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CORPORATE BRAND COMMUNICATION: BEYOND-MODERN REALITIES IN A SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

ABSTRACT

This article contributes theoretically to corporate brand communication literature by identifying the realities of corporate brand communication practices in a beyond-modern and social media landscape. It is widely acknowledged that the advent of the internet has created distinct opportunities to connect and communicate with stakeholders. Yet endeavours to explore the opportunities to employ corporate brand communication in a social media landscape to achieve differentiation and awareness of the corporate brand are limited. The proposed combination of two brand orientations as perceived by Balmer (2013), namely corporate brand and total corporate communication, and the resultant broadening of these views to a corporate brand communication orientation in a social media context could address this gap. Finally, a comparison is drawn between the total corporate communication outlook and the contemporary corporate brand communication orientation to illustrate the various points of contact available to the organisation in a social media landscape.

Keywords: corporate brand communication; social media; corporate brand; corporate communication; beyond-modern; stakeholder communication

INTRODUCTION

It is contended that the social media landscape has altered the realities within which brand communication is practiced. This, therefore, merits an investigation of the expanded touch points through which organisations and stakeholders connect, as evident in literature. This article contributes theoretically to corporate brand communication literature by identifying the realities of corporate brand communication practices in a social media landscape. The article commences by delineating a beyond-modern perspective of corporate brand communication and, in this way, contextualises the

perspective adopted. Following this, the corporate brand communication orientation that guided the investigation is conceptualised through identifying and motivating the brand orientations that jointly serve as points of departure. This is achieved by the combination of two orientations as perceived by Balmer (2013), namely corporate brand and total corporate communication, and the resultant broadening of these views to a corporate brand communication orientation in a social media context. Subsequently, the social media landscape in which a corporate brand communicates is delineated. Finally, a comparison is drawn between the total corporate communication outlook and the contemporary corporate brand communication orientation to illustrate the various points of contact available to the organisation in a social media landscape.

A BEYOND-MODERN PERSPECTIVE

Concepts such as postmodernism, *post* postmodernism, post-digital and late modern are used popularly to signify the changed ways in which organisations and stakeholders connect currently, and that are mainly attributed to the advances in technology (Kitchen & Proctor 2015; Fourie 2017: 10). Overton-de Klerk and Verwey (2013: 364) summarise the view of Lyotard (1988) on post-modernism as "an awareness and tolerance of social differences, ambiguity and conflict". Despite many diverse opinions on exactly when it emerged, and who its supporters are, the legacies associated with this era seemingly cannot be refuted (Matthewman & Hoey 2006; Fourie 2017a: 10). In fact, scholarly views do acknowledge the increased attention to context, cognisance and acceptance of aspects such as power, prestige, gender, multiple identities, and "dislocated subjectivities" (Lyotard 1979; Matthewman & Hoey 2006). Lyotard's (1979) observation that conversation is flexible and unrestrained is of particular interest in the context of communication in a social media milieu, considering that the language of social media is largely conversational.

Due to the lack of consensus on a uniform term to delineate this era, the term beyond-modernism is adopted when referring to the onset and prominence of technology, the continuance thereof, and the subsequent opportunities for corporate brand communication. This perspective underlines multiple realities because of the varied ways in which individuals interpret the world (Christensen *et al.* 2005: 163; Mumby 2013: 23). Thus, mainly due to diverse interpretations of the world, it is can be expected that organisations will be evidently challenged in the ways they connect and communicate with their stakeholders. In Fourie's (2017a: 15) view, the emergence of digital media in a post-modern society created a digital media landscape that is in line with the present focus on social media, and the worldview followed in this article.

This landscape is largely characterised by a recognition that the users of technology, among other aspects, are active participants in, rather than passive receivers of, communication (Fourie 2017a: 16). The concept of participation can be related positively to social media based on the active involvement of people on social media (Fuchs 2014: 532; Fourie 2017a: 11). In fact, these participants are able to increase their control of the brand communication process, including the production, dissemination and use of content. Novel ways are available to combine media on different platforms, such as discussed in a following section on media convergence (cf. Fourie 2017a: 16).

It further affords individuals opportunities to freely express their ideas and opinions, and thus to the possibilities to inform, observe, experience and explain (Fourie 2017a: 16, 17). As emphasised in a following section, interactivity and connectivity are vital properties of social media that are offered in the beyond-modern landscape.

Many opposing views on post-modernism are raised in scholarly literature that deserve a brief mention at this point. Critics of a postmodern view consider it to stand in direct contrast to the emphases of modernity, a focus on a single dominating ideology, and the value of an objective truth (Holtzhausen 2002). A seminal opinion, by Sokal and Bricmont (1999: 173-174), concurs that it pays excessive attention to subjective beliefs that are detached from their truth or untruth. Therefore, some scholars perceive it as idealistic. Nonetheless, though this scepticism is respected, it does not fall within the scope of this article to investigate the impact thereof on brand touch points.

CORPORATE BRAND COMMUNICATION

Based on views in literature, it can be accepted that a corporate brand is mainly concerned with the holistic presentation of the organisation, its products and/or services. Therefore, the organisation becomes the central, consistent and coherent brand message; thus, indicating a shift from marketing or product branding to corporate branding (Hamzah *et al*. 2014: 2299; Balmer *et al*. 2013: 44; Roper & Fill 2012). This can be loosely compared to the corporate brand orientation in which the brand *per se* is the focal point of the organisation (Balmer 2013).

Balmer (2013: 725) identifies various brand orientations at corporate level. In accordance with this view, these orientations allow for multiple combinations, of which the corporate brand and the total corporate communication perspectives are jointly deemed apposite to the outlook and purposes of this article. The corporate brand orientation positions the brand as the basis and key touch point of the organisation, whereas the total corporate communication perspective centres on the organisation's entire communication efforts. Corporate brand communication therefore creates a consistent meaning of internal and external coherence and value, and thus builds relationships between an organisation and its multiple stakeholders. It is for this reason that corporate brand communication should be approached from a strategic lens as everything an organisation does (Balmer 2013: 25). The exact notion that every action of the organisation distinctly constitutes communication for creating a desired corporate brand warrants consideration of both orientations (cf. Ouwersloot & Duncan 2008: 65; Duncan 2005: 110). Hence, for the purposes at hand, the term corporate brand communication denotes the prominence and incorporates viewpoints of the above orientations.

The corporate brand is the core focus and coherent idea about the organisation; it is shared among internal and external stakeholders, and informs the operations of an organisation (Balmer 2013: 724; Fisher 2014: 33; Hamzah *et al*. 2014: 2299). Balmer (2012: 6) describes the corporate brand as an "identity type", a "quasi-legal character", underlined by an "informal, powerful corporate contract" between organisations and stakeholders. Of importance in the context of this discussion is

the comprehension that social media presents special opportunities for organisations and stakeholders alike to explicitly share the brand idea and messages through communication via these platforms. Stakeholders are therefore able to form certain perceptions about the organisation, which will affect their choice of products and services based on the organisation's holistic brand, and including its qualities, identity, image and reputation (Hulberg 2006).

According to Balmer (2013: 725), total corporate communication consists of primary, secondary and tertiary communication. Hence, considering the context of a beyond-modern perspective on corporate brand communication, it can be asserted that primary, secondary and tertiary communication are similarly indicative of the different levels at which brand communication takes place, which arguably are unique in a social media environment. As per Balmer's (2013: 725) qualification, brand communication at the primary level refers to the "communication effects" of the organisation, employees, products and services. At the secondary level, brand communication encompasses the "controlled communication effects" of, for example, public relations and advertising efforts, and at the tertiary level, the "communication effects" of "third parties". It can thus be reasoned that brands communicate on these respective tiers through all activities, behaviour and interaction; in instances where content is created and owned by the organisation; and likewise, by means of the interaction between the stakeholder and the organisation.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Charlesworth (2015) asserts that digital transformation is critical to any organisation and that the driving force behind this transformation can be attributed to social media. This view is underwritten by the perspective of Fourie (2017b) and aligns with the focus on the prominence and continuation of technology as supported by the proposed perspective of corporate brand communication. The following sections will highlight particular aspects that are associated with the social media landscape.

Increased interactivity

Interactivity is generally used to set apart traditional media (e.g. newspapers) and digital developments, such as social media, although little consensus is evident in the literature on the aspects that qualify media as interactive. Descriptions mainly relate to the flow of messages, the quality of two-way communication, and the interchangeable roles of participants in the communication process. Even though the interactivity of social media is not easily defined, it suggests that organisations give up their control over the brand communication to some extent and substitute it with interaction (Quigley 2013: 414). Interactivity should include two prominent elements – the facilitation of two-way or multiway communication with feedback inherent thereto, and the opportunity for both senders and receivers to fulfil interchangeable roles. Fourie (2017b: 117) supports the notion of a social media landscape, in which communication is decentralised, in that it points to the involvement of users in communication as part of a group and as equals; moreover, feedback plays a central role, and it could be a direct result of interactivity. Traditional mass communication is said to mainly emphasise the message

but the opportunities offered by social media to "make contact" and communicate, both as communicator and recipient on social media platforms, centre around immediate feedback as opposed to message features (Fourie 2017b: 117-118). It is apparent that in a beyond-modern perspective, the focus has shifted to interactivity and interconnectivity, in some instances also referred to as feedback.

Two-way or multiway conversations

A main benefit of newer technology from a beyond-modern view is apparently the ability of all participants to actively communicate and respond to communication. This is popularly mentioned together with feedback in that everybody is allowed to respond to messages received on social media platforms. Various ways exist to participate on social media, namely by means of creating, adapting and sharing content, and involvement in and the observing of conversations and interactions (Swart 2018).

The connection between two-way communication, dialogue and conversations is apparent in the literature and is used interchangeably for present purposes to denote the unrestricted communication that takes place between organisations and stakeholders (Carim & Warwick 2013; Bonsón & Flores 2011). This being said, consideration should be given to the fact that not all activities on social media qualify as two-way or dialogic, and that social media interaction should not all be considered to be conversational or two-way communication (Swart 2018). In this vein, it must be accepted that some social media applications do not allow for two-way exchanges of messages or conversations *per se* but are, for example, more suitable for simply rating or tagging other stakeholders (*ibid*.).

Interchangeable roles

An earlier point, and closely associated with two-way communication, states the increased capability of participants to act as both senders and receivers. The implication is that, apart from providing feedback and comments on posts, tweets or re-tweets, opportunities exist to freely create and adapt content on these platforms. Likewise, participants can share content that consequently may create a wider awareness of a corporate brand. Participants therefore have the freedom to adapt content, to determine the pace in which content is shared, and to re-share content on a variety of platforms; thus, fulfilling interchangeable roles.

A stakeholder focus

The perspective by which organisations consider the interests of stakeholders is not novel and has been acknowledged and presented in traditional corporate communication and marketing communication literature (Steyn & De Beer 2012; Belch & Belch 2009; Martin & Hetrick 2006; Cornelissen 2000; cf. Mulder 2010). As mentioned earlier, for a corporate brand to formulate appealing brand messages it is vital to understand the functional and emotional expectations their customers might have. A marketing communication, as well as a corporate communication context, specifically aims to centre information (Hamzah *et al*. 2014) and thereby allows for a stakeholder-centric perspective that provides the stakeholder with more power. Rajagopal (2013) argues

for maintaining organisational communication control by managing the technological power of stakeholders, while Johansson and Carlson (2015: 70) maintain that stakeholders take "ownership" of brands and therefore it becomes difficult for organisations to retain control. This lack of organisational control is in line with a beyond-modern perspective, especially within a social media landscape. The fact that social media permits stakeholders to become active participants as conceptualised in a beyond-modern perspective forces organisations to acknowledge their unrestricted involvement in conversations about the corporate brand with or without involvement by the organisation (Swart 2018). This is clear, especially in a social media environment where continuous engagement is evident, and stakeholders, in addition, have the power over their perceptions of the corporate brand (Booth & Matic 2011: 184). Due to stakeholders' continuous engagement and participation, the message becomes the starting point for a conversation (Downes 2013: 219). Moreover, this focus recognises the need to know which topics or issues are raised to allow for the tailoring of brand communication. It is probable that the expectations stakeholders have are just as compelling in that organisations should demonstrate their commitment to engage in conversations by being active on social media (cf. Balmer 2012).

The social media environment provides the opportunity for a shift in power and control for corporate brand communication, where stakeholders have the power to engage, interact and connect in a transparent environment (Agresta & Bough 2011: 2-3; Quigley 2013: 414). Agresta and Bough (2011: 2-3) ascribe connectivity via social media as a main contributor to stakeholders' ability to produce user-generated content. From a corporate brand perspective, connectivity between the brand, organisation and stakeholders allows for the organisation to draw closer to the stakeholder and for clearer and individualised corporate brand messaging.

Listening approach

A stakeholder focus in a social media landscape inevitably compels organisations to adopt a listening approach that allows them to be informed of specific mentions of the corporate brand. Key to the corporate brand is trust in the organisation, its products and services (Fisher 2014: 33). The beyond-modern perspective implies that trust can be built if the organisation assumes a listening approach and if feedback from stakeholders is taken into account (*ibid*.). Conversely, trust can easily evaporate, especially in the new social media landscape where stakeholders can participate in a negative or non-contributing manner to brand conversations.

Booth and Matic (2011: 185) and Quigley (2013: 416) maintain that this listening approach is introduced when corporate brand communication transforms from monologues to dialogues, which enhances participation. In the social media landscape and in line with a stakeholder-centric focus it is fair to conclude that much of the power has shifted to the stakeholder. Thus, it is recommended that organisations adopt a listening approach in order to acknowledge feedback and to stay informed of the aspects that are being raised about the corporate brand. As stakeholders cannot be prevented from participating, the organisation should listen and react to stakeholders and mentions of the corporate brand and desist from formulating one-

way messages aimed at intentionally shaping stakeholders' perceptions (Parumasur & Roberts-Lombard 2014). A listening approach could further reveal certain expectations stakeholders have in terms of the corporate brand, which could allow the organisation to address them. In fact, a study by Swart (2018: 96) reveals that stakeholders could be incorporated in the communication endeavours of the organisation through a listening approach.

Prominent measures that the organisation could consider in order to stay informed about conversations on social media *inter alia* include the continuous monitoring and tracking of discussions on social media, and the mobilisation of brand ambassadors and influencers (Swart 2018: 111, 183). A presence on social media is perceived to be key to demonstrate that the organisation is present and willing to communicate on social media (Swart 2018: 126).

Monitoring and tracking

It is essential to monitor and investigate social media activities to determine the impact of discussions on the organisation, and to influence discussions to increase the engagement rate (Swart 2018: 184). Breakenridge (2012) maintains that knowledge of the places stakeholders congregate, their preferences regarding social media platforms, and the key topics that are of interest to them is essential for organisations. Thus, organisations are required to be follow conversations on social media and be involved in conversations in these online spaces to stay informed (cf. Swart 2018: 183; Burcher 2012).

Many free or paid-for monitoring tools are at organisations' disposal to observe social media conversations and provide statistics of mentions and stories that could affect the reputation of the corporate brand (Swart 2018: 370). The range of tools is extensive and includes, but is not limited to, HowSociable, Klout, and Social Mention (Moriarty *et al*. 2015; cf. Du Plessis 2017: 364; Swart 2018: 370). Searches using these tools reveal valuable information about current conversations, the probability that conversations about the brand will continue, the significance of stakeholders, and how conversations are grouped (cf. Du Plessis 2017: 364). In addition, the strategic benefits of monitoring and tracking conversational activity on social media are evident and organisations should acknowledge the importance thereof for evaluating brand guidelines, gaining insight into the various types of content that are shared, and assessing the types of engagement on these platforms (Swart 2018).

Social media ambassadors and influencers

Considering that social media extends the reach and increases the volume of communication, organisations need to consider alternative ways to keep track of conversations and to optimise the sharing of brand messages. Perhaps even more critical is the need to stay involved in the countless conversations that take place on social media. Online brand ambassadors and influencers are often mentioned in scholarly literature and it could be useful to monitor and spread brand messages online (Baer 2015; Hoffman & Novak 2009). These are individuals who hold long-term and short-term value for the organisation by passionately championing and increasing

the awareness and conversation about the brand (Moriarty *et al.* 2015; Baer 2015; cf. Swart 2018: 352). It is necessary that organisations mobilise ambassadors and influencers to optimise the sharing of corporate brand communication.

Changed stakeholder dispositions

Kitchen and Proctor (2015: 37) state that as result of the increased availability of information stakeholders' purchasing decisions have changed. The opinions of other stakeholders that are freely shared on a wide range of social media platforms are apparently regarded to be more objective than communication messages created and shared by the organisation or brand. This could be attributed to the fact that stakeholders share how the brand "has lived up to their expectations" (Agresta & Bough 2011: 32). They share brand experiences that are arguably more believable to other stakeholders than brand messages from the organisation. Previously, the organisation communicated to stakeholders by presenting and pushing messages through various media. However, from a beyond-modern perspective and rooted in a social media environment, stakeholders now disseminate information, engage in brand storytelling, act as brand ambassadors, and take part in brand conversations (Booth & Matic 2011: 185). Stakeholders, therefore, play a crucial role in shaping and protecting the corporate brand (*ibid*.). Cheung and Lee (2012) state that specific motives drive stakeholders to share their experiences and views on stakeholder-opinion sites, of which social networking sites, blogs, and discussion forums are examples. They term the sharing of opinions and experiences electronic word of mouth (eWOM) and their research indicates that the intention to share eWOM can be linked to aspects such as reputation and a sense of belonging (*ibid*.). Considering that reputation and a sense of belonging are both associated with an emotional connection with and favourable impression of a corporate brand, it is sensible that organisations consider the value of achieving positive impressions of the brand (Christensen *et al*. 2008; cf. Swart 2018: 83). In this way, it could urge stakeholders to spread positive word of mouth about the brand online. However, positive word of mouth will only realise in an ideal situation where the truths of the organisation are shared in a social media environment (Downes 2013: 218). The risks involved in stakeholders' intentions to share instantaneously in this environment include the sharing of facts that could be deceptive and could cause irreparable damage to the organisation's image and reputation (Downes 2013). This emphasises the importance of an organisation's commitment to fulfil its brand promise because, should the organisation not deliver on its promise, stakeholders' trust and faith in the brand could easily diminish due to stakeholders' connectivity with other stakeholders on social media platforms (Agresta & Bough 2011: 32).

Considering the above, it thus makes sense that the impressions of stakeholders about a corporate brand could be influenced on various platforms and by different users of social media. Organisations should then realise that conversations impact the corporate brand that require an awareness to monitor and track what is being said about the brand online. Similarly, the corporate brand should involve themselves in these discussions and participate in them (Swart 2018: 1). Content is used in an

interpretative manner, as it is reshaped and adapted to create meaning, experiences and relationships (Christensen *et al*. 2005:159)

Content creation

As stakeholders participate in and interact on social media, opportunities exist to create, share and adapt content, and in this sense become co-creators of content (Swart 2018: 112). These activities include posts, tweets, re-tweets, and shares on different social media platforms. Organisations must accept that stakeholders are empowered to originate and drive specific conversations through content creation on the platforms that could affect the impressions that are formed about the corporate brand (Swart 2018: 110) in both positive and negative ways. Social media content created by the organisation is popularly categorised as curated, co-created and created (Rakić & Rakić 2014; Leroux Miller 2013), which describes content that is repurposed, created in collaboration with the stakeholder, and solely created by the organisation, respectively. Apart from stakeholders creating and sharing content on social media, the organisation is able to source content in the aforementioned ways. Curated and co-created content allows the involvement of stakeholders in that their contributions can be solicited. This can also promote a connection with the organisation through participation (Swart 2018: 119). As the disposition of stakeholders changes in the social media landscape, Schroeder (2017) recognises a transformation from "corporate-generated" to "stakeholder-generated" content and messages.

Social media messages

Although this article does not explicitly aspire to explore the features of corporate brand messages or address their relevance in the adopted perspective, brief attention thereto is warranted. This is particularly relevant in instances where content is created purposely by the organisation as control over messages and discussions on social media are largely out of the organisation's control (Swart 2018: 111). As already mentioned, organisations have lost some of their authority pertaining to the brand message as it is now created and shared at will in a participatory stakeholder environment (Fisher 2014: 103).

Kang and Park (2018: 2-3) regard message content as vital to the formation of customers' attitudes towards the organisation as the originator of the brand message and underline the importance of considering the brand message *per se*. Text messages apparently comprise various structural features, such as abbreviations, font type, punctuation and size that likely affect the receivers and the way messages are processed on a cognitive and emotional level (Lang 2000).

Although the study by Kang and Park (2018) confirms that these structural features do in fact affect brand attitude and corporate trust, research that either confirms or refutes the impact of these features in brand communication is largely lacking. A noteworthy investigation related to social media messages is a study by Swani and Milne (2017) in which Facebook brand content is evaluated. Particular aspects were explored that could ultimately impact perceptions of the corporate brand, such as the brand strategy approach, message appeals and vividness (Swani & Milne 2017: 126-127). The fact

that organisations create content to advance perceptions about the corporate brand underlines the relevance of these aspects when brand messages are generated. The importance of adopting an appropriate brand strategy is highlighted with attention paid to the use of the corporate brand name, which can effectively motivate users to share brand messages in service social media messages, for example (Swani & Milne 2017). It is evident that appropriate message strategies could deliberately be utilised to increase message likes on social media, which could stimulate others to act similarly. In so doing, when the likes for a social media message increase, it supposedly raises interest in the brand message, which increases the engagement of users through commenting, liking, and other actions.

Swani and Milne (2017) assert that the message appeals in brand posts – functional and emotional – could motivate users to share and comment on the content created by organisations. Abratt and Kleyn (2012: 1054) write that stakeholder expectations in this context could be either functional or emotional. De Chernatony (2010) stresses the importance of thorough knowledge of the stakeholder and his/her needs, as well as an understanding of the functional and emotional expectations they might hold that should be aligned with the type of message appeal. Swani and Milne (2017: 131) write that there is a positive link between the type of message appeal and the type of offering when formulating brand messages. Considering the views that a corporate brand comprises of both functional and emotional values, or combinations thereof, both message appeals types need consideration when formulating corporate brand messages for social media, also depending on the expectations of the stakeholders.

The last aspect under scrutiny is the use of vividness, such as the use of images and videos in brand messages on social media. The results confirm the value of using images and videos, depending on whether the focus is on functional or emotional values, or both. Emotional values are considered intangible; thus, they cannot be portrayed with ease in this way, whereas words are more likely to be effective in these instances (Swani & Milne 2017: 127). Despite the dearth of research into these aspects for corporate brand communication, and based on the information above, it can be assumed that the use of images (such as photographs or videos) are invaluable in creating clear impressions of a brand or certain brand activities. Research by Swart (2018) pertinently explored the integration of content across different social media platforms that allows for the combination of voice, image and the likes. Although literature supports this notion, organisations seemingly overlook the potential it holds to portray a distinct impression of the corporate brand (Swart 2018; Jenkins 2006)

Media convergence and converged media

The rapid development of technology has brought about the convergence of different types of media and content that in context specifically refer to media convergence and converged media. The former denotes the creating and sharing of content on multiple social media platforms, whereas the latter refers to the use of different types of social media content (paid, earned and owned) on one or two channels, online or offline (Jenkins 2006). As already indicated, stakeholder focus is key when communicating in the social media landscape, which will greatly determine the types and combinations

of media and content an organisation will consider. The combinations of different types of media and content on a variety of social media platforms are considerations that could create opportunities for effective corporate brand communication, if used to good advantage.

Cross-departmental involvement (employees)

In line with the notion that all touch points are communication, consideration of employees' involvement in the communication of corporate brand messages is required. The role of employees could be two-fold in nature, functioning on a personal and emotional level, and on a corporate level (Russell n.d.). This could be achieved through the creation of social media content; for example, to create and share their own stories about their experiences with the brand, and to actively advocate for the corporate brand. The challenge organisations face to create social media content could partly be addressed by tasking employees to share their own brand stories online; that in turn could create credibility and emotional connections to the brand. Holmes (n.d.) declares that the concept of employee social media advocacy, highlighting the possibility of encouraging employees to share updates about the organisation on their personal accounts, is widely underused.

On a corporate level, the organisation should endeavour to provide employees with authentic and coherent brand messages that are embedded in the culture of the organisation and which enhance credibility and trust in social media and online environments (Agresta & Bough 2011: 100). In this way, employees can share approved brand messages and achieve a wider reach. Internalised brand messages should furthermore enhance meaningful engagement by employees, which reflect the identity and values embedded in the corporate brand that in turn could motivate them to become valuable social media influencers (Balmer 2013: 723-735; Balmer *et al.* 2013: 101). Corporate brand value and corporate brand promise are essential aspects when the corporate brand is centred at the heart of the organisation (Balmer 2013: 725). Brand messages could be shared, provided that employees are cognisant of "the single residence of vision" (Agresta & Bough 2011: 100). This supports an earlier point, namely that content shared by individuals and that offers real possibilities through involving employees is regarded to be more trustworthy than content shared by brand channels. Furthermore, it is important that employees' participation in sharing brand messages are voluntary and that they must be passionate advocates of the organisation (Holmes n.d.). Sharing news of the corporate brand should be part of a normal routine and be guided by a tailor-made social media policy and strategy that outlines best practices for sharing and commenting online (Russell n.d.). A benefit of such a policy could be to limit the implied disruptiveness of shared corporate brand messages (Agresta & Bough 2011: 100). In this sense, disruptiveness could refer to the repetitive sharing of inaccurate corporate brand messages in an incorrect format, which do not contribute to a positive brand image and could cause the message to lose its intended meaning. Therefore, messages that are created and shared by employees might disrupt the original intent of the corporate brand message and might further elicit negative discussions about the organisation's corporate brand. The use

of online tools that enable organisations to create content should be pre-approved, accurate, and on-brand.

Brand culture in the organisation

It is argued that brand culture might encourage employees' sharing of approved brand messages as it refers to the manner in which employees illustrate the organisation's brand identity and brings into line its brand values. This underlying manifestation of brand identity and values in terms of cross-departmental involvement and employees' participation in sharing brand messages differentiates one organisation from the next and therefore creates a competitive advantage (Hulberg 2006). Roper and Fill (2012) emphasise that corporate values are of critical importance to the corporate brand and the strongest indication of brand culture.

Brand communities

An early definition of a brand community regards it as "a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structural set of social relationships among admirers of a brand" (Muniz & O'Quinn 2001). Moreover, it can be regarded as a collective of people with specific interests in the corporate brand that provide stakeholders with possibilities to engage with one another, and the organisation to engage their stakeholders (cf. Cova & Pace 2006). As stakeholders share their experiences, and keeping track of others' comments, the opportunity exists to ensure that the corporate brand is portrayed in a favourable manner. Organisations could stimulate positive conversations about the corporate brand in these communities by means of identifying and mobilising prominent influencers and capitalising on their shared interests in the brand (Swart 2018: 376).

Brand communities usually develop spontaneously (Johansson & Carlson 2015) among like-minded people with shared interests (Agresta & Bough 2011: 4) as a result of stakeholders' interactions of sharing and recommending brand information. This stimulates active dialogues and conversations about the brand in which it is suggested that organisations can partake with the aim to create brand value and acquire followers (Rajagopal 2013). Agresta and Bough (2011: 4) oppose this view by arguing that the organisation is not at the centre of the conversation and can therefore not influence the brand community from an external position. Nonetheless, participation in brand community conversations provides the organisation with the opportunity to provide brand information in a format preferred by the stakeholder. However, organisations will possibly only be able to provide information in preferred formats once a listening approach is adopted and the organisation is informed of stakeholder's preferences pertaining to the type of content and platforms.

A CORPORATE BRAND COMMUNICATION ORIENTATION

The resultant distinctive communication environment that social media creates, as detailed in the sections above, prompts the expansion of Balmer's (2013)

conceptualisation of total communication to achieve an evidently favourable corporate brand for the organisation.
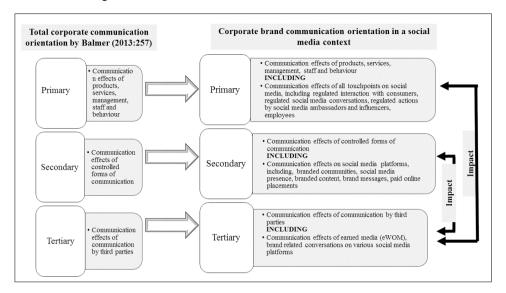

FIGURE 1: CORPORATE BRAND COMMUNICATION ORIENTATION IN A SOCIAL MEDIA CONTEXT

The proposed corporate brand communication orientation as illustrated above specifically emphasises the creation of distinctive connections with stakeholders and differentiation of the organisation that are afforded by using social media in order to communicate (Abratt & Klein 2012: 1050; Arvidsson 2011; cf. Mulder 2015: 60). Organisations should therefore make the most of the opportunities these connections offer by precisely attending thereto. Fundamental to the beyond-modern view is the notion to recognise the multiple realities of individuals connected to the organisation, which really compel organisations to communicate extensively to ensure all stakeholders are addressed.

The changed ways available to communicate as proposed in this article are significant and, as highlighted by Fourie (2017a: 16), offer a considerable variety and choice that enable organisations to extend the reach of their brand messages. Besides, within this new orientation, the focus should fall on the involvement of employees and the chances to increase meaningful engagement. As communication is decentralised, individuals are allowed to participate as communicators and receivers, and to provide feedback. In this way, organisations allow conversations (or two-way communication) to take place and eventually create awareness of a corporate brand. Linked to this idea are the opinions raised by fellow stakeholders on social media that directly affect others' perceptions about the brand. The distinct connections put forward in the corporate brand communication orientation (Figure 1) will, among other aspects, permit organisations to meet the stakeholders' expectations of being engaged in and actively

being listened to on social media (Capozzi & Zipfel 2012: 201). In the same way, the organisation will be able to listen to conversations about the brand and to react when needed. Listening provide opportunities to evaluate brand guidelines, and consider the topics raised on social media for integration into existing communication activities. Organisations should mobilise ambassadors, influencers and brand communities to advance the corporate brand, and to optimise corporate brand communication. Content drives conversations on social media, and allowing stakeholders to be co-creators could inspire them to share content on a broad front about the brand. Within the new communication orientation, different forms exist to access and share content that should be used to benefit the organisation (cf. Fourie 2017a: 16).

An extensive overview of literature discloses ways in which social media could positively shape the corporate brand and how corporate brand communication is being affected. Despite wide acknowledgement of the importance of communication in terms of the building of a corporate brand, indications are that it does not receive the necessary attention. A study by Balmer and Wang (2016) among senior managers of leading British business schools confirms communication as a key dimension in corporate brand building, proving that they do not yet adequately act as exemplars of 'best practice' with regard to the management of their corporate brands.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As this article delineates key theoretical realities for a corporate brand communication orientation, possibilities exist for empirical research to advance and refine these insights in real-life settings.

CONCLUSION

The main impetus for this article was to explicate the beyond-modern corporate brand communication realities in a social media landscape. It has shown the expanded and transformed realities in which corporate brand communication is practiced, and in doing so, argued for a beyond-modern perspective. This perspective broadens the assumptions associated with brand communication beyond the historical period, commonly referred to as modernism, and denotes the onset, prominence and continuance of technology, specifically referring and drawing attention to the social media landscape. A key argument is that, in the context of the proposed beyond-modern perspective, the organisation itself becomes the central brand message, not only its products and services. This view corroborates the notion that corporate brand communication should be approached from a strategic standpoint as everything an organisation does, communicates. The article has further confirmed the prominent role of social media in creating the altered realities within which corporate brand communication is practiced that warranted an investigation of the expanded touch points through which organisations and stakeholders connect. By doing so, an increased understanding of the changed disposition of the stakeholder is acquired, especially within the social media landscape, through emphasis on the adoption of a listening approach by the organisation, the monitoring and tracking of social media

ambassadors and influencers, and content creation by stakeholders. The article further enhances an understanding of the social media landscape as extant in a beyond-modern perspective. Balmer's (2013) corporate brand and total corporate communication orientations are combined and expanded by proposing a corporate brand communication orientation in a social media context. Withal, a comparison is drawn between Balmer's (2013) total corporate communication orientation and the proposed corporate brand communication orientation to exemplify the varied touch points at the organisation's disposal.

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