

Digital Activism on Social Media: The Role of Brand Ambassadors and Corporate Reputation Management

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Abstract

Social media constitute an important arena for public debates and steady interchange of issues relevant to society. To boost their reputation, commercial organizations also engage in political, social, or environmental debates on social media. To engage in this type of digital activism, organizations increasingly utilize the social media profiles of executive employees and other brand ambassadors. However, the relationship between brand ambassadors' digital activism and corporate reputation is only vaguely understood. The results of a qualitative inquiry suggest that digital activism via brand ambassadors can be risky (e.g., creating additional surface for firestorms, financial loss) and rewarding (e.g., emitting authenticity, employing 'megaphones' for industry change) at the same time. The paper informs both scholarship and practitioners about strategic trade-offs that need to be considered when employing brand ambassadors for digital activism.

Keywords: Digital activism, social media, brand ambassadors, reputation management.

1. Introduction

Corporate reputation perpetually affects the success of an organization and has lasting impact on various areas of business. It is a quality that is inter-subjectively created by stakeholders and based on their perception of the organization's actions (Scott & Walsham, 2005). It is not only built in consumer markets but is also affected by social and political corporate strategy (Mahon, 2002). However, existing literature heavily focusses on building theory that explains reputation being built in consumer markets (Roberts & Grover, 2012; Walsh & Beatty, 2007), overlooking its political dimension.

As social media have become indispensable tools for organizational reputation building (Schaarschmidt & Walsh, 2020), strategies for representing an organization are shifting from traditional media relations to target group-specific positioning (Wæraas & Dahle, 2020). In this context, one emerging strategy to do so is, in parallel to cultivating organizational social media profiles, showcasing individual brand ambassadors. The concept of the brand ambassador can be interpreted as a customer, a celebrity, or an employee who acts in the name of a brand (Fisher-Buttinger & Vallaster, 2008). In this study, we follow (Schmidt & Baumgarth, 2018) and assume an employee perspective on brand ambassadors. This perspective confines the concept to individuals who are a permanent member of the organization. The term "ambassador" is borrowed from politics, where it describes a diplomat or authorized messenger or representative (Fisher-Buttinger & Vallaster, 2008).

Brand ambassadors provide an external interface between an organization and its stakeholders, which makes them an important constituent of corporate reputation management. For example, previous research has explored the role of the CEO as a brand ambassador (Wang & Chen, 2020), including their representation on social media (Mirbabaie et al., 2019). Despite the prominence of this topic in academia (Marx et al., 2018; Pamuksuz & Mourad, 2016; Unsal & Brodmann, 2020), the number of CEOs engaging with social media leaves a lot to be desired. In Germany, for example, only about 40 percent of all CEOs maintain an active social media profile (Gravier, 2019), whereas 87 percent of Germans use social media (Rabe, 2019). Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, we have seen CEOs engaging in a new role that gave new impetus to the idea of the brand ambassador. That role, unlike typical qualities expected from a CEO such as comments on products and services, financials, or the workplace, is

that of a digital activist (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Goerge & Leidner, 2019). Recent examples are CEOs promoting vaccination campaigns (Buckley, 2021), or speaking up for the #BlackLivesMatter movement on social media (Segal, 2021).

Brand ambassadors engaging in digital activism is a phenomenon worthwhile to be scrutinized. Not only because of aspirational societal impact that might be achieved but also because we do not know how digital activism executed by brand ambassadors influences corporate reputation. Whereas one may assume that digital activism has a permanent positive effect on corporate reputation, PR departments may sometimes despair of their CEO single-handedly raving about politics and sensitive topics on social media. Therefore, this study poses a hitherto little considered research question:

RQ: *How do brand ambassadors engage in digital activism on social media to influence corporate reputation?*

To answer this research question, we conducted 14 qualitative interviews with experts in the field of marketing and corporate communications, as well as brand ambassadors. The interviews are analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The contributions we derive from this study are threefold.

First, this paper develops 6 themes that explain possible relationships between brand ambassadors, digital activism, and corporate reputation. Second, we cluster those themes into potentials and pitfalls and map the themes against the dimensions of corporate reputation management. Third, this paper informs practitioners about implications of strategically employing brand ambassadors. The industry experts expressed a strong interest to utilize the social media profiles of brand ambassadors more intensively. In this regard, the paper offers guidance for strategic communication that equips organizations with a personified voice and allows them to participate in political, social, and environmental debates more actively.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Corporate Reputation Management on Social Media

A positive corporate reputation yields economic benefits, and therefore, is a strategic resource (Deephouse, 2000). Reputation generally refers to the social status of individuals and organizations, the perception of which is based on attributes and qualities

of this entity (Scott & Walsham, 2005). Fombrun (1996) defines corporate reputation as "*a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describes the firm's overall appeal to all of its key constituents when compared with other leading rivals*" (p. 72). This includes the reactions of customers, investors, employees, and the public when referring an organization. In other words, corporate reputation is often described as the personal reputation of a company in the agreed-upon collective perception of others (Highhouse et al., 2009; Zinko et al., 2007). Building corporate reputation is a lengthy and time-consuming process, based on a complex social background and involves the company as well as its stakeholders (Deephouse, 2000). A poor reputation, in turn, can include loss of customers, high employee turnover rates, and impaired financial performance of an organization.

Fombrun et al. (2000) conceptualize corporate reputation via six dimensions: (1) emotional appeal, which can lead to positive feelings and respect for the company and increases trust; (2) presentation of products and services, to lead consumers to perceive the organization as innovative, to expect high product quality, or to identify with the products and services; (3) description of vision and leadership to clarify the implementation of organizational goals; (4) attractively perceived workplace and work environment; (5) interest in social responsibility, engagement, and willingness to engage socially and environmentally; (6) information on the company's financial performance to signal profitability and competitiveness.

The commodification of social media not only changed the management tasks around reputation building, but also necessitates the need to adapt media presentation strategies. Corporate reputation management now involves the use of information technology as a means of disseminating advantageous corporate information to positively influence public perception (Floreddu et al., 2014). Thus, it has now become state-of-the-art for companies to use social media and present themselves positively on those platforms (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Unlike traditional media, where communication with the public is one-way, the use of social media for corporate reputation management requires organizations to engage in a dialogue with their audience (Westermann & Forthmann, 2021).

Thus, social media enable individual interaction with stakeholders (Triantafillidou & Yannas, 2020). However, in addition to the benefits, previous studies point to risks of two-way interaction in real time, where reputation management can also expect negative reactions from stakeholders (Benitez et al.,

2020). By addressing specific topics on their own social media profiles, organizations can draw attention to topics they intend to cover and bypass the need to work with gate keepers for media coverage.

2.2. Employing Brand Ambassadors for Corporate Reputation Management

The role of organizational members or single employees in the process of building corporate reputation receives increasing attention in scholarship (Pham et al., 2014; Unsal & Brodmann, 2020). Since employees represent the organization both internally and externally to customers, investors, suppliers, and the media, they influence the perceived image of the organization through their own experiences, which varies depending on the stakeholder under consideration (Konadu et al., 2020).

Brand ambassadors act at the respective interfaces with external stakeholders and carry the brand promise to the outside world, whereby in their various roles contributing to the formation of the corporate reputation (Foster et al., 2010). Depending on the extent of identification of brand ambassadors with the company's philosophy, a "live the brand" mentality, which contributes to the creation of corporate reputation (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001) or, in the worst case, can even damage it in the case of destructive behavior (Wallace & de Chernatony, 2007). Rokka et al. (2014) suggest that brand ambassadors on social media can be an important element of a reputation management strategy across all markets. In this context, they face the difficulty of finding a balance between personality and marketing content, while maintaining authenticity and transparency.

Executive managers such as CEOs are most suitable to personify an organization by holding a lot of symbolic value. CEOs serve, both internally for employees and externally vis-à-vis the media or the market, as a source of company-specific information (Marx et al., 2018). A positive CEO reputation can strengthen the CEO's leadership authority, highlight his role in corporate policy and enhance their career prospects (Chen et al., 2019).

In examining the reputation of CEOs in traditional print media, Freling & Forbes (2005) show its influence on the earning potential of the company. Although it remains that CEO reputation is different from corporate reputation and that these two exist independently, they strongly influence each other (Rangarajan et al., 2017). Social media allow brand ambassadors to interact with stakeholders as a proxy for an organization, while potentially being perceived as an expert or thought leader (Pamuksuz & Mourad, 2016).

2.3. Digital Activism on Social Media

The notion of 'digital activism', also known as 'cyberactivism', is a form of activism in the digital age that uses the Internet, and social media, as central media platforms to influence collective action among a larger audience (Selander & Jarvenpaa, 2016). The context of digital activism is often of political nature. By reducing effort and resources through digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or other similar social media platforms, an individual, group, or even an organization can instantly reach large audiences across all boundaries and enable direct political action by informing citizens of events, creating interactive dialogue, organizing action, building outward coalitions, and cost-effectively connecting online and offline activists (Duarte, 2017; Leong et al., 2019).

The reason for digital activism to be a salient phenomenon for information systems research is because technology such as social media provide new affordances for activism (George & Leidner, 2018). They can provide not only an outlet for minorities and democratize the discussion culture (Ahuja et al., 2018) but also tools for effective organization (Mahabir et al., 2018). A hitherto rather unnoticed actor in digital activism are corporates and their representatives, that is, brand ambassadors. Brand ambassadors may provide support for movements that aim to restructure societies, industries, and/or individuals (Selander & Jarvenpaa, 2016). Brand ambassadors are particularly qualified to engage in digital activism because they are often perceived as authorities (Pamuksuz & Mourad, 2016) and can help organizations to portray a particular image of themselves (Miranda et al., 2021). However, we know little about the interplay between digital activism of brand ambassadors and corporate reputation.

3. Research Design

Since digital activism of brand ambassadors on social media appears to be a rather uncharted research topic, we approach it with a qualitative research design. We interviewed purposefully selected experts in the field to gain both deeper insights into the research topic, as well as reports on their experiences with working with or acting as brand ambassadors in the context of digital activism. Here, we aimed to reduce the distance between the researchers and the research object by engaging in personal conversations (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.1. Interview sampling

To investigate our research question, that is, exploring how brand ambassadors engage in digital activism on social media to influence corporate reputation, managers from marketing and communications departments as well as brand ambassadors were interviewed. As an indicator of expert knowledge in the subject area, we considered the management experience of each informant. In addition, we selected respondents based on the criterion that they are not only in an executive function but are also significantly involved in the conception and development of brand ambassador communications strategies, which is why they have extensive knowledge about the phenomenon under scrutiny. Table 1 provides an overview of the interview sample.

Table 1. Overview of interview sample

ID	Age	Gender	Position	Industry	Duration
i1	27	Female	Management (marketing and PR)	Textiles	26 min
i2	33	Female	Online marketing	Mechanical engineering	32 min
i3	52	Female	Head of marketing	Insurance	40 min
i4	42	Male	Director of strategy	Advertising	35 min
i5	49	Female	Head of marketing	Trade fairs	38 min
i6	42	Male	CEO	Mechanical engineering	25 min
i7	42	Female	CEO	Web development	43 min
i8	51	Male	CEO	Web development	43 min
i9	54	Male	CEO	Print media	28 min
i10	43	Female	CEO	E-commerce	33 min
i11	41	Male	CEO communications manager	Pharmaceutics	30 min
i12	41	Female	Senior communications manager	Consumer goods	42 min
i13	49	Male	Head of corporate communications	Healthcare technology	51 min
i14	25	Male	Assistant to the head of PR	Automotive	32 min

Their respective organizations range from small and medium sized companies to one large corporation from the insurance industry with more than 150,000 employees. We are aware that cultural differences may apply to brand ambassador digital activism, however, the organizations that employ our experts are globally active. Therefore, the experience gained by those experts can be assumed to traverse national borders. The interviews were carried out via Zoom and were based on a semi-structured guide including questions such as: *Do you engage in digital activism yourself? That is, to what extent do you use social media to address/advance/change social, cultural, or political issues? or Do you have specific guidelines for yourself or your employees on how you express oneself on*

social media about political and social issues? If so, what do they look like? or To what extent do you represent your own opinion on social media or do you adopt your company's position?

3.2. Reflexive thematic analysis

We use reflexive thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and apply it to the data collected via the interviews. The latter were conducted via Zoom, and the audio was recorded. Subsequently, all interviews were transcribed, ignoring dialects and expressions of agreement. A slight smoothing of the language was done to correct grammatical errors. The interview guide was open and was increasingly structured after the first interviews to pursue certain directions and initial themes.

Reflexive thematic analysis is designed to analyze qualitative data by evaluating the collected material of

the interviews through inductive coding that is guided by the research question. Two coders familiarized themselves with the data and developed codes. Subsequently, the codes were used to generate initial themes. After revising the initial themes with a third author, the themes were named and finalized. In the subsequent section, we present those themes and provide examples from the data for each of them.

4. Findings

In the following, we report categories that were inductively derived and that constitute either a potential or a pitfall of brand ambassador digital activism. Each category is supplemented by at least

one anchor example that represents the collected material.

4.1. Employing brand ambassadors as ‘megaphones’ for industry change

This theme was developed based on expert statements referring to the opportunities offered by positioning brand ambassadors on social media in direct comparison with conventional media. This strategy allows to address online-savvy target groups, expand their existing target group through social media features such as referrals and links, a more immediate channel into the everyday life of the target group, greater accessibility to the target group, increased opportunities to enter a direct dialog with the target group (especially via an ambassador’s social media profile), the possibility of more emotional communication, cost reduction in marketing budgets, independence from traditional media, visual and content design freedom, and more control concerning the message the organization and or the brand ambassador want to convey.

“In our social media communication, we are very clear to be at the forefront of the industry. We also put a lot of emphasis on it. We are always on the road at some congresses, [...] and have also had a few interviews with large media outlets. The external representation is one of our main concerns” (i8).

Many of the experts point out that being addressed privately by a social media user can counteract the anonymity of an organization and appears more credible to recipients than *“a company, which may only be a mask for some users” (i1)*. This may include even influencing a whole sector.

“The entire change that is currently necessary in our industry has been initiated by him [the CEO], which is why he communicates so openly to the outside world. But that is the task of every CEO of such global corporations. If he hides and doesn't go public, it's difficult. There is an upheaval in the industry right now and he is doing that very positively. It's very necessary. A person appears much closer than the construct of a large company.” (i3)

4.2. Engaging in salient public discourses via an authoritative proxy

Most experts mutually agree that digital activism by brand ambassadors puts an organization in a unique position to participate in societal discourse. As one interviewee explains it:

“there are three levels that a CEO can occupy. One is the personal theme, which is difficult for companies above a certain size [...]. One is to position oneself in a company-specific positioning - in other words, highlighting the company's core competencies. And you can address a social issue, such as sustainability or digitalization. That has to be well-targeted.” (i4)

Similarly, i5 addresses the necessity of selecting strategic focal points that spark emotional charge through the personal involvement of the brand ambassador. In other words, brand ambassadors are much more able to emotionally charge a message as compared to organizational actors. In principle, all experts highlight the relevance of moral and social responsibility and consider them important components of corporate reputation management. Here, the brand ambassador has the function of a guiding figure for the corporate vision and corresponding values who should *“lead by example” (i2)*. i6 speaks of his role as CEO as an *“identification figure”* who should make use of this role. However, especially the experts working in communications departments are a bit torn about the extent to which their brand ambassador should engage in societal discussions. This is because personal opinions not shared by shareholders might negatively affect the organization’s performance.

“He [the CEO] deals with future topics because they are important in the long term. Like Siemens with Mr. Kaeser, for example, who spoke out very clearly about racism. Many people are talking about this right now. Do you do that or not? Then there's the CEO of Deutsche Telekom in the U.S., who has taken a very personal stance, which not everyone likes either. And there are also a lot of CEOs who don't want to or aren't allowed to position themselves personally because they are evaluated by the capital market. And that's where it's rather bad.” (i6)

“I think that debates on social media can actually change something, because social media, as much as you sometimes find yourself in your topic bubble and networking bubble, is not detached from other life, at least LinkedIn is not. LinkedIn is really a professional network. There's a lot of talk there about events, about development in real life, about bills, a lot about events, podcasts that have taken place, etc., all of which also take place offline, so to speak, or at least take place outside of this platform, even though it may be digital. So in that sense, I think you can definitely have an influence, even outside of social media.” (i13)

4.3. Emitting authenticity through personal charisma

Most experts agree about the relevance of active involvement of brand ambassadors on social media. However, only i3 states that the CEO of her company himself actively produces a lot of content on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram and is present on YouTube in the form of interview publications. All publications appear on the CEO's own profile, which is managed by the organization. Other experts (i1, i2, i4) positively refer to their CEO's social media activities, but emphasize their restrained positions, whereby they act passively from the background. Proactive content creation of brand ambassadors is rarely recorded. In this sense, i4 and i5 see the relevance of an active CEO not only for external purposes: *"For employees, it's good if the CEO positions himself positively and employees get the feeling, there's positive talk about us out there."* (i4)

Expert i6, who was interviewed in his role as CEO, provides insight into his own handling of social media and describes himself as a passive user. Sporadically, he is active on Instagram to share industry-specific events with followers on certain occasions, and to provide them with insight and added value. However, he does not use social media to communicate social, political, or other opinions and does not plan to do so. We conclude that digital activism is not pursued often, but when a brand ambassador is personally committed to it, the impact can be immense.

"Our CEO does not use social media because he does not want to. However, he has actually already occurred once in an emergency, via Facebook. When we had a threatening situation at the XX trade fair where we were threatened that the trade show would be stormed, the CEO met with the initiators and also announced this via Facebook. But that was an exceptional situation." (i5)

Four experts from the sample emphasize the importance of self-descriptions by brand ambassadors to build an emotional relationship. Many techniques that are known, for example from influencer marketing, however, are being rejected by most brand ambassadors. In exceptional cases such as a corporate crisis, i4 and i5 advise to employ through a brand ambassador if operational measures fail.

"The CEO is actually an escalation level in such processes. If mistakes happen, it must first be resolved at the operational level. Otherwise, the issue takes on greater relevance and stage and gets boiled up. I

would never recommend that. In the event of a crisis, the CEO will be the last card to be pulled." (i4)

4.4. Risking financial loss

This theme was developed based on text passages that describe possible or already perceived negative effects of a brand ambassador's digital activism for corporate reputation. The experts especially find the following risks to be considered if brand ambassadors pursue digital activism: negative recipient reactions due to the risk of making the wrong choice of words, general criticism, increased customer complaints, loss of control over the communication situation, risk of misinterpretation, lower credibility in absence of quality media, dialog situation that goes nowhere, increased effort (e.g., corporate design). However, the problem that was mentioned the most was that building up brand ambassadors is a big financial risk. For example, this is the case if a lot of investment is made in building a personal brand only to see the brand ambassador leaving the company and taking the brand with them.

"The capital invested may be gone if that person leaves the company. As a company, you have to take into account how you want to manage your investment or even give this person a career springboard to another company. That's the balancing act that you have to do as a company." (i4)

4.5. Balancing individual and organizational interests

Experts also repeatedly addressed the differences and the varying impact of digital activism from an individual and a collective view. First, the experts mention that a brand ambassador's target group is not congruent with the target group of the whole organization. This involves the basic composition of followers on the organizational and the individual social media profile. In addition, i4 emphasizes the effect of activating a personal network, which leads to a higher weighting of the message. The second component of the different effect describes the more personal and relevant perception of the information than when it is announced by the organization. Additionally, i4 emphasizes that recipients have a stronger focus on the perception of personal information, whereas information concerning the company is often blanked out. *"The employee is a much more interesting touchpoint for many target groups, than the company itself, and that also applies to the CEO. As a result, this is directly much more personal."* (i4)

“I fully express my own opinion, but when I share it, it must also be fully in line with the company's position. So that is also the motivation why I do not take a party-political position. I think our company has many values that it stands for. So social justice or ecological justice, ecological fairness, for example, or a culture of employees, a culture of innovative strength, for example. That is also an important social issue at the end of the day. And that's where I express myself and where I fully stand, not because I have to, but because I'm convinced that I'm in line with the values and orientation of the company.” (i9)

4.6. Creating additional surface for attacks and firestorms

A variety of risks of employing brand ambassadors for digital activism were mentioned by the experts, including damage to the brand ambassador's reputation in the case of negative events within the organization, damage to the organization's reputation when the brand ambassador makes mistakes, excessive focus on one person and neglect of the performance of other employees, blurring of the line between private person and position as CEO, or security risks for the brand ambassador's private environment. However, the pitfall that was most prominently mentioned was that CEO digital activism poses a risk to corporate reputation by creating an additional focal point for criticism and attacks, that is, social media firestorms.

“I think that focuses too much on one person than on the company and the broad mass of employees and other executives who are involved here. Sure, there can be fault lines with other stakeholders, of course, because you have one person who can be actively attacked. For example, we supply technology to a customer who does not produce very environmentally friendly products with it, which may well be the case. But we don't see our responsibility in that. But then, of course, that can lead to a better point of attack for individuals if you want to attack the company in general.” (i6)

5. Discussion

Corporate reputation can be influenced by the help of various elements, including the actions of single employees, that is, brand ambassadors. In the context of digital activism, a brand ambassador often follows an agenda that is little in line with a corporate reputation building strategy but can greatly impact corporate reputation. Our interviews unearthed that

positioning brand ambassadors in social media can strengthen the relationship between stakeholders and the organization (Benitez, 2020).

Most of the experts mentioned that the strategies in their organizations to integrate brand ambassadors should be vastly improved (Mirbabaie et al. 2019). Therefore, employing brand ambassadors for digital activism is even one step further away from their daily practice. However, in our conversations, they conveyed high interest and much emotional involvement in this topic. Oftentimes, employees in communications and PR departments have a plethora of ideas for how executive managers can be integrated as brand ambassadors but lack the approval and interest of those executives. Moreover, they might simply not have the budget or priority with regards to pursuing those ideas. To the outside world, employees represent the interface between a company and its stakeholders (Rokka et al., 2013). The representation of the organization and that of a single brand ambassador are defined as separate social media profiles that exist individually but stand interdependent in relation to each other (Rangarajan et al., 2017).

As our interviewed brand ambassadors describe, when using their social media channels, they try to provide insights into industry-specific events and create informative added value. When considering the selection of topic areas to build corporate reputation, the experts emphasize the fundamental need for a brand ambassador not to address content indiscriminately. Our expert opinions mainly mirror observations made by previous research such as Pamuksuz and Mourad's (2016) approach that brand ambassadors are perceived by recipients as an expert with a high knowledge, which is why their messages are attributed a higher weighting. However, in comparison to other studies, we were able to gain a unique perspective on digital activism, which sets the focal point of brand ambassador messaging not on products and services and other traditional dimension of corporate reputation (Fombrun et al. 2000). Instead, digital activism through brand ambassadors is an emerging phenomenon based on the assumption that industry leaders can potentially change the industry itself or meaningfully impact societal debates about racism, the environment, vaccination campaigns and the like. We therefore want to use this study to ignite fruitful discussions about how information technology such as social media can be utilized to help brand ambassadors to convey important messages. A first step toward this goal is to establish concepts and themes around this phenomenon. The 6 themes we developed may serve as a basis for further theorizing in this regard.

It should be noted that sometimes brand ambassadors engage in digital activism on their own account. This behavior comes with both potentials and pitfalls. Whereas the personification of the messaging may have greater impact on discourses, may they be within an industry or in society, the corporate reputation is almost always involved (Chen, 2018). Our study contributes to this field of research by identifying hitherto rather unnoticed upsides and downsides of brand ambassadors' digital activism that need to be considered in corporate reputation management research. Table 2 provides an overview of our themes clustered into potentials and pitfalls and mapped to the relevant dimensions of corporate reputation.

Table 2. The influence of brand ambassador digital activism on corporate reputation

Potentials of brand ambassador digital activism	Dimensions of corporate reputation (Fombrun et al. 2000)
Employing brand ambassadors as 'megaphones' for industry change	-vision & leadership -products & services
Engaging in salient public discourses via an authoritative proxy	-social & environmental responsibility
Emitting authenticity through personal charisma	-emotional appeal -products & services -work environment
Pitfalls of brand ambassador digital activism	Dimensions of corporate reputation (Fombrun et al. 2000)
Risking financial loss	-financial performance
Balancing individual and organizational interests	-vision & leadership -work environment
Creating additional surface for attacks and firestorms	-emotional appeal -financial performance

The perception of brand ambassadors as experts and opinion leaders through digital activism, if done right, could be a mechanism of action for corporate reputation management that leverages both individual and corporate reputation building efforts. Through statements and descriptions of their own personality, brand ambassadors can act as guiding figures within the context of moral issues, to which stakeholders can orient themselves (Rokka et al., 2014). The CEO, who, like all employees, is an interface between the company and external stakeholders, above all can become a brand ambassador who takes responsibility

on behalf of the organization (Pham et al., 2014; Unsal & Brodmann, 2020). It is important, however, to make brand ambassadors part of a strategy that is consistent with the organizational values (Fombrun et al., 2000). Inconsistencies, as shown in our analysis may accelerate firestorms and negative sentiments toward the organization. Whereas the tone of this study is rather positive towards brand ambassador digital activism, structuring the input by our experts yielded a restrained yet excited attitude towards the topic of digital activism via brand ambassadors, which provides a fruitful basis for discussion and more research exploring this phenomenon.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the empirical investigation within the scope of this work was to expand the knowledge about the role of brand ambassadors and their digital activism for corporate reputation management. A thematic analysis of expert interviews in this field was conducted. The analysis resulted in 6 themes that mirror potentials and pitfalls and were mapped against the dimensions of corporate reputation management. We found that, in practice, executive employees are hesitant to engage as brand ambassadors in digital activism. However, strong opinions were communicated that brand ambassadors should increasingly be employed to give organizations an authentic voice in societal debates. This paper allows future research to test theoretical relationships between the concepts that make up our themes on corporate reputation. Moreover, practitioners can use these results to better evaluate strategic decisions about digital activism of their corporation or single brand ambassadors.

The limitations encountered in this study also serve as indications for future research. First, it must be pointed out that the scope of this study does not allow statistical generalization to all organizations and brand ambassadors. Therefore, in future research, case study research with more data subjects should be carried out to build theory. Possibly, a positivist case study that seeks to test hypotheses based upon our findings will make a good contribution. Moreover, it will be vital to not only get experts to talk about digital activism but track and analyze such efforts directly from social media platforms via analytics approaches. Here, social network analysis, sentiment analysis, and statistical tests applied to secondary data from Twitter, LinkedIn and the like will enrich the empiricism to explain the phenomenon. Nevertheless, our study marks a first foray in exploring the role of brand ambassadors for digital activism. With society increasingly laying claim to

corporations positioning themselves in important debates on pressing issues, digital activism will be an important strategic tool for organizations and aspiring brand ambassadors to do justice to their responsibilities and make an impact that goes beyond quarterly figures.

7. References

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