influence of crisis severity on consumer evaluations will be studied for this research. It will therefore be incorporated how crises with lower or higher severity for consumers, and hence differing levels of personal involvement and relevance, influence subsequent consumer evaluations. As previous studies have shown, crises of higher severity can lead to greater responsibility being attributed to the brand, leading to greater resentment and anger on the part of the consumer. Due to this, it is being studied to what extent a brand's crisis communication ultimately affects customers' subsequent brand evaluations, within a crisis of low and high severity. Elaborating on consumers functional and emotional evaluations of a brand's crisis communication, it will be studied to what extent the use of different crisis communication strategies and message frames during either a low or high severity crisis may influence consumers subsequent crisis evaluations. This aims to explore how consumers' subsequent crisis evaluations can be influenced and how it can be improved and enhanced by communicators.

This study aims to examine the combined effects of message framing and crisis communication strategy on customers' crisis evaluations within crises with different degrees of severity. Providing an overview on how brands have to manage the complexity of communication activities within online communication platforms, it is intended to investigate how a brand can maintain their reputation and obtain positive customer responses when facing crises of different severity. Using a 2 x 2 x 2 experimental between-subjects design including German participants, this research aimed to answer the following main research question:

*“To what extent does crisis communication strategy, message framing and the severity of the crisis influence consumers' crisis evaluations in perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?”*

Although there has been quite an amount of research on brand crisis communication, only little research has been conducted on the comparison between crises with different degrees of severity in relation to the use of message frames and crisis communication strategy. As studies have found, the severity of a crisis highly affects customers' evaluation of a brand's communication in times of crisis, making it especially important for communicators to find out how positive customer evaluations can be generated to protect brand reputation also in high severity crises, during which a brand is held highly responsible and accountable (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Although Ott and Theunissen (2015), emphasize the use of accommodative strategies to be more successful than defensive strategies for a brand's crisis communication, their work does not clarify whether this is equally applicable within crises of varying severity.

Moreover, as it has not yet been extensively studied how perceived response sincerity through the use of a brand's message framing and communication strategy can be increased within crises of different severity, this study aims to explore how perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention can be increased even in crises of high severity using the right communication efforts. As this gap remains to be further studied, and the interactions between those variables could generate important implications for practitioners, this research aims to investigate potential interactions between those three constructs and their effects on customers' crisis evaluations. The practical value of this study is therefore to explore how communication strategies and message frames within crises of different severity have to be combined to generate the most favorable consumer evaluations resulting from a brand's crisis communication. Ultimately, this allows conclusions to be drawn about how communication strategies and message frames need to be used and combined to improve brand communication in times of crisis. Providing recommendations to communicators, crisis communication efforts can be improved to obtain positive customer evaluations by generating higher perceived response sincerity, greater brand trust, more positive brand attitudes, and higher purchase intention.

This study contains six chapters. After this introduction, a theoretical framework on the use of communication strategies and message framing within organizational crises will be presented. For that, also the constructs of crisis severity and the studies dependent variables will be elaborated on to conceptualize the research model. In the third chapter, the methodological choices are presented and justified. After that, the analysis of results are elaborated on in chapter four. The discussion and interpretation of results, as well as this study's implications and limitations are given in the fifth chapter. Lastly, the conclusion of this study is presented in chapter six.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. Organizational crises

When facing a crisis, a brand's existence can be on the knife's edge by challenging its reputation, sales and survival amongst competitors (Wang, 2014). According to the definition of Sohn and Lariscy (2014), an organizational crisis can be defined as "a major event that has the potential to threaten collective perceptions and estimations held by all relevant stakeholders of an organization and its relevant attributes" (p.24). It can thereby lead organization's stakeholders to reassess their overall perceptions of the brand and to make them reevaluate their brand attitudes (Zyglidopoulos & Phillips, as cited in Sohn & Lariscy, 2014). A poorly handled crisis can thereby have a severe impact on how stakeholders interact with a brand and can threaten its operations and actions by posing a financial, as well as reputational threat (Coombs, 2007). Customer's reactions can vary from stopping to buy from the brand or even to engage in spreading negative word of mouth about the brands products or services (Coombs, 2007). The appropriate communication during a brand crisis is therefore of high importance to establish dialogue between the brand and its stakeholders to deliver the right message at the right time (Eriksson, 2018).

### 2.2. Customer crisis evaluation

In order to prevent or reduce reputational damage from a crisis, brands have to engage into several communication efforts in order to maintain customer satisfaction and the brands' attractiveness. A brand's crisis communication is, thus, primarily used to generate a more positive consumer sentiment and to ensure their continued loyalty to the brand. To ensure positive outcomes from an organizational crisis, a brand's communicational approach will have to satisfy the expectations of its consumers in order to generate positive evaluations. For this study, the construct of 'customer crisis evaluation' is taken into account. Doing that, it is studied how consumers evaluate a communication strategy paired with a certain message frame within different degrees of crisis severity and how this affects subsequent crisis evaluations.

*Response sincerity.* First of all, this study examines the perceived response sincerity of consumers after having encountered the brand's crisis message. According to Guèvremont and Grohmann (2017), consumers' responses are more favorable when a brand shows high levels of authenticity, responsiveness and sincerity during crisis communication. Demonstrating sincere and genuine actions which are ultimately reflected in greater perceived sincerity of a brand's response by consumers, more positive consumer evaluations, can be generated. In



relation to that, Nadeau, Rutter and Lettice (2020) point out that an incongruence in a brands crisis communication, leading to lower brand authenticity and, thus, reduced perceived response sincerity can have negative effects on a brands recovery from a crisis. Customers thereby view a brand as not being consistent within their communication and may even develop negative brand associations and evaluations, which can in turn negatively influence brand attitude and purchase intention (Nadeau et al., 2020; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). Choosing the right response strategy when facing a crisis to increase the brand's perceived sincerity can thereby minimize a brand's reputational damage (Jahng & Hong, 2017).

*Brand trust.* For consumers affective evaluations following a brands crisis communication, firstly, brand trust will be considered for this research. Brand trust represents a process in which beliefs about the reliability of a brand, as well as its safety and honesty are important facets that are considered by customers (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). A brand's trustworthiness determines above all consumers' willingness to engage with the brand and thereby to accept their very own vulnerability to the brand, since consumers depend on its fulfillment of their expectations and demands (Dirks & Skarlicki, 2009). Since a brand crisis can have a major impact on customer trust in the brand and its products as the competences and capabilities of the brand are being put into question, the retaining of consumers trust becomes of great importance to ensure positive evaluations (Hegner, Beldad & Kraesgenberg, 2016).

*Brand attitude.* In addition to consumers' affective evaluation in terms of their trust in the brand, also their attitude towards the brand after the crisis communication will be elaborated on. Consumers' brand attitude can be defined as their overall assessment of the brand which is based on positive or negative emotions in response to brand-related beliefs (Murphy & Zajonc as cited in Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014; Olson & Mitchell as cited in Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014). As Cho and Gower (2006) have stated in their research, perceptions of an audience after a crisis are shaped not only by what happens, but especially by how those events are communicated by the parties involved. A brand's chosen crisis communication can thereby positively influence consumers' evaluations to such an extent that brand attitudes become more positive, and the brand can be presented in a better light (Cho & Gower, 2006).

*Purchase intention.* Lastly, as functional evaluation, consumers purchase intention will be included in this study. As a brand crisis generally raises concerns and negative associations among consumers regarding the brand's capabilities and reputation, numerous researchers have already pointed out that a brand crisis can negatively influence consumers' purchase intentions or even cause consumers to stop buying from the brand altogether (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010). Purchase intention is thereby influenced to a large

extent by consumers' brand attitude and, thus, represents an intervening variable between the attitude and actual behavior of consumers (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014).

### 2.3. Crisis communication strategy

As Wang (2014) puts it, a brand's response to a crisis should be extensively considered in order to maintain consumer confidence in the brand. In this regard, choosing the right crisis response strategy for a brand's communication poses the core activity during a crisis (Fearn-Banks, as cited in Kim & Park, 2017). According to Benoit (1997), as well as Wang (2014), the most frequently employed communication strategies for the communication during a crisis can be denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness of event, or mortification. Coombs introduces the crisis response strategies of attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating, excuse, justification, compensation and apology (Coombs, 1998, 2007).

Kim and Park (2017) take a slightly different view and categorize response strategies into two main strategies, being accommodative strategies, by which brands accept their responsibility for the issue, and defensive strategies, by which brands defend their actions. Ott and Theunissen (2015) state that accommodative strategies have been found out to be more successful than defensive strategies for a brands crisis communication (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, as cited in Ott & Theunissen, 2015). In line with this, other researchers also emphasize that the use of apology for a brand's crisis communication has a more positive influence on the brand's overall reputation than the use of a denial communication strategy (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, as cited in Verhoeven, Van Hoof, Ter Keurs & Van Vuuren, 2012). However, none of these researchers address whether this seemingly preferential use of an apology for a brand's crisis communication is applicable within crises of different severity.

#### 2.3.1. Accommodative communication strategy

When deciding on a communication strategy during a crisis, communicators need to be well aware of the impact their words will have on consumers. When deciding for an accommodative communication strategy for their communication to its consumers during times of crisis, a brand ultimately apologizes and accepts its responsibility for the given crisis (Lee, 2004). Taking responsibility for a particular crisis is often perceived by consumers as honorable, as the acceptance of that negative event can evoke sympathy and forgiveness on the side of the consumer (Weiner, Graham, Peter, & Zmuidinas, as cited in Lee, 2004). According to Kim and Park (2017), an accommodative communication strategy may especially be used when the brand holds great responsibility for the cause of the crisis. Apologizing and accepting its

responsibility thereby not only shapes consumers' evaluations of the brand, but also their understanding of the organization's sincerity (Kim & Park, 2017).

According to Coombs and Holladay (2002), although scholars frequently recommend the use of an accommodative communication strategy during a brand crisis, accepting and apologizing for any problem that arises can also backfire if applied poorly. Having the potential to lead to a lot of legal problems, the public acceptance of responsibility for any issue can seriously weaken a brand's legitimacy and legal position because of which its reputation could be even further damaged (Fitzpatrick, as cited in Coombs and Holladay, 2002; Tyler, as cited in Coombs and Holladay, 2002).

### 2.3.2. Defensive communication strategy

In contrast to using an accommodative communication strategy, brands can also make use of a defensive communication strategy during a crisis to demonstrate minimal responsibility (Claeys & Cauberghe, as cited in Kim & Park, 2017; Coombs, 1995). When making use of a defensive communication strategy, a brand can use the denial of responsibility for a crisis to either protect the brand's reputation by shifting the blame or attacking someone else for the issue (Moon & Rhee, 2012). By doing that, the use of a defensive communication strategy can be employed to demonstrate a brand's minimal responsibility for a specific crisis. However, the denial of the brand's responsibility can also lead to anger and aggression on the part of the consumer when brands wrongfully claim that there is no problem or when the responsibility for the crisis is falsely blamed on someone else (Allen & Caillouet, as cited in Moon and Rhee, 2012; Coombs, as cited in Moon and Rhee, 2012). These negative emotions evoked by an inappropriate application of a defensive communication strategy can ultimately lead to a brand being perceived as insincere and untrustworthy, and to customers forming negative brand attitudes based on the brands crisis communication. Based on these insights from literature, the effects of crisis communication strategy are hypothesized to be the following:

**H1:** The use of an accommodative crisis communication strategy leads to higher a) perceived response sincerity, b) brand trust, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention, as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy.

## 2.4. Message framing

Affecting the attitudes and opinions of its audience, different presentations of information can produce different behavior and levels of engagement by using certain frames of presentation (De Vreese, 2005; Entman, 1993). As described by Zaller (1992), alternative formulations of the same message can significantly affect its meaning for a particular audience, by which small changes in the presentation of information can lead to great changes in the audience's attitude and opinion (as cited in Chong & Druckmann, 2007). The process of framing information thereby involves the selection of a certain aspect on an issue by presenting it more saliently in the communication (Entman, as cited by Kozman, 2016). Due to this, when presenting or communicating an issue in a particular way, the framing of a message can affect an audience's attitude and behavior on a specific issue (Chong & Druckmann, 2007).

Framing thereby poses a dynamic process between the activity of frame-building and frame-setting (De Vreese, 2005). The frame-building process, during which an issue is framed, is thereby followed by the process of frame-setting, by which the used frame for the presentation of an issue subsequently affects the audience's interpretation and evaluation of the presented information (De Vreese, 2005). According to De Vreese (2005), this activity of frame-setting can lead to the formation of attitudes. Using a certain message frame for the communication during a crisis, a brand can highlight certain factors of its message with the intended goal to persuade its customers and receive positive customer crisis evaluations (Cho & Gower, 2006). It can thereby be used to influence consumers' evaluation of a given crisis, as well as the brands perceived responsibility for the event. According to the study of Kim and Cameron (2011), the way a brand crisis is portrayed greatly influences consumers perception of the crisis and subsequently elicits certain emotional responses (Choi & Lin, as cited in Kim & Cameron, 2011). Due to this, it is of utmost importance that when responding to a crisis, a brand considers very carefully how to frame and present its message to consumers, as eventually the chosen way of communicating will influence not only consumers' emotions about the crisis, but also their subsequent attitudes about the brand, as well as their behavioral intentions (Cho & Gower, 2006; Kim & Cameron, 2011).

### 2.4.1. Emotional message framing

Making use of an emotional message frame to present information, a brand aims to use emotions for its communication during a crisis to elicit feelings among the receiver of the message (McKay-Nesbitt, Manchanda, Smith & Huhmann, 2011). Emotionally-framed messages can be

used to persuade the consumer of the brand's standpoint through appeals to the consumers' emotions (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011). According to Moon and Rhee (2012), when trying to persuade the recipient of a message by using emotional appeals, words or images stimulating the audience's positive or negative emotions about the issue may be used to express the brand's concern and regret for those affected by the given crisis. By describing in what way the brand is trying to manage the given crisis, an emotional appeal can be used to reduce consumer's anger against the brand and to generate more favorable attitudes (Moon & Rhee, 2012). Emphasizing the brand's compassion by showing emotion during the communication with its consumers, a brand can increase its trustworthiness, as well as shape consumers' subsequent attitudes on the brand and behavioral intentions when it comes to interacting with the brand (Kim & Cameron, 2011). In this regard, researchers emphasize that the use of emotional message frames has a more positive impact on consumers' attitudes and purchase intentions, as a brand is made to appear more human through the use of emotions for its crisis communication, leading consumers to react less angrily and upset to a brand's actions (Kim & Cameron, 2011; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014).

#### 2.4.2. Rational message framing

In contrast to an emotionally charged communication through the use of emotional message frames, with the use of rational message framing, a brand provides its consumers with concrete and clearly presented information about a given crisis situation (Moon & Rhee, 2012). By relying on arguments or reason, by providing clear and factual information to its consumers, beliefs about a given issue can be changed by persuading through appealing to the recipients' rationality (McKay-Nesbitt et al., 2011; Moon & Rhee, 2012). Using rational appeals to communicate during a crisis, a brand presents its information in an objective and straightforward manner to its consumers. This will lead consumers to focus their attention on the content of the message, rather than on its emotional presentation (Claeys & Cauberghe, 2014). A brand can thereby inform its users which steps it will take to manage the given situation to mitigate uncertainty on the part of the consumer (Moon & Rhee, 2012). According to Moon and Rhee (2012), this is particularly relevant when a crisis is considered to be severe and serious to consumers which may result in them becoming frightened and therefore requiring more factual information about what is happening at the moment. By using objectively presented arguments and facts, consumers are able to focus their attention on the content of the brand's crisis communication message, meaning that in the case of very serious matters, they are not distracted from important details by the use of an emotional appeal (Claeys &

Cauberghe, 2012). However, providing objective and factual information without the expression of emotions can provoke consumers to develop negative feelings towards the brand, as a rational approach to the framing of a brand's crisis message can be perceived as a lack of commitment and sincerity (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Based on these insights from literature, the effects of message framing are hypothesized to be the following:

**H2:** An emotional message frame for a brand's crisis communication leads to higher a) perceived response sincerity, b) brand trust, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention, as compared to a rational message frame.

### 2.5. Crisis severity

To select the best fitting approach for a brand's crisis communication, however, firstly the nature of the crisis must be identified in order to become aware of the severity of the issue (Benoit, 1997). Besides drawing a distinction between a product and a moral crisis, a crisis can also be differentiated according to its severity. According to Coombs and Holladay (2002), the severity of a crisis can be defined as "the amount of damage generated by a crisis including financial, human, and environmental damage" (p. 169). Damage caused by a crisis may range from minor to greater financial or environmental damage, or from a simple product defect to one causing physical injury or even the death of people involved. According to Lee (2004), a crisis is thereby perceived as being more severe in its impact when directly affecting consumers goals, as greater personal involvement and relevance for the consumer leads to greater responsibility being attributed to the brand. When consumers judge a crisis to be more severe, their perceptions of the organization, and especially its reputation, are becoming more negative (Claeys, Cauberghe, and Vyncke, 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). Resulting from this, a crisis of greater severity is said to generate more negative perceptions among consumers, resulting in greater damage to a brand's reputation and consumers' trust (Claeys et al., 2010; Coombs & Holladay, 2002; Verhoeven et al., 2012). Furthermore, findings from previous literature suggest that the severity of a crisis negatively influences purchase intention, in that consumers' purchase intention decreases as the severity of a brand crisis increases (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Fediuk et al., 2010). Based on these insights from literature, the effects of crisis severity are hypothesized to be the following:

**H3:** A low-severity crisis leads to higher b) brand trust, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention, as compared to a high severity crisis.

## 2.6. Interaction effects

### 2.6.1. Communication strategy and message framing

As described above, the choice of a communication strategy and the framing of a crisis response is a crucial decision to be made in crisis communication in order to obtain positive customer evaluations. Since it is generally more likely that the communication strategy will be chosen first based on the brands responsibility for the issue at hand, it is important to find out which message frames should be combined within each communication strategy. In this regard, it is particularly important to consider under which condition a brands' communication is perceived as authentic and sincere by its customers. As there has not been conducted sufficient research into the proposed interaction of crisis communication strategy and message framing to formulate a hypothesis, an exploratory research question for this interaction has been composed which will be further elaborated in in the discussion part of this study.

**RQ1:** To what extent does message framing influence the effect of crisis communication strategy on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?

### 2.6.2. Communication strategy and crisis severity

When deciding on a crisis communication strategy, it is important to consider what kind of crisis the brand is facing and how serious its consequences are for consumers. As described before, it has been found that accommodative communication strategies are generally seen to be more successful than defensive strategies for a brands crisis communication (Ott & Theunissen, 2015). However, it is not clear whether this means that an accommodative strategy is as successful in a low severity crisis as in a high severity crisis. Also, it is not clear whether an accommodative crisis communication strategy also generates greater perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention than a defensive crisis communication strategy during a low and high severity crisis. Due to this, as there has not been conducted sufficient research into the proposed interaction of crisis communication strategy and crisis severity to formulate a hypothesis, an exploratory research question interaction has been composed.

**RQ2:** To what extent does crisis severity influence the effect of crisis communication strategy on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?

### 2.6.3. Message framing and crisis severity

When deciding on brands' communication during crisis, it is just as important to decide which message frames to use in order to generate a positive consumer in a crisis of low as well as high severity. For the communication during crisis, it must be carefully considered whether the expression of emotions is appropriate or even necessary in the specific situation (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). Again, it is important to note that during a low severity crisis, consumers tend to be less involved as this crisis is of less relevance to them. In contrast, a high severity crisis tends to be highly relevant for consumers, as they are either directly involved or the crisis entails certain consequences for them. Based on this, during a crisis of high severity, the use of an emotional message framing could possibly be more appropriate as consumers may be upset or angry due to their involvement and an emotional and empathetic brand response can soothe consumers and thus elicit greater perceived response sincerity. On the other hand, during a low severity crisis, in which consumers consider themselves to be low involved and have low perceived relevance, a rational message framing may elicit greater response sincerity as consumers are not highly emotionally involved and an emotional response by the brand could be seen as overacting and exaggerated. However, due to an insufficient amount of research into the proposed interaction of crisis severity and message framing to formulate a hypothesis, an exploratory research question for this interaction has been composed.

**RQ3:** To what extent does crisis severity influence the effect of message framing on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?

### 2.6.4. Communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity

Lastly, this study seeks to identify whether there is a three-way interaction between the variables of crisis communication strategy, message framing, and crisis severity. It is thereby ought to discover under which type of crisis severity the combination of an accommodative communication strategy with an emotional or rational message frame as well as a defensive communication strategy with an emotional or rational message frame yields the most favorable customer crisis evaluations. As there has not been any research conducted into proposed three-way interaction of crisis communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity, an exploratory research question for this interaction has been composed.

**RQ4:** To what extent do an accommodative as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy, in combination with an emotional message frame compared to a rational message

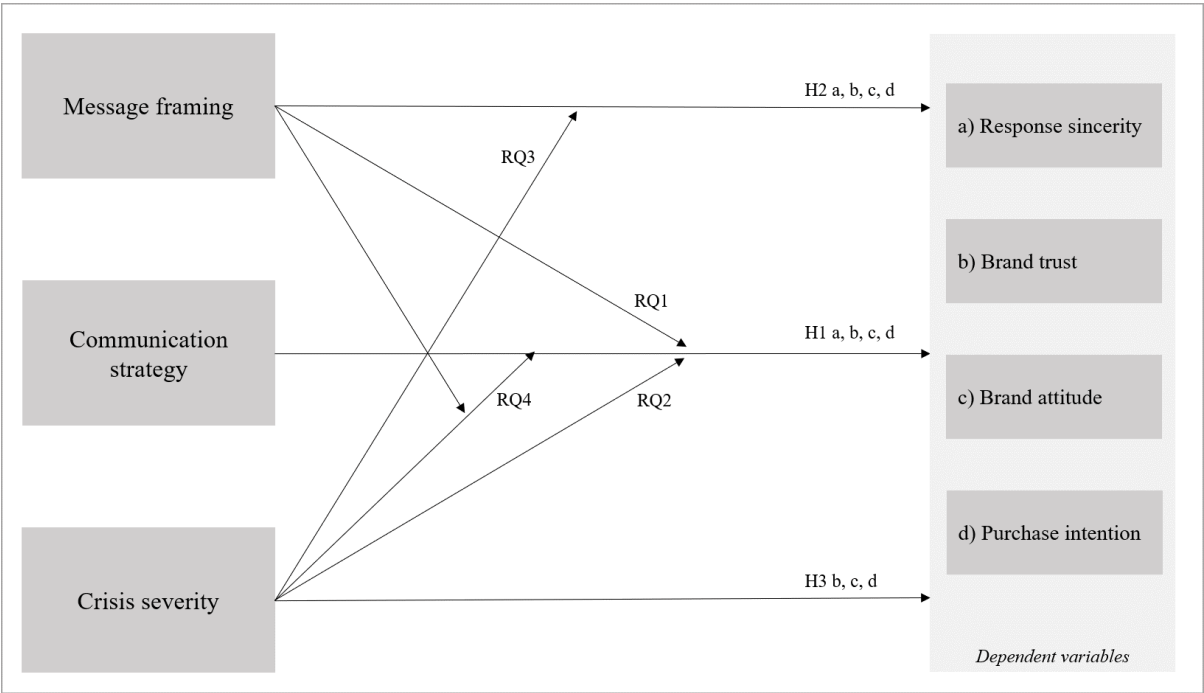


frame, and a high severity crisis compared to a low severity crisis lead to higher or lower a) perceived response sincerity, b) brand trust, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention.

2.7. Conceptualization of research model

Based on the theoretical framework and the findings from relevant literature, a theoretical research model has been developed. Figure 1 presents this theoretical research model with the expected main effects of crisis communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity on the study’s dependent variables. Furthermore, the expected interaction effects between message framing and communication strategy (RQ1), crisis severity and communication strategy (RQ2), crisis severity and message framing (RQ3), as well as the three-way interaction effect between the three constructs (RQ4) on the dependent variables are illustrated in this model. For the purpose of clarity, Table 1 provides an overview on the proposed hypotheses and research questions of this study.

**Figure 1**  
*Theoretical research model*



**Table 1***Overview of proposed hypotheses and research questions*

---

<i>No.</i>	<i>Hypothesis / Research question</i>
H1	The use of an accommodative crisis communication strategy leads to higher a) perceived response sincerity, b) brand trust, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention, as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy.
H2	An emotional message frame for a brand's crisis communication leads to higher a) perceived response sincerity, b) brand trust, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention, as compared to a rational message frame.
H3	A low-severity crisis leads to higher b) brand trust, c) brand attitude, d) purchase intention, as compared to a high severity crisis.
RQ1	To what extent does message framing influence the effect of crisis communication strategy on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?
RQ2	To what extent does crisis severity influence the effect of crisis communication strategy on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?
RQ3	To what extent does crisis severity influence the effect of message framing on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?
RQ4	To what extent does an accommodative as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy, in combination with an emotional message frame compared to a rational message frame, and a high severity crisis compared to a low severity crisis lead to higher or lower perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude, purchase intention?

---

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. Design

To test this studies hypotheses on the effect of crisis communication strategy and message framing within crises of different severities on perceived response sincerity, brand trust and attitude, as well as purchase intention, a 2 x 2 x 2 between-subjects experiment was conducted. The independent variables included crisis communication strategy (accommodative strategy vs. defensive strategy), message framing (emotional vs. rational), and the crisis severity (low severity crisis vs. high severity crisis). The dependent variables of this study are the perceived message sincerity, consumers' brand trust and attitude, as well as consumers' purchase intention.

#### 3.2. Procedure

Participants were approached via the researcher's social media channels (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram) and were thereby asked to participate in the study. Using the online survey tool "Qualtrics", participants of the online study were able to participate on their mobile devices instead of a specific research environment. Once participants read a short introductory text including a description of their tasks and their rights as a respondent, participants were asked to express their consent to their voluntary participation in the experiment and were forwarded to the survey. Participants were presented with one of the eight scenarios of the brands' crisis communication message, which were assigned randomly to participants using a randomizer option. After reading the presented scenario, participants were asked to answer manipulation check questions to verify the recognition of the presented crisis communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity presented in the scenario. After that, participants were asked to answer questions regarding the dependent variables of this study by answering questions on the perceived sincerity of the presented message, their brand trust and attitude, and their purchase intention. These questions were answered using a 5-point Likert scale varying from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Lastly, participants were asked a few demographic questions including their age, gender, highest education and current employment status.

### 3.3. Materials

Before the actual materials for this study were designed, a pilot study on respondents' use of certain groceries was conducted to decide on a specific product for the press release of the fictive brand in order to be able to make a justified decision. For this pilot study, the ten most frequently bought and used food products in Germany were presented to 20 participants and were ranked according to personal relevance and frequency of purchase. Among these products were bread, cheese, noodles, chocolate, and a cold cuts product. For the design of this study, a product which landed in the middle of the rankings was used. Thus, no product was chosen towards which respondents had either very strong preferences due to high relevance and willingness to buy or too low relevance due to low frequency of purchase and use. With an overall average fifth place from the products presented, a cold cuts product was chosen for the crisis communication of the fictitious brand "Landfried".

This crisis communication of the brand Landfried was published as a press release in the online portal of a local newspaper. The choice to present the brand communication during the crisis on the online portal of a local and reliable newspaper was made to provide a neutral channel for the presentation of the crisis communication, where, unlike when presenting a press release on social media, no number of likes, retweets or comments would affect participants' inferences on the communication of the brand. The independent variables were each manipulated for the eight different scenarios. The manipulations of the crisis communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity were thereby incorporated into the brand press release in an online news article. The fictive crisis response was presented on the online page of an existing newspaper in order to increase the credibility of the presented content. The press release presented in the online newspaper concerned a production malfunction in the production of a sliced product of the fictitious brand Landfried. The eight created scenarios on the online newspaper press release can be found in Appendix A.

The crisis response strategy was integrated into the brands press release by incorporating statement elements relating to either an accommodative or a defensive crisis communication strategy. For the accommodative communication strategy condition, the brand apologized and took full responsibility for the presented product error and the consequences presented. This was expressed by statements such as "We take full responsibility for this incident and regret the consequences of this production error" and "We would like to apologize to our customers". In the defensive communication strategy condition, the brand did not take responsibility for the crisis at hand and did not apologize to its customers. This was expressed by statements such as

“An event like this is beyond our control and difficult for us to influence” and “We will investigate the cause of this incident”.

Message framing elements were included by either using emotional or rational framing elements for the brand’s crisis communication message. Scenarios including the emotional message frame thereby included a great amount of adjectives to dramatize the brand’s apology and present it in a very emotional way. This was expressed using statements such as "Disturbing incident", "We deeply regret the consequences of this production error", "We sincerely convey our best wishes", and "We would like to sincerely apologize". On the other hand, in the rationally framed scenario, the response was presented straightforward without the presentation of emotional elements. This was expressed by statements such as "We are investigating this incident", "We regret the consequences", "We are wishing a quick recovery", and "We apologize".

Lastly, the crisis severity was introduced by briefly stating the type of crisis and the consequences for consumers at the very beginning of the brands’ press release. The brands crisis was thereby manipulated to be relatively low in severity, by only one person getting mild food poisoning as a result of the production error, or to be high in severity, by which 40 people suffered severe food poisoning as a result of the production error and were receiving medical treatment. Below, two of the eight manipulated press release conditions are presented. Figure 2 presents condition number two, for which an accommodative communication strategy and a rational message framing was used during a high severity crisis. Figure 3 demonstrates condition number seven, for which a defensive communication strategy paired with an emotional message frame was used during a low severity crisis.

**Figure 2**

*Press release condition two (accommodative x rational x high severity)*

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## Westfälische Nachrichten

Zeilungsgruppe Münster Westfälische Nachrichten

MÜNSTER MÜNSTERLAND NACHRICHTEN SPORT

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Di., 16.03.2021

### Gesundheit

#### Wursthersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, haben sich in der vergangenen Woche vierzig unserer Kunden durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine schwere Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen, wodurch sich zurzeit einige dieser Personen in ärztlicher Behandlung befinden.

Zur Vermeidung weiterer gesundheitlicher Risiken, bitten wir Sie auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge zu verzichten, bis die Ursache dieses Vorfalls geklärt ist. Bereits gekaufte Produkte können Sie in den Filialen zurückgeben. Wir übernehmen die volle Verantwortung für diesen Zwischenfall und bedauern die Folgen dieses Produktionsfehlers.

Wir möchten uns dafür bei unseren Kunden entschuldigen. Dem aufgetretenen Problem werden wir in unserer Herstellung nachgehen, um unseren Kunden auch in Zukunft die von unserer Marke gewohnte Produktqualität bieten zu können.

Im Namen der Marke wünschen wir den betroffenen Kunden eine schnelle Genesung.“

**Figure 3**

*Press release condition seven (defensive x emotional x low severity)*

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„Wie bereits berichtet, hat sich einer unserer Kunden in der vergangenen Woche durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine leichte Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen und befand sich aufgrund dessen kurzzeitig unter ärztlicher Beobachtung.

Um weitere Risiken auszuschließen, bitten wir Sie, bis zur Klärung der Ursache für diesen höchst beunruhigenden Vorfall auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge zu verzichten.

Wir werden der Ursache für diesen besorgniserregenden Vorfall in der Herstellung unserer Produkte nachgehen, aber möchten zudem betonen, dass solch ein beunruhigendes Ereignis leider außerhalb unserer Kontrolle liegt und daher nur schwer von uns zu beeinflussen ist.

Unsere geschätzten Kunden werden wir wie gewohnt mit hochwertigen Produkten versorgen und Ihnen die von der Marke Landfried bekannte Produktqualität bieten.

Dem betroffenen Kunden wünschen wir eine schnelle Genesung!“

### 3.3.1. Manipulation check

To ensure that the independent variables of crisis communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity were successfully manipulated to be recognized correctly by participants, a pre-test was conducted. For this, a total of ten manipulation check questions were asked. Participants were thereby asked whether they perceived the brand to have apologized and taken responsibility during their crisis communication, whether the brand's crisis communication was very emotional or included no emotional elements at all, and lastly as to how severe they would describe the presented crisis to be. Manipulation check questions for crisis communication strategy were answered on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree and included questions such as "Do you have the impression that the brand has apologized in its statement?" or "Do you have the impression that the brand has taken responsibility for the situation?". Manipulation check questions for message framing were as well answered on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For that, items such as "The company's statement on the crisis is emotional" and "The company's statement sounds very impersonal" were used. For the manipulation of crisis severity, participants stated how serious they would describe the presented crisis and its damage on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = not severe at all to 5 = very severe.

For the pre-test, 22 people participated and were randomly assigned to one of the eight scenarios of the brands crisis communication. To assess whether the independent variables were each correctly manipulated, an independent samples t-test was conducted. From this analysis, a significant difference was found for message framing ( $t(20) = 2.925, p = .008$ ) with in the emotional framing ( $M = 3.03, SD = 1.06$ ) and in rational framing ( $M = 1.85, SD = .82$ ). A significant difference was also found for the crisis severity ( $t(20) = -3.62, p = .002$ ) with in the low severity crisis ( $M = 2.77, SD = 1.30$ ) and the high severity crisis ( $M = 4.22, SD = .48$ ). A significant difference was however not found for crisis communication strategy ( $t(20) = -1.71, p = .103$ ) with the accommodative strategy ( $M = 3.93, SD = .83$ ) and the defensive strategy ( $M = 3.17, SD = 1.18$ ). For the actual study, the manipulations for message framing and crisis severity were therefore adopted and the manipulation of the crisis communication strategy was revised and adapted.

Manipulation check questions were also asked during the main study and were analyzed by the conduction of an independent samples t-test. For message framing a significant difference was found ( $t(215) = 5.31, p = .000$ ) with in the emotional framing ( $M = 2.84, SD = 1.09$ ) and in the rational framing ( $M = 3.58, SD = 0.95$ ). For crisis communication strategy, also a significant difference was found ( $t(215) = 9.93, p = .000$ ) with in the accommodative strategy

( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) and in the defensive strategy ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). Lastly, a significant difference was found for the manipulation of the crisis severity ( $t(215) = -5.18$ ,  $p = .000$ ) with in the low severity crisis ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ) and in the high severity crisis condition ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ).

### 3.4. Measurements

To measure the dependent variables, several studies were reviewed to incorporate appropriate measurement items. An overview of the incorporated measurement items for this study's questionnaire can be found in Appendix B. The results of a factor analysis to demonstrate discriminant validity among constructs are presented in Table 2 below.

*Response sincerity.* In order to measure the perceived response sincerity of the presented crisis communication message by the brand, items from Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin and Grohmann (2015) were adapted and adjusted to fit the specific context of this study. Examples of these items are: "In its statement, the company honestly and sincerely addresses customers' concerns" and "I consider the company's statement to be sincere". Using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, proved to be reliable for the resulting five items used in this study ( $\alpha = .899$ ).

*Brand trust.* For participants emotional evaluation, brand trust was assessed based on items according to Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) and Morhart et al. (2015). Again, a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, was made use of for the resulting five items used in this study. Examples of these items are: "I trust the Landfried company" and "The Landfried company is reliable". These items proved to be reliable for the context of this study ( $\alpha = .927$ ).

*Brand attitude.* For the emotional evaluations of participants, brand attitude was measured based on items from the study of Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014). Again, a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, was made use of. Examples of these items are: "I have a positive attitude towards the Landfried company" and "I associate positive qualities with the Landfried company". However, a conducted factor analysis proved the used scale to be inconsistent. Due to this, two items were removed, and the scale was narrowed down to six items. After the adjustment, the scale proved to be reliable in this study ( $\alpha = .915$ ).

*Purchase intention.* Lastly, for the participants functional evaluation, constructs from Schivinski & Dabrowski (2014) and from Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001) were incorporated to measure subsequent purchase intentions of the participant. For this, as well, a 5-point Likert



scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, was used to measure the resulting four items used in this study. An example of these items is: “If the opportunity arose, I would buy products from the Landfried company”. This proved to be reliable in this study ( $\alpha = .902$ ). The general descriptive statistics for this study’s dependent variables are presented in Table 3.

**Table 2**

*Results of the factor analysis with VARIMAX rotation of items*

<i>Constructs</i>	<i>Items</i>	<i>Factor loading</i>			
		<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>
Response sincerity	The company addresses customer concerns honestly and sincerely in its statement.	.755			
	I find the company's statement to be sincere.	.819			
	I find the company's statement warm.	.735			
	I find the company's statement insincere.	.757			
	I perceive the company's statement as being artificial.	.791			
Brand trust	The Landfried company is reliable.			.739	
	The Landfried company delivers what it promises.			.736	
	I trust the Landfried company.			.665	
	The Landfried company is unreliable.			.742	
	The Landfried company is not trustworthy.			.620	
Brand attitude	The Landfried company has a good reputation.				.670
	I have a negative attitude towards the Landfried company.				.712
	The Landfried company has a bad reputation.				.776
	I associate negative qualities with the Landfried company.				.660
Purchase intention	If the opportunity arose, I would buy products from the Landfried company.		.804		
	It is likely that I will buy products from the Landfried company.		.821		
	I would rather buy from the Landfried company than from other available companies.		.718		
	I would not buy any products from the Landfried company.		.750		

**Table 3***General descriptive statistics on the dependent variables*

	$\alpha$	$M$	$SD$
Response sincerity	.90	3.09	1.01
Brand trust	.93	3.16	.89
Brand attitude	.92	2.26	.66
Purchase intention	.90	2.72	1.09

### 3.5. Participants

Participants were gathered using the social media channels of the researcher through the distribution of the surveys' link on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. In total, 217 surveys were entirely filled in and completed. As can be seen in Table 4, the distribution of responses to each experimental condition was relatively evenly balanced with each condition presented at least 25 times to participants. From those 217 participants, 75 were male, 141 female, and one participant chose the option "other". All participants were German and aged between 18 to 60 years with a mean age of 33.71 ( $SD = 13.82$ ). As presented in Table 5, participants mostly indicated either to have completed a vocational education ( $n = 71$ ) or to have a university degree ( $n = 66$ ) concerning their educational background. Regarding their employment status, most respondents indicated to be either employed full-time ( $n = 100$ ) or to be studying ( $n = 76$ ).

**Table 4***Distribution of experimental conditions (m = male, f = female, o = other)*

			<i>Gender</i>			<i>Mean</i>	<i>Partici-</i>
			<i>m</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>o</i>	<i>age</i>	<i>pants</i>
Accommodative strategy	Rational framing	Low severity	5	21	0	35.54	27
		High severity	10	17	0	36.04	26
	Emotional framing	Low severity	11	17	1	33.62	27
		High severity	12	15	0	34.93	29
Defensive strategy	Rational framing	Low severity	6	22	0	29.54	29
		High severity	12	17	0	31.55	28

**Table 5***Distribution of gender, age, education and employment status*

		<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Gender	Men	75	34.56		
	Women	141	64.98		
	Other	1	0.46		
Age				33.71	13.82
Education	No educational qualification	0	0		
	Certificate of Secondary Education	2	0.9		
	General Certificate of Secondary Education	18	8.3		
	Higher education entrance qualification	59	27.2		
	Vocational education	71	32.7		
	University degree	66	30.4		
	Promotion	1	0.5		
Employment status	Full-time employment	100	46.1		
	Part-time employment	32	14.7		
	Unemployed	3	1.4		
	Self-employed	5	2.3		
	Student	76	35		
	Retired	1	0.5		

## 4. RESULTS

To test the beforehand established hypotheses, a MANOVA was conducted by using the program SPSS. Using these analyses, two groups have been compared on their outcome on the dependent variables of the study. In the following the results of the conducted analysis will be discussed by firstly elaborating on the main effects of the independent variables, and secondly discussing the interaction effects. The effects for the independent variables have been tested by means of a MANOVA.

### 4.1. Main effects for communication strategy

By conducting the analysis, it has been found that there was a significant main effect of crisis communication strategy on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda:  $p < .000$ ). It was thereby found that the influence of crisis communication strategy on perceived response sincerity was statistically significant ( $F(1, 209) = 17.15, p = .000$ ). Participants in the accommodative strategy condition did thereby experience greater response sincerity ( $M = 3.37, SD = .99$ ) than participants in the defensive strategy condition ( $M = 2.81, SD = .95$ ). In addition, also the influence of crisis communication strategy on brand trust has been found out to be statistically significant ( $F(1, 209) = 5.46, p = .020$ ). Participants in the accommodative strategy condition experienced greater brand trust ( $M = 3.30, SD = .86$ ) than participants in the defensive strategy condition ( $M = 3.02, SD = .90$ ). Due to these results, hypothesis 1a, as well as hypothesis 1b are supported, as there is a significant effect of communication strategy on response sincerity and brand trust.

The influence of crisis communication strategy on brand attitude was not significant. Although the accommodative strategy ( $M = 3.31, SD = .94$ ) scored slightly higher on brand attitude than the defensive strategy ( $M = 3.16, SD = .98$ ), there was no significant effect on brand attitude of respondents. The influence of the communication strategy on purchase intention was also found to be insignificant. Hypothesis 1c and 1d are therefore rejected as there are no significant effects of communication strategy on brand attitude and purchase intention. Table 6 provides an overview on the effects of crisis communication strategy on the dependent variables.

**Table 6***Main effects of crisis communication strategy*

	<i>Communication strategy</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>Hypothesis</i>	
	<i>Accommodative strategy</i>	<i>Defensive strategy</i>				
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>				
Response sincerity	3.37(.99)	2.81(.95)	17.15	.000	H1a	Accepted
Brand trust	3.30(.86)	3.02(.90)	5.46	.020	H1b	Accepted
Brand attitude	3.31(.94)	3.16(.98)	1.11	.293	H1c	Rejected
Purchase intention	2.71(1.10)	2.72(1.09)	.033	.856	H1d	Rejected

#### 4.2. Main effects for message framing

By conducting the analysis, it has been found that there was no significant main effect for message framing on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda:  $p = .124$ ). However, it has been found that the influence of message framing on brand attitude is statistically significant ( $F(1, 209) = 3.98, p = .047$ ). Participants in the emotional framing condition did thereby experience a more positive brand attitude ( $M = 3.36, SD = .90$ ) than participants in the rational framing condition ( $M = 3.11, SD = 1.00$ ). As an emotional message frame for a brand's crisis communication has been found to significantly lead to greater brand attitude, hypothesis 2c is therefore supported. Furthermore, as there was no significant influence of message framing on perceived response sincerity, brand trust and purchase intention, hypothesis 2a, 2b, as well as 2d are rejected. Table 7 provides an overview on the effects of message framing on the study's dependent variables.

**Table 7***Main effects of message framing*

	<i>Message framing</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>Hypothesis</i>	
	<i>Emotional framing</i>	<i>Rational framing</i>				
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>				
Response sincerity	3.19(1.07)	2.99(.94)	1.75	.187	H2a	Rejected
Brand trust	3.21(.88)	3.12(.90)	.57	.453	H2b	Rejected
Brand attitude	3.36(.90)	3.11(1.00)	3.98	.047	H2c	Accepted
Purchase intention	2.85(1.08)	2.59(1.09)	3.37	.068	H2d	Rejected

#### 4.3. Main effects for crisis severity

By conducting the analysis, although not yet significant, the main effect for crisis severity on the dependent variables as a group was found to be very close to the statistical significance level (Wilks' Lambda:  $p = .056$ ). This trend towards significance suggests that if a larger number of participants would have been recruited, the  $p$ -value most likely would have become statistically significant. In addition to that, it has been found that the influence of crisis severity on brand trust has been statistically significant ( $F(1, 209) = 5.55, p = .019$ ). Participants in the low crisis severity condition did thereby experience greater brand trust ( $M = 3.30, SD = .93$ ) than participants in the high crisis severity condition ( $M = 3.02, SD = .84$ ). Due to this significant effect of crisis severity on the dependent variable brand trust, hypothesis 3b can be accepted. Furthermore, the results do not confirm hypothesis 3c and 3d, as there are no significant main effects of crisis severity on brand attitude and purchase intention. However, although not significant, it can be pointed out that the low severity crisis condition produced greater responses on the dependent variables of brand attitude and purchase intention. With regard to consumers' perceptions of crisis severity, it is also noteworthy to mention that female participants ( $M = 3.72, SD = .77$ ) perceived the presented crisis on average as more severe than male participants did ( $M = 3.53, SD = .79$ ). Gender thereby influenced perceptions of crisis severity. Table 8 provides an overview on the effects of crisis severity on the dependent variables.

**Table 8***Main effects of crisis severity*

	<i>Crisis severity</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>Sign.</i>	<i>Hypothesis</i>	
	<i>Low severity</i>	<i>High severity</i>				
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>				
Brand trust	3.30(.93)	3.02(.84)	5.55	.019	H3b	Accepted
Brand attitude	3.30(.97)	3.16(.95)	1.33	.249	H3c	Rejected
Purchase intention	2.85(1.10)	2.59(1.07)	3.30	.071	H3d	Rejected

#### 4.4. Interaction effects

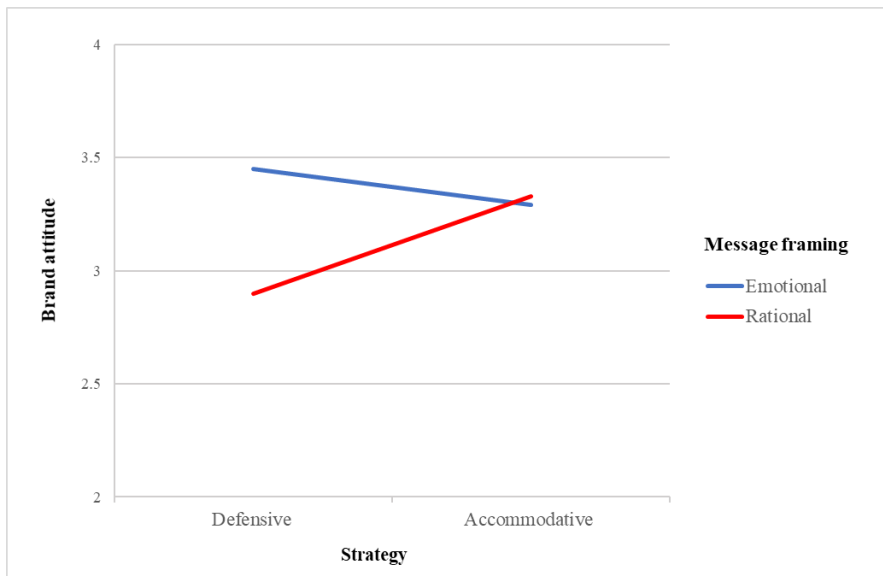
In the following, the interaction effects between crisis communication strategy and message framing, crisis communication strategy and crisis severity, as well as message framing and crisis severity are discussed. In addition to that, also the three way interaction effect between crisis communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity will be elaborated on.

##### 4.4.1. Communication strategy and message framing

The interaction between the independent variable's crisis communication strategy and message framing was found out to not have a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda:  $p = .131$ ). However, for the interaction effect between crisis communication strategy and message framing, a statistically significant influence on brand attitude was found ( $F(1, 209) = 5.61, p = .019$ ). Contrary to expectations it was found that a defensive crisis communication strategy paired with an emotional message frame ( $M = 3.45, SD = .89$ ) leads to a higher brand attitude than a defensive crisis communication strategy paired with a rational message frame ( $M = 2.90, SD = .99$ ). In addition to that, an accommodative crisis communication strategy paired with a rational message frame ( $M = 3.33, SD = .98$ ) led to higher brand attitude than an accommodative crisis communication strategy paired with an emotional message frame ( $M = 3.29, SD = .91$ ). Figure 4 shows the graph for the interaction effect between crisis communication strategy and message framing on the dependent variable brand attitude.

**Figure 4**

*Graph for interaction effect between communication strategy and message framing on brand attitude.*

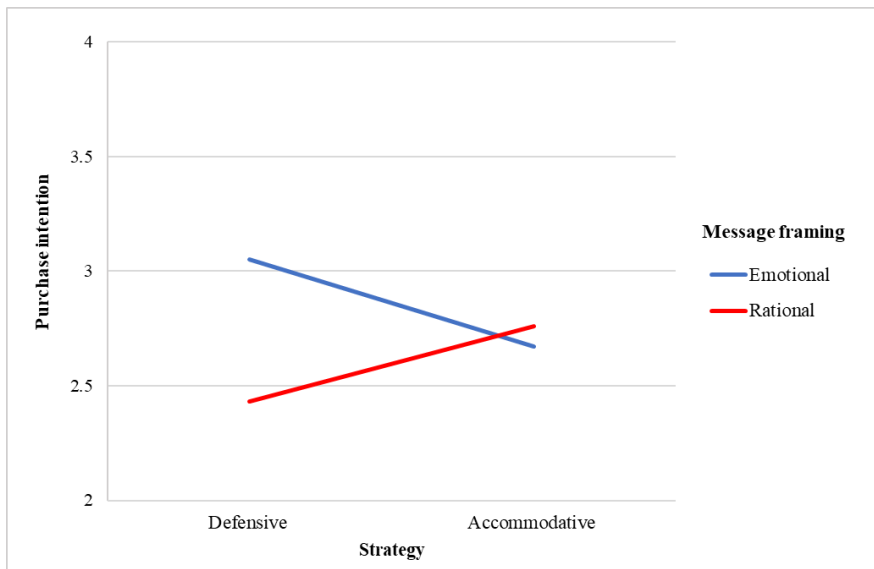


Furthermore, a significant interaction effect of crisis communication strategy and message framing has been found on the dependent variable purchase intention ( $F(1, 209) = 6.19, p = .014$ ). It was observed that a defensive communication strategy paired with an emotional message frame ( $M = 3.05, SD = 1.09$ ) leads to higher purchase intention than when paired with a rational message frame ( $M = 2.43, SD = 1.01$ ). However, when using an accommodative communication strategy, the use of a rational message frame ( $M = 2.76, SD = 1.16$ ) leads to a higher purchase intention than the use of an emotional message frame ( $M = 2.67, SD = 1.05$ ). Figure 5 shows the graph for the interaction effect between crisis communication strategy and message framing on the dependent variable purchase intention. Furthermore, no significant interaction effect of crisis communication strategy and message framing has been found on the dependent variable of perceived response sincerity ( $F(1, 209) = .957, p = .329$ ). Lastly, although not yet significant, the interaction effect of crisis communication strategy and message framing on brand trust has been found to be very close to the statistical significance level ( $F(1, 209) = 3.44, p = .065$ ). This trend towards significance suggests that if a larger number of participants would have been recruited, the p-value most likely would have become statistically significant. It was thereby observed that a defensive communication strategy paired with an emotional message frame ( $M = 3.18, SD = .95$ ) would lead to higher brand trust than when paired with a rational message frame ( $M = 2.88, SD = .85$ ). Likewise, an accommodative communication strategy paired with a rational message frame ( $M = 3.37, SD = .90$ ) would lead to higher brand trust than when paired with an emotional message frame ( $M = 3.24, SD = .83$ ).



**Figure 5**

*Graph for interaction effect between communication strategy and message framing on purchase intention.*

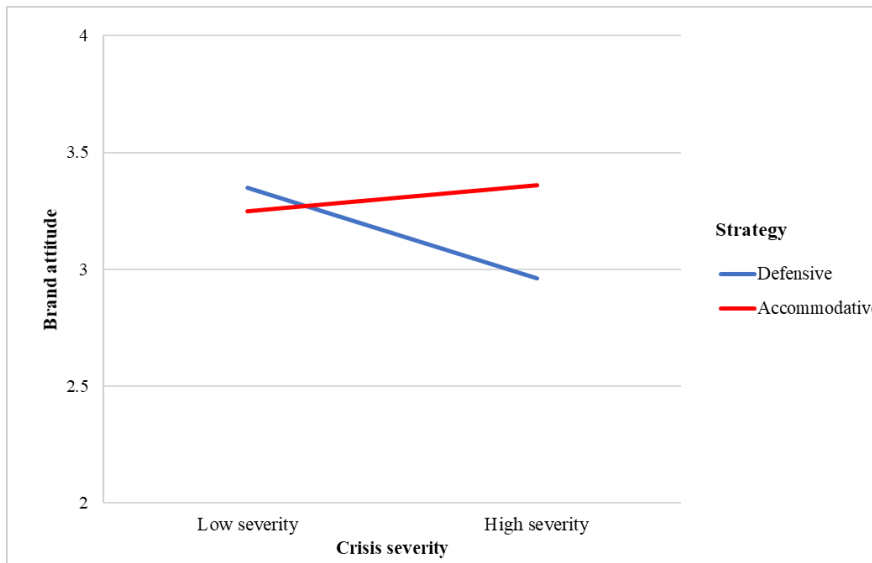


#### 4.4.2. Communication strategy and crisis severity

The interaction between the independent variable's crisis communication strategy and crisis severity was found out to not have a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda:  $p = .252$ ). For the interaction between crisis communication strategy and crisis severity, a statistically significant influence on brand attitude has been found ( $F(1, 209) = 4.01$ ,  $p = .047$ ). The use of a defensive crisis communication strategy led here to a more positive brand attitude during a low severity crisis ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) than during a high severity crisis ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = .93$ ). In contrast to this, the use of an accommodative crisis communication strategy led to a more positive brand attitude in a high severity crisis ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = .94$ ) than in a low severity crisis ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = .94$ ). Furthermore, no significant interaction effects were found between crisis communication strategy and crisis severity on the dependent variables perceived response sincerity ( $F(1, 209) = 2.92$ ,  $p = .089$ ), brand trust ( $F(1, 209) = 1.68$ ,  $p = .197$ ), and purchase intention ( $F(1, 209) = 1.20$ ,  $p = .274$ ). Figure 6 shows the graph for the significant interaction effect between crisis communication strategy and crisis severity on the dependent variable brand attitude.

**Figure 6**

*Graph for interaction effect between communication strategy and crisis severity on brand attitude.*



#### 4.4.3. Message framing and crisis severity

The interaction between the independent variables message framing and crisis severity was found out to not have a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda:  $p = .732$ ). In the MANOVA, no interaction effects were found for message framing combined with crisis severity. The relationships were all found to be insignificant for the dependent variables. The results show no significant effect of message frame and crisis severity on perceived response sincerity ( $F(1, 209) = .02, p = .904$ ), brand trust ( $F(1, 209) = .44, p = .509$ ), brand attitude ( $F(1, 209) = .07, p = .798$ ), and purchase intention ( $F(1, 209) = .11, p = .743$ ).

#### 4.4.4. Three-way interaction effects

The three-way interaction of the independent variables was found not to have a significant effect on the dependent variables as a group (Wilks' Lambda:  $p = .330$ ). Also, no three-way interaction effect was found for the crisis communication strategy combined with message framing and crisis severity on the independent variables. The relationships were all found to be insignificant for the dependent variables: perceived response sincerity ( $F(1, 209) = .009, p = .926$ ), brand trust ( $F(1, 209) = 1.44, p = .232$ ), brand attitude ( $F(1, 209) = .002, p = .960$ ), and purchase intention ( $F(1, 209) = .005, p = .942$ ).

However, it has been found that amongst all possible combinations, the use of an accommodative strategy with an emotional message frame during a high severity crisis ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) led to the greatest score on the dependent variable of perceived response sincerity. For the studies' dependent variable brand trust, the use of an accommodative strategy paired with a rational message frame during a high severity crisis ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = .92$ ) and during a low severity crisis ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .89$ ) yielded the highest results. For the dependent variable brand attitude, the use of an accommodative strategy with a rational message frame during a high severity crisis ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = .97$ ), and the use of a defensive strategy with an emotional message frame during a low severity crisis ( $M = 3.63$ ,  $SD = .99$ ) led to the highest score. Lastly, for the dependent variable purchase intention, the use of a defensive strategy paired with an emotional message frame yielded the highest results during a low severity crisis ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). Table 9 gives an overview on the supported and non-supported hypotheses, as well as on the results of the studies research questions.

**Table 9**

*Overview on supported and non-supported hypotheses and results of research questions*

<i>Hypotheses and research questions</i>	
<b>Hypothesis 1a:</b> The use of an accommodative crisis communication strategy leads to higher perceived response sincerity, as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy.	<i>Supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 1b:</b> The use of an accommodative crisis communication strategy leads to higher brand trust, as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy.	<i>Supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 1c:</b> The use of an accommodative crisis communication strategy leads to higher brand attitude, as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy.	<i>Non-supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 1d:</b> The use of an accommodative crisis communication strategy leads to higher purchase intention, as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy.	<i>Non-supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 2a:</b> An emotional message frame for a brand's crisis communication leads to higher perceived response sincerity, as compared to a rational message frame.	<i>Non-supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 2b:</b> An emotional message frame for a brand's crisis communication leads to higher brand trust, as compared to a rational message frame.	<i>Non-supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 2c:</b> An emotional message frame for a brand's crisis communication leads to higher brand attitude, as compared to a rational message frame.	<i>Supported</i>

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<b>Hypothesis 2d:</b> An emotional message frame for a brand's crisis communication leads to higher purchase intention, as compared to a rational message frame.	<i>Non-supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 3b:</b> A low-severity crisis leads to higher brand trust, as compared to a high severity crisis.	<i>Supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 3c:</b> A low-severity crisis leads to a more positive brand attitude, as compared to a high severity crisis.	<i>Non-supported</i>
<b>Hypothesis 3d:</b> A low-severity crisis leads to higher purchase intention, as compared to a high severity crisis.	<i>Non-supported</i>
<b>RQ1:</b> To what extent does message framing influence the effect of crisis communication strategy on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?	<i>A significant interaction effect between strategy and framing was found on brand attitude and purchase intention.</i>
<b>RQ2:</b> To what extent does crisis severity influence the effect of crisis communication strategy on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?	<i>A significant interaction effect between strategy and crisis severity was found on brand attitude.</i>
<b>RQ3:</b> To what extent does crisis severity influence the effect of message framing on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?	<i>No significant interaction effect was found between crisis severity and message framing on the dependent variables.</i>
<b>RQ4:</b> To what extent do an accommodative as compared to a defensive crisis communication strategy, in combination with an emotional message frame compared to a rational message frame, and a high severity crisis compared to a low severity crisis lead to higher or lower perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude, purchase intention.	<i>No significant interaction effect was found between communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity on the dependent variables.</i>

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## 5. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In the following, the results of this research are discussed, compared to results from previous studies and interpreted. After a general discussion of the results, firstly the main effects of crisis communication strategy, message framing and crisis severity on the studies' dependent variables are discussed, before secondly, the results of the interaction effects of this research are elaborated on. This study aimed to examine to what extent crisis communication strategy, message framing and the severity of a crisis influences consumers' crisis evaluations in perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention. This study revealed a number of significant results which can support previous research on the issue of crisis communication. However, this study also revealed insignificant results on a number of hypotheses through which previous study results could not be supported.

### 5.1. Main effects

#### 5.1.1. Communication strategy

Firstly, in line with findings from previous studies on the use of communication strategies during a crisis, it was hypothesized that an accommodative communication strategy would lead to higher perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention, as compared to the use of a defensive crisis communication strategy. With this study's results, the findings from previous studies could be partially confirmed. It has thereby been found that the use of an accommodative communication strategy indeed leads to higher perceived response sincerity and brand trust than the use of a defensive communication strategy. As several studies have already suggested, an accommodative strategy is generally perceived as more successful for a brands' crisis communication, as the acceptance of a negative event can evoke greater sympathy and forgiveness from consumers and can thereby lead to more positive outcomes (Allen & Caillouet, as cited in Moon and Rhee, 2012; Coombs, as cited in Moon and Rhee, 2012; Kim, Avery & Lariscy, 2009; Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Weiner et al., as cited in Lee, 2004).

The results of this study confirm that the apologetic elements and the acknowledgement to the cause of the crisis used for the accommodative strategy contributed to the brand being attributed greater sincerity by its customers. A brand admitting responsibility for negative consequences thereby not only increases its perceived warmth and honesty, leading to greater perceived response sincerity of the brand's communication, but also positively influences consumers' trust in the brand (Lee, 2004; Weiner et al., as cited in Lee, 2004). Using a heartfelt

and blame-bearing response hence made consumers more likely to trust the brand and perceive their communication during the crisis as more humane and sincere. This finding can be supported by the work of Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995), who claimed that consumers' trust is highly dependent on the honest and reliable behavior and communication of the brand, which in turn depends heavily on its perceived goodwill and sincerity. The relinquishment of responsibility and the distancing from the cause and damage of a crisis through the use of a defensive communication strategy however only seems to have led consumers to have less trust in the brand as perceived response sincerity also decreases. A defensive communication strategy may thus be perceived as artificial or dishonest if consumers have the impression that the brand is falsely avoiding its responsibility and accountability.

In this study, no significant influence of communication strategy was found on brand attitude and purchase intention. Accordingly, the use of a brand's communication strategy alone had no significant influence on consumers' functional evaluation in relation to their purchase intention as well as on their overall attitude towards the brand and did therefore not evoke more negatively or positively interpreted brand images. The claim of Kim et al. (2009) that an accommodative strategy always presents the better approach for a brand's crisis communication could hence not be fully supported. These results suggest that the independent use of a communication strategy in a crisis communication does not sufficiently influence consumers' brand attitude and intention to purchase from the brand. This finding could be explained by the fact that consumers may perceive communication strategies differently based on personal preferences. A possible correlation between consumers' personality and their preference for a communication strategy, which was not investigated in this research, could be the reason for this.

#### 5.1.2. Message framing

Secondly, it was hypothesized that the use of an emotional message frame for a brand's crisis communication would lead to higher perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention, as compared to the use of a rational message frame. As the results of this research have shown, the use of an emotional message frame did not lead to significantly higher perceived response sincerity, brand trust and purchase intention. However, in line with previous research, it has been found that an emotional message frame leads to a significantly more positive brand attitude on the side of the consumer. This finding is in line with the results of the study by Mayer and Tormala (2010), which suggest that message framing in crisis communication has a particular impact on consumer attitudes towards a brand due to the

persuasive influence of framing. As previous literature suggested, the use of an emotional message frame did indeed reduce consumer's anger during crisis and generated more favorable attitudes by emphasizing the brand's compassion and influence consumers' subsequent attitudes (Kim & Cameron, 2011; Moon & Rhee, 2012; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). In accordance with Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014), the display of emotions did significantly increase a brands' likelihood to be perceived as humane and approachable during tough times. Thus, emotional elements in a brands' crisis communication can be used as an important tool to positively influence consumer attitudes. The objective and purely factual presentation of information through the use of a rational message framing caused the opposite of the desired consumer reaction as has been discovered in this study as well. Refraining from using emotional elements during crisis communication, evoked more negative attitudes towards the brand.

Contrary to expectations and the results from previous studies, no significant influence of message framing was found on the other dependent variables of this study. This suggests that the independent use of message framing during a brands' crisis communication does not sufficiently influence consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust and purchase intention. As expressed by Mayer and Tormala (2010), message framing may therefore have a stronger influence on consumer attitudes due to its persuasive influence but may not have this influence on the other variables. This could again be related to the fact that people perceive and process message frames differently (De Vreese, 2005). It could be assumed that a correlation between the type of message frame used and the personality or personal preferences of the consumer influences the effectiveness of the message framing for a brands' crisis communication.

### 5.1.3. Crisis severity

Thirdly, in line with existing literature on the influence of crisis severity on consumer evaluations, it was expected that a low-severity crisis leads to higher brand trust, brand attitude, and purchase intention, as compared to a high severity crisis (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Verhoeven et al., 2012). As Claeys et al. (2010) proposed, a crisis of greater severity is thereby expected to generate more negative consumer crisis evaluations. Consistent with this it was found that a low severity crisis leads to higher brand trust. As proposed by Lee (2004), this study confirms that brand trust becomes less negatively affected during a crisis of lower risk and severity for the consumer, making consumers more likely to regain confidence in the brand and its actions. Conversely, in a crisis of higher severity, consumers' trust in the brand becomes more negatively affected, making it more difficult for the brand to rebuild this trust.

In addition, it was found that female participants perceived the crisis presented to them on average as more severe than male participants did. This influence of gender on consumers' perceptions of crisis severity presents an important insight for brands' crisis communication with regard to its consumer group. For brands, this makes it even more important to identify who their consumers are and how this affects their trust and confidence in the brand during a crisis.

Furthermore, although proposed by previous studies, it could not be confirmed that a low severity crisis also leads to higher purchase intention and a more positive brand attitude. In contrast to the results from Arpan and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2005) and other researchers, the severity of a brand crisis alone did not significantly influence consumers' purchase intention and brand attitude, leading us to conclude that consumers' intention to buy from a brand during a crisis, as well as their subsequent attitude towards it may depend on factors other than the severity of the situation. These factors can be, for example, the response timing of a brand following the occurrence of a crisis or its prior reputation.

## 5.2. Interaction effects

### 5.2.1. Communication strategy and message framing

For the interaction effect between crisis communication strategy and message framing, the first research question has been proposed to discover to what extent message framing influences the effect of crisis communication strategy on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention. For this interaction, a statistically significant influence was found on consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. A defensive crisis communication strategy paired with an emotional message frame thereby led to a more positive brand attitude and higher purchase intention than when paired with a rational message frame. Likewise, an accommodative crisis communication strategy paired with a rational message frame led to a more positive brand attitude and higher purchase intention than when paired with an emotional message frame.

The combination of communication strategy and a suitable message frame is therefore an effective way to shape consumers' perceptions and attitudes on a brand and to influence their subsequent buying intentions. Interestingly, when an accommodative strategy is used to apologize and take responsibility for the occurrence of a crisis, a rational message framing is more effective. The combination of an apology and acceptance of responsibility for the crisis with a factual and objective description of the events thereby led to more positive results on the study's dependent variables. This suggests that the apologetic elements of an accommodative



strategy no longer need to be reinforced by an emotional appeal in order to convince consumers of the brand's credibility and goodwill. On the other hand, when employing a defensive communication strategy without the use of apology to distance the brand from a crisis, the use of an emotional message framing is useful to prevent negative brand images and to maintain consumers' intentions to purchase from the brand. This distancing communication strategy can therefore still convince consumers of the brand's capability through the use of emotional and personal elements. This dissociation from a particular issue, coupled with emotional and personal communication elements, seems to be well-balanced for a brands' crisis communication. Although no confession or apology is expressed by the brand, the emotional message framing nevertheless conveys the impression to consumers that the brand is communicating with them on a very interpersonal and individual level, thereby still generating positive brand images and attitudes and ensuring further intentions to purchase from the brand.

Furthermore, there was no significant interaction effects found for message framing and crisis communication strategy on consumers perceived response sincerity and brand trust. When employing an accommodative crisis communication strategy, the use of a rational message framing did thereby not significantly generate greater perceived response sincerity and brand trust than the use of an emotional message framing. Likewise, when utilizing a defensive crisis communication strategy, an emotional message frame did not lead to significantly greater perceived response sincerity and brand trust.

### 5.2.2. Communication strategy and crisis severity

Previous studies has found that the use of an accommodative crisis communication strategy is generally seen to be more successful for a brands communication during crisis (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, as cited in Ott & Theunissen, 2015). Since this is a rather generalized statement, it is reasonable to examine whether an accommodative crisis communication strategy actually poses the best choice in low as well as high severity crises or whether this varies for crises of different severity. For the interaction effect between crisis communication strategy and crisis severity, the second research question has been proposed to discover to what extent crisis severity influences the effect of crisis communication strategy on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention. During this study, it has been found that a defensive crisis communication strategy leads to more positive brand attitudes when employed during a low severity crisis, whereas an accommodative crisis communication strategy leads to more positive brand attitudes when employed during a high severity crisis.

When facing a crisis of high severity, employing an accommodative communication strategy to apologize and accept the brand's responsibility for the issue will generate more positive consumer attitudes. As mentioned earlier, previous studies have found that consumers assume more risk for themselves in crises of higher severity and may therefore have greater doubts about a brand's performance and capabilities (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). As a result of this potential risk to the individual consumer, the brand's reputation is at greater risk (Claeys et al., 2010). In order to convince consumers of the brands' goodwill and to subsequently create positive brand attitudes, it is particularly important to demonstrate the responsiveness of the brand to the individual consumer within high severity situations. As this study has found, the use of apology and the acceptance of responsibility for the situation creates more positive brand images amongst consumers. Even in very difficult times, with the use of an accommodative strategy, a brand can thus make clear to its consumers that the brand stands by its deeds and actions.

When facing a crisis of low severity entailing less personal involvement and relevance for the consumer (Lee, 2004), the use of a defensive communication strategy generates more positive brand attitudes. The demonstration of minimal responsibility for a crisis of low severity crisis has therefore proven to be sufficient to generate positive brand attitudes as consumers are often not directly affected and hence perceive less risk (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). It can therefore be assumed that a far-reaching apology and complete acceptance of responsibility and blame for a crisis with little significance and impact on the consumer could even be considered as exaggerated and inappropriate. Due to the low relevance for consumers, a factual and straightforward description of the incident to display the brands' competence is sufficient to maintain positive consumer attitudes. As there have been found no significant effects of communication strategy and crisis severity on the dependent variables of perceived response sincerity, brand trust and purchase intention, it can be inferred that the interaction between these variables may depend on other factors which were not investigated in the present study.

### 5.2.3. Crisis severity and message framing

Lastly, for the interaction effect between crisis severity and message framing, the third research question has been proposed to discover to what extent crisis severity influences the effect of message framing on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention. During this study, no significant interaction effect was found between those two variables on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention. Due to this, as no difference between pairing of message frame and crisis

severity has been found, it can be concluded that both, the emotional and the rational message frame, have the same influence on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention regardless of the severity of a crisis.

### 5.3. Implications

#### 5.3.1. Theoretical implications

This study was aimed to examine the effect of message framing, crisis communication strategy and crisis severity on consumers' perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention. It was thereby ought to provide an overview on how brands have to manage the complexity of their brand communication activities to maintain their reputation and obtain positive customer responses when facing crises. This study thereby served to give additional insights on the successful use of communication strategies and message frames within a product harm crisis of low and high severity. Although there has been quite an amount of research on brand crisis communication, only little research can be found on the comparison between crises with different degrees of severity in relation to the use of message framing and a brands crisis communication strategy. This study has contributed to confirm several previously identified relationships and to provide further insights into the interactions between the studies variables.

Firstly, this study served to answer the still open question of whether an accommodative strategy for a brand's crisis communication is actually more successful than a defensive strategy, as has been pointed out in a number of previous studies. As this study has shown, although the use of an accommodative communication strategy indeed led to higher perceived response sincerity and brand trust than the use of a defensive communication strategy, an accommodative communication strategy poses not always the most successful strategy to be used by a brand. As results of this study have shown, an accommodative strategy failed to increase consumers' brand attitude and purchase intention. Furthermore, it was determined that during a crisis of low severity, the use of a defensive communication strategy leads to more positive brand attitudes making it clear that an accommodative strategy may not always be the better choice for a brand during crisis. The generalization that an accommodative strategy is the better choice for all brand communications during crises is therefore at least incorrect with regard to generating positive consumer brand attitudes. When a brand is confronted with a crisis where there is minimal personal involvement of consumers and minimal brand responsibility, a defensive crisis communication strategy offers the opportunity to create more positive brand attitudes.

Furthermore, this study served to find some interesting results on the interaction between crisis communication strategy and message framing, which is certainly beneficial to enrich theoretical knowledge on the subject. It was thus revealed that the brand attitude as well as the purchase intention of consumers can be strengthened by the use of a defensive crisis communication strategy in combination with the use of emotional message elements, and by an accommodative crisis communication strategy in combination with a rational presentation of a message. However, in addition to the insights that can contribute to the field of crisis communication, it was also observed that this study contradicts previous research. As for that, no significant effect of crisis communication on brand attitude and purchase intention was found, nor did message framing reveal any significant effects on perceived response sincerity and brand trust. Furthermore, apart from the significant effect of crisis communication on brand trust, no significant influences were found on perceived response sincerity, brand attitude or purchase intention. This suggests that consumer evaluations in times of crisis are furthermore influenced by other factors, which need to be explored in more depth through additional studies.

### 5.3.2. Practical implications

The practical value of this study was to further explore how different communication strategies and message frames within crises of different severity have to be used and combined to successfully influence consumers crisis evaluations. Due to this, we can draw conclusions on how communication strategies and message frames can be used and combined in the most optimal way to improve brand communication during times of crisis. By providing recommendations to communicators, it is thereby possible to ensure that the chosen crisis communication efforts are effective in obtaining positive customer evaluations. Generally, it can be pointed out that when facing a brand crisis, the use of an accommodative communication strategy through the use of an apology to its consumers and the acceptance of the brands responsibility enables communicators to generate higher perceived response sincerity and brand trust. To be considered as more sincere and genuine, and to retain trust and confidence of consumers, this study highlights the importance of showing remorse and to communicate that what has happened will not pass the brand by without consequences because of its responsibility for the crisis. Likewise, for effective brand communication during a crisis, an emotionally loaded communication approach should be considered first. By communicating on an emotional level with consumers, attitudes towards the brand will be more positive, leading to less reluctance to engage with the brand in the aftermath of a crisis. Furthermore, with a look to the severity of a crisis, it is important to understand first of all the relevance of the situation for the

consumer and the risk it creates for them. It is thereby particularly important to keep in mind that, as this study has found, women on average evaluate a brand crisis as more severe than men. As it has been found that higher severity from a crisis decreases consumer brand trust, it is important for a brand to act as quickly as possible to counteract negative consequences from a crisis with higher severity for consumers. For communicators, it is especially important to understand how these building blocks have to be put together to produce the best outcomes from their crisis communication.

When facing a high level of responsibility during a severe crisis that may have great relevance to consumers, it is advisable for communicators to accept the brands responsibility and use apologetic elements for its crisis communication. When less personal involvement from consumers and low brand responsibility for the crisis is the case, it has been proven to not necessarily be mandatory to publish an apology and a complete admission of responsibility. In a crisis of low severity, a defensive communication strategy can thereby also generate positive consumer evaluations. In this way, communicators can strengthen their consumers' brand attitudes and positively influence subsequent brand evaluations.

Furthermore, when deciding for a defensive crisis communication strategy because there is no need to apologize to the brands consumers and minimal responsibility for the events aims to be communicated, the use of an emotional message frame should be considered. Showing empathy and incorporating emotional aspects into the brands communication has thereby proven to be successful when a defensive communication strategy is applied in order to create positive brand attitudes and increase consumer purchase intention. On the other hand, when deciding to take responsibility for a given crisis and choosing to apologize to the brands' consumers, the use of a rational message frame is recommended to generate more positive consumer brand attitudes and higher purchase intentions. A rational and objective description of facts and information becomes valuable when employing an accommodative communication strategy during crisis communication. To protect their brand's reputation and ensure positive customer evaluations, brand communicators should carefully assess the crisis they find themselves in before choosing a communication approach for their brand.

#### 5.4. Limitations and future research directions

Although this research has proven to be useful for testing several hypotheses and exploring new interactions between the variables studied, it includes a handful of limitations that need to be mentioned and improved in future studies. The first limitation of this study presents the interrogation of participants previous involvement with the presented product. Although a preliminary study on the involvement of the target group with the product used for the brand's crisis communication was carried out before the main study was conducted, no additional questions were asked during the study to test the attitude of respondents with regard to the product used. Due to the results of the prior conducted pilot study, the product of a sliced produce was used for the brands crisis communication. During the main study, however, respondent's familiarity and use of the product have not been interrogated. As no questions on participants' use and familiarity with the product have been asked, influences of a possible diet or a reluctance towards the product were not able to be discovered as an influence on consumers' answers. Due to this, for future studies it is therefore highly advisable to test how participants' involvement, diet, or acceptance of the presented product influences their perception of a brands crisis communication and subsequently their perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention.

With regard to this point, no possible interaction with consumers' previous experience with food poisoning have been interrogated during this study. The experience with the scenario described in the press release could however influence participants' assessment of the presented crisis. Having experienced food poisoning or having no experience with food poisoning yourself could thereby also have influenced participants crisis evaluations. It would certainly be interesting to interrogate how consumers' previous experience with a possible brand crisis such as a food poisoning incident through a production malfunction affects their subsequent brand evaluations.

Furthermore, with regard to the design of this study, it can certainly also be noted that the use of a fictitious brand may have influenced the findings of this study. It can be assumed that consumers' familiarity with the presented brand may be an important factor through which customers' crisis evaluations can be influenced. Due to the fact that participants were not familiar with the brand, it may have been challenging for them to indicate whether they would purchase products from the brand. With regard to the study's participants, it can also be noted that the proportion of female participants in the study was considerably higher than the proportion of male participants. This study's sample was therefore not completely balanced in

relation to gender. This had a particular impact on participants' perception of crisis severity, as female participants perceived the crisis presented to them on average as more severe than male participants. For further studies on brand crisis communication, it would be beneficial to have a very balanced sample. With regard to the study's sample, it can also be emphasized once again that only participants with a residence in Germany were included for this study. Due to cultural differences in brand communication practices and consumer preferences, the results of the study could be quite different if conducted with participants from other countries and cultures. For future research it would therefore be interesting to take into account the role of culture in brand crisis communication. Furthermore, it would be interesting to test other variables and their influence on consumers. In particular, the preventability of the brand crisis could be a factor to be considered. It would be rather interesting to find out to what extent the preventability of a crisis through the possible prevention of the brand itself can lead consumer evaluations to turn out either more positive or more negative.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In the event of a brand crisis, it is of utmost importance to adjust a brands' communication activities in order to generate positive customer reviews and protect a its' reputation, even if it is held highly responsible and liable for a crisis. This study has shown the importance of making the right decisions when it comes to using crisis communication strategies and message frames in the event of a crisis of low but also high severity. The goal of this study was to answer the research question: *“To what extent does crisis communication strategy, message framing and the severity of the crisis influence consumers' crisis evaluations in perceived response sincerity, brand trust, brand attitude and purchase intention?”* In general, it can be concluded that this study has shown several positive effects of an accommodative communication strategy and an emotional message frame on consumers' crisis evaluations. It has also become clear that when involved in a low as opposed to a high severity brand crisis, consumer evaluations are less strongly negatively influenced, meaning that especially when there is high responsibility on the side of the brand, adopting a communication approach has to be carefully considered.

In addition, to help communicators choose the right communication activities during a brand crisis, this study emphasized the positive results obtained by the use of a defensive communication strategy during a low severity crisis and an accommodative communication strategy during a high severity crisis. Lastly, concerning the use of message frames within different crisis communication strategies, it has been emphasized that a rational message framing will enable communicators to generate greater brand attitude and purchase intention when employed with an accommodative communication strategy. Likewise, when employing a defensive communication strategy, the pairing with an emotional message framing will lead to greater brand attitude and purchase intention of consumers. Even though the explorative research question on a three-way interaction effect did not produce any significant results, this study highlights the importance of the appropriate combination of a crisis communication strategy and a brands message framing, as well as the importance of taking into account the severity of a given crisis when developing a brands' communication measures.



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## APPENDIX A: Stimulus material

### Figure 7

*Condition 1: Accommodative communication strategy, rational message framing, low crisis severity*

WN+ Jobs Anzeigen Abo

Di., 16.03.2021

**Westfälische Nachrichten**

Zeitungsgruppe Münster Westfälische Nachrichten Münsterische Zeitung

MÜNSTER MÜNSTERLAND NACHRICHTEN SPORT

Startseite > NRW

**Di., 16.03.2021**

**Gesundheit**

**Wursthersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler**

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, hat sich einer unserer Kunden in der vergangenen Woche durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine leichte Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen und befand sich aufgrund dessen kurzzeitig unter ärztlicher Beobachtung.

Zur Vermeidung weiterer gesundheitlicher Risiken, bitten wir Sie auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge zu verzichten, bis die Ursache für diesen Vorfall geklärt ist. Wir übernehmen die volle Verantwortung für diesen Zwischenfall und bedauern die Folgen dieses Produktionsfehlers.

Wir möchten uns dafür bei unseren Kunden entschuldigen. Dem aufgetretenen Problem werden wir in unserer Herstellung nachgehen, um den Vorfall zu klären, und unseren Kunden auch in Zukunft die von unserer Marke gewohnte Produktqualität bieten zu können. Im Namen der Marke wünschen wir dem betroffenen Kunden eine schnelle Genesung.“



## Figure 8

Condition 2: Accommodative communication strategy, rational message framing, high crisis severity



The image shows a screenshot of a news article from the website 'Westfälische Nachrichten'. The article is dated 'Di., 16.03.2021' and is categorized under 'Gesundheit'. The headline reads 'Wursthersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler'. The main text of the article is enclosed in a red border and contains the following content:

Di., 16.03.2021  
**Gesundheit**  
**Wursthersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler**

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, haben sich in der vergangenen Woche vierzig unserer Kunden durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine schwere Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen, wodurch sich zurzeit einige dieser Personen in ärztlicher Behandlung befinden.

Zur Vermeidung weiterer gesundheitlicher Risiken, bitten wir Sie auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge zu verzichten, bis die Ursache dieses Vorfalls geklärt ist. Bereits gekaufte Produkte können Sie in den Filialen zurückgeben.

Wir übernehmen die volle Verantwortung für diesen Zwischenfall und bedauern die Folgen dieses Produktionsfehlers.

Wir möchten uns dafür bei unseren Kunden entschuldigen.

Dem aufgetretenen Problem werden wir in unserer Herstellung nachgehen, um unseren Kunden auch in Zukunft die von unserer Marke gewohnte Produktqualität bieten zu können.

Im Namen der Marke wünschen wir den betroffenen Kunden eine schnelle Genesung.“

## Figure 9

Condition 3: Accommodative communication strategy, emotional message framing, low crisis severity



WN+ Jobs Anzeigen Abo

Di, 16.03.2021

**Westfälische Nachrichten**

Zeitungsgruppe Münster **WN** Westfälische Nachrichten Münsterische Zeitung

🏠 MÜNSTER MÜNSTERLAND NACHRICHTEN SPORT

Startseite > NRW

**Di., 16.03.2021**  
**Gesundheit**  
**Wursthersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler**

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, hat sich in der vergangenen Woche einer unserer Kunden durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine leichte Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen und befand sich aufgrund dessen kurzzeitig unter ärztlicher Beobachtung.

Zur Vermeidung weiterer Risiken bitten wir Sie auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge zu verzichten, bis die Ursache dieses beunruhigenden Vorfalls geklärt ist. Wir übernehmen die volle Verantwortung für diesen besorgniserregenden Zwischenfall und bedauern zu tiefst die Folgen dieses Produktionsfehlers. Wir möchten uns dafür ausdrücklich bei unseren Kunden entschuldigen! Unseren Kunden versprechen wir die Ursache für die unzureichende Produktqualität bis ins kleinste Detail gründlich zu untersuchen. Im Namen der Marke möchten wir unserem betroffenen Kunden von Herzen die besten Wünsche übermitteln. Wir hoffen zu tiefst auf eine baldige Genesung!“

## Figure 10

Condition 4: Accommodative communication strategy, emotional message framing, high crisis severity



WN+ Jobs Anzeigen Abo

Di, 16.03.2021

**Westfälische Nachrichten**

Zeitungsgruppe Münster **WN** Westfälische Nachrichten Münsterische Zeitung

MÜNSTER MÜNSTERLAND NACHRICHTEN SPORT

Startseite > NRW

**Di., 16.03.2021**  
**Gesundheit**  
**Wursthersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler**

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, haben sich in der vergangenen Woche vierzig unserer Kunden durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine schwere Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen, wodurch sich zurzeit einige dieser Personen in ärztlicher Behandlung befinden.

Zur Vermeidung weiterer Risiken bitten wir Sie auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge zu verzichten, bis die Ursache dieses beunruhigenden Vorfalls geklärt ist. Bereits gekaufte Produkte können Sie in den Filialen zurückgeben.

Wir übernehmen die volle Verantwortung für diesen besorgniserregenden Zwischenfall und bedauern zu tiefst die Folgen dieses Produktionsfehlers. Wir möchten uns dafür ausdrücklich bei unseren Kunden entschuldigen! Unseren Kunden versprechen wir die Ursache für die unzureichende Produktqualität genauestens zu untersuchen.

Im Namen der Marke möchten wir unseren betroffenen Kunden von Herzen die besten Wünsche übermitteln.

Wir hoffen zu tiefst auf eine baldige Genesung!“

**Figure 11**

*Condition 5: Defensive communication strategy, rational message framing, low crisis severity*

The image is a screenshot of a news article from the website 'Westfälische Nachrichten'. The page header includes the date 'Di., 16.03.2021', the website name 'Westfälische Nachrichten', and navigation links for 'MÜNSTER', 'MÜNSTERLAND', 'NACHRICHTEN', and 'SPORT'. The article is dated 'Di., 16.03.2021' and is categorized under 'Gesundheit'. The headline is 'Wursterhersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler'. The main text of the article is enclosed in a red border and contains the following content:

**Di., 16.03.2021**  
**Gesundheit**  
**Wursterhersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler**

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, hat sich in der vergangenen Woche einer unserer Kunden durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine leichte Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen und befand sich aufgrund dessen kurzzeitig unter ärztlicher Beobachtung.

Verzichten Sie bitte bis zur Klärung der Ursache für diesen Vorfall auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge, um weitere Risiken zu vermeiden und auszuschließen. Wir werden die Ursache für diesen Vorfall in der Herstellung unserer Produkte untersuchen.

Zudem möchten wir hiermit jedoch auch betonen, dass solch ein Ereignis außerhalb unserer Kontrolle liegt und daher nur schwer von uns zu beeinflussen ist.

Unsere Kunden werden wir wie gewohnt mit hochwertigen Produkten versorgen und Ihnen die von der Marke Landfried bekannte Produktqualität bieten.

Dem betroffenen Kunden wünschen wir schnelle Genesung.“

**Figure 12**

*Condition 6: Defensive communication strategy, rational message framing, high crisis severity*

WN+ Jobs Anzeigen Abo

Di., 16.03.2021

**Westfälische Nachrichten**

Zeitungs-Gruppe Münster Westfälische Nachrichten Münster

MÜNSTER MÜNSTERLAND NACHRICHTEN SPORT

Startseite > NRW

**Di., 16.03.2021**  
**Gesundheit**  
**WursthHersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler**

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, haben sich in der vergangenen Woche vierzig unserer Kunden durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine schwere Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen, wodurch sich zurzeit einige dieser Personen in ärztlicher Behandlung befinden. Verzichten Sie bitte bis zur Klärung der Ursache für diesen Vorfall auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge, um weitere Risiken auszuschließen. Bereits gekaufte Produkte können Sie bis auf Weiteres in den Filialen zurückgeben. Wir werden die Ursache für diesen Vorfall in der Herstellung unserer Produkte untersuchen. Zudem möchten wir jedoch betonen, dass solch ein Ereignis außerhalb unserer Kontrolle liegt und daher nur schwer von uns zu beeinflussen ist. Unsere Kunden werden wir wie gewohnt mit hochwertigen Produkten versorgen und Ihnen die von Landfried bekannte Produktqualität bieten. Den betroffenen Kunden wünschen wir schnelle Genesung.“

## Figure 13

Condition 7: Defensive communication strategy, emotional message framing, low crisis severity

WN+ Jobs Anzeigen Abo

Di., 16.03.2021

**Westfälische Nachrichten**

Zeitungsg  
Gruppe  
Münster

Westfälische  
Nachrichten  
Münster  
Münsterische Zeitung

MÜNSTER MÜNSTERLAND NACHRICHTEN SPORT

Startseite > NRW

**Di., 16.03.2021**

**Gesundheit**

**Wursterhersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler**

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, hat sich einer unserer Kunden in der vergangenen Woche durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine leichte Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen und befand sich aufgrund dessen kurzzeitig unter ärztlicher Beobachtung.

Um weitere Risiken auszuschließen, bitten wir Sie, bis zur Klärung der Ursache für diesen höchst beunruhigenden Vorfall auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge zu verzichten.

Wir werden der Ursache für diesen besorgniserregenden Vorfall in der Herstellung unserer Produkte nachgehen, aber möchten zudem betonen, dass solch ein beunruhigendes Ereignis leider außerhalb unserer Kontrolle liegt und daher nur schwer von uns zu beeinflussen ist.

Unsere geschätzten Kunden werden wir wie gewohnt mit hochwertigen Produkten versorgen und Ihnen die von der Marke Landfried bekannte Produktqualität bieten.

Dem betroffenen Kunden wünschen wir eine schnelle Genesung!“

**Figure 14**

*Condition 8: Defensive communication strategy, emotional message framing, high crisis severity*

The image shows a screenshot of a news article from the website 'Westfälische Nachrichten'. The page header includes the date 'Di., 16.03.2021', the website name 'Westfälische Nachrichten', and navigation links for 'MÜNSTER', 'MÜNSTERLAND', 'NACHRICHTEN', and 'SPORT'. The article title is 'Gesundheit Wursthersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler'. The main text discusses a food safety incident involving 'Landfried' and provides a statement from the manufacturer regarding the production error and the company's response to the affected customers.

Di., 16.03.2021

**Gesundheit**  
**Wursthersteller Landfried äußert sich zu Produktionsfehler**

Nach einem vermeintlichen Produktionsfehler bei den Aufschnittprodukten von Landfried hat sich nun auch die Marke selbst zu den Vorfällen geäußert und nimmt Stellung zur Ursache des Vorfalls:

„Wie bereits berichtet, haben sich in der vergangenen Woche vierzig unserer Kunden durch eines unserer Aufschnittprodukte eine schwere Lebensmittelvergiftung zugezogen, wodurch sich zurzeit einige dieser Personen in ärztlicher Behandlung befinden.

Um weitere Risiken auszuschließen, bitten wir Sie, bis zur Klärung der Ursache für diesen höchst beunruhigenden Vorfall auf den Verzehr von Produkten aus der auf unserer Website genannten Produktcharge zu verzichten.

Bereits gekaufte Produkte können in den Filialen zurückgegeben werden. Wir werden diesem besorgniserregenden Vorfall in der Herstellung unserer Produkte nachgehen, aber möchten betonen, dass solch ein beunruhigendes Ereignis leider außerhalb unserer Kontrolle liegt und daher nur schwer von uns zu beeinflussen ist.

Unsere geschätzten Kunden werden wir weiterhin mit hochwertigen Produkten versorgen und die von Landfried bekannte Produktqualität bieten.

Den betroffenen Kunden wünschen wir eine schnelle Genesung!“

## APPENDIX B: Measurement items

**Table 10**

*Manipulation check questions in German*

<i>Manipulation</i>	<i>Manipulation check questions</i>
<i>Communication strategy</i>	Das Unternehmen hat sich für die Krise entschuldigt.
	Das Unternehmen übernimmt eindeutig die Verantwortung für die Krise.
	Ich denke, dem Unternehmen tut die entstandene Krise leid.
	Das Unternehmen klingt defensiv in seiner Reaktion auf die Krise.
	Das Unternehmen entschuldigt sich nicht für die Krise.
	Ich habe den Eindruck, dass dem Unternehmen die entstandene Krise nicht vollständig leid tut.
<i>Message framing</i>	Die Stellungnahme des Unternehmens zu der Krise ist emotional.
	Das Unternehmen drückt in seiner Stellungnahme zu der Krise Emotionen aus.
	Die Stellungnahme des Unternehmens zu der Krise klingt sehr persönlich.
	Die Stellungnahme des Unternehmens enthält keine emotionalen Elemente.
	Die Stellungnahme des Unternehmens klingt sehr unpersönlich.
<i>Crisis severity</i>	Wie würden Sie die Krise, die das Unternehmen erlebt hat, beschreiben?
	Wie würden Sie den von der Krise verursachten Schaden beschreiben?
	Wie würden Sie die Auswirkungen der Krise auf die Sicherheit und Gesundheit der Verbraucher beschreiben?



**Table 11**

*Manipulation check questions in English*

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<i>Manipulation</i>	<i>Manipulation check questions</i>
<i>Communication strategy</i>	<p>The company has apologized for the crisis.</p> <p>The company clearly takes responsibility for the crisis.</p> <p>I think the company is sorry for the crisis that has arisen.</p> <p>The company sounds defensive in its response to the crisis.</p> <p>The company does not apologize for the crisis.</p> <p>have the impression that the company is not completely sorry for the crisis that has arisen.</p>
<i>Message framing</i>	<p>The company's statement on the crisis is emotional.</p> <p>The company expresses emotion in its statement on the crisis.</p> <p>The company's statement on the crisis sounds very personal.</p> <p>The company's statement does not contain any emotional elements.</p> <p>The company's statement sounds very impersonal.</p>
<i>Crisis severity</i>	<p>How would you describe the crisis the company has experienced?</p> <p>How would you describe the damage caused by the crisis?</p> <p>How would you describe the impact of the crisis on consumer health and safety?</p>

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**Table 12***Items and scales for dependent measures in German*

<i>Item (source)</i>	<i>Scales</i>
<i>Response sincerity</i>  (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015)	Das Unternehmen geht in seinem Statement ehrlich und aufrichtig auf die Bedenken der Kunden ein.
	Das Statement des Unternehmens empfinde ich als aufrichtig.
	Das Statement des Unternehmens empfinde ich als warm.
	Das Statement des Unternehmens empfinde ich als unaufrichtig.
<i>Brand trust</i>  (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015)	Das Unternehmen Landfried ist zuverlässig.
	Das Unternehmen Landfried hält, was es verspricht.
	Ich vertraue dem Unternehmen Landfried.
	Das Unternehmen Landfried ist unzuverlässig.
<i>Brand attitude</i>  (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014)	Das Unternehmen Landfried ist nicht vertrauenswürdig.
	Ich habe eine positive Einstellung zu dem Unternehmen Landfried.
	Ich glaube das Unternehmen Landfried hat einen guten Ruf.
	Mit dem Unternehmen Landfried verbinde ich positive Eigenschaften.
	Ich habe eine negative Einstellung zu dem Unternehmen Landfried.
<i>Purchase intention</i>  (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014)	Ich glaube das Unternehmen Landfried hat einen schlechten Ruf.
	Mit dem Unternehmen Landfried verbinde ich negative Eigenschaften.
	Wenn sich die Gelegenheit ergibt, würde ich Produkte des Unternehmens Landfried kaufen.
	Es ist wahrscheinlich, dass ich Produkte des Unternehmens Landfried kaufen würde.
	Ich würde eher von dem Unternehmen Landfried kaufen als von anderen vergleichbaren Unternehmen.
	Ich würde keine Produkte des Unternehmens Landfried kaufen.

**Table 13***Items and scales for dependent measures in English*

<i>Item (source)</i>	<i>Scales</i>
<i>Response sincerity</i> (Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015)	The company addresses customer concerns honestly and sincerely in its statement. I find the company's statement to be sincere. I find the company's statement warm. I find the company's statement insincere. I perceive the company's statement as being artificial.
<i>Brand trust</i> (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Morhart, Malär, Guèvremont, Girardin & Grohmann, 2015)	The Landfried company is reliable. The Landfried company delivers what it promises. I trust the Landfried company. The Landfried company is unreliable. The Landfried company is not trustworthy.
<i>Brand attitude</i> (Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014)	I have a positive attitude towards the Landfried company. The Landfried company has a good reputation. I associate positive qualities with the Landfried company. I have a negative attitude towards the Landfried company. The Landfried company has a bad reputation. I associate negative qualities with the Landfried company.
<i>Purchase intention</i> (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2014)	If the opportunity arose, I would buy products from the Landfried company. It is likely that I will buy products from the Landfried company. I would rather buy from the Landfried company than from other available companies. I would not buy any products from the Landfried company.