

**Stepping into Controversial Issues: Corporate Social Advocacy on Facebook and in the  
Online News**

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### **Abstract**

This research investigates how top companies' corporate social advocacy (CSA) practices have been covered by companies' own social media platforms and online news media. To this end, a content analysis was conducted to analyze 147 Facebook posts and 495 online news articles. This research first examined how CSA efforts have addressed internal and external stakeholders' interests. Results revealed that most CSA practices communicated on companies' Facebook posts and online news articles targeted external stakeholders. A higher level of social media engagement was generated when a post mentioned both internal and external stakeholders. Next, the research further explored how different corporate social initiatives (CSIs) were communicated. Although companies have primarily communicated cause promotion, other efforts such as corporate philanthropy, socially responsible business practices, and public statements demonstrated more values in arousing social media engagement. Further, socially responsible business practices and corporate philanthropic efforts were the most covered initiatives in online news. The tonality of CSA-related online news was generally positive, but the negative news coverage was more associated with internal stakeholders such as employees.

*Keywords:* corporate social advocacy, social media engagement, news media, stakeholders, corporate social initiatives

## **Stepping into Controversial Issues: Corporate Social Advocacy on Facebook and in the Online News**

Businesses are becoming an emerging force in social change movements. For example, during the Black Lives Matter social movement, many companies declared their support by making statements or contributing substantial money to anti-racism causes (Duarte, 2020). In addition, company giants such as Nike have the power to support marginalized groups by initiating a variety of campaigns (Waymer & Logan, 2021). Dodd and Supa (2014) termed this communication practice corporate social advocacy (CSA), which is “an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues” (p.5). CSA expands upon corporate social responsibility (CSR) by focusing on how businesses engage in socially or politically controversial issues where they risk reputational damage (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). CSA is a vital PR function because it engages publics beyond current stakeholders (Dodd & Supa, 2015). Prior research has examined the effect of CSA on financial outcomes (Afego & Alagidede, 2021; Dodd & Supa, 2014; 2015), human resource management (Turner et al., 2019), attitudes towards controversial social issues (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020), brand loyalty (Park & Jiang, 2020), and corporate reputation (Lim & Young, 2021). But the legitimacy gap can also exist for CSA, meaning that stakeholders’ expectations and the actual CSA behaviors can differ (Yim, 2021). Overall, research on CSA is relatively new and more research is needed to uncover how CSA has been communicated in different channels to prepare practitioners for the opportunities and risks.

This study aims to investigate how diverse companies’ CSA practices have been covered in online news and on companies’ own social media platforms. Furthermore, it explores the effect of CSA communication on social media engagement behaviors on Facebook. Prior

literature has noted the potential of communicating CSA through social media channels to build corporate reputation (Lim & Young, 2021) and facilitate people's engagement with brand-related communication (Park & Jiang, 2020). In the meantime, literature on CSR has highlighted the crucial role of news media in affecting how people interpret CSR and assess what aspects of CSR are important (Lee & Carroll, 2011; van den Heijkant & Vliegenthart, 2018). Media channels that are not controlled by the company present more credibility in CSR communication, whereas company-controlled communication channels allow direct and interpersonal interactions (Kim & Ferguson, 2014). Given the multiple sources from which stakeholders learn about companies' advocacy efforts, it is vital to understand how CSA-related information is disseminated across different channels. Therefore, this study employs a quantitative content analysis of 147 Facebook posts and 495 online news articles about CSA.

The findings of this study contribute to our understanding of CSA communication in online news and social media, which has theoretical implications for public relations (PR) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). First, most CSA research has focused on a single source (Carroll, 2011), even though stakeholders receive information about CSA from different sources and channels. Thus, this study enhances our knowledge of how CSA efforts have been covered and framed in company-controlled and -uncontrolled channels. It also provides practical suggestions about campaign design, stakeholder management, media relations, and social media monitoring for practitioners to effectively and strategically communicate CSA. Ultimately, this study helps demonstrate the capacity of CSA as an important PR function in fulfilling organizations' purposes, promoting issues, building relationships with diverse stakeholders, and engaging in public debates.

### **Literature Review**

### **Corporate Social Advocacy**

As a rising concept in public relations, taking a stance on controversial sociopolitical issues (i.e., CSA) is a voluntary activity that affects stakeholders' perceptions of social responsibility (Dodd & Supa, 2014). CSA has the potential to signal a company's unique culture or identity, which can attract supporters who share similar values (Afego & Alagidede, 2021). It has been perceived as "a corporate identity signal" (Park & Jiang, 2020, p.17) and "an effective relational communication strategy" (Browning et al., 2020, p.1). As a related concept to corporate social responsibility (CSR), CSA carries a controversial nature and can bring supporters, boycotters, or noncoters (Hong & Li, 2020). CSA highlights the critical role of communication (Waymer & Logan, 2021). Waymer and Logan (2021) considered CSA a form of engagement with moral judgment, and generating conversation is one important purpose. It is an essential but complex firm strategy worthy of further investigation (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

CSA can affect stakeholders cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally, and it is inherently both beneficial and risky (Hong & Li, 2020). Based on their reactions to CSA, stakeholders can become supporters, boycotters, or noncoters (Hong & Li, 2020). To effectively practice CSA, companies are encouraged to make connections between the issues they support and their values and identities (Afego & Alagidede, 2021). Yim (2021) pointed out that CSA legitimacy should be established with "a good fit with public expectations of the corporation itself and corporate standards of behavior" (p.62). In other words, an organization is perceived as credible and authentic when its CSA is consistent with its own values and aligned with public expectations (Yim, 2021). It is critical to enact authenticity in CSA practices (Kim & Young, 2021). Whether the effect of CSA on organizational outcomes is positive or negative largely

depends on the stakeholder groups (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Browning et al. (2020) also suggested that organizations consider stakeholders influenced by CSA.

### **Stakeholder Approach**

Corporate communication, including CSR and CSA, primarily centers on the stakeholder approach. A stakeholder is “any individual or group that maintains a stake in an organization in the way that a stakeholder possesses” (Fassin, 2009, p.116). Stakeholders consist of various constituents such as management, shareholders, business competitors, customers, employees, civil society, communities, and governments, among others. The emergence of the concept *stakeholder* demonstrates that companies begin to think broadly about diverse groups or constituencies (Clarkson, 1995). Fassin (2009) redefined the stakeholder model by proposing three distinct groups: stakeholders, stakewatchers, and stakekeepers. O’Connor and Spangenberg (2008) recommended using a multi-stakeholder dialogue framework as an appropriate way to evaluate overall CSR performance across sectors. In their stakeholder categories, internal stakeholders include employees, company management, and non-staff shareholders; external stakeholders include suppliers, customers, banks, etc.; broader stakeholders are discourse partners, such as NGOs, associations, partner companies, local authorities (O’Connor & Spangenberg, 2008). Cho et al. (2017) categorized the major stakeholders in CSR communication into internal and external. To achieve effective CSR communication, companies should involve various internal and external stakeholders’ voices (Cho et al., 2017). Prior literature suggested that CSR practices should respond to demands from both internal and external stakeholders (Yuan et al., 2011).

CSA offers companies a chance to redefine their stakeholders by signaling their key values and identities (Gaither et al., 2018). However, perceptions of CSA vary across different

stakeholder groups (Dodd & Supa, 2014) because CSA may deviate from key stakeholders' (customers, employees, government) personal and/or political values (Bhagwat et al., 2020). In addition, engaging in controversial social causes can potentially affect "a broader group of stakeholders" (Afego & Alagidede, 2021, p. 52). Bhagwat et al. (2020) discovered that investors generally had adverse reactions to CSA, especially when it was not aligned with key stakeholders' personal values and signaled intensive resource commitment. However, they found that investors and customers reacted more favorably to CSA with aligned values. Thus, it is important to understand how companies strategically target stakeholders in their CSA efforts, which is still understudied in the extant literature.

### **Corporate Social Initiatives (CSIs)**

The concept of corporate social initiatives (CSIs) facilitates business practitioners' decision-making process when supporting social causes. CSIs are "major activities undertaken by a corporation to support social causes and fulfill commitments to *corporate social responsibility*" (Kotler & Lee, 2005b, p.22). Kotler and Lee (2005b) proposed six categories of CSIs, including cause promotion, cause-related marketing, corporate social marketing, corporate philanthropy, community volunteering, and socially responsible business practices. First, cause promotion posts support social causes through "sharing messages, promoting causes, or paid sponsorship" (Austin & Gaither, 2016, p.299). Second, cause-related marketing contributes to social causes by using sales or business revenue (Kotler & Lee, 2005a). Third, corporate philanthropy is about direct donations to support a social cause (Kotler & Lee, 2005a). Finally, socially responsible business practices create business practices to advocate for the social cause (Kotler & Lee, 2005a; Austin & Gaither, 2016). In particular, Kotler and Lee (2005a) highlighted the strategic role of corporate social marketing (supporting behavior change campaigns) because

it has the potential to align “what society needs and a company’s goals and objectives” (p.102). Austin and Gaither (2016) applied these categories to analyze Coca-Cola’s Twitter posts about sustainability initiatives, and they discovered that socially responsible business practices received the most positive public response and cause promotion received the most negative. Furthermore, the type of CSIs can have a more significant impact on controversial topics, and more research should be devoted to examining a continuum of CSA efforts (Austin & Gaither, 2016). Investigating how companies communicate different types of CSIs can offer an overall view of existing CSA practices.

### **Communicating CSA on Social Media**

Social media offer new and vital options for companies to communicate their specific socially responsible initiatives directly with significant stakeholders (Austin & Gaither, 2016). An organization’s social media accounts serve as the voice of the organization and help garner attention from the general public (Wang & Huang, 2017). The presence of corporations on Facebook positively affects corporate reputation because it can indicate the potential openness to dialogue (Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021). In the CSR context, social media enable companies to disseminate information about their CSR practices without being affected by the gatekeeping function of the news media (Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021). Kim and Ferguson (2014) suggested that a company use itself as a communication source to engage in active CSR communication with external stakeholders. For high-CSR companies, social media bring more possibilities for stakeholder engagement, awareness, and social support, given social media’s characteristics (i.e., dialogic, uncontrollable, coordinated effect) (Lee et al., 2013). Internal and external stakeholders respond favorably to CSR-related messages on an organization’s social media account (Wang & Huang, 2017). In sum, social media enable companies to inform, involve, and engage a wide

range of stakeholders and allow stakeholders to express their evaluations of companies and CSR activities (Cho et al., 2017).

The growth of social media plays an even more critical role in CSA because competing opinions can be amplified in the social media environment. Companies advocate sociopolitical issues through social media channels, which affects corporate reputation (Lim & Young, 2021). During a CSA, people interact with others, including the company, to engage in a social media brand community (Park & Jiang, 2020). Social media lead to increased awareness of CSA, and both boycotters and advocates emerge in social media (Rim et al., 2020). It facilitates the effect of CSA on people's engagement in brand-related communication (Park & Jiang, 2020). Moreover, social media provide discursive spaces for people to express diverse opinions. For example, Cizek and Logan (2018) discovered that social media functioned as "a reservoir of ideological discourses, reflecting competing perspectives about race in the United States," in the case of Ben & Jerry's support for Black Lives Matter (p. 124). When companies take stances on sociopolitical issues, they simultaneously face opportunities and challenges in the era of social media. Park and Jiang (2020) indicated that there is a need for more research on the effect of CSA on social media engagement. Therefore, the first research question is proposed.

RQ1: How do companies have communicated CSA (i.e., major target stakeholders and CSIs) on social media?

### **Social Media Engagement**

Social media allow companies to monitor and measure social media users' engagement behaviors by looking at the number of reactions (Luo et al., 2015; Saxton & Waters, 2014). Social media engagement mediates the effect of CSA activity and people's identification with the company (Park & Jiang, 2020). Kim and Yang (2017) categorized Facebook behaviors into

hierarchical levels from the lowest (*like*), to the intermediate (*comment*), and to the highest (*share*), based on the required cognitive effort. They further pointed out that “like is affectively, comment is cognitively elicited, and share is either affective or cognitive or a combination of both” (p.447). Different digital technologies provide more possibilities for engagement outcomes. For example, Facebook introduced new “Reaction” features, including *love*, *haha*, *wow*, *sad*, and *angry* in 2016, and added *care* in 2020. These new reaction features on Facebook are helpful for users to express various emotions without high cognitive efforts (Yang et al., 2020). The second research question is to understand how social media engagement behaviors are affected by CSA communication.

RQ2: How do companies’ CSA communication affect people’s social media engagement behaviors?

### **News Media Coverage of CSA**

Although there has been limited research on news media coverage of CSA, the literature on CSR-related news media is increasing. Compared with company-controlled communication channels (e.g., websites, social media accounts, etc.), the voices of diverse stakeholders can be represented in CSR-related news media (Tam, 2019). Given the uncontrolled nature, news media have the potential to enhance the credibility of CSR communication (Kim & Ferguson, 2014). Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) also offers invaluable insight into how media influence audiences’ perceptions of CSR because media set the public agenda. News media affect how people interpret CSR and assess what aspects of CSR are important (Lee & Carroll, 2011; van den Heijkant & Vliegenthart, 2018). Building the CSR agenda in news media plays a crucial role in building corporate reputation (Lee & Riffe, 2017). Vogler and Eisenegger (2021) discovered that corporate reputation was associated with tone and salience in news media.

Stakeholders' familiarity with CSR activities increases with exposure to news coverage, which ultimately contributes to their perceptions of a particular company (Lee & Carroll, 2011). With the rise of CSR-related media coverage, Carroll (2011) called for more research on CSR-related news coverage to uncover "the organization-CSR-media interface" (p.439). Moreover, scholars have yet to address how news media have portrayed companies' social advocacy efforts. Thus, the third research question is proposed.

RQ3: How do online news cover CSA (tonality, major target stakeholders, CSIs)?

### **Method**

A quantitative content analysis was conducted to answer the research questions. Prior scholars have used content analysis to analyze CSR practices (e.g., Cho & Hong, 2009; Kwon & Lee, 2021; Shi, 2021) and understand stakeholder responses to CSA (Gaither et al., 2018). The Fortune Worlds' Most Admired Companies ranking (2020), which covers nine criteria including social responsibility, was used in this study to select studied organizations. Based on the available data on the Cision Insights' Horreum platform, 37 companies were chosen for data collection (see Appendix A). Only U.S. companies were chosen because CSA may vary across countries (Afego & Alagidede, 2021). In this study, a content analysis was conducted for both companies' Facebook posts and online news articles from July 31, 2019, to August 1, 2020.

### **Data Collection**

**Facebook.** As the most popular social media worldwide (Statista Research Department, 2021), Facebook was the social media platform selected for this study. The CrowdTangle API was used to collect posts from identified companies' public accounts. CrowdTangle is a tool offered by Facebook to collect data from public content on social media (Bleakley, 2020). A list of the Facebook page IDs was created on the CrowdTangle platform. Keywords or keyword

strings were developed from the literature and mass media news for four topics: race relations, LGBTQ rights, gun control, and immigrants/refugees. For every post, basic information was collected, such as the created timestamp, the number of reactions, the number of shares, the number of comments, text, and the embedded links, as suggested by Phadke and Chandaluri (2019). After manually screening the posts for relevance, 147 Facebook posts from 31 companies remained in the final sample.

**Online News.** For the online news media, Cision Insights' Horreum platform was used to collect online news articles from 86 online media outlets such as yahoo.com, vice.com, cnbc.com, time.com, among others. These online media outlets were selected because they were identified as popular online media with more than 10,000,000 followers listed in Horreum. Only the issue of race relations was selected, given the widespread media attention after the death of George Floyd in June 2020. In total, 27,865 news articles were collected about the issue of race relations, including the Black Lives Matter social movement. After removing the duplicates, 18,535 news articles remained. Given the large portion of irrelevant news articles, a script written by Java was created to filter the news based on keywords in the titles and URLs, and 667 news articles remained. After a further step of manual screening, 495 news articles about 25 companies' CSA were coded.

### **Coding Scheme**

A codebook was developed based on prior literature and was revised to adapt to the studied context.

**Type of CSIs.** Based on Kotler and Lee's (2005a, 2005b) categories of CSIs, practices in CSA were coded as cause promotion, cause-related marketing, corporate social marketing, corporate philanthropy, community volunteering, and socially responsible business practices.

Public announcement and the option of “Other” were added to cover all possible practices in this studied context. The coder provided a brief description of the initiative when “Other” was selected.

**CSA Major Target Stakeholders.** Based on prior literature (Cho et al., 2017; O’Connor & Spangenberg, 2008), the major stakeholders targeted by CSA efforts were coded into three categories: internal, external, and both. Internal stakeholders include the employees, company management, and non-staff shareholders. External stakeholders include suppliers, customers, nonprofit organizations, government, banks, NGOs, associations, partners, local authorities, communities, society overall. The option “both” means a CSA practice involves both internal and external stakeholders.

**News Tone.** News tone was coded as positive, negative, mixed, and neutral.

**Social Media Engagement Behaviors.** The numbers of like, comment, share, and reaction features (*love, haha, wow, sad, angry, care*) were collected to measure social media engagement, as suggested by prior literature (Kim & Yang, 2017; Yang et al., 2020).

## Results

### CSA on Facebook

Among analyzed 147 Facebook posts, the issue of race relations was prevalently communicated ( $N = 75, 51\%$ ), followed by LBGTQ rights ( $N = 63, 43\%$ ), immigrates/refugee ( $N = 3, 2\%$ ), and gun control ( $N = 1, 1\%$ ). Three posts mentioned both race relations and LBGTQ+.

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted with each variable to answer RQ1 about how CSA has been communicated on Facebook. First, more than half studied Facebook CSA-related posts targeted external stakeholders ( $N = 83, 71.4\%$ ). The rest of posts either discussed internal stakeholders ( $N = 24, 16.3\%$ ) or both internal and external stakeholders ( $N = 18, 12.2\%$ ).

As shown in Table 1, the most popular type of CSIs communicated by companies' Facebook posts was cause promotion ( $N = 83$ , 56.5%). Sometimes, companies also communicate about their public announcements ( $N = 26$ , 17.7%) and corporate philanthropic activities ( $N = 18$ , 12.2%). Regarding the "Other" option, four posts were related to Human Rights Campaign Corporate Equality Index (CEI) or unspecified corporate actions.

**Table 1**

*Summary of CSIs Communicated on Companies' Facebook Account*

CSIs	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Cause promotion	83	56.5	56.5
Public announcement	26	17.7	74.2
Corporate philanthropy	18	12.2	86.4
Socially business practices	12	8.2	94.6
Other	8	5.4	100
Total	17	100	

A series of negative binomial regression analyses were conducted to further examine the associations between CSA communication and social media engagement behaviors. The dependent variables were over-dispersed count variables. The (log) number of account followers was used as a control variable in the models, given its significant impact on social media engagement. First, I regressed social media engagement on the type of stakeholders in the posts. As shown in Table 2, the results showed that posts about both internal and external stakeholders generated significantly higher numbers of *like*, *comment*, *share*, *love*, *wow*, *haha*, *care*, and *angry*, compared with posts mention only internal or external stakeholders. Second, social media engagement was regressed on the type of CSIs. Cause promotion was used as the reference group. As shown in Table 3, posts about corporate philanthropy or public announcements aroused higher numbers of *like*, *share*, *comment*, *wow*, *haha*, *angry*, and *care*, compared with cause promotion. Furthermore, posts about socially responsible business practices generated higher numbers of *like*, *share*, *wow*, and *haha* than cause promotion. In other words, the results

revealed that posts about cause promotion were less likely to arouse social media engagement behaviors compared with other types of CSIs.

**Table 2**

*The Effect of Major Stakeholders on Social Media Engagement*

	Like	comment	share	love	haha	wow	angry	care
Internal	-1.25***	-1.03***	-1.2***	-.096***	-1.55***	-1.55***	-1.15***	-.71*
External	-1.84***	-1.457***	-1.6***	-1.66***	-1.64***	-1.14***	-.96***	-2.26***

*Note:* 1) Reference group = Both internal and external stakeholders 2) \* < .05, \*\* < .01, \*\*\* < .001\*\*\* 3) The non-significant results on sad were omitted from Table 2.

**Table 3**

*The Effect of CSIs on Social Media Engagement*

	Like	comment	share	wow	haha	angry	care
Public announcement	1.98***	1.5***	1.73***	1.48***	1.60***	0.79**	1.84***
Socially responsible business practices	1.29***	0.54	1.26***	1.47***	1.27***	-.57	0.26
Corporate philanthropy	1.63***	1.91***	1.8***	2.47***	1.54***	1.30***	1.04

*Note:* 1) Reference group = Cause promotion 2) \* < .05, \*\* < .01, \*\*\* < .001\*\*\* 3) The non-significant results on love and sad were omitted from Table 3.

**CSA in Online News**

Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted for each coded variable to analyze how CSA-related information has been covered in the final 495 online news articles. In terms of the tonality of news articles, 275 (55.6%) were positive, 75 (15.2%) were negative, 53 (10.7%) were mixed, 92 (18.6%) were neutral. Next, most of the news articles mentioned how CSA-related practices have affected external stakeholders (*N* = 324, 65.5%), and the rest of the articles covered internal stakeholders (*N* = 144, 29.1%) or both (*N* = 27, 5.5%). As shown in Table 4, the most frequent CSIs covered in the online news articles were socially business practices (*N* = 202, 40.8%) and corporate philanthropy (*N* = 123, 24.8%). A follow-up coding process was conducted among the 153 articles coded as “Other,” and several themes emerged such as crisis

response ( $N = 64$ , 12.9%) and employee benefits/DEI ( $N = 38$ , 7.7%), employee benefits/treatment, and corporate crisis responses. A Chi-Squared test revealed a significant association between the tonality of online news articles and the major stakeholders in CSA (Pearson Chi-Square = 4.35,  $df = 6$ ,  $p < .000$ ). In particular, the tonality of news articles tended to be more negative than expected when they involve internal stakeholders.

**Table 4**

*Summary of CSIs Communicated in Online News*

CSIs	Frequency	%
Socially business practices	202	40.8
Corporate philanthropy	123	24.8
Crisis responses	64	12.9
Cause promotion	39	7.9
Employee benefits/DEI	38	7.7
Public announcement	33	6.7
Community volunteering	2	0.4
Cause-related marketing	1	0.2
Other	34	6.9

*Note:* The types of CSIs are not mutually exclusive as a news article can cover more than one type of CSIs.

## Discussion and Implications

In response to increasing public expectations and support for corporate efforts to serve society (Austin et al., 2019; Edelman, 2021), companies advocated for diverse sociopolitical issues. Engaging in CSA transcends organizations' interests and helps maintain organizations' legitimacy (Dodd, 2018). This study explicates this trending and significant corporate communication phenomenon into tangible categories of initiatives (i.e., CSIs) with a stakeholder approach, in the context of both social media and online media.

### Major Targeted Stakeholders on Social Media and in Online News

In terms of major stakeholders in CSA efforts, most social media posts and online news articles target external stakeholders. This is aligned with the findings of CSR initiatives that dominantly address external stakeholder demands (Yuan et al., 2011). However, posts generated

a higher level of social media engagement behaviors only when CSA practices targeted both internal and external stakeholders. Moreover, the results of the online news analysis point out the risks of mistreating internal stakeholders such as employees, which could evolve into corporate crises with negative media coverage. Prior literature has highlighted the importance of involving multiple stakeholders, both internal and external, to enhance the credibility and sincerity of CSR communication (Cho et al., 2017; Morsing & Schultz, 2006). CSR is not only a strategy to gain legitimacy from external stakeholders but also an organizational process that “places the employees at its center” (Bolton et al., 2011, p. 61). It is recommended that practitioners consider diverse stakeholders’ needs, interests, and expectations to involve and engage stakeholders through CSA (Heffron & Dodd, 2021). CSA such as CEO activism offers a chance for companies to align internal and external stakeholders such as employees, customers, partners, communities, and the society at large (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018). For example, Nike’s CSA endeavors have presented effectiveness by “inviting more voices into the conversation on social issues” (Waymer & Logan, 2021, p. 6). To build stakeholder relationships, CSA-stakeholder deviation should be minimized to achieve positive reactions from critical stakeholders such as customers, employees, and state legislators (Bhagwat et al., 2020). The present study suggests a more integrated stakeholder approach to CSA, demonstrating sincerity by serving a wide range of internal and external stakeholders.

### **CSIs on Social Media and in Online News**

Results of the research found that companies’ social media platforms and online news media prioritized different types of CSIs in CSA-related communication. Companies predominantly communicated cause promotion, while online news articles covered more about corporate philanthropy and socially responsible business practices. Companies have utilized

diverse channels such as print ads, TV commercials, websites, social media, annual reports, and sponsorship to communicate their socially responsible commitment (Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Other than the controllable channels, news media also play a crucial role in the public discourse of corporate initiatives such as CSR (Carroll, 2011). In terms of the tonality of CSA-related online news media, most online news articles adopted a positive or neutral tone to report companies' advocacy efforts. Inspired by research on research on CSA (e.g., Lee & Riffe, 2017; Vogler & Eisenegger, 2021), the positive tonality of CSA-related news coverage potentially leads to a better corporate reputation in the long term. The findings of how the media cover CSA, therefore, bring an in-depth understanding of media relations practitioners to manage relationships with the news media.

This research discovered that the commitment and intensity of CSA efforts affect social media engagement and media coverage. On companies' social media platforms, corporate philanthropy, socially responsible business practices, and public announcement lead to more social media engagement behaviors, compared with cause promotion. Also, corporate philanthropy and socially responsible business practices gained the most online news media coverage of CSA. As argued by Austin et al. (2019), CSA practices with sustained commitment to change, compared with advocacy promoting a social issue, are likely to face less skepticism. According to the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report that surveyed 2,000 general population respondents, 53% of respondents called for concrete follow-up actions after a statement. Aligned with prior studies (Austin & Gaither, 2016), socially responsible business practices received more positive public responses than cause promotion. Corporate philanthropy has presented its potential in affecting diverse stakeholders (Gautier & Pache, 2015). Especially in emergent situations such as disaster relief, corporate philanthropy elicits positive stakeholder

reactions because it effectively deals with the extreme damages caused by disasters (Patten, 2007; Shi, 2020). Contentious social issues also need more concrete actions, instead of cause promotional efforts, to achieve meaningful changes for marginalized communities. When cause promotion initiatives don't include actions, greater skepticism towards companies' sincerity and legitimacy can be generated (Austin & Gaither, 2016).

Another finding is the vital role of public announcement in generating many types of social media engagement behaviors such as *like*, *share*, *wow*, *haha*, *care*, and *angry*. This finding can be attributed to the confirmative and intensive language used in the public announcements issued by companies or CEOs on social media. Using emotionally intense messages with strong and vivid language leads to more prosocial advocacy behaviors such as political participation intent and social media engagement (DiRusso, 2021). Furthermore, the data collection occurred after the death of George Floyd, when some stakeholders expected more explicit and robust public stances from companies. These findings, together, revealed how different types of CSIs are associated with stakeholders' reactions to CSA on social media.

### **Implications**

This study contributes to the existing scholarly work on CSA and public relations. CSA is perceived as “a pivotal direction for further theorizing and research in public relations and engagement studies” (Waymer & Logan, 2021, p.1). With an exploratory approach, this study advances our knowledge of how companies' social media platforms have communicated CSA efforts and how various online news media outlets have covered those efforts. Thus, theoretical understandings of CSA are strengthened with analyses of both company-controlled channels (social media accounts) and company-uncontrolled media (news media). This study empirically examines how companies addressed different internal and external stakeholders' needs about the

advocated sociopolitical issues with a stakeholder perspective. As suggested by Browning et al. (2020), organizations must consider stakeholders to be influenced by CSA. Thus, the results add value to the literature on the stakeholder theory in the context of CSA. Finally, by connecting CSIs and social media engagement, this study shed light on a broad spectrum of CSA efforts, as Austin and Gaither (2016) called for.

The findings of this study also provide practical implications for practitioners to make effective and strategic decisions about CSA. First, this study highlights the significance of stakeholders in achieving desired organizational outcomes through CSA. Both internal and external stakeholders' voices and needs should be included in the practice when companies engage in sociopolitical issues. By involving multiple stakeholders, it is more likely for companies to demonstrate the credibility and sincerity of their advocacy efforts. In addition, the news analysis results offer important insights into the role of internal management (e.g., managerial team structure, employee treatment, etc.) to avoid fundamental criticisms and skepticism when companies engage in CSA initiatives. Internal stakeholders' voices, demands, and interests should be integrated to CSA practices, communication, and evaluations. Next, the type of CSIs should be a crucial consideration for practitioners when designing, implementing, and communicating CSA practices, given their impacts on social media engagement behaviors and news media coverage. For instance, practitioners can further harness the strategic value of concrete actions such as corporate philanthropy or socially responsible business practices in building corporate reputation and corporate-stakeholder relationships. Practitioners should also consider using intense language to establish confirmative and clear public stances to advocate for sociopolitical issues when the primary goal is to engage their stakeholders.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Several limitations need to be acknowledged in this study and suggest the potential for future studies. First, only one social media platform was included in this study. Different social media platforms have their own features and targeted audiences, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future studies can explore more communication channels for CSA. Second, only one key issue (i.e., race relations) was analyzed for the news media coverage of CSA, given the scope of this study. Future studies can consider various issues advocated by companies and analyze the media coverage, which offers a more comprehensive perspective. Third, although social media engagement behaviors were used to provide insight into online public responses, a systematic measurement of corporate reputation may be insightful to see the interconnections between news media, social media, and corporate reputation around CSA. Fourth, future studies can utilize experimental designs to examine the causal relations between the type of CSIs and stakeholder reactions to CSA.

Appendix A<sup>1</sup>

Company Name	Facebook	Online News
Walt Disney	1	1
Walmart	1	1
Visa	1	1
USAA	1	0
UPS	1	1
Target	0	1
Starbucks	1	1
Southwest Airlines	1	1
Salesforce	1	0
Pepsi	1	1
Procter & Gamble	1	1
Nike	1	1
Netflix	1	1
Microsoft	1	1
Merck	0	0
McDonalds	1	1
MasterCard	1	1
Marriot	1	1
Lockheed Martin	0	0
JPMorgan	1	1
Johnson & Johnson	1	0
IBM	0	1
Google	1	1
Goldman Sachs	0	1
FedEx	1	1
Delta Arline	1	1
CVS	1	0
Coca-Cola	1	0
Charles Schwab	1	0
Caterpillar	1	0
BlackRock	1	1
Berkshire Hathaway	0	0
Apple	1	1
American Express	1	1
Amazon	1	1
Adobe	1	0
3M	1	0

<sup>1</sup> Note: 1 means there is at least one relevant post or article. 0 means there is no relevant post or article.

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