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Is Crisis Communication Fighting an Uphill Battle with Today's Consumers?

Students' perception of crisis apology marketing as a response to racism scandals

by

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Abstract

This study investigates how Swedish students perceive apology marketing when used in response to racism scandals through a qualitative multi-case study design. An imbalance is recognised between the conventional theoretical frameworks, the emergence of social media, and the increased awareness among consumers. Subsequently, this thesis explores the applicability of conventional theoretical frameworks in the current digital society and the role of apology marketing in a broader context. By drawing parallels between the literature and our empirical findings, gathered through semi-structured interviews, discrepancies are identified advocating for the obsolescence of existing theories on crisis communication in today's context. Our study finds that the belief-driven consumers' expectations and current efforts by organisations are yet to be aligned. Organisations are expected to lead by example and take a stance on social issues, as such, engaging in apology marketing is more than restoring consumer trust and brand image. Overall, the empirical findings point to the fact that apology marketing is at an end for the aware and critical consumers in terms of its theory and the current corporate practice. This study encourages future research to explore the role of culture on the perception of apology marketing.

Keywords: crisis communication, apology marketing, belief-driven consumer, transgression, social media.

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1 Introduction

The following chapter provides the reader with the context of the study to understand why the research topic is of interest, focusing on today's consumers and apology marketing as a crisis communication strategy. Subsequently, the research gap is identified in a problem discussion, leading to the development of our research aim and objectives. Derived from this is the formulation of our exploratory research question. We highlight the relevance of our study and guide the reader through the thesis structure in the outline.

1.1 Background and Problematisation

In a globalised environment like today, with the existence of social media, consumers like Millennials and Generation Z are becoming progressively more conscious of corporate behaviour and their subsequent wrongdoings (Yoon, Olson & Duhachek, 2019). This consumer group is characterised by an open-minded understanding of diversity, race, and multiculturalism (Licsandru & Cui, 2019). Arguing for the importance of brand activism, they essentially want companies to take a stance on social issues. Furthermore, approximately one in two people are belief-driven consumers, meaning they choose to avoid certain brands depending on the individual company's stance on relevant issues (Edelman, 2018). Due to an expanding multicultural consumer base and threats of adjusted consumer purchasing behaviour, organisations face added pressure to avoid transgressions, making it imperative to incorporate such issues into their operations.

Increased awareness regarding existing inequalities, among other factors, has led to the emergence of a movement originating in the United States, Black Lives Matter (BLM). The BLM movement, made up of a network of organisations and individuals, is dedicated to fighting racial injustice evident in different forms of state and police violence (Ransby, 2018). Mundt, Ross and Burnett (2018) highlight the importance of social media and online communication for the progression of this movement, stating that BLM is "a movement inextricably tied to the digital sphere" (p. 3). The hashtag: #blacklivesmatter was created in

2013 and has been a central aspect of BLM, providing an opportunity for discussion (Yang, 2016). Through this, users have been able to express their own opinions, interpretations, and experiences of social injustice. The emergence of this movement further stresses the increased consciousness of individuals and a subsequent rise in belief-driven consumers. As a result, companies face pressure to live up to the public's expectations of being socially aware.

As evidenced by the use of social media in the BLM movement, online communication can play a substantial role in the rapid spread of information. As of 2020, there were an estimated 3.6 billion social media users globally (Statista, 2021), emphasising the public nature and extensive reach of these platforms. Particularly in the case of movements, social media has the potential to scale efforts as it creates opportunities for involvement, for example, increasing protest turnout or raising support for campaigns (Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018). Therefore, it allows users to interact with the movement either directly or in more complex forms. While social media can be advantageous, its open nature can facilitate the spread of a crisis, thereby increasing organisations' vulnerability (Ngai, Tao & Moon, 2015). Users are able to share information and opinions on corporations quickly; as such, brands are hardly able to control what is shared. Consequently, this lack of control has led to a rise in the frequency and severity of corporate crises (Gruber, Smerek, Thomas-Hunt & James, 2015).

The increase in corporate crises has led to developments in crisis communication research. Theories such as the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), attribution theory, image restoration, among others, have contributed to creating frameworks for organisations to use as crisis response strategies. Crisis can take many different forms, such as victim, accidental, or preventable (Coombs, 2007). However, to limit the scope of this thesis, our research study will focus on racism transgressions, an understudied type of crisis in the literature (Maslikhan, 2019). The two transgressions used in our research are that of Hennes och Maurtiz (H&M) and Dove.

A common response strategy for a severe crisis often recommended in crisis communication literature is the issuance of an apology (Coombs, 2007). As such, apology marketing has become more frequently used to mitigate the adverse outcomes of a scandal. In the age of social media, these apologies are often posted to social media channels such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Research into crisis communication has not kept up with the rapid,

widespread adoption of this phenomenon (Coombs, 2014). Furthermore, due to the rise of social media use, today's consumers are more aware and engaged in more significant issues (Yoon, Olson & Duhachek, 2019). This awareness has placed added pressure on organisations and consumers to take a stance concerning societal issues. Essentially, those considered belief-driven consumers want their values to match the corporations' values, where their purchase intention reflects their personal values (Edelman, 2018). Therefore, crisis communication can play another role, not only to restore the brand image and sales for the company's benefit but rather to help educate. Through this, crises are experiences from which companies and consumers can learn. However, the literature tends to take on a managerial perspective instead of seeing crises as opportunities for social progress. We, therefore, recognise an imbalance between the conventional theoretical frameworks, the emergence of social media, and the increased awareness among consumers.

1.2 Research Aim and Objectives

The identified research gap leads to the development of the research study's aim and objectives. This study investigates how apology marketing, used in response to racism scandals, is perceived by students in Sweden. This aim will be achieved through the following objectives. Firstly, we review existing literature in the field of crisis communication to be used for the analysis of the empirical findings. Secondly, we have interviewed Swedish university students to understand their thoughts and opinions on the apology messages as a response to the two selected case studies. Thirdly, according to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), we will analyse the empirical material to identify emerging themes that will then be discussed concerning the relevance of existing literature.

1.3 Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this thesis is to contribute with a more thorough understanding of the perception of apology marketing as a response to a racism transgression. By exploring the reactions of individuals to race-related scandals and the apologies that the organisations issued in response, the paper seeks to identify the extensiveness of current theoretical frameworks in

our specific context. Further, we will explore the role of apology marketing in a broader setting regarding the uncontrollability of social media and the expectations placed by belief-driven consumers. In regard to the aim, objectives, and purpose, the following exploratory research question is formulated:

How have students perceived apology marketing as a crisis response to racism scandals in Sweden?

1.4 Relevance of the Research

In an era of crisis, apology marketing is commonplace for corporations to respond to transgressions. Previously, the guidelines on crisis management for corporations were shaped around a managerial perspective focusing on damage mitigation. However, the conventional theories are developed in a context of a pre-social media environment and without consideration to customers who are belief-driven. Thus, this research project undertakes another approach, namely how crises open up for opportunities instead that can then lead to societal developments. The findings of our study will highlight the insufficiency of current crisis communication literature, encouraging other scholars to revise crisis management to consider the perspective of society as well, rather than solely the managerial one.

The findings coupled with the societal relevance of our study provide corporations with an understanding that apology marketing has a more significant potential that should be embraced. The research will point to the possibility beyond restoring the brand image and maximising brand value, discussing the opportunity to educate consumers, rivals, and society on their learnings from a scandal. Our research will illustrate the inadequacy of issuing an apology after committing a perceived severe transgression and critically examine corporations' responsibility in the progression of social issues.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

To facilitate the reader's understanding of the thesis, the structure of the paper is described. In chapter two, the three main research streams within crisis communication are presented. Previous research discussing an apology as a crisis response strategy will be outlined along with the conventional theories. Furthermore, the literature review additionally provides a contemporary perspective on crisis communication, presenting research suggesting the challenges associated with a digital global setting. Subsequently, chapter three presents the research methodology on which the thesis is based. The chapter motivates the choices of applying an abductive perspective, using a qualitative multiple-case study design with semi-structured interviews, and the employment of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to the data.

Thereafter, chapter four presents the empirical findings structured around the emerging main themes. The discussion in chapter five revolves around these central themes and explores the relevance of crisis communication theories. Parallels between the literature and our empirical findings are drawn in addition to discerned discrepancies that advocate for the obsolescence of existing theories on crisis communication. The findings are then discussed in a broader context. Our study finds that the belief-driven consumers' expectations and current efforts by organisations are yet to be aligned. Lastly, we conclude the thesis with a summary, a discussion of theoretical and practical implications of our research findings and consider the limitations of the paper opening up for future research areas.

2 Literature Review

The following chapter will present the various theories that constitute this research paper and present a selection of literature relevant to this particular area of crisis communication. The normative perspective of the conventional theories presented undertakes a managerial approach, outlining response strategies for the corporation's benefit to maximise brand value and profit. Therefore, the theoretical frameworks do not consider the consumers' or societies' point of view when suggesting response strategies to regain consumer trust after a transgression. As a result, this managerial perspective limits the extent to which we can judge our findings based on these theories. An acknowledgment regarding this is essential to express as the thesis is not intended to embrace the same perspective as the theories but rather test the extensiveness of these theories in our empirical context.

The chapter begins by examining the central theories of crisis communication, attribution theory, SCCT, and image restoration. Thereafter, literature evaluating the dominating crisis response strategy of issuing an apology for its effectiveness and framing the apology message is presented. The chapter concludes with an insight into the challenges that a digital global context imposes on crisis communication.

2.1 Crisis Communication Theory

The Swedish Emergency Management Agency (2008) refers to a crisis as an occurrence that impacts a significant part of society and many peoples' lives, triggered by natural disasters or caused by planned actions. Emerging in times of crisis is the need for crisis communication. Three factors of a crisis impact crisis communication: the crisis event itself, the response of organisations and authorities to the event, and the portrayal of the crisis (The Swedish Emergency Management Agency, 2008). Crisis communication originates from the receiver of the crisis, regardless of whether the receiver's perception of the crisis is in line with the organisation's perception. The public shapes this interpretation with notable influences from the media.

In essence, crisis communication theory consists of three research streams: attribution theory, image restoration, and SCCT, with each theory consecutively building upon the previous one. In brief, attribution theory mentions the public's perception of the causality of events, whether causes of behaviour are attributed to internal or external factors (Weiner, 1986). Image restoration outlines the strategies used to restore a brand's image (Benoit, 1995). Whereas SCCT highlights the various response strategies related to the different crisis types (Coombs, 2007).

2.1.1 Attribution Theory

The first central research stream in crisis communication is the attribution theory developed by Weiner (1986). He states that the responsibility of a crisis and who is to be held accountable is determined by the public, i.e., stakeholders, consumers, media, among others. The causal attributions made by the public influence people's perception of the organisation, and in turn, can have a severe impact on the reputation of the company (Coombs & Holladay, 2007). Weiner's attribution theory is used to facilitate comprehension of causal attribution and develop the concepts of locus and controllability (Coombs, 1995).

Whether the cause of an event to the company is internal or external is referred to as the locus of control. In contrast, controllability determines whether the cause is intentional or unintentional (Coombs, 1995). According to the SCCT, the public makes causal attributions along causal dimensions in the event of a crisis (Coombs, 1995), leading to a determination of responsibility that affects the outcome of a crisis, for example, in terms of organisation reputation, emotion, and behaviour (Coombs, 2007). According to Lee (2005), the concepts of locus and controllability are interdependent and do not impact crisis outcomes separately, even though they are conceptually distinct. The author further suggests that people who identify an internal locus of control, meaning that the crisis responsibility is internal to the organisation, view the crisis as controllable. Contrary, he suggests that crises with an external locus of control are assumed to be uncontrollable by the public.

Depending on the causal attributions, individuals attribute responsibility for the crisis differently and have varying emotional responses (Weiner, 1986). Research conducted by

Coombs and Holladay (2007) showed that anger was evoked in situations where the organisation had control over the crisis. In contrast, for uncontrollable crises, consumers responded with pity. Anger, defined as negative emotions anywhere on the spectrum between annoyance to rage (Rubin, 1986), is elicited by the degree of responsibility to internal factors attributed to the crisis cause (Coombs, 2007; Pace, Feduik & Botero 2010).

The selection of an effective crisis response strategy for the given crisis type is imperative to reduce adverse reactions from the public (Coombs, 2007). Researchers have argued that apologies are the most effective strategy to regain stakeholder trust after a company suffers a crisis (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Drew, 1997). In its essence, an apology is denoted by the company shouldering the responsibility and asking for forgiveness from stakeholders (Benoit & Drew, 1997). Pace, Feduik and Botero (2010) showed that taking on more responsibility post transgression resulted in less anger toward the organisation. Thus, this emphasises mitigation of reputational damage through the acceptance of responsibility for a crisis. Concentrating on responsibility acceptance in an apology resulted in minimised reputational damage, as opposed to apologies that did not explicitly accept the blame (Pace, Feduik & Botero, 2010). In support of this notion, recent research by Chung and Lee (2021) found that an apology that was responsibility-oriented significantly reduced the negative public responses compared to that of a sympathy-oriented apology in a controllable crisis and had an internal locus.

Building on the framework of attribution theory, Takaku, Weiner and Ohbuchi (2001) present the dissonance-attribution model. The expectations and reality should be congruent for a consumer to be satisfied; however, a brand crisis disrupts the harmony between the expectations and reality, resulting in cognitive dissonance (Yuan, Cui & Lai, 2016). The dissonance-attribution model proposes that an effective apology can achieve forgiveness by reducing dissonance as the connection between the negative trait and attribution is broken (Takaku, Weiner & Ohbuchi, 2001). Yuan, Cui and Lai (2016) state that if the transgressor, the company associated with the scandal, provides an apology attributing the responsibility to external factors, reputational damage is likely to increase as cognitive dissonance increases. They suggest that self-attribution by an organisation leads to positive changes in brand attitude; meanwhile, external attribution affects consumer intentions and responses negatively.

It is crucial to acknowledge that these findings were associated with a product-type crisis, however, the authors found no significant differences for a moral crisis.

The notion that causal explanations can increase the probability of making external attributions and thus increase cognitive dissonance has continuously been a topic of debate among researchers and is contradicted by previous research conducted by Mattila (2009). The researcher finds that external attributions subsequently decrease the negative impact on reputational damage when investigating the role of the type of violation and response strategy on consumer loyalty, brand attitude, and consumer behaviour intentions. However, in line with the findings of Yuan, Cui and Lai (2016), other researchers suggest that when the organisation attributes the fault to external causes, the consumer trust and brand image is worsened (Liddle, 2005; Tax, Brown & Chrashekaran, 1998). Tax, Brown, and Chrashekaran (1998) found that causal attributions can be interpreted as making excuses and shifting the blame. Additionally, the study suggested that consumers disapproved responses that were used to minimise the company's accountability. Similarly, Liddle (2005) found that covering up the crisis by holding employees liable for the harm would be counterproductive.

Conversely, Mattila (2009) proposes that when an apology is provided with an external causal attribution, consumer trust can effectively be restored. The author further highlights the critical role that the media plays in the success of image reparation. He found that if the media depicts the harmful event as intentional, regaining consumer trust is nearly impossible regardless of the type of crisis communication strategy applied by the organisation. The ineffectiveness of apologies when media has condemned the organisation as having intentionally harmed stakeholders can be explained through the fact that apologies are perceived as insincere following such a condemnation (Schweitzer, Heshey & Bradlow, 2006).

According to Benoit (1995), the primary requirement of an effective apology is that it should be genuine and are otherwise discarded. Although the debate regarding the effectiveness of attributing the cause of a harmful event to external factors is widespread, Mattila (2009) and Yuan, Cui and Lai (2016) agree that it is critical to provide a thorough explanation of the scandal. Furthermore, they advocate for the critical component of accompanying the explanation with a sincere apology. As evidenced, attribution theory is widely applied in the

context of crisis communication and is the basis for an extensive amount of research conducted on the subject.

2.1.2 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Another focal theory of crisis communication is the theory of SCCT built on Weiner's (1986) attribution theory. SCCT, being one of the more recent theories across this discipline, has been extensively used as a framework by scholars in many studies. As discussed by Coombs (2007), this theory is used to assess the crisis's threat on reputation, suggesting the most appropriate response strategy to minimise the damage to the organisation's reputation. He states that the main argument of the SCCT is that there is no single alternative that is suitable for all crisis responses; rather, the circumstances of the crisis have to be considered in the choice of a response strategy to mitigate reputational damage. Due to this presumption, the author suggests that the SCCT framework differentiates between crisis types and distributes a response strategy to each crisis type. Coombs (2007) defines an organisational crisis as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organisation's operations and poses both a financial and reputational threat" (p.164). In his later work, Coombs (2011) further adds a critical aspect to the definition of a crisis, stating that the effect on stakeholders' relationship with the organisation is essential to consider.

The types of crises in the situational crisis communication framework are distinguished by the amount of responsibility attributed to the organisation, along a continuum of low-to-high responsibility, and these include victim clusters, accidental clusters, and preventable clusters (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). A crisis such as a natural disaster is classified as a victim cluster, according to Coombs (2007) and the theory of SCCT, due to the little or no responsibility attributed to the organisation. The author describes that unintentional actions, such as accidents caused by technical errors, can lead to accidental crises where a moderate level of responsibility is attributed to the organisation. Lastly, he suggests that the framework identifies preventable clusters that arise from an organisation's inappropriate action that could be avoided. Racism scandals are an example of this, leading to a preventable crisis. Thus, there is a positive correlation between responsibility attributed and the reputational threat posed on the corporation (Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

As suggested by Coombs (2007), SCCT classifies the corporate response according to the degree of responsibility of the crisis assumed to be attributed to the organisation. As such, crises with high responsibility attributed to the firm should be paired with a response strategy accepting responsibility to mitigate or prevent reputational harm. He states that the crisis response strategies are categorised as such; deny, diminish and rebuild. He further adds that a company pursuing a deny strategy will aim to reduce or eliminate reputational damage to detach themselves from the crisis, deflecting any blame. In contrast, a diminishing strategy will attest to a lack of control, attempting to reduce the severity of the crisis in the public's opinion. However, he highlights the need for managerial evidence, possibly leading to failure if none is presented. Lastly, he mentions that a rebuild strategy involves amends to recover a company's reputation, for example, issuing a full apology or providing compensation to those affected.

The SCCT framework associates each crisis type with a specific response strategy. It suggests that a deny strategy should be applied to a victim cluster crisis type. A diminished strategy should be used in an accidental crisis and rebuild strategies for an intentional crisis (Coombs, 2007). The conceptual connection made between types of crisis and response strategy originates from the SCCT's use of attribution of crisis responsibility, drawn from Weiner's attribution theory (1986).

2.1.3 Image Restoration

The last central research stream in crisis communication is Benoit's (1995) image restoration theory. He developed the theory of image restoration, built on apologia theory, suggesting five general image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of event, corrective action, and mortification. The final category of mortification suggests that brand images can be restored through confession and asking for forgiveness through an apology. The nature of the corporate crisis has to be considered to comprehend image restoration theory. According to Benoit (1997), this consists of two main components. Firstly, the accused is determined to be responsible, and secondly, the action is regarded as offensive. The author stresses that unless the organisation is assumed to be responsible for a crisis, receiving a negative impression from the audience is unreasonable.

Moreover, the relevant users, such as a brand's consumers, have to disapprove of the act in order for their image to be threatened. However, the power of determining whether the act is perceived as offensive is in the hands of the consumer. He further adds that the act does not have to be provocative; if the salient audience believes that it is offensive, that is sufficient for a threat to the brand image. In essence, both conditions illustrate that consumer perception overrides reality.

A part of restoring a brand's image includes rebuilding its reputation. Reputation has been defined as "how the organisation is perceived by its publics" by Coombs and Holladay (2002, p.167) and subsequently extended by Coombs in 2007 to "an aggregate evaluation about how well an organisation is meeting stakeholder expectations based on its past behaviour" (p.164). An organisation's reputation is collectively determined by the stakeholders' general perception and evaluation of the corporation. A favorable reputation is associated with positive consequences such as augmented buying intentions (Lyon & Cameron, 2004), consumer loyalty (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2001), and positive word of mouth (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). These prominent advantages highlight the significance of building, managing, and defending a good reputation. Additionally, an organisation's prior reputation is of great value, consequently creating a 'halo' effect, thereby limiting the negative outcome of a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). Although a good reputation requires time to build, it is worthwhile to focus on it as it can act as a buffer during a crisis (Coombs, 2007).

As Coombs (2007) identified, a significant threat to the organisation's reputation is a crisis event. While there are several different types of crises, one of these includes transgressions to which a high degree of responsibility is attributed (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). As transgressions are commonly associated with a violation of stakeholder expectations or an experience of injustice, feelings of anger toward the organisation may emerge (Feduik, Botero & Coombs, 2010). The greater the anger stakeholders feel toward the organisation, the more reputational damage is likely to be suffered. As illustrated in the study, anger can be reduced by accepting responsibility and expressing regret in the crisis response strategy, an essential factor for a successful image restoration process.

Race scandals are an example of transgressions, an action that violates important stakeholder values as stakeholders interpret that the corporation has intentionally engaged in wrongdoing (Feduik, Botero & Coombs, 2010). Previous research has shown that the optimal crisis response strategy of the organisation committing the transgression is to accept responsibility (Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 1996). According to Benoit's (1995) theory of image restoration, this can be done through an apology, one that the authors classify as one of the more effective strategies to restore the brand image. On the other hand, researchers Coombs and Holladay (2008) emphasise that its value has been exaggerated. Consequently, this has perhaps led to a lack of development within other approaches to crisis management.

Xu and Li (2013) mention that although the well-established theories of image restoration, attribution theory, and SCCT dominate in the field of crisis communication, they are restricted in their application due to their instrumental characteristics. According to the authors, the theories merely serve as textbook principles for organisations to follow for crisis communication rather than emphasising relational factors, such as ethics, as a critical aspect of a crisis response strategy. To compensate for the instrumentality of the established theories, Diers-Lawson and Pang (2016) suggest applying a stakeholder relationship management approach, where the focus is placed on developing the relationship with the organisation's stakeholders. They suggest this approach rather than an instrumental approach as it will actively incorporate the ethical feature of an apology into application and theory.

More recent research suggests the effectiveness of integrating authentic corporate social responsibility in response to a crisis and is in line with the pressures enforced on organisations by the public to ethically captivate multiple groups of stakeholders (Kim, 2013; Chung & Jiang, 2017). Nevertheless, Xu and Li (2013) recognise the difficulty in offering an ethical and believable apology for transgressors. The authors suggest that regardless of whether an apology has ethical content, factors such as appropriate timing, context, and the apology source will impact the credibility of an ethical apology.

2.2 Apology as a Crisis Response Strategy

In addition to the three main research streams in crisis communication, other literature has been developed around an apology as a response strategy. Firstly, what constitutes an effective apology is discussed by multiple scholars. Secondly, the theory of message framing is highlighted by Hallahan (1999) and further extended by other researchers in the field.

2.2.1 The Constitution of an Effective Apology

Attribution theory states that the responsibility of a crisis and who is to be held accountable is determined by the relevant audience (Weiner, 1986). Meanwhile, image restoration theory highlights that consumer perception is more important than reality (Benoit, 1997). Coombs (2007) suggests that the public's interpretation of responsibility can lead to detrimental consequences in terms of attitude and behaviour for the organisation if they are blamed for the crisis. Moreover, previous research by Coombs and Holladay (1996) demonstrated that crisis response strategies are chosen and outlined to protect corporate reputation. Therefore, it has become necessary for the company to deliver post-crisis messages to stakeholders, describing how the company will protect customers and the measures taken to cope with the crisis, both operationally and psychologically (Coombs & Holladay, 2008).

Providing an apology as a crisis response has become commonplace for corporations and has been emphasised as the most appropriate response strategy, especially in preventable scenarios (Benoit, 1995; Benoit & Drew, 1997). From that perspective, it is necessary to determine what constitutes an effective apology. As previously mentioned, an apology involves shouldering responsibility and asking for forgiveness from stakeholders (Benoit & Drew, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2008), which is regarded as the minimum requirement for an apology to be classified as genuine according to Benoit (1995). If this requirement is not fulfilled, it is merely an attempt to image restoration, and the apology is classified as a pseudo-apology (Dulaney & Gunn, 2018).

For an apology to be effective, Lazare (2004) identified four elements: acknowledgment of wrongdoing, how the crisis took place, a statement of regret with a dedication to preventing it from happening again, and a proposal of compensation/amends. Corporations that provided a genuine apology, including these four elements, experienced improved trust restoration and reputation than those that did not. Issuing a well-articulated apology can positively affect the brand (Pace, Feduik & Botero, 2010). On the contrary, an inadequate apology can evoke bitterness, causing it to potentially strain the consumer-organisation relationship (Hargie, Stapleton & Toursih, 2010).

As suggested by Newman and Kraynak (2013), more recent research has addressed other contextual factors appropriate to consider in the definition and effectiveness of an apology. For example, the researchers identify that in the case of transgressions, partial apologies with a simple expression of sympathy for the other party were more effective in reducing anger and negative attitude when the crisis was determined as ambiguous. On the contrary, the study showed that anger was reduced most effectively through full apologies with the admittance of accountability in obvious and unambiguous transgressions. Conlon and Murray (1996) suggest that accompanying the apology with a remedial solution has also shown to be an effective component of any corporate apology. Furthermore, the authors research supports the effectiveness of accepting responsibility, equating it to an increase in consumer purchase intent and overall satisfaction. However, the researchers also found that a delay in issuing an apology negatively impacts consumer satisfaction and, thereby, purchasing intention.

Botero, Feduik and Pace (2010) empirically examined the assumption that an apology is understood by the stakeholder as if the organisation is accepting responsibility for the event. The results of the study portrayed a positive relationship between reputation and responsibility acceptance. Thus, when the organisation accepts responsibility for a transgression-based crisis, the reputational damage is minimised, and stakeholders have an increased positive view of the organisation (Botero, Feduik & Pace, 2010). However, in contrast to the SCCT, the researchers find that an explicit statement of responsibility accompanying the apology is necessary to achieve maximum protection of the organisation's reputation and be consistent with Coombs SCCT framework's prediction.

2.2.2 The Framing of Apology Messages

The study's findings by Botero, Fediuk and Pace (2010) highlight the importance of careful message design within strategies and not only focus on effectiveness variances between response strategies. The theory of framing is valuable to determine the effects of messages in various public relations situations (Hallahan, 1999). To frame is to "select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in communicating text" (Entman, 1993, p. 55). Framing involves accentuating aspects to formulate an argument around a problematisation and its cause, solution, and evaluation (Entman, 1993). From the perspective of framing, communicated texts can influence individuals' perceptions of a specific situation. Moreover, Hallahan (1999) suggests that framing can impact the psychological processes applied when interpreting helpful information in decision making and comprehending reality.

The way corporations or other public relations actors frame messages by highlighting various attributes of the same issues has consequences on the audiences' interpretation of the matter (Chung & Jiang, 2017). Hallahan (1999) describes seven types of framing applicable to public relations. These include framing of situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. Framing of attributes is a strategic choice to highlight particular aspects of the issue (Hallahan, 1999). As suggested by Chung and Jiang (2017), a typical example of this model of framing in today's society is when companies accentuate the good qualities of their operations, such as their benevolent activities that are advantageous to society. The researchers found that the strategic choice of emphasising the corporate social responsibility activities of the company in the apology message after receiving negative publicity reduces the negativity of consumers and harmful effect on the brand.

Furthermore, the findings of Botero, Fediuk and Pace (2010) demonstrate the importance of determining variances within messages and not solely focusing on variances between strategies (Fediuk, Botero & Coombs, 2010). Their research study highlights a perceived difference between an apology with and without explicitly stating that the organisation shoulders responsibility. Thus, the wording of messages plays an essential role in crisis communication and affects the audience's reactions to a scandal (Botero, Feduik & Pace, 2010).

Conlon and Murray's (1996) findings highlight the role of providing compensation in an apology. The authors found that an apology that provided some form of remedial solution led to increased satisfaction among consumers. Further, they added that there was a greater willingness to engage with the company following the apology. These findings were confirmed by Courtright and Hearit (2002), stating that a remedial solution was a component of an effective apology. Another study by Coombs and Holladay (2008) considers consumer anger, expressing that a remedial solution can diminish this feeling. This aspect was further developed by Lee and Chung (2012), who focused on the way the compensation was formulated in the apology. The authors found that enforcing compensation in an active way rather than in a passive sense would reduce anger.

2.3 Challenges of a Digital Global Environment to Crisis Communication

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, in the context of the problem discussion, consumers today are becoming increasingly more aware, posing challenges on organisations and their responsibility regarding social issues. Following this, the omnipresence of social media highlights public participation as an extended dimension of crisis management. These two aspects will be presented as challenges to the conventional perspective of crisis communication.

2.3.1 The Rise of the Belief-Driven Consumer

A challenge posed to organisations in the current digital global environment is the rise of belief-driven consumers. Edelman (2018) defines this as consumers who actively choose to refrain from certain brands depending on the brand's stance on relevant issues. The report highlights that one in two people are belief-driven, emphasising the importance of brands taking a stance to foster relationships with consumers. Additionally, the report mentions that belief-driven consumers have either made a purchase from a brand due to its standpoint concerning controversial issues but have also avoided brands due to their unresponsiveness on a matter. Moreover, the report introduces the concept of 'leaders', a percentage of today's consumers who express their values through the brands they buy. In this case, if a brand does

not reflect the same values as the individual, the consumer will likely not purchase from the brand. This increased awareness of today's consumers places added pressure on organisations to play a more significant role in societal issues.

In line with the findings by Edelman (2018), Wilcox's (2019) study revealed that consumers increasingly insist on the organisation's expression of its opinions. He mentions that this expression serves as the basis for the consumers decisions as to whether or not to purchase a product and stay loyal to the brand. Further research by Licsandru and Cui (2019) found that today's consumers tend to have strong feelings on societal issues such as stereotyping. The authors also found that consumers are more aware of the intentions behind marketing efforts, and therefore, they understand advertisements beyond their apparent connotations. Both of these studies highlight the increased awareness of today's consumers and the effects faced by organisations as a result.

Consequently, organisations that do take a stance on social issues are faced with a level of risk. Wilcox (2019) highlights that even though a brand's position may strengthen its consumer relationship and reputation, it can also result in the isolation of specific stakeholder groups. The author expresses that consumers who disagree with the stance may have their purchase intention negatively affected, and as a result, decrease their number of purchases or avoid the brand entirely. He suggests that organisations need to determine which issues are appropriate and in line with the brand's values before positioning themselves in relation.

2.3.2 The Uncontrollable Nature of Social Media

In addition to the pressure placed on organisations stemming from consumer values, the communicative environment has experienced change due to the rapid development of social media. Consequently, the choice of communication platform has needed to be adjusted accordingly, as this plays a vital role in the success of crisis communication (Ki & Nekmat, 2014). As Jin, Liu and Austin (2014) found in their research, the use of social media increases significantly during times of crisis. According to the researchers, both the company and consumers can take advantage of social media: consumers can communicate about the crisis in their respective social networks, and the company can effectively communicate with stakeholders.

Particularly interesting for this research paper is the opportunity for consumers to communicate their opinions on social media, especially regarding the spread of negative statements or rumours by former, current, or potential consumers of the brand. The statements are then spread over the internet to a vast population, an action commonly referred to as negative electronic word of mouth (e-WOM), creating new challenges for organisations to overcome (Jin, Liu & Austin 2014). As such, negative e-WOM shapes a second crisis. Coombs and Holladay (2007) define this secondary crisis as the willingness to spread a negative statement and post an adverse comment/reaction. The researchers further found that anger has been one of the main drivers of negative e-WOM intentions and can result in current or future purchasing decisions and can have a detrimental effect on the company's reputation. Additionally, as Colon and Murray (1996) illustrated, a delay in the response time of an apology negatively affects consumer satisfaction. The delay of the process also provides social media a greater opportunity to spread information and for consumers to engage in negative e-WOM.

The outburst of social media has made public participation a common characteristic of crisis management (Jin, Liu & Austin, 2014), making it essential for organisations to consider social media strategies embodied in crisis communication. As expressed by Coombs (2014), research into social media is not yet a widely explored area, with developments in crisis communication literature, without a social media context, is more frequently studied. Thus, the context of social media in the development of effective response strategies is an understudied question, yet, vital for a company's success.

Previous research has mainly focused on traditional mass media channels such as newspaper articles or television news. These channels are arguably more controllable by PR managers. However, in the era of social media, the public can express emotion and opinion quicker than crisis managers can react, creating unprecedented challenges in terms of how to manage and monitor the spread of, perhaps false, information through social media channels (Jin, Liu & Austin, 2014).

3 Methodology

The following chapter lays the foundation of the research method upon which the thesis is built. Firstly, we present our reasoning for choosing an abductive research approach with deductive influences. Secondly, we discuss the relevance of our decision to use a qualitative multiple-case study design and continue by describing how we designed the interviews. Thirdly, our motivations for using a purposive and convenience sampling method are discussed, followed by an argumentation regarding our case study selection. Thereafter, the framework for data analysis is considered, with a decision to apply an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyse our data. The chapter ends in a discussion on how we will ensure that the research study is conducted with high quality and per ethical principles.

3.1 Research Approach

An abductive approach has a pragmatic outlook, drawing logical conclusions and developing theories about the social world (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Abduction originates in a problem that cannot be sufficiently explained through existing theories, as we identified in the problem discussion regarding the relevance of conventional crisis communication theories in a contemporary setting. The knowledge concerning the perception of apology marketing in response to racial scandals is limited; thus, the existing theories are insufficient to make sense of the phenomenon. The abductive approach facilitates this process by identifying the premises that could make the phenomenon more approachable.

Throughout the investigative process, previous research and data observations are in constant interrelatedness. As such, our study utilises an abductive approach, considering the dominant position of existing theory and research. Yet, critical implications are drawn from the observed data that expand the current body of research on crisis communication (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Hence, inductive and deductive influences are evident in our research purpose and problem, resulting in abductive characteristics. The deductive influence stems from

existing theoretical frameworks to derive the research question and formulate the interview guide, an important factor for data collection and analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2017). We used a frame of reference to identify themes in the interviews from a theoretical stance. The inductive features are presented through part of the purpose of the research: to broaden the understanding of the field and play a central role in generating patterns in the data without having a base from a theoretical standpoint (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Therefore, an abductive research approach with dominating influences of the deductive approach was chosen for our study.

3.2 Research Design

Considering the abductive perspective that we will apply to this research study, the research design revolves around a qualitative multi-case study. The reasoning behind the choice using a qualitative design approach is outlined in this section. Thereafter, an argument for the use of a multiple-case study is provided.

3.2.1 Qualitative Research Design

The characteristics of a qualitative research method were aligned with our thesis's objectives, and therefore, it was deemed the appropriate approach. A quantitative method exploring the effectiveness of apology marketing was ruled out due to the complexity and depth of our research topic. The thesis' purpose is to develop and contribute with an understanding regarding the interpretation of apology marketing following a perceived racism transgression. An individual's perception of an event would involve describing feelings, experiences, and opinions, which is difficult to quantify. To gather this type of information, we conducted interviews, further emphasising the need for a qualitative research method. The thesis further explores the impact of an apology on participants' attitudes towards the crisis brand, the apology message, their purchase intention, and their intention to engage in negative e-WOM. As such, this knowledge is naturally gathered in an explanatory manner.

We have chosen to apply a qualitative research method due to a high degree of flexibility compared to quantitative approaches. A quantitative approach is often structured, and as such,

the elements of the research process are established in advance. In contrast, a qualitative approach is unstructured and offers flexibility in all aspects of the research process (Kumar, 2014). In line with the description of Bryman and Bell (2017), a qualitative research design will allow us to focus on the descriptions and portrayal of the participants' experiences, perceptions, and feelings in regard to apology marketing. As suggested by the researchers, we can subsequently use the empirical material to test existing theories on crisis communication with our findings from the interviews.

3.2.2 Multiple-Case Study Design

Bryman and Bell (2017) mention five common types of research designs; experiment, cross-sectional, longitudinal, case study, and comparative. This thesis follows a case study research design, as we determined that other designs would not be appropriate given the depth of the empirical data needed for this study. Our research question is deemed exploratory in nature as it examines how students perceive apology marketing as a response to racism scandals in Sweden. Therefore, providing further motivation for why we chose a case study design. Additionally, some of the research designs mentioned above, such as experimental, are better suited for a quantitative approach and thus, not relevant for this study.

A case can range from a single organisation or a single location to a person or a specific event (Bryman & Bell, 2017). There are, however, varying definitions of what a case study entails, revealing the complex nature of such a study design. Harrison, Birks, Franklin and Mills (2017) highlight three frequently used definitions in this field of research, all sharing a few similar characteristics despite having underlying differing approaches. Furthermore, the authors state that a similar feature of a case study design is that it focuses on the comprehensive and in-depth examination of a single case, emphasising the case's unique characteristics. The researchers argue that this type of design is the most appropriate for an in-depth examination of a complicated event, situation, or problem in context. The division between this context and the issue is blurred. The authors further add that this design is advised to answer research questions that are phrased in such a way to address 'how' and 'why'.

A multiple case study is an addition to the case study design, involving the detailed investigation of more than one case (Bryman & Bell, 2017). In regard to this thesis, a multiple case study approach examining two cases will be used. Our motivation for this decision is the research design's ability to compare the findings from both cases. Bryman and Bell (2017) highlight that using more than one case stimulates the researcher to recognise similarities and differences across the cases, further aiding in developing our theoretical reflections on the empirical findings. This aid in the development of theoretical reflections is another motivation for why we chose a multiple-case study design. Through the comparison of cases, we can determine the circumstances in which a theoretical framework will or will not hold can be made (Bryman & Bell, 2017). In some instances, we may develop new concepts as extensions to existing theories or generate entirely new frameworks derived from our findings. As such, the appropriate research design for this thesis, considering the research question, was a multiple-case study.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The qualitative multi-case study is conducted through interviews to gather relevant empirical material to answer our research question. The following section outlines motivations behind the interview structure, with the facilitation of an interview guide. Furthermore, our reasoning behind the selection of participants is presented in the sampling method. The criteria for our case study selection are provided, leading to the presentation of our two selected case studies.

3.3.1 Interview Design

This study uses interviews to collect primary data to understand students' perceptions of apology marketing. Interviews enable rich and detailed answers providing insights into the individual's experience, a suitable method for the purpose of this research. In line with the recommendations of IPA (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009), semi-structured interviews are conducted to enhance flexibility. There is significant leeway in the way questions are presented, allowing participants to develop their answers (Bryman & Bell, 2017). This type of interview is beneficial when extensively exploring an event, as in-depth and diverse information is provided (Kumar, 2014). Regarding our study, the interview was divided into

two parts; the first part investigated the H&M case, whereas the second part focused on the Dove case.

To facilitate the interview, we created an interview guide (Appendix A), a central feature of the semi-structured interview, and an appropriate tool for interpretative analysis (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009). The guide was structured around the main themes of our study and contained questions revolving around the following themes: crisis involvement/responsibility, attitude towards the crisis brand, purchase intention, intention to engage in negative e-WOM, and attitude towards the apology message. Initially, we asked participants about their association and perception of the brand in question. Subsequently, the scandal was presented, and the participants were questioned about their reaction. Finally, we showed the apology, and the interviewees could express their thoughts and feelings towards the message. This sequence meant that the participants' perceptions could be recorded before and after the scandal and apology, allowing for comparisons. Respondents were allowed to answer openly and freely; meanwhile, we could pose follow-up questions, ensuring that the themes of the study were discussed thoroughly (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Pilot interviews were conducted to test the questions, and the interview guide was adjusted according to any changes that were found to be appropriate.

With acceptance from the participants, interviews have been voice recorded and subsequently transcribed. In regard to the current situation caused by COVID-19, the interviews were conducted digitally. Although digital interviews do not achieve the same degree of personal interaction with the interviewee, the disadvantage was minimised as body language expression was still possible for us to interpret. Furthermore, the digital nature made the interview process more time-efficient and enabled respondents from various parts of the country to participate in our study as the geographical location was not a hindering factor. Additionally, the interviews had an average duration of around 35 minutes, allowing both cases to be explored. In the empirical data and analysis chapter, we used pseudonyms in order for the participants to remain anonymous.

3.3.2 Sampling Method

As recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), the sample for this qualitative research study consists of a small homogeneous number of participants to thoroughly understand the central phenomenon within the sample. As such, the participants for this study were selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Purposive sampling, strategically choosing interviewees relevant for the study (Bryman & Bell, 2017), was driven by the criteria determined by the aim of the study that required participants to be students in Sweden. Considering that the purpose of the research is to examine the perception of a phenomenon in a specific population, students in Sweden, the purposive sampling of participants is driven by criteria. Secondly, due to the limited time and scope of the study, convenience sampling was applied, meaning that participants were selected based on availability and accessibility (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Our social networks were exploited to reach out to respondents, which can be seen as synonymous with convenience sampling.

Non-probability sampling is when participants are not chosen randomly, in contrast to convenience and purposive strategies (Bryman & Bell, 2017). A drawback is that it is impossible to generalise the findings due to the lack of representation of the sample (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The small number of respondents and non-probability characteristic tends to lead to an over-or under-representation of the population within the sample (Bryman & Bell, 2017). According to the researchers, convenience sampling is associated with the risk that other factors unrelated to the study affect the findings. For example, individuals with similar environments, for example, through upbringing or education, can have similar perceptions that create patterns in the findings that appear as a consequence of an over-representation of a certain environment. To minimise these risks, such factors have been considered when selecting participants by choosing individuals from varying environments. Thus, the sample consisted of 11 students aged between 20 and 25 years old attending various universities around Sweden. These participants belong to generation Z, a generation thought of as digital natives (Munsch, 2021).

3.3.3 Case Study Selection

When selecting the appropriate racial transgressions, we considered several factors. A connection with the participant and the company in question was preferred. The connection would allow for a broader range of opinions and emotions to be provided in the interview answers. Previous research has shown that a lack of connection between the participant and the transgression can be a disadvantage; hence, we preferred a connection. Another factor was if the brand had a global reach or not. An international brand would more likely ensure that the participants recognised it and therefore connected to it. The final factor was in what industry the company operates. The retail sector was determined to be the most appropriate as it encompasses goods to consumers. However, we selected two different product categories to avoid similarities in the answers.

Considering these factors, three racial transgressions were identified through extensive research. The first scandal we identified was H&M's scandal with its 'coolest monkey in the jungle' hooded sweatshirt modeled by a black child. Secondly, Dove's advert for body washes on Facebook was recognised. Thirdly, Pepsi's advertisement showing a Black Lives Matter protest with the celebrity Kendall Jenner was considered. However, time constraints restricted our study to two transgressions, as investigating three transgressions could lead to more surface-level answers by the interviewees. Therefore, using two transgressions would allow our interviews to go into great depth and detail to explore and answer the research question. Since the interviews were conducted in Sweden, H&M, a global Swedish clothing company, was deemed to fulfill the predetermined factors as participants were likely to have a personal connection to the brand. Dove was the other brand we selected as it sold different products to H&M, was a global brand, and participants were likely to connect to the company as Dove sells personal care products, products that are used daily. Thus, H&M and Dove were the two cases used in our research study. It is important to acknowledge that these scandals occurred in 2017 and the interviews for this study were conducted in 2021. Therefore, current diversity efforts by H&M and Dove may influence the participants' perception of the brand and the scandal.

3.3.4 Primary and Secondary Data

Throughout the research process, both primary and secondary data sources were used. Primary data was obtained through semi-structured interviews conducted with university students. This material was the central source of data in this thesis, considering its ability to achieve thorough knowledge and relevant empirical findings regarding individuals' perception of apology marketing. Secondary data were also used to facilitate the understanding of the primary data. Sources including the contexts of the two corporate scandals, their apology messages, and the media's response were used as secondary data. By gathering data using more than one method, triangulation of the research process can be achieved, enhancing the credibility of the findings (Yin, 1994).

3.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative research method is based on an interpretative phenomenological analysis as the purpose of the thesis focuses on an individual's perception of a phenomenon. The study is centered around the participant's personal experience and interpretation of apology marketing and considers the respondents' reflections. The interpretive phenomenological analysis aims to unravel an individual's lived experience through personal reflections (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The participant-oriented approach allows the interviewees to express themselves and their experiences without distractions or distortions. Consequently, the individual's perception of their experiences and what one chooses to share shapes the understanding of the situation for other people.

Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) describe that IPA originates in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography. To start, phenomenology, a form of qualitative research, is described by the research as having a philosophical perspective concentrating on studying a person's lived experiences within the world. The aspect of phenomenology shines through our research study as we focus on the participants' experience regarding apology marketing following a perceived racism transgression. Next, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state that hermeneutics is known as the theory of interpretation focusing on the interpretation of texts and meaning, relevant in our analysis of the transcribed interviews. We apply the theory of

interpretation in this study when developing a comprehension for the role that apology marketing plays in today's corporate world. We do this through both understanding the interviews by looking at the study in its entirety and understanding the study through the interpretation of one interview (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Lastly, ideography concerns the details and depth of material and is applied in order for us to understand how individuals experience the apologies in response to perceived racism transgressions (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Consequently, the interpretative phenomenological analysis becomes an effective tool for the analysis of our study.

We have decided to use a small number in our study, partly due to time constraints and partly to be able to begin the analysis with a thorough investigation of each interview followed by identifying similarities and differences among the responses, in line with the research of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). As confirmed by the researchers, we can create detailed accounts such as interpreting the causal attributions and perceived intentions of apology marketing. Subsequently, we can identify patterns, and variances among them, from the multiple detailed experience descriptions resulting in a general understanding and conclusive judgement on the role of apology marketing in a society with belief-driven consumers.

Hence, we apply the interpretative phenomenological analysis model to contribute to the objective of understanding and interpreting the consumers' thoughts rather than our preconceived notions and thoughts. As identified by previous research in chapter two, the consumer's perception of what the organisation attributes the cause of the scandal to play a central role in the subsequent effect on consumer behavioural intent (Yuan, Cui & Lai, 2016). As such, an analysis using IPA opens up the possibility of understanding the individual's perception of apology marketing and their subsequent receptiveness without skewing the analysis with our own preconceptions.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed to prepare for the analysis of the empirical material. The analysis of the transcripts has focused on central discussion points where the participants either had similar or varying opinions. Our understanding of the respondents' perceptions of the cases was done through adhering to the analysis guide of interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). To begin with, the transcripts are reread to be reminded of the overall impression of the interviews as a means to slow down

the process and achieve a general understanding of the individuals' experiences. Thereafter, the interviewees' relevant positions are noted down to comprehend further the underlying factors of their viewpoints (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). In this step, remarks are made with different intentions, partly to describe the content and conceptual remarks that capture the overall impression of the interview (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). After analysing each interview individually, we mapped the interviews collectively to identify common themes and variations within those. The themes are presented and analysed in chapter four.

3.5 Research Quality

Qualitative research using an interpretative phenomenological analysis aims to provide a study of high quality; the research quality is evaluated according to the following four dimensions of trustworthiness: transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Contrary to the typical quantitative criteria consisting of validity and reliability, Guba and Lincoln (1994) suggest that these dimensions are more appropriate when evaluating qualitative research, as there is not one single truth of social science.

Establishing the credibility of findings requires the study to be conducted in accordance with good practice and respondent validation, meaning that the findings are revealed to the participants of the study (Bryman & Bell, 2017). To institute credibility, synonymous with instituting internal validity in quantitative research, we aim to follow the ethical considerations discussed in chapter 3.7. Additionally, the participants are submitted with their responses and the results of the study if desired. Furthermore, as discussed in relation to the data collection, both primary and secondary data sources were used in order to achieve triangulation of data (Yin, 1994).

Transferability parallels external validity and concerns the possibility of applying the patterns that a study finds to other contexts (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The small sample size purposefully selected with specific characteristics does not allow the findings to be generalised to the whole population but rather aims to produce rich data of the details of a culture (Bryman & Bell, 2017). As we conduct 11 detailed interviews, the data gathered is detailed and rich in nature. The possibility of transferring patterns to other environments is

determined by other researchers but facilitated through the thick description that this study aims to develop, contributing to the database from which judgements concerning the transferability can be made (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Dependability can be paired with reliability and requires a detailed account of every step of the research process to demonstrate an auditing perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Every phase of the research process has been thoroughly examined and continuously worked to achieve optimisation of the process. Complete records are maintained across all phases of the process, for example, through detailed notes on how the problem is formulated, the selection of respondents, interview transcripts, and how data analysis decisions are made (Bryman & Bell, 2017).

The final dimension of confirmability concerns that the researchers can demonstrate acting in good faith and that personal values have not impinged the conduct of research or findings drawn (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Significant efforts have been made at limiting our own values and opinions to affect responses of the interviews or other parts of the process in a skewing manner to strive for objectivity. Consequently, interviews have been structured in a way to avoid the formulation of leading questions, and the personal thoughts of the respondent have been encouraged through the use of open questions. Furthermore, the study details were not revealed before the interviews to avoid impacting the perception and reactions of the participants.

3.6 Research Ethics

When conducting a research study, specific ethical principles should be adhered to; consent of participation, the confidentiality of personal information, and disclosure of non-damaging information before participation (Bryman & Bell, 2017). Similarly, Denscombe (2010) suggests four guidelines that should be adhered to when conducting social research. Firstly, participants should not be exposed to any physical or psychological harm during the research process. With data collected through interviews, the participant could remain anonymous, and we asked for their permission to record the interview.

Secondly, in line with the guidelines of Bryman and Bell (2017), informed consent was given, the participants were provided with information regarding the time commitment necessary for the interviews. Furthermore, the purpose of being selected when requesting their participation in the study was given. Thirdly, open and honest behaviour by the researchers was maximised by outlining the topic of the research paper and how the individual would contribute to a further understanding of the area of study. Moreover, throughout the interviews, the researchers' personal opinions were mitigated as much as possible through carefully formulated questions and responses to the respondents' reactions that limit researcher bias.

Lastly, Denscombe (2010) highlighted that no researcher should disobey the law and be aware of the consequences of defying it when conducting research. The study was not at risk of neglecting any laws, as the data gathered from interviews were not sensitive to constituencies. The information obtained to explain the problematisation and literature review was accessed through public websites and libraries. Moreover, the sample consists of individuals who are older than 18 in order to facilitate the adherence to ethical guidelines ensuring good research practice. According to The Swedish Research Council (2017), recorded interviews should not be conducted with individuals younger than 15 years old without consent from both the child and guardian. This study opens up for the participant to leave information that can be deemed sensitive for the individual. Furthermore, the study is considered a rather complex topic that can be difficult for younger persons to comprehend and provide further thoughts on the subject. Consequently, the boundary has been set at 18 years to adhere to the ethical guidelines.

4 Empirical Data and Analysis

In the empirical data and analysis chapter, an introduction of the context is firstly presented, providing an overview of the two investigated cases: H&M and Dove. Subsequently, we present relevant empirical data that we analyse from the perspective of the chosen theories. In accordance with the method of interpretative phenomenological analysis, we have striven to interpret the material from every individual's perception of apology marketing. The chapter is structured around central themes identified in the interview material, namely, the perceived intentions of the organisation, the perception of the apology statement, consumer loyalty and its consequences for consumer behaviour, and the responsibility of corporations in society. These distinguished themes serve as the basis of the analysis with the purpose of finding similarities and differences within each area that can be derived into an answer to the research question of the thesis.

4.1 The Context of the Scandals

The following section will present the context of the two case studies used to gather the empirical findings to provide an understanding of the racial transgressions used in this study. The first case, H&M, is presented, followed by Dove. In both cases, the racial scandal is described in detail, including additional information regarding the media response at the time. Furthermore, the apology provided by each brand is described to provide a greater contextual understanding. Both H&M and Dove's current efforts within diversity and inclusion are also briefly mentioned.

4.1.1 H&M 'Coolest Monkey in the Jungle' Scandal

In January of 2018, Swedish fashion retailer H&M received public backlash over an advert posted to their online store showing a black child wearing a green hooded sweatshirt with the words' coolest monkey in the jungle' printed in capital letters on it (Stack, 2018). The advert, shown below in Figure 1, was circulated and globally criticised online by social media users

as racist due to its references and comparison to a monkey, an animal that has been stereotypically used in ethnic slurs (Stack, 2018; The Arthur W. Page Center, n.d). It was further criticised in relation to another image in the same advert series showing a black boy wearing a hooded sweatshirt containing the words 'mangrove jungle survival expert'. Some social media users drew comparisons of this to neocolonial thinking (Bever, 2018).

As a result of the criticism, a growing number of media outlets worldwide started reporting on the matter, creating an intense and widespread scandal for H&M. News outlets such as The New York Times, Washington Post, The Guardian, and the BBC were among those reporting on the scandal. Additionally, celebrities were seen taking a stance against the brand, with one singer, 'The Weeknd' posting on Twitter: "Woke up this morning shocked and embarrassed by this photo. I'm deeply offended and will not be working with @hm anymore…" (The Weeknd, 2021). The rapper G-Eazy (2021), who was due to release a collaboration with H&M, took a similar stance. He posted to his Twitter account stating that even though he was excited over his collaboration, he decided to end his partnership after seeing the advert. He further expressed that he did not want to be associated with a brand that could allow this to occur, hoping it would serve as a lesson for the brand and others.

As a response to the criticism H&M received over the image, the company issued an apology on the 9th of January 2018 on their website that is shown below. A variation of this statement was also posted to their social media channels, including Twitter and Instagram.

> *"H&M is fully committed to playing its part in addressing society's issues and problems, whether it's diversity, working conditions or environmental protection – and many others. Our standards are high and we feel that we have made real progress over the years in playing our part in promoting diversity and inclusion. But we clearly haven't come far enough.*
>
> *We agree with all the criticism that this has generated – we have got this wrong and we agree that, even if unintentional, passive or casual racism needs to be eradicated wherever it exists. We appreciate the support of those who have seen that our product and promotion were not intended to cause offence but, as a global brand, we have a*

responsibility to be aware of and attuned to all racial and cultural sensitivities – and we have not lived up to this responsibility this time.

This incident is accidental in nature, but this doesn't mean we don't take it extremely seriously or understand the upset and discomfort it has caused. We have taken down the image and we have removed the garment in question from sale. It will be recycled. We will now be doing everything we possibly can to prevent this from happening again in future.

Racism and bias in any shape or form, conscious or unconscious, deliberate or accidental, are simply unacceptable and need to be eradicated from society. In this instance we have not been sensitive enough to this agenda. Please accept our humble apologies." (Hm.com, 2017)

On the other hand, some individuals noted that the advert was blown out of proportion, stating that this is not what H&M had intended to do (Bever, 2018). Others noted that they didn't think in those terms and considered it a child with a hoodie, not making that connection to skin color. Additionally, the mother of the child who modelled the hooded sweatshirt stated that she did not support the backlash the image was facing and instead was defending H&M (The Arthur W. Page Center, n.d).

Following the scandal, H&M decided to develop efforts to prevent such a scandal from occuring again. H&M appointed a head of diversity to lead and develop its inclusion efforts (The Arthur W. Page Center, n.d). A few of the initiatives pursued since the scandal in 2017 include mandatory diversity training for employees, setting up collaborative inclusion forums, and by 2025 setting a goal of reaching 30% diversity in senior leadership positions (H&M Group, 2021).

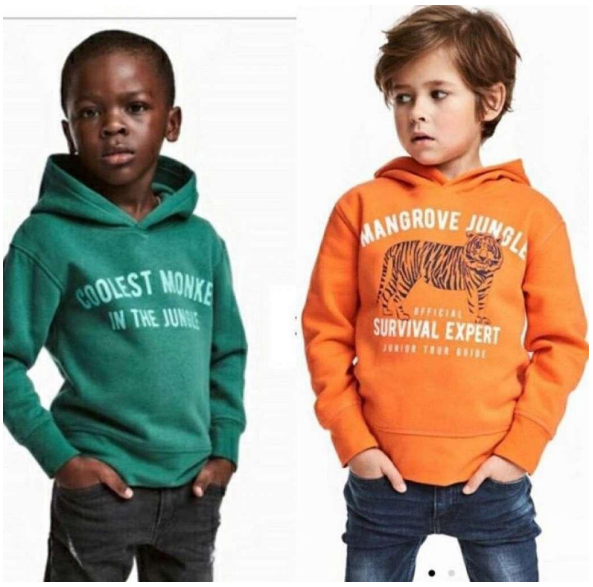

Figure 1. H&M's Hooded Sweatshirt Scandal (medium.com, 2018).

4.1.2 Dove's Facebook Body Wash Advert

Dove, a global personal care brand, is another company that has been linked to a racist scandal. The brand had in 2017 posted on its Facebook page an advertisement for its body wash (Astor, 2017). In this short video clip, also referred to as a 'graphic interchange format' (GIF), a black woman was seen removing her brown-coloured t-shirt to reveal a white woman wearing a light-coloured t-shirt (Astor, 2017). The advert, shown below in Figure 2, was labelled as racist, where social media users took to Twitter and Facebook to call out Dove. Users had perceived the advertisement as implying that dark skin is 'dirty' whereas light skin is 'clean' (Stack, 2018). The issue was picked up by media outlets such as The New York Times, Business Insider, and The Guardian. Although some outlets reported on the matter, the overall media attention was perceived to be less widespread than the H&M scandal. Dove removed the advert from Facebook and, on the 7th of October 2017, issued an apology in response to the criticism it had received. The apology posted to their Facebook page is shown below:

> *"Dove is committed to representing the beauty of diversity. In an image we posted this week, we missed the mark in thoughtfully representing women of color and we deeply*

regret the offense that it has caused. The feedback that has been shared is important to us and we'll use it to guide us in the future" (Dove, 2021)

A similar version of this apology was also posted to their Twitter account. Despite this, the media and social media users had mixed reactions towards Dove's apology, pointing out previous racism scandals the brand has been accused of (Slawson, 2017). One of the previous scandals that were referred to included one from 2011. This advert showed a before picture of cracked skin, where a black woman was positioned in front of, and an after picture of smooth skin, where a light skinned woman was positioned in front of (Slawson, 2017). As a result of Dove's past scandals, consumers began questioning the brand and its values.

In 2004, Dove launched its 'self-esteem' project to educate young individuals about body confidence and help them develop a better relationship with their bodies (Dove, 2020). Since then, Dove (2017) has been involved in a wide range of different campaigns and initiatives focusing on diversity and body positivity. One of their campaigns is the 'Dove real beauty pledge', launched in 2017. The company pledges three vows; to always feature real women in adverts, no digital manipulation to images, and to continue educating young individuals about body confidence through the self-esteem project. These initiatives are part of a bigger goal of wanting to inspire women to be the greatest versions of themselves and for them to be able to reach their full potential (Dove, 2017).

Figure 2- Dove's Facebook Advert for Body Wash (thedrum.com, 2017)

4.2 The Perceived Intentions of the Organisation

Following the thorough examination of our empirical findings, the first central theme that we identified is the theme regarding the perceived intention of the organisation tied to the scandal. The respondents' interpretations of the motives behind the marketing campaigns played a central role in how the participants perceived the brand, how responsibility for the scandal is attributed, and the demands placed on the crisis response strategy. The empirical material revealed a division among the participants regarding the interpretation of whether the scandal occurred intentionally or not. On the one hand, respondents believed that both organisations committed the scandal on purpose to advance their brand or as a means to create discussion.

> *"I feel like this is something that Dove has done on purpose to create extra publicity and it makes me angry...feels like the purpose of it is to create a scandal or shock the internet and create a viral GIF"- Noah*

The quote above illustrates that some respondents interpreted the scandals to be intentional to generate publicity for the benefit of the brand. The citation portraying the reactions to the advertisement of Dove reveals irritation and disapproval of such organisational behaviour. Although the empirical material suggested a more prominent tendency of the Dove scandal being created on purpose, the scandal surrounding H&M also was perceived as intentional by some.

> *"It is obviously blatantly racist, and it is impossible for someone to have overlooked the consequences… I think H&Ms advertisement is intentionally racist" - Philip*

From the response of the participant, it is understood that the perceived purpose of the advertisement is to actively inflict racism, creating a scandal with great media attention similar to that of Dove, which is intentional. The individual suggests that the marketing campaign is so evidently racist that it is impossible for it to be released without understanding that it would be offensive. As such, it can be interpreted that the organisation must have alternative objectives in mind that would benefit the firm with the advertisement, of which Dove was accused. On the other hand, respondents believed that crises were mistakes that happened accidentally.

"My initial reaction to this scandal was that it was accidental racism and according to H&M it seems like it was" - Hanna

In response to the apology message issued by H&M, the participant could confirm its initial perception of the intention of the scandal. With an agreement between their own experience and the explanation of the company, in addition to an apology that is viewed as trustworthy, the empirical material of the interviews suggested that some respondents believed that the scandals were accidents and unplanned. Although the transgression of H&M was perceived as accidental, the empirical material did not contain any evidence suggesting that the transgression of Dove was viewed as accidental.

The participants were presented with the scandals one after the other, firstly the case of H&M and thereafter the case of Dove. As such, the respondents tended to compare the two scenarios to one another. However, the comparisons showed a division in opinion regarding which marketing campaign was deemed intentional and unintentional.

"It seemed quite consciously chosen, not saying that H&M wasn't but this seems a lot more thought through" - Matilda

"I don't think it is intentional racism as it was in the H&M advertisement" - Ellen

When asked about their reactions to the Dove scandal and the accompanying apology, respondents often brought up the previously shown H&M campaign as a frame of reference. As illustrated by the quotes above, there were split opinions among the respondents. Although the first respondent deemed both scandals to be intentional, the general perspective of the interviews analysed collectively suggested that the crisis associated with Dove was interpreted as a deliberate action in comparison to that of H&M. On the contrary, the second participant considered Dove's advertisement for body wash an accident, but the H&M campaign was deemed intentionally racist.

Thus far, the outcome of the scandals has been discussed as either intentional to generate attention for the brand or as being a mistake, unintended to be interpreted as racially provocative. However, another prominent viewpoint observed in the empirical findings is that the companies conducted a major slip-up caused by ignorance/carelessness, something that should be impossible to occur in the eyes of those participants. The question "*how could this possibly happen?*" is recurrent among the various respondents. They believe that the scandal

was definitely preventable, though without the accusation of creating the scandal out of *ill-will* or on purpose.

> *"I don't think it was intentional to hurt people, of course not, because that's just foolish but it's basically equally foolish to let this just slip through. There's been a lot of people working on this campaign and the fact that nobody thought that this could be offensive shows incompetence" - Felix*

The response to the transgression of H&M above illustrates that the cause is attributed to the organisation, and thus was a crisis that could, and should have been prevented. As illustrated by the quote and reiterated throughout the empirical material, the participants highlight the surprise over how the scandal could pass unnoticed through so many leads. We saw similar trends in the reactions to the case of Dove.

> *"I'm shocked that this has been accepted by the company… and I'm shocked that they communicated in their apology as if they didn't know that this was wrong before using this marketing. I get a bit afraid of that actually" - Sara*

Although, as portrayed in an interview response, the expression of shock concerning the scandal of the body wash advert on Facebook is even greater than the reactions to 'the coolest monkey in the jungle' campaign throughout the interview material. Furthermore, the respondent expresses concern that we interpret to relate to what the organisation is capable of producing when causing such a scandal without revealing that they understood how problematic it was beforehand. The lack of communicative efforts and control functions within organisations is perceived as carelessness and interpreted as the basis for the respondents who attributed the cause of the scandal to the companies' ignorance.

> *"I am very surprised that such big brands do not have great communication within the company. It has to be accepted from so many leads within the company, so I am surprised and also a bit concerned" - Philip*

The quote reflects the reiterated perspective that individuals are shocked over the operational work of the companies with global markets and influence, the lack of control functions allowing such a preventable scandal to occur. The individual expresses concern regarding the

carelessness of the firm and emphasises the shock experienced over how the campaign could be released. Although the organisation is not blamed for intentionally creating the crisis, the quote suggests that incompetence and ignorance result in a matter that another participant describes as a preventable crisis that was supposed to be in their control.

Both scandals evoke the emotional response of concern, as some respondents are unable to comprehend the processes of the companies' operations allowing for such offensive scandals to occur. No accusations concerning intentionally inflicting harm are posed on the companies. Rather, the respondents associate the behaviour with incompetence. The idea suggests that the companies' purpose of the advertisement sets the ground for interpreting the scandal, and the apology is reinforced by several respondents emphasising the importance of intentions.

> *"I don't think the organisation had ill intentions behind the scandal and I think it is the intentions that should matter" - Theo*

In response to the scandal and apology of the crisis associated with H&M, a participant reiterates their opinion that whether the scandalous marketing campaign should be perceived as inflicting harm on purpose or not should take into account what the organisation describes their intentions to be. Thus, this line of argument suggests that the individual's perception of the scandal's purpose should not play a central role. Instead, one's interpretation should be moderated by the explanation provided by the company. Nevertheless, it becomes evident when considering the strong emotional reactions of some students that how the individual perceives the company's intentions do not always follow the same reasoning suggested by the quote above but instead originates from other factors.

4.3 The Perception of the Apology Statement

Another common theme found in our empirical material is the individual's perception of the apology statement. Following the interviews regarding the participants' reactions to the transgression, we presented the apology statements that the company released in response to the scandal. The following section will explore the participants' thoughts and opinions of the brands' crisis responses.

4.3.1 Perceived Intention Shaping Expectations on Apology

Throughout the empirical findings, it is evident that the respondents place great emphasis on the organisation's intentions behind the scandal. Although it is apparent that the interviewees' experiences regarding the perceived intent of companies differ, it is a common theme of the empirical data laying the ground stones for subsequent reactions. As such, the interpreted intention seems to influence the expectations that the participants put on the organisation in terms of how they should respond to the crisis.

> *"I guess some people would have liked to see concrete action but since I don't think this is an intentional act and there was no 'ill will' behind it I think their response is sufficient. In my opinion, it is enough for them to apologise and make sure it never happens again" - Simon*

The quote above illustrates that the individual interpreted the case as an unintentional accident, shaping his/her expectations on the apology. With an apology and reassurance that the mistake will not be repeated, the respondent was satisfied and accepted the apology. Nevertheless, the empirical data suggests that the expectations for a response were split, and a majority of the participants expressed disapproval of the apologies.

> *"It is really difficult to regain trust after such a scandal and I don't think that an apology is sufficient. Rather, launching other campaigns that disassociate from the scandal and showing new values is required" - Ellen*

The inadequacy of the crisis responses was highlighted in several interviews, especially when the scandal was deemed very severe, and the attribution of responsibility was directed toward the organisation. The participants repeatedly require an action from the company that contradicts their transgressional behaviour. The fact that actions speak louder than words was a common point of discussion among the interviewees and required a demonstration of the measures that will be taken in the future to prevent a similar event. As explained by the participants, the interviews suggest that the beliefs concerning the severity and attribution of responsibility of the scandal is correlated with the demands enforced by the consumer on the company. The demands shape whether the consumer is willing to accept their apology statement. The interviewees who viewed the transgression as highly severe and believed that

it was a preventable situation where the organisation should be held accountable would not accept any form of response.

> *"I am not sure what they can do... this is severe enough of a problem that an apology it's not going to be enough." - Philip*

The critical stance taken by the respondents who consider the crisis to be highly severe, indifferent of whether they believe that the scandal is either intentional or unintentional, have significantly elevated demands on the response of the corporation. As represented by the quote above, some respondents believe that there is no way for the company to recover from such a severe crisis. The students' expectations are observed to be augmented, stating that they require immediate action instead of using power words. As such, the respondents agree that actions are more powerful than words, and such expectations are brought about with the intention behind the scandal and increased perceived severity.

The theme of intention is evident in the way respondents perceive the crises and responses of H&M and Dove. The reactions to scandals and expectations on apologies are interpreted to be influenced by the objective of the organisation's marketing campaign. Another identified topic of discussion is the tendency to shift attribution away from the brand, distinguishing between the brand and the crisis. Through common interview responses suggesting a brand is more than a scandal, some participants imply that one scandal does not influence their individual perception of the brand. We interpret that the interviewees believe that it is unfair for a single occurrence to detriment the entire organisation. Likewise, several participants stress that the employees involved in the scandal should be held responsible rather than blaming the organisation as a whole.

> *"You cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater but it definitely sheds a negative light on the entire company, and I think it's definitely unforgivable of the people who made the advert. Hopefully they realise that, and the employees have to face consequences" - Felix*

We interpret the idiomatic expression used by the respondent to suggest that the valuable parts of the organisation should not be eliminated along with something undesirable, although it is a

common error. The quote above illustrates that there should be a separation between the whole corporation and the employees responsible for the scandal. The obligation to make this distinction is reinforced by several respondents who indicate that it is unfair to blame the entire company and all its employees for something they did not have control over. Hence, the participants argue that the attribution of accountability cannot be directed toward the whole organisation but rather on an individual basis. The findings suggest that the respondents' perceived intentions shape their expectations of the apology message. Whether the organisation can live up to these expectations is explored below.

4.3.2 The Organisations' Ability to Live Up to the Expectations on Apologies

In our empirical material gathered from the interviews, we find that how the consumers perceive the brands' intentions develop preconceived ideas on the apology message. These expectations are evident to be heightened by increased severity perceptions and whether the scandal is perceived as intentional. The expectations are further driven by the participants' personal values and engagement in societal issues. Consequently, the probability of the company living up to the presumptions of the consumers is seen to be dependent on the perceived purpose behind the scandal. The interviewees' reactions to the apology messages lead to the identification that participants who interpreted the transgression as accidental showed a more lenient and accepting approach toward the crisis response.

> *"I don't think it was intentional but it was a good apology, well crafted, and yeah denying conscious racism basically, but still claiming responsibility"- Simon*

The individual believes the H&M scandal was accidental and that the company provided a reasonable, well-crafted response. The perception of the apology lived up to their expectation. In the previous section, we saw that participants whose initial reaction to the H&M scandal was accidental, had their expectations met and were confirmed by the apology. Those participants who saw the scandal as accidental were more likely to be satisfied with the company's response; some participants even described it as genuine. The empirical material lacked evidence for a similar interpretation regarding the apology that Dove issued. We

believe the lack of acceptance for their apology is related to the greater severity attributed to the Dove body wash advertisement.

> *"It does not feel like Dove is taking it seriously. Take it seriously and apologise sincerely and clearly, then I think I would have been more apologetic towards the brand" - Sara*

> *"It's a very weak apology, it is short and it sounds like a customer service message" - Linnea*

It was evident in the analysis of the perceived intention of the organisation that most participants believed the Dove advert was intentional, and therefore were less satisfied with the company's response. The severity of the crisis shapes the expectation of the apology. Represented in the quotes two above, most interviewees did not believe Dove apologised sincerely nor were serious about their apology. From the responses, we recognise that these participants do not perceive the expression of regret as sincere, but rather label the company's application of apology marketing as superficial.

Moreover, a respondent made the connection to a customer service message and similarly, another respondent referred to the apology as being corporate. We interpret this opinion as a paradox, where respondents do not want corporate apologies to seem corporate. This paradox raises the issue of consumer expectations needing the apology to seem more human, something that will be further explored in the discussion. We see that these descriptions reflect the redundancy and lack of empathy experienced by the consumer when presented with an apology to a perceived preventable crisis. Furthermore, the apology was described as laughable by a participant, further emphasising the lack of seriousness that the company can convey through its apology. Similar tendencies are evident in the responses from interviewees who appraise the 'coolest monkey in the jungle' scandal as intentional and very severe.

> *"I think many of these apologies are so bland. In many cases they use power words like 'we will make a drastic change' and 'we have not come far enough' and those are words to easily throw around but rarely proven. I think it's way better to make a*

statement after three or four months to show what kind of progress they've made with specific numbers of what they've changed." - Jacob

From the quote above, we see further evidence concerning the companies' inability to convey emotion, obtain forgiveness and stand out from other corporate apologies. By putting all crisis communication apologies under one roof, we interpret that the individual does not recognise distinguishing features from the apology. Thus, this highlights the tediousness and unimaginative features of apology marketing as a phenomenon. Furthermore, the response highlights the insincerity associated with providing an apology too soon before the company can show actual progress. This idea was reinforced by others, who argue that actions speak louder than words. They would therefore like to see substantial efforts such as campaigns that illustrate taking a stance towards societal issues, rather than what this quote refers to as 'throwing power words around'. We see that the consumers who perceived the scandals as severe and intentional did not accept the apologies from the companies. Those that did not have their expectations met by the company's response provided suggestions for the improvement of the apology. We have seen that the common characteristic of the participants' response was the aspect of taking action.

"I think it's difficult to earn back the trust after this scandal but I think to launch different campaigns that strongly dissociate from the one that became a scandal... So to try and put forth a new message and showing what steps they will take in the future to prevent a similar situation" - Ellen

"In this case they should just admit to them being wrong and not emphasise all the other good things that they do for society" - Philip

From the interview responses, we see a demand for action that takes distance from the scandal showing other values through, for example, a new campaign. As seen in the second quote, another participant disapproved of H&M's CSR measures being brought up in the apology, as it was perceived as trying to cover up the actual transgression. In the empirical findings, we also see suggestions for greater transparency of how such a scandal could occur and reveal the repercussions for those responsible for the scandal. Another improvement suggested by the respondents is the timing of the apology. We have previously seen a respondent who

suggested waiting to issue the apology until the company had successfully implemented concrete actions for their crisis response to seem legitimate. On the other hand, another respondent urges the provision of an immediate response.

> *"Show immediately that it was a mistake, show what their actual values are through a new campaign. Act quickly so that the perspective of the company can also be considered before the crisis gets out of hand because of social media and we, as consumers, make up our perception of the brand. If they wait too long, I don't think that they will be able to change the consumer's mind or obtain forgiveness" - Matilda*

The participants have different opinions regarding their interpretation of when the apology should be issued. In contrast to what the previous individual stated, the quote above proposes that immediate action should be considered in order to facilitate the consumers' decision-making when shaping their perception of the brand after a transgression. This individual suggests that accepting the apology is more probable if the issue comes sooner rather than later. She indicates that with time, the crisis is more likely to spur away in the hands of social media, which is likely to influence the consumer's perception of the brand before the company can give its side of the story.

4.4 Consumer Loyalty and the Effect on Consumer Behaviour

Another principal theme evident in the empirical material was the presence of consumer loyalty, or lack thereof. From the gathered findings, we observed a clear divide regarding the acceptance of the apologies, where the participants choose to accept it, take a neutral stance, or reject the apology. Some participants that had bought the company's apology displayed evidence of the 'halo' effect. Other participants who accepted the apology had fluctuating perceptions, where they initially expressed negativity towards the brand and only accepted the scandal after reading the apology message. On the other hand, a few participants had no observed change in perception following the scandal and the apology. In contrast to this, the remaining respondents were those who did not accept the apology. Some perceived to have a worsened perception of the brand after we introduced the apology.

4.4.1 Acceptance of the Apology and its Effect on Behaviour

Throughout the empirical findings, it became evident that those participants who had a positive association with the brand prior to the scandal were more likely to accept the apology. This type of association is referred to as the 'halo' effect, where an individual's favourable perception of the brand before a scandal allows for the limitation of adverse outcomes. We observed these participants as loyal, who could see past the scandal and think about their positive associations with the brand instead.

> *"At H&M I think they have a good point and they're doing a lot of good things so I think that just one bad accident that could happen for everyone so I wouldn't stop shopping there just for one accident" - Theo*

> *"I'm probably still neutral because when I think about Dove today I think about their advertising that there are lots of different bodies, body types and skin colours so I still think they have recovered well" - Hanna*

We consider the first two quotes to confirm the existence of the 'halo' effect among participants. The first quote reflects the individual's knowledge of H&M's efforts and recognises the accidental nature. Thereby, having their previous perceptions about H&M doing good supersedes the negative impact of the scandal. The individual demonstrates this by stating that one accident would not negatively impact their purchasing intention. We further interpret the quote as showing evidence of a separation between the brand and the scandal. The second quote displayed a similar way of thinking to the first quote, where the individual acknowledges the efforts made by Dove to be more diverse and inclusive. These efforts lead to a positive association with Dove, thus, making them likely to accept the apology and not impact purchasing decisions.

Despite this, we saw that some respondents had a prior positive association to the brand but were left shocked when presented with the scandal. The expression of shock was particularly evident in the Dove case, where one participant noted that due to the availability of close substitutes, they would see no reason to purchase products from Dove. As such, their purchasing decision was negatively affected by the scandal. Overall, the respondent did not

display any influence of the ‘halo’ effect, despite having a positive prior perception of Dove. On the other hand, those participants who had accepted the apology did so only after we had presented it. Prior to the apology message, these participants displayed negative thoughts and emotions towards the scandal. As such, they showed a fluctuation in perception that was positively affected by the brand's apology.

> *“When reading their apology, I feel like the fact that this would become a crisis - the brand should definitely have known. It is a global brand so I do not understand how this could happen, but from the apology I understand that it is an accident” - Simon*

As explained by the participant, the acknowledgement that the H&M image was a crisis that the brand should have been aware of was contrasted with their understanding that the scandal was accidental in nature. The individual further notes that they gained this understanding only after we presented the apology. In the quote, the individual also mentions that H&M is a global brand and thus expresses the common interpretation taken by many respondents as ‘don't understand how this could happen’. This perspective was a common one taken by a lot of the respondents.

4.4.2 No Change in Perception

We identified that a determinant of consequential consumer behaviour was the individual’s personal engagement in the issue. A common perspective found in the empirical material resulted from no change in a participant’s perception after the crisis and apology message was presented. The lack of change in attitude would further result in no change in their purchasing intention either. If an individual had limited to no connection to the brand prior to the scandal, it would more likely end in their perception not having changed. Overall, there was an observed less personal association to Dove compared to H&M among the participants. Despite this, the respondents referred to both brands when they stated that they had no change in perception following the scandal.

> *“I just felt like personally it didn't really change my relation to H&M” - Sara*

"I would think one extra time yeah, but I wouldn't totally refrain from buying Dove" - Felix

The neutral stance taken by some of the participants is reflected in the quotes above. Both interviewees acknowledge that their relationship with the brand has not been affected by the scandal. The second quote also refers to the individual's purchase intention, with the participant expressing that even though they would think twice, their purchase intention has not been influenced. Even though we saw no evidence of a change in brand perception after the scandal, some of the empirical material pointed to other reasons than the scandal itself being the reason for this.

"This was never the reason for me not buying H&M from the beginning so it doesn't really influence my decision" - Matilda

"No not really since I'm not consuming them I don't have any opinion on them before" - Jacob

The quotes above illustrate that the participants with little or no previous connection to the brand, who did not see themselves as consumers of H&M and/or Dove, had no change in perception due to this lack of connection. When asked if this scandal affected the participants' purchase intention, they responded with a 'no' as they did not consume both the brand's products. As such, the interviewees did not have a connection to the brand that could be affected by such a scandal. Therefore, throughout the empirical material, it became evident that respondents who had little or no connection to the brand were more likely to take a neutral stance, and thus, have no change in their perception or affected purchase decision.

4.4.3 Negative Perception after Apology Message

In contrast to the participants who either accepted the apology or had no change in perception, the remaining participants negatively perceived the brand. This was shown either through the direct rejection of the apology, or through a worsened perception after we introduced the apology message. Those respondents who directly rejected the brand's apology also had their purchase intention affected negatively.

”It has changed slightly, I wouldn't actively go and buy Dove before neither but I think the chances of me buying from there is lower now” - Linnea

“Yes, since there are so many other similar brands, I see no reason to choose Dove now. Then I would rather buy another brand” - Felix

The first quote takes a less critical stance towards Dove, stating that they would not actively choose Dove prior to the scandal, this has slightly changed. They further expressed that their purchase intention was negatively affected, mentioning that the chances of buying dove products are lower following the scandal. The second quote takes a more critical stance regarding the number of substitutes present for the brand’s products. Therefore, they state that Dove had left them with no reason to choose their brand specifically, and we interpret this as directly rejecting the brand’s apology.

As previously discussed, crisis communication works to recover a brand's reputation after a crisis. The literature suggests that an apology strategy is an effective and commonly used method. Despite this, a unique perspective derived from the findings indicates that some participants gained a worse perception of the brand caused by the apology message. This perspective was solely evident following Dove’s apology, not H&M’s. This attitude indicated that the participants' expectations on the apology were not met, and as a result, expressed further frustration.

“This probably makes me even more mad, due to the fact that Dove didn't apologise and take the blame for it, I would probably be even more negative towards the brand than before you showed me this apology” - Adam

“The apology made no difference but rather I became even more irritated as it didn’t feel like Dove meant it” - Philip

As explained by the respondents, the framing of Dove’s apology harmed their perception of the brand. Instead of accepting or taking a neutral stance towards the apology message, we recognised that the respondents felt greater anger towards Dove than before. Both respondents

mention the aspect of responsibility, expressing that they did not feel like Dove claimed responsibility for their scandal. Another aspect brought up was the insincerity of the apology. The first quote highlights that Dove did not apologise, emphasising its insincere nature. The second quote expresses a similar opinion, where we see that the individual did not believe that Dove was remorseful. These reasons were noted as the cause for their worsened brand perception. Several respondents stressed that after the scandal and apology message, Dove was not a brand they would want to be associated with or support.

4.4.4 Intention to Engage in Negative Word of Mouth

Through the empirical material, it became evident that the participants' intention to engage in word of mouth, both face to face and electronically, was not as prominent as initially expected. Most participants expressed that they would not engage in e-WOM, such as spreading their thoughts and opinions on social media. However, certain interviewees highlighted that they would engage in a negative word of mouth face-to-face with friends or family.

> *"I know that I discussed it on a personal level, but it wasn't anything I posted on Social Media" - Sara*

> *"Not through social media I mean maybe a little bit face to face, but not something that I would initiate" - Linnea*

The quotes above reflect the reiterated perspective that participants would not engage in negative electronic word of mouth. We identified this attitude from another respondent whose intention to not engage in e-WOM was justified through their lack of social media use. However, they stressed that they engaged in traditional negative word of mouth with friends and family. Thus, possibly suggesting a choice to engage electronically if the individual was more active on social media. Despite this, the quotes above illustrated an intention for the participants to engage in a face-to-face discussion. Although, one individual highlights that they would not initiate a discussion about the scandal and only engage if it was brought up in conversation. We saw that this stance was further reinforced by several other participants who

expressed the same judgement. Overall, these expressions suggest that there is no strong will to engage in negative discussion among the participants, especially electronically.

4.5 Responsibilities of Corporations in Society

The final key identified theme found was the participants' view on the corporations' responsibilities in society. The critical appraisal considers the organisation's size, the position of strength, global influence, and immense reach that multinational corporations can potentially have through social media. The participants of the study emphasise the endless possibilities that large corporations have to engage in meaningful activities and spread awareness regarding social issues. From the interviews, we identify the high expectations that consumers have on global brands today.

> *"You would think such a large company, that should lead by example, can engage in much better activities than this, but instead releasing such an inappropriate campaign is unintelligent" - Philip*

Considering the powerful position and global impact that large multinational corporations have, such as H&M and Dove, one could think that they should by example and utilise the perfect opportunity to make a difference in societal challenges that such companies have. However, as expressed by participants, serious transgressions like H&M's 'coolest monkey in the jungle' scandal or Dove's body wash advert mirror ignorance and a waste of chances to engage in philanthropic activities. Not only did the large organisations contribute to the social problems, but the respondents suggest that they did not capture the opportunity to learn something from their mistakes. Nor did they teach their consumers about their wrongdoings for which their apologies could have been used.

> *"They could have explained what is wrong with society today and how they want to improve it, and taking on the responsibility and saying that they take it seriously" - Sara*

When commenting on the apology message, participants tended to discuss the great potential for corporations when providing an apology in response to the scandal. The respondents wish to see the shouldering of responsibility and seriousness to be reflected through the apology, and the possibility for companies to use apology marketing as a way to reflect further and review societal issues. However, as the quotation above reveals, the individual does not believe the apology is used to its full potential.

Moreover, we see from empirical findings that the students acknowledge the socioeconomic and political consequences that corporate transgressions should entail. The interviewees perceiving a corporate crisis as very severe and definitely preventable suggest that to reflect the seriousness of their malpractice, they also face economic and political repercussions. Not only on the level of the individual consumers' behaviour but perhaps also on national and international levels.

> *"Viewing H&M from an economic perspective, considering its presence in countless parts of the world and its substantial financial resources, I believe that such a serious scandal should even result in political consequences for the company inserted by people in leader positions, for example by affecting their freedom of trade through boycotting the brand" - Ellen*

Corporate transgressions that consumers perceive as very severe in the eye of a consumer, who is engaged and educated on societal issues, can seriously impact on the company performance due to standpoints taken by both the individual, celebrities and political leaders. Throughout the interview material, we identify participants who state that they will refrain from purchasing from the brand themselves, discourage friends and family, and engage in negative electronic and traditional word of mouth. Besides these intentions, as illustrated in the quote above, we acknowledge that the participants would like to see further consequences for the inappropriate company behaviour, especially those who perceive their actions as unforgivable. The individual wishes to see the imposition of barriers to trade and boycotting the brand on a broader scale. As discussed in chapter 4.1, providing the context for the scandals used for this qualitative study, celebrities, such as the singer 'The Weeknd', took a stance against the brand and dissociated themselves from the company. The idea of boycotting brands that misbehave is a stance of responsibility taken by the consumer to demonstrate their

disapproval of that company's actions, and to effectively warn other companies not to commit similar transgressions.

The data gathered from the semi-structured interviews reflects the debate on who has the responsibility to ensure that similar scandals do not happen again. Where the company's responsibility ends, and the consumers' responsibility takes over is a question on which we see our participants reflect. The students tend to associate Dove and H&M with unintelligence and incompetence to the scandals, raising the question of when it is not possible anymore to rely on the corporate world to shape principles for how organisations can fight racism and other societal issues. The participants suggest that at one point, the consumer has to put their foot down so other companies do not repeat scandals.

> *"I think it is unprofessional of H&M. Yet, society must also somehow be able to discuss what is wrong with it and not just say that H&M is wrong, blame them and move on. Then the next company does the same thing, so the focus should be to build principles for how companies should actually be able to work against racism and how to avoid things like this happening again" - Philip*

The quote above illustrates that the consumer is required to consider the implications of the scandal in an extended context. The respondents suggest that it is insufficient to blame the company without taking a stance yourself and reflecting on society's role in the discussion. Otherwise, there will not be any improvements in the long run and on a larger scale as companies continue to transgress. The division of responsibility between corporations, society, and the individual consumer for shaping the principles on how the corporate world has to fight societal issues such as racism is yet to be determined.

5 Discussion

The subsequent chapter presents a discussion of the main themes emerging from our empirical findings in relation to the relevance of the existing theories within crisis communication. The discussion sets out to explain how the empirical material validates or diverges from these theoretical frameworks. Generally, there are some parallels between the literature and our findings. On the other hand, identified discrepancies suggest a reevaluation of the relevance of existing theories with consideration of today's consumers.

5.1 Results in Relation to Existing Theory

In the following section, the findings derived from the analysis above will be discussed in relation to existing theoretical frameworks. This empirical material will be compared and contrasted to the three central theories in crisis communication: attribution theory, image restoration, and SCCT. Additionally, literature on the role of an apology as a crisis response, and apology marketing in a digital context will be examined in relation to our findings.

5.1.1 Attribution Theory

Regarding the theory of attribution, the students regarded the scandals associated with H&M and Dove as having an internal locus of control with an internal attribution. Although there were variances in perceived severity and intentions of the scandal, all participants of the study regarded the crisis responsibility to be attributed to the organisation. In contrast to the literature of Lee (2005), stating that the locus of control and controllability are interdependent, the empirical findings of this research study suggest exceptions to that interrelatedness. Diverging from the theory, respondents see an inclination of the scandal being out of the company's control in two circumstances, indicating that people who consider the locus of control to be internal also identify the crisis as controllable.

Firstly, the tendency of some interviewees to distinguish between the brand and the crisis, arguing that it is unfair to blame an entire organisation, suggests that the crisis is uncontrollable even though the responsibility is attributed to the company. Secondly, participants discussed poor communication within these large corporations as one of the causes of the scandal. They indicated that the defective communication and lack of control functions allowing for such a transgression to pass several leads within the company induce the crisis's uncontrollability. The two circumstances could potentially suggest another dimension to the theory that indicates that controllability and locus of control are interdependent, suggesting that the two concepts do not, in fact, have to influence one another but rather that other factors can disturb that theoretical relationship.

Weiner (1986) suggests that emotional responses to crises are dependent on causal attributions. On the one hand, the study confirms Coombs' (2007) research, as the participants expressed anger and shock over the situation when the organisation was deemed in control over the scandal. On the other hand, in the two circumstances described above, where the organisation was not in control, the participants did not only respond with pity as suggested by the theory. Participants who made a distinction between the brand, its employees and the crisis responded with pity. They suggested that neither the employees who were not directly involved in the scandal, nor the reputation of the organisation as a whole should suffer. Nevertheless, some participants responded with concern. These reactions were particularly evident in the circumstances where the interviewee believed that such a scandal should be possible to control for the company. However, an unsatisfactory communication system led to the scandal being perceived as out of their control. In contradiction to a response conveying pity that was expected from previous research, respondents highlighted concern for what could be possible when such a scandal has an internal locus of control but yet is uncontrollable.

The findings confirm the dissonance-attribution model developed by Takaku, Weiner and Ohbuchi (2001) to some extent. The alignment of the individual's expectations and reality is disrupted due to the scandal, and thereafter, for some consumers, restored with an effective apology. Although the model can explain the consumer behaviour of some participants, the empirical material shows evidence for tendencies that demonstrate the opposite. When the company attributes responsibility to internal factors in their apology, the reputational damage

increases. The lack of congruence with the dissonance-attribution model can be derived from the respondents' opinion regarding the insufficiency of an apology statement and the requirement for further actions to prove development. Additionally, in some instances, the respondent's brand perception even worsened after being presented with the crisis response. The deterioration in perception indicates that even an apology exclaiming self-attribution can detriment the brand image, not only apologies making external attributions as argued by previous research. Subsequently, the research study's findings suggest that even an effective apology is not guaranteed to reduce cognitive dissonance and obtain forgiveness. However, the consumer today believes that more concrete actions are necessary.

5.1.2 SCCT

The situational crisis communication theory building on attribution theory would suggest H&M and Dove to repair the intentional crisis with a rebuilding strategy. Per the suggestions of SCCT, most of the respondents attributed a high degree of responsibility to Dove and H&M. Subsequently, the companies responded with a rebuilding response strategy that accepted the responsibility to mitigate reputational damage. However, as we identified in the research findings, the message issued by Dove was not accepted as an apology by most of the respondents. However, it was instead reiterated as a statement that could be laughed at, and the company was criticised by participants for not taking the situation seriously. Similarly, a dominant number of the respondents were sceptical about the apology message issued by H&M as well. The findings suggest that companies have to improve their apologetic responses.

Moreover, the theory of situational crisis communication focuses on responsibility attribution in the choice of the response strategy. However, our empirical findings of this study suggests a possible addition to the well-established theory. Interestingly, the respondents discuss their opinion regarding the degree of accountability attributed to internal and external factors. Further, they elaborate on the fact that their expectations on the quality and extensiveness of the apology are shaped by their perceived intentions of the organisation with the scandal. The empirical findings suggest nuances to Coombs' (2007) research, proposing that the perceived

intentions also act as an important determinant in the demands placed on the response strategy.

5.1.3 Apology Marketing in a Digital Context

The global consumer base of multinational corporations and the omnipresence of social media has changed crisis management for organisations since the emergence of traditional media outlets and national consumer bases. In today's current environment, as previously mentioned, consumers are more engaged in issues and can express their opinions regarding transgressions to the company and the public through social media. The digital aspect distinguishes itself in our study in several ways. For example, its impactful role is evident in how it influences the perception of the severity and intentions of the crises. The interviewees suggest that the severity of the crisis is determined by the outpour on social media and confirm that the attributions made by media platforms greatly influence the attributions that consumers make as well (Mattila, 2009).

Schweitzer, Heshey and Bradlow (2006) find that once media has deemed a crisis to be intentionally harmful to stakeholders, apologies are ineffective due to the perceived insincerity of apologies following the media's condemnation. The findings of our study can partly be explained by this research and the eminent effect that social media has in comparison to the traditional media discussed in Schweitzer, Heshey and Bradlow (2006). The effect of social media is highly elevated due to its widespread reach and user base. This was shown through the surge in reactions after the transgressions of H&M and Dove. As determined, the apologies were interpreted as insincere by a majority of the respondents. This perception could partly be attributed to the inauthenticity associated with apologies after the media condemned the scandal as intentionally harmful. Considering that the scandals occurred in 2017, almost all interviewees recognised the adverts and were aware of the social media outpour that followed.

Although most of our participants had seen the scandal and the reactions on social media when the adverts were initially released, the engagement in negative e-WOM was less prominent than suggested by Jin, Liu and Austin (2014). The interviewees argued that their intention to engage in e-WOM was not very likely due to their minimal activity on social

media. Instead, the intention to spread damaging rumours and statements to friends and family was more prominent among the participants. However, when participants responded with anger over the scandal, their barrier to engaging in negative e-WOM due to minimal social media engagement, was overcome. It should be noted that even though our participants had a lower intention to engage in negative e-WOM, our study utilised a small sample size, and therefore, the findings should not be generalised to all consumers.

The empirical material suggested a variance in the preference regarding when the apology should optimally be issued for the consumer to be more forgiving towards the scandal. On the one hand, participants of the study expressed that they would have liked an immediate apology to have access to as much information as possible. They sought information regarding the intentions from the organisation's perspective before making a judgment regarding the responsibility attribution, severity of the crisis, and perceived intentions. With the incredibly rapid spread of information possible through social media channels, some interviewees vouched for an immediate response from H&M and Dove. They suggested that a quick response would minimise the spread of rumours, hinder the scandal from spiralling, or have the possibility to change the immediate negative reaction. The respondents stated that the adverse reaction is more likely when the background and intentions of the marketing campaign are not considered. In line with previous research (Colon & Murray, 1996; Jin, Liu & Austin, 2014), the student proposes that a quicker response could perhaps reduce the detrimental effect on the brand's reputation.

On the other hand, the study finds a dominant opinion among the respondents being the lack of seriousness that is reflected in the apology messages. The apologies issued tend not to be accepted by the respondents due to the absence of credibility. Instead, they require the company to show improvements before they can accept the apology. Therefore, an apology issued sooner rather than later reflects unseriousness. Participants would like to see concrete actions from the companies, instead of exploiting power words lacking meaning. This is a tendency common for immediate apologies, signifying that the company does not take the transgression seriously. In contrast, previous research states that a delay in a crisis response negatively affects consumer behaviour and brand perception (Colon & Murray, 1996). Nevertheless, our study contradicts the theory by suggesting that this is not the only possible

effect. Our findings suggest that a delay in a crisis response reflects seriousness, even in the context of social media, where information can spread rapidly.

5.1.4 Image Restoration

Benoit (1997) brought up a central theme in image restoration theory: the idea that consumer perception overrides reality. As such, it is decided by the consumers whether or not the transgression is perceived as offensive. Even if the act is not offensive, if consumers perceive it as such, that is a sufficient threat to the brand's image. In our empirical findings, one participant suggested that the crisis for H&M was not that they published the image. Instead, the crisis was the public's reaction to it. The debate regarding the origin of the crisis was further reinforced by the divide in respondents who believed that the H&M scandal was accidental or intentional. In the brand's apology, H&M referred to the scandal as accidental, meaning they did not perceive the image as provocative in its release. However, the participants interpreted it as offensive, which was then sufficient to threaten H&M's brand image. Therefore, through these findings, we can see that this has confirmed the literature findings by Benoit (1997), in which consumer perception does override reality.

Further evident in the empirical findings was the presence of the 'halo' effect, an aspect confirming the literature findings by Coombs and Holladay (2006). As previously discussed, an organisation's positive reputation is of great importance as it can limit the adverse outcomes of a scandal, an idea referred to as the 'halo' effect. In times of transgressions, a favourable reputation can act as a buffer. The empirical findings show that some participants acknowledge both brands' current diversity efforts, citing this as the reason for accepting the scandal. The participants view the scandals as accidental and can create a separation between the brand and the scandal. Therefore, allowing for their positive prior perception of the brand to outweigh the negative outcomes. In this case, our findings confirmed Benoit's literature findings as the participants' positive prior perception of H&M and Dove meant they possessed a halo effect and therefore accepted the brand's apologies.

However, a positive prior perception was not always found to end in the maintenance of consumer loyalty, resulting in variance with the literature. Participants who noted that they

had a positive relationship with Dove and H&M expressed shock when presented with the scandal, particularly in the case of Dove. One respondent highlighted that despite the positive association to Dove before the scandal, due to the availability of close substitutes and the expressed shock, the participant would see no reason to purchase a Dove product. A connection can be made to the perceived severity of the crisis, as Dove was generally recognised by participants as more severe when compared to H&M. This may suggest a reason for the change in the individuals' purchase intentions. However, according to Benoit (1997), the prior positive reputation was supposed to function as a buffer to limit negative consequences, therefore, deviating from the literature.

Furthermore, what is not considered in Benoit's (1997) image restoration theory is the aspect of a consumer's connection to the brand. We observed in our findings that consumers with a prior connection to the brand were more receptive and more likely to accept the apology. Whereas those participants who had little, or no connection often took a neutral stance regarding the brand and the apology message. However, some participants had little or no connection to the brand, and despite this, were interpreted to be even more agitated after Dove's apology message. So, even if the individual did not identify as a Dove consumer, they were still perceived to be angry. Considering this, the literature lacks acknowledgement of those not considered consumers of the brand. Non-consumers can spread negative statements and, therefore, pose a possible threat to the brand's reputation. This is particularly important in the age of social media due to public participation and the widespread reach. Therefore, the empirical findings of non-consumers as a stakeholder group are a possible aspect that could be considered in the literature.

Transgressions are commonly associated with violations of stakeholder expectations. Consequently, feelings of anger towards the organisation in question may arise. The feeling of anger and reputational damage is positively correlated. As such, the greater the anger toward the company, the greater the repetitional damage likely to be suffered. The literature suggests that an important factor for the successful image restoration process is reducing this anger through the acceptance of responsibility and the expression of regret in the response. Our study, however, revealed that despite Dove's apology, participants became more angered after the apology message was shown. In this case, the literature findings were in contrast to our empirical material. Although, some participants did not believe that Dove had accepted

responsibility and expressed regret over the advert, meaning that the feelings of anger in some of our participants did not end up being reduced by Dove's apology. The lack of effect on the consumer's anger can be interpreted as the apology did not live up to the expectations set by the participants. Nevertheless, the literature findings do not to consider the result of a worsened brand perception after the issuance of an apology message.

5.1.5 The Role of an Apology as a Crisis Response

Apologies in crisis communication have become a trend, with researchers like Coombs and Holladay (2008) suggesting that an apology's effectiveness has been overemphasised. As a result of its common use, consumers have slowly become overexposed. The empirical findings point to a tendency for participants to generalise the messages, seeing no uniqueness to each individual apology. From this uniform perspective on apologies, it can further be interpreted from the findings that participants do not recognise the distinguishing features of the apologies. One participant compared Dove's apology to a customer service message, further highlighting the standard features of apology marketing.

Several researchers have addressed the elements that constitute an effective apology, for example, Lazare (2004) identified four factors: acknowledging wrongdoing, how the crisis took place, a statement of regret with a dedication to preventing it from happening again, and a proposal of compensation. The literature argues that it is necessary to determine what constitutes an effective apology. Although this thesis does not assume the same managerial perspective. Instead, one can argue that there is no need to determine what makes an apology effective. Our findings suggest that apologies overall are not enough to recover from a severe crisis, especially a racial transgression, pointing to the outdatedness of this literature. As such, we found that apology marketing is at an end for the aware and critical consumers. These types of consumers can be seen as belief-driven, who see past companies' apologies. Many participants stressed that they required further action from the brand, adding pressure for organisations to be instrumental in, and take a stance on social issues. Although, those participants who are loyal consumers and less aware do not share the same view that apology marketing is at an end. Furthermore, these consumers are more likely to be receptive and accept an organisation's apology.

The literature findings mentioned in message framing theory suggest that emphasising the company's corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts in the apology message reduces the negativity of consumers and, thus, the adverse effects on the brand (Chung & Jiang, 2017). However, our empirical material indicated the opposite to the findings of the researchers. Participants emphasised that the inclusion of a brand's CSR actions deflected the attention away from the actual scandal. Additionally, they interpreted the incorporation as a way to cover up their wrongdoings by showing all the positive undertakings that are being done instead. The supposed reduction in negativity of consumers and effects on the brand was established not to be 'true' in our research study. As a result, this negative interpretation confirms the empirical findings deviation from findings in message framing theory.

The theories of image restoration, SCCT, attribution theory and other previous research conducted within the field of crisis communication can be applied to some extent to the context of today's consumer experiencing a racial transgression. However, as we have interpreted from the empirical findings, there are multiple notions that do not adhere to the findings of previous literature. Our findings suggest several aspects that could possibly be added to or updated within the well-established theories explaining crisis communication to be relevant for the critical consumer of today.

5.2 Empirical Findings Extended to the Broader Context

The findings discussed in relation to the literature above can be extended beyond the theoretical frameworks to a broader context, referring to the role of corporations in society. We observed that the participants critically evaluate the responsibilities of organisations in societal issues from the interview responses. The great market share and significant global influence, especially through social media, that many organisations possess have led to consumers' creation of certain expectations. Our interpretation of the interview responses suggests that consumers expect organisations to lead by example and take an active role in social challenges. This perspective was often taken by those participants who expressed dissatisfaction with the apology message and provided possible improvements. These improvements shared the common characteristic of taking action, where participants wanted to see more being done about the issue. The respondents suggested efforts such as launching a

new campaign to disassociate from the scandal and display the brands' actual values. In a way, a preventable crisis presents itself as an opportunity for organisations to promote societal change and improve existing operations. A crisis, such as the two presented in this study, raises awareness and highlights a controversial issue where consumer expectations and efforts by organisations are yet to meet.

Evident throughout the empirical findings is the opinion expressed by participants that the issued apologies are not enough to make up for the crisis and are uniform in nature. One participant referred to Dove's apology as being corporate, giving rise to a paradox in which corporate apologies should not seem corporate. Therefore, the empirical material implies that the best practice in terms of issuing an apology is one that does not appear to be corporate. This can further imply that the respondents want the apology to seem human, and in some way, relatable. Moreover, the empirical findings point to participants who express their own values through purchases. In other words, belief-driven consumers. Several participants took a critical stance against Dove after the crisis, expressing that the brand is not one they would want to be associated with or support. As such, the participants' personal values were mirrored in their decision to avoid Dove, where their values did not align. Such consumers can be referred to as belief-driven consumers, evident in our study to express that greater efforts by the organisations besides issuing an apology is needed.

Belief-driven consumers require brands to take a stance on societal issues, however, there is a risk that follows in doing so. In a sense, taking a stance can be referred to as a balancing act, as evident in the cases of Dove and H&M, where it can do more harm than good. Both companies stated that their intentions were to promote diversity and inclusion through the campaigns, although their audience had perceived it as the opposite, interpreting it as offensive instead. This highlights the need for brands to carefully integrate cultural diversity as well as other societal issues such as promoting different body types through marketing campaigns.

In regard to the research question, apologies as a response to severe transgressions are perceived as insufficient, unserious, and uniform in nature by our participants. Considering the misalignment of today's consumers and current efforts by organisations using apology marketing, crisis communication is facing an uphill battle with belief-driven consumers. Our

research points to greater efforts needed to overcome societal challenges than the issuance of an apology by organisations after causing a preventable scandal.

6 Conclusion

The concluding chapter presents a summary of the key findings derived from our research study. The relevance of the theoretical frameworks in our context is summarised, along with the empirical materials' application to a broader context. Thereafter, the implications of our findings in both practical and theoretical terms are discussed. Finally, the limitations of the research process are acknowledged and recommendations for future research are presented.

6.1 Summary

Through a qualitative multi-case study design, we examined how Swedish students perceived apology marketing when used in response to racism scandals. H&M and Dove were used as the two case studies interviewing the participants in semi-structured interviews. Although the main empirical findings confirmed the literature to some extent, they point to the outdatedness of the theoretical frameworks.

Firstly, the literature recommends using an apology in response to a severe crisis (Coombs, 2007). However, one of the prominent findings derived from our interviews suggests an un-seriousness associated with apologies, where some participants referred to it as corporate. The respondents observed the apologies to be uniform in nature, and this perspective highlights the overemphasis of apologies as a response strategy. Additionally, the un-seriousness was also expressed by participants when the apology was released too soon, as this showed a lack of effort by corporations to take action and make changes to their operations.

Secondly, the literature does not consider the result of a worsened brand perception after the issuance of an apology message. Through the empirical findings, we observed that certain participants expressed greater anger after reading the apology message due to the corporation's lack of responsibility and remorse. As such, the literature tends to lack acknowledgement of those stakeholders who are not considered consumers of the brand, possibly suggesting an addition to the existing theoretical frameworks.

Lastly, our main findings suggest that engaging in apology marketing is more than restoring consumer trust and brand image; but rather that organisations are expected to lead by example and take a stance on social issues. When asked if the apology could be improved, a common factor highlighted by participants was the element of taking action, suggesting efforts such as releasing a new campaign showing the brand's actual values. As a result, a crisis can present itself as a learning opportunity for organisations to promote societal change.

Respondents who require brands to take a stance on social issues and their personal values are reflected in their purchasing decisions and can be referred to as belief-driven consumers. Corporations today are faced with the emergence of these types of consumers and the extensive influence of social media. This creates a new kind of digital context where the expectations of these individuals challenge corporations. Overall, our empirical findings point to the fact that apology marketing is at an end for the aware and critical consumers in terms of its theory and the current corporate practice.

6.2 Research Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

During the course of the research process, several limitations of the study emerge. These constraints are important to acknowledge and open up opportunities for future research. The focus of our research paper was restricted to racial types of transgressions. As such, our findings cannot be generalised and applied to other kinds of crises. Subsequently, we suggest future research to explore whether the role of apology marketing in today's context differs across various types of transgressions, for example, within environmental crises. Regarding the theories we chose to evaluate in our study, we fully acknowledge that there are other empirically sound theories applicable within crisis communication. As such, further research can evaluate the applicability of different theories in this field in the context of today's society with social media and the emergence of the belief-driven consumer.

Furthermore, we determine the number of cases used in the research study to be a limitation. Due to time constraints and the depth of research needed, we only explored two case studies;

H&M and Dove. These two cases are only a small representation of the number of existing racial transgressions by organisations, and thus the opinions and thoughts of the participants are limited in scale. Hence, generalisations might be difficult to draw. Therefore, future research can explore a greater number of case studies, both focusing on other racial transgressions and other types of crises. We extend the same limitation to the number of participants within the sample included in our research study. We interviewed 11 Swedish students, also due to time constraints and the limited scope of this thesis. As such, this makes it difficult to generalise the findings to all students in Sweden and to other parts of the world. Hence, another suggestion for further examination is to include a larger, cross-cultural sample. There is a significant opportunity to explore differences in perceptions of crisis communication across cultures through a comparative study.

Another limitation to acknowledge is the level of participant involvement in the crises. A prerequisite we determined when selecting our case studies was a high connection between the brand and the participants. However, some participants were observed to not be as involved or connected to the brand as initially intended, which may have impacted the results through the participants' opinion on the severity of the crisis and its purchase intention. An interesting topic for further research could be to more thoroughly investigate how the individual's personality traits or connection to a specific societal issue influences their perception of apology marketing. Similarly, future research can explore the individual's social media habits concerning their perception of crisis communication strategies and subsequent consumer behaviour.

6.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The research findings contribute to the field of crisis communication with a contemporary perspective on conventional theories, suggesting both theoretical and practical implications. With respect to the theoretical contributions of the thesis, our findings assess the relevance of theoretical frameworks that are widely applied in crisis management. The discussion evaluates the extensiveness of literature, suggesting obsolescence of the three principal theories of crisis communication. The empirical material points toward a need for readjustments to improve the

applicability of the theories in a contemporary context with belief-driven consumers and the widespread use of social media.

Furthermore, our research indicates that the importance of the consumers' perceived intentions behind the scandal is underestimated in previous literature. The findings illustrate further theoretical implications in relation to the status of the apology as a crisis response strategy. Acknowledging that the respondents had a uniform perspective on apologies and the difficulty in issuing believable apologies after serious transgressions, this points to the need for theoretical literature to reevaluate the theory on the effectiveness of apology marketing. Perhaps, it is even necessary to provide completely new theoretical suggestions that incorporate the societal perspective when considering crisis management.

Regarding the practical implications of the empirical findings, we suggest that in the current environment, apology marketing implies more than trying to regain consumer trust and restore brand image. Our study suggests that issuing an apology following a severe transgression is considered by the belief-driven consumer as insufficient, impersonal, and lacks seriousness. As such, implications for corporations arise as the expectations of the belief-driven consumers surpass the current efforts by organisations. The participants' responses suggest that a crisis turns into an opportunity for organisations expected to initiate social change. Consequently, the study generates implications for corporations, enlarging their responsibility within societal issues. Thus, it provides contributions to the field of research by emphasising the high relevance of discussing the corporation's role for societal development.

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Appendix A- Interview Guide

Brand perception before crisis

Main question: What comes to your mind when you think of X?

- What associations do you have with the brand?
- What are you basing your opinions on? (e.g. past shopping experience, news, rumours, friends/family… etc.)
- Have you heard of any scandals from this brand?

Main question: What relationship do you have with X as a consumer? Have you consumed any of their products in the past 6 months?

- If not, why?
- If yes, do you identify yourself as a X customer?

How likely are you to purchase a product from brand X in the next month?

Main question: How do you talk about this brand with friends?

- Do you speak negatively or positively about it?
- Would you recommend this company to a friend?

Scandal is presented

Brand perception after crisis, before apology

What are your reactions to this scandal?

Do you consider the scandal to be accidental, preventable or out of their control?

How severe do you perceive this crisis to be?

How do you feel about the brand after hearing about this scandal?

How likely are you to purchase a product from brand X in the next month?

Have you engaged in spreading negative statements/opinions about this brand after the scandal, either electronically or through word-of-mouth? (if interviewee never heard of scandal - formulate as "would you…")

Apology Presented

Brand perception after apology

After hearing this, what are your initial thoughts?

- How do you view X as a company after hearing this apology message?

Do you feel that X has accepted responsibility for the scandal? How/Why, why not?

Do you see a scandal like this (racism scandal) happening again in the near future (e.g.next 2 years)?

Has your decision to purchase a product from this brand in the next month changed? Why/ why not?

Would you/have you conversed negatively about X after hearing this apology? Either through social media or in real life?

As a consumer, do you accept the apology? Why/why not?

How could they have improved their response?