Cape Peninsula
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An exploration of how public relations practitioners used social media to engage with consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic: a case of a fast-food company in South Africa

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Public Relations and Communication Management

in the Faculty of Informatics and Design

at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology

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Cape Town

31 January 2022

DECLARATION

I, **Kauthar Gool**, declare that the contents of this dissertation represent my own unaided work and that the dissertation has not previously been submitted for academic examination towards any qualification. Furthermore, it represents my own opinions and not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Signed: K. Gool **Date: 31 January 2022**

ABSTRACT

In South Africa, the first lockdown periods affected fast-food franchises significantly, with these establishments forced to close, or only partially operate, between March and June in 2020. Fast-food establishments are significant contributors to South Africa's food and beverages industry, and their closure during the stricter lockdown periods negatively impacted the country's economy. Furthermore, during the hard lockdown in 2020, there was a rise in misinformation proliferated online about the Coronavirus (COVID-19) and the operations of fast-food companies during various alert levels. It was thus vital for the public relations (PR) practitioners in these franchises to effectively engage with consumers, to inform them about the operational protocols their organisations would be adhering to during the different lockdown levels. With (public) interpersonal contact prohibited, it was vital for these practitioners to effectively utilise various social networking platforms to engage with consumers for informational purposes and to communicate interactively with this stakeholder group.

In this study, the researcher explored which platforms the public relations team in a specific fast-food franchise used to engage with consumers, why they chose to use specific social networks to interact with these stakeholders, and what messages they sent to this constituent group. Lastly, the researcher sought to discover whether the public relations team was symmetrical in their interactions with consumers on social media during the period studied.

The study was framed through the lens of stakeholder theory and the two-way symmetrical model and employed a qualitative research approach. Additionally, the researcher used the case study design, with data collected through interviews and a thematic content analysis of the company’s Twitter and Facebook pages. Content posted between March and July 2020 was sampled, with the researcher observing the change in the tone of messages shared on social media during lockdown levels five, four, and three in South Africa.

The results indicated that the public relations team in the selected franchise occasionally utilised social media, working alongside the digital department to disseminate informational messages to consumers during stricter lockdown periods. Social media was used by these practitioners for crisis communication messaging, to share information about the corporate social initiatives the company was involved in, and to manage the franchise’s reputation during the hard lockdown. Furthermore, the digital team primarily engaged symmetrically with consumers on Twitter and Facebook. The public relations team would only respond to queries from consumers when matters of contention escalated online.

There is an ongoing debate regarding the value and utility of social media utilisation by public relations professionals in various industries. Furthermore, many polemical articles have been published regarding the use of specific online platforms by these practitioners. Some academics argue that public relations professionals’ utilisation of social networks has been overly praised and inadequately critiqued. Therefore, this study contributes to advancing additional scholarly debate on social media utilisation by public relations practitioners in a specific market.

Key words: COVID-19, fast-food franchises, public relations, social media, stakeholder engagement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This was a hard-fought, crazy, and rewarding journey. All the best ones are, aren't they? Many, many times, I wanted to quit because my anxiety kept me feeling like I wasn't good enough to study at this level. I'd go from being productive and writing up my chapters with lucid precision, to crying in a corner because something hurtful a reviewer wrote *months ago* triggered me into feeling like a failure again.

However, despite all the turmoil and travail…. I FINISHED MY DISSERTATION.

This HUGE feat would have been impossible without:

- Allah, the Most High, my Creator and Sustainer. Shukran ya Rabb. In the same way, You split the sea for Prophet Musa and his people, You, and only You, my Lord, granted me the courage to produce this document. All praise is due to You.

- My parents, Ghairieyah and Sheigh Faizel, and siblings, Amaanoellah and Nu-haa Gool. Your love and unconditional support kept me sane throughout this process. Shukran for always cheering me on and constantly showering me with support and affection. I love you all so much.

- My main supervisor, Prof Izak van Zyl. Thank you for agreeing to supervise me and for meticulously checking my work. Your academic prowess is enviable.

- My co-supervisor, Deidre Porthen. Thank you for always being in my corner.

- My most *trusted* confidant, Dr Trust Matsilele. Thank you for being an 'ear' when I needed one, and for calming me down during my many panicked frenzies and meltdowns. May you always be blessed and successful.

- The selected franchise and all my research participants. I am so honoured to have used this company as a case in my dissertation. I have genuinely always been curious about the role of the public relations team in the conceptualisation of social media posts in this franchise and I am so excited to have had my burning questions answered! I want to extend my heartfelt gratitude to all my interviewees and those who helped me contact specific people. Thank you all, and God bless!

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my late grandmother, Mary Magdalena Elizabeth Hermanus. When you passed, you took a part of me with you, but I hope that wherever you are, you know that I still love you so much and think of you every day of my life, Ma. I hope to have made you proud with this work. I love you so, so, so much.

“The public is the only critic whose opinion is worth anything at all.”

~ Mark Twain

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Glossary of Terms

Term	Definition
Corporate social responsibility	The responsibilities that all establishments have towards their stakeholders, the community, and environments affected by a company's existence (Hopkins, 2014; Carroll, 1999).
Consumers	Stakeholders who purchase goods and services from an organisation (Benn, Abratt & O'Leary, 2016). They are important functional linkages in fast-food establishments (Plowman & Rawlins, 2017; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Rawlins, 2006).
Coronavirus	A deadly respiratory disease that resulted in millions of deaths, globally (World Health Organization, 2021; Tang, Comish & Kang, 2020).
Coronaviridae	The viral family that COVID-19 forms part of (Wang, Horby, Hayden & Gao, 2020).
Dialogue	Ongoing discourses occurring between two or more entities, allowing for the formation of mutually beneficial relationships, and the exchange of interesting viewpoints and ideas (Theunissen & Noordin, 2012).
Dominant coalition	The elite group of top managers tasked with running an organisation (Bowen, 2015).
Fast-food companies	Casual dining establishments where consumers can purchase fast-food, to be consumed, either on site or off-site (Mhlanga, 2018).
Integrated marketing communication	The incorporation of various communication functions to deliver cohesive messaging to stakeholders that reflect the holistic 'voice' of the brand (see Naumovska & Blazeska, 2016).
Marketing mix	Various communication functions, such as public relations, marketing, advertising, social media management, and sales, that work together to help a company reach certain objectives (see Kenton, James & Jackson, 2020).
Pandemic	The prevalence of a disease in many regions (see Morens, Folkers & Fauci, 2009).
Public relations practitioners/professionals	Practitioners tasked with fostering positive connections between a business and its diverse stakeholder groups (Ledingham, 2003).
Social media	Online websites and tools allowing for co-creational engagement between a business and its stakeholders (Bishop, 2019). These tools are also referred to as 'social networks' in this study.

Stakeholder	Any person, group, or even environment that may affect the functioning of an organisation (Freeman, 1984; Freeman, 2010).
Stakeholder-inclusive engagement	Co-creational communication that takes place between an establishment and various stakeholders, that centres around mutual value-creation and the fostering of trust with key constituents (see Taylor, 2018).
Symmetrical communication	Feedback-driven engagement that takes place between an organisation and its constituents (Grunig, 2006).
Triple bottom line	The obligations that all companies have towards the planet, profits, and people (Correia, 2019).

List of Acronyms

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
IMC	Integrated Marketing Communication
MERS-CoV	Middle East respiratory syndrome
NICD	National Institute for Communicable Diseases
PR	Public Relations
SARS-CoV-1	Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-1
SARS-CoV-2	Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2
WHO	World Health Organization

Chapter 1

Introduction and background

1.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the study's topic, questions, aim, and objectives. Herein, pertinent background information is discussed, contextualising the significance of the research, with a succinct overview of the case study and its public relations team provided. The study is then delineated, with the research parameters explicated. This chapter also provides definitions of key terms used throughout the study, with a detailed description of the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and its implications for the local fast-food market described. Lastly, this chapter provides a concise outline of the entire study.

The researcher was granted permission to identify the franchise in their submission of the study for examination, with the proviso that they omit the organisation's name in all online versions of the work. Therefore, the researcher has removed the name of the organisation in this and all online iterations of the work and refers to the establishment studied as 'Company X', 'the selected franchise', 'the business', and 'the organisation' throughout the study.

Furthermore, a few social media posts were included in the findings chapter of the unredacted thesis, to contextualise the public relations team's utilisation of selected platforms during the three lockdown levels studied. These images are also excluded from this version of the work, to avoid implicating the company directly. Interviewees are coded in this submission and the online versions of the research, with their affiliations with the franchise briefly described. One of the key reasons the researcher coded the names of their interviewees is because Lavrakas (2008) and Mamotte and Wassenaar (2015) argue that anonymity in a study may help participants feel more comfortable with sharing information honestly, without any fear or reluctance. The study's ethical considerations are further explained in chapter four, including referencing factors, data storage and management, and participant consent.

The researcher discusses the motivation of sampling a fast-food company in this study in the subsequent chapters. In the context of this work, 'fast-food franchises' are defined as casual dining establishments where prepared foods are sold to consumers, who may eat meals on, or off-site (see Mhlanga, 2018; Nagarajan, Vishnu, Govindan, Sreekumar, Srinivas, & Siddarth, 2017). These franchises form part of South Africa's food and beverages industry (see Mhlanga, 2018; Telukdarie, Munsamy & Mohlala, 2020). Moreover, 'consumers' are defined as individuals who purchase meals from fast-food establishments (Kapoor, 2017). They are essential vested groups whose support these franchises need (Kapoor, 2017; Rawlins, 2006). Lastly, the terms 'public relations practitioner' and 'public relations professional' are regularly interchanged in this study and refer to individuals tasked with fostering positive connections between an organisation and its stakeholders (Ledingham, 2003).

1.2. Background of the study

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an abundance of tragedy in its wake, with the disease adversely affecting all regions in which there are active cases (see Ozili & Arun, 2020). In addition to COVID-19 resulting in more than five million deaths by January 2022 (see Worldometer, 2022), the disease also significantly impacted the economic structures of affected territories. Baber (2020), for example, notes that the prevalence of the pandemic globally has led to a great economic downturn, more especially in developing countries, such as South Africa, with establishments that were considered 'non-essential', required to close during the hard lockdown periods in 2020 (see Battersby, 2020).

After the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) reported that South Africa had its first positive case of COVID-19 in early March 2020 (NICD, 2020), infections steadily increased, with the country's president, Cyril Ramaphosa, instituting a level-five lockdown a few weeks later (South African Government, 2020a; De Groot & Lemanski, 2021). In this study, the term 'lockdown' refers to the emergency protocols implemented by the South African government during diverse stages of the pandemic, with the country placed under different 'alert levels', based on the rapidity of transmission (see SA Coronavirus Online Resource and News Portal, 2020; South African Government, 2020a; Battersby, 2020). There were thus five different lockdown levels gradually implemented by the government at various stages of the pandemic in 2020 (see Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020; South African Government, 2020a). The diverse levels are briefly explicated as follows:

- Lockdown level five – from 27 March 2020, people could only leave their homes when they needed to purchase essential items, such as groceries and medical supplies, or when they needed medical treatment (see Battersby, 2020; South African Government, 2020a). Only people employed in the essential services could continue working on-site (South African Government, 2020a). In South Africa, 'essential' services, operational throughout the various pandemic stages, included medical services, the media, grocery outlets, transportation services, disaster management services, production and manufacturing, and electricity, water, and fuel production services, among others (ibid.).
- Lockdown level four – from 1 May 2020, some economic activity could resume, with stringent restrictions still in place (South African Government, 2020b; Ward, 2020).
- Lockdown level three – from 1 June 2020, economic and social activity could recommence, and fast-food establishments and other non-essential businesses could re-open, with some restrictions eased (see South African Government, 2020b; Greer, King, da Fonseca & Peralta-Santos, 2021).
- Lockdown level two – from 18 August 2020, restrictions on economic activity and the movement of people were further eased (South African Government, 2020b).

- Lockdown level one – from 21 September 2020, most economic activities could resume, with people still required to remain 1.5 metres away from each other while partaking in any social events (South African Government, 2020b; Jaja, Anyawu & Jaja, 2020).

In South Africa, fast-food franchises, such as Company X, were deeply affected by COVID-19 lockdown regulations because they were not allowed to operate during alert level five (South African Government, 2020b; South African Government, 2020c; Harris, 2021). Some franchises could operate on a delivery basis during alert level four in areas where infection rates were less prevalent (South African Government, 2020c). Only during lockdown level three, in June 2020, could most fast-food companies recommence operations, with consumers required to wear face masks, remain 1.5 metres away from each other, and sanitise their hands upon entering these establishments (see South African Government, 2020c; De Groot & Lemanski, 2021).

Furthermore, throughout the hard lockdown periods, there was a plethora of misinformation proliferated online about COVID-19 and the operational protocols various fast-food franchises would be adhering to during the different alert levels (see Barua, Barua, Aktar, Kabir & Li, 2020; Schmidt, Cloete, Davids, Makola, Zondi & Jantjies, 2020; Greer et al., 2021; Nguyen & Catalan-Matamoros, 2020). Misinformation can be defined as the propagation of fabricated information, with disinformation denoting the deliberate proliferation of unverified data (see Allcott, Gentzkow & Yu, 2019). Public relations professionals, who are often tasked with linking the inside of an organisation with the outside world (see Gilaninia, Taleghani & Mohammadi, 2013), thus needed to engage with consumers to inform them timeously about the functioning of their franchises during the different lockdown periods. In addition to engaging with consumers for informational purposes, it was also fundamental for these practitioners to communicate interactively about matters of importance to this stakeholder group, to continue building positive relationships with them during the hard lockdown (see Camilleri, 2021).

In this study, 'strict', 'stringent', and 'hard' lockdown periods refer to alert levels five, four, and three of the pandemic in South Africa in 2020. These three lockdown levels are studied in this research. Furthermore, the term 'stakeholder', which denotes any person, group, or environment that could affect the functioning and longevity of an organisation (see Freeman, 1984; Freeman & McVea, 2001), is used interchangeably with the terms 'constituent', 'vested party', and 'vested group', in this study.

With (public) interpersonal contact prohibited during the stricter lockdown levels, it was important for public relations practitioners to utilise social media to engage with consumers, who are important stakeholder groups to fast-food franchises (see Rawlins, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This study describes social media as online platforms utilised to facilitate engagement between an organisation and its vested groups (see Bishop, 2019; Aichner, Grunfelder, Maurer & Jegeni, 2021). A detailed look at the proliferation of these online platforms is provided in chapter two. Furthermore, the terms 'social media' and 'social networks' are utilised interchangeably in this study.

1.2.1. Overview of COVID-19 in South Africa

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) caused COVID-19, a disease that primarily affects the respiratory systems of humans (Tang et al., 2020). Wang et al. (2020) note that COVID-19 emerged from Coronaviridae, the same viral family that caused the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS-CoV) and the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV-1). There are many similarities between MERS-CoV, SARS-CoV-1, and COVID-19, with noticeable parallels between their origins and symptoms (Ali, Baloch, Ahmed, Ali & Iqbal, 2020). However, the current pandemic has caused many more deaths, infections, and widespread social and economic disruption than MERS-CoV and SARS-CoV-1 combined (Di Gennaro, Pizzol, Marotta, Antunes, Racalbuto, Veronese & Smith, 2020; Ahmed, Quadeer & McKay, 2020).

McKibbin and Fernando (2020) agree, arguing that the contagion also led to the dwindling of stocks in many countries. Goodell (2020) notes that early lockdown stages had an adverse effect on both the public and private sectors of affected regions. While locking down the country helped curb South Africa's infections, the imposed regulations further crippled the country's already struggling economy (De Villiers, Cerbone & Van Zijl, 2020; Chitiga-Mabugu, Henseler, Mabugu & Maisonnave, 2020). Furthermore, Mbandlwa (2020) notes that during the pandemic in 2020, South Africa reached its highest level of unemployment, with many non-essential businesses closing indefinitely. The fast-food market is a pertinent example of a non-essential service that experienced a decline in revenue because of the lockdown (see Statistics South Africa, 2020). Similarly, Van Heerden and Roos (2020), Chowdhury, Sarkar, Paul and Moktadir (2020), and Telukdarie et al. (2020) argue that industries associated with the trading of food, beverages, and tobacco, were sectors that were highly affected by the stricter lockdown periods in 2020, primarily because of the health and safety risks associated with their operating.

The lockdown affected the fast-food market immensely (see Chowdhury et al., 2020), with most franchises only recommencing operations in June 2020, under strict guidelines (see South African Government, 2020c). South Africa has quite an extensive fast-food market that employs many people from under-resourced communities (Mackay, Spies, Williams, Jansen van Rensburg & Petzer, 2013). For this reason, the lockdown and its various restrictions on these franchises were incredibly devastating, both economically and socioeconomically (Ajam, 2020).

1.3. Stakeholder-inclusive engagement

Even though engagement is a concept that is often mentioned in public relations literature, there is no standardised definition thereof, making its operationalisation ever more perplexing (Smith & Gallicano, 2015). Key terms related to engagement often include 'communication' and 'two-way interactions' with organisational stakeholders (Smith & Gallicano, 2015; Johnston, 2014). Furthermore, Dhanesh (2017) states that engagement is defined as interactions between a business and its stakeholders, with whom it shares pertinent interests, with communication existing on a continuum, ranging between 'control' and 'collaboration'. This description considers the oft-persuasive nature of public relations, with engagement only defined as unethical if it is inherently manipulative or unilateral (Taylor & Kent, 2014; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Furthermore, Taylor (2018) notes that public relations engagement should be practiced in a co-creational manner, creating mutual value for a company, its key stakeholders, and society through feedback-driven interactions. In this study, the researcher evaluates whether the public relations team in a selected fast-food franchise engaged with consumers in a 'stakeholder-inclusive' way by using social media to communicate with these constituents about matters of interest to them and not exclusively exchanging informational messages with this audience. Therefore, Taylor's (2018) definition of engagement is adopted in this research. Thus, in this study, 'stakeholder-inclusive' engagement is defined as feedback-driven communication between Company X and its consumers, which aids the building of mutually beneficial relationships between the franchise and these constituents.

1.4. Brief overview of Company X

Company X is a popular South African fast-food franchise established in the late 1980s in Johannesburg and currently has more than 300 active branches across the country (Whichfranchise, 2021). Additionally, the franchise, renowned for its Portuguese-style food, has more than 1000 stores operating in over thirty regions, including the United Kingdom, Canada, and Zimbabwe, to name a few (ibid.). Operating as a privately owned organisation, the franchise employs around 3500 people in South Africa, with the establishment ranked within the country's top-five biggest and most popular fast-food establishments (see Otterbach, Oskorouchi, Rogan & Qaim, 2021). Furthermore, Roberts-Lombard (2009) and Maumbe (2012) note that the organisation is in the same market as Steers, Chicken Licken, and Barcelos and describes itself as a casual, family-style dining establishment.

Company X is also renowned for its socially responsible business practices (see Wachira et al., 2020). Pertinent examples of this are the company's sourcing of local artworks to decorate each restaurant, and their use of small, Mozambican subsistence farms to supply the chillies used in the sauce the establishment is famous for (ibid.). Farmers are trained and equipped with all the necessary tools and skillsets to ensure that they remain motivated and highly productive, which, in turn, positively impacts revenue generation (See Bhardwaj, Chatterjee, Demir & Turut, 2018).

These are just two instances of Company X considering the triple bottom line and making decisions, that not only benefit stockholders and investors but various constituents with whom the organisation has relationships. Correia (2019) explains that the triple bottom line is a concept that calls for organisations to be cognisant of their obligations towards the planet, people, and profits, with revenue generation considered as only one aspect of organisational success. According to Freeman and Dmytriyev (2017), being socially responsible and considering the needs of diverse constituent groups is one way that an organisation demonstrates stakeholder-inclusive practices. In chapter three, the normative stakeholder perspective, and its interrelated relationship with corporate social responsibility

(CSR), is briefly discussed, with the latter concept briefly explicated in relation to this theory. CSR is also a key theme in the findings, discussed in chapter five.

In addition to being one of South Africa's most-loved fast-food franchises, the selected franchise is also known for its witty and interactive engagements with various stakeholder groups on social media and through their advertisements broadcasted on radio and television (Igumbor, Sanders, Puoane, Tsolekile, Schwarz, Purdy, Swart, Dura & Hawkes, 2012). The franchise rarely shies away from using social media in a fun, tongue-in-cheek way to address issues that affect South African consumers (ibid.). In this way, they effectively interact with these vested groups on social networking platforms and encourage reciprocal engagement from their consumers (ibid.). Many of the establishment's online posts illustrate how Company X has effectively utilised various platforms to engage with consumers throughout the different 2020 lockdown periods.

1.4.1. Overview of the selected franchise's public relations team

The public relations team provided much of the information discussed in this section in the pre-interview discussion that the researcher had with two of the participants. Therefore, the researcher only provides references where possible. It is vital to contextualise the size and operations of the public relations team in Company X, with the methodology chapter providing comprehensive details regarding the rationale of certain respondents being selected as interviewees.

1.4.1.1. An integrated marketing team

Although Company X is a large fast-food franchise, the organisation's public relations team is small, consisting of only two internal team members. The franchise also has a separate digital team, consisting of two people who work alongside the public relations department. The public relations and digital teams share dovetailing roles, with both departments utilising specialist external companies to carry out specific tactical tasks. These outsourced professionals are viewed as extensions of the internal digital and public relations departments.

Furthermore, the internal digital team works alongside two outsourced companies, one of which is responsible for the tongue-in-cheek engagements typically associated with Company X on social media. The other is primarily responsible for responding to complaints online. Two members of the former digital team are sampled in this project. Similarly, the internal public relations team works alongside an external agency. This agency partner carries out 'traditional' public relations functions, such as managing crisis communication, distributing press releases, and harnessing relationships with stakeholders (see Grunig, 2006).

The marketing mix within Company X, although lean, is unified, with integrated marketing communication (IMC) practiced in the franchise. The marketing mix refers to the various communication departments that help a company achieve its targets (Thabit & Raewf, 2018; Hallahan, 2007). Furthermore, IMC refers to the incorporation of various communication functions, such as marketing, social media management, advertising, sales, and public relations, to convey messaging that reflects the identity of a brand across diverse media platforms (see Naumovska & Blazeska, 2016; Valos, Habibi, Casidy, Driesener & Maplestone, 2016). Van Riel (1995) and Kitchen and Burgmann (2010) argue that the strategic incorporation of IMC practices is beneficial to a company, creating more collaboration and cooperation between different departments to ensure that organisational communication is cohesive.

1.5. Problem statement

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing hard lockdowns in South Africa negatively affected the local fast-food market, with franchises non-operational, or only partially operational, during lockdown levels, five, four, and three (see South African Government, 2020a; South African Government, 2020c; Harris, 2021). Fast-food companies contribute to over 36% of the overall income earned by South Africa's food and beverages industry and are significant contributors to the country's economy (see Statistics South Africa, 2020; South African Market Insights, 2020). Therefore, the closure of these organisations during the stricter lockdown periods negatively impacted this industry and the employees functioning within them (Mackay et al., 2013; Statistics South Africa, 2020; Mhlanga, 2018).

Furthermore, with the abundance of misinformation proliferated online about COVID-19 (see Mututwa & Matsilele, 2020) and the operational protocols that these non-essential companies were required to adhere to, it was essential for the public relations teams in these organisations to effectively utilise social media to engage with consumers (see Camilleri, 2021). Consumers are vital stakeholders that no fast-food franchise could function without (see Rawlins, 2006; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Therefore, it was essential for the public relations practitioners in these organisations to engage with these constituents during the diverse lockdown periods.

There is an abundance of research related to social media utilisation by public relations practitioners within the fast-food market (see Zhu, Anagondahalli & Zhang, 2017; Kim & Ramos, 2018; Guidry, Messner, Jin & Medina-Messner, 2015). However, what remains unclear, is how public relations practitioners in the local fast-food market in South Africa utilised social media to engage with consumers during the stringent lockdown periods in 2020. This is the intellectual puzzle that the researcher addresses by exploring one fast-food franchise and the engagements of its public relations team with consumers on social media during lockdown levels five, four, and three in 2020. This study is homogenous and does not represent all South African fast-food franchises or the public relations practitioners who function within them.

1.6. Research questions

The main research question that underpins this study is:

How did the public relations practitioners in a selected South African fast-food company use social media to engage with consumers during the stricter lockdown levels in 2020?

The secondary questions are as follows:

- Which social media platforms were primarily used by the public relations practitioners in the selected company to engage with the franchise's consumers?
- Why did the public relations team decide to use these specific social networks to engage with consumers?
- What messages did these public relations practitioners send to consumers during the three lockdown levels studied?
- To what extent (if at all) were the public relations practitioners in the selected fast-food company symmetrical in their communication with consumers on social media?

1.7. Aim and objectives

This qualitative study explores how public relations practitioners, who function in a selected fast-food franchise, used social media to engage with consumers during the stricter lockdown levels of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

To achieve the research aim, the study has the following objectives:

- To explore which social media platforms were primarily used by the public relations team in the selected franchise to engage with consumers during the hard lockdown in 2020.
- To ascertain why the public relations team decided to use specific social networks to engage with consumers during the period studied.
- To discover which messages the public relations team focused on communicating to consumers during lockdown levels five, four, and three in 2020.
- To determine whether the public relations practitioners in the franchise were symmetrical in their interactions with consumers on social media and the extent to which they were interactive in their communication with this vested group.

1.8. Overview of methodology

A succinct overview of the holistic research strategy is provided below. Chapter four presents a methodical narrative of the research process applied in this study, with justifications provided for all decisions undertaken.

1.8.1. Research approach

This is a qualitative study that is interpretivist in nature (see Dawson, 2009). This approach is well-suited to the study, which is inherently exploratory, with data gathered that focuses on the experiential viewpoints of participants (ibid.). This study is also homogenous and not representative of all fast-food establishments. This work exclusively explores the consumer engagement strategies of the selected franchise's public relations team during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 on Facebook and Twitter.

1.8.2. Research design

The exploratory case study design is used in this study, with the engagements of one fast-food organisation thoroughly evaluated (see Yin, 2012). In chapter four, the researcher explains why Company X was used as the case study for this exploration. The single case study design was primarily employed because the researcher was unable to conduct a comparative analysis using multiple fast-food companies within this mini-dissertation, considering the project's limited scope. However, this study is still valid, contributing to new knowledge within the public relations discipline.

1.8.3. Sampling strategy

Interviewees, the franchise, and Twitter and Facebook data were selected through the purposive and snowball selection strategies (see Elikan, 2016; Leighton, Kardong-Edgren, Schneidereith & Foisy-Doll, 2021). Using one fast-food company as a case was challenging because Company X has a small public relations team. Therefore, snowball selection was used to sample an adequate number of people who work alongside the public relations department. Two interviewees, the franchise, and social media content were sourced using the purposive method, with snowball sampling utilised to help the researcher select an adequate number of relevant participants who work alongside the public relations team and utilise social media to engage with consumers.

1.8.4. Data collection

Information was gathered through interviews and a thematic content analysis. Six partially structured interviews were conducted via Zoom Cloud Meetings and Microsoft Teams. The researcher asked each respondent questions about social media utilisation by the public relations department during the period studied. Content posted on the Facebook and Twitter platforms was then analysed thematically to identify which messages the public relations team sent to consumers during lockdown levels five, four, and three. Research reliability was thus established through the methodological triangulation of data (see Middleton, 2021). Furthermore, conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews was helpful in earmarking which social media posts were specifically from the public relations team before the thematic content analysis took place.

1.8.5. Data analysis

Both datasets were thematically analysed, with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach used as a guide. Data was coded manually, and interesting themes and sub-themes were derived from the information. After providing initial codes and themes to interview data, the researcher began collating social media posts found online and labelling them by date and contents. Therefore, there was some overlap in the content analysis and thematic analysis of interview data. Ultimately, data triangulation helped to establish research reliability (see Taherdoost, 2016), with clear alignment between the interview data and social media content.

1.8.6. Ethical considerations

As aforementioned, the name of the organisation and all participants has been anonymised in this version of the work, with Company X only identified in the submission of the study for examination. Data has been safely stored on three devices that only the researcher has access to and will be destroyed within five years after this study is published. All information regarding the management of data has been stipulated in the researcher's data management plan, with no person, institution, company, or reputation harmed by this work.

1.8.7. Relationship between research questions and methods

Table 1 concisely indicates the relationship between the research objectives, questions, and methods utilised. As aforementioned, semi-structured interviews have been used in conjunction with a content analysis to gather data that helped the researcher respond to the main and sub-questions, with both datasets thematically analysed (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, throughout the data-collection process, interviews were used by the researcher to earmark which social media posts were conceptualised by the public relations team, with the content analysis often used to verify data provided in the discussions. In chapters four and five, the researcher comprehensively discusses the relationship between the interview data and social media content and the correlation between the two datasets.

Table 1: Connection between research questions, objectives, and methods.

Central research question	Research Aim	Research strategy
How did the public relations practitioners in a selected South African fast-food company use social media to engage with consumers during the stricter lockdown levels in 2020?	To explore how the public relations team within Company X utilised social media to engage with consumers on social media during the stricter COVID-19 lockdown periods in South Africa in 2020.	As aforementioned, this study is qualitative in nature, with the single, exploratory case study design utilised (see Dawson, 2009; Yin, 2012). Both semi-structured interviews and a thematic content analysis are utilised to gather information regarding the utilisation of social networks by the franchise's public relations team, with the methodological triangulation of data aiding the reliability and efficacy of the work (see Middleton, 2021). The concepts of research validity and

		reliability are discussed in chapter four.
Sub-questions:	**Research objective**	**Research methods utilised**
1. Which social media platforms were primarily used by the public relations practitioners in the selected company to engage with the franchise's consumers?	To discover which social networks the franchise's public relations team used to engage with consumers. This objective, like all the others, fed into the central research aim and question.	Semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather information regarding which platforms Company X used to engage with consumers. Interviewees mentioned all platforms, both those that were utilised periodically, and platforms that were employed for specific campaigns. Additionally, the researcher verified this information by checking Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Tinder, to confirm that the company does indeed have an active presence on all the profiles mentioned during the discussions.
2. Why did the public relations team decide to use these specific social networks to engage with consumers?	To explore why specific social media platforms were utilised for consumer engagement during the period studied.	This information was gathered through semi-structured interviews, with the researcher asking pertinent questions pertaining to the rationale of specific platforms being used. Furthermore, in the literature review, the researcher briefly explores some of the ways Facebook and Twitter can be used by public relations practitioners within the fast-food market, since these specific networks are used by Company X for consumer engagement. Chapter five contrasts the findings with the literature cited.
3. What messages did these public relations practitioners send to consumers during the three lockdown levels studied?	To uncover which key messages were communicated to consumers during the stricter lockdown periods in 2020.	In addition to discovering important insights regarding social media utilisation by the selected fast-food franchise's public relations professionals through interviews and asking them outright which messages they sent consumers during the period studied, the researcher also verified their claims through

		comprehensively analysing social media posts (see Taherdoost, 2016), thereby validating the data.
4. To what extent (if at all), were the public relations practitioners in the selected fast-food company symmetrical in their communication with consumers on social media?	To find out whether the public relations team within Company X engaged in feedback-driven communication with consumers during the period studied.	This information was garnered through interviews and the content analysis. The comments under each social media post were also perused (as will be discussed in chapter four). However, the digital team mainly engages with consumers in a feedback-driven way through responding to enquiries. Therefore, it would not be conducive to analyse these comments comprehensively, since the public relations department is not prominently involved in responding to queries online, unless a crisis occurs.

1.9. Delineation of study

This study is not generalisable and does not represent all fast-food franchises or the engagement strategies of the public relations teams who function within them. Only Company X is sampled in this study. The researcher explores how the organisation's public relations team used Twitter and Facebook to communicate with consumers during the stricter lockdown periods in 2020. Only content posted during lockdown levels five, four, and three is analysed. Furthermore, while the selected organisation has a separate Twitter account where complaints are managed, called 'Talk2Company X', this page is not sampled in the study because it mainly filters content from the main platform pertaining to consumer grievances.

This study focuses on engagement, therefore filtering through complaints on the Talk2Company X page, most of which have been duplicated and shared from the main Twitter account, would not help the researcher address the study's objectives. Only content posted on the primary Facebook and Twitter pages is sampled. The methodology chapter explains the period studied and the rationale behind the researcher sampling content posted during specific months. Kaur and Pluye (2019) explain that it is vital for scholars to delineate their research to optimise results and contextualise their findings. Therefore, it was important for the researcher to discuss the study's parameters in the first chapter.

1.10. Significance of the study

Despite there being a plethora of literature published on social media utilisation in the public relations discipline (see Kent & Li, 2020; Watkins, 2017; Mavimbela, Conradie & Dondolo, 2018), there is ongoing academic debate regarding the implementation of these online tools by public relations professionals (see Valentini, 2015; Kent & Li, 2020; Capriotti, Zeler & Camilleri, 2021). There is no specific framework explicating how these platforms should ideally be used. Some public relations professionals utilise these online tools more than others, depending on the sizes and functionalities of their organisations, the extent to which integration takes place between various communication departments, stakeholder needs, and the willingness of practitioners to incorporate these platforms into their duties (see Jiang, Luo & Kulemeka, 2016; Neill & Lee, 2016; Kent, 2013; Komodromos, 2014; Robson & James, 2013).

Camilleri (2021) argues that it is essential for public relations professionals to strategically utilise social media to engage with stakeholders during organisational crises. Du Plessis (2018) agrees, noting that these platforms are ideal for truthful, transparent, and authentic communication with various vested groups. There are several ways public relations teams in the fast-food market utilise these platforms to engage with consumers and build relationships with these constituents, some of which are discussed in the next chapter (Guidry et al., 2015; Fondevila-Gascón, Rom-Rodríguez & Bernal & Gonzalez, 2017; Kim & Ramos, 2018; Zhu et al., 2017). However, Joo and Teng (2016) argue that these practitioners have failed to embrace these social networks' brand-building and engagement opportunities fully. Similarly, Robson and James (2013) note that practitioners within various industries and markets only utilise social media occasionally, when messages need to be communicated to stakeholders quickly.

There is no 'status quo' regarding the utilisation of these online tools by public relations teams, with some practitioners keener to embrace these tools than others (Becker & Lee, 2018; Mavimbela et al., 2018; Capriotti et al., 2021). Therefore, the study is salient and contributes to the advancement of additional academic debate regarding the use of these platforms by public relations practitioners in the fast-food market. Furthermore, this study adds to the pool of knowledge that promotes understanding about the importance of public relations professionals utilising social media to engage in a feedback-driven manner with stakeholders online during organisational crises. Komodromos (2014) notes that academics undertaking studies related to social media utilisation by public relations team members could help practitioners improve their consumer engagements and brand loyalty endeavours. Therefore, this study is important and valid to the public relations discipline and the fast-food market.

1.11. Chapter outline

This study is made up of six chapters.

Chapter one: Introduction and background

This chapter introduces the study, with its premise, background, aim and objectives, problem statement, and central and sub-questions explicated. Furthermore, key concepts, comprehensively explored in chapter two, are introduced, with the researcher providing a brief overview of Company X and its public relations department. The study is then delineated, with the contribution of the research to the field of public relations described. Lastly, the researcher briefly summarises every chapter in the study.

Chapter two: Literature review

Here, literature relating to the research topic is arranged in a narrative format. The arrangement of literature is guided by the key words connected to the study. Therefore, the terms 'COVID-19', 'fast-food franchises', 'public relations', 'social media', and 'stakeholder engagement' are explored, with each sub-section flowing into the next. The researcher further identifies the specific gap in the literature that their study fills.

Chapter three: Theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theory and model that frame the study are presented, with the researcher highlighting the salient aspects of each concept and their applicability within the study. In this study, the researcher decided to employ stakeholder theory (see Freeman, 1984) and the two-way symmetrical model (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984) to structure the work. The researcher cites both seminal and recent literature about these concepts in this chapter.

Chapter four: Research design and methodology

In this chapter, the researcher describes the holistic strategy utilised to conduct the study (see Liamputtong, 2020; McCombs, 2020). A summary of the methods used has been provided earlier in this chapter.

Chapter five: Findings and discussion

Here, the study's holistic findings are presented in a narrative format and analysed in relation to stakeholder theory, the two-way symmetrical model, and the literature cited in chapter two.

Chapter six: Conclusion and recommendations

This chapter concludes the study with a broad overview of the entire research process provided. The researcher also describes how every question was effectively addressed and justifies why specific methods and theories were used in the study. Lastly, the researcher recommends how future researchers could advance the topic.

1.12. Chapter summary

This chapter introduced the research topic, questions, aim and objectives, and problem statement. The case company and its public relations team were briefly discussed and contextualised. Additionally, the researcher presented some ethical considerations regarding the company being anonymised, which will be further discussed in chapter four. The research was also delineated, with its significance highlighted. Lastly, a succinct overview was provided of all the research chapters to follow.

Chapter 2

Literature review

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher presents literature related to the topic. From the research purpose statement, key words were identified, which guided the structure of this review. According to Boell and Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014), a literature review is essential to any study because it highlights what other authors have conceptualised in the past and enables scholars to find knowledge gaps that their research can fill. Here, the researcher presents a narrative, or 'traditional' literature review, chronologically introducing themes and linking them to each other sequentially (see Baumeister & Leary, 1997).

Firstly, the methods by which literature was selected are briefly explained. Thereafter, the literature is thematically presented, with each sub-section leading into the next. According to Fink (2005), presenting a narrative review of literature is an excellent way to identify current gaps in knowledge about a specific topic. The researcher then discusses the ramifications of the pandemic on South African fast-food establishments. The narrative then transitions into the essential role public relations departments play in stakeholder engagement, particularly during organisational crises, and discusses the implications of social media utilisation by these practitioners. The two final sections of the review explore what is currently known about social media utilisation by public relations teams in diverse industries, including the fast-food market. The researcher aimed to be as succinct as possible when synthesising and presenting salient literature relating to the topic.

2.2. Methodology

A plethora of online research focuses on COVID-19 and its effect on diverse sectors and the economies of various regions (Baber, 2020; Goodell, 2020; McKibbin & Fernando, 2020). It was thus a challenge to whittle down the amount of literature used in this review and to include only the most salient research on the selected topic. The five key words elucidated and expanded on in the review are 'COVID-19 and fast-food franchises', 'public relations', 'social media', and 'stakeholder engagement'. The researcher has endeavoured to systematically structure the research to allow content to flow from one section to another. Each subsection includes definitions of relevant concepts and a synthesis of important information, which rounds off each discussion (see Cronin, Ryan & Coughlan, 2008).

Additionally, Boolean operators have been used to filter results on Google Scholar; the primary search engine used to obtain literature from various databases. According to Fink (2020), Boolean operators are simple words like 'NOT', 'OR' or 'AND', used when searching for literature on online databases. Using these descriptors, along with the key words in a problem statement, can help researchers refine their searches and access data that is either as widespread or as focused as they need it to be (McGowan, Sampson, Salzwedel, Cogo, Foerster & Lefebvre, 2016). The researcher used the word

‘AND’ between key words to obtain as many results as possible before filtering them. Table 2 presents a few of the key phrases the researcher used when searching for literature online, the Boolean operator utilised, and the number of results each search received on Google Scholar. Naturally, more than just the listed searches were applied in this review, with diverse phraseologies and word combinations used to refine and filter information for the researcher to obtain the most relevant literature for their study.

Table 2: Examples of key phrases used to find literature online.

Examples of key phrases used by researcher	Boolean operator used	Number of results
COVID-19 AND misinformation	AND	2 500 000 results
Public relations AND social media	AND	3 820 000 results
COVID-19 AND South African economy	AND	81 300 results
Fast-food companies AND social media	AND	1 260 000 results
Fast-food market AND social media	AND	707 000 results
COVID-19 AND fast-food market	AND	39 700 results
Stakeholder engagement AND public relations	AND	521 000 results

Google Scholar and the Cape Peninsula University of Technology’s (CPUT) online library were primarily used to access various academic databases. Through these platforms, the researcher accessed literature on JSTOR, ResearchGate, Taylor and Francis Online, PubMed, Springer, Semantic Scholar, Academia.edu, Wiley Online Library, Science Direct, SAGE Journals, Cogitatio, EBSCOhost, and an open-access website called CORE.ac.uk. Literature focusing on South Africa’s lockdown levels and COVID-19 statistics were accessed on the WHO website, Worldometer, and various governmental online Coronavirus portals.

Both snowball and purposive selection strategies were used to access literature online. When using the purposive sampling method, the researcher selected specific journal articles written by specialists in certain fields (see Elikan, 2016), with their work highly cited. When using the snowball method, the researcher used books and journals they had already cited to find additional relevant literature for the review by perusing author reference lists (see Leighton et al., 2021). Additionally, one of the researcher’s mentors, who published several articles between 2020 and 2021 on COVID-19 and social media (see Mututwa & Matsilele, 2020), recommended the Cogitatio database as an added information source. In chapter four, when the researcher discusses the holistic research process, the purposive and snowball sampling methods are comprehensively discussed.

The researcher has endeavoured to locate literature that thematically aligns with what this project aims to address by citing articles and books that share similarities to the study undertaken. The credentials of authors and the number of citations their articles have were additional factors that were considered before the researcher cited them (see Thon & Jucks, 2016). However, an article may have been used if it was particularly pertinent to the study and published in the last three years without many citations. Furthermore, recent publications were cited, except in cases where foundational concepts were defined and explored. It was also crucial for the researcher to cite journals that have been peer-reviewed (see Masic, 2013), with cited authors employing qualitative methods that share similarities to the research strategies that this study utilises.

In the following sub-sections, the reviewed literature is presented, starting with an overview of the impact of COVID-19 on the local fast-food market in South Africa.

2.3. Effects of COVID-19 on the local fast-food market

Despite many fast-food franchises operating during the level-three lockdown (South African Government, 2020c; Lacombe, Quintela, Liao & Wu, 2020), many guidelines regulated the safety protocols these companies needed to adhere to. The protection and safety of staff members and consumers were vital, with franchises required to close for several days if positive cases were reported on-site (see Harris, 2021; Greer et al., 2021). Furthermore, these franchises could only trade between specific hours and were required to end their business days earlier than usual (South African Government, 2020c). The effects of these companies being non-operational, or only moderately operational during specific lockdown periods, was significantly negative, leading to a revenue decrease of more than 1.3% for the fast-food market in 2020 (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

These franchises are significant contributors to South Africa's food and beverages sector (see Ronquest-Ross, Vink & Sigge, 2015). In 2018 alone, these establishments created an income valued at 36% of the holistic revenue earned by this industry (South African Market Insights, 2020). Further to this, Habanabakize (2020) notes that in 2019, South African fast-food franchises generated a yearly revenue of more than two billion rand. These businesses also provide stable incomes to many of the country's unskilled and semi-skilled workers (Mackay et al., 2013), making them an economic asset in South Africa (Jeke & Wanjuu, 2021).

2.3.1. Threats to the fast-food market

Although fast-food franchises have the potential to foster growth in the South African economy, this market is also significantly volatile and vulnerable to numerous factors that could hinder its success (Mhlanga, 2018). Multiple factors influence the success of fast-food franchises. These factors include competition, the threat of new entrants selling better foods, consumer and supplier bargaining power, and other outlets selling the same meals (Porter, 2008; Dobbs, 2014). Many factors affect the growth of fast-food establishments (Wingrove & Urban, 2017), which is why franchises must establish themselves as trusted brands that consumers are familiar with (Tan, Ismail & Rasiah, 2011). Symmetrical communication between these franchises and their consumers, facilitated by public relations professionals (Grunig, 2011; Grunig, 2009; Kent & Taylor, 2002), is a critical way to foster trust and positive relationships with these stakeholders (see Lin, Wu & Chang, 2011; Farooqui & Alwi, 2019).

Consistent consumer engagement was especially pertinent during the hard lockdown periods of the pandemic, with social networks utilised as vital tools for these interactions (Chen, Riantama & Chen, 2021). Utilising social media during the lockdown also helped fast-food franchises give a ‘voice’ to their consumers, which, in turn, helped managers mine data on the overall satisfaction of these stakeholders, without interpersonal contact necessary (ibid.). Moreover, Camilleri (2021) notes that it was essential for the public relations teams in all organisations to strategically utilise social media to engage symmetrically with stakeholders, mainly because the pandemic was an unprecedented global health crisis.

From the literature, it is vital to reiterate that the pandemic and South Africa’s ensuing lockdowns negatively impacted the fast-food market and how consumers interacted with these businesses during the various alert levels (see Harris, 2021). Interaction with consumers using social media was essential for these businesses to determine consumer satisfaction (Chen et al., 2021) and ensure that this stakeholder group's various needs were met (see Martin-Neuninger & Ruby, 2020). There has been some research conducted on consumer interactions with food-related businesses on social media (Hanaysha, 2016; Holmberg, Chaplin, Hillman & Berg, 2016; Parsons, 2013; Chung, Vieira, Donley, Tan, Jean-Louis, Gouley & Seixas, 2021; Stephen, 2016; Šerić & Praničević, 2017). Similarly, there has been research conducted on the social media strategies of fast-food companies and how they engage with consumers (see Peeroo & Owodally, 2020). However, a paucity of scholarship examines how public relations professionals in the local, South African fast-food market used social media during the lockdown in 2020. Additionally, it is unclear whether public relations professionals within the local fast-food market facilitated engagements between their franchises and consumers using social media during the pandemic in 2020 or simply disseminated crisis communication messages to this stakeholder group during the hard lockdown. This is the gap that this study fills.

Due to the oft perplexing guidelines regulating the lockdown protocols fast-food franchises adhered to (Nhamo, Dube & Chikodzi, 2020), it was important for public relations teams to engage with consumers interactively (see Camilleri, 2021). In addition to these non-essential companies engaging with consumers for practical purposes, regular interaction, facilitated by public relations professionals, was also important for the ongoing management of connections with essential constituents (ibid.).

2.4. Public relations defined

There are various definitions of public relations, and as the profession evolved, these descriptions became more convoluted and interconnected with other functions within the communication discipline (Grunig, 2009; Smith, 2012; Smith & Place, 2013). In many organisations, the public relations department still shares a dovetailing relationship with the marketing, advertising, sales and, more recently, the digital subdivisions in the organisations they function within (Gesualdi, 2019). While these interconnected roles often fortify cohesive organisational communication and brand building, integrating various roles has also led to the increased encroachment of public relations departments (see Naumovska & Blazeska, 2016; Gesualdi, 2019). However, the public relations function is unique and vital in all organisations, be they private, public, non-governmental or governmental entities (Theaker, 2016; Grunig, 2006; Lauzen, 1991). Furthermore, Naumovska and Blazeska (2016) note that the inclusion of these practitioners in the marketing mix aids authentic business communication endeavours and catalyses honest engagements with stakeholders. However, because of the inherent hybridity of the field, it is often challenging to operationalise the function (Vieira & Grantham, 2014; Brunner, 2009; Seitel, 2017).

According to Harlow (1976), public relations refers to effective communication for the purposes of fostering and maintaining 'goodwill'. This definition was used when the field was intrinsically focused on public manipulation (see Hutton, 1999). However, a similar definition was suggested in the mid- 2000s by Cameron, Pang and Jin (2007), who stated that public relations is interconnected with strategic conflict resolution, where practitioners endeavour to meet the needs of the companies they function within and, *when possible,* other stakeholders. A significant facet of this definition is its divergence from many key definitions in modern public relations and stakeholder literature in that it does not prioritise the needs of an organisation's constituents.

In contrast, Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006) note that the public relations discipline is beneficial in identifying, creating, and managing positive, symbiotic connections between an establishment and its key stakeholders. Cutlip et al. (2006) also draw on literature from Ledingham and Bruning (2000) and Freeman (1984). They (Cutlip et al. 2006), note that cultivating positive connections between a business and its diverse constituents is crucial to the success of an organisation. Therefore, the definition by Cutlip et al. (2006), which offers a concise, stakeholder-inclusive description of the inherently pluralistic public relations discipline, is adopted in this study.

2.4.1. Evolution of public relations

A myriad of research describes public relations professionals as organisational members who strategically build relationships between their client companies and key stakeholders (Ledingham, 2003; Ki, Kim & Ledingham, 2015; Theunissen & Sissons, 2017; Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). In this role, practitioners are primarily tasked with facilitating open, dialogic engagements between a company and its stakeholders, helping the dominant coalition make socially responsible decisions that benefit the business commercially (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Ledingham & Bruning, 1998). Bowen (2015) explains that the dominant coalition refers to the small group of top managers tasked with running a company. These managers, who are sometimes referred to as the 'C-suite', 'board of directors', or 'executive committee', are the top decision-makers in a company (Kanihan, Hansen, Blair, Shore & Myers, 2013; Dozier & Broom, 1995; Knight & Sweetser, 2021).

While public relations professionals are often seen as managers of organisational relationships, the public relations discipline did not always centre around creating mutually advantageous connections based on trust and symbiotic value-creation (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Before the 1960s, the field was primarily used as a tool of public manipulation and unilateral communication, with no feedback sought from stakeholders (Clark, 2000). Around the late 1960s, with the proliferation of activism standing against greedy and exclusively shareholder-centric conglomerates, the public relations discipline paradigmatically evolved (ibid.). A 'paradigm' refers to the traditionally accepted theoretical understanding of certain concepts and philosophies, in both the social and physical sciences, during specific periods, that fortify solutions and problems to real-world issues facing practitioners (Kuhn, 1970; Kuhn, 1962; Van Zyl, 2015). The field of public relations thus drastically shifted from being exclusively persuasive to dialogue-centric, with two-way communication often considered as the most ethical form of stakeholder engagement (Grunig & Kim, 2021; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Kent & Taylor, 2002). There were, however, still organisations that practiced what Grunig and Hunt (1984) refer to as 'unethical' public relations practices by continuing to engage in one-way communication and public manipulation.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, corporations faced increasing pressure to engage in CSR practices. Various authors (Fernando, Scott & Munichiello, 2021; He & Harris, 2020; Carroll, 1999; Hopkins, 2014) note that CSR is a model of organisational self-regulation, with businesses required to be cognisant of their responsibilities towards the economy, their stakeholders, the environment, and communities and societies affected by the existence of an organisation. After many businesses started realising the importance of incorporating CSR into their business practices to build mutual trust with key stakeholders (Freeman & Dmytriyev, 2017), the strategic role of public relations emerged (Steyn, 2011).

The triple bottom line and CSR concepts are strongly interlinked with stakeholder theory. All three constructs presuppose that the dominant coalition should adopt stakeholder-inclusive business practices (Dmytriyev, Freeman & Hörisch, 2021). This is one of the reasons consistent engagements, facilitated by public relations practitioners, is essential to organisational success (Freeman, Kujala & Sachs, 2017; Grunig, 2009; Grunig, 2006). Additionally, the King IV report states that to be socially responsible, organisations are expected to function utilising the stakeholder-inclusivity concept, ensuring that all ventures undertaken are mutually beneficial for a business and its key vested groups (Institute of Directors Southern Africa, 2016).

2.4.2. Role of public relations practitioners in stakeholder engagement

The evolution of public relations led to these professionals taking on three broad roles in organisations: technical, managerial, and strategic (Steyn, 2011). In the technical role, practitioners functioning at the lowest level of public relations are tasked with information dissemination and implementing decisions made by the dominant coalition (ibid.). Public relations managers operate at the 'meso' level within their companies and resolve issues with stakeholders, play an advisory role to the dominant coalition, and participate in policy making (ibid.). Lastly, at the strategic level, practitioners operate at the societal level in their companies by helping the dominant coalition make decisions that are both socially responsible and beneficial to its growth (ibid.).

All three roles involve practitioners engaging with stakeholders, to a certain extent, and resolving issues with these constituents (see Steyn, 2011). According to Singleton and Groenewald (2003), the efficient resolution of stakeholder issues may help organisations maintain mutually beneficial relationships with key constituents, aiding organisational success. Co-creational, interactive engagements play a massive role in conflict resolution (Taylor, 2018; Alamanos, Rolston & Papaioannou, 2021).

As per the literature, the public relations discipline is ever-evolving (Hutton, 1999). For this reason, there are diverse ways this function may be practiced in organisations (Taylor & Kent, 2014). During the hard lockdown periods, the utilisation of social media for engagement and the resolution of issues that occurred online was vital for the survival of many organisations (Camilleri, 2021). Social media, however, like public relations, may be operationalised in diverse ways, with the term challenging to define universally.

2.5. Social media defined

There are various definitions of social media (Aichner et al., 2021), with many platforms available for online audiences to utilise. Therefore, the inherent heterogeneity of these tools and their ever-evolving nature make them challenging to define. However, as mentioned in chapter one, Bishop's (2019) description is adopted since this study inherently focuses on consumer engagement. Bishop (2019) states that social media, often referred to as 'social networks', are online tools that facilitate symmetrical engagement between groups. This engagement could occur between individuals or between a business and its key constituents (ibid.). This definition is valid and interlinks with the two-way symmetrical model discussed in chapter three. Although Bishop's (2019) definition does present a simplified understanding of how social networking platforms may be utilised, the salient aspect of this description is 'two-way engagement', which is a key construct in this study. This concise, salient definition is thus applicable to the research undertaken.

2.5.1. Overview of social networks

The proliferation of social media has drastically changed the way organisations engage with their stakeholders, with more collaborative, two-way communication now possible (Dijkmans, Kerkhof & Beukeboom, 2015; Leonardi, Huysman & Steinfield, 2013). However, the idea of 'online networking platforms' is not new, with the first official social media channel, Six Degrees, established in the late 1990s (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson & Seymour, 2011). In 1997, when the networking site was created, more than 1.7% of the global population had access to the internet. After that, in 1999, the world's largest search engine, Google, officially launched (Fuchs, 2021). Unfortunately, Six Degrees became insolvent in 2001, having just over three million users at its pinnacle (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011).

In the middle to late 2000s, however, there was a rise in the utilisation of social media, with Facebook launched in 2004 and Twitter emerging in 2006 (Lutttrell, 2019). A report by Statista, released in July 2021, shows that with nearly three billion users, Facebook is still the most-used social networking channel globally, followed by YouTube and WhatsApp (Statista, 2021). Figure 1, cited from Statista (2021), presents the top ten social media platforms globally, along with the number of users each platform has.

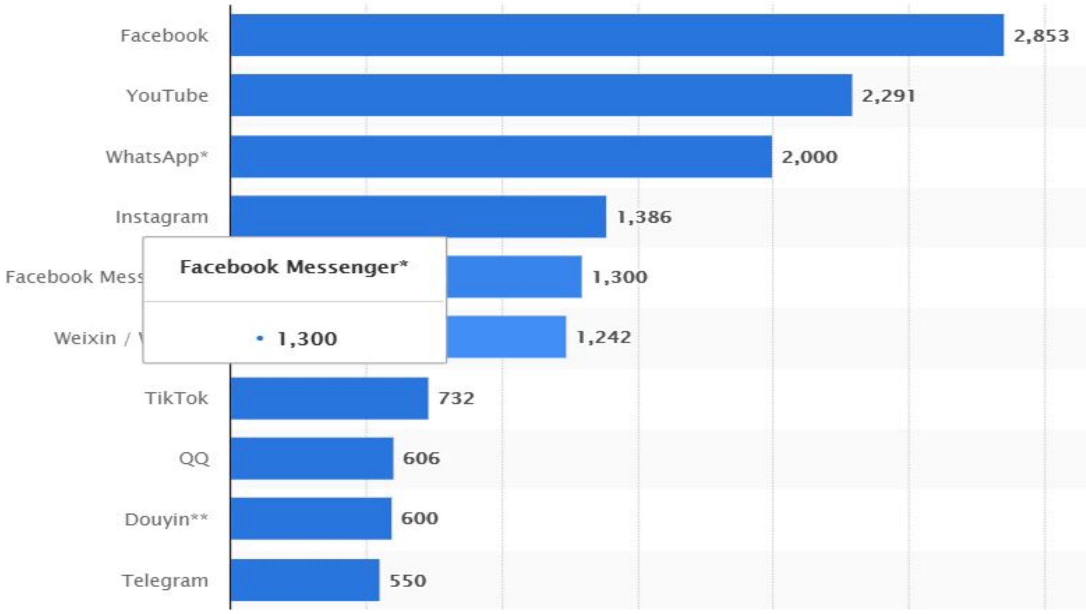

Figure 1: Top social media platforms globally and their monthly active users (Statista, 2021).

As aforementioned, there are many social media platforms in existence and several ways these tools could be utilised by businesses and the public relations teams within them (Kent & Li, 2020). Therefore, it would not be viable for the researcher to present an overview of every social media platform ever launched, or the many ways they could each be used. For this reason, only brief, concise descriptions are provided about the social media platforms that Company X used during the hard lockdown in 2020. The salient public social media platforms used by Company X are therefore:

2.5.1.1. Facebook

Created by Mark Zuckerberg in the mid-2000s, this platform continues to be the most prominent social media channel on the planet (Gwena, Chinyamurindi & Marange, 2018). There are many ways businesses and individuals can use this online platform (Hoffmann, Proferes & Zimmer, 2018). On Facebook, multimedia content can be created, shared, and interacted with, personal and group messages can be exchanged, and video content can be live-streamed (Bonsón Ponte, Carvajal-Trujillo & Escobar-Rodríguez, 2015). Users can also connect by becoming 'friends' on the platform or by 'following' one another.

According to various authors (Gaber & Wright, 2014; Wright, Gaber, Robin & Cai, 2017; Šerić & Praničević, 2017; Curran, Graham & Temple, 2011; Yang, Ren & Adomavicius, 2019), fast-food organisations can use this platform to make important announcements, build the reputations of their brands, advertise products and services, monitor competitors, foster relationships, and engage symmetrically with stakeholders. There are many other ways this platform can be used in the fast-food market because of its inherent versatility.

2.5.1.2. Twitter

Launched in 2006, this channel was initially marketed as a 'micro-blogging' platform, where users could share their views and interact with others (Rogstad, 2016). However, like all social media platforms, Twitter evolved, serving as a means of online engagement between people and a space where multimedia content could be shared and interacted with (see Maclean, Jones, Carin-Levy & Hunter, 2013). Individual posts, known as 'tweets', shared on this platform are pithier than on Facebook, with users limited to a maximum of 280 characters (Kim & Hammick, 2017). Users can establish networks by 'following' each other on Twitter and forward posts to their networks through 'retweets' (see Holmberg & Thelwell, 2014). Additionally, audiences can strategically hashtag certain words and phrases to draw attention to specific topical events or issues (Maclean et al., 2013).

Fast-food franchises can use this platform for consumer engagement and relationship and brand building (Harrigan, Miles, Fang & Roy, 2020; Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2017). Additionally, since Twitter is a platform where information spreads quickly, this channel is often used by public relations practitioners to quickly refute claims about their client companies and resolve issues with stakeholders swiftly (Linvill, McGee & Hicks, 2012; Kim & Hammick, 2017; Apuke & Tunca, 2019). These practitioners have also been known to use this platform to draw attention to specific matters or publicise events (Adi, 2015), with Saffer, Sommerfeldt and Taylor (2013) stating that Twitter can impact relationships between stakeholders and companies.

2.6. Impact of social media on stakeholder engagement

The rise in social media utilisation has significantly impacted the way people engage with businesses (Lipschultz, 2018; Capriotti et al., 2021). With these online platforms' fast-paced, collaborative nature, more emotive, two-way communication is possible between organisations and their key stakeholders (Camilleri, 2021). Additionally, various authors (Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy & Goodman, 2019; Grégoire, Salle & Tripp, 2015; Wang, Yu & Wei, 2012) note that social networking sites have given power back to consumers and changed the way they interact with organisations, with more symmetrical communication not only *possible* but *necessary* for relationship building with this stakeholder group. During the stricter lockdown periods of the COVID-19 pandemic, when many non-essential businesses were temporarily closed, it was essential for these organisations to effectively use social media to connect with key stakeholder groups, such as consumers (Camilleri, 2021). Rosen (2012) notes that stakeholders are no longer passive entities who blindly absorb information disseminated to them by organisations or the media. These constituents are now actively involved in the communication continuum, making their voices heard about any matters of discontent (ibid.).

Similarly, Hoffman and Lutz (2014) note that the proliferation of social networking sites has bolstered stakeholder engagement with organisations, with more interactivity required from businesses. Coombs (2007) further recommends that public relations practitioners effectively use these platforms to build the reputation of the organisations they work with and manage relationships with vested parties before organisational crises occur. Du Plessis (2018) agrees but argues that an organisation's public relations team could also use social media to build connections with constituents *during* crises, leading to beneficial, longstanding relationships between these parties and the relevant companies. Additionally, Read, Robertson, McQuilken and Ferdous (2019) argue that brands can build trust with consumers through engaging with them on Twitter and showing these constituents that the company values them.

Conversely, Komodromos (2014) argues that many public relations practitioners prefer social media engagement roles to be played by outsourced specialists or digital managers in an organisation. Komodromos's (2014) study is in sharp contrast with Neill and Lee (2016) and Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018). They note that the increased utilisation of social media has completely transformed the way practitioners engage with stakeholders and has led to increased engagement between businesses and key vested groups (ibid.). While the proliferation of social networks has empowered consumers to share their experiences with certain brands (Barnes, 2008), practitioners need to monitor these channels consistently due to the fast-paced nature of these platforms. When engaging with stakeholders online, organisations need to know their key audiences to create targeted, meaningful dialogues with these groups (see Bourne, 2016).

As per the literature (Dolan et al., 2019), social media has drastically altered the way businesses engage with stakeholders, with these platforms effectively breaking down barriers between companies and their key constituents. Notably, however, social media utilisation in the public relations discipline remains an anomaly, with no consistent framework governing how these practitioners should use these online platforms. Furthermore, there has been much debate about social media utilisation by public relations professionals within the fast-food market. Some researchers argue that utilising these platforms for stakeholder engagement has been overly praised and insufficiently critiqued (see Valentini, 2015).

2.7. Social media utilisation by PR practitioners

Before the dawn of the internet and social networking sites, there was a lack of immediacy in organisation-stakeholder communication (Duhé, 2017; Rosen, 2012). Various authors (Kent & Li, 2020; Phillips and Young, 2009; Kent, 2013; Neill & Lee, 2016) argue that the proliferation of social networking platforms has meant that traditional, long-form public relations practices needed to be altered, with practitioners functioning as facilitators of feedback-driven interactions between organisations and key constituents. Similarly, Grunig (2009) argues that social media could potentially help the public relations function become more strategic and dialogic. Kent and Li (2020) likewise suggest that much of the social media literature regarding public relations has focused on effective brand and relationship building, crisis communication, fundraising attempts, information dissemination, and influencer partnerships.

Joo and Teng (2016) and Becker and Lee (2018) suggest that while many public relations professionals value social media, they have not truly embraced the engagement, relationship building, and reputation management opportunities presented through utilising these platforms. Similarly, in an interesting exploratory cross-case study by Robson and James (2013), where five public relations professionals from diverse industries were interviewed, most respondents noted that they did not utilise social media strategically and only used these online networks on an ad hoc basis. Practitioners have also reported that their perceived reluctance to embrace and incorporate social media into their daily practices stems from their perceptions that these platforms are time-consuming, stressful, and cumbersome to constantly monitor, with privacy on these channels a concern (Mavimbela et al., 2018). The production of organisational content, brand building, engagement with stakeholders, and the refuting of online claims online needs to happen a lot faster on social media, with public relations practitioners sometimes overstretched in their attempts to build strong relationships online (ibid.). Further to this, Budree, Fietkiewicz and Lins (2019) note that the inherent hybridity of social media makes it vital for public relations practitioners to know who the key online stakeholders of their client companies are to strategically target engagements to these users and their needs.

As per the literature (Joo & Teng, 2016; Kent & Li, 2020; Mavimbela et al., 2018; Robson & James, 2013; Luo, Jiang et al., 2016), social media utilisation by public relations practitioners in various industries and markets remains a widely contested issue, with many practitioners not fully immersing themselves in the opportunities presented by these tools. Other scholars, such as Neill and Lee (2016), Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018), and Saffer et al. (2013), argue that social media has fundamentally changed how public relations is practiced at all three organisational levels. Furthermore, public relations professionals' utilisation of social media has led to research focusing on the principles of engagement, transparency, and authenticity. Transparency studies explore how open and honest a company is with their stakeholders online (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014). Authenticity scholarship examines how ‘genuine’ organisations are in their online communication (ibid.). Finally, engagement studies focus on whether businesses use social media to practice symmetrical communication with key constituents (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014; Kent & Li, 2020).

2.7.1. Diversification of social media uses

Social media and the many ways these platforms can be utilised has led to public relations practitioners being less dependent on journalists to publish organisational news (Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018). Practitioners can use these platforms to engage with stakeholders, build the brands of their client companies, publish company updates, manage diverse organisational relationships, and monitor competitors and social media trends (Carim & Warwick, 2013; Mavimbela et al., 2018; Kent & Li, 2020; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Troise & Camilleri, 2021). These platforms could also potentially help public relations teams ascertain stakeholder feelings about an establishment through engagement posts and polls before these strategists feed that information to the dominant coalition (see El Kasim & Idid, 2017; Steyn, 2011). Additionally, the strategic utilisation of influencers is also a growing trend within organisations for brand and relationship building. According to various authors (see Wielki, 2020; Berne-Manero & Marzo-Navarro, 2020; Appel, Grewal, Hadi & Stephen, 2020), influencers are people who utilise the internet and social media for marketing specific products and services or for raising awareness about issues in society.

During the hard lockdown periods, it was vital for public relations practitioners to find innovative ways to engage with stakeholders and manage communication crises online (Wong, Ho, Olusanya, Antonini & Lyness, 2020; Camilleri & Isaias, 2021). Furthermore, with the proliferation of misinformation online during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, it was essential for practitioners to monitor social media, to defuse fake news online about the organisations they functioned within (Cinelli, Quattrociocchi, Galeazzi, Valensise, Brugnoli, Schmidt, Zola, Zollo & Scalla, 2020; Mahoney & Tang, 2017; Sharma & Goyal, 2018; Barua et al. 2020; Staunton, Swanepoel & Labuschaigne, 2020). There are many other ways these practitioners could utilise social media, with these platforms ever-evolving and flexible to the needs of various businesses (see Kent & Li, 2020; Grunig, 2009).

According to a 2021 report released by Hootsuite, there are 4.48 billion active social media users (Kemp, 2021). This effectively means that more than half of the global population are online and actively use social networking sites. For this reason, public relations professionals need to incorporate these tools into their practices and strategically utilise them to achieve organisational objectives (Kent & Li, 2020; Grunig, 2009). During the first few months of the pandemic in 2020, many people spent significantly more time utilising various social networking platforms for information consumption, which often led to the propagation of misinformation online (see Abbas, Wang, Su & Ziapour, 2021; Kligler-Vilenchik, Stoltenberg, de Vries Kedem, Gur-Ze'ev, Waldherr & Pfetsch, 2020).

2.7.2. Social media use by PR practitioners in the fast-food market

There are several ways public relations professionals in the fast-food market can utilise social networks (see Alrawabdeh, Alheet, Al-Dwiry & Hamand, 2020; Mavimbela et al., 2018). Not only have these platforms created new brand-building opportunities for these practitioners, but they have also led to these professionals being able to connect consumers to a franchise in a more emotive, interactive way (see Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2017). Kim and Ramos (2018) argue that public relations professionals in the fast-food market can use these platforms to build relationships with consumers and other critical stakeholders by engaging with them about their organisations' CSR initiatives. This is also advocated for by Morsing and Schultz (2006) and Dodo, Baha, Bukar and Zara (2016). They note that using diverse platforms to engage symmetrically about CSR initiatives is a central way for public relations practitioners to foster trust and relationships with stakeholders (ibid.).

Furthermore, Zhu et al. (2017) note that these practitioners can use social media to manage organisational crises. Guidry et al. (2015) agree, arguing that platforms such as Instagram should be used as crisis monitoring and crisis response tools. Additionally, these authors (Kent & Li, 2020; Camilleri, 2021) advocate for the strategic utilisation of these platforms by public relations professionals in various markets during crises, with responsive, feedback-driven communication by these practitioners often considered the 'gold standard' in terms of engagement. During the stricter lockdowns in South Africa, it was essential for public relations practitioners in the fast-food market to effectively utilise social media to connect with consumers.

2.8. Chapter summary

In this chapter, the researcher presented salient research related to the topic by segmenting the key words linked to the research aims and elucidating them as concisely as possible. The terms 'COVID-19', 'fast-food franchises', 'public relations', 'stakeholder engagement', and 'social media' were thus crucial phrases that were unpacked, with the researcher firstly conducting a broad overview of each key word and then linking them all in the final sub-sections. Additionally, the researcher identified the gap they sought to fill with this study and analysed what is currently known about their selected topic.

Chapter 3

Theoretical framework

3.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the theoretical lens through which the study is framed. In this research, stakeholder theory is utilised in tandem with the two-way symmetrical model to structure the study in its entirety and interpret the results thereof. In previous chapters, it is evident that these two phenomena are interweaved within every aspect of the study's formation. However, the origins of these two phenomena were never fully explored, with mere one-line descriptions provided to explain certain constructs related to them. The researcher has tried to utilise appropriate theoretical concepts in this project since these authors (Lederman & Lederman, 2015; Green, 2014) have argued that choosing suitable phenomena through which a study can be structured is essential in legitimising academic works.

As discussed in previous chapters, the underlying theme in this study is consumer engagement on social media. Stakeholder theory is thus helpful in exploring the relationship between Company X and its consumers, who are key external constituents the organisation would not be able to function without (see Rawlins, 2006). Likewise, the two-way symmetrical model is instrumental to this study, supporting a key construct of the research, which is feedback-driven engagement between the franchise and its consumers, catalysed by public relations professionals (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Despite stakeholder theory and the two-way model being conceptualised more than thirty years ago, these concepts are still applicable in the public relations domain and related fields (see Morsing & Schultz, 2006; Du Plessis, 2018; Hörisch, Schaltegger & Freeman, 2020). The researcher thus cites seminal and contemporary literature in this chapter that critique and advocate for using these two concepts by public relations practitioners and explain how these two phenomena apply to Company X. The researcher firstly presents an overview of stakeholder theory, its diverse facets, and its applicability to the study. After that, the two-way symmetrical model and its fundamental underpinnings are explored. Both concepts are vital in interpreting the results discussed in chapter five.

3.2. Overview of stakeholder theory

According to stakeholder theory, developed in 1984 by American philosopher, Edward Freeman, all establishments have mutually reliant relationships with a variety of internal and external parties, which can affect organisational functioning, either directly or inadvertently, and are also affected to varying degrees, by an establishment's existence (Parmar, Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Purnell & de Colle, 2010; Freeman & McVea, 2001; Freeman, 1984). Despite being considered the 'grandfather' of stakeholder theory, Freeman points out that this concept was initially built on the longstanding work of American theorists James Emshoff, Richard Mason, and Ian Mitroff (Freeman & McVea, 2001). These authors (Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Mitroff & Emshoff, 1979) suggest that to evade organisational crises, managers should conduct ‘stakeholder analyses’, to determine the views of all vested parties, and not exclusively shareholders, before business decisions are made (see Freeman & McVea, 2001). Through the evolution of this theory, different academics have proposed varying definitions of what a ‘stakeholder’ is. Freeman’s broad description of stakeholders, however, which posits that this term refers to environments, groups, and people who can impact the functioning of an organisation, and are, similarly affected by an establishment’s operations (Freeman, 1984), continues to be widely cited in contemporary academic literature. This normative definition is thus adopted in the study.

Challenging the ideological standpoints of American economist, Milton Friedman, who suggested that all organisations should adopt stockholder-first management techniques, and function exclusively to increase profits (see Schwartz & Saiia, 2012), Freeman argues that all establishments are made up of various internal and external stakeholders, whom businesses should be cognisant of in their decision-making (Harrison, Freeman & Abreu, 2015). Consequently, the stakeholders of an organisation depend on the type of business in operation, its essential functionalities, the locale of operations, and who the organisation's target audiences are (see Benn et al., 2016; Fernando, 2021). Stakeholders could therefore encompass consumers, stockholders, the media, students, surrounding communities, bondholders, contractors, the government, competitors, suppliers, trade unions, activists, investors, and employees who are affected by the functioning of an organisation (see Keremidchiev, 2021; D’Souza, 2021).

Moreover, this theory suggests that for a business to be successful holistically, mutual value-creation for organisations and their stakeholders is needed (Freeman, 2010; D’Souza, 2021; Signori, San-Jose, Retolaza & Rusconi, 2021). Through this lens, profitability is merely one of the attributes of an efficient business, with relationship building with key vested groups paramount to a company’s longevity (Vidal, Burman & van Buren, 2015). To that end, stakeholder theory can be applied to any organisation, including fast-food establishments, with Alrawabdeh et al. (2020) noting that its adoption in these franchises is essential in rebuilding trust during organisational crises. Figure 2, adopted from Donaldson and Preston (1995:69), illustrates the traditional model of stakeholder theory, demonstrating the inter-reliant relationships organisations share with various internal and external entities.

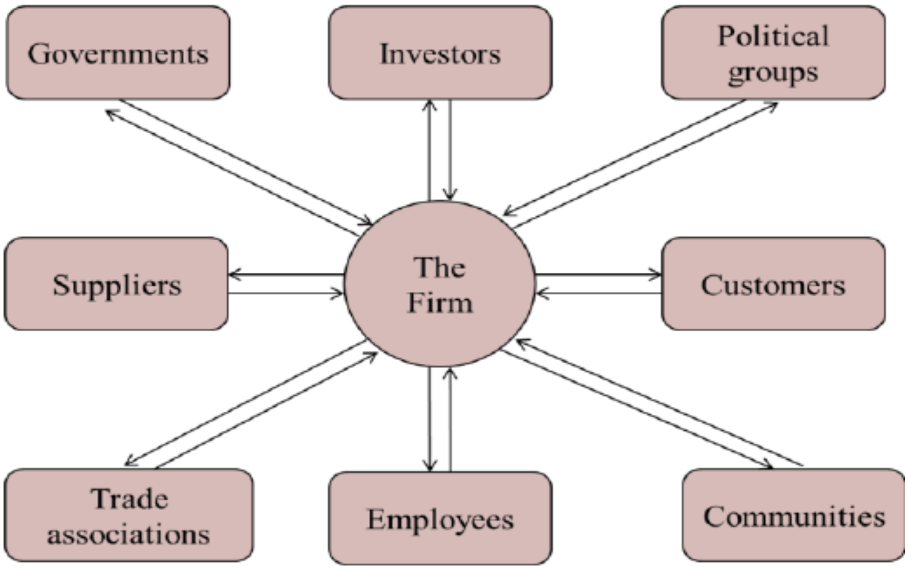

Figure 2: A traditional stakeholder theory model illustrating that companies share mutually reliant relationships with their key constituents (Donaldson & Preston, 1995:69).

3.3. Diversification of stakeholder approaches

Although Freeman's traditional stakeholder perspective is still extensively cited in literature spanning public relations, business ethics, management, and communication, there continues to be widespread debate about how this concept should be approached and pragmatically applied within organisations (see Hasnas, 2012; Miles, 2017). There is a litany of diverse stakeholder approaches, and the researcher cannot explicate all interpretations and their respective facets within this study. However, seminal work in stakeholder theory is that of Donaldson and Preston (1995), which continues to be cited in contemporary stakeholder literature (Getz & van Niekerk 2019; Freeman, Phillips & Sisodia, 2018). According to these scholars, there are three interconnected approaches to applying this theory (see Donaldson & Preston, 1995). However, the classical definition provided by Freeman (1984) is still the essence of the theory in all its typologies. The three approaches are described as follows:

- The normative typology suggests that an organisation is ethically obligated to consider the needs of diverse stakeholder groups, irrespective of whether these constituents play a direct role in an organisation's functioning or growth.
- The descriptive typology explores the inter-reliant connections between an establishment and its constituents. It seeks to determine the extent to which each vested group can affect an organisation's functioning.

- The instrumental typology presupposes that the dominant coalition within an organisation needs to build connections with key vested groups to foster business growth and profit maximisation. Additionally, this approach suggests that failing to engage with stakeholders or to address their concerns could be detrimental to a business (see De Colle, 2005).

According to De Colle (2005), organisations pragmatically utilise a combination of the three approaches in their business practices. As mentioned in chapter one, Company X engages in stakeholder-inclusive business practices (see Wachira et al., 2020). This is evident in their consideration of various constituents' needs and their interactive engagements with consumers on social networking platforms. With these reasons in mind, the researcher opted to adopt the normative stakeholder approach to this project, which emphasises the ethical obligations of businesses towards various vested parties, both internal and external (Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984).

The researcher is aware that it is beyond the study's parameters to make presumptions about the selected franchise's holistic business practices and the reasoning behind their CSR endeavours. It would therefore be unfair for the researcher to simply view the practices of this organisation as altruistic in nature. However, in the context of this study, the normative stakeholder approach is suitable to this project.

3.4. Classification and categorisation of stakeholders

Despite Freeman's (1984) definition of stakeholders continually applied in modern literature spanning many disciplines, it is necessary to delineate further *who* these vested groups are. Critics of this theory, such as Miles (2017), note that Freeman's longstanding definition of stakeholders is far too ambiguous and offers an oversimplified view of business relationships. There is also widespread debate about whether the environment should be considered as an authentic stakeholder (see Phillips & Reichart, 2000; Pactwa & Wozniak, 2020).

The need for businesses to effectively categorise their stakeholders is emphasised by Rawlins (2006), who notes that classifying these constituents is vital because it would not be viable for managers to consider all vested groups before making decisions. Furthermore, knowing who an organisation's key constituents are can help public relations professionals create specific messaging for a company's target audiences (ibid.). The researcher briefly describes a few salient categorisation systems below. There are many others to consider (see Phillips, 2003; Barney, 2018; Fassin, 2009; Hill & Jones, 1992), but the researcher aims to exclusively highlight *some* of the approaches that have been considered prominent in the transformation of stakeholder theory.

3.4.1. Clarkson's primary and secondary approach

Clarkson (1995) argues that stakeholders could either be primary or secondary. The author notes that stakeholders are considered 'primary' when they have 'formal or moral' ongoing transactional contracts with an organisation, with these parties essential to its longevity and growth (ibid.). Employees, managers, consumers, and contractors are examples of this constituent group. Furthermore, Shubham, Charan and Murty (2017) note that primary stakeholders can impact a business's policies to varying extents.

Drawing on Freeman's normative perspective, Clarkson (1995) notes that an organisation should consider all constituents but argues that secondary stakeholders have no formal agreements with an organisation and thus have far less influence than their primary counterparts. Therefore, the media, civil society, and communities surrounding a company would be examples of this stakeholder group (ibid.). Clarkson's (1995) categorisation system is valuable, with a seminal study by Galbreath (2006) suggesting that some groups of primary stakeholders positively impact holistic corporate performance.

However, while this approach provides an effective way for managers to categorise their constituents, with organisations increasingly facing external pressures from various vested parties, both 'secondary' and 'primary', it is necessary for these companies to consistently evaluate how much influence individual groups have over business growth (Jiao, Liu & Xu, 2020). Additionally, with businesses increasingly required to be socially responsible, considering the needs of secondary stakeholders is essential for an organisation's holistic growth and necessary in maintaining the good standing of a company in the eyes of the public (see Thijssens, Bollen & Hassink, 2015).

Additionally, with the proliferation of online networking platforms, users, who may have traditionally been considered as 'secondary' stakeholders, as per Clarkson's (1995) approach, could potentially destroy the credibility of an organisation with a simple 'tweet' or 'hashtag' (see Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001). To that end, Sedereviciute and Valentini (2011) suggest that a more internet-inclusive stakeholder mapping system should be operationalised that considers prominent online stakeholders who can influence public opinion about a company.

3.4.2. Categorisation based on salience

Stakeholders can further be organised and prioritised based on how much influence or 'power' they inherently have in a business, how 'urgently' their needs must be met, or how much 'legitimacy' their claims have (Mitchell, Agle & Wood, 1997; Goodman & Sanders-Thomas, 2017; Bourne, 2015;). This stakeholder categorisation system, conceptualised by Mitchell et al. (1997), builds on the work of Savage, Nix, Whitehead and Blair (1991), who argue that constituents who can influence organisational growth and have either a contractual or moral claim within an establishment, should be considered as stakeholders. According to this system, vested parties have 'power' to influence managers in a company or have a 'say' about how a business is operated. 'Legitimacy' is measured by exploring the various moral or contractual rights parties have in a company (see Mitchell et al., 1997). Lastly, 'urgency', a facet missing from the Savage et al. (1991) grouping system, is determined by examining how much pressure the managers in a business face when dealing with specific groups (Mitchell et al., 1997). With these three qualities in mind, the scholars then developed a ranking system by which stakeholders could be prioritised, based on the number of these characteristics they possessed (Magness, 2008).

Although the grouping system suggested by Mitchell et al. (1997) is undoubtedly useful in helping businesses categorise their stakeholders with respect to how much prominence they have, it has been criticised for not inherently taking into consideration stakeholder value-creation (see Bridoux & Vishwanathan, 2020; Raha, Hajdini & Windsperger, 2021; Frooman, 1999). In that way, this prioritisation system diverges slightly from Freeman's (1984) normative understanding of stakeholder theory, which emphasises that organisations should be cognisant of the needs of diverse groups and strive to create value for both the company and its various key constituents. Additionally, with establishments under increased pressure to be socially responsible, it would not be viable for the dominant coalition within businesses to exclusively take stakeholders into account based on their immediate salience within a company (see Soroka & Mazurek-Kusiak, 2014).

3.4.3. Prioritisation based on 'linkages'

In 1984, Grunig and Hunt conceptualised a linkage map, wherein they suggested that the vested parties of an organisation could be prioritised based on the various connections they shared with an establishment (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In their linkage portrayal, Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue that a company has four primary connections. These linkages evolve as an organisation advances and include functional, normative, enabling, and diffused linkages (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Rawlins, 2006; Plowman & Rawlins, 2017), all of which are briefly explained below.

- Enabling linkages are stakeholders who are influential in a company. The dominant coalition and financiers are examples of this type of linkage.
- Functional linkages are stakeholders without whom a company would cease to exist because they either make use of a business's outputs or are involved in producing goods and services. A staff member is one type of input functional linkage, and a consumer is one example of an output connection.
- Normative linkages refer to groups an establishment shares similar values with. Competitors, and even peer institutions, are examples of this type of linkage.
- Diffused linkages are groups that do not consistently interact with a company and are often the most challenging to build relationships with. Activists and the media are two examples of this group.

In addition to categorising stakeholders based on their links to an establishment, this map, when synthesised, further enables managers to explore which constituents should be considered a priority in a company (Rawlins, 2006; Plowman & Rawlins, 2017). The researcher has thus decided to employ this map in the study, categorising consumers as functional output 'linkages' that Company X could not operate without, with symmetrical communication essential between the franchise and this stakeholder group (see Grunig, 2009). Although this mapping system was conceptualised more than thirty years ago, it continues to be applied in modern public relations literature (see Plowman & Rawlins, 2017;

Mavimbela et al., 2018). The linkage map is useful because it specifically groups vested parties based on their connections with an organisation, with the model adjustable as a company evolves (ibid.). Rawlins (2006) notes that this categorisation system is one of the most accurate depictions of stakeholder-business connections in the public relations discipline. Figure 3 depicts the linkage map.

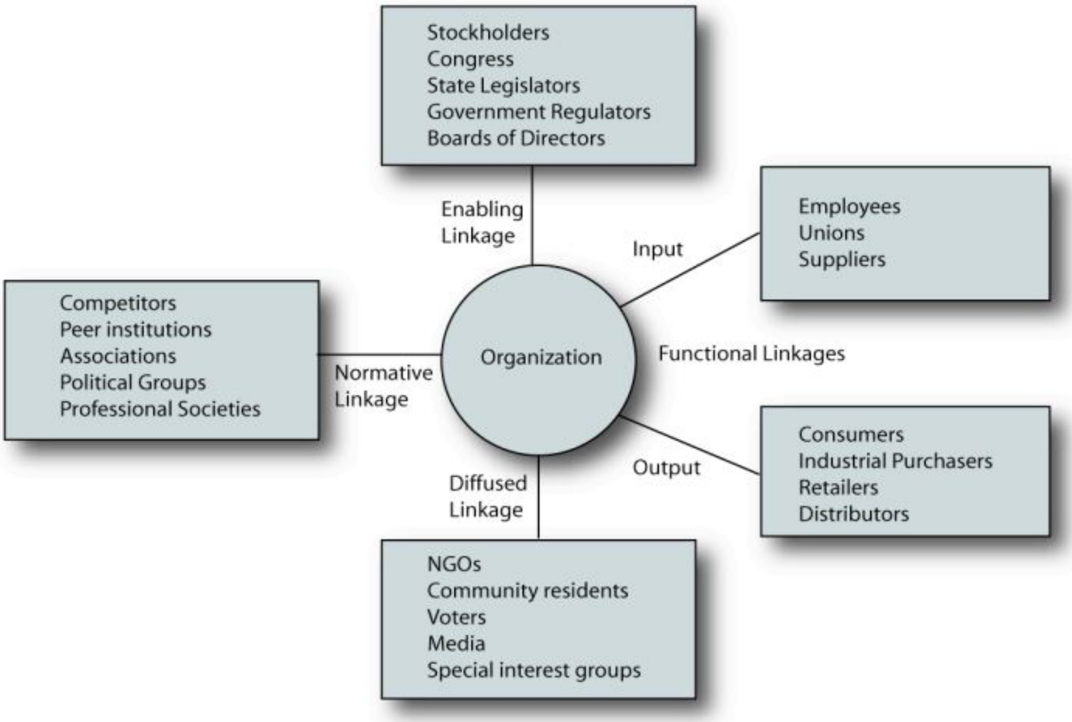

Figure 3: Grunig and Hunt's (1984) linkage map, depicting the various links stakeholders have to a company (Grunig & Hunt, 1984:141).

However, as mentioned in Clarkson's (1995) categorisation system, it is noteworthy to reiterate that the proliferation of social networks and the internet have granted more power to diverse audiences (see Kent & Li, 2020; Rosen, 2012; Taylor et al., 2001). Therefore, public relations professionals must be innovative and utilise emergent strategies to effectively manage various constituents (regardless of their category according to the linkage map) and resolve their issues quickly online (Taylor & Kent, 2014). According to Lynch (2006), emergent strategies involve practitioners formulating short-term solutions to unexpected problems. Conversely, deliberate strategies involve preparing longer-term plans, that consider an organisation's decisions conceptualised over two or more years (ibid.).

3.5. Stakeholder theory and CSR

Stakeholder theory has roots in many other prominent social phenomena and coincides with diverse facets of the evolved public relations paradigm, where relationship building is key to organisational success (see Ledingham, 2003; Freeman & McVea, 2001). While this theory has been significantly critiqued for its pluralistic nature and inherent heterogeneity (Gilbert & Rasche, 2008), this hybridity enables the stakeholder perspective to apply to many disciplines (Phillips, Freeman & Wicks, 2005).

Much research has been conducted on the dovetailing connection between the normative stakeholder perspective and the CSR concept (Dmytriyev et al., 2021; Freeman, 2010; Freeman & McVea, 2001). Since CSR is a key theme in the findings, the researcher briefly highlights its similarities and dissimilarities to stakeholder theory.

According to these authors (Hörisch et al., 2020; Dmytriyev et al., 2021; Freeman, 2010), the traditional stakeholder perspective is often likened to the CSR concept because both phenomena emphasise the pertinence of value-creation between organisations and diverse constituents. While both concepts do not discount the importance of organisational growth and revenue generation, which is evident in the triple bottom line concept (Correia, 2019), they instead postulate that profit maximisation should not be the only aim of any business (Freeman & Dmytriyev, 2017). What makes CSR and the normative stakeholder perspective decidedly similar is that they both posit that both humans and non-human entities, such as the environment, should be considered by organisations in their decision-making (Dmytriyev et al., 2021).

However, these authors (Freeman & Dmytriyev, 2017; Dmytriyev et al., 2021) note that while stakeholder theory suggests that businesses should be cognisant of their key constituents, CSR broadly focuses on organisations creating value for 'society as a whole'. Friedman and Miles (2002) state that a key task of top managers is to generate benefits for a company's various *vested parties* and not solely stockholders. Furthermore, Phillips and Reichart (2000) state that two key constructs of stakeholder theory are equality and the establishment of value for various parties. Contrastingly, CSR theorists note that organisations should be mindful of their impact on diverse groups, regardless of whether there is any benefit in their doing so (see Suchman, 1995). Figure 4, cited from Dmytriyev et al. (2021:11), illustrates the intersection between CSR and stakeholder theory, as well as the point at which the two concepts become dissimilar.

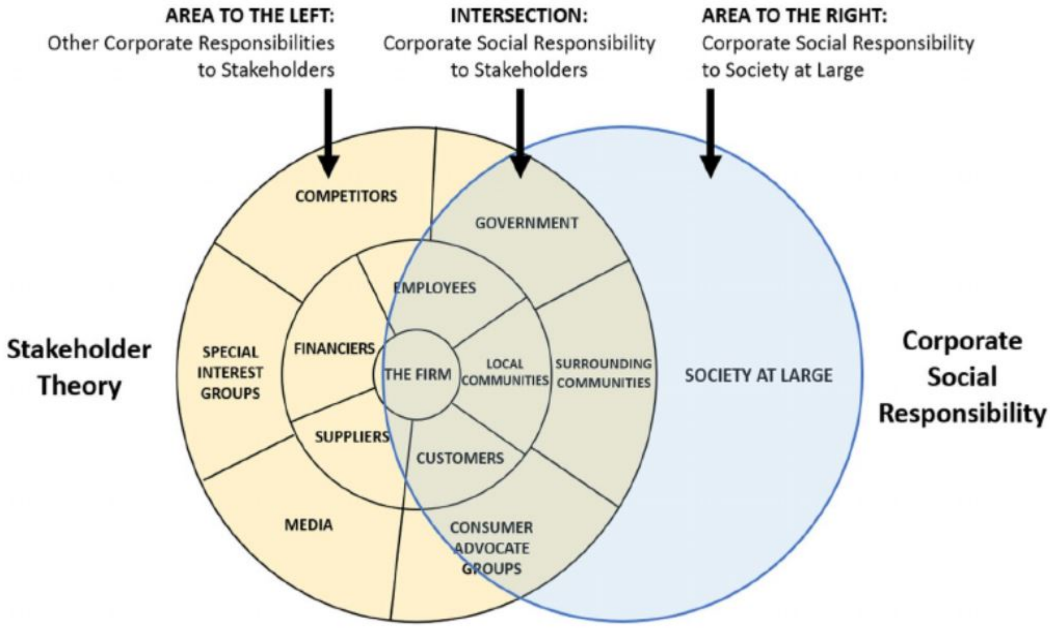

Figure 4: There is a dovetailing relationship between CSR and stakeholder theory, with these two concepts interconnected in many ways (Dmytriyev et al., 2021:11).

3.6. Applicability of stakeholder theory

Applying stakeholder theory to this study enables the researcher to thoroughly analyse the interconnected relationships between Company X and its consumers. This theory is thus used to describe the ‘type’ of stakeholder the franchise’s consumers are. This, in turn, is an additional justification for the relevance of the researcher exploring the engagements between the establishment and this specific constituent group and justifies the study’s premise. Moreover, the researcher was able to classify Company X as an organisation that incorporates stakeholder-inclusive engagement standards into their online communication strategies by addressing the needs of key constituents on social media. The term engagement is also a construct discussed in stakeholder theory. Alamanos et al. (2021) and Slabbert and Barker (2014) suggest that dialogue between stakeholders and managers is vital in resolving conflict between a business and its key vested parties. With fast-food companies closed during the hard lockdown in 2020 (see Harris, 2021), Company X had to rely on social media to communicate with consumers. The franchise's public relations team thus played a key role in these engagements.

Furthermore, in the analysis of research findings, the researcher also uses this theory to explore whether Company X used social media in a ‘stakeholder-inclusive’ way during the hard lockdown in 2020. As mentioned in chapter one, stakeholder-inclusive engagements refer to Company X communicating symmetrically with consumers (see Taylor, 2018) during the pandemic and using social media to engage about matters that South African consumers cared about. Below, the researcher briefly explores how stakeholder theory interlinks with the public relations discipline and discusses the benefits of applying this approach in fast-food companies.

3.6.1. Stakeholder theory and public relations

In chapter two, the researcher explored the transformation of the public relations discipline from being inherently manipulative to dialogue-centric (see Grunig & Kim, 2021). The new public relations paradigm, which centres around building and maintaining connections with key organisational constituents, thus shares an interconnected relationship with stakeholder theory and many of its tenets (see Maier, 2015). This theory can help public relations practitioners identify who the key stakeholders of an establishment are (see De Bussy, 2008), which is essential in formulating targeted, strategic messaging (Bourne, 2016). Additionally, within the public relations discipline, stakeholder theory helps identify and manage the various needs and values of key vested parties and balance those interests with an organisation's (see Heath, 2005). In this way, public relations strategists can gather information about various stakeholders, their needs, and concerns and then revert that data to the dominant coalition before key decisions are made (see Steyn, 2011).

There are many other ways public relations practitioners could employ this theory in their daily duties, with utility dependent on the nature of an organisation, its key functionalities, and target audiences (Godam, Omego & Ochonogor, 2019). The multi-dimensional nature of both stakeholder theory and public relations often also leads to paradigmatic intersections between the studies of these two constructs (see Heath, 2005). Furthermore, regarding the practical application of stakeholder theory to public relations, Freeman et al. (2017) note that engagement between a company and its constituents is vital in creating symbiotic connections that benefit a company and its key vested groups. In this way, stakeholder theory also intersects with the two-way symmetrical model, which emphasises that feedback-driven communication is the most ethical form of public relations (see De Bussy, Ewing & Pitt, 2010).

3.6.2. Stakeholder theory and fast-food franchises

The elements of mutual value-creation embedded in stakeholder theory make it employable within various organisational settings where managers understand the benefits of adopting stakeholder-inclusive business practices (Hörisch et al., 2020; Institute of Directors Southern Africa, 2016). Tong and Wong (2016) note that the utilisation of this theory is particularly beneficial to fast-food franchises. It [stakeholder theory] helps these organisations foster trust and positive relationships with their consumers. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) linkage model indicates that consumers are vital, functional connections to fast-food establishments. Therefore, it is necessary for these companies to be aware of their needs, especially with social networks granting these stakeholders more power to critique a franchise and its practices (see Hwang, Eves & Stienmetz, 2021; Taylor et al., 2001; Rosen, 2012).

As noted earlier, CSR and stakeholder theory share an interconnected relationship (Dmytriyev et al., 2021). To that end, franchises that implement stakeholder-centric practices into their key functionalities are more likely to build brand loyalty and awareness than those operating using Friedman's stockholder-first approach (McDonald & Rundle-Thiele, 2008). In this way, the adoption of this theory and its diverse facets by fast-food establishments is more than just an altruistic pursuit and could effectively bolster the image of these franchises (see Tong & Wong, 2016). Similarly, Abratt and Kleyn (2012) note that in the intensely competitive fast-food market, employing stakeholder-inclusive practices could enable franchises to enhance their reputability in the eyes of the public.

As aforementioned, there are several ways in which Company X incorporates the stakeholder perspective into their operational endeavours (see Wachira et al., 2020). A few pertinent examples of the franchise's stakeholder-inclusive practices have been mentioned in chapter one (see Wachira et al., 2020; Bhardwaj et al.,2018) and are explored comprehensively in chapter five. Furthermore, the engagement between Company X and its consumers online, which is described in chapter five, is another notable instance where the franchise displays stakeholder-inclusive communication.

3.7. Perceived limitations of stakeholder theory

Although the multifaceted composition of stakeholder theory makes it applicable to diverse industries, organisations, and contexts, this same plurality has perplexed many scholars over the years (see Miles, 2017). Hendry (2001), for instance, argues that this theory, and notably the normative perspective thereof, has been over-idealised, with little emphasis placed on the practical applications of the stakeholder concept within organisations. Moreover, Miles (2017) and Jepsen and Eskerod (2009) suggest that the oft indeterminate nature of who 'stakeholders' are and the many ways they can be classified is an additional facet of this theory that makes it highly contestable and limited in its practical employability. Miles (2017) further argues that because stakeholder theory has roots in diverse disciplines (see Freeman & McVea, 2001), it should be considered as an eclectic mix of interconnected concepts and not a conducive 'theory' per se. The normative stakeholder perspective is, however, nonetheless applicable to this work. This is because – based on the readings cited – the researcher found that Company X is an organisation that regularly engages and builds connections with various constituents, both internal and external (Wachira et al., 2020; Roberts-Lombard, 2009).

3.8. Grunig's four communication models

In 1984, American public relations scholars Grunig and Hunt (1984) developed four broad models of organisational communication to fortify understanding of the diverse ways that businesses interact with their vested parties (Grunig & Hunt,1984; Grunig, 2006; Grunig & Kim, 2021). These four models were established during the development of excellence theory, a philosophy suggesting that public relations professionals can strategically help a company function more effectively, with symmetrical communication essential to organisational growth (see Grunig, 2006). Out of the four proposed perspectives, the two-way symmetrical model continues to be considered the most ethical form of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Mavimbela et al., 2018).

However, according to Theunissen (2015), the dialogic nature of the adjusted, ‘ethical’ public relations paradigm does not negate the inherent persuasiveness of the field, with the discipline only unethical if it is intrinsically manipulative. The researcher briefly describes the four communication models below (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

- The publicity model – when using this model, public relations practitioners engage in the unilateral propagation of messages to stakeholders without any feedback sought from these parties. When utilising this approach, practitioners have no problem spreading untruths about their client companies to enable stakeholders to view an organisation positively (see Grunig, 2006).
- The public information model – this model is a form of unilateral communication, where practitioners are honest about the actions of their client companies but omit any negative information from their statements (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Through the lens of this model, public relations professionals are sometimes viewed as in-house journalists, focused on the dissemination of information to stakeholders (Grunig & Grunig, 2001; Suyono & Hanathasia, 2014).
- The asymmetrical model – this is a form of feedback-driven engagement in which practitioners use language to manipulate stakeholders into certain ways of thinking (see Grunig, 2009).
- The two-way symmetrical model – this feedback-driven communication technique is still considered by scholars within the public relations discipline as both effective and mutually beneficial to a business and its stakeholders (Go & You, 2016). By utilising this model, practitioners facilitate interactive engagements between their client companies and key vested parties, without manipulating these groups, but listening to, and being cognisant of their needs (see Grunig, 2006). This model is primarily used to build relationships between a company and its key constituents, foster trust with key organisational stakeholders, and resolve crises with various parties (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

3.9. Relevance of the two-way model

Despite the two-way perspective having been developed in 1984, this model is still applicable to the public relations discipline and research related thereto (see Mavimbela et al., 2018). Du Plessis (2018), for example, argues that using social media for two-way, transparent dialogues during organisational crises can effectively foster trust and mutually beneficial relationships with various stakeholders online, long after the crisis has passed. Similarly, Morsing and Schultz (2006) note that the symmetrical model is often the preferred method of engagement when public relations practitioners disseminate information about various CSR practices that organisations are involved in. In chapter five, the researcher discusses some of the CSR initiatives Company X engaged in during the hard lockdown in 2020, and how they utilised social media to disseminate information about these partnerships.

Therefore, despite the criticism the two-way symmetrical perspective received over the years, this model continues to be regarded as the quintessential way public relations should ideally be practiced (see Grunig, 2009; Du Plessis, 2018). Dialogic interactions between South African fast-food companies and their consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was essential, particularly during the stricter lockdown periods, when they were non-operational, or only partially operational (see Grunig & Kim, 2021; Camilleri, 2021; Harris, 2021). Thus, applying this model to the study allows the researcher to analyse whether Company X used social media to engage in feedback-driven communication with their consumers, and explore the franchise’s public relations team's role in that endeavour.

In the findings section, the researcher refers to the two-way symmetrical perspective, drawing comparisons between the study’s results and what is theoretically understood to be ‘best practice’ in public relations, according to this model. Moreover, key facets of this model support one of the most important constructs of this study, which is stakeholder engagement. With (public) interpersonal contact largely disallowed during the 2020 hard lockdown, many organisations needed to rely on the internet and social media to connect with their stakeholders, with their public relations teams playing a key role in the facilitation of these engagements (see Camilleri, 2021; Reddy & Gupta, 2020). The researcher thus utilised this model to explain why it was paramount for the practitioners within Company X to be involved in online consumer engagement. As aforementioned, strategic, dialogic engagements between an organisation and its key constituents is essential for conflict resolution and two-way value-creation, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic (see Alamanos et al., 2021; Camilleri & Isaias, 2021).

3.10. Critique of the two-way symmetrical model

Although this model is often viewed as the preferred method of communication between a company and its stakeholders, it must be noted that the two-way symmetrical technique has also received significant criticism, with scholars suggesting that it presents an over-simplistic view of organisational engagements with constituents (Theunissen & Noordin, 2012; Kent & Li, 2020). Additionally, Gower (2010) suggests that this model favours an organisation and its voice far more than its stakeholders, with little to no balance in these interactions. Similarly, various authors (Holtzhausen, 2000; Motion & Weaver, 2005) argue that this model fails to acknowledge that when public relations professionals are aligned to certain companies, they are more likely to prioritise the organisation’s needs above that of its vested parties.

Conversely, Go and You (2016) note that the tenets of interactive communication presented in this model remain relevant in contemporary business structures. This is primarily why the researcher employed this model in their study. The proliferation of social media has further catalysed interactive engagements between an organisation and its stakeholders, with fast, emotive dialogues not only possible, but encouraged (see Kent & Li, 2020).

3.11. Chapter summary

In this chapter, the researcher discussed the model and theory utilised in the project. Since stakeholder theory is a complex, pluralistic concept, the researcher spent more time explaining the diverse facets related thereto, with the two-way model explained in brief. This study's main theme is 'consumer engagement', with the inclusion of the two-way symmetrical model paramount in helping the researcher explain this preferred method of public relations communication. In contrast, stakeholder theory provided the researcher with a solid framework for investigating the type of stakeholder consumers are, and why Company X needed to interact with them effectively on social media during the pandemic in 2020.

Chapter 4

Research design and methodology

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher describes the holistic strategy employed to conduct the study. Herein, the overall methodology and design utilised in the project, the sampling approach through which respondents were selected, and techniques through which data was gathered and analysed, are comprehensively explored. Additionally, the researcher provides pragmatic justifications for every decision made in the completion of the study, thoroughly explicating the efficacy of each approach used, and highlighting some of the limitations of employing specific techniques. The chapter is then rounded off with a brief exploration of the ethical implications of the research.

According to various authors (see Liamputtong, 2020; McCombs, 2020; Kothari, 2004), the 'methodology' of a study can be defined as the pragmatic plan that a researcher employs in the completion of a study. The methodology chapter is a vital component of any study because it explores how the research was conducted and why the instruments utilised were suitable for the project (see Schensul & LeCompte, 2012). Furthermore, Leavy (2017) states that it is important for appropriate instruments to be used in a study, because how research is conducted impacts how valid and reliable the work is. Validity refers to the degree to which the methods employed in a study address the research problem (see Taherdoost, 2016). Similarly, reliability, which is often juxtaposed with 'validity', denotes how consistently a selected instrument measures what it is intended to measure and determines the replicability of results (see Middleton, 2021). The instruments and methods utilised in this study allowed for the gathering of rich data, that helped to address the study's objectives.

4.2. Research approach

This study is inherently interpretivist in nature (see Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Given 2008) and not generalisable to all fast-food franchises. The qualitative approach was thus undertaken. Dawson (2009) notes that qualitative studies involve researchers collecting exploratory, non-statistical information, that pertain to the experiential viewpoints and behaviours of individuals, using techniques, such as interviews, content analyses, observations, focus groups, exploratory surveys, and quizzes (Dawson, 2009; Ponelis, 2015). Conversely, the quantitative approach is focused on the collection of statistical and experimental data (Creswell, 2013; Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019), with the 'mixed-methods' typology producing research that is an amalgamation of quantifiable and exploratory information (see Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017; Williams, 2007).

The interpretive lens was well-suited to this study and enabled the researcher to collect interesting, qualitative information through interviews and a thematic content analysis. According to Chowdhury (2014), interpretivism is a philosophy suggesting that 'truth' is an inherently subjective idea influenced by individual viewpoints, experiences, and worldviews. Conversely, 'positivism' is associated with quantitative studies, while 'pragmatism' relates to the 'mixed methods' typology (see Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The interpretive paradigm was helpful in the study undertaken because it allowed the researcher to explore *how* the public relations team in Company X utilised social media to connect with consumers. This approach also made room for an analysis into *why* these practitioners engaged in the way they did using specific social networks (see Goldkuhl, 2010).

4.2.1. Applicability of the qualitative approach

A qualitative approach was appropriate because the research undertaken is primarily exploratory. The methods used were therefore not employed for the 'measurement' of data, but as interpretive techniques utilised for information discovery. Furthermore, Daymon and Holloway (2011) argue that it is useful for scholars to employ this approach when conducting research related to public relations, because it allows for a thorough analysis of the transformation of communication practices in this discipline.

An additional pertinent reason this method was applicable in this study, is because during discussions with respondents, the researcher was critically aware of what the interviewees said and *how* they said it. Key observational data is thus discussed briefly in this chapter (see Kelliher, 2005; Black, 2006). Furthermore, the qualitative approach was recently adopted by Capriotti et al. (2021) and Mavimbela et al. (2018), who explored how public relations professionals in various organisations utilised social media in their engagements with stakeholders. Additionally, several journal articles that were examined by the researcher regarding social media utilisation in the public relations discipline (see Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018; Robson & James, 2013; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Kent & Li, 2020; Camilleri, 2018; Camilleri, 2021), used the qualitative approach.

4.2.2. Addressing criticisms of qualitative studies

Although qualitative studies are rooted in interpretive thinking, with diverse data collection and analysis methods employed by researchers in their acquirement of knowledge about social phenomena, it is precisely the flexibility of this approach that has led to its criticism over the years (see Anderson, 2010). Qualitative studies have often been critiqued for being overly circumstantial and anecdotal, with research participants and their respective biases impacting the validity of findings (Ma & Olanyika, 2019). Similarly, Winde (2011) notes that because this approach is exploratory at its core, it might be difficult for future scholars to reproduce the study and establish the research as reliable. To that end, interpreting qualitative data is often challenging, with some cases more nuanced and thus harder to understand than others (see Rahman, 2016). Flick (2014) likewise suggests that analysing qualitative data is often arduous and time-consuming, with some findings veering away from the initial research question.

With regards to the assertions made about the qualitative approach being 'overly circumstantial' (Ma & Olanyika, 2019), the researcher ensured that the work was valid by sampling a diverse cohort of participants from Company X, who function as part of the digital and public relations teams that work with the company. They thereby obtained different viewpoints about the topic. As mentioned in chapter one, the digital team primarily manages the organisation's social media pages and shares an interconnected relationship with the public relations department. Therefore, by gathering additional information from this team, the researcher ensured that the data provided was substantiated and credible. Regarding the sampling of diverse participants, Kirchherr and Charles (2018) note that interviewing respondents who undertake distinct roles within a selected company could enable researchers to obtain rich data and discover interesting themes within a study.

Furthermore, information was validated by the researcher methodologically triangulating data, with two different instruments utilised. According to Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe and Neville (2014), data triangulation refers to the utilisation of more than one research approach or instrument to gather information and validate results. While Noble and Heale (2019) note that triangulating data aids overall research reliability, collecting and analysing data from multiple sources is quite time-consuming.

The qualitative approach was, however, nonetheless suitable for this work. This method helped the researcher gain important insights that contributed to the study's aim. Furthermore, emergent themes, that were not relevant to this project, per se, were also unearthed, and are briefly mentioned in the recommendations section of this study. These studies could be undertaken by scholars in future.

4.3. Research design

The researcher utilised the single exploratory case study design by using one fast-food franchise as a case under investigation. According to Yin (2012), a case study explores a real-world phenomenon within a specific context, organisation, or institution. This design was helpful in the study and made room for an in-depth investigation into social media utilisation by the public relations team within Company X during the 2020 pandemic, and the extent to which practitioners were involved in social media messaging. Rashid, Rashid, Warraich, Sabir and Waseem (2019) explain that case studies enable researchers to immerse themselves in their investigations and produce rich data that may even springboard into new theories being developed. This design is particularly useful to research in the public relations domain and enables researchers to identify limitations, best practices, and changes within this oft-transforming field (Jaques, 2009).

The researcher was inspired to conduct a case study because while much of their reading had suggested that social media utilisation by public relations professionals aided relationship building between an organisation and its stakeholders (Du Plessis, 2018; Camilleri, 2021; Troise & Camilleri, 2021), they wanted to investigate this phenomenon comprehensively through the lens of a real fast-food company. Moreover, an interesting study by Robson and James (2013), discussed in chapter two, found that public relations professionals tend to use social media on an impromptu basis, with little strategy involved. The researcher was curious about whether the selected organistion's practitioners used social media to engage regularly with consumers, or whether they only used these new media platforms intermittently.

Moreover, Yin, Krishnan and Ean (2012) note that case studies are useful to research that is inherently exploratory in nature. According to Nattrass (2020), exploratory research involves the investigation of phenomena that have not been thoroughly explored in the past. An exploratory single case study was selected because the COVID-19 pandemic is novel, with no research conducted yet that focuses on how public relations practitioners within the local fast-food market in South Africa utilised social media to engage with stakeholders during various stages of the pandemic in 2020. The study is thus homogenous and salient, as it explored a popular franchise that is well-known for its social media presence.

4.3.1. Limitations of case study research

Despite the case study design allowing for a thorough exploration of a novel phenomenon within a specific context (Yin, 2014), there were several challenges the researcher faced when completing this project, and they were forced to be innovative to obtain data that addressed the study's objectives. While Company X is a prominent brand, with local and international franchises (see Chutel, 2018), as mentioned in chapter one, their public relations team is small, consisting of only two internal practitioners, which was far too few to establish the research as reliable (see Middleton, 2021). Therefore, the researcher interviewed a diverse cohort of individuals working with the franchise's digital and public relations teams.

Additionally, there is an element of bias in exploratory case studies, with researchers required to remain self-reflexive to guard against any preconceptions that may influence their findings (see Lavrakas, 2008). According to Popoveniuc (2014), although there are various definitions of self-reflexivity, this concept refers to researchers being internally conscious of their experiences throughout the research process and critically aware of how their internal prejudices may impact results. Van Zyl and Sabiescu (2020) thus define critical subjectivity as a form of self-reflection, where researchers acknowledge the diverse ways their individual perspectives, worldviews, and personal biases could affect a study and the ability of these scholars to manage their views and develop reflexive, critical ways of expressing them.

Another common criticism of case study research is that studies using this design are not widely applicable. Even if similar research were to be conducted at another organisation in the same industry, the results would not be inherently identical (see Corcoran, Walker & Wals, 2004). As aforementioned, this study is not generalisable and explored a specific fast-food establishment and its engagements with consumers. However, insights from this study could be used by future researchers to probe into consumer engagements within other fast-food franchises and the involvement of public relations practitioners therein, with more comparative analyses then possible.

4.4. Sampling strategy

The snowball and purposive sampling methods were utilised to select respondents for this study. Elikan (2016) explains that purposive participant recruitment, which is also sometimes referred to as ‘judgement’, or ‘expert’ sampling, involves researchers selecting individuals and cases because of specific qualities they possess. The researcher used this strategy to select the franchise under investigation, recruit two participants, and determine which social media data to examine in the content analysis phase of the study.

The second selection method, the snowball approach, helped the researcher obtain an adequate number of respondents for the study. By using this approach, the researcher could also recruit willing participants, working alongside the public relations department. According to Leighton et al. (2021), snowball sampling involves researchers recruiting participants by either explicitly asking respondents to refer them to future interviewees, or by organically meeting these people throughout the data collection process. In this way, researchers may access new participants who possess relevant qualities that the study requires (Parker, Scott & Geddes, 2019). Additionally, Naderifar, Goli and Ghaljaie (2017) note that this sampling method is useful when researchers struggle to access the target groups they require. The researcher used the snowball sampling method until they reached the point of saturation with their data. Braun and Clarke (2019) define data saturation as the stage in the research process where no more novel information is provided by respondents, with participants’ responses becoming inherently similar or repetitive. In this project, by the fifth and sixth discussions, respondents started reiterating information already mentioned by other participants.

4.4.1. Homogenous purposive sampling

Homogenous purposive sampling involves researchers expertly selecting respondents with similar characteristics (Jager, Putnick & Bornstein, 2017). The researcher expertly selected the first two respondents because they form part of the selected company’s internal public relations team. The specific franchise was also purposively selected because it is a prominent South African brand, renowned for its social media presence and witty commentary online (see Smit, 2017). The franchise thrives on online feedback-driven interactions, advocated for in the two-way symmetrical model (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Moreover, Company X was selected because the researcher has always been curious about the role the public relations team played in the conceptualisation of social media content found on the franchise’s various social networking platforms. In this way, the researcher studied a topic and franchise they were genuinely intrigued by, which cultivated interesting analyses, fuelled by curiosity.

In addition to selecting two participants and the company itself, the researcher also purposively selected content posted on the company’s social media platforms to sample for the thematic content analysis. Although Company X is active on six social media platforms, only Twitter and Facebook are consistently utilised for consumer engagement. Therefore, content that was posted on these platforms between 25 March 2020, when the company closed before a level-five lockdown was instituted (Stiegler & Bouchard, 2020), and the end of July 2020, which was around one month after all fast-food establishments could recommence operations (De Villiers et al., 2020), was evaluated. As mentioned in chapter one, in June 2020, fast-food restaurants slowly started recommencing operations in lockdown level three (see South African Government, 2020c; Harris, 2021).

According to Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan and Hoagwood (2015), this sampling method is cost- and time-effective and allows researchers to garner rich data from fewer participants. Similarly, Barratt, Ferris and Lenton (2015) argue that this method best suits qualitative studies, where researchers are more focused on interpreting and creating meaning from data, than quantifying statistical information. The homogenous purposive sampling method is well-suited to single exploratory case studies, where one organisation or institution is comprehensively analysed (see Ames, Glenton & Lewin, 2019).

The purposively selected participants were approached via LinkedIn in May 2021, before email exchanges took place between the researcher and the potential respondents, after ethical clearance was obtained. Through these correspondences, the purpose of the study was explained, consent forms were signed, and interviews were coordinated. Additionally, the researcher had a pre-interview discussion with the two public relations team members via Microsoft Teams a few weeks before the official data collection commenced. As mentioned in chapter one, detailed information (that was permissible to share), was provided on the company and its public relations team during this discussion.

4.4.1.1. Limitations of purposive sampling

Although utilising this sampling strategy was useful in identifying two key interviewees for the study, according to Sharma (2017), this method can be inherently biased, as it relies on the researcher's judgement. Moreover, Berndt (2020) notes that research conducted with this sampling method is often challenging to validate, with scholars required to clearly justify why they chose to sample certain people, places, or organisations.

The researcher acknowledges the limitations of this sampling method but maintains that it was the most appropriate selection strategy to employ in the study. Additionally, pragmatic motivations were provided to justify the utility of this sampling approach. The researcher also explicitly noted that the objective of this study was to explore the engagements of the *public relations team* within Company X on Twitter and Facebook. To that end, the internal public relations department within the franchise was always the main target group of the study, with the inclusion of these staff members in the project essential. Furthermore, it was mentioned early in the study that the research undertaken is not generalisable but still a valid and interesting investigation that future researchers could further delve into using multiple comparative cases.

4.4.2. Snowball sampling

While the first two participants provided insightful information for a rich study to be undertaken, more than just two respondents were required to ensure that the research was credible (see Taherdoost, 2016). Chapter one mentions that the digital and public relations teams share an inter-reliant relationship. Therefore, both purposively selected respondents suggested that it would be helpful for the researcher to sample the internal digital team, consisting of two members, since they manage the franchise's social media pages. Therefore, the digital manager was recruited. Unfortunately, however, the researcher faced yet another conundrum since three participants would still be too few to establish research reliability, with the second digital member unwilling to participate in the research. Therefore, the selected franchise's external digital and public relations team members were sampled.

According to Guest, Namey and Chen (2020), although qualitative work is not generalisable, with researchers recruiting fewer participants to partake in their studies, it is necessary for at least five or six people to be sampled for a study to be valid and for new themes to emerge within datasets. Similarly, Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) argue that researchers are likely to acquire rich and current information within the first six interviews, with the point of saturation reached around the seventh discussion. Although there is some debate about whether it is viable to numerically justify how many interviews would be 'sufficient' for a homogenous study (see Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles & Grimshaw, 2009), the researcher knew that they would require more than three interviews, because new themes about the topic continued to emerge.

Therefore, Respondent B, who is the franchise's general manager of brand and strategy, referred the researcher to an outsourced public relations practitioner, who manages the franchise's portfolio externally, and to a member of the selected organisation's external digital team, who manages engagements on the company's social media pages. The external public relations practitioner works alongside Respondents A and B and has the title of 'managing partner' to the franchise. The outsourced digital practitioner, who has the title of 'account director' and works with the company's external digital team, then referred the researcher to their colleague, another social media manager, responsible for many funny engagements found online. A total of six participants were sampled for this study, two of whom were purposively selected and four of whom were selected through the snowball sampling approach. All respondents understood the research aim, and the data obtained from them helped uncover interesting themes that addressed the study's objectives. All participants who were sampled using the snowball method were contacted via email, with the researcher sending each the individual consent forms, before interview dates were coordinated. In Table 3, the researcher succinctly categorises each participant based on how they were coded in the study, their titles, and whether they were internal or external role-players to the franchise. Participants were coded alphabetically in the order that they were sampled.

Table 3: Categorisation of research participants, including their titles, codes, and relationship to Company X.

Participants recruited through purposive sampling	Title	Operations
Respondent A	Public relations manager	Internal public relations department
Respondent B	General manager of brand and strategy	Internal public relations department
Participants recruited through snowball sampling	**Title**	**Operations**
Respondent C	Account manager	External digital agency partner
Respondent D	Social media manager	External digital agency partner
Respondent E	Managing partner	External public relations agency partner
Respondent F	Digital manager	Internal digital department

4.4.2.1. Critique of snowball sampling

The snowball sampling method has been criticised for being inherently biased, with respondents subjectively recommending future participants, who could skew the research in specific directions (see Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Additionally, the researcher needed to gather additional information about where selected external public relations and digital practitioners fit in the sample population, as respondents' views might not have been representative of the sentiments of all members within the outsourced agencies (see Handcock & Gile, 2011).

The researcher was also self-reflexive throughout the selection process and evaluated the utility and efficacy of all participants and the value they added to the study, without blindly following the recommendations of other respondents. In the interviews, the researcher asked external respondents how many of their colleagues work with Company X and added that information in chapter five of this study. It would have been superfluous to interview all external digital or public relations agency team members since that would have inherently changed the study's purpose. External digital and public relations practitioners were selected because the researcher wanted to discover interesting themes from diverse parties working with Company X and needed to sample an adequate number of people.

Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter one, Company X has two main external digital companies that manage various aspects of the franchise's social media pages. Including all team members in the study would therefore not have been conducive to the study's purpose. Respondents D and E were specifically included because they form part of the digital firm that manages the fun, witty engagements the franchise is known for. Moreover, this external agency engages in two-way interactions with consumers and potential consumers online, which is what Grunig and Hunt's (1984) symmetrical model describes as an ‘ethical’ dialogic process. The other digital agency only communicates with online users for informational purposes when they need to manage complaints about the franchise.

4.5. Data collection

The researcher methodologically triangulated data to increase the reliability and veracity of the work (see Flick, 2014). The two instruments used to collect data were interviews and a thematic content analysis of posts found on the franchise’s Facebook and Twitter pages. While utilising two different techniques helped maximise the validity of the research (see Noble & Heale, 2019), triangulating data was time-consuming and arduous, which is often the case in qualitative studies (Flick, 2007). The researcher firstly conducted interviews, before commencing with the thematic content analysis. In this way, the interviews helped the researcher earmark which social media content was conceptualised specifically by the public relations team during the period under investigation.

4.5.1. Phase one: Interviews

Comprehensive, partially structured interviews were conducted with six respondents from 22 June to 22 July 2021, via the Microsoft Teams and Zoom Cloud Meetings videoconferencing platforms, with each discussion lasting between 27 and 51 minutes. As mentioned in the sampling section, the franchise’s internal public relations team was interviewed before additional respondents were recruited. While a small group of participants was selected, Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe and Young (2018) note that having fewer respondents in a qualitative study can help researchers conduct in-depth analyses of their datasets and synthesise results effectively. Additionally, the researcher reached the point of saturation between the fifth and sixth interviews, and there was thus no need for more respondents to be sampled.

The researcher initially wanted to conduct each interview face-to-face, since these authors (Lavrakas, 2008; Irvine, Drew & Sainsbury, 2012), note that this method allows for key observational data to emerge, and for participants to communicate verbally and nonverbally if they do not grasp the gist of certain questions. However, because all participants are based in Johannesburg, with the researcher in Cape Town, it was not viable to travel to meet with them, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic was still rife across the country at the time. For this reason, virtual interviews were conducted, which allowed for *some* observational data to be collected (see Tuttas, 2015). Greenspan, Gordon, Whitcomb and Lauterbach (2021) further argue that conducting interviews via video-calling software is both time and cost-effective and resembles interpersonal interactions without many of the distractions one would encounter when meeting respondents face-to-face.

Conversely, Irani (2018) suggests that it would be difficult to create meaning from discussions if the respondents, or the researcher, had connectivity problems. Additionally, with virtual interviews, behavioural data is limited to head, shoulder, and arm gestures, and observations relating to the tone used by participants when responding to specific questions (see Lobe & Morgan, 2020). Environmental observations are also restricted, with researchers exclusively able to see glimpses of surrounding backgrounds that are visible on screen (ibid.). During each discussion, the researcher and participants had little to no connectivity issues and no participant misunderstood any question. Furthermore, only Respondents B and F did not have their cameras on during their respective interviews. The researcher garnered a lot of interesting behavioural data from observing the other respondents' body language and facial expressions. During the discussions with Respondents B and F, the researcher relied on the tones they used in their responses to distinguish their general dispositions (see Fielding & Thomas, 2008). Five interviews took place via Microsoft Teams and one via Zoom Cloud Meetings, with interviews taking place during suitable periods that both the participants and the researcher were comfortable with. Table 4 presents the time and date of each discussion and general behavioural observations about participants. From this data, one can see that the first interview, in which new themes were emerging, was the longest, while the final discussion was the shortest, since the point of saturation had been reached.

Through the interviews, the researcher discovered how the internal public relations team utilised different social networks to engage with consumers and which messages they focused on communicating to consumers during the three lockdown periods. Very pointed questions were asked, that explored how much of the social media data was conceptualised by the public relations team, for the researcher to avoid including posts formulated by other departments. This information was important, since Papasolomou, Thrassou, Vrontis and Sabova (2014) note that a company’s public relations and marketing teams usually work together to formulate social media content.

A questionnaire, that served as a guideline for interviews, is found in Appendix A. Questions were adjusted slightly when external practitioners and members of the digital team were interviewed. However, all discussions and data derived therefrom addressed the research aim effectively. Most interviews were pleasantly conversational and engaging. The researcher often obtained all information by asking only three or four questions, adjusting the phraseology according to the flow of the dialogue.

Table 4: A summary of when interviews took place and the observed dispositions of each participant.

Participant	Interview date	Interview time	Duration of discussion (min)	First impressions/observations
Respondent A	22 June 2021	1:20 PM	51 min	The participant was friendly, exhibiting a kind and helpful disposition throughout the interview. They helped the researcher to identify social media content that would be directly from the public relations team.
Respondent B	25 June 2021	11:15 AM	35:51 min	The participant was helpful and provided information that supported what Respondent A alluded to regarding the public relations team utilising social media to inform consumers about COVID-19 protocols and the hunger drive.

Respondent C	30 June 2021	1:00 PM	36:01 min	The participant provided key information that supported what Respondents A and B alluded to, pertaining to how the internal public relations team utilised social media during the 2020 lockdowns. The respondent was relaxed, friendly, and patient throughout the discussion.
Respondent D	1 July 2021	1:30 PM	31:56 min	The participant was friendly, accommodating and engaging throughout the interview. They also expanded on some new themes the researcher discovered from Respondent C, regarding the connection between the digital and public relations teams.
Respondent E	6 July 2021	4:05 PM	33:24 min	The participant was very friendly, helpful, and talkative. One or two new themes emerged regarding the franchise's stakeholder-inclusive social media practices.
Respondent F	22 July 2021	2:03 PM	27:49 min	The participant was polite and provided information that supported what the other respondents already alluded to regarding the inter-reliant connection between the digital and public relations teams, and the utilisation of Twitter and Facebook for consumer engagement.

According to O'Keeffe, Buytaert, Mijic, Brozovic and Sinha (2016), partially structured interviews are beneficial to qualitative studies, with the technique offering an adjustable guide that researchers can follow to obtain rich data from participants, while making room for emergent themes to be discovered. Moreover, Whiting (2008) states that interesting, open-ended responses could be garnered through this method, with participants often more relaxed during discussions. Table 5 summarises what the researcher wanted to find out by asking certain questions and includes *some* examples from theory and the literature review that either supported or refuted what they discovered during these discussions.

Table 5: Interview questions posed and the objectives of each set of questions.

Interview questions	Objectives	Examples from literature/theory
1. What role do you undertake within the franchise? 2. What are some of the daily duties you undertake in this role? 3. What is your relationship to the dominant coalition? 4. What is your relationship to the digital team/public relations team?	- To acquire enough background information about each participant and the roles they undertake within Company X. - To gather data that contextualises the functioning of the organisation.	- The first four interview questions provide context about Company X and its public relations team. This information has been used in various chapters to contextualise the company and its marketing team.

5. How do you make use of social media within your role at the company?	- To gather information about each respondent that can be used in the findings chapter when they are introduced. - To find out how each participant used social media during the pandemic in 2020.	- According to these authors (McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014; Neill & Lee, 2016; Camilleri, 2021), social media can be utilised by public relations practitioners in diverse ways, depending on the nature of an organisation and its holistic structure.
6. How did the internal public relations team within the franchise use social media to engage with consumers during the hard lockdown periods last year? 7. Which social media posts shared during the hard lockdown periods were messages that were specifically conceptualised by the public relations team? 8. How did the public relations teams ensure that online rumours/misinformation about the franchise and its functioning during the diverse lockdown levels in 2020 was quickly defused?	- To find out how the internal public relations team within Company X used social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. - To discover which messages found on the franchise's various social media platforms were conceptualised by the public relations team. - To explore how involved the internal public relations team was in social media content creation during the hard lockdown in 2020. - To find out whether the selected franchise's public relations practitioners engaged in symmetrical communication with consumers on social media. - To discover how false information about the company was refuted online.	- Camilleri (2021) and Hussain (2020) note that social media can strategically be used by public relations practitioners to engage with stakeholders interactively during organisational crises. - Kent and Li (2020) suggest that these platforms can be used by PR practitioners for brand and relationship building, engagement, crisis communication, fundraising, information dissemination, and influencer partnerships. - Robson and James (2013) state that public relations practitioners only use social media occasionally. - With the proliferation of misinformation online during the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020, it was essential for public relations practitioners to monitor social media, to swiftly defuse fake news online (see Cinelli et al., 2020).
9. In your view, how important was it for the public relations team to interact regularly with consumers on social media during the hard lockdown periods? 10. Which platforms does the company primarily use for engagement? 11. Which stakeholder would you say social media engagement is primarily aimed at? 12. Is there any additional information you would like to share regarding the franchise and their online stakeholder engagement?	- To discover more about the internal public relations team's role in feedback-driven consumer engagement, on social media. - To find out which platforms are used for consumer engagement. - To discover which stakeholders social media engagement is aimed at. - To discover any additional, interesting data.	- Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue that two-way communication between public relations professionals and stakeholders is the most ethical form of communication. - Neill and Lee (2016) argue that the rise in social media utilisation has led to public relations roles needing to evolve holistically. - Valentini (2015), however, argues that social media utilisation by these practitioners has been overly praised. - Mavimbela et al. discovered that Facebook and Twitter are the two most popular platforms used by public relations professionals. - Freeman's stakeholder theory posits that the needs of all key

		constituents impacted by an organisation should be considered by top managers (Freeman, 1984), with engagement necessary for relationship building (Taylor & Kent, 2014). However, knowing *which* stakeholders social media communication is targeted at is essential for strategic communication (see Troise & Camilleri, 2021; Sommerfeldt & Yang, 2018).

4.5.1.1. Limitations of semi-structured interviews

Although using semi-structured interviews helped the researcher effectively address the intellectual puzzle, this method has been criticised by scholars for being very time-consuming (see Rabionet, 2011). Additionally, Husband (2020) argues that this method is prone to bias, with researchers needing to be cautious about how they phrase their questions. Moreover, despite this technique being suitable for the study, coordinating, conducting, and transcribing each interview was laborious. The researcher was also sometimes required to be composed when participants were slightly taciturn in their communication, although thankfully, most discussions were very pleasant.

The questionnaire guide and consent forms were sent to respondents beforehand to ensure that all participants understood what the study entailed. Moreover, before each interview commenced, the researcher spent five minutes explaining the study's purpose to respondents. They further asked permission to record discussions. By doing this, the researcher was able to set the minds of all participants at ease before the interviews began and recordings started. Questions were also carefully framed and phrased to prevent participants from answering in specific ways to please the researcher, which Bergen and Labonté (2019) define as social desirability bias or the Hawthorne effect. Interviews were also organised on days and at times that were convenient for respondents to enable them to be fully engaged in the discussions. Throughout the interview process, the researcher remained self-reflexive (see Holmes, 2010) and evaluated how their personal biases impacted how they received and created meaning from responses (see Van Zyl & Sabiescu, 2020).

4.5.2. Phase two: Content analysis

The thematic content analysis began after interviews were completed, transcribed, and coded. To reiterate, content posted between March and July 2020 was selected. By analysing content posted over those four months, the researcher observed the change in the tone of messages from level five, when the franchise closed, to level three, when they were operational. In the interviews, all participants suggested that Company X utilises Twitter and Facebook to engage with consumers. Therefore, content that was posted on these two platforms was analysed. The thematic content analysis took place from 5 August to 29 August 2021. The first week of the content analysis involved the researcher taking screenshots of all relevant Facebook and Twitter posts and dating and labelling them appropriately by themes. After that, the researcher thematically analysed and examined posts before relating them to what respondents said during interviews. Through the content analysis, the researcher evaluated how many posts were shared during the period studied and thematically evaluated the data. This was done to determine how much input the internal public relations team had in conceptualising content during the different lockdown levels studied.

4.5.2.1. Limitations of the content analysis instrument

The researcher acknowledges that the content analysis instrument has historically been criticised for offering an over-simplistic data evaluation (Stephenson, 1963). This technique has also been criticised for providing a 'mixed-methods' analysis of data since the technique is not inherently exploratory, with researchers continually evaluating the frequency of data before analysing the themes therein (Dumay & Cai, 2014). However, despite the perceived limitations of this approach, the researcher maintains that this method was helpful to the study, as it served as an effective triangulation technique (see Allen, 2017), with themes later compared to the interview data. Discussions with respondents thus served as a guide that helped the researcher identify and categorise content appropriately. The researcher also explicitly stated what type of data they would be exploring, further delineating the analysis to content specifically found on the company's Facebook and Twitter pages, posted in the selected timeframe, and conceptualised directly by the public relations team, or having some input from this department.

4.6. Data analysis

Interview transcripts and social media content were thematically analysed.

4.6.1. Thematic analysis

Maguire and Delahunt (2017) note that a thematic analysis involves researchers exploring different patterns within datasets and then arranging them according to the themes and sub-themes that emerge. This method was used to organise interview data and effectively present the information, making it easier to synthesise (see Tuckett, 2005). After watching and listening to the recordings of each interview to familiarise themselves with the data, the researcher manually transcribed each discussion verbatim. They did this to unearth underlying themes within the data and determine respondents' dispositions at different times during each interview (see Davidson, 2009). After that, the heart of the analysis took place, with codes and patterns derived from the dataset.

Braun and Clarke (2006) note that there are primarily six steps in the thematic analysis process. They are:

- Familiarisation – involving researchers watching or listening to recordings, making notes, transcribing information, and thoroughly perusing transcripts.
- Creation of preliminary codes – involving the formulation of opening codes or 'labels' from interesting pieces of information that stood out in the dataset.

- Probing the data for patterns that emerge – referring to the uncovering of themes and sub-themes.
- Evaluating themes – this involves researchers exploring whether the themes and codes that were generated work together and align with what the study aims to discover.
- Defining themes – which involves the thorough exploration of themes and the creation of succinct definitions of concepts that emerge.
- Formulation of findings – this involves the systematic presentation of results.

After familiarising themselves with the data from the interviews, the researcher began coding the information manually, using printed out copies of the transcripts, pens, paper, and sticky notes. Instead of coding data using the line-by-line method, the researcher looked at the critical points of each response holistically to provide context to codes, instead of labelling data at a base level, which would have been too rudimentary to form pragmatic themes from (see Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). In cases where responses were substantial, the researcher dissected the answers into individual sentences before coding the data. The deductive and inductive approaches were employed to evaluate interview and social media content. However, the latter technique was predominantly used, with the researcher careful not to pre-empt any results.

According to Thomas (2006), employing the inductive analysis approach involves researchers looking for emergent themes within datasets instead of having specific criteria through which information is evaluated. Conversely, the deductive approach analyses data through specific theoretical lenses. Both these approaches have their strengths and weaknesses, with the deductive approach often described as too 'rigid' (see Thomas, 2006; O'Kane, Smith & Lerman, 2021), and the inductive method understood to be far too broad, with inaccuracies sometimes occurring with holistic findings (Streefkerk, 2019; Ezzy, 2002). For this reason, the researcher used both inductive and deductive reasoning in their data analysis by reviewing information in relation to the theoretical underpinnings mentioned in chapter three and being open and responsive to new ideas and themes that emerged (see Streefkerk, 2019).

The thematic analysis of interviews took place between 24 July 2021 and 20 August 2021. However, it is worth mentioning that the researcher mainly worked on their analysis in the evenings, which is why the process took close to a month to complete. Furthermore, for three non-consecutive days during that period, the researcher did not work on their analysis and used that time to rest and reflect on some of the derived themes. After interviews were transcribed and initial labels were constructed, the researcher also started creating preliminary codes for the social media posts. Therefore, there was some overlap in their evaluation of interviews and social media posts. Three fundamental aspects of their interview analysis had already been completed, however, enabling the researcher to earmark which posts were from the public relations department.

Figure 5 presents how many days the researcher spent on the thematic analysis of interview data. The graph's 'formulating findings' section indicates how long the researcher took to derive basic themes and sub-themes from the dataset. It does *not* refer to when they completed their holistic results and discussion chapter of the study or how long that process took in its entirety. The graph illustrates that the transcription of interviews and the familiarisation phase of the analysis process took the longest to complete, along with the initial derivation of themes.

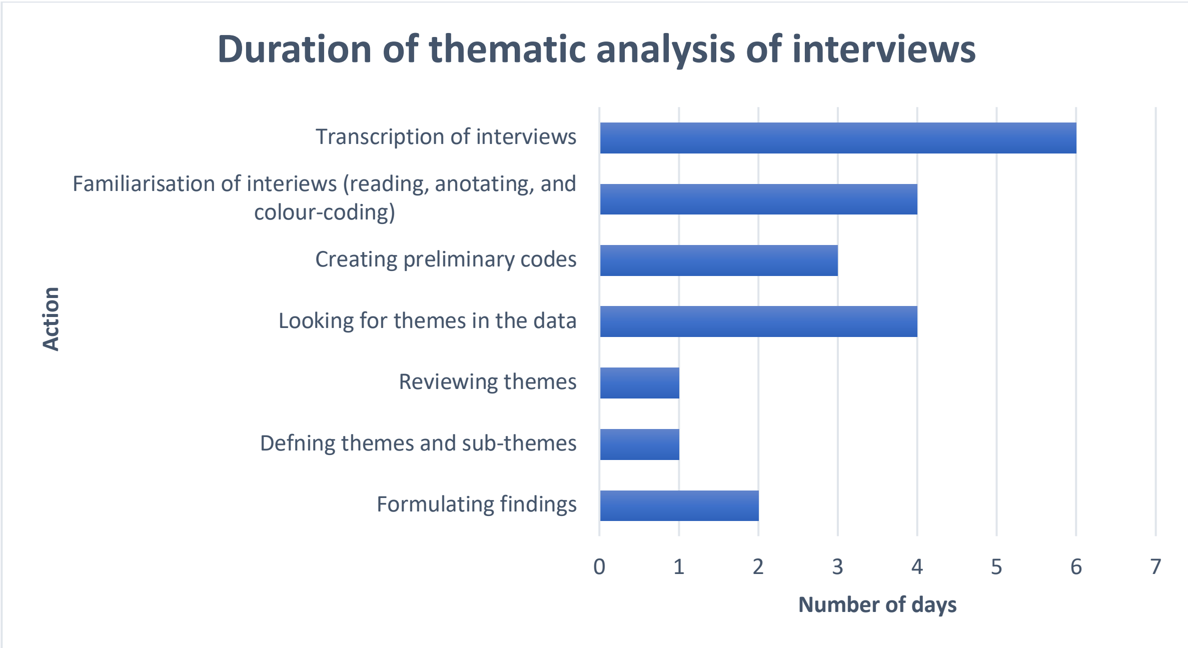

Figure 5: Bar graph illustrating the process of thematically analysing the interview data.

After collating and organising the franchise's social media posts, the researcher evaluated the frequency of specific messages. Unlike the thematic analysis of interviews, which involved the researcher formulating extensive preliminary codes, secondary codes, themes, and sub-themes, with the content analysis, the researcher read over each post, assigned labels and sub-labels to them and compared the data to the interview themes. Since each participant was asked which social media posts shared during the selected timeframe were from the public relations team, the researcher had no problem locating themes within this content because both datasets had clear alignment. Validity and reliability were thus established by the researcher utilising the thematic content analysis instrument as a triangulation technique (see Taherdoost, 2016).

The thematic content analysis took around three weeks to complete, between 5 August and 29 August 2021. Figure 6 presents the steps taken to complete the thematic content analysis and how long each step took. The graph's 'formulating holistic findings' section indicates how long it took the researcher to create themes from the posts, which were compared and analysed in relation to themes derived from interviews. Unlike the interview transcriptions, which took six days to complete, collecting and labelling all Twitter and Facebook posts between March and July 2020 was a long and laborious process. It took the researcher nine days to gather and cohesively categorise this information.

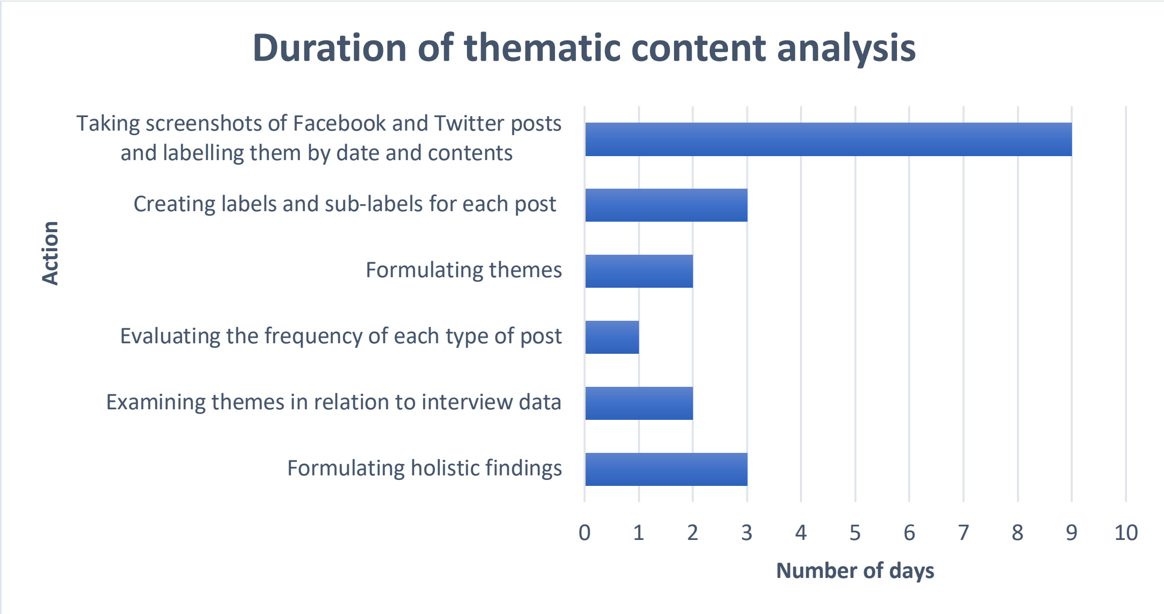

Figure 6: Bar graph illustrating the process of thematically analysing social media content.

4.6.1.1. Limitations of the thematic analysis technique

Holloway and Todres (2003) note that reliability is often an issue with this analysis method since data can be interpreted in several ways. As previously mentioned, however, the researcher remained self-reflexive throughout the data analysis process (see Van Zyl & Sabiescu, 2020) and established the research as reliable by using two different qualitative instruments (see Taherdoost, 2016). Additionally, they ensured that data was not analysed at an inchoate level, with cohesive themes and sub-themes formulated. Furthermore, the researcher comprehensively justified why the thematic analysis method was used to examine the two datasets, explaining how this technique was assistive in addressing the study's questions.

Therefore, despite the thematic analysis being quite cumbersome, this technique enabled the researcher to derive fascinating themes from the data, which were helpful in the chronological presentation and analysis of findings. It must be noted, however, that uncovered themes were merely used as a guideline for presenting the results, and headlines and sub-headlines are named independently. The two broad categories of social media content that the researcher found on the franchise's social media pages were, a.) content with *significant* public relations input and b.) content with *some* public relations input. This is explained in detail in chapter five. Furthermore, month-by-month analysis of social media data is provided in the findings chapter. Thematically analysing the interviews and the social media content was arduous, but interesting themes were unearthed after this process.

4.7. Ethical considerations

In chapter one, the researcher explicated that although they were granted permission to identify Company X in the submission of this study, the franchise's name needed to be removed before the work was published online, with the organisation anonymised throughout this and all online versions of the work. All Facebook and Twitter posts are also omitted herein. Furthermore, any arguments and references implicating the franchise directly have been removed.

None of the respondents' names are mentioned in any version of the work. As aforementioned, they have all been coded alphabetically. Some of the benefits of research anonymity have been mentioned in previous chapters (see Lavrakas, 2008; Mamotte & Wassenaar, 2015), with participants often more at ease when their identities are concealed. It is also vital to note that no respondents were interviewed before the franchise's CEO signed the consent form (see Appendix B) or before the researcher obtained institutional ethics approval (see Appendix C). As per the agreement, the name of the CEO and the franchise are concealed. The risk associated with conducting the study was thus mitigated through the researcher formally applying for ethical clearance from their institution.

All respondents willingly took part in the study and could withdraw their consent at any time. There was no coercion, threatening, or bribing of any participant, with all respondents approached politely by the researcher and voluntarily participating in the project. Largent, Grady, Miller and Wertheimer (2013) argue that it is vital for research participation to be voluntary to ensure that interviewees are truthful, honest, and comfortable during discussions.

All information was stored following the institution's data management plan that the researcher developed before being granted ethics approval. With this plan in mind, the researcher saved all video recordings, notes, transcripts, individual consent forms, and screenshots of social media data on a password-protected laptop and three external devices that only they have access to. The information stored on these devices will be destroyed within five years of the study's publication, and only the researcher will ever see this raw data.

Both the student and their supervisors were trained on ethics as part of the research project. Furthermore, in the first year of master's studies, all students at the institution are taught about the importance of ethics being inseparable to the research endeavour and about the pertinence of not simply relegating this section to the methodology chapter within a project (see Van Zyl & Sabiescu, 2020).

The feasibility of the study was ensured through the researcher first completing a research proposal, which was reviewed by two internal examiners, before presenting the work at a formal defence held by the institution. During the defence, six academics within the institution could comment on and provide feedback on the proposed study, helping the researcher identify issues that could arise through the project.

No people, communities, animals, or environments were harmed through the study. Furthermore, no reputations, whether organisational or individual, were tainted. Lastly, no buildings or properties were damaged at any time. This was simply a fascinating study to conduct, with no contemptuous issues raised.

4.8. Chapter summary

In this chapter, the researcher described how the study was conducted. They also explained why Company X was used, why specific Twitter and Facebook content was sampled, and why certain participants were selected. Furthermore, pragmatic motivations were provided, justifying all decisions made, thoroughly explicating the advantages and limitations of specific research decisions. In this way, the researcher effectively illustrated their inherent reflexivity and ability to critically evaluate their study and the decisions that shaped the work.

Chapter 5

Findings and discussion

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, the study's results are explicated and analysed. As stated in chapter one, the researcher is unable to include screenshots of the franchise's social media posts in this iteration of the work due to the ethical conditions of the study. As aforementioned, this is a qualitative case study, with interviews and a thematic content analysis used to gather data, with both datasets thematically analysed. Furthermore, this study was framed through stakeholder theory and the two-way symmetrical model. The work has been conducted ethically, and the researcher remained critically reflexive throughout every stage of the research process (see Van Zyl & Sabiescu, 2020).

As aforementioned, in this study, the researcher wanted to address one primary question, which is:

- **How did the public relations team in a selected South African fast-food franchise use social media to engage with consumers during strict lockdown periods in 2020?**

Chapter four explicated that the study's primary purpose remained the same despite the researcher sampling a diverse group of people using the purposive and snowball methods. The inclusion of these respondents was used to validate what Respondents A and B said and for the researcher to sample an adequate number of participants (see Naderifar et al., 2017). All responses contributed to the original aim, with interesting themes unearthed.

Here, the researcher firstly explores the dovetailing, inter-reliant connection between the digital and public relations teams and the role these departments played in consumer engagement utilising social networks during the pandemic in 2020. After that, the researcher briefly explores which platforms were used for consumer engagement during the harder lockdown levels. A month-by-month analysis of the Twitter and Facebook posts shared during the selected period is also provided, with the researcher exploring the involvement of the public relations team in the conceptualisation of content. Lastly, the researcher segues into the most critical part of this chapter, which is the section where social media content is categorised as follows:

1. Social media content with *significant* public relations input
2. Social media content with *some* public relations input

Findings are analysed in relation to stakeholder theory and the two-way symmetrical model, with results further evaluated and compared to the literature cited in chapter two. Salient results are presented narratively in the following sub-sections, with diverse themes cohesively linked.

5.2. Interconnected digital and public relations roles

There is an inter-reliant connection between the public relations and digital practitioners within Company X. The consensus among all six participants was that the public relations and digital teams work well together. These two departments collaborated during the hard lockdown periods in 2020 to conceptualise specific messages published on the franchise's Twitter and Facebook pages. According to Respondent B, the internal general manager of brand and strategy, a lot of content posted on the franchise's social media platforms during the lockdown in 2020 was formulated by multiple people who operate within the digital, public relations, and creative teams. They further argued that the company's internal teams and external digital, public relations, and creative agencies were involved in communicating relevant messages to consumers online. This finding shares similarities with a study by Gesualdi (2019), who argues that social media has created new opportunities for collaboration and encroachment between different roles within the holistic marketing mix.

Respondent F, who manages the digital and online platforms for various Indian, African, and Middle Eastern markets within Company X noted:

> *"We [the digital and public relations teams] leaned on each other a lot, and we intercepted a lot. A lot of the work we did during lockdown last year, they amplified, and a lot of what they did, we amplified, so we definitely have a hand-in-hand relationship".*

Similarly, Respondent C, who is an external digital practitioner managing the franchise's various online platforms, said:

> *"During lockdown last year, the internal PR team and the PR agency would develop content and statements that would need to be published on social media. Once a statement was prepared, we'd get the press release from them, and repurpose the statement into a news article on the company's website, and also publish it on the socials".*

The benefits of effective integration between various communication departments is advocated for by Naumovska and Blazeska (2016). They argue that the role of public relations professionals in the marketing mix in this endeavour could aid organisational transparency. They also posit that businesses implementing effective IMC practices are far more effective in their relationship-building efforts than those who undertake a siloed approach to organisational messaging (ibid.). Furthermore, in a seminal study by Valos et al. (2016), the authors found that integration between various communication teams is beneficial within service-related organisations, such as fast-food companies.

5.2.1. Differentiating between public relations and digital roles

Despite significant collaboration between the selected organisation's public relations and digital teams, this partnership does *not* extend to the day-to-day managing of the franchise's social media pages, which the internal digital team and two external agencies are responsible for. As mentioned in chapter four, two members of the external digital team responsible for engagement were sampled in this study.

Nine practitioners from this external agency work on the franchise's social media pages. Moreover, seven external public relations practitioners from a selected agency work with Company X, one of whom was sampled in this study. There was no need for more external practitioners to be sampled, as the point of saturation had already been reached within six interviews.

While the franchise's public relations practitioners strategically utilise social media, they use these platforms ad hoc. This was suggested by Respondent B in the following quotation:

> *"We use social media from a public relations perspective occasionally. So, public relations is often executed in digital spaces, not always, but in some online spaces. We look for ways to use social media to drive our PR targets".*

Similarly, Respondent A, who functions as the internal public relations manager for Company X, stated:

> *"The digital team focuses on engagement and having conversations online with our consumers, fostering brand love".*

All respondents suggested that during the pandemic in 2020, when pertinent communication needed to be disseminated to consumers, the public relations team would craft press releases and then send them to the digital team, who would share them on social media. Therefore, the public relations team did not directly work on the selected establishment's social media platforms, with practitioners relaying messages to the digital team, who edited and shared these messages on Facebook and Twitter.

Although a multiple case study by Robson and James (2013) found that public relations practitioners within various industries utilised social media intermittently, the researcher was surprised that this was the case within Company X, which integrates diverse digital platforms into their communication with stakeholders (see Smit, 2017). Furthermore, Du Plessis (2018) argues that using social media for interactive dialogues during organisational crises could effectively foster trust and mutually beneficial relationships with various stakeholders online, long after the crisis has passed. Public relations professionals are essential within this process of authentic social media communication. According to Du Plessis (2018), they should ideally engage in two-way symmetrical interactions with stakeholders online.

Komodromos (2014) unearthed a similar finding to what the researcher discovered in this project, stating that public relations professionals prefer social networking platforms to be managed by digital practitioners. As aforementioned, public relations professionals have no status quo regarding the utilisation of these online tools. Some practitioners use social networks strategically, with others occasionally incorporating them into their duties (see Capriotti et al., 2021; Mavimbela et al., 2018).

5.2.2. 'Traditional' public relations practices

Both Respondents A and B said that they engaged in 'classical' public relations practices, including media relations, strategic brand planning, sponsorships, paid and earned public relations, and crisis communication. Furthermore, both participants noted that while social media was used to achieve specific public relations targets during the pandemic, they were simply used as ‘another medium’ through which organisational messages could be shared. Respondent B, for example, said:

> *“Social media communication from a PR perspective is usually reserved for one of two things; when something big is happening in the country, and the other way in which we do that is when we have something critical to tell our audiences”.*

Similarly, Joo and Teng (2016) suggest that while public relations professionals value social media and the many ways these platforms could help them drive specific targets, many practitioners have not fully embraced the various relationship and brand-building opportunities presented by these channels. As mentioned in earlier chapters, there is no universally accepted way practitioners (should) use these platforms (see Capriotti et al., 2021; Mavimbela et al., 2018), with many studies producing varied, non-generalisable results. Works by Mavimbela et al. (2018) have tried to unpack some of the reasons practitioners either embrace or refuse the use of these tools. However, these studies are likewise limited to specific companies and industries. Furthermore, more pluralistic, qualitative studies by authors like Robson and James (2013) are also limited, with only a handful of practitioners sampled.

Sommerfeldt and Yang (2018) argue that while many public relations practitioners in diverse industries effectively utilise social media to build relationships with stakeholders, others are wary of these tools and refuse to integrate them fully into their practices. In Company X, while two-way engagements were practiced with consumers on two key platforms, the public relations team was not directly involved in these online conversations.

5.3. Social media utilisation by Company X

Although Company X is active on various platforms, including LinkedIn, YouTube, and Instagram, and have occasionally used Tinder and TikTok for brand-building purposes, none of these platforms were utilised for consumer engagement during the 2020 pandemic. The only two social media platforms the franchise used consistently in 2020, were Twitter and Facebook.

The franchise’s Facebook and Twitter pages have more than four million and 500 million followers, respectively. However, despite both platforms being used by Company X, respondents noted that two distinct audiences were found on these channels, with the franchise’s digital team aware of the needs of the stakeholders located thereon. Respondent B explicated this well in the following quotation:

> *“[We use] Twitter more for engagements and Facebook for broadcasting and publishing advertisements. Facebook may be for our older audiences and Twitter for younger users, but we are quite well represented across the full South African landscape”.*

Similarly, Respondent D, an external digital practitioner, noted:

> *“We keep our conversations on Twitter because that is the conversation platform”.*

Moreover, Respondent A said that Facebook was often used as an announcement platform by the brand. They noted:

> *"So, on Facebook, you find people are more open to us talking about prices, promotions, and safety protocols, but on Twitter, people don't talk about that. So, we are very specific about our messaging on each platform".*

Respondents C and D argued that Company X primarily uses Twitter and Facebook to engage with consumers and potential consumers because it is those specific platforms that these stakeholders are comfortable utilising. Furthermore, Respondent D explained that just because there is a rise in the utilisation of media such as TikTok does not mean that the franchise should adopt its use. They (Respondent D) argued:

> *"Every platform has its uses and benefits, and just because a new platform arises doesn't necessarily you should use it, or that the company would be able to use it in the way that the platform needs to be used".*

Respondent F further stated that because Company X has strong foundations on Facebook and Twitter, communication with stakeholders on these platforms during the hard lockdown in 2020 was organic and authentic. They (Respondent F) noted:

> *"We have a good foundation on Twitter and Facebook, so it was a natural behaviour for us. We know Twitter is not representative of the feeling of the whole South Africa, but it's definitely a space that we hold dear, and a space where we listen before we speak".*

The researcher was not particularly surprised that Facebook was one of the company's primary engagement platforms. A recent study by Statista found that this social network is still the most popular online channel globally (Statista, 2021). Furthermore, this result corresponds with a study by Mavimbela et al. (2018), who found that both Twitter and Facebook were the most-used tools for stakeholder engagement by public relations practitioners. According to various authors (see Gaber & Wright, 2014; Wright et al., 2017; Šerić & Praničević, 2017; Yang et al., 2019; Holmberg & Thelwell, 2014), Twitter and Facebook may be used by fast-food and other food-related businesses for brand-building, engagements, competitor monitoring, relationship fostering, and reputation management. Additionally, Kent and Li (2020) argue that these platforms could be utilised by public relations professionals in many ways, with consumer loyalty and trust often fostered through the effective utilisation of these online channels.

5.4. Observed social media dynamics

Despite the public relations team not directly working on the selected franchise's social media pages, these practitioners were responsible for conceptualising important content for Facebook and Twitter, regarding the company's operations during the first few months of the pandemic in 2020. From the thematic content analysis, it was found that there was significantly more content posted on Twitter than on Facebook during the selected period. However, this finding was not particularly surprising since all respondents stated that Twitter was the company's primary engagement platform. Facebook, in turn, was utilised for broadcasting messages, advertising meals, and disseminating information about safety protocols. While the researcher intended on sampling content posted between 25 March and 29 July 2020, the last content on Twitter and Facebook was published online on 28 July and 12 July 2020, respectively, before August posting commenced.

5.4.1. Tactical messaging

The selected franchise's 'tactical' social media content encompasses witty, often satirical posts conceptualised by the creative, digital, and public relations teams that address matters of interest to online audiences. These posts contain the franchise's easily recognisable fonts, artworks, and colourful backgrounds. The company often uses these posts as engagement tactics by instigating conversations about issues that South Africans care about. These posts have *some* public relations input, with practitioners ensuring that nothing posted online would damage the franchise's reputation. Many tactical posts shared during the period studied were aimed at facilitating engagement about issues that affected South Africans during the global health crisis, such as the lockdown, mask-wearing, hygiene protocols, and the curfew regulations citizens were required to follow.

5.5. Summary of Facebook posts

The researcher tallied 23 posts on the franchise's Facebook page between 25 March and 12 July 2020. Included in this analysis were posts and tactical messages on the Company X page. Close to 150 comments, in the form of the business responding to complaints, inquiries, and compliments, were also tallied. However, these comments were not included in the analysis, with the researcher simply perusing these responses to observe the interactions between the company and its consumers online.

When perusing the Facebook and Twitter comments, it was apparent to the researcher that Company X engaged in feedback-driven engagements by responding to queries, concerns, and complaints about the brand. This is another example of the franchise exercising stakeholder-inclusive, two-way interactions on social media. Similarly, Kent and Li's (2020) discussion around social media utilisation emphasises the power of these networks in facilitating interactive engagements with diverse stakeholder groups. Interactive engagements between fast-food franchises and their consumers are also advocated for by Dodo et al. (2016), with the authors viewing these dialogues as pointed examples of online CSR practices.

Figure 7 illustrates a line graph of the total number of Facebook posts published by Company X during the period studied. However, it must be noted that the researcher only evaluated two posts in March 2020. This is because they only analysed content posted from 25 March 2020 onwards. From the graph, it is apparent that most posts were published on Facebook in April 2020 (eight in total), when South Africa was still under a level-five lockdown (see South African Government, 2020a; Greer et al., 2021), with the least tallied posts in March 2020. The rise in April posting and engagement could be attributed to many people being at home during the hard lockdown and using their mobile devices and social networks more than usual, which Abbas et al. (2021) postulate in their study.

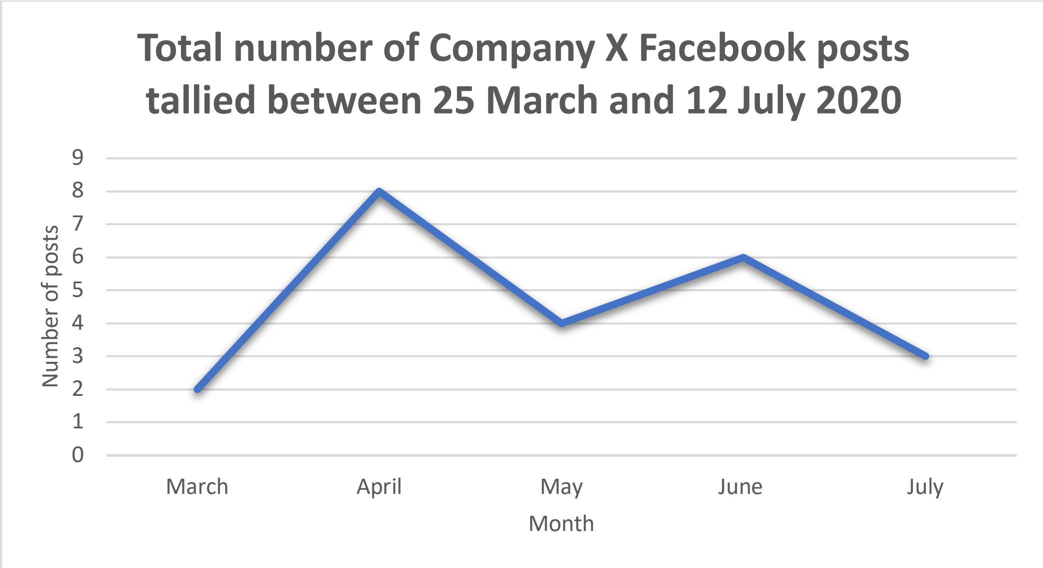

Figure 7: A line graph illustrating the total number of Facebook posts published by Company X during the hard lockdown in 2020.

5.5.1. March 2020 Facebook posts

In March 2020, the two posts publicised on Facebook were used to communicate to consumers that Company X would be closing during the level-five lockdown. The posts expressed the franchise's commitment to obeying the restrictions outlined by the South African government and encouraged people to stay home and stay safe. Furthermore, the franchise urged people to avoid spreading misinformation about COVID-19 and to show compassion for their fellow South Africans. These messages were useful in illustrating that although Company X could not trade during the lockdown, it still cared for its consumers and the country's citizens.

Suchman (1995) argues that caring for stakeholders is expected from organisations, not only because building relationships with diverse constituents may increase the bottom line, but simply because these businesses would not exist without society's permission. Furthermore, the normative stakeholder perspective posits that organisations are expected to be cognisant of the various constituents impacted by their existence (see Freeman, 2010; Freeman, 1984; Dmytriyev et al., 2021). As noted in chapter three, consumers are functional linkages, and without the buy-in of this stakeholder group, a franchise like Company X would close (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Plowman & Rawlins, 2017). All respondents noted that the public relations team conceptualised the two Facebook posts published in March 2020.

5.5.2. April 2020 Facebook posts

As aforementioned, eight posts were tallied in April 2020. Company X focused on engaging with consumers about the franchise remaining closed and informed them about there being no clear indication of when the establishment would recommence operations. Furthermore, the company shared some tactical posts, with clear messaging about social distancing and staying home, using a light-hearted, tongue-in-cheek tone in this communication. Camilleri (2021) advocates for this type of interactive communication, stating that it was necessary for businesses to engage responsively on social media with stakeholders during the hard lockdown, especially since they did not know when operations would recommence.

During this month, the franchise also shared details about a hunger drive that would be embarked on in May 2020. Posts about the hunger drive that the researcher classified as 'CSR communication', were formulated directly by the public relations team. The digital team then posted the content on Twitter, Facebook, and the franchise's website.

5.5.3. May 2020 Facebook posts

In May 2020, four posts were tallied on Facebook. Messaging during this month was useful in communicating to consumers that Company X was still closed and that selected stores were open for delivery. As aforementioned, during the pandemic, concise messaging was required by public relations practitioners (see Camilleri, 2021), because while *some* fast-food branches could reopen for delivery, others, in areas where the rates of infection remained high, needed to stay closed (see South African Government, 2020c; Harris, 2021; Business Insider South Africa, 2020). Additionally, posts were published that focused on the commencement of the hunger drive and the company's partnership with the Solidarity Fund. With this campaign, Company X encouraged consumers to purchase vouchers, with money worth ten times the gift card's value contributed to the Solidarity Fund, a charity formed in 2020, aimed at supporting people affected by COVID-19 (see Solidarity Fund, 2021).

5.5.4. June 2020 Facebook posts

Six posts were tallied in June 2020, most of which were focused on the advertising of meals. Furthermore, posts included details about how people could purchase meals, with delivery, drive-through, takeaway, call-in orders, and vehicle curb-side drop-offs (where food is delivered to consumers as they sit in their vehicles), optional. In June 2020, many fast-food establishments, including Company X, were operating, with social distancing observed in franchises and sanitising and mask-wearing required (see South African Government, 2020c; Lacombe et al., 2020). Posts about how consumers could obtain meals had some public relations input, mainly because Respondent B is the head of the franchise's creative team, with content shared in the form of artworks and infographics, with clear, concise messaging.

5.5.5. July 2020 Facebook posts

Three posts were published on Facebook during this period. Content posted was a mix of 'rest-in-peace' posts for renowned celebrities who had passed, tactical content that poked fun at the sale of alcohol being banned, and a post about consumers enjoying meals on-site, while needing to sanitise their hands and wear masks upon entry. This content included some public relations input. There were significantly more advertisements posted online this month, which was no surprise since many franchises were operating, with consumers allowed to enjoy meals on-site (see South African Government, 2020c).

5.6. Summary of Twitter posts

The researcher tallied 320 posts on the franchise's Twitter page between 25 March and 28 July 2020. This included tweets and retweets, engagement posts, COVID-19-related tweets, tactical posts, responses to users, and posts by influencers tagging the franchise, with these interactions being clear examples of partnerships with these 'micro-celebrities' (see Wielki, 2020). The researcher included responses to consumers in their Twitter analysis because these interactions were clear examples of two-way engagements. Conversely, on Facebook, while the franchise responded to comments, they only did so when complaints or queries needed to be addressed.

Figure 8 depicts a line graph illustrating the total number of tweets posted on the selected organisation's Twitter page during the period studied. From the chart, it is apparent that there was a lot of Twitter engagement in April 2020, when the country was under a level-five lockdown, with 128 tweets found online during this month. This could be attributed to the fact that many people were home during this period and may have spent more time on social media, which is suggested by Kligler-Vilenchik et al. (2020). Informational messaging containing COVID-19 content was broken up into a few separate tweets because of the 280-character limit (see Kim & Hammick, 2017).

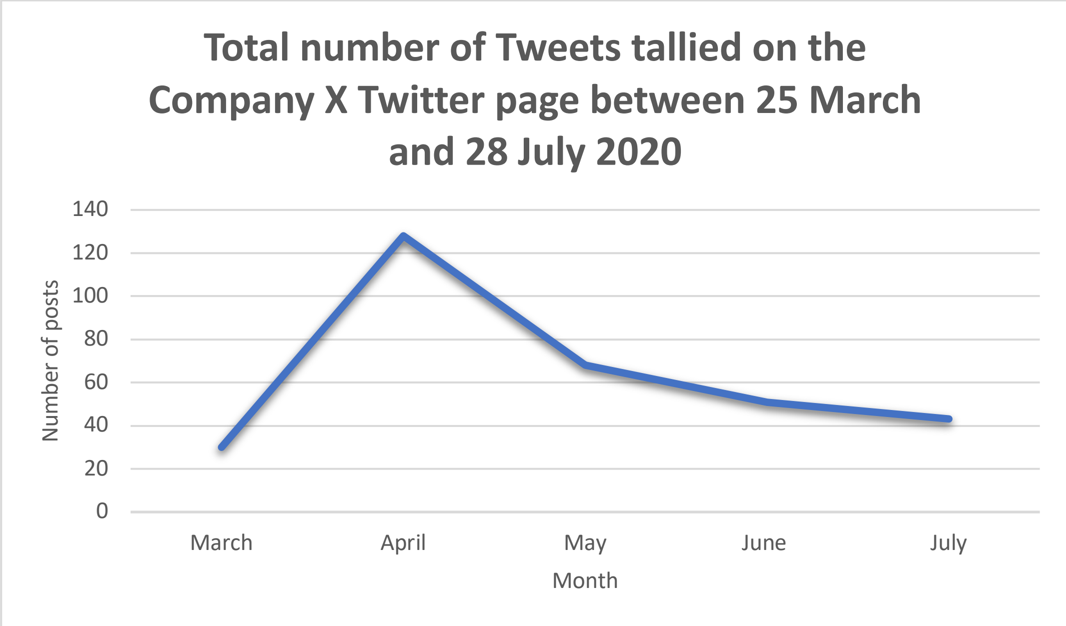

Figure 8: Total number of tweets on the Company X Twitter page, tallied between 25 March and 28 July 2020.

5.6.1. March 2020 Tweets

Thirty tweets were found on the franchise's Twitter page in March 2020, most of which were funny, light-hearted engagements in the form of 'memes', 'gifs', and witty interactions between Company X and its online stakeholder groups. Influencers also tagged Company X in their posts and interacted with them during this time, driving traffic to the franchise's page. As mentioned in chapter two, Twitter can potentially increase brand awareness, particularly when businesses have strategic relationships with influencers (Appel et al., 2020). In addition to the tongue-in-cheek tweets posted during this time, the company also shared informational messages about the franchise closing during the level-five lockdown, with posts broken up into three-tweet threads (see Kim & Hammick, 2017).

While Šerić and Praničević (2017) note that Twitter may be utilised for brand-building purposes by companies that trade foods, Sharma and Goyal (2018) and Mahoney and Tang (2017) point out that this platform could also be used by these businesses to refute fake news quickly online. It was necessary for fast-food organisations to effectively use Twitter during the pandemic in 2020 because misinformation was abundantly proliferated online about COVID-19 and the operations of these non-essential businesses during that time (Greer et al., 2021; Abbas et al., 2021).

5.6.2. April 2020 Tweets

During this month, 128 tweets were posted online. Among these tweets were engagement posts, announcements about Company X being uncertain about when operations would recommence, and tactical posts using witty messaging to encourage people to stay safe during the pandemic. Furthermore, the franchise announced that they would embark on a hunger drive in May 2020. As aforementioned, the hunger drive was one example of the company's CSR content shared during the hard lockdown in 2020.

5.6.3. May 2020 Tweets

Sixty-eight tweets were posted in May 2020. The researcher noticed that all critical COVID-19 announcements were posted on Facebook and Twitter throughout the period studied, despite the latter platform primarily being used for fun engagements (see Read et al., 2019). Therefore, it was not surprising to see that posts about the franchise's partnership with the Solidarity Fund, the announcement about the hunger drive commencing, and messages about Company X being open on a delivery basis, were shared during this month. Company X also informed their consumers that they were unsure when the franchise would reopen, despite some companies already opening for delivery during lockdown level two (see Business Insider, 2020).

5.6.4. June 2020 Tweets

Fifty-one tweets were posted on Twitter in June 2020. In addition to regular, light-hearted engagements, interactions with influencers, and posts about the Solidarity Fund partnership, the franchise also marketed certain meal specials and disseminated information about how consumers could obtain meals. Consumer complaints were also addressed, and information about the safety protocols the franchise was required to observe during the level-three lockdown, were mentioned (see South African Government, 2020c; Greer et al., 2021).

5.6.5. July 2020 Tweets

Forty-three posts were shared on Twitter in July 2020, including engagements, responses to complaints, tactical content, a rest-in-peace tweet paying homage to a fallen celebrity, and a funny, witty, tactical post. These tweets had some public relations input. As aforementioned, Twitter was mainly used for engagement (see Read et al., 2019), and therefore meal advertisements and safety messages on this platform were minimal. Company X reopened in July 2020 on a dine-in basis in some areas and communicated with their consumers about which branches would be open during that period.

5.7. Social media content with *significant* public relations input

These messages were conceptualised directly by the public relations team during the strict lockdown periods in 2020.

5.7.1. Crisis communication

After the president announced that South Africa would be placed under a level-five lockdown (see South African Government, 2020a; Harris, 2021), the public relations team within Company X formulated press releases about the franchise closing, which were shared on social media. Moreover, all communication about the global COVID-19 crisis and the franchise's operations during the different lockdown levels were conceptualised directly by the public relations department.

According to Respondent B, messaging from the public relations team would primarily communicate serious matters. They noted this in the following quotation:

> *"So, when we have serious things to communicate, which forms part of our crisis communication, PR would be the genesis of that work. So, if people are complaining, confused, or have specific things they're accusing the brand, or the restaurant of, then the PR team does all of that work. Also, if there is anything specific to communicate, such as the COVID-19 protocols we followed to keep you safe [the PR team would be responsible for that messaging as well]".*

They (Respondent B) further added:

> *"When we had to shift our restaurant opening hours because of COVID-19 level lockdowns, we communicated that online so that people would not be confused or disappointed about when they could purchase meals from our company and how they could get meals".*

Similarly, Respondent A explained that while Company X does not usually utilise social media for crisis communication, the pandemic was a unique situation, where incorporating these platforms was essential. They explained this in the following quotation:

> *"We don't normally use social media to engage in crisis communication, but obviously because we were dealing with an unprecedented pandemic, we would have, for example, briefed our infographics people and said, 'do an infographic that is easy to understand where we'll quite simply illustrate that we will wear masks and we will be sanitising'."*

Conversely, Respondent E, an external public relations professional, noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Company X itself was not in crisis, with communication helpful in responding to an external stressor that affected the franchise and its consumers.

> *"So, for us, it was not crisis communication, but more about responding to an external stressor that affected the company in some way. Unless there was something that could potentially harm the brand, there wasn't any crisis communication really needed".*

According to Civelek, Çemberci and Eralp (2016), public relations professionals' strategic utilisation of social networks during crises enables credible, authentic engagements to be facilitated between an organisation and its constituents. These engagements may also be employed to protect a company's reputation during organisational crises (Coombs, 2007). Similarly, Apuke and Tunca (2019) argue that social media could aid crisis communication, with public relations professionals able to refute online claims and fake news about the organisations they function within quickly.

5.7.2. CSR communication

Many interviewees argued that Company X did not like referring to their altruistic endeavours as 'CSR', with sustainable business practices interwoven into their daily operations. This is explained in the quote below by Respondent B:

> *"We don't do CSR, because it's not a separate department, or a separate stream of work, or a separate budget like most companies do. We do the right things because they are the right things to do, and they are integrated into our business and into everyone's life".*

Respondent E similarly stated:

> *"We don't call it CSR; it's really about sharing. Company X has a very keen sense of its responsibility to the community, and I think it's that deep sense of responsibility that drives many of its approaches in terms of how they think about the world.*

5.7.2.1. Hunger drive

However, during the hard lockdown in 2020, Twitter and Facebook were utilised to post information about two key CSR initiatives that Company X took part in. The hunger drive and the franchise's partnership with the Solidarity Fund were examples of this. With the hunger drive, Company X partnered with two other establishments during the hard lockdown and opened a few restaurants to deliver food to people affected by COVID-19. In the quotation below, Respondent B explains more about the initiative.

> *"We ran a 'frenemies' campaign, where [we teamed up with] two other franchises, who had the same problem as us; they would not have been able to trade, and all their food would have gone expired, because they weren't able to sell it. We didn't want the food to go to waste, so as the three frenemies, we partnered together, and we donated the food to people in need [who were] terribly affected by COVID-19".*

They (Respondent B) further described the use of social media to publicise details of the hunger drive, stating:

> *"That is a story we told more [and shared on social media], because we wanted to show industry solidarity and a coming together of the different restaurant partners".*

Respondent C similarly argued that the hunger drive was an example of direct public relations messaging. This is explicitly noted in the quotation below:

> *"The hunger drive would be an example of a post with a fully-fledged PR angle".*

5.7.2.2. Partnership with the Solidarity Fund

In May 2020, Facebook and Twitter were used for information dissemination about the franchise's partnership with the Solidarity Fund. Respondent F explained this in the following quotation:

> *“Working with the solidarity fund was sort of part of our values [as a company] and gave our app relevance in a time when we couldn’t sell chicken”.*

As mentioned in chapter three, there is a dovetailing relationship between CSR and stakeholder theory, with both concepts positing that organisations should be cognisant of the needs of diverse organisational constituents and not exclusively stockholders (Hörisch et al., 2020; Dmytriyev et al., 2021; Freeman, 2010; Freeman, 1984). Similarly, there is also an interconnected relationship between public relations and CSR, with both disciplines including facets related to relationship building with stakeholders, reputation management, and the application of business practices that take into consideration the triple bottom line (see Reeves, 2016; Clark, 2000; Correia, 2019).

5.7.3. Critical, one-way messaging

Although the franchise’s digital team practiced two-way symmetrical communication on social media during the hard lockdown in 2020, the public relations team engaged in one-way messaging with consumers. As aforementioned, these practitioners communicated critical messages to consumers about the franchise’s operations and the CSR initiatives in which Company X was involved. The digital team would then respond to queries about these initiatives on social media. The public relations team got involved and managed issues online only when matters of contention escalated on social media.

It would not be fair for the researcher to argue that the public relations team engaged in ‘press agentry’ or ‘asymmetrical’ communication, because these engagement forms are inherently manipulative (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). However, certain constructs related to the ‘public information model’ can certainly be used to analyse the type of communication these practitioners engaged in using Twitter and Facebook during the hard lockdown, since the team focused on delivering accurate information to consumers (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Suyono & Hanathasia, 2014).

However, certain tenets related to this model, proposing that practitioners withhold specific information about the companies they serve to avoid public scrutiny (see Grunig, 2009), cannot necessarily be applied here. It is, however, beyond this study’s parameters to draw conclusions about the holistic public relations practices in Company X beyond what is studied here. It is, however, fair to state that both two-way and informational communication is practiced between Company X and its consumers on social media. Morsing and Schultz (2006) argue that while both models are valid, the former engagement form is preferred when building lasting connections with stakeholders and communicating CSR practices.

5.8. Social media content with *some* public relations input

These posts illustrated substantial integration between the public relations and digital departments.

5.8.1. Tactical posts

There was a great deal of collaboration between the creative, public relations, and digital teams when conceptualising tactical posts. The various ‘lockdown lingo’ posts published by Company X during lockdown level five in April 2020 are examples of this. In these tactical posts, nomenclature related to

COVID-19 and the lockdown were crafted into witty puns, with important messages communicated to consumers about the importance of social distancing, sanitising, and staying home as far as possible.

With tactical posts such as this one, it was the duty of the public relations team to make sure that no messaging would damage the organisation's reputation. Respondent A explained their role in this endeavour in the following quotation:

> *"My expertise from a PR point of view is that I will come in and say, 'maybe be careful of using this kind of word, I don't want a media storm afterwards'. So, I might guide the digital and creative team so that I do not have a crisis to deal with after the fact. I make sure that we don't get too spicy, or too political. This work is collaborative, because everyone has a different social understanding. So, public relations, in terms of what I do, is about managing reputation".*

Respondent D similarly said:

> *"The public relations manager would step in from a PR perspective, because as much as we're creatives, and we want to go and break the internet, sometimes she has to hold us back".*

According to Capriotti et al. (2021) and Kent and Li (2020), the increased use of the internet and social networking platforms has enabled public relations professionals to manage an organisation's reputations quickly and efficiently. Furthermore, various authors (Du Plessis, 2018; Taylor, 2018; Adi, 2015; Saffer et al. 2013) argue that these platforms have led to communication between an organisation and their consumers being more open and symmetrical, with public relations practitioners able to quickly defuse fake news online (see Cinelli et al., 2020). Reputation management through social media was vital during the lockdown in 2020, with misinformation prevalent during that time (see Barua et al., 2020). However, as Becker and Lee (2018) note, public relations professionals often do not leverage these tools effectively for reputation management or consumer relationship building.

5.8.2. Stakeholder-inclusive engagements during lockdown

The researcher has cited examples of Company X incorporating stakeholder-inclusive practices into their business operations and social media engagements throughout this study. As posited in Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, businesses need to care for diverse constituent groups that could affect an organisation's functionality and success. Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter two, adopting stakeholder-inclusive business practices is also supported by the King IV report (Institute of Directors Southern Africa, 2016). The public relations team within Company X ensured that no messages disseminated online would harm the brand and provided input on tactical posts and vital organisational messaging.

Additionally, all respondents suggested that social media communication was aimed at consumers and potential consumers. Respondent B explained this well in the following quotation:

"[Social media communication is aimed at] everyone who uses Company X, so we speak quite democratically. So, it's anyone who is interested in, and wants to know about our business. Company X is of the people, and by the people, so, we are always communicating with our audiences, it's not like a strategic moment where we think we should say something. We talk to them, and they talk to us; it's a fluid relationship".

Respondent F further explicated this and stated:

"We cannot ever be comfortable and set in our ways and only communicate with consumers, because we aim to be inclusive and communicate with as many people as possible".

Conversely, Respondent A explained that social media communication is always about consumers. This is described in the following quote:

"Communication is always about the consumers, but it's about which consumer is on each platform and how they use the platforms that Company X is active on".

Similarly, in a 2017 study, Fondevila-Gascón et al. (2017) argue that when fast-food franchises engage in honest, symmetrical engagements with consumers, they will build authentic, meaningful connections with these constituents. Furthermore, much of the literature that the researcher perused regarding social media utilisation by public relations professionals alluded to the importance of 'engagement', 'transparency', and 'authenticity', which the researcher briefly discussed in chapter two (see McCorkindale & DiStaso, 2014).

Additionally, Respondent D argued that the franchise engages with consumers in an 'inclusive' way by talking to these stakeholders about matter that are of interest to them. Their (Respondent D) sentiments are explicated in the following quotation:

"We're really good at knowing what our community or target market wants, and then we almost give them what they want from us".

Their sentiments were echoed by Respondent A, who said:

"What the social media team does is stay on trend with what South Africans are talking about, so what the digital team will do is say, 'this is the sentiment that we are picking up from people', and that will help them develop creative lines to just engage with them".

Another way Company X communicates with consumers in a stakeholder-inclusive manner is by incorporating various South African languages and unique colloquialisms into their posts. Some posts are written in Afrikaans, while others are written in English, *isiZulu*, *isiXhosa*, South African slang, or a hybrid of various languages. This was noted by Respondent D in the following quotation:

"One of our personas is that we are just a South African brand. So, sometimes we'll use Zulu, sometimes we'll use Tswana, sometimes we're using Afrikaans, so we try and encapsulate as many languages as possible, and I think it helps to have a diverse team".

5.8.3. Prevention of misinformation

It was essential for Company X to use social media to ensure that consumers always knew the franchise's status to prevent the proliferation of misinformation about the business (see Staunton et al., 2020). All respondents noted that the company did so efficiently, with no significant misinformation cases occurring.

Respondent F explained that because the franchise used all online platforms effectively, from the website to the various social media pages, to communicate the status of Company X to its consumers, there was no confusion about operations during the lockdown in 2020. They said:

"We traditionally have very strong foundations in place, from our social media pages, to our TripAdvisor, to the website, and so we were able to update those quickly, so when our consumers were searching for Company X, they knew the status of our restaurant, which is always our number one priority".

Respondent A similarly argued that when there was any confusion about operational protocols and restrictions, the digital team would direct consumers to the website. The following quotation explains this succinctly:

"Instead of trying to answer [consumer queries] in 140 characters, we would direct them to our website, where we hold most of our information and where we store statements".

Respondent E argued that misinformation was not an issue that affected Company X because of the brand's relationships with its consumers. They noted:

"One thing Company X does very well is maintain relationships. So, whenever there is any misinformation about the franchise, people will always come to me and say, 'I received this, is it true?' and I'll go 'no, it isn't.'"

5.9. Chapter summary

This chapter presented the study's main findings. The results indicated that the selected franchise's public relations department shares an inter-reliant relationship with the digital team, with much of the social media content that was found online conceptualised by both departments. Messaging with a clear public relations angle included posts about the COVID-19 protocols Company X adhered to during the diverse lockdown levels in 2020, and CSR communication about the hunger drive and Solidarity Fund partnership. Social media posts with some public relations input included tactical posts, wherein these practitioners acted in their capacity as reputation managers.

Despite the franchise engaging in two-way, symmetrical interactions online, the public relations team focused on delivering informational messages to the digital team to be published on social media, with the latter department responding to consumer queries. If matters escalated online, the public relations team involved themselves in those conversations, resolving crises with stakeholder groups online. Furthermore, the researcher found that during the 2020 lockdown, the franchise engaged in stakeholder-inclusive interactions online by producing content about important topics that consumers cared about, through monitoring various platforms and joining online conversations. Furthermore, social media communication during the hard lockdown was aimed at consumers *and* potential consumers, with all respondents arguing that the brand always tried to be as inclusive as possible in their online engagements.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and recommendations

6.1. Introduction

This chapter broadly reflects on the study's purpose and the findings that have been unearthed through this project. The researcher starts by describing how all research questions have been answered. Therefter, pragmatic justifications are provided that explicate why this research is unique, with the contribution of this project to the public relations discipline succinctly explained. The researcher then summarises the entire study and critically evaluates the applicability of the methods and theoretical framework that have been employed to address the intellectual puzzle. A synopsis of the key findings is then provided before addressing the research limitations.

Naturally, because this study was interpretive and exploratory in nature (see Ponelis, 2015), during the research process, interesting emergent themes were discovered that were not pertinent to the study, per se, but were nonetheless provocative and insightful. Therefore, as the chapter is rounded off, the researcher recommends how future authors could advance certain aspects of this work. As mentioned in earlier chapters, all decisions undertaken during the research process were critically evaluated. Therefore, the researcher ensured that they remained self-reflexive and cognisant of how every choice they made contributed to the study's aim (see Van Zyl & Sabiescu, 2020).

6.2. Addressing the research questions

As aforementioned, the study's questions, described in chapter one, were addressed through the researcher employing the following strategies:

- By interviewing respondents who function as public relations and digital practitioners, either internally or externally, for Company X.
- By conducting a thematic content analysis and exploring which Facebook and Twitter posts published by Company X during the period studied were conceptualised by the public relations team.

Each research question is briefly responded to below. The researcher addresses the primary question first, before delving into the four sub-questions.

6.2.1. Primary research question:

How did the public relations team in a selected South African fast-food franchise use social media to engage with consumers during strict lockdown periods in 2020?

Despite not working on the fast-food franchise's social media pages directly, the public relations department in the organisation functioned alongside the digital team to communicate specific messages to consumers during the hard lockdown in 2020. Respondent B explained that the public relations team within the franchise utilised social media *occasionally.* This is an interesting finding, since it corresponds with what Robson and James (2013) discovered in their multiple case study, conducted more than eight years ago, wherein practitioners from various markets were sampled. Respondents A and B said they engaged in 'classical public relations practices' and that social media was used as 'another medium' through which information was communicated to consumers.

Their sentiments are in sharp contrast with a study by Neill and Lee (2016). They found that the rise in social media utilisation has impacted public relations professionals operating at every level within an organisation. They further argued that the increased utilisation of these platforms had created new sub-roles for these practitioners (ibid.). However, Capriotti et al. (2021) and Jiang et al. (2016) found that while some public relations professionals have effectively integrated various social networking platforms into their engagement duties, others have been warier of incorporating these online tools. Furthermore, Mavimbela et al. (2018) contend that perceived privacy issues related to social networking sites, and the effort it would take to monitor these platforms regularly, are two key reasons some public relations professionals have been less keen to use these tools strategically.

All participants suggested that the public relations team crafted pertinent messages about the franchise's opening and closing times during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the hunger drive, and the partnership with the Solidarity Fund. Respondent C noted that messages were packaged as press releases by the public relations team, before being repurposed by the digital department on Twitter, Facebook, and the establishment's website. Additionally, with tactical posts, the public relations team had input as reputation managers, ensuring that no content shared online would inherently damage the brand. Tactical posts and artworks on social media had input from the creative, digital, and public relations teams. Therefore, there was significant collaboration between the digital and public relations departments during various lockdown periods. This is something that Naumovska and Blazeska (2016) advocate for, arguing that incorporating multiple roles in the marketing mix could aid the efficiency of organisational communication.

6.2.2. Secondary research questions:

1. **Which social media platforms were primarily used by the public relations practitioners in the selected company to engage with the franchise's consumers?**

All participants suggested that while Company X is active on various social media platforms, they used Facebook and Twitter consistently to engage with consumers and potential consumers during the pandemic in 2020. Respondents C and D argued that while the franchise has an active Instagram page, no posts have been shared thereon. Furthermore, while the digital team has experimented with platforms such as Tinder and TikTok for brand-building purposes, Respondent D noted that it would not be conducive for the franchise to simply use a new platform just for the sake of using it. They (Respondent D) then stated that the franchise's consumers and potential consumers were comfortable using Twitter and Facebook, which is why engagements took place on these channels.

2. Why did the public relations team decide to use these specific social networks to engage with consumers?

As aforementioned, the public relations and digital teams used Twitter and Facebook to communicate with consumers and potential consumers, because this stakeholder group was comfortable utilising these platforms. Furthermore, Respondent F noted that because Company X had a good foundation on these platforms, it was natural for the digital and public relations teams to use them during the hard lockdown to engage with consumers. This is another pertinent instance where the company used social media in a stakeholder-inclusive way, with the engagement needs of consumers and potential consumers considered and addressed (see Freeman, 2010; Hörisch et al., 2020). Moreover, all respondents argued that the digital team monitored user engagements on social media and would then publish tactical posts that addressed matters that South African consumers cared about.

3. What messages did these public relations practitioners send to consumers during the three lockdown levels studied?

The public relations team in Company X disseminated informational messages during the hard lockdown in 2020. As aforementioned, all participants suggested that during the strict lockdown levels in 2020, social media posts with a direct public relations angle were messages about opening and closing times, various lockdown protocols, and CSR communication. Camilleri (2021) explains that engaging with stakeholders exclusively about COVID-19 protocols was not best practice in terms of organisational communication during the pandemic. He argues that it was crucial for public relations professionals to engage interactively on social media with organisational stakeholders (ibid.). He further contends that engaging about matters of interest to stakeholders was vital within companies where there was uncertainty about the recommencement of operations (ibid.).

4. To what extent (if at all), were the public relations practitioners in the selected fast-food company symmetrical in their communication with consumers on social media?

This is an interesting question, and there is no cut-and-dried answer thereto. While the digital team within the selected franchise engaged in two-way, symmetrical interactions with online stakeholders, the public relations team disseminated informational messages to consumers during the period studied. Therefore, certain tenets within the public information model can be utilised to describe the type of engagement the public relations team practiced on social media during the hard lockdown in 2020. However, it is essential to reiterate that these practitioners did not necessarily withhold any organisational information from the public to avoid scrutiny, which this model explicitly implies (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984). However, drawing conclusions about the holistic organisational practices within the franchise's public relations team is outside of this study's parameters.

After messages were disseminated on social media, all respondents stated that the digital team responded to online users' queries, concerns, and comments. The public relations department would only get involved in these engagements when matters of contention escalated on social media. Therefore, it is fair to state that both the two-way and public information model coexisted in the selected fast-food franchise's communication with consumers, with the digital team engaging interactively online and the public relations team utilising social media unilaterally on an ad hoc basis. According to Morsing and Schultz (2006), both the two-way and informational models are valid forms of communication, especially when public relations professionals engage about CSR practices a company is involved in. However, they note that the two-way model continues to be viewed as the most ethical communication typology between establishments and vested parties.

6.3. Justification of the study

Throughout the study, the researcher has acknowledged that a plethora of research has been conducted on social media utilisation by public relations professionals, many of which have been cited here. Academic works by these authors (Neill & Lee, 2016; Kent & Li, 2020; Taylor & Kent, 2014; Robson & James, 2013; El Kasim & Idid, 2017; Camilleri, 2021; Capriotti et al., 2021; Mavimbela et al., 2018), are just some examples of salient literature on social media utilisation within the public relations discipline, that have been discussed in this study. Furthermore, the researcher is well-aware that relevant literature has been published on the utilisation of social networks in the fast-food market and other food-related businesses (see Šerić & Praničević, 2017; Fondevila-Gascón et al., 2017; Peeroo & Owodally, 2020). Some prominent literature on the utilisation of these platforms by public relations practitioners in this market have also been mentioned here (see Zhu et al., 2017; Kim & Ramos, 2018; Alrawabdeh et al., 2020; Guidry et al., 2015).

However, it must be noted that there is a paucity of scholarship that focuses explicitly on the utilisation of Twitter and Facebook by public relations practitioners in South African fast-food franchises during the hard lockdown in 2020. Therefore, the research carried out here is valid and formative as it explored how public relations professionals in a prominent, local fast-food brand used these online tools in their consumer interactions during lockdown levels five, four, and three in 2020.

As noted in earlier chapters, with fast-food franchises non-operational or only partially operational during the stricter lockdown levels in 2020 (South African Government, 2020b; Greer et al., 2021), concise messaging, facilitated by public relations practitioners, was required between these organisations and their consumers (see Troise & Camilleri, 2021; Telukdarie et al., 2020). In addition to accurate and informative communication needed, Camilleri (2021) advocates for interactive engagement between businesses and key constituents during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Du Plessis (2018) argues that when public relations professionals engage in interactive, truthful, and authentic engagements with stakeholders on social media during crises, they are more likely to foster long-term relationships with these constituents in future. As other chapters mentioned, feedback-driven engagements between an organisation and its stakeholders are quintessential in the public relations discipline (Grunig & Kim, 2021).

Despite the study's inherent homogeneity, it is still relevant, especially considering the effect of the South African lockdown on the fast-food market (see Statistics South Africa, 2020). Furthermore, there was a need for public relations professionals to innovatively communicate with consumers, with no (public) interpersonal contact allowed during the harder lockdown periods in 2020. Therefore, this research is germane, considering the current pandemic and how it affected communication between fast-food franchises and consumers.

6.4. Synopsis of the research process

As aforementioned, this is a qualitative case study. Through this project, the researcher evaluated how the public relations team in Company X engaged with the franchise's consumers on two social networking platforms during a specific period. Respondent E noted that although Company X was not facing a crisis during the pandemic in 2020, per se, during the lockdown, the franchise needed to respond to an external stressor that affected the business and its consumers. As noted earlier, consumers are functional linkages without whom fast-food franchises would cease to exist (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Therefore, communication between Company X and this stakeholder group needed to be consistent and interactive.

6.4.1. Overview of methods

Employing the qualitative approach in this study made room for a thorough, interpretive analysis of participants' viewpoints (see Dawson, 2009; Chowdhury, 2014). By utilising this approach, the researcher gained in-depth knowledge on the topic. Data was gathered through interviews and a thematic content analysis. The researcher gained a profusion of information by using these instruments, some of which could be advanced in future studies, with the utilisation of multiple cases then possible. By employing the single exploratory case study design, the researcher effectively explored a real-world phenomenon within a specific franchise (see Yin, 2012), with results not generalisable but authentic and valid.

The content analysis unearthed interesting insights that confirmed what participants alluded to during the interviews. Therefore, by methodologically triangulating the data, the researcher established the study as reliable (see Flick, 2014; Noble & Heale, 2019; Middleton, 2021). Furthermore, because in-depth discussions were conducted, the researcher could effectively earmark which posts were from the public relations team before they embarked on the thematic content analysis. Therefore, no irrelevant information was included in the findings chapter.

The researcher effectively responded to all research questions using interviews and content analysis as instruments. However, employing both techniques was time-consuming and laborious (see Holloway & Todres, 2003). As mentioned in earlier chapters, the researcher used inductive and deductive analysis methods to code the two datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After identifying key themes and sub-themes, the researcher categorised social media content as either conceptualised *directly* by the public relations team or having *some* input from this department.

6.4.2. Suitability of theoretical framework

As mentioned in previous chapters, the normative stakeholder perspective was suitable for this research because it made room for an exploration into the 'type' of stakeholder group consumers were. This, in turn, helped the researcher justify the study's premise and explain why it was vital for Company X to effectively engage with these functional linkages (see Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Furthermore, based on their reading and the study's results, the researcher found that Company X often presents itself as a company that considers the needs of various constituent groups, with whom key connections are fostered (see Wachira et al., 2020). The researcher thus sought to explore whether the company's public relations team engaged in stakeholder-inclusive practices during the hard lockdown in 2020, by interacting with consumers symmetrically on social media.

The selected organisation is interactive in engaging with various stakeholders on social media. Therefore, the two-way symmetrical model was employed in tandem with stakeholder theory. The researcher sought to contrast how the public relations team engaged with consumers on social media, with the two-way model, which is still often regarded as the most ethical way of practicing public relations (Grunig & Kim, 2021). As aforementioned, however, some scholars posit that the two-way model is over-idealised, with Kent and Lane (2021), for example, arguing that symmetrical engagement does not necessarily translate into a balanced dialogue between an organisation and its stakeholders. Likewise, stakeholder theory has also received significant criticism for its portrayal of 'utopian' business practices and for its heterogeneous nature (Miles, 2017). However, the researcher has pragmatically justified why they adopted these two theoretical stances. Both concepts were essential in structuring this study and analysing the findings.

6.5. Synopsis of the results

This study's main findings are as follows:

- The public relations and digital teams in Company X are interconnected, with some of their essential functions overlapping. According to Naumovska and Blazeska (2016), these types of integrated communication practices benefit organisations and their brand-building endeavours.
- The digital team is primarily responsible for two-way social media engagement, with the public relations team disseminating informational messages during the hard lockdown in 2020. A 2014 study by Komodromos also found that public relations professionals prefer social media duties to be undertaken by digital practitioners, who are also referred to as 'social media managers' (Komodromos, 2014). Furthermore, Robson and James (2013) note that social media is used by public relations professionals 'when needed', with little strategy involved.
- Facebook and Twitter were the leading platforms utilised for engagement, with the latter channel used for interactive conversations. The former channel was used to broadcast updates about the lockdown and COVID-19. In their study, Mavimbela et al. (2018) also found that public

relations professionals from various industries preferred to use these two platforms in their engagements with stakeholders. Furthermore, Statista (2021) found that Facebook continues to be the most-used platform globally.

- Social media messages from the public relations team were aimed at consumers, potential consumers, and any person interested in the franchise's brand. This is another example of co-creational, stakeholder-inclusive interactions (see Taylor, 2018; Freeman, 2010). However, the digital team spearheaded the two-way engagement advocated for by Grunig and Hunt (1984).
- The franchise practiced stakeholder-inclusive communication on social media during the lockdown by engaging with stakeholders about matters they cared about. Camilleri (2021) refers to this type of interactive engagement as the 'gold standard' during organisational crises. Addressing stakeholder needs through engagement is also a fundamental construct of the normative stakeholder perspective (Freeman, 2010; Alamanos et al., 2021).
- Both two-way and public informational communication were practiced by Company X on social media during the period studied, which Morsing and Schultz (2006) note is often the case in many organisations.

6.6. Research Limitations

One of the most significant limitations of this study lies in its online anonymity. Although the researcher could identify the franchise in the submission of their study for examination, the name needed to be anonymised in all online versions of the work. This meant that the researcher was limited in their specificity of descriptions of the franchise and could not include the screenshots of Twitter and Facebook posts in any online works. Furthermore, some references that implicated the franchise directly also needed to be removed before the work was published on any public platform. However, the researcher does recognise the benefits of anonymising a study and has mentioned some of these advantages in earlier chapters (see Lavrakas, 2008). Nevertheless, they would have enjoyed publishing a few journal articles about the selected fast-food organisation, a popular franchise that many South Africans are fascinated by.

Additionally, while Company X was chosen because it is a well-known brand, renowned for its witticisms on social media, using a single case was nonetheless challenging, with the researcher unable to obtain an adequate number of *internal* public relations professionals for this study, with only two practitioners functioning within the franchise. The researcher, therefore, needed to be innovative in their data collection, using the homogenous purposive sampling method (see Elikan, 2016) to select the two internal public relations participants, with the remaining four participants selected using the snowball method (see Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Leighton et al., 2021). However, all research questions were answered effectively, with the researcher simply needing to adjust some of their proposed methods of data collection.

6.7. Recommendations for future research

Future scholars could undertake multiple case studies to better understand the implications of the study's results, sampling various South African fast-food franchises to explore how their public relations teams utilised social media during the pandemic. In so doing, these academics, and their successors, would better understand how public relations professionals within this market utilised social media to engage with consumers and *why* practitioners chose to use these channels in a specific way.

Additionally, the researcher did not include consumer views in this project. Therefore, if future academics decided to advance this topic using stakeholder theory, it would be interesting to have input from consumers in their analyses, and not exclusively the practitioners working in the franchises. This could be done through the mixed-methods approach. Researchers could firstly conduct interviews with public relations professionals and analyse content on their social media pages before surveying consumers to determine how they feel about the engagement efforts of the respective companies during various lockdown periods.

Furthermore, an interesting finding that did not fit the parameters of this research was the franchise's use of various South African languages in posts on Facebook and Twitter. Respondent D noted that because the franchise has a diverse team, it could connect with multiple consumers during the lockdown without offending specific groups or cultures. Future scholars could expand on this finding and explore *why* and *when* Company X decided to be a 'multilingual' organisation. This study would be pertinent, because the franchise was established in 1987 (Whichfranchise, 2021), seven years before South Africa became a democratic state, with racial and language tensions rife during the apartheid milieu (see Mhlauli, Salani & Mokotedi, 2015). Researchers could undertake several other studies, building on this project. However, this study's contribution to the public relations discipline remains salient, seminal, and reliable.

6.8. Chapter summary

Here, the researcher reflected on the study in its entirety, explicating how all questions were addressed and discussing the applicability of the methods and theories utilised. The limitations of the work were also discussed briefly. After that, suggestions were made regarding how future researchers could advance this topic.

Despite this study's inherent homogeneity, the research is reliable, contributing to ongoing scholarly debate on social media utilisation by public relations professionals in a specific market. Furthermore, this research adds to the pool of knowledge regarding public relations practitioners' utilisation of social networks.

As mentioned in earlier chapters, a paucity of local scholarship addresses the use of social networks by public relations professionals in South African fast-food businesses. This study is thus unique and pertinent, considering the negative impact the pandemic has had on these franchises in South Africa, and the need for these organisations to find innovative ways of communicating with their consumers, who are important external stakeholders whose support these companies need.

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Appendix A: Guiding questions for interviews

1. What role do you undertake within the franchise?

2. What are some of the daily duties you undertake in this role?

3. What is your relationship to the dominant coalition?

4. What is your relationship to the digital team/public relations team?

5. How do you make use of social media within your role at the company?

6. How did the internal public relations team within the franchise use social media to engage with consumers during the hard lockdown periods last year?

7. Which social media posts shared during the hard lockdown periods were messages that were specifically conceptualised by the public relations team?

8. How did the public relations teams ensure that online rumours/misinformation about the franchise and its functioning during the diverse lockdown levels in 2020 was quickly defused?

9. In your view, how important was it for the public relations team to interact regularly with consumers on social media during the hard lockdown periods?

10. Which platforms does the company primarily use for engagement?

11. Which stakeholder would you say social media engagement is primarily aimed at?

12. Is there any additional information you would like to share regarding the franchise and their online stakeholder engagement?

Appendix B: Signed consent form from the franchise's CEO

Cape Peninsula
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creating futures

PO Box 1906 Bellville 7535 Symphony Way, Bellville, Cape Town South Africa
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Agreement to Take Part in Research Activities

Full name: [redacted]

Name of organisation (if applicable): [redacted]

Role/position (if applicable): [redacted]

I give consent, in principle, to allow Kauthar Gool, a student at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, to collect data from research interactions with me (or individuals in my organisation) for their postgraduate research project. The student has explained to me the nature of their research and the natureof the data to be collected.

This consent in no way commits any individual to participate in the research, and it is expected that thestudent will get explicit consent from any participant prior to each research activity. I reserve the rightto withdraw my permission at some future time.

In addition, the organisation's name/ my name may or may not be used in academic disseminationas indicated below (Tick as appropriate):

	Thesis	Conference paper	Journal article	Research poster
Yes	✓			
No				

Date: **28 May 2021**

Signature [redacted]

Appendix C: Ethical clearance letter

Cape Peninsula University of Technology
creating futures

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07 June 2021

Kauthar Gool
c/o Department of Media
CPUT

Reference no: 213105144/2021/18

Project title: An exploration of how public relations practitioners used social media to engage with consumers during the COVID-19 pandemic: a case of a fast-food company in South Africa

Approval period: 07 June 2021 – 31 December 2022

This is to certify that the Faculty of Informatics and Design Research Ethics Committee of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology approved the methodology and ethics of Kauthar Gool (213105144) for the MTech Public Relations.

Any amendments, extension or other modifications to the protocol must be submitted to the Research Ethics Committee for approval.

The Committee must be informed of any serious adverse event and/or termination of the study.

Ms M Di Ruvo
Research Ethics Committee Rep
Faculty of Informatics and Design
Cape Peninsula University of Technology