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Leading to Social Impact Communication: Understanding Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) from Industry Professional Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to understand how practitioners define and describe corporate engagement with social issues within the larger context of their organization's social obligations. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with 20 communication professionals involved in CSA practices of large U.S. corporations. This study proposes an expanded definition of CSA as a part of social impact communication. Additionally, we present a social impact valuation process model, offering an initial theoretical grounding for understanding CSA decision-making processes. The study contributes to public relations literature by extending our understanding of the dynamics of CSA in practice and bridging the gap between practice and theory.

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Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA); Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); interviews; social impact valuation process; stakeholder theory

As corporate behavior becomes increasingly influential in capitalist society, there is a growing expectation for corporations to express their opinions on socio-political issues and actively engage in social change (Tsai et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). A recent Gallup (2023) study revealed that 48% of U.S. adults believe businesses should take a stance on such matters, with 59% of those aged 18 to 29 sharing this view. Closer to or more than half of publics advocate for corporations to speak out on issues related to climate change (55%), racial issues (45%) or gun control (39%). Corporate social advocacy (CSA), defined as companies publicly taking a stance on socially and politically controversial issues (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Lim & Young, 2021), has thus emerged as a business norm. However, even corporations actively engaging in CSA initiatives face challenges in meeting diverse stakeholder expectations amid an increasingly polarized political climate and divisive public opinions.

The growing importance of CSA has prompted scholars to document empirical insights into its strategic approaches, effects, and effectiveness from the perspectives of both external stakeholders (e.g., Browning et al., 2020; Lim & Young, 2021; Overton et al., 2021; Rim et al., 2022) and internal stakeholders (e.g., Cho et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022; Yim, 2024), often as siloed perspectives. However, there remains limited discussion on CSA from the perspective of industry professionals, such as public relations practitioners and corporate communication managers. These professionals, responsible for routine decision-making, strategy development, and representing their organizations to stakeholders, play a crucial role in balancing internal external stakeholder expectations to foster relationships centered on their organization's core values and social impact. Despite their importance, the views and practices of these professionals in the CSA process are underexplored in current literature. As we witness the earlier stage of burgeoning CSA research that continues to develop, it is essential to document professionals' views, especially given the multifaceted challenges they face within organizations, directly experiencing and addressing the complexities of CSA initiatives.

To fill this gap, this study explores the current state of CSA practices in large U.S. corporations through in-depth interviews with industry professionals. From their perspective, the study aims to understand how corporations initiate or engage with advocating for social issues while navigating the challenges of meeting diverse stakeholder expectations and pressures. Additionally, since corporate engagement with social political issues often blurs the line between CSR and other similar concepts (Browning et al., 2020), this study examines how industry professionals define and describe CSA practices grounded their experiences. As such, this study proposes an expanded definition of CSA as part of social impact communication and demonstrates the social impact valuation process with practical implications for managing CSA within organizations. It also contributes to public relations theory building by bridging the gap between practice and theory.

Literature review

CSA (Corporate Social Advocacy): evolving stakeholder expectations

With a noticeable surge in corporations' engagement in CSA in recent years, public relations scholarship has increasingly turned its attention to CSA (Waymer & VanSlette, 2021). CSA is generally defined as "an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on a social-political issue" (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5). By examining historical tenets, Gaither and Austin (2023) consider CSA as an evolution of traditional corporate advocacy, which has been manifesting as corporate issues or institutional advertising since the early 1900s (Sethi, 1977) through the early 2000s. Traditionally, corporate advocacy has been understood as a business practice aimed at advancing corporate interests and mitigating external threats, such as pressure from activist groups, media criticism, and government regulations (Gaither & Austin, 2023). The primary intent behind corporate advocacy was to minimize negative perceptions associated with an industry and divert public attention from areas of concern while emphasizing the industry's social benefits (Gaither & Austin, 2023). In contrast, CSA is characterized by its proactive and socially conscious approach, undertaken to benefit stakeholders (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Gaither & Austin, 2023). Gaither and Austin (2023) clearly distinguish CSA from traditional corporate advocacy, stating that CSA "represents an evolution of corporate advocacy in that the actions taken by a company are focused on publicly addressing a social issue or concern among certain stakeholders rather than serving an attempt to improve a corporation's image" (p. 179).

The emergence of the current form of CSA aligns with increasing societal expectations and stakeholder demands for greater social responsibility and ethical conduct by businesses (Tsai et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moreover, despite the potential for negative public reactions and adverse consequences for the company (Rim et al., 2020), CSA aims to benefit society beyond merely meeting stakeholder expectations. By raising awareness, promoting dialogue, and mobilizing conversations, CSA has the potential to create a social impact, foster community engagement, and drive societal change (Capizzo, 2020; Dawson & Brunner, 2020).

In the following section, we will further review how CSA aligns with or diverges from other similar concepts that are well-documented scholarly works and business practices.

CSA and similar concepts

CSA and CPA. Due to its involvement in political issues, CSA is often linked with corporate political advocacy (CPA). CPA, emerging from the business ethics literature, is defined as "taking a stance, politically, by voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain ideals or values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same" (Baur & Wettstein, 2016, p. 172). CPA discusses how corporations engage in political matters beyond strategic stakeholder relationships and management (Baur & Wettstein, 2016). CSA and CPA exhibit parallels in their advocacy of controversial social and political issues that may not directly align with a business's core values, potentially resulting in negative outcomes for stakeholder groups who do not share the same stance (E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Both concepts share a common trait in capturing a more proactive social role for corporations

beyond incorporating ethical and environmental concerns into their business practices, namely, CSR. Nevertheless, the two phenomena differ in terms of their theoretical assumptions and underlying motivation behind the corporate activity, as well as the degree to which each activity is publicized (Baur & Wettstein, 2016; Bhagwat et al., 2020; E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). CSA represents organizational stances on social and political issues, legitimized through stakeholder perception, deliberation, and the balancing of stakeholder interests, with a focus on enhancing corporate profitability based on stakeholders' responses (E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014). In contrast, CPA may promote specific ideal causes without prior broad stakeholder deliberation for legitimization (Baur & Wettstein, 2016; E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). CPA prioritizes social change beyond merely achieving business gains (Baur & Wettstein, 2016; E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018), potentially leading it to adopt a more radical stance than CSA (E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). While companies publicly take a stance on sociopolitical issues in CSA, they tend to address CPA issues in a private manner or obfuscate their actions if they choose to go public (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

CSA and CSR. Some scholars consider CSA to be rooted in CSR within the realm of strategic issue management (SIM), where effective interaction with various stakeholders is central (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). Within the framework of stakeholder theory and legitimacy theory, SIM demonstrates that organizations engage in strategic business planning and issue monitoring through communication with their stakeholders who are affected by their operations. CSR, defined as “a firm’s or brand’s commitment to maximize long-term economic, societal, and environmental well-being through business practices, policies, and resources” (Sen et al., 2016, p. 70), has long served as the conventional approach for corporations to engage with their stakeholders, aligning their ethical practices with their missions. CSR has demonstrated a generally positive impact which encompasses fostering positive relationships with consumers (Bhattacharya et al., 2009), nurturing trust (Hansen et al., 2011), and shaping employee attitudes, including organizational commitment (Glavas & Kelley, 2014).

Similar to CSR, CSA aims to meet stakeholders' expectations and gain legitimacy by aligning their organizational behavior with societal and stakeholder group beliefs about how an organization should behave. Scholars highlight the instrumental aspect of CSA, emphasizing the achievement of financial and tangible outcomes by enhancing an organization's reputation (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Lim & Young, 2021). Recent literature on CSA similarly focuses on outcomes like stakeholders' (e.g., consumers) attitudes (Overton et al., 2021; Rim et al., 2022), purchase intentions (Dodd & Supa, 2014), supportive behaviors (Li et al., 2022), and corporate reputation (Hong & Li, 2020; Lim & Young, 2021). However, unlike CSR activities, which often involve non-controversial philanthropic efforts for societal benefit and receive broad stakeholder approval, CSA involves taking a stance on specific policies or social and political issues lacking societal consensus (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). Consequently, CSA can evoke polarized public responses, isolating specific stakeholder groups, with outcomes contingent upon their perception of being associated with a particular stance on a controversial social-political issue (E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015), while CSR is generally welcomed by the public, benefiting a wider range of stakeholders (Weber et al., 2023). Tables 1 and 2 are summarized for a detailed scholarly perspective on the definitions and distinctions among CSA, CSR, and CPA.

Understanding CSA through the lens of practitioners

Despite the conceptual distinctions, the practical application and delineation of these concepts in scholarly work remain ambiguous, reflecting varying perspectives on their relationships and boundaries. For instance, scholars have used diverse terms, such as brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), political CSR (Scherer & Palazzo, 2011), or CEO activism (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018) to describe a company's engagement with controversial issues. Furthermore, some studies have simultaneously used CSR and CSA, labeling an organization's involvement in politically polarized issues as CSR, considering the common ground they share (e.g., S. Xu, 2024; S. Xu & Cho, 2023). Similarly, Dawson

Table 1. The definition and characteristics of CSA, CSR, and CPA.

Reference	Term	Definition	Key characteristics
Sen et al. (2016)	Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	"a firm's or brand's commitment to maximize long-term economic, societal, and environmental well-being through business practices, policies, and resources" (p. 70)	(a) Organizations' activities and ethical practices aligned with their mission (b) Organizations' engagement that impacts broader groups of stakeholders (c) Create positive outcomes for the organization's bottom line
Dodd and Supa (2014), Bhagwat et al. (2020)	Corporate social advocacy (CSA); Corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA)	"an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issue" (p. 5) A form of social advocacy and corporate actions, expressing public support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue (Bhagwat et al. 2020)	(a) Organizations addressing the social-political issues that may not be directly relevant to themselves (b) Organizations' engagement in controversial social-political issues that can potentially isolate specific groups of stakeholders while attracting activist groups (c) Necessary emphasis on financial outcomes for the organization
Baur and Wettstein (2016), Wettstein and Baur (2016)	Corporate political advocacy (CPA)	"taking a stance, politically, by voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain ideals or values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same." (p. 172)	(a) Organizations being vocal and targeting public efforts to encourage others to support its cause (b) Corporate political involvement that goes beyond its immediate economic interests, distinguishing it from cause-related marketing. (c) Visible to a larger public, taking place outside formal political channels such as formal political institutions and agents.

and Brunner (2020) viewed organizations engaging in controversial issues such as Patagonia's "The President Stole Your Land" initiative as CSR. Y. Kim and Bhalla (2022) also considered P&G's LGBTQ + diversity agenda as a proactive approach to CSR. Although these initiatives could be conceptualized as CSA in scholarly terms, they were categorized or labeled as CSR, indicating a lack of differentiation between the two terms.

Likewise, ongoing scholarly debate questions whether CSA is a unique concept or a subset of CSR (Browning et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016), which underscores the unclear boundaries of CSA. Initially, CSA was defined as a company making a public statement or verbally taking a public stance on socio-political issues, while CSR was understood to involve more specific, visible corporate activities (Dodd & Supa, 2015). However, recent studies suggest that CSA has evolved to encompass corporate actions beyond mere advocacy through statement (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

From a practical standpoint, understanding how corporations engage with social and political issues remains ambiguous, often blurring the distinction between actions falling under the umbrella of CSR and distinct, independent initiatives (Browning et al., 2020). Managers, including communication and public relations professionals, play pivotal roles within organizations, responsible for decision-making, policy formulation, and stakeholder representation (Duarte, 2010; Scott & Lane, 2000). They strive to establish consensus around the organization's core values and objectives, while meeting stakeholder expectations and addressing social impact. For example, professionals in advertising agencies focused on social impact perceive themselves as catalysts for change (LaVoi & Haley, 2021). Understanding how practitioners describe CSA is crucial given the conceptual and practical ambiguity surrounding the term, which affects how organizations strategize, communicate, and implement CSA. Therefore, drawing from the practitioners' perspective, this study explores how professionals define, integrate, and implement CSA as part of their organization's social responsibilities, particularly in comparison to traditional CSR practices.

RQ1: How do practitioners define and describe CSA within an organization's social obligations?

Table 2. Key similarities and differences among CSA, CSR, and CPA.

	Key similarities	Key differences
CSR vs. CSA	As CSA has evolved from the interrelated domains of strategic issues management and CSR (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015), both CSR and CSA are focused on meeting stakeholders' expectations and are legitimized by stakeholder perception. They adopt a more instrumental approach that emphasizes achieving financial and tangible outcomes through enhanced reputation (E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) CSR engages in non-controversial issues that align with their mission, while CSA involves itself in controversial social-political issues that may not be directly related to their core business operations (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). (b) CSR generates positive outcomes by generally garnering consensus among stakeholders, whereas CSA can isolate specific stakeholder groups and the results are contingent on their perception of being associated with a particular stance on a controversial social-political issue (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). The uncertainty and risks associated with CSA leads to uncertain outcomes on firm value, often resulting in negative reactions from investors, while customer reactions are contingent on their stance (Bhagwat et al., 2020).
CSA vs. CPA	Both CSA and CPA are "highly partisan," focusing on advocating controversial social-political issues that are not directly aligned with the core values of the business, and engaging in such advocacy can lead to negative outcomes for stakeholder groups who do not share the same stance (Bhagwat et al., 2020; E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) CSA represents the organizational stances on social-political issues, legitimized by stakeholder perception and deliberation, whereas CPA may promote specific ideal causes without prior broad stakeholder deliberation for legitimization (Baur & Wettstein, 2016). (b) CSA prioritizes corporate profit, whereas CPA prioritizes driving social change beyond achieving business gains (Baur & Wettstein, 2016; E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). (c) CPA may adopt a more radical stance in contrast to CSA due to the characteristics outlined in (a) and (b) (E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). (d) CPA is executed quietly, making it characterized by lower visibility, while CSA adopts a high publicity strategy (Bhagwat et al., 2020).
CSR vs. CPA	Both CSR and CPA address issues and take actions that extend beyond the immediate profit interests of a firm's shareholders. CPA can be potentially viewed as "an extension of CSR (Weber et al., 2023, p. 79)" if it aligns with the company's values, is integrated into the company's long-term strategy, and is supported by genuine actions (Wettstein & Baur, 2016; Weber et al., 2023).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) CSR benefits a wider range of stakeholders and the firm is perceived as socially responsible. In contrast, CPA benefits a smaller segment of the group and is more likely to be viewed as a controversial firm activity, making a political statement, or attempting to shape social policy in ways that favor one group over another (Weber et al., 2023). (b) CSR typically generates positive (or at worst, ambivalent) responses, while CPA seems to elicit more bimodal, negative, and politically polarized reactions (Weber et al., 2023).

Organization's practices and approaches to CSA: stakeholder theory perspectives

This study applies stakeholder theory as it offers a framework for understanding the complex and interdependent relationships between organizations and their stakeholders, which shape the organization's approach to CSA. The theory emphasizes the importance of considering the interest of stakeholders, defined as those who can affect or are affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives (Dmytriiev et al., 2021; Freeman, 1984; Freeman et al., 2010). Stakeholder theory argues that corporations should take into account the impact of their actions on these various groups in their decision-making process (Freeman et al., 2010). These stakeholders not only influence business decisions but also engage in value creation processes that benefit all parties involved, contributing to the generation of social value beyond business benefits (Freeman, 2010; Freudenreich et al., 2020).

Due to its shared perspective on business responsibility toward stakeholders, stakeholder theory has been widely applied in CSR literature across disciplines (Ji et al., 2022). It serves not only as a theoretical framework for elucidating a company's engagement in CSR but also for understanding stakeholders' response to CSR (e.g., Lee, 2017; Lim & Greenwood, 2017). Beyond its ethical and

normative foundations, stakeholder theory highlights CSR as a tool that enhances organizational financial performances (Carroll, 1999). The theory suggests that the various benefits stakeholders perceive through CSR activities, including functional and psychological values, can lead to increased stakeholder satisfaction, positive stakeholder-company relationships, and ultimately, improved financial outcomes for the company (Bhattacharya et al., 2009; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Freeman, 1984). It also acknowledges potential negative consequences, such as boycotts, lawsuits, and diminished shareholder value when stakeholder expectations are not met (Freeman, 1984; Wood & Jones, 1995).

While stakeholder theory illuminates the broader role of corporations in society, there remains a gap in research that directly connects stakeholder theory with CSA. Stakeholder theory emphasizes stakeholder-centered strategic management, promoting proactive engagement to address diverse interests and tackle complex challenges (Freeman et al., 2010). Moreover, it recognizes the necessity of balancing conflicting stakeholder interests, an aspect particularly relevant to CSA given the controversial nature of social issues and diverse stakeholder perspectives (Preston & Sapienza, 1990, p. 362). Thus, by applying stakeholder theory as a theoretical framework, this study explores how organizations integrate CSA into their socially responsible business practices while navigating diverse stakeholder expectations and pressures.

Complex Nature of CSA

Addressing social issues can enhance organizational legitimacy (Capizzo, 2020; Coombs & Holladay, 2018), but it also poses risks and challenges associated with CSA (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Weber et al., 2023). CSA often revolves around divisive public issues, eliciting distinct viewpoints of support or opposition that may disrupt religious, social, political, or other beliefs. Consequently, companies involved in such issues may attract supportive stakeholder groups while isolating opposing ones, leading to polarized public responses (Bhagwat et al., 2020; E. L. Ciszek, 2016; Dodd & Supa, 2014; Rim et al., 2020).

From a stakeholder theory perspective, managing interactions and preventing conflicts is crucial (Friedman & Miles, 2002). It is essential for managers to generate mutual benefits among stakeholders, rooted in fairness and reciprocity, with both business and stakeholders sharing the responsibility for cultivating relationships (Freeman et al., 2010). However, some scholars question the feasibility of satisfying all stakeholders simultaneously, suggesting the need to prioritize specific groups (Clarkson, 1995). Freeman (1984) suggests different approaches to satisfying stakeholder demands, ranging from cost minimizing to societal maximizing.

While such prioritization and segmentation approaches were primarily delineated between stakeholders and shareholder views, this notion can also be effectively applied within the context of CSA, particularly given the contentious and polarized nature of social issues, where stakeholders' views vary significantly. Often seen as "wicked problems" (Coombs & Holladay, 2018, p. 81), societal-political issues lack clear resolution, making it challenging for organizations to decide whether to remain silent or take action. Strategic engagement in CSA is essential, requiring systematic assessment of internal and external environments (Rim et al., 2022).

CSA decision-making factors

Previous research has documented various factors that are related to an organization's engagement with CSA. First, an organization's decision to engage in CSA has been understood within the broader context of corporate culture, including its purpose, identity, and values (Lim & Young, 2021; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). For instance, Patagonia's environmental initiatives, including those addressing climate change, are deeply ingrained in the company's identity of giving back to society and the planet (Dawson & Brunner, 2020). Similarly, Dick's Sporting Goods' active support for the gun control issue is perceived as driven by corporate values, evidenced by its involvement in supporting the issue and advocating for policy changes in its stores (Austin et al., 2019). Ben & Jerry's operates on the philosophy of "activism-infused capitalism," actively supporting causes such as racial justice and Black Lives Matter (E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Moreover, Ben & Jerry's serves as an example of the critical

role of purpose-driven leadership, where the company's purpose is central to its leadership ethos (Cardona & Rey, 2022). In shaping corporate culture and values, employees become drivers of reinforcing or changing corporate values as internal stakeholders. Disney's involvement in the "Don't Say Gay Bill," which occurred after employee protests, likewise illustrates this dynamic.

In a similar vein, corporate cultural factors, like "who we are," are critical in making decisions of CSA involvement, but they also affect how stakeholders evaluate CSA. When an organization's CSA involvement aligns with its long-standing values and identities, it can enhance positive evaluations of the involvement (e.g., Lim & Young, 2021). However, if an organization's actions do not reflect its true identity and values, it can face backlash. For example, Bud Light's association with a trans spokesperson has recently surprised stakeholders, as the company was not widely recognized for its support of LGBTQ+ rights, leading to a negative reaction from its core consumers (Bersoff et al., 2024).

Furthermore, an organization's involvement in CSA is closely tied to stakeholder belief and social norms, which significantly impact the company's decision. Organizations' goals are often aligned with the interests of stakeholders, and if there is a shared perception of how the company should act, engaging in CSA can yield benefits. In this respect, recent studies (e.g., Cho et al., 2023; Lim & Young, 2021; Overton et al., 2021; Rim et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2022; Yim, 2024) have primarily focused on understanding the perspectives of both external (i.e., consumers) or internal stakeholders (i.e., employees) to successfully derive the positive consequences of CSA while mitigating the negative responses. Yet, there has been no scholarly effort to elaborate on how the expectations of both external and internal stakeholders interplay in implementing CSA initiatives.

Other factors that may influence the organization's approaches to CSA include organizational structure. Corporations integrating or expressing their social and ethical considerations within their operations, corporate statements, and practices is a multifaceted process that requires collaboration among managers across various departments within the organization to effectively address stakeholder concerns while meeting organizational and broader societal objectives (Duarte, 2010). The role of communication practitioners, including public relations practitioners, is pivotal in CSA implementation, as they serve not only as facilitators in conveying organization's CSR initiatives with internal and external stakeholders but can also influence management by presenting diverse stakeholder perspectives (Bonyton, 2002; Clark, 2000).

Their access to a dominant coalition would also shape their influences, as well as the organization's approaches to CSA. Public relations can provide leadership and insight into strategic communication, especially in navigating the complexities of stakeholder relationships. Given that issues *prominently featured in the media agenda or ethical dilemmas* serve as pathways for public relations practitioners to access the dominant coalition (Bowen, 2009), the rise of CSA or increased corporate involvement in social and political issues would require greater involvement of public relations or CSR managers in organizational decision-making processes and communication with internal and external stakeholders.

Considering the diverse stakeholder groups both within and outside an organization, whose expectations and perspectives on CSA may vary across sectors, it is crucial to grasp the complexity of demands placed on the organization. To gain insight into the internal processes and approaches involved in CSA, the second research question is posed.

RQ2: How do organizations initiate and engage in CSA?

Method

In-depth interviews were conducted to address the proposed research questions. Interviews can provide depth and detail to the more general picture/viewpoint offered by quantitative social data as well as give authentic insight into the meanings that individuals and groups attach to experiences, social processes, practices, and events (Edwards & Holland, 2020, p. 583). In public relations, this

qualitative method has often been used to understand professionals' perspectives and experiences (e.g., Hill & White, 2000; Ju & Dong, 2023; Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015). Although CSA as a business practice has garnered the interest of researchers in public relations and strategic communication, there is a limited understanding of professionals' perception of and experiences with CSA, as well as the internal processes that lead to corporate advocacy. Therefore, an inductive and exploratory approach is the most appropriate to address the research questions set forth.

We conducted interviews with experts in corporate roles related to social responsibility. As the only source of data in this study, expert interviews served as a form of "grounding interviews" (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 659) where the objective is to generate a theoretically rich understanding of the knowledge and processes that experts have gained through their professional roles. In this approach, interviews are employed to "generate theory via the interpretative generalisation of a typology – in contrast to the representative statistical conclusions that result from standardised methods" (Bogner et al., 2018, p. 659). Informed by grounded theory, this method follows "an interpretative approach that aims at inductive theory building based on the data that was gathered" (Döringer, 2021, p. 273). This approach to theory building has been applied in recent marketing and business research (e.g. Eckhard et al., 2024; Österle et al., 2018; Raddats et al., 2022; Takacs-Haynes & Rašković, 2021).

Two researchers jointly conducted one-on-one interviews with professionals from large U.S. corporations whose work focused on corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication. To facilitate engaging participants through the United States, researchers used video conferencing software (i.e., Zoom) for the interview. The study procedure was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the two institutions where the authors are employed. Prior to interviews, interviewees completed a pre-interview questionnaire, which enabled the researchers to identify qualified individuals capable of providing detailed experiences and opinions. Participants joined Zoom interviews after consenting to the interview. After completing the interview, the interviewees were compensated with a \$100 gift card. With the participants' permission, the Zoom interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using Otter.ai, a professional automated transcription software. The transcriptions were later reviewed for errors by a research assistant. To protect interviewees' confidentiality and anonymity, recordings were kept in password protected files and identifying information was removed from the transcripts, where participants were identified only by a number. Data collection took place between February and May 2022. Each interview lasted an average of 65 minutes, with the shortest interview being 55 minutes and the longest 87 minutes. The interview questionnaire asked participants about their perceptions of CSA and how organizations decide to engage in CSA. Follow-up questions probed deeper into their experiences and views of this public relations practice. [Appendix A](#) includes interview questions.

Participants

We used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit interviewees who were involved in their organization's CSR practices and communication. Specifically, we invited professionals who had experience in CSR communication-related work between 2019 and 2021. This selection criteria was employed to account for the diverse organizational structures and job titles under which the public relations and communication teams operate (Bowen, 2009). This made it necessary to select participants based on their roles and responsibilities, rather than their titles. Additionally, existing research has placed CSA as a practice of meeting social expectations and addressing social issues (Gaither & Austin, 2023), which has been both associated with and differentiated from CSR practices (Dodd & Supa, 2014; H. Xu et al., 2022). Therefore, we viewed practitioners with experience in CSR as more likely to be actively engaged in or better informed about their organization's CSA initiatives.

We selected this specific timeframe because it corresponds with a notable increase in public demand for corporate accountability and advocacy, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the social movement against racial injustice, such as the Black Lives Matter movement reignited by George Floyd's death, during the years 2019–2021 (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2020).

Table 3. Interviewee titles, industry, gender, years of experience.

ID #	Title/Role	Gender	Years of industry experience	Industry	Report Line To
1	Global Vice President Community Relations	Female	30	Manufacturing (Food Safety Solutions)	The Senior Vice President of External Affairs
2	Brand Marketing Manager	Female	10	Retail	Reputation Team Leader
3	Head of Enterprise Marketing and Branding	Female	+30	Financial Service	Executive Vice President
4	Director of Corporate Communications	Female	20	Foodservice & Restaurant	Executive Vice President of HR
5	Director of Global Community Engagement	Female	15	Transportation	Chief Communications Officer
6	Manager of Social Impact Brand and Business Integration	Female	8	Retail	Vice President of Social Impact
7	Manager of Internal Communications	Female	20	Healthcare	Vice President of Communications and Public Relations
8	Global Communication Leader	Female	22	Manufacturing (Industrial Products)	Chief Communications Officer and CMO
9	Communication Specialist	Male	2.5	Manufacturing (Electrical Solutions)	Vice President of Commercial Excellence
10	Public Relations Senior Specialist	Female	8	Retail	Director of Public Relations/Vice President of Public Relations
11	Global Brand and Marketing Communications Leader	Female	10	American Multinational Conglomerate	Chief Marketing Officer
12	Manager of Corporate Sustainability Marketing	Female	9	Manufacturing (Food Safety Solutions)	Senior Vice President and Chief Sustainability Officer
13	Manager of DE&I Communication	Female	9	Supply Chain Management	Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion
14	Manager of Corporate Social Responsibility	Female	8	Pharmaceutical	Vice President of CSR
15	Senior Business Communication Partner	Male	8.5	Retail	Vice President of Communication
16	Manager of Global Sustainability and Product Stewardship	Male	26	Manufacturing (Industrial Products)	Vice President of Procurement
17	Vice President of Corporate Brand Equity	Female	+30	Healthcare	Head of Global Corporate Affairs
18	Manager of Public Affairs and Communications	Female	25	Financial Service	External Communications Leader
19	Sustainability Manager	Female	5	Energy	Director of Communication
20	Senior Public Relations Specialist	Female	3	Financial Service	Vice President of Communications

During this period, according to Porter Novelli's executive purpose study (Novelli, 2021), seven in ten executives responded that corporations and/or brands need to take risks that address social justice issues. Furthermore, nine out of ten executives advocated the importance of benefiting all stakeholders, not solely shareholders.

A total of 20 professionals of large U.S. corporations participated in the study. Recruitment of participation was halted at 20 participants when we encountered data saturation. The interviewers had no personal or professional connections to the research participants. As presented in Table 3, titles of the interviewees included public relations or external communication specialists, corporate communication managers, and CSR managers representing diverse industry sectors: financial, healthcare, manufacturing,

retailer, services, and other industries. While the headquarters of 13 interviewees are located in the Midwest, all operational impacts are experienced at either national or global levels, thus their experiences are not limited by regional implications. Seventeen females and three males participated.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were imported to NVivo for analysis. NVivo is a software for computer-assisted qualitative data analysis, which facilitates storing, organizing and managing data (Saldaña, 2013). However, the analysis of the data, or coding, is done by the researcher. Coding “is the result of raising questions and giving provisional answers about categories and their relations” (Douglas, 2003, p. 49).

Data analysis followed the phase step cyclical process of open, axial and selective coding detailed by Williams and Moser (2019), as it “provides researchers with nuanced access to study informants’ thoughts, perspectives, and reactions to study topics” (p. 46). During the open coding phase, transcripts were read closely and analyzed phrase by phrase, with labels being assigned to themes, or codes, emergent in the data. Codes are “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). Once all the data was coded and a list of themes was developed, the researchers moved on to axial coding, in which the data is analyzed again with the purpose of refining and organizing the themes (Williams & Moser, 2019). This involves exploring the connections between the themes through comparison, exploring and defining the relationships between themes. Lastly, selective coding was performed, in which the researchers identify situations or conditions that lead to other circumstances or certain outcomes. Coding at this phase is informed by the research questions and the researchers’ understanding of the phenomena under study.

Findings

Defining CSA

The first research question asked how practitioners define and describe CSA within the larger context of their organization’s social obligations. To account for any participants who were not familiar with the concept, they were provided with a definition and asked about their views of, and experiences with, their company taking a stand on social issues or engaging with controversial issues. Insights were derived from participant responses about their organization’s experiences and observations of efforts by competitors and peers.

Noticeably, CSA is not a term used by most of the participants to refer to this work. However, seen from the larger perspectives of advocacy and leading initiatives addressing social issues, they articulated a conceptualization of CSA with six distinct themes: leading the charge; manifesting the organization’s DNA; within the social responsibility spectrum; a communication function; promoted by leadership; and inherently risky. Each of these themes is detailed below.

Leading the charge

Participants defined CSA as a way in which businesses can take the lead in addressing social issues. As Participant 2 described CSA:

Corporate social advocacy, to me, seems more like you’re leading the charge, and you’re advocating as a brand and as a company. You’re advocating to do more. You’re advocating to go above and beyond just the baseline, what is kind of required of you. You are choosing to do more.

This understanding of CSA was related to businesses’ social obligations and their potential to spur positive social impact, do meaningful work, and be a model for others to follow. Participant 10 spoke about what could be achieved if all corporations “were all trying to make a more sustainable future.”

Manifesting the organization's DNA

Participants also defined CSA as an expression of the organization's values, mission, and culture. In the words of Participant 2, brands that are leading CSA work see these efforts as "just in their DNA." They added that this should be the goal for any company: to make "advocating, influencing other brands, and influencing both customers and employees to do what is right for communities and environmental practices" part of who they are as a company. For example, Participant 12 described CSA as something they do because they see themselves as a "very purpose-driven company" that "take[s] stances on things better aligned with our values and our mission."

In cases where participants did not feel the concept of CSA defined how they address their social responsibility, they explained it as a practice that was not (yet) part of how they saw themselves as an organization. As Participant 14 put it, "Just being in [our industry] and the nature of our business" makes their company more conservative when considering involvement with social issues.

Within the social responsibility spectrum

Participants saw CSA as closely related to CSR. For some, it was a new approach or evolution of CSR or "larger than CSR" (Participant 18). CSA is where CSR work leads companies that are committed to addressing their social responsibilities and doing good. As Participant 5 explained:

I think we're starting to transition over into CSA. I would say in the future state of this role, this function – if we are doing it right, and really doing it for the right reasons – CSR goes away. And it is CSA. That is the end game.

For others, the practice is under the CSR umbrella, or "on the spectrum of all corporate social responsibility" (Participant 12). They described it as part of the same business function, teams, or another way in which companies engage in social responsibility. CSA is reflective of how their teams are currently working.

Advocacy is a communication function

As Participant 9 described, it "is more about using the platform of the company to advocate for specific issues, which I think might fall under the CSR program." In participant responses, the centrality of communication in CSA was evident. For some, they saw it as a function that intersected with a company's communication or public relations functions including community relations, media relations, government relations, or lobbying. For example, Participant 2 explained that advocacy was "the real driving force for using corporate voice and corporate influence to drive change in a way that is measurable and meaningful."

Participant 1 explained that one of the ways they have engaged in CSA is by having associates lobby the state for police reform. Similarly, Participant 11 explained that for their corporate communication team engaging in more advocacy would be beneficial "because there's nothing worse in your corporate communications role than to have people sitting on the outside of [the company] going on your Facebook page going on your Instagram and saying 'Why aren't you dealing with XY and Z?' and then not having anything to say?"

Promoted by leadership

Participants considered it necessary to have leaders willing to make decisions, establish priorities, and speak publicly on the issues that the company has chosen to advocate for. However, this action is not limited to the CEO or the same as CEO activism. As Participant 9 explained, although CEOs can have their platforms, these should be ideally aligned with the business "because you don't want your leader going out and doing things that the company doesn't support, or vice versa." Participant 4 articulated the central role of leadership in CSA, opining:

I think in many ways it takes a CEO and/or a senior leadership team to do willing to lose perhaps 50% of their consumer base to be able to make that decision. And I think you've got to have a senior leadership team with a really strong constitution, who is willing to stick to it.

Inherently risky

Lastly, CSA was described as an endeavor with inherent risks. Participants recognized that advocacy can result in conflict, be polarizing, or bring other negative consequences for the organization (which are discussed below). Participant 11 acknowledged that for businesses today, failure to be socially responsive can lead to a loss of goodwill. Still, Participant 4 said, “advocacy is challenging” and requires balancing stakeholders’ expectations of businesses taking a stance on social issues with how polarized the U.S. society is.

Participant responses elucidated difficulties in trying to anticipate the outcomes of CSA. For Participant 7, this became evident when their company decided that not mandating the COVID-19 vaccine was the safest position for their company, but still faced backlash for this decision. They recounted:

The CEO was really in favor. The chief medical officer was in favor. The chief operating officer . . . but you know, our HR colleagues, including the chief HR officer was not in favor and said, ‘I don’t think we can do this, this is going to be detrimental. Are we willing to lose people over this? And looking at other systems who have implemented this, you know, they lost 1% of people (. . .) are we comfortable losing 3000 People from our organization?’

Deciding on CSA

The second research question asked how organizations decide to engage in CSA. Insights were derived from participants’ retelling of cases in which their organizations led advocacy efforts, including taking public positions on controversial issues. Details of how the companies became involved in CSA and the issues they decided to advocate for provided insights into the process of how these initiatives were implemented in these organizations, revealing two categories of catalyst for CSA involvement: *Internal expectations and demands* and *social expectations and demands*. Participant 4 summarized the interplay of these internal and social catalysts the following way:

Sometimes it’s an employee groundswell, and sometimes it’s an industry change, it’s a social justice issue, or a social-cultural norm change. In other cases, leaders can make a decision and say: “You know what? This is what’s right for our business.”

Internal demands and expectations

In detailing how internal demands and expectations drive their decision to engage in CSA, two catalysts emerged from participants’ responses: *Employee empowerment* and *Leadership choices*. In discussing both cases, participants also explained how one significant environmental factor shaped their decision-making: internal conflict.

Employee empowerment. Advocacy driven by efforts to respond to employees’ interests, needs, and advocacy were the most salient in participants’ responses. They detailed a variety of communication and feedback systems that facilitate employees bringing issues to the leadership’s attention, from employee resource groups (ERGs) to intranet sites. As Participant 5 explained, employee feedback includes “everything from would you recommend [our company] as a place to work, to do you agree with the way that we are approaching policies?”

Employees were motivated and empowered to share their needs, interests, and demands. In the words of Participant 14:

I always encourage employees to come to us when you have an idea come to us if there’s something you want to support. And we always respond to that, or we take note of it. There have been so many efforts that we have conducted because our employees brought it to us. And we love that.

Participants provided examples of instances in which employees made clear their expectation that the company would become involved with issues affecting the larger society. For example, Participant 11

explained that their employees are comfortable raising their voices when something happens and if the company does not respond, employees challenge them. The interviewee recalled: “Employees say, ‘Hey, it’s great that you’re taking care of this plant issue in [state], but why haven’t you addressed the issue with PAC money?’”

In other cases, employees’ expectations were framed more as demands, where their organizations felt they had little choice but to do something. For example, Participant 13 described their organization as being very risk-averse, and therefore CSA “is not something that leadership is going to think to do, it’s something that they will be forced to do.”

Leadership choices. The second internal driver of CSA engagement was the choices made by the organization’s leadership. Specifically, participants referred to instances in which CSA initiatives came from the highest level. Participants provided examples in which those in positions of influence and power make decisions about getting involved or not with certain issues. For example, Participant 1 explained that although in their organization all voices are heard, “at the end of the day, it goes back to who’s running and leading our company, and has the final say on the position we take.”

Some participants associated choices to be involved in CSA with how outspoken their CEO was. For example, Participant 11 spoke of their organization’s CEO as someone who “speaks very candidly” about his involvement with social issues and who is “very clear” on things that the organization is going to get involved in or not.

Internal conflict. One environmental factor that emerged from participants’ recollections of CSA initiatives was internal conflict. In trying to balance leadership decision-making with the expectations and demands of employees, participants acknowledged the occurrence of conflicting interests among their internal stakeholders.

Conflicting interests are a result of the different priorities and needs held by employees. An issue that one ERG advocates for can be something that another group considers trivial or would advocate against. As Participant 2 explained this not only influences the issues they engage with but also the way they engage with the issues, in which organizations are asking themselves “how do we do it in a way that’s less polarizing and more positive?”

Similarly, Participant 18 spoke about their efforts to “not to say anything that I think will irritate the company.” As Participant 13 explained: “We have such a diverse workforce that we will not always be right, especially with a lot of these politically charged issues.” Therefore, when they can determine what the majority of their employees would support, that is what they choose to pursue, but they still reported receiving backlash.

In some cases, participants referred to conflict among their internal stakeholders resulting from the business advocacy efforts. Participant 5 recalled instances in which the employees’ online discussions around social issues – from the murder of George Floyd to voting rights – devolved into arguments rife with offensive and shocking language. In Participant 13’s organization, similar instances led them to turn off comments for all internal communications.

Several participants expressed their concern with internal conflicts become external. For example, Participant 10 recalled what happened when their Chief Communication officer sent out a message to an ERG as a result of the Rittenhouse verdict.

[Saying] this might be a difficult time . . . these are all the resources we have available for you, please use them and reach out. We also created a safe space where everyone can come and talk about how they’re feeling (. . .). That piece of communication actually made it out externally. Someone took a photo and then posted it . . . And it spread like wildfire. We were getting emails from customers, being like “you guys don’t believe in justice!”

Social demands and expectations

The second category of catalysts emerging from participant responses had to do with their desires to be responsive to social demands and expectations. These external catalysts were a drive to do right and deference to key stakeholders.

Drive to do right. Participants spoke about their being attentive and responsive to social issues and finding ways to do what is right or most socially beneficial. As Participant 17 explained:

You are going to have to make those decisions in response to what's happening to the world around you. [Consider] the abortion movement, I don't think companies would have ever just had to take a stand if Roe versus Wade wasn't challenged, right? So you have to respond to that world around you.

Having a positive impact was also explained as a desired outcome of any CSA work. As described by Participant 6: "Organizations should measure their success based on what is the right thing to do and what is good for a [global] stakeholder and not just the business imperatives."

Deference to key stakeholders. Responses also referred to choices that were made in *deference to key stakeholders*, specifically customers, leadership, and potential employees. As Participant 12 explained:

We consider stakeholder analysis, we look at employees, we look at our investors. We look at customers and their customers, we look at communities, we look at non-governmental organizations. . . I would say we consider our full spectrum of stakeholders before making decisions.

For Participant 13, the demands of external stakeholders were instrumental for their organization's leading advocacy interventions. They said that the fact that "everyone that's part of our network is putting pressure on large companies" has helped spur their advocacy work. They added: "That is what started pushing us; students, firing at us and saying, 'you need to do something, you are part of the problem.'"

Similarly, Participant 2 spoke about how consumer expectations serve to persuade leadership to engage in advocacy work. They said:

[Consumers] want to purchase from a purpose-driven company. I just run that down, and I explain that to [consumers] that is just a baseline. This is why I'm bringing this to you, I'm not bringing it to you as a favor, I'm not bringing it to you, because it's my little pet project that I want to work on. I'm bringing it to you, because as a brand, we need to do this, and here's why, here's research showing that . . .

Politicization of issues. In efforts to meet social expectations and demands, an important environmental factor that emerged from the interviews was how social issues can become politicized. Participants provided examples of issues they found to be political and polarizing in their efforts, including being a government contractor, advocating for the right to vote, or committing to environmentally friendly practices. As Participant 1 explained, when issues are politicized "you have 50% that believe in one thing, and 50% [opposing]. So somebody is always going to be unhappy, that's just the way it is."

Participants spoke about how political views and ideologies colored external stakeholders' reactions to advocacy. Some reported that this awareness has led to their organizations being slow or hesitant to engage in advocacy. For example, Participant 20 recalled one instance in which their efforts to share a podcast episode featuring a transgender employee who was speaking about their area of expertise was deemed too risky. They said:

We recorded this podcast, it was like two hours . . . And then I ran it by my boss, and my boss is like, "I don't think we should put this out." And I'm like, "but why?" He's like, "I just feel like it's gonna ruffle too many feathers."

Selecting issues and corporate positions

Participant responses revealed that when a company is spurred toward CSA, they are faced with practical-level decisions to determine the issues that will be at the center of their efforts and the positions they will adopt. These processes are: *prioritizing issues, adherence to internal policies or procedures, and assessing potential risks and benefits.*

Prioritizing issues. A recurring comment in the interviews was the fact that companies could not address every issue or please every stakeholder. Consequently, they had to evaluate which issue(s) would become a priority in their efforts. A list of issues that participants' companies had prioritized in the past emerged from this discussion. Figure 1 illustrates mentions of specific advocacy issues in participants' responses.

In detailing how these choices are made, one consideration made was determining what was achievable with existing knowledge, support, and resources. Specifically, Participant 2 spoke about scarce financial resources to invest in CSA, while Participant 14 was concerned about not having staff members to dedicate to this work.

A second consideration that emerged in the interviews was the potential impact of their interventions. As Participant 3 explained, having many possible foci required reflecting on how they could advocate "meaningfully" while understanding that "you can only make so much change in a small company in a short period of time."

Additionally, participants considered the significance of the issues prioritized for their stakeholders together with the fit for the organization. In the words of Participant 6, this entailed asking themselves . . .

Does the moment like really call for it? At what scale? Is it like physically or geographically located near our corporate headquarters or in communities where we have a strategic presence? And are our competitors talking about it? And if so, it would be table stakes at this point for us to do it.

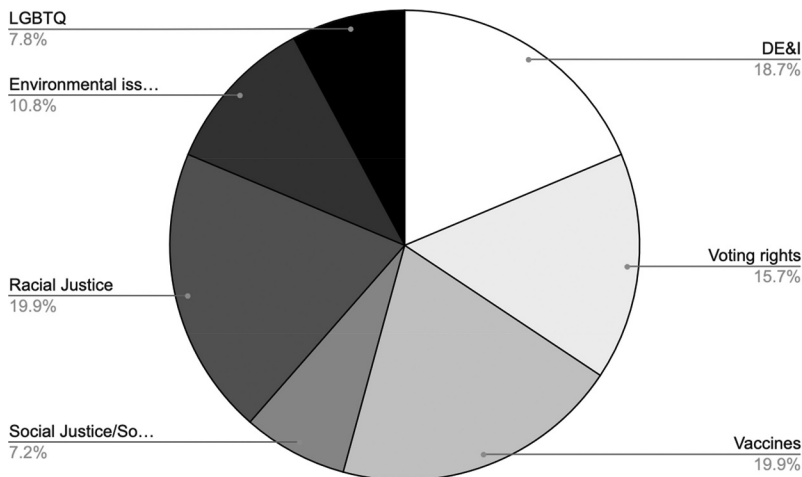


Figure 1. Corporate social advocacy Issues.¹

¹Percentages are provided for illustrative purposes. They represent the portion of the total mentions of issues in all interview transcripts combined.

Related to fit was the concern of being authentic and able to articulate why their organization was getting involved in the first place. As Participant 9 explained:

We're a little bit concerned about talking about too much stuff that has nothing to do with our business. It's kind of like, who are the people who need to hear from [our company] on this and why?

Questions of authenticity were also related to making sure that the organization is not only advocating for their values but also applying them to their work. As an example, Participant 10 mentioned their concerns in advocating for racial justice and equity when their leadership is primarily white.

Adherence to internal policies or procedures. Decision-making around CSA was also informed by the existence or lack of policies or procedures to inform this work. Most participants disclosed that their organization did not have specific policies or procedures for this work. In those cases, organizations adopted preexisting guidelines for their CSR, philanthropy, or community engagement work. For example, Participant 1 explained that their CSR policies prohibit funding advocacy work, so they do not dedicate funds or staff to CSA under this program. However, they have a team that looks at proposals for CSA initiatives department “and then makes a recommendation to [their] CEO.”

The lack of policies and procedures can also mean having to make case-by-case decisions. As Participant 10 explained, their organization is “struggling through this” and those making CSA decisions “review each one independently and decide whether we should [say] or not say something.” Another approach emergent in the interviews was relying on existing teams such as human resources, CSR, ERGs, government affairs, and communication to decide which issues to bring to the forefront.

Assessing risks and benefits. In their responses, participants provided detailed descriptions and many examples of ways in which they assess the potential risks and benefits of CSA involvement. This included trying to identify issues that are not polarizing or staying away from those that are irrelevant to their business. As Participant 14 surmised, they have to weigh the potential outcomes or benefits of their initiatives, “if we're not even making a dent of impact? And why would we open ourselves up to a PR crisis?”

Some referred to specific consequences for advocating for social issues, including losing employees, weakening consumer trust, or opening up the company to scrutiny or criticism. Participant 19 recounted one of their experiences:

There are a lot of investors and other stakeholders asking about whether we supported the Paris Climate Agreement. And there is a lot of internal hesitancy towards saying, Yes, we support it . . . Because they're really digging deep and seeing what trade associations you are donating money to or you are involved with.

A less common approach mentioned in the interviews was implementing a formal risk assessment process including their legal teams or leadership. Overall, an understanding of potential risks can be central to decision-making, as Participant 10 detailed.

Everyone wanted to get something out quickly to show that we were watching. We wanted to respond. But I feel that if you're trying to get something out quickly, then maybe it's not getting looked at by the right people . . . sometimes I feel like we have to take a step back and be like, well, what are we saying? Let's define the problem, what are we trying to say as a company? Where do we stand on this?

Compared to mentions of risks, discussion of potential benefits was more sparse in the participants' responses. However, some benefits salient in the responses were eliciting public support for their advocacy, reputational benefits, and gaining new customers or improving brand loyalty. As Participant 6 explained, their company sees potential in CSA supporting their goal to “broaden who our customer is and engage with new communities and younger audiences and people of diverse backgrounds . . . ”

One potential benefit that was emphasized in participant responses was the ability to recruit and keep a good employee base. As Participant 17 explained:

You can't look at these issues in isolation. You have to realize that if people today don't align with the values of a company, they say, Okay, I'm gonna go someplace that does (...) And that's what companies have to wrestle with. Yes, it's your brand. Yes, it's your reputation. But it's so much deeper. It's your ability to get talent in and keep that talent. And that's your lifeline.

Discussion

Despite the growing scholarly and practical interest, there is little understanding of how professionals view CSA and how organizations initiate and engage in CSA. Through in-depth interviews with 20 professionals, we sought to understand how practitioners define and describe corporate engagement with potentially controversial and polarizing social issues within the larger context of their organization's social obligations, as well as to develop initial theoretical grounding about CSA decision-making processes. Participants' responses provide a new perspective, grounded in practice, of what CSA is. The findings of this study highlight a broad scope of understanding CSA, portraying several aspects of it.

First, professionals view CSA as an opportunity to lead the charge in social impact while manifesting the organization's corporate values, mission, and culture. Embracing CSA initiatives involves efforts to become a change agent and use the process of value creation through a thorough consideration of corporate identity. This aspect aligns with London (2010), who posited that advocacy encompasses "the intention to advocate, the act of advocating, and the impact of advocating on multiple stakeholders" (p. 225) to effect change. Particularly within organizational contexts, advocacy entails multiple roles: representing others and mobilizing public pressure of issues that resonate with the organization's culture, mission, and values. Thus, advocacy "implies taking a leadership role" (London, 2010, p. 226). Corporations that embrace CSA initiatives perceive themselves as change leaders that impact society in a similar way that companies demonstrate their corporate identity, make a social impact, and foster social change (Dawson & Brunner, 2020). Such views simultaneously represent businesses' role in society, leveraging their power to lead and effect change, as exemplified in Gaither and Austin's (2023) conceptualization of CSA being initiated "on behalf of stakeholders" (p. 179).

Second, while acknowledging the inherent risks in CSA initiatives, professionals view CSA within a spectrum of CSR and consider its ultimate outcomes of social impact. This aspect distinguishes professional viewpoints from previous scholarly definitions of CSA, which heavily emphasize CSA as advocacy on controversial social or political issues (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2015). Such definitions have been widely adopted in the existing literature to characterize and distinguish CSA from CSR (e.g., Rim et al., 2020). However, participants in our study provided a more *nuanced* understanding of the types of issues that they consider controversial or political than previous research has indicated. Given the diverse interests of multiple stakeholders, they identified many issues that were traditionally considered uncontroversial as now being seen as controversial (e.g., sustainability and racial equity) or vice versa (e.g., women's suffrage) (Bhagwat et al., 2020). This study also coincides with Capizzo's (2020) finding that corporations appeal to more broad-based values, such as equality and prosperity, rather than potentially controversial aspects of human rights in their CSA initiatives. Referencing specific experiences, participants pointed to the difficulty in trying to anticipate the outcomes of CSA and thus, the risks inherent in the process. This also corresponds with Bhagwat et al. (2020), who underscored the uncertain nature of CSA, as it can have a double-edged sword effect of either strengthening or estranging relationships with stakeholders.

Assessment of the risks in engaging or not engaging with certain issues was a key consideration. More importantly, from the professional perspective that considers CSA as a spectrum of CSR, corporate role in creating social impact should be the main focus. This finding also aligns with Barnett et al. (2020), who addressed the strategic designing of social impact-driven CSR beyond good intentions. Stakeholder theory not only promotes a management process that involves outward engagement to address complex challenges but also recognizes the delicate balance with prioritization

needed to navigate conflicting stakeholder interests (Freeman et al., 2010; Schendel & Hofer, 1979), a critical aspect in the context of CSA given the contentious nature of social issues and diverse stakeholder perspectives.

Third, the perspective from professionals underscores the role of leadership, extending beyond the CEO, which has been the primary focus of existing literature, where CSA was often interchangeably used with the term “CEO activism” (e.g., E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). CEOs are often prominent figures as they have the platforms, but ideally, they should be aligned with the business. The role of leadership, perceived as a driving force and outcome accountability, echoes Cho et al. (2023) view on organizational leaders’ involvement in shaping organizational culture through norm and value reinforcement, where organizational culture is defined as the collective understanding of the organization shared among all stakeholders (Berson et al., 2008).

Lastly, in alignment with a previous study that explicated CSA as a communication behavior (Dodd & Supa, 2015), participants underscored the significant role of communication and public relations in voicing organizational stances on social issues and influencing others to achieve societal change. Especially given the inherent risks and challenges addressing diverse expectations and interests of various stakeholders, communication function is central in CSA. Patagonia’s sophisticated media planning approach named “wild public provocations” (Dawson & Brunner, 2020) and many companies’ issue-framing strategies focusing on broad-based values (Capizzo, 2020) showcase the essential role of communication in CSA. In addition to the communication efforts facing external stakeholders, participants in our study addressed the importance of communicating with internal stakeholders to foster a sense of shared purpose among employees. In such a process, they implied a strategic approach in managing internal stakeholders. Their internal communication efforts were driven by the desire to contribute to employee retention and loyalty, reflecting positive outcomes that have been empirically demonstrated in previous studies (Cho et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022). Yet, it is worth nothing that our participants emphasized communication aspects heavily, considering their responsibilities and positions in the workplace. Bhagwat et al. (2020), for instance, proposed highlighting “corporate actions” in defining CSA, in addition to the advocacy component.

Integrating participant responses, this study provides an expanded definition of corporate social advocacy as:

An impact-driven communication function promoted by a company’s leadership in which it takes a public stance on social issues in alignment with its identity, values, and mission, despite the risks inherent in doing so. CSA is part of the organization’s strategy to address its responsibilities and have a positive social impact.

This study further contributes to our understanding of CSA by proposing a model for the process through which companies are led to engage in advocacy and make choices about which issues to prioritize and which positions to adopt (see Figure 2). We have titled this *a social impact valuation process* because the result of the process is business-led advocacy around social issues. Given the potential influence that businesses can have and the relevance of the issues they engage with to society at large (consider, for example, environmental issues), organizations are making estimations about the impact of their work in this decision process. To be clear, this is a process that happens inside the organization, but the CSA efforts that result from this process have a larger societal impact.

The process begins with internal and social (external) catalysts. Internal catalysts are employee empowerment, where their efforts make advocacy desirable or required for their employers, and leadership choices, in which the drive comes from their decision to engage in CSA. External catalysts are a drive to do right, which refers to the organization’s efforts to address social problems or needs, and deference to stakeholders, in which the company is responding to the demands of key stakeholders such as consumers. Based on insights gleaned from the participants, only one of the four catalysts will be the driving force that leads to the undertaking, although others might have a secondary role. Once the organization is driven to CSA, companies proceed to a second level of decision-making, in which CSA transitions from a promise to a strategy. Here, companies will make choices based on the issues they prioritize, their assessment of risks and benefits, and adherence to policies and procedures. All

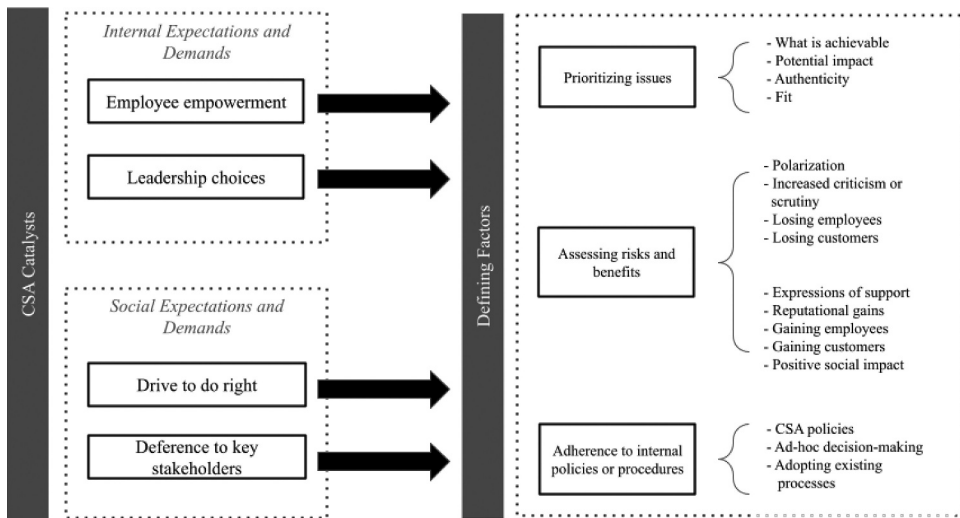


Figure 2. Social impact valuation process.

three factors come into play in this process. However, our findings suggest that certain factors could carry greater weight than others depending on the organization, the social issues, and the positions they decide to adopt. Based solely on mentions and nuance of the discussions, our findings suggest that the assessment of risks and benefits could have greater weight on advocacy decisions than considerations of issues to prioritize, such as authenticity and potential impact.

The proposed model contributes to current knowledge of CSA in several ways. First, with the recent proliferation of CSA, an increasing amount of academic research has empirically demonstrated its effectiveness and its effects on internal and external stakeholders. These studies offer strategic insights into how CSA should be implemented (e.g., congruence and perceived fit; Hong & Li, 2020; H. Xu et al., 2024) and communicated (e.g., value-driven motives and perceived authenticity; Lim & Young, 2021) to elicit a desired response. However, previous studies have tended to showcase the process of CSA in silos, focusing on individual factors, or either in the context of internal or external stakeholder relationships. Our proposed model fills the gap by illustrating the holistic nature of the complex organizational decision-making processes involved in CSA. Organizations' involvement in CSA is understood as an effort to meet the *intertwined* expectations of both internal and external stakeholders, rather than operating in isolation.

Second, while CSA is voluntary, engagements are often responsive in nature, addressing stakeholders' expectations and social needs. Organizations' actions span from proactive to reactive, involving both action and inaction, with decisions being made based on several defining factors (i.e., issue prioritization, risks and benefit assessment, and adherence to internal policies). It is worth noting that professionals also emphasized the role of leadership and the norms and culture of organization in the decision making process, evidenced by previous literature (Bass & Avolio, 1993).

Third, the social impact value process model suggests organizational efforts to incorporate their CSA strategy into the broader business framework, which is the essence of stakeholder theory perspective (Freeman et al., 2010; Porter & Kramer, 2002). Given the inherent risk and complex nature of meeting various interests of diverse stakeholders, organizations place greater emphasis on risk and benefit assessments. Professionals' views of CSA do not simply assign a social role to business; rather, their approaches underscore the intrinsic link between ethical and economic aspects, advocating for ethical accountability in business operations with a core focus on stakeholder management.

Based on insights gleaned from the industry professionals, the study proposed an extended definition of CSA and the social impact valuation process model, aiming to bridge the gap

between practice and theory. Our findings contribute to the current literature on CSA by providing evidence of how CSA is understood and implemented within organizations. In previous literature, CSA has been defined variously as distinct and unique from the related concepts such as CSR or CPA (Bhagwat et al., 2020; E. Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Practitioners' views also indicated the persistent debate and conceptual ambiguity surrounding the definition and scope of CSA (e.g., Browning et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Their view ranges from CSA being perceived as a new form of CSR, to being seen as the same concept situated under the same umbrella, to being regarded as public relations or communication functions. Nonetheless, from professionals' perspectives, CSA aligns more closely with CSR than it diverges, as both are rooted in a broader purpose of the firm and perspective on value creation. Our extended definition reflects their common aim to broaden the obligations of firms.

Furthermore, as we propose a model explaining the CSA process within an organization, there is a need and opportunity for future research to determine how these factors influence the ways in which businesses plan and implement their CSA interventions. In the meantime, we envision opportunities for organizations to utilize our model as a starting point to develop a protocol that guides their internal decisions surrounding CSA. Our participants expressed challenges related to the absence of protocols or framework, which led to a more ad hoc and spontaneous approach. We believe that having an internal protocol created based on this model would help professionals approach and practice CSA in a more systematic and strategic manner.

As management studies have expressed concern regarding the gap between science/academic research and practice (Banks et al., 2016), it is imperative to narrow this divide by incorporating professionals' perspective in understanding the phenomenon and advancing the knowledge. In this context, our study endeavors to bridge the gap between scholarly research and practical application by incorporating insights from industry professionals on CSA practices.

Limitations and future research

Despite its significant contributions, our study has several limitations. First, like other qualitative research exploring phenomena, perspectives, and experiences in detail and in depth, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to the entire business and industry. Thus, interpretation with caution is warranted. Additionally, most interviewees were recruited from a specific region (i.e., Midwest). Considering that different locations may have distinct backgrounds and cultures, our findings cannot be generalized to other locations in the United States. For example, some tech companies in the West Coast Bay area are known as activist corporations that are actively involved in CSA. Therefore, we suggest that our study can be replicated across different locations to evaluate the generalizability of the results. Second, while the proposed definition of CSA and a social impact valuation process are based on professionals' experience in the U.S., CSA initiatives have expanded to international and intercultural settings (Song & Lan, 2022). We encourage scholars to consider exploring the definition and process with a larger and diverse group of professionals nationwide and globally, addressing how culture and different societal circumstances influence the process of a social impact valuation. Furthermore, while the study's interviewees, CSR communication professionals with enhanced access to resources and opportunities for identifying CSA initiatives, offered valuable insights into their employer's CSA initiatives, it is worth noting that some organizations may have independent departments or personnel specifically dedicated to handling CSA communication. Additionally, despite the substantially meaningful findings, there are still important questions unanswered, such as how to establish legitimacy. Conducting interviews with Chief Communication Officers (CCOs) and leaders from companies actively taking a stance on controversial social issues to address these questions is recommended for future research to enhance our understanding of CSA. Last, applying different methodological approaches (e.g., survey, experiment), in future research may validate the proposed model of a social impact valuation process.

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Appendix A:

Interview Questions

I. General questions about the interviewee

- What is your job title, and to whom do you report?
- How long have you worked for the current employer and (CSR/communication) industry?
- Please briefly describe your company's CSR program and what roles you play?

II. Examining the state of CSA (provide a brief introduction to the notion of CSA with academic definition and some examples of CSA initiatives). We'd like to hear from industry experts like you about how you name and define it.

1) How would you define "corporate social advocacy" and/or differentiate it from CSR?

- Is there a distinction made between philanthropy/CSR and CSA engagement?
- Has your firm incorporated CSA practices into CSR practices?

2) Has your firm advocated any controversial issues?

- If yes- explain details on the issue and how the organization handled, how internal and external stakeholders responded.
- If not, any reasons/barriers/concerns influencing the org's inaction (being silent/not embracing a stance) on a socially controversial issue

3) What are the expectations/voices from your internal/external stakeholders?

Weigh on whose voice influences that decision (e.g., employees vs. consumers vs. investors vs. CEO/C-suite members vs. mission statement)

4) We want to know if there are any tensions/different perspectives in addressing controversial issues within various stakeholders of the organization. Is your management team and employees in agreement with your communication team about addressing controversial issues?

5) How does your company communicate with employees about the company's decision in CSA (action or inaction)?
What is the most important aspect when communicating with them?

6) How do you see challenges/opportunities embracing CSA?

7) Anything to add?