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Handling Cancel Culture Online

A study of perceptions of cancel culture and crisis response on social media

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Thank you note

After two months of dedicated work, our bachelor thesis is finally completed. We would like to thank our supervisor Charlotte Simonson for all the valuable advice and help along the way. We would also like to thank Mats Heide for his interesting lectures in Crisis communication that definitely sparked our interest and idea for writing this research thesis. Lastly we would like to emphasize that our contribution to this research thesis has been equal.

Alice och Johanna

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Abstract

Handling cancel culture online

With this research study we hope to provide a greater understanding of the receivers perspective within the field of crisis communication, in order to be able to further develop crisis response strategies. This research study's purpose is to understand young adults' perception of the phenomena of cancel culture and why it should be taken into consideration in order to counteract a crisis on social media. The research study is based on qualitative group interviews analyzing young adults' perception of the phenomenon cancel culture and crisis response strategies. The interview material has been analyzed through using an abductive research methodology and oscillated between empiricism and theory. By using the RAT, IRT and SIT theories to be able to identify patterns and dynamics in the interview material. The interviews were done in relation to an empirical example. The empirical example that was used is about the Swedish influencer Margaux Dietz and the scandal she was a central part of during the autumn of 2022. The empirical example was of importance thus it was used as an example of the phenomena cancel culture and how it can develop on social media. The analysis indicates that there is an exciting prevalent negative picture against cancel culture on social media. The analysis also shows that even though there is a negative picture of cancel culture, the majority of the respondents have sometimes participated in different forms of cancel culture. This research study explores in correlation to SIT and several psychological factors to the respondents' participation in cancel culture. Ultimately, this study examines crisis response strategies related to IRT and their perceived effectiveness by social media users during *the Margaux Dietz scandal*.

Keywords: Cancel culture, crisis communication, social media

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Sammanfattning

Hantering av cancel culture online

Studien har som syfte att bidra till en större förståelse för mottagarperspektivet inom kriskommunikation för att kunna utveckla krisstrategier. Syftet är att förstå unga vuxnas uppfattning av fenomenet cancel culture och hur detta kan tas i beaktning för att motverka kris på sociala medier. Studien har sitt utgångsläge i ett socialkonstruktionistiskt perspektiv och undersöker sociala medie användares uppfattning av fenomenet cancel culture i relation till kris genom kvalitativa gruppintervjuer. Genom ett abduktivt forskningssätt har materialet analyserats och där vi pendlat mellan empiri och teori. Studien har utgått från teorierna RAT, IRT och SIT för att hitta mönster och motsättningar i intervjumaterialet. Intervjuerna har gjorts mot bakgrund till ett empiriskt exempel. Det empiriska exemplet som används är den svenska influencern Margaux Dietz och den skandal hon var del av under hösten 2022. Det empiriska exemplet var av intresse då det kan fungera som ett exempel för fenomenet cancel culture och hur detta kan te sig på sociala medier. Analysen indikerar att det finns en utbredd negativ bild mot cancel culture bland sociala media användare. Vidare visar det på att trots den negativa bilden har en majoritet av intervjupersonerna någon gång deltagit i olika former av cancel culture. Studien utforskar genom teorin SIT olika psykologiska anledningar till respondenternas deltagande. Slutligen, visar studien på de krisresponsstrategier i relation till IRT som sociala medie användarna uppfattar som mest effektiva i relation till Margaux Dietz krisen.

Nyckelord: Cancel culture, kriskommunikation, sociala medier

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In today's society, the reliance on traditional media for communication and making statements is no longer necessary due to the growth of social media (Eriksson, 2012). This shift has given individuals and organizations various social media platforms, granting them the ability to choose how and to whom they want to deliver their message to. As a result, there has been a significant power shift in terms of understanding patterns and implementing strategies in crisis response communication. This has led to numerous challenges for crisis managers, one of them being when and how to define a crisis (Eriksson, 2012).

As a result of social media, new challenges for communicators have arisen. It is possible to say that cancel culture is one of today's biggest challenges for organizations and individuals online. Cancel culture is not a new phenomenon; however, it has taken a new form in the context of social media and digital platforms and become somewhat of a buzzword in today's society (Tandoc et al., 2022). Cancel culture arose as a tool for those who previously had no voice to be able to speak out publicly through social media (Williams, 2021). The concept of the term is a form of boycott against an individual (often a celebrity) who has done any form of wrongdoing or acted in a controversial manner. In 2006 Tarana Burke created the #metoo movement, which had its breakthrough later in 2017. O'Keefe (2021) argues that the movement was the beginning to how the cancel culture trend has developed to as it is today. The #metoo movement aimed to spread awareness about sexual harassment and assault by visualizing how numerous women have felt exploited, or harassed in some way, especially in a work environment (O'Keefe, 2021).

The #metoo movement involved a wave of women holding men accountable for their involvement in sexual harassment, primarily through social media call-outs. These call-outs resulted in many of the cases in severe consequences for the accused, including job loss,

damaged reputations and strained relationships. The efficiency of such canceling actions become visible, leading individuals to adopt similar rhetorics in addressing other ethical dilemmas online with the outcome of cancellation (Norris, 2021). The Black lives matter movement (BLM), for instance, emerged as another example rooted in ethical concerns, focusing on racial and cultural injustices and following a rhetorics pattern similar to #metoo (O’Keefe, 2021). According to Norris (2021) this attitude and approach shift on social media eventually came to be known as cancel culture. As a result an online environment has emerged, where expressing opinions and experiences with the intention to cancel individuals, organizations, and companies has become normalized. The rise of cancel culture presents new challenges that impact the effectiveness of crisis communication strategies today.

A recent cancel culture crisis that took place in Sweden in November of 2022, was the cancellation of the Swedish influencer, blogger, and entrepreneur Margaux Dietz. Dietz has become influential on various social media platforms in the last couple of years and has been collaborating with several brands as well as creating brands of her own. However, in 2022 she became the subject of a scandal after posting a controversial video on her Youtube channel. The video in question became widely criticized on social media for being unethical and Dietz's morals were questioned. As the criticism against Dietz increased, brands that had previously collaborated with her began to distance themselves from her, and now, four months later (March, 2023) she is still trying to repair her image. For instance, one of her long and well-known ambassadorships with Stronger ended shortly after the published video and she lost approximately 10 000 followers on Instagram only a month after the scandal (Wicklin, 2023).

1.2 Problem definition

In today's social media-driven world, communication researchers face high-stakes threats, emphasizing the importance of research-based evidence for efficient crisis communication and management, as noted by Austin and Jin (2017). Comprehending the dynamics and behaviors of the social media users enables communicators to identify potential threats, predict public reactions, and design proactive communication strategies that minimize risks and protect the brand's reputation (Austin & Jin, 2017). In addition, cancel culture has

increased in usage and discussion in recent years, making it a relevant phenomenon to consider within the field of strategic communication and crisis communication. From previous research it can be assumed that there is a lack of research of cancel culture from a receiver perspective (Norris, 2021). By comprehending social media consumers' perceptions and attitudes towards cancel culture, strategic communicators can develop effective communication strategies that align with their values and beliefs. Such strategies facilitate the adept management of crises on social media platforms while mitigating the negative impact of cancel culture.

The Margaux Dietz crisis exemplifies the potential consequences of cancel culture and highlights the need for individuals and brands to manage their online presence, and reputation online. Particularly in relation for business and branding purposes on social media. Investigating cancel culture further is crucial to prevent future scandals and reputational harm, which could result in detrimental outcomes. Previous research within cancel culture related to crisis communication has focused on the sender's perspective as an organization, company or personal brand. However, this study aims to provide a detailed examination of the receivers perceptions and experiences on crisis response communication online in relation to cancel culture, with the purpose of providing a new angle to the field (Saldanha et al., 2022).

1.3 Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this research study is to examine social media consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward cancel culture, by utilizing *the Margaux Dietz scandal* as an empirical example. Furthermore, the purpose is also to contribute to a greater understanding of the usage of crisis response strategies and hopefully, a foundation that highlights the importance of how the recipients and social media users perceive themselves, others, and organizations in a cancel culture environment. To be able to fulfill the research study's purpose, we have conducted group interviews with young adults that have expressed a great knowledge about social media usage, the empirical example of *the Margaux Dietz scandal* and the phenomena of cancel culture.

The following research questions will be answered to fulfill the purpose of the study:

RQ1: *What are the perceptions of cancel culture on social media among young adults?*

RQ2: *What are young adults' perceptions of crisis response strategies online?*

1. Previous research

The following paragraphs aim to introduce previous research that has great importance for the purpose of this research study.

2.1 Crisis Communication

Risks and crises have always been a natural part of society throughout history, but risks may seem more relevant than ever in today's society, taking the modernization and the development of social media into consideration. One of the greatest consequences of the rapid development of social media is that it demands society, norms, and individuals' way of living in terms of constant input of one's thoughts and opinions (Van der Schyff & Flowerday, 2023)

As aforementioned, strategic communication is a broad and complex practice that aims to describe the greater focus on communication to achieve one's goals (Heide et al., 2018).

This for example could be when an organization or company strategically plans an event, ad or campaign in relation to a specific target group or when an influencer wisely chooses a collaboration partner that correlates well with the audience's values and beliefs. Crisis communication has the same essence as strategic communication, meaning that both practices have the same aim of in a strategic way adapt their communication to reach a specific goal (Heide et al., 2018). The main difference being that within the practice of crisis communication one's goal correlates with a greater outcome of the crisis situation, for example how to use crisis communication response strategies to solve and position oneself in a good position in the crisis situation (Heide et al., 2018).

Moreover, both of the practices relate to each other in numerous ways and according to Heide et al., (2018), the ones are so deeply intertwined that they need each other to be able to coexist. Two great examples of how well the two practices correlate to each other is (1), *the need for greater organizational knowledge*, which means that if an organization or company has a well functioning communication and strategic way of handling problems or everyday

efficiencies, they have less probability to end up in a crisis situation in the first place. This type of organization or company is also commonly referred to as a high reliability organization (Heide et al., 2018). Moreover, (2), *the importance of targeting the receiver*, within the practice of strategic communication it is according to Heide et al., (2018), of importance to take the receiver's complexity into consideration while formulating communication. Especially, when it comes to communicating internally and developing deeper organizational knowledge. However, the same goes for crisis communication, especially in relation to social media. Thus, the weight of knowing the receivers patterns and behaviors can make the communication to be perceived more efficiently (Heide et al., 2018).

Furthermore, this implies that the receiver's perspective is becoming even more central for organizations and companies today and that they are aware of the power that the audience now holds, especially on social media. Despite the progress within the field of crisis communication and crisis response strategies, there are still several challenges remaining. The availability of social media has changed the power dynamics in numerous ways, resulting in journalists and traditional media no longer having the upper power segment of the major information flow that spreads in society. The change in information flow has changed how societal and organizational crises are received and communicated (Karlsson, 2008).

2.1.1 Crisis communication on social media

A recent study reveals that overall social media usage grew rapidly between the years of 2011 and 2019, where 54% of the individuals that were interviewed said they used social media daily followed by an increase of 72% only eight years later (Statista, 2019). With the rise of new social media platforms and their increasing popularity, we could only assume that the statistics have further increased their percentage to where we are today in 2023. The rise of social media has resulted in an increase of information flow, where anyone at any time can publish and contribute to online communication. Social media has created user-centric platforms, meaning individuals have more control and flexibility to share and receive information online. Furthermore scholars argue that social media has largely replaced traditional media as the primary news source for a significant portion of the younger population (Eriksson, 2018).

Due to the rapid growth of social media, crisis communication research today faces a whole new dimension of criteria to consider. One of the largest ones being how to efficiently be able to adapt to the complexity of social media (Eriksson, 2018). The complexity of social media platforms is the rapid change of opinions, constant feedback and adaptation to a conversation in a way that makes the wide target groups feel seen. Many of the theories and strategies existing today do not in fact, consider social media normalities and its complexity (Eriksson, 2018). A greater example of social media normalities in relation to demonstrate how complex it is, could for example be the usage of emojis or adapting to a trend in the “right way” (Eriksson, 2018). This further implies that the research that is currently existing on crisis communication on social media has several challenges remaining, which puts enormous pressure on the research within the field to diversify.

In order to make sure one uses the right crisis strategies, it is important to understand the target group and their online behaviors and normalities. Theories and strategies today, regarding the receiver's perspective all have in common that they are narrow and based on a specific case and can therefore only be applied to individual cases (Eriksson, 2018). To make sense of this practice, there seems to be a trend within the field of researchers trying to combine these different strategies of different specific cases to create more diverse strategies to use on social media (Eriksson, 2018). However, this is assumed to be confusing for organizations and companies, whereas after reading them, it seems to be in the same diffuse pre-crisis situation (Eriksson, 2018).

Communicators can incorporate the above stated insights into crisis communications strategies to better navigate the opportunities and challenges social media provides during a crisis. It is crucial to continually update and adapt crisis communication approaches to correlate with the dynamic nature of social media and the perceptions of social media users (Eriksson, 2018). Due to the constant development and change in the social media landscape it is important to stay updated on the latest trends and strategies (Coombs, 2019). This research thesis aims to contribute to the ever evolving field of crisis communication on social media.

2.2. Cancel culture

The term cancel culture can be described as the boycotting of a person or a brand online when the opinions or actions do not match one's own (Tandoc et al., 2022). Boycotting in cancel culture refers to the act of intentionally withdrawing support or avoiding a person or brand due to a controversial act or wrongdoing. This can include not wanting to consume an artist's music, refusing to purchase products from a brand, or unfollowing an individual on social media. One of cancel culture's prominent characteristics is defined by the fact that there in the majority of cases is a marginalized group of people that seems to be expressing emphatic and moralistic arguments about a person or an organization's wrongdoings, for one to lose its position of power (Tandoc et al., 2022).

While explaining the emergence of cancel culture it is essential to distinguish between cancel culture and the act of cancellation of something or someone. While explaining the term and act of cancel culture and the act of canceling someone or something, in both cases the primary focus is the act of boycotting. The overall definition of boycotting aims to describe when someone or something shows their dissatisfaction against someone or something, while refusing to cooperate or calls for pressure to be exerted (Norris, 2021). Usually, boycotting can be seen as a practice that has been used in a societal context for ages, a great example of boycotting is when an organization or company goes on a strike to show their dissatisfaction directly to the upper power segment (Norris, 2021). However, it is of importance to notice that boycotting in that manner usually has a direct correlation between, for example, an employee and their work position. Something that is affecting them in a direct manner, for example taxes, work environment or their salary, with other words there is something that triggers them that has a direct link to their everyday life. In a cancel culture context online, boycotting is now a synonym for the word canceling which has the same essence of the practice in a societal context. However, the greatest distinction between the two practices is that, in cancel culture the boycotting can relate to something that has not in fact a direct impact on the social media user's life. This distinction is of great importance considering this research study thus, it raises the question of why social media users feel the need to boycott someone or something online (Norris, 2021).

As a consequence of the above mentioned, it is noticeable that there has been a recognition and attitude change to subjects like racial injustices, gender normality and feminism during the last five years (O'Keefe, 2021). This has greatly impacted the precautionary measures of how individuals and organizations approach and relate to different situations and crises, both online and in a societal context. What was initially an efficient and impactful way for individuals to reprimand injustices that were rooted in deep systematic societal injustices such as racism and equality, has emerged into something that is now including everyone as an open debate, especially online (Norris, 2021).

Moreover, research on cancel culture today points out cancel culture as a new form of online activism intended to call out unacceptable behavior and give a voice to minorities. Cancel culture can be seen as a positive phenomenon for promoting social justice and raising awareness about issues such as racism and sexism, as the previous example of #metoo. If we take the aforementioned term of boycotting on social media into consideration, these subjects on the other hand can be great examples of how boycotting may affect someone's everyday life. However, cancel culture today is often criticized for being extreme and associated with radicalization and censorship (Clark, 2020). Taking social identification and group identity into consideration, it can be argued that the focus in cancel culture often switches from the main issue to angering one or a few people, to instead speak for a whole population of people showing the majority what is considered to be right or wrong.

The current state of research indicates several consequences considering a cancel culture environment online, making it possible for rumors and negative information to spread quickly across multiple online platforms (Tandoc et al., 2022). Negative information spreads through social media and creates a filter bubble, which can boost the voices of social media users. A filter bubble aims to explain the personalized environment where individuals mainly receive information that matches their beliefs and perspectives, and not participate in others' thoughts about a situation. Social media users can easily participate in a debate and express their feelings and opinions about a topic or event. In this way, cancel culture can easily create herd behavior, where individuals adjust to the actions and behaviors of a larger group (Bouvier & Machin, 2021). Moreover, this can sometimes be a consequence of one's will to feel the connection with like minded individuals, and accumulate their group identity (Tandoc et al.,

2022). The power each individual can have through social media and by adapting to cancel culture, strengthens the objective of researching social media users' perceptions and behavior online. Ultimately, to further highlight the question of why social media users feel the need to boycott someone or something online, even though they're not the main target for the critics of the boycotting per say.

3. Theoretical framework

The following paragraphs aim to explain the theoretical framework and the theories chosen for this research study. As mentioned before, there used to be a lack of theory-based research within crisis communication. The research within this area has improved, but due to the dynamic landscape of social media there is a need for up to date theory based research, therefore this part is particularly important.

3.1 Rhetorical arena theory

Rhetorical arena theory, also referred to as RAT, aims to explain the process of the social sphere that emerges during a crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). The theory advocates the importance of letting many voices communicate their thoughts simultaneously. What defines RAT, is that it emphasizes the weight of what the majority of individuals express in relation to the crisis and their overall definition of the crisis situation. RAT contains the two concepts of arena and voice to explain crisis communication from a multi-voiced perspective, identifying, describing, and explaining patterns in communication processes during a crisis. The basic premise is that the emergence of a crisis creates an arena as a social sphere. Numerous actors and voices with an interest in a specific event or a crisis will all gather in the arena and tell their own opinions and perceptions of how the crisis should or should not be handled. It may be seen as all the actors in the arena are competing for who has the power to define the crisis. An example of different actors in an arena regarding a crisis is traditional media, politicians and the most relevant actors for this particular study, social media and social media users. These actors will within the arena share their opinions, compare the event with their own experiences and point out the victim and villain of the crisis (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

The theory implies that crisis communications is a complex result of ongoing communication processes before, during and after a crisis. The communication process refers to both senders and receivers that are creating meaning together or for themselves. RAT points out that crisis

is rather subjective than objective, referring to the fact that it is something created through communication (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). RAT has a macro and micro perspective, where the macro perspective is an analytical perspective giving an overview of interaction patterns between different actors in the RAT. This perspective focuses on analyzing interaction patterns when different actors and voices meet. Several communication processes define communication patterns, including actors' reactions, perceptions, opinions, and blame. Every communication process that provides for the crisis becomes a part of the arena. In the arena, power differences may affect how and when different voices are heard, and they are rarely symmetrical. The purpose of the micro perspective is to deconstruct a specific individual communication process within the arena and categorize it into three elements: crisis communication, sender, and receiver. However, for this research study RAT will be used in a more general manner, seeking to define the different actors and perceptions regarding the crisis within the sub-arena (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

Social media has become an important arena for interaction and conversation, especially during crises (Pew Research Center, 2021). However, it can be argued that the rhetorical arena approach can be perceived as confusing in a cancel culture environment due to multiple actors and perspectives online. In conclusion, it can be argued that voices on social media can take new turns and evolve rapidly on social media and it is therefore important to consider the RAT theory and the many voices that are circulating within the specific arena. Through this research study we are hoping to define some of the voices within the arena by analyzing young adult perception of culture.

3.2 Image repair theory

Image repair theory (IRT) created by Beniot aims to conceptualize guidelines and strategies that can be applied when an organization or individual's image has been affected during a crisis, and is therefore an efficient post-crisis strategy (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

IRT and Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) correlates well with each other thus, both practices have a similar structure regarding the different clusters that can be applied in different situations. Moreover, the SCCT model provides a different type of application of the model thus it has three clusters being, Cluster (1), *victim cluster* which is based on a naturally

occurring crisis, Cluster (2), *accidental cluster* that implies that there are minimal attributions of crisis responsibility and Cluster (3), *the intentional cluster* such as human-error accidents and organizational misdeeds (Coombs, 2007). After considering what crisis type the situation applies to, the SCCT model wants to adjust which crisis response strategy to use in order to remain and repair one's reputation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

The clusters provided by IRT is Cluster (1), *denial* which refers to one's action of denying their responsibility in a situation. Cluster (2), *evasion of responsibility* refers to when one tries to rationalize their actions in a situation that proves that their behavior is not the main factor contributing to the crisis event. Cluster (3), *reduce offensives* refers to when one tries to reduce the picture of their involvement in the crisis while addressing other greater actions to prove their overall innocence. Cluster (4), *corrective action* refers to when one tries to take control over the crisis situation in a way of taking actions to prevent it from happening again. Cluster (5), *mortification* refers to when one clearly expresses their involvement and openly takes their full responsibility in the situation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

However, in this research study IRT has been chosen thus, even though *the Margaux Dietz scandal* is a complex example of a crisis situation online, within the theory of SCCT it's going to be marked as an intentional crisis and therefore only applicable to some responsive actions. As by contrast, IRT provides five different clusters that do not need for a labeling of crisis beforehand and is therefore more applicable to comprehend the dynamics and different ways *the Margaux Dietz scandal* seems to have been turned. Recent studies show that in the last ten years the IRT model has evolved in numerous ways (Choi & Mitchell, 2022). As aforementioned, the IRT theory takes its ground in the SCCT model which has a primary focus on the transmitter's perspective. For example, organizations, politicians, government authorities and companies. However, As a consequence of the societal digitalization of the last ten years, there are clear signs as to where the theory has started to take more visual expressions into consideration. These signs are (1), *that the transmitter now can be an individual as well as an organization or company*. Sign (2), *which platform is chosen to use depending on when, how and what to communicate*. Moreover (3), *taking specific visual expressions into consideration before communication*. This can be taken to the extent of

example the choosage of specific clothes, makeup, lighting setup when the crisis response is going to take its form in a visual context (Choi & Mitchell, 2022).

Ultimately, IRT is of importance in relation to this research study thus, its latest research discovery taking visual expressions into consideration. This correlates well with the arena being social media like mentioned above in relation to the RAT theory. Also, considering the fact of the IRT giving a greater meaning to this research study because of the more simple labeling model of not first choosing what type of crisis it is. Moreover, the more simple structure of the IRT model is going to be more applicable to comprehend the dynamics of cancel culture and *the Margaux Dietz scandal*.

3.3 Social identity theory

Tajfel and Turner (1986) defines Social identity theory (SIT) as a group of people who identify as the same social category. People assign themselves social categories through discourse and communicating with larger groups. Individuals use the categories to identify and evaluate themselves through social attributes. These attributes capture the similarities and differences within a group, which primarily focuses on people's self-conceptions based on their belonging in a particular group such as sports group, religion, or interests. However, the theory focuses on how these groups will affect people's perceptions, attitudes and behavior regarding things within and outside the group (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Furthermore, SIT focuses on how people integrate into a self-concept and how this influences our views of other members and members of “our” group. The people that we identify ourselves with will have the biggest influence on our behavior (Miller, 2013). People will use already existing identities to make sense of their own social context and see if the category will resemble similarities and differences among people. People in the same groups will adjust to similar standards, have similar attitudes, and behave similarly (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). This is interesting in the context of cancel culture, as the phenomenon often starts off with a group or individuals expressing their opinions and attitudes toward a person or a brand. Through social media, opinions and attitudes can spread rapidly and the group may

grow and affect others with the same idea. The feeling of belonging in a group can exaggerate the attitudes and behavior of an individual in order to fit in.

SIT involves three psychological processes: *social categorization*, *social identification*, and *social comparison*. *Social categorization* is where individuals divide people according to categories based on similar characteristics such as age, nationality, or race. This process can help individuals understand others and make sense of their social surroundings (Ashford & Mael, 2008). The second process, *social identification*, is where individuals define their self-identification in terms of the social categories they identify with. Ashford and Mael (2008) aims to explain that *social identification* is a basic human need and creates, maintains, and builds individuals' self-esteem and sense of belonging. Lastly, the *social comparison* process is where individuals will compare their own social group with other groups to establish an understanding of their self-identification. This process may have consequences such as creating conflicts and discrimination between groups as each group may believe their own group is superior (Ashford & Mael, 2008).

SIT is interesting to consider in relation to the context of cancel culture, as cancel culture is often conducted by a group of people sharing the same ideas and perceptions of a certain event or a person. It may show that different groups will have different perceptions and attitudes toward cancel culture and how group “memberships” and the sense of belonging may shape and change social attitudes towards crises and scandals on social media (Ashford & Mael, 2008).

3.4 Synthesis of above mentioned theories

In conclusion, the three theories are closely related to one and another, as they all focus on understanding communication processes within social contexts and their impact on individuals or groups during crisis. However the three theories contribute with different perspectives and emphasize different aspects of communication and identity which can contribute to a comprehensive understanding of our empirical material and to better answer the research questions. The theories will be useful to analyze the rhetorical dynamics within the arena, the role of social identity and understand how image repair theories are perceived.

4. Method & Material

The following paragraphs aim to explain how and why some methods were chosen regarding data collection and sampling as well as introduce the theoretical philosophy of science. Moreover the choice of case and material selection is presented. Lastly, the credibility and quality of the research study will be discussed.

4.1 Scientific approach

This study seeks to enhance comprehension of communicative interactions and their potential influence on a phenomenon. Therefore, due to our adoption of an interpretative approach in analyzing these issues, a qualitative method was the most suitable (Bryman, 2018). As for example, the phenomena of cancel culture, that is created in a social media online environment. Frequency and measurability is not the main focus of the study; identifying patterns and understanding social phenomena will have a central role in the analysis of the empirical material. Qualitative research also has a great focus on linguistic symbols to decrease the distance between theory and data analyzing complex phenomena (Maanen, 1979). Moreover, we chose to base the study on an abductive approach which according to Eksell and Thelander (2014) can be described as a combination between an inductive and deductive approach. The great advantage of using an abductive method is that rather than committing to an inductive or deductive approach, it is possible to combine the two. This enables the research process to be based on both existing theories as well as the collected empirical data. The chosen theories RAT, IRT and SIT, have been used as a framework for better understanding young adults' perception of culture and crisis response strategies online. This enables creative thinking and generates plausible explanations to our phenomenon as it allows for discussion and reflection (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). The method allowed us to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of cancel culture concerning crisis communication by taking the recipients' experiences and perspectives into consideration.

The scientific approach for this thesis is a social constructivist perspective which aligns with our qualitative method and abductive approach. The social constructivist approach is based on understanding the world as socially constructed and created through social interactions with one's surroundings (Bryman, 2018). This means that we see that reality is created and recreated in subjective consciousness. For the purpose of this study, this means that communication constructs the social reality which means that we can analyze the dynamics that arise in relation to cancel culture and crises online. Within social constructivism it is essential to understand human interaction and social relationships as well as social norms and identities, which will be in particular interesting when analyzing the conducted group interviews (Bryman, 2018). In addition to this, us as writers of this thesis become co-creators of meaning through the interpretations we make of our material.

4.2. Group interviews as a data selection method

The research study uses group interviews, which provides valuable insights into how social media users perceive cancel culture, enhancing the analysis and facilitating a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Qualitative interview questions allow the researchers to hear the views and perspectives of the respondents with the aim of understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Qualitative interviews also allow for a deep understanding and detailed descriptions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). In order to start a group discussion on specific themes and, through the group dynamic, include several perspectives we chose to conduct group interviews. Group interviews can be seen as more flexible and dynamic than individual interviews and may better represent everyday discussion. Group interviews can enrich the data, in particular when the members of the group feel comfortable sharing their opinions and experiences with others in the group. Therefore each group contained group members that were familiar to each other and comfortable participating in the group discussion (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). Moreover, semi-structured group interviews were chosen. In our semi-structured interviews, we used our interview guide as a starting point. However, in semi structured interviews, the interviewer can follow up with new questions that add value to the interview. Therefore semi-structured interviews can be argued to give deeper knowledge by the potential of dialogues between the respondents and allowing

following up on angles and perspectives interesting to the participants. The questions were asked as open questions to allow discussion and reflection among the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014).

4.2 Choice of crisis case

For the purpose of the research study the empirical example of *the Margaux Dietz scandal* has been chosen as a crisis case. The crisis case is used to enrich the interviews and by having a concrete example of cancel culture and crisis on social media. Margaux Dietz is a well-known Swedish influencer who primarily operates on social media, promoting her personal brand. Her success has made her a prominent profile and a highly relevant topic in today's society, especially among young adults. Dietz's missteps on social media caused a huge uproar and can be seen as a prime example of how cancel culture emerges on social media (Wicklin, 2023). This example illustrates the challenges brands facing when operating online and how they can avoid the phenomena of cancel culture. In addition, the crisis also sparked our interest as researchers and challenged our ideas and thoughts on the topic of online crisis communication. In accordance with the guidelines for the processing of personal data in degree with the Faculty of social Sciences, us as researchers are obligated to inform Margaux Dietz that she has been used as an empirical example for this thesis (Samhällsvetenskapliga Fakulteten, 2023). We have therefore sent a message to Margaux Dietz on Instagram, informing her about our research study.

4.3 Strategic selection of respondents

The sampling method was to collect valuable data from our group interviews, based on a strategic sampling method commonly used in qualitative studies to collect varied interview answers. The premise of the method is to choose a few variables or characteristics that are in particular important for the research question (Trost & Hultåker, 2016). Therefore, it was important in this research study to choose a group of individuals with a social media account that is used frequently. Social media as a variable is important because we can assume from the above mentioned, that an individual that has a broad picture of cancel culture, also has a

greater understanding of how social media works. It is an important variable thus, it is needed in order to have an understanding of Margaux Dietz media presence and be able to answer the interview questions. According to a research study done by SOM-Institutet (31 mars 2021) 69 percent of Swedish citizens are regular social media users whereas the majority of them are between the ages of 16 to 29 years old. It is, therefore, justified to assume that these numbers could also reflect the social media usage of countries similar to Sweden and that teenagers and young adults are going to be influenced by social media events in their development and everyday life. Therefore, we have chosen a sample of young adults. The sample group was also chosen; thus, it is the most representative age group that we can see among those participating and interacting on Margaux Dietz social media accounts, which are mainly young women (CHIC Värvar Influencern Margaux Dietz – Aller.se, 2023). Therefore, the sampling partly represents Margaux Dietz follower group and those mainly exposed to *the Margaux Dietz scandal*. In this way it was possible to analyze young adults' overall perception of cancel culture and crisis- and response strategies.

4.4 Implementation of the interviews

While implementing the interviews, we recruited fourteen individuals that were divided fairly into five groups. The respondents were chosen according to the criteria as mentioned above, such as having a social media account, awareness of Margaux Dietz, and being young female adults. As mentioned before, each group consists of members who are well-known to each other, in order to create a comfortable group dynamic where each respondent can feel at ease in sharing their own opinions. The participants were recruited through word-of-mouth among acquaintances as well as students studying at nearby libraries. The age range of the respondents were 18-25 years. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2014) the participants of the interviews should give their permission to participate in the interviews. The participants had to give their consent by signing contracts giving their permission for the contribution to the purpose and analysis of this study.

Furthermore, the interviews were conducted in a quiet, controlled environment to ensure credibility. In order to make the research study valid, the research questions have been used as a guideline while choosing the correct theoretical framework as well as asking relevant questions to the respondents (Bryman, 2018). Each interview lasted approximately an hour

and was recorded with a tape recorder according to the guidelines for the processing of personal data in degree projects at the Faculty of Social Sciences (lu.se, 2022.) The recordings were later transcribed by hand and used anonymously in our analysis. To ensure credible data analysis, the data was later not coded, but examined as a whole, looking for different patterns, perspectives, and topics relevant for our research question. Lastly, we used mind mapping, selecting the most relevant segments from the group interviews. This method enables us to analyze data in a structured and reliable manner easily (Bryman, 2018). From this we were able to choose a few categories to discuss that were recurring in the interviews. Through the analysis the goal was to find the most plausible answers and explanations, and observe how these align or contradict with previous research and theories.

4.5 Methodological reflection

Tracy (2010), provides a framework of eight criteria for excellent qualitative research. These criteria can be important to consider in order to develop trustworthy data and qualitative, qualitative research study. One of the criterias that are interesting to look at in the context of qualitative analysis is sincerity. Sincerity relates to the word vulnerable, meaning that we have aimed to be self-aware, and emphatic as researchers. One possible way to make sure there is sincerity, is by looking at self-reflexivity. As a researcher it is important to adapt a reflexive mindset and reflect upon how the research is conducted. It is therefore important as writers to be aware of our backgrounds, experiences and beliefs that may have shaped this research (Tracy, 2010). As mentioned before in relation to our social constructivism scientific approach, we as writers become co-creators of meaning through the interpretations we make of our material. We have our own perception of cancel culture and crisis response strategies, which must be considered while aiming for a subjective analysis of the empirical material. However, our conclusions and interpretations have been grounded in a broad theoretical framework and previous research which improves the credibility. Moreover, through the analysis we strived to make subjective interpretations and assumptions to achieve trustworthy and credible results. Thick description can ensure credible data within qualitative research by providing in-depth data. In the analysis quotations from the interviews are presented in order to strengthen our analytical points and provide rich material. The quotations have then been

noticed, analyzed and unpacked to understand certain behavior and interaction and unfold details (Tracy, 2010).

5. Analysis

In this section the first two paragraphs will present the chosen case as well as the scandal that has been used as an empirical example to improve the discussions within the group interviews. The third paragraph will present the Margaux Dietz documentary, as it is often referred to among the respondents. The last paragraphs will discuss the interview material by analyzing different patterns divided into five categories, seeking to find the best plausible explanations and answers to our research questions.

5.1 Case introduction

In 2017 Margaux Dietz had her large breakthrough on Youtube, after documenting her own birth and uploading it on her channel. It did not take long before she got a massive response and the video went viral on the platform (Wicklin, 2023). According to Google support (2023), the term “viral” refers to Youtube's algorithm along with the number of views sorted to be one of the popular videos on the platform that week. This was the start of her career as an influencer, meaning that after the video was published, she got recognition, brand deals and ambassador requests (Wicklin, 2023). Dietz has since 2017 been active as a program host both on her own channel in a program called *Parti tempen*, where she interviewed different members of the Swedish parliament before the last two electoral cycles in 2019 and 2022. Dietz has since then released three different books, two children's books and one self autobiography. As aforementioned, Dietz also has been the brand ambassador to several big companies, including Stronger, a Swedish-owned brand that makes active clothing wear to women (Wicklin, 2023). In 2021 Margaux Dietz had a turnover of nearly 12 million Swedish krona (Wicklin, 2023).

5.1.1 The Margaux Dietz scandal

The third of November 2022 Dietz published a video on her Youtube channel, where she filmed an unconscious man laying outside her doorstep in her apartment complex. In the

video she, her son and her assistant proceeds to document the unconscious man, where they sneak out, laugh, take photos and at one point she lets her son touch him (Wicklin, 2023). Dietz calls her personal trainer where she describes the situation as to that there is a knocked-out man that is covered in blood outside her door, and proceeds to ask for help about what she should do and if she should call the police (Wicklin, 2023). After the situation occurred, the video went on to her talking about her day.

After the video was published the critics came in at a rapid pace and were massive. The video was discussed on various platforms and SVT, which is a Swedish state owned television company, continued to make a documentary only approximately one month after the scandal occurred. Consequently, many of her sponsors, brand deals came out publicly to show that they distanced themselves from her personal brand, even her long and well known ambassadorship with Stronger ended shortly after the published video (Wicklin, 2023). Another consequence of the massive critics led to Dietz being denounced to the police for a crime categorization that in Sweden is called *olaga integritetsintrång*, and can be translated as the illegal invasion of privacy (Wicklin, 2023). Dietz also got denounced to the Swedish social agency, as to where they reported a notice of concern for her being an unstable caregiver and home for her son, both of the investigations were further abandoned with no evidence (Wicklin, 2023).

The Margaux Dietz scandal is going to be central in this research study because it is a relevant and complex empirical example of cancel culture. As aforementioned, one of the greatest consequences of the course of events during a cancel culture situation is to know in what time to act in order to repair the damage. Because, often when the crisis from an internal point of view has seemed to tranquilize it is often something else concerning the person or organization that emerges as a problem to dilute the cancel culture situation further (Norris, 2021). In this case new things were brought up to light during the same time as the intense criticism from the published video. During this time some of her followers looked up old status updates on her now private Facebook where she had painted her face in a darker color for a custom party that was supposed to represent a person of color (Wicklin, 2023). In response, another follower publicly on social media questioned one of the children's books she had published some years ago. The critics were focused on the fact that the name of the

book was “*Arnold in South Africa*”, but still there were no people of color to be presented in the book (Wicklin, 2023). This course of events is a great representation of why it is of importance to research the receiver's viewpoint of cancel culture. Because even though Dietz and her management seemed to have some control over the situation, social media users brought something new to light, and they were back on feeling helpless.

5.1.2. Can we forgive Margaux?

The documentary *Kan vi förlåta Margaux* was frequently cited among the interview respondents, as a prime illustration of Dietz crisis strategies. Therefore the following paragraph will describe the fundamentals of the documentary.

On 23rd of December 2022, a few weeks after Dietz's oblique step, the documentary *Kan vi förlåta Margaux*, the English translation *Can we forgive Margaux?* was published. The documentary is made by the state-owned media Channel SVT as part of the “Edit” series. A series containing several investigative documentaries discussing topics in Swedish society. The description of the documentary on the website SVT play (SVT play, 2022) lets us know they filmed Dietz during her isolation a few weeks after the scandal, isolation due to all the hate and threats that have been circulating about her on numerous media channels. SVT explains that the documentary seeks to answer questions such as, *Does she regret it?*, *What have been the consequences?*, and *How has the silence affected Margaux?*. The 40-minute-long documentary first portrays the massive attention the scandal has had on digital media platforms, Swedish television news, radio, and podcast discussions. It also shows the police reports, notifications of concern, and threat letters that she has received in her mailbox for the past few weeks. Further on the documentary shows Dietz having conversations regarding the scandal with friends, family, and media personalities (svtplay.se, 2023). It can be argued that the overall aim for Dietz is to face the criticism and give her apologies.

The documentary itself has been widely discussed, criticized and questioned. Dagens Media (Wedholm, 2023), reported that the documentary has been reported to the Swedish media

board of examiners regarding Swedish publishing laws over 20 times as some claim it was created mainly to save Dietz's reputation and less as a non-biased review.

5.2 Overview of group interviews

Chart of the conducted group interviews, length and age of respondents

Group interview 1 - 42:27 min	Group interview 2 - 33:36 min	Group interview 3 - 33:49 min	Group interview 4 - 37:03 min	Group interview 5 - 37:36 min
A (23 years)	A (23 years)	A (23 years)	A (18 years)	A (25 years)
B (22 years)	B (25 years)	B (22 years)	B (19 years)	B (25 years)
C (22 years)	C (23 years)			C (23 years)
D (21 years)				

5.3 The respondent's perception of cancel culture

The following paragraphs aims to show our findings, divided into five categories that were identified in the interview material. The categories are based on patterns that were identified in the interviews and related to the two research questions.

As aforementioned, due to digitalization, cancel culture has rapidly grown and changed its form in recent years. *The Margaux Dietz scandal* originated from a Youtube video and gained attraction through social media, which increasingly has become the major platform for cancel culture discourse. Within the sub-arena as discussed in RAT, it is important to be aware of different actors' perceptions of the crisis to be able to adjust the crisis response after one's target group (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

Therefore, the respondents were asked during the interviews to share their definitions of cancel culture to understand the overall perception among the chosen sampling group. The interviews have shown that the respondent's perception aligns with the previous research on the definition of cancel culture. As mentioned before, cancel culture can be seen as a positive

phenomenon, used as a new form of online activism that aims to act for social justice and spread awareness. However, according to the respondents, the negative aspects of cancel culture often take over the positive when cancel culture is used to the extreme. The extreme aspects often lead to cancel culture as a form of bullying and public shaming and may lead to damaging consequences for individuals and organizations (Wong, 2021). The quotes below show how some of the respondents define cancel culture.

I would say that, from my point of view, it is about more ethical issues. It is something that arises and a group that feels that they are offended by this crisis. They will join together to be perceived as a cancel culture against the ethical problem that a certain person or company has created. That is my view. (Respondent B, Interview 1)

It's like this consequence of cancel culture might be worse than the consequence of what originally happened. (Respondent A, Interview 3)

(...) I don't really know if I think cancel culture gives room for any constructive criticism. (...). (Respondent C, Interview 5)

The respondents express that cancel culture is not a tool of constructive criticism, and often results in negative consequences. From the citations above it can be assumed that the negative perception of cancel culture seems to be greater than the positive perception which can further be seen in the citation below.

It became viral. The person exposed to cancel culture can become really hurt. I'm thinking of Johnny Depp who got canceled and lost his contract with Disney. It can have devastating consequences (...) (Respondent A, interview 5)

Most respondents agreed that cancel culture has good intentions, but often crosses the line if it used to bully and shame other people. This suggests that cancel culture is a prevalent phenomenon online but not necessarily justified or accepted. However, it may also suggest that there are other, perhaps psychological aspects promoting social media users' behavior online and participation in cancel culture rather than the overall attitude towards it.

5.4 Group identity and engagement in cancel culture

The respondents expressed their negative perception towards cancel culture by distancing themselves from those they identified as having “engaging in cancel culture” behavior. This could also be referred to the psychological process within SIT, called *social categorization*. By using SIT it is possible to assume that this behavior may indicate that the respondents distance themselves from individuals engaged in cancel culture to differentiate themselves from their particular group (Ashford & Mael 2008). The respondents stated in a clear manner it was a group they did not belong to or associate themselves with. *Respondent C* and *D* in *interview 1*, as well as *C* in *interview 2*, reflect about who is participating in cancel culture, not mentioning themselves.

(...)No I think it is about who you are as a person, I would never comment.(...). (Respondent C, interview 1)

(...) I have never done it, but I would not say I would ever do it because it's just not who I am. But if I did, it would be because it is something very personal to me.(...). (Respondent D, Interview 1)

(...)Yes, but there are still many if you look, who are the ones who often write hate comments? Well, it is Märta 79 who sits there and does body shaming.(...). (Respondent C, interview 2)

All three citations above point out that it's a “type” of person that engages in cancel culture, and the type they are describing does not correspond with their own self identity. Simultaneously, most of the interview respondents expressed that they had participated in cancel culture in different forms than what they defined cancel culture as from the outset. They began defining cancel culture as bullying, excluding a person and posting their opinions about someone online. However, it occurs that they had participated in cancel culture in other ways in the form of unfollowing, sharing posts on social media, boycotting music, and writing personal messages, expressing their anger towards celebrities online, as seen in the quotes below. This is possible to understand as a paradox against the aforementioned negative perception against the phenomenon.

(...) I once wrote to Lojsan, one time when she defended the situation with NAKD interns that were treated like shit. (...). (Respondent A, interview 3)

You know when Kanye West, it was this big thing. When he made his both racist and anti-Semitic statement. On Twitter: I was like, I'm not going to listen to his music anymore. I was really part of the. (...). (Respondent C, interview 2)

These quotes are examples of how the respondents have participated in cancel culture. The quotes indicate that the respondents have for instance participated in cancel culture by writing messages to influencers online and stop listening to artists' music. Initially, the respondents had a clear understanding of what cancel culture entails. However, as the interviews progressed their understanding of the phenomenon expanded as they themselves admitted that they had participated in different forms of cancel culture. Although most respondents had a negative attitude towards cancel culture, most of the respondents had used it to hold famous people, companies and influencers accountable for their actions.

5.5 Personal identification

The interviews showed that the respondents will act differently on social media depending on their perception of the surrounding, similar to *social categorization* in SIT (Ashford & Mael, 2008). This behavior can be identified in many of the interviews as a way for social media users to understand a certain event or scandal online. Several respondents have expressed that the main reason they decide whether to get involved in cancel culture or not, is if an event is relatable to them. An event regarding a certain social group may be a bigger trigger point for those identifying with the group. People who strongly identify with a group are more likely to perceive the scandal as a crisis and become threatened by it to take the opportunity to express their own beliefs and opinions that match their self-identification. *Respondent C, interview 2* expresses the personal attack she felt when a scandal applied on her social group and identification in society.

(...) And then I also felt an attack on me. And I was like, okay, but this is a group in society that I belong to..(...). (Respondent C, interview 2)

The respondents that did not feel affected by *the Margaux Dietz scandal* expressed it was because it was not something they could identify themselves with nor relate to, and therefore it was not something they bothered to get involved in. *Respondent B, interview 1* states that *the Margaux Dietz scandal* is highly relatable for people identifying as mothers and was therefore not relatable or interesting to her.

There were a lot of mothers who were really pissed off. And it's very difficult, I mean, I find it very difficult to put myself in a mother role as I'm not a mother. No, and then it's like, you can't understand how you would react to it. (Respondent B, interview 1)

In addition to this a majority of the respondents expressed that peer pressure from friend groups and society affected their involvement in a scandal. Some explained that not getting involved in a scandal may be considered by others as a statement, if they did not participate in cancel culture, this could be seen as a sign that it agrees with the person involved in the scandal. This could be related to SIT, where individuals evaluate and identify themselves based on their social attributes and belonging to a group (Ashforth et al., 2008). This may indicate that when the respondent did not take a stand or participate in activities similar to those within their groups, their self identity may collapse. Participant *B* and *A* from *Interview 5* and *2* are two of the respondents expressing that engaging in scandal on social media is important to fit into one's own group.

(...) For example, if I would post a black picture on Instagram. It was almost as if you were a racist if you didn't do it. There was so much pressure about it. And that in itself can be perceived as not taking a stand.(...). (Respondent A, interview 5)

Yes, and I think so too. If you were to put everyone in a room by themselves. I don't think everyone would be as hard on a person in their circle of friends. Whereas if you sit in a large group. And you think that one person has done something wrong. It's very easy to just... No okay, but we distance ourselves from you in the whole group. Because everyone thinks so. (Respondent B, interview 2)

In the citations above both mention groups of people and how these can pressure one to take a stand. Moreover, most of the respondents as mentioned before did not identify themselves with cancel culture. We found that the main reason they did not relate to *the Margaux Dietz scandal* was because they had distanced themselves from Dietz and her behavior. According

to our interviews, most respondents expressed a sense of superiority concerning Dietz and other celebrities and organizations involved in crises. It was possible to see that the respondents compared their own social identity and group to Margaux Dietz, which could, according to SIT, be a possible way for individuals to establish an understanding of their self-identification. When a group feels superior to another, it may create conflict and discrimination between groups according to Ashford and Mael (2008). It occurs that the respondents distance themselves from those involved in the crisis (Margaux Dietz in this case particularly), because their own values and morals do not match with those involved. The respondents appeared to view it as imperative to distance themselves from behaviors that do not match with their self-identification. The distancing behavior suggests the importance for the respondents to distance their personal identities and morals from those associated with a bad moral or negative behavior. This may be a suitable crisis response strategy for organizations to regain their trust and image. *Respondents A and B in interview 3 and 5* distanced themselves from Dietz as a person in their perception lacking morals, and that is disconnected from reality.

(...) It feels a bit egoistic, and insensitive, inhuman even to publish the video. When it is actually a situation when you are like, what the hell has happened to this person? Why are you lying there? How are you? Are you even alive? (...). (Respondent A, interview 3)

(...) It shows she has a weird view on life. She is a rich white woman. She has a lot, and also there are some things from her past. She has a view that is kind of. I mean disconnected from reality. (...). (Respondent B, interview 5)

Ultimately, it is arguable to say that the interviews show that the respondent's perception of cancel culture is affected by multiple factors, some that are possible to identify through SIT. The interviews show that the respondent's involvement and opinions on cancel culture were highly influenced by their self-identification in relation to other social groups. Lastly, it shows that there are psychological factors impacting the respondents' interaction with cancel culture. This eventually affects the type of crisis response strategies the respondents find better or worse in relation to different crises.

5.6 Usage of crisis response strategies

What can be assumed from the above mentioned, it is clear that the respondents had a greater understanding and perception of cancel culture on social media. As it is stated in the RAT, numerous actors and voices with an interest in a specific event or crisis will gather in the arena to tell their own opinion and perceptions of how a crisis should or should not be handled (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). The respondents expressed several thoughts on how and why some crisis response theories in relation to *the Margaux Dietz scandal* did not fulfill their purpose. This part of the analysis is going to further analyze their thoughts about crisis response strategies with *the Margaux Dietz scandal* as the central part of the discussion. One thing that many of the respondents addressed several times was Dietz role and responsibility in the crisis situation. The respondents seem to have the same perception of Dietz being fully responsible, while at the same time showing empathy for the mistake. Since they agreed that Dietz was central in the crisis, it was assumed that however she was about to respond to her actions, it was going to be seen as an act of evading her responsibility.

However, it is of interest mentioning that even though the respondents are assumed to not have a greater knowledge of crisis communication nor crisis communication strategies, it is clear that they reflected over different response strategies that's been used over all in relation to cancel culture online.

It is a hard path to walk. It can be very problematic if it goes too fast, because that can end up in backlash. And people being like, oh god you are just doing this to save your own skin. But, at the same time, if you are quiet for too long people can think like this person does not care. So it is hard to know. (Respondent C, Interview 2)

Yes, you come with excuses, that is it, they come with very vague excuses that make it all much worse in the end. Like they are getting more canceled. Like, I didn't know that he was about to die, like what the fuck are you talking about? And then it gets even worse. (Respondent A, Interview 5)

As the quotations above states, the respondent expressed the issue with crisis response in a metaperspective considering the overall context. They are expressing that it is in fact

problematic if the response in the shape of an excuse comes too fast though there is a big risk of the response getting backlash. However, they also mentioned that it is problematic if it takes too long for the person responsible for the crisis to address it. As *Respondent A*, from *interview 5* expresses it seems that the respondents have the overall perception that when an individual online for example an influencer as Dietz. When the crisis response takes too long, the response usually is perceived as a way of evading their responsibility (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). In Dietz's case it's not by denial or shifting blame, more assumed to be a feeling of the excuses being too vague and factual and in fact missing genuinity. Moreover, the respondents also expressed that they got the perception that Dietz did try to evade her responsibility in the crisis situation.

Her uploading the plant pictures. (Respondent C, Interview 1)

But like it was like that, you just felt. Does she even take this seriously? (Respondent B, Interview 1)

As the quotations above represent, the respondents expressed that they remembered that it took a while for Dietz to respond publicly to the critics against the published video. Something that was brought up by one group, in particular, was that they remembered Dietz uploading some posts that were diffuse and hard to understand before she posted her apology to her Instagram. She uploaded what the respondents referred to as the “plant pictures” where she was accused by the respondents of writing diffuse captions. Referring to 3-5 instagram posts, showing pictures of plants and motives that were out of context in relation to the crisis situation. Moreover, this was perceived as a way for Dietz to evade her responsibility and shift focus from the actual crisis situation. The “plant pictures” is something worth mentioning thus, the respondents expressed that it influenced them and the way they portrayed her in the crisis, the posts is assumed to be the first thing that was seen as a way of evade her responsibility. Unfortunately, did Dietz delete these pictures only a short time after she published them, leaving behind no evidence to them existing.

A majority of the respondents mentioned the SVT documentary several times. It can be assumed from the quotations below, that making the documentary was perceived as Dietz's

crisis response of trying to correct her action. *Correcting action* is a common crisis response strategy within IRT, which refers to when one tries to take control over the crisis situation in a way of taking actions to prevent it from happening again (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020).

I think the triggering point for me was when SVT made a documentary about it. It was by far the worst. Public service has nothing to do with a specific influencer online behavior. One, they shouldn't make it into a bigger deal. Two, it only contributes to the criticism. And three, they shouldn't make a documentary that is just like a one week pop cultural fenomen. It is so irrelevant. Respondent A, Interview 1

(...) And its also fucked that SVT did go through with it. Ehm, like it creates an even longer distance from her audience. And like, with that you want them [celebrities or influencers] to climb down from their throne. For them to have full understanding that it went wrong, but with doing a documentary on SVT and making even more money off the situation, rubs me the wrong way (...). Respondent B, Interview 5

It is assumed from the quotations above that the respondents felt that Dietz was trying to correct her actions with the documentary, but doing so while also evading her responsibility at the same time. For example, the respondents thought that Dietz put herself on a pedestal in the sense as to her thinking that a documentary was the right response to the crisis. This act correlates with SIT's *social comparison* as to her showing that she is superior to her social media followers (Ashford & Mael, 2008). Meaning that, it is assumed that the respondents thought Dietz tried to put herself in some higher sense within the arena, being social media, that she tried to set herself to be someone else. Also correlating with SIT, and her followers feeling like friends rather than just social media followers. As such, they felt portrayed or feeling naive to not knowing that she in fact had a central part in the scandal.

I felt like, what the fuck, are you going to play the victim for in the documentary? I felt like it is much better to distance yourself from social media for Dietz deleted them off for your own mental health and like, try to have a self-as process. And come to terms with, okay what is it that I am doing? Why do people act this way? Is it reasonable for people to act the way they do? (...) I get that she wants to explain her side with SVT, but it portrayed her as insincere. And like that she still does not understand what she has done, it's like she is just having a series where she sits and cries (...). (Respondent A, Interview 3)

However, what also is clear is that the respondents did not find the documentary fulfilling the purpose as an honest apology. Instead, as the respondents' quotation above illustrates, the way of correcting her actions correlates well with the crisis responses of the IRT being *simple denial* or a new way of *evade responsibility* (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). Meaning, that Dietz tried to rationalize her actions in crisis and deny her central role in the situation.

This makes the attempt of repairing her image not useful, thus, the order of strategies communication during the crisis already has made an insincere and diffuse impression for the respondents and social media users. It is of interest to mention that the respondents also presumably seemed to be aware of what the documentary should serve as a purpose in relation to the crisis. That was assumed to be like above mentioned, a way of evading her responsibility due to the crisis situation. The quotation below is a great example of that:

And like I remembered she said that she got several requests from TV4 and channel 5 and that everyone wanted her to choose their channel to do her comeback on and that she then chose SVT because they were the most neutral ones. (...) So yes, I would say that if she were genuinely sad about it she would have known better than to make a whole documentary about it. (Respondent A, Interview 4)

SVT is a state owned television channel that focuses on making documentaries about current important topics that relate to the overall societal context most frequently in Scandinavia (SVT, 2023). Taking this into consideration in relation to the IRT theory and its different clusters, it is interesting how SVT as an objective channel she chose made the corrective action not useful (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). As aforementioned, it was assumed that she put herself in a position, being superior to her social media followers, which can be assumed from the quotations was a triggering point for them. For the conducted interviews that is the base for this research study, was as aforementioned based on a strategic sampling method where the respondents considered themselves to have a greater knowledge of social media users, cancel culture and also about *the Margaux Dietz scandal*. As it seems that the respondents have a broad knowledge of crisis response theories, it is important to take their perception of it even further on in the pre-crisis state.

Like, I think that is the whole point. It is so easy to hide behind a screen, and especially now when you have the option to write anonymously on Facebook. It gets so much easier to feed the situation further. (Respondent A, Interview 1)

I think that it affects the information flow, because it is in that high volume. And it's like so, you are so anonymous online. You can post whatever you want. You can say whatever you want to say. We become a part of this cancel culture (...). (Respondent C , Interview 2)

Some of the respondents mentioned the perspective of anonymity on social media platforms, as the quotations above illustrate, a common perception among the participants is that the emergence of social media has contributed to the width of many cancel culture situations. The assumed correlation of anonymity and a more rapid information flow affects the theory of the hypothetical rhetorical arena that is central within the laws of the theory. Moreover, RAT wants the crisis manager to categorize an arena of voices to conceptualize the difference between them to further hear which voices speak for the majority of the population (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016). However, this may be something that has worked for cases before, but considering the width of the hypothetical arena being social media, it gets difficult to hear clear voices and pinpoint similarities. Another aspect of anonymity that needs to be considered concerning the RAT theory is that it makes it difficult to know what the perceptions are of one's own target group. Because when you cannot see a representative profile picture or name, it is difficult to know the perceptions of the target group and how to communicate that specific opinion of that group.

5.7 The importance of showing remorse

The interviews showed that showing remorse during a crisis was the most appreciated response among the respondents. Showing remorse could be linked to IRT *mortification*, the act where one takes responsibility for their role in the crisis situation (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). The quotations below is an example where both respondents request the word “sorry” as for Margaux Dietz to show genuine regret and remorse.

(...) It is like this, if you want to get off lightly even if you don't agree that you are guilty. (...) It is just for you to open up completely and say that you did wrong. That is the best strategy. Like, I am so sorry that I made you upset. (Respondent B, Interview 5)

That is the whole point. The only thing that you want is a genuine apology. Just say it. God this went terribly wrong and I am sorry that I didn't realize this earlier. But it feels like they are protecting themselves (...). (Respondent A, Interview 3)

In addition to showing mortification, the respondents emphasized the importance of genuinity. Some respondents meant that in Dietz's case, an apology would only be seen as valid if it was followed by an act that showed that the words that she expressed were put into an actual context. Looking at this process in relation to cancel culture and through a metaperspective, it is assumed that whatever strategy that was applied, it was going to create new critics. Several respondents expressed that cancel culture has an effect of a constant information flow of new viewpoints to hold against someone or something in the timeline of events in a cancel culture situation. However, they also expressed that mortification as a strategy, could work in the favor regardless of new critics thus, it can always be defended with the act of a genuine apology.

In addition to showing remorse there were divided thoughts among the participants regarding the timing of a genuine apology. A few of the respondents appreciated the person involved in a crisis to stay silent for a while before giving response to the crisis as shown in the quote below. The respondents expressed that silence could be seen as a sign of the person involved in a crisis reflecting on the wrongdoings and taking responsibility.

It is good to show that you actually reflect on what you have done and then choose to be silent for a little while. I think that could be great in similar situations to this one. Like, to not make the situation worse. (Respondent A, Interview 3)

In contrast, some respondents did not find the silence a good thing. These respondents felt that an immediate response may feel ungenune and almost as if the person or brand is trying to reduce the picture of their involvement in the crisis. This could be understood

as evasion of responsibility which according to IRT is when one recuses their involvement in a crisis by addressing other greater actions to prove their innocence (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). However, these respondents also addressed as seen in the quote below that being silent for too long may be perceived as one not taking responsibility or showing remorse for the wrongdoings. Therefore silence before a crisis response was not always appreciated.

(...) Yes, it is. And that is also problematic. To just go crazy silent. Because otherwise everyone starts thinking like this. You didn't think what you did was problematic? (...).
(Respondent C, interview 2)

However, the respondents were not united on whether the response should come as soon as possible or later, the overall perception among the respondents was that showing remorse by apologizing and admitting one's wrongdoings is the best crisis response. The quotation below empathizes this statement.

(...) When the creator does something wrong they should just admit that they did wrong and not come with all those excuses. (...). (Respondent C , Interview 5)

Showing remorse, or mortification is considered as one of the most effective ways of dealing with a crisis as a part of IRT five clusters which provides crisis response strategies (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). However, the above mentioned quotations further empathizes the power of the strategy in today's crisis management online. This also shows that cluster (5), mortification within IRT still today plays a significant role in crisis communication in the aftermath of a perceived wrongdoing.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The following section first presents the main findings and conclusions from our analysis of conducted group interviews using and discussing them in relation to the theories RAT, IRT, and SIT. Secondly, a discussion of our contribution to the field of strategic communication and the chosen phenomena is presented. Lastly, suggestions for further research are presented.

The research study examined social media consumers' perceptions and attitudes of cancel culture by using *the Margaux Dietz scandal* as an empirical example. By systematically analyzing the interview material, we could see examples of the perception of cancel culture and analyze through crisis communication theories to understand how it can be used in future crisis response communication on social media. The analysis was based on our two research questions:

RQ1: *What are the perceptions of cancel culture on social media among young adults?*

RQ2: *What are young adults' perceptions of crisis response strategies online?*

Based on the findings, we were able to use the RAT theory as a foundation for understanding the communication dynamics within the arena. The RAT theory addresses the specific needs and concerns regarding a crisis which were useful in order to answer RQ1. The subarena, in this case, becomes social media, where Margaux Dietz is the main stakeholder and the social media users as active actors within the arena. Our finding shows that there is an overall view of cancel culture as a tool for expressing opinions and thoughts against those of wrongdoing or opinions that do not match with one's own. However, the negative aspects of cancel culture in previous research seem to be the greater perception among the respondents. Most respondents have shared an attitude to cancel culture as cruel, bullying and a phenomenon often oversteering. During the interviews, the respondents expressed a clear sense of differentiation from the phenomenon of cancel culture by emphasizing personal differences

from engaging in it. However, further into the interviews, the respondents revealed that they had participated in different forms of cancel culture themselves.

Therefore, we analyzed potential reasons for participating despite the negative perception, to better understand the potential underlying reasons for the respondent's participation in cancel culture. Self identification is assumed to be a common reason for getting involved in cancel culture. Respondents who could relate to the crisis and the person involved in the crisis were more likely to participate in cancel culture. A suggestion for crisis managers dealing with a crisis online could be to acknowledge this behavior by lifting shared values and empathize relatability as a strength rather than a disadvantage. By highlighting things in common between the primary stakeholder and the individuals within the subarena, it may reduce uncertainty and encourage individuals to participate in constructive dialogue. The constructive dialogue was in the interviews frequently described as the opposite of the phenomenon of cancel culture. Therefore it is possible to say that encouraging constructive dialogue among social media users could mitigate the risks of cancellation.

Based on our findings, the main reason for individuals to participate in cancel culture is group dynamics and a sense of belonging. Individuals strive to establish a strong position and express opinions on social media, where some social groups may feel superior to others. For instance, a few respondents conveyed that refraining from sharing one's viewpoints online may be perceived as an act of not standing up for one's social group. This frequently engenders an online polarization environment, which may develop as a form of a cancel culture. This typically creates a more extreme society online where individuals grant to express their opinions in terms of cancel culture; thus, the real goal is often to identify oneself.

Our findings further showed that individuals will compare their own social groups to others. The respondents stated a sense of superiority to our empirical example Margaux Dietz, by distancing their personal self from the identity of Dietz. This showcases the need for crisis managers to consider the perspective of power dynamics to mitigate the adverse effects it may cause during a crisis, preventing cancel culture. One could do so by acknowledging the comparison and social media users' concerns regarding the crisis. By demonstrating a

commitment to shared values and morals, crisis managers can reduce the perception of a distance between their own social group and others in society. By understanding this online dynamic, crisis managers can tailor their communication strategies to prevent getting involved in cancel culture. A few ways of doing so may be through the understanding of the social media users perception of cancel culture and how this will reflect on their perception of crisis response theories.

As aforementioned, we discovered some patterns regarding chosen crisis communication strategies that were used in the Dietz case, and that the respondents expressed their knowledge of. The patterns showed that the respondents thought that one of the most crucial strategies was the importance of an actual sincere and genuine apology, indicating that *mortification* in relation to the IRT framework is something that crisis managers should take into great consideration. However, from the analysis, we also discover that even though the importance of genuinity was highlighted, more was needed in Dietz case. Several of the respondents even expressed the disappointment of being considered as naive as one unity, making them triggered and in some cases even acting on its publicity, meaning that they would send a message on social media to the influencer in question. This is the opposite of what effect you want after applying *mortification* as a crisis communication theory.

In addition to the respondents' request showing remorse was the timing of the apology. A few of the respondents appreciated the silence between the crisis and Dietz crisis response while some of the respondents found this to be a way of evading responsibility. The respondents expressed that it is in fact problematic if the response comes too fast though there is a big risk of the response getting backlash. However, the respondents also mentioned that it is problematic if it takes too long for the person responsible for the crisis to address it. This also further indicates the social media users dynamic thinking, meaning that they have a clear vision of crisis response normalities online. Although the time aspect divided the respondents in some sense, the overall perception was that apologizing and showing remorse was the best crisis response strategy.

Furthermore, therefore crisis managers must follow up the apology with the actions of someone that is in fact sorry for their central role in the crisis situation. It also further

highlights that the recipient's perspective has one, if not even one of the most central roles in relation to crisis communication. The respondents or social media users are complex individuals that have a broad understanding of seeing patterns in crisis communication strategies online. Resulting in challenges for crisis managers thus, their complexity and feelings towards the situation plays one of the central roles in how the respondent is going to perceive the communication. Meaning, that if they feel like they are being communicated as a whole group in a crisis situation, the ones it triggers are going to react further.

Influencers, who typically maintain a specific communication style, undergo a significant shift in their approach during times of crisis, adopting a more corporate-like manner. The sudden change in communication leads recipients to experience a sense of betrayal. This can be assumed to correlate to the fact that showing remorse is more complex and needs to be consistent with the words of forgiveness long after the apology. Consequently, when this sense of betrayal steams from someone previously perceived as a friend, the feeling of naivety intensifies. In conclusion, our findings have shown that understanding social media users' perception of cancel culture crisis can help tailoring more effective crisis management strategies to avoid being cancelled online.

6.1 Proposals for further research

After conducting extensive research on the topic of cancel culture and crisis response strategies online, it is clear that there is still much more to be explored. For future research, it would be interesting to have a larger selection of respondents to understand the broader perception of cancel culture in society. Arguably, this research thesis is limited in terms of time and resources for a more comprehensive study. This study is also limited to the empirical example of Margaux Dietz and her primary target group. This research study is limited to the perception of young women, therefore further research, using another empirical example and sampling methods would give new insights and perspectives to this phenomenon. Another possible way to expand the extent of the study would be to compare an organization's use of crisis response strategies with the social media users' response to the strategies. In this way it would be possible to see if the response strategies align with the perceptions target group of the organization.

Another possible proposal for further research would be to make a quantitative research study about cancel culture in relation to crisis response strategies. Meaning, that if the topic gets more substrate in the form of more empirical examples in relation to the topic. A quantitative research study would contribute to the field in a way of getting more factual data in the shape of numbers and statistics. To further, strengthen the great importance of the receivers complexity in relation to cancel culture and crisis response strategies online.

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8. Bilagor

Bilaga. 1 Intervjuguide

Hej, vi är mycket tacksamma över att du idag är med och bidrar till vår studie kring Cancel Culture. Vårt mål med denna forskningsstudie är att få större vetskap kring sociala medier användares uppfattning av Cancel Culture, i relation till den skandal influencern Margaux Dietz var central i nyligen i november 2022. Syftet är att genom en bättre förståelse för mottagarperspektivet kunna bidra till forskning kring kriskommunikation på sociala medier och hur sändare perspektivet kan anpassas. Vi hoppas att insikterna kan bidra till forskningsfältet inom Strategisk kommunikation. Vi kommer att utgå från ett antal frågor, men med det sagt kan diskussionen i rummet ta olika riktningar och det är möjligt att nya diskussionsfrågor uppstår längs vägen.

Ni är här idag eftersom ni har ett konto på en eller flera sociala medieplattformar, ni är mellan 18-25 år gamla, samt har vetskap om influencers Margaux Dietz. Innan vi kör igång önskar vi att få godkännande från samtliga till att intervjun kommer att spelas in och användas som underlag i studien, vänligen fyll i blanketten du fått vid sidan av detta papper. Ditt namn och grupp kommer att representeras som ex. person x och grupp 2 och efter transkriberingen av intervjun så kommer ljudfilen att förstöras.

Tema: Cancel culture & engagemang

1. How would you describe the terminology "cancel culture"? Vad är din definition av termen "cancel culture"?
2. What is your opinion on "cancel culture", do you think it is a fair way to deal with controversial statements or behaviors on social media? Vad är din uppfattning av

“cancel culture”, tycker du att det är rättvist att diskutera kontroversiella statements eller beteende/situationer på sociala medier?

3. Do you reckon that cancel culture is becoming more popular on social media or is it just specific circumstances and situations that lead to someone or something getting canceled? Tror du att cancel culture är någonting som har ökat i popularitet på sociala medier eller är det mer fokuserat på specifika situationer som har lett till att någon eller någonting har blivit canceled? ex. då metoo, eller någon har gjort något som är objektivt fel.
4. Do you think that social media enables cancel culture to progress into something bigger than some situations would have been taking offline? Tror du att sociala medier bidrar till att cancel culture att utvecklas till någonting större, än till exempel om situationen i fråga hade tagits i diskussion offline?
5. Do you think companies and organizations can avoid "cancel culture" by managing crises effectively on social media? Tror du att företag och organisationer kan undvika “cancel culture” genom att ta en kris offentligt på sociala medier?
6. Do you think that it is possible to repair one's image after getting canceled on social media? Tror du att det är möjligt att återskapa en individs/organisations image efter att man har blivit canceled på sociala medier?
7. How do you think social media affects the way we deal with and perceive crises and scandals today? Hur tror du att sociala medier har påverkat hur vi hanterat och upplever kriser och skandaler i dagens samhälle?
8. Have you ever been involved in "canceling" someone or something on social media? for example discussing online, unfollowing a company or person, etc. Har du någonsin varit involverad i att cancela någon eller något på sociala medier? ex. genom diskussioner online, avfölja en individ eller ett företag som en reaktion på en skandal?

Tema: Margaux Dietz skandalen

9. What do you think was the main reason for the massive backlash that came with her uploading her Youtube video? Vad tror du är den största anledningen till den stora kritik som Margaux Dietz fick efter att hon publicerat sin video?
10. Do you think Margaux Dietz was canceled? Tror du att Margaux Dietz är cancelled?

Is there something you would like to add? Can we forgive Margaux? Har ni något mer ni skulle vilja lägga till? Kan vi förlåta Margaux?

Tack för att ni tog er tid,

Johanna & Alice