

**Master Thesis**

**MAINTAINING BRAND REPUTATION IN  
TIMES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

A qualitative study examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on marketing communication policy to achieve brand reputation in Germany.

submitted as a requirement for the degree of

**Master of Science in International Business Management  
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## Candidate Declaration

I hereby certify that the thesis entitled: **Managing Brand Reputation in Times of the Covid-19 Pandemic** submitted for the degree of: **Master of Science in International Business Management** is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgement is given.

Candidate Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Douglas Dalhoff". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, prominent 'D' at the beginning.

Date: 04<sup>th</sup> June 2021

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## Acknowledgement & Dedication

I am sincerely grateful for the fruitful and beneficial cooperation with the lecturers and supervisors of Griffith College Dublin, who contributed to this work.

Especially, I would like to emphasise the positive experience I had as a participant in the double degree programme at SRH Berlin and Griffith College. I would like to thank both institutions for their support throughout the entire programme and, in particular, for this thesis.

*„Tear off your face mask and show your smile!“ (Interviewee No. 5).*

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## List of Abbreviations

AGMA	-	Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analyse
AIDA	-	Attention-Interest-Desire-Action
ATL	-	Above-the-line
BTL	-	Below-the-line
B2C	-	Business-to-Consumer
CRM	-	Customer-Relationship-Management
DNVB	-	Digital-Native-Vertical-Brands
e.g.	-	exempli gratia (Lat.)
et al.	-	et altera (Lat.)
FMCG	-	Fast-Moving-Consumer-Goods
i.e.	-	id est (Lat.)
LSE	-	London School of Economics
MB	-	Marketing Budget
OTC	-	Over-the-counter
POS	-	Point-of-Sale
SEA	-	Search Engine Advertising
SEO	-	Search Engine Optimisation
VIP	-	Very-Important-Person
vs.	-	versus

## Abstract

It was shown that maintaining brand reputation is a central element within marketing management. Companies undertake the task of developing a brand identity, which consumers perceive as a brand image. Thus, brand reputation can be understood as the image held by consumers as well as the strategic goal of the management. Decisions on the choice of adequate marketing communication activities for establishing brand reputation refer to the orchestration of the marketing communication instrument mix, budget allocation, and the design of brand messages. The starting point for this process is the consideration of consumer behaviour, including the customer journey. The Covid-19 pandemic has radically changed consumer behaviour and consequently also the managerial task environment and the associated decisions in marketing communication policy.

Based on the theoretical foundation on brand reputation and marketing communication activities, an explorative study was conducted with a qualitative poll of 15 managers from different industries. The study shows that during the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a shift from offline to online in the use of marketing communication instruments. Marketing budget reductions were reported. Differences in management decisions by company type can be observed. The reported brand messages often refer to the change in needs and the psychological situation of the target groups. However, these Covid-19-related brand messages are dependent on the products and services offered. Agility as a general behavioural characteristic of the company's internal organisation plays a major role in the pandemic. The pandemic period is also regarded as a "wake-up call" for post-pandemic management.

# 1 Introduction

It goes without saying that the Covid-19 pandemic poses particular challenges and tests for management science and businesses. The world has changed radically since the pandemic outbreak, and so have the conditions for brand management and marketing.

The construct and marketing objective *Brand Reputation* and the changes in marketing communication due to the Covid-19 pandemic are the central subject of this thesis and will be explained and analysed in its principles.

The understanding and definition of brand reputation has to be derived from different academic sources. In general, brand reputation refers to how various audiences evaluate the brand (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). As an essential preliminary remark, it must be added that brand reputation is, on the one hand, a managerial objective and, on the other hand, a customer held phenomenon. Brand reputation can be explored according to the constructs of *Brand Identity* and *Brand Image*.

The realisation and implementation of brand reputation in the market are essentially achieved through marketing communication activities. This addresses a vital management discipline, namely marketing communication policy. According to the classical marketing approach of the 4 Ps, this refers to “*promotion*” (Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p.549). This discipline, among other aspects, deals with formulating objectives, determining and allocating the budget, designing the communication message and the marketing communication instruments available to decision-makers.

Various consumer behaviour-related factors also have an impact on brand reputation that need to be considered. These are influential constructs such as the *AIDA-principle*, *Customer Journey*, and *Brand Funnel*. These theoretical concepts will be pursued to gain further insights into the approach of brand reputation management.

The Covid-19 pandemic is, in turn, expected to have a significant impact on conditions when it comes to maintaining the brand reputation. Essentially, the impact of Covid-19 on all areas of consumers’ everyday life is immense. Some recent findings are addressing this subject. Consumers are insecure, as many have suffered immediate income losses (Singh *et al.*, 2020). Simultaneously, public life restrictions mean that many people no longer spend money on travel, concerts and other leisure activities (Britt, 2020). On the other hand, since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, online communication in general and internet usage has increased enormously. Reasons for this are the immense information needs of the population around the pandemic and the forced social-distancing during the lockdown (Allington *et al.*, 2020). Where many offline communication activities in consumer leisure time are no longer possible, media consumption and communication are shifting to the internet (Wong *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, otherwise less digitally inclined people can be reached as they also switch to working

online. Increasing online affinity makes itself noticeable to marketing decision-makers. Companies are rethinking their media strategies and looking for ways to increase efficiency (McKinsey, 2020).

The results of this discussion will provide the author with the current state of knowledge on the described theoretical elements and the general findings associated with them, as well as the specific changes caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Following the arguments above, it is up to review which new conditions in the managerial task environment to maintain brand reputation are emerging as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This leads to the central research question of this thesis: “How are marketing communication activities designed and implemented to maintain brand reputation in times of the Covid-19 pandemic?”.

More precisely and under the headline of research objectives, it needs to be analysed whether an even more radical and urgently needed transformation of the marketing communication ecosystem occurs due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The question is also about which touchpoints of the customer journey are selected to be addressed and which marketing communication instruments are chosen by management. It is interesting to observe what this means for the available marketing communication budgets. A potential change in the marketing communication messages should also be considered. Hence, the focus of the study will be on marketing communication instrument selection/orchestration, budget allocation, and the brand messages affected by Covid-19 circumstances.

A conceptual framework is set up for a suitable assisting overview of these theoretical elements and as a starting point for the empirical study. In a subsequent step, hypotheses will be formulated based on this framework, the examination of which will be pursued in an empirical study.

A sample of responsible German managers will be assembled as interview partners in order to obtain information about the approaches and activities from the business world. This empirical method involves explorative, qualitative interviews conducted in the pandemic-ongoing period April-May 2021.

The data collected will then be used to gain new knowledge and insights, discuss and test the hypotheses that have been put forward. It is intended to draw conclusions for the further development of academic understanding as well as recommendations for practical management.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Managing Brand Reputation**

First of all, it is essential to discuss the general concept of a brand. Brands are imaginary images in stakeholders' minds, which serve an identification and differentiation function and shape customer behaviour (Aaker, 2012). It means that every firm has to follow a strategy to create a picture in its consumers' minds and distinguish it from its competitors. “A company can create successful brands

even without resorting to expensive media advertising through a well-devised marketing strategy that incorporates brand building as one of its main elements” (Joachimsthaler and Aaker, 1997, p.39). It is then crucial to discover how to develop and communicate such a brand and capture the resulting brand reputation.

Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) argue that brand reputation is the aggregate perception of outsiders on companies' salient characteristics or products. They suggest that it is more than just keeping the customer satisfied, but more something a firm and/or its product earns over time. Brand reputation refers to how various audiences evaluate the brand (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009). If a firm is likely to attract more customers, they have a positive reputation. A positive brand reputation then results in benefits such as a *Competitive Advantage*, *Brand Awareness*, *Brand Loyalty*, as well as higher sales and increased profits (Milewicz and Herbig, 1994; Herbig *et al.*, 1994). Additionally, a strong association with the brand generates a higher *Brand Recall* and *Brand Recognition* and *Brand Trust* among the target group (Alba and Chattopadhyay, 1986). If a firm repeatedly fails to fulfil its stated intentions or marketing signals, it eventually develops a negative reputation (Milewicz and Herbig, 1994).

### 2.1.1 Brand Identity and Brand Image

Meffert *et al.* (2015) argue that firms develop a *Brand Identity* internally in order to communicate it to stakeholders. A brand needs a clear identity otherwise marketing it will prove to be futile (Joachimsthaler and Aaker, 1997). The brand identity represents the characteristics of the brand, which, from the perspective of an internal target group (firm), shape the brand's character sustainably. The *Brand Image* is an imaginary idea of a firm or product firmly anchored in the minds of relevant target groups (Meffert *et al.*, 2015). The main difference between brand identity and brand image is the perspective (Figure 1). It can be critically determined that the constructs of brand image and brand reputation are similar. Hence, a well thought-out brand identity may lead to a positive brand image and thus brand reputation.

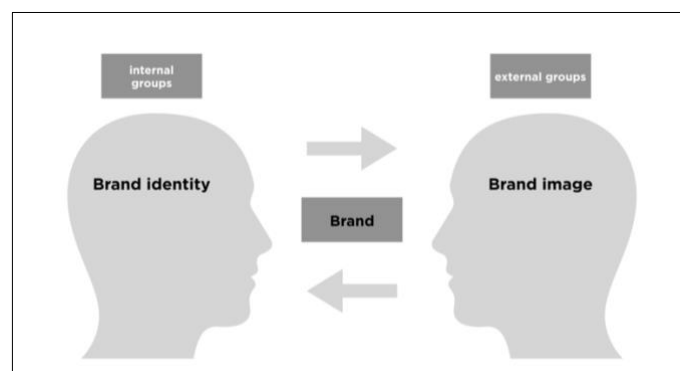


Figure 1: Brand Identity & Brand Image (Burmam *et al.*, 2018, p.29)

The measurement of brand reputation/brand image among the target groups represents a separate topic. In practice, standardised procedures are available from market research companies and companies have

their own standardised procedures for this purpose. Gensch (1978) and Feldman (2014) discuss this in an academic context. However, this aspect is not the focus of this thesis.

### 2.1.2 Brand Steering Wheel by Esch

A theoretical model to create and structure brand identity is the “*Brand Steering Wheel*” by Esch (2014, p.102). It deals with the creation of a brand identity for a company as well as for a product or service. Based on the two brain hemispheres theory, consumers store a brand's logical elements in their left part of the brain while the emotional facts are stored on the right. These are defined as "hard facts" and "soft facts" (Esch, 2014, pp.102–103). The hard facts contain the *Brand Attributes* and *Brand Benefit*. The soft facts are about the *Brand Tonality* and *Brand Appearance*. It is critical to note that the Brand Steering Wheel can equally refer to both sides, brand identity and brand image (brand reputation). The following Figure 2 provides a visual overview of the brand steering wheel model and its elements. At this point, emphasis should be placed on the essential element of brand appearance, as it contains the concept of communication and is thus related to the marketing communication to be explored.

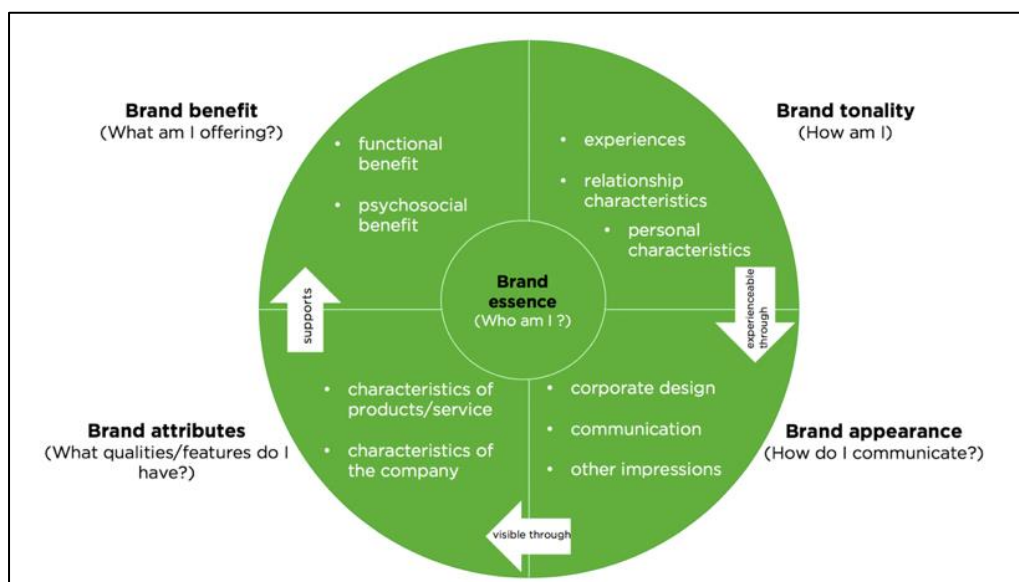


Figure 2: *Brand Steering Wheel* (Esch, 2014, p.104).

One other related construct to be highlighted is *Brand Awareness*, as it represents the beginning of a brand relationship. Brand awareness is the requirement for the existence of brand reputation in people's minds (Hoyer and Brown, 1990; Huang and Sarigöllü, 2014). Moreover, it is the beginning of customer-brand interaction, which will be dealt with in the Chapter 2.3.

## 2.2 Marketing Communication

In general, “communication is the transmission of information and messages for the purpose of directing the opinions, attitudes, expectations and behaviours of specific audiences according to specific objectives” (Bruhn, 2018, p.3). In academic marketing literature, the authors use the terms brand

communication, marketing communication(s) and, in part and more broadly, corporate communication to address the product or corporate level. This thesis focuses on the product level. In the further continuation, the term marketing communication will be used.

“Marketing communication(s) are the means by which firms seek to engage and excite people, to persuade them to purchase and experience the market offering they promote” (Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p.550). The marketing communication policy of a company includes the entirety of all communication activities and instruments of a company that are used to present the company and its management to the relevant internal and external target groups of a company (Bruhn, 2018, p.5). Due to the specific scope of this thesis, the focus is on the external target group - the customers.

Meffert adds that "communication policy covers the systematic planning, design, coordination and control of all the company's communication measures concerning all relevant target groups to achieve the communication objectives, thereby achieving the overall marketing and corporate objectives" (2015, p.569).

### 2.2.1 Marketing Communication Objectives

The marketing communication objectives derive from overall marketing objectives and provide the guideline for the marketing communication strategy. The central requirement for marketing communication objectives is that they must be clearly operationalised. Following the SMART-approach objectives must be *specific, measurable, achievable, reasonable* and *time-bound* (Bjerke and Renger, 2017). Marketing communication objectives can also be defined according to *content, extent, time* and *segment*. “In terms of content, communication objectives can be differentiated according to economical (e.g. turnover, revenue) and psychological (e.g. awareness, sympathy) objectives” (Meffert *et al.*, 2015, p.571). When using economic objectives, the problem of attribution arises because the influence of communication measures on specific economic success variables is usually only indirect and rarely clearly distinguishable. Therefore, the objectives of marketing communication are supposed to be focused on psychographic objectives. Meffert (2015, pp.571–572) identifies the following five psychological marketing communication objectives: *Awareness, Attitude, Competitive differentiation, Purchase intention, and Repurchase intention*:

In addition, further classifications of marketing communication objectives are also feasible, such as differentiating between *customer acquisition, customer retention* and *customer recovery* (Steffenhagen, 2016, p.293).

### 2.2.2 Marketing Communication Budget

At the strategic level, it is a crucial matter of determining the marketing communication budget, which should be high enough to achieve the objectives. The marketing communication budget includes all financial resources available for communication, e.g. costs for production, creation, placement of

communication media, costs for market research, consulting of an external partner and success control. In addition to determining the budget amount, budgeting also includes budget allocation, i.e. the distribution of budget in terms of subject matter and time to products, customer segments, communication instruments, and sales areas. Due to the poorly assured information base and increasing investments, this is often fraught with high uncertainty and increasing risk. (Bruhn, 2018, p.261).

In short, a company has to deal with the following decision-making situations:

- Decision on the amount of the marketing communication budget
- Decision on the inter-instrumental allocation
- Decision on inter-media allocation
- Decision on the intra-media allocation

At the operational level, the individual communication instruments are then selected according to their suitability for achieving the desired goals and given a budget.

In practice, young companies often use the “affordable method” for budgeting and refer to the scale used in previous years (Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p.561). Larger, and more professionally managed companies use other methods such as "percentage-of-sales", or "competitive parity" and access their database and estimation techniques (Weber, 2002; Zhao and Zhu, 2010; Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p.561).

Regarding budget, a frequently seen approach of brand-leading companies is to engage specialists, i.e. advertising, influencer or digital marketing agencies (Soberman, 2009; Nöcker, 2016).

In addition to assessing the budget, the communication message design is determined according to the objectives and strategy. Budget determination and message design represent the central decision fields of marketing communication policy (Meffert *et al.*, 2015, p.570).

### 2.2.3 Marketing Communication Messages

“A communication message is the encoding of a strategic idea that uses modalities such as text, image, sound and/or scent to make statements about products/services/brands/companies on consumers in order to achieve the desired effects in the context of the communication objectives that are relevant to the company” (Bruhn, 2018, p.492).

The design of the marketing communication message is closely linked to the brand identity (Esch and Rühl, 2016). In other words, what the brand represents and what it wants to be perceived as by consumers is to be conveyed. The *Brand Steering Wheel* discussed in Chapter 2.1.2 contains the element of *brand appearance*, including *brand communication*. Thus, the strategically developed and pre-formulated brand identity forms the starting point for the operational design of specific marketing communication messages. Separate communication messages can pursue their own goals when referring

to a specific situational context (like a pandemic), especially when short-term communication strategies are applied. Still, the strategically pre-formulated brand identity should always be used as a guideline.

In principle, companies have a wide range of options for shaping their marketing communication message. However, there are generally four options available to the marketing decision-maker to communicate the desired positioning to consumers or to create an image in their minds. This can be firstly an *updating design*, secondly an *informative design*, thirdly an *emotional design* or fourthly an *emotional and informative design* (Bruhn, 2018, p.492). In this case, the Rossiter-Percy grid can be referred to (Rossiter *et al.*, 1970, p.11). As shown in Figure 3, this communication grid differentiates based on the underlying consumer need and, on the other hand, based on the present product involvement. The four types of design mentioned are thus indicated.

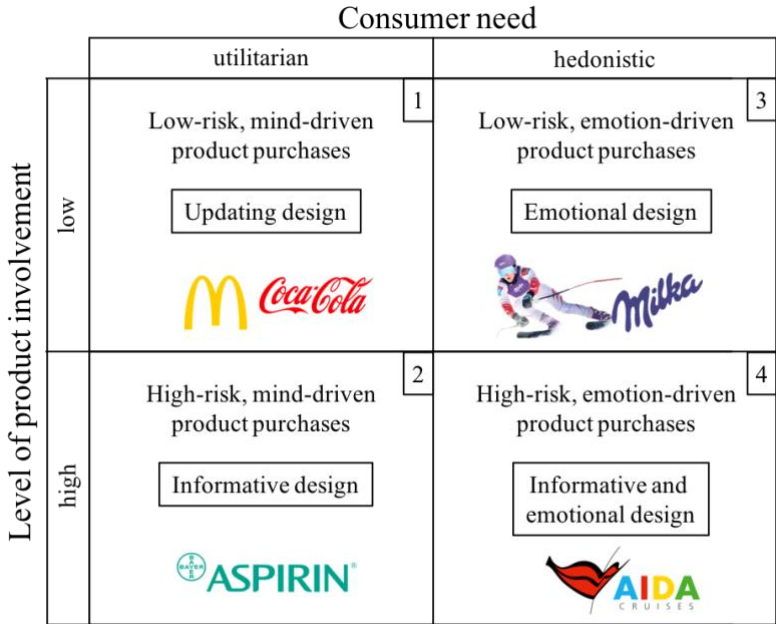


Figure 3: Rossiter-Percy-Grid (Rossiter et al., 1970)

2.2.4 Traditional Marketing Communication Instruments

Through marketing communication, “customers can discover who develops and supplies the product and judge the reputation of the company’s brand” (Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p.550). To achieve the overall marketing objective brand reputation, a marketing manager has various marketing communication tools at his disposal. In the marketing literature, there are numerous approaches to classify and categorise different marketing communication instruments.

Bruhn (2018) identifies the marketing communication instruments: “Media Advertising”, “(Sales) Promotion”, “Direct Marketing”, “Public Relations”, “Sponsoring”, “Personal Communication”, “Trade fairs/Exhibitions”, “Events” and “Social Media”.

1) Media Advertising means the transport and dissemination of advertising information via advertising mediums within the framework of traditional public communication. This includes advertising in print media (newspapers, magazines, business journals and other supplements), TV and cinema, radio and Out-of-Home advertising. It is a form of non-personal communication (Bruhn, 2018, pp.370, 373).

2) Promotion - also referred to as "sales promotions" – refers to the application of temporary measures with a campaign character, which pursue the goal of achieving the communication objectives at downstream sales stages through additional incentives. These are provided in a person- and/or object-related context (Bruhn, 2018, pp.371, 384).

3) Direct Marketing describes any marketing measures that involves directly addressing the potential customer with a request for a response. This is a focused one-to-one approach to initiate a direct dialogue with the consumer. Examples of this are conventional letter post, SMS or telephone calls (Bruhn, 2018, pp.371, 404).

4) Public Relations (PR) refers to the use of communication measures to primarily gain understanding as well as trust among selected target groups. This is a process of interaction between the company and the public through editorial channels (Bruhn, 2018, pp.372, 416).

5) Sponsoring refers to the use of communication measures involving the provision of money, material resources, services or know-how by companies to promote individuals or other organisations in fields of sport, culture, social welfare, the environment. This is based on the principle of "give-and-take" (Bruhn, 2018, pp.371, 429).

6) Personal Communication involves the use of communication activities associated with the mutual establishment of contact between the company and the consumer in a face-to-face situation, into which certain expectations are incorporated through verbal and non-verbal communication behaviour. Salesperson are active in this field (Bruhn, 2018, pp.372, 445).

7) Trade fairs and Exhibitions are activities that involve participation in an event that is fixed in terms of time and place. The purpose is to provide an opportunity for product presentation, self-promotion and comparison with the competition. These can also be subordinated to personal communication (Bruhn, 2018, pp.372, 453).

8) An Event as a marketing communication instrument delivers an experience-oriented occasion that is perceived multi-sensitively by selected recipients. The focus in this context is on positive emotionalization in regard to the company or the product/service. (Bruhn, 2018, p.463).

9) Social Media Communication takes place on online-based platforms and characterises both communication and collaboration between companies and social media users as well as their interconnectedness. Social media communication takes place both actively and passively, with the

mutual goal of exchanging information, opinions, impressions and experiences as well as contributing to the creation of company-relevant content. (Bruhn, 2018, p.473) This includes platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn etc. but also other blogs and forums. It is certainly critical to note that Bruhn (2018) lists social media among the traditional instruments, although it has a strong digital character. In the later procedure of the empirical study, this instrument is then evaluated as a digital instrument.

*9.1) Influencer marketing* is to be located within social media. Influencer marketing is a marketing communication instrument in which companies specifically engage opinion leaders (influencers) and thus persons with an own reputation, influence and reach into their marketing communication strategy. As a result, influencers can have an impact on brand reputation and sales of brands as well as goods and services (Smith and Zook, 2019, p.160).

*9.2) Content Marketing* involves creating and distributing relevant, meaningful, consistent and shareable content. This is mostly done in the form of videos as “an exceptionally engaging channel”, with the aim of the content going "viral" (Berger and Milkman, 2012; Kingsnorth, 2019, p.187). With regard to broadcasting videos, live-streaming formats are also prevalent and increase online purchase intention (Zhang *et al.*, 2020).

The following Figure 4 is intended to evaluate the marketing communication instruments by Bruhn (2018) discussed in order to possibly make decisions on the marketing communication objectives (Chapter 2.2.1) and costs/budget allocation (Chapter 2.2.2) in general.

		Brand Awareness/Reputation Potential	
		low	high
Costs	high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promotion</li> <li>• Trade fairs/Exhibitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media Advertising</li> <li>• Direct Marketing</li> </ul>
	low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal Communication</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public Relations</li> <li>• Sponsoring</li> <li>• Social Media Communication</li> </ul>

Figure 4: Instrumental Budget Allocation (Bruhn, 2018, p.314).

At this point, it can already be anticipated that some of these instruments are subject to changes during the Covid-19 period.

2.2.5 Digital Marketing Communication Instruments

Moreover, it is to be said that customers' information processing preferences, as well as whether they want to process information at all, have changed significantly as a result of technological advances.

Marketers have been forced to question a variety of standard strategies due to the significant spread of efficient broadband internet networks, versatile smartphones, and low-cost tablets and other devices. “Consumers can shop at any time, on any device, in any location” (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.57). In addition, the growth of social media has reshaped the digital media landscape and lead to increased online marketing interaction points. The traditional, impersonal "show and tell" communication methods have lost their efficacy in terms of influence and use as a result of these drastic changes (Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p.550). Therefore, it is essential to take a close look at the digital instruments of the "new world".

In between, however, there is the additional useful distinction of marketing communication measures into "above-the-line (ATL)" and "below-the-line (BTL)" measures. ATL describes marketing communication measures in the sense of traditional communications used to address target groups in a broad and impersonal way. These include, for example, TV, radio, press and Out-of-Home. “BTL is used to tailor your communications to individuals or segments to ensure a more powerful message”. These include, for example, SEO, direct mail and paid search. (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.11).

Rowles (2014) and Kingsnorth (2019) identify the digital toolkit for marketing communication with instruments such as *Social Media* (already discussed above), *Search, Display and Programmatic, E-mail Marketing* and *CRM/Marketing automation*. In addition, other authors add instruments such as *Affiliate Marketing* or *Video* (Goldschmidt et al., 2003; Edelman and Brandi, 2015; Hanula, 2019). All these digital marketing instruments aim to find consumers in the digital landscape and encourage them to find you as a company and gain an enquiry from them to convert them into customers. These would be successfully operationalised, resulting in so-called “leads” (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.211). The digital marketing communication instruments can all be grouped under *Performance Marketing* and are addressed in the following.

*1.1) Within Search, SEO (search engine optimisation)* refers to measures that serve to increase the visibility of a website and its content for users of a web search engine such as Google. Thus, when people search for a particular product/service or topic, a company’s website or social media is found (Smith and Zook, 2019, p.609). This optimisation refers to the improvement of the unpaid results in the organic search engine ranking. All ranking factors can be driven by three corners of the SEO triangle (*Content, Technical SEO* and *Links*). “If your site has compelling, broad, relevant and timely content [keywords] that is fast to download, easy to navigate, works across all platforms with no errors and a large number of reputable site link to you because they also think your site is valuable, then your SEO strategy is likely on the path to success” (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.123).

*1.2) Also, within Search, there is Paid Search (or SEA (search engine advertising)).* “It is the process of bidding for potential clicks on an advert you create that is displayed within the search results pages of most search engines” (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.141). Thus, it is the purchase placement of ads on search engines like Google. Usually, these are ads in text format that promote offers that match the user's search

query. On the search results page, depending on the search query, there are up to four ads above the organic search results and up to three below. It is here again crucial to work out the relevant keywords on which paid *ad groups* and *ad campaigns* are based (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.144).

2) Display and Programmatic Advertising refers to the automated buying and selling of advertising space on the internet. Advertisers (demand side) can participate in advertising space auctions in real-time from an inventory of advertising space (supply side). The process is also called “*Real Time Bidding*” (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.157). After evaluating the user relevance for the advertiser's campaign, the highest bidder is awarded the banner ad and is allowed to display it. Based on the available user data, advertising banners or commercials tailored to the user are displayed. The targeted and user-specific control of the advertising spaces leads to increased inefficiency. Scatter losses are minimised, and more efficient use of budget is made possible (Smith and Zook, 2019, p.358). This instrument is closely related to native advertising which is “any paid advertising that takes the specific form and appearance of editorial content from the publisher itself” (Wojdyski and Evans, 2016, p.157)

One sub-instrument to be mentioned in this context is Retargeting. This approach is about “targeting users based on previous actions they have performed on a website. “This is most commonly used to message people who have visited a site but not completed a purchase. The creative often consists of products a user has browsed” (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.156).

3) E-Mail marketing refers to sending commercial e-mails to a person or a larger group of people. More specifically, to contacts who have subscribed to the company's e-mail list and have explicitly agreed to receive your email. Email regulations are fairly well established. The collection of permissions by consumers is fairly standardised with the *opt-in* and *opt-out* routes, including *unsubscribe options* (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.73). In principle, e-mail marketing is the digital equivalent of direct marketing. This is because electronic mailings are delivered directly to personal e-mailboxes, and consumers are thus addressed directly. The aim is usually to increase sales and strengthen customer loyalty in the long term. “Sending the right number of emails is vital for long-term profitability” (Zhang *et al.*, 2017). Hereby, modern, professional e-mail marketing is increasingly moving away from mass e-mailing and is instead focusing more and more on target group-specific and personalised communication.

4) Customer Relationship Management (CRM) refers to a strategy for systematically managing a company's relationships and interactions with existing and potential customers. A CRM system helps companies stay connected with their customers, optimise processes and increase profitability but also to enhance brand loyalty (Kingsnorth, 2019, p.29). CRM involves upselling and cross-selling with the intention of generating more sales by convincing customers to buy additional products. Upselling is the technique of proposing the more expensive (better, newer) product or upgrades in the same category. Cross-selling is the technique of proposing an additional product that matches the already purchased

product (Kamakura, 2008, p.42). Here again, an individualised, relevant approach is pursued for the most successful outcome.

*5) Affiliate marketing* involves affiliates promoting the products and services of companies on their websites. “The affiliates often host an attractive link to the partner [company] website, and every time the referred visitors buy the brand the affiliate gets paid a commission” (Smith and Zook, 2019, p.343). These website providers thus have "publisher" characteristics.

As a conclusion with regards to traditional and digital marketing communication instruments, it is to be mentioned that with the primary goal of building and maintaining brand reputation, the repertoire of marketing communication has to be aligned. Bruhn (2008) recommends the application of an “*integrated*” approach. *Integrated Marketing Communication* has the task of reasonably interlinking the communication across communication channels and communication instruments in a coherent and consistent communication system in order to achieve optimal results for all parties involved. In a more detailed definition, a “*canon*” of different marketing communication instruments is described, which are used in an integrated form to achieve positive brand reputation. “Integrated marketing communications (IMC) is the coordination and integration of all marketing communication tools, avenues, functions and sources into a seamless programme that maximises the impact on consumers and other end users” (Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p.428). With a successful implementation “the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts” (Kotler *et al.*, 2019, p.22). These activities can vary in terms of content, timing and design, and each makes a specific contribution to building and maintaining brand reputation in customers’ minds.

## 2.3 Consumer Behaviour and Marketing Decisions

Before the exact influences of Covid-19 on brand reputation and, moreover, on marketing communication policy can be discussed in detail, the relevant theoretical background of consumer behaviour must be discussed. This is to be done from a management perspective to guide a brand reputation strategy and the use of its marketing communication strategy.

### 2.3.1 AIDA Principle

The *AIDA principle* (*Attention, Interest, Desire, Action*) is widely used for managerial decision-making in marketing communication (Ullal and Hawaldar, 2018). This stage model for marketing communication effectiveness contains four phases that the customer should go through, ultimately leading to a purchase decision. According to the AIDA, the first task of marketing communication is to generate "Attention". The marketing communication instrument should attract the target group in order to influence their awareness to the extent that they are interested in the promoted object. To arouse "Interest" in products or services is the second task. This should lead to the "Desire" to have the product or service. This, in turn, should lead to the goal of achieving the desired purchase "Action".

### 2.3.2 Customer Journey

Based on the AIDA, the conceptual model of the *Customer Journey* refers to the individual cycles that a customer surpasses before deciding to purchase a product. It describes all touchpoints of a consumer with a brand, a product, or a service within a more complex and digital-related landscape (Rawson *et al.*, 2013; Van Bommel *et al.*, 2014; Heinemann, 2016).

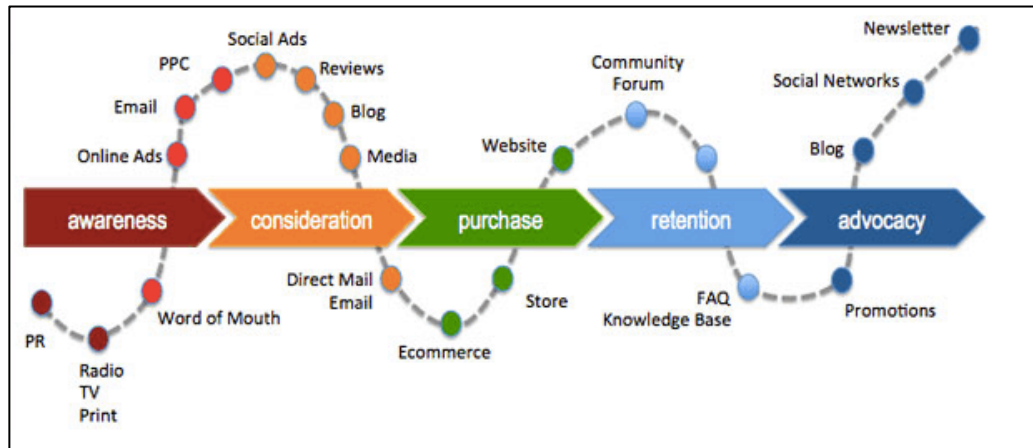


Figure 5: Customer Journey (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017, pp.143–150)

The customer journey includes the direct touchpoints between the customer and the company through the marketing communication instruments described and other indirect touchpoints where third-party opinions about a brand, product or service are obtained. At this point, the great importance of "word of mouth" should be mentioned as well as the significance of third-party *reviews* on online rating portals. However, these latter two concepts are not directly in the control of a company. (Powell *et al.*, 2017; Vermeer *et al.*, 2019).

Nevertheless, *customer journey maps* help marketers to understand their target groups better. A thorough understanding of the entire customer journey is a fundamental precondition for a customer-oriented marketing approach to gain a distinct brand reputation (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017). In particular, the possible change in customer journeys due to factors arising from the Covid-19 pandemic needs to be investigated.

Also, based on the AIDA principle, the *Brand (purchase) Funnel* represents a conceptual model to analyse consumer (decision) behaviour. The brand funnel is a marketing tool controlling and describing the relationship between a customer and a particular brand at different time stages. With the use of the brand funnel, it can be determined how many customers are retained or lost in the process, from creating *brand awareness* to *brand loyalty* (Burmam *et al.*, 2017; Dierks, 2017).

It is assumed and has to be further examined, concerning the Covid-19 pandemic, that the changes in consumer behaviour after lockdown are significant – especially regarding the customer journey and stages of the brand funnel.

## 2.4 Consumer Behaviour and Managerial Implications in Covid-19 times

The occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic massively influences the superior brand strategic goal of achieving and maintaining brand reputation. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused the lockdown and social distancing mandates that have disrupted the consumer habits of decision-making, buying and shopping. Consumers are exposed to new regulations and procedures in how they shop products and services that marketing managers have to deal with (Sheth, 2020).

Concerns about the Covid 19 pandemic in Europe, especially in Germany, began to be publicly perceived and critically felt at the beginning of 2020. The German government took the first measures in March, and the impact on economic activity respectively marketing was enormous and abrupt. This included restrictions in everyday life, such as closing all non-system relevant shops and instructing citizens to stay at home.

On the one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic is a classic crisis situation, which has been described in the literature in relation to the financial crisis, product-harm and other crises (Chong, 2004; Cleeren *et al.*, 2017). However, on the other hand, it can be stated that this total pandemic outbreak does not only refer to one industry such as the financial sector and a crisis of a single branch or "only" of economic life but fully affects the entire world and all areas of life. This is unique and poses considerable and new challenges to the entire management process and here, of course, especially to the marketing communication tasks discussed.

Since the marketing discipline, as a "real-time" science (Oliver *et al.*, 1998) and practical subject, has the task of responding to the behavioural processes of consumers and equally recipients of marketing communication in a customer-oriented manner, the topics of the changing work environment of management and the underlying behaviour of the target groups are continuously analysed, and contributions from research and practice are formulated for relevant approaches and answers.

In the framework of the presented thesis, the aim is to collect and evaluate the results of studies and other materials of a current kind. Naturally, the scientific coverage of the subject area is limited in the ongoing processes, but some work can be found in the area of practice-related publications by market research companies and practitioners. These are assembled hereafter according to recent research by the author of this thesis in spring 2021. Obviously, it is not yet possible to achieve completeness and holistic representation here, but rather a continuous and approximative portrayal must be undertaken.

### 2.4.1 Companies' Agility

"Marketing agility is defined as the extent to which an entity rapidly iterates between making sense of the market and executing marketing decisions to adapt to the market" (Kalaignanam *et al.*, 2021, p.35). According to Covid-19 alterations and changes in consumer behaviour, marketers had to change their marketing communication strategies, especially regarding brand reputation maintenance. Changes to the

marketing environment forced firms to develop strategic agility pre-, during and post-pandemic (He and Harris, 2020). Covid-19 speeds up the digital transformation of business processes and customer experiences (Li, 2021). He and Harris (2020) argue that, with the Covid-19 pandemic, firms are not only forced to develop strategic agility but also entrepreneurial agility to constitute flexibility to the point of “hypermobility”. As a result, many companies will focus more on short-term activation and less on strategic brand building. Furthermore, many companies could find previously hidden or untapped sources of entrepreneurial and innovative spirit that saw inventiveness in adversity.

#### 2.4.2 Typology of Companies

The latest "New Era In Experience Report" by Adobe and the London School of Economics (LSE) identifies key business categories and required leadership characteristics for successful business in the "new normal" (Rentz, 2021a). This study identifies the following three key business types that differ in their response to the pandemic and their digital transformation and technology investment approach during Covid-19.

*"Thrivers"* (25 %) are the most successful type of companies. During the pandemic, they increase their investments in digital technologies, change their organisational structures and adapt their business processes to bring products and services to market at a faster pace.

*"Hiders"* (40%) have reduced their spending on technology and innovation during the pandemic. However, they maintain sufficient investment to remain competitive in the short term and maintain their "status quo" position.

*"Survivors"* (35%) can manage with the bare minimum and have made the most drastic and "reactionary" spending cuts during the pandemic. Their management is very cautious and restrained, and disconnected from day-to-day business and customer interaction.

#### 2.4.3 Marketing Budget

In Covid-19 times, companies face reduced marketing budgets due to emerging financial uncertainty (Vafainia, 2020). However, “firms that engage with it [reduced marketing budget] lose more market share than those that don’t” (Kumar and Pauwels, 2020). The German media agency "Pilot" publishes its representative study series "Pilot Radar" at regular intervals. It is reported therein that in the first two months of the year 2021, 16.3% less was invested in advertising than in the same period last year. A warning is given against too much abstinence from advertising. This is not only because the mood among consumers has clearly improved over time, and the desire for and in consumption can be clearly deduced from this. It is crucial to protect brand reputation against competition and ensure awareness and relevance among consumers - drastically cutting marketing budgets is not a good decision in the current situation (Pilot, 2021). It is not advisable to cut the marketing budget in times of a recession where advertising is seen as an investment rather than an expense (Kumar and Pauwels, 2020).

#### 2.4.4 Digital Migration

Consumers' usual life patterns have changed dramatically. Everyday activities like going to the grocery shop or having dinner with friends are now risky or even forbidden by the government. So overnight, demand patterns have shifted, and the customer journey has changed. Physical touchpoints thus become obsolete. Already a high number of consumers have migrated to digital (Baig *et al.*, 2020). Innovative digital models help as customers need digital, at-home, and low-touch options. “Digital-led experiences will continue to grow in popularity once the coronavirus is quelled, and companies that act quickly and innovate in their delivery model to help consumers navigate the pandemic safely and effectively will establish a strong advantage” (Diebner *et al.*, 2020, p.7). Emphasis must also be set on migrating customers to digital channels to save money and boost satisfaction. Moreover, firms must build agile capabilities to address changing dynamics (Diebner *et al.*, 2020).

#### 2.4.5 Change in Consumers' Media Usage and Interest

In the course of a study conducted by the market research company Nielsen in 2020, 1,000 internet users aged 18-69 living in Germany were surveyed. Regardless of the age and gender of the respondents, the use of media offers has increased substantially. Compared to the previous year, the use of the following media increased in particular: Smart speakers: + 129%; game consoles: + 52%; DVD/Blu Ray devices: + 40%; newspapers/magazines: + 24%; tablet: + 16%. In terms of daily media use, traditional television is the most notable. The daily use of public and private television services increased by 30% compared to the previous year. This is possibly due, among other things, to the population's increased need for information. Video streaming services were also consumed for an average of two hours per day, 20 % more than in the previous year. The measures imposed also have an impact on online consumption behaviour. Due to the fact that most people relied on online ordering during this period, the age group of 50+ also ordered more online. Thus, there was a demographic alignment of online consumption behaviour towards younger population groups. In terms of content, online offers in the form of news and health portals and the home and garden sector were particularly in high demand. The highest decline in clicks, on the other hand, was recorded by websites relating to tourism (Nielsen, 2020).

The “Convergence Monitor” by the “AGF Video Research Institute” shows within a representative survey sample that Covid-19 has led to significant growth in the areas of interaction/communication, transaction, overall media use, video, reading, and audio (AGF, 2020).

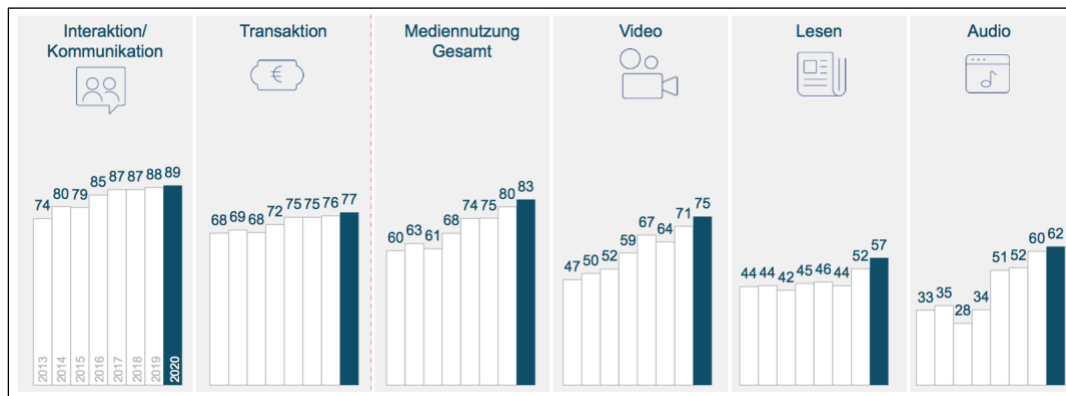


Figure 6: Internet Usage - Time Course (AGF, 2020)

The organisation “AGMA” (Arbeitsgemeinschaft Media-Analyse) presents in a published study that with regard to a shift in consumers’ fields of interest, the Corona-effect has been noticeable within the marketing communication instrument of magazines in 2020. Food magazines and special-interest magazines have been read more than before the pandemic. Food magazines (+7%), do-it-yourself magazines (+5 %), consumer electronics and computer magazines (+8 %) were used much more intensively during the period of social distancing (AGMA, 2021). This shows that people have more time and interest in DIY (do-it-yourself) and computer-based hobbies.

Older media users have been encouraged by the growing need for information in the Covid-19 crisis to get a smartphone: Among 50-64-year-olds, the proportion of users rose from 80 to 87 per cent, and among 65-69-year-olds to 73 per cent. In addition, the audio market (e.g. podcasts) is significantly growing among the over 50s (AGF, 2020).

#### 2.4.6 Spending on Marketing Communication Instruments

According to the market research company Nielsen (2021; Rentz, 2021b), companies invested 34.2 billion € in marketing communication in 2020 in Germany. This means a decline in spending of 4.4% compared to 2019. It is therefore important to take a closer look at the media spending figures.

Channel/Instrument	Gross Spending in € million in GER	Change in % 2019/2020
TV	16.009.350	- 1,8
Print total	7.350.250	- 9,8
Newspapers	4.498.586	- 9,0
Online	3.981.775	+ 4,9
Out-of-Home	2.297.993	- 6,7
Radio	1.900.447	- 4,3
Magazines	2.851.664	- 11,0
Direct Mail	2.744.287	- 10,0
Cinema	40.459	- 74,7

Table 1: Marketing Communication Spending 2019/2020

It is no surprise that only one marketing communication category grew in 2020 - Online advertising spending increased by 4.9 per cent to around 4 billion euros in total. TV closed the year with a gross minus of 1.8%. The last two months in 2020 were more positive, however, after advertisers had massively cut back their spending at the beginning of the pandemic, November and December were up 8.7% and 11.3 %, respectively. Overall, gross TV spending in 2020 amounted to around 16 billion euros. The print was just able to prevent the double-digit decline. Nonetheless, the 9.8% drop is, of course, a heavy blow to the genre. As expected, cinema was hit the hardest. The genre lost three-quarters of its advertising spending. Out-of-Home and Direct Mail also suffered steep declines, although outdoor advertising notably managed a promising end to the year with a plus of 5.1 % in December 2020. Radio managed to come off very lightly with a minus of 4.3 %, but fewer commuters and generally lower airtime did less harm to the genre than one might have expected.

#### 2.4.7 Psychological Perspective of Consumer Behaviour

“The psychological perspective on the pandemic and its impact on consumer culture provides rich insights for a deeper understanding of the shifts of the consumer mood” (Ziems, 2021, p.24). An exceptionally relevant examination of this topic is provided by a recently published psychological in-depth analysis by Ziems et al. (2020). Rarely in recent years has there been such intense fatigue among people as at the time of the lockdowns. Everywhere there are signs of exhaustion, complaints, resentment and disappointment among the people. The first, second, and the dragging “third wave” of the pandemic are taking their toll with continuing uncertainty among consumers. The infection numbers remain very high, and the effects of the vaccinations are only slightly noticeable. The isolation leads to depression. Consumers are locked up at home and feel exhausted by this. "The soul becomes grey like the grey sky around cloudy winter weather" (Ziems, 2021, p.24). At the same time, feelings of panic intensify with the fear of becoming economically vulnerable (Ziems, 2021).

The pandemic and its “perpetuation of the state of emergency” brings up new functions of brands. Those brands who think more deeply about the psychology of the crisis have the best chance of exploiting the new potentials. Consumers desire to be inspired by brands and thereby gain and grow in purpose and personality (Frohne, 2020). For example, brands in the automotive industry like Tesla or the fashion industry like Nike are winners in this respect. Other sectors such as interior design or food stand for the regaining of stability and security and comfort. Family brands like Nutella or Coca Cola can benefit from the promise of pleasing normality and stability (Ziems, 2021). In this context, the new brand challenges are shown in the following Figure 7.

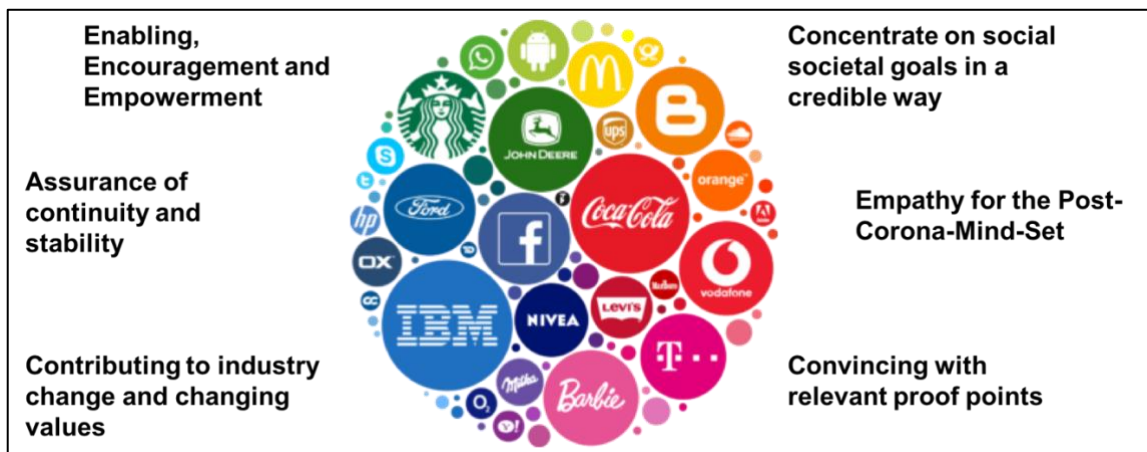


Figure 7: New Brand Challenges (Ziems, 2021, p.27)

It is in the psychological context that consumers also perceive marketing communication messages differently. Thus, other cognitive and emotional associative areas are activated by the brands. For example, elements that seemed harmless and humorous before the crisis would now bring dramatic and latent frightening effects. The content of marketing communication messages is unconsciously compared with the consumer's own current experience of the crisis. Accordingly, messages slip in that would have been completely irrelevant before the crisis. Therefore, the impact clusters of positive marketing communication policy in Covid-19 times are: "window to normality", "small everyday escapes", "light at the end of the tunnel", "renewal and rebirth", and "sensualisation" (Ziems, 2021, pp.28–29).

Diebner et al. (2020) elaborate that brands must focus on customer care and customers' concerns in these unusual times. "Particularly in times of crisis, a customer's interaction with a company can trigger an immediate and lingering effect on his or her sense of trust and loyalty" (Diebner *et al.*, 2020, p.2). Emphasis is put on supporting people and staying true to the company's purpose and values.

It remains to be investigated to what extent marketing managers are able and/or conscious to implement these current findings of psychological market research in their marketing communication activities.

### 3 Conceptual Framework & Hypotheses

At this point of the thesis, it should be noted that in the relevant scientific, peer-reviewed literature, the discussion of the pandemic and the corresponding consequences in the analysis of consumer behaviour and the following marketing communication strategies have only been carried out to a limited extent. A sufficient, dedicated Covid-19-related discussion of brand management and brand reputation has lacked up to now. An analysis of the publications in the four leading journals, namely the Journal of "Marketing", "Marketing Research", "Consumer Behaviour", and "Advertising", was realised by the author of this paper. There are Covid-19-related, topic-specific works around topics such as "breast milk substitutes" (Tulleken *et al.*, 2020), "therapeutics/vaccines" (Banday *et al.*, 2020), "olfactory

dysfunction” (Brookes *et al.*, 2020) or "alcohol consumption" to be found. Especially with a focus on Germany around March 2021, no relevant peer-reviewed publications can be found.

Nevertheless, with the latter part of this paper, it has become apparent that some relevant results on changing consumer behaviour and recommendations of practitioners and market researchers on marketing decisions and corresponding orientation of marketing communication policy are available. However, it remains to be investigated how these relevant results relate to the essential task of brand management and the essential goal to maintain brand reputation. The approach of the following research study is intended to contribute to the existing knowledge and research gap. For this approach, all presented constructs can be integrated into a conceptual framework.

In the context of this thesis, it is of significant interest in 2021 to analyse which changes of circumstances to the managerial goal of maintaining brand reputation are induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. The empirical study will focus on the managerial perspective of brand reputation as an objective to be achieved. The following conceptual framework (Figure 8) is provided to structure the underlying elements and ideas discussed in the former chapters.

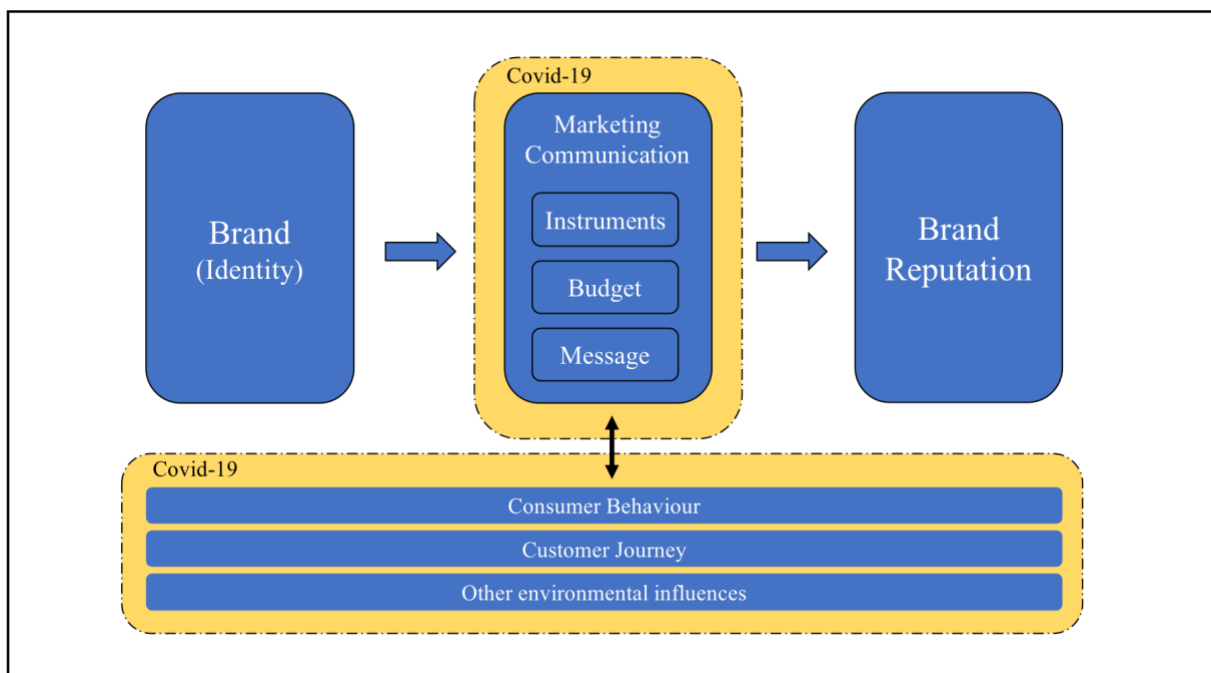


Figure 8: Conceptual Framework

The fundamental topic of the brand has been dealt with in Chapter 2.1. Within business theory and especially the discipline of marketing, the brand as a “set of assets”, brand management and the brand identity are vital to building success within a market-driven approach of the company. With specific characteristics, a brand ensures that its set of assets is sustainably differentiated from another set of assets that fulfil the exact basic needs from the point of view of relevant target groups. The brand is a “static element” and subject to former strategic decisions and activities. (Aaker, 2012, p.7; Meffert *et*

*al.*, 2015, p.328). Following this logic, the Covid-19 should also have no changing influence on the statics and the endurance of the brand (identity).

The key objective of brand management is to build brand reputation among the target groups. Veloutsou and Moutinho (2009) argue that brand reputation is the aggregate perception of outsiders on companies' salient characteristics or products. They suggest that it is more than just keeping the customer satisfied, but more something a company and/or its product earns over time. Brand reputation refers to how various audiences evaluate the brand (Veloutsou and Moutinho, 2009).

As discussed in Chapter 2.2, marketing communication is an essential discipline to achieve, maintain or enhance brand reputation among the target groups. Its components "Instruments", "Budget", and "Message", however, are influenced by the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, as discussed in the former chapters. Likewise, the Covid-19-related changes in consumer behaviour and the elements contained therein, such as the customer journey, are enforcing agility and influencing marketing communication to generate brand reputation.

In reference to the various previous aspects, the following core hypotheses can be formulated to be tested within the empirical study. However, it must be emphasised that the study has an exploratory character so that further interesting results regarding marketing decisions during the pandemic are to be expected in addition to the hypotheses.

## **Hypotheses**

- **H1:** Brand reputation as a managerial issue remains important at the same level as before the crisis. It is by no means less significant.
- Marketing communication management is changing substantially in terms of marketing communication instruments by new Covid-19 influences and circumstances.
  - **H2.1:** There is a shift from offline towards online marketing communication instruments/channels.
  - **H2.2:** There is an allocation of the marketing communication budget from offline towards online instruments/channels.
- There is a change of the superordinate brand message transported or several sub-messages caused by new Covid-19 influences and circumstances.
  - **H3.2:** Marketing communication messages include pandemic-specific content related to the pandemic.
  - **H3.2:** Brands are increasingly oriented towards the Covid-19-related new needs of consumers.

- **H3.3:** Brands are increasingly oriented towards Covid-19-related changes in consumers' state of mind (mood).
- **H4:** The marketing management orientation is changing substantially. An agile strategy is essential.

## 4 Methodology

Following the theoretical explanations at the beginning of this thesis, the research is complemented by a qualitative research approach with interviews of practitioners. The interviews aim to gain insights into the relevant marketing practice and investigate the mindset and activities of marketing managers within the challenging time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The addressed research project follows the scheme of a “circular strategy” (Witt, 2001, pp.5–6). With the review of the relevant literature on the topic, a previous understanding is provided. At the end of the research project, a contribution should be made to further theory development. Thus, this procedure is inductive. It is the procedure of qualitative, non-standardised research. This approach is suitable because the respective area is only poorly researched. Since brand reputation and marketing communication at the time of Covid-19 have not yet been studied from a marketing theory perspective, an exploratory approach and a qualitative method is suitable.

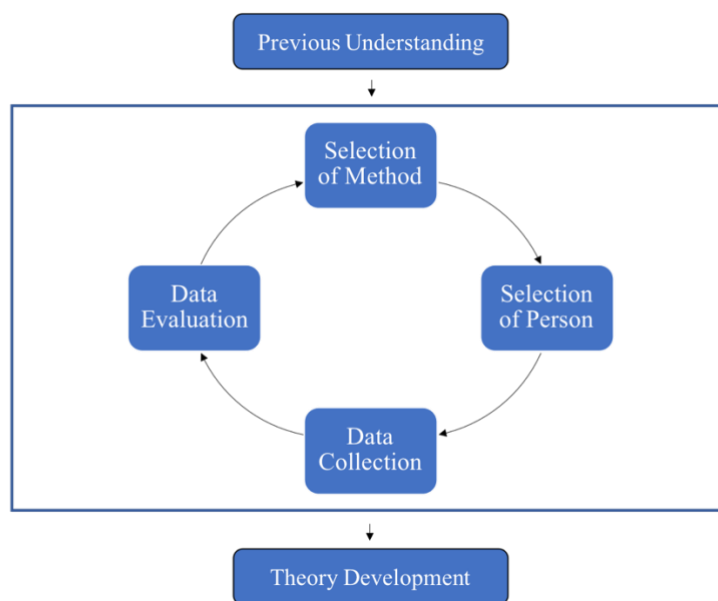


Figure 9: Circular Strategy (Witt, 2001, p.6)

Within qualitative research techniques, there are various procedures available. These are, for example, observation, document analysis of so-called secondary research, and interviews/surveys. In this thesis, the qualitative interview approach is chosen because, firstly, decision-makers in the outlined marketing management process can generally be expected to provide more in-depth and productive information on the topic. Secondly, it is crucial to consider that in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, it cannot be

assumed that this disruptive influence has come to an end, but rather that the questions are oriented towards a current real-life situation. Findings concerning this specific actual situation were to be explored.

It is exceptionally interesting to shed light on the Corona crisis situation and to gain information about the business sub-area from the marketing spectrum and to determine relevant results for academic theory formulation and research as well as for practice. Accordingly, the aim is to generate data material with the information of real people involved. Considering the fact that the pandemic is ongoing during the time this thesis is being written, the discussion of the topic is very up-to-date. It is about a process of management activity that is currently taking place in the managers' area of responsibility. As a result, both varied and diverse reactions to the topic area can be expected. From the collected data material, statements can be derived with regard to the confirmation or rejection of the hypotheses. In addition, further information can be expected from the interviews and the subsequent data analysis, which will provide a rich picture of the pandemic situation and the task environment of the managers.

The term “convenience sample“ is widely used in the academic field. It refers to “a type of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling where members of the target population that meet certain practical criteria, such as easy accessibility, geographical proximity, availability at a given time, or the willingness to participate are included for the purpose of the study” (Etikan *et al.*, 2016).

A procedure of actual representativeness can only be realised by professional market research companies and their enormous budgets. In the academic field, smaller samples are common (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). However, on the other hand, it must be ensured that the participants of the interview are sufficiently suitable to be available as respondents to the targeted research subject.

#### 4.1 Sample of Interview Partners

The general and superior requirement for the interviewees is their ability to provide information on the topic of brand reputation and, in particular, the following management activities regarding marketing communication. Accordingly, the interviewees should be qualified, responsible marketing managers with relevant responsibilities within their companies, with decision-making power and process knowledge. The author of the thesis had a number of options at his disposal for creating a sample of competent managers.

Since the aim was to conduct an exploratory study and draw on as many perspectives as possible, it was also necessary to draw on a broader range of marketing managers. The sample of marketing managers interviewed comes from a broad mix of industries. They differ by company age (e.g. start-up vs. established corporations), by different industries (e.g. health care vs. car manufacturers) and distribution channels (e.g. e-commerce vs. traditional retail). Nevertheless, within this broad industry mix, the focus

is on B2C companies. The brand and its management are in the foreground for all marketing managers surveyed and have a high significance in consumer decision-making.

<b>Brand</b>	<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Products</b>	<b>Industry &amp; Company specifications</b>
Weingut Fürst Löwenstein	Chief Marketing Officer	- Wine	Alcohol - > 100 years; 15 employees - 10.000-100.00 € Marketing Budget
thyssenkrupp Bilstein	Head of Sales Excellence	- Automotive components - Shock absorbers	Automotive - > 100 years; 2.000 employees
VitaMoment	Marketing Manager	- Food supplements	Healthcare & Nutrition - > 4 years, 26 employees - 100.000-1 Mio € MB
GeloRevoice (Pohl-Boskamp)	Brand Manager	- Pharmaceuticals - Cold remedies	Healthcare & Pharmaceutical - > 100 years, 650 employees - > 5 Mio € MB
Dr.Smile	Head of PR & Communications	- Dental braces - Orthodontic treatment	Healthcare - > 4 years, 300 employees - 100.000-1 Mio € MB
Audi	Head of Direct Sales VIP	- Automobile & Services (VIP)	Automotive - > 100 years, 43.000 employees - 1 – 5 Mio € MB
HDI	Head of Brand & Marketing	- Insurances	Insurance - > 100 years, 22.000 employees - > 1 Mio € MB
Voi.	Marketing Specialist	- E-Scooter	Mobility - > 2 years, 400 employees - 100.000-200.000 € MB
Pedigree (Mars)	Brand Manager	- Animal food	(Animal) Food - > 50 years, 1.200 employees - 1 – 5 Mio € MB (interviewee)
Rugtales	CEO & Co-Founder	- Rugs & Kilims	Interior Design - > 1,5 years, 3 employees - 10.000-50.00 € MB
Volkswagen	Head of Integrated Communications	- Automobile & Services	Automotive - > 80 years, 120.000 employees - > 10 Mio € MB
Pro Akustik	CEO	- Hearing aids	Healthcare - > 25 years, 700 employees - 100.000-1 Mio € MB
Solaris Bank	Marketing & Communications Manager	- Financial Services - Means of payment	Finance - > 5 years, 400 employees - 1 – 5 Mio € MB
Hyundai	CEO Germany	- Automobile & Services	Automotive - > 50 years, 250 employees - > 10 Mio € MB
Malteser	Head of Marketing	- Services in health and social care	Healthcare & Social - > 50 years, 33.000 employees - 5 – 10 Mio € MB

Table 2: Interview Participants

## 4.2 Questions and Interview Guideline

The chosen approach is that of a semi-structured personal qualitative interview. The author of this thesis conducted the interviews. The main requirement here is to cover the targeted topic area as comprehensively as possible and at the same time in a profound way. Particularly, it is challenging to achieve a concentration of the specific subject issues described in the literature review from the extensive field of marketing communication. Furthermore, the current nature of the topic can have a positive effect on the quantity of responses. But, at the same time, the interviewees do not have the opportunity to reflect deeply on their business activities.

The use of an interview guideline has the function of positively controlling the process of interviewing (Qu and Dumay, 2011). The exact interview guideline can be found in the original German version and an English translation in the appendix. The interview guideline was structured as follows:

Opening: To begin the conversation, the interviewee was informed about the author's intentions and the objectives of the interview. Consent to record the interview was obtained. Assurance was given that the information given in the interview would be treated sensitively. The manager was then asked about his area of responsibility and about the company's industry in order to obtain general information and "break the ice".

Body: The basic understanding of the concepts related to brand reputation as well as the general challenges caused by the Covid 19 pandemic were addressed. This is followed by semi-structured questions on the marketing communication constructs manifested in the conceptual framework (i.e. instruments, budget and message) to address the content of the hypotheses, in addition to other specific clarifications. Questions on Covid-19-related marketing communication policy, e.g. customer journey or agility, were also asked here, but always according to the scope and context of the conversation.

Closing: In order to enable a more precise classification of the company at a later stage, further company specifics as well as responsibility details were requested. In the end, thanks were expressed for the participation.

To ensure a fluent and improved interview process, several pre-tests were undertaken (Hunt *et al.*, 1982). For this purpose, fellow students and persons with academic as well as practical experience were consulted by the author.

## 4.3 Data collection and Analysis

The qualified interviewees were contacted by email with a request to participate in the interview (see appendix), in which a 25-30 minute interview was announced, and an appointment was arranged. Of the 20 responsible managers contacted, 15 agreed to take part in the interview. The interviews were conducted between 19th April 2021 – 4th May 2021. It was agreed with the interviewees that they would

remain anonymous but that at least the company's name would be disclosed. It was also essential for the data collection to include demographic, firm-related data in order to be able to make relevant differentiation in the following evaluation.

A total of 15 individual recorded interviews were completed. The transcribed interviews contain an exact reproduction of the expressed statements. Only a few linguistic adjustments had to be made. One transcribed interview is added as an example in the appendix of this thesis. Further transcribed interviews can be accessed electronically. The interviews were reviewed based on relevant keywords, and the significant elements were elaborated.

In order to systematically evaluate the responses received and to provide a structural overview, a list of keywords was developed based on the topics covered in the literature review, the conceptual framework and the hypotheses. For this process of organising the qualitative data, the coding programme from the provider "Audiotranskription.de" was used.

The respective subjective perception of the interview partners was accepted. Misperceptions or subjective distortions cannot be excluded. Nonetheless, the procedure of interviewing participants - and in this case, marketing managers - is well established as a research procedure in marketing research.

## **5 Findings & Discussion**

### **5.1 Structure of Company Situation and Categorisation**

For the following analyses, the first step is to develop a structure for the companies interviewed. The classifications discussed in academic literature, e.g. according to goods, can only be taken into account to a limited extent in this context. The objective is to offer a more extensive structure for the following analysis of the interview material beyond the individual areas in perusing pragmatic aspects.

The characterisations have been generated with the help of general information on the market and consumer behaviour available on the internet, interview partners and from the knowledge acquired by the author during his studies. At the same time, they should serve to illustrate the given variety of market challenges of the interviewed managers and the following specific analysis. At this point, it is once again emphasized that all companies and the managers interviewed are affected by the pandemic.

## Categorisations according to product and service areas

The diversity of the business activities of the companies interviewed is expressed by a classification of operations according to product or service areas:

A	Tangible products (FMCG & premium)	Weingut Fürst Löwenstein, VitaMoment, GeloRevoice, Pedigree (Mars), Rugtales	5
B	Tangible products (automotive & car parts)	Volkswagen, Audi, Hyundai, thyssenkrupp Bilstein	4
C	Tangible (technical) products with service characteristics	Dr.Smile, Pro Akustik	2
D	Services	Voi., HDI, Solaris, Malteser	4

*Table 3: Categorisation of Companies*

In addition to the overview of the individual interview partners involved in the research, it is also important to describe the market situations of these companies.

As mentioned repeatedly, the objective of this study, due to its situational as well as exploratory character, is to reflect the "breadth" and diversity of the companies, their interviewed managers and, consequently, different markets as well as, now addressed here, the market conditions and, in turn, the differentiating consumer behaviour derived from them.

### **A: Tangible products (FMCG & premium)**

The category of tangible products (mostly FMCG) is the category in which a strong manifestation of marketing policy has been found for decades and in which the brand has a significant meaning in an almost always intensive competition. The tangible products grouped in this category are not in fierce competition with each other, but in their respective particular markets.

The Fürst Löwenstein wine estate faces small and medium-sized players in the wine market. Mars (Pedigree) is in a large but global competition. The pharmaceutical OTC product GeloRevoice is competing in a category with many players, while the nutritional supplement start-up VitaMoment is an innovator in a relatively new, growing market.

Rugtales offers interior/home products, which are not necessarily FMCG but a shopping product, which is why they are added to the tangible products for reasons of expediency. Regarding consumer behaviour in this category, it can be mentioned that the products are repeatedly bought in short purchase cycles and according to sensory/aesthetic decision criteria.

### **B: Tangible products (automotive & car parts)**

For the automotive companies interviewed, a strong competition can be seen in a "mature" industry, with an essentially saturated market in Germany, with no/limited growth potential. Strong globally active competitors such as the market leader Volkswagen, the global group's premium manufacturer

Audi and the relatively "small" importer Hyundai - are facing each other. Consumer behaviour in the automotive market is characterised by long purchase periods (repurchase cycle of 4-6 years) and shows a fundamentally strong brand dependence. Furthermore, there is a relatively high - but declining - brand loyalty.

In a similar way, the car parts manufacturer thyssenkrupp Bilstein can be considered a brand product. Its target group consists of DIY customers in a market with moderate competition, although at the retail side.

### **C: Tangible (technical) products with service characteristics**

Both hearing aids and transparent orthodontic braces are aimed at relatively distinct, specific target groups. The Pro Akustik organisation is active in a traditional market with a focus on retail within a strong competitive environment. Dr.Smile, on the other hand, as a "disruptor", aggressively attacks the established competition in an expert-determined and traditional market of dentists and orthodontists with an innovative product and approach.

### **D: Services**

Insurance companies like HDI represent an established, traditional service. Competition is essentially led by some strong and large competitors among traditional corporate groups. According to industry information and numerous industry studies, brands play an influential role in the decision-making process. Malteser sees itself as a service provider for humanitarian aid in health and social services. Other providers are in the market, but the competition against each other is rather low. Solaris, on the other hand, is a very young player with new distribution structures in the market segment of financial service providers. Voi. is a young start-up from Sweden that offers a new form of "last mile" or micro-mobility with its e-scooters. The market for such innovative mobility service providers has only emerged in recent years, but is highly competitive.

## **5.2 Changes in the Managerial Task Environment through Covid-19**

Part of the research focused on significant changes in the respondents' perception of the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of the key parameters in the marketing and brand management task situation. These include the areas of (1) changes in the competitive environment, (2) Covid-19 induced and related consumer behaviour and (3) changes in the customer journey.

### **5.2.1 Changes in the Competitive Environment**

Overall, all 15 managers interviewed agree that the Covid-19 crisis has brought about significant changes in the competitive situation. These relate on the one hand to the overall change in the marketing environment for the economy in general and for the respective industry - but also, remarkably, to the

activities of individual competitors. The following are highlighted quotations and condensed reflections from the interviews:

„Extrem starker Wettbewerb für Weingut, kleine Größe wirkt sich aus“; „indirekter Wettbewerb wirkt sich aus“ [Hersteller & Händler]	"Extremely strong competition for wine estate, small size has an impact"; "indirect competition has an impact" [producer & retailer]"	Fürst Löwenstein
„[Wir sind] stärker als Konkurrenz bei Lieferung emotionaler Inhalte. [Ein Entscheidungskriterium zu Pandemiezeit]“	"[We are] stronger than competition in delivering emotional content. [Key decision criteria at pandemic times]"	thyssenkrupp Bilstein
„Durch Covid viele neue Wettbewerber, da Gesundheit das hervorstechende Thema ist“	"Through Covid, many new competitors, as health is the most prominent topic"	VitaMoment
„Wettbewerb steht auf Corona-Inhaltsthema“; „Wettbewerber kopieren uns in Strategie“; „Wechselseitig keine Zeit für Abmahnungen“	"Competition focuses on Corona content"; "Competitors copy us in strategy"; "No time for formal warnings on reciprocal basis".	GeloRevoice
„Konservative Kieferorthopäden und Zahnärzte haben nicht denselben Hebel [wie wir]“	"Conservative orthodontists and dentists don't have the same leverage [as we do]"	Dr.Smile
„Makler zeigen sich als wichtige Gatekeeper“; „Sicherheit und Absicherung sind bedeutsamer geworden“	"Agents prove to be key gatekeepers"; "Safety and assurance have become more important".	HDI
„Wettbewerb war immer nur offline fokussiert, jetzt turn zu Online Wettbewerb. Das ist extrem“	"Competition has always been offline focused, now turn to online competition. This is extreme".	Rugtales
„In Bezug auf den Wettbewerb konnte man feststellen, dass alle nur mit Wasser kochen“	German phrase- analogous: "They [competition] also put on their trousers one leg at a time"	Volkswagen
„Relativ konservative & innovationsfeindliche Branche“; „Dominanz großer Outlet-Organisationen wie Fielmann und KIND“	"Relatively conservative & anti-innovation industry"; "Dominance of large organisations like Fielmann and KIND".	Pro Akustik
„Themen von Online vs. Offline zeigen sich [bei rein online-basierten Unternehmen zeigt sich Überlegenheit]“	"Issues of online vs. offline emerge [with purely online-based companies showing superiority]"	Solaris
„Veränderungen ins digitale [aller]“	"Changing to digital [all]"	Malteser

Table 4: Quotations: Changes in Competitive Environment

It becomes apparent that a review of one's own position in the competition is evoked in almost all companies and triggers the activities in the direction of innovation and reinforcing the value proposition. It is also clear that specific opportunities in business orientation arise several times, which subsequently have to be clarified and transferred into marketing communication, i.e. messages and instruments.

### 5.2.2 Changes in Consumer Behaviour

As already described in Chapter 2.4 and manifested in the interviews, the pandemic affects almost all areas of human behaviour. In this sense, of course, it also affects buyer and consumer behaviour in its opportunities and characteristics. In summary, it can be said that all the companies studied are affected in a certain way - but in a differentiated manner. The following are highlighted quotations and condensed reflections from the interviews:

„Kunden kommen nicht mehr zum Weingut“; „Keine Neukunden“	"Customers no longer come to the estate"; "No new customers"	Fürst Löwenstein
„Mehr Schrauben am Auto findet statt“; „Gegenstand mehr in top-of-mind“	„More car tinkerers“; "Subject more in top-of-mind"	thyssenkrupp Bilstein
„Thema Gesundheit hat durch die Pandemie extrem an Bedeutung gewonnen“	"The topic of health has become extremely important due to the pandemic".	VitaMoment
„Die jüngeren Konsumenten sind für die älteren einkaufen gegangen. Diese sind damit die Käufer, nicht die Verwender, d.h. Neukundenpotenzial“; „die Menschen beschäftigen sich mehr mit Erkältungen“	"The younger consumers have gone shopping for the older ones. These are thus the buyers, not the users, i.e. new customer potential"; "people are more concerned with the subject of a cold"	GeloRevoice
„Praxen immer geöffnet, weil system-relevant“; „Konsumenten unsicher, ob Praxisbesuch hygienisch sicher ist“	" Surgeries always open because relevant to the system"; "Consumers unsure whether visiting the surgery is hygienically safe"	Dr.Smile
„junge Zielgruppen machen sich plötzlich Gedanken über Sicherheit und Absicherung“; „Bespäßung von Kindern zuhause“	"young target groups are suddenly concerned about safety and assurance"; "keeping children entertained at home"	HDI
„Durch Lockdown geringe Mobilität generell“	"Low mobility in general due to lockdown"	Voi
„Etablierte Marken profitieren von Hamsterkäufen“; „Nachhaltigkeitsgedanken gewinnt an Bedeutung“; „+25% Hundeadoptionen aus Tierheimen“	"Established brands benefit from hoarding purchases"; "Sustainability thinking gains significance"; "+25% dog adoptions from animal shelters"	Pedigree
„Neugestaltung von Haus und Wohnung wegen ständiger Präsenz/Home-Office stark gesteigert“	"Redesign of house and flat greatly increased due to constant presence/home office"	Rugtales
„Kaufzurückhaltung aufgrund finanzieller Unsicherheiten“; „Keine Händlerbesuche möglich“	"Reluctance to spend due to financial uncertainties"; "No dealer visits possible"	Volkswagen
„Starkes Produktinteresse aber keine Bereitschaft zu Shop-Besuch“; „Kunde generell verunsichert und angstgetrieben“; „Kinder erlaube ihren alten Eltern Shop-Besuch nicht“	"Strong product interest but no willingness to visit the shop"; "Customers are generally insecure and fear-driven"; "Children do not allow their elderly parents to visit the shop"	Pro Akustik
„Zahlungsverhalten Richtung digital - contactless payment“	"Payment patterns towards digital - contactless payment"	Solaris
„In Pandemie stärkeres Informationsaufnahmeverhalten also mehr Medienkonsum“	"Stronger information consumption behaviour in the pandemic means more media consumption".	Hyundai
„Vertrauen und Glaubwürdigkeit extrem relevant. In Corona noch mehr“	"Trust and credibility extremely relevant. In Corona even more"	Malteser

Table 5: Quotations: Consumer Behaviour

The answers of the respondents reflect the respective changes in consumer behaviour and products in their specificity. They show in their entirety the serious changes in this important part of the task environment for managers working in their fields.

### 5.2.3 Changes in the Customer Journey

The interviewed managers indicate that the customer journey of their target groups has changed during the pandemic. In general, the shift from offline to online is claimed, respectively the online touchpoints

are used more often. Older consumers have learned to use the online journey and are on the move accordingly.

With regard to the individual branches and players, there are interesting changes in the elimination or addition of touchpoints. Audi and Hyundai as car manufacturers successfully use virtual showrooms, also including virtual reality via an online channel. The Fürst Löwenstein wine estate also offers virtual wine tastings, but this is more expensive because now one bottle is no longer enough for 20 physical participants, but all the bottles of wine to be tasted have to be sent to one online participant. Through these innovative solutions, the face2face contact with experiential character, important in these industries, is substituted. A new or changed touchpoint for Pro Akustik as a retailer is the possibility of "Click & Collect".

Companies whose physical touchpoints are retained because of their system relevance (DrSmile, Pro Akustik) are under less pressure to substitute touchpoints on the customer journey online. Only activities such as the necessary filling out of forms are shifted to the digital world in order to avoid unnecessary direct contact.

In part, the customer journey is also extended in terms of time, as consumers spend more time on their journey (gathering information, processing, etc.) from home.

At this point, it should also be mentioned that two of the managers interviewed explicitly state that the increasingly digital customer journey they observed was not necessarily directly related to the pandemic. Either way, the customer journey was continuing to transform. It can therefore be assumed that the pandemic has at least intensified the shift towards digitalisation in brand management and marketing communication.

### 5.3 Changes in the Marketing Communication Decisions through Covid-19

Now, in the follow-on step, the changes in marketing communication through Covid-19 can be addressed. It is in this area that the formulated hypotheses were oriented. The findings on these particular hypotheses are discussed in detail now.

#### 5.3.1 Brand Reputation Management

The answers to the initial question about the managers' familiarity with and understanding of the topic of brand reputation show that in different expressions - but in principle all of them - the concept of brand reputation was known and familiar in terms of its meaning.

However, only GeloRevoice, Pedigree, Rugtales, Hyundai and Malteser were explicitly mentioning brand reputation at different points in the interview. Nevertheless, implicit reference was made to these steering target constructs in the majority of responses. As an interpretation for this, it is suggested that the importance of brand reputation for the task and action area of the practitioners is a matter of course

and therefore does not need to be explicitly articulated. Or the structure of the survey/questionnaire focused too much on the specific marketing communication measures, so that less attention was paid to the general construct. Therefore, the hypothesis 1 is supported:

*H1: Brand reputation as managerial issue remains important at the same level as before the crisis. It is by no means less significant.*

The result on the topic of brand reputation measurement is surprising. Three groups emerge: those who measure specifically, those who pursue it generally and the inexperienced/ignorant. The prestigious brands Audi, Volkswagen and Pedigree report professionally designed measuring instruments, some of which are used throughout Europe. At Pedigree this is done at intervals of 2-3 years and at Volkswagen it is even done on a quarterly basis. Pro Akustik records shop visits and response figures, Solaris uses Google Review and Trust Pilot. Malteser uses community and donor studies. The other companies do not comment. Thyssenkrupp Bilstein declared: „Man lässt es laufen“ ("We just let it pass").

### 5.3.2 Marketing Communication - Instruments

The 15 managers interviewed used traditional and digital communication instruments to maintain brand reputation through marketing communication already before the pandemic and to a great extent, however, to varying degrees depending on the product, industry and distribution channel and the competitive situation.

In general, it can be said that no company used a traditional offline instrument for the first time during the pandemic. If at all, the use of a traditional instrument was intensified, e.g. by Hyundai in relation to TV because of the resulting price reduction. As an exception, Pro Akustik can be mentioned, who have newly implemented the (BTL) traditional offline instrument direct marketing (via post). One reason for this is the increased willingness of consumers to read mail at home. Pro Akustik's response analysis confirmed the exorbitant success of this approach. Furthermore, Fürst Löwenstein reintroduced the traditional instrument of direct marketing, more precisely that of telephone calls, because customers could be reached at home.

The long-established large, financially strong companies, groups and brands such as Volkswagen, Audi, Hyundai, Malteser and Pedigree had used a wide range of marketing communication tools before the pandemic. During the pandemic, they had to concentrate or reduce the extent of these and use online approaches in their place, or significantly strengthen, refocus and add new content to these online activities. Volkswagen stated: „Die Pandemie hat das beschleunigt, was wir sowieso schon vorhatten“ ("The pandemic accelerated what we were already doing anyway"). At Malteser, this referred to social media instruments such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, which had already been launched before but where intensified.

Another category is that of companies that have existed for a long time (Fürst Löwenstein, HDI), which only became aware of new digital tools or developed them for themselves as a result of the pandemic. One example of this is that Fürst Löwenstein only started to use search engine management in the first place. HDI developed webinars and conferences.

Young companies and start-ups such as VitaMoment, Rugtales, DrSmile and Voi. were already active in online media before the pandemic and the lockdown. For them, further expansion or elaboration of these tools emerged as a priority and a matter of course. DrSmile, for example, founded its own SEO team and also reported: „das ganze CRM-System wurde umgebaut und verstärkt“ ("the whole CRM system was rebuilt and strengthened"). Moreover, these start-ups have always had a strong focus on programmatic/display ads as well as marketing communication via their own technological platform. VitaMoment was already clearly positioned with its focused online strategy before the pandemic that no change in the choice of instruments was reported as necessary in the new situation.

Before the pandemic, essentially all companies except VitaMoment used events and trade exhibitions for their individual target group approaches. Due to the lockdown restrictions, these opportunities were eliminated. The companies transferred these to a smaller extent to online or virtual-based events and fairs (webinars, showrooms, etc.). For this, the interviewed managers report an enormous organisational learning progress.

The pop-up store approach of Dr.Smile and Voi. has completely disappeared, but has been replaced by opportunities such as through affiliates (Ströer, MyDeals) in the online landscape. Also on the losing side are sponsoring activities at non-occurring sport events for Bilstein and Audi. Pedigree was no longer able to use the instrument of sales promotion at the POS: „Keine Coupons mehr an Regalen erlaubt, auch keine Markenbotschafter mehr im Markt, keine Markenexperience mehr“ ("No more coupons allowed on shelves, no more brand ambassadors in the market, no more brand experience"). A POS-communication approach was only possible for GeloRevoice as a brand that sells through system-relevant pharmacies (retailers). In particular, the reduced mobility of consumers in everyday life led to a continuous elimination of out-of-home instruments. None of the managers referred to the traditional communication instrument of cinema advertising. It is obvious that this was also one of the instruments that was absolutely cut back.

All in all, it can be observed that the tendency to reduce the classic traditional instruments (see also chapter 2.4.6) is extremely reinforced in the decisions of the interviewees over the entire pandemic period. Therefore, the hypothesis 2.1 is confirmed:

*H2.1: There is a shift from offline towards online marketing communication instruments/channels.*

### 5.3.3 Marketing Communication - Budgets

Another research question is the change in budget available for marketing communication to maintain brand reputation. It was to be analysed whether an increase or decrease of the budget occurred or whether a reallocation (online -> offline instruments) of the budget took place among the interviewed managers.

With regard to the amount of the budget at pandemic times, the following results are obtained:

Budget higher	Fürst Löwenstein, Dr.Smile, Rugtales, Malteser	4
Budget lower	Thyssenkrupp Bilstein, GeloRevoice, Audi, Volkswagen, Pro Akustik	5
Budget same	VitaMoment, HDI, Voi., Pedigree, Solaris, Hyundai	6

*Table 6: Budget Development*

It can be observed that companies that were described as directly negatively affected by the pandemic had to cut their budgets. In contrast, the companies that were economically favoured (as a result of consumer behaviour) decided to keep their budgets the same or to increase them. Six companies reported unchanged budgets. It is possible that the decisions to increase or especially to maintain budgets were based on the fact that certain opportunities arose in the market. Or there were price reductions by some media. For example, Hyundai reported that they acted "anti-zyklisch" ("counter-cyclical") because the price of running TV spots was suddenly more favourable. However, this is an exception. Similarly, the opportunity for an innovative approach such as virtual showrooms was also evident.

Referring back to the categorisation of product and service areas, the German "tangible products (automotive and car parts)" in category B report budget decreases, with the exception of the international importer Hyundai. The "service" providers in category D keep their budget constant. Only Malteser increased the budget due to direct (health & social) support activities in the Covid-19 pandemic.

In terms of reallocation and shifting the budget towards online instruments, the following overview emerges.

Reallocation yes	Fürst Löwenstein, Thyssenkrupp Bilstein, GeloRevoice, Dr.Smile, Audi, HDI, Voi., Pedigree, Rugtales, Volkswagen, Pro Akustik, Solaris, Hyundai, Malteser	14
Reallocation no	VitaMoment	1

*Table 7: Budget Reallocation*

Almost all, in fact 14 companies, have shifted the budget for marketing communication to online instruments. The only exception is VitaMoment, which was also fully invested in online tools before the pandemic as a D2C Brand in the era of "digital (dis)intermediation" (Gielens and Steenkamp, 2019). This is typical for a "Digital Native Vertical Brand" – DNVB, which is a prominent term in today's business world.

It is worth emphasising that intended target groups can be more precisely identified in the online procedure and can be reached more cost-effectively overall via online instruments. The elimination of

trade fairs/exhibitions, events and sponsoring as quite expensive instruments makes it possible to reallocate this released budget to other online communication instruments. Even the shift from actual offline events to webinars and Zoom conferences contains such a cost advantage. Solaris pointed out: „Wir mussten uns Gedanken machen ... das Budget, was wir eben jetzt nicht für Events ausgeben, wie können wir das stattdessen nutzen?“ (We had to think about... the budget that we don't spend on events now, how can we use that instead?). The only exception is the Fürst Löwenstein wine estate, which has higher costs in a certain online instrument. For the virtual tasting, which now takes place virtually at the consumer's home, a larger quantity of bottles per participant is required and the shipping of these bottles is also cost-intensive. However, the hypothesis 2.2 is confirmed:

*H2.2: There is an allocation of the marketing communication budget from offline towards online instruments/channels.*

#### 5.3.4 Marketing Communication – Messages

A significant number of interviewees made new and explicit reference to the Covid-19 situation during the pandemic in their message formulation - in each case, of course, considering the respective product and brand features.

GeloRevoice highlights this by changing the brand claim from: „GeloRevoice besser gut bei Stimme“ ("GeloRevoice better for the voice") to „Ergänzung zu Mundschutz – Halsschutz!“ ("Supplement to face mask - throat protection!"). Whereas before the pandemic the subjects of "singing", "socialising" and "partying" changed to "home office" and "wearing a mask". Voi., meanwhile, tested using a disinfectant to remove the viral load from the e-scooters. However, this message did not receive a positive response from the users. Dr.Smile and Pro Akustik, as Tangible (technical) products with service characteristics (category C) drew attention to their hygienically safe, system-relevant and thus open surgeries and shops. These examples all follow an "informative-design" from the Rossiter-Percy-Grid (Chapter 2.2.3). In addition, the first phase of the pandemic, Volkswagen focused on all "everyday heroes", i.e. nurses and doctors, with a customised car flat rate for them.

Another aspect is that a political statement on Covid-19 should be avoided strictly according to VitaMoment, Volkswagen, Hyundai and Malteser. VitaMoment clearly states that otherwise the danger of a connection with the German political movement "Querdenker" ("lateral thinkers") and negative multipliers could arise. Nevertheless, hypothesis 3.1 is essentially confirmed.

*H3.1: Marketing communication messages include pandemic-specific content related to the pandemic.*

A characteristic of the pandemic is that consumer needs of a newer kind emerge or appear as reinforcements of basic product and service desires. In brand management and reputation development, these needs are to be addressed by the marketing messages. Here, marketing managers have great

opportunities to create suitable communication content. The following needs and corresponding messages were identified from the interviews.

The need for good health, which is predominant in pandemic times, is addressed by VitaMoment through the message „Nährstoffmängel auffüllen“ ("Prevent nutritional deficiencies"). VitaMoment takes the desire for well-being in health as an argument for its message to eliminate the fear of a weak immune system of the consumer.

The distinctive need for financial security in the pandemic period and after, which is perceived as particularly uncertain, is addressed by HDI through messages of payments made in the event of company closures and occupational disability following the claim: „Wie wichtig es ist abgesichert zu sein“ ("How important it is to be covered"). According to Malteser, the increased desire for interpersonal relationships and warmth, and in some cases also for support, is fundamentally conveyed by its services and its claim: „Weil Nähe zählt“ ("Because closeness counts"). In the pandemic, this was communicated extensively in formulated messages. This corresponds to the conditions described by Ziemis (2021) in his psychological analysis (Chapter 2.4.7). In this context, brands try to assure continuity and stability.

Fürst Löwenstein uses the need for enjoyment and entertainment by highlighting its at-home tasting experience. According to Hyundai, the need for information has increased significantly and must be taken into account by the brand with an appropriate amount of information in the messages. The need to do something good for oneself is expressed by Volkswagen through the "Gönnt Euch was all-inclusive Paket" ("Treat yourself with an all-inclusive package"). The need for new interior design in the lockdown living situation is addressed by Rugtales. New dog owners (25% more dog purchases during the pandemic in Germany) are communicated with the message to give the new "family member" the right quality food.

Audi and Volkswagen formulate that the needs of sustainability, diversity, social justice and sharing, which are in line with the trend in German society, are considerably intensified in the pandemic and thus have relevance for the formulation of the message. Hypothesis 3.2 can thus be confirmed.

### *H3.2: Brands are increasingly oriented towards Covid 19-related new needs of consumers.*

Chapter 2.4.7 dealt with the changed mental state of people during the pandemic. In this study, it is of course a matter of recording the product- and market-related psychological state, which is subsequently relevant for building brand reputation in the sense of a customer-oriented communication policy. The managers interviewed again mention numerous approaches for message design and message formulation in connection with their respective products and services.

Dr.Smile, against the consumers' depression, sends an invitation to work on oneself and do something for one's own beauty in order to feel better. In doing so, Dr.Smile addressed the feeling of isolation with

the messages "make yourself your number one" and „Nimm dein Leben jetzt in die Hand“ ("take charge of your life now").

The opportunity to surround oneself with beautiful things and, above all, to create beautiful situations, largely falls away in the pandemic. Rugtales addresses this with its cheerful products. The products are bright and colourful and encourage people to redesign their living environment and feel better about it. This approach reflects an "emotional design" from the Rossiter-Percy-Grid described in Chapter 2.2.3. The oriental travel destinations as "small everyday escapes" (Chapter 2.4.7) addressed in the communication messages also reinforce this positive association.

In the sadness of the Corona situation, an owned or newly acquired dog helps people. The old traditional brand Pedigree takes on the task of positively developing this positive relationship and feeling as its message content.

Also worth mentioning is the physical psychological condition of a spreading tinnitus caused by corona stress, which can be treated with the newly created Kalmeda-App from the Pohl-Boskamp group, to which GeloRevoice belongs. Hypothesis 3.3 can thus be confirmed.

*H3.3: Brands are increasingly oriented towards Covid-19-related changes in consumers' state of mind (mood).*

### 5.3.5 Marketing Agility

The construct of agility to describe current business orientation and management activity is known by all interview partners as a "buzz word". However, there are some differences in the application and implementation in their own management.

The Fürst Löwenstein wine estate and the start-ups Voi, Dr.Smile and Rugtales see themselves as being agile "from the very beginning" and acting accordingly. Dr.Smile even noted: „Die Agilität war das, was das Unternehmen so stark gemacht hat“ ("Agility was what made the company so strong"). Rugtales reports its agility especially with regard to their young employees. GeloRevoice sees the whole company, including production, operating with newfound flexibility and speed. VitaMoment, Hyundai and Malteser show further, with reference to their own organisation, a pursuit for speed as an aspect of agility. HDI highlighted its steep learning curve, which is directed at internal communication too. For thyssenkrupp Bilstein, on the other hand, a certain "immobility" is noted in the interview.

Volkswagen refers to an "epochaler Umbruch" ("epochal upheaval") for the group with short-term changes of direction. At Audi, it is about gaining "corporate speed" - a presumably deliberately chosen relativization. But the situation is similar at Pedigree, because here, too, they see themselves bound to the "corporate tanker".

With reference to the typology of companies described in Chapter 2.4.2 ("Thrivers", "Hiders", Survivors"), it can be summarised that the concept of agility established by the start-up/Internet landscape is more strongly present in a comprehensive, continuous form the more comprehensively the company is anchored in the online world or the online marketing approach.

Corporations and large companies probably (only) implement the aspect of "speed" for product and tradition reasons. So it depends on the company and the management orientation. Therefore, the following hypothesis 4 can be partially confirmed.

*H4: The marketing management orientation is changing substantially. An agile strategy is essential.*

#### 5.4 Expected Changes after the Covid-19 pandemic

In addition to the questions about the managers' decisions during the pandemic, which are at the core of the research study, the managers also stated their expectations for the future. Overall, almost all managers expressed the continued or increasing importance of the online approach. Malteser stated: „Es wird kein Zurück geben“ ("There will be no going back"). Fürst Löwenstein refers to the pandemic as a „Wachrüttler“ ("wake-up call"). Only the manager of thyssenkrupp Bilstein expects the whole society and his company to return to old behaviour. With regard to the internal organization, Hyundai commented: „Es haben sich Dinge ... beschleunigt und die werden nicht wieder zurückgedreht“ ("Things have speeded up and they will not be turned back").

In the automotive industry, managers see a change in the awareness of car buyers with regard to the experiences made in Corona times as well as the prioritisation of needs.

In the case of tangible (technical) products with service characteristics, it has been noted that the focus will clearly shift back to the new customer segment (Pro Akustik, Voi, Dr.Smile).

The following statement by Voi. is representative for the service companies: „...dieses spontane Reagieren-Können wird bleiben" ("...this ability to react spontaneously, will remain"). Moreover, the service oriented companies see a "longing for social contacts, meetings.... human closeness" (HDI).

Comeback potential is seen for specific communication instruments. Pop-up stores are coming back (Dr.Smile). Personal contact is essential for premium wine (Fürst Löwenstein). Events are coming back (Malteser/HDI). Radio will have a comeback (Hyundai). New formats developed in the pandemic will evolve (Hyundai). Trade fairs, on the other hand, will not make a comeback (Hyundai). The trend is away from TV and print (Pedigree). On the other hand, TV will come back (Volkswagen).

It can be stated that the managers are very attentive to the behaviour of their respective target groups. They have empathy for the post-corona-mind-set.

## 6 Conclusion

The general academic literature on the topics of brand reputation and marketing communication management is extremely extensive. Within this thesis, it was possible to show the central importance of brand reputation as a management objective in the literature review in Chapter 2. On the other hand, brand reputations is a customer held phenomenon. In this context, the significance of brand identity management was dealt with using the exemplary model of the brand steering wheel (Esch, 2014, p.104) as well as the subsequent significance of the consumer-side brand image.

The use of marketing communication aims to achieve and maintain brand reputation. For this purpose, marketing managers apply certain marketing communication measures whose special features and possible applications are described in detail. Specifically, it is about the elements of marketing communication objectives, budget, messages, as well as traditional and digital instruments. These corresponding marketing communication measures always refer to consumer behaviour. For this purpose, the modelled AIDA principle and the customer journey were presented.

With these components derived from the current literature, a compact form of brand reputation management and marketing communication was consolidated.

In the further course of the literature review, the focus was on consumer behaviour and managerial implications in Covid-19 times. In addition, the question was raised as to which the pandemic poses special features and challenges in relation to marketing communication to maintain brand reputation. An analysis of recent publications and findings in this area was developed.

In this context and with regard to the actions of companies, the currently discussed construct of agility represents a unique descriptive feature. For the analysis of the general approach of companies, the typology of companies divided into Thrivers, Hiders and Survivors offers a useful scheme. Also, the possibly counterproductive reduction of the communication budget in a crisis was described. On the consumer side, changes have been reported in the context of digital migration. In addition, changes in consumer media usages and interests could be formulated. Also worth mentioning is the very insightful psychological analysis of consumers' psychological state of mind in Covid-19 times by Ziems (2021). He points out that profound changes can be observed in the psychological state of mind, which management has to consider.

In addition to the basic theoretical constructs, the new conditions and related marketing communication activities induced in Covid-19 times were thus developed in the literature review.

The Conceptual Framework in Chapter 3 consists of a developed model for maintaining brand reputation related to the Covid-19 time. This allows the formulation of 7 hypotheses on management decisions to

achieve and maintain brand reputation during the pandemic through marketing communication measures.

Following the hypotheses, Chapter 4 was designed to establish a methodology for empirically pursuing the research question. In the academic approach, the scheme of a "circular strategy" (Witt, 2001) was applied. According to this scheme, the aim is to contribute to the further development of theoretical knowledge. Following the marketing discipline, there is the additional aspect of contributing to practical knowledge. A qualitative research approach with interviews of practitioners was chosen. The compiled convenience sample consisted of 15 responsible managers who were interviewed using a structured interview guideline. These managers hold responsible marketing management functions in various industries for different products and services. These are the brands: Weingut Fürst Löwenstein, thyssenkrupp Bilstein, VitaMoment, GeloRevoice, Dr.Smile, Audi, HDI, Voi., Pedigree, Rugtales, Volkswagen, Pro Akustik, Solaris Bank, Hyundai and Malteser. For this form of an explorative study, which refers to the acquisition of relevant data on the current crisis situation, the chosen approach was considered adequate because the aim was to achieve the most detailed descriptions of management behaviour possible and thus to generate a rich data basis for a subsequent description and analysis.

In the further course of the thesis, Chapter 5. presented the findings and discussion to answer the main research question: "How are marketing communication activities designed and implemented to maintain brand reputation in times of the Covid-19 pandemic?".

The findings revealed clear tendencies in the decisions and approaches of the managers. Furthermore, the manifoldness and diversity of the various challenges of certain industries and marketing situations for the management was reflected. A wide variety of practices could be identified among the managers interviewed in how the marketing communication measures are carried out. The categorisation of the respondents according to product/service categories was helpful in this respect.

Firstly, the changes in the managerial task environment through Covid-19 were presented. Regarding competition, it became apparent that a review of one's position in the competitive environment is evoked in almost all companies and triggers the activities in the direction of innovation and reinforcing the value proposition. In terms of changes in consumer behaviour, it once again became evident in what different sorts and facets the pandemic is making itself noticeable in consumers' everyday lives. It has also been discovered that the customer journey has changed, with some touchpoints disappearing and new ones being added.

Subsequently, the specific results on the marketing communication decisions induced by Covid-19 follow, in which were covered by the hypotheses.

The explicit naming of the construct of brand reputation by the interviewed managers as well as the implicit description of it pointed out its ongoing high significance of brand reputation. Therefore,

Hypothesis 1 is supported: *Brand reputation as a managerial issue remains important at the same level as before the crisis. It is by no means less significant.*

Regarding marketing communication instruments, it was observed that the tendency to reduce traditional instruments is highly reinforced. Therefore, hypothesis 2.1 is confirmed: *There is a shift from offline towards online marketing communication instruments/channels.*

After examining the changes in the available marketing communication budget and its allocation, the hypothesis 2.2 is confirmed: *There is an allocation of the marketing communication budget from offline towards online instruments/channels.*

Concerning the marketing communication message, it could be shown that certain companies directly addressed the Covid-19 pandemic in their message formulation. However, this depends on the product or service that the brand offers. Hypothesis 3.1 is essentially confirmed: *Marketing communication messages include pandemic-specific content related to the pandemic.*

Likewise, the hypotheses 3.2 and 3.3 are confirmed within the discussion of the subject of marketing communication messages. *Brands are increasingly oriented towards Covid 19-related new needs of consumers; Brands are increasingly oriented towards Covid-19-related changes in consumers' state of mind (mood).* Interesting, very different individual statements were formulated here in the interviews.

Regarding the need for agility, which is more pronounced in times of pandemic, it was found that young companies/start-ups were before and are during the crisis well positioned due to their size. But also, the large corporate companies pointed to the best possible implementation of agile action with regard to the components of speed and flexibility. Therefore, hypothesis 4 is partially confirmed: *The marketing management orientation is changing substantially. An agile strategy is essential.*

Interestingly, in the interviews, managers commented on their different expectations about the post-pandemic situation. It should be emphasised here that the majority believes that the pandemic can be described as a kind of wake-up call. New instruments and channels have been tried out for the first time or have been highly strengthened as a result of the pandemic. This will also be continued after the pandemic. Nevertheless, the traditional physical channels have a chance to be reintroduced, although more attention will be paid to the actual necessity of these.

Overall, it can be said with regard to the findings and discussion in Chapter 5 that the chosen methodological approach proved to be successful. From the data generated in this explorative study with the qualitative approach and a subsequent interpretation, it was possible to derive an assessment of the hypotheses put forward. A multi-faceted picture of the management situation and challenges during the pandemic emerged.

As a final conclusion of the work presented, it can be said that the literature review on the topic and the subsequent empirical study have provided a contribution to the significance of brand reputation management in the times of Covid-19 that has its own epistemic value.

### **Limitations**

The study's limitations must, of course, also be noted. The small convenience sample (15 interviewees) of representatives from very different companies and industries allows only a limited generalisation. The chosen form of semi-structured interviews naturally led to only a few statements that could be listed quantitatively. However, the highly differentiated information that emerged from the dialogue-based interview process of such a qualitative study has its own value. This information can be used for the subsequent conception and formulation of a quantitative follow-up study, as is often done in practice in academic and market research procedures.

### **Implications for Further Research**

This thesis presents usable findings for further academic research within the management discipline and here again for brand and marketing communication management. It shows the integrated significance of the concept of brand reputation. It is therefore also worth pursuing in future studies. Furthermore, it shows which changes are given in a pandemic situation, perhaps even a prototypical crisis situation. From this, further questions can be derived for academic research in the future. Last but not least, it would be interesting to use the results of this qualitative study as a basis for a subsequent quantitative survey in a representative sample.

### **Managerial Implications**

The results presented also allow for several statements and recommendations for practical management to be derived. How the individual industries proceeded during the pandemic and what considerations were made for the time afterwards can also be used as important suggestions for the further development of one's own management approach, for training in coping with future crises or for monitoring the competition. Here, the shift (offline/online) in the marketing communication instruments used and its necessary realisation as well as the pursuit or implementation of "agility" are of predominant relevance.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guideline

Originally, the qualitative interviews were conducted in German. Below is the original version in German followed by a translation into English.

### GERMAN

#### „Opening“

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Sehr geehrte(r) Interviewee, diese Befragung steht im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit an der SRH Berlin und dem Griffith College Dublin. Es geht angesichts der Covid-19 Pandemie um Fragestellungen, die Ihre Ansichten und Entscheidungen in den verschiedenen Feldern der Marketingkommunikation betreffen. Hier ist es wichtig Ihre ganz persönliche Ansicht und Erfahrungen im Rahmen Ihres Verantwortungsbereichs im Unternehmen kennenzulernen. Wie bereits in meiner E-Mail mitgeteilt, erlaube ich mir, unser Gespräch aufzuzeichnen. Selbstverständlich ist es Ihnen freigestellt zu entscheiden welche Fragen Sie jeweils beantworten können und wollen. Ebenfalls darf ich nochmals erwähnen, dass die Wiedergabe unseres Gesprächs und Ihre Antworten vertraulich erfolgen. Ich danke Ihnen für die Teilnahme.

1. Zunächst darf ich fragen welchen Verantwortungsbereich Sie in Ihrem Unternehmen haben bzw. wie Ihre Position bezeichnet wird?
2. Bitte nennen Sie mir die Branche, in der Sie sich Ihr Unternehmen befindet.

#### „Body“

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3. In der Markendisziplin gibt es Begriffe, die in unterschiedlicher Form Verwendung finden. Kennen Sie die Begriffe Markenidentität und Markenreputation/Markenimage?
  - ⇒ Bitte beschreiben Sie die Relevanz dieser Begriffe für Ihre Tätigkeit
  - ⇒ Wird Markenreputation bzw. Markenimage bei Ihnen spezifisch gemessen?
4. Welche Veränderungen und Herausforderungen sehen Sie seit Beginn der Covid-19 Pandemie in der Gestaltung von Markenreputation?
5. Ich möchte mich nun auf die Kommunikationsmaßnahmen, die Ihnen zur Verfügung stehen beziehen. Welche Marketingkommunikationsmaßnahmen, also Kanäle und Instrumente fallen Ihnen ein, die Sie bereits vor der Pandemie verwendeten, um Ihre Zielgruppe zu erreichen.
  - ⇒ [freie Aufzählung]
  - ⇒ [Nachfrage zu nicht aufgezählten, verwendeten Instrumenten]
6. In Bezug auf spezifische digitale Kommunikationsinstrumente welche Maßnahmen verwendeten Sie auch schon vor der Pandemie?
  - ⇒ [freie Aufzählung]
  - ⇒ [Nachfrage zu nicht aufgezählten, verwendeten Instrumenten]
7. Nun möchte ich auf die Sondersituation eingehen, die sich durch die Covid-19 Pandemie ab März 2020 ergeben hat. Wenn Sie sich nochmal auf die Kommunikationsmaßnahmen beziehen. Was hat sich in Ihrer Wahl der Kommunikationsinstrumente durch Covid-19 verändert?
8. Hat sich durch Covid-19 die Customer Journey verändert? Also, damit meine ich: Sind die Zielgruppen nun auf anderen Kanälen bzw. Touchpoints zu erreichen?

9. Beobachten Sie Veränderungen in der Kommunikationspolitik Ihrer Wettbewerber?
10. In Bezug auf das Ihnen zur Verfügung stehende Kommunikationsbudget. Was hat sich durch Covid-19 für Sie verändert? Fällt das Marketingbudget möglicherweise kleiner oder größer aus? Hat sich die Verteilung des Budgets auf die verschiedenen Kommunikationsinstrumente verändert?
11. Nun möchte ich auf das Thema der Kommunikationsbotschaft, welche über die verschiedenen Kanäle/Instrumente kommuniziert wird, eingehen? Sind es andere Botschaften, die Sie in Pandemiezeiten der Zielgruppe übermitteln?
- ⇒ [Sind Sie auf neue Bedürfnisse Ihrer Zielgruppe gestoßen, die durch die Pandemie aufkamen, welche Sie im Inhalt der Markenkommunikation adressieren?]
  - ⇒ [Sind Sie auf veränderte psychische Verfassungen Ihrer Zielpersonen gestoßen, die durch die Pandemie aufkamen, welche Sie in der Markenkommunikation adressieren?]
12. Ein heutzutage oft verwendeter Begriff ist „Agilität“. Forderte die Covid-19 Pandemie Ihr Unternehmen dazu in der Marketingorientierung besonders agil sein zu müssen?
13. Gehen wir davon aus, dass die Pandemie bald überwunden sein wird. Wird sich in Ihrer Marketingkommunikationspolitik erneut etwas ändern?

#### **„Closing“**

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14. Zum Abschluss noch ein paar Fragen zu Ihrem Unternehmen:
- a. Wie groß ist Ihr Unternehmen?
  - b. Bezogen auf das von Ihnen verantwortete Marketingbudget. Über 1.000€, über 10.000€ über 100.000€ über 1 Mio.€ pro Jahr?

Nun sind wir schon am Ende des Interviews. Ich danke Ihnen sehr dafür, dass Sie sich die Zeit genommen haben, meine Fragen zu beantworten.

## ENGLISH

### „Opening“

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Dear interviewee, this survey is part of my Master's thesis at SRH Berlin and Griffith College Dublin. In view of the Covid-19 pandemic, the questions concern your views and decisions in the various fields of marketing communication. Here it is important to get to know your very personal views and experiences in the context of your area of responsibility in the company. As already communicated in my e-mail, I will take the liberty of recording our conversation. Of course, you are free to decide which questions you can and want to answer. I would also like to mention again that the recording of our conversation and your answers will be treated sensitively. Thank you for your participation.

1. First of all, may I ask what area of responsibility you have in your company or what your position is called?
2. Please tell me the industry/branch in which your company is situated.

### „Body“

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3. In brand management, there are terms that are used in different forms. Do you know the terms brand identity and brand reputation/brand image?
  - ⇒ Please describe the relevance of these terms to your activity
  - ⇒ Do you specifically measure brand reputation or brand image?
4. What changes and challenges do you see in shaping brand reputation since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic?
5. I would now like to refer to the communication measures you have at your disposal. What marketing communication measures, i.e. channels and instruments, can you think of that you already used before the pandemic to reach your target group?
  - ⇒ [free enumeration]
  - ⇒ [Question on instruments not mentioned but used]
6. In terms of specific digital communication instruments, which measures did you use even before the pandemic?
  - ⇒ [free enumeration]
  - ⇒ [Question on instruments not mentioned but used]
7. Now I would like to talk about the special situation that has arisen due to the Covid-19 pandemic from March 2020. If you refer again to the communication measures. What has changed in your choice of marketing communication instruments due to Covid-19?
8. Has Covid-19 changed the customer journey? By this I mean: Are the target groups now reached via other channels or touchpoints?
9. Do you observe changes in the marketing communication policy of your competitors?
10. In terms of the marketing communication budget at your disposal. What has changed for you as a result of Covid-19? Is the marketing budget possibly smaller or larger? Has the allocation of the budget to the different communication instruments changed?

11. Now I would like to address the subject of the marketing communication message that is communicated via the different channels/instruments? Are they different messages that you communicate to the target group in pandemic times?
- ⇒ [Have you identified new needs of your target group that have emerged as a result of the pandemic, which you are addressing in the content of your marketing communication?]
  - ⇒ [Have you identified any changes in the psychological conditions of your target groups that have arisen as a result of the pandemic and which you are addressing in your brand communication?]
12. A term often used these days is "agility". Did the Covid-19 pandemic require your company to be particularly agile in its marketing approach?
13. Let's assume that the pandemic will soon be overcome. Will there be any changes in your marketing communication policy again?

### **„Closing“**

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14. To complete, a few questions about your company:
- a. How big is your company?
  - b. In terms of the marketing budget you are responsible for. Is it over 1.000€, 10.000€, 100.000€ or 1 Mio.€ per year?

Now we are already at the end of the interview. Thank you very much for taking the time to answer my questions.

## Appendix B: Transcribed Interviews

All 15 transcribed interviews can be accessed via [this link](#). The following is an example of one interview.

### **Interview 14: 30.04.2021, 14:00**

#00:00:00-0# DD:

Sehr geehrter Interviewee, diese Befragung steht im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit an der SRH Berlin und dem Griffith College Dublin. Es geht angesichts der Covid-19 Pandemie um Fragestellung, die ihre Ansichten und Entscheidungen in den verschiedenen Feldern der Marketingkommunikation betreffen. Hier ist es wichtig, Ihre ganz persönliche Ansicht und Erfahrungen im Rahmen Ihres Verantwortungsbereichs im Unternehmen kennenzulernen. Wie bereits in meiner E-Mail mitgeteilt, erlaube ich mir, unser Gespräch aufzuzeichnen. Selbstverständlich ist es Ihnen freigestellt zu entscheiden, welche Fragen Sie jeweils beantworten können und wollen. Ebenfalls darf ich nochmals erwähnen, dass die Wiedergabe unseres Gesprächs und Ihre Antworten vertraulich erfolgen. Ich danke Ihnen für Ihre Teilnahme. Zunächst darf ich Sie fragen, welchen Verantwortungsbereich Sie denn in ihrem Unternehmen haben beziehungsweise wie Ihre Position bezeichnet wird?

#00:00:43-5# Interviewee 14:

Ich bin Geschäftsführer von Hyundai Motor Deutschland.

#00:00:48-4# DD:

Bei Hyundai. In welcher Branche ist das Unternehmen also tätig?

#00:00:51-1# Interviewee 14:

Im Automobilbereich.

#00:00:55-9# DD:

Schön. Nun zum eigentlichen Thema. In der Maskendisziplin da gibt es verschiedene Begriffe. Kennen Sie die Begriffe Markenidentität und Markenimage beziehungsweise Markenreputation?

#00:01:08-1# Interviewee 14:

Ja. Wenn Sie mich jetzt nach einer wissenschaftlichen Abgrenzung fragen würden, würde ich wahrscheinlich alt aussehen. Aber ja!

#00:01:13-3# DD:

Sehr schön. Dann können Sie mir sicher die Relevanz dieser Begriffe wie Markenidentität für Ihr Unternehmen beschreiben?

#00:01:25-5# Interviewee 14:

Na ja, also ich. Ich fange mal mit dem Markenimage an, weil das wahrscheinlich der, zumindest bei uns in der Branche der gängige Begriff ist, wo man natürlich unglaublich viel drunter verstehen kann, und unglaublich wenig. Für mich ist es ganz klar, und das ist dann eben auch dieser schwammige Übergang zur Markenidentität. Es ist das, was der Kunde mit der Marke verbindet. Das ist das, was den Kunden „anprompted“ und später vielleicht doch „prompted“, aber „anprompted“ einfällt, wenn er an die Marke denkt oder über die Marke angesprochen wird. Das heißt, das können die Produkte sein, das kann das Gesamtunternehmen sein, das können die Vertriebswege sein, mit denen er zu tun hat, wenn er mit Produkten der Marke in Kontakt kommt. Es ist also sehr vielfältig, woher dieses Image dann kommt oder es geprägt wird. Die Markenidentität ist wirklich schwierig davon abzugrenzen. In den Beziehungen ist es aus meiner Sicht, im deutschen Sprachgebrauch wahrscheinlich das Gleiche.

#00:02:33-5# DD:

Ja, also es ist so, dass die Markeidentität das ist, was das Unternehmen intern kreiert und darstellen will und das Image ist dann so von anderen Perspektive, wie es dort ankommt. So kann man das abgrenzen. Was meinen Sie denn jetzt, wo wir das zusammen definiert haben, welche Veränderungen und Herausforderungen haben sich denn nun durch die Pandemie ergeben in der Gestaltung einer solchen, eines solchen Markenimages?

#00:02:57-9# Interviewee 14:

Na ja, man kann in zwei Richtungen diskutieren und kann sagen, durch die Pandemie hat sich die Bedeutung eines Images, einer Markeidentität verstärkt. Ganz einfach deshalb, weil Kunden gewisse andere Berührungspunkte nicht mehr haben und deshalb noch stärker fleißig daran festhalten. Wie ist das Markenimage? Wie ist die Markeidentität? Was erwarte ich von den Produkten dieser Marke? Es kann aber auch genau umgekehrt ausgelegt werden, wenn man darüber nachdenkt, denn dadurch, dass die Digitalisierung unbestrittenen deutlich forciert wurde in allen Bereichen, und das gilt für unsere Branche definitiv, für den Automobilvertrieb. Das sind einfach Entwicklungsschritte gegangen worden innerhalb von einem Jahr, die sonst fünf Jahre gedauert hätten. Und dadurch einhergehend ist die Loyalität zu einem Unternehmen, zu einer Marke geringer geworden. Denn es ist ganz klar, dass - was man feststellt wenn Leute digitaler unterwegs sind - die Hemmschwelle, ähm, ja, Präferenzen zu ändern oder wegzugehen von bisherigen Produkterfahrungen und Erlebnissen, geringer geworden ist. Also deswegen glaube ich, die erste andere Antwort, ist wahrscheinlich das, was man automatisch sofort schnell sagt: Markenimage wird wichtiger in der Pandemie. Aber ich glaube, es ist auch die andere Entwicklung, das ist eine Gegenentwicklung, die man nicht unterschätzen darf. Also wir erkennen ganz klar durch die Digitalisierung verändert sich unglaublich viel in einer sonst sehr trägen und konservativen Branche.

#00:04:38-3# DD:

In dem Zusammenhang hat die Kommunikation natürlich eine große Bedeutung. Ich möchte mich nun auf Kommunikationsmaßnahmen beziehen. Welche Kommunikationsmaßnahmen, also Kanäle und Instrumente fallen ihn ein, die sie auch schon vor der Pandemie verwendet haben, um ihre Zielgruppe zu erreichen?

#00:04:55-1# Interviewee 14:

Na gut, bei uns ist das wirklich der klassische Media-Mix, also die nationale Kommunikation läuft ganz klassisch, wenn ich von oben anfangen über TV, über tatsächlich immer noch Print, über Out-of-Home Dinge, dann aber sehr stark digital, sprich, alle möglichen Online-Kanäle, die man sich dann nochmal getrennt anschauen muss. Aber ich sage mal generell digitale online Kanäle. Aber Kommunikation bedeutet ja auch sehr stark Pressearbeit und die Kommunikation meiner Handelspartner, meiner Vertriebsstufe, die auch sehr stark kommuniziert, nicht im TV, aber in den anderen Medienkanälen auch, wo ich übrigens noch Radio vergessen hatte, neben den anderen klassischen Media-Kanälen. Aber die Bedeutung einer PR ist, glaube ich, nochmals gewachsen in dieser Zeit.

#00:05:55-2# DD:

In der Pandemie Zeit, meinen Sie?

#00:05:56-5# Interviewee 14:

Ja, habe ich wirklich den Eindruck, weil, ähm, die Kunden oder die potenziellen Kunden da draußen noch intensiver kommunizieren und noch intensiver konsumieren, hätte ich fast gesagt, nämlich Botschaften konsumieren, Online-Dienste lesen oder klassische Zeitungen und Ähnliches lesen, wo sie einfach Informationen aufnehmen und deshalb wir mit der PR-Arbeit Einfluss nehmen können oder versuchen einzunehmen - Einfluss zu nehmen.

#00:06:29-2# DD:

Welche Kommunikationswege fallen Ihnen denn ein, die durch die Pandemie nicht mehr möglich sind, für Ihr Unternehmen?

#00:06:33-7# Interviewee 14:

Naja, also das ist bei uns klar, ob gewisse Out-of-Home Dinge, ich sag mal, Ausstellungen und Messen und so weiter sind nicht mehr möglich gewesen und haben sich extrem verändert. Aber das ist einfach nur ein weiteres Beispiel dafür, dass die ganze Sache einfach beschleunigt wurde. Ich sag mal so eine Messe war vor 20 Jahren wirklich das Medium und um viele Menschen zu erreichen, Automobile auszustellen, das war schon so sehr auf dem absteigenden Ast. Es gab viele Messen, die schon weit vor der Pandemie, äh, die Pforten geschlossen haben und das hat sie jetzt einfach beschleunigt. Es wird nur noch sehr wenig übrig bleiben bei den Messen. Und bei den Dingen wie Out-of-Home, wo ich vor allem denke - beim Automobil ist das klassischste: Fußgängerzone, stelle drei Autos aus, fünf Mädels, die dann das Auto erklären, und ich sage mal versuchen dann in Kontakt zu treten mit den Menschen, die da herum laufen. Auch das hat sich jetzt natürlich teilweise zwangsweise, äh, erübrigt oder ist zurückgefahren worden. Aber auch das war etwas, was sowieso schon auf dem Rückwärtsgang war und sowieso schon weniger entscheidend wurde, weil das einfach nicht mehr dem Informationsverhalten der potenziellen Kunden entspricht.

#00:07:56-6# DD:

Also sie würden sagen, dass die Pandemie diesen „Shift“ rüber zu digital unterstützt hat? Nochmal verstärkt hat?

#00:08:02-2# Interviewee 14:

Ja absolut! Dramatisch unterstützt hat oder beschleunigt hat. Aber ich ja, beschleunigt ist für mich immer das entscheidende Wort. Es ging eh in die Richtung. Interessant ist aber auch, wir haben gerade gestern wirklich mit unserer Mediaagentur sehr intensiv uns angeschaut, auch Marktforschung, wo wir gesehen haben, wie das wirklich das Media-Verhalten der Konsumenten sich entwickelt hat. Und es gibt in der Pandemie in den letzten 13-14 Monaten zwei Gewinner. Das eine ist natürlich Online. Alle möglichen Online, äh, Kommunikationskanäle. Aber auch TV. Das muss man ganz klar sagen. Die Bedeutung von TV im Kommunikationsmix ist deutlich höher geworden. Die war so ein bisschen am Abbröckeln und am Zurückgehen vor der Pandemie. Und das hat sich extrem wieder erhöht. Ich rede nicht nur von klassischen TV-Kanälen, sondern eben auch, dass man Spezialformate wählt, wo man, äh, diese L-Form mit bucht und Dinge, ganz neue Dinge, die es vielleicht vor fünf oder zehn Jahren so noch nicht gab. Aber ganz klar muss man sagen TV neben Online der große Gewinner in den letzten 14 Monaten, was Media-Kanäle angeht.

#00:09:08-7# DD:

Also wenn ich mal den Begriff der Customer Journey in unser Gespräch mit einbringe, dann würden Sie sagen, dass die Zielgruppen nun durch die Pandemie auf anderen Kanälen und Touchpoints zu erreichen sind?

#00:09:18-8# Interviewee 14:

Nicht andere. Aber die Gewichte haben sich verschoben. Absolut. Bei dieser Customer Journey, wenn man bei den bleiben, war ja vorher schon der der Startpunkt, gerade bei uns im Automobil, schon sehr stark online. Und nur noch ganz wenige Touchpoints waren im Händlerbetrieb. Man hat immer diese McKinsey-Studie zitiert, die jetzt auch schon ein paar Tage alt ist. Aber irgendwo früher hat einer, wenn er ein Auto gekauft hat, ist siebenmal in ein Autohaus gegangen. Also „früher“ ist vielleicht zehn Jahre her ungefähr. Und inzwischen hat man bei der McKinsey-Studie herausgefunden, dass es nur noch 1,4 Besuche im Autohaus sind, also wirklich mehr oder weniger nur noch „Ich gehe dahin, tu die letzten Details abstimmen und beim nächsten Mal hole ich das Auto ab“. Das sich wirklich extrem gewandelt. Aber das war schon vor der Pandemie so. Jetzt hatten wir Situationen, wo alle Autohäuser geschlossen waren. Da war das natürlich definitiv so. Aber das wird auch weiter so bleiben und sich noch weiter, äh,

beschleunigen, wie gesagt. Diese Customer Journey läuft immer mehr tatsächlich online ab. Das ist ja auch ein Teil dessen, was geschehen ist in der Pandemie - dass immer mehr online Dinge abgeschlossen werden. Es ist nach wie vor in unserer Branche so, dass der überwiegende Anteil der Kunden dann doch die finale Kaufentscheidungen im Autohaus treffen, nicht online, sondern im Autohaus, nachdem sie extrem gut vorbereitet sind und das Auto auch, eben nicht online, sondern im Autohaus, abholen wollen. Das entwickelt sich auch langsam weg, aber ganz, ganz langsam selbst in der jetzigen Zeit. Wir haben Angebote von Online-Leasing, Online-Kaufen. All diese werden tatsächlich angeboten bei Hyundai in Deutschlands. Es wird nicht genutzt bis zum Ende. Was man klar spürt, ist das mehr und mehr Kundengruppen das Angebot sehen wollen. Sie wollen sehen, dass sie theoretisch online abschließen könnten, aber der letzte Schritt wird doch immer noch woanders, also in 99,5 Prozent der Fälle, woanders gemacht. Aber man will es sehen als Kunde. Man möchte die Möglichkeit haben.

#00:11:38-3# DD:

Das ist eine spannende Erkenntnis.

#00:11:40-0# Interviewee 14:

*(unterbricht)* Ganz, ganz spannend. Und wir stellen uns natürlich darauf ein, sowohl nationale als auch lokal mit unseren Handelsbetrieben, also lokal - jeder kleine Autohändler muss inzwischen dann eben die Möglichkeit geben, auch dass er per Videochat mit dem Kunden kommuniziert, dass er vielleicht als Verkäufer im Ausstellungsraum ist und der Kunde sitzt zu Hause auf der Couch und sagt: „Jetzt zeig mir doch mal den grünen i30. Und wie geht denn das da? Wie funktionieren das? Wie sehen die Felgen aus?“ Und wir national auf jeden Fall auch. Und da haben wir schon vor der Pandemie, äh, etwas etabliert, was vielleicht ganz interessantes ist als Fallbeispiel. Wir haben einen sogenannten Online Showroom. Der ist national angeboten, äh, das heißt 7 Tage die Woche von 10:00 bis um 10:00, also tatsächlich bis abends um 10 Uhr. Auch am Samstagabend und am Sonntagabend kann der Kunde in einer Chat-Funktion mit Live-Produktberater sprechen. Die sitzen bei Aschaffenburg in einem, äh, ich sag mal in einer Lagerhalle, die bisschen aufgepeppt ist, schön präsentiert, vier Fahrzeuge, die vier gängigsten Fahrzeuge. Und es fängt an dieser Chat, wenn der Kunde das möchte in einem Gespräche und dann irgendwann, sagt der Kunde: „Jetzt möchte ich aber mal sehen, wie der i20 aussieht“. Und dann geht der Berater in diese Box, wo der i20 steht und kann ihm den eben genau zeigen. Dann sagt der Kunde eben: „Ja, wie ist denn das mit der, ähm, äh, mit dem Infotainmentsystem?“. Und dann erklärt er ihm am Gerät, wie das funktioniert. Oder dann sagt der: „Jetzt hätt ich hier schon mal gern mal gesehen, wie das eigentlich mit den Sicherheitsgurt“. Und dann geht er eben mit seiner Videokamera dahin und zeigt dem Kunden das. Also das ist unglaublich explodiert, wie das genutzt wird. Das war vor der Pandemie - ja, interessant, spannend, irgendwie neu - und in der Pandemie ist das wirklich durch die Decke gegangen und es geht immer weiter in die Richtung. Wir haben jetzt allein in den ersten vier Monaten diesen Jahres schon so viel, äh, Interaktion gehabt über diesen Kanal wie im gesamten Jahr 2020. Also, da sieht man es. Es wird noch einmal intensiver und wir reden hier über jetzt schon in den ersten vier Monaten 2000 Klicks auf, äh ich meine 2 Millionen Klicks auf dieser Seite und immerhin 20.000 Gespräche, die wir schon geführt haben in vier Monaten. Also intensivst!

#00:14:03-6# DD:

Sehr spannender Kanal, als eine Art – wie haben Sie es genannt? Eine Online ...

#00:14:08-6# Interviewee 14:

*(unterbricht)* Wir nennen es Online-Showroom, um einen Namen zu geben mit dem die Kunden auch was mit anfangen können.

#00:14:13-5# DD:

Dann gibt es doch auch noch andere Werbeformate digitaler Art. Es gibt das Thema Suchmaschinenmanagement, was sie sicher tun, auch sogenannte Native Anzeigen im Internet, CRM, E-Mail. Das sind auch solche Kanäle, die sie nutzen, nehme ich an? Meine Frage ist dann, wurden die intensiviert durch die Pandemie?

#00:14:35-6# Interviewee 14:

Also. Ja, die wurden intensiviert. Ja, es ist einfach definitiv ein dickes Ausrufezeichen. Ich überlege gerade. Die klassischen Online-Kanäle haben wir mit wirklich deutlich mehr Budget allokiert, um dort eben mit den mit den potenziellen Kunden zu kommunizieren. Suchmaschinen - all diese Dinge ganz klar. Wie gesagt, das waren die zwei Gewinner auch von der Nutzung der Kunden. Neben dem TV waren das die ganzen Online-Kanäle. Ich habe nur so kurz überlegt. Sie hatten auch CRM genannt, also das klassische Kundenkontaktprogramm in der Customer Journey - wie oft spreche ich den Kunden an - dann auch national oder lokalen oder über den Vertriebspartner. Auch das haben wir deutlich intensiviert, weil wir gemerkt haben, dass die Kunden auch offen dafür sind. Also vor der Pandemie war oft die Aussage: „Ich darf den Kunden nicht zu oft kontaktieren, der ist genervt“. Das war wirklich ein ganz wichtiger Punkt, wo wir genau überlegt haben: Wie oft kann ich den Rahmen sprengen? Jetzt habe ich ihm schon zum Geburtstag gratuliert. Ich habe ihm gesagt, dass ein neues Update von seinem Navi System zur Verfügung steht. Und wie oft kann ich den noch kontaktieren? Und das hat sich deutlich verändert in der Pandemie. Die Leute sind offener für mehr Austausch. Das ist für uns eine gute Sache. Wir können öfters an ihn herantreten, an den Kunden, ohne dass wir den Eindruck haben, dass wir nerven oder wir nerven zu viele der potenziellen Kunden oder der tatsächlich auch Bestandskunden. Das ist tatsächlich so, dass sich das Verhalten da verändert hat. So ein bisschen übertrieben, aber viele, die dann im Homeoffice sitzen oder vielleicht generell Kurzarbeit haben oder was auch immer - die waren wahrscheinlich froh, wenn sie dann noch eine zusätzliche E-Mail von Hyundai bekommen, wo ihnen eben Informationen überkamen. Sie hatten mehr Zeit, sich damit zu beschäftigen. Wie wenn sie abends in die Kneipe gehen könnten oder – keine Ahnung-vielleicht auf Auslandsreise, Dienstreise wären. Also da merkt man, da ist auch so eine gewisse Veränderungen zu erkennen.

#00:16:39-2# DD:

Und in Bezug auf das zur Verfügung stehende Kommunikationsbudget. Hat sich da durch Covid-19 was verändert? Ist das Budget größer oder möglicherweise kleiner ausgefallen?

#00:16:50-4# Interviewee 14:

Also größer nicht. Das ist klar, dass je nach Branche ja die Pandemie schon einiges an Spuren hinterlassen hat von der Wirtschaftlichkeit her. Jetzt für unsere Branche gesprochen, ist es so, dass in Deutschland ungefähr 20 Prozent weniger Neuwagen letztes Jahr vermarktet wurden, als das normal der Fall gewesen wäre wahrscheinlich. Im Servicebereich sind die Umsatzeinbrüche gar nicht so groß. Aber es ist definitiv große Umsatzeinbrüche und dadurch natürlich auch Profits, die reduziert wurden. Was natürlich dann die spontane Reaktion von jedem Financier in jedem Unternehmen ist, ist das auch Marketingbudgets, Kommunikationsbudgets angepasst werden. Also ich glaube, zumindest in unserer Branche hat keiner im letzten Jahr mehr ausgegeben, definitiv alle weniger. Die Frage ist wie viel weniger. Jetzt in unserem Fall - wir konnten Gottseidank sehr viel von dem Marketingbudget verteidigen, weil wir glaubhaft zeigen konnten, dass wir zu den Gewinnern gehören, wenn wir richtig kommunizieren, nachdem es dann wieder aufgegangen ist. Aber also eine Erhöhung können Sie wirklich ausschließen in unserer Branche. Ähm, bei uns ist es so, dass wir Gottseidank noch das stabil halten konnten. Das einzige im Marketingbudget, was reduziert wurde, sind gewisse BTL-Aktivitäten, also Aktivitäten, was weiß ich, wir machen sehr viel im Motorsport, wir machen sehr viel im Fußball-Sponsoring, die Vereine sponsoren wir weiterhin, und wir geben den weiterhin Autos. Aber wir tun natürlich bei den Spielen keine Autos mehr ausstellen und keine Promotoren hinstellen. Da sind Kosten einfach weggefallen, die dann tatsächlich auch weggefallen sind und nicht mehr woanders ausgeblasen wurden.

#00:18:35-6# DD:

Ah das ist interessant, weil sie eben noch meinten es gab diese Allokation - also Sie sprachen da eher, glaube ich, von einer Umverteilung.

#00:18:43-1# Interviewee 14:

(unterbricht) Ja, also die reinen Kommunikationsbudgets, die hat man umverteilt, also noch mehr Richtung online geschoben. Aber die anderen Marketing, äh, Ausgaben, die man hat oder hatte. Die sind teilweise tatsächlich eingespart worden. Diese Dinge, die man, ja wir nannten es BTL – Below-the-Line Kommunikationsmaßnahmen, Aktivierungsmaßnahmen rundum Sponsoring und solche Dinge - hat man eingespart. Und in aller Fairness ist dann schwer zu argumentieren, wenn man 20 Prozent weniger Umsatz macht, das dann das Geld woanders ausgegeben wird. Das was nicht wirklich das.

#00:19:19-5# DD:

Nun möchte ich auf das Thema der Kommunikationsbotschaft eingehen, also das Thema, was über diese verschiedenen Kanäle kommuniziert wird. Sind es andere Botschaften, die während der Pandemie-Zeit der Zielgruppe übermittelt wurden? Sind es zum Beispiel andere Bedürfnisse innerhalb der Zielgruppe, die man anspricht? Um, sagen wir zu unterstützen, zu helfen oder bessere Laune zu machen?

#00:19:44-9# Interviewee 14:

Also, ja und nein. Ich sage mal, ist klar, gewisse Dinge mussten und gewisse Botschaften mussten sie neu aufnehmen, im Sinne von „Unsere Ausstellungsräume sind jetzt wieder geöffnet“ oder „sind unter folgendem Vorgaben geöffnet“ oder dann, wenn alles zu war, dass wir gesagt haben „wir haben aber einen Online-Showroom, wo Ihr Euch Informationen reinziehen könnt“. Also, das ist klar. Das hat aber ja direkt mit der Pandemie zu tun oder mit den pragmatischen Auswirkungen. Ich nehme mal an, die Frage ist eher, ob man gewisse Bedürfnisse von Kunden eher herausgestrichen hat oder nicht. Das ist teilweise der Fall gewesen. Vor allem am Anfang haben wir uns sehr viel Gedanken darüber gemacht. Aber so ein bisschen unsere Erfahrung war - eigentlich haben sich die Bedürfnisse, die wir befriedigen müssen mit unserem Produkt, Angebot mit dem, was wir da kommunizieren, nicht groß verändert. Also das war eher weniger eine Veränderung. Es ist es nicht so, dass plötzlich nur noch auf Schnäppchen aus waren oder, ein anderes Extrem, nur noch Produkt-Highlights hören wollten und der Preis war vollkommen egal. Also beides war nicht der Fall. Oder auch am Anfang dachten wir alle jetzt müssen wir unglaublich gute Versicherungen mit dazugeben - eine Arbeitslosenversicherung, eine Corona-Versicherung, alles Dinge, die man mal ausgetestet hat, wir oder auch Wettbewerber. Wenn ich ehrlich bin, wirklich größere Relevanz hat nichts aus meiner Sicht in unserer Branche hier gewonnen. Also es war nicht so, dass plötzlich die Kunden nur noch finanzieren wollten oder nur noch bar bezahlen wollten oder so grundsätzliche Veränderungen kann man nicht sagen.

#00:21:27-1# DD:

Wie steht es denn um mögliche veränderte psychische Verfassungen bei der Zielgruppe? Ich mach mal ein Beispiel: Die Leute sind alle im Lockdown, sitzen zu Hause, sind deprimiert, sind traurig, sauer. Ist das was, was ihre Marke vielleicht adressiert hat, um irgendwie möglicherweise abzulenken oder in Richtung „Hey, wie wäre es denn mit einem Auto, mit einer Autofahrt?“, oder eben mit so einem Autozusammenhang?

#00:21:49-5# Interviewee 14:

Also die Emotionalität oder die psychische Verfassung der Bevölkerung hat eine große Auswirkung auf unser Geschäft gehabt. Oder hat sie weiterhin. Das vielleicht mehr, als wenn man schon denken würde. So ein Auto kauft, hört sich erst mal sehr rational an, ist aber unglaublich emotional, obwohl es die zweitgrößte Anschaffung der meisten Menschen in ihrem Leben ist neben Wohnung und Haus. Es ist dann tatsächlich das Auto damit die größte Anschaffungen. Aber trotzdem ist es unglaublich emotional. Und wenn man sich die Fieberkurve anschaut, wie die Pandemie-Zahlen sich entwickelt hatten - also ich sag mal jetzt als eine Messgröße die 7-Tage-Inzidenz. Da können Sie fast ablesen an dieser Kurve, wie sich dann auch mit gewissen Zeitverzug unsere Kaufvertragseingänge entwickelt haben. Es ist schon wirklich verrückt, in Zeiten, wo die Leute ängstlich von „Oh die Pandemie-Zahlen gehen schon wieder hoch, die Inzidenz-Zahlen gehen schon wieder hoch“. Da ist tatsächlich das echte Kaufverhalten oder der Kaufeingang zurückgegangen. Das hat, glaube ich, nicht damit zu tun, dass dann Ausstellungsräume zu waren. Irgendwie finden die Kunden und die Verkäufer zueinander. Das funktioniert schon. Es ist

wirklich so diese emotionale Zurückhaltung - dann ist noch mehr Angst da draußen oder noch mehr Menschen, die auf einmal denken „Oh, wie wird mein Unternehmen das überstehen, werde ich noch einen Arbeitsplatz haben später oder nicht? Also das ist, das hat schon einen direkten Zusammenhang. Das ist schon korreliert, sehr stark. Haben wir mit diesen Ängsten gespielt? Nein, das haben wir bewusst eigentlich nicht gemacht, denn da musste man ein bisschen aufpassen. Und es ist natürlich auch so, dass so eine Kommunikationsbotschaft nicht – also normalerweise nicht innerhalb von kürzester Zeit auch zu verändern ist. Also da müssen Sie, da wollen sie eine gewisse Konsequenz und Stringenz haben und nicht ständig wechseln. Und es hat auch Vorlauf. Wenn ich also bei einem Bewegbild im TV, da habe ich natürlich allein die Produktionszeiten und da kann ich nicht mal eben eine Woche so und eine Woche so kommunizieren. Online kann ich das schon ein bisschen mehr oder auch bei klassischen Printmedien, aber trotzdem war mir sehr klar, dass man ein bisschen aufpassen muss, dass man nicht zu sehr hier Botschaften sendet, die zu sehr mit der Pandemie zu tun haben, weil man dadurch auch zu viel Opposition sich schaffen können. Das ist so ein bisschen - im Geschäftsleben hat mir mal irgendjemand gesagt: man muss immer aufpassen - über Politik und über Religion solltest du nicht sprechen, weil du kannst immer jemanden falsch erwischen. Du weißt nicht – da sitzt einer dir gegenüber der ist halt ein Querdenker und der findet das alles Mist, was da gerade passiert. Und wenn du dann deine Meinung dazu noch äußerst kann sein, dass du den Kunden für immer verloren hast. Jetzt können Sie sagen ich muss trotzdem eine Haltung haben, gewisse Dinge nach außen transportieren als Unternehmen. Ja. Aber auf der anderen Seite muss ich natürlich auch gucken, dass ich meine Kundenbasis, potenzielle Kundenbasis möglichst groß halte. Also deswegen, da ist man normalerweise eher zurückhaltend als vorsichtiges Unternehmen.

#00:24:58-8# DD:

Ein heutzutage oft verwendeter Begriff, ist Agilität. Forderte die Covid-19 Pandemie Ihr Unternehmen dazu, in ihrer Marketingorientierung auch besonders agil zu sein?

#00:25:12-4# Interviewee 14:

Ja, wie sie sagen also ähm, als Gesamtunternehmen - definitiv musste man sehr agil sein. Man musste sehr schnell schauen, wie man die Mitarbeiter im Homeoffice richtig mit den richtigen Tools versorgt. Man musste sehr schnell mit seinen Handelspartnern, mit seinen Geschäftspartnern Wege finden, wie man kommuniziert oder auch gewisse Dinge miteinander vereinbart, um sich gegenseitig zu schützen. In der Marketingkommunikation, Agilität, ja, äh, weil natürlich die Frage sich gestellt hat: „Wenn ich in einen Lockdown bin, macht es Sinn noch so zu kommunizieren wie vorher? Oder „Macht es Sinn, dann noch Budgets zu investieren? Oder sollte ich mir die besser aufheben?“. Das ist ganz interessant. Ich sagte gestern hatten wir so eine Meeting mit unserer Mediaagentur. Sowohl die, die die klassische Media Kreation macht, als auch die, die die tatsächliche Media Buchung machen. Und da haben wir letztes Jahr - ich kann mich noch gut erinnern, tatsächlich bewusst antizyklisch gehandelt. Wir haben in dem Lockdown März/April letztes Jahr - waren wir tatsächlich neben Mercedes die einzigen, die noch richtig Kommunikationsbudget rausgehauen haben, weil wir damals gesagt haben „Hey, die Leute haben jetzt Zeit, die konsumieren“. Und es ist sowieso in unserer nationalen Kommunikation nicht so, dass dann morgen ein Autokauf daraus entsteht, sondern ich tu Image-bildende Maßnahmen machen. Ich tu Produktkenntnisse und Produkt-Awareness in meiner nationalen Kommunikation nach vorne boosten, um danach dann in dem Sales Funnel tatsächlich irgendwann zum Verkaufsabschluss zu kommen, über die verschiedenen Kanäle. Und das hat super gut funktioniert aus zwei Gründen. Zum einen war es supereffizient, weil die Media Kanäle wurden günstiger in der Zeit, weil alle haben sich zurückgezogen tatsächlich. Die großen Player haben sich komplett zurückgezogen im Automobilbereich. Und dadurch wurde es günstiger, weil die Anbieter von TV, Zeitungen oder von Online und alle möglichen waren in der Not. Die mussten uns günstige Angebote machen. Und wir sind natürlich viel besser durchgedrungen, weil viel weniger kommuniziert haben in unserem Bereich, in unserem Feld. Das war super spannend. Das hat super funktioniert. Das ist jetzt in dem Lockdown seit Mitte Dezember – ist ja fast ein Dauerlockdown mit hoch und runter - und aber irgendwie schon ein bisschen abgeschwächt, aber schon noch ähnlich. Also wir haben uns die Zahlen von den ersten drei Monaten angeschaut jetzt Januar bis März. Und da war es tatsächlich so, dass unsere Wettbewerber erneut deutlich weniger Kommunikationsbudget ausgegeben haben als in den ersten drei Monaten des

letzten Jahres, wo ja schon auch ein Pandemie-Monat dabei war, aber noch zwei Monaten Volldampf war. Die haben deutlich weniger ausgegeben. Wir haben das nicht so gemacht. Wir haben bewusst wieder gesagt komm das hat letztes Jahr gut funktioniert. Wir machen es wieder antizyklisch. Wir gehen jetzt wieder stark in die Budgets rein, weil es effizienter ist und unsere sind so klein, dass man dann schon - mit so Effizienzen kann man seine Strecken gut verlängern.

#00:28:22-5# DD:

Wir sind nun schon beim Vorletzten Fragenbereich, damit Sie wissen. Gehen wir jetzt davon aus, dass die Pandemie bald überwunden sein wird. Wird sich in ihrer Marketingkommunikationspolitik erneut etwas ändern? Möglicherweise zurückändern?

#00:28:37-6# Interviewee 14:

Ja also gewisse Dinge, gewisse Kanäle werden wir schon wieder mehr bespielen. Also ich sage mal, der Budget-Mix, wird wieder etwas zurückgehen in Richtung Radio zum Beispiel. Radio ist ein spezielles taktisches Kommunikationsmittel, was in unserer Branche gut funktioniert und das hat die ganze Zeit überhaupt keinen Sinn gemacht, weil mit Radio sende ich vor allem die Botschaft „Geh zum Hyundai Händler und schau dir dort ein Auto an“. Das war jetzt einfach nicht sinnvoll das so zu tun. Ähm, ansonsten von den reinen Kanälen, das ist der Hauptunterschied - es wird dann auch wieder irgendwo vielleicht so etwas wie Messen geben. Die werden aber deutlich verändert sein und sich anders ausgestalten. Das ist ja übrigens auch mit der IRA so geschehen, die dieses Jahr in München stattfinden soll. Die hat einen deutlich anderen Schwerpunkt als in den letzten Jahren Jahrzehnten in Frankfurt. Die ist ja eh schon sehr viel digitaler angelegt und sehr viel weniger große Ausstellungsstände, sondern ganz andere Wege mit den Kunden oder den potenziellen Interessenten in den engen Kontakt zu kommen. Also dieses Gebiet der Kanäle und wo wir unser Geld ausgeben, wird sich wieder etwas verändern. Aber, ich habe es gesagt, es haben sich Dinge einfach beschleunigt, und die werden nicht wieder zurückgedreht werden. Also es wird nicht die Digitalisierung wieder zurückgedreht. Es wird nicht gewisse ... halten ... wird nicht wieder zurückgedreht. Das ist glaube ich ganz, ganz klar. Was die Inhalte angeht, ich hab's ja gesagt, da haben wir gar nicht so viel verändert aufgrund der Pandemie. Da wird sich jetzt auch nicht so viel zurück verändern. Als das ist, glaube ich nicht unbedingt was, was passieren wird.

#00:30:18-6# DD:

Zum Abschluss noch ein paar Fragen zum Unternehmen. Wie groß ist denn Ihr Unternehmen?

#00:30:25-0# Interviewee 14:

Naja, wie tun sie Größe definieren? Wir haben einen Umsatz von zweieinhalb Milliarden ungefähr im Jahr. Wir haben 250 direkte Mitarbeiter.

#00:30:37-8# DD:

In Deutschland?

#00:30:38-7# Interviewee 14:

In Deutschland, genau. Wir haben, äh, 500 Vertriebsstandorte. Das sieht aber ja eigenständige Unternehmer. Der Hyundai Händler ist ein eigenständiger Unternehmer, von daher nicht direkt mit uns verbunden. Hyundai als Konzern in Europa ist natürlich sehr viel größer. Nur von den Mitarbeitern allen in Deutschland haben wir 1800 Mitarbeiter von Hyundai. Davon 250 bei Hyundai Deutschland. Das ist nämlich mein Unternehmen, das ist der Vertriebsarm. Aber die anderen, das sind Leute, die in der Entwicklung sitzen, im Design. Die haben ein eigenes Zentrum in Rüsselsheim. Das sind Leute, die bei der Bank arbeiten. Das sind andere, äh, Sparten dieses riesigen Hyundai-Konzerns. Da gibt es welche, die Logistik machen. Da gibt es zum Beispiel eine Werbeagentur, die dem Hyundai-Konzern gehört, die wir natürlich auch nutzen dürfen oder müssen. Und andere Unternehmen dieser Art, die so angepflanzt sind. Das ist bei diesem weltweiten Hyundai-Konzern unglaublich beachtenswert. Der ist eben sehr viel mehr als nur Auto. Jetzt mal abgesehen davon, dass Lkw, Busse und alle möglichen

Transportmittel gibt, gibt es Schiffe, es gibt Stahlwerke, es gibt Unternehmensteile, die Straßen bauen. Es gibt Unternehmensteile, die Partner-Stores betreiben. Es gibt alles, was Sie sich nur vorstellen können. Wenn Sie in Seoul durch die Gegend laufen, sehen Sie überall Hyundai und sei es am Aufzug im Hotel, mit dem sie hochfahren, der ist dann auch von Hyundai. Die Zahlen, die ich Ihnen da mal genannt hab. Die sind dann auf das Deutschland-Geschäft bezogen, vielleicht deshalb am relevantesten oder als Beispiele ganz gut.

#00:32:32-5# DD:

Und bezogen auf das Marketingbudget in Deutschland ist das bei Ihnen im Jahr höher als 5 Millionen?

#00:32:38-9# Interviewee 14:

Ja.

#00:32:39-6# DD:

Auch höher als zehn?

#00:32:42-0# Interviewee 14:

Ja.

#00:32:42-2# DD:

Gut zu wissen. Schön! Damit sind wir nun am Ende des Interviews. Ich danke Ihnen sehr dafür, dass sie sich die Zeit genommen haben, mir meine Fragen zu beantworten.