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# Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative Rhetorically Constructed as an Act of Corporate Social Responsibility

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# Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative Rhetorically Constructed as An Act of Corporate Social Responsibility

Rachel Kaplan

## Abstract

*Walmart is the largest publicly owned retailer in the world (Fishman, 2008). Walmart operates in a contested rhetorical environment because of an aggressive pricing strategy, low-paying wages, and discrimination claims made by women. This paper argues Walmart created several Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs to help improve corporate image and reputation. CSR encourages companies to consider a triple bottom line: people, the environment and profit. Consumers who practice socially responsible consumption choose to support companies they perceive give back to the community, participate in CSR initiatives to help people, and incorporate sustainable practices into the lifecycle of their products. This paper adds to the conversation about communicative functions of CSR and narrative creation. Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative appears to be a small part of a much larger overall goal of reputation repair. This paper explores the historical development of CSR from the viewpoint of proponents and critics of CSR, most notably this work frames Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative as an act of CSR. Lastly, the paper considers a rebirth of the new corporate image created by myriad CSR programs at Walmart.*

*Keywords: corporate social responsibility; corporate image; reputation repair; Walmart; rhetoric; narrative*

**W**almart is the largest publicly owned retailer in the world (Fishman, 2008). Sam Walton opened the first Walmart store in Rogers, Arkansas, in 1962, with the expressed goal of bringing the lowest possible prices to consumers (Fishman, 2008). This lofty goal has come at a high price in terms of the company's reputation. The rhetorical landscape surrounding Walmart's intentions are highly contested. However, Walmart is currently undertaking intentional efforts to repair its infamous reputation (Taylor, 2017).

Walmart is viewed in a negative light by some stakeholders, particularly facing opposition when moving into a new town, as many are concerned about decreased home values, the creation of low-paying jobs, traffic, and the loss of small, niche retailers (Pope & Pope, 2015). The negative sentiment towards Walmart is rhetorically constructed from the aggressive pricing strategy that Walmart employs. "Walmart has the power to squeeze profit-killing

concessions from vendors” (Fishman, 2008, p. 15) and has been cited publicly for being both powerful and aggressive with suppliers.

The contested rhetoric surrounding Walmart’s reputation continues to form negative sentiments from not only aggressive pricing and low-paying wages, but also its mistreatment of women. Walmart’s poor treatment of women is widespread and pervasive, “Almost 2,000 women in 48 states claim that Walmart discriminated against them for pay and promotions” (Hines, 2012, para. 1). Women who work and have worked for Walmart are pursuing a lawsuit against Walmart claiming, “Walmart systematically favors men for raises and promotions” (Hines, 2012, para. 2). The women are still in the process of litigating their claims against Walmart.

In 2018, Senior Judge Rosemary Collyer, U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, dismissed lawsuits against Walmart regarding people with disabilities. The “federal judge has dismissed an U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission suit accusing a Walmart store of failing to accommodate two deaf employees, concluding the complaint fell short of stating a proper disability discrimination claim” (Mulvaney, 2018, para. 1). Walmart is operating in a rhetorical landscape filled with pessimism and negativity about its business practices and their intentions toward multiple stakeholders.

Nonetheless, Walmart reports its “mission [is] to create opportunities so people can live better. We [Walmart] consider it our responsibility to make a positive impact in the communities we serve” (Walmart Foundation Our Focus How We Give, 2018, para. 2). Walmart’s low pricing strategies do help the poor, as the low pricing strategies are considered an antipoverty force in America, “Walmart saves a typical American family of four about \$2,500 a year. That’s about what a family of four gets from the government in food stamps” (Kestenbaum, 2017, para. 4). Furthermore, Walmart helps to improve the lives of farmers in third-world countries. Walmart factories hire low-skilled farmers to work and earn a dollar day. This dollar is life-changing for the farmers as it allows the farmer to purchase electricity and running water for the first time; it greatly improves “their living standards” and “their longevity” (Kestenbaum, 2017, para. 5). Walmart and the Walmart Foundation have “donated 1.4 billion dollars in cash and kind” (Walmart Foundation Our Focus How We Give, 2018, para. 1) and have a variety of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, including grant programs that focus on opportunity, sustainability, and scholarship programs helping team members and their families further their education.

The Minneapolis Federal Reserve conducted a study to see if Walmart had a negative or positive effect on counties where a Walmart was present, and the results were positive for Walmart. The Fed’s report concluded, “Firm growth, employment and total earnings were somewhat stronger in Wal-Mart counties” (*MSNBC/Forbes*, 2008, para. 2). It seems that the company is having difficulty convincing the public Walmart is good for communities as, “a Pew study cited by the report, 24% of Americans think the company is bad for the economy, and 31% had an unfavorable view of it” (*MSNBC/Forbes*, 2008, para. 2). The company has constructed a

variety of CSR programs to both help the community and increase goodwill with stakeholders. Doug McMillon, the CEO of Walmart, recently said in an interview, “If the world knew what we’ve done for the past 10 years and what we’re doing to make things better holistically, I think our reputation would be dramatically better” (Ignatius, 2017, para. 42). The company is on a mission to make those efforts known.

Because of their contested rhetorical landscape, in 2018 Walmart launched the Opioid Stewardship Initiative as an act of CSR aimed at reducing the number of opioids dispensed in an effort to alleviate the opioid crisis. This program is an act of CSR because its main focus is on helping the other. Mike Hunter, attorney General of Oklahoma, explains the importance of Walmart’s program in ending opioid abuse. Hunter said, “We appreciate good corporate citizens like Walmart for serving as an example of how private businesses can play a major role in ending this epidemic,” and Hunter elaborates further and stated, “Implementing these changes in all of its 4,700 pharmacies nationwide is an immense undertaking and I appreciate the company’s continued efforts” (Gerszewski, 2018, para. 19). Attorney General Hunter underscores the need for responsible corporate behavior as a tool in combating the opioid epidemic.

### The Opioid Stewardship Initiative

This particular initiative is interesting for analysis because the medical community is calling upon the private sector to act as more people are dying from drug-related overdoses than died during the entire Vietnam War (Welch, 2017). Moreover, this case is insightful because an analysis could help us understand if there is a *genuine good* associated with Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative. The genuine good is to be interpreted in an Aristotelian sense, which seeks to protect and promote the health and welfare of the polis and not simply profits. “Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good; and for this reason the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim” (Aristotle, n.d., p. 1). In Walmart’s case a genuine good would emerge when communicating a shift in their actions including corporate social responsibility programs that benefit the other. This paradigmatic shift towards care of the consumer reinvents the narrative including positive elements of the new corporate ethos.

Moreover, this case is insightful because an analysis could help us understand if there is a *genuine good* associated with Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative.

Aristotle’s work encourages consideration of telos, meaning the end use or ultimate use; for example, the telos of an acorn is an oak tree. Given the proper conditions, an acorn will grow and flourish. The telos of life is to live a virtuous existence contributing to the polis (community), with time for

contemplation, and developing one's potential (Aristotle, n.d). The telos of business is generally thought to be profits, but the Opioid Stewardship Initiative allows for a virtuous telos to emerge; saving lives by reducing the amount of opioids in society.

Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative claims that "the health and safety of [Walmart pharmacy] patients is a critical priority" and Walmart's pharmacies will be "part of the solution to our nation's opioid epidemic" by limiting opioid prescriptions and putting measures in place to reduce the abuse of prescription opioids (Walmart, 2018, para. 1). In this way, Walmart is communicating the importance of community health to its internal and external stakeholders through this costly initiative. The genuine good of saving lives appears to be the telos of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative. The Opioid Stewardship Initiative restricts prescriptions to short-term use, provides a disposal kit for any leftover pills, ensures all pharmacies stock ample doses of naloxone (an opioid overdose antidote), and provides funding to sponsor community education sessions warning about the dangers of Opioids.

Additionally, this analysis is an important step in understanding how CRS programs like the Walmart Opioid Initiative aids organizations in revamping corporate image. Finally, this initiative is interesting for analysis as this case study further extends the idea that CSR efforts serve a communicative function in reinventing a narrative that may allow for a creation of a new corporate ethos.

This work explores the historical development of CSR, explains the construct of corporate societal marketing as a communication tool to spread awareness of CSR initiatives, and provides several successful examples of CSR in current business environments. The theoretical lens applied in this work is narrative theory. The purpose of this paper is to explore the construct of CSR in relationship to Walmart's new Opioid Stewardship Program. Most notably the paper seeks to understand if exploration of the programs at Walmart provides insight into the communicative functions of CSR programs, reputation repair, and narrative creation.

## Background

The social responsibility of businesses has been widely debated. Nobel-prize-winning economist Milton Friedman argued businesses do not exist to be socially responsible; rather, Friedman explains businesses exist to make a profit. Friedman (2009) explains,

there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud. (p. 133)

Friedman's book *Capitalism and Freedom*, published in 1962, has been met with criticism. Friedman's rhetorical position is based on the idea that corporations have no responsibility to improve the community. There is a "small but articulate" (Mohr et al., 2001,

p. 67) group of consumers who have become discerning and want to engage in business with companies who act in socially responsible ways and support causes and organizations important to the consumer. In 1881, F. Y. Edgeworth wrote about the economic principle of self-interest and rationality: “The first principle of Economics states that every agent is actuated only by self-interest” (p. 16). Following this principle, the consumer would be most likely to purchase an item with the lowest cost and of similar quality to the competition. Although the principle of self-interest is widely accepted, and in turn, most consumers act in their own self-interest with purchasing, this may not always be true, especially for “consumers who are actively practicing SRCB [socially responsible consuming behavior]” (Mohr et al., 2001, p. 68). The aforementioned group of consumers who practice SRCB feel a sense of pride when they purchase from socially responsible companies and feel as if they are punishing companies by refusing to purchase from companies who are not acting socially responsible (Mohr et al., 2001). Therefore, there is a group of consumers willing to pay more to purchase from socially responsible companies.

Companies responded to this call from consumers and established corporate social responsibility departments and now companies are communicating CSR efforts to consumers. Companies must consider two factors when communicating CSR messages, source and cost (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). The source matters because companies fear the companies’ messages can appear overly self-serving and the message can backfire, hence CSR programs may be communicated best through “third party endorsements” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 112). The cost of a CSR initiative matters because excessive marketing of a CSR program “may create the impression the company is more interested in generating publicity” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 12) than supporting the cause itself. Chaudhri elaborates, “In sum, the corporate communication of CSR serves several interrelated functions including building an organization’s image, identity, and reputation; inviting stake-holder support and identification by creating awareness, information-sharing, and pro-active deflection of (anticipated) criticism” (Chaudhri, 2016, p. 421). Throughout this work, Walmart is framed as creating and supporting CSR initiatives as a way of improving image and reputation.

A Cone Communications’ CSR study, encourages a redefining and “pushing the traditional boundaries” of what corporate social responsibility is and how it is implemented and communicated (Anderson, 2017, para. 1). The Cone Company concluded, “Companies are to share more intangible values – such as what they stand for and what they are willing to stand up for” (Anderson, 2017, para. 1). The Cone Company’s conclusions coalesce with Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative; this is a clear example of a company taking a firm stance against the over-dispensing of opioids. The Walmart Corporation has taken note that customers want more from the company in terms of its reputation and the treatment of its employees and customers. An article entitled, *Walmart has spent more than \$18 million on tear-jerking ads to fix its infamous reputation* outlines the measures the company is taking, including investing 2.7 billion dollars on increasing wages for employees, training programs for employees, and scheduling programs to aid employees (Taylor, 2017). The company has also established a

Walmart Academy providing workers with an intensive training program equipping them with a multitude of skill sets. Walmart has made vast monetary investments in programs to change its reputation from an anti-worker company that values profit above all else, and its monetary investment in these programs is vast. *Forbes* reports, “Consumers now have higher expectations of what brands should contribute to the world. Companies who connect their brand to positive social action earn strong reputations that encourage buying and customer loyalty” (Ludema & Johnson, 2018, para. 9).

A relational approach to corporate communication situates relationships, dialogue, and trust at the core (Chaudhri, 2016). Companies enter into dialogue with consumers in the relational approach, as the company attempts to form a relationship with consumers and potential consumers. The goal of this dialogue is to understand consumers’ concerns and then the company attempts to develop a mutually agreeable solution and enter into dialogue creating shared meaning (Golob & Podnar, 2011). This approach develops a network for companies to develop CSR programs based upon consumers’ concerns. Email, websites, and various social media platforms serve as channels for *interactivity*, therefore consumers are able to communicate concerns directly with companies (Kaul et al., 2015). Companies in the current business environment are responding to the ever-changing economic and communicative climate in a variety of ways, including using CSR programs to shape or reshape corporate identity.

### **Application of Narrative Theory**

The narrative paradigm has five basic fundamental assumptions: “humans are homo narrans or storytellers, the mode of human decision making is good reasons, production and practice of good reason is ruled by history, biography, and culture” (Fisher, 1984, p. 7). Narrative probability exists with a coherent story (Fisher, 1978). Narrative fidelity exists if the story “rings true” and the world is full of stories which one must choose (Fisher, 1984). Stories that have coherence and ring true are the stories most people are likely to believe.

Narrative analysis is the most appropriate tool for analysis because people both inside and outside the organization use organizational stories to communicate and socially construct a shared understanding of the organization. Narrative theory is a good fit for analysis of the Walmart case study because it allows for exploration of questions such as; Are people speaking about Walmart in a positive manner despite the contested rhetorical environment surrounding the corporate ethos of the company? Will the narrative Walmart is crafting “ring true” with consumers, or does the narrative created from CSR programs lack narrative fidelity? Narrative theory is an appropriate methodology for this study because it is through the examination of the narrative’s creation that we can see the role of the CSR in the social construction of the narratives that lead to an organizational ethos.



## Historical Development of CSR and Mega-Corporations

The Walmart Corporation is the largest retailer in the world and is a Mega-Corporation. Mega-Corporations emerged in the United States in the 1870s as the railroad and petroleum industries moved toward monopoly status resulting in public debate about the power of monopolies (Cheney, May, & Roper, 2007). Responding to public pressures, the United States government passed laws to limit the power of monopolies; for example, in 1890, Congress passed the Sherman Anti-Trust Act with the intention of promoting competition and to prohibiting any mechanism to fix prices (Peppin, 1970). A huge shift occurred in society after the end of World War II with an economic expansion in the postwar economy. Then, “[a] view that came to be known as ‘corporate social responsibility’ emerged as a coherent position shortly after World War II” (Terris, 2005, p. 41). This view of CSR encompassed the victory of free enterprise, and the universal recognition of American influence on a global scale provided a foundation for a perspective that “endorsed capitalism but sought to humanize [it]” by serving social ends (Terris, 2005, p. 41). CSR was conceptualized as a tool to aid businesses to do “good” in the community and CSR has the communicative function to alert stakeholders to what the company is doing to help others (Holladay & Coombs, 2011, pp. 109–113). CSR emerged as a checks-and-balances tool to ensure mega-corporations are giving back to the communities they serve.

In 1953, economics professor Howard R. Bowen developed what became known as the “social responsibilities of businessmen”; Bowen stressed that with the widespread nature of American prosperity, there was a need for a “more generous role of the corporation in society” (Terris, 2005, p. 41). Bowen’s ideas are foundational to understanding the development of CSR in America. In short, Bowen explained the social pressures on businesspeople to act in socially acceptable ways drive businesspeople to act ethically. Bowen elaborates on what he deems “informal social controls”: businesspeople want to be admired and respected, and they enjoy the role of educating and leading the “broader public,” so once businesspeople realize they have the power to lead, educate, and better the broader public, businesspeople “can play a part only by making their organization into good corporate citizens” (Bowen, as cited in Terris, 2005, p. 42).

In many corporations, “CSR programs form the backbone of many advertising campaigns” (Terris, 2005, p. 42) and CSR efforts are highlighted along with the product in commercials and print ads. Dawn dishwashing liquid’s property of removing oil from animals covered in oil during an oil spill or Tide’s campaign highlighting the company’s humanitarian efforts to help people clean their clothing after disasters are examples of CSR initiatives being included and illuminated in advertisements.

CSR is an amalgamation of ideas encompassing the role of the corporation and philanthropic efforts of the corporation toward service initiatives to the community. In this historical moment, CSR is under attack from both the Left and the Right. Cheney, May, and Roper (2007) note that from a neoliberal economic perspective, CSR efforts are often deemed “wrong-headed” (p. 3) and critiqued, because CSR violates the “principles of free enterprise” (p. 3) while also confusing the roles of “the private, governmental, and nonprofit sectors” (p. 3);

and from the Left, CSR is “at best a public relations strategy for complacency and control” (p. 3). CSR may be a way to have a sort of checks-and-balance system, as “unchecked corporate power is problematic for democratic society” (Cheney et al., 2007, p. 3). The aforementioned commentary makes the point that CSR operates in a contested environment. There are concerns about CSR not being a sincere effort rather that CSR can be a public relations stunt, but in a positive sense CSR can serve as a checks and balance tool to serve the community. CSR is defined as “the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it peruses its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 6). Corporate societal marketing is a means of communicating the various functions of CSR programs.

### **CSR—Triple Bottom Line**

When considering the construct of CSR, Coombs and Holladay (2011) suggest consideration of the “triple bottom line—people, the environment, and profit” (p. 8). The term *triple bottom line* originated with Elkington in 1994 (Elkington, 2018). A triple bottom line “agenda focuses corporations not just on the economic value they add, but also on the environmental and social value they add—or destroy” (Elkington, 2004, p. 3). According to Coombs and Holladay (2011), “Corporate social responsibility is the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole” (p. 8). CSR in praxis often includes a driver of the triple bottom line (Elkington, 2004).

Elkington (2004) explains there are seven drivers important to a triple bottom line: markets, values, transparency, life-cycle technology, partnerships, time, and corporate governance. Each of these drivers is facing a paradigmatic shift in the “third millennium, as society is shifting towards a ‘global cultural revolution’” (Elkington, 2004, p. 3). Each of the aforementioned items is part of a *revolutionary shift* creating mini-revolutions within corporations. For example, Elkington explains markets were once focused on compliance; however, the focus of the new paradigm is competition both domestic and internationally.

Transparency is another driver of the triple bottom line, as both internal and external stakeholders demand to know. The shift away from traditional authority and a traditional hierarchy “means that a wide range of different stakeholders increasingly demand information on what the business is going and planning to do” (Elkington, 2004, p. 4). Another mini-revolution related to transparency is what Elkington refers to as the life-cycle technology. The life cycle refers to knowing about the product from cradle to grave.

Starbucks is a corporation that has focused on transparency in their sourcing from start to finish. Approximately 15 years ago, Starbucks entered a partnership with Conservation International, and the company committed to ethically sourcing its coffee beans (“Starbucks Responsibly Grown,” n.d.). Starbucks’ website explains their project as “making coffee the

world's first sustainable product to improve the lives of at least 1 million people in coffee communities around the world" ("Starbucks Responsibly Grown," n.d., para. 1). Starbucks has prioritized concerns about the environment and the farmers who grow their coffee. Additionally, the company recently announced they are concerned, not just about coffee bean sourcing, but also about the end use of their product. "The change is part of Starbucks' commitment to increasing recyclable materials in their drinks, eliminating plastic straws by 2020, and replacing the straws with recyclable plastic lids" (Nace, 2018, para. 5). The fourth driver of the bottom line is partnerships. Elkington (2004) predicted, "Revolution 5 [partners] will dramatically accelerate the rate at which new forms of partnership spring up between companies, and between companies and other organizations—including some leading campaigning groups" (p. 5). This is seen in the aforementioned Starbucks example of a strategic partnership with Conservation International, and this is a trend in the marketplace.

The sixth driver of the triple bottom line is time (Elkington, 2004). Information of news events that occur in various parts of the globe are instantly known to those thousands of miles away. The constant flow of information affects the construct of time and makes the world seem *wider* and more accessible in an instantaneous fashion (Elkington, 2004). However, this moment-to-moment view of time is revolutionized when considering the triple bottom line, which focuses on a longer-term time horizon.

The last and perhaps most important driver of the triple bottom line is corporate governance. Corporations are made up people who are decision makers; "the business end of the TBL agenda is the responsibility of the corporate board" (Elkington, 2004, p. 6). Corporate governance boards are expected to handle questions regarding pay structure and stock performance. However, in addition, board members are now asking about the role of the business in terms of CSR and questioning whether corporations have an ethical obligation to help the community at large by balancing the triple bottom line with shareholders profits (Elkington, 2013). Corporations with large profit margins can affect the world around them, and corporations are responding to this ability with policy changes and a vast array of CSR initiatives.

### **The Opioid Crisis and the Opioid Stewardship Initiative at Walmart**

In the current business environment, corporations are responding to questions about the opioid crisis in the United States. Because opioid-related deaths are at historic levels, Walmart is answering the call to help reduce opioids in circulation. The purpose of this section is to provide a brief overview on the scope and scale of the opioid crisis in America.

In 2017, drug overdoses claimed more than 72,000 lives; drug overdoses killed more people than did car accidents, HIV, or guns (Sanger-Katz, 2018). An article entitled "*Two Innovative Approaches for Treating Opioid Addiction*" released in 2018 by Blue Cross and Blue Shield points out, "Each day more than 115 people die from opioid overdoses" (para 1). According to the Mayo Clinic Staff (2018), "Anyone who takes opioids is at risk of developing

addiction” (para. 1). Hence, addiction does not discriminate by gender, age, or race—anyone can become addicted.

In her book *Drug Dealer, MD*, Anna Lembke (2016) outlined how long courses of opioids can actually make the pain worse for patients. Lembke described how the Perdue Pharmaceutical Corporation hired doctors to speak at medical conferences about the benefits of opioids; they called these paid spokespeople *thought leaders*. One of the foremost thought leaders was Dr. Russell Portenoy (Lembke, 2016). Portenoy championed the use of opioids for chronic pain in the 1990s (Catan & Perez, 2012). Portenoy and other thought leaders successfully influenced their colleagues toward a pro-opioid stance (Kaplan, 2018). “In 2012, health care providers wrote 259 million prescriptions for opioid pain medication, enough for every adult in the United States to have a bottle of pills” (Paulozzi, Mack, and Hockenberry, as cited in, Dowell, Haegerich, & Chou, 2016, p. 1).

The Walmart Corporation has taken note of these astounding figures—hence the birth of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative. Walmart has chosen to abandon the old paradigm whereby doctors write prescriptions for opioids, and pharmacies fill the prescriptions with no questions asked. Walmart is responding to the crisis by implementing strict protocols.

Walmart is taking a multifaceted and comprehensive approach with the Opioid Stewardship Initiative. First, the company is tackling the issue of fraudulent prescriptions; as of January 1, 2020, Walmart will only fill e-prescriptions for controlled substances. The rationale for e-prescriptions is two-pronged: e-prescriptions are less prone to errors and are trackable. The trackable nature of e-prescriptions encourages pharmacies to use NarxCare, and this allows pharmacists to see how many other prescriptions patients have. “Narxcare is a tool that helps pharmacists make dispensing decisions and provides pharmacists with the real-time interstate visibility that currently exists” (“Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative,” 2018, para 3).

Another major component of the initiative is to keep the amounts of opioids prescribed at a low quantity and dosage. One of the most impactful parts of the initiative is that “Walmart and Sam’s Club will restrict initial acute opioid prescriptions to no more than a seven-day supply nationwide, with up to a 50 morphine milligram equivalent maximum per day” (“Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative,” 2018, para 6). This policy is in alignment with the CDC guidelines for opioid use, which suggest short-term usage of opioids for acute pain to reduce the likelihood of addiction (CDC, 2018).

Another component of the Initiative is to provide a free disposal program. “DisposeRx enables patients to dispose of leftover medications responsibly in their trash at home. Patients filling any new Schedule II opioid prescription at the company’s pharmacies receive a free DisposeRx packet” (“Walmart’s Opioid Stewardship Initiative,” 2018, p. 2). The aim of the DisposeRx is to dispose of medicines safely so that those who may be curious to experience an opioid are not exposed to the drug. An element of the program aimed at youth is Prescription for Life, a high school-based curriculum program sponsored in part by Walmart aimed at educating teens about the opioid crisis and the dangers of opioids.

The final two pieces of the initiative involve reducing the number of opioid related deaths. Walmart is committed to stocking all of its pharmacies with the drug naloxone, which has life-saving properties for those in the midst of an overdose. Finally, Walmart is committed to supporting legislation that implements a seven-day limit for opioid prescriptions.

### **The Argument for CSR at Walmart**

I explored the Opioid Stewardship Initiative by examining Walmart's website dedicated to the initiative, reviewing concerned politicians' comments about Walmart's new policies, and reporting branding experts' comments about Walmart's launch to repair its reputation. I researched public commentary on the Walmart Stewardship Initiative. Attorney General Hunter is a pervasive force in combating the Opioid Crisis in America, bringing lawsuits against Perdue Pharmaceuticals, Teva Pharmaceuticals, and Johnson and Johnson for their roles in the opioid crisis (Sant, 2019). I followed Hunter's commentary closely and analyzed how he provided a third-party endorsement of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative.

The new narrative construction includes the news that Walmart was invited to political discussions on the opioid crisis in America. Walmart's Regional Health and Wellness Director, Lisa Smith, was invited to share information about the Opioid Stewardship Initiative with members of the Oklahoma Commission on Opioid Abuse (Gerszewski, 2018). Inviting Walmart to provide insights and partake in the discourse surrounding policymaking regarding opioid misuse is significant. Walmart in this instance is not being perceived in a negative light; rather, the state government of Oklahoma has publicly praised the company—in fact, the Attorney General referred to the Walmart Corporation as “good corporate citizens” (Gerszewski, 2018, para. 19). Lisa Smith (as cited in Gerszewski, 2018) said,

Walmart recognizes the impact the opioid epidemic has had across the country and has taken proactive measures to ensure we are part of the solution. Much like the Oklahoma Commission on Opioid Abuse, Walmart's Opioid Stewardship Initiative continues looking at policies and procedures we can implement to combat the epidemic, while ensuring the highest quality care for those we are serving. (para. 16)

Notably, this quote by Lisa Smith shows she has aligned Walmart's interests with the government's interests to combat the opioid epidemic rather than aligning Walmart's interests with profits. This realignment highlights a change in the corporate ethos to portray Walmart as a good corporate citizen and shows Walmart's influence as a tool to combat opioid addiction and overdose death.

Thus, the initiative is an act of CSR:

By engaging in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, companies can not only generate favorable stakeholder attitudes and better support behaviors (e.g., purchase, seeking employment, investing in the company), but also, over the long run, build

corporate image, strengthen stakeholder–company relationships, and enhance stakeholders’ advocacy behaviors. (Du & Bhattacharya, 2010, p. 8)

I assert the Walmart Stewardship Initiative is an act of CSR because corporate societal marketing in all forms are a “progeny of philanthropy” (Drumwright & Murphy, 2001, p. 165), with a low emphasis on economic goals. CSR is defined as “the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it peruses its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 6). This initiative focuses on helping the other with a low emphasis on economic goals.

### CSR at Walmart, Narrative Construction, and Narrative of Coherence

The Walmart Opioid Stewardship Initiative is a voluntary program that is creating goodwill with stakeholders. CSR can be “strategic when it is integrated in larger corporate goals” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 29). Walmart has publicly stated its goal of changing its public perceptions

The Opioid Stewardship Initiative is transformative in regards to a corporate ethos—the company is publicly taking a stance against the overprescribing of opioids causing harm and potential death to customers.

(Taylor, 2017). “Walmart is an interesting case study because it has undergone a transformation of corporate ethos, branding, and reputation management” (Mainwaring, 2017, para. 2). The Opioid Stewardship Initiative is transformative in regards to a corporate ethos—the company is publicly taking a stance against the

overprescribing of opioids causing harm and potential death to customers. Walmart is arguably attempting to rewrite its corporate narrative to show it has evolved from a company focused only on profits to a company that cares about people. Narratives are a way for management to build “acceptance of and cooperation with” CSR initiatives (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p 45). This exhaustive CSR history explores some of the skepticism about CSR in general regarding whether CSR programs are enough to change the narrative of the company.

Arguably, the Walmart Corporation is taking the risk that many consumers may switch pharmacies because of its policies; clearly, there is a low emphasis on economic goals. Moreover, Walmart appears to be focusing on longer-term goals and influencing public policy. In fact, with bipartisan support, the federal government will release a new policy: “Senators reached a deal to advance legislation that had long been stalled following House passage of a similar package to combat the epidemic of opioid addiction in the country” (Itkowitz, 2018, para. 2). Several of the components of the opioid stewardship initiative were included in the bill. For example, dosage and the addictive qualities of opioids are being addressed. Republican Senator Lamar Alexander (as cited in Itkowitz, 2018) said,

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It allows the FDA to require prescription opioids to be packaged in set amounts like a 3- or 7-day supply of blister packs, and spurs the development of a new non-addictive painkiller. The House has already passed its version of the act, and there is a bipartisan urgency to work with our House colleagues to get the legislation to the President's desk. (para. 11)

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Walmart is a multibillion-dollar company with far-reaching influence. Further, the impact of three- or seven-day opioid courses should reduce the number of opioids circulating in public, as well as reduce initial addiction. Walmart supports this legislation and is credited publicly; therefore, this is now integrated into the Walmart narrative.

The legislative efforts were successful as “President Donald J. Trump on Oct. 24, 2018 signed into law legislation aimed at ending the nation’s opioid crisis” (Garvin, 2018, para 1). The new legislation that passed was entitled “Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act” (Wynne & Joyce, 2018, para 2) and one of the goals of the bill is to “ease the epidemic” (Wynne & Joyce, 2018, para 3). Because of the new law “The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can now require drug manufacturers to alter opioid packaging so doctors can prescribe smaller quantities, such as a three-or seven-day supply, rather than the traditional 30-day supply” (Wynne & Joyce, 2018, para 16).

In addition, John Auerbach, president and chief executive of policy of Trust for America’s Health, which focuses on public health and prevention issues, has publicly praised Walmart’s Stewardship Initiative. Auerbach (as cited in Court, 2018) said, “It’s a positive move for a business to become involved in helping to control the opioid epidemic, and so Wal-Mart is to be applauded for that” (para. 17). Walmart has communicated its efforts to combat the Opioid Crisis and is beginning to be recognized publicly, thus illustrating a communicative element of CSR, a third-party endorsement. A third-party endorsement complements and reinforces CSR messages (Coombs & Holladay, 2011). These messages regarding Walmart—the information on Walmart’s website, the comments by members of Congress, Attorney General Hunter’s comments, Lisa Smith’s public appearances, and John Auerbach’s public statement—have reinvented the narrative to include a new ethos that Walmart cares about customers. Fisher (1984) claimed narrative beings have “[an] inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and [a] constant habit of testing narrative fidelity” (p. 8). The company is benefiting from narrative coherence—diverse voices on the topic, including health care professionals, members of Congress, and branding experts, have been encouraged by Walmart’s shift toward responsible opioid dosing. The coalescence of the stories of Auerbach, Smith, and Attorney General Hunter regarding the positive elements of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative has created an element of narrative coherence. These elements are communicating a rebirth of a new corporate ethos.

### Implications, Discussion, and Narrative Fidelity

Economist Milton Friedman (2009) long held the position that corporations exist to make a profit and do not have the responsibility to give back to the community. CSR can provide a company with a noble telos beyond making profits. In fact, CSR initiatives have multiple benefits, such as improving corporate image, shifting the company toward socially conscious consumption, and improving rapport with stakeholders. Improving Walmart's reputation is the main "reason why Walmart continues to support and launch new corporate responsibility programs, which it does at an almost dizzying pace" (Buss, 2017, para. 1). CSR programs at Walmart are good for business and for its reputation in the communities it serves; these programs have far-reaching influence with "stakeholders, including officials, suppliers, employees, and customers by making good on the *live better* part of its *Save Money. Live Better* tagline" (Buss, 2017, para. 1). Several of Walmart's recent CSR programs include supporting Fight Hunger, Spark Change (focusing on food insecurity), providing financial support for the 2017 Women's Economic Empowerment Summit, sponsoring the McGinnis Venture Competition for young entrepreneurs at Carnegie Mellon University, and supporting Project Gigaton, aimed at eliminating one gigaton of emissions from manufacturing and materials by 2030 (Buss, 2017). Walmart is rhetorically crafting a new image, and each CSR program is a small piece of its new, improved reputation.

Throughout this work, the Opioid Stewardship Initiative is framed rhetorically as an act of CSR. The Walmart Corporation has had and continues to have influence over public policy. Several parts of the Substance Use Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act (SUPPORT) bill have already been implemented at Walmart pharmacies across the county. Walmart's corporate image has long been associated with squeezing profits from suppliers and chasing small businesses out of communities; however, the initiation of the SUPPORT policy at Walmart and the Walmart Foundation demonstrates a paradigmatic shift toward philanthropic efforts.

This work sought to answer the following question: "Is there any genuine good associated with the Opioid Stewardship Initiative?" I discovered there is a genuine good associated with the Opioid Stewardship Initiative and other CSR programs at Walmart. Walmart is purposively creating and implementing CSR programs to create a new corporate ethos. In addition, Walmart is taking specific actions to protect and promote the health and welfare of its pharmacy customers with the Opioid Stewardship Initiative. Thus, there is a genuine good associated with this program—Walmart has voluntarily provided strict regulations, potentially risking losing pharmacy customers as the price of doing what it deems best for society. CSR programs can provide a path forward in pursuit of a noble telos. The noble telos can include benefiting the other in a variety of ways, including community improvements and life-saving programs.

Most notably, this case study provided insights into communicative functions of CSR and narrative creation. It appears that the Opioid Stewardship Initiative is a small part of a much larger overall goal of reputation repair. However, the rebirth of the new corporate image created



by myriad CSR programs raises the challenge of what Coombs and Holladay (2011) termed the “CSR promotional dilemma” (p.111). This dilemma exists when there is too much effort to create awareness of initiatives; this excess effort “can have a boomerang effect as stakeholders become cynical and skeptical if there is excessive self-promotion about CSR initiatives” (Coombs & Holladay, 2011, p. 111). In essence, this dilemma creates a double-bind challenge. This challenge may explain why much of the news coverage of the Opioid Stewardship Initiative has stemmed mostly from a factual standpoint in terms of the company’s public statements. However, Attorney General Hunter and John Auerbach, president and chief executive of policy for Trust for America’s Health, publicly made positive statements praising Walmart’s efforts to combat the opioid crisis. Thus, the narrative about the company has shifted toward the good efforts of the company and away from the negative factors—all while the company relied on external people to talk about it.

To explore the rhetorical dimensions associated with the creation of a new ethos, this work analyzed internal stakeholders’ perceptions, such as CEO interviews, the internal communications posted on Walmart’s website, public officials’ statements about this policy, and finally, brand experts’ comments about the company’s efforts. The company seems to be in a cycle of rebirth regarding changing its actions to build a better reputation with its entire collection of CSR programs. Doug McMillion (as cited in Ignatius, 2017), CEO of Walmart, recently said in an interview,

I’m really proud of our work in environmental and social sustainability—including the commitments we’re making on greenhouse gas. If the world knew what we’ve done for the past 10 years and what we’re doing to make things better holistically, I think our reputation would be dramatically better. (para. 42)

It appears that the company may be purposively engaging in programs to achieve just that. In 2018, McMillion (as cited in Green, 2018) said, “Walmart has undertaken initiatives to become more sustainable by cutting waste and taking carbon out of its supply chain. It started offering store employees better wages and expanded maternity leave, and began to give back to its communities” (para. 14). Rhetorically, Walmart is relying upon the communicative functions of its CSR programs to recreate a narrative to build a reputation as a company that cares about the communities it serves so customers can feel good about shopping at the retailer.

Walmart is constructing and creating a narrative based on its CSR programs. Walmart’s narrative involves caring about pharmacy customers. Moreover, the narrative now includes supporting veterans through a partnership with Goodwill Industries, as well as many environmental endeavors to reduce pollution. The overarching and unanswered question involves narrative fidelity: “Does the new narrative created by Walmart ring true to internal and external stakeholders?” I assert it is premature to answer this question with any degree of certainty—the CSR efforts at Walmart are relatively recent developments.

In conclusion, applying the narrative theory lens to the Walmart case study extends the idea that CSR can be a tool of narrative construction and can create a rebirth of corporate ethos. The narrative theory lens supports a conclusion that the corporation's narrative can communicate a rebranding of sorts, and CSR can be the basis to construct a narrative of rebirth and rebranding. The new narrative of Walmart includes elements of concern for customers, not just concern for profits. The CEO publicly stated if people knew of Walmart's environmental and social efforts, the reputation of the company would improve. The analysis of this case study indicates the narrative of a new more caring company has emerged. Fisher (1984) claimed people are inherently storytellers; thus, people will continue to interpret their experiences with Walmart. Over time, narrative fidelity will become clearer. According to Fisher (1984), people make sense of their lives through stories; Walmart is allowing a new narrative to emerge to inform consumers about the company and its new corporate ethos. The important takeaways from this case study are as follows: (a) CSR can serve as a tool of narrative creation, (b) narrative analysis is the most appropriate analysis tool because people both inside and outside the organization use organizational stories to communicate and socially construct a shared understanding of the organization, and (c) CSR can provide a company with a noble telos beyond that of simply making profit.

The narrative theory lens supports a conclusion that the corporation's narrative can communicate a rebranding of sorts, and CSR can be the basis to construct a narrative of rebirth and rebranding.



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