

Sociopolitical Advocacy and the Role of Public Relations

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

Edited by Holly K. Overton and Nicholas Browning

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 13

When It Doesn't Go to Plan

Corporate Social Advocacy and Crisis Communication

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DOI: 10.4324/9781003593140-16



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW YORK AND LONDON

13 When It Doesn't Go to Plan

Corporate Social Advocacy and Crisis Communication

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Introduction

An organizational crisis is “an event perceived by managers and stakeholders as highly salient, unexpected, and potentially disruptive” (Bundy et al., 2017, p. 1662). Such crises involve violations of important stakeholder expectations and therefore threaten the organization’s relationships with stakeholders (Coombs, 2022). While various types of organizations—including corporations, nonprofit institutions, and government agencies—can experience organizational crises, this chapter focuses primarily on corporate crises.

Traditionally, crisis communication researchers and media have paid most attention to operational crises with clear causes. These have included crises such as natural disasters, industrial accidents, and corporate misconduct—events that have immediate detrimental impacts on corporate operations, finances, and reputation (An & Cheng, 2010; Cheng, 2018). However, as social expectations regarding corporate social responsibility (CSR) have increased, companies now face crises when stakeholders perceive them as socially irresponsible, even in areas without legal obligations (Carroll, 1999; Freeman, 1984; Parmar et al., 2010; Coombs, 2019). Today’s stakeholders demand that corporations not only comply with laws and regulations and respond appropriately to incidents involving harm but also consider how their choices and actions affect key stakeholders and society at large (Coombs, 2019; Chen & Holladay, 2023).

Meanwhile, Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), an extension of CSR (Browning et al., 2020; Rim et al., 2024) discussed throughout this book, began receiving substantial attention from communication scholars and society around the mid-2010s. Dodd and Supa (2014) defined CSA as “an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues” (p. 5). By articulating the characteristics of CSA as a public relations function, they established a foundation for subsequent research based on a clear conceptualization of CSA.

CSA activities existed before the mid-2010s, such as Levi Strauss & Co.’s support for gun control and Chick-fil-A’s opposition to same-sex marriage. However, a striking example of heightened expectations for corporate involvement in sociopolitical issues emerged following George Floyd’s death in 2020.

The deaths of Michael Brown in 2014 and George Floyd in 2020—both Black men killed by white police officers—occurred only six years apart, yet corporate responses differed significantly. Corporate responses to Brown's death were minimal. Despite potential differences in the specific contexts of these events, the widespread and active corporate engagement in social justice issues following Floyd's death suggests powerful academic and social implications. Immediately after Floyd's death, many corporations posted black squares on their social media pages to mourn Floyd and protest racism and police brutality. Companies including Amazon, Target, and Apple supported the Black Lives Matter movement by funding related organizations and creating racial justice programs.

As more companies implement CSA initiatives and diversify their approaches, examples of both successful and unsuccessful cases have emerged. Unsuccessful CSA cases can lead to threat of corporate crisis or become a crisis. This can occur when CSA faces strong and widespread backlash or fails to meet stakeholder expectations related to CSA, creating threats to corporate reputation (Byun & Mann, 2024).

CSA can also connect to corporate crises when companies use it as a crisis management strategy. Through CSA, companies can strengthen relationships with stakeholders who share their core values and beliefs (Browning et al., 2020). Based on these positive relationships, they can mitigate the negative impacts of potential future crises (Park, 2022). Additionally, companies may initiate CSA or strengthen existing CSA initiatives when responding to crises—whether caused directly by CSA or originating from other sources—in an attempt to protect and rebuild damaged corporate reputation. The topic of CSA in the context of crisis communication is emerging and requires more thorough research in the future.

SCCT as a Theoretical Framework to Understand CSA in Relation to Crisis

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) serves as a widely used theoretical framework in crisis communication research (An & Cheng, 2010; Avery et al., 2010; Cheng, 2018). SCCT categorizes crisis types that organizations may experience and recommends appropriate response strategies for each type. These crisis types are classified according to the perceived level of crisis responsibility attributed to the organization. The theory posits that crises associated with higher levels of responsibility have more severe negative impacts on organizational reputation.

SCCT emphasizes that organizations should prioritize preventing and reducing physical and psychological harm caused by crises. Once these primary concerns are addressed, organizations should then implement appropriate crisis response strategies to protect their corporate reputation (Coombs, 2022). These response strategies include defensive strategies (e.g., attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating), diminishing strategies (e.g., excusing, justification), and

accommodative strategies (e.g., compensation, apology). A key principle of SCCT is that as the level of crisis responsibility attributed to the organization increases, more accommodative strategies become necessary.

SCCT organizes crisis types into three broad clusters: victim, accidental, and preventable. Each cluster contains specific crisis types (see Coombs, 2022 for a detailed discussion). The victim cluster includes natural disasters, workplace violence, and malevolence—situations perceived as involving minimal organizational responsibility and thus causing minimal reputational damage. The accidental cluster encompasses crises such as technical-error accidents and product harm, which involve low attribution of responsibility and consequently low reputational impact. The preventable cluster includes human-error accidents, human-error product harm, organizational misdeeds, data breaches, and scansis (a term that represents a situation where a crisis becomes a scandal)—all of which involve strong attribution of crisis responsibility and cause substantial reputational damage.

It is important to note that this aforementioned SCCT typology represents the most recently updated version, which differs significantly from versions used until the mid-2010s. Since its initial development, SCCT's crisis typology has evolved to focus exclusively on operational crisis types that disrupt organizational reputation and operations in an immediate fashion. Timothy Coombs, SCCT's developer, has continuously updated research findings and practical guidelines through his book "Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing, and Responding," first published in 1999. The fifth edition (2019) introduced significant updates to the crisis typology. Notably, rumors (previously in the victim cluster) and challenges (previously in the accidental cluster) were removed from the traditional typology and reclassified under a new category called "paracrisis." Additionally, data breaches and scansis have been newly added to the preventable cluster.

The reclassification and addition of concepts such as paracrisis (a "look-alike" crisis), data breaches, and scansis (a hybrid of scandal and crisis) in the latest crisis typology of SCCT reflects heightened societal expectations for corporate ethics and citizenship. Given that CSA functions to maintain and develop stakeholder relationships by meeting societal expectations, this evolution suggests that companies' failure to adequately fulfill stakeholder expectations regarding CSA can lead to corporate crises.

From Challenges to Paracrisis: SCCT's Evolution and Its Implications for CSA

The evolution of SCCT's crisis types to the latest version seems to have been driven largely by two key factors (see Coombs & Holladay, 2015): the widespread adoption of social media and heightened social expectations for CSR. Social media has transformed how stakeholders interact with corporate information. People can now easily access and scrutinize information about unethical corporate activities and quickly share their thoughts about these

activities. Consequently, challenges that would have previously remained confined to specific activist groups or limited stakeholder audiences can now rapidly gain attention from a broad range of stakeholders and the general public, emerging as visible crisis threats (Coombs & Holladay, 2015).

In the traditional SCCT typology, Coombs (2007) classified stakeholder claims about inappropriate organizational operations as “challenge crises.” These were placed in the accidental cluster, suggesting low crisis responsibility and relatively minor negative impacts on organizational reputation. However, two factors have rendered this classification obsolete: heightened standards for corporate ethics and increased stakeholder monitoring of corporate behavior through social media. When companies now face stakeholder challenges regarding corporate ethics and social responsibility, they often experience reputational damage far more severe than what traditional SCCT’s accidental crisis category would predict (Kim & Austin, 2020).

Recognizing this gap, Coombs and Holladay (2015) introduced the concept of “paracrisis,” defined as “a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior” (p. 409). Unlike operational crises, paracrises primarily pose reputational threats without immediate financial or operational disruptions (Coombs, 2019; Selaković et al., 2020). Although paracrises do not require full-scale crisis responses, they demand careful monitoring and public management because of their potential to escalate into actual crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2015; Chen & Holladay, 2023).

Chen and Holladay (2023) found that, in practice, companies respond to paracrises by using a range of crisis response strategies either individually or in combination, such as refutation (denying a challenge accusation), revision (making changes to existing organizational practices), refusal (not making any direct response), recognition (acknowledging the validity of a challenge accusation), and reference to organizational values. However, further research on the effectiveness of these paracrisis response strategies is needed. Crisis management professionals must carefully assess and manage the likelihood that a paracrisis will escalate into an actual crisis, the extent of damage the paracrisis may inflict on the organization and its stakeholders, and the speed at which the paracrisis may develop into a crisis and exert its influence (Coombs, 2022). CSA-related paracrises may vary in their potential to develop into actual crises and the severity of their negative impacts, depending on factors such as public attention to the specific CSA issue and the level of involvement by influential stakeholders in the CSA issue. Additionally, the strength of a company’s commitment to CSA can influence how it evaluates the extent to which criticism from certain stakeholders regarding its advocacy should be accommodated or dismissed. This dynamic is illustrated by contrasting responses: when faced with consumer backlash following CSA on police brutality and racial discrimination, Nike (with Colin Kaepernick) maintained its position, while Pepsi immediately withdrew its related campaign (with Kendall Jenner).

When a paracrisis escalates to a full-blown crisis, it may manifest as an organizational misdeed or scandal, underscoring the importance of effective

paracrisis management. Coombs and Tachkova (2019) characterize scansis by the moral outrage stakeholders feel and express when they perceive organizational injustice and greed. Notably, SCCT's standard guidance for protecting organizational reputation does not apply to organizational misdeed crises and scansis (Coombs, 2022; Tachkova, 2021). These morally charged crises represent the highest level of perceived crisis responsibility and can severely damage organizational reputation and operations. When responding to such crises, organizations are advised to fully acknowledge the moral violation and commit to corrective actions that prevent similar future wrongdoings (Coombs & Tachkova, 2019).

This framework helps us understand how unfulfilled stakeholder expectations regarding CSA can develop into paracrises or moral outrage-involving crises. Chen and Holladay (2023) note that paracrises emerge from the perceived social obligations of an organization. As public expectations increase for companies to take positions on important political and social issues (Edelman, 2024), organizations face growing potential for CSA-related stakeholder challenges that may result in paracrises and other crises. Conversely, CSA can also function as a crisis management strategy when companies rally key stakeholders by clearly demonstrating their values (Park & Jiang, 2023) and when companies implement CSA in response to a crisis. This dual nature of CSA—as both a potential crisis trigger and as a crisis management tool—highlights its strategic importance in contemporary corporate communication.

CSA as a Crisis Risk

CSA can become a crisis risk when the divisive nature of social/political issues provokes backlash among stakeholders who take a different position on the CSA issue from the company. CSA inherently involves taking positions on issues where stakeholders hold diverse values and opinions (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). Consequently, when a company initiates CSA, stakeholders who disagree with the company's position may criticize or boycott the organization (Byun & Mann, 2024; Rim et al., 2020), potentially triggering a paracrisis or operational crisis.

Nike's social justice campaign with Colin Kaepernick illustrates this risk. After partnering with Kaepernick—who had knelt during the national anthem at NFL games to protest police brutality and racial discrimination—Nike faced significant backlash from politically conservative consumers and those who viewed the kneeling as disrespectful. These stakeholders shared images of damaged Nike products on social media with the hashtag #JustBurnIt and called for boycotts. Empirically, Rim et al. (2020) demonstrated how advocates and boycotters emerge when companies take political stances, studying Starbucks and Budweiser's responses to President Trump's immigration ban. Their research revealed that boycotters appeared extensively even within advocates' networks and formed dense, highly connected subgroups, allowing them to expand their influence effectively. These cases highlight the importance

of establishing robust issues monitoring and crisis management plans to prepare for potential stakeholder backlash against CSA initiatives.

A company's response to CSA backlash provides stakeholders with a retrospective lens through which to evaluate the organization's initial sincerity. For example, when Pepsi's advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner was criticized for trivializing the Black Lives Matter movement, and when Bud Light faced opposition for collaborating with a transgender social media influencer, both companies quickly discontinued their campaigns. Their ambiguous apologies and immediate retreat from the advocacy suggested a lack of genuine commitment to the issues, creating the impression that they were merely attempting to capitalize on socially relevant topics without authentic conviction.

Both the Pepsi and Bud Light cases share a critical weakness: insufficient association between the company and the advocated issue. When organizations advocate for issues that appear disconnected from their business or values, stakeholders may suspect ulterior motives and view the CSA negatively. Conversely, when companies demonstrate congruence with the issues they champion—through related business operations or values (Kim et al., 2025; O'Donnell et al., 2023) or through consistent historical support (Lim & Young, 2021)—stakeholders are more likely to perceive the CSA as authentic and value-driven.

Another situation where CSA can become a crisis risk is when stakeholders perceive that a company's CSA falls short of expectations. Disney's response to Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill (officially the Parental Rights in Education Act) exemplifies this scenario. Despite Disney's long history of supporting LGBTQ+ communities through proactive CSA, the company initially hesitated to oppose the bill, which restricted education on sexual orientation and gender identity in public elementary schools. This passive stance drew criticism from employees and the LGBTQ+ community, creating a paracrisis. Disney eventually declared its opposition and actively worked to challenge the legislation.

This case demonstrates that companies need to display dynamism in stakeholder communication and consistently uphold their professed values, particularly during fluid social and political situations (Bundy et al., 2017). Establishing open communication channels, demonstrating willingness to engage, and sharing information about CSA processes and outcomes can enhance perceived accountability (Gaither et al., 2025).

The complexity of CSA-related challenges and crises can extend beyond reputational concerns. Disney's opposition to the "Don't Say Gay" bill prompted Florida to reconsider the company's tax and legal benefits, resulting in ongoing legal disputes. This demonstrates how CSA can create multi-faceted risks affecting government relations, legal standing, and financial performance, requiring comprehensive crisis management approaches. Similarly, following Donald Trump's re-election as U.S. President and his opposition to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, companies have responded differently—Apple maintained its DEI policies while Amazon, Google, Meta, and many other companies scaled back their DEI programs. These varied

responses highlight the practical challenges of balancing CSA commitments with operational realities amid shifting social/political pressures (Shropshire & Hillman, 2007).

CSA as a Crisis Management Strategy: Proactive and Reactive CSA

While CSA can create crisis risks, it can also serve as an effective crisis management strategy when properly implemented. Organizations can utilize CSA in two distinct ways: proactively, to build resilience against future reputational damage, and reactively, as a response mechanism to rebuild reputation and restore stakeholder relationships after a crisis has occurred.

Proactive CSA occurs when a company adopts and promotes positions on controversial social or political issues before external pressures emerge from stakeholders such as consumers, journalists, or activists (Denner et al., 2025). In contrast, reactive CSA responds directly to stakeholder pressures as issues arise (Denner et al., 2025). In crisis communication contexts, proactive CSA encompasses stand-taking activities conducted before a crisis occurs, while reactive CSA refers to advocacy initiated specifically as part of post-crisis response efforts.

A company's CSA history can foster strong relationships with like-minded stakeholders (Dodd & Supa, 2015), creating a buffer against future reputational damage. Effective proactive CSA aligns advocacy with core organizational values and stakeholder expectations. Gaither et al. (2025) note that CSA provides companies opportunities to realign stakeholder relationships while clarifying corporate values. Park (2022) further demonstrates that CSA signals organizational identity, reduces skepticism, and enhances stakeholder relationships.

SCCT identifies pre-existing stakeholder relationships as contextual modifiers that influence crisis responsibility attribution (Coombs, 2022). Negative pre-crisis relationships can elevate responsibility attribution and escalate crisis severity, while positive relationships can reduce both (Coombs & Holladay, 2006; Brown & White, 2010). This suggests that the relationship-strengthening effect of proactive CSA can serve as reputational capital during crises.

However, proactive CSA does not universally yield positive outcomes during crises. Context matters significantly, and a company's CSA history may sometimes intensify negative stakeholder reactions (Janssen et al., 2015). Research on CSR—studied more extensively than CSA in crisis contexts—suggests that positive pre-crisis expectations can heighten stakeholder disappointment when these expectations are violated, resulting in more severe negative reactions (Cho et al., 2021; Sohn & Lariscy, 2015). This implies that positive expectations formed through proactive CSA might become liabilities during crises. When crises stem from CSA expectation violations, stakeholders may perceive inauthenticity in the company's inconsistent actions (Vredenburg et al., 2020), rapidly deteriorating organization–stakeholder relationships.

Research on reactive CSA remains limited. Ji and Wan's (2024) study—among the few examining this approach—found that corporate reputation is better protected when reactive CSA is present, demonstrating its potential as

an effective crisis response strategy. The study used scenarios where reactive CSA was highly relevant to the crisis issue, potentially amplifying its positive effects. Similarly, in CSR contexts, Kim and Choi (2018) found that crisis-congruent reactive CSR initiatives mitigated negative consumer responses to both the crisis and the company.

Further research is needed to explore reactive CSA's various roles and effects during crises. Important areas for investigation include the influence of crisis-CSA congruence, crisis types, prior CSA presence, and perceived organizational motives (Kim & Choi, 2018; Rim & Ferguson, 2020; Wei & Kim, 2021; Wu & Overton, 2022). Such research would help establish a more comprehensive understanding of CSA's effectiveness as a crisis response strategy across diverse contexts.

Future Directions for Crisis Communication Research in the CSA Context

Future crisis communication research in the CSA context needs to expand in several critical directions. First, scholars should examine more diverse aspects of CSA-involved crises. While the paracrisis framework provides a valuable starting point, further classifications of CSA-involved crises that account for varying stakeholder expectations, issue polarization levels, and organizational characteristics would advance crisis communication research in the CSA context.

Second, research should explore the boundary conditions that determine when proactive CSA serves as reputational capital versus when it creates vulnerability during crises. Factors such as company-issue fit (Lim & Young, 2021), company-stakeholder identification (Rim et al., 2022), and crisis type (Janssen et al., 2015) likely moderate these relationships. Systematic empirical investigation is needed to establish when proactive CSA helps versus harms crisis outcomes. For example, future research may test the following proposition: "Proactive CSA with high company-issue fit will mitigate the impact of non-CSA-related crises, while such CSA will aggravate the impact of CSA-related crises."

Third, the emerging area of reactive CSA warrants significant attention. Researchers should examine how unique contexts and characteristics involved in the crisis, corporations, stakeholders, and the reactive CSA initiative interact with reactive CSA effectiveness. These investigations would contribute to our understanding of CSA as both a potential crisis trigger and a strategic crisis management approach in today's increasingly complex sociopolitical environment. For example, future research may consider examining the following proposition: "Congruence between the crisis issue and the reactive CSA issue will help the company overcome the crisis and generate positive stakeholder outcomes."

Discussion Questions

- 1 Think of a specific CSA campaign. What are the potential crisis risks associated with that CSA initiative? What is the likelihood that each of these risks could lead to a corporate crisis, and why?

- 2 Consider one successful and one unsuccessful case of crisis response related to CSA-involved crises. What do you think were the factors that contributed to the success or failure of each crisis response? How should the company in the unsuccessful case have responded to the crisis, and what is your reasoning?
- 3 When a company that has previously experienced a crisis (whether CSA-related or not) seeks to implement a CSA campaign as part of its post-crisis renewal process, what factors should it consider? Discuss the key considerations and potential challenges involved in using CSA as a reputation rebuilding strategy.

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