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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CANCEL CULTURE AND BRAND
COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Bachelor Thesis

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I have written this Research paper/Bachelor Thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.

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Introduction

In 2018, the popular mass-market fashion brand H&M faced widespread cancellation, accusations of racism and boycotts after releasing an advertisement featuring a black child wearing a hoodie with the slogan "Coolest Monkey in the Jungle." The campaign sparked outrage across various social media platforms. (John, 2018) This case demonstrates the growing influence of cancel culture, in which companies face significant reputational damage due to perceived missteps in ways that can have immediate and far-reaching consequences. As consumer expectations of ethical behaviour and inclusivity continue to rise, cancel culture has become a critical issue for brand communication strategies in the digital age.

Similarly, in 2024, Djerf Avenue, the company founded by well-known Swedish influencer Matilda Djerf, faced serious backlash as a result of investigation by the Swedish newspaper that had revealed claims of a toxic workplace culture inside the company: 11 current and former employees reported verbal abuse, bullying, favouritism and body-shaming, which significantly contradict with the brand's public image of inclusivity and empowerment (Faulkner, 2024; Acheson, 2024). This controversy damaged brand's reputation as well raised broader concerns among social media users about the authenticity of influencers' companies that promote progressive values, but apparently fail to follow them in reality.

Digitalization, specifically development of social media has drastically changed the way society communicates (Crimmins, 2022), giving individuals the power to influence public discourse and call out organizations for their actions (Hooks, 2020). This shift has transformed the societal norms of ethical behaviour. Public exposure of certain behaviours through digital platforms can decrease personal and perceived social acceptance of such actions (Arias, 2019). And this evolving dynamic has given rise to a the phenomenon that really sparks my interest and I plan to discover in this bachelor thesis — cancel culture. As Clark (2020) highlights, the widespread accessibility of social media channels has made the concept of "cancel culture" possible.

Since we are living in the era where corporate accountability and ethical values are prioritized by consumers (Öberseder et al., 2014; Edmond, 2023), brand communication strategies should align with principles of transparency, inclusivity, and accountability. Consumers now expect brands to not only deliver quality products or services, but also reflect ethical principles that align with public values. Cancel culture

“offers a way for minorities to push for changes that reflect equity and social justice” (Wong, 2022, p. 71). This focus on accountability introduced new challenges for brand communication strategies in the context of rapid growth of cancel culture. Cancellation might escalate very quickly (Crimmins, 2022), giving brands little time to formulate an adequate response and resulting in reputational and financial damage, making it important to understand how brands can navigate cancellation. The author believes that addressing this issue is crucial for maintaining brand reputation and desired brand perception. Upon reviewing literature related to the topic of cancel culture, it has come to the author's attention that there needs to be more studies examining the relationship between cancel culture and brand communication strategies, highlighting first-hand experiences of the brands. While existing research mostly focuses on cancel culture from consumer perspective and its overall consequences for brand reputation (Zhang et al., 2023; Costa & Azevedo, 2024; Tandoc et al. 2024; Lopes, 2022; Gomes da Costa, 2022), limited attention has been given to how companies prepare for potential cancellation, how they develop brand communication strategies applicable in case of crisis situations caused by cancel culture, creating a research gap.

So the aim of this study is to find out how companies manage their brand communication strategies in relation to cancel culture. To achieve this aim, the following research tasks have been formulated:

- Defining the concept of cancel culture and giving the overview of cancel culture, exploring the reasons as well as consequences of cancel culture behaviours
- Exploring the importance of brand communication strategies within the concept of cancel culture
- Conducting the interviews with the companies' representatives that are responsible for forming brand communication strategies
- Analysing the collected data and drawing conclusions based on the findings

The structure of this bachelor thesis is organized into two main sections, corresponding to the theoretical and empirical parts. The first chapter establishes the theoretical foundation of the study by defining and providing the overview of cancel culture, highlighting its role in shaping brand communication strategies, investigating

the relationship between cancel culture and brand perception, and overviewing the previous research on the cancel culture.

The second chapter is dedicated to the empirical part of the thesis. The empirical analysis consists of the data and methodology, the analysis of results, and the discussion of findings. The first subchapter aims to provide a detailed overview of the methodology and sample size. The author conducted interviews with specialists responsible for managing brand communication within their companies, exploring strategies they apply for handling potential cancellation scenarios. While conducting interviews, the author obtained valuable insights into how companies manage their brand communication strategies in relation to cancel culture, focusing on how they navigate the reputational risks associated with potential cancellations. The second subchapter presents the analysis of interviews. The part of the analysis of interviews examines qualitative information gained through interviews.

Keywords: cancel culture, brand communication strategies, crisis communication, reputational risks

1. Cancel culture as an important factor in shaping brand communication strategies

1.1. The overview of cancel culture: defining the phenomenon of cancel culture

In the first subchapter the author analyses the definitions of cancel culture, defines the triggers of cancel culture behaviours, explores the role of social media in the context of cancel culture, and defines the consequences of cancel culture behaviours.

Cancel culture is a response that reflects collective disapproval of some offensive actions, often involving the withdrawal of support from brands or individuals, and is frequently accelerated by social media. Cancel culture was defined quite a lot before. Table 1, that is presented in Appendix A, represents some of the definitions.

Based on those definitions, cancel culture appears to be a complex phenomenon that consists of individual, social, and cultural components. The main common aspect of all analysed definitions is the withdrawal of support, as a response to perceived unethical behaviours, violations of societal norms and values. For example, Clark (2020) describes cancel culture as the withdrawal of attention, support and resources, such as money and time, in response to offensive, problematic actions, statements or values. Ng (2020) and Lee & Abidin (2021) extend this concept by emphasizing that cancel culture addresses behaviours such as sexism, racism, or bullying, and involves actions like unfollowing

and boycotting on social media, or cancelling purchases. Authors such as Tandoc et al. (2024) and Zhang et al. (2023) focus more on the collective nature of cancel culture. They describe cancel culture as a collective disengagement or a call to action against perceived ethical stains, while Gomes da Costa (2022) and Costa & Azevedo (2023) add to the definition that it is driven by generational values, especially among Millennials and Gen Z.

Lopes (2022), Zhang et al. (2023) and Tandoc et al. (2024) present social media as a central platform that amplifies cancel culture, allowing backlash to spread rapidly. However, some authors such as Clark (2020) and Reyes-Fournier (2022) do not mention the social media at all. This indicates that although social media frequently acts as a catalyst and is important component of cancel culture, it is not specifically considered intrinsic to cancel culture, cancellation may happen outside of social media platforms.

Another aspect of comparison is perceived intentions and purpose of cancel culture. For some, cancel culture is a tool for advocacy and justice. Lee & Abidin (2021), for example, connect it to high-profile social justice movements like #MeToo, which aim to address systemic issues. Gomes da Costa (2022) and Costa & Azevedo (2023) link cancel culture's rise to generational characteristics of Millennials and Gen Z, who use it as a vehicle for societal change. In contrast, Reyes-Fournier (2022) views cancel culture more as punitive measure, with no assumption of redemption or change. Definitions of cancel culture also differ on its scope. While some focus on individuals, such as public figures or influencers (Ng, 2020; Clark, 2020), others talk about the concept in the context of organizations and brands (Zhang et al., 2023). The broader scope aligns with the collective nature of cancel culture, which Tandoc et al. (2024) describe as engagement in public shaming to hold the target accountable for socially unacceptable behaviour.

Overall, the definitions share both similarities and differences in how cancel culture is understood. While some definitions emphasize its collective nature and actions like boycotting or unfollowing, perspectives differ on intentions and scope of cancel culture. For some, it serves as a tool for advocacy and social justice, driven by younger generations seeking systemic change, while others see it purely as a punishment mechanism.

Since cancel culture can be considered as a quite recent phenomenon, “a new type of negative brand relationship” (Costa & Azevedo, 2023, p. 291), it is crucial to identify the main reasons that trigger cancelling behaviours. Studies identify a wide range of triggers of cancel culture, but ethical violations and ideological incompatibilities stand out as the most significant. Racism, sexism, discrimination, and social privilege consistently emerge as primary causes (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Gomes da Costa, 2022; Zhang et al, 2023). Racism was actually found to be the main trigger, with 78.1% of respondents marking it as “very important” (Costa & Azevedo, 2023).

Interestingly, cancellation can be caused by lack of statement on some social issue, meaning that the company’s fear to make any statements may lead to cancelling, it is not acceptable for a brand to not have the explicit opinion, or keep silent nowadays, otherwise it would be seen as complicit (Bakhtiari, 2020). These findings underscore the increasing expectation for brands to uphold progressive values. It also became evident that cancelling can also be elevated by situations, in which companies do attempt to address the social problematic topics, but execute their campaigns or actions in a way that appears tone-deaf, inauthentic, or insensitive with the cause they aim to support (Gomez-Mejia, 2020; Crimmins, 2022).

Ideological incompatibility plays a significant role, as highlighted by Zhang et al. (2023) and Yates & Carolina (2021). When a brand’s actions or statements conflict with consumer beliefs, particularly on political, social, or environmental issues, consumer loyalty can quickly go away. Highly reputable brands are particularly vulnerable in such scenarios, as their perceived „betrayal“ intensifies consumer backlash (Costa & Azevedo, 2023). When expectations are high, even small missteps can trigger strong public backlash. However, according to Saldanha et al. (2022), customers are less likely to cancel the brand, if they have strong emotional attachment towards it. These ideological conflicts are amplified through social media, where consumers demand accountability and change. Therefore, social media is both an accelerator and a catalyst of cancel culture. Given the role of social media, influencer management is another key consideration, when it comes to triggers of cancelling. Zhang et al. (2023) highlight the role of influencers in shaping consumer perceptions and driving cancellations. Carefully checking influencer partnerships and ensuring alignment with brand values are essential to minimizing risks. Lopes (2022) illustrates how viral hashtags and influencer narratives shape collective outrage. Similarly, Zhang et al. (2023) demonstrate that posts shared by credible influencers significantly increase the likelihood of cancellations,

especially when consumers have strong parasocial relationships with these individuals. Parasocial relationships are one-sided psychological connections that people develop with celebrities, influencers, brands, despite having no direct interaction with them (Zhang et al, 2023; Liu & Wang, 2025). These findings highlight the important role of social media influencers and in general social media platforms in escalating and spreading cancel culture.

Figure 1 combines the main attributes of cancel culture, depicting the process of cancel culture: starting from the main triggers in the centre, surrounded by accelerators and followed by consequences.

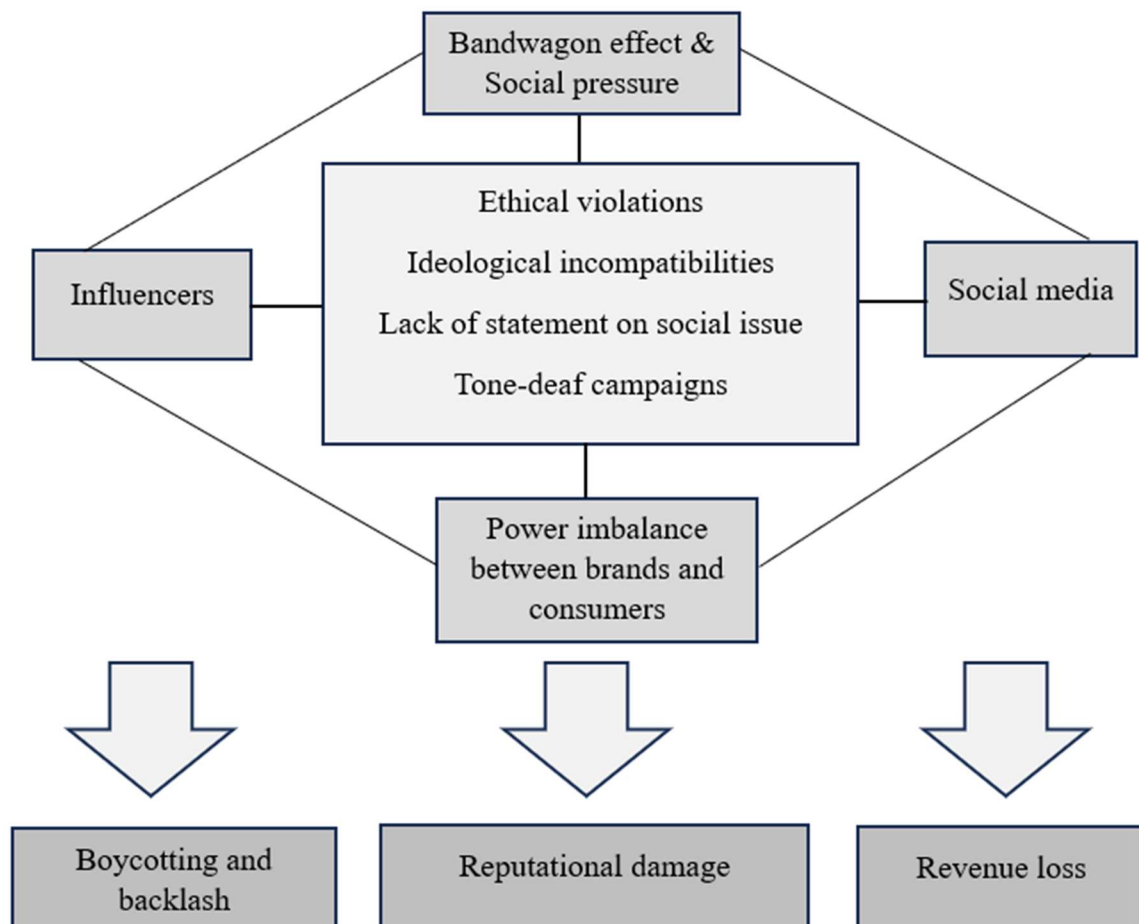


Figure 1 Cancel culture framework: triggers, accelerators and consequences

Source: Compiled by the author based on Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Gomes da Costa, 2022; Crimmins, 2022; Bakhtiari, 2020; Gomez-Mejia, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023; Tandoc et al, 2024.

The major motivation of consumers to participate in cancellation is the desire to enforce accountability and justice, cancelling is seen as a way to demand responsibility and corrective action from brands whose practices have been unethical. For some

consumers engaging in cancel culture means raising awareness about broader societal issues. In such cases cancelling is not only a punitive action but also an educational tool to inform others on some injustice issues. (Tandoc et al, 2022) Social influence and the bandwagon effect also contribute significantly to cancelling behaviours. Bandwagon effect refers to the tendency of an individual “to adopt the viewpoint of the majority” (Bindra et al., 2022). This effect is specifically relevant in the context of social media, where individuals' purchase decisions are impacted by the collective choices and views of other people (Oan-Oon & Choibamroong, 2024). Many consumers join cancelling campaigns because of prevailing social norms or pressure by the society to seek justice, the need for social acceptance and validation. Studies even reveal that engaging in cancellation is not significantly correlated with consumers' prior preference or purchase history with the cancelled brand. The perception of power dynamics also plays an important role, cancelling gives consumers a sense of empowerment, especially in scenarios, where there is a perceived imbalance between brands and consumers. And social media's accessibility and anonymity make it even easier for users to engage in cancel culture, allowing it to spread very quickly. (Zhang et al., 2023; Tandoc et al., 2022; Saldanha et al., 2022; Cummings et al., 2024; Bouvier and Machin, 2021) However, the results of surveys show that most of the people participating in cancelling do not want the cancelled brand to „go away“ completely, they often aim for accountability and change instead (Gomes da Costa, 2022; Tandoc et al., 2024; Yates & Carolina, 2021). Studies also show that probability of cancellation is higher for substitutable types of products, hence, in case of brands operating in highly competitive markets, the consequences of being cancelled can be particularly significant (Cummings et al., 2024).

As it was stated before, social media plays an important role in accelerating and fuelling the cancel culture behaviours. Usually cancellation takes place on the social media (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Tandoc et al., 2024, Zhang et al., 2023). And the term cancel culture is inextricably linked to social media, especially Twitter (currently known as “X”) (Klausner & Klausner, 2022; Bouvier, 2020). Twitter has now become the platform for social justice (Bouvier & Machin, 2021). Social media users usually start using hashtags, share short posts or messages that are called “tweets”, to express their disappointment, loss of trust, or any other feeling connected to negative experience with the brand. The most popular channel for cancelling is through eWOM (electronic word-

of-mouth) (Zhang et al., 2023). Electronic word-of-mouth refers to any comments about a product or company spread via the internet to a large audience (Dolan et al., 2019). Cancellation through eWOM usually happens in the following way: the wrongdoing that triggered cancellation gets a collective reaction, with users sharing the post widely and expressing their disappointment through comments, retweets, and hashtags. As the conversation gains momentum, it frequently escalates into a larger movement, with calls for boycotts and demands for accountability. (Zhang et al., 2023) The most significant high-profile examples of cancellation cases on Twitter are #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter (Bouvier, 2020). Those social media movements have significantly influenced the business landscape, forcing companies to reevaluate their practices, public statements, and even branding and positioning of some products. For example, to avoid and prevent cancellation, the name of one of the products by PepsiCo was changed to eliminate racially insensitive association, demonstrating a commitment to social responsibility. The syrup that had been named “Aunt Jemima” was rebranded to Pearl Milling Co. (Latham, 2024; Saldanha et al., 2022). According to surveys in the U.S, 60% of the U.S. population state that the reaction of the brand towards racial justice protests impacts their decision to whether buy or boycott the brand in the future (Menon & Kiesler, 2021). This shows that cancel culture, which is driven by social media movements, significantly affects brands’ behaviour, making it very important to not only make responsive changes after cancelling behaviours arise, such as issuing apologies, but also to have strategies that prevent full-scale cancel culture, or to adopt preventive measures as rebranding like in that particular case.

Another important aspect that comes to mind when thinking about cancel culture is the consequences of cancel culture, and how those consequences are impacting brand perception, consumer behaviour, and financial performance of a brand. It is essential to study the long-term consequences of cancelling behaviours for companies to be able to respond to such crisis as cancellation (Mueller, 2021). But it is also important to understand that the aim of cancel culture, as it is revealed in Tandoc et al. (2024) and Yates & Carolina (2021) papers, is very rarely to eliminate brands entirely, but rather seek accountability and change in business practises. That is why the process of cancellation itself is quite short – usually lasts months, sometimes even weeks (Allen, 2021). The author thinks that navigating cancel culture can actually lead to improved brand loyalty. Delivering the right messages and taking timely actions provide brands

with opportunities to build stronger relationships with their consumers, position their values clearer, enhance transparency, and show consumers their opinions are acknowledged and genuinely matter to the brand (Costa & Azevedo, 2023). However, failure to address public concerns promptly and properly can result in long-lasting damage to brand perception, where “image repair is mandatory” (Costa & Azevedo, 2023, p. 295). Because of the lack of action, or insufficient response, cancellation on social media often leads to boycotting, hating, avoiding the brand, backlash, online shaming and brand value write-offs (Gomes da Costa, 2022; Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Yates & Carolina, 2021). According to Saldanha et al. (2022), the long-term effects of cancel culture include revenue loss, terminated contracts, reputational damage, and damage to brand positioning. The financial impact of cancel culture is also essential aspect to consider. Marwick (2021) provides case studies illustrating how cancellations lead to terminated sponsorships, lost revenue, and diminished market positioning. Lopes (2022) adds that impact of cancel culture often have effects on associated brands, partners or collaborators of the cancelled brand. The rapid spread of electronic word-of-mouth only intensifies these consequences, as negative narratives quickly gain attention across platforms.

1.2. The importance of brand communication strategies in the context of cancel culture

In this subchapter, the author defines brand communication strategies, introduces the main theories of crisis communication, and discusses the role of brand communication strategies in the context of cancel culture.

Cancel culture has emerged as a complex phenomenon that significantly affects brand’s marketing practises (Crimmins, 2022). It operates at the intersection of societal norms, consumer expectations, and social media, often forcing brands to navigate ethical dilemmas and public accountability under scrutiny (Tandoc et al., 2024; Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). And its influence reshapes how brands engage with their audiences, respond to crises, and align with evolving societal values (Yates & Carolina, 2021; Lopes, 2022).

Studies indicate that a significant proportion of consumers are willing to take action against brands based on ethical considerations. For instance, 55% of online adults in the United States are prepared to boycott a brand due to unethical business practices (Proulx, 2022). And the global survey by Edelman (2018), involving 8,000 respondents across eight markets, including the U.S., Japan, the UK, and Germany, found that 64%

of consumers are likely to buy or boycott a brand solely based on its position on social or political issues. Those results show that underestimating the role of cancel culture in how brand is perceived by customers can lead to unfortunate consequences, such as damaged reputation, loss of consumer trust, and significant declines in sales, ultimately impacting the brand's long-term success and market positioning. Meaning that it is crucial to take cancel culture into consideration, while adopting communication strategies. Brand communication strategies refer to the methods businesses use to communicate with their customers and stakeholders about their products, services, and values (Shaik et al., 2025). These strategies incorporate both planned efforts, such as advertising, public relations, and social media engagement, and unplanned interactions, like customer feedback and word-of-mouth, including electronic word-of-mouth (Mudzanani, 2015). Through brand communication strategies, brands' core beliefs and principles are expressed, impacting the brand's capitalization and growth (Palevska et al., 2023). Customers are more likely to associate themselves with a brand and be attached to it if the brand's values resonate with their own. The ultimate goal is to build brand equity, cultivate trust in the brand's mission and credibility, and align with consumer expectations by delivering consistent and meaningful messages across all touchpoints. Managing the image of the company in the consumers' eyes is major for the brand (Krupka, 2023). Therefore, it can be concluded that brand communication strategies play a significant role in shaping the brand perception. More and more companies are investing extensively in building a strong social media presence to improve consumer interactions and increase revenue (Nguyen, 2020). And since all brand-related communication distributed via social media can be considered brand communication (Fang et al., 2023), its role becomes particularly critical in the context of cancel culture, where social media may act as both a platform for backlash and, most importantly, a tool for brands to rebuild trust, address public concerns, and demonstrate accountability. Proactive engagement is equally important. Tandoc et al. (2024) emphasized the need for brands to monitor public sentiment and address any issues before they escalate into significant problems. Engaging directly with the audience and demonstrating a commitment to societal values can help strengthen brand credibility and loyalty.

However, as was mentioned earlier, addressing public concerns, or taking some actions on important social issues does not necessarily shield brands from backlash (Mirzaei et al., 2021). Because every statement or action that brand makes should be authentic and carefully thought through, otherwise brand may be cancelled for woke

washing (Mirzaei et al., 2021). Moreover, inadequate communication strategies might influence the brand perception in a more harmful way and lead to additional damage, intensifying the initial crisis (Diulio & Arendt, 2017). That is exactly why coherent brand communication strategies are essential, they help brands mitigate reputational damage and align their messaging with societal values to navigate the challenges caused by cancel culture by enabling brands to respond transparently and authentically. The findings collectively emphasize the importance of proactive, transparent, and authentic communication strategies in navigating cancel culture. Mueller (2021) mentioned right timing of messages, trainings for crises situations, social media usage policies, but no specific and useful methodologies or illustrative cases were presented. And according to Costa & Azevedo (2023), brands have the potential to regain consumer trust and forgiveness, which can lead to enhanced word-of-mouth promotion and stronger purchase intentions in the future. Both papers emphasize the importance of brand communication strategies. However, existing research lacks a comprehensive framework that examines how companies manage their brand communication strategies in relation to cancel culture. That would be vital for understanding of how companies prepare for and manage incidents before they escalate into crises, when cancelling can be prevented.

A crisis occurs when the company is perceived responsible for the offensive act, and the act itself is considered offensive (Benoit, 1997). This statement aligns really well within cancel culture settings. When it comes to cancel culture, public perception is the main determinant of reputational damage: whether the brand is really responsible for an issue matters less than whether consumers consider it to be responsible. (Benoit, 1997)

To analyse how brands proactively prepare for crises, what strategies they have in case of cancellation, this research applies the Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007), it represents a framework for crisis communication, emphasizing that crisis response strategies should include not only post-crisis strategies but pre-crisis strategies as well (Jaques, 2007). To gain a comprehensive understanding of how brands act to defend themselves when their reputation is already at risk – whether they have faced cancel culture or experienced a problematic incident, but full-scale cancellation did not occur yet, my research applies the Theory of Image Restoration Discourse by Benoit (1997) and Situational Crisis Communication theory by Coombs (2007a) (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007a). Those theories are basically the framework for choosing the most suitable crisis response strategy (Park, 2017). However, unlike Jaques (2007a), Benoit (1997) and Coombs (2007a) focus solely on

post-crisis stages. So the author combines strategies from both theories and a model to compile a comprehensive full-phase crisis integrated model, presented as Figure 2, which illustrates the importance of both pre-crisis and post-crisis strategies equally.

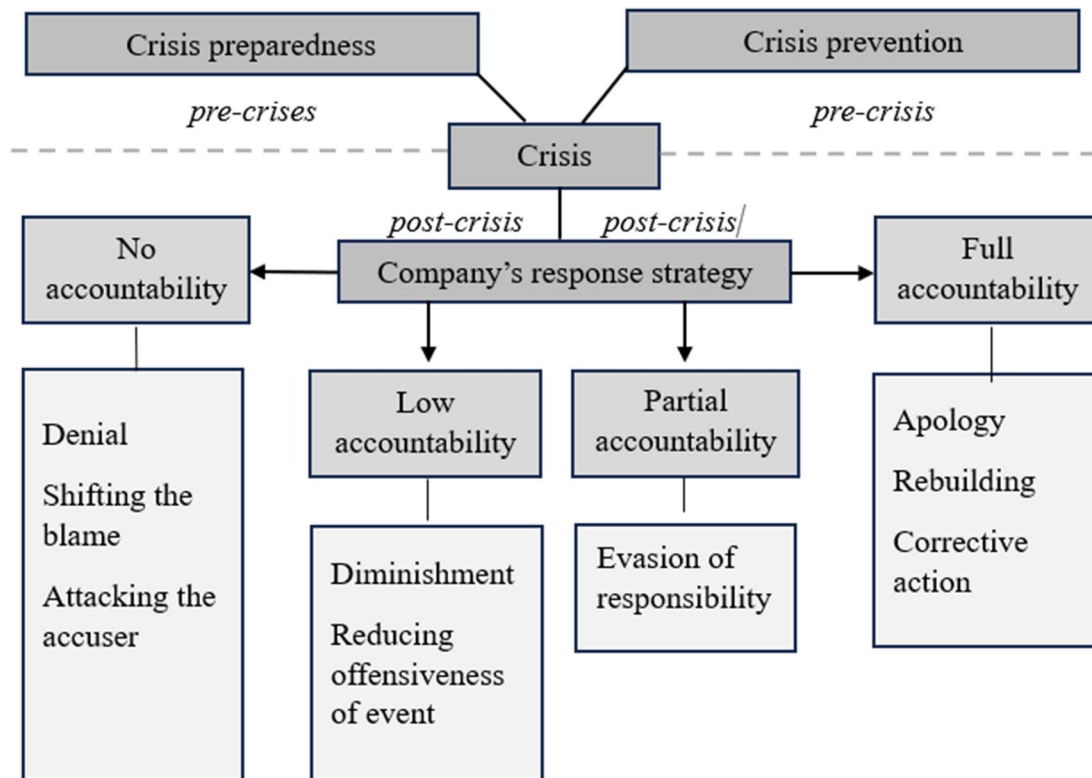


Figure 2 Full-phase crisis integrated model

Source: Compiled by the author based on Jaques, 2007; Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007a.

According to Jaques (2014), not having the prepared crisis planning results in much higher costs for the company than investing in preparedness strategies. The two primary segments of pre-crisis strategy include crisis prevention and crisis preparedness. Crisis preparedness does not necessarily prevent crisis from occurring, but it helps companies to respond in a way that minimizes reputational damage. Crisis preparedness strategies include having a crisis management team, the predefined system of distribution of roles: who reports to whom and who makes decisions during a crisis, materials prepared in advance such as statement templates, and organizational information. One of the most important components is testing of communication strategies beforehand. (Jaques, 2014)

Crisis prevention segment is driven by the goal of taking timely actions to reduce the possibility of crisis occurring in the first place. Those strategies include close monitoring of public sentiment and “social forecasting”. Another interesting

recommendation is trainings for company's communicators and PR-specialists to identify triggers that could potentially lead to crisis in the past. (Jaques, 2014)

In case a crisis does happen despite implementing preventive strategies, the focus shifts to how companies respond on early stages. Companies' responses vary depending on the level of accountability they are taking. So the author categorised responses into four groups: No Accountability, Low Accountability, Partial Accountability, and Full Accountability. And each category contains specific strategies that companies apply. Under "No accountability" group, organizations do not take any responsibility for the crisis, they may attempt to distance themselves from the offensive act by either denying any wrongdoing, putting responsibility on someone else for the incident, or questioning the motives or credibility of those who are criticizing the company. Overall, „the denial strategies aim to remove any blame and association with the organization involved in the crisis“ (Cooper, 2015, p. 7).

Under "Low accountability", the company somehow acknowledges the crisis but tries to downplay, belittle its significance. These strategies aim to shift consumers' perception and reduce the level of blame put on the company. It might include stating that the issue isn't as severe as it seems, or reminding of previous positive actions of the company to offset negative perceptions, comparing the current issue with more serious ones. (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007a; Park, 2017; Cooper, 2015)

When company takes the partial accountability, it may frame its actions as a response to someone else's action, quite similar to the "Shifting the blame" that falls under "No accountability", but the key difference lies in the acknowledgement of some responsibility for the act instead of full denial. Another typical strategy for that category is emphasizing the fact that the incident was unintentional or accidental, and/or the company's initial intentions were good, even though something went wrong. (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007a; Park, 2017; Cooper, 2015)

"Full accountability" level means that the company fully takes responsibility for the act and focuses on rebuilding trust with stakeholders. This is the most proactive approach out of four. The primary strategy is to openly acknowledge the crisis and take the action to fix the problem and implementing concrete steps to prevent future occurrences. Sincere apology and admitting the fault also plays an important role. (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007a; Park, 2017; Cooper, 2015)

For the thorough analysis of effect of cancel culture behaviours on brand communication strategies, the Means-End theory will be applied. It demonstrates that

consumers perceive the brands and make their decisions based on a hierarchical chain of attributes, consequences and values, where brands' actions (attributes) lead to consumer reactions (consequences), ultimately shaped by deeper personal beliefs and societal expectations (values). The theory suggests that consumers do not simply engage with brands based on their products but rather because of the values associated with them. (Reynolds & Olson, 2001) Therefore, cancel culture behaviours can be seen as a reflection of deep disconnect between customer and brand values. In my work Means-End theory is used for analysing what role consumer values play in shaping brand communication strategies: how brands interpret consumer values and expectations of the brand, and how they develop or adapt communication strategies to mitigate potential cancel culture crises.

In summary, cancel culture should not be considered only as a cultural phenomenon, from the business perspective cancel culture is able to redefine the relationship between brands and their stakeholders. "When consumers engage in cancelling brands, it creates a challenging environment for marketers" (Saldanha et al., 2022). It challenges brands to operate in an environment where public accountability is demanded, and where brands are extremely vulnerable to cancel culture effects. (Saldanha et al., 2022) At its core, cancel culture reflects the shift from transactional to relational branding. Consumers are no longer passive recipients of messaging, they are active participants that shape the narrative and demand the alignment with their values. (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Tandoc et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, it is no longer enough for brands only to respond to crises caused by cancel culture, they must cultivate an organizational culture with coherent communication strategies that aligns with societal expectations before crises arise. Having coherent brand communication strategies and positive authentic relationships with consumers can prevent negative brand behaviour (Velasco, 2020). The unpredictable nature of cancel culture is amplified by how rapidly information spreads on social media, it presents both a challenge and an opportunity. While missteps can escalate quickly, the same platforms also allow brands to engage directly with their audiences, rebuild trust, and demonstrate accountability in real time. Brands can navigate the challenges caused by cancel culture by applying coherent communication strategies. (Costa & Azevedo, 2023)

One of the critical insights lies in the power of emotional connection of the customer with the brand, since consumers are more likely to forgive brands with which they feel a deep alignment with (Saldanha et al., 2022). This emphasizes the importance of fostering genuine relationships built on shared values with the customer. Overall, the

analysed literature provided valuable insights into cancel culture as a social phenomenon, and how it can affect companies' both reputation and finances. The reviewed studies explored the triggers, reasons, and motivations behind cancelling behaviour, as well as the consequences and effects of cancel culture on brands. However, there is a gap in research that would examine cancel culture not from the consumers' perspective, but from the brands' perspective. Specifically, there is a lack of studies addressing real-life cases of brands and communication strategies that they adopt. The Table 2, that is presented in Appendix A, represents summary of previous studies on cancel culture.

2. Empirical study of brands and their brand communication strategies: preparing for and responding to cancel culture

2.1. Methodology overview of the empirical study

In this subchapter, the methodology that the author has used to conduct the empirical analysis will be discussed. Methodology relies on the previous studies that were discussed in the theoretical chapter, with focus on finding out how companies manage their brand communication strategies in relation to cancel culture.

This study employs a qualitative research approach. The qualitative approach is highly valuable for investigating complex social phenomena, allowing researchers to capture nuanced in-depth perspectives, personal insights and experiences (Dźwigoł, 2024). While the previous studies mostly relied on online surveys or interviews with consumers that participated in cancelling (Zhang et al., 2023; Costa & Azevedo, 2024; Tandoc et al. 2024; Lopes, 2022; Gomes da Costa, 2022), the author conducts semi-structured interviews with the companies' representatives that are in charge of brand communications. The methodology is designed to explore the brand perspective on cancel culture, addressing a gap in the existing literature that mainly focuses on consumers' side in the context of cancel culture. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their ability to balance structure and flexibility for participants to share their insights while ensuring the discussion remained aligned with research topics. The interview responses provide a clear picture of companies' experiences with cancel culture: how they perceive it and manage their communication to minimize reputational damage in the case of arising cancel culture. The step-by-step plan of empirical analysis can be seen from the Figure 3.

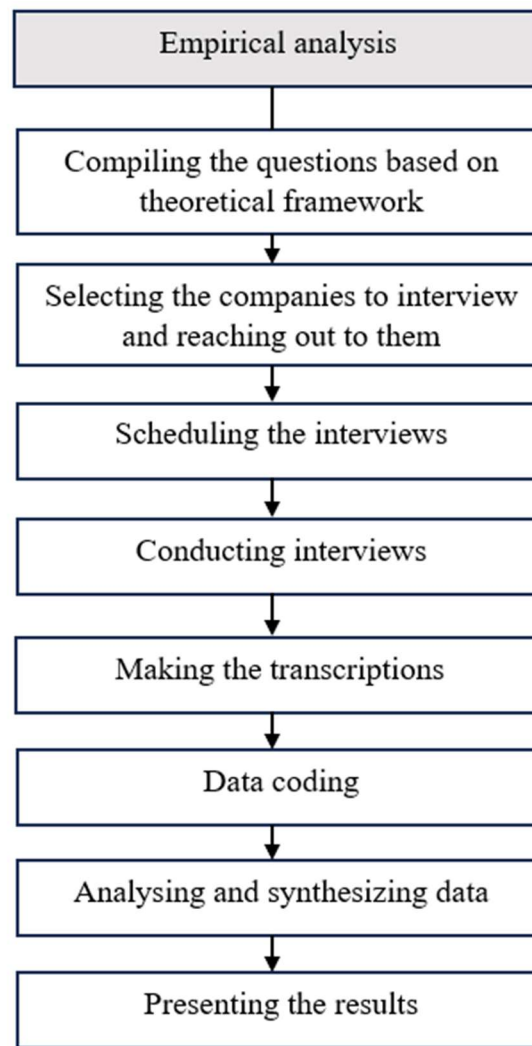


Figure 3 Step-by-step plan of empirical analysis

Source: Compiled by the author

The first step is compiling the questions based on the theoretical framework.

The questions for the interviews were prepared with accordance to the theoretical part discussed in the first chapter, particularly based on the Crisis Management Relational Model (Jaques, 2007; Jaques 2014), Theory of Image Restoration Discourse (Benoit, 1997), Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007a), and Means-End Theory (Reynolds & Olson, 2001). The list of questions is presented in the Appendix C. The questions are divided into four sections: understanding cancel culture and perception of risk; brand and consumer values; planning of communication strategies; crisis response.

The first section “Understanding cancel culture and perception of risk” is aimed at uncovering how cancel culture is perceived, how companies assess its relevance and risk for their brands. Questions about specific triggers of cancellation that are especially relevant to

the brand, and past incidents that could have led to cancellation are formed based on the first chapter's discussion on the main causes of cancel culture. As was discussed in the first chapter, Costa & Azevedo (2023), Zhang et al. (2023) and Bakhtiari (2020) identified the primary reasons of cancel culture behaviours, highlighting ethical violations, ideological incompatibilities between customers' and brand's values, lack of statement on social issue, and insensitive tone-deaf campaigns.

The second section focuses on the role of brand values and how they align with consumer expectations in a time when cancel culture is highly topical and brands are increasingly held accountable for their actions and messaging. The questions are mostly grounded in the Means-End Theory (Reynolds & Olson, 2001), which explains that consumer decisions are guided by deeper personal beliefs and societal values, rather than just product attributes. For example, Gomes da Costa (2022) and Costa & Azevedo (2023) in their papers state that cancel culture is mostly driven by Millennials and Gen Z, who prioritize social responsibility and ethical alignment. As a result, brands need to adapt and to reflect new values in their messaging. This was the basis for the question about shifts in societal expectations over recent years, aiming to explore whether companies have recognised these shifts and adapted their communication strategies accordingly.

The third section "Planning of communication strategies" addresses how brands plan their communication strategies to minimise reputational risks in the context of cancel culture. These questions are mostly grounded in Jaques' (2007, 2014) Integrated Crisis Communication Model, which highlights the importance of both crisis prevention and preparedness. This category of questions helps the author understand whether companies have established proactive measures such as predefined communication plans, prepared in advance statement templates, internal trainings to support crisis readiness. For instance, Jaques (2014) emphasizes the importance of pre-defined roles in managing crises, so one of the questions aims to understand whether companies have established their internal structures to coordinate their response in times of a crisis. In addition to planning, this category also considers the processes by which brands develop and approve campaigns, as well as how they evaluate external collaborators such as brand ambassadors or influencers. Previous research by Gomez-Mejia (2020) highlights that brand values that do not align with consumers' values and expectations, or insensitive campaigns can significantly damage brand reputation. Furthermore, this section addresses whether companies reflect on the past experiences of other companies and incorporate insights into their own preventive strategies, a practice Jaques (2014) referred to as social forecasting (Jaques, 2014).

The fourth section focuses on how brands respond during the early stages of reputational crises caused by cancel culture. This category is mostly based on Benoit's (1997) Image Restoration Theory and Coombs' (2007a) Situational Crisis Communication Theory, both of which explore how organisations choose response strategies based on perceived accountability. By asking those questions, the author wants to find out what initial response strategies brands apply in case of facing potential cancel culture, using the *Full-phase crisis integrated model* compiled by the author. This section explores how companies monitor and evaluate the public's reaction to their campaigns, with an emphasis on consumer sentiment and social media engagement, these aspects are critical in the context of cancel culture, since public backlash can escalate rapidly and responsive communication strategies depend on a brand's ability to detect and address negative sentiment quickly (Zhang et al., 2023; Tandoc et al., 2024).

The next step of the empirical analysis was selecting the companies to interview and contacting them. Companies to interview were selected based on their active engagement in marketing activities, including various campaigns and advertisements. As cancel culture is closely tied to public perception, only companies from business-to-consumer industries that operate within the Baltic region were considered. The decision to focus on companies that operate in the Baltics was influenced by the fact that it is more feasible to get in touch with such companies. Another factor that influenced the selection was author's personal interest in investigating companies with strong reputation, as previous studies have shown that highly reputable brands are particularly vulnerable when facing cancel culture (Costa & Azevedo, 2023), making it particularly relevant to see how such reputable companies prepare for and manage reputational risks caused by cancel culture. As discussed in theoretical part, social media is considered both catalyst and accelerator of cancel culture: it plays an important role in the spreading of cancel culture, while also providing companies with platforms to engage directly with their audience and rebuild trust with customers (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Tandoc et al., 2024, Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, only companies with an active social media presence were considered. The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method, ensuring that the insights gathered are directly relevant to the research aim. So the main criteria for selecting the companies include:

- Active engagement in marketing activities (frequent campaigns and advertisements)
- Business-to-consumer industry
- Operation within the Baltic region

- Strong brand reputation
- Social media presence

In total, the author reached out via email to Communications managers and PR specialists from 17 companies, 4 companies agreed to participate. Three of the selected companies operate in retail sector, and one is a service-based company. Among the retail companies, two are international companies, while one is a large Estonian brand. The fourth company provides service-based platform and operates internationally, although it does not operate in retail, it still falls under the category of business-to-consumer industries. All four brands are considered well-known and widely recognised for their strong reputations and trusted brand images across Baltic markets, based on their market performance and customer satisfaction indicators. They engage in frequent various marketing campaigns and advertisements, making them suitable for the empirical exploration of their communication strategies in the context of cancel culture.

Given the sensitive nature of cancel culture, all interviewed companies preferred to remain anonymous. Anonymity encouraged openness and honest reflection during the interviews, allowing participants to share internal practices, communication strategies, perceptions, and challenges. The interviews were conducted in April of 2025. Interviewed brand representatives were in charge of communication and/or marketing activities within the companies. Table 4 represents an overview of the interviewed participants.

Table 4

An overview of interviewed participants

Participant	Position of the interviewed specialists	Company industry	Country
P1	Communications and marketing manager	Retail	International
P2	Head of PR	Service provider	International
P3	Communications manager	Retail	Estonian
P4	Head of Marketing; Baltic Communications manager	Retail	International

Source: Compiled by the author

Three interviews were conducted via the video conferencing platform Microsoft Teams, lasting between 56 minutes and 77 minutes, with the average duration of 65 minutes.

One interview was conducted via email, and resulted in a six-page written response. An overview of interviews conducted can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

An overview of interviews conducted

Participant	Date of the interview	Length (in minutes/pages)
P1	11.04.25	77 minutes
P2	17.04.25	56 minutes
P3	29.04.25	62 minutes
P4	29.04.25	6 pages

Source: Compiled by the author

Although only four interviews were conducted, the author considers this number sufficient due to the qualitative and exploratory nature of the research. The main objective was to conduct an in-depth analysis of how specific companies approach their communication strategies in the context of cancel culture, focusing on prevention, preparedness, and early-stage response strategies. Each case of cancellation is unique, shaped by different triggers and public reactions, where context is critically important, and each situation should be addressed individually. Communication strategies vary across different fields and industries depending on every brand's values, target audience, even cultural differences. Rather than attempting to generalize findings across all industries or companies, this study prioritises uncovering in-depth insights and practical approaches of selected brands. The findings provide valuable insights from each company into how cancel culture is perceived, how brand as well as evolving consumer values influence communication strategies, how those strategies are shaped, and individual experiences of each brand with cancel culture.

After conducting the interviews, the author proceeded with the thematic data analysis. Thematic analysis strengthens the coherence and reliability of the findings, since it enables clear links to be drawn between the collected data, its interpretation, and the conclusions, minimising potential bias (Naeem et al., 2023). In this thesis, author applies six following steps of thematic analysis identified by Naeem et al. (2023) based on the Braun & Clarke (2006):

1. Transcription, Familiarization With the Data, and Selection of Quotations: the initial step is thoroughly reading through the text to grasp its content, and selecting quotes that highlight key themes. The interviews were transcribed using the built-in transcription feature in Microsoft Teams, subsequently carefully reviewed and corrected manually by the author.

2. Selection of Keywords: the second step is examining the data to identify repeated words and phrases that reflect participants' views, selecting keywords that capture the core ideas expressed. The repeated keywords were extracted from the text, focusing on terms that emerged frequently in the conversations. The author referred them to the theoretical framework discussed in the first chapter to ensure that selected theoretical keywords aligned with the research questions.
3. Coding: the third step is identifying common patterns in the data – codes, and grouping similar codes into categories. In the coding process, I manually analyzed the interview data to bring out codes, and then grouped similar codes into one category. For example, under the category „Reflection of core values in messaging“, the codes such as „Customer First“, „Transparency“, and „Authenticity“ are grouped, because they all represent fundamental values that participants identified as crucial in shaping their brand communication strategies. These codes were consistently mentioned in relation to how companies shape their communication.
4. Theme Development: the fourth step is grouping categories into themes. Similar to the previous step, the author grouped categories into the broader themes. For example, categories such as „Delegation of responsibilities“, „Preparedness“, and „Process of campaign development“ were grouped together under the theme „Planning of communication strategies: proactive strategies & crisis preparedness“.
5. Conceptualization Through Interpretation of Keywords, Codes, and Themes: the fifth step is analysing and defining concepts from the data.
6. Producing the report: the sixth step is integrating analysis with theoretical framework. All the emerged themes are linked to the theoretical framework discussed in the first chapter. For instance, „Planning of communication strategies: proactive strategies & crisis preparedness“ aligns with the Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007).

Applying a thematic analysis, the author identified codes, categories and themes. An example from the coding table is presented in Table 6. The complete coding table can be found in Appendix D.

Table 6

Example from the coding table

Quote	Code	Category
“We definitely look over every campaign, team thinks through the campaign message, makes sure the communication is clear, it’s not offensive.”	Campaign review	
“Every Monday we have meetings, where we have all teams deciding, brainstorming.”	Weekly meetings, brainstorming together	
“We give very clear guidelines to all brand ambassadors...tone of voice and language – not to be offensive, to be a bit humorous, which aligns with our brand.”	Clear guidelines, tone of voice and language	Alignment of brand messages with values
“We rely on strong team instincts and local knowledge ... we do not work with partners whose values do not match ours.”	Local knowledge, matching values	

Source: compiled by the author

The detailed discussion and analysis of the themes is going to be provided in the next subchapter.

2.2. Analysis of data and results

In this subchapter, the author discusses the results of the conducted interviews. The analysis is structured around themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of data. The author identified five themes:

1. Understanding of cancel culture and perception of risk
2. Reflection on company’s past incidents and triggers of cancellation
3. Brand and consumer values
4. Planning of communication strategies: proactive strategies and crisis preparedness – pre-crises stage
5. Crisis response: reactive measures – post-crisis stage

These themes are in alignment with the literature discussed in the theoretical part.

Understanding of cancel culture and perception of risk

When asked to define cancel culture, all interviewees demonstrated an awareness of the phenomenon. Cancel culture is perceived as a phenomenon driven by public opinion, typically occurring online, in response to behaviour by a company or individual that is considered offensive or misaligned with societal values. However, Participant 2 emphasized cancellations of individuals (artists or public figures) rather than companies, since they tend to be less impactful, especially when brands have large customer bases and strong value propositions: *“I’m yet to see a successful (company) cancellation... if you’re offering a solid product at a reasonable price, people come back.”* Participant 1 and Participant 3 viewed cancel culture as a predominantly negative phenomenon, highlighting that people often cancel something they disagree with without taking the time to understand the context, instead making *“snap judgments”*. Participant 4 offered a more nuanced perspective, emphasizing *„polarization“* of the phenomenon, acknowledging both negative and positive implications of cancel culture. Overall, it can be concluded that interviewees don’t see cancel culture as something random, but rather as a reaction to actions perceived offensive, however they also recognised the risk of it becoming too subjective, where disagreement can trigger backlash without any room for dialogue or nuance.

In terms of potential risk for the companies, all interviewed companies see cancel culture as a manageable risk. Interviewee 4 emphasised the importance of staying true to their core values, rather than allowing fear of being cancelled to dictate their actions: *“It’s something to be aware of but not something that should paralyze or overly dictate what we do”*. Interviewees 2 and 3 acknowledged that the risk becomes more serious when the cancellation is *“related to people”*, for example, to sensitive issues such as the violation of human rights or the mistreatment of employees. However, Interviewee 2, representing a big international brand, expressed scepticism about the actual impact of cancel culture on the company, suggesting that while occasional small-scale backlash may occur, it rarely leads to long-term damage: *“Companies with millions of customers are very hard to cancel.”* Interviewee 1 and 3 shared a similar view, highlighting that cancellation does not create a *“shockwave effect that goes up and up”* (P1), it eventually stops. As Participant 3 put it: *“On social media, people might laugh at us and the media may stir things up a bit, but I’m quite confident it won’t affect our sales and reputation that much.”* This aligns with Allen’s (2021) statement that the process of cancellation itself is quite short, typically lasting a few months. In summary, while all interviewees recognised the existence of cancel culture, they largely framed it as a manageable reputational risk rather than a serious long-term threat. The risk was perceived as more significant in cases involving human rights or ethical violations.

Reflection on company's past incidents and triggers of cancellation

Regarding specific triggers of cancellation, participants identified triggers that are particularly relevant to their industry, with majority of the triggers being related to product issues and brand communication. All interviewees highlighted marketing and advertising as key areas of vulnerability, especially when messaging is seen as insensitive or contradicting the brand's core values. This corresponds with the findings by Gomez-Mejia (2020) that noted that insensitive campaigns can lead to reputational damage.

The choice of brand ambassadors and partnerships was also considered crucial, with Interviewee 1 emphasising that *"the people you choose to work with represent your brand"*, it either reinforce authenticity or result in backlash if seen as inauthentic or controversial. This idea is reflected in the paper by Zhang et al. (2023), it highlights that carefully checking influencer partnerships and ensuring alignment with brand values are essential for minimizing risks. Some specific concerns included pricing, sustainability, textile sourcing, and supply chain transparency (P3). Safety concerns related to the company's products or services and allegations of employee mistreatment were also mentioned as potential triggers (P2).

When asked to reflect on past accidents that could've led to crisis, Interviewee 2 mentioned situations related to the safety of the service they provide in some specific markets they operate in, due to higher crime rates and regional differences. Although these events did not escalate into full-scale cancellations, the interviewee acknowledged that they triggered public attention and criticism on social media platforms. Interviewee 1 shared an experience with facing small-scale backlash in Poland after running a campaign featuring LGBTQ+ influencers. It resulted in negative comments on the brand's social media accounts as well as critical social media posts. The company reflected on the situation, saying: *"We are open to different sexual orientations... but in some countries we operate, people are still a little bit dogmatic... and a part of society might actually cancel us."* This case represents the challenges brands face when navigating cultural and political differences across markets. While the company positions itself as inclusive promoting diversity, it recognises that such values might provoke controversy in some regions. The interviewee pointed out that while *"cancel culture comes from liberal movements"*, cancelling behaviours can be driven by individuals with opposing values.

Participant 3 mentioned receiving public attention for selling certain products to minors, even though the practice is not considered illegal, it still raised some criticism and concerns from consumers and the media.

These examples illustrate the main triggers of cancellation identified in the literature – ideological incompatibility and ethical violations (Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Gomes da Costa, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). The impact of these triggers on brand communication strategies highlights the importance of aligning messages with consumer values to prevent reputational harm.

Brand and consumer values

All interviewees emphasised that consumer values and societal expectations play a significant role in shaping brand messaging and communication strategies. This aligns with the main core idea of the Means-End Theory (Reynolds & Olson, 2001), which explains that consumer decisions are based not only on product attributes, but also on how brand actions align with deeper values and beliefs. Participant 1, representing a cosmetics retailer and distributor, stressed the importance of monitoring public sentiment: *“You always have to be on the train.”* They explained that their company is constantly adapting its messaging to reflect current social discourse. For example, women’s empowerment has been quite a topic over recent years, and as interviewee highlighted: *“We had to be able to provide such brands and such products that would empower women.”* To illustrate this approach, they ran a campaign in which traditionally male-oriented products were also marketed to women, challenging conventional gender boundaries: *“There is no such thing as for men and for women.”* Similarly, Participant 3 described their campaign aimed at empowering women, which focused on addressing more serious topics than beauty and fashion, such as women’s rights. Interviewee 2 made it clear that their central value is *“to put customer first”*, and mentioned that the company constantly collects feedback, both quantitative and behavioural, from customers to refine their messaging.

All interviewees acknowledged shifts in consumers’ expectations over recent years. Participant 2 observed that consumers have become more vocal and demanding of companies, expecting that brands make public statements or at least show awareness of societal issues such as sustainability or ethical business practices: *“It’s not anymore that you’re providing a product and that’s it, people also have like a set of expectations towards your sustainability, towards the way your management is conducted.”* Similarly, Participant 4 highlighted a demand for transparency and inclusivity, while Participant 1 also pointed out

the increasing consumer preferences for authenticity, sustainability, simplicity, and clarity in brand messaging.

While delivering their messaging, Participants 2, 3 and 4 mostly rely on their established strong brand values and well-defined tone of voice. As Participant 4 explained: *“We just aim to keep our communication as inspiring and positive as possible.”* Even though interviewees stated that they had noticed shifts in consumers’ expectations and *“adapted tone and visual choices accordingly”* (P4), the guiding principle remains to be *“staying true to who we are”*, as Participant 4 put it.

Brand ambassadors and influencers represent the company in the eyes of the public, so the alignment between their values and the brand’s values is crucial for maintaining authenticity and trustworthiness of a company. In the previous studies it was highlighted that influencers significantly shape consumer perceptions (Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, the process of evaluating and selecting them is essential for minimizing potential reputational risk. All of the participants emphasized strong value alignment of the brand representative with the brand values as a main criterion for partnerships. For example, interviewee 4 said the following: *“We do not work with partners whose values do not match ours, we choose people whose values are the same as ours”*. Participant 2 shared an interesting approach: when selecting influencers, they consider not only visibility and reach on social media but also whether the influencer resembles their typical customer – someone who reflects the brand’s values and can organically connect with the audience. Participant 3 also mentioned assessing an influencer’s past collaborations, reputation in the field, content quality, and overall social media feed as a part of evaluation process. Interviewee 1 often works with influencer agencies to identify suitable brand representatives, however, the final choice is made internally, based on which candidates align best with the brand’s values and image. When working with brand representatives, Participant 2 highlighted that they provide ambassadors with very clear guidelines on how the brand and its products should be presented, this includes specifying the appropriate context and positioning for brand promotion, as well as offering direction on tone of voice and language to use, ensuring that the messaging is humorous, not offensive and in alignment with their brand values.

Overall, the findings reveal that customer values play an important role in shaping brand communication strategies. All interviewed companies recognised the growing importance of aligning messaging with evolving changes in consumer expectations. At the same time, core brand values remain a foundation – they guide how companies implement these changes in practice.

Planning of communication strategies: proactive strategies and crisis preparedness – pre-crisis stage

Campaigns and advertisement are the statements of the company through which a company communicates with the public, and in which its core values and identity are rooted. Language, tone of voice, and the people featured all play an important role in shaping how the message is received. All four participants described the whole process of creating new campaign and advertisement as structured multi-stage collaborative process usually involving multiple departments. As Participant put it: *“It’s a team effort involving creative, marketing, and e-commerce departments, we create the campaign concept, plan production, include the right people, review visuals, set our copy, style, and tone.”* It was also mentioned that it is quite long process, for example, interviewee 3 highlighted that the whole production phase is 9 months. There seems to be the coordinated distribution of roles as well: *“We’ve got a creative team who comes up with the content... and then the marketing team distributes it in appropriate channels”* (P2). Participant 2 and 4 operating internationally made a huge emphasis on localization of advertisements in diverse markets, tailoring content accordingly to fit cultural and regional differences: *“By localization, we don’t mean translating it bluntly into local language... we always mean feeling local context and specific needs.”* In order for campaigns to be approved, they need to undergo an internal review process. As interviewee 2 noted: *“The approval runs through the marketing team across responsibility lines... manager of each department approves it”*. Overall, this structured review process and clear distribution of roles function as a proactive measures in crisis prevention. These measures reduce the risk of the campaign being misunderstood, misinterpreted, perceived as offensive or insensitive, which could lead to reputational damage and potentially cancellation.

Participants differed in whether they have prepared in advance statement templates. While Participants 1,3 and 4 do not have them, interviewee 4 explained that although they do not have those pre-prepared statement templates, they believe the teams are ready to respond quickly: *“No templates, but we know how to react quickly if needed...It’s more about readiness than having things pre-written for us”*. In contrast, Participant 2 stood out for its structured preparation, noting that the company has statement templates and crisis response plans in place: *“We’ve got sort of a handbook, which is listing all the potential crisis issues that might pop up and our first responses to these situations”*. Moreover, the company conducts regular tabletop crisis exercises and trainings for PR teams and regional managers. These trainings simulate crisis scenarios, define responsibilities, and help ensure preparedness of employees. This approach demonstrates crisis preparedness and aligns with

Jaques (2014), who outlines the importance of having predefined roles, prepared statements, and training to manage risk proactively. Participants 1,3 and 4 explained that they do not have specific trainings for employees on crisis communication for managing potential reputational risks.

Participant 2 also provided a detailed explanation of how responsibilities are defined and delegated during a crisis. There are specific formed crisis teams on both local and global levels. When a crisis arises, usually a local crisis team is assembled, typically involving representatives from public relations, marketing, legal, and operations departments. As it was explained, the team is formed dynamically, depending on the nature of the crisis, ensuring the involvement of relevant experts. If the crisis escalates across markets, a global crisis team is assembled as well. Roles are predefined, and decision-making authority follows functional lines: *“People who are in charge of operations will still be in charge of operations. People who are in charge of communications will still be in charge of communications.”* Participants 1,3 and 4 described less structured approach. For example, Participant 3 noted that in times of crisis, the communications manager, marketing director and CEO are involved, along with the manager responsible for the area directly affected by the crisis, similar to what Participant 2 described. Usually these specialists prepare materials and statements, which are then reviewed and approved by the CEO. In the companies represented by Participants 1 and 4, marketing managers are in charge, with the level of leadership involvement depending on the scale of the issue, as Participant 4 put it: *“The country marketing manager with their local marketing team takes the lead. The group marketing manager is also involved, and for bigger crises, senior management may be included”*. Even though the approach of the companies differ, all of the interviewees highlighted the importance of not only including marketing, public relations and communications specialists, but also specific teams depending on the nature of crisis.

While all participants acknowledged the potential reputational risks tied to cancel culture, none reported having specific communication strategies built around it. As Participant 4 explained it: *“We just rely on common sense, clarity, and fast local response, we trust our teams.”* However, observation of other companies’ experience was consistently mentioned by all interviewees as a form of crisis prevention and preparedness. Participant 2 noted that their company regularly monitors competitors within the industry and learns from failed campaigns or controversial messages, describing these as *“teachable moments.”* Similarly, Participant 4 shared that examples from other companies reinforced the importance of authenticity, and taught them that *“trying too hard or jumping on trends without*

authenticity might lead to backlash". Which reflects the findings by Mirzaei et al. (2021) that revealed that every statement or action that brand makes should be authentic and carefully thought through, otherwise brand may be cancelled for woke washing. Participant 1 referred to industry cases where brands promoting narrow beauty standards or overlooking body positivity had faced public criticism as the most relevant and insightful to their brand. It was also mentioned that cancel culture is very time- and context-sensitive: "*What was not cancelled two years ago might no longer be acceptable today*"(P1), which, as Jaques (2014) states, makes monitoring of public sentiment on social media platforms and "social forecasting" crucial to prevent disconnection from the audience. Participant 4 noted that their local teams closely monitor social media sentiment using analytics tools. Participants 1 and 3 mentioned collaborating with external marketing agencies, who can provide insights into current social dynamics.

In summary, the findings reveals that the implementation of campaigns is a structured and lengthy process involving multiple departments, which makes it significantly harder for insensitive or controversial messaging to be overlooked. However, while all companies acknowledge the potential reputational risks tied to cancel culture, their level of preparedness varies. Some rely on instinctive readiness and team experience, while others apply structured planning, predefined roles, and simulations.

Crisis response: reactive measures – post-crisis stage

As an initial response strategy, all participants chose acknowledging the issue and apologizing, which means the companies are willing to fully take responsibility for the offensive act. According to the author's *Full-phase crisis integrated model* (Figure 2), this places all four companies within the "Full Accountability" category of response strategies. Participant 2 also mentioned removing any content perceived as insensitive or offensive, an action that falls under the strategy „corrective action“, which is also reflected in the Figure 2. Participants 1 and 3 made a huge emphasis on transparency, highlighting the importance of official statement through media channels. As Participant 3 put it: "*To be honest, and to talk to the media*". Participant 4 stressed the importance of reacting quickly and rebuilding trust with customers by changing the practices, aligning with the idea of „corrective action“. All the interviewees agreed that denial or ignoring the issue might escalate the backlash.

Once the initial response is released, it is crucial to monitor public and customer reactions. For measuring the consumers' reactions and feedback for any message, campaign or public statement, both Participants 2 and 4 usually apply a similar metrics-driven approach, using KPIs such as reach, click-through rates and website visits, as Participant 2

put it: *“There are very clear markers and KPIs that we are tracking constantly for each campaign, and then observing these and changing things accordingly if necessary.”*

Interviewees 1,2 and 4 highlighted interaction with customers and comments on different social media platforms, while Participant 3 emphasized a more research-based approach: the company collaborates with a media agency to conduct a research aimed at understanding how the message was perceived and what emotions, reactions it triggered among the people.

For evaluation whether brand’s reputation is recovering after the reputational crisis, or further communication adjustments are needed, Participant 2 described conducting brand health studies, collecting information from both customers and non-customers on how the brand is perceived in terms of overall likability, trust towards the company, affordability, and sustainability: *“The main purpose is to gather information on what people feel about the company...what matters is actually perception of people”*. Importantly, the interviewee stressed that this feedback is not linked to a specific message, campaign or public statement, but as a reflection of the company’s perception and reputation in general. All Participants noted that recovery would be monitored by comparing engagement levels and sales performance before and after the crisis, as well as by closely observing sentiment across social media platforms, including comments, overall tone, and trends in audience response.

Overall, all four companies recognise the importance of timely and transparent responses when facing reputational crises. Although none of the participants had experienced full-scale cancellation, their response strategies in case of potential cancelling indicate a clear commitment to taking full accountability for their actions, including public acknowledgment, apology, and corrective actions. Monitoring audience sentiment and evaluating brand perception through both metrics and qualitative feedback are seen as essential for navigating the consequences of cancel culture.

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to find out how companies manage their brand communication strategies in relation to cancel culture. The aim has been achieved and all the research tasks have been completed.

In the theoretical part, the author has compared different definitions of cancel culture from previous studies, and based on that, defined the phenomenon of cancel culture as a response that reflects collective disapproval of some offensive actions, often involving the withdrawal of support from brands or individuals, and is frequently accelerated by social media. The theoretical part also examined triggers, accelerators and consequences for brand perception of cancelling behaviours. The role of implementing adequate brand

communication strategies was emphasized, outlining how proactive strategies, alignment between brand and consumer values, and timely responses form the foundation for managing reputational crises caused by cancel culture. To provide a conceptual framework for analysing the proactive and reactive brand communication strategies in response to potential cancel culture, the Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model (Jaques, 2007), the Theory of Image Restoration Discourse (Benoit, 1997), the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2007a), and the Means-End Theory (Reynolds & Olson, 2001) were applied.

The empirical analysis, based on semi-structured interviews with the specialists that are responsible for forming brand communication strategies from four reputable companies operating in the Baltic region, revealed that while cancel culture is widely recognised, and is mostly perceived as a manageable rather than serious risk. None of the interviewed companies have developed communication strategies specifically because of the rise of cancel culture, but these companies implement some proactive strategies, including internal campaign reviews, evaluation of ambassadors, monitoring public sentiment, and „social forecasting“. The approaches of the companies differ, ranging from more intuition-based approach to structured preparation, where the company has statement templates, crisis response plans and employee trainings. In times of a crisis caused by cancel culture, all interviewed companies reported committing to responses that reflect full accountability of the company, including authentic public apology, content removal, and corrective actions.

This research contributes to the understanding of how companies manage their brand communication strategies in relation to cancel culture. Findings revealed how companies perceive the phenomenon of cancel culture and manage their communication strategies to minimize reputational damage in the case of potential cancel culture, filling a gap in existing literature that primarily focuses on the consumer perspective rather than company's.

However, there is a limitation. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, they may not fully represent the range of diverse companies' experiences with cancel culture. For future research, it would be valuable to expand the sample size to include more companies, particularly those that had faced cancel culture in the past and have successfully recovered from it. This could provide highly valuable insights for the companies highlighting specific brand communication strategies that help companies minimize reputational damage after facing cancel culture.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1

Table 5

Different definitions of cancel culture

Source	Definition
Clark, 2020	““Cancelling” is an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one’s attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money.”
Lee & Abidin, 2021	“Cancel culture can be understood as a cultural means to advocate social justice by “withdrawing any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic,” as evidenced in the #MeToo movements and Black Twitter.”
Ng, 2020	“...the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues.”
Tandoc et al., 2024	“Cancel culture is defined as involving the public shaming of a target on social media, carried out or supported by a group of people, which aims to hold the target accountable for socially incorrect or unacceptable behaviour.”
Gomes da Costa, 2022	“Cancel culture emerged as the practice or tendency to participate in a mass cancellation to express disapproval and exert social pressure, in which the act of cancelling is the withdrawal of support to someone (individual or organization) and it is fuelled by Generation Z and Millennials and their need to change the world for the better.”
Reyes-Fournier, 2022	“Cancel culture is a set of norms, values, and beliefs that allow groups to “call out” or ostracize those deemed to violate social

	norms. Unlike boycotts, there is no assumption of change or redemption.”
Costa & Azevedo, 2023	“Cancel culture emerged as the practice or tendency to participate in a mass cancellation to express disapproval and exert social pressure, in which the act of cancelling is the withdrawal of support to someone (individual or organisation), and it is fuelled by Generation Z and Millennials and their need for social change.”
Zhang et al., 2023	“‘Cancel culture’ describes a collective disengagement from a person or a brand, typically due to its ethical stain, frequently initiated from and spread rapidly on social media. It is more or less an expression of self-agency and the desire to withdraw attention from an individual or entity with conflicting morals or values.”
Lopes, 2022	“Cancel culture is a term for the social phenomenon, commonly initiated on social media, of withdrawing support from someone or something in the public eye who has done/presented something considered offensive. It is almost always accompanied of public backlash, where negative comments pile up on social media and users express their feelings towards the “culprit” and their act.”

Source: Compiled by the author based on Gomes da Costa, 2022; Clark, 2020; Tandoc et al., 2024; Lee & Abidin, 2021; Reyes-Fournier, 2022; Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Lopes, 2022; Ng, 2020.

APPENDIX B

Table 2

Table 2

Summary of previous studies on cancel culture

Name of the study, and the year	Authors	Methodologies	Sample size	Who was studied – consumers or companies	Methods for data analysis
This brand is #cancelled: Exploring brand avoidance in the age of	Zhang et al.	Quantitative research: survey	486 participants	Consumers who have engaged in brand cancellation	Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), Confirmatory Factor

cancel culture and influencer marketing (2023)					Analysis (CFA)
Antecedents and consequences of the “cancel culture” firestorm journey for brands: Is there a possibility for forgiveness? (2024)	Costa & Azevedo	Quasi-experimental study: online survey simulating brand cancellation journey	178 participants	Consumers engaging in cancel culture due to ideological incompatibilities	Path analysis, exploratory factor analysis, paired samples t-test, Wilcoxon signed rating test
#CancelCulture : Examining definitions and motivations (2024)	Tandoc et al.	Sequential exploratory mixed-methods approach: in-depth interviews and national online survey	20 interviewees , 786 survey respondents	Social media users (consumers) who participated in cancel culture	Qualitative analysis, multiple linear regression, statistical modeling
The process of cancel culture on social media: the case of social media influencer Elle Darby (2022)	Lopes	Mixed-methods approach: content analysis and discourse analysis	1380 messages from social media comments and tweets	Social media users (consumers) who participated in cancel culture	Thematic content analysis, sentiment analysis, discourse analysis
Blame, then shame? Psychological predictors in cancel culture behaviour (2021)	Mueller	Mixed-methods approach: qualitative interviews and quantitative survey	27 qualitative interviewees , 986 survey respondents	Social media users (consumers) who participate in cancel culture	Linear regression, neural network analysis, hierarchical decision tree modeling, ANOVA
Business of cancel culture study. Porter Novelli (2021)	Yates & Carolina	Survey-based research, social media analysis (case studies)	1,004 U.S. general market adults (survey) + 13 months of Twitter conversatio	Consumers engaging in cancel culture and companies affected by cancel culture	Descriptive statistical analysis, analysis of sentiment on social media, case study

			n (case studies)		evaluation
Cancel culture and the consumer: strategic marketing perspective (2023)	Saldanha et al.	Theoretical framework analysis, conceptual model development	Conceptual study, no direct sample	Consumers engaging in cancel culture and brands affected by cancel culture	Theoretical analysis, consumer behavior framework development
Cancel Culture: What does it mean for a brand to be cancelled? (2022)	Gomes da Costa	Mixed-methods approach: netnography and online survey	Reddit discussion threads (2018-2021) + 178 survey respondents	Consumers engaging in cancel culture	Content analysis, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, Spearman correlation analysis
#Canceled! Exploring the phenomenon of canceling (2024)	Cummings et al.	Mixed-methods approach: qualitative study, quantitative survey, social media field data analysis	198 Gen Z students (qualitative), 372 U.S. participants (quantitative survey), 4,507 Twitter posts	Consumers engaging in cancel culture and brands affected by cancel culture	Thematic analysis, regression analysis, sentiment analysis
Morally Motivated Networked Harassment as Normative Reinforcement (2021)	Marwick	Qualitative study: semi-structured interviews	28 individuals who experienced online harassment, 9 Trust & Safety platform workers	Consumers who experienced harassment and platform workers	Thematic analysis, qualitative coding, networked harassment modelling
An investigation into Cancel Culture's effect on brand reputation and future collaborations and partnerships in the Irish advertising and broadcasting	Crimmins	Qualitative research: semi-structured interviews	5 hiring managers in the Irish advertising and broadcasting industry	Companies in the advertising and broadcasting industry	Thematic analysis, inductive coding

industry
(2022)

Source: compiled by the author based on Gomes da Costa, 2022; Tandoc et al., 2024; Costa & Azevedo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Lopes, 2022; Ng, 2020; Crimmins, 2022; Marwick, 2021; Cummings et al., 2024; Saldanha et al., 2023; Yates & Carolina, 2021;

APPENDIX C

Interview questions

Section	Questions	Theoretical framework
Understanding cancel culture and perception of risk	Could you please share your personal perspective on cancel culture?	Intro question
	How would you define cancel culture in your own words?	Intro question
	What specific triggers of cancel culture do you think are most relevant to your brand?	Costa & Azevedo (2023), Zhang et al. (2023) and Bakhtiari (2020)
	Could you provide any examples of situations or actions by your company that you believe could have potentially resulted in cancellation or backlash (even if they didn't escalate)?	Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007), Theory of Image Restoration Discourse by Benoit (1997)
	How does your company perceive the risk of cancellation? Do you view it as a serious threat, a manageable risk, or something else?	Costa & Azevedo (2023)
	In your opinion, what could be the potential impact of cancel culture on your brand's perception and overall reputation?	Theory of Image Restoration Discourse by Benoit (1997), Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs (2007a)
Brand and consumer values	What role do consumer values and societal expectations play in shaping your brand's messaging and communications strategy?	Means-End theory by Reynolds & Olson (2001), Tandoc et al. (2024)
	Have you noticed shifts in your consumers' personal or societal expectations over recent years. If so, how have these shifts informed your	Gomes da Costa (2022), Costa & Azevedo (2023) Means-End theory by Reynolds & Olson (2001), Krupka (2023)

	brand communication strategies?	
	How do you internally ensure that your partnerships and brand messages align authentically with your stated values and won't be seen as offensive, and insensitive?	Gomez-Mejia (2020), Saldanha et al. (2022), Mirzaei et al. (2021)
	In your experience or from your understanding, is it riskier for your brand to remain silent or to openly communicate on controversial issues?	Bakhtiari (2020)
Planning of communication strategies	Have you already implemented or developed any specific communication strategies because of the rise of cancel culture?/ Does your company have a crisis communication plan in case of crisis on social media?	Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007)
	Could you describe the typical process of developing and approving a marketing campaign or advertisement before publication?	Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007), (2014)
	How does your company choose and evaluate brand ambassadors, partners or maybe influencers to collaborate with?	Zhang et al. (2023)
	Does your company provide any trainings for employees on communication strategies for managing potential reputational risks?	Mueller (2021), Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007)
	Do you have any statement templates prepared in advance in case of crisis occurrence?	Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007)
	In a times of crisis (or potential crisis) who is responsible for decision-making?	Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007)
	Did any of the examples from the past of other companies' experience give	Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007)

Crisis response	you some insights on what should be avoided in campaigns?	
	Hypothetically, if your brand unintentionally made a problematic statement or misstep online, what would be your first initial response strategy?	Theory of Image Restoration Discourse by Benoit (1997), Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs (2007a)
	Once you release a new campaign, how do you measure the consumers' reactions/ feedback?	Tandoc et al. (2024), Zhang et al. (2023)
	How do you measure social media sentiment to prevent disconnection from your audience? What tools/methods do you use?	Issue and Crisis Management Relational Model by Jaques (2007), Tandoc et al. (2024)
	If the crisis did happen, how would you determine whether your brand's reputation is recovering, or if further communication adjustments are needed?	Theory of Image Restoration Discourse by Benoit (1997), Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Coombs (2007a), Means-End Theory

APPENDIX D

Coding table

Table 7

Coding table

Theme	Category	Code
1. Understanding of cancel culture & perception of risk	Conceptual definition	Values-based boycott
		Negative phenomenon Not random phenomenon
	Risk perception	Manageable risk Limited impact People-related risk
2. Reflection on company incidents & triggers of cancellation	Past incidents	LGBTQ+ backlash case
		Minors case Safety concerns Mistreatment of employees
	Potential triggers	Insensitive messaging

		Product issues Marketing and advertising Ambassador mismatch
3. Brand and customer values	Reflection of core values in messaging	“Customer first” Current social discourse Inspiring and positive communication Transparency Authenticity
	Selection of ambassadors and working with them	Value-match screening Visibility and reach “Typical customer” Content quality Clear guidelines
4. Planning of communication strategies: proactive strategies & crisis preparedness	Process of campaign development	Cross-department collaboration Lengthy process Localization, cultural fit Structured multi-stage review
	Preparedness	Crisis handbook Tabletop crisis exercises Skill to react quickly
	Delegation of responsibilities	Formed crisis teams Specific teams based on the nature of crisis Functional-line authority Marketing teams
	Learning from other companies	Failed campaigns Insensitive messaging Lack of authenticity Narrow beauty standards Overlooking body positivity Importance of public sentiment, “social forecasting”
5. Crisis response: reactive measures – post-crisis stage	Initial response	Acknowledge Apologize Removing offensive content Changing practises Media statements
	Monitoring of public reactions	KPIs Click-through rates

	Website visits Direct customer feedback Interactions Comments Research
Evaluation of reputation's recovery	Brand health studies Engagement levels Sales performance Social media sentiment

Source: compiled by the author

Resümee

TITLE IN ESTONIAN

Your Name

Selle bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on välja selgitada, kuidas ettevõtted haldavad oma brändikommunikatsioonistrateegiaid seoses tühistamiskultuuriga. See töö täidab olulise uurimislünga, kuna selle kohta, kuidas ettevõtted tühistamiskultuuri tajuvad, selleks valmistuvad ning tühistamiskultuurist tulenevate võimalike maineriskidega toime tulemiseks kommunikatsioonistrateegiaid arendavad, on vähe uuringuid. Olemasolevad uuringud keskenduvad peamiselt tarbijate vaatenurgale, kuid ettevõtete vaatenurkadele on vähe tähelepanu pööratud. Töö teoreetilises osas toob autor välja tühistamiskultuuri üksikasjaliku analüüsi, võrreldes erinevaid definitsioone ning uurides selle käivitajaid, võimendajaid ja tagajärgi brändi mainele. Rõhutatakse brändikommunikatsioonistrateegiate rolli, keskendudes ennetavatele strateegiatele, brändi ja tarbija väärtuste kooskõlale ning õigeaegse reageerimise olulisusele. Teoreetiline raamistik põhineb peamiselt kriisijuhtimise mudelitel ja teooriatel. Empiirilises osas kasutab autor kvalitatiivset uurimismeetodit, viies läbi neli poolstruktureeritud intervjuud erinevate ettevõtete kommunikatsioonispetsialistidega. Intervjuud annavad väärtuslikku teavet ettevõtete kogemuste kohta tühistamiskultuuriga, kuidas nad seda tajuvad ja oma kommunikatsioonistrateegiaid haldavad, et minimeerida mainekahju tühistamiskultuuri juhtumi korral.

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