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Online Spoof Illustrations in the Aftermath of a Reputational Brand Crisis

Defining the Phenomenon and Its Consequences
for Brand Management

– MASTER THESIS –

International Marketing and Brand Management

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to explore the phenomenon of online spoof illustrations that are created in the aftermath of a reputational brand crisis. In a first step, characteristics of these illustrations are assessed and categorized. Subsequently, their impact on a brand's reputation is investigated.

Methodology: An exploratory sequential mixed method approach was applied, with initial qualitative research facilitating a subsequent quantitative phase. Over 500 spoof illustrations of three cases (Barclays LIBOR crisis, Volkswagen "Dieselgate", and BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill) were collected online. A structuralist semiotic reduction analysis was conducted to assess the context as well as denotative and connotative features of these images. These insights were further combined with grounded theory to arrive at a framework that allows a categorization of the illustrations. Finally, an online self-completion questionnaire with 501 respondents was used in the quantitative stage of the thesis to assess the harmfulness of spoof illustrations to a brand's reputation.

Findings: Spoofs can be found in several illustrations types, be it cartoons and caricatures, subvertisements, photographs, or image macros. They include recurring content elements, such as a brand's logo, name, slogan and product, different stakeholders and political actors, as well as pop cultural and situational artifacts. The *Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework (RSIF)*, which is introduced here for the first time, allows a classification of spoof illustrations, according to the dimensions Humorousness and Aggressiveness. These dimensions form four categories: Resenting, Insulting, Mocking, and Gloating. The quantitative data suggests that spoof illustrations have a negative impact on a brand's reputation. It can also be inferred that the less humorous and more aggressive a spoof is, the more harmful it is to a brand's reputation.

Theoretical Contributions: The thesis contributes mainly to the fields of (online) crisis- and reputation management, strategic brand management, and stakeholder relations. It gives an extensive definition of spoof illustrations that help to further understand the tools stakeholders use to criticize a brand. Furthermore, the *RSIF* can arguably be applied to a vast range of different scenarios of brand criticism and parody. Finally, substantial gaps in literature were filled in the fields of online criticism, brand parody, and brand reputation.

Managerial Implications: Spoofs can be harmful to a brand's reputation, and thus need to be closely monitored during a crisis. The study was conducted in close relation to real-life examples and therefore delivers immediate implications for practitioners, especially by applying the *RSIF* in corporate crisis situations. After spoofs have been collected, they can be instantly mapped and evaluated with the help of the framework. Consequently, three action alternatives are presented, namely Ignore, Reduce Impact, and Counteract.

Originality/Value: Spoof illustrations that are created following a brand crisis have only been researched in a cursory manner. This is the first comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon. It provides an extensive descriptive as well as interpretative assessment of the spoofs, and also demonstrates their implications for a brand and its reputation. Furthermore, the *Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework* that was developed in the course of this study, allows academics and practitioners alike a quick and simple assessment of any spoof illustrations.

Keywords: Spoof Illustrations, Brand Parody, Crisis Management, Stakeholder Online Reactions, Corporate Reputation, Strategic Brand Management

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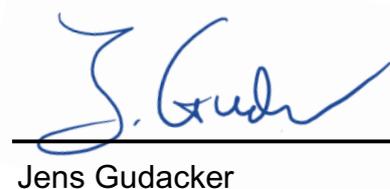
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1 INTRODUCTION

They are all around us. Whenever a well-known company is involved in a scandal or crisis, the Internet is full of images that criticize, ridicule, or assault the brand for its missteps. The most recent large-scale crisis, the Volkswagen “Dieselgate”, is a good example of this. Consumers and other stakeholders feel betrayed and lied to, thus taking to social media to give vent to their anger – often in the form of pictures instead of words. But research has largely ignored these visuals. Are they simply taken for granted? Are they just “irrelevant little doodles”? This can be doubted, as we are facing a new reality, where the rapidly growing Web 2.0 gives everyone a voice, and any single picture can be seen by millions. What used to be graffiti on the wall or a mocking cartoon in the local newspaper, is today a world-wide piece of communication with the potential to stain a brand, especially in the context of a reputational crisis. Additionally, it can even be argued that in contrast to simple texts, an image attracts more attention, conveys a clear message, and is easily shared – “a picture is worth a thousand words”. Would all of this not mean that these illustrations have a high potential to affect a brand?

This observation is the *raison-d’être* for this thesis, which puts the phenomenon of *spoof illustrations* at the core of its investigation (see Figure 1 for examples). The following definition of spoof illustrations (and their synonyms “spoof visuals”, “spoof pictures”, “spoof images”, or simply “spoofs”) is proposed:

Spoof illustrations address or criticize brands by using brand elements or parodies of them.



Figure 1 Examples of Spoof Illustrations¹

¹ Sources for all spoof illustrations used in this thesis can be found on pp. 101-103

In this thesis, only spoof illustrations that can be found online and are used in the context of a reputational brand crisis will be considered. One thing should be highlighted, however. The words parody and spoof, which are used synonymously in this thesis, are often limited to standing for something humorous, such as Sabri & Michel (2014, p. 43), who define parody as “a form of creative art that mimics a particular work [...] through the use of ironic, humorous, or satiric imitation”. While humor certainly plays a considerable role in spoof illustrations, it would not be accurate to exclude those pictures that are more serious. After all, a crisis is not necessarily a laughing matter. For this reason, the terms spoof and parody will only be used to stand for “imitating something (i.e. a brand) by altering or exaggerating its characteristics”, without the imperative presumption of humor.

Unsurprisingly, parodies and spoofs have a long tradition. The phenomenon dates back to Greek philosopher Aristotle, who first used the word “parodia” in his work *Poetics* to discuss satirical poems (Dentith, 2000). During the course of time up until today, those that are in the public eye – be it kings, actors, or politicians – have always been the subject of ridicule, parody, and criticism. With increasing globalization and capitalism, brands have been added to this list. They and their advertisements have been spoofed ever since brands were featured in print, radio, and television (Berthon & Pitt, 2012). However, as mentioned before, the Internet has revolutionized the scope and intensity of brand parodies. It has empowered consumers and other individuals by giving them a voice, shifting brand building from being a one-way monologue to an interactive dialogue (Bal et al., 2010). It has supplied user with tools that allow them to create and share their own perspective towards a brand, which is called co-creation. Official brand campaigns thus have to battle with user-generated content for the public’s attention (Fielding, 2006). But what does it mean for a brand when this content is critical, and maybe downright insulting – especially, when it is already damaged by a crisis?

There have been plenty of studies on both content that is critical of brands, and stakeholder reactions in a crisis. A general example of this is negative Word-of-Mouth (Brummette & Fussell Sisco, 2015; Pace, Balboni & Gistri, 2015), which could result in a “firestorm” when done by a large group of people online (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2014). On a more concrete level, there has been research on such concepts

as anti-branding, which can be seen as a rather ideological and anti-capitalistic form of criticism (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Yazıcıoğlu & Borak, 2012) or “brandalism” (brand vandalism) and “subvertising” (subvert advertising), which adapt existing advertisements and similar branded content to make a statement and rebel against the brands (Smith-Anthony & Groom, 2015).

All of these items are absolutely legitimate in their contribution to the research of brand criticism in general, and stakeholder relations in a crisis. However, they indicate some substantial gaps that this thesis will attempt to fill. First of all, crisis reactions and emotions (such as negative word-of-mouth) are often only investigated in an abstract way. They lack practical examples, such as spoof illustrations, which constitute a significant part of these reactions. This is also where the second big research gap can be identified. While there has been some research on brand parodies (e.g. the aforementioned brandalism and subvertisement initiatives), they have almost always been conducted generally, and not in the context of a crisis. It should be expected, however, that spoof illustrations do not only occur much more frequently when a brand is in crisis, but that they are also perceived to be more relevant and valid to the situation. Consequently, no one has yet investigated what effect such spoof illustrations can have on the stakeholders in a crisis, and how they harm the brand and its reputation. Seeing that we are constantly surrounded by a large variety of spoofs on social media, blogs, and other online sources, it is astonishing that it is still unknown what implications they have on the brand.

A clear purpose for this thesis emerges from the preceding arguments. First of all, it needs to be investigated what characterizes spoof illustrations that are created following a crisis. To do this, the particularities of such visual forms of communication need to be considered just as much as the illustration types they come in, the content they include, and the context they refer to. Furthermore, it will not be sufficient to simply describe the spoofs. For this reason, the thesis will also set out to develop a form of categorization that allows to differentiate between types of spoofs. After all, while other brand parody activities are usually researched within a narrow field, it is suggested that spoof illustrations can come in a variety of forms and were created with different intentions. Therefore, the first research question is as follows:

RQ₁: *What are the characteristics of spoof illustrations, and how can they be categorized?*

The second purpose of this thesis will be to assess the spoofs' impact on the affected brand. Seeing that such pictures are easily posted and shared online, they can potentially reach an extremely large audience in a short amount of time. This could prove to be harmful to a brand's reputation. Furthermore, the thesis will also aim to investigate whether there are differences in the impact on a brand between different types of spoofs. Consequently, the second research question asks:

RQ₂: *Do spoof illustrations have an impact on a brand's reputation in a crisis?*

The relevance of both research questions can further be affirmed by identifying several calls for future research relating to this topic. Bokor (2014), for example, addresses the need in observing the phenomenon of critical online visuals, to be able to understand online crisis communication better. Sabri and Michel (2014) point out that further research needs to be conducted to analyze the harmfulness of negative user-generated brand parodies. Moreover, Bal et al. (2009, p. 236) state that it is important to understand "what particular brands might be targeted, what about them might be spoofed, and how this will happen". This is especially relevant for brand managers, since they need to consider and react towards an increasing occurrence of user generated parody and spoofing that might be harmful towards a brand's reputation (Bal et al., 2009; Mishra et al., 2010).

Disposition

The following Chapter 2 will present selected literature and discuss their relevance in regards to the research question. Chapter 3 introduces the chosen cases and gives a reasoning for their selection. The methodology used throughout this thesis will be discussed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will then present the findings of the research. It will first provide a semiotic analysis of the spoofs, then introduce the *Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework (RSIF)*, and finally deliver the results of the questionnaire. Chapter 6 discusses these findings. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes this thesis by addressing theoretical contributions and practical implications of the study, as well as considering limitations and inspiring future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses the ideas, models, and theories of literature that is relevant for the purpose of this study. It starts out with rather general topics that constitute the basic foundation of this thesis, such as the concept of reputation, which is argued to be a central dependent variable of spoof illustrations. This is followed by an analysis of crisis management and what factors play a role in it. The literature review will then increasingly become more focused on the particularities of spoof illustrations, by first assessing stakeholder reactions and emotions in a crisis. Subsequently, an investigation of the additional challenges the Internet can pose to a brand in crisis is presented, finally leading to a discussion of online brand criticism and –parodies.

2.1 Corporate Brand Reputation

The term reputation has seen a constant increase in attention ever since the 1990's (Balmer & Greyser, 2003). And while there are without doubt many factors that contribute to this growing interest in the phenomenon, there are two that stick out (cf. Roper & Fill, 2012): First, a 24/7 media coverage that is constantly looking for the next big story, often putting corporations in the spotlight. Second, increasing skepticism and cynicism among consumers, who “now often expect companies to get things wrong” (Roper & Fill, 2012, p. 11). Thus, having a good reputation has become an absolute necessity for any organization. In fact, Deloitte (2013) reports that (negative) reputation has become the top strategic risk as perceived by senior management. But what is reputation, and what are its characteristics?

Unsurprisingly, reputation is an ambiguous term that has been defined in many different ways throughout the literature. However, there are two recurring elements that can be considered to be the essence of reputation (Helm, Liehr-Gobbers & Storck, 2011): a time component and a perceptual component. Authors that mention the time aspect are, for example, Balmer & Greyser (2003, p. 177), who stated that reputation is “formed over time” and “based on what the organization has done and how it has behaved”, or Yoon, Guffey and Kijewski (1993, p. 215), saying that “a company's reputation reflects the history of its past actions”. As for perception, it can be noted that “reputation can be defined as a distribution of opinions (the overt expressions of

a collective image) about a person or other entity, in a stakeholder or interest group” (Bromley, 2001, p. 317). It can thus be seen that reputation is a process that accumulates past actions of an organization that are perceived and evaluated by stakeholders to arrive at an opinion that will determine their future attitude towards the respective organization. This will be the definition of the phenomenon of reputation applied in this thesis, thus also following Fombrun (1996, cited in Roper & Fill, 2012, p.7), which can be considered to be one of the most quoted definitions of reputation (e.g. Helm, Liehr-Gobbers & Storck, 2011; Urde & Greyser, 2016; Roper & Fill, 2012):

Corporate reputation is a collective representation of a firm’s past actions and results that describes the firm’s ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders. It gauges a firm’s relative standing both internally with employees and externally with its stakeholders, in both its competitive and institutional environments.

A favorable reputation can bring about many benefits. First of all, it is considered to be an intangible asset of a company (Schweizer & Wijnberg, 1999; Marconi, 2002). This means that a good reputation will not only make it more likely for a consumer to buy the company’s product (Balmer, 1998), but, similar to branding (Roper & Fill, 2012), even encourage them to pay a premium price for it. What is more, a good reputation also ensures a high quality of applicants for a vacancy and facilitates access to capital markets and investors (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). A favorable reputation can also act as a security for consumers when a purchase decision cannot be based on quality or other tangible information (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997). Tennie, Frith and Frith (2010, p. 484) take it to an even simpler level and apply reputation to evolutionary theory, where “individuals who have gained a reputation for cooperative behaviour are more likely to be chosen as partners [and] to receive rewards”.

It can thus be seen that reputation is an important asset to a company and brand. Should spoof illustrations indeed affect perception, and thus a brand’s reputation, all these benefits are consequentially at risk.

Brand Identity, Image and Reputation

Many of the characteristics and benefits of the term reputation could also be applied to related concepts, such as brand identity or brand image, and drawing a distinction can therefore often be confusing. There are, however, various approaches to solve this ambiguity. Several models achieve to not only establish a distinction between identity, image, and reputation, but even show how they are interdependent. Gray & Balmer (1998), for example, developed a framework in which corporate identity, through communication, creates the image and reputation of a company. This can lead to a competitive advantage (see Figure 2).

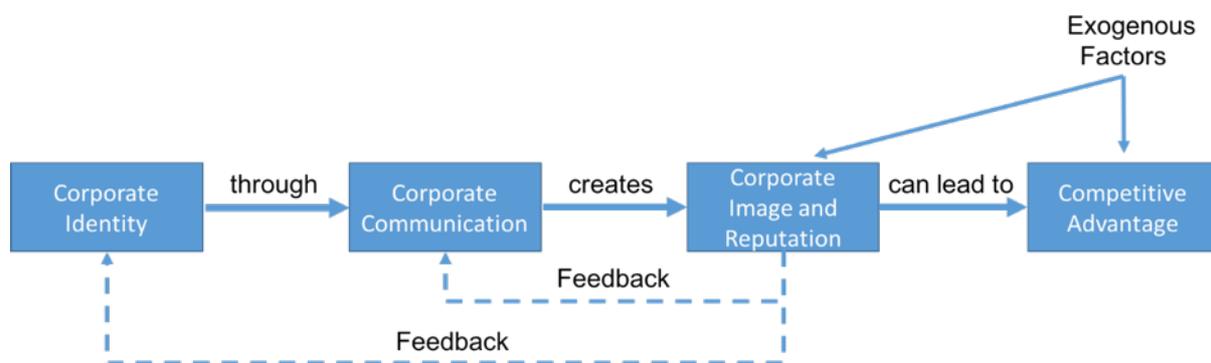


Figure 2 Reputation Management Model (Adapted from Gray & Balmer, 1998)

Similarly, Fill (2009, cited in Roper & Fill, 2012) proposes that corporate personality influences the identity or brand, which in turn affects the corporate image, and then its reputation. In this model (illustrated in Figure 3), communication serves as the underlying linkage between all these building blocks.

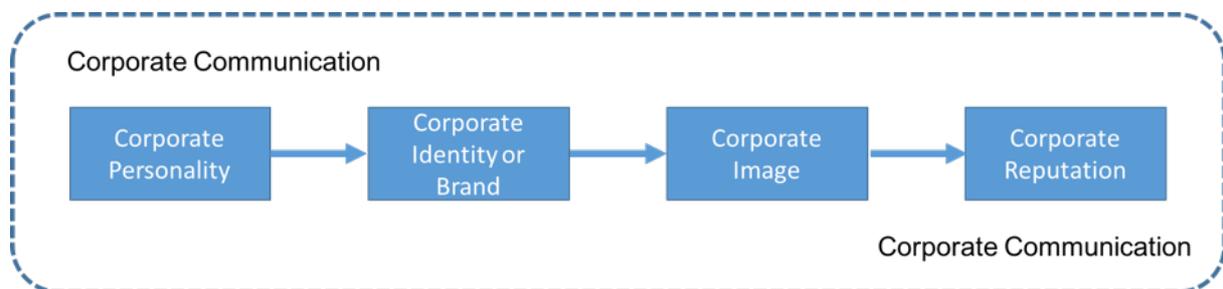


Figure 3 Creation Process of Brand Reputation (Adapted from Fill, 2009)

What can be seen from the two models is that identity is usually placed at the beginning of the reputation building process. This is because identity is the internal perspective of a company or brand, while image and reputation can be considered as mostly external ones (Fombrun & van Riel, 1997; Zarco da Camara, 2011). Similarly,

Urde & Greyser (2016) compare identity and reputation to two sides of the same coin – different perspectives can give different impressions of the same object. Furthermore, identity is made up of a brand's values, vision, and competences (Kapferer, 2012), answering the question "Who are we?" (Zarco da Camara, 2011). Brand identity is the sender, and is received by external stakeholders through communication. The interpretation of these messages results in a brand image (Kapferer, 2012), and ultimately, in reputation (Fill, 2009, cited in Roper & Fill, 2012). But what is the difference between image and reputation? Literature suggests that brand images are rather short-termed and individual, while reputation can be seen as a long-term phenomenon that is a collective accumulation of images over time (Chun, 2005; Fombrun & van Riel, 1997; Liehr-Gobbers & Storck, 2011; Urde & Greyser, 2016). And while a reputation may be a collection of different images, Bromley (2001) argues that an organization can also have different reputations at the same time, depending on the various interest groups. This means that it might have a good reputation with its customers, but a horrible one with its employees, for example.

The definition of interdependency between identity, image, and reputation was important to understand possible consequences of spoof illustrations. Seeing that reputation is the result of a multi-step process following identity and image, even a small impact on a brand's identity caused by a spoof can have a large effect on its reputation.

Creation of Reputation

The last section has illustrated the theoretical process that leads from identity to image and ultimately to reputation. But how is a reputation actually formed and established in an individual's mind? According to Bromley (2000), there are three levels of information processing that can contribute to forming an impression of a company: the primary level, which is based on personal experiences. Direct observation is naturally an important source for forming a reputation (Tennie, Frith & Frith, 2010), but occur relatively rarely compared to the other two levels (Roper & Fill, 2012). The secondary level includes word of mouth from relatives or friends, while the tertiary level encompasses the information gained through mass media. These last two levels are those where spoof illustrations can occur.

However, one negative piece of information will not immediately destroy a company's entire reputation. In fact, individuals will at first be unwilling to change their assessment of a company's reputation when they are exposed to negative information (Wartick, 1992). This is because reputation is not based on aggregation (Roper & Fill, 2012), but rather on the averaging principle, which was verified by Bennett and Gabriel (2001). They state that every single piece of information about a brand or company will be evaluated on its level of (un)-favorableness, and the resulting average of these will determine whether the overall reputation is positive or negative. Troutman and Shanteau (1976) compare this to mixing hot and a cold water which will turn into a liquid of intermediate temperature. Thus, establishing a reputational reservoir (Greyser, 2009) of favorable impressions will prevent a company from rapidly sliding into disaster in times of crisis (Greyser, 1999; Markwick & Fill, 1997). Thus, a single spoof might not do immediate harm. However, being constantly exposed to them online could paint a different picture, and attack this reservoir.

2.2 Crisis Management

The previous section has established the concept of reputation, evaluated the benefits of being perceived favorably by the public, showed the interdependence between identity, image, and reputation, and considered how a reputation is initially formed. But even the best approaches to reputation-building can face the immediate threat of failure when a company steers towards a crisis. The following part will thus summarize the academic literature on crisis research.

Fink (2002) uses the term "turning point" to define a crisis – it is a crucial turning point for better or worse, in a situation that has reached a critical phase. When thinking of a crisis, it is easy to reduce the phenomenon to a single isolated event. In reality, this is only the trigger leading to a time of uncertainty for the company and its stakeholders in the aftermath of this event (Ho & Hallahan, 2004). This can result in interference with the daily operations of business and pose a financial as well as reputational threat to the organization (Coombs, 2007; Fink, 2002). However, no two crises are alike. In fact, Greyser (2009) identifies nine categories of corporate brand crises that can occur. These range from classic ones, such as product failures, social responsibility gaps, or corporate misbehaviors, to less salient ones, for example executive or spokesperson

misbehavior, poor business results, or controversial ownerships. A further differentiation needs to be made in terms of the responsibility of the organization. According to Coombs (2007), there are three crisis clusters. First, the victim cluster, where the organization also fell victim to an external event, such as a natural disaster. Second, the accidental cluster, e.g. due to a technical fault. Finally, in the preventable cluster, the crisis stems from the organization knowingly placing people at risk. It is to be expected that spoof illustrations will mainly occur in the accidental and preventable cluster.

Phases of a Brand Crisis

As previously mentioned, a crisis is not just one single event, but is made up of several phases that can all affect the final outcome of the crisis (Roper & Fill, 2012). While there are many different models that attempt to define these phases, Roper & Fill (2012) found that they can all be broken down into three core stages: pre-impact, impact, and readjustment.

Before a crisis even breaks out, a company will be in the prodromal phase (Fink, 2002; Sturges, Carrell & Newsom, 1991). This is where issues management comes into play (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008) that should identify precursors to imminent crises (Sturges, Carrell & Newsom, 1991). This also includes measures of proactive planning, should it become apparent that an issue is starting to escalate (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). What follows is the “point of no return” (Fink, 2002, p.22): the acute crisis. This is the sudden trigger that will make the possibility of a crisis reality (Sturges, Carrell & Newsom, 1991). Arguably, this is the shortest phase of a crisis. When it comes to the time after the incident, Fink (2002) compares crisis to a disease, which could either turn out to be a 24-hour flu, or become chronic and linger for years, for example due to ongoing legal actions, media coverage or public outrage (Sturges, Carrell & Newsom, 1991). Here, of course, spoofs can also have a considerable effect on the duration of the phase. Sooner or later, a crisis will eventually be resolved, and after internally debriefing the events (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008), an organizations should be able to return to business-as-usual.

Reputation Management in a Crisis

By now, it has been established that a crisis can heavily affect a brand's reputation (cf. Coombs, 2007). But what factors determine how and to what extent a reputation will be damaged? Greyser (2009, p. 597) puts the concept of authenticity into the focus – or, to be more precise, “talking, being, staying” authentic and “defending” authenticity. Being and staying authentic is in line with Marconi (2002), who states that the most important aspect of reputation management is not only being honest with the stakeholders, but with oneself. Talking authentic refers to (post-) crisis communication, where an essential task is to be in control of the message (Fink, 2002). Otherwise, if messages from external stakeholders, and especially spoofs, dominate, authenticity will not be given. Finally, when it comes to defending authenticity, a term that Greyser (2009) calls reputational reservoir comes into play. This reservoir is a pool of favorable impressions that has been built over time. Similar to a bank account, the more reputational capital has been saved up, the more can be “spent” (Alsop, 2004), meaning that a company will be more likely to fully recover from a crisis (Roper & Fill, 2012). Analogously, in the event of a hurricane (i.e. a crisis), it will not suffice to tape the windows shut for a house to survive (Sturges, Carrell & Newsom, 1991). It needs to be built on a strong foundation – this is the reputational reservoir (Greyser, 2009).

2.3 Stakeholders in a Crisis

A central component in a brand crisis are undoubtedly a company's stakeholders. Not only is the reputation dependent on them, but the entire organizational existence is based on employees that create value, governments that provide a regulatory framework, and, probably most importantly, customers that buy the company's products. For this reason, the role of stakeholders in a crisis will now be evaluated.

Stakeholder Theory was prominently established by Freeman (1984), which states that stakeholders can be individuals or groups that are affected by the actions of an organization. While the focus in earlier times was on stockholders, stakeholders are nowadays a much more diverse collection of groups that are constantly growing bigger (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). This of course poses a challenge to organizations in a crisis, as any single action taken by it can trigger different responses from the various stakeholder groups (Savage, Dunkin & Ford, 2004). Boin and Lagadec (2000) suggest

that this escalation in stakeholder variety and the growing “inter-wiredness” between them results in a snowball effect. This increases the likelihood of stakeholders forming alliances against the company (cf. Greyser, 2009) and makes it harder for the organization to manage its relations with them in a crisis. This is reinforced by the fact that a crisis will rarely only affect one stakeholder group, but can usually result in layoffs of employees, financial losses for investors and even harm of consumers at the same time (McDonald, Sparks & Glendon, 2010).

Roles of Stakeholders

Not only are there different groups of stakeholders – such as customers, employees, or the media – but they can be classified further depending on the roles they assume regarding a crisis. Before a crisis even breaks out – i.e. in the issues management phase, as mentioned before – stakeholders can be categorized according to their stance on the respective issue and their level of importance to the company (Nutt & Backoff, 1992). The *problematic* and *antagonistic* stakeholders are those that oppose the company on an issue, whereas the former has negligible power over the organization and the latter thus poses the biggest threat in an issue. These are also the types of stakeholders that could create and share spoof illustrations. At the same time, the *low-priority* and *advocate* stakeholders are the two categories that support a company on an issue. Here, again, only the latter is really important, as the advocates have more power than the low-priority stakeholders (Roper & Fill, 2012).

While the types of stakeholders in an issue are straightforward and easily applicable, Pearson & Mitroff (1993) found that when an issue develops into a crisis, there are not less than seven different roles stakeholders can assume: rescuer, hero, victim, protestor, ally, enemy, and villain. As the very descriptive nature of these categories already suggests, every archetype stands in a different position to the organization in the crisis and thus also takes different actions to either support or harm it. For example, an enemy might have revealed the crisis in the first place, while the hero could be an organization that acts on behalf of the affected company (cf. Roper & Fill, 2012). While it is obviously practical to apply this framework to evaluate the various stakeholder groups, it must be kept in mind that those originally labeled as allies or rescuers, for example, can always decide to turn their back on the organization and prioritize their

own interests (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993). This is especially relevant when the relationship between organization and stakeholder is not particularly strong (Ulmer, 2001). At the same time, Pearson & Mitroff (1993) recommend to also evaluate one's own company on this framework to understand how it is perceived by the outside world.

Stakeholder Emotions

As Pearson and Clair (1998) put it, an essential task of crisis management is understanding what information and resources stakeholders have access to, how they will react to a crisis, and what actions they could take to exert a negative impact on the company. The relationship between an organization and its stakeholders is based on a "psychological contract" that defines the expectations between the parties. Are these expectations not met or even violated (e.g. during a crisis), the situation can lead to a perceived breach of this contract (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010).

To evaluate the degree of such a violation, stakeholders will need information. Stephens and Malone (2009) highlight that they are indeed on a constant hunt for more information in times of crisis, as this is known to be common behavior in a situation of uncertainty. However, as they are to some extent limited in their ability to gather information, it is not uncommon for stakeholders to fall back on heuristic acts of information-processing (Zyglidopoulos & Phillips, 1999). An example of this could be seen in the attribution model of Weiner (1980, cited in Coombs, 1995; Klein & Dawar, 2004) who states that people make judgments based on three dimensions. First, locus of control, which determines if the cause of a crisis stems from an internal or external source. Second, stability, i.e. whether the behavior that triggered the crisis is permanent or only temporary. And third, controllability, which looks at whether the cause was beyond the organization's control or not. If it is believed that a crisis has an internal locus, was controllable and stems from a stable behavior, stakeholders will assume that the company is responsible for it (Coombs, 1995). These three dimensions certainly also influence whether spoof illustrations are created or not. This is similar to the aforementioned classification of a crisis being either the act of an outside party, an accident, or a preventable occurrence, which will trigger different degrees of attributed responsibility (Coombs, 2007). At the same time, it must be

remembered that it is barely relevant if a company is objectively responsible for an event, but rather if it is perceived to be by the interpretation of the stakeholders (Benoit, 1997; Zyglidopoulos & Phillips, 1999).

The final judgment on what factors influenced a crisis can lead to strong emotions in the minds of the stakeholders, and eventually to actions (cf. Coombs & Holladay, 2005). The most cited emotional response is anger, but also anxiety, sympathy, schadenfreude, resentment, and sadness are mentioned as being possible reactions to a crisis (Coombs, Fediuk & Holladay, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2005; Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010; Jin & Pang, 2010; McDonald, Sparks & Glendon, 2010; Stephens & Malone, 2010). Unsurprisingly, anger and resentment are evoked when an organization is perceived to be responsible for a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2005; McDonald, Sparks & Glendon, 2010). It should be noted, however, that Fediuk, Coombs and Botero (2010) distinguish such an act of moral outrage between being generally angry that an incident has taken place regardless of the responsible actor, and anger directed towards the company. Schadenfreude, i.e. being happy that someone faces a crisis, is triggered when an organization has purposefully placed its stakeholders at risk (Coombs & Holladay, 2005). Fright and anxiety can be attributed to being overwhelmed with the situation and having to deal with uncertainty (Jin & Pang, 2010), while sympathy is often felt when a company is not believed to be responsible (McDonald, Sparks & Glendon, 2010). These emotions are not mutually exclusive, but can actually be felt simultaneously at different levels. For example, a stakeholder could experience a primary feeling of anger, with an underlying layer of anxiety (Jin & Pang, 2010).

Stakeholder Reactions

So how do these emotions lead to real-life reactions? Fediuk, Coombs & Botero (2010) list three possible directions: ignoring the faults and remaining inactive, engaging in confrontation to get an apology or be compensated, or retaliating. On a more concrete level, these can include ending the relationship, public protests, negative word-of-mouth, or product boycotts (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010). Anger has been shown to have an especially strong influence on negative word-of-mouth and purchase intention (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). However, the extent to which such a reaction

will be felt by the company is certainly dependent on the resources of the respective stakeholder, and the control he/she exerts on the organization (Savage, Dunkin & Ford, 2004). For example, the boycott by a big wholesale customer would be a bigger threat to the company's existence than by a small individual. Nonetheless, it is clear that any retaliatory action by a stakeholder can be costly for a company in crisis and needs to be carefully addressed (cf. Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010). As for spoof illustrations, they can be seen to fall into the confrontational and retaliatory categories.

What role does the online world play for these emotions and reactions? Maresh-Fuehrer and Smith (2016, p. 621), for example, point out that research in crisis communication reveals that the Internet is "facilitating both the spread and mitigation of crisis". This is caused by the occurrence of word-of-mouth in social media and facilitated by the simplification of "liking", "sharing" and "retweeting" of crisis related content (Pace, Balboni & Gistri, 2015). Moreover, an emotion-filled dialogue sets the overall emotional tone of a crisis, which is quickly spread across the entire web community and can influence the opinion of the general public (Brummette & Fussell Sisco, 2015). Ott and Theunissen (2015, p. 98) even go a step further and argue that a greater emotional impact of the audience is leading to a higher risk for a brand to be harmed in a crisis. While analyzing online comments, they explored that negative emotions (e.g. *anger* and *schadenfreude*) can harm the perception of a brand in a crisis and even change consumer behavior.

Generally, it can be said that online critique is often expressing more anti-corporate attitudes than positive or defending comments (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002). Moreover, word-of-mouth dynamics in social media can lead up to a specific form of brand "firestorms", where a brand is attacked by a huge amount of negative and emotional content (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2014). Since this is most likely to occur when a brand is in a crisis, social media content and especially the phenomenon of emotional online word-of-mouth can become really harmful for a brand in a crisis.

Figure 4 summarizes the cognitive model that leads from the trigger of a crisis to the stakeholders' reactions (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010). Special attention should be given to the two final steps of a model. Considering that moral outrage can come in

the form of spoof illustrations, it is thus to be expected that these pictures can also result in reputation damage.

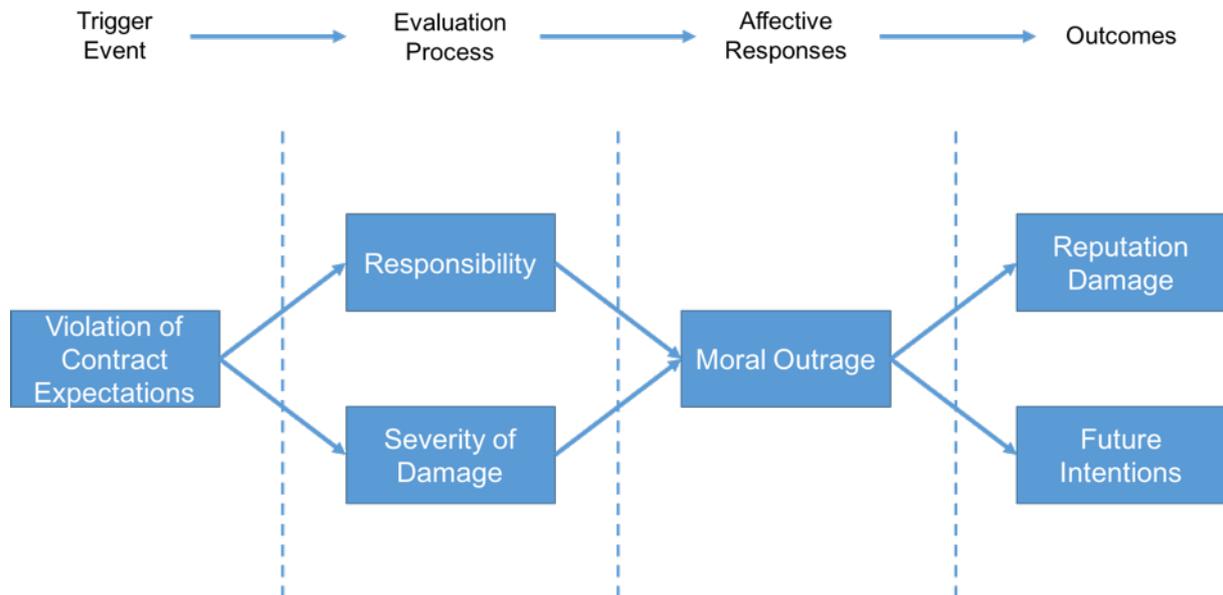


Figure 4 Stakeholder Reaction Model (Adapted from Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010)

2.4 Brand Crisis in the Online Sphere

The preceding section on stakeholder reactions has already introduced the thought that the Internet presents a brand crisis with additional challenges. By turning to these implications in the following section, the literature review will also move on from general considerations presented so far to look closer at those concepts that influence the phenomenon of spoof illustrations.

The Internet as a Facilitator in a Brand Crisis

The increase of Internet usage is one of the greatest challenges for marketing practice and changes the way business are communicating and managed radically (Bokor, 2014; González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). DiMaggio, Hargittai and Neuman (2001) describe the Internet as “the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval” (p. 307). Referring to blogs, wikis, podcasts and other powerful web tools, Richardson (2010, p. 1) specifies a more narrowed concept of “a collaborative medium, a place where we (could) all meet and read and

write". The Internet, and especially the appearance of peer media, such as blogs and social networks, eliminates geographic and time barriers and provides instant access to companies' information (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008).

Contrary to traditional mass media, the web is an engaging platform instilling transparency and two-way conversation where the audience is using their voice to express their own opinions publicly (Bokor, 2014). These changes accelerate the speed of information distribution and makes individual and local issues go public and global in just a few seconds (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Considering these characteristics, González-Herrero and Smith (2008) argue that the Internet gives a corporate crisis a new dimension that accelerates crisis content, critical comments (and thus also spoofs), and makes it more difficult to manage an organizational crisis.

Especially the huge increase of social networks allows the public to create, publish, share and discuss crisis related content and accelerates the crisis news cycle while breaking geographic boundaries (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Therefore, it is inevitable for all organizations to adapt their crisis communication strategies, in order to be able to manage a corporate crisis online (Bokor, 2014). All these arguments show that the Internet can be seen as a facilitator of a corporate crisis, while user-generated content (represented as online spoof illustrations in this thesis) is extensively accelerating the spread of critical public opinions towards a brand in a crisis. The following section will therefore address the possible effects towards the brand values of an enterprise in crisis.

Online Brand Destruction in Times of a Reputational Crisis

Critical opinions that are concerning a corporation in a crisis, such as spoof illustrations, might have an effect on a brand's reputation. As mentioned before, brand reputation is difficult to manage, as this construct consists of "soft" variables (e.g. reliability, credibility or trustworthiness). These variables can be questioned online by the public, who sometimes reveal facts that organizations would prefer to hide (Greyser, 2009). Especially in a crisis, consumers want companies to communicate honestly and openly and are using the Internet to challenge, discuss and question an affected brand (Pace, Balboni & Gistri, 2015). Addressing this context further, Pace,

Balboni and Gistri (2015) highlight two factors that make a crisis more harmful for a brand today. First, stakeholders are reactive and sensitive toward corporate crises and highly demand transparency and clarification. Second, stakeholder participate more as an active brand co-creator and generate content criticizing and attacking a brand on the web (Hatch & Schultz, 2010; Vallaster & von Wallpach, 2013).

Bokor (2014, p. 44) discusses such “brand destruction” in the online sphere as a concept which addresses “some kind of consumer revenge on companies”. The Internet, with its weblogs and social media platforms, provides an adjuvant surrounding for both customers and business partners to tackle and damage the brand in question. While brand destruction normally occurs either through incidental acts caused by a company itself, or by a strategic act of a competitor, Bokor (2014) outlines the phenomenon of an “online brand destruction effect”. Here, customers or business partners are attacking a brand via critical online communication. In his paper he even goes so far to define consumers on social media platforms as a “critical mass” that consists of “civic warriors with strong weapon in their armory” (p. 40). Arguably, the opportunity of producing, sharing and discussing self-created online content, in which a brand is criticized or even attacked, is used particularly when a brand is in a reputational crisis.

Furthermore, Pace, Balboni and Gistri (2015) argue that stakeholders can amplify and extend crises with user-generated content that can even lead into a change on brand attitude and behavior of other consumers. Creating digital content which addresses a brand in a crisis, can “form a barrage of reactions, comments, analyses, and parodies” (Pace, Balboni & Gistri, 2015, p. 3). The finding that user-generated content is more likely to be emotional (Pace, Balboni & Gistri, 2015), together with the fact that highly aroused negative online content is more likely to become viral (Berger & Milkman, 2012), clearly shows the uncontrollable harm that derives from such content. However, it has to be mentioned that online brand destruction activities can even have positive effects on brands, since they provide free web presence and data aggregation, even if the overall context is negative (Bokor, 2014).

2.5 Online Tools for Brand Criticism and Parody

Knowing that a brand can be harmed by highly aroused emotional content that is negatively addressing a brand in a crisis online, the argument that parodic illustrations can have an impact on a brands' reputation has been strengthened. Therefore, the following section will address different movements and tools that external stakeholders are using in order to criticize a brand online.

Brand-Critical Movements

As discussed before, with the invention of the Internet, branding faces a dramatic change from "long-term asset cultivation to fueling short-term cultural phenomena", where brand managers need to reflect public opinion and defend their brand when being criticized online and offline (Fournier & Avery, 2011, p. 206). External stakeholder criticism can vary from more humorous or sarcastic approaches to rather serious anti-corporate movements. While presenting current research findings, the following section will highlight different types of online consumer criticism, and thus also guide the discussion towards the object of study: spoof illustrations.

Online anti-branding is a rather aggressive social movement of consumer activism on the Internet, where anti-brand communities represent a movement against capitalism and corporate globalizations (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). The sometimes called "marketplace rebellions" are attacking brands via electronic word-of-mouth communication and are creating entire communities and platforms (e.g. anti-brand websites) that are constructed against brands (Williams & Kolbas, 2015). Exploring this phenomenon further, Yazıcıoğlu and Borak (2012) analyzed the role of social media and how online discussions co-create the meanings surrounding a brand. This study reveals the interesting finding that not only members of the anti-branding movement are exposed to online anti-brand content. It should rather be seen as an "an ideological element of consumption processes in people's daily lives", since such content can be quickly disseminated to all consumers via the Internet (p .561).

A similar phenomenon is called "brandalism". This is a movement whose "aim is to rebel against the visual assault of media giants and advertising moguls who have a stranglehold over messages and meaning in our public spaces" (Smith-Anthony &

Groom, 2015, p. 1). David (2016) discusses the occurrence of brand vandalism during the 2016 United Nations climate talks in Paris, where the brand of the corporate sponsor VW was attacked. Driven by the media buzz of the VW Dieselgate crisis, brand vandals replaced VW billboard ads in Paris with the slogan: "Now that we've been caught we're trying to make you think we care about the environment". Taylor (2016) states that "brand vandalism" is not a new phenomenon, but with the advent of social media and other digital tools, the outrage and effectiveness of such activism can cause significant harm towards the attacked brand. Here it is interesting to see that the influence of the physical posters that were replaced was tiny compared to the outreach of digitalized photographs in the online sphere.

Furthermore, the appearance of "culture jamming" in combination with "subvertising" needs to be highlighted. Culture jamming is driven by the idea that advertising is a propaganda device for accomplishing special interests (Lasn, 1999). Since the most targeted medium of culture jammers is advertising, they often create so called "subvertisings" (Önal, 2005), which is a portmanteau of "to subvert" (i.e. to overthrow) and advertising. According to Smith-Anthony and Groom (2015, p. 30) subvertising refers to "the practice of making spoofs or parodies of corporate and political advertisements in order to make a statement". This form usually involves artwork in adapting an old or designing a new advertising in order to "disrupt mainstream media constructs" and "unveil corporations' hidden agendas" (Chung & Kirby, 2009, p. 35).

Besides these rather aggressive brand criticism approaches, there are more sarcastic and humorous ways external stakeholders are criticizing corporations. One example would be the use of brand parody. Parody is a form of art, in which a particular work is mimicked through the use of ironic, humorous, or satiric imitation (Sabri & Michel, 2014). These more humorous approaches can be used for brand criticism in several media formats mimicking different situations. One common type of brand parody is parody advertising as "advertising that is an imitation or spoof of a common and well-known situation [...] in an attempt to be humorous through ridicule [...]" (Govoni, 2004, p. 154 in Villarreal, Thota & Blozis, 2012).

All in all, it can be said that there are several movements and ways external stakeholder can criticize a brand in a more direct and sinister, or indirect and humorous way. They are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of Brand Critical Movements

Movement	Explanation
Anti-Branding	... is a rather aggressive social movement against capitalism and corporate globalization (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).
Brandalism	... is a movement that “aim is to rebel against the visual assault of media giants and advertising moguls who have a stranglehold over messages and meaning in our public spaces” (Smith-Anthony & Groom, 2015, p. 1).
Culture Jamming	... is driven by the idea that advertising is a propaganda device for accomplishing special interests (Lasn, 1999).
Brand Parody	... is a form of art, in which a particular brand is mimicked through the use of ironic, humorous, or satiric imitation (Sabri & Michel, 2014).

Bokor (2014, p. 43) questions in which way a brand can be criticized online, highlighting four “seizure of power methods” external stakeholders can use: (1) an opinion leader attacks a company online, (2) a gate-keeper (such as a former employee) attacks an organization online, (3) a more or less organized group attacks against a company and (4) online memes about products or services confront brands. This study is focusing on the phenomenon of the fourth “seizure of power method”, since it is addressing online criticism via images and illustrations. Therefore, the following section will discuss the occurrence and use of such illustrations and will demonstrate current research findings.

Visual Brand Criticism

Hoetzlein (2012) analyzes crisis illustrations in the context of visual communication of the Fukushima accident in 2011. Even if the study does not directly address the brand behind this incident, it reveals general findings on visual communication. She indicates that visual depiction is always part in a conflict and crisis. Situational or journalistic photography, besides other images, can appeal to the viewer, drive attention to the portrayed event and can stimulate and influence the viewer's emotions. Furthermore, Hoetzlein (2012, p. 13) highlights that crisis messages and images may be sometimes excessively or even unreliable, since they can be "decontextualized, translated across cultural boundaries or manipulated by the news media itself". The viewer is simply left behind and has to be careful in interpreting crisis visual context by themselves.

Apart from journalistic photographs, online memes represent an illustration format that is usually generated by users in a crisis (Rintel, 2013). Crisis memes are "the ghoulish and satirical posts that spread through social media concurrently with serious journalistic reportage" and are mostly user generated productions based on online templates of popular online image macros (Rintel, 2013, p. 253). Vickery (2014) conducts her research about the appropriation of such online macro-image memes. Findings reveal that the anonymity of web users allows an easy creation and adaption of more or less appropriate online memes, which stimulate visibility and attention on several web platforms (cf. Vickery, 2014). Furthermore, these findings demonstrate the unpredictability and uncertainty of web user co-created images.

Rintel (2013, p. 255) addresses this issue further and criticizes the use of crisis memes for "not being reasoned discourse, difficult to control, reinforcing cultural divides and making use of copyrighted content without permission and in ways that the copyright holder may not wish". Since such visuals may harm copyrights content, a general legal consideration of online illustrations needs to be questioned. Regardless of the motivation or format, Ramsey (2010) analyzes online brand portrayals from a legal point of view. She discusses trademark infringements which are disclosed by a third party and may harm the markholder's reputation. The disclosure of untruthful, offensive or inappropriate information including an unauthorized impersonation of a brand does not necessarily follow the free right of speech. However, when a

markholder is not displayed in a confusing way and the “third party is simply using the mark in parody, satire, criticism, comparative advertising, news reporting, or other commentary” courts will allow certain unauthorized uses of marks, while protecting the right for freedom of expression (Ramsey, 2010, p. 860). This argument is supported by Smith-Anthony and Groom (2015) who claim that the general legal consideration of social commentary, satire and parody rather supports citizen’s rights than markholders’ property rights in recent years, which puts corporate organizations and brand owners in a difficult legal position. Reflecting on those arguments, most spoof illustrations portraying a brand in a crisis can thus be considered legal, since they address the context of a crisis in a clearly parodic way.

Continuing the discussion about online spoof illustrations, the phenomenon of political cartoons and their impact towards political image and brand should be addressed. Bal et al. (2009) developed a theoretical framework especially for political caricatures to demonstrate how and why political brands are “satirized, spoofed, caricatured or mocked in a particular way” (p. 236). This theoretical framework was developed considering literature on caricature and satire. The framework shows that brands need three characteristics (sympathy, gap and differentiation) to be cartooned. *Sympathy* stands for the premise that a brand can be identified and related to. *Gap* defines the requirement of having a dissonance between the perceived image. And *differentiation* presumes the fact that a brand needs to have physical or ideological characteristics to differentiate from other brands or a given context. Only if all these three characteristics are provided, a parody or spoof caricature can be created (Bal et al., 2009). Berthon and Pitt (2012) develop the framework of Bal et al. (2009) further, while applying general theory of spoof advertising and literature of caricature, satire and burlesque to the framework. In this paper, they address the central question of “which brands are most at risk of being parodied, and why?” (p. 88). Using the framework of Bal et al., (2009) they apply the three necessary conditions to successfully create caricatures and spoofs of brands. Applying those findings towards the context of this research, it can be stated that all three characteristics are existent in online spoof illustrations. *Sympathy* is given by the awareness of a brand logo, product and name. *Gap* is reflected in the image decrease caused by the crisis which leads to a gap between brand image and brand identity. And *differentiation* is created by media exposure and given by a number of unique attributes connected towards the brand and the related

crisis. Therefore, it can be said that if a corporation is in a reputational crisis, its brand is facing a high risk of being portrayed through spoof illustrations.

Bokor (2014) addresses this issue and calls for future research in observing the phenomenon of critical online visuals, to be able to understand online crisis communication and its impact better. Furthermore, he questions if online illustrations have an impact towards the portrayed brand value. This leads to the final part of the literature review, which will discuss research findings on the impact of brand parodies towards stakeholder attitudes.

Brand Parody and Its Influence on Stakeholder Attitudes

Fuelled by the Internet, the rapid development of new technologies, and the characteristics of social media platforms, brand parodies can now be easily created, published and distributed by amateurs and are no longer limited to professional artists and entertainers for commercial mass media (Bal et al., 2009; Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). Such user-generated content presents potential damage to brands, especially since companies cannot influence and control their appearance (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). Since there is no agreed definition of parody and differences to satires, mash-ups and other formats are not evident, Stern (1991) notes that parody narratives are “ambiguous hybrid forms”.

A hybrid form of brand parody is hijacked advertising, which takes a real ad and manipulates it. It is used in a study of Villarreal, Thota and Blozis (2012) analyzing the impact on viewers' attitudes towards a portrayed brand. In a quasi-experiment, 274 students were exposed to one of three different online videos (original corporate brand advertising, a hijacked-humorous version of the ad, or a hijacked-negative version of the ad). Before and after being exposed to the videos participant's brand attitudes are measured. While the original brand ad caused a positive attitude effect, not only hijacked-negative ads, but even hijacked-humorous ads had a negative impact on the viewer's attitudes towards the portrayed brand. This shows that even humorous perceived user-generated content could be harmful towards the target brand.

Sabri & Michel (2014) take a different approach by looking at the phenomenon of negative advertising parodies created by amateurs and spread through social media. They argue that negative parody ads will affect not only consumer perceptions towards the portrayed brand, but will also affect consumer behavior. Their findings reveal that parodies with strong claim credibility and humorous appeal represent the most harmful parodies and can affect attitudes and purchase intentions negatively towards the parodied brand.

Parguel and Lunardo (2010) however, explore different findings. Using netnography, they analyze YouTube comments of anti-tobacco brand spoof advertisements. In general, anti-brand spoof ads can be seen as hijacked advertisements using irony or sarcasm to make an official ad look ridiculous or distasteful (Parguel & Lunardo, 2010). The results of this exploratory study show that anti-tobacco brand spoof ads generate more positive emotions (e.g. fun, laughing) than negative emotions (e.g. dislike and fear). Thus, such spoof ads seem to be less efficient in changing brand attitude, since viewers pay more attention to the humorousness of the spoof than to the relevant anti-brand arguments.

Finally, Vanden Bergh et al. (2011) use a more general approach and attempt to investigate key dimensions of user-generated parodies of TV ads. In this exploratory research, the discovered dimensions of ad parody are then related to viewers' attitudes towards the targeted brand and the parody ad itself. Analyzing several social media spoof ads, the four dimensions humor, mockery, truth and offensiveness were identified. Findings reveal a positive influence of the dimension humor and a negative influence of offensiveness on the attitude towards the presented parodies. However, no significant relationship between those parody dimensions on the perceptions towards the portrayed brand can be found. They reason this finding with the argument that consumers might be able to distinguish between an official brand message and a user-generated parody (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). While their study shows some similarities to the topic of this thesis, it solely focuses on videos instead of pictures, it is not investigated in the context of a crisis, and only looks at parodies of existing brand material instead of original creations. These points will be expanded upon in the process of this thesis.

Table 2 gives an overview of the results reported on visual brand criticism and spoofs that were presented above. Reflecting on these contradicting findings, Sabri and Michel (2014) point out that further research needs to be conducted to analyze the harmfulness of negative user-generated parodies towards the targeted brand. In today's business environment, brand manager need to consider and react towards parody and spoofing of products and services, since they are increasingly common (Bal et al., 2009). Not only for brand managers but also for academics and researchers it is important to understand "what particular brands might be targeted, what about them might be spoofed, and how this will happen" (Bal et al., 2009, p. 236). These can be seen as the main considerations that motivate the research conducted in this thesis.

Table 2 Central Findings of Literature on Brand Criticism and Parody

Source	Research Object	Findings
Hoetzlein (2012)	Crisis Photography	Crisis visuals appeal to the viewer, drive attention to the portrayed event and can stimulate and influence the viewer's emotions.
David (2016)	Subvertisements	The effect of physical replaced posters is little compared to digitalized online images.
Rintel (2013) & Vickery (2014)	Online Memes	Online memes can easily be created and adapted by web users and stimulate visibility and attention on several web platforms.
Bal et al. (2009)	Political Cartoons	Brands need three characteristics (sympathy, gap and differentiation) to be satirized, spoofed, caricatured or mocked.
Parguel and Lunardo (2010)	Critical Social Media Comments	Anti-tobacco brand spoof ads generate more positive emotions (e.g. fun, laughing) than negative emotions (e.g. dislike and fear).
Vanden Bergh et al. (2011)	Parodies of TV Advertising	There is a positive influence of humor and a negative influence of offensiveness on the attitude towards the presented parodies.
Villarreal, Thota and Blozis (2012)	Hijacked Advertising	Both hijacked-negative and hijacked-humorous ads have a negative impact on the viewer's attitudes towards the targeted brand.

Figure 5 summarizes the theories presented in this literature review. It shall illustrate the connections between the concepts presented, and serve as a theoretical reference for the research conducted in this study, which will be presented in the following chapters.



Figure 5 Summary of Literature Review

3 CASE SECTION

Before any research or analysis was conducted, it was necessary to identify and select cases of brand crises that are appropriate to study the phenomenon of spoof illustrations. This chapter will thus present the reasoning for the choices made and give short descriptions of each crisis.

3.1 Screening and Cross-Sectional Design

To define best suitable cases in order to answer the research questions, several corporate crises were screened and a variety of keywords and search engines were tested. The annually released crisis review of The Holmes Report (2016), which ranks the biggest corporate crises every year, was used as a basis of reference to explore the appearance and variety of spoof illustrations portraying different crisis situations. Since the central object of this thesis is spoof illustrations that appear online, the Internet with its vast visual content was defined as the overall object of analysis. Former business research shows that websites and their web page content deliver considerable sources of data that could be used for both quantitative and qualitative analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

As a matter of course, it is important to find web page material that best facilitates the research purpose. Since the large amount of data contained online is publicly accessible, but widely disseminated, the use of search engines is a highly desirable tool to select and analyze website content (Yu-Chai et al., 2014). Nevertheless, it has to be recognized that using search engines limits the findings to just a portion of available web content and might lead to a biased sample. However, a deliberate choice and variety of search keywords are important factors for obtaining more appropriate search results (Rodriguez & Asoro, 2012). Furthermore, the fact that websites (and especially search results) are continually changing, is limiting the reproducibility of analysis and replication of data selection. The rapid growth and speed of change in the web commands researchers for an explicit track of data selection and source clarification (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Certainly, the usage of an image search engine is the most appropriate and convenient method to explore the phenomenon of online spoof illustrations that appear in a specific context (Bryman &

Bell, 2011). Therefore, the data and case selection process was conducted sensitive towards the aforementioned issues and limitations.

A first screening process showed that different types of corporate crises reveal different types of online illustrations which may affect the reputation of a brand differently as well. Since this variation of illustration effects cannot be explored by conducting a single case study, the decision was taken to analyze more than one reputational crisis. Reflecting on the aforementioned criticism of search engine data collection, more than one keyword and time frame had to be used to prevent creating a biased sample. Therefore, some crisis situations should be rather deeply analyzed looking at a higher number of search engine result pages. In order to produce general findings of a phenomenon, it is necessary to compare and contrast the findings deriving from each of the cases (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In fact, the most convenient methodological approach for this research purpose was a cross-sectional design focusing deeply on a few corporate crises. “A cross-sectional design entails the collection of data on more than one case and at a single point in time in order to collect a body of quantitative or quantifiable data in connection with two or more variables, which are then examined to detect patterns of association” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 53). This research design allows to reflect both the uniqueness of each case and the commonalities across different cases (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

3.2 Case Selection

Because this research is based on an explorative approach, it was important to define major corporate crisis cases, where a large number and variety of different spoof illustrations are existent and accessible online. This is in line with Stake (1995), who states that the primary selection criteria of a case should be based on the “anticipation of the opportunity to learn”. As discussed before, significant learning for this research purpose will derive from collective cases that will be analyzed jointly to explore a phenomenon (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Thus, considering the screening process and the discussed cross-sectional design circumstances, three crises that were all ranked as the largest crisis of their respective years (The Holmes Report, 2016) were selected as empirical cases for this study: BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill (2010), Barclays LIBOR scandal (2012) and the Volkswagen “Dieselgate” (2015). This decision was

based on the fact of anticipating variation in the existence and appearance of spoof illustrations, different crisis triggers, the possibility to define particular crisis keywords that can be used as search terms, and different time frames (2010, 2012, 2015) to avoid temporal influences. Since it is important to understand the context of spoof illustrations, the three defined corporate crises will be elaborated first.

3.3 Case Descriptions

In order for the reader to understand references and situations that are addressed in the spoof illustrations used in this thesis, short descriptions about the events of each crisis will be given. These shall only be seen as short introductions to each case rather than complete summaries.

BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill (2010)

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico, which was licensed by the company BP (British Petroleum), exploded and sank. 11 workers died because of this incident (Harlow, Brantley & Harlow, 2011). However, it is not only the casualties that have brought the company under great scrutiny following this incident. After the platform sank, oil spilled out of its gusher, which BP was not able to stop for 87 days. It was eventually capped on July 15, 2010 (Morgan et al., 2016). During this timeframe, an estimated 4.9 million barrels of oil was released into the Gulf of Mexico, polluting the coasts of US-states Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill was thus 20 times larger than the Exxon Valdez spill (Morgan et al., 2016). Not only were countless birds and aquatic wildlife killed (Muralidharan, Dillistone & Shin, 2011), this also resulted in substantial economic deficits for the affected regions, especially for the tourism and fishing industry (Harlow, Brantley & Harlow, 2011). BP, who took the main responsibility for the incident, was accused of implementing faulty safety measures, conducting an inadequate amount of maintenance, and violating environmental laws (Muralidharan, Dillistone & Shin, 2011; Safford, Ulrich & Hamilton, 2012). The company's image subsequently fell to an all-time low (Muralidharan, Dillistone & Shin, 2011).

Barclays LIBOR Scandal (2012)

The London Interbank Offered Rate (LIBOR) is a daily published index that serves as a benchmark for various financial instruments, such as swaps, options, and futures (Ashton & Christophers, 2015). Every day, selected experts (“submitters”) from a range of international banks submit their well-informed and honest estimations of interest rates over different time periods and currencies. These are averaged and then published as the current LIBOR (McConnell, 2013). Seeing that contracts that are fixed to the LIBOR are worth approximately \$300 to \$800 trillion (HM Treasury, 2012), even slight movements of the index can have a significant cumulative effect. In June 2012, Barclays was fined by authorities of the United Kingdom and the United States because it was revealed that some of the company’s submitters had deliberately given false estimates. This was instigated by traders working at Barclays, who hoped that such slight deviations of the submitters’ estimates (and thus on the LIBOR) would have a positive effect on their swaps and futures contracts (Ashton & Christophers, 2015). Thus, they took benefit from manipulating a tool that is supposed to be accurate and neutral. While it was later discovered that similar incidents occurred in other banks as well (McConnell, 2013), Barclays remained the bank most associated with the LIBOR scandal.

Volkswagen “Dieselgate” (2015)

On September 18, 2015, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released information stating that German car manufacturer Volkswagen (VW) had violated the federal Clean Air Act (Cue, 2015). This was the result of investigations that dated back to May 2014, when the EPA initially informed Volkswagen of discrepancies between emission test conducted in the laboratory and on the road. At that time, the company claimed it to be a software issue, and recalled 500,000 cars (Cue, 2015). However, discrepancies continued to occur, leading to the aforementioned EPA statement on September 2015. VW eventually admitted that from 2009 to 2015, employees installed “defeat devices” in Volkswagen diesel vehicles (Trope & Ressler, 2016). This means that NOx emissions of more than 11 million cars were 15 to 30 times higher in real-life usage than in laboratory testing (Cue, 2015), thus clearly and knowingly violating the legislation “Clean Air Act” (Trope & Ressler, 2016). The crisis sparked severe public outrage, especially because it turned out to

be a large act of dishonesty by engineers, their supervisors, and maybe even higher officials of a company that was highly regarded and trusted (Trope & Ressler, 2016). Furthermore, Volkswagen violated its own core values (especially “reliability” and “responsibility”) and has thus weakened the brand substantially (Gudacker, Engeln & Eichinger, 2015).

4 METHODOLOGY

After describing the cases selected for this study, this chapter will present the methodological approach and research perspective of this study. First of all, the research philosophy and research strategy will be defined. Moreover, the research design will be presented, which was chosen in order to explore the phenomenon of spoof illustrations and to quantify their impact on a brand's reputation.

4.1 Research Philosophy

The first step in approaching the research question is the decision on the ontological and epistemological standpoints that the research process will be based on. This choice has important consequences on the collection and analysis of the empirical data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). To come to such a decision, it is without doubt important to take the research question and the derived empirical material that is needed to answer this question into consideration.

It can be said that all elements of this research can be broken down to one basic object of study: the change of attitudes. This is because this thesis investigates the effect of spoof illustrations on a brand's reputation, which is highly influenced by the customers' attitude towards the company (Roper & Fill, 2012). Seeing that attitudes are highly personal, and can vary from individual to individual, it will be sensible to approach the topic from an ontological perspective that is closer to the nominalist than realist end of the spectrum. The latter states that phenomenon are constructed externally and that there is a definitive existence of facts that can be uncovered. The former, however, suggests that there is no "one truth" and that everything we see is socially constructed and in a constant transformation (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). More precisely, this thesis will take a relativist stance, meaning that facts and truth are not necessarily given, but rather depend on the viewpoint of the observer (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012).

As the following section about research strategy will show, this thesis will pursue a mixed-method approach. For this reason, a traditional and exclusive epistemological decision between positivism (using objective and independent methods) and

interpretivism (subjective and explanatory approaches) will not do this research justice (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). This is reinforced by the general perception that positivism is the epistemological paradigm of quantitative research, while interpretivism is associated with qualitative methods (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Rather, this thesis will follow the epistemological stance of pragmatism, which allows for a mixed method concept (Cameron, 2011; Hall, 2013). Pragmatism is defined as “a problem solving, action-oriented inquiry process based on commitment to democratic values and progress” (Greene & Hall, 2010, cited in Cameron, 2011, p. 102). This will thus help the study to use those methods that are best suited to answer the questions raised in this thesis (i.e. what are spoof illustrations, and how do they affect a brand’s reputation?) and will not be restricted by an arguably outdated war between the paradigms (cf. Hall, 2013). Based on the defined research philosophy stances, the next section will discuss the research strategy of the paper.

4.2 Research Strategy

As already put forward in the introduction, research on the topic of online spoof illustrations in general, and their consequences on the reputation of a brand in particular, have only been sparsely studied before. This means that this study will pioneer in unknown territory, and can thus be considered to be of an exploratory nature. Exploratory studies are conducted to find and develop principles and measurements that can be applied to a certain phenomenon. This is often done by looking for patterns that emerge from the data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). While exploratory research is an imperative first phase in the investigation of any object of study, it needs to be remembered that it can lack an appropriate degree of generalizability (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2011). This will certainly need to be considered during the course of this thesis.

The “Research Philosophy” section introduced the ontological and epistemological considerations applied in this study. Also because of its exploratory nature, the relativist and pragmatic stance of this research will mean that many different factors, viewpoints, and sources of empirical data will be considered to get satisfactory answers to the questions raised. For these reasons, it is appropriate to conduct a mixed-method approach that combines qualitative and quantitative aspects. More

specifically, this thesis will follow an “exploratory sequential mixed method”. In this procedure, one starts with a qualitative method, looking to build or identify an instrument that can be used in the subsequent quantitative phase. There, the instrument will be tested and applied to a larger sample of respondents (Creswell, 2014). For this thesis, this means that the qualitative phase should help to achieve a basic understanding of the spoof illustrations. The goal is to come up with a tool that allows a categorization and classification of these visuals to discover nuances and differences between them that might influence the perception of the illustrations. In the quantitative phase, it will then be tested whether and what influence the different categories of spoofs exert on the reputation of the affected brands.

A few arguments for and against the utilization of a mixed method approach need to be addressed. Blending qualitative and quantitative methods has only increased in popularity in recent times and is thus not free of controversy (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A recurring topic is that of the ontological and epistemological incompatibilities, which was already mentioned above. However, Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 619) state that “the connection between research strategy, on the one hand, and epistemological and ontological commitments, on the other, is not deterministic”. Furthermore, both the pragmatic epistemological and the relativist ontological stance are already moderate manifestations of their respective dimensions that allow for a mixed methodology.

Another point of criticism is that qualitative and quantitative approaches simply deliver different types of data, which will need to be aligned carefully (Creswell, 2014). However, not only will access to both types of data lead to a stronger and more comprehensive understanding of the question at hand, qualitative research also helps in providing hypotheses and measurements that can be used and tested in the quantitative phase (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Creswell, 2014; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). It was already mentioned that this factor is a strong reason for the use of mixed methods in this study.

Finally, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012) argue that a mix of qualitative and quantitative procedures increases the validity and generalizability of the results. Seeing that a lack of generalizability was a consequence related to the exploratory nature of the study, the mixed method will help to decrease this concern. Of course,

this advantage is only valid as long as the researcher is versed in both qualitative and quantitative research designs (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). As this study is conducted by not one, but two researchers, who additionally have previously specialized in qualitative and quantitative research respectively, this too will not pose a problem in this research study. The following section will describe the research design that was derived from the defined research strategy.

4.3 Research Design: A Multi-Phase Study

As mentioned before, spoof illustrations, to date, have not been subject of brand reputation or crisis management research. Thus, little is known about their characteristics and their effects on the perception towards a brand's reputation, especially when a brand is portrayed in the aftermath of a reputational crisis. To be able to study the impact of such illustrations, it is important to resolve the lack of research and explore and determine the characteristics of spoof illustrations beforehand. Therefore, a multi-phase study was chosen, ranging from explorative research (collecting illustrations and investigating the phenomenon) over to qualitative grounded theory approaches (defining specific characteristics and developing a conceptual framework) to finally quantitative data collection (quantifying the developed framework and measuring possible impacts on a brand's reputation). An overview of the methodological multi-phase approach is illustrated in Table 3. The following sections will describe the four phases of this research design in detail.

Table 3 Overview of Methodological Multi-Phase Approach

Phase 1	Exploration of phenomenon and collection of online spoof illustrations <i>(3 major reputational crisis x 3 search keywords x 6 time frames =513 detected spoofs)</i>
Phase 2	Investigation and determination of online spoof illustration characteristics <i>(Conducting structuralist semiotic reduction analysis on collected visuals)</i>
Phase 3	Development of reputational spoof illustration framework <i>(Grounded theory approach, verification of dimensions by attribute collection)</i>
Phase 4	Quantification of framework dimensions and brand reputation impact <i>(online survey, two real reputational crisis cases with eight spoof illustrations each)</i>

Phase 1: Collection of Spoof Illustrations

To explore this phenomenon, a variety of online spoof illustrations portraying the three selected crisis situations had to be collected. Since there is an enormous amount of images on the web, effective image retrieval techniques needed to be used in order to find images that assist to answer the research purpose (Yu-Chai et al., 2014). Considering the advantages and disadvantages discussed in a review of image search engines (JISC Digital Media, 2008), the web search engine *Google Images* was chosen to screen and collect spoof illustrations. Using a search engine like *Google Images* offered a great opportunity to gain an overview of visuals being displayed on a variety of different websites and mimicked the way people would naturally search for information and images online (cf. Rodriguez & Asoro, 2012).

The collection of spoof illustrations was conducted daily for ten consecutive days (March 18 through 27, 2016) using three keywords and six different time frames per crisis. The keywords were developed while screening the outcome of the respective search result pages and mainly constituted of the brand name combined with the words “crisis” or “scandal”, as well as specific crisis keywords or user-generated hashtags (e.g. “Dieselgate”). The date ranges (1 week, 4 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year and 2 years after the crisis appearance) allowed to track the occurrence and variation of different spoof illustrations over time as well as decrease the threat of creating a biased sample by increasing the number of search result pages. The application of three keywords and six time frames, while analyzing the first 100 images of each search result page, meant that 1800 visuals portraying the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill (2010) and the Barclays LIBOR scandal (2012) were viewed. In the case of Volkswagen Dieselgate (2015) only 1200 visuals were inspected, since the incident appeared only a little more than half a year before the data collection.

During the collection process, only visuals that clearly portrayed the brand in a critical or parodic crisis context were added to the empirical data base. Duplicates were excluded. Photographs that exclusively showed top managers, politicians or other actors as well as information graphics (e.g. infographics, bar graphs, pie charts, stock market diagrams, etc.) were not included. Due to the rapid change of web content and

dynamic algorithms of search engine results, all possible data information was tracked, including search information (search date, used keyword and selected time frame), reference clarification (image source URL and web page source URL), context description (publisher, type of website and context) as well as illustration descriptions (published date, type of visual, format and name).

Overall 4800 visuals were screened and a total of 513 spoof illustrations were detected. These 513 visuals formed the empirical data base of the thesis and were used as fundamental basis for all methodological applications. A detailed overview of the outcome of the collection process can be found in Table 4.²

Table 4 Overview of Data Collection Process

3 Corporate Crises	BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill (2010)	Barclays LIBOR Scandal (2012)	Volkswagen Dieselgate (2015)
3 Keywords	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. BP Crisis 2. BP Oil Spill 3. BP Deepwater Horizon 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Barclays Crisis 2. Barclays Scandal 3. Barclays LIBOR 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Volkswagen Crisis 2. Volkswagen Scandal 3. Dieselgate
5 Time Frames (1 week, 4 weeks, 3 months, 6 months, 1 year and 2 years)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 20.04.10 - 27.04.10 2. 28.04.10 - 20.05.10 3. 21.05.10 - 20.07.10 4. 21.07.10 - 20.10.10 5. 21.10.10 - 20.04.11 6. 21.04.11 - 20.04.12 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 27.06.12 - 03.07.12 2. 04.07.12 - 27.07.12 3. 28.07.12 - 27.09.12 4. 28.09.12 - 27.12.12 5. 28.12.12 - 27.06.13 6. 28.06.13 - 27.06.14 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 18.09.15 - 25.09.15 2. 26.09.15 - 16.10.15 3. 17.10.15 - 18.12.15 4. 19.12.15 - 18.03.16
Visuals Viewed	1800 Images	1800 Images	1200 Images
Visuals Detected	166 Spoofs	113 Spoofs	234 Spoofs

Phase 2: Structuralist Semiotic Reduction Analysis

After the collection of over 500 spoof illustrations, it was important in a first step to make sense of these pictures in order to properly answer the question “What is it that we are looking at?”. Only after the pictures had been critically analyzed and discussed was it sensible and appropriate to try and establish a framework that allows a

² A list of all illustrations and additional information that were coded during the collection process can be downloaded here: <http://bit.ly/1XOISNo>

categorization of the spoofs (see phase 3). The theoretical foundation applied for this purpose was that of semiotics. This step is especially relevant considering that the framework construction in phase 3 follows the ideas of grounded theory. This approach is sometimes argued to be vague, stating that being led by the data alone can be considered not academic enough (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2011). For this reason, semiotics has provided suitable substance to grounded theory and enriched the framework-construction process vastly.

What does it mean to apply semiotics? In basic principle, it is the science and analysis of signs and symbols. It follows semiotic theory, suggesting that “the symbolic order of a culture is constructed and interpreted through a system of signs” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 561). Thus, the pictures were interpreted according to the signs and symbols depicted in the spoof illustrations to identify the tools used to make fun or attack the brand in question. This is especially relevant as Combe and Crowther (2000) found that signs and symbols can have an effect on the positioning of brands in the viewer’s perception.

Urde (2016, p. 32), when speaking of brands as signs, defines them as follows: “a ‘sign’ [...] is intended to stand for something, in some respect or capacity – and it addresses somebody; that is, it creates in the mind of a person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more fully developed sign”. Danesi (2004) uses the simple equation $X=Y$ to illustrate this concept. Here, “X” can be seen as the signifier, which acts as the thing that points to an underlying meaning. “Y”, on the other hand, is the signified, which is the meaning to which the signifier points (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This means that the spoofs were not only evaluated according to what symbols and signs were used on an explicit and literal level, but also what they signify on a deeper and implicit level. This is also called denotation and connotation. Denotation is the “definitional”, the obvious, the description that could be found in a dictionary. Connotation, however, has far more layers – it is polysemic and can thus evoke socio-cultural, ideological, or emotional associations (Chandler, 2007). An important addition for this study is the fact that connotations are context-dependent (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This means that the use of a brand’s logo or tagline, for instance, can have completely different meanings, depending on whether it is used officially by the company or in a parodic way through the spoof illustrations.

While the just mentioned concepts form the basic meaning of semiotics, it is important to specify the exact semiotic method used. For this thesis, a structuralist semiotic reduction analysis was applied. Structuralist semiotics attempt to break through the layer of the observable to explore underlying relations and structures to arrive at insights that may still be veiled at first glance (Chandler, 2007). Further, conducting a structuralist semiotic *reduction* means that the similarities between different types of visuals are highlighted by defining the “smallest narrative units” (Barthes, 1977, cited in Chandler, 2007). Respectively, not the meaning of a single piece of illustration was in the spotlight of analysis, but rather the recurring stylistics and content types that unite the spoof visuals.

Finally, on a more practical note, Spencer (2011) presents a procedure for semiotic analyses that was followed in this study and shall be briefly presented:

1. Noting the context of the illustrations (e.g. date of publication, source, in what relation to the crisis)
2. Examination of the denotative features of the spoofs
3. Evaluating intertextual references (i.e. reading the scene - what genres, what emotional settings are conveyed?)
4. Assessing the anchorage of text and image (whenever applicable), i.e. what effect does the combination of text and visuals have on the receiver?
5. Interpretation of the connotative layers of the illustrations

Furthermore, the results of this structuralist semiotic reduction analysis provided suitable substance to develop the conceptual framework of this study.

Phase 3: Framework Development

The section on research strategy already mentioned that in an exploratory sequential mixed method approach, the initial qualitative process is conducted to come up with a framework that can be used and tested in the subsequent quantitative step. This was done in this phase of the study. The insights from the structuralist semiotic reduction analysis were taken into consideration and included in the framework development, which was guided by principles found in grounded theory.

In general, grounded theory is a form of theory development, whereas the researchers ground their theory in empirical data according to a set of procedures (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 12) define it as “theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another.” This means that grounded theory is an iterative process, going back and forth between the data and preliminary findings (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Such a recursive approach also ensured in this study that a tight connection between the emerging concepts and the original data (i.e. the spoof illustrations) was maintained (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2011).

What made grounded theory a specifically good fit for this research question was the fact that in contrast to a positivist quantitative research, it was not necessary to use preconceived codes and categories, but the concepts, patterns and framework dimensions were able to freely emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2000, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2011; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012).

From a procedural perspective, an approach to grounded analysis by Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012) was taken and adopted for the analysis of the spoofs visuals. In this process, it was first necessary to become familiar with the illustrations and reflect on them. Here, the semiotic analysis proved to be a valuable addition. Further, the data was conceptualized and catalogued in iterative steps. The emerging concepts were then linked to arrive at the Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework (RSIF), which allowed to come up with hypotheses about these connections in the framework (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Finally, Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Jackson (2012) suggest that comments of others need to be considered that might require a re-evaluation of the instruments built. Therefore, an attribute collection was conducted in order to prove the existence of the framework dimensions. On April 12, 2016 a total of 110 undergraduate students at Lund University, Sweden, participated in a live survey. The real-time voting system *Mentimeter* was used, which allows an audience to respond live to questions while using their smart phones or similar devices. In a classroom setting eight different spoof illustrations were displayed successively to the audience, who were asked to write down all attributes that come in mind while looking at each of the visuals. The participants had the opportunity to fill in up to 10 words per

spoof illustration. Given that the purpose of this survey was only to collect attributes and verify the framework dimensions, no further information regarding spoof illustrations, brands, crisis situations, etc. were provided.

Phase 4: Quantification of Framework and Impact on Reputation

After developing the conceptual framework of this study, an online self-completion questionnaire was conducted to empirically prove the existence of the framework's dimensions and to be able to measure the brand reputation impact caused by spoof illustrations.

Online Self-Completion Questionnaire

A web survey was chosen in order to quantify the framework and assess the spoofs' impact on brand reputation. In this type of questionnaire, respondents answer questions by completing a survey online by themselves (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Respondents were asked to rate spoof illustrations and state their attitudes towards the portrayed brand. Since no interviewer is present when a self-completion questionnaire is being completed, interviewer bias was eliminated (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Considering the fact that individual attitudes towards different illustrations and brands are inquired in this questionnaire, an anonymous situation was preferable and more convenient for respondents. Additionally, a web survey saves time in coding the collected data and reduced the likelihood of errors while processing and analyzing the respondents' answers (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, Bryman & Bell (2011) suggest that the following disadvantages of an online self-completion questionnaire should be acknowledged and further considered. First, since there is no interviewer, great attention must be paid to ensure that instructions are clear and the questions are easy to understand. Second, respondents who are completing an online questionnaire become tired of answering questions that are not salient to respondents or take too long, a risk that is called "respondent fatigue". Third, since the respondents cannot be controlled nor tracked, there is a risk of missing data and a generally low response rate. These disadvantages were considered in the construction and distribution phase of the questionnaire and were counterbalanced by several actions – e.g. using closed questions, conducting pilot- and pre-tests, creating a short and appealing questionnaire design, and incorporating incentives. These actions, together with the

construction and distribution of the questionnaire, will be explained further in this section.

Case Exclusion

Before developing the web survey, the decision was taken to exclude illustrations of the Barclays LIBOR scandal from the questionnaire. This decision was based on the three following reasons. (1) Since it is relevant to be aware and understand the context (here: reputational crisis background) of an image (here: spoof illustration) to be able to rate them accordingly (Deely, 1990), a bank manipulation crisis dealing with specific interest rates might be difficult to understand and spoof illustrations hard to interpret correctly. (2) In order to be able to state attitudes towards a brand, it is necessary to have a high level of brand awareness. Hence, the British multinational bank and financial service company Barclays might not be as well-known as the other brands VW and BP. (3) Meeting limitations in survey completion duration and considering the general time constraints this thesis was facing, the decision was taken to rather deeply investigate two brands with more spoof illustrations instead of analyzing only a few spoofs of three different crises broadly. Therefore, only spoof illustrations portraying BP and VW were used as stimulus material and were incorporated in the online questionnaire. To select relevant spoof illustrations and to ensure the functionality and comprehensibility of the survey questions, a pilot study and a pre-test were conducted first.

Pilot Study

Before constructing the self-completion questionnaire, a pilot study was established to ensure that the research framework was quantifiable and the questions operate well. This was of importance, because the questionnaire was planned to be distributed online, where no interviewer would be available to assist participants with any questions (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The pilot study took place on April 13, 2016, where six students rated 16 successively displayed spoof illustrations (eight illustrations portraying each VW and BP crisis). The participants gave individual feedback via the real-time voting system *Mentimeter* and results were discussed afterwards in a group setting. The pilot study revealed that the framework dimensions work accordingly and selected spoof illustrations were “easy to understand” and “simple to rate”. These

insights supported the methodological approach and justified the selection of closed questions for the web survey.

Construction of Questionnaire

Considering the results of the pilot study, an online self-completion questionnaire was created using the survey software *Qualtrics Research Suite*. Two separate surveys were conducted for each (VW and BP) crisis, including eight randomized spoof illustrations per case. The selection of spoof illustration derived from the pilot study findings and were chosen strategically in order to represent illustrations for each framework category. Capitalizing on the technical opportunities of a web survey, participants were randomly assigned to either the BP or VW survey and answered only questions related to the assigned brand. Additionally, the order of the reputation subscales was randomized and participants were automatically reminded to reevaluate non-answered questions, to avoid bias and missing values. To increase the response rate (Bryman & Bell, 2011), an incentive (2x1 Amazon gift cards worth 25\$) for additional participation motivation was offered and raffled out to two survey participants. In the questionnaire, only closed questions were used in order to ensure the clarity and meaning of the questions, to enhance the comparability of answers and to satisfy the statistical assumptions for further analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Malhotra, 2010). However, disadvantages of closed questions (e.g. loss of additional respondent notions or negative side effects of force-choice answers) were reflected and considerably accepted.

To be able to rate and understand the context of the displayed spoof illustrations, the portrayed company, as well as the corporate crisis itself, had to be clarified beforehand. Therefore, a neutral brand- and crisis description text was developed showing the logo of the brand and presenting neutral facts about the company and the crisis in each case. Before showing the first illustrations, an additional information text was developed to demonstrate the background and source of the used illustrations and to give clear instructions in how to rate them accordingly.

To measure the dimensions of the framework (*humorousness* and *aggressiveness*), particular scales for the questionnaire were developed. The framework dimension *Humorousness* was measured on a bipolar 100-point-scale ranging from 0 = serious

to 100 = humorous, and the framework dimension *Aggressiveness* was measured on a 100-point-scale ranging from 0 = less aggressive to 100 = more aggressive. The starting point in both scales was indicated at point 50 to measure participant's tendencies. Furthermore, respondents were asked directly for their opinion on how harmful they think the displayed illustration is towards the portrayed brands' reputation. Questions about attitudes are common in self-completion questionnaire research and are empirically conducted via Likert scales (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, the item *Harmfulness* was measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = not at all harmful to 5 = extremely harmful.

While the questions relating directly to the spoof illustrations were developed particularly for this questionnaire, the reputation measurement was based on an existing and well established multi-item scale. The reputation measurement scale RepTrak™ Pulse by Ponzi, Fombrun and Gardberg (2011) was selected as a short-form measure of corporate reputation. Since this scale is an emotion-based measure of the corporate reputation construct, it suited to the questionnaire's aim to measure the impact on brand reputation that is caused by emotionally loaded spoof illustrations. Therefore, the RepTrak™ Pulse scale was chosen and measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. For this study, the scale was adopted for the brands VW and BP and was filled out before and after displaying the set of spoof illustrations. This enabled the opportunity to measure the impact on VW's and BP's brand reputation caused by the displayed spoof illustrations. Additionally, demographic data, including gender, age and nationality, was collected at the end of the questionnaire.

Pre-Test

To ensure the usability and understandability of each survey item, a pre-test was conducted before distributing the final survey. In the pre-test, eight participants were interviewed while filling out a survey draft. The pre-test was conducted in order to identify questions that make respondents feel uncomfortable and to detect certain biases (Bryman & Bell, 2011). In particular, the understandability of selected illustrations, clarity of worded instructions, survey duration, layout, language and flow, as well as the overall opinion towards the questionnaire were discussed, edited, and approved, before the survey was sent out.

Survey Distribution and Census Assumption

Bryman & Bell (2011) mention that a distribution of web surveys is facing issues that limit the usage of probability sampling techniques. Researchers face difficulties in defining sampling frames of a general online population, since they are expensive to acquire, highly confidential and controlled by the Internet service providers. Considering this statement together with the ramifications of this thesis, the use of a convenience sampling was taken into consideration in order to get a large number of participants in a short time manner. However, since the population, which the sample is meant to represent, cannot be clearly defined, it is impossible to generalize findings to an entire web user population (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2011). Therefore, and as opposed to a sample survey, the decision was taken (together with a professor of the Lund University Department of Statistics) to collect census data obtaining a finite population represented by all survey respondents. According to Malhotra (2010), census data can be used in marketing research and can be utilized as a baseline for explorative studies. While the applicability of inferential statistics in census data could be seen as excrescent, testing can be used in this study as a guide for deciding whether or not an observed effect (e.g. impact on brand reputation) is worth interpreting. Therefore, inferential statistics will be used only for the purpose to explore findings within the census data, and not to generalize on the entire population of web-users. This is in line with researchers such as Leckie et al. (2011) or Subramanian, Duncan and Jones (2001), who also conducted inferential analyses with census data.

The survey was therefore distributed between 20 April and 1 May 2016, via several online channels using e-mail lists, web messengers, online forums and social media groups. A detailed overview of the survey, including a list of the chosen illustrations, can be found in Appendix 2.

5 ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the findings of the multi-phase research approach of this study. First of all, qualitative findings derived from the structuralist semiotic analysis will be described in order to determine specific characteristics of spoof illustrations. Building on these findings and applying principles of grounded theory, the conceptual framework of this study, namely “Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework”, will be presented and described accordingly. Resulting hypotheses will then lead into the quantitative analysis part of this chapter. Consequently, descriptive as well as analytical statistics of the empirical web survey data will be presented to provide an answer to the question whether spoof illustrations have an impact on a brand’s reputation.

5.1 Semiotic Analysis

After the collection of over 500 illustrations of the three crises (BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, VW Dieselgate, and Barclays LIBOR scandal), a structuralist semiotic reduction analysis was applied to arrive at a descriptive overview of the data at hand. This includes external factors, which help to understand the context of the illustrations (i.e. in what medium and at what point in the timeline of the crisis they were published), and more importantly, the types of illustrations and different content elements used in the pictures.

Context of Spoof Illustrations

One element that was tracked during the collection of the illustrations was the source of the pictures. This was important to put them into context for further analysis, but should also help practitioners to better understand where the illustrations come from. There are three main categories of different mediums the illustrations were taken from: news articles, blogs and social media, and web presences that collect illustrations and caricatures, often run by the artists themselves. Figure 6 gives an overview of the distribution of these mediums.

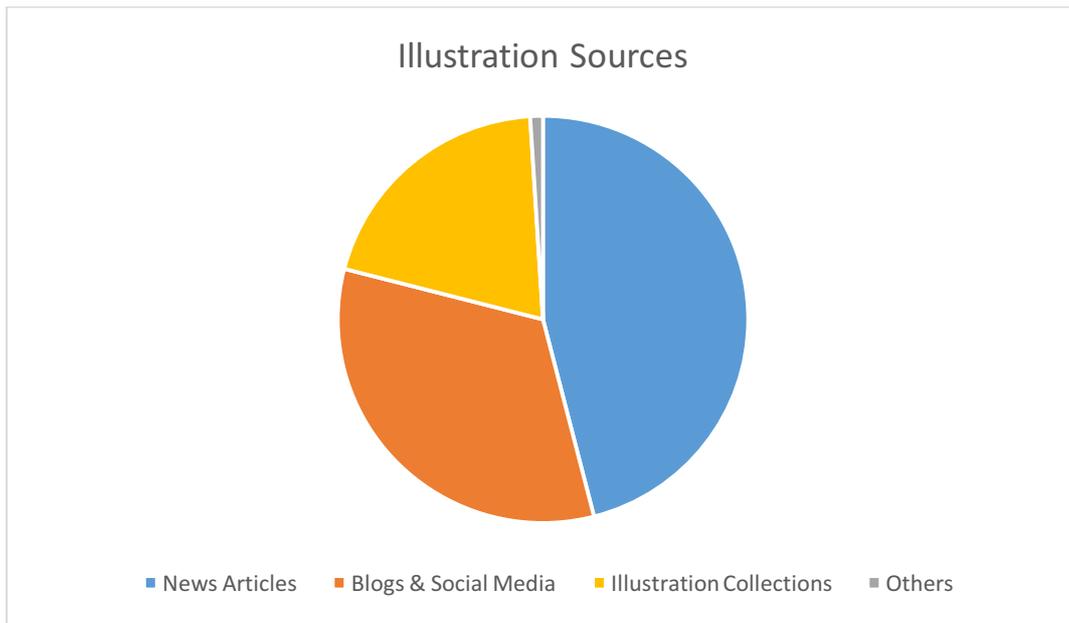


Figure 6 Distribution of Online Spoof Illustration Sources

Almost half of the illustrations collected for this thesis stems from online news articles. These include smaller news portals as well as big and well-known online newspapers, such as the Financial Times, The Guardian, or the New York Times. As these articles are generally rather text-heavy and only contain few pictures, the included illustrations should arguably draw a lot of attention. It should be noted that the spoof illustrations used in serious newspapers are generally more tasteful than those from other mediums, but they can still be very scathing.

Social media, and especially blogs, are another substantial sources for spoof illustrations, which accounted for one third of all collected illustrations. In contrast to the neutral tone on news articles, this type of medium is a personal one, and thus often places the pictures in a more emotional context, conveying a clearly opinionated impression. This is especially true for blogs that were created solely to address the crisis at hand, or that take on a general critical stance against capitalism, environmental pollution or similar issues.

Finally, approximately one fifth of the spoof illustrations were found on websites that are dedicated to parodic images and caricatures. Some of them take on the form of a web shop, where other media outlets can purchase the illustrations to use for their

own articles. Others, however, could be considered to be more of a personal page of an artist who expresses his/her disapproval with a brand through their work.

A second contextual factor that was included in the initial data collection was the time component. As established earlier (see section 2.2), a crisis undergoes several phases (e.g. Roper & Fill, 2012), and timing plays a crucial role in all of these. Considering that spoof illustrations are created after a crisis has happened, they will interfere with and possibly prolong the abatement and termination phase of the company (cf. Sturges, Carrell & Newsom, 1991). Thus, it can be argued that it will only be in the best interest of the brand that if any spoof illustrations are created, they will be published in temporal proximity to the outbreak of the crisis, when media coverage is high anyway.

Looking at the temporal distribution of the illustrations, it becomes apparent that in the Volkswagen and Barclays crises, the first week after the outbreak brought about the most illustrations. After that, the number of pictures dropped steadily. It should be noted that Barclays did experience another small surge in illustrations approximately nine months after the initial crisis, which could be led back to the company announcing restructuring plans as well as ongoing legal proceedings against Barclays at that time (Financial Times, 2013; The Telegraph, 2013). It is possible that Volkswagen will experience a similar resurgence at a later point in their crisis. At the time of this thesis, however, a little more than half a year after the start of "Dieselgate", this has not been the case yet.

As for BP, it is noteworthy that most images were not published immediately after the Deepwater Horizon oil platform exploded and sank, but rather as it became obvious that the company faced serious trouble in stopping the leak. Thus, almost half the pictures collected stem from a time between one and three months after the explosion, when the leak was eventually fixed. During this timeframe, the public was frustrated that BP was not able to stop the oil from flooding the ocean. This means that BP moved from being a victim in this disaster to being an enemy that fails to protect its stakeholders (see section 2.3). After the spill was stopped, the number of illustrations went down, albeit not entirely, since the coasts were still soiled. Figure 7 illustrated these findings.

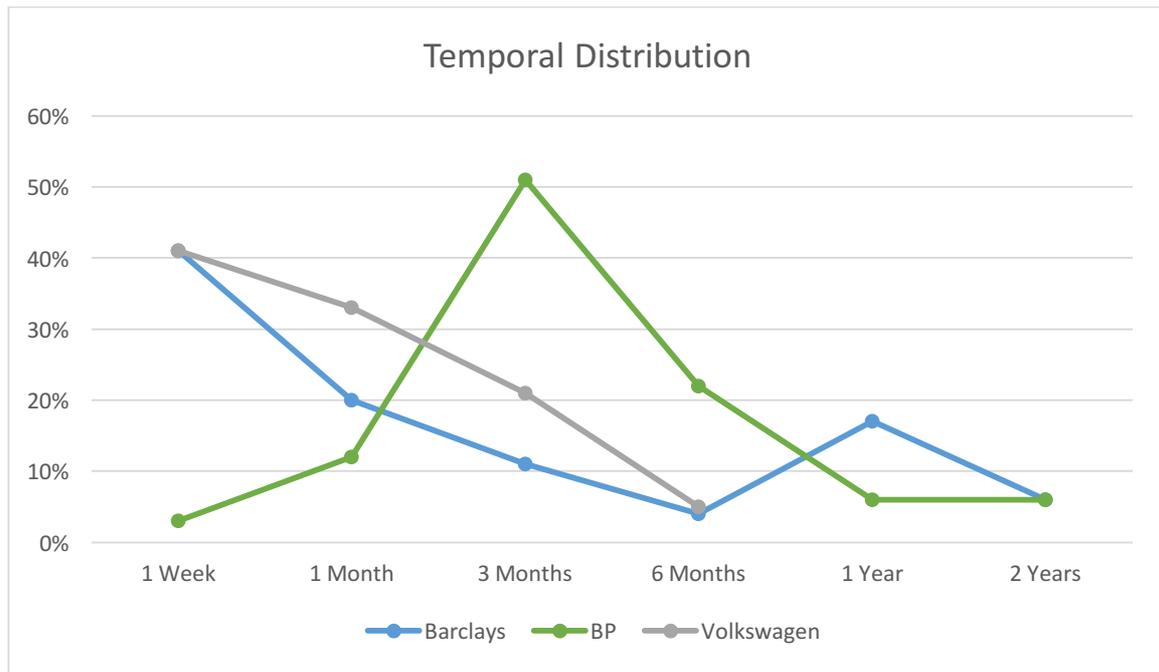


Figure 7 Temporal Distribution of Detected Spoof Illustrations

Types of Spoof Illustrations

The term “spoof illustration” is a general one, and was chosen for this very reason. In fact, the phenomenon can occur in many different types of illustrations, all addressing the situation in their own way. What they have in common, however, is that they depict the brand crisis from a critical point of view, no matter if they are photographs, cartoons, or modifications of official brand material. While a classification of different illustration types is presented, it should be noted that these are not strict categories, and that some illustrations might be applicable to more than one type.

Subvertisements

A substantial category of illustration types is the alteration, modification, or imitation of brand material, such as logos and advertisements, often paired with distorting the brand’s name or slogan. All of this can be said to fall into the category of “Subvertisements”, which have already been discussed in the Literature Review (p. 20). For example, many spoofs of the BP oil spill crisis depict the company’s green and yellow logo drenched in oil, almost literally dragging the brand through the mud. Several of these pictures underline their disapproval of BP by inventing new meanings for the company’s acronym, such as “Beyond Propaganda” or “Big Pollution”.

Similarly, Volkswagen's slogan "Das Auto" has been adapted to many new meanings, for example "Das Problem" and "Gas Auto". As for parodies of advertisements, an example is the picture of a poster at a bus stop, which is designed in Barclays' colors, has the company's logo on it, and states "For the best fixed rates". See Figure 8 for examples.



Figure 8 Spoof Examples of Subvertisements

It becomes of course apparent that these subvertisements are extremely intrusive to the very core of the brand. Logos, corporate colors and design, and other visual identifiers of a brand are a means of expressing and communicating its identity to the external world (Kapferer, 2012; Roper & Fill, 2012). These visuals are consequently loaded with associations and emotions in the minds of the consumers. By tampering with these elements, the creators are effectively attacking the brand's values and personality. Seeing that the communication of a brand's identity is the first step of factors that influence reputation (see p. 7), this type of illustration can arguably have a strong impact on the customer's perception, and is a big nuisance for brand managers.

Cartoons & Caricatures

There are two types of illustrations that are quite similar in their structure, which allows a comparative analysis of these two. However, they each have some distinct characteristics that need to be considered. These types are cartoons and caricatures. One obvious feature that combines them is that they are drawings, either done by hand or with the help of a computer. They depict a certain situation in the crisis, often in an exaggerated way. For example, some situations illustrate the consequences of

the crisis (such as a can of tuna filled with oil, see Figure 9), while others address internal proceedings that the artist imagines to happen behind closed doors (e.g. a chief executive being put through a metal press like an old car in Figure 9). What makes these drawings (both cartoons and caricatures) so effective is that arguments and occurrences are much easier conveyed in this medium than in written text, for instance (El Refaie, 2003). As a result, even complex situations can be rapidly understood and interpreted by the receiver. Furthermore, they are likely to evoke affective responses (El Refaie, 2003).



Figure 9 Spoof Examples of Cartoons

However, in this thesis, some distinction between cartoons and caricatures will be made. Cartoons are understood to be rather simple drawings, which are easily comprehensible and depict generic actors and situations (see Figure 9). Caricatures, on the other hand, usually make clear references to existing persons, such as a company's CEO or political actors involved in a crisis. From a semiotic point of view, a further characteristic of caricatures is an extensive use of metaphors (Cohn, 2016). For example (Figure 10), the use of "Uncle Sam" stands for the involvement of US politics in the BP oil spill. Additionally, the "golden parachute" is a classic metaphor for well-paid compensation when an executive leaves a company. The former CEO of Barclays, Bob Diamond, is often depicted as a "fat cat", which is a metaphor for being corrupt and greedy (The New York Times, 2002), and one caricature even shows him abusing the justice system, portrayed through the Roman goddess Justitia.

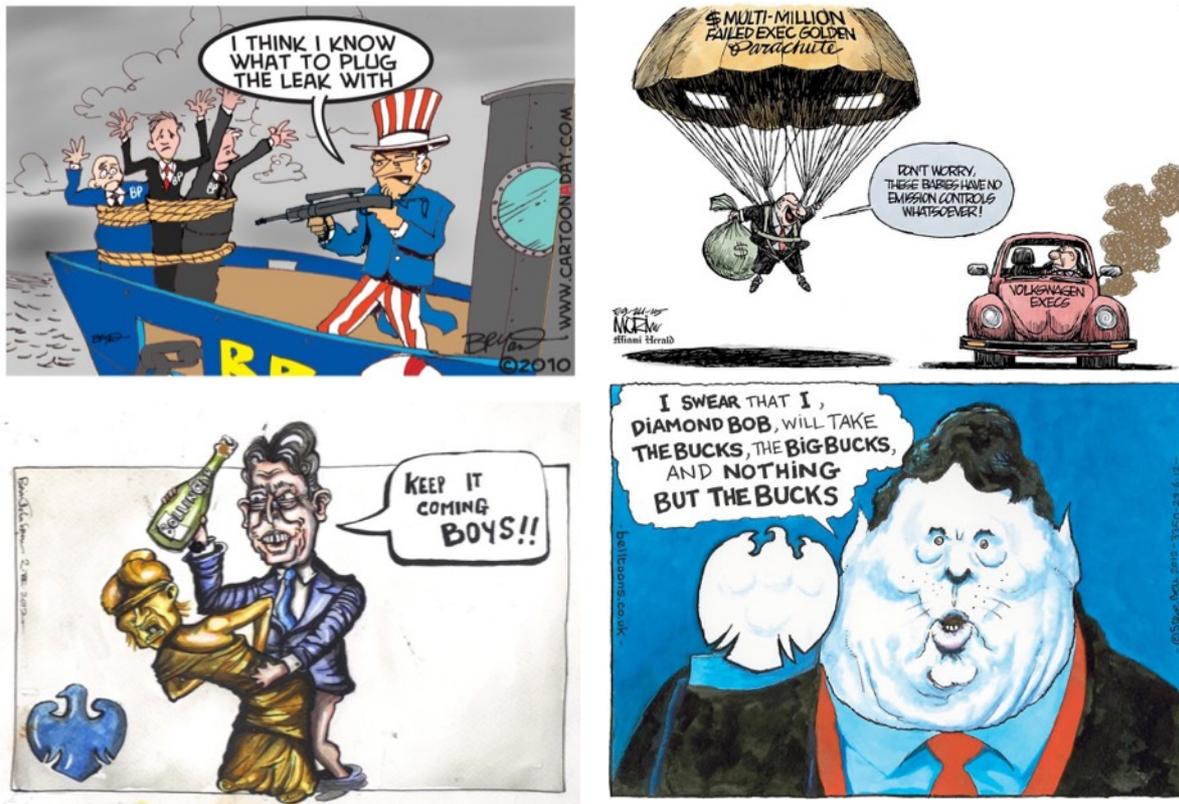


Figure 10 Spoof Examples of Caricatures

Photographs

A medium that also has special characteristics it can utilize to comment on a brand crisis is photography. It might be expected that photos can only show a realistic depiction of events, but this is far from true. In fact, Brown (2006, cited in Spencer, 2011) highlights that it is not realism that defines photography, but a “truthfulness to the appearance of things”. It is likewise a point of view of the photographer, who chose to focus on those things of a whole that are important to her or him. It is a comment, a critical inquiry to the world around the photographer (Allmark, 2011).

Examples of spoof photographs can be seen in Figure 11. A typical style of the photos that deal with brand crises is showing the CEO or other relevant actors scratching their head, frowning, or in another unfortunate pose, often with the company logo in the back. The photograph might be taken completely out of context, but conveys an unmistakable feeling of weakness, impotence, and failure when associated with the crisis. Other photos deal with the logo, such as the photo of the VW logo on a car that was transformed into resembling the devil, or the logo on a BP gas station that was covered in dirt. Similar to the analysis of the subvertisements above, this form of

reinterpreting the logo can be seen as an attack to the very identity of a brand. While these two categories of photography (CEO and logo) are popular ones, there are of course many other themes, depending on the crisis. Examples are a woman who is on a beach and covered in oil, or a fleet of Volkswagen cars that has completely burnt out. What these diverse photographs have in common, however, are that they only develop the full spoof and criticism towards the brands when they are put in context of the crisis.

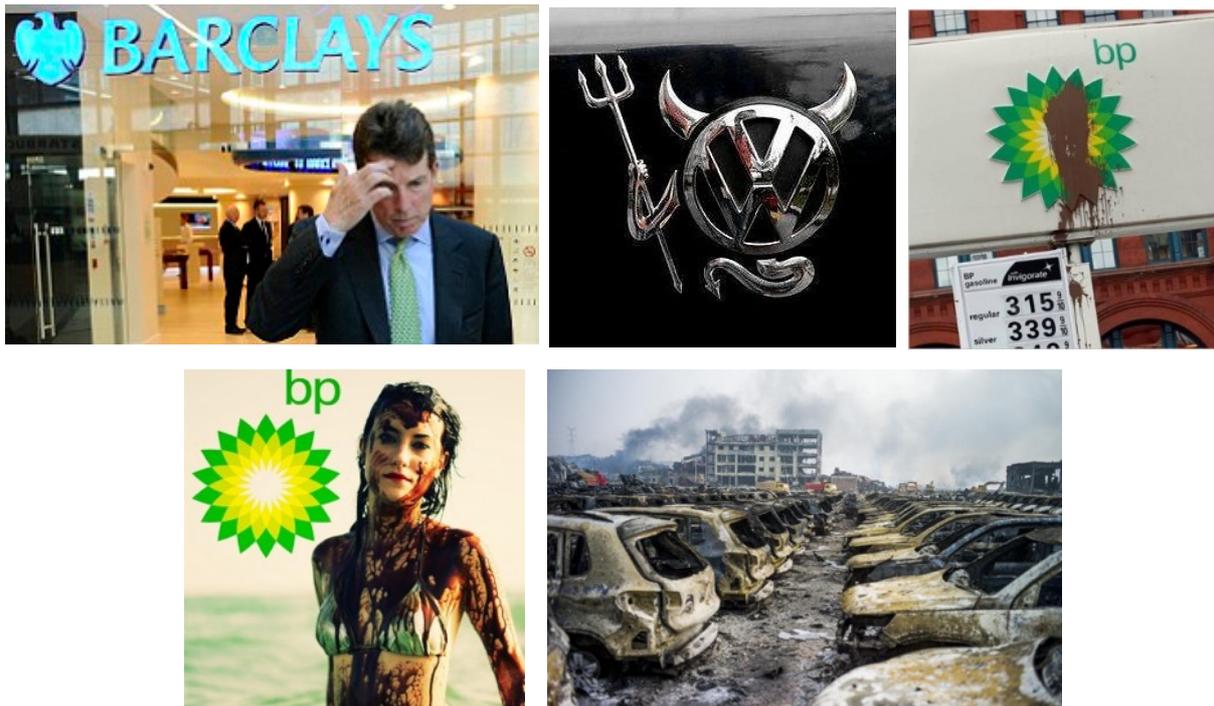


Figure 11 Spoof Examples of Photographs

Image Macros

Finally, there is one type of illustration that has emerged and gained popularity through the Internet: Image Macros. There are two characteristics of image macros that distinguish it from other types mentioned in this thesis: they are instantly recognizable, and basically anyone can create them. What makes them so recognizable is the fact that every image macro follows the same pattern – it is simply a picture, superimposed with text (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015). The text is always white with black outlines and written in the font called “Impact”. Not only allows the white/black color combination of the text to be legible on any picture, the Impact font was also specially designed to stand out and draw attention (Vox.com, 2015). Furthermore, as this thesis specifically looks at online illustrations, it is important to note that the image macro is a type of

spoof that anyone can create to criticize and spoof a brand in crisis, while, for example, caricatures or photography would require a certain degree of competence and know-how. Vickery (2014) highlights that there are platforms allowing users to generate image macros with their own pictures and texts in a matter of seconds.

In the illustration collection of this research, image macros were used, for instance, to mock Barclays by showing a character of the movie “Austin Powers”, who has a sarcastic facial expression, asking for a “quote” on “Libor”, playing on the fact that the LIBOR quotes were falsified and did not reflect accurate estimations. Another example, this time concerning the Volkswagen crisis, shows a car with black smoke coming out of the exhaust, stating that the owner “wanted the VW tune”. This black smoke, which illustrates pollution and environmental damage, in combination with calling it the “VW tune” makes a clear statement: The Volkswagen brand is bad for the environment. Both examples can be seen in Figure 12.

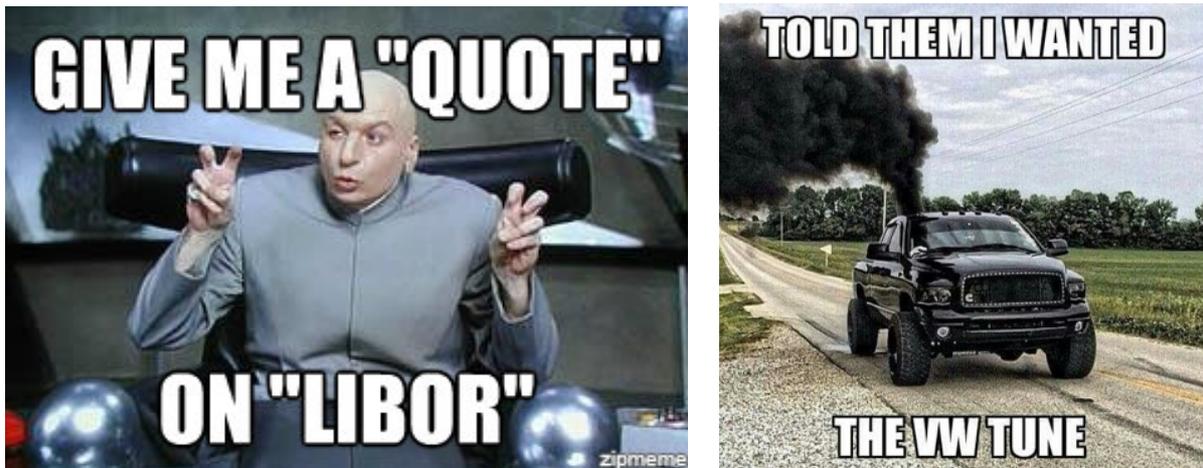


Figure 12 Spoof Examples of Image Macros

Content Elements of Spoof Illustrations

By now, it has been established that spoof illustrations can come from different sources, at various points in time of a crisis, and through several possible types of illustrations. At the same time, there are recurring themes, motifs, and objects that are used throughout all these illustrations and allow for comparison. This chapter will give an overview of these content types:

Logo

It has already been mentioned in the previous chapter that Logos play a big part in spoof illustrations. However, they are not only used when they are modified in subvertisements, but occur regularly in any types of illustrations. As Logos are used for fast recognition of a brand, they are likewise included in the illustration to make it immediately clear what a cartoon, photograph or other spoof illustration is about (e.g. in Figure 13).



Figure 13 Logo Spoof

Slogan

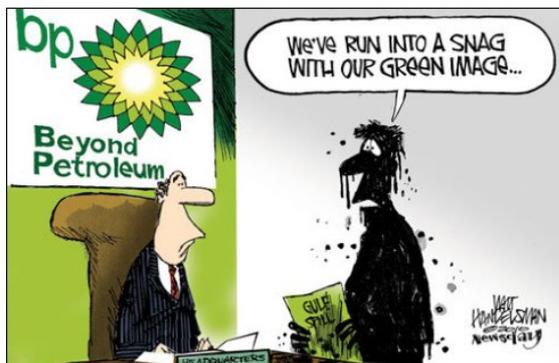


Figure 14 Slogan Spoof

In a similar fashion to the logo, slogans are cited in spoof illustrations to draw more attention to the brand that is criticized in the picture. On a more interpretative level, the slogan can either be adapted to a new meaning (see “Gas Auto”, Figure 8), or kept in its original form, which can be seen as almost cynical in some context, such as the “Beyond Petroleum” example in Figure 14.

Brand Name

Although not as often used as the logo, the brand name is another measure the creators of spoof illustrations use to put a picture into context. It is often placed next to other visual identifiers of a brand, but can just as much be the main component of a picture, for instance when the name is changed to mean something else (such as in Figure 15).



Figure 15 Name Spoof

The Product



Figure 16 Spoof of Products

Naturally, one of the most important types of content is the respective product/item that is affected by a crisis. It is simply the reason for the outbreak of the situation and the main point of criticism. For BP, it is the oil. For Volkswagen, the car (see Figure 16). And for Barclays, it can be argued that the LIBOR, and the greed surrounding it, is objectified through money bills and coins.

Stakeholder: Executive

In a crisis, executives (and especially the CEO) can become pretty well-known almost overnight, giving countless media appearances to defend their company. Unsurprisingly, they are also represented in many illustrations, arguably to personify the crisis. Figure 17, for example, shows Bob Diamond, CEO of Barclays.



Figure 17 Spoof of Executives

Stakeholder: Political Actor



Figure 18 Spoof of Political Actors

Big crises oftentimes require the intervention of politicians, especially when a country's image is on the line, as was the case with Volkswagen and "German Engineering". Obama, Merkel, and Cameron all had to get involved in the BP, VW, and Barclays crisis (respectively) and were thus at the mercy of the public's

criticism. In the example of Figure 18, Angela Merkel is portrayed, driving a VW beetle with a Euro emblem and stating “But it passed all the tests!” – thus simultaneously spoofing Volkswagen and the Euro crisis.

Stakeholder: Victims

Spoof illustrations can focus on the cause of a disaster (and thus on executives and politicians) or on the consequences, e.g. the victims of a crisis. These can be animals that were harmed by the oil spill (see Figure 19), or depictions of customers that have to deal with the fact that they were lied to (such as the cases of Volkswagen and Barclays). This is a special form of accusation towards the brand, which can be interpreted as saying: “Look at what you have done!”



Figure 19 Spoof of Victims

Pop Culture



Figure 20 Pop Culture in Spoofs

A surprisingly big amount of illustrations contain content that is borrowed from pop culture (such as movies, literature, or other popular forms of entertainment) which is defined as “cultural activities or commercial products reflecting, suited to, or aimed at the tastes of the general masses of people” (Dictionary.com, 2016). For example, all three crises examined in this thesis included pictures that were associated with Pinocchio (e.g. in Figure 20). In the BP crisis, figures like Aquaman or SpongeBob SquarePants are shown as victims of the oil spill. It can be argued that the motives and actors of popular culture are well-known among society, and that they are archetypes (e.g. Pinocchio equals lying) that make it easy to draw quick associations between the events of pop culture and the crisis at hand.

Situational Artifacts

Every crisis has certain quotes or objects that become characteristic and almost iconic of the event. They are called “situational artifacts” in this research paper. For example, some images of the Barclays crisis show a bottle of Bollinger champagne, which was used by a banker to celebrate an illegally lowered LIBOR rate. Concerning quotes, an example is the CEO of BP, Tony Hayward, who was widely mocked for stating that he “wants his life back” after the crisis had been going on for a long period of time (see Figure 21).



Figure 21 Situational Artifacts in Spoofs

To summarize the findings of the semiotic analysis, Table 5 gives an overview of the types of illustration and content elements identified in the spoof pictures.

Table 5 Overview of Types and Content Elements of Spoof Illustrations

Illustration Type	Description
Subvertisements	Take brand elements (logo, advertisements, slogan, etc.) and alter them to turn the message against the brand
Cartoons	Depict events caused by the crisis in an exaggerated way, using generic actors and situations
Caricatures	Similar to cartoons, but refer to real-life actors (e.g. CEO). Extensive use of metaphors
Photographs	Usually depict the product, brand, or people involved in an unfavorable way (often taken out of context) to criticize the situation
Image Macros	Pictures that are superimposed with text, always in the same font. Can be created by anyone online in a matter of seconds
Content Elements	
Logo, Slogan, Brand Name, Product, Stakeholder (Executives, Political Actors, Victims), Pop Culture, Situational Artifacts	

5.2 Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework (RSIF)

It was mentioned earlier that the purpose of the semiotic analysis was to get a structured and comprehensive impression of the spoof illustrations. This would help to arrive at a framework that serves three purposes. First, it should allow for a dimensional categorization and intuitive mapping of the visuals. Second, it should be a tool that can be quantified for the final stage of this thesis, in order to examine its real-life applicability. Third, the framework should help both academics and brand managers/practitioners in assessing the impact of the spoofs on a brand's reputation.

It soon became apparent that one of the framework dimensions would require an emotional aspect. This is because the various visuals conveyed a broad range of different moods, depending on the context and theme of the picture. The literature review in this thesis (p. 16) has already highlighted that crises can trigger severe affective responses and moral outrages that are able to lead to reputational damage (cf. Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010). A range of various emotions among stakeholders was also provided, be it anger, sympathy, or anxiety.

Furthermore, it was identified that the other dimension of the framework would need to indicate some sort of intensity or magnitude scale that allows to differentiate between various levels of agitation. It has been mentioned earlier (p. 48) that serious newspapers tend to utilize rather moderate spoof illustrations, while personal blogs or social media profiles can be more extreme in their approach of criticizing a brand in crisis. Thus, this is an important factor that needed to be considered in the emerging framework.

After deliberate considerations, it was proposed to label one dimension "Humorousness" and the other "Aggressiveness". An open-ended attribute collection with 110 undergraduate students was conducted to verify the suitability of these labels for the spoof illustrations. This approach generated 1748 individual word entries. Whereas every illustration revealed a different set of unique words, the overall frequency of similar attributes was used to confirm the framework dimensions. Words that were mentioned at least five times by the audience were included in the analysis, while attributes which solely describe the illustration content were excluded.

As a result, the first framework dimension *Humorousness* was found in several words, including funny (31 times), joke (12 times), fun (8 times), humor (7 times) and ironic (7 times). Paraphrases and synonyms of the second framework dimension *Aggressiveness* were detected as well, including the unique words bad (69 times), dark (18 times), disgusting (13 times), destruction (11 times), dangerous (10 times), savage (10 times), damage (9 times), death (9 times), destroying (9 times), horrible (9 times), evil (8 times), and horror (6 times). An overview of the most mentioned words is presented in a word cloud in Figure 22. To conclude, both framework dimensions could be seen as confirmed.



Figure 22 Word Cloud of Attribute Collection Analysis

The result is the *Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework (RSIF)* that is introduced here for the first time and is illustrated in Figure 23. The framework is two-dimensional, with “Humorousness” on the X-axis and “Aggressiveness” on the Y-axis. Furthermore, these two dimensions make up four categories, namely “Resenting”, “Insulting”, “Mocking”, and “Gloating”. All of these features will be closer examined in the following section.

Dimensions

First of all, the two dimensions of the RSIF are discussed. Descriptions on different nuances of the dimensions are presented, and examples of typical illustration- and context types are given. It should be noted, however, that these examples only reflect tendencies, and that, for instance, illustrations types like caricatures can be found on the entire range of the dimensions.

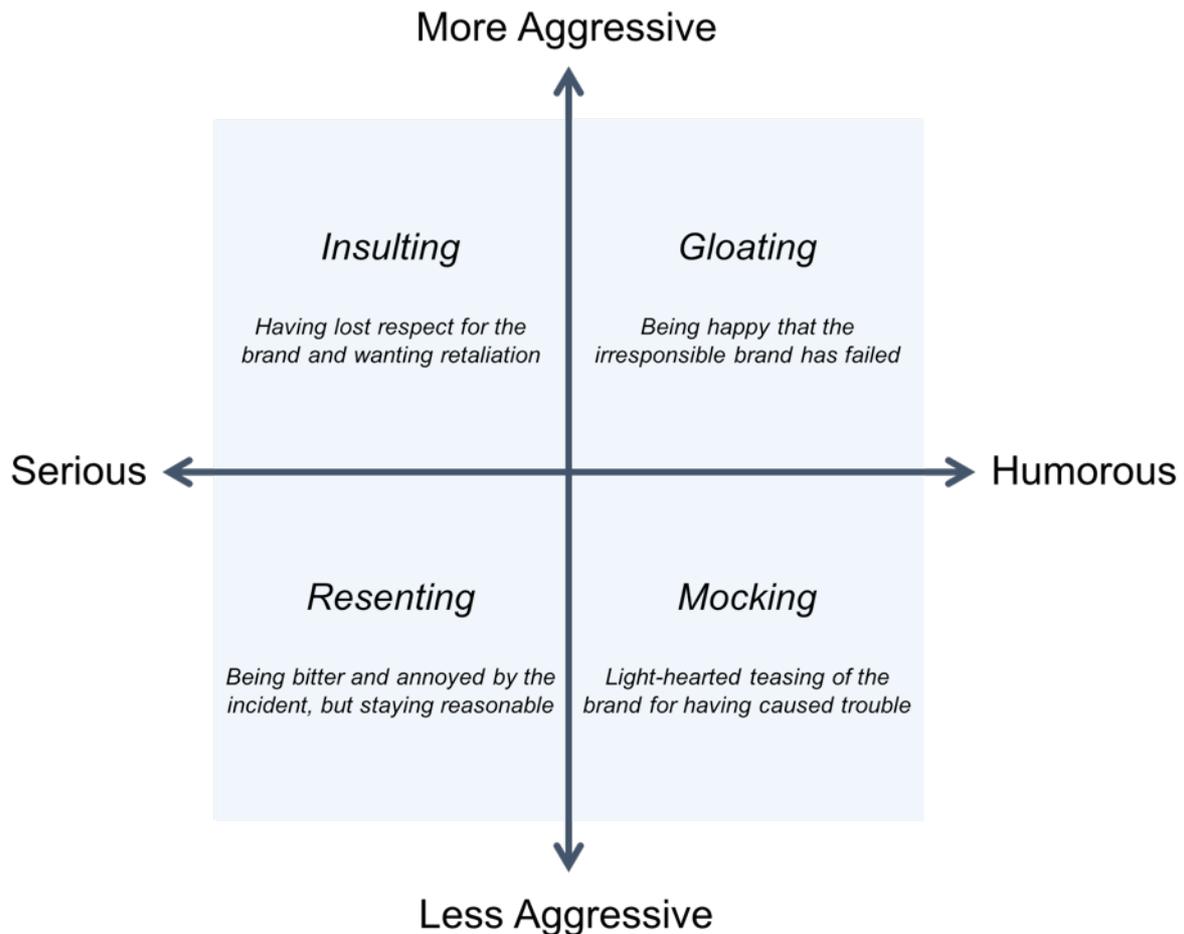


Figure 23 The Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework (RSIF)

Humorousness

As indicated above, the *Humorousness* dimension reflects the basic emotional spectrum that the spoof images can range on. The further to the right a spoof is positioned on the map, the more humorous it is perceived by the audience. Likewise, a picture on the left-hand side of the framework lacks humor, i.e. it is seen as a more serious form of spoof. This distinction is important, as there are many different layers and levels of humor (or the absence thereof) that can be identified.

For example, a humorous picture can be full of puns, exaggerated situations, and similar jokes. It could even be argued that a few examples of this extreme are even just created for the joke's sake, piggybacking on the public debate of a current brand crisis. Image macros and cartoons are typical illustration forms that rank high on humorousness. A spoof that is positioned towards the middle of the dimension might

still use comedic elements to attract attention and be memorable, but has a clear undertone that criticizes the brand in crisis and conveys dissatisfaction with the actions of the company. Caricatures and subvertisements can often be examples of this. Finally, there are images that are considered to be serious rather than humorous. They depict a stern view on the consequences and issues that will arise or have already occurred due to the crisis. Photographs are a typical medium used to express such a mood.

Aggressiveness

The second dimension – *Aggressiveness* – also includes an emotional component. However, it serves an even greater purpose. It allows to track the intensity of agitation that is conveyed in the spoof illustrations. The further a picture tends towards the top end of the framework, the more aggressive it is in the tone it sets. By contrast, a spoof on the bottom end of the RSIF is moderate and less offensive in its approach to the topic. The decision for this second dimension was based on the impression that the message of some illustrations are really belligerent and hostile towards the brand, while others exhibit a rather austere attitude.

Images that score high on the aggressiveness dimension are typically hard to digest. Their creators are not afraid to use grim and dark elements, be it death, destruction, or any forms of political incorrectness, to express their disgust and outrage with the brand that has caused a crisis. They desire to see retaliation and want individuals who are responsible for the situation to be called into account. Such spoofs are often spread by activist groups, or enraged individuals that are not afraid to express their opinion. An illustration that has a medium amount of aggressiveness still unmistakably conveys irritation and anger with the negligent brand. However, language and image elements do not cross the line of good taste, and the discussion remains rather factual than blowing it out of proportion. Finally, pictures that exhibit low or even no aggressiveness at all are the least intense form of spoofs. The creators either might not consider a crisis to be too big of a deal, are no longer surprised by “big corporations” messing up in the name of profit, or simply do not feel personally affected by the crisis. Still, they use illustrations to comment on the events, if from a distance. Typical sources of such pictures are newspapers, who are naturally inclined to report in an unbiased way.

Categories

The two dimensions of the RSIF make up four categories that allow a classification of the spoof illustrations. Depending on whether a picture is humorous or serious, and has a high or low level of aggressiveness, it will be assigned to one of the four categories that reflect the emotional reaction an image expresses towards a crisis: *Resenting*, *Insulting*, *Mocking*, or *Gloating*. These will now be examined in detail.

Resenting

A low level of aggressiveness, and a more serious than humorous tone characterizes the category *Resenting*. Resentment has been identified as a recurring emotion that can be evoked by a crisis (Fediuk, Coombs & Botero, 2010). Merriam-Webster (2016a) defines it as “a feeling of indignant displeasure or persistent ill will at something regarded as a wrong, insult, or injury”. This means that there is a bitterness and annoyance towards the brand because it has put their own interests in front of those of the stakeholders. However, resenting spoofs are very matter-of-fact. They are serious about the issue and want a solution, but stay calm and reasonable.

Insulting

The *Insulting* category is also found on the serious side of the framework. However, it is identified by a high degree of aggressiveness. It can be most closely associated with the emotion *anger* that was identified in the literature (Coombs, Fediuk & Holladay, 2007; McDonald, Sparks & Glendon, 2010). Spoof illustrations that fall into this classification do not only express displeasure with a brand, like it is the case with resentment. They are truly offended by the actions and have lost respect for the brand and company. Furthermore, the creators of such images are not simply pleased by the company solving the issue at hand. It can be argued that they want to sustainably harm the brand, be it by insulting, degrading, or shaming it.

Mocking

Mocking is the category that can be found in the lower-right corner of the Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework. It is characterized by a humorous message and a low degree of aggressiveness. To mock means “to laugh at or make fun of (someone or something) especially by copying an action or a way of behaving or speaking”

(Merriam-Webster, 2016b). Spoofs that are mocking a brand can be said to take a rather light approach to the crisis. While the creators are invested enough in the situation to feel the urge to create a spoof, they can arguably distance themselves far enough from the crisis to see the humor in it. Thus, the images tease and ridicule the brand for having caused a predicament, but are still implicitly criticizing it for the missteps and troubles it has produced.

Gloating

Finally, the fourth category of the RSIF is *Gloating*, which has a high level of aggressiveness while still being humorous. Gloating is defined as “show[ing] in an improper or selfish way that you are happy with [...] another person's failure” (Merriam-Webster, 2016c). It is thus synonymous with *schadenfreude*, which was identified by Coombs and Holladay (2005) to be a recurring stakeholder reaction to a brand crisis. A spoof picture that is gloating uses dark humor and cynicism in commenting on the situation. The creators are well-aware of the fact that the company has put other stakeholders' interests on the line in the prospect of fast profits and gains, and are now rejoicing that it is facing the repercussions of it.

Resulting Hypotheses

The work presented in this thesis so far – the initial introduction of the research topic and -question, the literature review, and the subsequent qualitative part of this study – have led to an extensive exploratory understanding of the phenomenon of spoof illustrations. The analysis of context (such as time and source), different types of images (e.g. subvertisements, caricatures, etc.) and content elements has resulted in a tool – the Reputational Spoof Illustrations Framework (RSIF). This framework serves two important functions for the following quantitative part of this study: First, it will be used as the starting point and main tool of the web survey. Second, it allows to formulate hypotheses that can be tested through this questionnaire. These hypotheses are introduced below.

The first hypothesis is derived from the second research question introduced at the very beginning of this thesis, and is thus of central importance to the entire study. The question is whether spoof illustrations in general affect the reputation of the brand,

isolated from any other news reports, public discussions or corporate press releases that might also have an influence on a brand's reputation. Seeing that a vast majority of the spoofs have negative connotations in their message, it is to be expected that they will thus also have a negative effect on the brand's reputation. Consequently, the first hypothesis is:

H₁: Spoof illustrations have a negative effect on a brand's reputation.

Furthermore, the framework needs to undergo testing to determine its practical applicability, and to allow users of the RSIF to assess the severity of the different dimensions and categories. Looking at the *Humorousness* dimension, it could be expected that a serious (i.e. less humorous) spoof uses stronger and more factual arguments against the brand, and will thus have a negative impact on the targeted brand's reputation. Additionally, this argument could be reinforced, considering that a more humorous picture might distract from the actual incident by putting the joke at the center of attention. These arguments lead to the second hypothesis of this research project:

H₂: The more humorous a spoof illustration, the less harmful it is to a brand's reputation.

Finally, the other dimension of the RSIF – *Aggressiveness* - will also be considered in the hypothesis formulation. Here, the question arises whether a higher or lower degree of aggressiveness towards the brand will be more harmful to its reputation. In this case, it is to be expected that a more aggressive spoof will have a stronger impact on the brand. The very nature of the term "aggressive" suggests that one is dealing with forms of offenses, insults, and mischievousness that attempt to put harm on their opponent. Thus, the third and final hypothesis is proposed:

H₃: The more aggressive a spoof illustration, the more harmful it is to a brand's reputation.

5.3 Survey Analysis

The aforementioned hypotheses will be critically assessed in the following section, by analyzing the empirical data that was collected in the online self-completion questionnaire. First, descriptive statistics will give an overview of the respondents' demographics, the spoof illustration dimensions and the attitude towards the brand's reputation. After mapping all survey illustrations into the developed framework, findings of inferential statistics will provide a basis to assess the three hypotheses of this paper. An overview of all 16 spoof illustrations that have been used in the web survey can be found in Appendix 1.

Descriptive Statistics

After preparing and editing the data set, the total census consists of 501 participants being divided between the cases of BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill ($n = 243$) and the Volkswagen Dieselgate ($n = 258$). Before conducting inferential methods, the most relevant descriptive findings will be highlighted in the following section.

Demographics

The census consists of 248 male (49.5%) and 253 female (50.5%) participants and shows the following respondents' age groups distribution: 18-24 years ($n = 228$, 45.5%), 25-34 years ($n = 225$, 44.9%) and 35 years and above ($n = 48$, 9.6%). Furthermore, the question regarding the participants' nationality reveal that respondents come from 44 different countries. The majority of participants are from Germany ($n = 232$, 46.3%), Austria ($n = 76$, 15.2%) and Sweden ($n = 60$, 12.0%), while 11 participants (2.2%) did not indicate their nationality. All in all, demographic statistics reveal a gender and case balanced census consisting of rather young and mainly European respondents. A detailed overview of all demographic variables and their distribution for each case can be found in Appendix 3 and 4.

Brand Reputation

The reputation is measured on a multi-item scale before and after displaying eight spoof illustrations in each case. The four subscale items of the *RepTrak™ Pulse* reputation measurement model by Ponzi, Fombrun and Gardberg (2011) are measured on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Before combining these four items (good feeling, trust, admiration and

overall reputation assessment) into overall brand reputation variables, the internal reliability of the subscales is assured by calculating Cronbach's alpha. Measuring the average of all subscale reliability coefficients, Cronbach's alpha is used to check the internal reliability of the multi-item scales (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This test reveals that the *RepTrak™ Pulse* subscales show an excellent internal consistency ($\alpha \geq 0.9$), reporting that all reputation scales indicate a level of 0.91 or above (Malhotra, 2010). Therefore, the means of the subscales are averaged to the overall reputation variables *BP Reputation Before*, *BP Reputation After*, *VW Reputation VW Before* and *VW Reputation After*. To measure the effect of the displayed illustrations the variables *BP Reputation Impact* and *VW Reputation Impact* are created by subtracting the respective reputation variables *before* from *after*.

In the case of *VW*, a negative *Reputation Impact* ($M = -.28$, $SD = .64$) is explored, since the overall *Reputation* variables indicate a mean difference *before* ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.34$), and *after* ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.40$) being exposed by eight spoof illustrations. Similar results are found in the case of *BP* with a larger negative mean *Reputation Impact* ($M = -.40$, $SD = .70$). While the Reputation of *BP* is generally perceived lower than the reputation of *VW*, the reputation fell from 2.93 ($SD = 1.25$) *before* to 2.53 ($SD = 1.25$) *after* seeing the spoof illustrations. These first findings reveal a mean difference with a negative impact on brand reputation and are illustrated in Figure 24.

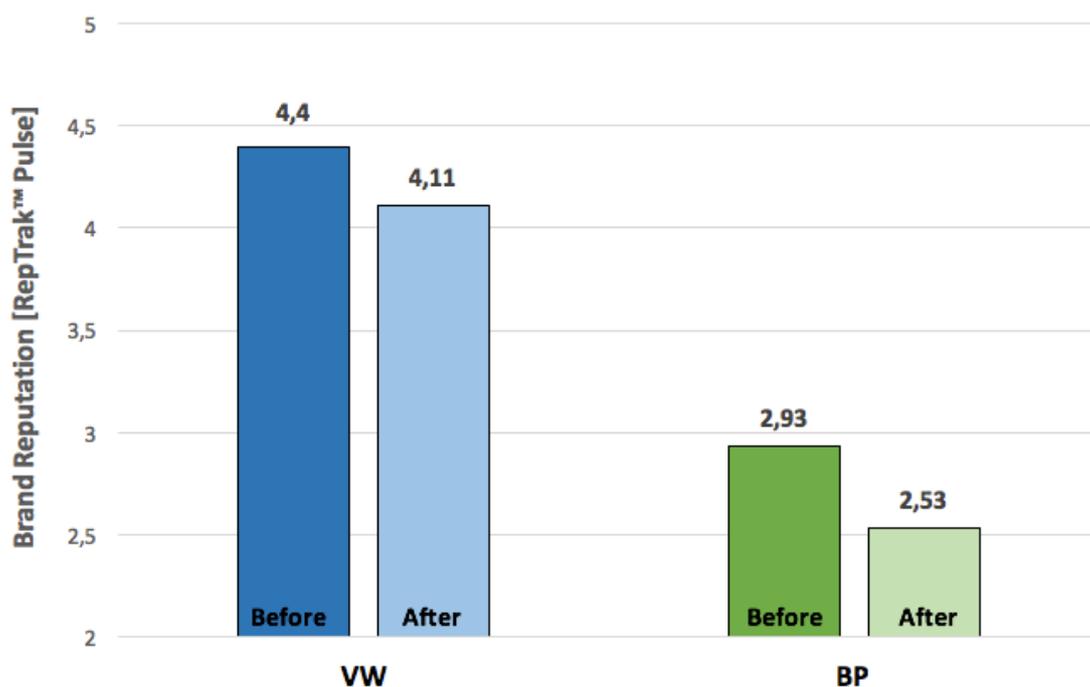


Figure 24 Brand Reputation Before and After Spoofs

The displayed mean differences will be analyzed further in the analytical statistic section of this chapter. A detailed summary of all reputation variables can be found in Appendix 5.

Spoof Illustration Dimensions

After demonstrating the descriptive findings of the reputation variables, the respondent's perception towards the spoof illustrations will be presented in the following section. In particular, the framework dimensions *Humorousness* and *Aggressiveness* as well as the potential harm towards the portrayed brand will be presented and subsequently mapped into the Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework.

Humorousness

The framework dimension *Humorousness* is measured on a bipolar 100-point-scale ranging from 0 = serious to 100 = humorous, whereas the starting point is indicated at point 50, to measure the participant's tendency. The most humorous perceived illustration in the VW case is the "VW Faked Test" illustration showing a mean of 74.12 ($SD = 18.60$) on the *Humorousness* framework dimension. Contrariwise the most serious perceived illustration in this case is the "VW Girl Filter" image with a mean of 19.44 ($SD = 21.56$). In the case of BP, the "BP Pelican" illustration shows the most serious tendency with a mean of 21.46 ($SD = 18.92$), the "BP Tuna" spoof a rather moderate humorousness ($M = 46.93$, $SD = 27.46$) and the "BP Stupid" image was considered the most humorous illustration with a mean of 66.40 ($SD = 23.36$). The most extreme spoofs of the BP case are illustrated in Figure 25, ranging from least humorous (left) to most humorous (right).



Figure 25 Spoof Examples for Framework Dimension *Humorousness*

Aggressiveness

The framework dimension *aggressiveness* is measured on a 100-point-scale ranging from 0 = less aggressive to 100 = more aggressive, while the starting point is indicated at point 50 to measure the participant's tendency. The most aggressive perceived illustration in the VW case is the "VW Girl Filter" illustration showing a mean of 79.67 ($SD = 20.90$) on the *Aggressiveness* dimension. In contrast, the least aggressive perceived illustration in this case is the "VW Faked Test" image with a mean of 28.01 ($SD = 21.50$). In the case of BP, the "BP Sorry" illustration shows the least aggressive tendency with a mean of 37.55 ($SD = 21.18$), the "BP Lesson" spoof a moderate aggressiveness ($M = 49.11$, $SD = 22.77$) and the "BP Earth" illustration the most aggressive tendency 66.12 ($SD = 21.82$) of all BP spoof illustrations. The most extreme spoofs of the BP case are illustrated in Figure 26, ranging from least aggressive (left) to most aggressive (right).



Figure 26 Spoof Examples for Framework Dimension *Aggressiveness*

Harmfulness

The variable *harmfulness* is measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = "not at all harmful" to 5 = "extremely harmful". The most harmful perceived illustration in the BP case is the "BP Pelican" illustration showing a mean of 3.54 ($SD = 1.07$) representing a tendency towards the scale option "very harmful". Contrariwise the least harmful perceived illustration in this case is the "BP Sorry" image with a mean of 2.49 ($SD = 1.03$) representing a tendency to be "slightly harmful". In the VW case the "VW Faked Test" illustration shows the least harmful tendency with a mean of 2.14 ($SD = .91$), the "VW Stinkbug" is perceived as "moderately harmful" ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.08$) and the "VW Girl Filter" spoof is most harmful ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.08$) towards the reputation of

the VW brand. The most extreme spoofs illustrations of the VW case are illustrated in Figure 27 ranging from least harmful (left) to most harmful (right). Additionally, a detailed descriptive analysis of all spoof illustrations variables can be found in Appendix 6 and 7.

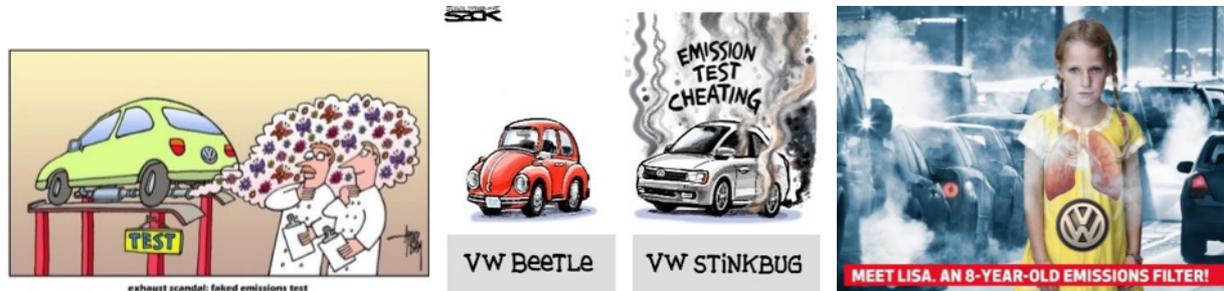


Figure 27 Examples of Slightly, Moderately and Very Harmful Spoofs

Mapping of Visuals in Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework

After demonstrating the most extreme examples of every dimension and case, the following analysis will provide an overall overview and tendency of harmfulness of the analyzed spoofs. Therefore, all 16 illustrations are plotted into the framework (see Figure 28) using the mean of each illustration's framework dimensions and the arithmetic mean of the explored harmfulness-index (*HI*: 1 = not at all harmful, 2 = slightly harmful, 3 = moderately harmful, 4 = very harmful and 5 = extremely harmful). The *harmfulness-index (HI)* is represented additionally in the size and color of the circles (dark green: $HI \leq 2.5$, light green: $2.5 < HI \leq 3.0$, yellow: $3.0 < HI \leq 3.5$ and red: $HI > 3.5$).

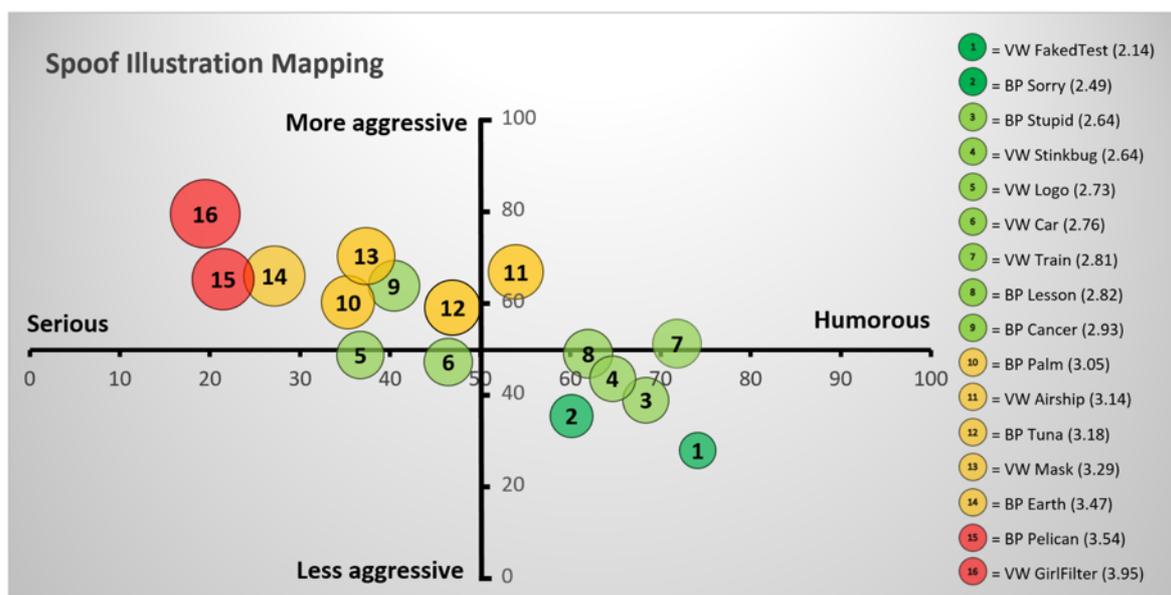


Figure 28 RSIF-Mapping of Survey Spoof Illustrations

A first tendency can be seen, which suggests that the most harmful illustrations are rather serious and more aggressive, while the least harmful illustrations are rather humorous and less aggressive. This consideration will be tested further in the following section.

Analytical Statistics

After presenting the general descriptive findings of this study, the following chapter will focus on analytical statistics. While there is still an ongoing discussion about the applicability of inferential statistics in census data, testing will be used in this study only as a guide for deciding whether or not an observed effect (e.g. impact on brand reputation) is worth interpreting. Therefore, results will only be used for the purpose of exploring and describing tendencies in a new phenomenon, gained as a benchmark in this pilot study. First, a mean comparison analysis will illustrate if there is a tendency for a negative reputation impact caused by spoof illustrations. Second, a Spearman correlation coefficient analysis will explore linear relationships between the framework dimensions *Humorousness* and *Aggressiveness* on the *Harmfulness* towards the portrayed brand's reputation. Third and final, a multiple linear-regression model will be estimated to explore which dimension might have a stronger impact on the reputation of a targeted brand.

Impact on Brand Reputation

To test for an existence of a negative reputation impact caused by the displayed spoof illustrations, a *t*-Test for depended variables is conducted. Therefore, arithmetic means of two sample groups (here: reputation before and reputation after being exposed to the spoof illustrations) are compared and the variance between and within the groups are analyzed (Malhotra, 2010). A *t*-Test for dependent samples is completed for both cases VW and BP. In the case of VW, a significant negative effect on a brand's reputation is explored comparing the Reputation *Before* ($M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.34$), and *After* ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.40$) being exposed to the spoof illustrations, $t(242) = 8.84$, $p < 0.001$. This same finding is achieved analyzing the *BP Reputation Before* ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.25$) and *After* ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.25$, $t(257) = 7.07$, $p < 0.001$). Since both cases disclose a significant difference, it can be assumed that spoof illustrations

have a negative impact on a brand's reputation. Therefore, these findings (summarized in Table 6) support the first hypothesis H_1 of this research paper.

Table 6 Reputation Impact Analysis (Dependent *t*-Test Results)

Case	<i>Before</i>		<i>After</i>		<i>t-test</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>T</i>
BP Reputation	2.94	1.25	2.53	1.14	242	8.84**
VW Reputation	4.4	1.34	4.11	1.40	257	7.07**

Note. ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Relationship Between Harmfulness and Framework Dimensions

Before exploring relationships between the framework dimensions *Humorousness* and *Aggressiveness* on the *Harmfulness* towards the portrayed brand's reputation, the data set has to be adjusted. In order to conduct summary statistics of combined variables (e.g. all aggressive illustration ratings), "stacking" techniques can be used as a more straightforward way, instead of measuring the effect of every single variable separately (Malhotra, 2010). When respondents give equal contribution to the same questions about multiple occasions (here: towards different spoof illustrations), a data file can be stacked to place all sample values in one single column (Malhotra, 2010). Since every respondent rates eight illustrations on the same scales, the stacked variables *Humorousness*, *Aggressiveness* and *Harmfulness* consequently consist of 4008 stacked observations that are used for further analytical statistics ($k = 501$ respondents \times 8 illustrations = 4008 stacked observations for each variable).

To explore the linear relationship between those variables a Spearman's correlation analysis is conducted. This method examines the relationship between ordinal (here: *harmfulness*) and interval variables (here: *humorousness* and *aggressiveness*) (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The Spearman's correlation analysis reveals that within this population the *Humorousness* of a spoof illustration is negatively correlated ($r(4006) = -.376$, $p < .001$) with the *Harmfulness* towards the portrayed brand. This is a first indicator that more humorous perceived spoof illustrations might generally be less

harmful towards the portrayed brand's reputation and supports the proposition of the second hypothesis H_2 of this research paper.

In contrast, analyzing the correlation of the perceived *Aggressiveness* of spoof illustrations with the *Harmfulness* towards the portrayed brand's reputation, Spearman's coefficient indicates a positive correlation within this population ($r(4006) = .479, p < .001$). A spoof illustration that is perceived as more aggressive seems to harm a portrayed brand's reputation more than a less aggressive perceived illustration. These findings support the third hypothesis H_3 of this thesis. To conclude, Table 7 presents the results of the Spearman's correlation analysis among the illustration variables. To further examine the relationships between these variables, a linear regression analysis is conducted next.

Table 7 Spearman's Correlation Analysis Among Illustration Variables

Variables	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>Humorousness</i>	<i>Aggressiveness</i>	<i>Harmfulness</i>
Humorousness	46.47 (29.05)	-	-.475**	-.376**
Aggressiveness	56.90 (25.81)	-.475**	-	.479**
Harmfulness	3.00 (1.12)	-.376**	.479**	-

Note. $k = 501 \times 8$ illustrations = 4008 stacked observations, ** $p < .01$ (2-tailed).

Harmfulness of Spoof Illustration Dimensions

As an approximate approach, a multiple linear regression analysis is conducted to further examine the relationships between the illustration variables and to develop a hypothetical model for predicting the harm of spoof illustrations. Additionally, a regression analysis is executed to further examine the linear relationships that are explored in the aforementioned section. A linear regression analysis is a statistical tool to estimate the relationships and causing effects of independent variables (here: *Humorousness* and *Aggressiveness*) on depended variables (here: *Harmfulness*), while executing statistical modeling techniques (Malhotra, 2010)

This multiple regression analysis (detailed results displayed in Appendix 8) reveals a significant regression equation ($F(2, 4005) = 659.56, p < .001$), with an adjusted R^2 of .247. Consequently, the variables *Humorousness* and *Aggressiveness* can explain approximately 25 % of the variation in *Harmfulness* towards the portrayed brand. The following regression formula is assumed for the analyzed population:

$$\text{Harmfulness} = 2.419 - .008 (\text{Humorousness}) + .016 (\text{Aggressiveness})$$

Considering the standardized beta coefficients of the calculated model, *Aggressiveness* seems to have a greater impact than *Humorousness* (.377 > -.195) on *Harmfulness*. Since the adjusted R^2 of this model is only .247, the variability explained and goodness-of-fit of this model seems to be rather low. However, there are no indications of multicollinearity since no variable shows a *VIF* higher than 10 and a *collinearity condition index* of higher than 15 (see Appendix 8). Furthermore, a scatter plot of the saved residuals and the independent variables *Humorousness* and *Aggressiveness* show a fairly constant residual variance and seem to be homoscedastic (see Appendix 8). Additionally, a histogram and a normal probability plot illustrate that the residuals are normally distributed (see Appendix 8). Therefore, all assumptions for a linear regression can be confirmed.

All in all, this model can be used to draw the conclusion that *Aggressiveness* has a greater impact than *Humorousness* on the *Harmfulness* of a portrayed brand, even if this significant model indicates a rather low goodness-of-fit. Furthermore, the positive correlation between *Aggressiveness* and *Harmfulness* as well as the negative relationship between *Humorousness* and *Harmfulness* are again explored in this approximate regression approach. Therefore, these findings further support both hypothesis H_2 and H_3 of this thesis. The following chapter will now elaborate and discuss all findings of this research project.

6 DISCUSSION

The following chapter will discuss the findings of this research project and compare the results with selected research literature. Saying this, it needs to be highlighted that this exploratory study is one of the first comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon of online spoof illustrations that address the context of a reputational brand crisis. Therefore, findings will be compared to research of other brand parody formats and will reflect upon general reputation and crisis management literature.

The Phenomenon of Spoof Illustrations: Why Was It Not Explored Before?

Before discussing both qualitative and quantitative findings of this study, an essential question need to be raised. Why has this phenomenon not been explored before? Further, one might wonder: Was it simply overlooked? Not taken seriously? Or was it falling off the map, with other incidents being more pressing during a corporate crisis? These questions need to be discussed in order to present and highlight the relevance of this research project. In fact, researchers (e.g. Greyser, 2009) as well as professional service firms (such as Deloitte, 2013) alert that a significant loss of reputation is one of the top strategic risks brands are facing today. So why was this phenomenon not taken into consideration?

First, it could be deliberated that the impact and damage of a single spoof might not be fundamentally harmful towards a brand, especially when a brand has gathered a sophisticated reputational reservoir (Markwick & Fill, 1997; Wartick, 1992). Certainly, there is no doubt that personal experience, word-of-mouth, and mass media information can form and influence a reputation positively as well as negatively (Bromley, 2000). But are there enough or particularly harmful spoofs to actually have a significant impact on a brand's reputation? This question can be answered by looking at the data screening and illustration collection process of this study. An unimaginable amount of spoofs was found in the online sphere, being replicated and shared on a multitude of blogs, social media channels, news and other web portals. The invention of the Internet accelerated the speed of information distribution and makes individual and local issues go public and global in just a few seconds (González-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Hence, spoofs have a rather unpredictable online outreach and cannot be overlooked any longer.

Second, since parody is dating back in history and is certainly not a new phenomenon, one could argue that it is a given and sufficiently explored subject. Looking back in time and considering the impact of a parodic local newspaper caricatures or radio sketches, these parodies seemed to be rather predictable. However, contrary to traditional mass media, the web became an engaging platform where all users can express their opinion and create their own content easily (Bokor, 2014). Generally knowing that online word-of-mouth is often expressing more anti-corporate attitudes (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002) and mostly contains negative emotions (Brummette & Fussell Sisco, 2015), brands are continuously attacked online. Especially in a crisis, where the most cited emotions are negatively related (e.g. anger, anxiety, schadenfreude or resentment; Coombs & Holladay, 2005), this phenomenon can lead up to a so called brand “firestorm”, where a brand is attacked by a huge amount of negative related content online (Pfeffer, Zorbach & Carley, 2014). These negative emotions and anti-corporate attitudes are present in spoofs as well. For examples spoofs that are assigned to the framework category “insulting” represent serious and more aggressive illustrations, and revealed to be the most harmful spoofs in regards to the findings. All this leads to the assumption that the scope and intensity of professional and user-generated parodies was revolutionized by the Internet and that the phenomenon of online spoof illustrations has to be taken seriously.

In conclusion, the relevance and urgency of this phenomenon can be affirmed. What used to be graffiti on the wall or a mocking cartoon in the local newspaper, is today a world-wide piece of communication with the potential to stain a brand, especially in a context of a reputational crisis. Therefore, this phenomenon cannot be overlooked and has to be taken seriously today. Since this is the first study to comprehensively explore and analyze the phenomenon of online spoof illustrations during a brand crisis, it should be seen as a basis and inspiration for further research. But what about the impact of those spoofs? How harmful are they really for the targeted brand?

The Impact of Spoofs on a Brand’s Reputation – How Harmful Are They?

Besides exploring the phenomenon of online spoof illustrations, the purpose of this paper was to investigate the impact on a brand’s reputation. Can spoof illustrations actually change stakeholder attitudes towards a brand? Do they harm a brand’s reputation in a crisis? These questions were addressed at the beginning of this study.

Literature showed that there is a phenomenon called “online brand destruction effect”, where customers or business partners are attacking a brand via critical online communication (Bokor, 2014). Arguably, such user-generated content, in which brands are criticized or even attacked, can be particularly seen during a reputational crisis. The finding that high-aroused negative online content is more likely to become viral clearly shows the uncontrollable harm that derives from such content (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

But what about the parodic elements of such content? Is it only perceived as a funny piece of communication, or can parody be actually harmful and change the attitudes of the viewer? Answering these questions, research findings show contradicting results. While Villarreal, Thota and Blozis (2012) found that humorously hijacked advertisements have a negative impact on the viewer’s attitudes, Parguel and Lunardo (2010) explored that humorous anti-tobacco brand spoof ads generate more positive (e.g. fun, laughing) than negative emotions (such as dislike and fear).

This thesis, being a pioneer study exploring parodic online illustrations in the context of a reputational crisis, found a significant negative impact on a brand’s reputation. Measured before and after showing eight spoof illustrations to the survey respondents, the reputation in both cases (BP and VW) was significantly harmed. Both hypotheses predicting the harmfulness of spoof illustrations were supported by the derived data of the web survey. Findings revealed that the more humorous a spoof is perceived, the less harmful it is for a brand. In contrast, the more aggressive a spoof is perceived, the more harmful a spoof is for a brand. This leads to two conclusions that can be seen as answers to the questions identified in the literature above. First, spoofs and parodies are not necessarily seen as humorous, but can just as much evoke serious feelings. This is certainly supported by the fact that a crisis is generally not a funny occasion. Second, humor can affect people’s attitudes, but to a much lesser degree than when spoof illustrations are considered to be serious and aggressive. Vanden Bergh et al. (2011) found a similar relationship analyzing online spoof advertising videos. Their findings revealed a positive influence of the variable humor and a negative influence of the variable offensiveness on the attitude towards the presented spoof ad videos. Therefore, the findings of this study support the argument that brand

parody can be harmful towards brands, especially in the context of a reputational crisis.

Consequentially, the question arises, what does this negative impact mean for a targeted brand? First, it has to be said that a single spoof will not immediately destroy a company's entire reputation. In fact, individuals will at first be unwilling to change their assessment of a company's reputation when they are exposed to negative information (Wartick, 1992). However, the results of this study show a significant decline in brand perception towards the reputation of the portrayed brand. Since the participants were neutrally reminded about the crisis context before rating the brand's reputation for the first time, this negative impact can be seen as an isolated effect only caused by the displayed spoofs. Still, this impact should be considered a rather short-term effect in participant's minds. However, being constantly exposed to spoofs in the online sphere could arguably change attitudes and attack a brand's reputational reservoir in the long term as well. In general, the appearance of spoofs should be seen as an additional crisis-related tool of external stakeholders, which they use to display their opinion and fuel critical and negatively afflicted content towards a brand. Therefore, spoofs are one of many pieces of critical communication that together can strongly harm a brand's reputation. But how can such a complex phenomenon be assessed, suit the circumstances of a crisis, and be evaluated quickly? The developed framework of this study provides a solution for spoof evaluation and instant action in a crisis.

Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework: A Tool for Spoof Evaluation?

A specific framework for spoof illustrations, namely the "Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework" (RSIF), was developed in this research project. The insights from the structuralist semiotic reduction analysis of this study were included in the framework development, which was guided by principles of grounded theory. Interestingly, the attribute collection, which was conducted in order to confirm the developed framework, showed a similar result to the findings of Parguel and Lunardo (2010), who analyzed different emotions in social media anti-brand spoof advertising comments. Comparable to the findings of this study, the most mentioned emotions were "funny", "bad", and "stupid". Therefore, similar attributes were found both in literature and self-

conducted research, which provides a solid fundamental basis and proof for the developed framework.

The conceptual two-dimensional framework RSIF, with “Humorousness” on the X-axis and “Aggressiveness” on the Y-axis, reveals four categories of spoofs, namely “Resenting”, “Insulting”, “Mocking”, and “Gloating”. Interestingly, the developed dimensions are closely related to general parody classifications found in literature. Rose (1993) classified parody in general by the two dimensions humor/playful wit and disparagement/ridicule. Furthermore, Vanden Bergh et al., (2011), who categorize user-generated ad parody videos in social media, conducted an attribute collection and discovered the following four primary dimensions of video advertising parodies: humor, truth, mockery, and offensiveness. Since these dimensions are developed only for video material in social media and not for illustrations, and without referring to a crisis context, it is interesting to see that they reflect similar dimensions and categories developed in the RSIF. Therefore, it could be argued that the developed framework might be applicable to other spoof formats or brand parody research in general as well.

However, it can already be said that the Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework is applicable to all online spoof illustrations. Not only all detected illustrations of this study, including all types of spoof formats (caricatures and cartoons, macro-images, photographs and subvertisings) were able to be mapped on the RSIF, but also web survey results quantified and proved the existence of all framework categories. Here it has to be said that an individual perception of a single illustration varies a lot, since the sense of humor and emotions can be extremely different for individuals (Vanden Bergh et al., 2011). However, the RSIF revealed to be a suitable tool to evaluate an overall feeling towards spoofs and to categorize them quickly. The classification into the four framework categories “Resenting”, “Insulting”, “Mocking”, and “Gloating” additionally helps to predict the harmfulness of a spoof illustration. As described before, the results of the web survey showed clearly that spoofs that fall into the category “Mocking” are the least harmful, spoofs in the categories “Gloating” and “Resenting” are moderately harmful, and spoofs that are evaluated as “Insulting” illustrations are most harmful towards the targeted brand. The subjective harmfulness was evaluated by every respondent and for every single spoof illustration. Therefore,

the direct harm of an illustration was assessed. By evaluating the overall harmfulness of spoof illustrations, however, the finding of Sabri and Michel (2014) should be taken into consideration. They explored that the more humorous a parody is perceived, the higher the attention and larger the dissemination of a spoof will be. Thus, even spoofs of the category “Mocking” can become extremely harmful for a brand, when being spread to a larger scope of online users. Furthermore, it should be noted that these findings reflect tendencies that are based on two brand crisis cases, 4008 stacked observations and 501 survey respondents. To ensure and confirm the strong results of this paper, further research should be conducted using other crisis cases or a variety of different spoof illustrations.

All in all, the Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework represents a powerful tool for both researchers and brand managers to categorize spoof illustrations and quickly assess the harmfulness of any spoof. It comprises all relevant characteristics of a conceptual framework - it predicts what direction the spoof will take, what the consequences might be, and what a firm might then do (Berthon & Pitt, 2012). Arguably, the framework can be even used without a crisis context and assess the harmfulness of any spoof illustration. These considerations will be developed in the following last chapter of this thesis. The findings of this paper will be summarized, future theoretical and managerial implications described, and the limitations of this study addressed.

7 CONCLUSION

As discussed in the introduction, this thesis set out to give a comprehensive first overview on the phenomenon that was named *spoof illustration* and was defined as images that “address or criticize brands by using brand elements or parodies of them”. While this definition is still valid, it can be expanded to summarize the particular object of study of this thesis: “Spoof illustrations are images that can be found online and are created by external stakeholders (be it professionals or amateurs). They address or criticize a brand in the context of a reputational crisis by using brand elements or parodies of them”. To investigate these spoof illustrations, over 500 visuals from three brand crises (Volkswagen “Dieselgate”, BP Deepwater Horizon, Barclays LIBOR scandal) were collected and qualitatively analyzed. This research also gathered quantitative data by conducting an online survey with 501 respondents. All of this material achieved to answer the two research questions presented at the beginning of the study, which will now be assessed in detail:

RQ₁: What are the characteristics of spoof illustrations, and how can they be categorized?

It was found that spoof illustrations can come in many different forms, from various sources, and at different points of time in a crisis. From a contextual perspective, this means that spoofs are not just created and shared by highly involved activist groups or bloggers, but just as much from individuals on social media as well as reputable newspapers. It is thus a phenomenon that can be found in all parts of society. It was further found that the majority of spoof images will not necessarily occur shortly after a crisis breaks out, but at the point when public opinion turns against the brand. This was the situation with the BP oil spill, where the organization was incapable of stopping the spill for several months and thus faced increasing criticism. From a semiotic perspective, various types of illustration and content elements have been identified that characterize spoof illustrations. Table 9 summarizes these findings.

Table 8 Overview of Type and Content Elements of Spoof Illustrations

Illustration Type	Description
Subvertisements	Take brand elements (logo, advertisements, slogan, etc.) and alter them to turn the message against the brand
Cartoons	Depict events caused by the crisis in an exaggerated way, using generic actors and situations
Caricatures	Similar to cartoons, but refer to real-life actors (e.g. CEO). Extensive use of metaphors
Photographs	Usually depict the product, brand, or people involved in an unfavorable way (often taken out of context) to criticize the situation
Image Macros	Pictures that are superimposed with text, always in the same font. Can be created by anyone online in a matter of seconds
Content Elements	
Logo, Slogan, Brand Name, Product, Stakeholder (Executives, Political Actors, Victims), Pop Culture, Situational Artifacts	

When it comes to the categorization of spoof pictures, this thesis introduced the *Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework (RSIF)*, which allows an evaluation of the images on the dimensions *Humorousness* and *Aggressiveness*. These dimensions make up four categories, namely *Resenting*, *Insulting*, *Gloating*, and *Mocking*. Figure 29 gives an overview of the framework.

The quantitative part of this study investigated the second research question, which looked at the consequences of spoof illustrations and their implications for brands and their reputation:

RQ₂: *Do spoof illustrations have an impact on a brand's reputation in a crisis?*

To answer this question, the reputation of either BP or Volkswagen was assessed in the questionnaire both before and after being exposed to eight spoof illustration of the respective crisis. In both cases, the perceived reputation decreased significantly. It can thus be concluded that spoof illustrations indeed exert a negative influence on the

reputation of a brand in crisis, and should thus be carefully monitored. It was further achieved to reveal which of the four categories of the RSIF are especially harmful. The less humorous a spoof picture, the more harmful it is; Likewise, the higher the level of aggressiveness, the higher its harmfulness towards a targeted brand. Therefore, it can be concluded that spoof illustrations that fall into the *Mocking* category are comparatively the least harmful ones. *Gloating* and *Resenting* can be seen as moderately harmful categories, while *Insulting* images are the most harmful ones to a brand's reputation. The color code illustrated these conclusions in Figure 29.

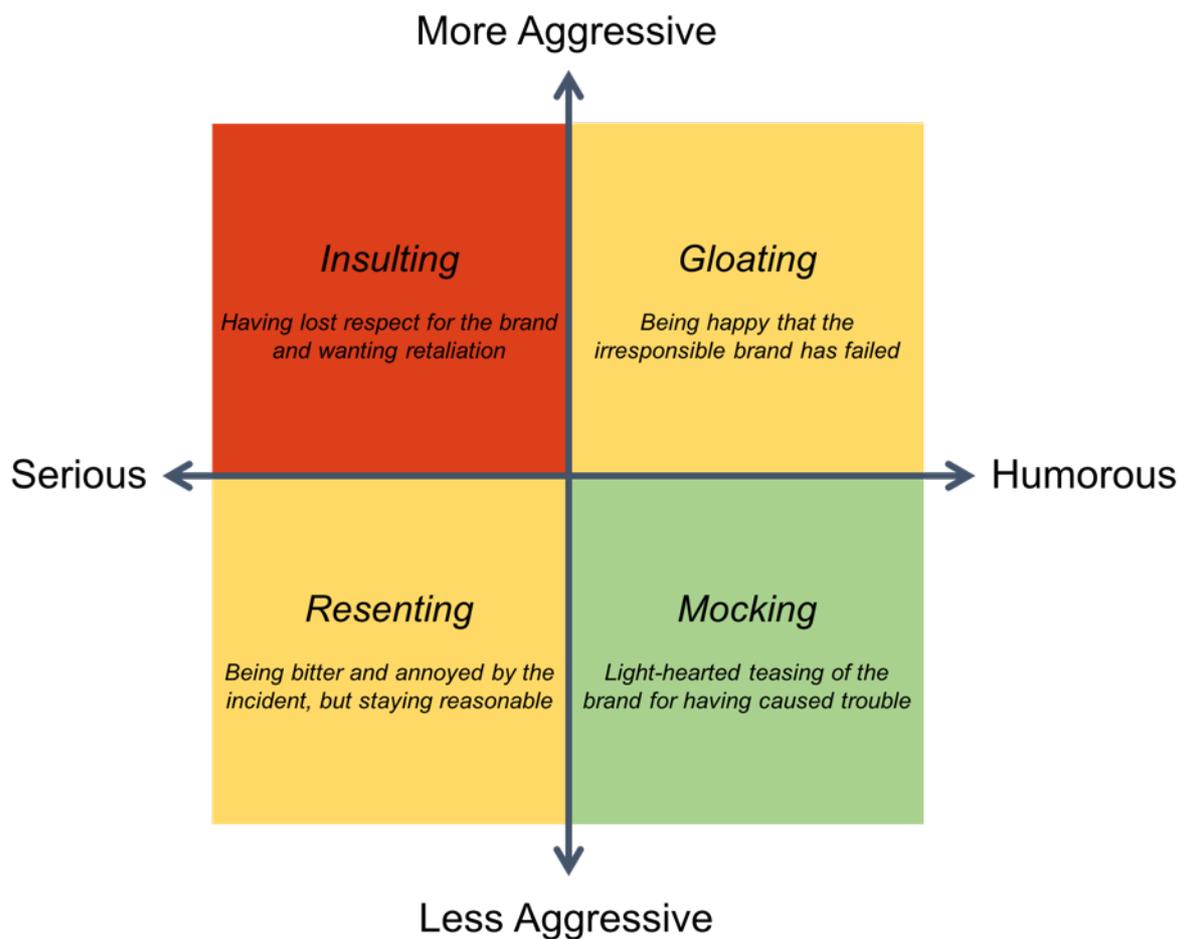


Figure 29 Concluding Overview of Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

As noted several times throughout the paper, this thesis has taken an exploratory approach to investigating spoof illustrations, as existing literature has mostly neglected this phenomenon so far. Thus, this study has not only taken inspiration from several related theoretical fields, but its results likewise contribute to them. These results are especially of interest in the fields of (online) crisis- and reputation management, strategic brand management, and stakeholder relations. More precisely, there are three main theoretical contributions of this thesis that can be highlighted:

The phenomenon of spoof illustrations has been defined. The thesis achieved to provide a definition of spoof illustrations that can be taken as the foundation of future research on this topic. To enrich this foundation, it has been shown in what contexts and time frames such spoofs can occur. Furthermore, the analysis of the types of illustration (caricatures, photographs, etc.) and content (e.g. logo, stakeholder, pop culture) that are prominent in spoof pictures did not only provide a denotative and descriptive overview. It just as much delivered connotative insights that should further help to understand the stakeholders' emotions and the tools they are using to express them in the occasion of a brand crisis.

The *Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework (RSIF)* has been introduced. Not only has this thesis achieved to come up with the dimensions and categories of the framework, but the RSIF has also been tested and confirmed in a quantitative matter. It has further been concluded that a higher level of aggressiveness and a lower degree of humorousness of spoof illustrations increase the harmfulness towards the targeted brand's reputation. Thus, the framework provides important additions to theories in reputation- and crisis management as well as brand criticism and -parody. It can further be considered to apply the framework to more than just corporate brands. In fact, any entity that could be considered a brand, be it countries, celebrities, or institutions (cf. Kapferer, 2012), can use the framework to assess the harmfulness of the spoofs they are faced with. Similarly, it can be considered to use the RSIF for other formats of brand parody and criticism.

Substantial gaps in the literature have been filled. First of all, it has been mentioned earlier that spoof illustrations have only been sparsely studied before. This thesis thus provides an addition to existing literature on a topic that will undoubtedly only grow bigger and become more important in the years to come. Apart from that, the study succeeded in addressing further gaps that had been identified by other researchers. For example, both Bokor (2014) and Sabri and Michel (2014) called for a better understanding of critical online visuals and user-generated brand parodies to assess their impact and harmfulness on a brand and its reputation. Similarly, Bal et al. (2009) wanted to know what elements of a brand will be spoofed, and with what means this would happen. The analysis of content- and illustrations types has provided an extensive answer to this question, especially thanks to the use of a sequential mixed method approach that has generated a considerable amount of diverse, but complimentary data.

7.2 Managerial Implications

By using real-life examples of spoofs and analyzing them in close proximity to the selected cases, this thesis has taken a rather practically oriented approach to the topic. As a result, brand managers, PR specialists, crisis managers and other executives can take the results presented in this study – be it the description of the spoofs, their categorization with the Reputational Spoof Illustrations Framework, or the assessment of their harmfulness – and apply them directly to their own brands. To summarize these practical implications, step-by-step guidelines for spoof illustrations targeted against a brand in crisis will now be presented (see also Figure 30).

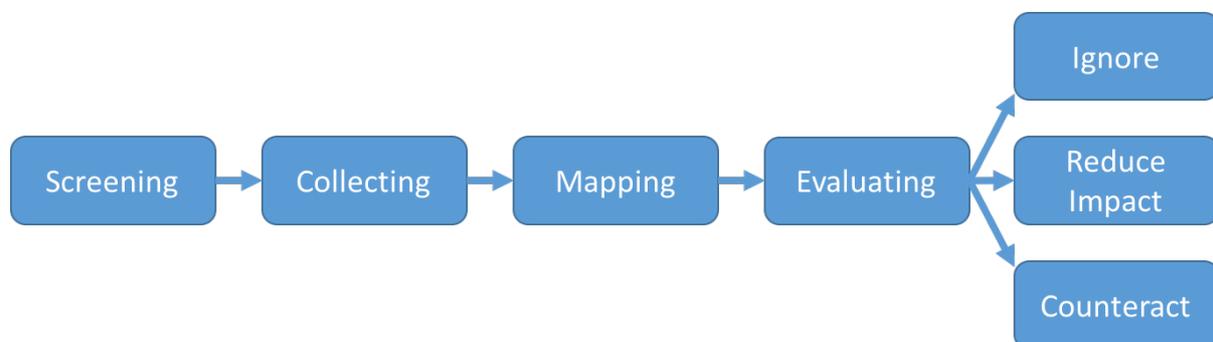


Figure 30 Operational Guidelines for Approaching Spoof Illustrations

1. Screening: If there is the suspicion that spoof illustrations are being created and shared, be it because of an on-going brand crisis or in general, it is sensible to conduct a screening of different (online) mediums. This can be done through search engines (such as a Google Image search) or on social networks. Different keywords should be used to cover as many illustrations as possible, especially those terms that are used in the news and in public discussion (such as “Dieselgate”).

2. Collecting: Should stakeholders indeed be spoofing the brand, those images need to be collected. It is recommended to set up a database in which not only the pictures, but also additional information is stored for future reference. For example, it should be noted who published it, together with a link to the source. Additionally, the time and context of the publication should be included to consider at what point in a crisis certain spoofs were created.

3. Mapping: After the spoof visuals have been collected, the *Reputational Spoof Illustrations Framework* (RSIF), which was developed in this thesis, can be applied to map and categorize the spoof illustrations. This is done by determining the level of Humorousness and Aggressiveness of every spoof and consequently placing them in the Resenting, Insulting, Mocking, or Gloating category. The images can either be mapped according to one’s own perception, or by having them assessed by multiple individuals to take decisions on more sophisticated data.

4. Evaluating: Following the mapping of the images, it needs to be evaluated if there are trends that can be derived from the completed framework. This means identifying if the spoofs are dominantly positioned in a single quadrant of the RSIF, or if they are rather evenly spread throughout the dimensions. As presented in this thesis, it is suggested that the category Mocking is the comparatively least harmful one. Spoofs that fall into the Gloating and Resenting area of the framework are moderately harmful, while those in the Insulting category are the most harmful ones.

5. Actions: After the spoofs have been collected, mapped, and evaluated, it needs to be decided how to proceed. Generally speaking, Smith-Anthony and Groom (2015) differentiate between being reactive and proactive in a crisis. This can also be applied to specifically dealing with spoof illustrations during a crisis. However, it is

recommended that these actions are aligned with the overall crisis management strategy in order to stay authentic (cf. Greyser, 2009). Three possible actions are presented:

- *Ignore*: The pictures are simply disregarded, and it is not considered that immediate action is necessary. This could be the case when there are only few spoofs available, or when they are predominantly found in the Mocking category. Still, ongoing monitoring and screening is highly recommended to continuously assess the situation.
- *Reduce Impact*: Instead of ignoring the spoofs, the brand can also think of subtly joining the conversation. This means spreading corporate pictures, such as illustrations on the company's perspective on the crisis, either on their own website or by providing it to news agencies and well-known newspapers. By doing this, it can be prevented that critical pictures of the brand take over entire search engine results. The keywords used to tag these pictures on a company's website should, however, not only be official ones ("Volkswagen crisis") but also those that are used in the public debate and are thus more likely to be searched (e.g. "Dieselgate"). These can be hidden in the meta-description of the website, for example, if they company does not want to publicly use such terms.
- *Counteract*: The brand might also decide to actively act against the spoofs. This is an option when the illustrations are offensive, make false claims, or take pieces of information out of context, which could be the case with spoofs in the Insulting category. In this situation, a brand can try to provide factual and serious counter-arguments to distance itself from such claims and accusations. In the worst case scenario – for example with extreme cases of slander – legal actions might be considered. However, it could prove difficult to identify the original creator of a highly-shared spoof. Furthermore, legal action against parodies could not succeed (as they could be considered freedom of speech) but only further fuel crisis reactions (Ramsey, 2010).

7.3 Limitations and Future Research

The variety and number of different methods used and material collected has provided an extensive insight into the field of spoof illustrations. However, the exploratory nature of the study naturally incurred limitations that will be discussed in this last part of the thesis. At the same time, these limitations shall inspire future research to extend the literature on spoof illustrations, which will only grow in importance in the following years.

First of all, the reputation of the brands used in the questionnaire (Volkswagen and BP) was assessed using the RepTrak™ Pulse model by Ponzi, Fombrun and Gardberg (2011), which was developed to provide a short-form measure of reputation, using four questions. Seeing that the goal was a high number of respondents in a limited amount of time, it was necessary to use this model in order to keep the survey as short as possible. Since the RepTrak™ Pulse has been extensively tested on its reliability and validity, this choice was more than justified. However, it would be interesting to take a more multi-dimensional form of reputation measurement to discover what parts of the reputation (such as responsibility, emotional appeal, or performance) are affected by spoof illustrations. To do this, it could for example be considered to use the Reputation Quotient (RQ) developed by Fombrun, Gardberg and Sever (2000), or the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (CBIRM) by Urde and Greyser (2016), which both split up the phenomenon of reputation into several different dimensions. Similarly, reputation was only assessed immediately after the pictures were shown. Further research could also consider to investigate the long-term effects of the spoofs.

The Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework presented in this thesis has shown that it is a powerful tool to quickly map and evaluate any spoofs that are created against a brand in crisis, be it caricatures, subvertisements, or photographs. However, it needs to be considered that both crises that were selected for the quantitative stage of the study dealt primarily with environmental issues. Additional research could therefore test if there are significant differences in the use of the framework when it comes to other crisis types, be it employee mistreatment or injuries/deaths of consumers due to product failures. Furthermore, looking at the very general nature of the RSIF, its scope

could be extended to include spoofs that target brands without referring to a specific crisis. These brands do not necessarily need to be organizations, but could also use a broader definition of the term, such as countries or celebrities (as explained in the section on theoretical contributions, p. 85).

Thirdly, it should be investigated what demographic, psychographic, or behavioral attributes might influence the perception of spoof images. An example of this could be the differentiation between customers and non-customers, and if those that buy a brand's products are, for instance, more likely to engage in reducing cognitive dissonance and trying to downplay the spoofs. Another study could investigate the involvement with a crisis, for example if the level of individual environmental consciousness affects the evaluation of spoofs of a brand that has caused an environmental disaster. Since this thesis used convenience sampling that restrict the generalizability of the results, it is thus also recommended to use probability sampling for all of these surveys (cf. Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Finally, the (online) environment in which spoof illustrations are created and shared should be further investigated. While this study has taken contextual factors into consideration, there is far more that needs to be researched. For example, who are the individuals that create spoofs? What is their motivation? Social media, especially, should be in the focus of such research – how are spoofs on Facebook, Twitter, etc. used to stimulate conversations about a brand? Why do users share them, and are there types of pictures that are more likely to be shared than others?

Answers to these questions will help to firmly establish the phenomenon of spoof illustrations in the world we live in, and help brand managers, crisis experts and academics alike to understand the power of user-generated visual criticism that is increasingly directed towards brands in crisis.

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Illustration Sources

The pictures used in this thesis were all found online, and we do not claim ownership for any of them. Despite our best efforts to track the original creators of each illustration, this was on occasion beyond our abilities. Nonetheless, the sources used for every image depicted in this study shall be presented in the following table:

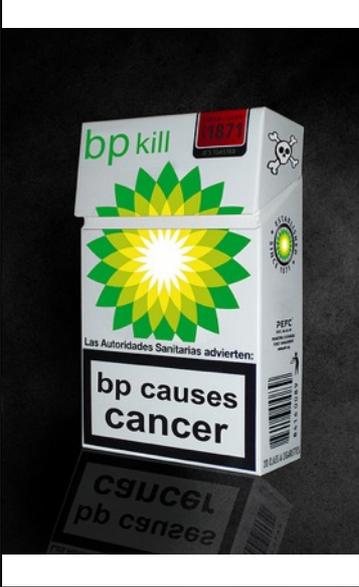
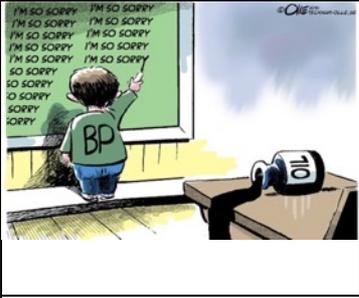
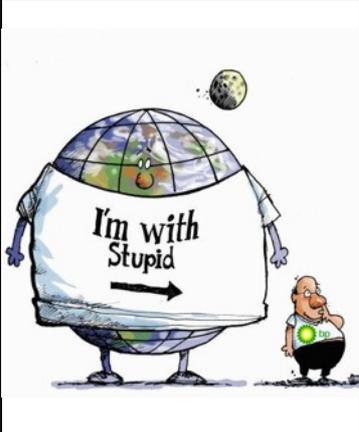
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Figure 8a	http://draketoulouse.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/bpbloglogo21.jpg
Figure 8b	http://www.marketingdirecto.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/vw4.jpg
Figure 8c	https://holdouts.files.wordpress.com/2012/07/axce3q7cqaewfe7.jpg
Figure 9a	http://www.cartoonistgroup.com/properties/anderson/art_images/cg4c074a16d9bfa.jpg
Figure 9b	http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/03451/240915-MATT-WEB_34_3451896b.jpg
Figure 10a	http://www.cartoonaday.com/images/cartoons/2010/05/BP-Oil-Executive-Plug-01-598x404.jpg
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Figure 11c	http://static01.nyt.com/images/2010/08/11/business/11BP/11BP-popup.jpg
Figure 11d	http://forward-now.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Gulf-Oil-Spill-Allocated-Settlement-298x300.jpg
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Figure 15	http://goodlifetimes.com/images/images-didyouknow/bp-logos/4751453949_760edf1ac8.jpg/image_mini
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Figure 21	http://www.davegranlund.com/cartoons/2010/06/14/bp-ceo-tony-hayward/
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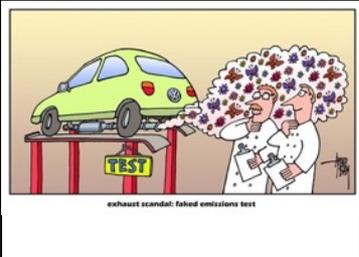
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Figure 26b	https://www.theguardian.com/business/cartoon/2010/sep/07/bp-deepwater-horizon-oil-spill-birds
Figure 26c	http://loe.org/images/content/100611/bpEarth.jpg
Figure 27a	http://media.cagle.com/107/2015/09/22/169122_600.jpg
Figure 27b	http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_144304921221935.jpg
Figure 27c	https://staticseekingalpha.a.ssl.fastly.net/uploads/2015/11/4/saupload_DieselGate_2BLisa_2BEmission_2BFilter.jpg (slightly adapted)

9 APPENDIX

Appendix 1 Overview of Spoof Illustrations Used in Web Survey, Including Sources

	BP Cancer	http://farm5.static.flickr.com/4135/4751473901_65a34b0df9.jpg
	BP Sorry	http://www.tecknar-olle.se/?p=2849
	BP Stupid	http://activerain.com/image_store/uploads/4/9/5/4/2/ar127682483624594.jpg

 <p>KipperWilliams SO WHAT LESSON HAS BEEN LEARNT? PELICANS FLY BETTER WHEN THEY'RE NOT COVERED IN OIL</p>	<p>BP Lesson</p>	<p>https://www.theguardian.com/business/cartoon/2010/sep/07/bp-deepwater-horizon-oil-spill-birds</p>
 <p>bp Now, all tuna from the gulf coast comes pre-packaged in oil.</p>	<p>BP Tuna</p>	<p>http://www.iridetheharlemline.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/1bp8-600x376.jpg</p>
	<p>BP Earth</p>	<p>http://loe.org/images/content/100611/bpEarth.jpg</p>
	<p>BP Pelican</p>	<p>http://deepwaterhorizonsettlementclaims.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/deepwater-horizon-settlement-300x300.jpg</p>

	<p>BP Palm</p>	<p>https://puregibberish.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/bp_oil_spill_on_america_3.jpg</p>
	<p>VW Train</p>	<p>http://browst.com/image/?id=https%3A%2F%2Fscontent.cdninstagram.com%2Fphotos-xf1%2Ft51.2885-15%2Fs320x320%2Fe35%2F11909117_553409544810554_234621499_n.jpg</p>
	<p>VW Faked Test</p>	<p>http://media.cagle.com/107/2015/09/22/169122_600.jpg</p>
	<p>VW Stinkbug</p>	<p>http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_144304921221935.jpg</p>

	<p>VW Airship</p>	<p>http://img.ifcdn.com/images/d2bfc0b556e23684a1a812b61e851b55f12cfb6de13be7854eee4be9921fcfab_1.jpg</p>
	<p>VW Car</p>	<p>https://pbs.twimg.com/media/CPgPwVeWsAAOdUx.jpg</p>
	<p>VW Logo</p>	<p>http://d3lp4xedbqa8a5.cloudfront.net/imagenegen/max/ccr/1023/-/s3/digital-cougar-assets/whichcar/2015/10/01/-1/WC-Primary-Image-Wide.jpg</p>
	<p>VW Mask</p>	<p>http://edgardaily.com/media/18781/vw-emission-scandal-gas-mask.jpg</p>
	<p>VW Girl Filter</p>	<p>https://staticseekingalpha.a.ssl.fastly.net/uploads/2015/11/4/saupload_DieselGate_2BLisa_2BEmission_2BFilter.jpg (slightly adapted)</p>

Appendix 2 Online Self-Completion Questionnaire

Overview of Survey Structure:

1. Welcome Page
2. Neutral Brand and Crisis Description
3. Measure of Brand Reputation Before Being Exposed to Spoof Illustrations
4. Rating Instructions for the Subsequent Displayed Spoof Illustrations
5. Measure of Framework Dimensions *Humorousness* and *Aggressiveness*
6. Measure of *Harmfulness* Towards Portrayed Brands' Reputation
7. Measure of Brand Reputation After Being Exposed to Spoof Illustrations
8. Demographic Questions Including Gender, Age and Nationality
9. Thank You Page



Welcome to the survey!

Thank you for your interest in taking part in this research.

We are two master students at Lund University, Sweden, and are investigating online **spoof/parodic illustrations**. By completing this questionnaire, you will **help us** to collect new research findings for our **master thesis**. Therefore, we would be delighted if you could take 5-7 minutes out of your day to answer the following questions.

To thank you for your participation, we'll be giving away **2x1 Amazon gift cards worth \$25** (or equivalent in your currency) to two randomly selected survey respondents. At the end of the survey, you may submit your e-mail address for a chance to win.

Thank you so much for your participation,

Eric Eichinger & Jens Gudacker

The participation is voluntary. Your answer will remain anonymous and will be treated highly confidential. We are not affiliated with any companies mentioned in this survey and the results will only be used for academic purposes.

Welcome Page

Background information

Please read the following text carefully to understand the context of this questionnaire and to be able to fill it out correctly.

BP (also known as British Petroleum) is an oil and gas company.
It is the 6th biggest oil company worldwide.

On 20 April 2010, the company's *Deepwater Horizon* oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico sank. It is estimated that following this incident, 4.9 million barrels of oil were spilled into the ocean. The leak was stopped on 15 July 2010.



Neutral Brand and Crisis Description of BP Deepwater Horizon Case

Background information

Please read the following text carefully to understand the context of this questionnaire and to be able to fill it out correctly.

Volkswagen (also known as VW) is a car manufacturer.
It is the 2nd biggest car company worldwide.

On 18 September 2015, the United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that Volkswagen installed software in diesel-engine cars that enabled them to pass emission tests. During normal driving, however, emissions were actually up to 40 times higher than allowed by law. Volkswagen is currently recalling and fixing affected car models.



Neutral Brand and Crisis Description of VW Dieselgate Case

How do you perceive the company BP?

Mark the response that best describes your
attitude towards the company BP.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
BP is a company that I admire and respect	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
BP is a company I have a good feeling about	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
BP is a company that I trust	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
BP has a good overall reputation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Measure of Brand Reputation Before Exposed to Spoof Illustrations (e.g. BP Case)

Instructions on how to rate spoof/parodic illustrations

You will now see 8 different **spoof/parodic illustrations** portraying the aforementioned incident of VW. These illustrations are real examples that were found **online**.

Please answer every question honestly and keep in mind that there is **no right or wrong answer**. Indicate your **immediate perception** and opinion towards the displayed illustrations.

Spoof Illustration Rating Instructions



In your opinion, how **serious/humorous** is this illustration?
Drag the slider to the point you think best describes the level of seriousness/humorousness of the displayed illustration.

Serious | Humorous

In your opinion, how **aggressive** is this illustration?
Drag the slider to the point you think best describes the level of aggressiveness of the displayed illustration.

Not at all aggressive | Extremely aggressive

Measure of Framework Dimensions *Humorousness & Aggressiveness* (e.g. “VW Mask” Spoof)

In your opinion, how **harmful** is this illustration to the **reputation of the VW brand**?
Mark the response that best describes how you perceive this illustration to be harmful to the reputation of the VW brand.

Not at all harmful Slightly harmful Moderately harmful Very harmful Extremely harmful

Measure of *Harmfulness* Towards Portrayed Brands’ Reputation

How do you perceive the company Volkswagen (VW)?

Mark the response that best describes your
attitude towards the company VW.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
VW is a company that I trust	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
VW is a company that I admire and respect	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
VW is a company I have a good feeling about	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
VW has a good overall reputation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Measure of Brand Reputation Before Exposed to Spoof Illustrations (e.g. VW Case)

Demographics

You're almost done! Only three more questions left.

What is your gender?

Please select your gender below.

Female Male

What is your age?

Please select your age range below.

18 - 24 years 25 - 34 years 35 - 44 years 45 - 54 years 55 - 64 years Age 65 or older

What is your nationality?

Please select your nationality from the drop down menu below.

Demographic Questions Including Gender, Age and Nationality

Thank you for taking part!

You helped us to collect important research findings for our master thesis

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.

Your response has been recorded.

PS: If you have any questions or comments you can reach us by e-mail: gib15eei@student.lu.se

Best regards,

[Eric Eichinger](#) & [Jens Gudacker](#)

Thank You Page

Appendix 3 Distribution of Demographic Variables in Survey Cases (n = 501)

Case	Gender	<i>Age</i>			Total N (%)
		<i>18 -24 years</i> N (%)	<i>25 -34 years</i> N (%)	<i>+35 years</i> N (%)	
BP	Female	52 (21.4)	53 (21.8)	12 (4.9)	117 (48.1)
	Male	53 (21.8)	61 (25.1)	12 (4.9)	126 (51.9)
	Total	105 (43.2)	114 (46.9)	24 (9.9)	243 (100)
VW	Female	73 (28.3)	53 (20.5)	10 (3.9)	136 (52.7)
	Male	50 (19.4)	58 (22.5)	14 (5.4)	122 (47.3)
	Total	123 (47.7)	111 (43.0)	24 (9.3)	258 (100)
Total	Female	125 (25.0)	106 (21.2)	22 (4.4)	253 (50.5)
	Male	103 (20.6)	119 (23.8)	26 (5.2)	248 (49.5)
	Total	228 (45.5)	225 (44.9)	48 (9.6)	501 (100)

Appendix 4 Frequencies of Nationalities Across Total Census

Country	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Valid Percent</i>
Germany	232	46.3 %	47.3 %
Austria	76	15.2 %	15.5 %
Sweden	60	12.0 %	12.2 %
Finland	13	2.6 %	2.7 %
Other Europe	55	11.0 %	11.2 %
North America	33	6.6 %	6.7 %
Other	21	4.2 %	4.3 %
N/a	11	2.2 %	-

Appendix 5 Descriptive Statistics of Reputation Measurements

Case	Reputation	<i>N</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
BP	Before	243	1.00	7.00	2.93	1.25
	After	243	1.00	6.00	2.53	1.14
	Impact	243	-4.50	1.25	-0.40	0.70
VW	Before	258	1.00	7.00	4.40	1.34
	After	258	1.00	7.00	4.11	1.40
	Impact	258	-5.25	1.75	-0.28	0.64

Appendix 6 Descriptive Statistics of BP Spoof Illustration Variables (*N* = 243)

Illustration	Variable	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
BP Cancer	Humorous	0	100	40.41	25.20
	Aggressive	0	100	63.96	22.59
	Harmful	1	5	2.93	1.16
BP Sorry	Humorous	0	100	60.12	24.07
	Aggressive	0	100	37.55	21.18
	Harmful	1	5	2.49	1.03
BP Stupid	Humorous	0	100	66.40	23.36
	Aggressive	0	100	45.01	23.93
	Harmful	1	5	2.64	0.97
BP Lesson	Humorous	0	100	64.00	23.90
	Aggressive	0	100	49.11	22.77
	Harmful	1	5	2.82	0.95
BP Tuna	Humorous	0	100	46.93	27.46
	Aggressive	0	100	59.20	22.52
	Harmful	1	5	3.18	1.02
BP Earth	Humorous	0	100	24.15	20.45
	Aggressive	0	100	66.12	21.82
	Harmful	1	5	3.47	1.10
BP Pelican	Humorous	0	100	21.46	18.92
	Aggressive	0	100	65.46	21.31
	Harmful	1	5	3.54	1.07
BP Palm	Humorous	0	100	35.32	20.04
	Aggressive	0	100	60.36	20.61
	Harmful	1	5	3.05	1.04

Appendix 7 Descriptive Overview of VW Spoof Illustration Variables ($N = 258$)

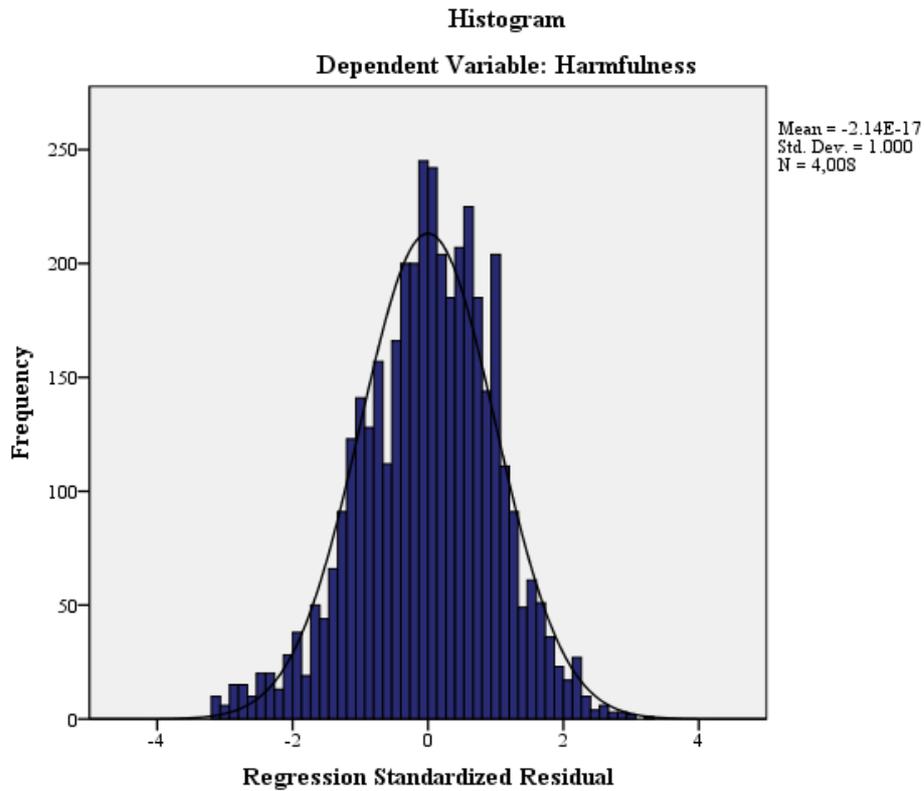
Illustration	Variable	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
VW Train	Humorous	0	100	71.84	25.63
	Aggressive	0	100	51.34	25.23
	Harmful	1	5	2.81	1.11
VW Faked Test	Humorous	0	100	74.12	18.60
	Aggressive	0	100	28.01	21.50
	Harmful	1	5	2.14	0.91
VW Stinkbug	Humorous	0	100	63.66	22.60
	Aggressive	0	100	45.71	23.07
	Harmful	1	5	2.64	0.95
VW Airship	Humorous	0	100	52.93	29.30
	Aggressive	0	100	66.96	22.82
	Harmful	1	5	3.14	1.06
VW Car	Humorous	0	100	46.45	23.19
	Aggressive	0	100	47.34	22.81
	Harmful	1	5	2.76	0.93
VW Logo	Humorous	0	100	36.69	21.50
	Aggressive	0	100	48.82	24.99
	Harmful	1	5	2.73	1.09
VW Mask	Humorous	0	100	37.34	26.00
	Aggressive	0	100	70.48	22.40
	Harmful	1	5	3.29	1.02
VW Girl Filter	Humorous	0	100	19.45	21.55
	Aggressive	8	100	79.67	20.91
	Harmful	1	5	3.95	1.08

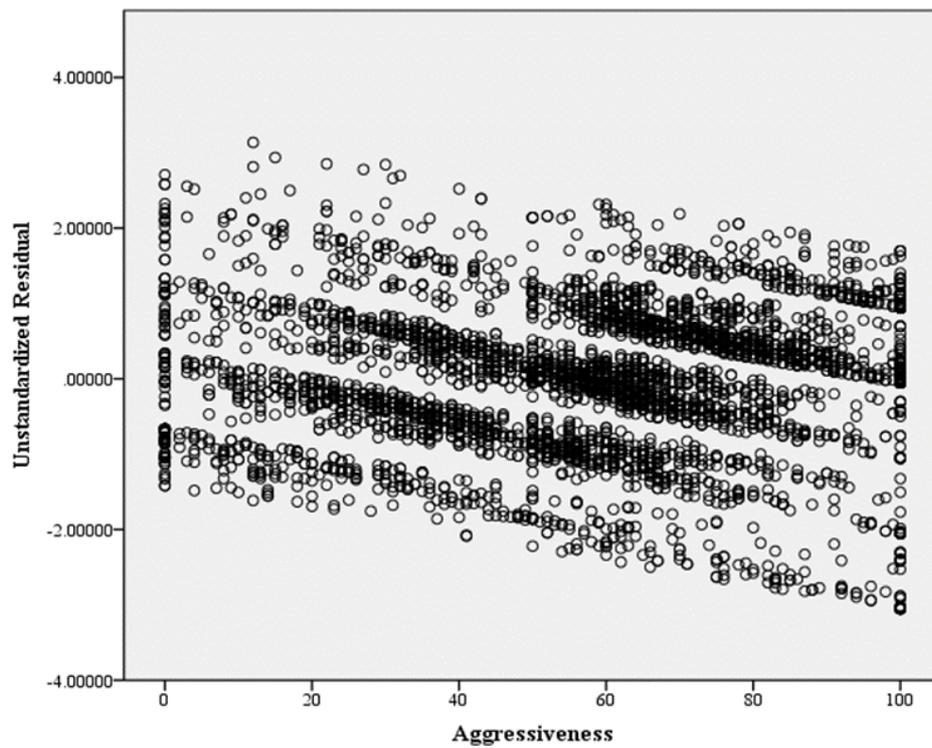
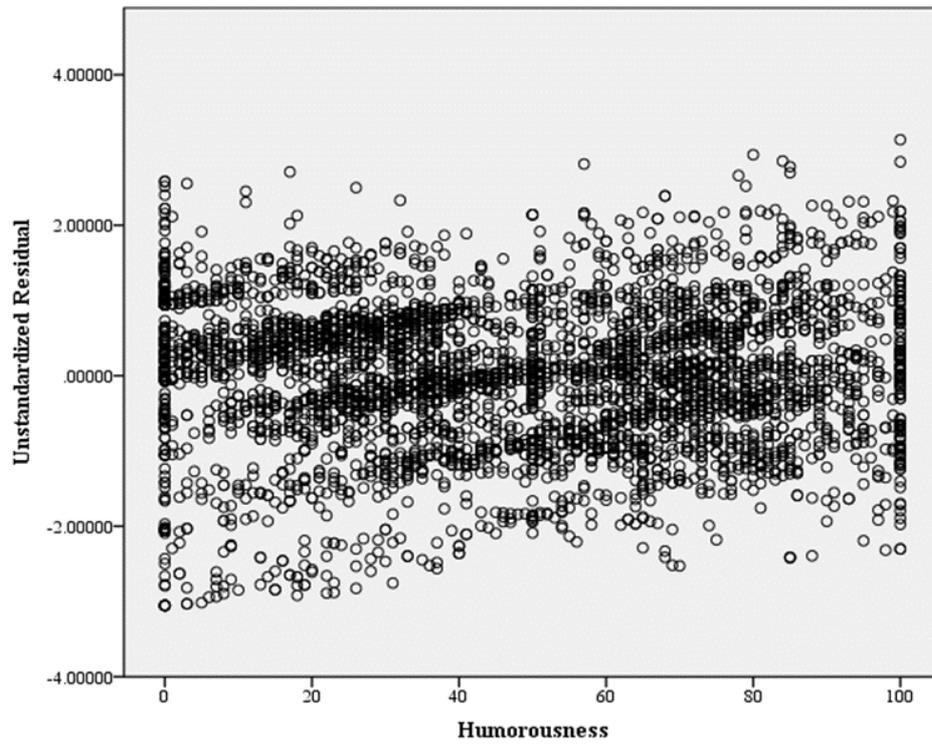
Appendix 8 Results of Multiple Regression Analysis

	F	df	p	adj.R ²
Overall model	659.56	2	.000**	.25

	β	t	p
(Constant)		41.25	.000**
Humorousness	-.195	-12.60	.000**
Aggressiveness	.377	24.37	.000**

Note. a. k = 501x8 illustrations = 4008 stacked observations, **p < .001





Appendix 8 The Reputational Spoof Illustration Framework

