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## BUDWEISER IN THE 2017 SUPER BOWL: DIALECTIC VALUES ADVOCACY AND THE RHETORICAL STAKEHOLDER

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BUDWEISER IN THE 2017 SUPER BOWL: DIALECTIC VALUES ADVOCACY  
AND THE RHETORICAL STAKEHOLDER

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the  
College of Communication and Information  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Benjamin P. Windholz

Lexington, Kentucky

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2018

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### BUDWEISER IN THE 2017 SUPER BOWL: DIALECTIC VALUES ADVOCACY AND THE RHETORICAL STAKEHOLDER

Organizational-public relations discourse is changing given the advent of social media, and corporate statements are evaluated under different criteria in the digital age. Grounding Budweiser's response to controversy over their 2017 Super Bowl advertisement in terms of consumer expectations for corporate social responsibility provides a new perspective for approaching Bostdorff and Vibbert's (1994) conceptualization of values advocacy. This study recognizes the power of the rhetorical stakeholder, a discursively created public, and demands re-evaluation of the values common to society from a co-creational OPR perspective. Conceptualizing dialectic values advocacy outlines the changing values among contemporary, common stakeholders as well as the means for communicating these values superficially to promote unanimity among publics and organizations. Previously successful universal values like unity and patriotism have since been replaced with sensationalism and discord; formally engendering these values through ambiguous controversy allows an organization to strategically construct audience perceptions of reputation.

KEYWORDS: Public Relations, Values Advocacy, Rhetoric, Communication, Dialectics

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### Case Overview

On January 27, 2017, newly elected United States President Donald Trump signed an executive order barring people from seven largely Muslim countries from entering the country for 90 days (“Full Executive Order Text,” 2017). This executive order was only the most recent development after an election filled with talks of building a wall between the US and Mexico and other legislation slowing immigration. On January 31 Anheuser-Busch released its 2017 Super Bowl advertisement, a commercial advocating traditional American values through the narrative of Budweiser’s immigrant-founder, drawing the ire of conservative pundits amid the Presidential travel ban. Organizational messages extolling the feel-good aesthetic of universal values, such as the Budweiser commercial, are known as values advocacy. Values advocacy, as described by Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994), is the use of inoffensive, uncontroversial, and universal values to elicit organizational support and goodwill among stakeholders. Typically values advocacy campaigns have employed such core values as “patriotism,” “hard work,” and “unity” to establish an altruistic reputation for a brand. As an otherwise exemplary instance of values advocacy, the function of Budweiser’s advertisement is apparently controversial when understood against the politically-charged climate created by the recent Presidential travel ban (Singhvi & Parlapiano, 2017). *Advertising Age* aptly suggests the spot “comes off as very relevant today amid the nation’s heated political debate on immigration refugee rights” despite noting “that was not the intent” (Schultz, 2017, para. 2). Although immigration narratives are not foreign to traditional American values, the contemporary cultural context radically reframed the otherwise uncontroversial rhetoric.

Values advocacy is nothing new for Anheuser-Busch, which frequently taps into inoffensive values with advertisements celebrating traditional narratives essential to America. In 2012 the beer company announced a “Red, White and Blue Summer,” re-designing their bottles and cans in a patriotic flourish of stars and stripes. Budweiser’s Vice President at the time, Rob McCarthy, reminded consumers that the company’s patriotism was evidenced “more importantly in our philanthropic support for the families of America’s fallen heroes through the Folds of Honor Foundation,” by donating a portion of profits to provide scholarships to families of U.S. soldiers killed in action (Anheuser-Busch, 2012, para. 4). In the summer of 2016 Anheuser-Busch even went so far as to temporarily rename its flagship Budweiser beer “America” in honor of the Olympics and the upcoming election (Monllos, 2016).

Premiering the week before Super Bowl LI, Budweiser’s commercial featured the (somewhat fictionalized) rags-to-riches story of German immigrant founder Adolphus Busch, promoting the ambiguous and inoffensive values of American endurance and success. Gritty with realistically-high production values, Anheuser-Busch (2017) described the minute-long commercial as “a cinematic piece of film” titled “Born the Hard Way” (para. 1). Developed by Anomaly Global, an advertising agency based out of New York, Toronto, London, Amsterdam, and Shanghai, the TV spot dramatizes the discrimination and hardship Busch experienced on his journey west through the United States, before ultimately finding entrepreneurial success in St. Louis (Wootson, 2017).

In a press release, Anheuser-Busch (2017) insisted the advertisement was nothing more than “the official kick-off of its year-long ambition-inspired platform” which they believed would “resonate with today’s entrepreneurial generation” (para. 1). Emphasized

in the spot were the conventional American dream and its universally accessible values; Steven Busch articulated the commercial's depiction of pursuing the American dream through "perseverance, hard work and unwavering commitment to quality" (Anheuser-Busch, 2017, para. 9). In an e-mail to the *Washington Post*, the vice-president of marketing further espoused Anheuser-Busch's attempt to simply celebrate an "unrelenting pursuit of the American dream," insisting that the idea had been developed a year before the ban (Boren, 2017, para. 3).

However, the advertisement received a polarizing response in light of the political climate at the time of its debut. Championed by opponents of the Presidential ban and demonized by some politically conservative pundits, Anheuser-Busch, apparently, inadvertently failed to avoid "the overt controversy of public policy disputes," and instead commented at the critical moment of policy activation (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994, p. 151). Among the milieu of seemingly anti-immigrant government sentiment, *SB Nation* interprets Anheuser-Busch's message bluntly: "Give immigrants a chance to live a better life and chase their dreams, and they might go on to do great things" (Hinog, 2017). Several notable conservative pundits in the aftermath demanded a "#BoycottBudweiser" campaign, seemingly the opposite effect of a successful values advocacy message (Thorne, 2017). The circumstances surrounding this crisis demand greater attention, not only to the means by which the discussion was grounded, but the context in which the message was interpreted. More important, the medium by which Budweiser's commercial was interpreted distinguishes the response from Bostdorff and Vibbert's original conceptualization of values advocacy and past examples of successful campaigns. Social media demand a re-examination of values advocacy and the

paradigmatic groundings of research on crises and public relations in general. The present thesis proposes introducing a new, rhetorically-informed construct to replace traditional values advocacy.

As will be shown through the following section, organizational-public relations (OPR) are constituted by discourse, context, and significance; no longer just the content of the discourse, but the discourse as a formal act shapes a brand identity. The sum of an organizational message can be understood not in the individual messages in isolation, but the greater act of discourse as it exists in a unique context. Budweiser's Super Bowl controversy illustrates the need for more OPR theorization accommodating the new media context, demanding a transformative element that considers both stakeholders and organizations and provides direction for future research and strategic application.

Through the rhetorical idea of a dialectic, which reconciles two unlike meanings to create an interpretation transcending both opposites, this thesis will introduce a new construct in dialectic values advocacy to explain Budweiser's commercial and the ensuing response.

### **Social Media & Public Relations: A Problem**

Budweiser's values advocacy campaign uncharacteristically launched a high-publicity social media campaign, and so cannot be theorized as values advocacy by the standards of old media. While media have changed quickly, the theories of OPR have changed only incrementally in the last decades. Contemporary theories of OPR cannot escape a discussion of social media; Kent (2015) notes how social media are "one of the biggest success stories on the Internet, as sites like Facebook and Twitter have gone from zero users to more than 1 billion users in less than a decade" (p. 1). However, Kent also observes that social media still lack a "coherent body of theory" and are an "essentially

nascent communication media” (p. 1). Social media, as an “assemblage of discursive spaces, poses significant challenges for an industry that has traditionally pushed its messages into the ether” (Motion, Heath, & Leitch, 2016, p. 12). The emergence of social media has shifted stakeholder expectations for organizational reputation, or the sum of interactions and communication between stakeholders and organizations (Coombs & Holladay, 2006), and in so doing changed the demands of OPR practitioners and researchers. Budweiser’s Super Bowl spot and subsequent response can be explained only through an understanding of the nuances of social media as a communication form.

Social media also have the added element of greater permanence: Before the rise of user-generated content, the discord associated with the dissenting voices of stakeholder cacophony was never traced and could exist without visibility or influence to brand identity. Now, however, every negative opinion is attached to a corporation, and the new media context requires more accountability from both the opinions and actions of a corporation (Hall, Frink, & Buckley, 2017). OPR research understands discourse to mean stakeholder “participat[ion] in the public conversation regarding the course of policies that may affect them” (Elwood, 1995, p. 7), but the rise of *concretized discourse*, or traces of individual-organizational discussion, means that an organization is unable to respond covertly to conflict among stakeholders and must leave a permanent record of communication. Indeed, the need for positive communication between stakeholders and organizations has never been greater: The Twitter handle #BoycottBudweiser is not just a splash on the front page of a newspaper that will be gone within the day, but a lasting impression digitally associated with the brand, informing the reputation, or “an

evaluation stakeholders make about an organization” regarding the favorableness or unfavorableness of its character (Coombs & Holladay, 2006).

The unexpected mediated response to Budweiser’s otherwise innocuous commercial illustrates the need for more attention in OPR research to the exact dimensions between stakeholders and organizations. Although much theoretical attention in OPR has been devoted to the “symmetrical model” characterized by two-way communication in the public conversation between organizations and stakeholders (Grunig, 2006, p. 156), and formative empirical studies have demonstrated the emergent power of posting on social media in shaping brand and reputation (de Vries, Gensler, Leeflang, 2012) and maintaining customers (Kim & Ko, 2012), little research has been shown to cohesively explain the discursive loop in social media. Heath (2001) notes how selecting “relationship, community, symmetry, shared meaning, growth in pedagogy, refinements in best practices, ethics, daunting efforts to meet the challenges of technology that changes daily and of globalization that resists full understanding” (p. xii) as the single focus of research “misjudges their interdependence” (Heath, 2013, p. 426). Perhaps more important, no empirical research has yet recognized, or proven methodologically capable of recognizing, the power of stakeholders in determining reputation through social media at the intersection of such research focuses. In effect, the greater scope of the Internet as an active and reactive medium is left unclassified and unconsidered by OPR research despite numerous examples such as Budweiser that emphasize this nominal need.

There is a growing demand for new theoretical constructs to integrate developing ideas of the communicative consumer environment and reflect new technology (Motion,

Davenport, Leitch, & Merlot, 2013) to explain stakeholder response to mediated messages and rationalize organizations like Budweiser's choice to run controversial advertisements. While OPR research has utilized empirical methods to realize the importance of newer constructs like engagement (Men & Tsai, 2014; Kang, 2014), scholars have not yet explicated definitions theoretically. Some researchers have begun identifying the ideographs (McGee, 1980) of OPR, or concepts with shared meanings that are designed to "close off discussion rather than encourage it, by introducing concepts that on their face seem uncontested and generally understood" but on closer examination "often reveal more subtle characteristics" (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 385). Ideographs such as "relationship" (Coombs & Holladay, 2015) and "engagement" (Taylor & Kent, 2014) are understood to stand for an agreed-upon construct, but in recent years have been shown as more complex and unexamined. Other "taken for granted" concepts, like two-way communication, have never been fully operationalized or integrated into a coherent theory of OPR (Taylor & Kent, 2014, p. 384). Indeed, while Budweiser's controversial commercial would most likely be considered a crisis, or "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes," this definition fails to describe the unique audience and fully articulate the complex reaction the advertisement received through social media (Coombs, 2007b, 2-3).

The inadequacy of OPR theory to properly address key constructs is likely the result of an inability to express the complex texture of the contemporary consumer landscape; an application of traditional values advocacy theory to Budweiser's Super Bowl spot presupposes the general values of stakeholders as consistent and monolithic.

Articulating the powers of the new stakeholder to define reputation requires theory predicated on fluid meaning; Botan and Taylor (2004) observed, “The co-creational perspective sees publics as co-creators of meaning and communication as what makes it possible to agree to shared meanings, interpretations and goals” (p. 652). As Coombs and Holladay (2015) advocated, research must study “the process through which this co-creation of meaning within organization-person relationship occurs” in order to develop accurate theories and appropriate strategies for maintaining reputation (p. 691). Co-creation of meaning among stakeholders with increasingly disparate ideas of reputation, as evidenced by Budweiser’s Super Bowl spot, has prevented cohesive theorization of the new commercial environment and the necessary direction for organizational action. In effect, Budweiser’s advertisement requires new theoretical underpinnings to explain the increasingly common phenomenon of controversy in social media, and the field of OPR research at large must innovate constructs to stay reflective and relevant in a changing media landscape.

### **An Argument for the Dialectic—Reconciling Meanings**

The co-creational clash between Budweiser’s objective organizational message and the diverse, competing stakeholder interpretations it received through social media requires a means of reconciling both as reputation. Addressing the shortcomings for OPR to rationalize competing meanings among stakeholders and organizations will allow campaigns, like Budweiser’s, greater strategic application. The only way to study a process that is characterized by being *in process* must be equally reflexive and provide an understanding of discourse and the co-creational process beyond the vague definition of an ideograph.



Utilized by such philosophers and rhetorical theorists as Hegel, Kant, and Fichte, the dialectic is used to describe two things in contradicting relationship which, as a result of this conflict, give rise to a third outcome reconciling the two (Schnitker & Emmons, 2013). The duality between two competing conceptualizations of meaning (i.e., Budweiser's values advocacy and stakeholder perceptions of controversial political maneuvering) means that reputation is co-created and emerges from two unlike, even at-odds ideas. As Burke (1950) observes, the "dialectician sends up one thing, something is abstracted from it, and it returns as another thing" but "the change that comes back is not merely something subtracted, or abstracted from the original sum: a notable element has been added as well" which in itself is a "rebirth, a transformation" (p. 244). Dialectics inform the co-creation paradigm of OPR and provide greater depth to a field and theories troubled by ideographs.

For the purpose of this paper, the dialectic as a theoretical frame will serve a two-fold purpose. First by guiding an understanding of the competing perspectives of meaning through the dualisms present in Budweiser's Super Bowl spot and providing a theoretical underpinning that rationalizes the context and discourse in social media. Second, as a formal description of the active role the public conversation plays, the dialectic informs the means by which OPR managers can engage stakeholders and provides a strategic outline, in process, for future practitioners.

As Heath (2006) advocates, "other forms of discourse can account for how people in society cocreate meaning that guides their activities" (p. 109). The rhetorical approach suitably reconciles the dualisms present in the co-creational perspective of OPR literature; identifying the processes present in organizational-individual discourse lends

insight to reputation formation. A dialectic-rhetorical understanding of OPR theoretically reflects the form of a changing communication environment by considering media and cultural contexts when interpreting a message and is necessary to develop appropriate response strategies for organizations. Budweiser's message when analyzed through the dialectic is more than mere crisis or values advocacy, it also introduces a more complex construct that, in Burke's (1950) words, transforms both phenomena.

Heath (2009) elaborates how "difference needs to be reconciled" and rhetoric is "the rationale for effective discourse," such that rhetoric is an appropriate resource not only for analyzing a public relations act, but for developing greater concord among increasingly discordant parties within the act itself (p. 23). Discourse is capable of making the discord meaningful, not always mutually beneficial, but significant; in a mediated world, beneficence is not always the goal from either individuals or organizations. As Budweiser's case will illustrate, remaining within the conversational threshold on strategic terms is the new ideal for organizational reputation.

### **Outline of Study**

While Budweiser's "Born the Hard Way" campaign somewhat dramatized the origin story of the brewing company, the beer company did have roots in a German immigrant. Anheuser-Busch officially started as an organization in 1861 in St. Louis, MO after Adolphus Busch married into Eberhard Anheuser's family and began working his way up to partner of the company (Anheuser-Busch, 2018). The beer mogul grew over the next century, with Budweiser becoming the top-selling beer in the US from 1977 until 2001, when Bud Lite pushed the original brew to the number two slot (Hahn, 2018). In 2008 Anheuser-Busch joined InBev, a partnership between Interbrew and Ambev,

international beer companies located out of Belgium and Brazil respectively, to form AB InBev. In 2016 the company also expanded to include SABMiller from South Africa. Since being bought by AB InBev, Anheuser-Busch has routinely changed lead advertising agencies to promote the Budweiser brand, maintaining the most stability between VaynerMedia and Anomaly (Schultz, 2017a). In a competitive market rife with craft beers and microbreweries, Budweiser has strived to keep abreast of the culture and move beyond the talking frog aesthetic that once defined the brand. VaynerMedia won the “YouTube Ad of the Year 2016: Ad That Goes Straight to the Heart” for Budweiser’s Harry Caray spot the morning after the Cubs won the World Series (VaynerMedia), and *AdAge* applauded the commercials simultaneous engagement on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube (Hia, 2016). Indeed, Budweiser recognized the need for engagement to overcome the mounting odds against big-business beer, but, more important, illustrates the overwhelming necessity of social media in promoting both products and organizational reputation. Budweiser’s identity as an American beer has come under fire with the AB InBev merger, and so the organization has found itself forced to redefine and reconstruct who it is through social media.

Analyzing the Budweiser advertisement yields compelling insight into the changing consumer environment in which values advocacy is practiced, and contributes to the body of OPR literature by developing contemporary strategies for reputation management through the dialectic. This thesis will discuss the co-creational distortion of values advocacy through context, outlining both the sociopolitical and the media contexts that distorted the traditional values advocacy message; by analyzing Budweiser’s case through a dialectic lens, stakeholder perceptions will articulate a new media context and

the cultural demands will shape a new form of values advocacy. First, a review of relevant OPR and values advocacy literature is provided, followed by a theorization of the contemporary cultural and media contexts. Next, an overview of Budweiser's values advocacy campaign and response to the controversy will lend background to the case study. Budweiser's Super Bowl spot will be analyzed through the lens of values advocacy to provide lessons learned and increase understanding of the dialectic relationship among a corporation and the consumer environment during contemporary values advocacy campaigns. Finally, grounded in an analysis of Budweiser's campaign, a new values advocacy campaign technique will be developed, expanding the construct of values advocacy to include the new dialectic construct of ambiguous controversy. In a discursively mediated society, identifying and exploiting contemporary values of form instead of content will be shown to succeed Bostdorff and Vibbert's (1994) traditional organizational epideictic and contribute more effectively to promoting reputation through social media.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

In order to understand Budweiser's Super Bowl commercial as values advocacy, the media and cultural contexts in OPR must first be understood as technically informed by the form of social media. The following section will outline the existing literature on discourse between an organization and its stakeholders, focusing on identification of values and illustrating the need for further work in this area. Furthermore, interdisciplinary works will be drawn from in order to develop a substantive foundation to base a new theorization of values advocacy. Through an exploration of issues management and corporate social responsibility, values advocacy can be contextualized as a unique organizational marketing tactic designed to gain universal support and

goodwill for an organization. The context of stakeholders will also be examined to develop new universal values distinct to a social medium and identify key formal attributes that can inform an analysis of Budweiser's 2017 Super Bowl commercial.

## **The Organization**

**Issues management.** The present media environment is what Kent and Taylor (1998) described as dialogic, which is characterized by “intersubjectivity” such that “individuals who engage in dialogue do not necessarily have to agree” (p. 325). Etter, Ravasi, and Colleoni (in press) recognized the discursive capacity of mediating technologies and the effects for reputational strategies; the authors note how “we can no longer take the relative alignment between the content of news media and collective judgments for granted” since the individual-organizational relationship can be described as “fragmented, recursive and dynamic” (p. 2). The “information explosion makes it increasingly important and difficult to offer a perspective on a subject that members of a target audience will accept as their own” (Elwood, 1995, p. 7). Despite the fluid interpretations of dialogue, Kent and Taylor suggest that organizations must be present to engage stakeholders; maintaining relationships with stakeholders shapes the dialogue around an organizational message.

Developing and maintaining a positive relationship with publics through issues activity is widely recognized as necessary for maintaining positive relations among organizations and stakeholders. Issues management is recognized as integral to developing individual-organizational relationships and dealing with crises when necessary (Botan & Taylor, 2004). The fluid adaptation of issues management reflects the changing technological landscape facing OPR practitioners today. Issues management

“underpins [public relations] and emphasizes a proactive philosophy that aligns multidimensional, layered and textual interests to develop mutually beneficial relationships through managerial processes and societal engagements” (Motion, Heath, & Leitch, 2016, p. 2).

Issues management has come to be accepted as a strategic form of OPR focused on developing organizational control over social narratives (Jaques, 2012). Issues are created when stakeholders attach significance to an exigence, such that “agents create or recreate arguments which they feel will be acceptable resolutions to questions about the status quo” in which they have an interest (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985, p. 5). The original purpose of issues management to negotiate the “interrelated and independent” decision-making groups of government, publics, and business relationships in terms of policy (Jones & Chase, 1979, p. 10) has since developed into a continuous grooming intended to “influence ‘policies’ long before policy options are created by others” (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1985, p. 9). In a mediated society, then, the organization cannot remain ignorant of public discourse.

Botan and Taylor (2004) identified issues management as well-suited towards meeting the needs of applied OPR communication research because of both the specific nature and value of the field, while Elwood (1995) called the context “particularly rhetorical in nature” (p. 8). Dialogue among publics and organizations, centered around salient social and political issues, is necessary to “agree to shared meanings, interpretations, and goals” between publics (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 652). Issues management is thus recognized as a means of engaging publics and discursively developing reputation through the co-creational paradigm (Johnston, 2014).

Issues management is predicated on “shaping policy on issues in which the public has a stake” (Kuhn, 1997, p. 189) and identifying issues before they become issues by negotiating the context to avoid crisis (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995). This can be done in a variety of ways, through inoculation (Burgoon, Pfau, & Birk, 1995), anticipation (Olaniran & Williams, 1998; Olaniran & Williams, 2004), or strategic image initiatives designed to “build and nurture positive relationships with all publics” (Gonzalez-Herrero, 1996, p. 85). While values advocacy falls into the latter category, multiple issues across multiple channels change the perception of issues. An important element of issues management is identifying the relevance profile of concerned publics. Hallahan’s (2001) model of issues actualization identified four types of publics distinguished by their involvement and knowledge: active (high knowledge, high involvement), aroused (high involvement, high knowledge), aware (high knowledge, low involvement), and inactive (low knowledge, low involvement). Issues become salient when exposed to publics with appropriate characteristics. In Budweiser’s case, however, active publics found diverse levels of knowing and involvement with the advertisement through technology, and therefore the Super Bowl spot was re-contextualized through the mediated collective. While Hallahan’s model is important, the social media consumer considers more than just knowledge and involvement given the co-creational paradigm.

Alternately, rhetoric that advocates the reputation of an organization through a single issue can establish the character of an organizational reputation (Cowden & Sellnow, 2002). In a consumer environment mediated by social media, the political is inextricable from the organizational. While organizations have always had to contend with political and cultural issues and their conflict with corporate interests (Marra, 1998),

the present media context demands greater attention from OPR managers and greater involvement for reconciling this conflict. The reason why expectations for issues management have changed is because the stakeholder has changed; the individual-organizational relationship is shifting towards a more interactive approach that places the corporation at the center of discourse (Heath & Millar, 2004).

**Values advocacy.** Brown, Dacin, Pratt, and Whetten (2006) concluded that image, reputation, and identity are the discursive product of perceptual interchange between stakeholder perception and corporate intent. Research has demonstrated the importance of values in establishing consistent reputation (Aust, 2004) to facilitate identification among stakeholders (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000). Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) charted values advocacy's rise in American culture since the 1970's, emphasizing the fact that messages around "positive areas of agreement with the public" that refrain from necessarily tying these values to specific products improves stakeholder perceptions of an organization (p. 144). Regulating public perception of an organization by rhetorically framing issues is widely recognized as an investment in the long-term reputation of an organization (Coombs, 2010). Grounded in the ancient concept of epideictic, or praise or blame rhetoric (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1971), values advocacy seeks to celebrate the values of a corporation and in the process develop a benevolent and ethical reputation. Institutional rhetorical praise functions in three ways: Serving to enhance the image of a corporation, deflect criticism, and prepare for policy discourse (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994).

Through the use of universal and beneficent abstract principles, values advocacy can enhance organizational reputation and develop what Coombs (2007a) termed



“reputational capital,” describing the accumulation of stakeholder goodwill towards an organization (p. 165). Organizations can praise or condemn both values themselves or the individuals who personify these values, associate products with virtues, and discuss involvement in philanthropy (Bostdorff & Vibbert, (1994). Crable and Vibbert (1983) analyzed Mobil’s half-length ads in the Sunday paper in the late 1970s, keeping in mind the effectiveness, ethics, and rhetorical artfulness of the campaign and observing how the oil company used an appeal to universal values through interesting news items and cartoons to identify with their audience. Crable and Vibbert also determine that values advocacy has the power to fabricate a narrative, or modern mythology, for an organization through rhetorical appeal to the common values of the common person. Thus, identifying the common stakeholder and associated values is essential to maintaining the uncontroversial strength of values advocacy. Values advocacy requires identification with the nonthreatening universal to be effective in improving the reputation of an organization and emphasize how the organizational-individual relationship fits into the greater narrative of society.

In a crisis situation, values advocacy is capable of deflecting criticism and serving as a response strategy to restore lost reputational capital. In their analysis of Planned Parenthood’s rhetorical response to a 2015 crisis involving misinformation, Brandhorst and Jennings (2016) focused on how both fact and value are necessary components to developing organizational reputation. From a stakeholder perspective, values are difficult to extricate from facts and can be used to develop credibility despite the presence of condemning details. As Brandhorst and Jennings noted, “values advocacy offers a way for the organization to perform crisis communication in a manner that does not involve

denial, scapegoating, justification, or apology, but rather involves emphasizing shared values and assuring the audience of the organization's worth to society" (p. 731).

In effect, values advocacy is a peripheral means of demonstrating legitimacy that removes the organization from the focus and pacifies the public with ambiguous, unifying values; as Bostdorff and Vibbert noted, "because values advocacy focuses on values with which there is widespread agreement, it detracts attention from how the organization enacts or would like to enact those values" (p. 149). Values advocacy in crisis situations has been shown to divert media coverage and dilute the dominant voices from focusing on the organization-in-crisis (Yang & Veil, 2017). The covert nature of values advocacy is beneficial both in-crisis and out, allowing an organization to seem less profit-driven in its initiatives and become commonplace among stakeholders.

Implicit in a discussion of values advocacy is the concept of corporate reputation, which Coombs (2007a) insists finds roots in responsibility. The case of Tylenol shows how a "responsible" company can use values advocacy strategically to pre-emptively mitigate corporate guilt in a crisis through re-contextualization (Veil & Kent, 2008). Johnson & Johnson's Tylenol campaign to educate consumers about dosing drugs came on the heels of a massive lawsuit in which Johnson & Johnson stood as defendant in an overdosing trial, leaving consumers with the impression that Tylenol was a responsible and caring company in the wake of negligence.

Organizational epideictic, or rhetoric designed to praise, as a form of issues management improves the reputation and identity of a corporation by creating a "relationship between the target public and the corporation" that is based on "mutual support of a specific social value" (O'Connor, 2006, p. 277). Bostdorff and Vibbert

(1994) articulate the axiological nature of this relationship, publicly celebrating “inoffensive” and “widely-held, but ambiguous values” (p. 145). The peripheral and ambiguous approach of values advocacy has the potential to humanize corporations to stakeholders; more importantly, consumer purchase intentions have been shown to be directly affected by public-serving motives on the part of the organization (Lee, Haley, & Yang, 2013).

Finally, values advocacy has the potential to prepare stakeholder perceptions for policy discourse involving salient issues to the organization. Developing a context of consistency provides logical strength to actions otherwise unexpected from an organization, also increasing “audience adherence to certain values so that the audience will prefer them over other value warrants with which they might conflict in the context of public policy or judicial debate” (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994, p. 150). In addition to reminding consumers of strategic principles, values advocacy can also set up an ethical situation wherein stakeholders must maintain their own moral consistency. Brandhorst and Jennings (2016) described the double bind of values advocacy: Values advocacy forces audience members “to either accept the organization (perhaps even despite problematic practices), or be framed as ‘against’ the values which the organization stands for (many of which are held highly in American society)” (p. 731).

Through a critique of Reagan’s appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr’s uncontroversial rhetoric to enforce policies otherwise inconsistent with the ideas of King, Bostdorff and Goldzwig (2005) identify the risks associated with displacing cultural contexts. Bostdorff and Goldzwig’s analysis demonstrates the relevance of contextualizing issues to determine meaning. The context is thus inextricable from the

content of a values advocacy campaign, and the relevance of the rhetorical milieu informs the meaning of organizational epideictic. Audience expectations must be conceptualized to determine appropriate values and develop methods for exploiting these values to create goodwill towards an organization.

**Consumer expectations for organizational values.** There is an increasing expectation among stakeholders for corporate social responsibility (CSR) from organizations (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). Closely related to Bostdorff and Vibbert's (1994) conceptualization of values advocacy as promoting uncontroversial values, CSR narrows the focus and commitment of audience identification among specific corporate values. While values advocacy promotes ambiguous values, a CSR campaign focuses on a concrete cause and the actual philanthropy rather than the principles associated with the act. While CSR demands companies address real social problems like disease and poverty (Lichtenstein, Drumwright, & Braig, 2004), values advocacy campaigns are limited to the abstract and detached invocation of virtue, not necessarily the virtuous act itself.

Although an ethical element informs CSR, researchers have questioned the authenticity of CSR for actual intended change by an organization (Laufer, 2003; Graafland, Eijffinger, & Smid, 2004) while demonstrating the multitude of factors influencing corporate ethics (Basu & Palazzo, 2008). In effect, the presence of ethical behavior is not necessary for the perception of corporate social responsibility. Many organizations claim the reputational benefits as justification for trafficking in CSR, preferring pragmatic motivation in contrast to ethical benefits for rationalizing social responsibility (Smith, 2003). CSR constructs organizational reputation under the

consumer perception of responsibility regardless of the motivation in undertaking the responsible actions. Given the absence of actual ethical motivation, the distinction between CSR and values advocacy becomes one of virtuous specificity: CSR requires the explicit statement of organizational intent tied to a certain issue while values advocacy shrinks from expression and commitment.

The prevalence of CSR research and campaigns evidences a growing demand for more ethical and responsible actions on the part of organizations. The world of commerce no longer exists in the vacuum of function, but must be receptive to the larger impact of industry practices and communication implications. Consumers respond to organizations that demonstrate a societal obligation considering the “economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary categories of business performance” (Carroll, 1979, p. 499). Despite short-term costs (Davis, 1973), CSR nuances organizational reputation such that identifiable values yield measurable economic benefits long-term (Murray, 1997; Burke & Logsdon, 1996; Sprinkle & Maines, 2010). More importantly, Mohr, Webb, and Harris (2001) identify a wide range of stakeholder interests and responses in CSR for organizations, much like Hallahan’s (2001) model, where stakeholders are tempered by information and involvement.

Campbell (2007) makes an important query asking why corporations would act in a socially responsible way, spending energy and time to give the appearance of social responsibility, an assumption often taken for granted in contemporary analyses of CSR rationalized by profit margins; research and practice of CSR shows the cultural demand of ethically rationalized commercialism. Campbell conjectures two reasons why CSR is practiced, finding organizational impetus both in multiple contextual dimensions of the

socioeconomic environment and in what he calls “dialogue-based regulation” (p. 961). Put in relevant terms, these translate to the respective context and discourse actualized through social media visibility; discourse can be concretized as reputational capital through social media because stakeholder responses leave lasting records in concretized discourse. Burke and Logsdon (1996) described visibility as “the firm’s ability to gain recognition from internal and external stakeholders” (p. 499), and Yang and Kent (2014) recognized the need for CSR and other reputation-defining activities to develop visibility on social media.

CSR research recognizes stakeholders in the most traditional form as having “increased interest in an organizations’ reputation management” because it is believed to lead to a “positive impact on future profits as a result of a greater desire by Stakeholders to be associated with such responsible organizations” (Suliman, Al-Khatib, & Thomas, 2017, p. 15), while Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, and Hill (2006) found that supporting causes consistent with the values of an organization improves consumer attitudes towards a firm. Brammer and Millington (2006) noted how “Stakeholders who are more informed concerning corporate actions are more likely to take action towards companies and, in consequence, more visible organizations are subject to greater levels of scrutiny by, and regulation from, their stakeholder constituencies” (p. 6-7). Thus, greater awareness of an organization demands greater expectations for reputational nuance. As Mohr et al. noted, “Lack of awareness is likely...to be a major inhibitor of consumer responsiveness to CSR,” meaning that given enough visibility, an organization is expected to adhere to certain standards of behavior (p. 48). Essentially, CSR cannot inform purchase decisions if stakeholders are unaware of an organization or its actions in the first place; awareness

of an identity in social media, or significance, brings both profit and potential criticism of organizational behavior.

While the philanthropic demands of CSR are a sufficient standard to be judged, this accountability comes at its own price: An organization must commit to one side of an issue to perform social responsibility. Becker-Olsen et al.'s (2006) findings illustrate the diversity with which publics must be understood; while identifying values that have public support can benefit an organization, espousing specific causes has the potential to create controversy due to the varied backgrounds and identities of stakeholders. Corporations must commit to making change which will understandably alienate the people it inevitably fails to benefit; the literature on issues management demonstrates how organizations are actively interacting with a fractured and fragmented audience prone to intersubjectivity and conflict (Elwood, 1995; Kent & Taylor, 1998; Etter et al., in press).

**Competing dualisms in OPR relationships.** Committing to one side of an issue, even in an act of charity, is a dangerous political act for an organization in the current media and cultural climate. Indeed, as concomitantly divisive, organizational moral actions “illuminate the ethical challenges present when the corporation is inextricably linked to social and cultural norms and values” (O’Connor, 2006, p. 281). Yet, not committing is perhaps worse than committing and provoking the ire of stakeholders because it makes an organization less visible, less recognizable, and less significant in an increasingly competitive market. The organization is left responding to this paradox of goodness, wherein stakeholders expect socially responsible action but cannot agree on the most important socially responsible action.

Research in the discipline of interpersonal communication has begun theorizing the paradox of these competing dualisms, yet no connection has been made to OPR research as a field. Baxter's (2004) theory of relational dialectics articulates the tension caused by competing goals in relationships as conflicting but identifies these contradictions as the "unity of opposites" (p. 182). Reducing conflict to the three main dichotomies of integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-non-expression, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identified thematic expectations actualized both internally and externally to determine in a relationship constitutive identities of the speakers. Although these innumerable competing dualisms create tension, this conflict forms a dialectic, subsuming two conflicting interests or ideas and transforming them into a third option transcending either originals. Baxter identifies these moments of transformation as "emergent occasions where the difference of opposition interpenetrates in ways that create a sense of coherence or wholeness" (p. 187), providing reconciliation between two otherwise incompatible perspectives. Recent work on these dualisms has identified the dialectic as a means to understand digital identities through social media (Fox, Osborn, & Warber, 2014). Given an OPR affinity for borrowing interpersonal relationship constructs (Coombs & Holladay, 2015), the use of the dialectic is a natural fit for rationalizing and explaining the many disparities and dualities that plague organizational-public relationships.

In the past, values advocacy has been a means to respond to the dualistic expectations of stakeholders without committing fully to one side through the use of abstract and uncontroversial values. CSR invites considerations of much deeper and more complex moral conversations than can be communicated in press releases, but as



Brummett (1995) noted, when “knowledge has grown so vast, unwieldy, and fragmented that it can neither be managed nor predictably shared,” organizations must pursue “*strategies of reduction*” (p. 23). Values advocacy is reductive and uncomplicated as the simple invocation of goodness rather than the complicated consequences of goodness itself. Organizational epideictic is a means of reconciling stakeholder expectations for goodness with the fact that goodness for someone else is not necessarily goodness for the individual. Furthermore, values advocacy abstracts issues into universal values: Socially responsible values are more practicable and concrete than organizational epideictic.

However, as in the case of Budweiser’s 2017 Super Bowl commercial, the context in which abstract values are espoused has the potential to distort both the value itself and the identity of the organization. The OPR manager is left with the problematic situation demanding a new strategy that can answer the call of ethical commercialization without alienating stakeholders, particularly in a world where the American public believes that “values are in a decline and business is partially responsible for this” (Mohr, Webb, Harris, 2001, p. 66). A contemporary conceptualization of audience expectations for corporate social responsibility, tempered by the paradox of goodness demands a new approach to values advocacy campaigns. In effect, the context and stakeholder must be conceptualized to develop a theorization of the means by which they can be manipulated to demonstrate organizational goodness. The next section will outline literature on the new context and stakeholder, developing working definitions to ground the analysis of Budweiser’s values advocacy and identify a contemporary answer to the paradox of goodness.

## Contexts & Stakeholders

**The role of context in organizational discourse.** Cheney and Vibbert (1987) noted that if an organization were to “identify a specific public and target it for a persuasive campaign, the meanings of both ‘the company’ and ‘the environment’ must be managed in the department’s discourse,” articulating the dualism of co-creational communication (p. 176). Heath (2009) emphasized “the role information, fact, plays in shaping knowledge and opinions as well as being convincing and motivating actions” (p. 21). Alternately, as Ji, Li, North, and Liu (2017) noted, “public relations scholars seem to have not yet taken enough action in investigating how stakeholders are responding” to crises, instead focusing on “analyzing organizations’ online profiles, communication models, and so forth” (p. 202). The co-creation paradigm requires a closer understanding of the relationship between the subjective and the objective to determine meaning in reputation; the conflict between fact and response is necessary to understand communication. Organizational reputation is shaped by stakeholders with competing ideas in dialogue constituting and constituted by the individual-organizational relationship (Ihlen, 2013). Ihlen (2010) sums up the theoretical conflict between objective fact and subjective response by describing how rhetoric “is seen as enacting and creating the environment” and facts are “conditioned by social agreement,” but simultaneously recognizing “that an environment exists and that humans must presuppose the existence of something that is true” (p. 53).

The stakeholder-context relationship is interactive, such that the “environment” described by Cheney and Vibbert (1987) is characterized by multiple stakeholder interests. Considering this dialectic, Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) warned that

“communicators must foresee the possibility that their audiences will not interpret values in the same way that the organization does,” indicating the widely interpretive element of even the most innocuous messages (p. 154). While the virtue of values advocacy lies in universally agreed-upon abstractions, the environment ultimately makes independent judgments for the acceptance of shared values.

Douglas (2008) emphasized the importance of context for interpreting messages, advising that such work “must pay attention to the broader historical, political, and economic context within which such texts were produced and received” (p. 70).

Douglas’s prescription takes on even greater value when considered in the context of social media, where texts are not only received but further actualized in feedback. Hauser (1999) notes how “Deliberative discourse is definitively factional, with the engaged parties each attempting to appropriate historicity” and as such, “epideictic may serve more polemical ends and raise controversy” (p.18). Social media’s dialogic form necessarily invites content reflectively disparate; social media re-conceptualize the way crises and values advocacy are communicated in discourse (Diers, & Donohue, 2013; Kleinnijenhuis, Schultz, Utz, & Oegma, 2015).

Furthermore, the increasingly global techno-industrial context of Cheney and Vibbert’s (1987) environment requires values cognizant of cross-cultural subjectivity of meaning (Triandis & Albert, 1987): Essentially, messages are changed by cultural and technological mediation. Subjectivity of meaning leads to “messages not being understood...and even if understood, in being ineffective” (Triandis & Albert, 1987, p. 275). When crafting a message, practitioners must be aware of diverse media and cultural contexts. Culture filters organizational messages, regardless of content, and actively

informs the meaning of otherwise innocuous perceptions of organizational social responsibility.

Messages cannot be understood acontextually or else, as Schegloff (1997) says, truth “seems to disappear in a hall of perspectival mirrors” (p. 166). However, Schegloff (1997) goes on to emphasize the need for researchers to first recognize the context of the participants in order to understand the sociocultural meaning of discourse and restore some direction for analysis and subsequent organizational strategy. Douglas (2008) contends that both political-cultural and media context inform understandings of messages, such that the analyst must bear in mind both when interpreting. Johnson (2003) also recognizes the role of scale in informing contexts, and the necessary relationship between descending contexts in constructing meaning.

Some research has begun mapping the context of a mediated world, such as Hanna, Rohm, and Crittenden (2011) who emphasize an organizations need to be active online, articulating the concrete conduits and pathways that function to make up a social media “ecosystem” as it “centers on the consumer experience” (p. 267). Mangold and Faulds (2009) recommend methods for shaping discussions around a specific brand narrative, but the discussion itself is perhaps most important for practitioners trying to stay relevant and develop values advocacy campaigns in the world of social media. Although positivist assumptions limit these studies, both are promising beginnings for developing the relationship between rhetoric and OPR through social media and articulating the media context. These studies need a more thorough working framework reflective to the dialectic to contribute meaningfully to a body of work on organizational reputation in social media. Johns (2006) insisted that recognizing context is necessary to

developing a conceptualization of organizational behavior, but admits that little research is studying context and that empirical methods are insufficient at this point for proper theorization. Therefore, the political-cultural and media contexts will be examined as a rhetorical construct to determine the discursive environment in which Budweiser's Super Bowl advertisement took place.

**Stakeholder-centrism.** The first month of 2017 saw Donald Trump inaugurated as President of the United States delivering an inauguration speech about unity in America. If the critic were to look for eloquence in this speech, they would find little by conventional standards. Instead, the oratorical skill of Trump came not from his inauguration speech, but his social media accounts; an article in *Time* describes how “through the frantic weeks of his transition, Trump continued to practice the us-against-them politics that won him the job” as his “Twitter feed chattered with denunciations of U.S. intelligence agencies, various media outlets, actress Meryl Streep and civil-rights icon Rep. John Lewis” (Von Drehle, 2017, para. 17). While many news outlets have made comparisons between Trump and former President Ronald Reagan as entertainer-turned-conservative-populist-outsider-politicians (Olsen, 2017; Drezner, 2018; Schwarz, 2018), both Presidents must be understood in the specific contexts of their times: While Reagan was an actor in the music video era, Trump was a reality TV star in the social media age. Johns (2017) recognized the benefits of comparing multiple contexts in order to isolate unique differences and develop a more thorough understanding of a specific context. A brief comparison of the two Presidents' communication roles, then, will anchor a discussion of the context present at the time of the Budweiser advertisement and demonstrate the relationship between cultural content and media form.

Media has long informed politics and culture, as Denton (1988) described the instrumental role television played in Reagan’s election and how the “messenger became the message—molded and shaped to fit the requirements of television” (p. xi). In effect, Denton recognizes the need for the message to “fit the medium in both form and content,” which requires a nuanced understanding of a new media context (p. xii). The role of social media can lend direction to articulating the new consequences as messenger: 62%, nearly two out of every three U.S. adults got their news on social media the year of the election (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Ott (2016) opined, “the Age of Twitter virtually guaranteed the rise of Trump” (p. 65). Ahmadian, Azarshahi, and Paulhus’s (2017) study noted how Trump’s Twitter usage exceeded his more seasoned opponents in the Republican primary. Wells et al. (2016) identified Trump’s “triggering of social media activity in the form of retweets of his messages” as “key factors in explaining his coverage in leading print news outlets” (p. 675). More importantly, as Denton described the medium-as-message, the formal constraints of a seemingly ubiquitous social media reflect the content of the election. Once the role of social media is understood, a cultural context can be conceptualized from the form of the media; when looking at the stakeholder-organizational relationship, we can develop a framework for understanding public behavior as informed by the dictums of message-as-media.

Twitter is limited to short and relatively uncomplicated thoughts and can be considered a reductive medium (Ott, 2016). The natural question: Why do Twitter messages get misinterpreted if the medium is so simple? Twitter reifies conflict by connecting multiple individuals operating in diverse contexts, and so must be addressed as the reification of disagreement. Senior Vice President at the advertising group

responsible for the digital response to Budweiser's commercial Joe Quattrone observes, "We know that when attention isn't on the TV screen, it's on the second screen, and more specifically on social sites like Facebook and Twitter" calling the contemporary rhetorical situation a "mobile-first world" (Monllos, 2017, para. 27). Organizations cannot only understand stakeholders as unilateral in a multi-dimensional medium; multiple platforms formally espouse a different message than single platforms: Multiple platforms for gaining media requires multiple, fragmented populations. In the age of multiple platforms, the medium is diverse and, by McLuhan's (2006) reasoning, reflects the message: Multiple interpretations across multiple platforms result in conflicting messages and discourse.

Furthermore, while television and newspapers were a formal medium, social media are an informal medium. Ahmadian et al. (2017) suggest that the informality of Twitter was a contributing factor in making Trump accessible as a candidate and ensuring his success. Research indicates that the informality in promoting Trump as a candidate was a deciding factor in the success of social media campaigns for the 2016 election (Enli, 2017), and introduces the notion of perceived authenticity. Thomas (2013) re-conceptualizes stardom on Twitter, identifying denuded boundaries between celebrity and fan that interact through notions of authenticity. Thus, informality and authenticity can be understood to resonate with social media users and develop relationships important to the success of online campaigns. Beyond authenticity, though, Keen (2007) finds a prioritization of the amateur in contemporary culture: The amateur has replaced experts and organizations as the credible source relied on by denizens of social media. In social media, the amateur can be understood to represent average users.

While in the past, humble roots were enough to identify political candidates with constituents, social media both demand and provide a new level of authenticity in allowing abstract individuals (such as presidents and organizations) to communicate directly with their audience and espouse amateurism. The amateur as a political candidate in the age of social media must no longer identify with constituents in only the figurative sense, but actively engage voters to establish significance. In effect, the new political candidate will invoke identification not through content but through form. The contrast between Donald Trump's elite background and his identification with constituents can be traced to a formal engagement that engendered the authentic amateur.

Instead of the primetime presidency of the Great Communicator circa 1980 where the stage was under the spotlight and "presidents use the medium to confirm rather than challenge, to present rather than to engage with the public," the stage has now become the audience (Denton, 1988, p. xii). Presenting makes sense for television, but engagement is the way that speakers adapt to social media, by extending the stage to include the audience members. If Reagan was a media celebrity, Trump recognized the pragmatism of practicing a celebrity democracy and sharing fame with his media-constituents, which included not only his supporters, but his detractors as well. Media-constituents are a reflection of formal following, of vested interest in the behavior (whether in approval or disapproval) instead of concordance with policies. While television prioritized show over substance in the case of Reagan, social media demand the boundaries of show be redefined to include the audience.

Clearly, the cultural and media context in the age of social media can be considered stakeholder-centric: Stakeholders have moved into a cultural age where they



find themselves the stars and curators of their own entertainment and persuasion. Instead of trusting the slick advertisements of seamless organizations and made-up politicians, the new consumer of culture is skeptical of expertise and infallibility and prefers the auspices of amateurism in communication over stiff professionalism. Because of the media context, the cultural context is more resistant to the old platitudes of organizational messages and demand fresh and flawed voices to promote a product. User-generated content is directly related to attitudes towards brands (Smith, Fischer, & Yongjian, 2012) and generating future sales (Dhar & Chang, 2009), through both marketer-to-consumer messages and consumer-to-consumer messages (Goh, Heng, & Lin, 2013).

Messages can no longer be analyzed only by the spotlight's shine. Unlike Reagan's polished city-on-a-hill-content, Trump did not need to put on a show of content to win support but instead made the *audience* the show; the ability to engage made the man significant even if he was not well liked. From the events and trends in cultural attitudes and media habits, a context emerges, which the Budweiser commercial was interpreted in, as a reductive, fragmented, stakeholder-centric milieu. A context in which the stakeholders trust themselves more and want to listen to and watch more of themselves; if the context is stakeholder-centric, then research needs next to identify the stakeholder.

**Rhetorical stakeholders.** OPR identifies stakeholders as “groups and individuals who have a stake in the success or failure of a business” (Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & de Colle, 2010, p. xv), and Donaldson and Preston (1995) describe stakeholders as “persons or groups with legitimate interests in procedural and/or substantive aspects of corporate activity” (p. 67). The dimensions of what constitute such

a stake or legitimate interest remain under argument. Furthermore, the rise of social media has made such a conceptualization problematic, raising important questions regarding the boundaries of stakes. How can we reconcile the opinions of stakeholders who are not directly purchasing when their relationship, as tempered by multiple cultural and political ideologies, can still affect corporate reputation? Does voyeuristic entertainment count as a legitimate interest in a company? Organizations act as cultural players and stakeholders understand this action among the context of competing ideologies. Although stakeholders are fragmented and diverse, each individual expects shared and similar recognition, representation, and communication from the organization. The expectation for organizational reputations and CSR arises out of a collective consciousness constructing perceptions of an organization and their intersections with political, ethical, and entertainment value in the dialectic interpretation of new media.

While research has long struggled to cohesively conceptualize stakeholders as a distinct construct, Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) identify three interconnected attributes in identifying saliency among stakeholders through “power, legitimacy, and urgency” (p. 879). In the cultural/media context of the Internet, users are capable of all three attributes when regarding multiple issues. Power is defined as the extent a party has or “can gain access to coercive, utilitarian, or normative means, to impose its will in the relationship” (p. 865). While in the past, poor stakeholder opinions were less threatening, concrete discourse has made organizations give power to the collective of stakeholder opinions. The construct of legitimacy refers to “socially accepted and expected structure or behaviors” and is “often coupled implicitly with that of power when people attempt to evaluate the nature of relationships in society” (p. 866). The collective proclivity towards

authenticity lends legitimacy to everyday stakeholders, where distrust of organizations means that OPR practitioners must address even the wildest individual claims. Finally, the diversity of issues discussed through social media and rate of discussion on the Internet means that urgency is a formal inevitability.

In the Internet age, stakeholders no longer need material stakes or any real connection to the organization to be a stakeholder capable of changing organizational behavior, making them what Mitchell et al. (1997) term “definitive stakeholders” who demand priority for claims and dictate organizational trajectory (p. 878). Mitchell et al. limit their qualifications for definitive stakeholders to the powers of the stakeholders, neglecting any criteria for the relevance or physical interests a stakeholder has in an organization. The difficulty of categorizing interests lends itself to the public sphere of social media, where voices are strong based on their relationships outside of the organization rather than within the organization. As Bechmann and Lomborg (2013) explained, consumers are no longer just “a target for companies to exploit” but also “an empowered, productive agent” (p. 767). Otherwise irrelevant, peripheral individual opinions become relevant through social media and construct an organizational image as much as those directly involved. Based in Bitzer’s (1992) rhetorical audience, these new stakeholders “must be capable of serving as a mediator of the change which the discourse functions to produce” (p. 63). Indeed, this means that publics who hold no financial or consumer interest in a company are stakeholders and audience to organizational messages just as much as those actually buying products. More important, new media in a factional context has created a new consumer who wants “to have their rights fulfilled in every possible aspect, everywhere and at all times” leading to “a lack of flexibility and

accommodation in many interpersonal and interorganizational relations” (Frandsen & Johansen, 2010, p. 361).

This study ventures these voyeuristic new consumers are *rhetorical stakeholders*: powerful and diverse voices integral to the creation of organizational reputation. The rhetorical stakeholder considers multiple issues through multiple channels and is capable of actualizing corporate reputation through social media. By examining Budweiser’s values advocacy campaign, rhetorical stakeholders will be shown as the new common person, and require new evaluations for common sense mediated by the dialectic. The contemporary context for values advocacy campaigns and expectation for corporate social responsibility demands consideration of those stakeholders who have little relationship to the organization apart from the cultural/media context. The construct of rhetorical stakeholder contributes meaningfully to OPR research in the age of social media and marries the consumer to the context while recognizing the new organizational-individual relationship.

Indeed, in order for an organization to pacify a deeply fragmented and powerful rhetorical stakeholder base, the use of contemporary unifying messages, or values advocacy, becomes necessary. The present thesis proposes dialectic values advocacy as an expansion of values advocacy to reflect the changing contemporary stakeholder as outlined in the following rhetorical case study of Budweiser’s Super Bowl campaign.

### **Chapter Three: Methodology**

Although largely informed by rhetorical ideas, most OPR researchers rarely utilize rhetorical methods when analyzing cases; case study researchers generally prefer more empirical methodology. As such, a reasonable question that could be raised against

rhetorical methods would be: Can a broad, critical analysis accurately understand the complexities of social media and organizational reputation? Would more positivist qualitative methods show the details of stakeholder responses in greater relief, such as analyzing each individual tweet for different themes? However, an empirical approach would be capable only of isolating discrete characteristics of the rhetorical act without identifying the act itself. An interpretive approach provides greater cohesion of analysis, particularly in the heavily fragmented discursive environment of social media.

As Hutchison (2013) noted, interpretive methods “can address dimensions of meaning that often escape the net of structured scientific inquiry (e. g., a quantitative content analysis or a formal value analysis)” (p. 27). Indeed, an OPR perspective that appreciates the new age of stakeholders can no longer analyze only an isolated message or response, but must develop tools to understand and theorize the dimensions of meaning between the two, as Livingstone and Liebe (1995) noted “Now the time has come for both texts and audiences to be analyzed in parallel and in the light of each other” to examine the socializing and cultural effects of media (p. 157). OPR in the age of social media must analyze the act of discourse instead of isolating messages and responses. From an OPR perspective, the stimulation of discussion, or dialogue, is the most important aspect of a social media artifact: Identifying significance is an investment in an organization’s reputational future. Two distinct methodological approaches will be utilized simultaneously for this thesis: case study and dialectic rhetorical criticism. The present section will outline each respective method before justifying the current methodology’s focus on the constructs of discourse and context.

## **Case Studies & Criticism**

Yin (1981) advocates a scholarly recognition of the narrative implicit to crisis events through qualitative and critical research; case studies can “provide description, test theory, or generate theory” through an understanding of the multiple mechanisms at work in a single artifact (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 535). As a heavily theoretically-grounded piece, the present study seeks to analyze public relation communication strategies and values advocacy through an appropriately reflective methodology. The purpose of case study research is to develop the boundaries of contemporary phenomenon, while recognizing the larger context surrounding the process; as Yin (2002) observes, “The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context” (p. 4). As previous literature shows, recognizing the context and the phenomenon’s relationship with this context is integral to understanding organizational discourse through social media, particularly in the case of Budweiser and the 2017 Super Bowl commercial. While there is some variation in approaching case studies (Creswell, Hanson, Clark, & Morales, 2007), the present study will anchor its paradigm in rhetorical criticism, which Heath and Toth (1992) call a “useful means for such examination because of the long history of critical thought that has surrounded informative and suasive discourse” (p. xii).

While social science approaches and theories emphasize the process of communication and the relationship as defined by discrete, empirical constructs, rhetorical criticism is responsible for centering discussions of OPR around meaning (Heath, 2009, p. 1). Heath (2000) recognizes how the rhetorical approach identifies the values of OPR, such that a “good organization” is “communicating well” and ensures the goodwill of

stakeholders (p. 70). The rhetorical tradition begins with the dialogue instead of the results of the dialogue when analyzing public opinion and as such, “rhetorical criticism is a method that analyzes discourse, explains how specific groups responded to this discourse, and illuminates the process by which such discourse influenced the targeted publics” (Elwood, 1995, p. 8).

More important, perhaps, rhetoric provides foundations to base analyses of OPR relationships not just on stakeholders as symbol-using individuals, but symbol-misusing individuals (Burke, 1966). In the context of concretized discourse, the intent of an organization is irrelevant to a message, and organizations must be aware of public misinterpretation and ready for the potential effects. The most effective way to study a subject full of competing meanings must accommodate plurality and recognize the possibility for multiple interpretations. A case study analysis operationalizing rhetoric as “the use of discourse by competing interests seeking to induce one another to accept a mutually harmonious point of view” satisfies this requirement (Heath & Toth, 1992, p. xiv).

### **Analyzing Budweiser’s Values Advocacy**

While Botan (1997) observed how dialogue “elevates publics to the status of communication equal with the organization” (p. 196), he also noted how it “manifests itself more as a stance, orientation, or bearing in communication rather than as a specific method, technique or format” (p. 192). Analyzing dialogue lends itself more towards multiple, nuanced methods instead of a one-size-fits-all method. For this reason, Budweiser’s Super Bowl advertisement will be analyzed rhetorically, grounded in a dialectic methodology that assumes “rival parties use symbolic exchange to come to

agreements about cultural structures, events, and actions” and uses this assumption as the foundation for analysis (Toth, 1992, p. 6). Drawing from both formalist and neoclassical traditions, the present study will analyze the discourse between Budweiser and stakeholders as a distinct act, studying the relationship as a transformation of meaning filtered through media.

Replicating the methods of Crable and Vibbert’s (1983) early values advocacy study, the present methodology will proceed by “studying examples of the messages and then summarizing the major issues developed” through major news sources online, press releases, and social media posts (p. 384). #BoycottBudweiser tweets will serve to map out public response, while mainstream news articles will provide judgment landmarks for the construction of reputation. In this way, the dialogue, and distinct relationship, between Budweiser and stakeholders can be studied in ways inaccessible to empirical methods.

However, to focus only on the discourse is not to claim this discourse is without judgment values; while studying dialogue rhetorically seems abstract, the advantage of social media is that attitudes are already grouped into broad judgments. For example, the #BoycottBudweiser movement is tied together thematically by negativity towards Budweiser. The outcome of thematic analysis for individual tweets would show only that people were not supporting Budweiser, which can already be assumed by the name after the hashtag. Rather, the critic can get an idea of the extent of the seriousness of sentiment by the duration of the discourse. As long as #BoycottBudweiser is present, the analyst knows that the discussion continues, and therefore the discourse can be studied without belaboring these pluralistic individual meanings. In effect, analyzing each individual tweet



becomes irrelevant to an analysis of the broader conversation between Budweiser and stakeholders. Mainstream news sources will be introduced to anchor discussion of popular opinion and organizational representation; however, the primary artifact studied in this thesis is the discourse itself, or the interaction between the organization and its stakeholders as co-creational. Douglas (2008) noted the methodological risks of analyzing a media artifact in isolation, and so the present study will include a series of intertextual analyses between Budweiser's Super Bowl advertisement and diverse other grounding case studies.

Through a dialectic rhetorical criticism following Crable and Vibberts (1983) original means for outlining values advocacy and grounded by context and intertextual artifacts, this thesis will propose multiple exploratory constructs incapable through positivist methodology. That being said, the overarching ideas developed through this criticism can serve as a framework to engage in future empirical studies to determine discrete individual constructs. The following analysis and discussion will theorize a dialectic values advocacy by identifying the form of Budweiser's values advocacy amid the current media context.

## **Chapter Four: Analysis**

### **Calm Before the Storm**

The most recent marketing techniques of Budweiser leading up to the 2017 Super Bowl can help contextualize its choice to air what was interpreted as a controversial commercial during the most-watched annual televised event in the United States. As mentioned earlier, in the summer of 2016, Budweiser changed the name of its flagship beer to "America," also modifying the copy on the front of cans and bottles to include lyrics from "The Star-Spangled Banner" and phrases from the Pledge of Allegiance

(Anheuser-Busch, 2016). The bottle re-design was part of the “America is in Your Hands” campaign, intended to “[remind] people from sea to shining sea to embrace the optimism upon which the country was first built” (Anheuser-Busch, 2016, para. 2). At the time the label re-design may have perhaps appeared overly-saturated in American values, drawing both cheers and jeers, but has now been labelled “controversial” by both *Fortune* and *Business Insider* (Segarra, 2017; Taylor, 2017b).

Budweiser’s “America is in Your Hands” campaign was mainly criticized because of Anheuser-Busch’s Belgium-based parent company AB InBev. Despite the fact that Budweiser “is brewed in [America] and has long been part of U.S. beer-drinking fabric” AB InBev’s European location prompted local brewers to respond with anger at the perceived hypocrisy (Acitelli, 2016; Schultz, 2017b). Interestingly enough, despite this response, Budweiser opted to return the promotion the next year, adding a limited edition camo-themed aluminum can in the process and donating a portion of proceeds to the charity Folds of Honor, which provides educational scholarships to military families (Anheuser-Busch, 2017).

Although in a press release, Anheuser-Busch (2016) referenced only “Fourth of July celebrations, the Copa America Centenario soccer tournament, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the National Park Service, and events to celebrate the brand’s six Team Budweiser athletes competing to appear in the Rio 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games” as inspiration for the label, the promotion coincided with the primaries of the 2016 presidential election and held implicit political meaning (para. 4). As a result, politically liberal consumers interpreted the aggressive patriotism to betray right-leaning tendencies amid the current election climate characterized by similar tonal appeals from

conservative candidates. Through Budweiser's renamed "America" beer, users perceived Anheuser-Busch lending political support towards Trump's "Make America Great Again" platform (Davis, 2016; Kaplan, 2016).

Because the cultural content is shaped through the form of media, the fragmentation of social media caused Budweiser's patriotic platitudes to appear strategic, regardless of the intent. Divisions among stakeholders turn even the most platonic messages into pointed political maneuvers. Budweiser faced the impossible task of sending a unifying message about America: in the summer of 2016 the broad values of "Americanism" and "patriotism" were interpreted by liberals as conservative ballyhooing, and in the 2017 Super Bowl the values of "hard work," "acceptance" and "unity" were decried as liberal by conservatives.

Despite the partisan appeal of its America campaign, *Forbes* accused Budweiser of "wrapping itself in a patriotic flag, borrowed interest that may give it a short-term promotional bump, but will not give it the seismic turn-around it needs to compete" for a millennial audience that wants "things that are new and different, things they feel they've discovered and can then share with friends on social media" (Adamson, 2016, para. 5-6). Indeed, by December of 2016, AB InBev's stock had fallen by 26%, putting the company at 103.15 USD, the lowest price per share since 2014 ("Anheuser-Busch InBev S.A. ADR," 2018).

Key to this drop in points is the changing market of beer sales. Eric Shepard, an industry tracker at Beer Marketer's Insights, noted how "Budweiser has been declining for a long time" since light beer has failed to generate the same sales as in the past (Meyersohn, 2017). As *AdWeek* noted, "Bud needs to position itself in a way that will

resonate with consumers in the U.S.—especially craft beer-loving millennials—as it aims to grow market share” since the most recent available financial results indicated that sales had “declined by mid-single digits, while estimated market share was down 20 points” (Monllos, 2017, para. 6). Budweiser had been struggling with declining profits due to the rise of craft beers and micro-breweries in the past 10 years (Monllos, 2017). The trend towards more localized beer can be traced back to the stakeholder-centric media context discussed earlier that demands cultural auspices of authenticity and amateurism, leading craft beer to triple its market shares in the last decade based on “innovation and creativity” (Bennett, 2017, para. 6).

Understandably, Budweiser’s long-standing history as an American company and recent international ownership put the beer mogul in a reputational bind, struggling to articulate a new marketing approach to reach millennials. Although AB InBev acquired eleven craft breweries in 2014 and marketed them under its “High End” line, the organizational image and reputation of Budweiser still struggled against a growing market of craft breweries (Nurin, 2017). As such, Budweiser required an attention-getting campaign to reinvigorate its bottom line by redefining its reputational identity. Coupled with the size of the organization, values advocacy involving an uncontroversial national narrative was a natural choice to re-brand the identity of an internationally-owned corporation battling hyper-local competition.

Celebrating traditional patriotic values was consistent with Budweiser’s reputation through past values advocacy campaigns, such as the “America is in Your Hands” campaign, but past experience had also shown Anheuser-Busch that even the most innocuous messages were rife for angry and competing political interpretations.

Budweiser thus was conscious of the stimulating possibilities for the ad, and, as Cowden and Sellnow (2002) recognized, strategic management of a single issue has the potential to re-frame the identity of an organization. Thirteen scripts were pitched for the 2017 Super Bowl spot, and the final product was greenlit in late November of 2016 and filming was concluded in late January (Monllos, 2017). The decision to go ahead with the politically provocative story of Adolphus Busch as an immigrant was approved weeks after Trump was elected president, meaning executives were conscious of the heightened political climate surrounding immigration that had plagued the election and would persist by the time of the Super Bowl. The single issue proved to be a strategic match of content struck in a formal powder keg.

However, before releasing the 2017 Super Bowl spot, Budweiser recognized the need to engage the public through multiple platforms regardless of the issue content. As such, Budweiser delegated media responsibilities to MediaCom and digital responsibilities to VaynerMedia before the advertisement premiered. As Andre Rivera, MediaCom's account leader for Anheuser-Busch InBev observed prior to the ad's release, "We don't think about it as digital buying versus TV buying—that's old thinking for us. We understand Budweiser's target consumer and how they behave, and then we look at all the tools we can use to create the best, most integrated experience" (Monllos, 2017, para. 26). In effect, Budweiser was fully conscious of the potential for its advertisement to "spark a lively conversation" during the Super Bowl and decided to run it anyway (Monllos, 2017, para. 34). Budweiser understood that immigration, an otherwise ambiguous texture of American Dream rhetoric, had become a salient issue since the beginning of the election cycle. As such, through an issues management

perspective, Budweiser was conscious of the provocative nature of its advertisement: Immigration had been a hot-button issue for nearly two years prior to the filming and release of the commercial. Regardless of the exact expectations Anheuser-Busch had in mind for an audience response to “Born the Hard Way,” the beer company knew that there would be a response.

### **The Commercial & Fallout**

Premiering a week prior to the Super Bowl, Budweiser’s commercial featured the fictional account of Adolphus Busch’s journey to St. Louis as a German immigrant, enduring treacherous conditions and racist hostility in a new country. By situating parallels between contemporary immigrants and historic ones, Budweiser invoked a hot-button issue, provoking the ire of politically conservative rhetorical stakeholders. Regardless of the complexity of political undertones, the exact nature of this provocation is irrelevant to an analysis of the strategy as dialectic; suffice to say, the commercial’s response as a formal artifact speaks more to OPR significance than the content beyond simple inflammation.

Mainstream media covered the controversy extensively for days before the Super Bowl; media outlets often discerned distinctly intentional political messages in the content (Maheshwari, 2017; Huddleston, 2017; James, 2017) and predicted fallout for being “accidentally political” (Larkin, 2017, para. 1). Budweiser released the spot six days before the Big Game, the reaction from political conservatives was nearly immediate: popular right-leaning website Breitbart published an article labeling the spot “pro-immigration” (Gilbert, 2017, para. 5). Within days, Budweiser’s commercial had

racked up over 14 million views online before debuting on television during the Super Bowl itself (Taylor, 2017a).

Ricardo Marques, vice president and ranking executive for Budweiser in the U.S., noted how the Super Bowl is “one of the few platforms that allows you to talk to such a large, captive audience in a live broadcast” (Monllos, 2017, para. 13). On Super Bowl Sunday, the spot became the most-watched Super Bowl commercial online of all Super Bowl advertisements that year (Atkinson, 2017). Similarly, consumer outrage also peaked and resulted in conservative stakeholders taking to Twitter to exact acute revenge against Budweiser under the hashtag “BoycottBudweiser.” Much of the fury was directed towards criticizing the historical accuracy or heavy-handed politicism of the ad.

Examples of #BoycottBudweiser tweets include “Never drinking @Budweiser you should respect the AMERICAN president instead you mock with liberal propaganda” and “This Bud’s no longer for me” (Taylor, 2017a, para. 7). Right-wing Twitter-users advocated #DrinkYuengLing instead of Budweiser due to Yuengling’s fifth-generation owner Richard Yuengling’s public support of Trump before the election; left-wing beer-drinkers had already begun a #BoycottYuengling movement in October (Victor, 2016). The day after the Super Bowl, #BoycottBudweiser was trending worldwide (Poletti, 2017).

Amid the backlash, Budweiser contented itself with blithely maintaining innocence in provoking such outrage, releasing a single press release and letter to the *Washington Post* in response. Through its Twitter account, Budweiser commented on the controversy only by promoting the spot through re-tweeting users advocating for their brand. Tweets such as “@Budweiser not much of a beer drinker, but I will pick some up

on the way home” and “Please everyone buy a case of Budweiser!” characterized the outpouring of support promoted by Budweiser in the aftermath (Taylor, 2017a, para. 15). In order to analyze Budweiser’s response, a series of intertextual analyses will illustrate the political and media climate in which the 2017 Super Bowl spot was released, and anchor Budweiser’s distinct values advocacy campaign amid a new OPR context.

### **Form & Ambiguity**

**New expectations for OPR form.** The Super Bowl as a media context is arguably the biggest stage for promotions, and the most successful and memorable campaigns in recent years have transcended the stage and allowed audience members to engage beyond the television. A year after Budweiser’s commercial, Netflix stunned the 2018 Super Bowl audience by releasing a new original movie, the third installment to the popular Cloverfield franchise dubbed *The Cloverfield Paradox*, without any advance press, ads, or trailer. Netflix ran a thirty-second teaser during the Super Bowl and communicated via social media telling viewers to watch the film immediately after the game (Lynch, 2018). The film, which critics ended up largely panning, was irrelevant to the form of advertisement or, rather, Netflix’s attention to form as advertisement. Netflix not only gave the movie publicity but, by *Forbes*’s estimation “won” the Super Bowl by making “an event in a way that just running a Super Bowl ad can’t do by dropping its movie with a sly sort of fanfare that equaled the hype of any star-studded Hollywood PR campaign in a fraction of the time” (Thier, 2018, para. 1).

Through a more conventional marketing tack, *The Cloverfield Paradox* would have likely appealed only to a certain film-going demographic, quietly hitting theaters, pulling in a modest box-office earning, and ending up on Netflix anyway. Instead, the



campaign found relevance that transcended the content of its product making both the film and Netflix as an organization significant to stakeholders. The use of multiple platforms made the audience create their own hype around the film through word of mouth on social media; recognizing the form and shaping content that is reflective of this form proved that an organization can promote a product without preparation and in doing so generate universal interest. In effect, instead of the organization crafting specific messages that relate to all stakeholders, the stakeholders themselves find a way to relate the product and organization to their peers through word of mouth. The problems presented by concretized discourse can be subverted to perform a marketing and reputation solution and maintain relevance in a rapidly fragmenting stakeholder world.

While in the past reputation was understood as a more or less static construct, the new media context demands this identity be considered performative: engaging stakeholders is a means of demonstrating values as an organization. While in the past, values were more concrete and could be endorsed by invocation, in a context of CSR the new values must be engaged as a process to demonstrate through form. Netflix illustrates the importance of form and multiple platforms for utilizing the media context as an organization through the most expensive and widely-watched media event of the year. While in the past celebrity appearances and tear-jerking animals may have been sufficient to engage an audience, social media demand more interactive efforts to appeal to audience values.

**Ambiguity two ways.** Pepsi's failed values advocacy can be analyzed to illustrate the differences between form and content. On April 4, 2017, Pepsi released a commercial featuring young radicals organizing in a protest. The protestors unite with a riot squad of

police lined up against them after a model, played by Kendall Jenner, hands one of the officers a can of Pepsi. The advertisement was intended to reflect topical sentiments around protesting, specifically the Black Lives Matter and Women's March movements, but instead provoked near-universal outrage at the soft drink mogul for "appropriating imagery from serious protests to sell its product" (Victor, 2017, para. 6). Pepsi immediately took down the commercial and issued a statement, saying they were "trying to project a global message of unity, peace, and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize" (Smith, 2017b). Pepsi attempted to brand themselves as a company in touch with younger generations and the dominant cultural values, but instead only ended up accused of appropriating these values. While many dimensions of this commercial were flawed, the most notable element of their campaign is a surprising lack of ambiguity, which Burke (1966) describes as the "sheer emptiness" of words through the detachment or obscurity of meaning, in both content and form (p. 6). Eisenberg (1984) recognizes the utility of strategic ambiguity in allowing stakeholders to read diverse interpretations into an organizational text.

In the content of its commercial, which Coombs (1999) defined as "the actual messages contained" in a text, Pepsi's choice to depict complicated issues with enthusiastic simplicity meant that multiple interpretations of the commercial were not possible among multiple platforms and stakeholders (p. 127). Although the protest signs were painted in Pepsi colors and the characters were paper-thin, online stakeholders took issue mainly with the role of a Pepsi can to resolve deep social issues. Instead of Budweiser's gritty and ambivalent endorsement of Adolphus Busch's immigrant journey, the message of Pepsi's advertisement was clear: buy Pepsi. While Pepsi's erred on the

side of corporate interests, a purely altruistic simple message also fails to generate dialogue and instead results in general disapproval. As an example, the Mexican-based beer company Tecate released a “light-hearted takedown” of Trump’s Mexican border wall policy in which American and Mexican citizens met at a waist-high wall to drink beer together (Schultz, 2016). Just like Pepsi, Tecate’s commercial content was too specific and received relatively little feedback beyond a general reaction of support. Direct messages fail to stimulate conversation that isn’t absolute: supporters will support, rejecters will reject, but few will take the effort to actively interpret and keep a brand in the public mind. Clarity of message contrasts Budweiser’s advertisement that positioned traditional values in a loaded and distorting context and resulted in ambiguity of content. Beyond blatant commercialism, Pepsi’s direct support for protests failed to generate discussion from a formal perspective as well as that of content.

While ambiguity of content is directly related to Eisenberg’s (1984) construct allowing multiple readings of a text, theorizing ambiguity of form distinguishes the unique social media response from Eisenberg’s ambiguity of content and expands strategic ambiguity to include the means by which a message is communicated. Coombs (1999) identified form as referring to “how a crisis response should be presented” (p. 126). In the form of Pepsi’s commercial, the soft-drink company’s response was equally unambiguous by apologizing and removing the offending spot. The simple content resulted in simple judgment, and then the form pointed only to a simple solution: Pepsi cut short their conversation by admitting they were wrong instead of engaging in dialogue with stakeholders, leaving a rich topic for identity-building untapped. While addressing a crisis is necessary, apologizing is not necessarily the best response strategy

(Coombs & Holladay, 2008), and ending the conversation puts the stakeholder-organizational relationship in terms of right and wrong. Instead, creating a dualistic situation when a dialectic is needed creates interpretive grey area which will engage multiple groups among multiple platforms.

For example, Airbnb's 2017 Super Bowl spot titled "We Accept" featured a montage of diverse faces and even suggested a hashtag near the end, touting heavy-handed political undertones (Roberts, 2017). However, the commercial failed to live up to the hype of Budweiser's advertisement in large part because Airbnb's message was consistent with prior political beliefs of the organization; Airbnb has loudly advocated for immigration and diversity in the United States, and so an unambiguous message fails to generate discussion. Targeting an issue at a like-minded group of stakeholders fails to practice values advocacy as a unifying message inoffensive to any party or achieve general goodwill for an organization (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994). Visibility does not arise from diversifying a message to appeal to multiple groups but presenting a message that can be interpreted in multiple ways and generate continued discussion. Formal ambiguity is necessary to both remain neutral and generate discussion; Budweiser's diverse targeting of consumers keeps the brand under discussion and allows stakeholders to generate branding material. Through ambiguity of content and form, contemporary branding efforts must stimulate discussion without alienating important rhetorical stakeholders and still remaining significant and relevant amid the medium.

### **Espousing Formal Ambiguity**

Narrowing the focus of context, #BoycottBudweiser appeared in the midst of an escalating string of other boycotts from both left and right wing consumers involving

over 250 companies (Richardson, 2017). While these companies notably included Nordstrom, Starbucks, and Uber, the case of 84 Lumber elucidates Budweiser's seemingly static role on the social media stage in the wake of public controversy. 84 Lumber also released a Super Bowl advertisement with similarly politically-charged universal themes in an attempt at values advocacy. Developed by Brunner Advertising, the commercial marked 84 Lumber's first time advertising in the Super Bowl. 84 Lumber's vice president, Maggie Hardy Magerko, used Twitter two days after the Super Bowl, reminding viewers the commercial was about "highlighting the characteristics of a person that will go to great lengths for a new opportunity," through a "demonstration of the human spirit – grit, determination and hard work" (para. 3).

84 Lumber's similar message lends insight to the content and forms situating Budweiser's values advocacy campaign. In an interview with *AdWeek*, Brunner Advertising's chief creative officer Rob Schapiro observed how "everything has become a political conversation, whether we want it to be or not" and that "ignoring the conversation that's taking place in the media and at every kitchen table in America just didn't seem right" (Oster, 2017). Brunner's website proudly recounts conveying "the core values of 84 Lumber in the most disruptive way possible on the biggest stage" through the Super Bowl spot (2017). The advertising agency couches these boasts in both values advocacy and CSR language, identifying 84 Lumber's audience as "millennials who value what a company stands for as much as the products the company sells" while also recognizing the three-month-long planning process required to orchestrate such a sensation (Brunner, 2017).

While the content of the ads was similar, there were three major differences between the form of 84 Lumber and Budweiser's campaigns. First, 84 Lumber's organizational position includes the intriguing added dimension of having direct stakes in the immigration issue as the company "relies heavily on immigrant labor" (Oster, 2017). As such, explanations for the advertisement were framed not only as a celebration of universally shared values but also as recruitment for people with those values. Promoting a financial agenda beyond selling products differentiates 84 Lumber from Budweiser both in the ethical and rhetorical implications of the spot. 84 Lumber received accusations of "astonishing cynicism" for perceptions of advocating illegal immigration to benefit the construction sector (Smith, 2017a, para. 1). Not merely controversial, the advertisement for 84 Lumber was directly related to the bottom line of the company—in contrast to values advocacy. Much like Pepsi, clear financial motivation betrayed the lumber company's bid to answer expectations for corporate social responsibility and depicted the company only as disingenuous.

Competing public interests in the interpretation of corporate values complicate the conflict between economic and altruistic motivations. Stahley and Boyd (2006) recognize the existence of competing goals implicit to values advocacy, actualized through a paradox of the organization-publics dichotomy. Through an analysis of mutually exclusive values, the authors describe how the presence of a paradox in values advocacy "can pose serious public relations problems by undermining, or at least weakening, what was intended to be a value with a single—positive and supportive—interpretation" (p. 315). In effect, perceptions of social responsibility are tempered by pragmatic

understandings of a company's financial interest creating cognitive incompatibility for organizational motivation among consumers.

Second, 84 Lumber did not anticipate the continuing process of values advocacy and their website was crashed from over 300,000 hits within one minute of the commercials' airing during the Super Bowl (Pasquarelli, 2017). Within an hour of the premiere, 84 Lumber's website was completely swamped, crashing several times before the end of the Super Bowl (Tascarella, 2017). Technical inadequacy for the social dialectic damaged 84 Lumber's potential to engage its rhetorical stakeholders, those viewers unassociated with the financial future of 84 Lumber but discursively formative in their cultural interest mediated online. The ability to engage functions as an illustration of crisis responsibility and contributes to the reputation in organizational response to crises (Coombs, 2007a). Accordingly, Budweiser's plans for values advocacy was diversified across multiple channels to accommodate the media. As Joe Quattrone, Senior Vice President at VaynerMedia, who Budweiser hired to deal with the digital elements of the ad, said, "It's critical that we're involved in the strategy planning at an early stage so that we can ensure the campaign has legs on social and digital platforms in order to have the most impact" (Monllos, 2017, para. 28). Unlike how Budweiser or Netflix anticipated a strong social media response and encouraged word of mouth, 84 Lumber was inadequately prepared to formally accommodate a response across multiple platforms.

Most important, though, 84 Lumber attempted to justify its commercial after the fact. Budweiser maintained a more dialectic campaign by only tweeting promotions of the advertisement and never acknowledging the criticism; the use of ambiguity averts a crisis and re-frames otherwise negative feedback as harmless hype. In contrast, other

social media responses have the potential to snowball bad publicity, such as Applebee's reputation-damaging social media meltdown regarding a receipt posted to Reddit (Weisbaum, 2013). In fact, many OPR crisis situations discourage engaging reputational threats as the best course of issues management (Veil, Petrun, & Roberts, 2012). Budweiser's stably positive, ambiguous responses amid the crisis of misinterpretation successfully reaped the benefits of bad publicity without incurring any of the financial damage. 84 Lumber attempted to control the message by shutting down stakeholder conversation and putting its reputation back in terms of right and wrong. Instead, like Budweiser, organizations must allow stakeholders to engage in dialogue with one another to develop branding material and enforce organizational reputation.

The differences between 84 Lumber and Budweiser in handling provocative values advocacy can be summed up as a question of communication. While Budweiser maintained ambiguous and uncontroversial communication, 84 Lumber's involvement with the actual issue of immigration required engagement that put their reputation at risk. 84 Lumber's scrambling responses to criticisms may have been necessary to preserve their reputation but can be considered a failed attempt at values advocacy. Meanwhile, Budweiser's empty discursive engagement espouses a new values advocacy. Budweiser's recognition of the rhetorical stakeholder's role in sustaining campaigns demands reconsideration of values advocacy. While the long-term effects of the dialectic values advocacy approach have yet to be seen, the imminent crisis Budweiser experienced during the Super Bowl all but died down within five months with little to no remedial reputational work on the part of Anheuser-Busch.



The stocks of AB InBev (Anheuser-Busch InBev's ticker symbol) in public trading improved during the three months immediately following the Super Bowl, gradually climbing nearly 24% by October of 2017 ("Anheuser-Busch InBev S.A. ADR," 2018). In the larger scale, the controversy re-invigorated Budweiser's flagging brand and ignited Anheuser-Busch's stocks on an upward trend. The fact that Anheuser-Busch's stocks improved in the aftermath of their Super Bowl campaign is a testament to the new values of society and a strategic exploitation of these values. While in the past, organizations have been able to claim a static value, in the age of social media organizations must embody these values in their form. Budweiser orchestrated what can be considered a *dialectic* values advocacy campaign by provoking celebration and outrage through ambiguous controversy, as will be explained in the following section.

### **Chapter Five: Dialectic Values Advocacy**

Values advocacy programs no longer exist in television or print news media. The present thesis proposes the construct of dialectic values advocacy to replace the traditional theorization of values advocacy. While Mobil's "Observations" were taken out as full-page ads in the newspaper during the 1970s, contemporary technology, and thus values advocacy, have changed (Cralle & Vibbert, 1983). New strategies for values advocacy campaigns must reconcile the diverse cultural/media contexts when considering the universal messages conveyed to stakeholders. Given the paradox of goodness, the expectations for CSR, and fragmented audience opinions, values advocacy is perhaps more necessary in the current media climate than before. In effect, the emergent interactive media has resulted in a changed, rhetorical stakeholder, and so to develop a campaign that, in Cralle and Vibbert's (1992) words, "synthesizes the American

consciousness” and promotes the values of the “common person,” the values typically associated with the common person must be re-defined. (p. 45).

The new consumer as rhetorical stakeholder holds new values and corporate expectations for responsibility; as will be shown in the following section, the new consumer demands different values, which this study terms values of *form*. Budweiser’s choice to use a politically charged advertisement demonstrates the contemporary values system, which has replaced Bostdorff and Vibbert’s (1994) conventional values of content including “patriotism” and “optimism.” The following section will highlight the differences between values of content and values of form. However, these “new” values are subject to the same constraints as traditional, content-based, values advocacy in that the organization must distance themselves from the values to maintain “near social unanimity” (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994, p. 143). Given political and media contexts that prioritize user-generated content, the only way for an organization to deal with the new environment of stakeholders and their expectations for political action on the part of organizations is to promote nothing. An organization that commits to a political stance risks embroiling itself in a conflict, alienating stakeholders, and leaving a trail of negative discourse to distort its reputation. In effect, dialectic values advocacy must promote formal values without committing to a single side; an organization must advocate formal values only superficially, which is to say, without consequence. The following sections outline the new values of contemporary society, then explain how to employ these values ambiguously as organizational epideictic to answer these challenges.

## Changing Values Systems

Budweiser's case study illustrates the importance of social media in determining the effects of mainstream advertisements (e.g., television commercials). What Williams (1974) called "cultural technology" shapes the outcomes of content through its communication: The Internet molded Budweiser's response to an otherwise innocuous example of values advocacy (p. 3). Furthermore, values "always have a cultural content, represent a psychological investment, and are shaped by the constraints and opportunities of a social system and of a biophysical environment" (Williams, 1979, p. 21). In other words, Budweiser's "Born the Hard Way" created values through a combination of multiple social and technological factors by which the stakeholder understands the message form. Indeed, Crable and Vibbert (1983) described how Mobil messages "are used in a medium uniquely suited" to the strategies of values advocacy (p. 394), emphasizing the fact that the medium informs the meaning of the message (McLuhan, 2006). Social media demand a values advocacy reflective of new technology and a reality that requires recognizing and exploiting the medium and the values implicit in the form of communication. For these reasons, organizations must change the way they practice values advocacy with respect to the technology, media, and culture. Social media's scope and breadth of users means stakeholders come from many diverse backgrounds and that otherwise universal values of content will no longer resonate universally.

Just as Crable and Vibbert's (1983) "Observations" from Mobil were manifest "while the public relaxes on a Sunday afternoon reading 'the papers,'" so, too, does a social media campaign distinctly "[establish] the epideictic which allows the deliberative discourse (via corporate advocacy) to flourish" (p. 394). A mediated experience that

primarily involved reading-and-listening constituted Mobil's values advocacy and, in the formal context, dictated the content of newspaper and television messages. The distinct form of social media requires a reconsideration of the values of the "common man" (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1992, p. 45). Crabbe and Vibbert (1983) recognized that "the mighty" are "placed in office by those on the sofa" through reading and listening, an observation changed by a stakeholder capable of interacting with the organization itself (p. 394). In fact, through social media, the rhetorical stakeholder does not just place the mighty in office from their sofa, but themselves become the mighty from the comfort of home. Social media users now interact with other sofa-sitters via smartphones and computers instead of reading the newspaper in solitude. All the while, each participant comments, likes, and retweets; as Burke (1964) observed, the expectations of the audience reflect the form. In a culture of interactive media, then, where apolitical messages are almost impossible, organizations must recognize the form of social media to reach stakeholders. Understanding the common stakeholder and their expectations through social media means that promoting universal values is now an interactive experience.

Even as Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) understood values as collective, or ideas that stakeholders could converge upon, the new, formal values of social media are individual in nature. Instead of developing universal agreement on a specific value of content, such as "patriotism" or "hard work," the provocation of contrasting individual opinions becomes the value itself. The act of provocation is what the present thesis terms a *formal* value, in that it requires action on the part of both the organization and audience to be present. Social media demands dynamic and interactive values. As an example, audiences understand "patriotism" through images of an American flag or a bald eagle,

but “engagement” cannot be communicated without behavior on the part of the organization itself to prove the existence of “engagement,” even superficially.

An analogy from Crable and Vibbert (1983) describing their original values advocacy analysis can clarify: “In one sense, the Sunday magazine section is a directionless collage; in another sense, it is one of the best encapsulations of the American character and experience” (p. 394). Based on the analysis of Budweiser’s 2017 Super Bowl spot, however, this directionless-ness is now a formal chart of the American character; instead of turning to the *content* of the collage as an indication of universal values, organizations must now follow the *form* of the directionless collage and facilitate this discord through provocative stakeholder engagement.

The form is also consistent with the fragmented landscape of the social media market, necessary to appeal to an audience of diverse, contrasting opinions. The effect, instead of concord behind a central idea (e.g., “patriotism,” “unity,” “hard work,” etc.), is discord involving multiple competing ideas. Whereas in the past invoking a value that stakeholders agreed on was sufficient to constitute values advocacy, in the age of social media garnering discordant responses that generate discussion is more important. Invoking the value of individual opinions in a stakeholder-centric culture *prioritizes the individual* and promotes an appropriate value to the audience.

Budweiser’s 2017 Super Bowl message caused stakeholders to re-evaluate their perception of Budweiser’s reputation and engage social media to make sense of this perception. The formal values of “engagement” and “sensationalism” actively put stakeholders in competition with one another to interpret the message. Whereas Crable and Vibbert’s (1983) values of content (e.g., supporting “patriotism” while reading a

newspaper in isolation) did not require a response, values of form require involvement and action on the part of stakeholders. By prioritizing the individual and inviting stakeholders to engage in discord, an organization promotes formal values. As seen through Budweiser's case study, the way to stimulate stakeholders through social media is to provoke with controversial messages. However, articulating "discord" and "engagement" as values is easier said than done. Many other organizations have attempted to court controversy less successfully than Budweiser.

### **Disruption without Damage: Strategizing Dialectic Values Advocacy**

The contemporary formal values of "engagement" and "discord" raises the question: In the context of a PR campaign, how does an organization court controversy without suffering the negative effects? By formally associating itself with the values of discord and engagement, Budweiser was able to generate attention and provoke people, but the messages' ambiguous content and ambiguous form enabled Budweiser to mitigate negative effects. Although Budweiser formally espoused the value of engagement in its provocative political advertisement, the behavior following the spot was detached, inactive, and decidedly unengaged. Consistent with Bostdorff and Vibbert's (1994) conceptualization of values advocacy as "ambiguous" and "inoffensive" in nature (p. 145), the form of dialectic values advocacy must engage stakeholders only superficially, or provoke without true provocation. Budweiser's engagement was superficial in that it stimulated the public through controversy, but did not engage in a meaningful public discussion beyond starting that conversation.

While provocation is necessary for maintaining the auspices of responsibility and significance, dialectic values advocacy campaigns only sport the façade of engagement.

Empty stimulation is parallel to traditional values advocacy campaigns committing the organization only to vague ideas instead of clear policies. Dialectic values advocacy engages the audience superficially by means of empty disruption and positive framing as a kind of ambiguous communication, coupled with the communication of an ambiguous subject. Ambiguous controversy, then, characterizes the new values advocacy through social media. A dialectic approach to values advocacy must balance multiple paradoxes to transform conflict into unanimity. Budweiser's strategies to balance ambiguity and controversy will inform an understanding of dialectic values advocacy and strategize unanimity in social media.

**Ambiguously controversial content.** Budweiser's choice to premiere a controversial advertisement with political undertones shows the importance of dynamic content. The content of a message must be sufficiently creative and arousing to require attention and interest (Botha, 2014). In the swiping-culture of smartphones and social media, significant commercials invite several viewings for stakeholders to fully notice all of the details and make a judgment. Particularly for a Super Bowl commercial, the role of technology is apparent in allowing viewers repeated viewings on YouTube for a commercial that would otherwise be seen only on television. To avoid a message that is so complex that it immediately alienates viewers, the use of relevant and emotional material, a strategy that Botha and Reyneke (2013) note is a key factor in viral marketing, becomes necessary. Budweiser understood the salience of immigration as an issue when developing the commercial. Relevance is necessary to facilitate values advocacy campaigns in a digital market saturated by interesting stories (Botha & Reyneke, 2013). The emotion associated with immigration in the cultural climate fueled attention for

Budweiser's advertisement. Through a combination of emotion and relevance, Budweiser formed controversial content that distinguished itself from other Super Bowl advertisements by using relevance to stimulate both approval and anger simultaneously.

Alternately, courting such controversy is not a particularly good idea for maintaining the status quo in an organization. Therefore, universal appeals must temper the emotion and relevance (or controversy) to prevent stakeholders from making absolute judgments and require more in-depth readings of the text. Thus, dialectic values advocacy does not merely appeal to gross social transgressions, but it evokes gross social transgressions couched in appeals to universal values. This orientation creates a complex artifact that draws in viewers and facilitates discussion by balancing provocation and innocence. Budweiser's Super Bowl spot reflected good intentions, but beneath the superficial values of "hard work" and "perseverance," the beer company appealed to controversy to espouse the value of "engagement." The balance between controversy and innocence created ambiguity that differentiated Budweiser's commercial from other controversial advertisements, engaging stakeholders and provoking discussion.

**Superficially engaging form.** After Budweiser's ambiguous-yet-controversial message sparked conversation, the organization superficially associated itself with the formal value of engagement. Budweiser's refusal to respond to negative tweets and its promotion of positive tweets maintained ambiguity in the organization's actions. Instead of actually engaging in dialogue, like the promoted value, Budweiser started the conversation and immediately declined to answer any questions, refusing even to apologize for offending stakeholders amid the burgeoning #BoycottBudweiser movement. Budweiser adamantly maintained the correctness of its spot and continued to



retweet its supporters. Budweiser created an ambiguous controversy by stimulating discourse, celebrating positive feedback, and ignoring negative feedback. To engage in more direct dialogue would have created only traditional controversy. In this way, goodwill was cultivated around Budweiser, and the beer company found many supporters to cushion its reputation with positive words. Practicing superficial engagement through dialectic values advocacy allows an organization to surround its social media identity with Tweets valorizing and sustaining conversation about the virtues of the organization.

Consequently, ignoring negative feedback is consistent with the focus of values advocacy campaigns “to keep [an organization] visible in a positive, non-controversial way” (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994, p. 145). Dialectic values advocacy expands the circumstances Veil, Petrun, and Roberts (2012) identify as requiring a response to reputational threats; sometimes the best answer on social media is no answer. Budweiser espoused the formal value of engagement only superficially, exploiting the act of engagement instead of fully engaging. As this study has shown, the strategy generated goodwill towards Budweiser and subsequent increase in stock prices.

**The risks of simple messages.** Dove’s 2017 beauty campaign, which sought to promote the value of diversity, serves as a counterpoint in illustrating the balance of ambiguity and controversy in form and content. Social media collectively criticized Dove’s 13-second commercial on Facebook as “racially insensitive” for featuring three women of different races taking off t-shirts and turning into each other (Bailey, 2017, para. 1). Dove promptly issued an apology regretting the offense caused and pulled the advertisement. Like Pepsi’s protest spot, Dove’s attempt to celebrate the value of diversity became a direct attack on diversity in the eyes of stakeholders. While the spot

was an example of traditional values advocacy in promoting inclusive beauty, contemporary sensitivities undermined the messages intended simple meaning. This factor illustrates the necessity for ambiguity and complexity to temper negative interpretations with positive interpretations. Even as the Nigerian model who starred in the spot publicly claimed that she was not a victim of racism from Dove, the commercial was almost unanimously denigrated as racist (Ogunyemi, 2017). As Dove's case demonstrates, an organization risks violently undermining its own status quo by promoting traditional universal values among fragmented stakeholders, a situation that can quickly result in crises and negative distortions of reputation.

Dove's commercial was unambiguous in both form and content and as a result did not provoke discussion but, rather, condemnation. In 13 seconds, the unambiguous message about diversity was stated, and so stakeholders were unable to sustain a conversation about the intricacies of Dove's ethics. However, Dove responded unambiguously as well, overwhelming the controversy/ambiguity balance and shutting down any possibility for dialogue. Dove's unambiguous apology failed to maintain a dialectic values advocacy, and an overly explicit message turned what would have otherwise been a textbook values advocacy campaign into a crisis.

Successful dialectic values advocacy finds the balance between ambiguity and controversy; as Dove's example illustrates, even simple messages about values are susceptible to misinterpretation and capable of provocation. Organizations must be more cautious when releasing messages involving values and identify the degree of ambiguity among the content and form to avoid situations involving universal outrage. When dialectic values advocacy is employed, the organization balances anonymity and

notoriety: An unambiguous message and unambiguous response (including an apology) can—and probably will—exacerbate controversy, while an overtly milquetoast message without any controversy and ambiguous engagement will go unnoticed. Only through a combination of notoriety and anonymity, or ambiguous controversy, can an organization intentionally engage people without damaging its reputation. By balancing values of content and values of form, organizations practicing dialectic values advocacy must create a message that will stimulate discussion and provoke varied responses while not completely alienating stakeholders and ruining the organizational reputation.

### **Ambiguous Controversy's Consequences: Outrage & Praise**

Rooted in Bostdorff and Vibberts (1994) original conceptualization of values advocacy, Budweiser's advertisement celebrated the traditional values of "hard work," "opportunity," and "the American dream" while at the same time courting the subtext of controversy through a deeply ambiguous message. Ambiguous controversy has the power to allow for multiple interpretations, and lets stakeholders find their own identification rather than creating a universal identification through a value of content. Social media demand a values advocacy technique capable of dialectically balancing the many paradoxes of the new stakeholder dialectically. Whereas traditional organizational epideictic "praises commonly held values and beliefs," dialectic values advocacy requires rhetoric that simultaneously praises and outrages, allowing stakeholders to deliberate at length upon the nature of this judgment (Cralle & Vibbert, 1992, p. 31). Provoking discussion by facilitating both outrage and praise represents a new rhetorical appeal distinct to the era of reality television and social media. Organizations can no longer expect a consistent reaction but must anticipate the diversity of competing opinions

among multiple rhetorical stakeholders. Stimulating empty discussion is key to promoting the formal value of “engagement” in a dialectic values advocacy campaign.

Consistent with previous theorizations of values advocacy, organizational engagement and discussion does not affect the status quo, but rather “diverts public attention from serious questions about organizational policies, products, and practices” (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994, p. 153). In the context of the formal value of “engagement,” the organization’s empty stimulation causes the stakeholders to be active but unfocused. Dialectically, discursive organizational action transforms discursive stakeholder action into inaction: Nothing happens. Although impassioned discussion occurs on the controversial subject, such as Budweiser’s ambiguously controversial challenge of Trump’s immigration policy, the organization makes no concrete commitment to an issue and, after the furor dies down, society remains unchanged. Budweiser was content to agitate and continue with operations as usual because values advocacy campaigns do not represent hills to die on; values advocacy messages are causes associated with “values the audience already held” (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994, p. 147). Therefore, neither the traditional values of “hard work,” “perseverance,” and “acceptance,” nor immigration were the focus of Budweiser’s dialectic values advocacy campaign. Instead, “engagement,” “sensationalism,” and “discord” were the values the audience already held that the company used to create positive identification.

Indeed, if continued organizational engagement changed the circumstances surrounding an issue, the organization would be practicing CSR and alienating sections of fragmented rhetorical stakeholders. Instead, formal universal values simply maintain the status quo; consistent with Bostdorff and Vibbert’s (1994) original theorization of

values advocacy, organizations invoke empty universal values that enforce the status quo to exploit the goodwill of stakeholders. Of course, also similar to Bostdorff and Vibbert's observations, dialectic values advocacy "poses a serious threat to the polity by distracting citizens from troublesome issues and encouraging them not to hold organizational communicators accountable" (p. 153).

Although intuitively it seems that stimulating engagement would draw attention to important issues and generate productive dialogue about important public policies, the reality is that the dialogue is merely a superficial exercise simultaneously in outrage and praise. During the year following Budweiser's Super Bowl spot, although lawmakers fought in the Supreme Court over three successive iterations of Trump's travel ban, stakeholders generally lost interest in the issue. Other activist causes such as women's rights, sexual misconduct, and school shootings took priority on social media in a succession of diverse movements and colorful hashtags. In the contemporary media context, few causes have the staying power to remain relevant enough for real action beyond Internet support or condemnation. In essence, dialectic values advocacy is distinct from corporate activism in outcome, but also in means. As Dozier and Lauzen (2000) noted, "public relations practices cannot adequately accommodate social movements because such movements simultaneously involve deep psychological issues (at the microlevel) that are acted out at the societal level (at the macrolevel)," while OPR approaches focus on a broader scale (p. 13). The diluted and vague rhetoric of dialectic values advocacy accommodates these psychological-social issues by allowing individuals the power to individually create their own meaning.

The fleeting qualities of social media make dialectic values advocacy well suited for enhancing reputation. An organization too explicitly taking sides through CSR will only embroil itself in a transient conflict, but in the process will damage its reputation and make little change in the system. Engaging with stakeholders through ambiguously controversial messages and social media behavior becomes key to dialectic values advocacy; however, navigating the balance between ambiguity and offense is situationally-driven and must be informed by the media and political contexts. Just as analyzing discourse is not possible without an understanding of the political and media contexts, so too developing a dialectic values advocacy campaign is not possible without recognizing these constantly evolving contexts and balancing both form and content to create ambiguous controversy. While the stakeholder-centric rhetorical stakeholder is a broad foundation from which to start strategizing campaigns, specific contexts, like Budweiser's unique Super Bowl stage, require further detail.

Just like traditional values advocacy, the goal of dialectic values advocacy is ethical nothingness, a disappearing act among the many controversies and the vitriol that defines contemporary social media. While some organizations and OPR professionals may discontent themselves with such paradoxical, unsettling logic, the reality is that the new mediated market teems with similar contradictions. Social media are both constantly new and permanently historical; because of this contradiction, the medium creates reputation transformed somewhere between the new and old.

Counterintuitively, conflict is required in the contemporary age for an organization to cultivate goodwill among stakeholders. With the rise of concretized discourse, organizations are more reluctant to put reputations on the line for fear of

negative feedback clinging indefinitely. Alternately, organizations who fail to drum up conflict will fade away and become just another digital fossil in the Internet. An organization can find success through social media by recognizing the communication medium and taking the necessary risks to achieve significance. Because the medium is inherently unpredictable, organizations must use this instability to recreate identity constantly, to generate conflict, and to develop a reputation as an organization consistent with the values of social media. New technology redefines stability for organizations: In a fast-paced market, the “directionless collage” of what would otherwise be understood as barely-contained chaos spells stability for an organization (Crabbe & Vibbert, 1983, p. 394), and reinventing a reputation constantly develops a consistent reputation.

Media and culture are as inextricable as content and form or organization and stakeholder. Social media have blurred the lines between these dualisms altogether, and the rise of the rhetorical stakeholder means that an organization has even less agency over its identity. In a culture that focuses on the individual, stakeholders are tired of the slippery rhetoric of television and print and demand authenticity from organizations through social media. While organizations may be at a loss to deliver realness through media, they must recognize this stakeholder need and develop strategies like dialectic values advocacy to capitalize on the vulnerabilities of cultural unity among a dissonant and unforgiving audience.

### **Chapter Six: Discussion**

As the analysis of Budweiser’s success suggests, the new common values of the common person are rooted in formal values of activity such as “sensationalism,” “engagement,” and “discord;” the contemporary organizational epideictic paradoxically

provokes outrage and celebration. In effect, while traditional values advocacy conceptualized values as unifying, the emergent organizational epideictic reframes values advocacy around discord and the recognition of individual voices. Engagement as a formal value of dialectic values advocacy has many important implications to consider for the future of OPR research and professional management of reputation. The introduction of rhetorical stakeholders and dialectic values advocacy offer several theoretical and practical implications for public relations. Issues management research must recognize a new construct of stakeholders whose peripheral interest creates meaningful consumer perceptions of an organization and, in effect, defines reputation. Professionally, corporations and firms must consider the cultural and media characteristics of the medium when developing campaigns to establish and strengthen relationships with consumers.

### **Theoretical Implications & Future Research**

Dialectic values advocacy has several implications for issues management. Because issues management is discursively informed (Kuhn, 1997), a dialectic approach to values advocacy expands theoretical understandings for the activation of issues. Managing the reputation of an organization requires formally espousing the new values of engagement and sensation. In effect, as informed by dialectic values advocacy, issues management is consistent with Crable and Vibbert's (1985) conceptualization as a long-standing relationship between publics and the organization. However, considerations of the form of the medium illuminate this relationship. In a hyper-mediated society, issues management can no longer rely solely on the content of issues, but must consider the means of communication, as well.



In effect, conceptualizing the rhetorical stakeholder as a public creates a reputation that changes how issues management research can understand issues and strategies for management. The introduction of rhetorical stakeholders also enriches Bitzer's (1992) rhetorical situation by demonstrating the discursive power of mediated messages and lends insight to the complicated market in which organizations must establish and maintain identities. The rhetorical stakeholder is consistent with Frandsen and Johansen's (2010) new consumer as individually construed, universal only in the formal discursive context. When consumers are only formally universal, the means by which an organization can manipulate common values is through a formal approach. Furthermore, the rhetorical stakeholder construct begins to theorize the problematic phenomena of concretized discourse and develop strategies for organizational action when developing identity through social media.

Likewise, the dialectic illuminates the co-creational perspective of OPR (Botan & Taylor, 2004), transcending the organizational and the stakeholder perspectives and becoming something that satisfies both realities. A dialectic understanding of social media rationalizes the co-creational paradigm and develops a coherent theorization of the consumer environment and appropriate organizational strategies. The expectations of society for organizational reputation must also inform decisions for responsibly engendering the values of discord. Developing a reputation of responsibility must approach the issue beyond situational factors (Coombs, 2007a), and reflect on the deeper cultural, formal values that characterize contemporary publics.

When theorizing cultural values, which Sarma (2017) recognized heavily influences consumer behaviors, research must emphasize a strong relationship between

media and culture, particularly in a globalizing world. Budweiser's new provocative aesthetic is admittedly disparate from the Clydesdale-aesthetic that traditionally characterized the beer mogul's commercials. Although no research as of yet indicates that the company's new direction is a reflection of international values, the recent merger of AB InBev and corresponding transnational identity could lead one to speculate on the role of globalization in changing traditional values. The sheer breadth social media has connected disparate people across countries and continents, perhaps leading to stakeholder-centric attitudes that transcend cultural barriers. Researchers have long struggled to develop comprehensive promotional campaigns across different cultures and continents (Kaynak & Hassan, 2014), and a universal technology may make these theorizations possibly easier and certainly more necessary in the near future. Research exploring the boundaries of identification through the Internet is necessary to fully explicate cultural values for any country and develop means for identifying with these populations to sell products and promote a brand (Karababa & Kjeldgaard, 2014).

Furthermore, Budweiser's traditional, politically conservative reputation could be considered in conflict with the left-leaning controversy as well, which creates discord and confusion for stakeholder expectations. The dissonance between Budweiser's conventional audience and the content of the Super Bowl spot may have also contributed to the intensity of the backlash. Although beyond the extent of the present study, subversions of reputation may have a future in OPR research for maintaining relevance and significance for an organization through the art of radical reinvention. The field of OPR may see more case studies involving organizations reinventing themselves continuously to remain relevant in the near future.

Identifying the complexities of the social media landscape lends direction to next steps in OPR research informed by the distinct features of the rhetorical dialectic. A dialectic approach reconciles the differences present between diverse meanings as Heath (2009) noted, and provides a foundation on which to base future empirical studies examining the nuances of an interactive media landscape. Although rhetorical criticism shaped the present study, future research can utilize empirical methods to operationalize the current constructs and provide more methodological evidence. Variables such as temporality, tonal consistency, emotionality, and relevance all contribute to shaping the social media identity of an organization and determining the context of interpretation for dialectic values advocacy and should further guide future research regarding controversy and ambiguity in social media. The inclusion of these constructs begins to deconstruct ideographs in the OPR field and strategize the use of concretized discourse.

Finally, the form of engagement and the values of stakeholders are starting points for establishing accurate operational definitions to describe these important terms in OPR research and lead future research detailing further nuances. The goal of introducing a more rhetorical perspective to underpin any future methodological work is to bridge better the gap between theory and the realities of OPR: Public relations firms and corporations will strategize reputation more effectively in a new and relatively untested medium with strong theory. The cohesive assumptions of a rhetorical-dialectical paradigm provide a means to describe, explain, and more accurately predict the stakeholder response to mediated organizational messages and guide empirical work in the field.

## **Professional Implications: Developing Strategies**

Given the spate of recent controversies and scandals, organizations must tread carefully to avoid the Internet's contemporary guillotine, and values advocacy is one way of promoting goodwill without offending significant audiences. Organizations have always used values advocacy but, as Budweiser, Pepsi, Airbnb, Dove, and countless others not examined here have shown, stakeholders no longer interpret traditional values advocacy in a universally favorable way. Corporations will benefit from employing dialectic values advocacy in order to generate goodwill among an increasingly intolerant public. Given the contemporary rhetorical situation, which includes expectations for corporate social responsibility from organizations, acting in the interests of organizational and societal values can enhance the rhetorical stakeholder/organization relationship (Becker-Olsen, et al., 2006). By identifying new ambiguous values that appeal to the paradoxical nature of individuality in social media, organizations can formally espouse a responsible reputation without offending stakeholders.

In a world defined by hyper-mediation, a world in which message form is constantly evolving, the content must reflect the form because the form is the content. Several firms are already marrying form and content using a combination of awareness and authenticity to promote both large and recondite brands through the use of experiential marketing; Denise Wong, president of George P. Johnson Experiential Marketing, noted how "Experiential work is where the rubber hits the road—where advertising meets the Amazon review" (Coffee, 2017, para. 2). Advertisers and marketing professionals have struggled in recent years to adapt successfully to the changing and unforgiving medium of the Internet. Consumers increasingly ignore

traditional advertising content, as Patrick Jong, project manager at the marketing agency Giant Spoon observed, “Nobody is tweeting about a billboard” (Coffee, 2017, para. 8). Stakeholders are looking for something personal in the increasingly impersonal and suffocatingly spacious scope of the Internet; an organization can no longer rely on traditional media to promote quietly through the established channels but must be creative and innovative to compete through social media.

Even traditional advertisements on social media sites are becoming aged and antiquated; in February 2018 Unilever, one of the world’s top advertisers, threatened to pull its advertisements from Facebook and Google if the companies did not clear the “swamps” of marketing content saturation (Riley, 2018, para. 2). The discursive space continues to shift as advertisers now focus their attention on mobile marketing; a different format from a computer, the viewability of advertising in apps offers even more potential for engagement from stakeholders (Upstone, 2017). Recognizing the technological form must shape the content, because advertising content that worked on a computer does not always translate to the attention span and situational context of a hand-held phone, and according to 2017 study by *Flurry*, U.S. consumers spend over 5 hours on their phone each day (Perez, 2017). Identifying a means to accommodate the ever-changing form of social media remains a persistent question for advertising firms, and a working theoretical relationship between form and content will inform practical directions for new advertising media.

The rhetorical dialectic can help advertisers understand the basic concepts underpinning social media as a cultural technology. Although this approach does not provide a systematic, empirical method for producing content, the new media demands a

more artful and interpretive touch to stay creative and innovative. In spite of the surplus of user data, using this data in an appropriate way remains for the time being more art than science; organizations do not have the time to develop long-term studies methodically developing best practices when the next best thing in technology will usurp the current tech toys in a matter of years. Instead, organizations must act fast and use a deep understanding of the cultural values and media rules to develop creative and innovative significance that will make stakeholders aware of an organization. One-size-fits-all solutions, if they ever worked in advertising, are nearing extinction in the hyper-competitive marketing world of social media. Companies that phone in efforts to develop reputation will quickly find that there is someone else out there doing the exact same thing with more flair and distinction.

In an algorithmic wilderness, the overwhelming chaos of competing organizational identities can obscure an otherwise spotless reputation, tarnishing corporate image with invisibility. The ability to offend ambiguously allows an organization to appear relevant and rhetorically visible to the public consciousness while remaining beneficent through the promotion of values universal to society. The new dialectic world and discursive consumer demands a new dialectic approach to values advocacy, issues management, and crisis management communication in general. Indeed, in the future, the companies who will be most successful will recognize the rhetorical power of stakeholders and access the potential of concretized discourse to build dynamic identities.

## **Closing Thoughts**

Dialectic values advocacy employs engagement superficially as a contemporary value. In the rhetorical landscape of social media, unanimity exists only in division. The most pervasive value rhetorical stakeholders share with one another is a penchant for disagreement, creating a culture of argumentation. Organizations can use this friction to their advantage, because ambiguous controversy stimulates rhetorical stakeholders to discuss, and among the detractors and critics of the message, an organization will have supporters who will defend and provide praise. Dialectic values advocacy, in a sense, perpetuates the organizational epideictic to endure beyond the message itself and create visibility for an organization. Dialectic values advocacy is not the exploitation of static values but a provocation of outrage and celebration simultaneously, to engage stakeholders and make an organization the subject of dialogue.

The preceding analysis of Budweiser's 2017 Super Bowl advertisement illustrates how values advocacy can adapt to contemporary technologies, each of which demands new theoretical devices to explain the rhetorical implications of social media. Dialectic values advocacy formally accommodates society's changing values to reflect the increasing ubiquity of social media and paradoxical realities of a hyper-mediated world. Budweiser's successful values advocacy campaign re-invigorated the beer titan's stock prices and gave the suffering brand visibility by espousing the formal value of engagement through ambiguous controversy.

The dialectic in this study serves a two-fold purpose guiding both future research and future practice. Scholars and organizations can no longer study responses or messages in isolation but must focus on the discourse itself to understand the dynamics of

social media. Through an emphasis on the discourse, research can better inform OPR strategies for developing reputation through social media, and organizations can remain visible and competitive in an increasingly fragmented, unstable world.



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## Vita

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