# PERSUASION TACTICS USED IN CORPORATE AND ACTIVISTS' COMMUNICATION

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**ABSTRACT**

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Persuasion or persuasive attempts are inevitable part of human communication. The process of convincing someone to change their attitude, belief, or behavior is vital for corporate communication. Scholars have been researching persuasion as a phenomenon to understand triggers that alter human's behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. Many persuasion theories are widely applied in marketing and corporate communication. The role of persuasion in communication can be positive or negative. When used for unethical purposes, persuasion can lead to manipulation and exploitation. In recent years, the phenomenon of misinformation has risen big concern in the society. Misinformation appears and is spread by various sources: news media, companies, offline and online gossip, etc. (Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2019). In many cases, misinformation is so powerful due to its high persuasiveness that triggers audiences to alter their behaviors, thoughts, and beliefs.

This study aims to understand the usage of persuasion tactics by different actors when talking about the same case accused of misinformation. To approach this phenomenon, a theoretical framework of persuasive tactics in misinforming messages was created. Later the framework is used to evaluate the selected case: KLM and Fossielvrij NL communication about Fly Responsibly campaign that was accused of misinformation. The objective of the research is to understand which persuasion tactics are utilized by the company and activists to communicate about the case accused of misinformation and compare persuasion tactics used to see the approaches chosen to persuade the audience. The nature of this study is a qualitative study with an abductive approach. The empirical data was collected through netnography of two webpages created by the company and activists that specifically addressed the Fly Responsibly campaign. Data was analyzed through content analysis applying the developed framework. Based on the results, it based visible that company and activists used different persuasion tactics in their communication. The company was creating a vision of KLM being a partner helping customers, appear likable and acting in a socially encouraged manner. Whilst activists through their communication portray KLM as an authority that can be seen as an expert by others, and consequently, mislead them by "overusing" their trust.

Keywords: Persuasion tactics, misinformation, corporate communication, activists' communication

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# 1   INTRODUCTION

## 1.1   Introduction and justification of the study

Persuasion or persuasive attempts are inevitable part of human communication. The process of convincing someone to change their attitude, belief, or behavior is vital in personal, corporate public communication (Gunden et al., 2020). We are surrounded by persuasive attempts everywhere: in content we consume, at home, at educational institutions and workplaces. The ability to persuade others is a powerful tool in many aspects of life, from personal relationships to business and politics.

Clearly, such a big part of human communication has attracted many scholars, who were trying to conceptualize and understand what makes messages persuasive, how can one be persuaded or, opposingly, resist persuasive attempts. Over decades of research, it has been found that persuasion involves using various strategies and tactics to influence the thoughts and behaviors of the listener. These strategies can include appealing to emotions, using logic and reasoning, providing evidence or proof, and using social proof or authority (Cialdini, 2014; Kraemer & Mosler, 2010; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986).

Persuasion is a critically important element of corporate communication as it is essential for influencing stakeholders' attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, in corporate communication, persuasion can be used to achieve organizational objectives such as promoting a product or service, gaining support for an idea, creating positive brand image or motivating employees to take action.

The role of persuasion in communication can be positive or negative. When used ethically and responsibly, persuasion can be a powerful tool for positive change, such as persuading someone to adopt healthy behaviors or support a worthy cause (Lee & Nguyen, 2013). However, when used for unethical purposes, persuasion can lead to manipulation and exploitation. For instance, in such phenomenon as misinformation, persuasiveness is vital. In many cases, misinformation is so powerful due to its high persuasiveness that triggers audiences to alter their behaviors, thoughts, and beliefs.

Misinformation has become one of the biggest issues that modern society faces. The misinformation crisis became possible predominantly due to the rise of social media and other online platforms that make it easy for false information to spread rapidly and widely (Wu et al.,2019). Misinformation can be found on a wide range of topics. For instance, misinformation is very common in such areas as:

*Health*

In recent years, a concern about misinformation about health became immensely important, because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of anti-vaccine misinformation. False information about health and medicine can be particularly harmful as it can lead people to make choices that negatively impact their health (Chou et al., 2020). Misinformation on this topic can include false claims about the effectiveness of treatments or the safety of certain procedures, as well as conspiracy theories about the origins of diseases (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021).

*Politics and catastrophes*

After the US presidential elections of 2016, misinformation in the pollical sphere gained a lot of attention. In this area, misinformation can include false claims about political candidates or their policies (Lee, 2019). In addition, major events like terrorist attacks or natural disasters also trigger the generation of various conspiracy theories.

*Science and environment*

Misinformation on science and technology topics can appear because of individual's lack of information about the phenomena as well as malicious reasons. Range from false claims about UFOs or conspiracy theories about new technologies like 5G can be considered misinformation in this area (Roozenbeek et al., 2020; Scheufele et al., 2021; Hanley et al., 2023). Environmental misinformation is false or inaccurate information that is spread about environmental issues, often with the goal of promoting certain agendas or ideologies. This can include false claims about the causes and effects of climate change, the safety and effectiveness of certain environmental policies, and the impacts of human activities on the environment (Treen et al., 2020).

Additionally, it was suggested that misinformation can harm democracy in several ways. First, it can undermine public trust in government institutions, as people become increasingly skeptical of the information they receive from official sources. This can lead to a breakdown in communication between citizens and their elected representatives, making it more difficult to reach a consensus and make informed decisions.

Second, misinformation can create a polarized political climate in which people are more likely to retreat into their own ideological bubbles, rather than engaging in open and honest debate with those who hold different views. This can lead to a breakdown in communication and a lack of understanding between different groups, making it more difficult to achieve consensus and make informed decisions (Brown, 2018; West & Bergstrom, 2021; McKay & Tenove, 2021).

Finally, misinformation can lead to a breakdown in democratic norms and values, as people become more willing to accept and promote false information that supports their pre-existing beliefs, rather than engaging in critical thinking and fact-checking (Brown, 2018). This can undermine the very foundation of a democratic society, which depends on a shared commitment to truth, fairness, and accountability.

To cause all previously mentioned consequences, a misinforming message should be persuasive. Previous research found that misinformation can persuade through emotional appeals, addressing confirmation bias, social influence, or cognitive overload (Garrett, 2016; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Bastick, 2021; Susmann & Wegener, 2022) The current study contributes to the understanding of the ways persuasive tactics are used in misinforming messages.

Research on persuasion tactics in misinformation is important since it can aid to understand the causes that contribute to its spread and the consequences it can cause in various areas. Through this, researchers can develop effective interventions to counter false information.

As misinformation is such a big issue, many social actors try to fight it. Activists are one of the most vocal groups when it comes to countering misinformation (Suwana, 2020). One of the methods used by activists is calling out actors that create and spread misinforming messages. Sometimes big corporations become these actors in their corporate social responsibility initiatives. The cases of a big company with a well-established brand being called out for misinformation create significant negative publicity for the company and can have negative consequences for the business. For instance, in the most negative cases, when no results are achieved but publicity, some activists' organizations are taking companies to court (Scheidel, 2020). In these cases, both parties need to communicate their arguments and persuade audiences and the court to take their side.

## 1.2  Study objective and research questions

This study aims to understand the usage of persuasion tactics by different actors when talking about the same case accused of misinformation. To approach this phenomenon, the theoretical concept of various theories of persuasion and way of using communication for misinformation will be placed within the context of a specific case

concerning misinformation. The selected case addressed a phenomenon of activists calling out airline company KLM for misinforming ads and taking it to court. Comparing the persuasiveness of activists' and company's communication on the topic that was publicly claimed to be misinforming is the main idea of this research.

*Objective of the study*

To understand which persuasion tactics a company and activists utilize to communicate about the case accused of misinformation, and to compare the tactics chosen to persuade the audience.

*Research questions*

The first research question aims to understand the persuasion and misinformation narratives used in KLM Fly Responsibly misinformation.

*Research question 1:*
*Which persuasive tactics borderline misinformation in corporate communication?*

The second research question's main purpose is to compare which persuasion tactics the company and activists operate when talking about the same campaign that was accused of misinformation.

*Research question 2:*
*How do persuasion tactics differ in activists and company´s communication?*

This study aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of persuasion tactics used by different actors when talking about misinformation. Due to the fact that the concept of misinformation and activists hijacking corporate messages through calling out the brand is relatively new, at the moment these topics do not have a vast theoretical base created concerning the persuasiveness of such communication. To address this research gap, it was decided to create a framework that can be used to understand and analyze the persuasiveness of various types of misinformation. It was done, via literature review on theories of persuasion for the past decades, the most common theories of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, process of attitude changes and principles of persuasion were addressed to form an understanding of how a narrative can be persuasive. Additionally, literature on narratives that are used in misinforming messages was also utilized. As a result, the framework for analyzing persuasion tactics used in misinformation was created and can be seen as the main theoretical contribution of this research.

This framework was used in netnographical research and content analysis to understand the correlation between certain types of misinformation and persuasion tactics. Firstly, an analysis of content from activists' website was done. Secondly, by going through the same process, the company's webpage was analyzed. Through that it was possible to understand that there were specific persuasion tactics used in this case. Additionally, the study found several core differences in how company and activists frame their messages to persuade target audiences.

## 1.3   Structure of the study

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapters Two and Three present a literature review on the topics of persuasion and misinformation. Chapter Four presents the theoretical framework of persuasive tactics in misinforming messages. Chapter Five describes the case of KLM and Fossielvrij NL lawsuit on the Fly Responsibly campaign in detail. Chapter Six presents a methodology of the research. The results are illustrated in Chapter Seven. Finally, Chapter Eight contains a conclusion based on the evaluation of the results, describes limitations of this study, as well as provides directions for further research.  It is important to note that AI-based large language models (Chat GPT) have been used in this thesis for preliminary investigation of areas, in which misinformation and brand hijackings are common.

# 2   PERSUASION

Persuasion is often defined as a process of deliberate attempting to alter other individual's or groups' beliefs, views, and behaviour (Gunden et al., 2020; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b). Typical examples of it can be seen in various real-life situations. Persuasion appears when one's expressed opinion changes, shapes, or influences the opinion of other people in the group (Mustaffa et al. 2019; Dayton & Zelley, 2004). As well, any shift of thoughts or behaviour as an impact of external messages from advertising, printed material, or any other information source (Van Reijmersdal & van Dam, 2020). In general, it can be stated that the process of providing information on a topic can be referred to as a persuasion attempt if it aims to bring about a change in the information receiver's behaviour.

## 2.1   Theories of persuasion in the modern world

In the last decades, persuasion has been an important concept in communication, marketing, and consumer psychology (Gunden et al. 2020). One of the purposes of companies doing marketing is to shift the target audience to become real customers (Hubspot, n.d).  Thus, an organization needs to persuade them that they need its product or services. They can be either influenced by marketing communication directly or persuaded by the people they know who were impacted by the communications before (Kotler, et al., 2017). Therefore, knowledge and application of persuasion theories and tactics become crucial factor for success. As to consumer psychology, understating persuasion as a concept can help practitioners to understand the triggers of consumer behavior and decision processes (Samson & Voyer, 2012).

Potential and existing customers receive digital corporate information in vast amounts every day. Primarily these messages are persuasive attempts that aim to alter people's opinions and actions in a desired way that will benefit the organisation (persuasion agent). Audiences (persuasion targets) are put into a position where they need to interpret and process the information, which leads them to developing their understanding of tactics used in corporate persuasion attempts (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Therefore, people do not simply believe and perform desired actions, but rather evaluate the information, infer motives that guided a message, and respond based on

these inferences (Ham & Kim, 2019). This process is known as a persuasion knowledge of an individual.

*Persuasion knowledge*

Persuasion knowledge can be defined as an intuitive understanding of underlying tactics motives and goals in perceived communication messages and forming responses to persuasion based on it (Friestad & Wright, 1994; Ham & Kim, 2019). It plays a significant role in attitude change held by audiences (persuasion targets). Often decisions that a made by persuasion targets are defensive (Verlegh et al., 2015). Especially it is present when evaluating selling content or crisis responses (ex. A press release addressing a corporate crisis) (Robinson et al., 2001; Kim & Nam, 2019). In other words, people tend to resist the message when the person knows he/she is being under a persuasion attempt. However, in order to develop persuasion knowledge, an individual needs to be able to distinguish the cases then he/she is exposed to a persuasion attempt. Several studies have identified that the overall level of erudition led to higher identification of persuasive intentions (Nelson, 2016; Waiguny et al., 2014).

The fact that over time target audiences become more aware of corporate persuasion tactics, and tend to make more informed decisions, formed a need for corporate communication practitioners to search for persuasion tactics that would help to establish a relationship based on trust and mutual benefit (Kotler et al, 2017; Chen & Cheng, 2020). Thus, the audience of the organisation would not feel manipulated. Corporate communicators are finding newer persuasion techniques to promote to, communicate with and engage their target audiences. This is one of the triggers for persuasion research. Scholars have been analysing and conceptualising persuasion for many decades. The researchers were suggesting many theories on how persuasion works. Some of the were concentrating on ethical ways of persuasion, others attempted to structure the stages of persuasion, and thirds described information processing stages.

*Factors influencing the persuasion process*

As follows from previously said, the core idea behind creating persuasion theories by scholars was the need to find a theoretical understanding of the persuasion process and its further advancement. Due to the fact that persuasion is a highly individual process, there is no unified theory that would work in every situation (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999). Among the factors that influence the persuasion process is content,

an individual's involvement and attitude towards a topic, one's emotions, perceived benefit, etc. (Kraemer & Mosler, 2010). Persuasion variables that can have an impact on persuasion success are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Variables influencing individual's persuasion adapted from Kraemer & Mosler (2010)

| Persuasion variable | Characteristics |
|---|---|
| Involvement | Personal involvement in the topic is a recipient's belief that the issue has a significant impact on one's own life and is perceived with an instinct important. Thus, the elaboration of the message goes through the central route of the ELM and results into a lasting attitude change (Bae, 2008; Kraemer & Mosler, 2010). |
| Attitude | Attitude is a tendency to react to information positively or negatively (Kraemer & Mosler, 2010). It has an ability to impact behavioural intentions (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986a). Thus, creating a positive attitude towards an issue is crucial for persuasion success. |
| Habit | If an individual has formed a habit of certain behaviour, one is less likely to change this behaviour through persuasion (Kraemer & Mosler, 2010) |
| Affect | Emotional states facilitate persuasion and altering behaviour. Inducing strong emotions like anger or sadness can directly influence the types of action an individual will choose (Rucker & Petty, 2004) |
| Knowledge | Better knowledge about the subject can increase likelihood of taking an action when persuaded to do so (Kraemer & Mosler, 2010). |
| Beliefs | Beliefs are impacting intentions for actions. It was found to be possible to alter beliefs through persuasion attempts (Jalnawala & Wilkin, 2007 cited in Kraemer & Mosler, 2010). |
| Perceived benefit | Perceived benefit is highly important in persuasion attempts, since an individual gets persuaded easier when there is an evidently good cost-to-benefit ratio (Kraemer & Mosler, 2010). |
| Ability | The more a persuasion target is capable of processing an incoming information, the more persuasive power this |

| | information carries (Pierro et al., 2005). Ability determines the route of processing. |
|---|---|
| Social influence | When majority of people around or role models are behaving in a certain way, it is easier to persuade others to take the same action (Kraemer & Mosler, 2010). |
| Self-persuasion | Self-persuasion is a phenomenon that occurs when a person talks about a topic and during the course of persuades oneself. Thus, talking about the topic of persuasion has a persuasive effect on a talker (Kraemer & Mosler, 2010). |

In the 21st century, among most highly used theoretical frameworks addressing persuasion can be named several: the Elaboration Likelihood Model, the TARES ethical guides of persuasion, Cialdini's principles of persuasion, and Heuristic systematic model, Persuasion Knowledge Model, and others.

Persuasion is closely related to social influence, which refers to the change in attitudes, feelings, and beliefs as a result of communication or interaction with another individual or group of individuals (Xiaya Chen & Davidson, 2019). One of the most used social influence theories was developed by Kelman. The scholar has identified three processes of attitude change: compliance, identification, and internalization (Mustaffa et al., 2018).

According to Kelman (1958), actions, thoughts and behaviours are influenced by the referent of others through:

*Compliance*: an individual feels that the behaviour is guided by a set of socially encouraged/required rules. In this process one complies with the opinions of significant others (Kelman, 1974) Thus, to avoid punishment or to get a reward a person pragmatically changes the attitude (Tinc et al., 2021).

*Identification:* when a person has a sense of belonging to a group and acts in agreement with this group (Kelman, 1974; Hsu et al., 2018).

*Internalization*: the process when an individual has an instinctive belief in the action and/or transforms the group's behaviour in accordance with this belief (Hsu et al., 2018; Tinc et al, 2021).

## 2.2   The Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is named among the most popular models describing the way persuasion works (Hamelin et al., 2020). It has been developed in the 80s, but still is used by many scientific studies on persuasion. The core idea of the model is that a response to persuasion is formed based on three factors: the individual's willingness to elaborate the messages together with the strengths of the arguments that are contained in the persuasive message. (Gunden et al., 2020; Hamelin et al., 2020). Persuasion target's elaboration refers to efforts that an individual applies to evaluate the information, process it, and consequently reject or accept arguments provided by the persuasion attempt (Nickerson, 2022).

The ELM addresses persuasion from a cognitive perspective. It states that a persuasion target ought to use one's own mental abilities as motivation and reasoning in order to accept or reject the information provided by the message (Dainton & Zelley, 2004). The model can be used as a framework describing core principles that make persuasive attempts effective. The basic principle is that whenever a persuasive message reaches the persuasion target (customer, audience, etc.), a certain extent of elaboration is represented (Nickerson, 2022). Nevertheless, persuasion is an internal process that is influenced by the individual abilities of each persuasion target. Therefore, the importance of understanding audience's motives, abilities and expectations is crucial when creating persuasive messages (Dainton & Zelley, 2004). This means that the same message can be more persuasive for one individual and have a lesser influence on another.

*Two routes of persuasion*
According to Petty and Cacioppo (1986b), there are two routes by which a persuasive message is processed: central and peripheral. The central route is typically characterized by elaborated, rational messages that contain strong arguments and evidence supporting the message (Dainton & Zelley, 2004). When a message is going through central route, a person uses careful processing of facts. Typically, it leads to longer processing of a message and longer-lasting attitude change in case a person accepts the reasoning behind the persuasive attempt (Hamelin, 2020). One of the factors that can trigger a person to use a central route of processing a message is if the matter is personally important to them and one feels motivated or has enough knowledge to invest effort into processing of the message (Kane, 2020; Nickerson, 2022). Some scholars claim that the message can have a long-lasting effect on an individual only when the two conditions of internal motivation and ability are fulfilled (Allison et al., 2017; Dainton & Zelley, 2004). A common example of a message

that will be processed through a central route can be relevant information about a consumer good that an individual has the intent to buy (Allison et al., 2017).

On the other hand, a peripheral route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model refers to a processing of a message when motivation and ability are lower (Hamelin et al., 2020). When processing a message through a peripheral route a persuasion target relies on emotions and heuristic-based judgements (Dainton & Zelley, 2004; Kane, 2020). This means that when a person is not highly motivated or skilled in the topic of a message, he/she will tend to jump to a conclusion about trustworthiness of a message based on limited information (Nickerson, 2022). The conclusion is formed based on so-called peripheral cues, which are the side characteristics of a message like length of an article, tone of voice of a speaker or persuasion agent's perceived expertise (Allison et al., 2017). In this case, the impact of the message leads to a short-lived change (Nickerson, 2022).

Nevertheless, the ELM describes the ways of procession a message straightforwardly, the persuasion as a process is very complex. For instance, both routes occur to influence the evaluation process of a persuasion target at the same time. Once a person is gaining more motivation or ability to elaborate on a topic, the peripheral route does not stop functioning, but rather its impact of the processioning decreases (Allison et al., 2017). This means that the two routes are not mutually exclusive, which lead to the importance of considering both routes when constructing persuasive messages.

Based on the ELM, when a person receives a persuasive communication, one determines whether to process in through effortful (central) or non-effortful (peripheral) attitude change process. A decision through which route the processing will take place is affected by motivation, cognitive abilities, and initial attitude (Cacioppo & Berntson, 2012). The algorithm of the ELM process is presented in Figure 1.

Message → Is there a motivation to process the [+]

Yes → Is there cognitive ability to process the message?

Yes → Processing of the message

After processing is there favourable or unfavourable attitude shift?

No → Retaining previous behaviour/attitude

Yes → Is there long time change in cognitive structure (thoughts rehearsal, reflections)?

No → Is peripheral precessing operating (attractiveness, expertise popularity of the source)

No → Retaining previous behaviour/attitude

Yes → Peripheral route

Yes → Central route

Figure 1. The Elaboration Likelihood Model adapted from Petty & Cacioppo (1986a)

## 2.3 Cialdini's principles of persuasion

A more applied theory of persuasion has been introduced by Cialdini (2014). The scholar has outlined six principles of persuasion/influence. Each of them separately or in combination can be used to encourage desired behavior. These principles are widely, sometimes unknowingly, used in everyday life by people of various professions (Pamela et al., 2022). Corporate communication is one of those fields where these principles are applicable. For instance, persuasion principles are used to increase consumer trust in a brand and its products (Pamela et al., 2022). Another field where principles are most widely used in scientific research on persuasion (Zalake et al., 2021). Social scientists name Cialdini's principles of persuasion as global persuasive approaches that are easily implemented across industries (Gkika et al., 2016 cited in Alslaity & Tran, 2021).

Relations and cues driven by society impact the way people are motivated to think or act. The principles of persuasion are constructed to reflect on these motivating factors (Pamela et al., 2022). They explain the ways a person forms a response to request and provide means to convince a person to do a desired action (Alslaity & Tran, 2021). Researchers have found that if used appropriately, the principles can increase likelihood of a person accepting advice or recommendation (Alslaity & Tran, 2020). Thus, they can be implemented in shaping attitudes towards a brand.

Due to the fact that individuals' perceptions are very different from one person to another, one cannot always be persuaded by the same means as another. The one-size-fits-all approach does not exist. Cialdini's principles of persuasion describe various approaches to persuasion (Alslaity & Tran, 2021). Therefore, persuasion agent is set to decide which principle is more applicable in one or another situation. According to Cialdini (2014), there are six principles of persuasion. Each of them will be presented and described further.

*Reciprocity*

The first principle is reciprocity. This principle refers that people feel obliged to repay the favors (Cialdini, 2014). This means that if a person has provided something tangible or intangible to you, you would feel obliged to provide something to this person in return. A typical way this principle is used by companies is a free-sample technique. This way a potential user not only gets to test the product, but also is triggered to do something in return (Goss et al., 2021). Additionally, the principle can be exploited to trigger uneven exchange. For instance, a small favor can be developing a sense of obligation that will motivate a person to agree to a significantly bigger return favor (Cialdini, 2014). This makes the principle also applicable in a negative context.

This principle can be applicable in many ways. For example, people not only tend to buy something from a brand that has given them something for free, but also are more likely to follow the advice of an individual who they are in debt to (Alslaity & Tran, 2021). This can be utilized in various communication environments in both private and public sectors. For example, politics is a field where principle of reciprocity is highly applicable as a mean of persuasion. An illustration of applying this principle can be a desire to provide an authoritative person with a gift or favor in a hope of a favorable decision (Cialdini, 2014).

*Commitment and consistency*

The next principle is called commitment and consistency. It is based on the human need to be aligned/consistent with one's own beliefs, thoughts, and actions (Pamela et al, 2022). In addition to that, people align with their commitments that are a form of position and/or belief expressed (Zalake et al., 2021; Cialdini, 2014). The tendency to keep initial commitments is based on three factors: a persona; consistency is appraised by society, consistency is a beneficial approach to daily life, and lastly, personal

consistency with own beliefs and actions is "a valuable shortcut through the complexity of modern existence" (Cialdini, 2014, 101). This means that when a person is consistent with previous decisions, it eliminates the need of processing all relevant information again in a similar situation. There is societal pressure on humans to act in accordance with their previous actions. Therefore, active, voluntary, and public commitments evoke a desire to act and to respond in a way that would support and not contradict their previous behavior (Goss et al., 2021).

When planning a persuasion attempt, an agent tries to induce a person to act in a way that will be consistent with the desired behavior later (Cialdini, 2014). For example, when a person was committed to achieving a certain goal, he/she will be easier persuaded to do a favor honoring previous commitment (Zalake et al., 2021). The key is to generate first smaller commitments and enlarge them further as well as encourage a persuasion target to take written public commitments. In addition, it is considered that a person needs to believe that the commitment is self-initiated (Goss et al., 2021).

This principle lies in the basis of customer loyalty. When one person acts in accordance with previous commitments. To generate initial commitment, companies use such common tactics as giving a trial period with full refund, trade-in programs or easing the signing up process (Cialdini, 2014; Alslaity & Tran, 2021). In common good programs, publicly revealing names who have signed up for the program has also proved its benefit (Cialdini, 2014).

*Social proof*

The next principle is social proof. It predominantly refers to identifying what is considered "correct" in the society. According to Cialdini (2014, 109), we see "a behavior as correct to the degree we see others performing it". It means that we perceive a certain behavior or way of thinking as more appropriate if others are doing it. Moreover, behavior is more enticing and appealing, when more and more individuals are staying to participate in such behavior (Pamela et al., 2022).

A real-life example of this principle working in online environment is review systems. When people are buying goods or reserving hotel rooms, they pay attention to the amount and quality of reviews, amounts of followers, and mentions of a company in resources they find trustworthy (Alsailty & Tran, 2021). All these are examples of how the principle of social proof is shaping the behavior.

When applying this principle in persuasion attempt, it is highly influential if two conditions are fulfilled. Firstly, a person is uncertain about the way to behave and does not have enough knowledge about the situation or phenomenon. Secondly, people are more likely to follow individuals who they found similar to themselves (Cialdini, 2014).

*Liking*

Liking is the next persuasion principle. It postulates that individuals respond more positively to a person whom they deem "likable" (Pamela et al, 2022). Additionally, when discovering similarities between a persuader and themselves, persuasion targets more willingly respond positively (Goss et al., 2021). Commonalities help to establish higher levels of comfort and community. This factor played a crucial part in social media communities (Schaefer, 2014). Undoubtedly, this principle has a close connection to authority and social proof principles, which also deal with interpersonal connections and feelings of similarity.

Cialdini (2014) names several factors that make the principle of liking work more effective. They are personal attractiveness of a persuader, similarity between individuals, compliments or praise towards a persuasion target, personal contact and increasing familiarity, and lastly association with positivity.

*Authority*

The next principle is authority, which is concerned with the fact that when surpassed by an authoritative individual, people tend to obey. A person may start to act oppositely to his/her own beliefs and preferences when directed to do so by an authority figure (Cialdini, 2014). In a communication realm, it works so that people tend to trust advice or recommendations from experts (Zalake et al., 2021). Examples of authority figure who have such influence could be doctors, teachers, and higher positioned colleagues. This principle is highly used in advertising as a form of review of the product by an expert (Alslaity & Tran, 2021).

*Scarcity*

Scarcity is the phenomenon that to many people "opportunities seem more valuable when they are less available" (Cialdini, 2014, 234). If it is hard to get the product, the desirability of it increases (Zalake et al., 2021). This principle addresses a common weakness of our cognition that perceives things that are hard to get to be more

valuable (Cialdini, 2014). Moreover, this applies not only to physical commodities but to information as well. Cialdini (2014) argues that limited access to a message make individual to want to receive it and become more favorable to its content. This way in communications, when aiming to convince targets of something, practitioners set people in a situation where they need to put effort to get the desired message, which could make them believe the content. Typically used techniques to make a product/service/piece of information scarcer is through limited number offers and deadlines (Goss et al., 2021). Displaying of number of items left in stock also addressed principle of scarcity (Alslailty & Tran, 2021).

In a study by Tinc et al. (2021), the persuasion principles were anticipated in Kelman's Processes of Attitude Change. Based on the way principles work, each of them could encourage a behavior that would fall into one of the three processes: compliance, identification, or internalization. The division is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Cialdini's principles of persuasion anticipated to the three processes of change

|  | Compliance | Identification | Internalization |
|---|---|---|---|
| Authority | X |  |  |
| Reciprocity | X |  |  |
| Scarcity | X |  |  |
| Liking |  | X |  |
| Social Proof |  | X |  |
| Consistency |  |  | X |

Additionally, the Cialdini's principles of persuasion can serve as cognitive cues that allow one avoiding performing extensive cognitive processing. Thus, address the peripheral route that requires less cognitive work (Shi et al., 2018). Relying on perceived source credibility, number of reposts, relationship with an information source are included in the principles developed by Cialdini that are addressing the peripheral route (Tsohou et al., 2012; Shi et al., 2018). Thus, the principles can be added as impacting factor to the process described by the ELM (Figure 2).
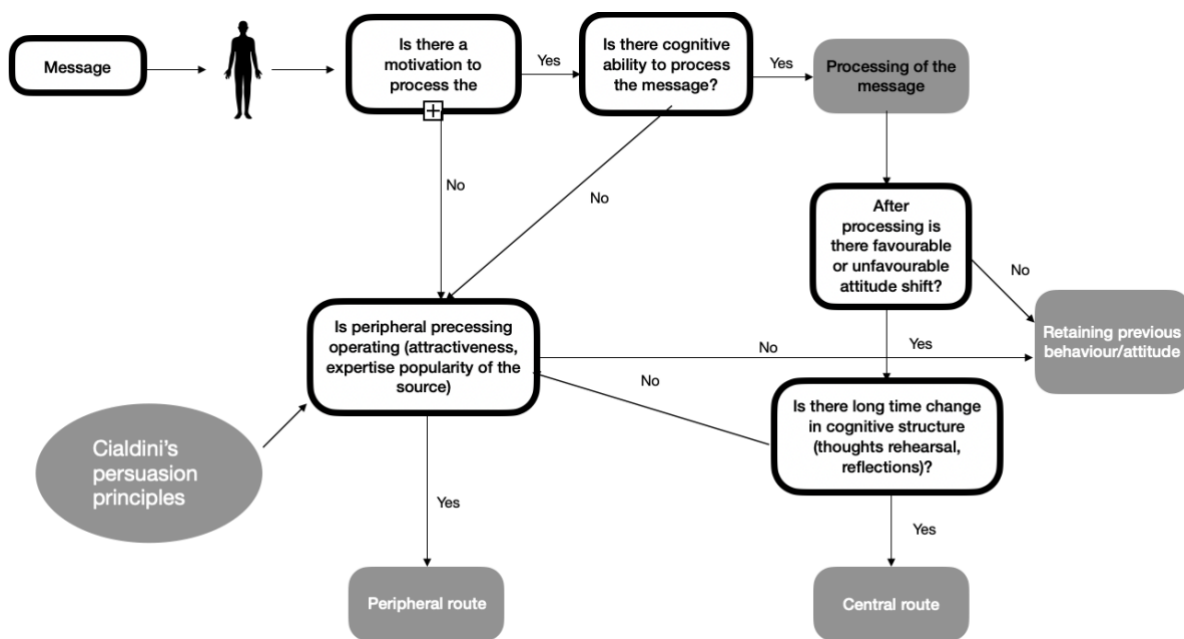
Figure 2. Location of Cialdini's principles of persuasion in the ELM (Placement of Cialdini's principles of persuasion added by the author of this thesis)

## 2.4 Persuasion knowledge, perceived credibility, and processes of attitude change

Persuasion attempts work differently on individuals. Some are influenced easier, to change behavior or thoughts of others more efforts are required. The phenomenon that guides this process is persuasion knowledge. First described by Friestad & Wright (1994), this term is predominantly used in corporate environment and is defined as one's personal knowledge and belief of a persuasion attempt towards him/herself. Consumers develop understanding of underlying motives and tactics applied in companies' communication and marketing. People rely on this knowledge whenever they feel that they are targeted by a persuasion attempt (Isaac & Grayson, 2017).

Nobody is born with persuasion knowledge. It develops over time via the surrounding environment and personal cognitive abilities. The researchers claim that when people are exposed to a message, they learn to distinguish whether the message aims to persuade them something, as well as they learn to detect what persuasion tactics are used in the message (Boerman et al., 2017). Over time, a person creates an understanding of underlying motives and appropriateness of the message (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Thus, with an aid of their own persuasion knowledge a person is

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capable of determining an advertising message and reacting critically toward the content provided (Boerman et al., 2017). However, the research has shown that activation of persuasion knowledge is dependent on the extent to which cognitive abilities of a person are loaded. This means that people whose cognition at the moment is more loaded are less likely to identify a persuasion attempt and process it effectively (Wen et al., 2020).

Persuasion knowledge starts to develop in childhood with an ability to differentiate commercial and non-commercial content (John, 1999). It drives the assumption that adults have higher persuasion knowledge. Nevertheless, nowadays adults also need to deliver and adjust their persuasion knowledge over types. It is explained by constant development of way commercial messages are delivered. For instance, an introduction of social media marketing has been a game changer, since it changed the advertising formats. When a new advertising format is introduced or when a persuasive message is included in editorial content, a person needs to refine and adjust his/her persuasion knowledge (Boerman, 2017). Meaning that when a person is exposed to a type of content that cannot be instantly identified as advertising/persuasion attempt, consumers do not possess abilities to guard themselves against this content.

There are two dimensions of persuasion knowledge distinguished. Conceptual persuasion knowledge refers to the recognition of persuasive intents and tactics, consequently, cognitively defending against them (Rozendaal et al., 2011). Attitudinal persuasion knowledge is content to the basic tendency of consumers being skeptical towards messages that they identify as advertising. This kind of distrust can be an attitudinal mechanism that guards the mind against advertising influence (Boerman et al., 2017). However, a typical activation process when a person recognizes a persuasion attempt and develops critical attitude toward the message, leads to the attitudinal persuasion knowledge being less likely to appear when the conceptual persuasion knowledge of a person has not been activated (Boerman, 2017)

In recent years research has found that persuasion knowledge does not only lead to skepticism towards a message, but to higher credibility and positive evaluations. According to Isaac & Grayson (2017), if a persuasion agent addresses a target using a credible tactic, the message, and the agent him/herself are evaluated more favorably by an individual.

The concept of perceived source credibility is often linked to the persuasion knowledge. When a persuasion attempt is recognized by a person, the persuasion

knowledge is triggered. Then a person evaluates the source's credibility based on its expertise, the extent to which a communicator is entitled to make the statement, and trustworthiness, which refers to source's motivation to provide truthful information (Xie et al., 2011; Attaran et al., 2015;). When both factors are true, the message is considered credible. A message that is perceived as trustworthy and expert has been proven to shift attitude and behavior in the desired direction (McGinnies & Ward, 1980; Attaran et al., 2015). Higher credibility has a positive effect on message's persuasiveness (Nan, 2013). Nevertheless, many corporate messages are perceived as biased because they are clearly connected to a brand and seek benefit only for the brand. The perceived credibility of a biased source is low, especially in case of a clearly identifiable selling intent (Eisend, 2006; Friestad & Wright, 1994).

All in all, a combination of persuasion knowledge and perceived credibility form a way an individual evaluates a message. They are used in defense mechanisms against persuasion attempts. Nevertheless, many factors influence how this mechanism will work, consequently, will the message be trusted on rejected.

## 2.5   Ethicality of persuasion: the TARES test

Scholars and practitioners have been researching and developing persuasion tactics for decades. At some point, a question whether persuasion can be ethical started to arise. And if ethical persuasion is possible, many other questions follow. What persuasion attempt is considered ethical or unethical? How to define and conceptualize ethicality of persuasion? Is it possible to measure ethics of persuasion? Finally, will ethical means of persuasion be as effective as those persuasion attempts that were not formed under ethical guidelines?

Persuasion in its core aims to influence target's behavior and make the person act or think in a desired way. Based on this fact it is possible to assume that such concepts as propaganda are based on application of persuasion tactics. Nevertheless, persuasion can be considered genuine and, consequently, ethical if the message aims to inform without creating false impressions (Baker & Martinson, 2001).

One of theoretical concepts that addressed the issue of ethics in persuasion is the TARES test. Its core idea is to set ethical boundaries to guide persuasive messages. It is applicable for any types of persuasive attempt, including corporate communication (Lee & Nguyen, 2013). The TARES test sets the practitioners accountable for their

message's ethicality, by providing a five-part test that defines the morality of a message (Lee & Cheng, 2010). These five parts of the acronym: truthfulness, authenticity, respect, equity, and social responsibility. All of them are designed to guide communicator's actions toward a moral persuasion (Baker & Martinson, 2001). To be considered ethical, a message must pass all the principles (Lee & Nguyen, 2013).

*Truthfulness* of a persuasive message referee to communicator's intention not to deceive and provide a persuasion target with truthful data that they need to make decision.

*Authenticity* of persuader is about genuineness and sincerity of a communicator toward a particular persuasion target. This principle states that a persuasion agent should demonstrate personal moral independence and commitment to a principle.

Principle of *respect* requires persuasion agents to respect message receivers' dignity, rights, interests. In a corporate realm, the principle states that no persuasion should be attempted if it denotes disrespect to the persuasion targets.

*Equity* principle is about making no persuasion attempts knowing that the persuasion target does not possess abilities and skill to understand the context and underlying motivations of the persuader. The persuasive appeal must be fair and transparent, meaning that the communicator ought to consider not only the content of a message but the way it can be executed.

The last principle is *social responsibility*. It postulates that communicator should be sensitive not only towards a specific individual or group of individuals, but also consider wider circles and common good.

Table 3 illustrates the questions for communicator that allow to run the TARES test to a message and identify its ethicality in accordance with all for principles. They were adapted from Baker & Martinson (2001).

Table 3. The TARES test questions adapted from Baker & Martinson (2001).

| Principle | Questions |
|---|---|
| **Truthfulness** | Is this communication open, sincere, and honest? |
| | What can be done to ensure that this persuasive message is truthful? |
| | Does this message fulfil the human need to have truthful information to perform life decisions? |

| Authenticity | Does communicator personally believe in this message? Can communicate fully support and advocate for this message? Does the communicator truly believe that the persuasion targets will benefit (or will be doing the right thing) if they are persuaded to act or think in the ways that are promoted by the persuasive attempt? Is the communicator's motive to mislead, fraud, hurt or manipulate others? |
|---|---|
| Respect | Does the message respect the persuasion target as a human being with dignity and worth of respect? Are the rights, interests, and wellbeing of persuasion targets been fully considered? |
| Equity | Are specific (or vulnerable) audiences targeted unfairly by this message? Are the claims made outside of persuasion target' ability to understand the context and underlying claims of the communication? |
| Social responsibility | Is the message formed responsibly to individuals, society, the public, and the public interest? Could the message/information/product promoted be harmful to individuals or to society? Does the persuasive message conform to the ethical requirement to do no unnecessary harm or to prevent harm? |

# 3 MISINFORMATION

Misinformation appears to be common in the digital environment (Treen et al., 2020). The magnitude of spreading fake, misleading and deceptive information is enormous. It takes various formats and becomes very hard to recognize (Khan & Idris, 019). Consequently, it becomes more dangerous. As follows from the previous chapter, when the piece of information is not recognized as a persuasion attempt, people do not yet have developed ways of protecting oneself from its impact. Thus, various types of misinformation can influence the democratic process, attitudes toward a brand or government, public health, and countless number of other aspects of life.

## 3.1 Deliberative democracy

Across many social sciences the term "deliberate democracy" has gained significant value in past decades (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Deliberative democracy is a form of democracy that is based on meaningful discussions and deliberations to make informed decisions. This model assumes active participation in the decision-making process with all opinions heard and considered equally. Its core idea is a collective decision with consequential deliberation (Ercan et al., 2019; McKay & Tenove, 2021). The goal of deliberative democracy is to create a more inclusive, transparent, and effective form of governance that reflects the interests and values of the community as a whole. According to Curato et al. (2017), it emphasizes the importance of pluralism, rather than being just consensual but meta-consensual. Metaconsensus, which acknowledges the legitimacy of different values, beliefs, and judgements, as well as encourages discourse between the parties. Deliberate democracy is seen as a normative theory, that describes the way politics and relations ought to be (Curato et al., 2017). Alongside theoretical research, it has implications in practice. According to Selen et al. (2015), deliberate democracy is not about all or nothing, but rather that the application of it to certain extent. It provides a set of practical implications that are used in various modern democratic states.

Deliberation is communication that aims to carefully consider a particular issue or decision that is weighing the pros and cons of different options, considering different viewpoints and arguments, and discussing the issue with others in a respectful and productive way (Bächtiger et al., 2018). Selen et al. (2015) emphasize that listening and reflecting are essential to deliberate communication. They also add that the arenas of

deliberate communication are various, including social media, private conversations, formal settings, public events, etc. These ideas gain attention of various stakeholder groups such as regular citizens, activists, NGOs, and decision-makers all across the world. The aspect that makes deliberation fruitful is that it can induce agreement to restrict destabilizing options and "structure the preferences participants such that they become "single-peaked" along one dimension, thus reducing the prevalence of manipulable cycles across alternatives". (Curato et al., 2017, 29).

Since deliberate democracy relies on informed and reasoned discussion, debate, and compromise, with the goal of achieving a consensus that reflects the will of the people, a concern about how current information disorder impacts deliberate decision-making arises. Research argues that misinformation spread threatens democracy by weakening the possibility to rely on truthful beliefs (Brown, 2018; McKay & Tenove, 2021). According to McKay & Tenove (2021), there are three aspects that lie on the basis of healthy deliberative environment: epistemic (opinions are based on facts), ethical (mutual respect among citizens), and democratic (inclusion). The authors claim that misinformation campaigns harm all three of these aspects through the spread of false information, decreasing moral respect and displacing opinions that hold legitimacy. In the context of misinformation spread, deliberation holds the power to decrease the negative impact of information disorder (Bago et al., 2020; Chambers, 2021). For instance, the research by Bago et al. (2020), has supported the view of classical reasoning account in relation to misinformation and deliberation. Classical reasoning account states that people engaging in deliberative communication are aided to uncover the truth. Opposingly, a lack of deliberation creates grounds for believing in fake news (Bago et al., 2020).

The corporate world is an integral part of society, thus, can be involved in deliberate democracy. For instance, companies are active in shaping the institutional environment where they operate. They have to operate with external stakeholders in their market. To achieve their business objectives, organizations use such means as lobbying and corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Frynas & Stephens, 2015). The role of companies' CRS activities is connected not only to political, but also to environmental aspects. Scherer (2018) states that to tackle environmental issues all actors including businesses, governments, and civil society actors need to be involved into innovation process. The contribution of business must represent but needs to be set within ethical boundaries. According to Voeglin & Scherer (2015), there are three ways in which businesses can contribute:

*Responsibility to do no harm*: Creation and spread of new products, services, ideas, and processes that will not cause environmental and social damage throughout the whole production chain.

*Responsibility to do good*: Creation and spread of products, services, ideas, and processes that provide public good

*Governance responsibility*: deliberatively involve social actors to define priorities in public policy and find solutions to common problems.

Nevertheless, some CSR activities are not guided by sincere or altruistic principles, but rather by economic reasoning or stakeholder pressures (Whelan, 2012; Scherer, 2018). Companies use their authority to shape or put through regulatory changes in social and environmental areas through lobbying and memberships in various committees (Frynas & Stephens, 2015). This can create room for some companies to put their business interests ahead of the common good.

## 3.2 Information disorder: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation

Research claims that solving global problems is currently impossible without addressing the misinformation crisis (West & Bergstrom, 2021). Thus, an understanding of misinformation phenomenon, its aspects, and tactics is crucial. Commonly there are named three types of information disorder: misinformation, disinformation, and malformation. They are differentiated based on harm and falseness dimensions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Figure 3 illustrates the conceptual framework for examining information disorder.
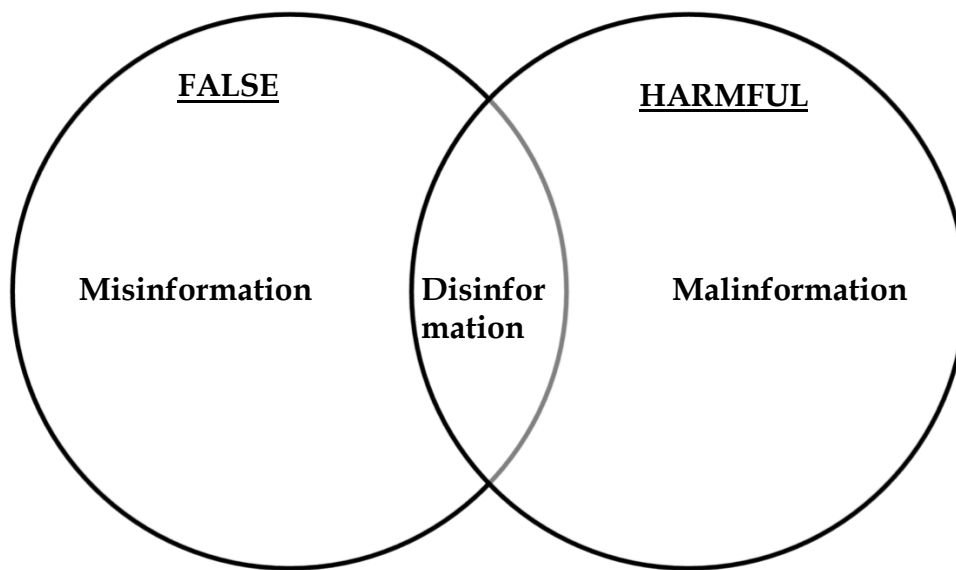
Figure 3. Information disorder adapted from Wardle & Derakhshan (2017)

*Misinformation*

Some scholars define misinformation as information that is contradicting the scientific consensus regarding a topic. In accordance with this definition, the boundaries of concuss are adjusted when new scientific evidence appears and theories are advanced (Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2019). Other scholars define misinformation as any information that eventually occurs to be false (Ecker et al., 2022). The basis for variations in defining misinformation appears, because of the variety of areas where misinformation appears. Depending on the topic of the research, the aspects that define what information can be considered misinforming vary. In general, common factors in labelling a piece of information as misinforming are its false and/or misleading content (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Misinformation appears and is spread by various sources: news media, companies, offline and online gossip, etc. (Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2019). According to Jerit & Zhao (2020), misinformation occurs when an individual has incorrect factual beliefs with confidence. Misinformation makes it possible to shape public debate and opinions to serve one's economic or political interests (Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2019). There are many aspects that make it so powerful such as tendency to share misinformation and the continued influence effect.

Researchers have found that false and misleading information spreads faster and deeper than truth. Falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth, since they typically evoke brighter feelings of surprise, disgust, and fear (Vosoughi et al, 2018). The reasons for misinformation's fast spread are various. One of psychological reasoning refers to the fact that people wish to believe information that

aligns with their inner view of the world. The trials of being consistent with own attitudes connect to the desire to arrive at a certain, favourable conclusion, which can become the basis of creating, spreading, and believing misinformation. Additionally, misinformation containing messages often contain moral-emotional words (eg. Fight, punish, etc.) significantly increasing the sharing percentage (Ecker et al., 2022). Additionally, there are such factors for sharing misinformation such reasons as "making others feel better", self-promotion, misinformation being interesting if true etc. (Altay et al., 2022; Barthel et al, 2016; Islam et al, 2020). Misinformation's power is often based on its vast repetition. The more times a person is exposed to a message, the higher the possibility that the person will start believing it (Corneille et al., 2020). This belief has a such magnitude that the effect stays despite contradictory advice and time passing. This phenomenon is known as the continued influence effect.

*Disinformation*

The term disinformation is often used together or as a substitute for misinformation. The core difference is that disinformation is internationally false information (Bastick, 2021). In other words, a deliberate spread of misinformation to acquire reputational, economic or any other type of benefit can be named disinformation (Ecker et al., 2022; Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2019). It typically is considered a more dangerous type of information disorder, since it is intentionally constructed in a way that causes harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Often the spread of disinformation is constructed in an organised manner with sufficient funding. For example, climate change disinformation campaigns are linked to conservation think tanks. They sponsor non-peer reviewed books and other materials that aim to polarise climate change issues (Lewandowsky, 2021). Amongst the risks that disinformation has on society are also named skewing markets and destabilising democracy. The risks are so dramatic due to the fact that by addressing on an individual level, designed disinformation can have large-scale impacts (Bastick, 2021).

*Malinformation*

The third type of information disorder is malformation, which appears when actual information is shared to cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In other words, malinformation is reconfigured truthful information in order to deceive (Baines & Elliott, 2020). A common example of maliformation is when a piece of information that was meant to stay private becomes available publicly. Presenting and forming information can make any information be perceived in accordance with the communicator's intent. Thus, factually true information can deceive and mislead the communication's target (Grimes & Gorski, 2022).

According to Wardle & Derakhshan (2017), when evaluating the information disorder narrative there are five questions to ask:

1. How durable is the message?

    Durability of the message is dependent on its goals. The message can be designed to impact short-term events benefit (eg. Elections) or to have a more prolonged impact (eg. Climate change or vaccination beliefs).

2. How accurate is the message?

    The extent of potential harmfulness of the message is closely connected to its accuracy. The scale could be "truthful information with an intent to harm" on one end to "fully fabricated information" on the other end.

3. Is the message legal?

    Some messages can be illegal in certain jurisdictions. Thus, hate speech messages or privacy infringements can have legal consequences for the communicator.

4. How official is the source of the message?

    The message is perceived as more credible if it is coming from a well-known source. Thus, the persuasiveness of the message varies based on whether it is distributed officially or as anonymous imposter content.

5. What is the message's intended target?

    Information disordered message's target is defined as an individual/ group of individuals/organization/entire society that is discredited by the message.


## 3.3   Misinformation persuasion strategies. Previous research findings

Due to a big variety of types of misinforming messages and an extensive range of fields where it appears, the ways how misinformation persuade is hard to classify or measure. Amongst the biggest persuasive factors of misinforming messages, the research has named addressing strong emotions (Baum & Adbel, 2021; Ecker et al., 2022).

Addressing emotions is a strong persuasive tactic since it has the potential to destruct a person from thorough analysis of the message, source's credibility etc. (Baum & Abdel, 2021). Consequently, the person when the person is not addressing more diagnostic cues, he/she is more likely to rely on the peripheral route when elaborating on the message. Misinforming messages address strong emotions like fear, anger, happiness etc., because they increase engagement and promote belief (Bastick, 2021). For example, a person tends to believe and share a misinforming message if it

generates fear or danger, because the message receivers feel that spreading information can help to avoid harm (Baum & Abdel, 2021).

Messages that generate strong emotions are found to spread virally also due to the online platforms' algorithms. Driven by emotions people engage with such content more easily and willingly, which triggers the platform to prioritize the misinforming content (Garrett, 2016; Bastick, 2021). Emotions were found to be effective in generating virality of the content (Berger & Milkman, 2013), which is one of the main aspects of misinformation spread. Figure 4 presents percentage change that emotions trigger in virality and wish to share. For example, the research has found that probability of content making appearing among the most-emailed list is over 30% higher if article has such traits as anger, awe, and practical value. On the other hand, such a trait as sadness decreased the probability by 16%.
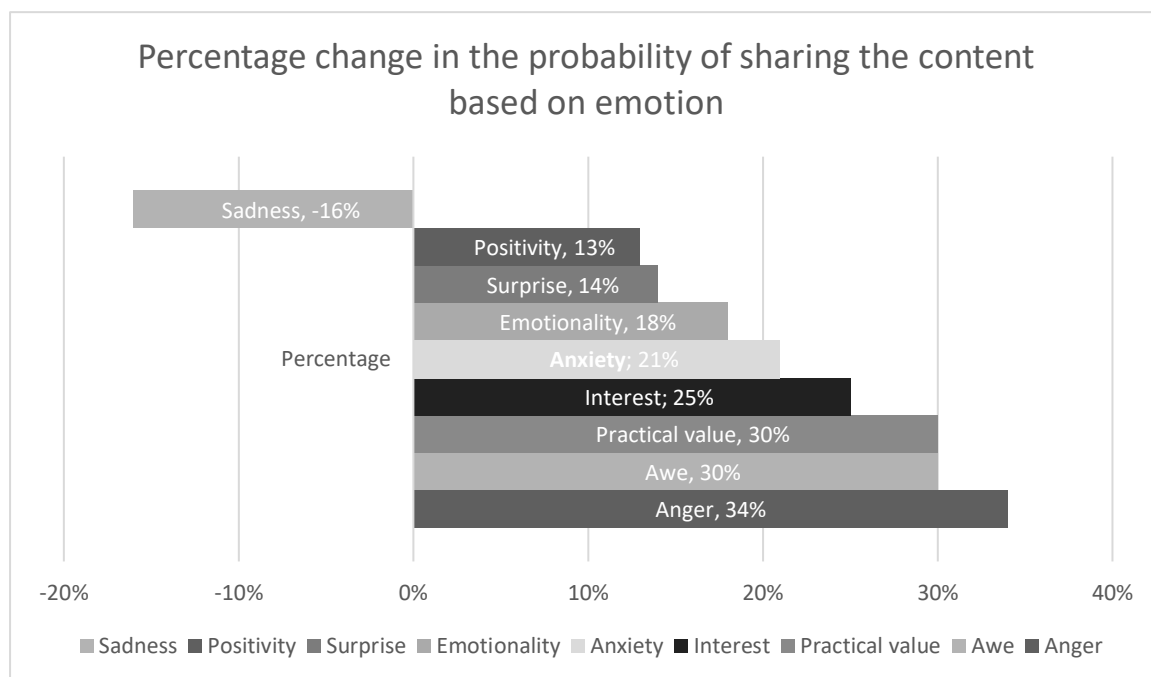


Figure 4 Probability of sharing the content based on emotions. Adapted from Berger & Milkman (2013)

In addition to creating emotional messages, misinformation communicators repeat the message as many times as it is possible. Due to the continued influence effect and illusory truth effect trust in misinformation increases. The continued influence effect refers to the fact that people tend to believe information even after it was retracted (Susmann & Wegener, 2022). The illusory truth effect is a cognitive effect when prior exposure stimulates perceived accuracy and credibility (Moritz et al., 2012; Wahlheim et al., 2020). Thus, repeated messages generate higher believability (Shin et al., 2018).

Amongst other common tactics of misinformation, persuasiveness is named such factors as a message having a powerful visual component and being constructed with a strong narrative (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Vivid storytelling is one of the ways that is used by misinforming messages. The story usually is highly detailed and includes real locations, names, quotes etc. Thus, the information that the message delivers become more believable (Peng et al., 2022).

## 3.4   Communication narratives of misinformation

There was much research classifying strategies the misinforming and disinforming messages utilize. Due to the fact that these messages can be in any shape, form, and category. Some researchers have identified field-specific types of information disorder content such as health misinformation.

Pamment et al. (2018) have classified six general ways in which communication narratives are used in misinforming messages. These are fabrication of existing or similar narratives, manipulation of existing content, misappropriation, propaganda, satire and/or parody, and native advertising or clickbait.

Fabrication of the content means that a message delivers information that has no factual basis. It is also characterized by having an explicit intention to mislead, deceive and misinform. To make the fabrication narrative look legit, communicators often utilize platforms that appear legitimate to the persuasion target (Pamment et al., 2018). Additionally, commutators fabricate the narrative with details and vivid storytelling to increase believability (Peng et al., 2022).

Manipulation refers to the reshaping of existing content in a way that misleads the audience or supports a false narrative. Nowadays it often appears in visual and video forms. For example, photoshopping and utilizing deepfake technology to manipulate one's opinions, attitudes, and beliefs (Pamment et al., 2018). Additionally, when a communicator alters picture, text, and video promotional content in order to make the product or service more appealing. A common field where this type of manipulation is present is the beauty industry.

Misappropriation narratives appear when a message exists in false contents or creates false connections. Using unconnected information to describe an issue, reshaping the facts in a way that fits the narrative, placing real facts into false context, etc. is

identified as misappropriation content and can be called misinforming (Pamment et al., 2018). To make the narrative more legit, a message can cite scientific evidence inappropriately and take them out of the context (Peng et al., 2022).

Propaganda narratives set a goal of influencing and shaping public opinion in a way that benefits a public figure, party, or government (Pamment et al., 2018). Propaganda as misinforming narratives would aim to affect the quality of political decisions performed by a citizenry. Thus, it predominantly concerns cognitive aspects such as shaping beliefs (Brown, 2018).

Satire and parody narratives have an impact on public discourse, can shape political trust, and influence public opinions. In misinforming content, this type of narratives often aims to ridicule, critique and devalue individuals, campaigns, companies, and organizations by means of humour. Satire which addresses and ridicules factual information, parody is often constructed on obvious absurdity of a concept between the author and the audience (Pamment et al., 2018). Nevertheless, both of the communication narratives make it harder for the audience to distinguish false from factual information. By appealing to this narrative, misinforming messages focus on personal involvement rather than on details (Peng et al., 2022). Thus, persuading people using emotional triggers.

Native advertising and clickbait messages can sometimes be disinforming. Native advertising is a form of promotional communication that intend to blend sponsor content with editorial content (Carlson, 2015). Clickbait refers to maximizing click rates by attracting an individual's attention through headings, stories, and posts that allure one to click (Chatterjee & Panmand, 2022). According to Pamment et al. (2018), such narratives can be misleading due to camouflaging promotional intent into a message as well as luring individuals onto webpages by means of catchy headlines. Generally, these tactics are legitimate, but they are often utilized in misinforming campaigns.

## 3.5   Corporate greenwashing as misinformation

In recent years, there is a clear demand for sustainable and greener products, businesses, and services, and it is only increasing as awareness of climate change, loss of biodiversity and global pollution increases. Customers expect companies to act responsibly in terms of the sustainability of their operations. This factor triggers the dissemination of misleading and fraudulent information in corporate promotion and

communications to appear more sustainable. This process is often called greenwashing (Naderer & Opree, 2021). Greenwashing is an umbrella that describes various forms of an organisation's misleading communications in relation to its sustainability and environmental practices (Cojoianu et al., 2020). In other words, greenwashing occurs when a company falsely promotes its products or actions as green, sustainable, or environmentally friendly as well as in situations when companies spend more resources on promoting their actions as green than on the sustainability itself (Nemes et al., 2022). Thus, greenwashing can be called a type of corporate misinformation.

On the industry side, similar questions have arisen, an eco-labelling company TerraChoice (2010), identifies seven sins of greenwashing

1. Sin of the hidden trade-off: claiming a product is "green" based on very few attributes and ignoring other attributes that could be more important
2. Sin of no proof: stating environmental claims without any proof
3. Sin of vagueness: overly ambiguous claims about an organization's product or processes based on vague narratives (eg. "All natural ingredients" claim).
4. Sin of irrelevance: an environmental claim that is unhelpful and irrelevant for consumers searching for more sustainable options.
5. Sin of lesser of two evils: emphasising more environmentally friendly options within one category and ignoring the damage of the category of the product itself (eg. organic cigarettes).
6. Sin of fibbing: completely fake/false narrative (eg. claiming to have a certification when a product does not have it).
7. Sin of worshiping false labels: creating an image that the product is supported and approved by a trustworthy third party.

The scope of the misinformation about the green practices of companies is immensely large. A review of 500 global websites demonstrated that about 40 percent of sustainable or green claims made by companies are greenwashing practices (Nemes et al., 2022). If a person is eager to buy a truly sustainable product, one must learn how to recognise illegitimate green claims (Naderer & Opree, 2022). Doing that requires resources, and even then, it is not possible in all cases. Several studies have found that consumers' own expertise and involvement in environmental topics can be an important factor that helps an individual to detect and interpret greenwashing (Parguel et al., 2015; Grimmer & Woolley, 2014; Grimmer & Bingham, 2013). Typically assumed that people with higher environmental knowledge and personal emotional involvement in climate emergency would process greenwashing information through the central route of the ELM. Additionally, Naderer & Opree (2022) have identified

that younger and higher educated individuals were more likely to identify misleading content in green ads. Thus, this generation is less vulnerable and easily affected by misinformation about environmental corporate practices.

## 3.6   Activism and misinformation

There are many groups that aim to prevent the appearance and spread of misinformation. One of them is activist communities (Suwana, 2020). Activists fighting against misinformation are individuals or groups who work to counter the spread of false or misleading information. They aim to promote accurate and reliable information, as well as raise awareness of the dangers of misinformation (Russel & Tegelberg, 2020). A significant amount of activism is happening in the environmental area. Activists fighting against corporate greenwashing work to expose and counter false or misleading environmental claims made by corporations. They aim to promote transparency and accountability in corporate environmental practices and explain what dangers false environmental claims can bring to society (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021; Nguyen, 2020).

Activists fighting against corporate greenwashing use a variety of strategies to counter false environmental claims. Some work to fact-check claims made by corporations and to expose false information through channels like social media, print media and other online/offline platforms to reach a wider audience. They may also work to raise awareness of the dangers of false environmental claims, by educating people about how to spot false information and how to seek out reliable sources (Nucci & Hibberd, 2021). In some cases, activists may also engage in advocacy work, pushing for changes in laws or policies that can help reduce the spread of false environmental claims. For example, they may work to ensure that companies are held accountable for the environmental claims they make, by advocating for stronger regulations or greater transparency in environmental reporting. Additionally, in extreme cases, activist groups are filing lawsuits against companies that misinform their audiences or use hijacking strategies to make the changes in a forceful way (Scheidel, 2020).

Overall, activists fighting against corporate greenwashing play a crucial role in promoting environmental accountability and transparency in the corporate world. Research has found that activism has a significant influence on corporate communication. For instance, activism leads to increased corporate transparency and drives changes in corporate behavior toward adopting more environmentally friendly policies or improving labor conditions (Flammer et al., 2021; Maignan & Ferrell, 2000).

Consequently, activism reaches the goal of decreasing environmental damage (Akey & Appel, 2019). Thus, activism helps to create a world where companies are held accountable for their environmental impact and where consumers have access to accurate information about the environmental practices of the companies they support.

Nevertheless, sometimes activism becomes brand hijacking and has negative consequences. Activism and brand hijacking refers to the use of a brand by activists to advance a political or social cause. In brand hijacking, activists use a company's name, visual identity, or communication to draw attention to their cause, without the company's consent or control (Siano et al., 2022; Luoma-Aho et al., 2018). Brand hijacking can take many forms, including protests, demonstrations, and online campaigns like hashtag hijacking (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). For example, activists may use a company's hashtag in a negative light to criticize the company's environmental or social practices. They may also create fake websites, social media accounts, or advertisements to spread their message. By doing so, activists hope to generate media coverage and public attention, and to pressure the company to take action on their cause (Luoma-aho et al., 2018). While brand hijacking can be a powerful form of activism, it can also be controversial. Companies may view it as an infringement of their intellectual property rights and may seek legal remedies to protect their brand. Additionally, brand hijacking can be harmful to the company's reputation, as it can associate the company with a negative cause or issue.

# 4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF PERSUASIVE TACTICS IN MISINFORMING MESSAGES

When identifying and classifying which persuasion tactics are adapted to misinforming messages, research can utilize a four-step process, which is presented in Figure 5. Based on this process, a framework of persuasive tactics in misinforming messages has been created (Table 4). Firstly, the narratives that are misinforming (provide factually incorrect information, mislead, or create false connections) can be selected and placed into misinformation narratives categories described by Pamment et al. (2018). They are located in the upper row of the framework.

Once all statements are placed into categories of misinforming narratives, they can be located in the persuasion cells in accordance with the persuasion principle addressed. According to Tinc et al. (2021), each of Cialdini's persuasion principles can be located in Kelman's processes of attitude change. In the compliance process such principles of authority, scarcity and reciprocity can be applied. The integration stages include liking and social proof principles. And finally, internalization stage has a consistency principle. Persuasion principles and processes of attitude change are placed into the left columns of the framework. Once these steps are accomplished the data on what persuasive strategies and misinformation narratives are used in communications is available. Additionally, via counting for frequency of code, it is possible to understand which narratives more often utilise particular persuasion principles and process of attitude change.
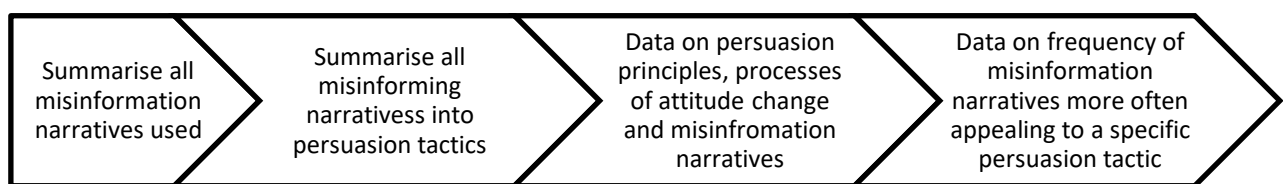


Figure 5. Process of identifying and classifying persuasion tactics in misinforming messages.

Table 4. Theoretical framework of persuasive tactics in misinforming messages.

| Attitude change processes | CIaldinis | Misinformation narratives | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *Fabrication* | *Manipulation* | *Misappropriation* | *Propaganda* | *Satire/Parody* | *Advertising* |
| Compliance | Authority | | | | | | |
| | Reciprocity | | | | | | |
| | Scarcity | | | | | | |
| Identification | Liking | | | | | | |
| | Social proof | | | | | | |
| Internalisation | Consistency | | | | | | |

# 5   KLM FLY RESPONSIBLY CAMPAIGN

In 2022 a Dutch environmental organization Fossielvrij NL filed a lawsuit against the Dutch airline KLM. The plaintiff claims that KLM's fly responsibly campaign is misleading and makes a false claim of making flying sustainable. According to environmentalists, the sustainable solutions that the company is stating are false solutions. Additionally, instead of concentrating on reducing the actual impact, the company aims to expand its operations whilst to make a difference, airlines need to be reducing the number of flights. For instance, according to Fossielvrij NL (n.d.), while trying to gradually reduce the amount of emissions per passenger, the company seeks to enlarge the overall amount of flights and ensure the company's growth to become more sustainable.

The Fly responsible campaign by KLM focuses on creating a more sustainable future and the company's aim is to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050. The company claims to increase its usage of biofuels, as well as sending funds to reforestation programs. According to Fossielvrij NL (n.d), sustainable aviation is impossible, and the only way to impact the sustainability of aviation is to reduce the number of flights. Secondly, deforestation programs cannot compensate the amount of greenhouse gases that are released. Thirdly, sustainable aviation fuels could not replace fossil fuels. The actual use of alternative fuels by KLM was only 0,17% in 2021.

The lawsuit has attracted the attention of major media like BBC, Bloomberg, Reuters etc. Undoubtedly, the case has attracted significant attention to the company and the issue of greenwashing practices that misinform the audience. Based, on its recent appearance and the big discussion caused by this lawsuit, the case was selected for this research to investigate the narratives that were used in the camping that was later accused of being misinforming. The lawsuit is scheduled to take place in 2023. At the moment, it is possible to take a look at it from the perspective of what persuasive narratives are used in corporate communication messages that were accused to be misinforming. The reason for selecting this case was in the fact that it can provide data on how activism and corporate communication deliver their messages to the audience, as well as see what persuasion tactics are applied by both parties when talking about the same issues in the campaign that was accused of misinformation.

# 6   METHODOLOGY

The following chapter will be presenting the methodology of the research including research philosophy, data collection and data analysis methods. The structure of the of the methodological steps of this study is presented in the Figure 6. Each of the aspects were chosen based on the purpose and research questions of this thesis.
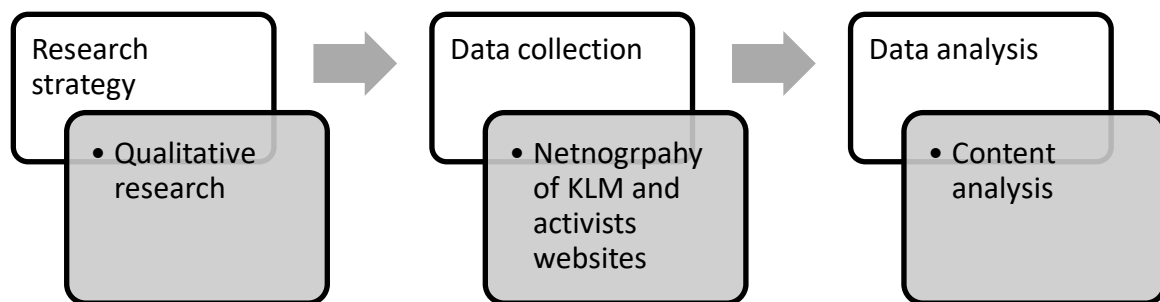
Figure 6. Structure of the research

## 6.1   Research philosophy

When conducting academic research outlining research philosophy is crucial. Each of the research methods and approaches is always connected to philosophical questions, thus, ensuring raising and generation of new knowledge through research (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Typically, the research philosophy unified framework includes the following aspects: ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008).

Ontology describes "assumptions about the nature of reality" (Saunders et al., 2019, 133). Ontology describes relationship between society parts and world as a whole thought prism of ideas about existence. Research can have objectivism and subjectivism as an ontology (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). Objectivism argues that reality exists independently from social actors and the studies phenomena can be studied in separation of thought, experiences, and interpretations of social actors (Saunders et al., 2019). On the other hand, subjectivism refers to studying of a social phenomenon that involves perceptions, feelings, and emotions of social actors. In

other words, reality is created by social actor as a result of their interaction (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Epistemology is about "what constitutes acceptable, valid and legitimate knowledge" (Saunders et al., 2019, 133). It often refers to the means of acquiring knowledge as well as the relations between the research and studied phenomenon. According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), epistemology can be based on positivism, critical realism, and interpretivist views. Positivist views refers to focusing on facts and fundamental laws that constitute reality as an observable phenomenon. Critical realist view is about reality being independent from social actors' perceptions, but the access to it is limited by those perceptions. Interpretivism refers to focusing on studying of meanings, understanding relationship, and developing ideas based on knowledge that are available exclusively through social actors.

This study's ontology is subjectivism, since it sees reality created by social actors. Meaning that reality is impacted by individuals' own feelings, perceptions, and interpretations. The epistemology is interpretivism, since research persuasion in misinformation can be only studied through social actors and is influenced by people involved and, thus, cannot be entirely objective (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

This study sets a goal of gathering qualitative information that describes and evaluates social actors' feelings and perceptions of the researched phenomena. Thus, aqualitative methodological approach has been selected (Adams et al., 2014).

## 6.2   Qualitative research

There are two main categories of research methods: qualitative and quantitative. Based on the objectives and research questions of this study, a qualitative research approach has been selected as it would provide more fruitful information about the studied phenomenon. Most of qualitative methods are focused on understanding reality as a social construct and interpretation of underlying cultural meanings (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). One of the core characteristics of the qualitative research is that results are retrieved based words and images gained that not always have a single meaning and can be interpreted differently (Saunders et al., 2019).

Qualitative research methods involve working with mostly non-numeric data (Adams et al., 2014). However, some scholars argue that often there are quantitative elements in qualitative research and other way around. Therefore, the research design is often

mixed and sees qualitative and quantitative techniques as sides of one continuum (Saunders et al., 2019). However, depending on the research philosophy, qualitative or quantitative techniques can be more preferable. For instance, interpretivist research is often done using qualitative methods that allow researchers to withdraw socially constructed interpretations and meanings expressed about the studied phenomenon (Saunders et al., 2019).

As follows from the literature review, persuasion strategies impact individuals differently because of social actors' personal interpretations and views. Consequently, this study implies interpretivism, therefore, relying on qualitative methods have been selected. According to Adams et al. (2014), qualitative methods' goal is to investigate and describe social relations and experiences of social actors.

There are two basic models of research: deduction and induction. Deduction refers to research being driven by the theory and existing theory is the main source of knowledge (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Induction is about drawing general conclusions based on a finite number of observations. It operates from "specific to general" and means that theory is produced as a result of empirical findings of research (Adams et al., 2014, 10). Nevertheless, induction and deduction rarely exist purely. In many studies a combined form of them – abduction - is used. Abductive approach is combining observational data (induction) and at the same time applies existing or plausible theory to understand and justify empirical data (Saunders et al., 2019; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This research is using abductive approach. A prior theories and studies on misinformation narratives and persuasion models were used as a basis of a developed framework. The collected data is used to create new viewpoint on the phenomena. Due to the fact that the topic of misinformation persuasiveness is still relatively new and academic knowledge on it is still in development, an abductive approach appears to be the best choice for this research.

## 6.3 Data collection

The following subchapter presents the data collection method used in this research. A qualitative research method selected is netnography.

### 6.3.1 Netnography

Netnography is a form ethnographic research that is applied in online environment. It is widely used in various fields of business research since it allows to study unique features of technologically mediated social interactions (Kozinets, 2018). Internet is a

mean of providing of continuous social experience to millions of users. Netnography was developed to understand and interpret online communities, their interactions, information sharing, and meanings created (Brace-Govan, 2014). According to Kozinets (2018), netnography is not falling under a category of digital ethnography since it follows particular procedural guidelines. Netnography approach is both specific and dynamic (Kozinets, 2018).

According to Kozinets (2020), the procedural guidelines of netnographical research can be organized into four stages and six movements. They are presented in Figure 7. The first stage is Initiation. Here research should be focused on defining research's scope and problem it is addressing, what source or topic will be researched, formulation research question and planning the whole research inquiry. The next stage is about data collection, and it includes three movements: immersion, investigation, and interaction. Immersion refers to researcher personal "immersion" into the topic, which typically involves spending a significant amount of time on website/webpage, reading available resources on the topic, studying comments and variety of conversation about the issue. Investigation movement is about searching existing data and reading available resources on the topic. Interaction refers to engaging with online conversations. An example of this movement can be when a researcher enters a social media discussion, asking questions etc. The third stage is integration. It deals with interpretation and analysis of the data. This can be done through content, thematic, narrative analysis or other qualitative processes of analysis. The fourth stage is incarnation, which is about withdrawing and formulation the results (Kozinets, 2020; Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022).

```
┌─────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────┐
│      Stage 1:       │          │      Initiation     │
│  probelm definition │          │                     │
└─────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────┘
          │                        ╱      │       ╲
          ▼                       ▼       ▼        ▼
┌─────────────────────┐    ┌──────────┐┌──────────┐┌──────────┐
│      Stage 2:       │    │Investiga-││Interaction││ Immersion│
│   Data collection   │    │   tion   ││          ││          │
└─────────────────────┘    └──────────┘└──────────┘└──────────┘
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┌─────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────┐
│      Stage 3:       │          │     Integration     │
│   Data integration  │          │                     │
└─────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────┘
          │                               │
          ▼                               ▼
┌─────────────────────┐          ┌─────────────────────┐
│      Stage 4:       │          │     Incarnation     │
│Research communication│         │                     │
└─────────────────────┘          └─────────────────────┘
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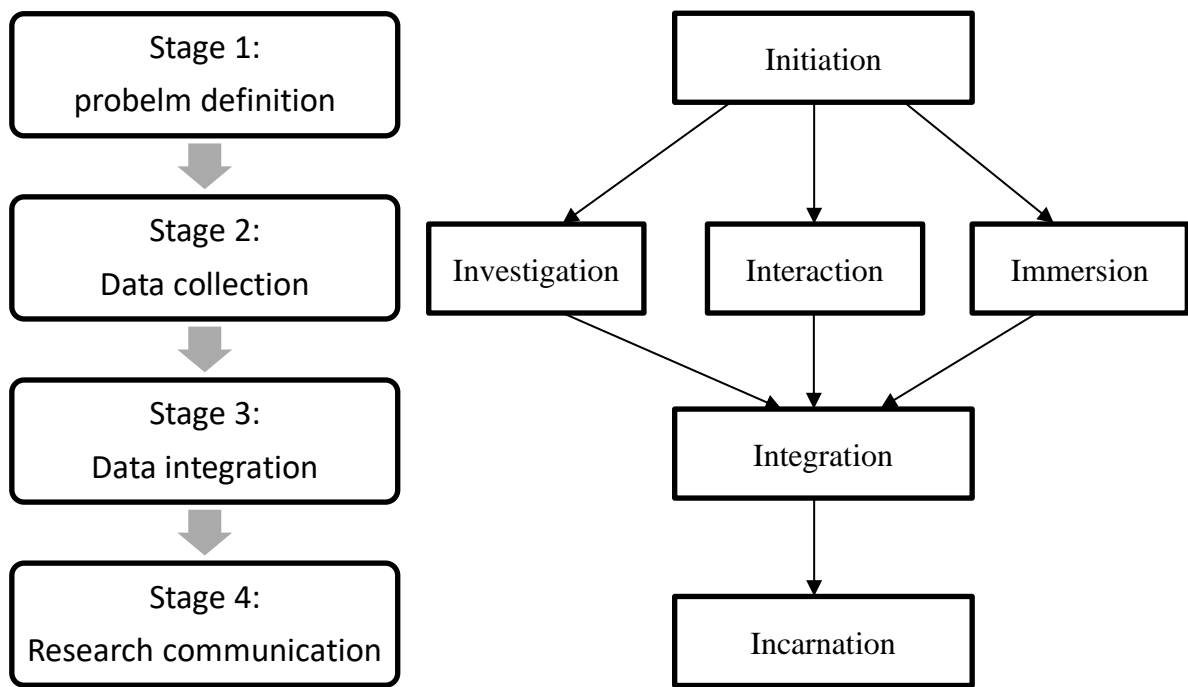
Figure 7. Stages and movements of netnography. Adapted from Gambetti & Kozinets (2022)

This research studies a phenomenon that involves organizations delivering and explaining their point of view to online community. KLM thieves to improve its brand image as well as provide more reasons to potential customers to fly with KLM. As to Fossielvrij NL activists aim to debunk the information that they see misinforming in the KLM Fly Responsibly campaign. In order to understand and research the persuasive narratives that are present in this case, both parties have website pages contributes specifically to Fly Responsibly campaign. The content provided on these pages is the most fruitful resource available to understand the communication tactics of both parties. Therefore, applying netnography to this research was selected.

## 6.4 Data analysis

The following subchapter presents the data analysis method applied in this research. Firstly, content analysis will be introduced. Further the type of content analysis and way it is applied in the research are presented.

### 6.4.1 *Content analysis*

Content analysis is an approach that is commonly used to analyze qualitative data such are documents and websites. Its core goal is to quantify and assign the content in predefined categories. Typically, content analysis is used to analyze existing content

rather than generate data (Bryman, 2016). This data analysis technique can be chosen to apply for many reasons such as "to compare media or levels of communications", "expose propaganda techniques", "identify the intentions and other characteristics" of communication (Krippendorff, 2019, 54). These applications are highly relevant for current study since the data is collected from two websites to compare and analyze the communication levels, intentions and means of persuasion when dealing with concept of misinformation.

Content analysis sees communication as a mean to portray the reality. With its usage it is possible to demonstrate what was in the mass attention at certain period of time and at the same time do it in a systematic and objective way (Bryman, 2016; Neuendorf, 2016). One of the other distinguishing characteristics of content analysis is that it can be implemented in both qualitative and quantitative ways. Qualitative content analysis involves dealing looking for meaning and constructs of the text (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, as cited in Bryman, 2016, 285). In quantitative analysis it is possible to count for a frequency of code or defining periods. This way it is possible to certainly say how often a topic was raised in the text (Bock et al., 2011).

Content analysis serves as mean to identify topics, their nature, and ways they are presented in the sources via structured coding of themes (Bryman, 2016). As this research is using abductive approach, prior theories and studies on misinformation narratives and persuasion models serve as a basis of a developed framework that will be used for coding of the content. Elo & Kyngäs (2008) identify three main phases in the content analysis process: preparation, organizing and reporting. Preparation stage refers to selecting unit of analysis and type of content. In this research, unit of analysis is a sentence or collocation that would address one theme; content type is manifest meaning that it aims to picture observable content (The Sociology Department of Colorado
College, n.d.). As the framework created based on the theory was created, it will be used a coding matrix for the content. Once the matrix is created, a researcher retrieves the content and exemplifies it into identified categories. When using matrix some narratives will fit the categorization, and some could not, which would provide a possibility to create separate concepts based on inductive content analysis techniques (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Based on a complete matrix, a summative approach can be applied to identify meaning of words and collocations in specific context as well as understand underlying meanings. This approach is suitable for this study because it shows how words and narratives are used (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

## 6.5 Methodological process of the research

Due to complexity of the research structure, the process of collecting and analyzing data will be presented in this subchapter step by step. The data collection was done via netnography of KLM and Fossielvrij NL website pages about Fly Responsibly campaign. The following webpages were analyzed. KLM webpage is flyresponsibly.klm.com and for Fossielvrij NL - gofossilfree.org/nl/nosustainableflying/

*Netnography*
In initiation stage of netnography, the researcher selected the case to use to study persuasive narratives that are applied in misinformation. As the case was selected, the researcher got acquaint with all available information and resources where discussion on this case took place. After the investigation movement, the author identified two webpages that would provide richest data on the selected case. Based on this, two webpages were studied: KLM Fly Responsible campaign page and Fossielvrij NL "There is no such thing as sustainable flying" webpage that is fully dedicated to explaining why Fly Responsibly campaign is misinforming. Due to this selection, the interaction movement was not applicable, thus, the immersion movement was performed. In order to understand the meaning and messages organizations intended to deliver to the page's visitors, the author deeply immersed into the text in order to retrieve the "deep data". It stands for revelatory elements of the text that are rich in meaning and relevant to the research questions (Gambetti & Kozinets, 2022).

The data collection was done as follows. All narratives the Fossielvrij NL attributes to KLM were identified and written down. This means that from Fossielvrij NL webpages, all sentences or colocations that were said to be misleading in KLM Fly Responsibly campaign were recorded and later analyzed via content analysis.

*Content analysis*
The created framework was used as a coding matrix. Once all the narratives were placed into categories. The author inductively identified themes they were addressing. After this analysis was complete, the author returned to netnography of the KLM website. The same steps with initiation and immersion movements were followed. Based on the themes identified in content analysis, all the narratives that address these themes on the KLM Fly Responsibly webpage were written down.

Due to the fact that there is no court decision on this lawsuit, it is impossible to state with certainty which party is correct and if Fly Responsibly campaign truly

misinformed customers. In order to avoid false accusations, the framework to analyze the content retrieved from KLM's webpage was modified (Table 5). The communication narratives of misinformation were replaced by the identified themes from the content analysis of Fossielvrij NL webpage. This way it became possible to see KLM's narratives that address these themes, as well as identify persuasion principles and processes of attitude change, they address. The identified themes of narratives will allow to apply the communication narratives of misinformation to KLM statements afterwards in case, the fact of misinforming by KLM will be lawfully proved. Since the meaning of the themes identified from Fossielvrij NL and meaning of the same themes on KLM website are the same, each narrative will keep being in the same category of misinformation narratives. Further the KLM's webpage narratives were placed in the framework to identify which persuasion narratives and processes of attitude change were addressed.

Table 5. Theoretical framework of persuasive tactics in misinforming claims from activists

| Processes of attitude change | Cialdini | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Compliance | Authority | | | |
| | Reciprocity | | | |
| | Scarcity | | | |
| Identification | Liking | | | |
| | Social Proof | | | |
| Internalisation | Consistency | | | |

# 7   RESULTS

The following chapter will present the results of this research. Firstly, results gained from the activists´ website will be presented. Afterwards, the findings of KLM Fly Responsibly campaign are described.


## 7.1   Narratives used by Fossielvrij NL

KLM's Fly Responsibly campaign has a separate webpage flyresponsibly.klm.com that contains all information about the program. As mentioned previously, Fossielvrij NL has also created a separate webpage gofossilfree.org/nl/nosustainableflying/ dedicated to explaining reasons why KLM's Fly Responsibly camping is misinforming and why activists are taking the company to court. To conduct netnographical research, the texts that Fossielvrij NL has on their webpage was collected on 13th of November 2022. Therefore, this research based its findings in accordance with the narratives that were present on the webpage on that date. Depending on how the case was evolving, Fossielvrij NL could have altered the contents of their texts. Firstly, all the narratives that were collected had to meet the requirement of "this is what KLM states in their communication about Fly Responsibly". All the narratives were collected as quotes without any alterations. In total, there were found 25 narratives that activists state being KLM's misleading claims.

On data analysis stage, the development framework on misinforming narratives and persuasion has been used. Each narrative was first analyzed to what type of misinformation narratives it is connected and further via which persuasion principle it aims to affect a communication target. The filled in framework is presented in the Table 6. During the process of content analysis, it became clear that some of the narrative addressed multiple persuasion principles at once. Therefore, some of them were placed in framework multiple times. Additionally, only the sentences that were identified by the activists as main misinformation claims they aim to debunk were placed into the fabrication narratives of misinformation that refers delivering an information that has no factual basis (Pamment et al., 2018).

Table 6.Narratives from Fossielvrij NL webpage (gofossilfree.org/nl/nosustainableflying/)
Retrieved on 13 November 2022

| Attitude change processes | CIaldinis | Misinformation narratives | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *Fabrication* | *Manipulation* | *Misappropriation* | *Propaganda* | *Satire/Parody* | *Advertising* |
| Compliance | Authority | 1) Sustainable aviation is possible 2) Sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels 3) KLM <…> claiming that climate damage can be undone by offsetting. | 1) flying won't worsen the climate emergency 2) KLM's 'solutions' to reduce climate damage - such as bio and synthetic fuels, improved engines and other new technologies 3) KLM suggests that emissions from flying can be compensated by planting trees. 4) Airlines like KLM mislead us into boarding under the guise of sustainability. 5) trees are said to absorb CO2, and thus can "reduce the impact of the flight". 6) With the CO2, offset claim, KLM is misleading us that planting trees can substitute for reducing our emissions, 7) KLM says: "There is no scientific consensus yet on exactly how big the effect is besides CO2. That's why we don't include it." | 1) Sustainable flying 2) "Sustainable" fuels 3) For years, KLM has been claiming that replacing fossil fuels with alternative fuels is the most important way to reduce emissions. 4) KLM uses their Fly Responsibly campaign and similar green marketing to try to convince customers that they can book a ticket without worries. 5) KLM considers improving energy efficiency (such as new aircraft with more fuel-efficient engines) an important part of becoming sustainable, 6) KLM emphasizes that it is gradually reducing emissions per passenger. 7) the company wants to reduce emissions per passenger by 30% by 2030 compared to 2019. | | | 1) KLM presents itself as a leader in sustainable flying, but uses intensive lobbying techniques to block climate policy. |
| | Reciprocity | | | | | | |
| | Scarcity | | | | | | |
| Identification | Liking | | 8) KLM advocates "moderate growth" in media appearances and in its own annual report, claiming that it needs growth to become more sustainable | 8) We are on our way to sustainable aviation 9) KLM now claims that 'together we are on the road to sustainable aviation' | | | |

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | 9) Needs growth even if it leads to more emissions in the short term. | | | | |
| | Social proof | | 10) customers can offset their flights emissions if they pay extra for tree planting<br>11) people think they can continue to fly with peace of mind and politicians fail to implement effective climate policies.<br>12) Airlines like KLM mislead us into boarding under the guise of sustainability<br>13) $CO_2$ compensation undoes the climate impact of flying | 10) KLM uses their Fly Responsibly campaign and similar green marketing to try to convince customers that they can book a ticket without worries. | | | 2) an invitation to buy flights from KLM this suggests that it is going to be possible to fly sustainably in the coming decades, and so we are enticed to board with confidence. |
| Internalisation | Consistency | | 14) people think they can continue to fly with peace of mind and politicians fail to implement effective climate policies.<br>15) Airlines like KLM mislead us into boarding under the guise of sustainability | 11) KLM uses their Fly Responsibly campaign and similar green marketing to try to convince customers that they can book a ticket without worries. | | | |

Table 7 represents the frequencies and percentage of narratives' distribution in the framework. The highest numbers of narratives were placed into manipulation and misappropriation columns. This means that the narratives that Fossielvrij NL attributes to KLM most often address these two communication narratives in misinformation. Fabrication and advertising were also used, but in significantly lesser number of narratives. Based on statements of Fossielvrij NL, propaganda and satire were not used in Fly Responsibly campaign communication.

Table 7. Frequency of misinformation narratives from Fossielvrij NL webpage
(gofossilfree.org/nl/nosustainableflying/)

| Misinformation narratives | Frequency of code | % |
|---|---|---|
| Manipulation | 11 | 44,0 % |
| Misappropriation | 9 | 36,0 % |
| Fabrication | 3 | 12,0 % |
| Advertising | 2 | 8,0 % |
| Satire/Parody | 0 | 0% |
| Propaganda | 0 | 0% |
| **Total** | **25** | **100%** |

Due to the previously mentioned fact that some of the statements were placed into several persuasion principles, the total number of statements increased. For example, a statement "*KLM uses their Fly Responsibly campaign and similar green marketing to try to convince customers that they can book a ticket without worries*." Addressed authority, social proof, and consistency principles. Authority in this case would be about customers willingness to trust into messages that claims it is possible to compensate negative impact of their flying, because it was said by big authoritative company with recognizable brand and wide resources. Persuasion principle of social proof is addressed for those potential or existing customers who start to think of KLM as a greener company that does good to the planet. As well as the company appeals to social proof principle since it provides people an opportunity to keep flying without changing their habits, but at the same time do socially encouraged actions of living more sustainably. Thus, people are persuaded to fly with KLM since some of them will feel that they are making their consumption greener. Lastly, persuasion principle of consistency would be crucial in decision making for those people who are committed to making their lifestyle greener and have been pursuing sustainable consumption in the past. These group of people would feel that choosing to fly with KLM is consistent with their decisions and matches their values. Therefore, the statement was placed in all three persuasion principles cells since persuasiveness highly depends on the target of persuasion and works differently for everyone. As audience that flies with KLM is very wide, it is important to keep various scenarios in mind when placing statements into the framework.

Table 8 represents the way narratives that Fossielvrij NL attributes to KLM were persuasive. It total, there were 31 statements placed into the framework. The vast majority was addressing principle of authority, when people can be persuaded by the statements since they are supported by big, recognizable brand of international company. Additionally, the statements addressing social proof and consistency were

also presents. Especially in the case when the narratives presented are about customers making greener choices for themselves. In these cases, Fossielvrij NL cites KLM statements that emphases customers individually making a choice of compensating negative impact of their flying, and KLM appeals as an intermediate that provides this opportunity to them. The principle of liking was address by statement that often included a bond between a company and customers. By emphasizing that KLM and its customers are in this way to sustainability "together", the company can be viewed as an appealing partner. Principles of reciprocity and scarcity were not addressed. Based on the framework, it can be seen that all misinformation narratives in Fossielvrij NL communication mostly used authority principle. Additionally, out of two more common misinformation narratives, manipulation appealed to social proof and liking in more cases that misappropriation.

Table 8. Frequency of persuasion principles from Fossielvrij NL webpage
(gofossilfree.org/nl/nosustainableflying/)

| Persuasion principles | Frequency of code | % |
|---|---|---|
| Authority | 18 | 58,0 % |
| Social proof | 6 | 19,4 % |
| Liking | 4 | 12,9 % |
| Consistency | 3 | 9,7 % |
| Reciprocity | 0 | 0% |
| Scarcity | 0 | 0% |
| **Total** | **31** | **100%** |

Table 9 represents distribution of processes of attitude change that were addressed. The highest number of statements that were in the attributed to KLM refers to compliance. This points out that an individual feels that the behaviour is guided by a set of socially encouraged/required rules (Kelman, 1974). Thus, people can change their attitude based on narratives that are told by those who have an authority and more knowledge to talk about an issue, in this case sustainability and aviation industry. 32,3% of statements were addressing identification. Thus, narratives were encouraging people to feel part of a group and act together with this group. Significantly lesser amount of statements were about internalization, which requires the attitude change motivation to be initiated by individual's internal motives and beliefs.

Table 9. Frequency of processes of attitude change from Fossielvrij NL webpage
(gofossilfree.org/nl/nosustainableflying/)

| Process of attitude change | Frequency of code | % |
|---|---|---|
| Compliance | 18 | 58,0 % |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Identification | 10 | 32,3 % |
| Internalisation | 3 | 9,7 % |
| Total | 31 | 100% |

Fossielvrij NL identifies three claims that make KLM Fly Responsibly campaign misinforming (Figure 8). According to their website gofossilfree.org/nl/nosustainableflying, the claims are:
- Sustainable aviation is possible
- CO2 compensation undoes the climate impact of flying
- Sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels



Figure 8. Misinforming claims stated by activists. Adapted from Fossielvrij NL webpage (gofossilfree.org/nl/nosustainableflying/)

Table 10 illustrates how the misinformation narratives are distributed amongst the three claims that activists debunk. The claim "sustainable aviation is possible" was the most frequently mentioned claim. In Fossielvrij NL communication "sustainable aviation is possible" referred statements contained more often misappropriation narratives. As to the "CO2 compensation undoes the climate impact of flying" claim, it mostly used manipulation narratives of misinformation that refer to reshaping existing facts. The third claim "Sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels" addressed misappropriation in 50% of statements.

Table 10. Frequency of claims and misinformation narratives they address

| Claims | Fabrication | Manipulation | Misappropriation | Advertising | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sustainable aviation is possible | 1 statement | 5statements | 7 statements | 2 statements | 15 |
| | 6,7 % | 33,3 % | 46,7 % | 13,3 % | 100 % |
| CO2 compensation undoes the climate impact of flying | 1 statement | 6 statements | 0 statements | 0 statements | 7 |
| | 14,3 % | 85,7 % | 0 % | 0 % | 100 % |
| Sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels | 1 statement | 1 statement | 2 statements | 0 statements | 4 |
| | 25 % | 25 % | 50 % | 0 % | 100 % |

As these are the main claims identified by activists, they are used to analyze the content available on KLM's Fly Responsibly webpage. As the case does not have a court decision yet, the statements addressing these claims will not be placed into misinformation narratives but will be analyzed in accordance with persuasion principles and attitude change.

## 7.2 Narratives used by KLM

To promote Fly Responsibly campaign, KLM created a separate webpage. All text content from this page was retrieved on 13th of November 2022. Thus, this research based its finding in accordance with the narratives that were present on the webpage on that date. Depending on how the case was evolving, KLM could have altered the contents of their texts. Firstly, all the narratives that were collected had to meet the requirement of addressing one of the three claims that activists find misinforming. All the narratives were collected as quotes without any alterations. In total, there were found 34 statements that addressed one of the three content-driven categories.

On data analysis stage, the framework on misinforming narratives and persuasion has been altered. The misinformation narratives by Pamment et al., (2021) were replaced by the misinforming claims that the activists attribute to KLM. The filled in framework is presented in the Table 11. Same as previously, during the process of content analysis, it became clear that some of the statements address multiple persuasion principles at once. Therefore, some of them were placed in framework multiple times.

Table 11. Narratives from KLM webpage (flyresponsibly.klm.com ) Retrieved on 13 November 2022

| Processes of attitude change | Cialdini | Sustainable aviation is possible | CO2 compensation undoes the climate impact of flying | Sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Compliance | Authority | - creating a more sustainable future for aviation.<br>- Together we can speed up the process of Sustainable Aviation fuel production, speed up the renewal of our fleets and do more, faster, and better.<br>- Fly Responsibly is KLM's commitment to taking a leading role in creating a more sustainable future for aviation.<br>- a big step towards a sustainable future for the aviation industry | - pathway consists of several measures, and each one contributes to reducing our CO2 emissions step by step <...> fleet renewal, operational improvements and carbon offsets.<br>- Reforestation is a nature-based contribution that helps compensate CO2 emissions outside the aviation industry.<br>- The quality of our CO2 reduction projects is certified with the Gold standard by WNF. | - Replacing fossil kerosene with Sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF) can reduce CO2 emissions by at least 75%.<br>- SAF is a critical component of the aviation industry's pathway to net zero CO2 emissions in 2050, so it is important that we succeed.<br>- we have a substantial share in the worldwide SAF market, nevertheless, it is still less than 1% of our fuel usage.<br>- by far the biggest contribution will be made by replacing fossil-based jet fuel with sustainable Aviation Fuels (SAF<br>- Sustainable aviation fuels: a promising solution<br>- Stimulate availability of sustainable aviation fuel on a larger scale |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Reci proc ity | | | |
| | Scar city | | | |
| Identification | Liking | -Any company in any industry can do their part for sustainable aviation. - Together we can speed up the process of Sustainable Aviation fuel production, speed up the renewal of our fleets and do more, faster and better. - Together we can make your business trip more sustainable - Join us today for a more sustainable tomorrow. - We kindly invite you to join us in making aviation more sustainable. | - For the past ten years, we've been offering you a simple service through which you can contribute towards offsetting CO2 emissions. | - SAF is a critical component of the aviation industry's pathway to net zero CO2 emissions in 2050, so it is important that we succeed. - To reach our climate ambitions, we aim to use 10% SAF by 2030. - In January 2021, KLM became the first airline in the world to carry out a commercial passenger flight on an admixture of 500 litres of sustainable synthetic kerosene. - since January 2022, we include a small percentage of SAF on KLM flights departing Amsterdam - KLM is committed to leading the industry in creating this demand signal. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Social Proof | - If you do decide to fly, there are ways to do so that reduces your impact on the environment.<br>- KLM participated in a trial at Schiphol to test sustainable ways to taxi aircraft utilizing Taxibot: a unique towing vehicle that tows full aircraft almost to the start of the runway, without the aircraft having to start its engines.<br>- When you fly KLM, you will now be able to choose one or more ways to contribute,<br>- Fly Responsibly is KLM's commitment to taking a leading role in creating a more sustainable future for aviation. | - Smaller carbon footprint, more forests<br>- With our CO2 impact programme you can help reduce your flight's impact on the environment.<br>- If you would like to contribute towards CO2 compensation, our CO2 impact programme now includes <..> reforestation option.<br>- Help reduce your impact<br>- If you contribute to our reforestation programme, you will pay a small amount towards reducing the climate impact of a flight. | - If you would like to contribute towards CO2 compensation, our CO2 impact programme now includes several additional SAF-based options<br>- With the new SAF-based options in our CO2 impact programme, you are helping to reduce a part of the CO2 emissions of a flight.<br>- Your purchase also helps grow the SAF market.<br>- As SAF is currently much more expensive than regular aircraft fuel, your contribution helps us to cover the difference. |
| Internalisation | Consistency | - If you do decide to fly, there are ways to do so that reduces your impact on the environment.<br>- When you fly KLM, you will now be able to choose one or more ways to contribute, | - With our CO2 impact programme you can help reduce your flight's impact on the environment.<br>- Help reduce your impact | - If you would like to contribute towards CO2 compensation, our CO2 impact programme now includes several additional SAF-based options<br>- With the new SAF-based options in our CO2 impact programme, you are helping to reduce a part of the CO2 emissions of a flight. |

Table 12 represents the distribution of narratives that KLM uses in their communication when addressing each of the claims that are misleading according to Fossielvrij NL. KLM has addressed all three of them. The highest number of statements were about sustainable aviation fuels being a solution. KLM has stated that sustainable aviation fuels are "promising solution" and "biggest contribution", thus, significant amount of webpage's content was about it. About 33% of the statements were relation to making sustainable aviation possible. The least but still significant communication on the webpage concerned CO2 compensation through reforestation.

Table 12. Frequency of misinformation narratives from KLM webpage (flyresponsibly.klm.com)

| Claims | Frequency of code | % |
|---|---|---|
| Sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels | 14 | 41,2 % |
| Sustainable aviation is possible | 11 | 32,3 % |
| CO2 compensation undoes the climate impact of flying | 9 | 26,5 % |
| **Total** | **34** | **100%** |

Table 13 represents distribution of persuasion principles that were addressed. The highest number of statements were addressing authority and social proof principles. Second most addressed was liking principle that was connected to appealing in positive light and creating a partnership feeling with the audience. Lastly, principle of consistency was addressed by 14% of statements. Here it can be seen an increase of statements that were implying to liking and social proof statements comparing to the statements on Fossielvrij NL webpage, where principle of authority was predominant.

Table 13.Frequency of persuasion principles from KLM webpage (flyresponsibly.klm.com)

| Persuasion principles | Frequency of code | % |
|---|---|---|
| Authority | 13 | 30,2 % |
| Social proof | 13 | 30,2 % |
| Liking | 11 | 25,6 % |
| Consistency | 6 | 14,0 % |
| Reciprocity | 0 | 0% |
| Scarcity | 0 | 0% |
| **Total** | **43** | **100%** |

Table 14 represents distribution of processes of attitude change that were addressed. The highest number of statements addressed identification process of attitude change. It refers to a person changing attitude because one has a sense of belonging to a group and acts in agreement to this group (Kelman, 1974; Hsu et al., 2018). Compliance and internalisation were addressed in significantly lesser number of statements – 30,2% and 14%.

Table 14. Frequency of processes of attitude change from KLM webpage (flyresponsibly.klm.com)

| Process of attitude change | Frequency of code | % |
|---|---|---|

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Identification | 24 | 55,8 % |
| Compliance | 13 | 30,2 % |
| Internalisation | 6 | 14,0 % |
| **Total** | **43** | **100%** |

Some of the claims that KLM has on its website contradict activists' statements. For example, webpage of Fly Responsibly campaign has such narratives as: "we realize that today aviation is far from sustainable, even though we have been and are - working hard to improve every aspect of our company, our societal role and environmental impact." However, there is a chance that those statements were added to the Fly Sustainably webpage after the lawsuit and misinformation accusation gained publicity.

## 7.3   Comparing the communication

In this section the results from Fossielvrij NL and KLM webpages will be compared. Firstly, the types and amounts of persuasion principles will be compared. Further, attitude change processes distribution will be illustrated.

Table 15 illustrates the percentages of using each of persuasion principles in the communication of both parties. The authority principle was addressed in a significantly higher number of statements in activists content compared to the KLM content. Thus, there is a difference in frequency of using narratives that portrays KLM as an authoritative figure that has expertise and using this expertise to alter persuasion target's beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Cialdini, 2014; Zalake et al., 2021). Reciprocity and scarcity principles were not used in neither of the pages. Application of liking principle is significantly higher in company's content (25,6%) compared to activists one (12,9%). Liking principle refers to the company being portrayed as an appealing partner that customers tend to like and, consequently, trust. Typical examples of addressing liking principles included the words "together", "join us" etc., thus, aiming to create a sense of community and being one team with the customers. Social proof principle was addressed in both pages. More often it was applied in company's content (30,2%). This principle refers to altering beliefs, attitudes, behavior based on what is social encouraged and approved. The main socially approved topic that was addressed in this case was sustainability and encouraging everyone to adjust one's lifestyle to more eco-friendly path. Finally, principle of consistency was least referred in most cases, yet more commonly met in company's content (14%). This principle refers to person acting the way that does not contradict one's value and previous

actions (Cialdini, 2014). In this case, the narratives that would target people who already try to go for sustainable options and alter their lifestyle in accordance with these choices. Since, it is very individual principle many it might absolutely not work for one type of people but be crucial for another based on one's experience. In none of cases, a statement, that was addressing this principle, was present only in this category. For example, when KLM used a sentence like "If you do decide to fly, there are ways to do so that reduces your impact on the environment.", it addressed internalisation and identification processes. Same work with activists' content. For example, is a sentence that activists use in their debunking of KLM communication "convince customers that they can book a ticket without worries" can be addressing authority, social proof, and consistency (only for those whose values encourage one to reduce own environmental impact).

Table 15. Comparing the company and activists' use of persuasion principles

| Persuasion principles | Frequency of code | | % | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Activists | Company | Activists | Company |
| Authority | 18 | 13 | 58,0 % | 30,2 % |
| Social proof | 6 | 13 | 19,4 % | 30,2 % |
| Liking | 4 | 11 | 12,9 % | 25,6 % |
| Consistency | 3 | 6 | 9,7 % | 14,0 % |
| Reciprocity | 0 | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| Scarcity | 0 | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| **Total** | **31** | **43** | **100%** | **100%** |

Figure 9 illustrates the difference in persuasion principles that were the most used by each of the parties, as well as which of them were not addressed by any of them. There can be seen as big drop of using all of the principles compared to authority one in activists 'communication. Whereas company's statements are most evenly distributed between authority, social proof, and liking. There is a visible difference in extent of addressing social proof and liking compared to activists' statements.
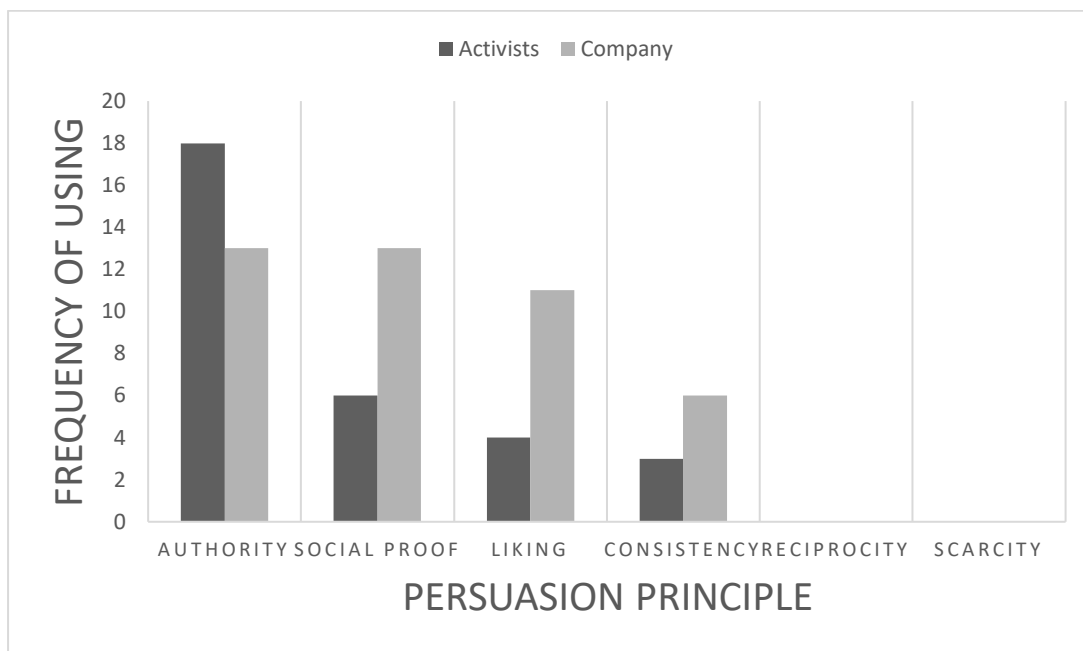
Figure 9. Frequency of using the persuasion principles

Table 16 illustrates the percentages of using each of processes of attitude change in the text. The compliance process was more commonly used in activists' content. This process is about behavior and beliefs being shaped based on socially required rules or by the influence of significant, authoritative figures (Kelman, 1974). It shows that in their communication activists attributed to KLM more statements that presented the company as an "authoritative figure" that can provide expert information about the issue that the customers will trust, and as a result customer will be misinformed. Typical examples of this type of sentences that Fossielvrij NL attributed to KLM were "KLM suggests that emissions from flying can be compensated by planting trees" as well as narratives about "sustainable fuels" and "sustainable aviation" that could have led customers to assume and believe that these concepts exist and are possible.

As to the identification process of attitude change, it refers to a person altering behavior based on sense of belonging to a group and following groups' attitudes (Hsu et al., 2018). This case it can be seen that company's content addressed identification more (55,8%) than the content on activists' page (32,3%). Communication of KLM included portraying the company as a partner that guides customers to more sustainable aviation and help them to reduce their own negative impact in environment. This can be seen in sentences like "For the past ten years, we've been offering you a simple service through which you can contribute towards offsetting $CO_2$ emissions" or "With our $CO_2$ impact programme you can help reduce your flight's impact on the environment".

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Lastly, the internalization process of attitude change refers to an individual has an instinct belief in the action and transforming behaviour in accordance with this belief (Hsu et al., 2018). It was the least addressed process for both webpages. KLM used it in more cases (14%). In none of cases, a statement that was addressing this principle was present on in this category, rather than serving as an addition. For example, when KLM used a sentence like "Help reduce your impact", it addressed internalisation and identification processes.

Table 16. Comparing the company and activists' use of processes of attitude change

| Processes of attitude change | Frequency of code | | % | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Activists | Company | Activists | Company |
| Compliance | 18 | 13 | 58,0 % | 30,2 % |
| Identification | 10 | 24 | 32,3 % | 55,8 % |
| Internalisation | 3 | 6 | 9,7 % | 14,0 % |
| **Total** | **31** | **43** | **100%** | **100%** |

The results are also illustrated in Figure 10. It is visible that for activists, process of compliance was the most used. In company's case, identification was more often applied. It can also be seen that the overall difference of addressing a certain process of attitude change. Company's most common process – identification – is more often used than activists' most common process – compliance.
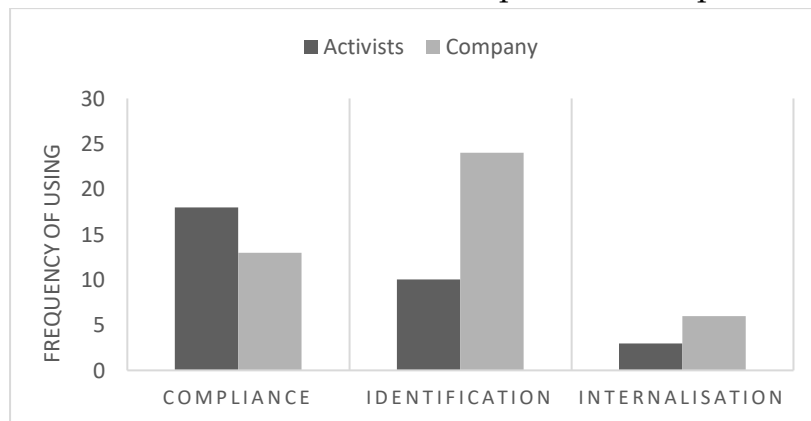


Figure 10. Frequency of using the processes of attitude change.

# 8    CONCLUSION

This chapter aims to further discuss and reflect the research findings. To achieve this goal, the results of the study for activists' and company content are further compared, as well as the answers to the research questions are presented. In the conclusion of this research, the aim is to the present and explain communication patterns, relations and differences found. In addition, the author will present the evaluation of the study through analysis of its limitations and further research possibilities.

## 8.1    Theoretical contributions

This study aims to understand which persuasion tactics are addressed by the company and activists to communicate about the case accused of misinformation and compare persuasion tactics used to see the approaches chosen to persuade the audience.

To approach the phenomenon of persuasiveness of misinformation, the theoretical concept about various theories of persuasion and way of using communication for misinformation were placed within the context of a specific case concerning misinformation. The selected case guided the focus of investigating persuasiveness of misinformation within the spectrum of corporate activism. The phenomenon of activism is one of the most vivid tendencies in corporate communication. Various groups of activists are often speaking out about corporate activities and in the past decade, the impact of activists' activities has become more severe for the company's public image (Luo et al., 2016). Companies across the world are placed into the situation, when they have to concentrate not only on their products, services and profitability, but on being "good citizen" and avoid facing cancelling. As mentioned previously, one of the common topics where activists are especially vocal is environmental misinformation. The case of a big company with a well-established brand as KLM being called out for misinformation created an immense negative publicity for the company. Such influential sources as BBC and Reuters published about this case (Thomas, 2022; Deutsch et al., 2022). Thus, taking this case and comparing the persuasiveness of activists' and company's communication in the topic that was publicly claimed to be misinforming was the main idea of the research.

Due to the fact that concepts of misinformation and activists hijacking corporate messages are relatively new, at the moment these topics do not have a vast theoretical base created concerning the persuasiveness of such communication. To address this

research gap, it was decided to create a framework that can be used to understand and analyze the persuasiveness of various types of misinformation. Via literature review on theories of persuasion for the past decades the most common theories of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, process of attitude changes and principles of persuasion were addressed to form an understanding of how a narrative can be persuasive. Additionally, literature on narratives that are used in misinforming messages was also utilized. As a result, the framework for analyzing persuasion tactics used in misinformation was creates and can be seen as the main theoretical contribution of this research. The framework can be used in other research that aim to understand which ways of persuasion misinforming narratives addressed, as well as to compare persuasion tactics used by different parties when talking about the same issue or concept.

## 8.2 Research questions

This subchapter will present the answers to the research questions set. The first research question aimed to understand the concept of what misinformation narratives are used and how do they persuade in KLM Fly Responsibly misinformation. The second research question's main purpose was to compare which persuasion tactics the company and activists operate to when talking about the same campaign that was accused of misinformation.

*Research question 1:*
*Which persuasive tactics borderline misinformation in corporate communication?*

This study concentrated on evaluation the persuasion and attitude change process that are application for peripheral route of the elaboration likelihood model. People who are deeply invested and have vast amount of knowledge on sustainability, aviation industry, reforestation and $CO_2$ compensation are more likely to process the information provided by the company and the activists through the central route. The persuasiveness of the messages would rely on logical and argumentative basis of communication. Whereas this research is concerned with persuasive tactics of misinforming audience that is not immersed into the topic. Thus, the following conclusions are relying of processing through the peripheral route of the elaboration likelihood model.

By retrieving and analyzing all KLM narratives that were claimed to be misinforming in Fly Responsibly campaign, it was clear that there were several most used types of misinformation narratives in this campaign – manipulation and misappropriation.

Manipulation is reshaping existing content in a way that would mislead audience and support the false narrative (Pamment et al., 2018). According to the activists, KLM addressed manipulation to convince customers that their sustainable solution will help flying be less ecologically negative. Manipulation narratives would lead to convincing customers to board the plane under "the guise of sustainability". Based on the content analysis, it can be concluded that the main misinforming narrative used was manipulation of existing content. In addition to that, the second frequent category of misinformation was misappropriation, which refers to when a message exists in false contents or creates false connections. In these narratives, a fact can be reshaped or placed in a context that make them fitting the wished picture (Pamment et al., 2018). In this case, activists illustrate their position with KLM's narratives about achieving sustainable aviation fuels. The existence of such fuels is a fact, however, the usage of those fuels in significant less than 1%. As well as reducing "the amount of emission per passenger" can be a truthful statement, whereas if the overall number of flights done by the company increases, reduction per passenger does not change the situation. Based, on analysis of activists' website, reshaping, placing into different context the narratives do not open the full picture to the KLM customers and become misinforming even if outside of the context these narratives can be truthful.

According to the results, the persuasiveness of manipulation and misappropriation narratives is created through principles of authority. Cialdini (2014) states that a person may start to act oppositely to his/her own believes and preferences when directed to do so by an authority figure. Based on the activists' content, KLM reaches the audience from a position of authority that has the needed knowledge and experience to create a path for them to live more sustainably. Often this position is supported by principles of liking or/and social proof, in synergy of which a persuasion target can feel that the action is guided by the company whom they can trust and the action that they will take together with this company will be help them to live according to socially encouraged standards. Based on the persuasion principles mostly addressed in this case, process of attitude change also that authority and social guidance were mostly appealed to when activists describe KLM's communication that they see misinforming. Compliance was more frequent, which marks that narratives told were aiming to make an individual to feel that the behaviour is guided by a set of socially encouraged/required rules (Kelman, 1974). Aiming to create a path for people to change their attitude based on narratives that are told by those who have an authority and more knowledge to talk about an issue, in this case sustainability and aviation industry. In combination to that identification narratives were encouraging people to feel part of a group and act together with this group.

Among other conclusions that can be made based on evaluation of activists' content about ways KLM misinform in the Fly Responsibly campaign can be named several. Firstly, consistency was found to go together with social proof persuasion principle in many cases. It can happen because the socially encouraged behaviors go from internal behavioral norms, beliefs, and values of many individuals (White et al., 2019). In addition, persuasion principle of consistency would work as a persuasion factor only for a small portion of people who already live in accordance with these principles. In this particular case, leaning towards more cautious and sustainable choices, yet do not have immense theoretical understanding of sustainable aviation fuel and reforestation topic pitfalls. In case a person has sufficient knowledge on the topic the evaluation would go through the central path of the Elaboration Likelihood model, which involved logical and structured understanding of all factors. Figure 11 presents how the processing of message would happen for a person with sufficient knowledge and resources to evaluate information through the central path of the ELM. If a person does not have any of the main influencing factors (motivation, cognitive ability, attitude shift, and reflection) the processing would mostly be shifted to peripheral route. Processing of KLM or Fossielvrij NL messages through peripheral route would be affected by persuasion tactics.
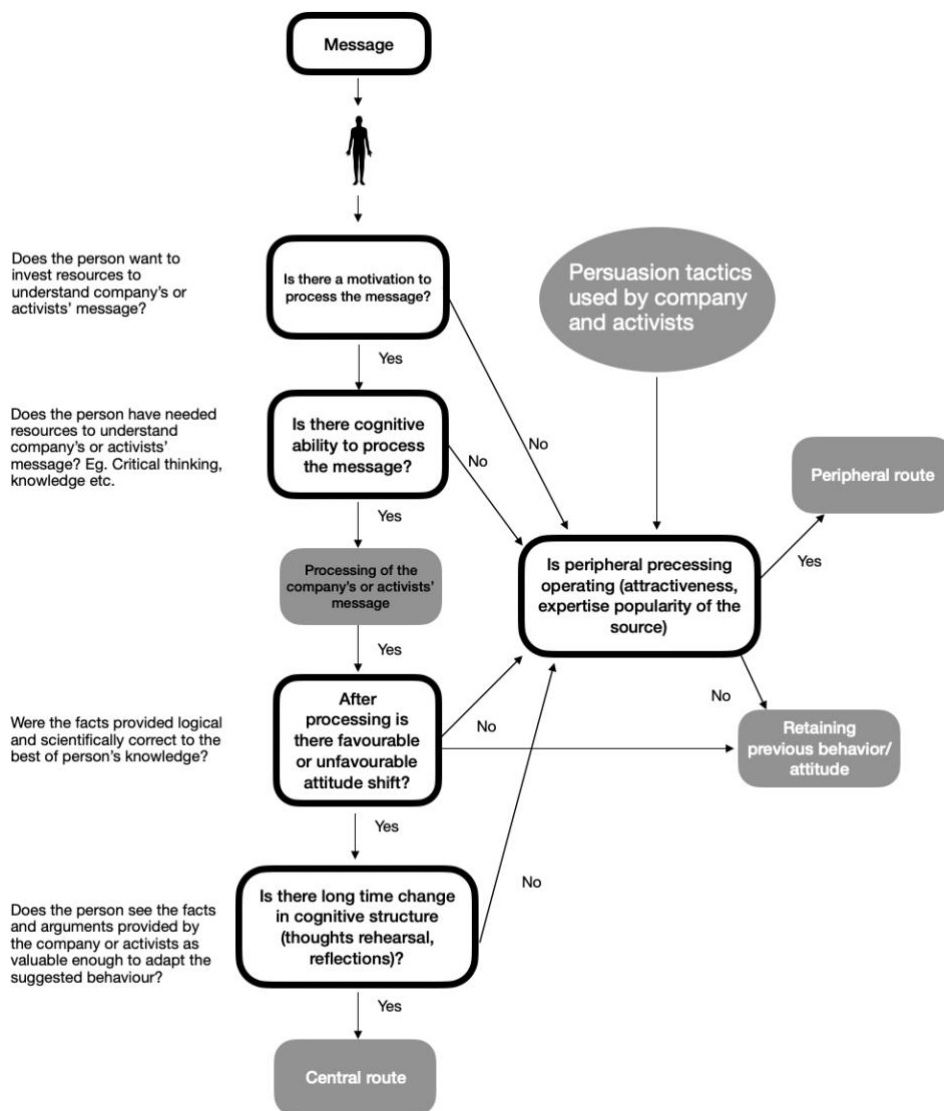
Figure 11. Persuasion through the central route of the ELM when evaluating the message by KLM or Fossielvrij NL.

When evaluating the ethicality of persuasion, the TARES test was found to be hardly applicable. To understand the extent to which the company's and activists' communication was done ethically, an insightful information from within the organizations is needed. For instance, questions related to authenticity and intentions of communicators like "Does communicator personally believe in this message?" cannot be answered. Nevertheless, to understand the severity of information disorder is possible through five questions introduced by Wardle & Derakhshan (2017). In case, court proves that KLM Fly Responsibly was misinforming. The severity of company's communication can be evaluated as follows:

1) How durable is the message?

As durability of the message depends on its goals. As climate change and environmental issues are durable problems that do not have a specific deadline. Fly Responsibly campaign has a prolonged impact.

2) How accurate is the message?

This question concentrates on the extent of potential harmfulness of the message and is closely connected to its accuracy. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) suggest using the scale "truthful information with an intent to harm" on one end to "fully fabricated information" on the other end. As this case does not yet have a court decision, the accuracy of messages can only be assumed. Based on the results of evaluating activists' claims, this campaign most uses misappropriation and manipulation of existing narratives. Thus, according to activists, KLM communication is not accurate.

3) Is the message legal?

Some messages can be illegal in certain jurisdictions. As this case is a subject of a lawsuit, the legality of the massages is a crucial aspect. In case of activists win, the claims done by KLM in Fly Responsibly camping will be considered illegal.

4) How official is the source of the message?

The message is perceived more credible if it is coming from a well-known source. Thus, the persuasiveness of the message varies based on whether it is distributed official or as an anonymous imposter content. The messages in this case are distributed by a well-known company. Thus, all the messages provided by this company gain credibility and persuasiveness based on the brand value. Therefore, in case of misinformation will be proven, the severity of information disorder will be higher.

5) What is the message's intended target?

In this case, information disordered message's target is groups of individuals that are customers or potential customers that could be discredited by the messages in Fly Responsibly campaign.

Thus, based on these questions it can be said that in case activists win the lawsuit and prove that KLM was misinforming, the severity of this misinformation will be rather high. It is determined by prolonged impact, not accurate information, authority of the source that spread the information, and relatively high number of target audience.

*Research question 2:*
*How do persuasion tactics differ in activists and company´s communication?*

The second research question aims to identify the difference in communication narratives and persuasion tactics that KLM and Fossielvrij NL applied when describing the same case accused of misinformation. Based on content analysis, three main themes were identified in communication for both parties. The content driven themes that were further used for comparison were: sustainable aviation is possible; $CO_2$ compensation undoes the climate impact of flying; sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels. Content analysis of both KLM and Fossielvrij NL about the themes has revealed several critical differences in how activists and the company communicate on the same themes that were claimed to be misinforming. The differences in communication are presented in Table 17.

In KLM communication none of the claims appears straightforwardly. Thus, the company content does not include such sentences "*sustainable aviation is possible*"; "$CO_2$ compensation undoes the climate impact of flying"; "*sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels*" directly in the text. An important factor that needs to be emphasized that since the moment of lawsuit start till the moment when this research started, and the content was retrieved from the KLM page has past several months. There is a chance that after the lawsuit the text has been altered. Nevertheless, this does not play a crucial role to this research and does not prevent answering the research questions. Thus, one of the first differences highlighted in that the themes that activists identify as the main misinforming elements are not used directly in KLM communication. However, all of the topics they addressed are present and KLM widely communicate each of them as a benefit to the customers, aviation and planets provided by Fly Responsibly campaign. Another difference that is closely connected to the first one is that there are some sentences that fully contradict activists' sayings. For example, "*we realize that today aviation is far from sustainable*" or "*The fastest way to reduce your flight-related CO2 emissions is by not flying*", which makes the case not as straightforward as it might appear only based on activists' content. It also important to notice that it is unknown if these narratives were placed in the campaign's text after the lawsuit or before.

Despite the presence of narratives that fully contradict claims provided in activists debunking, the amount of these statements is relatively low compared to the number of statements that refer to the topics of the misinforming claims. For instance, some of the KLM's statements or expressions can be interpreted as "undoing" or fully compensating negative impact of flying. For example, "*smaller carbon footprint, more forests*".

The next big aspect of KLM's communication about Fly responsibly campaign concerns the persuasion principles used. Addressing of authority principle was the more frequent in activists' communication, whereas company communication addressing liking and social principles has been much higher that it appears from activists' communication. Similarly with the processes of attitude change. The share of identification is much higher for company's communication in comparison to the activists' one. As identification is the most used process of attitude change it can be concluded that the company wanted to be seen as a partner helping customers, appear likable and acting in a socially encouraged manner. If customer joins KLM, they also become likable and gain social proof to their actions. According to the results, activists appeal to compliance. They portray KLM as an authority that can be seen as an expert by others, and consequently, mislead them by "overusing" the trust that customers have towards KLM.

One of the main found differences that illustrate this conclusion is the way the KLM shapes their proposal to the customers. KLM uses "help to reduce *your* impact" but "join *us* today for a more sustainable tomorrow". In a way, the company associates negative impact to solely customers, but "making aviation more sustainable" to the KLM itself and customers should join them. Another illustration is when KLM says "our reforestation program" company is aligned and associated with positive matters. All the negative aspects are mentioned either for "aviation industry" or customers in expressions like "your flight". In addition to the previously mentioned conclusions, a significantly higher share of addressing liking, social proof and consistency persuasion principles occurs in company's communication when it comes to broader category of "sustainable aviation" and category that needs to evoke/persuade customers to pay for reforestation program. Whereas the category of sustainable aviation fuels that requires company to act has been addressing audience through authority.

To sum up, KLM creates a communication pattern that makes company associated only to positive aspects, and shift negativity and responsibility for their business's emission and environmental impact to industry or customers. That can be seen from frequency of addressing social proof and liking principles of persuasion. Social proof is aiming to make customers believe they are living sustainably eliminating impacts of their flights. Whereas, liking principle is making KLM look like an appealing partner that provide possibilities of sustainable lifestyle with no need to stop using flights. In addition, this communication patten is supported by results of a significantly high share of sentences addressing identification process of attitude change that refers to a person feeling oneself a part of a community and altering

behavior based on it. It can be illustrated by such vivid examples of using sentences as "help to reduce *your* impact" or "*your* flight" but "join *us* today for a more sustainable tomorrow" or "*Together* we can make *your business trip* more sustainable" demonstrate the intent of linking KLM to positive aspects and perceiving negative impacts as individual's own responsibility.

This creates a room for activist community to question legitimacy of environmental claims from their side and see company's trials towards improving aviation impact as misinforming and creating a belief among customers that it is possible to fully compensate their environmental impact of flying by purchasing tickets with KLM Fly Responsibly campaign. Table 16 summarizes the main differentiating aspects between KLM and Fossielvrij NL communication.

Table 17. Comparison of company's and activists' communication.

| Comparison factor | KLM communication | Fossielvrij NL communication |
|---|---|---|
| **PERSUASION** | | |
| Most addressed process of attitude change | Addressing identification process of attitude change | Addressing compliance process of attitude change |
| Most addressed persuasion principles | Significantly higher share of addressing liking and social proof principles than in activists' content | Heavily relying on usage of authority principle |
| Link between persuasion tactics and narratives | Themes that require actions from the customers used mostly liking and social proof; Theme that requires action from the company appealed to authority. | Authority was the main persuasion principle for all misinformation types. |
| **COMMUNICATION ABOUT MISINFORMATION** | | |
| Misinformation claims | None of the misinforming claims appear straightforwardly. The narratives' impact is dependent on each individuals' perception and level of involvement into the topic (central or peripheral route of the ELM.) | Strictly stating the misinforming claims "sustainable aviation is possible"; "CO2 compensation undoes the climate impact of flying"; "sustainable aviation fuels can replace fossil fuels" |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Contradicting statements | Content includes sentences fully contradicting the misinforming claims | No mention of contradiction statements |
| Negative impact connection | Linking negative impact of flying to customers and industry | Linking negative impact to KLM and industry |
| **COMMUNICATION ABOUT ROLE OF KLM** | | |
| Portraying KLM | Vision of KLM being a partner helping customers, appear likable and acting in a socially encouraged manner. | Vision of KLM being an authority that can be seen as an expert by others, and consequently, mislead them by "overusing" the trust that customers have towards KLM |
| KLM impact connection | Linking KLM to positive change | Linking KLM to misleading and fraud actions |

In addition, this case also brings a lot of ideas connected to deliberate democracy. For instance, whether this type of events make deliberate democracy dangerous and harmful to the economy or whether the confrontation between various social actors like company's and activists make deliberate democracy unachievable model for the society. On one hand, deliberate democracy is about emphasizing the importance of pluralism, rather than being just consensual but meta-consensual that includes recognizing and respecting different views and opinions (Curato et al., 2017). Activists calling out the brand for what they see as harmful behavior is an evident example of this. Nevertheless, by just addressing the company, they did not manage to cause any actions. Thus, metaconsensus did not happen and activists filed a lawsuit. Curato et al. (2017) argues that deliberate democracy should be seen as a normative theory, that describes the way relations ought to be. Selen et al. (2015) adds to this view starting that deliberate democracy is not about all or nothing, but rather that the application of it to certain extent. Based on this, the case of KLM and Fossielvrij NL creates a precedent of deliberation in the society. According to Bago et al. (2020), people engaging in deliberative communication are aided to uncover the truth. Opposingly, a lack of deliberation creates grounds for believing in fake news (Bago et al., 2020). Thus, activists attracting attention to harmfulness of flying create a setting where people are less likely to trust misinforming messages about this. Nevertheless, in this particular case there is also a possibility to look at it from another perspective. On the

other hand, from some actors' point of view, this type of freedom of calling out or even hijacking brand's communication can be seen as harmful and polarizing. For instance, in this case actors that support the perspective of KLM would see activists using democratic freedoms as a weapon to target the company.

All in all, it can be said that addressing such comprovincial topic as sustainability in aviation industry can potentially become a reason for facing strong activism reaction and accusations of being misinforming for any company in the industry. The case taken for this research is different, because the activist created a big publicity for this case and have filed a lawsuit against the company. Based on the results of this research, it can be concluded that KLM has created a room for misinformation accusations in their communication and not as straightforward communication in actual flying impact. To avoid misinformation accusations, KLM could have provided more statistics on how big of an impact aviation has, and how much can be compensated, as well as what an impact a single purchase can do in terms of reforestation. A more transparent and data driven communication would not create a situation when activists file a lawsuit. At the same time, aviation industry is an essential part of global economy, which could not be stopped entirely. It would lead to significant positive environmental impact, but also to a total collapse of economic situation. Thus, KLM can be in "the best out of the worst" position by trying to improve the situation by working on reforestation and sustainable aviation fuels. Thus, from a position of activism calling out only KLM might not be solely right, but it can create precedent for other companies in the market. The case creates a trigger for aviation industry to become more transparent of the negative environmental impact that comes with each flight, as well as describe not only potential benefits of "sustainable aviation" solutions, but the potential downsides of such projects as reforestation, other ways of decreasing $CO_2$ emissions, and sustainable aviation fuels application.

## 8.3 Evaluation of the study

According to Erikson and Kovalainen (2008), evaluation of the research is crucial to ensure the trustworthiness, quality, and scientific nature of the research. Aim of this chapter is to describe and explicitly evaluate these aspects in current study. It is done by presenting the stages of developing the research and describing research materials and methodologies chosen to ensure trustworthiness and quality of the study. There are three core aspects of good quality research - validity, reliability, and generalizability of the study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). According to Rose &

Johnson (2020), to ensure trustworthiness of research it is important to ensure validity and reliability alignment with larger issues as ontology and epistemology. Additionally, research should demonstrate the accuracy of the examined literature and arguments, appropriate selection of data collection- and analyzing methods.

This research was relying on ontology of subjectivism, since it investigated the reality created by social actors. The reality was impacted by individuals' own feelings, perceptions, and interpretations. The suitable epistemology was interpretivism, since researching persuasion tactics in misinformation can be only studied through social actors and is influenced by people involved and, thus, cannot be entirely objective (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This study set a goal of describes and evaluates social actors' communication on the researched phenomena, thus, gathering qualitative has been selected (Adams et al., 2014). As this study managed to bring understanding in difference how different actor apply persuasion tactics about the same campaign accused in misinformation, selected research paradigms were accurate.

The validity of research refers to the extent to which the study's results accurately reflect reality from different viewpoints (Rose & Johnson, 2020). Eriksson & Kovalinen also emphasized that findings should accurately represent the phenomenon referred to. One of the ways to ensure that is triangulation of theories, which mean that "several theories are used in explaining, understanding and interpreting the case" (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 293). In this research investigated phenomenon was approached by reviewing a number of persuasion and misinformation theories and showing connection between them. As all previously developed theories were addressing one or both researched topics, their significance to this study was validated.

Reliability in research refers to the consistency and stability of results obtained from a study. It is the degree to which the findings of a study can be replicated or repeated under similar conditions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This study applied qualitative research methods with an intent of producing new information and connection between persuasion and misinformation. To ensure study' reliability content analysis was chosen as the most systematic way to analyze qualitative data. Use of clear and well-defined theory-driven categories ensured coherence of analysis and aided overall reliability of the research. According to Rose and Johnson (2020), it is important to provide a clear documentation of the methodologies and a detailed research protocol to enhance reliability, enabling others to replicate similar strategies.

The generalizability means the extent to which the results of the study can be generalized to other settings, populations, or contexts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). It is concerned with the extent to which the study's findings can be applied to the real

world beyond the research setting. As this specific research was concern with only one specific case, generalizability of the results is inappropriate in this study setting. Further research is required on the subject matter to ensure that the findings can be confidently applied and integrated into the existing body of knowledge

## 8.4 Limitations and further research

Despite ensuring overall reliability and quality of the study, the research has limitations. In the chapter, the limitations of this research will be acknowledged and discussed. Thus, they can be neglected in future research.

Firstly, when dealing with topics of persuasion, it is important to keep in mind that there is no universally persuasive strategy that will work for everyone. Impacting one's beliefs, attitudes and behavior is dependent on plenty of individual factors such as topic awareness, critical thinking abilities etc. This research investigates only possible ways narratives about misinformation can be persuasive. Thus, for some audience some of the principles discussed in this study would work, but for other they might not. For example, internalisation and linked to it principle of consistency would work only for individuals would already consider sustainable choices as part of their lifestyle and would be persuaded to choose an eco-friendlier option for their flight. At the same time, people who have resources (knowledge, time, willingness) to thoroughly evaluate the Fly Responsibly campaign offers would be mostly using the central route of the ELM. Thus, these individuals might take the same action but will be persuaded by different means.

Secondly, the research was done by one person, thus, it is influenced by one's biases to certain extent. To eliminate personal impact, the research followed theory-grounded approaches that enable to evaluate qualitative content in a systematic manner, for example, content analysis with prewritten coding rules that were based on theories of misinformation narratives, persuasion principles and processes of attitude change described in detail.

Thirdly, the case selected for the research did not yet have a court decision which have led to restrictions for the research. As it would have been unethical to identify company's communication as misinforming narratives, the researchers concentrated on how it was framed by activists who accused the brand in speaking misinformation.

Although this research combined several crucial persuasion and misinformation theories before its results can be generalized more research is needed. As mentioned previously there were some limitations in this research. Further investigation of this topic could concentrate on eliminating them. In can be done by, for example, conducting a similar study with more researchers. This can also enlarge reliability of the study.

One of the key theoretical contributions of this study was the developed theoretical framework of persuasive tactics in misinforming messages. Testing the framework with other misinformation cases. For example, cases that already have court decisions or gained immense public attentions. For example, collecting trolls' content that is spread on social media and evaluating with persuasion tactics were addressed by misinforming narratives that are used there. Additionally, it is possible to pick a case when activists accusing an organization of misinformation were found to be wrong. When a significant number of cases will be analyzed, it will be possible to connect misinformation narrative to the persuasion principle they most often address, and maybe find a correlation. Thus, the application of this framework can be rooted in the field of knowledge by providing ground to link certain misinformation type of the persuasion tactics it often uses.

As to the selected case specifically, the content on KLM's lobbying in the parliament and to political authorities to shape the legislative norms in accordance with its interested can be investigated in relation to their CSR activities. Fossielvrij NL has mentioned that on contrary to its public activities of decreasing emissions and overall negative impact of flying, the company continues lobbying to ensure the growth. Thus, in the future this particular case can be continued by investigation of this issue.

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