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Designing Communication for Dialogue and Engagement

The Volkswagen Emission Scandal in Sweden

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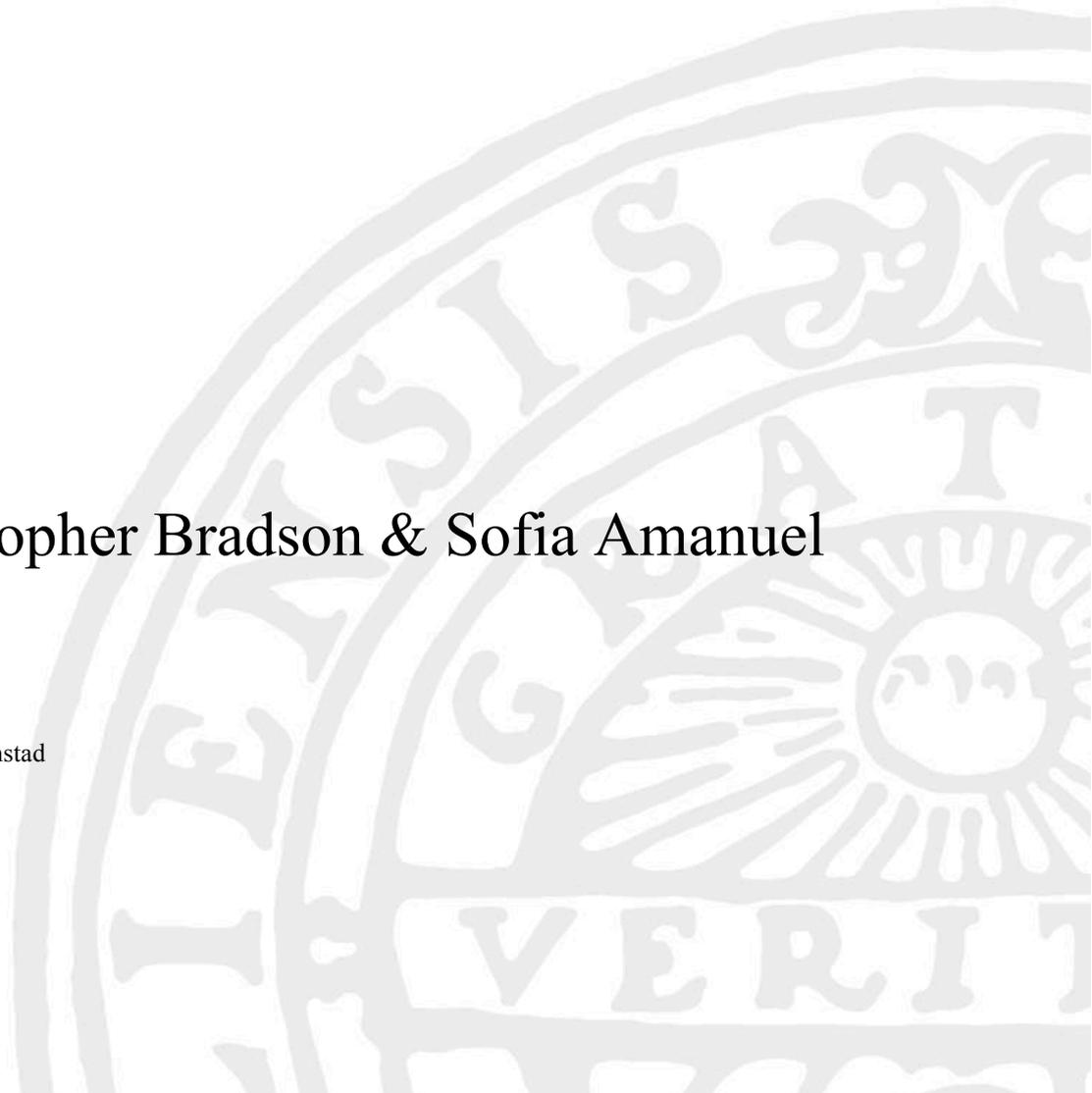
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Abstract

Title: Designing Communication for Dialogue and Engagement

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Level: Master Thesis, 30p Media and Communication studies

Keywords: Dialogue, Communication Design, Stakeholder engagement, Stakeholder communication, CSR communication.

Background: The changed attitudes about the role of business in today's contemporary society alongside with globalization and the evolved media-information environment has enlarged the pressures on businesses in regards to how they should pursue profitability, while responding to demands about accountability that is motivated beyond financial gain. There is a need for a better understanding about communication choices and how these are perceived by intended stakeholders, in order to accelerate effective communication that initiates stakeholder engagement.

Research Questions: (1) How is Volkswagens communication design constructed in creating dialogue and engagement after a corporate scandal with its customers? (2) How does Swedish Volkswagen customers, in attribute of being external stakeholders, perceive the opportunities for engagement based on the four selected Volkswagen tools? What challenges does Volkswagen encounter when trying to create dialogue through these tools?

Purpose: The purpose of this thesis is to examine how Volkswagen is creating opportunities for stakeholder dialogue and engagement through the theoretical perspective of communication design. By engagement we mean one-way or two-way communication, where stakeholders seek out or take part of communicative messages provided by the organisation. The study aims to examine how Volkswagen has designed their communication efforts, after being subjected to a global corporate scandal which proposed public demands for accountability and responsibility.

Theoretical Framework: The framework consists of Communication theories, giving considerable space to literature from theorists Aakhus and Bzdak whom developed the framework for communication design used in this study. Additionally, the framework includes a smaller selection of CSR, Public Relation, and Media research focusing on stakeholder engagement.

Method: We have taken two parallel methodological pathways. The first method involved applying for elements provided by Aakhus and Bzdak framework for reconstructive design, while doing a thematic analysis on the media texts provided by the tools. The second research question was examined by conducting semi-structured interviews with Swedish Volkswagen stakeholders in order to gain a deeper understanding if Volkswagens communicative instruments were enabling engagement.

Findings & Conclusions: Our study concludes that Volkswagen is showcasing constructs in their design that aims to reduce scepticism among stakeholders, addressing important issues for stakeholders, providing solutions and articulating progress in multi-stake issues. We also conclude that Volkswagens communication messages are conveyed in a calculated way, with a persuasive nature to create an identity of being a 'corporate good citizen'. There is a complexity in terms of diminishing scepticism, since stakeholders are being more demanding in today's society, particularly after a corporate scandal such as the one Volkswagen has been subjected to. Stakeholders are becoming more aware that companies are dictating the dialogic discourse, which affects the communication design in what motives a company incorporates in their communication. We conclude that customers felt that the opportunities to engage with the company was fairly low, and highly depended on how they where processing the nature of the messages (*intrinsic/extrinsic*), as well as how they defined engagement from personal beliefs and values.

Titel: *Communication Design in creating dialogue with stakeholders after The Volkswagen Emission Scandal*

Författare: Christopher Bradson & Sofia Amanuel

Nivå: Masteruppsats, 30 hp

Nyckelord: Dialogue, Communication Design, Stakeholder engagement, Stakeholder Communication, CSR Communication.

Bakgrund: Det samtida informationssamhället ställer nya krav på organisationer, där man utöver att uppnå sina ekonomiska mål också förväntas visa ansvarstagande i frågor som är motiverade bortom finansiella intressen. Detta i syfte för att skapa intressent engagemang. Det behövs således en bättre förståelse för hur organisationer genomför sin kommunikationsval, med syfte att initiera intressent engagemang, och hur dessa insatser faktiskt uppfattas av intressenterna.

Forskningsfrågor: (1) Hur är Volkswagens kommunikationsdesign konstruerad för att skapa dialog och engagemang med sina kunder efter en global utsläppskris? (2) Hur uppfattar svenska Volkswagen kunder (även definierade som intressenter), möjligheterna till engagemang baserat på fyra utvalda Volkswagen verktyg? Vilka utmaningar stöter Volkswagen på när man försöker skapa dialog genom dessa verktyg?

Syfte: Syftet med denna studie är att undersöka hur Volkswagen skapar möjligheter för intressentdialog och engagemang genom ett perspektiv av kommunikationsdesign. Begreppet engagemang definierar vi som envägs- eller tvåvägs kommunikation där intressenter söker upp eller tar del av kommunikativa meddelanden från organisationen. Studien syftar till att undersöka hur Volkswagen har utformat sina kommunikationsinsatser efter att ha varit involverade i en global utsläppsskandal, vilket gjort så att omvärlden ställt ökade krav på organisationen i form av att ta ansvar och visa på transparens.

Teoretisk ramverk: Studiens ramverk består av kommunikationsteorier, CSR, och medieforskning, där ett extra stort utrymme tillägnats teoretikerna Aakhus och Bzdak som utvecklat ett ramverk för att analysera och kartlägga kommunikationsdesign.

Metod: Vi har tagit två olika metodologiska vägval för att kunna besvara våra frågeställningar. I den första frågeställningen har vi använt oss av Aakhus och Bzdak designramverk för att kartlägga Volkswagens kommunikationsdesign samt genomfört en tematisk innehålls analys på de medierade texterna. För att besvara den andra frågeställningen har vi genomfört semi-strukturerade intervjuer med fem Volkswagen intressenter i form av kunder, för att kunna få en djupare förståelse kring huruvida Volkswagens kommunikationsverktyg möjliggör för engagemang enligt respondenterna.

Resultat och slutsatser: Vår studie drar slutsatsen att Volkswagen visar konstruktioner i sin design som syftar till att minska skepsis bland intressenter, adressera viktiga frågor för intressenter, tillhandahålla lösningar och formulera framsteg i flervärdesfrågor. Volkswagens kommunikationsmeddelanden förmedlas på ett kalkylerat och effektivt sätt, med en övertygande natur för att skapa en bild att vara en "bra organisatorisk medborgare". Det finns dock en komplexitet när det gäller att minska omgivningens skepsis, eftersom intressenterna är mer krävande i dagens informationssamhälle, särskilt efter en den typ av globala företagsskandal som Volkswagen varit involverade i. Intressenter blir mer medvetna om att företagen dikterar den dialogiska diskursen, vilket påverkar kommunikationsdesignen i vilka motiv ett företag införlivar i sin kommunikation. Respondenterna var tillfredsställda med de kommunikativa verktygen när det gällde informationsriklighet, men kände att Volkswagen dikterade den övergripande diskursen för engagemang och upplevde möjligheterna till engagemang som relativt låg. En ytterligare slutsats är att kundernas perception av möjligheter i att engagera sig med företaget var starkt kopplat till hur de behandlade arten av meddelandena (inneboende /extrinsic), liksom hur de definierade engagemang från sina personliga övertygelser och värderingar.

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1. Introduction

Design can be perceived as a natural fact about communication and therefore a natural occurrence in ordinary communicators language usage and the capability to facilitate mutual knowledge and principles of engagement. Communication design can be described as the activity in ordinary communicators creativity in language practice and the capacity to use common knowledge and principles of interaction (Aakhus, 2007). Some of the most perplexing dimension when it comes to communication is the aspect of meaning, in regards to how it is that people convey and infer meaning in messages (Jacobs, 1994). The groundwork for communication design originates in the forms and patterns of language use that emerges when individuals interpret and are faced with meaning, action and coherence (Aakhus, 2007). Design is apparent when individuals construct conversation though ‘moment-by-moment and turn-by-turn as a procedure of interactivity through the use of language (Aakhus, 2007). In today's society organizations are confronted with the demand for increased proficiency in corporate social responsibility and stakeholder engagement. This is an important task in the shifting conditions of globalization and developments in information communication technologies, as well as making sense of stakeholder- and CSR-communication (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015).

In 2015 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) revealed that the automaker Volkswagen had equipped its diesel vehicles with a defeat device that was used to cheat on emissions tests (BBC, 2015). The scandal that started in America, quickly received global attention. Throughout the world politicians, journalists, regulators, car owners and environmental groups started to question the legitimacy of the Volkswagen brand and expecting accountability for their actions.

Cummins (2001) argue that organizations, such as Volkswagen, experienced a disruptive shift in the societal expectations for how they are conveying communication messages. These shifts can be characterized from a perspective of tell-me, to show-me, to involve me. Stakeholder engagement is often equated to a simplistic notion of corporate responsibility. This notion removes the complexity in stakeholder engagement and its relationship to responsibility.

According to Greenwood (2007) stakeholder engagement can be defined as a practice by which an organisation involves stakeholders in a positive manner in organisational

activities. This definition incorporates many areas of organizational activity that surrounds stakeholder engagement and provides challenges in regards to theorising the practice. Engagement can be understood as a mechanism for different things, depending on its context. It can for example occur in areas such as public relations, supplier relationship and management. In these contexts, theorists suggest that engagement can be seen as a mechanism for consent, control, co-operation, accountability and employee involvement (Greenwood, 2007). We align ourselves with this statement, hence we find it valuable to examine how Volkswagen is creating engagement from an accountability perspective, since the company has been subjected to a former corporate scandal.

The emergence of social media has created both opportunities and challenges for organizations. The establishment of an online community constructs unrelated individuals together where the interactions can turn negative. Social media can also form the information spreading process to become more transparent, thus creating positive engagement feelings with stakeholders such as trust and credibility. Organizational management is being challenged by ‘empowered online publics’ constantly, where a solitary deleterious comment can produce a crisis that can potentially damage an organization's reputation (Li, 2016).

In today's contemporary society we are emphasising the impact that companies have on the environment as well as how responsible they are towards their stakeholders and society in general. In Sweden, politicians are currently debating environmental zones in the cities and potentially banning diesel vehicles because of their environmental impacts (Regeringen, 2018). One of the biggest corporate scandals related to this in the modern economy is the diesel emission scandal that involved Volkswagen. We argue that this case can offer valuable empirical data in terms of measuring how plausible a company's communication design is in terms of creating dialogue and engagement with external stakeholders after a crisis.

1.1 Problem statement

The changed attitudes about the role of business in today's contemporary society alongside with globalization and the evolved media-information environment has enlarged the pressures on businesses in regards to how they should pursue profitability, while responding to demands about accountability that is motivated beyond financial gain (Handy, 2003). How communication is valued remains a central part of stakeholder engagement, as it determines how effective, legitimate and plausible the engagement will be (Jacobs and Aakhus, 2002). There is a need for a better understanding about communication choices and capabilities within the field, in order to accelerate effective communication that initiates stakeholder

engagement. Because of the important role of communication in conveying messages and solving different communicative problems, there is a fundamental need for an expansion of empirical research that investigates how stakeholder communication initiatives are designed, as well as being perceived by its intended target group in terms of opportunities for engagement.

The practice of CSR and engagement is currently undergoing a transition where stakeholders are being perceived as having more bargaining power in the business environment and a shift from one-way communication to two-way communication, where companies actively listens to, and reflect upon, the voices and interests of the stakeholders (Dhanesh, 2015; Girard and Sobczak, 2012; Kim, 2014; Morsing and Schultz, 2006; O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2014; Trapp, 2014). This shift guides companies to a more dialogic, transparent and collaborative strategy when developing their stakeholder communication efforts. This opens up the opportunity to examine if customers are in agreement with this research, in terms of them perceiving that our chosen company, Volkswagen is providing a more dialogic and transparent strategy when they are conveying messages to these stakeholders.

1.2 Purpose and Research question

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how Volkswagen is creating opportunities for stakeholder dialogue and engagement through the theoretical perspective of communication design. By engagement we mean one-way or two-way communication, where stakeholders seek out or take part of communicative messages provided by the organisation. The study aims to examine how Volkswagen has designed their communicative activities, after being subjected to a global corporate scandal which proposed public demands for accountability and responsibility. This makes the company an interesting research subject to examine, in relation to how they are communicating their dialogue-initiatives by analysing different tools that are used to communicate with stakeholders. The purpose of this thesis is to expand the empirical research on stakeholder engagement through communication design, by analysing CSR-messages that are being conveyed to Volkswagen customers. In light of this reasoning, we will examine the success and failures of Volkswagens communication design.

The study further aims to examine how Volkswagen customers, in attribute of being external stakeholders to the organisation, experience the opportunities for engagement. According to Volkswagen, their customers represent the organisations most important group of external stakeholders (Volkswagen Sustainability Report, 2016). The essay will be

focusing on four selected communicative tools that Volkswagen uses as a means to engage and convey messages to their stakeholders. These tools are Volkswagens Sustainability Report, their Sustainability Magazine called Shift, their international Instagram account and Swedish website. This logic branches out into our research questions:

- ***RQ1:** How is Volkswagens communication design constructed in creating dialogue and engagement after a corporate scandal with its customers?*

- ***RQ2:** How does Swedish Volkswagen customers, in attribute of being external stakeholders, perceive the opportunities for engagement based on the four selected Volkswagen tools?*
 - *What are the challenges that Volkswagens meets in creating opportunities for dialogue with these tools?*

1.3 Delimitations

Having a communication design perspective creates certain limitations within our scope of study. Our chosen communication design perspective focuses on selected communicative activities that are orchestrated through design features for creating interactions with stakeholders. These design features can be procedures, roles and technologies (Aakhus, 2002). There are some similarities in studying a company's communication strategy, but we have limited our study to four identified tools that Volkswagen uses for conveying communicative messages to their external stakeholders. There are certainly other tools that could potentially be included in a study like this, but in regards to our timeframe and the size of our study, we argue that four tools is the maximum amount feasible. Since our objective is to provide a broad examination of the outward of Volkswagens communication design, we aimed to incorporate as many tools as possible, yet being mindful of the lucidity of the thesis. Moreover, our focus will be on Volkswagen customers, in attribute of being external stakeholders. According to Volkswagen, their customers represent the organisations most important group of external stakeholders, which further validates our line of reasoning (Volkswagen Sustainability Report, 2016).

It is also possible to presume that internal stakeholders such as employees might have had an intriguing perspective on the emission scandal but could possibly be prohibited to speak on the matter due to the pending legal investigation (CNN, 2018). An attempt was

actually made reaching out to Volkswagens head office in Wolfsburg Germany without any further success. Therefore, we have limited ourselves to examine Volkswagens external stakeholders in the form of customers.

Furthermore, we argue that the relevance of this case lies in the fact that Volkswagen was subjected to this very public scandal which has influenced the way the organisation works, for example by creating the Sustainability Magazine Shift in order to foster transparency and engage with their stakeholders (Volkswagen Sustainability Magazine Shift, 2016). The contextually specific situation that Volkswagen has been involved in makes the organisation an interesting research subject to examine, in relation to how they are using certain tools to communicate their initiatives and how these tools are being perceived by the stakeholders in terms of creating opportunities for dialogue and engagement.

Lastly, we would like to note that the emission scandal was uncovered in back 2015 which might possibly affect how the customers perceive Volkswagen over time. However, it is not possible to speculate or conclude in what actual way this might affect public perceptions about the organisation. One could perhaps assume that Volkswagens communicative strategy has changed over time, going from sheer crisis communication when the news first broke, to a more long-term strategy to rebuild the brand over time. However, it is not possible for us to conclude this in any absolute way - yet, it is important to keep in mind that the time frame of the crisis might influence or limit stakeholder perceptions about the organisation.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

This thesis is based on seven chapters and subchapters as shown below.

- Chapter 1 introduces the thesis and its purpose, outlines the research questions and discusses its delimitations.
- Chapter 2 presents the previous research within related fields and identifies the research gap of the thesis.
- Chapter 3 proposes the theoretical framework of the thesis.
- Chapter 4 describes the Volkswagen emission scandal.
- Chapter 5 outlines the methodological pathway of the study.
- Chapter 6 provides the data presentation and empirical findings according to the field of study.
- Chapter 7 presents the analysis of collected data in correlation to the theoretical framework.

- Chapter 8 constitutes the final part of the thesis where we will discuss the conclusions of the research and give suggestions for future research.

2. Previous research

The main objective of this chapter is to outline the fields of previous research that is considered relevant for the thesis. By reviewing a selection of papers and articles within related fields we intent to clarify the research subject and identify the research gap, which establishes the contribution of the study.

2.1 Communication Design

The term *Communication Design* may represent different things in the academic field such as technical communication, information design and content development (Swartz, 2012). This suggestively captures a consciousness that the communication field can sometimes lack a centre. Swartz further this claim by mentioning that communication has its genres and processes, but the purpose of communication design can be articulated as such; *the focus on defining and solving problems in novel ways and in response to the exigencies of highly varied situations that underscores the importance of what we do* – (Swartz, 2012). He argues that this is a preferred definition of communication design, as the scope of communication is widely broad. Communication Design aims at producing concrete effects in the world that is the focus of ‘design’ according to his paper. The previous research in the field focuses on classifying movements as horizontal and vertical, gradually though the integration of communicative practice into day-to-day work of different fields. The research investigates complications that is situated in the movements, that communication design aims to address and solve. Swartz further postulates that communication design represents a more profound transference towards the sociological work that it can embody. He suggests that communication has continuously been about moving and connecting individuals and things, while communication design captures something that can be described as ‘translation’, with an ability to link together actors, humans, and non-humans in a fashion that synchronizes their goals and actions for a situated purpose (Swartz, 2012). We argue that Swartz account of communication design and its ability to link together different actors is a valuable notion in regards to analysing specific tools aimed at stakeholder engagement and how they are perceived by different target groups. This because of the fact that the design perspective allows us as researchers to use the messages provided by Volkswagen, and examining the

nature of the communication and its ability to link stakeholders, while solving a specific problem for the company that is being researched.

2.2 Stakeholder communication research

Communication that is used to create stakeholder engagement can be theorised from many perspectives. Managerial theories tend to hold stakeholder engagement as a form of managerial control (Owen et al., 2000), or in means of which an organisation can manage potential risks from influential stakeholders (Deegan, 2002). Critical theorists, such as Bauman (1993); Power (2004) tend to challenge the actual purpose of stakeholder engagement and the rationales it upholds (Bauman, 1993; Power, 2004). Theorists that focus on accountability and responsibility usually theorize engagement as a mechanism for organisational responsibility towards stakeholders (Gray, 2002), through stakeholder involvement and governance (Van Buren III, 2001). Our study will be focusing on an accountability and responsibility perspective, because of our chosen Volkswagen case and research interest. The study's main objective will be focusing on examining how certain tools, which are a mechanism for organizational responsibility towards stakeholders, is valued and perceived by stakeholders. The research will build upon previous stakeholder theories and CSR communication contributions.

Studies within the communication field that have examined The Volkswagen Emission Scandal have predominantly been attentive to stakeholder engagement from a crisis perspective. *The study Volkswagen Emission Crisis – Managing Stakeholder Relations on the Web (2016)* focuses on the online interaction of the corporate scandal. Their data consists of tweet-hashtags and social media messages which have been cleaned and analysed for their study. The findings of the study indicate that the company did not engage in ‘private communication’ as the study calls it, with its stakeholders through social media. They argue that Volkswagen focused on communicating through their website instead and sharing links with its stakeholders, and referred them to the public to its FAQ. While this study focuses on the online interactions with stakeholders and Volkswagen through twitter, our study will be turning its academic gaze on how relevant stakeholders are perceiving Volkswagens communication efforts in resolving the identified communicative problem.

Another study that focuses on stakeholder engagement with Volkswagen is; *Stakeholders in the various field and relations between them (2017)*. The study focuses on expanding the understanding of stakeholders in different sectors and how they can be categorized and viewed as different, depending on what enterprise or industry they are

coupled with. They use Volkswagen as an example for stakeholder engagement in the automotive industry and create four segments that constitute ‘the distribution of stakeholders’ according to the researchers. These four segments are; Society, Customers, Partners and Capital market. The authors findings indicate that the difference between managing stakeholders in the automotive industry compared to other industries are quite small. They further suggest that complexity can arise from development programs and stakeholder expectations in regards to sustainable programs. While this study focuses on stakeholder engagement in different industries, its findings can be applicable in the way that stakeholders expectations of a company's sustainability program are filled with complexity. Consequently, showing the importance of understanding stakeholders better and take their perceptions into account to reduce such complexity.

2.3 CSR communication research

The literature of studies regarding CSR communication is varied and incorporates several approaches. The conception of CSR can sometimes be understood as something equivocal and indefinite (Frankental, 2001; Coelho et al., 2003), but there has however been a lot of groundwork in attempts to conceptualize CSR. Studies indicate that the Internet is arguably the best medium available to implement CSR communication and convey CSR information (Guimarães-Costa and Pina e Cunha 2008), where the organizations have the ability to ‘set the agenda’ (Esrock and Leighty, 1998). In the study ‘Making Sense of CSR Communication’ Paul Ziek postulates that CSR communication is limited to large organizations. There might be variation in how these organisations utilize their CSR moves, however organizations tend to communicate CSR messages by conveying information about ‘classically accepted CSR behaviours’ (Ziek, 2009). These behaviours are mostly philanthropy, specifically corporate philanthropy, since this is the oldest and most broadly acknowledged piece of CSR (McClimon, 2004) and the second oldest CSR behaviour being Code of Ethics (Murphy, 2005). This research is highly useful in creating a better understanding of our study and the chosen tools that will be analysed from a stakeholder perspective.

2.4 Research gap

Jackson and Aakhus (2014) postulate that design can be viewed as something relatively new in the practice of communication. They argue that like in other domains, the design of something new can never disobey the laws of nature, but it can challenge something that has

always been understood as ‘the nature of communication.’ Design can provide insights of how communication can be constituted. They further suggest that while other academic disciplines deal with developing in their sense what is ‘designable’, the communication discipline provides challenges in regards to how they can expand the notion of design. They argue that there is a productive tension across other academic disciplines about how design contributes to knowledge, and they further claim that in communication scholarship there is a muting of that kind of productive scholarly engagement, by the division between scientific and humanistic traditions (Jackson and Aakhus, 2014). This is based on the observation that our field of possible design activity, such as messages, campaigns, organizational forms etc. remains subjected to empirical analysis (*the true*) or to criticism (*the ideal*), but lacks appropriate attention to what is not true but might be both desirable and possible (*the real*) according to Jackson and Aakhus (2014). This furthers our claim that there is a lack of design studies in the field of communication, just like there is in other emerging design disciplines. The purpose of this study is to expand the empirical research on communication design and provide contributions in making design theoretically diverse as other empirical and critical traditions in the field of communication. The scope of communication is arguably broad, and we position ourselves behind the statement of Swartz (2012), that our field can sometimes lack a centre. There is however a research gap when it comes to articulating communication design, and producing empirical data that measures the effects of opportunities for dialogue and stakeholder communication in an ‘extreme instance’, while using the design perspective. The design perspective will be used for its ability to link together actors in a situated purpose. Normally, the framework that Aakhus and Bzdak have provided is aimed at communication professionals within organizations, but our aim is to incorporate the stakeholders’ perspective as well. This will broaden the analysis and create more precise empirical result, where contributions from both the organizational messages and stakeholder perceptions will be analysed.

3. Theoretical framework

Chapter 2 provided a brief review of literature related to our research questions. This chapter will provide the conceptualization, which constitutes the frame of reference for this thesis. The aim of this chapter is to select relevant theories and concepts that we will use in our research. Furthermore, the theoretical framework relies on three fundamental perspectives. The first perspective stems from the fields of Communication and Stakeholder engagement,

where relevant studies and theories will be highlighted. The second perspective integrates studies from the fields of Public Relations and Media research. The concluding perspective incorporates studies from the field of Corporate Social Responsibility. These three pillars create a multifaceted and holistic framework, which will assist us in answering our research questions. Lastly, it is important to keep in mind that these are mere categorizations created in order to create a cohesive structure and not in any way fixated.

3.1 Communicative perspective

Communication scholars Aakhus and Bzdak (2015) suggest that the challenges in developing stakeholder engagement derive from how communication works, and how it should be used in generating value-creating stakeholder engagement. They argue for something they call ‘*new consciousness about competence in designing communication among stakeholders*’. They further postulate that the technological and societal shift has produced an opportunity to see, and question the communication values and norms within the field of stakeholder engagement. Aakhus (2011) postulates that there is a problematic unawareness in regards to what degree, and in what ways organizations are introspective or even conscious of their work as something he calls ‘*communication design practices*’. The selection of communication has consequences for stakeholder relations and governance practices, especially in regards to how dialogue and conversation is developed (Deetz, 2007).

3.2 Communication design rationale

The reconstruction of communication design originates from dialogue theories (Walton, 1999) and message design logics (O’ Keefe, 1988). Dialogue theories often advocate for particular dialogic ideals while communication design practice focuses on the dialogue, context and the practice, instead of encouraging specific models (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015). Aakhus postulates that communication design can be articulated as a practice that attends to the ‘*practical reasoning*,’ by acknowledging the significant problem to be resolved, and altering the structures of communicative activities to solve the problem. This practice can be used to change and alter the way people interact and reason with each other (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015). There are both new and old frameworks in how organizations could engage in multi-stakeholder initiatives, to solve social, environmental and economic problems. There are two prominent rationales for designing stakeholder engagement from a professional discourse. The two rationales offer contrasting perspectives on the nature and determination

of communication in developing stakeholder engagement. These rationales assist to illustrate two fundamental models of governance through communication (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015).

Harvard Business Scholars Michael Porter and Mark Kramer have developed the key framework of shared value. It aims to guide organizational decision-making about the relationship between business and society, though confronting societal problems (Porter and Kramer, 1999, 2006, 2011). The framework is a prescriptive theory that articulates how organizational leaders should structure stakeholder engagement and the effects of governance through communication. The approach operates from a principle that organizations should view their responsibilities in terms of competitive advantages, and seek profitability with an intersection of business opportunities and social values (Porter and Kramer, 2011). Communication scholars highlight the significance between customers and employees in terms of facilitating corporate responsibility initiatives that return business value (Bhattacharya et al., 2011). Theorists argue that we are approaching a future where the main focus must turn to how corporate responsibility initiatives can return social value. This focus raises questions in regards to systematic-rationality, where the legitimacy about the dominance of shareholders among all other stakeholders comes into question (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015). The shared value framework has been criticized since it does not address the fundamental tension between social and economic goals (Crane, Palazzo, Spence, and Matten, 2014). Aakhus and Bzdak suggest that shared value seeks to dismiss traditional CSR and that the framework diminishes the complexity between the business-society relationship (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2012).

The second prominent rationale for designing stakeholder engagement from a professional discourse can be reconstructed from practices such as CSR and corporate philanthropy (Aakhus and Bzdak 2015). The logic provides a different way to conceptualize communication governance role in creating stakeholder engagement, and is further equivalent to collaborative governance (Zadek, 2005). The rationale holds an approach of 'design thinking' in the social sector, and takes a more cooperative dimension with something called a human-centred perspective (Brown and Wyatt, 2010). Aakhus and Bzdak further postulates that companies are recognizing the value of their CSR and reputation in terms of generating new engagements that lead to strengthening social capital. Many businesses are going from a vertical orientation to a more horizontal inclusiveness alignment when it comes to stakeholder engagement. They are also shifting from short-term engagements to long-term engagements (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015).

Calton et al., (2013) provides a framework within the field that calls for an open system, where the company is being regarded as an equal stakeholder. The model differs from traditional stakeholder models since it does not position the company in the centre (Calton et al., 2013). Aakhus and Bzdak articulate that this rationale introduces a new paradigm of collaborations that involves multi-stakeholder governance, transparency and new engagement determinations. The new model initiates an assessment of all elements, in terms of how businesses can bring value to a specific issue, instead of focusing on how they can find value in participation. Aakhus and Bzdak postulate that engagement should be seen as more than a series of bilateral negotiations of interests and identities. They further suggest that stakeholder engagement should not be seen as a simple dialogue in today's global and mediated context. They argue that organizational communication in regards to stakeholder engagement must recognize an involvement of what they call an ongoing multi-actor, multi-issue discourse (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015). The disruptive changes call for a polylogue, which embodies distinctive dynamics for conflict and collaboration (e.g., Lewiński and Aakhus, 2014).

3.3 Value-creating networks

Aakhus and Bzdak (2015) postulate that there has been an important shift in stakeholder engagement competence, with the increased pressure on businesses to pursue profitability while responding to accountability demands. They suggest that there has been a shift in the expectations for engagement and changes in value creation. Companies should not be seen as the central node in a value-creating stakeholder network, they should rather be seen as one part of a value-creating network according to Aakhus and Bzdak. Corporate Social Responsibility is an arena where significant devotion has been given to collaborative stakeholder engagement. Scholars suggest that CSR has evolved from being predominantly charity driven engagement, to strategic bottom line-driven engagement to recent approaches that comprise collaborations such as public-private partnerships and other multi-stakeholder initiatives (Vogel, 2005; Zadek, 2005).

The transference to value-creating networks can be perceived as a subtle but profound one, that places shared problems and prospects at the center of networks, of actors who have multiple stakes in a problem or opportunity. This focus towards value-creating networks creates the need for 'engagement competence' within organizations in order to enable multiple stakeholders to co-operatively create value. Aakhus and Bzdak argue that as organizations and professionals pursue to improve their engagement competence, they are confronted with many different ideas of what is effective stakeholder engagement. Managerial

guidance has usually been established around a stakeholder perspective that believes the company to be the central node in the value creating network (Aakhus and Bzdak 2015). A stakeholder perspective can be described as a managerial strategy, in order to broaden an organization's viewpoint about its environment and capacity to recognize and persuade different key stakeholders in order to manage risk (e.g., Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997; Friedman & Miles, 2002). Aakhus and Bzdak further postulates the importance of this guidance, but that it runs counter to the demand of building a collaborative stakeholder network that focuses on solving shared problems through multi-sector, multi-expertise cooperation. They argue that organizations and professionals should thoughtfully modernize their premises about how communication works, and how its designed to work, in generating value-creating stakeholder engagement (Aakhus and Bzdak 2015). Aakhus and Bzdak creatively describes that stakeholder theory have unlocked the 'black box' of organizations to uncover the influence of stakeholders on companies, while communication design can be seen as the practice that opens up the 'black box' of stakeholder engagement. Thus a design perspective illustrates an approach for understanding what knowledge and values are being used and implemented in designing engagement through communication. They further suggest that there are shortfalls in knowledge and conceptualizations within organizational communication, where organizations and their professionals have given more devotion to structure knowledge about persuasion rather than dialogue. Critical approaches tend to function as an important part of what organizational communication should be, and new ways to motivate innovation for stakeholder engagement. Aakhus and Bzdak argue for the fact that critical theory intersects with the design approach introduced by them. Communication Design aims to advance theory about engagement though an approach that contains critique, but eventually pursues to advance and develop principles for design thinking and design processes in interventions for creating stakeholder engagement (Aakhus and Bzdak 2015).

3.4 Aakhus framework of communication design

Communication design can be perceived as an orientation to examine communication campaigns, persuasive messages, group procedures (Aakhus, 2007) or stakeholder engagement (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2010). Design is apparent in practices, institutions and procedures as well as technologies. We aim to look at the procedure of how a company constructs their communication efforts to create stakeholder dialogue after a significant crisis. We find communication design to be an adequate framework for its ability to articulate the design and engagement logic of a specific practice or tool that organizational practitioners

use. As our study aims to research how stakeholders are perceiving design features in regards to the opportunities for dialogue, we will use this framework as a roadmap in understanding our respondents' perceptions better in opportunities for dialogue and engagement through Volkswagens channels.

Aakhus (2002) provides a method for reconstructing communication design practice by concentrating on four elements. The first element embodies to identify the *exigency* in the occurrences to be resolved through different acts of communication. The second element designates the *purpose* of the suggested type of communicative activity for resolving the exigency. The third element of the framework embodies to stipulate how the selected communicative activity is *orchestrated* through design features for interaction. These design features can be procedures, roles and technologies for shaping or instructing interactivity. The last component in the frameworks aims to articulate the *systematic-rationality* of the communicative activity. The purpose of the systemic-rationality is to justify the effectiveness and legitimacy of the communicative activity, in order for the orchestration to deliver the purpose that resolves the exigency (Aakhus, 2002). The rationality of design practice can be analysed in multiple ways according to Aakhus. Communication researchers and managerial scholars can examine the design practice by observing practitioners while they're doing their work, or study the way practitioners discuss how they do their work. Another way to analyse the logic of design practice is to investigate the tools that organisational practitioners use, in which they do their work (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015). The framework for articulating communication design from Aakhus perspective emphasises on examining an organization as a design practice. We want to further develop and use this framework. While applying it to a specific organization, we also want to involve a stakeholder perspective. As the framework aims to examine the effectiveness and legitimacy of an organizational dialogue, we want to further its discursive range by examining how stakeholders are perceiving the opportunities for engagement and dialogue.

3.5 Dialogue through Public Relations messages

In order to provide a nuanced critical framework that focuses on external stakeholders, we have chosen to incorporate Public Relation (PR) literature that emphasises on the role of dialogue. PR plays a key role in communication with external stakeholders and is therefore highly relevant for this study. Theoretician Paul Willis postulates that dialogue in a PR context aims to manage the social contracts that exists between an organisation and its

stakeholders. Although this is fundamental in terms of organisational governance, it is surrounded by extensive empirical challenges.

Management scholars within the field have emphasised that the issue of power is an underlying recurrent theme of many contemporary studies of corporate social responsibility and stakeholder engagement. They claim that the practice has not been able to confront corporate power and that alternative approaches should be developed (Bendell, 2004; Blowfield, 2005). Dialogue plays a key role in organisational governance, and maintaining and developing relationships with an organisation's stakeholders enacted through communication. It also advances questions in terms of how organisations assess and supervise their actions and behaviours, specifically in relation to stakeholders (Willis 2015). Paul Willis (2015) provides a perspective called dark dialogue, where he argues that consideration should be given to the practices that aim to nullify dialogue and obstruct engagement. Willis draws his idea of dark dialogue from the work of Fawkes (2010) *The shadow of excellence: A Jungian approach to public relations ethics* where she explores the disciplines 'dark aspects' in terms of ethics. The perspective encourages a reflection on the role of what can be seen as 'non-engagement'. It can for example include the decision not to communicate something, also called the silent treatment in Public Relations, or only responding to stakeholder enquiries through communication channels sanctioned by the organisation itself. Willis argues that such non-activity by organisational practitioners can be seen as a form of resistance to the demands from stakeholders for tolerable performance, specifically in a social context. He further postulates that what might be positioned as a 'dissatisfying operational failing' or an 'oversight' can be defined as premeditated form of stakeholder abuse. The perspective serves a framing that turns the academic gaze from what an organisation does to engage with its stakeholders, to what they don't do (Willis, 2015).

A substantial amount of literature in Corporate Social Responsibility have likened Public Relations as something Willis articulates as the "glossy communication of initiatives". He further argues that Public Relations should be seen as a strategic management discipline that shapes organizational responses to social issues generated by the organization. Willis further postulates the importance to confront issues surrounding organisational power as an endemic problem that's equated to a wider management literature than just Public Relations. He suggests that the core of the problem is how organisations discharge their responsibilities to society and how they hide behind their stakeholders. He argues that the absence of social auditing protocols can be seen as how organisations exhibit power over others (Willis, 2015).

3.6 The dialogue of engagement

The effect of stakeholder relationships on the ongoing success of organisations is now well recognised and generally accepted by most scholars, even by those subscribing to a neoclassical view where the primarily *raison d'être* of a firm is to serve its investors (Foley, 2001). This means that organisations need to engage with stakeholders as they have the power, in its various forms, to influence the achievement of outcomes within the organisation (Foster and Jonker, 2005). Different organizations interpret the meaning of 'engagement' in different ways but the common goal is often to persuade the audience about something perceived to be of value to the focal organization (Foster and Jonker, 2005). This somewhat linear model of communication views information as a commodity that needs to be transmitted, rather than seeing communication as a social process characterized by mutual negotiation (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985). Crane and Livesey (2003) argue that stakeholder relationships in modern day society is characterized by an array of shifting, ambiguous and contested interactions between interested parties and within diverse organisations. Furthermore, there is no doubt that communication is the essential building block for constituting and maintaining effective stakeholder relationships (Crane and Livesey, 2003). Earlier applications of communication theory regarded stakeholders as "receivers" or "audiences" of messages sent by the organisation, whilst later theories emphasized the importance of feedback and two-way communication. Grunig and Grunig (1992) raises an objection against more recent forms of communication theory and argues that it still involves a strong element of persuasion and manipulation by the sender. In both instances, there is an underlying idea of being in control of how the message will be perceived by the other part. Grunig and Grunig (1992) calls this "asymmetrical dialogue" where the aim of communication is to persuade stakeholders, even though there is an emphasis on two-way dialogue. The main objective for the organisation is to make sure that the receiver understands the message that is being transmitted, covert in the form of shallow feedback and conversation. The theorists argue that the previous perspective on communication fails to acknowledge the fact that every act of conversation involves that the stakeholders takes an active role in developing meaning of the message that is being conveyed.

Andriof (2001) suggests that "symmetrical dialogue" is a superior form of communication where both parties are highly involved in the dialogic act. Rather than gathering information and responding, this is a situation where the interests of both parties are represented in such a manner that can persuade and allow the other party to persuade. This is

essentially about creating a mutual understanding of the situation (Cheney and Dionisopoulos, 1989).

3.7 Staking the reputation on stakeholders

Stakeholder engagement has recently risen on the agenda of many theoretical fields due to the booming of social media (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching, 2013). Social media facilitates dynamic, often real-time interaction, which has caused a lack of control for the organisations as stakeholders are becoming increasingly empowered and putting more pressures on the organisation in terms of social corporate responsibility (Viglia, Pera and Bigné, 2017). Theorists Viglia, Pera and Bigne (2017) proposes that the rise of social media has led to an increased active participation of different stakeholders and that the interconnectedness amongst different stakeholders has created a strong ecosystem of multiple voices that the organisation must take into consideration.

Corporations are increasingly investing in social media, hoping to improve their corporate reputation through engaging and managing relationships with various stakeholders online. A large amount of researchers within the PR-domain has investigated if organizations adopt dialogic, two-way communication to interact with their publics online and whether online platforms are able to foster organizational transparency and credibility depending on degree of ease to navigate the website, encouraging stays and providing opportunities to give feedback (e.g. Callison, 2003; Kent and Taylor, 1998; Zerfass and Schramm, 2014).

In contrast to previous studies, Ji et al., (2017) takes the stakeholders perspective by investigating the relationship between stakeholders behaviour on Facebook and corporate reputation. The theorists conducted a content analysis based on 5-year longitudinal data from various 'Fortune 500' companies. In order to understand how general stakeholders used Facebook for their engagement, data were collected from the companies Facebook accounts from 2009-2013. Ji et al., (2017) draws a distinction between two levels of engagement - shallow engagement and profound engagement. When stakeholders are involved in shallow engagement they are mainly consuming the organisations message by liking and sharing the content. Ji et al., (2017) argues that this form of engagement behaviour connotes a positive meaning and is expected to influence corporate reputation in a positive way. On the other hand, profound engagement activities can be measured through comments. These comments may differ in valence, thus positive and negative comments can affect corporate reputation in opposite ways. The results show that shallow engagement activities such as liking and sharing showed no significant effect on corporate reputation.

From a theoretical standpoint, information produced by such behaviour only requires superficial information processing by the receivers. This type of information processing may affect people's attitude temporarily but in the long term it exerts no significant effect on the public's evaluations of a company's reputation. However, when profound engagement variables were included in the test, they showed significant impacts. Positive comments and negative comments led to opposite effects, whereas there was no significant effect associated with neutral comments. The current research found that only when people display strong positive or negative emotions in their comments and explain why they felt that way, only then would the comments change the public's perceptions and evaluations toward a company (Ji et al., 2017).

3.8 Open dialogue with diverse stakeholders

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) emphasizes the important role of corporate communication in establishing and maintaining transparent and open dialogues with diverse stakeholders to foster ethical courses of action (Golob and Bartlett, 2007; Kirat, 2015). The practice of CSR is currently undergoing a transition as the stakeholder obtains more bargaining power in the business environment. Numerous public relation researchers argue that CSR communication has evolved from one-way communication to two-way communication, where companies actively listens to, and reflect upon, the voices and interests of the stakeholders (Dhanesh, 2015; Girard and Sobczak, 2012; Kim, 2014; Morsing and Schultz, 2006; O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2014; Trapp, 2014).

Morsing and Schultz (2006) argue that the most common and widespread type of CSR communication is called stakeholder information strategy. These types of communication initiatives are highly commercialised and superficial aiming to promote what the company has done in terms of 'giving back to society' especially in areas where they might have caused previous damage. During the 1990s, crisis management heavily influenced the field of CSR and *the stakeholder responsiveness strategy* gained popularity (Wood, 1991). This form of strategy meant that organisations regarded the communication of CSR activities as both proactive and reactive responses to current pressures and potential threats. Nowadays, more companies understand the importance of engaging different stakeholders in their business procedures and the notion of CSR stakeholder engagement is drawing increasing attention from CSR practitioners (Devin and Lane, 2014; Girard and Sobczak, 2012; O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2014). The process of CSR stakeholder engagement encompasses the activities of engaging key stakeholders in communication, dialogue and operations, as well as getting

consent of the stakeholders (O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2014). Moving the strategic focus of CSR communication from responsiveness to engagement reflects a paradigmatic shift in planning and implementing the CSR initiatives and communicating with key stakeholders. Furthermore, this type of engagement strategy guides the companies to a more dialogic, transparent and collaborative direction than other models such as stakeholder information strategy and stakeholder responsiveness strategy (Wen and Song, 2017). Organisations face many challenges in communicating their CSR initiatives to the outside world in an authentic and engaging way since the definition of CSR both entails self-interest and societal interest. This could cause somewhat conflicting issues and many theorists argue that the company might get backlash if the stakeholders view their CSR-initiatives as overly self-promotional (Coombs and Holladay, 2011).

3.9 Conveying CSR-messages to stakeholders

In today's society Corporate Social Responsibility attempts to increase business value from CSR activities. This emphasises the need for organisations to communicate CSR more efficiently to its stakeholders. Du, Bhattacharya and Sen attempts to conceptualize a framework of CSR communication and its different aspects. CSR can be described broadly as an obligation to improve societal well-being through open business forms and corporate contribution properties (Kotler and Lee 2005). Companies are dedicating considerable resources to different social initiatives, alternating from environmental protection to societal business practices. Du, Bhattacharya and Sen argues that organisations have different motives in doing CSR beyond ideological thinking. CSR can be an influential strength for social change but the intricate business returns that corporations are gaining should be mentioned. CSR can generate substantial business benefits to an organization, specifically from the stakeholder group consumers. It can bring a variety of business benefits, from brand resilience to negative company news and premium pricing among many others (Du et al., 2007). A stakeholder driven perspective can also sanction other stakeholder behaviours such as employment seeking and different types of stakeholder investments (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen 2010).

Corporate social responsibility usually contains properties of a specific company's identity and values that can be seen as definite and persistent, but often distinctive to the company's virtue. Communicating CSR can be viewed as a significant task in terms of how to communicate with stakeholders. The challenge often concentrates on how to minimize 'stakeholder scepticism and transfer core motives in an organisations CSR activates. Du et al.,

further postulates that research on CSR in terms of attributions, indicate that a company's CSR activities does not attribute simply intrinsic or extrinsic motives, but a more mixed message of motives where stakeholders are engaged in something they call '*a sophisticated attribution process*'. Further research indicates that a majority of stakeholders have a positive reaction when a company's CSR attributions are mixed. Suggestively that stakeholders tend to be more lenient of extrinsic motives as long as the initiatives attributes to the intrinsic motives as well (Ellen et al., 2006). Du, Bhattacharya and Sen argues that stakeholders are more keen to acclimate a win-win perspective, when considering that CSR initiatives can and ought to oblige the needs of society and the outlines of business (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen 2010). They further suggest that CSR communication tend to focus on a company's inclination in social causes, instead of focusing on social cases themselves. Due of this context, CSR communication can focus on numerous factors, from obligations to a specific cause to the impact for a cause, or the congruity between the cause and the organisations business, also known as CSR fit. A company's CSR activities can be recorded and distributed through an array of communication channels. A company can for example communicate its CSR activities through a press release, or bestow a section of media in its official online website to CSR, or use other mediums such as TV commercials and magazines (Du, Bhattacharya and Sen).

Christensen et al., postulates that the public are expecting organisations to unequivocally demonstrate and embrace CSR. This notion descends from the idea that CSR is usually associated with transparency and accountability (Christensen et al., 2011). As previously mentioned, the need for CSR among stakeholders can indicate a conceivable growth for the companies themselves (Porter and Kramer (2006), but it is an issue that companies must evaluate. The concern derives from greater expectations of stakeholders in regards to how companies practice and communicate to stakeholders. There is also a growing public scepticism towards corporate CSR-messages according to literature (Christensen et al., 2013).

There is a distinction concerning owned media, paid media and earned media in terms of CSR communication. Christensen et al., argues that most self-presented media on company's websites or annual reports will be positive, because an organization isn't forced to 'tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth' (Christensen et al., 2011). Organizations that are consequently intending to establish their identity and reputation that will depict them as responsible and a good corporate citizen (Elving, W.J.L. 2015).

3.10 Summary of the theoretical framework:

This section concludes with a summary of the key-points from the theoretical framework that we will carry onto the analysis in chapter 7.

To summarize, this chapter constitutes the frame of reference for this thesis and relies on three fundamental perspectives that correlates to our research subject. Key points that we will carry onto the analysis is consist of Communication Design Theories, heavily provided by Aakhus and Bzdak which lays the foundation of the study and methodology in regards to examining the communication design. The literature provides an important theoretical foundation in regards to how stakeholder engagement communication can be theorized and how a design perspective can be used to examine a company's communication efforts. Furthermore, the communication theories will assist in examining how an organization constructs dialogue. The framework also contains Public Relation Theories that focuses on dialogue and power. Dialogue is a main theoretical reference for this thesis, as it aims to examine the opportunities created for dialogue through design features that stakeholders have access to. When examining a company's communication efforts, especially in regards to a corporate scandal, we argue that its important to have a critical stance in viewing the inherent power theme that comes with the agency of the company and their ability to control what's being communicated on their channels. Therefore, literature of public relations and power will be incorporated in our analysis to provide a nuance and coherent examination of the design. The framework further depicts Corporate Social Responsibility theories that presents perspectives in how CSR-communication contains properties of specific values and attributes that could potentially be used in conveying CSR-communication in order to impact stakeholders. While examining communication design from our chosen CSR literature, we are allowed to dissect different CSR messages that are being conveyed through the chosen Volkswagen tools, and create a more in depth understanding of how Volkswagen is trying to communicate their commitments to their stakeholders.

Some of the key-points to bear in mind when analysing the second research question are the findings from Foster and Jonker (2005), Grunig and Grunig (1992) who argue that organizations often tend to interpret the meaning of 'engagement' as a way to persuade the audience in order to push their own agenda. Theorist Smircich and Stubbart (1985), Foster and Jonker, (2005) also touch upon the immensely critical fact that organisations often fail to acknowledge that every act of communication involves that the

stakeholders take an active role in developing meaning, which is apparent in the Volkswagen case. Ji et al., (2017) research on the relationship between stakeholder engagement on social media and corporate reputation are also important when analysing the second research question as it provides important notions on different levels of stakeholder engagement.

Lastly, theorists within the realm of CSR-communication have also provided important findings which have assisted us in analysing the empirical material. Some of the key-findings come from Coombs and Holladays (2011) research that suggests that an organisation might get backlash if the stakeholders regard their CSR-initiatives as overly self-promotional. Morsing and Schultz (2006), (Wood, 1991), Christensen et al., (2011) also provides conceptualisations about different types of CSR-communication styles and strategies that organizations might take when communicating to their stakeholders which will assist us in analysing the second research question.

4. Volkswagen emission case description

The case begins with a background description of Volkswagen, followed by the case of events that took place during the emission scandal in 2015. Lastly, it is important to note that this case focuses on Volkswagen automobiles and will therefore not be aiming any attention to other brands within the company portfolio.

The Volkswagen Group, also referred to as Volkswagen Aktiengesellschaft, is a major German automobile manufacturer founded by The Deutsche Arbeitsfront in 1937 (BBC News, 2015). It is the largest carmaker in Europe comprising of twelve brands from seven European countries. These brands are Volkswagen Passenger Cars, Audi, SEAT, SKODA, Bentley, Bugatti, Lamborghini, Porsche, Ducati, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, Scania and MAN. Additionally, the Volkswagen Group offers a wide range of financial services, including customer financing, leasing, insurance activities and fleet management.

The company has a complex history steaming back to Nazi-Germany, where Adolf Hitler had a vision to enable German families to have their first car. At that time, very few Germans owned a car and the aim was to create a “car for the people” (BBC News, 2015). Ferdinand Porsche had the main responsibility of designing the car called KdF-Wagen with its signature “beetle-shape.” During World War II (1939-1945) the company produced

vehicles for the German army and owes its post-war existence largely thanks to Ivan Hirst, a British army major who saved it from being dismantled and sold off as a part of war reparations (BBC News, 2015). Volkswagen became an essential part of West Germany's post-war growth and continued its expansion throughout the decades.

In the late 90s the company embarked on a round of acquisitions of famous names, buying up Britain's luxury carmaker Bentley, France's Bugatti and Italy's Lamborghini. In 2014 Volkswagen became the second largest automobile manufacturer in the world, following Toyota, with factories in 31 countries and producing nearly 41.000 vehicles daily. The strategy of Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles is focused on the vision of providing "world-leading transport solutions to our customers." According to Volkswagen, these vehicles are designed to increase customer's economic success, which is the most essential reason for a purchase alongside quality and reliability concerns. The company envisions their goal become the leading provider of low-emission and zero-emission light commercial vehicles and to offer integrated transport solutions (Volkswagen, 2017).

In 2015 it came to the public's knowledge that Volkswagen had been involved in an emission scandal and the following case of events will be described in the next section.

The emission scandal

During 2015 The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) uncovered that numerous Volkswagen cars that were being sold in the United States had a 'defeat device'. This software allowed diesel engines to detect when they were being tested and altering their performance to increase results in emission testing's. The Volkswagen cars with defeat devices were supported by colossal marketing campaigns proclaiming its cars' low emissions.

In November 2015 Volkswagen made a public statement that they had found abnormalities in their testing to measure carbon dioxide emission levels. The first number that was given to the media was 800.000 cars that could potentially be affected in Europe. Volkswagen made a new statement following their investigations in December 2015 that only 36,000 cars produced each year would have been affected by these irregularities (BBC, 2015).

The Defeat Device

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) concluded that the cars engines were equipped with a computer software that could sense test scenarios. The software monitors speed, engine

operation, air pressure and the position of the steering wheel to detect laboratory conditions. While sensing these test scenarios, the device appeared to put the Volkswagen vehicles in a 'safety test mode' in which the engine ran below normal performance and power. The engines switched out of this test mode while being on the road, which resulted in the vehicles emitting nitrogen oxide pollutants 40 times above what is allowed in the US (BBC, 2015).

During this corporate scandal three key figures of Volkswagen responded in public statements;

Michael Horn, the VW American boss made the statement 'We've totally screwed up.' (BBC, 2015).

Martin Winterkorn, the chief executive at the time made the statement 'Broken the trust of our customers and the public.' He resigned shortly after as a result of the scandal. (BBC, 2015).

Matthias Mueller, the replacement of Mr. Winterkorn made this statement while taking up his new post 'My most urgent task is to win back trust for the Volkswagen group – by leaving no stone unturned.' (BBC, 2015).

5. Research methodology

This chapter deals with the methodology proposed for the current research. It is based on the research problem and stated research questions. In this chapter, we outline the methodology to be used in our research and the theoretical basis behind the approaches and their definitions. Thus, motivations and justifications for all adopted methodological choices will be given under each section.

Briefly, we have taken two parallel methodological pathways in order to examine our research questions. The first method involved applying Aakhus and Bzdak framework for reconstructive design onto an 'extreme instance' such as the Volkswagen emission scandal in order to examine how the organisations communication design was constructed. The framework is constituted by examining four elements which are Exigency, Purpose, Orchestration and Rationality. These four elements frames the Dialogue and engagement design logic which assists in answering how Volkswagens communication design is

constructed. The second research question was examined by conducting semi-structured interviews with five Swedish customers (i.e. stakeholders) in order to gain a deeper understanding if Volkswagens communicative tools were enabling opportunities for engagement.

5.1 Research strategy

According to Saunders et al., (2009) a research strategy can be defined as the general plan of how the researcher will go about answering the research question. Furthermore, there is a distinct difference between a research strategy and a research method. Whereas a research strategy concerns the outlining of a specific project plan, research method can be defined as the tools and techniques for data collection (Denscombe, 2010). Thus, when we talk of research methodology we not only talk of the research methods but also consider the logic behind the methods that we use in the context of our research study and explain why we are using a particular method or technique.

No single strategy can be considered as an unprecedented solution. In fact, each strategy has its own advantages and disadvantages deepening on various contextual factors surrounding the project such as control and integrity aspects (Yin, 1994). Denscombe (2010) postulates that one should consider three key questions when deciding upon a proper research strategy:

- *Is it suitable?*
- *Is it feasible?*
- *Is it ethical?*

Debating these questions will help us justify the choice of strategy in a clear and explicit way.

First and foremost, we have chosen to conduct a case study and argue that this research strategy is the prime way for us to go about examining Volkswagens communication design. The two research questions of this thesis are correlated to each other in the sense that the first question helps us outline the communication design of Volkswagen and the second research question works as a complementary bridge by incorporating the perceptions of the stakeholders in terms of engagement. These two questions helped us achieve a holistic understanding for the relationship between communication design and stakeholder engagement in an extreme instance such as the Volkswagen emission scandal.

Secondly, our choice of strategy takes the practical aspects of conducting a research into account. In the words of Denscombe (2010), we have to ask ourselves if the study is feasible in regards to accessing data and information that is crucial for the study. Conducting a case study allows us to be in greater control of the data gathering due to the fact that we're not solemnly dependent on one source of information. Instead, we can rely on several inquiries to describe the case and the Volkswagen organisation through assessing news reporting, social media and interviews. Another practical consideration, which helps to determine the feasibility of the research strategy, is the time-limitation. Denscombe (2010) argues that some strategies, such as case studies, are relatively predictable in terms of their time-span and lend themselves to fairly tight time planning which further confirms our line of reasoning. When choosing the strategy researchers should also bear in mind the audience for the research and the particular *research community* that one is a part of (Denscombe, 2010). Different subject areas and disciplines tend to have different perspectives on research and this means that they generally have a preference for certain styles of research rather than others.

In the domain of communication research, there is a longstanding tradition of conducting case studies due to the unique and detailed insights that the approach offers. As communicational researchers, we feel that it is exceedingly imperative to keep mindful of the traditions of our own discipline and chose an approach that would be considered proper by the community.

Lastly, we need to ask ourselves about the ethical aspects of our work and if the research strategy permits us to work within an appropriate code of conduct. Denscombe (2010) postulates that there are some general guidelines within the context of contemporary social research. First and foremost, no one should suffer harm as a result of participating in the research. In this instance, the notion of 'harm' could mean anything ranging from physical to mental harm or abuse. It is the researchers utmost obligation to make sure that participants understand the nature of the research and their involvement. In addition, it is equally important that the data will be treated confidentially and handled with care. Our choice of strategy permits us to abide by these ethical guidelines and we are highly devoted to uphold high methodological standards throughout the course of the project. By considering Denscombe (2010) three key questions; "*is it suitable is it feasible and it is ethical*" we argue that our choice of research strategy aligns with these queries.

5.2 Case Study Methodology

Researches that use the case study approach are given the opportunity to choose from an extensive range of social phenomena as the main unit of their analysis. All of the following examples can subsequently be used as the unit of analysis; an organization, an industry, a workplace, a policy etc. The scope of potential ‘cases’ might be broad but it is eminent that the unit has definite boundaries (Denscombe, 2010).

Another significant criteria that researchers must deal with while using the case study approach, is what grounds the case will be selected on. There are numerous of instances that invoke different logics, and some of the most relevant ones to this study are the ‘typical instance’ and the ‘extreme instance.’ The typical instance proposes a logic that the chosen case has similar key features to other instances that could have also been chosen. This allows the case study’s findings to be generalized to a ‘class of things’ due its typicality. The extreme instance on the other hand proposes a logic of being contrast with the norm (Denscombe, 2010). We have chosen to examine Volkswagen and the emission scandal that was uncovered in 2015. The Volkswagen emission case offers a logic that can be seen as contrast to the norm, since the company have more or less failed their stakeholders, consequently having a lot of media coverage in traditional media and on social media. This offers extreme circumstances where a company is conveying messages of accountability and change after a public corporate incident. We argue that this makes up for a relevant and interesting research case where our focus will be to examine the communication design of Volkswagen and how the organisations customers, attribute of being stakeholders to the organisation, perceive the opportunities for engagement based on four communicative tools that Volkswagen has directed towards this group.

The main reason for choosing a case study approach is because it helps us to examine why specific outcomes might have happened in the Volkswagen emission scandal instead of just concluding what those outcomes were. The case study approach allows us to focus on Volkswagen and offers adequate detail to disentangle the complexities of the given situation. Because of the investigative nature of our research we need to examine our issue in depth and stipulate a rationalization that can handle the complexity of the case and the communicative framework. We argue that case studies are a strong choice in terms of descriptive accounts, particularly in regards to our research purpose and question.

Lastly, the case study approach is vulnerable to criticism in terms of credibility of generalizations made from its findings (Denscombe, 2010). We are aware of this fact, but our

objective of this study is not to produce statistically applicable results. The Volkswagen emission scandal is one of the biggest corporate scandals related to modern day economy and the situation is unique in the sense that it produces contextually specific circumstances and actions taken from the focal organisation. One can say it is contrast to the norm, making it an ‘extreme instance.’

5.3 Reconstructive communication design

In short, we have taken several methodological steps in the process of examining Volkswagens communication design (RQ1). First and foremost, we have used Aakhus and Bzdak framework for reconstructing communication design which assisted us in developing our own methodology. We have also identified four communicative tools that Volkswagen use as a means to communicate with their stakeholders. Secondly, we have operationalized the theoretical elements provided from the framework into a particular set of questions in order to examine our four selected communicative tools. Lastly, we have analysed the empirical material from these tools by using a thematic analysis in order to identify recurring themes within our empirical data.

5.3.1. Choosing a suitable framework

In order to examine how Volkswagens communication design is constructed (RQ1) we needed a prominent framework which would allow us to do so. The Aakhus and Bzdak communication design framework has been chosen for this study because of its ability to articulate logics of communication design, in order to address existing shortcomings and understanding stakeholder engagement from a communicative perspective. We saw a compelling opportunity to apply this framework on a former corporate crisis, in order to examine communication design logics for constructing dialogue with stakeholders. The specific case chosen for this study, The Volkswagen Emission Scandal offers an instance in how communication is used for solving a specific exigency. Aakhus and Bzdak suggest that the exigency is often communicative. They further argue that the fluctuating context for society and business is framed as the risk in ignoring how the environmental-social-economic problems are seen as products of current forms of social organization, where multiple stakeholders share a stake. The commitment of the dialogue and engagement is to recognize and generate opportunities for enabling condition for ‘civil society’ and addressing social-environmental-economic problems (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015). We have turned our academic

gaze to focus on stakeholder communication in general with elements of social corporate responsibility. We also wanted to emphasize the significance of understanding how external stakeholders are perceiving communication design developed by organizations and their professionals, and how legitimate and effective it really is.

The reconstructing framework seeks out to articulate the ‘logic of communication design practice’ in practices, systems and technologies (e.g., Jacobs and Aakhus, 2002; Jacobs and Jackson, 2006). The framework aims to go beyond examining the message design, by concentrating on dialogue and the context of the communication. The design stance can be viewed as a complementary dialogically inspired theory (e.g., Kuhn and Deetz, 2008). Aakhus and Bzdak shapes a method for reconstructing communication design by concentrating to four elements. The four elements are called *exigency*, *purpose*, *orchestration* and *system-rationality* which identifies *the dialogue and engagement design logic*. According to Aakhus and Bzdak, the rationality of design practice can be analysed in multiple ways ranging from on-premises observations to analysing how practitioners discuss their communication efforts. Another way to analyse the logic of reconstructing communication design is to investigate the tools that practitioners use, in which they do their work in (Aakhus and Bzdak, 2015).

5.3.2. Operationalization of the Aakhus and Bzdak framework

Operationalization secures that the research objectives are answered in a way of transforming theoretical constructs into feasible measures or questions (Saunders et al., 2012). As previously mentioned, theorists Aakhus and Bzdak has developed a method for reconstructing communication design by concentrating to four elements. These four elements are called exigency, purpose, orchestration and system-rationality. Aakhus encourages researchers that want to use communication design to develop their own methodology. *“While other disciplines have actively engaged in refining design methodology, this has not been the case in communication. The challenge in communication design methodology is devising strategies that engage both the empirical and normative dimensions of communication.”*– (Aakhus, 2009). Thus, we have used the framework provided by Aakhus and Bzdak as the theoretical foundation to further develop and articulate our own design methodology.

The challenge in this particular study is to operationalize the theoretical constructs provided by Aakhus and Bzdak into a refined design methodology in order to examine Volkswagens communicative tools. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the fact

that the operationalization has been developed as a means to further articulate Aakhus and Bzdak framework and the elements presented by them. In consideration of the four elements; exigency, purpose, orchestration, and systemic-rationality, the authors Aakhus and Bzdak (2015) have explained each rationale's design logic in a table. These tables have been used to carefully extract questions from, in order to apply the design approach to our own emission case. After gathering the empirics through the design framework we have used a thematic analysis for identifying, analysing and recognizing themes within the media texts. The thematic analysis has been used in order to examine and develop themes of how Volkswagens communication design is constructed, and what these constructs are trying to communicate to specific stakeholders'. Thematic analysis fluctuates from other analytic methods that pursue to depict patterns within qualitative data. Other analytical methods are usually theoretically bounded, such as discourse analysis, thematic decomposition and grounded theory. As thematic analysis is not merged with any pre-existing theoretical framework, it offers us as researchers flexibility in terms of it being used within different theoretical frameworks, such as the design perspective. We have defined themes as being something that is given considerable space in empirical data that is in accordance with Braun and Clarke (2006) definition. The themes are developed from a thematic map, where the most prevalent codes from Volkswagen's communication design transcripts has been extracted. This process will be further explained later in the chapter.

By carefully reviewing and examining the two tables provided by Aakhus and Bzdak (2015) in the *Stakeholder Engagement and Communication Design Practice* paper we have extracted and developed questions to each categorical element of the Communication Design framework in order to apply the frame on our chosen case. It is important to bare in mind that each table stands for a specific rationale logic of stakeholder engagement, and that we have considered all elements provided in order to create questions that will provide a coherent foundation in order to assist the analysis of our case. The exigency in the Volkswagen case is composed by examining the circumstances that Volkswagens communicative tools are trying to resolve. The questions we will focus on with this element is; *What is accounting for the social context? What is the current social-environmental-economic problem? How is different external media actors initiating their exigency?* The second element designates the purpose of the suggested type of communicative activity for resolving the exigency. The questions we will examine to describe the purpose will be; *What is the purpose for VW communicative activities in creating engagement? What are the driving factors for such an involvement? What does the sustainability report, SHIFT, Instagram and*

Swedish website state in regards to these communicative activities? The orchestration of Volkswagens communication activities is produced by examining the company's design features of creating dialogue and how they are shaping engagement through their channels with customers. This is achieved by asking: *How is Volkswagen constructing themes within their stakeholder communication? What is their contribution? How do they show commitment to their stakeholder networks?* The systemic-rationality of Volkswagens communicative activity is examined by asking the following set of questions: *How does Volkswagen justify dialogue within their stakeholder network? Are the stakeholders involved in dialogue? How effective and legitimated is their communicative activities?*

These questions will be our guidelines, as we will apply the framework to our chose case. The questions extracted from the two communication design tables is a way for us to apply the specific frame on Volkswagens communication efforts, and mainly a way for us to operationalize the communication design framework in order for us to answer our first research question.

5.3.3. Identifying the communicational tools

We have identified four crucial tools that enable communication with Volkswagens stakeholders. The tools that will be examined in this study is Volkswagens annual Sustainability Report, their international Sustainability Magazine called Shift, their Swedish website and Instagram account.

Volkswagen Sustainability Report – Responsibility and Change

Volkswagens Annual Sustainability Report is an official document addressing the company's commitment to transparent and responsible corporate governance. The most recent version was published in 2016 and theme of the year was 'Responsibility and Change.' In an open letter to the company stakeholders Volkswagen declares that they are undergoing a profoundly challenging - yet extraordinary exciting - transformation and further enunciates their immense social responsibility being one of the worlds largest industrial corporations (Volkswagen Sustainability Report, 2016).

In the report, Volkswagen writes that the manufacturer encompasses 12 different brands in 153 markets, consequently leading to an extensive range of requirements, expectations and attitudes from various stakeholders. They further articulate that the vast range of interactions can be seen as an immense opportunity, due to the fact that their stakeholder relationships are invaluable to the work that they do. On the other hand, they

write that the diversity of these interactions can be viewed as a challenge due to many conflicting objectives.

Volkswagen has a strategic management system in place to help the organisation navigate the large numbers of stakeholders and fostering a good relationship. Volkswagen defines a stakeholder as: “*individuals, groups or organizations with a legitimate interest in how the Volkswagen Group reaches its corporate decisions and in the implications of those decisions*” (Volkswagen Sustainability Report, 2016). At the heart of Volkswagen's stakeholder universe there are two groups, *employees* and *customers*, that represent the most important internal and external stakeholders. Surrounding this core, Volkswagen has identified 12 additional stakeholder groups based on regular contacts. These 12 stakeholder groups are categorized into five branches: business stakeholders, political stakeholders, academia stakeholders, media stakeholders and societal stakeholders (Volkswagen Sustainability Report, 2016).

CSR initiatives in the Sustainability Report

Volkswagen supports 256 CSR-projects around the world (2016), divided upon all continents besides Oceania. Approximately 50 percent of these CSR initiatives are generated in Europe. They vary between brands and topics, in Britain for example; the only Volkswagen brand that is involved with CSR initiatives is Bentley with topics ranging from Education and Science to Health. Sweden has three CSR initiatives with the brands Scania and Volkswagen with all of them being education related. Germany is the country in Europe where Volkswagen has the most CSR initiatives, with brands such as Porsche, Volkswagen Commercial Vehicles, SKODA and Audi. The topics of these initiatives vary between Education and Science, Culture and Arts, Health, Regional Support, Traffic Education, Environmental Protection and Voluntary Work. Volkswagen had 37 ‘Environmental Protection’ CSR-initiatives in 2016, distributed in five European countries; Spain, Italy, Germany, Slovakia, Poland and Czech Republic.

Shift Magazine

“Shift means to move, change, or change gear – making it a fitting motto for a company that needs to reinvent itself to stake its claim to the future” (Shift Magazine, 2016).

Volkswagen's Sustainability Magazine ‘SHIFT’ was created in regards to the emission scandal as a means to take accountability and ownership of the organisation's wrongdoings by

engaging in an open dialogue with the public. In the editorial of the magazine Volkswagen writes that the sustainability magazine is born out of the crisis and that their objective is to have the courage to deal with conflicting goals openly. *“We want to foster change within the company and generate understanding outside.”* (Shift, Volkswagen Sustainability Magazine, 2016). According to Volkswagen, the SHIFT-magazine is a natural complement to the annual Sustainability Report by providing more easily accessible content and less statics. The magazine is very similar to a regular magazine with interviews, debate articles, think pieces and illustrations. SHIFT-Magazine intends to seek out the opinions of others and to stay argumentative. The articles are not only made by Volkswagen professionals, but by other relevant actors within the fields of Sustainability and Environmental Research. One example is the renowned professor Dr. Klaus Töpher, Germany's second Minister of Environment who wrote a critically reflecting article for the magazine called “Motor of Change.” (Volkswagen Sustainability Report, 2016). In addition, the magazine incorporates the voices of both internal and external stakeholders. For example, some of the external stakeholders that are being interviewed in the magazine consists of a customer, a car dealer and an investor (Shift Volkswagen Sustainability Magazine, 2016).

Swedish Website

Volkswagen Groups Swedish website has also been identified as an instrument for shaping the dialogue with external stakeholders, with a particular emphasis directed towards Volkswagens customers. The top of the website is categorised into six different topics ranging from contact information to career options. Each of the categories is clickable with subcategories. There is a lot of information on the page and further down on the page various news articles are showcased about the recent developments within the company. In addition, there is one section called “the diesel question” where interested customers can read more about the scandal and what actions are being taken by Volkswagen in order to regain the public's trust (Volkswagen Group, 2018).

Volkswagen Instagram Account

Volkswagens official Instagram account with 2.8 million followers is another tool for engaging in dialogue with their stakeholders, as well as the general public, through posting videos and clips of everything that goes on within the world of Volkswagen. The company has posted a total of 1757 pictures, mostly of the latest cars with inspirational captions. In the profile description Volkswagen has attached link with legal notices for social media and

writes about their commitment to upholding transparency through all of their channels.” *Both within and outside of Volkswagen AG, transparency and open communication are a matter of course*” (Volkswagen, 2017). On Volkswagens English website there is a section called “our social media channels” where the user can easily get direct access to the numbers of followers each social media channel has and filter out different types of posts.

Lastly, we have limited ourselves to these four tools in regards to our research subject, hence disregarding other social media platforms such as Facebook. We have decided not to incorporate Facebook as a communicative instrument due to the magnitude of the thesis. Just like in any other study we have had to make certain decisions in regards to time-constraint and keeping the lucidity of the thesis, and argue for the fact that these four tools accounts for a relevant scope of research. The chosen tools accounts for a broad and holistic perspective with a correlation to Volkswagen and we do not find it feasible to incorporate more tools than that. Incorporating more social media channels such as Facebook into this particular research would alter the theoretical standpoint shifting the focus from communication design and stakeholder engagement to sheer social media research. As previously stated, all of the selected tools are used as a means for Volkswagen to engage in a dialogue with their stakeholders. The Sustainability report and Shift magazine are addressing the emission scandal very directly by emphasizing accountability and transparency, whereas the Instagram account and Swedish website also does this but in a more understated manner. Of course, one could perhaps argue for the fact that we could have chosen to include Facebook instead of Instagram in this particular study but we decided to choose the latter. We considered both Instagram and Facebook as ‘typical’ social media platforms. Clearly, there are physical differences in the channels in terms of design - but it is not possible to conclude how choosing Instagram over Facebook might have influenced the study's final results.

5.3.4. Sampling

As previously mentioned, we have chosen to focus on four communicative tools that Volkswagen uses as a means to interact and engage with their stakeholders. Just like in any academic research, we have also had to make decisions regarding the amount of material to be examined for each one of the tools. The process of sampling data began with carefully examining each one of the communicative tools. The first tool we looked into was Volkswagens Annual Sustainability Report. The most recent version was published in 2016 under the theme of “Responsibility and Change.” The report was divided into different

headlines ranging from strategy, economy, people, environment, brands, regions, facts and figures etc. Each headline was then followed by a variety of articles and statistics, provided by Volkswagen. We began the process of sampling data by reading through the report while taking side notes in order to get a holistic understanding of the material. Shortly after, we began discussing how many texts would be feasible to examine considering the fact that we were looking in to three more Volkswagen tools. We decided upon 10 texts from the Sustainability Report, and these were strategically sampled based on their ability to address the crisis. This meant that the texts that most clearly addressed the crisis were selected followed by other texts that more implicitly addressed the matter. The majority of articles came from the environmental section of the report and texts that addressed other topics were left out due to lack of relevance. This principle of relevance was applied to all of our sampling, meaning that only articles/texts/posts addressing the emission crisis would be of interest for this particular study.

The second tool we have examined is Shift Magazine, which according to Volkswagen works as a compliment to the Sustainability Report by providing more easily accessible content and less statistics. The magazine is available in both print and online versions, and consists of 58-pages. The magazine is divided into two sections called ‘insight’ and ‘outlook’- where the first one is focused on directly addressing the emission scandal by “dealing with mistakes openly” while the second one ‘outlook’ is more focused on Volkswagens forthcoming plans. After going through the magazine, we began identifying commonalities in Volkswagens usage of words to describe the scandal and addressing the matter. We chose the articles based on their ability to address the crisis and for this reason the majority of the text that were sampled came from the magazines ‘insight’ section as it dealt with the crisis more directly. Since the most recent version of the Sustainability Report was released in 2016 and Shift magazine was first released in connection to that report we felt that it would be feasible to analyse 10 articles for each tool, adding up to a total of 20 articles.

In addition to this, we decided to incorporate Volkswagens official Instagram account and their Swedish website into our scope of research in order to get a holistic and broad perspective of the organisations communicative efforts. Furthermore, it is important to note that these tools were examined as a complement to the Sustainability Report and Shift-magazine. Upon careful consideration we decided to analyse 5 Instagram posts and 5 articles - adding up to a grand total of 30 articles/posts from Volkswagens different communicative tools.

The empirical material was then analysed using a thematic analysis, which will be explained in the upcoming section. Lastly, it is important to note that we have taken it upon us to examine two different research questions - with two distinct methodological pathways. Therefore, we felt that the amount of empirical data was the maximum amount feasible - in addition to also conducting interviews for the second research question.

5.3.5. Data Analysis: Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis is used for identifying, analysing and recognizing themes within our empirical data gathered from the communicative tools. Braun and Clarke (2006) postulate that thematic analysis fluctuates from other analytic methods that pursue to depict patterns within qualitative data. Other analytical methods can be discourse analysis, thematic decomposition and grounded theory that are theoretically bounded. They argue that thematic analysis allows researchers to avoid the implicit theoretical commitment of the other mentioned analysis. In contrast to for example, grounded theory and other methods like narrative, discourse analysis and IPA, the thematic analysis is not merged with any pre-existing theoretical framework, which offers the researchers flexibility in terms of it being used within different theoretical frameworks.

5.3.6. Data analysis method: thematic analysis of the communicative tools

The thematic analysis that have been conducted on the four different tools have first been translated from various media texts into descriptive accounts. During this process we have used the four elements provided by Aakhus and Bzdak framework for reconstructing communication design as well, in order to create our descriptive account of the media texts. The initial codes gathered from the material were both manifest and latent. After producing the codes from the different tools we started sorting the produced codes into potential themes and compiling relevant codes with relevant themes. During this step we started analysing how different codes could be combined to form overall themes. The next step in our thematic analysis was to refine and elaborate our developed themes. It was during this phase it became apparent to us that some previously thought of themes had to be dismissed due to fragmented data and in some cases a lack of data to support our findings. Another difficulty that we had to encounter during this step of the process was that some themes tended to fall into each other, while others became divided. In order to have a clear perspective on how to assess our data we used Patton (1990) concept of dual criteria for assessing categories - Internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. According to Patton, data within themes should have an

aggregated meaning while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes. Furthermore, it is important to note that these steps were taken separately for each one of the tools and that there were different challenges when assessing different types of data.

During this process it also became apparent that some of the tools were more useful to extract data from, than others in terms of our research purpose. The two tools that provided us with the most relevant data became the Sustainability Report and Shift-magazine mainly because of their orientation towards stakeholder communication. Hence, the material gathered from these two tools were more easily categorized due to the fact that they had distinct sections addressing stakeholders and environmental issues related to our case. The biggest challenges rose when analysing the material from Instagram due to more fragmented data which made it more difficult to assess and categorize into themes, which resulted in the tool being less used for extracting data compared to the Sustainability Report and SHIFT magazine. This happened with the Swedish Website as well, which implicated our thematic analysis. Both Instagram and the Swedish Website became secondary compared to the other two tools during this stage, and was therefore given less capacity in the development of themes and therefore, the analysis. The final step in our thematic analysis was to develop a thematic map of the data material. It was during this step we defined and refined different topics to use in the analysis, and started analyse data within the themes.

5.3.7. Methodological challenges in adopting the Aakhus and Bzdak framework

Naturally, there have been some challenges in developing our own methodology while using the framework for reconstructing communication design as our theoretical foundation. In this section we are going to address some of the methodological challenges of the framework and how we handled those obstacles. The Aakhus and Bzdak framework that is described in the paper *Reconstructing Communication Design* presented its challenges when being implemented in a study like ours. While focusing on to operationalize the four key elements on our chosen case, we felt that the framework was inadequate to provide cohesive guidelines to how one should apply the frame on another specific case. We therefore used the tables postulated in the paper to extract and develop questions for each of the four key elements. We also felt a challenge in how to present our findings and analyse them with relevant literature besides communication design literature. This was solved by applying the thematic analysis, which isn't theoretically bounded with any pre-existing frameworks and offered us the flexibility to operationalize our study the way we intended to. The communication design framework tends to have an organizational focus, and is discursively developed so that

researchers or professionals within organizations can examine their stakeholder communication. This presented challenges of gaining access to the company, as well as, us wanting to account for the actual stakeholders' perception in the matter. We therefore chose to incorporate Volkswagen customers and conduct interviews with them, in order to measure their perceptions of Volkswagens communication design constructs. This approach led the communication design to be a way to articulate and examining how Volkswagen was conveying messages, and what design features were available for stakeholders to engage in, and then to evaluate and analyse their success and failures.

5.4 Interview methodology

5.4.1. Semi-structured interviews

In order to examine RQ2 we have decided to conduct semi-structured interviews. Ekström and Larsson (2010) postulate that this particular method is well suited for exploring people's perceptions in regards to complex and sometimes sensitive issues. Hence, we argue that this method was the prime way for us to go about examining stakeholder opinions in regards to Volkswagens communication design. Semi-structured interviews allow the informants the freedom to express their views in their own terms and encourage two-way communication (Saunders et al., 2009). The interviewer has worked out a set of questions in advance, but intends the interview to be conversational following topical trajectories that may stray from the interview guide (Bryman and Bell, 2007).

5.4.2. Sample selection

Saunders et al., (2009) state that sampling is a necessary process when data collection of the entire population is impossible or impractical due to budget or time constraints. According to the literature there are two main approaches to the selection of samples: probability sampling or non-probability sampling (Saunders et al., 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2007). A probability sampling relies on the use of complete random selection, which means that the researcher has absolutely no influence over the selection of people to be included in the sample. Non-probability approaches to sampling do not operate on the principle of random selection and are used when researchers find it difficult or undesirable to choose their sample on the basis of pure chance (Denscombe, 2010). Non-probability sampling offers a range of alternative techniques to select samples based on subjective judgement for example: quota, snowball, self-selection, convenience and purposive sampling. (Saunders et al., 2009).

5.4.3. Purposive sampling

We have decided to use a purposive sampling method in order to select our respondents due to the fact that we are examining a specific group of people that can be categorized as Volkswagen customers. Purposive sampling operates on the principle that we can get the best information through focusing on a relatively small number of instances deliberately selected on the basis of their known attributes. With purposive sampling the respondents are 'hand-picked' for the research either on the basis of *relevance to the issue being investigated* by the researchers or on the basis of having expertise *knowledge* about the topic (Denscombe, 2010). Hence, it is up to the researchers to choose a suitable sample selection (Saunders et al., 2009). We decided to select respondents on the basis of relevance to our study. Since we are examining the perceptions of Volkswagen customers in attribute of being stakeholders, naturally, we needed to ensure ourselves that customers can be categorized as stakeholders to the organisation. We decided to use Volkswagens own definition of such a notion that states the following: "*Individuals, groups or organizations with a legitimate interest in how the Volkswagen Group reaches its corporate decisions and in the implications of those decisions.*" (Volkswagen Sustainability Report, 2016). The reason for following Volkswagens own stakeholder definition was that we wanted to make sure that the selected scope of respondents could be classified as a stakeholders according to the organisation themselves hence, validating the relevance of our selection by relying on Volkswagen as a source instead of just ourselves. Volkswagen has a strategic management system in place to help the organisation navigate the large numbers of stakeholders and has mapped out two particular groups at the core of their stakeholder universe, surrounded by twelve additional stakeholder groups. The two groups at the heart of Volkswagens stakeholder universe are *employees* and *customers*, which represents the organisations most important *internal* versus *external* stakeholders (Volkswagen Sustainability Report, 2016). Volkswagen is the second biggest car manufacturer in the world and their prime business is producing and selling car (CBS News, 2018). Naturally, every individual that buys a Volkswagen car contributes to the organization's economic profit and therefore it is not unexpected that the organisation has placed their customers at the core of their stakeholder universe. Based on this argument, we decided to choose Volkswagen customers as the scope of study for this thesis because of their important role as external stakeholders to the organisation. Their *relevance* to the organisation, and this study, is high since we are examining how Swedish customers - in

attribute of being Volkswagen stakeholders - are perceiving the opportunities for engagement based on the four selected tools that are directed towards this particular group.

By utilizing Volkswagens own stakeholder map while deciding upon which group of stakeholders to examine, we can also ensure ourselves that the selection of respondents are *relevant* based on the criteria of being customers and external stakeholder to the organisation. Of course, there might be some challenges in letting the organisation define what accounts as a stakeholder, but in this instance we position ourselves behind the fact that Volkswagen has made a relevant and valuable classification. Volkswagen is a profit-driven organisation and would most likely not be able to exist without its customers all over the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that the organisation has placed their customers at the core of their stakeholder universe. Thus, validating our line of reasoning in choosing Swedish customers as our scope of study.

Naturally, there were also some practical factors affecting our selection of respondents. For example, the respondents needed to be willing to take some out of their personal schedules in order to take part in the interviews. We managed to get five respondents to our interviews, which is in accordance with theorists Denscombes (2010) notion about purposive sampling that one can yield the best information through focusing on a 'small number' of instances deliberately selected on the basis of relevance to the study. Bryman and Bell (2007) states that qualitative studies, such as ours, can sometimes be criticised for having a lower degree of generalisation since it observes much smaller units than quantitative research. However, it is important to emphasize that our objective has never been to produce statistically applicable results, instead we have chosen to focus on a smaller number of instances. The respondents consisted of five Swedish Volkswagen customers that have purchased cars from the global actor, with a gender division of two women and three men. There were varying ages within the group ranging from the youngest respondent being 27 years and the oldest one being 60 years. The one unifying factor was that all of the respondents were customers to Volkswagen by owning a Volkswagen car and could therefore be categorized as a stakeholder according to the organizations own definition of such (Volkswagen Annual Report, 2017). We argue that this number of respondents is fair in regards to the overall research scope of the thesis and it's time-constraints. Since we have taken it upon us to examine two research questions, with two distinctive methodological pathways - while keeping the qualitative nature of our thesis in mind - we argue that this is a fair and reasonable number of respondents.

All of the respondents are presented confidentially and have been given a number ranging from 1-5 in order to secure their privacy. Even though we are fully aware that the nature of our research isn't of a highly sensitive nature, we still felt that it was imperative to give our respondents the option of confidentiality which was very appreciated. As previously mentioned, our respondents are Swedish Volkswagen customers with different ages and occupations. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that we have interviewed the respondents in attribute of being Volkswagen car owners and hence disregarding other personal information due to confidentiality reasons. With that said, one should of course bear in mind that the respondents background could possibly influence the outcome of this type of study. The respondents pre-existing knowledge about the issue could for example be an influential factor but it is difficult to conclude in what actual way that might affect the outcome of our results.

Apart from being Volkswagen car owners, the selected respondents are also Swedish which adds another layer of complexity. One could argue that Swedish stakeholders are a less 'relevant' group but Volkswagen makes no geographical distinction when referring to their customers at the core of the organisation's stakeholder universe. For a global organisation like Volkswagen, each customer is equally important and therefore Swedish stakeholders should not be diminished as 'less' relevant than any other geographical group. They have also invested in Volkswagen cars and were also subjected to the vast media coverage about the emission scandal. With that said, we still believe that the results of our study might have gotten another outcome if we were to interview German or American customers - because the emission scandal was first detected within these contexts. Unfortunately, we did not have the possibility to do so.

5.4.4. Data Collection Instrument: designing the interview guide

Even though semi-structured interviews are known to be highly flexible, they still require rigorous preparation. It is essential for the researchers to devise an interview plan and prepare the questions in advance (Esaiasson et al., 2012). Our main objective while designing the interview guide was to keep the questions as flexible and open-ended as possible, allowing the respondents to express themselves in a free way. The interview guide followed a natural trajectory with broader, initial questions subsequently followed by more analytical questions deep diving into specific areas. We divided the interview guide into three themes that correlated to the research question called *Constructing dialogue*, *CSR-communication* and *Stakeholder engagement*.

5.4.5. Testing the Interview Guide

Ghuri and Grønhaug (2010) argues that a good researcher should conduct a pilot-test in order to check the validity of the research questions prior to conducting the final interviews. We decided to follow these recommendations and did a test-run with two acquaintances asking them about their overall understanding of the questions and if there was anything we needed to consider revising. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive in terms of comprehension except for some minor adjustments that needed to be done.

5.4.6. Interview process

In short, the interview process encompassed the following stages: reaching out to potential respondents, scheduling a date for the interviews, choosing a suitable venue, pre-testing the interview guide, conducting the actual interviews, transcribing the data and lastly working through a thematic analysis in order to identify relevant and applicable themes within our data.

The first step of off the process included reaching out to potential respondents. We wrote a formal email introducing ourselves as researchers and explaining the overall purpose of our study, asking if the respondent felt keen to participate in an interview. Upon receiving a reply, a suitable time and date was arranged to accommodate the schedule of our respondents.

Conducting the interviews

Our main objective was to keep the interview sessions as casual and relaxed as possible in order to stimulate a genuine conversation. Each session started of by briefly explaining the overall purpose of our research while handing out coffee and refreshments to the participant. After this short welcoming we handed the participant a printed copy of the Volkswagen sustainability report and the Shift-magazine to look at. We also gave the participants some additional time to look at Volkswagens Swedish website and their Instagram account. Even though the participants were asked to examine these tools before coming to the interview we could not assume that everyone did. Hence, it was imperative to give each participant some additional time to examine and reflect upon these tools by themselves before starting the actual interview. Since we were examining the respondents in attribute of being customers and external stakeholders to the organization and the selected tools were directed towards this particular target group it was important that the respondents had at least seen the tools or

heard about them briefly. Furthermore, it is very important to stress the fact that the respondents were only handed the material with *no* further directions or steering. The material was only handed to the respondent so that she or he could start their thought process about the tools, without any further advisement or directions given. As previously stated, the respondents were asked to examine these tools before coming to the interview but we could not assume that everyone did. Thus, it was essential to give the respondents some additional time by themselves to reflect in peace. One could argue that this might possibly affect the respondents opinions, but since we made it a point *not* to brief the respondents about the material, just simply handing it over and let them reflect by themselves before starting the interview we argue that was probably not the case. Perhaps this might have influenced the respondents on some subconscious level but our objective was just to get the conversation going by kick-starting their own personal thoughts in regards to the tools and not give them any further steering. The interview session begun with some general questions followed by more specific questions in regards to Volkswagens communication design. During the interview process our main objective was to encourage a casual dialogue with the respondent. The point was to get the interviewee to open up about their opinions about Volkswagens communicative tools in terms of creating engagement. This meant that we followed the interview guide while asking the questions, but allowed flexibility in terms of adapting questions, changing order or asking unplanned questions to explore and clarify the interviewees responses.

All of the interviews were conducted in English and we made sure that this was something that the respondents felt comfortable with while initiating the first contact through email. We felt that it was essential to keep the interviews in English due to overall nature of the thesis and the fact that we didn't want alter the respondents statements in the translation process by changing certain words or phrases. Hence, by keeping the same language throughout the entire thesis we could ensure a higher reliability by avoiding possible translation errors. Each interview lasted for about 35-45 minutes and worked as an excellent compliment to our first research question by bridging the relationship between Volkswagens communication design and the stakeholders perceptions of this matter in terms of creating engagement. The interviews were conducted during a time interval of two weeks (2/4-16/4-2018) in order to accommodate the varying schedules of our respondents. Lastly, it was an advantage being two researchers because we could take turns interviewing the respondents while the other one took notes and recorded the conversation. This particular set up allowed us to keep sharp and alert throughout the whole process.

5.4.7. Ethical considerations

All respondents have been presented confidentially (and given a number ranging from 1-5) in order to secure their privacy and right to speak freely during the interview sessions. Even though we are aware that the questions in this particular research aren't of a highly sensitive nature, we still felt that it was necessary to give our respondents this alternative in order to feel fully comfortable with the research terms. It is important to stress the fact that we were interviewing the respondents from the perspective of being a stakeholder to the organisation hence, disregarding other personal information. This was something that all of the respondents appreciated very much and everyone agreed upon the terms of confidentiality. According to Saunders et al., (2009) giving the respondents this opportunity can lead to more open answers and deeper discussions.

Before starting each interview, we went through some ethical guidelines with the respondent. First and foremost, we asked for permission to record the interview and explained the use of these recordings. Secondly, we told the interviewee about how we intended to reference his or her answers and made sure that everyone that everyone agreed upon these terms. Lastly, we offered the respondents the opportunity read through the transcribed material in order to make sure that no statements had been misinterpreted. However, a majority of the respondents declined this invitation due to different reasons ranging from hectic schedules to feeling content with their initial participation. By taking these measures in order guarantee the consent of our respondents throughout the entire study, we can argue that our research aligns with the notion of good ethical practice (Denscombe, 2010).

5.5 The Thematic Analysis for interview transcripts

Because of the nature of this study, we have chosen to incorporate the thematic analysis for its properties of being an essentialist or realist method, which has the ability to report experiences and meanings felt by participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006) in interacting with Volkswagen. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that the thematic analysis must encompass a number of selections that need to be unequivocally contemplated and discussed in the method section. The first question is *what counts as a theme?* A theme in the data according to Braun and Clarke is something that captures importance in relation to the research question and articulates some grade of patterned response or meaning within the data set. We have defined themes of being something that is given considerable space in the data transcripts in our

conducted interviews in accordance with Braun and Clarke's definition. The themes are developed from a thematic map, where the most prevalent codes from the transcripts has been extracted. We have chosen to provide a comprehensive account of specific themes within the data, partially because of the limited data sets, as well as this being a complementary bridging method in regards to our first research question. The two primary ways to identify themes and patterns is through an 'inductive' or 'bottom up' way (e.g., see Frith and Gleeson, 2004), or in a theoretical or deductive 'top down' way according to Braun and Clarke. The inductive approach indicates that the themes that are identified are heavily related to the data themselves (Patton, 1990). The theoretical thematic analysis is often more analyst-driven and is frequently more comprehensive of some aspects of the data instead of providing a rich description of the data overall. The coding of the data plays a significant role in this section as well, in regards to if a researcher is coding for a specific research question or allowing the research question to develop through coding the data (Braun and Clarke 2006).

We have chosen to conduct a thematic analysis since our interviews are strongly driven by our research question. The main objective is to identify the stakeholders perceptions and feelings in regards to Volkswagen stakeholder communication and therefore is more analytical driven. The interviews are conducted for the sole purpose of this study, and therefore classified as a bottom up way. Another important choice a researcher should take according to Braun and Clarke is about what "level" the themes are to be identified. The two approaches are on a semantic/explicit level or at a latent and interpretive level (Boyatzis, 1998). The semantic approach recognizes themes within the surface meaning of the data. The thematic approach goes past the semantic substance of the data and aims to identify or examine underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations (Braun and Clarke 2006). We have chosen to use a latent thematic analysis for its ability to interpret data beyond its explicit description. The reason for this is mostly based on the fact that our study focuses on communication and perception, which by nature is interpretive driven.

5.5.1. Braun and Clarke Six phases

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe six phases of a thematic analysis that was used in this study in order to process our empirical data and identify relevant themes. According to the theorists, the first phase is to familiarize yourself with the data. We did this by transcribing the data into written form in order to conduct the thematic analysis. This can be seen as a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology (Bird, 2005) and an interpretative act

where meanings are ‘created’, rather than a mechanical approach of putting spoken sounds in writing paper (Lapadat and Lindsay, 1999).

Our next step was to familiarise ourselves with the data and start generating initial ideas about what is in it. This is called the production of initial codes and aims to classify a feature of the data that appears relevant and interesting to the analyst (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In the third phase we started to arrange the codes into potential themes. Our main objective during this phase was to analyse the codes and contemplate how they could be combined into a comprehensive theme that correlated to our research question. In the fourth phase we had created a composition of themes from the initial codes and discussed the overall relevance of these themes. It was during this phase that some themes got disregarded, new ones came up and some got merged together in order to accommodate the research question. In the fifth phase, we had created a satisfactory thematic map with relevant themes based on the data material. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) it is also in this phase that the researcher refines the final themes that will be presented in the analysis. The sixth and final phase resulted in a set of well-elaborated themes extracted from the data that we felt pleased with.

5.6 Research quality standards

It is exceedingly imperative that the researchers demonstrate that their findings are based on practices that are considered as ethical, methodological conduct (Silverman, 2004). Conventionally, the bases for judging the credibility of qualitative research have been based on the criteria of reliability and validity (Denscombe, 2010). Thus, we have decided to discuss our research in terms of this rationale.

5.6.1. Reliability

Reliability refers to the trustworthiness and possibility for another researcher to reconstruct a studies result (Bryman and Bell, 2007). Hence, reliability has to do with the quality and consistency of the measurements. In order to have a high level of reliability we have thoroughly argued for all of the adopted methodological choices in this chapter so that the reader can get a precise understanding of the writing process. We argue that the essence of reliability is to have consistency throughout all aspects of our study and we have made it a point to keep a precise track of our methodological approaches. Records are kept of all phases of the research process, including interview transcripts, notes and decisions regarding the

thematic data analysis etc. Thus, we can state that the reliability of this study is high. Even though we are fully aware that some internal bias affects all researchers (Denscombe, 2010), we have taken many measures to avoid this as much as possible. First and foremost, we have recorded and transcribed all of the interviews so that the empirical data couldn't be subjected to any misinterpretation in hindsight. Secondly, we made it a point to conduct the interviews in English. We felt that it was imperative to keep the interviews in English due to overall nature of the thesis and the fact that we didn't want alter the respondents statements in the translation process by changing certain words or phrases. Hence, by keeping the same language throughout the entire thesis we could ensure a higher reliability by avoiding translation errors. Furthermore, we have refined the empirical data by using a thematic analysis in order to identify relevant themes that correlate to the research question. We have systematically explained all of the steps of this phase in order to provide a possibility to reconstruct our study and to avoid as much research bias as possible.

Lastly, taking these necessary steps has also increased the *objectivity* of the study. According to Denscombe (2010) objectivity refers to the absence of bias in the research. We have continuously tried to minimize our influence on the research results by trying to be fair and even-handed in all respects of the thesis.

5.6.2. Validity

The validity's purpose is to determine the relevance of the conducted study and can be branched into two main types, *internal* and *external* validity (Wildersheim and Eriksson, 1997). In brief, internal validity indicates if the researchers have measured what they set out to measure, whereas external validity refers to if the studies results can be generalized (Denscombe, 2010). We argue that the conducted study has a high internal validity due to the fact that the choice of methodology is appropriate for answering our research questions. The communication design framework has been chosen for this study because of its ability to articulate logics of communication design, in order to address existing shortcomings and understanding stakeholder engagement from a communicative perspective. We saw a compelling opportunity to apply the communication design framework onto a corporate scandal, in order to examine communication design logics for constructing dialogue and engagement with stakeholders. We chose to broaden the analysis by conducting semi-structured interviews with Volkswagen stakeholders in order to understand how they were perceiving Volkswagens communicative tools in terms of creating engagement and further discuss what challenges the organisation meets while trying to convey their communication.

Additional measures have also been taken in order to ensure the internal validity while designing our research questions. We have made sure to possess a sufficient theoretical understanding of the research field before constructing the interview guide and conducting any interviews.

External validity refers to if the study's result is applicable to other context and the degree of generalisation to a broader population (Bryman and Bell, 2007; Patel and Davidsson, 2011). Qualitative studies can sometimes be criticised for having a lower degree of generalisation since observes fewer units than a quantitative research (Bryman and Bell, 2007). However, it is immensely important to emphasize that the objective of this study has never been to generate statistically applicable results. As previously stated, we have decided to examine one of the biggest corporate scandals related to modern day economy and the situation is unique in the sense that it produces contextually specific circumstances and actions taken from the focal organisation. Lastly, we have interviewed a fairly modest number of respondents based on a non-probability sampling technique and by taking these multiple factors into consideration we can state that the generalisation of the study's findings are low.

5.6.3. Limitations

Upon consideration, perhaps we could have gotten other results from the interviews by talking to American or German Volkswagen car owners instead of Swedish ones because the emission scandal was first detected within these contexts. Due to geographical and timely limitations, this was unfortunately not possible. With that said, we still argue that the selection of respondents is relevant to the current research because they fit into Volkswagens own definition of their external stakeholders and the organisation makes no geographical distinction when placing their customers at the heart of their stakeholder universe. One should bear in mind that Volkswagen is a global company with customers all over the world, and Swedish stakeholders should not be diminished as a 'less' than relevant target group for our research. By conducting this study Our Ambition is to understand how these customers, in attribute of also being stakeholders, experience the opportunities for dialogue and engagement though the design features presented by Volkswagens communicative tools.

There are however some methodological limitations that we would briefly like to discuss. For instance, there is a range of different approaches that we could have chosen in order to examine the perceptions of stakeholders. As previously stated, we chose semi-structured interviews because we felt that the method provided the in-depth analysis that we were looking for in this particular study. The respondents were given the freedom to express

their views in their own terms and our focus was to get their opinions about Volkswagens communicative tools and if these tools were enabling opportunities for engagement. We felt that this method was the prime way for us to examine stakeholder perceptions but in hindsight we might perhaps have gotten equally interesting results by conducting focus group interviews and allowing the respondents to share experiences amongst themselves. However, we chose not to conduct focus groups because we felt that potential group dynamics might influence the discussion. There is always the possibility that some voices will not be heard while more extrovert participants might dominate the discussion (Denscombe, 2010). Therefore, we felt that it was better to conduct semi-structured interviews with each respondent individually, allowing everyone to express their own opinions on their own terms.

5.7 Summary of research methodology

In summary, we have taken two concurrent methodological pathways in order to examine our research questions. The first method involved applying Aakhus and Bzdaks framework for reconstructive design onto an ‘extreme instance’ such as the Volkswagen emission scandal in order to examine how the organisations communication design was constructed. The framework is constituted by examining four elements which are Exigency, Purpose, Orchestration and Rationality. These four elements frame the Dialogue and engagement design logic that assists in answering how Volkswagens communication design is constructed.

The second research question involved conducting semi-structured interviews with five Swedish Volkswagen customers in order to examine if the four identified communicative tools was enabling engagement according to theses respondents. Lastly, the empirical data was processed through a thematic text analysis in order to identify recurring themes that correlated to the research question.

6. Results/Empirics:

The main objective of this chapter is to present the empirical findings of this study in a cohesive way. The structure of the chapter follows the overall logic of the thesis whereas section 6.1 presents the results drawn from the first research question (RQ1) and section 6.2 presents the results from the second research question (RQ2).

6.1 Results from Volkswagens communication design

This chapter begins with a brief synopsis of the communication design framework and the four elements presented by Aakhus, followed by the results for the first research question.

Aakhus (2002) provides a method for reconstructing communicative design practice by concentrating on four elements. The first element of the framework is to identify the exigency in the incidence to be elucidated through different acts of stakeholder communication. The second part of the framework is to designate the purpose of the proposed type of communicative activity for solving the exigency. The third part of the framework aims to instruct how the selected communicative activities is orchestrated through design features for interaction. The fourth part of the frameworks focuses on the systemic-rationality of the communication, in order to articulate the effectiveness and legitimacy of the dialogue.

Exigency: The exigency in the Volkswagen case is composed by examining the circumstances that Volkswagens communicative tools is trying to resolve. This is achieved by analysing the following set of questions:

- *What is accounting for the social context?*
- *What is the current social-environmental-economic problem?*
- *How is different external media actors initiating their exigency?*

In regards to the social context being the company Volkswagen that was subjected to a previous emission scandal, the exigency stems from the fact that the company needs to take accountability and regain its reliance from its stakeholders. The exigency is created from a wide spectrum of actors. The spectrum ranges from Volkswagen itself, for being involved in implementing a defeat device, to external media factors such as BBC News, The New York Times and CNN etc., to governmental bodies such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and politicians, regulators and environmental groups. In 2018, the American streaming media company Netflix Inc. debuted its documentary series Dirty Money about corporate scandals with the Volkswagen Emission Case as its debut episode, which gained a lot of media attention and brought the company back into the public eye. Our observations indicate that all of these factors accounts for the exigency that Volkswagen now is trying to resolve in relation to creating dialogue and engagement through different acts of communication with its customers. The exigency can be related to a variety of different things, such as brand authenticity, rebuilding trust, conveying accountability and responsibility messages and other

aspects of the Volkswagens organization, but our main focus will be how the organization is creating opportunities for engagement and dialogue throughout this study.

Purpose: The second element designates the purpose of the suggested type of communicative activity for resolving the exigency. This is achieved by examining the following set of questions:

- *What is the purpose for VW communicative activities in creating engagement?*
- *What are the driving factors for such an involvement?*
- *What does the sustainability report, SHIFT, Instagram and Swedish website state in regards to these communicative activities?*

The purpose of the communicative activity in our identified communicative tools is to inform and engage Volkswagens stakeholder through conveying messages that incorporate CSR and consumer related information that generate business value to Volkswagen from the specific stakeholder group, customers. Due to the backlash the emission incident resulted in, one can yield that the organization has made it a point to emphasize its obligations in terms of accountability and responsibility to relevant stakeholders and society as a whole.

Swedish Website: By pursuing a purpose of informing stakeholders about the time-frame of the scandal, what they are doing now, and how they ought to prevent future mistakes, the company is conveying Stakeholder-, and CSR-messages to stakeholders in order to create clarity. What this could mean in terms of attitudes of stakeholders and will be accounted for in the second research question and analysis section.

SHIFT: The magazine aims to involve stakeholders in the decision process and creating a co-involvement in developing a discourse about what societal responsibility the company should take, and how they can be a better corporate citizen. The magazine is divided into two sections called ‘insight’ and ‘outlook’, which addresses different aspects of the scandal from an inside-out perspective. ‘Insight’ articulates a purpose that depicts the critical self-reflection of Volkswagen by dealing with mistakes openly, whereas ‘outlook’ is more focused on the organisations forthcoming plans such as electrification, digitalization and automation.

CSR-Report: The purpose for the Volkswagen Corporate Social Responsibility report aims to address Volkswagens commitment to transparency and responsibility corporate governance. One of the top priorities for Volkswagen is to continue dealing with the repercussions of the diesel scandal in the *spirit of transparency* and that each of the key

developments over the last 12 months (from 2016) has been given its own dedicated chapter within the report.

Instagram: The identified purpose of the tool Instagram is to showcase what is going on within the Volkswagen Universe. This can be related to a purpose of creating dialogue with stakeholders as well as the general public. This tool is in terms of reach the strongest, but the least specified as it does not only aim to engage with current stakeholders. It can also be perceived as a marketing tool, but because of the nature of our study we will only focus on the stakeholder engagement perspective from a consumer stance.

Orchestration

The orchestration of Volkswagens communication activities is produced by examining the company's design features of creating dialogue and how they are shaping engagement through their channels with customers. This is achieved by asking:

- *How is Volkswagen constructing themes within their stakeholder communication?*
- *What is their contribution?*
- *How do they show commitment to their stakeholder networks?*

Based on the four identified tools that we have chosen to include in this study, Volkswagen is shaping opportunities for dialogue by providing extensive informative content through three of the identified communicative tools. These are the Swedish Website, SHIFT and CSR-report. They have orchestrated the communication in a perceivably transparent way, where they talk openly about the emission scandal and are conveying stakeholder messages with details and other relevant information that stakeholders could be interested in.

CSR-Report: Volkswagen communicates a range of other information topics in their sustainability report related to the identified *purpose*. They are also showcasing CSR initiatives in an interactive world map, that one can click around on and get an overview of CSR-initiatives in different countries. Indicating that the company is a global actor and have initiatives all over the world. Volkswagens communication and stakeholder messages are prioritized by the company's two main stakeholder groups Customers and Employers, which are at the core of the Volkswagens stakeholder universe.

SHIFT: Volkswagens online Sustainability Magazine SHIFT is orchestrated to be used as a tool of critical-self examination and dialogue stated the company. According to Volkswagen, their magazine SHIFT is orchestrated to construct the decision-making process by involving stakeholders and encourage a transparent dialogue.

Instagram: The Volkswagen Instagram functions as a more interactive communicative tool for stakeholders, as it has other elements of interactivity in comparison to the other communicative tools. These features are comment sections and sharing functions where the company have the ability to reply to stakeholder inquiries.

The Swedish Website: The Swedish website is more customer orchestrated from a marketing stance. It's orchestrated to communicative news about different car-models, combined with elements of environmental concerns and elements of responsibility in the messaging.

Rationality

The systemic-rationality of Volkswagens communicative activity is examined by asking the following set of questions:

- *How do Volkswagen justify dialogue within their stakeholder network?*
- *Are the stakeholders involved in dialogue?*
- *How effective and legitimated is their communicative activities?*

First we need to clarify how dialogue is justified from the communication design perspective - dialogue is primarily considered as justified if it's effective in finding ways to create social value with its stakeholder network, primarily in regards through the orchestration (Aakhus and Bzdak 2010). The dialogue is effective in allowing Volkswagens customers to discover the company's efforts and attitudes toward social-environmental and economic initiatives that are being addressed though the identified tools. Legitimacy is created by the company's acknowledgment of the emission scandal and communicating what needs to be done. The rationality differs, depending on the tools. The CSR report and Magazine Sift have a more dialogic approach within the stakeholder network, while Instagram and the website is more focused on the general public. Volkswagen arguably aims to create trust and reduce scepticism though their design features. The information-rich content, sustainability magazine and their eloquent sustainability report justifies dialogue though information, within their stakeholder network. There are also elements of co-creation element in the stakeholder magazine, but in a very marginal proportion. The dialogue is mostly one sided, controlled entirely by the company. The social media tool Instagram have different sets of design features, that allows stakeholders to interact in another way from other tools. Dialogue is justified though the ability for customers to comment, and the possibility that the company's Instagram replies back. Instagram does not have the same legitimacy as the other tools, based

on how legitimacy is articulated within this framework - as it is orchestrated for everyone instead of focusing on the stakeholder network.

6.2 Results from the interviews

The following section showcases the empirical findings from five interviews with Volkswagen stakeholders. The data has been segmented into different themes, which illustrates and captures the essence of our empirical findings in correlation to the second research question.

6.2.1 The respondents pre-existing knowledge of the emission scandal

Each interview session began by asking the respondent how much she or he knew about the emissions scandal prior to participating in the interview. The results state that the majority of the respondents had a superficial knowledge of the situation previously to the interviews. Respondent 1 states the following (R1): *“I actually didn’t know that much about the emissions scandal going into this interview. I think the first time I heard about it was back in 2015. I read the news every morning before work and remembering seeing this article saying something like “we’ve totally screwed up.” And at that point, I didn’t really have time to read more on the issue but I remember feeling just horrible.”* A similar statement were made by respondent 4 who described herself as feeling daunted and taken back when the news first broke about the scandal. R4 states the following in her interview: *“I felt shocked that a global company like Volkswagen could do something like that to its customers and the environment.”*

Respondent 5 describes herself as up to date on the issue and says that she is well aware of what happened. *“I have followed this incident in the media very closely and find it interesting.”* Respondent 2 says he had a decent knowledge of the scandal going in to the interview after watching a Netflix documentary about it. He argues that the situation has become somewhat of a buzz and states the following: *“Well I read about in the news a couple of years back, and now reliving it after it become so commercialised by Netflix.”* The respondent was asked to clarify what he meant with ‘commercialised’ and said the following: *“Well you know. It became a hype, everyone knows about it now and want to talk about it. Also pretend that they knew about it before.”*

Respondent 3 who also watched the Netflix documentary said the following in his interview: *“I read about it briefly in late 2015 – early 2016. Then it resurfaced in a Netflix*

documentary called dark money or something.” When the respondent is asked express how he felt hearing about the emission scandal he says: *“I didn’t really think too much about it when I first heard it. Then I saw the Netflix series and got upset. Probably because of the way they visualised it.”*

6.2.2 Constructing dialogue based on informative communication

A recurring theme in the interviews was how Volkswagen constructed dialogue through providing very informative content in their communicative messages on their website(s). Respondent 5 said the following in her interview: *‘it was very information rich if I can say that and I think it is a good thing.’* While generating the initial codes from the interviews almost everyone one of the respondents agreed upon the fact that Volkswagen was very informative in their communication on their Swedish website. According to the respondents, the motives behind Volkswagens communication was however not so consistent in terms of what the respondents provided, ranging from disbelieving the overall motives of the communication, to thinking it was a manoeuvre to distract the public by providing too much information. Respondent 3 stated the following in his interview regarding the issue: *“I think companies always have an agenda with what they are doing, Volkswagen are just trying to cover up for their mistakes by this talk of transparency and engagement.”*

When asked about if the communication was satisfactory the majority of the respondents said yes, and this was based on the informative nature of Volkswagens website. Hence, meaning that the respondents felt like the information provided on website was adequate to their information needs. There were however two respondents who expected more from the communication. Respondent 5 stated the following in her interview: *“Because of my personal believes I would like to see a whole environmental section on their website, but maybe that’s too much to ask.”* Overall, there seems to be a correlation in terms of the scandal and the expectations of the stakeholders. The expectations of the stakeholders are aligned with the information provided on the channels in most of the cases. When asking the respondents: *Do you feel like it is easy to engage with Volkswagen through their official website? Is it satisfactory?* Respondent 1 answered: *Well it depends on what you mean with engagement – if it’s about accessing information I would say it’s very easy. I mean there is tons of information on their page! But if you mean engagement in the sense that I would feel encouraged to actively seek out information from their page I would say no.* This further

indicates the theme of constructing dialogue through informative communication. When the respondents were asked about if they had ever heard of the company's stakeholder magazine SHIFT everyone but one respondent answered no. Respondent 4, who had heard about the magazine said the following in her interview: *I've heard about SHIFT before, I think I got a newsletter from Volkswagen about it.* Demonstrating that she had heard about it previously, but didn't actively seek out the information herself. When the respondents were asked if they knew about the incident prior to coming to the interview sessions everyone said yes, but this notion of knowing was mostly based on the fact that they had heard about it through external media. R2 states: *Well I read about in the news a couple of years back, and now reliving it after it became a hit by Netflix.*

6.2.3 What design features appealed the respondents in regards to stakeholder engagement

When asked about what features of the communication design the respondents perceived as most effective in creating engagement a majority said the way Volkswagen composed their information. The Volkswagens sustainability report was the most prevailing tool in terms of effectiveness while extracting data from the interviews. Four out of five respondents choose the orchestration as something that they perceived as effective in regards to creating engagement R2: *I like the different sections where they have, different categories about different things. It made me feel very engaged reading the content and that it was accessible.* Another design feature that the respondents were satisfied with was the interactive map on Volkswagens CSR-projects. The interactive map, where the user clicks on different countries on an earth globe to see what the company is doing in that specific country, felt engaging according to the stakeholder respondents. They argued that the information was not only accessible, but also in an interactive way that creates engagement. One respondent states: R3: *I think the CSR map was good because of its ability to tell me what Volkswagen does in a specific country I'm interested in knowing. It was fast and informative.* Respondent 1 and 5 brought up the notion that the sustainability report works for both for external and internal stakeholders which brought up the question regarding, to whom the content is directed towards. Volkswagen has a variety of articles and content published in the online version of the sustainability report that is directed towards internal and as well as external stakeholders. This is a design feature that the respondents perceived as very effective, as it allowed them to access as much, or as little information as they needed to feel engaged. Another design feature

that engorges engagement according to the data extracted from the interviews is the ability to comment. The respondents thought that this was a key design feature in regards to have an ability to communicate and engage with a company. This feature is only available on the Instagram-instrument in our study, as there is no comment section for neither the sustainability report, the magazine or the Swedish website. Respondent 2 stated the following in his interview: *I would love to have the ability to comment sometimes when I am on a company's website, but I get it why they encourage emails instead. The Internet can sometimes be a bit out of order and I suppose that's what we have social media for.* In terms of design, stakeholders only have the ability to comment immediately on the company's Instagram, and are instead incited to email for further questions. Another key feature in building business value and meeting stakeholder engagement was the nature of the instrument SHIFT. Having a sustainability magazine that involves other external stakeholders to write opinionated articles was something that resonated with the respondents. Our data indicates that the attitude towards the instrument was positive, specifically for its ability to reduce scepticism *R4: The magazine is probably my favourite thing from Volkswagen. It was so well made, and the articles were really interesting. I imagine it being a hit with another car owners as well.*

6.2.4 Opportunities for dialogue with Volkswagen

Many of the questions that were discussed during the interviews centred around how Volkswagens communication design was being perceived by the respondents in terms of creating dialogue and engagement. The respondents were asked to reflect upon whether they felt engaged in a dialogue with Volkswagen through the four identified communication tools.

The data shows contrasting results in regards to which instrument that were being discussed at the moment. Three out of five respondents liked the Instagram account in terms of creating engagement, feeling like it was the easiest way to directly engage in dialogue with Volkswagen. Respondent 2 said the following in his interview: *“Even though I've never commented on their Instagram I think that's the easiest way to engage. But I would personally never write anything because I don't think they care...so why waste my time.”*

Respondent 4 gave a similar statement arguing that *“no one ever sees these things”* Additionally, when the respondents were asked if they had ever interacted with the Swedish or international Instagram account of Volkswagen everyone said no indicating a possible

contradiction in terms of actively engaging and choosing not to. Respondent 5 said the following in her interview regarding the matter: *“I honestly don’t feel like they care if I comment or not, a lot of these actions taken by Volkswagen seems like a front to cover up for the scandal. It’s not about engaging us in a real or honest way.”*

6.2.5 Questioning the motives of Volkswagens communicative design

The constant questioning of Volkswagens ‘true motives’ for engaging with the stakeholders was also a theme that became apparent while extracting the initial codes from the data. When the respondents were asked to discuss Volkswagen in terms of authenticity there were miscellaneous and strong reactions. Unsurprisingly, there was a great deal of frustration and criticism directed towards Volkswagen and their actions during the emission scandal. Respondent 1 said the following: *“I mean, of course it’s a disgrace that a big company like Volkswagen could have it in them to cheat their customers in this way, especially in times like these! It’s just unbelievable.”* Similar statements were made by the other respondents as well who expressed anger regarding the whole situation. *“I felt anger. I felt cheated. It’s not like I’ve had some huge trust towards Volkswagen but to see a company actually cheat and blankly lie just upsets me so much. – Respondent 4.*

“I’m obviously upset that it happened and the impact it had on the environment, but I also believe that it was a good thing that it got so much media coverage. I think we sometimes just believe the companies do the best for the environment and the people and then something like this happens. People were like shocked when this news broke out a couple of years ago, but its not that uncommon for organizations to earn money on societies and the environments expense” – Respondent 5.

“I mean the scandal makes me doubt them. They did what they did... and that doesn’t show authenticity to me – Respondent 2”

The respondents argued that the gross misconduct of Volkswagen had affected their trust towards the company and this became apparent while discussing the underlying motives for Volkswagens communication design. All of the respondents expressed a sense of scepticism towards the true reasons for engaging with them. Respondent 4 said the following in her interview *“ I just think the timing is a bit off for Volkswagen, I’ve never heard of any CSR-initiatives before the scandal... that makes me question their motives”*

Respondent 1 said the following on the matter: *“Of course I think it’s a good thing that they are trying to take responsibility for their actions with their magazine and sustainability report but somehow it doesn’t feel genuine... it feels like an act to cover up for their mistakes. They talk so much about engagement but I’ve never heard of any of these instruments before coming here today.”*

Respondent 5 who had a proclaimed interest about the emission scandal gave an interesting thought about Volkswagens communication arguing that it was highly persuasive: *“Volkswagen is obviously trying to make us believe that there is a focus on dialogue but I honestly haven’t seen anything that validates this...it just feel like empty words, they are still in complete control of the message”*

7. Analysis

This chapter analyses how Volkswagens communication design is constructed based on the frame of reference in chapter 3. Furthermore, it analyses how the respondents are perceiving Volkswagens communicative tools in terms of creating opportunities for engagement and discusses what challenges the organisation meets based on the theoretical foundation.

7.1 Communication Design Analysis

As the creator of the communication design framework Aakhus and Bzdak states, exigency is often *communicative*, and our case is no exception to this regularity. There are however complex elements in regards to how Volkswagen uses its communicative tools and CSR messages to create a dialogue with customers, attributed external stakeholders that we will confer in this section. The two most prominent rationales in stakeholder communication from an organizational perspective postulated in the theoretical framework is *shared values* and *open collaborative governance* (Aakhus and Bzdak 2015). By examining Volkswagens stakeholder initiatives, we can conclude that Volkswagens communication design has prominent elements of the Shared Value framework. This conclusion is based on the fact that Volkswagen is seeking to account for its reputable damages, consequently seeking business value by intersecting their business opportunities and social values through its communication. The Swedish website is a tool for this where the Shared Value framework is eminent. As it provides consumers with the latest news about Volkswagen car models, as well as incorporating messages about environmental concerns and elements of responsibility.

Volkswagens communication efforts does also embody elements from the second rationale, Open Governance that is usually discursively reconstructed from practices such as CSR (Aakhus and Bzdak 2015), because of the nature of our identified tools. The Volkswagens stakeholder magazine SHIFT is a significant example of a central component of the Open Governance rationale, which embodies element of co-creation and long term engagements articulated to stakeholders (Aakhus and Bzdak 2015). By having this instrument, they are shifting their stakeholder engagement from a vertical orientation to a more horizontal inclusive alignment (Aakhus and Bzdak 2015) where consumers, in attribute as stakeholders are being addressed and accounted for. This is also seen by Volkswagens efforts to include the customers in a *self-examining dialogue* through the magazine. The CSR report also functions as a bridge under the second rationale of open governance, where they are articulating transparency to customers through the tool. There is however a complexity in articulating Volkswagens communication design through the lens of the two prominent rationales articulated by Aakhus and Bzdak (2015). Mostly because of the fact that this study incorporates multiple tools that function under different rationales. . The open Governance model initiates an assessment of *'all elements'*, in regards to how a company can bring value into a specific issue. This is communicated to Volkswagen customer, by addressing the emission scandal and doing their 'utmost' to account and prevent further environmental impact by defeat devices. Consequently, suggesting that Volkswagens communication design is addressing the emission scandal, while at the same time conveying CSR-messages that can be seen as a series of bilateral negotiations of interests and seeking to find value in participations with stakeholders, specifically customers. This suggestively places them back in Shared Value rationale, as the business value aspect is prominent. We argue that based on our case Volkswagen is mostly attributing the Shared Value rationale in its communication design, and somewhat brings element of the Open Governance rationale. We place ourselves behind this argumentation due to the fact that our empirical data suggest that the company is negotiating interests and trying to resolve an exigency while at the same time gaining business value. This argumentation can somewhat differ depending on which tool is being accounted for, but from a general perspective we conclude that Volkswagen stays in the rationale of Shared Value with elements of Open Governance.

While composing the elements found in Volkswagens communication design from our four tools, we argue that we have to incorporate the themes of corporate power Willis (2015) and how it is entrenched in the communication due to the specific circumstances of our chosen case. The Volkswagen Emission Scandal has resulted in a public

relations approach, in managing stakeholders, primary consumers and potentially shifting the dialogue to something that would benefit the company in terms of business value. As mentioned in the theoretical framework management scholars postulate that the issue of power is an *underlying theme* in contemporary studies regarding CSR and stakeholder engagement (Willis, 2015). Our findings indicate that the messages that Volkswagens is conveying to its stakeholders contains elements of obstructing engagement, such as presenting information through their tools that should be seen as ‘true’ and controlling the dialogue. By sanctioning the information given to the stakeholders on their own communicative channels, Volkswagen can control what enquiries to share and what to ‘not share’. The corporate powers over stakeholders in the Volkswagen case is clearly exhibited through the purpose and orchestration of VW communicative tools. One of the most compelling tools used by Volkswagen in orchestrating their communication is the SHIFT-magazine. The magazine can suggestively be viewed as an ‘social auditing’ protocol where the company accommodates to its stakeholder groups in terms of creating stakeholder engagement. One must however confront the possibility that the company could be using this instrument as a way to account for being subjected to the scandal, and at the same time control the dialogue as they are the publishers of the magazine. As Paul Willis (2015) states, ‘glossy’ communication initiatives can often be viewed as a strategic management tool. Specifically, in relations to sustainability communication. Because of the identified exigency in the communication design, one can undertake the position that the magazine functions as a strategic responsive tool to social issues generated by the company. The rationality in communication design aims to articulate the effectiveness and legitimacy of communicative features for engagement and dialogue. As Du et al., (2007) postulates that the motives in doing stakeholder engagement differs, particularly beyond ideological thinking. We suggest that Volkswagen is justifying an effective dialogue through the vast information they are providing to their stakeholders. We position ourselves behind the argument that Volkswagens showcases a high level of legitimacy by acknowledging the emission scandal and communicating it to their stakeholder through multiple tools and channels. There is however a complex relationship between the extensive scope of benefits the company is receiving by communicating this way to their stakeholders. One can argue that this level of accountability and information regarding the emission scandal is expected from a Public Relations stance, since this case is not a typical instance but an extreme one, as the company has been subjected to a global corporate scandal. Which requires specific ways of communicating CSR to affected stakeholders. We argue that Volkswagens stakeholder communication contains inclusive properties of the company’s

brand identity, in hopes to restore their idiosyncratic values before the emission scandal. While the motives for CSR fluctuates, literature suggests that companies can gain substantial business benefits from engaging in CSR communication. Du et al., (2007) argues that one group in particular is a very powerful one to communicate to, which is the stakeholder group customers, especially in order to create brand resilience to negative company news. This can be seen in the way Volkswagen has designed some of its tools and their content. Our data suggests that stakeholder messages are highly aimed at reducing scepticism and aiming in creating brand resilience through the tools. The headline of Volkswagens environmental section in their CSR report states ‘Think of an environmental role model. Did you think of us at Volkswagen? Probably not. But that’s exactly what we’re aiming to be in the field of the environment: a model company. We want to deliver mobility for everyone around the world and, as we do so, to minimize the impact on the environment. Here on this site you’ll find lots of examples of current projects through which we’re pursuing this goal.’ As seen in this example, Volkswagen is obliging to the societal need of minimize environmental impact. Their message contains of a mixture of attributes, both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, which literature such as Ellen et al., (2006) and Du et al., (2007) argues are well received by stakeholders. They call it ‘a sophisticated attribution process’ where stakeholders are engaged in reacting positive to when a company's CSR messages when they are mixed. Volkswagen uses this regularity in most of their messages aimed at their stakeholder network. They are arguably aiming to accumulate a win-win perspective with stakeholders, where Volkswagen focuses on the company's inclination to the environmental causes and issues, instead of focusing on a specific social causes or environmental issue.

Aakhus and Bzdak (2015) made significant arguments that the transference to value creating networks might be a subtitle, but a profound one that changes how organizations view shared problem and prospects at the centre of networks. This can be seen as a theme in the Volkswagens communication design. Since our chosen case for this study focuses on emission and environmental impact, it is being perceived as a multi-stake problem with a value-network approach that places the problem in the centre of the communication. This has significant implications on how Volkswagen is communicating to its stakeholders. By addressing different environmental problems as something of great importance, and something that they are working to prevent allows the company to account for environmental problems in a subtle way, that also gives the company opportunity to withdraw and deflect involvement from a critical stance. It also opens up the communication for others actor, such as experts and academics, which can be seen co-creating articles for stakeholders in their

magazine SHIFT. The communication design is therefore highly affected by this approach and results in a successful way of incorporating other actors in the network, while the company discursively controls what to communicate and what to leave out to stakeholders. We must take into account the paradoxical nature of the multi-stake approach that has been a prevalent theme in the data of our case. By being able to incorporate the multi-stakeholder approach in the way Volkswagen communicates through its tools, they can place blame on other factors, or other actors in the stakeholder network, which creates a problem of accountability. It can also be used to diffuse one's role and involvement in different multi-stake problems. This view can be perceived as quite critical and somewhat hard to prove with rigorous academic evidence to support it. But the mere possibility of it is important to point out. There is also another side to it, Volkswagen allows co-creation, innovation and multi-stake opportunities to arise through this approach. One prime example of this is SHIFT-magazine where different sectors are being involved in the communication efforts in order to tackle the environmental difficulties that faces the world.

Examining and analysing a company's communication design from an outside perspective can provide its challenges, but we argue that it is most fundamental since it allows a more critical and nuanced examination of what successes and failures a company is having with their communication efforts and how it affects their stakeholders. As the Aakhus and Bzdak framework allows a researcher to discover the systemic-rationality of a company's communication design, it is important to examine how effective and legitimate the communicative activities are. This is partially done in the next section of the analysis, where the stakeholders accounts are being addressed and analysed based on the chosen tools of this study and the opportunities for involvement in dialogue with Volkswagen. We can however examine how Volkswagen justifies dialogue within their stakeholder networks through our data from the thematic analysis of their communication design. As previously stated, our data indicates that legitimacy is created when Volkswagen acknowledges the emission scandal and its involvement in environmental issues as a consequence of the scandal. By having four different tools we add another layer of complexity in how we analyse and present the rationality of the communication design. Our data indicates that the CSR report and SHIFT-magazine embodies characteristics that results in a more dialogic approach within the stakeholder network. This can be correlated with the main objective of the tools, or their intended function, being more stakeholder oriented and aimed at specifically informing Volkswagen stakeholders. These characteristics were identified as themes within our data; ability to reduce scepticism among stakeholders, addressing important issues for stakeholders,

providing solutions and showcasing progress in multi-stake issues, less focus on products and marketing efforts. The two other tools, Instagram and the Swedish website are more focused on providing a platform for marketing efforts in terms of the company's cars with less focus on how to solve multi-stake issues. What can be drawn as a concluding argument of this section is that Volkswagen is showcasing calculated and measurable stakeholder communication efforts, by providing stakeholders with design features that focuses on accountability and scepticism reduction, while yet upholding a strong brand portfolio with environmental issues at the core of their communicated societal concerns.

7.2 Interview analysis

7.2.1. The actual feeling of engagement

What one can yield from the empirical results is that the respondents exhibit ambiguous feelings towards how Volkswagen has constructed their communication design regarding the emission scandal and their communication efforts. This might perhaps be a consequence of pondering upon complex and entangled issues that the respondents normally wouldn't consider. Our data suggests that engagement is not merely about clicking on a company website or commenting on Instagram, it's about actual human emotions and the *feeling* of engagement as well. During the interviews, several of respondents touched upon the importance of feeling prioritized and heard as stakeholder to Volkswagen. When discussing Volkswagen Instagram account some of the respondents argued that they would never comment or interact with the organisations social media because they felt like no one from Volkswagen would ever read it. Respondent 5 said the following in her interview: *I honestly don't feel like they care if I comment or not, a lot of these actions taken by Volkswagen seems like a front to cover up for the scandal. It's not about engaging us in a real or honest way.* Respondent 2 gave a similar statement saying: *“Even though I've never commented on their Instagram I think that's the easiest way to engage. But I would personally never write anything because I don't think they care...so why waste my time.”*

This suggests a possible contradiction in regards to theorists Foley (2001) and (Foster and Jonker, 2005) which postulates that organisations must engage with stakeholders due to the power they have to influence the achievement of outcomes within the focal organisation. One the one hand, theorists such as Foley (2001), Foster and Jonker (2005), Viglia, Pera and

Bigné, (2017) are indeed correct because external stakeholders have the possibilities to interact and engage in new and more direct ways through for example social media, but on the other hand these theories fail to account for the human cognitive aspect which is about feeling like ones voice actually matters. Many theorists within the fields of Communication and Social Media research have often described social media as the silver lining of engagement, enabling stakeholders to actively participate in an online dialogue and influence the organisation. Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; Hennig-Thurau, Hofacker, and Bloching, 2013 argue that the booming of social media facilities dynamic, often-real time interaction, which has caused a lack of control for the organisations as stakeholders are becoming increasingly empowered and putting more pressure on the organisations in terms of corporate social responsibility (Viglia, Pera and Bigné, 2017). But the empirical data suggests that the answer might not be that simple when it comes to actual engagement, because if the respondents don't feel like their voices are being taken into consideration they might not interact with the company at all, which puts the entire notion of engagement at stake. Of course, one should keep in mind that these findings are based on a fairly modest number of respondents but it still shows an interesting contradiction about the perceived bargaining power of stakeholders in regards to the organisation.

7.2.2. Questioning Volkswagens agenda

The empirical findings can also be analysed through Ji et al., (2017) study that investigates the relationship between stakeholders' engagement on social media and corporate reputation. Ji et al., (2017) postulates that corporations are increasingly investing in social media, hoping to improve their corporate reputation through engaging with various stakeholders online. This notion seemed to be validated by several respondents who stated that the reason behind Volkswagens communicative efforts was to 'cover up' for their wrongdoings and rebuild the brand. Many of the respondents expressed a sense of scepticism towards Volkswagens newfound commitment to corporate social responsibility questioning the timing and legitimacy of their communication in terms of creating an honest dialogue with the stakeholders. Respondent 4 said the following in her interview: *"I just think the timing is a bit off for Volkswagen, I've never heard of any CSR-initiatives before the scandal... that makes me question their motives."*

Theorists Ji et al., (2017) draws a distinction between two forms of engagement – shallow engagement and profound engagement. Based on the conceptualization of Ji et al.,

(2017) the empirical data demonstrates that the respondents only were involved in shallow engagement, if they were interacting at all with Volkswagens communicative tools. Ji et al., (2017) postulates that information produced by such behaviour only requires superficial information processing by the receivers, which correlates to the empirical findings of our study. This type of information processing may affect people's attitude temporarily but in the long term it exerts no significant effect on the public's evaluations of a company's reputation. However, one cannot draw that kind of conclusion for this particular study.

One possible factor why the respondents were only involved in shallow engagement might due to the fact that the emission scandal took place back in 2015. Some of the respondents stated that they had a superficial knowledge of the scandal before coming to the interviews, and said that they had heard about the situation on the news a couple years ago. Perhaps, if the scandal would have taken place in more recent times, the respondents might have been involved in a more profound engagement and expressed strong opinions about Volkswagens communicative tools. Although one cannot draw these conclusions is a direct way from our empirical data, there is presumably some form of correlation between the levels of engagement and the timeframe of a crisis.

Foster and Jonker (2005) argue that different organizations interpret the meaning of 'engagement' in different ways but the common goal is often to persuade the audience about something perceived to be of value for the focal organization. This seems to be the case for Volkswagen who has invested a great deal of effort into their communicative channels in order to convey the messages of 'change' and 'environmental commitment' to the public. Based on the conceptualization of Grunig and Grunig (1992) it is apparent that Volkswagen exhibits a form of communication called asymmetrical dialogue, which is validated by the respondents. According to the theorists, the aim of the communication is to persuade stakeholders, even though there is an emphasis on two-way dialogue. The main objective for the organisation is to make sure that the receiver understands the message that is being transmitted, covert in the form of shallow feedback and engagement (Grunig and Grunig, 1992). This notion is confirmed through the empirical data where the majority of the respondents expressed scepticism towards Volkswagens true motives for engaging with them, arguing that it was a way to make up for the organisations past mistakes. Respondent 1 said the following on the matter: *"Of course I think it's a good thing that they are trying to take responsibility for their actions with their magazine and sustainability report but somehow it doesn't feel genuine... it feels like an act to cover up for their mistakes."*

Based on the same conceptualisation, one can argue that Volkswagen actually intended to engage in a superior form of communication called ‘symmetrical dialogue’ (Andriof, 2001) where the dialogic act is characterized by a high involvement from both parties and where the sides come to understand the situation from each others perspective (Cheney and Dionisopoulos, 1989). Numerous examples point towards this conclusion and in the SHIFT-magazine for example, Volkswagen writes that the objective of the magazine is to take accountability for past mistakes by dealing with conflicting issues openly and by inviting their stakeholders to engage in a transparent dialogue. However, this persuasion doesn’t seem to resonate with the respondents who still are apprehensive about the true motives of the focal organisation. The data suggests that the respondents did feel like Volkswagens communicative tools were satisfying in terms of providing information richness, but what seemed to be lacking was a deeper sense of genuine engagement both from a physical design perspective and from an emotional involving perspective. Theorist Smircich and Stubbart (1985), Foster and Jonker, (2005) all touch upon the immensely critical fact that organisations often fail to acknowledge that every act of communication involves that people develop their own understanding of the issue, which is extremely apparent even in the Volkswagen case. The stakeholders take an active role in developing meaning and no message is passively received or understood they way Volkswagen intended. The study showcases that the ambition of Volkswagen is to create a sense of engagement and dialogue amongst their stakeholders by continuously emphasizing these commitments through their communicative tools. However, the organization is in a complex situation due to its passed negligence, which has affected the stakeholder’s interpretation of the situation. Furthermore, there is no doubt that communication is the essential building block for constituting effective stakeholder relationships and creating genuine engagement (Crane and Livesey, 2003). Yet, the Volkswagen case illustrates the immense difficulties the organisation meets while trying to take accountability and ownership of past mistakes while simultaneously being tarnished by public perception. Trying to change stakeholder perceptions by including a narrative of ‘dialogue’ and ‘engagement’ is not as easy as one might think, due to the fact that the stakeholders take an active role in interpreting Volkswagens communication.

7.2.3. Conflicting motives

It is possible to conclude that Volkswagen faces many challenges in their current communication because it entails both self-interest and a proclaimed environmental interest. Given Volkswagens position as one of the world's leading automakers and their involvement in the emission scandal one can call the legitimacy of this communication into question due to contradictory motives. The data confirms this notion, because many of the respondents interpreted the motives behind the organisations environmental commitments in another way than the organisation originally intended. The difficulties Volkswagen meet in conveying their CSR-messages in a genuine way and inviting their stakeholders to engage in dialogue can be analysed in light of Coombs and Holladays (2011) notion, that an organisation might get backlash if the stakeholders regard their CSR-initiatives as overly self-promotional. Given the history of Volkswagen, what seems to be lacking according to the empirical data is a genuine commitment to the matter. According to the respondents Volkswagen provides a lot of information about the organisation and their CSR-initiatives but still dictate the overall discourse of interaction. Respondent 5 said the following on the matter: *“Volkswagen is obviously trying to make us believe that there is a focus on dialogue but I honestly haven’t seen anything that validates this...it just feel like empty words, they are still in complete control of the message”*

These findings can be analysed through Morsing and Schultzs (2006) argument that the most common and widespread type of CSR-communication is the *stakeholder information strategy*. Volkswagens communication possesses all of the ‘typical’ characteristics of such a strategy by providing vast amounts of information aiming to promote what the company has done in terms of ‘giving back to society’ especially in areas where they have caused previous damage. The organization also exhibits tendencies of the *stakeholder responsiveness strategy* (Wood, 1991). This form of strategy regards communication of CSR-messages as both proactive and reactive to current pressures and potential threats. This seems to be the case for Volkswagen who has been very timely with their commitment to corporate social responsibility and transparency. As previously stated, the empirical data demonstrates that the respondents question why Volkswagen hasn’t been proclaiming the same environmental commitment previously to the emission scandal. Respondent 4 questioned the timing of Volkswagen, arguing that she had never heard of any CSR-initiatives previously of the scandal. Thus, employing this type of reactive communication as a means to account for previous misconduct aligns with Woods (1991) definition of the stakeholder responsiveness strategy.

7.2.4. Opportunities for engagement

In this day and age, the notion of *CSR stakeholder engagement* is drawing increasing attention from CSR and communication practitioners (Devin and Lane, 2014; Girard and Sobczak, 2012; O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2014). Many theorists within the field profess to a paradigmatic shift regarding stakeholder engagement, where the emphasis has turned from a strictly managerial top-down perspective to engaging stakeholders in the dialogic act and taking a more transparent and collaborative direction (O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2014; Wen and Song, 2017). However, our study showcases the many obstacles Volkswagen meet in trying to subscribe to this contemporary notion of CSR stakeholder engagement. When the respondents are asked about whether they feel like Volkswagens communicative tools are enabling engagement the answers are ambiguous and contradicting, possible due to the fact that the emission scandal is something that has stirred up the emotions of many people worldwide. One general conclusion that can be drawn in terms of engagement is that the respondents feel like Volkswagen are dictating the discourse for engagement. In the discussion of engagement and the measures an organisation can take in order to create dialogue and engagement our study indicates an interesting contradiction from the stakeholders' perspective. Naturally, many of them exhibited very strong emotions about the emission scandal but simultaneously show passivity when it comes to actively engaging with the organization themselves. But when it comes to stakeholder engagement who is to blame for the insufficiency that Volkswagens communicative tools has showcased in terms of creating dialogue and engagement? Volkswagen has stated that these tools are used as a means engage with their stakeholders and foster transparency, yet the legitimacy of this communication is continuously questioned by the stakeholders who at the same time does very little to actively take part in the dialogue themselves. One could of course argue that the responsibility to uphold a dialogue with their stakeholders falls on the shoulders of Volkswagen, but in terms of choosing to actively engage with the organisation there seems to be an interesting contradiction from the stakeholders as well. Volkswagen shields themselves by providing as much information as possible through the communicative channels, while proclaiming a narrative of engagement and transparency, which the respondents don't seem believe.

7.2.5. Conveying CSR-messages to stakeholders

Conveying CSR messages to stakeholders can be viewed as an influential strength for creating intricate business returns according to Christensen, et al., (2011). Our empirical data indicates that this can potentially become intensified during an instance where a company has been subjected to a corporate scandal. Our study further indicates that Volkswagen has invested extensively in their CSR-communication through their sustainability report and magazine, and as a result are gaining extensive business value from the CSR engagement.

The empirical data suggests that the respondents had miscellaneous feelings and attitudes towards the company. From the perspective of Ellen et al., (2006) Volkswagen uses both intrinsic and extrinsic motives in their communication which according to our theoretical framework can be correlated to a positive reaction within the stakeholder's universe. The respondents were in agreement with this phenomenon, as they appreciated the mixture of both extrinsic and intrinsic motives. What emerged in the data was that if the company only used intrinsic messages, their scepticism tends to increase, but when a mixture was presented it felt more trustworthy as the respondents expected there to be some kind of business value motive in the communication. This can be related to the communication design, and how Volkswagen is designing its orchestration when conveying messages to its customers. We would like to further that statement by suggesting that this mix can create a confusion, where stakeholders are showered with CSR-initiatives and can sometimes be involuntarily made to think of a win-win perspective where the company's identity is seen with virtue. Our data indicates that there is also another side to the argument as well. As two respondents felt that when Volkswagen was conveying a lot of messages with dominantly intrinsic motives, their guard went up and they expressed notions of scepticism. The argumentation for this is that the company is using their tools to incline themselves to important initiatives, while restoring business value through them. This can be seen through a number of factors, but mostly through the orchestration of their Sustainability report. The company has a focus on constructing engagement through addressing their stakeholders in a very informative way, and at the same time emphasising that they are in a transformation phase. While doing so, they are accounting for the past and is 'transforming', while at the same time highlighting their commitment to transparency, accountability and comparability through the instrument. As Elving, W.J.L. 2015 (2015) postulates that the public are expecting organisations to demonstrate CSR and that this derives from a greater expectations of stakeholders in regards to how they communicate. The growth of public scepticism towards CSR messages has also grown, which in our study is a recurring theme. Since we are focusing on a 'corporate

scandal' also called as an 'extreme instance', scepticism towards the company and its communication messages is inevitable due to surroundings of our research case.

8. Conclusion

As the first research question aims to examine how Volkswagen is constructing their communicative tools, in response to a specific exigency we argue that it would be appropriate to discuss the success and failures of the design features in Volkswagens communication. We conclude that Volkswagens communication messages are conveyed in a calculated and effective way, with a persuasive nature to create a 'corporate truth' through their tools. The extensive content and richness in information allows them to create trust, and answer most of the inquiries that the customers, attributed as stakeholders could possibly have in terms of information needs. There is a complexity in terms of diminishing scepticism, since stakeholders are being more demanding in today's society, particularly after a corporate scandal such as the one Volkswagen has been subjected to. Stakeholders are becoming more 'aware' that companies are dictating the dialogic discourse, which affects the communication design. The motives in the messages that are being conveyed by the Volkswagen tools consist of both intrinsic and extrinsic messages, that are being perceived in different ways. When the design included a mixture of intrinsic and extrinsic motives the respondents felt the most positive about the messages. There was however a display of confusion and the respondents were not always in agreement about what motives combination constructed the best possible engagement. This concludes that the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic messages conveyed through CSR-tools are complex to measure in terms of success and failure. The mixture of motives was in accordance to stakeholders feeling positive as previous studies states, but the exact formula was not. This was showcased by our respondents as they had their own preferences in how they wanted to feel engaged and what made them feel it the most. One aspect of this that we can conclude is that consumers felt that the opportunities to engage with the company was depending on how they were processing their messages and the nature of them. Hence, making the design perspective highly relevant. The majority of the information provided by Volkswagen was intrinsic in the two tools that resonated best with the respondents, and therefore a higher design of intrinsic motives in the design can heighten opportunities for engagement. This also reduced the notion of Volkswagen exercising power over the stakeholders, as they're messages was heavily designed with motives of 'doing good for the customer'. Aakhus argues that communication design can be articulated as a practice that attends to 'practical reasoning', where acknowledging a significant problem to be

resolved is the main focus, and then altering structures of communicative activities to solve the problem. One must bare in mind that these design features are not merely a neutral occurrence for stakeholders, they are rather calculated features that aims to solve a specific organizational and/or societal problem. One general conclusion that can be drawn from RQ2 is that the stakeholders experience the opportunities for engagement as fairly low, regardless of which communication tool that was being accounted for. The respondents were satisfied with the communicative tools in terms of providing information richness, but feel like Volkswagen dictated the overall discourse of engagement. There was however a complexity in defining engagement that we have discussed throughout this study. This complexity resulted in a confusion that some of the respondents felt engaged merely by taking part of a one-sided dialogue though information, and while others had the personal preference of them being able to comment and interact with the company as a two-sided interaction. As the definition of engagement and opportunities for dialogue can sometimes differ due to personal beliefs and values, the construction of how a company orchestrates dialogue does not always align with a stakeholders definition, which affects how a company's design efforts will be perceived. Specifically focusing on the one-sided or two-sided communication ways, as those two rationales seemed to be the main customer definition of how respondents perceived dialogue in our case study, which ultimately affected their perception of opportunities for dialogue. Furthermore, this study illustrates the challenges Volkswagen encounter while trying to take accountability and ownership of past mistakes and simultaneously being tarnished by public perception, and yet maximize business value. Trying to change stakeholder perceptions by including a narrative of 'dialogue' and 'engagement' is challenging for Volkswagen, due to the fact that the stakeholders take an active role in interpreting the messages that are being conveyed to them and depending on how urgent the individual need for dialogue is, contracts a reaction to the tools.

As the theory suggest, the new consciousness in designing communication among stakeholders aims at solving specific problems, and our study indicates that Volkswagen is a competent actor in developing its design. The conclusion is based on the fact that the company has implemented channels and messages that are in accordance with the 'new paradigm of collaboration' that Aakhus and Bzdak presents, which is characterized by the involvement of multi-stakeholder governance, transparency and new engagement determinations. The most apparent tool to do this is the Magazine SHIFT, as it can be perceived as a tool that embodies some aspects of the model Open System postulated by Calton (2013), where the company is viewed as an equal stakeholder. Although our

respondents did not always perceive the company in this view, we would like to suggest that Volkswagen is showcasing how future engagement will, and could be designed, in terms of how businesses can bring value to a specific issue, instead of focusing on how they can find value in participation. Another successful feature of Volkswagens communication design that one can conclude from this study is that it involves transparency and new engagement determination. Our study concludes that Volkswagen is showcasing constructs in their design that aims to reduce scepticism among stakeholders, addressing important issues for stakeholders, providing solutions and showcasing progress in multi-stake issues. They are showcasing a subtle direction to a rationale that will most likely asses all elements, in terms of how a company can bring value to a specific issue, in this case the environmental issues. This might be correlated to them being exposed to a corporate scandal regarding the environment, as it might exaggerate communicative efforts to regain trust, create accountability and take responsibility for one's involvement. Although the company has a long way to go in terms of developing a satisfactory model that aligns with both the organizations need and its stakeholders, communication literature in this field is providing compelling arguments and models to how companies can and should design future engagement and structures for dialogue rather than only focusing on persuasion.

8.1 Final considerations

Although we have taken multiple measures to ensure the validity and reliability throughout the entire course of this thesis, one must still keep in mind that the respondent's statements ultimately are subjective and based on their own personal thoughts in regards to the matter. Furthermore, it is eminent to highlight the fact that our respondents indeed can be categorized as Volkswagen stakeholders due to the fact that they are customers and play an important role in the organisations financial wellbeing - but one must keep in mind that the Swedish context might influence their overall interest and understanding of Volkswagen and the emission scandal. As previously stated, the emission scandal was first detected by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in California. Perhaps, if there had been an opportunity to interview American stakeholders - who were contextually more close to the emission scandal - we might have gotten other results.

Naturally, our respondents had varying levels of understanding of the emission scandal where some respondents had a superficial knowledge and others described themselves as very up to date on the issue. Nonetheless, each and every one of the respondents represents Swedish Volkswagen customers in attribute of being external stakeholders to the organisation.

One should keep in mind that Volkswagen is a company with customers all over the world and the communicative tools examined in this thesis are directed towards all of their customers (in attribute of being external stakeholders) without making any geographical distinction. Thus, our findings are relevant because they illustrate how Swedish stakeholders perceive the opportunities for engagement based on the selected tools and how they are receiving messages designed and conveyed by Volkswagen. By incorporating four different tools in a study of this size, we have been left with somewhat fragmented data in regards to the perception of Volkswagens communication design according to stakeholder. Therefore, we have mostly used the data to draw conclusions in how different messages are perceived instead of focusing on the whole design structure of the company's stakeholder communication efforts, where more depth would be needed and preferably knowledge in organizational communication from research subjects.

Communication Design and how it is developed in today's literature, is best used from an organizational perspective, where the researchers will have extensive freedom and insight to a specific organization and its professionals. As one of the biggest challenges while conducting this study was to develop our own methodology. This was a necessity as the field is yet underdeveloped. While one of the most prominent communication design scholars Aakhus (2007) encourages scholars to create their own methodology, it came with some very challenging and complex dimensions. One aspect is that we wanted to create a methodology that would account for the stakeholders' discourse, and not only focus on how messages are constructed from an organizational perspective. We argue that in order to be able to measure the success and failure of design features, one must give the stakeholders a specific role in the methodology. We hope to have created a methodological path for future studies that are interested in having a design perspective, as well as measuring how messages are being conveyed in regards to stakeholder engagement with the group customers.

8.2 Suggestion to future research

We argue that the field of stakeholder engagement from the perspective of communication design is yet underdeveloped, and is in need of future research. We suggest that the design perspective and its ability to connect different actors is something that should be valued more in communication studies regarding stakeholders and management studies. The perspective can however be challenging at times, because of the fact that it is yet underdeveloped and lacks a common understanding among scholars. We do however suggest that more studies should involve the design perspective, in order to get down to the specific features of how

corporate messages regarding stakeholder engagement are being developed and perceived by its intended target group. We hope to have contributed to the field of communication design and created a methodology approach, where you can link together a company's messages to specific group of stakeholders. We have also aimed to decipher how a company uses its tools to communicate with its environment in a coherent way, in order to examine dialogue in a situated purpose. While our study covered the outward of four different tools, future research could potentially focus on other tools that a company uses, or one specific tool from a design perspective. It could for example be the stakeholder magazine SHIFT, or a company's social media platform in order to get an in-depth analysis about what specific features it embodies and if it works how its meant to from an organizational perspective. We also suggest that future studies could combine both qualitative and quantitative methods, a survey study in how stakeholders are perceiving a specific tool would produce statistical empirical results that could further support our claim or create more clarity in terms of how stakeholder engagement should be developed and designed to reach maximum impact.

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Appendix 1

Interview guide

General questions:

Please state your name

How old are you?

What's your educational background?

What's your occupation?

What type of Volkswagen car do you own?

Theme 1: Constructing Dialogue

Going into this interview, how much did you know about the emission scandal?

How did you feel about the emission scandal?

What do you think of Volkswagen as a brand?

Do you believe in the Volkswagen brand - what makes them authentic or not?

Do you trust the information that is being submitted by the company?

Has the emissions scandal affected your trust towards the company?

Do you feel like Volkswagen makes an effort to involve its customers in different CSR-initiatives?

Do you feel like there is a dialogue with you and the organisation? Do you feel like Volkswagen is listening to their customers?

What is your opinion about the tools in terms of creating engagement? Do they make you feel engaged and included or not? Please elaborate why

Theme 2: CSR-communication

What do you like best with Volkswagens CSR-Communication?

Which tool did you prefer and why?

What potential problems do you see with Volkswagens communication?

How effective do you consider their communication to be? (Why?)

How legitimate do you consider their communication to be? (Why?)

Do you feel that the brand is being authentic with their CSR-initiatives?

Is there anything lacking in the CSR-initiatives? If yes, please specify

Is there anything lacking in the specific tools? If, yes please specify

Theme 3: Stakeholder engagement

Have you ever visited the Volkswagen website with the aim of understanding the crisis previous of today?

Have you ever visited Volkswagens Instagram accounts (either the international or Swedish one) previous of today?

Have you heard about SHIFT-magazine before of today?

Have you heard about the CSR-report before of today?

Do you feel like it is easy to engage with Volkswagen through their official website? Is it satisfactory?

Do you feel like it simple to access information about the company on its website?

Do you feel like it is simple to access information about the company through SHIFT-magazine? Is it satisfactory to your needs?

Do you feel like it is simple to access information about the company through the sustainability report? Is it satisfactory to your needs?

Do you feel like it is simple to engage in a dialogue with Volkswagen through their Instagram account?

Appendix 2

Volkswagen Stakeholder Universe

