

# Rise of the Brand Ambassador: Social Stake, Corporate Social Responsibility and Influence among the Social Media Influencers

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## Brian G. Smith, PhD

Purdue University, United States of America. Email: bgsmithphd@purdue.edu (corresponding author)

## Megan C. Kendall

Purdue University, United States of America. Email: mkendall@purdue.edu

## Devin Knighton

Purdue University, United States of America. Email: knighton@purdue.edu

## Temi Wright

Purdue University, United States of America. Email: wrigh407@purdue.edu

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## Abstract

One of social media's influences on public relations has been the connection they provide organizations with stakeholder groups, and the need to recognize new and emerging stakeholder groups and their influence on the organization. One such stakeholder group with social media-borne influence and recognition in public relations is brand ambassadors, who distribute organizational content to social networks. This study examines the meanings and motivations of brand ambassadors in establishing relationships with an organization, and their considerations in representing and distributing content for an organization. In particular, we examined the consideration of corporate social responsibility (CSR) content among brand ambassadors. Findings suggest complex considerations of loyalties, commitments, and stakes within the brand ambassador-organization relationship. CSR content's value among ambassadors was questionable. The ethical issues of organizational ties, including compensation, are discussed.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility, brand ambassador, social media, ethics, WOM

# 1. Introduction

As communication between organizations and its stakeholders moves from print to digital, and from digital on the desktop to digital on mobile devices, organizations are facing a greater challenge of engaging stakeholders who now have the ability to easily ignore communication with the swipe of a thumb. Not only has it become a challenge to attract attention, but it also has become a challenge to build credibility in an age when accusations of fake news are prevalent. The 2017 Edelman Global Trust Barometer reported the largest drop in trust across business, government, media and NGOs since the research project began 17 years ago (Edelman, 2017). At the same time, stakeholders have taken the opportunity to engage organizations to advance their own agenda, through the access, visibility, and empowerment that digital media provide, influencing an organization's brand and reputation without official association with the organization. In fact, the growing trend is for social media users to flex their social media muscle by labelling themselves brand ambassadors on social media. In many cases, this association is without explicit organizational recognition, and yet, these influencers represent a critical stakeholder group.

This study examines the factors that drive brand ambassadors, including their sense of stake, the role of corporate social responsibility, and their empowerment through social media engagement. Brand ambassadors are a critical but under-examined stakeholder group in public relations and communication management. In 2016, organizations in the United States spent an estimated \$570 million on brand ambassador campaigns on Instagram alone (Drolet, 2016). Not all brand ambassadors make a lot of money, nor does it seem that income is the main motivator. Disney, for example, launched the "Disney Parks Mom Panel" in 2008, which for nearly a decade has selected mothers as online brand ambassadors to field questions from customers and to make recommendations on ways to create that "magical moment" at Disney without monetary compensation (Celestino, 2017). Questions about motives of brand ambassadors and reasons for engaging the brand have not been clearly examined. This study, comprising in-depth interviews with brand ambassadors, suggests that motives revolve around social stake, loyalties between brand, ambassador, and network, and social media content fit. Insights on compensation that emerged from this study are also discussed in the context of ethics and public relations.

## 2. Literature Review

A brand ambassador is someone who is passionate about an organization or its brand, and engages in activities, often on social media, that provide brand meaning for consumers (Ambroise, Pantin-Sohier, Valette-Florence, Albert, 2014). Brand ambassadorship has expanded through social media technology because social media platforms enable the “transformation of broadcast of monologues into social dialogues” (Botha, Mills, 2012, p. 85). Companies use brand ambassadors in a variety of purposes that range from promotional window dressing to strategic collaboration (The Brand Ambassadors, 2012). Though brand ambassadorship is often considered a function of word-of-mouth marketing (Groeger, Buttle, 2014), the concept has specific relevance for public relations because it involves engaging a full range of stakeholder groups, from citizens to employees, to carry organizational messages (Rehmet, Dinnie, 2013) and reinforce an organization’s identity (Ambroise et al., 2014). Furthermore, brand ambassadors serve as organizational spokespeople, humanizing the brand and facilitating relational connections with an organization (Ambroise et al., 2014).

As a subject of academic interest, brand ambassadors have received little attention. However, some research has considered social media influencers, or “independent, third-party endorsers who shape attitudes through...social media” (Freberg, Graham, McGaughey, Freberg, 2011, p. 90). Social media influencers are defined by their social media usage, including their number of social media posts and followers (Freberg et al., 2011). Despite preliminary research on social media influencers, brand ambassadors deserve more attention in public relations and communication.

### 2.1. Brand Ambassadors as Stakeholders

One of the principle differences between the term brand ambassador and the more general term social media influencer may be the connection with the organization. An influencer is generally “independent” from an organization, whereas a brand ambassador may be connected through an explicit relationship with a brand or company. Brand ambassadors, then, are a stakeholder group that bears responsibility and influences the behavior of an organization. By definition, stakeholders are influencers of an organization’s “wealth-creating capacity and activities” (Post, Preston, Sachs, 2002, p. 19). Brand ambassadors’ capacity to humanize a brand (Ambroise et al., 2014) render them an important stakeholder group, because they fulfill the role of legitimizing an organization (Post et al., 2002).

Stakeholder relations are “one of the most important core competencies of public relations” (de Bussy, 2010, p. 127). According to stakeholder theory, organizations owe a level of responsibility to the groups that legitimate and support an organization’s existence (Freeman, 1984). In the social media sphere, the borders of what constitutes being a stakeholder become blurry. Heath (1994) suggested that stakeholders may be defined by the giving and receiving of tangible and intangible stakes, and Smith (2012) argued that the relationship between organization and stakeholder takes place in the negotiation of stakes around a shared interest. At the same time, however, traditional stakeholder theory claims that stakeholders are identified and managed by the organization, according to corporate needs (Donaldson, Preston, 1995). Furthermore, stakeholders are more than influencers, but are rather partners, working directly with the organization.

Brand ambassadors represent a unique stakeholder group - they may work directly with an organization, but they may also be more proactive in creating their own connection to an organization. In fact, Smith (2010) argued that social media users may become stakeholders through their social network-borne stakes, which can include sense of influence, identity and risk of organizational representation within their respective social networks. This consideration of a proactive stakeholder connection and the negotiation of stakes through social media is still relatively nascent in public relations and communication literature. Therefore, this study examines the following research question:

**RQ1:** How do brand ambassadors consider their role as stakeholders on social media?

Consistent with Smith (2010), we argue that brand ambassadorship revolves around the negotiation of stakes that include influence, identity and risk of representation.

## 2.2. Brand Ambassador Influence

Social media’s potential for influence is borne in its capacity to connect like-minded individuals in publicly visible and accessible platforms (Habibi, Laroche, Richard, 2014). Social media grants users voice and empowers them in their interactions with organizations (Saffer, Sommerfeldt, Taylor, 2013; Smith, Taylor, 2017). This potential for influence has put organizations on the defensive, for fear that social media users will “use their side of the conversation to bash a company’s products” (Toledano, 2010, p. 231).

Despite its significance to public relations and communication, relatively few studies examine influence via social media. In the literature, influence is considered a factor of engagement and organization-public dialogue (Kang, 2014; Taylor, Kent, 2014). Influence may also be relational (Smith, Taylor, 2017), as network connections play a considerable role in one's social media influence activities (Austin, Liu, Jin, 2012; Smith, 2010). This social-level of influence is also consistent with stakeholder theory, which argues that stakeholders are dependent on others for their power with an organization (Mitchell, Agle, Wood, 1997). Though this originally referred to power through connections to managers and other employees, the principle applies to other external groups that may imbue power as well. Other factors that may relate to social media influence fall under the self-efficacy umbrella, including communicative effectiveness (Kang, 2014) and using others' social media efforts as motivation (Smith, Men, Al-Sinan, 2015).

### 2.3. Brand Ambassador Identity

Social media research often centers on the uses and gratifications of social media use (McCay-Peet, Quan-Haase, 2016; Wang, Tchernev, Solloway, 2012), including social needs (Hargittai, Hsieh, 2010), informational needs (McCay-Peet, Quan-Haase, 2016), personal psychological needs (Leung, 2013), and entertainment needs (Pai, Arnott, 2013; Wang, Tchernev, Solloway, 2012). Recently, personal psychological needs have become an increasing area of study, as research has considered personality-level factors of social media use. Gil de Zúñiga and his colleagues (in press), for example, examined the “big five” personality traits in social media usage and found that four, in particular correlate with social media use. These include agreeableness, or “the tendency to defer to others” (p. 4), extraversion, or needs for belonging and conversation, conscientiousness, or sense of achievement and purpose, and, finally, openness to new experiences and change. The one factor that did not correlate well with social media use was emotional stability, which suggests that “the more emotionally stable persons tend to be, the less time they will spend on social media” (p. 9).

Other research on social media has examined the personality traits of influencers. Freberg and associates (2011) found that social media influencers demonstrate personality traits that include being verbal, smart, ambitious, productive and poised. Ambroise et al. (2014) studied personality transference from celebrity sponsors onto a brand, and found that brand ambassador personality traits carry over onto the brand and influence consumer attachment

and purchase decisions. The researchers concluded that the effect is particularly salient with well-known brand ambassadors. More research is needed to understand how personality influences brand ambassador behaviour.

## 2.4. Brand Ambassador Risk of Representation

Like any public communication activity, there is a certain level of risk involved in social media communication. In fact, research has shown that risk, or the possibility of disappointing outcomes, is one of the most important determining factors for social media use (Wang, Min, Han, 2016). Part of this risk is personal, comprising self-disclosure and the “act of making yourself manifest”, a behaviour that has a significant role in social media communication (Lin et al., 2016, p. 290). The import of risk-taking centres on the possible loss or other negative outcome that risk may incur (Colquitt, Scott, LePine, 2007). For social media users, this risk of loss may involve loss of reputation and even network followers.

Risk for brand ambassadors may also involve their interaction with brand-sponsored content. When social media users engage on social media, they become “co-owners of the information” they post (Wang, Min, Han, 2016, p. 37). This sentiment may be particularly salient for brand ambassadors, as they inherently incur a risk in representation (and co-ownership) of brand content online. Smith (2010) argued there is risk in seeming overtly promotional or attached to a brand or organization, which stands to damage social media user legitimacy and, subsequently, that of the organization.

Though sharing positive messages about a brand’s products may yield a crisis of legitimacy and subsequent negative reaction for a brand ambassador, corporate social responsibility initiatives may be a less promotional, and thus, a less risky domain. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is rooted in the recognition that organizations exist as community members and, therefore, have a moral obligation to support the communities in which they operate (Kent, Taylor, 2016). In return, an organization earns “more freedom to operate” (Kent, Taylor, 2016, p. 61) and sees gains in the “triple bottom line” of “economic, social, and environmental performance” (Aguinis, Glavas, 2012, p. 933).

Publics may be more receptive to CSR messages, which include employee relations, product safety and quality, community relations, natural environment, human rights, and

diversity (Uzunoglu, Turkel, Akyar, in press). Recent research has shown that combining CSR messages on ethics with product messages has a better impact than messages that are purely product-centred (Uzunoglu, Turkel, Akyar, in press). This is consistent with the claim that “good deeds may be thought of more highly” than company promotion toward product sales (Kent, Taylor, 2016, p. 63). Kent and Taylor (2016) suggest a model wherein CSR is promoted in a dialogic effort, through relational interaction, rather than as a monologue to create sales. Brand ambassador activities regarding a company’s CSR efforts, then, may fall under this dialogic approach.

Brand ambassadors may legitimize an organization’s CSR activities because publics tend to question the motives of organizations that toot their own horn regarding their socially responsible behaviour (Rim, Song, 2016). Through social media, users participate and interact around socially responsible issues (Rim, Song, 2016), but at the same time, doing so is not without its risks. Research has shown that social media users who engage in or seek to influence a company’s CSR activities on social media become both “social judge and socially judged” in what has been termed a “social judgment paradox” in which an issue or cause may incur both agreement and disagreement (Boyd, McGarry, Clarke, 2016).

Still, research has shown that social media empowers moralizing behaviour (Boyd, McGarry, Clarke, 2016) and communicating about CSR activities stands to benefit brand ambassadors because CSR has explicit social value (Rim, Song, 2016). The benefits of CSR communication on social media to both organization and brand ambassador render it an important area for exploration in public relations and communication research. Therefore, this study examined the following research question:

**RQ2:** How do brand ambassadors weigh an organization’s CSR activities when deciding whether or not to represent that organization on social media?

## 3. Method

Our choice of qualitative research methods was informed by our research questions. As Nelson, Treichler and Grossberg (1992) put it, “research practices depend upon the questions that are asked” (p. 2 as cited in Denzin, Lincoln, 2011). As our research questions in this study are exploratory, we needed to find qualitative data that provide depth of understanding into the social stake of brand ambassadors and how they see organizations’ CSR. “The open-ended nature of the qualitative research project leads to a perpetual resistance against attempts to impose a single, umbrella-like paradigm over the entire project” (Denzin, Lincoln, 2011, p. x). Findings are thus co-constructed by means of interpretive tools allowing us to serve as bricoleur, piecing together the bricolage that is this study. In this section, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of our methodical decisions during the research.

### 3.1. Participant Selection and Context

We used a purposive sample for this study. Participants for this study were recruited online based on their self-identification as brand ambassadors in their social media profiles on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and blogs. Researchers also used a convenience sampling technique, recruiting brand ambassadors from their own social networks. In all cases, participants had to self-identify as brand ambassadors. We conducted a total of 14 interviews (six pre-test interviews, and eight official interviews) lasting between 45 minutes to an hour. Though there is no specified number of sufficient interviews for a qualitative study, eight interviews is considered satisfactory (McCracken, 1993).

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 60 and were selected from a wide range of industries including fashion and lifestyle, health, technology and entertainment. All participants had at least a semi-formal relationship with the organization wherein the organization recognized the participant as an associated brand ambassador. All participants received some form of compensation from the brand. Some received payments per post. Others received free products, discounts, funded vacations while others found their compensation in the social capital and networking opportunity it brought them. In our study, 87% were female and 13% were male.



## 3.2. Procedures

Interviews were pretested as a way of ensuring the craftsmanship validity of the interview protocol and selected method (Kvale, 1995). Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we conducted semi-structured interviews for a period of three months. Every member of the research team conducted interviews to ensure investigator triangulation in our data collection (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation thus increased credibility (Lincoln, Guba, 1985) and validity (Lather, 1991). Interviews drew on the responsive interviewing style, emphasizing conversation (Rubin, Rubin, 2012). Questions explored brand ambassadors' use of social media, sense of influence and identity, relationship with their respective organizations, and opinion of corporate social responsibility.

Following the procedures of an inductive study, we began analysis while interviews were still ongoing (Strauss, Corbin, 1990). This allowed “the possibility of collecting new data to fill in gaps, or to test new hypotheses that emerge during analysis” (Miles, Huberman, 1994, p. 50). The researchers and professional transcriptionists transcribed interviews which were then checked for accuracy against the audio recordings by the researchers. Participants' identifying information was kept hidden on the transcripts.

Analysis was carried out inductively through open coding and then a priori from the codebook we created following the consolidation of first-level descriptive codes (Tracy, 2013). As a first step, each researcher coded the same interview transcript following Miles and Huberman's (1994) check-coding. We then ensured inter-coder reliability by talking through the codes, and then synthesizing and merging codes and categories to create a codebook (Miles, Huberman, 1994; Tracy, 2013). The codebook was uploaded into Dedoose – the Q-DAS software we used to analyse the data. In line with Bernard and Ryan (2010), each code in the codebook carried an annotated description of the code, inclusion criteria and examples of what might constitute the code. This further helped ensure inter-coder reliability and confirmability in the study. To further ensure validity, each researcher was then assigned an interview transcript to code that was not from an interview that researcher had conducted.

## 4. Findings

Findings suggest that brand ambassadors balance their responsibility to their social networks and their connection to organizations. While ambassadors express the need to provide valuable content to their followers, they also value the benefits they get from representing the organizations with which they profess connection. In interviews, discussions covered themes of identity, power, influence, stake and corporate social responsibility. Emergent codes were determined based on frequency across interviews and further interpreted in regards to our research questions.

**RQ1:** How do brand ambassadors consider their role as stakeholders on social media?

Overall, brand ambassadors in this study characterized themselves as connectors between the organization and consumers. They often spoke of their influence over other social media users, but they were also cognizant of their preferred position with a brand or organization, and discussed the difficulty of negotiating loyalties between the brand and their social media followers.

### Brand representative

Of course, the centre point of brand ambassador activities is the brand, itself. Many indicated that their journey to becoming a brand ambassador began with an interest in the brand's products and services. Interviewee 7 said the difference between a consumer who talks about a brand and a brand ambassador is the relationship with the brand. "A brand ambassador has a relationship with that brand, either they emailed me or I reached out to them and then we worked together on the product. A brand ambassador interacts with the brand." Some even admitted that they began with an interest in getting free products, but that transitioned into working with the brand toward promotion and, in some instances, product development.

That does not mean, however, that ambassadors are brand-owned. Interviewees valued their independence from the brand. Interviewee 1 said she worried about the social capital loss of being afraid to "post something that's in a competitor's wheelhouse." "I'm conscious about posting too much about [the brand], I don't want [my followers] to think, are they paying you? Is there something going on behind the scenes here?"

Throughout interviews, it was apparent that one of the challenges brand ambassadors face is balancing brand interests and the needs of their networks. On one hand, interviews often

echoed interviewee 4, who said she prefers to be a resource for her network, rather than for the brand, “For me, I just want to share with people what my experience is and let them make the evaluation on their own...I don’t want to tell somebody this is the best restaurant, you have to eat there.” On the other hand, others said their role was to connect their networks with the brands they liked. Interviewee 2 said she tries to be transparent with follows, but she tries “really hard to work with brands that I really do like and care about.” Interviewee 1 said she often works with brands she “loves” and proactively looks for brands to represent. She explained, “I think that’s really the secret sauce... being an ambassador comes from really just believing in the product.” She went on to say she talks about her brand every chance she gets.

Overall, control over content may have been the central focus for brand ambassadors. Interviewee 5 said: “I have not really engaged in any brand that I’ve really done any paperwork that says you cannot post any other stuff up. I don’t know what’s going to happen then though. Those are part of the dangers because I had a friend that works with a brand...He cannot even run his page to do a shout out for me.”

## Influencer

Sense of influence over social media followers was a significant consideration in participants roles as brand ambassadors. Participants in this study attributed their influence to a number of factors, including charisma, honesty, openness, and quality of social media post. However, each seemed to have the same common denominator - they earned their influence from their social network. Interviewee 6 admitted that his sense of influence came from user recognition and the number of times people have contacted him to tell him, “I’ve been watching your posts and I’m really interested about them.” Interviewee 2 explained it this way: “I think you need to have a pretty wide circle of influence and within that, not necessarily super devoted followers, but people that interact with you on social media.”

Of course, one of the central areas where participants considered their influence was on purchase decisions. Interviewee 8 said being a brand ambassador meant “influencing someone to make a purchase or go somewhere or inspiring them to do something similar, and that is powerful”.

However, many were less-inclined to consider their influence in the realm of purchase-decisions, rather considering themselves as information-providers. For example, interviewee 2 said her social media followers see her as “a source of information”. Interviewee 4 also

admitted that serving as an information source was important for gaining influence from a network: “I really feel like influence is helping [my followers] make an informed decision.”

Though participants readily recognized their influence over their networks, the same cannot be said about their influence over an organization. Most considered themselves powerless to influence an organization’s decision, with many indicating that this type of influence fell outside of the bounds of their relationship with the organization.

### **Collaborator, not company representative**

Despite their role in providing information about an organization or even persuading others to make a purchase, participants in this study did not consider themselves as company representatives. Rather, they described their role as independent collaborators. Participants commonly characterized their roles as autonomous and independent. One blogger explained it this way: “I have never had anyone [at the organization] say, ‘You should say this. You should not say that.’ Some of that, I think, is that I understand what my role is . . . Never have I felt like they have tried to get me to do something I wasn’t comfortable with and that includes when we have made promotional videos and things like that. It’s always still, ‘Talk about this from your personal perspective.’”

As a collaborator, compensation was a significant consideration among interviewees. Though few expected monetary compensation, most expected some sort of reciprocity or return on their investment in the brand. Interviewee 8 summarized it in this way, “It’s like any business deal. You’re kind of like, ‘Okay, what am I getting out of it?’” Some indicated they receive money, like interviewee 6 who said, “I decided to be an ambassador because the compensation plan is amazing, [the company] takes half of their profits and gives it back to the ambassadors.” Most others, however, received their compensation through product perks. For some participants, product perks influenced their social media activities. For example, Interviewee 2 explained, “If I like their stuff then I’ll be pretty motivated to work with them because who doesn’t want free stuff that they’ll really like?” Interviewee 1 admitted: “It probably depends on how much product they’re sending me. If I just get one product that’s pretty cheap I don’t feel as invested in posting about it all the time. I’ll probably do the one required social media post, but if it’s a brand I really care about and they’ve sent me a lot of stuff or they have been super nice to work with I try to go the extra mile.”

**RQ2:** How do brand ambassadors weigh an organization’s CSR activities when deciding whether or not to represent that organization on social media?

For brand ambassadors in this study, corporate social responsibility (CSR) was one of the considerations of deciding which brands to collaborate with. For example, Interviewee 1 called corporate social responsibility “a new expectation of companies” worth learning more about.

### **CSR and fit**

In many cases, socially responsible content was considered as anything that enabled the brand ambassador to talk about more than just product. Participants in this study valued how this type of content enabled them to build their own personal brand, and often discussed social responsibility in terms of fit. For example, a fashion blogger said she enjoyed the opportunity to help small businesses because “a lot of them are run by young women, similar to me... young moms who want something on the side, but don’t want to work in an office.”

As such, many admitted that CSR content helped them be genuine, and true to their own personal brand and identity. In fact, interviewee 7 said that he was already involved in socially responsible activities, so brands who reach out doing something similar are attractive to him. He explained, “I post about social justice or charitable events, it doesn’t have to be about the brand. But, if the brand reaches out to me with the idea, it’s just better because it makes me happier to work with them.”

Another ambassador who operates from a religious-based perspective said the “faith-based motives” of the company she interacts with “make it easy to have faith in the company” as a brand ambassador. She explained, “If I’m going to represent a brand, I better know the ins and outs of it, right? So if I got the impression that people at the top were money hungry or investing incorrectly, or...if I didn’t think someone was holding their company with integrity and responsibility, then I would have never joined that company.” Similarly, interviewee 8 was very clear on his position. He said, “I definitely would not work for something that goes against my political belief.”

### **Ambassador influence in CSR**

Results suggest that CSR was an area where the brand ambassador might have influence with the organization. One interviewee, upon admitting that the company she represented

“is still trying to figure [CSR] out” said, “Maybe that’s an opportunity for me to bring value.” She further explained that helping the company have a socially responsible focus is a role she “should have.” Others were more vocal about their influence. Interviewee 7 argued, “I feel like it’s everyone’s duty to make sure brands are doing good things or getting their products in the right ways.” In discussing his involvement in CSR with his organization, Interviewee 5 said: “I feel if a brand calls you a brand ambassador, they need to engage you. You are not a figurehead. You are not a puppet to be pushed around. You are important. Your voice should be heard. You should beat your chest and say you have major stake.”

Others, considered it beyond their role to influence a company’s CSR efforts. Interviewee 2 explained, “I don’t feel like it’s my place to tell them [to do CSR] because I feel like I’m there to talk about their products and my experience with them. I don’t feel like I should be influencing how they run their business.”

Still, brand ambassadors in this study considered CSR efforts a shared experience, wherein they participated in the goodwill of the organization in a social effort. For example, interviewee 5 discussed his involvement with his brand in a campaign to end gender-based violence. He planned a campaign in which he and his other brand ambassadors went into city markets to “speak out,” “spread the word,” and “engage people” on “what the brand stands for and why violence is not an option to resolving issues.”

### CSR in brand ambassador decision-making

Overall, among brand ambassadors in this study, CSR content played a role in whether the ambassador represented the brand or not. Many, like interviewee 6, indicated that representing a brand with a CSR priority “makes it easy to for me to promote something that I’m equally as passionate about”. Interviewee 7 said engaging in socially responsible activities made the company more attractive: “Finding a way to tie fashion to a charitable cause, I love that idea. Brands that do that I gravitate to even more. Because it shows that they have a social conscience and it shows that they’re willing to do good.”

For others, CSR was a nice bonus, but not a requirement. For example, a fashion blogger said, “If I’m on the fence [about representing them] and they’re like ‘Oh, but we volunteer at a homeless shelter,’ it doesn’t make that much of a difference... It’s a nice thing, but if I don’t like their products then it’s not going to make a difference.” Another blogger said that an

organization's orientation to equality were "pieces that add up in the whole brand strategy." Interviewee 5 described it as the combined social and personal benefit, "I really believe in what they stand for – as long as it is something that is just, and as long as I'm getting cool bucks for the kind of service I offer, talking and making it happen."

## 5. Discussion: Rise of the Brand Ambassador

Up until this point, very little research has been conducted on brand ambassadors as a stakeholder group, with the topic nearly absent from the literatures in public relations, communication management, and advertising. Instead, research commonly examines social media commentary about an organization or lumps them into the word of mouth (WOM) discussion (Groeger, Buttle, 2014). The purpose of this study was to examine brand ambassadors as a stakeholder group. Consistent with stakeholder definitions, this study's results confirm that brand ambassadors carry an organization's "wealth-creating capacity" (Post, Preston, Sachs, 2002, p. 19), and brand ambassadors in this study consider their role as such. As a stakeholder group, this study's results propose postulates about brand ambassador roles, as well as the ethical challenges of the brand ambassador-organization connection.

### Brand Ambassadors Stakeholders

Their role, according to this study, maybe one of mediation, as interviewees in this study filled roles in gatekeeping, advocacy, and boundary spanning for their respective organizations. As a stakeholder group, however, brand ambassadors may be unique, as they are not necessarily created or developed by the organization based on corporate needs, per the traditional stakeholder definition (Donaldson, Preston, 1995). Furthermore, brand ambassadors may not have the same type of access or influence with the organization as other stakeholder groups. In fact, results from this study suggest that brand ambassadors may not even consider themselves stakeholders, evidenced by the low sense of influence with their associated organizations. In fact, many considered their connection a simple product-based transaction, without much awareness to their value-creating capacity as stakeholders to their organizations. This may be on account of their apparent limited access to the organization compared to other stakeholder groups (i.e. employees, investors). Still, brand ambassadors, according to this study, are proactive - they tend to self-select into their organization connection.

Therefore, stakeholder relations may be unique with brand ambassadors. First, this study's results suggest that shared interest may be a significant factor for the brand ambassador-organization relationship, as interviewees in this study sought out organizations based on their needs and online personas. Second, the brand ambassador-organization relationship operates around the negotiation of both tangible and intangible stakes (Heath, 1994; Smith, 2012). This study suggests that stakes are negotiated around shared interests, and may be principally tangible for the brand ambassador, but intangible for the organization. Consistent with research by Smith (2010), this study shows that brand ambassador stakes may be primarily social, and include access and credibility with their extensive social networks. Personal control over content and influence within their networks were also resource considerations among brand ambassadors.

Evidence from this study shows that brand ambassadors guard their social stake closely, and may only provide social access to organizations they trust and who offer valuable content experiences. As such, the organizational stakes offered to the brand ambassador may be primarily tangible, and include resources for creating content. Brand ambassadors take on recognizable risk in promoting a brand, and this risk may also influence ambassador consideration of organizational branded content.

What remains to be seen is how ambassadors negotiate their loyalty in the exchange of stakes. One of the challenges that arose in this study's results was how ambassadors balanced loyalty to brands (who provide the ambassador content) and loyalty to networks (who provide the ambassador influence). Findings suggest a complex consideration of brand ambassador persona fit, network favorability, and organizational reliance. Furthermore, there is evidence that brand ambassadors feel empowered through their social media engagement and network interaction with the organization, consistent with recent research (Smith, Taylor, 2017). Future research should examine how brand ambassadors balance their loyalties, and consider their empowerment as both dependent and independent of the organization.

### **Brand Ambassadors and Compensation**

With stakes as a basis for considering brand ambassador relations, one significant stake that emerged from this study was compensation, which came in various forms including monetary compensation and free products. Though from a strategic perspective, providing



compensation may be justifiable, especially if brand ambassadors operate in the realm of paid promotion. However, this research suggests that they may also operate in the realm of earned media, word of mouth (WOM), and publicity, which is deemed unpaid and considered as 3rd party endorsement. Therefore, payment for such service stands to invalidate earned social media content for both brand ambassadors and from organizations that support them. Furthermore, compensation stands to further fan the flames of public cynicism about public relations, especially if public view brand ambassadors as organization-sponsored publicity.

Though the ethical conundrum of taking compensation for social media representation was not the central focus of this study, interview discussions revealed the tightrope brand ambassadors walk between being compensated while keeping up the image of objectivity to their followers. Interviewee 1's exclamation, "I don't want [my followers] to think are they paying you?" underscores this ethical dilemma, especially when perceived credibility is central to being a successful brand ambassador.

The critical question for both research and practice is, how do we consider the brand ambassador-organization relationship? Do we hold brand ambassadors to ethical standards born in transparency, or should the relationship be considered strictly a business exchange at its core? We argue that for brand ambassadors to be considered a stakeholder within the realm of public relations and 3rd party endorsement, then an ethical standard is required. In public relations, the deontological perspective, where ends are justified by the means, has been considered the standard for ethical behaviour (Bowen, 2004). A deontological standard necessitates transparency.

However, the brand ambassador's unique position with the organization renders the situation more complicated than a simple call for transparency. Transparency and disclosure may be the standard for public relations professionals, but what about brand ambassadors with less official connection to the organization? Their status as semi-professionals may require transparency, but not all brand ambassadors would consider themselves professionals. Indeed, many in this study admitted that their involvement in brand ambassadorship is more about their affinity for the products they represent than about building a professional relationship. From this standpoint, the brand's attention to the ambassador may prove some form of higher status than other brand fans. From this perspective, disclosure about compensation might show a

privileged position with the brand to a brand ambassador's followers, and therefore, provide evidence for the ambassador's credibility as an organizational representative.

Yet, responses in this study suggest that brand ambassadors may fear a crisis of credibility should the monetary connection be known. In this case, network favourability may be the principle decision-making factor for brand ambassadors. Of course, insight on the compensation conundrum was limited to interviewee-initiated discussion, so this study's results provide insufficient depth. Future research should more closely examine a brand ambassador's priorities in creating and posting content online, and the considerations underscoring the decision to disclose the nature of their connection with the organization. In this effort, the stakeholder-organization relationship, and the negotiation and exchange of stakes therein, serves as a valuable context for future research. More development in this area is particularly critical because there are currently minimal standards for compensation in a relationship like one between a brand ambassador and an organization.

### **Brand Ambassadors, Legitimacy, and CSR**

The problem of brand ambassador compensation is exacerbated when considering that brand ambassadors operate in the realm organizational legitimacy. Defined as the perception that "actions of an entity are proper or appropriate", brand ambassadors provide strategic legitimacy, which is conferred by groups or individuals from outside the organization (Long, Driscoll, 2008, p. 174, 176). Ethics are a central component to legitimacy.

In this sphere, corporate social responsibility plays a particular role in legitimating an organization, as responsible behaviour stands to connect an organization to the "socially constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs", central to legitimacy, itself (Long, Driscoll, 2008, p. 174). The role of stakeholder groups like brand ambassadors is especially pivotal because social responsibility does not produce legitimacy on its own (Long, Driscoll, 2008). CSR content posted by brand ambassadors online may act as a legitimacy bridge – it legitimizes the organization as a valuable member of society while also legitimizing the brand ambassador by providing him or her with more than just product-centred social media content. Inasmuch as CSR content enables organizations "more freedom to operate" (Kent, Taylor, 2016, p. 61), brand ambassadors gain value through CSR content as well, as research has shown CSR messages mixed with product messages have a better impact (Uzunoglu,

Turkel, Akyar, in press), and, as such, ambassador posts may receive more positive response because of their pro-social orientation (Kent, Taylor, 2016).

However, evidence from the interviews suggests some ambivalence toward CSR content. Of course, no one is going to be against CSR, but it appears to have very little to do with the brand ambassadors' decisions to advocate on behalf of their organizations. Rather, responses suggest that CSR content is a nice bonus to the type of content brand ambassadors may distribute: it's nice to have, but it's not necessary. Though a few brand ambassadors sought out companies who were socially responsible, most participants in this study based their decision to represent a brand or share content on the nature of the product, itself. Therefore, the connection between CSR and brand ambassador representation is tenuous, at best.

This result may be due to the nature of the connection between a brand ambassador and his or her social media network. Followers may seek content about products and services more than they do CSR activities. Furthermore, the value of product-oriented content may be easier to track because organizations and brand ambassadors can connect social media posts to purchases. Other possible explanations include brand ambassador identity, as some respondents indicated that content decisions were based on fit.

## 5.1. Practical Implications

Though this study provides insight on the needs and motivations of brand ambassadors in promoting an organization's content online, including the need to provide ambassadors autonomy in their social media activities. However, the ethical dilemma of brand ambassador compensation suggests a greater need for organizations to establish standards or even a code of ethics when working with 3rd party endorsements like those provided by brand ambassadors. In fact, research confirms that strategic legitimacy is earned, in part, through a properly implemented code of ethics (Long, Driscoll, 2008), and this study suggests that part of that code should include transparency when working with brand ambassadors.

Overall, sustainability in a digital world requires a recognizable and trusted online identity by both the brand and brand ambassador. Unaffiliated, autonomous social media influencers who become brand ambassadors may be one way for organizations to build and grow that digital legitimacy.

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### **Brian G. Smith, PhD**



Brian G. Smith, PhD (University of Maryland, 2009) is an associate professor at the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University. Dr. Smith researches public engagement with organizations via digital interactive media, and the organizational response, integrated communication (iComm). He has built recognition for his scholarship on the concept of social media engagement, including the social stake and sense of influence underlying social media behavior. Smith was a Fulbright Scholar in Austria in 2017.



### **Megan C. Kendall**



Megan C. Kendall is a graduate of Purdue University (M.A., 2018), with expertise Media, Technology, and Society. Her research focuses on social media communication and crisis communication in a digital age. Professionally, she helps organizations navigate social media, and develop social media acumen.



## Devin Knighton



Devin Knighton, APR, is a doctoral student in public relations at Purdue University. He has over ten years of professional experience building the public relations programs for startups. Knighton earned his Accreditation in Public Relations (APR) in 2016, his Masters in Strategic Public Relations from the George Washington University in 2010, and his Bachelors in Communications from Brigham Young University in 2005. As a doctoral student, Knighton has received awards for teaching and research and is a recipient of the AEJMC Roschwalb Grant. His research interests center on social networks and their impact on strategic public relations, public formation, and organization-public relationships.



## Temi Wright



Temi Wright is a Fulbright scholar and recipient of Purdue University’s Ross Fellowship setup to recruit outstanding doctoral students. He taught language and culture classes at Indiana University in 2015-16 before joining Purdue University as a graduate student. His current research interests are in the intersections of public relations, intercultural communication and organizational communication with the aim of understanding how culture dynamizes strategic communication and relationship building efforts. Recent research has focused on organizational identity and organizations’ use of separation – an image repair strategy – in constructing new identities during crisis. Before entering the United States, Temi Wright taught English, Yoruba and Literature in Nigeria and was awarded the National Youth Service certification. He also was an entrepreneur and co-owned an entertainment services organization, Seymil Ventures.