

DO CALLS TO ACTION ENDANGER CORPORATE REPUTATION?

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Corporations face increasing pressure to take a stand on sociopolitical issues, with gender equality being a prominent example. This study examines the impact of calls to action in corporate social media posts on reputation. The findings show these messages can backfire, triggering negative reactions even among supporters of the cause. In today's polarized climate, a company's reputation depends not just on the issues it advocates for, but also on how it communicates them. Thoughtful and careful message strategies are key to protecting and enhancing corporate reputation while addressing relevant sociopolitical issues.

CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY: CALLS TO ACTION AS A MESSAGE STRATEGY

Corporations today face growing pressure to take a stand on social issues, and many respond by engaging in corporate social advocacy (CSA), making their values visible to the public. CSA has been described as the taking of a public stance on a controversial social political issue by corporations (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Some studies suggest that CSA enhances a company's reputation when it is perceived as authentic and aligns with the company's

identity (Lim & Young, 2021), while others warn that CSA can backfire, leading to negative news coverage, boycotts, and damage to public perception (Abitbol et al., 2018).

Previous research has examined factors such as how the issue a company advocates (Dood & Supa, 2014) or how the alignment between company values and customer expectations affect consumer responses to CSA (Lim & Young, 2021). However, less attention has been paid to the role of the message strategy itself. Companies such as Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia mobilize stakeholders through petitions and calls to action, inviting them to support causes and demonstrate shared values. Calls to action are increasingly common in CSA messages, yet their effect on

reputation remains uncertain. To explore this, we conducted an experimental survey with 172 individuals in Switzerland that focused on gender equality, which is a pressing societal challenge and one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Drawing on reactance theory (Brehm, 1966) and prior CSA research (Hong & Li, 2020), we tested the impact of CSA messages with or without a call to action. The objective was to provide a close examination of how different CSA message strategies shape individuals' perceptions and responses and influence corporate reputation.

FROM CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY

For several decades, companies have been expected to go beyond their purely economic responsibilities, which has traditionally been described as corporate social responsibility (CSR). While CSA shares similarities with CSR in that both involve companies taking social responsibility and aiming to contribute to society, CSA and CSR differ significantly. Traditional CSR often involves philanthropy or non-controversial activities. CSA, by contrast, tackles divisive, politically charged, and emotionally charged topics to express societal values and norms (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Hong & Li, 2020). By making their values explicit, companies can not only shape public perceptions about the company but also contribute to debates on justice and equality. In this view, CSA is both a reputational strategy and a tool for societal change. To achieve societal change, CSA messages include a call to action, urging the public to engage (Troy et al., 2023). This makes CSA inherently political. It is less about operational responsibility and more about value-driven engagement.

Scholars have linked the shift from traditional CSR to political and social advocacy to mediatization, i.e., society's adaption of media logic, and rising polarization, which both make companies more visible in public debates on sociopolitical issues (van der Meer & Jonkman, 2021). Companies are increasingly expected to speak out on moral and social issues to maintain their reputation and legitimacy, but face constant scrutiny, which is also related to recurring scandals and accusations of genderwashing, i.e., claims that companies make towards supporting gender equality are unsubstantiated and thus do not align with their actual actions. By engaging in CSA, companies can respond to these growing expectations, but can also risk backlash or boycotts if their advocacy does not resonate with stakeholders (Rim et al., 2020). Thus, it is essential to understand how message strategies can help companies mitigate the risk of backlash and its potentially negative impact on reputation.

Reactance theory (Brehm, 1966)

The theory posits that individuals value their freedom of choice and autonomy. When they perceive a message as limiting, controlling, or pressuring, they experience psychological reactance – a motivational state aimed at restoring freedom.

- > It can explain negative reactions to persuasive CSA messages, such as resistance, anger, or rejection of the message.
- > Reactance can reduce message effectiveness, damage attitudes toward the company, and even lead to doing the opposite of what is advocated.
- > This is stronger when messages are forceful, directive, or lack options and weaker when communication emphasizes choice or personal relevance.

Application to CSA messaging

- > Stakeholders often suspect persuasion intent in corporate communications, especially in social advocacy.
- > CSA messages with a call to action may increase cognitive engagement (Suchman, 1995), heightening the perception of persuasion and triggering reactance.
- > Such reactance can reduce identification with the company and subsequently damage reputation.

BETWEEN TRIGGERING RESISTANCE AND MOBILIZING SUPPORT

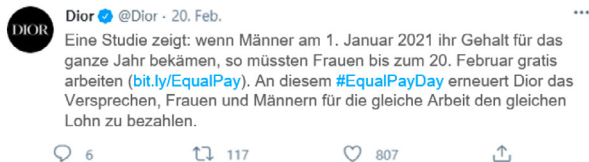
Calls to action in CSA messages can be powerful because they can mobilize people beyond awareness, turning shared values into concrete support and collective action for social change. However, when organizations seek active public support through a call to action in their CSA messages, the stakes for reputation are higher. Audiences pay closer attention and process the message more carefully, evaluating both the company's motives and its procedures (Suchman, 1995). This heightened scrutiny can increase perceptions of persuasion intent, i.e., the sense that the company is primarily acting in its own interest to convince people to follow its cause. Such perceptions often trigger psychological reactance, a defensive reaction in which

individuals resist perceived pressure and push back against the message (see Brehm, 1966).

This defensive stance can also lower identification with the company that advocates for a sociopolitical issue, reducing the emotional and cognitive bond that typically supports positive evaluations. People may view the company's CSA message as intrusive or manipulative, which can damage trust and weaken reputation. The more a CSA message calls for active engagement, such as signing a petition, sharing content, or taking other concrete actions, the more likely audiences might question the company's intentions or feel pressured. This tension creates a delicate balance for communicators: Calls to action can mobilize support and amplify social impact, but they also carry the risk of increasing skepticism, resistance, and negative reactions that ultimately affect corporate reputation.

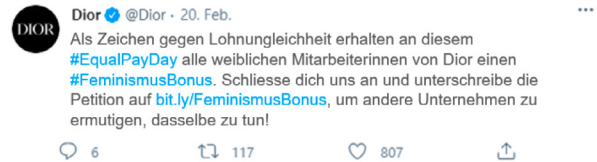
About the study

The online study conducted in the German-speaking region of Switzerland presented participants with manipulated tweets and measured various metrics, including identification with the company, reactance, and reputation.



Tweet in the control group with no call to action.

Translation: "A study shows: If men received their year pay on 1st January 2021, women would have to work for free until 20th February (bit.ly/EqualPay). On this #EqualPayDay, Dior renews its commitment to give men equal pay for equal work."



Tweet in the call-to-action group. Translation:

"To take a stand against the gender pay gap, all female employees of Dior will receive a #FeminismusBonus to mark this year's #EqualPayDay. Join us and sign the petition on bit.ly/FeminismusBonus to encourage other companies to do the same!"

THE EFFECTS OF CALL-TO-ACTION MESSAGES ON REPUTATION

The study found that CSA messages with a call to action consistently triggered higher levels of psychological reactance among participants. This suggests that individuals

may feel a higher persuasive intent in call-to-action messages, i.e., they perceive that the company is trying to influence them, which makes them more resistant to the message. This heightened reactance was found to reduce identification with the company, ultimately weakening corporate reputation. By contrast, messages without a call to action, which simply inform about the company's support

for gender equality, are processed with less cognitive effort and elicit lower reactance. This, in turn, leads to higher identification with the company, thereby enhancing corporate reputation. Taken together, a CSA message with a call to action leads to a lower and more negative reputation compared to the CSA message without a call to action.

Notably, participants' gender and their alignment with the gender equality issue did not affect these patterns. That means that even when participants agreed with the underlying social issue, regardless of whether they identified as female or male, the direct push to act in the CSA message seems to have prompted scrutiny and defensive responses, suggesting that reactance and decreased identification occurred broadly across the audience. Right-leaning participants showed stronger reactance, although this tendency was independent of the specific message type. Indeed, individuals with conservative political views have been found to be more resistant to advocacy messages, including those encouraging climate change awareness (Zhou, 2016).

CHOOSE CSA MESSAGES AND AUDIENCE CAREFULLY

The study demonstrates that CSA message strategy matters. CSA messages with a call to action can drive societal impact by mobilizing behavior, but also invite scrutiny and defensive reactions. This highlights a key tension for companies. On the one hand, CSA allows firms to take a stand on socially relevant issues and promote change. On the other hand, the strategy itself can backfire if audiences feel pressured or manipulated. If audiences perceive the company as self-interested or persuasive, they may respond with reactance and disidentify from the company, lowering corporate reputation. Skepticism toward companies, due to past scandals, misconduct, or genderwashing, can intensify this effect.

Social issues are often polarizing and connected to political ideology, so companies must craft messages that appear authentic and compelling to avoid triggering defensive reactions. For corporate communicators, there are three main takeaways from the study:

1. Companies aiming to communicate their values effectively must strike a balance between encouraging societal

participation and maintaining individuals' identification with the company and corporate reputation.

2. CSA messages should be transparent and align with the company's values, while adopting a less overtly persuasive tone. Instead of focusing on convincing the audience, messages should simply communicate the social issue the company supports, along with the reasons and methods behind this support.

3. Companies need to consider the audience's political context and the social context, i.e., how the issue itself is discussed in the public sphere. Right-leaning participants showed stronger reactance than left-leaning participants, regardless of message type.

In an increasingly polarized and globalized society, the insights from this study underscore the importance of considering both the content and the structure of corporate messaging when studying the societal and reputational impact of CSA.

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MORE INFORMATION

A more detailed discussion of the study can be found in Marschlich and Bernet (2024), on which this article is based.