

Sociopolitical Advocacy and the Role of Public Relations

Theoretical Developments and Emerging Perspectives on Corporate Social Advocacy and Related Constructs

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First published 2026

ISBN: 978-1-032-97295-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-97296-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-59314-0 (ebk)

Chapter 1

Responsibility, Advocacy, and Activism

Explicating and Mapping Constructs

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003593140-2



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

1 Responsibility, Advocacy, and Activism

Explicating and Mapping Constructs

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The title of this edited volume is very purposely descriptive. As promised, it will focus on sociopolitical advocacy and the role of public relations relative to the practice—and it will do so from a variety of different perspectives: theory building, antecedents and outcomes, message development, practical application, and so on. With that in mind, this first chapter might seem like a bait and switch insofar as we explore an array of prosocial communication constructs that decidedly *aren't* forms of sociopolitical advocacy. But that doesn't mean they're irrelevant. In fact, they're vitally important to our understanding of the development and function of sociopolitical advocacy communication in the public relations context.

Sociopolitical advocacy researchers face a major limitation in advancing knowledge within this subdiscipline, namely the lack of clearly explicated and consistently applied terms. Theory building and scientific progress can only advance when a community of scholars explicates core constructs, both in their own right and in relation to one another (Chaffee, 1991; Chaffee & Berger, 1987; Kuhn, 1962). The aim of this chapter is to achieve these important goals—or at least push us a little closer toward that end (Figure 1.1 and Table 1.1).

Corporate Social Responsibility

Broadly speaking, we situate sociopolitical advocacy within the larger realm of prosocial communication, which speaks to the intentions or actions of organizations ostensibly targeted to improving the public welfare; such efforts are often strategically planned to generate bottom-line benefits for the organization as well. By no means are sociopolitical advocacy initiatives the only form of prosocial communication, nor are they the most established. In truth, formal definitions of constructs such as corporate political advocacy (CPA) and corporate social advocacy (CSA) didn't appear in the public relations literature until the 21st century—and only regularly from the 2010s onward (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Wettstein, 2015; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). As such, these constructs have important forebearers, and an understanding of them is necessary to fully comprehend sociopolitical advocacy in this context.

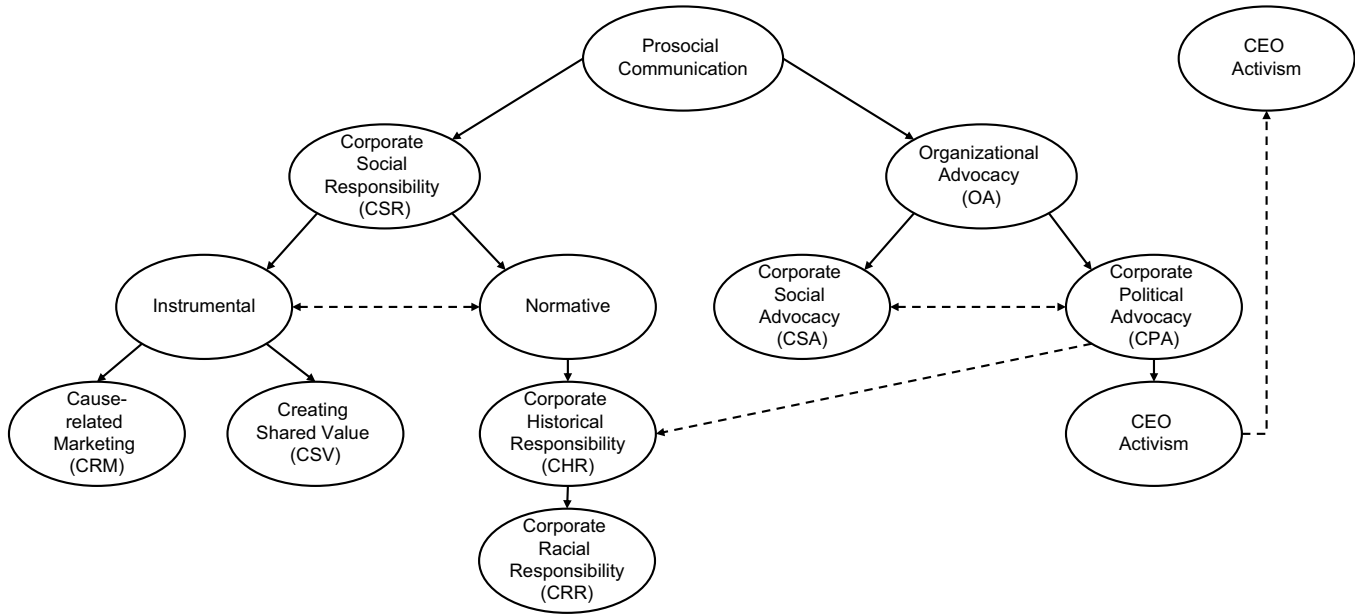


Figure 1.1 Prosocial Communication Concept Map.

Table 1.1 Defining Key Constructs

<i>Construct</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Prosocial communication	Prosocial communication speaks to the intentions or actions of organizations ostensibly targeted to improving the public welfare. Such efforts are often strategically planned to generate bottom-line benefits for organizations as well.
Corporate social responsibility (CSR)	A subset of prosocial communication, CSR represents a voluntary action on the part of organizations to address the needs and wants of stakeholders as they relate to advancing the general welfare. Though tied to the public good, CSR campaigns are designed to bolster corporate reputation and image; thus they often result in the self-preservation and improved financial health of the organization. CSR activities seek to avoid controversy, when possible, in an attempt to generate broad bases of support.
Instrumental CSR	A classification of CSR activities motivated primarily by potential financial gain rather than concern for the public welfare; however, instrumental CSR efforts may include some normative concern for the public good.
Normative CSR	A classification of CSR activities motivated primarily by potential improvements to the public welfare rather than concerns for financial gain; however, normative CSR may include some instrumental concern for organizations' bottom lines.
Cause-related marketing (CRM)	CRM constitutes a marketing activity in which organizations agree to contribute to social causes when consumers engage in revenue-driving exchanges. Though CRM campaigns are most successful when consumers attribute normative motivations to these actions, the practice is primarily instrumental, oriented toward bolstering organizational reputation and securing the resulting financial benefits.
Creating shared value (CSV)	CSV focuses on organizations' abilities to create economic value for themselves through efforts addressing broader social needs. CSV derives largely from the work of Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011), who conceptualized CSV as distinct from CSR; however, critics note this distinction only holds if CSR is conceptualized as a purely normative practice (see Crane et al., 2014).
Corporate historical responsibility (CHR)	Grounded in normative CSR practices, CHR argues that organizations have moral responsibilities to reconcile, through discourse and action, historical injustices in which said organizations have been complicit.
Corporate racial responsibility (CRR)	Drawing on critical race theory (CRT) and normative CSR—CHR more specifically—CRR argues that organizations have benefited from various means of racial oppression, particularly in the treatment of African Americans. As such, these organizations have a moral obligation to advocate for racial justice, improved race relations, and greater societal equity.

(Continued)

6 Sociopolitical Advocacy and the Role of Public Relations

Table 1.1 (Continued)

Construct	Definition
Organizational advocacy (OA)	A subset of prosocial communication, OA represents a voluntary action on the part of organizations to advance a contentious sociopolitical cause. By inherently embracing controversies—which are typically driven via political partisanship—OA strives to signal a shared commitment to a subset of stakeholders and thus necessarily risks alienating those who disagree with the organizational position. Organizations may engage in OA out of normative, instrumental, or mixed motivations.
Corporate social advocacy (CSA)	CSA occurs when organizations instrumentally engage in OA, aligning themselves with a controversial sociopolitical cause with a built-in focus on how these efforts can directly or indirectly enhance their own financial well-being.
Corporate political advocacy (CPA)	CPA occurs when organizations normatively engage in OA, aligning themselves with a controversial sociopolitical cause in an attempt to persuade their stakeholders to support the cause as well.
CEO activism	CEO activism occurs when organizational leaders deliver sociopolitical messages not through official organizational channels but instead through personal communication channels. CEO activism is considered a subset of CPA when leaders' individual views cannot be meaningfully separated from those of the organization, typically due to the person's strong name recognition and deeply ingrained connection to the organization.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is the most critical of these forerunners for a multitude of reasons. First, it is likely the oldest. In his historical overview of CSR's development, Carroll (1999) argues that the construct was formalized with Bowen's (1953) publication of *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*. However, as several recent historical studies of public relations show, key functions of the practice often pre-date professionalized efforts—sometimes by centuries (Lamme, 2014; Lamme et al., 2009; Lamme & Miller Russell, 2009; Myers, 2015a, 2015b, 2020; Page et al., 2024; Russell, 2020; Wilson et al., 2024). The same is arguably true for CSR. Philanthropic efforts of businesses and their executives date at least as far back as the Gilded Age, and corporations such as chain grocers offered in-kind donations and targeted scholarships during the Great Depression (Browning, 2018; Gautier & Pache, 2015).

Regardless of where we place the origin date, the formalized study of CSR relative to public relations is much more established than that of any form of sociopolitical advocacy. Scholars have therefore drawn upon that history, applying several important elements of CSR to the study of sociopolitical advocacy. In both fields, researchers have investigated normative/ethical (Benn et al., 2010; Gaither et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020; Sabadoz, 2011) and instrumental/economic motivations (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Hong & Li, 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Overton et al., 2020; Peloza & Shang, 2011); prosocial (Hartman et al., 2007; Heffron & Dodd, 2021; Jin & Drozdenko, 2010) and

pro-company outcomes (DiStaso, 2012; McWilliams & Siegel, 2011; Rim et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022); the roles of fit (Aksak et al., 2016; Kim & Lee, 2020; Vasquez, 2022), authenticity (Lee, 2023; Lim & Jiang, 2021; Lim & Young, 2021), and skepticism (Austin et al., 2019; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Rim & Kim, 2016; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001); and the relevance of each of the above in relation to reputation (Abitbol et al., 2018; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Browning et al., 2018; Kim, 2011) and relationship management (Browning et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019), among other paradigms (Smith, 2003).

Defining CSR

These widely varying applications have simultaneously made CSR among the most studied constructs in public relations, as well as the most notoriously difficult to define. As an example, Carroll (1999) lists more than 30 distinct definitions of the construct in his 50-year retrospective. However, despite their diverse nature, there are commonalities across these definitions.

One of the foundational premises behind CSR is the *iron law of responsibility*. Davis (1960) developed this idea, arguing that the “social responsibilities of businessmen need to be commensurate with their social power” (p. 71). This stewardship principle rests on the assumption that economic success stems from social contributions to industry; thus, organizations owe debts to society proportional to their gains. As a result, larger, more profitable companies experience more intense societal pressure to engage in CSR (Gulyás, 2009).

While Davis’ (1960) view appears altruistic, there is certainly an exchange element present, which perhaps foreshadows the more self-interested profit motives that would become prominent in CSR definitions during the following decades. Johnson (1971) believed that CSR stemmed from selfish motives, claiming that “social responsibility states that businesses carry out social programs to add profits to their organization” (p. 54). Steiner (1971) moved the understanding of CSR a step further by defining it not as a practice of altruism or of pure selfishness but instead as one characterized by enlightened self-interest: CSR actions are not good only for the company or the publics they serve but for both. This symbiotic understanding of CSR has persisted since the 1970s and is personified in David et al.’s (2005) definition: “*Corporate social responsibility ... is a citizenship function with moral, ethical, and social obligations that provide the scaffolding for mutually beneficial exchanges between an organization and its publics*” (p. 293, emphasis original).

During the 1980s, scholars began to view CSR as a construct comprised of several subcomponents. One of the most prominent such conceptualizations is that of Carroll (1983), who saw CSR as “composed of four parts: economic, legal, ethical and voluntary or philanthropic” (p. 604). Generally, researchers have followed in this tradition, arguing that effective CSR practices must contribute either directly or indirectly to positive economic performance on the part of the organization (see Browning et al., 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Goering, 2010; Sabadoz, 2011; Walsh & Beatty, 2007).

Carroll (1983) also views CSR as a voluntary action; that is to say, it is not systematically forced upon the organization by governmental or regulatory bodies. The voluntary nature of the practice has been a mainstay of many CSR definitions (see Browning et al., 2022; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Demetriou et al., 2010; Homburg et al., 2013; Mackey et al., 2007).

The legal and ethical components of Carroll's (1983) conceptualization are more problematic. First, several scholars believe that social responsibility extends *beyond* what the law requires (Drucker, 1984; Fitch, 1976; Sethi, 1975). McWilliams and Siegel (2001), for example, suggest that CSR constitutes "actions that appear to further some social good, beyond the interest of the firm and that which is required by law" (p. 117). Coombs and Holladay (2012) are even more forceful, stating that they "do not consider behaviors that are required by law to be part of corporate social responsibility" (p. 7).

Perhaps the pushback on the legality element results from its contradiction with the voluntary action requirement. Legal obligations are forced upon organizations, not taken up freely. It is more sensible to say that one would expect socially responsible companies to follow the law, though simply doing so does not make an organization socially responsible. Legal compliance is thus a necessary but insufficient component of CSR (Carroll, 2015).

Last is the understanding of CSR as an ethical exercise. As both CSR and ethics are often considered behaviors that extend past legal obligations to ensure some social good, it is perhaps natural to think of CSR as a moral endeavor (Carroll, 1991, 2015; Lim & Pope, 2022). However, while CSR efforts are sometimes undertaken out of altruistic intentions and exercised through ethical means to produce moral goods, this is not always the case (Falck & Heblich, 2007). In the most general sense, CSR is typically operationalized as a reputation management effort, which may not necessarily align with ethical behavior, as L'Etang (2003) points out:

Reputation concerns others' perceptions about an organisation in relation to their knowledge about organisational behaviour. By itself, however, a focus on "reputation" does not guarantee morally good behaviour because it is not a moral principle that can guide action. Rather it is a pragmatic, self-interested approach. Fear of a poor reputation may be a motivating factor, but it is not a particularly worthy one. The same applies to many programmes of corporate social responsibility.

(p. 64)¹

Keeping these elements in mind, CSR cannot be equated to simply following the law or behaving ethically. Instead, it must be understood as a voluntary practice that provides economic value to the organization and social, economic, and/or environmental value to the stakeholders it affects (Dahlsrud, 2008). In this sense, CSR should contribute to an organization's triple bottom line in providing (1) a means to profitability while at the same time benefiting

(2) the people and (3) the environment within which it operates (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

Taking the above considerations into account, we define CSR as a subset of prosocial communication that represents a voluntary action on the part of organizations to address the needs and wants of stakeholders as they relate to advancing the general welfare. Though tied to the public good, CSR campaigns are designed to bolster corporate reputation and image; thus, they often result in the self-preservation and improved financial health of the organization. CSR activities seek to avoid controversy, when possible, in an attempt to generate a broad base of support.

Normative and Instrumental Motivations for Engaging in CSR

Digging deeper, we must also consider the multitude of motives organizations purport for engaging in CSR (Aguilera et al., 2007; Lim & Pope, 2022; Perrault & Shaver, 2021). Scholars typically consider them in dyads, most often operationalizing CSR as driven either by normative, ethical motives or instrumental, profit-seeking ones (Graafland & van de Ven, 2006; Kim & Lee, 2012). Generally, normative motives are considered noneconomic and conceived from an organization's moral and citizenship duties to its respective stakeholders. Contrarily, instrumental motives are economic and stem from an organization's enlightened self-interest to pursue profit (Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Carroll, 1999; David et al., 2005; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Hartman et al., 2007; Jahdi & Acikdilli, 2009; Neville et al., 2005; Peloza & Shang, 2011; Raghurir et al., 2010; Reeves & Ferguson-DeThorne, 1980; Turker, 2009).

Normative motivations align closely with the stewardship principle, which views organizations as public trustees that have a duty to use their resources to effect positive change for stakeholders (Clark, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Post et al., 1996; Troy, Eng, & Overton, 2025b). From this perspective, CSR is often seen as a way for an organization to repay societal debts; as Hartman et al. (2007) put it, "corporations reap the benefits of serving as a community citizen and therefore owe a congruent contributory obligation to that community" (p. 374). The echoes of Davis' (1960) iron law of responsibility are apparent here.

Normative motivations for engaging in CSR tie directly to many assertions by public relations theorists that practitioners serve as a corporate conscience. Within this framework, practitioners are seen as ethical advisors—and at times activists—working within the organization to influence the values, beliefs, and thus decision-making of top management (Benn et al., 2010; Bowen, 2008; Jin & Drozdenko, 2010; Kim & Reber, 2008).

Other scholars—L'Etang (2003) in particular—view the idea of the corporate conscience as an occupational myth. In their eyes, the motivations and goals for CSR are instrumental rather than normative. Most often instrumental motivations for engaging in CSR focus on the direct pursuit of economic value (e.g., profitability, revenue gain, efficiency) or the indirect creation of

economic value through improved reputation and/or relationships (Hartman et al., 2007; Kim & Yang, 2013; L'Etang, 2003; Manheim & Pratt, 1986; Rim & Ferguson, 2020).

This separation between normative and instrumental motives has at times been hard to maintain. Some studies suggest that, regardless of motive, organizations that engage in CSR are often perceived to be more ethical (Jin & Drozdenko, 2010; Lyon & Cameron, 2004). Moreover, many executives see an overlap in these two drivers of CSR (Blomgren, 2011). Stakeholders also seem to believe and accept that organizations and their leaders serve two masters. Generally, stakeholders evaluate organizations more positively if they do not attribute CSR practices to entirely selfish motives. However, stakeholders also realize organizations face pressures to turn a profit, so CSR practices that appear overly altruistic are commonly met with skepticism (Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Leonidou & Skarmeas, 2017; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001) (Figure 1.2).

Building on this normative/instrumental dyad, Ellen et al. (2006) conceptualized and tested a more complex model of CSR motives, which added an element of valence, resulting in four broad motivations. They contend that instrumental motives take two forms: *egoistic*, in which the organization exploits the cause for self-interested gain, or *strategic*, in which the organization acts with self-interest to connect prosocial initiatives to the organizational mission. Similarly, normative motives also take two forms: *stakeholder-driven*, in which the organization acts in response to stakeholder demands, and *values-driven*, in which the organization demonstrates a genuine care for the issue or cause.

Ellen et al. (2006) found that values-driven and strategic motivations prompted positive responses from stakeholders, while stakeholder-driven and

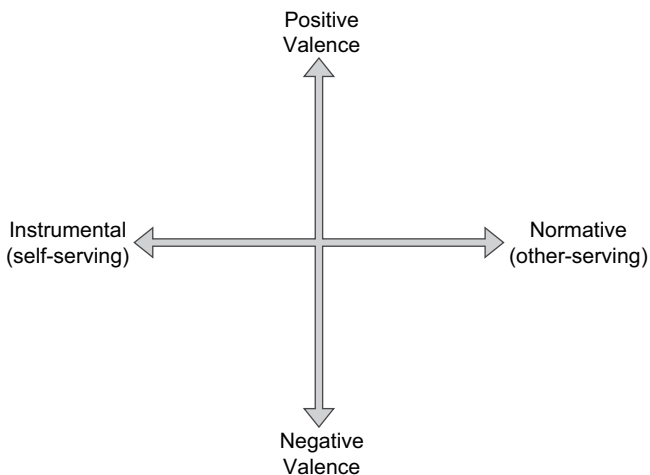


Figure 1.2 Ellen et al.'s (2006) Typology of CSR Motives.

egoistic motivations generated negative responses. Subsequent research has produced mixed findings. Vlachos et al. (2009) found only the values-driven approach to CSR increased consumer trust, patronage, and a willingness to recommend products. In studying CSR skepticism, Skarmeas and Leonidou (2013) found that values-driven attributions decreased CSR skepticism, egoistic and stakeholder-driven attributions increased skepticism, and strategic attributions had no significant effect.

Operationalizing CSR Actions

Moving beyond motivation, determining what actions constitute CSR is also challenging. Several scholars have put forth various typologies to categorize CSR activities. Coombs and Holladay (2012) propose a five-part typology based largely on organizational motive. The first CSR practice is *philanthropy*, which constitutes direct donations of money, services, or products to charitable causes. Next is *cause promotion*, defined as activities designed to increase awareness or concern among stakeholders for a given social cause. Third is the practice of *cause marketing*, in which organizations contribute a percentage of sales to third-party organizations supporting social causes. Fourth is *social marketing*, or the practice of influencing stakeholder behavior to advance some social good.² Finally, there is *volunteering*, in which organizations either encourage their employees to donate their time and talents to promote some social good or partner with third-party organizations to achieve that same end.

Peloza and Shang (2011) put forth a typology with slightly greater exclusivity among groupings. They propose that CSR practices can be separated into one of three broad categories and then further classified into more specific subcategories. The first broad category is *philanthropy*. Philanthropic practices include cause-related marketing (CRM), cash donations, community involvement, employee volunteerism, promotion of social issues, and direct donations of products or services. Second is *business practices*, which constitute activities carried out in everyday organizational operations that contribute to some social good. Business practices include environmental protection, diversity, employee relations, and customer relations. Finally, *product-related features* are considered part of CSR practice provided those features create environmental or social goods. The most common product-related features are product quality/safety and the use of organic or biodegradable components.

Keeping these past typologies in mind, as well as the requirement that CSR consist of voluntary actions beyond what the law demands, we posit a seven-part typology of CSR action types. It is based on findings from past studies and grouped by the varying stakeholders to whom an organization is accountable. It attempts to address past issues of mutual exclusivity, but for certain practices—CRM in particular—some crossover among categories appears inevitable (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Peloza & Shang, 2011; Rettab et al., 2009; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).

Further Subconstructs of CSR

Cause-Related Marketing (CRM). Though the CSR typologies discussed previously include CRM, marketing scholars generally maintain that CRM differs from CSR in that it is transaction based, representing “an offer from the firm to contribute a specified amount to a designated cause when customers engage in revenue-providing exchanges that satisfy organizational and individual objectives” (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60). Philanthropic CSR, on the other hand, is not necessarily tied to a specific product or service and often requires no participation from the stakeholder to trigger an organizational action (Brown & Dacin, 1997). Donation amounts vary with consumer purchase decisions in CRM practices but remain constant for philanthropic CSR regardless of whether the consumer purchases a product or service (Gautier & Pache, 2015).

Nevertheless, CRM shares several characteristics with instrumental CSR, in particular the focus on capitalizing economically by strengthening the interconnected identities among the cause, the company, and the consumer (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Brown & Dacin, 1997; Hong & Li, 2020; Kim & Choi, 2012; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001).³ As an example, Robinson et al. (2012) investigated the role of cause choice in CRM. Often companies select the charity or cause that will receive a percentage of consumer sales revenue, but other times that choice is left to the consumer. Robinson et al. (2012) found that allowing consumers to choose the causes their purchases would benefit led them to view products more favorably and thus positively influenced purchase intentions. Regardless of whether the consumer or company selects the cause, CRM increases feelings of identity and involvement, as it requires stakeholders to participate to ensure some social good occurs (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012; Strahilevitz & Myers, 1998). Given the overlapping focus on generating economic return via fostering shared social identity, we consider CRM to fall more within the realm of instrumental CSR than beyond it.

Creating Shared Value (CSV). Creating shared value (CSV) is another concept popularized in the marketing scholarship, most notably by Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011). CSV focuses on organizations’ abilities to create economic value for themselves through efforts addressing social needs. Somewhat counterintuitively, CSV echoes Friedman’s (1962, 1970) view that the primary social responsibility of business is to generate profit, which he believed would create positive downstream effects for society more broadly. From the perspective of CSV, social problems are themselves business opportunities insofar as tackling societal ills results in profit (Menghwar & Daood, 2021).

In their seminal piece, Porter and Kramer (2011) argue that organizations create shared value primarily in three ways. First, they can *reconceive products and markets* by focusing on how the organization can benefit from serving traditionally disadvantaged communities and countries. Second, companies can *redefine productivity in their value chains* to address negative externalities. For instance, the use of local suppliers can improve community relations and

reduce carbon emissions, which ultimately saves the organization money. Similarly, efforts to improve the lives of employees—via job training, on-site childcare, stock options, etc.—often lead to higher productivity and greater retention, which benefit the organization financially. Lastly, Porter and Kramer (2011) advocate for *local cluster development*, which is founded on the idea that the “success of every company is affected by the supporting companies and infrastructure around it” (p. 72). Essentially, because communities and companies succeed and fail together, organizations have a strong financial incentive to engage in community relations, improvement, and empowerment.

Though Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011) view CSV as distinct from CSR, there is no question that the concepts are closely related (Crane et al., 2014; Menghwar & Daood, 2021). We go a step further, categorizing CSV as effectively a form of instrumental CSR. In their attempt to distinguish CSV from CSR, Porter and Kramer (2011) describe CSR purely in its normative, morally motivated form. CSV is no doubt miles apart from that conceptualization. However, as Crane et al. (2014) argue, Porter and Kramer (2011) cast CSR as a straw man in many of their arguments, ignoring or downplaying decades of scholarship that speak to the business case for CSR. As we noted previously, there is a long history of viewing CSR through an economic lens (L’Etang, 1994). To remove that side of the equation creates an incomplete picture, and as such, we feel CSV is not a particularly original construct, as it shares several commonalities with instrumental CSR (Crane et al., 2014; Menghwar & Daood, 2021).

Corporate historical responsibility (CHR) and Corporate racial responsibility (CRR). CRM and CSV are studied much more copiously in the marketing literature than in the public relations scholarship. We’ve included these constructs here largely for the sake of completeness and to articulate how they connect with CSR as part of the broader concept mapping we undertake in this chapter. The constructs of corporate historical responsibility (CHR) and corporate racial responsibility (CRR), however, are deeply ingrained in public relations scholarship of prosocial communication and are thus much more germane to the current discussion.

As seen in Table 1.2, CSR efforts related to race often manifest in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) commitments. These typically relate to hiring and promotion practices, though they also capture externally facing initiatives benefiting traditionally marginalized publics (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Hon & Brunner, 2000; Peloza & Shang, 2011; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Scholars have attempted to advance race-related CSR, particularly through critical, legal, and historical approaches. Critical race theory (CRT), for instance, took root in 1970s legal scholarship, arguing that racism is systemically embedded in various aspects of U.S. society and its many institutions. Scholars deploy CRT to explore and expose how whiteness has been normalized throughout U.S. culture, with the hope that doing so constitutes a step toward racial justice (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Logan, 2021; Robinson, 2003).

Table 1.2 CSR Action Types

<i>Initiative</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Philanthropy	Cash and in-kind donations to third-party organizations seeking to benefit a social cause. Product donations would often be cross-categorized as philanthropy and community involvement. CRM may also be cross-categorized as philanthropy and some other effort depending on the particulars of the donation structure.
Environmental sustainability	Modifications in business operations and product development that lessen pollution or combat climate change.
Community involvement	Engagement with external stakeholders—often those who are proximate, but not always. Employee volunteerism and the support of basic human rights would be two examples.
Diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI)	Commitment to diversity hiring and promoting beyond legal requirements, as well as advocating for social initiatives that benefit traditionally marginalized publics.
Employee relations	Practices that promote the general welfare of the organization's workforce. Commitments to advanced job training, the setting aside of scholarship money for continued education of employees, and the provision of on-site childcare services are some examples.
Investor relations	Transparent communication and relationship building with brokers, analysts, and individual investors. Many of these elements are embodied by the governance element of the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) approach.
Product safety	Measures taken beyond the legal minimum to ensure products and/or services do not harm consumers or salespersons.

From this perspective, Robinson (2003) suggests that CSR should include a corporate reparations paradigm. Through slavery, sharecropping, and other forms of forced labor, many organizations profited from the pain of African Americans; as such, these organizations and their successor corporations owe a debt to this public.

Though not inherently connected to race, Janssen's (2013) work on CHR intersects with Robinson's (2003) view. Janssen (2013) defines CHR "by principles of respect and remembrance, accountability for corporate history, an attitude of remorse, and commitments to justice in the present and future" (p. 66), which serve as means to atone for past transgressions. Both Robinson's (2003) and Janssen's (2013) scholarship are primarily grounded in normative, ethical responsibilities, though each explicitly states that fulfilling these moral obligations would also lead to bottom-line organizational benefits.

Logan's (2021) theory of CRR builds upon the work of Robinson (2003) and Janssen (2013) while simultaneously situating itself within communication and public relations practice. CRR emerged from the scholarship connecting CRT and public relations (Edwards, 2012; Pompper, 2005), as well as the CSR literature; the stewardship principle is particularly pertinent in both CSR and CRR contexts (Davis, 1960; Hartman et al., 2007). CRR argues that organizations

have benefited from various means of racial oppression—particularly in the treatment of African Americans—and therefore they have a moral obligation to advocate for racial justice, improved race relations, and greater societal equity. According to Logan (2021), CRR:

holds that corporations should communicate in ways that advocate for racial justice, attempt to improve race relations, and support achieving a more equitable society ... because doing so is the right thing to do, not because it is the profitable thing to do.

(p. 6)

She further articulates five communication principles of CRR: Communication must (1) speak to racism directly, (2) focus on the implications and complexities of racism, (3) advocate for equity and racial justice, (4) outline a path toward a more harmonious society, and (5) prioritize societal needs over corporate interests.

Generally, we consider CRR a specific type of normative CSR, given its grounding in the overarching CSR construct as well as its focus on a prescriptive, ethical means to address racial injustice. Moreover, CRR does not inherently seek out controversy as do the various forms of sociopolitical advocacy. That said, several public relations scholars have investigated high-level campaigns by organizations working to advance racial justice (e.g., Starbucks, Nike, Ben & Jerry's) from the perspective of sociopolitical advocacy (Abitbol et al., 2018; Browning & Cheema, 2025; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Waymer & Logan, 2021). Also, given that race and the politics surrounding it continue to be a divisive issue—at least in U.S. contexts (Horowitz et al., 2025)—we also suggest that CRR could be understood in the context of corporate political advocacy (CPA) as well.

Advocacy in the Context of Prosocial Communication

Before we delve into our discussion of sociopolitical advocacy, we need to take a quick detour. For better or worse, many terms used in public relations scholarship have multiple meanings, advocacy being one. Apart from its use in more specific sociopolitical circles, it also serves as a core construct of public relations theory and practice more generally (Edgett, 2002; Fawkes, 2015). Within this latter framework, advocacy aligns closely with its lay definition and is generally understood in the context of marketplace theory, in which public relations practitioners work to advance the causes, cases, or interests of their clients or employers (Barney & Black, 1994; Fitzpatrick, 2006). This view is clearly reflected in the Public Relations Society of America's (2000) definition of advocacy in its code of ethics: "We serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent. We provide a voice in the marketplace of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate."

That said, a long-standing dispute regarding the role of advocacy in public relations practice has been a near constant undercurrent in much of our discipline's scholarship for a half century or better (Edgett, 2002; Fawkes, 2012). While a detailed overview lies beyond our scope here, a brief discussion is warranted for the purposes of differentiation—especially given that ethicality is an important dimension of sociopolitical advocacy, as well as a major point of contention in elucidating the place of advocacy in public relations research and practice, as it is more broadly understood.⁴

The divide among public relations scholars as to the effectiveness and ethicality of advocacy roughly aligns with demarcations drawn between the competing camps of the excellence and contingency theories. Grunig and Hunt (1984) introduced the four-model typology of public relations practice (press agency, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical), which became an important building block for excellence theory. In a later work on the excellence project, Grunig (1989) expressed concern that the dominant worldview of public relations was oriented toward practices of persuasion and manipulation, represented by the first three models and the asymmetrical worldview underpinning them. He stressed that the two-way symmetrical worldview offered a more effective and ethical alternative. Grunig and White (1992) later solidified this perspective: "Public relations also cannot be excellent if the schema for public relations in the organization ... conceives of public relations as asymmetrical, in a neutral or *advocacy role*, and solely technical in nature" (p. 55, emphasis added). Excellence theorists instead suggested that the standard for public relations effectiveness "becomes how well the organization satisfies the demands of its relevant external publics" (Grunig et al., 1992, p. 76).

Proponents of excellence theory contended that their support of two-way symmetrical communication was not intended to exclude persuasion from the profession. While symmetry might represent a normative ideal, the reality of the practice would at times lead to scenarios in which persuasion would be acceptable and even valued (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Many embraced the mixed-motive approach developed by Murphy (1991), later revising it to include a so-called win-win zone. Within such an approach, parties negotiate their interests via a two-way process in which each party acknowledges the self-interests of the other, works to simultaneously influence the other, and ultimately attempts to achieve some balance in which each side finds the final result acceptable (Dozier et al., 1995; Grunig, 1992).

Nevertheless, several scholars pushed back against the excellence approach, largely on the grounds that it prized coordination, compromise, and accommodation while devaluing—or failing to account for—the traditional roles of persuasion and advocacy in public relations practice (Leichty, 1997; Leichty & Springston, 1993; McBride, 1989; Murphy, 1991). The most significant challenge came from Cameron and colleagues and would later emerge as the competing contingency theory (Cameron et al., 2008; Cancel et al.,

1997; Cancel et al., 1999). Among its many features, contingency theory conceives of public relations practice as existing along an advocacy-accommodation continuum, arguing that appropriate organizational communication strategies vary situationally. In short, they assert that advocacy as persuasion is in many (perhaps most) instances an effective and ethical tool of public relations.

In grappling with the legacy of the excellence project and the debates surrounding it, Fawkes (2015) noted that these divides manifest unevenly depending on one's position within or outside academia and that the field must find a way to move beyond them:

just as excellence attracts academics, advocacy resonates with practitioners. What we need is a concept of the field that acknowledges *both* these types (not clustered into ethical and anti-ethical, such as Bowen, 2008) as legitimate aspects of PR, each of which call for nuanced ethical responses. (p. 206, emphasis original)

Several scholars have begun this important work, perhaps most notably in Edgett's (2002) efforts to develop criteria for ethical advocacy and later the responsible advocacy approach put forth by Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) and the principled advocate model advanced by Baker (2008). More recently, Aghazadeh et al. (2023) have gone further, challenging the marketplace assumptions that ground much of public relations practice, which could result in alternative means to frame and potentially solve this dilemma. Finally, other scholars have pushed public relations practitioners to value dissensus and agonism, arguing that embracing pluralism and vigorous debate is oftentimes more fruitful than striving for consensus (Capizzo, 2023; Castelló & Lopez-Berzosa, 2021; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Davidson, 2016).

Though the term "advocacy" appears repeatedly throughout this chapter and this book, its meaning will relate only tangentially to the more general usage described above. Its meaning in sociopolitical contexts, however, continues to remain elusive.

Sociopolitical Advocacy

As we stated at the outset, scholarship dedicated to sociopolitical advocacy shares much with its prosocial communication cousin, CSR. The indeterminate indeterminant usage of terminology is unfortunately one of those similarities. Astute readers will notice that, up until this point, we have mostly used the rather generic term *sociopolitical advocacy* in lieu of *corporate social advocacy* (CSA). The former also received top billing in the book's title—all this despite the more prominent usage of CSA in the public relations scholarship.⁵ Our rationale harkens back to a familiar distinction seen in the CSR literature: instrumental versus normative motivations.

Corporate Social Advocacy

Of all the sociopolitical advocacy constructs, CSA is the most referenced in the public relations literature. The term was introduced and popularized by the work of Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015), and these seminal pieces are probably the most cited when sourcing a definition for CSA. Given that, these scholars are worth quoting at length here:

Corporate social advocacy (CSA) refers to an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues. Whether these stances are planned, as in the formal output of communication, or not, as in the case of a CEO making an off-the-cuff remark to a journalist: [*sic*] the outcome is the perception by the public that the organization is linked in some way with the issue (Park & Berger, 2004). CSA materializes as an area worthy of specific analysis within the existing issues management and corporate responsibility scholarship in three primary ways: (a) the social-political issues addressed by organizations are divorced from issues of particular relevance to the organization; (b) engagement in the social-political issues is controversial and serves to potentially isolate organizational stakeholders while simultaneously attracting activist groups; and, (c) as a result, there is a particularly necessary emphasis on financial outcomes for the organization.

(Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5, emphasis original)

The most pertinent element of this definition is controversy. Scholars of sociopolitical advocacy regard the contentious aspect of the practice as the most significant differentiator between sociopolitical advocacy and CSR (Abitbol et al., 2018; Austin et al., 2019; Browning et al., 2020; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Lee, 2025; Lim & Young, 2021; Overton et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2022).

However, the scholarly focus on controversy at times obscures other elements of this definition (Yang et al., 2022). One is the assertion that CSA deals with issues lacking a direct connection to the organization's operation. While there are several ways to view integrating a prosocial activity within organizational operations—the core principles undergirding CSV among them—perhaps the most well known and widely studied integration is fit, which Abitbol et al. (2018) define as follows:

Typically, it is the congruency between the cause a company supports and the company's business plan or mission (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). However, in the current business climate, fit can take on other forms such as fit between a company's value system and that of its stakeholders.

(p. 18)

This view would delineate CSA from CSR, as scholars have repeatedly shown that high company-cause congruence increases the effectiveness of CSR in

terms of bolstering reputations, relationships, and revenues (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Lafferty, 2007; Lafferty et al., 2004). However, from our vantage, such a disregard for fit appears arbitrary, self-defeating, and potentially contradictory to the aims of sociopolitical advocacy.

One reason relates to another element of Dodd and Supa's (2014, 2015) definition of CSA, namely that practices necessarily require organizations to have an eye toward their own financial outcomes. In other words, by this understanding, CSA constitutes a fundamentally instrumental endeavor. First, this is an odd stipulation considering Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015) repeatedly argue that CSA can constitute either planned or unintentional actions; successfully persuading stakeholders to take an action that financially benefits the organization would seemingly require a planned communication effort in most settings, especially considering Dodd and Supa's (2014, 2015) grounding of CSA in strategic issues management. Moreover, such a foundation would encourage a greater focus on activities closely related to organizational operations, which would likely result in a higher degree of fit (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Suchman, 1995).

More importantly, however, the guidelines of promoting financial success while avoiding high company-cause fit potentially contradict one another, especially given Dodd and Supa's (2014, 2015) reliance on CSR as a formative construct from which CSA emerges (Carroll, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 2012; Duhé, 2009; Robinson et al., 2012). Consider as well that the term "fit" has multiple meanings, and while no predetermined congruence between company and cause definitively determines whether an organization engages in advocacy, the connection or fit between *stakeholders* and the cause certainly does (Abitbol et al., 2018; Gupta & Prisch, 2006).

Alternatively called company-cause identification or customer-cause congruence, this concept of fit reflects the degree to which stakeholders perceive themselves as sharing similar characteristics, values, or objectives with a particular organization (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Bigné-Alcañiz et al., 2010; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). By taking a controversial stance on some sociopolitical issue, organizations signal to stakeholders and society more broadly what they value (Browning et al., 2020; Cundill et al., 2018; Park & Jiang, 2023). While that signal may alienate some stakeholders, the effectiveness of sociopolitical advocacy depends on the ability of such overt signaling to engender strong customer-cause congruence (Hong & Li, 2020; Park & Jiang, 2023). Typically, authentic action consistent with an organization's stated stance will strengthen this sense of shared values (Edelman, 2018; London, 2010; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

Furthermore, several studies of CSA have demonstrated a positive relationship between enhanced fit of various kinds and numerous downstream effects, such as improved reputation (Hong & Li, 2020; Lim & Young, 2021), increased purchase intention (Hong & Li, 2020), heightened word-of-mouth (Overton et al., 2021), decreased perceptions of corporate hypocrisy (Kim et al., 2025), and positive attitude change toward the issue (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). Moreover, these benefits have been linked to authenticity in CSA, which in part

occurs when an organization “upholds its core values through CSA” (Lee, 2025, p. 378), or in other words displays fit between the company and the cause—a cause that stakeholders also value (Lim & Jiang, 2021; Lim & Young, 2021; Yim, 2021).

Why All the Fuss?

Our aim here is not to deride the CSA scholarship of Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015). Quite the opposite. This subdiscipline would not exist without their pioneering work. However, as the study of CSA has proliferated, the construct’s definition has become more elastic. CSA has been used in myriad ways across hundreds of studies, which makes findings difficult to interpret, leads to misconceptions about the practice, and impedes theory development.

Very briefly, let’s examine how three recent studies conceptualized CSA, bearing in mind that each relies on Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015) as a starting point for defining the construct. First, Kim et al. (2020) consider CSA in comparison to CSR:

CSR focuses on actions and policies that could increase an organization’s reputation and profits, whereas CSA emphasizes an organization’s values and how to demonstrate its values within controversial social issues (Wilcox, 2019). Ciszek and Logan (2018) posited that an organization can present itself as a more values-driven organization through CSA activities.

(p. 2)⁶

Second, in their work, DiRusso et al. (2022) juxtapose CSA with activism:

CSA is a public relations initiative in which a company produces a timely response to a controversial social issue, taking a stance that alienates some consumers but unites others. ... Put simply, CSA takes a public stance on an issue and tries to generate others’ support for the corporate position, while activism specifically criticizes an issue and exerts pressure to influence institutional change.

(pp. 1–2)

Finally, Waymer and Logan (2021) describe CSA “as the public stance corporations, including their leaders, take on controversial social and political issues” (p. 3), and within that context, their study seeks “to uncover if or how Nike is engaging CSA that challenges status quo gender, racial, and cultural norms that attempt to circumscribe the human potential of women and people of color” (p. 1).

Note that each of these conceptualizations describes CSA as value laden and ethically oriented. Kim et al. (2020) describe CSR in purely instrumental/economic terms, contrasting it with CSA, which they assert is values driven.

DiRusso et al. (2022) conceive of CSA as a process of converting stakeholders to adopt an organization's issue or position, with little mention of behaviors that contribute to the bottom line. Waymer and Logan (2021) lean into the controversy element, yet make no reference to economic motivations and instead view CSA as a means of empowerment to generate social change.

Again, our aim here is not to critique these studies per se. They all make exceptional contributions to the field. Nevertheless, we must stress that, at some level and at some point, normative and ethical considerations have been read into the CSA construct—considerations that were absent in foundational conceptualizations (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). Our supposition is that the duality of instrumental/normative motivations for engaging in CSR was simply ported over to the study of CSA, the latter construct drawing heavily from the former. But the seminal works of Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015) make little to no reference to normative, moral concerns in relation to CSA. Instead, the focus is squarely on “how organizational stances on social-political issues has [*sic*] an impact on organization goals, specifically the financial bottom line” (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 2), and more specifically “how CSA impacts organizational financial outcomes via purchase intentions” (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 289).

With the above considerations in mind, we maintain that CSA occurs when organizations instrumentally engage in sociopolitical advocacy, aligning themselves with a controversial sociopolitical cause with a built-in focus on how these efforts can directly or indirectly enhance their own financial well-being. For the sake of clarity, scholars who focus on sociopolitical advocacy from a normative, ethical, values-driven, or issue-oriented perspective should (a) reconsider their reliance on Dodd and Supa's (2014, 2015) seminal work to ground their approaches, (b) clearly articulate the motivations and outcomes under study, and/or (c) consider using terms other than CSA in their research.

Corporate Political Advocacy

Fortuitously, a plausible alternative exists in the construct of corporate political advocacy (CPA). This construct is arguably more common in the business ethics, management, organizational communication, and marketing literatures than in public relations scholarship. It stems from an explicit social justice and/or activist orientation in contrast to the economically enlightened self-interest indicative of CSA (London, 2008, 2010; Wettstein, 2015; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Broadly, in this context, advocacy represents “the act of supporting an idea, need, person, or group. Social advocates take public action to engender fair treatment or further the cause of people in need who can't speak for themselves (or do so effectively)” (London, 2008, p. 313). Building upon this work, Wettstein and Baur (2016) formally defined CPA as “voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same” (p. 200).

CPA is distinct from other forms of corporate political engagement, many of which involve the organization leveraging its political power to press for

policy changes that benefit its bottom line. Lobbying efforts are just one of many examples that fall under this self-interested purview (Bonardi & Keim, 2005; Getz, 1997; Keim & Zeithaml, 1986; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011). Additionally, CPA messages are more often targeted to generate support for a cause or issue among a broad set of stakeholders rather than directly influence policy- or decision-makers. The process is akin to two-step flow, in which the advocating organization seeks to generate and mobilize a broad base of supporters who will then feel empowered to effect change (Wettstein, 2015; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

Effectively, CPA shares many key elements with CSA but operates with a focus on normative motivations and outcomes rather than instrumental ones. There have been a handful of applications of CPA in the public relations literature in recent years. In their critical discourse analysis of Ben & Jerry's support of the BLM movement, Ciszek and Logan (2018) rely on CPA as a foundational construct. They argue for the value of dissensus in generating meaningful changes to the status quo, as well as the role that CPA can play in promoting genuine—though not necessarily dialogic—exchanges concerning important social issues, thereby establishing moral legitimacy for the organization. Others are more skeptical of CPA and whether it consistently delivers on its wider promises. For example, Hoffmann et al. (2020) contend that, though promising, CPA may at times result in little more than epideictic rhetoric, or “ceremonial communication that affirms the respectability or shamefulness of current behaviour” (pp. 155–156). In analyzing Nike's “Dream Crazy” campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, the authors contend that deliberate content and messaging choices strip away key context and detract from efforts to discuss or promote racial justice. Like Ciszek and Logan (2018), Hoffmann et al. (2020) believe that CPA has a key normative role to play, but to meaningfully do so, organizations that engage in the practice must embrace conflict and maintain persistent focus on the ethical outcomes they hope to realize.

The Special Case of CEO Activism

Like the other forms of prosocial communication discussed up to this point, CPA is an organization-level exercise. To effectively achieve their ends, disparate as they may be, organizations must integrate these efforts into their broader outlooks and operations (Dowling & Moran, 2012). CEO activism is unique in that its focus rests more on the individual, namely the CEO or some other high-ranking leader, rather than the organization itself.

Chatterji and Toffel (2018) define CEO activism as executives “taking public stands on political and social issues unrelated to their companies' bottom lines” (p. 80). Hambrick and Wowak (2021) echo many of these elements but extend them significantly, describing CEO activism as “a business leader's personal and public expression of a stance on some matter of current social or political debate, with the primary aims of visibly weighing in on the issue and influencing opinions in the espoused direction” (p. 34).

In both of these definitions, elements of CPA are clearly present. First, the aim appears largely normative, as the CEO addresses issues disconnected from the economic health of her organization and instead appears motivated by moral concerns regarding the issue at hand. Among the many reasons CEOs speak up, Chatterji and Toffel (2018) suggest personal conviction is a primary driver. Relatedly, CEOs may also feel that organizations have a purpose extending beyond profit and that certain positions might reflect not just their values, but those of the organization more broadly.

Second, through such actions, CEOs strive to build broader bases of support for their views. Hambrick and Wowak (2021) in particular stress the public nature of CEO activism. Attempts to assert one's influence for personal gain or the financial benefit of an organization often occur through more private lobbying efforts. By contrast, CEO activism is necessarily done in the open. The high-profile nature of CEOs brings with it visibility, a prerequisite in persuading others to adopt a particular opinion or position.

Though we define CEO activism as a specialized form of CPA, we wish to acknowledge a key difficulty with such a typology, namely the extent to which a CEO can serve as a stand-in for the organization itself. CEOs are individuals, not entities. They have lives that exist beyond their organizations and their leadership roles within them. To that extent, it is virtually impossible to determine with certainty where the line between the person and the role should be drawn—or how boldly. If a CEO acts purely as a private citizen, can we tie that action, its motivations, or its outcomes directly to the organization as a form of CPA? Perhaps not. However, CEOs often possess strong name recognition that is paired schematically with their organizations in the minds of stakeholders, arguably so much so that any CEO action—personal or professional—will result in direct consequences for their organizations.

Conversely, the pendulum could swing in the other direction, and upper echelons theory proves instructive here. Within this framework, Hambrick and Mason (1984) contend that “top executives see their decision situations through personalized lenses formed by their experiences, personalities, and values” (p. 39). In other words, CEOs' personal views or ideologies influence their decision-making relative to organizational positions. This situation appears unavoidable and could create consternation. Agency theory distinguishes between the principals who own an organization (e.g., shareholders) and the agents who operate it on their behalf (e.g., managers); the CEO would therefore be considered a managerial agent in this context (Connelly et al., 2011; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). The so-called agency problem arises when managers act in accordance with their own interests rather than those of the principals (Friedman, 1962, 1970). If a CEO achieves enough power and influence within an organization to syphon significant corporate resources toward her activism initiatives, those efforts may not be independent enough to constitute CEO activism. Recall that CEO activism represents individual action. If an organization commits vast resources to a sociopolitical advocacy initiative at the behest of its leaders and managers, that strikes us as a more general form of CPA as opposed to the specialized case CEO activism represents.

Organizational Advocacy

The landscape of sociopolitical advocacy as understood in the public relations context is confusing, to put it mildly. Our efforts thus far to meticulously draw lines of demarcation among these constructs should, at the very least, illustrate that fact. However, it is important to note that these constructs rarely fit so neatly into boxes as they do in the concept mapping we provided at this chapter's outset. This reality becomes further complicated when one considers that these constructs aren't always studied in isolation; indeed, comparing different antecedents, psychological processes, and messaging factors across varying types of prosocial communication has become increasingly commonplace (Bhagwat et al., 2020; DiRusso et al., 2022; Overton et al., 2021; Vasquez, 2022).

Studies including instrumental and normative motives and outcomes of sociopolitical advocacy, that is, comprising elements of both CSA and CPA, present special challenges. First, we never truly *know* what motivates organizations and their leaders to act; we can only *infer* what drives them. Consider again Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign, perhaps the most studied sociopolitical advocacy case in the public relations literature. Did Nike feature Kaepernick because it sought to advance his protest against brutality in policing the Black community? Or did Nike include him to capitalize off his notoriety—or arguably infamy—to bolster its bottom line? Some scholars view "Dream Crazy" as an ethical exercise (e.g., Waymer & Logan, 2021), while others are more skeptical (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2020). However, any honest answer must begin with some version of "I think..." rather than "I know..." because we're at best making educated guesses based on what an organization says and how an organization behaves, à la attribution theory (Kelley, 1967; Kelley & Michela, 1980).

This problem is further compounded by social norms and desirability biases. Ellen et al. (2006) argue that organizations sometimes engage in prosocial communication out of egoistic motivations, simply exploiting a sociopolitical cause for corporate gain. There are countless examples of pinkwashing, greenwashing, rainbow washing, wokewashing, insert-cause-here-washing—but in none of those instances did an organization intentionally or publicly disclose its selfish intent. Organizations that engage only shallowly and symbolically with an issue often communicate in the same way a more genuine, substantive actor would (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Browning et al., 2022). As such, authenticity is notoriously difficult to determine without the benefit of hindsight.

Many corporate backtracks of the 2020s support this notion. To cite one example, Target recently retooled its Pride Month marketing efforts out of concerns about a conservative backlash (Holman & Creswell, 2023). As related rollbacks to DEI policies mounted, Target faced extensive consumer boycotts (Cameron, 2025). The backlash to the backlash was fueled by an attribution of inauthenticity by more liberal-leaning stakeholders. These consumers aren't boycotting Target so much for its DEI rollbacks—including its public support

for the LGBTQ+ community—but because those actions directly contradicted high-profile statements that supported those very values. The sense of betrayal is more damning than the action itself.

Interestingly, Target still continues to celebrate Pride Month, though in a more subdued fashion (Salao, 2023). While this reads as mixed messaging, it speaks to a second challenge regarding drivers of sociopolitical advocacy: ulterior motivations. Disney proves particularly instructive here. The company seems to have dug in on several issues regarding race and LGBTQ+ representation and has spoken out clearly and publicly against Florida’s Parental Rights in Education bill (aka, “Don’t Say Gay” bill), despite box-office boycotts and declining theme park attendance (Burton, 2023). That steadfast stance may be as much practical as principled. Griffin (2000) catalogued the queer community’s long-standing affinity for Disney, many of whom see themselves reflected in the characters and subtext of its films and television shows—and also welcomed as employees. Griffin (2023) has since argued that Disney has no interest in a broader culture war but instead simply views LGBTQ+ audiences and their allies as immensely valuable to future revenue. To paraphrase Kant (1994), one could view Disney as acting *in accordance with* moral duty but not *from* it. In other words, these could be instances in which corporate support for a cause seems substantive rather than symbolic and aligns with some moral principle, but the organization acts more from economic necessity rather than ethical concern.

The third and final challenge is that normative and instrumental motivations can co-occur. Perhaps it is the case that Nike believed it would profit from including Kaepernick in its campaign, but also felt a genuine moral obligation to advance his cause. Similarly, Disney may very well view LGBTQ+ audiences and allies as important sources of revenue while at the same time holding a sincere conviction regarding their fight for equity and equality. Several studies of sociopolitical advocacy have embraced this dual perspective, simultaneously investigating how advocacy can advance stakeholder support for a cause as well as the company advocating for it (Browning & Cheema, 2025; Browning et al., 2020; Kim & Meganck, 2025; Troy, Buckley et al., 2025a).

In effect, these scholars are either (a) investigating CSA and CPA simultaneously, yet as distinct constructs, or (b) studying the outcomes of sociopolitical advocacy more broadly without stipulating a specific motivation driving the practice. Commonly, researchers deploying the latter approach simply describe their work as a study of CSA, which isn’t wholly accurate. Again, as originally conceptualized, CSA explicitly focuses on instrumental motives and outcomes and therefore does not precisely reflect the construct under study in these cases. Unlike CSR, CSA as commonly defined does not capture both instrumental and normative elements. A broader, umbrella term in the realm of sociopolitical advocacy would be immensely beneficial in cases where (a) organizational motivations are impossible to determine, (b) normative and instrumental motivations appear intertwined, or (c) a wide set of motivations are of interest to

the researchers. With these concerns in mind, Browning et al. (2020) coined the term organizational advocacy (OA), defining it as follows:

The taking of a stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue that risks alienating some stakeholders while signaling to others a shared commitment to values or ideals important to both parties. This sociopolitical issue may or may not be relevant to ordinary business operations, and the organization may engage in organizational advocacy out of normative, instrumental, or mixed motivations.

(p. 1030)

We have modified this definition slightly for the purposes of this work, placing it at the level of CSR in our concept mapping to fill this needed gap. As such, OA offers a theoretically grounded framework that accounts for the varied and often overlapping motivations that drive sociopolitical advocacy. By capturing both normative and instrumental dimensions, OA provides conceptual clarity that is necessary to support more precise theorizing and empirical testing. In the chapters that follow, this framework offers a foundation from which scholars can build, challenge, and refine our collective understanding of the development and function of sociopolitical advocacy communication in the public relations context.

As we move into subsequent chapters, OA serves as both a conceptual anchor and a diagnostic tool—one that can help scholars better evaluate the shifting boundaries, motivations, and implications of organizational voice in the public sphere.

Chapters in This Book

This book is divided into three parts. *Part I: Foundations* lays the conceptual groundwork for the various types of prosocial communication discussed throughout the volume, with the first chapter conceptualizing and mapping constructs and laying the groundwork for the deeper and more nuanced discussion of these constructs and their vast areas of applicability that appear in later chapters. In Chapter 2, *A New Integrated Theoretical Model of Stakeholder Response to Corporate Social Advocacy*, Joon Kyoung Kim and Won-Ki Moon introduce a new comprehensive conceptual model of CSA. Their proposed model, the Integrated Model for Authentic Corporate Social Advocacy (IMACSA), connects three key domains that influence stakeholder responses to CSA: company factors, communication factors, and stakeholder factors. Notably, the model emphasizes feedback and adaptation as key elements to achieving long-term perceptions of authenticity among stakeholders. The authors propose that the model can serve as a roadmap or a checklist for CSA communication: start with the company's value and internal truth, bridge to external expectations, craft authentic narratives, and sustain through accountability.

Chapter 3, titled *Public Relations and the Art of Living Together: CSA as an Organizational Citizenship Responsibility in Democratic, Interdependent Societies*, by Luke Capizzo and Leping You, advances a critical rethinking of CSA through the lens of organizational citizenship in democratic, interdependent societies. Moving beyond traditional theories that emphasize harmony- and consensus-oriented approaches, the authors call for a more agonistic, deliberative approach that centers listening, stance-taking, and long-term community engagement. By linking CSA, CPA, and organizational citizenship, the chapter offers a powerful framework for understanding public relations not just as reputation management but also as a meaningful contributor to democratic life.

Chapter 4, *Trickle Down and Out Effects of Leadership Communication: The Special Case of CEO Activism*, by Grace Ji, offers a comprehensive account of CEO activism research through a systematic review of peer-reviewed articles published in communication journals from 2014 to 2024. Ji identifies key challenges in CEO activism research, including a lack of dedicated theoretical frameworks, conceptual overlap with constructs such as CSR and CSA, and the predominance of U.S.-centric studies. The author calls for more research on CEO activism across diverse geopolitical, cultural, and institutional contexts.

Part I concludes with Chapter 5, *Corporate Racial Responsibility: Theory, Applications, and Extensions*, by Nneka Logan. Underscoring CRR's normative framework, Logan asserts that corporations have a moral and ethical responsibility to support racial justice, particularly through their communication practices. She offers five communication principles to aid scholarly research and analyses pertaining to corporate communications about race, arguing that CRR theory provides a pathway for understanding how corporations have earned a responsibility to race and how they can demonstrate that responsibility by engaging in communications that advocate for racial justice, inclusivity, and more harmonious race relations.

Part II: Antecedents and Frameworks further highlights how theoretical frameworks inform practice, with a particular focus on emerging trends and applications across the field. For example, in Chapter 6, *Engaging Polarized Publics in Corporate Social Advocacy: A Deliberative-Agonistic Model of Dialogic Communication*, Joon Soo Lim critically examines how two perspectives on CSA propose employing dialogic communication to address challenges from active publics holding opposing views on contentious social issues. The chapter focuses on the symbolic management and deliberative-agonistic democracy perspectives and explains their theoretical assumptions, premises, and limitations. After discussing the shortcomings of reactive strategies in response to conservative backlash within the symbolic management perspective, the chapter contrasts Habermas's deliberative democracy and Mouffe's agonistic pluralism, which propose shared yet divergent approaches to implementing dialogic communication. To connect theory with practice, the chapter illustrates how high-profile companies responded to mounting pressure from

conservative activism. The chapter advocates for institutionalizing agonistic dialogue as a sustainable approach to dealing with the ideological tensions inherent in CSA.

Chapter 7, *Navigating Corporate Social Advocacy: Organizational Dynamics and Challenges*, by Hyejoon Rim, Moonhee Cho, and Katie Haejung Kim, examines the internal operations of CSA, exploring how it is perceived within organizations in comparison to CSR, the multifaceted challenges communication organizations face, and the approaches to navigating such challenges. Drawing on in-depth interviews with communication professionals of large U.S. corporations, the study reveals three distinct perspectives on the relationship between CSA and CSR: viewing CSA as an evolution of CSR, as a subset of CSR, or as opposite ends of a spectrum. This chapter also identifies key internal tensions that arise in the process of CSA—including conflicts between leadership and employees, among employees, and among departments—and how organizations work to address them. By examining these dynamics, the chapter offers both theoretical and practical guidance for navigating the complexities of CSA from a public relations perspective.

In Chapter 8, *Authenticity in Corporate Social Advocacy*, Ejae Lee centers on the critical role of authenticity in CSA and its implications for public relations practice. Lee argues that authenticity is not merely about taking a public stance on sociopolitical issues but goes further to ensure a consistent, values-driven alignment between an organization's mission, actions, and communications. The author argues that unlike traditional CSR, authentic CSA involves consistent engagement with sociopolitical issues—even at the risk of backlash or financial loss. Using Ben & Jerry's as a case study, the chapter illustrates how long-term, values-driven advocacy fosters public trust and credibility. The chapter concludes by calling for global research and practical strategies to help organizations maintain authenticity in increasingly complex social and political landscapes.

Chapter 9, *Shaping Public Expectations: The Interplay of Individual, Organizational, and Social Determinants in Organizational Advocacy*, by Sung-Un Yang and Nicholas Browning, argues that there is a pressing need for a more comprehensive understanding of the individual, organizational, and social determinants that influence public expectations for OA. The chapter discusses conceptual frameworks underlying these critical factors and their impact on shaping public expectations for OA. The chapter identifies seven key factors at individual, organizational, and societal levels, including (1) a lack of faith in government; (2) withdrawal and polarization; (3) increased corporate influence; (4) a societal shift of social norms toward greater awareness of sociopolitical issues; (5) the impact of social media on efficacy for problem-solving; (6) evolving preferences of Millennial and Gen Z publics; and (7) the need to meet expectations of social norms and values.

Part II concludes with Chapter 10, *Messages That Move Us: Opportunities for Integrating Media Psychology and Public Relations in Corporate Social Advocacy Theory and Message Development*, by Matthew S. VanDyke and

Alan Abitbol. They argue for future CSA scholarship focused on the intersection of media psychology and public relations. The authors highlight that while CSA has gained traction as a communication strategy, most scholarship focuses on public reactions and business outcomes rather than the design of the messages themselves. They advocate for more research on how the effective and ethical design of CSA message content and structure—particularly emotional and narrative elements—elicit prosocial and positive organizational outcomes.

The final section of the book, *Part III: Applications Across the Field*, examines sociopolitical advocacy in various subdisciplines of public relations to which the research appears currently most relevant. The chapters in this section discuss effective and ethical advocacy messaging, organizational listening, integrating AI tools, advocacy in the nonprofit sector, and how advocacy intersects with crisis communication. In Chapter 11, *Corporate Social Engagement Framework in a Fully Functioning Society: Businesses as Agents of Change via Principled Corporate Dissent*, Minjeong Kang explores various corporate social engagement activities across a range of prosocial communication types. She argues that companies should effectively engage in advocacy and activism through direct challenges to prevailing norms and policies. Such principled corporate dissent, as she calls it, reflects organizations' moral obligation to combat injustice, promote the general welfare, and ensure the proper functioning of a pluralist society.

Chapter 12, *A View from the Other Side: Advocacy and Nonprofit Communication*, by Virginia S. Harrison and Christen L. Buckley, argues that nonprofit organizations not only are well positioned to engage in CSA but, in many cases, are expected to do so due to their mission-driven nature and moral authority. Unlike for-profit corporations, whose engagement in advocacy can appear opportunistic or purely strategic, nonprofits often operate from an established foundation of values that makes advocacy a more natural and credible extension of their work. The authors contend that nonprofits can—and should—embrace CSA as a strategic function that aligns with their organizational identity, helps fulfill their mission, and meets evolving stakeholder expectations. They propose a framework for understanding nonprofit CSA based on whether advocacy is proactive or reactive and whether it targets internal or external stakeholders. This framework helps clarify the different strategic roles CSA can play within nonprofit organizations. Ultimately, the authors argue that CSA offers nonprofits a powerful way to assert relevance, deepen stakeholder trust, and lead in shaping public discourse around social issues.

In Chapter 13, *When It Doesn't Go to Plan: Corporate Social Advocacy and Crisis Communication*, Seoyeon Kim and Lucinda Austin examine the emerging intersection between CSA and crisis communication, focusing on how CSA can function as both a potential crisis trigger and an effective crisis management strategy. The authors draw on situational crisis communication theory and explore how SCCT's evolution—particularly the emergence of the paracrisis concept—provides valuable insights for

understanding CSA-related risks and opportunities. Kim and Austin examine both the risks and strategic potential of CSA in crisis contexts to inform how organizations can navigate the increasingly complex terrain of corporations' social and political engagement. The chapter concludes with future directions for crisis communication research in the CSA context.

Finally, Chapter 14, *Exploring the Intersection of Social Media and Artificial Intelligence in Organizational Advocacy Practices*, by Yi Lou and Hua Jiang, illustrates how the convergence of social media and AI is significantly reshaping OA practice, rapidly transforming how advocacy campaigns are created, received, curated, disseminated, and interpreted across media platforms. According to Lou and Jiang, involving AI and social media has transformed OA into an interactive, participatory communication process of meaning co-construction in digital spaces, which raises questions about the moral foundations of advocacy. The chapter concludes with future research directions at the intersection of AI, social media, and OA, emphasizing the need to support more ethically grounded and culturally responsive communication strategies.

Conclusion

As sociopolitical advocacy continues to evolve as a central concern in public relations scholarship and practice, the necessity of rigorous conceptual mapping has never been more urgent. This chapter has attempted to provide such a foundation by distinguishing among overlapping but distinct constructs—CSR, OA, CSA, CPA, CRR, and CEO activism, among others—each with its own motivational architecture and communicative implications. These distinctions are not meant to constrain inquiry but to enable more nuanced and accurate investigations moving forward. Bringing together authors who are thought leaders and emerging scholars from diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives, this volume provides comprehensive conceptualizations and discussions of key constructs related to prosocial communication through perspectives grounded in public relations, marketing, and communication theory. It examines issues central to sociopolitical advocacy communication, including theoretical underpinnings, understanding both normative and instrumental drivers of advocacy, relationship building, effective and ethical advocacy messaging, and how advocacy intersects with crisis communication. With attention to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, this book also addresses the tensions associated with advocacy and how societal changes will impact sociopolitical advocacy research and practice in the future. It examines principles and concepts of advocacy and explains how they have been applied in research and practice throughout various organizational contexts. In the following chapters, we invite readers to build on this framework, to challenge it, and to refine it, as we collectively work toward a clearer, more coherent understanding of advocacy in the public relations domain.

Terminological ambiguity and inconsistent application of core constructs have slowed theoretical progress in sociopolitical advocacy research. By

mapping the terrain of prosocial communication, we hope to provide scholars with a clearer lexicon and a conceptual roadmap. Let this chapter serve not as a final word but as a prompt to revisit assumptions, sharpen definitions, and pursue greater clarity in both scholarly and professional discourses. Scholars must interrogate existing frameworks and build new models that account for the dynamic, often polarized nature of modern advocacy. At the same time, practitioners need tools and insights to navigate increasingly complex stakeholder expectations, reputational risks, and ethical dilemmas.

This book contributes to both aims by bridging theory and practice—offering a multidisciplinary foundation that supports rigorous research and equips professionals to lead with clarity, responsibility, and impact in today’s challenging advocacy landscape.

Notes

- 1 In an empirical test of CSR’s impact on organizational performance outcome, Jin and Drozdenko (2010) used stepwise linear regression and separated the impacts of ethicality and social responsibility as independent variables. The relative lack of multicollinearity (VIF = 1.33) between the two variables lends further evidence to L’Etang’s (2003) claim that ethics and social responsibility are distinct constructs.
- 2 Cause marketing is effectively the same as cause-related marketing (CRM). Social marketing arguably aligns more with an activism orientation than CSR.
- 3 These relationships are commonly known as (a) consumer-cause fit, (b) company-cause fit, and (c) consumer-company congruence.
- 4 To again stress this point, the theories of excellence and contingency are much more complex than the discussion here captures. We only mean to highlight relevant aspects as they relate to the current scholarly understanding of advocacy’s role in public relations.
- 5 For context, in September 2025, we conducted an advanced Boolean search across three EBSCO databases: Business Source Complete, Communication & Mass Media Complete, and Communication Source. A search for *public relations AND sociopolitical advocacy* yielded 1 result. Pairing *public relations* with more specific terms was more fruitful: *organizational advocacy* = 23, *corporate social advocacy* = 122, *corporate political advocacy* = 17, and *CEO activism* = 16.
- 6 Ciszek and Logan’s (2018) piece referenced here is actually a study of corporate political advocacy (CPA) rather than CSA.

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