Fear of being replaced: The dark side of employee ambassadorship on social media

Alessandra Sossini and Mats Heide
Department of Strategic Communication, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Abstract

Purpose – This study problematizes the prevailing normative and managerial-dominated view of self-initiated employee ambassadorship on social media from a power perspective. The aim is to provide a more nuanced and critical understanding of the negative aspects of this phenomenon.

Design/methodology/approach – The empirical material encompasses qualitative interviews with employees from 14 organizations and Foucault's concept of disciplinary discursive power to analyze which and how discourses exert power over employee communication on social media and what role visibility plays in it.

Findings – This study indicates that employee ambassadors' social media communication is governed by two discourses that create complex tensions, where ambassadors constantly must negotiate between self-branding requirements and an authenticity paradox. These tensions intensify through visibility on social media, where employees strategize and situationally silence their communication through self-monitoring and self-surveillance practices. Conclusively, the findings also outline the need for further critical research to offer a deeper understanding of power relations that influence the communication practices of organizational members.

Research limitations/implications – The paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of self-initiated employee ambassadorship on social media and highlights disciplinary power relations that go beyond organizational borders.

Practical implications – The findings underscore that organizations need to address the critical aspects of self-initiated employee ambassadorship and act as facilitators to support employees in their navigation process.

Originality/value – This paper contributes a new critical power perspective on employee ambassadorship on social media.

Keywords Social media, Power, Employee communications, Discourse, Resistance, Employee ambassadorship

Paper type Original Article

Introduction

Social media have given employees new opportunities to take on the role of communicators and brand ambassadors. They can share experiences, build employer identification (Falkheimer and Heide, 2014) and make their voices heard by a larger audience (Miles and Mangold, 2014). Therefore, social media have evolved to become a significant part of organizations' strategic communication (cf. Falkheimer and Heide, 2022). Although employee ambassadors' communication can occur in the context of a premeditated and controlled initiative that has been taken by the organization and that consciously trains employees to become brand ambassadors, employees have also begun creating and publishing supportive messages on their own initiative, thus outside the scope of organization-initiated employee

ambassadorship programs (Van Zoonen *et al.*, 2014). This is a growing phenomenon. In 2022, LinkedIn experienced a 22% year-over-year growth in engagement, with a continuing upward trend (Shepherd, 2023). This development is beneficial for organizations, as self-initiated employee ambassadorship enhances the credibility of the organization's brand and communication (Van den Berg and Verhoeven, 2017). However, to minimize the risk of reputational damage and still benefit from employees' communicative motivation, the professional environment suggests that an incentive-driven and strategic management approach be employed to guide employees' voices while enhancing their feeling of empowerment (Soens and Claeys, 2021).

While there is considerable research on the "positive" aspects for organizations, too little attention has been paid to the darker side of employee ambassadorship, for example, the risks to employees as well as the more extensive societal control mechanisms that influence employees' communication (Alvesson and Deetz, 2021) and be harmful to their well-being (Altheide, 2013; Van Zoonen *et al.*, 2016). One explanation for this can be found in the dominating management perspective on how to steer employee communication on social media (e.g. Dreher, 2014; Opitz *et al.*, 2018; Soens and Claeys, 2021). This perspective assumes that employees' sense-making and communication processes are controllable by managers, even though it has become evident that strategy and practice do not always overlap (Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012; Alvesson and Blom, 2019) and that organizational life is filled with contradictions that make it messy rather than homogeneous (Deetz, 1992; Einola and Alvesson, 2018). Additionally, earlier research has also neglected organization members' embeddedness in society and their constant exchange with and compliance to social, cultural and political systems (cf. Alvesson, 1996). This form of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1972) extends beyond managerial boundaries, prompting self-disciplinary behaviors among employees that are deeply ingrained in social structures (cf. Duffy and Chan, 2019). However, the assumption that employees take on and off the role of ambassadors freely and voluntarily without being influenced or impacted negatively is still predominant (e.g. Morrison, 2014). This has at least two negative consequences. On the one hand, employees are falsely ascribed illusionary freedom of speech and participation on social media (Müller, 2018). On the other hand, this problem causes organizations to believe that employees' communication can only be directed through strategic managerial control, such as guidelines and incentives.

Hence, the present study specifically investigates the previously overlooked negative facets of employee ambassadorship on social media and the power relations that can be found outside the organization that still govern employee ambassadors' communication. The study is based on qualitative interviews with employees who regularly engage in self-initiated ambassadorship on LinkedIn as well as employees who resist such communication activities.

The study aims to generate new knowledge and deepen the understanding of self-initiated employee ambassadorship on social media by taking a more nuanced and critical perspective of power relations. Based on this aim, the following research question was derived:

RQ1. How and which discourses exert power over self-initiated employee ambassadors' communication activities on social media?

Research on employee ambassadorship and power

In this section, we will review previous research on employee ambassadorship and the communicative role of employees as well as present theories on power. Naturally, we have no ambitions to cover the large field of power studies. Still, we focus on Michel Foucault's power concept, which emphasizes the role of discourse, communication and their disciplinary effect.

Employee ambassadorship, social media and control
The concept of employee ambassadorship derives from branding studies, where both older and more recent research has acknowledged the significance of employees as carriers of the organizational identity and brand messages (De Chernatony, 1999; Hatch and Schultz, 2003; Kärreman and Frandsen, 2020). From this notion, employee ambassadorship emerged, referring to employees who "embody the brand" (Müller, 2018, p. 42) they work for. Initially, this concept was introduced as a management practice to guide employees in aligning their communication with the brand identity (Ind, 2007). However, further studies have demonstrated other benefits of including employees in the branding process, e.g. that it enhances the meaning of their work (Sartain, 2005; Kärreman and Rylander, 2008).

Strategic communication researchers have also recognized employees' pivotal role as communicators, whose communication processes extend beyond branding processes to profoundly shape organizational goals and constitute the organization (Heide and Simonsson, 2011, 2018; Heide *et al.*, 2018). Consequently, intentionally or unintentionally, employees assume various communicative roles. In their Active Employee Communication Role (AECR) Framework, Madsen and Verhoeven (2019) grouped these roles into eight categories, four of which are closely associated with the employee's role as an ambassador. In a subsequent study, Verhoeven and Madsen (2022) expanded on this and introduced challenges, adding a more critical dimension to employees' communicative responsibilities. One primary challenge is that employees are often not adequately prepared to assume a communicative role, which diminishes their sense of autonomy.

Social media have given employees a new opportunity to take on the role of ambassadors and claim their autonomy. Falkheimer and Heide (2014) emphasized the participatory features of social media, where employees can autonomously formulate and publicly communicate strategic messages on behalf of the organization. A managerial perspective has driven this development. On the one hand, it highlights managers' expectations and the great value of employees' personal social media communication about their work (Pekkala *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, previous research has focused on strategic management practices meant to directly or indirectly guide employees' communication so as to avoid reputational damage (Soens and Claeys, 2021). However, this still raises the question of the degree to which an organization can control its employees' personal social media. From a communication perspective, Falkheimer and Heide (2014) argued that social media make communication less controllable. Studies have shown that employees' ambassadorship on social media is guided not only by managers, but also by other organizational members, their relationships and the organizational culture (e.g. Martin *et al.*, 2015; Smith *et al.*, 2017). LinkedIn, as a professional social media platform, is of particular significance in this context. The platform serves as a prominent identification point due to the constant visibility of the link between employees and their employers (Van Zoonen *et al.*, 2018), which automatically turns employees into ambassadors. Consequently, previous research has mainly been based on human resource (HR) management studies, which have analyzed how employee ambassadorship on LinkedIn influences the employer's brand (Da Motta Veiga *et al.*, 2020; Joglekar and Tan, 2022).

While discussions about employee ambassadorship predominantly revolve around management perspectives, few scholars have adopted a critical perspective. Wæraas and Dahle (2020) outlined the effects of internal managerial regulations, which can engender employee dissatisfaction. Moreover, as employees are now expected to be active communicators, they must constantly navigate between professional role expectations and their identity as individuals, creating tension and leading to what Andersson (2019) addressed as the "undesired self." Müller (2017) called this phenomenon "brand-centered control," wherein employees internalize the corporate brand to the extent that they are "branded all around the clock" (p. 910). These tensions intensify through social media, which erase the line between work and private identity (Van Zoonen *et al.*, 2016) and give rise to new

expectations. Christensen (2023) demonstrated that employees' identity formation on social media is "permeated by organizational and social ideals and expectations, participating in constituting members' perception of who they are" (p. 53). Cassinger and Thelander (2020) further elaborated on the notion that this self-presentation originates from social conventions embedded in hierarchical structures. In this respect, social recognition is a central aspect, where the pressure to meet certain expectations and ideals of an imagined audience constrain the employee voice (Madsen, 2016; Christensen and Christensen, 2022).

The above literature review highlights the increasing relevance of employee ambassadorship in organizations' communication. While there has been a shift toward an employee-centered approach, only a limited amount of research has explored the potential downsides associated with this phenomenon.

The disciplinary effect of power

In recent decades, critical postmodern researchers have underscored the need to adopt a critical lens to examine the taken-for-granted power and control mechanisms that exist within organizations (Deetz, 1992). Critical postmodernist research has adopted a more fluid perspective on power relations, emphasizing dynamism over rigid structures. In this view, power is situational and subject to constant negotiation within the organization and society, where power and meaning are ascribed through communication and discourses (Alvesson and Deetz, 2021). Hence, communication is the very means through which power is conducted, exercised, advanced and preserved.

This study adopted this postmodern perspective and was guided by Michael Foucault's (1972) understanding of power, which attributes to modern society a dominant disciplinary power, where social norms define what is "normal" and acceptable and emanate from impersonal and "faceless" social institutions, e.g. offices, which operate according to rules, procedures and discourses (Prasad, 2017). Disciplinary power relations often elude our perception, the result being that seemingly natural situations are rife with unnoticed power dynamics (Alvesson, 1996). As Foucault (1977) has maintained, "[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (p. 93). This underscores the multiplicity of power and its resistance to being acquired or possessed (Deetz, 1992). However, this notion could lead to the assumption that everything can be looked at from a power perspective, which runs the risk of us engaging in hyper skepticism and overlooking the potential of human agency to influence power relations (Prasad, 2017).

Critical organization scholars have stressed the notion that discourses are the essence of power relations in organizations, influencing how organization members perceive, experience and construct their reality and identity. Deetz and Mumby (1990) elaborated on this, stating that "the social construction of organizational reality is characterized [. . .] by the complexity of various discursive practices that define what it means to be an organization member" (p. 39). This relationship between power, discourse and organization members also aims to open up the traditional perspective on managerial power (Deetz and Mumby, 1990). However, Foucault's (1972) primary focus was not on the truth of discourses but on how they generate and influence social practices and "systematically form the object of which they speak" (p. 49). Based on this, Storey (2018) underlined the enabling, constraining and constituting features of discourses, describing them as social scripts that members of society consciously or unconsciously perform. Similarly, Prasad (2017) laid out three key elements, where discourses can be analyzed through: (1) their internal rules, (2) their effects and (3) their manifestation in materialistic practices. Therefore, discourses can be seen as systems of meanings, ideas and assumptions that shape how people talk about and understand the discussed topic.

Furthermore, to offer a more nuanced understanding of the disciplinary power of discourses, Foucault's concept of self-surveillance and visibility is significant, especially in

the context of continuous self-exposure on social media. Through his panopticon concept, Foucault (1977) related to modern self-surveillance, where a perpetual sense of visibility ensures the automatic operation of power. Essentially, it is not direct punishment that governs individuals, but an imagined surveillance or disciplinary gaze that fosters a sense of responsibility to self-monitor and self-adjust one's behavior to conform with the norms established by discourses (Prasad, 2017). This surveillance can also be found within organizations, where members engage in mutual surveillance, which is not limited to top management but also occurs between colleagues (Mckinlay and Taylor, 1998).

A final proposition regarding power that Foucault (1978) made is that there is no power without resistance and that resistance is the natural ongoing response to any form of power (Deetz, 1992). However, although resistance is present, this does not mean that it completely replaces power, but that power and resistance are in a dialectic relationship, constituting and influencing each other, resulting in various conflicts (Mumby, 2005).

In conclusion, while Foucault's concepts have gained attention in organizational studies, they have primarily been used for theoretical purposes and seldom been applied to empirical data, such as interviews (Alvesson and Deetz, 2021). Nonetheless, scholars are increasingly advocating the use of critical concepts in research interviews to uncover and challenge normalized power relations. Thus, applying the concepts of discursive power and visibility to empirical material allows us to critically examine the communicative behaviors of employee ambassadors on social media.

Methodology

The ambition of the present article is to contribute to theory development by focusing on aspects that are often taken for granted. According to Weick (1989) "a good theory is a plausible theory, and a theory is judged to be more plausible and of higher quality if it is interesting rather than obvious, irrelevant or absurd" (p. 517). This demands fuller problem statements and creativity, and it is one of the reasons we have focused on the dark side of employee ambassadorship on social media – an aspect that is rarely covered. Further, we seek to generate new knowledge that meets the criterion "that's interesting" (disconfirming assumptions) rather than "that's obvious" (confirming assumptions) (Weick, 1989). The postmodern perspective is based on social constructionist ontology, meaning that reality is understood as a social construct. Thus, organization is a verb (i.e. to organize), and employees are essential in this construction process (Weick, 1995). Further, we do not aim to describe and explain reality as an objective phenomenon that exists "out there," but to cover the social construction of reality by focusing on actions, communication and interpretation (cf. Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Consequently, the present article is based on empirical material collected using the qualitative research method of interviews.

The study applied a critical interpretive research approach, as it aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the power relations and control mechanisms that govern self-initiated employee ambassadors on social media. The empirical material was gathered from 15 qualitative semi-structured interviews with self-initiated employee ambassadors and with employees who resisted ambassadorship on social media. The participants were from 14 organizations and worked in a variety of roles.

A purposive sampling strategy was used based on strategic choices concerning which individuals were most suitable to interview (Patton, 2002; Palys, 2008). We recruited participants with information-rich perceptions and in-depth insights about their role as self-initiated ambassadors on social media (cf. Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). To guarantee the suitability of candidates, two requirement catalogs were created. For the first group, the framework of employee communication roles proposed by Madsen and Verhoeven (2019) was used to find employee ambassadors. In addition to the ambassador role characteristics, the

catalog ensured that participants were not receiving any monetary incentives for their role as an ambassador, as this could bias the empirical material. The same process was also applied to the second sampling group to find candidates who were resisting self-initiated employee ambassadorship on social media. The main requirement for selection was their opinion about and resistance to employee communication on social media. Additionally, network sampling was used to reach further interviewees by seeking recommendations from individuals already involved in the study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Theoretical saturation (cf. Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was reached after we had analyzed 15 interviews, meaning that additional interviews would not have helped us produce any more theoretical insights. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) discussed sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research and suggested that saturation can be achieved within a narrow range of interviews (9–17). This result confirms earlier research (e.g. Guest *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, we believe that the number of interviews (15) we conducted is sufficient to allow analytical generalizations (Halkier, 2011).

For the interview process, two interview guides were used to create an overarching thematic structure. Both guides covered three main themes: the perception and experience of employee ambassadorship on social media, the experience of self-disciplinary behavior and the experience of visibility and surveillance. We made verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, initiated the first-order analysis of the material and, thus, developed a better understanding of the content (e.g. Mcmullin, 2023).

The postmodern perspective implies that interviews are not conducted with the aim of discovering already existing ideas and meanings that only exist inside the interviewee. Instead, interviews are mutual processes in which the conversation can lead to new insights and ideas on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). Seeking to meet the criterion "that's interesting," we have used the empirical material to rethink the obvious and the taken for given (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011).

Therefore, after the first-order analysis, the interview transcripts were further analyzed in different steps. Initially, the transcripts were merged with the interview notes and memos and categorized to make the material more manageable. After organizing the empirical material and gaining further insights into the transcripts, the empirical material was then analyzed through a critical lens. To accomplish this, an abductive research approach was used, where the researcher works iteratively and alternates continuously between the empirical material and theory to get at the deeper meaning of the interviews (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). In other words, the empirical material has been used as a partner for critical dialog rather than as a mirror of an "objective" reality that exists "out there" (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013).

To conclude, one important aspect to discuss within critical research is researchers' reflexivity. Because critical research focuses on power dimensions, we have been aware of the asymmetrical power relationship between the interviewer and interviewee throughout the entire collection process of the empirical material. This acknowledgment is crucial, considering that the interview and its setting are always controlled by the interviewer/researcher (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014).

Analysis

In this section, we present and discuss our analysis of the empirical material. First, we focus on two leading discourses identified and deconstructed in the interviews – discourses that exert disciplinary power and govern the communicative behavior of employee ambassadors. Second, we discuss the disciplinary effect of visibility in relation to the discourses and how employees established strategies to "hack" it.

Power of discourse: navigating between substitutability and authenticity
To comprehend how discourses wield power over employee ambassadors, it is essential to first identify and deconstruct the influential discourses. Our analysis has unveiled two dominant discourses that shape self-initiated employee ambassadors' communication on social media, influence their communication and give rise to tensions and paradoxes, which employees must then navigate. These two discourses are: (1) the discourse of employee substitutability and (2) the discourse of social media authenticity.

From employee substitutability to self-branding strategies. The first discourse that became apparent through deconstruction of and critical dialog with the empirical material was the discourse of employee substitutability. Interviewees emphasized the critical role of social media in today's business landscape, where employee communication on platforms like LinkedIn is considered as "part of the good form" but also expected by the organization as an additional job responsibility to produce value through "communicative labor" (cf Mumby, 2016). As one interviewee put it:

> For me, it's part of the job or my role. And I think everyone knows when they don't feel like doing their job. But still, it means that for me. I have a kind of self-understanding that it's just part of the job.

An internal rule that has thus been manifested is that communication by employee ambassadors on social media might impact their attractiveness and that not realizing this could create the risk of replaceability and job loss. Another interviewee explained:

> I'm firmly convinced that our society is so far gone now, especially for us in communications, that we're replaceable. [. . .] To be seen, that requires an active LinkedIn profile.

She emphasized that it was by increasing her LinkedIn activity that she felt management's attention. Consequently, active participation on LinkedIn has become an indication of success and expertise in the competitive landscape of the job market – "the war for talent." The analysis revealed a distinct trend among employees, emphasizing the use of individual presentation on the platform to fortify their personal brand and self-perception. This has a dual impact on the employee, but results in a unified communicative outcome. On the one hand, their communication as ambassadors is a reactive measure in response to the possible substitutability, the goal being to increase their attractiveness with their current employer. On the other hand, it is also a proactive measure meant to increase their attractiveness on the job market in the event of job loss. Related to the latter, it became clear that interviewees felt obliged to create a self-image detached from the organization so that they could compete with other talents and be relevant to potential new employers. Consequently, what emerges are *self-branding strategies* meant to gain recognition for the work of individuals that would otherwise have been lost under the cover of the corporate brand. At the same time, this also shows that the urge for self-presentation is not simply intrinsically motivated but explained by substitutability and competition on the labor market. However, it is important to note that, despite their individual presentation on LinkedIn, the interviewees still underscored the importance of their employer's reputation (cf Schaarschmidt and Könsgen, 2020). This interdependence suggests that the organization's and the ambassador's communication efforts are crucial for enhancing the respective images and competitiveness on the corporate and labor markets. For ambassadors, this entails not only supporting the organizational image on social media but also meticulously crafting a compelling self-image, causing them to simultaneously strive for perfection and professionalism. One interviewee explained:

> If you make a mistake or miscommunicate on Instagram, it's somehow forgivable. But on LinkedIn, I feel like there's this pressure. Professionals and people might be your peers, and they can judge you. They can have this idea about you, and it can follow you for the rest of your career.

This also highlights the enabling and constraining attributes of discourses (Storey, 2018). The normalization of self-branding strategies caused by the discourse of employee substitutability creates a coercive culture of comparison and perfectionism that causes employees to think carefully about what they post, the goal being to avoid damaging their self-image (cf. Madsen and Verhoeven, 2016). Because there is no power without resistance (Foucault, 1978), it is also important to mention that some interviewees expressed reluctance concerning the pressure associated with creating a self-image as well as resistance to LinkedIn's operating principles, such as its algorithm. One interviewee explained: "[b]y now, it's really getting on my nerves. And yet, it's a very powerful tool. And then you just swim with it." This was elaborated on further by another interviewee:

> I shied away from LinkedIn for a long time because I thought it was just a giant collecting data. Nevertheless, there's basically no getting around it, because otherwise, you're missing out on a big market if you're not there.

This illustrates the dilemma ambassadors can face when navigating between the positive and negative sides of social media communication. However, the power this discourse exerts has caused the ambassadors to subordinate their personal assessment to the relevance of LinkedIn on the market to stay attractive. This effect has been further fueled by the urge to post regularly to keep one's visibility high on the platforms – even if they had nothing to share.

From authenticity to an authenticity paradox. The second discourse that governs the communication of employee ambassadors on social media centers around the significance of authenticity in brand communication. Here, the focus is on how authenticity is closely tied to specific internal rules, which influence communicative practices and dictate the representation of reality (cf. Van Leeuwen, 2001). One norm that emerged prominently in the interviews was the emphasis on personal expression, which concerns intense personalization of the ambassadors' content (e.g. selfies, personal stories or perspectives) to create authentic and credible communication. This norm advances their job responsibilities to a new, higher level. According to the interviewees, merely supporting the company by sharing corporate content was no longer sufficient. They now felt compelled to add a "personal touch" to their posts, sometimes even private stories, to enhance the credibility not only of their personal brand, but also of the organization's brand. This belief was further reinforced by their understanding of LinkedIn's algorithm, with one interviewee noting that, in users' feeds, company posts were featured less frequently than personal posts. This knowledge compelled employees to use their personal accounts to support the organization's branding efforts. As a result, ambassadors acknowledged the thinning line between private and professional life.

This also supports Van Dijck's (2013) and Falkheimer and Heide's (2014) claim that the division between employees' private and professional identities is being dissolved due to social media. However, the ambassadors' attitudes toward this dissolution differed. Whereas some have already normalized it, others resist mixing their private and professional life. Nevertheless, this tension is overshadowed by the authenticity discourse's constraining power (Storey, 2018), giving rise to a dilemma in which employees need to evaluate not only what they should post and whether they should post, but also how personal they should be to be considered "truly authentic." As this discourse solidifies through the materialistic practice (Prasad, 2017) of impressions and likes, interviewees expressed frustration over the fact that personal and private posts tend to receive higher engagement rates, further pushing them toward personalizing their professional communication. Consequently, it can be argued that employees find themselves in an authenticity paradox. On the one hand, authentic and personal content is necessary to enhance the brand's credibility. On the other hand, the earlier discourse of substitutability and the pursuit of the perfect self-image limit employees' ability

to be genuinely authentic and candid about their work life and professional identity. One interviewee even candidly admitted that his LinkedIn communication was always an "exaggerated presentation of the self." Therefore, it can be argued that this paradox reduces the diversity of expression and compels employees to conform to a "golden rule," according to which adherence to the norms created by the platforms, organizational expectations and society takes precedence over standing out. When asked about the extent of communicative freedom employees truly had, one ambassador explained:

> Not free really. Because it's also about the fact that you represent the company. And the company probably doesn't always completely coincide with your values.

This shows that the authenticity paradox has already been normalized and accepted by the ambassadors, which creates resistance (Foucault, 1978) to the discourse of authenticity in brand communication, but also acceptance and adaption to the authenticity paradox. However, it is also worth noting that the interviewees who resisted this notion expressed criticism about the loss of authenticity and the emergence of this paradox. This creates reluctance such that the platform's declining authenticity could have a spill-over effect, which brings us back to the constraining effect of the previous discourse of employee substitutability.

Hacking visibility: self-monitoring strategies and situational silencing
The analysis of the interviews revealed that visibility is a central aspect of enabling the disciplinary attributes of discourses and giving discourses their actual power. However, the way in which the interviewees conveyed their attitude toward visibility on social media suggests that being prominently seen on the platform has become routine, taken as a given and considered an integral part of their professional journey. The ambassadors spoke about their constant visibility with a sense of ease and self-assuredness, and this visibility, especially in the discourse of employee substitutability, appeared to be a crucial survival strategy in the professional landscape.

> If you look at the world right now. Usually, doing the job is not enough. You must be visible if you want to win. [. . .] And I think that at some point, everyone will be visible. Whether you want it or not. We're already visible [. . .] So it's inescapable.

This self-assuredness can be attributed to the normalization of what Prasad (2017) called the "disciplinary gaze." On the one hand, it can be linked to accepting additional job responsibilities and the widespread adoption of self-branding strategies. On the other hand, one interviewee also associated it with the desire for professional connections and networking, which have become indispensable for career success. He mentioned that it has become customary within the organizational culture to connect with colleagues and managers on LinkedIn. However, it can also be argued that this practice elevates visibility and, in turn, fosters self-discipline. In the analysis, two approaches were identified concerning how ambassadors had adjusted their communication on social media to deal with the constant visibility: (1) Strategizing through Self-Monitoring and (2) Situational Silencing.

Strategizing through self-monitoring. The interviews showed that ambassadors do not simply accept or passively submit to their visibility but exhibit a rather strategic approach to actively engaging with its mechanisms to their own benefit. On the one hand, this can be referred to as impression management; on the other hand, starting from a critical perspective, it can be considered a self-monitoring and disciplinary practice, where the ambassadors observe their own communication and adapt it to what was considered successful. In line with what Van Zoonen et al. (2018) called a "filter," ambassadors actively and strategically sort out what is and what is not beneficial for their own image.

Here, it is important to consider that visibility does not only entail posting behavior but also other engagements such as sharing, commenting, or liking, because due to LinkedIn's digital architecture, activities other than posts are also displayed to people inside and outside one's own network. The ambassadors used these algorithmic mechanisms to increase their reach and relevance. To exploit visibility further, ambassadors also relied on the hack of tagging, by mentioning people in their posts, hoping these people would engage with the post, thus causing the ambassador's profile to appear in the feeds of even more people. Once again, this exemplifies visibility's high value and its interconnectedness with the previously addressed discourses. Nevertheless, in contrast to this more positivistic-sounding side of strategizing, the theme of pressure was also highlighted:

> Whenever I'm writing for LinkedIn, I'm thinking carefully about whether I sound judgmental or opinionated or if my language is discriminatory, and so on. So, this kind of stuff puts some pressure on you.

This statement is an ideal illustration of the self-monitoring mechanisms that are used not only to improve one's own position, but also to avoid misunderstandings, which points to the fundamental challenge of social media communication.

Situational silencing. Looking at the strategies and self-monitoring mechanisms mentioned above, however, it became clear that these self-monitoring practices can also intensify and take the form of self-surveillance (Deetz, 1998), which is not focused on achieving a positive outcome by strategizing one's communication but instead on avoiding a negative outcome by holding back certain aspects. What can be described here as situational silencing, causes ambassadors to avoid certain topics for fear they could violate, as one participant said, "unwritten rules" and negatively impact their personal image. This aspect became apparent in the interviews, as the ambassadors elaborated that they felt constrained from freely expressing their opinions about specific topics, such as politics. This caution regarding content also ties into what Christensen and Christensen (2022) outlined in their study when they discussed that employees' communication is adapted to and disciplined by social expectations. Similarly, several interviewees agreed that conflicts or dissatisfaction with the organization and organizational failings could not be communicated on LinkedIn and needed to be strategically silenced, whereas personal failures should be communicated. For example, one participant elaborated that she liked sharing her shortcomings, as they might have taught her followers specific lessons. However, when asked whether this also applied to organizational failures, she responded as follows:

> Failures of the organization are strictly not shared. Funny right? I think there are people on the inside at the top who put a stop to things like that.

This refers to the imagined surveillance that results from the strong networking within companies, i.e. superiors could detect something on LinkedIn they disagree with. The subtle and sometimes unconscious anxiety about stepping on someone's toes with one's own communication and violating norms can be explained by Foucault (1977) concept of the panopticon. Here, given their visibility, the ambassadors always assume an imagined audience, which triggers the disciplinary function of power, irrespective of whether or not anyone is actually observing them. Two ambassadors who both worked for the corporation provided a compelling example that elaborates on this point. Both had posted an internal workshop on LinkedIn about a transformation project within their organization. After the post, higher management voiced opposition to this post. Between the lines, the participants mentioned that such a reaction might be based on the organization's good, prestigious reputation, which could be influenced negatively if they openly showed that a transformation was underway within the corporation. How visibility can reinforce self-surveillance, especially when negative comments have been made by someone with authority, was expressed by one of the two ambassadors:

Sure, the announcement from this boss is now somewhere in the back of my mind. Not that I'm afraid to publish such a post again, because I would have enough arguments that speak for such a post. [. . .] But maybe now I think about what kind of pictures I will use. [. . .] And maybe I'll frame it a little differently. [. . .] I think that's purely subordinating yourself, so to speak, in the sense of "I only communicate messages that are in line with my employer."

But this example also exemplifies how power can be met with resistance, as the other employee involved in this situation made clear that he would not adjust his communication and that he was setting up some meetings to influence this rather traditional view on using social media for an organization's branding purposes. This also shows the power and agency of the subject to influence specific discourse.

Concluding discussions

In the analysis, the complexity of the phenomenon of self-initiated employee ambassadorship on social media has become apparent, and in contrast to previous research on employee communication on social media (e.g. Dreher, 2014; Martin *et al.*, 2015; Pekkala *et al.*, 2022), it has been shown that a large proportion of the influencing factors and disciplinary power does not emerge from control within the organization. Instead, it derives from interplay of discourses, social norms, driver effects and visibility that transcend organizational borders.

First, the study reveals two leading discourses that exert power over self-initiated employee ambassadors on social media. The discourse of employee substitutability and the discourse on authenticity influence employees' communication by virtue of their enabling, constraining and constituting nature and lead to contradictions, tensions and paradoxes, in relation to which employees must negotiate personal, social and organizational expectations.

Second, the findings demonstrate the bidirectional relationship between the abovementioned discourse and the existing visibility and imagined surveillance on social media. In this context, visibility is not only a continuation of the discourses that control whether one adheres to the norms, but these discourses are further consolidated when employees build on and internalize them through the visibility of other people's content. In this connection, on the one hand, employees use *self-monitoring practices* and their knowledge about the platform to strategically manage their personal image. On the other hand, visibility leads to *self-surveillance*, whereby certain topics are situationally silenced based on employees' fear of being rejected by their imagined audience. This supports Foucault (1977) description of visibility as a "trap" (p. 200), as visibility can be used to benefit one's own image and career advancement. At the same time, visibility limits freedom of expression and pressures employees into situational silencing as they imagine an organizational and societal audience.

Theoretical implications

The present study makes several theoretical contributions beyond the previously discussed findings. To begin with, it becomes evident that employee ambassadorship on social media is not performed entirely voluntarily or for individual reasons (e.g. Morrison, 2014; Van Zoonen *et al.*, 2018) but in a controlled, disciplined and strategic manner. The article offers a more profound understanding of previous findings by applying this critical employee-centered perspective on the phenomenon of self-initiated employee ambassadorship. However, the results also reveal the limitations of ambassadors' actual co-creation opportunities in their organization's branding and communication process, as they are disciplined not only by the organizational disciplinary gaze, but also by the norms and effects of discourses grounded in the professional and social sphere.

Furthermore, employing more critical reasoning, the present article elaborates on managers' actual control over employee communication on social media. The analysis shows

that employees' sense-making process regarding their communication on social media is grounded in external organizational discourses, which managers cannot directly influence. However, it must be considered that organizations benefit from these external power relations and the visibility outlined here, because employees involuntarily turn into strategic communicators. The desire for the perfect self-image, the authenticity paradox and the mutual dependency between employee and employer regarding image development cause employees to comply with the positivist noncritical undertone on social media, which silences critical voices and allows organizations to gain indirect latent power that protects their reputation.

Additionally, the research presented here demonstrates the importance of integrating critical theories into strategic communication research, as this approach enables a more nuanced understanding of the communicative micro-practices of employees, who constitute an organization and who, through their agency, influence its success. By questioning and critically analyzing normalized practices, the darker side of underlying power dimensions can be uncovered – something that should be considered in ongoing discussions about employees' communicative responsibilities.

Practical implications
On a practical level, this study deepens our understanding of the larger power dimensions and tensions in which self-initiated employee ambassadors are embedded. Encouraging employees in their communication without adding pressure by using guidelines, policies, or expectations and acknowledging the actual limiting scope of managerial control could support employees' process of negotiating between the various discourses, norms, visibility and personal values. This could also promote a new counter-narrative that does not see employee ambassadorship on social media as a threat to organizational reputation or as exploitation of employees' communicative motivation, but as a collaborative interaction between employees and organizations to support each other in their respective branding activities. Additionally, organizations, especially managers, should focus on the organizational culture, which they can actually influence and reduce the risk of a culture of silencing and resistance to ambassadorship on social media. A positive organizational culture allows employees to be active on their channels without pressure or coercion and to build a sufficient level of trust, which assists them in their role as strategic communicators who support organizational success.

Further research
Future research should engage with a more critical perspective and examine control and power mechanisms as well as the "darker side" of organizational communication processes. Thus, as researchers, we should embrace the tensions, paradoxes and contradictions organizational life has to offer. Moreover, future research should embark on a more comprehensive exploration of the influence of discourses within the realm of strategic communication. This exploration will enable a more nuanced understanding of the profound impact that discourses have on the communicative practices of employee ambassadors. In particular, deeper investigations into the discourse of authenticity and its paradox will shed light on the implications for an organization's brand communication.

Lastly, an investigation of resistance in the context of self-initiated employee ambassadorship on social media would contribute to an even more comprehensive understanding, since such research would not only offer a counter-perspective, but also challenge the currently accepted norm of employees bearing communicative responsibility as a given.

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Corresponding author
Alessandra Sossini can be contacted at: Alessandra.Sossini@isk.lu.se