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Strategic silence and concrete corrective actions in employer brand image recovery

Brands amid workplace well-being controversies

International Business
Bachelor's thesis

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Abstract

Organizational crises may damage not only corporate reputation but also the image of the organization as an employer. This is particularly relevant in international business contexts, where organizations compete for talent across multiple borders and are evaluated by multiple stakeholders under different institutional expectations. In workplace well-being related controversies, such as concerns regarding employee treatment and working conditions, employer image recovery may depend not only on communication but also on tangible organizational change.

The main research question of this thesis aims to examine how strategic silence and internal organizational change can positively contribute to employer image recovery after a crisis. Strategic silence is understood as temporary and deliberate reduction of public communication, while corrective actions refer to implemented organizational changes addressing the causes of the crisis. The thesis is conducted as a conceptual literature-based study, examining previous research on employer branding, crisis communication strategies and legitimacy management. The theoretical foundation is supported by illustrative case examples, where the framework is applied into real-life situations.

The findings suggest that communication alone may be insufficient in restoring employer image after workplace-related crises. Instead, implemented corrective actions appear central in rebuilding credibility and legitimacy. Strategic silence may function as a supportive response strategy by signalling work-in-progress and therefore allowing additional time for examining the situation and implementing changes. Overall, the thesis concludes low-communication and action-centred image repair strategies as viable alternatives to traditional models. As internal practices and working conditions have gained importance through growing digital transparency, heightened stakeholder expectations and intensified global talent competition, maintaining legitimacy across borders has become increasingly crucial for internationally operating organizations. The thesis therefore contributes to international business research by linking employer branding, crisis recovery and legitimacy management in institutionally complex environments, providing a fresh angle on the topic.

Keywords: employer branding, employer image, institutional theory, legitimacy repair, crisis communication, strategic silence, workplace well-being

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Tiivistelmä

Organisatoriset kriisit voivat vahingoittaa paitsi yrityksen kaupallista mainetta, myös sen kuvaa työnantajana. Tämä on erityisen merkityksellistä kansainvälisen liiketoiminnan kontekstissa, jossa organisaatiot kilpailevat osaajista yli maarajojen ja kohtaavat useita institutionaalisia odotuksia sidosryhmien arvioinnin alaisena. Työhyvinvointikohuissa, kuten työntekijäkohtelua ja työoloja koskevissa tapauksissa, työnantajamielikuvan palautuminen voi olla riippuvaista paitsi viestinnästä, myös konkreettisista sisäisistä muutoksista.

Tämän tutkielman päätutkimuskysymys tarkastelee, miten strateginen hiljaisuus ja sisäiset organisaatiomuutokset voivat edistää työnantajamielikuvan palautumista kriisin jälkeen. Strategisella hiljaisuudella tarkoitetaan julkisen viestinnän väliaikaista, tietoista vähentämistä, kun taas konkreettiset korjaustoimet viittaavat toteutettuihin organisaatiomuutoksiin kriisin taustalla oleviin ongelmiin puuttumiseksi. Tutkielma on toteutettu käsitteellisenä kirjallisuuspohjaisena tutkimuksena, jossa tarkastellaan aiempaa kirjallisuutta työnantajabrändäyksestä, kriisiviestintästrategioista ja legitimiteetin hallinnasta. Teoreettinen pohja täydentyy havainnollistavilla tapausesimerkeillä, joissa esiteltyä viitekehystä sovelletaan käytännön tilanteisiin.

Tulokset osoittavat, että pelkkä viestintä ei välttämättä riitä työnantajamielikuvan palauttamiseen työhyvinvointiin liittyvien kriisien jälkeen. Konkreettiset korjaustoimenpiteet sen sijaan osoittautuvat keskeisiksi uskottavuuden ja legitimiteetin uudelleenrakentamisessa. Strateginen hiljaisuus puolestaan voi toimia tukevana vastausstrategiana viestimällä sanattomasti meneillään olevasta korjausprosessista ja mahdollistamalla lisäaikaa tilanteen arviointiin ja muutosten toteuttamiseen. Kokonaisuudessaan tutkielma esittää toimintakeskeisten ja matalan viestinnän strategioiden toimivan varteenotettavina vaihtoehtoina perinteisille kriisiviestintämalleille. Koska sisäisten käytäntöjen ja työolojen merkityksellisyys ovat kasvaneet digitaalisen läpinäkyvyyden sekä sidosryhmien korkeampien odotusten myötä ja kansainvälinen kilpailu osaavista työntekijöistä kiristyy, legitimiteetin ylläpitäminen laajoilla toimintakentillä on yhä kriittisempää kansainvälisesti toimiville organisaatioille. Tutkielma osallistuu näin ollen kansainvälisen liiketoiminnan tutkimukseen yhdistämällä työnantajabrändäyksen, kriisiviestinnän ja legitimiteetinhallinnan institutionaalisesti monimutkaisissa toimintaympäristöissä ja tarjoaa aiheeseen tuoreen näkökulman.

Avainsanat: työnantajabrändäys, työnantajamielikuva, institutionaalinen teoria, legitimiteetin korjaus, kriisiviestintä, strateginen hiljaisuus, työhyvinvointi

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1.1 Background

In international business environments, organizational crises can rapidly undermine not only consumer trust but also employer brand image. Especially in developed economies, crises quickly become increasingly visible and consequential due to the highly digital media, rapid flow of information and heightened stakeholder expectations (Coombs, 2007, 164). In such contexts, these crises rarely remain confined to temporary organizational or operational costs but rather can further extend to affect the long-term image and reputation of the company.

Traditionally, crisis communication research has been focused on protecting the company in the eyes of shareholders, investors and consumers in order to remain its commercial strength. As for employer branding, research highlights also the importance of organizational reputation for an employer in attracting and recruiting new talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 501). A growing number of firms are showing interest in developing formal employer branding strategies and are pouring considerably large resources into these efforts. Employer branding is essentially defined as emphasizing the characteristics and benefits of a firm to highlight the differences from its competitors, to attract skilled employees. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 501–502.) However, while organizations may actively manage their employer brand through communication, employer image is also highly dependent on internal realities and how stakeholders interpret them. When discrepancies emerge between communicated values and lived experiences, reputational damage may follow quickly. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 505; Furusten, 2023, 116; Suchman, 1995, 574.)

Organizations now operate within institutional environments, in which their actions are continuously evaluated against socially constructed norms and expectations (Furusten, 2023, 117). According to the legitimacy theory, organizations must maintain uniformity between its actions and the social norms and expectations of the public to ensure its continuous acceptance and legitimacy in the eyes of the mentioned public (Suchman, 1995, 574). Suchman (1995, 574) conceptualized legitimacy as the extent to which an organization's actions are perceived as appropriate and aligned with the norms and values of a particular social context. In the context of international business, employer image recovery within the legitimacy frame requires additional complexity, for the operations often happen across multiple institutional environments. Legitimacy is therefore not constructed along a single audience's point of view but evaluated through diverse stakeholder groups, including the national and the global standards. (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999, 67.). This is particularly relevant for multinational enterprises whose operations rely heavily on cross-border coordination and global workforces. Previous literature on the topic recognizes the growing competition in attracting global talent and discusses the challenges these MNEs face (Scullion & Collings, 2006, 10).

Different crisis communication strategies have been extensively examined through previous literature, which suggests highly communicative responses such as denial and justification as effective reputation repair strategies in post-crisis situations (e.g. Benoit, 1997, 179; Coombs, 2007, 170). While these frameworks provide valuable insight into how organizations attempt to manage stakeholder perceptions during crises, considerably less attention has been paid to situations in which organizations rely primarily on concrete internal corrective actions and limited public communication. By addressing these themes, this thesis contributes to international business research by situating employer image recovery within the institutional complexity faced by multinational companies. By examining low-visibility and action-centred strategies, it offers a new perspective on gaining and recovering legitimacy after crises in international business contexts.

1.2 Research objectives and structure

This thesis aims to examine how employer image recovery could unfold in situations where organizations rely on strategic silence and internal corrections rather than highly visible communication and PR-strategies. Within this thesis, high-visibility and high-communication strategies refer to traditional crisis responses emphasizing explicit communication, whereas low-visibility, low-communication and action-centred strategies highlight the focus on internal corrections and limited external statements. These expressions are used simultaneously to emphasize different dimensions of the combined approach. A particular focus of this thesis is placed on workplace well-being–related crises, as these crises differ from many traditional reputational threats. This raises the main question for this thesis: **how can strategic silence and internal organizational change positively contribute to employer image recovery after a crisis?**

To address this question, the thesis is structured around the following sub-questions:

- How is employer image recovery defined in a post-crisis context?
- Why can strategic silence and concrete corrective actions be considered viable strategies in legitimacy restoration processes?

- In which situations can this low-communication and action-centred approach be considered useful?

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 2 presents the theoretical foundations of employer image, legitimacy and post-crisis recovery. Chapter 3 first examines traditional crisis management strategies, while the latter sections then present strategic silence and the role of concrete corrective actions as potential alternative solutions to the main issues related to the traditional strategies. By combining these two approaches, this thesis proposes a framework in which these action-centred and low-communicative responses may together support employer image recovery. This framework is then applied to real-life situations in Chapter 4 through selected illustrative case examples involving workplace-related crises. The cases highlight issues related to precisely internal practices and broader working conditions, enabling a comparative examination of how different crisis responses may shape employer image recovery.

2 Theoretical foundations of employer image and legitimacy recovery

2.1 Employer branding and employer image

Employer branding has emerged as a central concept in international business research (Azhar et al., 2024, 103; King & Grace, 2010, 939). The growing interest in the matter is based on the assumption that human capital, thus the employees, creates added value to the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 503; King & Grace, 2010, 939). If a distinctive employer brand image is being put forward before and during the hiring process, the recruits will have a certain mindset about the company already when applying. Later on, they will bring that mindset into the workplace, further helping to make that image a reality and committing to the values the company wants to highlight. Therefore, successful employer branding can lead to the employees contributing positively to the company's success and performance. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 503.)

According to Keller (1993, 3), brand image is based on the associations the consumers and other stakeholders hold in their mind about the company and its products, reflected on the memories of previous knowledge on the brand. Applied to the employer brand context, employer brand image represents those associations held by stakeholders, but of the perceptions of the organization as a workplace (Lievens et al., 2016, 411). These associations are therefore shaped by both the organizational communication and the experiences of employees within the organization. While employer branding represents the organization's strategic efforts to shape these perceptions through communication and human resource practices, employer image ultimately reflects the way these efforts are interpreted by the employees and stakeholders of the organization. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 505.) The differences between employer brand, employer image and employer brand associations are presented through a clear hierarchical system – employer branding represents the strategic attempts to pertain to the perceptions about the employer and associations are the specific thoughts, attributes and meanings the stakeholders connect to the organization as an employer. By controlling the associations linked with the organization, it aims to finally shape the employer image, which in turn reflects the overall, broader perceptions held by the stakeholders. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 505–507.)

What separates employer branding from strategic corporate branding, besides the focus on being just on the organization as an employer, is the focus and target audience of the efforts. While traditional branding is directed to external audience, employer branding focuses on both the external and internal audience. According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, 503), the external dimension of employer branding focuses on attracting potential employees by communicating the organization's value proposition as an employer. The internal dimension, in contrast, focuses on strengthening the identification, commitment, retention and organizational culture of the existing workforce. Internal actions aim to align employees with the organization's values and reinforce the employer brand through daily practices and bettering the employees' experiences of the workplace, ultimately decreasing the turnover rate and establishing the employer as a unique workplace. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 503–504; De Neve & Ward, 2025, 146–147; King & Grace, 2010, 947.) The intent is then to make the internal image to show transparently to the external audiences. However, research notes this as a potentially lengthy process – even though desirable working conditions and other favourable practices may have an immediate impact on current employees' perceptions and the internal employer image, it may take quite some time to show in the external one (De Neve & Ward, 2025, 152–153).

This dual structure highlights a fundamental interdependence between internal and external employer branding. While external communication aims to shape expectations about the employer, internal practices determine whether these are fulfilled in reality. Employee experiences therefore act as a key mechanism through which employer brand promises are either validated or challenged (King & Grace, 2010, 955). Research on workplace well-being supports this view, suggesting that organizations that share information about their workplace well-being with positive results from the current employees, receive increasing attraction from potential ones (De Neve & Ward, 2025, 149–150). According to De Neve & Ward (2025, 150), transparency about workplace condition –related themes is rapidly increasing, which highlights the need for effective employer image strategies.

The relationship between these two dimensions, internal and external branding, is particularly crucial in crisis contexts, especially in ones concerning workplace well-being controversies: because they concern the internal practices rather than external products or market failures, stakeholder evaluations are closely tied to tangible evidence of the organizational practices (Scott & Lane, 2000, 45; Suchman, 1995, 572–573). When discrepancies emerge between communicated values and internal realities and actual practices, these inconsistencies may quickly undermine employer image. Internal issues, such as problematic working conditions or unskilled leadership can therefore spill into external perceptions of the organization as an employer, ultimately threatening the organization's legitimacy.

2.2 Legitimacy and institutional acceptance in employer image recovery

Organizations, especially multi-national ones, operate widely in an institutional environment. Institutional environment is defined as the surroundings of an organization, which determine the standard guidelines the organization must adapt to in order to maintain its acceptability within its operating area (Furusten, 2023, 4). The core idea behind this institutional theory is that organizations, much like individuals, are unable to ignore their surrounding environment, operating independently, but instead are greatly affected by these conditions. Therefore, organizations accept and adapt these structures into their practices and communications in order to align with institutional expectations and gain acceptance from relevant audiences. Though remaining somewhat continual, these standards are not immutable but gradually evolve with the developing world (Furusten, 2023, 4). This further challenges the organizations' efforts to stay on the socially acceptable side, for their once legitimate operations may later on be convicted as no more tolerable.

Within such environments, maintaining legitimacy becomes essential for ensuring organizational survival. Suchman (1995, 574) refers to the term legitimacy as a "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially determined system of norms, values and definitions". Because legitimacy is therefore socially constructed and largely subject to stakeholders' subjective evaluations, it's more dependent on how organizational actions are interpreted rather than the actual intentions of the organization itself. For multinational enterprises, legitimacy challenges are further intensified due to institutional complexity of operating across multiple national environments through its subunits. Besides merely the internationally constructed norms, firms must also navigate different regulatory frameworks, specific cultural norms and stakeholder expectations simultaneously. (Kostova & Zaheer, 1999, 67.) As a result, legitimacy is not a fixed nor uniform attribute but may vary across countries and organizational units.

When organizational practices are perceived to violate the institutional expectations, legitimacy may be challenged (Suchman, 1995, 597). In the context of employer image, legitimacy influences how organizations are perceived as employers and whether their practices are considered appropriate by current and potential employees. Because the employer brand associations, as previously defined, are influenced by not only organizational communication but also by observing existing practices, stakeholders evaluate whether the organization's behaviour aligns with broader social norms, ultimately either confirming or denying its legitimacy as an employer. (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, 505; Furusten, 2023, 116; Suchman, 1995, 574.) Understanding employer image through the institutional and legitimacy theories provides a useful framework for analysing how organizations respond to crises that threaten their standing as employers.

Figure 1 presents a simplified version of Suchman's (1995, 600) classification of organizational legitimacy into three types – pragmatic, moral and cognitive.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY

	GAINING legitimacy	**MAINTAINING legitimacy**	**REPAIRING legitimacy**
PRAGMATIC	Respond to stakeholder needs and advertise correctly	Maintain stakeholder support and monitor opinions	Address disruptions in stakeholder relationships
MORAL	Conform to societal norms and values	Monitor ethics and institutional expectations	Excuse / justify / address perceived wrongdoings
COGNITIVE	Conform to taken-for-granted models and standards	Reinforce legitimacy as axiomatic, protect assumptions	Provide explanations to restore comprehensibility

Figure 1. Types of legitimacy (adapted from Suchman, 1995, 600)

These types of organizational legitimacy are then linked to the strategies through which legitimacy is supposedly gained, maintained and repaired. Pragmatic legitimacy is based on the stakeholders' self-interest and reflects the extent to which the organization is perceived to provide value or benefit to its audiences (Suchman, 1995, 578). Moral legitimacy, however, is grounded in the ethics and concerns whether organizational actions are considered appropriate and aligns with the institutional values (Suchman, 1995, 579). The deepest level of these all, cognitive legitimacy, represents almost an unconscious level of acceptance – the organization's actions are perceived as taken-for-granted and normalized, and any alternatives are seen as unthinkable and impossible to comprehend (Suchman, 1995, 582–583). The horizontal dimension of Figure 1 represents the dynamic process of legitimacy over time. Gaining legitimacy refers to the initial establishment of stakeholder acceptance, whereas maintaining involves reinforcing and preserving this acceptance over time through consistent and appropriate behaviour (Suchman, 1995, 586–587, 593–594). Repairing legitimacy, in turn, refers to the efforts undertaken when the initial legitimacy is challenged, focusing on re-establishing trust and acceptance (Suchman, 1995, 597). To delimit the aspects of the framework most relevant to this thesis, the focus will be on the repairing phase, as the thesis examines situations where legitimacy has been disrupted by workplace-related crises. Of the vertical rows, the attention will be mostly on the moral and pragmatic types of legitimacy, since the external stakeholders evaluate the morality of the employer while the internal stakeholder, the employees, determine whether the employer fulfils their needs and expectations.

2.3 Defining employer image recovery in a post-crisis context

Organizational crises can suddenly and unexpectedly disrupt the alignment between organizational practices and societal expectations, thereby threatening organizational legitimacy of even previously the most secure organization (Coombs, 2007, 164; Suchman, 1995, 594). In such situations, stakeholders reassess whether the organization continues to act in ways that are considered appropriate within the prevailing institutional environment. Suchman (1995, pp. 594–595) presents two main strategies for maintaining legitimacy: protecting past accomplishments and perceiving future changes. Because crises often happen abruptly, the latter usually is no longer an option, since the change has already happened. Legitimacy repairing efforts are much similar to the point of creating legitimacy in the first place, but instead of having a "clean slate" to start with, repairing phase often represents responsive actions after an unforeseen incident (Suchman, 1995, 597). The strategies for repairing legitimacy depend on the situation – does the organization still enjoy some of its previous credibility and trust and how widely has the crisis affected its stakeholders? Though previous literature presents denying, explaining and justifying the situation as options for legitimacy repair efforts, it already recognizes that these strategies may be misread by the public as insincere, even further damaging its reputation. (Suchman, 1995, 597–598.)

In contemporary crisis contexts, media plays a central role in shaping how crises are interpreted by the public. Coombs (2007, 164) argues that media coverage influences how stakeholders attribute responsibility for a crisis and evaluate the organization's response. Negative media attention can amplify reputational damage by repeatedly framing the crisis in ways that highlight organizational failure or misconduct. As a result, organizations facing crises often experience reputational challenges that extend beyond the immediate event itself. Though previous literature (cf. Coombs, 2007, 164) recognizes the effect of digital communities and online networks to some extent, the contemporary media environment now differs significantly from the context of which much of the earlier crisis communication research was developed. With the rise of social media, information about organizational crises can rapidly spread across multiple platforms and global networks, allowing stakeholders themselves to actively shape crisis narratives rather than relying solely on traditional media channels (see, e.g. Jin et al., 2014; Veil et al., 2011). As a result, crises may escalate more quickly and reach broader audiences than in earlier media environments. This creates also pressure for the organizations' management to follow the public discussion, in order to stay on top of the situation.

From the legitimacy perspective, reputation restoration and image recovery cannot be understood merely as a reduction of the negative publicity. Instead, recovery refers to a gradual process through which organizations attempt to restore its public standing by re-establishing congruence between their actions and stakeholder expectations, including resolving the underlying causes of the crisis. This process is conceptualized as the *legitimacy repair*, where organizations respond to threats through e.g. actions and communication aimed at rebuilding acceptance. (Suchman, 1995, 597–598.) In the context of workplace well-being –related crises, legitimacy repair and image recovery is closely linked to employee experiences and organizational practices. Research on workplace well-being suggests that employees' evaluations on fairness, working conditions and organizational support plays a crucial role in shaping how organizations are perceived as employers, giving them a competitive advantage (De Neve & Ward, 2025, 149–150).

According to research, post-crisis recovery process begins when the initial crisis gradually ceases, whereas the recovery itself is dependent on the public's perception and rebuilding of any of the physical and symbolic damage the organization endured during the crisis (Austin et al., 2014, 846). In this sense, recovery is not a single event but reflects a broader stabilization of stakeholder associations rather than focusing on merely on the crisis disappearing. Recovery in such contexts therefore requires much more than just restoring external reputation. Organizations need to address underlying issues in organizational practices that influence employee well-being and rebuild trust among both internal and external audiences. Consequently, employer image recovery after a crisis can be understood as a process which results in the repaired legitimacy of the organization as a desired employer, operating in a way that aligns with stakeholder expectations regarding employee treatment and workplace well-being.

3 Strategic silence and corrective action as post-crisis strategies

3.1 Active crisis communication and reputation repair strategies

Crisis communication research has traditionally emphasized the importance of visible and proactive communication when organizations face reputational threats. Organizations are often expected to respond quickly, provide information to stakeholders and actively manage public perceptions in order to mitigate reputational and financial damage (Benoit, 1997, 183–184; Coombs, 2007, 165). Within this perspective, active communication is seen as a central mechanism through which organizations attempt to shape how crises are interpreted by stakeholders and the media.

One of the most widely cited frameworks for crisis communication strategies is Benoit's Image Repair Theory, which outlines a range of communication strategies organizations facing crises may use to repair reputational damage. These strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action and mortification. (Benoit, 1997, 179.) The underlying assumption of this framework is that organizations could influence stakeholders' perceptions by strategically framing their responses and providing explanations or apologies depending on the situation. Similarly, Situation Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) argues that organizations should tailor their crisis communication strategies according to the degree of responsibility attributed to them for the crisis and that communication is central in each of these situations (Coombs, 2007, 170–171). SCCT claims to share the same core ideas of communication as the power tool as the Image Repair Theory but links the strategies of the initial theory to a systematic framework (Coombs, 2007, 171).

The first strategies in these frameworks include a complete or a partial denial of the accusation. The organization could either deny the act altogether or question whether the act was harmful at all (Benoit, 1997, 179). Other methods presented for denial of the accusations would be "attacking the attacker", therefore confronting the party claiming the original issues with the organization's actions (Coombs, 2007, 170). These methods lean on the fact that if the organization stays disconnected from the crisis altogether, it cannot suffer any of the damages that come with it (Benoit, 1997, 180; Coombs, 2007, 171). Shifting the blame, or as Coombs describes it, scapegoating, falls somewhat under the same category – blaming someone else might take the focus off of the organization (Benoit, 1997, 180; Coombs, 2007, 170). The bottom line with this strategy is the question whether the public believes the organization to be at fault or not. Ultimately, the actual culprit does not matter: the party that is perceived as guilty is the one facing the crisis.

(Benoit, 1997, 178; Coombs, 2007, 171.) The issues with these strategies emerge if and when needed to prove these statements. Coombs (2007, 171) claims that in order to succeed with denying or shifting the blame, organizations need solid and concrete evidence to back up these claims, and even then, the success is not guaranteed. If, on the other hand, the organization gets caught for falsely trying to shift the blame off of itself, it can significantly harm its reputation and make the process for recovery a lot more complicated and prolonged (Benoit, 1997, 184). Therefore, trying to tamper with any evidence or deny accusations of wrongful acts, especially when they are known to be true within the organization, could backfire completely. In such contexts the organization is forced to change their narrative in the middle of the crisis, from a failed denial to another crisis management strategy, and according to the SCCT, this type of inconsistency tends to deteriorate the effectiveness of the overall response (Coombs, 2007, 173).

Evasion of responsibility and reducing the offensiveness of the act aim to achieve the same kind of results – framing the crisis as “not so bad” or arguing that the company lacked control in the situation due to an unforeseen event or missing information preceding the act or framing it as a humane accident (Benoit, 1997, 180). Coombs (2007, 171) refers to these strategies as the diminish crisis responses, while Huxman (2003, 295) argues them to be political ones. Either way, these strategies lean on the thought that if people see the organization only as partially responsible, or if the act isn’t considered to be as harmful, the threats to the image are significantly smaller (Benoit, 1997, 178). However, these strategies aimed at evading responsibility might be perceived by stakeholders as attempts to avoid accountability, particularly when the organization is clearly connected to the crisis. Similarly, reducing the offensiveness of the act may be seen as minimizing the actually significant issue. Again, if the organizations’ initial response strategy fails, mixing another crisis management response after a failed one may be harmful for the overall repair process (Benoit, 1997, 183; Coombs, 2007, 173). Especially in crises including workplace conditions or employee treatment, such responses may therefore risk further undermining stakeholder trust.

The following strategy, bolstering, involves emphasizing the organization’s positive qualities and reminding stakeholders of its past achievements in order to offset reputational damage after a crisis (Benoit, 1997, 179–180; Coombs, 2007, 172). By reminding stakeholders of its broader record of positive contributions, the organization attempts to frame the crisis event as inconsistent with its overall identity and values. According to Coombs (2007, 170) , bolstering strategies may also include praising the stakeholders for being of support to the organization during the crisis or victimizing the organization itself, presenting the situation as if the organization also deserves sympathy for facing accusations. These actions aim to counterbalance the organization’s image in the eyes of the public. When successful, using past positive associations, praising and claiming to be the victim of the crisis too may inflict some sympathy, but can easily backfire too. The effectiveness of bolstering may be especially limited in situations where the stakeholders expect the organizations to directly address the causes of the crisis. (Coombs, 2007, 170.) As in the previous strategies, in such cases emphasizing past achievements and trying to frame the situation into something it necessarily is not may be seen as trying to shift attention from the real issue rather than acknowledging responsibility, again ultimately risking undermining stakeholder trust.

Following the concept of acknowledging responsibility, as presented in previous literature: the final image repair strategy, mortification, refers to a strategy in which the organization accepts responsibility for the crisis and expresses remorse, often followed by an apology (Benoit, 1997, 181). In addition to owning the blame and expressing a full apology, mortification may include trying to compensate the damages made by offering remunerations to the ones mostly affected by the crisis (Coombs, 2007, 172). This approach is based on the assumption that an honest confession and a sincere apology can help restore stakeholder trust and mitigate reputational damage. In contrast to more defensive or prohibitive strategies, mortification signals alignment with societal standards and institutional expectations regarding responsibility and ethical conduct, which may support the restoration of organizational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995, 598) . Still, image repair strategy acknowledges the issue of even this honest strategy: admitting the blame might open the organization up for e.g. any lawsuits from affected parties (Benoit, 1997, 181). This thesis will, however, examine the role of mortification within other low-visibility image restoration strategies. Since apologizing does not necessarily require highly visible or continuous communication, briefly acknowledging responsibility may form a part of a broader response in which organizations combine limited public communication with concrete internal actions.

The contemporary media environment further complicates the organizations’ ability to control the crisis narrative and therefore manage the communication alone. Social media platforms enable stakeholders to actively participate in the dissemination and interpretation of crisis-related information, reducing the organizational control over the situation (see, e.g. Jin et al., 2014; Veil et al., 2011). Social media is argued to being able to take the effects of the crisis even further, since generating and transmitting misinformation is more and more common in the current media environment. Moreover, since the stakeholders of an organizations gain access to some information on social media, whether accurate or not, they are less likely to consider any alternative information afterwards. (Coombs & Holladay, 2023, 254–256.)

These limitations with the previous image repair strategies suggest that crisis recovery cannot be always achieved solely through high-visible communication strategies. Instead, organizations may sometime benefit from alternative responses that avoid the risk of getting blamed for an answer that is perceived as wrongful in the situation. Examining such alternative approaches may therefore provide additional insight into how organizations could restore legitimacy and rebuild employer image after crises.

3.2 Strategic silence as a response strategy

In contrast to traditional crisis management strategies that emphasize rapid and visible communication, organizations may adopt strategic silence as a deliberate response to reputational threats. Le et al. (2019, 163) define organizational strategic silence as vague and ambiguous, minimal communication or rather even lack thereof. This definition emphasizes the fact that for a silence to be strategic, it has to be an intentional choice – in contrast, “natural silence” is used when referring to a situation in which the company is forced to stay silent or there is a lack of clear responses or relevant information, which both signal more of a failure in communication rather than a strategic choice (Woon & Pang, 2017, 335).

Organizational strategic silence is then again divided into further groups: avoiding, hiding or delaying silence. The avoiding type is seen in situations in which the organization attempts to differentiate itself of the crisis altogether, ultimately hoping for the issues to go away. Hiding silence indicates that the organization is trying to withhold some information from the stakeholders, with no intent on revealing it later on either. (Le et al., 2019, 169.) In some of the literature, these types of silences are also referred to as evasive silence (Woon & Pang, 2017, 336). Both of these strategies can, however, be seen as inferior approaches to strategic silence, since the organizations are counting on the crisis merely disappearing as time passes. Therefore, they are also less relevant to the purpose of this thesis, since it aims to examine the effect of combining strategic silence with concrete corrective actions. For this reason, this research will be focusing on the last silence strategy, delaying silence.

With delaying silence, the intention is to communicate patience and active work-in-process in fixing the initial cause of the crisis (Le et al., 2019, 169). This can signal professionalism and seriousness in engrossing into the issues within the organization, since it conveys a message about the organization actively working on the solutions. The crucial part in this approach is, however, the intent of eventually breaking the silence (Le et al., 2019, 169). This differentiates the delaying strategy of the previous ones ceasing communication indefinitely. The logic behind delaying silence is therefore the silence working as a bridge between the crisis and later on being able to provide sufficient information and actual progress to the stakeholders.

No matter which silence strategy is used, at least a temporary information vacuum is generated in the eyes of the public. Information vacuums originate when a knowledge gap is formed between the demand for answers from the media and other parties and the organization's ability and willingness to provide information at that time (Woon & Pang, 2017, 347). However, as research shows, not all questions have to be answered immediately for the stakeholders to maintain trust in the organization. The main priority is that the information gap must be strived to be attentively sealed eventually to prevent any belated rumours from arising later on. (Woon & Pang, 2017, 347.) Inevitably, when an information gap is created due to delayed communication, the organization is left more vulnerable since it is not actively contributing to the stories formed about the situation, allowing other parties to shape the information with their own perceptions. While this too can be risky for an organization facing legitimacy threats, it can simultaneously prevent the risk of miscommunication during the crisis. As stated in previous chapters, choosing the right strategy of crisis communication is always precarious. Especially if failed, any of the active crisis communication choices can stir even more discontentment within the stakeholders and ultimately harm the organization's image further. If an approach with strategic silence is chosen, it can alleviate these effects since it eliminates the risk of "choosing the wrong story". Delaying the communication also allows some additional time for the crisis managers to analyse the reactions of the public and to later on frame the answers based on the evolving situation.

An important dimension of strategic silence concerns not only the decision to withhold communication, but also the timing and manner in which silence is eventually broken. Le et al. (2019, 169,174) argue that delaying silence may be effective only when it is followed by a well-planned and coherent response afterwards. In this sense, silence is not an end state but a temporary phase within a broader crisis response process.

The way in which the silence is eventually broken plays a critical role in shaping stakeholder evaluations. If organizations re-engage with the stakeholders by providing clear information, acknowledging responsibility where appropriate and demonstrating alignment between communication and organizational practices, the prior period of silence may be successfully interpreted as a strategic effort to ensure accuracy or credibility (Le et al., 2019, 174–175).

However, if the silence is prolonged excessively or followed by inconsistent or unconvincing communication, stakeholders may interpret the silence as avoidance, concealment or incompetence, therefore intensifying reputational damage. Studies also show that if the silence is, instead, broken forcefully due to changed circumstances or other factors, the organizational image is likely to get negatively affected even after the communication. Unintentional or poorly planned silence and the breakage may signal incompetence or corruption within the management, which could then again result in lasting damages on the reputation. (Le et al., 2019, 173.) The ideal time of when to break the silence is highly circumstantial, hence this thesis will not be examining or offering any prefabricated response times for varied situations. However, as the research's findings show, the recommended timing is when the organization has had enough time to gather information on the situation or made appropriate adjustments to its operations, in order to present credible responses to the stakeholders (Le et al., 2019, 173–174). Breaking the silence represents a critical stage in the recovery process, as it shows how the organization positions itself in relation to the stakeholder expectations. The transition from silence to ultimately communication therefore requires careful consideration of both timing and content.

In crises related to internal organizational practices, such as working conditions or employee treatment, strategic silence may present both potential benefits and significant risks. Unlike externally driven crises, these situations often involve uncertainty, conflicting accounts and especially incomplete information regarding organizational practices. In such contexts, immediate and highly visible communication may lead to premature or inconsistent statements, which can further undermine credibility (Coombs, 2007, 173). With rapid statements, there is also no way for the organization to communicate any changes actually made to correct the situation, since it has not had the time to examine the situation and discover the actions needed to change the narrative. Strategic silence may therefore provide organizations with additional time for assessment and alignment before engaging in public communication, ultimately giving them at least some control over the crisis (Le et al., 2019, 174).

However, the effectiveness of strategic silence is again highly contingent to stakeholder interpretation and the overall narrative of the crisis. When the employer stays silent in workplace well-being controversies, the lack of response may be interpreted as avoidance or unwillingness to address the issue. In such cases, the silence may create an informational vacuum which is then filled with stakeholder-generated narratives, such as employees' experiences and speculation shared through social media, all of which the organization has limited ability to control (Coombs & Holladay, 2023, 254–255; Pang et al., 2022, 225; Woon & Pang, 2017, 374).

Potentially as a partial answer to this issue, Le et al. (2019, 174–175) suggests the use of a first-response statement before delaying further communication, as it briefly signals a work-in-process without stating any definitive answers, therefore justifying the following silence better. This could aid the organization to not face criticization for withholding information and helps to minimize later distractions from focusing on investigating the issue, as the public's craving for communication is shortly satisfied. Especially when the investigation and concrete corrective steps to be taken can be estimated to take time, the need for a short statement before silence may increase. (Le et al., 2019, 174–175.) As briefly recognized in previous chapters of this thesis, mortification could function to complement less communication-intensive approaches by providing an initial sign of accountability while allowing organizations to focus on corrective actions that support long-term legitimacy restoration. Corporate apology has been defined as the organization's public statement in response to past violations, which are further understood as any negative events posing significant threats to the organization's reputation, expressed through combined elements of message content, spokesperson, timing and delivery method (Shao et al., 2022, 3420–3421). Though publicly expressed, previous literature suggests that corporate apology, because of its four key elements (content, timing, spokesperson and delivery method), can be strategically shaped to fit the chosen crisis communication method (Shao et al., 2022, 3420) . Recognizing this possibility then again strengthens the suggestion that mortification as a first-response statement could potentially be executed also within the low-communication framework examined in this thesis.

The role of an apology in organizational controversies has been researched widely, and it is continuously concluded that stakeholders, first, expect the organization to apologise for its misdeeds and express concern for the victims (Coombs & Holladay, 2023, 591). In contrast to other crisis response strategies, mortification is seen as more appropriate along with following corrective actions (Benoit & Drew, 1997, 158–159; Sellnow et al., 1998, 70). Therefore, if the organizations expressed remorse already within the primary first-response, it could help alleviate the critique they would potentially face afterwards.

3.3 The role of concrete organizational actions and internal changes

Corrective action in image repair strategies is previously acknowledged and defined as a response in which the organization promises to resolve the issue, either by restoring the original state of affair before the crisis or promising to prevent the act in the future (Benoit, 1997, 181; Bundy et al., 2017, 1673). Although the role of concrete actions is therefore noted in the image repair theory, this conceptualization places emphasis on the communication of intent, rather than the implementation of actual organizational change. This once again highlights the research gap that exists in the commonly cited theories of previous crisis communication. Benoit (1997, 184) too, highlights a crucial issue within the communication-centred reputation repair strategies – if the organization's actions do not fulfil its promises, the image restoration process will backfire. Therefore, even when communicating responsibility to the stakeholders through visible strategies, the words need to be followed by actions to support the credibility. When organizations fail to demonstrate tangible improvements, their responses may be interpreted as symbolic or performative, thereby undermining trust (Benoit, 1997, 184). Moreover, when following the low-communication, action-centred crisis response framework established in this thesis, the role of corrective actions is arguably even more crucial as communication is limited and organizational corrective action itself becomes the key element of communicating change to stakeholders. This then again signals the attempt to adapt to the institutional expectations again, gradually regaining legitimacy as an organization as the practices realign with societal norms. (Suchman, 1995, 597–598.)

Building on this, a distinction can be made between promised corrective actions and implemented corrective actions. While the former operates primarily at the level of communication, the latter refers to the actual, tangible changes in organizational practices that address the root cause of the crisis. Implemented corrective actions can be understood as not only operational adjustments – they also function as signals through which organizations communicate commitment, accountability and intent. In crisis situations, stakeholders are eager to know that steps are taken to fix or prevent future recurrence of the problems (Benoit, 1997, 184). Such evidence is often derived from observable actions besides merely stated intentions and traditional crisis discourse, which again support the need for concrete operations for legitimacy restoration (Suchman, 1995, 586). Concrete organizational actions can simultaneously enable the organization to continue its functions, express mortification to stakeholders, compensate victims and demonstrate commitment to resolving and correcting the causes of the crisis (Sellnow et al., 1998, 70).

To further illustrate the relationship between all the different crisis response strategies discussed in the previous sections, Figure 2 presents a visual representation of crisis responses along the dimensions of visibility and symbolic-substantive orientation. The figure highlights how crisis management strategies differ not only in their level of communication visibility, but also in the extent to which they rely on symbolic and rhetorical framing or substantive organizational action.

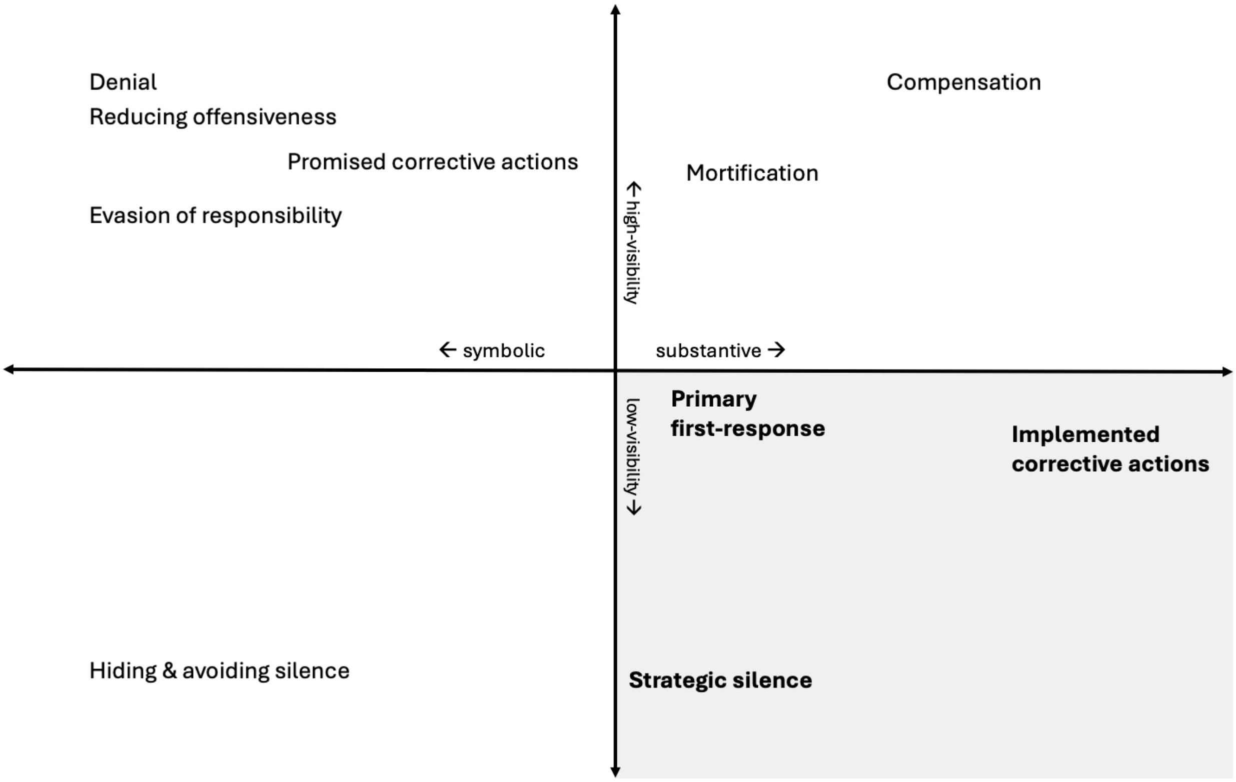

Figure 2. Positioning of crisis response strategies along visibility and symbolic-substantive dimensions (developed from Benoit, 1997, 179; Le et al., 2019, 169; Sellnow et al., 1998, 70)

As illustrated in Figure 2, strategies such as denial, evasion of responsibility and reducing offensiveness are positioned towards the highly visible and symbolic side, as they rely heavily on explanations, justification and narrative management (Benoit, 1997, 179–180). Promised corrective actions similarly lean towards the upper-left corner of the model, since they emphasize communicated intent instead of the actual changes (Benoit, 1997, 181; Bundy et al., 2017, 1673). Corrective actions and compensation, in contrast, are located towards the substantive side, because they involve more tangible responses addressing the causes of the crisis. Mortification falls somewhere between these dimensions, as it combines visible communication and acknowledgement of responsibility with the possibility of more substantive elements (Benoit & Drew, 1997, 158–159; Sellnow et al., 1998, 70). The lower part of the model illustrates different forms of lower-visibility responses: evasive forms of strategic silence are positioned towards the symbolic side due to their passive and avoidance-oriented nature, as they function by withholding communication without addressing the underlying issues (Le et al., 2019, 169). Delayed strategic silence, however, is positioned closer to the substantive dimension, as it can be understood as a temporary reduction of public communication intended to support internal investigation and organizational change. The shaded area in the figure therefore illustrates the integrated framework proposed in this thesis, where strategic silence, potentially preceded by a primary first-response where needed, is combined with corrective actions as part of the legitimacy restoration process.

Previous crisis communication research and image repair theories suggest that effective crisis responses are rarely based on a single strategy, but rather on the combination of multiple response elements (Benoit, 1997, 184; Sellnow et al., 1998, 71; Suchman, 1995, 586). In particular, the combination of strategic silence followed by corrective actions, potentially supplemented with a brief first-response of mortification, provides a fresh angle to the field and a more comprehensive approach to legitimacy restoration than e.g. communication-cantered strategies alone. Strategic silence, as examined in the previous chapter of this thesis, aims to communicate patience and active work-in-process without making any high-visibility statements (Le et al., 2019, 169). After this, the corrective actions in turn form the substantive core of this combined approach. As previously discussed, the distinction between promised and implemented actions is critical as stakeholders evaluate observable elements of correction rather than stated intentions (Benoit, 1997, 184). Therefore, though not literally expressing any precise statements or promises of the outcome, strategic silence may also fail if not followed by visible progress or results of the work completed during the silent period.

This approach is particularly salient in crises related to workplace well-being, where stakeholder evaluations of legitimacy are strongly influenced by perceptions of how employees are treated. In such contexts, credibility is closely tied to whether organizations can demonstrate that they ensure both the physical and emotional safety of its employees (Madden & Eng, 2022, 563–564). By addressing the situation internally, the image the employees have of their employer may gradually transfer also to the external stakeholder perceptions. Because of the increasingly transparent information about workplace conditions, both potential employees and other stakeholders have access to current state of affairs in the workplace after a crisis (De Neve & Ward, 2025, 150–151).

Overall, these insights highlight that post-crisis recovery depends not only on what organizations communicate, verbally or non-verbally, but how they translate their responses into tangible organizational practices and concrete evidence of change. The alignment between different strategies used is crucial for a successful crisis management strategy, regarding of which communication strategy is paired with the action-centred method. As established within this thesis, combining strategic silence with an action-forward strategy may prove successful in real-life situations. Based on the preceding discussion, the framework proposed in this thesis consists of three sequential elements: a temporary period of strategic silence, implementation of corrective actions and finally re-engagement with stakeholders. The following section will examine and evaluate the effectiveness of the suggested framework by applying this perspective to practical example cases.

4 Illustrative cases of workplace well-being controversies

To illustrate the applicability of the proposed framework, two workplace-related crisis case organizations – Jungle Juice Bar and Hesburger – are briefly examined. These cases represent different approaches to crisis response in situations involving employee treatment and working conditions, allowing for a comparative assessment of how strategic silence and concrete corrective actions may influence recovery outcomes.

4.1 Jungle Juice Bar

Public criticism regarding working conditions in a Finnish smoothie bar chain, Jungle Juice Bar, gained visibility through employee accounts and media coverage, which highlighted concerns related to recruitment practices, workload and managerial behaviour (Yle, 2023). A few years prior to this, the same organization faced another workplace-related crisis, when a former employee was laid off during the trial period (Helsingin Uutiset, 2018). Together, these episodes suggest a pattern in which internal workplace issues became publicly visible and affected stakeholder perceptions about the organization as an employer. In line with crisis communication research, such coverage is likely to influence how stakeholders attribute responsibility and evaluate the organization's response (Coombs, 2007, 164).

Initially, the organization's response relied primarily on communicative strategies, including both evasive comments with a partial denial and acknowledgement and expressions of intent to improve (Iltalehti, 2018a, 2018b). While the latter may signal accountability, the mix of communication strategies used may have confused stakeholders about the actual intentions of the company, ultimately doing precious little in improving the situation. Moreover, as Benoit (1997, 184) notes, image repair strategies may backfire if the communication is not matched with corresponding action, as stakeholders ultimately evaluate credibility based on observable outcomes. The organization's employer image stayed tarnished for several years, until actual changes were made and the new chief executive officer undertook the lead. Only then did the internal employer image begin to evolve through the employees' lived experiences, which were then subsequently reflected in external stakeholder interpretations. This shift becomes evident in later media coverage during the latter employer image crisis, where accounts from former employees – primarily reflecting earlier organizational practices before changes made – remain critical towards the employer, while current employees tend to describe more positive experiences despite acknowledging ongoing issues. (Yle, 2023.) This contrast suggests that improvements in internal practices and changes in management had begun to reshape employee perceptions, which on turn contributed to a more favourable overall image. As a result and in line with the SSCT's findings, subsequent crises appear to have been met with a more resilient base of stakeholder trust, potentially enabling faster recovery compared to earlier periods (Coombs, 2007, 165).

Compared to the earlier crisis, the organization seems to have relied less on highly visible communication and more on concrete corrective actions, as suggested by the limited number of public statements available from that period. However, despite sharing some of the main elements, this approach does not fully align with the framework suggested in this thesis. While the organization shifted towards a more action-centred response and limited communication, it did not signal a clear transition out of the non-communicative phase. The organization did introduce transparent communication about its workplace ethics and sustainability, e.g. reporting the monthly workplace well-being questionnaire results on its web page (Jungle Juice Bar, n.d.). However, no official post-crisis statements were made that would have explicitly marked the corrective actions, leaving stakeholders forced to actively search for this information rather than the organization articulating the implemented reforms publicly. Utilizing the silent period to improve internal practices still appears to have proven effective, since besides merely bettering the internal image, the organization was also externally recognized when the CEO of the time, Elli Holappa, was chosen as the "Most People-Centric Leader" of Human Power awards 2024 (Human Power, n.d.). Nevertheless, this approach may have missed reaching its full potential, by not leveraging the value of delayed communication and breaking the silence with careful intention. By combining action-centred response with strategic silence and then communicating the executed changes by re-engaging with the stakeholders promptly, Jungle Juice Bar could have been able to win back the stakeholder trust much sooner.

4.2 Hesburger

A somewhat different response trajectory can be observed in the case of Hesburger, where a scandal emerged and quickly spread after the fast-food chain published a "Responsible employer" -campaign, which appeared to blatantly differ from the lived reality of the employees working in the restaurants (Yle, 2021b). In contrast to a low-visibility communication, the organizations initially relied on highly visible and defensive communication, which appears to have contributed to only intensifying the crisis.

Public statements from company representatives included e.g. dismissing the employee accounts as unrepresentative of reality, undermining accountability of the situation (Iltalehti, 2021a). The chief operating officer tried to contextualize the situation by emphasizing the organization's operational constraints as a business unit and justify the critique it faced by framing the recruitment campaign – which originally started the crisis – as a response to staff shortages and thereby suggesting the blame to be misplaced, for the organization was already "trying to do better" (Yle, 2021a). These types of responses align with image repair strategies such as reducing offensiveness and evasion of responsibility and similarly reflects the SCCT's response patterns where organizations attempt to mitigate perceived responsibility by victimization and justification (Benoit, 1997, 179; Coombs, 2007, 170–172). However, such strategies can be seen as less effective and more harmful in similar situations, as they may be perceived as dismissive or defensive rather than responsive and solution-oriented. In this case, the management's reliance on justification and denial created a contrast so visible compared to the thousands of conflicting comments from employees, it ultimately weakened the credibility of the response and reinforced negative perceptions when the stakeholders adopted the competing frame. (Coombs, 2007, 171).

Following the initial phase of defensive communication, Hesburger then changed strategies and adopted a public apology before proceeding to the concrete actions (Iltalehti, 2021b; Yle, 2021c). The organization then published an official plan outlining measures to improve workplace conditions (Hesburger, 2021). This transition reflects a move towards corrective action along with the mortification, where the organization accepts the blame, acknowledges the need for change and promises to take steps to fix the issues (Benoit, 1997, 181–182). Importantly, these measures appear to have extended beyond the level of communicated intent. By making the planned actions visible and over time implementing them in practice, the organization provided stakeholders with observable signals of commitment and change. From a legitimacy perspective, this gradual alignment between organizational practices and institutional expectations may have contributed mainly to restoring trust and credibility (Suchman, 1995, 598). This recovery is further supported by external recognition, since Hesburger was nominated, though not awarded, among the top organizations in the Human Power's "Most People-Centric Employer" -category in 2025, suggesting the success in making the internal efforts visible in broader reflections of Hesburger's employer image (Hesburger, 2025; Human Power 26, n.d.). In addition to this, Hesburger was also ranked among the top three contestants in "Employer Brand of the Year 2025" in Rekrygaala. According to the organizer of the event, the category recognizes employer that have systematically developed an attractive employer brand through long-term strategic brand-building rather than individual campaigns. (Rekrygaala, n.d..) These recognitions suggest that improvements in internal practices were not only experienced by employees but also translated into a more positive external employer image, supporting the argument that implemented corrective actions can have a lasting impact on stakeholder perceptions.

When evaluated through the framework developed in this thesis, this case highlights a key limitation related to the timing and sequencing of communication. The organization engaged in highly visible communication at an early stage, before sufficient internal alignment had been achieved, which appears to have led to intensifying the crisis. By responding immediately and visibly, the organization increased the risk of inconsistency between its public statements and employees' lived reality, which forced them to alternate between several conflicting communication styles during the public crisis. This, as mentioned in crisis communication research, is likely to inflict confusion and mistrust in the audience (Coombs, 2007, 173). Therefore, although an official apology and corrective actions were eventually implemented, their impact may have been delayed due to the opposing communication the organization initially relied on. The low-visibility and action-centred framework instead proposes more of a structured sequencing of response elements. In this case, a brief initial acknowledgement of the issue in the shape of a primary first-response, potentially incorporating some elements of early mortification, may have served to signal awareness and responsibility without having to commit to any specific claims (Benoit & Drew, 1997, 158–159; Le et al., 2019, 174–175). This could then have been followed by a period of reduced communication, during which concrete corrections are implemented. Only after such actions have been established should the organization have re-engaged with stakeholders through more visible communication, thereby allowing claims to be substantiated by observable change.

5 Conclusions

This thesis examined how organizations can restore employer image and legitimacy after workplace well-being –related crises, focusing on the role of low-visibility communication and concrete corrective actions. The study was structured around three sub-questions, which together clarify how employer image recovery can be understood, why such responses may be viable and in which contexts they may be effectively applied.

The first sub-question aimed to find a definition for employer image recovery point in a post-crisis context. Based on the theoretical discussion, employer image recovery cannot be merely reduced to a decrease in the negative media attention or a short-term reputational improvement. Instead, recovery is better understood as the gradual process of legitimacy recreation, in which stakeholders reassess whether the organization's practices, values and communication are once again aligned with broader expectation and norms. Through this process, the organization regains acceptance as a credible and desirable employer, which can then be seen as the point of recovery.

The second question examined why low-communication and action-centred responses can be considered viable strategies in legitimacy restoration processes. The findings suggest that the viability in such responses is rooted in how stakeholders evaluate organizational credibility. Rather than relying solely on immediate and visible communication, stakeholders tend to assess whether the organizations' actions align with the promises. In this context, the distinction between promised corrective actions and implemented corrective actions becomes critical. While communication may articulate intent, the legitimacy restoration depends on whether this intent is translated into observable change. Low-communication approaches, specifically combining delayed silence with a possible brief primary first-response, may therefore enhance credibility by allowing organizations to first align internal practices with external expectations before making public claims. When communication is delayed until the situation has been investigated and corrective actions can be supported with tangible evidence of change, the organization also may avoid the mistrust and confusion that often follow premature or defensive statements.

The last sub-question aimed to confine the situations in which this approach may be considered useful. Based on the theoretical analysis and the illustrative cases, the framework appears particularly relevant in crises related to internal organizational practices, such as working conditions, workplace culture, leadership and employee treatment. In these contexts, stakeholders are likely to evaluate the situation through the visible changes and how the organization addresses the root of the crisis. Since these contexts also involve the employees of the organization, internal perceptions of the organization are likely to spread further into the external perceptions through social media, which makes it even more crucial for organizations to handle the issues by internal corrections to better manage the employer image.

In response to the main research question, the analysis indicates that strategic silence and concrete corrective actions can positively contribute to employer image recovery, when communication is intentionally delayed and supported by internal changes. Taken together, these findings suggest that employer image recovery may not always be adequately executed through highly communicative strategies alone. Although much of the previous crisis communication literature has strongly emphasized the importance of visible and timely reacting, the analysis through this study indicates that stakeholder evaluations are often shaped not only by communications, but the way how organizational practices align with the socially constructed norms. Without such alignment, conflicting communication may not only fail to restore trust but even undermine it further. This contrast could be seen in the case examples, where the earlier responses had to be revoked due to their ineffectiveness, ultimately creating even more confusion and scepticism. This thesis therefore contributes to prior literature by filling a visible gap in crisis communication research, in which low-communication and action-centred response strategies have received considerably less attention than the ones based on active communication. The contribution to international business research, specifically, is evident when situating employer image recovery within the broader context of institutional complexity. Multinational enterprises and other internationally operating organizations must manage employer legitimacy in environments where the expectations are shaped by both global norms and local institutional contexts. Even though not all workplace-related crises spread widely, the analysis suggests that employer image remains highly relevant in IB concerns, because the risks associated with employee treatment, transparency and organizational credibility have the potential to affect organizational attractiveness across markets. This makes this topic particularly important in global talent competition, where employer image increasingly functions as a critical strategic resource. By shifting the analytical focus from communication alone to the interaction between silence and implemented corrective action, this thesis offers a new perspective on how employer image may be rebuilt after a crisis.

This study is, however, subject to several limitations. Firstly, the analysis is based on limited number of case examples both operating in service industry, specifically in the restaurant sector, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, the reliance on publicly available sources, including media reports and the organizations' own web pages, may introduce bias in how organizational actions and stakeholder perceptions are represented. Additionally, though including the brief case analyses, the thesis and the framework presented is solely conceptual, since it has not been empirically tested across a broader set of contexts. Future research could build on these findings by focusing on empirical examination of the relationship between strategic silence and corrective actions across different industries and cultural settings. In particular, quantitative studies could provide further insight into how the timing of communication influences the credibility of strategic silence and delayed communication. Additionally, future research could include exploring how organizations can effectively signal internal change to external audiences in increasingly transparent digital environments to manage the employer image beyond merely trusting in the way internal perceptions gradually transfer into external ones.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Explanation of the use of AI

Artificial intelligence was used in a limited and supportive role during the preparation of this thesis. The use of AI complies with the academic integrity guidelines of the University of Turku, and the author takes full responsibility for all content presented in this thesis. The tool used was OpenAI's ChatGPT (5.3).

Purpose of the use:

AI was used to support the ideation, composing and reviewing processes. Specifically, it was used to refine the initial research topic, explore potential research gaps within the topic and to assist in identifying relevant academic literature. During the composing phase, AI was utilized to improve the clarity and academic tone of the text and correct the grammar by proofreading the text. AI was not used to independently generate any theoretical arguments, conduct analysis or produce final content. All of the interpretations, arguments and conclusions are of the author's own production and any suggestions by AI were carefully reviewed and edited.

Examples of the prompts used:

Rewrite this paragraph in a more academic tone while keeping exactly the original meaning.

Is the structure logical based on the table of contents?

Check for unnecessary repetition between these two chapters.

Is this term used correctly in academic context?

No confidential, sensitive or unpublished data was shared with AI tools. All academic references were independently read and cited in accordance with the academic guidelines.