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Discourses after Dieselgate
-Consumers' perspective on brand disasters

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Abstract

Brands are one of the most valuable assets to a company, which makes brand disasters a highly relevant topic to companies. In order to gain deeper understanding on the matter of brand disasters, this study is taking on a perspective that is new for the phenomenon: discourse analysis on the consumer perspective of a brand disaster. For this purpose, Volkswagen´s emission scandal Dieselgate has been chosen in order to explore and illustrate the discourses created after a brand scandal. Analysis on the interview material from nine Swedish VW consumers have resulted in seven discourses: Rebellizing, Moralization, Passivication, Normalization, Victimization, Scandalization and Politicization. The presence of the multitude of discourses suggests that the matter of brand disasters such as Dieselgate is a complex issue with many important aspects to regard when understanding the situation. The analysis has showed that important themes in the brand disaster from a consumer perspective are: responsibility, trust, harm and systemic critique. The study shows that there is a noticeable mistrust of environmental-friendly alternatives after a greenwashing scandal. The study has found that discourse analysis as a method is suitable for studying matters such as a brand disaster from a bottom-to-top perspective, in order to understand the situation from a new perspective.

Key words*: Discourse analysis, discourse, brand disaster, scandal, brand crisis, greenwashing, Dieselgate.

Introduction

Brands are one of the most valuable assets to a company, and they are highly affecting consumers buying decisions. This makes brand management one of the most important aspects for a firm (Kotler, 1999). One important part of brand management is to avoid scandals, which can have disastrous consequences for a brand. For example, can a crisis that makes the brand seem immoral seriously damage the consumers' confidence in the brand. (Yuan, Cui & Lai, 2016). The consumers increasing concerns of environmental aspects of products have led to that many companies are trying to become more environmental-friendly, since consumers are willing to act on concerns regarding sustainability (Martin & Schouten, 2012). This has also led to the birth of a new concept; *greenwashing*, which can be described as when firms intentionally are misleading or deceiving consumers with false claims about their environmental practices and impact (TerraChoice, 2007). Consumers who are striving to become greener in their consumption has a challenge in trying to differentiate between products and to validate the environmental information provided by the companies. When a company is caught with greenwashing the consequences on the brand reputation can be devastating. One such greenwashing scandal of huge proportions caught the attention of the world when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in September 2015 announced that investigations had been started against one of the world's leading car brands, Volkswagen, VW. The company had in some of their cars installed software that detected when the car was tested in a laboratory, thus lowering the levels of toxic nitrogen oxide emissions momentarily. The levels on the road however, were up to 40 times higher than the permitted level according

to law (Zachariadis, 2016). The reactions from the consumers were very negative and the scandal got the name Dieselgate. Some has called it one of the biggest brand disasters of the last decade (French, 2016). Understanding brand disasters is a pressing issue for firms, but according to researchers is it despite its importance to the companies, an area where companies seem to have learnt little from past mistakes (Richter Quinn, 2004). In order to see brand disasters from a new perspective, this study will take on a new approach; with a discourse analysis from a bottom-to-top perspective. Discourse analysis is used in order to understand social realities created with communication, and have mostly been done from a top-to-bottom perspective, including the one study that have been used discourse analysis on brand disaster (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). The purpose of this paper is accordingly to examine Dieselgate from a consumer perspective, in order to explore and illustrate discourses of brand disaster in a new way. Interviews with Swedish VW consumers have been conducted in order to answer the research question of this paper; *What consumer discourses have been created after Dieselgate?*

Theoretical background and prior literature

Discourse analysis is a method to understand social reality, as it describes and interprets communication as a conceptual generalization of conversation, which gives meaning to statements within a specific context (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discourse theory is one of the most widely used approaches within social constructionism and has its roots in French post-structuralist theory, which rejects totalizing and universalizing theories such as psychoanalysis and Marxism (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). It is anti-realist in that it rejects the notion that any research can arrive at a definite account (Bryman & Bell, 2003). The term first came into general use in 1952 in a series of publications by Harris (1952). The method developed over the next four decades into a science of sublanguage analysis (Kittredge & Lehrberger, 1982), and finally into a fully articulated theory of linguistic informational content (Harris, 1991). Foucault (1969), who is viewed as one of the key theorist within the field, transformed the term "discourse" from referring to formal linguistic aspects, to institutionalized patterns of knowledge, that are manifested in disciplinary structures and operate by the connection of power and knowledge. Instead of focusing on agents and structures as the primary categories, Foucault instead focuses on power and how it is spread across different social practices. Another important aspect of power in the theory of Foucault is that power is not seen as exclusively oppressive, but as well as productive, as it constitutes discourse, subjects, practices and knowledge (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Berger and Luckmann (1966) contributed to the field by focusing on the constitution and stabilization of knowledge on the level of interaction, something that Keller (2011) built on in his widely-known Sociology of Knowledge Approach to Discourse, SKAD, which is a framework for discourse research. It combines the theories of social construction of Berger and Luckmann (1966) with assumptions based in symbolic interactionism and the concepts of Foucault (1969). Keller argues that our sense of reality, which includes the meaning of everyday actions, events and objects, are produced by routinized and permanent interaction. Discourse analysis has been used in various fields such as medicine (Rayner, Pyett & Astbury, 2010),

education (Rex & Schiller, 2009), peace research (Gibson, 2012), feminism (Graineger, 2009), anthropology (Turner, 2013), and organizational analysis (Thomas & Hewitt, 2011). In the field of discourse theory there are many different methods. Critical discourse analysis, CDA, is one common used method which provides theories and methods for empirical studies of relations of power between different agents in society, and shows how it is exercised through language (Fairclough, 1992). A study by Dunn and Eble (2015) showed that CDA techniques can be used as a means to identify potentially silenced discourses in crisis communication. It added to knowledge by letting previously underrepresented stakeholders be heard. A discourse is a body of text composed of statements, meant to communicate specific information and knowledge. Statements are seen as abstract constructs that assign meaning to semiotic signs such as words, just as the discourse itself is an abstract construct that communicate meaning among subjects, objects and statements (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discourses does not exist by itself, but are always related to other discourses in what is called interdiscursivity (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). An important part of discourse theory is the discourses are constituting as well as constituted. This means that people are products of discourses as well as producers of discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discourse analysis does not assume that there is an objective truth to the understanding of construction of phenomena, but the analysis the texts or conversations are seen as manifestations of a world that the subjects create themselves. Language is not viewed as merely a channel through which information is communicated, but rather as a "machine" that generates and therefor constitutes, the social world, identities and social relations. This means that changes in discourse is a means by which changes in the social world is created, and that language is not a reflection of a pre-existing reality (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Discourse analysts state that language is structured in discourses, that could also be viewed as patterns or systems of meaning, where meaning differ from different discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). An important aspect of understanding discourse analysis is that the aim is not to categorize people as for example "green" consumers, nationalists or feminists, but to identify the existing discourses from which categories are constructed. Text and talk from one source as for example a person, is also not expected to be consistent, but rather to draw from different discourses depending on the context. This is explained in the branch of discourse psychology which rejects the modern idea that the individual self consists of a single, stable identity. The view of the self is instead that it is made up of multiple, discursively constituted identities (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The role of the researcher is to explore and identify the different existing discourses as a means to understand the driving forces that constructs the social world. Discursive psychologists share the view that identities are created through the ways in which people position themselves in talk and texts in their everyday life, but vary in their specific understanding of the discursive construction of identity (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The purpose of research in discourse analysis is not to get "behind" the discourse and find out what people *really* mean with their statements, or to discover the reality behind the discourse. The reason for this, according to discourse theory, is that reality cannot be reached outside of discourse, which makes the spoken or written language itself the object of analysis. The goal of the analysis is to explore patterns of and across statements and to identify the social consequences of different discursive representations of reality (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The first objective in the analysis is not to sort out which statements about the world are right

or which are wrong, but to find abstract constructs that explains reality in a certain way. In later stages of the analysis however, a critical evaluation of the constructs can be carried out (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Consumption is a practice that many consumers use to experience different realities, in what can be called identity play or living out fantasies (Holt & Thompson, 2004). Consumers use purchases in their identity seeking processes (Warde, 1994) which could be part of the explanation why many consumers have such strong negative reactions when they feel they are being cheated about qualities of a product or a brand; it is linked to their identity. A brand disaster or a brand crisis, can be described as adverse events that threaten brand reputation (Dutta & Pullig, 2011). Brand disasters such as a *moral crisis* are viewed as highly damaging to a brands reputation, as it makes consumers judge the company as more immoral, lose their confidence in the brand and spread negative WOM. But in spite of company efforts, we have in recent years seen scandals succeeding each other on different markets of the world (Yuan, Cui & Lai, 2016). The area seems to be a difficult one to manage. According to Larkin, author of Strategic Reputation Risk Management, is it extraordinary that the business has learned so little from its past mistakes (Richter Quinn, 2004). Previous studies of brand crisis involve mostly *product failures* and have not focused on the even more damaging *moral crisis* (Yuan, Cui, & Lai, 2016). Research has shown that media plays an important role in how consumers handle brand disasters. One explanation for this could according to Fritz and Altheide (1987) be that the discourses presented by news media plays a critical role in creating culturally legitimated frameworks for understanding events such as social problems. A macro level analysis by Humphreys and Thompson (2014) shows that media coverage of crisis events contains consumer anxieties that is sparked by initial media news. The creation of the *brand disaster myth*, that is propagated by the powerful cultural influence that is the news media, strongly forms consumers' beliefs and opinions through a discursive structure. It also helps frame public discourse in ways that reestablish consumers' trust in *expert systems*, which refers to a network of technical specialists, regulative processes, monitoring technologies, performance standards and analyses of trade-offs between expected benefits and calculable risks for the population. Disaster myths direct the attention of the consumer toward a brand that is designated by the media as a culprit brand, and provides a sense of dramatic closure to the crisis, which also enables systemic risks to be more easily forgotten or ignored (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). Another effect of the creation of disaster myths is according to Humphreys and Thompson (2014) that it helps contain the harming effects of the disaster event to one brand which reframes other corporations and governmental institutions from more systematic critiques. With oil spill disasters, research has shown that although they can function as rally point for environmental activists, they exert little enduring on consumers' everyday consumption practices (Pettit, 2012), a phenomenon that in this context is called *oil spill amnesia.* When disruptive events such as a brand disaster happen, various social actors act loosely coordinated to preserve status quo in order to protect sources of economic, social, or cultural capital from devaluation or to defend deeply held ideological beliefs (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). The phenomenon of creating a culprit brand is also called *brand scapegoating,* and can be described as a situation where the cultural blame for a product harm crisis is projected onto a vilified brand, no matter what other brands, organizations or other agents are involved in the situation (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). A *brand crisis* is

described by Dawar and Lei (2007) as instances of well-publicized claims that a brand proposition is unsubstantiated or false. This could for example happen if a brand of hair shampoo that is associated with "hair protection" gets reported of causing hair loss. The consumers' mental representation of a brand is made up by different brand associations, that are seen as unique to the brand, and that differentiate the particular brand from other brands in the category. Such a crisis can severely damage the brand, regardless of the veracity of these undermining claims. The damaging effect of the crisis however, is strongly connected with the brands' key benefit associations. If the claims are strongly connected to the key associations of the brand, the crisis will be perceived as more severe by the consumer and thereby is more damaging to the brand (ibid). This is why *greenwashing* have such severe negative consequences for firms who are claiming to be environmental-friendly. Greenwashing can be described as when firms intentionally are misleading or deceiving consumers with false claims about their environmental practices and impact (TerraChoice 2007). The phenomenon has shown an increasing prevalence over many years (Nyilasy, Gangadharbatla & Paladino, 2014) since it has shown that environmental performance does influence purchase intentions and brand attitudes among consumers (Montoro-Rios et al., 2008) and can be a competitive advantage for a company (Martin & Schouten, 2012). Another psychological mechanism that influences how consumers cope with marketplace threats is the *just world hypothesis* (Wilson & Darke 2012). According to this hypothesis are consumers' positive believes of the general benevolence of the world influencing their reactions to decision-generated threats. Consumers who uses this mechanism have a higher level of trust than those who does not, the latter group has a higher tendency to react with distrust when faced with decision-generated threats. Understanding the mechanisms of consumer trust is highly relevant for companies since it plays a key role in marketing outcomes, including effective brand (ibid). Opportunistic behavior, or perceived opportunistic behavior, is a factor that have been found to have a negative correlation with consumer commitment and trust (Morgan & Hunt, 1994). People also need their expectations to be congruent with reality, which creates a sense of equilibrium (West & Turner, 2013). A brand disaster contradicts consumer expectations and results in cognitive dissonance instead of a sense of equilibrium. According to Yuan, Cui and Lai (2016), when consumers face such cognitive dissonance, they either keep their original attitude, change their attitude or trivialize the issue. This is similar to how Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) describe the possible reactions of agents in a position of lesser power, in situations with agents over greater power; with resistance, compliance or acceptance. *Attribution theory* deals with how a social perceiver uses information to form explanations for events (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Internal attribution refers to that reasons for certain behaviors or outcomes are due to the people themselves, while external attribution suggests that the reasons for one's behavior are found in his/her environment. It has been found that people tend to attribute their success to internal factors and their failures to their external environment (Gioia & Sims, 1985). In response to a brand crisis, a company may attribute blame to internal causes and apologizes accordingly. Consumers view such internal attribution from the company as more positively and develop positive expectations on the company for the future, while external attributions from the company are perceived less positive and generate negative expectations (Yuan, Cui & Lai (2016). Previous research on brand familiarity has suggested that high perceived familiarity

may act as a buffer against negative impact of negative information on brands. This could be explained by the fact that familiar brands have shown to be better liked, easier recalled and being more noticeable in advertisements by consumers (Dawar & Lei, 2007). In a brand crisis, familiar brands are perceived by the consumers to carry less "responsibility" for the crisis which creates a lesser negative impact on their brand evaluations. Contradicting research however shows that the brand first implicated in the situation, the most well-known and the brand most relevant to the consumers, is more likely to be ascribed the blame by the consumers in cases of brand disasters, which is an explanation of the consumer tendency to be attracted to the brand scapegoating myth (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). Sundaram and Webster (1999) have shown that familiar brands are less harmed by negative word-of-mouth, WOM, as they are less susceptible to change and have more stable brand evaluations than unfamiliar brands. WOM has become a growing force in shaping consumer decisions (Kotler, 2011). Although WOM and brands are highly important in the marketing field, the relationship between them has received relatively little attention (Lovett, Pereres & Shachar, 2013). As mentioned before, is one of the qualities of discourses that they are constituted and as well as constituting (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). WOM is interesting in regard to discourse analysis, since WOM can be regarded as a process where discourses are sustained and created, constituting and constituted. This implies the relevance of discourse analysis as a way to understand complex situations in the market such as brand disasters. The most important driver for offline WOM have been found to be the emotional driver (Lovett, Pereres & Shachar, 2013). Brand reputation and reputation risk are becoming increasingly relevant for firms, due to the increasing prominence of social media and the internet where news, particularly bad news, spread faster. There are few empirical studies that deal with the effect that certain reputation damaging events such as downsizing, layoffs, corporate crime or other brand disasters have on corporate reputation and thus stakeholder perceptions. However, studies emphasize that different types of reputation damaging events can have a significant, negative impact on corporate reputation (Gatzert, 2015). Ill-prepared corporate responses a brand crisis can have profound negative effects on a brand. Consumer expectations of a firm has also shown to impact how consumers interpret the firms' response to a brand disaster (Dawar & Pillutla, 2000). Different strategies have been developed to help companies that have become a brand scapegoat, one example is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, SCCT, which has been developed from earlier theories such as Corporate Apologia, Impression Management, and Image Repair Theory (Çınarlı, 2016).

Methodology

In this explorative study, nine semi-structured interviews with Swedish VW consumers were conducted in order to answer the research question of what discourses are created after a brand disaster. So far, discourse analysis as a method have mostly been used to study top-to-bottom communication from organizations. This study takes on discourse analysis from a bottom-to-top /consumer perspective, in order to see brand disasters in a new light. The case of Dieselgate was chosen in order to examine consumer discourses, as it is considered as one of the biggest brand disasters in recent years. The whole thing started when the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency in September 2015 announced that it started investigations against one of the world's leading car brands, Volkswagen, VW. The company had in some of their cars installed software that detected when the car was being tested in a laboratory, thus lowering the levels of toxic nitrogen oxide emissions momentarily. The levels on the road however, were up to 40 times higher than the permitted level according to law (Zachariadis, 2016). The publics' immediate reactions were very negative, a survey by Autolist in February 2016 found that public willingness to buy a VW had fallen 28 percent, in the same time as public perception of the environmental consciousness of the brand fell almost 50 percent. A quarter of those surveyed thought that the scandal was as bad as or even worse than the BR Deepwater catastrophe (French, 2016). Some voices however claimed that it was previously known, at least to experts around the globe, that the vehicles were tested with outdated procedures that did not reflect the emission levels on the road (Zachariadis (2016). VW was prior to the scandal valued to US$31 billion, making it the world´s third most valuable auto brand, but was estimated to have lost US$10 billion in value as a consequence of the scandal (Brand Finance, 2015). Due to serious reputation damage VW's pretentious motto "Das Auto", eng. The Car, was dropped as a part of showing the humility in an image rebuilding effort (Çınarlı, 2016). The company is now paying the highest company fee in history for breaches under the Clean Air Act; US$14,7 billion, as well as US$10 billion to buy back or repair 11 million vehicles in the US which had the device installed (French 2016). The study has a qualitative approach in order to gain a deeper understanding of the subjective experience of the consumers (Bryman & Bell, 2011) and does not assume that there is only one truth (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011). This method is more suitable than a quantitative approach as it describes, explains and interprets. The exploratory design is suitable as the study strives to generate theory rather than testing theory (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The study´s analysis is combining elements from different discourse analytical perspectives, as well as non-discourse analytical perspectives and is therefore to be considered as *multiperspectival*, which is a form that is positively viewed in most forms of discourse analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Multiperspectivalism is based on a multitude of approaches that are weighted against each other according to their relevance and what kind of local knowledge they contribute with, but without serious assessment of their relations to each other (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Semi-structured interviews have an advantage in that the participants sometimes expresses thoughts, opinions or feelings that they would not have done in a closed interview, and allows for both a deeper and a wider understanding of the topic (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This allows to explore subjective matters as the participants' trust in different societal institutions. For this reason were interviews chosen over focus groups, where opinions and thoughts might be momentarily affected and/or not be as freely expressed as in personal interviews. The interviews were conducted over phone and took between 20 to 40 minutes. The participants were asked permission for the interview to be recorded and were informed that their participation would be anonymous. The semi-structured approach meant that a list of questions was loosely followed during the interview, the interview guide can be found in Appendix 1. All of the questions were not exactly the same in all interviews since follow-up questions were asked during the interview depending on the information given during the interview. Most of the questions were intentionally open, as not to lead the answer of the interviewee in any particular direction (Bryman & Bell, 2011), and to encourage more speech

(Kovalainen & Eriksson, 2008) in order to capture a multitude of perspectives. As an example, was one of the first questions in the interviews "What is Dieselgate?". This was to give the respondent a chance to give any kind of information about their thoughts and opinions about the circumstances or the events that by the media has been given the name Dieselgate. Some of the questions were more direct, such as "Have your trust in environmental-friendly options in general changed after Dieselgate?" in order to give information about specific topics. Some of the questions were repeated to give additional information on important topics, if the answer given on the first question was a bit short. The interviewees selected for the study were all Swedish and owned a VW that were either a gas or a diesel car. The interviewees in the study were found through an open question for participants on Facebook, and also by asking the interviewees in the end of the interview if they knew anyone else who owns a VW. The interviews were conducted until a level of saturation of the information was reached, in other words that a limit of the available discourses was reached. According to Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) is it often sufficient to use under 10 interviews in discourse analysis, as discursive patterns can be created and maintained by just a few people and the focus is on language use, rather than the individual. What is important is that the researcher clearly describes their chosen sample and justify their choice based on their research questions and their methodology (ibid). The interviews were all fully transcribed and included all words spoken, as is suggested by Kovalainen and Eriksson (2008) for business research. The transcriptions were printed and thereafter the data within each interview was screened for statements on different themes and narratives that were used to explain the situation of Dieselgate. The statements of importance were mostly descriptions of the different agents in the situation. When all of the relevant statements in the texts were found, they were categorized into different discourses, depending on the way they explained the roles of the different agents as protagonists and antagonists, as victims and villains. This was done by comparison of the different statements, where emphasis was on finding similarities and contrasts between them. The discourses were named with reflection to how they portray the agent or phenomenon they describe. Different and sometimes opposing narrative structures could exist within one interview, but the discourses were left standing for themselves as recommended by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002). Some of the statements were selected to illustrate the discourse in the Analysis and Findings chapter, as they were examples of common themes. Others were chosen as they expressed a certain aspect that was of interest within the discourse. In the study, most of the interviewees were found through FB and thus were acquaintances to the author. This does not have to mean that the result is biased, but that it is in fact less biased since the interviewees can be considered more comfortable to speak about the subject without holding back their opinions when talking to someone they know. As researchers before have remarked, is the "saving face" phenomenon a possible problem in discourse analysis (Cameron, 2001), which might be reduced if the respondent is acquainted and comfortable with the interviewer. In studies of a qualitative design however, there is always a risk of bias present, since the researcher is required to analyze qualitative data and draw results.

Findings and Analysis

Discourse	Description
Rebellizing	The discourse is describing the government as the responsible agent in the situation, since the laws are impossible for companies to live up to.
Moralization	The discourse is depicting the consumer as the responsible agent, since companies are fundamentally untrustworthy.
Passivecation	The discourse is describing companies as the responsible agent, and the consumer should be able to trust the companies.
Normalization	The discourse is supporting the actions of the company in crisis, and normalize the actions that created the scandal.
Victimization	The discourse is portraying the consumer and the environment as the victims in the situation.
Scandalization	The discourse is portraying the media as a prominent agent and as an important investigating institution. It can be seen as either as a catalyst for societal change or as a problem.
Politicization	The discourse is portraying green marketing as untrustworthy or even as a scam.

Table 1: Consumer discourses

Rebellizing

According to this discourse, is the explanation for Dieselgate to be found in causes outside of the automotive industry. The laws made by the government are creating unnecessary problems for the automotive industry:

> *I think the government is fooling the consumers by persisting on testing cars in the way it is done now (Interviewee 4).*

> *I think it´s a good thing that someone did something to show that the testing method doesn´t work. And it happened to be VW, because they went a little further than everybody else did (Interviewee 4).*

The testing method is described as a problem in relation to the laws, something that the government should do something about:

> *The car manufacturers could have gone together and told the government that another testing method is needed (Interviewee 4).*

Moralization

The Moralization Discourse addresses responsibilities linked to Dieselgate, specifically the responsibilities of the consumers. It describes how there is a need for customers to gather information about products before buying them, and thereby puts some or all of the responsibility for that they bought something else then they thought, onto the customers.

> *One should probably do some research. If you buy a product that you feel is important, then you should probably look it up more than what it just says on the product (Interviewee 2).*

This statement states that the subjective importance of the product to the consumer is a factor that determines the relative responsibility of the consumer, not the relative responsibility of the company. It takes focus from the company and describes responsibility as a factor derived from the consumer experience. Companies are portrayed as fundamentally untrustworthy, something that is described as an objective truth:

> *I think one should be able to trust companies 100%, but then of course it isn´t possible (Interviewee 1).*

These statements show that although one "should be able to trust the companies", the fact that it is not so is expressed with a lack of strong emotions or harsh judgements. This depicts a society where consumers should be aware of their role towards the companies. Marketing is portrayed as communication that, just as the companies, is untrustworthy:

> *Commercial is commercial, you should always take it lightly (Interviewee 2).*

> *Marketing is a legitimate way of fooling the customers (Interviewee 4).*

These statements express how the consumer have a responsibility to be aware of the agenda of marketing, which is mostly not depicted in a favorable way, but as something that tries to fool the consumers. The responsibility of the consumer can be described as even greater than just for the sake of the consumer, as it can be said to have consequences not just for the consumer himself /herself:

> *If the consumer had cared a little more and been more aware of how the technology works, it would have been easier to make better commodities (Interviewee 4).*

This statement takes even more responsibility away from the company and even makes VW more of a victim to society or to the costumers rather than the agents who has made something wrong.

Passivecation

The Passivecation discourse on the other hand depicts how the responsibility for the information about the product lies on the companies, and what is left for the consumer to do is to trust in what the companies tell them. This takes away the responsibility from the consumer and gives them an excuse to be more passive in their role as consumers:

> *I mean what can you do? You need a car to get to work, so there´s not much more than trusting in what they tell you (Interviewee 6).*

In this statement, "not much more to do" is describing trusting the companies as the only option for the consumer. The situation of constant choices that consumers are facing is described as a reason why consumers should be able to trust the companies:

> *Preferably should we be able to fully trust the companies, because all of the choices is on the consumer, so then one should be able to trust the companies without being a Janne Josefsson (Interviewee 2).*

The situation is described as very difficult for the consumer, and that everybody cannot be a "Janne Josefsson", an investigating journalist, to go on with their everyday life. Some statements show an even higher level of passivication that the consumer should be able to take:

> *I have no possibility to say if it is right or wrong if someone come up with a number of how much exhausts a car should release, that I just have to trust (Interviewee 3).*

This means that the consumer not only think that they have the right to accurate information, but that they think that they should not have to judge the information from a bigger perspective. This puts even more responsibility on the company to know what is best in a bigger societal or sustainable viewpoint, thus rendering the consumer to an even more passive agent. Some customers think that it depends on the complexity of the product what level of responsibility the customer can be expected to have. The technological complexity of a car can be seen as a factor that shifts more of the responsibility from the customer to VW:

> *There are products other than cars, that are easier to understand, where you could be more skeptical to what is said and marketed (Interviewee 3).*

"Could" is used about understanding of other products than cars, which implies that the average consumer *couldn´t* understand the technology of the car, thus putting the responsibility on the company, and leaving the consumers in a more passive role.

Normalization

One common discourse found with the respondents were the Normalization Discourse, which in different ways normalizes the actions that created the scandal and can be seen as an expression of support for the actions of VW.

> *They are not going to be the only ones (Interviewee 6).*

> *My first thought was that they are probably not the only ones (Interviewee 7).*

One way of normalizing the actions is by comparing VW with other brands, claiming that others do the same thing:

> *They are not the only car brand that is cheating, there are also others. I know of many Japanese car companies that are cheating (Interviewee 9).*

Statements of how other companies do the same thing offers support for the actions leading to the brand disaster. Even thou the consumer does not know any other specific companies, the opinion is grounded on this belief:

> *There is nothing that says that the others should be better just because they haven't found it yet* (Interviewee 8).

> *I am convinced that there are more people out there who did the same cheating, I just don't know where (Interviewee 6).*

Statements of how common the actions are, is also used in this discourse:

> *Somewhere you understand that this is more widespread than for just one brand, and that has also showed later, so one is not very surprised (Interviewee 2).*

Some even went further in their normalization of the actions of VW by not comparing them to other companies, but rather with the automotive business as a whole:

> *I would rather blame the whole industry, because everyone knows what's going on (Interviewee 6).*

> *I think they took a punch for something that is in the business (Interviewee 1).*

Statements of this level shows the strongest support for the actions of VW, in that they are not only seen as approvable actions, but even as necessary to survive in the business, as something that "everybody" in the business knows about. Some consumers even expand the responsibility to the whole of society, claiming that the reason why companies like VW is pushed into actions that result in brand disasters as Dieselgate, is the pushing forces of the collective for the new and improved:

> *Somewhere could it be that we as a society have a responsibility to understand that we are putting a lot of pressure on constant development, and that it could happen that they take the easy way out because they can´t see how they economically could push this in a good way (Interviewee 2).*

Victimization

Consumer Victimization

According to this discourse are consumers the ultimate victims of Dieselgate, as a result of how they feel fooled by VW:

> *It is really wrong, that they didn´t succeed with what they promised. They are cheating the consumer (Interviewee 9).*

> *Yes, it is bad, customers should get the right information, otherwise it is misguiding (Interviewee 3).*

The consumers are portrayed as cheated, and that they have the right to get accurate information from the company about the products. This so that they can make the right buying decision according to their values:

> *If someone is interested in environmental issues, then it is kind of that they are a bigger environmental criminal then they thought (Interviewee 5).*

The actions of VW is described in a negative way:

> *It was distasteful (Interviewee 3).*

> *So this is what you are claiming, but do I have to go somewhere and read tests and compare the cars, or does it mean that one of the cars is not for real, so to speak (Interviewee 2).*

This further depicts VW as the villain of the situation. The consumers have according to the discourse been put in a bad situation by VW, and have not received what they thought they paid for:

> *It is bad to fool your customers, as it ultimately comes down to. That they think that they have bought an environmental-friendly car, but then it actually isn't (Interviewee 8).*

Environmental Victimization

The Environmental Victimization discourse portrays the environment as the ultimate victim of Dieselgate. Resentment of how companies misuse the environmental concerns of the consumers was expressed in statements such as:

> *It is devaluating the value of environmental work. The biggest problem with this is ultimately that it damages the environment (Interviewee 2).*

The consumers express their concern for the environment and how it is affected by the actions of the companies:

> *In the long-term we are only fooling ourselves, if we don't become more environmental-friendly, then we won't be able to keep going. We only have one planet so to speak (Interviewee 2).*

The word "fool" is used to describe the actions of what "we", as in humanity, do, just as it is used to describe what VW is doing to the consumers.

> *Environmental values, in the eyes of VW, it becomes only a marketing word, instead of something you actually care about (Interviewee 2).*

The statement express the mistrust of VW as a result of Dieselgate, as the company is perceived as that their concern for the environment is not genuine. Although the Consumer Victimization discourse often is intertwined with the Environmental Victimization discourse, it can also be seen separately. This means that the consumer can be seen as the ultimate victim as well as the environment, since the consumer feels cheated.

Scandalization

The scandalization discourse portrays media as an important agent in the situation, with a role that is more prominent in the beginning of the scandal:

> *It was a big thing during a couple of days, but as with many of these scandals, there were rumors that VW would go bankrupt, but as with many of these things it is forgotten after some days or a week (Interviewee 3).*

The scandalization means that the event receives a lot of attention in the beginning, where as it with time receives less and less attention until it after some time feels overplayed:

> *It became a little media-spectacular in the beginning, at least in the first weeks, or months. After that it has been downplayed and you haven't heard anything about it lately (Interviewee 8).*

The media attention could also be seen as having positive consequences for VW:

> *It could also be a positive thing for VW that they received publicity (Interviewee 9).*

No matter what the assumed consequences are of the scandal, one thing that is clear however, the scandalization makes the media a highly relevant agent in the situation.

Scandalization as a catalyst

The discourse does in some cases portray the media as an important investigating institution that has the power to create positive change in society:

> *Apparently it is not possible to trust the companies, since even more has been discovered now after the VW-scandal (Interviewee 5).*

This statement shows that the consumer thinks that important and hidden information has been brought out by the media, thus rendering the media as a change agent of society. The change brought on by the media can have consequences for other organizations, as is shown by this statement of how other companies is affected by the crisis:

> *It isn´t just VW, it has spread to other brands since they now have begun to look into the whole automotive industry (Interviewee 5).*

Scandalization as a problem

The scandalization can also be seen as a problem. The media is portrayed as the antagonist that is causing problems for VW, which in this case would be portrayed as the protagonist:

> *It is actually media that has destroyed the whole thing, it could have been resolved better for both parties if the media hadn´t used it as they did (Interviewee 4).*

This portrays VW as a victim to the circumstances and the media as the villain, who preys on an innocent actor and creates something that wasn't a problem from the start. The reason for the actions of the media is explained by statements like:

> *The bigger scandal, the more money media makes (Interviewee 4).*

Profits is thereby stated as the driving factor of the events in the scandalization discourse. Another problem with the scandalization that is portrayed in how consumers talk about Dieselgate, is the fact that the scandal creates a time-limited attention period of the public:

> *It seems as the thing has passed pretty much. It is a shame in a way because we need to take care of the environment, so it should be a bit bigger in a way (Interviewee 5).*

This statement shows that scandalization also can be seen as a limiting factor of the consequences for the company, and as an issue in environmental work.

Politicization

This discourse depicts environmental-friendly alternatives and green marketing as containing different levels of greenwashing. The mildest level of expression in this discourse is a skepticism of green alternatives:

> *It is probably a lot of cheating with environmental-friendly and sustainable and green products and this and that (Interviewee 3).*

The fact that the statement includes the word "cheating" shows that green products is not seen as a scam, but as a legitimate alternative, although it sometimes can be expected to be cheated on. Some statements depict how consumers are aware of the agenda of green marketing and therefor have some responsibility to investigate what it actually means:

> *That something is environmental-friendly is a good sales argument today, and I think as a consumer one has to be pretty careful to read what it actually means (Interviewee 1).*

This statement as well depicts green alternatives as legitimate, but that there are nuances to the information that the consumers should be aware of. Statements of a higher level of skepticism show that environmental-friendly options can also be seen as something of a scam:

> *I think it mostly is just a marketing thing, to say that it is a green product just to sell it (Interviewee 3).*

The words "I think" and "mostly" in this statement show that green alternatives is not totally a scam, but still shows a very high level of skepticism of this type of marketing that is used "just to sell". Statements of the highest level of skepticism however, depicts green alternatives as a full-blown scam:

> *It is just for show, to say that you are environmental friendly, but it is only bullshit. It is political… It has to do with other things in the car industry also I think, but in reality, it is not as environmental friendly as it should sound (Interviewee 3).*

The statement shows that environmental-friendly aspects of products is just how "it should sound" in today's society, when in fact it is not true and just "bullshit".

Discussion

The findings of the discourse analysis are seven different discourses: Rebellizing, Moralization, Passivication, Normalization, Victimization, Scandalization and Politicization. The presence of the multitude of discourses suggests that the matter of brand disasters such as Dieselgate is a complex area with many important aspects to regard when understanding the situation. According to the discourses presented, the major actors involved according to the consumers are VW, the media, consumers, the government and the automotive industry. As described by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) is the motive of discourse analysis not to categorize people as for example "green consumers", and people cannot be expected to be consistent. This can be seen in the material where different and sometimes opposing discourses can be found in one individual interview.

   The discourses found suggest that *trust* and *responsibility* are important themes in brand disasters such as Dieselgate, and the discourses concerning responsibility are Moralization, Passivication and Rebellizing. Moralization and Passivication are the clearly most common discourses, with Moralization on one side placing the responsibility on the consumer, Passivication on the other hand placing the responsibility on VW. The presence of the opposing discourses creates a spectrum of views on responsibility, which suggests that consumers have a nuanced view on the matter. This view suggests that it might be easier to change, than if the discourses had shown only one side and with no nuances. The Rebellizing Discourse also shows that some consumers put some of the responsibility on the government, which together with the scandalization discourse implies that some consumers sees past the disaster myth and have a more systemic critical thinking that the myth is trying to refrain from. The presence of all of the discourses found, which lays responsibility on all of the agents in the situation, suggests that the situation is relatively stable, in spite of the crisis of Dieselgate. Had it been that the Moralization discourse, which places the responsibility on the consumer, would be missing, the situation would have been different for VW. If the

consumers had put all of the blame on VW the company would have found itself in a much worse situation. The fact that the consumers puts some of the responsibility on themselves could also be seen as a response of compliance and acceptance, as is described by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) of how agents of lesser power react in situations with agents of greater power. This can in fact be seen in both the Passivication discourse and the Moralization discourse. The Passivication discourse describes the companies as responsible for the situation, and the consumer is described as an agent that passively have to trust the companies. The Moralization discourse is describing companies as fundamentally untrustworthy, a fact that consumer just have to accept and adapt to. The reaction of trivializing the issue as is one of the reactions consumers can choose when facing cognitive dissonance brought on by a brand disaster (Yuan, Cui and Lai, 2016), can be seen in the Normalization discourse. It describes the actions of VW as normal, thus trivializing them.

Another theme that can be found in the existing discourses is *harm*, that can be done to consumers, the environment but also to VW. The presence of the Victimization discourse does not come as such a big surprise, since VW has been portrayed in the media as a lawbreaker and a villain, in a way that can be described as brand scapegoating (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). A not so common part of the Scandalization discourse however, can in some cases also portray VW as a victim, that is used by the media for profit. The more common Victimization discourse has to parts; Consumer victimization and Environmental victimization. The higher prevalence of the Consumer victimization discourse than the Environmental victimization discourse suggests that the consumers are more concerned with the harm done to consumers, than the harm done to the environment. The presence of the Politicization discourse further describes harm of the consumer, in this case when the environment is used as a mean by companies to fool the consumer. As shown in the Politicization discourse are there many different levels to how much consumers trust or mistrust green alternatives. It shows that the environmental trend and greenwashing has highly affected the way consumers perceive the market; the consumers are well aware of the misuse of green alternatives. The reason why consumers feel like they are the victim when they are fooled with greenwashing, could be explained by the fact that consumers use consumption as a means to experience different realities and in their identity seeking process (Holt & Thompson, 2004). When they are a victim of greenwashing, they therefore feel robbed of part of their identity, and hence experience themselves as a victim. As research has shown, is the most important factor for offline WOM the emotional driver (Lovett, Pereres & Shachar, 2013). So when consumers feel hurt personally by the greenwashing company, this is the most likely driver to give the company bad WOM. The fact that consumers are angry with the company when greenwashing is discovered, could also be explained by the fact that people tend to attribute their success to internal factors and their failures to their external environment (Gioia & Sims, 1985). They feel good about themselves when they buy an environmental-friendly alternative (success), and they get angry with the company when the greenwashing is discovered (failure).

Another important theme found in the analysis is *systemic critique*. The presence of the Scandalization discourse and the Rebellizing discourse shows that the consumers, although they also accuse VW for their actions, is not solely blaming VW but also blame the media and the government. The Normalization discourse include statements of how other brands have

done similar things as VW, sometimes in an unspecific way such as ""*I am convinced that there are more people out there who did the same cheating*" which suggests that not everybody is buying into the brand scapegoating, that the situation can be described as. The complexity of the Scandalization discourse shows that many consumers perceives the media as having a prominent role in the situation, although there are many different explanations on what the consequences are of the scandalization. The dramatic closure that is one of the goals of the disaster myth, seem to have affected the consumers (Humphreys & Thompson, 2014). Some are aware of how media is making a thing of the situation, while other explains how the disaster "has passed". Scandalization can either be seen as a catalyst, or as a problem, as explained above. There is however possible to see the Scandalization discourse from another angel, explained through two different factors; Weather the publicity has positive or negative consequences for VW, and weather the scandal has a limiting effect or a catalytic effect on development towards a more sustainable society. The limiting effect as a consequence of the Scandalization is what is explained in the literature as an effect of the disaster myth (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014). This creates an intense period of public attention towards the brand, which is thereafter followed by what is more or less a total absence of attention that makes the public think that the scandal has passed. The presence of this dimension in the Scandalization discourse implies that not all consumers buy into the disaster myth either. The presence of the Rebellizing myth is another sign that some consumers see past the disaster myth, and are aware of dimensions to the problem that might be more systemic in their nature than what first meets the eye.

Conclusion

The study has found seven consumer discourses after the VW Dieselgate scandal: Rebellizing, Moralization, Passivication, Normalization, Victimization, Scandalization and Politicization. The presence of the multitude of discourses suggests that the matter of brand disasters such as Dieselgate is a complex area with many important aspects to regard when understanding the situation. The analysis has showed that important themes in the brand disaster examined, from a consumer perspective are: responsibility, trust, harm and systemic critique. The study shows that there is a noticeable mistrust of environmental-friendly alternatives after a greenwashing scandal. The study has found that discourse analysis as a method is suitable for studying matters such as a brand disaster from a bottom-to-top perspective, in order to understand the situation from a new perspective.

Theoretical Implications

The study shows that discourse analysis can be used as a method to understand brand disasters as well as a method for understanding complex situations from a bottom-to-top perspective.

Managerial Implications

The findings of the study show how the different agents are depicted by consumers and thus suggests what the important issues are, that should be addressed by companies in case of a brand disaster. Suitable methods to handle brand disasters should be develop in regard to consumer opinions and awareness of the roles of different agents, and thus the results of the study can be used as a framework for developing methods to handle brand disasters.

Limitations and Future research

Discourse analysis is a method for generating concepts, and these concepts might have been constructed differently with the same value of explanation. There is always a risk that aspects have been missed out, and a study with more participants could possible generate discourses that explain the issue further. The participants in the study are all Swedish consumers, future research on discourses after brand disasters could also be done with participants of other nationalities. The case chosen for this study came out in media one and a half years prior to the study, a possible research object of the same method could be on a brand disaster when it is in its more acute phase. Another possible area of research is how different actions from the company affect different consumer discourses.

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Appendix 1

Do you have or have had a Volkswagen?

For how long have you had a VW?

Why did you choose this car?

What is Dieselgate?

How does it affect consumers?

Who´s fault was it?

Did anyone do anything wrong?

Should VW have done something differently?

What should they have done?

Where you affected by Dieselgate?

When did you first hear about Dieselgate?

What was your reaction when you heard it?

What was your emotions when you learnt of Dieselgate?

What do you think of VW?

Has it changed since Dieselgate?

Have you considered getting rid of your VW?

Has your trust in VW changed after you learnt of Dieselgate?

Have your thoughts about environmental-friendly options in general changed?

Have you heard of any other scandals?

Has your trust in environmental-friendly options in general changed?

Have your thoughts about the car industry changed?

Have your thoughts about Germany changed?

Have your thoughts about the marketing of companies changed?

Have your consumption patterns changed after Dieselgate?

Would you recommend VW for someone who will buy a car?

What does trust mean to you?

Do you think Dieselgate is a scandal?

Do you think something like this can happen again?

How much do you care about environmental questions?

How do you think this has affected VW?

Do you know anyone else who owns a VW?

Is it possible to trust the companies? Why / why not?