

# MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

What's in an @reply?  
A case study of two-way communication in Target Canada's Twitter @replies

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## Abstract

This paper analyzes the Twitter @replies (responses to a user's initial tweet) of Target Canada as the organization entered the Canadian retail landscape in the Spring of 2013. The @replies posted by Target Canada are analyzed through two lenses: Grunig's (1992) two-way symmetrical model of public relations and Kent & Taylor's (2001) dialogic theory of public relations. Grunig's model argues that the symmetrical model of communication serves the interests of both organizations and their publics by emphasizing dialogue and mutually beneficial relationships (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999). Similarly, Kent & Taylor advocate for relational interaction and relationship building between organizations and their audience. This case study will contribute to the small body of literature that focuses on Twitter's @reply function. As social media use is an increasingly important marketing and branding tool, it is important for organizations to realize the potential that each platform can offer. Through Twitter @replies, organizations can create a balanced dialogue (where both the organization and its public participate in a dialogic exchange) and build open, mutually beneficial relationships.

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## Introduction

This major research paper (MRP) focuses on the role of Twitter from an organizational perspective. It examines specifically how Target Canada uses the @reply function and the way it can be applied to two-way communication in an organization-publics relationship and its public relations implications. To begin, this MRP will provide a brief overview of public relations theory—particularly two-way symmetrical communication—along with a review of relevant literature, a profile of Target Canada opening its first stores north of the border, and the significance and professional application of this research. Following the literature review, the methodology will outline the steps I used to obtain tweets and @replies from Target Canada during a particular period in the organization. Using the two-way symmetrical model of public relations and dialogic theory, I will analyze how Target Canada seems to engage and interact with its publics, and how the organization utilizes Twitter's @reply function to converse and engage with its followers. My discussion will then draw upon my data analysis to formulate recommendations on how organizations can best engage with publics through the @reply function. In the end, my research paper will provide a précis of my major findings, research limitations and recommendations of future areas of research.

## MRP Topic Overview

In this study, I documented and analyzed how Target Canada interacts with Twitter users through the @reply function beginning on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013, the organization's official grand opening date in Canada. When a Twitter user tweets at another user by including the latter's Twitter handle into the user's tweet, the second user can write a response to the initial tweet through the @reply function thereby writing

an @reply. The @reply function also serves to start conversations between users. Therefore, my MRP focuses on two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1998) and engagement on Twitter, specifically through the @reply function. Moving away from mass communications which takes a one-way messaging approach, similar to broadcasting, organizations have been adopting two-way communication to establish better relations with stakeholders using social media platforms (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Social media is seen to combine aspects of broadcast media with elements of face-to-face communication (Marwick & Boyd). Moreover, dialogue is commonly seen as the preferred method of communication to effectively build relationships and support conversations between organizations and their audiences (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). As such, the “advent of social media has opened up even greater possibilities for interpersonal and organizational communication” (Lovejoy & Saxton, p. 338). However, the definition of “engagement” can vary as it is a commonly-used buzzword in regards to social marketing initiatives. This will be explored and defined in my literature review.

### **Importance of this research to Target Canada**

As a major organization breaking into the Canadian retail landscape, Target Canada, its entry north of the border, and its operations are monitored in the media as well as by customers. In recent years, social media channels have allowed organizations to engage and establish relationships with their publics. This type of engagement on social media has emerged into social customer relationship management. Creating positive relationships and engagement experiences benefits both the organization and its publics.

Twitter, a microblogging platform, is increasingly viewed as a space where people can express support and share discussions (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh & Greenwell, 2010). “Companies not only watch chatter about their own products, but they also monitor perceptions of their competition in an effort to gain market share” (Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie, 2011, p. 194). One of Grunig’s models of public relations, the two-way symmetrical model, posits that communication is most beneficial when used to both promote mutual understanding and resolve conflict between the audience and the organization. To achieve these objectives, Target Canada can monitor its Twitter feed and address both the praise and concerns it receives from the public through the @reply function. There has been little research examining organizational uses and benefits of Twitter @replies; thus, this MRP addresses a gap in the literature. This research outlines how Target Canada’s @replies exemplify aspects of two-way symmetrical communication and how these @replies ultimately contribute to the organization’s purposeful engagement with its stakeholders.

### **Relevance to Professional Communication**

Social media platforms are corridors for information exchange, interactivity and engagement. As such, “social media user interactivity is influenced by functionality (website features) and contingency (interdependence of responses)” (Smith, 2010, p. 330). Through analyzing Target Canada’s @reply tweets as a form of two-way symmetrical communication and engagement with its stakeholders, I examined how corporate organizations can interact with customers and how they can employ the @reply function for two-way symmetrical communication and customer service purposes. Organizations are able to use social media to foster new interactions with



their publics “through a steady flow of inputs and outputs toward mutually beneficial relationships” (Smith, p. 330).

This MRP relies heavily on public relations theory by James E. Grunig, and Michael L. Kent and Maureen Taylor to best analyze the patterns of @reply content employed by the organization. Through examining Target Canada’s @replies, I identified the strategies that the company seems to employ to communicate and address the concerns of its customers. In turn, these patterns speak to how the organization can add value and create positive engagement experiences for customers and maintain positive relationships with them.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theories used to frame my MRP fall under the field of public relations and stress the importance of relationships. Grunig’s (1985) Excellence Theory of Public Relations emphasizes using engagement and two-way conversations to build long-term relationships with stakeholders (Waters & Williams, 2011). If public relations revolve around mutually valuable relationships between organizations and publics, “then the Internet holds tremendous promise for improving the communication that is an essential part of developing and sustaining such relationships when organizations and publics both have access to online media” (Kelleher, 2009, p.172). The effect of online media and social media in developing relationships will be further explored in the literature review.

Similarly, strategic communication should focus on engagement and the audience “because it is a more ethical approach, not to mention more beneficial to the organization’s ability to achieve long-term financial and participatory goals (Waters &

Williams, 2011, p. 355). Correspondingly, Grunig's Four Models of Public Relations map out the progression of organizational communication from one-way persuasive messages to building two-way relationships through conversation (Waters & Williams, 2011; Roper, 2005). The model comprises four types of communications:

- 1) *Press agency/publicity* model uses persuasion to manipulate the audience according to an organization's wishes.
- 2) *Public information model* relies on one-way communication means such as press releases to disseminate organizational information.
- 3) *Two-way asymmetrical model* supports imbalanced two-way communication. It uses research to discover how to best persuade an organization's publics.
- 4) *Two-way symmetrical model* uses communication to promote a mutual understanding and respect as well as to resolve conflict between the audience and the organization.

My MRP will use the fourth model to analyze Target Canada's @replies because it promotes a balanced conversation between an organization and its stakeholders to encourage dialogue and to build a sincere and mutually beneficial relationship (Waters & Williams, 2011). Grunig (1992) believes that "excellent organizations 'stay close' to their customers, employees, and other strategic constituencies" (p. 16). Thus, the two-way symmetrical model can cultivate relationships with both external and internal publics (Grunig, 2009). This fourth model "emphasises dialogue and features communication programmes that serve the interests of both organizations and their publics" (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1998, p. 219). On Twitter, this model can be applied to conversations between Target Canada and its followers, as well as to Target Canada's

attempts to recognize others publicly through @replies and its efforts at conflict resolution (Waters & Williams, 2011). Two-way symmetrical communication can balance and fine tune “the relationship between an organization and its publics through negotiation and compromise” (Rhee, Grunig ed, 2007, p. 104).

Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang & Lyra (1995) researched the two-way symmetrical model in international settings, and discovered that it may be generally effective in all cultures. In comparison, the two-way asymmetrical model of public relations uses research to identify key messages that an organization’s publics are likely to support; thus, it has been a common practice in modern public relations strategies (Grunig et al., 1995). Ideally, organizations that negotiate, bargain and provide strategies of conflict resolution “bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviours” of both parties and exemplify the two-way symmetrical model (Grunig et al., 1995, p. 169). Grunig et al. believe that the other three models represent a manipulative, dominant and coercive worldview of public relations. The other models do not encourage a balanced dialogue or an open, mutually beneficial relationship.

Similarly, Kent and Taylor’s (2001) Dialogic Theory of Public Relations stresses that two-way communication is needed to build relationships with an organization’s publics. This orientation consists of five features:

- 1) *Mutuality*-acknowledges the relationship between an organization and its publics. It includes an aspect of collaborative orientation and a spirit of mutual equality.
- 2) *Propinquity*-advocates for a type of rhetorical exchange. For organizations, dialogic propinquity means that publics are consulted in matters that influence

them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations.

- 3) *Empathy*-stipulates that trust and support must be present if dialogue is to succeed. There should be a support and confirmation/acknowledgement of others.
- 4) *Risk*-features vulnerability, unanticipated consequences and recognition of strangers. Dialogue has the potential to produce unpredictable and dangerous outcomes.
- 5) *Commitment*-is a required principle to build community relations and relationships. Dialogue should be honest and forthright, and held for the purposes of mutual benefit and understanding.

Bortree & Seltzer (2009) studied how dialogic strategies used by environmental advocacy groups lead to dialogic engagement between organizations and visitors. Their research provided the first analysis of the relationship between the formation of an online space for dialogue and actual dialogic engagement (Bortree & Seltzer). Their findings suggest that utilizing dialogic strategies “to create opportunities for dialogic engagement may produce positive outcomes such as increasing the number of stakeholders who interact with the organization by growing the organization’s social network” (Bortree & Seltzer, p. 318).

Overall, both frameworks agree that two-way symmetrical communication is the optimal objective of organization-stakeholder relationship management. This MRP will use these two frameworks to analyze the types of engagement and two-way communication that occur in Target Canada’s @reply conversations with Twitter users.

Grunig's and Kent and Taylor's classifications will help characterize how the organization communicates with its publics, and the MRP will consider Target Canada's patterns of Twitter use and how it conforms to the aforementioned models.

## Literature Review

### What is the definition of "engagement"?

As organizations incorporate social media into their marketing initiatives, "engagement" has become a buzzword frequently used in communication strategies. Vivek, Beatty, & Morgan (2012) define customer engagement as "the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate" (p. 127). Vivek et al.'s model of customer engagement considers the participation and involvement of current or potential customers as a precursor of customer engagement, whereas value, trust, affective commitment, word of mouth, loyalty, and brand community involvement are the possible outcomes of customer engagement. Vivek et al. argue that customer engagement is a vital component of relationship marketing, which points to the importance of building relationships with one's audience.

Outcomes of engagement can commonly be confused with the act of engagement itself (Calder, Malthouse & Schaedel, 2009). Calder et al. believe that engagement stems from experiencing a website or a medium; an outcome of engagement would be recommending the website to a friend. Engagement is often equated with behavioural actions, but Calder et al. clarify that it is "antecedent to

outcomes such as usage, affect and responses to advertising;” therefore, engagement stems from experiencing a medium (p. 322).

In addition, the emergence of Web 2.0 platforms allowed consumers to become content creators, and the terms “mass collaboration”, “social interaction”, and “user participation” and “generated content” have emerged (Panagiotopoulos, 2012). Social media engagement has been widely explored in academic research. Starbucks has used social media to listen to customer feedback, and Obama’s 2008 Presidential Campaign is widely cited as the prime example of social media use in the public sector (Panagiotopoulos; “Obama and the”, 2009). Social media can also be used to cultivate participation, engage with stakeholders and increase transparency (Panagiotopoulos).

Another type of engagement that has emerged is electronic word-of-mouth since social media has allowed customers and potential customers to easily connect and discuss potential brands (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2010; van Doorn et al., 2010; Chu & Kim, 2011). Van Doorn et al. (2010) have also contributed to the literature by defining customer engagement behaviour (CEB). They argue that customer engagement behaviours go beyond purchase transactions and can be described as any customer behavioural aspects that contain a brand focus and result from motivational forces; these activities can include blogging, and recommending and reviewing the brand.

Interactive, participatory media such as blogs also have the potential to help organizations and publics to capitalize on the capability of the Internet to realize relationship outcomes (Kelleher, 2009). Outcomes such as trust, satisfaction, commitment and mutuality are important to all organizations and their audiences. This kind of engagement has the potential to be more genuine rather than exploitative.

Kelleher's research supports a model of distributed public relations where key outcomes are cultivated by a wide range of people communicating interactively while representing the same organization, but these individuals do not think of themselves as public relations people. Kelleher identified the term "contingency interactivity" to describe the process of interactive communication that is contingent upon previous messages. In this MRP, Target Canada's @replies are contingent on the user's original tweet. The greater extent to which a response depends on the content of the previous exchanges between two parties, the more "intertwined and cumulative", the more fully interactive" the process is seen to be (Kelleher, p. 174). Therefore, the user's initial tweet relies on Target Canada's @reply in order to complete (or continue) the interactive process. How this process develops will speak to the extent Target Canada is able to interact and build relationships with its audience.

### **Engagement on Twitter**

Social media can be used to build meaningful relationships and enable conversations of value with the target audience. Depending on varying degrees of "usefulness of information, feedback loops, ease of interface, conservation of visitors and generation of return visits," social media sites can be optimal for relationship cultivation (Smith, 2010, p. 330). Social media enables brands to extend their personality while engaging with consumers on their terms, at the time they want (Woodcock, Broomfield, Downer & Starkey, 2010).

Since its inception in 2006, Twitter has grown to be an important tool to consider in social marketing. Research regarding Twitter has covered areas such as social network structure, response to large events, user gratification, and

conversation/collaboration (Sibona & Walczak, 2012; Yardi & Boyd, 2010; Chen, 2011). Malhotra, Kubowicz and See (2012) have analyzed the potential of retweeting for marketers. Retweets have farther reach and often contain both implicit and explicit endorsement. Accordingly, retweets are a type of social advocacy in which followers become brand ambassadors for that organization within their personal networks (Malhotra et al.). Ultimately, users who retweet a brand's original tweet act as an influencer (Malhotra et al.). Therefore, when an individual retweets a brand's tweet, he/she is engaging with the brand and experiencing the brand through the medium of Twitter. The platform also enables real time feedback, and problems can be addressed directly (Rinaldo et al., 2011). Many marketers use Twitter to build and maintain relationships with customers and influential people (Rinaldo et al.).

Engagement on Twitter can also provide public relations-related activities offered by publics to the organization. This socially distributed model of public relations occurs when individuals with little recognized stake in an organization initiate and/or fulfill public relations duties through online interactivity (Smith, 2010).

Twitter's role during natural disasters has also been researched (Kongthon, Haruechaiyasak, Pailai and Kongyoung, 2012). Many use Twitter for its ability to provide real-time, relevant information faster than traditional media (Kongthon et al., 2012). Others use it to establish community and connections, which is another type of engagement since these individuals are experiencing community relations through the platform (Smith and Giraud-Carrier, 2010; Chen, 2011). Engagement in the form of hashtags has also been researched (Kongthon et al., 2012). Hashtags (terms or phrases prefaced with the number symbol) are often used to relate to trending topics or



product branding. Smith (2010) has studied how social media sites can be the gateway to public relations that is disseminated to non-organizational publics, particularly in terms of the Haiti earthquake at Port-Au-Prince. Smith's research shows that "dialogic feedback loops, positivity and openness" are apparent public relationship strategies used by Twitter users to promote organizational efforts in Haiti (p. 331).

Civic and political engagement on Twitter has shown participatory practices through forms of mass self-communication, such as in the case of the Arab Spring (Comunello & Anzera, 2012). Twitter facilitated the organization and connection of social groups. Online engagement between politicians and the general public does not necessarily result in conversations but rather takes on the form of one-way broadcasting in some cases (Grant, Moon and Grant, 2010). Broadcasting would not be considered engagement under Grunig's two-way symmetrical due to the lack of back-and-forth dialogue but would conform to his one-way model. Grant et al. (2010) believe Twitter can rapidly connect with the politically engaged and provides a public space in which issues and policies are publicized, discussed and disputed. This can be similar to Target Canada's use of Twitter to discuss and respond to followers' relevant issues and concerns.

Junco, Elavsky and Heiberger (2013) have also used Twitter to assess outcomes of student engagement and collaboration. Additionally, Twitter has also been researched as pedagogical tool (Rinaldo et al., 2011). Twitter has been used to increase student engagement leading to higher involvement with the professor and class material, and improve the overall organization of the course structure (Rinaldo et al.). These students have indicated they feel better prepared for future careers and that

Twitter played an important role in attaining educational goals (Rinaldo et al.). Rinaldo et al. (2011) claim Twitter can effectively engage students through experimental learning. They are able to observe and reflect the course material and “develop the ability to deal with abstract concepts and to test with their tweets” (Rinaldo et al., 2011, p. 203).

Specific Twitter handles have also been analyzed to discover how often individuals tweet and what they are tweeting about; however, research on a specific handles’ @reply tweets is limited (Grant et al., 2010). Although Sibona and Walczak (2012) have studied the use of Twitter’s @reply function for recruitment selection, little research focuses on how @replies can be used for engagement.

Marwick & Boyd (2010) have studied Twitter users and the imagined audience. They have discovered that users write different tweets to target different audiences. Users with a large number of followers imagine their audience as a community or fan base (Marwick & Boyd, 2010). Twitter users such as large organizations and corporations have specific understandings of their audiences that they connect with and manage (Marwick & Boyd). The audience addressed is the actual readers who the piece of writing is intended for (Marwick & Boyd). On Twitter, this can refer to @replies, where a tweet is written as a response for an intended reader.

The proposed research will attempt to contribute to current literature by analyzing a corporate organization’s use of Twitter’s @reply function to interact with and engage its followers. This adds to the understanding of customer engagement and how organizations can converse and build relationships with their Twitter followers.

So far organizational-level social media studies (Burton & Soboleva, 2011; Jansen et al., 2009; Sharp, 2011; Walters & Williams, 2011; Zhang et al., 2011) show that organizations use social media for two primary reasons: information sharing and dialogic relationship building (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Twitter's greatest potential for organizations is external communication with customers (Burton & Soboleva). Non-profit organizations' use of Twitter has been researched by Lovejoy & Saxton, who have discovered three key functions of microblogging updates: information, community and action.

Organizational tweets can be categorized into different types of interactivity (Burton & Soboleva, 2011) or for building two-way communication to discover how publics think and how an organization can improve (Briones, Kuch, Liu & Jin, 2010). Briones et al. (2010) have studied the social media practices of the American Red Cross and discovered the non-profit organization successfully uses social media platforms dialogically and demonstrates Kent & Taylor's (2001) principles via active responses to posts. This enables the organization to gain insight and ideas from its various publics (Briones et al.).

Moreover, Rybalko & Seltzer (2010) have analyzed dialogic communication in the Twitter use by Fortune 500 companies. Although they have discovered some companies attempt to incorporate dialogic features into their tweets, Twitter is not yet used to its full dialogic potential (Rybalko & Seltzer).

### **Content Analysis of Tweets**

Content analysis of tweets reveals the content and possibly the intentions of the user posting those tweets. Hambrick et al. (2010) established six categories of tweets

(interactivity, diversion, information sharing, content, promotional, and fanship) that professional athletes exhibited on their Twitter feed. They concluded that Twitter allows athletes to facilitate a level of interactivity with fans that cannot be found in mainstream media (Hambrick et al.). Jansen et al. (2009) also analyzed content of tweets along with the range, frequency and timing, and studied microblogs as a form of electronic word-of-mouth. They focus on the impact microblogs can have on the relationship between company and customer. Word-of-mouth branding via Twitter can influence the brand awareness and brand image of this relationship (Jansen et al.). Therefore managing brand perception on Twitter should be an essential part of an organization's marketing strategy (Jansen et al.).

Naaman, Boase & Lai (2010) have also analyzed content posted by Twitter users to show two types of common user behaviours: "Informers" and "Meformers". Their findings suggest users who are more likely to share information as opposed to focus on the "self", are more conversational and show more Twitter interaction (Naaman et al.). Lovejoy & Saxton (2012) are the first to analyze the content of nonprofit organizations' Twitter updates. Their results show that organizations are employing dialogue, "community-building, and promotion and mobilization in their microblogging efforts" (Lovejoy & Saxton, p. 349). Lovejoy & Saxton's findings show that many non-profit organizations post more informational tweets than dialogic or engagement-oriented tweets. Community-focused posts are meant to engage users while action-oriented tweets are meant to mobilize the community (Lovejoy & Saxton). Their Information-Community-Action scheme challenges the information/dialogue dichotomy, and Lovejoy & Saxton propose that the "action" function needs to be further researched.

Overall, previous research has indicated the importance of two-way symmetrical communication in effectively building mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics. By encouraging dialogue, organizations create positive engagement experiences for their publics and promote a balanced conversation.

## Method

### Research Questions

Based on the theories and themes in literature described above, the following research questions have been developed:

**RQ1:** To what extent does Target Canada's use of Twitter @replies conform to Grunig's two-way symmetrical model?

**RQ2:** In what ways does Target Canada's Twitter handle employ the five features of Kent and Taylor's dialogic theory, as evidenced by @replies?

**RQ3:** In what ways can Target Canada's @replies be considered an example of purposeful engagement on Twitter?

Ultimately the questions aim to define and analyze the type of engagement that Target Canada enacts through Twitter @replies.

### Data Collection

This MRP focuses on Target Canada's efforts to engage followers via Twitter @replies during a specific period: its Canadian grand opening. Although no new stores opened on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013, this is the grand opening date for the 24 stores that have opened in Ontario since March 2013. Data collection began on April 5<sup>th</sup> and ended on June 20<sup>th</sup>. Every fifth @reply was archived for a total of 150. The final data set of 150

@reply tweets from Target Canada's official Twitter handle, @target\_ca, was collected from April 5<sup>th</sup> to June 20, 2013. Every fifth tweet was selected for this purposive sample. The @replies and the user's initial tweet were saved and archived as screenshots. Preliminary observations of Target Canada's Twitter feed in February 2013 revealed that out of 100 tweets, only one was an original tweet, seven were retweets and the remaining 92 were @replies. The significant majority of @replies seemed to be an atypical but important pattern, suggesting that Target Canada is keen on engaging with users who mention the organization. Target Canada seems to be very active and responsive through the @reply function. Additionally, little literature discusses the @reply function and its potential for organizational use; therefore, this characteristic became the focal point of this MRP.

## Data Analysis

The data is analyzed using open coding, and the codes will be compared to the criteria defined using the features of Kent and Taylor's Dialogic Theory of Public Relation as well as Grunig's Two-way Communication Model. Bortree & Seltzer (2009) have developed their content categories based on Kent & Taylor's (2001) dialogic communication literature and considered both organizational dialogic strategies and outcomes of dialogic engagement. Some studies (Jansen et al., 2009) have followed Glaser & Strauss's (1967) coding development strategy that stipulates the following categories: No Sentiment, Wretched, Bad Sentiment, So-so, Swell, Great. However, I deemed the grounded theory approach to be the most appropriate since "emergent theory is 'grounded in' the relationships between data and the categories into which they are coded" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 250). Categories were then developed

through continually comparing units of data. Open coding, a method of unrestricted coding of data, (Lindlof & Taylor) was used to allow an @reply to exhibit multiple codes. This provides a better analysis of the different categories of @replies occurring and what codes are more likely to be present in Target Canada's replies. In his research, Smith (2010) also categorized tweets based on the response type, assigned different categories and coded the content in the tweets.

It is also important to consider the tone (defined in the table below) of the user's tweet to Target Canada. This provides another means of analyzing how the organization responds to positive, negative, and neutral tweets. Evaluating tone provides insight into how Target Canada responds to varying kinds of feedback and attitudes toward the organization. Similarly, Jansen et al. (2009) considered the ratio of positive and negative branding tweets in regards to electronic word-of-mouth. They indicate organizations can employ tweets as a means of measuring and responding to customer feedback about products and services that are positively or negatively received by the consumers (Jansen et al.).

In the event of a discussion, defined as a case in which Target Canada provides two @replies to the user, both @replies are numbered as one since it pertains to one conversation with the same user. In terms of coding, both @replies were coded and contributed to the overall count of codes. In discussions, the tone of the user was coded from their initial tweet.

The table below summarizes the different codes that I have established and found in my sample.

Table 1: Definitions of Categories and Codes	
Categories of @replies	Definition and Example
Appreciative	This type of @reply includes expressions of gratitude from the

	<p>organization, all of which include a variation of the phrase “thank you” (e.g., “thanks”, “thank you”, or “TY”).</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user Thanks for sharing. We will take this into consideration for future assortments and to better meet the needs of our guests. (@Reply #7)</p>
Informational	<p>This type of @reply generally include a link for the user to find out more information, a phone number to call, or simple text-only responses to questions regarding the organization and its stores.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user To check when your local store will be opening, just check [link]. We can’t wait to see you there! (@Reply #2)</p>
Relational	<p>This type of @reply shows social engagement with the user or friendly commentary responding to the original tweet, and does not contain overt marketing intentions on the part of the organization.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user we are so glad you had such a great experience! (@Reply #16)</p>
<b>@reply Codes</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Acknowledgement	<p>This occurs when the company acknowledges the feedback that the follower is giving or suggesting.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user We expect our team members to be helpful. Your comments are important and we’ll pass them along to our Store Leadership team. (@Reply #48)</p>
Apology	<p>Replies from Target Canada that express apology. These usually include the word, “sorry”.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user We’re sorry, but we won’t be carrying Royall Lyme cologne in Target Canada. (@Reply #110)</p>
Commentary	<p>This occurs when the organization responds to the user’s shared media or shared positive experiences related to the organization.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user looks like a perfect afternoon! (@Reply #107)</p>
Directional	<p>Replies that include a link or other media that provides further information.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user We know you’re excited! We are too. Routinely check out [link] for the most up-to-date store openings information. (@Reply #133)</p>
Discussion	<p>If Target Canada replies to the same follower twice following the user’s initial tweet.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user Let us know what sizes you’re looking for and what specific store you shopped at. We’ll share your feedback with our buyers.  @target_ca thank you, much appreciated!! I was at the Chinook Target and looking for pants in size 10. There were very few.  @user We appreciate the follow-up and we’ve shared your concerns with the appropriate teams! (@Reply #140)</p>



Emoticon	<p>Replies that included :) or &lt;3 (a smiley face or a heart)</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user imitation is the sincerest form of flattery ;) (@Reply #36)</p>
Enthusiasm	<p>Enthusiasm is usually characterized by an exclamation mark or a variation of the word, “excited”, as well as well wishes such as “Happy shopping!”</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user go leafs go! (@Reply #62)</p>
Informational Text	<p>Commonly occurs in informational @replies; this occurs when Target Canada uses text-only for informative purposes. It is distinct from Directional because it does not guide the user to information outside of the @reply.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user While we know it’s exciting to get a free GiftCard, we don’t have an Instagram account and this offer isn’t from Target. (@Reply #94)</p>
Question	<p>This occurs when Target Canada asks the follower a question for more information to better answer the user’s concern/inquiry.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @user We’re sorry to hear you were given misinformation about the item availability. Which store location did you visit? (@Reply #142)</p>
<b>User’s Initial Tweet Codes</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Direct Prompt	<p>One of the two types of prompts, this occurs when users begin their tweet with “@target_ca”.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @target_ca Your flyers are lacking in ethnic diversity. One obvious omission. (@Reply #31)</p>
Mention Prompt	<p>The second type of prompt occurs when user’s references Target Canada in their tweet, but do not directly address the organization.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Congrats again to @SarahASTevenson on taking home the @TorontoFashion #NewLables 2013 Award! Can’t wait to see your @target_ca collection!! (@Reply #79)</p>
Negative Tone	<p>The user’s initial tweet has negative content such as a complaint, dissatisfaction, unfavourable reactions or disappointment.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> @target_ca No PF Changes, No Cherry Coke, No Starbucks Icecream...Pretty disappointed in overall selection. Same as Walmart.. #nothingnew (@Reply #88)</p>
Neutral Tone	<p>The user’s initial tweet does not exhibit positive or negative content such as inquiries and questions. This is common in informational @replies when followers seek information.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Does @target_ca sell cherry coke in #guelph? (@Reply #119)</p>
Positive Tone	<p>The user’s initial tweet has positive content such as satisfaction, praise or welcoming the organization to Canada, and shows excitement.</p>

	<i>Example:</i> Thank you @target_ca. These tights are awesome. Will be buying more soon :) [image link] (@Reply #13)
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## Results

In the results section, a summary of the results is provided followed by the analysis of the data. I will begin by outlining important patterns in the data overall with a brief summary of the findings in each type of @reply: appreciative, informational and relational. This will be followed by a more detailed breakdown and analysis of each category following the “General Findings” section.

### General Findings

Out of 150 @replies, 33 were appreciation, 93 were informational, and 24 were relational. The type of @reply is determined by the content of Target Canada’s @reply. A detailed look at the findings can be seen in Table 1 below.

(1) Appreciation @replies include expressions of gratitude from the organization, all of which include a variation of the phrase “thank you” (e.g. thanks, thank you, or TY). Many of these pertain to appreciation for feedback or content sharing such as pictures and/or shopping experiences. On the other hand, an appreciation @reply may also include apologies when acknowledging feedback with negative content from the user.

(2) Informational @replies may include a link for the follower to find out more information, a phone number to call, or simple text-only responses to questions regarding the organization and its stores.

(3) Relational @replies convey social engagement with the follower, friendly conversation or comments to the original tweet. They generally show enthusiasm and

sociability to the follower, as well as efforts to establish a two-way conversation or relationship. However, relational @replies can also stem from a follower's tweet that has a negative tone.

Of the 150 @replies, 49 were mentions (an example can be seen in Figure 01 below) of @target\_ca in the users' tweets while 101 were direct prompts to the company.



**Figure 01: @Reply #55**  
The user's tweet includes a mention and a positive tone.

Tweets with direct mention prompts always begin with "@target\_ca". In 150 @replies, Target Canada was replying to 38 positively toned tweets from a user while 70 were neutral in tone and 42 had negative tones. Tones reveal the follower's attitude towards Target Canada based on the text of their tweet. Figure 01 above is an example of a positive tone. Last, out of 150 @replies, 17 are classified as discussions.

Table 2: Total Results (150 @Replies)		
@Reply Category	Total Number	% of Sample
Appreciative	33	22
Informational	93	62
Relational	24	16
User's Tweet Codes		
Mention	49	33
Direct Prompt	101	67
Positively Toned	38	25

Neutral Toned	70	47
Negatively Toned	42	28

In terms of @reply codes, the most common were informational text (59), enthusiasm (50) and directional (42). This seems to indicate that Target Canada largely uses the @reply function to answer inquiries and do so in a friendly manner. The emoticon (9) and apology (13) appeared the least frequently in these @replies.

### Appreciative @Replies

I will now summarize the results in each of the three categories of @replies beginning with appreciative @replies. As seen in Table 3 below, within the 33 appreciative @replies, 14 were mentions while 19 were direct prompts to the organization. The appreciative @replies were dominated by negatively-toned tweets from customers: 25 out 33 were negative, while there were only 4 positive toned and neutral toned tweets each. Six of the appreciation @replies were discussions. Most of the appreciation @replies contained an acknowledgement (28) and nine included an apology. There was very little enthusiasm (5), informational text (4), directional aspects (2), and commentary (1); however, the organization did ask 7 questions in these tweets.

Table 3: Appreciative @Replies (33 total)		
User's Tweet Types	Number (Total)	% of Appreciative @Replies
Mention	14	42
Direct Prompt	19	58
Positively Toned	4	12
Neutral Toned	4	12
Negative Toned	25	76
<b>Target Canada's @Reply Codes</b>		
Acknowledgement	28	85
Apology	9	27
Commentary	1	3
Directional	2	6
Emoticon	0	0

Enthusiasm	5	15
Informational Text	4	12
Question	7	21

## Informational @Replies

In this data set, I identified a total of 93 informational @replies. Eighteen were mentions while 75 were direct prompts. Many of the users began their tweets with “@target\_ca” to seek answers to their queries. As such, many of these tweets were neutral in tone (64), while 13 were positive and 16 were negative. Accordingly, there were 55 informational text codes, 40 contained directional information, and 30 were coded with enthusiasm. This category of @replies had very few emoticons (3), acknowledgement (3), apologies (4), and questions (2). Overall, there were 11 discussions in this category.

Table 4: Informational @Replies (93 total)		
User's Tweet Types	Total Number	% of Informational @Replies
Mention	18	19
Direct Prompt	75	81
Positively Toned	13	14
Neutral Toned	64	69
Negative Toned	16	17
<b>Target Canada's @Reply Codes</b>		
Acknowledgement	3	3
Apology	4	4
Commentary	5	5
Directional	40	43
Emoticon	3	3
Enthusiasm	30	32
Informational Text	55	59
Question	2	2

## Relational @Replies

Of the 150 @replies, relational @replies were the smallest category (24 of 150). In this data set, relational @replies comprised 17 mentions and 7 direct prompts. The majority of these @replies were positively toned (21). Only two were neutral and one was negative. 23 @replies contained commentary, while 15 showed enthusiasm and 6 included emoticons. Acknowledgements, apologies, informational texts and directional information were not present in relational @replies. Target Canada posed one question in this category of @replies.

Table 5: Relational @Replies (24 total)		
User's Tweet Types	Total Number	% of Relational @Replies
Mention	17	71
Direct Prompt	7	29
Positively Toned	21	88
Neutral Toned	2	8
Negative Toned	1	4
<b>Target Canada's @Reply Codes</b>		
Acknowledgement	0	0
Apology	0	0
Commentary	23	96
Directional	0	0
Emoticon	6	25
Enthusiasm	15	63
Informational Text	0	0
Question	1	4

## Discussion

Similar to the results section, the discussion section will begin with examining general patterns in each of the @reply categories and then move on to patterns of specific @reply codes.

## @Reply Categories



**Figure 02: @Reply #9**

This is an informational @reply responding to a direct prompt.

The data shows that most of the @replies were informational which seems to relate with the fact that the majority of the users' tweets included a direct prompt (67%) to the company's Twitter handle as seen in Figure 02 above. Forty-nine of the initial tweets (or 33%) include mentions of Target Canada which implies that the company is also monitoring users who use the handle and commenting and replying accordingly. Another noteworthy occurrence is that on two occasions, Target Canada responded to a tweet that did not include the "@target\_ca" Twitter handle. The first included a mention of "@target", the American counterpart of the organization; and the second incidence was in response to "@asktarget", the organization's guest service help desk. I believe this was worth noting because it indicates that Target Canada also monitors other Twitter handles under the organization's umbrella even if they do not pertain to the Canadian stores. An example of this is seen in Figure 03 below. There is little research on the understanding of social media audiences, so "we often act as if [the audience were bounded]" to social media messages and presuming that they will receive the message

(Marwick & Boyd, 2010, p. 115). The users who have used a Twitter handle that is not @target\_ca seem to have assumed that all Target Twitter handles are one and the same. However, in noticing and replying to these other Twitter handles, Target Canada seems to demonstrate that it monitors the Twittersverse effectively.



**Figure 03: @Reply #20**

In this @reply, Target Canada responds to a tweet that directly prompts @Target rather than @target\_ca.

In the appreciative @replies, the organization acknowledges the value of each user who provides Target Canada with feedback whether it is positive or negative. It follows Kent & Taylor's *mutuality* feature where an aspect of collaborative orientation is present, in this case to improve the services of the organization. There is also a rhetorical exchange, or Kent & Taylor's *propinquity* where the public is willing to voice their demands and expectations of the organization. Where there is no enthusiasm, there is always an acknowledgement of feedback or, at times, both occur simultaenously. This conforms to the conflict management aspect of Grunig et al.'s (1995) two-way symmetrical communication. Overall, appreciation @replies can play a significant role in Target Canada's strategy to productively engage with these users and



to turn constructive feedback into appropriate action. These users are willing to voice their concerns and would like to be consulted in matters that affect them. Although simply showing acknowledgement may not be the most proactive social media action, it is a necessary first step to improve matters and contributes to mutually beneficial relationship building efforts. As such, the @reply function as a tool for two-way communication facilitates a mutually beneficial relationship between Target Canada and its publics. Communicated commitment as seen in Figure 03 above can account for assurance, when Target Canada responds that they are committed to sharing feedback internally for improvement. (Kelleher, 2009). Kelleher's idea of *assurance* occurs when the organization assures the public that their concerns and feedback are legitimate. Target Canada is shown to do this since 85% of the appreciative @replies include the acknowledgement code.

The Relational @replies category had a higher mention prompt to direct prompts ratio when compared to the other two categories. This seemingly occurs when users are simply sharing their experience with the organization via a passing comment to the Twitterverse. These tweets do not directly call for Target Canada's attention, but rather highlight the fact that some users have positive attitudes towards the organization. Nevertheless, Target Canada still responds to these positive tweets. This is a good idea because it shows that these positive experiences matter to the organization and Target Canada is actively engaging and commenting to these tweets. This also contributes to establishing mutually beneficial relationships. As Bortree and Setlzer (2009) have discovered, "dialogic strategy use appears to be closely related to positive dialogic outcomes" (p. 318). The positively-toned tweets in the category far outweigh the

negative (88% versus 8%). In turn, these users end up participating in “public relations activities, as public content reflects on organizational reputation” (Smith, 2010, p. 330). One can say that users who tweet positive experiences with Target Canada through a mention prompt simply want to publicly alert others of their positive experience. This accordingly reflects positively on the organization. Smith aptly puts that this is “how public relations is distributed to Tweeters” (p. 330).

### @Reply Codes

The tone of the user’s initial tweet is also important because it alludes to the user’s attitude as well as his/her satisfaction/dissatisfaction with Target Canada. The majority of the initial tweets in the sample were neutral in tone (47%). Most users were simply seeking information and did not convey a positive or negative tone (as seen in Figure 04 below), which is consistent with the large number of informational @replies from Target Canada that make up the bulk of the sample.



**Figure 04: @Reply #12**

This is an informational reply and the included link makes up the directional characteristic. Informational replies make up the largest portion of the data set.

The appreciative category of @replies were responding to the negatively toned tweets (60%). Users were voicing their frustrations and concerns to the organization.

Grant et al. (2010) have compared Twitter to a public space of a town square, where issues can be openly discussed. In each case, Target Canada shows appreciation for the criticism it receives which once again shows an exchange of rhetoric or *propinquity* as well as conflict management in a mutually beneficial relationship. This communicated commitment reveals that Target Canada seems to be committed to building a relationship with its publics (Kelleher, 2009).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, relational @replies responded to the highest amount of positive toned tweets (55%). In this category, users generally shared their shopping experiences and general affinity for the organization as seen in Figure 05 below. This group also contained the most emoticons compared to the two other categories of @replies by the organization. Emoticons are a more colloquial form of communication and can be more expressive than copy. However, further research is needed to determine what kind of engagement emoticons can elicit.



**Figure 05: @Reply #57**

The user shares a shopping experience with Target Canada through a mention of the organization's handle. Target Canada responds to her positive tone with an emoticon and commentary.

To encourage dialogue and mutual understanding with the user, Target Canada frequently poses questions to clarify the user's needs and concerns. This practice conforms to my research in the following ways: (1) Target Canada is actively engaging with the user through two-way communication to (2) establish dialogue and a mutual beneficial relationship. The usefulness of the information and the encouragement for feedback enable social media platforms like Twitter to be optimal spaces for relationship cultivation (Smith, 2010). Of the 10 question appearances in the sample, 70% of the questions appeared in an appreciation @reply, where Target Canada appreciates the received feedback and acknowledges the concern. Many of the questions Target Canada asked in its appreciative @replies had to do with identifying the particular store location in which the user experienced a problem. Figure 06 is an example of this. Kelleher (2009) believes an organization's assurances indicate that the public's concerns are legitimate and that the organization is committed to maintain a relationship. By identifying the location of the source problem, Target Canada is better able to provide the necessary support for the customer. Other questions posed included a commentary in a relational @reply; for example, "Are you loving it?" from @reply #66.



**Figure 06: @Reply #26**

In this appreciative @reply, the organization responds to a negatively toned user and poses her a question for clarification to better serve them.

## Other Patterns for Analysis

Interestingly out of the sample of 150 @replies, 16 were signed with an employee's name. Although this pattern only occurred 16 times, I think it is worth noting when considering Target Canada's @reply content. A conversational voice can lead to higher levels of trust and satisfaction (Kelleher, 2009). The highest occurrence was Mike at 13, followed by one appearance each by Beth, Matthew and Nancy.

It is unclear why this pattern occurred so infrequently and only the employee named "Mike" (see Figure 07 below) seemed to be signing his reply regularly. This does imply that more than one Target Canada employee is monitoring and replying to customers. It also provides a conversational human voice in which an organization personally connects with its publics (Smith, 2010) and provides some accountability and transparency.

Personally connecting with the user on the organization's behalf may help establish relationships with the publics. There were two discussions in this data set that

included a name of an employee, however the user did not continue the conversation using the employee's name or did not further the conversation at all. Therefore, the question of whether an organization should speak from a unified voice or a personalized voice is beyond the scope of this research.



**Figure 07: @Reply #92**

This @reply is one of 13 responses that were signed “Mike”. Only 16 of the data sample included a signed name.

## Implications

This research not only adds to the literature on the use of Twitter to improve customer engagement, but it enriches the literature on Twitter’s @reply function and the content that is being posted through this function. Target Canada has largely used @replies to address inquiries and concerns regarding its stores and products. In this data set, over two thirds of users (67%) have directly prompted the organization with their concerns, indicating that they expect a response. Social media is becoming more useful in this regard for customer relationship management, which leads many to believe that they are getting more organizational responses from their postings compared to traditional media (Briones et al., 2010).

In its informational @replies, Target Canada generally includes informational text (39%) or a directional aspect (28%) to best address the user's inquiry. 33% of the time, the organization also shows enthusiasm in its responses. These active responses and interactions allow Target Canada to gauge its public's reactions and to gain ideas on how to improve their relationship (Briones et al., 2010).

Twitter @replies also allow for semi-private conversations between an organization and its stakeholder. Eleven percent of Target Canada's @replies were considered discussions as they included two replies to the same user. The real-time nature of Twitter allows individuals to quickly share information as well as feedback (Rinaldo et al., 2011). This enabled the organization to clarify the user's concerns to ensure their issues were being fully addressed. It also demonstrates the organization's intention of "seeking opportunities to engage in and stimulate dialogue with stakeholders" (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010, p. 340). Discussions were most apparent in informational replies (64%) followed by appreciation replies (35%), in which follow ups are more valuable compared to relational @replies. Often discussions occur when Target Canada poses a question to users to best address their needs. An example of this can be seen in Figure 08 below.



**Figure 08: @Reply #139**

Target Canada asks the user a question to clarify his concern and thereby begins a conversation with the user.

Unlike @relational replies, there were no emoticons used in appreciation @replies. Sixty-seven percent of emoticons occurred in relational @replies while the remaining 33% appeared in informational @replies. Emoticons may be useful inclusions into appreciation @replies to show understanding and reassurance that the user's issue has been addressed by using a more colloquial way of communicating. Emoticons also provide a friendlier aspect as they are a more colloquial form of communication, and may be more engaging compared to overused phrases, which will be analyzed later in this section. However, future research should focus on whether emoticons can be an effective way of engagement.

Generally, relational @replies generated by Target Canada contained the most positive content since 70% of commentary were responding to users' experiences and praises, along with the most number of emoticons seen in the total sample (67%).



Relational @replies seem to be the most positively engaging on both the organization's and the user's part as indicated by the higher frequency of @reply codes appearing in this category. Target Canada is unlikely to face negative consequences for not replying to these types of tweets but chose to do so because it seems to be mutually beneficial. Responding to positive comments suggests that Target Canada sends relational messages in an effort to create a two-way symmetrical model (Grunig and Jaatinen, 1999) of public relations to "serve the interests of both the organization and their publics" (p. 219). Moreover, due to the overall positive nature of this category, there were no apologies coming from the organization in relational @replies.

Out of 29 commentary instances, 70% occurred in relational @replies. In this category, Target Canada responds with delight to the user. This contributes to a positive space to develop and maintain mutually beneficial relationships. Twitter provides a setting for social interaction through tweets and direct communications through @replies (Hambrick et al., 2010). Target Canada's purposeful engagement contributes to its relationship building efforts.



**Figure 09: @Reply #81**

However the amount of informational text (39%) found in this sample may indicate that these @replies can be more interactive and engaging, rather than

responding with text-only replies. Text-only replies can seem to be definite and final, which is unlikely to encourage the user to continue the conversation. @Replies with informational text contained 25% of enthusiasm, and only generated 14% of discussions. Although Target Canada also had directional aspects in (95%) of its replies, many seem to be copy-and-paste answers, considering the content was worded exactly the same (albeit to different users). The table below outlines the frequency of these copy-and-paste answers. However, the pattern of copy and pasting would likely not be noticed since users likely would not have the interest or time to peruse all the @replies provided by the organization. Thus it can only be detected by researchers like myself or individuals who are extremely curious. Some users responded a second time with dissatisfaction because the media provided did not contain the information they were looking for. This shows that the public is willing to speak out about their demands and expectations to the organization as described in the propinquity feature of Kent and Taylor's (2001) Dialogic Theory of Public Relations.

<b>Frequency of Appearance</b>	<b>Variations of repeatedly used @replies from Target Canada</b>
20 or 13%	Check out [link] for the most up-to-date information on store openings.
7 or 5%	Thanks for sharing/thank you for your feedback. We will take this into consideration for future assortments and to better meet the needs of our guests.

In addition, it may be more helpful for Target Canada to have employees who are responsible for monitoring the Twitter feeds consistently sign their names at the end of their responses. This may add to another level of interactivity between both parties that is not possible through mainstream media (Hambrick et al., 2010). This may help the initial user should he or she wish to continue looking for assistance outside of Twitter

such as calling the phone number that had been provided. It may be beneficial to indicate to the customer service personnel that “Mike” or some other employee directed them to this telephone number. Twitter @replies can then be one of many first points of contact for future customer service needs. Employees who sign their names at the end of the @reply will also make the response seem more personable and sincere. As Marwick and Boyd have aptly put, “authenticity is a social construct” (p. 119). This kind of authenticity will make it easier for the user to begin to establish a relationship with the organization as well as giving the organization a conversational voice.

In brief, Target Canada is seen to exhibit many aspects of Grunig’s fourth model of two-way symmetrical communication. Through conflict resolution efforts, acknowledgement of feedback and recognizing its publics publically, Target Canada encourages a balanced dialogue and shows its interest and support for a mutually beneficial relationship. The organization’s commitment to community relations conforms to both Grunig and Kent and Taylor’s theories. Target Canada’s @reply activity can be considered a type of purposeful engagement.

## **Research Limitations**

My MRP concentrates on the @replies of one particular organization during a period of high attention as the retailer opens its first Canadian stores. The research presented in this paper outlines the patterns of responses exhibited by Target Canada within a very specific time frame. As such, this MRP does not take into account the @reply patterns of other retailers or organizations and how they respond to customer inquiries and feedback. Due to time constraints, a sample of only 150 @replies was

collected. A larger sample over a longer period of time would have been able to better represent the patterns of Target Canada's @replies. The content of their replies can be better compared with a larger sample.

In addition, since I did not interact directly with users who were mentioning Target Canada, I had no knowledge of their experiences and expectations for the organizations other than the information provided in their tweets. Although I considered the tone of the content from the user's initial tweet, I was only able to base my judgement on the 140 characters of a tweet. My evaluation of their attitude, feedback and/or satisfaction was based on the user's syntax, diction and implied tone of the tweet. As such, I was also unable to analyze whether or not Target Canada's @reply was effective in responding to the user's inquiry. This clarity would provide further insight to the effectiveness of the @reply, and show what content within the @reply is most effectual. Additionally, my MRP is a case study of Target Canada's @replies. Other organizations may use the @reply function for different purposes or not at all.

Moreover, my research was conducted during a time when Target Canada is still considered relatively novel in the Canadian retail landscape, so it may benefit from an elevated interest on the part of the general population. Whether or not the organization's @replies will have similar patterns in the future of the company's presence in Canada, is unclear. Further research on @replies of other organizations is needed to determine if organizational use of this function is effective and holds true to Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model. The inclusion of the users' tone from their initial tweet and after an @reply will provide additional insight into how to best address their needs and take advantage of the potential that a 140-character @reply has.

However, this research can imply the possible outcomes and opportunities that an organization is offered through the @reply function and how to best utilize it. The discussion section above provides strong guidance on how to effectively engage in two-way symmetrical communication using Target Canada as a case study.

## Conclusion

Twitter is more than a platform for posting updates on “What’s happening?” It is an online space for social connection and interaction. “Interactivity is a driving force of Twitter use, and involvement seems dependent on technological facilitation (functional interactivity) and interdependent messaging (contingent interactivity). Furthermore, tweets can fulfill or impede public relations efforts as messaging activities are distributed to publics with little or no stake in organization success” (Smith, 2010, p. 332). Effective relationship building relies heavily on the common interests between an organization and public. Organizations can improve by gaining insight and ideas from their publics (Briones et al., 2010). This research not only adds to the literature on customer engagement on Twitter, but enriches the literature on Twitter’s @reply function and the content that is being posted through this function.

Overall, Target Canada was mostly replying to tweets that expected a response as seen in 101 direct prompts. Many of these were general inquiries that contributed to the larger amount of informational @replies compared to the other two categories. In brief, the results show that Target Canada does indeed promote a mutual understanding and respect as well as to resolve conflict between the audience and the organization through two-way symmetrical communication. It also exhibits four of Kent &

Taylor's five features of the Dialogic Theory of Public Relations: mutuality, propinquity, empathy and commitment.

In this study, Kent & Taylor's (2001) dialogic strategies were modified for application to a social network context, specifically Twitter. Similarly, Lovejoy & Saxton's (2012) Information-Community-Action scheme is important beyond the simple information/dialogue dichotomy that dominates previous literature on new media and organization. Information is the main activity to attract followers, while community-focused messages help to connect and engage users, and finally action-oriented messages serve to mobilize the community (Lovejoy & Saxton). Further studies are needed to analyze the "action" function.

However, this research adheres to previous research in that it posits that two-way symmetrical communication may be the most effective and the most supportive of long-term mutually beneficial relationships. Content analysis of Target Canada's @replies in this research has shown that it is important to address the inquiries and concerns of the publics. Ultimately, "technology itself can neither create nor destroy relationships; rather, it is how the technology is used that influences organization-public relationships" (Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010, p. 341). Technology is merely a space where dialogic communication opportunities exist; it falls into the hands of the organization to decide how to use the tools to engage in dialogic, meaningful communication (Rybalko & Seltzer). Overall, Twitter's @reply function shows great promise in this regard, and organizations must be willing to invest time and effort to maintain and monitor their Twitter feeds and provide opportunities for a balanced dialogue to best participate in a two-way symmetrical, dialogic communication with their publics.

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