Communication strategies in a value-related crisis
– case study of Oatly

Kommunikationsstrategier i en värderelaterad kris – en fallstudie av Oatly

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Summary

The global food system faces great challenges in terms of sustainability. The access to food is unevenly distributed and one third of the population is either suffering from micro deficiencies or from a high calorie intake. Moreover, the food productions system contributes to more than 25 % of the total greenhouse gases and 18 % of these stems from livestock. With a growing population demanding more of these climate intense products, great challenges await. Subsequently, a change of diets to one including more plant-based products is seen as one solution to substantially reduce negative impacts of consumption and reach a more sustainable planet.

Stakeholders are expecting corporations to act responsible and incorporate CSR into their business conducts. This is especially true for corporations in the food system when facing challenges that can eventually escalate to a crisis. The aim of this study was to examine how a corporation communicate to its consumers in a value-related crisis. This encompasses finding out what communication strategy is used and the reputational outcome from this approach. The study was constructed as a case study of the communication of a Swedish oat milk company. How the corporation communicated was examined from their main communication channels: sustainability reports, webpage, and social media. Moreover, three focus groups were conducted with the corporation's consumers and a corporate representative to gain a deeper understanding of the study phenomenon. Based on corporate social responsibility, corporate social responsibility communication, situational crisis communication theory and social media, a theoretical framework was created to guide the analysis of data.

Findings of the study show that the corporation used a denial- and a CSR communication strategy. It is suggested by the theoretical framework that these strategies were not sufficient nor successful in this endeavour of protecting the reputation in a crisis. In crisis communication through social media, it is perceived important with strategies that are more accommodating to consumer expectations to protect corporate reputation. The corporation's prior reputation and CSR actions was expected to shield a corporation in a crisis which was not perceived to be the case for the studied corporation. Neither did the response strategy protect the reputation as this was not found fitting for the specific crisis situation. Though, it was found that the financials were not affected, and the corporation continued to grow in a rapid phase. Therefore, it is suggested that the reputation was only slightly affected, if affected at all, in the end.

Sammanfattning

Det globala livsmedelssystemet står inför stora utmaningar när det gäller hållbarhet. Förändrade kostmönster till sådana som släpper ut mindre växthusgaser och är nyttigare är en del av lösningen för en hållbarare matproduktion. Tillgången på mat är ojämnt fördelat och en tredjedel av jordens befolkning lider antingen av näringsbrist eller av ett för högt kaloriintag. Vidare så står livsmedelssystemet för mer än 25 % av de totala växthusgaserna och 18 % kommer från djurhållningar, och med en växande befolkning kommer efterfrågan på dessa produkter öka och föra med sig stora utmaningar. Därför ses kostförändringar där intaget av växtbaserade produkter är ökad som en del av lösningen för att minska den negativa påverkan av vår konsumtion och för att nå en mer hållbar planet.

Intressenter förväntar sig att företag agerar ansvarsfullt och väver in företagens sociala ansvar i deras affärsverksamhet. Det är extra sant för företag i livsmedelssystemet när de står inför hinder som eventuellt kan leda till en företagskris. Målet med den här studien är att undersöka hur företag kommunicerar till dess konsumenter i en värderelaterad kris. Det innefattar att studera vad för kommunikationsstrategi som används och vad det fått för konsekvent på företagets rykte. Den här studien är baserad på en fallstudie av hur ett svenskt havremjölksföretag kommunicerar. Hur företaget kommunicerar studerades på deras huvudkanaler: hållbarhetsrapport, hemsida och i sociala medier. Utöver detta så hölls fokusgrupp intervjuer med några av företagets konsumenter samt en intervju med en företagsrepresentant för att få en djupare företeelse för det studerade fenomenet. Baserat på förtegens sociala ansvar, kommunikation av företagens sociala ansvar, situationsbaserad teori för kriskommunikation, konstruerades ett teoretiskt ramverk för att guida analysen av data.

Fynden från den här studien visar att företaget använde en förnekelser- och en företagens social ansvar strategi vid sin kriskommunikation. Det föreslås av det teoretiska ramverket att dessa strategier inte var tillräckliga eller lyckade i att skydda företagets rykte i krisen. Vid kriskommunikation i sociala medier, är det viktigt att strategier är mer tillmötesgående mot kunders förväntningar för att skydda ryktet. Företagets tidigare rykte och sociala ansvarstagande var förväntat att skydda företaget i krisen, men fynden tyder på att det inte gjort det för det studerade fallet. Inte heller skyddade svarsstrategin ryktet då det inte passade den specifika krissituationen. Dock så visar fynden på att företagets finanser inte påverkats, då företaget fortsatte växa snabbt efter krisen, därav tros ryktet ha påverkats lite om det ens påverkats alls i slutändan.

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1 Introduction

In this first chapter the research problems, aim and research questions will be presented, followed by the study's delimitations and a visual of the project outline.

1.1 Problem background

The global food production system puts great pressure on the climate, and it plays a major part in disrupting the ecological stability on Earth (Willet *et al.* 2019). Food is unevenly distributed across the globe as 820 million people suffer from micronutrient deficiencies whilst food-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity are rising (*ibid.*). Together these issues encircle as much as one third of the population (Röös 2018). Food production is estimated to contribute with more than 25% of the total greenhouse gas **(GHG)** released to the atmosphere (Tilman & Clarke 2014, 518) whereas 18% is solely caused by livestock (Stoll-Kleemann & O'Riordan 2015, 37). Thus, there is a shift required from GHG intensive products, such as dairy and meat, to more plant-based food sources to overcome these issues (Lindahl & Jonell, 2020; Willet *et al,* 2019; Röös 2018; Röös *et al.* 2017). However, as the world population has reached over seven billion and is expected to grow by another two point three million until 2050, followed with a rise of average income, there will be an increased demand for animal-based food products (Tilman & Clark, 2014). Subsequently, it risks leading to an 80% increase of global GHG (Tilman & Clark, 2014, 520). Thereby, the current food system urgently needs to transform to reduce its negative impact and consumption patterns needs to shift to reach a more sustainable society (Willet *et al.* 2019).

The formulation of sustainable development made by The World Commission on Environment and Development in the Brundtland report, was an important milestone on the road towards sustainability (WCED 1987). The objective is *"to meet the need of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs"* (WCED 1987, 7). Hence, the definition directs corporations to consider both future and present aspects of sustainable development when making business decisions. Nowadays, in the age of internet and social media, market transparency has increased, and consumers have become more aware of industry conditions and how products are produced (Saeed *et al.* 2021). This makes it important for organizations to incorporate sustainability into the supply chain and shift the focus from profit maximization to sustainability issues (*ibid.*). Therefore, companies with sustainability claims must be credible for consumer to continue to buy their products. Perceived misconduct, or sustainability work that is not good enough, could possibly affect the consumers' food choices and have consequences for the corporate mission (Vainio 2019). Hence, economic growth in today's market is not enough, and as 71% of the largest economies in the world being corporations (Babic *et al.* 2017, 27), there is a need for these institutions to wider embrace social and environmental values.

Society and business are interdependent. Porter and Kramer (2007) argue that for corporations to be successful society needs to be healthy and a healthy society needs corporations to be successful. Historically, the focus has not been on where they intersect but rather on the friction between the two sides. Instead, Porter and Kramer (2007) believe that the focus should be on shared value, as society and corporations are mutually dependent. In response to the limitations and perceived failures of governmental regulation in the wake of reform of the welfare state, globalization and privatization, corporate social responsibility (**CSR**) has grown over the last decade (Hartmann 2011). Hence, organizations being held responsible for their activities by media, activists and governments has resulted in CSR becoming a priority for businesses across

the globe (Porter & Kramer 2007). Research has indicated that key stakeholder such as investors, employees and consumers are more and more ready to act to both punish and reward corporate citizens (Du *et al.* 2010). Knox and Maklan (2004, 509) similarly indicate that:

"Business practices, even those conducted a very long way from their home markets, can be subject to intense scrutiny and comment by customers, employees, suppliers, shareholders, and governments, as well as other groups upon whose support the business relies".

Subsequently, to create positive stakeholder perceptions organizations are investing more and more in CSR related activities (Ajayi & Mmutle 2020). In the pursuit to generate stakeholder confidence organizations can use CSR communication of their CSR activities to possibly boost their reputation (*ibid.*).

During a corporation's lifetime, a crisis is bound to happen (Kim & Woo 2019) and is debated to be part of everyday business practice (Kim 2014). The threat posed by a crisis is real concern for corporate managers as the consequences does not only include tangible losses related to tangible assets, but it also often includes severe harm to intangible assets such as reputation (*ibid.*). A media broadcast or an article can instantly destroy a corporation's reputation that have taken decades to build up because of the public's extensive appeal for crisis (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009). Hence, it is of great importance that corporations know how to lessen the negative impact in the wake of a crisis and CSR involvement might offer a suitable tool for this purpose (*ibid.*). To recapture stakeholder trust after a crisis, crisis communication is a tool used by corporation (Zhang & Broden 2017). Choosing the right communication strategy offers the potential to shield the corporate reputation that is threatened in a crisis (Coombs 2007). Hence, knowing how to use these strategies is important for corporate managers as the they sooner or later will have the need for them.

1.2 Problem

Each industry faces its own set of unique stakeholder relationships and context, thus there is a need for industry specific CSR issues to be examined (Kim 2014). The pressure on the food industry to act environmentally friendly is increasing (Kim 2014; Maloni & Brown 2006) and the sector is supremely dependent on society, economy, and the environment, making CSR highly relevant (Hartmann 2011). CSR in the food sector faces challenges and there are mainly three reasons behind this: the sector greatly depends on resources (physical, human, and natural), food is an important human need and therefore strong opinions surround it and lastly, the structure of the food chain is complex (*ibid.*). Specifically, conflicts may arise regarding CSR involvement in the supply chain as large and small corporations can diverge in how to approach CSR (*ibid.*). Moreover, a pressure is rising as the public expect the industry to conduct itself in a more sustainable manner (Kim 2017). As the global food production system is responsible for up to one fourth of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions there is an urgent need for a transformation towards sustainable food systems (Röös 2018). This transformation encompasses both change in consumption and production, what is eaten and how it is produced (*ibid.*). Thereby, sustainable diet is an important aspect in lowering the environmental footprint of the food industry and this type of diet is gaining attention (*ibid.*). In numerous countries there is also a rising demand for plant-based dairy alternatives which hold the potential to reduce the environmental footprint of the food industry. For instance, countries such as Sweden with a long history of milk consumption (Rundberg 2019) is seeing a trend of increased demand for plant-based milk products (Sonck 2017).

Communicating about CSR today calls for more sophisticated strategies for communication than in the past (Morsing & Schultz 2006). Criticism can spur from the rising number of CSR surveillance institutions and CSR rankings. Combined with the increasing stakeholder focus outside the direct corporate actions, on the actions of consumers, politicians, and suppliers (*ibid.*) hence, the undertaking of communicating CSR messages is today something rather complex. When CSR actions are symbolic rather than concrete, deceptive communication labelled greenwashing leads to "green talk", whereas communication is targeting stakeholder satisfaction without concrete actions (Siano *et al.* 2017). Greenwashing is the difference between "talk" and "action" (*ibid.*). To add to the challenges, when a corporation face a crisis, effective communication is essential in order to preserve corporate reputation and for continued prosperity (Sisco 2012). Moreover, nowadays as expectations from society are high, CSR has gone from being viewed as an asset in a crisis to hold the capacity to turn into a crisis if not taken care of in a proper manner (Siano *et al.* 2017).

Social media has drastically changed how information diffuses in today's information society, both associated to the availability and transmission of information (Lin et al. 2016). Consequently, increasing the risk of crisis emerging and for corporations to lose the control in a crisis (Feng *et al.* 2020). This has implications on how to conduct crisis management and how to reduce risks in corporate operations. By using social media in a crisis situation, it can increase outcomes from communication efforts if used sensibly (Veil *et al.* 2011). However, corporations are required to use a combination of both traditional media and new media, as these are complimentary (*ibid.*).

As a result of globalization, which has enabled interaction and communication between markets around the world and new business opportunities are now more accessible for financial investors (Hall 2018). Facilitating funding transfers across different countries (Bank for International Settlement 2017) and leading to an increase of international investments (Hall 2018). Large investors are now seeing a shift whereas investments in sustainability are seen as the future on the investment market (Brown, 2010). Though, if sustainable investments are lacking trustworthiness, then it might lead to distrust and consumers dissociating from the company (Brockhaus *et al.* 2017). Thereby, it could be said that some consumers will not agree on decisions by corporations taking on large and possibly controversial investors and face the risk of consumer cynicism. However, consumers might not react the same to all investments and they do possibly not lead to crisis for all corporations that are subject to investments.

Research on CSR with focus on the food industry is limited and Hartman (2011) argues that studies in this area is of high value. Future research is important due to the high level of vulnerability in the food industry as consumers expectations are high relating to concerns on food safety, packaging, and obesity (Assiouras *et al.* 2013). Ingam *et al.* (2005) and Kübler *et al.* (2020) argue that there is a lack of research on how consumers react to value related crisis. These crises can be of greater consequence as they tend to trigger strong emotional reactions, more so than crisis related to performance. Lately, there has been an increase of value related crises and therefore this gap in knowledge on consumer reactions can be problematic (Kübler *et al.* 2020). Also, there is not sufficient research on the relationship between CSR crisis and CSR reputation (Gistri *et* al. 2019). There is limited research on CSR crisis and the connections of pre-crisis elements, such as the relationships stakeholders have created with the corporations before a crisis and the post-crisis elements such as how the corporation chose to respond in a crisis, and then the outcomes of intentions and attitudes (Tao & Song 2020). The social media context is not well described in existing crisis communication theories. Thus, research on crisis communication in the context of social media is valuable (Roshan *et al.* 2016; Zhao *et al.* 2020).

It is suggested that most of research has focused on investigating the outcomes of crisis responses using the traditional medias (Kerkhof *et al.* 2011) and it is found that corporations widely differ in their strategy for communicating on social media (Ott & Theunissen 2015). Therefore, an enhancement of the classic crisis communication theories whereas social media is considered could be beneficial (Cheng 2018). It could lead to a better understanding of its role in a crisis and how to use it in a more sensible manner, thus corporate representative might be able to shield corporate reputation more effectively.

1.3 Aim

The aim of this study is to explain how corporations communicate in a crisis. More specifically, how a CSR positioned corporation in the food sector experiencing a value related crisis communicates. The objective is to provide a picture of the reputational implications of the chosen communication strategies. The following research questions are formulated to achieve the aim:

1. At a time of a value-related crisis, what is the communicational strategy?
2. What are the reputational consequences from the crisis communication?

1.4 Delimitations

To reach the aim of the thesis and provide an answer to the research questions, certain delimitations had to be made, both empirical and methodological. When conducting the literature review, various aspects of CSR communication and crisis communication was included. Theories on CSR communication and crisis communication work as a foundation when the data was analyzed and to be more precise, the various factors in the situational crisis communication theory (**SCCT**) is of great focus. However, this also implies that other theories and perspectives are not included. Hence, other observations and aspects are missed out on. On the other hand, theories were selected based on research questions and aim of the study, thereby of relevance for the project. The aim of the study is not to explain the outcomes of a crisis over a longer period, hence only a snapshot in time of the consumers perspective on the event was investigated.

The study took on a case study design and investigated a single corporation from the Swedish food industry in depth. The aim was to understand a specific case, not to generalize the collected data. Primary data was collected through three focus group interviews and an interview with a corporate representative from the selected case company. These individuals did not provide objective facts; however, it provided the study with a consumer and a corporate perspective (Wibeck 2000). The aim was to explain how a corporation choose to communicate in a crisis and the reputational outcomes and the thoughts and feelings of the chosen interviewees are of interest. Moreover, sustainability reports from 2017, 2018, 2019 were studied, which could have its inherent delimitations. As these documents were written from a corporate perspective the corporate actions could be described in a favorable fashion to strengthen the corporate reputation.

Another delimitation was choosing a corporation that has a high environmental status in Sweden. In 2019 it was ranked as one of the top ten most sustainable corporations in the food and beverage category (Sustainable Brand Index 2019). The choice of case subject and context can have effect on the results. However, a corporation actively engaging in the sustainability

can provide important insights and serve the interest of the study, though also limit the relevance of the study results to corporations in the similar industries

1.5   Outline

The thesis is divided into seven chapters that are illustrated below in Figure 1. The intent is to show the thesis's structure.

Figure 1 - Illustration of the study's outline.

Chapter one starts with an introduction to the subject followed by the identified empirical problem. Also, the aim, research questions, delimitation and the study outline are covered. In the second chapter the methodological choices are clarified. The details of how data was collected, the literature review is explained and how quality and transparency, validity and reliability is assured. Also, ethical considerations are discussed. The third chapter presents theories from existing literature and leads up to a theoretical framework that is used for the collection of data and the analysis. The chapters following the theory is where the case study is presented and the results from the study. Chapter four provides an empirical background for the reader and the empirical results. In chapter five, the results from the study are analyzed in relation to the conceptual framework. The sixth chapter is where the research questions are discussed and answered with the connection to theories, previous studies, and the background. In the last and seventh chapter, a conclusion from the case study is presented with suggestions for future research.

2 Method

In this chapter, the methodological approach is presented. Firstly, the literature review is outlined, followed by the research design. After that the empirical data collection which includes a semi-structured interview, focus group interview and secondary data is presented. It is followed by how the data was analyzed. Lastly, quality- and ethical assurances conclude the chapter.

2.1 A literature review

To find articles related to the formulated research questions, databases such as Web of Science, Google Scholar and Primo (online library at SLU) were used on subjects of CSR, CSR communication, communication strategies and corporate crisis. The objective was to find the most relevant literature related to the aim of the study and to find these several keywords were used in the search: "corporate social responsibility", "corporate social responsibility communication", "corporate social responsibility communication strategies", "crisis communication", "corporate crisis" or "crisis" and "situational crisis communication", "food sector" and "food industry". Also, reference list of read articles were used to trace ideas and to attain more detail information in the original sources. Articles from peer-reviewed journals were the base of the review to grant higher quality of the research and gain trustworthiness.

2.2 Research design

A qualitative research design grants a deeper understanding of a phenomenon where the interpretivist's is seeking to understand the individual's experience (Bryman & Bell, 2015) with the objective to grasp a phenomenon in its natural environment (Robson 2011). When the goal is to examine the meaning groups or individuals attribute to a specific phenomenon and the context specific complexity is important, a qualitative design will be preferred (Creswell 2007). The qualitative method was used for this study as the individual's perception in a crisis situation and the linked reputational outcomes is of interest. It is important to understand their contextual conditions and to reach the study aim one needs to understand the crisis through the eyes of the consumers.

It is a flexible approach as the researcher has the possibility to alter the research questions and to add additional data (Bryman & Bell 2015). In this study a flexible design is preferred as the problem does not emerge from existing theory, instead a real-world problem is sought to be understood (Robson 2011). When using a flexible study design, the case study approach is one strategy for conducting research (Robson 2011). A case study focuses on the uniqueness of a single case and where the case can be institutional or a person, for example. It is the case that the researcher aims to explain (Bryman & Bell 2015). Case study was chosen for this study as the aim is to gain a contextual understanding of a phenomenon. It is also flexible, creating space to adapt during the research process. During the data collecting process a case study protocol was conducted and can be found in *Appendix 1*.

2.2.1 Choice of industry

The food industry is an important part of society (Maloni & Brown 2006), greatly impacting the environment, society, and economy (Hartmann 2011). As it covers a fundamental need people tend to be strongly opinionated on the theme of food (*ibid.*). All industries risk public criticism for its CSR related actions. For the food industry it can be very critical as it concerns

the use of resources, satisfaction of basic human needs and societal welfare across the globe (Maloni & Brown 2006). Thus, the risk of critique for corporations in this sector is greatly present (Hartmann 2011) and it is therefore applicable for the aim of this study.

2.2.2 Choice of case

The choice of empirical case was based on several criteria. The first criterion for selecting the case study was that it should be in the food industry, for all the reasons above. Secondly, the selected case should recently have experienced a value-related crisis, which are of destructive nature, as there is a lack of research on how consumers react to these crises it is valuable to study (Ingam *et al.* 2005; Kübler *et al.* 2020). The third criterion was that the unit of analysis is actively working with sustainable and have this as a core value. With the goal to enrich the field of research on CSR communication strategies in crisis, in the Swedish food sector, the Swedish organization Oatly was selected. According to the organization, their goals is to "*drive a systemic shift towards a sustainable, resilient food system that empowers people to choose solutions that improve their lives and ensure the future of the planet for generations to come*" (Oatly 2019 n.p.) and it has recently accepted an investment of 200 million dollars from Blackstone Growth (Oatly 2021b). Also, corporations active in Nordic countries experience that consumer expect corporation to act more responsible compared to other regions (Morsing & Schultz 2006). Lastly, consumer expect more from corporations in the food industry (Assiouras *et al.* 2013) thus, there is an elevated level of pressures on corporations from countries located in the north to live up to high expectations and are this was perceived valuable to study.

2.3 Data collection

The data was collected through multiple sources, as not a single method of collecting data could assist in reaching the study aim and increase reliability of the findings (triangulation). The sources include focus groups, an interview with a corporate representative and secondary data from online publications and corporate documentation. Hence, the different sources were used to gain a deeper understanding of crisis communication and to enable triangulation which increase validity in a study using a flexible design (Robson 2011).

As empirical data is the foundation of the study, it also includes corporate documents such as the corporate sustainability reports. The sustainability reports were found on the company webpage and are official documents created for company stakeholders. The reports were observed before the data collection begun to ensure their applicability, for a good overview of the communication of the case company and as a foundation for formulating the guides for the interviews. Online articles were also used to get recent information on the corporation excluded in the corporate documentations. These non-academic publications were used to gain broader perspectives besides what the corporation states in its documents.

2.3.1 Focus groups

Focus group interviews were organized to investigate how the consumers perceive CSR crisis communication (Table 1). This technique can be used to study people's attitudes, values and conception in a specific area (Wibeck 2000) and enables the participants to raise topics and questions that they deem important that can lead to a deeper understanding in the subject (Bryman & Bell 2003). Also, the researcher can use the technique to study how the participants collectively build meaning in the studies phenomenon (*ibid.*). Focus group was chosen to reveal how Oatly's communication on the investment event is perceived by the focus group members,

to gain an understanding of their emotions and attitudes of the event and to grant them room to discuss the different topics together.

Table 1 - Interviewees in the case study, each group color-coded

Interviewees	Role	Interview type	Date of interview	Validation
Anonymous	Employee Oatly	Zoom interview	2021.05.28	2021.08.27
Focus group 1				
Hanna	Student	Focus group interview	2021.04.13	Direct oral
Alexandra	Student	Focus group interview	2021.04.13	Direct oral
Kevin	Professional	Focus group interview	2021.04.13	Direct oral
Emma	Professional	Focus group interview	2021.04.13	Direct oral
Focus group 2				
Karin	Student	Focus group interview	2021.04.19	Direct oral
Anna	Student	Focus group interview	2021.04.19	Direct oral
Pauline	Student	Focus group interview	2021.04.19	Direct oral
Focus group 3				
Lasse	Professional	Focus group interview	2021.04.20	Direct oral
Johan	Professional	Focus group interview	2021.04.20	Direct oral
Kristofer	Professional	Focus group interview	2021.04.20	Direct oral

In Table 1, all the respondents are presented. The table clarifies who participated and what group they belonged to, what date the interview took place and when the collected data was validated. Three focus groups, as recommended by Wibeck (2000) as a minimum, were organized with a total of ten participant to gain insight and understanding on how the consumers perceive the investment event and led to deeper conversations unfolding on the subject. The groups were not too large and did not risk losing the attention of some participants and facilitates the space for all participants to articulate their views (*ibid.*). The respondents were selected with the following criteria: a) in the focus group the respondents should have similar demographic variables such as age, education, ethnicity as this could facilitate discussions more easily (*ibid*.) b) consume or know of Oatly products, as conversations would otherwise be unfruitful and not fill the aim of the study c) and for the purpose of the thesis be aware of the Blackstone investment.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the focus group had to be held digitally, over the online meeting tool Zoom. This does not seem to have affected the interactions and dialogues as all participants were actively discussing the themes presented and a depth to the conversations was achieved. An interview guide was prepared beforehand and connects to the theories and study aim (Appendix 2).

In the beginning of the focus group sessions, the study purpose was presented as well as how the gathered information from the interviews is used. Also, consent on recording of the dialogues for transcription was confirmed at the beginning, as well as the use of first names in the thesis. In beforehand the participants were sent a documentation on how their personal data

is processed, in order to follow the current GDPR-regulations. These steps were taken to build trust and to gain quality to the study. The questions were prepared beforehand, however not sent to the respondents. To validate what was being said, verification was made orally by asking for clarifications of what was being discussed throughout the session.

2.3.2 Interview

In this study a semi-structured interview was conducted to gain a corporate perspective of the study phenomenon, and the interview was organized in line with recommendations by Robson (2011) to access relevant insight and information from the interviewee. In a semi-structured interview, the interviewer follows a guide which works as a checklist of subjects to touch upon during the interview and this structure grants the interviewer freedom to ask follow-up questions, modify the order of questions during the interview and how much time each topic gets (*ibid.*). The interview guide used in the interview can be found in *Appendix 3*. The employee was interviewed as it was a valuable opportunity to get insight into the corporation, its underlying motivation, and a corporate perspective on the crisis and corporate response. The employee is active in the corporation sustainability activities and has valuable knowledge of the studied phenomenon however, the person wished to stay anonymous. Upon agreeing to the interview, the interviewee was sent the themes of the interview so both parties were prepared in beforehand. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the distance to the interviewee, an online meeting was planned and conducted instead of a physical meeting. By having the component of visual communication in the interview, even though not meeting for a face-to-face conversation, it was still possible to collect contextual information from the interviewee. The date for interview and validation can be found in Table 1.

2.3.3 Social media

The social media platforms used for collection of data in the study was Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. These appear to be the main ones communicated on by the corporation and they were chosen to reach a wider understanding of the reputational impact from communicating on these platforms, from its consumers. Communicating on social media is crucial for communicating strategies and the three examined for this study are amongst the most important in terms of connectedness (Dutot *et al.* 2016).

2.4 Analysis of data

In this study a thematic content analysis was conducted after the data was collected. It is a commonly used method for finding themes (patterns) in the collected data (Braun & Clarke 2006), and it is a generic method when analyzing qualitative data (Robson 2011). The themes found in the data connects to the research questions as they capture information that relates to these *(ibid.)*. According to Vaismoradi *et al.* (2013, 3), "*thematic analysis is an independent and reliable qualitative approach to analysis*". By using this flexible approach, it can contribute to finding complex and detailed data (Braun & Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is especially fitting when the research surrounds the concerns people have about an event (Vaismoradi *et al.* 2013) and as it describes the reality people experience (Robson 2011). It is thereby considered to be a suitable approach for processing data in this study as it fits the aim and research design.

In the analysis process the researcher follows several steps which are according to Robson (2011): 1. Data familiarization, 2. Generating initial codes, 3. Theme identifications, 4. Thematic networks construction, 5. Interpretation and integration. Though is not a linear process as the researcher might need to jump back and forth, which can lead to reviewing earlier steps (*ibid.*). This method was applied to organize and make use of the collected data from the

focus groups, interview, and documents to identify themes. Further it was made possible to draw conclusions from the findings.

Even though the thematic content analysis is deemed suitable for this study, there are some potential pitfalls. During the analysis it is important to keep the purpose of the analysis in mind (Robson 2011). As the materials used for the study are most likely produced for other purposes and for another audience than researchers, there is a risk of if being interpreted in an unintended manner. Organizing an interview with an organization representative was one way to move past this obstacle. Information was gained on the purpose of the written communication from the representative to reduce the risk of the material being interpreted in an undesired way. Moreover, the study aim was kept in mind while conducting the analysis to avoid making wrong assumptions. The themes were selected with care to make sure they connect to the research questions.

2.5   Quality assurance

It is important in research to ensure reliability and validity. To address this in the study, techniques by Riege (2003), who has collected extensive literature on how to ensure reliability and validity in case studies, were used (Table 2).

Table 2 - Techniques for establishing validity and reliability in case study design, modified by the author (Riege 2003 p. 78.79)

Case study design tests	Examples of relevant case study tactics	Applied in this project
Construct validity	Use multiple evidence sources for collecting data Establish evidence chain Review of evidence by key informant	Triangulation: interviews and secondary data sources Transcripts of interviews and secondary data is documented During interviews, oral validations and interview transcripts sent after for validation
Internal validity	Explanations are assisted with diagrams and illustrations Ensure that theories and concepts are systematically connected	When analyzing the different data sources, the same themes and theories are used Illustrations and models from the theoretical framework are used in the analysis
External validity	The research boundaries in the study are defined Evidence is in the analysis compared with existing literature	Accounted for in method chapter Analysis built on conceptual framework, abductive approach
Reliability	Ideas and theories are accounted for The research design and research issues align Actions and observations are recorded concretely Case study protocol used Concrete data recording Case study database is created Assuring meaningful linkage of findings across multiple data sources Application of Peer review/examination	Presented in the research design and theoretical framework Done throughout the method chapter Focus groups are recorded and observations noted Done in appendix 1 Appropriate recording equipment is used for recording The gathered data is organized The same framework is used for all interviews and documents Proposal, supervisor seminars, oppositions and peers performed

In case studies, construct validity is fundamental. In this study it is assured by utilizing multiple sources of evidence, focus group interviews, email-interview, and corporate documentation. The interview with the corporate representative was transcribed and sent for validation in a follow-up email. Internal validation was ensured by analyzing the secondary data and interviews through the same conceptual framework and graphic models. The boundaries of the research design are defined to reach external validation and the literature, from the conducted literature review, was constantly matched with the collected data. Lastly, several techniques were used to ensure reliability: case study database and protocol (Appendix 1). Thus, interviews

were recorded, using peer-review and by assuring coherence between the research design and the study problem. Through resorting to the technique presented by Riege (2003), a case study can reach good scientific quality.

2.6 Ethical considerations

In this study, ethical dimension has been considered in collecting the data to minimize potential negative consequences for the participants. It is an existing risk of stress, anxiety and harm for the people participating in research projects (Robson 2011). Therefore, it is important with consent, information, and confidentiality and when carrying out the research (*ibid.*). Before the interviews information on how their personal information would be processed, a General Data Protection Regulation form was sent out for their approval. In time for the interviews, they all started with an explanation of the study purpose and again how the collected data would be utilized. By informing the participants of the study's purpose, how the material was going to be used and gaining their consent of recording, thus showing full transparency and ethical dimensions were appropriately considered for this specific study design.

3 Theoretical framework

The third chapter presents theories that will outline the theoretical framework for the study. First CSR is introduced and the interrelatedness to corporate reputation and crisis. Further, CSR communication is introduced, followed by the situational crisis communication theory and all the factors influencing reputational outcomes during a crisis. The chapter is concluded with the conceptual framework.

3.1 Corporate social responsibility

Numerous of theories and definitions have been developed over the years in the field of CSR, such as "*stakeholder management*", "*corporate sustainability*", "*issue management*", "*corporate citizenship*", "*stakeholder accountability*", and they are all representing the CSR concept (Garriga & Melé 2004). The European Commission (2010, 3) has defined CSR as:

"*a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis*".

Vanhemme and Grobben (2009, 273) chose to explain CSR as:

"*the extent to which organizations meet the legal, economic, ethical, and discretionary responsibilities places on them by various stakeholders*".

Thus, describing a way of conducting business in a manner whereas other objectives than only profit, and shareholders are considered. It is also something voluntary and about meeting stakeholder expectancies.

Organizations all over the globe invest extraordinary efforts into CSR initiatives with the goal to create shared value for the environment, society and for themselves (Janssen *et al*. 2015). The most positive aspect of CSR for corporations is a boosted reputation (Kim 2019) and consequently, organizations believe that the CSR activities can act as a storage of goodwill and thereby shielding them from impacts from unexpected situation (Janssen *et al*. 2015). However, CSR might also increase the negative effects from those and lead to negative reactions from corporate's stakeholders (*ibid.*).

Motivation behind why corporation choses to engage in CSR are classified into two categories, intrinsic or extrinsic (Janssen *et al.* 2015). If the motive is intrinsic the corporation is performing out of real concern for the issue at hand. Extrinsic is the opposite whereas the corporation is performing out of the own interest to increase revenues (*ibid.*). When consumers perceive motives to be intrinsic, the assessment will be more positive and the opposite for extrinsic motives (Kim & Choi 2018). This can be displayed in purchasing behaviors and attitudes (*ibid.*). However, acceptance towards extrinsic motives is expanding when consumers learn more on CSR. Thereby understanding that CSR could provide benefits for corporations financially and for society (Du *et al.* 2010). To increase the trustworthiness of CSR efforts and to avoid the skepticism surrounding CSR motives corporations should recognize both these motives in its CSR communication (*ibid.*).

3.2 Reputation

Reputation, refers to how an organization is viewed by the public and is a valued organizational asset (Coombs 2007; Coombs & Holladay 2006). It is argued to be the most important intangible corporate asset of all (Kim, 2017) and it has the capability to create value (Dutta & Imeri 2016). It is the stakeholder-corporation relationship that creates the reputation, by their communication and interactions (Coombs & Holladay 2006). A good reputation can serve as an aid in damage repair and as a shield from possible harm created by the crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2001, 2006). However, a good reputation is not always helpful. Sohn and Lariscy (2015) suggests that a good reputation hold the risk to backfire and can injure the corporation even more. This is called the "boomerang effect". A good reputation is burdened of suffering more severely when faced with a crisis than those with poorer reputation, due to the heightened expectation held by the public (*ibid.*).

Scholars have established the link between corporate reputation and CSR (see Kim & Kim 2017; Maden *et al.* 2012; Dutta & Imeri 2016; Arikan & Kantur 2012). CSR can be powerful when maximizing earning potential from reputation, as it can influence stakeholder's favorable perceptions (Unerman 2008). Ajayi & Mmutle (2020) argues that CSR is a considerable driver of reputation that can give an organization an edge over competitors which are also viewed as "reputable". However, when facing a crisis, the corporate reputation is at most risk due to how management respond can affect the public perception for a long time (Sisco 2012). If a corporation fail to respond appropriately to a crisis, profits can be affected due to the damaged reputation (Vanhemme & Grobbe 2009). Therefore, how the corporation chooses to communicate after a crisis can restrict the potential damage on the reputation and holds the potential to repair it (Coombs 2007).

3.3 Brand crisis

A crisis is an unpredictable event in which stakeholder expectations are let down and affects corporate business negatively (Wang *et al.* 2021). Sohn and Lariscy (2014, 24) define it 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 attributions*".

In light of negative news, corporations are expected by the consumers, to provide explanations or take action and failing to do so may be perceived as lack of concern (Kapoor & Banerjee 2020). Stakeholder will recognize corporations to be in a crisis when the corporations have disregarded crucial expectancies held by its stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay 2015). Consequences of irresponsible corporate action can bring customer complaints, negative word of mouth, legal action and boycott, to name a few examples (Grappi *et al*. 2013). For corporations to grasp the severity of a possible crisis situation it needs to understand the impacts on the customers. By closely monitoring the attitude and reaction the marketers can shape a post-controversy brand relationship with the consumers (Banerjee 2018). If an organization during a brand crisis fails to address consumer concerns, it face's the risk of consumer changing their attitude regarding the brand (Kapoor & Banerjee 2020). Moreover, it is of great importance that the top management respond quickly to the crisis, with authority and genuineness (Banerjee 2018). Hence, the timing of the communication is utterly important (Kim & Choi 2018). Also, Stephens (2005) stresses the need to respond swiftly to access the organizations stakeholders in time so that an organization can find out if its key stakeholders are abandoning the organization when crisis hits.

Dutta and Pullig (2011) classifies brand crisis into two categories: performance-related and value-related. Performance related crisis concerns defective or even dangerous products (Dawar & Pillutla 2000). The value related crisis involves ethical and social concerns enveloping the values advocated by the brand, and thereby does not directly relate to the product (Dutta & Pullig 2011). In line with this, Kübler *et al.* (2020, 777) describe that "*value-related crisis involves a violation of norms or unethical behavior*". A performance-based crisis relates to the perceived benefits related to brand functionality while psychological and symbolic benefits are impacted in a value-based crisis (Dutta & Pullig 2011). Value-based crisis often generate strong emotional reactions (Kübler *et al.* 2020) and can therefore have critical consequences. Sohn and Lariscy (2014), chose to classify crisis into corporate ability (CA) crisis and CSR crisis. Their research suggests that a CRS crisis is more serious and will create more damage that CA crisis, as the former is affecting trust and attitudes more severely thus the outcomes are more severe (*ibid.*). Ham and Kim (2019) choses to define crisis as deliberate or accidental, and this classification will affect customers perceptions in a crisis, whereas deliberate is connected to more negative outcomes (Ham & Kim 2019).

The consumer response to value-related crisis may differ depending on which company made the transgression, even though it is the same category of unethical behavior. Hence, some companies will suffer more than others from an incident (Zhang *et al.* 2019). Consumers will use previous experience and brand information to draw conclusions on unknowns such as if the incident will happen again and if it was accidental or deliberate, as a result of the information asymmetry during a crisis (*ibid.*). Earlier research has shown that consumers emotional attachment to a brand (Schmalz & Orth 2012; Banjeree 2018), commitment (Ahluwalia *et al.* 2000), information on product attributes (Folkes & Kamins 1999) and brand age (Zhang et al. 2019) might protect brands when ethical sidesteps befall.

3.4   Corporate response in a crisis

The way in which corporations chooses to answer in a crisis, the crisis response, is a symbolic resource that can be used to influence future stakeholder interaction with the corporation and to help protect reputation (Coombs & Holladay 2001). If not properly handled, the asset that reputation represent can be damaged as well as corporate finances. Therefore, what the corporations say in a crisis is of great importance, both for sustainable development and for corporate image and finances (Feng et al. 2020). The public will make attributions about the cause of a crisis. Two factors have been identified to substantially affect consumers perception: prior corporate reputation and crisis responses (Coombs 2007: Coombs & Holladay 2001, 2006: Sohn and Lariscy, 2015). These two factors have been the center of studies when researchers have been examining the value of engaging in CSR in shielding intangible and tangible corporate assets during crisis (Kim & Woo 2019). Moreover, favorable attitudes are shown towards corporations that has learnt from a crisis. Communicating on how future crisis will be prevented, and the lessons learnt from the previous one (Zhang *et al*. 2020). Nowadays living in an information society, information has never been so accessible and the space to share opinions is extremely available thus, making crisis communication especially critical (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith 2008). The public expect corporations to be transparent, credible and reply quickly, and those failing to those so are in trouble (*ibid.*).

3.5 Corporate social responsibility communication

CSR is increasing in importance on the corporate agenda and with-it CSR communication, as stakeholders can only be made aware of corporate activities through communication (Ajayi & Mmutle 2020; Coombs 2012). According to Coombs (2012, 45) does "*communication play a critical role in change acceptance*" and is critical for identification, which is a form of change support. Thus, CSR can be important when unexpected events emerge. The benefits of effective CSR communication are spreading a positive message related to the corporation's CSR involvement (Ajayi & Mmutle 2020). Further benefits involve corporate identification (the extent that people identify with an organization), as stakeholders are made aware of the shared social concerns between the corporation and stakeholder, identification with the corporation is facilitated (Coombs & Holladay 2015). For CSR to generate desired output, fitting communication strategies and channels must be used, regardless of what CSR area that an organization chooses to focus on (*ibid.*). Corporate managers must understand vital elements related to communicating CSR and must create stakeholder awareness and manage stakeholder attributions towards CSR activities (Du *et al.* 2010).

The effectiveness of CSR is impacted by questions on where to communicate, what and how to communicate and to understand stakeholder- and corporate-specific factors (Du *et al.* 2010). Effective communication is required in crisis situations to reestablish and protect corporate reputation (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009). Using CSR claims as a tool to counteract the damaging effects of a crisis can be effective (*ibid.*). The stakeholder support for CSR suggests that communication on CSR related issues can help a corporation to build a reputation that can restore and shield corporate image when faced with a crisis (*ibid.*). Thus, CSR can work as a pre-crisis shield as it mitigates the risks prior a crisis (Tao & Song 2020). However, when trying to defend company legitimacy, corporations using CSR communication in a crisis might risk objecting too much and thereby creating the opposite desired effect, consumers suspicion (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009; Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990). Also, CSR increases expectations and thereby risk heightening the attention of the crisis, as it affects how stakeholders attribute the blame (Janssen et al 2015). Activist groups are increasingly challenging corporations if they perceive the corporations act irresponsible (Tao & Song 2020). There is a risk of these challenges to intensify and turn into a crisis with both consequences to finances and reputation (Coombs & Holladay 2015).

3.6 Situational crisis communication theory

The corporate objective for engaging in crisis communication is to enhance stakeholders' evaluations and to recapture stakeholder trust (Zhang & Borden 2017). Constructing on this background, two separate conceptual perspectives approach the field of crisis communication: a rhetorical and a strategic tradition. The rhetorical tradition focuses on textual interpretations and one theory here is image restoration strategy. When confronted with a crisis, what can a corporation say in response to the threat, thus the message is of importance (Benoit 1997: Zhang & Broden 2017). The strategic tradition focuses on "*contextual factors and outcomes of crisis communication strategies*" (Zhang & Broden 2017, 210). Here the SCCT is a primary theory and has an audience-centered focus (*ibid.*). The theory is based on image repair discourse and attribution theory and can be categorized as reactive response strategies in the post-crisis stage (*ibid.*).

SCCT express the factors, relationships and assumptions that should be taken into consideration when choosing a crisis response strategy to shield corporate reputation (Coombs 2007). The SCCT is built on eight elements: the crisis situation (the crisis), crisis responsibility, severity,

performance history (reputation- and crisis history), crisis response and organizational reputation (*ibid.*). These elements are visualized below in figure 2. The theory emerged after realizing the need for a crisis theory that consider situational aspects. Hence, selecting a crisis response strategy with a situational approach (*ibid.*). For a corporation to best protect its reputation a crisis response strategy must choose that best fits the crisis situation (*ibid.*). A crisis response strategy being what a corporation does and says after the crisis to protect corporate reputation. Corporate reputation is assumed in SCCT to be a valued asset which is threatened in a crisis. Therefore, the theory objective is how to handle corporate reputation in the wake of a crisis.
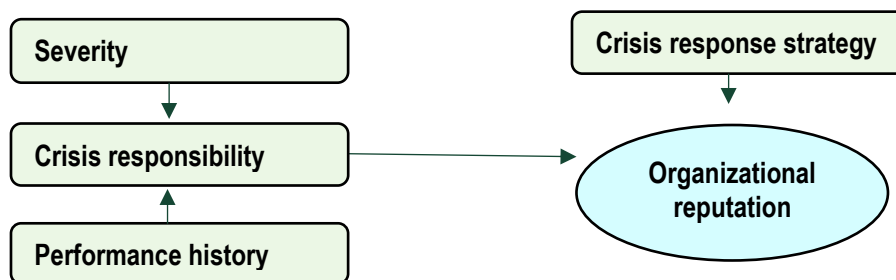

Figure 2 - Variables and Relationships in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs 2007, 168).

The process of choosing the most fitting crisis response strategy begins by pinpointing the crisis type, conceptualized as the framework in which stakeholders try to understand the incident (Coombs 2007). How much the corporation is to blame for the crisis is connected to the level of personal control and crisis responsibility and how much control the corporation had over the incident (*ibid.*). The crisis responsibility is important in assessing how great the damage is because of the crisis. The level of crisis responsibility that will be attributed to the corporation starts with identifying the crisis type. Thirteen types of crises are defined by Coombs (2007) and are formed into three clusters: the preventable cluster, the accidental cluster, and the victim cluster. The preventable cluster surrounds purposefully expose stakeholders to a risk or not putting enough effort into prevention of deficient product from getting out on the market or prevent an accident (*ibid.*). The accidental cluster surrounds unintended corporate actions and low blame is put on the organization (Claeys *et al.* 2010). The last one, the victim cluster is crisis where both the organization and its stakeholders are victims of the crisis therefore, a low level of responsibility is applied on the corporation (Coombs 2007).

When the crisis type is identified, as a part of the crisis responsibility adjustment process, historical performance and severity are considered. These are viewed as intensifying factors for a crisis. The historical performance refers to previous crisis and how stakeholders been treated before the crisis (Coombs 2007). Coombs (2007) suggests that even the occurrence of crisis history will ascribe a higher crisis responsibility and thereby hurt the reputation. Severity refers to the level of environmental, human, and financial damage that is caused by the crisis (*ibid.*). These two factors have shown to be intensifying perception of the crisis responsibility in some types of crises (Coombs & Holladay 1996). Subsequently, a higher crisis responsibility will be attributed by the public when historical performance is poorer and the severity greater (Coombs 2007).

When crisis responsibility is estimated the level affects the choice of crisis response strategy (Coombs 2007). Coombs (2007) have articulated eight possible crisis response strategies presented in *Table 3 - Crisis response strategies adapted from Coombs (2014, 145) and Coombs (2007)*. These are then be categorized into four clusters: denial, diminishment, bolstering and

rebuilding (Coombs 2014). With a denial strategy the corporation tries to deny the crisis exists. Diminishment strategies aims to lower the sense of control the corporation has over the crisis. With bolstering strategies, the intent is to create a positive relation between the stakeholders and the corporation. Lastly, the rebuilding strategies aims to by apologizing or compensating rebuild the corporate reputation.

Table 3 - Crisis response strategies adapted from Coombs (2014, 145) and Coombs (2007)

Crisis strategy cluster	Crisis response strategy	Description of crisis response
Denial	Attacking the accuser Denial	The person or group which called out the crisis are confronted The existence of a crisis is denied
Diminishment	Excusing Justification	Whereas corporate responsibility for a crisis is minimized by crisis managers Attempts are made to minimize the perceived damage that the crisis has wreaked
Bolstering	Victimization Ingratiation	Stakeholders are promoted that the organization is also a crisis victim Stakeholders are reminded of corporate's past good deeds and stakeholders are also praised by the crisis managers
Rebuilding	Apology Corrective action	Stakeholders are reminded of corporate's past good deeds and stakeholders are also praised by the crisis managers The crisis managers try to repair the damage or/and prevent it from repeating

The eight strategies can be arranged on a continuum, illustrated in Figure 3, from defensive to accommodating (Coombs 2007). The crisis managers can then use the continuum to match the crisis response with the level of crisis responsibility (*ibid.*).
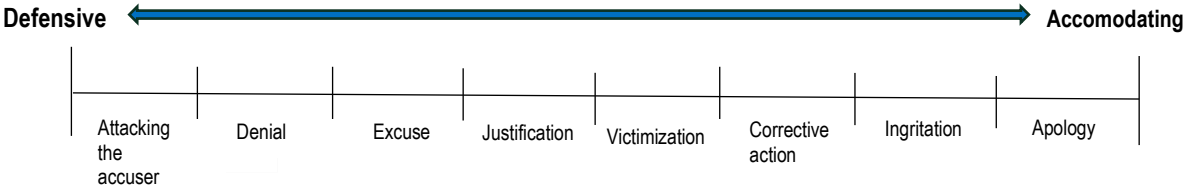
Figure 3 - The defensive – accommodating continuum based on Coombs (2007) response strategies, authors own interpretation.

The chosen response strategy must be more accommodating when the corporation carries a greater crisis responsibility and by acting according to this principle, corporations should be able to protect its reputation (Coombs 2007). Furthermore, the crisis managers need to choose a strategy according to how much damage the crisis might cause. Higher potential damage should be followed by a strategy that accommodate the victims (*ibid.*). However, there are risks associated with recognizing responsibility, and therefore corporations are often hesitant to take accountability until last minute when they are out of options (Xu & Li 2013).

3.6.1 Literature on response strategies effectiveness

In the literature there are various studies suggesting where certain responses are more fitting than others. Accommodating strategies are those in which the corporation care for the victims or/and apologizes (Janssen *et al*. 2015). These are according to Ott and Theunissen (2015) more fruitful compared to diminishing and denial strategies. Combining accommodating strategies with actions showing that the corporation is considering consumer complaints is found most efficient (*ibid.*). Kerhof *et al.* (2011), similarly suggest that an apology is more efficient in creating more positive assessments and credibility. However, the level of crisis responsibility prescribed to the corporation will be higher and if accusations are found to be true, the corporation should act in concession (Bradford and Garrett 1995). Moreover, apology strategies can be costly in terms of costs and lawsuits as it can be used as evidence against the corporation in court (Coombs & Holladay 2008).

When a corporation had no control over the situation and can provide evidence supporting the claim, an excuse strategy is suggested by Coombs & Holladay (2008). In crises caused by accidents, for example a technical misdeed, strategies that lower the corporate responsibility for the crisis are most suitable, such as the excuse strategy (Ham & Kim 2017). In the case of incorrect standards when evaluating the of the unethical action, is where the justification strategy is more applicable (Coombs & Holladay 2008).

Those crises that are preventable, most fitting with confession strategy (Coombs & Holladay 2008). A denial strategy is argued by Bradford and Garrett (1995), to be appropriate when corporations can present proof that the unethical act was not caused by them. However, denial strategies are found to rarely be efficient, and this is epically the case for CSR corporations (Janssen et al. 2015). Janssen et al. (2015) suggest that CSR companies always must display care and acknowledge the situation sincerely. This is supported by Feng *et al.* 2020, a responsive strategy does most efficiently protect corporate reputation. Rebuilding strategies are argued to be more effective on social media compared to diminishing and denial strategies to mitigate risks to corporate reputation. This found by Ott and Theunissen (2015) and Roshan *et al.* (2016) in their respective studies using a case study approach. Especially, as negative feelings tend to spread rapidly on social media (Ott & Theunissen 2015). Corrective actions has been found to be an appealing strategy for the stakeholder as these generate more positive reviews, shares, and likes (Trantafillidou & Yannas 2020). Therefore, rebuilding strategies whereas corporation compensate or apologize, in a preventable crisis could be more suitable (*ibid.*).

3.7 Crisis communication channels

During a crisis, corporations must decide on which channels to communicate in order to protect or repair corporate reputation. These include for example press releases, information on webpages, public presentations, and social media. For crisis communication today, the new media plays an increasingly important role (Schultz *et al*. 2011; Roshan *et al.* 2016). Advancements in the field of technology is changing how researchers and crisis managers handle and disperse information to concerned parties in a crisis (Veil *et al.* 2011). Social media enables corporations to better understand consumers needs during a crisis and thereby holds the possibility to excel or protect reputational outcomes (Roshan *et al.* 2016). This new media is often viewed by corporations as effective in rebuilding reputation when faced with a crisis (Schultz *et al*. 2011). Further, findings suggest that the medium in which the communication goes through is more important than the message (*ibid.*) thus, selecting a fitting medium is valuable. Triantafillidou and Yannas (2020), suggest that Twitter is more efficient in rebuilding

reputation in an ethical-charged crisis than Instagram and Facebook. Therefore, some channels might be more fitting and effective than others depending on the crisis context.

Social media platforms are today an important communication tool for corporation as they most certainly can affect sales and reputation, and even corporate continuity (Kietzmann *et al*. 2011). During a crisis, these facilitate a space for discussion (Otto & Theunissen (2015) and in a crisis response, social media can possibly inspire awareness, engagement and prepare the public as the topics are made interactive and visual (Veil *et al*. 2011). Also, they have created a more democratic communication climate between the corporation and its stakeholders with power structures divided by the social media communities with communication happening with or without the corporation's interference (Kietzmann *et al*. 2011). Thereby, also making social media intimidating for some corporations (Veil *et al*. 2011). Consequently, the use of social media and how it is used can in a crisis increase outcomes from communication efforts, if used sensibly (*ibid.*). However, corporations are required to use a combination of both traditional media and new media, as these are complimentary (*ibid*.).

Nevertheless, communicating on social media during a crisis can put corporations in danger as negative comments tend to escalate (Zheng *et al.* 2018) and it speed up the disperse of the crisis (Roshan *et al.* 2016). People tend to post in social media when they recognize that their opinions will gain more support. Even though the sender perceives it to be a single incident and could possibly forgive the corporation, this opinion will not be expressed as it will gain as much support (Zheng *et al.* 2018). Therefore, it is argued that the social media platforms do not advocate for a diversity of opinions. Also, as social media facilitates a situation whereas the corporation has almost no control over, the susceptibility in crisis is increased as well as the severity and recurrence of crisis events (Kietzmann *et al.* 2011). According to Ott and Theunissen (2015, 101) the "*reputational risk is further increase because of programming algorithms favor posts with a high activity regardless whether such activity is positive or negative*", thus facilitating for negative feelings to spread quickly on these platforms and corporations turn into a magnet for these users. Subsequently, it is important that corporations have internal guidelines for how to communicate via social media before a crisis appears.

3.8 Conceptual framework

The theories presented in this chapter makes up the study's conceptual framework. In Figure 4, a summary of the components of SCCT are visualized and two additional elements that will aid in explaining the study phenomenon.
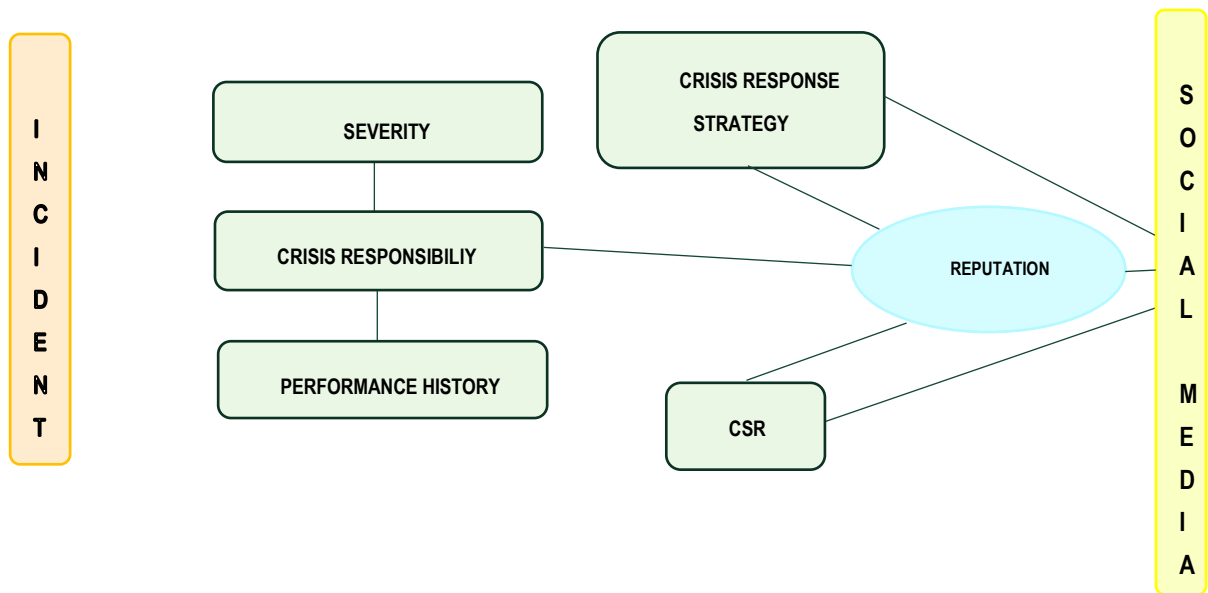
Figure 4 – A visual description of the conceptual framework.

Throughout the literature review it has become evident that in the field of crisis communication the SCCT is widely used and applicable to varying crisis situations. However, in the context of social media and CSR research was scarce. The SCCT does not take the influence of social media into consideration, for the reason that communication channels are not incorporated into the model (Roshan *et al.* 2016). As social has great influence today its role in the crisis response it is important to study. A value-related crisis in the food sector introduces new context to the SCCT, as this sector is receiving more pressure to act sustainably (Kim 2017). Thus, a framework is developed that account for CSR and social media within the SCCT. The model shows eight factors that can have an explanatory value for the study phenomenon, and that fits the purpose of the study.

4 Empirical data

The following chapter starts with a description of the corporation in focus for the study and the investor Blackstone. After, the information gathered from the Oatly interview together with information with secondary data are presented, followed by a review of the communication on the Blackstone investment and the corporate' perspective. Finally, the last part contains the consumer perception collected from three focus group interviews on Oatly's CSR engagement and the crisis event.

4.1   Empirical results

4.1.1   The story of Oatly

In 1963, Arne Dahlqvist at Lund's University discovered lactose intolerance (Rosen 2015) and at this time there were no milk alternatives for lactose intolerant consumers. Later, in the beginning of 1990, Rickard Öste with associates found out how to make oat milk from oats and this led to the founding of Oatly in 2001 (*ibid.*). In 2001 Carnegie entered as an investor. Industrifonden invested in in 2002 and in 2006 Östersjöfonden, which enabled for the first fabric to be built (Cision n.d.). Oatly was in the beginning recognized as a brand for people with allergies, and it was not until in 2012 when Toni Petersson became CEO and John Schoolcraft created a path that changed Oatly completely (Frick 2016). It became a challenger brand to the milk industry. Through a 50-50 joint venture in 2016, Verlinvest invested more capital in Oatly (Kwok 2021), followed by China Resources investing in 2019 (Hallman 2019). The 25th of May 2021, the corporation was listed on Nasdaq and thereby raised an additional 1.4 billion dollars (Ziady 2021).

The idea of Oatly is to develop products that can be consumed regardless of ethical standpoints, allergies, and health status (Oatly 2017). The following is stated on the webpage: "*our sole purpose as a company is to make it easy for people to turn what they eat and drink into personal moments of healthy joy without recklessly taxing the planet's resources in the process*" (Oatly 2021, a). Hence, sustainability is according to the employee about everything they do (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). Further, it is described that the company is taking a step further by providing a sustainability solution through the products and at the full impact, instead of focusing on only reducing impact, which is the usual approach to sustainability (*ibid*.). The corporation appears to have to some extent succeeded on its sustainability mission as it in 2019 was ranked as one of the top 10 most sustainable brand in Sweden for food and beverage (Sustainable Brand Index, 2019). Moreover, the demand has at one point exceeded what Oatly could produce, hence leading to an oat milk shortage in the US (Deitz, 2019).

As of today, Oatly has a global reach to markets in 25 countries all over Europe, Asia, and North America (Oatly 2019). The corporation currently distribute to 32 000 coffee shops and 60 000 retailers (Ziady 2021). The main markets are in Sweden (24%), United Kingdom (23%), North America (19%) and Finland (10%) (Oatly 2019), with a product range of over 40 products (Oatly 2017). Oatly's main office is in Malmö and their production and development center is in Landskrona (Oatly 2021a). The company is currently in a quick expansion phase whereas the sales grew with 88% in 2019 and a revenue of 1949 million SEK (Oatly 2019). This has led to an expansion of the number of employees and in 2019 the number rose with 74% (Oatly 2019). In 2017 the number of employees counted to 171 (Oatly 2017) and in 2019 they counted 506 (Oatly 2019). To meet rising demand, the corporation expressed the need for

more capital and successfully gained the attention of one of the largest capital investors in the world: Blackstone Growth (Oatly 2021b).

4.1.2 Blackstone Growth investment

In the summer of 2020, a leading global investor Blackstone invested 200 million dollars in the Oatly (Oatly 2021b: Piauger 2020) and thereby owning a 7% stake. Blackstone is one of the largest capital investors in the world and has assets in sectors such as real estate, infrastructure, and insurances (Blackstone 2021a). The company was founded by Peter Peterson and Stephen Schwarzman in 1985 (Forbes 2021), and Schwarzman is currently both chairman & CEO (Blackstone 2021b). The corporate aim is to" create *long-term value for our investors through the careful stewardship of their capital*" (Blackstone n.d., n.p.). Stephen Schwarzman is also one of the largest donors for the former US president Donald Trump and donated 4.8 million dollars to his 2020 campaign (Nasiripour & Parman 2020). The former president administered cuts in environmental protection, denied climate change and pulled the US out of the Paris Climate Agreement (Friedman, 2019).

Blackstone Group is a partial owner of the corporation Hidrovias do Brazil, which is accused of converting Amazon Forest to farmland (Grim 2019). The company runs the Amazon Terminal, which aid farmers in transporting soybeans from Miritituba, located deep in the forest (*ibid.*). Blackstone states that the highway BR-163, the road from Miritituba, has been operated since 1976 by the Brazilian government and the organization is not transporting products from the sensitive Amazon ecosystem, instead they reduce greenhouse gases by changing transportation from trucks to barges (O'Donnell 2019). Also, Blackstone owns stakes in Patria Investimentos that owns more than 50% of Hidrovias do Brazil (The intercept 2019). Blackstone states that it is "*falsely accused of being responsible for deforestation of the Amazon through the development of an industrial road. The erroneous claims and mischaracterizations were blatantly wrong and irresponsible*" (Blackstone n.p., n.d.). Further, it is communicated that shipping are for traders that follows the Amazon Soy Moratorium, which implies that soybeans are not allowed to be cultured on lands that been illegally deforested (*ibid.*). However, according to O'Donnell (2019), the American Democrats admitted to the fact that Hidrovias has aided the Brazilian government to increase the shipments on Br-163, by creating funding mechanisms to keep the road in good shape and decrease congestions. The Brazilian government of Jair Bolsonaro has declared intentions on partnering with Hidrovias to develop and privatize long stretches of Br-163 (Grim 2019). Hence, the investment by Blackstone in Hidrovias is accused of providing opportunities for deforestation that will accelerate the conversion of rainforest to farmland and the climate crisis, by providing money to an organization that makes profit from deforestation (*ibid.*).

4.1.3 CSR and Oatly

Three set of values drive Oatly; nutritional health, sustainability, and transparency (The Challenger Project 2016: Oatly 2019). As Oatly's creative director John Schoolcraft puts it "*we want to sell products, but we do not really want to sell them, we want people to find their own way and we want these products to help them out*" and that by people consuming Oatly's products they do something good for both the planet and for themselves, and this is the bigger picture that the company is envisioning (The Challenger Project 2016). Consuming a plant-based diet is stressed to be the solution to today's challenges related to health and sustainability, and Oatly products are produced to make it easier for the consumers to switch diet (Oatly 2017). By also being transparent and having a constant dialogue with stakeholders, they see progress in building a food system that is more sustainable (*ibid*). To follow their values on health,

sustainability, and transparency the company has created four sustainability strategies that are presented in Oatly's sustainability reports and summarized in Table 4.

Table 4 - A summary of Oatly's sustainability strategies

Sustainability strategies	Aim	Activities
Upgraded society	Achieve change that is real and stretches outside the company borders	Participate in research projects, events such as music festivals, political discussions and challenge the food industry to show their carbon emissions on their packaging's
Resource efficiency	Use resources as efficiently as possible and use less of them as they grow	Reduce greenhouse emissions from cultivation, transport, packaging by higher resource efficiency and made from renewable sources, energy consumption from production facilities by switching to 100 % renewable energy, water savings by better planning
Super suppliers	Synchronicity between Oatly's goals and values with their suppliers and collaboration partners	Codes of conduct (67% of suppliers have signed in 2017), supplier evaluations (SEDEX)
Committed co-workers	The whole work force is committed to sustainability challenges and a culture whereas everyone feel they can contribute	Sport- and health activities such as gym memberships, running teams, mindfulness, yoga, monitor safety and balancing women men representation in the company

The four strategies were created for Oatly to reach its goals and vision. The first strategy concerns an upgrade of society, whereas Oatly aims for real change in the food system. One action from the company to achieve an "upgrade society" was to launch a campaign all over Europe; "Hey food industry", in which the food industry is challenged by Oatly's marketing to show its environmental footprint (Oatly 2019). By having a provocative message, the corporation hopes to facilitate and create discussions on climate change (Pers.com., May 28, 2021), which is also one strategy found in an upgraded society. Moreover, the corporation is currently cooperating with the Stockholm Resilience Center and Stockholm Environment Institute to discuss future visions for sustainability.

The second strategy is where the company strives to use resources more efficiently (Oatly 2019.). This is done by reducing emissions from cultivation, transport, packaging, energy consumption from production facilities and water consumption (*ibid.*). The goal is to reduce emission in all of the production chain, from production to consumption (Pers.com., May 28, 2021).

The third strategy is about super suppliers, whereas the company aims to share its values with its suppliers (*ibid.*). Also, making sure the suppliers follow the company's code of conduct is one action in this strategy. To engage them on sustainability, a questionnaire is regularly used to follow up on their sustainability efforts and how Oatly's requirements are met (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). Also, there is a relatively new tool, Ecovadis, whereas the suppliers are screened each year and get scores and opportunities for improvement (*ibid.*).

Lastly, committed co-workers is where the company strives to maintain a high level of encouraged co-workers that are greatly committed to sustainability (Oatly 2019). As

sustainability is at the core of Oatly the employees need to be committed to the cause. This is achieved by focusing on employee health, sustainability engagement and working conditions (*ibid.*). The activities related to health are both related to mental and physical wellbeing, with for example gym memberships and yoga sessions. To ensure the employees have access to the all the knowledge necessary, annual sustainability kick offs are arranged (Oatly 2017). Moreover, internal newsletters are regularly sent out to employees on various topics (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). An E-learning platform is being developed where the employees will get the opportunity to learn more on sustainability (*ibid.*).

4.1.4 Corporate communication message

In 2012, the course of Oatly changed. Toni Petersson started as CEO and a new company purpose was created: sustainability. To express the company purpose for existence and making it the center of everything which changed the direction of the company according to Schoolcraft (2016). When John Schoolcraft entered as the Creative Director and led a reorganization of the whole company, whereas the company structure was made flat and the marketing department removed (The challenger project 2016), it was possible for the company to focus its energy on creation and executing ideas in a quicker phase than before. Thereby they could react faster to market happenings (*ibid.*). Also, the packaging, which is their primary communication channel, was completely remade into something eye catching and interesting for the consumers (*ibid.*). These changes led the company into a path of being a challenger brand, which is not completely risk free as "*being a challenger brand means you are constantly threat of being sued, of the news ringing you, of threatening everybody else's jobs*" (The challenger project 2016). However, by being a challenger brand and standing up to big corporations Schoolcraft said that they can begin to change things, as the world is starting to think plant-based and is open to listen to Oatly's massage on sustainability and health (*ibid*). The former sustainability manager Carina Tollmar at Oatly explains that "*it has been of great importance for us to challenge current norms and break new ground in our communication*" (Oatly 2017, 63). Hence, communication is regarded at Oatly as a mean to build opportunities, engagement, and interest to change how and what is produced and what is eaten (*ibid.*). According to the corporate representative, with communication the goal is to be plain spoken, hence it is formulated in a way that is conversational and accessible to most so as many as possible can understand the message (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). This is especially important as much of what is communicated is complex, hence the message needs to be simple so the public will understand.

In the communication messages the company tries to be both bold and humble (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). The boldness relates to being fearless in making sustainability statements that will get conversations flowing about climate change and the impact the food and beverage has on these issues. The humble part is about being transparent about both success through also on challenges on meeting sustainability goals and admitting to the fact that the company does not have all the answers and taking people with them on the journey (*ibid.*). Hence, the corporation does not shy away from difficult and provocative messages. The aim is to get conversations started on climate change and for people to realize the impact food and drinks have on the planet (*ibid.*).

4.1.5 Corporate communication channels

Looking at the communication channels of Oatly there are four main ones: product packaging, webpage, sustainability report and social media. The product packaging is Oatly's most impactful communication channel (The challenger Project 2016; Pers.com., May 28, 2021). The product package contains information on ingredients and the nutritional values where the amount of the different nutrients and additives that the products contain is presented.

Certification is another part of the product packaging information, for example the organic products are certified with the Krav-certification scheme and the FSC certification for responsible sourced packaging materials (Oatly 2021a). Another important part on the packaging, and differs compared to other companies, is putting messages on sustainability and health in various versions across the product line on the product. These are getting people engaged whilst buying and consuming the products (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). Lastly, and this is one more recent information put on the packaging, is the product's climate footprint. All Oatly's product have the calculated climate impact on them, with the vision that the consumers can compare them to others in the future.

Social media is found to be the company's second main communication channel. The social media platforms used for communication are Instagram, Facebook and Twitter and these are all used actively by the corporation. On Instagram is where the corporation can bring fitting visual imagery to their messages (Pers.com., May 28, 2021).

On the webpage the stakeholders can find information on the organization, its history, aim and vision. It is also possible to find all the product specific information: how the products are produced, ingredients, nutritional status, and climate impact. Stakeholders can also look for commonly asked questions or ask questions directly to the company.

Lastly, sustainability reports provide information for the stakeholders how the company works with sustainability and health questions in more detail. In their sustainability report the company tries to showcase transparency by being honest about risks and where the company needs to improve. For example, the there is a discussion on how the company work with their "risk ingredients" (cacao, coffee, vanilla, palm oil and coconut), as there are concerns related to sustainability, both environmental and social, when it comes to these raw materials (Oatly 2019).

4.2 Communication on the Blackstone investment

Blackstone's investment in Oatly took place on the 16th of July 2020 and this is when the crisis was initiated. During the first period after the investment there were mainly news articles covering the event. The connections of Blackstone and deforestation of the Amazon rainforest is the main criticism from the investment event (Grim 2019; O'Donnell 2019; Helmore 2020; Piauger 2020) and alleged boycotts from Cafés in Europe are highlighted in one of the articles (Piauger 2020). From the start, the corporation responds to comments and reactions on the event received on its various social media posts, which were not relating to the incident per se. A few months after the investment is when the corporation for the first time explains its reason for choosing Blackstone and this is published on the webpage on the 3rd of September. On the same day, Oatly posted on both Facebook and Instagram the reason behind choosing Blackstone as an investor and refers its consumers to get more information from the webpage.

Table 5 - Posts from Facebook and Instagram on the investment event

Post 1 – Instagram (3/9-20)	Post 2 – Facebook (3/9-20) *
Have you heard the news? Of course, you have. In fact, you may even have taken the time this week to voice your opinion on a social feed or two in order to relieve some of the disappointment (or excitement?) you felt when learning about one of our new investors, Blackstone. We totally understand. And we think it's time that you get some answers about how your favorite plan-based company in the whole world could let you down so massively. It's just that we don't feel we've let you down. In fact, we are convinced that Blackstone's investment in Oatly will strengthen the global sustainability movement substantially and help us gain ground in dealing with the long-term irreversible effects of climate change. We have never been more determined and dedicated to succeeding in our mission of creating long-term societal change for the benefit of the planet that we are right now, which is why you might want to click on the link in our bio for an honest, uncensored account of where things are really at.	By now you have probably seen this picture on your journeys on the internet. Maybe you have even posted it and written a few well-chosen words of what you think of Oatly and the fact that we let the American capital investor Blackstone buy it way into Oatly for approximately 2 billion SEK. We fully understand. And of course, you deserve a good answer on why your previously loved (?) oat drink company disappointed you so badly. The thing is though, we have not let you down. We have never been as dedicated and convinced that we can create real change, and we see this as a great success for the global sustainability movement. But wait. How did you think now? Maybe you wonder. Our answer is, thank you for asking and we ask you in return to go to oatly.com/hurtänkteninu were we have written a whole lot on how we think. Not for you to love us again (if you even have or stopped), but for you to dislike us on better ground instead of on highly simplified picture of reality. *author's translation from Swedish to English

In Table 5, the statements on Oatly Instagram and Facebook account are presented. In these two posts Oatly argues for their choice of investor and their continued commitment to sustainability. On Twitter, where the corporation is also active, there was no post to be found relating to the investment. Although, the corporation still answers on comments connected to the investment event.

After the investment there seemed to have been an awareness of the necessity to communicate to the stakeholders. Oatly communicated though a variety of channels such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, the webpage, on TV-media interviews (mainly financial news in the US) and in interviews for newspapers. Studying the different statements, the message is consistent throughout the communication relating to the sustainability benefits of the investment.

On the webpage is the only place where stakeholders can find the full explanation from Oatly on the choice to take funds from Blackstone. The goal motivating Oatly is the same as it was before the investment: drive change and transparency into the food system (Oatly 2021b). As demand for their products are rapidly growing, they explain the need for funding to be able to grow fast and sustainably. Moreover, Oatly proclaim that the discussions and headlines surrounding the investment are critically lacking nuance. The Blackstone decision is a result of an excessive thought period that was in line with the previous line of thought, on change and it is claimed to have been nuanced (*ibid.*). By proving to one of the largest global capital investors in the world that sustainable investments are profitable, others would follow.

"Our bet is that when Blackstone's investment in our oat-based sustainability movement brings them larger returns than they would have been able to get elsewhere (like, say, from the meat and dairy industry which are one of the major causes of the deforestation in the Amazon today) a powerful message will be sent to the global private equity markets, one written in the only language our critics claim they will listen to: profit" (Oatly 2021b n.p.).

These types of investments are claimed to be only a portion of the investments made today. Thus, to reduce GHG by 50 percent by 2030, the capital flow needs to be directed from oil, gas, soybean production in the Amazon, into sustainable ventures (Oatly 2021b). Moreover, by investing in Oatly capital that otherwise would have ended in unsustainable corporations now is directed to Oatly. It is claimed that Blackstone investment will aid the sustainability movement greatly as it will create immense change and the corporation conclude the webpage post by saying:

"*We realize that all of you may not share this view and disagree on the right path forward to create a more sustainable world. That's okay. Hopefully we'll continue to share the same end goal of a better, more sustainable world, and that we are able to work towards that goal together in whatever way we can*" (Oatly 2021b n.p.).

Hereby showing that the corporation understand that the choice is not appreciated by all however, hoping the shared vision is intact of a more sustainable planet.

4.2.1 Corporate perspective

According to the corporate representative (Pers.com., May 28, 2021), the Blackstone investment has generated different reactions in different countries. For example, in the US the reactions to the event were perceived to be milder, as the public is more familiar with large capital investors such as Blackstone as these types of investments are more common (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). Although negative reactions also occurred there, the corporation perceived that the positive outnumbered the negative ones. In Sweden, it was noticed that the reactions were more negative with people raising larger questions on the implication of global investors funding small private companies, what changes this implicates (*ibid.*).

From a corporate perspective, Oatly communicated openly about the investment, engaging in interviews, mostly in financial news, communicating on social media, and detailed information was provided on the webpage (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). Thus, the corporation engaged in a broad communicational campaign during the period after the investment pronouncement.

It is perceived that there is an outsized focus on the connections of Blackstone (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). The multinational investor has numerous of investments in its portfolio as they invest broadly and some of them are going to be unconventional (*ibid.*). Moreover, finding an investor that does not invest in something unsustainable is going to be nearly impossible according to the corporate representative. What is important though is:

"*a company like Oatly partnering with a company like Blackstone is to try to show that these big investors should start moving their investment toward companies that work on sustainable solutions and that there is value in that, not just for emotional reasons but economic as well*" (Pers.com., May 28, 2021).

Thus, there is a need to move all investment to more sustainable ones. If the focus only is on niches such as green investments and green bonds then a great number of investments are missed out on and there will not be a change for the better (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). By showing that profits and sustainability are not tradeoffs these investments can be made mainstream (*ibid.*).

The greatest challenge related to the communication of the Blackstone investment has been for the local level community managers (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). In places where the reactions were more negative, it was perceived to be greater challenges for the people on the ground to manage the conversations. To bring people out of emotional reactions to think of the bigger picture (*ibid.*). Despite this, the investment went as well as Oatly hoped for. Capital was received so more oat milk can be produced, which was the whole aim. There were no financial consequences following the event, the corporation continues to grow. Moreover, the conversations generated after the investment was a positive thing according to the corporate representative. It got the public talking on green investments, how these should look and how to drive investments toward more sustainable venture. This has not been properly on the agenda before and now it is (*ibid.*).

The corporate's learning experiences after the investment are twofold. Firstly, the corporation learnt that there is going to be emotional reactions anytime the corporations make a large decision when people connect emotionally with the brand (Pers.com., May 28, 2021). These reactions will be hard to predict, whether they will be negative or positive and how much of each. Secondly, there are going to be emotional reactions internally as well. Due to confidentiality, there were limitation on how much could be shared beforehand. Therefore, there need to be enough resources to manage the discussions internally and create open forums for it (*ibid.*). All in all, more resources might be necessary in the future to handle the discussions both internally and externally.

4.3   Consumer opinions and reactions

To get insights into how Oatly's consumer perceive the investment event and Oatly's communication efforts, focus group interviews were conducted. Young people's opinion is regarded by Oatly as valuable as they are the ones that will experience the effects from today's unsustainable food system (Oatly 2017), hence the chosen focus group respondents all belonged to the age group 20-30 years old. The questions asked during the focus group interview can be found in *Appendix 2*.

Firstly, the participants were asked on their general perceptions of Oatly whereas Oatly is associated by most as having great products, innovative marketing and the more sustainable option compared to cow's milk. However, the investment affected some of the respondent previous positive perceptions of Oatly and their sustainability efforts. In Table 6, a summary of the respondents' opinions of the brand Oatly and their sustainability efforts is shown.

Table 6 - The focus group participants' perceptions of Oatly and the sustainability work

Category	Perceptions of focus group participants
General thoughts of Oatly	"I'm very happy for Oatly, first brand making delicious plant-based products" (Pauline) "they have made replacements products that really replaces animal products" (Karin) "they are so good at entertaining with their marketing" (Hanna) "they are cool and attractive for consumers" (Lasse)
Thoughts on Oatly's sustainability work	"Oatly try to make people go from milk to plant based milk, which I think is really important" (Kevin) "less CO2 emissions throughout the food chain than cow milk" (Focus group 3) "don't see them as the perfect sustainable choice" (Focus group 2) "uncertain of what sustainability work they actually do" (Focus group 1)

The perceptions of Oatly as a brand were overall positive. Oatly's products were celebrated for being able to replace cow alternatives in a way that does not jeopardize taste or texture (Focus group 2). The group also highlight the fact that various of Oatly's products are consumed by people that would otherwise regularly consume animal products. They are seen to use Oatly's product Ikaffe instead of regular milk in their coffee, as they too think it is as tasty in coffee as regular milk (*ibid.*). Thus, Oatly is seen to have started the trend whereas people more easily choose plant-based alternative, as people have realized that the difference in taste and texture is not that great (*ibid.*). Related to the company's sustainability efforts, a mix of feelings and thoughts were expressed. Most of the participants were not aware of how Oatly works with sustainability, more than the fact that oat milk has a lower environmental footprint than cow milk (Focus group 1,2,3). However, some positive aspects were brought up, such as Oatly's marketing efforts on encouragement to get people to change from cow milk to oat milk (Focus group 1).

Then the respondents discussed their opinions of Oatly's way of communicating and on the marketing channels they most encounter this communication. Some of the responses are summarized in Table 7.

Table 7 - The focus group participants perception about Oatly communication and channels

Category	Perceptions of focus group participants
Corporate communication	"they do something different, and catch their audience in a unique way" (Focus group 1) "they market in a fun way that people share on social media" (Anna) "they are smart and one step ahead, like in the war with Arla" (Focus group 3) "they are creating a revolution in the milk industry with their cool marketing" (Lasse) "I think their communication is the reason behind their success" (Johan)
Marketing channels	"they are most visible on buses and trains when moving in the city" (Focus group 1) "their packaging draws a lot of attention" (Focus group 2) "hear about Oatly's marketing through friends" (Focus group 2)

The Oatly way of communicating is regarded by most participants as "fun", "smart" and "different". The participants describe that their attention is caught by the unique way of communication (Focus group 1) and whereas most of the communication gets notices on buses and trains, and the packaging (Focus group 2).

Further, the participants discussed their thought on the Blackstone investment and the way in which Oatly responded to the public reaction to the investment. In Table 9, some of the answers are highlighted.

Table 8 - The focus group participants perception about the investment and on Oatly communication after the event

Category	Perceptions of focus group participants
Thoughts of the investment	"if they could have found a more sustainable investor, wouldn't they have done so"? (Focus group 1) "I'm disappointed in them, they don't live up to what they say anymore. This is greenwashing for me" (Alexandra) "with their bold marketing you cannot have any bodies in your closet, it makes it all the more scandalous" (Hanna) "all this money is invested in a green sector, which is good. More consumers will be reached, and Blackstone is investing in something good instead of something bad, like chopping down the rainforest" (Kevin) "Blackstone does not want to do anything good. They just want to create value for their shareholders, there is no ethical motive behind investing in Oatly" (Focus group 1) "it is a big company and it's understandable that the investment is all about money" (Focus group 2) "I think it is great that a big investment company changes its portfolio towards more sustainable products" (Johan) "if it gets noticed that it is profitable to invest sustainable than they will invest in more sustainable companies" (Lasse) "my first thought was that this is not okay, since Blackstone are contributing to deforestation of rainforests" (Kristofer)
Oatly's communication on the investment	"companies need money to grow, so argument for pursuing with the investment on their web page is understandable" (Focus group 1) "maybe the consumers could have been informed on the investment beforehand" (Focus group 1) "could have helped the situation by communicating on more channels" (Kristofer) "if they communicated more comprehensive that would have fired up the other side even more" (Focus group 3) "I have not seen the communication on the investment from Oatly" (Anna)

The participants expressed mixed feelings relating to the investment. Most of the participants thought that Oatly should have found a more sustainable investor (Focus group 1,2,3). Hence, implying that negative reactions could have been avoided in the first place. However, some of the respondents understood the choice and Oatly' reasoning behind it, since there will be a sustainable company investment in Blackstone's portfolio from now on and the possible positive outcome is that other corporations notice that green investments are profitable (Focus group 3). Though, there were discussions that most of the participants endorsed: that the objective to increase capital was greater than the sustainability agenda (Focus group 1,2,3). One participant felt extra disappointed in Oatly for choosing Blackstone, as the company cannot live up to what they say anymore. With their unique and somewhat aggressive marketing style, Oatly must be able to live up to what is being promised or it can be perceived as green washing (Focus group 1). The synopsis from discussions on the topic is that the participants agreed with Oatly's long term objective, though the perceived pathway there differs.

Regarding how well the communication from Oatly's reached the participants and facilitated understanding, there were some mixed perceptions. Some had not seen any communication from Oatly on the event (Johan, Anna). However, the members agreed that the communication

could not have helped the situation in a positive direction towards positive consumer understanding anyways (Focus group 1,2,3). It is discussed that a survey on consumer perception of taking Blackstone on as an investor in beforehand could have been an option, as Oatly then would have considered the interest of their consumers when making the decision on investors and could possibly have milden the reactions (Focus group 1). The primarily shock when the news came out could possibly have been dampened if the consumers knew beforehand (*ibid.*). However, as there was a lot of confidentiality surrounding the investment this would not have been possible for Oatly to share in beforehand.

The last discussions relate to if the investment has changed their attitudes towards the corporation and if it has changed their purchasing behaviors. Moreover, how their view of Oatly's sustainability efforts has changed. The thoughts are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9 - The focus group participants perception on the corporation after the investment, purchase intentions and thoughts on their sustainability efforts

Category	Perceptions of focus group participants
Effects of the investment on perceptions and buying intentions	"I continue to support Oatly as they provoke and they are visible, and have made the world question traditional milk in a fun way" (Hanna) "I boycott Oatly now since they market themselves as sustainable, and then they take on Blackstone. This makes me very disappointed" (Alexandra) "I buy less from Oatly now" (Anna) "I still buy from Oatly but I don't have the same good feelings afterwards" (Karin) "the animal ethic perspective goes first, so we continue to buy Oatly's products" (Focus group 2) "I still buy and I think people that boycott should be careful, then you should know everything about everything you buy" (Kristofer) "I still buy and I think people are unfair towards Oatly, they judge too quickly and does not take the time to understand the reason behind the investment" (Lasse)
Effects on how Oatly's sustainability work is perceived after	"it can have effected their overall environmental impact, depends on the environmental destructions of Blackstone is in the calculations or not" (Focus group 1) "I don't know if I see them as more sustainable than any other oat milk company" (Lasse) "Oatly is not my go-to sustainable choice" (Karin) "they are too big to be sustainable" (Anna) "their goal to grow and gain profits feels more important to them than sustainability (Focus group 2).

Lastly, when the participants discussed whether the investment has changed their attitudes towards Oatly, there were some mixed responses. Most of the participants still buys Oatly products however, maybe not with the same positive feeling afterwards (Focus group 2). There were even a participant boycotting the products since she felt that Oatly did not live up to what they communicate anymore (Focus group 1). The feeling of disappointment was too great to continue purchasing their products. Some of the participants felt pity for Oatly as they perceive people to judge Oatly to quickly (Focus group 3). When the participants talked about how they perceive Oatly's sustainability work after the investment they mention that Oatly is not their first choice when looking at sustainability (Focus group 2). Also, some participants were uncertain as they did not know if they should count Blackstone's actions into the sustainability calculation (Focus group 1).

4.3.1 Reactions on social media

The Facebook and Instagram post received numerous reactions and comments from the public. The Instagram (as of the 7th of September 2021) has received 6601 likes and 2630 comments and compared to other post the corporation usually get similar likings, however not as many comments (usually around 200). On the Facebook post there is 425 likes and 409 comments, also substantially more comments than in their regular posts.

There is a mix of reactions in the comment sections on the social media platforms. The comment with negative reactions relates to feelings of disappointment, anger, sarcasm, betrayal, and uncertainty. Some of the respondents are unsure about what they think and a few of the respondents support the investment. In Table 10, a selected number of comments are presented and from which of the social media platforms they are found. These comments can also be found in *Appendix 4*.

Table 10 - Comments on the main social media platforms

Social media platform	Comments
Instagram	• "Oatly at some point you will regret this abhorrent blackstone investor decision. Candy coat it all you want, you totally sold out you eco ethical standing! Thankfully there's malkorganics" • "no more Oatly for us. Now I'm drinking Sproud Barista" • "naïve to think you can influence money men. Good luck" • "HOW DARE YOU!" • "I have bought Oatley products for years BUT NEVER MORE! There are better alternatives who don't practice double moral standards. • "hey guys, really weird – your barista smelling a bit smokey these days… oh hang on, wait, no it's just that burning ecosystem over there. No worries" • "sold out. Looking at other brands now. From now on, you have to be stopping blackstone from turning the amazon into farmland" • "I read your explanation on the website. I'm still unsure about what I should think about this. I mean you've got a point, but I'm nor sure if this is the right way for change" • "keep up the good work and this makes me even more proud to serve your products" • "but I love Oatly so much, it's my substitute for everything. One step at a time the world will get better – no judgement Oatly"
Facebook	• "was really disappointed by this news. By having Blackstone as a owner you will never, whatever argument you choose, get away from the fact that you indirectly support and contribute to the awfulness Blackstone stands behind. Thanks for me, I will choose other alternatives from now on" • "Blackstone Oatly. Of all corporations you chose to be sponsored by Blackstone. Have some self-dignity" • "I refuse to buy your products and visit the events you sponsor" • "go on! If not you, who? It requires courage, and you have it. Do you succeed with half of your ambitions the world will already win. I think there is a lot do to get a plant based planet, not just a vegan club"
Twitter	• "I will stop buying Oatly if you take fund from Blackstone – a company with ties with deforestation in the Amazon #boycottoatly" • "sad but not surprised to hear the news. Hipster capitalism at it again #boycottoatly • "Oatly has just had a large investment from Blackstone, a company that: support & donate to Trump. Invest in two companies in Brazil that contribute towards the deforestation of the Amazon. Earns billions of dollars from oil & gas. Buy oat milk but #boycottoatly • "very disappointing of Oatly….we have already stopped buying the brand #boycottoatly • "congratulations @Oatly for single-handedly enabling Trump-funding deforesters Blackstone to greenwash their bio" • "discovered that Oatly has partnered with Blackstone – an investment company who part own companies who are responsible for Amazon deforestation. I have done a full information post on Instagram and will from now on be moving my purchases elsewhere"

Of all the comments, a large portion the comments were answered by Oatly, and with messages in line with post one and two, and on the webpage. Examples of this are presented in the following subchapter.

4.3.2 Oatly's social media interaction with the public

When analyzing the comments Oatly received on its post on the social media platforms, they hold on to their choice of investor by directing to the possible positive outcomes for the climate. One comment on post 1 on Instagram reads:

"It's clear this is about expanding your business and making more money regardless of who profits from that. The patronizing, arrogant tone with which you're trying to justify it is especially grating. Sad as I love the product but will be switching to another brand" (See appendix 4, picture 12).

Oatly responded as follows:

"Yes, of course it's about expanding and growing. That's how we replace meat and dairy all over the world. It's also about money, because if we are to stay sustainable as we grow, we need to invest in making our supply chain even better and build more factories to decrease transportation. The planet will profit from this. We are sorry to see you leave but hope you stay plant based. Love, Oatly"

The message from Oatly regarding growth and sustainability is persistent throughout its comments on their social media. Another example of this is from the Facebook post whereas a stakeholder comments:

"Dear Oatly, I am sorry but I think you are real naïve here. You must be if you think you can affect a company such as Blackstone to the better. There is only one thing that drives this type of corporations and that is money, money and again money" (See appendix 4, picture 16).

The response from Oatly is:

"Exactly! And it is extra important for this reason to show that it is possible to prioritize sustainability and profitability. More than trying to change Blackstone, it is more about the investment in itself that sends signals to the rest of the financing world to invest sustainably. If it is profitable, others will follow. And slowly the capital will stream in favour of green. That is the plan! Love, Oatly."

Examining the comments Oatly received on its social media channels, it is found that many are upset with Oatly for taking funds from Blackstone. They are accused by some of the users to only care about profits. This is also the perception of some of the focus group participants from group one and two. As one of the participants put it "*it is a large company, their goal is to earn money, so of course they chose this large investor*" (Anna). Moreover, the message in the responses made by Oatly are in line with post one and two, and the information provided on the webpage.

5 Analysis

In the analysis chapter the empiric from the last chapter is connected to the theories in chapter 3. The communication of the Blackstone event is connected to the factors in the SCCT to gain insights of the reputational consequences.

5.1 Value-related crisis

The investment event is found in this study to be a crisis, more specifically a value-related crisis. A crisis is an unpredictable event whereas stakeholder expectations are let down (Wang *et al.* 2021; Coombs & Holladay 2015) and the shared impression of a corporation is threatened as a result (Sohn & Lariscy 2014). This is found to be the case as Oatly's consumers expected the corporation to make sustainable decisions and did not perceive the choice of investor be in line with their perception of the corporation and its sustainability efforts. Resulting in feelings of betrayal, disappointment and even anger. Further, the crisis is categorized as value-related since it surrounds ethical and social concerns (Dutta & Pullig 2011; Kübler *et al* 2020). Choosing an investor accused of being connected to deforestation is perceived to be of both ethical and a social concern and this is also what the stakeholders are most concerned with in this crisis.

5.2 Crisis response strategy

The corporate objective for engaging in crisis communication is to increase stakeholder evaluations and to gain back trust (Zhang & Borden 2017). The response strategy is what the corporation does and says in a crisis to protect the reputation (Coombs 2007). Where Oatly choose to communicate about the investment event was primarily on their webpage and on social media (see Table 10), whereas they present the reasons behind the choice of taking Blackstone on as an investor. Based on the social media responses and webpage publication, it is suggested that the corporation uses a denial strategy. Recall that a denial strategy is when the mere existence of the crisis is denied (Coombs 2007). The corporate representative proclaimed that the investment event went as well as the corporation hoped for and not acknowledging it as a crisis. Thus, it is interpreted that the corporation is denying its existence, rather seeing it as a corporate challenge. Instead the corporation suggest that the event is part of the change towards sustainability, whereas sustainable investments are a crucial part on the journey**.** The findings also suggest the use of CSR communication in the crisis response. The corporation is perceived to communicate a positive message on its CSR involvement (Ajayi & Mmutle 2020). Oatly claim that the investment is a success for their sustainability engagement and to create a dietary shift.

Figure 5 presents a visual of the result of the analysis and the investigated phenomenon. Thus, showing how the findings interact with the components in the SCCT and additional factors of CSR and social media, which are found to be of relevance in this context.
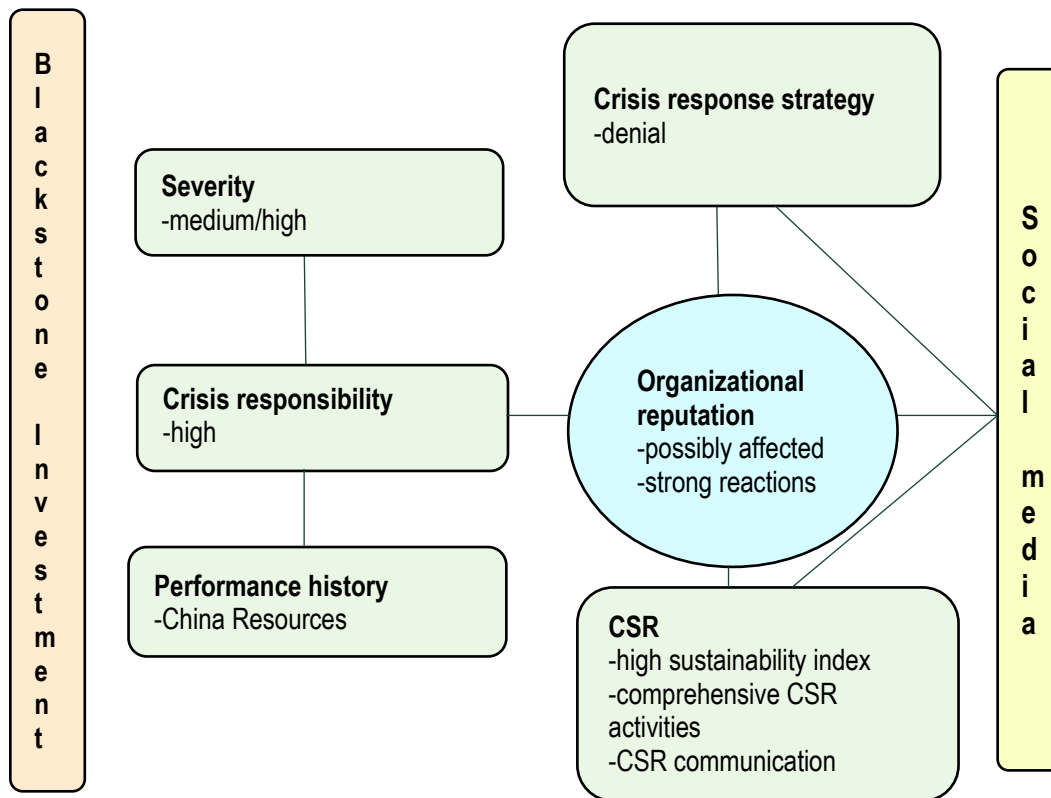
Figure 5 - Visual depiction of the main findings connected to the SCCT.

The event that caused the crisis, specifically the Blackstone investment, is presented in the left corner in Figure 5. The factors influencing the corporation's reputation are represented by the green boxes and the main influential aspects under the topic. CSR is added as a factor as this is found to be affecting the reputational outcome. The blue box represents the organizational reputation. Lastly, in the right corner social media is presented and the factors it affects. The analysis explaining these findings are described below, whereas the theories assist in understanding the outcomes of the investment event. The analysis of the findings in connection to the different factors in the SCCT is presented in the following subchapters.

5.2.1 Severity

Severity refers to the level of damage to corporate finances, the environment, and humans (Combs 2007). As the crisis event relates to an investment made, and with the critique that the investor is connected to deforestation of the Amazon rainforest, the potential damage is found to be mainly environmental. The severity of deforestation of the Amazon rainforest is high. However, the level of involvement and connection to deforestation by the investor Blackstone is hard to establish. Also, how much of this responsibility is put on Oatly receiving fund from Blackstone. Though, there are indications that Blackstone is investing in companies that does act in sustainable manners in the sensitive Amazon region, there might be a relevant connection to deforestation, and therefore affecting the severity level.

As a majority of the focus group participants articulated that Blackstone's involvement in deforestation is of concern and has affected their trust for Oatly (Focus group 1,2) it is indicated that some of the actions of Blackstone is now reflected in the Oatly brand. A majority of the focus group participants concluded that companies have a great responsibility to know about how their investor operate, especially as it is hard for the consumers to get this information

from the investors on their own (Focus group 2, 3). For the connection of Blackstone and deforestation, cafés in Europe, as some in Finland, Sweden, U.K. and Germany chosen to boycott it products. Further, some of the focus group participants have chosen to boycott the products or purchase fewer products than before. It is also found that numerous people on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook have done the same. Showcasing that these stakeholders find the connection to deforestation too great for a continuous support of Oatly and thus put blame on the corporation for Blackstone's involvements. When summarizing how the consumers perceive the responsibility Oatly's have in the matter, the severity of the event is deemed to be relatively high. Therefore, the severity level can be an intensifying factor in this specific crisis (Coombs & Holladay 1996).

5.2.2 Performance history

Performance history is an intensifying factor during a crisis (Coombs & Holladay 1996; Coombs 2007). More precisely, past crisis and the relationship history are of interest, how bad or good the stakeholder been treated in the past (Coombs 2007). There is no data indicating a mistreatment of stakeholders in the past. However, regarding previous crisis there is a similar investment case in Oatly's near history. In 2019, China resources owned by the Chinese government invested a 30% share in Oatly. Coombs (2007) suggest that the mere existence of crisis hold the potential to damage corporate reputation. Hence, this past investment event may have effects on the crisis responsibility ascribed to the corporation, as both performance history and severity is a mediator of how great or small the crisis responsibility will be, and eventually the reputational outcome (Coombs & Holladay 1996). As the severity is deemed relatively high and a performance history with prior crises, a high crisis responsibility will be prescribed the corporation (Coombs 2007).

5.2.3 Crisis responsibility

To better grasp the crisis there is a need to analyze the different element within the SCCT model, which describes who ultimately holds the crisis responsibility. The first step is to define the crisis type (Coombs 2007). Coombs (2007) presents thirteen types of crises, whereas "*organizational-misdeeds*" is the one matching the crisis event. Organizational misdeed refers to organizations conducting business in a way that they know will jeopardize its stakeholder (*ibid.*). Translated to this circumstance: the corporation choosing a controversial investor knowing that the stakeholder would be upset. The crisis types are categorized into clusters, whereas organizational misdeeds belong to the preventable cluster. Based on the empirical findings, it is argued that Oatly falls into the preventable cluster, and those have the potential to do most damage to the reputation (Claeys *et al.* 2010). There is an intentionality in the choice of investor, that ultimately lead up to the crisis. Oatly claims to have considered many aspects before choosing the investor and thus, the investor it was desired by Oatly, it is indicated that the corporation acted deliberately and that the crisis could have been prevented if they had chosen another investor. Here the company has a lot of responsibility for what happened (Coombs 2007) and this is often the case in crisis, that the corporation is responsible for it (Coombs 2015).

5.2.4 Corporate social responsibility

Engaging in CSR is suggested in previous research to boost corporate reputation (Kim 2019) and possible shield it in the event of a crisis (Janssen *et al.* 2015). Oatly appears to approach CSR in a comprehensive and holistic manner, as the corporation engages in CSR throughout its activities and value-chain, both internally and externally. In the four sustainability strategies Oatly claim to strive for sustainability of the society as a whole, whereas the aim is a dietary shift towards plant-based food products, and in its own supply chain (suppliers and resource

efficiency) and for fully committed employees on the climate challenge. Moreover, the corporation in 2019 was listed as one of the top sustainable corporations in the food and beverage category, also indicating engagement and actual outcomes of the CSR efforts. These CSR activities can have facilitated identification between the corporation and its stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay 2011) and thereby worked as pre-crisis shield to mitigate crisis risks (Tao & Song 2020). Thus, the previous CSR efforts and status held the potential to protect the corporate reputation after the crisis.

There are benefits in effectively communicating on CSR and possibly so in a crisis. A positive message on the corporate CSR is dispersed (Ajayi & Mmutle 2020) and this can be an effective tool in counteracting negative effects in a crisis (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009) and possible shield reputation (Ham & Kim 2020). In the crisis response Oatly described the sustainability advantages from the investment and on its continued mission for a sustainability shift in the food chain, thus communicating on its CSR and CSR relating to the investment event. Communicating on CSR could be suitable as it effects consumers change acceptance and support (Coombs 2012). Corporations with long history of CSR are found to reap larger benefits in a crisis (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009). As Oatly has, since 2012 when the course of the corporation changed, been actively working with CSR it could affect the crisis outcome in a beneficial way.

However, disregarding stakeholder trust is part of the traits of a crisis. Not meeting CSR concerns is a disregard of trust (Coombs & Holladay 2015). This is found to be the case according to focus groups interviews. The respondents perceive that their opinions have been neglected in the choice of investor, as Blackstone is found to be unethical and unsustainable, and thereby ultimately affected their trust in Oatly when taking them on as an investor. Dawkins (2005) argue for the risk of communicating on CSR as there is a possibility that the CSR message draws scepticism and aggressive media reactions (*ibid.*). Therefore, a need of alignment between the CSR communication and the interest of consumers if corporations shall reap the rewards from CSR (*ibid.*). The findings suggest that this is not the case as the sustainability claims of the investment does not coordinate with the consumers perceptions of sustainability. Lastly, CSR motives could have affected the effectiveness of the CSR communication. If the consumers perceive the corporation to be acting out of intrinsic motives the assessment will be more positive (Kim & Choi 2018). The finding suggests that most of the respondents perceive Oatly to have acted on extrinsic motives hence, solely out of their own interest to increase profits.

5.2.5 Crisis communication channels

The effectiveness of communication of CSR in a crisis is affected of where the response is communicated (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009). After reviewing the communication channels used by the corporation in managing the crisis, social media (Instagram and Facebook) and the webpage are found to be the main ones. After the investment took place comments started to appear on posts on the corporation's social media platforms, post unrelated to the event. The corporation responds to these comments in a moderately fast phase from when the comments are received. According to Schultz *et al.* (2011) the communication on these platforms is valuable as it allows the corporations to quicker access and connect with its stakeholders compared with traditional media. Though, the post on the webpage with the full explanation on the reasons for choosing Blackstone was published almost two months after the investment, together with post one and two on the social media platforms. Coombs (2015) also suggests that an immediate response is important after a crisis hits. Thus, there is a possibility that absence of communication from the corporation in these two months impacted the public's

perceptions and attitudes. Oatly did not connect with the consumers during a long period and could therefore not convey the corporation's perspective, to possibly change the attitude held by the public in time. Due to the changed power structures provided by social media, the public's discussion would continue on the platforms with or without Oatly's interference (Kietzmann *et al.* 2011). However, the corporate engagement on these platforms is important anyways as the benefits of crisis communication is enhanced (Veil *et al.* 2011).

6 Discussion

In the discussion chapter the empirical findings and analysis are connected to the research questions from chapter 1. These are then related to previous studies to put the result into a broader context, and they also serve as the chapter's structure.

6.1 At the time of a value-related crisis, what is the communicational strategy?

The findings suggest the use of two strategies: denial according to the SCCT and a CSR communication strategy. By using a denial strategy, the corporation is in denying the existence of a crisis (Coombs 2007). This was found to be true for Oatly as the corporation perceives the investment event to have preceded as well as they hoped and not communicating in a way whereas they perceive it to be a crisis. This strategy is most applicable in cases whereas the corporation can present proof that they did not cause the unethical action (Bradford & Garett 1995). As it is Blackstone that is accused of being unethical, this could possibly be an appropriate plan of action however, Oatly does not present any proof or argument against these claims of Blackstone's connections. The denial strategy is found as rarely being efficient for CSR corporations, instead care should be displayed and sincere acknowledgment of the consumer concerns (Janssen *et al.* 2015; Ott & Theunissen 2015). Feng *et al.* (2020) suggested a responsive approach, as this was found as most efficient in protecting corporate reputation. The findings in this study did not suggest a responsive approach in the corporation's crisis communication, though they would possibly have been more appropriate as proposed by Janssen *et al.* (2015). In the context of social media, rebuilding strategies are most efficient as feelings and reaction tend to travel quickly there (Ott & Theunissen 2015; Roshan *et al.* 2016). Traiantafillidou and Yanna (2020) similarly suggest the rebuilding strategies when communicating on social media for best effect. Moreover, these are recommended in a preventable crisis (*ibid.*). Hence, in relation to previous research, Oatly did not communicate in the most efficient manner to shield corporate reputation.

Moreover, the findings in this study suggest the use of a CSR communication in the crisis response strategy. Janssen *et al.* (2015) and Tao and Song (2020), stated that CSR can act as a storage of goodwill and thus shield a corporation in a crisis. Moreover, Vanhemme & Grobben (2009) argued that effective CSR communication in a crisis also hold the potential to repair reputation. In this study, CSR's protective capacities were not apparent. Instead, it seems as a "boomerang effect" has occurred, which is in line with research by Sohn and Lariscy (2015). Expectancies on the corporations are found to be higher due to their extensive CSR activities and aggressive marketing style, which appears to have backfired and instead of protected the corporation in a crisis, has possibly injured the corporation.

Argued by Kübler *et al.* (2020), is that value-related crisis generates strong emotional reactions and are followed by great reputational consequences. In fact, a similar notion of strong reactions was noticed amongst some of the focus group respondents. Most of the reactions on social media displayed feelings of betrayal, anger, and disappointment. On this note, it is critical to keep in mind that negative comments on social media tend to escalate (Zheng *et al.* 2018) and spread quickly (Roshan *et al.* 2016). People tend to share what the perceive will gain most support, even though it is a single incident which people otherwise would forgive (Zheng *et al.* 2018). Moreover, programming algorithms make post showing high activity levels more visible and thereby increasing the reputational risk even further (Ott & Theunissen 2015). Thus, looking at reactions on social media has its inherent drawbacks possibly giving a more negative

picture of the public perception of the incident than it has actually produced in reality. To get a more certain reading of the reactions it would be beneficial to examine all posts on the social media platforms communicated by the corporation to get a more certain picture of all the different reactions and attitudes.

6.2   What are the reputational consequences from the crisis communication?

How well did the chosen crisis communication strategies shield the corporate reputation? To reach a desired reputational outcome, the corporation needs to match the crisis response with the crisis situation (Coombs 2007). First and foremost, the corporation is found to have a high crisis responsibility, as the crisis type is deemed as preventable. Severity and the performance history are mediating factors that could either help or obstruct the corporate reputation in some situations (Coombs & Holladay 1996). As severity of the incident is found to be high and the corporation does have a crisis history, these have not influenced the crisis responsibility in a favorable direction. The mere existence of a crisis in the past can damage the reputation (Coombs 2007). Hence, these factors contribute to a high responsibility. A high crisis responsivity level should be accompanied by a more accommodative crisis response strategy than one with a low responsibility level (*ibid.*). Subsequently, failing to response in an accommodating manner might lead to reputational damage (Coombs 2007). The findings suggest a denial strategy which is not accommodating the crisis situation, according to the SCCT the reputation should be negatively affected.

Another indicator of how the reputation has been affected is profits, as these are affected in a crisis (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009). In the case of Oatly profits are found not have been affected, rather have they continued rising in a rapid phase as the corporation continues to grow financially. Thus, suggesting the opposite from the results than the findings related to the SCCT. The unaffected profits could indicate that the consumers emotional attachments and identification to the brand and commitment to the sustainability cause might have aided and protected the brand (Schmalz & Orth 2012; Ahluwaila *et al.* 2000; Coombs & Holladay 2011). Moreover, the prior reputation might have protected the brand during the incident (Coombs 2007; Coombs & Holladay 2002, 2006; Sohn and Lariscy, 2015). Based on the focus group interviews, numerous of the consumers state to have positive feeling towards Oatly's products and their unique and entertaining marketing style, and the majority claimed to still purchase their products. Therefore, this study is in line with previous research on that prior reputation and personal attachments, have possibly shielded the reputation to some extent from further damage.

To prevent critical events from turning into a crisis, organizations need to address consumer concerns (Kapoor & Banjeree 2020), which for example could have implied for Oatly a change of ownership structure to green investors, either by cancelling the funding from Blackstone or with the promise to take on green ones in the future. This type of response should have been quick, authoritarian, and genuine to succeed (Banjeree 2018; Stephens 2005). Him and Choi (2018) also stresses the importance of the timing of the response. However, as too long time has passed as of now, it is possibly too late for this type of action. Based on Oatly communication on the event, no future change in shareholder structure is indicated from the company. Also, the response to investment critique was communicated almost two months after the investment took place. Stephens (2005) argues for a swift response may access the stakeholders in time, before they abandoned the company. Thus, the relatively long time it took

for Oatly to reply might have affected the reputational outcome, together with the non-compliance to the consumer's concerns.

By using CSR claims in crisis communication, corporations can counteract damaging affects in a crisis as it may positively impact consumer evaluation of the corporation (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009). Prior CSR activities can operate as a storage of goodwill and thereby shielding from negative outcomes in a crisis (Janssen *et al* 2015). Oatly state to still be true to its sustainability vision and present the reasons for why the investment is positive for the global sustainability movement. A handful of the respondents agreed with their reasoning and thus could CSR possibly shield the corporation to some extent. However, few saw Oatly as sustainable after the investment. It was found that a majority of the respondents perceive Oatly to have acted out of extrinsic motives, whereas profit was seen as the main reason for the investment. This is in line with Kim and Choi's (2018) research, that when corporations act on these motives the assessment will be more negative. However, some of the respondents understood the investment could benefit both the corporation and society and communication on both these motives could have increased trustworthiness and avoid scepticism (Du *et al.* 2010). Thus, the findings are not entirely in accordance with previous research on CSR's protective capacities in a crisis. On the other hand, the reputational outcomes could have been even more negatively affected if the CSR was not such an inherent part of the corporate activities as it is found to be.

Moreover, communicating effectively in a crisis is also suggested to protect reputation (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009.). During the interview, not all of the participants were aware about the information provided on Oatly's webpage and this could possibly have affected the reputational outcome. The corporation could possibly have relied more heavily on social media platforms to communicate the whole story to facilitate broader understandings amongst its stakeholders. Thus, the communication could have been more effective and reached more people. However, in Oatly's response there is a risk of objecting too much and thereby creating the opposite desired effect, consumer suspicion (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009: Ashforth & Gibbs 1990.). Hence, the corporation could have been perceived to protest in an overwhelming manner. Thus, the extent in which the corporation shared the message on its channels might have been sufficient and there were no indications from the consumers that the corporation was communicating in an overwhelming manner that led to skepticism.

The level of success of the chosen strategies in this specific crisis situation in saving the corporate image is challenging to determine. On one hand there is evidence of insufficiency in the response as the respondents and social media users display negative opinions and reactions of Oatly after using a CSR- and denial strategy. The focus group participants described that their perceptions are not what they were before the event. In crisis involving CSR corporations, care and sincerity should always be displayed (Janssen *et al.* 2015). A possible reason for why Oatly is not accommodating in their crisis response is because they do not see this incident as a crisis. According to Xu and Li (2013), crisis managers often gravitate to strategies where the corporation's interest is placed first, often when the stake for taking responsibility is high, and then they hesitate to take accountability. Only when they are out of options is when accountability is taken, and this might be why a lot of corporations fails in its attempts to communicate after a crisis (*ibid.*) Hence, the finding suggest that the corporation is reluctant to take responsibility and could thus be in line with Xu and Li's (2013) research.

Coombs (2007) suggest that the effectiveness of the crisis response is influenced by both a pre-crisis phase of preparation and prevention, and a post-crisis phase, how well the corporation

learned from its mistakes. Oatly accepted an investor capital alleged for connections to deforestation of the Amazon rainforest and it is possible that Oatly was not aware of this connection due to lack of pre-crisis planning, and inadequate research into the investors in beforehand. The lack of preparation and knowledge might have left the corporation unprepared for the crisis. After analyzing the empirical findings, it is found possible that Oatly did not take the involvement of Blackstone in deforestation into consideration in the pre-crisis phase, which subsided into the crisis emerging. Moreover, it appears as the company have not learnt from its strategies in the post-crisis phase. The corporate representative expressed that the greatest challenges related to the event was to get people out of an emotional response and not giving indication on any learnings on whom to take on as investors in the future to avoid a repetition of the event. Zhang et al (2020), suggested that stakeholder show more positive attitudes towards corporations that learnt from the crisis, communicating on preventions from the situations to repeat itself and on what lessons that can be drawn from it.

The findings are in line with Kim and Choi (2016), who argues that consumer responses are more positive when the crisis is a result of an accident, rather than if the crisis is found preventable. The study case crisis was preventable, and the consumers reactions were predominantly negative. Moreover, the findings in this study are interesting as previous research has indicated that consumers react differently to value-related crisis depending on which corporations made the transgressions, even as the category of unethical behavior is the same. Hence, this study can contribute to previous research with more substance in the field of crisis communication in a value-related crisis. Moreover, research on how consumers interpret crisis responses are meaningful (Ham & Kim 2019) and therefore, enriches this study the field of crisis communication with this specific case context and the responses found.

The findings in this study could be useful for crisis managers, both when planning and executing crisis communication. For them to understand the consequences of choosing combination of strategies, in this specific case denial- and CSR strategy, in a similar crisis situation. Corporations are recommended to get a broad understanding of their reputation; especially how much CSR is related to the reputation through focus groups or surveys. Further, the importance of social media needs to be accounted for in a crisis, as opinions with high "share value" tend to be shared and social media facilitates for crisis to spread and escalate quickly. Thus, there is a need for monitoring social media and chose a fitting crisis response strategy. The communication should be quick and genuine to dampen negative reactions and build trust. The findings further suggest that corporations should be consistent in how they present themselves to their stakeholders. When the stakeholder identifies with the corporation's mission and when they feel forsaken or betrayed, it can lead to strong reaction with possibly great consequences on the reputation and sales. Nonetheless, there is a potential danger when portrayed as sustainable and ethical as this can lead to frequent scrutiny and eventually escalate to a crisis.

7 Conclusions

In this last chapter the study's conclusions are presented. The findings from the empirics are connected to the study purpose and key findings. The chapter is concluded with methodological reflections and the study's contributions.

To undergo a crisis is expected for every corporation in their lifetime. However, it is not the absence of crises that is the issue, it is how the corporations chooses to respond when they happen that is important. Empathy, shared interest, and values with the stakeholder will show if they can be trusted again. This study aimed to identify and analyze how a corporation in the food sector communicate in a value-related crisis, and the reputational outcomes from the chosen communication strategy. Further the use of social media was explored and CSR in the communication efforts. The findings suggests that the crisis Oatly experienced belonged to the preventable cluster and these particular crises are connected to create the most damage to corporate reputation. The SCCT did not propose a denial strategy in face of preventable crisis as those are fitting when the corporation is not responsible for the crisis. Instead, a rebuilding strategy, with for example apology would according to previous research be more accommodating and suitable. Thus, the corporation is presumed to not have chosen the most fitting strategy for the distinct crisis situation through the SCCT lens. Therefore, the corporate reputation should according to the previous literature on crisis communication have been negatively affected.

In the study, the corporation was found to communicate on its CSR engagement as well. Communicating on CSR could have been effective in protecting the corporate reputation. However, CSR was not found to have protected the image effectively, as the CSR status has heightened the consumer expectancies, which probably drew more attention drawn towards the crisis. These expectancies should be accommodated by the corporation to mitigate a crisis and was not found to be true. Further, not all consumers found the corporation to be sustainable in the first place. There are indications of that the corporation's prior reputation and personal attachment shielded the reputation from further damage. The finding suggests that the corporation was fairly successful regardless, as the event does not seem to have affected sales as majority of the respondents still consume Oatly products. However, if there is no learning experience from the event and by repeating it in the future with a similar investment, it could have a dire effect on the reputation.

7.1 Methodological reflections and suggestions on future research

To be able to proceed with the study, limitations had to be made which ultimately affect the results of the study. Thus, the methodical choices and future research will be discussed in this last part. Conclusions in this study are made by analyzing a single case study in a specific time period. In the real-world, things change at a constant phase that affect CSR communication and crisis management. Thus, to get a deeper understanding of the subject of crisis communication longitudinal research might be needed. The aim of this study was to get a deeper insight into crisis communication of a single case study and followed by a longitudinal study looking at more stakeholder groups and in different countries. Thereby more precisely grasping the reputational outcomes and increase transferability to similar situations. Anyhow, the study could serve as a pilot study and an opening for future studies.

The research on communication in a value-based crisis is limited. This study contributes with insights on how a sustainable positioned company in the food sector communicate in a crisis and what strategies the corporation applies. Moreover, there is still need for research in the crisis communications field, as much of the research surrounds the SCCT. In this study the empirical findings are collected from social media observations and three focus groups, together with an interview from a corporate representative. Only reactions from one stakeholder group in Sweden was examined and, in the future, it would be valuable to investigate other stakeholder groups and in different countries to find out their perceptions of the event. Moreover, only one representative from the organization was interviewed and it would be beneficial to gain a deeper understanding from the corporate employees, which is also a stakeholder group. There is a need to find out the collective perception of the event to be more certain in the interpretation of the reputational fallout. According to the employee at Oatly, the company noticed that the reactions differed in different countries and continents. The reactions in Sweden were perceivably more negative than those in the US for example, as the consumers there are more used to large investors such as Blackstone. Thus, interviewing other stakeholder groups would gain a deeper understanding of how the reputation was affected by gaining insights from all Oatly's interested parties. Furthermore, there are limitations in the selection of samples of comments in the study from social media, as not all of them were analyzed due to time limitations.

Researchers could use the information collected from the focus groups as a reference frame when developing surveys for quantitative studies in the future. Scaling up the participatory numbers and widening the selection based on socio-economic background, geographic span, age-groups and so on. It would be interesting to see how people with different economic income perceive the studied phenomenon, or with varying educational background. In this study, the focus was to identify perceptions, though not the actual behaviors of the consumers. In the future, to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon, it could be interesting to observe the action of the stakeholder, thereby to study if it effected their intentions and behaviors as well. Thereby, grasping the rational-/irrationalism in the decision-making process. The consumers claiming to boycott do they indeed stop to purchase the corporation's products? This could possibly lead to a more comprehensive understanding of consumer perceptions and behaviors, and ultimately the reputational fallout.

7.2   Contributions of the study

In the literature, no studies on value-related crisis in the food sector in Sweden were discovered. Therefore, these findings are interesting as consumers in Nordic countries have higher expectation on corporations to act socially responsible (Morsing & Schultz 2006). Simultaneously, the expectation on CSR from corporations in food industry are high as well (Assiouras *et al.* 2013). The corporation is thereby experiencing high expectancy from consumers in Sweden and for conducting business in the food sector. Additionally, CSR increase expectancy (Janssen *et al*. 2015) making this particular crisis context difficult for corporate managers to maneuver.

Crisis communication research in the past has mainly focused on how communication should properly be done and how to repair a reputation after a crisis (Coombs & Holladay 2004; Coombs 2015). In this study it has been explored what social media channels the corporation used as tools to manage crises, and how these could have affected the rebuild of the corporate reputation. As each crisis is different in its nature, the research on crises needs to be applied to each individual one. In this study the unique circumstance of Oatly's crisis in July 2020 and its crisis communication was investigated, to find out what strategy was used and how they

repaired the reputation via communication on its webpage and social media platforms. This study also highlighted the importance of CSR communication via social media instead of only the traditional channels and how negative reactions can be on these channels. Moreover, the study showed the applicability of the SCCT for corporations in the food sector communicating on social media.

CSR is in previous studies perceived to shield corporate reputation in a crisis (Vanhemme & Grobben 2009; Tao & song 2020) however, the implications in a value-related crisis has been of less focus (Tao & Song 2020; Sohn & Lariscy 2014) and the effectiveness of responses in these are relatively unknown (Kapoor and Banjeree 2020). By examining the effects on reputation through the SCCT with the inclusion of CSR in a social media context, the result of this study suggests that using a denial- and a CSR-strategies in a value-related crisis in the food sector is not always efficient or certain to protect the corporate reputation. These results could have been affected by the fact that two response strategies were found and impacting the discussion and conclusions. However, this study still contributes with an empirical insights of crisis communication in a value-related crisis. The theoretical framework and empirical findings of the study could enrich crisis communication theory by showing the importance of a national and industry-specific context, as expectancies are found to be high there.

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Acknowledgements

Appendicies

Appendix 1. Case study protocol

Case study
Crisis communication of Oatly.

Case study background
Found in Chapter 4.

Research questions
Found in Chapter 1.

Data collection methods
Semi-structures interview via Zoom.
Semi-structured focus group interviews via Zoom.
Sustainability reports of 2017-2019, official documents.

Data collection procedure
April 2, 2021 – Approached focus group participants

April 3, 2021 – Constructed the interview guide for focus groups

April 13, 2021 – Focus group 1 was conducted

April 19, 2021 – Focus group 2 was conducted

April 20, 2021 – Focus group 3 was conducted

April 21, 2021 – Transcription of focus groups

April 7, 2021 – Approached the employee at Oatly

May 19, 2021 – Arranged interview

May 20, 2021 – Constructed the interview guide

May 28, 2021 – Interview with Oatly employee

May 29, 2021 – Transcription of interview

June 6, 2021 – Validation sent to interviewee

August 24, 2021 – Attained validation

Interviewees
Full list found in chapter 2

Interview guide
Appendix 2-3

Ethical considerations
The interviewees provided their informed consent to participate.
The interviewees agreed to recording.
The interviewees were provided with information about the study purpose and data usage.

Preparations
Pen and paper used for taking notes.
Zoom used for recording.
Interview guides used during the interviews.

Appendix 2 – Interview guide focus groups

Interview guide in Swedish.

Tema	Frågor
Generellt	• Hur många gånger per vecka konsumerar ni havremjölk? • Hur ofta är det från Oatly som ni köper? • Är hållbarhet är viktigt för er? Hur nu tänker på hållbarhet i vardagen? • Vad är era tankar om Oatly? • Vad tänker ni om deras hållbarhetsarbete?
Kommunikation	• På vilka kanaler når Oatlys budskap er? • Hur ser ni på Oatlys kommunikationsstil? • Vad är era tankar om kommunikationen från Oatly om investeringen?
Investeringen	• Hur tänker ni kring Blackstones investering i Oatly? • Vad för ansvar har företaget att vara informerad om sina investerares verksamhet och aktiviteter? • Vad är era tankar om Oatlys och Oatlys hållbarhetsarbete efter investeringen? • Har er konsumtion av Oatlys produkter förändrats efter investeringen?

Interview guide translated to English.

Theme	Question
General	• How many time per weeks do you drink oat milk? • How often is from Oatly that you buy? • Is sustainability important to you and how does it show in your everyday life? • What are your thoughts of Oatly? • What are your thoughts on their sustainability work?
Communication	• Which channels do you see Oatly's message? • What are your thoughts on Oatly's communication style? • What are your thoughts on the communication on the investment?
Investment	• What do you think of Blackstone's investment in Oatly? • What responsibility do corporations have to be informed of the actions of its investors? • What are your thoughts about Oatly and its sustainability work after the investment? • Have your consumption of Oatly's products changed after the investment?

Appendix 3. Interview guide Oatly

Interview guide for the semi-structured interviews Oatly

Theme	Question
Background	• What did you do before? • How long have you worked in your position at Oatly?
CSR	• Could you describe your view on sustainability at Oatly and the company's mission? • How do you make sure the sustainability objectives are fulfilled? • Who do you see as the reader of the sustainability reports? • If focusing more closely on how you communicate sustainability, could you try to describe how the corporation think about this?
Stakeholders	• How does your communication invite for stakeholder dialogue? • How do you keep track of their understanding of your communication? • Are there some stakeholders that are more important, especially in relation to communication? • Can the stakeholders influence how you work with sustainability? How? • How do you keep your co-workers committed to the cause?
Communication	• Which communication channels do you deem as more important? • How do you customize the communication message to a broad range of actors and make sure that the communication is understood in a way you want them to be? • How does the communication with suppliers look? • How do communicate with your co-workers on sustainability activities?
Blackstone investment	• How do you handle communication on critical events within the company? • The investment from Blackstone has received media coverage and reactions from consumers, how do you perceive the event? • Could you please describe the communication to stakeholders on the event? • How did the internal dialogue around Blackstone connection to Hidrovias and Patria Investments go? • What has been the biggest challenge related to the event? • Was there a learning experience from the investment? • Did you experience any financial consequences from the event?

Appendix 4 – Stakeholder comments on the social media platforms

Stakeholder comments Instagram

Picture 1

Lol way to absorb constructive feedback. Pathetic sell outs. Capitalist "vegan" companies will never ultimately be 100% for the animals.

50 w   Reply

Picture 2

No, I'm sorry, I just can't get on board with this and won't be buying Oatly anymore. I appreciate your perspective but it's not the company I thought it was. My miss-understanding i guess. I'll be joining the Post Oatly Generation. #postoatlygeneration

49 w   7 likes   Reply

—— View replies (3)

Picture 3

Picture 4

I read your explanation on the webside. I'm still unsure about what I should think about this. I mean you've got a point, but I'm not sure if this is the right way for change.

51 w   2 likes   Reply

@oatly at some point you will regret this abhorrent blackstone investor decision. Candy coat it all you want, you totally sold out your eco ethical standing! Thankfully there's @malkorganics 👍
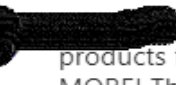
52 w   Reply

Picture 5

No more Oatly for us. Now I'm drinking Sproud barista.

52 w   1 like   Reply

Picture 6

I have bought Oatley products for years BUT NEVER MORE! There are better alternatives who don't practise double moral standards!
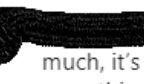
52 w   Reply

Picture 7

"HOW DARE YOU!"

52 w   Reply

Picture 8

But I love oatly so much, it's my substitute for everything. One step at a time the world will get better -no judgement @oatly

52 w   Reply

Picture 9

Naive to think you can influence money men. Good luck.

50 w · Reply

—— View replies (5)

Picture 10

It's clear this is about expanding your business and making more money regardless of who profits from that. The patronising, arrogant tone with which you're trying to justify it is especially grating. Sad as I love the product but will be switching to another brand.

49 w · 4 likes · Reply

—— View replies (8)

Picture 11

Sold out. Looking at other brands now. From now on, you have to be stopping blackstone from turning the amazon into farmland.

53 w · Reply

Picture 12

Hey guys, really weird - your barista milk's smelling a bit smokey these days....oh hang on, wait, no it's just that burning ecosystem over there. No worries!

47 w · 3 likes · Reply

Stakeholder comments Facebook

Picture 12

Blev riktigt besviken av att mötas av denna nyhet. Genom att ha blackstone som ägare så kommer ni aldrig, vad ni än väljer att argumentera, komma undan det faktum att ni indirekt stödjer och bidrar till dom hemskheter blackstone står bakom. Tack för mig, jag väljer andra alternativ från och med nu.
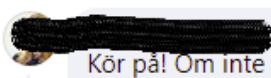
Gilla · Svara · 51 v   👍 4

Picture 13

Blackstone Oatly. Av alla företag, så blir ni sponsrade av Blackstone. Ha lite självrespekt.
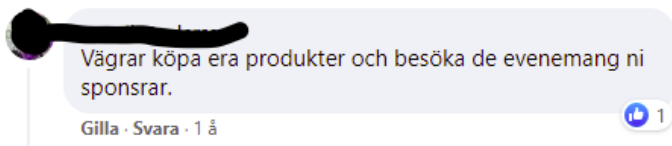
Gilla · Svara · 1 å   👍 36

Picture 14

Kör på! Om inte ni, vem? Det krävs mod, och det har ni ju. Lyckas ni med hälften av ambitionerna så har världen redan där vunnit mycket. Jag tror det måste göras för att få en växtbaserad värld, inte bara en liten vegansk klubb.
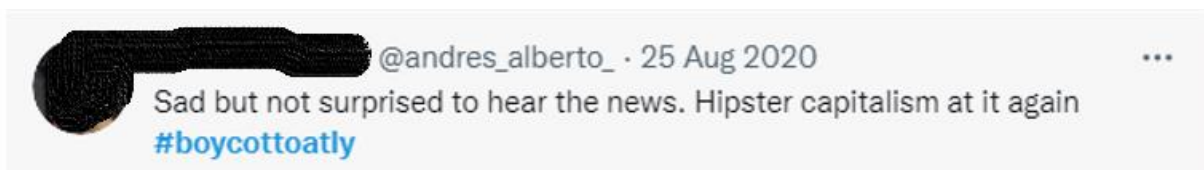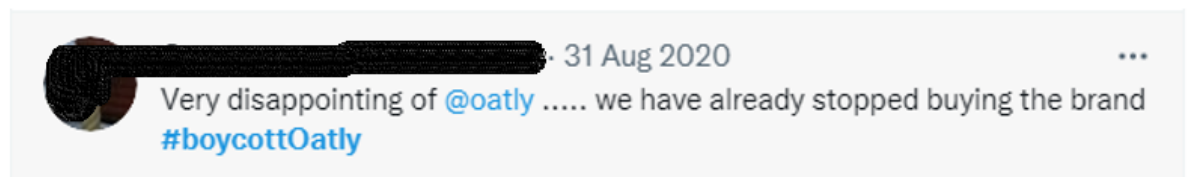
Gilla · Svara · 1 å   👍❤️ 15

Picture 15

> Vägrar köpa era produkter och besöka de evenemang ni sponsrar.
>
> Gilla · Svara · 1 å 👍 1

Stakeholder comments Twitter

Picture 16

> @andres_alberto_ · 25 Aug 2020 ···
> Sad but not surprised to hear the news. Hipster capitalism at it again
> #boycottoatly

Picture 17

> 20 Sep 2020 ···
> Oatly has just had a large investment from Blackstone, a company that:
>
> • Support & donate to Trump
> • Invest in two companies in Brazil that contribute towards the deforestation of the Amazon
> • Earns billions of dollars from oil & gas
>
> Buy Oat Milk but #boycottoatly
>
> 💬 1   🔁   ♡ 1   ↑

Picture 18

> · 31 Aug 2020 ···
> Very disappointing of @oatly ..... we have already stopped buying the brand
> #boycottOatly

Picture 19

· 29 Aug 2020

Discovered that @oatly has partnered with Blackstone - an investment company who part own companies who are responsible for Amazon deforestation. I have done a full information post on Instagram and will from now on be moving my own purchases elsewhere

Thread key points:

Show this thread

Picture 20

7 Sep 2020   · · ·

Replying to @oatly

I will stop buying #oatly if you take fund for Blackstone – a company with ties with deforestation in the Amazon. #boycottoatly.

Picture 21

· 31 Aug 2020

Congratulations @oatly for single-handedly enabling Trump-funding Amazon deforesters Blackstone to greenwash their bio.

Show this thread

	205	16.3K	2
	Posts	Followers	Following

Blackstone
Learn how we're backing sustainable, plant-based alternatives to dairy with our investment in @oatly
bit.ly/32i4TvZ
345 Park Ave, New York, New York, 10065

Popular Scientific Summary

Reaching a sustainability of food production is critical as it contributes to more than 25 % of the global greenhouse gases and with a growing population that is demanding more resource intense products, it is becoming even more urgent. One of the solutions to the problem is the change of diet to a more plant-based one, to decrease the negative impacts of food consumption. When choosing to buy plant-based product from corporations only producing these foods, consumers except them to be both ethical and sustainable. What is interesting is what happens to these corporations when they make a misstep or something that is not appreciated by the consumers. For example, the corporation Oatly producing food products from oats took on a investor that is linked by many to deforestation of the Amazon forest. This caught media attention all accross the globe. The goal with this thesis was to look at what the consumers thought of this particular investment and how it ultimately affected the reputation of corporation known for sustainability, and also get a corporate perspective on the event. To gather the data, focus group interviews were held with a total of ten corporate consumers and one interview with a corporate representative. How the corporation communicated about the event to the public was looked at, both on its webpage, its social media channels and to some extent its traditional media communication. These were looked at through the perspective of a crisis communication theory to investigate what strategy the corporation used and if this shielded the corporate reputation. It became evident that the investment affected most of the consumers in how they think about the corporation and somewhere less likely to continue to buy the corporate products, but the results shows that it only mildly affected the corporate reputation, if at all.