The total amount of characters in this thesis amounts to 159,019 compliant to 72,25 standard pages. Conferring with requirements this excludes spaces, abstract, table of contents, list of references and appendices.

Appendices are enclosed separately.

June 2015

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Anders Bjerre Jakobsen (AJ86829)
Abstract

Previously, extensive studies of social media as a powerful communications tool in B2C markets have been conducted, however, this form of communication has not yet been examined into depth in connection with B2B markets. In the B2B industry, the personal relation carries a lot of weight and this thesis project attempts to clarify if and how the use of social media platforms can be used to recreate the personal atmosphere in a digital environment. Therefore, the purpose of this report is to examine to what extent the use of social media communication seems to be applicable in a B2B context.

During recent years, the classic B2B company Maersk Line has leaped onto the social media scene as an industry pioneer due to the company's extensive use of social media platforms, and for that purpose, Maersk Line is the case company of this project. Maersk Line’s main goal with their social media actions is to ‘get closer to their customers’, and therefore, this thesis project attempts to clarify if Maersk Line seems to be focusing on developing and maintaining strong customer-supplier relationships through the use of social media platforms, and if so, how this comes across in their social media communication. For this task, the theoretical areas of stakeholder communication and relationship marketing are included in the thesis. First of all, the notion of stakeholder communication is applied to examine how Maersk Line communicates and interacts with their stakeholders on social media, and furthermore, the area of relationship marketing is added on with the aim of examining to what extent Maersk Line seems to be focusing on their customer-supplier relationships on social media, and how this might be evident through the content they post and their online interactions.

The philosophical worldview of this report is social constructivism as the overall objective of the project is to create an understanding of Maersk Line’s social media communication, and this understanding is constructed through inductive research. Also, the thesis is significantly characterized by the hermeneutic research approach, which is based on interpretation, as this accurately characterizes the researcher’s process because the analysis of the empirical data is highly affected by the personal and subjective impressions of the researcher. In practice, the research is conducted through extensive qualitative document analyses of Maersk Line’s Facebook content from the last six months of year 2014.
The analysis of the empirical data is conducted through two completely separate units of analysis, one dealing with stakeholder communication and the other dealing with relationship marketing. What these two units of analysis clarify is that Maersk Line does succeed in coming across as an inclusive and open company on Facebook. This is vital as they are dealing with a very important stakeholder group, their customers that is, who require a lot of attention. And overall, the company does succeed in establishing an interactive environment in terms of effective organisational listening. However, their communication and interactions with the Facebook followers do not reach the level of a dialogue, but instead comes across as predominantly persuasive in nature. A reason for this is that there exist a constant power imbalance between Maersk Line and their followers on Facebook both in terms of Maersk Line’s willingness to participate in conversations and interactions and also in terms of the focus being on Maersk Line in the majority of the content. It is evident that Maersk Line has a lot of focus on developing strong customer relationships on Facebook, and they come across as relating to their market in a predominantly relational way as the company focuses more of their attention towards building up relationships than they do on business transactions and profits. However, there are still improvements to be made if Maersk Line wants to increase their impact on the customer-perceived relationship value.

Essentially, Maersk Line comes across as a success in terms of taking the company closer to the customers on social media; however, they are not found equally successful in taking the customers closer to the company.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

During recent years, globalisation has changed the way marketing and public relations work is conducted (Wakefield 2009). A significant reason for this change was the introduction of the Internet, especially Web 2.0 and social media, which emerged in the slipstream of globalisation and has since developed rapidly: “75% of Internet surfers used ‘Social Media’ in the second quarter of 2008 by joining social networks, reading blogs, or contributing reviews to shopping sites; this represents a significant rise from 56% in 2007” (Kaplan & Haenlein 2009: 59).

Social media has caused a shift in locus of activity away from the desktop and towards the web (Berthon et al. 2012). Where communication through the traditional broadcast media was done mainly as monologues, that is, one sender talking to many receivers without a direct option for giving feedback, social media communication has instead opened up to a dialogue approach where every actor has an immediate and powerful voice (Lomborg 2011). This possibility for instant engagement creates a speed of response that can be breath taking, and it makes the medium very collaborative and intimate as it facilitates a platform for having ‘online conversations’.

In business terms, social media has been referred to as consumer generated media as it “describes a variety of new sources of online information that are created, initiated, circulated and used by consumers intent on educating each other about products, brands, services, personalities and issues” (Mangold and Faulds 2009: 358). Social media enables customers to talk directly to one another, sharing and discussing brand experiences in a frequency that makes it impossible for a company to control what is being said. Before social media, a company was able to contain a problem within a given country or even local community; however, social media now makes it possible for corporate stories to be spread all over the world within minutes (Wakefield 2009). In other words, social media has enabled stakeholders outside a company to set the online agenda and company managers must learn to shape these discussions if the end result is to turn out to their advantage (Mangold and Faulds 2009).

For companies, there are definitely also benefits to gain through involvement on the social media platforms. It is a cheap approach to reach a huge, international audience, thereby, creating valuable brand awareness. And social media can also be used to enter into dialogue with a company’s
stakeholders and surroundings, and through that, obtain insights, which would otherwise be difficult to facilitate. According to Kim and Ko (2012), these factors can have a significant effect on an organisation’s financial results, and by that, social media can be seen as a tool that contributes to a company’s bottom line results.

For several years, the benefits of social media have been known and recognized by Business-to-Consumer (B2C) companies, who are able to communicate directly to their customers, that is, consumers who are also the end-user of the company’s products or services, through social media, thereby establishing both brand awareness and a positive brand attitude. However, in Business-to-Business (B2B) marketing, where business is conducted between companies, the use of social media is not as common as in B2C marketing (Jussila et al. 2013). One of the reasons for this is that the effect of social media as a communications tool in B2B marketing is still an unexplored area, and many B2B companies are not convinced that social media is the right way to target their customers.

This may sound strange as there are a lot of similarities in B2C and B2B marketing when it comes to communicative needs: Both allow for engaging with and obtaining new customers, increasing communication with existing customers, and receiving input on new product ideas etc. (Jussila et al. 2013). And these are all purposes that social media are able to fulfil.

However, there is also a long line of differences in B2C and B2B marketing that require B2B communication practitioners to reinvent the way that social media is used. The perhaps most significant difference is the focus on the relationship between customer and supplier. Whereas B2C companies have a lot of focus on the business transaction itself, B2B companies instead spend many resources on developing and maintaining relationships with their customers (Coviello et al. 2002). As the traditional “off-line” approach in creating relationships in the physical world carries a lot of importance in B2B marketing, it is sometimes undermining the new, emerging approaches to communication such as social media (Shedd 2013). Therefore, the recipe for B2B success on social media has not yet been fully identified, which is one of the reasons why social media is not anchored in B2B marketing in the same way as we see it happening in B2C marketing (Heath et al. 2013). Today, however, social media platforms play such a big role in our everyday lives that B2B companies are beginning to embrace it as a relevant communication channel. One of these companies is Maersk Line.

Maersk Line (part of Maersk Group) is the world’s largest shipping company with 25,000 employees in 150 countries. In recent years, the Danish shipping company has launched a social media
campaign with the main goal to “get closer to our customers” (Maersk Line Social 2015), and today, the company is active on most platforms. The reason for this shift was that the company wanted to move away from ‘closed doors’ and secrecy, and towards more openness with the customers in focus through communication and interaction with ‘fans’ instead of hard-core marketing (Appendix 1). And their online presence has been a great success in terms of their number of followers and a record-high engagement score for which they have been highly appraised as being a social media pioneer in the B2B industry (Wichmann 2012). According to Jonathan Wichmann (2012), who is former head of social media at Maersk Line and the founder of the campaign, the company has several good reasons for using social media such as product development, brand awareness and employer branding, however, one purpose overshadows the rest: Maersk Line wants to get closer to their customers.

But is that actually the result of Maersk Line’s social media activities? The company sees social media as an ideal way to get closer to their customers, but is Maersk Line in fact able to interact with their stakeholders through social media? And to what extent is Maersk Line able to use the social platforms to develop and maintain their customer-supplier relationships? Social media may be a cheap way to engage with a large, international audience, but if the company ends up using the social media platforms as a traditional marketing channel, it may not be worth the trouble and resources spent. These uncertainties in the new, digital environment of B2B marketing is some of the issues that this report will attempt to clarify.

A closer look at how Maersk Line manages their customer relations in a B2B context through social media will be taken in this thesis project. Throughout the thesis, there will be referred to customer-supplier relationships, and when that is, Maersk Line is always the supplier and Maersk Line’s B2B customers are always the customer.

1.1 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Maersk Line is a classic B2B company that has put in a massive effort on social media platforms in recent years. The common understanding is that Maersk Line is applying social media in a way that benefits the company in terms of bringing them closer to their B2B customers. This report will take a closer look at how Maersk Line, as the supplier, is engaging with their B2B customers on social media and to what extent they seem to manage and develop their customer relationships.
through the digital platforms. Therefore, the following problem statement is posed, which this report will attempt to answer:

______________________________________________________

*In B2B marketing, trust and commitment is very important in customer-supplier relationships. Does Maersk Line seem to focus on developing and maintaining strong customer-supplier relationships through the use of social media platforms, and if so, how does this come across in their social media communication?*

______________________________________________________

As an extension of the problem statement, a couple of additional research questions are presented below:

**RQ1:** *How does Maersk Line’s stakeholder communication come across on social media?*

**RQ2:** *How is Maersk Line’s focus on customer-supplier relationships evident through the content they post and their interactions on social media?*

Based on an in-depth analysis of a set of empirical data, the problem statement as well as the research questions will be attempted answered in the conclusive remarks of the thesis.

### 1.2 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

Previous studies have examined the use of social media as a powerful communications tool in B2C markets; however, this form of communication has not yet been examined into depth in connection with B2B markets. The purpose of this report is to examine to what extent the use of social media communication seems to be applicable by a B2B organisation. In B2B marketing, the personal relation carries a lot of weight and this thesis seeks to shed light on if and how the use of social media platforms can be used to recreate the personal atmosphere in a digital environment. Drawing on the work of stakeholder communication and relationship marketing, the study explores the use of social media communication in a B2B context. For this purpose, Maersk Line has been picked as the case company because of their extensive use of social media platforms making them a so-
cial media pioneer in the B2B industry. The company's presence and activities on social media will make up the foundation of the thesis of which an in-depth study will be conducted. Maersk Line operates in an international B2B market, and therefore, all of their social media communication is consistently done in English. It is their efforts in interacting and engaging with an international B2B audience through social media platforms that will be examined in this thesis.
1.4 THESIS STRUCTURE

Introduction
Introduction to the thesis and a presentation of the purpose of the study as well as the proposed problem statement

Theoretical framework
An elaborate description of the theoretical foundation of this thesis, which are the areas of stakeholder communication and relationship marketing

Methodology
A presentation of the research approach and the research method of this thesis as well as an outline of how the empirical data is collected and analysed in practice

Analysis
In-depth analysis of the empirical data. The analysis is conducted in two separate analytical units. First, the theoretical unit of stakeholder communication is applied, and second, the area of relationship marketing completes the analysis

Conclusion
The problem statement of the thesis is answered based on the results from the analysis

Discussion
Further discussion of social media in a B2B context including the limitations of this thesis as well as possibilities for future research

Figure 1.1: Thesis structure
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To fully comprehend the context of this thesis project, an elaborate description of the theoretical framework will be presented in this section focusing on the aspects that will make up the foundation of the data analysis.

2.1 STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION

Stakeholder communication is an important aspect for an organisation in their work to develop and protect their customer-supplier relationships as well as their own reputation (Cornelissen 2011). In this thesis, the notion of stakeholder communication will be included to examine how Maersk Line communicates with their stakeholders on social media, and in the following section, different aspects of stakeholder communication will be introduced. First, stakeholder communication as a general concept will be explained. Second, different types of stakeholders will be described based on the “Stakeholder Salience Model”. Third, three different strategies in stakeholder communication, that is, the informational, the persuasive and the dialogue approach, will be accounted for, and finally, the concept of organisational listening will be included to provide as versatile a concept of stakeholder communication as possible.

2.1.1 STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION IN GENERAL

In 1984, Edward Freeman defined the concept of a stakeholder as “… any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s purpose and objectives” (Weber and Marley 2012: 629).

Some stakeholders are contractual as they have a legal relationship with the organisation such as employees or shareholders. Other stakeholders such as local communities and media have a more diffuse, non-contractual stakeholder relationship, as there are no legal dependencies. However, all stakeholders have one thing in common: They are all important to the organisation as they all have the ability to impact the organisation’s performance (Woerkum and Aarts 2008). No organisation is
immune from public opinion and stakeholder relationships are in fact mutual dependencies: Stakeholders are affected by the operations of an organisation; however, stakeholders are also capable of affecting the performance of the organisation (Cornelissen 2011).

“The days when companies could do as they pleased, fly in the face of public opinion, turn a deaf ear to the cries of staff, routinely give ‘no comment’ to the press and speak to the City via their profit margins are long gone…” (Scholes and James 1997: 278)

An organisation should not underestimate the power of stakeholders. Should this happen anyway, it can have fatal consequences to the development of stakeholder relationships (Payne and Giacalone 1992). However, before even talking about stakeholder communication, a company needs to identify who their primary stakeholders are and where they will need to focus their energy to achieve effective stakeholder communication. Fundamentally, stakeholder communication is about sharing the company values and building trust. If organisations are caught in the act of telling different stories to different people or displaying inconsistent behaviour, stakeholders will find this unacceptable and the repercussions may be difficult to recover from (Scholes and James 1997). In order for an organisation to identify the importance of different stakeholder groups, they need knowledge about the specific stakes of a group (e.g. equity or economic stakes), knowledge about the opportunities and challenges in connection with that specific stakeholder group, and knowledge about the responsibilities that the organisation have to these stakeholders (Cornelissen 2011).

When these factors are decided, effective stakeholder communication is about providing the stakeholders with the type of information about the part of the company in which they have an interest. This may sound easy but mastering the art of giving the right people the right information can prove much harder than expected (Cornelissen 2011). When the flow of information is upheld during longer periods of time, this will help establish strong stakeholder relationships.

### 2.1.2 Different Types of Stakeholders

As mentioned, identifying the primary stakeholder groups is a difficult task. One way of doing this is by using the ‘Stakeholder salience model’ (Mitchell et al. 1997). Salience is about how visible or prominent a stakeholder is in terms of three main attributes: power, legitimacy and urgency. By determining this, a company will know where to focus most of their attention in order for them to meet the needs and requirements of the specific stakeholder. By identifying the presence or ab-
sence of the three mentioned attributes, a classification of the groups of stakeholders can be constructed. According to the ‘Stakeholder salience model’ seven different types of stakeholders can be identified from the three before-mentioned attributes (Mitchell et al. 1997). These seven types are listed here.

1. **Dormant stakeholders**: This type of stakeholder only contains the power attribute. Dormant stakeholders have the power to impose their will on others but as they do not have the legitimate or urgency attribute, their power remains dormant.

2. **Discretionary stakeholders**: If a stakeholder is discretionary, this means that they hold a legitimate claim, but this is neither supported by the power to impose this on others nor an urgency claim.

3. **Demanding stakeholders**: These stakeholders are the ones that have an urgency claim, but who do not possess powerful or legitimate claims to impose their urgency on anybody else.

The first three types of stakeholders are called ‘latent stakeholders’ as they only possess one of the three attributes (Mitchell et al. 1997). These stakeholders will need the other attributes to support their claims and as long as this is not the case, they must be assumed not to be the primary focus of the company.

4. **Dominant stakeholders**: These types of stakeholders possess both the attributes of power and legitimacy, and therefore, these stakeholders will take a dominant position over the company. Even though they lack the urgent claim, they will want to influence the company.

5. **Dangerous stakeholders**: The dangerous type of stakeholders are those who lack the legitimate attribute to get something imposed on a company but who possess a powerful and urgent claim, and thereby, the drive to try. This can prove dangerous to a company.

6. **Dependent stakeholders**: These stakeholders are dependent of the company to get something done as they do not possess the power to do so themselves. They have the attributes of legitimacy and urgency, but without the powerful claim they will need the support of the company to succeed in being influential.
Stakeholder types 4-6 are called ‘expectant stakeholders’ as they possess two of the desired attributes to obtain influence over a company (Mitchell et al. 1997). The company will need to communicate to these groups on a regular basis in order for them to establish a strong relationship where they know where they have the other party.

7. **Definitive stakeholder:** When a company identifies a stakeholder as being definitive, this stakeholder must get a lot of attention and must be communicated with often. This type of stakeholder possesses all the required attributes, and therefore, these stakeholders need to be prioritized more than other stakeholders as they hold a lot of power over the company.

![Stakeholder Salience Model](image-url)

*Figure 2.1: The stakeholder salience model (core instead of definitive stakeholder) (Olson 2013)*
The purpose of identifying these attributes is to identify which type of stakeholder Maersk Line’s B2B customers are. When this is done, it will be possible to demonstrate how the company should relate to them in the most effective way in order to meet the communicative needs of the B2B customers.

2.1.3 Three Strategies of Stakeholder Communication

The stakeholder salience model provides an insight into how intensely an organisation needs to communicate with its stakeholders. And there are different approaches to stakeholder communication. These different approaches have been grouped into three overall strategies each emphasizing different levels of communication intensity from simply informing stakeholders about the decisions of the organisation to actively communicating with a group of stakeholders on an on-going basis. The ideal use of the strategies presented below will depend on the salience of the specific stakeholder group and the need for active engagement to build long-term relationships (Cornelissen 2011).

The first strategy is the informational strategy. This strategy is also known as the one-way symmetrical model of communication as this approach is simply about informing a stakeholder about something concerning the organisation. Communication channels like press releases or company websites are appropriate vehicles for this kind of information sharing (Cornelissen 2011).

The second strategy is called the persuasive strategy. Here, the organisation tries to “change and tune the knowledge, attitude and behaviour of stakeholders in a way that is favourable to the organization” (Cornelissen 2011: 50), and this can for example be facilitated through advertising campaigns or meetings and discussions between the organisation and the stakeholders, where they are given the opportunity to provide feedback. Persuasion has long been a key element in public relations work, and according to Woerkum and Aarts (2008) it still is: “Persuasion continues to be an integral function of public relations activities (...) aimed at external publics” (p. 200). The persuasive strategy is also known as the two-way asymmetrical model of communication because it is two-way communication on unequal terms. Whereas organisations apply the persuasive strategy to affect the attitudes and behaviour of their stakeholders, the stakeholders, in turn, do not have the same possibilities for affecting the organisation, as the organisation indicates no willingness to change.
The third and final strategy is the dialogue strategy. This strategy is a two-way symmetrical model of communication as both parties, that is the stakeholder and the organisation, “mutually engage in an exchange of ideas and opinions” (Cornelissen 2011: 50). In this approach, active consultation of stakeholders is the cornerstone of a process where mutual understanding and a willingness to change is the focus of both parties. For organisations, it is a good idea to engage in dialogues with salient and powerful stakeholders in order for the organisation to maintain and develop their beneficial relationships. According to Scholes and James (1997), “the key feature of tomorrow’s successful company will be its inclusive approach to business – actively communicating with and involving a wide range of stakeholder groups” (p. 280).

In any case, it is a good idea to listen to important stakeholders such as customers and shareholders and actively involve them in the decision-making of the organisation. As Singer and Kayson emphasize in their study from 2004, consistency and transparency are key in effective stakeholder communication when emphasizing the interactions with the most salient and powerful stakeholders on a continuous and relational basis as the aim here is to build long-term relationships (Singer and Kayson 2004).

![Figure 2.2: The three strategies of stakeholder communication (Cornelissen 2011)](image)

2.1.4 ORGANISATIONAL LISTENING

The art of stakeholder listening is an important part of good stakeholder communication. When stakeholders are invited to give their opinion on company related matters, this may result in valuable knowledge for both stakeholder and organisation. Creating forums for commenting and sharing
experiences or inviting stakeholders in the creation of values are examples of the facilitation of a mutual beneficial knowledge sharing partnership (Scholes and James 1997).

The general definition of listening accepted by the International Listening Association in 1996 states that listening is “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages” (Burnside-Lawry 2011: 148). As an extension of this general definition, the concept of organisational listening was later defined by Burnside-Lawry (2011) as “not simply limited to the listening skills that employees do or do not possess, but includes the environment in which the listening occurs that is shaped by the organization and is then one of the characteristics of the organizational image” (p. 148). In other words, organisational listening involves the general definition of listening, however, the way that the meaning is constructed and responded to is highly affected by the organisational environment. The behaviour of individuals is inseparable from the organisation they represent and the outcome of this organisational listening, in turn, reflects the organisational image. Dysfunctional listening may come across as organisations trying to dominate rather than cooperate with their communities and the negative outcomes may include financial costs due to damage on stakeholder relationships (Payne and Giacalone 1992).

Effective organisational listening leads to a better understanding of the needs and values of the stakeholders and this is one of the cornerstones in building a positive organisation-stakeholder relationship, as it facilitates effective organisation-stakeholder communication. In such a process, the facilitation of dialogue is important in which listening is a vital component. Genuine dialogue is necessary for the achievement of mutual understanding between parties and relationship building (Burnside-Lawry 2011).

The conditions for effective organisational listening vary from business to business, and therefore, it is assumed difficult to make one recipe for success. However, Burnside-Lawry (2011) points out some general elements that would be important in organisational listening across all businesses: “The presence of affective, cognitive, and behavioural attributes that contribute to ‘accuracy’, the perceptions that the listener has accurately received and understood the message sent, and ‘effectiveness’, where the listener demonstrates supportive behaviour to enhance the relationship between speaker and listener.” (p. 150)

Based on this definition and the findings of the study conducted by Burnside-Lawry (2011), seven conditions of ineffective organisational listening were constructed. These seven conditions are in-
dicators of an organisation that is not listening effectively to its stakeholders and they are described below:

- **Not appropriate organisation behaviour**: The behaviour of the organisation comes across as being defensive and arrogant.
- **Corporate culture**: The corporate culture of the organisation comes across as not regarding stakeholder engagement as a priority, not exhibiting willingness to change, and not encouraging stakeholder participation. In this case, the organisation does not listen effectively to its stakeholders.
- **Power imbalance**: Examples of covert and overt sources of power imbalances are indicators that an organisation is not listening effectively.
- **Not sincere**: Stakeholders associate an organisation’s lack of sincerity with perceptions of ineffective organisational listening.
- **Not comprehensible**: Guidelines and protocols that are understood by all stakeholders are of great importance. Otherwise, the organisation comes across as disregarding certain stakeholder groups.
- **Not knowledgeable**: An organisation that allocates third-line or lower managers to attend meetings is an organisation that lacks commitment to effective organisation listening.
- **Not ideal speech conditions**: Communication aimed at creating mutual understanding between parties requires the creation of a public space where participants can freely challenge organisational policies, statements, or actions.

Organisational listening is perceived as an important ingredient in an organisation’s engagement with their customers, and therefore, Maersk Line’s social media communication will be evaluated in terms of the seven conditions of organisational listening. Even though the combination may seem unnatural, it is found suitable for determining Maersk Line’s ability to listen to and include their stakeholders on social media. This will be assessed based on their efforts in attending to stakeholder needs on social media and their interactions with stakeholders, especially, in terms of their responses to queries and questions as well as the response time used.

By asserting how Maersk Line is addressing their customers in terms of stakeholder communication, this section will attempt to evaluate if the organisation is in fact able to address their customers in an appropriate way.
2.2 RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Social media has long been acknowledged as a valuable communication channel in B2C marketing as it is a quick and cost-efficient way of approaching your target audience. The same movement has started to pick up pace in B2B marketing, however, the B2B industry has been more hesitant to implement social media in their marketing agendas: “A time-line on Google trends shows a growing interest in social media since 2004, while specific in social media in B2B only emerged in 2010” (Michaelidou et al. 2011: 1154). One of the main reasons for this variation is the difference in the approach to customer-supplier relationships and hence the approach to marketing. As Coviello et al. (2002) identified, B2B firms relate to their markets in a more relational way whereas B2C firms have a more transactional approach. In the world of B2B, the personal relation does carry a lot of weight and B2B companies have generally been more preoccupied with relationship marketing than social media marketing. However, this reluctance has since changed and the purpose of this report is to identify if Maersk Line’s acknowledged social media activities is serving this intended purpose and, in turn, are able to combine social media and relationship marketing in favour of the company’s relationships with their customers. For this examination, different theoretical aspects on relationship marketing will be presented with the aim of examining to what extent Maersk Line focuses on their customer-supplier relationships on social media, and how this is evident through the content they post and their interactions with stakeholders.

2.2.1 COMBINING RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Morgan and Hunt define relationship marketing as “all marketing activities directed towards establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges” (Rodriguez et al. 2012: 369). In other words, the goal of relationship marketing is to build strong and long-term customer relationships, which is a key factor in B2B marketing. But is it possible for the relationship-oriented B2B marketing to go hand in hand with social media communication?

Traditionalists might argue that these concepts are as different as a vegetarian and a big, juicy rib eye steak, however; maybe this is not the case. B2B companies could have a genuine business purpose on the social platforms. Social media encompasses a huge potential for B2B companies to communicate with their customers, build relationships and trust, as well as identify prospective partners in terms of B2B selling (Michaelidou et al. 2011). Customer loyalty is an important ingredi-
ent in B2B customer relationships and social media could be seen as a value-adding vehicle for increasing this loyalty, as an organisation is able to interact with customers all over the world. By that, social media should be considered as a vehicle for soft marketing rather than a hard-sell vehicle (Brennan and Croft 2012). Where the most important reason for adopting social media marketing is awareness to B2C companies, B2B companies instead consider cultivation of customer relationships as the most important goal (Michaelidou et al. 2011).

Social media are more or less an online version of the traditional social networks. These networks carry a lot of importance in the B2B business environment as they refer to connected business relationships, where an important exchange exists between business partners (Håkansson and Ford 2002). The facilitation of strong, competitive business networks is crucial to a company’s struggle against competitors and they offer significant benefits including a very likely enhancement of economic value (Gemünden et al. 1997). Members of an online network are able to exchange information and provide solutions from and to different locations across the world in a very short period of time, and if social media could be implemented as a tool for developing and maintaining deeper customer-supplier relationships between B2B companies, this would serve as an important communications tool (Rodriguez et al. 2012). This new era of sharing content and creating conversations results in greater engagement with the customer, which in turn could mean the creation of meaningful relationships with e.g. customers.

However, all of the above is easier said than done and there are not many successful B2B cases, where companies have delivered the perfect recipe for combining social media and relationship marketing. One of the most appraised B2B companies on social media is Maersk Line with their award-winning social media initiatives. What this thesis will attempt to evaluate is to what extent Maersk Line seems to be successful in getting closer to their customers in terms of relationship management. In the following sections, an introduction of the included theories will be provided as well as a description of why these are found useful. To provide a clear impression of if and how Maersk Line’s social media campaign is creating value in the client relationships, different theoretical aspects will be included to provide a sufficient analysis.

2.2.2 RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONS ON CUSTOMER-SUPPLIER RELATIONSHIP VALUE

One of the things that will be looked at is the impact of different relationship functions on the cus-
customer-perceived relationship value. In recent studies, customer-supplier relationships have been promoted as a source of value for customers and as a way for suppliers to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Ritter and Walter 2012). The customer-perceived relationship value, that is, a customer's overall assessment of the benefits and sacrifices of a given relationship with a supplier, is determined by a range of different relationship functions, which contributes to the customer’s value-creation process. According to Ritter and Walter (2012), Maersk Line’s communication is not able to deliver value directly to a customer but can instead fulfill specific functions in order for them to assist in the value-creation process. The relationship functions are categorized into two groups: Direct, operation-related functions and indirect, change-related functions. The direct, operation-related functions include the payment, volume, quality and safeguard function, and the indirect, change-related functions include the innovation, information, access and motivation function.

In this report, an assessment of the impact of these relationship functions in Maersk Line’s social media communication with their customers will be done thereby using an estimation on the relationship value created by the social media activities. But first, a description of each relationship function.

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<th>Relationship functions on customer-perceived relationship value</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Direct, operation-related relationship functions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Payment function</td>
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<td>2. Volume function</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Quality function</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Safeguard function</td>
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**Figure 2.3: Relationship functions on customer-perceived relationship value**

The direct, operation-related relationship functions have a direct and immediate effect on customer profitability because they support the customer’s operational processes and its operational excellence (Ritter and Walter 2012). The first direct, operation-related function is the ‘Payment function’. This function covers the financial side of a business relationship. In such relationships, customers tend to focus on purchase price, total cost of ownership, or net present value. Furthermore, this function also revolves around the different payment methods made available by the supplier. Payment models like leasing, customized installments or payments on the basis of the customer’s us-
age of the product/service are changing the payment structure into a revenue stream that is related to the economic success of the customer (Ritter and Walter 2012). If a supplier succeeds in meeting the needs of a customer in this area, it will have a positive effect on the customer’s value creation.

Next, we have the ‘Volume function’. Whereas the Payment function is concerned with price and payment methods, the volume function is instead concerned with the volume of business a customer chooses to allocate to a specific supplier. According to Ritter and Walter (2012), many firms are moving away from wide supplier bases, where they have a relatively fragmented purchasing power, to smaller and sometimes single-source supplier bases. The decision to use a limited range of suppliers, thereby, allocating larger volumes of purchases to selected suppliers allows customers e.g. to influence suppliers and to reduce communication costs. The volume function has three aspects: the volume of a given product, the volume of different products and volume over time. In other words, if a supplier manages to obtain large purchase volumes from specific customers, it is likely that these customers, in turn, will also create value as it could provide them with more supplier influence.

The third direct, operation-related function is the ‘Quality function’. As the name reveals, this function is about the quality of a product or service especially in regards to how the customer sees a fit between a supplier’s product/service and the customer’s own operations – the better the fit, the higher the perceived quality, which then leads to higher perceived value (Ritter and Walter 2012). Quality can be several things. Quality might be related to the product or service itself as it encompasses valuable features that increase the overall perceived value, however, quality can also be related to factors such as the reliability of the product, the ease of handling it in the customer’s production processes, or logistical superiority in delivery (Ritter and Walter 2012).

The fourth and final direct, operation-related function is the ‘Safeguard function’. This function regards a supplier’s ability to establish a safety net underneath their customers. Customers need to feel safe and to trust their supplier’s ability to deliver what they have promised on time, and one way of creating value here is by developing a network of flexible suppliers that can change order volumes at short notice (Ritter and Walter 2012). The establishment of such networks might provide benefits such as reduced distribution costs and inventory levels, and furthermore, customers might choose to have reserve supplier sources to lessen their dependency on other suppliers. If a supplier manages to establish such security measures, it could very well result in an increase in the customer’s value creation.
Next, we have the indirect, change-related relationship functions. Unlike the direct, operation-related functions, these functions have an indirect, delayed influence, as their effects depend on changes to be made in the customer firm, the given business relationship, or other relationships. The delayed influence of these functions occurs outside or later in the business relationship (Ritter and Walter 2012). The first indirect, change-related relationship function is the ‘Innovation function’. This function is concerned with a supplier’s ability to “serve as valuable partners for the customers’ product and process innovations by contributing innovative ideas, supplying innovative components and production facilities, or engaging in collaborative development projects” (Ritter and Walter 2012: 138). By making resources available for customers, a supplier can help to e.g. speed up the development process or gain access to a wider range of technological inputs. And at the same time, the supplier would increase the customer’s value creation process.

The second indirect, change-related relationship function is the ‘Information function’. In order for a supplier to fulfill this function, they must be capable of passing on relevant technical or market-related information to the customers. This function carries some importance as firms need information about their environments and sense their markets in order to maneuver successfully (Day 1994). Suppliers often have vast amounts of specialized knowledge not only from their own industry but also about their customers’ industry and situation, as they are likely to supply other firms in the same markets. If a supplier is able to communicate critical, new information faster than the competition is able to obtain the same, then the customers have gained an advantage in the market — and customer’s value creation will most likely benefit from this.

The third indirect, change-related relationship function is the ‘Access function’. This function is concerned with a supplier’s ability to connect customers with potential exchange partners or other influential people. This means that if a customer gains access to e.g. other suppliers, possible customers, industry associations or governmental institutions via their current supplier, this will increase the customer-perceived relationship value. The access can either be created by active involvement by the supplier, or more passively, where a customer can use a relationship with a prestigious supplier as a reference. The impact of the access function on perceived relationship value depends on the value of the new relationship (Ritter and Walter 2012).

The fourth and final indirect, change-related relationship function is the ‘Motivation function’. Another way of a supplier to contribute to a customer’s profitability is by increasing employee efficiency. There are different ways for how this can be achieved, however, if the customer is working with a supplier that is known for its innovativeness, social responsibility, or corporate success in general,
an employee might be driven by the fact that he or she can gain respect and recognition among colleagues, which then increases that employees’ motivation (Ritter and Walter 2012). In many firms, there is a hierarchy of external partners such that only experienced, successful managers are allowed to work with the high-profile suppliers, and therefore, employees might view allocation of such suppliers as an internal promotion (Ritter and Walter 2012).

The above-mentioned indirect, change-related relationship functions all indicate a positive impact on customer-perceived value, but these functions require a change process before they can affect profitability. In that connection, Ritter and Walter (2012) also established four additional factors that may decrease customers’ perception of value given high levels of indirect function fulfilment. These four functions are called Erosion of own capabilities, Reluctance to adopt inputs, Limited integration capacity and Competitors’ access to similar resources. However, as these functions are concerned with how the change process takes place at the customer, the four functions will not be included in this study. First of all, the focus of this thesis is on how Maersk Line is building up and developing their customer-supplier relationships through social media and not what changes are taking place at their customers, and secondly, it will not be possible to obtain this customer information in a sufficient manner.

All of the relationship functions accounted for will be applied to Maersk Line’s social media communication in order to assess if the company is able to impact the customer-perceived relationship value by fulfilling the functions.

2.2.3 RELATION TO THE MARKET

As an extension of the estimation of customer-perceived value creation, focus will also be put on how Maersk Line is relating to their market and how this comes across in their social media communication (Coviello et al. 2002). Does the social media campaign come across as predominantly transactional or predominantly relational? Or is it somewhere in between? If a company is being predominantly transactional, it involves a distanced connection between the company and the customer. When applying this perspective, the company does nothing to adapt to the needs and desires of the customer and vice versa (Freytag and Clarke 2001). In the other end of the spectre, we have the relational perspective where the company aims at developing a very close relationship with the client. Here, adaptation to client requirements is of highest importance.
According to Coviello et al. (2002), even though it is still possible to support the claim that B2C companies are primarily transactional in their relation to the market and B2B companies are predominantly relational, as it is well-known that B2B markets are characterized by customer-supplier interdependencies, there are, however, also many exceptions. Therefore, it will be interesting to examine whether Maersk Line’s social media activities are in fact relational as the classic notion of B2B companies prescribes it, or if it could be perceived as predominantly transactional in its relation to the market. To examine this, Coviello et al. (2002) presents a model called ‘Four aspects of marketing classified by exchange and managerial dimensions’ (p. 35), which serves the purpose of clarifying how a company is relating to their market.

As the title of the model indicates, the relation to the market will be determined on the basis of two dimensions: Exchanges and managerial influence. Essentially, relationships are exchanges between two or more parties, and these exchanges can either be done in transactional or relational ways (Day 2000). Whereas the transactional exchanges have a lot of focus on the specific deal and how much each party is getting from it, then the relational exchanges emphasize the importance of including very close information, social and process linkages and mutual commitments between the parties. In that connection, it is interesting to look closer at Maersk Line’s social media initiatives and if their campaign is establishing a specific exchange between Maersk Line and their customers (Day 2000). Furthermore, the managerial dimensions are also included to look at if and how top management influences the way that the company relates to their market, and whether or not they are doing anything to adapt to the needs and desires of the customers.

The model suggests that “marketing is characterized by multiple complex processes manifested in four different aspects of marketing practice” (Coviello et al. 2002: 34), and these four groups make up the structure of the table. The four aspects are: (1) Transaction marketing, where a supplier manages the marketing mix to attract and satisfy customers. (2) Database marketing, where a supplier uses technology-based tools to target and retain customers. (3) Interaction marketing, where a supplier develops interpersonal relationships to create cooperative interactions between customer and supplier for mutual benefit. And (4) Network marketing, where a supplier develops interfirm relationships to allow for coordination of activities among multiple parties for mutual benefit, resource exchange, and so forth. If a company is categorized under transaction marketing or database marketing, the company is predominantly transactional in its relation to the market, but if a company is grouped under interaction marketing or network marketing, it is predominantly relational.
A supplier is grouped under one of these four aspects based on a range of different exchange and managerial dimensions, which are the purpose of exchange, the nature of communication, the type of contact, the duration of exchange, the formality in exchange, the managerial intent, the managerial focus, the managerial investment and the managerial level. It is on the basis of these factors that an attempt to determine whether Maersk Line comes across as predominantly transactional or relational will be made. A complete illustration of the ‘Four aspects of marketing’ can be seen below:
Figure 2.4: The four aspects of marketing classified by exchange and managerial dimensions (Covello et al. 2002)
All of these above-mentioned theoretical approaches to relationship marketing will be applied to the analysis of Maersk Line’s social media use in order for the analysis to be as comprehensive and thorough as possible. As Maersk Line has received a lot of praise for their work on social media as a classic B2B company, this study assumes that the company pays a lot of attention to relationship marketing.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this section of the thesis project, the study moves away from the theoretical framework and towards the more practical knowledge through collection and analysis of the empirical data. Methodology revolves around how to transform a worldview and a range of theories into a specific project using appropriate methods. Here, the research design of this study will be introduced with emphasis on the influential factors of philosophical worldview, research strategy and research method, which must all complement each other in order to achieve the best possible result (Creswell 2009).

3.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

According to Creswell (2009), some basic philosophical ideas should be made explicit before conducting a research project in order to make up the foundation of the research as well as to guide the actions of the study: “The types of beliefs held by individual researchers will often lead to embracing either a qualitative, quantitative or mixed method approach for the research” (p. 6). Creswell works with four different worldviews: Postpositivism, social constructivism, advocacy/participatory and pragmatism.

The philosophical worldview of this research is the social constructivist one. According to this belief, individuals and groups seek understanding of the world in which they live and work (Creswell 2009). This understanding is created by the individual’s own subjective perception of their world, and therefore, the results of a social constructivist research would reflect the participants’ subjective interpretation of the question(s) posed. For this reason, broad and general questions are often asked in order for the research to influence the participants as little as possible and instead let the participant’s own interpretation construct the results. This is the approach taken to this research as the overall objective of the thesis is to create an understanding of the B2B company Maersk Line’s social media communication in a relationship marketing context, and this will be done through inductive research. When conducting inductive research, the researcher is taking a ‘bottom up’ approach, as the research is build from the bottom and up (Neuman 2003). This means that the researcher wishes to examine a generalization, like for example social media communication being
an unfit match for B2B companies, and through observations of specific examples in this connection, a degree of general knowledge is established in the conclusion based on these observations (Goddard and Melville 2004). By combining the social constructivist worldview and the inductive research approach, it is the view of the participants that constructs the meaning rather than support or refutation a constructed hypothesis, like we know it from the postpositivist worldview or from the deductive research, which is the opposite approach of inductive research. In this study, the meaning is ‘socially constructed’ and it is through our own experiences that subjective meanings toward certain objects or things are developed (Creswell 2009). And these meanings can vary a lot from person to person as different social and historical factors like social background, profession, age and personality traits can have a great impact on the results. The role of the researcher is to make sense of, and interpret the meanings of, others thereby developing a pattern of meaning (Creswell 2009).

And again, this is the objective of this thesis. The concept of social media is still a relatively new and unexplored area and, therefore, the description of social media included in this thesis must be seen as socially created through an interaction between different social media academics whose work has been selected for this study. It is the human interpretation of these academics and their contributions to the social media discipline that make up the framework of social media as a communication channel in this thesis, which in turn, makes up the framework that motivates a great deal of the project. By that, the thesis rests upon social scientific theory as it is built on several different approaches and includes several different researchers. Furthermore, doing a research that combines the concepts of social media and relationship marketing is also a relatively unexplored combination, and the task of the researcher here is to study the communicative practices including relationship marketing carried out on social media by Maersk Line and put this into a meaningful pattern that addresses the problem statement in an appropriate way. By doing so, the experiences and background of the researcher will also end up shaping the end results here.

In addition to social constructivism, this thesis will also be significantly characterized by the hermeneutic research approach. The hermeneutic method of analysis is based on interpretation (Beck Holm 2011), and therefore, it very accurately describes the process of the researcher in this thesis. Where the social constructivist worldview is good at describing the role of the participants in this research, that is, the different social media academics included in the study including the researcher himself, and how the foundation of this thesis is socially created through the interaction between these participants, the hermeneutic research approach adds-on and completes the study by outlining the role of the researcher and how the researcher’s own interpretations will affect the
results (Beck Holm 2011). Hermeneutic analysis enables you to elicit an in-depth understanding of meanings of, for example, the role of social media communication in a B2B context, which will be the case here. This understanding is produced through systematic interpretation processes, which are commonly known as a hermeneutic circle interpretation of specific details that will affect the interpretation of an entire phenomenon. As the researcher repeatedly reviews these interpretations, the researcher is automatically producing a deeper and deeper understanding of the examined phenomenon (Koppa 2015). In other words, the researcher obtains a full understanding of a broad and general phenomenon, in this case social media communication and relationship marketing in a B2B context, based on the researchers own interpretation of smaller details within this phenomenon, which in this case is Maersk Line’s social media activities and the specific content within. By examining this over and over, a deeper and deeper understanding will be obtained. However, whereas postpositivism is aimed at finding a final, complete truth, the hermeneutic circle is an infinite process, as you are always able to review your interpretations, thereby deepening your understanding, which is said to be the purpose of interpretation (Beck Holm 2011). As hermeneutic analysis is about interpretation, the role of the researcher becomes highly significant. Consequently, the end conclusion of this thesis will be highly affected by how that specific individual (the researcher) has interpreted the findings of the study. Therefore, the hermeneutic strategy is in stark contrast to those research strategies that stress objectivity and independence of interpretations in the formation of knowledge.

3.2 RESEARCH METHOD AND STRATEGY

In terms of the research method used in this thesis, the qualitative research method has been applied. The qualitative approach is best suitable for this research design, as well as a natural continuation of the social constructivist worldview, as it seeks to establish a meaning in the phenomenon that is being examined (Creswell 2009). Whereas the quantitative research method tests a theory by specifying narrow hypotheses and the collection of data to either support or refute the hypotheses, thereby, establishing an explanation for how the world works, the qualitative research method instead attempts to facilitate an understanding of the world e.g. because the study is dealing with a phenomenon where little research has been done previously (Creswell 2009). And this is the case with social media communication in a B2B context. In other words, the qualitative research method is used to explore and understand a certain phenomenon and this is done in an in-depth and thor-
ough manner, which would not be possible with the quantitative research method. Therefore, the qualitative research method is the overall research design of this study.

As previously mentioned, the concept of social media in a B2B context is a novel phenomenon that still has not undergone extensive research and this is exactly what merits a qualitative approach. Through qualitative research, an in-depth insight into an unexplored area can be established as well as shed light on some important aspects, which would not otherwise have been available. By focussing the study on this one specific phenomenon, the research is able to reach depths that the quantitative research method would only have scratched the surface of. In this case, it is the researcher who collects the data from Maersk Line’s social media platforms, which in turn, puts the researcher in an important role to deliver an end result that is reliable. Once the data has been gathered, the researcher must build the patterns of meaning from the bottom in an interpretive manner that lies within the previous described theoretical framework.

For the purpose of this thesis, the chosen strategy of inquiry is the qualitative strategy of document analyses. To put it in a more tangible framework, the thesis seeks to explore and understand the phenomenon of the use of social media by B2B companies through extensive document analyses of Maersk Line’s social media content. The specifics regarding which social media platform to include in the study and what content that is to be looked at, will be elaborated in the next section ‘Empirical data’. Here, It is the researcher’s interpretations of the results from the document analyses that will make up the final conclusions of the study. Document analyses is a strategy of research in which the researcher explores in-depth a type of document with a high degree of relevance for the study (Bowen 2006). This type of in-depth exploration is found to be an appropriate strategy for obtaining a satisfactory understanding of Maersk Line’s social media content.

### 3.3 Empirical Data

In terms of the process of collecting and analysing the empirical data, a range of important selections has to be made prior to this process. These selections hold immense importance for the credibility of the study as it determines e.g. the source of the empirical data and the timespan looked at in terms of narrowing the study down to a specific time period. All of these choices determine the depth and the meticulousness (or the level of superficiality) of the analysis.
Shortly after the introduction of Maersk Line’s social media campaign, they were active on most platforms including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Vimeo and Google+ just to name a few, and each of these platforms have their own specific attributes that makes them unique and applicable for different purposes (Maersk Line Social 2015). A study that includes all of these platforms would prove too extensive for this thesis project, and it would result in superficial research lacking in-depth analyses. For that reason, the study will only be dealing with one primary platform: Maersk Line’s company page on Facebook that currently holds over 1 million followers (Maersk Line Facebook page 2011). A Facebook follower is a Facebook user that actively ‘subscribes’ to Maersk Line on Facebook, thereby, receiving Maersk Line’s posts in the user’s newsfeed. And a company page on Facebook is a company-created profile where organisations are able to facilitate interactions and discussions with their followers and with stakeholders in general, which can be argued to enhance the possibility of building strong relationships with customers. Furthermore, Facebook is the most successful social media platform with the highest number of users worldwide as it holds around 1.39 billion monthly active users (Zephoria 2015), and therefore, it allows for an organisation to engage with a large online audience. In a company presentation explaining the principles of their social media activities, Maersk Line is stating that Facebook is their primary platform for interacting with ‘fans’ (Appendix 1), and this makes sense, as Facebook allows for a global company like Maersk Line to communicate with users worldwide in the users’ personal realm, because “users create a personal profile from where they can post information about themselves ranging from their occupation, to their religious and political views to their favourite movies and musicians” (Hughes et al. 2011: 561). This social dimension is important for Maersk Line in the process of getting closer to their customers, which is why Facebook is found most relevant to examine for this purpose.

In terms of the time period of research, the thesis is limited to Facebook content from the last six months of year 2014. Maersk Line’s social media campaign has now existed for several years, and it would be too extensive to include every Facebook post they have ever posted as they have a ‘one post per day’ strategy (Appendix 1). Therefore, the study will be limited to the content from Maersk Line’s company page in the period from 1 July 2014 to 31 December 2014, and all content posted on the Maersk Line Facebook page in this period, that is, 171 Facebook posts in English, will be included. Social media is still a relatively new phenomenon, developing and changing rapidly, and for that reason, using the most up-to-date content will serve as the most accurate data.

As every relevant aspect of the empirical data from Maersk Line’s Facebook page is collected, an analysis will be conducted based on the theoretical framework described in section 2.0. Prior to the
analysis, a range of articles relevant for the analysis has been reviewed within the theoretical areas of stakeholder communication and relationship marketing. Both of these theoretical areas will be applied in the analysis independently and in a descriptive manner, thereby, using them to describe how Maersk Line is conducting their social media presence in two analytical units completely separate from each other with the purpose of the units answering a research question each: Where the first unit of analysis will attempt to answer RQ1, the second unit of analysis will attempt to answer RQ2, and the results will then be gathered in the conclusion. The analysis of Maersk Line’s use of Facebook will be supported by extensive use of concrete examples from the Facebook page.

In the first unit of analysis, the theoretical area of stakeholder communication will be applied in a descriptive manner to provide a clarification of how Maersk Line is communicating with their stakeholders on Facebook. First, the stakeholder salience model will be used to identify which type of stakeholder Maersk Line’s B2B customers are. Here, the level of salience will be evaluated on the basis of the reviewed literature as well as a subjective impression of the customers’ power, legitimacy and urgency on social media. Then, the three strategies of stakeholder communication will be included to determine which primary strategy Maersk Line applies in their communication on Facebook. Whether the strategy is predominantly informational, persuasive or dialogue will be determined by the subjective impression obtained by the researcher when going through the Facebook content, focusing on the way they approach their Facebook followers, the way they interact with them as well as the content they post. And finally, the notion of organisational listening is also applied in an attempt to describe if the organisation’s ability to listen to their Facebook followers seems dysfunctional or effective. Here, an in-depth examination of the individual posts will be made based on the seven conditions for ineffective organisational listening including a close look at how they are attending to stakeholder needs and their ability to respond to queries and questions in an appropriate way. The term ‘listening’ may seem odd in this connection; however, this thesis believes that by studying the online interactions it will be possible to get a sufficient, yet subjective, impression of Maersk Line’s ability to achieve effective organisational listening.

In the second unit of analysis, focus shifts towards relationship marketing. This unit adds the relationship dimension by examining if and how Maersk Line seems to be focussing on developing strong relationships with their customers on Facebook, and the first objective is to apply a range of relationship functions to Maersk Line’s Facebook communication, thereby, assessing if the company is able to impact the customer-perceived relationship value by fulfilling the functions. This assessment is based on the content of their Facebook posts and their interactions with Facebook followers. In practice, this will be done by applying the functions one-by-one, thereby, describing
Maersk Line’s ability to fulfil the functions based on the subjective impression obtained, when looking through the content. Subsequently, it will be determined how Maersk Line is relating to their market in terms of different exchange and managerial dimensions. On the basis of these factors, an attempt to determine whether Maersk Line comes across as predominantly transactional or relational will be made based on the previous analysis as well as subjective impressions.

As emphasized above, this analysis will be highly based on the personal impressions obtained by the researcher when going through Maersk Line’s Facebook content, and therefore, the results will reflect the researcher’s subjective impressions to a great extent. All of the results collected throughout the analysis, which is conducted in the next section of the thesis, will be gathered and evaluated in the conclusion, as this will serve as a sufficient foundation for the conclusive remarks.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS

Now, the time has come to do an in-depth analysis of the empirical data. The analysis will be presented in a clear and logical way by conducting the research within the two theoretical areas, that is, stakeholder communication and relationship marketing, one at a time and completely separate from each other. By doing so, each theoretical area will be applied to the empirical data independently ensuring that the effect of each theory will not be compromised by the other. The results will then be gathered and evaluated in the conclusion. First, the theoretical area of stakeholder communication will be applied, and then, the area of relationship marketing rounds off the analysis.

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<td><strong>1st unit:</strong> Stakeholder communication</td>
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<td>The notion of stakeholder communication is included to examine how Maersk Line communicates and interacts with their stakeholders on social media. By asserting how Maersk Line is addressing their customers in terms of stakeholder communication, this unit attempts to evaluate if the organisation is able to communicate with their customers in an appropriate way.</td>
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Figure 4.1: The two units of analysis

4.1 STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION

The first step of the analysis is to clarify how Maersk Line uses Facebook to communicate and interact with their stakeholders. This is an important part of the process as good stakeholder communication is a fundamental component of a company’s ability to communicate in a clear and precise manner with the stakeholder groups of interest, which in this case are Maersk Line’s B2B customers. First of all, it will be determined which type of stakeholders Maersk Line’s customers are according to Mitchell’s Stakeholder Salience Model (1997). Then the strategy of Maersk Line’s
stakeholder communication will be looked at in order to determine if this is primarily informational, persuasive or if it resembles a dialogue. The last aspect of Maersk Line’s stakeholder communication being looked at is the concept of organisational listening in order to determine Maersk Line’s ability to include their customers in their communication on Facebook.

4.1.1 TYPE OF STAKEHOLDER

As already established by Maersk Line themselves, their primary stakeholder group on social media as well as the primary receiver of their social media communication is the company’s customers (Wichmann 2012). The Stakeholder Salience Model by Mitchell (1997) defines a stakeholder type based on the stakeholder possessing one or more of the three attributes: power, legitimacy and urgency. On the basis of these attributes, the stakeholder group in question is placed in one of seven stakeholder categories ranging from the less important stakeholder groups of dormant, discretionary and demanding stakeholders, who only possess one of the three attributes, to the highly important definitive stakeholders, who possess all three attributes.

In the classical perception of marketing, customers would often be categorized as dominant stakeholders because they possess both the powerful and the legitimacy claims (Cornelissen 2011). Customers hold a lot of power upon an organisation as well as the legitimacy of a specific claim because they often are the company’s primary source of income in addition to also being the primary users of the company’s products or services, thereby, giving them a strong influence on the organisation. However, the customers could be assumed to lack the urgency claim. The urgency claim determines a stakeholder group’s ability to call for immediate action by an organisation and under traditional pre-social media circumstances, customers would have a hard time imposing such an urgent claim upon an organisation themselves, thereby, making the organisation act immediately. However, concurrently with the increase in social media’s popularity worldwide, it could be argued that the customers’ urgency claim has also increased exponentially.

The introduction of social media as a valuable communication channel have not only provided companies with a tool for communicating with most of their customers at once – it has also provided customers with a voice, a very powerful voice that is, which several companies have already experienced. Nowadays, an unjustly treated customer has the possibility to vocalize his or her bad experiences with a specific company across the world in a matter of minutes through viral sharing of text, pictures, videos or another form of online content. As previously mentioned, companies
need to address such imposing threats immediately before running out of control, and by that, it would be fair to assume that a customer of a social media-active company also possesses the urgency claim. In other words, it could be argued that the power of social media has catapulted customers into the *definitive* stakeholder category, which is a very important stakeholder category of any company. As the B2B industry and social media is still a relatively new combination, it could be said that B2B customers don’t impose the same power and urgency through social media as e.g. B2C customers, but nonetheless, it must be assumed that B2B companies still need to focus a lot of attention towards their customers on these platforms.

An exemplification of the powerful voice of the stakeholders is found on Maersk Line’s Facebook page. Here, commentary sections are available with each of the company’s Facebook posts, enabling for comments and feedback by their followers. These commentary sections are frequently used by followers to comment on the posted content, and Maersk Line’s posts receive as many as 99 comments per post, which is the case on a post from 27 October 2014 (Appendix 5). Every time Maersk Line posts content on their Facebook page, their Facebook followers are able to write comments, and these comments are available for all other followers to read. By that, a negative comment can quickly spread across Maersk Line’s more than 1 million followers. Furthermore, Facebook followers also have the possibility to share or like a post, through which a post by Maersk Line may quickly go viral spreading to far more Facebook users than the company’s own follower base, and finally, the followers also have the opportunity to simply refer to Maersk Line in one of their own Facebook posts containing the follower’s own interpretation of Maersk Line’s actions. Therefore, Maersk Line’s customers do have independent voices on Facebook, which is not possible for the company to control, and as a result, it must be argued that it is important for the company to focus a lot of attention towards their customers on Facebook.

**4.1.2 STRATEGY OF STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION**

It is one thing to identify the type of stakeholder a company is dealing with but a completely other thing to master the art of communicating with that stakeholder group in an appropriate and effective way. In this process, it is important for a company like Maersk Line to choose and implement the right strategy of stakeholder communication. For this purpose, three main strategies have been identified: The informational strategy, the persuasive strategy and the dialogue strategy (Cornelis-
sen 2011). In the following, an assessment of Maersk Line’s primary strategy for stakeholder communication is presented.

All of the three strategies are to some extent evident in Maersk Line’s Facebook content. Naturally, the company aims at providing information to their customers about the company, their services and the business in general, which essentially is the informational strategy. Furthermore, the Facebook page also comes across as an arena for discussions, debates, conversations and two-way communication in general, where the company can interact with Facebook users in a seemingly dialogue-like approach. However, the persuasive strategy is found to be the primary strategy applied by Maersk Line. More than anything, Maersk Line’s Facebook page comes across as a way for the company to influence and persuade the attitudes and knowledge of the customers to some degree by e.g. posting positive stories about the company and its employees. When going through the Facebook content, the impression you get is that Maersk Line does not engage in mutual exchanges of ideas and opinions with their stakeholders on Facebook. Maersk Line does provide a great insight into their business from all corners of the world by e.g. providing annual statistics, stories from the day-to-day life at Maersk Line as well as communicating the employees’ own experiences, however, this is perceived as an attempt to change and tune the knowledge and attitudes in favour of the company more than an attempt to initiate a mutual dialogue between two equals.

Maersk Line does invite Facebook followers to participate on the platform, and a lot of the content posted by Maersk Line is actually provided by their followers such as visually impressive photos of the Maersk Line vessels and the company logo. Examples of such user-generated content are posted consistently month after month as it is seen on 12 August 2014a (Appendix 3), where Maersk Line has posted a photo of one of their vessels in a harbour at night accompanied by the text:

“Our version of ‘the evening attire’! (Image by Moritz Wicklein) #MaerskLine #Shipping”

This post is indicating that the photo posted is provided by Moritz Wicklein and this type of user involvement is an often repeated occurrence on Maersk Line’s Facebook page. However, all of this user-generated content remains about Maersk Line, and it comes across as an attempt to portray the company in visually beautiful sceneries all over the world. So, even though this is a way to encourage stakeholder involvement, it never reaches the level of the dialogue strategy, where exchanges are mutually taking place between both parties. Instead, it resembles the persuasive
strategy, as Maersk Line seems to be affecting attitudes towards the company in a positive direction.

Furthermore, when users comment on Facebook posts, Maersk Line’s social media managers are often quick to respond with e.g. useful and informative answers or a ‘like’, thereby acknowledging that they have received and read the comment, and by that, they seem to be entering into dialogues with their Facebook followers. However, these conversations rarely resemble a two-way symmetrical model of communication, as Maersk Line rarely participates in the conversations on equal terms with the Facebook followers. They are quick and seemingly willing to respond to all questions posted, however, they rarely initiate further conversation and they indicate little interest in their stakeholders. An example of this is found in a post from 3 November 2014 (Appendix 6), where the user Prithwijit Maitra makes this comment to a post made by Maersk Line:

“Franck has hit it right on the head… well written article. Lets have more of these”.

For this comment, Maersk Line provides this response:

“Hi Prithwijit, Thanks for your interest in these articles. Our LinkedIn page hosts a lot of articles on these lines. You might be interested in checking it out: (link for LinkedIn page)”

By that, the company again comes across as accessible and helpful as well as willing to listen to customer feedback, however, not indicating any interest in entering into a dialogue with the stakeholder. The tendency is that the vast majority of the content is about Maersk Line and their business, thereby, not indicating a desire to enter into mutual exchanges where their customers and their businesses are also in focus.

An example of such content is found on 15 September 2014 (Appendix 4), where Maersk Line asks:

“Did you know that each year Maersk Line carries 183 million tonnes of goods – or the equivalent of the weight of 500 times the empire state building?”

And again a week later on 22 September 2014 (Appendix 4), where they ask this question accompanied by a photo of a sundown from the bridge of a Maersk Line vessel:

“Sunset shot from the bridge room of the Mary Maersk. Not a bad view right?”

This type of content exemplifies that Maersk Line is bringing the company closer to their customers, however, not many examples of Maersk Line bringing the customers closer to company are found,
and by that, the persuasive strategy is coming across as the primary approach used for stakeholder communication on Facebook. This strategy is commonly used in advertising or different forms of campaigns, where the sender seeks to “change and tune the knowledge, attitude and behaviour of stakeholders in a way that is favourable to the organization” (Cornelissen 2011: 50), and this is also the overall impression obtained when looking through Maersk Line’s Facebook content.

The informational strategy is not perceived as the primary strategy applied by Maersk Line as this strategy is predominantly concerned with one-way communication, where the receiver does not have the possibility of responding or in any obvious way provide feedback to the organisation, which is contradicting the purpose of social media. Neither is the dialogue strategy coming across as the primary strategy. Even though many of Maersk Line’s Facebook posts aim at engaging their Facebook followers by e.g. asking questions, the dialogue strategy is not visible in the way they approach user interactions and feedback. Whenever a comment is targeted at Maersk Line, they are quick to either respond to, or ‘like’, the comment, however, the company does not indicate a willingness for the stakeholders to affect Maersk Line through Facebook, only vice versa it seems. Even though the dialogue strategy could be argued to be the most effective strategy for communicating with the definitive stakeholder group, the predominant strategy for stakeholder communication identified in Maersk Line’s Facebook content remains the persuasive strategy.

4.1.3 ORGANISATIONAL LISTENING

The next important aspect of focus is Maersk Line’s ability to listen to and understand their customers. As described in section 2.1.4, this is important in terms of handling important incoming information as well as managing an organisation’s brand and image. In terms of organisational listening and Maersk Line’s ability to listen to their stakeholders, this will be determined on the basis of Maersk Line’s ability to attend to stakeholder needs on Facebook and their interactions with stakeholders, especially, in terms of their handling of stakeholder queries and how they respond to these. Dysfunctional listening, where the needs and values of the stakeholders are not understood, risks coming across as an excluding organisation unwilling to include the views and opinions of the stakeholders and this is to be avoided. For that reason, Burnside-Lawry (2011) has constructed seven conditions of ineffective organisational listening, which serve as indicators of an organisation not listening effectively to its customers. These seven conditions will be applied to Maersk Line’s
Facebook content to assess whether or not they are achieving effective organisational listening, as this is an important component in building strong customer relationships.

The first condition of ineffective organisational listening is called “Not appropriate organisation behaviour”. This condition revolves around an organisation’s behaviour and how this comes across in their communication. In this connection, “not appropriate organisation behaviour” is an organisation being e.g. defensive and arrogant and not indicating any concerns for the views and opinions of the stakeholders. And it is fair to say that Maersk Line’s Facebook communication does not come across as being defensive and arrogant on Facebook. Generally, the Danish company is perceived as being generous in providing their Facebook followers with an extensive insight into the day-to-day business of the organisation in a highly visual way. Also there is a feeling of no question being ‘too stupid’ for Maersk Line, who manages to answer the vast majority of questions being asked by their Facebook followers in a relatively short timespan.

An example of this is seen on 21 October 2014 at 12:45 p.m. (Appendix 5), where a user named Jeroen Jannsen asks:

"That’s the biggest series of ships yet, right?"

Only 18 minutes later at 1:01 p.m., Maersk Line replies by answering the question as well as providing a source for more knowledge on the subject:

“Hi Jeroen, you’re right. The Triple-E ships are the world’s largest, most efficient ships. You can know more about them here: (link)"

Maersk Line does not respond to every single comment being made with either a like or a response, however, the company’s social media managers come across as being consistent in answering most of the comments directed towards Maersk Line may it be a question, a request, a correction or just a simple remark. Generally, the company comes across as being open to input and suggestions from their Facebook followers, however, for the purpose of keeping their Facebook platform strictly ‘social’, thereby keeping focus on getting closer to their customers, Maersk Line has established a set of ‘House rules’ (Appendix 8). Among other things, these house rules states that the company’s Facebook page is not for “questions about shipping”, “Nothing offensive” will be tolerated and “No job applications” should be send to the company via Facebook. By that, the company establishes certain ground rules, and even though the majority of their over 1 million Facebook followers may not actually read these, the company is laying down a set of ground rules which explains to the company’s Facebook followers how this is not a another channel for recruit-
ment or for shipping orders, but a platform for the company to engage with their customers. And by doing so, Maersk Line comes across as invested in making it happen.

At times, however, it happens that a question regarding either jobs in the organisation or specific shipping orders appears in the Facebook commentary section, but also here, Maersk Line comes across as an open organisation by demonstrating a welcoming attitude in their response. An example of this can be found on 3 July 2014 at 12:22 p.m. (Appendix 2), as RB Pillai Ocl makes this comment to a Maersk Line Facebook post:

“Dear sir. We need a small vessel 1000 mt or self propelled barge we have an order in hand for 2 years contract…”

This is an ‘violation’ of the house rules, however, Maersk Line responds in this helpful manner within an hour:

“Hello RB Pillai – thanks for reaching out to us. Our customer care representative will reach out to you for more information shortly. Regards, Maersk Line Social”

Even though this customer is not utilizing the Facebook platform in the way it was intended, Maersk Line comes across as helpful and directs the customer to the right department. Another example of this is seen on 17 September 2014 at 8:49 p.m. (Appendix 4), where Mubadekanyi Augustine Liabara asks this question:

“How do we get employed in your company? Am in South Africa and want to join your company”.

To that question, Maersk Line replies after just 41 minutes at 9.30 p.m.:

“Dear Mubadekanyi Augustine Liabara, thank you for your interest in Maersk Line. We’re always looking to hire the best people to work with us at Maersk Line. Please go to our website and take a look at the opportunities we offer under the Career section: (link). Good luck”

These examples may seem slightly obvious as an organisation would be more or less stupid not to welcome a potential new customer or employee just because they are contacting the company via the wrong channel, but even so, it exemplifies to what extend Maersk Line comes across as being accessible for their customers in a manner that is not perceived as being defensive or arrogant.

The second condition of ineffective organisational listening is called “Corporate culture”. Where the first condition was concerned with the behaviour of the organisation and if this could come across as being defensive and arrogant, this second condition is concerned with how the culture of the
organisation is being perceived by the environment. Important factors in this regard is whether the organisation’s culture comes across as being inclusive where stakeholder participation is encouraged by encouraging stakeholder engagement, and if the organisation is willing to listen to them and adapt to input, or if the culture instead comes across as being excluding as the organisation does not demonstrate a willingness to encourage participation from the stakeholders.

As previously exemplified, Maersk Line gives the impression that they regard quick responses to comments and posts made by their Facebook followers and they often post questions for their Facebook followers to respond to. Also, many of the company’s Facebook posts contain user-generated content like photos of Maersk Line’s vessels and all of these factors are indicators of a culture that comes across as inclusive and encouraging on social media.

Several times each month, Maersk Line reaches out to their Facebook followers by asking questions or in other ways try to engage with their stakeholders on Facebook. An example of this is found on 30 December 2014 (Appendix 7), where they post a photo of their Triple-E vessel accompanied by this text:

“Spotted: Maersk McKinney Moller by Michal Dziewiecki at Port of Gdansk. Have you spotted the Triple-E yet? #TripleE #MaerskMcKinneyMoller”

With this question, Maersk Line leaves the impression that they encourage stakeholder participation, and several of their Facebook followers accepts the invitation as they respond by posting a range of photos of the Triple-E vessel taken by the users themselves.

Another example of Maersk Line’s inclusive organisation culture is found on 9 October 2014 (Appendix 5). The vast majority of the user comments throughout the Facebook content are positive, praising either the content posted or the company in general. However, a few examples of constructive criticism are also found and on 9 October 2014, the Facebook user Tom Miller provides this comment to one of Maersk Line’s Facebook posts:

“Your main website only posts high HR customer care positions, which requires 5-10 years of experience, or many type of different Accounting and managerial positions. Your main website has absolutely no type of on-board ship positions what so ever...”.

To this seemingly critical query, Maersk Line again comes across as being open to feedback. The company demonstrates a willingness to take in input from their stakeholders as well as a willingness to change their procedures and adapt to the feedback by responding in this way:
“Dear Tony. Thanks a lot for you valuable feedback. This will help us in making the job postings on our website more relevant and user-friendly. We will take this forward with the HR team and let them know of your concern. Regards, Maersk Line Social”.

Maersk Line leaves the impression that openness and stakeholder inclusion should be characteristics used to describe the corporate culture of Maersk Line’s Facebook page, as a tendency in their Facebook content is that they focus a lot of their social media attention towards inviting their stakeholders to join the action.

The third condition of ineffective organisational listening is “Power imbalance”. This condition is concerned with imbalances of power between an organisation and its stakeholders, which may manifest itself in overt and expressed ways or in a more covert and hidden fashion. When an organisation for example shuts down a stakeholder conversation or discussion by stating that this is an issue for the organisation’s management to discuss and that the views of the stakeholders will not be needed as the decision-making process is unaffected by external opinions or if the organisation do not show any interest in discussions by not getting involved, the organisation then builds up a power distance between them and their stakeholders which may be unhealthy for the creation of strong relationships as the organisation may come across as unapproachable. And in turn, that will be perceived as ineffective listening.

Maersk Line has set up an arena for online discussions on their Facebook page with the assumed intend to engage their followers in online conversations among each other as well as with the company. As it was argued in the analysis review of the first condition of ineffective organisational listening called “not appropriate organisation behaviour”, the company does not come across as taking an either arrogant or defensive approach to their communication on social media, as they do not neglect the input and feedback of the stakeholders.

However, it could be argued that a degree of power imbalance does exist on the Facebook platform, as Maersk Line is an industry giant and the company does come across as being an authority figure. Maersk Line consequently initiates online conversations by asking questions and presenting facts on Facebook but they never really come across as presenting their own opinions or attitudes towards the issues talked about. Instead, Maersk Line comes across as participating in the conversations ‘on the sideline’ and whenever a question is directed towards the company, they are quick to respond in a seemingly constructive, helpful and factual manner, however, they rarely respond with a new question. In that sense, it seems that Maersk Line perceives their own role as conversation/discussion initiators and as the industry experts, always available for answering
questions or queries, however, not as a participator in the discussions on equal terms as their Facebook followers. And by that, a power imbalance could be argued to be present to some extent.

An example of this is evident on 27 October 2014 (Appendix 5), where Maersk Line initiates and online conversation on their Facebook page by posting this:

“We love our fans on Facebook and we love hearing from you 😊 So tell us, what do want to see more of? What do you like? And what do you want to know more about? We are all ears! (Photo by Aditya Mohan)”

Several of Maersk Line’s Facebook followers comment on this post by letting the company know what interests them and which type of content they would like to see more of. Maersk Line responds to the majority of the comments, however, they do so in a manner that comes across as not initiating an extension of the conversation. Two examples of this are presented below.

First, the Facebook user Lars Goedecke writes:

“Hi there! Loading and unloading up to 17.000 !!! containers craves an extraordinary logistics, both on the ship and on the quay. How do you manage and how long does it take to empty the vessel?”

To this query, Maersk Line responds:

“Hello Lars. That’s an interesting question. The reply to this one of course can’t be summarized in a comment here. However, we would love to talk about it and perhaps get into the details of the process in an article. Thanks for sharing the query, we would love to write about it and share it here for all the audience. Thanks. Regards, Maersk Line Social”

In another comment to the same post, a user writes this query:

“I have a suggestion: Why you don’t make a new section on your Facebook page, tell us a new information about shipping world everyday, and a new information about Maersk world everyday… I love shipping… I love Maersk…”

To this suggestion, Maersk Line responds with this:

“Hi there, thanks for the suggestion. Perhaps you would like to follow Maersk Line on LinkedIn. We post in-depth stories about Maersk Line and industry at large. Kind regards, Maersk Line Social”
Both responses come across as both helpful and appropriate, however, they are not perceived as an attempt to establish reason ground for further immediate discussion or conversation, and by that, it could be argued that they do facilitate a degree of power imbalance.

The fourth condition of ineffective organisational listening is called “Not sincere”. As the name indicates, this condition is concerned with the level of sincerity that comes across and to what extent an organisation demonstrates an ability to ‘walk the talk’ (Burnside-Lawry 2011). Should a company get caught in being insincere or in promising more than they are able to keep, this could in turn do vital damage to their credibility in the eyes of their stakeholders. But more than that, this condition is also about the amount of resources a company invests in the stakeholder projects and in stakeholder communication in general as well as how approachable the company is perceived to be, as this in the end makes their claims carry even more weight. If a company fails to do so, they could come across as being untrustworthy.

In the case of Maersk Line’s activities on Facebook, it is difficult to assess their level of sincerity being an outsider looking in. However, Maersk Line’s Facebook posts and comments generally come across as being sincere, not only because the organisation holds a great amount of credibility being the world leader in the shipping industry but also because many of their claims are supported by either factual information or pictures. An example of this can be seen on 4 July 2014a (Appendix 2), as Maersk Line posts the following claim:

“Did you know Maersk Line had zero fatalities in 2013? IHS Maritime reports: (link)”

IHS Maritime is a global expert on the maritime industry (IHS 2015), and by supporting their claim with a report from a credible third party, the claim comes across as being trustworthy. In general, when Maersk Line puts forward claims like this that could be disputed as it may be perceived as a biased claim, they often support the claims by either statistical or third party information.

Furthermore, the company comes across as being invested in their stakeholder communication as they are perceived as having allocated a lot of resources for the purpose of being accessible for their Facebook followers, and more often than not, the company has a representative in the other end seemingly capable of answering questions and responding to all queries in a reasonably short timespan. As Maersk Line explains it, the company has entered the realm of social media with the purpose of getting closer to their customers. With that in mind when looking through Maersk Line’s Facebook content, the tendency is that they come across as very approachable as they respond to many stakeholder queries with a quick and seemingly appropriate answer, thereby indicating, that
they have invested the required amount of energy and resources into the campaign. Several examples of the company’s ability to reach out to their Facebook followers have been given previously in the thesis and another example therefore is not found necessary. However, it is important to stress that when going through Maersk Line’s Facebook content and the many user comments, it is close to impossible to find examples of stakeholders being unsatisfied with Maersk Line and their level of sincerity.

The fifth condition of ineffective organisational listening is called “Not comprehensible”. This condition is concerned with the fact that it is important that all stakeholders understand technical content like for example guidelines and protocols presented by the organisation. If an organisation fails to make such material comprehensible, it could come across as disregarding certain stakeholder groups, which in turn, could be perceived as ineffective organisational listening. If stakeholders do not comprehend the message or the content being communicated, they may feel overlooked and disregarded by the organisation, which could build up a distance between the stakeholder and the organisation, thereby, risking to damage the relationship.

In the case of Maersk Line and the company’s Facebook page, the organisation has over 1 million followers to take into account when posting content online. It is therefore a reasonable assumption that it is difficult for Maersk Line to post content that speaks to every one of their Facebook followers. Where some of the stakeholders may have difficulties comprehending content that is too technical, more technical capable stakeholders may have a hard time relating to a company if the content posted is not technical enough. Even though it is probably not all of Maersk Line’s +1 million Facebook followers that are either potential or existing customers, it is still fair to assume that this stakeholder group (customers) contain a wide variety of personalities, and therefore, the company is facing the challenge of customizing the company’s Facebook content to different types of people.

As it must be assumed important to Maersk Line that the vast majority of their Facebook followers comprehend and relates to the content posted, the company’s content comes across as highly mixed. The tendency is that they post content that comes across as ‘easily digestible’ meaning that many of their Facebook posts are not technical but light and fun such as photos of Maersk Line vessels from all around the world, fun facts about the company and the industry as well as non-business related projects they are involved in. Such content is consistently being used by the company, however, it is also mixed with more technical and in-depth content such as extensive company articles, news stories from the company as well as different angles on the day-to-day busi-
ness of the world’s biggest shipping company, and this mix of content comes across as an organisation attempting to talk to different stakeholder groups with a mix of content.

An example of this varied flow of content is found on 2-5 December 2014 (Appendix 7), where it is evident how Maersk Line posts ‘fun’ content the one day and technical, business related content the next.

On 2 December 2014, Maersk Line makes this post accompanied by a photo of a Maersk Line vessel build in LEGO:

“Maersk Line’s LEGO models make awesome holiday gifts. Won’t you agree? #LEGO #TripleE #Christmas #December #MaerskLine”

The next day (3 December 2014), the posted content is more business-related:

“Maersk Line is extending its service coverage to call Alexandria Dekhila terminal in Egypt. With the additional feeder service to Dekhila, Maersk Egypt will be able to serve the imports from across the world. Maersk Line now has the coverage across the 5 main Egyptian ports in the Mediterranean calling Port Said East, Port Said West, Damietta, Alexandria and Dekhila. Seen here in the picture is Maersk Ahram having called at Dekhila terminal this week.”

The day after, on 4 December 2014, the content is again turned informal accompanied by a visually impressive photo of the sun rising behind a Maersk Line vessel:

“Spotted: A magnificent sunrise with Maersk Cotonou at Port of Tanjung Plepas (Image by Arjun Bharadwai) #MaerskConotou #MaerskLine #Shipping #Sea”

And then on 5 December 2014, Maersk Line shares an in-depth article about the company with their Facebook followers accompanied by this text:

“... Crews on board work like a well-oiled machine, with each crew member fulfilling an essential role. So what are the profiles of these seafarers who are on board the ships? Read on as we go about decoding the ranks for you: (link)”

These examples serve as an illustration of the flow of information and how this is perceived as being highly varied. By mixing the content, the company comes across as attempting to reach as many of their stakeholders as possible. It may not be that every stakeholder finds every post equally interesting, however, none of Maersk Line’s posted content is perceived as being inappropriate due to a lack of mutual understanding between stakeholders and the organisation.
When trying to determine how comprehensible an organisation’s communication comes across, it is also important to look at how the stakeholders are responding to the content. And on social media, especially, this is a viable benchmark as the stakeholders have a direct channel for expressing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the content posted. Based on this measure, it can be argued that Maersk Line is doing something right. Not once in the six months of Facebook activities included in this thesis, have there been examples of stakeholders expressing difficulties in understanding and comprehending the content from Maersk Line. Neither are there examples of stakeholders criticizing content by demanding more technical content, and by that standard, Maersk Line seems to have found a decent middle ground.

The sixth condition of ineffective organisational listening is called “Not knowledgeable”. As the name of the condition reveals, this is concerned with an organisation’s ability to demonstrate a deep knowledge about their area of expertise. If an organisation is not successful in doing so or if they come across as e.g. having allocated personnel for a stakeholder event or project without the required knowledge to enlighten stakeholders about the company or the business or lacking the required knowledge about the stakeholder group in order to answer their questions in a satisfactory manner. It can be argued that stakeholders find reassurance in knowing that the organisation and the supplier have a deep knowledge about the business they are conducting and the industry they are a part of.

As the world’s leading shipping company, Maersk Line should come across as a global expert and judging by their Facebook content, they do seem to take on the role of the expert. In their Facebook posts, the company often takes up industry specific topics or issues thereby leaving the impression that they have a deep knowledge as well as a willingness to explore new areas of the business. They do so by e.g. posting statistics, facts or by linking to their own in-depth articles, where the reader is able to take on a detailed presentation of the topic. An example of this is found on 9 July 2014 (Appendix 2), where Maersk Line makes the following post:

“"Invasive marine species are one of the four greatest threats to the world’s oceans." –IMO. Read more about how #MaerskLine is addressing this concern: (link to full article). Courtesy Maersk Group”

And another example is found on 14 July 2014b (Appendix 2), where the company shares another article accompanied by this text:
“Can 3D printers be used to produce spare parts aboard ships? Read more as we explore the futuristic technology: (link to full article)”

These examples demonstrate how Maersk Line shares their knowledge with their Facebook users, and this is also the case when Facebook users contact Maersk Line with questions regarding the company in general, the vessels or the industry. More or less no questions are being left unanswered, and through their informative and seemingly appropriate answers, the level of knowledge comes across as being extensive. Even to such an extent that the sender of the question could get the idea that it is the expert himself typing the answer. Even if this is not the case, it provides for a high degree of effective organisational listening. A few examples of this have been found of this as well.

On August 30 2014 (Appendix 3), the Facebook user Nguyen Cong Hung asks Maersk Line this question:

“Can you explain why need have some pilot ship spray water around the Triple E when it into the port?”

And a couple of days later, on 5 September 2014, Maersk Line replies with this explanation:

“When a vessel calls into a port for the first time, it’s a tradition that the tug boat perform a ‘water salute’ to welcome the vessel. This is one of our Triple E vessels, the world largest and most energy efficient cargo ship – we agree that a maiden port call is a definitely a cause for celebration! You can learn more about the Triple E at (link).”

And another example is found on 12 November 2014 at 2:08 p.m. (Appendix 6), where Anton Runarsson writes this comment at a Maersk Line Facebook post:

“Wonder how many metric tonnes that actually is, floating in seawater 😃”.

To which Maersk Line replies only 49 minutes later at 2:57 p.m. on the same day:

“Hi Anton, the pure steel weight of the vessel (one of our Triple E’s) is approximately 55,000 tons. That does not include ballast water, cargo etc. Hope that helps!”

Then Anton Runarsson immediately replies with a follow-up question at 2:59 p.m.:

“What is the maximum load capacity of this vessel?”

And 22 minutes after, at 3:21 p.m., Maersk Line answers the second question:
“Hi Anton, one of our Triple E’s can carry 18,000 Twenty-foot Equivalent Units (or containers). It’s the biggest ship in the world!”

By doing this, the company comes across as having both an extensive knowledge as well as a desire to share this knowledge with the company’s stakeholders, and therefore, in terms of this condition, Maersk Line’s actions are not perceived as ineffective organisational listening.

The seventh and last condition of ineffective organisational listening is called “Not ideal speech conditions”. This last condition is about the creation of a public space “where participants can freely challenge organisational policies, statements, or actions” (Burnside-Lawry 2011: 165). When communication is aimed at establishing strong relationships, then the facilitation of such a public space could be argued to be a requirement. Factors that would see an organisation fail at fulfilling this condition could be e.g. that the organisation responds to questions and queries in an insufficient and dissatisfying manner, that the organisation answers questions evasively, that questions and queries are ignored completely, that no resources have been earmarked for stakeholder-related topics or that the organisation in general does not invite stakeholders to participate in company-related conversations and discussions (Burnside-Lawry 2011).

So far, the analysis of Maersk Line’s Facebook content has shown that the organisation comes across as being inclusive when it comes to engaging their stakeholders on Facebook. The company often asks questions for the Facebook-followers to reflect on, they often include user-generated content, and more often than not, the company is quick to respond to stakeholder questions in a seemingly helpful manner. And when a comment does not require a specific answer, Maersk Line often acknowledges the input received by simply liking the comment. Not many of the stakeholder comments are in fact challenging the way Maersk Line conducts their business, however, with the Facebook page, Maersk Line does come across as having established a public space for their stakeholders to let their opinions be known if they have issues that need to be addressed.

In a few occasions, though, stakeholders do raise concerns about aspects of the business that they feel could be done in a different and better way. An example of this is found on 30 October 2014b at 2:37 p.m. (Appendix 5), where the user Maciej Kostrzewa raises a concern about Maersk Line’s new website:

“Your new website is not clear enough. Last layout was better for container tracking.”
This may not be a concern regarding the fundamental, core business of the company; however, it is a concern that challenges the actions of the organisation to some degree. Maersk Line is quick to respond and just a few hours later at 4:37 p.m., the user receives this response:

“Thanks for the feedback Maciej. We would like to know more about the issue you faced in the website. Kindly drop us a note through our inbox. Regards, Maersk Line Social”

By this answer, Maersk Line leaves the impression of being interested in the opinion and experiences of the stakeholder, and by sending out such signals, they could be perceived as being willing to create a mutual understanding between the organisation and the stakeholders.

There are also examples of Maersk Line directly asking their Facebook followers for advice thereby utilizing Facebook’s public space as a forum for e.g. research and development through stakeholder conversations. One of the more creative examples is found on 6 August 2014b (Appendix 3), where Maersk Line launches a Facebook competition called #MyContainer with this post:

“Maersk Line announces #MyContainer Competition! Remember how we talked about a Maersk Line container being used as an IT classroom? Here’s your chance to get creative and submit your ideas for alternative use of the containers. Rush in your entries for #MyContainer, and win some cool prizes. Don’t forget to think inside, outside and around the BOX! Read the competition details here: (link)”

With this competition, Maersk Line gives the impression that they wish to engage with their stakeholders by picking their brains. The specific purpose of the competition may not be to improve aspects of the company’s core business, however, by initiating such a stakeholder-involving project they do invite their stakeholders to have their say by contributing with any ideas or innovative suggestions they might have. Such initiatives can be perceived as the organisation’s willingness to establish ideal speech conditions, where the stakeholders feel welcome to vocalize opinions and attitudes.

4.1.4 Maersk Line and Stakeholder Communication

To sum up, Maersk Line stakeholder communication comes across as being inclusive and open, however, also predominantly persuasive in nature. It is found that those of their customers being active on Facebook are highly important stakeholders, who require a lot of attention. But still, the primary strategy for stakeholder communication was found to be the persuasive strategy, as
Maersk Line chooses to focus most of their attention on themselves instead of their customers, and this creates an unbalanced communicative situation where Maersk Line comes across as attempting to affect the attitudes and knowledge of their customers but not vice versa. In terms of organisational listening, Maersk Line is perceived as being successful in achieving effective organisational listening in the majority of the seven conditions, and in both organisation behaviour, corporate culture, sincerity, comprehensibility, knowledge and ideal speech conditions, the company comes across as effectively listening to stakeholders and attending to their needs. However, one stands out. And that is the condition of power imbalance. It is evident that there exists a power imbalance or a power distance between Maersk Line and their Facebook followers, and this may not be beneficial in the process of establishing strong relationships.
4.2 RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

B2B markets and relationship marketing often go hand in hand. Personal relations carry a lot of weight in the business of a B2B company, and in recent years, while the role of social media marketing has increased significantly in B2C markets, the B2B industries have been more reluctant to adapt to this change as many have considered the face-to-face dimension to be incompatible with an online platform. As previously described, this reluctance has since changed and more and more B2B companies have realized that there are benefits to gain from social media as there is a huge potential for B2B companies to communicate with their customers, build relationships and trust as well as identify prospective partners in terms of B2B selling. In the following section, a closer look will be taken at if and how a classic B2B company like Maersk Line seems to be focussing on developing their customer-supplier relationships on Facebook, thereby, combining social media and relationship marketing, and if Maersk Line’s acknowledged social media activities seems to be serving this intended purpose of building strong relationships with the company’s stakeholders.

Firstly, the relationship functions on customer-supplier relationship value will be applied to Maersk Line’s Facebook content in order to determine the impact of these functions on the relationship value created in the minds of the customers. And secondly, an assessment of Maersk Line’s relation to their market through social media will be included in order to determine if Maersk Line is predominantly transactional or relational in their presence on Facebook.

4.2.1 RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONS ON CUSTOMER-PERCEIVED RELATIONSHIP VALUE

When looking at relationship marketing, an important aspect to obtain knowledge about is the impact of the different relationship functions on customer-perceived relationship value. Customer-perceived relationship value is a customer's overall assessment of the benefits and sacrifices of a given relationship with a supplier, and this is determined by a range of different relationship functions, which contributes to the customer’s value-creation process. In this thesis, all of the relationship functions will be applied to Maersk Line’s social media communication in order to assess if the company is able to impact the customer-perceived relationship value by fulfilling the functions. As described in the theory section, the relationship functions are categorized into two groups: Direct, operation-related functions and indirect, change-related functions. Where the direct, operation-related functions “have a direct, immediate effect on customer profitability because they support
the customer’s operational processes and its operational excellence”, the indirect, change-related functions instead “have an indirect, delayed influence, as their effects depend on changes to be made in the customer firm, the given business relationship, or other relationships. The profitability impact of such functions occurs outside of or later in the business relationship” (Ritter and Walter 2012: 137). First of all, the direct, operation-related functions will be looked at and these include the payment, volume, quality and safeguard function. When these are accounted for, the indirect, change-related functions will then be introduced.

4.2.1.1 DIRECT, OPERATION-RELATED RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONS

The first direct, operation-related relationship function is the ‘Payment function’. This function covers the financial side of the relationship as customers focus on factors like purchase price, total cost of ownership or net present value, at least to some extent, depending on their purchasing orientation (Ritter and Walter 2012). The payment function also encompasses the different methods of payment, which is an area where companies are able to customize the payment function by using different payment structures like leasing or instalment agreements to fit the needs of the customer.

However, this is not a function that is found in Maersk Line’s Facebook content and this appears to be a deliberate choice. In the previously mentioned House Rules (Appendix 8), which is where Maersk Line has laid down the ground rules for the participants on the Facebook page in terms behaviour and inappropriate conversation topics, one of these ‘rules’ is called “No questions about shipments”. By stating this rule, the company seems to establish that topics regarding shipments are inappropriate, may that be queries regarding existing shipments or questions about e.g. pricing, and furthermore, it is not possible to place an order for a shipment via the Facebook page.

On Facebook, Maersk Line does not ‘talk dollars and cents’ with their followers, and in that sense, Maersk Line does not seem to regard their Facebook platform as a marketing platform for pushing their products and services at favourable prices.

The second direct, operation-related relationship function is the ‘Volume function’. This function is about the extent of which a customer, chooses to use the products or services of a certain supplier. When a customer is identifying the right suppliers for them to use, they face the choice of going with a wide, fragmented supplier base, or a smaller, if not single-source supplier base. According
to Ritter and Walter (2012), the allocation of large purchase volumes to a few, selected suppliers have certain benefits as “it allows customers to influence suppliers, to consistency of supplies (no variations among suppliers) and to reduce communication costs” (p. 137). If this view is transferred to Maersk Line, it means that if they are successful in convincing their customers to bring most of their shipping needs to Maersk Line, this would in turn have a direct and positive effect on a customer’s profitability, however, this aspect of Maersk Line’s customer-supplier relationships is not evident based on the content on their Facebook page.

As described in connection with the payment function, Maersk Line’s Facebook page does not come across as a platform for discussing shipments. By that ‘rule’, any queries about shipments are redirected, and it is therefore not possible to say anything about the volume of work they do for each specific customer. Instead, Maersk Line regularly posts general statistics and facts about their overall shipping volume.

An example of this is found on 7 October 2014 (Appendix 5), where Maersk Line shares this fact about the volume of their business:

“We move mountains of electronics. Last year we shipped more than 900,000 containers of electronics. Half of them were shipped between Asia and Europe. #Shipping #MaerskLine #Trade”

And another example of such facts is seen on 5 November 2014a (Appendix 6):

“Did you know 100 Maersk vessels will reach a port within the next 24 hours? #FunFact #Shipping #MaerskLine #Port”

And around Christmas, Maersk Line also used the occasion to post another fact about their volume, as they posted this on 9 December 2014 (Appendix 7):

“Last year #MaerskLine moved more than 300,000 containers of toys and gadgets. It’s quite possible that the toys you receive as Christmas gift were shipped by us. #MaryMaersk #TripleE #Christmas”

In other words, the topic of volume is touched upon at several occasions on Maersk Line’s Facebook page, however, these posts are not containing information about the business volume of the individual customers, and therefore, it is not possible to determine how Maersk Line as a supplier, manages the volume of the individual customers.
The third direct, operation-related relationship function is the ‘Quality function’. This function is concerned with the quality of a product by the extent of which that product fits into the customer’s operations. According to Ritter and Walter (2012), “the better the fit, the higher the perceived quality, and, thus, the higher the perceived value” (p. 137). Product quality can be different things. It can be related to the product itself as the product encompasses valuable features that increase the value of the product, and quality can also be related to factors like the reliability of the product, the ease of handling it in the customer’s production processes, or logistical superiority in delivery (Ritter and Walter 2012).

In Maersk Line’s Facebook content, the company comes across as doing a lot of both direct and indirect mentioning of the quality of their products. Factors like the company’s global reach, the reliability of their services as well as the willingness and ability to adjust to customer needs are being presented on their Facebook page in the shape of statistics, facts, photos, videos etc. The quality of a company’s products or services must be assumed to carry a lot of weight when a customer is deciding the supplier to use, and therefore, it makes sense to focus some of their attention towards this on Facebook.

One of the more indirect ways Maersk Line comes across as describing the quality of their services is in the way they communicate their global reach. The company frequently posts photos of the Maersk Line vessels in different harbours and waters all around the world, thereby creating a sense that no matter where in the world a customer is situated, that customer is able to make use of Maersk Line’s services. This is not a claim that the company is directly vocalizing themselves, however, as they are consistently doing these posts, it is the feeling you are left with when looking over their Facebook content. A couple of examples of this is found in July (Appendix 2) and August (Appendix 3), which is presented here:

On 11 July 2014:

“Photo of the week: Wishing you all a happy weekend! #MarieMaersk #Malaysia (image by Aditya Mohan)”

On 23 July 2014:

“Edith’s last call to Aarhus, Denmark: The view as seen while on board #EdithMaersk. What do you think? (image by Aditya Mohan)”

On 1 August 2014:
“Photo of the week #MaerskLine #Germany (image by Aditya Mohan)”

On 8 August 2014b:

“Photo of the week #MaerskLine #Istanbul #Turkey (Image by Enes Gemci)”

And a last one, on 11 August 2014b:

“#EdithMaersk (14000 TEU) passes #MarieMaersk (18000 TEU) at The Great Bitter Lake, #SuezCanal (image by Aditya Mohan) #Maersk Line #Containership #Shipping”

This is just a small segment of the many posts of this nature, which comes across as a demonstration of the reach of their services. In terms of the quality of their services, Maersk Line also leaves the impression that they are able to welcome most types of customers. They are indirectly saying that no type of good is too complicated, too strange or too extensive for Maersk Line to take across the world. In a post from 5 August 2014, this is communicated in a very direct way by the company:

“As you read this more than 500 Maersk container ships are moving goods around the world, shipping everything from adhesive tape and aircraft parts to yeast and zinc. #MaerskLine #Containership #Movingtheworldaround”

This post is accompanied by a photo of a Maersk Line vessel, carrying a huge amount of containers, and the company’s ability to move such large amounts of goods around the world is also a quality frequently mentioned on Facebook, often in the shape of factual information or statistics. On 23 July 2014b (Appendix 2), Maersk Line shares a photo of a fully packed vessel posted by Maersk Group stating this:

“Every year we move enough cargo to reach the height of Mount Everest”

In a few occasions, Maersk Line also gives the impression that they are a reliable supplier. When determining the quality of a company’s products or services, reliability must also be assumed to be a significant factor as it is vital for customers that they are able to rely on the information from their supplier, and Maersk Line gives the impression that they do offer a reliable service. An example of Maersk Line communicating their level of reliability when it comes to delivering on time can be seen on 31 July 2014 (Appendix 2), where they make this post:

“As you read this, 100 Maersk ships are getting ready to reach a port within 24 hours. Every 15 minutes one of our vessels calls on a port, loads goods and connects to the world.”
Again, Maersk Line never mentions specific shipments or describes their services in detail, however, the above mentioned examples leaves the impression that by addressing the overall performances of the company they do describe a high level of quality to those of their customers that follow Maersk Line on Facebook.

The fourth and final direct, operation-related relationship function is the ‘Safeguard function’. This function is about the number of flexible order solutions a supplier provides to its customers in order for the supplier to establish a sense of security. In the case of Maersk Line, it could be security in terms of providing several solutions for delivering the ordered product or service on time at short notice. One way for a supplier to do so, would be to make available a network of flexible suppliers that can change order volumes at short notice, thereby, reducing distribution costs and inventory levels, or alternatively, providing a ‘reserve source’ that makes the customer less dependent on one primary supplier. By taking such safety measures, a customer creates value in the operations as a ‘plan B’ is established in the case of last minute changes or anything unforeseen going wrong.

Maersk Line frequently posts content about the stability and precision of the company’s performances that could be argued to come across as a reinforcement of how Maersk Line is safeguarding their customers. It could also be argued that Maersk Line’s frequent Facebook posts about the abilities and the reach of the company are instilling a sense of trust and security and in one instance, on 10 July 2014 (Appendix 2), Maersk Line also refers to a partnership with another company:

“Two M’s join forces to redefine the A,B,Cs of shipping experiences! Maersk Line has announced a 10 year Vessel Sharing Agreement (VSA) with Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) on the Asia-Europe, Transatlantic and Transpacific trades. The VSA will be referred to as 2M.”

However, in the six months of Facebook content this thesis is dealing with, this is the only mentioning of a business partner or a business network, who they are working with to establish an extra safety net for their customers. If this is in fact networks that they have in place or not is not possible to assess on the basis of the Facebook content, and therefore, the company does not completely fulfil the safeguard function on Facebook. Now, the thesis will be moving on to the indirect, change-related relationship functions.
4.2.1.2 INDIRECT, CHANGE-RELATED RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONS

As previously described, the indirect, change-related relationship functions are the functions that have an indirect, delayed influence on the value-creation process, as their effect depends on changes being made in the given business relationship. Therefore, unlike the direct, operation-related functions, when applying the indirect functions an immediate impact on profitability is not taking place, but instead, the impact of such functions occurs outside of or later in the business relationship hence the delayed effect. In the next section each of the eight indirect, change-related relationship functions will be applied one-by-one to determine if and how Maersk Line fulfils these relationship functions in a way that contributes to the customer’s value-creation process.

The first indirect, change-related relationship function is the ‘Innovation function’. This function determines to what extent suppliers, in this case Maersk Line, are able to “serve as valuable partners for their customers’ products and process innovations by contributing innovative ideas, supplying innovative components and production facilities, or engaging in collaborative development projects” (Ritter and Walter 2012: 138). In other words, this function is concerned with a supplier’s willingness to make resources available for customers, thereby, helping them in the development of their own business practices. Through the use of a supplier’s expertise and experience, customers can e.g. speed up their development processes, engage in larger projects and gain access to a wider range of technological inputs, and in turn, this will have a positive effect on the customer’s value-creation process.

When looking over Maersk Line’s Facebook content, it seems that the company has not included this angle on innovation in their Facebook strategy. Maersk Line does come across as focusing on innovation and several of their Facebook posts are concerned with the innovative aspects of their business, and the company is also including their customers in these considerations. An example of this was given in the previous unit of analysis regarding the Facebook competition #MyContainer, where Maersk Line asked their Facebook followers to give their input on innovative and alternative uses of a Maersk Line container. Another example of the company’s focus on innovation is found on 4 August 2014 (Appendix 3), where they posted this:

“As an important step towards achieving the milestone – ‘complete customer self-service’, Maersk Line introduced remote bill of lading. A service that’s first of its kind in the Ghanian shipping industry. Read more: (link for article)”
And another demonstration of Maersk Line’s innovativeness is seen on 30 July 2014 (Appendix 2):

“Our ECO-voyage tool allows us to handle any type of weather in the most fuel-efficient way: (link for article)”

As these examples show, the company does provide innovative content coming across as a demonstration of how Maersk Line thinks outside the box in their work, however, Maersk Line’s innovative focus seems to remain solely on how they conduct their own business in an innovative manner and not how they are able to help their customers in providing innovative input for them to develop and improve their own businesses. However, it should also be mentioned that there are found no examples of customers asking for further innovative advice from Maersk Line. This could be argued to either be because the customers do not require this assistance from Maersk Line but it could also be assumed to be because the company does not communicate a willingness to make these resources available. Overall, Maersk Line does not leave the impression that they openly offer their assistance to the innovative practices of their customers.

The second indirect, change-related relationship function is the ‘Information function’. This function is concerned with a company’s ability to pass on relevant technical or market-related information. And according to Ritter and Walter (2012), this is a valuable function as “firms need information about their environments and sense their markets in order to maneuver successfully” (p. 138). With the deep insight into their own industry as well as their customers’ situation and needs, suppliers are usually able to provide access to critical information faster than the competition, thereby, also decreasing the costs of market research.

Being the world’s largest shipping company as well as an industry leader, Maersk Line must be assumed to have a lot of in-depth knowledge about the industry and about what trends customers should be aware of, thereby, providing them with cutting-edge knowledge not immediately accessible for the competition. And on Facebook, Maersk Line does also occasionally provide their Facebook followers with seemingly in-depth knowledge and information not only about the company itself but also about technical aspects of the industry in general. As already described, in order for a company to fulfil the information function they must pass on relevant technical or market-related information and Maersk Line does seem to be providing exactly this to their stakeholders, often accompanied by an elaborating, in-depth article. Different examples of such informational posts are found on Maersk Line’s Facebook page, and the first example of this is seen on 11 July 2014b (Appendix 2):
“You have seen them. Those bulky boxes of metal with the iconic stars on both sides, fitted on trains and trucks going around the world delivering your promises - the Maersk Line containers. Ever wondered what other purposes these containers serve? Read more about what happens when a container stops being a container: (link for article)"

And on 6 August 2014c (Appendix 3), Maersk Line also passes on their knowledge about sustainable business practices by reducing emissions:

“Alternative Marine Power – Ships are using electrical power while in port: a step taken to reduce emissions. Read more: (link for article)"

And on 11 September 2014 (Appendix 4), Maersk Line enlightens the stakeholders about a phenomenon that seems to be surrounded by a lot mystique judging by the several user questions about exactly this:

“So why do tugboats spary water on vessels coming into a port? Get the full explanation here: (link for article)"

And on 24 November 2014a (Appendix 6), a final example of Maersk Line sharing industry-specific information with their stakeholders is found:

“About 100 Maersk Line vessels call at port every day across the world. Given the vast difference in the geographies that the vessels end up at, have you ever wondered how the logistics and communication at each port are managed? It’s worth considering that every port would have a local language, a different set of local coastal state regulations, and a different system to navigate around the coastal area. Did you know that this important advisory capacity of negotiating the vessel to and from the port successfully lies with the marine pilot? Pilots are the experts at ship handling possessing thorough understanding of the local waterways and possible anomalies. Read more about the marine pilots and pilot boats: (link for article)"

The third indirect, change-related relationship function is the ‘Access function’. This function is concerned with a supplier’s ability to help customers to establish contact with potential exchange partners or other influential groups. These groups encompass a wide range of individuals, organisations or other companies, which a customer could benefit from getting access to. If a supplier for instance helps a customer get access to potential customers, other suppliers, industry associations, or governmental institutions, this could possibly help the customer to improve their business, and in turn, the perceived value of the new relationships would then determine the effect on the value-
creation process between supplier and customer. Furthermore, customers can use their relationship with a prestigious supplier as a reference. By doing so, the supplier does fulfil the access function, however, in a more passive way.

Regarding the active handling of the access function, where a supplier actively connects their customers to potential exchange partners and influential people, this is not an impression you get when browsing through Maersk Line’s Facebook page. There is not one example of Maersk Line actively helping their Facebook users or customers get access to external partners, who might be able to assist in specific issues or develop the customer's business. However, if you look at the passive utilization of the access function, Maersk Line does post content that could be assumed to increase the company's level of prestige, thereby, making them more valuable for a customer to use as a reference. On 18 July 2014b (Appendix 2), the company makes this post about nominations for a business award:

“Maersk Line has been shortlisted for Lloyd's List Global Awards in ‘Company of the year’, ‘CSR’ and ‘Training’ categories. Read more: (link)”

And again on 22 July 2014 (Appendix 2), Maersk Line posts a picture of one of their fully packed Triple-E vessels accompanied by this short text:

“A World Record! Mary Maersk left Algeciras on 21 July with 17,529 TEU. She is heading to Asia. Your Promise Delivered! #TripleE #MaryMaersk (Image by Justo Prieto)”

These posts give the impression that Maersk Line is one of the leading companies in the shipping industry, and another example of this is found on 21 August 2014c (Appendix 3):

“Maersk Line remains the leading carrier on reliability in Q2. Read more: (link)”

And again on 19 November 2014 (Appendix 6), the company stresses that they are on top of the shipping industry:

“Maersk Line named Shipping Company of the Year at Automotive Supply Chain Global Awards. Read more: (link)”

These are just some of the examples of Maersk Line emphasizing the success of the company, and therefore, this can be argued to increase the perceived value of the access function as the company comes across as a good and valid reference.
The fourth indirect, change-related relationship function is the ‘Motivation function’. This function is concerned with a supplier’s ability to indirectly contribute to a customer’s profitability by increasing employee efficiency through social support. Ritter and Walter (2012) exemplifies this by stating that “by working with a supplier that is known for its innovativeness, social responsibility, or corporate success, an employee can gain respect and recognition among colleagues, which then increases that employee’s motivation” (p. 138). As previously described, an employee’s allocation to important suppliers may be viewed as an internal promotion, which then drives the employee to increase his or her efficiency.

As Maersk Line is currently the world’s largest shipping company with 25,000 employees in 150 countries, it could be assumed that this factor alone fulfils the motivation function, but more than that, the company also frequently posts content that stresses both their social responsibility as well as their high status in the shipping industry. On 12 August 2014b (Appendix 3), Maersk Line describes one of their corporate social responsibility initiatives:

“Slowing ships down for cleaner air and whale protection. Six global shipping companies, Maersk Line, COSCO, Hapag Lloyd, K Line, Matson, and United Arab Shipping Company are participating in the speed reduction incentive program. Read more: (link for article)”

And again on 26 August 2014b (Appendix 3), the company makes a post indicating that there is action behind their CSR words – and that they do that better than the rest of the shipping industry:

“The Clean Cargo Working Group’s report on annual CO2 emission performance data for the container shipping industry states that the member carriers have reduced CO2 emissions per container transported in 2013 by 7.7%. Maersk Line is outperforming the rest of the industry. Read more: (link for article)”

Another example of this is found again on 18 September 2014 (Appendix 4):

“Maersk Line is delighted to announce that it has been shortlisted for ‘Sustainable Ship Operator of the Year’ at the inaugural Ship Efficiency Awards. Read more about our efforts here: (link for article)”

And the post about the nomination was followed up with a post about winning the award on 3 October 2014 (Appendix 5):

“Maersk Line named Sustainable Ship Operator of the Year at the Ship Efficiency Award 2014. Read more: (link for article)”
On 1 October 2014a (Appendix 5), Maersk Line makes a post about how CEO Søren Skou has been acknowledged for his contribution to the company’s success:

“Maersk Line CEO Soren Skou has been awarded the Lloyd’s List Newsmaker of the Year award. The award recognises Soren Skou as an influential figure in the shipping industry having presided over a period of strong results at Maersk Line as well as having been a key move behind industry alliances like P3 and 2M: (link for article)”

And the last example is found on 10 November 2014b (Appendix 6), where Maersk Line announces their effort in fighting the Ebola epidemic:

“Maersk is committed to assist Ebola-hit countries in West Africa and emphasizes on the importance of keeping trade links open. Read more: (link for article)”

It is not possible assess the actual influence of Maersk Line on their customers’ employees, however, on the basis of the motivation function laid out by Ritter and Walter (2012), Maersk Line does come across as making an effort in building up a ‘high-profile’ status in the minds of their Facebook followers.

As both the direct, operation-related relationship functions and the indirect, change-related relationship functions have now been applied to Maersk Line’s social media activities, or more precisely, the Facebook aspect of the social media campaign, the thesis now moves on to look at how Maersk Line is relating to their market, and how they doing this through their Facebook presence.

4.2.2 RELATION TO THE MARKET

The next step of the analysis is to determine how Maersk Line relates to their market on Facebook. To do so, the model called ‘Four aspects of marketing classified by exchange and managerial dimensions’ by Coviello et al. (2002) will be applied to make an assessment of how Maersk Line comes across on Facebook in terms of relating to the market in a predominantly transactional or a predominantly relational way. A pre-determined stereotype does exist about B2B companies being predominantly relational, however, this stereotype has been proven wrong on several occasions (Coviello et al. 2002). Therefore, it will be interesting to see how Maersk Line comes across on the relatively new social media platform – new in a B2B context anyway. In the following section, the
model by Coviello et al. (2002) will be used to determine if Maersk Line’s use of Facebook should be characterized primarily as transactional or relational.

First of all, there are areas where Maersk Line comes across as relating to their market from the transactional perspective. One of these areas is the nature of the company’s communication with their Facebook followers. On Facebook, Maersk Line remains a company that comes across as communicating with a large group of individuals and the conversations rarely resembles a dialogue between two equals communicating with each other on the same terms. The company does not seem to meet the stakeholders at eye level but instead Maersk Line is perceived as being a company communicating to a targeted segment of individuals more than being equals, and this resembles transactional perspective most accurately. Several examples are found throughout the Facebook content, where Maersk Line does acknowledge and respond to queries from their Facebook followers and stakeholders, however, the company rarely takes an initiative to continue or develop the conversation further. In that sense, they come across as transactional more than relational. One of these examples are found on 4 July 2014a (Appendix 2), where Maersk Line makes this post:

“Did you know Maersk Line had zero fatalities in 2013? IHS Maritime reports: (link)”

For this information, Maersk Line receives a few responses. One of these is from an individual called Andy Lane who writes this on 4 July at 1:54 p.m.:

“Congratulations on a perfect record, safety job number one, hope for a repeat in 2014.”

Maersk Line is quick to respond to this, as they reply only two minutes later:

“Thank you, Andy.”

With this response they acknowledge his comment, however, no further conversation is initiated. Andy Lane then goes on to respond to Maersk Line’s reply with this comment two days later:

“Here are some shocking numbers from the Construction Industry in Singapore. January 2014 – 8 fatalities, Jan-May 2014 – 71 serious injuries! Industry body says ‘pressure to complete projects on time is to blame’! Sounds like profits before life. The absence of corporate consequences are behind this. So again, well done to Maersk Line on an awesome achievement!”
However, Maersk Line does not reply to this comment at all. By that, Maersk Line comes across as being interested in sharing the good company news with all of their Facebook followers but not interested in conversing with the same followers afterwards.

Also, the type of contact does not come across as the level of interpersonal level known from face-to-face communication. Maersk Line’s communication approach on Facebook does come across as informal and personalized; however, there seems to be a constant distance between them and their stakeholders. And this is not only due to the medium, but also the way Maersk Line responds to user-generated comments.

An example of this is seen on 3 September 2014b (Appendix 4), where the user Leif Alexander Pedersen writes a comment to Maersk Line’s post about the company’s Triple-E LEGO model ships:

“*Oh, we did that at school in Economics, with LEGO cars, when we studied productivity and the assembly chain 😊 I can tell you that a ‘work-team’ is hard to get. At the end, my group was the one who finished building first the LEGO car we were assigned ;) … and I’m still waiting to hear from you for the (LEGO) Triple-E I’ve won in #MyContainer contest… strange that I think about that of Economics, it was so many years ago…😊*”

To which Maersk Line replies:

“*Hi Leif, As communicated to you earlier, we will be notifying you about the expected time of delivery of your prize in a couple of days’ time. It’s been a pleasure having your participation in the competition. Regards, Maersk Line Social*”

Maersk Line does not initiate further conversation about the experiences of the user, or even comment on them. Instead, they come across as somewhat of an authority figure where they, formally, clarify how competition procedure is working.

However, when looking through Maersk Line’s Facebook content, the company seems to be relating to their market in a predominantly relational way.

Regarding the purpose of Maersk Line’s exchanges with stakeholders, this resembles the relational perspective the most. As previously described, Maersk Line does not touch upon aspects concerning specific shipments or any economic transactions on Facebook, and furthermore, it is not possible for customers to purchase Maersk Line’s services via their Facebook page. And in that sense, the transactional perspective does not seem to be present. Instead, Maersk Line as a sup-
plier is perceived as wanting to engage in interactive relationships between a buyer and seller (or supplier and customer). This comes across as interaction marketing with a relational focus, and throughout the Facebook page there are several examples of Maersk Line interacting with their Facebook followers. A few of these examples have already been given previously in the thesis, and a couple more will be provided here.

On 1 October 2014b (Appendix 5), Maersk Line makes this post accompanied by a user-generated photo:

“We are delivering promises across horizons! #MaerskLine #YourPromiseDelivered (Image by Holly Birket)”

To which, Holly Birket comments at 4:52 p.m. on the same day:

“Woo – I’m famous! This was taken somewhere in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The vessel is the ‘Maersk Sembawang’. I miss her”

And Maersk Line then replies the next day:

“Yes Holly, that was an amazing picture! Thanks. Regards, Maersk Line Social”

Another example can be seen the day after on 2 October 2014 (Appendix 5), where Maersk Line posts a photo of the company’s first voyage with this text:

“Maersk Line’s first voyage: On 12 July 1928 the Leise Maersk left Baltimore on its first voyage from the American East Coast via the Panama Canal to the Far East and back. The cargo consisted of Ford car parts and other general cargo. #ThrowbackThursday #MaerskLine #Voyage”

The user Erik Nielsen then replies at 3:56 p.m. in the same day:

“Great shot; more of the same pls.”

To which Maersk Line then responds the next day:

“Noted, Erik. We will be giving you more of such posts in the coming days. Regards, Maersk Line Social”

Such examples of Maersk Line interacting with stakeholders and Facebook followers are many when going through their content, which gives the impression that the primary purpose of the company’s exchanges with the users is to establish interactions.
Also, when looking at the duration of exchanges between Maersk Line and their stakeholders on Facebook, this comes across as being predominantly relational. Maersk Line makes around one Facebook post per day aimed at all of their over 1 million Facebook followers. By that, Maersk Line arguably establishes a daily exchange with the stakeholders, thereby, building up continuous and ongoing online interactions that are mutually adaptive as Maersk Line not only posts content but also responds to stakeholder questions.

Moving on to the level of formality in the exchanges, this also seems to resemble the relational perspective the most. Maersk Line uses a mix of formalities, which include both formal, business-related posts as well as informal, socially related posts, and this dynamic creates an environment, where stakeholders are likely to feel an attachment or an interest. An example of the more formal content is found on 3 November 2014 (Appendix 6), where Maersk Line provides a business insight into a company doing business in a developing market:

“How is Maersk Line keeping the focus right in a growing and dynamic market like India? Read more: (link)”

And these formal posts are regularly mixed with informal and light content as it is seen on 1 December 2014 (Appendix 7):

“We are having a pleasant day at work, how about you? #MaerskLine spotted by Muhammad Tarraf at Port de Luanda, Angola.”

Regarding the managerial dimensions, that is, the managerial intent, managerial focus and managerial investment, this is not information that this thesis project have a direct insight into. However, on the basis of the available content on their Facebook page, an estimation of these factors will be made as it is assumed that management have played a part in laying down the strategy for the use of the platform.

And essentially, the managerial intent, the managerial focus and the managerial investment is coming across as being relational as well. You could argue that the management of a company would initiate a Facebook campaign such as Maersk Line’s current activities to attract new customers, to increase profits, to distribute and sell the company’s services or any of the other direct benefits that is related to the transactional perspective, and it must also be assumed that Maersk Line’s management does hope that these elements will be a result of the social media campaign. However, what comes across as the clearest managerial intent, focus and investment when going through Maersk Line’s Facebook content is the elements of interaction marketing. The company is
perceived as being careful not to initiate or engage in any interactions about e.g. specific shipments or prices but instead comes across as putting a lot of focus on interactions which is seen in the way they post questions on Facebook for their stakeholders to respond to and the way they are quick to respond to or like comments and queries from stakeholders. The company does come across as being careful in establishing, developing and facilitating relationships with the stakeholders, in which they have invested several resources. As a result, their primary managerial focus comes across as being more relational than transactional.

All in all, there are examples of Maersk Line both taking a relational and a transactional approach to their market. Nonetheless, when going through the different exchange and managerial dimensions according to the model by Coviello et al. (2002), the company does come across as being predominantly relational in their relation to the market.

4.2.3 MAERSK LINE AND RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

Overall, it is evident that Maersk Line does focus on developing strong relationships with their customers through their content and interactions on Facebook. It was found that they relate to their market in a predominantly relational way where most of their attention is focused towards building up relationships instead of on the transaction itself. And this was also evident in terms of the relationship functions, where they are found successful in fulfilling some important functions, however, not all. The direct, operation-related did not play a big role in their actions on Facebook, but what was maybe even more surprising was, that neither did some of the indirect, change-related relationship functions. By looking at the indirect functions, it leaves the impression that Maersk Line could make an even greater impact on the customer-perceived value if some aspects of the Facebook presence were done differently.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

As the analysis of the empirical data has now been completed, it is time to draw up some conclusive remarks regarding what has been done and how the outcome ended up looking. Firstly, the results from the analysis unit of stakeholder communication will be presented, and secondly, the results from the analysis unit of relationship marketing will be included. Finally, the two units of analysis will be merged in order to determine how the findings are answering the problem statement of this thesis:

*Does Maersk Line seem to focus on building up and developing their customer-supplier relationships through the use of social media platforms and if so, how does this come across in their social media communication?*

5.1 RESULTS FROM STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATION

In the first unit of analysis, the notion of stakeholder communication was examined in connection with Maersk Line’s social media activities. By that, the first unit of analysis set out to answer RQ1, which was: “*How does Maersk Line’s interactions and general communication with stakeholders come across on social media?*”

The first step taken in the analysis was to establish what type of stakeholders Maersk Line is dealing with. The company’s acclaimed goal is to get closer to their customers on social media, and in that connection, it is important to assess how important or prominent a stakeholder type their customers are. Here, it was assessed that the introduction of social media has resulted in Maersk Line’s customers being definitive stakeholders, which is the most prominent type of stakeholder. The entry of Web 2.0 and social media has provided customers with a powerful voice, and when being a social media-active company, the customers of Maersk Line are now able to vocalize their frustrations and poor company experiences via viral sharing of content with the possibility of being spread across the world. And this provides a power and urgency claim that customers were assumed not to possess prior to social media. Being definitive stakeholders, Maersk Line should fo-
cus a lot of their attention and resources towards the customers in order for them to meet their needs and requirements in the process of building up strong customer-supplier relationships.

The next step then was to make an assessment of Maersk Line’s primary strategy of stakeholder communication on Facebook. This thesis works with three overall strategies, which are the informational strategy, the persuasive strategy and the dialogue strategy. There were traces of all three approaches in Maersk Line’s Facebook communication, however, one stood out the most: The persuasive strategy. Even though Maersk Line demonstrated both a willingness to provide customers with information about their business as well as willingness to go into dialogue with customers, what came across as most evident on the company’s Facebook page was that the communication is predominantly about Maersk Line and not about the customers. With the Facebook page, the company successfully establishes an arena for two-way communication where both parties are able to interact with each other and where stakeholders can interact with other stakeholders, and there are found several examples of exactly this taking place. However, there are only few examples of Maersk Line indicating a willingness to mutually engage in exchanges of ideas and opinions. Instead, the company primarily comes across as a business attempting to influence the knowledge and attitudes of the stakeholders in the favour of the organisation instead of sharing the role of influencer with their stakeholders. By that, two-way asymmetrical communication is taking place, as the interaction is not equal for both parties.

The analysis then moved on to examine Maersk Line’s ability to listen effectively to their stakeholders. For this purpose, Burnside-Lawry’s (2011) seven conditions of ineffective organisational listening were included as they serve as indicators of an organisation’s dysfunctional listening in terms of stakeholder communication. These seven conditions were applied to Maersk Line’s Facebook content, as effective listening is an important part of good stakeholder communication and of building up strong customer-supplier relationships. And what the section identified was that, for the most part, Maersk Line does demonstrate a willingness to interact with and ‘listen to’ their stakeholders in an effective way. Maersk Line does not come across as either defensive or arrogant, quite the opposite actually, as they are generous in providing the Facebook followers with an extensive insight into the organisation and they are quick to respond to stakeholder queries in a seemingly satisfying manner. Furthermore, they often include user-generated content in their posts, and frequently ask for the opinion of their followers. And even though they do not respond to every single comment with either a like or a response, they are quick to do so when a comment is directly aimed at the company. Regarding the culture of the organisation, Maersk Line’s culture was found to come across as inclusive and encouraging as they frequently post questions for their stakehold-
ers to respond to and, overall, the company comes across as very approachable. In regards to the company’s level of sincerity and ability to communicate in a comprehensive way, Maersk Line does come across as both sincere and comprehensible on Facebook. There are not found examples of Maersk Line being ‘caught in a lie’ or ‘not walking their talk’, and furthermore, they come across as invested in being available for their stakeholders. The content posted range from deep technical knowledge to the more superficial and fun content, which improves the possibility of the majority of their Facebook followers to comprehend and relate to the content. Also, there are no examples of Facebook followers expressing difficulties in understanding the content or expressing concerns about the technical level. Regarding their level of knowledge, Maersk Line is also perceived as successful in demonstrating their extensive knowledge of the business. This is found to be the case in terms of the content they post, but also in terms of answering technical questions, as they are able to answer these with factual and technical responses in a relatively short timespan. In other words, they come across as experts in their field and that is also a condition for demonstrating effective organisational listening. In terms of the speech conditions established by Maersk Line, this is about the organisation creating a public space where stakeholders can challenge the organisational policies and actions. With the establishment of Maersk Line’s Facebook page, it could be argued that such a public space is facilitated and the company also follow-up on this by being available for any issues customers may have concerning the company. All of these above-mentioned factors are influential in improving the relationship between speaker and listener. However, there are examples of power imbalances in the communication between Maersk Line and their customers. In this condition, it seems that there does exist a distance between the company and their stakeholders. Maersk Line has willingly set up an arena for online conversations and discussions with their stakeholders, and it is evident that the company do regard stakeholder contributions. However, even though they initiate conversations and discussions, Maersk Line never really comes across as presenting their own attitudes towards the issues being talked about and whenever they are confronted directly, they respond in a constructive and often factual manner without asking new questions, thereby, indirectly shutting down the conversation or discussion. And by that, they rarely participate on equal terms with the stakeholders.

In terms of answering RQ1, Maersk Line’s stakeholder communication comes across as predominantly persuasive in nature. Considering that the company is dealing with a definitive stakeholder group, they are doing a lot of the things right in terms of stakeholder communication and organisational listening, and Maersk Line definitely comes across as doing a great effort in the process of interacting with their stakeholders. However, a few important aspects are lacking in order for the
company to reach the level of a dialogue, which is ideal when trying to build up strong relationships. One crucial reason for this is that there exists a power imbalance, as the two-way communication on social media is not taking place on equal terms for both parties.

5.2 RESULTS FROM RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

The second unit of analysis was concerned with relationship marketing, which attempted to provide an answer for RQ2: “How is Maersk Line’s focus on customer-supplier relationships evident through the content they post and their interactions on social media?”

To answer this, the first part of the analysis unit was concerned with a range of different relationship functions on customer-perceived relationship value. These functions are divided into two subgroups – the direct, operation-related relationship functions and the indirect, change-related relationship functions.

The direct, operation-related relationship functions are the functions that have an immediate effect on a customer’s profitability. As Maersk Line has stated that the company’s social media initiatives are seen as a platform for communicating with stakeholders and customers in particular, and not a platform for marketing, these functions could be assumed not to play a significant role. And after analysing the Facebook content it is evident that several of these functions do not come across as being fulfilled on Facebook. First of all, the payment function does not appear in the content as Maersk Line does not wish to discuss prices or specific shipments on Facebook as stated in their ‘House rules’. Furthermore, the company also do not touch upon specific volumes of business in connection with specific customers, and therefore, the shipping volumes of the individual customers are not possible to assess from the Facebook page. However, they do address their shipping volumes in general terms, and in that sense, they do indirectly indicate an ability to take on large volumes of work. In terms of the quality function, this is something that Maersk Line frequently addresses in their content both directly and indirectly. This comes across e.g. in posts about their global reach and the reliability (and volume) of their shipments, and this is something that could be assumed to be an underlining of the high-quality of the company’s services as well as an indication of their ability to adjust to customers’ shipping needs. Furthermore, there are not really found mentioning of flexible solution orders or specific business partners, as the safeguard function requires. This serves the purpose of providing the customers with a sense of security in the case that something goes wrong, however, the fact that they are the world’s largest shipping company and the fact
that they themselves are a stable and reliable source to work with is found to be the only safety net provided by Maersk Line.

Whereas, the direct functions did not play a significant role on the Facebook page, as it was anticipated, the indirect, change-related relationship functions could instead be assumed to do so as these are helpful in the process of building up strong relationship over time. These functions have an indirect and delayed effect on the customer as well as the given business relationship. However, it became evident that some of these functions were also not fulfilled in the way that is most beneficial for the creation of customer-perceived value. Regarding the innovation function, Maersk Line does touch upon aspects of innovation and how the company uses innovation to strengthen their own business, however, this is only in connection with Maersk Line. The company, being the supplier, does not give the impression that they are willing to provide resources or innovative guidance for their customers as a way of assisting them in the process of developing and improving their businesses. Instead, Maersk Line comes across as successful in fulfilling the information function. The company provides their Facebook followers with in-depth knowledge and information, not only about Maersk Line as a company but also about the industry in general, and this is knowledge that could benefit their customers. In terms of the access function, Maersk Line does not give an impression of active involvement; but instead, they primarily come across as fulfilling this function in a passive way. The company comes across as fulfilling the access function passively as they post content that could be assumed to increase the company’s level of prestige, thereby, making them more valuable for a customer to use as a reference. The last function included in the analysis was the motivation function, and here, there were examples of Maersk Line fulfilling this function. Maersk Line is the world’s largest shipping company which automatically generates prestige, but furthermore, they frequently post content about e.g. their CSR awareness and CSR initiatives as well as continuously emphasizing their high status in the shipping industry, which are factors perceived to influence the motivation of their customers’ employees positively.

And finally, the analysis took a close look at how Maersk Line is relating to their market through their social media communication. Here, it was found that they do so from a predominantly relational perspective, even though signs of the transactional perspective were found in a few of the dimensions like the nature of the communication. Here, it was perceived that the communication between Maersk Line and their Facebook followers rarely develops into a dialogue between two equals interacting on the same terms. Also the type of contact used on Facebook resembles the transactional perspective mostly, as there seems to be a constant distance between Maersk Line and their customers. Even though they do apply an informal and personalized communication, the
tendency is that they come across as being distanced from their followers. However, when that is said, the predominant perspective was found to be the relational one. Both in terms of the purpose of the exchanges, the duration of the exchanges and the level of the formality in the exchanges these all resemble the relational perspective the most. Maersk Line does not touch upon issues concerning financial aspects of the business or specific shipments, and their Facebook strategy of around one post per day seems to establish a daily interaction with stakeholders thereby building up on-going online conversations and discussions. And as previously described, these posts come across as a mix of formalities ranging from the more formal, business-related posts to informal and social-oriented content. Regarding the managerial dimensions, these proved difficult to assess, as information about the managerial involvement in the social media campaign is not available. However, as it was assumed that management have been involved to some extent in laying down the strategy for the social media activities, the managerial intent, focus and investment essentially come across as being relational as well, especially in the way that Maersk Line is being very aware of interacting with their Facebook followers.

Therefore, to answer RQ2 it must be concluded that it is evident that Maersk Line does focus on their customer-supplier relationships on social media both in terms of fulfilling relationship functions, in terms of the content they post and in their relational approach to their market through social media. However, there are still elements where Maersk Line seems to be neglecting the importance of developing customer-supplier relationships on Facebook.

5.3 GATHERING THE RESULTS

The focus of this thesis has been on Maersk Line and their social media activities. Maersk Line has an acclaimed goal of getting closer to their customers through their presence on social media, and what this thesis has set out to examine is to what extent Maersk Line actually seems to be focusing on building up strong relationships with their customers on the social media platforms, and if so, how this comes across in their social media communication. With all of the results from the two units of analysis laid out, the time has now come to gather these results into a final answer of the problem statement.

Based on an analysis of the empirical data, Maersk Line comes across as actively seeking to build up strong customer-supplier relationships on the social media platform Facebook. As it was determined in the beginning of the analysis, Maersk Line is dealing with a group of customers that
require a lot of attention and that is essentially what they are giving them on Facebook. By establishing the company page on Facebook, they are providing customers with ideal speech conditions, where they are able to raise questions and concerns as well as engage with Maersk Line, and the company also demonstrates a strong willingness to interact with their stakeholders and a willingness to listen to what they have to say. This does not only come across in the culture that is perceived as both inclusive and engaging but also in the way that they post interactive content, in the way that they are quick to reply to stakeholder queries, and in the way that they often include user-generated content in their own posts. In other words, Maersk line succeeds in not coming across as a defensive and arrogant industry giant, but instead a generous organisation inviting their Facebook followers to participate. They create an atmosphere of being very approachable where an answer is not far away when asking questions, and they come across as being sincere in a comprehensive and often informal manner as they communicate to their more than 1 million Facebook followers in a mix of both fun and socially-oriented content as well as the more technical knowledge. With their display of extensive industry knowledge, the company also plays the part of an industry expert sharing their deep expertise with customers and stakeholders in general, and this is also perceived as being beneficial and motivating in the development of strong relationships. Furthermore, Maersk Line has chosen not to include any content concerned with the financial aspects of the business or specific shipments as they wish to keep Facebook as a platform for communication and not marketing. Aspects like their shipping volumes and high quality of services are touched upon, however, only in general terms, where it does not come across as delivering a sales pitch. Via Facebook, Maersk Line is relating to their market in a predominantly relational way, as they seek to keep the exchanges between customer and supplier interactive, thereby, removing the focus away from a possible transaction.

However, there are also found areas where they could increase their efforts in building up strong relationships. Despite Maersk Line’s efforts in interacting with their customers, there do exist a power imbalance between the company and their Facebook followers and Maersk Line often creates a power distance by coming across as the before-mentioned industry expert where they do not succeed in meeting their followers as equals. And even though the company is careful in being available for stakeholders, the focus of the interactions constantly revolves around Maersk Line and not the customers. This might seem natural as the online interactions are taking place on Maersk Line’s Facebook page, however, they do come across as not taking much interest in the business of the customers, or in helping to develop and improve this. Maersk Line’s focus comes across as being on what they are capable of as a company and what measures they are taking to
improve their own business, which they invite their Facebook followers to be a part of, however, they do not seem to give any indications of willingness to provide e.g. resources or input to the process of developing and improving the business of their customers, and they do not seem to show any active involvement in establishing such exchanges. Therefore, the interactions do not come across as dialogues, where both parties mutually engage in an exchange of ideas and opinions. The company entered the social media realm with a clear goal, however, in terms of building up strong customer relationships, a better and more sustainable result could be assumed achievable if some things were done differently.

All in all, it is a fine line when balancing a company’s openness and vulnerability on the World Wide Web. On the one hand, the company wants to emphasize its own strengths, thereby, presenting themselves in the best possible light, but on the other hand, the company must also be assumed to benefit from taking an interest in the stakeholders. You could say that Maersk Line succeeds in taking the company closer to the customers, however, not equally successful in taking the customers closer to the company. Essentially, Maersk Line is doing a lot of the right things in developing strong relationships with their customers; however, there are room for improvement, if they wish to get even closer to their customers.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Maersk Line has a clear goal with their efforts on social media – they wish to get closer to their customers through the use of different platforms. And on paper, this makes really good sense, as the social media platforms (as the name indicates) are platforms where individuals and companies are able to mutually engage in online conversations. As demonstrated in the analysis of Maersk Line’s Facebook content, the company is good at engaging their Facebook followers by seeking their input, applying user-generated content and interacting with them in an highly approachable way. However, Maersk Line does all of these efforts in a slightly narrow-minded fashion as all topics of conversation are concerned with themselves and what they are capable of instead of focusing on their customers. By doing so, Maersk Line’s actions on Facebook sometimes resemble marketing more than a mutual exchange of ideas and opinions, and what Maersk Line is neglecting is that when building up strong customer relationships, it could be a good idea to leave the marketing visions out of the mix. Maersk Line themselves establishes that their Facebook page is for communication and not marketing, however, elements of their communicative approach on Facebook does resemble marketing to some extent. And this may be where Maersk Line and a lot of other B2B companies come up short in their ambition of getting closer to their customers. With more than 1 million followers and a record high engagement score on their Facebook page, Maersk Line is a rare B2B success story on social media but this does not change the fact that they have not been able to eliminate the marketing aspect from the platform, which is not ideal for building up strong relationships with B2B customers. And this is a mistake that a lot of B2B companies must be assumed to make when leaping onto social media and away from their comfort zone.

When a B2B company is entering the realm of social media, it is of high importance that they clarify the purpose of their social media presence in advance, but what is even more important is to understand and acknowledge the social features that each social media platform has to offer. By laying down a strategy for how to utilize social media in the correct way in a business context, this will make the purpose clear for all parties involved, and in turn, increase the chances of success significantly. Otherwise, social media initiatives may end up being a waste of time and resources as efforts are unfocussed and inadequate, and there is a definite risk of the focus shifting from communication and interactions towards a traditional marketing channel, where B2B companies are able
to push their products or services to a large audience. When implemented in a clear and appropriate way, the social media platforms are ways for a company to differentiate themselves from competitors by taking a new and alternative approach to communication and customer interaction, especially in the B2B industry, where social media is a relatively new phenomenon.

A potential pitfall for B2B companies is that they may enter social media without a clear plan or strategy for how to take advantage of the benefits that lies within these platforms because they lack the necessary know-how about social media. There is no doubt that digital communities are able to contribute to the business of a company, including B2B companies, but it requires the company to execute their social media presence in the right way. Many companies could be assumed to enter into the social media realm, because a consensus has been established about companies needing to be present on social media, as this is where they are able to reach the majority of their stakeholders and not because they see certain benefits in the new social aspects. As social media is instead seen as yet another marketing opportunity, companies often comes up short in utilizing all of the business opportunities that exist there. Today, it is normal for B2B companies to be present on social media and as the number of competitors active on social media increases, the incentive for joining the fun yourself also grows exponentially. However, it is not enough just to be present on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or one of the other communities, and companies often forget to establish a beneficial purpose for their own use of social media to benefit their business, and as a result, they end up fumbling in the dark.

It is not so much ‘what’ a company’s social media presence is used for that is important, but much more ‘why’ the online presence matters. And that ‘why’ can be several different things. A company may use social media for internal employee communication, for recruiting new employees, for pushing news and company stories to stakeholders, for interacting with customers or for a range of other things. And one thing does not exclude the others, it is merely important that the company establishes a self-awareness about what features their social media presence should encompass before launching it. With Maersk Line, we see a company that did establish a ‘why’ before launching their social media campaign, and in that sense, they took a progressive first step and they are definitely an example to follow for other B2B companies. However, subsequently the company comes up short in terms of ‘walking the talk’ and completely fulfilling their objectives, and by that, they may not experience the same impact as they could have experienced, if they had committed 100% to building up strong stakeholder relationships. Social media, and especially Facebook, is a great way for connecting with stakeholders and the global community in general, however, if com-
panies fail to keep their marketing visions on the platforms relevant for that purpose, they will have a harder time making use of the numerous social possibilities that exist on social media.

Naturally, a complete dedication to the development of customer relationships would also mean that organisations to a large extent would have to set aside some of their own interests. They would not be able to have as much focus on their own operations and capabilities, and they would have to put themselves in a more vulnerable situation. In the process of helping the customers to improve their own businesses or give them access to other influential sources, which would make the operations of the customers run more smoothly, organisations also risk alienating their own importance and in the end become replaceable or dispensable. But in the end, B2B companies must see Facebook and the rest of the social media platforms for what they are, that is, social online communities, and without a clear plan for how to use these platforms appropriately, the risk is that a company will not be able to tap into the potential that lies within the social media environment.

**6.1 LIMITATIONS**

In the process of reflecting on the findings from the study of Maersk Line’s Facebook content in a relationship marketing context, it is also important to account for the limitations of the study.

First of all, a limitation of the study is the relatively large insecurity concerning the amount of Maersk Line’s Facebook followers actually being customers or potential customers. Maersk Line essentially launched their Facebook campaign to get closer to their customers; however, it is difficult to assess how many of their followers on Facebook really fit into the stakeholder group of ‘Customers’. As we know, Maersk Line’s customers are companies themselves, but on Facebook, the majority of interactions are with individuals, and therefore, it is difficult to assess whether they are representing or are in any way connected to a customer, or if they instead are e.g. employees, competitors or unemployed individuals interested in a job at Maersk Line. The company has selected Facebook as a platform for targeting their customers, and by that, this thesis assumes that customer communication is taking place on Facebook; however, there is risk that this is not the case.

Furthermore, this thesis only looks at how Maersk Line is using Facebook to interact with their stakeholders but not really vice versa. One limitation was that it is not possible to determine how
many customers Maersk Line is actually communicating with on Facebook, and another is that the customers’ perception of Maersk Line’s Facebook content is not included in the study. It would have benefitted the validity of the thesis to include the views and perceptions of the customers, being the primary receivers of Maersk Line’s Facebook communication, however, this proved too extensive a task for an assignment of this magnitude and was therefore given a lower priority.

Another limitation is that only the social media platform, Facebook, was included in the study. Maersk Line launched their social media campaign on several different platforms but Facebook was selected as the source of empirical data as that specific platform was found most useful for developing relationships. As the analysis have since illustrated, there are things that could have been done differently in order to optimize the relationship-building aspect further, but what the thesis does not illustrate is whether or not these shortcomings are compensated on some of the other social platforms, and if Maersk Line is focusing their attention in these specific areas on other platforms than Facebook, as all platforms must be assumed to contribute to the relationship building.

The final limitation worth mentioning here is the size of Maersk Line as a company. The dramatic increase of social media’s popularity has convinced numerous companies that using social media is the latest and best way to effectively build your brand. And there is definitely no denying that social media can be an incredible vehicle for change. However, those possibilities might not be equally realistic for all companies. Maersk Line has had a lot of success on social media since launching their campaign, however, would the company have been able to achieve the same success if they were not the biggest shipping company in the world as it happens to be the case? Maersk Line was already a massive brand and a successful industry leader before social media, and by that, you can argue that they start their social media adventure with a major advantage. It would be fair to assume that the more loyal customers you have ‘offline’, the more fans your are able to attract ‘online’. Therefore, it might be the big, global and well-known brands that benefit the most from being on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and all the other platforms, whereas new and upcoming brands have a much harder time establishing a foundation for building up customer relationships. Also, the big brands have more access to the traditional mass media coverage and this is also a way to gain critical momentum for a social media campaign. In other words, social media may not be applicable to the same extent for small and medium sized companies in terms of developing strong customer relationships. For this reason, the findings of this thesis cannot be generalized to the broader community based on the study alone.


6.2 FUTURE RESEARCH

As this thesis comes to an end, it has not only attempted to give an answer to the problem statement and the research questions stated – it has also opened up to new, interesting questions that serve as a foundation for further research in this area.

As already touched upon, this thesis is concerned with the world’s largest shipping company, Maersk Line, which is recognised all over the world, and this gives them certain advantages in their process of interacting with stakeholders on social media. In that light, it would be very interesting to conduct a similar research with a small or medium-sized B2B company in order to shed light on how they are able to develop strong customer relations on social media, and what kind of challenges they are facing in the process. It must be assumed that some of these challenges are different from those of bigger and well-known brands. One challenge is to facilitate an interactive environment with stakeholders, but a completely other challenge is to establish the contact in the first place. This task must be assumed to be easier for large, global brands like Maersk Line, and therefore, it would be interesting to examine how this differs for smaller companies.

Another interesting aspect to take a closer look at is the other social media platforms as the different platforms have different competences. In this thesis, Facebook has been put under the loop; however, it would also be of great interest to look into the abilities of platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram and YouTube in the process of developing strong relations with customers and other stakeholders, as these undoubtedly encompass other competences and tools than Facebook. As mentioned, Maersk Line has incorporated a long line of different social media platforms in their social media activities and a future study could examine how they use e.g. Twitter to develop relationships and how this differs from Facebook.

And last but not least, it would also be interesting to include the customers in a future study. One thing is how the company is conducting their social media presence, but another thing is how the customers are receiving this. To some extent, this is something you can see from the comments written under Maersk Line’s Facebook posts, however, this could be examined into depth by interviewing customers, thereby, letting them describe their perception of social media in a B2B context.
REFERENCES


