



H&M's communication with stakeholders via social media in the wake of the 'monkey hoodie incident' - a corporate communication approach

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my parents, who, by their example, taught me that a disciplined work ethic carries with it a torch of hope, that sacrifice carries with it the potential of newfound treasures and that resilience yields promises of great beauty. Thank you for your example. I love you both dearly.

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ABSTRACT

While corporate organisations have been using various strategies and platforms to facilitate two-way communication for a long time, the rise of social media has presented new opportunities and challenges. The nature of the exchange of information via social media means that messages that are shared within the public domain happen in real time. Organisations have opportunities to engage directly and immediately with stakeholders and participate in discussions as part of two-way communication but need to consider that stakeholders can now express their views, both positive and negative, immediately, publicly and on a global scale, posing a potential risk to organisations.

The 2018 H&M “monkey hoodie incident” is a case in point. In January 2018, H&M was at the centre of a major international social media incident. Stephanie Yeboah, a Twitter personality, shared a screenshot of the Swedish retailer’s website at 11pm on January 7 that featured a picture of a boy of colour wearing a hoodie with the slogan “coolest monkey in the jungle”. After Yeboah called attention to the image’s racist overtones, her post was “retweeted” (re-shared) more than 21,000 times on the X (formerly Twitter) platform over the next 48 hours. Other users quickly began to condemn H&M’s policies and demand a response in an outpouring of “tweets”.

In this study, it is argued that H&M should have adhered to the principles of the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and strategic communication management in communication with its stakeholders on social media to build and maintain positive stakeholder relationships. The general research question of this study was: *‘What was the nature of H&M’s communication with its stakeholders via social media in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident?’*

The empirical part of the study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach. The qualitative part of the study comprised a qualitative content analysis of H&M’s communication with stakeholders on their social media platforms (Facebook and X [Twitter]) in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. The quantitative part of the study comprised a sentiment analysis of stakeholders’ responses to H&M’s communication on the matter on its social media platforms.

The key findings were that:

- H&M demonstrated signs of both asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews in its communication practices with its stakeholders via X and Facebook.

- The organisation did have measures in place to balance its needs with those of its stakeholders; however, these attempts were overshadowed by the core need for the organisation to drive sales via marketing-orientated communication.
- The organisation did cultivate an environment conducive to two-way communication in its messaging directed at its stakeholders, thereby showing its openness to feedback from their stakeholders.
- More consistent real time and two-way communication was, however, needed in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident, so that the organisation could work towards attaining mutual understanding and trust among its stakeholders.
- There was evidence that H&M's communication was thought through and strategic, but that it did not necessarily facilitate two-way communication.
- The overall negative sentiment results from H&M stakeholders indicate that more social media listening engagement is needed to overcome potential misunderstandings regarding topics of shared interest, such as the topics of diversity and inclusion.
- H&M did not fully utilise all the built-in social media functions that can be used to facilitate the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and stakeholder relationship management.

Key terms: *Corporate communication, H&M, monkey-hoodie incident, reflective paradigm, social media, social media engagement, social media listening, strategic communication management, stakeholder relationships, two-way symmetrical communication.*

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CHAPTER 1 CONTEXT, PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Freeman *et al.* (1983:89; 2010:26) propose that an organisation would cease to exist without its stakeholders. This implies that the latter are of extreme significance to corporate organisations. Furthermore, the latter and the former share a symbiotic relationship, because without stakeholders, there would ultimately be no corporate organisation. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that corporate organisations acknowledge their responsibility towards their stakeholders (Freeman *et al.*, 1983:89; Freeman *et al.*, 2010:26). Stakeholders can be divided into three primary categories or “stakes”, namely, equity, economic and influencer. Equity stakes refer to those who have direct ownership of the organisation, such as shareholders, directors or minority interest owners. Economic stakes are held by those who have an economic but not an ownership interest in the organisation, such as employees, customers, suppliers and competitors. Lastly, influencer stakes are held by those who have neither an ownership nor economic interest in the organisation’s actions (Cornelissen, 2020:ch.4, par.11). In the context of this study, the term “stakeholders” refers to those with economic stakes.

According to Steyn (2004:70-72), corporate communication provides the strategic approach organisations require to recognise, prioritise and manage issues and stakeholder relationships anticipatorily. This is because corporate communication, sensitises organisations to issues that matter to their stakeholders. The current researcher assumed that corporate communication principles (as conceptualised in two-way symmetrical communication theory, the reflective paradigm and strategic communication management (SCM) could be utilised by an organisation to manage its day-to-day organisation-stakeholder relationships and to cultivate both mutual understanding and beneficial relationships through social media listening and via its built-in communication functions. The inability of many organisations to control how user-generated content (UGC) is spread via social media highlights the necessity of mutual understanding and positive relationships between organisations and their stakeholders in preventing negative UGC that can harm the entities. The following theoretical framework: two-way symmetrical model of communication, reflective paradigm and SCM, in conjunction with certain social media processes and functions, could help the organisation to manage its relationships with its stakeholders daily and in real time, as well as identify potential conflict situations timeously.

To inhibit possible conflict that could impact an organisation's survival, the latter should prioritise its stakeholders' requirements and interests (Cornelissen, 2020:ch.4, par.6). Many organisations have incorporated social media into their corporate communication strategies to meet the demands of diverse stakeholder groups (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020:120). Social media has changed how information is shared between organisations and their stakeholders by challenging the sender-based communication paradigm (one-way communication) in favour of knowledge sharing (two-way communication) (Vidhi, 2016:442).

Social media can contribute to two-way communication between an organisation and its stakeholders through online interaction, which includes activities such as online content sharing, instant messaging and responding to content through Facebook "reactions" (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011:260;262; Hase *et al.*,2023:1502). There are also social media processes that could be utilised in conjunction with social media functions, which could help organisations to build and create favourable relationships with their stakeholders. The first process is referred to as "social media engagement" (Sherman & Smith, 2013:28; Kerpen, 2011:65; Ryan, 2020:13). When an organisation utilises social media engagement processes, it is well equipped to understand its stakeholders and their expectations (Ryan, 2020:13).

The second process is referred to as "social media listening", which enables an organisation to monitor a large volume of social media discussions carefully by documenting major topics of interest. For example, since social media conversations occur in real time, listening could be utilised to observe and extract useful information about trending topics and the most recent conversations between stakeholders via social media (Buzoianu & Bîră,2021:2; Kerpen, 2011:20). Social media listening enables organisations to align themselves strategically with current challenges and popular topics addressed by their stakeholders via their social media platforms, while also enhancing the quality of organisation-stakeholder relationships (Kerpen, 2011:20-21).

The social media engagement and social media listening processes have similar outcomes to the corporate communication principles of two-way symmetrical communication. Furthermore, the reflective paradigm and SCM principles assist to create and maintain overall positive organisation-stakeholder relationships. However, whereas corporate communication principles are concerned with how communication practice could help foster positive organisational-stakeholder relationships, social media engagement and social media listening are concerned with how its built-in functions could be utilised to foster overall positive organisational-stakeholder relationships (Sherman & Smith, 2013:28; Kerpen, 2011:65,20-21; Ryan, 2020:13, Buzoianu &

Bîră, 2021:2; Grunig & White, 1992:65; Dozier *et al.*, 1995:39; Dozier & Ehling 1992:197; Holmström, 2005:501; Steyn & De Beer, 2012:30-31).

The two-way nature of social media means that stakeholders can gather independently and formulate their own solutions to problems. They also have an option to develop and disseminate UGC to solve problems independently via social media platforms (Moens *et al.*, 2014:8; Peschke, 2017:28; Sethi, 2021:6). This implies that organisations have limited control over the information their stakeholders communicate autonomously. Hence, overall positive organisation-stakeholder interactions are important to ensure the overall sustainability of the organisation. In this study it is argued that since organisations cannot control the spread of information regarding issues that affect them via social media, it is crucial to implement measures to manage organisation-stakeholder relationships via their social media platforms, such that it would serve the best interests of both parties alike.

The case of the H&M monkey hoodie incident was identified as an ideal study to interrogate this assumption because it comprised the following characteristics:

The H&M incident showcased the influence of the viral dynamics of social media and the ramifications of UGC, as well as the limited control organisations have over these aspects of social media. The communication between H&M and its stakeholders occurred on popular social media platforms, namely Facebook¹ and X (Twitter²), which offer both social media engagement and listening processes, including built-in two-way communication functions. The combination of all these attributes made the H&M monkey hoodie incident an ideal case study.

1.2 THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE: TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION, REFLECTIVE PARADIGM AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

As part of the investigation of H&M's communication with its stakeholders, the literature on the concept of "worldview" was explored.

¹During 2021 Facebook underwent a name change to Meta. However, Facebook remains the most commonly used name to refer to the social media platform. (refer to: <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/facebook-company-is-now-meta/>)

² Twitter was rebranded as "X" in July 2023. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/tech/x-twitter-logo-rebrand-why-elon-musk-b1096363.html#:~:text=Elon%20Musk's%20rebranding%20of,in%20a%20flurry%20of%20tweets>

The worldview an organisation selects to adopt in its approach towards organisation-stakeholder interactions informs the general nature of the said communication between the two parties. When an organisation adopts a symmetrical worldview, it implies that its approach to communication with its stakeholders is based on the pillars of negotiation and compromise. The aim is to manage conflict for the mutual benefit and advantage of both parties involved (Grunig, 1992:20-21). According to Deatherage and Hazleton (1998:60), organisations can achieve overall excellence in communication when they adopt a symmetrical worldview perspective in conjunction with the two-way symmetrical communication model.

The latter is considered the most ethical and socially responsible approach to resolving conflict between organisations and their stakeholders, (Grunig *et al.*, 2002:27; Grunig, 2006:165). It is characterised by the active participation of all involved parties to address and resolve issues, and thereby foster healthy relationships and cultivate a shared understanding. Consequently, communication serves the purpose of conveying information that caters to both the stakeholder and the organisation's requirements (Grunig, 2006:159; Grunig, 2011:13). An organisation can establish mutually-beneficial relationships with its stakeholders by engaging in two-way symmetrical communication because it involves considering the expectations of stakeholders in its decision-making processes. This should result in enhanced organisational efficacy to achieve its objectives (Grunig & Huang, 2000:38). Organisations are also better able to achieve mutual understanding and build trusting relationships with their stakeholders when utilising the principles of two-way symmetrical communication to engage with the latter (Ehling, 1992:652-653; Grunig & Huang, 2000:36-40). The two-way symmetrical communication model has similar characteristics to those of the reflective paradigm because the latter is also vested on a symmetrical worldview and its principles also enable mutual understanding between organisations and its stakeholders.

The reflective paradigm can be defined as a strategic approach to communication, which involves the examination of an organisation from an external or public perspective (Van Ruler & Verçiç, 2005:266). This approach is centred on meeting stakeholders' expectations. The aim is to avoid or resolve conflict between organisational behaviour and stakeholder expectations through ongoing conversations between the two parties with the intention of building trusting relationships (Holmström, 2005:501). This is achieved when the organisation uses mutual reflection, which comprises a "reflective" and an "expressive" task. The external environment, namely society, is examined by employing a process known as "the reflective task of communication". The latter enables an organisation to comprehend the effects of its influence on society, as well as the reciprocal influence of the latter on the former (Holmström, 2005:501). Using the expressive task of communication requires the organisation to utilise dialogue to better align itself with its stakeholders' expectations (Holmström, 1996:99). By means of this process, the organisation is

also well equipped to identify potential conflicts between social systems and evaluate the consequences and impact thereof to introduce corrective behaviour (Steyn & Bütschi, 2004:11). Thus, the organisation's communication in the public sphere is no longer considered a mere form of persuasion, but rather that of shared responsibility, negotiations and engagements. This serves to enhance mutual trust among between the stakeholders and the organisation, and foster a greater sense of belief in organisational legitimacy among the former (Holmström, 2005:501).

The third emerging discipline that was investigated is referred to as "strategic communication management" (SCM). As with the reflective paradigm and the two-way symmetrical model of communication, SCM provides theoretical principles for how corporate organisations such as H&M should communicate with their stakeholders to foster mutual understanding between the two parties.

SCM is focused on stakeholder relationships and the responsibilities organisations have towards their stakeholders (Steyn & De Beer, 2012:30-31). This academic field operates on the premise that the communication function forms part of the organisation's overall management function. Communication is considered an integral aspect of any successful management structure. Furthermore, SCM plays a central role in shaping the organisation's approach towards stakeholder engagement and managing their expectations (Steyn & De Beer, 2012:31). The principles of SCM, when executed as part of an overall communications strategy, require organisations to engage directly with their stakeholders through two-way communication to gather information related to its concerns, values and expectations; that is, to serve both its interests and those of the public. Information gathered from the public and stakeholders is utilised by the organisation to align it strategically according to the stakeholder environment (Steyn & De Beer, 2012:30).

In short, the theoretical principles of the two-way symmetrical model of communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM are all geared towards creating long-term positive organisation-stakeholder relations based on mutual understanding via two-way communication.

Corporate organisations such as H&M need to foster and maintain positive relationships with their stakeholders to ensure sustainability (Holmström,1996, Holmström,1997, Grunig & Huang, 2000:29; Steyn, 2002:45; Steyn & Bütschi, 2003:12; Grunig, 2006:159; Grunig, 2011:12,14).

This study was focused predominantly on the nature of communication between H&M and its stakeholders to facilitate positive relationships towards organisational sustainability. Therefore, the current researcher focused on the theoretical underpinnings of corporate communication in relation to stakeholder relationships. The two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and

SCM require organisations to reflect on their positions in society, utilise their positions to establish mutual understanding with their stakeholders and consciously engage with the latter to enhance and maintain these relations (Holmström, 2005:501; Verçiç *et al.*, 2001:382; Grunig *et al.*, 2002:27; Steyn & Bütschi, 2003:11; Grunig, 2006: 159;165;Grunig, 2011:13; Steyn & De Beer, 2012:1).

Social media platforms such as Facebook and X provide channels for symmetrical two-way communication between organisations and their stakeholders (Emeksiz & Şimşek, 2002:46). The two-way symmetrical model of communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM serve as complementary theoretical frameworks to explore the nature of communication between H&M and its stakeholders on its social media platforms in the wake of the 'monkey hoodie incident'.

The next section contains details of the situation H&M faced in 2018 after an image posted on its website became an international point of discussion overnight because of social media's virality and UGC sharing capability. Due to the dissatisfaction expressed by their stakeholders on social media regarding the monkey hoodie advertisement, the organisation was exposed to huge reputational and financial risks. This case demonstrates the need for organisations such as H&M to refer to corporate communication principles as a guideline to help foster overall positive organisational-stakeholder relationships within the social media space.

1.3 CONTEXT: H&M MONKEY HOODIE INCIDENT

Hennes and Mauritz AB, known universally as "H&M", was founded in Sweden in 1947 and is listed on Nasdaq Stockholm. H&M strives to produce affordable fashion for the global market (H&M, 2016:4).

During January 2018, H&M found itself at the forefront of a global public social media incident. At 11pm on January 7, X personality Stephanie Yeboah tweeted a screenshot of the British version of the Swedish-based retailer's website with the photograph of a boy of colour wearing a hoodie. The words "coolest monkey in the jungle" were printed on the front of the hoodie. Yeboah highlighted the racist connotation of the picture and the following night and day, her message was retweeted (re-shared) on the X platform more than 21,000 times. This sparked an influx of tweets from users who criticised H&M's practices and demanded a comment. On 8 January 2018, Canadian pop star, The Weeknd, who had previously acted as a brand ambassador for one of H&M's clothing lines, posted a tweet in which he expressed his embarrassment about the photograph and announced that he would terminate his collaboration with the company. His tweet was retweeted 111,000 times. By that time, millions of people globally were discussing the incident and accused H&M of racism. The very next day, the price of H&M's stock dropped and

hit an eight-year low. It was speculated at the time of the incident that the H&M brand would most likely result in further harm to the business and profits would continue to decline (Bučko, 2018).

H&M removed the advertisement from the website, but continued to sell the hoodie online, although not in all countries. Formal statements explaining their stance regarding the advertisement were posted by H&M on their Facebook and X pages, as well as in the global mainstream news media.

The backlash of the social media outcry saw international artists with a voluminous number of social media followers terminate their relationship with the company (Thomas, 2018). Furthermore, the H&M monkey hoodie incident escalated to new heights in South Africa, where the members of a South African political party, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), vandalised H&M stores across the Gauteng province. Stock was damaged, which prompted H&M to close all its stores. This resulted in a massive uproar in the X discourse on racism in South Africa, which resulted in a divide among South Africans about the EFF's violent protest action (Spies & Mitchley, 2018).

1.4 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND GENERAL RESEARCH QUESTION

Organisations such as H&M should utilise their social media platforms as part of their communication strategy to build, maintain and protect their relationships with their stakeholders because these associations impact the organisation's survival. Because of the alarming rate at which tweets about the monkey hoodie incident were shared, it was necessary for H&M to implement measures to manage its stakeholders' expectations via their social media pages.

The principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM demonstrate that shared meaning is necessary between organisations and their stakeholders to assist with the management of organisation-stakeholder relationships and to establish positive relationship outcomes such as mutual understanding and trust. Social media platforms could help to facilitate two-way communication between organisations and their stakeholders. The monkey hoodie incident calls into question H&M's communication with its stakeholders while under pressure from uncontrollable factors such as the viral nature of social media and the opportunity for their stakeholders to share UGC.

It is against this background that the following general research question was posed:

What was the nature of H&M's communication with its stakeholders via social media in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident?

1.5 SPECIFIC RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Two specific research questions were formulated to assist in answering the general question:

- 1.5.1** How should corporate organisations communicate with their stakeholders via social media according to the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM to enhance stakeholder relationships?
- 1.5.2** To what extent did H&M's communication with its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident adhere to the principles of the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM?

1.6 SPECIFIC RESEARCH AIMS

In light of the abovementioned research questions, the following aims were formulated:

- 1.6.1** To determine, based on theoretical principles derived from the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM, how corporate organisations such as H&M should communicate with their stakeholders via social media to enhance stakeholder relationships through a literature review.
- 1.6.2** To determine, by means of qualitative content analysis and sentiment analysis, the extent to which H&M's communication with its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident adhered to the principles of the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM.

1.7 RESEARCH METHODS

This study comprised a literature review to respond to the first research question and a qualitative content analysis and sentiment analysis to respond to the second research question.

1.7.1 Literature review

An extensive literature search was conducted utilising the following keywords: "corporate communication", "two-way symmetrical communication", "reflective paradigm" and "strategic communication management".

The following databases were consulted: NWU library, Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, Nexus, Sabinet, JSTOR and Emerald Insight Journals to determine the existing body of knowledge available and to ensure adequate theoretical material for the investigation.

The following scholars' contributions were significant regarding the two-way symmetrical model of communication: Grunig and Grunig (2002;2008), Dozier *et al.* (1995) and Grunig and Huang (2000). Reflective theory: Holmström (1996;1997;2005), Kjaerbeck and Holmström (2007), Van Ruler and Verčič (2005) and Verčič *et al.* (2001). SCM: Steyn 2002; 2009 and De Beer, Steyn & Rensburg, 2013. Regarding social media, the work of Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), Fredeberg (2016), Capriotti and Zeler (2020) and Hamdan (2021) was relevant.

The following MA and PhD studies comprised examinations of the utilisation of social media by various institutions to engage with their stakeholders from a corporate communication perspective:

Kaka (2022) investigated marketing theory and the principles of two-way symmetrical communication to identify ways in which institutions of higher learning could utilise Facebook to increase student engagement. Naidu (2020) explored how language and semiotics was utilised by H&M in their Facebook advertisements to perpetuate ideologies of feminine beauty. Hope (2019) focused on how corporate organisations such as H&M could develop its visual, social networking strategies and engagement more effectively among their stakeholders through brand imagery. Swart (2018) examined how a non-profit organisation (NPO) utilised social media to interact with various stakeholders.

From the above, it can be inferred that although studies have been conducted on the role of social media from a corporate communication perspective, there is an opportunity to build on this perspective because no evidence was found regarding specific corporate communication principles being interrogated to theoretically identify guidelines for how corporate organisations should communicate with their stakeholders. There was also no evidence that the theoretical principles had been applied to the social media context in conjunction with social media engagement, social media listening processes and built-in social media functions to foster positive stakeholder relationships via social media.

The following MA and PhD studies investigated the theoretical principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM:

Matthee (2011) investigated how two-way communication could be utilised by organisations in the banking sector to communicate with their stakeholders. Kloppers (2005) studied the identity of an NGO and its stakeholders' perspectives of its identity through the lens of SCM. Jansen van Rensburg (2007) utilised SCM to investigate how a university incorporated the theory's principles into its corporate social engagement programmes. Wiggill (2009) focused on the practice of SCM in the NPO context. Meintjes (2012) considered SCM in the context of Chapter 8 of the *King III*

Report on Governance. Coetzee (2008) aimed to determine the connection between organisational relationships and the success thereof and investigated the relationship between organisational alliances (as a specific form of organisational relationship) and the achievement of its goal within the context of SCM. De Beer (2014) examined how SCM could be conceptualised in a triple context environment. Sutton (2014) focused on the theoretical principles of the reflective paradigm, with reference to relationship building practices at the North-West University's Institutional Office. Igboanugo (2014) explored how public relations practitioners and professional bodies conceptualised ethical communications. The principles of symmetrical communication and the reflective paradigm were utilised as the benchmark for the analysis.

It was determined that none of these studies focused on the specific corporate communication principles collectively or how these said principles could be utilised by organisations in conjunction with social media functions and processes to build and maintain overall positive organisational stakeholder relationships. This constituted a gap in the literature, which the current researcher endeavoured to address.

1.7.2 Empirical study

The next section comprises a brief overview of the research methods that were utilised for the empirical part of the study. These methods are described in more detail in Chapter 3.

1.7.2.1 Mixed-methods approach

Combining quantitative and qualitative research techniques into a single investigation is known as the mixed-methods approach (Bryman, 2006, 97–98; Truong & Liu, 2020:1564; Johnson *et al.*, 2007:113; Creswell, 2003:12). Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of a problem or situation, whereas quantitative research facilitates generalisation and precision (Creswell & Creswell, 2015). A qualitative method was used to examine how H&M engaged with its stakeholders via its Facebook and X platforms. The researcher utilised a quantitative method to analyse the general sentiment of H&M stakeholders regarding the apology messages shared by the latter on their Facebook and X platforms in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident.

The incorporation of both qualitative and quantitative methods within the framework of a mixed-methods approach made it possible to examine the connections between the narrative conveyed in H&M's communication and the reactions (sentiments) of its stakeholders in response thereto on the monkey hoodie advertisement, thereby providing insight into what was communicated by H&M and how these messages were received by its stakeholders.

1.7.2.2 Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis is utilised to disclose the themes and patterns embedded in a text (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2014:234). According to Shava *et al.* (2021), researchers can acquire a deep understanding of social reality through qualitative content analysis because it provides a holistic overview of the text or speech and the environment in which the latter is presented and considered.

The official H&M South Africa Facebook page, although active from January to March 2018, was officially closed during July 2018 and redirected to the company's global Facebook page. It was noted that when the official H&M South Africa page was active, Facebook was flooded with comments relating to the monkey hoodie incident and that political protest action was undertaken by a South African political party. The closing of the H&M South African Facebook page was noted as a critical finding.

Despite the H&M Facebook page being closed, messages communicated by H&M and by their stakeholders remained accessible via a Facebook search for the monkey hoodie.

H&M's social media communication on Facebook and X was subjected to a qualitative content analysis of the timeframe identified as the wake of the monkey hoodie incident (1 January 2018 to 31 March 2018).

A search was conducted to establish the H&M stakeholders' responses to the apology messages that were issued by H&M on their Facebook and X pages. The messages were checked to ensure that they responded directly to the apology messages from H&M and did not comprise any hyperlinks or spam that were not directly related to the apology messages.

All the social media posts published by H&M are still widely available via an internet search. The total number of Facebook and X posts shared by H&M on these platforms, namely 94 messages, were evaluated for the qualitative aspect of the study.

1.7.2.3 Stakeholder sentiment analysis

Sentiment analysis was conducted to determine how the apology messages shared by H&M on their Facebook and X platforms were received by their stakeholders. Sentiment analysis enables organisations to examine their reputation and comprehend how their stakeholders react to significant events (Gascon *et al.*, 2016:179-180). The analysis was conducted using SentiStrength, which is an online sentiment analysis software that utilises a lexical method to classify social media texts (see Thelwall, 2017:119). One hundred comments from H&M's

Facebook and 100 tweets on X platforms were analysed. The comments were relevant to the timeline identified as the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. The identified timeframe was from 1 January 2018 to 31 March 2018.

Only messages that were direct responses to the apology messages published by H&M regarding the monkey hoodie advertisement on its Facebook and X platforms were included in the sample. The objective was to validate a quality sample relevant to the research question.

1.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

All the social media posts related to the monkey hoodie incident were available online within the public domain and for analysis. An ethical clearance application was submitted to the NWU Basic and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The study was classified as no risk and the ethics number 01004-20-S7 was issued.

1.9 CHAPTER LAYOUT

Chapter 1: The context of the study and the research problem was presented in this chapter, followed by the research questions, aims and methods utilised in the study.

Chapter 2: A literature review is presented in which the theoretical perspectives of the two-way symmetrical model of communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM are explored. Details are also provided of the functions and opportunities social media can offer organisations that intend to cultivate positive stakeholder relationships and to identify potential conflict situations via social media. Literature regarding Facebook and X, as well as the social media processes and functions of these platforms, are also explored in this chapter to answer the first research question.

Chapter 3: The details of the mixed-methods approach utilised for the empirical section of the study are presented. The research design, that is, the qualitative content analysis and the sentiment analysis, is also explained, followed by a description of the analysis process. The reliability and validity of the study, as well as challenges encountered, are noted.

Chapter 4: The empirical research results, namely the findings from the qualitative content analysis and sentiment analysis, are presented in this chapter.

Chapter 5: The general and the specific research questions are answered in this chapter, with specific reference to the normative theory guidelines from the reviewed literature (Chapter 2) and the findings from the empirical study presented in Chapter 4. Furthermore, areas for further study are highlighted.

CHAPTER 2 THE TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION MODEL, THE REFLECTIVE PARADIGM AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT: A LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

It was argued in section 1.1 that positive relationships between organisations and their stakeholder's were crucial to ensuring organisational success and sustainability. It was also argued that organisations should apply the principles of the two-way symmetrical model of communication, as well as the reflective paradigm and SCM in their communication with stakeholders to facilitate mutual understanding and positive long-term mutually beneficial relationships (section 1.2). The role of social media in facilitating such communication was highlighted, given its instantaneous and real time nature. The functions for social media engagement and social media listening, which platforms such as Facebook and X offer and which can assist organisations with driving two-way communication was, underscored in sections 1.1 and 1.4. In essence, it was argued that organisations such as H&M should utilise social media as part of their overall communications strategy to facilitate two-way communication with its stakeholders to protect and maintain their stakeholder relationships (sections 1.2 & 1.4).

It is against this background that the aim of this chapter is to answer the first specific research question as indicated in section 1.5.1:

How should corporate organisations communicate with their stakeholders via social media according to the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM to enhance stakeholder relationships?

To answer the above question, an extensive review of the literature on social media was conducted to comprehend what opportunities social media provided to practically implement the theoretical principles, the impact thereof on corporate communication, and the functions and processes it can offer organisations that intend to create and maintain favourable relationships with their stakeholders. Furthermore, a review of the literature on the corporate communication principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM was conducted to establish how corporate organisations should communicate with their stakeholders to comprehend their interests and build positive organisation-stakeholder relationships as a continual process.

The research question is answered in the conclusion of this chapter in the form of four guiding arguments.

2.2 SOCIAL MEDIA

“Social media” is a complex term with multiple definitions. There is no consensus among scholars regarding the meaning of the term (Rosen, 2022; Freberg 2016:773; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010:59). Scholars such as Lin and Rauschnabel (2016:2144) define it as a platform that enables organisations to share content and engage in real time discourse, regardless of physical location, whereas scholars such as Aichner et al. (2021) define social media broadly as encompassing various online platforms such as blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks, forums, microblogs, photo sharing, product reviews, social bookmarking, social gaming, social networks, video sharing and virtual worlds.

According to McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2017:17), social media are web-based services that grant individuals, communities and organisations opportunities to collaborate, connect, interact and build a community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share and engage with easily accessible UGC. This definition is deemed the most appropriate to this study, because it is broad and encompasses many of the elements of social media that are examined in this study.

The next section contains details of the functions social media platforms, specifically Facebook and X, offer for organisational-stakeholder communication. The opportunities provided by the functions of social media for two-way communication between organisations and their stakeholders, and the degree to which organisations have access and control over the functions provided by the Facebook and X social media platforms, are also explicated.

2.3 FACEBOOK AND X

H&M utilised both Facebook and X to communicate with its stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident (section 1.3). According to Capriotti and Zeler (2020:120) and Freberg (2019:33), Facebook and X are two of the most popular social media platforms available to users. The functions of these platforms are detailed in sections 2.3.1 to 2.3.6 below.

2.3.1 Facebook

Facebook is the most renowned and extensive available social media platform. Among the multiple social networks available, Facebook remains the social media platform of choice and its user base has grown dramatically in recent years (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020:120). In the second quarter of 2023, Facebook had approximately three billion monthly active users, making it the

most popular social media platform in the world (Dixon,2023). The distinguishing feature of social media platforms such as Facebook is the social interaction opportunities it offers its users. For example, Facebook users can engage in message exchanges, share images and videos, and post comments (Burke, *et al.*, 2011:572; Breuer *et al.*, 2002:2658). When Facebook was initially introduced, users did not have many alternatives to respond to status updates (Hamdan, 2021:669). One could only leave a comment. On February 9, 2009, Facebook released a new function, namely, the “like” function, which enabled users to “like” their friends’ status updates, photographs, videos and links (Hamdan, 2021:669). On Facebook’s official page, the like button is described as a method to inform others that one likes a post without having to comment (Hamdan, 2021:669). In 2016, Facebook introduced “reactions” to allow users to express five emotions in addition to the “like” function, namely, “love”, “ha-ha”, “wow”, “sad”, and “mad” (Hamdan, 2021:670). This means that stakeholders have direct access to the organisation through Facebook and they are able to communicate and share their perspectives and feelings immediately within the public domain.

H&M utilised a Facebook business page to communicate with its stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. According to Hosain and Mamun (2023:192), Facebook provides individuals and organisations the opportunity to establish business profiles and pages to advertise and promote their products and engage directly with their consumers. A Facebook business page includes a functionality to send and receive messages, post updates, acquire notifications and interact with other users’ content by, for example, liking, sharing and commenting on posts (Facebook Help Center, 2024). Organisations can either limit or increase interaction with their stakeholders by utilising their rights to the access, permission and controls feature, which a Facebook business page provides. Further details about these features are provided below.

2.3.2 Access, permission and controls

A Facebook business page provides access to tasks that can assist one to administer the page (Facebook Help Center, 2024). These tasks include:

The Facebook page administrator has access with complete control, whereas an editor has only partial control. A moderator can only respond to message replies, community activities, advertisements and insights. However, an analyst only has access to “insights”, whereas the community manager can only moderate live chats. The task access, roles and responsibilities for each role is described in further detail below.

Users with administrative or editing rights may add, remove and modify all the material at will. In addition to responding to direct messages (DMs) sent to the organisation’s inbox, they may also

reply to comments made on the page and edit or remove automated responses. Furthermore, people with admin or editor privileges may create, amend and delete advertisements, as well as manage connected accounts, share posts via the page and then analyse the results by utilising the advertising data. They also have an option to either provide or withdraw task access to the page.

Moderator access enables one to manage the Facebook page by utilising other management tools such as Meta Business Suite, Creator Studio, Ads Manager or Business Manager. However, those with task access can manage content, create, manage or delete posts, respond to comments and update Facebook page information. Those with access to messages and community activity via task access can respond to DMs in the Facebook inbox, comment, manage unwanted content and report activity on the page advertisements, create, manage and delete advertisements and other advertisement-related tasks, and have access to the insights feature. The latter enables one to view how the page, content, advertisements and other metrics perform (Facebook Help Center, 2024).

Community managers have access to the livestream chats and can moderate these by means of the following actions: delete or report comments, suspend users from livestream chats for up to 15 minutes, ban users from current livestreams or from all livestreams on the page and pin comments at the top of the live chat (Facebook Help Center, 2024).

The discussion of access, permission and controls demonstrates that organisations that opt to utilise a Facebook business page to communicate with their stakeholders have at their disposal options to either permit a free flow of information from its stakeholders or restrict the flow thereof by enforcing limitations via the built-in task options. The specific Facebook functions that can further assist one to share information between organisations and their stakeholders are detailed in the following section.

2.3.3 Facebook functionalities

According to the Meta Business Help Center (2024), Facebook offers the following built-in functions and recommends that organisations utilise these to cultivate their social media engagement processes (section 1.1):

Organisations can utilise the post option to display images, videos and polls. The inbox function serves as the central hub for all communication and the messenger function can be utilised to reach many individuals, as well as communicate personally. The comments function enables receivers of information to share their feedback in response to the information shared by the

sender. It also enables the original sender of the information to view the feedback from the receiver and respond to it directly. Thus, the commenting function provides an equitable opportunity for the organisation and its stakeholders to engage in a reciprocal process of communication, deliberation and response.

“Groups” enables one to communicate with a select group of individuals who are interested in one’s products or services. This function can be utilised to connect over common interests, create discussion forums and a calendar for the organisation. The “insights” feature provides an overview of the organisations brand page, including engagement and activities undertaken by visitors.

Thus, the built-in Facebook functions offer organisations the opportunity to engage with their stakeholders (via social media), comprehend their stakeholders’ interests (via social media listening) and, generally, facilitate the exchange of information between organisations and their stakeholders. The definitions of social media engagement and social media listening were noted in section 1.1 above; however, a more detailed discussion thereof will be provided in section 2.12 – 2.13 of how the social media processes can be utilised in conjunction with the built-in functions. The access, permissions, controls and built-in functions offered by X are described in the following section.

2.3.4 X

X is a microblogging website that allows users to submit short messages (called “tweets”) limited to 280 characters (up from 140 in 2017). Microblogging enables the rapid distribution of information and exchange of ideas, opinions and artefacts with a variety of audiences. X provides multiple options for users to connect with microblogs; for example, to post on their profiles (“retweet”), click the response symbol, reference someone (by tagging their username), comment directly on a tweet by utilising the reply function, DM someone or follow a person on X (Khalil *et al.*, 2002:347; X Help Center:2024). All one requires is an internet connection to initiate an X account to acquire instant access to a multitude of other X members, including corporate organisations (Page, 2014:30). Page (2014:30) asserts that X is an ideal engagement platform because it allows one-on-one communication. Several functions are also built into the platform, which support and impact how two-way communication takes place. These functions include, *inter alia*, “photos”, “hashtags”, “hyperlinks”, “videos” and “numerals” (e.g. sports scores) (Page, 2014:30). The next section elaborates on the type of access and controls X affords its users.

2.3.5 Access, permission and controls

X has five distinct degrees of access, each with a unique set of rights that can be granted to anyone deemed fit by the organisation. These varying degrees of access govern what people can access, modify and create inside the advertisements account. The five degrees of access include the following roles:

An account administrator has complete access to X “advertisements” and they can add new account administrators and managers. Access to the account can be modified by the account administrator, which includes access to advertisement managers and advertiser campaigns. Account administrators can examine performance data but are unable to post organic X (Tweets); they can generate promoted-only or limited delivery tweets. The advertisement manager can examine performance data and modify campaigns but cannot offer people access to the advertisements accounts or allow them to submit organic tweets. They can, however, create promoted tweets. The creative manager can edit shared creative information, for example, in the form of videos or posts. Furthermore, they can view previews, but cannot create or change campaigns. The campaign analyst can view performance data but can neither build nor modify campaigns. Moreover, they are unable to provide individuals access to the advertisements account or submit any tweets. The organic analyst can check the analytics for campaigns but cannot view paid campaigns. The partner audience manager can access, create, change and delete custom audience lists but they can neither update nor supply new audiences to an advertising account because this level of permission only grants access to the custom audience list the user has created (X Business, 2024).

Based on the above access, permissions and controls provided by X, it can be inferred that, like Facebook (section 2.3.2), the X functions serve to either limit the dissemination of information on the platform or enhance its capacity to exchange information. This is of significance to the study because it indicates that organisations which utilise X and Facebook to communicate with their stakeholders do have a certain degree of power and discretion to either share or limit information via their Facebook or X pages. The subsequent section will provide a more comprehensive explanation of the functions X offers.

2.3.6 X functionalities

X has a function that enables users to search for current conversational trends (in real time). This function provides important insight into matters that could impact the organisation and the external environment in which the organisation finds itself (X Help Center, 2023; Page, 2014:31). Furthermore, the platform offers an advanced search feature that empowers users to tailor their

search results according to certain date ranges, individuals, keywords and other parameters. Individuals can locate certain articles by recalling a particular term within the content, even in instances when the author of the said post is not recollected (Dorney, 2023).

X users can create, curate and communicate information in real time in a limited number of characters (Freberg, 2019:33). X offers the following built-in information sharing functions, namely: tweets (to share textual information), retweets, the reply option, DMs to a user and hashtags.

Organisations can share a tweet they believe would be of interest to their audience and can respond directly to messages from their stakeholders by utilising the retweet function. Retweets (also known as “reposts”) enable the user to respond to an original tweet by sharing the original tweet from their sender on their own X page, with the option of including or excluding a personalised message (X Help Center, 2024). Messages can include hyperlinks, photographs, videos and interactive “GIFs” (graphic interchange formats). When an organisation tweets, the results are accessible in real time. This permits the organisation to assess how its stakeholders have responded to its message. Key metrics, which are available at the level of a tweet, include the number of people who viewed the tweet, the number who acted after reading the tweet and video views, which includes the number of individuals who viewed the video and link clicks. If a link was included in the tweet, the organisation can determine how many individuals clicked thereon (X Developer Platform, 2024). The reply function allows dialogue between the sender and the receiver. Moreover, more users can be added to the dialogue by including their X handle (username) in the message. The direct message function enables an organisation to send a private DM to a user. This is particularly important when providing customer service (Freberg, 2019:33; X Blog, 2016). Another function that can be utilised to disseminate and acquire access to information by utilising the X platform is chat sessions. The latter can be set up according to a particular theme or topic of common interest. There is also the option to follow hashtags, which is a keyword preceded by a # sign, which enables users to track and follow certain conversations (Freberg, 2019:33). According to Freberg (2019:33), many organisations have adopted their own unique branded hashtag (#), because it allows them to track and follow conversations relevant to the organisation in the X space. Furthermore, the adoption of their own unique hashtag enables the organisation to participate in the conversation around user-generated hashtags from their community. Organisations can also monitor, track and evaluate the success of a hashtag within a campaign. The X “like” function enables organisations to interact directly with their stakeholders. It is utilised to indicate support or acknowledge the communication received (X Help Center, 2024).

Mueller (2002) asserts that the X platform encourages a conversational tone to maintain and build relationships. It can be inferred that the X platform inspires conversations that are generally casual and informal in nature. Thornborrow and Montgomery (2010:101) highlight that X has impacted the public discourse trends such that it poses risk to the organisation because they cannot control communication on the platform. However, Page (2014:30) contends that there is scope for organisations to share quick two-way communications with their stakeholders and influence their external environment, and that the X platform can be utilised by corporate organisations to build and protect their reputation with existing or potential stakeholders.

In conclusion, although organisations that utilise X cannot control stakeholders' communication, it does provide functions that an organisation can utilise to mitigate this risk. Social media offers functions that can help to facilitate two-way communication to foster long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with organisations' stakeholders for the greater good of both parties. This will be elaborated on in more detail in section 2.13.2. For successful organisation-stakeholder relationships to be achieved, sound communication practices must be implemented to assist the facilitation of the outcome. Hence, in the next section, the theory that informs relationship management which could assist these practices is explored.

2.4 THEORETICAL POINTS OF DEPARTURE INFORMING RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

In this section, the relevance of the theoretical principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM are described in terms of relationship building and management. Symmetrical and asymmetrical worldviews are utilised to contextualise these theoretical perspectives.

2.4.1 Significance of worldviews as part of the excellence study

In a quest to determine which factors contribute towards the success of an organisation, Grunig and his team at the International Association of Business Communicators conducted a 15-year study referred to as "the Excellence Study" (Grunig, & Grunig, 2008:327). This study produced the excellence theory, which was focused on the role of corporate communication within organisations' strategic management context (Grunig, 2006:151).

In terms of this theory, organisational efficiency begins at the worldview level, because the latter shapes and defines the way in which organisations think and define themselves (Grunig, 1992:17-32). Organisational culture and the worldview organisations choose to adopt affects how they

implement their communication strategy (Grunig, 1992:13-32). According to Grunig & White (1992:55-66), worldviews can be classified as either asymmetrical or symmetrical.

Should an organisation hold an asymmetrical worldview, it is likely that it would revert to a communication style that is closed off to the requirements and interests of their stakeholders. Moreover, the selected communication style of the organisation would be predominantly persuasive in nature to benefit itself (Grunig, 1992:21; Grunig & White, 1992:51-55). According to Deatherage and Hazleton (1998:58), asymmetrical worldviews possess the following characteristics and are practised as follows: the organisation has an internal focus and places its own ideologies and principles on a pedestal. Moreover, it does not consider any factors within the external environment, such as feedback from its stakeholders. It operates on a closed system, is characterised by an exclusively outward flow and new information is not accepted. Moreover, innovation is not valued; instead efficiency and cost control are dominant. There is no free exchange of ideas and knowledge is exclusive to top management within the organisation. Any external efforts to change are resisted. Tradition is utilised to enforce stability within the organisation and top management is considered the central authority throughout the communication process. Organisations that subscribe to an asymmetrical worldview endeavour to influence stakeholders in ways which benefit solely the interest of the institution (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998:58).

In contrast, should an organisation adopt a symmetrical worldview, its communication style is focused on negotiation and compromise, because symmetrical worldviews operate on the premise that corporate communication should be implemented to facilitate the management of conflict for the benefit of all parties involved (Grunig, 1992:21). According to Deatherage and Hazleton (1998:58), symmetrical worldviews are characterised as follows: the organisation acknowledges that it is not separate from its stakeholders and the latter has an influence on it. There is a free and equal exchange of information with stakeholders and no resistance on the part of the organisation to engage with the latter. The organisation strives to balance power with its stakeholders and its external environment. The organisation values authentic feedback from its stakeholders, including new ideas. Furthermore, innovative thinking is encouraged, thereby enabling agreement between the parties involved, (Oksiutycz, 2021:108).

The organisation is aware that its behaviour has a direct impact on its stakeholders. Negotiation through mutually beneficial agreements form the foundation of conflict resolution between the organisation and its stakeholders. Organisations that adopt a symmetrical worldview understand the value of mutual understanding. The worldview works in conjunction with the two-way

symmetrical model of corporate communication and results in effective corporate communication (Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998:58).

Grunig (1992:20-22) notes that communication practitioners have criticised symmetrical communication as being too idealistic. However, Grunig (1992:22) argues that this notion of idealism is merely a result of the fact that communication practitioners tend to assimilate the views of the organisations they work for and most organisations are inclined to operate from an asymmetrical worldview, which favours one-way communication. Grunig (1992:22) defends the symmetrical viewpoint based on evidence provided by the research conducted in the Excellence Study. The latter revealed that the outcome of symmetrical communication was ethically compliant, was an obligation to social responsibility and inhibited conflict (Grunig, 1992:22).

Knowledge of symmetrical and asymmetrical practices can help communication departments and organisations to achieve communication excellence (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10).

2.5 TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION

Within the context of the symmetrical worldview, the excellence theory includes a description of best practices for the corporate communications function so that the organisation can acquire excellence, as well as ensure that both the organisation and its stakeholders' interests are met (Grunig, 1992:29-39, Grunig *et al.*, 2002:4-5). The proposition of the excellence theory is that if an organisation wants to be excellent, communication with stakeholders should be based on a symmetrical worldview practice, which Grunig (2002) refers to as "two-way symmetrical communication" (Grunig *et al.*, 2002:13-16). The latter communication model is based on inclusion; the voices of many, including those within the organisation, its stakeholders and the public, are embraced (Grunig & White 2012:65; Dozier, *et al.*, 1995:39).

This section on two-way symmetrical communication comprises an elaboration on how this model of communication can build trust and create mutual understanding and beneficial relationships between organisations and their stakeholders. These relationship outcomes serve to protect organisation-stakeholder relationships and assist in building and enhancing such relationships as a continuous process.

2.5.1 The Principles of Two-way Symmetrical Communication

The two-way communication model is rooted in a comprehensive understanding of subject matter and a collection of methodologies employed for strategic purposes, namely conflict management and public relationship development. The implementation of the two-way symmetrical communication model requires communication departments to possess specialised knowledge in

the realm of strategic research, which can be acquired through feedback. “Strategic research” refers to the systematic collection of reliable information relating to various public groupings on a large and small scale that can have an impact on the organisation. This information is then organised such that it is easily manageable and subsequently shared with the strategic decision-makers within the organisation. The goal of this process is to enhance the quality of all strategic decisions made by the organisation. The use of strategic research enables advanced departments to optimise limited and informal opportunities to acquire knowledge on various publics (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10). Two-way symmetrical communication can only be “two-way” if involves the utilisation of research through feedback to close the loop of communication (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:41).

Symmetrical practices imply important values regarding how organisations ought to behave in society (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10). Symmetrical communication is deemed more socially responsible and ethical than asymmetrical communication because it serves to manage conflict and benefit both the organisation and its stakeholders (Grunig, 1992:22; Grunig & Huang, 2000:36; Botha & Meintjes, 2021:251-252). The symmetrical model of communication is also more efficacious due to its underlying assumption that the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of both top management and the public are subject to change (Dozier & Ehling, 1992:197-198).

Grunig and Huang (2000:38-39) argue that the implementation of integrative symmetrical techniques are far more effective to promote contact between organisations and their stakeholders than the utilisation of distributive asymmetrical approaches. The symmetrical approach to integrative negotiation encompasses both the integrative and the negotiation strategy (Grunig & Huang, 2000:38).

The integrative strategy is a negotiation approach in which one endeavours to solve problems for both parties with the intention of creating a mutually beneficial solution for all. Using negotiation as part of the two-way symmetrical communication process, the organisation needs to ensure that there is an equal exchange of information and ideas between itself and its stakeholders. This can be achieved only when the organisation is willing to consider an open discussion and bargain with its stakeholders to create a win-win solution for all (Grunig & Huang, 2000:38; Oksiutycz, 2021:108-109).

The two-way symmetrical model underscores the need for mutually beneficial communication and relationships. “Mutually beneficial” implies that a dialogue between two or more people or parties takes place to attain a desired outcome regarding one or more issues of conflict, which might require a compromise between the two parties (Grunig & Huang, 2000:38). The normative guidelines are that when an organisation utilises two-way symmetrical communication as part of

its communication strategy, it should ensure that it utilises the elements of dialogue and networking strategically and strive towards a balance of power between itself and its stakeholders (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:39; Grunig & White, 2012:65; Dozier & Ehling, 1992:197).

Using dialogue as part of two-way symmetrical communication implies that both the organisation and its stakeholders should have an equal opportunity to persuade the other/s of their perspectives (Dozier & Ehling, 1992:197). Engaging in dialogue changes the relationship between the organisation and its stakeholders because it underlines their similarity (Kent & Taylor, 2002). When an organisation utilises dialogue as part of the two-way symmetrical model of communication, it would translate into a scenario in which it demonstrates that it is open to receiving feedback from its stakeholders, regardless of whether it is positive or negative. The organisation needs to ensure that its stakeholders have free and open access to information. This can materialise only when it provides essential feedback channels. The organisation needs to equip its stakeholders with a means to respond to its messages (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1980:169; Grunig & Huang, 2000:37; Oksiutycz, 2021:112–113). This action would indicate to its stakeholders that there is no resistance to engagement (Grunig & Huang, 2000:32).

Networking, which is an essential aspect of the two-way symmetrical communication process, occurs when the organisation and its stakeholders work side by side towards achieving a positive outcome relating to a shared interest. Networking builds mutual understanding between organisations and their stakeholders (Grunig & Huang, 2000:36; Oksiutycz, 2021:108-109). Grunig and Huang (2000:36) describe mutual understanding as a two-way process to achieve mutual comprehension in which people not only communicate information but also create and share meaning. According to two-way symmetrical model theorists, organisations that practise two-way symmetrical communication are likely to cultivate trust and cooperative relationships with their stakeholders (Ehling, 1992:652-653; Grunig & Huang, 2000:38-40). Without trust, the organisations' overall operations and productivity would be vulnerable. Furthermore, investor confidence would erode when employees experience low morale due to a lack of trust in their employer. Moreover, the consumers could refuse to purchase products if they do not trust the organisation (Grunig & Huang, 2000:29). Trust transpires when there is confidence and reliability between the exchange partners (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Grunig & Huang, 2000:19).

2.5.2 Stakeholder Relationships in Two-way Symmetrical Communication

The literature indicated in this section demonstrates that the following relationship outcomes can be achieved when using two-way symmetrical communication: mutual understanding, mutually beneficial relationships and trust.

Mutual understanding (Grunig & Huang, 2000:36) is one of the key ingredients required for healthy and favourable organisation-stakeholder relationships, which can help to prevent conflict and misunderstandings. Mutually beneficial relationships (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:41; Grunig & Huang, 2000:38) are critical to ensuring that the nature of the relationship between organisations and their stakeholders is not in any way biased and it is characterised by an equal balance of power between both parties. Trust (Ehling, 1992:652-653; Grunig & Huang, 2000:38-40) is fundamental to cultivate collaboration between organisations and their stakeholders.

The two-way symmetrical model of communication provides important communication principles to ensure that the quality of the relationships between an organisation and its stakeholders are practised according to an optimum standard to attain above-mentioned relationship outcomes (Stafford & Canary, 1991:5; Hon & Grunig, 1999:14-17).

The reflective paradigm, which is also grounded on a symmetrical worldview, also offers insight into how corporate organisations might employ communication strategies effectively to foster favourable relationships with their stakeholders.

2.6 REFLECTIVE PARADIGM

This section comprises an examination of the reflective paradigm and its alignment with the excellence theory. Furthermore, it contains a demonstration of how the reflective paradigm can facilitate the establishment mutual understanding between organisations and their stakeholders and stakeholder trust. Furthermore, the reflective paradigm adds an additional facet to the outcomes of the relationship between organisations and their stakeholders: that of the promotion of social systems to coexist harmoniously and voluntary self-control within organisations. The literature that relates to the reflective paradigm indicates that these relationship outcomes can be achieved when the principles thereof are implemented by an organisation because they can help them to recognise stakeholders' interests and possibly intercept potential social media incidents in advance.

Holmström (1996:11) conceptualised an approach to corporate communication referred to as "the reflective paradigm". This paradigm encourages organisations to analyse and comprehend their place in society (Kjaerbeck & Holmström, 2007:1–2). The reflective paradigm method is described by Van Ruler and Verčič (2005:266) as a strategic process to view an organisation externally or publicly. Reflection should be a fundamental practice for any organisation which intends to retain organisational legitimacy (Kjaerbeck & Holmström 2007). Van Ruler and Verčič (2005:266) echo Holmström's (1996) sentiments and similarly argue that an organisation cannot secure its licence to operate without a reflective approach to communication. With reference to worldview discussed

in section 2.4.1, for the reflective paradigm to achieve positive relationship outcomes effectively and protect stakeholder relationships, the organisation would need to adopt a symmetrical worldview so that it can be open to external feedback from stakeholders, new ideas, ideologies and systems (Holmström, 2005:501; Kjaerbeck & Holmström, 2007:7; Grunig *et al.*, 1992:22).

2.6.1 Principles of the Reflective Paradigm

The reflective paradigm facilitates the development and maintenance of healthy stakeholder relationships through the principle of mutual reflection (Holmström, 1997:32). Mutual reflection, also known as “the observation of the second order”, is comprised of two main tasks: reflective and expressive communication tasks (Holmström, 1997:32; Holmström, 1996:99).

The primary purpose of reflective practice is to foster social trust (Holmström, 1997:34). The organisation would need to extract information about the stakeholder’s expectations from the public communication system and plug this back into the overall communications strategy (Holmström, 1996:98). Reflection enables the organisation to identify a broad range of elements, which are wider than financial gains, which could have an impact on the organisation (Holmström, 2002:16-19). Factors such as social, ecological and moral qualities are also considered (Holmström, 2002:16-19). Such reflections result in the realisation that various groups perceive the world from different perspectives; that is, one’s own perception is but one of many (Holmström, 2002:16-19). The reflective process helps the organisation to acknowledge that if there is no mutual understanding, it would eventually result in issues for itself and its stakeholders. Consequently, it must consider its stakeholders’ perspectives (Holmström, 1996:68).

The expressive task comprises communication practices that need to materialise outside the organisation. Through the expressive task, the organisation is encouraged to engage in dialogue with its stakeholders and ensure that its public image is aligned with the stakeholders’ perceptions and expectations (Holmström, 1996:99). This process of alignment between the organisations’ public image and its stakeholders’ perceptions requires negotiation between various social systems (Holmström, 1997:32).

Mutual reflection opens up the possibility for more nuanced perspectives and the opportunity to probe one’s “opponents” worldview, thereby eliciting alternative perceptions of reality. This broader view of reality can assist the organisation in areas in which its communication strategy is lacking. Furthermore, it can shed light on areas in which future stakeholder communication can be enhanced (Holmström, 1996:64;97-101).

Verçiç *et al.* (2001:382) propose that this interdependent relationship between organisations and their stakeholders is significant for the sustainability of the organisation. Furthermore, an organisation can only be effective in its communication if it considers social concerns and reflects on the effects thereof in all its decision-making processes.

2.6.2 Stakeholder Relationships as Informed by the Reflective Paradigm

This section concerns the relationship outcomes that can be achieved when the principles of the reflective paradigm are implemented. These relationship outcomes include mutual understanding, stakeholder trust, voluntary self-control and the co-existence of social systems.

As noted in section 2.5.2, mutual understanding between organisations and their stakeholders is realised when the latter negotiates ideas and opinions through the reflective and expressive task of communication (mutual reflection); by listening and extracting information; engaging with its social system effectively; and working towards reaching common ground with its stakeholders (Burchell & Cook, 2008; Kent & Taylor, 1998). By using mutual reflection, an organisation can form a mutual understanding with its stakeholders because this process enables it to perceive itself from the stakeholders' perspectives (Holmström, 1996:68; Holmström, 1997:32; Steyn & Bütschi, 2003:12). Holmstrom (1996) proposes that mutual reflection enables an organisation to interact with its stakeholders such that the engagement benefits both parties. Through mutual reflection, the organisation is equipped to work together with its stakeholders towards shared and common interests (Holmström, 1996:98; Falconi, 2010:5). The outcome of this process is solidarity, acceptance and support from its stakeholders (Holmström, 1996:98).

Stakeholder trust is further achieved through mutual reflection, which enables the organisation to better understand its position in society and the boundaries its stakeholders value. As a result, the organisation is equipped to practise self-regulation, which contributes to gaining its stakeholders' trust (Steyn & Bütschi, 2003:12; Holmström, 1997:32).

When reflection is incorporated into an organisation's communication strategy, it is well positioned to predict potential conflict between the various social systems, evaluate its influence and adjust its communication and behaviour accordingly, such as exercising voluntary self-control (Holmström, 1996:68; Holmström, 2002:17-19).

Social systems can co-exist when daily business practices include mutual reflection because this would inherently guide all the members of the organisation to follow routine procedures, which might include consideration of social and environmental impacts (Holmstrom, 2005:501; Verçiç *et*

al., 2001:373; Kjaerbeck & Holmström, 2007:1-2; Holmström, 2002:9). The objective of mutual reflection is to facilitate the coexistence of social systems (Holmström, 1997:35-36).

In line with the two-way symmetrical model and the reflective paradigm, SCM also implies that organisations should have a symmetrical worldview and practice communication in a symmetrical manner to establish a positive relationship with their stakeholders. This section below on SCM consists of an elaboration on how this academic field can assist the organisation to be socially responsible and identify potential incidents promptly.

2.7 STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

SCM is an academic field in which communication management is conceptualised in an organisation's strategic context (De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9). Scholars within the Pretoria school of thought participated in research that included various studies from the early 1990s (Steyn, 2009). It was concluded that the objective of corporate communication was reciprocal strategic reflection, which comprised both the reflective and expressive task of communication as conceptualised by Holmström (De Beer *et al.*, 2013:20-21). The term "reflective strategist" was coined to encapsulate the reflective and strategic role of those who were previously known as "PR strategists". This term went on to become significant within the academic field of SCM, especially within the communication studies sphere on the African continent (Steyn, 2009:516).

According to the principles of SCM, the reflective strategist is responsible for conducting strategic reflection (Holmström, 1996; De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9,20-21). When corporate communication operates in its strategic role, it becomes operationalised through the "mirror" and "window" functions (De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9,20-21; Van Riel, 1995:1-15). The focus of the mirror function is on external environment observations and trends, and forecasting the potential impact these events could have on the organisation's objectives and policies (De Beer *et al.*, 2013:10). The window function refers to the planning and execution of a communication policy, which results in communication that portrays all aspects of the organisation in a clear and appealing manner (Van Riel, 1995:2). In a comparative analysis conducted by Steyn and Bütschi (2003), the South African mirror function was found to be similar to the European reflective task and the window function was found to share similarities with the expressive task (De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9-11).

De Beer *et al.* (2013:9, 20-21) maintain that the reflective strategist needs to keep an ear to the ground and listen to the key stakeholders' current views and ideas because it could have an impact on the organisation. This can be achieved through the environmental scanning process, which is part of the SCMs reflective process (Steyn, 2002:44-46). The reflective strategist performs environmental scanning to extract information from the external environment, filters the

information for meaningful material and transfers the meaningful material back into the corporate communications strategy (Steyn, 2002:42). The reflective strategist should share the learnings and information gathered as part of this environmental scanning process with management and flag any potential areas of concern before it spirals out of control (De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9,20-21; Botha & Meintjes, 2021:258).

The reflective strategist serves to remind management that acquiring the stakeholders' trust is achieved not merely given by changing outer communication, but by being accountable for its words and actions (De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9,20-21). This can be achieved through the boundary spanning process. The purpose of this process is to assist the organisation to balance its own needs with those of its stakeholders, while remaining socially responsible (Steyn, 2009:528). Holladay and Coombs (2013:8) assert that during the act of boundary spanning, the communications practitioner is placed in the "middle" when attempting to balance the stakeholders' needs and those of the organisation. When they adopt this position, they connect the organisation with society. Rees (2020:7) proposes that the communication practitioner is in an advantageous position to assist organisations with stakeholder relations in the digital age due to the inherent acceptance of the value of relationship building, adaption and boundary spanning embedded in corporate communication.

2.7.1 Principles of Strategic Communication Management

Social and environmental responsibility is at the core of SCM (Steyn, 2009:529). Similarly, the reflective paradigm in relation to the principal of mutual reflection includes as consideration of social and environmental responsibility as highly significant. It can be inferred from the literature that using SCM or the reflective paradigm to inform an organisations' communication strategy, whether simultaneously or individually, should both yield the same outcome; that is, to better position the organisation to mitigate risk (Holmström, 2005:501; Verčič *et al.*, 2001:373).

The literature pertaining to the reflective paradigm reveals that reflective and expressive tasks should be orchestrated by the organisation and the latter should be the executor and custodian of the reflective process (Holmström, 2005:25; Kjaerbeck & Holmström, 2007:7; Grunig, 1992:22). The literature regarding SCM revealed that the communications practitioner in the role of reflective strategist is the custodian of this process on behalf of the organisation (Holmström, 1996; De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9, 20-21; Botha & Meintjes, 2021:256-257). Thus, SCM legitimises the position of the communications practitioner in organisational decision-making processes.

2.7.2 Stakeholder relationships as informed by Strategic Communication Management

The literature on SCM reveals that when the reflective strategist implements the window and mirror functions of communication, the following relationship outcomes can be achieved: mutual understanding, socially responsible behaviour and the early identification of potential conflict.

Socially responsible behaviour can be achieved by the organisation when the reflective strategist, through environmental scanning, guides the management according to the societal and stakeholder expectations of the time, and the organisation amends its communications strategy accordingly (De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9,20-21). The reflective strategist can help the organisation garner cooperation and develop mutual understanding among its stakeholders (Steyn & Puth, 2000:19).

The value of SCM lies in helping organisations to improve their decisions and develop strategies that are on the pulse of current societal and stakeholder issues and trends. This process can help organisations to map a relevant course of action for their future (Steyn, 2012:46). SCM also helps organisations to identify a potential conflict promptly, enabling them to either completely avoid the conflict or find a resolution for it (Steyn, 2012:29).

Having discussed the theoretical perspectives of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM, including how the respective theoretical principles are aimed at cultivating, managing and maintaining healthy, long-term organisation-stakeholder relationships are expounded upon against the background of the argument proposed in section 1.1. It was noted that social media had changed the way corporate communication was practised because it provided social media engagement and social media listening. Social media engagement and listening processes, in conjunction with the relevant built-in social media functions, can assist organisations to drive the said principles of corporate communication forward on a practical, day-to-day level. The latter is detailed in the sections that follow. However, it is important to establish, according to the theoretical perspectives noted in sections 2.4 - 2.7, how corporate organisations such as H&M should communicate with their stakeholders via their social media platforms.

2.8 CORPORATE ORGANISATIONS' COMMUNICATION WITH THEIR STAKEHOLDERS: TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL MODEL, REFLECTIVE PARADIGM AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

Table 2-1 below provides an overview of the core principles of the theoretical perspectives discussed in the reviewed literature. These principles serve to inform the normative guidelines of

how a corporate organisation should communicate with its stakeholders via their social media, for example, Facebook and X, to improve their understanding of their stakeholders' interests.

Table 2-1: Theoretical perspectives: Two-way Symmetrical Model, Reflective Paradigm and Strategic Communication Management

Theoretical perspective	Two-way Symmetrical Model	Reflective Paradigm	Strategic Communication Management
Communication Principles	Two-way	Reflective Task	Environmental Scanning
	Symmetrical	Expressive Task	Boundary Spanning
	Dialogue		
Purpose & Outcomes of communication	Mutual understanding	Mutual understanding	Mutual understanding
	Mutually beneficial relationships	Stakeholder trust	Socially responsible behaviour Early identification of potential conflict
	Negotiation	Voluntary self-control	
	Trust	Co-existence of social systems	

The description of the theoretical foundations of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM has offered theoretical insights into how these principles might contribute to the establishment and sustainability of positive relationships between organisations and stakeholders. The following section comprises a review of the literature on social media, its influence on corporate communication practices, uncontrollable aspects thereof and strategies for organisations to utilise its inherent functions effectively (via social media engagement and social media listening) to foster positive relationships with the stakeholders.

2.9 SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

The literature revealed that the utilisation of social media has had a significant influence on the management of corporate communication (Kent, 2010:645; Allaguia & Breslowba, 2016:1; Wright & Hinson, 2017:1, Yuen *et al.*, 2023:135375). Linos (2018:36) asserts that social media has prompted several companies to realise the need to engage in social media platforms to expand their online presence. Capriotti and Zeler (2020:119) assert further that numerous organisations perceive social media functions as being highly valuable to facilitate effective management of the communication between them and their stakeholders.

The rising public acceptance of social media is advancing its incorporation into the organisation's communication strategies globally. One of its most significant advantages is the promotion of two-way conversations (Capriotti & Zeler, 2020:120; Macnamara & Zerfas, 2012:287). Social media and its relevant functions can be utilised by organisations to identify issues relevant to their stakeholders. The organisation can prepare for different situations, strategically implement online communication and enhance communication as an ongoing process in real time (Freberg, 2019:7). As indicated in section 1.1, social media platforms such as Facebook and X offer functionalities that could facilitate the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM.

However, it is important to acknowledge that, as much as social media provides immense benefits to organisations that want to move closer to the needs of their stakeholders, it also brings with it certain associated risks. In section 1.1, it was highlighted that one of the greatest threats to organisations brought about by social media is the dissemination of UGC among its users. The next section is an examination of UGC and how this method of information sharing has affected the corporate communication process. In section 1.1, it was argued that since UGC shared among stakeholders is executed outside the control of the organisation, it is imperative that the organisation implements an essential management strategy to mitigate the risk of false narratives and perceptions among its stakeholders. Using the social media listening process (described in section 2.12 below) and the available social media functions in conjunction with the relevant principles of corporate communication, the organisation has a good chance of mitigating the risks posed through sharing user-generated content.

2.10 USER-GENERATED CONTENT

The global economy has seen growth within the digital marketplace and stakeholders are no longer passive but have become active participants in dialogue related to organisational practice via UGC (Verwey, 2015:11). Otherwise referred to as "user-created content" or "consumer-generated media", UGC refers to publicly available data on the internet, generally via a website or social media platform/s that is created by the public in their personal capacity (Moens *et al.*, 2014:8). UGC is not restricted to a geographic location or a specific network of people. The act of posting UGC on a social media platform empowers the user to express her- or himself creatively, share content and even acquire global influence (Moens *et al.*, 2014:8; Arora & Sanni, 2018:476). Organisations can utilise this to their advantage because this information could be utilised as research through feedback, as stipulated by the two-way symmetrical communication model (see Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10;41, Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Grunig & Huang, 2000:19). Furthermore, by incorporating the expressive task according to the principles of the reflective

paradigm, the organisation can employ the gathered information effectively during its interactions (via the process of dialogue) with its stakeholders, as well as ensure that all future communication from the organisation is congruent with the stakeholders' perspectives (Holmström, 1996:99). The opportunity to create UGC to help solve problems enables users to unite on their own accord, independently of an organisation, to respond to problem-related questions (Moens *et al.*, 2014:8; Peschke, 2017:28, Sethi, 2021:6). According to Muntinga *et al.* (2011) and Schivinski and Dabrowski (2014), UGC has a tremendous influence over an organisation and its reputation. As noted in (section 1.3), this kind of influence was evident in the case of H&M, which suffered a severe negative operational and financial impact.

As elucidated in section 2.3.3, stakeholders can establish their own “groups” in which they engage in discussions about the organisation, which is beyond its control. Consequently, the organisation loses control over a part of its strategic communication (Solis, 2008:20; Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016).

UGC also brings with it a risk associated with virality. The latter is the process through which knowledge spreads rapidly from one person to another and across various networks (Freberg, 2019:9). When content from one platform is reused on another, it can gain a new audience and spread quickly across the new medium (Freberg, 2019:9). Complaints can occasionally spread and intensify into potential catastrophic “internet firestorms” (Pfeffer *et al.*, 2014:117). However, although UGC has associated risks, the organisation is not without recourse. Social media also provides the benefits of processes that can be utilised by organisations to engage in two-way conversations with their stakeholders. Thus, via two-way communication, an organisation can acquire feedback directly from its stakeholders, cultivate relationships and jointly find solutions to problems so that, hopefully, the stakeholders do not feel the need to find solutions without the direct input of the organisation. The first of these processes is social media engagement.

The next section is a description of social media engagement process and includes details of the many options its platforms provide organisations to foster two-way communication. The significance of social media engagement in the context of organisational-stakeholder relationships is also examined.

2.11 SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

Social media engagement can be described as the process whereby an organisation actively seeks opportunities via its social media platforms to form relationships with its stakeholders (Sherman & Smith, 2013:28; Kerpen, 2011:65, Ryan, 2020:13). To engage via social media, the

participants utilise platforms such as Facebook and X to build connections with target audiences and, hopefully, elicit feedback (Sherman & Smith, 2013:28; Kerpen, 2011:65;68).

“Feedback” can be defined as the process whereby the result of an action is returned (Dixit, 2018:4). It is essentially the receiver’s response, or what the latter has comprehended from the message or information supplied to her or him, which is then sent back to the sender. The feedback extracted via the social media engagement process complements the two-way symmetrical communication principle, which indicates that research gathered through feedback is necessary for communication to be “two-way” (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:41).

Social media engagement strategies include responding to questions on social media platforms directly and timeously: when a stakeholder poses a question on one of the organisation’s social media platforms, the latter should respond directly and timeously (Kerpen, 2011:67-68). The literature pertaining to social media engagement revealed that actions taken via social media platforms, such as liking, commenting and sharing organisation-related posts on behalf of users has traditionally been utilised to measure user involvement and interaction (Dhaoui, 2014; Luarn *et al.*, 2015; 2013, De Vries *et al.*, 2017).

It was indicated in sections 2.3.3 and 2.3.6 that both Facebook and X have functions to facilitate the social media engagement process. Facebook offers the “reactions” and “comments” functions (Hamdan, 2021:670; Freedman, 2022; Meta, 2024). X offers the following options: “retweeting,” “commenting” and the “like” function (Page, 2014:30; Fredberg, 2019:11; Khalil *et al.*, 2002:347; X Twitter 2023). Using these functions, the organisation can acquire feedback from their stakeholders, which can be considered a form of engagement.

Social media engagement should be utilised to facilitate the process of dialogue between the organisation and their stakeholders and possibly increase the latter’s trust and loyalty (Kerpen, 2011:64). Social media provides a participatory platform for dialogue and joint action (Yüksek, 2014:9). Engaging in dialogue with stakeholders on social media platforms can provide useful information regarding how stakeholders perceive an organisation (Ahmed *et al.*, 2022:829).

It was argued in section 2.3 that Facebook and X functionalities could facilitate dialogue. Facebook offers the following functions for this purpose: livestreams, live chats, groups, messenger, private inbox and the comments section (Freedman, 2022; Meta, 2024;). X provides the following functions which can be utilised to facilitate dialogue: tweets, the retweet option, chat sessions and DMs (Freberg, 2019:1, Khalil *et al.*, 2002:347; X Twitter: 2023).

The literature reviewed in section 2.5.1 on the principles of two-way symmetrical communication revealed that dialogue was a necessary part of the communication process between organisations and their stakeholders to achieve mutual understanding (Grunig & Huang, 2000:36), mutually beneficial relationships (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:41; Grunig & Huang, 2000:38) and trust (Ehling, 1992:652-653; Grunig & Huang, 2000:38-40).

The literature regarding stakeholder engagement via social media also revealed that dialogue between organisations and their stakeholders had a positive impact on organisation-stakeholder relationships (Dholakia & Durham, 2010; Hudson, Roth, Madden, & Hudson, 2015); an overall positive effect on the attitude of stakeholders towards the organisation (Szewczyk, 2015, Schivinski & Dabrowski, 2016); and trust relationships (Laroche, Habibi & Richard, 2013; Gamboa & Gonçalves, 2014; Szewczyk, 2015). Based on these findings from the literature, it can be argued that dialogue is an ideal two-way symmetrical form of engagement. Social media engagement helps the organisation to reach mutual consensus with its stakeholders because the process of engagement creates an opportunity for both the organisation and its stakeholders to contribute to communication via its social media platforms (Kerpen, 2011:65).

The next section is concerned with why social media listening is important for an organisation that utilises it to communicate with its stakeholders. The section on social media listening will expand on how it can enable organisations to build positive stakeholder relationships.

2.12 SOCIAL MEDIA LISTENING

Social media listening is an approach to monitoring stakeholder conversations via social media platforms (Buzoianu & Bîră, 2021:2). It is a strategy that enables an organisation to follow a large volume of social media discussions closely by tracking relevant topics of interest. Its purpose is to reveal strategic insights and produce the latest content, and it can be utilised to conduct a sentiment analysis. Social media listening should be a continuous process. When an organisation engages directly with its stakeholders via its social media platforms, it also becomes better at listening (Kerpen, 2011:65).

Social media affords organisations the opportunity to listen to online conversations on social networks in real time (Kerpen, 2011:20). The act of real time listening presents organisations with an opportunity to align themselves strategically with current matters and trending topics addressed by their stakeholders via their social media platforms, which in turn should enhance stakeholder relations (Kerpen, 2011:20-21; Kim, 2016:8). Furthermore, it is argued that social media listening should be one of the primary steps organisations adopt to develop a strategic communication strategy for their social media platforms. It can be included as part of the research

phase of the organisation's communication strategy. It is only via listening to stakeholders on social media in real time that an organisation would be best equipped to create relevant and alluring two-way communication with its stakeholders (Kim, 2016:8).

According to Kim (2016:8), if an organisation does not take the time to listen actively to what stakeholders express via its social networks, it will not acquire the information required to engage in a meaningful dialogue with them on its social media platforms. Moreover, if organisations do not utilise this opportunity social media offers to enhance their stakeholder relationships, they are at risk of damaging their corporate reputation (Kerpen, 2011:18). Failing to employ active social media listening on behalf of an organisation results in inefficient and late responses because it will not be equipped with the relevant strategic insight to respond in alignment with the stakeholders' concerns or effect the necessary changes to ensure the growth of the organisation (Kerpen, 2011:18).

The literature discussed in section 2.6.1 regarding the principles of the reflective paradigm revealed that the reflective task of communication, SCM and environmental scanning have similarities because they all require that an organisation search its external environment for information that can be utilised to enhance communication with its stakeholders (Holmström, 1996:68,98; De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9,20-21; Buzoianu & Bîră, 2021:2; Steyn, 2022:44-46).

It can be inferred from the literature that the reflective tasks of environmental scanning and social media listening, which involves the extraction of information from the external environment for utilisation in its communication strategy, is a vital component of the overall communication strategy because it contributes to an enhanced understanding of stakeholder interests (Holmström, 1996:68; Holmström, 2002:9); helps to identify potential conflict timeously (Steyn *et al.*, 2012:29); and enables an organisation to align itself strategically with current matters of concern to its stakeholders (Kerpen, 2011:20-21).

It was noted in sections 2.3 – 2.3.6 that Facebook and X functionalities are required to facilitate the social media listening process, the reflective task and environmental scanning. Facebook offers the “insights” function, while X has the “# hashtag” search option and tweet metrics (Meta, 2024; X Twitter, 2023).

2.13 SOCIAL MEDIA FUNCTIONS THAT COULD FACILITATE TWO-WAY SYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION, THE REFLECTIVE PARADIGM AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

The following built-in social media functions were identified as those which can help to facilitate the practical implementation of the two-way symmetrical model of communication, reflective paradigm and SCM:

2.13.1 Facebook

The “insights” function can be utilised to listen (social media listening) to stakeholders (do research) before providing feedback (social media engagement).

The built-in insights function enables organisations using Facebook to gather information regarding age, gender, occupation, level of education, marital status, number of children per home and other personal details. It also provides information regarding how often stakeholders engage using Facebook and what devices they use to do so, their purchasing history, including preferences and preferred means of purchasing. Demographic information can be found, including stakeholders that have interacted with the organisation’s Facebook page, the number of stakeholders already following the organisation’s Facebook page, the number of interactions with the organisation’s page (likes and comments) and patterns regarding the organisation’s present or future stakeholders throughout Facebook, (Meta, 2024).

The “comments” function can be utilised for the principles of two-way communication and symmetrical communication

The comments function enables the organisation and its stakeholders an equal opportunity to receive, view and respond to communication from one another in real time (Freedman, 2022; Meta 2024; Facebook 2023; Hamdan, 2021:670). This function can, therefore, assist with the two-way principle, which indicates that feedback should be included in the organisation’s research process. This is also known as “research through feedback” (see Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10;41, Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Hon & Grunig, 1999:18-19). The comments function can also be utilised to facilitate the symmetrical aspect of two-way symmetrical communication, in terms of which organisations must negotiate with their stakeholders and work together with them to attain mutually beneficial outcomes (see Grunig & Huang, 2000:38; Grunig, 2006:159; Grunig, 2011:13). Furthermore, the comments feature provides organisations and their stakeholders with the opportunity to send and receive information between each other in real time. This implies that there is a possibility for both parties to participate in a joint effort regarding problem-solving (negotiation).

The “comments” function can be utilised for social media listening and the reflective task of communication (environmental scanning)

Considering that the comments function allows stakeholders to respond to communication from the organisation (Freedman, 2022, Meta 2023, Facebook 2023, Hamdan, 2021:670), feedback from stakeholders is freely available to them via the Facebook’s comments section. This also indicates that there is an opportunity for the organisation to monitor feedback from its stakeholders (via the comments function) through the social media listening process. It further means that the organisation can facilitate the reflective task of communication through environmental scanning.

The “photo” and “video” functions can facilitate the principles of two-way communication

The photo and video functions are two Facebook features that can be utilised to share information through visual imagery. Thus, the organisation can share relevant information according to the principles of two-way symmetrical communication by utilising these features (see Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10;41, Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165).

The “polls” function can facilitate the principles of two-way communication and social media engagement.

Polls can be utilised by organisations to survey their target audiences to elicit their interests (Facebook, 2003; Sherman & Smith, 2013:34) or to pose important questions to stakeholders to gather information about their interests and concerns. This provides the stakeholders with an opportunity to provide feedback in real time (Sherman & Smith, 2013:34). Thus, the feedback generated by the polls function can be utilised as part of the two-way symmetrical principle and that feedback from stakeholders can be utilised as research (Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10;41, Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Hon & Grunig, 1999:18-19).

The polls function can also be utilised as part of the social media engagement process, that is, organisation-stakeholder engagement. The organisations can ask its stakeholders questions directly to gather feedback by means of polls. This can be considered a suitable function that organisations can utilise as part of two-way communication for their social media engagement processes (see Kerpen, 2011:64).

The “status update” function can facilitate the principles of two-way communication

Status updates enable one to share information between two parties in the form of a text message, which generally pertains to quick updates such as information about current activities or thoughts (Techcult, 2023). This implies that organisations can utilise status updates to facilitate the principles of two-way symmetrical communication to share relevant information with stakeholders

and provide feedback to them (see Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10,41; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Hon & Grunig, 1999:18-19).

The “livestreams” and “live chats” functions can facilitate the principles of two-way communication

Livestreams, commonly referred to as “Facebook Live”, facilitate the dissemination of information through the real time transmission of video and audio content. Livestreams present organisations with a valuable opportunity to engage actively in immediate and interactive dialogue with their stakeholders (Meta, 2024). Given the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, as outlined by Grunig and Huang (2000:38), it can be inferred that organisations can utilise livestreams to facilitate dialogue with their stakeholders, with the aim of engaging in joint problem-solving activities. Livestreams have the potential to foster an equitable allocation of power between organisations and their stakeholders (see Grunig & White, 2012:65; Dozier *et al.*, 1995:39; Dozier & Ehling, 1992:197).

According to Freberg (2019:1), the utilisation of live chats enables the direct exchange of messages between organisations and their stakeholders. Real time communication facilitates interactive dialogue and enables organisations to deliver tailored feedback and prompt responses to frequently raised enquiries, and thereby enhances stakeholder engagement (Meta, 2024). The exchange of messages between the participants, characterised by a sender-receiver dynamic, is a common occurrence in chat sessions. The live chat function offers direct and personalised feedback options, along with real time capabilities (Meta, 2024). The interactive nature of live chats facilitates a reciprocal exchange between organisations and their stakeholders. This enables organisations to provide feedback and stakeholders to offer real time reactions to this input. These features align with the principle of two-way symmetrical communication that accentuates the significance of negotiation and equal exchange of communication. This two-way communication principle enables organisations to establish mutually beneficial agreements with their stakeholders (see Grunig & Huang, 2000:38). Furthermore, it can assist with conflict management (see Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998:58). The collection of comments from stakeholders through livestreams and live chats can also provide valuable information, which could be utilised as part of the organisation’s research and feedback to its stakeholders (see Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10,41; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Hon & Grunig, 1999:18-19).

The “groups” function can facilitate networking as conceptualised in two-way symmetrical communication

The groups function provides organisations with the opportunity to connect with stakeholders with whom they share similar interests (Meta, 2024). Via this function, organisations can share information with their stakeholders, feedback can be shared by both parties and the organisation

can work together with its stakeholders toward achieving a mutual understanding of areas of shared interest because networking builds mutual understanding between organisations and their stakeholders (see Grunig & Huang, 2000:36). The groups function can be utilised to facilitate the two-way symmetrical communication principle of networking (see Grunig & White, 2012:65; Dozier *et al.*, 1995:39; Dozier & Ehling, 1992:197).

The “reactions” function can facilitate symmetrical communication and reflective or environmental scanning

By using the reactions function, stakeholders can express their sentiment regarding organisation-published posts in real time (Hamdan, 2021:670). This Facebook function enables stakeholders to provide feedback to the organisation by expressing their thoughts or feelings in relation to a shared message. The reactions function includes emotional responses such as “like”, “heart”, “care”, “wow”, “haha,” “sad” and “angry”.

Since the reactions function provides information regarding stakeholders’ sentiments, it could assist with research through feedback (see Dozier, *et al.*, 1995:10,41; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Hon & Grunig, 1999:18-19).

Organisations can utilise the process of social media listening and monitor the reactions of their stakeholders to acquire an enhanced understanding of stakeholder sentiments (see Buzoianu & Bîră, 2021:2; Kerpen, 2011:20). By monitoring the sentiments of its stakeholders, the organisation is also in an optimal position to identify potential conflict in advance (Steyn *et al.*, 2012:29). ‘Reactions’ can, therefore, assist with environmental scanning.

2.13.2 X

Tweets can help facilitate the principles of two-way communication/ expressive task/boundary spanning

Tweets enable users to disseminate messages via the X platform in several formats, including photos, hyperlinks or URLs (Uniform Resource Locators), textual information, interactive GIFs, numerals and videos, and retweets (X Help Center:2024; Freberg, 2019:11; Page, 2014:30). By utilising the X photos feature, users can share images that easily and quickly add richness of depth to their communication. A maximum of four photographs can be displayed together in one tweet, (Filadelfo, 2014). Hyperlinks or URLs are links which enable direct access from one specific location in a hypertext or hypermedia document to another in the same or a different document (Twitter.com). In the context of X, “textual information” refers to concise communications that

represent individuals' immediate thoughts. It specifically pertains to information that is conveyed through text (Pawar & Agarkar, 2020:59).

GIFs are visual representations, which are shared or uploaded in response to various forms of communication, such as messages or social media interactions. These animated images are commonly utilised to convey and communicate certain feelings or sentiments (Jenkins: 2022). "Numerals" refers to symbols that represent numerical values and, within the context of X, they are often used to mark important events or share sports scores (Hürriyetoğlu *et al.*, 2014). "Videos" refers to recordings that can be shared via X to quickly share happenings in the moment (X Help Center: 2024). "Retweets" (or "reposts") are messages that are shared with others who follow one's X account. Reposts are frequently utilised to share news or important findings on X and they always maintain the original source (X Help Center: 2024). Thus, organisations have the capability to provide pertinent information to its stakeholders using these specific functions.

The "retweeting" function allows organisations to facilitate the principles of two-way/ symmetrical communication/ reflective task/environmental scanning

When an organisation retweets a post, it can repost (reshare) a message (Rashid and Saidin, 2023:30). There is also a retweet option to share information directly with a stakeholder who has commented or posted a tweet on the X page (Khalil *et al.*, 2002:347; X Twitter, 2023). The utilisation of this function facilitates the exchange of information between the organisation and its stakeholders. This suggests the potential for two-way communication through this function. Since the retweet function can be utilised by organisations to provide feedback to their stakeholders and for them to respond with feedback, the repost function can assist with symmetrical communication through negotiation (see Grunig & Huang, 2000:38), as well as with the reflective task of communication and environmental scanning (see Holmström, 2005:501; Steyn, 2002:42).

The "like" function can be utilised to facilitate the principles of symmetrical communication, the reflective task and environmental scanning

To express approval of a tweet, users click the like button, which is heart-shaped and provides stakeholders an opportunity to offer feedback directly to the organisation. The like feature can be utilised as part of the two-way symmetrical principle of research through feedback (see section 2.5.1). An organisation's external research process, which aids in the reflective task of communication and environmental scanning as information gathered regarding likes, could be utilised as part of its external research process (see Holmström, 2005:501; Steyn, 2002:42).

The “comments” function can be utilised to facilitate the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective task and environmental scanning or boundary spanning

A “comment” is primarily a text-based form of engagement on a social media platform. It enables users to respond to posts in their own words. The number of comments on a piece of content indicates the level of engagement users have with that content (MetricHQ). This function provides stakeholders with the opportunity to reply to the organisation (provide feedback) on information shared by them and thereby assist with the principle of two-way symmetrical communication, which indicates that feedback can be utilised as part of an organisation’s research. Hence, the organisation can align its messages with the stakeholders’ interests (see Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10,41; Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Hon & Grunig, 1999:18-19).

The “chat sessions” function can assist with the facilitation of two-way communication

Chat sessions occur when a group of Twitter users meet at a pre-determined time to discuss a certain topic and utilise a designated hashtag (#) for each contributed tweet. A host or moderator poses questions to prompt responses from the participants and encourages interaction among the group (buffer.com). The chat sessions can assist with negotiation due to its send-receive dynamic in real time (see Grunig & Huang, 2000:38), help to resolve conflicts (see Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998:58) and conduct research through feedback (see Dozier *et al.*, 1995:10;41, Bruning & Ledingham, 1999:165; Hon & Grunig, 1999:18-19).

“Hashtags” (#) can be utilised to facilitate the process of social media listening/ environmental scanning

Hashtags (#) are placed before a relevant topic or phrase in a tweet to group the tweets into categories so that it is easier to find in an X search. When one clicks or taps on a word that is hash-tagged in a message, it takes one to other posts in which that term appears (Twitter.com). The organisation can monitor and evaluate user-generated hashtags and the surrounding conversations (refer to: Freberg, 2019:11). The information gathered using a relevant hashtag for a search can be utilised as part of the social media listening (see Kerpen, 2011: 20 &65) and environmental scanning processes (see De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9, 20-21).

Based on the reviewed literature regarding the principles of corporate communication (sections 2.4-2.7), as well as social media and its processes and functions (sections 2.3-2.3 and 2.9-2.13), guiding arguments were developed for how corporate organisations such as H&M should communicate with their stakeholders via social media, as well as in response to research question 1.5.1. These are presented in detail in the chapter conclusion below.

2.14 CONCLUSION

Based on the literature discussed in this chapter the first research question, *How should corporate organisations communicate with their stakeholders via social media according to the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM to enhance stakeholder relationships (1.5.1)*, is answered in the form of four guiding arguments:

2.14.1 Guiding Argument 1: Two-way communication

Organisations should facilitate two-way communication between themselves and the stakeholders on their social media platforms. This implies that the organisation shares information on social media, provides stakeholders with the opportunity to react (provide feedback) to its messages, listens (social media listening) to them and provides feedback (replies) to stakeholders' communication. The built-in social media insights function can be utilised to listen (social media listening) to stakeholders (do research) before providing feedback (social media engagement).

2.14.2 Guiding Argument 2: Symmetrical communication

Organisations should facilitate symmetrical communication with their stakeholders on their social media platforms through negotiation. This implies that both parties have an equal opportunity to exchange information and persuade the other of its perspectives with a view to attaining a mutually beneficial outcome. On Facebook, this refers to comments, photos, videos, polls and status updates, livestreams and live chats, groups and reactions. On X it is referred to as information shared via tweets and retweets, which can include textual information, GIFs, hyperlinks, numerals, videos, likes, comments and chat sessions.

2.14.3 Guiding Argument 3: Reflective task or Environmental scanning

Organisations should utilise social media platforms to monitor real time communication (social media listening) as part of its reflective task of environmental scanning so that they can align themselves strategically with the stakeholders' interests. On X, organisations can follow relevant hashtags to follow online conversations, while on Facebook, they can monitor the reactions and comments sections to understand stakeholder sentiments.

2.14.4 Guiding Argument 4: Expressive task/Boundary Spanning

Organisations should utilise social media platforms' real time communication ability as part of its expressive task. Based on the findings from the reflective task (environment scanning or social

media listening), the organisation should balance its needs with those of its stakeholders (boundary spanning); align itself with stakeholders' interests and reflect their understanding of their needs and expectations through communication; and ensure that its public image matches stakeholders' notions of social responsibility.

This chapter comprised an answer to the question of how corporate organisations should communicate with their stakeholders via social media according to the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM to enhance stakeholder relationships, as indicated in Chapter 1, research question 1.5.1.

The following chapter comprises a description of the research methods utilised to answer research question 1.5.2.

CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODS: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS AND SENTIMENT ANALYSIS – A MIXED-METHODS APPROACH

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the methods used for the empirical part of the study are described. The research design in section 3.2 provides an overview of the research questions and the methods used to answer the research questions (refer to Table 3-1). The discussion regarding the research approach in section 3.3 highlights why it was beneficial for the mixed-methods approach to be applied to this specific study.

The section on qualitative content analysis in section 3.4 is a description of the research method, a motivation of its relevance for this study and elaboration of the sample selection process utilised, as well as how the qualitative data analysis was conducted. Furthermore, the categories for analysis are discussed in this section in conjunction with their corresponding operational definitions and the relevant units of analysis to explain how the research method was applied in this study.

The quantitative section of the study in section 3.8 is a description of the empirical research method utilised for the quantitative part of the study, known as sentiment analysis, as well as the sentiment analysis software, SentiStrength. The data collection process and data processing via SentiStrength is detailed in this section.

The reliability, validity and challenges faced during the application of both the qualitative and quantitative research methods are indicated. Both the qualitative and quantitative research methods were integrated according to the convergent application of the mixed-methods approach (refer to Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) for integration.

3.2 RESEARCH DESIGN

The general research question formulated for this study was:

What was the nature of H&M's communication with its stakeholders via social media in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident? (1.4).

To be able to answer the general research question, two specific questions were formulated. Table 3-1 below contains the specific research questions and the corresponding research methods.

Table 3-1: Research Questions and Methods

Research Question	Research Methods
How should corporate organisations communicate with their stakeholders via social media according to the two-way symmetrical model; the reflective paradigm and SCM to enhance stakeholder relationships? (1.5.1)	A literature study was conducted to answer specific research question 1.5.1.
To what extent did H&M's communication with its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident adhere to the principles of the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM? (1.5.2)	A qualitative content analysis was conducted of H&M's communication on X and Facebook regarding the monkey hoodie incident, followed by a sentiment analysis of stakeholders' responses to H&M's communication on the matter on the same social media platforms, to answer specific research question 1.5.2.

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

A mixed-methods approach was chosen for this study. This approach combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods as part of a single study (Bryman, 2006:97-98; Truong & Liu, 2020:1564; Johnson *et al.*, 2007:113, Cresswell, 2009). When qualitative and quantitative findings are combined, additional information is acquired that is useful to respond to the research question and a comprehensive picture is painted to describe the findings regarding the phenomenon under investigation. This process assists supporting various perspectives of the research topic. Furthermore, the information can be cross-referenced to confirm the findings (Cresswell, 2009). Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of the various perspectives, whereas quantitative research allows for generalisation and precision. The suitability of utilising both methods for this study are discussed in the next section.

According to Cresswell (2009), when conducting qualitative research, only a relatively small sample is required to acquire a detailed perspective of the subject under investigation. Based on Cresswell's (2009) assertions, the qualitative research approach was identified as suitable for this study because it would enable the researcher to investigate and share the research findings such that it reflects the richness and depth of H&M's communication as presented on their Facebook and X platforms. On the other hand, the quantitative approach enables a broader investigation of

a large sample (Cresswell, 2009). This characteristic of quantitative analysis was especially useful for the sentiment analysis of H&M's communication on the monkey hoodie advertisement because it meant that a wider sample could be utilised for the investigation. Thus, the qualitative analysis could be used to gain an understanding of H&M's perspective (one entity only), whereas the quantitative analysis could be used to gain an understanding of more than one entity, namely H&M's stakeholders.

A limitation of the quantitative approach is that it does not generate an in-depth understanding of the situation, while the limitation of the qualitative approach includes that it does not permit one to draw conclusions about a large population and the utilisation of a small sample does not precisely measure how the general population feels. Consequently, a limited generalisability was probable (Cresswell, 2009; Schreier, 2012). A combination of the qualitative and quantitative approaches helps researchers to mitigate the limitations of both. Consequently, a combination of the two methodologies can result in an all-inclusive image of the topic (Adcock & Collier, 2001; Erzberger & Kelle, 2003; Maxwell & Loomis, 2003; Morse, 1991; Polit & Beck, 2004; Sandelowski, 1995, 2000; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Therefore, by combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the researcher was able to acquire a sound understanding of H&M's communication with its stakeholders via social media in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident.

The integration process utilised to combine qualitative and quantitative research findings distinguishes the mixed-methods technique from other research approaches. There are numerous mixed-methods designs, which are dependent on the type of integration process utilised for a particular study. The order and integration of qualitative (executed as a first step) and quantitative research (executed as a second step) process and findings is referred to as the "convergent design" (Cresswell, 2009). The mixed-methods approach and its convergent design was deemed appropriate for this study because it provided the scope required for the inclusion and integration of the qualitative and quantitative research findings. According to Cresswell (2009), a convergent design is one in which the researcher intends to gather both qualitative and quantitative data, analyse both datasets and then merge the results of the two sets of analysed data to provide further insight regarding one aspect of the qualitative study (the perspectives and feedback from H&M's stakeholders). Thus, the application of the convergent design in this study provided a detailed and layered perspective of the nature of H&M's communication with its stakeholders via social media, as opposed to a one-dimensional evaluation of its statements. The mixing of the qualitative and quantitative results (see Chapters 4 and 5) provided an additional holistic understanding of the overall nature of communication between H&M and its stakeholders via its social media pages, namely Facebook and X.

In Chapter 4, both qualitative and quantitative findings are combined as part of the convergent design. While the qualitative findings tell the story of how H&M communicated with its stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident and largely from the perspective of H&M, the quantitative outcome informs the story from a different perspective. The quantitative findings shed light on the feelings and perceptions of H&M stakeholders in direct relation to its apology messages and thereby provides insight into the true feelings of the stakeholders at grassroots level. The following section is a description of qualitative content analysis and how it was applied in this study.

3.4 QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSES

Various scholars (Groebe & Rustemeyer, 1994; Krippendorff, 2004; Mayring, 2000; 2010; Shapiro & Markoff, 1997) who have explored the meaning and purpose of qualitative content analysis concur that it is a systematic method to explain the meaning of any text-based communication or web-based content (including social media posts), audio visual, visual and social interaction content material.

Qualitative content analysis is concerned with real-life situations. This implies that the data utilised for the analysis is not separated from the social context in which it occurs (Bengtsson, 2016:10; Coe & Scacco, 2017). When conducting a qualitative content analysis, it is important to consider all relevant background information. This could be a reference to an earlier paragraph in the same piece of writing, information on the relationships between the characters in the dialogue or background on the culture from which one's work originated (Schreier, 2012:9). In this study, it was important to keep the context in mind, namely the monkey hoodie incident and the stakeholders' reaction thereto.

Qualitative content analysis facilitates the analysis and description of the most essential attributes of vast quantities of qualitative data because the material utilised for the analysis should be condensed and summarised (Schreier, 2012:9).

Thus, a researcher, within the scientific framework provided by the qualitative content analysis design, has the necessary scope to interpret data. Shava *et al.* (2021) contend that qualitative content analysis enables researchers to better understand social reality by adopting an integrated view of the speech or text and its specific contexts.

Qualitative content analysis was utilised to analyse the messages communicated by H&M on their social media platforms, Facebook and X, in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. 1 January

2018–31 March 2018 was identified as the timeframe during which H&M communicated their first and last messages regarding the incident.

The sample gathered for the qualitative section of the study comprised apology messages and those which directly addressed the topic/s related to the monkey hoodie incident, as communicated by H&M on Facebook and X for the abovementioned period.

The qualitative content analysis meant that the researcher was able to conduct an in-depth analysis of H&M's communication via its social media platforms (see Schreier, 2012), while the impact of the external environment at the time of the incident was also considered during the analysis. These factors included, the EFF strikes at the H&M stores and the spread of UGC (see Schreier, 2012:9, Bengtsson, 2016:10; Coe & Scacco, 2017). The impact of the social context had to be considered to comprehend H&M's intentions when it communicated with its stakeholders via its social media pages.

The researcher was able to identify relevant categories to classify the information according to pertinent areas for further investigation. The qualitative process allowed for the summarisation and breakdown of the social media posts and tweets shared by H&M into manageable yet relevant pieces of information (refer to Schreier, 2012:9).

After the relevant categories had been defined, the information was classified into groups according to the operational definitions. Please refer to section 3.4.3 for a more detailed description of the categories and operational definitions utilised for the analysis.

3.4.1 Sample selection process

The selection of the material to be included in the study was the first step. The following criteria were referred to as a guideline for this process:

The timeframe selected for the study was 1 January 2018–31 March 2018 because it was during this time that communication relating to the monkey hoodie incident was at its highest. This included the time during which communications about the incident had subsided.

To identify an adequate timeline for the wake of the monkey hoodie incident, the researcher conducted a broad online search to establish what H&M had communicated on its Facebook and X pages. Particular attention was paid to the dates at which H&M started their communication about the incident. On 9 January 2018, H&M released its first apology message for the incident on the H&M global X page. This message was posted two days after the incident had gone viral. Stephanie Yeboah's tweet had been posted on 7 January 2018 at 11pm (see section 1.3).

Various keywords were inputted into the Facebook and X built-in search functions to establish the location of H&M's communication. For example: "H&M monkey in the jungle," "H&M issues + apology + statement," and "H&M + coolest monkey hoodie".

The next step involved capturing screenshots of the relevant communication on H&M's Facebook and X pages within the prescribed timeline. The sample utilised for qualitative content analysis was extracted from the real world and from its natural environment with no amendments to the data (see White & Marsh, 2006:35-36, Tracy 2013:9; Cibangu 2012:110). Thus, during the data collection process, the researcher did not amend the original messages communicated by H&M, which were sourced by extracting screenshots of messages communicated by H&M in its original format; that is, exactly as the messages appeared on Facebook and X.

The sample included relevant communication regarding the monkey hoodie incident as shared by H&M on its South African Facebook page, Global Facebook Page, X South Africa and X Global page for the period under study. Due to the public nature of the social media posts published by H&M on their social media pages, special permission was not required to gather data from the social media platforms.

3.4.2 Data analysis

During the data analysis of the qualitative content, the aim is to become immersed in the data; that is, the written material must be read through several times (Polit & Beck, 2004). Therefore, several readings of all the texts gathered for the sample were read to acquire an overall understanding of what was communicated by H&M. During these readings, it was found that the organisation shared more communication about the monkey hoodie incident on its Facebook pages than on the X pages. The total data in the form of messages shared by H&M on its Facebook and X platforms comprised 94 posts and tweets combined. This data was analysed for the qualitative part of the study.

3.4.3 Categories and operational definitions

In sections 2.5 to 2.5.2 above it was concluded that organisations should facilitate two-way symmetrical communication between themselves and their stakeholders on their social media platforms. In other words, both parties must have an equal opportunity to exchange information and attempt to persuade the other party of its perspectives with a view to reaching a mutual understanding and a reciprocal beneficial outcome.

The theoretical conclusions in section 2.12 also indicated that organisations should utilise social media platforms to monitor real time communication via social media listening as part of their

reflective task of environmental scanning to align themselves strategically with the stakeholders' interests. On X, organisations can follow relevant hashtags (#) to survey online conversations, while on Facebook organisations can monitor the reactions and comments to comprehend stakeholder sentiments (see section 2.13).

It was also concluded in section 2.13 that organisations should utilise social media platforms' real time communication ability as part of their expressive task. Based on the findings from the reflective task (environment scanning or social media listening), the organisation should balance the needs of the organisation with that of its stakeholders.

It is argued that the above can be implemented practically on social media by:

- Sharing relevant information on social media;
- Providing stakeholders the opportunity to provide feedback on its messages;
- Listening (social media listening) to stakeholders; and
- Providing feedback (reply to) on stakeholders' communication.

The built-in social media insights function can be utilised to listen (social media listening) to stakeholders (conduct research) before providing feedback (social media engagement) (see section 2.13).

The categories utilised to analyse H&M's communication with stakeholders of the monkey hoodie incident' via social media were based on the following operational definitions:

Sharing relevant information: All the information related to the monkey hoodie incident which was shared by H&M on social media from 1 January 2018–31 March 2018. On Facebook this refers to comments, photos, videos, polls and status updates, livestreams, live chats and groups, while on X it referred to information shared via tweets and retweets, which could include textual information, hyperlinks, photos, videos, interactive GIFs, hashtags, numerals and chat sessions.

Providing opportunities for feedback: All invitations and opportunities for feedback from stakeholders related to the monkey hoodie incident. On both Facebook and X, this includes any messages that invite feedback on the monkey hoodie incident, as well as H&M's communication related to it. On Facebook, this includes the availability of the reactions function, which includes: likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry, as well as the polls and the comments functions. On X this includes the availability of the retweeting function, liking a tweet and direct comments on posts.

Acquiring feedback from stakeholders: All feedback from stakeholders relating to the monkey hoodie incident and to H&M's communication relating thereto as posted on social media. On Facebook, this includes messages to H&M via the comments and reactions functions, which includes: likes, heart, care wow, haha, sad and angry. On X this includes direct comments on posts, liking a tweet and retweeting.

Providing feedback to stakeholders: All feedback provided to stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident. On Facebook, this refers to responding to comments directly, Facebook posts reacting to communication from stakeholders and reactions, including likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad, and angry. On X feedback it refers to commenting directly on a tweet, a retweet and issuing a tweet, which includes photos, hashtags, hyperlinks, videos and numerals.

3.4.4 Units of analysis

In the context of qualitative data analysis, a unit refers to an independent item which serves as the focal point (Chenail, 2012:266). The units of analysis utilised in the qualitative content analysis process are listed below.

On Facebook, the units of analysis included:

- insights
- comments
- photos
- videos
- polls
- status updates
- livestreams
- live chats
- groups
- reaction's function, which included: likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry.

On X, the units of analysis referred to information shared via tweets and retweets, which could include:

- textual information

- hyperlinks
- interactive GIFs
- numerals
- videos
- liking a tweet
- direct comments on tweets/posts
- chat sessions
- photos
- hashtags

3.4.5 Reliability

According to Mayring (2000:4), a summative check of the reliability should be conducted as one of the final steps of the analysis process. To undertake the latter, the researcher should check whether the findings of the analysis relate back to the theoretical guidelines and the research objective. The final step is to explain the findings and thereby address the research question and the identified objectives. This process, as outlined by Mayring (2014), was utilised to verify the messages by H&M to establish whether the interpretations gathered during the analyses process correlated with the operational definitions and relevance to the theoretical conclusions of the overall research objective. The results from the data analysis for Facebook and X were kept on file to integrate after the quantitative section of the study had been finalised. Please refer to Chapters 4 and 5 of this study.

3.4.6 Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985:290) argue that the concepts of reliability and objectivity are not the most suitable options for qualitative studies. They recommend that the constructs of credibility and transferability be utilised instead. Research is deemed credible if the data analysis process demonstrates an accurate identification and description of the subject matter, as well as whether the relevant theoretical framework can be applied to the broader social context. To bolster the credibility of qualitative content analysis, researchers must not only formulate data collection strategies that elicit representation effectively, but also establish transparent procedures for the categorisation process, as well as provide details of how conclusions were derived from the raw

data. Therefore, it is important that descriptive, clear and accurate criteria and definitions are provided, and that the process is shared in a transparent manner (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Since the analysis process was outlined in detail in a transparent and detailed manner in this chapter and concise operational definitions were provided from the theoretical foundation in Chapter 2, and in accordance with the outline for credibility as described by Lincoln and Guba (1985:290) and Graneheim and Lundman (2004), it is argued that the necessary steps were taken to ensure the credibility of the qualitative part of the empirical study.

3.4.7 Challenges encountered during the qualitative content analysis

Some of the methodological challenges that were faced during the data collection process included the verification that the start and end date identified for the H&M posts were accurate and correlated with the timeline of the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. This challenge was responded to by conducting online Google searches for newspaper articles on the incident to identify when the broader mainstream news media started to share communication about it, as well as when the volume thereof started to decline. The online newspaper articles served as a reference point for the commencement date of the incident becoming a global topic of discussion and as a reference point for when the discussion of the incident started to decline globally. This information was compared to the start and end dates of H&M's discussions of the incident on their social media pages for verification purposes.

A secondary methodological challenge was H&M closing its South African Facebook page. This meant that the researcher had to search for the original H&M Facebook apology posts by utilising the Google interface and not the Facebook one. H&M did, however, reinstate its South African Facebook page at a later stage. This provided direct access to the original Facebook apology messages.

Although these challenges were experienced when conducting the qualitative content analysis, they were mitigated. Therefore, the difficulties did not have a negative impact of the findings of the study.

The next section comprises a description of the quantitative section of the study, which was conducted via sentiment analysis using SentiStrength.

3.8 SENTIMENT ANALYSIS AND SENTISTRENGTH

Sentiment analysis, also referred to as "opinion mining", is the process of determining the emotional tone that underlies a succession of words utilised to examine the attitudes, ideas and sentiments contained in an internet mention (Bannister, 2018). It is a computer-based evaluation

of a sentiment of a text, such as its general trends regarding organisations, brands and product offerings expressed on social media. By utilising sentiment analysis, organisations can pre-empt stressful social media situations and understand the perspectives of their stakeholders (Schweidel & Moe, 2014; Tirunillai & Tellis, 2014; Ranjan, *et al.* 2023). Sentiment analysis provides an overall public opinion of certain topics because it helps one to identify positive or negative opinions, as well as measure an entity such as an organisation (Paltoglou & Giachinou 2014; Bannister, 2018). By understanding the sentiment behind messages, organisations can strategise and prepare effectively for the future (Bannister, 2018).

By using the sentiment analysis software SentiStrength, the researcher was able to determine the overall sentiment of H&M's stakeholders in response to the monkey hoodie communication shared on their social media pages in the wake of the incident and thereby provide an in-depth answer to research question 1.5.2.

SentiStrength is an online sentiment analysis tool which classifies social web writings through a lexical approach (Thelwell, 2017:2). It provides the following advantages to determine sentiment:

SentiStrength can be utilised to analyse sentiment patterns in the social web in addition to its commercial uses (Thelwall, 2017:120). While most existing sentiment detection algorithms tend to be designed for commercial use to identify opinions about products rather than behaviour, SentiStrength fills in this gap and specifically measures sentiment patterns prevalent on social media platforms (Thelwall *et al.*, 2010:2544). SentiStrength can estimate positive and negative sentiment strength simultaneously in English short informal texts. Furthermore, it employs dual positive and negative scales because psychological research indicates that individuals can experience both (positive and negative) emotions concurrently and, to a degree, independently (Vilares *et al.*, 2015:4; Norman *et al.*, 2011). SentiStrength applies a dual 5-point scheme to classify texts: a score from 1 (no positivity) to 5 (very strong positivity); and a second score from -1 (no negativity) to -5 (very strong negativity) (Velars *et al.*, 2015:4). SentiStrength employs a lexicon of sentiment words, as well as word stems together with average positive or negative sentiment strength scores (Thelwall, 2017:130). Texts are classified with the largest positive or negative scores of any constituent word unless these are modified by any of the additional classification rules, such as emotions, negations and booster words (Thelwall, 2017:130).

This online sentiment analysis software utilises algorithms to identify the sentiment and the sentiment strength of the said texts. This, in turn, assists one to comprehend the role of the emotion articulated in the texts. A clear understanding of the emotion latent in the text sheds light on whether there is agreement with the said text, consent, disapproval or even a potential conflict (Thelwall *et al.*, 2010:2544). Since the inception of SentiStrength, there have been numerous

updated versions on its platform. Each upgrade includes an expanded dictionary and idiom list, as well as new rules to manage contradictory results and new linguistic features (Vilares *et al.*, 2015:4). This implies that the online sentiment dictionary utilised by SentiStrength has not remained static over time but expanded to accommodate the changes in language utilised within the online space. According to Vilares *et al.* (2015:4), SentiStrength provides good results across a variety of social media domains, including X, and has often been utilised to monitor popular events in X (Vilares *et al.*, 2015:4). SentiStrength can predict positive emotion with 60.6% accuracy and negative emotion with 72.8% accuracy. Both are based on the strength scale of 1 to 5 which is better than baseline and a wide range of general machine learning approaches (Thelwall, 2010:2544). SentiStrength has near-human accuracy on general short social web texts but is less accurate when the texts contain sarcasm, such as in political discussions. SentiStrength's accuracy can be improved by expanding its vocabulary and adjusting its mood setting for groups of texts with a narrow subject focus (Thelwall, 2017:130). Due to the above advantages, SentiStrength was considered an appropriate tool to measure the H&M stakeholders' sentiments regarding the monkey hoodie incident.

SentiStrength has been utilised for several academic studies to measure sentiment. Thus, other researchers have found the research tool credible. These studies include but are not limited to *Direct-to-Consumer Genetic Testing on Social Media: Topic Modelling and Sentiment Analysis of YouTube Users' Comments* (Toussaint *et al.* 2022) and *Political conversations on Twitter in a disruptive scenario: The role of party evangelists during the 2015 Spanish general elections* (Baviera, Sampietro & García-Ull, 2019), to name but two.

The next section provides a description of the data collection procedure for the sentiment analysis section of the study.

3.8.1 Data collection and processing via SentiStrength

At the inception of the data collection process for the quantitative section of the study, it was important to acquire an overall understanding of how many stakeholder comments were available on H&M's social media pages. An online Google search was conducted to acquire a general understanding of the volume of the comments. The same search keywords as indicated in section 3.4 were utilised. The Google search yielded hundreds of results in the form of comments from H&M stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident. Due to the extremely high number of search results, it was not possible to estimate the exact number of comments accurately. The viral nature of social media and its UGC capability, as described in section 2.10, also meant that the number of stakeholders' comments found during the general search had the potential to increase over time, thereby making it impossible to estimate both the current and future number

of comments accurately. This created a challenge because it was not possible to collect and analyse all the present and possible future comments from H&M stakeholders.

It was noted during this phase of the investigation that there were, on average, between 20 and 80 comments in relation to each apology message or monkey hoodie incident-related post published by H&M for the 1 January 2018–31 March 2018 period. Further criteria were established to enhance the relevance of the responses:

- The messages from stakeholders via the Facebook and X platforms had to be in direct response to any monkey hoodie incident-related messages communicated by H&M; or
- in direct response to the apology messages published by H&M on its Facebook and X platforms. The rationale was to ensure that all the responses measured for sentiment were relevant to the selected topic.

Since SentiStrength is a text-based analysis programme, a further criterion was that the messages had to include text. If an image or user-generated images was utilised in response to H&M, it had to include a text message as a rationale for the image to express emotion. Since SentiStrength does not measure the sentiment of images, in instances where stakeholders responded to the H&M apology message using only an image, the latter could not be included in the sample via the SentiStrength platform and was thus excluded from the data analysis and quantitative analysis processes.

Other exclusionary criteria included comments that did not address the topic communicated by H&M; for example, when a stakeholder posted a message on a completely different topic to the thread of comments in which all other stakeholders addressed the monkey hoodie incident. There were also instances in which comments were shared in the form of URLs (hyperlinks) to various accounts, such as direct selling websites or comments; incoherent indecipherable words that had no relation to the topic; data in languages other than English; and unnecessary retweets and texts that made no sense. To ensure that the sample was free of these elements, every comment from H&M stakeholders was read individually and comments that had these elements were excluded from the sample. This method enabled the researcher to clean the data of unnecessary spam and hyperlinks and verify that all the messages in the sample were direct responses to H&M's apology messages. The total number of comments from stakeholders was 200, 100 from Facebook and 100 from X.

The Facebook and X raw data, in the form of comments from H&M stakeholders, was copied verbatim into two MS Excel spreadsheets. One spreadsheet was allocated to the Facebook

comments and the second to the X comments. The data was then converted to a txt. file and plugged into the SentiStrength programme. The latter processed the txt. file and produced a list of sentiment results. This process was followed for each spreadsheet.

3.8.2 Reliability and validity

When selecting measuring instruments for quantitative studies, it is crucial to ensure validity; that is, to measure the construct or domain under investigation accurately. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish reliability, which refers to the ability to provide the same results consistently when utilised several times in the same circumstance and with the same population (Cambridge Cognition, 2016).

To ensure the validity of the study, the data collection procedure, as outlined in section 3.8.1, incorporated a rigorous and precise set of criteria to establish the final comments for the sample that would undergo SentiStrength processing. The utilisation of the criteria outlined in section 3.8.1 contributed towards the validation process by ensuring that the comments subjected to analysis through SentiStrength were devoid of extraneous elements such as irrelevant hyperlinks and remarks. By adhering to the criteria specified in section 3.8.1, the comments included in the sample were aligned with the research objectives, which augmented the validity of the data.

To assess the reliability of the results, a test-retest methodology was employed evaluate whether consistent outcomes could be acquired over a three-month period when the data was analysed by SentiStrength. The purpose of this measure was to maintain the stability of the test scores over time. As mentioned in section 3.9, the SentiStrength internal dictionary undergoes regular updates, which can potentially affect the results due to the addition of new linguistic features to the programme (Vilares *et al.*, 2015:4). The test results exhibited no significant deviations and the findings were accepted as reliable.

3.8.3 Challenges experienced with sentiment analysis

The data cleaning procedure was an extremely time-consuming process because it required individual examination of many comments to establish their eligibility for analysis, as indicated in section 3.8.1. As stated in section 3.8, SentiStrength exhibits limited accuracy when dealing with texts that have elements such as sarcasm or images. Consequently, to uphold the precision of the analysis, measures to validate the sentiment outcomes of the comments made by H&M stakeholders that included sarcasm were considered. This validation process involved manual checking to verify whether the sentiment score aligned with the dual 5-point scheme to classify texts (section 3.8).

Although challenges were encountered with the sentiment analysis, these were addressed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.11 CONCLUSION

This chapter comprised a description of the research design, the research approach and the rationale for the selection of the mixed-methods research approach for the empirical section of the study. The objective was to provide a justification and overview of the qualitative, and quantitative processes utilised for the empirical investigation. The need for a convergent design was discussed to highlight the value of a holistic approach to responding to the general research question. Furthermore, the researcher described the data collection criteria, methods and analysis process to provide integrity and transparency regarding the research process, thereby also helping to ensure that the research can be considered credible and transferable. The research findings are presented in Chapter 4 according to the parameters of the convergent approach; that is, in an integrated manner.

CHAPTER 4 DISCUSSION OF RESULTS: EXPLORING THE NATURE OF H&M'S COMMUNICATION AND STAKEHOLDERS' SENTIMENTS IN THE WAKE OF THE MONKEY HOODIE INCIDENT

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the preceding chapter, the research methods utilised in the empirical aspect of the study were described. The objective of this chapter is to present the findings of the empirical study to respond to the second research question:

To what extent did H&M's communication with its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident adhere to the principles of the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM? (1.5.2)

This question was answered by means of a qualitative content analysis of H&M's communication with its stakeholders on its social media platforms regarding the monkey hoodie incident and a sentiment analysis of the stakeholders' responses to the organisation's communication.

In response to specific research question 1.5.2, the arguments formulated in section 2.14 were utilised to determine which categories were employed for the qualitative content analysis of H&M's communication with its stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident.

Given this study's focus on communication as part of building, maintaining and protecting relationships with stakeholders, the H&M stakeholders' sentiments were considered to comprehend how they reacted to H&M's communication regarding the incident on its social media platforms (sections 1.7.2.3 & 3.8). A total sample of 200 comments (100 from Facebook and 100 from X), which were direct responses to the apology messages issued by H&M during 1 January 2018–31 March 2018, was gathered. The sample was processed through a sentiment analysis software programme to determine the overall sentiment of H&M's stakeholders (section 3.8).

The sentiment analysis findings are presented and integrated with those of the qualitative content analysis under the section: *Feedback from stakeholders* (section 4.2.3).

4.2 FINDINGS: H&M'S COMMUNICATION WITH ITS STAKEHOLDERS RELATED TO THE MONKEY HOODIE INCIDENT ON ITS SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The findings of the qualitative content analysis are presented according to the following categories acquired from the literature study:

Sharing Relevant Information, Providing Opportunities for Feedback, Feedback from Stakeholders and Providing Feedback to Stakeholders.

4.2.1 Sharing relevant information

The operational definition for “sharing relevant information”, as noted in section 3.4.3, included all the information related to the monkey hoodie incident which was shared by H&M on its social media platforms. On Facebook the functions that could assist with sharing relevant information were comments, photos, videos, polls and status updates, livestreams, live chats and groups. On X the definition referred to information shared via tweets and retweets, which can include textual information, hyperlinks, photos, videos, interactive GIFs, hashtags, numerals and chat sessions.

The theoretical arguments presented in section 2.5 indicated that for organisations to build relationships with their stakeholders based on mutual understanding and stakeholder trust, they should engage in two-way communication with the latter, which includes sharing relevant information with their stakeholders. According to the two-way symmetrical communication principles, sharing relevant information implies that information shared by an organisation must be informed by an in-depth understanding of their stakeholders’ needs and expectations (section 2.5.1).

The reflective paradigm and SCM principles in sections 2.6 & 2.7, similarly to the concepts of two-way symmetrical communication, prompt organisations to understand the stakeholders’ needs, expectations and views through the reflective task and environmental scanning before disseminating information to them. If an organisation has an in-depth understanding of stakeholders’ matters of interest and their views and expectations, it can communicate relevant information by signifying to stakeholders that the organisation does in fact consider their needs. According to the reflective paradigm principles in section 2.6, organisations must exercise mutual reflection so that they can share information with stakeholders that is aligned with their perceptions and expectations. The principles of the SCM (2.7) indicate that the organisation should exercise the mirror function to learn about its external environment and utilise the window function to use the data acquired (as part of the mirror function) so that the organisation can share information with its stakeholders that is clear and corresponds with their needs and interests.

Social media, as indicated in sections 2.2, 2.3, 2.9, 2.11, 2.12 and 2.13, offers the key functions needed to ensure that information communicated with stakeholders is understood on an accessible platform. Social media listening (section 2.12) can be used to gain an extensive knowledge of stakeholders' questions and requirements. This helps organisations to create information that meets stakeholders' communication needs, making the shared information relevant.

The findings indicated that H&M's communication was publicly available via its social media pages from 1 January 2018–31 March 2018. Despite the temporary closure of the South African Facebook page, information regarding the incident was publicly available via a Google search. H&M might have implemented the temporary closure of the South African Facebook page as a precautionary measure to safeguard the organisation through this critical period. While information could have been accessible through a Google search, the stakeholders did not have the same level of access and freedom to the information as they would have had if the H&M South African Facebook page had been public and open throughout this period. This suggests that H&M did not abide entirely by the reflective paradigm principle of mutual reflection or the strategic communication (mirror and window) processes. In fact, the closed Facebook page meant that H&M could not exercise these said principles and could not fully utilise the built-in social media functions to do so during the time in which the H&M South Africa Facebook page was closed.

4.2.1.1 H&M's information sharing practices via Facebook

During the qualitative content analysis process, it was observed that H&M did employ the comments function to provide its stakeholders feedback and share pertinent information related to the monkey hoodie incident. However, it was noted that the utilisation of the comments function was restricted to a minimal number of responses. For a comprehensive examination of H&M's feedback to stakeholders through the comments function between 1 January and 31 March 2018, please refer to section 4.2.4.2.

H&M utilised the status update function only twice to share critical information about the monkey hoodie incident during the specified period. The first instance was on the H&M Global Facebook page, while the second was on the H&M South Africa Facebook page, to issue an apology message to its stakeholders. Figure 4-1 and Figure 4-2 show the original apologies shared by H&M on 16 January 2018.

It was found that H&M did not use videos or photos to share information regarding the monkey hoodie incident in the wake of the uproar.

It is evident that from 1 January– 1 March 2018, H&M did not utilise the livestreams or live chat, groups or polls functions to disclose any pertinent details about the monkey hoodie incident.

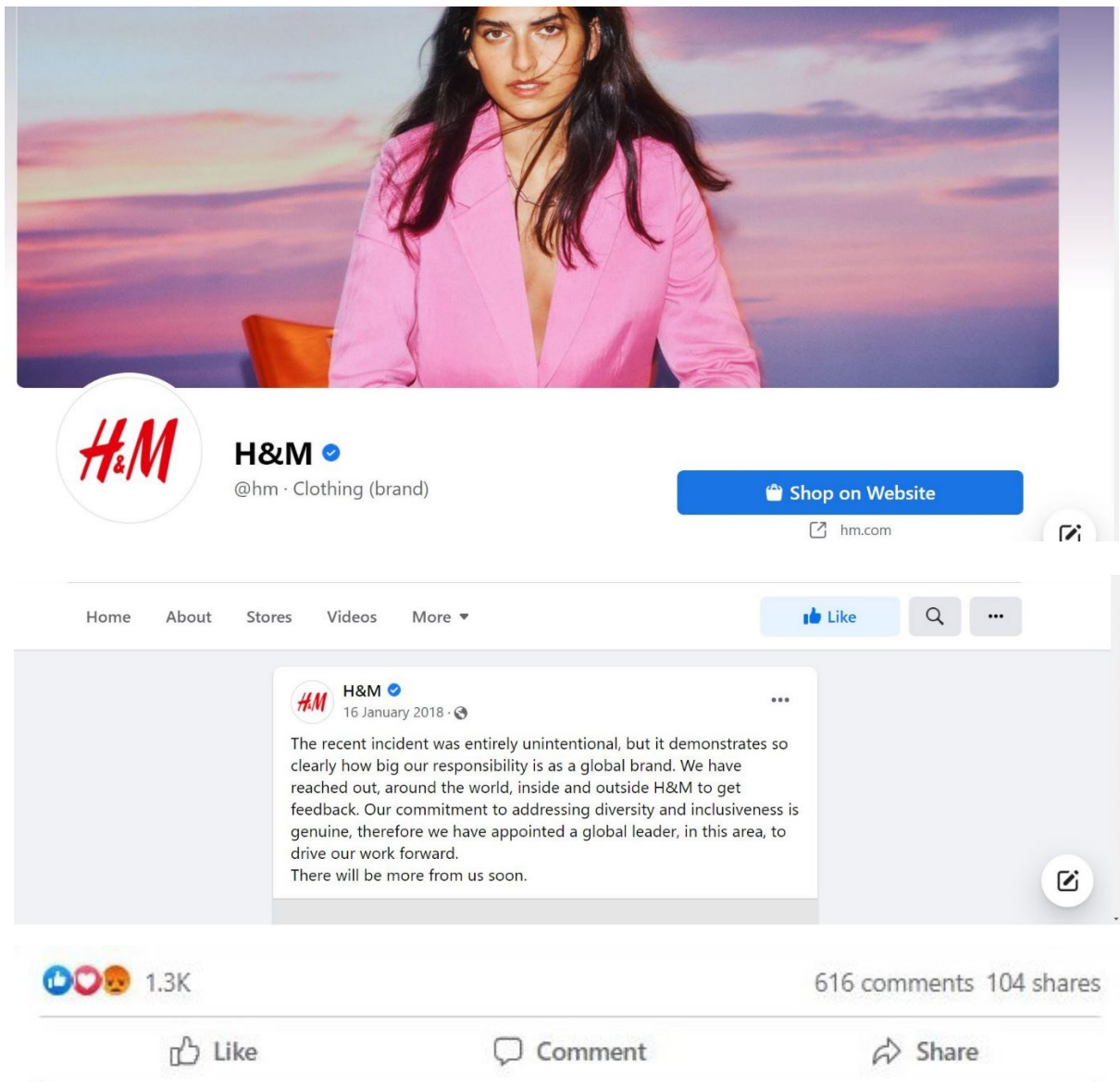


Figure 4-1: H&M Global Apology on Facebook Page (2018)

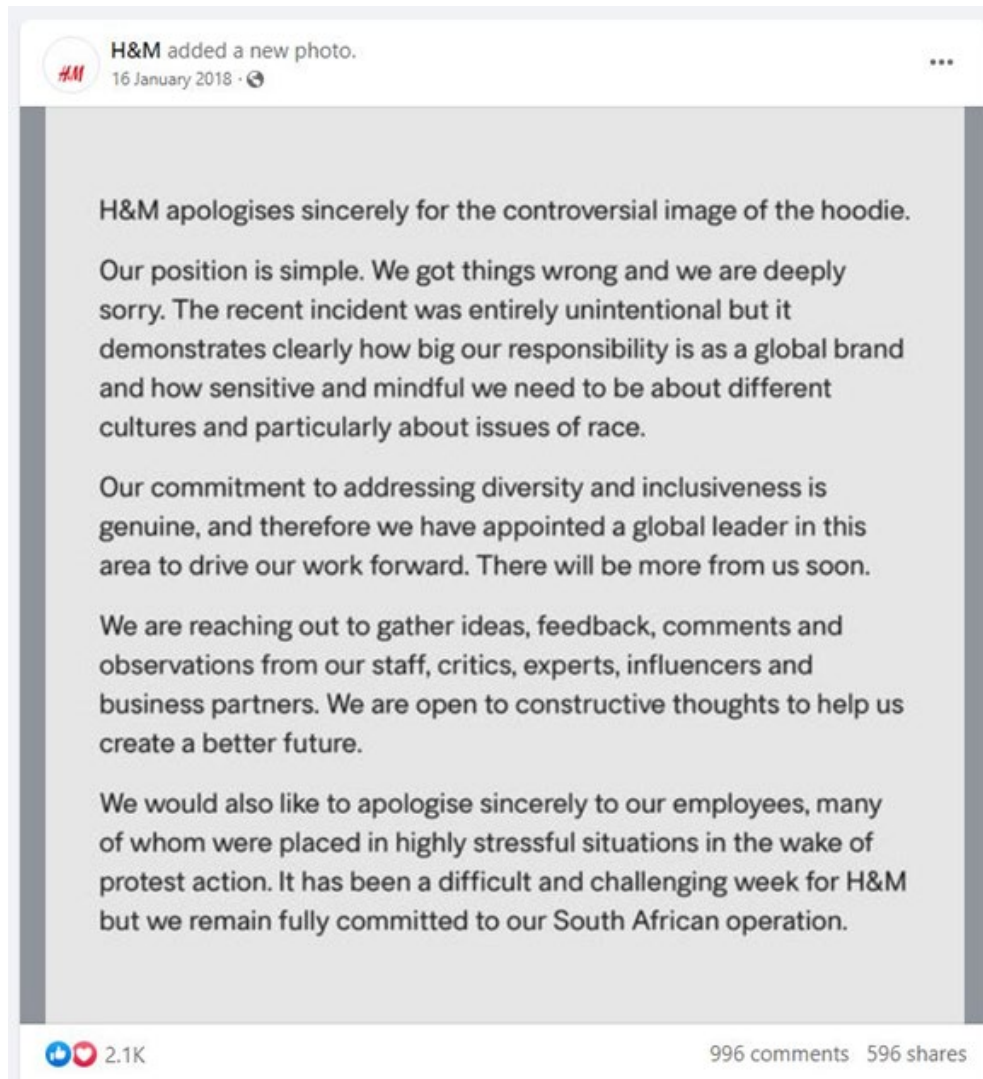


Figure 4-2: H&M South Africa Apology on Facebook Page (2018)

4.2.1.2 H&M's information sharing practices via X

H&M issued an apology message on 9 January 2018 on its X page (Figure 4-3). It utilised the tweet function and textual information. In this message, H&M addressed the gravity of its actions transparently and acknowledged its responsibility, without attempting to excuse its behaviour. H&M also notified its stakeholders that the organisation had implemented measures to ensure that its mistake would not be repeated in the future. This message by H&M revealed that it was aware of how its actions had affected its stakeholders and its external environment, and that the organisation was working towards improving the situation to meet its stakeholders' expectations regarding its behaviour. These findings are substantiated with particular attention to the following references, as illustrated in (Figure 4-3): those made by H&M to the people who are disgruntled about the image of the children's hoodie, as well as the reference to the fact that H&M confirmed that the image of the monkey hoodie had been removed from their channels and their product

offering. If H&M had possessed no prior knowledge that their external stakeholders, whom they refer to as “people” in their apology statement, were unhappy about the image of the monkey hoodie, the retailer would not have been equipped to offer an apology in the first place or articulate that it was necessary to remove their image from all their media channels.

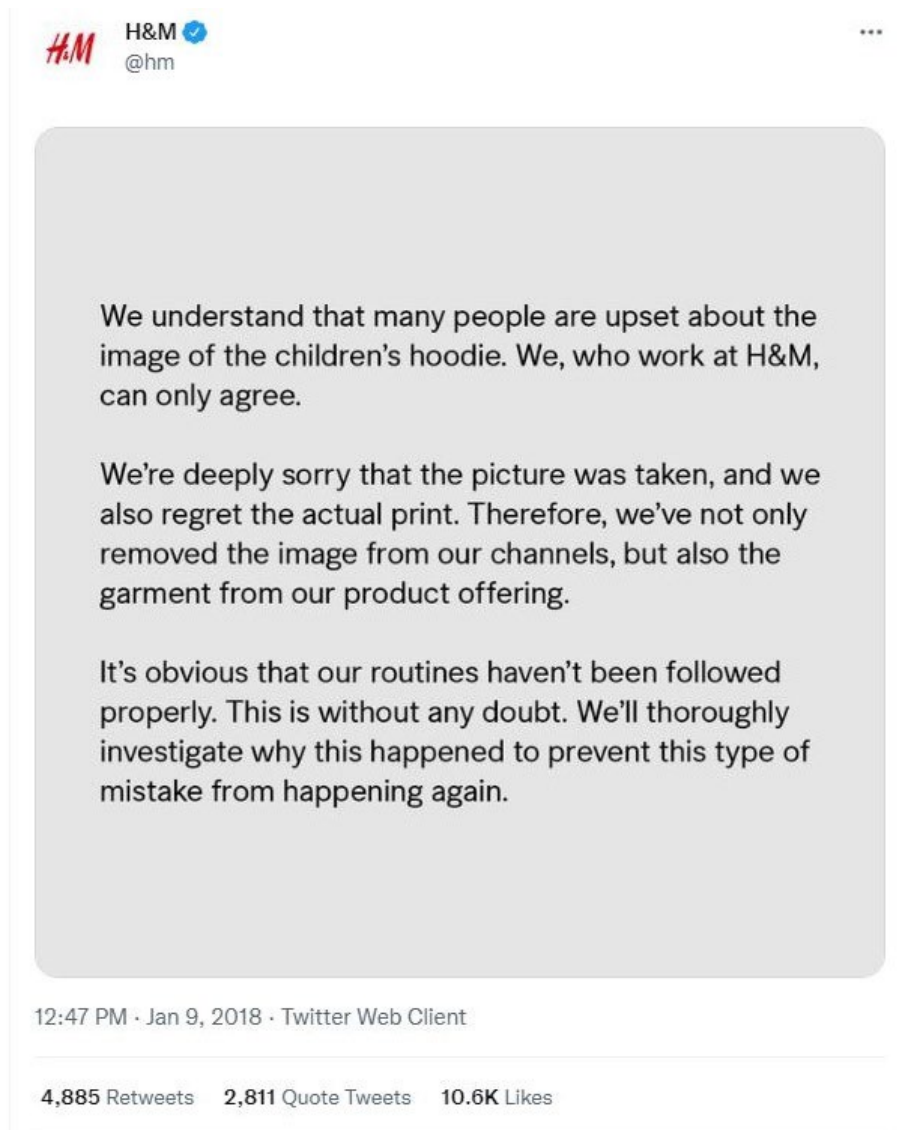


Figure 4-3: H&M Global Apology Message on (X)Twitter Page (2018)

The tweets, including textual information, shared by H&M regarding the EFF store protests (Figure 4-4) were published four days after their initial apology post (Figure 4-3). This was an interesting finding, considering the instant and real time nature of social media. Furthermore, H&M only shared information regarding the EFF protest via its X South Africa page. Since this information was relevant to all its South African stakeholders, perhaps the same information should also have been shared on H&M's South African Facebook page. This choice to share information on only one of its local social media pages created potential risks regarding the trustworthiness of the information shared by the organisation. It implies that the organisation had failed to be consistent regarding sharing information with all its relevant stakeholders. As highlighted in section 2.5, trust is a necessary component of a relationship between organisations and their stakeholders.

H&M's inconsistent information sharing practices on its social media platforms might have compromised its stakeholders' trust due to the noticeable irregularity in providing information across platforms. The findings indicated that H&M had considered its external environment because the shared information with its stakeholders disclosed an understanding of events that were taking place externally to the organisation, and which had an impact on both parties. This was particularly evident in the messages shared by H&M regarding the EFF protests, because the latter had an impact both on itself and its South African stakeholders. The fact that H&M was able to address the EFF protest directly (an external event that had affected both their stores and their stakeholders at grassroots level), implied that the organisation was willing to address socio-political issues related to their brand transparently within a public forum. It can, therefore, be inferred that H&M was, to an extent, transparent in its communication with its stakeholders.

Using the photos function via their X platforms, H&M revealed an awareness of diversity and inclusion through information shared with its stakeholders. H&M communicated its understanding of diversity and inclusion through tweets by sharing photographs of models from various races, age groups and genders to showcase their garments. Although the photographs were not necessarily directly linked to the monkey hoodie incident, it was noted as an important finding because it revealed a certain level of awareness and understanding of these topics by H&M and conveyed high social value.

The photographs seen in (Figure 4-5) were posted between 4 January 2018 and 26 February 2018. It can be seen in Figure 4-5 that H&M used models to showcase their clothing from diverse racial groups. H&M had already used images of models from diverse racial backgrounds from 4 January 2018, before the monkey hoodie incident occurred on the 7 January 2018 (section 1.3). These images were also shared on H&M's X South Africa page a month after the monkey hoodie incident had flared up on social media (Figure 4-5, photos dated 7 Feb and 26 Feb 2018).

Although, the findings revealed that H&M utilised models from diverse ethnic groups to showcase their garments, it is important to note that, generally, it continued with a business-as-usual approach in terms of the information shared via both its social media pages.

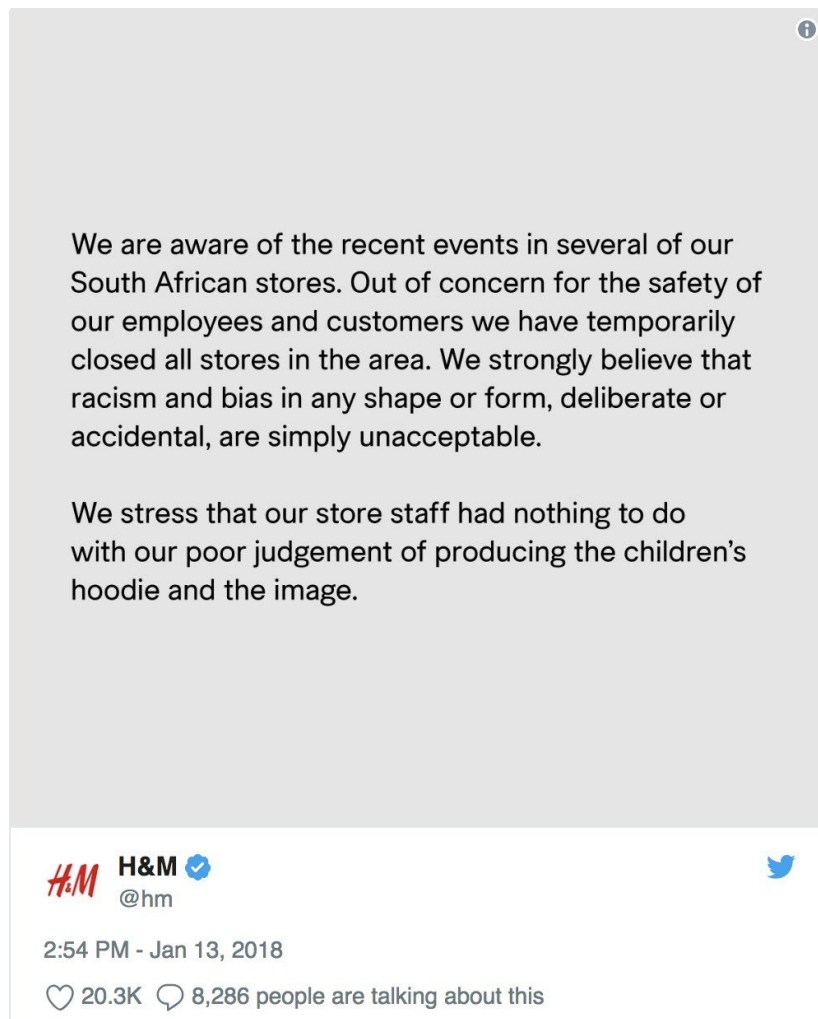


Figure 4-4: H&M South Africa Political Protest Update on its (X) Twitter Page

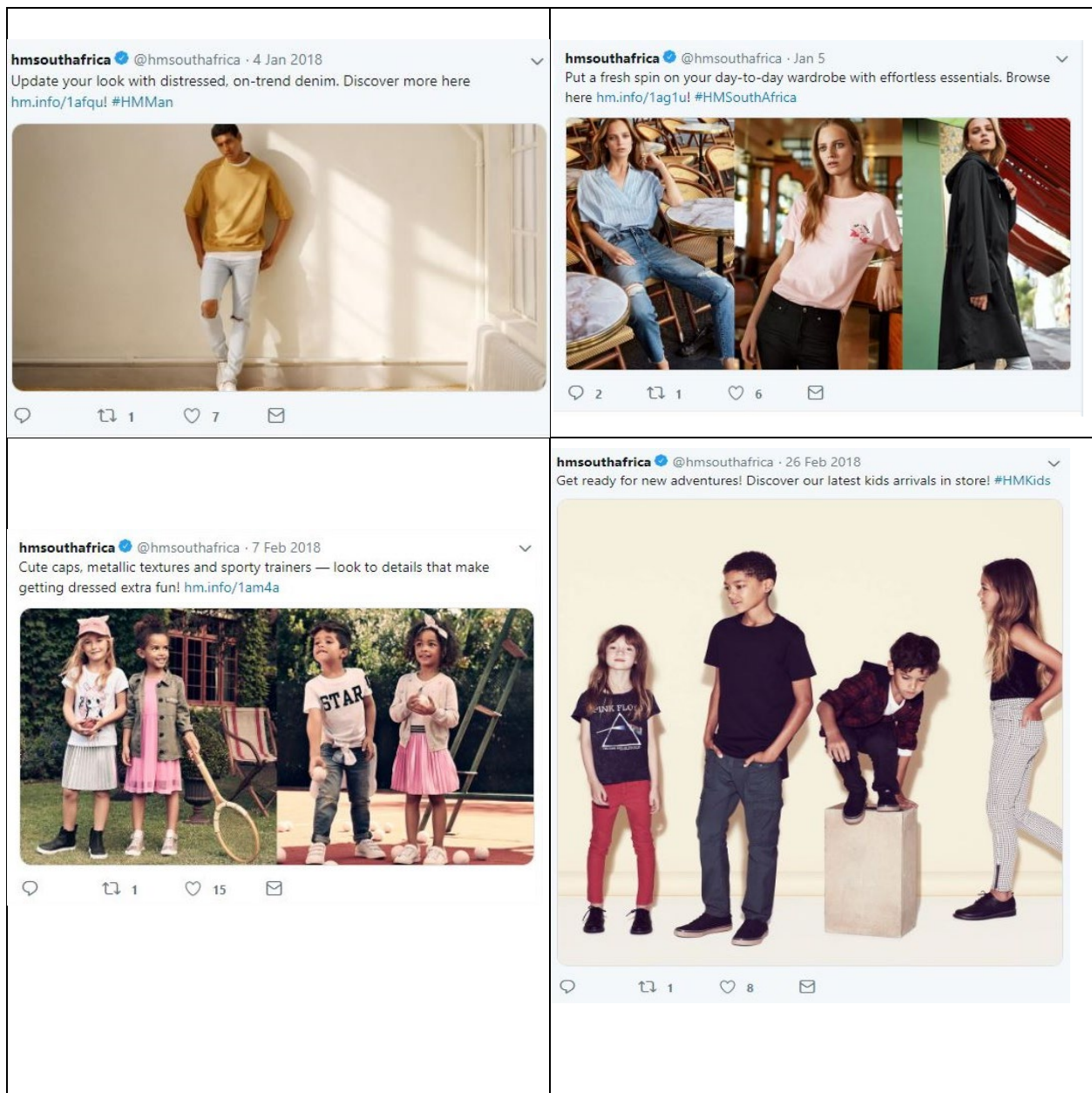


Figure 4-5: H&M South Africa Twitter Page (2018): A sample showcasing diversity and inclusion

The research findings indicate that H&M did not disseminate the communication seen in Figure 4-4 on its official Facebook sites for both South Africa and globally. Furthermore, the photographs showcasing diversity and inclusion (Figure 4-5) were also not shared as part of H&M's communication with its stakeholders on its official Facebook sites for both South Africa and globally. It would thus seem that H&M purposefully withheld pertinent information from selected stakeholders who follow these social media pages. Although the information was publicly available, if not shared equally across all their social media pages, one would need to search for

it. Furthermore, all information should be shared consistently across all their social media pages and with the stakeholders who follow them.

It was also found that H&M did not utilise the retweets function or interactive GIFs, hashtags, numerals or hyperlinks, videos, or chat sessions to share any relevant information regarding the monkey hoodie incident.

4.2.1.3 Facebook and X – Summary of Findings

The messages of apology shared by H&M on the H&M Facebook pages and H&M South Africa X on 16 January 2018 (Figure 4-1, Figure 4-2, Figure 4-3 and Figure 4-4), implied that the organisation had acquired knowledge of external social issues and were cognisant of the fact that advertising a boy of colour wearing the monkey hoodie had affected both the organisation and its stakeholders negatively. These messages by H&M further revealed that it was aware of its stakeholders' discontent regarding the advertisement and that the organisation had reached out to its external stakeholders to gather more information regarding the incident. H&M mentions the issue of diversity and inclusion in the context of the information shared with its stakeholders in its messages, which implies that the organisation was aware of the significance of diversity and inclusion to its stakeholders.

It was identified that from 1 January to 31 March 2018, H&M demonstrated a lack of consistency in the dissemination of pertinent information to several significant stakeholder groups through its various social media platforms.

The evidence suggests that the functions identified for 'sharing relevant information' were either not utilised adequately or, in most instances, not at all. H&M's decision to refrain from utilising the functions via Facebook and X to share relevant information indicates that the organisation did not fully capitalise on numerous opportunities, through its social media pages, to learn more about its external social and political environment, including but not limited to its stakeholders' perspectives, requirements and concerns. The functions could have been utilised to foster collaborative problem-solving (negotiation) and to enhance power dynamics between the organisation and its stakeholders (see Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998:58; Dozier *et al.*, 1995:39, Dozier & Ehling, 1992:197; Grunig & Huang, 2000:38; Grunig & White, 2012:65). Furthermore, the opportunity for an equal exchange of ideas between the organisation and its stakeholders to create a mutually beneficial relationship between the two parties was lost (see Grunig & Huang, 2000:38).

4.2.2 Providing opportunities for feedback

The operational definition for “providing opportunities for feedback”, as noted in section 3.4.3, refers to all invitations and opportunities for feedback from stakeholders relating to the monkey hoodie incident. On both Facebook and X, this included any messages that invited feedback on the incident, as well as H&M’s communication regarding it. On Facebook, this included the availability of the reactions function, which included likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry, as well as the polls and comments functions. On X this included the availability of the retweeting function, liking a tweet and direct comments on posts.

It was noted in section 2.5.1 that when an organisation provides their stakeholders with opportunities for feedback, it essentially demonstrates that they are open to dialogue. The principles mentioned were that when an organisation utilises feedback as part of two-way symmetrical communication, the organisation creates an environment for dialogue and negotiation between itself and its stakeholders. Therefore, feedback from the latter is necessary if the organisation wants to achieve a win-win relationship, mutual understanding and trusting relationships with its stakeholders.

In section 2.6–2.6.1, it was noted that, according to the principles of the reflective paradigm, feedback from stakeholders should be included in the organisation’s research process and overall decision-making procedures. It was stated in sections 2.7–2.7.1 that organisations should utilise stakeholder feedback to learn about their external environment as part of the mirror function as defined by SCM so that it comprehends the stakeholders’ needs, concerns and expectations, as well as to detect trends and possible threats early on.

It was also explained in section 2.10 how stakeholders can provide feedback regarding information shared by the organisation without the permission of the latter, via UGC. It was argued in section 2.11 that the utilisation of social media engagement processes in conjunction with the built-in social media functions (section 2.13) can help facilitate the process of dialogue between an organisation and its stakeholders. The organisation should seek feedback from the latter to enhance its ability to develop and nurture healthy organisational-stakeholder relationships and build stakeholders’ confidence.

4.2.2.1 Opportunities to provide feedback via Facebook

H&M highlighted that they had created opportunities for feedback, as evident from the post on their Facebook South Africa page on 16 January 2018 (refer to Figure 4-1 & Figure 4-2):

“We have reached out, around the world inside and outside H&M to get feedback.

We are reaching out to gather ideas, feedback, comments and observations from our staff, critics, experts, influencers and business partners. We are open to constructive thoughts to help us create a better future”.

The fact that H&M mentioned in its Facebook post (Figure 4-2) that it was open to “constructive thoughts” can be interpreted to mean it was open to and welcomed feedback from its stakeholders.

In a second post on 16 January 2018 on its H&M South Africa Facebook and H&M Global Facebook pages, H&M indicated that: “*We are listening*” (see Figure 4-6). This message could also be considered an attempt to illustrate that the organisation was open to receiving feedback and that it provided ideal circumstances for its stakeholders to share their feedback.

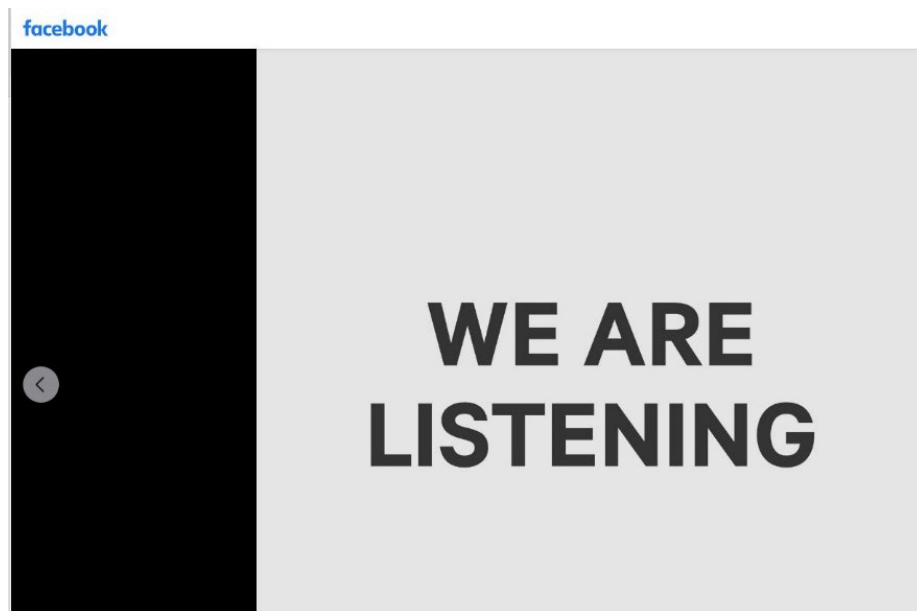


Figure 4-6: H&M South Africa Facebook Page: Published using the post function on 16 January 2018

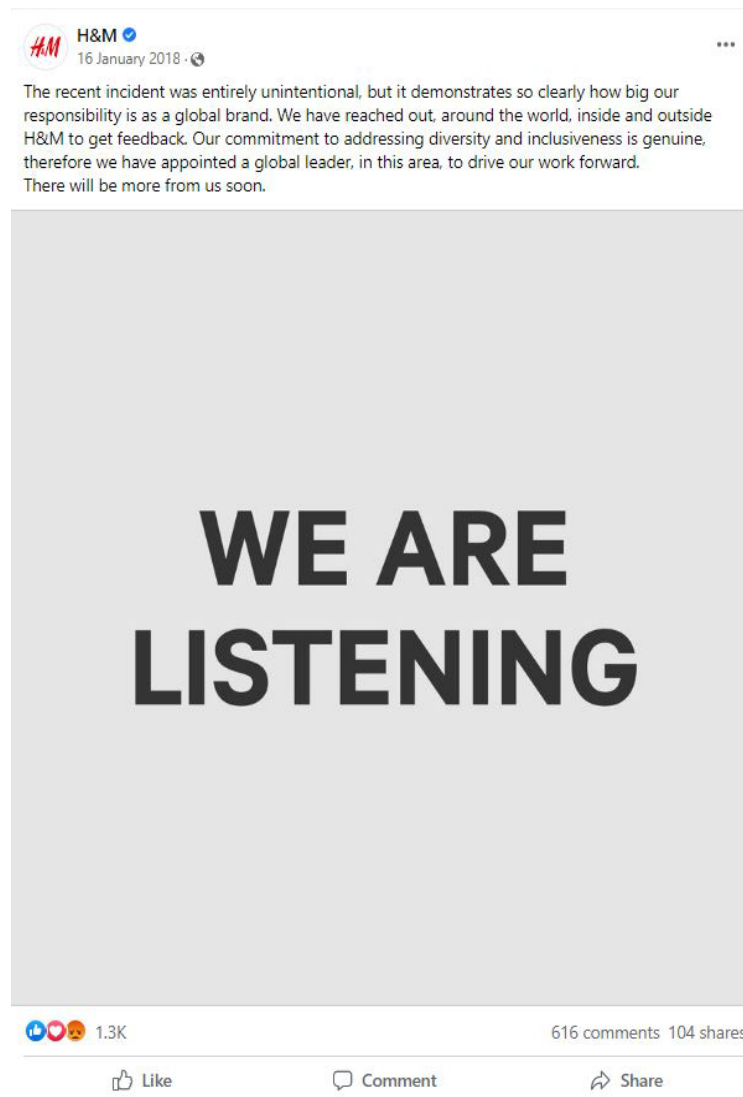


Figure 4-7: H&M Global Facebook Page: Published using the post function on 16 January 2018

However, the analysis indicated that, apart from the Facebook posts (Figure 4-1, Figure 4-2, Figure 4-6, Figure 4-7), H&M did not disseminate any posts from January 1, 2018 to March 31, 2018 to explicitly invite stakeholders to provide feedback. Thus, there was a large gap between what H&M claimed (that they were open to feedback, open to constructive thoughts and listened to their stakeholders) and what they actually did (provided limited communication regarding the monkey hoodie incident).

However, H&M did provide their stakeholders with the opportunity to provide feedback via the Facebook reaction functions, namely: likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry. The comments function was also enabled for the entire period under investigation. This implied that H&M stakeholders could share their feedback through the comments function. However, H&M did

not utilise the polls function and thus missed opportunities to acquire feedback from its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident by posing specific questions about how it could enhance its communication in the future.

4.2.2.2 Opportunities to provide feedback via X

It was revealed that H&M did not utilise the tweets function to extend invitations for feedback from its stakeholders from 1 January 2018–31 March 2018. The findings, however, indicated that they did provide their stakeholders with the opportunity to provide feedback via X during that period. Using the retweeting function, the H&M stakeholders could reshare messages from them. By utilising the like function, H&M stakeholders could show their appreciation and share messages via the direct comments function. Moreover, H&M stakeholders could share their opinions, ideas and perspectives regarding the monkey hoodie incident.

The X feedback functions, which includes the retweeting function, liking a tweet and provision for direct comments on posts, were available to stakeholders to provide feedback to H&M. Furthermore, it was found that, despite having the option to disable the feedback functions through administrative privileges (refer to 2.3.2), especially *in lieu* of negative comments received from their stakeholders, H&M chose to leave their feedback channels open to their stakeholders on X.

4.2.2.3 Facebook and X: summary of findings

It was found that H&M did provide their stakeholders with the necessary means to provide feedback. The organisation chose to leave the feedback functions accessible to their stakeholders via their Facebook and X platforms from 1 January 2018–31 March 2018, despite the risk of receiving negative criticism from them. It can be concluded that H&M complied with the principle of two-way symmetrical communication, which meant it took responsibility for the provision of necessary channels of feedback for its stakeholders (see Grunig & Huang, 2000:37, International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, 1980:169). There is evidence that H&M did invite feedback from their stakeholders via their Facebook messages (Figure 4-6 and Figure 4-7), but it had failed to follow-through with the same invitations on its X platform. The fact that H&M demonstrated a certain degree of receptivity to feedback from its stakeholders revealed that it was open to their responses. Thus, it can be argued that H&M demonstrated that they were approachable with regard to receiving feedback from their stakeholders (refer to message in Figure 4-1, Figure 4-2, Figure 6 and Figure 4-7).

The next section comprises an elaboration on the findings regarding the feedback H&M's stakeholders shared via the H&M (Facebook and X) platforms.

4.2.3 Feedback from stakeholders

The operational definition for "feedback from the stakeholders", as indicated in section 3.4.3, refers to all messages on Facebook to H&M via the comments function, as well as the reactions such as likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry, and on X via direct comments on posts, liking a tweet and retweeting.

In section 2.12, it was explained that by employing social media listening processes in conjunction with its appropriate functionalities (section 2.13), the organisation can observe and keep track of what their stakeholders have to say. By observing and tracking online conversations, the organisation acquires strategic insights and valuable opinions. The process of social media listening (see in section 2.12) has similarities with the mirror function of SCM, as indicated in section 2.7. Both processes include the utilisation of feedback to monitor external environment observations and trends. The organisation's aspiration to foresee the possible influence of external events on its aims and policies requires feedback from the stakeholders. Social media listening is an approach to monitoring stakeholder conversations via social media platforms (see section 2.12). It is a strategy that enables an organisation to follow a large volume of social media discussions closely by tracking relevant topics of interest. Its purpose is to gain strategic insights, produce the latest content and be utilised by organisations to conduct a sentiment analysis. Social media listening can be perceived as a continuous process. When an organisation engages directly with their stakeholders via its social media platforms, it is better than listening (Kerpen, 2011:65).

As seen in section 2.12, social media affords organisations the opportunity to listen to online conversations on social networks in real time. Organisations can strategically align themselves with current and prevalent topics discussed by their stakeholders through their social media platforms via the practice of real time listening. Hence, it is imperative that organisational-stakeholder relationships are improved (Kerpen, 2011:20–21; Kim, 2016:8). Furthermore, it is argued that social media listening should be one of the primary steps organisations adopt to develop a strategic communication strategy for their social media platforms. It should, therefore, be included as part of the research phase of the organisation's communication strategy. It is only via listening to stakeholders on social media in real time that an organisation can be best equipped to align its communication to create relevant and engaging two-way communication (Kim, 2016:8).

4.2.3.1 Feedback from H&M stakeholders using the comments function via Facebook

It was evident that from 1 January 2018–31 March 2018, H&M's stakeholders actively shared feedback by directly commenting on H&M's posts. The findings of the sentiment analysis, conducted on a sample of 100 Facebook comments posted in response to the monkey hoodie incident revealed that H&M stakeholders generally expressed a slightly positive sentiment of +1.6 (on a scale ranging from -5 to +5). This scale represented a highly unfavourable sentiment at -5 and highly favourable sentiment at +5. A sentiment score of +1.6 was a somewhat positive response, which suggested that it was neither particularly favourable nor predominantly negative.

Below, selected examples are listed on the positive sentiments shared by H&M stakeholders using the comments function on the H&M South Africa and Global Facebook pages. The comments are shared to provide context for the positive feedback shared by the H&M stakeholders:

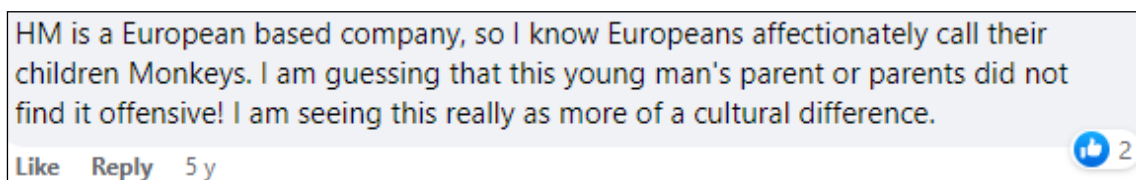


Figure 4-8: A sample comment showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

It can be inferred from Figure 4-8 that this stakeholder believes that due to H&M being a European multinational corporation, the business might have been oblivious to the many cultural nuances and connotations associated with the term "monkey". This message garnered two likes. It seems that two stakeholders agreed with the content of this communication. However, this statement is contrary to the findings presented in section 4.2.1.2. Figure 4-5 revealed that H&M had showcased models of various racial groups in their advertisements, even before the emergence of the monkey hoodie incident. Hence, it could be deduced that the organisation was aware of the significance of diversity even before the monkey hoodie incident took place.

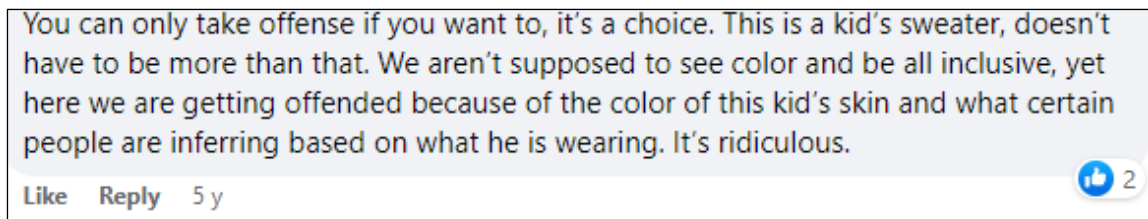


Figure 4-9: A sample comment showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

The stakeholder (Figure 4-9) contends that being offended by a boy of colour wearing a sweatshirt with a monkey design is a subjective interpretation and asserts that H&M should not be held responsible for how its stakeholders experience the advertisement. This message received two likes; thus, two stakeholders agreed with this communication.

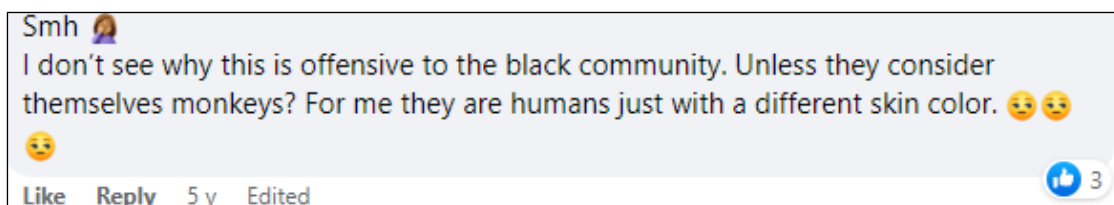


Figure 4-10: A sample comment showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

In the stakeholder's statement (Figure 4-10), it is argued that the term monkey should not be considered a racial insult in any context. The message garnered three likes, meaning that three stakeholders agreed.

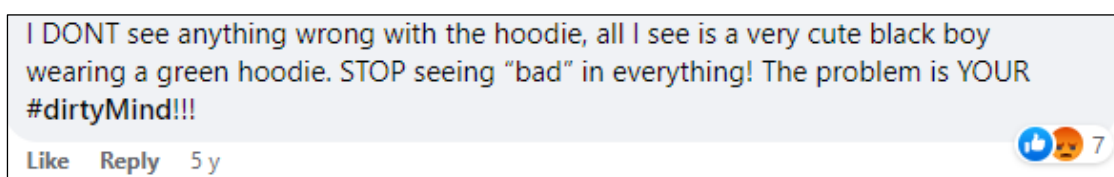


Figure 4-11: A sample comment showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

This stakeholder (Figure 4-11) argued that the perception of racism with reference to the monkey hoodie advertisement published by H&M was purely dependent on the readers viewpoint. An interesting finding in this post is the #dirtyMind (user-generated hashtag), which was utilised by the stakeholder to underscore their stance. This message received mixed reactions, including likes and the angry reaction. Thus, the stakeholders had mixed feelings about this message.

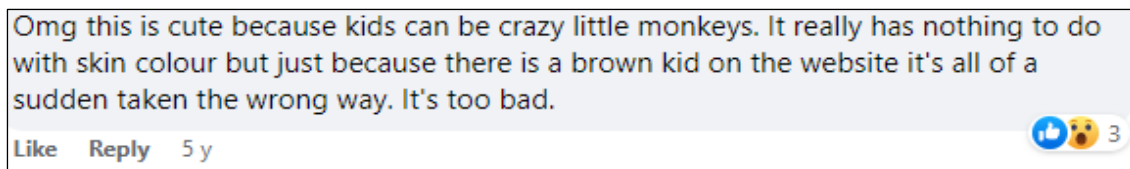


Figure 4-12: A sample comment show positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

In this post, the stakeholder (Figure 4-12) noted that the issue was not that serious and that the image was taken out of context. This message received a mix of likes and shocked reactions, which revealed that the stakeholders were divided in their feelings towards this message.

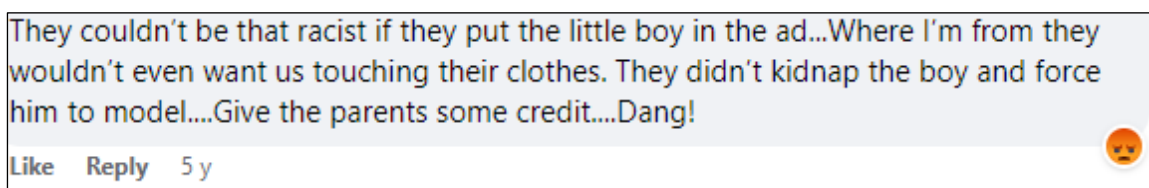


Figure 4-13: A sample comment showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

The stakeholder (Figure 4-13) argued that the H&M advertisement did not reflect racial undertones. Furthermore, the parents of the child involved in the campaign granted permission for their son to participate. Thus, the public should acknowledge the parents' judgement in relation to the advertisement. This post received an angry reaction from another stakeholder, who apparently disapproved this message.

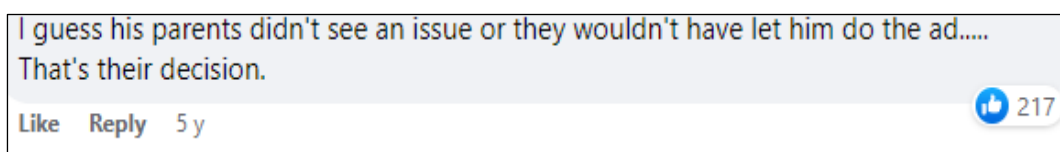


Figure 4-14: A sample comment showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

Another stakeholder (Figure 4-14) underscored the significance of parental involvement in the decision-making process regarding their son's participation in the monkey hoodie advertisement. This perspective was supported by 217 likes from other stakeholders. It can be assumed that they had a similar perspective to the attitude conveyed in this communication.

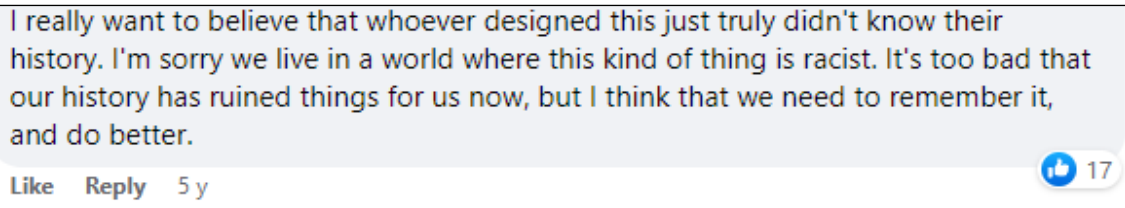


Figure 4-15: A sample comment showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

The stakeholder (Figure 4-15) asserted that the H&M employee's actions were not driven by a deliberate aim to exhibit racial insensitivity. Furthermore, the stakeholder suggested that it might be appropriate to extend the benefit of the doubt to H&M. This message garnered 17 likes, indicating that 17 stakeholders agreed with this perspective.

Of interest was the number of likes the positive comments received from other stakeholders. Hence, H&M had an opportunity to further validate and support the positive comments by utilising either the comments function to leave a message of support or the reactions function to express appreciation for the support. However, H&M did not do so in its communication with its stakeholder. This could be seen as a missed opportunity for further two-way communication.

The following negative sentiments were expressed by H&M stakeholders via its South African and Global Facebook pages:

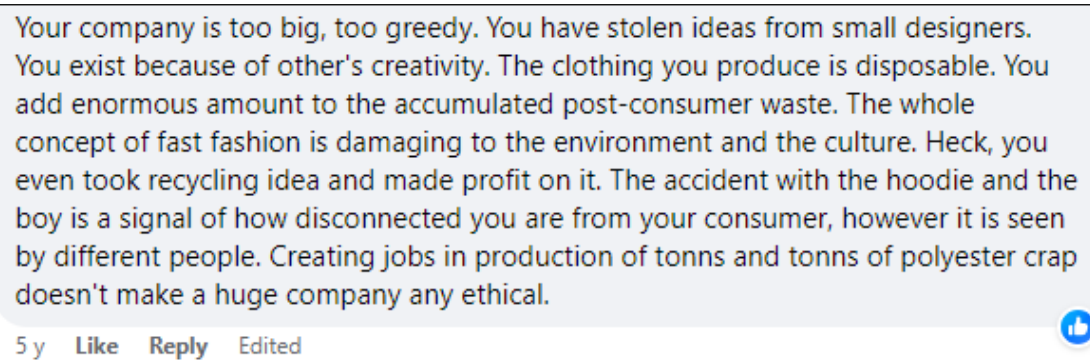


Figure 4-16: A comment with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

The stakeholder (Figure 4-16) suggests that H&M demonstrated a lack of consideration for its employees, the environment and cultural considerations. A perception was created that the organisation prioritised financial gain above all else and lacked a strong relationship with its stakeholders. The inadequacies of its social awareness was evident following the monkey hoodie incident.

Ok but don't post this faux woke crap and then stick your shiny new 'chief diversity officer' in some back office with no funds or power to ensure that you actually make progress.

5 y Like Reply

Figure 4-17: A sample comment with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

In the communication (Figure 4-17), the stakeholder expressed the view that H&M lacked legitimacy in its communication with the stakeholders. Moreover, they expressed doubt regarding the effectiveness of the newly-appointed diversity manager to influence the organisation's decision-making processes regarding issues of diversity and inclusion.

How did NOBODY @H&M know how Racist the advertisement was? You can't be that stupid. Learn history. Cultural Conditioning is dangerous.

5 y Like Reply



Figure 4-18: A sample comment with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

The message illustrated in (Figure 4-18) expressed scepticism about H&M's alleged ignorance of matters of diversity and inclusion. They questioned the authenticity of H&M's apology statement. However, this comment was contrary to the X findings indicated in section 4.2.1.2, where the stakeholder (Figure 4-5) argued that H&M was in fact aware of the external environment when it addressed the issue of diversity and inclusion in the apology messages. Moreover, the organisation utilised models from various ethnic groups to showcase their garments as part of their advertising campaigns.

I will stop buying in your stores.

5 y Like Reply



Figure 4-19: A sample comment with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

In (Figure 4-19), the stakeholder expressed that they would refrain from purchasing goods at all H&M stores with immediate effect. This comment was endorsed with the like and the heart reaction, meaning that other stakeholders supported this comment. It also received an angry reaction, indicating that other stakeholders were also upset with H&M's behaviour. The

endorsement via the reactions function could be interpreted as other stakeholders standing in solidarity and collectively agreeing to no longer purchase products from H&M.

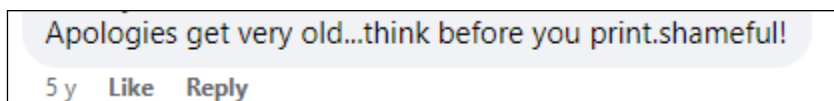


Figure 4-20: A sample comment with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

Here it is clear that the stakeholder (Figure 4-20) considered H&M's printing and publishing of the monkey hoodie a shameful decision. Also, the apology shared by H&M was inadequate and could not remedy the situation.

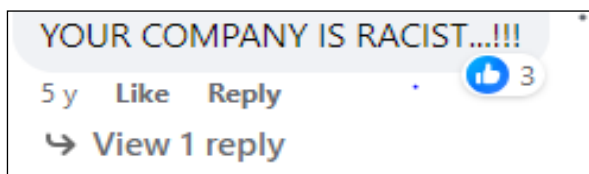


Figure 4-21: A sample comment showing negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

This stakeholder (Figure 4-21) firmly believed that H&M was a racist organisation. This comment received three likes from other stakeholders, indicating that they agreed with this sentiment.

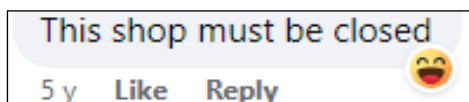


Figure 4-22: A sample comment with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

This message (Figure 4-22) indicates that this stakeholder felt that H&M must cease operations.

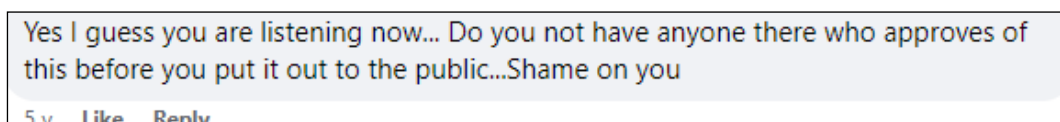


Figure 4-23: A sample of comment with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

This stakeholder (Figure 4-23) responded to H&M's "we are listening" message sarcastically and expressed that the organisation should feel ashamed of itself for portraying the boy of colour wearing the monkey hoodie.

Regarding the general themes identified in the comments by the H&M stakeholders via Facebook, the positive comments indicated that since the parents of the boy who modelled the hoodie did not consider the image racially insensitive, there was no need for people to take offence. The stakeholders believed it was the parents who should be held responsible for the racially insensitive image, not the organisation. The rationale was that the parents had the final decision-making authority to decide whether the boy of colour (their son) would participate and wear the garment as part of H&M's advertising campaign. The negative comments generally revealed that H&M stakeholders felt that the organisation was directly responsible for misrepresenting the boy of colour who wore the monkey hoodie and should therefore be ashamed of their actions and take the necessary corrective measures to amend their approach. The comments presented in this section illustrate how H&M stakeholders utilised the comments feature to communicate both favourable and unfavourable opinions concerning the monkey hoodie incident. The subsequent section comprises an elaboration on the themes that were prevalent in the comments from H&M stakeholders.

4.2.3.2 Specific themes detected across the Facebook page in H&M stakeholders' comments

A common issue raised by H&M's stakeholders in the Facebook comments section was that of diversity and inclusion. The stakeholders generally shared with the organisation that they needed to be more inclusive and, furthermore, implement active measures to learn about various cultures, including sensitive race-related issues. They generally felt it was the responsibility of the organisation's staff to educate themselves about these issues. Examples hereof include images (Figure 4-24 – Figure 4-27).

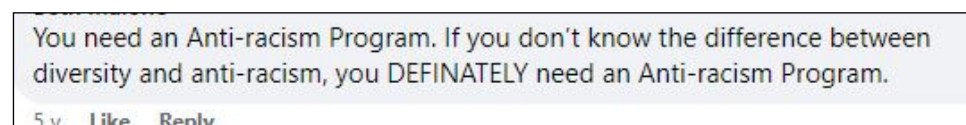


Figure 4-24: A sample comment regarding diversity and inclusion

This stakeholder (Figure 4-24) holds that H&M should provide training to create awareness of, *inter alia*, racism.

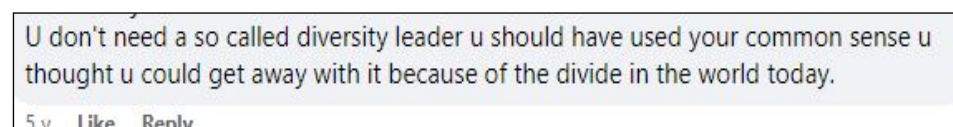


Figure 4-25: A sample comment regarding diversity and inclusion

It was argued (Figure 4-25) that H&M should not have utilised a boy of colour in the monkey hoodie in the first place. Moreover, it should have been aware of the probable consequences.

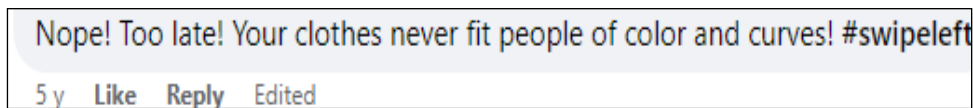


Figure 4-26: A sample comment regarding diversity and inclusion

It is asserted in Figure 4-26 that H&M is not an inclusive brand.

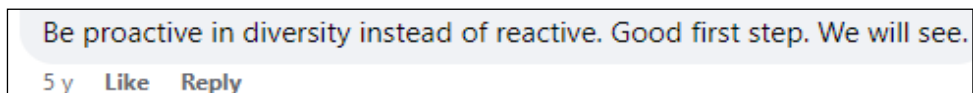


Figure 4-27: A sample comment regarding diversity and inclusion

It is proposed (Figure 4-27) that H&M should initiate steps to acquire a better understanding of diversity.

The findings presented in this section demonstrate that the general perspective shared and expressed by H&M stakeholders was that they considered the organisation the only entity liable for representing the boy of colour inappropriately in their advertising campaign. Thus, the onus was on H&M to ensure that their communication was representative and authentic when it came to matters of diversity and inclusion.

4.2.3.3 Feedback from H&M stakeholders: Facebook reactions function

As indicated in section 2.13, feedback from stakeholders through the reactions function can provide an organisation with an immediate indication of how its messages are being received; the organisation should, therefore, utilise this information to inform its ongoing communication via its social media platforms.

On H&M's Facebook South Africa page, the second apology post (Figure 4-2) received 2,100 reactions, which were predominantly split between likes and heart reactions, and 966 comments. The same message (post) was also shared on H&M's Global Facebook page (Figure 4-1) on 16 January 2018 and received 616 comments and 1,300 mixed reactions. The reactions were mostly a mix of angry, likes and heart reactions. These high engagement (feedback) metrics from stakeholders revealed that H&M stakeholders were highly invested in learning about what the organisation had to say regarding the monkey hoodie incident.

4.2.3.4 Feedback from H&M stakeholders using the X comments function

The X comments highlighted H&M stakeholders' proactive engagement because they utilised the available feedback functions. The findings from the analysed 100 X comments yielded a -3.95 negative sentiment out of a scale of -5 to +5 (-5 equals a highly unfavourable sentiment and +5 indicates a highly favourable sentiment). The utilisation of the comment feature to articulate their disapproval of H&M's messages showcased the stakeholders' narrative. They were open about expressing their sentiments about the occurrence and demonstrated a willingness to utilise the social media functions for this purpose.

Below are some examples of the responses gathered from H&M's X platforms that illustrate the unfavourable emotion expressed about its apology statements:

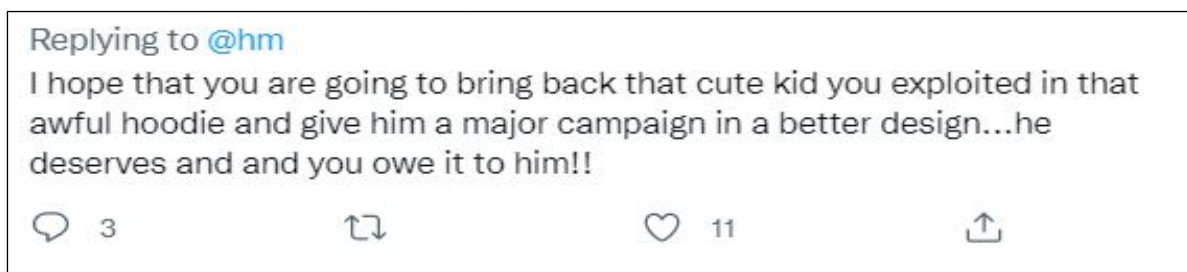


Figure 4-28: A sample tweet with an negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

This stakeholder (Figure 4-28) holds that H&M should have taken steps to rectify the situation with the child who initially modelled the garment. This assertion is further supported by an additional 11 instances of positive feedback, which was illustrated by the number of heart clicks. Thus, 11 individuals held a similar perspective.



Figure 4-29: A sample tweet with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

It is argued in Figure 4-29 that H&M was aware that their behaviour would be considered racist. This implied that the PR team opted to illustrate the boy of colour wearing the monkey hoodie as a publicity stunt. This comment was supported by six likes and six retweets.



Figure 4-30: A sample tweet with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

As per (Figure 4-30), this stakeholder holds that H&M could have done better. Moreover, they will no longer support the H&M brand.



Figure 4-31: A sample tweet with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

This stakeholder (Figure 4-31) explicitly mentioned the H&M United Kingdom subsidiary by utilising the hashtag (*#hmunitedkingdom*) and expressed their disapproval of the organisation's actions in the monkey hoodie incident.



Figure 4-32: A sample tweet with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

The stakeholder (Figure 4-32) remarked with the original link (usat.ly/2m7IJHu) to the apologetic message and expressed dissatisfaction with H&M's behaviour by referencing the said apology message.

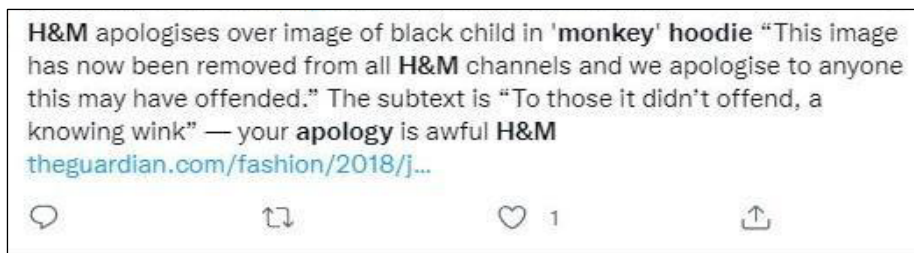


Figure 4-33: A sample tweet with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

In the comment (Figure 4-33), the link to the original apology message from a news article published on the online news platform, *The Guardian*, was shared with other stakeholders (theguardian.com/fashion/2018lj). The stakeholder cited this article and expressed that H&M's apology was pretentious (see reference to "those it did not offend knowing wink").



Figure 4-34: A sample tweet with negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

In this communication (Figure 4-34), the stakeholder perceived the monkey hoodie incident as an act of racism and deemed it morally reprehensible.

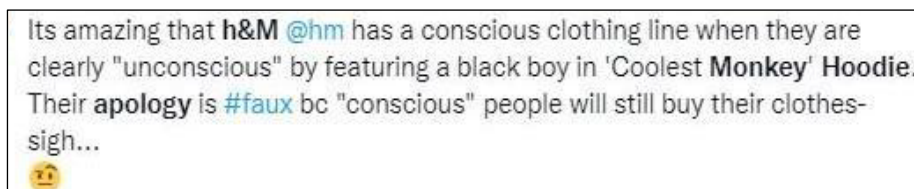


Figure 4-35: A sample tweet showing negative emotion towards H&M's apology statements

The stakeholder (Figure 4-35) referenced the H&M conscious clothing line and argued that the title of this clothing line was ironic considering the monkey hoodie incident. It could be inferred that the stakeholder believed that H&M was insincere in its communication with its stakeholders.

Overall, these negative sentiment examples illustrate how, via the reactions function, H&M's stakeholders could further legitimise such shared opinions. It was interesting to note that the stakeholders' reactions, as illustrated by the number of likes, comments and retweets,

demonstrated a higher level of engagement from stakeholders with the negative sentiments than those with the positive sentiments.

H&M's stakeholders also expressed positive sentiments towards the organisation via their X platforms. Below several such examples are expressed:



Figure 4-36: A sample tweet showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

This stakeholder (Figure 4-36) highlighted that, whereas many brands did not take responsibility for making racists remarks, H&M had issued an apology (had assumed some accountability) for its actions. Furthermore, this stakeholder held that it was most likely the case that the person/s who work for H&M might have published the original monkey hoodie advertisement with the intent to harm. Therefore, the H&M brand should not be held accountable for the actions of a few callous employees.



Figure 4-37: A sample tweet showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

In this comment (Figure 4-37), the stakeholder praised H&M for issuing an apology and advised it to share its anticipated plan publicly, so that it could avoid similar incidents in the future.



Figure 4-38: A sample tweet showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

The argument presented in this comment (Figure 4-38) was that those who interpreted the monkey hoodie image as a racist advertisement were the ones who were at fault because they were overly sensitive.

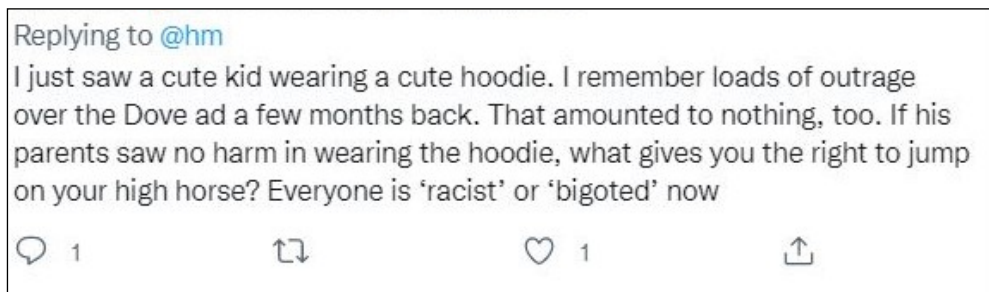


Figure 4-39: A sample tweet showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

This comment (Figure 4-39) highlighted that the image of the boy wearing the monkey hoodie was not problematic whatsoever. If the boy's parents thought it reasonable for their child to model the monkey hoodie, who were we to judge their decisions? Not everything has a racist intention, although it could be misinterpreted as such.



Figure 4-40: A sample tweet showing positive emotion towards H&M's apology statements

In this comment (Figure 4-40), the responder also postulated that the image of the boy wearing the monkey hoodie could not be interpreted as racist if his parents thought it sensible for their son to model the garment.

4.2.3.5 Themes identified in H&M stakeholders' X comments

Two prominent themes were identified in the feedback from stakeholders, namely *#BoycottH&M*, and the topic of diversity and inclusion.

4.2.3.5.1 *#BoycottH&M*

Using the comments function on X, some of H&M's stakeholders took matters into their own hands by formulating and disseminating their own message in response to H&M's messages of apology. The hashtag *#BoycottH&M* was utilised by several stakeholders to urge other H&M stakeholders to refrain from purchasing goods from the clothing retailer. This is an example of how stakeholders can develop and share UGC to address problems and unite independently in the online space without the organisation's consent (section 2.10).

Some examples of the original messages illustrating the #BoycottH&M narrative are listed below:

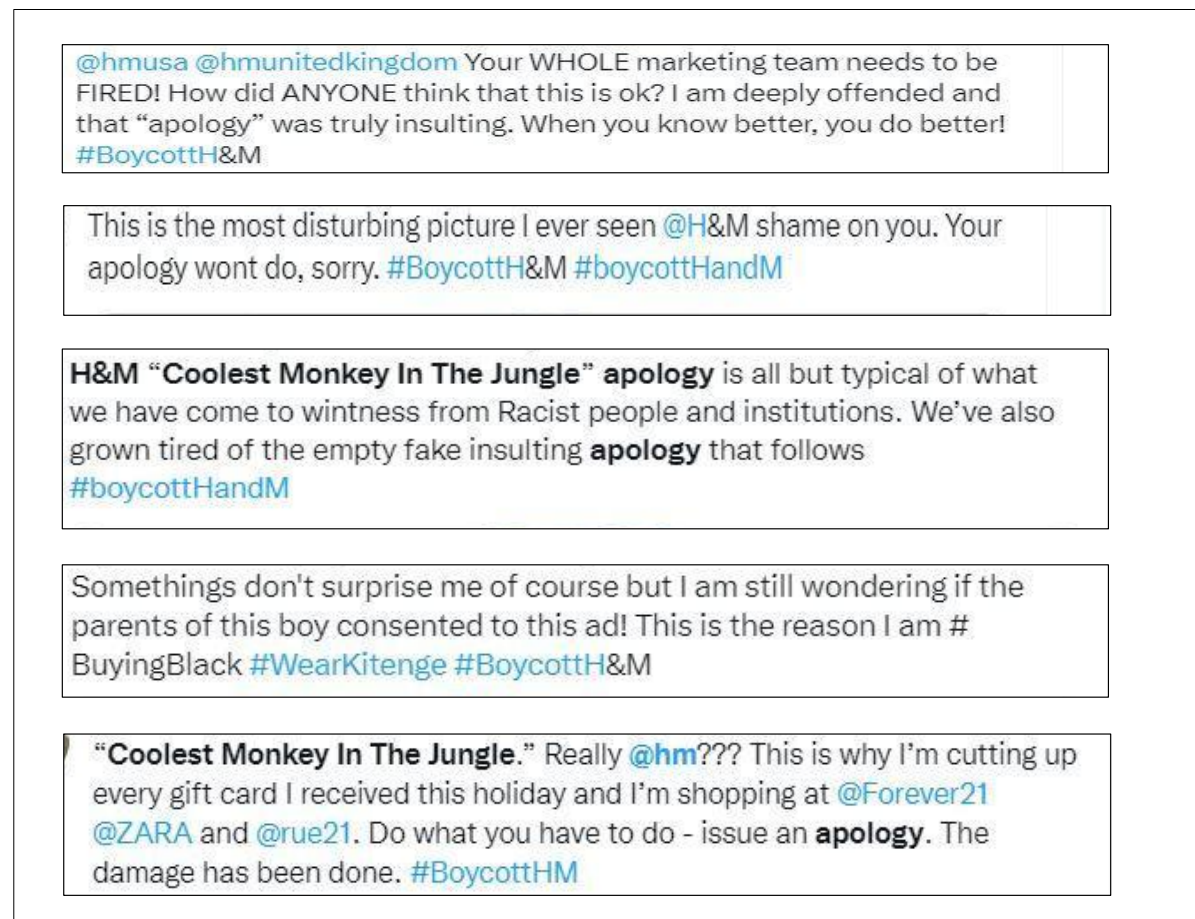


Figure 4-41: Examples of the original messages illustrating the *#BoycottH&M* narrative

If it had utilised the insights feature on its X platform, H&M would have been able to use the Google online search platform to search for the *#hashtag* *BoycottH&M* to gather a broader

understanding of the risk associated with this hashtag. It is interesting to note that H&M did not share any information in response to the user-generated messages that incited a boycott.

4.2.3.5.2 Diversity and Inclusion

The feedback from H&M stakeholders highlighted several significant trends in conversations external to the organisation, such as issues of diversity and inclusion (section 4.2.1.2).

Examples extracted from the sentiment analysis sample of tweets via the comment section showing that H&M stakeholders did not believe that the organisation had showcased adequate racial diversity include the following:



Figure 4-42: A sample tweet demonstrating the theme of diversity and inclusion

The stakeholder's communication (Figure 4-42) reiterates diversity and inclusion, and highlights H&M's weakness in this regard. This assertion is substantiated by 10 heart clicks, indicating that 10 stakeholders concurred with the statement.



Figure 4-43: A sample tweet demonstrating the theme of diversity and inclusion

This message (Figure 4-43) implied an implicit characterisation of H&M as an organisation with racist tendencies. Furthermore, it was noteworthy that this opinion received three heart link clicks, which suggested that three stakeholders shared this perspective.

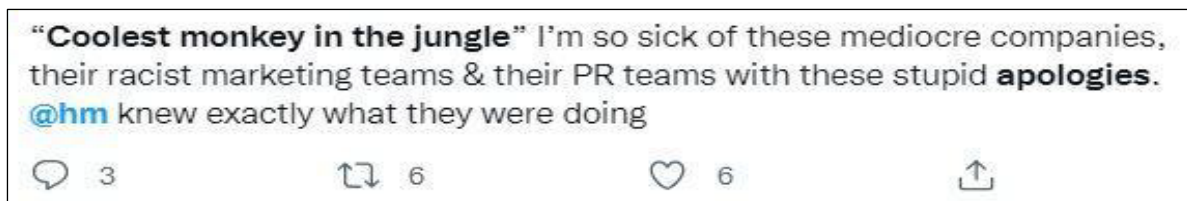


Figure 4-44: A sample tweet demonstrating the theme of diversity and inclusion

In this instance (Figure 4-44), the stakeholder articulated their dissatisfaction with the monkey hoodie incident and highlighted the significance of inclusion and diversity. This is articulated in the phrase “their racist marketing and PR teams”. This perspective was underscored by six heart clicks, which signifies that six stakeholders agreed with this perspective. Furthermore, the tweet garnered six retweets, implying that the message was shared six times in its original form on six distinct X sites owned by individuals or organisations.



Figure 4-45: A sample tweet demonstrating the theme of diversity and inclusion

The stakeholder in this communication (Figure 4-45) highlighted diversity and inclusion, and argued that the absence of diversity within the business was a contributory factor to the monkey hoodie incident. This argument was substantiated by 41 heart clicks, indicating that these stakeholders concurred with this viewpoint.

These perspectives expressed by H&M stakeholders revealed that there was much support from other external stakeholders, who utilised the like, comment and retweeting functions to show that they concurred that the organisation had failed to include adequate information regarding issues of diversity and inclusion. Comments with high engagement, such as these ones regarding diversity and inclusion, can be utilised according to the mirror function of SCM for the purposes of identifying any external threats to the organisation early on (see De Beer *et al.*, 2013:9-10, 20-21). However, this does not imply that comments with lower engagement rates were less significant and should not be considered.

4.2.3.6 User-generated content utilised via X

H&M stakeholders also chose to share, by means of comments, their own UGC in response to the apology messages shared by the organisation on their X platforms:

It was revealed that in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident, H&M stakeholders created and shared their own UGC in response to the apology messages issued by the organisation. Figure 4-46 is an example of UGC shared by the H&M stakeholders. Furthermore, the latter also expressed dissatisfaction with the original image of the boy of colour wearing the monkey hoodie, and redesigned the original print, with the words “King of the world” added as the title of the image. Moreover, a golden crown was added to the boy’s head and three supplementary lines were added to each side of his body to underscore his royalty. The second image of a crown was added in front of the hoodie to replace the original text (“Coolest monkey in the jungle”).



Figure 4-46: The user-generated image of the boy wearing the monkey hoodie

4.2.3.7 Facebook and X – summary of findings

Overall, the H&M stakeholders demonstrated high engagement through the built-in social media functions across all its Facebook and X platforms. Thus, they were not afraid to utilise the feedback functions at their disposal, especially in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. They also utilised the feedback functions identified on both Facebook and X to voice their feelings, criticisms and opinions about the advertisement.

Stakeholder feedback throughout 1 January 2018–31 March 2018 via comments on posts by H&M showed that they felt the organisation did not have a firm grasp of what it meant to be diverse and inclusive and that it was unaware of the social reality and its responsibility. It appeared that the stakeholders' perceptions of H&M's behaviour differed from that of the organisation. This was revealed in section 4.2.3.2, in which it was indicated that the organisation had demonstrated, through its communication, the belief that it was aware of its external environment and conscious of racial diversity and inclusion.

The negative and positive variations of the sentiment scores in relation to the same messages of apology shared both on Facebook and X could be attributed to the fact that H&M was more active on X and this increased the likelihood of it receiving negative feedback. The overall slightly positive sentiment score on the Facebook sample and relatively negative sentiment score for the X sample indicates that, in future, H&M should take proactive steps to comprehend its stakeholders' interests and communicate these more frequently via their social media pages. Notably, there was an ideal opportunity for H&M to engage in two-way communication with its stakeholders. The organisation also had access to adequate information via the comments from its stakeholders, which it could have utilised to better align its communication with their needs. It could have done so according to the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM because it had the necessary social media functions at its disposal to do so (section, 2.13). The findings, therefore, reveal that H&M received sufficient feedback, which should have been utilised as a point of departure to engage further with its stakeholders, as well as to indicate that it was in fact listening to what the latter had expressed.

The next section concerns the findings related to the feedback H&M provided to its stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. References from H&M's communication are presented to illustrate the type of feedback the organisation provided its stakeholders.

4.2.4 Providing feedback to stakeholders

The operational definition for providing feedback to stakeholders, as noted in section 3.4.3, indicated that it included responses to stakeholders' communication. On Facebook, this refers to responding to comments directly and posts that are reactions to communication from stakeholders, and reactions that include likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry. On X feedback reactions refer to a commenting directly in a tweet, a retweet and issuing a tweet which includes photos, hashtags, hyperlinks, videos and numerals.

It was stated in section 2.5.1 that, in accordance with the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the provision of feedback is essential to facilitate an equitable exchange of

information through discussions and negotiations between organisations and their stakeholders. When an organisation offers feedback to its stakeholders, it could foster stakeholder trust, promote mutual understanding and cultivate mutually beneficial relationships. In line with the expressive task of communication and in adherence to the principles of the reflective paradigm indicated in section 2.6.1-2.7.1, it is imperative for an organisation to furnish feedback consistently to its stakeholders and ensure that the responses are congruent with the latter's expectations. This practice engenders heightened stakeholder confidence and enhances the reputation of the organisation. Based on the principles of SCM in section 2.7.1, it is recommended that organisations utilise the window function to strategise communication with stakeholders effectively. The social media engagement process in section 2.11 implies the utilisation of social media functions to interact with stakeholders, gather input and immediately address their inquiries. This facilitates the establishment of a shared understanding and agreement between the organisation and its stakeholders.

4.2.4.1 Feedback via the Facebook post function

As noted in section 4.2.2.1, on 16 January 2018, H&M posted a response to its stakeholders on its South African and Global Facebook pages (refer to images Figure 4-6 and Figure 4-7). A notable phrase in the post was "We Are Listening", which could have served as evidence of social media listening by the organisation.

Moreover, the message from H&M stated that "There will be more from us soon." However, despite providing a promise to share further information with their stakeholders, H&M did not share any feedback with their stakeholders via Facebook after 16 January 2018. The organisation thus failed to fulfil its promise to its stakeholders.

4.2.4.2 Feedback via the Facebook comments function

Only one instance was identified between 1 January 2018–31 March 2018 in which H&M provided direct feedback to a stakeholder by commenting on a post.

The correspondence between H&M and the stakeholder read as follows:

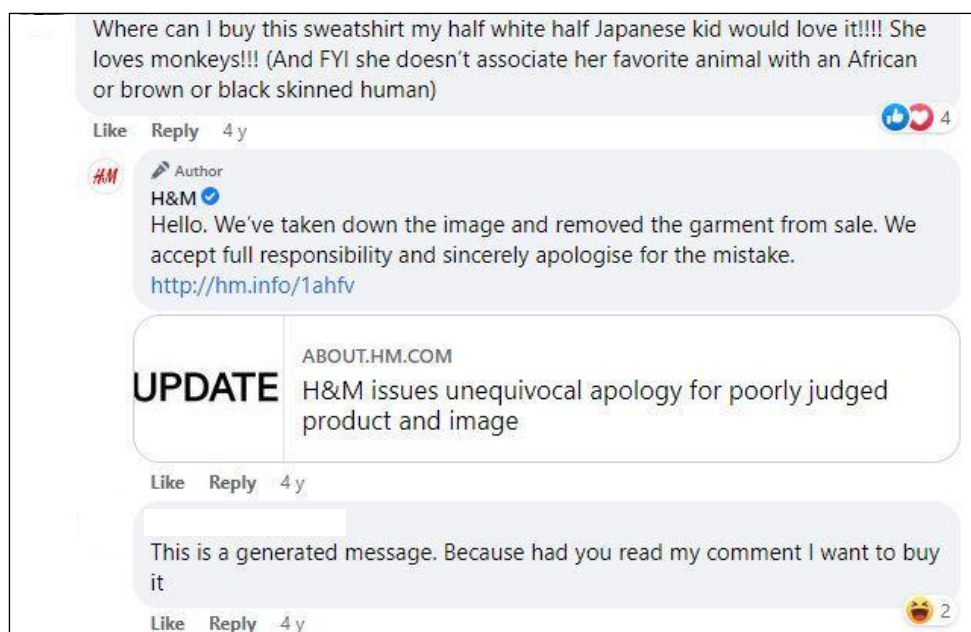


Figure 4-47: H&M provides direct feedback to a stakeholder via the comments function

It could be inferred from this post that the stakeholder was unhappy with H&M's response. They observed that H&M had not answered the question about the hoodie adequately. The reply from H&M appeared to be an automatic response rather than a thoughtful, researched and individually tailored one. H&M did not respond to the stakeholder using their name (X Twitter handle). The stakeholder proceeded to publicly criticise the organisation's inability to effectively answer their question. H&M did not respond to this criticism in the 1 January 2018–31 March 2018 period.

4.2.4.3 Feedback via the Facebook reactions function

H&M did not respond to stakeholders who reacted using likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry.

4.2.4.4 Feedback via X: comments function (respond to a tweet)

On January 13, 2018, H&M responded with a comment on its X Global profile, which marked the second occurrence of such an action. The following is an excerpt from the original response by H&M to a comment made by an H&M stakeholder:

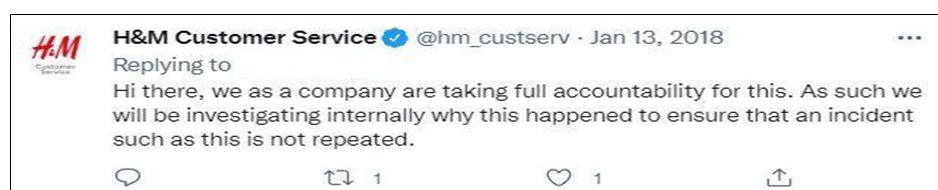


Figure 4-48: H&M responds directly to a tweet from a stakeholder

The message seen in Figure 4-48 differs slightly from the first response sent by H&M (Figure 4-47). In this one, H&M referred to the stakeholder by name and utilised their specific X user handle (the name of stakeholder was removed for ethical purposes). H&M did not receive any further responses from this stakeholder in reply to the feedback, but the tweet response from the organisation received one heart and one like reaction. The response by H&M also received one retweet, indicating that a stakeholder had chosen to disseminate the organisation's message. H&M utilised this opportunity to underscore the organisation's commitment to assuming responsibility for its actions, as implied in its original apology message issued via X, (see Figure 4-3). However, no new information was shared with the stakeholder in this feedback.

The third instance in which H&M responded to its stakeholder is detailed in the transcript below:

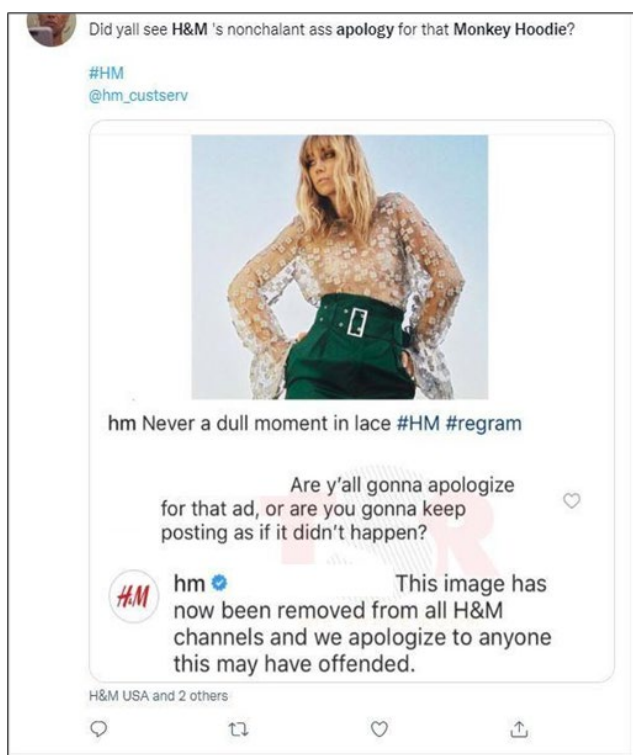


Figure 4-49: H&M responds directly to a stakeholder's tweet

With reference to the above communication, the analysis of the two-way communication between H&M and its stakeholder reveals that H&M demonstrated a willingness to address the monkey hoodie incident. H&M's acknowledgement, as communicated in its feedback, could be interpreted as an endeavour to demonstrate its obligation to fulfil stakeholders' requirements and expectations. This action conforms with the process of negotiation as per the two-way symmetrical communication principles (see section 2.5.1).

4.2.4.5 Feedback via X tweets: textual information, photos, hashtags, hyperlinks, retweets and the numerals functions

Despite the negative sentiments shared in the comments section on H&M's X pages, the organisation displayed a willingness to share further information regarding how it intended to find solutions to the monkey hoodie incident. H&M was transparent about opinions other than its own.

H&M did not to share photographs with its stakeholders regarding the incident between 1 January 2018 and 31 March 2018. This was an interesting finding because user-generated images (see section, 4.2.3.6 and Figure 4-46) were circulated via H&M's X comments section. H&M could have reshared the UGC of the altered image through the X photos function to validate their stakeholders' perspectives if they were in agreement therewith.

With regard to H&M's utilisation of the hashtags function, it was clear that the organisation used it to generally promote the stores products via its X platform (Figures 4-50 and 4-51). The most frequently used hashtags by H&M for this period was “#H&MSouthAfrica” and “#H&MStudio”. Although their stakeholders had circulated messages with the hashtag #BoycottH&M (refer to section 4.2.3.5.1 and Figure 4-4.1), the organisation did not utilise the hashtags function to respond to the #BoycottH&M hashtag.



Figure 4-50: A sample #HMSouthAfrica post



Figure 4-51: A sample #HMStudio post

During the period under study, the organisation did not share any information with its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident utilising the hyperlinks function. H&M preferred to focus on sharing hyperlinks to their online store. H&M also did not utilise the numerals or retweets functions to share information regarding the monkey hoodie incident during this period.

Thus, the photos, hashtags, hyperlinks, retweets and numerals functions were underutilised by H&M from 1 January 2018–31 March 2018 to share comments with its stakeholders.

4.2.4.6 Feedback via the X videos function

In a bid to showcase its newly launched Autumn range, H&M posted a video on its X page on 22 March 2018. The video showcased racially diverse models wearing the new range and the tweet below the video read as follows: “*Mix up and look sharp this autumn with power tailoring with a touch of glam.*” The analysis of the X South Africa tweet showed that the phrase “*power tailoring*” was utilised in conjunction with the video, which featured racially diverse models. The utilisation of the term “power” coincided with the circulation of the UGC during January 2018 (Figure 4-46). It was observed that the stakeholders referred to the boy in the original advertisement as powerful and even recreated the image of the boy wearing the hoodie, so that the original inscription “*Coolest monkey in the jungle*” became “*King of the world*” (section 4.2.3.6 and Figure 4-46). The term “king”, according to the Oxford dictionary, refers to a ruler who is associated with power.

This video could, therefore, be interpreted as an attempt to indirectly respond (through implied messaging) to the stakeholders' UGC. This finding could be perceived as an attempt by H&M to connect its messaging with the requirements and expectations of its stakeholders. Given this approach, it could be concluded that H&M followed the reflective paradigm principle noted in section 2.6.1 that it is necessary for an organisation to include other external factors such as social and moral attributes as part of its reflection.

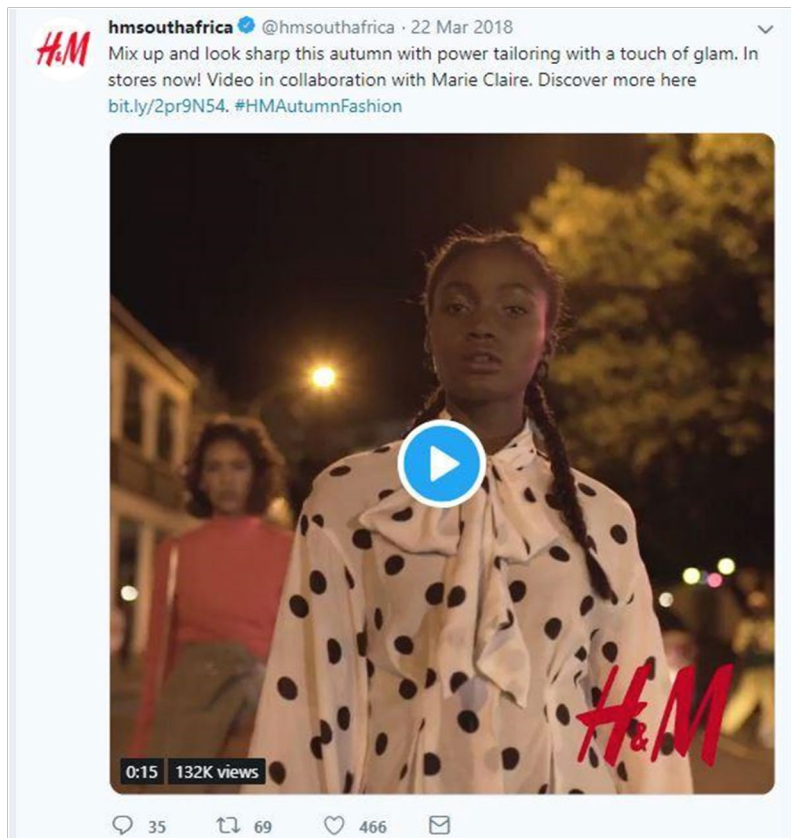


Figure 4-52: A sample of a video posted by H&M showcasing diversity and inclusion

4.2.4.7 Facebook and X – summary of findings

For the entire period under investigation, only three instances were identified in which H&M provided direct feedback to its stakeholders in response to comments received from them. The findings, therefore, suggest that H&M provided minimal feedback to its stakeholders during a critical period. This lack of feedback by H&M was noted as a significant finding. Since social media processes and functions enable instant, real time communication, the ideal would have been that communication on behalf of H&M would have met the demands of its external environment because it had these functions at its disposal. However, the evidence revealed that H&M chose to restrict feedback to its stakeholders.

Although it is not practically possible to respond to every social media comment, the findings showed that H&M missed many opportunities to utilise the built-in social media functions to share feedback with its stakeholders in real time and request (via social media engagement) opinions and perceptions from the stakeholders on the matter. As previously stated in section 2.5.1, feedback is an essential aspect of the negotiation process between organisations and their stakeholders. The lack of feedback implies that there was no room for negotiation between the two parties. This is problematic because, in the absence of negotiation, the connection between the two sides might become strained and limit the organisation's ability to create and work on fostering trust relationships with its stakeholders, mutual understanding and mutually beneficial partnerships.

In (section 2.13), it was explained that social media provided the functions for real time feedback; therefore, it was strange that H&M was inconsistent with the rate of feedback given to its stakeholders, especially in relation to the number of comments and questions they posted (section 4.2.3).

Since the findings suggested that there was limited feedback and no negotiations had taken place between H&M and its stakeholders via the Facebook and the X pages, one could infer that the organisation's ability to prepare its communication strategically was affected because (due to a lack of negotiations) it had limited access to information about its stakeholders' needs and perspectives. Moreover, the organisation's capacity to exercise the window function in accordance with the SCM principles outlined in section 2.7 could have been affected negatively. Consequently, the organisation was unable to perceive and comprehend its position on the monkey hoodie incident or distinguish it from that of its stakeholders. It was discussed in section 2.6.1 that the consequences of failing to engage in mutual reflection would result in a lack of trust and unity between organisations and their stakeholders. This, in turn, would hinder stakeholder support for topics of common interest.

4.3 CONCLUSION ON H&M'S COMMUNICATION

The aim of this chapter was to answer specific research question 1.5.2. The outcomes were presented according to the following four categories: Sharing Relevant Information, Providing Opportunities for Feedback, Feedback from Stakeholders and Providing Feedback to Stakeholders.

The findings regarding the *sharing of relevant information* suggested that H&M did share some relevant information with its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident, although it was

limited in relation to the entire three-month span during which the discourse regarding the monkey hoodie incident took place on its Facebook and X pages.

The information shared by H&M was openly and publicly available to its stakeholders. However, the organisation did not share all the relevant information across its social media pages. Certain information was omitted from some of them, despite these having a significant stakeholder following. Moreover, despite the instant, real time nature of social media and the functionality it provides for social media listening (research), the organisation preferred to delay sharing its apology posts on its Facebook and X pages by two to three days. The organisations' ability to conduct effective research and effectively communicate (share information) with its stakeholders might have been negatively impacted as a result of the H&M South Africa Facebook page having been temporarily closed because it meant that the principles of the reflective paradigm and SCM could not be effectively implemented.

It was concluded that the functions which could have been utilised to share relevant information were also underutilised.

With regard to *providing opportunities for feedback*, if the organisation had utilised the built-in social media functions at their disposal optimally, it would have been in a better position to learn more about its stakeholders' concerns and interests regarding the monkey hoodie incident.

The *feedback from H&M stakeholders* highlighted significant trends in conversations that took place outside the organisation, such as those about issues of diversity and inclusion, #BoycottH&M and the user-generated image of the boy wearing the hoodie. Overall, the H&M stakeholders demonstrated high engagement with the built-in social media functions across its Facebook and X platforms. This implied that the organisation's stakeholders chose to utilise the feedback functions to share and voice their feelings, criticisms and opinions about the monkey hoodie incident. Feedback from the H&M stakeholders through the comments function was high in response to H&M's apology messages.

There were few instances of H&M responding to its stakeholders. Moreover, the responses appeared generic because these did not address any of the questions posed by the stakeholders. It is recommended that to build trust with its stakeholders, an organisation should provide personalised feedback, especially in relation to the questions posed. Furthermore, the organisation should endeavour to fulfil its promise to provide feedback to its stakeholders as swiftly and efficiently as possible and not neglect to conduct the necessary research required, as indicated by the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM.

Despite having the opportunity to interact directly with stakeholders who had left positive feedback in the comments to create a connection and be heard, H&M did not respond. Thus, the organisation missed many opportunities to encourage positive dialogue with stakeholders who had supported them. H&M could have utilised the feedback functions to pose follow-up questions and close the communication loop.

The findings suggest that H&M did not fully adhere to the principle of two-way communication. This was demonstrated by H&M's choice not to share all relevant information with its stakeholders across all its social media platforms from 1 January–31 March 2018.

Although H&M utilised some of the Facebook and X functions available, it did not utilise all the built-in social media functions optimally, such as the Facebook functions insights, comments, photos, videos, polls, status updates, livestreams, live chats and groups, or the X functions: tweets and retweets, textual information, hyperlinks, interactive GIFs, numerals, videos, liking a tweet, direct comments on tweets, chat sessions, photos and hashtags. The findings demonstrate that H&M did not utilise the social media engagement and listening functions to gather maximum information regarding their stakeholders' needs and interests. If this had been done, H&M would have been in a better position to align their communication with the stakeholders' needs, interests, and concerns regarding the monkey hoodie incident.

In the next chapter, Chapter 5, the specific research questions posed in Chapter 1 and general research question presented in section 1.4 will be answered. Furthermore, areas for further study will be recommended.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION – THE NATURE OF H&M’S COMMUNICATION WITH ITS STAKEHOLDERS IN THE WAKE OF THE MONKEY HOODIE INCIDENT

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 1, it was argued that communication via social media platforms can play a significant role in promoting mutual understanding and beneficial outcomes, as well as enhance overall organisation-stakeholder relations when the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM is applied. It was argued that social media can contribute specifically to two-way communication via processes such as social media listening, social media engagement and the built-in social media functions to cultivate positive organisation-stakeholder relationships. Chapter 1 featured an overview of the H&M monkey hoodie incident and an explanation of the rationale for selecting the case to examine the identified arguments. In Chapter 2, guiding arguments informed by the literature review were proposed to explain how corporate organisations such as H&M should communicate with their stakeholders via social media according to the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM to enhance organisation-stakeholder relationships. It was argued that communication between organisations and their stakeholders via social media should be two-way in nature, symmetrical and include a reflective aspect, environmental scanning, the expressive task of communication and boundary spanning. Chapter 3 comprised a description of the mixed-methods approach that was adopted for this study, followed by an explanation of how the empirical aspect thereof was conducted. In Chapter 4, an integrated presentation was provided of the findings from the qualitative content analysis and sentiment analysis on how H&M communicated with its stakeholders via their social media platforms during the specified investigation period of January 1, 2018 to March 31, 2018.

Chapter 5 comprises a summary and interpretation of the primary findings. The latter will be examined in relation to their relevance and direct implications to answer the general research question that was the focus of this study.

The general research question posed in section 1.4 was:

What was the nature of H&M’s communication with its stakeholders via social media in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident?

The answers to the two specific research questions will be integrated into the answer to the general research question.

5.2 COMMUNICATION GUIDELINES FOR CORPORATE ORGANISATIONS WITH STAKEHOLDERS VIA SOCIAL MEDIA

The first specific research question of this study was:

How should corporate organisations communicate with their stakeholders via social media according to the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM to enhance stakeholder relationships? (1.5.1)

This question was answered through a literature review on the two-way symmetrical model in section 2.5, the reflective paradigm in section 2.6 and SCM in section 2.7, with social media engagement being dealt with in section 2.11, social media listening processes in section 2.12 and built-in social media functions in section 2.13. Four guiding arguments were formulated based on the reviewed literature to answer the specific research question 1.5.1:

Guiding Argument 1: Two-way communication

Organisations should facilitate two-way communication on their social media platforms between themselves and their stakeholders. This implies that the organisation should utilise social media to share information; offer stakeholders the opportunity to respond (provide feedback) to its messages; engage in active listening with stakeholders (social media listening); and provide a response (feedback) to the communication. Before providing feedback (social media engagement), the built-in social media insights function can be utilised to listen (social media listening) to stakeholders (conduct research) (see section 2.14.1).

The first guiding argument highlighted the significant steps organisations can undertake to ensure that the nature of the communication between themselves and their stakeholders maintains a two-way dynamic via social media platforms. As indicated in section 2.4, communication is not only two-way, but to also symmetrical in nature.

Guiding Argument 2: Symmetrical communication

Organisations should facilitate symmetrical communication with their stakeholders on their social media platforms through negotiation. This implies that both parties have an equal opportunity to exchange information and persuade the other of their perspectives with a view to reaching a mutually beneficial resolution (section 2.14.2).

As indicated in section 2.4.1, symmetrical communication can only be achieved by an organisation that has a symmetrical worldview. When an organisation possesses such a view, it is ideally positioned to receive feedback, ideas and perspectives from its stakeholders without

resistance. Furthermore, both the two-way symmetrical communication model and the reflective paradigm principles consider the adoption of the symmetrical worldview as a requirement for organisations that want to build a mutual understanding with their stakeholders.

Guiding Argument 3: Reflective task/Environmental scanning

Organisations should utilise social media platforms to monitor real time communication (via social media listening) as part of their reflective task to scan the environment with a view to aligning themselves strategically with their stakeholders' interests. On X, organisations can follow relevant hashtags (#) to track online conversations, while on Facebook they can monitor reactions and comment sections to gauge stakeholder sentiment (section 2.14.3).

It was determined from the reviewed literature on the reflective paradigm (2.6) and SCM (2.7) that it is essential for an organisation to have a clear understanding of what is taking place in the macro environment in which it finds itself. Furthermore, the organisation should consider the teachings from the macro environment and channel these with the essential information back into its communication strategy so that all communication is aligned with the stakeholder's needs and interests. It was also argued that the principles of the reflective paradigm and SCM, in conjunction with the expressive task of communication, can assist the organisation to communicate in such a way that its own needs are balanced with those of its stakeholders to ensure equity between the two parties.

Guiding Argument 4: Expressive task/Boundary Spanning

Organisations should utilise the social media platforms' real time communication capabilities as part of their expressive task. Based on the reflective task (environmental scanning or social media listening) outcomes, an organisation should balance its needs with those of its stakeholders (boundary spanning); align itself with stakeholder interests and reflect their understanding of the needs and expectations through its communication; and ensure that its public image aligns with stakeholder perceptions of social responsibility (section 2.14.4).

The guiding arguments from the reviewed literature indicated that corporate organisations such as H&M should utilise their social media platforms, for example, Facebook and X, to enhance their understanding of their stakeholders' interests and expectations.

This is significant because, as indicated in section 2.7, when organisations possess a comprehensive understanding of stakeholders' interests and expectations, they can position themselves strategically to foster mutual understanding and establish a reciprocal beneficial relationship with their stakeholders. Consequently, the organisation benefits by cultivating

stakeholder trust and initiating negotiation processes. Moreover, the organisation becomes more adept at identifying external environmental factors that might potentially affect its operations. By accessing crucial information, the organisation can meet stakeholders' expectations effectively and identify and address conflict proactively during the early stages.

The guiding principles that were formulated to respond to the first specific research question 1.5.1, informed the analysis of H&M's communication with its stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident to answer the second specific research question (1.5.2).

5.3 H&M'S COMMUNICATION WITH ITS STAKEHOLDERS REGARDING THE MONKEY HOODIE INCIDENT ON ITS SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The second specific research question was:

To what extent did H&M's communication with its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident adhere to the principles of the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM? (1.5.2)

A mixed-methods approach was utilised to answer the research question, integrating both quantitative and qualitative research techniques within a unified inquiry. The qualitative investigation consisted of a content analysis of H&M's communication with stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident on Facebook and X. The quantitative investigation entailed a sentiment analysis of the comments from H&M stakeholders in response to H&M's communication regarding the monkey hoodie incident extracted from the same platforms. The timeframe identified for the investigation was the wake of the monkey hoodie incident from 1 January 2018–31 March 2018.

On Facebook the units of analysis used for the qualitative content analysis included: insights, comments, photos, videos, polls, status updates, livestreams, live chats and groups. The reactions functions included: likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry.

On X, the units of analysis used for the qualitative content analysis referred to information shared via tweets and retweets, which included: textual information, hyperlinks, interactive GIFs, numerals, videos, liking a tweet, direct comments on tweets or posts, chat sessions, photos and hashtags.

As part of the qualitative analysis process, four categories were identified in section 3.4.3 based on the guiding arguments (see section 2.14) and operational definitions were formulated for each

category (section 3.4.3). These categories included: Sharing Relevant Information, Providing Opportunities for Feedback, Feedback from Stakeholders and Feedback to Stakeholders.

As part of the quantitative analysis section and in a bid to measure feedback from stakeholders, a sentiment analysis was conducted to acquire an in-depth understanding of the stakeholders' perceptions of H&M's communication as related to the monkey hoodie incident.

5.3.1 Sharing of relevant information

As described in section 3.4.3, the operational definition for sharing relevant information included all data relating to the monkey hoodie incident shared by H&M on the social media platforms. The following functions were analysed on Facebook regarding the sharing of relevant information: comments, photos, videos, polls and status updates, livestreams and live chats and groups. On X it refers to information shared via tweets and retweets, which can include textual information, hyperlinks, photos, videos, interactive GIFs, hashtags, numerals and chat sessions.

With regard to H&M's utilisation of the specified Facebook functions that can be used to share relevant information with its stakeholders, the results indicated that the organisation employed the comments and status updates functions to do so regarding the monkey hoodie incident (section 4.2.1.1). However, these functions were highly underutilised. Since it was highlighted in section 2.13.1 that the comments and the status update functions both help to implement the principles of two-way and symmetrical communication, more could have been done to facilitate two-way symmetrical communication during this critical time.

Furthermore, H&M did not use the photos, videos, polls, livestreams or live chat functions. Since these functions can be utilised to implement the principles of two-way symmetrical communication (see section) 2.13.1, it was determined that H&M did not utilise the Facebook functions at its disposal optimally to facilitate the principle of two-way symmetrical communication that relates to sharing relevant information with stakeholders.

Similar trends were detected with regard to H&M's overall utilisation of the X functions, in terms of sharing relevant information with their stakeholders. Although H&M utilised the tweets function, which comprised textual information and photos, to respond to the monkey hoodie incident to some extent, the function was not optimally used. Since the tweets function can be used to facilitate the principles of two-way communication (section 2.13.2) and H&M's utilisation thereof was limited, it can be argued that the organisation adhered only in part to the two-way communication principle of sharing relevant information with the stakeholders (section 2.5). H&M did not utilise any of the other identified functions that could have assisted it to implement the

principles of two-way communication, namely the retweets function, chat sessions, interactive GIFs, hashtags, hyperlinks or the numerals function.

The findings presented in Chapter 4 indicate that H&M was inconsistent with sharing relevant information across all social media pages in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. Thus, H&Ms' information sharing practices could have been perceived as untrustworthy by its stakeholders, which could have had a negative impact on stakeholder trust relationships. Hence, H&Ms behaviour is contrary to the two-way symmetrical communication principle that organisation-stakeholder trust was necessary and must be fostered through the communication process (section 2.5). Since H&M closed its Facebook pages temporarily, the organisation could not fully exercise the reflective paradigm principle of mutual reflection (2.6.1) and the SCM principles (window and mirror functions) (section 2.6.2), so that it could effectively share information aligned with its stakeholders' needs and expectations. Furthermore, despite the real time nature of social media, H&M generally took a long time to share relevant information with its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident. Although the information it shared highlighted the events that were taking place in its external environment, limited information was shared from 1 January 2018–31 March 2018.

5.3.2 Providing opportunities for feedback

The operational definition for the provision of opportunities for feedback (see section 3.5) refers to all invitations and opportunities for this purpose from stakeholders that related to the monkey hoodie incident. On both Facebook and X, this included any messages that invited feedback on the incident and on H&M's communication regarding the incident. On Facebook, this included the availability of the reactions function, which includes likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry, and the polls and comments function. On X this included the availability of the retweeting function, liking a tweet and direct comments on posts.

With regard to H&M's utilisation of the specified Facebook functions that can be utilised to provide the stakeholders with opportunities to provide for feedback, it was determined that the latter could provide feedback to the organisation using the reactions and the comments functions. The X functions, namely the retweeting function, the option to like a tweet and to share a direct comment on posts, were also available and which the stakeholders could have utilised to provide feedback. Although H&M regularly received negative feedback from its stakeholders (section 4.2.3), it opted to keep the feedback functions available to its stakeholders. However, H&M did not specifically utilise either the Facebook functions or the X functions to extend any invitations to the stakeholders for feedback, despite having indicated that it was open to constructive criticism.

H&M shared limited invitations for feedback across both its Facebook and X pages. However, since the feedback functions were available to the stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident, H&M demonstrated a certain degree of receptiveness to feedback from its stakeholders. The organisation also demonstrated a willingness to learn more about its external environment (section 4.2.2.1-4.2.2.2). Hence, it could be inferred that H&M's communication revealed signs of the principles of the reflective paradigm (reflective task) and SCM (mirror function), which indicated that learning from the external environment (via feedback from stakeholders) was important to enhance communication (section 2.6-2.7).

The findings in section 4.2.2 revealed that H&M did provide their stakeholders with a means to share feedback on both its Facebook and X platforms following the monkey hoodie incident, although it was not encouraged often. This indicates that H&M complied in this regard with the two-way symmetrical communication principle, in terms of which organisations should provide their stakeholders with the necessary channels for feedback (section 2.5.1).

5.3.3 Feedback from stakeholders

As indicated in section 3.4.3, feedback from stakeholders included all feedback relating to the monkey hoodie incident and H&M's communication related thereto, as posted on the social media. On Facebook this referred to messages to H&M via the comments and reactions function, which included likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry. On X this included direct comments on posts such as liking a tweet and retweeting.

On Facebook, H&M's stakeholders utilised both the comments and reactions functions to share feedback (section 4.2.3.1; 4.2.3.3). They also utilised the X functions, which included direct comments on posts and functions such as likes and the retweeting function to share feedback with the organisation (section 4.2.4.4 - 4.2.4.5.). Since the vast majority of the functions were utilised by H&M's stakeholders to share feedback with the organisation via the Facebook and X platforms, it could be deduced that H&M had access to vast amounts of information regarding its stakeholders perspectives, which it could have utilised to facilitate the process of social media listening (section 2.12), as well as the reflective paradigm (reflective task) and the principle of SCM (according to the mirror function). Gathering external feedback from stakeholders can assist an organisation to foresee potential threats to align its communication with their needs and perspectives (sections 2.6; 2.7).

The feedback from H&M stakeholders shed light on controversial issues that were foremost in their minds. The theme of diversity and inclusion was identified as the only topic prevalent across both the Facebook and X platforms. The second most pronounced theme from the organisation's

stakeholder's feedback was the call to #Boycott H&M, which was only prevalent on its X platform. The overall sentiment analysis outcome of +1.6 for Facebook was slightly positive and was contrary to the rather negative sentiment result of -3.95 for X. The latter was analysed in relation to the messages of apology that were issued by H&M.

The user-generated image of the boy of colour wearing the digitally altered image of the hoodie (Figure 4-46) could be interpreted as an indication that the H&M stakeholders wanted to see a more positive portrayal of the boy in its communication. The stakeholders even amended the image according to their preferences and circulated the changed image independently via social media. The discontent voiced by H&M's stakeholders over the monkey hoodie advertisement suggests that these stakeholders had an expectation that the organisation should possess an understanding of its external social surroundings, including its intricacies. They also indicated that H&M's stakeholders believed that the organisation's decision to publish the advertisement online demonstrated a lack of awareness about the current state of its external environment and a failure to comprehend the needs and expectations of its stakeholders. The apology messages from H&M (see Figure 4-1, Figure 4-2, Figure 4-3, Figure 4-4 and Figure 4-5, Figure 4-6, Figure 4-7) do, however, suggest that the organisation had some awareness of the situation in its external environment. This indicates that, after the initial incident, the organisation tried to comprehend its external environment and the needs and expectations of its stakeholders.

5.3.4 Feedback to stakeholders

The operational definition of providing feedback to stakeholders, as noted in section 3.4.3, was that it included all feedback to their communication relating to the monkey hoodie incident. On Facebook, this referred to responding to comments directly and posts that were reactions to communication from stakeholders, and reactions that included likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry. On X, feedback referred to commenting directly on a tweet, a retweet and issuing a tweet, including photos, hashtags, hyperlinks, videos and numerals.

With regard to H&M's utilisation of the specified Facebook functions to provide feedback to the stakeholders, the organisation utilised the posts function to share extremely limited information. Despite promises to share additional feedback in the future, the organisation failed to fulfil its promise (section 4.2.4.1). Although the comments function was utilised to share feedback with the stakeholders, this function was highly underutilised for two-way symmetrical communication. It was utilised only once during the entire period of the investigation (4.2.4.2). H&M did not utilise any of the reaction functions to share feedback with its stakeholders (likes, heart, care, wow, haha, sad and angry) (section 4.2.4.3).

H&M utilised the X function, comments minimally to provide feedback to the stakeholders. This function was underutilised for the two-way symmetrical communication. It was used only twice to share feedback with the stakeholders during the span of three months. This means that H&M missed out on multiple opportunities to engage and negotiate with its stakeholders to reach a mutually beneficial outcome (section 4.2.4.4).

The videos function was used to indirectly share feedback with stakeholders, even though it might not have directly tackled the conversations taking place outside the organisation regarding the monkey hoodie incident. However, this might have been an indirect attempt to demonstrate an awareness of the stakeholder's needs and expectations regarding the topic of diversity and inclusion (section 4.2.4.6 & Figure 4-52).

H&M did not utilise the photos or retweet functions to provide feedback to its stakeholders. This implied that the organisation missed out on opportunities to positively validate (using the photos and retweet functions) the UGC shared by its stakeholders of the boy in the controversial advertisement wearing the amended illustration of the hoodie. H&M did not utilise the hashtag (#) function to share feedback with its stakeholders. Instead, it selected to utilise the hashtag function to promote its store and its products (business as usual), despite the noise in its external environment and via social media about the incident. H&M did not utilise the hyperlinks function to respond to its stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident. Instead, the hyperlinks function was utilised to promote the H&M online store. Moreover, the numerals function was also not utilised to share information about the monkey hoodie incident.

The findings revealed that the limited feedback shared by H&M was generic and was likely to have been an automated response because the messages (feedback) did not address the questions raised by its stakeholders. This implied that the organisation did not comply with the principle of boundary spanning (section 2.7) throughout the entire period under study. There were many opportunities for H&M to share real time feedback with its stakeholders, but the company opted not to do so.

5.3.5 Conclusion on research question 1.5.2

In conclusion, with regard to sharing relevant information with stakeholders, despite having access to several social media functions to do so, not all the functions were utilised for this purpose, nor were they used regularly. There were many opportunities for H&M to share real time feedback with its stakeholders, but it decided not to do so. It was confirmed that H&M provided its stakeholders with opportunities to provide feedback across its social media platforms regarding the monkey hoodie incident. This decision was taken despite the risk of probable negative

backlash from the stakeholders. This resolve could be interpreted as the organisation having adopted a symmetrical worldview (section 1.2). Thus, it was an indication that the organisation was open to acquiring new information from its external environment. However, although necessary feedback channels were available, there were limited signs that the organisation tried to encourage more feedback. Therefore, it was deduced that H&M was reserved when it came to encouraging stakeholder feedback. Regarding the overall feedback received from the stakeholders, there was much enthusiasm to exchange their perspectives with the organisation, which they did by utilising the social media functions available to them. H&M provided extremely limited feedback regarding the monkey hoodie incident to their stakeholders' responses on the matter, especially considering the latter continued to talk about the incident and raise questions and concerns two months after the initial occurrence had taken place.

Although H&M utilised certain functions to drive two-way and symmetrical communication, it was established that, due to the available social media functions, much more could have been done to drive a two-way and symmetrical communication approach between H&M and its stakeholders (using the built-in social media functions), especially during such a sensitive time.

Relevant information and regular updates regarding the incident were required to address the stakeholders' concerns about this incident. It was a bold and positive move by H&M to retain the feedback channels for stakeholders' comments and feedback because the risk of negative criticism was extremely likely in lieu of the online comments regarding the monkey hoodie incident. It was also an ideal strategic decision because it implied that the organisation could open itself up to receiving important information about its stakeholders' wants, needs, perspectives and ideas, which it could utilise to align future communication.

Since H&M had received a vast quantity of feedback from its stakeholders via their social media pages, the organisation had access to a great deal of important information that could be utilised to better understand its external environment. However, it was observed that H&M preferred to abstain from providing real time feedback to the stakeholders. This might have been an attempt by the organisation to create some distance between it and the stakeholders regarding the monkey hoodie incident and to try and keep the focus of its social media communication on product rather than people-related matters. Although the organisation addressed diversity and inclusion only during the very early stages of the incident, it skilfully weaved in themes of diversity and inclusion through the appropriate social media functions and included images that embodied the essence thereof as part of its X advertising campaigns.

In the few instances in which H&M responded directly to stakeholders' comments, it provided generic rather than personal responses, which might not have been in the company's best

interests because the nature of social media platforms are engineered towards a more personal, real time dialogue between sender and receiver. The impersonal, generic responses provided by H&M also meant that limited negotiations took place between it and its stakeholders. Consequently, H&M missed many opportunities to generate a dialogue to attain mutually beneficial outcomes.

5.4 THE NATURE OF H&M'S COMMUNICATION WITH ITS STAKEHOLDERS IN THE WAKE OF THE MONKEY HOODIE INCIDENT

In the next section, the general research question, '*What was the nature of H&M's communication with its stakeholders in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident*' (1.4), is answered.

This question was answered by analysing H&M's communication via Facebook and X, using the principles in the reviewed literature on the two-way symmetrical model, the reflective paradigm and SCM as lens.

Regarding H&M's sharing of relevant information in relation to the principles of two-way symmetrical communication (section 2.5), the reflective paradigm (section 2.6) and SCM (section 2.7), the research findings showed that the organisation did not adhere fully to the said communication principles. Although H&M demonstrated an understanding of its stakeholders' needs and expectations in their communication and in accord with the principles of two-way communication, the reflective paradigm and SCM, the findings indicated that too little relevant information was shared with stakeholders. For example, during the 1 January 2018–31 March 2018 period, via both the Facebook (section 4.2.1.1, Figure 4-1, Figure 4-2) and the X platforms (section 4.2.1.2 Figure 4-3, Figure 4-4), H&M shared only two Facebook posts and two X tweets, with relevant information about the monkey hoodie incident.

H&M did not fully adhere to the principle of the two-way symmetrical communication, which indicates that an organisation should ensure that stakeholders have free and open access to information (2.5.1). This was particularly evident in the findings described in section 4.2.1 and 4.2.4, which indicated that not all information was shared equally across H&M's various social media platforms. Moreover, H&M was able to only partially adhere to the reflective paradigm principle (mutual reflection) and the strategic communication (mirror and window functions) because the research findings indicated that H&M was not entirely transparent in all its communication for the 1 January–31 March 2018 period and there was a period in which the social media pages had been closed off to the public (section 4.2.1).

The organisation did not comply fully with the principle of two-way communication, namely that it should have engaged in two-way communication with its stakeholders by sharing relevant information to build a mutual understanding and stakeholder trust (section 2.5). This was evident in how H&M underutilised the functionalities to share information via its Facebook and X platforms. On Facebook, the videos, photos, livestreams, live chats, groups and polls functions were not utilised to share relevant information (section 4.2.1.1). On Twitter (X) the retweets, interactive GIFs, hashtags, numerals, hyperlinks, videos and chat sessions functions were not utilised to share meaningful information with the stakeholders.

The research evidence suggests that the overall nature of H&M's communication in relation to sharing relevant information with its stakeholders was that the organisation exhibited traits of both asymmetrical and symmetrical worldviews during the entire period under study (section 2.4.1). The asymmetrical communication traits detected in H&M's communication style are attributed to H&M's consistent marketing and sales-driven messages, mostly shared via their X brand page (section 4.2.4.5). This could mean that the organisation maintained a predominantly sales-driven and marketing-oriented focus as its social media communication strategy in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident. The temporary closure of the South African Facebook page and the organisation's inconsistent information sharing practices across its social media platforms can be regarded as indicators of an asymmetrical worldview, as described in section 2.4.1, because this behaviour on part of H&M means that, at a certain point, the organisation shut itself off from receiving any feedback from the external environment in which it found itself. It also implies that the organisation was not willing at this stage to compromise or negotiate with any outside entity. However, the contradictory behaviour (symmetrical worldview characteristics) became apparent when the organisation shared information that showcased the theme of diversity and inclusion (section 4.2.3.5.2; Figure 4.5) and tackled the store protest issue with a message on X (Figure 4-4) in a direct and transparent fashion. When it came to sharing relevant information with stakeholders, it was deduced from all the relevant findings pertaining to this category that the nature of H&M's communication was to attempt to find a balance between meeting its sales-driven goals and meeting its stakeholders' needs (boundary spanning). This was indicated by the juxtaposition of H&M providing important communication regarding current affairs affecting the store and its communication aimed at driving sales. However, since the communication shared by H&M was predominantly sales-driven on its X platform and extremely limited on its Facebook platform, it can be deduced that the agenda behind H&M's communication (messaging) for the 1 January–3 March 2018 period was mostly sales oriented, indicating that the scale was tipped in favour of H&M's core need to generate sales rather than meeting its stakeholders' need and an interest in learning more about up-to-date developments regarding the monkey hoodie incident.

Regarding opportunities to provide feedback, the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and strategic communication, the findings presented in section 4.2.2 revealed that H&M's communication showed signs of the two-way communication principle that it is important for organisations to open themselves up to dialogue (section 2.5.1). This was evident particularly with regard to communication shared by H&M via its Facebook posts, in which it directly expressed in its communication that it was open to constructive thoughts and that it was listening (section 4.2.1; Figure 4-2 and Figure 4-6). These posts indicated a willingness on part of H&M to include stakeholders' feedback in its research process. This can be interpreted as an adherence to the reflective paradigm and strategic communication principles that an organisation should learn about its external environment so that it is positioned to understand its stakeholders' needs, concerns and expectations (sections 2.6; 2.7). Based on the overall findings regarding the opportunities for feedback, it was deduced that H&M did show signs of a symmetrical worldview (section 2.4.1) having influenced its approach to communication because its apology messages showed clear signs of an openness to negotiation and compromise (section 4.2.2). This was further substantiated by the fact that all the relevant social media functions that could be used by stakeholders to respond to H&M were left available and unrestricted on its Facebook and X pages. This indicates that H&M had cultivated an environment on its social media pages that was conducive to two-way communication. Therefore H&M stakeholders could express their views and concerns about the organisation.

Regarding the feedback from H&M stakeholders, as indicated in the empirical results (section 4.2.3), the sentiment analysis results were particularly negative. The key theme across both H&M's Facebook and X pages (via feedback from stakeholders) revealed that the organisation was out of touch with the real meaning of diversity and inclusion, and, more specifically, the type of communication its stakeholders wanted to see on the topic of diversity and inclusion. The way H&M understood it best to communicate on this topic was not what its stakeholders needed. This was brought to light by the negative sentiment analysis results, as well as the comments and reactions from the stakeholders, which indicated that there was a mismatch between what diversity and inclusion meant to H&M and what it meant to its stakeholders. The research also suggested that H&M was unable to implement social media listening effectively and apply the strategic communication principle, which requires that an organisation utilise the feedback from stakeholders to inform its future communication, foresee potential future conflict and ensure that all communication is aligned with the stakeholders' expectations (section 2.7). The overall negative sentiment results, along with the key themes identified in the stakeholders' responses to the organisation, indicate that although H&M attempted to apologise to its stakeholders via the apology posts and tweets, and despite showcasing models from differing racial and ethnic

backgrounds as part of its advertising campaigns on X during the period under study, and despite directly addressing the political protests with a post dealing with this hard issue, this was not enough communication for H&M's stakeholders, who wanted more conversation around these topics; they wanted more dialogue and this was possible, given the potential for two-way communication and social media engagement processes available via Facebook and X. The negative feedback via the comments section, the UGC of the boy wearing the recreated monkey hoodie and the #BoycottHM hashtag that were circulated on social media are indicators of stakeholders taking matters and conversations into their own hands. Social media allows for this type of engagement from stakeholders, highlighting the opportunities and risks it poses to organisations. The stakeholders' communication might have reflected an unmet need for further communication on this topic from H&M.

The research findings showed that H&M provided its stakeholders with little and unsatisfactory feedback. Two-way symmetrical communication requires that feedback be an essential part of the negotiation process (section 2.5). The feedback shared on behalf of H&M during the three-month period of investigation was not sufficient for the organisation to work towards building positive organisation-stakeholder relationship outcomes, which include mutual understanding and beneficial relationships, as well as trust.

H&M shared video footage during March 2018 (section 4.2.4.6; Figure 4-52) that complemented the messaging in the UGC shared by its stakeholders (section 4.2.3.6). This can be considered congruent with the reflective paradigm principle that organisations' messaging should align with stakeholders' concerns and expectations (section 2.6). However, based on the results regarding feedback to the stakeholders (section 4.2.4), H&M generally shared limited information that was in alignment with its stakeholders' needs and concerns. Moreover, the backlash from stakeholders in the section regarding feedback from stakeholders (4.2.3) indicates that there was a definite need for more information regarding the monkey hoodie incident among H&M's stakeholders. It can be argued that the reflective paradigm principles should have been exercised more frequently by H&M using the relevant social media functions at its disposal. The organisation should have implemented the reflective paradigm principles so that more of the communication (feedback) reflected an alignment with the stakeholders' needs and concerns. In doing so, H&M would have better positioned itself to achieve the overall positive organisation-stakeholder relationships indicated in section 2.8, namely mutual understanding, stakeholder trust, voluntary self-control and the co-existence of social systems. If the two-way symmetrical communication principles had been implemented frequently and with urgency throughout H&M's communication for 1 January 2018–31 March 2018, the organisation would also have been in a better position to exercise the SCM window function (section 2.7).

The research results indicate (section 4.2.4) that at no point did H&M consistently engage in two-way conversations with its stakeholders on their branded social media pages. This resulted in what could be considered an unwanted “hostage situation” because H&M’s stakeholders inevitably started driving the dominant narratives, such as #BoycottHM (section 4.2.3.5.1), on their branded social media pages. This was evidenced specifically in instances of negative sentiments overshadowing the positive sentiments across H&M’s Facebook and X pages (section 4.2.3). The proportion of information shared by stakeholders in the comments section (section 4.2.3) by far outweighs the quantity of information shared by H&M regarding the topic of the boy of colour wearing the monkey hoodie (section 4.2.4). This disproportionate number of comments from stakeholders in relation to feedback (responses to comments) from H&M further implies that H&M’s stakeholders wanted and needed more real time, instant communication about this point of discussion.

The nature of H&M’s communication in terms of the stakeholders’ view of its feedback was that the organisation’s communication lacked authenticity (section 4.2.3). The nature of H&M’s feedback, according to the empirical evidence, can be perceived as strategic in nature because H&M provided feedback to only a few messages or topics at specific times, implying that communication showed signs of being on the pulse of current stakeholder issues as per the strategic communication principle (section 2.7). Although strategic, this strategy did not complement the two-way, real time nature of social media. In fact, it went against the grain of the inherent flow of two-way communication patterns typical of social media platforms. H&M’s sporadic and calculated feedback, which was sometimes irrelevant to the comments it was replying to, can be deciphered as a communication pattern that is typical of a one-way communication style of disseminating information. The adoption of a communication pattern that leaned more towards the one-way communication style might have contributed to H&M’s inability to adequately validate the stakeholders’ sentiments in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident.

In conclusion, the organisation did not share important information consistently across its social media pages. Furthermore, information was withheld from selected social media pages, which possibly contributed towards a feeling of mistrust among H&M stakeholders. Although there were opportunities to provide the stakeholders with feedback, H&M did not consistently encourage feedback in its communication. From the stakeholders’ perspective, their feedback to H&M revealed anger and frustration with the organisation for not understanding their expectations. Although there were many opportunities for H&M to engage with the stakeholders by providing feedback, these opportunities were not utilised. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that H&M did not fully utilise the opportunities for two-way communication available on the social media platforms. H&M’s communication with its stakeholders on its social media platforms only

partially adhered to some of the principles of two-way symmetrical communication, the reflective paradigm and stakeholder relationship management.

5.5 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that organisations that intend to incorporate social media into their corporate communications strategies should refer to the arguments as well as to the following knowledge acquired from the H&M case study:

- When developing their communication strategies, organisations that want to communicate with their stakeholders using social media should do so using a symmetrical worldview approach.
- As part of their corporate communication strategies, organisations should aim to utilise all the built-in social media functions on their Facebook and X pages. On Facebook, this includes comments, photos, videos, polls, status updates, livestreams, live chats, post shares and insights. On X this includes tweets and retweets, including textual information, hyperlinks, photos, videos, interactive GIFs, hashtags, numbers and chat sessions. These functions should be used for the purpose of the social media listening (or environmental scanning or the mirror function) to gather as much information as possible regarding their stakeholders' needs and interests. The relevant findings need to be included in the organisation's communication strategy.
- To ensure that there is an equal balance of power between itself and its stakeholders on its social media pages, the organisation must ensure that it exercises two-way symmetrical communication, environmental scanning (or the mirror function or social media listening) and social media engagement to provide stakeholders with relevant feedback in accord with the real time requirements of social media.
- Relevant information and regular feedback must be shared by the organisations consistently across all their social media pages to avoid the disintegration of trust relationships and enhance mutual understanding.

5.6 CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

This study provided theoretically informed guidelines for how corporate organisations should communicate with their stakeholders via social media to build and maintain overall positive organisation-stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, these guidelines were interrogated in

relation to the real-world H&M monkey hoodie incident so that further learnings could be identified for organisations who, like H&M, utilise social media to communicate with their stakeholders.

5.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study only analysed H&M's communication with its stakeholders via its social media platforms during a specific timeframe. Therefore, one cannot make assumptions regarding H&M's overall communication with its stakeholders. The study also focused specifically on what was communicated through content analysis and sentiment analysis, without taking cognisance of the reasons for the choices by the organisation.

The findings also related to only the built-in social media functions that can be utilised to help foster healthy and strategic stakeholder relationships. Other aspects of social media that were not addressed in this study and which may have contributed towards building and enhancing positive organisation-stakeholder relationships included the incorporation of social media influencers and digital media storytelling as part of the social media strategy.

This researcher did not intend to provide an exhaustive guideline for corporate organisations that utilise social media as part of their corporate communication strategies. However, it is advised that further research on social media be considered when developing a corporate communication strategy. Since social media technology is constantly evolving and improving, consideration of current research can help to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive social media strategy for an organisation that endeavours to acquire maximum benefits from the ever-changing two-way symmetrical communication platform known as social media.

5.8 SUGGESTED AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Other research methodologies, for example, interviews with H&M's management and communication departments, could shed light on the motivation for the approach to and decisions H&M made regarding its communication with its stakeholders via its social media platforms in the wake of the monkey hoodie incident.

Although the research findings of this investigation are of relevance to organisations such as H&M in the retail sector, perhaps a follow-up study could be conducted to potentially explore the degree to which these outcomes could be made relevant to organisations in other major sectors that require regular and direct communication with their stakeholders, such as financial services, hospitality, leisure and real estate.

Another potential study could be an exploration of the incorporation of social media influencers and their potential to build stakeholder loyalty, as well as how their services could best be utilised to drive the principles of two-way communication towards building mutually beneficial organisation-stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, the strategic incorporation of digital storytelling could also be explored to further enhance organisation-stakeholder relationships.

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