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May, 2019

THE IMPACT OF PARASOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS ON ORGANIZATIONS'  
CHARITABLE GOALS

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Jack J. Valenti School

of Communication

University of Houston

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In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Robyn Anne Balaban

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine if the media effect of parasocial relationships can impact an organization from achieving their charitable goals. In this qualitative study, relationship management theory provided the framework to explore parasocial relationships and to understand if these relationships could affect an organization from accomplishing their goals. To explore the presence of this phenomenon, donors of Justin James (J.J.) Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief fund were interviewed to see if not only had parasocial relationships between them and the J.J. Watt foundation transpired, but if these relationships also prompted them to donate. Practical implications include an opportunity where organizations can leverage their social media presence to engage with potential donors through the use of inclusive language and showing their presence in their communities through their philanthropic efforts.

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Dedicated to:

Mackinley, Sawyer and Lincoln –

Never give up on your dreams & never stop working towards them.

Mamere –

Laissez les bon temps rouler!

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## INTRODUCTION

In an age where charitable and philanthropic giving is increasingly being done online, organizations have been given a unique opportunity by way of digital technology to connect and engage with their donors. According to Non Profit Source (2018), \$405 billion was raised in 2017 for nonprofit organizations, with \$31billion of coming via online donations. Since 2016, the number of donations given online grew 12.1%, with 54% of donors preferring to donate online. Embracing digital technology, a tool called, “crowdfunding,” emerged, providing a new opportunity in which donors could donate their money to the organization of their choice.

In 2015, crowdfunding generated a global fundraising volume of \$34billion and is presently projected to exceed \$300 billion by 2025 (Fundly.com, 2018). Part of the reason for its surge in popularity among organizations is that it allows for smaller organizations to bring awareness to their organizational or charitable goals through direct engagement and interaction with their key publics (Chin, 2016). Since nonprofits solely operate to provide social good for their communities, relationships between them and their donors are imperative. This notion highlights the importance and significance of relationships between nonprofit organizations and their donors.

Within the discipline of public relations, one of their key tenets is that an organization’s success depends on the type of relationship they have with their key publics (Grunig, 1985). Through the exploration of understanding relationships between an organization and their publics, Grunig (1985) and Hon and Grunig (1999) recognized that the most-effective method to cultivate these favorable relationships is through the utilization of two-way symmetrical communication. The implementation of such communication methods pre-

Internet era was often found to be costly and time consuming; however, with the rampant growth of digital technology, including social media, organizations were able to quickly and cost-effectively reach their target publics which enabled them to cultivate and foster relationships with them, or potential donors. While two-way symmetrical communication is viewed as the primary method to facilitate relationship growth, relationships may also be cultivated via one-way mediated communication, which are known as *parasocial relationships*.

Parasocial relationships is a phenomenon that is receiving more academic attention due to the proliferation of the Internet and social media. This phenomenon, which can find its roots in the work of Horton and Wohl (1956), found that over time and through repeated exposure to a media character, a media user could create relationships that were tantamount to interpersonal relationships without ever having actual contact with them. This phenomenon was discovered via the exploration of the *uses and gratifications* theory which positioned the media user to be active as they were in control of which media characters, or personae, they exposed themselves to (Rubin & McHugh, 1987). What makes parasocial relationships unique and starkly different to that of other interpersonal relationships, is that these relationships are generated through: repeated exposure to the media character, mediated and are one-sided with the media character controlling the message with no obligation to reciprocate the communication (Horton & Wohl, 1956).

On August 25, 2017, Hurricane Harvey wreaked havoc on the city and surrounding communities of Houston, igniting multiple fundraiser campaigns; however, the one that received the most attention was Justin James (JJ) Watt's Hurricane Harvey relief fund. Watt, who is professional athlete for the Houston Texans National Football League (NFL) team,

and a prominent member within the Houston community, utilized his social media following to raise money for disaster relief. With an initial goal of \$200,000 USD, Watt exceeded this amount and raised \$37 million USD in 19 days from over 200,000 donors (The JJ Watt Foundation, 2018). His social media fundraising campaign has become the largest and most successful crowdfunding campaign to date (Phillips-Erb, 2017). While public relations scholarship has supported the notion that organizations should engage in two-way communication to cultivate effective and positive relationships to ensure that their organizational goals can be achieved, in the case of Watt's crowdfunding campaign it can be posited that donors had parasocial relationships with Watt due to his high mediated exposure within the Houston community.

This thesis intends to explore the J.J. Watt Hurricane Harvey relief fund to first understand if the relationship between Watt and his donors were parasocial in nature, followed by understanding if type of relationship can aid an organization in achieving their charitable goals. Using qualitative in-depth interviews as my research method, those who donated to Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief fund and reside within the city of Houston will be interviewed to fully explore the intended research questions. The purpose of this study is to examine if the media effect of parasocial relationships can impact an organization from achieving their charitable goals.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### *Public Relations*

When public relations as a discipline began to take form in the 1950's and 1960's, it was primarily viewed as a tool that influenced or manipulated public opinion, either through day-to-day media relation activities or through planned public information campaigns

(Grunig, J., Grunig, L.A., & Dozier, 2006). In 1985, Grunig and his team undertook the task of defining what it meant to be a public relations practitioner from an academic standpoint. It was an attempt at developing a broad, general theory of public relations through the integration of the most prominent middle-level theories available within the discipline at the time (J. Grunig, L. Grunig, & Dozier, 2006). As a result of this undertaking, the Excellence study emerged and subsequently outlined that in order for an organization to be successful, the public relations practitioner should be in a role that included: investigating and understanding who an organization's key publics are and implement strategic communication methods to garner and cultivate relationships with these key publics to ensure organizational success. This study was revolutionary for the discipline of public relations as it shifted the viewpoint of seeing a public relations practitioner from one who manipulates opinions, to one that builds strategic relationships with identified key publics as a means to achieving organization goals and ensure success.

From a business standpoint, value is most commonly defined by monetary gain; however, Grunig (2013) emphasized that a public relations practitioner's value lies within their ability to identify and cultivate these meaningful relationships between the organization and their publics, which includes relationships with potential donors (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Public relations programs were therefore found to be most effective and provide the most value to an organization through the building and developing successful relationships with identified key publics that not only aided in the accomplishment of the organization's objectives, but also bringing of strategic value. Dozier (1995) reasoned that, "the purpose and direction of an organization (its mission) is affected by relationships with key constituents (publics) in the organization's environment" (p.85).

*Organization- Public Relationships*

Deriving from an interpersonal relationship perspective, Ledingham and Brunig (1998), initially defined an organization-public relationship (OPR) as, “the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either can impact the economic, social, cultural, or political well-being of the other” (p. 62). Broom et al. (2000; Ledingham, 2003) extended upon this further and suggested that, “relationships consist of the transactions that involve the exchange of resources between organizations... and lead to mutual benefit, as well as mutual achievement” (p.91). Conversely, Pfeffer and Salanick (1978) outlined that relationships may begin when people are linked in some way, such as: morally, economically, socially, emotionally, geographically, or culturally. They also stated that, “interdependence exists whenever one actor does not entirely control all the conditions necessary for the achievement of an action for obtaining the outcome desired from the action” (p.40). This prompted Hung (2009) to define OPR as, “when an organization and their strategic publics are interdependent, and this interdependence results in consequences to each other that organizations need to manage constantly” (p.396).

When outlining organizational goals, it is important to understand what methods of communication an organization will implement to garner meaningful relationships with their publics, because as Hon and Grunig (1999) outlined, it is imperative to establish these types of relationships with your publics prior to asking them for help, such as donating either their time or money to a fundraising campaign. Recognizing that relationships can affect organizational goals, methods for cultivation of relationships have been highly discussed in within public relations literature, with scholars such as Grunig (2013) and Hung (2007)



demonstrating that two-way symmetrical communication is the most-effective method at achieving successful OPR's when compared to using one-way asymmetrical communication.

One-way communication occurs when information goes straight from source to receiver and is unidirectional in nature (Stacks & Watson, 2007; Vivian, 2013). This method is best represented as a monologue, or when information is to be disseminated amongst a public. One-way communication, simply speaking, is the dissemination of information and does not require nor need feedback from their desired public. Once the message is distributed, the communication between the organization and the public is complete. Conversely, two-way communication is multidirectional, meaning that the receiver can give the source feedback, creating a loop (Stacks & Watson, 2007; Vivian, 2013). Within this realm, conversation with publics are key as active engagement and listening provide the organization with the opportunity to create beneficial relationships (Grunig, J., Grunig, L.A., & Dozier, 2006).

Another important distinction was the balance of power between an organization and their public, which was denoted through symmetrical and asymmetrical communication (Grunig, 2002). Symmetrical communication represents a mutual balance of power where the organization worked with their public to reach a mutual goal and benefit both parties long-term. Asymmetrical communication will often try to convince the public that the relationship desired by the organization is also good for the public (Grunig, 2002). J. Grunig (1993) created a two-way symmetrical model that positioned public relations as a process of continual and reciprocal exchange between the organization and their publics. A director of public affairs for a county government in Hon and Grunig's (1999) research highlighted the link between symmetrical public relations and organizational effectiveness:

“The main strategy is open communication- by being open, in touch with your various publics, determining what their needs and wants are, how they can best be achieved, and how you can all work together toward common goals. And, I think that’s key with any group and organization you bring together. That’s what you build trust on, that’s what you build relationships on, and that’s what you accomplish goals with” (p. 11).

As technology evolved, it has challenged and evolved how an organization can engage in two-way communication with their public. Relationship management theory supports the notion that the goals put forward by the organization can be achieved when they have positive relationships with their publics.

### *Relationship Management Theory*

Broom et al. (2000) described that, “relationships are represented by the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its publics... it can be described as a single point that can be tracked over time” (p.18). Broom and Dozier (1990) argued that the relational perspective shifts the validation of public relations initiatives from measures of communication output to that of behavioral outcomes.

Ledingham and Brunig (2000) outlined how goals are developed around relationships, and that communication is used as a strategic tool to help an organization to achieve their goals. Relationship management theory specified how to build toward symmetry, and when to apply the approach over time (Ledingham, 2003). It also helps to describe how an organization can engender public loyalty by meeting the needs of the public (Ledingham, 2003).

Grunig (2002), deriving from psychology literature, identified that there are two main types of interpersonal relationships that can be used to assess the relationship between an

organization and a public: exchange and communal. Exchange was outlined to exist when one party gives benefits to the other, only because the other has provided benefits in the past or is expected to do in the future (Grunig, 2002). A party is willing to give benefits to the other because it expects to receive benefits of comparable value from the other. In essence, a party that receives benefits incurs an obligation, or debt, to return the favor, such as an organization doing things for their community and stakeholders. Communal relationships exist when parties are willing to provide benefits to the other because they are concerned for the welfare of the other party, even when they believe they might not get anything in return. These relationships are important for organizations should they want to be socially responsible and add value to their community (Grunig, 2002). Grunig (2002) highlighted that a measure of the degree to which a public believes that it has a communal relationship with an organization is perhaps the purest indicator of the success of the public relations management function.

Grunig, Grunig, and Ehling (1992) initially suggested that the relationship state can be determined by the dimensions of: reciprocity, trust, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding. Ledingham and Brunig (1998) refined this list to five determinants that are predictors of the likeliness of a relationship to emerge: trust, openness, involvement, investment, and commitment. Recognizing that the value of public relations practitioners lies in their ability to foster strategic relationships, it became imperative to have measurable qualities to evaluate the effects public relations techniques and programs.

Grunig (2002) identified that these measurable characteristics for determining strength of relationship to be: control mutuality, trust, commitment, and satisfaction. Control mutuality, which Grunig (2002) defined, is the, “degree to which the parties in a relationship

are satisfied with the amount of control they have over a relationship” (p. 2). It was argued that the most stable and positive relationships exist when organizations and publics have some degree of control over the other. Trust is the level of confidence that both parties have in each other and their willingness to open themselves to the other party. Within this characteristic exists three important dimensions: integrity, dependability, and competence. Commitment is described to be, “the extent to which both parties believe and feel that the relationship is worth spending energy on to maintain and promote” (p.2). Satisfaction is the extent that to which the organization and their public feel favourably about each other because positive expectations about the relationship are reinforced. A satisfactory relationship occurs when each party believes that the other is engaging in positive steps to maintain the relationship (Grunig, 2002). Through the measurement of these characteristics, an organization can therefore effectively evaluate the value of a public relations program.

#### *Public Relations and Nonprofit Organizations Fundraising*

Relationship management become imperative for both nonprofit and charitable organization as they solely exist to benefit the general public, without ever netting a profit in an effort to provide a public benefit (National Council of Nonprofits, 2019). This notion therefore positions the organization’s survival on their ability to develop meaningful relations with potential donors in order to achieve their organizational success, which is to continue providing programs and services to the community (Richard Waters, 2008; Waters, 2009).

Expounding from public relations literature, it has been shown that two-way communication between an organization and their publics is the most effective way to cultivate and establish favorable relationships. In the case of non-profit organizations, this involves them actively listening to their donors in order to understand their needs and

motivations (Ahern & Joyaux, 2011). This utilization of two-way communication is crucial to create a mutual understanding of both parties needs and motivations (Shaw & Allen, 2006).

In an age of digital technology, it has provided organizations an avenue to uniquely engaging their publics in dialogue, which is a key characteristic in excellent public relations (Grunig, 1992). By utilizing this technology, nonprofits are able to cost-effectively establish dialogue with their key publics; however, by other organizations utilizing this technology, it begins to increase the number of organizations that donors can interact with. As of 2015, there were 1.56 million nonprofit organizations registered with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) that individuals could donate to (National Center for Charitable Statistics, 2019). In 2017, Americans donated \$410 billion to charities with \$31 billion coming from online means (Nonprofit Source, 2018). According to NonProfit Source (2018), 54% of worldwide donors prefer giving their donations online, with 21% of all donations in 2017 coming directly from social media.

Stemming from the notion of relationship management theory, where relationships can either be communal or exchange in nature, Hung (2001; 2007) observed that nonprofits may change the type of relationship they may have with their donors depending on their needs. These change in needs are often a result motivated by survival. This implies that that non-profit organizations do not engage in one type of relationships with their donors, but rather change these depending on their situation and goals (Hung 2001; Hung, 2007). On one hand, they may receive funding from donors without ever having to return funds, which would indicate a communal relationship. Conversely, they may also have an exchange relationship with their donors at times because donors will expect nonprofits to deliver

certain services to their beneficiaries, which are also indirectly also the donor's beneficiaries (Wiggill et al., 2009). One of the increasingly more popular ways that organizations can engage donors is through crowdfunding.

### *Crowdfunding*

Currently, there are over 1,250 crowdfunding platforms worldwide (Fundly, 2018), and according to Massolution.com (2018), donation-based crowdfunding has grown more than 50 percent in 2015, raising nearly \$3 billion. Crowdfunding is defined as, "the practice of funding a project or cause by raising money from a large number of people, typically through the Internet" (YouCaring, 2018). The Internet encourages participation and allows such a participatory culture to flourish because it is made possible through personal, 'ubiquitous connections,' of the digital age (Delwiche & Henderson; 2012; Booth, 2015). Crowdfunding exists at a unique conjecture between an individual goal and an open, participatory model of networked action (Booth, 2015). Crowdfunding grew in popularity, because for many independent productions, fan engagement on social media remains a way in which content creators can create awareness about their work through directly interacting with fandom (Chin, 2016).

### *Crowdfunding and Relationships*

According to Fundly.com (2018), only 78% of crowdfunding campaigns reach their target fundraising goal. In much of the literature, crowdfunding is studied through the fan perspective and a way for celebrities to further involve their fans to ensure their projects success. Chin (2016) wanted to understand fandom and how it can be used as a tool to engage with fans. She found that fans not only played an instrumental role in spreading the word about a crowdfunding campaign, but also kept fans engaged throughout the campaign

which increased the likelihood of reaching organizational success. She highlighted that by implementing an open channel of communication between an organization or individual and their respective fans, or public, they would likely work in favor of either the organization or individual. Booth (2015) further confirmed this when he studied three crowdfunding campaigns who had three different success outcomes. The most successful campaign used inclusive language and actively involved their fans, whereas the remaining two campaigns who did not use inclusive language or not as engaging were not as successful. Chin (2016) recognized that not only do fans want to interact with content through transmedia storytelling, they also want to interact with content creators, particularly if they are expected to invest via crowdfunding. While this is a very interactive process, crowdfunding, as Booth (2015) describes, “a metaphor for seeing a relationship grow and develop” (p. 18).

#### *Active Audience Perspective*

Media effects researchers seek to understand the extent to which the media can influence their audiences. One of the first theories that emerged from this perspective was the *hypodermic needle model* which suggested that the media had a direct influence onto its audience members (Baran & Davis, 2012). This model was discredited when Paul Lazarsfeld (1942) determined that the media in fact appeared to have a *limited-effect* on its audience, supporting the notion that the media reinforced pre-existing opinions and ideologies instead. Although many mass communication theorists were concerned with what the media did to people, others progressively shifted their views to understand what people did with media rather, prompting active-audience theories to emerge.

Herta Herzog (1942) was one of the first scholars who pioneered an active-audience theory because she wanted to understand why audience members specifically engaged in the

type of media that they chose. For her research, she interviewed those who listened to soap operas on the radio. Through her research, she was able to determine that listeners had a set of preconceived gratifications they wished to satisfy that they could satisfy by listening to the soap operas. Herzog (1942) was able to operationalize three gratifications that listeners wished to satisfy whilst engaging with their media of choice: emotional, wishful thinking, and learning (Herzog, 1942). Alan Rubin (1983) expanded Herzog's (1942) research wanting to understand what viewers motivations for watching television were. Through this investigation, he was able to extend upon Herzog's gratification list and identified nine unique gratifications that individuals wished to satisfy: relaxation, companionship, entertainment, social interaction, information, habit, pass time, arousal, and escape (Rubin, 1983). While scholars began to identify and understand that audiences sought after specific media to serve a specific purpose, Horton and Wohl (1956), discovered that through repeated engagement with specific media, users would begin to develop an affinity towards media persona(s), which caused them to develop what they called "parasocial relationships."

### *Parasocial Relationships*

Upon studying the development of parasocial relationships, Horton and Wohl (1956) identified that a relationship was more likely to develop and transpire as a result of repeated parasocial interactions. They defined parasocial interactions as a, "simulacrum of conversational give and take" (p.216). Characteristically, these interactions are one-sided, non-dialectical, controlled by the performer, and are not susceptible to mutual development. Due to these identified characteristics, the viewer is put in charge of whether they want to continue to expose themselves to the media persona; however, it is the media persona that controls the message. Horton and Wohl (1956) recognized that through enough repeated



parasocial interactions that the user was much more likely to begin to develop an affinity towards the media character, thus developing a parasocial relationship. This was an important facet to recognize in the development in the understanding of parasocial relationships because as an individual increased interaction, or the number of parasocial interactions with their media persona of choice, the more likely they were to achieve deeper states of intimacy.

In Horton and Wohl's (1956) study, they specifically looked at media personas who were mediated via traditional means (i.e. radio, television, or movies). They defined a media persona as, "the typical and indigenous figure of the social scene presented by radio and television" (p.216). Their hypothesis was that as media viewers who engaged in either of these traditional media sources, parasocial relationships would begin to form via seeming face-to-face relationships between the spectator and media persona. They recognized that the spectacular feat about these media personae is that they could claim and achieve intimacy with who are essentially crowds of strangers. They recognized that this intimacy, even if it was an imitation, was extremely influential and satisfying for the great those media users who chose to receive it.

By the media personae engaging in such behaviors, it allowed for the audience to begin to know the personae in a way that is similar to the way that they know their chosen friends: through direct observation and interpretation of their appearance, their gestures and voice, their conversation and conduct in a variety of situations (Horton & Wohl, 1956). This notion can be paralleled with existing interpersonal scholarships that highlight that should an individual want to be friends with someone, they will make themselves more available to the person they want to be friends with, or increase exposure (Kyewski, Szczuka, & Krämer,

2018). Giles (2002) highlighted that perceived realism, and attraction to the media figure, were highly correlated with the measure, thus suggesting that media users evaluate media figures along similar criteria to people they encounter in the flesh. Regardless if the context is mediated or interpersonal, people use the same cognitive processes when they approach communication (Bargh, 1988). While Horton and Wohl (1956) gave birth to the concept of parasocial relationships, scholars thereafter investigated what the antecedents of parasocial relationships could be.

### *Antecedents of Parasocial Relationships*

Much of the scholarly research conducted about parasocial relationships, stemming from a uses and gratifications paradigm, hypothesized that the antecedents of both parasocial interactions and relationships were specific to the media user who wanted to satisfy an individual need. This hypothesis supported the notion that people have basic needs, formed by social and individual characteristics, which in turn leads to gratifications that require fulfillment (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985). One of the pinnacle studies examining this was Rubin, Perse, and Powell's (1985) study on local television newscasters. They investigated whether a viewer's relationship with a local television newscaster was developed as a result because the media viewer felt lonely this was how they chose to engage in a form of companionship. This study posited that the antecedent of parasocial relationships for media viewers was to fill a void of companionship. Using Perlman and Pepalu's (1981) definition, they defined loneliness, "as resulting from an individual's perceived discrepancy between two factors: the desired level and the achieved level of social contact" (p.158). They administered 390 questionnaires to undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university. In their study, 87% of all respondents indicated

that they watched local news. Using a revised UCLA Loneliness Scale, their instrument contained 20 items, 10 that expressed satisfaction and 10 dissatisfactions with social relationships. These items included questions such as, “I lack companionship,” “I feel part of a group of friends,” and, “I feel isolated from others.” They also created an empirical scale for parasocial interaction using a 20-item scale, that had an alpha reliability of .93. Items on this list included, “The news program show me what the newscasters are like,” “When I’m watching the newscast, I feel as if I am part of their group,” and, “I sometimes make remarks to my favorite newscaster during the newscast.” Through a quantitative analysis, the authors were not able to correlate loneliness to the outcome of parasocial behavior. One of the biggest findings was that while individuals may score the same on social participation, viewer’s individuals needs are likely to vary or fluctuate over time, thus not every viewer requires the same items to obtain satisfying relationships. Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1985) demonstrated that individual needs vary, which suggested that there is no singular antecedent for the formation of parasocial relationships for all media users, and that the reasons for the development of parasocial relationships therefore varies between media users.

While it is generally agreed that parasocial relationships do not replace actual interpersonal relationships, it is a phenomenon that still transpires. Much of the scholarship that has further investigated the antecedents of parasocial relationships outlines that there are three theoretical perspectives that provide insights into the formation of parasocial relationships: uncertainty reduction theory, personal construct theory, and social exchange theory (Cole & Leets, 1999; Giles, 2002). Uncertainty reduction theory highlights that due to the increased exposure of a media character, the viewer begins to know and learn more about them, thus reducing their uncertainty, and increasing the strength of the parasocial

relationship (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Cole & Leets, 1999; Giles, 2002). Personal construct theory suggests that viewers of a media persona begin to develop a sense of knowing the media persona by applying their interpersonal construct systems to the parasocial context (Turner, 1993; Cole & Leets, 1999; Giles, 2002). Social exchange theory connects intimacy and the relationship importance to a cost and reward assessment where a parasocial interaction with a media persona would have high reward and low-cost exchange (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Cole & Leets, 1999; Giles, 2002). Understanding that parasocial relationships exist, can transpire in response to engaging with specific media characters, scholarship began to investigate what the implications of this phenomenon meant for mediated communication.

#### *Parasocial Relationships Impact on Consumer Behavior*

Alperstein (1991) conducted a study to see whether or not parasocial relationships could influence consumer behavior and what the implications of these relationships may have. Conducting twenty-one ethnographic interviews, he found that some of his participant demonstrated a strong attraction to and unyielding faith in certain celebrities regardless of the advertisement or product they were associated with. Other participants, who displayed a long-term attraction, sometimes expressed an uncertainty about the celebrity's appearance in television advertising. This skepticism did not necessarily affect the viewer's feelings towards them, but rather seek some sort of reasoning as to why the celebrity appeared in a commercial.

Extending outside of the marketing-consumer realm, parasocial relationships with media characters can also have social consequences, such as increasing the persuasive power of public service announcements or bringing awareness to a societal problem (Eyal & Cohen,

2010; Brown et al., 2003). Brown, Basil, and Bocarnea (2003) demonstrated this when they found that parasocial behavior with an athlete who was regarded as a public role model, was more likely to increase audience identification with that person, which in turn can promote a set of certain attitudes and beliefs. For their case they specifically looked at Mark McGwire's public service to prevent child abuse. For their study they conducted a survey with 356 responses to find if a correlation between exposure to McGwire and increased parasocial behaviour existed, as well as whether that identification with him could translate to a positive association with either concern for child abuse prevention or speaking out about child abuse. As technology as evolved, particularly with the growth of the Internet, it has provided another avenue for media personas to develop parasocial relationships with media users.

#### *Parasocial Relationships and Social Media*

In the last decade, with the growth of the Internet and social media, it has become easier to facilitate two-way communication between an organization and their public. Madden et al. (2013), citing the Pew Internet and American Life Project, defined social media as an, "umbrella term that is used to refer to a new era of web-enabled applicators that are built around user-generated or user-manipulated content, such as wiki's, blogs, podcasts, and social networking sites" (p. 2). It is also defined as being a mediated platform where a barrier between the user and the media persona exists, causing the media user to not see, touch, or have face-to-face conversations with them (Federick et al., 2012). It has opened up new possibilities for organizations to connect with their stakeholders by allowing them to receive real-time feedback about organizational announcements and engage in conversations, which prior traditional media could not accommodate (Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012). Gerbaudo (2012) argued that, "social media is a means to not simply convey abstract

opinions but give shape to the way in which people come together and act together, or, to choreograph collective action” (p. 4). Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, have mixed elements of mass communication, and interpersonal communication.

Recognizing this, corporations and organizations have begun to utilize social media platforms as an effective way to cultivate and garner relationships with their publics.

Tapscott (2009) outlined this notion when he discussed that those who are actively involved with social media expect business to engage with them and embrace relationships with their publics. Social media facilitates interactivity by providing users with the opportunity to correspond with other users, share information, and form personal relationships (Hambrick et al., 2010).

Within the realm of social media, one of the biggest facilitators of parasocial relationships are celebrities and famous athletes, who presently have the most likes on Facebook and followers on Twitter and Instagram (Nölleke et al., 2017; Social Bakers, 2018). Federick et al., (2014) conducted a study that used the operational definitions of parasocial behaviour to investigate whether professional athletes exhibited social or parasocial behaviour on their social media accounts. They defined that social behavior on social media was represented when their social media posts were in a direct response to another social media which included a media users’ unique social media handle. A social media handle is unique and specific to the user, thus when the user searches to find their athlete(s) of choice, they will look them up by their social media handle. Federick et al. (2014) defined parasocial behavior as a message not appearing to be in direct response to anyone and would be most representative through the broadcasting of a statement or sharing information. These notions would be comparable to two-way and one-way communication

respectively. It should also be noted that Federick et al., (2014) outlined that if an athlete posted or asked a general question to his followers, and was not directed at anyone specifically, and used inclusive language such as, “we,” or, “you all,” that the athlete could exhibit interactive parasocial behavior. By placing emphasis on the direction of the message, Federick et al. (2014) provided a detailed picture of how professional athletes used social media, in particular Twitter.

Lueck (2015) also further demonstrated celebrities exhibited parasocial behavior via their social media posts. She demonstrated this by analyzing the conversation on a Facebook fan page of the celebrity, Kim Kardashian. One of Kardashian’s Facebook posts had the ability to generate over 3,000 comments, yet Kardashian did not respond or establish two-way communication with any of her followers or commenters, thus providing the perfect environment to encourage the development and growth of parasocial relationships. Through this research she was also able to highlight that as the media persona developed more avenues for the fan to interact, such as increasing frequency of posts, or posting on multiple social media platforms, the stronger the parasocial relationship became. Lueck’s research complements Federick et al. (2014) because while celebrities or athletes post on their social media pages, they are also increasing their likelihood that a media user, or individual within their target public, will have repeated parasocial interactions with them, thus allowing for the cultivation of parasocial relationships.

#### *Justin James Watt Foundation*

Justin James (J.J.) Watt is a defensive end for the Houston Texans, a team within the National Football League (NFL). He is a prominent athlete and sports figure within the city of Houston, Texas. According to Social Bakers (2018), Watt has over 5.4 million followers,

and over 9,244 tweets. He is also one of the highest endorsed professional athletes to date, receiving over \$2 million USD in endorsements from over 7 large corporations, 3 of them residing within the Houston Area: H-E-B, Houston Ford, and NRG (Forbes, 2018). In 2017, Watt was also ranked number 20 overall in the National Football League (NFL) for jersey sales (Roepken, 2017). While Watt is seemingly one of the most popular individuals within the community of Houston, he is also the face, founder, and president of the Justin James Watt Foundation.

The J.J. Watt foundation was launched in 2011 with the intent and mission to provide after-school athletic opportunities for middle-school aged children so that they, “may learn character traits of accountability, teamwork, leadership, work ethic, and perseverance” (The JJ Watt Foundation, 2018). In Watt’s foundations first year they raised \$11,000USD for 33 Milwaukee public schools (The JJ Watt foundation, 2018). On August 27, 2017, Watt expanded the foundation to include disaster relief for Hurricane Harvey.

#### *Justin James Watt Hurricane Harvey Relief Fund*

Using social media as the primary vehicle to launch and carry out his fundraising campaign, Watt reached out to his social media followers asking for donations to his Hurricane Harvey Relief fund. On August 27, 2017, Watt kicked off his campaign using a video of himself that outlined his intent to raise \$200,000 USD for hurricane relief. By using his social media channels, he was able to quickly and cost-effectively carry out his fundraising campaign. His campaign was exclusively carried out across his social media accounts including: Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. His fundraising campaign solely consisted of him posting of videos of himself that outlined his cause, why his cause was important, what he was going to do with the donated funds, and his call to action of how to



donate. His videos also provided his followers another avenue to further engage with Watt, either through: liking his post, commenting on his post, or sharing his post on their social media. In 19 days, the JJ Watt foundation exceeded the initial goal of \$200,000 and successfully raised \$37 million USD for Hurricane Harvey disaster relief fund from 209,432 donors. To date, his crowdfunding campaign has become one of the largest and fastest fundraising campaigns (Phillips-Erb, 2017).

By definition, an organization is an organized body of people with a particular purpose, especially a business, society, or associated. Using this definition, coupled with Hung's (2009) definition of what an OPR is, Watt's foundation and his relationships with his publics can thereby be classified as such. Operationally speaking, Watt's organizational goal was to raise \$200,000USD for Hurricane Harvey Relief; however, with his pronounced fundraising success, drawing from Hon and Grunig's (1999) research, it can be assumed that Watt had cultivated and fostered positive relationships with his followers that enabled him to achieve his fundraising goal.

### *Research Questions*

Using the above literature as a framework, it can be understood that a link between a campaigns' success and the use of two-way symmetrical communication exists. For the case of J.J. Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief fund, using the public relations literature as framework, it would suggest that he had a positive relationship with his 209,432 donors because his pronounced organizational success. Seeing how his campaign was exclusively carried out across his social media accounts, combined with the number of donors, it can be postulated that perhaps Watt cultivated parasocial relationship with his donors. As the literature suggests, Leuck (2015), Watt's strong social media presence, along with his

heightened media presence due to both being a professional athlete and having large endorsements by Houston-based corporations, it provided members of the Houston community with more opportunities to engage in parasocial interactions with him. Therefore, I posit the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do donors of the J.J. Watt Hurricane Harvey Relief fund have a parasocial relationship with Justin James Watt?

RQ2: To what extent can parasocial relationships impact an organization from achieving their charitable goals?

### *Significance*

By exploring the above research questions, it will highlight whether an organization can cultivate relationships through effective one-way communication on their social media channels. With online giving playing an increasingly large role for nonprofits or charitable organizations, it's further prompting organizations to create an online presence to engage with their key publics. This notion complements existing public relations literature of the importance of relationships, and how communication methods between an organization and their publics can affect an organization in achieving their goals. Currently there is minimal literature that investigates parasocial relationships within a public relations framework.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To be able to answer my proposed research questions above, I conducted and executed a qualitative study via in-depth interviews with those who donated to Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief fund. Broadly speaking, "qualitative interviews provide opportunities for mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation, via a path that is organic, adaptive, and often times energizing" (Tracey, 2012, p. 284). Qualitative research

allows for myself as the researcher capture the breadth and depth needed to answer my posited research questions that is not about the number of respondents, but instead specific to the phenomenon that I am studying (Todres & Galvin, 2005). These findings are attuned to focusing on very specific and highly textured detail within the individual's specific context, which for this case is relationship that the donor has with Watt. Depth, for this thesis, refers to the density of contextual information, and breadth is how unique individual meaningful organizes broad and fundamental themes. The narrative breadth will allow for the participant to give their individualized approach and significant information that they lived through in great detail and texture (Todres & Galvin, 2005).

Qualitative in-depth interviews have often been of choice among public relations scholars, such as Hung (2009), and Grunig (2002) who studied relationships between organizations and their publics. Grunig (2002) outlined that he chose qualitative research methods when trying to understand relationships because interviews enabled the researcher to fully grasp what motivates people as well as explain what they think in their own terms. Hung (2009) chose qualitative methods because she felt that these methods were best used for exploratory or descriptive research in an attempt to uncover and understand what lies deep within the complexity and process of any little-known phenomenon or innovative system by conveying the interaction of context, setting, and the participants' frame of reference. This becomes important because through the conduction of these interviews it will allow myself as the researcher to understand how the donors themselves define their relationship with Watt, and which of the measurable relationship qualities (i.e. satisfaction, commitment, trust, and control mutuality) resonated the most between them.

Qualitative research also made it possible for me, the researcher, to ask probing questions that quantitative research often cannot, such as strategies that an individual felt the other party has done to cultivate the relationship. Grunig (2002) highlighted how the understanding of these cultivation strategies are the communication methods that public relations professional use to develop new relationships are the characteristics of the organization. These communication methods would therefore be the independent variable that affects the dependent variable, or the relationship between the organization and their public. Understanding these cultivation methods would allow me as the researcher to understand if Watt developed a relationship with his donors, and if so, how.

Currently, I reside with the city of Houston, and am actively involved with both the Houston Texans fan page on Reddit, as well as the National Football League fan page. Being actively involved on both those pages, as well as utilizing my personal network that I have developed both on and off the campus of University of Houston, I was able to recruit my interviewees.

To ensure robustness of my data that allowed me to adequately answer my research questions, I interviewed 8 donors. Drawing from literature on qualitative research methods, this number of interviews was an appropriate sample size for this type of research (qualitative interviews), because I was observing a phenomenon that is specific to a particular group of individuals (i.e. those who donated to Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief Fund), and 5 to 8 interviews were found to be pedagogically valuable (Tracey, 2012).

It was required that each interviewee both donated to Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief fund and reside within the city of Houston or one of its surrounding communities (i.e. Tomball, Humble, League City, etc.). It was imperative that donors to Watt's Hurricane

Harvey relief fund reside within the community of Houston because they would have the highest amount of parasocial interaction opportunities with Watt due to his strong and highly mediated presence within Houston media (i.e. sports news, H-E-B advertisements, etc.). This consistent exposure to a specific media character would be vastly different compared to someone who resides outside of Houston. It is imperative that I interview those who would have the highest degree of parasocial interactions with Watt as these repeated interactions would have the highest likelihood of developing into a parasocial relationship. As Rubin and McHugh (1987) outlined, the extent to which the media user exposes themselves to the media persona, is proportionate to the level of affinity they have towards them. By setting up these requirements, it enabled me to adequately explore if parasocial behaviour transpired.

For my interview guide (see Appendix 1), I modelled it from Grunig (2002) and Chung and Cho (2011). Grunig (2002) and other researchers at the University of Maryland developed questions for those qualitatively studying relationships via interviews. They were designed as a way for public relations professionals to assess relationships between an organization and their public. These questions are not only designed to gather information about the type and quality of relationships, but also reflect the same dimensions and operational definitions of relationship indicators as the quantitative questions and can be used as the basis for an interview protocol. It allowed for me to understand if a relationship exists between the organization and its public by measuring the four relational outcomes: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment. It also tested to see if the participant views the relationship as communal or as exchange. Grunig (2002) and Tracey (2012) suggests the first few questions be designed to see what the participant knows about the matter at hand. By doing such, I was able to assess their knowledge about Watt and his reputation in the

participant's mind. It also informed me if they were using their own first-hand knowledge, or secondary knowledge that they received from others.

Since the phenomenon being studied is parasocial relationships, it was imperative to incorporate questions that measured this. Chung and Cho (2011) developed a questionnaire that was designed to empirically test for parasocial relationships. Drawing from their calibrated questionnaire, they ensured that the following qualities would be tested: friendship, understanding/ identification, trustworthiness, and intentions. By incorporating these questions with Grunig's (2002) relational questions, it informed me that should a relationship exist between Watt and the donor, whether it is parasocial in nature or not.

Each interview will be conducted either face-to-face, over the phone, or Skype, depending on accessibility, and will be recorded and then transcribed. I will ask each participant if they wish to use their actual name or choose a pseudonym. Should the interviewee choose a pseudonym, I will only refer to them as the pseudonym from then forward, including all notes and transcripts. Once the interviews have been conducted, I will transcribe each interview and then use open-coding to analyze the results and answer my posited research questions.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### *Data Collection - Interviews*

In total, eight participants who donated to Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief fund and reside within the Houston community were interviewed for my thesis. Participants were recruited through an announcement posted online in undergraduate classes at the University of Houston, as well as through my personal network. Each participant was given the option to do a face-to-face interview, but due to accessibility and timeliness, phone interviews were

chosen for all 8 participants. Prior to the start of the interview, each interview was provided with a consent form that outlined the purpose of this research and why their participation helps my research. Participants were also asked if they wanted their actual names used in my research, as well as consenting to being audio recorded. They were also informed that should they wish to not answer a question or no longer wished to participate in my research, they could stop at any time. Once consent was given, phone interviews were set up.

In an effort to capture all of my data, phone interviews were recorded using a 'Voice Memo,' app on my laptop. Once the interviews were recorded, they were then transcribed. The transcription process allowed me to fully immerse myself into my data ensuring that I was fully exploring my posited research questions. In total, there was approximately 3 hours, 21 minutes, and 12 seconds worth of data to transcribe. The average time for interview was 24 minutes. The longest interview was 34 minutes and 7 seconds, and the shortest was 20 minutes and 41 seconds.

When interviewing my participants, I used the approved interview guide that was submitted the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Houston. While the interview guide was shaped using both Grunig's (2002) relational questions and Chung and Cho (2011) parasocial behavior indicator questions, I structured the questions to be open-ended and conversational, yet while ensuring that I was capturing the information I needed to answer my research questions. By doing such it allowed me to fully delve into their responses and understand their insights and perspective.

When I initially started to interview my participants, I took notes in addition to the voice recording. After participant number four, I realized that my note taking was distracting me from fully engaging in the interview because I became focused on taking notes. This in

turn affected me from probing at certain answers thus causing me to not delve deeper in some of their responses where I could have explored further.

It should be noted that while I pilot tested my interview guide on a colleague, I should have chosen someone who was not an academic. When I conducted my first interview it became very clear where areas of confusion lied. Confusion from the participant was illuminated by either them stating that they did not understand the question, did not know how to answer the question, or asked me to explain what I was asking. By understanding where these areas of confusion manifested, it allowed myself in subsequent interviews to change how I worded my questions, yet still while ensuring that I was able to capture the essence of the question to ensure that I would be able to adequately answer my research questions. An example of this was question, “to what extent do you believe that Watt is attentive.” The word, “attentive,” was confusing and resulted in me having to explain the definition in a manner in which the interviewee would understand.

Once all interviews were transcribed, they were open coded, which allowed for myself as the researcher to identify if any common themes existed among my participant’s answers.

Since I was able to interview 8 participants, which were outlined in my methods section as pedagogically viable, I can ensure robustness of my data enabling myself to confidently answer my posited research questions.

#### *Data Analysis*

##### *Frequency of Exposure*

*“During a season where it’s sports, I’d say that I would see him on tv about 5 times a week.*

*If it’s not football season... I’d think just three times a week”- Tara*



Of the eight participants, six of them stated that they see him once a week or more. The remaining two stated that they only see him twice a month or fewer. The exposure the participants identified in having with Watt included: watching Texans football, friends on social media engaging with his posts on Twitter, sports news (i.e. radio, social media), news (i.e. watching news or news stations Facebook posts), H-E-B commercials and shopping at H-E-B, or either hearing of his involvement with nonprofits or posters hanging up at the Houston Food Bank. Of the eight participants, only two actively followed J.J. Watt's personal social media posts, one followed him on Twitter, but was not active on Twitter, and two followed him after donating to his Hurricane Harvey Relief fund because they wanted to see where their money went. The remaining four participants who did not follow J.J. Watt before or after donating, were aware of his social media presence due to their friends engaging with his social media content. This could be seen in statements like: "It's usually always on Twitter, he's always doing some type of foundation and it's always being re-tweeted on my timeline," or, "[my friend] posted on Facebook, that's how I got to know the name."

While the amount of exposure varied among participants, when participants were asked, "When you hear the name J.J. Watt, what do you think about?" six out of eight participants said, "football," or that he played football for the Texans. While they acknowledged that he played football, only three of them were active fans of the Houston Texans and watched football games. One of the participants, Sophia, worked in a restaurant, so while she was not an active follower of the Texans, she still watched the games as they were often playing in the background. This level of exposure to Watt as a football player, or member of the Texans organization, translated to participants knowledge to his off-the-field

efforts. This could be seen when they drew upon examples of him visiting sick kids in Children's hospitals or donating to local after-school programs (See Table 1).

### *Relatability*

*"I find him relatable in that he's a hard worker. I think that's something that a lot of Americans appreciate. You know, we all kind of feel like we work hard at our jobs and he is a hard worker..." Jennifer.*

Participants were further asked if: they found J.J. Watt relatable, shared similar values, felt that he was a normal person like themselves, or if thought that they could be friends if Watt was not a professional athlete.

Out of the eight participants, five found him relatable. This could be seen in statements as, "Yes, I would say that he is," or, "absolutely!" When they were asked to explain why they felt that he was relatable, it was because of his philanthropic efforts. "He is relatable in a way that he is aware of the issues that are in the city," "he likes to feel good by doing good things... for people, or for the community, and to me that's something that I also relate to," "he is just trying to be a genuine person... [he's] not doing it for the likes. He is doing it because he can," or, "he does seem relatable, he does seem to be doing the things that we kind of wish that we could even though we can't in everyday life."

Two of the remaining participants carried over this notion that he could be relatable via his philanthropic efforts but did state that they did not find him completely relatable. One stated, "[I found him relatable] moreso before the hundred-million-dollar contract... I think that changes anyone... that amount of fame will change anybody." The other participant stated that Watt is, "relatable based on what his PR puts out there." She further described how she hasn't heard him speak but is aware of his charity work that he is engaged in, and

that it might be harder to relate to him because, “most people don’t know what it’s like to be that hugely amazing’.”

Only one participant firmly stated that she did not find him relatable whatsoever. This was indicated when she said, “We’re from Houston, like I feel like that’s the only thing that binds us.”

### *Sharing of similar values*

*“I would say ‘yes’ as far as wanting to do things through service and activism” – Kaci*

When participants were asked whether or not they felt that they had shared similar values with Watt, six out of the eight participants felt that they did. This was often expressed using affirmative words such as, “yes,” or, “definitely.” When participants were asked to explain what values they shared, it was often because his philanthropic efforts. This was evidenced by statements like, “fundraising is one of my biggest, I would say hobbies... so that would be one thing,” “[share the same value] or wanting to do things through service,” “I would love to be in line with how he operates as a human,” or “I would say so. I know that I would do something similar like what he did if I was in [similar] position.”

One participant did not feel that they shared similar values with him, but if they did, it was would be because of, “... the fact that he always contributes and comes back to Houston.” The remaining participant was confused by the question and did not know how to answer it.

### *Perceptions of being normal like themselves*

*“He shows up outside of sports you know? It’s easy to see these individuals as like people that are better than the rest... but at the end of the day he goes home, and he’s got to do his deal” – Rayne.*

When participants were asked question whether they felt that Watt was a normal person like them, six of them said that they felt that he was. This could be seen in quotes like, “I know he is a normal person because he still has to struggle through his everyday life,” “I would say [he is a normal person like me] because of how he helps people,” or, “...he doesn’t come from an entitled background, and he’s still very family oriented.”

One participant felt that Watt was not a normal person like them because outside of him coming, “from a family who loves him and supports him... I don’t see any similarities.” The remaining participant had confusion on the question but expressed earlier in the interview that she was not familiar with him, so she did not know how to answer the question.

### *Being Friends*

*“He’ll probably be one of those people that I don’t really talk to as much, but they are always a person I can basically always relate to and count on” – Ajdina*

Extending upon the notion that participants could relate to Watt if he was not a professional athlete, they were asked if whether they could see the two of them being friends. Out of the eight participants, three said that they could potentially be friends with him because they were both passionate about sports. This could be seen in statements such as, “We are both obsessed with sports,” or, “it would be fun to be with someone who actually knows sports.” They also mentioned other qualities including that they felt that he would be someone who they did not have to have constant contact with but knew they could always relate and rely on. Another mentioned how they are also both family-oriented and could likely create friendship from that.

One participant did not see herself being friends with him, but felt that he would get along and “fit” within the golf community in which she resides in. “I can totally see him being with... these ‘good ol’’, boys that play golf and you know, mess around...they like to have a good time and they like to get outside and do things.”

Another participant said that she could not see them being friends because she felt that she did not have that much common in him. “I am not really an athlete, I’m not a man... It’s kind of seems football is most of his life you know, so I can’t-...maybe friendly, but not buddies.”

One participant stated how they could be friends by identifying areas they could bond over, such as football, enjoy sports as a whole, being outside and being active; however, did not know if that was enough that would create a friendship. “I respect him, and I respect what he does, but I do not know if we would relate on a level that would cultivate a friendship.”

#### *Relationship Quality 1- Control Mutuality*

*“He takes a lot of that into account because he wants to remain a good role model for younger kids” – Tara*

In an effort to understand the measurable relationship quality of “control mutuality,” participants were asked a series of questions regarding if they felt that Watt was attentive, took his public interests into account when making his decisions, or whether or not they felt they had any control over his foundation. When participants were asked if they thought that Watt was attentive, four of the eight participants agreed that he was. This could be seen in statements like: “I think he is very attentive...he is very aware. He is constantly commending fellow athletes and other people on accomplishments or things that they’ve done,” or “He’s

aware of opportunities for him to connect with the community that way. He seems to understand what people like you know.”

While four of the eight participants agreed that Watt is attentive, it should be noted that the answer to this question was not fully captured. When I conducted my first interview, it became clear that the participant did not know the word “attentive”, or how I was using it in my question. I in turn would try to explain it to the best of my ability, but it would lead to them discussing his integrity rather than his awareness. When I was transcribing my interview throughout the process, it allowed me to listen to myself and the participants reaction to the question, which enabled me to devise a more effective way of defining, “attentive,” which allowed me to capture the appropriate answer from half of my participants.

Diving deeper into understanding the control mutuality element of relationship management, participants were also asked if they felt that Watt took his publics interests into account, thus shaping his decisions and behaviors. Among the eight participants, the responses were split between Watt taking the publics interests into account because he is trying to promote himself as an active member of the community versus not caring about his public’s opinion and wanting to engage in philanthropic activities within Houston regardless of his public.

For those who felt that he did it promote his brand had statements like, “I think there is part of it he’s really taking genuinely the interest into account, but also he probably is doing it for his ‘organization reputation’,” “he took Harvey itself as way that he can promote himself.”

Conversely, those who felt that it was because he wanted to do good, said statements like: “I don’t think he cares what everybody else thinks, he’s just who he is,” “He seems like a people pleaser to me. He [doesn’t] care about people’s opinions...[he] just wants [people] to know that there is a celebrity out there that is looking out for people,” “He’s still got his background from where he was raised and he does, he still sticks true to that...I think he might tailor some things that he does and how he shows up to fit the role of living in Houston,” “He wants to remain a role model for younger kids and wants to make his family proud, and wants to have, feel good about what he’s done each day.”

*“I don’t have any control over what he does. What he does with the money is out of my control” – Leidy*

When participants were asked whether or not they had any control over Watt’s foundation, majority of them agreed that they had no control. The reasoning for this included: “I am just one person,” or, “I have a small part in a big picture.” One participant elaborated on this notion more in that, “the only time [she would] have power is if it was something severe that he was doing that could relate to a lot of people, like if it was something with his foundation that was corrupt, like racial, I feel that’s the only time that something, the only time it’d work and I’d have a voice, if it’s something that people want to hear.” Seven out of the eight participants felt that even though they donated, they had no control to tell Watt what to do with the money.

One participant felt that she did have some control as, “you are kind of speaking with your dollar,” and that, “you kind of have a say in what [Watt] is doing and you also have a say if you not to contribute.”

It was also briefly discussed by those who identified themselves as being active followers of Watt, that he was likely not controlling the money, but rather his mother or his attorneys. “It is his foundation and they are going to do what they are going to do, but I mean his mom is in control of the foundation anyways,” and, “I don’t have any control. I did think about, ‘who’s in charge.’ I’m sure the attorney is in charge now.”

*Relationship Quality 2- Trust*

*“He doesn’t just show up for him, he shows [up] and he shows the city respect and he show the supporters respect because there are a lot of people that do support him...he like to make it known that he is very appreciative of this city and the people that support what he does” –*

*Rayne*

Participants were asked if they felt that Watt treated his both supporters and them personally fairly and justly, and if they felt that Watt could not only be relied on, but also had the ability to accomplish what he says he will do.

For the first part of the question, participants felt that they were treated fairly and justly, but that was a response because there was no other evidence to suggest otherwise. This notion of lack of evidence or inferred behavior carried over into their responses when they were asked if they felt that Watt treated his supporters justly and fairly. This could be seen in comments such as, “I think [he’s treated his supporters fairly and justly], mostly because I haven’t heard otherwise,” “based on what I see in the media, I would say that he treats his supporters fairly and justly,” or, “in all of his posts, he is constantly like, ‘thank you’ to all his supporters and ‘we couldn’t do this without you’.”

One participant had a very unique case with being treated fairly and justly by Watt. Due to a close family member whom works for the Houston Texans organization, her family



and her have attended multiple events where Watt has been in attendance. When the participant was asked if she felt that Watt had treated her personally fairly and justly, she elaborated about a time when Watt had given her daughter signed gloves and tickets to a game for her 6<sup>th</sup> birthday. This level of feeling that Watt treating his supporters fairly and justly was expressed when she provided an example of when Watt attended her friend's grandmothers 99<sup>th</sup> birthday. Due to her friend's grandmother being a big fan of Watt, someone had invited Watt to her birthday via social media. Not only did Watt attend her friend's grandmother's birthday, but he also brought her and her family to NRG stadium where he gave them a tour and brought them down onto the field for a Texans game. Drawing from personal experience, the participant expressed a high-level of agreement in that Watt treats both her personally and his supporters justly and fairly.

The remaining participant felt that she was not, "treated good as his supporter," because she felt that she received no special treatment.

*"You know when he got his contract it was huge, and then he got hurt, and could have walked away...but he didn't. [He] went through surgery and other injuries and other surgeries and he's still playing" – Tara*

When participants were asked if they felt that Watt could be relied on to keep his promises, as well as whether or not if he had the ability to accomplish what he said he would do, this really highlighted the disparity between those who were active followers of him pre-Hurricane Harvey, and those who became more familiar with him post- Hurricane Harvey. Out of the eight participants, four of them were able to draw on examples prior to him starting his Hurricane Harvey Relief fund that he could be relied on to carry out his initiative. All four of these participants discussed his work ethic of him being a professional athlete.

This was expressed in statements such as: “He’ll do that in football where it’s like ‘I’m going to show up and be the best football player that I can be and make it happen this year,’ and then inevitably he shows up, and he lives beyond his expect-, beyond like other people’s expectations,” “the evidence is how hard he seems to work at his job,” or “You’ve seen him get hurt for the past two years and he’s come back to the team, and he’s, you know, outperformed everyone else in the NFL as far as defensive players go.”

The remaining four participants agreed that Watt could be relied on and that he could accomplish what he wanted because of how he handled the Hurricane Harvey Relief fund. This could be seen in the comments like, “you are kind of seeing how it is playing out and how it is actually helping people,” “He raised millions of dollars for Hurricane Harvey and then he showed everyone where the money was going. He showed that the money was used in a good way, which is good because then people can trust him more,” and, “he show[ed] what he did.”

The four participants who had no prior indication that he could be relied on also continued on with these themes that he could be relied on because of Hurricane Harvey due to his transparency of his efforts and continual change of his fundraising goals. This could be seen in statements like, “I’m very confident [that he has the ability to accomplish what he says he will do] because... he continued to increase his goals and then what he said he was going to do with the money,” “It wasn’t like a, ‘I’m going to keep you all in the dark in terms of what we’re going to do with this money,’ it’s, ‘this is what we are going to do with the money,’” and, “he’s obviously someone who can set goals and achieve them...like how he exceeded these goals for raising money for funds.”

### *Relationship Quality 3 - Commitment*

*“His involvement, his activism here... he’s involved in multiple other things throughout the city as well, and so to me, that shows a commitment” – Kaci*

The third relationship quality, commitment, was explored by asking participants to describe how Watt was showing them that he was trying to invest or maintain a long-term relationship with both them personally and the city of Houston. Out of the eight participants, one felt that Watt was trying to maintain a long-term relationship with her personally because she received a “thank you” card from the Watt’s foundation. The remaining seven participants did not feel that Watt was trying to maintain a relationship with them personally, as much as he was trying to maintain a long-term commitment with the City of Houston. This was evidenced in statements including, “I don’t think he is trying to build a relationship personally with me, as much as he is trying to build a relationship with his fans and his community,” or “Not necessarily [maintain a long-term commitment to a relationship] with me, but the city of Houston.”

When the participants identified that Watt was trying to maintain a long-term commitment with the City of Houston, they primarily discussed that he shows this commitment via his activity within the community and city of Houston. This was evidenced in statements like: “he wants to make Houstonians proud,” “you can tell he is trying to build a long-term relationship with his fans through his high involvement with the community. He is an active-figure in Houston,” “He’s not just a show up and do the football gig and then go be a recluse, he commits to it, and he lets the city know that he is grateful for what the city has done for him, and again he gives that back every year,” and “his involvement, his activism here.”

Extending beyond his presence with being an active member within the community, one participant identified that when he speaks on social media, he uses inclusive language and he doesn't just talk about himself. "He's constantly talking about Houston, like it's not like only about the Texans, it's not only about the Watt foundation, and it's not only about his family, or his girlfriend...there's so much messaging around Houston."

One participant acknowledged that he is trying to try in the city because of the relief fund but did not demonstrate that he was doing it to try to maintain a long-term commitment with the city of Houston.

#### *Relationship Quality 4 - Satisfaction*

*"He is a really positive force for us. He is really one of like the pillars of like what makes Houston, Houston today, because he just seems to do a lot for us" – Jenn.*

Satisfaction was the last relationship quality that was investigated via asking the participants about their level of satisfaction in the relationship that Watt had with both them personally and the city of Houston. All eight participants highlighted that they were satisfied in their relationship that they had with Watt. It should be noted, like the previous question that explored how participants viewed Watt treating both his supporters and them personally, the satisfaction at the personal level because there was no evidence that existed that would suggest for them to not feel satisfied. This could be seen in their shorter answers and also in their reinforcement of their, "positive" attitude, or that it wasn't a "love-hate." Other statements included: "the connection I have with him I mean is very positive," "I am very satisfied with our relationship," or "I don't have any complaints."

While all participants expressed positive sentiments towards their relationship with Watt, they became more elated when they described their satisfaction with the relationship

that Watt has with the city of Houston. This was evidenced by participants heightened tone of voice, more animated answers, and longer answers. Some of these answers included: “I am pretty satisfied with his dedication and his attitude,” or “I am satisfied with his relationship with the city of Houston because of how much he gives back.” One participant described how their satisfaction stemmed from the fact that there were a lot of people who are not doing anything, but that “[Watt] is like the only one who is trying to do something.”

*Communal versus Exchange Relationship*

*“I think that he’s still concerned with it because he is living here, and you want the city that you live in to be doing as well as possible” - Sophia*

To understand what type of relationship, communal or exchange, manifested between Watt and his donors, participants were asked whether they felt that Watt cared about the welfare of the City of Houston, valued their support, and whether his actions were a result because the city expected something in return from him.

Participants felt that Watt is not only concerned about the welfare of the city of Houston, but also his fans, or public. This could be seen in statements like, “I think that he is concerned about the welfare of all his fans at the city of Houston,” or “I think he definitely, I mean it seems like he cares about the city of Houston or else he wouldn’t have started raising money.”

Three of the participants agreed with the abovementioned sentiments as well but felt that while he cares or is aware of issues among the community, he would not involve himself unless if it was a larger problem, or something that he was able to readily fix. This could be seen in statements like, “He is concerned for our city. I feel we have certain things that would happen that would affect us badly enough, I think he would step in. Every day stuff?

Like no,” “I don’t necessarily think it’s at the top of his list...It’s probably not the first thing he wakes up and thinks about, everyone else in the city, but I think he’s definitely a selfless human being, outside of like just dumping money into an issue,” and “He’d probably come out for like huge things like environmental things, I feel like in general, if we look at the poverty in Houston...I feel like that isn’t really something that he can fix.”

Participants agreed that Watt did value their collective effort in donating to his Hurricane relief fund. Seven out of the eight participants garnered this attitude from his social media posts, what he vocalized in the media, or what he physically does for the fans. This was evidenced by statements like, “I do think he values his fans supports, that’s why he does so much for the fans and why he is so willing to help out. I think that matters a lot to him,” “He always seems to always be thanking the fans, so to me, you know a player doesn’t have to say that,” “I think that he values not only my support, but any fans support because if he didn’t value their support, I don’t think he would take the initiative that he does to do acts of kindness,” “He’s highly dependent on our support and he is very thankful for it,” and, “the appreciation he shown on social media.”

While participants felt that Watt cared about their wellbeing and valued their support, some participants felt that Watt had a responsibility to the city of Houston due to the vast amount of support he received from Houstonians, and others felt that he did it out of the sheer goodness of his heart, but none of them thought that the city expected anything from him. This could be seen in statements like, “He didn’t have to do anything,” “I don’t think that the city really expects anything in return, I just feel like he has the opportunity to do something good and he is going to do it...it’s just really well appreciated when they do,” “the city of Houston kind of came up underneath him and we built a platform for him...we put

him on a pedestal,” “I don’t see him doing it to fulfill an expectation you know? I think it’s, he does it because he has the ability to do it and he does it to make people happy.”

*Dichotomy of Power*

*“I have never tried. If I had opportunity to talk to him, I would shake his hand and take a picture with him” - Sophia*

When participants were asked if they have tried to talk to Watt, all but one said, “No.” The one who did not say, “No,” was because she has talked to him before at various Texans events because her family member who works for the Texans organization. “I mean we don’t have like individual lunches or dinners, but we’ve been at the same event a few times, and he’s talked, he has given our kids free stuff... [but] it’s not like we are BBQing on Sunday’s or something.”

For the remaining seven participants, they have not tried to express the want to talk to him. Three of the seven said that if they had the chance to talk to him they would want to ask him about what it is like to run and operate a non-profit and ask for insight. “I’m not really interested in talking to him, like maybe on like a level of like business and like understanding how he’s running these nonprofits.”

The other four were content with not speaking with him. One said they could but did not really see the point. “I might throw a like on their post, but I don’t ever try and reach out beyond that, and the reasoning beyond that is just like I feel, potentially it would just like be a waste of time, right?” Another participant said, “there’s really nothing that I would have to say to him besides maybe a short ‘thank you for everything that you’ve done,’ but I don’t know what else I would say to him because I am just a speck of dust in his sea, you know, of fans.”

*Motivation to Donate*

*“I didn’t intend to donate money, but I saw on the Facebook that my friends are donating their money...That’s how I decided to donate my money” - Jiwon*

Participants were asked about what motivated them to donate to Watt’s Hurricane Relief fund in the first place. Aside from one participant who was told before the campaign was launched to donate and spread the word, the remaining seven participants did not donate until the weeks after Harvey. Part of the reason for this lag, as one participant described was because, “... as people started realizing how bad Harvey actually was, they didn’t know how to contribute, and that’s how I was too.”

One of the largest motivators for my participants to donate was because it was how they could help out in the meantime. “We were not at home, and there was nothing else we could really do,” “I was virtually unaffected by Harvey, whereas I knew other people in the city were just going through like horrible times...I couldn’t leave my house and volunteer anywhere, but I could give my money,” and, “You don’t really know how to help and you sit there and you want to help, where should I volunteer at, or what you should give, and that was just a great way to contribute.”

Three of my participants donated to multiple other causes outside of Watt’s Hurricane Harvey Relief fund, whereas three others exclusively donated to his initiative. Between the six participants, there was this recurring theme of “trustworthy celebrity,” and this notion that they knew that the money was going to be going directly back into the city of Houston. This could be seen in statements like, “He is a true philanthropist and I think that it was a genuine effort to do something really good because he knew of his stature in the city and he knew of his reputation... I thought that was awesome and I thought that he would be



successful with it,” “There’s a lot of places out there that say ‘donate, donate, donate,’ but there is no real idea where the money is going... a bunch of people were doing it, seemed like a great cause by a well-respected individual, and the city needs it,” and “There was a lot of other GoFundMe’s, but with those, you didn’t really know if the money was going back to the community and help those who were affected by Hurricane Harvey. There was a lot of publicity associated with his campaign with a lot of support, so I felt that I could trust his charity moreso than others I was seeing.”

In terms of getting their awareness, two participants found out about his fundraising efforts through his personal page. The remaining six participants heard about it through their friends sharing it on social media, or from other news media sources covering his initiative. This could be seen in statements like: “I didn’t intend to donate money, but I saw on Facebook that my friends are donating their money and then she posted, ‘hey guys, I would really appreciate if you guys are thinking about like donating money, donate to this organization,” “It was through someone else’s [social media] and people were just posting about the different ways. It was like a couple weeks after Harvey hit, and he was still taking donation and it was still when he was starting to get more publicized,” “I learned about it on a news stations Facebook page and seen it all over my social media and heard about it on the radio,” “It was the most advertised, the one that I saw the most, it was the one I always remembered the most,” and “I didn’t go looking or it, I didn’t go searching for it...but just through people sharing it, coming through my news feed.”

#### *Strength of Relationship*

*“The Houston community really saw the impact of his fundraising” - Leidy*

To see the strength of the relationship, participants were asked if they would donate their money to Watt again. Out of the eight participants, all of them said that they would donate again because of how quick Watt was able to raise funds and distribute funds to those who needed it. This was evidenced in comments such as: “I will do it again just because like I said, when you donate online, you never really know if the money is actually going to go to the foundation or if it’s going to go to something good or somebody else’s pocket,” “Yeah, I would because a) I have no indication that the money was used wrongly and b) I think that when you go with a credible source, it’s likely that your money is going to be spent well and it’s good for our Houston community,” “I would [donate again] because I’ve seen like what, how fast he was able to bring in so much money and so much support and in such a small amount of time, and I feel like he could easily do it again,” “Yes [I would] just because he follows through. I’ve seen it. I’ve seen him give, I’ve seen him do things for Baytown Junior High School, I’ve seen him do things with the Harvey money.”

Two participants said they would donate again, but like Harvey, it would have to have to be under extreme circumstances. This could be seen when the two participants said, “In a quite honest answer, like if it were today, the answer would be neg-, probably no, but say, worst case scenario, another natural disaster hits and he reboots this and does this again, absolutely,” “I would donate again especially because it was such a bad catastrophe like Harvey.”

#### *His Portrayal in the Media for both Active and Passive Followers*

While it was evident in the answers of who were active followers of Watt, because they were either fans of him or sports in general, or welcomed his positivity on their social media feeds, the participants who were not active followers, found him to be a credible individual due to

his prevalence among news media sources. These statements included, “like CNN and Fox are two different places to get different types of information. If you can get on both of those, it’s like big,” “newspaper articles...trustworthy news sources have a credible articles and things, you know it’s not just social media and whatever is trending, its actual news,” and “based on what you see in the media.” Participants also felt that he must be a good person due to lack of evidence suggesting otherwise. This came in the form of, “I haven’t heard otherwise,” “He seems like a nice person,” “I think that he really makes it a point to keep his reputation clean and to say good things about other people,” “the only thing I really knew was the fact that he was so loved in Houston,” “even if you don’t really know about him, you don’t just dislike him,” “he has a reputation for himself,”

## DISCUSSION

### *Donors measuring their relationships with Watt*

Using public relations literature as a framework to explore whether a relationship between J.J. Watt and his donors existed, it was investigated that should a relationship exist, was it through parasocial means, and if so, did this prompt donors to donate.

In order to answer research question 1 (RQ1), it first needed be established whether a relationship between Watt and his donors transpired. This element was explored using Grunig’s (2002) interview guide and measuring the four relationship qualities (i.e. commitment, satisfaction, trust, control mutuality). Second, using a modified questionnaire that Chung and Cho (2011) developed to test for parasocial relationships, it could highlight that if a relationship transpired, was parasocial in nature.

### *Active Followers versus Passive Followers*

When participants were interviewed it became evident through both their answers and provided examples who were active followers of Watt and who were passive followers. Active followers of Watt often drew upon his athletic career (i.e. coming back from an injury) or how he made his presence known, both on-the-field (i.e. decorated playing career or staying after practice to sign autographs) and off-the-field (i.e. visiting sick kids in children's hospitals or donating money to after school programs). Passive followers based their knowledge of him off of what others effectively implied about him. Their implied knowledge was derived either from what they seen on their social media feed due to their friends liking and sharing Watt's posts or through credible news media sources reporting on Watt. One passive follower captured this theme perfectly when she said, "even if you don't really know about him, you just don't dislike him." Passive followers also measured their relationship (i.e. trust, satisfaction, commitment and control mutuality) due to his Hurricane Harvey relief fund using his Harvey initiatives as relationship measurement indicator.

All participants expressed extreme satisfaction with Watt, particularly because of his Hurricane Harvey initiative and what he did during such a dire time for Houston. While they did say that they were satisfied with his relationship with them personally, they became more expressive and animated in their answers when discussing their level of satisfaction in the relationship that Watt has the city of Houston. This increase in excitement could be attributed that he violated expectations in a positive fashion in that the city did not expect Watt to do anything, but he did. This could be seen in statements such as: "He didn't have to do anything for Harvey, and he did," or, ""He didn't have to do anything."

*Donors defining Watt's commitment to the city of Houston*

For the measurable relationship quality of commitment- participants did not strongly feel that Watt was trying to maintain a long-term commitment to a relationship with them but agreed that he was trying to pursue one with the city of Houston. Participants identified his level of commitment to the city of Houston due to his high involvement with various organizations within the city of Houston and the level of effort he puts in to both connect with his fans and his community. They identified his level of involvement through his social media or news coverage, his dedication, and the time and effort he invests to take care of the city of Houston. “He didn’t have to do anything for Harvey, and he did,” and “if he didn’t care about the fans, or he didn’t care about the city, I think he would be more selfish with his time.”

This notion of identifying a stronger relationship quality with the City of Houston versus them personally also occurred during the exploration of the “satisfaction” relationship quality. While participants were satisfied with their relationship that they personally had with Watt, they were more satisfied in the relationship that Watt has with the City of Houston. This was evidenced by participants more animated answers or responses such as “even more satisfied.”

#### *Donors Identifying What Makes Watt Trustworthy*

“Trustworthiness,” was a consistent theme throughout participants answers. They all felt that he was trustworthy due to his philanthropic efforts, strong media presence (i.e. personal social media and news media) and being transparent about how he was using the money from his Hurricane Harvey fund. While this relationship quality resonated the strongest among participants, this one also manifested at different times among the participants. Active followers found him to be, “trustworthy,” due to his on-field efforts and

willingness to engage with the fans, versus passive followers found him to be trustworthy because of how he showed donors how he was using the money, or their friends indicated so.

*Donors Perceived Lack of Control Over Watt's Foundation*

The analysis of the measurable relationship quality of control mutuality highlighted the clear difference of power and who they thought had “control.” When they were asked if they felt whether they had any control over what he did with the money or the foundation, the majority of them agreed that they had “none...what he does with the money [was] out of [their] control.” However, two of the participants felt that the only time they would have any control is if the sentiment that they were feeling was something shared among the larger community, then the likelihood of them influencing his decisions increased. While it can be seen that some form of relationship exists between the donor and Watt, it was needed to be determined if it was parasocial in nature.

*Identifying Antecedents of Parasocial Relationships*

Referring back to the literature on parasocial relationships, there are three different constructs that are identified as contributing to the development and growth of parasocial relationships: uncertainty reduction theory, personal construct theory, and social exchange theory.

Uncertainty reduction theory outlined that the more a media user is exposed to a media character, whether passively or actively, the more likely the media user will develop an affinity towards the media character, or at least develop a sense of knowing who they are (Perse & Rubin, 1989; Cole & Leets, 1999; Giles, 2002). This heightened increase in parasocial interactions between the user and the media persona is identified as being a cause

to the development of parasocial relationships. This construct was investigated by asking participants the frequency in which they seen him, and where they predominantly seen him.

As a whole, six participants said that they see him or heard about him once a week or more, with every-day being the most frequent. Among these participants, three of them identified that they followed Watt on his various social media pages (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram) prior to his Hurricane Harvey Relief efforts. For the remaining three participants who did not follow but stated that they see him more than once a week, commented how they consistently see him on their social media feeds via their personal social networks, as well as in places they frequented (i.e. advertising at the Houston Food Bank or H-E-B). Among the most active followers who were self-identified sports fans, or fans of the Texans, were able to identify more locations of where they would see him.

The next construct that can also lead to the development and growth of parasocial relationships is personal construct theory. This theory highlights that a media user is more likely to develop an affinity towards their media character of choice if they feel that both them and the media persona share similar values (Turner, 1993; Cole & Leets, 1999; Giles, 2002). This was explored by asking participants questions pertaining to if they felt that they found Watt relatable, shared similar values with him, how they seen him as a normal person like themselves, and whether they felt they could be friends with Watt if he was not a famous athlete.

Participants agreed that they found him relatable because of his philanthropic efforts among the city of Houston, or willingness to donate his time and money to helping out others and simply doing good. One criterion in that participants had to have met in order for them to

involve themselves in my research was that they donated to Watt's relief fund, therefore participants exhibit a level of goodwill by donating their money to a foundation.

Majority of the participants also felt that they shared similar values with him, mostly again, due to his willingness of "wanting to do good," and that he was, "family- oriented." With regards to feeling that Watt was a normal person like themselves, some participants believed that he was because he "has normal everyday struggles," and because of "how he helps the community."

When participants were asked if they could see themselves being friends with Watt had he not been a famous athlete, only three said they could, but simply because they could bond over their love of sports and how they perceived him to be a reliable friend.

Social exchange theory is the final theory that can lead to the development of parasocial relationships. This theory connects intimacy and the relationship importance to a cost and reward assessment where a parasocial relationship with a media character would have high reward and low-cost exchange (Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Cole & Leets, 1999; Giles, 2002). Within the case of Hurricane Harvey, it was an extreme natural disaster that had a disastrous impact. With Harvey being as extreme as it was, people were stranded and unable to volunteer like they wanted but could donate money in the meantime. "We were at home and we couldn't go anywhere... I felt like anything I could do, I would like to do. I couldn't leave my home and volunteer anywhere... but I could give money." It was an easy way for participants to help their "neighbors." One participant, Leidy, described this experience as "the most convenient at the time. [She] seen the link and was like, 'okay, I am just going to do it.'"



Participants, while split between Watt acting in a selfish or selfless manner, all agreed that he was not acting in this way because the city expected something from him, but “it was appreciated,” that he did. Some participants felt that he was doing it to make himself look better and improve his overall public perception as an effort to improve his brand, whereas others felt that, “he likes to feel good by doing good things.” Some participants felt that he did it because he held a responsibility to his fans. “He has some type of responsibility to the people that support him, and they go to games for him.”

#### *Active Followers and Parasocial Behaviour*

As evidenced by the data, for those who were already active followers of his prior engagement to the launch of his Hurricane Harvey relief fund, except one participant who had physically interacted with him or had two-way conversations with him, exhibited parasocial behavior. This was evidenced by their particular frequent exposure to him, their heightened awareness to his life which highlighted things that they could relate on, as well as values they shared. For the participants who were not active followers of Watt were not well versed with who Watt was prior to Hurricane Harvey, as evidenced by their second-hand knowledge of him, but became more active followers of him post Harvey.

Therefore, upon answering RQ1, it became apparent that there were two groups within my data sample of donors: those who were active followers of Watt, and passive followers. Strictly looking at the passive group, they did not purposely engage in any type of mediated contact with him, had inferred knowledge about him via their social media pages and watching the news. Using Horton and Wohl’s (1956) definition of a parasocial interaction, the donors from the passive group had these interactions with Watt, but extending within active audience lens, chose to not personally expose themselves to Watt.

Due to their second-hand knowledge, combined with their limited prior knowledge of Watt, and using post-Harvey examples in their answers, it would suggest that there was minimal to no parasocial relationship among the passive follower group.

For the active follower group, one of them had had previous personal contact with Watt which instantly eliminates her from having a parasocial relationship with him. The remaining three participants in the active follower group exhibited parasocial relationship qualities. This could be seen in them using first-hand knowledge to answer their questions and listing more places of where they see Watt. This would suggest that among my participants, three of them had parasocial relationships with Watt.

It should be noted that for the passive follower group, they had the potential to cultivate parasocial relationships with Watt post- Hurricane Harvey. Among the four participants in the group, one of them decided to follow Watt on social media to see what he did with the money. The remaining three also heightened their exposure to Watt to also see how he was distributing his funds.

#### *Parasocial Relationships and Their Impact on Donating*

For my second research question (RQ2), drawing upon my results in RQ1, it investigated whether the manifested parasocial relationship influenced the donor's decision to donate, thus impacting the organization in achieving their charitable goals. In the answering of RQ1, it was identified that three participants had a parasocial relationship with Watt.

Isolating these three identified participants responses in understanding their motivations to donate, as well as the timeliness of their donation, would indicate the strength of their relationship with Watt, thus positioning him to be their prime influencer for them to

donate. Among these three participants, when asked, “why did you donate,” one of donors outlined that she felt that he was the most, “trustworthy,” person that she could donate their money to during that time, and another said that it was a way for them to help their “neighbors,” while they were unable to leave their home. Among the three participants, one donated the week of the Hurricane, and the other two donated 10 to 14 days after, which would indicate a time-lag between campaign launch to action of donation. Taking this information, their cultivated parasocial relationship with Watt was not the sole motivator for them to donate. Speaking on the aggregate of participants, 42% of them exhibited parasocial means, but since this was not the sole motivator for them to donate, this positions that while parasocial relationships can exist among a few donors, the impact is not significant.

For the passive follower group- they did not impact Watt’s charitable goals through parasocial means because they did not have a parasocial relationship prior to the launch of his relief fund. Their motivations as to what prompted them to donate their money to his relief fund extends beyond the scope of this thesis as it ventures into brand management and reputation management theory. This was evidenced by them using similar key words to describe him (i.e. “football” or “good person”) or inferring their knowledge about him from what they seen through either their social media feeds through friends sharing his posts or seeing him in credible news media sources. This could be seen in sentences like, “the only thing I really knew was the fact that he was so loved in Houston,” “He seems like a nice person,” “He seems really well known across the United States and that he is a good person,” or, “he has a reputation.”

*Donating to Watt’s Hurricane Harvey Relief Fund versus Other Foundations*

It should also be noted that majority of the participants, three, exclusively only donated to Watt's initiative, whereas three others donated to multiple other campaigns, including the Red Cross. Two of the participants were not asked as this question was not initially scoped in the interview guide but was later added for the remaining six participants. Among the exclusive donor group, one participant vehemently stated that they did not trust the Red Cross. Another participant who donated to both, stated that she would never donate to the Red Cross again after seeing how little the provided to her community. One participant donated to Red Cross as well because she identified that she previously worked there and directly knows about the work they do. Throughout the interviews, participants seemed to have a level of trust in Watt and that he was going to give the money directly back into the City of Houston, and his social media presence only amplified that, whereas with the Red Cross they were not sure where their money was going.

While there was no parasocial behavior exhibited for passive follower group, all donors said that they would donate to him again based on the evidence given to them regarding how the funds were distributed. Stemming back to Hon and Grunig (1999) our passive donors also all said that they would likely donate to Watt again, which shows strength in relationship between the organization and him. So, while it may not have impacted this specific fundraising campaign, it has the potential to impact Watt's next fundraising campaign.

### **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Upon conduction of this study, it identifies a slight venture away from traditional relationship management methods. Rather than looking at the use of two-way symmetrical communication, it posited that parasocial relationships were just as impactful for an

organization in achieving their charitable goals. For a nonprofit organization that solely exists to provide social good to their communities, donor relationships are imperative. For the case of J.J. Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief fund, it demonstrates the power of social media in communicating campaign goals, using a corporate social responsibility approach. While two-way communication symmetrical communication is effective in cultivating relationships with individuals, my participants highlighted the notion that while Watt was not cultivating a relationship with them individually, he was doing so with the community of Houston, in which they identify as being a part of. Watt was able to harvest the trust of the participants through his strong social media presence showing his philanthropic efforts and how he gives back to the city of Houston.

For public relations practitioners, it would be suggested to use more inclusive and community-focused messaging to engage and communicate with potential donors. It would also be advised to use the organizations social media platforms to show their presence within their communities using a corporate social responsibility approach, to not only involve, but also activate potential donors, to support the organization in achieving their charitable goals.

## **CONCLUSION**

On a whole, the thesis intended to investigate the impact that parasocial relationships could have on an organization from achieving their charitable goals. Using relationship management theory from public relations literature and the media effect of parasocial relationships as the guiding framework for this thesis, it was found that parasocial relationships have an insignificant impact towards an organization from achieving their charitable goals. This was determined by interviewing eight donors to the JJ Watt Hurricane Harvey Relief fund.

Specifically speaking for the city and surrounding area of Houston, Watt is a prevalent media character as he is both a professional athlete, as well as an active member of the Houston community. To fully explore the question, an interview guide was created using both Grunig's (2002) and Chung and Cho's (2011) questions to not only determine that if a relationship existed between Watt and the donor, but whether it was through parasocial means.

Upon exploring these research questions, two donor groups emerged in my data: an active follower group, and a passive follower group. One of the prime discriminants between these two groups was the amount of knowledge they had about Watt prior to the launch of his Hurricane Harvey Relief fund. For the active followers, they were not only able to identify more places of where they see or hear about him, but also gave examples of his athletic career and philanthropic activities before Hurricane Harvey. For the passive follower group, they had limited knowledge of him, and the knowledge that they did have was second-hand and that was what shaped their perception of him.

Among the active follower group, three of them had never personally interacted with him, and after analyzing my data, exhibited parasocial relationship behaviour, but this was not the prime motivator for them donating. This was evidenced by their reason to donate, time-lag from campaign launch to donation, as well as the lack of participants who were active followers of Watt prior to donation.

Among the passive follower group, two of them became active followers post donation because they wanted to watch how the money was being distributed post donation. This included them following him on social media, as well as keeping up with the news. Sharing similar sentiments with the active follower group that he is "trustworthy" and

“reliable”, while a parasocial relationship did not influence their decision to donate, it could in the future.

### **LIMITATIONS & FUTURE AREAS OF STUDY**

For this study, one of the largest limitations was recruiting enough participants that would allow me to fully explore my research question. Within the requirements of recruitment, participants had to reside within the community of Houston; however, since it was gravely affected by Harvey, many residents would have been a recipient of the donation, rather be the donor.

Another limitation was having all interviews conducted via the phone, rather than face-to-face. While the phone interview provided convenience and timeliness in conducting the interviews, a face-to-face interview likely would have enabled a level of comfort and may have given me longer and more insightful answers.

In the initial interviews, I supplemented them by taking notes. When I transcribed my early interviews, it became apparent that I was not probing where I could have because I was concerned about taking notes. Once I identified this, I no longer took notes and listened to areas where I could further probe.

While I did pilot test my interview guide, I should have tested it on someone who is not studying public relations or is in graduate school like myself. This would have highlighted to me where the confusion in questions lied. This confusion became clear when asking participants if they felt that Watt was attentive, as well as whether or not they felt that the relationship between them and Watt was communal or exchange in nature.

After conducting this research, to fully explore the notion of parasocial relationships as prime motivator for individuals to donate, an additional criterion of being an active

follower should be met. Out of the eight participants, only three were able to provide myself with insight as to whether parasocial behavior can influence donor behavior, which gives me a fairly small size; however, it highlighted other motivators as to why donors donate (i.e. brand management, reputation management).



**TABLE 1.1 – PARTICIPANTS AND PARASOCIAL INTERACTION OCCURENCES**

<b>Participant's Name</b>	<b>Words they associated with J.J. Watt:</b>	<b>Frequency of Exposure:</b>	<b>Follow him on Social Media?</b>	<b>Where does the exposure occur?</b>	<b>When did they donate:</b>
Leidy	He plays for the Texans	Once or twice a week	No	Advertising, pictures of him at Houston food bank, H-E-B commercials, shopping at H-E-B, radio.	Week after the Hurricane
Jenn	Football player, good person, fun, affable	Weekly	Yes	TV, Instagram, Texans Football organization, H-E-B commercials, shopping at H-E-B.	Week that Harvey happened
Ajdina	Football	Once a month	No	Twitter	Few days after it was started
Rayne	Good person. Good athlete	Two to three times a week	Yes	Instagram, watching football, sports news	More than a week- wasn't instant
Sophia	Houston hero	Every Sunday	No	Via friends that are involved in nonprofits, watching football, social media	2 to 3 weeks after
Tara	All-American football player, philanthropist, momma's boy	Five times a week if its football season, three times a week if it's not football season	Thinks she follows him on Twitter, but isn't active on Twitter	Watching football, H-E-B commercials, Papa John's commercials	10 days after
Kaci	Football player	Every day probably	Followed him after Hurricane Harvey when she re-activated her account	Through family friend who works for Texans organization, news, sports radio, sports news	Before it was announced
Jiwon	Wasn't familiar with the name	Twice a month	No, but followed him after donation	Facebook or news articles	Two weeks

**APPENDIX****Appendix 2.1 -Recruitment Post**

Do you live in the Houston region and did you donate to JJ Watt's Hurricane Harvey Relief Fund? If so, then you can be part of my research study that the University of Houston! Each eligible participant will receive a \$5 Amazon gift card! It will consist of one interview that will last approximately 45 minutes. Participation is completely voluntary, and your answers will be confidential. If you are interested or have any further questions, please do not hesitate to email me at [rbalaban@uh.edu](mailto:rbalaban@uh.edu). This research study has been reviewed by the University of Houston Institutional Review Board. Thank you for your time!

**Appendix 2.2- Interview Guide**

1. Tell me about what you know about J.J. Watt
  - a. Where do you most often see him or read about him?
  - b. How well would you say you know him? Do you think you know how he exists outside of playing football?
2. What do you know about J.J. Watt Hurricane Harvey Relief Fund?
  - a. How did you hear about the JJ Watt Hurricane Harvey Relief Fund?
  - b. At what stage did you donate money to Watt's initiative?
  - c. Why did you donate?
3. Do you feel that you have a relationship with JJ Watt?
4. Do you find that Watt is relatable?
  - a. Do you feel that you share similar values?
  - b. Have you tried to or want to talk to him?
  - c. Do you think you two would be friends if he was not a famous athlete?

**Control Mutuality**

5. To what extent do you believe that JJ Watt is attentive to what he says?
  - a. Can you provide examples that show JJ Watt has taken his public's interests into account in its decisions and behaviors or that show it has failed to take those interests into account?
  - b. To what extent do you feel you have any control over what JJ Watt does that affects you? Why?

**Trust**

6. Would you describe anything that JJ Watt has done to treat you fairly and justly?
7. Would you describe things that JJ Watt has done that indicated that he can be relied on to keep its promises?
8. How confident are you that JJ Watt has the ability to accomplish what it says it will do?
  - a. Can you give examples?

**Commitment**

9. Can you provide me any examples that suggest that JJ Watt wants to maintain a long-term commitment to a relationship with you or the city of Houston?

**Satisfaction**

10. How satisfied are you with the relationship that J Watt has had with you and the city of Houston?
  - a. Please explain

**Communal Relationship**

11. Do you feel that JJ Watt is concerned about the welfare of you and the City of Houston, even if it gets nothing in return?
  - a. Why do you think so?
12. Do you feel that Watt values your support?

**Exchange Relationship**

13. Do you feel that JJ Watt gives or offers something to you or the City of Houston because it expects something in return?
  - a. Can you provide any examples that show why you think this?

14. Would you donate to Watt's foundation again? Why or Why not?

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