Master Thesis

Crisis communication through social media, yay or nay?
A Qualitative Study of Stakeholder’s Corporate Reputation

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Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to extend the understanding of stakeholders’ corporate reputation regarding a brand’s crisis communication.

**Research Questions:**
- How are stakeholders’ cognitive reputation affected after exposure of the crisis communication and the generated eWOM?
- How are stakeholders’ affective reputation affected after exposure of the crisis communication and the generated eWOM?

**Methodology:** The research was of qualitative nature and had an explorative approach. The collection of data was done by semi-structured interviews based on a convenience sample of six respondents.

**Findings:** The results of this study indicated that the crisis communication had a higher impact on the respondents’ corporate reputation than the eWOM had. The generated eWOM worked as an influential factor of the corporate reputation rather than the dominant factor in connection to corporate reputation. The crisis communication is proposed to be a dominant factor affecting one’s corporate reputation of a brand, even though one’s corporate reputation of a brand previous to the crisis lays the foundation for how one is affected.

**Research limitations:** Since this study applied the crisis communication of two fashion-retailer brands, there was a limitation by aiming the focus towards the fashion industry. Previous corporate reputation towards these two specific brands may also have affected the results.

**Keywords**

*Corporate reputation, affective reputation, cognitive reputation, crisis communication, eWOM*
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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

It once been said “just because you communicate during a crisis does not mean you necessarily make the situation better” (Edward Burkhardt, the CEO of the company Rail World Inc quoted in Coombs, 2015). Bitner et al. (1990) further describe the concept as crisis communication, which regards how a firm communicate after a crisis occurred with the aim to improve the situation that the crisis has caused, both for the firm itself but also for the stakeholders. In order to make the situation better for both of these parties, the communication towards a firm’s stakeholders is one of the most important factors to consider (Bitner et al. 1990). According to Bitner et al. (1990) there are different types of failures that can occur and in turn lead to a crisis. The authors further describe how failures may revolve around difficulties with delivery of a service, actions among employees which are considered unprompted and unsolicited and when firms fail to meet consumer’s needs and wants. A stakeholder is partly defined as a person who has some type of interest in a company (Business Dictionary, n.d.). Stakeholder is first and foremost the term that will be used throughout this research to describe the individuals who either has an interest in a firm, the term consumer is partly used to describe individuals who are consuming a firm’s goods. Since the term stakeholder includes all who has an interest in a company, consumers can also be included in this term (Business Dictionary, n.d.).

An example of a crisis that has occurred was when Volkswagen company in September 2015 was detected to have software issue in their cars, the diesel engines could detect when they were being tested and in turn change the showings of the test results in order to be perceived as more environmental friendly. This was acknowledged all around the world and had major consequences for the company (BBC, 2015). How a company choose to communicate after a crisis occurred have according to Coombs (2007) direct affect on stakeholders’ thoughts and feelings towards the company. One of the communication tools that has increased in usage over the recent years, when regarding crisis communication, is social media. The increase is due to the fast pace of communication that social media offer and the ease the process of responding to the company’s stakeholders. Social media also gives the possibility to reach a large number of individuals in a short period of time (Park et al., 2012; Dalziel, 2014; Manika
et al., 2015; Roshan et al., 2016; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006) which further explain why social media is a popular crisis communication tool. Besides the increase among companies communicating crisis communication over social media (Park et al., 2012; Dalziel, 2014; Manika et al., 2015; Roshan et al., 2016) the usage of social media among individuals has also increased (Chu and Kim, 2018; Wakefield and Wakefield, 2018). This further explains the benefit for companies to use social media, since individuals are active on those platforms, which also includes stakeholders of companies. Chu and Kim (2018) explains that stakeholders usually use social media in the context of crisis communication to large extent by creating content about brands on social media, which regards the creation of electronic word of mouth, eWOM (Chu and Kim, 2018). Cheung and Lee (2012) describe eWOM as a way for stakeholders to share their thoughts regarding a brand or a specific product online and offers possibility for individuals to exchange thoughts and feelings regarding information of brands. Stakeholders engagement and interaction in social media is closely connected to the crisis communication content created by companies, which often tempts individuals to take part in the communication (Vallaster and con Wallpach, 2013). Chu and Kim (2018) states that eWOM tends to increase when companies communicate regarding a crisis. It is further stated the way in which the company chose to communicate on social media regarding a crisis influence whether the eWOM is created in a positive or negative manner (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2018).

Chu and Kim (2018) discuss eWOM as a possibility for individuals to exchange thoughts and feelings regarding information of brands online, which can further be described as informal messages that the consumers create in different forms such as comments and reviews (Ye et al., 2011). The creation of eWOM may result in making crises even more challenging and possibly dangerous for the firms (Pace et al., 2017) since the control of what is said lies outside the power of the companies (Zheng et al, 2018). Beside the possibilities social media gives companies (Park et al., 2012; Dalziel, 2014; Manika et al., 2015; Roshan et al., 2016), social media also offer stakeholders channels where they have the opportunity to find unbiased and what themselves consider reliable information (Chu and Kim, 2018; Kumar et al., 2017). EOM created in social media is highly influential on consumers (Erkan and Evans, 2016). Beside the possibilities social media gives companies (Park et al., 2012; Dalziel, 2014; Manika et al., 2015; Roshan et al., 2016), social media also offer stakeholders channels where they have the opportunity to find unbiased and what themselves consider
reliable information (Chu and Kim, 2018; Kumar et al., 2017). EWOM created in social media is highly influential on consumers (Erkan and Evans, 2016; Zheng et al., 2018). Through the increased social media usage both among companies and stakeholders regarding crisis communication (Chu and Kim, 2018; Park et. al., 2012; Dalziel, 2014; Manika et al., 2015; Roshan et al., 2016), stakeholders have through the creation of eWOM been empowered in the communication regarding a crisis and possess large power over what is said (Zheng et al., 2018).

Traditional word of mouth which is created outside online channels has shown to have connection to reputation among consumers towards firms in crisis (Coombs and Holladay, 2007). An individual’s reputation is an overall evaluation which one holds towards a firm and its brand, which is called corporate reputation (Zheng et al., 2018). Stakeholders creation of either positive or negative eWOM in social media, as a response to a crisis, has shown to have an impact on other stakeholders and their corporate reputation towards the company of discussion (Erkan and Evans, 2016).

1.2 Problem discussion

Coombs and Holladay (2007) states that all information which stakeholders receive regarding a company is the foundation for their development and change regarding the reputation they hold towards a company, where second hand information, such as eWOM is a major source. Thiessen and Ingenhoff (2011) explain communication as the major trait that have effect on reputation, and especially in a crisis situation. Patriotta et al. (2011) agrees with this through stating that crises often tend to affect one’s creation of reputation, however, according to Pace et al. (2017) the affect eWOM has on stakeholders differs to large extent from case to case. Zhang et al. (2017) adds to the discussion by stating how companies often fail to handle stakeholders’ online comments and activities that are unfavorable for the company, again implying that content created by stakeholders online can cause difficulties for the companies. Through the possibility social media offers for stakeholders to express their own opinions regarding a crisis they become a type of brand co-creator (Hatch and Schultz 2010; Merz et al., 2009). This underlines the power in stakeholder’s thoughts and feelings published online, in other words eWOM, regarding a company’s crisis communication through social media.
The strength behind consumers’ corporate reputation towards a brand is explained by its connection to stakeholder’s intentions towards the brand. Zheng et al. (2018) as well as Barnett et al. (2006) discuss how a positive corporate reputation increase the chance of individuals having positive intentions towards that brand, intentions which for example may be to buy the brand’s products, something which both Wartick (1992) together with Fombrun and Shanley (1990) agrees with. Wakefield and Wakefield (2018) further discuss the issue of control for managers and brands when it comes to communication in connection to social media. They state that brands in general have less control over consumers’ thoughts and feelings based on content generated online (Wakefield and Wakefield, 2018), which implies the need to explore how consumers think and feel depending on communication in social media. Gotsi and Wilson (2001) states that communication from companies and information regarding companies has affect on individual’s creation of corporate reputation towards the firm. This is in line with Erkan and Evans (2016) findings stating that eWOM affects individuals’ opinions, which underlines the importance of crisis communication since it is a major generating trait for stakeholder’s creation of eWOM (Chu and Kim, 2018). Due to the fact that social media is an increasing tool to use for crisis communication (Zhang et al., 2017; Pew Internet, 2006), further research within the concept of eWOM together with crisis communication is needed in order to see how stakeholders’ corporate reputation towards a firm actually is affected if a crisis is communicated in a social media context.

Corporate reputation is highly influential regarding one’s intentions towards a company (Coombs and Holladay, 2007), which highlights the importance, for the firm itself, regarding the corporate reputation stakeholders’ has of the company. With corporate reputation being founded upon all information, and in particular communication, which one receives regarding a company (Coombs and Holladay, 2007; Thiessen and Ingenhoff, 2011), in combination with the increased usage of social media when regarding crisis communication and in turn the high extent of generated eWOM (Zhang et al., 2017; Chu and Kim, 2018), Pace et al. (2017) findings stating that the effect eWOM has differs. This imply the need for exploring this area of research further. Since crisis communication to high extent is a generating factor for eWOM, and eWOM has affect on one’s opinions (Erkan and Evans, 2016) in relation to the value stakeholders’ corporate reputation holds for firms, this need to be explored in relation to each other.
1.3 Purpose and delimitations

1.3.1 Purpose
The purpose of this paper is to extend the understanding of stakeholders’ corporate reputation regarding a brand’s crisis communication.

1.3.2 Delimitations
The two companies chosen for this research has different origins in terms of countries where they have been started. Since one of these companies is originally from the country where this research is conducted, this could possibly impact the results of this study. This could imply different thoughts and feelings among the respondents towards the one brand that originates from the same country as the research was conducted in. The choice to conduct the study in Sweden and no other geographical areas is also a factor which may influence the outcome of this study. Both of these two brands are also fashion retailer brands, which could have impact on the results of this study, researching brands within another business or industry may have given other results.

1.4 Research questions

- How are stakeholders’ affective reputation affected after exposure of the crisis communication and the generated eWOM?
- How are stakeholders’ cognitive reputation affected after exposure of the crisis communication and the generated eWOM?

1.5 Report structure
The theories which has been utilized throughout this research are presented in chapter 2 in form of a literature review, followed by chapter 3 which revolves around the conceptual framework and leads to the conceptual model of this research. Chapter 4 regards how the research was performed, and presents the methodological steps that this research has progressed through. The collection of data for this research is presented in chapter 5, the empirical results. These are further analyzed in relation to the theories of the research in chapter 6, and answers the research questions. Chapter 7 presents the conclusion of the research and answers the purpose of this study. In the last and final chapter, which is chapter
8, are the theoretical and managerial implications presented, followed by the limitation of the study and suggestions for further studies.
2. Literature review

2.1 Crisis communication

The concept of crisis has no standard definition, however, Falkheimer and Heide (2006) describes crisis with characteristics such as significant threats, unpredictability and urgency. Heath and Millar (2003) presents approximately 20 different definitions of what a crisis could be. However, the characteristic of control regarding crises is a trait which the majority of the definitions according to Coombs and Holladay (2010) have in common. Control is discussed in different manners, however, control can be used with the aim of preventing, ease or take lessons from a crisis which occurred. Falkheimer and Heide (2006) continue the discussion regarding crises with closely relating it to the concept on risk, stating that if risks are ignored there is an increase of the possible happening of a crisis. Coombs and Holladay (2010) state how companies, in the eye of the public, can both be defined but also judged depending on their ability to manage a possible crisis, this is further supported by Piotrowski and Guyette (2010). Companies are evaluated depending on their actions in a post-crisis situation when regarding how they respond and recapture control over the situation. Depending on how a company also ease the situation surrounding a crisis and ease possible harm that has been caused, are also characteristics evaluated by the public. Coombs and Holladay (2010) does in turn add to the discussion by highlighting how crises come with the risk of damaging the brand of the company.

If a crisis occur, crisis communication is the firm’s response and way to send information through different channels to their stakeholders (Coombs, 2010). Seeger (2006), Reynolds and Seeger (2005) as well as Falkheimer and Heide (2006) state that the aim of crisis communication is to decrease the harm caused by the crisis and to reduce the possible negative outcomes which may follow, while also aiming at restoring the picture of the company and the brand. The importance of the initial crisis communication is the power it possesses, this since the first impression among of the communication among stakeholders affects the overall perception of continuous communication regarding the same crisis. General recommendations for crisis communication is for companies to be fast and continuous in their communication, while also be open with what is happening (Coombs, 2014). Gilman (2004) discuss how individuals’ capacity and ability to process information is reduced to large extent while dealing with situations which also is very emotionally engaging.
Since crisis situations may be very emotionally charged for stakeholders, the need for clear crisis communication is implied (Coombs, 2014).

2.2 EWOM in Social Media

Electronic word-of-mouth, also known as eWOM, is described by Ye et al. (2011) as a way for consumers to share content and opinions online, whether it is positive or not. Erkan and Evans (2016) agree upon the highly influential impact eWOM has and discuss it in connection to social media as a specifically suitable platform where eWOM can be created. Kumar et al. (2017) states how eWOM is often trusted to a higher extent in relation to other type of advertisements which is sent through online channels, this since the persons behind the eWOM often are trusted by the receiver, which underlines the power eWOM possess. Erkan and Evans (2016) underlines that the concept is not only a way for consumers to communicate online, it is also a way for opinion leaders to share their attitudes towards a specific brand or a product. Through social media, consumers can choose to share the content in different ways; either by pictures, texts or videos, which makes it more usable and attracting for consumers (Erkan and Evans, 2016). Due to the fact that consumers can easily share their opinions and search for others opinions regarding a brand’s products or services, social media has become a highly influential information-seeking platform from a consumer perspective according to Chu and Kim (2011), which is further supported by Erkan and Evans (2016).

Both traditional WOM as well as eWOM engage individuals who both wishes to express oneself but also individuals who seek for information (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Goldsmith and Horowitz, 2006). Traditional WOM differs from eWOM in specific ways which is defined by Lee (2009) who states that the individual who delivers and shares the message of eWOM is more anonymous. There are no restrictions regarding when you can generate eWOM and the amount of eWOM which can be created. Lee (2009) continue the discussion regarding the power behind eWOM by explaining how it, in comparison to traditional WOM, exists longer on the online platforms. Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) explain reasons for why individuals chose to publish their thoughts and opinions in social media. The creation of eWOM may according to Hennig-Thurau et al. (2004) fulfill individuals desire to have social interaction or may be depending on economic reasons, and can also be created with the aim
of warning others. Raluca (2014) states how eWOM gives consumers large power over a brand.

2.3 Corporate reputation

According to Zheng et al. (2018) corporate reputation is an overall evaluation that the public creates of a firm or a brand. Moreover, it is an evaluation that the public forms based on a firm’s past dealings with a prediction of the handling that possibly may happen in the future (Zheng et al., 2018; Wartick, 1992; Barnett et al., 2006; Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Gotsi and Wilson (2001) agree upon this, but adds the importance of communication into the definition. They mean that stakeholders create an evaluation depending on the communication a firm perform and the information one receives from the firm (Gotsi and Wilson, 2001). Barnett et al. (2006) together with Gotsi and Wilsom (2001) further mean that a positive corporate reputation indicates that a brand has appeared in a favorable way, which results in the public generating higher thoughts and beliefs of the brand. Zheng et al. (2018) further argue for corporate reputation to be a valuable and important factor to take into consideration in order to gain a favorable reputation among the stakeholders.

The evaluation that is created among the stakeholders is based on three components within the attitudinal theory; cognitive, affective and behavioral (Zheng et al., 2018; Einwiller et al., 2010; Fombrun et al., 2000). Szmigin and Piacentini (2014) explain the attitudinal theory as what a person thinks, feels and do. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) complement this definition by writing that an attitude is “a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner in relation to some object”. However, an attitude can change over time and is dependent on the experience an individual has of the attitude object, as well as the knowledge and emotions the individual holds towards the object (Schiffman and Wisenblit, 2015; Ajzen, 2007). Since corporate reputation is created as a part of an individual's attitude, the corporate reputation can change as well as the feelings and knowledge of a brand or a firm. Einwiller et al. (2010) together with Schwaiger (2004) refers to this as a construct of two components within the theory of attitude; affective and cognitive. The affective component refers to the emotional aspect of the reputation towards the firm or the brand while the cognitive component regards the evaluation based on the knowledge and beliefs one has of the firm (Einwiller et al., 2010). In terms of corporate reputation, Thiessen and Ingenhoff (2011) state that the affective reputation is related to the sympathy a stakeholder
holds towards the firm and how attractive the firm is in the eyes of the stakeholder. When it comes to the cognitive reputation, it is rather an evaluation that the stakeholder forms out of the company’s previous performance (Schwaiger, 2004). Solomon et al. (2016) further describe the cognitive component as beliefs that is based on the perception one has formed through experiences, in this case of a firm or a brand.

Einwiller et al., (2010) further mean that the reason for why behavior is not a part of the corporate reputation are due to the fact that behavior is connected more to the outcome and achievements of the reputation, more specifically if it leads to purchase or not. The focal point within corporate reputation is therefore the emotional and knowledge-based components a stakeholder forms towards a firm rather than the outcome of it (Einwiller et al. 2010). Zheng et al. (2018) adds to the discussion that it is essential to separate the two components; affective and cognitive, in order to clarify stakeholders’ corporate reputation in connection to a firm’s crisis. This due to the fact that cognitive and affective reputation is closely related to the competence and likeability a stakeholder considers a brand to has. Where the competence is related to the cognitive component and likeability related to the affective (Schwaiger, 2004). Einwiller et al. (2010) agree to this and state that this division is necessary since it is closer correlated to how stakeholders tend to think when evaluating a company.
3. Conceptual Framework

3.1 Research model

In order to clarify the theoretical concepts and how the concept connects to each other, a conceptual model was created. This was done with the aim to guide the reader and to be able to meet the purpose of the paper. The model is created as a chain where the three major concepts of the study is presented and shows how these three concepts is connected and affected by each other. Additionally, it is created in the context of social media, this since the tool of social media when regarding crisis communication is a tool that has increased in usage for both companies and stakeholder over the last couple of years (Park et. al., 2012; Dalziel, 2014; Manika et. al., 2015; Roshan et. al., 2016). The first concept presented in the model (see Figure 1) is crisis communication, a concept which regards the response which a firm generates after a crisis has occurred (Coombs, 2010). Companies creation of crisis communication on social media has increased, which in turn has increased the engagement from stakeholders, through tempting them to create eWOM. This is the next concept which is presented in the model, where it is showed that crisis communication generates eWOM (Chu and Kim, 2018). eWOM reach a large number of individuals and all information which is consumed by stakeholders of a company affects their corporate reputation which they hold towards the company (Coombs and Holladay, 2007), which is why the next step in the conceptual model is corporate reputation. Einwiller et al. (2010) does together with Schwaiger (2004) refer to cognitive reputation as a construct made up of two components within the theory of attitude; affective and cognitive, and is therefore sub categorize to corporate reputation in the conceptual model.

Figure 1. Corporate reputation affect model
Based on the corporate reputation affect model, assumptions regarding the following research and its outcome were created.

Assumption 1: The crisis communication from the company in social media will be the foundation for the eWOM that is created.

Assumption 2: Corporate reputation will be directly affected by the eWOM which is generated as a response to the crisis communication.

Assumption 3: The affective reputation and the cognitive reputation is equally affected by the eWOM generated by Crisis Communication.
4. Method

4.1 Research Approach

In order to be able to connect theory with empirical data that is gathered in a research, it is necessary to apply one of the main approaches that Bryman and Bell (2011) discuss, these are inductive or deductive approach. Since this research is a theory-based study it has a deductive approach, which means that the authors test theory that has been created previously (Saunders et al. 2009). This study aimed at exploring the connection between the three theoretical concepts crisis communication, eWOM and corporate reputation. Since the three concepts which were the foundation for this study previously has been thoroughly studied separately, this argued for a deductive approach.

Saunders et al. (2009) further state that a deductive approach can both be done through quantitative and qualitative studies. A qualitative approach enables collection of rich data, which is data with a deeper understanding of the concepts that are researched (Merriam, 1998). This study had a need for rich data since it aimed at exploring the combination of three concepts of crisis communication, eWOM and corporate reputation had not been well researched together previously. The qualitative approach was therefore the most suitable one for this research. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), a qualitative research highlights the words rather than the quantity of the data, which was an additional argument for a qualitative approach being most suitable for this research. This since this study aimed at exploring the stakeholders’ corporate reputation based on eWOM generated from a crisis communication in a detailed and in depth way rather than the quantity of it. Merriam (1998) further explain a qualitative approach through the possibility it offers researchers to understand the creation of people’s reality and their everyday experiences, which was in line with the purpose of this study, and was one further argument for a qualitative approach being most suitable.

4.2 Research Design

Bryman and Bell (2011) state that depending on what research design that is chosen for a study, it affects the outcome of it. The research design explains the outline of the study and how it will be carried out in order to meet the purpose of the study (Saunders et al., 2009). It is crucial for researchers to choose the most appropriate research design, depending on the
research field and how well it is studied previously, in order to be able to collect the data that is needed. One research design is cross-sectional design, which is when one single case is studied during a specific point in time, collected from two or more sources (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Rindfleisch et al., 2008). This in relation to the focus cross-sectional designs has on collecting qualitative data (Bryman and Bell, 2011), there was a cross-sectional design was suitable the research area of this study. This research did a cross-sectional study by looking at the corporate reputation among the stakeholders generated based on eWOM generated from crisis communication in a thorough and detailed way. This was done with several different sources in order to create a deep understanding of the affective and cognitive components.

4.3 Research Purpose

In order to create a guidance throughout the study, a research purpose that systemize the study is needed. There are different ways to apply a research purpose and Saunders et al. (2009) further explain one of the approaches as exploratory. An exploratory research purpose is defined to regard a research that has to be further studied or explored in order to create a clearer understanding of the subject (Saunders et al. 2009). This made an exploratory purpose suitable for this study, with the need for further studies which the area of stakeholders’ corporate reputation, based on eWOM generated from crisis communication had. With these concepts still scattered picture, it was again indicated that an exploratory research purpose was most appropriate for this study, since further gathering of data was needed in order to understand the research area in a more thorough way.

4.4 Data Sources

There are different ways to gather data within a study, which Bryman and Bell (2011) presents as primary and secondary data. In the gathering of primary data, information is collected from the actual source of information. This process which is led by the researchers has the aim of collecting tailored and new data that solves the purpose of the study (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005). This type of data, primary data, was highly appropriate for this research since there was a requirement for new data for this study. By collecting primary data, the researchers can have control over the subject during the whole process and get data that is relevant and reliable, which is why primary data was needed for this study (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Hair et al., 2011).
4.5 Data Collection Method

Bryman and Bell (2011) discuss different methods that can be used in order to collect data, among the five most common methods that is presented by the authors is in-depth interviews. With in-depth interviews, researches are able to gather valuable and deep data from the respondents, which is recommended for studies with a qualitative approach (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Saunders et al. (2009) further discuss in-depth interviews in a context of semi-structured interviews, which is interviews that has the aim to discuss a specific topic and therefore has a more organized interview session with prepared question in relation to the theory of study. This gives the researchers possibility to retrieve and collect data which has a closer connection to the theory, which made semi-structured interviews appropriate for this research area and in turn this study. Since this research wanted to explore corporate reputation with crisis communication and eWOM in specific, semi-structured interviews enabled to collect data closely connected to these concepts.

The interviews were held with each respondent individually, with the aim of getting hold of the individuals own thoughts and feelings, and to avoid the respondents to be influenced by others. The researchers aim was to lead the respondents towards the topic during the interview session, but still be able to ask follow up questions during the interview, which Saunders et al (2009) discuss as a possibility with semi-structured approach. Furthermore, the interviews were done face-to-face between the researchers and the respondents, this to make it possible to see facial expression and different reactions during the session. The interviews were recorded and later on transcribed in order to not miss out any important opinions from the respondents. Each of the six interviews were within a timespan of 30-45 minutes and were conducted at a neutral and calm environment. In order to avoid misunderstandings and difficulties when translating the data collected, the interviews were held in English with the aim of retaining nuances and details throughout the transcription process. After six interviews saturation was reached, this since patterns appeared in the answers from the data collected through the interviews.
4.6 Data Collection Instruments

4.6.1 Interview Guide

In order to do a semi-structured interview and gain as accurate responses as possible in connection to the theoretical concepts, it was essential to have an interview guide for this study. An interview guide helps the interviewer to stick to the topic of discussion during the interview session, while it also leads the respondent in the right direction (Bryman and Bell, 2011). According to Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005), it is of importance to construct questions that is in accordance to the purpose of the research in order to gain the responses that involves the chosen topic. By having an interview guide with questions that regards crisis communication, eWOM and corporate reputation, the researchers were able to gain the responses around the chosen topic (see appendix 1). In order to see if the questions were understandable and to test the order, pretests were done on three randomly selected respondents. The questions were revised and changed into the present order of the interview guide.

The two different brands that were used during the interviews were H&M and Benetton, which both had previously occurred crises. They are two big fashion brands both active in Sweden and globally (H&M, n.d.; Benetton, n.d.). H&M was founded in 1947 and has since then expanded into one of the biggest fashion brands worldwide, having 4293 stores all over the world (H&M, n.d.). Benetton was founded 1965 and is today one of the best known fashion brands in the world, with approximately 5000 stores worldwide (Benetton, n.d.). The crisis which occurred to H&M was when the company published a picture on their social media channels, picturing a young, dark skinned boy wearing a sweater with a print saying “Coolest monkey in the jungle”, a sweater which the company was going to sell in their stores. This created a lot of reactions among the public which resulted in H&M publishing an apology, their crisis communication, on their social media channels (Facebook H&M, 2018; Prweek, 2018). The crisis which occurred to Benetton was when the company published a picture on their social media channels picturing three boys, with the caption underneath the picturing saying “Sorry ladies. No girls allowed!” This did also create a lot of reactions from people seeing the picture, which in turn also made Benetton publishing their apology in their social media channels (Daily Mail, 2017). Both of the crisis communications did in turn
generate eWOM created by the companies’ stakeholders (Facebook H&M, 2018; Daily Mail, 2017).

These crises, the crises communication and the chosen eWOM comments are presented with H&M in appendix 2 and with Benetton in appendix 3. One of the requirements when choosing which brands and crises to use when collecting data was to have one crises which was well known in Sweden, and one crises which was not. This in order to make it possible to detect differences in the corporate reputation depending on pre-knowledge among the respondents. However, there were also a requirement that all of the respondents had pre-knowledge regarding the two brands in order for them to have an already existing corporate reputation of both brands, this since the possible affect of eWOM on corporate reputation wanted to be explored. Both of these requirements was control questions which the respondents got to answer previous to the interview. These brands were also chosen for this research since they are both active in the fashion industry, this in order to minimize the risk of differences between different industries. One of the two other control question regarded whether the respondent previously had engaged with the brands, this questions was asked with the purpose to get the respondent thinking about the two brands and create a bigger awareness for themselves regarding their thoughts and feelings towards the brands. The last control question was asked with the purpose of assuring the respondents knowledge regarding what eWOM is. The chosen eWOM comments that was shown during the interviews was filtered through Facebook as the most relevant comments.

The following interview was regarding the two brands, however the first part of the interview revolved around H&M while the second part revolved around Benetton, the exact same questions were asked regarding both brands. The questions during the interviews were divided in two different parts, where some of the questions were asked before the exposure of the crisis communication together with the eWOM and some of them after the exposure. In what order the questions were asked can be seen in the interview guide (appendix 1). All of the questions were asked twice during one interview session, this since how eWOM affects the respondents’ corporate reputation wanted to be explored. The reason for asking questions before versus after was to explore if there were any differences regarding the corporate reputation in the respondent’s answers after the exposure of the crisis communication and the eWOM.
4.6.2 Operationalization
Saunders et al. (2009) describe operationalization as a way for researchers to collect relevant data by theorize the ideas within the study into more measurable concepts presented in a table. By creating a table with the concept within the literature review as a basis, the researchers were able to define different categorizations within the operationalization. The table consist of three theoretical concepts (see Table 1) which is Crisis communication, eWOM and Corporate reputation which is divided into two parts since it has two sub concepts; affective and cognitive components. In the third column the theoretical concepts together with the sub concept of corporate reputation were defined. The fourth column consist of the operational definition which Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005) state is needed in order for the reader to easier follow why the concepts were used within the study. The questions connected to every theoretical concept are found in the last and fifth column.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical Concepts</th>
<th>Sub Concepts</th>
<th>Concept Definition</th>
<th>Operational Definition</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Crisis Communication         |                    | Crisis communication regards how a firm communicate after a crisis occurred with the aim to improve the situation that the crisis has caused, both for the firm itself but also for the stakeholders (Bitner et al. 1990; Coombs (2007)). | To explore the respondents’ thoughts regarding the crisis communication of the brands researched. | - How do you think the brand handled the crisis?  
- Do you believe the brand took responsibility for the crisis? In what way?  
- In what way do you believe the handling of the crisis affected you and your opinion towards the brand? |
| Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) |                    | EWOM is a way for consumers to share their thoughts regarding a brand or a specific product online, whether it is positive or not. It can be described as informal messages that the consumers create in different forms such as comments and reviews (Ye et al., 2011; Cheung and Lee, 2012). | To explore how the respondents’ use and engage with eWOM on social media.                  | - In what way do you usually engage with eWOM?  
- How do you perceive the eWOM comments?  
- How did it affect your opinions towards the brand? |
| Corporate Reputation         | Affective component | Corporate reputation is an overall evaluation that the public creates of a firm or a brand (Zheng et al. 2018). The affective component refers to the emotional aspect of the reputation towards the firm or the brand (Einwiller et al. 2010). | To explore the emotions and feelings towards the brand of discussion, both before and after being exposed to the crisis communication and eWOM. | Before the crisis communication and eWOM is presented  
- What feelings are evoked when thinking about the brand?  
- What are your impressions towards this brand?  
- How are you/could you get emotionally attached to this brand?  
- In what way would you feeling confident using this brand?  
After the crisis communication and eWOM is presented |
| Corporate Reputation | Cognitive component | Corporate reputation is an overall evaluation that the public creates of a firm or a brand (Zheng et al. 2018). The cognitive component regards the reputation based on knowledge and beliefs one has towards the firm (Einwiller et al., 2010). | To explore the knowledge and beliefs towards the brand of discussion, both before and after being exposed to the crisis communication and eWOM. |

**Before the crisis communication and eWOM is presented**
- What do you know about this brand?
- How do you perceive the brand’s values?
- What are your thoughts of the brand?

**After the crisis communication and eWOM is presented**
- How do you perceive the brand behind the crisis communication?
- How do you perceive the brand’s values?
- What are your thoughts of the brand after exposure to the crisis communication and eWOM?
4.7 Choice of respondents

The choice of respondents is a way for researchers to choose a specific segment of a population which Holme and Krohn (1997) state will function as a representation of the population. It is further explained by Levy and Lemeshow (2008) as a gathering of empirical material from a sample that is wanted from the researchers within the study. Bryman and Bell (2011) present different ways to do chose the respondents, where non-probability is presented as one of them. Non-probability indicates that some individuals of the population has a higher chance of being selected than others (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Within non-probability sampling there are different categories of how to sample the units. Bryman and Bell (2011) describe one of them as convenience sample, where the researcher create a sample of what is available and does not focus on a specific gender, age or ethnicity.

Since gender, age or ethnicity was not seen of importance for this study, convenience sample was the most suitable collection of respondent method. The respondents were collected through availability, but with the requirement that they were familiar with the brands H&M and Benetton and were considered to be a part of the target groups for both of the brands. The respondents consisted of six people, with a random distribution of three men and three women. The distribution of an equal amount of men versus women were still based on the availability. The respondents were within an age span of 22-27 years old and had different ethnicities. Four of the respondents were from Sweden, one of the respondents were from France and one was from United Kingdom. All of the respondents were students, however there were different educations represented in the respondent group. Three of them studied business, two studied engineering and one studied psychology. Bryman and Bell (2011) further state that even though non-probability sample is hard to generalize, words is of higher importance than numbers in a qualitative study, which is an additional argument for why convenience sample was chosen for this study since the researcher aimed for detailed answers around the subject.

4.8 Data Analysis Method

In a qualitative research, the rich data that is gathered is one of the major contributions. It is however important to be able to analyze the data in a thorough and understandable way (Bryman and Bell, 2011). In order to give the reader a clear and accurate understanding of the
data, Bryman and Bell (2011) argue that transcriptions should be done of the empirical material. This should be done in time in order to make it possible to start the coding process, which is the analysis method of this study. Coding is a process where the researchers identify and label the empirical data that seem to be the most relevant in the data collected. The collected data is later on divided into different themes after a process of thoroughly studying and theorization of the data (Saldaña, 2009; Birks and Mills, 2011; Bryman and Bell, 2011). Coding is a common analysis method when it comes to qualitative studies since it enables the researchers to analyze the rich data in a deeper way (Saldaña, 2009; Birks and Mills, 2011), which is why coding were chosen as a data analysis method for this paper. A program called NVivo were used for the coding process, which is a program that is used for qualitative studies in order to manage, explore and find patterns of the gathered data (QSR International, n.d). The program was used with the aim to increase the opportunity during the analyzation process to reach valuable patterns in the data collected. Bryman and Bell (2011) further state software program in overall to be a way for researchers to speed up the analyzing process.

The first step that was done within the data analysis process were to transcribe all the interviews. These transcriptions were implemented into the coding program NVivo (QSR International, n.d). By having all the transcriptions within the program, the researchers were able to code all the written data into themes. In order to find the themes, the researchers structured and highlighted the relevant data which created patterns, and later on a visualization of the results which is according to Ghauri and Grønhaug (2005) together with Urquhart (2012) important steps in order to find reliable and relevant data for the study. The results were narrowed down into themes which was the foundation for the coding scheme that can be found in the end of the empirical chapter. The coding scheme was structured after the theoretical concepts within the study with corporate reputation before the crisis, crisis communication, eWOM and corporate reputation after the exposure of the crisis, crisis communication and eWOM. Each of the respondents had an own column with the themes created out of their answers in connection to each theoretical concept. This with the aim to see how the respondents corresponded with the theoretical concepts and what themes that were created under each category (see table 2 for H&M and table 3 for Benetton). All of the respondents were named after the colors Orange, Blue, Green, Pink, Yellow and Red without any specific order since the interviews were anonymous. The last column consists of a summary over the themes where the numbers behind each theme shows the number of times
content regarding these words were mentioned during the interviews. This was done in order to clarify the most highlighted themes. The themes that were mentioned the same amount of times under each subcategory were placed in alphabetic order. Table 4 and 5 presents a summary of the two coding schemes, where the found themes for both H&M and Benetton are presented next to each other, regarding all the concepts. This was done with the aim to present them in a simplified way.

Besides the tables, the empirical material has been summarized in written form with the aim to give the reader an understanding of the interviews and an insight into what the respondents said. This summary can be found in chapter five of this study, which ends with the presentation of the tables. The transcribed material from the interviews is available if requested through contacting the authors.
4.9 Quality Criteria

In order to assure that the research is thoroughly evaluated, quality criteria concepts can be used within the evaluation process. Bryman and Bell (2011) discuss trustworthiness in connection to qualitative research, where there are four different categories. Credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. Credibility can be referred to whether the findings in the study were able to find common patterns among the respondents and if it were recurring patterns (Krefting, 1991; Bryman and Bell, 2011). By asking question that were constructed in accordance to the literature review and to the purpose of the study, the researchers were able to get credible answers together with common patterns that aroused during the interviews. After six interviews, the recurring patterns gave the researcher a clearer picture of the study which gave the study a higher credibility, which is in accordance to how Bryman and Bell (2011) together with Krefting (1991) state to be one of the criteria for a higher trustworthiness of a study. Dependability is another criteria that should be met, which Bryman and Bell (2011) mean should be done by record all the gathered data in a consistent and clear way. This was done by recording all the interviews which later on were transcribed, to get as clear and consistent data as possible and not miss any important factors.

The third criteria is transferability which Graneheim and Lundman (2004) explains as to what extent the data can be transferred into other contexts and groups. Krefting (1991) further describe the importance of having clear information of how the research was done and the construction of it. By having an operationalization table and an interview guide together with a description of how the gathering of the data was done, the reader could easily follow how the procedure went, which is in accordance to Krefting (1991) criteria for transferability. Additionally, these description and the operationalization was also done with the aim to make it easier for further research to transfer the study into another context (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Confirmability were met by being objective within the research, which Bryman and Bell (2011) mean is to not influence the respondents’ answers or add own values to the research. By no having leading questions and let the respondents share their opinions, together with transcribing all the interviews later on, the research was able to be objective and achieve confirmability.
### 4.10 Methodology Summary

*Table 6. Methodology summary*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Application for method</th>
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<td>Qualitative Approach</td>
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<td>Cross-sectional design</td>
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<td>Interview-guide</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Operationalization</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choice of respondents</td>
<td>Convenience sample</td>
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<tr>
<td>Data Analysis method</td>
<td>Transcriptions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coding (Nvivo)</td>
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<td>Credibility</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dependability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Transferability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Confirmability</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
5. Empirical Results

5.1 H&M – Before the crisis

H&M was the first brand that was discussed during the interviews, a brand which all of the six respondents were both familiar with and previously had engaged with. Orange, Blue, Green, Pink and Yellow all discussed H&M as a brand which they perceive as global. Yellow said “It is a Swedish fashion brand, very famous globally, stores everywhere in the world. Super big, super huge, super famous”. All of the respondents also discussed H&M in connection to availability, both in terms of products and placement of stores. Ethics was another trait discussed in both positive and negative manners, where Orange said “they don’t have any unethical way of producing their clothes” while Blue stated “I know they have a lot of issues with where they are producing their clothes and things like that but yeah... but I would still buy their products because it is cheap”. All of the respondents highlighted H&M’s prices in connection to their products by explaining them as cheap, which were a trait discussed in relation to quality in all of the interviews. The opinions towards the quality of H&M’s products was according to Pink, Orange and Yellow very good, while Green said “Cheap clothes but with a great span, so it is both quality and not so good quality maybe”.

The loyalty towards H&M were expressed by Blue and Green. Green did as well as Orange and Yellow also discussed trustworthiness towards the brand, Orange said “I don't think I would ever buy something at a certain price there and then get disappointed for what I get. I trust H&M”. Red did however express feelings of untrustworthiness towards H&M by saying “In one way they are untrustworthy, since they have like one impression of what they want to be and one of what they actually are, that those two impressions doesn't really correspond with each other”. Red continued by stating “I perceive them as ambiguous, standing for one thing and doing another”. However, Red did as well as Blue, Green and Pink express satisfaction towards H&M, while Yellow had a more neutral perception of the brand. However, all of the six respondents said that they would react and consider it very sad if H&M went out of business.

The transcribed material from the interviews are available if requested through contacting the authors.
5.2 H&M - After the crisis

5.2.1 Crisis communication
All of the six respondents was since before familiar with the crisis of H&M. After the crisis of H&M was shown and explained as well as the crisis communication and chosen e-WOM comments was presented, Blue expressed opinions towards H&M’s way of communicating after the crisis by saying “I feel that it was more of a way for them to stop the word of mouth on internet. I don't really see an engagement from them, this is a way from them to try improve the brand”. Pink and Yellow both said that H&M could have done something more than they did. Blue further said that the crisis communication from H&M was perceived as an automatic response, “It was more like an automatic response in a way. They were obligated to do that since it was huge”. However, Blue still did as well as Red, Green, Pink, Yellow and Orange considered H&M to take responsibility regarding what happened, even though the opinions regarding the extent of taking responsibility differed. Red said “I think they handled it by the book. I don't think there is any other way they should have done it. I think it is good that they posted an apology” which was similar to what Pink said, “But I think the way they responded to it was good and I guess they responded to peoples’ comments which is also good, to show that they care about their customers”. Orange express his/her thoughts and said “if they are making it personal and commenting on all comments. Like saying we are sorry, they are not defending anything which is good”. Responsibility was further discussed by Green by saying “I think it is easy to take responsibility when you have an online-world and you can just publish something like that... I don't know if it is the right way to take responsibility, but this was the best way they could have handled it”. The communication from H&M was further on described by both Pink and Orange as being genuine, Orange said “And they obviously were really sorry because they don't know how it happened”.

5.2.2 EWOM
When the eWOM, which was created as a response to the crisis communication was brought up, three out of the six respondents talked about the importance of how the comments were written and formulated, when depending on how they affected the respondents. Regarding the eWOM Yellow said “I perceive them pretty vulgar, there are two camps here, those who are for and those who are against and I think that they kind of go against each other. And when
that happens during eWOM it usually kind of just escalates into bullshit talking, trash talking about one another”. The same respondent also said “In some sense yes it affects me because I see what kind of consumers and customers H&M has, what their opinion is, but my personal opinion towards the brand itself does not changed”. Pink expressed him/herself by saying “I think as long as you formulate what you try to say, whether it is positive or negative, in a good tone... then I'm more engage to it, like discuss the topic with you”. Red touched upon the subject by also mentioning the grammar of eWOM, but rather talked about untrustworthiness by saying “I noticed... I think it was the second comment that was very bad grammatically. And that feels very untrustworthy. I mean, is that like real opinions or is that someone who barely knows what they are writing”.

Two out of these respondents, Yellow and Orange expressed their thought regarding eWOM as though it is a very powerful tool. Orange said “I think it is like a huge tool to either spread brand awareness or like destroy brand image. It is so powerful, obviously I listen”. The same respondent further expressed how negative eWOM in specific affects him/her to large extent. Yellow said regarding eWOM that “It kind of makes my own opinion grow stronger”. Five out of the six respondents said that they usually don’t create eWOM themselves, while Pink said that he/she sometimes comment, mainly when it regards sexism or racism. Red expressed that he/she may comment sometimes but only on accounts with fewer followers, “I think if I saw something on H&M Instagram, I don't think I would comment on it, if I see like they have 200 000 comments, I don't think I would do anything about it”.

5.2.3 Corporate reputation
All of the six respondents talked about their corporate reputation after being presented to the crisis in terms of being unchanged in relation to before. Green said “But my overall feeling towards H&M is pretty much the same. I think it is due to my previous experiences and that I love to shop at H&M”. Similarly did Pink express “Since like they solved the crisis and it went well, I would still say they it is my go to store if I would buy my t-shirt even after the crisis”. The eWOM rather raised the awareness towards the crisis itself rather than changing the respondents’ intentions to engage with H&M, Red said “I don't really think it affected my opinion towards H&M, it rather raised a question whether that shirt in particular was something that was actually bad, or... how do you call it... a coincidence”. Blue talked about how the eWOM did not affect his/her thoughts and feelings towards the brand, and stated that
the same opinions as she/he had before towards H&M still existed. Yellow expressed similarly “I wouldn't say that would affect me from not buying from them anymore. I wouldn't say that that affects my feelings in any way”. Four of the respondents did consider this crisis to be contradicting to what they perceived H&M’s values to be, however did Blue, Red and Orange all believed that is was a mistake.

Red, Blue, Green and Orange talked about how their trust towards H&M and their previous thoughts and feelings towards the brand made them believe that the crisis was not performed on purpose, and resulted in these respondents having a corporate reputation towards H&M which partly consisted of trustworthiness. Red expressed this by saying “I trust H&M that much to say that I don't think that they would do this on purpose. Cause they are such a big company and they are smarter than that I think”. The same respondent had a better corporate reputation towards H&M after the crisis, due to their actions in taking responsibility for the fault, and was not affected by eWOM to a large extent. Similarly did both Pink and Yellow during their separate interviews say how H&M’s crisis communication affected them into believing that H&M really care about and for their customers. Pink said “I mean I guess there are some kind of respect, how they handle it... That is the only thing that has changed from my impression before. That there are actually people behind it and not just money...”. Pink continued to explain his/her corporate reputation towards H&M as genuine after being presented to the crisis, crisis communication and eWOM by saying “They do value their customers and they do value their like how people actually care and see them, and that's why I think their values are like even stronger now than before the crisis”. In contrast to what the other five respondents expressed did Green say “the negative comments would definitely affect me more since I have a positive feeling towards H&M from the beginning... I would consider the negative comments more since that would be a possible way to change my mind...”. Green, as well as Orange, did also express disappointed feelings towards H&M based on their crisis communication, Orange said “They could have done something more”.

Four out of the six respondents agreed with both the positive and negative eWOM which they were present with. Yellow said “At the same time I can see why people are getting upset about it but reading through the comments I can also feel that those who feel that H&M didn't do anything wrong also have a point. So I can totally understand both sides”. 

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5.3 Benetton – Before the crisis

Benetton was the second brand that was discussed during the interviews, a brand which all of the six respondents were all familiar with. Blue, Pink and Yellow said they perceived Benetton as an upscale and to some extent exclusive brand with good quality. Orange’s opinion was corresponding to their view on the brand’s quality, through saying “Good clothes, I feel like it's good quality clothes”. Blue and Orange said they perceived the brand as offering basic clothing but still exclusive, and Yellow, Orange and Blue talked about the brand in positive manners. Green, Pink and Red had a more neutral approach to the brand and did not consider themselves to be emotionally attached to the Benetton brand, while Orange could become emotionally attached if the clothes would attract him/her to a larger extent, while Blue said “I am in a way emotionally attached because I really like their way of thinking, but it never pushes so far that I buy things from them”.

Three out of the six respondents highlighted diversity when talking about their corporate reputation towards Benetton before the crisis was presented. Yellow said “What I know about them is that they are for diversity, I guess that is why they have the "united colors". I know that is something they use a lot in their advertisements” and Orange said “They promote like a lot of diversity, their advertising always has like different ethnicities, and united colors and ... I don't know. I think they have a good image”.

5.4 Benetton - After the crisis

5.4.1 Crisis communication
None of the six respondents were familiar with the crisis of Benetton before their interviews. When talking about Benetton’s crisis communication during the interviews, Blue and Orange considered that the brand took responsibility to some extent for the crisis, through the apology they posted. All of the other four respondents, Red, Green, Pink and Yellow, considered the crisis communication from Benetton as insincere. Red stated “But at least for me it would have been sincerer by stating that they were sorry and that this was not going to happen again. Instead of trying to make themselves look better by adding other things”. Green had a similar saying by stating “I think they like in one way trying to justify that they put that caption up, like "we are not sexist, we’re sorry if we offended someone". But it doesn't feel like a sincere apology if you can say that, rather they try to just blow it off. It is
just a caption”. Both Blue and Green was quite ambiguous regarding their opinions towards the crisis communication, with Green first stating that the communication felt insincere, while later saying “I think they handled quite well I guess... They gave an example of what they have done for women and ehh... Apologize to who they have possibly angered”. Blue first talked about Benetton showing engagement in their apology by talking about their work regarding empowering women, but also expressed opinions regarding how the communication felt a bit automatic.

5.4.2 EWOM
Regarding the eWOM which was created as a response to the crisis communication by Benetton, Yellow had expect more angry comments. He/she said “I expected more from the side that reacted against it (the comments), that was not a lot of like hate, they didn't seem that upset. I figured they would have a consumer base that was more into the whole feminism thing than the answers I saw there. It was a big difference from what I thought”.

While Orange, Blue and Red all talked about partly agreeing with both sides of the eWOM, Pink stated “They just talked about this is wrong, this is right... I would say that the comments are even childish... That they don't really approach the problem properly either”. Orange, Blue and Red did all later on during the interview experienced to be influenced by the negative comments to a larger extent than by the positive ones, Green felt the same way. Orange said “I agreed with both as I read both, but I think yeah, I think negative eWOM has a larger spillover, has a larger effect. The negative sticks with you”, similarly to Blue who said “I think that the negative comments affected me the most, because I agree with them even more”.

5.4.3 Corporate reputation
To some extent did five of the six respondent consider their corporate reputation towards Benetton to be unchanged, these were Orange, Pink, Green, Blue and Red. Green did however also express how the crisis communication made him/her feel positive depending on the crisis communication from the brand. Green said “I would go and check that empowering women thing they mention or what it was... It gives me an opportunity to me as a women to "okay, let's see this way of thinking about instead.” Blue also consider the corporate reputation towards Benetton to increase positively after being presented with the crisis. However, both Blue and Green did express to be influenced negatively by the eWOM they
read. Red, Pink, Yellow and Orange had the similar way of experiencing their corporate reputation towards Benetton more negatively after the crisis, crisis communication and eWOM. Pink said “The respect for their customers is lacking... Since I mean, they just don't, or it doesn't seem like they care so much...” pointing to the crisis communication from the brand. Red said “The comments pushed me to think about what I think”, and did also say that another picture of what Benetton stood for was created while also the negative feelings towards the brand had increased. Red, Blue and Orange all said that they could agree with both sides of the comments, Orange said “It is funny, when I read the ones that were angry at them I felt angry at them, and when I read the ones not angry at them, I didn't feel angry at them”.

Pink expressed “you can see that it feels almost childish in the way Benetton handle it. Since they basically say "it is not that big of a deal guys, we are trying to fix this on this side" but they still got a crisis that they still haven't handle. Like the first part of the apology is great but then it just become this other thing like "we're sorry but...", creating a corporate reputation towards Benetton as being irresponsible. Only Blue highlighted diversity in connection to Benetton after the crisis was presented. Orange continued the discussion regarding corporate reputation towards Benetton after the crisis by saying “Yeah I think, since I don't actually have any opinions towards this, something like this makes me question them even more”. The disappointment towards Benetton was also discussed by Yellow and Red, and Yellow said “Since I expected more in their answer, maybe my general opinion is disappointment in how they handled it”. Red discussed it similarly by saying “If Benetton would have been a brand which I purchased a lot of things from, e.g. H&M, it would have had a more negative impact on me. But now it is more that I think that they handled it badly”.

Four of the respondents, Red, Blue, Yellow and Orange, thought that Benetton were contradicting their own values, mainly based on the crisis itself and the communication afterwards. Blue said “Well, I didn't know that they have like empowering women program for women. But also afterwards it was also an automatic response to shut down the problem. But it is hard to see if they really stand for the apology...”. Red further expressed “A lot of the comments talked a lot about equality and also because it was kind of a sexist thing. So probably Benetton wants to be seen as an equal company. It then it feels quite stupid for them to have an advertisement like this where they are really saying that this is only for boys”.
Table 2. Coding scheme H&M

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H&amp;M</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Orange</th>
<th>Blue</th>
<th>Green</th>
<th>Pink</th>
<th>Yellow</th>
<th>Red</th>
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<tr>
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<td><strong>After the crisis</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Crisis Communication</strong></td>
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<td>Unengaged Responsible Automatic response</td>
<td>Responsible Genuine</td>
<td>Unengaged Responsible</td>
<td>Unengaged Responsible</td>
<td>Responsible</td>
<td>Responsible (6) Unengaged (3) Genuine (2) Automatic Response (1)</td>
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<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Source credibility</td>
<td>Source credibility Powerful</td>
<td>Untrustworthy Source credibility</td>
<td>Source credibility (4) Entertaining (2) Powerful (2) Ambiguous (1) Untrustworthy (1)</td>
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<td><strong>Corporate reputation</strong></td>
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<td>Unchanged Trustworthiness Negatively affected Contradicting values Ambiguous</td>
<td>Unchanged Trustworthiness Negatively affected Disappointed</td>
<td>Unchanged Genuine</td>
<td>Unchanged Genuine Contradicting values Ambiguous</td>
<td>Unchanged Trustworthiness Responsibility Contradicting values Ambiguous</td>
<td>Unchanged (6) Contradictive (4) Ambiguous (4) Disappointment (2) Genuine (2) Negatively affected (2) Responsibility (1)</td>
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### Table 3. Coding Scheme Benetton

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<th>Orange</th>
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Table 4. Comparison summary H&M and Benetton, before the crisis

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<tr>
<th>Summary – Before the crisis</th>
<th>H&amp;M</th>
<th>Benetton</th>
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Table 5. Comparison summary H&M and Benetton, after the crisis

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<th>H&amp;M</th>
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6. Analysis

Zheng et al. (2018), Wartick (1992), Barnett et al. (2006) and Fombrun and Shanley (1990) explain corporate reputation as an overall evaluation one creates of a brand in connection to the brands' handlings, which were shown through the respondents’ knowledge and feelings towards the two brands of discussion. The respondents’ knowledge regarding the brands can be connected to what Einwiller et al. (2010) defines as cognitive reputation, which is the evaluation of a brand based on the knowledge and beliefs one has of a firm. Corporate reputation is also connected to the feelings one has towards a brand, which Einwiller et al. (2010) refers to as affective reputation. Based on the empirical results, the cognitive reputation points to be a foundation for the respondents’ affective reputation, with feelings directed towards the brand that are based upon the respondents’ knowledge. It was shown that the more knowledge the respondents had of the brand, the stronger corporate reputations aroused towards it. Trustworthiness was a common theme discussed regarding H&M, a feeling among several of the respondents that were shown to be based upon their previous knowledge regarding the brand. Loyalty was one of the other feelings towards H&M which through the empirical results showed to be based upon the respondents’ cognitive reputation. All of the respondents showed more or less an emotional attachment towards H&M before the crisis communication was shown, while no one felt an attachment towards Benetton.

All of the respondents were familiar with the brands of discussion but only knew about the H&M crisis in comparison to the crisis of Benetton, which no one of the respondents knew from before. The amount of knowledge regarding H&M was larger in comparison to the previous knowledge towards Benetton, which indicated a stronger corporate reputation of H&M than of Benetton before presentation of the crises, which makes it clear that the respondents had more knowledge and feelings towards H&M than towards Benetton. The way in which the respondents explained their thoughts and feelings towards the different brands showed stronger corporate reputation towards H&M in comparison to Benetton, which was shown through more developed descriptions of H&M and the respondents higher extent of engagement with H&M than Benetton. This was also shown through the themes created based on the respondents’ explanations of their thoughts and feelings towards the two brands before presentation of the crisis, which regarding H&M resulted in more themes. The themes regarding H&M also included more words which pointed in a positive direction,
implying a more positive corporate reputation towards that brand among the respondents. Based on the empirical results regarding corporate reputation towards H&M and Benetton before the crises were presented, the corporate reputation towards H&M were shown to be more extent. One assumption to this could be that all of the respondents had previous knowledge regarding the H&M crisis, which therefore may have resulted in the respondents having a higher cognitive reputation and knowledge to a larger extent. This in turn may have been a contribution to their stronger corporate reputation, in comparison to Benetton. However, H&M’s higher availability on the Swedish market in comparison to Benetton can be one foundation that leads to stronger corporate reputation, which should not be disregarded. This was indicated since all of the respondents mentioned availability when discussing H&M, pointing to this trait as important when creating one’s corporate reputation towards the brand. Solomon et al. (2016) states that the cognitive components is partly based on experiences of a brand, which could explain how H&M’s availability to a higher extent on the Swedish market may have affected the respondents’ corporate reputation in a stronger way.

Regarding the corporate reputation in connection to the crisis communication after presenting the crisis, crisis communication and eWOM, the empirical investigation indicated that the way the respondents interpreted the crisis communication differed depending on how the corporate reputation were before. Patriotta et al. (2011) states that crises often tend to affect one’s creation of reputation, however, the findings of this research suggests that one’s creation of reputation also is founded upon one’s corporate reputation post crisis. Coombs and Holladay (2010) and Piotrowski and Guyette (2010) state how companies, in the eye of the public, can both be defined but also judged depending on their ability to manage a possible crisis or how they manage a crisis that have occurred. All of the respondent felt that H&M took responsibility for the crisis and that the way the company handled it was overall good. However, when it comes to Benetton, half of the respondents felt that the company took responsibility in their crisis communication but the majority of them felt that the apology was insincere. It is shown that the way companies handle their crisis, as Piotrowski and Guyette (2010) discuss, has a crucial role in the judgment of the company from the eye of the public.
While the majority considered Benetton's crisis communication insincere, half of the respondents said H&M's crisis communication was not showing engagement, however did still all of the respondents perceive H&M crisis communication to take responsibility for the crisis that occurred. The more positive way of thinking and feeling towards H&M way of handling their crisis communication may be dependent upon the respondents previous more positive and stronger corporate reputation towards that brand. This indicates that a strong and positive corporate reputation towards a brand previous to a crisis makes stakeholders more tolerant to the crisis, as long as the crisis communication is perceived as being responsible. Additionally, the previous knowledge of the crisis may also have an impact on the corporate reputation after being presented to a crisis, crisis communication and eWOM since the respondents knew about the crisis of H&M before while the Benetton crisis was unknown. Since Coombs (2010), Falkheimer and Heide (2006), Reynolds and Seeger (2005) and Seeger (2006) state that the aim of crisis communication is to decrease the harm caused by the crisis and to reduce the possible negative outcomes that may follow, the decrease in the case of H&M may already have occurred. If so, the respondents may have created a cognitive and affective reputation of H&M in relation to the crisis previously to the interviews, which may have resulted in not being as affected of the crisis than as in the Benetton case. This indicates that the formation of corporate reputation again, play a significant role in how one interpret information and how the overall evaluation is generated of a company from the public. However, the respondents’ corporate reputation towards H&M after being presented to the crisis changed in terms of the themes found. The way in which the brands communicated after the crises, and the respondents’ perception of the crisis communication, may also had an impact.

Coombs (2014) further discuss the importance for companies to have a fast, continuous communication and openness towards the happenings around the crisis. When it comes to H&M and the eWOM that was generated from the crisis communication, there were several of the respondents who highlighted H&M to be a caring company in the way they were handling the crisis and answered the eWOM comments. The company had a continuous communication with the stakeholders and an openness towards the crisis by admitting that they made a mistake. Even though Benetton did apologize and were perceived, based on the empirical findings, to be quick in their crisis communication, the findings also showed that the perception of Benetton’s communication as not continuous and did not give a feeling of
openness. In relation to what Coombs (2014) state, the perceived insincere and not continuous crisis communication from Benetton, may have resulted in the respondents’ negative way of experiencing the crisis communication and the handling of eWOM. Several of the respondents stated that it felt like the company tried to change the problem into another direction by mentioning the female empowering program and through that erase the problem with the crisis, while H&M did an apology without any further statement of what they have instead. This indicates that the way brands handle crisis communication can in other words affect how the stakeholders’ cognitive and affective side towards the brand is developing, depending on how the communication is formulated. This is in line with what Thiessen and Ingenhoff (2011) found in their research, with explaining communication specifically in crisis situations as a major trait when regarding affecting one’s reputation.

When it comes to eWOM, Kumar et al. (2017) states how eWOM often is trusted to a higher extent in relation to other type of advertisements which is sent through online channels. This since the persons behind the eWOM often are trusted to a higher extent by the receiver, something that underlines the power eWOM possess. In the empirical findings, eWOM was mentioned as a powerful and influential tool, however to a larger extent regarding H&M than regarding Benetton. The way the respondents interpreted the eWOM comments from the crisis communication differed, where the formulation of the eWOM comments were also a major trait which affected the respondents’ thoughts regarding the level it influenced their own opinions. Comments which were considered formulated bad grammatically or containing non serious content had less influence on the respondents’ corporate reputation, it was seen as an untrustworthy source of information. This points to the formulation of eWOM comments mainly affecting the affective reputation among the respondents, through creating a feeling of untrustworthiness. These eWOM comments did not either give the reader any new information which their cognitive reputation could be built upon, again implying the non-affection on the overall corporate reputation. The results of the findings pointed towards eWOM rather being an influential factor on corporate reputation which goes against assumption two that assumed eWOM to directly affect corporate reputation. Assumption three was also contradicted by the findings of this of study since the affective reputation was affected to larger extent by the eWOM comments in comparison to the cognitive reputation.
The majority of the respondents did however say they agreed with both-side when it came to positive versus negative comments. This can be due to the corporate reputation one had before of the brand. In the case of H&M, the respondents said to agree to both sides, which could point to how the positive comments is agreed upon based on one’s strong corporate reputation towards the brand from before the crisis was presented. The negative eWOM can still be agreed upon since the thoughts and feelings of the crisis seen as an isolated event is not positive, which is supported by the respondents’ thoughts and feelings towards the crisis that occurred. That would explain the agreeing with both-side positive and negative comments. The cognitive and affective reputation seem to affect the way the respondents interpreted the crisis communication in connection to the eWOM comments. The corporate reputation might have been that strong before the crisis so the results after the crisis communication and the eWOM was rather confirmed in a positive way, since H&M handled the crisis as expected. If the company’s crisis communication on the other hand would not have corresponded with the stakeholders’ expectation, the stakeholders that agreed both-sided might have turned into being negatively affected instead. The negative eWOM would in turn may create a negative corporate reputation towards the brand as a whole. This was detected with some of the respondents’ thoughts and feelings towards Benetton’s way of conducting their crisis communication. Their communication was seen as insincere and automatic, and did later result in a corporate reputation towards the brand, after being presented to the crisis, that mainly was described by themes in negative manner.

The corporate reputation of Benetton before the crisis were described with words as diversity and an upscale brand with quality, while words in connection to Benetton after the crisis were more in a negative manner and the brand was seen as ambiguous. This is something that shows how the negative comments affected the respondents to a higher extent, which might be due to weak corporate reputation previous to the crisis, where the focus tends to be on the negative eWOM comments and instead create an opinion towards the brand in connection to what is read about the brand in the comments. This is something that goes in line with what Raluca (2014) who states that eWOM is a tool that gives consumers large power over a brand, which indicates that brands needs to be aware of what kind of eWOM that is spread online. If a negative corporate reputation arouse, eWOM can be seen as a negative influential factor for brands since it allows stakeholders to easily share their opinions and search for other opinions regarding a brand. This makes eWOM and social media a highly influential
platform that brands needs to be aware of how to manage in order for it to not harm the brand (Chu and Kim, 2011; Erkan and Evans, 2016). This is why eWOM is an even more important factor to take into consideration if the stakeholders do not have that strong corporate reputation towards the brand, while the crisis communication might be even more important than the eWOM in the aspect of stakeholders that holds a stronger corporate reputation towards a brand. The two crises which this study is built upon points to that eWOM is founded upon the crisis communication which a company creates in social media, however does the findings of this research rather extend the understanding of corporate reputation in relation to crisis communication and eWOM. The focus on the foundation of the eWOM was in turn limited and the findings regarding assumption 1 is therefore doubtful.

When it comes to corporate reputation, Barnett et al. (2006) together with Gotsi and Wilson (2001) mean that a positive corporate reputation indicates that a brand has appeared in a favorable way, which results in the public generating higher thoughts and beliefs of the brand. This is something that can be both positive and negative for a brand. If the public generates higher thoughts and beliefs of the brand, it will be even more complicated for the brand to meet the expectations. The empirical material indicated that when crisis communication didn’t meet the expectations several of the respondents mention, in this case Benetton, to be insincere. This can in turn change the corporate reputation into something negative rather than a positive reputation. Zheng et al. (2018) however state it is essential to separate the two components; affective and cognitive, in order to clarify stakeholders’ corporate reputation in connection to a firm’s crisis. When the opinions towards the two brands were discussed after exposure of the crisis, the majority of the respondents said to be unaffected in their corporate reputation. However, what could be noticed during the answers was that even though the respondents mention themselves to be unaffected in their knowledge and feelings towards the brands after the crisis communications, the discussions around it regarded the feelings towards the brand without any further reflection of the knowledge of the brand. Moreover, there were keywords that were brought up after the crisis that were more positive than before, which means that the corporate reputation of the brand was affected even if the respondents said the opposite. However, the affective reputation seems to be more affected due to the discussion around the feelings towards the brand rather than the cognitive reputation, which goes against the third assumption, since the affective and cognitive reputation seems to not be equally affected.
The reason for this can be in accordance to what Thiessen and Ingenhoff (2011) state, which is that the affective reputation is related to the sympathy a stakeholder holds towards the firm while the cognitive reputation is rather an evaluation that the stakeholder forms out of the company’s previous performance (Schwaiger, 2004). The respondents who had a strong corporate reputation before and said to be unaffected of the crisis communication and the eWOM comments might felt sympathy for the brand, which could be the reason for why the respondents rather discussed the feelings towards the brand in connection to the affective reputation. While the cognitive reputation could have been affected at an earlier stage, especially in the H&M case, which was discussed that the respondents were familiar with the crisis before and therefore already formed a cognitive reputation before the interviews. When it comes to the case of Benetton, where the respondents didn’t have that strong corporate reputation before, the respondents also said to be unaffected, but what could be noticed here to was that there were more negative keywords that aroused after the exposure of the crisis communication and eWOM. However, both the cognitive and affective reputation were in other words negatively affected, if not even more the affective reputation, since the themes disappointment and contradicting were brought up afterwards. This again implies that it goes against assumption three that means that they are equally affected by the eWOM.

According to Einwiller et al. (2010), the focal point for brands when regarding corporate reputation is the emotional and knowledge-based components a stakeholder forms towards a firm rather than the outcome of it. However, the question is if the outcome does matter since the empirical material indicated that depending on what corporate reputation one holds towards a firm before an exposure, in this case a crisis communication, the outcome of it will differ. Depending on what cognitive reputation one has before and the feelings one holds towards a brand, in other words what affective reputation one has, the picture of the brand will be affected either in a positive or negative way. According to the results in this study, the stronger corporate reputation one has, the more forgivable one seems to be towards a brand regardless what has happened, which also were shown within a neutral corporate reputation. It seems to matter if one is able to create an opinion and knowledge of the brand before that results in how receptive one is towards a happening, whether this happening is in the form of eWOM comments or a crisis communication. This means that only assumption one is in line with the results of this study, while both assumptions two and three goes against it.
6.1 Propositions

Based on the analysis, a revised conceptual model was developed in order to clarify the connections between the concepts of this study. The findings of this research propose that a stakeholder’s corporate reputation towards a firm after being exposed to the firm’s crisis, crisis communication and eWOM is dependent upon their corporate reputation previous to the crisis. This affects how a firm’s crisis communication in the context of social media affects both the affective and the cognitive reputation of one’s overall corporate reputation post crisis. It is also proposed, in comparison to what previous theory states, that eWOM rather influence the affective reputation of the corporate reputation. The affective reputation does in turn influence cognitive reputation of one’s corporate reputation post crisis. These does together lay the foundation for the corporate reputation towards the firm after the crisis.

![Proposed corporate reputation affect model](image)

*Figure 2. Proposed corporate reputation affect model*

Based on the proposed corporate reputation affect model, following propositions can be made.

**Proposition 1:** The corporate reputation stakeholders has towards a firm previous to a crisis is the foundation for how their corporate reputation is affected by the crisis communication and eWOM in social media.
Proposition 2: The crisis communication is the dominant factor and the eWOM works as an influential factor.

Proposition 3: The affective and cognitive reputation is affected by the crisis communication, where affective reputation in turn also affects the cognitive reputation.
7. Conclusion

The original conceptual model that was developed in connection to the literature review proposed that crisis communication generated eWOM which in turn affected stakeholders’ corporate reputation towards a brand. However, the results of this study indicated that the crisis communication had a higher impact on the corporate reputation than the eWOM had. The generated eWOM functioned as an influential factor of the corporate reputation rather than the dominant factor in connection to corporate reputation, which in this case goes against how Erkan and Evans (2016) together with Chu and Kim (2011) discuss eWOM to be a highly influential factor that can harm the brand. According to the results of this study, eWOM may still be influential, however highly dependent upon the corporate reputation one has of the brand previous to the crisis. The crisis communication is proposed to be a dominant factor affecting one’s corporate reputation of a brand, which confirms findings by Piotrowski and Guyette (2010), Thiessen and Ingenhoff (2011) and Patriotta et al. (2011) stating that the way companies handle their crisis and crisis communication has a crucial role in the judgement and reputation of the company. However, the findings of this study additionally propose that one’s corporate reputation of a brand previous to the crisis lays the foundation for how one is affected by crisis communication. The results of this study is in accordance with the findings from Zhang et al (2018) who discuss the importance to separate the two components within corporate reputation in order to understand the stakeholders’ corporate reputation after the crisis communication. The findings of this study indicated that the crisis communication had a higher impact on the affective reputation than on the cognitive reputation. However, the cognitive reputation was in turn affected by the affective reputation the stakeholders’ formed, and also directly influenced by the crisis communication. According to Einwiller et al. (2010) it is important for firms to focus on how affective reputation and cognitive reputation is formed. Through the findings of this study regarding the connection between how eWOM influenced affective reputation which in turn affected cognitive reputation, a part of the formation of both of these concepts post a crisis is emphasized. This research also made it possible to conclude that the thoughts and feelings one has towards a brand previous to a crisis occur, lays the foundation for how the corporate reputation is changed.
8. Research implications

8.1 Limitations

Since this study applied the crisis communication of two fashion-retailer brands, there were a limitation by aiming the focus towards the fashion industry. If the crisis communication would have been used in another context or another industry, it might have resulted in other opinions and another corporate reputation both before and after the crisis. Previous corporate reputation towards these two specific brands may also have affected the results. If other brands were used, it might have been another result since the respondents’ corporate reputation probably would have been different towards those brands.

8.2 Theoretical implications

This study contributes with research of stakeholders’ corporate reputation and how it is affected by crisis communication and the generated eWOM. Previous research indicated that eWOM is a powerful and influential tool, generated to high extent when a crisis occurs, however with a scattered picture regarding the affect on stakeholders. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore how the eWOM in connection to a brand’s crisis communication affected the stakeholder’s corporate reputation. Through this study’s qualitative and explorative approach, the findings of this research shifted the focus on the eWOM and how it affects corporate reputation. This research suggests that the way in which crisis communication is handled, affects corporate reputation to a higher extent than eWOM. This contribution questions previous research regarding the discussion of the power of eWOM since the eWOM comments did not directly affect the stakeholders to a high extent. This study proposes that the corporate reputation one has after a crisis occurred is dependent upon the corporate reputation that individual has previous to the crisis. One’s corporate reputation previous to a crisis does according to these findings have affect on how the individual perceive the crisis communication, which in turn showed to affect the affective reputation. An individual’s cognitive reputation is however affected to some extent by the crisis communication, but also affected by the affective reputation depending on the crisis communication. EWOM was found to rather influence both the affective and the cognitive reputation, which together create the corporate reputation.
8.3 Managerial implications

The contribution of this study is of importance for companies where a possible crisis may occur in the future. The findings of this study highlights the importance of executing crisis communication when a crisis occur, this since it was found that the way the crisis communication was handled did affect the respondents’ corporate reputation to a higher extent in this case, than the eWOM comments did. Also since the contribution of this research indicated that the corporate reputation stakeholders have before a crisis affects their thoughts and feelings towards crisis communication and eWOM when a crisis occur. This does in turn affect the stakeholders’ corporate reputation towards a brand after a crisis. It is therefore important to build strong relationships between companies and stakeholders in order to not harm the brand if a crisis occur. If a crisis occurs, it is of importance to act in accordance to the expectations the stakeholders has in the handling of the crisis communication. As long as the company takes responsibility for what they have done, in this case a sincere apology, it can maintain or even increase a positive corporate reputation among the stakeholders and generate a positive outcome of the crisis rather than harm the brand. However, brands should be aware that it is demanded more in a crisis situation from the company behind the crisis, if the stakeholder does not have as strong corporate reputation from the beginning, in order to create a positive or neutral corporate reputation among stakeholders.

8.4 Future research

The results of this study showed that the corporate reputation one had before towards the brands, had a highly impact of how the crisis communication were interpret and therefore affected the outcome of the corporate reputation after. One suggestions for future research is to both explore the affection crisis communication in social media followed by generated eWOM’s has on stakeholders’ corporate reputation regarding other brands. This partly in the fashion industry but mainly in other contexts and industries than fashion, with the aim to detecting differences in corporate reputation among stakeholders and to create a bigger understanding of the concepts affection on stakeholders. Additionally, separate the two concepts of corporate reputation in order to see if the corporate reputation in connection to other industries or brands affect the cognitive or the affective side the most.
There are several ways to perform and conduct both crisis communication and eWOM in social media, which imply the suggestion for future research that regards different types of crisis communication and eWOM than those explored in this study. Also the social media channels through where the crisis communication is delivered and in turn eWOM is created should be explored in order to detect possible differences in the way it has affection on corporate reputation. When the research area has been further researched through qualitative studies, the following suggestion is to conduct quantitative research on the area of crisis communication and generated eWOM and how it affects stakeholders’ corporate reputation, with the aim of making it possible to generalize results and in turn make general conclusions.
Reference list


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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview guide

Control-questions:
- Are you familiar with the brands H&M and Benetton (United colors of Benetton)?
- Have you engaged with the brands in some way e.g. buying or visiting a store?
- Are you familiar with any recent crisis that has happened to H&M?
- Are you familiar with any recent crisis that has happened to Benetton?
- Do you know what eWOM is?

Before the crisis communication:
- What do you know about this brand?
- What do you perceive to be the brand’s value?
- What are your thoughts of the brand?

- What feelings are evoked when thinking about the brand?
- What are your impressions of the brand?
- How are you/could you get emotionally attached to this brand?
- In what way would you feel confident using brand?

After presenting the crisis:
- How do you think the brand handled the crisis?
- Do you believe the brand took responsibility for the crisis? In what way?
- In what way do you believe the handling of the crisis affected you and your opinion towards the brand?

- In what way do you usually engage with eWOM? (only asked the first time)
- How do you perceive the eWOM?
- How did the eWOM affect your opinions towards the brand?

- What feelings are evoked when thinking about the brand?
- What are your impressions of this brand?
- How are you/could you get emotionally attached to this brand?
- In what way would you feel confident using this brand?

- How do you perceive the brand behind the crisis communication?
- What do you perceive to be the brand’s values?
- What are your thoughts of the brand after exposure to the crisis communication and eWOM?
Appendix 2 – H&M crisis, crisis communication and eWOM

**Crises, H&M.** The company published the picture below, where the shirt had the print "Coolest monkey in the jungle".

![Image: Prweek, 1/9-2018]

**Crises communication, H&M.** Published on the companies facebook-page

![Image: Facebook H&M, 1/9-2018]

**EWOM created as a response to crisis and crisis communication, H&M.**

| "Don't think you did anything wrong. The question is why people see the picture as racist, says more about them than about you" | "How do you defend ourself for all the slavery / children labour which you have in order to produce your clothes? Costs you just a few crowns while you sell for several hundred?"

| "I have been a loyal customer for several years. I love your clothes and prices. Nowadays it is my 9 year old daught- her who wants to go to H&M each weekend because she admires you! Will always stand by you. You are the best! Just so you know" | "That this would be an honest mistake is highly unlikely. We talk about rigorous processes before advertisements from big fashion companies is published. This is obviously concous move. The question is: why?"

| "Talk about creating cism out of something that not is racism. Anti-racism over all, but this is just radiciouls" | "HM… You know as much as I know that before an advert should be displayed, it has undergone a thorough check. That green shirt was picked. A decision was made on who to wear it. It was accepted to be fit for publica- tion and It was publicize on your permission… You can not deny knowing about this, you just wanted to express that thing which you have always felt inside you. Let me ask you something, are you sorry for the publication or you’re sorry for the message you passed across? Which is it please?"

| "My son would have loved that sweater. You who do something racist out of this picture should should ask yourself about your own REFERENCES" | "Hello H&M. Do you admit it was racist?"
Appendix 3 - Benetton crisis, crisis communication and eWOM

**Crises, Benetton.** The company published the picture below, where the text below the picture said “Sorry ladies. Girls not allowed!”

![Benetton](image)

2,276 likes  
*Benetton Sorry ladies. Girls not allowed!  
#SS17 #Benetton #kids*  
*Daily Mail, 7/6-2017*

**Crises communication, Benetton.**

**Benetton’s apology in full**

*Hi everyone,*

*We’re very sorry that our message struck the wrong chord with some of you. We only meant to be playful in this post, and we apologize [sic.] if we have unintentionally offended anyone. We certainly did not intend it to be sexist.*

*In fact, we take pride in the fact that United Colors of Benetton has always promoted gender equality, which we firmly believe is necessary for building a better world. This is precisely why we launched - in 2015 - the Women Empowerment Program, a long-term sustainability program aimed at supporting and empowering women worldwide.*

*Daily Mail, 7/6-2017*

**EWOM created as a response to crisis and crisis communication, Benetton.**

- “Gee, it's almost like people are looking for stuff to piss them off! Who cares about this? You’ve never seen a “no girls allowed” sign? Think the girls pay attention? Not likely. Watched my daughter and her friends storm a fort bearing that sign. Also witnessed boys not caring about a no boys sign too. There was no crying. Lighten up. There are way more offensive ads to get worked up over.”

- “That caption is so inappropriate compared to that cute pic. You did not choose wisely. Shame shame”

- “Didn’t your whole message used to be about inclusivity? Sad”

- “Girls not allowed! What year is this?!?”

- “One of society’s biggest ills is the pandering to the offended. Benetton SHOULD NOT apologise. Pathetic.”

- “Buy them or don’t buy them, who cares? Quite frankly I like seeing boys as boys and girls as girls. All this gender rubbish drives most people mad”

- “Jeez Benetton, that sort of talk is expected from dinosaurs & out of touch sexist. Sort it out! These clothes are cool for cats, boys and girls!”

- “This is a harmless ad that is poking fun at how boys at that age call girls yucky, nothing more, nothing less. People need to stop making everything something to fight