Apology Marketing: A consumer perspective in Finland on a successful apology campaign involving the fast-food industry

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Abstract:

With such huge popularity worldwide, there is a big need for businesses in the fast-food industry to care more about their services. Fast-food chains should not only aim to meet the needs and satisfaction of customers but should also know how to handle unexpected errors. This thesis aims to explore the core factors leading to a successful apology campaign implemented by the fast-food companies according to the customers' opinions. The research question is: What are the most important elements needed in an apology campaign for fast-food chains in Finland. The qualitative method was chosen to collect rich data for this study. To be more specific, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight participants living in Finland. The interview data were analyzed following the thematic analysis. It means that the interview transcriptions were transferred into codes then organized into themes and sub-themes. The results show that when assessing the content of the organization's apology, there are no differences between the fast-food industry and other fields. However, regarding the apology campaign implementation, there are some specific factors that customers expect to see and experience in the fast-food apology campaign, such as the food and color-related elements. The author also considers the study limitations, which are the lack of academic literature about the topic "Apology Marketing" and the small sample size.

Keywords:	Apology, Organizational apology, Apology marketing, Apology campaign, Fast-food industry.
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1 INTRODUCTION

In this hectic society, the fast-food industry is becoming more and more popular than ever. According to Zion Market Research (2017), the global fast-food market is estimated to be worth USD 900 billion by 2026. With such huge popularity worldwide, there is a big need for businesses in this industry to care more about their services. Fast-food chains should not only aim to meet the needs and satisfaction of customers but should also know how to handle unexpected errors. When companies make a mistake, the first basic thing to be done is an apology (Fisk et al. 2013 p.169). Nevertheless, Fisk et al. also maintain that an apology – a sign showing that they have failed - is considered unusual and foreign to some firms.

Even though public apologetic messages have not become the norm yet for all businesses, there have been some successful cases in the fast-food industry of how companies handled the crisis and turned it into amazing marketing opportunities. For instance, the chicken shortage crisis of KFC in England happened when 600 restaurants from this fast-food chain were forced to close their doors. KFC acknowledged the error and quickly issued an apology campaign that succeeded to flip the situation. It was a creative yet sincere apology that KFC sent to whoever suffers from this. (Appendix 1)

In addition, Shevlin (2008 p.145) has described the new way of marketing – not trying to brag to be more superior. Instead, consumers nowadays prefer the attitude of modesty. They appreciate brands that can admit their mistakes and make an effort to recover the issue as fast as possible (Scott 2010 p. 56). Regarding this tendency, it is wise for companies to study and know their consumers' expectations of business apologies beforehand.

1.1 Problem statement

In fact, customers place more importance on negative word-of-mouth (WOM) than positive comments (Solomon et al. 2019). Solomon et al. also argue that it is even easier and faster to spread the negative WOM online. In addition, some furious consumers and former employees even create websites to share their disappointments on the internet (Solomon et al. 2019). This raises the necessity for companies to act promptly and reasonably to calm down their clients as fast as possible in case any scandals happen unexpectedly. However, this issue has not been discussed and researched in dimensional views. To be exact, there have been some studies on how apologies help the firms manage crises (Kesetovic et al. 2014, Coombs and Holladay 2008, Lukaszewski 2013), or recover services (Wirtz and Mattila 2004, Sengupta et al. 2018, Raymond et al. 2013, Fisk et al. 2013), but none of them have mentioned how apologetic messages can become a marketing strategy, i.e., creating a campaign that makes businesses look cooler, but at the same time, persuades consumers to forgive them. In this regard, the research contributes to the fast-food industry by exploring how the firms should act based on customers' expectations and how they can turn it into a marketing opportunity.

1.2 Aim of the study

Scott (2010) also maintains that in this real-time operating world, businesses need to be fast to catch up with the media, i.e., reacting to any incident within one hour. A late response will make customers think that companies are careless and indifferent about the issue. Meaning that a timely apology campaign with appropriate manners is vital for any firm to restore its service. Thus, this thesis aims to explore the main factors that lead to a successful apology campaign from the perspective of customers in Finland, especially regarding the fast-food industry.

1.3 Research questions

To support the study aim which is to investigate clients' perspectives, there is one main research question: **What are the most essential elements needed in an apology campaign for fast-food chains in Finland?** To answer this question, qualitative research has been conducted with the interview method. The results are discussed and analyzed later in this thesis.

1.4 Demarcation

As mentioned before, this paper is tailored for the Finnish fast-food industry regarding marketing apology campaigns. It comprises a full analysis of customer perspective with an intention of assisting Finnish fast-food businesses on how to handle negative incidents with apologies. However, there are some limitations while implementing such research. Firstly, since this research aims to understand the fast-food industry, it does not apply to other industries in Finland. In addition, it does not apply to any fast-food chain in any other country but Finland. Secondly, the customer side is the only focus of this research, which means there is no relation to any business point of view. Hence, factors such as financial budget are not included. And lastly, the author intends to analyze general key ideas of how to conduct an apology campaign. Therefore, there is no clear division between the online and offline channels.

1.5 Definitions

The focus of this study is apology marketing. However, apology marketing is a fairly new concept and there are few academic sources that mention this in particular. Hence, this subheading gives a brief definition of what apology marketing is before we approach the literature review.

1.5.1 Apology Marketing

Smith (n.d.) has pointed out that apology marketing has several alternative names, such as “apology advertising”, “mea culpa marketing”, or “new leaf signaling”. No matter what the official term is, the definition is still the same. Sherry (2018) maintains that apology marketing refers to “the ads used the brand’s reputation crises to promote rather than just defend”. Sherry also claims that with the presence of apology marketing, CEOs do not need to depend on an apologetic message, or they will not be forced to resign. On the other hand, businesses will pay a costly fee for the marketing media to fix the problem and they move on (Tellody n.d.). In short, this campaign is not simply an apology from the brand. Instead, it is the combination between the apology itself and the marketing campaign so that the brand can reveal its sincerity and responsibility to the media.

2 THEORY

Regarding the aim of this thesis, the theoretical framework should be divided into three major sections, which are apology, campaign, and consumer attributes. Therefore, in the first subheading, we will analyze corporate apologies: why they need to apologize and how they can do it effectively. Next, in the following subheadings, it is all about consumers where the theories focus on consumer attitude and consumer satisfaction. Last but not least, the final subheading will be about the marketing campaign and its desired components for a successful apology campaign.

2.1 Apologies in business

Apologies are omnipresent and they are seen as the norm in our daily life (Abeler et al. 2009). Fineman (2015) maintains that what each apology means is determined by its context and how it is conveyed. It can be an act of sympathy for somebody else's losses, a regret of the wrongdoings, or a "verbal reflex" when one violates any social etiquette (Fineman 2015).

Apologetic messages are also regularly used in business contexts when firms have made mistakes and disappointed their customers. Battistella (2014) defines apology as "a splitting of the self into a blameworthy part and a part that stands back and sympathizes with the blame giving, and, by implication, is worthy of being brought back into the fold". In addition, Kador (2009) argues that apology in this modern time means "to acknowledge and express regret for a hurtful action", while Lazare (2005) explains in more detail that apology "refers to an encounter between two parties in which one party, the offender, acknowledges responsibility for an offense or grievance and expresses regret or remorse to a second party, the aggrieved".

This theoretical framework focuses on the apology campaign from the company to its consumers. In other words, the focal point of this subheading is to deeply comprehend apologies in business situations, and they will be analyzed as public apologies (since a marketing campaign is seen to be public and widespread).

2.1.1 Business-related reasons to apologize

There are many reasons why companies need to say sorry, but we have to bear in mind that "failure alone is not enough to trigger an apology". Moreover, what differs organizational apology from human-to-human apology is that organizations' intentions do not come from pure empathy, and they only say sorry if their failures are noticeable. To be more specific, when brands decide to apologize, they must benefit more from that than to keep silent, such as rebuilding their reputation and fading social media harsh criticism. (O'Meara & Cooper 2020)

Kapor (2009) maintains that the offenders say sorry when they take responsibility for their mistakes and express their regret directly and clearly. Then they offer compensation and promise the offended party that the unwanted incidents will not happen again (Kapor 2009). In addition, O'Meara et al. divided professional apologies into different categories and listed six reasons why organizations should say sorry:

- **Customer satisfaction**: In order to remain customer satisfaction levels, businesses need to apologize along with compensation, refund, or replacement (O'Meara & Cooper 2020). In this case, the compensation element is more powerful than the apology itself, and O'Meara et al. believe that with minor business-related mistakes, saying sorry simply means "we have noticed your concern". However, Wirtz and Mattila (2004) argue that "compensation might not add value (i.e. not increase satisfaction) in situations where the recovery process is well-implemented" and "offering compensation did not make up for a poor recovery effort". Therefore, brands need to consider the situation carefully before giving any compensation to avoid counterproductivity or unnecessary.
- **Problem-solving and service recovery**: O'Meara & Cooper (2020) maintain when customers deal with inconvenient circumstances like lost belongings, they do not appreciate the "displays of empathy" through apologies. Instead, they need more practical actions from the company to fix the mistakes (O'Meara & Cooper 2020). Nevertheless, brands are still required to say sorry to customers, but in this situation, they try to keep it short and concrete, then focus on solving the problems.

- **Customer retention**: Some companies apologize because otherwise, they may lose their customers. Customer retention apologies usually result from operational failures which means the organization is not taking action together. Unlike service recovery apologies, customer retention apologies can occur at any stage during the consumer life cycle, and timing is an extremely important factor. (O'Meara & Cooper 2020)
- **Organizational fright, stress, and exhaustion**: In the early days when the Internet was not invented, it is challenging for businesses to precisely understand their customers' feelings and opinions about them, especially in a short time. Everything is different now with the use of the Internet – firms can easily find out how their clients are talking about them through online platforms (such as social media and blogs). However, the online world is complicated, and it is not always delightful to get updated on the Internet. Criticism may happen at any time, so the organization needs to be prepared to handle that. Otherwise, the team may end up panicking and as a consequence, they come up with a rash decision. In this case, saying sorry is seen as the only way to get out of the criticism wave, so firms apologize because they have to. (O'Meara & Cooper 2020)
- **Comply with regulations and laws:** Trade regulations all over the world are able to oblige firms to rectify their prior moves if they have violated any of the rules. Apologies, in this case, are not for clients, but the firm's regulator. (O'Meara & Cooper 2020)
- **Because they are sorry:** In organizational contexts, purely sincere apologies are fairly rare. As the author has mentioned earlier, most of the time brands say sorry when the apology helps them gain a positive impact. Business-related apologies are considered rational, even though the organization includes a bunch of people with a variety of emotions. However, every once in a while, "organizations take us by surprise and say sorry because they are sorry and because saying sorry is the right thing to do". (O'Meara & Cooper 2020)

2.1.2 Four types of corporate apology

According to Chung (2011), sympathy and responsibility are considered the two main elements for an effective business apology. Figure 1 below shows four types of corporate apology based on the sympathy and responsibility scale.

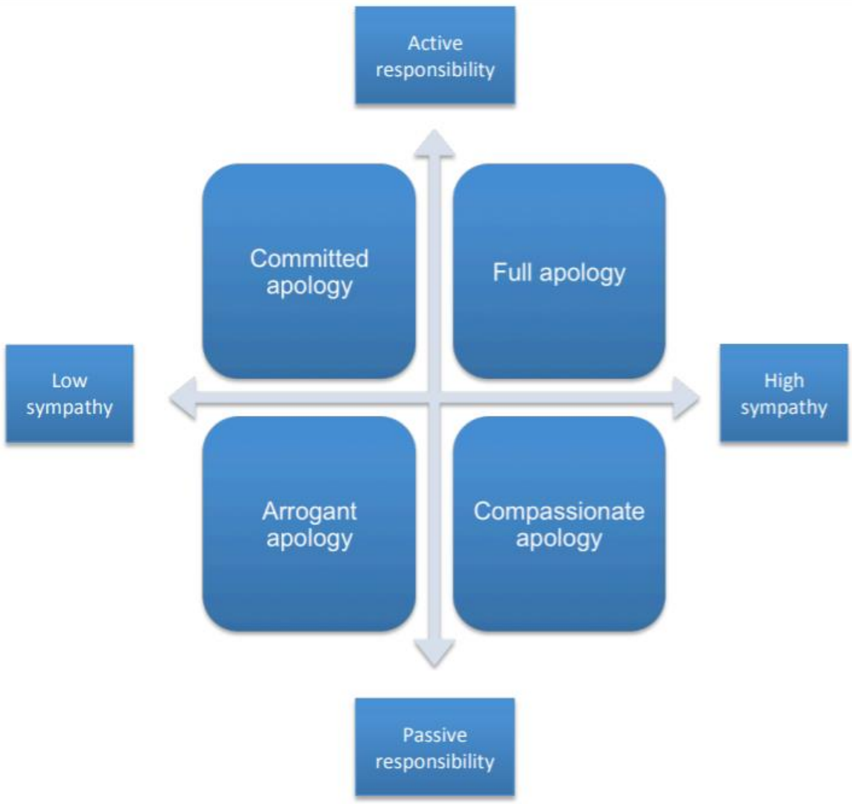

Figure 1 Four types of corporate apology (Chung 2011)

A full apology is defined as having active responsibility and high sympathy. Chung states that a full apology is considered to be the most sincere and effective crisis response from organizations. Although this type of apology is appreciated when handling any crisis, brands cannot always use it because of the legal liability. (Chung 2011)

An apology statement that involves active responsibility, but low sympathy is called the *committed apology*. In other words, firms take actions quickly and responsibly to control the crisis, but they do not mind whoever has suffered from this incident when it comes to emotions and empathetic feelings. Instead, they are more rational while handling the crisis. As a result, companies may succeed in reducing public anger, but for some individuals, this apology statement is seen as “a weak gesture” due to a lack of sympathy. (Chung 2011)

With passive responsibility and a high level of sympathy, *a compassionate apology* means that firms show a great extent of sympathy towards customers, but they avoid taking any responsibility for the mistakes. (Chung 2011)

And the last type of corporate apology is the *arrogant apology* – an apology statement with low sympathy and passive responsibility. It is considered to be the least effective apology among all four types since it has neither sincere behaviors nor attitudes. (Chung 2011)

2.1.3 Elements of an effective apology

Kador (2019) maintains that lots of individuals find it not comfortable to apologize so they either avoid doing it or do it terribly. It happens in organizational contexts as well. In other words, it is not unusual to hear that lots of organizations are incapable of giving decent apologies after having done something badly (O’Meara & Cooper 2020). They also argue that this matter is becoming “bigger and more visible” (O’Meara & Cooper 2020). Therefore, it is vital for businesses to acknowledge the importance of corporate apology and how they can conduct an effective apology accordingly.

Chan (2017) has developed the *seven Rs of a repairing apology* which defines the components of sincere and effective apologies.

- *Recognize*: Recognize the mistakes and damages and never overlook any wrongdoing.
- *Reflect*: Take dimensional perspectives to assess the problem and empathize with people who suffer from the problem.
- *Regret*: Show the upset side that we repent and regret.
- *Responsibility*: Explain to the upset side what happened and confirm the mistakes, and no excuses (it makes the apology get worse).
- *Request*: Ask the offended party for understanding and forgiveness.
- *Redeem*: Take actions to lessen the damage and recover the relationship.

- *Resolve*: Let the offended know that the incident will not repeat.

Similarly, Kador (2009) also develops dimensions of effective apology within the Rs. He even emphasizes that all components are equally essential. However, this time there are only five Rs:

- *Recognition*: The first element is to be aware of the offense. Offenders usually skip this step since they think it is obvious. Nevertheless, omitting the recognition step can make the offended party wonder whether their upsetting reasons are being heard correctly. In this step, we have to remember that saying sorry always comes along the causes – why we need to apologize and how wrong we are. Kador (2009) also emphasizes that all excuses from the offender should be set aside.
- *Responsibility*: It means that the apologizers should be responsible for their violating actions, and again without any kind of "defensiveness, evasion, or blame". Additionally, the responsibility step focuses on the needs of the offended party and makes sure that the offenders take responsibility fairly. (Kador 2009)
- *Remorse*: It is the feeling when offenders acknowledge their wrongdoings, and they wish they had not done it. This step is for the penitence of apologizers. The offended party can assess the remorse of offenders by their verbal and nonverbal language (Kador 2009). However, in the corporate context with the apology campaign, it is challenging to assess since the campaign is just a combination of visual design and texts. The public cannot see nor hear the firms in person to conclude whether they regret their mistakes or not.
- *Restitution*: This dimension is all about relationship restoration. In this step, firms try their best to mend the connection with customers to what it was before the crisis. Kador (2009) maintains that effective apology is the combination of words and actions, and "restitution should be a critical part of every apology". There are three requirements that the offended party expects from this dimension: reparation for the mistake, a sense of sacrifice from the apologizers, and lastly the relationship commitment from apologizers (Kador 2009).
- *Repetition*: The fifth component is repetition, which means the offender will not repeat the same mistake. Moreover, it also stands for the repetition of apologies. Kador states that making an apology twice is acceptable, but more than three will not benefit the apologizers. He also suggests trying different methods to maximize

effectiveness. However, in reality, it is unavoidable to meet someone who will not accept the apology even though how sincere it is. (Kador 2009)

To sum up, the author decides to combine these two theories to create a new theoretical framework with updated definitions to fit the business context (figure 2).

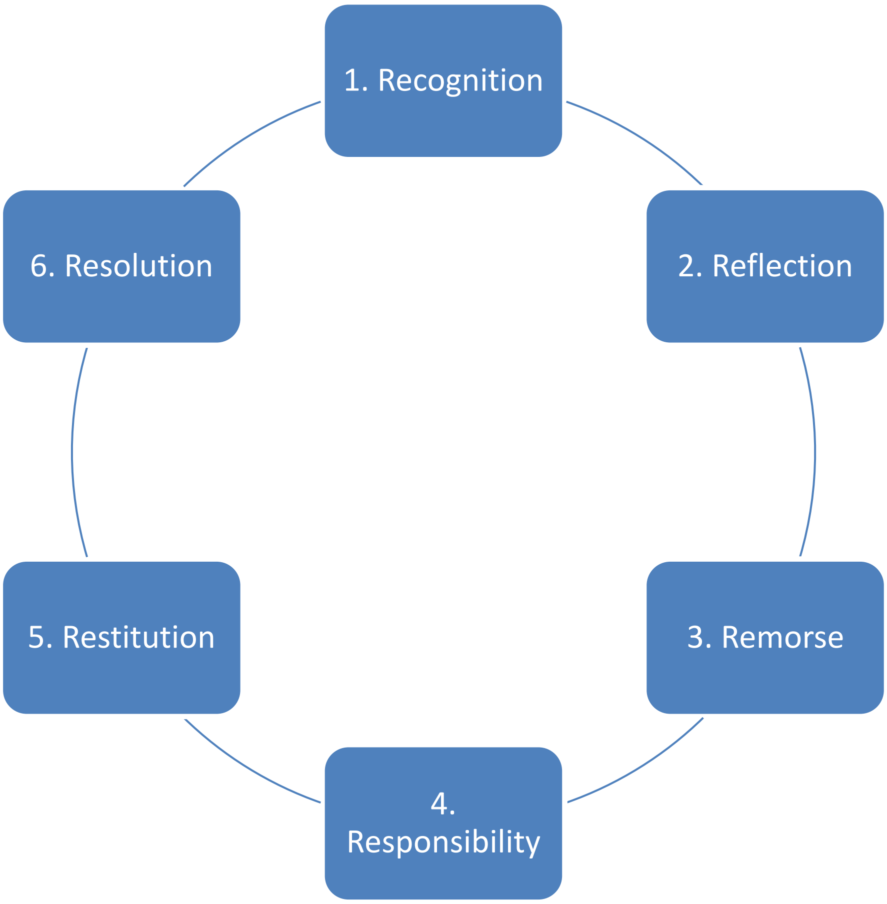

Figure 2 The 6Rs of corporate apology

1. Recognition: The organization recognizes the mistakes and damages that it has done.
2. Reflection: The organization evaluates the wrongdoings through a multidimensional view and empathizes with customers who are affected by the damages.
3. Remorse: The organization acknowledges the mistakes and shows its regret.
4. Responsibility: The organization confirms the mistakes to customers and takes responsibility accordingly.

5. Restitution: The organization takes actions to lessen damages and recover the relationship with affected customers.
6. Resolution: The organization promises the mistakes will not happen again.

2.1.4 Determinants of an effective apology

Apart from the well-structured elements in the previous subheading, both Kador (2009) and Battistella (2014) also agree that recipients (in this case, consumers) are the determinant of the successful apology. Different customers have different preferences when it comes to the company's apologetic actions. However, most of them will appreciate proof that the company has done its best to fix the mistakes (Kador 2009, O'Meara and Cooper 2020)

Additionally, since the focus of this thesis is about public apologies, which represent apology campaigns, other factors should be considered as well. Public apologies are different from person-to-person ones since they are not representative of any individual. Hence, to assess the effectiveness of a public apology, we need to analyze the language and the context around the apology (Battistella 2014). About the language, if the organizations meet all the required content shown in the subheading 2.1.3, they are qualified. About the context, consumers will evaluate them based on their time of response (are they fast enough?), their recovering actions (are these enough to cover the mistakes?), etc.

2.2 Customer attitude

When the brand is facing a crisis, consumer attitudes will be more or less affected in a negative way. In other words, the brand needs to change their clients' negative attitude towards the mistake and move on, which is done by an apology campaign in this case. However, before conducting any campaign, we need to know thoroughly about customer attitude. What is that and how can companies change their clients' attitudes based on different mindsets?

According to Solomon et al. (2019), "an attitude is a lasting, general evaluation of people (including oneself), objects, advertisements or issues". Another definition from Xue et al. (2021) is "attitude is a combination of somebody's philosophies, feelings, and theories".

In this theory, there is a term called *attitude object*, which is “anything towards which one has an attitude” (Solomon et al. 2019). When it comes to attitude, Solomon et al. also state that two individuals may have the same attitude about something in spite of different forces. Therefore, being aware of how consumers’ attitude is formed is useful for marketers before they try to change them.

2.2.1 ABC model of attitudes

Solomon et al. also developed a model called the ABC model of attitudes, which ABC stands for affect, behavior, and cognition. This trilogy of attitudes has been brought up before by Howard and Sheth (1969), but those elements were not connected as different sequences at that time. Hence, we will follow the ABC model of Solomon et al. (2019) to comprehend consumer attitudes better. According to Solomon et al., the ABC model of attitude is “a multidimensional perspective, stating that attitudes are jointly defined by affect, behaviour and cognition”.

- *Affect* in this model reflects consumer’s feelings and emotions about an attitude object (this sequence is alternatively called “feeling”) (Solomon et al. 2019, Asiegbu et al. 2012).
- *Behavior* refers to the individual’s attempt to do something regarding an attitude object (as known as the “doing” phase) (Solomon et al. 2019, Asiegbu et al. 2012).
- And the last component is *cognition* – the beliefs, knowledge, or information that a consumer has about the attitude object (which is also known as the knowing or thinking process) (Solomon et al. 2019, Asiegbu et al. 2012).

All of those elements are vital when we assess customers’ attitudes, but we need to combine them to see their relative impact, which is called a *hierarchy of effects* (Solomon et al. 2019). There are three hierarchies analyzed in the book, which are condensed in figure 3.

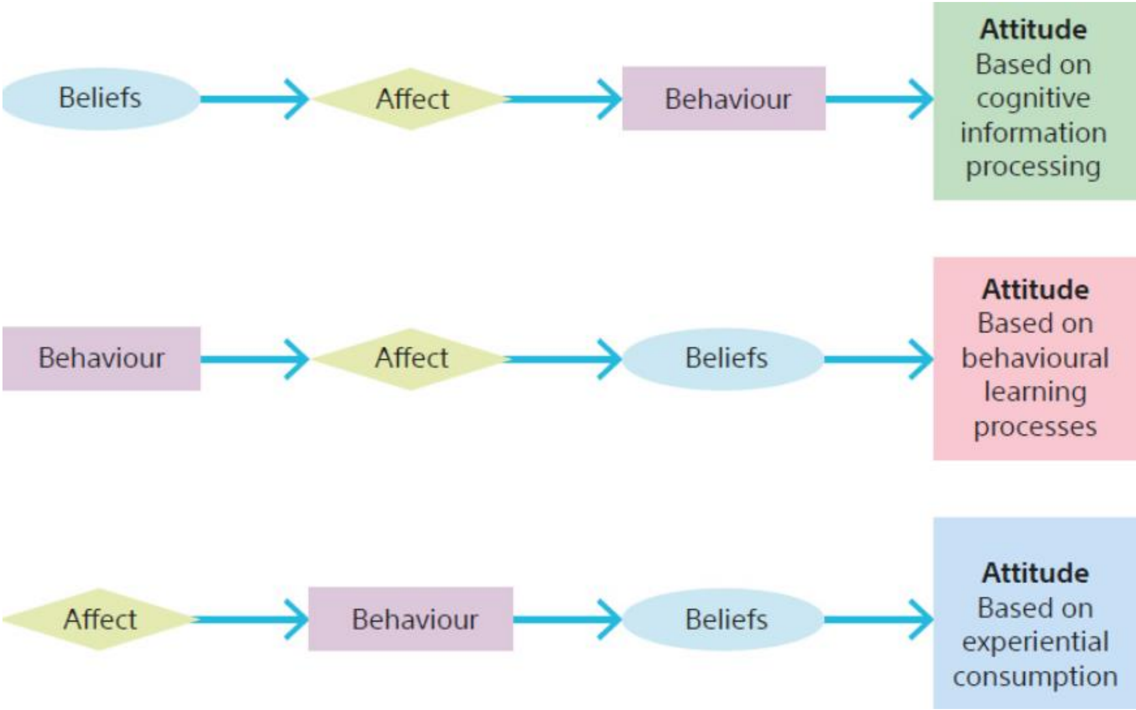

Figure 3 Three hierarchies of effects (Solomon et al. 2019)

- **The standard learning hierarchy**: It starts with customers' beliefs, then affect and in the end their actual behavior. To be more specific, consumers with this type of attitude hierarchy often approach "a product decision as a problem-solving process". They will firstly research and gain lots of information (*beliefs*) about relevant matters. Next, they form a feeling (*affect*) about a product that stands out the most after their assessment of all previous beliefs. Eventually, after those pieces of information and feelings about the product, they decide to take action, e.g purchase the product or subscribe to the service. This attitude is based on cognitive information processing, which means consumers tend to find sufficient information and compare all alternatives first before coming to the decision to any behavior. With this type of attitude, we can see the bonding and loyalty of consumers at a high level because they are "not easily persuaded to experiment with other brands". In addition, when it comes to brands' performance, their satisfaction is "more directly related to brand loyalty than corporate image". (Solomon et al. 2019, Niosi 2021)

Related to the fast-food industry, one example from this attitude hierarchy is that customers have done found a lot of information on the internet about "Where is the best burgers in town?". Then, they start to form a feeling about one restaurant that stands out and meets most (or all) of their requests. And lastly, they will go eat out at that fast-food restaurant, and it is likely that they will keep eating there for a while (as a loyal customer).

- **The low-involvement hierarchy**: This hierarchy begins with consumers' behavior, then their feeling (affect), and lastly their thinking (beliefs). Unlike the standard learning hierarchy, they do not want to be overloaded by complicated information about the brands. Instead, this sequence is based on the consumer's behavioral learning process, which means "the consumer's choice is reinforced by good or bad experiences with the product after purchase". In this hierarchy, customers do not have a biased fondness for any brand specifically. Instead, they only form the evaluation regarding their feelings and thoughts after purchasing the actual product. (Solomon et al. 2019, Niosi 2021)

  For instance, when some people go out and crave fast food, they may choose any fast-food restaurant that is nearby, buy a burger, and afterward create an evaluating process (feelings and thoughts about food quality, staff attitude, etc.).

- **The experiential hierarchy**: This sequence happens with "consumers act on the basis of their emotional reactions". To be more specific, customers form their feelings (affect) before their behaviors, and lastly, come up with the belief attribute. With this attitude hierarchy, customers are greatly influenced by intangible attributes (for example, store decoration) and other stimuli such as the brand name. (Solomon et al. 2019, Niosi 2021)

  For example, customers go to a random Chinese fast-food restaurant they found on the street. The reason is simply that they think the outdoor design of the restaurant looks very cozy and authentic (with red furniture and lanterns on the ceiling), so they think it may taste good as well. After that, they order the food (behaviors) and eventually evaluate the restaurant with their knowledge (beliefs).

2.2.2 How to shift consumer attitudes

After having a clear idea of attitude in general and the hierarchy of attitude in particular, now the focus is on how marketers can change their clients' attitudes. This aim is connected to something we called *persuasion*. This method is seen as "an active attempt to change attitudes" and "the central goal of many marketing communications". (Solomon et al. 2019)

Petty and Cacioppo (1986) have originally developed the theories of persuasion which involve central and peripheral routes to persuasion and the method is called Elaboration Likelihood Model (figure 3).

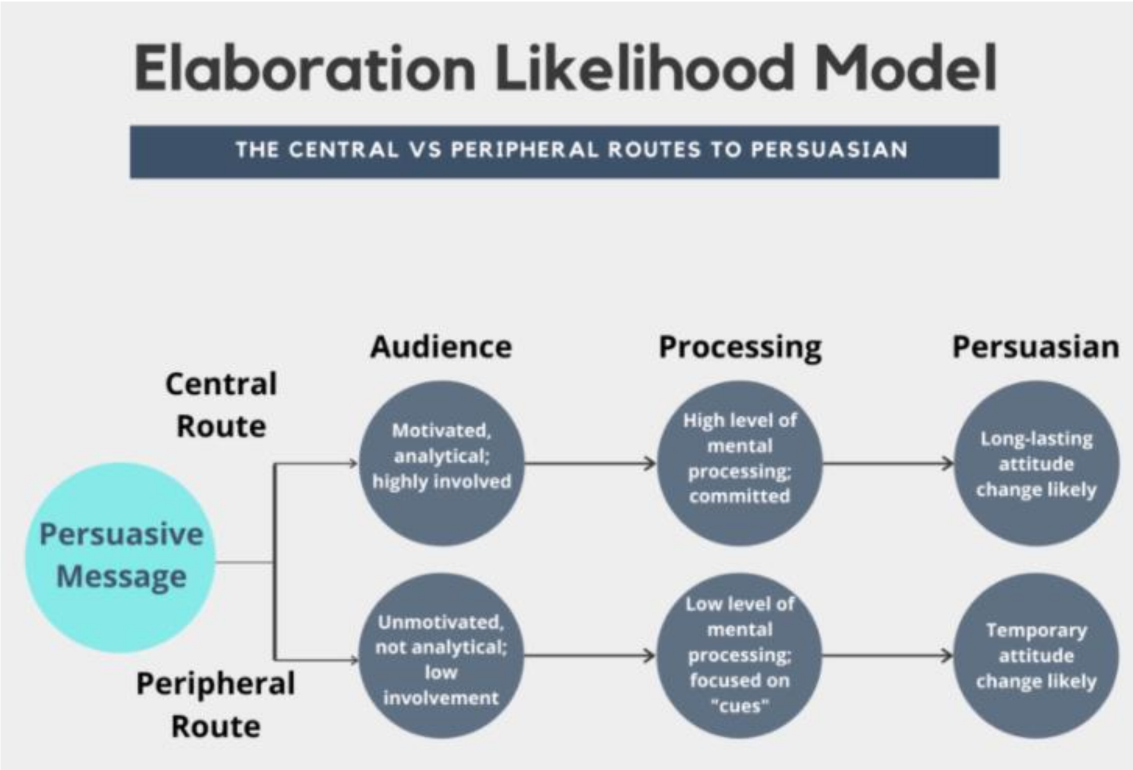

Figure 4 Elaboration Likelihood Model (Niosi 2021)

To change the attitude of those who follow the traditional hierarchy of attitude (beliefs – affect – behavior), it is crucial to take into consideration the message factors, for example, the argument quality (Solomon et al. 2019). This is when the *central route of persuasion* got involved. The central route is suitable for the highly involved audience who actively seeking knowledge and information. Niosi (2021) also states that "the argument must be strong and, if successful, will result in lasting attitude change".

Oppositely, for determining attitude change for low-involvement consumers (who follow the sequence of behavior – affect – beliefs), the peripheral route is used. In this case, customers prefer some cues such as "product's package, the attractiveness of the source or the context in which the message is presented" to make their decision on the message suitability (Solomon et al. 2019). As a result, this route only affects consumers' attitudes temporarily (Niosi 2021).

2.3 Consumer satisfaction

According to Hill et al. (2017), customer satisfaction is a measurement of the corporate's 'total product' performance concerning customer requirements. To be more specific, customer satisfaction is simply the fulfillment from the consumer perspective – if clients' requirements are fulfilled, they are satisfied (Oliver 2015). Nevertheless, Hill et al. (2017) also show that this is a relative concept rather than an absolute one, which means that customer satisfaction is relative to customer expectation initially. Therefore, when analyzing customer satisfaction, both expectation and satisfaction should be taken into account (Hill et al. 2017).

Taking apology campaigns into consideration, consumers expect to receive a sincere apology from the brands (discussed in subheading 2.1.3). Moreover, they also demand solutions for mistakes, and only apology is not enough (Harvard Business Review, 2018). To support that statement, Wirtz and Mattila (2004) also maintain that the combination of an apology and a timely recovery led to high effectiveness. Additionally, Fisk et al. (2013) call the solution phase "urgent reinstatement", in which the firms need to quickly omit the problems and make things right. Through this solution-seeking process, organizations imply that "customer satisfaction is important to the organization" (Fisk et al. 2013).

2.4 Apology Campaign

When the brand presents its corporate apology through an elaborate campaign, it is essential to bear in mind what are the factors leading to a successful marketing campaign in general. This subheading focuses on explaining the definition and clarifying all needed elements to conduct a successful marketing campaign. Since this study is based on the customer's point of view, all the elements mentioned below are related to the customers.

2.4.1 Marketing campaign

According to Cambridge Dictionary, a campaign is "a planned series of activities that are intended to achieve a particular aim". In other words, when implementing any type of campaign, the organizers must have a plan which includes a focal aim and a set of activities to support that.

In terms of a marketing campaign, the Corporate Finance Institute (CFI) (n.d) has defined it as a sequence of activities to either promote the brand's product/service or enhance the reputation of the brand. Moreover, the marketing campaign is implemented through different mediums such as social media, online advertisement, and newsprint (CFI n.d, Decker 2017).

In addition, Decker (2017) states that marketing campaigns do not consist of "all marketing efforts for a brand". Instead, focusing on only one goal and pursuing one harmonious theme will result in a successful marketing campaign (Decker 2017). Furthermore, Decker also maintains that "campaigns make companies memorable", either in a good or bad way. Hence, companies must try their best to conduct an amazing campaign, because no firm wants to be mentioned as a bad campaign example.

2.4.2 Components of a successful marketing campaign

When it comes to practical work in any marketing campaign, CFI has shown six needed elements which will be presented below:

- *Planning (goals)*: During this stage, brands need to find out the campaign aim and comprehend what is needed to achieve (CFI n.d., Decker 2017). In this case of the apologetic concept, companies have to determine which component they want to achieve the most, whether it is customer retention, customer satisfaction, or obtaining public relations reputation?

- *Measurement (KPIs)*: The next step is to create a measurement benchmark so that businesses can track and analyze how they are doing in this campaign (CFI). In other words, they need key performance indicators (KPIs) (Decker 2017). This is a vital component because businesses always need real and suitable data to work with. For example, if firms want to gain customer retention, they can track the number of existing clients who repurchase after the crisis apology.
- *Target market identification*: To make sure that the campaign is being delivered to the right customers, the target market is very important (CFI). For any apology campaign, this is even stricter. Compared to an ordinary marketing campaign that promotes the brand's products and aims to achieve positive results (more sales, more pre-orders, etc.), an apologetic campaign is more sensitive and it thrives for reducing negative outcomes as much as possible.
- *Delivery of the marketing campaign (channels)*: After brands determined their target for the marketing campaign, they should consider the means of delivery next (CFI, Decker 2017). For instance, if the firms want to recover their reputation to the public by the apology, they should go with online mediums such as social media and digital display advertising.
- *Results*: In this element, if brands want to accomplish desired results, they should always "calibrating and perhaps re-calibrating marketing efforts to align with goals" (CFI). It will be inappropriate when they aim to retent their customers after the mistakes, but their actions do not align with that goal at all. Thus, it is essential to look back at the initial goal so that they do not digress from the original plan.
- *Assessment*: Last but not least, when the marketing campaign is over, "it is important to assess the results of the campaign and evaluate its effectiveness" (CFI). CFI suggests that evaluating the opinions of customers after the campaign is also very helpful.

Furthermore, Decker (2017) also adds a few other factors that affect the success of a marketing campaign, which are budget, content format(s), team, and design. However, since this study's main focal point is the consumer perspective, company-related elements such as budget and team will not be assessed.

- *Content format(s):* It is familiar for marketers to comprise several content formats in one campaign (Decker 2017). The marketing team needs to come up with suitable and timely content for apologetic issues since this is a sensitive phase. If the content does not meet the offended customers, the results can be worse (Kador 2009).
- *Design*: Visual aids are significant for every marketing campaign. Brands need to ensure that their design is professional but at the same time suitable for the campaign goals. (Decker 2017)

3 METHOD

According to Ruane (2016), there are four types of research goals: exploring, describing, explaining, and evaluating. This thesis aims to explore the key components needed in an apology campaign based on consumers' opinions. Hence, this is exploratory research, which is proposed to get a better "understanding of a new or little researched setting, group or phenomenon" (Ruane 2016). Ruane also argues that exploratory researchers have a tendency to conduct one-on-one interviews or any kind of "participatory study" with a small size of samples. As a result, exploratory research often collects qualitative data which contains rich data from the research subject (Ruane 2016).

3.1 Choice of method

As this research aims to explore the reasons behind a well-established apology campaign, the qualitative method was chosen to discover the main elements that answer the question. According to Rubin et al. (2005 p. 2-3), with the qualitative method, researchers can deeply analyze participants' opinions, the reasons why they have such thoughts, and what they have experienced. They also maintain the qualitative method even allows researchers to "understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate". Additionally, qualitative research has the power to convey words and images to document reality (Ruane 2016). In this case, we need to analyze customers' opinions about the Marketing apology campaign. Hence, the qualitative method will make more sense in obtaining rich data focusing on the participant's view.

In this study, the semi-structured interview method was chosen as a primary source. In short, an interview is a sequence of planned agenda that makes the conversation between the interviewer and interviewees purposeful (Ruane 2016). Within the given agenda, key points or questions need delivering, and a degree of understanding must be met (Ruane 2016). The author chose to conduct semi-structured interviews because of their flexibility within a given outline. According to Bryman and Bell (2011), when the researchers decide to do the semi-structured interview, they need to prepare a set of questions that fit the topic they want to analyze. Bryman and Bell also maintain that when doing such type of interview, interviewers can flexibly change the question order, wording, or even add up follow-up questions based on respondents' answers.

3.2 Respondents

In qualitative research, it is usual that the samples are quite small compared to quantitative study because qualitative study focuses on in-depth analyses (Bryman and Bell 2011, Ritchie et al. 2014). Regarding the implementation of data collection, first of all, the author must select suitable participants depending on the relevance in their interests and background. In this research, interviewees are frequent consumers of fast-food products. It means that they can be frequent fast-food eaters (with no preference for any brand) or loyal customers from a specific fast-food brand. The reason is that they have some experience with fast-food brands from the customer's point of view. Therefore, their opinions on the fast-food company's apology values than those who are not familiar with the concept of fast food or do not intend to purchase fast-food products.

The author conducted interviews with eight participants who live in different parts of Finland such as Helsinki, Vantaa, Espoo, Lahti, and Tampere. They have different backgrounds and nationalities, but all of them have been living in Finland for at least three years. Half of the interviewees are Finnish, and the other half are from different countries such as Vietnam and Bangladesh, who came to Finland to work or study. The author believes that respondents with different backgrounds can bring diverse opinions and perceptions to this study. The respondents are listed below in table 1.

Table 1 List of respondents

Interviewee A	Student, 21 years old, female, living in Helsinki
Interviewee B	Full-time worker, 22 years old, female, living in Vantaa
Interviewee C	Student, 23 years old, male, living in Helsinki
Interviewee D	Part-time officer, 22 years old, female, living in Helsinki
Interviewee E	Student, 28 years old, female, living in Espoo
Interviewee F	Full-time officer, 32 years old, male, living in Espoo
Interviewee G	Eutrepreneur, 27 years old, female, living in Lahti
Interviewee H	Student, 25 years old, male, living in Tampere

3.3 Questionnaire - Interview guide

In qualitative interviews, researchers use an interview guide to cover the main topics with a set of questions. The interviewers can flexibly decide the orders of questions or the choice of words. Additionally, there is no fixed format for an interview guide. Researchers can build a guide with proper full questions or key points (with phrases and single words) that cover all the topics. (King et al. 2019)

In order to formulate a proper interview guide, Bryman and Bell (2011) list a few factors to bear in mind. Firstly, researchers need to develop a reasonable order for all the topic themes they want to include. The next step is to create questions for the interviews based on the decided themes. While building up the questions, researchers should consider the use of words (not too academic and complex for the respondents) and avoid leading questions. (Bryman and Bell 2011)

The author decided to make a full-sentence format with a total of fourteen questions, including one introducing question in the beginning, four direct questions along with three probing questions, and the remaining ones are indirect (see Appendix 2). Regarding the structure of the interview guide, it starts with a brief introduction of the research aim and background information then the interviewer starts asking questions. Under each topic theme, the interviewer explains the concepts involved (for example, organizational apology) and gives examples in between when needed. In the end, the interviewer wraps up the interview with the question "Do you want to mention something that I have forgotten to ask?" to get more insights from the respondents.

3.4 Research approach

Concerning the interviewing process, interview questions should be prepared in advance and sent to the chosen interviewees. By doing this, the author expects that interviewees will have more time to prepare and contribute more profound information for the discussion. Moreover, Bryman and Bell (2011) maintain that providing the interview guide beforehand can strengthen the research dependability. The interviews were held online through Zoom because of the COVID-19 restriction. Zoom meetings were a good choice because some interviewees do not live in the Uusimaa region to conduct face-to-face interviews. Before the interviewer conducts the actual interviews, the interviewer should clarify to participants that this process is voluntary and make sure they are all aware of the study objectives. English is the conducted language and all the interviews will be audio recorded for research analysis. Hence, the interviewer needs to ask interviewees for permission and has to ensure that all of the interviewees' data is anonymous.

3.5 Analysis of the data

After collecting the raw data from the semi-structured interviews, we decided to analyze the data following the thematic analysis. King et al. (2019) have defined the word "theme" in the thematic analysis as "recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question". The researchers need to keep in mind that in thematic analysis, not only do they have to produce a set of themes but they also need to organize them in reasonable order (King et al. 2019).

King et al. also clarify three steps needed in the thematic analysis, which are descriptive coding, interpretive coding, and overarching themes. To be more specific, in the first stage, the researcher needs to identify helpful transcript data that can potentially answer the research question(s) (e.g respondent's views and opinions that are related to the topic discussed). There is no need to try interpreting the data yet because that will be taken into account in step two – interpretative data. In this stage, the researchers should cluster descriptive codes that represent similar meanings and build a code that interprets them. Researchers must not “apply specific theoretical concepts” in this step because the result would be limited and biased. The reason is that it perfectly fits the researcher’s literature review and there is nothing novel after analyzing the raw data. Finally, the researcher classifies several overarching themes that define key concepts in the analysis. The overarching themes should be created based on the interpretive themes, but they are at "a higher level of abstraction". (King et al. 2019)

3.6 Validity and reliability

According to King et al. (2019), the definition of validity is to determine if a certain form of measurement does measure “the variable it claims to” while reliability refers to the accuracy of the measured variable. Grønmo (2020) also agrees that validity connects with “the adequacy of the data regarding the research questions to be investigated”. To be more specific, this means the interview questions need to be relevant to the research aim. Additionally, the chosen participants need to meet the characteristics that can help the author answers the research question (which is known as face validity) (Grønmo 2020).

On the other hand, reliability, as known as dependability, is maintained and assessed by an ‘auditing’ approach, which means the researcher has to make sure that all documents involved in the research process are accessible – interview transcripts, data analysis, and so forth (Bryman and Bell 2011). In order to secure the reliability factor in qualitative research, the researcher should consider examining whether the study is trustworthy (Golafshani 2003). To enhance the trustworthiness of this study, the author is aware that some aspects are affecting this. Firstly, it is important that the data collected is objective, and personal opinions of the researcher are not included. Secondly, before conducting an interview, a careful guide is essential for respondents to fully understand the aim and thus can contribute more to the research. And lastly, the transcription quality also affects the trustworthiness of the research. In other words, while conducting an interview (whether online or offline), make sure the surroundings are calm and quiet to avoid any distractions to interviewees. As a consequence, the interviewer can transcript the data smoothly later on.

4 RESULTS

After the interviews were conducted, the author analyzed the data using the thematic analysis method. To be more specific, the collected qualitative data from the interviews were then transferred into codes. After that, all the codes went through iterative comparisons to create different themes/sub-themes. The author formed the themes regarding the aim of this study, which is to find out the main factors for a successful apology campaign of Finnish fast-food chains.

4.1 Factors of sincere organizational apologies

The diversity of factors was discussed during the interviews regarding sincere organizational apologies. Of all those factors, the author has chosen four characteristics: *reflection of the mistake*, *showing responsibility*, *compensations*, and *formality and professionalism of the apology*. They are chosen based on the majority of answers from interviewees about what components a sincere organizational apology should have.

During the interviews, all participants agreed that it is no difference between an organization apology in general and an apology in the fast-food business context. They claimed that "*only how the fast-food chains implement the campaign is different*" or "*the core factors of a sincere apology can be applied for any business.*" In other words, factors of sincere organizational apologies discussed during the interviews can also apply to other industries.

4.1.1 Reflection of the mistake

A common factor that six out of eight respondents agreed on was the reflection of the mistake. When being asked about components of a sincere apology (question 2.d), respondent D stated that:

> "*Reasons behind the mistake have to make sense to customers. Not only in the fast-food business, but I think it makes sense to every type of business out there. It means that they should explain to the customers what happened and what went wrong. Also, I think they should show sympathy towards people who are triggered by the incident*."

Respondent E also agreed about the sympathy towards the offended party when it comes to the company's reflection process:

> "*In this case, sympathy is a vital factor here. If companies look back at the incident and show no sympathy to those who got hurt, we can see it in their words and actions. It means that they just did it because they have to, not because they are sorry about it."*

Moreover, when the company reflects on their errors, they are expected to do it with honest and humble attitudes.

> *"When any company has to apologize because of any reason, I expect that they are honest with customers about their wrongdoings and not make any excuses. It shows that they do not try to cover the mistake but want to fix the situation*." (Interviewee C)

> *"The company should be humble and kind of step back to re-assess the problems. The fact that they reflect their own mistake with a proper attitude is a plus point for me."* (Interviewee F)

In short, most of the interviewees agreed that before telling the public that they are sorry, organizations need to objectively point out what they are sorry for, i.e. reflect their own mistakes. It is a good add-on because it shows that they know what they did wrongly and want to resolve that issue.

4.1.2 Showing responsibility

While asking interviewees about what elements they think are needed for a proper organizational apology, *responsibility* became the most common word that appeared. Most interviewees also agreed that an organizational apology is considered sincere if the company takes responsibility for its fault. The responsibility shows in the way they handle the problem. A few interviewees pointed out the importance of fast responses when it comes to such sensitive issues:

> "*I think it is vital in this stage that brands show their customers that they will take responsibility for the incident. To be able to do that, they first need to be timely. It means that they have to respond quickly to show that they care about the offended party and they want to fix this mistake as soon as possible."* (Interviewee A)

> *"If a company messes up something to its customers, the least they can do is to be responsive. They should apologize in time. It means that no more than 1 or 2 days after the business received complaints."* (Interviewee H)

Another element that interviewees valued was the actions of fast-food chains after the apology. Interviewee G expressed her thought about responsibility:

> "*I appreciate it if they act responsibly after the mistake happens, something like taking actions to fix the problem they have made. I, as a customer, do not want mere apologies. I want the restaurant to show me what steps they are going to take to fix this problem."*

> "*When I think of responsibility, I expect the fast-food chain can come up with solutions to prevent the same mistake from happening again*." Participant F also spoke up.

However, when asked about what they feel about organizational apologies (question 2.a), one participant raised her concern:

> "*It's controversial. On one aspect, the company shows its responsibility towards their stakeholder. On the other hand, it needs to be questioned in terms of integrity and reliability."* (Interviewee D)

4.1.3 Compensations

Other than that, compensations were mentioned quite a lot among participants when they assessed a sincere organizational apology. Many of them admitted that they did expect to receive compensation from the restaurants if they did something wrong. Participant C stated:

> "*Besides from the company's apology, I think it will look more sincere if they propose some actions to fix the error. If it can not be fixed, a compensation would also work."*

In addition, some participants also said that fast-food chains should compensate customers if they are the ones who cause the problem. And they also mentioned that they did not expect any compensation from the restaurants if the fault is not theirs.

> *"In the fast-food industry, compensations can happen in many ways, vouchers, free meals, discounts, you name it. But I think they should only compensate when the mistakes are from the company's side. You know, in customer service, sometimes you have to say sorry even though it is the customer's fault. But if that is the case, I do not think compensations are necessary."* (Interviewee C)

> *"In my opinion, if the mistake was unexpected and another external side made it, like delivery partners or logistics partners, I do not expect to receive any compensation from the restaurant."* (Interviewee H)

4.1.4 Formality and professionalism of the apology

The last factor the author wants to include in this theme is how the company prepares and writes its apology. An organizational apology should represent the whole firm, even though the mistake was made by individuals or teams. Hence, customers expect that the way companies say sorry should be objective, rational, and professional. Moreover, the interviewees even emphasized the importance of a formal manner in the company's apology.

> *"I think they have to be professional and sincere at the same time to make angry customers stay. As an organization, apologies represent all staff in that company,*

so I think they should be rational and objective. It means that it is not about one person's perspective nor it should not have any individual emotions in there!" (Interviewee H)

"As a customer, if I ever have to receive an apology from a company, I expect it to be well written. The reason is that I can see they respect me and make an effort to communicate with me and sort things out. Of course, I appreciate their professionalism when handling such cases." (Interviewee B)

4.2 Findings about apology campaigns

After discussing factors leading to a satisfactory organizational apology, the interviewees were asked what they thought about fast-food campaigns in general and apology campaigns in specific (question 3). In general, all participants were not familiar with the terminology "*apology campaign*". However, the author managed to explain it to all interviewees, both in the interview guide sent before the interview day, and repeated it once more during the interviews. Below are the three sub-themes that the author has collected from the conducted interviews.

4.2.1 Desired factors of a fast-food campaign

When being asked about what they would like to see in a fast-food campaign, their answers varied. Nevertheless, most participants said they expected to see the brand's food appear somewhere in the campaign (either in the advertisement visuals or any other form).

"I want to see the food appearing in the fast-food campaigns. In this case, we are talking about fresh-looking and quality food. It will not look good at all if the image is all about soggy French fries, or the salad does not look fresh enough." (Participant B)

"Quality and hygienic must be the priority when I assess any fast-food product. It also applies to the implementation of the brand campaigns. I expect that they make the visual aids look clean and the food looks good there." (Participant F)

On the other hand, respondent E claimed: "*The campaign can include whatever components they want as long as it is relevant to what they want to achieve after this"*. Additionally, participant C commented about the importance of good advertisement as well as high publicity:

> *"To make a fast-food campaign memorable, first it needs to appear everywhere on the internet. Whether it is because of your content or visuals, it needs to stand out. As a consequence, more people will share it to social media, more news publishers will write about your campaign."*

When discussing the visual aids in a fast-food campaign, there were some noticeable elements that interviewees expected to see. Participant A commented:

> *"Since it is a fast-food campaign, I would notice the most on the color. I usually see fast-food brands come up with a bright and vibrant set of colors so it can draw people's attention more. Maybe it is just me, but I also expect them to carry out a cheerful, positive vibe into the campaign."*

> "*I think the campaign would be nice if they capture some feelings or emotions to it. For example, it can be a campaign that warms people's hearts when Christmas is coming."* (Interviewee D)

And lastly, participant H discussed the content and format of the apology campaign compared to the ordinary organizational apology:

> *"Additionally, I think when it comes to the media, a sense of humor and creativity is always appreciated. Of course, they should not overdo it. In my opinion, the words in their apology marketing do not need to be too formal or stilted compared to a normal organizational apology from the CEO."*

4.2.2 Opportunities and challenges

In questions 3.b and 3.c, the author asked the interviewees what they thought about an apology campaign and what challenges might appear if the fast-food chain decides to implement it. The answers were diverse, but overall, most of them agreed that this is a smart idea by giving comments like "*it is a good idea"* or *"this is a very good aspect"*.

When it comes to the opportunities that apology campaigns can bring to the firm, some participants raised their thoughts:

> "*They make a large-scale public apology to minimize disruption to diners and transparently explain what was done to fix the problem. Transparency in the media will reduce customer discomfort and make them feel respected."* (Interviewee B)

> *"It is a game-changer. People feel respected and cared for when they receive an apology and understand that things happen. Therefore, they would be willing to forgive and try a better offering."* (Interviewee D)

However, fast-food chains also face some risks and challenges when implementing any apology campaign. If the apology is not done properly, it may lead to counterproductive consequences:

> *"As I have mentioned above, the challenges may be about the content of the apology. As a customer, I expect to see a positive and bright vibe from fast-food chains. So if they happen to make an apology campaign, I hope they can keep it cool and humorous to make the mistakes less serious. But of course, they need to be careful about that since it can be counterproductive and seen as insincere."* (Interviewee A)

> *"If your apology campaign is not satisfactory enough, there are many challenges the company has to face. Financially speaking, they may risk losing potential customers and also loyal customers. That will affect their revenue. Also, they may get involved in a controversial debate because of their campaign."* (Interviewee B)

Other than that, when publishing your apology campaign, the content and design have to be appropriate to the context, and everything needs organizing carefully to avoid any unexpected cricism. Interviewee E stated:

> *"The marketing team needs to be careful with the content to make it good enough, no more no less. And the designer needs to make sure the visuals are appropriate in this sensitive case."*

"The campaign has to be very organized. In the situation when the company needs to apologize in public, they do not want to mess it up. Because apologizing is a sensitive matter, of course they would want everything to go smoothly. And hopefully, customers will forgive their mistakes. So I think that they should be well-prepared and assess the situation carefully." Participant F raised his opinion.

4.2.3 The needs of public apology campaign

There were mixed answers about whether fast-food chains should apologize publicly or not (question 2. c). Half of the participants said yes, and the other half argued that it depends. Participants who claim that there is a strong need for public apologies stated their opinions:

"It is needed for companies to express publicly their mistakes. If they do not apologize publicly, the rumor might spread, and it is not good for the brand at all." (Interviewee G)

"If any problems of organizations viral in social media, they can ruin their image. Before it went viral, it is better for them to apologize publicly." (Interviewee F)

On the contrary, the rest of the interviewees said it depends on the situation.

"If the mistake is widespread and lots of customers have to suffer from this, I think the company should apologize publicly. Make it fast and appropriate. However, if the mistake only triggers a few customers, apologies in private would have been better. Because if your company say sorry in public every time they make any mistake, even a small one, it is not good for the brand image at all. People may start thinking that your brand is full of errors, and they may not become your customers." (Interviewee A)

"It depends on how big the mistake is. If it's a small error that makes only a few customers angry, maybe a private apology and compensation on the side like vouchers or free meal would have been enough." (Interviewee C)

5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we discuss the results from interviews conducted and the methodology used in this study. The author used the qualitative method with semi-structured interviews to collect data. The results presented above will be discussed more deeply with the comparisons from the literature in the theory chapter.

5.1 Discussion of results

This study aims to explore the key elements leading to a successful apology campaign from the customers' perspective regarding the fast-food industry. The qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to answer the research question: **What are the most important elements needed in an apology campaign for fast-food chains in Finland?** In this section, the author discusses the results from the semi-structured interviews with two main points. Firstly, the discussion is about key elements of a successful organizational apology. Next, combined with the desired factors that customers expect from fast-food campaigns, a discussion of how a fast-food apology campaign should perform will be presented.

5.1.1 Effective elements of organizational apology

First of all, we will once again take a look at the results, and then compare them to the literature framework that was presented previously. As seen in Table 2, there are four elements that lead to a satisfied organizational apology, which are *reflection of the mistake, showing responsibility*, *compensations*, and *formality and professionalism*.

Table 2 Effective elements of organizational apology

Theme	Sub-themes	Behaviors
	Reflection of the mistake	• Reflect on their own mistakes (what happened, what went wrong, etc.) • Be honest about the wrongdoings.

Effective elements of organizational apology		• Show sympathy towards customers.
	Showing responsibility	• Fast responses. • Actions afterward to fix the mistake. • Solutions to prevent the same mistake in the future.
	Compensations	• Work well, especially in private apologies (when restaurants only triggered a few customers). • No need to compensate if the mistakes are not from the restaurants themselves.
	Formality and professionalism	• Represent the whole company • Be rational, objective, and professional. • Formal manner. • Well-written and proper content/words.

Regarding the first factor – reflections of the mistake, it combines the first two steps in the literature framework the 6Rs of corporate apology in figure 2. In the result chapter, it was described by three main behaviors from the customers' points of view. The first behavior is to reflect on their mistakes (providing information such as what happened, what went wrong, etc.). In this element, the recognition step (from the framework the 6R of corporate apology) is also included here. In the framework, the author describes the recognition step as “the organization recognizes the mistakes and damages that it has done.” Next, the second behavior is to be truthful about the wrongdoings, and the last one is to show sympathy towards customers. The behaviors here are a bit different from the definition in the literature framework. They both contain an act of empathy towards the offended party (in this case, customers). However, when we look at the result, the customers also appreciate honesty and humbleness from the company while reflecting on the mistakes, meanwhile, in the literature framework, the author only mentions evaluating the mistakes via a multidimensional view.

The second factor is showing responsibility. In this element, the results show three moves that the company should behave to be seen as responsible. Those actions contain fast responses, afterward actions regarding mistakes, and solutions to prevent similar errors in the future. These outcomes are more detailed than the literature framework about the 6Rs of corporate apology (figure 2). To be more specific, in the framework, the author only states that "the organization confirms the mistakes to customers and takes responsibility accordingly." There is no further explanation of what moves are considered as "takes responsibility accordingly". Neither is in the author's framework or previous research (Kador 2009 and Chan 2017). Hence, answers from interviewees make this step more understandable and practical since there are specific actions that they expect companies to do to show their responsibility towards the mistake.

Firstly, interviewees expected that companies respond timely to the crisis in order to show their willingness to solve the problem. Next, they would look more carefully at the company's actions to fix the problem. Many interviewees appreciate actions compared to merely apologies. They want the company to fix their mistake by practical actions. This behavior is also supported by the literature mentioned in the theory chapter. Kador (2009) and O'Meara et al. (2020) agree that many customers will acknowledge proof that the organization has taken actions to fix and recover the mistakes. Customers want to know that the company has done its best to fix this. This behavior is mentioned in framework 6Rs of corporate apology as the restitution step. Interviewees claimed that this should be seen as proof of responsibility since the action reflects the company's accountability for the mistakes. And the last behavior from this factor is to show customers solutions or ideas to prevent the same misstep from happening in the future. This behavior is similar to the final step - *resolution* - in the literature framework about 6Rs in corporate apology. In the framework, it states "the organization promises the mistakes will not happen again.” By fulfilling all these three behaviors, the company will be seen as a reliable side when taking full responsibility for its mistakes.

Next, the result also shows that within the small scale of one-to-one interviews, many respondents agreed that compensation plays a big part in the way the company handles crises. They mentioned how this works well, especially in private apologies (when restaurants only triggered a few customers). The interviewees also did not expect to receive compensation if the fault was not on the company’s side. However, as mentioned before, this method works for private apologies, in other words, apologies that only the triggered customers and the company know about it. Therefore, this factor will not be presented in the apology campaign, where the apology is public, and everyone can find information about it.

And last but not least, interviewees did appreciate the formality and professionalism of an organizational apology. Whether it is spoken or written, companies need to show their formal manner and professionalism. Handling mistakes is a sensitive issue that can affect any brand’s reputation. Thus, companies have to be careful with their words and tones to make customers forgive the mistakes and continue to be their consumers. In the interviews conducted, respondents consider corporate apologies rational, objective, and professional. Even though the mistake was made by one or several employees, the apology represents the whole company no matter what. Hence, the way companies say sorry needs to be representative and appropriate. From the theory chapter, Battistella (2014) also agrees that we need to analyze the language and the context around the apology. It is important that companies apologize to the right people, at the right time, and with the right message.

5.1.2 Desired factors of a fast-food apology campaign

In this section, we will discuss the desired factors of a fast-food campaign, then combine with the elements of a sincere organizational apology to create a complete list of successful fast-food apology campaigns based on customers’ points of view. Below are the factors that interviewees have pointed out as essential when it comes to any type of fast-food campaign (see table 3). Later, the author will also connect these factors with the apology campaign created by fast-food brands.

Table 3 Desired factors of a fast-food apology campaign

Theme	Sub-themes	Factors
Desired factors of a fast-food campaign	Content-related factors	• The content should be cheerful and positive. • Capture some emotions to the campaign. • A sense of humor and creativity, but do not overdo it. • Transparency in the message.
	Visual-related factors	• The food that appears in the campaign should be fresh and clean looking. This factor is relevant to a fast-food campaign. • The color should be bright and vibrant to drive customers' attention.
	Other factors	• Good advertising and high publicity so more people know about the campaign.

Regarding the content of the fast-food campaign, there are four main factors that interviewees expected to see. They are cheerful concepts, emotions involved, humor along with creativity, and the message's transparency. Some interviewees admitted that fast-food brands bring them a positive vibe no matter what. Hence, a sense of humor works particularly well in the case of any fast-food campaign. In the conducted interviews, when the interviewer showed them an example of the FCK campaign by KFC (Appendix 1), all of them agreed that this is a good and creative approach when you have to apologize to customers. KFC succeeded in making fun of their brand name to launch their apology campaign. They were able to make the issue more lighthearted and less serious than it needed to be. However, many respondents still raised their concerns about this approach. They stated that there are many challenges the companies have to face if the campaign is not attractive enough. People may see the humor as inappropriate and insincere, so the brand should not overdo it. Kador (2009) also agreed that the outcomes could be worse if the content does not meet the expectation of offended customers.

In addition, another factor that interviewees appreciated was the transparency in the apology message. When the fast-food brand creates an apology campaign, the large-scale apology will increase the transparency in the company’s message and lead customers to feel respected and eventually forgive the mistake.

And lastly, it is recommended that the campaign caption some emotions into it, which is opposite to the factor of professionalism that we have discussed above organization apology. When it comes to apology campaigns, marketers should make customers empathize with the company’s struggles and make them feel that things happen, and we all make mistakes from time to time so that customers will be more likely to forgive.

Interviewees also mentioned a lot about visuals when it comes to any type of campaign. Decker (2017) also agrees that visual aids are vital for any marketing campaign. In the case of an apology campaign from a fast-food chain, two elements stand out the most: food appearance and colors. Many respondents stated that they expect to see the food images from the brand in the campaign, just like any other industry: clothes appearing in a fashion campaign, makeup products appearing in a cosmetics campaign, and so on. Moreover, the respondents emphasized the importance of fresh-looking food there. The reason is that the brand should always show customers the best quality available.

Another factor that they care about is the colors. Fast-food chains logos are known for being vibrant and catching everyone's attention, so are their campaigns. Customers are familiar with those bright color schemes, so their campaigns should follow that route also. The apology from KFC (Appendix 1) has succeeded in keeping their signature bright red into the advertisement. Using bright colors not only catches people’s attention but also gives them a sign of familiarity.

Lastly, the significance of good advertising and high publicity is also emphasized during the interviews. There are no detailed thoughts about how to get better publicity from the interviewees. However, from the theory, several factors can affect the publicity of a campaign. They can choose the right target market for the campaign, the right channels for publishing the campaign, etc. These factors are from the company's side to decide, so there is no discussion about these elements in this study.

5.2 Discussion of method

The author chose the qualitative method to gain rich data from participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted according to the plan. However, the author could not arrange physical interviews with respondents living in the Uusimaa region due to the safety of participants during the pandemic. The positive side is that online interviews worked well, and all of the respondents were familiar with Zoom beforehand, so there was no problem while conducting online interviews.

Semi-structured interviews are flexible in a way that the interviewer can change the order of questions, the wording in the questions, or even add follow-up questions (Bryman and Bell 2011). With this flexibility, the author was able to convey the interviews more naturally based on the respondents' answers and ask some follow-up questions to understand the interviewees' point of view more clearly. As a result, the interviewer can get more insights from respondents' answers and add more aspects to the study that the interviewer has not thought of before.

Overall, the reliability and validity of this research are met. Regarding reliability, all the data presented is objective and reliable. There were no personal opinions from the researcher. Moreover, the interviews were conducted in a quiet environment from both sides so the author could have good audio quality for transcriptions. As a result, the transcriptions were transparent and clear without any inaudible troubles. About the validity of this research, the interview questions are relevant to the research aim, which is to investigate the key factors for a successful apology campaign in Finland regarding customers' opinions. In addition, the author also met the face validity for choosing participants that meet the requirements in the Respondents section.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to analyze the main factors that build up a successful apology campaign from the fast-food industry from the customers' point of view. And the research question is **What are the most important elements needed in an apology campaign for fast-food chains in Finland?** This study leads to two conclusions. When assessing the content of the organization apology, there are no differences between the fast-food industry and other fields. However, regarding the apology campaign implementation, there are some specific factors that customers expect to see and experience in the fast-food apology campaign.

In conclusion, satisfactory content in an apology campaign is done by the four factors below. Firstly, the restaurant needs to reflect on its mistake with an honest attitude and sympathy towards customers. The message should also be transparent and clear. Secondly, they need to show their responsibility by giving fast responses, fixing the mistake with practical actions, and providing solutions to prevent the same issue from happening again. Thirdly, formality and professionalism should be met with appropriate wording and an objective approach, but there is no need for being too formal. A sense of humor and creativity is appreciated in a campaign, but they have to remember not to overdo it. And last but not least, a successful campaign contains positive content and should capture some emotions so that customers are more likely to empathize with the brand and forgive its mistake.

About the visual aids of the apology campaign from the fast-food chain, customers expect to see images of the brand's food in the campaign. Also, the color themes used in the campaign should match the brand's logos which are usually vibrant and bright to catch people's attention. Another factor that is also important when implementing an apology campaign is to make sure that it has good advertising and high publicity to reach more people.

6.1 Limitations of the study

Since apology marketing is a fairly new topic, there has not been any academic research yet that studies this issue, which leads to difficulty when searching for the literature section. Apology marketing is still a novel approach to customers in Finland. Hence, as a result, interviewees could not provide profound insights since none of them have experienced this type of apology from any brand. Another limitation is the interview size. The interview size could be bigger for more data and insights to gather and analyze. And lastly, as mentioned in the first chapter, this study focuses on the perspective of customers. As a consequence, many business-related factors are not discussed or mentioned in this study. Thus, the results only answer the question of what customers expect about an apology campaign, not how a company should implement it since other factors need consideration, such as finance and planning process.

6.2 Suggestions for further studies

For further studies, the author suggested that it is advantageous to continue to investigate apology marketing. Many themes can be worked on since this topic is fairly new, and there is not much academic research about it. One of the themes can be about factors of successful apology campaigns but from the business's point of view. It would be insightful to see how marketing managers from different firms think and behave when they need to conduct an apology campaign. Future researchers can also investigate apology campaigns in different countries and see how cultures affect this.

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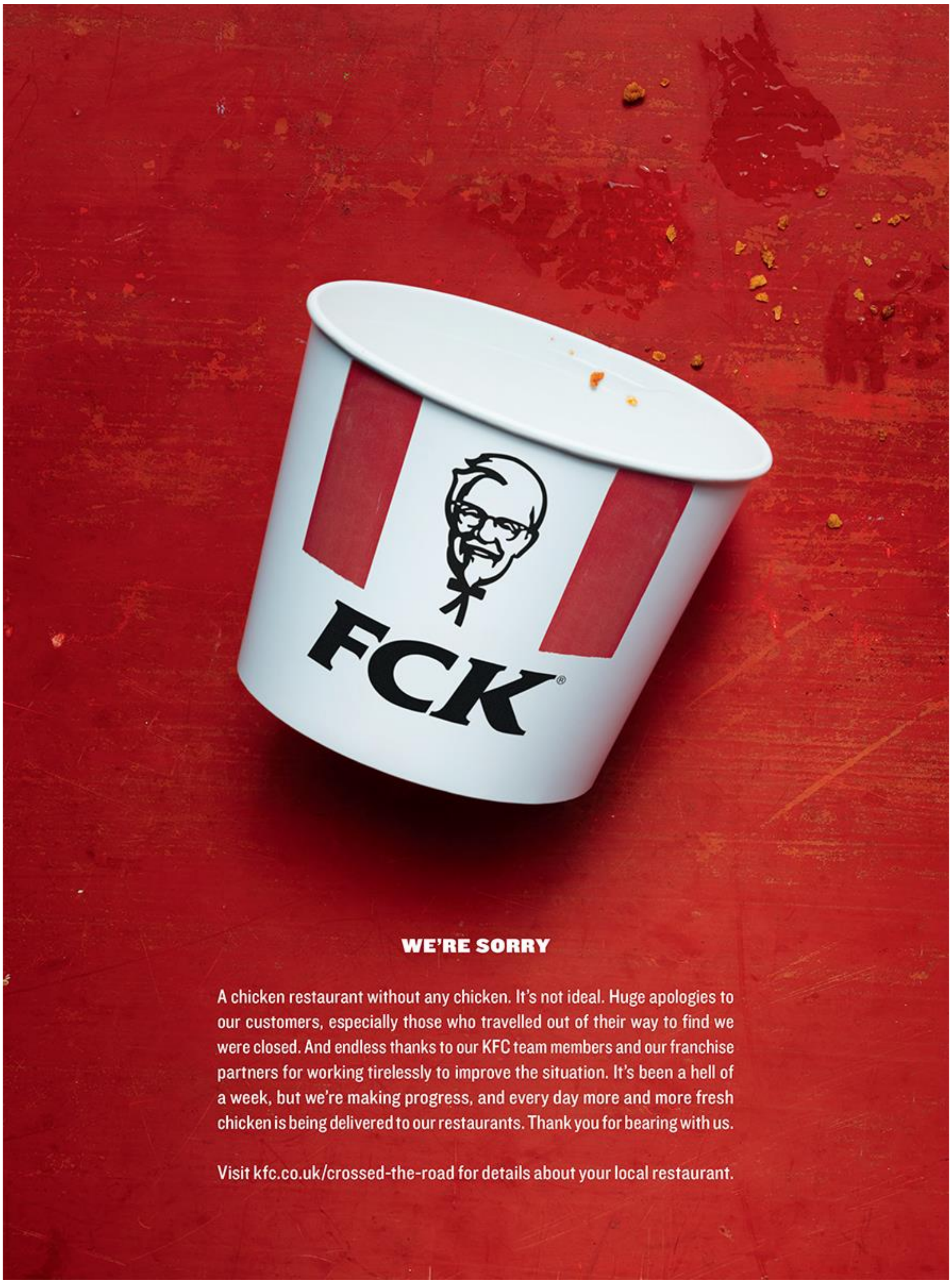
APPENDICES

Appendix 1

KFC U.K apology message after running out of chicken stock



Appendix 2

The interview questions

1. General information and customer attitude
    a. Please introduce yourself briefly and also your background as a fast-food consumer.
    b. Do you have a favorite fast-food restaurant or fast-food chain?
        i. If yes, how did that happen?
        ii. If no, why not?
2. Apologies in business
    a. What do you think about organizational apologies?
    b. What are the reasons that a fast-food chain needs to say sorry to customers in your opinion?
    c. Do you think they should apologize publicly? Motivate your answer.
    d. What factors do you appreciate the most when it comes to a sincere apology in general?
    e. Do those factors add up or change in the fast-food business context? If so, how?
3. Apology campaign
    a. In general, what elements make a fast-food campaign memorable (in a good way) in your opinion?
    b. What do you feel about a fast-food apology being implemented as a campaign? (e.g FCK campaign from KFC)
    c. What challenges do you think fast-food chains may have when carrying out an apology campaign?
4. Closing
    a. Do you want to mention something that I have forgotten to ask?