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## **Seeking License to Operate in Times of Uncertainty**

**A discourse analysis of how a GRO communicates to obtain loyalty during a prevailing inflation**

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## Foreword

We want to express our greatest gratitude to Camilla Nothhaft, for her invaluable support as our supervisor for the bachelor thesis. Your guidance and expertise have made a significant impact on our research paper. Thank you for believing in our abilities and for providing constructive feedback that enhanced the quality of our research. We are fortunate to have had you as our supervisor, and we will carry the lessons learned under your mentorship throughout our academic and professional journeys’.

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We want to emphasize that our contributions as researchers have been equal throughout the bachelor thesis process.



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# Abstract

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During recent years, Swedish society has been affected by circumstances causing conditions for uncertainty. Since the beginning of 2022 the prevailing inflation has caused further implications on societal, organizational and individual levels. Due to the economic difficulties, grocery prices have increased significantly. As the grocery retail industry fulfills a primary need for consumers, this research paper investigates how a grocery retail operator communicates during the inflation to maintain loyal customers. More specifically, this study will analyze the external digital communication of the market leader Ica, comparing data from 2019 to data from 2022 and 2023. The research will be conducted through a qualitative case study, followed by a discourse analysis that seeks to elaborate how the discourse of loyalty is maintained. Specifically, the analysis seeks to understand the efforts Ica makes to communicate loyalty, especially in times of inflation. The discourse of loyalty will be examined by looking at how five different interdiscourses are communicated. Hence, investigating how they create meaning for obtaining loyal customers. By abductively employing a theoretical framework rooted in sustaining customer relationships, this thesis suggests different courses of action a GRO can implement to attain customer loyalty. The findings suggest that the external digital marketing communication incorporates characteristics of public relations and corporate communication to remain loyal customers during times of uncertainty. In fine, the results indicate that the interrelation of interdiscourses contributes to the discourse of loyalty by emphasizing emotional rather than rational characteristics.

*Keywords: Public Relations (PR), Corporate Communication, Digital Marketing Communication, Customer Loyalty, Inflation, Grocery Retail Operator (GRO), Grocery Retail Industry (GRI)*

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# 1. Introduction

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Society is continuously changing and evolving where economic and financial performance have a significant influence on our standards of living. As the world comes to terms with the economic changes in western countries, the world is increasingly affected by economic downturns (Tench, 2017). The grocery retail industry (GRI) consists of six organizations operating on the market (Svensk Dagligvaruhandel, n.d). Together, these actors constitute one of the largest industries for the Swedish economy.

During the last years, the GRI has suffered from high inflation, where buying food remains a primary need for everyone in the society. A high inflation means that the general price level increases. As a result the average basket of goods becomes more expensive to purchase (Sveriges Riksbank, 2022). Accordingly, statistics presented by Statistic Sweden indicate that the prices of groceries in Sweden increased over twenty percent between February 2022 and February 2023 (SCB, 2023). This represents the highest increase in price since the year 1950. The level of inflation is often measured in the Consumer Price Index (CPI), and represents the development of the domestic average price trend (SCB, n.d). This standard measurement indicates the alterations that affect the consumer's economy and can be used to compare the development over time (Sveriges Riksbank, 2022) (Appendix 1). Hence, Swedish households are affected by a higher level of uncertainty caused by inflation.

## 1.1 Problematisation

“Record-high food prices in Swedish grocery stores” (Aftonbladet, 2020).

The research problem of this study has its origins in the prevailing inflation in Sweden in 2023. Society is currently finding itself in an economically difficult position, influencing households to rethink how to spend their finances. Grocery retail is a primary need for Swedish households, and can only be satisfied from a limited number of grocery retail operators (GRO) on the Swedish market.

The inflation creates conditions for uncertainty in coherence with increased prices on groceries, raising the obstacle for GRO's to keep loyal customers during this financially difficult time. Therefore, this report will focus on how a GRO strategically communicates loyalty in its marketing communication to maintain relationships with the stakeholder group of customers in times of inflation. This will be attainable by comparing communication material from the prevailing inflation (2022/2023) in relation to material from times unaffected by uncertainty (2019).

## **1.2 Aim and research questions**

The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of how a GRO uses marketing communication as a means for establishing and maintaining relationships with their publics to preserve loyalty and trust. More specifically, this thesis will examine how the Swedish GRO Ica obtains loyalty from their customers through their external digital communication in the context of a prevailing inflation. This will be examined by collecting data from the Icas's Youtube channel.

Following research questions have been formulated in order answer the aim:

- How is the discourse of loyalty communicated and maintained in the GRO's digital marketing communication?
- In what way does the GRO communicate in times of uncertainty to create and obtain trust and loyalty from their customers?
- How does a GRO adjust their digital marketing communication on a micro level, in order to adapt to societal changes on a macro level?

## **1.3 Background**

Ica was founded in 1917 by Hakon Swenson with the purpose of merging individual grocery retailers by working in cooperation as a unified organization (Ica, n.d). All of the Ica retailers own and manage their own store but cooperate in areas such as purchasing, logistics, marketing communication and overall

development. This serves the purpose of being as close to the customer as possible. In 2013, Ica became “Ica Gruppen” for the purpose of further development and a future direction. Today, Ica Gruppen consists of multiple operations including Ica Sweden, Ica Bank, Ica real estate, Rimi Baltics and Apotek Hjärtat. Ica Sweden (Ica) refers to the organization's operations within the GRI and constitutes the primary operation of Ica Gruppen (Ica, 2023). At present time, Ica manages 1267 stores in 287 of the 290 Swedish municipalities. Due to their market share of 35 percent, it makes them the leading actor within the grocery retail operations.

#### **1.4 Relevance for the field of strategic communication**

Hallahan et al. (2007) define strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p.3). Further, Zerfass et al. (2018) elaborate the definition of strategic communication as an organization’s deliberate use of communication to participate in meaningful interactions. This thesis interests in how an organization use communication as a means for maintaining loyal customer relationships making the paper a contribution to the field of strategic communication. Specifically, this thesis is of relevance to the field as it examines how meaningful interactions between the GRO and its customers are maintained through the use of digital marketing communication. Scholars of strategic communication examines organization centered communication and how it engages in premeditated communication activities and the potential effects (Hallahan et al., 2007). Furthermore, strategic communication concerns a wide range of organizational activities including promotion of products, brands and various relationship building activities. By comparing the communication released during inflation with communication material from a year unaffected by uncertainty, it is possible to analyze how the communication of the organization is carried out and examine if there are identifiable differences between the years of comparison.



## **1.5 Limitations**

As the inflation is prevailing, the data collection ended as soon as the analysis was initiated. Therefore, communication material published after week 16 has not been regarded. Additionally, it is of relevance to highlight that the GRI has been criticized for remarkable price increases in 2023, creating a debate that resulted in several price reductions by GRO's from week 12 and forward. Furthermore, Swedish society has been embossed by prevailing uncertainties since the pandemic of COVID-19 broke out in February 2020. Therefore, communication material from 2019 has been collected as units of comparison to communication material from the years of 2022 and 2023. It is relevant to highlight the implemented development of Ica's loyalty programme in the beginning of 2020. The previous loyalty programme "Ica-kortet" became "stammis" ("a regular"). The implementation could potentially impact the analysis regarding how the programme is communicated and thereby how the interdiscourse "about Ica" is portrayed. In fine, this case study will intentionally examine a single form of marketing communication rather than different communication materials.

## **1.6 Disposition**

The disposition of this thesis is structured by dividing the research into six sections. Initially, the phenomena under investigation is presented by taking the causative context into account. The second section provides insights to knowledge made by previous scholars that are of relevance for this study. This is followed by a theoretical background creating conditions for analyzing the empirical material thoroughly. The fourth section presents a reflection of the research methodology selected for conducting this study. The fifth section illustrates the analysis of the thesis by applying the theoretical framework. Hence, this creates prerequisites for analyzing the material in a nuanced way. In fine, the concluding section presents the study's findings by discussing them in relation to the previous research. Further, the final conclusions suggest how the research can be expanded in future directions.

## 2. Literature review

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### 2.1 Public relations

Grunig & Hunt (1984) define public relations (PR) as “the management of communication between an organization and its publics” (p.6). The authors argue that the purpose is to build mutually beneficial relationships, by taking the public's attitudes, behaviors and needs into account. Ihlen & Raknes (2020) infer that society can either provide or eliminate an organization with “license to operate”. This term refers to the public's social permission of an organization's operations and is established if the organization reflects the publics' interest and social norms. Due to this, the strategic planning of PR campaigns must be carefully considered and adapted to the societal context. Willis (2017) infer that PR campaigns aim at communicating an organization's values and personality to its publics, composing PR as an active part in brand development.

Traditionally, scholars have defined PR in terms of relationship building activities to create a favorable commercial environment, whereas marketing has been related to customer management and generating desired financial outcomes (Kohli & Jaworski, 1990; Tong & Chan, 2022; Willis, 2017). Contemporary studies infer that the prevalence of digital communication has resulted in ambiguous boundaries between PR and marketing (Tong & Chan, 2022). The authors findings illustrate how digitalization has enhanced the role of PR in marketing communication contexts, regardless of business operations. Wood (2017) suggests that one of the foremost similarities is the emphasis for communication, considering it as a dialogue where the external demands should be adapted to by the organization. The integration of PR and marketing result in a more flexible communication environment, increasing the possibilities of attracting a desired public's awareness, interest, and purchase intention (Tong & Chan, 2022; Willis, 2017).

PR is a well-known communication discipline in previous research. In recent years studies have attempted to incorporate PR and marketing communication by

identifying key similarities of the disciplines. This research paper attempts to understand how PR objectives integrate in the marketing communication of a GRO in order to maintain relationships with their publics. Therefore, this research concerns how PR characteristics are embedded into a marketing communication context during times of uncertainty.

## **2.2 Corporate communication**

Frandsen & Johansen (2017) suggest that we are living in a society where both product and corporate brands affect how individuals live their lives. Based on this idea, we are living in a symbolic marketplace, where organizations must concentrate on gaining a favorable image and reputation. Simultaneously, Slabbert & Barker (2014) stress that relationships between an organization and its publics should be maintained proactively in order to ensure the effectiveness of the organization. The development of digital communication has affected the behavior of consumers and the conditions for marketing communication (Kaul, 2015). As more traditional marketing strategies continuously have a great impact on consumers, the conditions for maintaining meaningful relationships have changed. His research infer that established corporate strategies are challenged, resulting in concerns for communicating products and values.

Previous literature distinguishes between corporate- and consumer communication (Wood, 2017). Slabbert & Barker (2014) conceptualize corporate communication as a strategic management function that concerns all internal and external communication performed by an organization to create and maintain relationships. Wood (2017) claims that communicating meaningful values contributes to the maintenance of symbolic and social capital. Symbolic capital refers to an organization's attempt to improve their status and reputation in order to create a favorable brand image (Wood, 2017). Social capital involves building relationships with the stakeholders to gain trust and maintain the corporate reputation. These forms of capital are important resources to position a brand on the market (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). As corporate communication involves communicating the organization in a favorable manner, the use of corporate

values creates a more effective sales environment. In contrast, consumer communication is related to marketing communication and can be seen as an effort for selling products by displaying various product qualities and promoting perceived benefits.

Previous literature distinguishes between corporate and consumer communication and highlights how they can be integrated into the organizations marketing communication for different purposes. As corporate communication can be seen as an important prerequisite to the GRO for reminding the customers of who they are, and what they stand for, the authors want to understand if and how this form of communication is embedded into the communication during times of uncertainty.

### **2.3 Customer loyalty**

During the past years, there has been a shift in both the micro and macro environment leading to changes that affect all forms of marketing communication (Schultz et al., 2014). Simultaneously, the phenomenon of commoditization, where brands become more similar has increased. His research illustrates how the phenomenon result in a decrease of customers' preferences towards specific brands. Thereby, Veloutsou (2015) argues that customer loyalty has become a prominent management function to ensure preference towards the brand among customers.

Nobar & Rostamzadeh (2018) have investigated the interrelationship of loyalty, expectation and satisfaction. Their research show that satisfaction and expectation are prerequisites for customer loyalty. Customer satisfaction is an organization's willingness and ability to meet customer demands by managing their expectations and creating value. Supportably, Tartaglione et al. (2019) infer that customer satisfaction and customer trust are positive presumptions of customer loyalty. Mutually, customer loyalty has a positive effect on satisfaction and trust. Due to the interdependency, customer loyalty becomes a complex area of study as it includes multiple interrelated and dependent assumptions. Therefore the authors findings indicate the importance of investing in brand loyalty, brand

engagement and brand communities in order to improve customer loyalty. Primarily, the researchers raise attention to the brand community, as it is the environment in which communication between consumers and brand emerge, which allows brand identification and experience that can enhance consumers' attachment to a brand.

Current research has brought insights into important concepts of customer loyalty and the effectiveness of building strong brands in order to obtain customer relationships and loyalty. Although, what is still unknown is the phenomenon of customer loyalty in times of uncertainty when customers cannot take previous experiences with a brand into account as there are more vital primary needs to consider. Therefore, this study aims at filling the gap of what concepts brand's prioritize during times of uncertainty to maintain and establish customer loyalty.

## **2.4 Loyalty programs**

The phenomenon of loyalty programs has become increasingly popular within the field of consumer research and commonly implemented as a marketing communication effort adopted by organizations (Henderson et al., 2011). Bruneau et al. (2018) view loyalty programs as an attempt to achieve and maintain relationships. In contrast, Meyer-Waarden et al. (2023) suggest that loyalty programs can result in customer loyalty towards the program provided by the organization and not the organization itself.

Bruneau et al. (2018) argue that building relationships demand an interdependence between two parties and thereby a value must be enhanced. Further, the relationship must generate more than economic advantages to enhance the value. Therefore the loyalty programs must include social aspects such as customized communication and personalized offers for generating a valuable relationship with the customer. Using loyalty programs as a marketing capability for developing customer-organization relationships, can enhance the engagement and thereby generate insights about customer-behavior (Bruneau et al., 2018).

Previous research explains the functions and potential positive outcomes generated by the implementation of a loyalty program. As expectations are not necessarily met, this study has a primary focus on analyzing if a GRO communicates their loyalty program in a meaningful manner to create customer value.

## 3. Theoretical framework

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### 3.1 System theory

Gregory (2017) declares that organization's need to take the external environment into account since they have a limited influence on it. By monitoring changes and arising issues, the organization can facilitate adjustments and control the development of different situations. Moreover, the authors make a distinction between the macro- and the micro environment. The macro environment can be described as changes, issues or trends that are out of their control. Yet, the organization could have an impact over the macro environment if they operate proactively. As organizations are operating in an environment characterized by increased accountability, they must constantly work to gain different types of symbolic capital from their stakeholders. Therefore, studying how the GRO adapts its communication to inflation is of relevance for comprehending their response to macro environmental changes.

System theory is a framework identifying to what extent organizations operate in interdependent relationships in their internal and external environments (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In order to obtain mutual relationships, communication must be used as a means for an exchange to occur. Grunig et al. (2002) claim that the purpose of the theory is to receive further benefits for an organization. The theory suggests that an organization can either operate as an open system or a closed system. Organizations operating as an open system, listens to their external environment in order to adapt to changes that could affect the organization. By applying the open system approach, the operations can be adapted to the external context and satisfy the needs of their stakeholders. In contrast, the closed system operates in a manner that does not take their external environment into consideration. Topić (2017) infer that the operations of a closed system are primarily based on their past experiences and previous knowledge. This thesis will analyze what approach the GRO adapts during times of uncertainty in order to comprehend in what way they communicate with their customers.

## **3.2 Brands**

Originally, a brand has been defined as “a name, concept, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of the above, which identifies the products or services of one or a group of sellers (...)” (AMA, n.d). Today, brands are viewed as tools for creating customer value to improve an organization’s position on the market (Catic & Poturak, 2022). Since brands exist in the customers minds, the process of building brand value has to do with perception rather than reality (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). In order to manage brand perception, brand managers have to understand consumer behavior and all stages they move through during the purchase process, rather than gathering information about competitive offerings.

Depending on the level of purchase risk, scholars distinguish between symbolic and functional brands (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). Symbolic brands provide the consumer with trust, minimizing the high perceived risk. To achieve brand trust, organizations must develop an intimate perception through emotional investment. A brand is symbolic when consumers purchase it based on emotion rather than rational preferences. Functional brands provide consumers with safe and easy purchase choices based on its predictability and credibility. They provide a low-level of risk making consumers depend on the brand more likely.

Brands create added value for customers by offering consistency in an unpredictable and dynamic world, contributing to an added value for buying products and services from a specific organization (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al, 2018). Hence, the application of the theory contributes to the understanding of how Ica make use of their brand to ensure loyal customers. Moreover, the authors suggest that brand trust derives from perceived benefits during a period of time. By using the brand over time, stakeholders create a habit and a sense of belonging to the brand. Due to this, stakeholders of a brand return to the organization in times of uncertainty to provide reassurance and comfort.

### ***3.2.1 Brand loyalty***

Catic & Poturak (2022) define brand loyalty as the possibility of customers to repurchase a product or service when wanting to satisfy the same need regardless



of changes in market circumstances. By maintaining a positive customer experience, brand loyalty can be obtained. Whether a customer stays loyal to a brand is based on the extent to which the brand creates value for the customer. Therefore, it is an essential marketing strategy to reflect upon emotional components to improve a brand's market position. In order to retain existing loyal customers, as well as attract new loyal customers, brands must stay interesting by offering more than what is expected on the market. The comparison of the years affected and unaffected by uncertainty will provide insights regarding in what ways ICA communicate and if there are any differences between the years.

Digitalization and globalization has made the 19th century an era of great competition between organizations (Catic & Poturak, 2022). In a competitive market, a primary goal is to gain customer loyalty to build a recognizable and favorable brand. Brand communications scholars highlight the importance of satisfying as well as delighted customers in order to achieve loyalty. Customers stay satisfied by responding to their expectations on the brand and its product(s). By exceeding customer expectations, they will also be delighted and thereby show a greater degree of loyalty to the brand.

### **3.3 Consumer trust**

According to Melewar et al. (2017), trust refers to the degree in which an individual is willing to enter a relationship that involves vulnerability, determined by their expectation that the trustor will demonstrate positive intentions and behavior. A decision based on trust involves processes of reasoning as well as emotional involvement (Ozdemir et al., 2020). Therefore, McAllister (1995 as cited in Dunn et al., 2012) introduces a model of trust which examines the phenomenon as bilateral: cognitive- and affective trust. The model will be applied in order to analyze how the interdiscourses are communicated by interrelating them to each other and examine how emotional characteristics are embedded.

McAllister's Hierarchy Model assumes that in order to obtain affective trust, the consumer's decision-making process must priorly achieve cognitive trust (Wang et al., 2023). Cognitive trust is primarily based on rational judgements of

one's beliefs about the trustee's ability and integrity (Dunn et al., 2012; Ozdemir et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). The cognitive trust arrives from a decision based on information of the other's behavior reflecting upon integrity factors such as honesty and fairness of the referent (Ozdemir et al., 2020). Cognitive trust is formed through direct interactions with the trustee as well as from learning about the trustee's reputation (Dunn et al., 2012).

Affective trust is established upon emotional feelings of security between actors in a relationship, and the belief that one's concern for the other is reciprocated (Dunn et al., 2012; Ozdemir et al., 2020). To achieve affective trust, the trustor must trust the trustee because they exhibit genuine care and concern, and give signals of good will for the welfare of the trustor (Ozdemir et al., 2020). Affective trust derives from the emotional bond generated by feeling safe, comfortable, or cared for in the social exchange (Wang et al., 2023). Trustors with high affective trust are willing to make themselves emotionally vulnerable to the trustee because they expect the trustee to respond in a supportive and considerate way (Dunn et al., 2012).

### **3.4 Legitimacy**

Suchman (1995, p.574) defines legitimacy as “(...) a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions”. In order to operate and survive in a competitive market, organizational activities have to respect society's social and moral values (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Hence, legitimacy does not solve an organization's social, economic or environmental challenges - it increases the organization's credibility and virtue. In order to adapt to these circumstances, organization's must justify their existence through legitimate actions that do not threaten the society or environment in which it operates (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Especially, financial crises and instability puts great pressure on organizations to reevaluate their value systems, hence emphasizing the importance of legitimacy.

Legitimacy is an essential intangible resource since it can protect an organization from social negative comprehensions (Burlea & Popa, 2013). These can either concern the specific organization or an entire market. Hence, legitimacy must be handled carefully to proactively handle the organizational image. As organization's operate in dynamic societies, legitimacy theory has the role of clarifying social, economic, and environmental demands that organizations must adapt to in order achieve social approval.

### 3.4.1 Legitimacy theory

Legitimacy theory originates from management- and stakeholder theory explaining the fundamentals of organizational behavior when wanting to fulfill social acceptance (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Organization's use the theory for making predictions about obtaining legitimacy. In order to use legitimacy as a resource, social and environmental information must be taken into consideration.

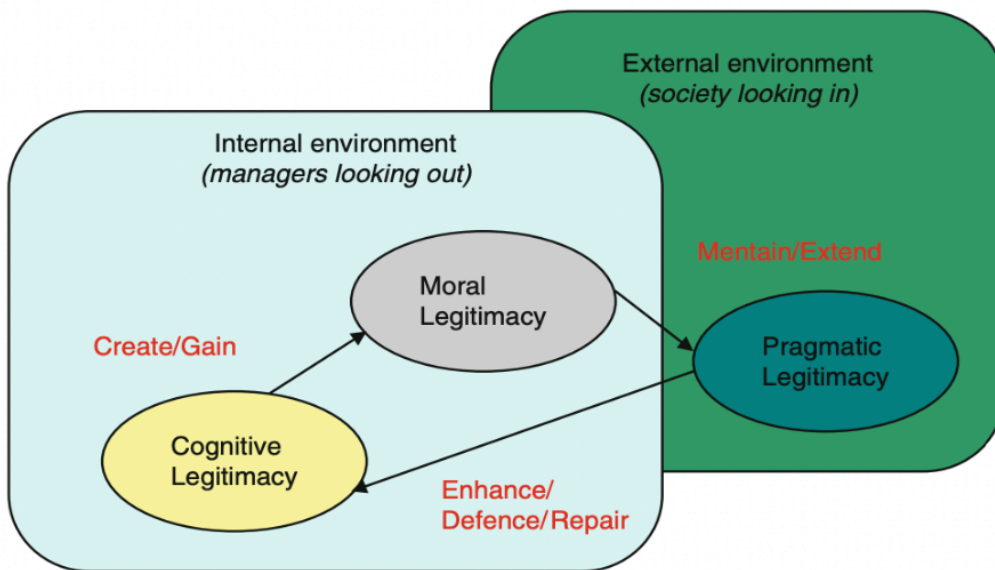


Fig. 1 Legitimacy theory: The life cycle of legitimacy

Legitimation is a complex process in which organizations obtain its legitimacy, through stages of creation, extension and maintaining the legitimacy (Burlea & Popa, 2013). The authors consider legitimacy as a difficult resource to attain, but an even more difficult resource to maintain and improve. In order to

improve an organization's life cycle of legitimacy, internal and external knowledge that potentially could impact the organization's legitimacy need to be considered. Therefore, the analysis will interpret how the communication contributes to the maintenance of relationships by engaging in the legitimacy process. During an organization's existence legitimacy moves through different stages (Burlea & Popa, 2013). The authors highlight three types of legitimacy correlating with the organization's internal and external environment: cognitive-, moral- and pragmatic legitimacy. The different types are motivated by the public's understanding of the organization in relation to contemporary social interests.

Firstly, an organization needs to attain cognitive legitimacy (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Building cognitive legitimacy, the organization aims at receiving attention from its primary stakeholders in order to create an immediate and powerful visibility. To gain cognitive legitimacy, the activities of the organization should respond to the customers expectations and reflect what the brand stands for (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). Therefore their operations must be accepted by their customers in order to establish legitimacy. Cognitive legitimacy is achieved through short-term projects which create a foundation for a long-term sustainable development of the organization's legitimacy (Burlea & Popa, 2013).

When cognitive legitimacy is attained the organization is able to expand its moral legitimacy (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Moral legitimacy is about the customer's moral judgments of an organization's actions, perceiving them as acts of good (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). Hence, an organization's moral legitimacy is motivated by the social acceptance of its existence (Burlea & Popa, 2013). By analyzing how past experiences have been accepted by the customers, the future strategies of the organization can be adjusted to the external expectations. If the organization succeeds in attaining this level of legitimacy, pragmatic legitimacy is achieved.

Pragmatic legitimacy is essential in order to ensure an organization's survival (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Pragmatic legitimacy is the customer's perception that the organization is having their best interest, which is created through the organization's logos and pathos (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). Because of its

external visibility, pragmatic legitimacy is considered difficult to control (Burlea & Popa, 2013).

Maintaining organizational legitimacy could therefore be seen as a process where the organization must consider the needs and expectations held by external stakeholders (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Therefore, internal actions must reflect legitimate values and be communicated in a strategic and proactive manner.

# 4. Method

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## 4.1 Social Constructionism

A prominent characteristic of the social constructionist approach is that reality is socially constructed (Burr, 2015). As social actors, humans create their own realities through the interactions in their daily social lives. Thereby, knowledge and perceptions of individuals are created through interaction, by communicating some kind of language. Researchers are interested in the use of language and the different meanings we ascribe within the social interactions. This means that there is no absolute truth, rather the world can be seen from different perspectives and be perceived differently within different discourses. Using language as a performative action thereby affects how people perceive the world within a given discourse. Further, the author suggests that the way in which language is used produces and reproduces knowledge at a personal as well as a societal level.

In order to provide insights into how different interdiscourses ascribe meaning to the discourse of loyalty during times of uncertainty a social constructionist approach was applied. Arguably, the purpose was to understand how a GRO uses language to create meaning and simultaneously obtain loyalty towards their customers. Hence, the proposed approach allowed this paper to analyze how reality is constructed by the interactions within the communication material.

## 4.2 Abduction

This study has adopted an abductive approach in order to make inferences of the examined material. Abduction refers to various reasoning processes of exploratory and hypothetical thinking, imagination, and guessing (Fortes, 2022). It is a process of exploring the possible within the available information making it an approach dealing with uncertainty rather than truth-seeking. Abduction refers to making inferences based on less strict logical reasoning, as the context contains insufficient or uncertain evidence and information (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019;

Fortes, 2022). Hence, it is a creative reasoning process of inferring reasonable explanations from surprising observations, making it a reasoning procedure of “maybes”. Douven (2022) infer that the reliability of abductive conclusions increase if they are drawn on true premises and information. Hence, abduction can be seen as a mode of reasoning of momentary truths (Fortes, 2022).

### **4.3 Empirical method**

Merriam Webster (n.d) defines the case study as ‘an intensive analysis of an individual unit’. This method allows the researcher to entail a more detailed and in depth collection of data to describe a phenomenon in a specific context (Flyvbjerg 2011). The data collection was conducted through a qualitative case study. The case study was a useful choice of method since this paper examined a specific business of operations during a specific circumstance as the inflation. As there is limited research of this specific phenomenon, the method provided the study with thorough information taking the context into account. Due to the definition of case studies, there are contradictions regarding the generalizability of the method (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Some scholars claim that the method can only formulate hypotheses that later on must be compared to a wider range of cases. However, the sample can be representative for a larger community and thereby representative for the specific phenomenon under investigation. Therefore, the market leader Ica Sweden was selected as the case of analysis.

#### **4.3.1 Sampling**

A non-random sampling technique has been used for collecting data. The technique implies that all units in a population do not have the same opportunity to be selected (Hultåker & Trost, 2016). More specifically, a deliberate sampling technique has been applied, as Boyle & Schmierbach (2020) suggest using it when conducting case studies. This infer collecting intentionally selected data, in order to target a specific organization or a market. As this thesis targets a specific market within a specific context, the deliberate sampling technique was naturally

selected. Despite examining a specific case, Boyle & Schmierbach (2020) argue that case studies generate useful findings of a specific phenomenon, where conclusions can be applied to a wider spectrum of cases.

The selection process was initiated by considering markets in which consumers feel a primary need for purchasing despite financially uncertain times. As the GRI has been subject to public debate during the prevailing inflation, attention was drawn towards this market. Following the drastic price increase on groceries, GRO's has been a highly prioritized topic in Swedish media. Deliberately, Ica was strategically elected due to their leading position on the market, to provide useful information for illustrative purposes. Hence, increasing the possibility of the generalizability of our findings from a rich set of data.

In order to conduct the analysis, 20 digital video campaigns from Ica's Youtube channel have been studied. When studying the development of CPI, a protruding period of time of the inflation was identified. When the Ukraine War emerged the 14th of February 2022 the Swedish CPI increased with over one percentage unit between February to March. That same increase occurred every month from June to October 2022 (appendix 1). Therefore, eight campaigns from 2022 were collected. Since the inflation is prevailing, campaigns published in present time were collected. Specifically, six campaigns from 2023 were studied. In order to answer the research questions, campaigns from 2019 were analyzed to compare if there are any adjustments of how the GRO communicates loyalty in times of uncertainty (2022/2023). 2019 was selected as the year of comparison as it is the last year unaffected by uncertainty. Hence, six campaigns were sampled from 2019 which represented the same weeks as the material from 2023 in order to increase the relevance of comparison.

#### **4.4 Analytical method**

When conducting a discourse analysis, researchers are interested in analyzing how language produces a specific view of social reality (Daymon & Holloway, 2011). Discourse is the process of speaking or writing about a phenomenon in order to make it meaningful, whereby the discourse analysis permits researchers to analyze



a wide range of different materials (Börjesson & Palmblad, 2007; Daymon & Holloway, 2011). A discourse can be defined as the production, dissemination, and perception of an interrelated set of texts (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Texts are not meaningful individually as discourses produce meaning through their interconnection with each other. Further, texts can take various forms such as written texts, spoken words, pictures, symbols and artifacts.

Whereas qualitative methodologies in general work to understand or interpret social reality as it exists, discourse analysis endeavors to uncover the way in which it is produced (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). The method is a reflexive and interpretive style of analysis that involves a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative examination of texts as well as a set of assumptions concerning the effects of language. The authors claim that the method is committed to the social constructivist approach as they view the analysis as three-dimensional as it concerns text, discourse, and context. The discourse analysis connects text to discourse by locating it in a social or/and historical context. Thus, researchers can identify actors, relationships, and practices that characterize the situation of the study and affect its outcome.

#### ***4.4.1 Scheme of Analysis***

Berglez (1999) infer that a discourse analysis can be conducted by examining the thematic and schematic structure of the communication material. In order to understand how meaning is created, the different structures can be organized in a scheme of analysis. The purpose is to identify perspectives and formulate questions that enable the researcher to analyze how the discourse is maintained. Firstly, the analysis focuses on the communication materials' thematic structure characterized by how different themes are presented in a particular hierarchy, representing the overall context (Berglez, 1999). The thematic structure can be represented more or less explicitly, but is often depicted in the title of the material as it often summarizes the materials main content and message. Our thematic structure aims at developing an understanding of how different themes are displayed in the campaigns and thereby constructs the discourse of loyalty.

Bergström & Boréus (2005) refer to the relationship between a discourse and themes within it as interdiscursivity. Researchers can analyze a discourse by looking at the interrelationship between different interdiscourses. The thematic analysis aims at identifying interdiscourses contributing to the creation of meaning to obtain loyalty. This resulted in five identified interdiscourses: “price”, “about Ica”, “sender/receiver”, “social context” and “added value”.

Further, the analysis involves observing the schematic structure of the content. This level involves a storytelling feature characterized by alluding to a certain context that connects to the general thematic structure (Berglez, 1999). The schematic structure identifies the content of a text and how it produces a story. The author infer that interactions can be implemented from different sources to establish meaning in a desirable manner. In fine, the schematic structure can examine the summarizing section as it summarizes the message of the content. Based on the identified interdiscourses in the thematic structure the study’s schematic structure was depicted. Through a schematic analysis a deeper understanding of how the GRO communicated loyalty was comprehended. The schematic structure aimed at targeting the implicitly embedded messages of the interdiscourses and how it was communicated. Analyzing the interdiscourses, thereby involves creating an understanding of how the message of the interdiscourses relates to creating and maintaining the discourse of loyalty.

#### **4.5 Reliability, Validity & Reflexivity**

Reliability refers to the quality of the research and the possibility of other scholars to draw the same conclusions analyzing the same material (Damon & Holloway, 2011). Therefore, researchers should provide a detailed record of the research process. In order to obtain reliability, a scheme of analysis will present a framework for how the analysis has been conducted. Bergström & Boréus (2005) suggest that intersubjectivity is important to consider when conducting a discourse analysis, since it refers to making inferences that other scholars could reach by analyzing the same material. Taking intersubjectivity into consideration increases the possibility of generating a trustworthy research process and

obtaining reliability for this study. The presented scheme of analysis state how the inferences have been made on an equal basis. Hence, creating conditions for analyzing the material in a reliable manner.

Our method section transparently provides insights into how the discourse analysis has been conducted. The first section of the analysis describes how the interdiscourses have been interpreted and defined. As discourse analysis is based on interpretations of how different uses of language create different meanings, the interpretations must be adapted to the specific social context where the data is collected (Bergström & Boréus, 2005). The introduction section aims at introducing the context of inflation, leading to the phenomenon under investigation. Further, the organization of analysis is introduced providing the reader with relevant background information. Moreover, the analysis will be supported with empirical examples in order to adapt plausible theories and make legitimate interpretations. In order to minimize the risk of misinterpreting the collected data from its context, the interdiscourses will relate to the inflation in order to analyze how they are communicated and contribute to the discourse of loyalty.

Internal validity refers to presenting the research in a manner that reflects the social world. (Damon & Holloway, 2011). In order to establish the validity of a discourse analysis one needs to consider the context and explanatory power (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). Therefore, researchers must analyze elements that fit the analytical explanation of the discourse in order to relate the discourse of analysis to a context. Firstly, the sampling process was fundamental in order to provide relevant material for studying the discourse of loyalty during uncertain times. Therefore, material was selected based on significant weeks and periods of the inflation to maintain the study's relevance. Explanatory power refers to the productivity of the analytical explanations based on the researchers' ability to produce new explanations in relation to the context of the discourse (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). Therefore, material prior to and during the inflation have been sampled in order to increase the relevance of the analytical findings in relation to the context of study. Comparing the material provides the

opportunity to analyze how loyalty is maintained during uncertain times, increasing the opportunity to produce new findings and explanations.

External validity refers to generalizing the findings onto other cases (Damon & Holloway, 2011). However, the authors suggest that findings that are specific for a particular context are hard to generalize due to the uniqueness of the qualitative study. As data regarding a specific organization is examined, the possibility of generalizability is limited. Examining how Ica communicates in order to meet customer expectations and satisfy their primary needs, will represent how a certain organization communicates during times of uncertainty. Thereby, this study can identify strategies that other GRO's potentially could adopt in their digital marketing communication to adapt to societal changes causing times of uncertainty. Damon & Holloway (2011) argue that external validity could be achieved if the findings are typical for similar cases. Therefore, the potential adjustments of the communication could be seen as a potential benchmark for other GROs. Further, the identified strategies and tactics could be generalizable for all markets fulfilling customer's primary needs.

Due to the social constructionist view of knowledge, it is essential for researchers to consider reflexivity (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips, 2000). As discourse analysis views the social world from one point of view researchers must defend findings and conclusions through theoretical frameworks. In this research paper an abductive approach will be applied in order to provide relevant analysis and findings. Hence, the empirical material will be tested in relation to different theoretical frameworks and empirical material. Burr (2015) argues that taken-for-granted assumptions and personal preconceptions must be considered to remain objective and unbiased. By analyzing all of the communication material in relation to the scheme of analysis, the thematic structure provides the opportunity to identify objective interdiscourses from a wide collection of material. As the requirements for identifying patterns and themes were determined in advance, subjectivity could be avoided.

# 5. Analysis

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## 5.1 Empirical material

Since the beginning of 2001, Ica Sweden has produced and broadcasted marketing communication campaigns on national television (Ica, n.d). With the development of digitalization the campaigns are published digitally on Ica's website as well as on their Youtube channel where they have over 110 million views (Ica, n.d). Every week during the year a thirty seconds long sketch is released consisting of graphic, textual as well as spoken elements (Ica, n.d). In 2021 Ica had released over 830 campaigns. The majority of the campaigns takes place in a fictitious Ica store and features fictional employees displaying discounted goods. But in some occasional cases the campaign will take place in another setting. Today, "Ica Stig" and his store crew represent the voice of Ica (Ica Historien, n.d).

## 5.2 Interdiscourses of loyalty

By analyzing the digital campaign videos of 22/23, five discourses have been identified. These occur more or less explicitly throughout the campaigns over the years of 2019, 2022 och 2023. Jointly, these are interpreted as interdiscourses contributing to the creation and maintenance of the discourse of loyalty as they ascribe meaning related to the inflation, the customers or/and the Ica brand. Hence, the interdiscourses are fundamental features for understanding and analyzing how customer loyalty is communicated and in what way Ica portrays themselves in the digital campaigns in order to obtain legitimacy from the public.

"Right now reduced **prices**, if you are a regular" (week 8-11, 2023). The first identified interdiscourse is "price". As the material of analysis is partly communicated as traditional marketing communication with the purpose of increasing sales, price is considered a prominent factor to investigate. Furthermore, analyzing price contributes to valuable insights of how it is portrayed throughout the years, creating different meaning in different contexts.

The different meanings ascribed concerns communicating different associations during the inflation as well as the previous year that was not characterized by the same level of uncertainty.

“Always very low prices on **ICA basic \*Ica logo\***” (week 45, 2022). The second interdiscourse identified in the material focuses on the Ica brand and how they portray themselves in order to create and maintain relationships with their customers. The interdiscourse includes all corporate communication regarding the operations of “Ica Gruppen”. Therefore it concerns both factual products of Ica’s own line(s), and how Ica uses their brand to position themselves towards their customers and stakeholders by their communication. Additionally, an important feature of the interdiscourse regards communicating Ica’s loyalty program, “a regular”. As brands have become an important tool for creating value for the customers (Catic & Poturak, 2022), the “about Ica” interdiscourse became an essential unit of analysis. Furthermore, it becomes vital for an organization to maintain a brand that represents a sense of belonging, specifically in times of uncertainty (Rosenbaum-Elliot et al., 2018). Hence, communicating the interdiscourse indicates how Ica purposefully position their brand to maintain loyal customers.

“Look who already found who their **easter egg**” (week 15, 2019). The third theme considered in the material is the “social context” of the videos. The interdiscourse was elected due to the variety and extent of Ica alluding the campaigns to general societal contexts and popular culture. These could either be everyday events like holidays, season based activities or popular cultural events, or adopting to more serious contexts of political and economic character. In fine, this interdiscourse describes how inflation is taken into consideration as a social context. By examining the context of a campaign, the opportunity to identify how the campaigns are adjusted to different social contexts could be interpreted. This interdiscourse creates the opportunity to see how Ica creates a relatable context for their customers, hence how this affects the relationship and loyalty process.

“**You** find all **your** regular-offers in the Ica-app” (week 39, 2022). The fourth interdiscourse of analysis was labeled “Sender/Receiver”. Due to the thesis focus

on how a GRO communicates to achieve loyal customers, analyzing whether and how the brand addresses the customer in relation to the brand as senders of the communication could potentially create valuable knowledge. Thereby, analysis of how the brand differentiates sender versus receiver in the communication by the use of language. “Sender/receiver” is considered an important interdiscourse to analyze in order to understand how Ica portrays their customers and talk about and to them, to create a connection with them by establishing relationships. Examining how Ica incorporates the receiver in the interaction gives insights regarding how Ica creates meaning for the customer.

“You receive **better mortgage** the more you consume at Ica” (week 35, 2022). The fifth interdiscourse is labeled “added value” to further investigate how Ica ascribes additional values beyond low prices and price offers for the brand’s loyal customers. As earlier mentioned, the degree of loyalty towards a brand depends on the amount of perceived value by the customers (Catic & Poturak, 2022). Hence, this involves communicating how remaining loyal to Ica potentially leads to further benefits and opportunities. Additionally, this interdiscourse examines how the communication ascribes emotions as a means for creating further values in the meaning making process.

### **5.3 Loyalty in 2019**

“But I have not hidden any **easter-eggs** since 1997.” (week 15)

By analyzing the campaigns, an understanding of how Ica applies the schematic structure to make use of storytelling features to communicate the five interdiscourses is comprehended. Cognitive trust refers to one’s rational judgements which develops from knowledge of the trustee’s reputation (Dunn et al., 2012). In the campaign video *Ulf’s easter-egg*, Ica utilizes storytelling features to strengthen the interdiscourse of “social context”. To increase brand loyalty, customer’s sense of belonging to the brand must be created (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). By analyzing several campaigns one can determine that Ica alludes to a social context by referring to holiday seasons and popular cultural events. By alluding to a publicly known context as easter, Ica manages to maintain their

reputation as knowledgeable and trustworthy. Further Ica increases this perception as Ica Stig refers to the brand's history ("1997"), increasing the knowledge of the brand's long experience within the market and adapting to a commonly celebrated holiday. One can therefore comprehend that Ica characterizes this interdiscourse by using storytelling features in order to build a cognitive consumer trust, increasing the credibility of their reputation.

"**Carefully** chosen" (week 5). Looking at how the brand communicates the interdiscourse of "added value", one can gain understanding of how the brand strives to build an emotional relationship with customers through the communication of the campaigns. A brand achieves affective consumer trust by exhibiting feelings of care in the social exchange (Wang et al., 2023). In the campaign *Ica's own products* Ica uses a storytelling approach towards the process of how the brand selects the products sold in their stores. The brand manages to increase their reputation as a brand who carefully selects their products, hence increasing their reputation as trustworthy. Although Ica alludes to the interdiscourse of "added value" it is not possible to assume the aim is to strengthen the emotional relationship with their consumers since they do not maintain the interdiscourse "sender/receiver". Rather, what can be comprehended is that added value is utilized as a strategy to increase the reputation of the brand's products. As cognitive trust concerns the rational judgements about the trustees integrity, it can be interpreted that meaning is ascribed to Ica's products rather than the brand. Thus, it is possible to mark that Ica attempts to build cognitive consumer trust rather than affective trust in the campaign's of 2019.

"Crowded in the **store**" (week 4), **Ica's own goods**" (week 5), "**Ulf's Easter Egg**" (week 15). Analyzing the titles of the campaigns provide insights into how Ica use their communication to produce a certain reality of loyalty through knowledge by alluding to the interdiscourses. Despite identifying all of the interdiscourses to some extent in the content of the campaigns, "about Ica", "social context" and "added value" are the only identified interdiscourses in the titles of the communication material. The foremost prominent interdiscourse that can be identified in the majority of the titles is "about Ica". Adapting the



definition of a brand as “a name, concept, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of the above, (...)” (AMA, n.d), implies that the primary message of the titles is to communicate the Ica brand. The mention of the Ica brand is displayed in both explicit and implicit ways. The more implicit messages concern the title of “Crowded in the store” and *Ulf’s easter Egg*. Hence, the title *Crowded in the store* can be interpreted as an implicit reference to the “about Ica” as it refers to their store. Moreover, the title of *Ulf’s Easter Egg* also implies an implicit allusion to the Ica brand, since he is associated with the Ica campaign and the brand.

Boreús (2005) suggests that different interdiscourses can create certain meanings by interrelating them to each other. Although the majority of the titles incorporate “about Ica” in 2019, it cannot be comprehended as an allusion to the discourse of loyalty due to the lack of interrelation with the other interdiscourses. If other interdiscourses would have been mentioned in the same title in relation to “about Ica”, an interrelationship could have created further meaning. Hence, the contribution to the discourse of loyalty would have been more explicit. The different interdiscourses of loyalty are mentioned in the titles, but do not contribute to the discourse of loyalty. As the authors of this paper are interested in understanding how the discourse of loyalty is communicated, the analysis has not been able to identify any purposeful interrelationships. Therefore, the analysis of the titles in 2019 does not communicate a coherent purpose related to the maintenance of loyalty. As this thesis is characterized by a social constructionist approach, the lack of meaningful allusions in the titles create another sense of meaning. The examples above can be considered as an attempt of generating awareness to the brand. As brands can be used as tools for improving an organization’s position on the market (Catic & Poturak, 2022), it can be interpreted as a strategic choice to use the titles as a way of positioning the brand as a further effort to sell products and alluding to a discourse commonly used in marketing communication.

“Great **prices** in **store**, for **you** who loves breakfast **\*Ica logo\***” (week 7),  
“Let **us** fix the dinner, try **our** prepared meals **\*Ica logo\***” (week 8). The communication material often includes a short summary in the end which can

provide further knowledge about the message of a campaign. Except for the interdiscourse of “about Ica” that is the most prominent in the titles, the interdiscourses of “sender/receiver” and “price” occur in the endings of the campaigns. Therefore, the analysis indicates that the endings of the campaigns contain interdiscourses that were absent in the titles. This indicates that Ica creates a greater meaning in the endings of the campaigns than in the titles that represent the customers first impression of the message. Hence, the summaries are used as tools of maintaining loyalty to a wider extent than the titles. This analysis illustrates that Ica assumes that customers will be watching the entire campaign video. Thereby, the effectiveness of communicating a certain message can be challenged. The implication regards the fact that the meaning of the message is ascribed in the endings where there is a risk of merely communicating the Ica brand and not creating value for the customer. Furthermore, as both titles and summaries incorporate the interdiscourse of “about Ica” to the greatest extent, it is interpreted that the organization mainly uses their marketing communication as a means for communicating the brand.

Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2018) argue that brands exist in the minds of the customers making it essential to offer more than just information about prices and competitive offerings. The authors suggest that organizations must provide customers with an added value and a sense of belonging. The first example illustrates how Ica addresses the receiver, increasing the emotional connection between brand and consumer. However, in the majority of the summaries, “sender/receiver” primarily displays Ica as the sender and does not take the receiver into account. This can be supported by the fact that the previous mentioned example represents the only ending of a campaign where the receiver is addressed. Hence, it could not be interpreted that Ica adopts “sender/receiver” as a strategic interdiscourse to obtain loyal customers. As there is an absence of a pattern where the communication targets Ica’s customers or induces any personal commitment, it can be interpreted as the brand takes their customers' knowledge of the brand for granted. Thus, the communication indicates that Ica are aware that they can rely on their brand to attract consumers.

“Crowded in the **store**” (week 4), “Very good **prices** in **store** \*Ica logo\*” (week 4). By analyzing the campaign video *Crowded in the store*, two interdiscourses could be identified in the title and summary of the campaign. These concern displaying “about Ica” and “price” in a campaign taking place in the fictional Ica store. When analyzing the title it was observed that it solely communicates “about Ica” without interrelating it to another interdiscourse. The meaning ascribed to the title implicitly explains that it is crowded in the Ica store, despite any meaningful association. Grunig et al. (2002), argues that a closed system is characterized by not taking the external environment into consideration. The absence of a receiver for the communication, stresses that the primary message is inexplicit. As it does not target their customers, it could be interpreted as the external environment is excluded. Therefore, any purposeful pattern of alluding to the discourse of loyalty was not identifiable.

Furthermore, the ending of the campaign interrelates the interdiscourse of “price” and “about Ica”. Hence, creating a deeper meaning. It could be interpreted as the purpose of the message is to imply that the store is crowded with customers due to the low prices. The closed system approach is characterized by performing the organizational operations in a manner that is based on previous experience and knowledge (Topić, 2017). Due to the diffuse purpose of the message, the campaign can be seen as an effort of positioning the brand as an organization that provides offers that make the store-visitors crazy. Moreover, the communication can be seen as a marketing effort where Ica relies on their previous experience and uses their brand as a means for enhancing their position.

Due to their position as market leaders, Ica are able to use the communication as a strategic effort for preserving their current position. As the campaign does not address any receiver, the communication does not fulfill any particular purpose of creating meaning for *their* customers. Since Ica does not refer to them in a meaningful manner, the message is interpreted as targeting a general range of consumers. Therefore it can be interpreted that Ica takes their previous experience for granted as they assume that the receiver of the communication is aware of who they are. Thus, it can be perceived as Ica is putting all their trust into their

established brand by using it as a tool to strengthen current as well as potential relationships. The lack of purposeful interaction infer that Ica operates as a closed system by using their own knowledge to communicate themselves as a GRO that provides the best prices.

“At **ICA.se** we have produced weekly menus with lots of simple and **cheap** recipes.” (week 3). A part of the analysis investigated whether a particular hierarchy of the interdiscourses was visible or not. Throughout the campaigns, the interdiscourses were more or less prominent, leading to different meanings and associations regarding their essence. The interdiscourses that were communicated to the greatest extent during the year of 2019, were “price” and “about Ica”. In order to create an understanding of how the discourse of loyalty is maintained, the interrelation of the interdiscourses have been analyzed. Brands must identify what functional and symbolic advantages they provide their customers with (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). A functional brand provides the customers with a safe and easy-choice based on credibility. The example above illustrates how Ica communicates the interdiscourses “about Ica”, “sender/receiver” and “price”. One can assume that this interrelation creates the perception of Ica as an easy choice based on rational conditions. Ica manages to develop brand credibility by putting “about Ica” in relation to “price”. This interrelationship illustrates how Ica perceive themselves as credible by communicating “price” as a feature of making the brand trustworthy. As the interaction within the communication does not involve a specific receiver, the meaning ascribed is that the communication is not targeted. Hence, it does not allude to any symbolic feature. As Ica fails to address the receiver of the communication they do not maintain an emotional connection between the brand and the customer, which result in the perception of Ica being a functional brand.

“Let **us** fix the dinner, try **our** pre-made dishes **\*Ica logo\***” (week 3). Legitimacy is an intangible resource that protects organization’s from socially negative perceptions (Burlea & Popa, 2013). Through the interdiscourses of “about Ica” and “sender/receiver” it is illustrated how Ica manage to communicate their brand personality. By remarking themselves as the sender of communication,

Ica manages to communicate the messages they are representing in each campaign. Interrelating “sender/receiver” with “about Ica” the brand manages to communicate what they stand for and who they are. Cognitive legitimacy is built by creating brand visibility which responds to what the brand stands for (Burlea & Popa, 2013; Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). In the example above it can be seen how interrelating the two interdiscourses creates cognitive legitimacy. Through the use of language Ica position themselves as a brand of responsibility who exists in order to simplify the lifestyle around food for consumers.

“**Ica’s own** products, so delicious” (week 5), “**Carefully** chosen” (week 5). Interrelating “about Ica” to the interdiscourse of “added value” creates an opportunity to motivate the brand’s moral values. Moral legitimacy refers to stakeholder’s moral judgment of an organization’s actions motivating their social acceptance to exist (Burlea & Popa, 2013; Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). By addressing themselves as the actor choosing what products the customer’s are offered with and relating it to an emotion, Ica manage to communicate how their actions reflect upon moral values. Hence, customers are given the opportunity to perceive the brand as morally accepted giving Ica social acceptance to operate. Further, pragmatic legitimacy is produced by the organization’s ability to make the audience feel a certain way (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). As previously mentioned, analyzing different aspects of different campaigns from 2019, Ica have failed to address the receiver of the communication in the majority of the analyzed units. The absence of “sender/receiver” result in a vague connection between Ica and their customers which in turn does not contribute to obtaining pragmatic legitimacy. Thereby, there is a risk of customers perceiving the organization as not having their best interest. As the obtained level of legitimacy reflects how the public of the organization consider their social interests, the lack of pragmatic legitimacy can be interpreted as the communication being used in a strategic rather than proactive effort. Interpretatively, it can be argued that Ica uses their marketing communication as a strategic effort to position their brand rather than operating proactively to attain intangible resources that strengthens the brand loyalty when exposed to socially negative perceptions.

## 5.4 Loyalty in 22/23

“Right **now**, **Ica retailers** throughout the country are working to **reduce the price** of selected goods, from the southernmost **store(...)**all the way to Bottenviken” (week 15, 2023). This example highlights how Ica communicates a message that could be interpreted as an intentional act of operating as an open system. The mention of *right now* could be interpreted as a reference to the ongoing inflation. Hence, alluding to the interdiscourse of “social context”. Moreover, the communication encompasses the interdiscourses of “price” and “about Ica”. According to (Grunig et al., 2002), an open system organization is characterized by proactively listening to their external environment. By adapting the approach, organizations are able to adjust their operations in order to satisfy their needs. As Ica communicates their efforts of lowering the prices throughout the whole country, they adapt to the needs of their customers on a national level. By communicating these adapted operations, mutual beneficial relationships can be achieved. This could be interpreted as a strategic endeavor as the customers remain loyal towards Ica in parallel with Ica preserving their customers during uncertain times. The interdiscourse that appeared to the greatest extent through the years was “price”. As the ongoing inflation leads to an increase of the average price level, it could be argued that Ica adapts to a wider societal context by communicating price more prominently. Tench & Yeomans (2017) argues that organizations must be aware of their external environment as it concerns changes and potential issues at a macro level. As the inflation is out of the organizations control, they purposefully communicate how their operations are adapted on a micro level.

“Right **now** very **low prices** in **your store**. **Save like a regular!** \*Ica logo\*” (week 44 & 46, 2022). Despite repeatedly communicating the “price” interdiscourse in the titles and the contents of the campaigns, the interrelation with other interdiscourses occurs. The example mentioned above additionally contains “sender/receiver” and “about Ica”. The example illustrates a further development of communicating the organization as an open system. As the message of the campaign occurred during two different weeks, it could be interpreted that the

intended message is intentionally emphasized. The “sender/receiver” interdiscourse indicates that the lower price is available in the customer’s store. Moreover the mention of *a regular* refers to communicating the interdiscourse “about Ica”. This highlights the open system approach, as it additionally indicates how the organization adjusts their operations as an act of fulfilling their customers needs. By interrelating the multiple interdiscourses, the communication contributes to the discourse of loyalty. More specifically, the interrelation indicates that the customers can return to *their* store to acquire great offers and save money. By explaining that the offer is valid *right now*, it suggests that it relates to the ongoing inflation and the “social context”. By implicitly communicating the interdiscourse of “about Ica” through their loyalty program *a regular* it implies that it is targeting their external environment. More specifically it targets those that are loyal to the organization. In fine, it aligns with the open system approach as the organization retains their customers and the customers receive benefits for being loyal.

“**Good prices** on everything for the **lunchbox \*Ica logo\***” (week 4, 2023), “**Great prices** on food for **large scale cooking** that lasts a long time **\*Ica logo\***” (week 7, 2023). The communication of the “price” interdiscourse is alluded to in an explicit and implicit manner. The examples illustrate how Ica alludes to the macro level of the inflation, in a more implicit manner. Despite the mention of the word price, the examples display how the organization urges their customers to think more economically. As prices have increased, consumers must carefully consider how to spend their expenses. Aligning with the social constructionist approach, the meanings ascribed within the interaction have an impact on how people perceive the world (Burr, 2015). Therefore, Ica continues to enhance the perception of the current inflation and position themselves as being aware of the increased prices. Therefore, it can be seen as an effort of being perceived as an organization that the customers should remain loyal to. Supportably, the examples concern the summaries of two campaign videos and features the Ica-logo in relation to the communicated message. By displaying their logo, Ica deliberately ascribes further meaning as they portray themselves as the

providers of their customers needs. As the meaning embedded into the communication material suggests measures for the customers to think more economically, Ica offers their customers a reliable organization to trust during uncertain times. As the endings of a video summarizes the main message, the interdiscourse of “about Ica” creates a meaningful association by alluding to the context of inflation.

“**Ica Basic - Cheaper** for the right reason **\*ICA-logo\***” (week 3, 2023), “This particular one is **cheaper** because **we** buy so much” (week 3, 2023), “So that's why **we** proudly put **our name** on the goods” (week 3, 2023). In the examples above the interdiscourses “about Ica”, “price” and “added value” can be identified. Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2018) suggest that symbolic brands demand a higher level of consumer trust to minimize the perceived risk when consuming the products. The author further suggests that the allusion of emotions and a sense of intimacy towards the brand are important to gain trust. In this campaign Ica manages to derive trust from their customers by having *Ica Stig* educate them about the quality of Ica's cheapest product line. Since he is the fictitious store manager, and well associated with the Ica brand it can be assumed that he possesses valuable knowledge and is presented as a credible source of information. Therefore Ica purposely tries to gain trust from their customers, by having an authoritarian explain *why* their goods are cheaper. The meaning ascribed to the interaction of the communication is arguably related to the context of inflation. It could be seen as an attempt to communicate a typical functional brand, in a symbolic manner with the purpose of obtaining loyal customers. Hence, it implies that Ica wants their customers to trust that they can continue to buy their products, despite the inflation. As previously mentioned, it is vital for organizations to understand the behaviors and needs of their customers to manage their perception of the brand and its products (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). By maintaining a symbolic association to the Ica brand and its products, it could be understood as Ica tries to affect the customers perception by alluding to the discourse of loyalty.



Even though the interdiscourse of “price” is communicated, it is adapted to the societal context which creates a deeper meaning. As brands can be seen as tools with the purpose of creating value for customers, obtaining a symbolic brand can improve an organization's position on the market in comparison to their competitors (Catic & Poturak, 2022). The communication can be seen as an effort of positioning themselves towards their competitors. However, by analyzing the campaign it could be interpreted that the purpose is to create an added value for the customer and rather reminding their customers of why they should be loyal towards the organization and its brand. In accordance, Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2018) suggest that organizations must understand the behaviors of their customers to manage their perceptions.

Whereas symbolic brands represent goods that are associated with a high risk, functional brands provide goods that do not implicate any risk by purchasing it (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). As Ica is a GRO with the main distribution of groceries, they are in general unassociated with any high perceived risks. Therefore, Ica can be considered a functional brand as they offer primary need products. However, the inflation has affected how people spend their expenses due to the increased prices and specifically the increased prices on groceries. As the establishment of brand value refers to a process of handling perceptions (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018), it can be argued that Ica attempts to influence their customers' perceptions of the brand and the symbolic value they represent. Today it could be interpreted that Ica communicates in a manner that displays their brand as symbolic rather than functional by communicating the interdiscourse of “price” differently, due to the economic circumstances.

“Think that **our** own goods are so popular and so **affordable** after **100 years**” (week 33, 2022). In this example it is illustrated how Ica uses the interdiscourses “sender/receiver”, “price” and “social context” to maintain their trustworthiness and reliability during the inflation. Rosenbaum-Elliott. (2018) argue that customers develop a sense of belonging towards a brand by perceived benefits during a longer period of time. The meaning ascribed in the communication is that Ica as an organization have provided their customers with

an appealing customer-offer for over a decade. Accordingly, the interrelationship of “sender/receiver” and “about Ica” contributes to maintaining a sense of belonging.

Interpretively, this could be seen as an attempt to increase customers’ trust towards the brand. Supportably, Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2018) argue that brands offer customers stability in a world that is under constant change. As the inflation creates conditions for uncertainty, it can be interpreted as Ica intentionally communicates a message that maintains their trustworthiness in relation to the prevailing circumstances. By taking the needs of their customers into consideration, the meaning ascribed within the interaction is that the customers can return to Ica despite the economic difficulties.

“Right **now reduced prices** on the food **you** purchase often, for **you** as a **regular \*Ica logo\***” (week 8-11, 2023). During 22/23, “price” is a commonly emphasized interdiscourse throughout the campaigns, increasing its position in a thematic hierarchy. Throughout week eight to eleven, Ica implemented a campaign called *Now reduced price on the food you purchase often*. From the campaign one can explicitly identify the interdiscourses “price”, “sender/receiver”, and “about Ica”. The organization manages to emphasize the message of “price” by addressing whom it concerns as well as why they offer reduced prices. As brand trust derives from experiencing a sense of belonging towards the brand, the organization should offer the customer perceived benefits over time (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., 2018). Thus, achieving brand trust increases the probability of customers returning to the brand in times of uncertainty. Communicating the same campaign for a duration of four weeks, Ica continues to develop the brand’s trustworthiness for a longer period of time by these explicit customer values and benefits. One could interpret this action as a purposeful strategy to enhance their brand value, increasing customers' sense of belonging to the brand and the possibility of customer’s loyalty.

Further, the previously mentioned example indicates that Ica communicates more than what is expected from their customers. Brand’s must retain their existing customers and attract new ones by offering more than what is expected

on the market (Catic & Poturak, 2022). Not merely does Ica explicitly communicate the interdiscourse of “price” to their loyal customers, they even communicate an additional value for their customers by offering personalized offers. Implicitly, the interdiscourse of “added value” could be interpreted as a communication effort with the purpose of providing their customers with a reward for staying loyal to the brand. Achieving brand loyalty means increasing the possibility of customers returning to the brand to repurchase the same product or service, regardless of market conditions (Catic & Poturak, 2022). By providing personalized messages Ica maintains the perception of offering their customers safe and reliable choices. Consequently the trustworthiness of Ica as a brand is increased and simultaneously position them as a responsible GRO, regardless of changes on a macro level generated by the inflation.

“We continue to **reduce** plenty of **prices**. Look out for the arrow in **your store \*Ica logo\***” (week 15, 2023). The interdiscourse of “social context” is consistently utilized implicitly and explicitly through the campaigns. Due to the inflation, Ica alludes to the societal context to a great extent. Customer’s stay loyal to brands based on their ability to create customer value, which is done by reflecting upon emotional components (Catic & Poturak, 2022). By adapting to the societal context, Ica manages to exhibit its emotional support for their customers, increasing their association as a reliable brand. From Ica’s perspective, “social context” could be interpreted as a feature for creating a sense of emotional belonging to the brand in order to increase customer loyalty.

“Are there a lot of **regular prices now?**”- Fictional customer (week 20, 2022), “Of course! **Stig**, this man wants to know everything else one gets as **a regular.**” - Stina, Ica associate (week 20, 2022). This interaction represents a fictional customer in the campaign that is interested to know more about Ica’s prices. The example highlights the interdiscourses of “about Ica” as it concerns their loyalty program. Furthermore, it relates to the interdiscourse of “price”. Hereby, the interdiscourses of “price” and “about Ica” are interrelated which puts emphasis on how Ica provides great prices. More specifically, it concerns the great prices that Ica provides to their loyal customers. Further, the example relates to the

interdiscourse of “social context” concerning the ongoing inflation as the customer asks for the prices “right now”. Catic & Poturak (2022) argues that brand loyalty is obtained when customers continue to satisfy their needs from the same organization, despite changes on the market. Therefore, the meaning ascribed in the interaction is that the customers want to know more about Ica and their operations. Hence, the customers want to remain loyal to the Ica brand, despite the general unstable situation of inflation. As Ica responds to the customer with the purpose of explaining more, the message of the campaign could be interpreted as an attempt to invite their customers to remain loyal to their brand.

Brands achieve customer satisfaction by responding to their expectations of the brand (Catic & Poturak 2022). Throughout the videos, Ica uses their fictional sales associates as representatives of the brand’s voice. The example above illustrates how a customer is interacting with Ica’s sales associate *Stina* regarding the implication of being *a regular* customer. Using *Stina* as the sender of the communication, one can interpret the character as a symbol representing Ica’s message. As meaning is created in the social exchange, the use of fictional characters contributes to the realization of the interaction between Ica and its customers, contributing to the value making process of the interdiscourses. Using the characters as symbolic sources of information, the brands allude to the discourse of “about Ica” to achieve reliable customer satisfaction. Hence, the brand succeeds at forming positive brand expectations in the fictional interactions between Ica and customers.

“I really like **regular prices**” (- Customer) (week 20, 2022). By exceeding customer expectations, a brand achieves delighted customers (Catic & Poturak 2022). In order to communicate Ica’s credibility the brand has illustrated fictional customers who represent the customer’s voice. By giving customers a voice in the campaigns, the brand visualizes the degree of customer satisfaction. Using fictional customers as sources of information to the interdiscourse “about Ica”, the brand increases the credibility of the communication messages. Thus, letting fictional customers interact with the brand’s real customers enhance the chances of achieving brand loyalty. Allowing external actors representing the customers to

utter a voice, Ica increases customer's sense of belonging to the brand's loyalty program, maintaining its credibility. Interpretively, this can be seen as a strategic communication effort which assumes that the receiver of the campaign is a customer of Ica who can relate and connect with the emotions of the fictional characters.

“Great **regular-prices** in **your store** \*ICA-logo\*” (week 34, 2022). Affective trust refers to the emotional feeling of security and is generated by a trustor feeling cared for by a trustee in a social interaction (Dunn et al., 2012; Ozdemir et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). During 22/23, an increased use of communicating the interdiscourse “sender/receiver” has been interpreted. The example illustrates how Ica addresses their customer directly by referring to *your* store. It can be depicted as a strategic choice to increase the use of the “sender/receiver” interdiscourse as it embosses the message of a campaign as personal, increasing customer's emotional connection to the communication. The meaning ascribed to the campaign is that Ica welcomes the customers to *their* store by referring to it as the customer's which creates the feeling of a community. As it further alludes to “price” and “about Ica”, the GRO creates a feeling of security on the basis of the societal context. The example provides the customers with the information that the customers enrolled in the loyalty program can turn to their “own” stores and take part in exclusive offers. As the interaction only concerns customers enrolled in the loyalty programme, it generates a feeling where the customer is cared for by Ica. As customers are emotionally vulnerable during the inflation, Ica puts emphasis on generating an emotional connection in the interaction with its customers through “sender/receiver”, “price”, and “about Ica” to achieve affective brand trust. By establishing the emotional connection to the loyalty program, Ica manages to create the perception of themselves as a safe consumer choice and credible brand.

“**Cheaper** for the **right reason**” (week 3, 2023). An organization obtains legitimacy through justifiable economical and social actions that the general public perceive as respectful towards society's social and moral norms (Burlea & Popa, 2013). The identified interdiscourses highlights the different ways in which

Ica communicate in order to justify their operations during the inflation. By alluding to “price” and “social context” the brand manages to communicate their responsible actions that increase customer satisfaction. By communicating how an organization’s actions respond to customer expectations cognitive legitimacy is achieved (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). These interdiscourses indicate in which ways Ica adjust its actions in order to fulfill social expectations, to increase the brand’s legitimacy during the inflation. As earlier interpreted, this example educates customers why Ica are able to maintain low prices for their “ICA Basic” line, during inflation. Through the marketing communication Ica manages to respond to market demands by displaying how they as a market leader act in coherence with customer expectations. Hence, through interdiscourses Ica manage to reflect the brand’s core values during the inflation obtaining their legitimacy.

“News: As **a regular you** receive **better mortgage** the more **you** purchase with **us**. **\*Ica bank logo\*** Easy peasy.” (week 35, 2022). Furthermore, Ica alludes to “sender/receiver”, “about Ica” and “added value” throughout their campaigns, establishing an emotional connection with their customers. Moral legitimacy refers to the socially accepted perception of an organization’s moral acts (Burlea & Popa, 2013; Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). In this campaign Ica reflects upon its brand activities moral judgment by alluding to “added value”. Thereby, it is illustrated explicitly how Ica’s actions could be perceived as moral and good efforts. The brand creates an added value by displaying how they want to favor their loyal customers during inflation by reducing customers loans, an area greatly affected by inflation. By interrelating “added value” with “sender/receiver” and “about Ica”, the brand maintains its pragmatic legitimacy. Pragmatic legitimacy refers to the perception of an organization having the customer's best interest (Gustafson & Pomirleanu, 2021). By explicitly referring to the brand’s loyalty program, Ica maintains the perception of having their loyal customers' best interest. This is further emphasized by incorporating “sender/receiver” into the context. This interdiscourse makes the message of the campaign personal and emotional which intensifies the interaction between Ica and their customers. In relation to each other “sender/receiver”, “about Ica” and “added value” maintain

the emotional connection alluding to the customers perception of the brands moral and pragmatic values. By alluding to emotion to a great extent, Ica manages to communicate inclusivity, the benefits of being loyal as well as the brands moral values obtaining the brands legitimate image during inflation. Thereby, Ica deliberately adjusts their communication to adapt to what their customers expect in order to affect their perceptions of Ica as legitimate. Hence, it could be argued that Ica proactively tries to establish legitimacy in order to use it as a resource.

### **5.5 A comparison of the discourse of loyalty**

The analysis has resulted in reflections regarding the ascribed meanings within the communication material. Therefore, the campaigns of 2019 have been compared with the campaigns communicated during 22/23 for illustrative purposes. This section displays differences and similarities of how Ica alludes to the discourse of loyalty during times of uncertainty in comparison to times unaffected by uncertainty. The analysis of Ica's campaigns in 2019, 2022 and 2023 implies that Ica continuously communicates their main activities as a GRO. However, in 22/23 the use of language is adjusted and their communication portrays their activities differently to adapt to the context of the inflation. Further, the communication during the recent years contributes to the discourse of loyalty to a greater extent.

“Very **good prices** in store **\*Ica logo\***” (week 4, 2019), “Right **now** very **low prices** in your store. **Save like a regular! \*Ica logo\***” (week 44 & 46, 2022). Comparing two summaries addressing the Ica store (“about Ica”) from each period of time highlights distinct differences of how Ica obtains loyalty through the interdiscourses. In the example from 2019 Ica interrelates “price” and “about Ica” in order to produce a meaningful message embossed by loyalty. Whereas in 22/23 Ica expands the use of interdiscourses and adds “social context” and “sender/receiver”. Firstly, this comparison shows the greater use of interrelating several interdiscourses and secondly, how Ica creates an emotional connection to their customers in order to obtain loyalty during 22/23. In 2019 there is a lack of using language in order to target Ica's customers whereas in 22/23 the use of “sender/receiver” and “about Ica” is used to a greater extent in order to target Ica's

loyal customers. In 2019 it can be comprehended that Ica is positioning their brand by displaying that the receiver receives affordable prices in the Ica store. However, in 22/23 Ica proactively targets the intended receiver of the communication by amplifying *your store* and *a regular*. Therefore, it can be interpreted that Ica targets the customers that are loyal towards the organization rather than assuming that all consumers are potential customers. Furthermore, this interpretation suggests that in times of uncertainty Ica does not rely on the brand's previous reputation and image. Instead they communicate in a sense that makes the communication efforts more personalized and emotional, illustrating that Ica are aware of the potential changes in the customer preference due to inflation.

Even though "price" is one of the most prominent interdiscourse during each of the analyzed years, the interdiscourse is communicated differently and portrayed in a more meaningful manner during the years affected by uncertainty. As illustrated in the example above as well as in the analysis of 2019, "price" is mainly communicated as a reference to lowered prices and competitive offerings. As the analyzed data concerns the marketing communication of a GRO, it is reasonable to assume that price would be communicated to a great extent. However, an important reflection regards how "price" is communicated and emphasized as a consistent theme during 22/23. Furthermore, it is portrayed differently by alluding to associations related to obtaining loyal customers during the years affected by inflation. These years highlight an increased mention of price in the titles and summaries of the campaigns in comparison to the campaigns of 2019. As the interdiscourse occurred in almost every title for several weeks in a row, it can be considered as an intentional act of communicating a certain message. The identified pattern suggests that the primary message embedded in the communication of 22/23 is that Ica listens to the needs of their customers and communicates their adaptation to issues on a macro level by adjusting their efforts on a micro level. By interrelating "price" to the other interdiscourses as "social context" Ica purposefully adapts to the context of inflation and manages to communicate their main activities in alignment with the preference of their customers. Displaying interdiscourses in relation to each other, Ica maintains a



deeper meaning of their campaigns as they put more emphasis on certain interdiscourses. By alluding to “price” in relation to the other interdiscourses, Ica manages to communicate more than just affordable prices as the inflation has greater consequences than increased prices on groceries. As they communicate how their operations generate further advantages for their customers, they provide reasonable advantages of being loyal towards the Ica brand. Hence, in 22/23 Ica succeeds in contributing to the discourse of loyalty in a purposeful manner by portraying different interdiscourses as more important through different campaigns at different times.

## 6. Analytical Discussion

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An important finding regards a greater use of corporate communication in the year of 22/23, in comparison to the year of 2019 that was characterized by pervasive elements of consumer communication. This indicates that Ica purposefully communicates in a different manner during times of uncertainty to obtain trust and maintain relationships towards loyal customers. As consumer communication is principally regarded as a marketing effort, this finding suggests that the primary purpose of the communication in 2019 is to sell products. This can be supported by the vague interrelation of interdiscourses and partial maintenance to the discourse of loyalty. Distinctively, the communication of 22/23 fulfills a greater purpose due to the establishment of meaningful relationships. As these years concern the years affected by uncertainty, the findings imply that corporate communication is used to gain trust and obtain loyalty in relation to inflation. The embedded meanings of the campaigns indicate that Ica position themselves as a responsible brand by communicating who they are and what they stand for, hence obtaining a legitimate corporate reputation. Thereby, Ica creates a more effective promotion of the brand based on their social capital and consequently obtains loyalty that can be used as a resource during times of uncertainty.

Similar to Tong & Chan's (2022) findings, this thesis illustrates how digital media enhance the integration of PR-functions in digital marketing communication. Thus, it shows how GRO's can adapt their digital marketing communications efforts on an organizational micro level to comprehend changes on a societal macro level. Even though all analyzed campaigns are designed as marketing communication, the communication of 22/23 contained a greater extent of PR characteristics. As presented in the analysis, there is an absence of consistently interrelating several interdiscourses in the data from 2019. The campaigns of 2019 do not communicate a consistent pattern of addressing a certain receiver nor alluding to further loyal benefits. This use of language

illustrates how Ica put emphasis on communicating humoristic and enjoyable values alluding to the discourse of marketing communication rather than maintaining loyalty. However, in 22/23 Ica frequently succeeds at communicating how they strive to meet customer expectations through interrelating the interdiscourses frequently. As customer satisfaction is a prerequisite for obtaining customer loyalty, Ica creates meaning for how their actions are legitimate. Through the use of interdiscourses Ica illustrates how the brand takes the external environment into account when operating during inflation and they continuously obtains the three forms of legitimacy. By integrating rational and emotional features in the communication, Ica manages to communicate how they benefit their customers, and why customers gain from staying loyal to the brand. Thereby, Ica manages to obtain **license to operate** from their customers.

Our findings illustrate the importance of integrating PR functions onto marketing communication in order to manage relationships during times of uncertainty. By embossing the interdiscourses of personal character the communication manages to create further meaning of loyalty. This indicates that the GRO uses marketing communication as a tool for managing relationships. Distinguishing between the data from 2019 and 22/23 it is apprehended that GRO's should implement PR objectives in all channels of digital communication during uncertain times. As the inflation creates conditions of uncertainty on a societal, organizational and individual level, a necessity is to maintain mutually beneficial relationships. Therefore, a GRO should communicate in a manner that appeals customers to repurchase the brand and simultaneously provide the customer with a reliable organization. Hence, this study contributes to the knowledge that marketing communication is not only a tool for increasing sales but also building mutually beneficial relationships.

By examining the year of 2019 and comparing the findings with the years of 22/23, differences of how loyalty is communicated and maintained by the use of language in the marketing communication was identified. The most prevalent finding regards the interrelation of interdiscourses where this is considered as an intentional act of attaining loyalty by alluding to the discourse of loyalty in a

meaningful manner. The campaigns during 22/23 included multiple interdiscourses communicated simultaneously. By using additional interdiscourses in the same unit of language, Ica succeeds at establishing a reinforced allusion to the discourse of loyalty and an enhanced relationship to their customers. A further interesting finding regards the interconnection of the interdiscourses and the loyalty program. Our findings indicate that the loyalty program of Ica is embedded into the maintenance of the loyalty discourse in a meaningful manner by using a more personal communication that is adapted to the social context of the inflation. Thereby, Ica deliberately endeavors to attain a reinforced relationship with the customers by providing an added value and contributing to more than economic advantages. The campaigns that were communicated during the year unaffected by uncertainty displayed the interdiscourses in an incoherent manner and in an unidentifiable pattern. In fine, our findings suggest that the purposeful use of communicating the interdiscourses simultaneously and relating them to changes in the macro environment is a strategy for obtaining loyalty.

Even though GRO's are traditionally defined as functional brands, it can be concluded that customer loyalty is an essential management function to perform during times of uncertainty. When uncertainty is affecting societal, organizational and individual levels it becomes vital to create a symbolic value for GRO's in order to provide a unique customer-offer, hence obtaining customer loyalty. In this case study it is illustrated how GRO's can implement communication strategies of emotional character into their marketing communication in order to connect with their customers. Further, creating personalized and emotional messages are seen as proactive attempts to create customer preference towards the GRO. In fine, integrating PR-objectives and corporate communication are seen as key objectives to ensure loyal customers in times of uncertainty.

## **6.1 Future research**

This research paper has focused on how a specific GRO communicates during inflation in order to maintain loyalty. Therefore, the possibility of generalizability has been limited. An interesting extension of the research would be to analyze the digital marketing communication of multiple GROs to create an understanding of how the competitors communicate and analyze if there are any differences. Additionally, this study assumes the perspective of a GRO and does not take the customer's perspective into account. Therefore, future research could investigate the same phenomenon from a customer perspective in order to investigate the effectiveness of a GRO's digital marketing communication efforts.

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# Appendixes

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## Appendix 1: Consumer Price Index

År	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	Maj	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Okt	Nov	Dec
2023	11,7	12,0	10,6									
2022	3,7	4,3	6,0	6,4	7,3	8,7	8,5	9,8	10,8	10,9	11,5	12,3

Consumer Price Index following the Inflation Rate (%)

## **Appendix 2: Scheme of analysis**

### **1. Thematic structure**

- What interdiscourses can be interpreted in the material?
- Are the interdiscourses presented in a particular hierarchy?
- How does the interdiscourses allude to the context?
- How is the discourse of loyalty interrelated with the interdiscourses?
- What is the primary message of the content in the campaign?
- What words is the GRO enhancing in order to create a message of loyalty?
- What message(s) does the titles of the material convey?

### **2. Schematic structure**

#### *Interdiscourse: Price*

- How is price portrayed in the communication material?
- How is price displayed in the communication material beyond written numbers?
- How is price discussed in verbal communication beyond written numbers?
- How prominent are personalized prices addressed in the communication material?
- Who is portrayed as holding the power of price changes due to customer demands?

#### *Interdiscourse: About Ica*

- How is the brand portrayed and communicated in the material?
- How is brand legitimacy developed and established in the communication?
- Who is the representative of the GRO-brand?
- What does the brand communicate to create a sense of belonging to the brand?
- How does the brand position itself?
- How does the brand portray itself to seem responsible for its actions?

#### *Interdiscourse: "Sender/Receiver"*

- How does the brand communicate inclusivity to the customer?
- Who is the marketing communication addressing?
- How does the GRO portray themselves as the sender of the communication?
- How does the communication target the receiver?

*Interdiscourse: Context*

- What social context can be identified in the material?
- How is the context communicated?
- How does the context contribute to communicating the message of the video?
- How is the communication alluding to societal changes?

*Interdiscourse: Added value*

- How is the loyalty program communicated to attract consumers?
- How is the loyalty programme communicated by alluding to perceived benefits?
- How does the communication allude to emotions?
- What connotations are communicated except offers/lower prices?

### Appendix 3: Empirical Material

Week 3, 2019: [ICA reklamfilm 2019 v.3 - Enkla veckomenyer](#)

Week 4, 2019: [ICA reklamfilm 2019 v.4 - Trångt i butiken](#)

Week 5, 2019: [ICA reklamfilm 2019 v.5 - ICAs egna varor](#)

Week 7, 2019: [ICA reklamfilm 2019 v.7 - Kärlek till frukost](#)

Week 8, 2019: [ICA reklamfilm 2019 v.8 - ICA fixar middagen](#)

Week 15, 2019: [ICA reklamfilm 2019 v.15 - Ulfs påskägg](#)

Week 20, 2022: [ICA reklamfilm 2022 v.20 - Alla älskar stammis](#)

Week 33, 2022: [ICA reklamfilm 2022 v.33 - Så mycket bättre med ICAs egna varor](#)

Week 34, 2022: [ICA reklamfilm 2022 v.34 - Skitbra priser på ICA](#)

Week 35, 2022: [ICA reklamfilm 2022 v.35 - Godare bolån](#)

Week 39, 2022: [ICA reklamfilm 2022 v.39 - Personliga erbjudanden](#)

Week 44, 2022: [ICA reklamfilm 2022 v.44 - Låga priser](#)

Week 45, 2022: [ICA reklamfilm 2022 v.45 - Låga priser](#)

Week 46, 2022: [ICA reklamfilm 2022 v.46 - Låga priser](#)

Week 3, 2023: [ICA reklamfilm 2023 v.3 - Billigare av rätt anledning](#)

Week 4, 2023: [ICA reklamfilm 2023 v.4 - Mättande matlådor](#)

Week 5, 2023: [ICA reklamfilm 2023 v.5 - Öväntad Musikfest-gäst i butiken](#)

Week 7, 2023: [ICA reklamfilm 2023 v.7 - Storkok](#)

Week 8, 2023: [Just nu sänkt pris \(på maten du handlar ofta\) v.8-11](#)

Week 15, 2023: [ICA reklamfilm 2023 v.15 - Nytt sänkt pris](#)