

## *Preface*

In the last years the role of social media in crisis discourses has become one of the major topics in crisis communication research. Content analyses of social media messages are considered an ideal non-reactive way to observe publics' responses to crises. Social networks, discussion boards, weblogs, micro-blogs and other platforms can be important forums to track spontaneous crisis responses from both the publics' and the organizations' perspective, especially in countries like the US and Germany. In both countries more than 70% of the population uses the internet and social media adoption is constantly growing. That crises are important topics on social media platforms was also demonstrated by Facebook's latest list of the most mentioned topics. In Germany, the E coli outbreak, the plagiarism scandal of the former German Secretary of Defense and the Fukushima crisis in Japan were among the ten most important topics in status mentions in 2011 (Facebook, 2011).

The understanding of how publics cope with and interpret crises is crucial for developing the body of knowledge in crisis communication. Some scholars advocated an audience-oriented approach to crisis communication and applied attribution theories from social psychology to explain the effects of responsibility attributions on organizational reputation in the context of crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2004; Lee, 2004; Schwarz 2012a). They were particularly interested in the link between stakeholder attributions and the effective selection of crisis communication strategies by public relations professionals as proposed by the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs & Holladay, 2004).

However, as most of the research that has been done to test the SCCT relied on experimental designs, artificial stimulus materials and student samples, we do not know to what extent these findings can be regarded as representative for real-world crises. Thus, SCCT and its ex-

tensions need further external validation. Scholars have usually triggered crisis-related attributions artificially by using certain stimulus materials and asking participants about their respective perceptions of causes and responsibility. For crisis communication, however, it is crucial to understand to what extent such attributions are triggered spontaneously among publics during a real crisis and whether they base their evaluations of organizational reputation on perceptions of cause and/or blame. This real-world interaction between organizations and their publics following a crisis can be well observed on social media platforms (Schwarz, 2012b). The systematic accumulation of theory-driven case studies on social media content is one of the promising avenues that will help scholars and practitioners in the future to test the validity of theories such as SCCT and to understand the implications for an evidence-based approach to crisis communication management.

Therefore, we invited Franziska Niedermeir, now a graduate student at Ilmenau University of Technology, to publish the results of her Bachelor thesis in this issue of the IRGoCC Report. Her study gives interesting insights into the crisis communication dynamics in the case of the Nestlé palm oil crisis that was triggered and amplified by the international NGO Greenpeace in 2010. By analyzing postings on two Facebook fan pages operated by Nestlé, Franziska Niedermeir intended to test assumptions of the SCCT as well as the extent to that Nestlé did adhere to certain form recommendations for an effective crisis response. In spite of the usual limitations of such social media analyses (e.g., lack of representativeness, susceptibility to manipulation), the findings revealed several weaknesses of Nestlé's crisis response and allow further conclusions for the applicability of the SCCT in such cases.

*Andreas Schwarz, July 2012*

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# Facebook as an instrument of strategic crisis communication: a content analysis of the Nestlé palm oil crisis

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## Abstract

*Social media provide organizations with new opportunities for crisis communication but also present dangers, as shown by the Nestlé palm oil crisis. This paper examines Nestlé's crisis communication during the palm oil crisis and Facebook fans' perceptions of the crisis on two of the company's Facebook fan pages by conducting a content analysis. The research discovered little dialogue orientation and revealed that content recommendations were only partially met. Furthermore, a markedly different perception of the crisis on both fan pages and differences in the*

*evaluation of Nestlé were associated with different crisis communication strategies. However, the results could not confirm the theoretical assumptions of the SCCT. Using the example of the palm oil crisis, this research offers insight into the use of Facebook as a communication instrument during crises and highlights the need for further research on Facebook communications so that scientifically based recommendations for crisis communication via Facebook can be provided in the future.*

## 1. Introduction

"Nestle fails at social media" (Magee, 2010), the headline on techeye.net on 19 March, 2010, expressed what many people thought about Nestlé's crisis communication at that time. The crisis was caused by a viral Greenpeace campaign against the food company that received a lot of attention in the social media world. The campaign named "Ask Nestlé to give rainforests a break" called attention to the unsustainable source of Nestlé's palm oil with the aim of changing the company's palm oil policy. Approximately 250.000 people joined the campaign, which primarily took place on Facebook, and made it one of the most successful online campaigns to date (Bayona, 2010). However, the palm oil controversy itself as well as Nestlé's reaction to the campaign was discussed heavily in the social media world. This incident reveals that for companies that often lack professionalism in handling their social media platforms, campaigns like this are a new challenge, and deliberate communication is important during such crises. This points to the question how companies should deal with such campaigns.

Furthermore, this crisis shows that the Internet is becoming an important instrument in crisis communication. As in this case, the Internet can be the starting point of a new crisis, but it also provides organizations with new possibilities for crisis response (Hallahan, 2010). One such

possibility is the chance to enter a dialogue with stakeholders via platforms like Facebook (Stephens & Malone, 2010). This opportunity for dialogue is an important characteristic for crisis communication because the function of Public Relations (PR) in crisis is to enable a reconciliation of interests between the concerned company and its stakeholders (Köhler, 2006). Symmetric communication provides the possibility for the company and its stakeholders to find a common ground, even when they have opposing interests (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 1996). Thus, another topic that needs closer consideration is how platforms like Facebook can be used for communication in crises. This research focuses on the communication between the food company Nestlé and its Facebook fans on the Facebook platform during the 2010 palm oil crisis to find out more about Facebook as an instrument for crisis communication.

## 2. Literature review

In crisis communication research, two aspects of communication during a crisis are differentiated: form and content. Whereas form recommendations describe how one should respond to a crisis, the content aspect illustrates what should be said.

Regarding the form of crisis response, a fast, consistent and open crisis response is advised (Coombs, 2007). In particular, fast communication becomes more important in the Internet age due to the high speed with which messages are transmitted (Herbst, 2001). With a fast response, the company can bring its own view on the crisis into the opinion forming process and avoid the danger of incorrect information spreading due to misinformed media (Coombs, 2007; Riecken, 2008). The second form recommendation, consistency, means that stakeholders are informed homogenously and is aimed at avoiding contradictions (Riecken, 2008), which would reduce the company's credibility (Mast, 2008). Finally, the last form recommendation, openness of communication, states that the company needs to be willing to provide information to the public. If the company does not do so, stakeholders may react with mistrust and resistance (Baumgärtner, 2008). These three form recommendations are primarily discussed in practitioner literature (Löffelholz & Schwarz, 2008), which Coombs (2006) describes as the "most basic and primitive line of research concerning crisis response" (Coombs, 2006, p. 172). Thus, Coombs (2006) argues that scientific research on form recommendations is needed for a deeper understanding of their effect.

In addition to the formal aspects, the actual content plays an important role in the success of crisis management. In crafting the content of crisis communication, the aims of crisis management – minimizing the damage, retaining responsiveness and rebuilding the damaged image – should be considered, and the communication should be orientated toward those goals (Coombs, 2007). The communicative reaction can be divided into three sequential information categories: instructing, adjusting and internalizing information. Particular research focus is placed on internalizing information, which serves to generate a positive reputation of the company among its stakeholders (Sturges, 1994). Reputation management is important in crisis because a company's reputation is endangered by the crisis, and communication can influence the stakeholder's perception of the company. In reputation management research, a special focus is placed on how crisis response strategies can be used to protect the corporate reputation during a crisis (Coombs, 2007). Although the literature includes many systems of crisis response strategies, a set of strategies combined by Coombs (2006) is used for this research because it is the basis for Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Within the framework of SCCT, Coombs and Holladay (2004) try to establish guidelines for the selection of crisis response strategies to protect the reputation of the concerned organization in the best possible way. SCCT is based on attribution theory, which states that people

make judgments about the causes of an event, especially when the event is unusual (Weiner, 1986). Thus, people naturally also make attributions toward an organization in crisis situations. As the responsibility attributed to the organization in such a crisis situation increases, the probability of a negative image of the company among its stakeholders also rises (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). SCCT further argues that different crisis types create different attributions of crisis responsibility, and hence, the basic crisis types are ranked by the level of responsibility attribution. In a second step, the modifiers, performance history and crisis severity are evaluated because they can influence the level of responsibility attribution. A negative performance history, for example, would increase the crisis responsibility. Furthermore, crisis response strategies are sorted by the level of responsibility acceptance by the organization, as shown in figure 1 (Coombs, 2006). Choosing the appropriate crisis response strategy during a crisis influences both the crisis perception and the organization's reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). SCCT states that, with a higher responsibility attribution, a strategy with a higher level of responsibility acceptance should be chosen so that the stakeholders' expectations are met. Thus, the organization's reputation can be protected best when the accord between responsibility acceptance and responsibility attribution is high (Coombs, 2006).

1. Full Apology: the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and requests forgiveness from stakeholders. It can also include some form of compensation.
2. Corrective Action: the organization takes steps to repair the crisis damage and/or prevent a recurrence of the crisis.
3. Ingratiation: the organization reminds stakeholders of past good works by the organization or praises the stakeholders in some fashion.
4. Justification: the organization tries to minimize the perceived damage related to the crisis. Includes claiming that the damage was minimal or that the victim deserved it.
5. Excuse: the organization tries to minimize its responsibility for the crisis. Includes denying intent or control over the crisis event.
6. Denial: the organization maintains that no crisis occurred. The response may include efforts to explain why there is no crisis.
7. Attack the Accuser: the organization confronts the people or group who say that a crisis exists. The response may include a threat such as a lawsuit.

Figure 1: Crisis response strategies by level of responsibility acceptance (Coombs, 2006, p. 182)

Although some of the assumptions of SCCT have already been empirically tested, further studies need to be conducted to enable a generalization of the theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). In addition, some elements, such as modifiers and stakeholder perception, need to be observed more closely (Coombs, 2006). Schwarz (2010) also regarded the missing observer dependency as a limitation of SCCT and, therefore, extended the approach towards the antecedents of causal attributions from the stakeholders' perspective. In his research Schwarz (2012) found that stakeholders perform a naïve kind of analysis of so-called covariation information prior to causal attributions. Responsibility attributions were found to mediate the effect of causal attributions on evaluations of organizational reputation.

Another important factor in crisis communication is, as mentioned before, symmetric communication. One model giving concrete options for action is the mixed-motive model of public relations (Köhler, 2006). Based on the four models of public relations by Grunig and Hunt (1984), this model combines the models of asymmetrical and symmetrical communication, as one of the two forms is used depending on the situation. Although the model includes two asymmetrical extremes, in which the interests of either the company or the stakeholders are favored, it also contains a win-win zone. This zone provides the opportunity for both parties to enter a symmetrical communication process, even if they have conflicting interests. In the case of differing interests, a common ground can be reasoned via negotiations and cooperation to reach the win-win zone (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 1996). Therefore, the mixed-motive model enables the identification of solutions from which both parties profit in conflict situations. However, it remains questionable whether solutions can be found that benefit both sides in conflict situations (Mast, 2006).

### 3. Research questions and method

This study analyzes Nestlé's crisis communication on Facebook during the palm oil crisis as well as the Facebook fans' perception of the crisis. In particular, compliance with form recommendations, the dialogue orientation of the crisis communication and the applied crisis response strategies are scrutinized. Consequently, the questions guiding the research are:

***To what extent did Nestlé adhere to form recommendations of crisis communication on the company's Facebook fan page during the palm oil crisis, and in what way did the food company use the extended possibilities that Facebook offers for stakeholder communication?***

***How did the Nestlé Facebook fans perceive the palm oil crisis and Nestlé's crisis communication?***

***To what extent did Nestlé's choice of crisis response strategies during Greenpeace's palm oil campaign affect the Facebook fans' attitude towards the company?***

***Hypothesis 1: The smaller the difference between Nestlé's responsibility acceptance and the responsibility attribution, the more positive is the attitude towards Nestlé among Nestlé's Facebook fans.***

The research at hand analyzes communication on the international corporate Facebook fan page "Nestlé" (152,209 fans; state: 6 December, 2010) and the German fan page "Kit Kat – die Pausenseite" (11,096 fans; state: 6 December, 2010) during the palm oil crisis from 17 March, 2010 to 8 May, 2010. The period of investigation was determined using the official start and end dates of the Greenpeace campaign against Nestlé. The choice to analyze both fan pages stems from the idea that possible differences in crisis communication between the fan pages can lead to a more thorough exploration of the research question. In addition, a German and an International fan page were chosen to draw an international comparison. Whereas all messages by Nestlé were analyzed on both fan pages ("Nestlé" fan page: 40 posts/comments; "Kit Kat – die Pausenseite" fan page: 23 posts/comments), a simple random sampling was drawn from the fan messages. To ensure a representative sample, 500 messages were selected from the 1817 fan messages on the Nestlé fan page and 400 out of 892 fan messages on the Kit Kat fan page.

In addition to the Facebook messages, three press releases from Nestlé Headquarters and three press releases from Nestlé Germany, all of which were published during the palm oil crisis, were added to the research to provide more insight into Nestlé's crisis response strategies. Although Nestlé's Facebook messages were predominantly short, they often contained a link to the analyzed press releases, so the press releases were indirectly published on the Facebook fan page.

Before the data collection began, the inter-coder reliability was tested via Holsti's coefficient of reliability for all codebooks, and the reliability coefficients were evaluated as satisfying (codebook for press releases: 0.96; codebook for Nestlé's Facebook messages: 0.99; codebook for fans' Facebook messages: 0.97).



## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Nestlé’s crisis communication

#### Descriptive Results

In the investigated period, 40 messages (23 posts, 17 comments) were posted on the Nestle fan page by Nestlé; whereas on the German Kit Kat fan page, only 23 messages (12 posts, 7 comments, and 4 discussion posts) were published. Furthermore, the discussion forum was used for distributing information on the German fan page only.

An examination of Nestlé’s communication activities over the time period reveals that Nestlé was especially active at the beginning of the investigated period on both fan pages (figure 2). Particularly outstanding is March 19, 2010, on which 20 messages were published by Nestlé on the Nestle fan page. Figure 2 also includes the publication dates for the press releases from both Nestlé Germany and Nestlé International. The figure shows the correspondence between press releases and communication activities on Facebook. At fewer than 50 words, the majority of the messages (“Nestle”: 67.5 %; “Kit Kat – die Pausenseite”: 82.6 %) were rather short, which was expected due to the nature of the Facebook platform.

#### Compliance with form recommendation

To assess the speed of Nestlé’s initial crisis communication, the start of the Greenpeace campaign (17 March, 2010; 6:00 am; Totz, 2010) was used as temporal point of reference. On both fan pages, the company did not

respond until late afternoon (Nestle: 5:00 pm; Kit Kat: 6:09 pm). Riecken (2008) points out that a reaction in the first few hours of a crisis is necessary to introduce the company’s facts into the story published by the media. Because Nestlé only provided information eleven hours after the start of the campaign, one can regard the communication on both fan pages as rather slow. To gain further information about Nestlé’s compliance with the form recommendations, the fan messages were examined in regard to evaluation of Nestlé’s crisis response. The speed of crisis response was, however, barely mentioned: the speed was criticized in only four messages, whereas it was only commended in one message.

To evaluate the transparency of the crisis response, the topics of the fan pages will be addressed first. As figure 3 shows, messages on the Kit Kat fan page focus more strongly on the crisis (87 % of all Nestlé messages), whereas on the Nestle fan page, only 72 % of the messages refer to the crisis. The small number of messages referring to the crisis suggests a limited willingness to provide information, but it also creates the appearance that the management tries to distract the fans from the crisis by generating new issues. Coombs (2008) calls this strategy ‘build new agenda’.

Furthermore, publicizing certain information pertaining to the palm oil crisis itself was seen as indicator for transparency. The analysis showed that the information given on the German fan page was more extensive, as numbers for palm oil usage (in Germany and worldwide) were stated, and one linked press release even contained

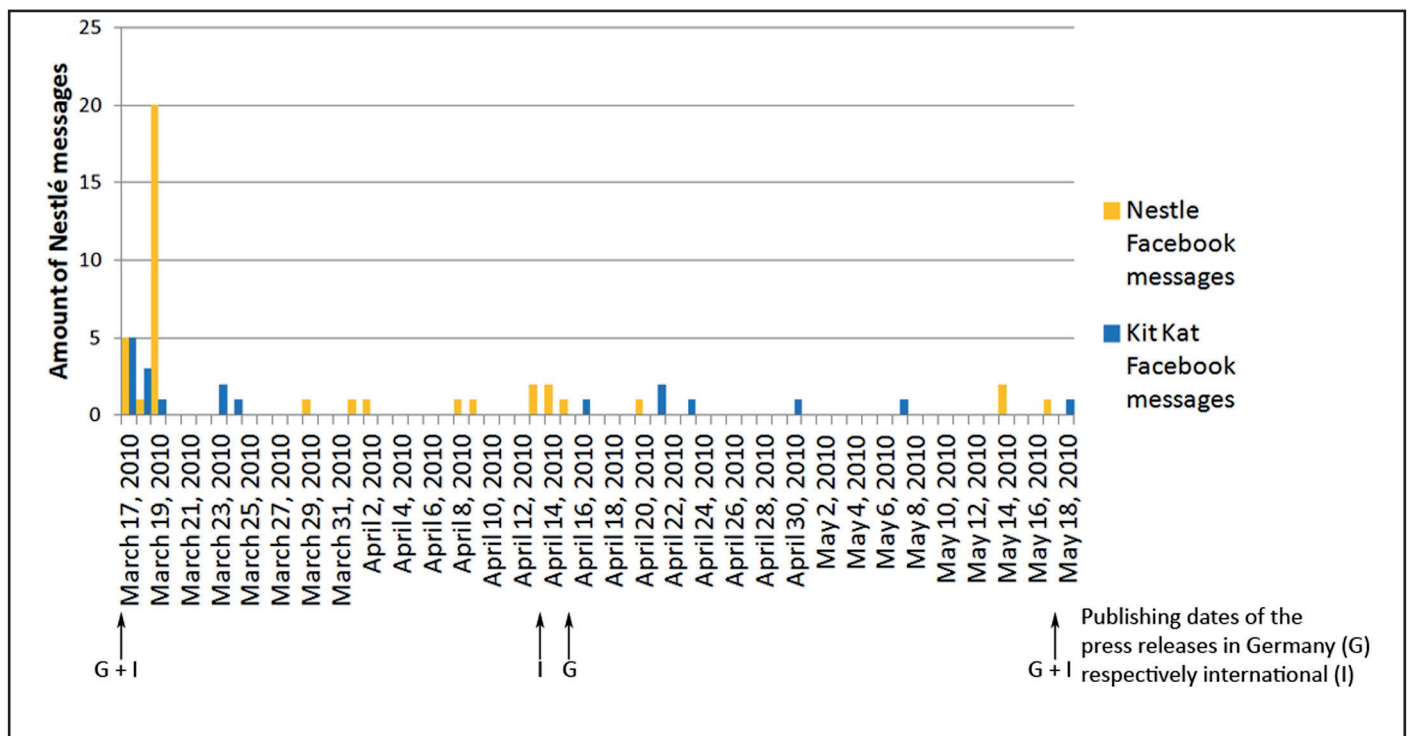


Figure 2: Number of Nestlé messages during the palm oil crisis on both Facebook fan pages

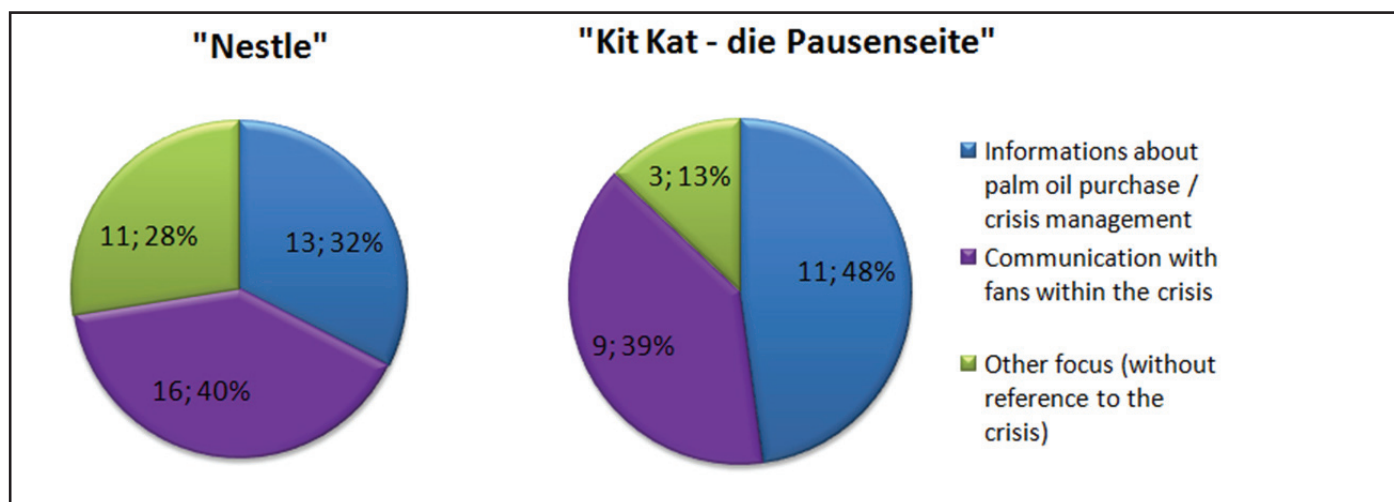


Figure 3: Focus of the Nestlé messages on both Facebook fan pages

some information on the Greenpeace campaign. On the Nestle fan page, information about palm oil usage was only found in one linked press release, but not in any Facebook messages, and no background information on the Greenpeace campaign was given. Data on the palm oil supply from Sinar Mas were not provided on any fan page. However, given the complexity of the supplier relationships, this information may not be actually ascertainable. Consequently, this information represents a moderate level of transparency because several details were given, but background information on the Greenpeace campaign, for example, was minimal. Both the focus of the messages and the provided information lead to the conclusion that transparency on the Kit Kat fan page was higher. Once more, the fan messages rarely contain an evaluation of the transparency of crisis response ("Nestle": 5.2 % messages contain evaluation; "Kit Kat – die Pausenseite": 3.0 %). On both fan pages, the negative statements ("Nestle": 4.4 %; "Kit Kat – die Pausenseite": 2.8 %) dominate the positive remarks. However, one might argue that fans not complaining about the lack of transparency are satisfied with the given information. The results from fan message analysis, therefore, support the earlier conclusion of a medium level of transparency. Concerning the third form recommendation, consistency, the analysis shows that the data given by Nestlé regarding their palm oil usage and purchase did not change, which indicates high consistency. In the fan messages, only two comments indicate a negative evaluation of consistency. In this case, one might also infer that the lack of criticism shows contentment with the consistency of crisis response.

The form recommendations transparency and consistency, however, were only tested with a small number of variables and thus are limited.

### Dialogue orientation and usage of extended options provided by Facebook

Another important element of this study is the examination of Nestlé's openness to dialogue, given the simplicity of direct communication with the stakeholders via Facebook, which highlights a peculiarity of crisis communication in social media.

An indicator of symmetrical communication was the degree of Nestlé's activity. On both fan pages, Nestlé's participation was low compared to the number of fan messages published ("Nestle": 40 Nestlé messages to 1817 fan messages; "Kit Kat – die Pausenseite": 23 Nestlé messages to 892 fan messages). Nestlé's minimal reactions to fan messages show a low willingness to dialogue. In addition, requests by Nestlé for dialogue, such as invitations to ask questions, were rare ("Nestle": 1 message; "Kit Kat – die Pausenseite": 5 messages). Also analyzed was the number of references to fan comments, found in 19 messages (47.5 %) on the Nestle fan page and in seven messages (30.4 %) on the Kit Kat fan page. Finally, in 42.5 % of the Nestle messages and in 39.1 % of the Kit Kat messages, a link to a press release was included, which shows that Facebook is often used to distribute press releases and not to start a dialogue. As a consequence, Nestlé's openness to dialogue is low on both fan pages: Nestlé's willingness to communicate was minimal, and the company's messages referred to fan messages only to a limited extent. Thus, Nestlé does not take into account that a symmetrical communication would provide a better ground for settling the conflict, as stated by the mixed motive model. In another interesting factor pertaining to dialogue orientation, is that the structure of the German fan page allows the fans to compose posts themselves, whereas on the international fan page, fans can only comment on messages posted by Nestlé, which would suggest a higher dialogue orientation on the first page.

With regard to additional functions provided by Facebook, such as the possibility to attach pictures or videos, the analysis shows that eight pictures/videos were included on the Nestle fan page, but none on the Kit Kat fan page. This observation also demonstrates a limited usage of the additional features provided by Facebook.

### Crisis response strategy and tonality

In the course of the crisis, Nestlé used a range of different crisis response strategies on its Facebook fan pages. Whereas the strategies “corrective action” (n = 13) and “excuse” (n = 10) were primarily identifiable on the Nestle fan page, the strategies “justification” (n = 9) and “excuse” (n = 8) were most frequently found on the Kit Kat fan page. The strategies “full apology” and “attack the accuser” did not appear in any of the Nestlé messages. Another striking finding is that more than one crisis response strategy appeared in many messages. A detailed overview recording the changes in crisis response strategies over time can be found in the appendix. The strategy “build new agenda” can also be found in this overview, even though it does not appear in Coombs’ (2006) classification of crisis response strategies pertaining to acceptance of responsibility. However, it is assumed that this strategy might also have an effect on fan perception. From the observed crisis response strategies, one can conclude a moderate acceptance of responsibility on both fan pages with a slightly higher acceptance on the Nestle fan page.

In terms of the tone of the crisis communication, the majority of the messages were neutral/ambivalent (“Nestlé”: 75.0 %; “Kit Kat – die Pausenseite”: 69.6 %). Another 15.0 % of the messages on the Nestle fan page and 26.1 % on the Kit Kat fan page were friendly, but the number of unfriendly messages was also noteworthy (“Nestlé”: 10.0 %; “Kit Kat – die Pausenseite”: 4.3 %; 1 message). Although the number of unfriendly messages was small, it may have affected the fans’ crisis perception because a respectful interaction with the stakeholder is an essential factor for building trust (Baumgärtner, 2008).

## 4.2. The Facebook fans’ crisis reaction

### Descriptive results

An analysis of the publication dates of the fan messages (figure 4) shows especially high variation in the number of messages on the international fan page. The dates 19 March, 2010 (77 messages) and 2 April, 2010 (63 messages) stand out in particular. Although the high number of messages on 19 March, 2010, may be attributed to unfriendly Nestle messages, the peculiarity on 2 April, 2010 has no obvious explanation. On the Kit Kat fan page, the dates March 17, 2010 (101 messages) and March 18, 2010 (36 messages) show high fan activity, whereas the number of messages per day mostly remains below 20 messages in the remaining period of investigation. However, on those days, a high percentage of messages do not refer to the crisis (March 17, 2010: 78.2 % messages without crisis reference; March 18, 2010: 38.9 % messages without crisis reference). Therefore, the deviation might be attributed to an incident before the crisis.

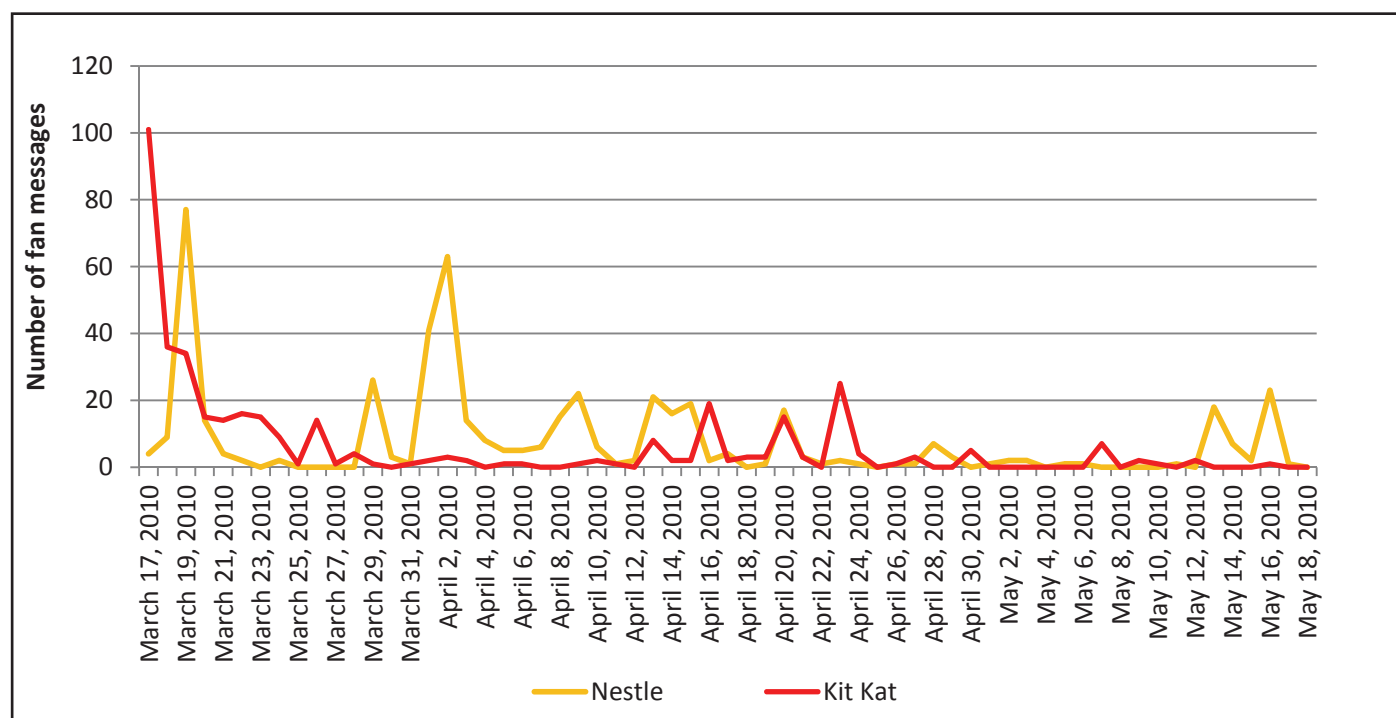


Figure 4: Number of fan messages on both fan pages



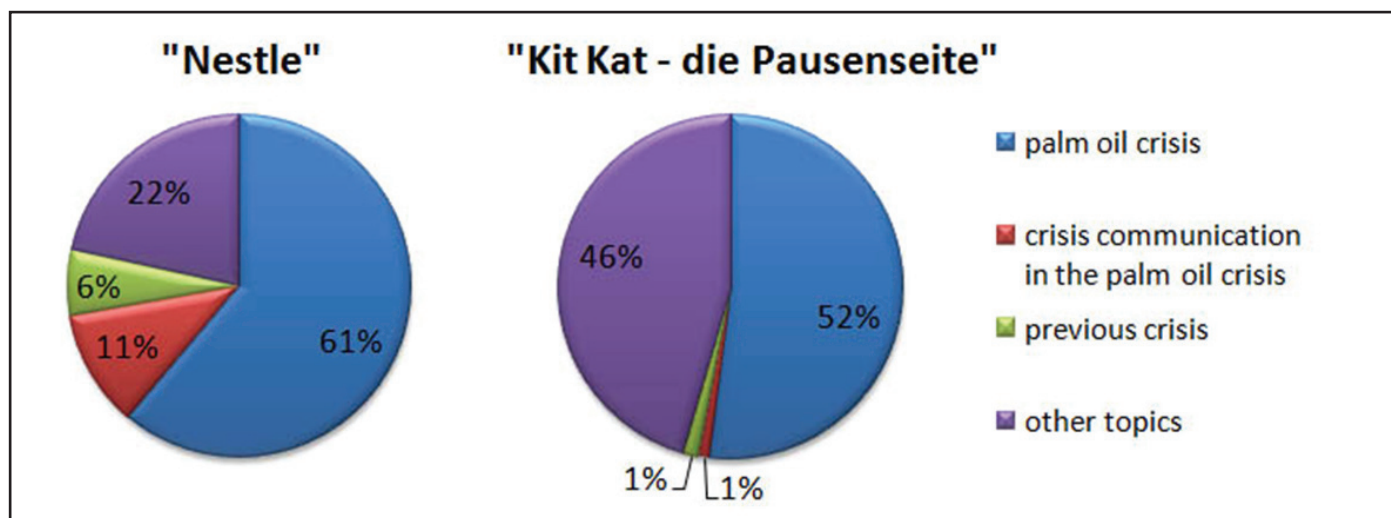


Figure 5: Focus of the fan messages

The analysis further revealed the presence of five very active fans on the Kit Kat fan page, who composed more than ten of the analyzed messages, whereas on the Nestle fan page, a maximum of eight messages was written by one fan. A comparison between both fan pages showed that fans of the Nestle fan page ( $n = 337$  people;  $M = 1.49$  messages per person) on average wrote fewer messages than fans of the Kit Kat fan page ( $n = 243$  people;  $M = 1.65$  messages per person).

#### The Facebook fans' crisis perception

Looking at the topics on both fan pages, one can detect a considerable difference. Whereas the topic of the palm oil crisis clearly dominates the Nestle fan page (61.0%), on the Kit Kat fan page, the topics "palm oil crisis" (52.0%) and "other topics" (no crisis reference; 46.0%) both have a high frequency of occurrence (figure 5). The topics "former crises" and "crisis communication in the palm oil crisis" play only a minor role on the Kit Kat fan page but account for 6.0% (former crises), respectively 11.0% (crisis communication in the palm oil crisis) of the messages on the Nestle fan page. These findings demonstrate that the crisis attracted more interest on the international fan page. The attitude towards the crisis offers further confirmation of this finding. On the Nestle fan page, the crisis was regarded as important in 57.2% of the messages and unimportant in only 14.4%, whereas no clear allocation was feasible in 28.4% of the messages. On the Kit Kat fan page, however, the theme was only considered important in 34.0% of the messages and was seen as irrelevant in 47.3% of the messages. In the remaining 18.8%, no clear classification was possible.

Moreover, a stronger emotional response is recognizable on the Nestle fan page (20.6%) than on the Kit Kat fan page (4.3%). The emotionalization on the Nestle fan page is particularly strong in messages that focus on the palm oil crisis (28.8%) which highlights the relevance of the crisis

for the fans. By contrast, only 4.3% of the messages that refer to the crisis on the Kit Kat fan page are emotional.

Another dimension of the fans' crisis perception was their evaluation of Nestlé's crisis communication. The evaluation in regard to the form recommendation was already mentioned earlier in this paper, but explicit judgments of the communication with fans were also analyzed. Again, evaluation was found only in a small number of comments, but the dissatisfaction on the Nestle fan page (positive: 0.8%; negative: 6.4%) is higher than on the Kit Kat fan page (positive: 0.8%; negative: 1.2%).

The last aspect concerning crisis perception is the fans' responsibility attribution. This variable was ascertained to verify the assessment of responsibility attribution using the crisis type. In most of the messages ( $n$  (Nestle) = 301;  $n$  (Kit Kat) = 264), however, no clear evidence about responsibility attribution was possible; therefore, the subsequent results should be viewed with caution. In the remaining messages, the responsibility attribution was higher on the Nestle fan page ( $M = 2.79$ ;  $SD = 0.57$ ) than on the Kit Kat fan page ( $M = 2.39$ ;  $SD = 0.89$ ;  $p \leq 0.001$ ; see table 1). This difference in responsibility attribution suggests that the crisis type is not solely decisive for the responsibility attribution in the context of a crisis. Potential causes for the difference in attribution of responsibility are that Nestlé's performance history differs in Germany and worldwide or that the articulation of responsibility attribution differed in strength due to the form of crisis communication, even though it was de facto the same. However, those explanations cannot be

	No responsibility	Moderate Responsibility	Full responsibility
Nestle	8.0% (16)	4.5% (9)	87.4% (174)
Kit Kat	27.2% (37)	6.6% (9)	66.2% (90)

Table 1: The Facebook fans' attribution of responsibility

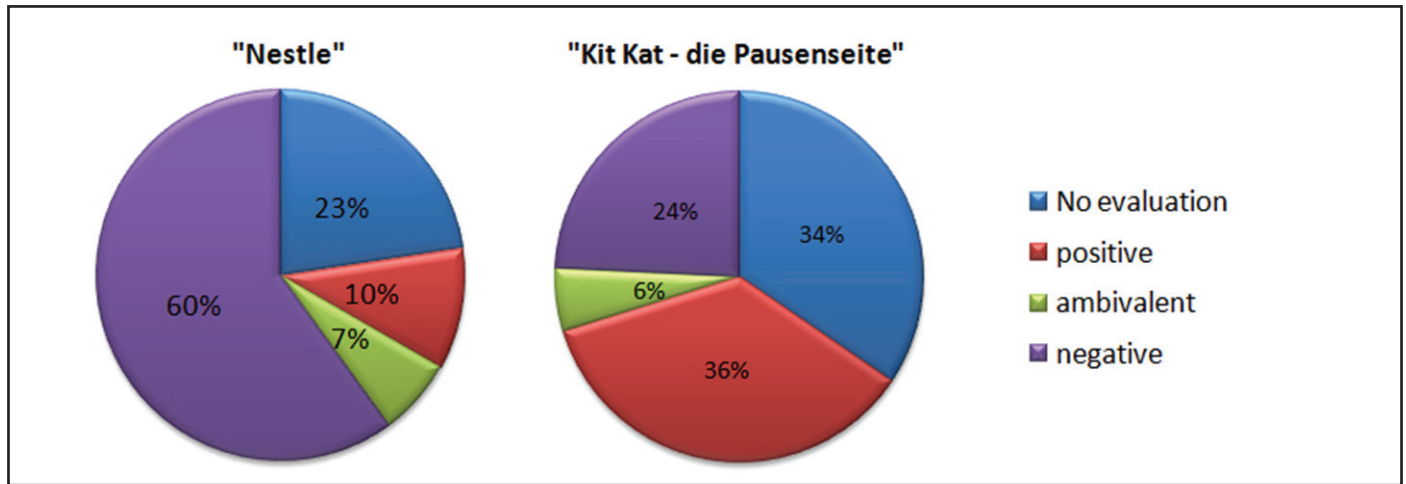


Figure 6: General evaluation of Nestlé on the Facebook fan pages

proven and would require further examination. Generally, the detected moderate to high attribution of responsibility confirms the anticipation of the attribution of responsibility by the crisis type.

**Attitude towards Nestlé**

In examining the fans’ perspective, the attitude towards the company is of special interest to determine the extent to which the crisis impacted stakeholder perceptions. Figure 6 shows a remarkable difference in the attitude towards Nestlé on both fan pages; the evaluation of Nestlé is significantly more negative on the Nestle fan page than on the Kit Kat fan page (M (Nestle) = 2.64; SD (Nestle) = 0.711; M (Kit Kat) = 1.82; SD (Kit Kat) = 0.943; p <= 0.001). To gain further information about the fans’ attitude towards Nestlé, an assessment of various dimensions of corporate reputation was conducted. However, as shown in table 2, in the majority of the messages no information was given about the evaluation of single dimensions. As expected due to the topic of the crisis, environmental awareness in particular was evaluated negatively, especially on the Nestle fan

page. Additionally, in 24.4 % of messages on the international fan page, credibility was mentioned, and negative evaluations (13.8 %) outnumbered the positive ones (10.6 %). Moreover, the dimension “products” was assessed relatively often (15.7 %) on the Kit Kat fan page. The evaluation was only negative in one case.

Fan loyalty to Nestle, indicated by whether they continue buying Nestlé products or they boycott them due to the crisis, is another aspect of the attitude toward the company. On the Nestle fan page, 15.6 % of the fans expressed intent to boycott the company, at least until implementation of changes in the palm oil supplier relationship. In 1.0 % of the messages, loyalty to Nestlé was voiced (83.4 % made no statement on loyalty). The Kit Kat fan page reflects a rather different distribution: 2.3 % of the messages showed loyalty, whereas 3.5 % voiced intent to boycott (94.3 % no statement on loyalty). This variable further indicates that the palm oil topic was considered more important by the fans of the Nestle fan page compared to the fans of the Kit Kat fan page.

Another dimension of crisis perception is a company’s crisis history (Coombs & Holladay, 2004). In this analysis,

	No evaluation		Positive evaluation		Negative evaluation	
	Nestle	Kit Kat	Nestle	Kit Kat	Nestle	Kit Kat
Credibility	75.6 %	93.5 %	10.6 %	3.3 %	13.8 %	3.3 %
Products	94.6 %	84.3 %	3.2 %	15.5 %	2.2 %	0.3 %
Vision / Management	95.0 %	98.5 %	0.8 %	0.5 %	4.2 %	1.0 %
Workplace satisfaction	94.8 %	99.8 %	1.2 %	0.3 %	4.0 %	0 %
Environmental awareness	45.0 %	74.8 %	4.0 %	1.8 %	51.0 %	23.3 %
Financial success	97.2 %	97.8 %	2.8 %	2.3 %	0 %	0 %

Table 2: Evaluation of different reputation dimensions

the relevance of this aspect becomes apparent through messages referring to earlier crises. In 8.8 % of the messages on the Nestlé fan page, as well as in 1.8 % of the messages on the Kit Kat fan page, a reference to earlier crises or earlier irresponsible behavior, was found. The infant formula scandal, which was mentioned in 25 messages on the Nestlé fan page and in two messages on the Kit Kat fan page, was discussed most frequently.

#### Dialogue orientation and usage of extended options provided by Facebook

For the establishment of two-way communication, not only is a dialogue orientation from Nestlé important, but the fans also need to be interested in starting a dialogue. On the Nestlé fan page, 9.6 % of the messages contained questions and 14.8 % included requests to act, whereas the Kit Kat fans showed considerably less dialogue orientation with 3.3 % of the messages containing questions and 4.0 % of the messages containing requests to act. The number of questions and requests to act is, therefore, rather small, but it shows certain interest in a dialogue. Other features such as posting pictures or videos were not possible on the Nestlé fan page and were rarely used by Kit Kat fans (1.0 %). Additionally, the incorporation of links was minimally used (Nestlé: 8.6 %; Kit Kat: 10.2 %).

#### Relationship between crisis response strategy and reputation

Finally, the relationship between Nestlé's crisis response strategies and the evaluation of Nestlé in the fan messages was scrutinized. For this purpose, the fan messages were assigned to the crisis response strategies that Nestlé used at the particular point in time. The assignment to the crisis response strategies was conducted using the date of the fan message and the dates of strategy changes mentioned previously (see appendix). In this way, for every combination of crisis response strategies, the mean evaluation of Nestlé was calculated. The results of the analyses are listed in table 3 (Kit Kat fan page) and 4 (Nestlé fan page). As far as possible, the strategies and strategy combinations were ranged by the degree of responsibility acceptance. In the case of strategy combina-

tions, the average responsibility acceptance was calculated and compared with the remaining strategies. For this process, the strategies were ranked with a value from 1 (very high responsibility acceptance) to 7 (no responsibility acceptance), and the mean was calculated. The strategy "build new agenda" was positioned at the end of the tables due to lack of knowledge regarding its responsibility acceptance. As this strategy drifts away from the crisis topic, a classification with regard to its responsibility acceptance seems difficult. However, a topic change might be understood as denial of responsibility because the company does not address the crisis situation. This assumption needs to be examined in future studies.

On the Kit Kat fan page, the opinion of Nestlé is better with less responsibility acceptance by the company (see table 3). The most positive evaluation is found in those time ranges when the crisis topic was avoided by introducing other topics. Difference in evaluation of Nestlé was only significant according to the Scheffé test between the strategies "build new agenda" ( $M = 1.39$ ,  $SD = 0.0774$ ) and the combination of the strategies "corrective action", "ingratiation" and "justification" ( $M = 2.35$ ,  $SD = 0.900$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). Because all strategies on the Kit Kat fan page, without consideration of the strategy "build new agenda", possess moderate acceptance of responsibility, the evaluation differences are, as expected, rather small. Considering the assumed moderate to high responsibility attribution among the stakeholders, SCCT assumes that a strategy with moderate to high responsibility acceptance has the most positive effect on fan perception. On the Kit Kat fan page, by contrast, one can observe that the strategy combinations with low to moderate acceptance of responsibility generate a better response.

Keeping in mind Schwarz's (2010) criticism of the SCCT, this contradiction could be due to an incorrect estimation of the responsibility attribution. Indeed, the determined responsibility attribution of the fans is medium (to high), but this result cannot be used as a reliable indicator due to the high number of missing values.

Strategy	N <sup>1</sup>	M	SD
Corrective action + ingratiation + justification	46	2.35	0.900
Corrective Action + justification + excuse	25	2.12	0.971
Justification + excuse + denial	109	1.89	0.936
Build new agenda	46	1.39	0.774

Table 3: Fan evaluations by crisis response strategies on the Kit Kat fan page

Strategy	N <sup>1</sup>	M	SD
Corrective action	76	2.53	0.774
Corrective action +ingratiation + justification	6	1.67	0.816
Ingratiation	3	2.33	1.155
Corrective action + excuse	14	2.57	0.756
Justification	4	2.75	0.500
Excuse	23	2.61	0.656
Build new agenda	217	2.71	0.675
Build new agenda + excuse	42	2.71	0.596

Table 4: Fan evaluation by crisis response strategies on the Nestle fan page

For the Nestle fan page, differences can be detected between the evaluations ranked by the various strategies (see table 4); however, they are not significant according to the Scheffé test. Moreover, the results are limited due to the very low number of cases for a few strategies. Nevertheless, for the Nestle fan page, the relationship between the attribution and acceptance of responsibility is examined. The medium to high responsibility attribution predicted by the crisis type and the high responsibility attribution determined by the content analysis lead to the conclusion that the evaluation should be positive when the responsibility acceptance is high. This assumption can be confirmed by the analysis because the evaluation is slightly more positive for crisis response strategies accepting a higher degree of responsibility. If one neglects crisis response strategies with six or fewer fan messages because of insufficient expressiveness, one can determine that the strategy "corrective action", which is characterized by high acceptance of responsibility, affected the fan messages in the most positive way ( $M = 2.53$ ;  $SD = 0.774$ ). The strategy "build new agenda" ( $M = 2.71$ ;  $SD = 0.675$ ) as well as its combination with the "excuse" strategy ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 0.596$ ) seems to have a negative effect on the perception of the company.

Hypothesis 1, which implies that a small gap between responsibility acceptance and attribution causes a more positive fan attitude towards Nestlé, must be rejected. Such a tendency was found only on the Nestle fan page, but it was not significant. However, one should consider that a possible reason for the contradiction with the hypothesis might be that the Facebook fans' attribution of responsibility could not be identified in a satisfactory manner.

<sup>1</sup> Missing values can be traced to nonexistent judgments of Nestlé in the comments or to the fact that the messages were published before Nestlé's first statement and, therefore, could not be assigned to a strategy.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this case study was to analyze Nestlé's crisis communication and the Facebook fans' perception to generate first findings about the usage of Facebook as an instrument in strategic crisis communication. The company communicated consistently and, at least in part, transparently, but it did not react rapidly to the crisis. The study also found that the extended options that Facebook provides for crisis communication (e.g., the opportunity for symmetric communication) were barely used. Hence, one can conclude that the advantages of online communication, such as the possibility for rapid reaction and direct contact with stakeholders, were not exploited. Furthermore, the analysis of the fans' crisis perception showed a rather different attitude towards the crisis and the company on both fan pages. On the Nestle fan page, more significance was attributed to the crisis, and Nestlé was evaluated more negatively than on the Kit Kat fan page. This response may be attributed to several possible reasons. The differences might be due to characteristics of the fans, such as different usage of Facebook or different interests in ecological topics. However, Nestlé's performance history may also vary in different countries, or the form of crisis communication may have influenced the fans' perception. This study focused only on the possible effects of crisis response strategies. Small, but not significant differences in the evaluation of Nestlé stemming from different strategy combinations were found. However, the strategy combinations also had a similar degree of responsibility acceptance, whereby no marked differences in the evaluation of Nestlé were expected. The hypothesis for verification of the assumption of the SCCT must be rejected, perhaps because the attribution of responsibility was not sufficient, and the stakeholders' perspective would need to be included to a greater degree. This inclusion was attempted in this study but was



only partially successful because in many cases, the fans made no statements on responsibility attribution.

For several variables relying on fan comments, the problem occurred that an analysis was only possible for a small number of comments. Although the fans' general attitude was mostly recognizable, the brevity of fan comments made it difficult to state more specific details. To gain more differentiated findings about the fans' perception, one would need to survey the fans. Another problem that might distort the research results is the impossibility of determining if all of the Facebook fans were true Nestlé fans, or if some of them were Nestlé employees or paid supporters. Similarly, one cannot determine how many of the active fans were actually members of the environmental organization Greenpeace seeking to promote controversy on the fan page. Finally, fan posts may have been deleted; whether this occurred, and how many posts were affected, cannot be determined. On the Nestle fan page, several fans complained about deleted posts, which suggests that deleting comments was no rarity. Consequently, this is another factor that might have distorted the results.

Future analysis of other crisis cases and the subsequent communication via Facebook would provide sufficient context for a more general statement on the use of Facebook in crisis situations. With the help of further research, scientifically based recommendations for acting in crisis situations and reacting to campaigns against the company could be crafted. Even if they do not prevent a temporary problem, these recommendations can help companies avoid larger problems resulting from misguided crisis communication.

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## Appendix

### I) Crisis response strategies on the Nestle fan page

Date	Time	Crisis response strategies
March 17, 2010	5.00 pm	Corrective Action + Justification
March 17, 2010	6.01 pm	Corrective Action + Excuse
March 17, 2010	7.10 pm	Excuse
March 18, 2010	1.25 pm	Corrective Action
March 19, 2010	2.11 am	Corrective Action + Excuse
March 19, 2010	3.53 am	Justification
March 19, 2010	10.20 am	Corrective Action
March 19, 2010	10.44 am	Ingratiation
March 19, 2010	12.37 am	Corrective Action + Excuse
March 19, 2010	4.17 pm	Corrective Action
March 29, 2010	1.56 pm	Build New Agenda
April 1, 2010	12.17 am	Build New Agenda + Excuse
April 2, 2010	6.04 am	Build New Agenda
April 13, 2010	6.39 pm	Corrective Action + Ingratiation + Justification
April 13, 2010	7.57 pm	Excuse
April 15, 2010	11.44 am	Build New Agenda
May 17, 2010	07.06	Corrective Action

### II) Crisis response strategies on the Kit Kat fan page

Date	Time	Crisis response strategies
March 17, 2010	6.10 pm	Justification + Excuse + Denial
March 23, 2010	8.05 pm	Ingratiation + Corrective Action + Justification
April 16, .2010	11.37 am	Corrective Action + Justification + Excuse
April 23, 2010	4.12 pm	Build New Agenda
May 18. 2010	6.30 pm	Corrective Action

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