Bachelor's Thesis

A stitch in time saves nine: The impact of response strategy (denial vs. rebuilding) and tone of voice (human vs. organisational) on customer attitude and organisational reputation in crisis communication on websites.

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Abstract

This study measured the impact of crisis response strategy (denial vs. rebuilding) and tone of voice (human vs. organisational) in crisis communication about a false SPF value on sunscreen bottles on the website of a fictitious company. In this investigation, the effects on both customer attitude and organisational reputation were gauged. The main reasons for this study are that previous studies on crisis response strategy and tone of voice yielded contradictive results and to explore possible interaction effects of both in crisis communication. The current study utilised an experimental setting and an online questionnaire, in which respondents were asked to rate a text. The texts contained a denial strategy or a rebuilding strategy (apology) and were combined with either a human or an organisational tone of voice. Thus, the experiment comprised a total of four different texts. Generally, the results indicated that there was no significant effect of tone of voice on either customer attitude or organisational reputation. This is in line with Huibers and Verhoeven (2014) and Jahng and Hong (2017) who also did not find an effect, but conflicts with other studies that revealed an effect (Park & Cameron, 2014; Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Moreover, our study did not indicate an interaction effect between crisis response strategy and tone of voice, which contradicts the study of Kim and Cameron (2011). However, there was a significant effect of response strategy on customer attitude in crises, which is consistent with previous research from Yuan et al. (2021) and Claeys et al. (2010) in preventable crises and with Kiambi and Shafer (2016) in accidental crises. The text with a rebuilding response strategy led to a higher rating on customer attitude than the text with a denial response strategy.

Keywords: crisis, crisis communication, crisis response strategy, tone of voice, customer attitude, organisational reputation

Introduction

Crisis communication is becoming increasingly important to companies, especially since social media currently play a vital role in the rapid dissemination of news. This means that when a company faces a crisis, it needs to respond quickly and appropriately to try to limit reputational damage and to prevent, for instance, a negative effect on sales (Park et al., 2012).

One of the companies that has faced a crisis in the past is Domino's Pizza. In 2009, two employees posted a video on YouTube in which they played all kinds of unsavoury and unsanitary pranks on food in a restaurant's kitchen (Park et al., 2012). This video not only significantly influenced the public's attitude towards the company, but it also had a detrimental effect on its reputation. Park et al. (2012) observed that the number of negative messages and sentiments about Domino's Pizza increased significantly right after the release of the video and they also noticed a substantial decrease in purchase intention due to reputational damage.

Initially, the company decided not to make a public statement about the incident, fearing that doing so would only increase the number of people watching the above-mentioned video (Flowers & Young, 2012). This did not turn out to be a sensible choice in hindsight since the video was not only viewed over 500,000 times within just a few days but it was also widely discussed on social media (Park et al., 2012). Thereupon, after a few days, the company still decided to make a public statement by using a response strategy. This is a goal-oriented action taken to mitigate the negative impact of a crisis on an organisation and its stakeholders. It also helps an organisation to categorise and deal with a crisis when it occurs (Coombs, 2007). In an effort to restore its reputation, Domino’s Pizza used an apology response strategy in a video in which it asked for forgiveness in an emotional way (Flowers & Young, 2012). This apology video had an immediate beneficial result: both the number of adverse messages and unfavourable sentiments decreased immediately (Park et al., 2012).

In crisis communication, not only the response strategy is significant but also how something is communicated (i.e. the tone of voice). The president of Domino’s Pizza used a human tone of voice (“It sickens me that the actions of two individuals could impact our great system”). A human tone of voice may be defined as a more informal way of communication (Kelleher & Miller, 2006), which means that the organisation addresses its stakeholders in a personal way and displays emotions.

This example shows that it is not only crucial for a company to act immediately in a crisis, but also to use communication strategically. Strategic communication is ‘’the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission’’ (Hallahan et al., 2007). It refers to both response strategy and tone of voice (Park & Cameron, 2014). Different factors, such as the type of crisis (Coombs, 2007), the crisis phase (Coombs, 2007), and whether the crisis is product or value-related (Kübler et al., 2020) determine which response strategy and tone of voice are the right options. Whereas some studies suggest that a rebuilding response strategy generates better results than a denial response strategy (Claeys et al., 2010 al; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016), other studies have not always found this positive effect of the rebuilding response strategy (Yuan et al., 2021; Fuchs-Burnett, 2002). Therefore, the impact of rebuilding response strategy is further investigated in this study.

Concerning tone of voice, some studies (Park & Cameron, 2014; Kelleher & Miller, 2006) indicated that a human tone of voice produced better results in crisis communication with regard to reputation and attitude than an organisational tone of voice, while others did not find this positive effect of human tone of voice (Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014; Jahng & Hong, 2017). Thus, it appears that the rebuilding response strategy and human tone of voice are not always and in all circumstances the best options. Therefore, the aim of this study is to further investigate the impact of crisis response strategies (denial vs. rebuilding) and tone of voice (human vs. organisational) on customer attitude and organisational reputation and to explore possible interaction effects of both in crisis communication.

Theoretical framework

Crisis and crisis communication

In literature, the term *crisis* is defined in multiple ways. However, what most of the different definitions have in common is that a crisis is a major threat to an organisation, that it is unpredictable, and that it is essential to categorise it and to respond to it (Lee, 2020).

Pearson and Clair (1998), for example, define a crisis as "a low-probability, high-impact event that threatens the viability of the organisation and is characterised by ambiguity of cause, effect and means of resolution, as well as the belief that decisions must be made quickly." In other words, a crisis is an event that is infrequent but can have enormous consequences for an organisation and even lead

to its downfall. Although the cause, the outcome and the best solution are often unknown, decisions must be taken quickly. Coombs (2007) also defines the term crisis: "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens key stakeholder expectations and can seriously affect an organisation's performance and generate negative outcomes." In other words, a crisis cannot be predicted and only becomes one when stakeholders perceive it as such. These stakeholders will subsequently react to the organisation as if it were in crisis. This may be at the expense of the company's reputation or business results.

Crises can be divided into several categories, such as international disasters, natural disasters, corporate mishaps, accidents, and failures (Zirpolo, 2019). These different crises consist of several stages. Whereas Bodeau-Ostermann (2006) identify six different phases (reaction, extension, means, focus, retraction, and rehabilitation), Coombs (2019) only identifies three: *pre-crisis*, *crisis event*, and *post-crisis*.

In the pre-crisis phase, a crisis management team prepares in advance in an attempt to prevent a future crisis. In the crisis event phase, the organisation responds to an actual crisis, and in the final phase, it tries to understand why the crisis has been able to happen. In this study, the company is in the crisis event phase and responds to an emerging crisis in four different ways.

During each crisis phase, it is essential that an organisation communicates strategically since effective crisis communication can significantly reduce the damage to an organisation or its stakeholders (Coombs, 2017). To clarify the role of communication in a crisis, Coombs and Holladay (2010) have provided the following definition of crisis communication: “the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation”. Thus, since there are various types of crises and crisis stages, there is a need for different approaches of strategic communication (Coombs, 2017).

Crisis response strategies

‘’Crisis response strategies are used to repair the reputation, to reduce negative affect and to prevent negative behavioural intentions‘’ (Coombs, 2007). Several researchers have classified these strategies in different ways. Whereas Benoit (1995) identifies five different response strategies (*denial*, *evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification*), Bradford and Garrett (1995)

classify *no response, denial, excuse, justification,* and *concession*. Coombs (2007) has combined these and other classifications in the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). We have utilised this theory because it has not only merged different classifications into a new one, but also provides crisis managers with a framework to select the right response strategy for an emerging crisis. For this selection, several factors have to be considered such as crisis responsibility, crisis history, and prior relational reputation (Richards et al., 2017).

According to the SCCT, there are various response strategies, such as *diminishing*, *bolstering, denying,* and *rebuilding*. Diminishing strategies are strategies which are used to deny that there is any intent in order to reduce the level of responsibility for the crisis. In addition, they are used to justify the crisis thus reducing the perceived loss.

Another response strategy, bolstering, consists of three subcategories: r*eminding strategy (*i.e*.* reminding its stakeholders of the good deeds it has undertaken in the past), the *ingratiating strategy* (i.e. flattering the stakeholders who have assisted during the crisis), and *victimage strategy* (i.e. trying to convince the public that it is itself a victim of the crisis).

The third response strategy, denial, tries to disconnect the organisation from the crisis. The underlying idea is that if an organisation is not responsible for a crisis, it should not be harmed by it (Benoit, 1995). Coombs (2017) distinguishes three different sub strategies for this denial strategy. The first one is the *attack the accuser strategy*, which means that the organisation should confront those who make negative comments about it. The second sub strategy is *denial*, which entails that the organisation simply denies that it is in any way responsible for the crisis. The last sub-category is *scapegoating,* which means that the organisation blames others for the crisis.

The fourth response strategy, rebuilding, tries to create favourable news about the organisation. The two sub-strategies which can be used for this purpose are *compensation* and *apology.* In the case of the compensation strategy, the organisation provides aid, goods and/or money to compensate the victims. In the case of the apology strategy, the organisation admits publicly that it is responsible for the resulting crisis and asks the public for forgiveness.

A number of studies examined the effect of different response strategies in crisis communication. Yuan et al. (2021) compared the impact of diminish and

rebuilding response strategies on trust (i.e. attitude). The study revealed that the diminish strategy improved trust, while the rebuilding strategies did not in accidental crises. However, in preventable crises, the rebuilding strategy had a beneficial influence on trust whereas the diminish strategy did not. Claeys et al. (2010) also found this positive effect of rebuilding strategies in preventable crises. Moreover, Kiambi and Shafer (2016) concluded that the apology strategy improved both attitude and reputation. In their study, the impact of three response strategies (sympathy, compensation, and apology) on the reputation of a fictitious company was examined. The participants were asked to read a story about a plane crash of a fictional airline company. The results indicated that the apology strategy (i.e. rebuilding) had a more beneficial impact on reputation than the other strategies. Furthermore, the apology strategy led to a more favourable attitude towards the company than the compensation strategy (i.e. rebuilding). This may be explained by the fact that the compensation strategy is more likely to cause anger, as it can be interpreted as buying off blame. A limitation of this study is that the participants were all communication students, which entails that the sample was not representative for the entire population.

Whereas the above-mentioned studies generally revealed that a rebuilding strategy is most effective, Verhoeven et al. (2012) claimed that apologising is just as effective as not apologising. In this study, the effects of crisis response strategies (apology vs. no apology) and crisis responsibility on reputation and trust were examined by showing participants either a video in which the CEO apologised for a fictitious crisis or a video without this explicit apology. The results revealed that apologising had no significant effect on reputation and trust. This could be ascribed to the fact that both conditions were perceived as apologetic by the participants. This might be due to the way the control message was delivered. This delivery could have been interpreted as equally professional and empathetic as the apology video. Another study conducted by Fuchs-Burnett (2002) demonstrated that the apology strategy only had a beneficial effect on reputation if it was based on legal liability. If this was not the case, it might harm the organisational reputation. Since the studies that were conducted revealed varying results on whether the rebuilding or denial response strategy is most effective for reputation and attitude, this is further examined in this study.

Reputation and attitude

Several studies showed that response strategies can influence reputation and attitude. In research, reputation is defined in different ways, however, what most of them emphasise, is that a company's reputation is determined by its ability to meet stakeholder expectations (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Spence (1974) defines reputation as “the outcome of a competitive process in which firms signal their key characteristics to constituents to maximise their social status.” In other words, companies emphasise their positive aspects to stakeholders in order to obtain the best possible social status possible. Reputation is furthermore considered to be a highly valuable commodity because a favourable reputation can be beneficial to a company in multiple ways: it may, for instance, lead to higher sales, higher selling prices, better job applicants, and more investors (Fombrun & Shanley,1990).

Attitude is also defined in multiple ways. However, what the definitions generally have in common is that an attitude is a summarising evaluation of an object such as an organisation or a person (Petty, 1995). De Pelsmacker et al. (2017) describe attitude as ‘’the stakeholders’ overall evaluation of an organisation”. Attitudes may range from very negative to very positive.

Tone of voice

In addition to the response strategy, attitude and reputation can also be influenced by the tone of voice in crisis communication. The tone of voice is an instrument a company may use to communicate with its stakeholders and which may influence how they interpret a message. Tone of voice is not about content but about the way a message is delivered (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). The two tones of voice mentioned in the literature are the human and the organisational tone of voice. The human tone of voice is defined by Kelleher (2009) as "an engaging and natural style of organisational communication as perceived by an organisation's audience based on interactions between individuals in the organisation and individuals in the audience". A message that uses a human tone often includes informal language, commonly uses the first person ("I/we"), and tends to display emotions (Park & Cameron, 2014).

The organisational tone of voice, on the other hand, only provides objective and clear information about a crisis (Kelleher, 2009). A message for which the organisational tone of voice is used is usually delivered in formal language, commonly uses the third person (“it/ the company”) and does not show any emotions

(Park & Cameron, 2014).

A number of studies suggest that using a human tone of voice may be beneficial during a crisis situation. Park and Cameron (2014) investigated blogs and concluded that a human voice of tone may have a favourable effect on reputation since it increased the perceived social appearance of the company. This increase subsequently led to a more positive reputation. Kelleher and Miller (2006) further noted that it may have a beneficial effect on attitude: it is reported to increase stakeholders' trust in the company because it strengthens the bond with them. This might also lead to stakeholders lowering their assessment of the severity of a crisis (Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). Xifra and Huertas (2008) found another significant benefit of human tone of voice. It may give stakeholders the impression that the company communicates with them in an open and clear way, which they find essential during a crisis. This in turn makes the public believe that the company is "transparent", which has a beneficial effect on both attitude and reputation.

However, other studies reveal different results with regard to the beneficial effect of human tone of voice. Huibers and Verhoeven (2014) examined blogs to investigate how tone of voice may influence an audience's reactions during a crisis. The results showed that there was no favourable effect of human voice of tone in crisis communication. Furthermore, Jahng and Hong (2017) examined the role of tone of voice (human vs. organisational) and prior brand attitude on the evaluation of crisis communication on Twitter. Like Huibers and Verhoeven (2014), this study did not find a significant effect of tone of voice on the evaluation of crisis communication. Since there are conflicting results in previous research, this study further explores the impact of human tone of voice on both organisational reputation and customer attitude.

Previous research often examined the influence of both tone of voice and response strategy on attitude and/or reputation. For instance, Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014) conducted an experimental study wherein participants were presented with two vignettes in which a fictitious organisation reacted to a crisis situation. Two factors were manipulated, namely response strategy (diminish vs. rebuilding) and the communication of emotion (no emotions, shame, regret). The results demonstrated that expressing emotions (i.e. human tone of voice) had a beneficial effect on organisational reputation. In addition, a rebuilding response strategy was preferred over a diminish strategy since the former is associated with

positive emotions whereas the latter is associated with negative emotions. Although Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014) expected an interaction effect between tone of voice and response strategy on organisational reputation, i.e. the rebuilding response strategy compared to the diminish response strategy, would have a more beneficial effect on organisational reputation if a human tone of voice was used than an organisational tone of voice, this effect was not found.

Thus, a number of studies suggest that using a human tone of voice may be beneficial during a crisis situation (Park & Cameron, 2014; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Xifra & Huertas, 2008; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014), whereas other studies have not found a significant effect (Huibers & Verhoeven, 2014; Jahng & Hong, 2017). Since there are different results in terms of the influence or tone of voice, this is further investigated in this study.

Research question and hypotheses

Although much research has been conducted on response strategies and tone of voice in social media settings, little research has been performed on response strategies and tone of voice on websites. This is remarkable since it is the most used platform among businesses (Ruggieri et al., 2018). In addition, previous research indicates conflicting results in terms of most successful response strategy and tone of voice. This leads to the following research question:

RQ: ‘’*To what extent do the response strategy (denial vs. rebuilding) and tone of voice (human vs. organisational) influence customer attitude and organisational reputation in crisis communication on websites?’’* To answer the above-mentioned research question, several hypotheses were formulated. Hence most studies suggested that using a human tone during a crisis situation is more beneficial than an organisational tone, some studies showed this beneficial effect on attitude (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007; Xifra & Huertas, 2008), while others found it on reputation (Park & Cameron, 2014; Xifra & Huertas, 2008; Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014). This leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: The human tone of voice on websites will have a more favourable effect on the customer attitude towards the company than the organisational tone of voice during a crisis.

H2: The human tone of voice on websites will have a more favourable effect on the company’s reputation than the organisational tone of voice during a crisis.

Next to tone of voice, response strategies are vital in crisis communication. Since previous studies found that rebuilding strategies generally have a more beneficial effect on attitude and reputation than the denial response strategy (Claeys et al., 2010; Yuan et al., 2021; Kiambi & Shafer, 2016), it leads to the following hypotheses:

H3: The rebuilding response strategy on websites will have a more favourable effect on customer attitude in crisis communication than the denial response strategy.
H4: The rebuilding response strategy on websites will have a more favourable effect on reputation in crisis communication than the denial response strategy.

It is possible that there will be an interaction effect between response strategy (denial vs. rebuilding) and tone of voice (human vs. organisational), since Kim and Cameron (2011) have shown that the human tone of voice can influence the interpretation of a response strategy. This could make some strategies more effective than others. In other words, since the denial response strategy is often seen as negative while the human tone of voice is seen as positive, combining the two may reduce the negative effects of the denial strategy more than the denial strategy together with the organisational tone of voice. However, this interaction effect has hardly been systematically examined yet which leads to the final two hypotheses:

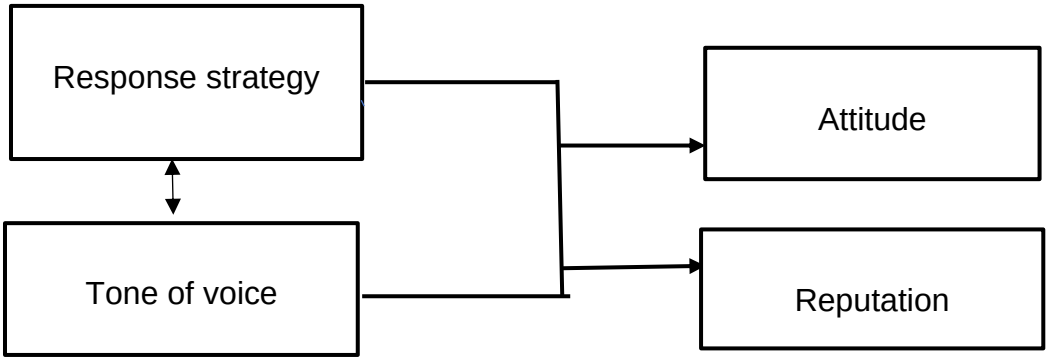
H5: The effect of a rebuilding strategy on customer attitude, relative to a denial strategy, will be more favourable if an organisation communicates with a human tone of voice rather than an organisational tone of voice.
H6: The effect of a rebuilding strategy on organisational reputation, relative to a denial strategy, will be more favourable if an organisation communicates with a human tone of voice rather than an organisational tone of voice.

Method

In our study, participants read a text of a company dealing with a crisis. In order to examine the impact of tone of voice (human vs. organisational) and response strategy (denial vs. rebuilding) on both customer attitude and organisational reputation, four different texts were created: (a) rebuilding response strategy – human tone of voice, (b) rebuilding response strategy – organisational tone of voice, (c) denial response strategy – human tone of voice, and (d) denial response strategy – organisational tone of voice.

Next, the participants individually filled out a questionnaire to measure the impact of the different texts on attitude and reputation. The influences of tone of voice and response strategy on reputation and attitude and the interaction effect of tone of voice and response strategy on reputation and attitude are shown in this analytical model. This experimental study examined the impact of tone of voice (human vs. organisational) and response strategy (denial vs. rebuilding) on customer attitude and on organisational reputation.

Figure 1. Analytical model



Materials

For this experimental study, a fictitious company was selected to ensure that the organisation did not have a crisis history and to ensure that the participants would not have formed an opinion about it yet (Porrit, 2005). In this way, there were no confounding variables which could have affected the results of our study. The company faced a technical-error product harm crisis, i.e. a false SPF-value was mentioned on sunscreen bottles, which meant that due to a technical error, a defective and possibly dangerous product was manufactured and sold to customers. According to the SSCT (Coombs, 2007), this type of crisis belonged to the cluster of accidental crises thus the responsibility of the organisation was low. Choosing a type of crisis with a high level of responsibility would have been illogical since the attitude of stakeholders toward the company would already have been negative and thus it would matter little anymore with which tone of voice the company would communicate.

To investigate the impact of different response strategies and tones of voice in

a technical crisis, four different conditions for one website were employed: tone of voice (human vs. organisational) and response strategy (denial vs. rebuilding). A website was selected since most research on response strategies and tone of voice utilised a social media setting, but hardly any research has yet been conducted on websites which is remarkable since it is the most used platform among organisations (Ruggieri et al., 2018).

Tone of voice was operationalised according to Park and Cameron (2014). For the two conditions with a human tone of voice, the choice was made to write the text in the first person (“I”/”we”), the first name of the CEO (‘’This is David, the CEO of Solarize’’) and to use informal language (“All the best from your beach-fun buddies”). We also expressed emotions in these two conditions ("I am here to ask for your forgiveness’’). For the conditions with an organisational tone of voice, on the other hand, the text was written in the third person ("Solarize"). Furthermore, formal language was used (“To whom it may concern’’, ‘’Sincerely’’), and no emotions were expressed.

The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs, 2017) was used to operationalise the response strategies. In this experimental study, two response strategies were used: denial and rebuilding. The former was formulated as ‘’Deny any responsibility for the crisis’’. In the conditions for which this strategy was used, the organisation emphasised that it was in no way responsible for the crisis ("Solarize is therefore not to blame for this issue and calls on the machinery manufacturer to address the public complaints and grievances’’). In the other conditions, the rebuilding response strategy was used which was defined by Coombs as ‘’publicly take responsibility for the crisis and as for forgiveness’’. In these texts, the company apologised for the technical error (‘’Solarize would like to apologize for the recent issue of its sunscreen bottles containing the wrong SPF rating’’) and took full responsibility for the crisis (‘’Solarize would like to take full responsibility for this accident’’). The four different texts had originally been written in English, but were translated into Dutch by group members who were native speakers of Dutch since all participants had the Dutch nationality.

Before the experiment commenced, a pre-test was conducted by using a focus group consisting of five Radboud University students. At first, the participants were given the printed texts of the four different conditions without labelling them. After explaining to them the two independent variables tone of voice and response

strategy, they were asked to label the conditions to the texts. All the participants labelled the texts correctly, which revealed that the texts were adequately manipulated. Since the focus group participants were already aware of the research goal, they were not part of the experimental study.

Participants

For our experimental study, we tried to find as many participants as possible in order to make the results more generalisable. We needed at least 30 participants per condition, thus at least 120 participants in total. Ultimately, a total of 137 participants took part. These participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire about their socio-demographic characteristics age, gender, nationality, and level of education. Participants had a mean age of 33.88 years (SD = 16.35; range = 18-83) and were all native speakers of Dutch. In addition, the highest completed or current educational level was WO (n=60), followed by HBO (n=37), MBO (=23), secondary school (n=16) and other (n=1). The participants were equally distributed across the four conditions.

According to Kim and Yim (2022), the nationality of their participants (American vs. Chinese) significantly influenced attitude during a crisis. Moreover, Zhu et al. (2017) observed that culture had a major role in interpreting crises and attributing responsibility. It was therefore decided to only include participants with a Dutch nationality in this experiment to control for the independent variable culture. Participants with a non-Dutch nationality were thus excluded from the study. Therefore, it was decided to write the texts also in Dutch, since English texts would have two complications. First, participants might not thoroughly understand the texts. In addition, there might be problems of cross-cultural equivalence. Concerning nationality, the groups were homogeneous which eliminated systematic error. However, in terms of age, gender, and educational level, the groups were heterogeneous which enabled generalisations of the results.

To verify that the socio-demographic conditions were equally distributed across the four conditions, two types of statistical tests were conducted: a Chi-square test for gender and education level, and a one-way ANOVA for age. The result of the first Chi-square test showed no significant relationship between the conditions and gender ($\chi 2$ (6) = 5.13, p = .527), which meant that the participants were equally distributed in terms of gender. The second Chi-square test which was conducted neither showed a significant relationship between conditions and educational level

($\chi 2$ (12) = 11.99, p = .447).Therefore, it could be concluded that the participants were also equally distributed in terms of educational level. Regarding age, a one-way analysis of variance showed no significant effect of age on the different conditions (F (3, 133) = 1.49, p = .220), which meant that the participants were equally distributed in terms of age as well.

Design

A 2 (denial vs. rebuild response strategy) x 2 (human vs. organisational tone of voice) between-subjects design was chosen for this experimental study to ensure that the participants would not discover the research goal by reading all different conditions.

Instruments

Since several studies revealed an effect of response strategies and tone of voice on attitude and reputation, but also showed discrepancies, the dependent variables attitude and reputation were selected.

To operationalise the variable attitude, a study by Tao and Song (2020) was selected. They investigated the relationship between response strategy and attitude in a crisis, which was a perfect fit for our study since we also investigated this. For the questionnaire, we used three items on a bipolar scale: (a) 'For me, the organisation is bad (1) … good (2)', (b) 'For me, the organisation is unfavourable (1) … favourable (2)', (c) 'For me, the organisation is negative (1) … positive (2).'

To operationalise the second dependent variable reputation, a study from Coombs and Holladay (2002) was chosen which had been adapted from one of their earlier studies (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). We used five items on a 7-point Likert scale, running from totally disagree (1) to totally agree (7). These items were: (a) 'The organisation is concerned with the well-being of its publics', (b) 'The organisation is basically honest', (c) ' I trust the organisation to tell the truth about the incident', (d) 'Under most circumstances, I would be likely to believe what the organisation says', and (e) 'The organisation is NOT concerned with the well-being of its publics'.

Since the items to assess both reputation and attitude had been written in English, they were translated into Dutch by using the Brislin's back-translation model, which meant that the items from the source language (i.e. English) were translated into the target language (i.e. Dutch) and then back into the source language by a (near) native speaker (Brislin, 1970). Since the two versions in the source language

were identical, the translation was considered to be adequate.

To check whether we could calculate an aggregated mean from the items for the variables attitude and reputation and to test the reliability of the Likert scales, the Kuder-Richardson 20 test was used to calculate the internal consistency reliability for attitude and Cronbach's alpha for reputation. The internal consistency reliability of 'customer attitude' comprising three items was good: K-R20 = .88. Consequently, the mean of all three items was used to calculate the compound variable 'customer attitude', which was used in the further analyses. The reliability of 'organisation reputation' comprising five items was also good: α = .83. Consequently, the mean of all five items was used to calculate the compound variable 'organisation reputation', which was used in the further analyses.'

Finally, the socio-demographic characteristics were measured, using these questions: (a) ''What is your gender?'' (male, female, other, I prefer not to answer this question), (b) ''What is your age?'' (open question), (c) ''What is your nationality?'' (Dutch, other; participants with a non-Dutch nationality were excluded), (d) ''What is your level of education?'' (Secondary school, MBO, HBO, WO, or other).

Procedure

The participants were selected by convenience sampling. The researchers asked relatives, friends, and acquaintances via WhatsApp to participate in this experiment. At the beginning, the participants were notified that they were participating in an experiment on crisis communication which was conducted via an online questionnaire which was created using Qualtrics. The research goal, however, was not mentioned to them to avoid bias. After the introduction, the participants were asked to carefully read one of the four conditions of the texts individually. Next, the participants individually filled out the questionnaire. Incidentally, the questions were randomised to avoid ranking order bias and the participants were not allowed to go back to the text.

Prior to the study, the participants were informed about the EACH rules. This meant that they could discontinue the experiment at any time and that they were also informed that their data would be treated with the utmost care which meant that the data would be anonymised and would not be handed to others.

Statistical treatment

Two two-way ANOVAs with between-subjects factors were conducted to measure the

effect of the crisis response strategy and tone of voice on reputation and attitude and to ascertain whether there was an interaction effect between response strategy and tone of voice. In cases where the ANOVA showed a significant difference, we conducted a Bonferroni post-hoc test to check which groups differed from each other. For all tests, we used a significance level of .05 which was appropriate since the probability of a Type 1 and Type 2 error was relatively small because only a few tests were conducted.

Results

The goal of this experimental study is to examine to what extent the response strategy and tone of voice would influence customer attitude and organisational reputation in crisis communication on websites. To answer the research question, six hypotheses are formulated which were examined by using two two-way analyses of variance.

Customer attitude

A two-way analysis of variance with response strategy and tone of voice as factors did not show a significant main effect of tone of voice on attitude (F (1, 133) = .81, p = .369). However, the two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of response strategy on customer attitude (F (1, 133) = 8.71, p = .004). The rebuilding response strategy led to a higher rating on attitude (M = 1.60, SD = .44) than the denial response strategy (M = 1.37, SD = .43). Based on Bonferroni's post hoc test, it may be concluded that a human tone of voice in combination with a rebuilding response strategy (M = 1.65, SD = 0.41) had a significantly more positive effect on customer attitude (p = .043) than a human tone of voice in combination with a denial response strategy (M = 1.36, SD = 0.43). Finally, there was no significant interaction effect of tone of voice and response strategy on customer attitude (F (1, 133) = .31, p = .580). A complete overview of the means and the standard deviations for customer attitude can be found in Table 1.

Organisational reputation

A two-way analysis of variance with response strategy and tone of voice as factors did not show a significant main effect of tone of voice on reputation (F (1, 133) = .27, p = .604). There was neither a significant main effect of response strategy on reputation (F (1, 133) = 3.86, p = .052). However, the effect was really close to the significance level of .05. Finally, no significant interaction effect was found between

response strategy and tone of voice on reputation (F (1, 133) = .31, p = .582). An overview of the means and standard deviations for organisational reputation can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Means and standard deviations (in parentheses) of the dependent variables reputation (1 = totally disagree; 7 = totally agree) and attitude (1 = unfavourable; 2 = favourable).

Response strategy	**Tone of Voice**	***n***	**Reputation *M* (*SD*)**	**Attitude *M* (*SD*)**
Denial	Human voice	30	4.41 (1.01)	1.36 (.43)
	Organisational voice	31	4.40 (1.18)	1.39 (.43)
	Total	61	4.40 (1.09)	1.37 (.43)
Rebuilding	Human voice	37	4.70 (1.34)	1.54 (.47)
	Organisational voice	39	4.92 (1.19)	1.65 (.41)
	Total	76	4.81 (1.26)	1.60 (.44)
Total	Human voice	67	4.57 (1.21)	1.46 (.46)
	Organisational voice	70	4.69 (1.21)	1.53 (.44)
	Total	137	4.63 (1.20)	1.50 (.45)

Conclusion

This study focuses on the impact of response strategy and tone of voice on customer attitude and organisational reputation in crisis communication on websites. This was examined on the basis of a research question and six hypotheses.

H1: The human tone of voice on websites will have a more favourable effect on the attitude towards the company than the organisational tone of voice during a crisis.
The analyses demonstrated that there was no significant effect of tone of voice on attitude, so this hypothesis was rejected. For as far as customer attitude is

concerned, it made no difference whether the company communicated with a human or organizational tone of voice during the crisis.

H2: The human tone of voice on websites will have a more favourable effect on the company's reputation than the organisational tone of voice during a crisis.
The analysis revealed that there was no significant effect of tone of voice on reputation. This implied that using a human tone of voice or an organisational tone of voice had similar effects on organisational reputation during a crisis, so this hypothesis was rejected.

H3: The rebuilding response strategy on websites will have a more favourable effect on attitude in crisis communication than the denial response strategy.
The analysis indicated that there was a significant effect of response strategy on customer attitude. The text with a rebuilding response strategy had a higher rating on customer attitude than the text with a denial response strategy. Thus, this hypothesis was accepted.

H4: The rebuilding response strategy on websites will have a more favourable effect on reputation in crisis communication than the denial response strategy.
The analysis revealed that there was no significant effect of response strategy on reputation. This entailed that it made no difference for the organisational reputation whether the organization employed a rebuilding response strategy or a denial response strategy. Although the effect was very close to the significance level, the hypothesis was rejected.

H5: The effect of a rebuilding strategy on customer attitude, relative to a denial strategy, will be more favourable if an organisation communicates with a human tone of voice rather than an organisational tone of voice.
The analysis demonstrated that there was no interaction effect between tone of voice and response strategy on customer attitude. Therefore, this hypothesis was rejected.

H6: The effect of a rebuilding strategy on organisational reputation, relative to a denial strategy, will be more favourable if an organisation communicates with a human tone of voice rather than an organisational tone of voice.
For organisational reputation, neither a significant interaction effect was found between response strategy and tone of voice. Thus, this hypothesis had to be rejected as well.

RQ: ‘’To what extent do the response strategy (denial vs. rebuilding) and tone of voice (human vs. organisational) influence customer attitude and organisational reputation in crisis communication on websites?’’

The results indicated that tone of voice neither had a significant effect on attitude nor on reputation. For attitude, there was no significant effect of tone of voice, however, there was a significant effect of response strategy. This implied that the text using a rebuilding response strategy had a higher rating on customer attitude than the text with a denial response strategy. Furthermore, there appeared to be no interaction effect between crisis response strategy and tone of voice on attitude and reputation.

Discussion

The purpose of this research is to gain more insight into the impact of response strategy and tone of voice on customer attitude and organisational reputation in crisis communication on websites. This was examined through an experimental survey study using a fictitious company. To ensure the internal validity of this research, our survey was based on previous research on the impact of response strategy and tone of voice on both attitude and reputation.

Response strategy

One of the reasons this study focuses on response strategies is that previous research showed conflicting results on which response strategy is most favourable for organisational reputation and customer attitude in crisis communication. Another reason is to examine what effect these strategies have when they are combined with different tones of voice.

This study showed a significant effect of response strategy on attitude, which implies that a rebuilding response strategy has a more favourable effect on customer attitude than a denial response strategy. These results are partially consistent with previous research. Yuan et al. (2012) also found that the rebuilding response strategy, compared to the diminish response strategy, had a favourable effect on trust (i.e. attitude) in preventable crises. In accidental crises, however, this beneficial effect was not found. It is remarkable that in our study the rebuilding strategy had a beneficial effect on attitude in an accidental crisis situation, while Yuan et al. (2021) found that the diminish response strategy had a more beneficial effect on trust than the rebuilding response strategy in accidental crises. A possible explanation for the conflicting results may be that our study selected a fictitious company, while Yuan et

al. (2021) used an existing company with an already established reputation.

Nevertheless, the results of our study were not consistent with Verhoeven et al (2012) on attitude. In their study, the participants either watched a video in which the CEO made an apology for the emerging crisis or a video in which no explicit apology was provided. The researchers did not find a significant effect of the rebuilding strategy on trust and claimed that apologising was just as effective as not apologising. A possible explanation is that participants perceived both videos as apologetic since the participants found both conditions to be equally professional and emphatic. The difference in the results between our study and the study by Verhoeven et al. (2012) may be attributed to the fact that in our study, contrary to the study by Verhoeven et al. (2012), the used material had been adequately manipulated since our pre-test showed that focus group participants flawlessly labelled the texts.

However, similar to our study, Verhoeven et al. (2012) did not find a significant effect of response strategy on reputation. This is in contrast with some previous research. Kiambi and Shafer (2016) noted that the apology strategy had a more beneficial effect on reputation than the compensation strategy since the compensation strategy might generate anger because it may be seen as buying off guilt. The discrepancy between the findings of our study and Kiambi and Shafer's (2016) study could be explained by cultural differences. While in our study the participants were Dutch, the participants in Kiambi and Shafer's (2016) study were American. According to Zhu et al (2017), culture could play a major role in interpreting crises and assigning responsibility.

The favourable effect of the rebuilding response strategy is supported by Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014). They demonstrated that the rebuilding response strategy is preferred over the diminish response strategy since the former is associated with positive emotions and the latter with negative emotions. An explanation that Van der Meer and Verhoeven (2014), contrary to our study, found a significant effect may be that the participants were exposed to both a rebuilding and diminish strategy which might have led to participants noticing a clear difference between the two messages. Consequently, they might have rated the message using a rebuilding response strategy more favourably than the message using the diminish response strategy. In our study, however, participants had no comparison material because they rated only one text to ensure they would not discover the research

goal.

Although our experiment found no favourable effect of the rebuilding response strategy on reputation, it should be mentioned that the results were very close to the significance level of .05. The utilised significance level, however, is arbitrary since a slightly higher significance level would have made the results significant.

Tone of voice

The main reason that tone of voice is investigated in this study is that previous research is inconclusive about the effect of tone of voice on attitude and reputation in crisis communication. This study did not find any significant effect of human tone on either customer attitude or organisational reputation which is consistent with Huibers and Verhoeven (2014). They investigated the impact of tone of voice on audience's reactions on blogs, but did not find a significant effect either. Another study, from Jahng and Hong (2017), supported this finding. It stated that the tone of voice on Twitter had no significant effect on the evaluation of crisis communication. The agreement between our study and Huibers and Verhoeven (2014) and Jahng and Hong (2017) is remarkable since the settings were different. While our study used a website, the other two studies utilised social media (Twitter). Hence, it may be concluded that different online media generate similar results.

Although several studies, including our study, did not find a significant effect of tone of voice, Park and Cameron (2014), did. They claimed that a human tone of voice had a favourable effect on reputation since using the first person and sharing personal stories might have a beneficial effect on a company's perceived social image which can subsequently lead to a more favourable reputation. Kelleher and Miller (2006) furthermore established that the human tone of voice increased the connection between the company and the public which could lead to an increase in trust. These contradictory results with our research may be caused by cross-cultural differences. While Park and Cameron (2014) and Kelleher and Miller (2006) exclusively used American participants, we only used Dutch participants. According to Kim and Yim (2022), the nationality of the participants could have a considerable impact on crisis interpretation.

Xifra and Huertas (2008) also concluded that there was a beneficial effect of the human tone of voice although they did not only find a favourable effect on reputation, but also on attitude since it also gave the public the idea that the

organisation communicated with them in an honest and open way in their blogs. Blogs are considered to be authentic and trustworthy whereas texts on websites are often not because they are written by the company itself (Park and Cameron, 2014). This may have accounted for the contradicting results.

Interaction effect

This study investigated whether there was an interaction effect between response strategy and tone of voice on customer attitude and organisation reputation, but found none. This is noteworthy because Kim and Cameron (2011) showed that a human tone of voice could influence the interpretation of a response strategy.

Limitations and further research

Several limitations can be mentioned for this study. The first limitation concerns the socio-demographic characteristics educational level and gender of the participants. Regarding educational level, 97 respondents had a higher educational level (university or HBO), while the remaining 40 participants had a lower level of education (MBO, high school or other). In terms of gender, relatively more women (n= 89) than men (n=46) participated in the survey. Consequently, the sample is not representative which implies that the results are not entirely generalisable. Future research should try to minimise these differences.

Another limitation of this study is that a 7-point Likert scale was used to measure organisational reputation. However, the results revealed that the mean for organisational reputation is 4.63 (*SD* = 1.20) which implies that a relatively large number of participants selected the neutral option. For future research, it would be advisable to exclude the neutral option from the scale. In this way, the convenient option is removed and participants are encouraged to think thoroughly about their answers.

Although no significant interaction effect was found in our study, the reason for this is not evident. It is therefore recommended to study the interaction effect again.

It is also recommended to include the independent variable culture in future research. In our study, only participants with a Dutch nationality had been selected to control for this variable. However, previous research showed that participants' nationality can significantly influence the interpretation of a crisis (Zhu et al., 2017; Kim & Yim, 2022).

The final recommendation is to investigate whether bias plays a role in the

evaluation of crisis communication. In this study, a fictitious company was chosen to control for bias. Future research could further focus on the comparison between a fictitious and an existing company in terms of crisis communication, which would allow the examination of factors such as crisis history and accumulated reputation, which are also important in crisis communication (Porrit, 2005).

Practical implications

A practical implication of this study is that it provides more insight into crisis response strategy and tone of voice in crisis communication in a Dutch context. Since the rebuilding response strategy had a more favourable effect on customer attitude than the denial response strategy, this knowledge can be applied by organisations that want to minimise the impact on customer attitude during a crisis. In addition, this research shows that organisations do not need to think about which tone of voice (human or organisational) they should use since it has no significant impact on neither reputation nor attitude.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: text instructions and online survey

Beste deelnemer,

Hartelijk dank voor uw bereidheid om mee te werken aan dit onderzoek van de Radboud Universiteit.

De procedure van dit onderzoek bestaat uit het invullen van een online vragenlijst. Eerst ziet u een afbeelding van een bericht van een bedrijf. Nadat u het bericht heeft gelezen, krijgt u een aantal vragen. Het invullen van de vragenlijst zal ongeveer tussen de 5-10 minuten duren.

Uw deelname aan dit onderzoek is vrijwillig en u kunt zich op elk moment terugtrekken. Al uw antwoorden blijven vertrouwelijk, worden anoniem verwerkt en worden alleen voor dit onderzoek gebruikt.

Als u op de knop 'Ik ga akkoord' hieronder klikt, geeft u aan dat:
- U bovenstaande informatie heeft gelezen
- U vrijwillig akkoord gaat met de deelname
- U minimaal 18 jaar oud bent

Als u niet wenst deel te nemen aan dit onderzoek, kunt u uw deelname weigeren door deze webpagina te verlaten. Wilt u meer informatie over dit onderzoek, neem dan contact op met mahshid.mokhannaki@ru.nl

Nogmaals bedankt voor uw deelname.

- Ik ga akkoord

U gaat nu het bericht van de company website zien. U krijgt deze maar één keer te zien, dus lees het goed door. Klik op ‘ik snap het’ om door te gaan naar het bericht.

0 Ik snap het

Ik zie de organisatie als

Slecht	Goed
0	0

Ik zie de organisatie als

Ongunstig	Gunstig
0	0

Ik zie de organisatie als

Negatief	Positief
0	0

De organisatie is bezorgd om het welzijn van haar klanten
0 sterk mee oneens
0 mee oneens
0 beetje mee oneens
0 niet mee eens en niet mee oneens
0 beetje mee eens
0 mee eens
0 sterk mee eens

De organisatie is eerlijk
0 sterk mee eens
0 mee oneens
0 beetje mee oneens
0 niet mee eens en niet mee oneens
0 beetje mee eens
0 mee eens
0 sterk mee eens

De organisatie is eerlijk

0 sterk mee eens

0 mee oneens

0 beetje mee oneens

0 niet mee eens en niet mee oneens

0 beetje mee eens

0 mee eens

0 sterk mee eens

Ik vertrouw erop dat de organisatie de waarheid vertelt over het probleem

0 sterk mee eens

0 mee oneens

0 beetje mee oneens

0 niet mee eens en niet mee oneens

0 beetje mee eens

0 mee eens

0 sterk mee eens

In de meeste gevallen, zou ik waarschijnlijk geloven wat de organisatie zegt

0 sterk mee eens

0 mee oneens

0 beetje mee oneens

0 niet mee eens en niet mee oneens

0 beetje mee eens

0 mee eens

0 sterk mee eens

De organisatie is niet bezorgd om het welzijn van haar klanten

0 sterk mee eens

0 mee oneens

0 beetje mee oneens

0 niet mee eens en niet mee oneens

0 beetje mee eens

0 mee eens

0 sterk mee eens

Appendix 2: Reactions of the organisation in Dutch with a translation into English
Appendix 2a: Reaction of the organisation: denial response strategy with an organisational tone of voice

To whom it may concern,

Solarize would like to address the recent isse of its sunscreen bottles containing the wrong SPF raring. It is important to clarifiy that this issue was caused by a technical malfunction during the production process. A thorough investigation indicated that the problem was rooted at Solarize's new machinery. These state-of-the-art equipments have recently been acquired to improve the company's production capabilities and product quality. However, despite our best intentions, investigations suggest that the machines had a defect that affected the composition ratio of the ingredients. Solarize is therefore not to blame for this issue and calls on the machinery manufacturer to address the public complaints and grievances.

Sincerely,
Solarize

Appendix 2b: Reaction of the organisation: rebuilding response strategy with an organisational tone of voice


Solarize

SEARCH... HOME SHOP ABOUT PRESS CONTACT

Aan wie het belangt,

Solarize wil zich verontschuldigen voor het recente probleem met flessen zonnebrandcrème met een verkeerde SPF-waarde. Het is belangrijk te verduidelijken dat dit probleem werd veroorzaakt door een technische storing tijdens het productieproces. Een grondig onderzoek wees uit dat het probleem te wijten was aan de nieuwe machines van Solarize. Deze ultramoderne apparatuur is onlangs aangeschaft om de productiemogelijkheden en productkwaliteit van het bedrijf te verbeteren. Ondanks onze beste bedoelingen blijkt uit onderzoek dat de machines een fout bevatten dat de samenstelling van de ingrediënten beïnvloedde. Solarize biedt zijn oprechte excuses aan en neemt de volledige verantwoordelijkheid voor dit ongeluk.

Hoogachtend,
Solarize

To whom it may concern,

Solarize would like to apologise for the recent issue of its sunscreen bottles containing the wrong SPF-rating. It is important to clarify that this issue was caused by a technical malfunction during the production process. A thorough investigation indicated that the problem was rooted at Solarize's new machinery. These state-of-the-art equipments have recently been acquired to improve the company's production capabilities and product quality. However, despite our best intentions, investigations suggest that the machines had a defect that affected the composition ratio of the ingredients. Solarize would like to offer its most sincere apologies and take full responsibility for this accident.

Sincerely,
Solarize

Appendix 2c: Reaction of the organisation: rebuilding response strategy with a human tone of voice

Solarize

SEARCH... HOME SHOP ABOUT PRESS CONTACT

Beste en geliefde klanten,

Ik ben David, de CEO van Solarize, en ik ben hier om uw vergiffenis te vragen. U weet waarschijnlijk van het recente probleem met onze zonnebrandflessen met de verkeerde SPF-waarde. Ik wil dat u weet dat dit probleem werd veroorzaakt door een technische storing tijdens het productieproces. We hebben een grondig onderzoek uitgevoerd waaruit bleek dat het probleem te wijten was aan onze nieuwe machines. We hebben deze ultramoderne apparatuur onlangs aangeschaft om onze productiemogelijkheden en productkwaliteit te verbeteren. Helaas en ondanks onze beste bedoelingen bleek uit onderzoek dat de machines een defect hadden dat de samenstellingsverhouding van de ingrediënten beïnvloedde. Ik grijp dit platform aan om namens ons team oprechte excuses aan te bieden aan al onze klanten en alle anderen die door dit ongeval zijn getroffen. We zien u, het spijt ons zeer en we nemen de volledige verantwoordelijkheid.

Het beste van jullie strandvrienden,
David Tompson en het Solarize team

Dear and beloved customers,

This is David, the CEO of Solarize, and I am here to ask for your forgiveness. You probably know about the recent issue with our sunscreen bottles containing the wrong SPF-rating. I want you to know that this issue was caused by a technical malfunction during the production process. We conducted a thorough investigation that showed that the problem was rooted at our new machinery. We purchased these state-of-the-art equipments recently to improve our production capabilities and product quality. Unfortunately and despite our best intentions, investigations showed that the machines had a defect that affected the composition ratio of the ingredients. I take this platform to sincerely apologise on behalf of our team to all our customers and everyone else who has been affected by this accident. We see you, we are very sorry, and we take full responsibility.

All the best from your beach-fun buddies,
David Tompson and the Solarize team

Appendix 2d: Reaction of the organisation: denial response strategy with a human tone of voice

Dear and beloved customers,

This is David, the CEO of Solarize, and I am here to ask for your forgiveness. You probably know about the recent issue with our sunscreen bottles containing the wrong SPF-rating. I want you to know that this issue was caused by a technical malfunction during the production process. We conducted a thorough investigation that showed that the problem was rooted at our new machinery. We purchased these state-of-the-art equipments recently to improve our production capabilities and product quality. Unfortunately and despite our best intentions, investigations showed that the machines had a defect that affected the composition ratio of the ingredients. So it really wasn't our fault, and we would like to call on the machinery manufacturer to step up and answer to the complaints.

All the best from your beach-fun buddies,
David Tompson and the Solarize team

Appendix 3

Statement of own work – BA thesis

By signing this declaration, the undersigned,

Emma van Rijswijk, s1066563

Bachelor's student at the Radboud University Faculty of Arts,

declares that the submitted BA thesis is entirely original and was written exclusively by himself/herself, and without the use of AI tools, such as ChatGPT. The undersigned has indicated explicitly and in detail where all the information and ideas derived from other sources can be found by referencing all sources used, both in the text and in the bibliography.

By signing this declaration, the undersigned also declares that the research data presented in this thesis were collected by the undersigned himself/herself using the methods described in this thesis.

Bennekom, 9 June 2023