Corporate Social Advocacy as Public Interest Communications: Exploring Perceptions of Corporate Involvement in Controversial Social-Political Issues

Lucinda Austin, Barbara Miller Gaither, Kenn Gaither

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Elon University, Elon University

Article Information	Abstract
	Through a nationally representative U.S. survey of 1,214 participants, this study examined attitudes toward the role of corporations in public interest communications and response to a series of recent high-profile corporate social advocacy cases. Findings provide preliminary evidence for what types of public interests are most appropriate for organizations to address, based on perceived motivations, commitment to advocacy, and dimension of corporations as actors for social change. Results from this study suggest demographic differences by political viewpoints, age, income, education, and gender. However, an overall level of agreement across all respondents indicates that corporations should engage in addressing important social issues, which is particularly noteworthy given that the U.S. population skews conservative.

Introduction

Included in the discussion of public interest communications are nonprofit and government organizations. However, businesses have also been imagined "as one of the great institutions capable of the greatest social change," particularly in social concerns where government and nonprofits fall short (Fyke, Feldner, & May, 2016, p. 218). As corporations are increasingly taking public stands on social issues, such as Gillette's recent advertising campaign on toxic masculinity (Iqbal, 2019) and Nike's controversial support for Colin Kaepernick, the question of

what corporations' role in public interest communications should be remains up for debate (Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018).

Examples of corporate social responsibility (CSR), such as the Novartis Pharmaceuticals Healthy Families initiative in India, highlight the potential for businesses to advance the human condition. The initiative delivered health education to approximately 24 million people and provided health diagnosis and treatment to 2.5 million (Novartis, 2016). This initiative also returned profits in less than three years (Novartis, 2014). As companies see returns on their investments from CSR, Dutta (2019) counters that CSR programs deployed to serve the public interest may ultimately serve the status quo. According to Dutta (2019, p. 53), "Development and public good are often paradoxically co-opted within efforts of community relations and CSR to strategically achieve goals of privatized organizational effectiveness."

Corporate social advocacy (CSA), meanwhile, moves beyond CSR in that it represents corporate engagement in controversial social or political issues that often lack direct relevance to the company (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Additionally, unlike CSR, which involves corporate-sponsored initiatives that simultaneously address a social or environmental concern while benefiting an organization's image (e.g., de Bakker & den Hond, 2008), corporations engage in CSA recognizing it may not be received well by all stakeholders. Gaither, Austin, and Collins (2018) found that DICK's Sporting Goods' CSA on gun control following the Parkland, FL, school shooting was undertaken despite the potential for polarized reactions and potentially negative sales impacts. Although companies are increasingly expending resources and engaging in risk by taking public stances on issues that transcend the interests of the organization (Dodd, 2018), CSA as a form of public interest communications remains largely unexplored.

Just as CSR campaigns frequently generate skepticism from stakeholders and activist organizations regarding corporate motivations, recent CSA also has been criticized as woke washing, or attempts by companies to appear socially conscious to make profits. Nevertheless, CSA may be viewed quite differently from CSR given its apparent potential to alienate some stakeholders by supporting others. Through a U.S. national survey, this study explores perceptions of well-known CSA cases and perceived motivations and expectations for corporate engagement in public interest communications, a topic yet to be fully explored in scholarly research. Specifically, this research examines perceived motivations for CSA (e.g., Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006), dimensions of corporations as actors for social change (Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018), and what types of societal/political issues are most appropriate for organizations to address. These responses are compared with political affiliation, education, age, and concern for social involvement, shedding light on the shifting societal expectations for the role of business in advancing the public interest.

Literature review

Field of Public Interest Communications

Despite a rich legacy of research, mostly in the political realm, public interest research in communication has received limited attention. Seminal works by Dewey (1927), Habermas (1984), and Lippmann (1927) traverse the 20th century and illustrate the ongoing struggle to define the public and actualize the public interest. Lippmann casts a discerning shadow on the public interest, positing much of the public in a democracy are too far removed from the very issues that affect them, either from lack of access or knowledge (Fott, 1998). Dewey likewise viewed the public as inchoate and unorganized but capable of effectively functioning with certain limits that could only be defined through shared experience (Mayhew, 1997). For both Dewey and Lippmann, a central concern was the formation of community in the realm of competing interests. Habermas viewed the loose formation of such communities as public spheres and antecedents to public opinion (1984).

A rich vein of research in public relations has emerged to challenge fractured notions of symbolic communication as a defining feature of the public interest (Carah, 2019), often by examining who speaks in and for the public interest, and those voices that are limited by power structures (L'Etang, 2004). This shift toward postmodern and critical treatments has dislocated relative power away from normative notions of a public interest (Dutta, 2019; Heath & Waymer, 2019; Pal & Dutta, 2011). Dutta suggests public relations and community relations are often self-driven, privately-led initiatives that co-opt the public sphere for private gain and erase the voices of the subaltern (2019). A stream of research has examined public relations and public interest through case studies (Gaither & Curtin, 2019; Kaneva & Popescu, 2014; Somerville & Davidson, 2019), often in non-western contexts focusing on the role of government rather than organizations in the public interest. There is general agreement among these research streams that organizations are driven by avarice rather than any altruistic commitment to the public interest.

According to Munshi and Kurian (2005, p. 518), "It is possible for public relations to begin to be ethical and socially responsible only if it acknowledges the diversity of publics that corporations may have… and break down the hierarchy of publics and take into account the resistance of marginalized publics." Semantic disagreements are pressing issues in public interest communications. Johnston and Pieczka (2019, p. 21) argue public relations scholarship has reached an "impasse" toward any conclusive or overarching notion of what constitutes "the public" or "a public," let alone any constructive way to conceptualize power, access, debate, and agency in the public interest. To other scholars such as Somerville and Davidson (2019), failure to account for heterogeneity of publics is a chief concern for public relations.

This study supports the symbolic expression function of communication (Carah, 2019; Somerville & Davidson, 2019) by examining the perceived motivations for organizations to enter the combustible space of sensitive sociopolitical issues through CSA. Consequently, it does not

support a monolithic notion of public, while it does provide insights into the symbolic value of CSA initiatives to corporations and the often disempowered publics that collectively participate in how the public interest is defined, negotiated, and contested. As skepticism of organizational motives as anything other than self-serving abound in the literature, L'Etang (2013) argues there is little evidence organizations are finding meaningful ways to balance organizational obligations of service in the public interest to the necessity of business solvency driven by organizational publics including shareholders. And although motivations for CSR have been studied extensively in literature, organizational motives for the emerging trend of CSA is an area of research ripe for investigation. In turn, there is need for scholarship that foregrounds the public interest vis-a-vis the currency of culture, ethics, values, dialogue, and diversity of publics (Bang, 2019; Mundy, 2019; Munshi & Kurian, 2005; Taylor, Kent, & Xiong, 2019).

Corporations' role in public interest communications

Corporate social responsibility

A main way that businesses work to better the lives of stakeholders such as employees, customers, and the communities in which they operate, is CSR. CSR emphasizes the relationship between business and society (Snider, Hill, & Martin, 2003) and involves organizational operations that connect back to greater societal economic, ethical, legal, or philanthropic concerns (Kim & Reber, 2008).

CSR is defined as "business practices that address an organization's various economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities as they pertain to a wide range of stakeholders" (Lee, 2017, p. 211). CSR initiatives provide a form of public good by fulfilling social responsibilities businesses have to the communities in which they operate, either through mitigating negative business impacts or by providing benefits to a community. These benefits may include donating money to local charities, giving employees paid volunteer days, and providing services to underserved populations, to name just a few (Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018). CSR initiatives also are designed to portray a company as responsive to the needs and concerns of society (Ellen et al., 2006), thereby giving the business a boost in reputation.

Corporate social advocacy

In recent years, corporate advocacy regarding social issues has been discussed in academic literature as a subset of CSR. The last several years in particular have seen a rise in corporate activism in response to government actions and policies (Foorhar, 2017), as businesses have taken a definitive action or stance in response to politically charged issues. After U.S. President Trump issued the 2017 travel ban, for example, many companies released statements against the travel ban and called out unfair immigration policies (Reisinger, 2017).

These CSA statements veer from traditional CSR into a new category of corporate action. CSA, or a company's public activism on controversial issues (Dodd & Supa, 2014), extends beyond what has traditionally been considered CSR. Although CSR efforts may support an issue with which most people agree (e.g., fighting pollution), CSA involves corporate support of or opposition to policies, political perspectives, or issues (Clemensen, 2017). In other words, CSA represents a unique business-society relationship that moves beyond corporate citizenship and CSR—strategies that usually involve philanthropic efforts in *support* of a cause—into a public stance on a controversial issue or public comments on the ways the company is working to further address that issue (Clemensen, 2017; Dodd & Supa, 2014).

CSA goes against conventional business wisdom that advises companies to remain neutral on controversial issues for fear of alienating customers or potential customers (Korschun, Aggarwal, Rafieian, & Swain, 2016). And although it is true that some consumers are likely to react negatively toward business stances on political issues, new research also suggests that consumers respect and patronize companies that take stances on issues that align with their stated corporate values (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014; Gaither, Austin, & Collins, 2018; Korschun et al., 2016).

Certainly the idea of a company participating in political dialogue through corporate citizenship is not new and has been discussed previously in the context of CSR (Matten & Crane, 2005). However, the recent political climate of the United States has made it more common for corporations to weigh in publicly on important political issues (Clemensen, 2017; Dodd, 2018; Korschun et al., 2016). Additionally, the increase in popularity of social media has made it easier than ever for current issues to receive extensive media coverage while also allowing activists and corporations to release public statements on current events and express their views to their publics (Schulz, 2017). By engaging with stakeholders about political issues, however, companies open themselves up to a host of potential criticisms about motivations and legitimacy (Etter, 2013).

As this trend increases, examining publics' views of corporations in relation to social advocacy may shed light on factors important for consideration. Therefore, the first research question is posed:

RQ1: How do individuals perceive the primary role of business in society with regard to social issues?

Further, to explore conditions and factors that may affect this perceived role in society, the following two sub-questions are posed:

R1a: Under what conditions are a corporation's actions on controversial social issues more appropriate?

R1b: What individual factors affect perception of businesses' role in social issues?

Dimensions of corporations as actors for social change

As described above, a valid query in dealing with corporations as actors for social change is whether or not corporations may be well suited to do so. There are many different models for how businesses might invest in the public interest and communicate this investment. Fyke et al. (2016) described three categorizations of business-society relationships: CSR, conscious capitalism, and social entrepreneurship. In this conceptualization, CSR helps to legitimize business practices, is integrated into an already existing business model, and still has profits at the center of its functioning. Both conscious capitalism and social entrepreneurship focus more on the social good rather than profits or the existing business model. Conscious capitalism focuses primarily on stakeholders as the core of the business model and driving change that benefits stakeholders. Social entrepreneurship instead has a core goal of sustainable social and economic change. Organizations in this category are founded upon their social values, as opposed to these social values later being fit into an existing business model (Fyke et al., 2016).

When examining factors that affect moving beyond CSR to create larger scale social change, Gaither, Austin, and Schulz (2018) suggested the importance of: 1) linking to a generalizable interest and 2) genuine engagement (Edwards, 2016) through dialogue (Taylor & Kent, 2014). Research suggests that CSR higher in economic and ethical focus, as opposed to a focus on products, yields higher engagement on social media (Uzunoğlu, Türkel, & Yaman Akyar, 2017). However, this engagement should be perceived as genuine to promote change. Linking to generalizable interest can prove to be more challenging for companies taking on advocacy or activism roles, as the causes being advocated for are sometimes controversial or polarizing. Organizations driven by stakeholders (conscious capitalism) or by social values (social entrepreneurship) may have more capacity for creating social change, due in large part to their tendency to focus on conferring benefits instead of removing harms (Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018).

To further explore this framework within the context of CSA specifically, a second research question is posed to examine the different conceptualizations of business-society relationships and ethical motivations of conferring harms versus adding benefits:

RQ2: How do CSA initiatives differ in terms of the corporations' dimensions as actors for social change?

Perceived motivations and expectations

As consumers have become increasingly aware of businesses' CSR campaigns, many are becoming skeptical of these types of business activities and their underlying motivations (Forehand & Grier, 2003). This skepticism may be particularly heightened for CSA whereby companies address controversial and often polarizing issues. These initiatives may be seen as insincere or with ulterior motives, such as the term woke washing mentioned above implies (Spry, Vredenburg, Kemper, & Kapitan, 2018). Companies that are perceived as jumping on the

bandwagon of social activism to paint their business as socially aware may be met with backlash. Skepticism can result in decreased product purchases (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006) and lowered stock values for companies.

Kotler and Sarkar (2017) distinguish between marketing-driven, corporate-driven, and values-driven initiatives. The values-driven category is what they term brand activism, which includes six subsets: social, political, business, legal, economic, and environmental activism. In the marketing-driven category are: cause promotion, cause-related marketing, and corporate social marketing. In the corporate-driven category are: corporate philanthropy, workforce volunteering, and socially responsible business practices. Prior research suggests that corporate-driven CSR may be more positively received because of perceived commitment to the social issue (Austin & Gaither, 2016). However, this category of values-driven initiatives provides a new category for further exploration.

Ellen et al. (2006) proposed that motives for CSR initiatives are nuanced and proposed measuring attributed motives along a continuum of self- and other-centered motives. These are: strategic and egoistic (both considered self-centered motives), and values- and stakeholder-driven (both considered other-centered motives). Participants have responded most positively toward values-driven (an other-centered motive) and strategic (a self-centered motive), and negatively toward stakeholder-driven and egoistic motives. These specific motives, however, have not been explored explicitly in a CSA-specific setting. Therefore, based on Ellen et al.'s conceptualization, our third research question is as follows:

RQ3: What do individuals perceive as the primary motivators of CSA initiatives?

Method

To explore these three research questions, this study used a nationally representative U.S.-based survey of 1,214 participants to evaluate attitudes toward the role of corporations in social issues, as well as participants' attitudes toward a series of well-known recent CSA cases.

Participants

Data collection was funded by a grant from a large southeastern university. A national research firm conducted the survey using panel participants who received a small incentive for participation through a survey rewards panel. Of the 1,204 participants, 44.9% were male and 54.2% female (<1% other). The majority of participants were White (57.2%), with 22.5% Hispanic/Latino, 12.2% Black/African American, 3.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 1.7% Native American, and 2.1% indicating Other.

The mean age of respondents was 41 with age ranges represented as follows: 18-25 (16.5%), 26-35 (25.8%), 36-45 (24.2%), 46-55 (10.4%), 56-65 (12.2%), 66-75 (7.7%), and 76-85+ (2.3%). On a five-point political ideology scale, 34.1% of the sample considered themselves conservative

(1 or 2); 37.5% considered themselves to have moderate viewpoints (3); and 26.8% considered themselves liberal (4 or 5). The mean score on the political viewpoint scale, where 1 = very conservative and 5 = very liberal, was 2.88 (*SD* = 1.20). This breakdown closely mirrors the U.S. political ideology breakdown from recent national polling.[1]

The sample represented a range of education levels typical of those in the United States—approximately 4.1% had less than a high school education, 23.1% had completed high school, 18.4% had some college, 13.1% had an associate's degree, 24.0% had a bachelor's degree, 13.3% had a master's degree, and 3.2% had a doctorate. The majority of the sample worked full-time (47.8%) or part-time (13.0%). The remainder of the sample was retired (16.1%), unemployed (16.2%), or students (6.1%).

Procedure

After clicking a screener question regarding commitment to reading the questions fully and an agree-to-participate button to indicate consent, participants were asked about their perceptions regarding the role of corporations in society. Questions evaluated respondents' perceptions of the company's motivations and their views on the roles of corporations as actors for social change. Participants then were asked a series of questions to gauge their demographics and concern about a variety of social issues. Following these questions, participants were asked to read short cases of actual instances of CSA in randomized order, including CSA by Nike, DICK's Sporting Goods, and Gillette. All cases featured a high-profile CSA initiative from within the past year, and participants were given information about the cases to help control for familiarity. Following is a description of each of the three cases.

Case 1: Nike and Kaepernick

In Fall of 2018, Nike ran a campaign prominently featuring Colin Kaepernick, an NFL player who became the leader of the Take a Knee movement by kneeling during the pre-game playing of the national anthem to protest police brutality and social inequality. Nike's ad campaign featured the text, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything," with an image of Kaepernick's face.

Case 2: DICK's Sporting Goods and gun control

In Spring of 2018, DICK's Sporting Goods announced that—in response to the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL—it would stop selling guns to customers under 21 and pull assault rifles and high-capacity magazines from all its stores. The

---

[1] Saad, L. (2019, January 8). U.S. still leans conservative, but liberals keep recent gains. *Gallup*. Retrieved from: https://news.gallup.com/poll/245813/leans-conservative-liberals-keep-recent-gains.aspx

company has since been lobbying for gun control reform and announced this spring that it would stop selling firearms altogether at roughly 17% of its stores.

Case 3: Gillette's toxic masculinity ad

Early this year, the razor company Gillette launched a campaign titled, The Best a Man Can Be, promoting, as the campaign says, "positive, attainable, inclusive and healthy versions of what it means to be a man" (Gillette, 2019, para. 4). The news has called this an ad against the culture of toxic masculinity. The primary ad for the campaign references bullying, the #metoo movement, and men holding other men accountable. As part of this campaign, Gillette is sponsoring grants for programs to make meaningful and impactful change on making a positive difference in the lives of young men. Gillette is also donating money for programs at the Boys and Girls Club of America.

Survey measures

Participants responded to a series of questions assessing their views on corporate involvement in social issues, dimensions of corporations as actors for social change, and perceived motivations for CSA. All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale with "1" representing "Strongly Disagree" and "7" representing "Strongly Agree."

Views on corporate social involvement

Participants were asked a series of questions to gauge their views on the involvement of corporations in social issues (Gaither, Austin & Schulz, 2018). Participants were asked how strongly they agreed with the following statements: that corporations should "work to better society," "advocate for social issues," "only advocate for issues related to their business or products," "advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services," "advocate on political issues that align with their corporate values," and "advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus."

Dimensions of corporations as actors for social change

In response to three short CSA cases featuring Nike, DICK's Sporting Goods, and Gillette, participants were asked a series of questions regarding different dimensions of corporations involved in social change based on work by Gaither, Austin, and Schulz (2018). First, participants were asked if they perceived the purpose of the action to be to "change people's views on the issue" or to "create change in society on the issue." To examine distinctions between conscious capitalism, social entrepreneurship, and CSR (Fyke et al., 2016), participants were asked if the company was "committed to social change," "committed to creating a more just society," or "more concerned with social change than profits."

Perceived motivations for CSA

To examine underlying motivations for the CSA (Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018), participants were asked if the company, through this action, was trying to "benefit society" or "reduce a societal harm or concern." Additionally, to explore perceived ethical motivations, the following scales were included in the survey (Ellen et al., 2006).

Values-driven

The values-driven scale included three items asking participants their perceptions of: a) whether the company has a long-term interest in society; b) feels morally obligated to help the public; c) is trying to give something back to the community; and d) wants to help consumers who care about this issue. These scales were created for each CSA scenario (Nike, DICK's, and Gillette). The scales yielded mean scores of 4.84/7.00 for Nike ($SD = 1.65$, $\alpha = .95$), 5.20 for DICK's ($SD = 1.54$, $\alpha = .95$), and 4.97 for Gillette ($SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .95$).

Stakeholder-driven

The stakeholder-driven scale also included four items asking participants' level of agreement with statements that the company: a) feels their customers expect them to be involved in social issue campaigns; b) feels society in general expects them to be involved in social issue campaigns; c) feels their stockholders expect them to be involved in social issue campaigns; and d) feels their employees expect them to be involved in social issue campaigns. The scale yielded a mean score of 4.70/7.00 for Nike ($SD = 1.58$, $\alpha = .93$), 4.84 for DICK's ($SD = 1.50$, $\alpha = .93$), and 4.76 for Gillette ($SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .93$).

Strategic-driven

The strategic-driven scale included three items asking participants' level of agreement with statements that the company: a) will gain more customers by supporting this social issue; b) will keep more of their customers by supporting this social issue; and c) hopes to increase profits by supporting this social issue. The scale yielded a mean score of 4.84/7.00 for Nike ($SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .80$), 4.73 for DICK's ($SD = 1.48$, $\alpha = .81$), and 4.87 for Gillette ($SD = 1.42$, $\alpha = .83$).

Egoistic-driven

Lastly, the egoistic-driven scale included two items asking participants their perceptions of: a) whether the company wants to be involved in this social issue to get publicity; and b) whether the company is taking advantage of the social issue to help its own business. Following the suggestions made by Eisinga, Grotenhuis, and Pelzer (2013) for two-item measure reliability, Spearman-Brown coefficients were obtained ($\rho = .88$). The scale yielded a mean score of 5.00/7.00 for Nike ($SD = 1.62$, $\rho = .88$), 4.55 for DICK's ($SD = 1.74$, $\rho = .89$), and 4.79 for Gillette ($SD = 1.62$, $\rho = .89$). See Table 1 for scale means.

Table 1. Perceived motivations for CSA

Corporations' Perceived Motivations	**Mean/SD**	**One-sample _t_-test**
Nike		
[was trying to] benefit society	4.77/1.86	$t(1203) = 88.84, p = .00$
reduce a societal harm or concern	4.73/1.84	$t(1203) = 89.05, p = .00$
Egoistic-driven	4.99/1.62	$t(1203) = 21.15, p = .00$
Strategic-driven	4.84/1.48	$t(1203) = 19.70, p = .00$
Values-driven	4.84/1.64	$t(1203) = 17.69, p = .00$
Stakeholder-driven	4.70/1.58	$t(1203) = 15.49, p = .00$
DICK's Sporting Goods		
[was trying to] benefit society	5.27/1.74	$t(1203) = 25.44, p = .00$
reduce a societal harm or concern	5.30/1.70	$t(1203) = 26.62, p = .00$
Values-driven	5.20/1.54	$t(1203) = 27.16, p = .00$
Stakeholder-driven	4.84/1.50	$t(1203) = 19.34, p = .00$
Strategic-driven	4.73/1.48	$t(1203) = 17.02, p = .00$
Egoistic	4.55/1.74	$t(1203) = 10.94, p = .00$
Gillette		
[was trying to] benefit society	5.03/1.68	$t(1203) = 21.29, p = .00$
reduce a societal harm or concern	5.00/1.65	$t(1203) = 21.01, p = .00$
Values-driven	4.97/1.48	$t(1203) = 22.68, p = .00$
Strategic-driven	4.87/1.42	$t(1203) = 21.26, p = .00$
Egoistic-driven	4.79/1.62	$t(1203) = 16.89, p = .00$
Stakeholder-driven	4.76/1.48	$t(1203) = 17.75, p = .00$

Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean responses, were used to examine overall attitudes toward the role of corporations in society and perceptions of specific CSA cases. Correlation, *t*-tests, and regression analyses then were conducted on specific demographic factors to evaluate their role in views toward CSA.

Results

In regard to the role of corporations in society (RQ1a), one-sample *t*-tests were used to examine perceptions of corporate involvement in social issues and whether sample means were significantly different from a neutral response (4). For each question, the *t*-tests were significant. Respondents felt most strongly that corporations should work to better society ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.57$), with questions regarding whether businesses should advocate for social issues receiving somewhat less support ($M = 4.89$, $SD = 1.72$). The means also were lower on whether corporations should advocate on political issues that align with their corporate values ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.72$); that corporations should advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear consensus ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.70$); and that corporations should only advocate for issues related to their business or products ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 1.78$). The question that received the least support was whether corporations should advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.78$). (See Table 2.)

Table 2. Perceptions of the role of corporations in society

I believe corporations should…	Mean/SD	One-sample *t*-test
work to better society	5.33/1.57	$t(1203) = 117.58$, $p = .00$
advocate for social issues	4.89/1.72	$t(1203) = 18.03$, $p = .00$
advocate on political issues that align with their corporate values	4.69/1.72	$t(1203) = 13.93$, $p = .00$
advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus	4.57/1.70	$t(1203) = 11.63$, $p = .00$
only advocate for issues related to their business or products	4.50/1.78	$t(1203) = 9.79$, $p = .00$
advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services	4.38/1.78	$t(1203) = 7.46$, $p = .00$

As shown below in Table 3, there were differences in regard to these perceptions by political viewpoints, with liberal respondents demonstrating more agreement than conservatives that corporations should work to better society and advocate for social issues.

Table 3. Perceptions of the role of corporations by political viewpoints

I believe corporations should…

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree
work to better society							
Very conservative	7.5% (15)	2.5% (5)	4.0% (8)	8.0% (16)	13.6% (27)	27.1% (54)	37.2% (74)
Conservative	6.0% (13)	3.7% (8)	7.4% (16)	20.% (43)	26.5% (57)	20.0% (43)	16.3% (35)
Moderate	4.0% (18)	2.9% (13)	5.5% (25)	17.6% (80)	28.8% (131)	19.6% (89)	21.8% (99)
Liberal	1.0% (2)	0.5% (1)	1.5% (3)	9.8% (20)	22.5% (46)	34.3% (70)	30.4% (62)
Very liberal	3.1% (4)	0.8% (1)	0.8% (1)	8.4% (11)	11.5% (15)	24.4%(32)	51.1% (67)
advocate for social issues							
Very conservative	6.5% (13)	7.0% (14)	5.5% (11)	12.1% (24)	15.1% (30)	27.6% (55)	26.1% (52)
Conservative	12.1% (26)	6.5% (14)	12.6% (27)	19.1% (41)	19.1% (41)	21.4% (46)	9.3% (20)
Moderate	5.3% (24)	6.8% (31)	7.0% (32)	25.3% (115)	20.7% (94)	20.2% (92)	14.7% (67)
Liberal	3.9% (8)	2.9% (6)	4.4% (9)	16.2% (33)	20.6% (42)	29.4%(60)	22.5% (46)
Very liberal	2.3% (3)	0.8% (1)	3.1% (4)	12.2% (16)	14.5% (19)	29.8% (39)	37.4% (49)

To examine this relationship further (RQ1b), bivariate linear regression analyses were conducted. The regression analysis indicated that liberal viewpoints significantly predict perceptions that corporations should work to better society [$F(1,1202) = 24.72, p < 0.00), R_2 = 0.02$]; should advocate for social issues [$F(1,1202) = 24.32, p < 0.00), R_2 = 0.02$]; and should advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus [$F(1,1202) = 10.72, p < 0.01), R_2 = 0.01$]. Conservatives, meanwhile, were significantly more likely to believe that corporations should only advocate for issues related to their business or products [$F(1,1202) = 6.07, p < 0.01), R_2 = .05$]. There were no significant differences by political viewpoints in perceptions of whether corporations should advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services; whether corporations should advocate on political issues that align with their corporate values; or whether corporations

should advocate on social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus. Significant findings are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The role of political viewpoints on perceptions of the role of corporations in society

I believe corporations should…	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-statistic	Significance
work to better society	.19	.04	4.97	.00
advocate for social issues	.20	.04	4.93	.00
should advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus	.13	.04	3.28	.00
only advocate for issues related to their business or products	-.11	.04	-2.46	.01

Also in answer to RQ1b, higher levels of both income and education were significantly likely to predict support for CSA across every item (see Table 5). Higher levels of income and education were associated with perceptions that corporations should work to better society; should advocate for social issues; should advocate only for issues related to their business or products; should advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of fit with their products or services; should advocate on political issues that align with their corporate values; and should advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus.

Table 5. The role of income and education on perceptions of the role of corporations in society

I believe corporations should…	Income				Education			
	β	SE	t	p value	β	SE	t	p value
work to better society	.20	.04	4.89	.00	.12	.03	4.13	.00
	$[F(1,1158) = 23.86, p < .01, R_2 = .02]$				$[F(1,1202) = 17.02, p < .01, R_2 = .01]$			
advocate for social issues	.13	.04	3.01	.00	.10	.03	3.02	.00
	$[F(1,1158) = 9.04, p < .01, R_2 = .01]$				$[F(1,1202)=9.11, p < .01, R_2=.01]$			
only advocate for issues related to	.20	.05	4.29	.00	.13	.03	4.17	.00
	$[F(1,1158) = 18.38, p<.01, R_2 = .02]$				$[F(1,1202) = 17.40, p < .01, R_2 = .01]$			

their business or products								
advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services	.24	.05	5.16	.00	.14	.03	4.52	.00
	$[F(1,1158) = 26.64, p < .01, R^2 = .02]$				$[F(1,1202) = 20.40, p < .01, R^2 = .02]$			
advocate on political issues that align with their corporate values	.21	.04	4.74	.00	.14	.03	4.46	.00
	$[F(1,1158) = 22.47, p < .01, R^2 = .02]$				$[F(1,1202) = 19.89, p < .01, R^2 = .02]$			
should advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus	.25	.04	5.87	.00	.13	.03	4.18	.00
	$[F(1,1158) = 34.45, p < .01, R^2 = .03]$				$[F(1,1202) = 17.50, p < .01, R^2 = .01]$			

Interestingly, age was not significantly correlated with most attitudes toward CSA, with two exceptions (see Table 6). Younger respondents were more likely to respond that businesses should advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services $[F(1,1202) = 9.77, p < 0.01), R^2 = .01]$, and that corporations should advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus $[F(1,1202) = 16.85, p < 0.01), R^2 = .01]$ than older respondents. Correlations for these demographic variables are shown in Table 7.

Table 6. Relationship of age with perceptions of the role of corporations in society

I believe corporations should…	β	SE	t	p value
advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services	-.01	.00	-3.13	.00
should advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus	-.01	.00	-4.11	.00

Table 7. Correlations between demographic factors and attitudes toward CSA

I believe corporations should…	Age	Political Viewpoints	Income	Education
work to better society	.05	.14**	.14**	.12*
advocate for social issues	-.05	.14**	.09*	.09**
only advocate for issues related to their business or products	-.03	-.07*	.13**	.12**
advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services	-.09**	.03	.15**	.13**
advocate on political issues that align with their corporate values	-.04	.01	.14**	.13**
advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus	-.12**	.09**	.17**	.12**

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Males and females also responded significantly differently to perceptions of CSA. Results from t-tests revealed that women were less likely to agree that businesses should only advocate for issues related to their business or products ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 1.6$, compared to men: $M = 5.39$, $SD = 1.53$; $t(1202) = -4.14$, $p < .01$); should advocate on political issues that align with their stakeholder values, regardless of the fit with their products or services ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.8$, compared to men: $M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.8$; $t(1202) = -2.61$, $p < .01$), should advocate on political issues that align with their corporate values ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.72$, compared to men: $M = 4.91$, $SD = 1.69$; $t(1202) = -4.12$, $p < .01$), and should advocate for social issues, even when there is not a clear social consensus ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.68$, compared to men: $M = 4.78$, $SD=1.7$; $t(1202) = -3.94$, $p < .01$).

With regard to concern for social issues, participants as a whole expressed above average concern for all issues investigated. In order of importance, participants expressed concern for: 1) racial equality ($M = 5.45$, $SD = 1.61$), 2) social issues in general ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.64$), 3) environmentally responsible business practices ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.58$), 4) gender equality and sexual harassment ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.69$) *and* police brutality ($M = 5.30$, $SD = 1.70$), 5) gun control and reform ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.76$), 6) climate change ($M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.76$), and 7) immigrants' rights ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.79$).

Results of multiple linear regression indicated that there was a collective significant effect between the political affiliation, age, income, education, and general concern for social issues on the belief that corporations should: work to better society ($F(5, 1154) = 133.68$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .32$), advocate for social issues ($F(5, 1154) = 97.53$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .30$), only advocate for issues

related to its business or products ($F(5, 1154) = 18.53$, $p < .001$, $R_2 = .07$), advocate for issues that align with stakeholder values regardless of fit ($F(5, 1154) = 37.99$, $p < .001$, $R_2 = .14$), advocate for issues that align with corporate values ($F(5, 1154) = 49.93$, $p < .001$, $R_2 = .18$), and advocate for social issues even without a clear social consensus ($F(5, 1154) = 64.26$, $p < .001$, $R_2 = .22$). The individual predictors indicated that concern for social issues ($t = 24.07$, $p < .001$) and income ($t = 2.65$, p $< .01$) were significant predictors for working to better society. Individual predictors for advocating for social issues were concern for social issues ($t = 20.73$, $p < .001$) and age ($t = -2.84$, $p < .01$). For advocating for issues that aligned with stakeholder values regardless of fit, individual predictors were concern for social issues ($t = 7.68$, $p < .001$), political views ($t = -3.87$ $p < .001$), and education ($t = 2.19$, $p < .05$).

Corporations as social actors

In regard to perceptions of specific CSA initiatives relative to dimensions of corporations as social actors (RQ2), 64.4% of respondents at least somewhat agreed with the statement that Nike was trying to change people's views on the issue, with 44.1% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Only 17.89% at least somewhat disagreed with the statement. Meanwhile, 66.68% of respondents at least somewhat agreed that Nike was trying to create change in society on the issue, with 46.68% agreeing or strongly agreeing with that statement. Only 15.28% expressed some disagreement with this statement.

For DICK's Sporting Goods, these percentages were similar; 64.36% of respondents at least somewhat agreed that DICK's was trying to change people's views on the issue, with 45% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Even more noteworthy, though, 71.6% of respondents at least somewhat agreed that DICK's was trying to create change in society on this issue, with 50.75% agreeing or strongly agreeing. For Gillette, 63.12% of respondents at least somewhat agreed that Gillette was trying to change people's views on the issue, with 42.69% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Additionally, 65.11% of respondents at least somewhat agreed that Gillette was trying to create change in society on this issue, with 44.93% agreeing or strongly agreeing.
For both Nike and Gillette, the responses were comparable in regard to perceptions of whether the corporations were trying to change people's views on the issue or to create change in society (with <3% difference). For DICK's Sporting Goods, however, the difference between these responses was higher, with more people agreeing that DICK's was trying to create change in society than to change people's views on the issue (7.24% difference).
Additionally, one-sample *t*-tests were used to examine whether these perceptions were significantly different from a neutral response to these statements (4). For each question, the *t*-test was significant. For each initiative, respondents felt corporations were trying to both change people's views on the issue and to create change in society on the issue. Interestingly, across each case, means were higher for perceptions that the company was trying to create change in society on the issue than to change people's views on the issue. (See Table 8.)

Table 8. Corporations as social actors: Frequencies and one-sample *t*-tests

The purpose of [the company's] actions was to…

	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree/ Agree	Mean/ SD	One-sample *t*-test
Nike							
Change people's views on the issue	12.04% (145)	5.85% (71)	17.52% (211)	20.3% (246)	44.10% (531)	4.93/ 1.74	$t(1203) =$ 98.32, $p <$ .001
Create change in society on this issue	10.79% (130)	4.49% (54)	17.86% (215)	20.00% (243)	46.68% (562)	5.03/ 1.67	$t(1203) =$ 104.44, $p <$ .001
DICK's Sporting Goods							
Change people's views on the issue	9.97% (120)	6.56% (79)	19.10% (230)	19.35% (233)	45.01% (542)	5.00/ 1.70	$t(1203) =$ 20.52, $p <$ .001
Create change in society on this issue	8.14% (98)	4.65% (56)	15.61% (188)	20.85% (251)	50.75% (611)	5.23/ 1.61	$t(1203) =$ 26.44, $p <$ .001
Gillette							
Change people's views on the issue	9.63% (116)	4.32% (52)	22.92% (276)	20.43% (246)	42.69% (514)	4.99/ 1.65	$t(1203) =$ 20.74, $p <$ .001
Create change in society on this issue	8.63% (104)	4.81% (58)	21.43% (258)	20.18% (243)	44.93% (541)	5.03/ 1.60	$t(1203) =$ 22.44, $p <$ .001

Perceptions of company's commitment to social change

To evaluate perceptions of the company's commitment to social change, a scale was created consisting of three items: [Company is] committed to social change, creating a more just society, and more concerned with social change than profits. For the Nike CSA, the mean of the scale was 14.47 (*SD* = 5.04, α = .91); for the DICK's Sporting Goods CSA, the mean of the scale was 15.45 (*SD*=4.71, α =.93); and for the Gillette CSA, the mean of the scale was 14.74 (*SD*=4.60, α =.92).

As shown in Table 9, the means on these items varied slightly, with DICK's Sporting Goods receiving the highest mean score. Most noticeable across initiatives was the level of agreement regarding the company's commitment to social change and creating a more just society. On these measures, 65.36% and 63.71% (respectively) at least somewhat agreed with these statements for Nike; 71.67% and 69.77% at least somewhat agreed for DICK's; and 63.95% and 62.88% at least somewhat agreed for Gillette. Interestingly, for both Nike and Gillette, these percentages were lower on perceptions that the company was more concerned with social change than profits (55.48% at least somewhat agreed for Nike and 56.9% at least somewhat agreed for Gillette). This percentage was noticeably higher for DICK's Sporting Goods, where 66.78% at least somewhat agreed that the company was more concerned with social change than profits.

One-sample t-tests were again used to examine whether these perceptions were significantly different from a neutral response to these statements (4). For each question, the t-test was significant. For each initiative, respondents felt the company was committed to social change, to creating a just society, and was more concerned with social change than profits. (See Table 9.)

Table 9. Commitment to change: Frequencies and one-sample t-tests

[The company] is…

	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree/ Agree	Mean/ SD	One-sample t-test
Nike							
Committed to social change	11.88% (143)	5.81% (70)	16.94% (204)	20.43% (246)	44.93% (541)	4.97/ 1.78	$t(1203) = 96.92$, $p < .00$
Committed to creating a more just society	12.87% (155)	6.4% (77)	17.03% (205)	19.19% (231)	44.52% (536)	4.88/ 1.77	$t(1203) = 95.88$, $p < .00$
More concerned with social change than profits	16.78% (202)	7.9% (95)	19.85% (239)	16.11% (194)	39.37% (474)	4.62/ 1.93	$t(1203) = 83.01$, $p < .00$
DICK's Sporting Goods							
Committed to social change	8.80% (106)	3.73% (45)	15.78% (190)	20.01% (241)	51.66% (622)	5.23/ 1.64	$t(1203) = 20.01$, $p < .00$
Committed to creating a more just society	9.39% (113)	4.4% (53)	16.45% (198)	20.1% (242)	49.67% (598)	5.14/ 1.64	$t(1203) = 24.12$, $p < .00$
More concerned with social change than profits	11.20% (135)	6.15% (74)	15.86% (191)	17.11% (206)	49.67% (598)	5.08/ 1.78	$t(1203) = 21.11$, $p < .00$

Gillette							
Committed to social change	9.72% (117)	5.73% (69)	20.6% (248)	20.93% (252)	43.02% (518)	4.98/ 1.66	$t(1203) = 20.52$, $p < .00$
Committed to creating a more just society	8.80% (106)	5.07% (61)	23.26% (280)	19.52% (235)	43.36% (522)	4.98/ 1.59	$t(1203) = 21.32$, $p < .00$
More concerned with social change than profits	11.30% (136)	7.56% (92)	24.17% (291)	18.11% (218)	38.79% (467)	4.78/ 1.71	$t(1203) = 15.96$, $p < .00$

Attributions of company motives

To examine perceptions of corporation motivations for the CSA (RQ3), one sample *t*-tests were conducted on both statements regarding perceptions of the actions as attempts to benefit society and reduce a societal harm or concern, as well as the scales created regarding perceived ethical motivations (as values-driven, stakeholder-driven, strategic-driven, or egoistic). For each analysis, the test value was the mid-point of the question or scale (4), which indicated a neutral response regarding perceptions of the company's motives.

Respondents were significantly likely to view each of the three CSA initiatives as being attempts to both *benefit* society and *reduce* a societal harm or concern. For both Nike and Gillette, the initiatives were slightly more likely to be viewed as efforts to benefit society than to reduce a societal harm or concern; DICK's Sporting Goods' CSA was viewed slightly higher as an attempt to reduce a societal harm or concern. These differences, however, were quite small.

Additionally, all CSA initiatives were likely to be viewed as being driven by all four dimensions of ethical motivations. These findings along with scale means are shown in Table 1 in order of highest means for each scale for each CSA initiative. Most noteworthy, the highest perceptions of CSA being driven by values was DICK's Sporting Goods; this initiative was also likely to be viewed as being driven by stakeholders. For this initiative, egoistic motivations (i.e., driven by publicity and profits) received the lowest response (although still significant). Gillette's initiative was also most likely to be seen as values-driven. Nike's CSA, on the other hand, was seen as most egoistic and driven least by stakeholders.

Discussion

CSA and public interest communications

Most importantly, this study suggests overall public support for corporate efforts to better society, which includes advocating for social issues (i.e., CSA). In a U.S. national survey, these statements—that corporations should work to better society and should advocate for social issues—received the highest level of agreement among all questions regarding general attitudes toward public interest communications. Although there were differences by political viewpoints, age, income, education, and gender, it is important to note that these differences do not negate what seems to be an overall level of agreement across respondents that corporations should engage on important social issues. This is particularly noteworthy to consider as the survey sample, as with current U.S. public opinion polling, skews conservative.

In an era of globalization, pluralization, and the erosion of traditional institutions, Dodd (2018) argues corporations have "emerged as protector and promoter of the political agendas of the public on a large scale" (p. 227). As trust in democratic institutions continues to decline (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2017), "the power of nation-states and traditional institutions is eroding, leaving private actors (i.e., corporations) and civil society actors (e.g., NGOs and activists) to pick up the slack" (Dodd, 2018, p. 231). This research sheds light on shifting societal expectations that seemingly support the role of business in advancing the public interest and the potential for an increased role in public discourse.

It also suggests that activism is a shared dialectic between organizations and individuals, not binaries that work in opposition to each other (Ciszek, 2019; L'Etang, 2016). Relative power cannot be ignored; although organizations might have more resources and sophisticated communications, individuals and activist groups are increasingly both participating in dialogue within and for the public interest as they expect organizations to likewise formulate their own positions. Such perspectives illustrate the dynamic and amorphous nature of publics, who engage in ongoing struggle with organizations for legitimacy, influence, and agency. Ciszek (2019) noted public relations theory has historically othered and marginalized activism, and this research suggests continuation of this approach nullifies the possibility of theory development to capture the rise of organizational activism though CSA.

Despite the general support for CSA, however, it is important to consider the demographic differences identified in this study. Liberal and younger respondents were more likely to support corporate involvement in social issues even when there was not a clear social consensus on an issue, whereas conservatives and older respondents were likely to support the idea that businesses should only advocate for issues related to their business products and services. Higher levels of income, education, and overall concern for social issues also played a role in perceptions of corporate engagement with social issues.

Although CSA seems to be generally accepted across a wide range of demographics, the most noteworthy differences seemed to be in regard to how the initiative should be implemented

and whether or not the initiative should relate to the company's products, services, or expressed values. For example, whereas older conservatives may be more likely to believe CSA must be aligned with corporate products and services, younger and more liberal stakeholders may support CSA on a range of pressing social issues. Businesses considering undertaking CSA initiatives should consider these findings relative to key stakeholders when determining whether or not to weigh in on politically charged issues.

Social change: Generalizable interest and genuine engagement

To move closer toward social change, linking to a generalizable interest and genuinely engaging with the issue and relevant stakeholders are both important (Gaither, Austin, & Schulz, 2018). Most of the cases of activism represented here, however, were somewhat controversial in mainstream society. Interestingly, although this study matched the U.S. population in terms of political affiliation and leaned toward the conservative side, participants reported moderate support for many divisive social issues. The issue of gun control, although not seen as the most important issue, still received moderate support across the groups as a whole. While all three cases presented often politically divided issues, DICK's Sporting Goods had a unique advantage: although gun control reform is seen as a controversial issue, the importance of reducing gun violence may be more universal compared to issues addressing specific racial or gender groups, as in Nike's and Gillette's CSA case.

It is important to consider, however, that although CSR initiatives may benefit most when the interests are clearly generalizable, CSA and activism by nature are likely to involve polarizing issues and may work to address the social good for marginalized groups. In other words, corporations may find it increasingly challenging to link to issues with a generalizable interest, especially as the U.S. population becomes further divided politically.

And although linking to a generalizable interest may be problematic for CSA initiatives, genuine engagement with stakeholders appears to be not only possible but imperative in the greater equation for public response to CSA. For example, DICK's CSA not only supported gun control and reform publicly, the company also acted on these values through political lobbying and changes to store gun sale policies. Perhaps as a result of this genuine engagement with the issue and key stakeholders, DICK's CSA was perceived to be more values- and stakeholder-motivated than the other CSA cases. This possibility is particularly important to consider as values-based companies that fail to take action—even if the social issue is a controversial one—have been shown to elicit more scrutiny than companies that act (Korschun et al., 2016).

Comparing cases of CSA: Perceived motivations and commitment

The three cases explored here: DICK's Sporting Goods, Gillette, and Nike, all received mostly favorable responses. Although respondents acknowledged a range of motivations for the CSA, those by DICK's Sporting Goods appeared more directed toward removing harms (e.g., stopping sales of DICK's products) than conferring benefits, as was the case for both Nike and Gillette.

Also noteworthy, both DICK's Sporting Goods and Gillette were seen to be driven mostly by values, a motivation that may generate more favorable attitudes toward the CSA initiative and the sponsoring company. Interestingly, Nike's CSA was perceived to be more ego-driven than strategic-, values-, or stakeholder-driven, although all values ranked relatively highly. For Gillette, the CSA was perceived to be mostly values-driven and then strategic-driven. The CSA by DICK's Sporting Goods, meanwhile, was perceived as the most driven by values among each of the three cases, with stakeholders being the second strongest motivator, and the least driven by egoistic motives. DICK's Sporting Goods also received the highest mean scores on items related to the company being committed to social change, creating a more just society, and being more concerned with social change than profits.

Possible reasons for this perception of DICK's may lie in the specifics of DICK's CSA efforts. Of the three initiatives examined, DICK's was the example that moved the most into significant action and activism on a social issue by changing store policies and working to drive policy change through lobbying. DICK's expressed a commitment to the issue by announcing it would discontinue the sale of products that may have been seen as contributing to gun violence, an action that may have helped to stress that DICK's was putting its values and stakeholders over profits. Gillette's and Nike's CSA cases, in contrast, did not involve stopping sales of any business products or altering business operations in any way. DICK's CSA messaging also focused heavily on DICK's values as an organization when announcing the CSA (Gaither, Austin, & Collins, 2018).

The findings on commitment support this, in that, overall, DICK's was seen to have the highest commitment to CSA compared to Gillette and Nike, which had the lowest perceived commitment. CSR commitment has been shown to be important in attribution of motives. CSR programs with longer commitments have been perceived as more genuine in their concern for society and communities (Du, Bhattacharya, & Sen, 2010; Webb & Mohr, 1998). Commitment has been operationalized in terms of the amount of effort and resources over time to reach a goal (DeShon & Landis, 1997; Yoon et al., 2006), as well as the consistency of those efforts (Ellen et al., 2006). Less is known, however, about commitment when it comes to CSA and activism. This research provides emerging support for the importance of commitment and moving beyond words into action that affects business operations and products when it comes to the perceived motivations for CSA.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Future research is recommended to explore differences in gender. Male participants reported more significant support for social initiatives than female participants when it came to initiatives that might be controversial in some way (e.g., initiatives where there is no clear social consensus, that align with stakeholder regardless of fit with products or services, etc.). Although these findings suggest preliminary differences in gender, no clear rationale for this difference is evident. Future research could further explore these demographic differences in a more systematic way.

Emerging research here suggests that activism with sustained commitment to change by the corporation may be met with less skepticism than advocacy promoting a social issue. As companies continue this trend of high-profile social advocacy programs, efforts may be met with increasing skepticism. Future research is recommended to further examine differences between activism and advocacy and perhaps define and test a continuum of CSA efforts, varying in commitment and intensity.

Conclusion

The postmodern and critical turn toward public relations has focused on power and its many forms. Although that research has necessarily problematized public relations and its influence on the public interest, this research illustrates the power dimensionality of the corporate sector in shaping dialogue within the public interest. How that dialogue is perceived—whether genuine or met with skepticism—underscores the need for corporations to engender trust with key publics. How social responsibility is framed is a key concern for organizations in the process of building trust through communication (Heath & Waymer, 2019; Sillince & Mueller, 2007). According to Dutta (2019), the framing of organizational participation in the public sphere drowns out public participation and "secures the hegemony of private control over public interests" (p. 52). This research suggests, however, that how organizations are framing their participation in sociopolitical issues through CSA has some value to publics.

Although respondents acknowledged a range of motivations for the CSA, there was overall support for corporate involvement in social issues and CSA generally, a finding that underscores the supposition that CSA represents more than a passing fad in corporate communication. Still, organizations engaging in CSA face an uphill climb against cynicism: "While [communications] campaigns have demonstrably helped rake in billions of pounds for big corporates, there is no evidence any have significantly changed the world for the better… Whether you think it's 'woke-washing,' or companies raising and mainstreaming important issues, this is a phenomenon that is not only here to stay, but will keep on growing" (Jones, 2019, para. 19). For scholars, unresolved tensions remain to account for the fluidity of cultural norms and values, power imbalances, and what issues receive most relative weight in the public interest. Also, scholarly inquiry is needed to deconstruct the marginalized publics who are ignored or othered by organizations, even when some publics laud CSA.

This research does not suggest a one-size-fits all approach treatment of publics will work. From age to political affiliation to gender, there are enough differences to indicate perceptions of CSA, its efficacy, effectiveness and role in PR are as varied as definitions of the public interest. This research suggests building trust symbolically weaves a thread between corporate values and action toward an issue. The publics in this study ostensibly support organizations taking positions and engaging in social issues, which unlocks the "straitjacket of neutrality and impartiality" in much public interest communications theory (Campbell & Marshall, 2002, p. 11; as cited in Johnston & Pieczka, 2019). As such, theory should expand to address the gaps

between corporate advocacy and activism with a concurrent emphasis toward values-driven action with a concomitant view of the consequences of organizational stasis toward public issues. CSA is a ripe scholarly area for pushing the boundaries of public relations by more fully examining organizational power not only to target publics, but at the behest of publics increasingly expecting organizational stances toward the myriad competing issues in the public interest.

References

Austin, L. L., & Gaither, B. M. (2016). Examining public response to corporate social initiative types: A quantitative content analysis of Coca-Cola's social media. *Social Marketing Quarterly, 22*(4), 290–306. doi:10.1177/1524500416642441

Bang, T. (2019). Ethics. In B. R. Brunner (Ed.), *Public relations theory: Application and understanding* (pp. 63–78). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.

Campbell, H. & Marshall, R. (2002). Utilitarianism's bad breath? A re-evaluation of the public interest justification for planning. *Planning Theory (1)*2, 163–187. doi:10.1177/147309520200100205

Carah, N. (2019). Commercial media platforms and the challenges to public expression and scrutiny. In J. Johnston & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts* (pp. 92–110). New York, NY: Routledge.

Ciszek, E. (2019). Activism. In B. R. Brunner (Ed.), *Public relations theory: Application and understanding* (pp. 159–174). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.

Clemensen, M. (2017). *Corporate political activism: When and how should companies take a political stand?* University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/11299/189490

Coombs, T. W., & Holladay, S. J. (2012). Fringe public relations: How activism moves critical pr toward the mainstream. *Public Relations Review (38)*5, 880–887. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.02.008

de Bakker, F.G.A., & den Hond, F. (2008). Activists' influence tactics and corporate policies. *Business Communication Quarterly, 71*, 107–111. doi:10.1177/1080569907313381

Dewey, J. (1927). *The public and its problems.* Athens: Swallow Press.

Dodd, M. (2018). Globalization, pluralization, and erosion: The impact of shifting societal expectations for advocacy and public good. *Journal of Public Interest Communications, 2*(2), 221–238. doi:10.32473/jpic.v2.i2.p221

Dodd, M. D., & Supa, D. W. (2014). Conceptualizing and measuring "corporate social advocacy" communication: Examining the impact on corporate financial performance. *Public Relations Journal*, *8*(3), 1–23. Retrieved from http://www.prsa.org/Intelligence/PRJournal/Vol8/No3/

Du, S., Bhattacharya, C. B., & Sen, S. (2010). Maximizing business returns to corporate social responsibility (CSR): The role of CSR communication. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *12*(1), 8–19. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2370.2009.00276

Dutta, M. J. (2019). Communicating public engagement, public interest and participation: Culturally centering community voices. In J. Johnston & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts* (pp. 52–71). New York, NY: Routledge.

Edelman Trust Barometer. (2017). Retrieved from https://www.edelman.com/research/2017-edelman-trust-barometer

Edwards, L. (2016). The role of public relations in deliberative systems. *Journal of Communication, 66*, 60–81. doi:10.1111/jcom.12199

Ellen, P. S., Webb, D. J., & Mohr, L. A. (2006). Building corporate associations: Consumer attributions for corporate socially responsible programs. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, *34*(2), 147–157. doi:10.1177/0092070305284976

Elving, W. (2013). Scepticism and corporate social responsibility communications: The influence of fit and reputation. *Journal of Marketing Communications, 19*(4), 277–292. doi:10.1080/13527266.2011.631569

Etter, M. (2013). Reasons for low levels of interactivity: (Non-) interactive CSR communication in Twitter. *Public Relations Review, 39*, 606–608. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.06.003

Forehand, M. R., & Grier, S. (2003). When is honesty the best policy? The effect of stated intent on consumer skepticism. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 13*, 349–356. doi:10.1207/S15327663JCP1303_15

Fott, D. (1998). *John Dewey: American philosopher of democracy*. Oxford, UK: Rowan & Littlefield.

Fyke, J. P., Feldner, S. B., & May, S. K. (2016). Discourses about righting the business society relationship. *Business and Society Review, 121*, 217–245. doi:10.1111/basr.12086

Gaither, B. M., Austin, L. L., & Collins, M. (2018). Examining the case of DICK'S Sporting Goods: Realignment of stakeholders through corporate social advocacy. *Journal of Public Interest Communications, 2*(2), 176–201. doi:10.32473/jpic.v2.i2

Gaither, B. M., Austin, L. L., & Schulz, M. (2018). Delineating CSR and social change: Querying corporations as actors for social good. *PR Inquiry, 7*(1), 45–61. doi:10.1177/2046147X17743544

Gaither, T. K., & Curtin, P. A. (2019). Articulating national identity in postcolonial democracies: Defining relations and interests through competing publics. In J. Johnston & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts* (pp. 113–132). New York, NY: Routledge.

Gillette. (2019). *The best men can be.* Retrieved from https://gillette.com/en-us/our-commitment

Gupta, S., & Pirsch, J. (2006). The company-cause-customer fit decision in cause-related marketing. *Journal of Consumer Marketing, 23*(6), 314–326.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 1). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Heath, R. L., & Waymer, D. (2019). Terministic dialectics of individual and community agency: Co-creating and co-enacting public interest. In J. Johnston & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts* (pp. 32–51). New York, NY: Routledge.

Iqbal, N. (2019, January 19). Woke washing? How brands like Gillette turn profits by creating a conscience. *The Observer: The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/jan/19/gillette-ad-campaign-woke-advertising-salving-consciences

Johnston, J., & Pieczka, M. (Eds.). (2019). *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Jones, O. (2019, May 23). Woke-washing: how brands are cashing in on the culture wars. *The Guardian.* Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/media/2019/may/23/woke-washing-brands-cashing-in-on-culture-wars-owen-jones

Kaneva, N., & Popescu, D. (2014). We are Romanian, not Roma: Nation branding and post socialist discourses of alterity. *Communication, Culture & Critique, 7*, 506–523. doi:10.1111/cccr.12064

Kim, S. Y., & Reber, B. H. (2008). Public relations' place in corporate social responsibility: Practitioners define their role. *Public Relations Review 34*(4), 337–342. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.07.003

Korschun, D., Aggarwal, A., Rafieian, H., & Swain, S. D. (2016). Taking a stand: Consumer responses to corporate political activism. *SSRN.* doi:10.2139/ssrn.2806476

Kotler, P., & Sarkar, C. (2017). Finally, brand activism! *Marketing Journal.* Retrieved from http://www.marketingjournal.org/finally-brand-activism-philip-kotler-and-christian-sarkar

L'Etang, J. (2004). *Public relations in Britain: A history of professional practice in the 20th century.* London: Erlbaum.

L'Etang, J. (2013). Public relations: A discipline in transformation. *Sociology Compass, 7*(10), 799–817. doi:10.1111/soc4.12072

Lee, T. H. (2017). The status of corporate social responsibility research in public relations: A content analysis of published articles in eleven scholarly journals from 1980 to 2015. *Public Relations Review, 43,* 211–218. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2016.10.001

Lippmann, W. (1927). *The phantom public.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

Matten, D. & Crane, A. (2005). Corporate citizenship: Toward an extended theoretical conceptualization. *Academy of Management Review, 30*(1), 166–179. doi:10.5465/amr.2005.15281448

Mayhew, L. H. (1997). *The new public: Professional communication and the means of social influence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Mundy, D. (2019). Diversity. In B. R. Brunner (Ed.), *Public relations theory: Application and understanding* (pp. 49–62). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.

Munshi, D. & Kurian, P. (2005). Imperializing spin cycles: A postcolonial look at public relations, greenwashing, and the separation of publics. *Public Relations Review, 31*(4), 513–520. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2005.08.010

Novartis. (2016). *Novartis social ventures*. Retrieved from https://www.novartis.com/about-us/corporate-responsibility/expanding-access-healthcare/novartis-social-ventures

Novartis. (2014). *Arogya Parivar: Healthy family in rural India commercial innovation to address health needs at the bottom of the pyramid.* Retrieved from https://www.novartis.com/sites/www.novartis.com/files/Arogya-Parivar-fact-sheet_2014_final.pdf

Pal, M., & Dutta, M. J. (2011). Public relations and marginalization in a global context. In N. Bardhan & C. K. Weaver (Eds.), *Public relations in global cultural constructs: Multi-paradigmatic perspectives* (pp. 195–225). New York, NY: Routledge.

Reisinger, D. (2017, April 20). Major tech companies line up against Trump's revised travel ban. *Fortune.* Retrieved from http://fortune.com/2017/04/20/tech-company-travel-ban/

Sarkar, C. & Kotler, P. (2018). Stand for something: Brand activism at Nike. *Marketing Journal*. Retrieved from http://www.marketingjournal.org/stand-for-something-brand-activism-at-nike-christian-sarkar-and-philip-kotler/

Sillince, J., & Mueller, F. (2007). Switching strategic perspective: The reframing of accounts of responsibility. *Organisation Studies, 28*(2), 155–176. doi:10.1177/0170840606067989

Snider, J., Hill, R. P., & Martin, D. (2003). Corporate social responsibility in the 21st century: A view from the world's most successful firms. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *48*(2), 175–187. doi:10.1023/B:BUSI.0000004606.29523.db

Somerville, I., & Davidson, S. (2019). Security, democratic legitimacy, and the public interest: Policing and the communicative ritual in deeply divided societies. In J. Johnson & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Public interest communication: Critical debates and global contexts* (pp. 172–191). New York, NY: Routledge.

Spry, A., Vredenburg, J., Kemper, J., & Kapitan, S. (2018, December 5). Woke washing: What happens when marketing communications don't match corporate practice. *The Conversation*. Retrieved from http://theconversation.com/woke-washing-what-happens-when-marketing-communications-dont-match-corporate-practice-108035

Taylor, M. & Kent, M. L. (2014). Dialogic engagement: Clarifying foundational concepts. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 26*(5), 384–398. doi:10.1080/1062726X.2014.956106

Taylor, M., Kent, M. L., & Xiong, Y. (2019). Dialogue and organization-public relationships. In B. R. Brunner (Ed.), *Public relations theory: Application and understanding* (pp. 79–96). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.

Uzunoğlu, E., Türkel, S., & Yaman Akyar, B. (2017). Engaging consumers through corporate social responsibility messages on social media: An experimental study. *Public Relations Review, 43*(5), 989–997. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2017.03.013

Weaver, C. K., Motion, J., & Roper, J. (2006). From propaganda to discourse (and back again): Truth, power, the public interest, and public relations. In J. L'Etang & M. Pieczka (Eds.), *Critical debates and contemporary practice* (pp. 7–22). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Webb, D. J., & Mohr, L. A. (1998). A typology of consumer responses to cause-related marketing: From skeptics to socially concerned. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, 17*, 226–238. doi:10.1177/074391569801700207