

**To Speak or Not to Speak: How Public Relations Can Influence Authentic Corporate Social
Advocacy and Support Organizational Reputation**

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This capstone research is dedicated to the memory of my mom, Mary Wilkinson, who believed that you could never say the wrong thing so long as your heart was in the right place.

Abstract

Over the past decade, organizations have faced pressure to speak out on divisive social and political issues, a practice scholars define as corporate social advocacy (CSA). Although there are benefits to engaging in CSA, CSA also carries inherent risks, including to organizational reputation. As such, several scholars posit that CSA has emerged as an important function of the public relations practice. This capstone furthers the research on this theory through the following thesis: when public relations professionals are given the autonomy and have the influence to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to be authentic and positively impact the organization's reputation. Academic literature on CSA, public relations excellence, ethics, and reputation formed the foundation of a normative theory, which the researcher tested through a survey and in-depth interviews with public relations professionals at Canadian and American corporations. Results demonstrate that most public relations professionals are empowered to participate in their organization's CSA decision-making and strategy development, which drives authentic CSA and may contribute to a positive organizational reputation. Moreover, public relations professionals who consider ethics in their CSA decision-making are more likely to achieve authentic CSA. This research surfaced practical recommendations for promoting authentic CSA that may contribute to organizational reputation.

Keywords: corporate social advocacy, public relations, communication, ethics, reputation, issues management

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To Speak or Not to Speak: How Public Relations Can Influence Authentic Corporate Social Advocacy and Support Organizational Reputation

To speak or not to speak out on divisive social and political issues—that is the question that weighs heavily on many organizations, executives, and, subsequently, the public relations professionals who support them. Although brands speaking out on contentious social and political issues is not new, this practice, known as corporate social advocacy (CSA), has become increasingly prevalent over the past decade (Taylor, 2024b). Scholars attribute the rise in CSA to stakeholders increasingly pressuring organizations to speak out on contentious issues (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Taylor, 2024a) to prove their corporate values (Jacobs & Raval, 2023). In addition to organizations surpassing the government in terms of public trust (Edelman, 2024), activists often target corporations to speak out since they perceive corporations as having the resources to dismantle barriers and drive social change (Eilert & Cherup, 2020).

Since stakeholders are more likely to scrutinize an organization’s commitment to purpose and values during a crisis (McKinsey and Company, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic arguably accelerated the pervasiveness of CSA. Additionally, “2020 was distinguished by a convergence of national events that positioned race at the forefront of organizational discussions” (McCleary-Gaddy et al., 2022, p. 135). The police killings of multiple Black Americans in 2020, including the high-profile murder of George Floyd, sparked protests and the Silence is Violence Movement, which called for people to speak out in solidarity with the Black community, specifically on social media (Capatides, 2020). The Silence is Violence movement posited that for racism to be eradicated, people needed to speak out against it (Kachanoff et al., 2022). For many, doing so felt like a requirement to demonstrate they were not racist (Turley, 2020). Many

who stayed silent faced intense criticism because “just as speech is deemed harmful, and thus subject to regulation, silence is now deemed harmful” (Turley, 2020, para. 9).

The pressure to demonstrate solidarity grew with Blackout Tuesday, a day activists paused business operations to reflect on racism and inequality (Gonzalez, 2020). This led to many individuals and organizations posting a black background and the Black Lives Matter hashtag on their social media channels (Willingham, 2020). Although many did so with good intentions, some activists criticized this practice for saturating the hashtag, making it challenging to find useful information about the movement. Others argued that amplifying the voices of Black activists would have been more effective than silence on social media. The double-sided coin of pressure and criticism surrounding Blackout Tuesday indicates a lack of consensus on the correct response to this issue. Organizations also felt pressure to turn their words into action, and many companies began addressing the issue of racism within (McCleary-Gaddy et al., 2022). From May to September 2020, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) roles on Indeed surged by 123%; that same year, LinkedIn profiles with a title related to DEI increased significantly.

It was not long, however, before many organizations learned that navigating these issues is perhaps more nuanced than silence is violence. In the wake of Hamas’ October 7 attack on Israel, both staying silent and speaking out generated backlash, demonstrating “how fraught with risk reacting to geopolitical crises has become for business executives and their employers” (Jacobs & Raval, 2023, para. 4). Given this, some organizations implemented principled neutrality, restricting leaders’ public statements on issues unrelated to their operations (Weldon, 2024).

Criticism and backlash are not reserved for organizations’ responses to geopolitical conflict. After Bud Light and Target experienced public backlash to their 2023 Pride campaigns,

companies became less vocal about supporting the 2SLGBTQI+ community in 2024 (Repko, 2024). The practice of integrating social and political issues into corporate communications, which surged in 2021, began to wane; by the first quarter of 2024, mentions of DEI on corporate earnings calls had dropped by 80% relative to the first quarter of 2021 (Prideaux et al., 2024). By 2024, multiple organizations, including Tractor Supply Co. (TSC) (Alsharif, 2024) and Walmart (Green & Kang, 2024), began reversing the DEI commitments they made in 2020 due to pressure from conservative activists.

The shifting landscape characterized by conflicting stakeholder demands presents a challenge for organizations and the public relations professionals who support them. In a time when organizations and executives face mounting pressure to speak out on contentious social and political issues that may result in backlash, this capstone research sought to further the understanding of how public relations professionals can contribute to CSA efforts that are authentic and protect or enhance organizational reputation. Thus, this capstone research explores how and to what extent public relations professionals are empowered to use ethical decision-making frameworks to influence authentic CSA that supports organizational reputation.

Academic literature on CSA, public relations excellence, ethics, and reputation supported the development of a normative theory, which the researcher tested practically by conducting a survey of and in-depth interviews with public relations professionals at corporations in Canada and the United States. Although the thesis was ultimately left unproven, the research surfaced insights supporting the researcher's propositions. Moreover, this research led to practical recommendations that public relations professionals can use to promote authentic CSA that may contribute to organizational reputation.

Literature Review

Corporate Social Advocacy

Corporate Social Advocacy Defined

Dodd and Supa (2014) define CSA as “an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues” (p. 5). Although considered an outgrowth and division of corporate social responsibility (CSR), CSA involves controversial and divisive topics (Dodd & Supa, 2015; Hong & Li, 2020; Sauter & Jungblut, 2023) that are not directly related to the company’s core business (Rim et al., 2020; Sauter & Jungblut, 2023). CSA encompasses both progressive and conservative issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020), such as the public statements in support of and against same-sex marriage made by Starbucks and Chick-fil-A, respectfully (Dodd & Supa, 2015). Unlike CSR, CSA typically exists within the communicative dimension (Sauter & Jungblut, 2023), as it often happens without much thought or action planning (Lim & Young, 2021). However, as engaging in CSA can lead to actionable commitments, CSA and CSR are often conflated.

Lim and Young (2021) posit that in addition to evolving from CSR, CSA emerged from CEO activism and corporate political advocacy, which encompasses an organization’s entire portfolio of political activities that seek to influence policy. Yim (2021) argues that CSA is a branch of values advocacy, which Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) define as “the appeal to shared cultural values in order to... enhance the organization’s image, to deflect criticism of the organization and/or its policies, procedures, and services; and to establish value premises that can be used in later discourse” (p. 146). However, values advocacy involves appealing to shared, non-controversial values (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994), whereas “the controversial nature of the discussed topic is a crucial characteristic of CSA” (Sauter & Jungblut, 2023, p. 22). Given its controversial nature, scholars (Ashby-King, 2023; Dodd & Supa, 2015) also argue that CSA

evolved from and is a form of strategic issues management, which is “concerned with ensuring that an organization is perceived as legitimate and operates in a way that its stakeholders believe it should behave” (Dodd & Supa, 2015, p. 288). Fröhlich & Knobloch (2021) posit that as the world becomes increasingly polarized, CSA is emerging as a “highly specialized task of corporate communications” (p. 9).

Guided by the definitions presented in the literature, for this capstone, CSA is defined as when an organization externally communicates its position on a divisive social or political issue that is not directly related to its core business.

Authentic Corporate Social Advocacy Defined

CSA authenticity is “the genuineness and consistency of the firm’s commitment to the advocated issue reflecting the organization’s true identity” (Lim & Young, 2021, p. 5). This definition is consistent with Vredenburg et al.’s (2020) definition of authentic brand activism, which is “the alignment of a brand’s explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice” (p. 445). Yim (2021) defines authentic stand-taking as when an organization achieves high consistency with its actions and high congruence with society; this represents the ideal category of CSA as the organization’s CSA is both authentic to itself and aligned with society’s expectations. To achieve authentic CSA, organizations must remain abreast of how society is changing and evolve accordingly by addressing two types of gaps: factual gaps, which exist when there is a discrepancy between what the organization says and how it acts, and conformity gaps, which exist when there is a discrepancy between how the organization behaves and how society believes it should behave.

Unlike authentic stand-taking, faulty stand-taking is when an organization achieves high consistency but low congruence; it is authentic to itself but out of step with society’s

expectations (Yim 2021). Accordingly, fake stand-taking is when an organization achieves low consistency but high congruence; based on its actions, it has no right to speak out and is simply capitalizing on a trending issue. Fake stand-taking is also called window dressing (Gower, 2017) or woke-washing, which is when “marketing messaging about the focal sociopolitical issue is not aligned with the brand’s purpose, values, and corporate practice” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 445). When an organization speaks out on a trending issue in a way that is inconsistent with its current or past actions, positioning, and culture, stakeholders will perceive the CSA as either virtue signalling or financially motivated (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Drivers of CSA

The literature points to several factors that drive an organization to engage in CSA. For some organizations, the impetus is their belief in promoting an issue as an end in and of itself; the CSA is proactive as it is motivated by their concern that societal values intrinsic to their brand are at risk (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). For example, when Starbucks advocated for same-sex marriage, the company did so as they felt diversity and respect for human equality—core values to the company—were being suppressed in society. There are other motivations beyond purely altruistic ones, specifically, potential financial gains, maintaining legitimacy, and employee expectations and activism.

Financial Gains

Organizations have been told that engaging in CSA can attract customers and boost their bottom line (Edelman, 2022; Taylor, 2024a). Asset managers have posited that addressing social issues and environmental risks can generate better returns (Rappaport & Mauboussin, 2022). For example, Nike’s stock reached an all-time high following its vocal support of Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the national anthem at National Football League games in 2016 (Taylor,

2024b). Nike's financial gains fueled other organizations to follow suit, as predicted by Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994), who theorized that the success of appealing to shared values would drive imitation.

In 2022, Edelman found that a brand's response to social events influenced buying behaviour more than consumers' life events, with Generation Z driving this trend (Edelman, 2022). When consumers trust that a brand will take action to support social or political issues, not only does their purchase intention increase, but they are also willing to pay more for products and services. Alternatively, some brands have experienced financial losses associated with their CSA efforts; between April and June 2023, Target, Anheuser Busch, and Kohl's collectively lost \$28.7 billion in market value due to backlash against their respective SLGBTQIA+ marketing campaigns (David, 2023). As companies find themselves "trapped between society's progressive impulses, and the conservative backlash" (David, 2023, para. 3), CSA also carries a financial risk.

Maintaining Legitimacy

Beyond the potential financial gains or risks associated with CSA, organizations feel pressured by stakeholders to speak out on political and social issues (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Taylor, 2024a). The 2021 Edelman trust barometer found that 86% of survey respondents believed CEOs should speak out on societal issues, and two-thirds felt a CEO should step in to address the government's failings (Edelman, 2021a). Trying to remain neutral through silence is often seen as complicity (Taylor, 2024b), and not acting on social issues can negatively impact an organization, reputationally and materially (O'Leary, 2022). As such, organizations may engage in CSA to improve their reputation while avoiding risk (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021) and be deemed legitimate by their stakeholders (Sauter & Jungblut, 2023). Organizational legitimacy

is an organization's right to exist and operate as determined by its stakeholders (Metzler, 2001); stakeholders make this decision based on their perception of the extent to which an organization's actions are in line with the values and norms of the society in which it operates (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Thus, an organization's motivation for engaging in CSA may be an attempt to gain or bolster moral legitimacy by fulfilling its social and societal responsibilities (Sauter & Jungblut, 2023).

Employee Expectations and Activism

Engaging in CSA can also help organizations attract and retain talent (Edelman, 2021b, 2022; Taylor, 2024a). Employees, especially Millennials and Generation Z, report a preference for working for companies that address social issues (Edelman, 2022, 2023) and share their values or beliefs (Edelman, 2021b). In 2021, one-third of employees surveyed stated they had left their jobs because their organization did not take a stand on a specific social or political issue.

Employees' voices have grown in volume and power since the onset of COVID-19. From January 2020 through May 2021, employees emerged as an organization's most important stakeholder group, surpassing customers (Edelman, 2021b). Additionally, employee activism has become increasingly common (Reitz & Higgins, 2024). In 2021, three-quarters of employees stated they would take internal or external action to influence their organization to change (Edelman, 2021b). The rise in employee activism indicates that employees believe corporate values are up for debate (Taylor, 2024b). Younger employees, specifically, believe their employer's values should align with their own and expect organizations to speak out on social, political, and environmental issues (Taylor, 2024a). Employees also expect their organization to have a higher purpose and for their CEO to exemplify organizational values (Edelman, 2023).

Striving to meet employee expectations, however, is not without risk. In the absence of clear criteria for CSA, when an organization speaks out on one issue, it sets the expectation that it will speak out on all issues, and leaders “find themselves locked into a cycle of perpetual statement-making” (Taylor, 2024a, para. 1). Moreover, an organization cannot realistically align itself to every employee’s personal values. For example, Americans who identify as Democrats want their CEOs to speak out on contentious issues, whereas those who identify as Republicans or Independents do not (Edelman, 2023). By meeting the expectations of certain groups of employees, an organization may alienate and isolate others (Taylor, 2024a). Thus, organizations must strike a balance through internal and external communication.

The Ethics of Corporate Social Advocacy

Ethical CSA

To be an ethical business, organizations must be honest with where they can have a genuine impact (Taylor, 2024b). As organizations find themselves increasingly pressured to speak out on social and political issues (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Taylor, 2024a, 2024b), they may weigh in on issues where they do not or cannot have an impact (Taylor, 2024b). By engaging in inauthentic CSA or woke-washing, the organization is making false claims, which makes the CSA unethical (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Additionally, because CSA communication can influence people’s positions on controversial social issues (Parcha & Westerman, 2020), the decisions to engage or not engage in CSA must be approached through an ethical lens.

Like ethical dilemmas, CSA decisions can lead to conflicts over whose values are right (Bowen, 2004; Farmer, 2018; Gower, 2017). “Certain issues might not be important in the value systems of one organization, whereas the same issue could be of tantamount importance in an organization holding differing values” (Bowen, 2004, p. 80). Effectively solving these dilemmas

requires a framework for decision-making (Bowen, 2004, 2005; Gower, 2017; Grunig, 2006) as opposed to relying on individual decision-making, which leads to inconsistency and the perception that the organization is not reliably ethical (Gower, 2017), or consensus decision-making, which limits the organization's options (Bowen, 2008). A formal decision-making process equips organizations to avoid reputational risks when engaging in CSA (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Reitz & Higgins, 2024; Wettstein & Baur, 2016), and frameworks offer rationality and create consistency in ethical decision-making, which drives trust and bolsters relationships with stakeholders (Bowen, 2005). For example, Wettstein and Baur (2016) posit three conditions an organization should consider before speaking out on a controversial issue: whether their stance is consistent with company values, is plausible insofar that what they are promoting could become woven into the organization's corporate social responsibility strategy, and is authentic to the organization's culture, character, and actions.

Having a framework in place before an issue arises allows organizations to more effectively diffuse ethical and political issues (Taylor, 2024a). Once an issue arises, using a decision-making framework that brings forward multiple perspectives on the issue, including those of your stakeholders (Bowen, 2004), provides for a deeper understanding of the issue (Bowen, 2006), and ultimately enhances ethical decision-making (Bowen, 2008; Grunig, 2006). This can be achieved through the process of two-way, symmetrical communication, which proposes that "individuals, organizations and publics should use communication to adjust their ideas and behaviour to those of others rather than to try and control how others think and behave" (Grunig, 2006, p. 156). By engaging in two-way symmetrical communication, decision-makers can avoid the trap of ethical relativism because the focus is not on the outcome but rather on the process of facilitating a dialogue (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). Moreover, if the objective of

the CSA is driving change, two-way symmetrical communication can “bring about symbiotic changes in the ideas, attitudes, and behaviours of both their organization and publics” (Grunig, 2001, p.12). By connecting with their affected stakeholders directly, organizations can drive meaningful support (Ashby-King, 2023) and demonstrate their views are being taken into consideration (Reitz & Higgins, 2024). By considering society’s values and expectations, an organization is better equipped to drive positive social change through its CSA efforts (Yim, 2021).

Ultimately, using a framework guides organizations to make the most ethical decision by considering its impact from multiple perspectives (Bowen, 2005). Frameworks provide an ethically defensible rationale for one’s decision because they are based on reason (Parsons, 2016). Communicating this rationale helps organizations maintain relationships with those stakeholders who may disagree with the final decision (Bowen, 2004; Gower, 2017).

Public Relations: The Internal Activist and Ethical Conscience

Multiple scholars have advocated for public relations to serve as an internal activist (Berger, 2005; Holtzhausen, 2000) or ethical conscience of the organization (Bowen, 2006, 2008; Gower, 2017; Ryan & Martinson, 1983). Bowen posits that deontology or duty-based ethics—wherein a decision is right or wrong is based on the intent not necessarily the outcome of the decision—aligns best with the public relations practice (Bowen, 2005, 2023). As an internal activist, public relations can advocate for ethical practices and promote change within the organization and society (Berger, 2005). When public relations helps their organization navigate conflicts with stakeholders, the organization becomes more transparent and democratic, an evolution that can drive societal change.

Opposing Milton Friedman's (1970) position that a business's only responsibility is to drive profit, Ryan and Martinson (1983) argue that public relations should act as the corporate conscience of the organization, serving the public interest while guiding their organization through complex issues. As boundary-spanners who build relationships with the organization's many stakeholder groups, public relations professionals are well suited to the role of ethics counselor (Bowen, 2006, 2008). By advocating for these stakeholders internally, public relations can help organizations make ethical decisions. Doing so requires them to be "well-versed in both moral philosophy and ethics" (Bowen, 2005, p. 192). Given public relations' power to shape public opinion, making ethical decisions is the function's moral obligation (Gower, 2017). This obligation is reflected in the Canadian Public Relations Society's definition of public relations, which states "public relations is the strategic management of relationships between an organization and its diverse publics, through the use of communication, to achieve mutual understanding, realize organizational goals and serve the public interest" (Flynn et al., 2008, as cited in CPRS, n.d., para. 4). Thus, public relations professionals must have and follow a strong ethical code.

Serving as the ethical conscience of the organization also requires authority, access to the dominant coalition, and the opportunity to present stakeholders' perspectives without fear of reprisal (Ryan & Martinson, 1983). Moreover, autonomy—both for the public relations professional and the function—is critical (Bowen, 2004, 2006, 2008). When the public relations function reports directly to the CEO and the top communicator is a member of the dominant coalition, public relations can serve as an ethical advisor by influencing strategy and policy (Bowen, 2006). Furthermore, public relations can help the organization achieve its goals by

ensuring key stakeholders' perspectives are considered in the decision-making process (Bowen, 2006; Grunig & Grunig, 2013).

There are, however, barriers that prevent public relations professionals from serving as the ethical conscience. In addition to those that are self-imposed, such as public relations professionals who defer to legal on issues of ethics, many barriers are due to public relations professionals' lack of access to the dominant coalition (Bowen, 2008). They are shut out of the decision-making process and relegated to communicating the decision once it has been made. These barriers are compounded when public relations is sublimated under another function, as it cannot conduct effective environmental scanning or form strong relationships with stakeholders through symmetrical, two-way communication (Grunig, 2006). When public relations is subsumed by another function, it begins focusing solely on the stakeholders important to that business unit. For example, when public relations reports into marketing, public relations professionals' focus narrows to customers as those are marketing's priority stakeholders (Bowen, 2008). Public relations can best serve their organizations when they and marketing operate "as equal partners in management" (Grunig & Grunig, 2013, p. 69).

Overcoming these barriers requires "a gradual acceptance of [public relations'] counsel, based on proving their worth through the knowledge they have brought to the table" (Bowen, 2008, p. 289). As public relations professionals are often only initially invited when a crisis hits (Bowen, 2008), crises represent an opportunity for public relations professionals to prove their value in their organization (Flynn, 2012), demonstrate their skills, and earn the trust of the dominant coalition (Bowen, 2006, 2008). By managing problems, building relationships with key publics through symmetrical communication, and providing sound ethical counsel, public relations professionals can demonstrate their value and eventually earn their seat at the table.

Public relations professionals' potential to serve as the internal activist or ethical conscience of their organization, combined with the value of frameworks to enforce consistent decision-making, leads to the following proposition:

Proposition One (P1). When public relations professionals are given the autonomy to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to be authentic.

Corporate Social Advocacy and Organizational Reputation

Reputation Defined

Fombrun (2018) defines corporate reputation as “the overall estimation in which a company is held by its constituents” (p. 105). Corporate reputation comprises five principles: visibility, transparency, distinctiveness, consistency, and authenticity (Fombrun & van Riel, 2023). Similarly, Barnett et al. (2006) define corporate reputation as “observers’ collective judgements of a corporation based on assessments of the financial, social, and environmental impacts attributed to the corporation over time” (p. 34). Despite the numerous definitions of corporate reputation, common among them is that reputation is about stakeholders’ perception of the organization (Aula & Heinonen, 2016; Barnett et al., 2006; Coombs, 2023; Deniz, 2020; Fombrun, 2018; Gibson et al., 2006). As such, building a strong reputation requires consistency of communication and actions (Coombs, 2007; Murray & White, 2005; Sisson & Bowen, 2017) and maintaining good relationships with a company’s many stakeholders, specifically employees, investors, customers, and communities (Fombrun, 2018). Doing so is critical for organizational success as a positive reputation is widely considered a valuable intangible asset (Barnett et al., 2006; Coombs, 2007; Deniz, 2020; Farmer, 2018; Gibson et al., 2006; Murray & White, 2005) correlated with better financial performance (Farmer, 2018; Fombrun, 2018; Gibson et al., 2006),

and a firm's ability to attract and retain talent and suppliers (Farmer, 2018; Fombrun, 2018) and survive a crisis (Fombrun, 2018; Sisson & Bowen, 2017).

Some scholars (Aula & Heinonen, 2016; Eisenegger, 2008; Fombrun & van Riel, 2023) propose that reputation is built across multiple dimensions. The Harris-Fombrun reputation quotient includes six dimensions: emotional appeal, products and services, financial performance, vision and leadership, workplace environment, and social responsibility (Fombrun & van Riel, 2023). Eisenegger (2008) outlined cognitive, affective, and normative dimensions that contribute to a firm's functional and social reputation. A firm's functional reputation is predicated on how well it performs what it sets out to achieve; social reputation is predicated on how well it lives up to society's expectations and values. Aula and Heinonen (2016) define two structural dimensions of reputation: the financial-rational dimension, which comprises measures of the company's financial success and growth, and the social-rational dimension, which includes social responsibility and public image. Although all dimensions are key, the loss of social reputation is considered more arduous to overcome as a functional or financial reputation can be mended through improved performance (Eisenegger, 2008).

Reputational Impact of CSA

Engaging in CSA can enhance stakeholder perception of the organization's social responsibility (Dodd & Supa, 2014), legitimacy, and reputation among stakeholders aligned with the organization's stance (Liu & Getz, 2024). Conversely, CSA can have significant negative impacts on reputation. When studying the effect of CEOs engaging in socio-political activism, Sauter and Jungblut (2023) found the results to be mostly negative and that "the more stakeholders oppose a CEO's socio-political position, the worse they assess this dimension of corporate reputation" (p. 32). CSA can lead to backlash from and the alienation of stakeholders

who disagree with the organization's position (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Rim et al., 2020; Taylor, 2024b; Wettstein & Baur, 2016) and calls to boycott the brand (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This risk of backlash is especially high for organizations with a heterogeneous customer base (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021).

Regardless of their position, when organizations take a stand, stakeholders are wary of whether their words match their actions (Taylor, 2024b). If the CSA does not naturally fit the company's image, it can damage its reputation and drive boycott behaviours (Hong & Li, 2020). When studying the impact of CSA brand fit on reputation, Lim and Young (2021) found that perceived authenticity was the strongest predictor of reputation. Therefore, although they may feel pressured to do so, organizations should not align their CSA with public values if those values do not align with those of the organization (Yim, 2021). Engaging in fake stand-taking or woke washing can lead to conflicts of interest, decreased stakeholder support, and a loss of organizational legitimacy, which is defined as the extent to which an organization's actions are perceived as congruent with the social values and norms of the larger system (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). Threats to organizational legitimacy are especially prevalent when an organization draws the attention of dissenting activist stakeholders who previously were not targeting the organization (Dodd & Supa, 2015). As Eisenegger (2008) stated,

It does not suffice merely to adapt to the expectations of the social and functional outer worlds. Whoever merely fulfils expectations blindly is soon threatened by the stigma of being labelled a conformist or even an opportunist... exemplary reputation management means fulfilling the functional and social expectations of key stakeholders without betraying one's own identity (p. 8).

This is perhaps the position American retailer Tractor Supply Co. (TSC) found itself in when, on June 27, 2024, it announced it was reversing its DEI commitments and refocusing its efforts on rural American priorities (Alsharif, 2024). The move came after weeks of criticism from conservative activists, led by political commentator Robby Starbuck, who accused TSC of further dividing Americans over race and criticized the company for supporting LGBTQ+ youth and groups that worked to stop deportations. According to TSC, customer and community feedback influenced its decision and “going forward, we will ensure our activities and giving tie directly to our business” (Tractor Supply Co., 2024, para. 4).

Furthermore, as CSA becomes more common and expected, it is no longer seen as a differentiator (Vredenburg et al., 2020), and stakeholders become increasingly skeptical of the organization’s true motivation for CSA (Sauter & Jungblut, 2023). Stakeholders are more supportive of and engaged with CSA when they perceive it to be intrinsically rather than extrinsically motivated (Byun & Mann, 2024). Yet even when organizations engage in CSA for what stakeholders perceive to be the right reasons, doing so too often and on too many issues can cause confusion and damage legitimacy (Yim, 2021).

Mirzaei et al. (2022) found that only brands with a long history of supporting sociopolitical causes can weigh in on trending CSA initiatives without looking inauthentic. Organizations that take uncommon stances rather than jumping on the bandwagon of trending issues are perceived by their stakeholders as genuinely caring about the issue, which makes the CSA seem more meaningful (Parcha et al., 2020). Doing so can also support organizational reputation through enhanced visibility. By supporting lesser-known issues further removed from their core business, an organization’s CSA strategy can stand out in an increasingly crowded market of activist brands (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Public Relations: The Reputational Steward

Public relations is widely considered the function that protects a company's reputation (Bowen, 2008; Murray & White, 2005; Sisson & Bowen, 2017) and mitigates legitimacy problems (Metzler, 2001). For public relations professionals, ethics and reputation management are interwoven as ethical decisions support a positive reputation (Bowen, 2008; Farmer, 2018). Moreover, strong reputations require fostering good relationships with diverse stakeholder groups (Fombrun, 2018). Public relations professionals are well positioned to do this; as boundary-spanners (Bowen, 2006, 2008), they can influence strategy related to stakeholder relationships and offer advice on social and ethical decisions (Murray & White, 2005).

Public relations professionals can and should advise the dominant coalition on the potential reputational benefits and risks of wading into divisive issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2017; Rim et al., 2020). Engaging in CSA is inherently polarizing, and organizations must be prepared to manage the subsequent communication challenges. Stakeholders assess an organization's reputation as positive or negative based on the extent to which it meets their expectations—but not all stakeholders hold the same expectations (Coombs, 2023). When organizations fail to meet their stakeholders' expectations, stakeholders may attempt to drive negative publicity about the organization, creating a reputational threat, as seen with Tractor Supply Co. (Alsharif, 2024). Moreover, as CSA is an evolution of CSR (Hong & Li, 2020), it raises the risk of appearing hypocritical (Coombs, 2023). When organizations promote their actions as responsible and stakeholders can prove otherwise, the reputational damage is greater than had the organization not engaged in CSR in the first place.

Once the decision to engage in CSA is made, public relations managers can help organizations achieve authentic CSA by ensuring words and actions are consistent (Lim &

Young, 2021) and driving broad, strong public support by transparently communicating the organization's intrinsic motives (Byun & Mann, 2024). As CSA is an extension of issues management (Ashby-King, 2023; Dodd & Supa, 2015), public relations should be involved in its organization's CSA strategies. If backlash occurs, public relations can help mend relationships through open dialogue with those stakeholders who disagree with their stance (Byun & Mann, 2024).

The importance of corporate reputation to organizational success and inherent reputational risks and potential rewards associated with engaging in CSA, combined with public relations' role as stewards of organizational reputation, leads to the following proposition:

Proposition Two (P2). When public relations professionals have influence over their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to have a positive impact on organizational reputation.

Research Problem

Several scholars agree that CSA has emerged as an important function of the public relations practice (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021; Sauter & Jungblut, 2023). As boundary spanners (Bowen, 2006, 2008) and the ethical conscience of the organization (Bowen, 2005), public relations professionals are well suited to help their organizations implement decision-making frameworks for authentic CSA consistent with the organization's actions and congruent with society's expectations (Yim, 2021). This leads to P1: when public relations professionals are given the autonomy to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to be authentic. As strategic issues managers (Dodd & Supa, 2015) and reputational stewards (Bowen, 2008; Murray & White, 2005; Sisson & Bowen, 2017), public relations professionals can help their organizations

navigate CSA missteps, which leads to P2: when public relations professionals have influence over their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to have a positive impact on organizational reputation. Together, P1 and P2 form the following thesis: when public relations professionals are given the autonomy and have the influence to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to be authentic and positively impact the organization's reputation.

The question is, does this normative theory exist practically? Are public relations professionals empowered to influence their organization's CSA strategies and, if so, how and to what extent, and what is the outcome? This inductive capstone research explored these questions and sought to offer practical recommendations for how public relations professionals can influence CSA strategies that are authentic and positively impact their organization's reputation.

Research Questions

RQ1: How and to what extent are public relations professionals involved in their organization's corporate social advocacy strategies?

This question explored the role public relations professionals play in their organizations' CSA strategies, including whether they have the autonomy to influence organizational decision-making related to CSA, and their role in developing and distributing CSA-related communications, monitoring stakeholder response to CSA, and conducting issues or crisis management if the CSA generates stakeholder backlash. Assuming that not all public relations professionals are included in their organization's decision to engage in CSA and the subsequent strategy development, this question explored what barriers may prevent public relations professionals from being part of the decision-making and strategy development processes, and how these challenges are overcome.

RQ2: How and to what extent do public relations professionals balance the interests of their organizations' multiple stakeholder groups when engaging (or not engaging) in corporate social advocacy?

This question explored how public relations professionals with the autonomy to influence organizational decision-making related to CSA make decisions about CSA, including why organizations choose to engage or not engage in CSA and how and to what extent decision-making frameworks and reputation management strategies are employed. This question also explored the challenges public relations professionals face in navigating CSA and how they overcome these challenges.

RQ3: How and to what extent does public relations' involvement in corporate social advocacy impact the corporate social advocacy's authenticity?

This question explored how and to what extent public relations professionals' involvement in CSA can help an organization achieve authentic CSA, which is when CSA has high consistency with the organization's actions and high congruence with society's expectations (Yim, 2021).

RQ4: How and to what extent does public relations' involvement in corporate social advocacy enhance organizational reputation?

This question explored how and to what extent public relations professionals' involvement in CSA can enhance organizational reputation.

Methodology

To determine how and to what extent public relations professionals are given the autonomy to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA strategies and how and to what extent this influences the CSA's authenticity and the

organization's reputation, the researcher conducted mixed-methods research. To strengthen the construct validity of the research, three sources of data were triangulated (Yin, 2018): a literature review, a survey, and in-depth interviews.

Before starting this field research, the researcher applied for and received approval from the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB) (see appendix C). The researcher was committed to doing no harm and conducting the research ethically, including applying the five core principles of ethical public relations research outlined by Bowen and Stacks: intellectual honesty, fairness, dignity, disclosure, and respect (Stacks, 2017). Protecting the participants' anonymity was especially important given the controversial nature of CSA and the sensitive topics therein.

Method One: Literature Review

The researcher studied the academic literature on CSA, public relations excellence, public relations ethics, and reputation. The literature review surfaced two propositions that provided the foundation for a thesis for how and to what extent public relations professionals can support CSA strategies that are authentic and enhance organizational reputation.

Method Two: Survey

The literature review informed the researcher's development of a survey, the objective of which was to gain a better understanding of how and to what extent the normative theories realized through the literature review exist in practice. The researcher developed a series of 14 questions informed by the literature and aligned to the research questions (see appendix D). The researcher designed the questions to gain a further understanding of how public relations professionals can contribute to CSA efforts that are authentic and enhance an organization's reputation. The primary survey linked to an optional secondary survey in which participants could agree to participate in a follow-up interview and receive a copy of the results; if a

participant agreed, the survey prompted them to provide their email address for researcher follow-up. By using a secondary survey, the first survey responses of those participants who provided their email addresses remained anonymous. Before the survey's release, three public relations professionals tested it and provided feedback, which the researcher implemented before launching the survey on Lime Survey.

Data Collection: Survey

The survey opened on September 12, 2024, and the researcher shared it via email and on LinkedIn. The McMaster University Master of Communication Management's (MCM) LinkedIn page also shared the researcher's survey. To increase the survey's reach, the researcher boosted the MCM page post with a \$200 ad spend; LinkedIn does not enable post boosting on personal pages.

Survey participants received informed consent (see appendices E, F) and participants were not coerced into completing the survey. The survey could be ended at any time, all questions other than screening questions could be skipped, and every question included the response options *unsure* and *prefer not to answer*. The survey data was also anonymized.

The survey ran for approximately five weeks and closed on October 19, 2024. The final dataset was a convenience, purposive, snowball sample (Stacks, 2017) of 82 public relations professionals employed at publicly traded or privately held corporations in Canada or the United States. Of the 82 respondents, 25% ($n=21$) were the most senior public relations professionals in their organization, and 75% ($n=61$) were not. Table 1 shows the distribution of survey respondents' years of public relations experience.

Table 1

Survey Question: How Many Years of Public Relations/Communications Experience Do You Have?

Answer (N=82)	<i>n</i>	%
0-5	9	11%
6-10	21	26%
11-15	15	18%
16-20	17	21%
21+	20	24%

Data Analysis: Survey

The researcher cleaned and one-hot encoded the survey data to allow for statistical comparison. The researcher then conducted frequency and correlation analyses in Excel, wherein values between ± 0.50 and ± 1 were considered a strong correlation, ± 0.30 and ± 0.49 were considered a moderate correlation, and values below ± 0.29 were considered a weak correlation (Statistics Solutions, n.d.).

Method Three: In-Depth Interviews

The researcher conducted long-form interviews with senior public relations professionals to gain a deeper understanding of how and why (Yin, 2018) public relations professionals are involved in their organization's CSA efforts, the tools they use in their decision-making, and their perspective on how that helped or hindered the organization's reputation. Bowen's (2005) use of interviews to test her normative model and build a practical ethical decision-making model inspired the researcher's method.

Data Collection: Interviews

The researcher identified potential interviewees through the secondary survey, the researcher's network, and that of the researcher's supervisor, Dr. Terry Flynn, which resulted in a convenience sample. Interviews with 15 public relations professionals were conducted between

October 2, 2024, and November 15, 2024. Interview participants were given informed consent (see appendices G, H), not coerced into participating, and permitted to end the interview at any time. At the time of the interviews, 10 interviewees were the most senior public relations professionals within their organization, and 3 had previously been the most senior public relations professional within their current or previous organization. Two interviewees were neither currently nor formerly the most senior public relations professionals in their organization but were the most appropriate person to speak to, given their role. As shown in Table 2, the interviewees were employed at publicly traded or privately held corporations across seven industries; 11 interviewees work in Canada, and 4 work in the United States. Each public relations professional was assigned a pseudonym, and their industries were left purposefully vague to protect anonymity.

Table 2

Interviewees by Their Location and Industry

Pseudonym	Location	Industry
Public Relations Professional A	United States	Financial
Public Relations Professional B	Canada	Energy
Public Relations Professional C	Canada	Food Production
Public Relations Professional D	United States	Hospitality
Public Relations Professional E	Canada	Energy
Public Relations Professional F	Canada	Energy
Public Relations Professional G	Canada	Retail
Public Relations Professional H	United States	Retail
Public Relations Professional I	Canada	Retail
Public Relations Professional J	Canada	Pharmaceutical
Public Relations Professional K	United States	Hospitality
Public Relations Professional L	Canada	Technology
Public Relations Professional M	Canada	Retail
Public Relations Professional N	Canada	Retail
Public Relations Professional O	Canada	Retail

Note. $N = 15$.

All interviewees were given informed consent before starting the interview. The interviews were held over Zoom or Microsoft Teams and recorded and transcribed using the relevant platform's transcription services. The researcher destroyed the interview recordings after editing the transcripts and will destroy all transcripts following the successful completion of this capstone. The researcher asked interviewees a series of 12 questions (see appendix I) informed by the research questions; an hour was allotted per interview, and interview times ranged from approximately 30 minutes to over an hour, depending on the amount of detail provided by the interviewee.

Data Analysis: Interviews

The researcher analyzed the interview data by following theoretical propositions (Yin, 2018) developed through the literature review, specifically:

Proposition One (P1). When public relations professionals are given the autonomy to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to be authentic.

Proposition Two (P2). When public relations professionals have influence over their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to have a positive impact on organizational reputation.

The researcher also examined plausible rival hypotheses, namely the *super rival*, or “a force larger than but including the intervention accounts for the results” (Yin, 2018, p. 173), and the *societal rival*, or “social trends, not any particular force or intervention, account for the results” (Yin, 2018, p. 173).

The researcher applied two analytical techniques, including pattern matching, specifically, pattern matching for processes and outcomes (Yin, 2018). The researcher engaged in

explanation building, which also surfaced areas of future study related to CSA. Additionally, the researcher conducted a correlation analysis of interview data. First, the responses from interview questions 2, 3, 4, 7, 9, and 13 were quantified through one-hot encoding (see Table 3).

Table 3

One-hot Encoding of Interview Questions for Correlation Analysis

Interview Question	Answers Coded as 1	Answers Coded as 0
Who do you report to?	The CEO	Someone other than the CEO
How and to what extent are you involved in your organization's decisions to engage or not engage in corporate social advocacy (CSA)?	Involved	Not Involved
When your organization chooses to engage in CSA, how and to what extent are you involved in developing the CSA strategy?	Involved	Not Involved
What is your/your organization's process for deciding whether to engage or not engage in CSA?	Decision-making framework mentioned in answer	Decision-making framework not mentioned in answer
What role does ethics play, if any, in your/your organization's decision to engage in CSA	Ethics is considered in CSA decision-making	Ethics is not considered in CSA decision-making
In your opinion, has your organization's previous CSA strategies had a positive, negative, or neutral impact on your organization's reputation?	CSA has had a positive impact on reputation.	CSA has had a neutral impact on reputation; or interviewee was unsure of reputational impact; or answer was unclear

Second, the researcher looked at the notes taken during the interviews and the interview transcripts for the existence of two factors that together, as per Yim's (2021) definition, suggest an organization is engaging in a process that should lead to authentic CSA. The first factor was whether the interviewee indicated that their organization's communication was aligned with its

action. The second factor was whether the interviewee indicated that stakeholders' and society's perspectives were considered but did not constitute the deciding factor for engaging in CSA; instead, stakeholders' and society's perspectives contributed to a decision that was ultimately authentic to the company. When the interview featured both factors, the organization's CSA was considered authentic by the researcher as per Yim's (2021) definition and assigned a one during one-hot encoding. For interviews where one or both factors were not present, the researcher could not assess whether their CSA was authentic, and the organization was assigned a zero for one-hot encoding.

The researcher analyzed the data using Microsoft Excel and ChatGPT-3.5 to supplement the interpretation of the correlation analysis (see appendix J). To ensure accuracy and relevance, the researcher meticulously reviewed and edited all responses generated by ChatGPT. Since the one-hot encoding for correlation analysis was based on the researcher's qualitative analysis, which included not only what the interviewees said but also how they said it, this analysis required subjective evaluation (Stacks, 2017). As the researcher was matching the patterns in the interviewees' responses with theories presented in the literature and not striving to surface objective facts, intercoder reliability was not required (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Results

RQ1: How and to what extent are public relations professionals involved in their organization's corporate social advocacy strategies?

Autonomy

Just over half of the survey respondents, 56% ($n=46$), indicated that the most senior public relations professional in their organization reports directly to the CEO. As outlined in

Table 4, for those whose leaders do not report to the CEO, the most common functions that their public relations leader reports to are marketing/brand, human resources, operations, and legal.

Table 4

Public Relations Reporting Structures

Public Relations Leader Reports to (N=82)	<i>n</i>	%
CEO	46	56%
Marketing/brand	12	15%
Human resources	5	6%
Operations	5	6%
Legal	4	5%
Other	10	12%

At the time of their interview, two interviewees reported directly to the CEO, one reported to a public relations leader who reported directly to the CEO, and one had previously reported to the CEO of their organization before becoming self-employed as a communications consultant. Three interviewees reported to marketing, three reported to human resources, three reported to legal or regulatory affairs, one reported to operations, and one reported to global impact. Those who reported directly to the CEO saw their reporting structure as beneficial; “to not have a layer between you and the CEO is critical... it allows you to do your job far better” (Public Relations Professional M, personal interview, October 24, 2024). However, those who did not report directly to the CEO did not necessarily indicate their reporting structure was problematic. For example, PR Professional D, who reports to a marketing leader and is several levels removed from the CEO, stated they have a seat at the decision-making table and a direct line to the decision-makers. Additionally, although the interview data revealed a positive correlation between reporting directly to the CEO and being involved in CSA decision-making, it was weak ($r=0.25$).

Interviewees' public relations teams comprised a range of structures, from small teams of two to large, cross-functional teams across a global brand. 47% ($n=7$) of interviewees' teams included some form of ESG, community impact, or DEI element as part of their portfolio.

Public Relations' Role in CSA

When asked how often their organization engaged in CSA in the last year, the most common answer among survey respondents was *sometimes* ($n=35$), followed by *rarely* ($n=21$) and *never* ($n=11$). See Table 5 for the frequency analysis of how often organizations engaged in CSA in the last year.

Table 5

Survey Question: In the Last Year, How Often Has Your Organization Engaged in Corporate Social Advocacy?

Answer ($N=82$)	n	%
Never	11	13%
Rarely	21	26%
Sometimes	35	42%
Often	8	10%
Very often	5	6%
Unsure	2	2%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%

In terms of whether public relations participates in the organization's decision to engage or not engage in CSA, 83% ($n=68$) of survey respondents said *yes*, 10% ($n=8$) said *no*, 6% ($n=5$) were unsure, and 1% ($n=1$) preferred not to answer. There was a slightly moderate positive correlation ($r=0.35$) between organizations that never engage in CSA and organizations where public relations does not participate in the decision to engage in CSA.

In terms of the roles public relations plays in CSA, the most frequently reported role was *the development of CSA-related communications, such as media statements or social media posts*, followed by *monitoring stakeholder response to CSA*, and *issues and/or crisis*

management related to CSA (see Table 6 for the frequency analysis of public relations' roles in CSA). Other roles mentioned in the open-ended answer for those who selected *Other* were convening the cross-functional conversation regarding the CSA decision and consulting on the decision.

Table 6

Survey Question: In Your Organization, What Role(s) Does Public Relations/Communications Play in Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), if Any? Select All That Apply.

Response (N=82)	<i>n</i>	%
Development of CSA-related communications materials, such as media statements or social media posts	71	87%
Monitoring stakeholder response to CSA	63	77%
Issues and/or crisis management related to CSA	60	73%
Development of CSA strategy	53	65%
Decision to engage in CSA	49	60%
None	4	5%
Other	3	4%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%

When asked how and to what extent they were involved in their organization's decisions to engage or not engage in CSA, 87% ($n=13$) of interviewees stated they were very involved; they lead the decision-making process as it is their accountability, play a key role in making recommendations, or, at a minimum, are part of the discussion. Public Relations Professional O stated that their corporate affairs and communications team has a role in the decision-making "because in many cases these aren't fundamental business questions, but they're questions of morality, right and wrong, social involvement, and they don't align neatly to the day-to-day business" (personal interview, November 15, 2024). The public relations professionals leading the decision-making process indicated they are not doing so alone; they work closely with their own and cross-functional teams to come to a decision. As articulated by Public Relations

Professional M, “these decisions, they’re big decisions... You certainly can’t make them in isolation” (personal interview, October 24, 2024).

The two interviewees who are not involved said that because their organizations do not feel pressure to engage in CSA, there is no need to make these decisions. Public Relations Professional C speculated that, should the question of engaging in CSA arise, public relations would be involved. Public Relations Professional F indicated they had been involved in the CSA decision-making at their previous organization, where there was pressure to engage in CSA.

When asked how and to what extent they were involved in developing their organization’s CSA strategy, 67% ($n=10$) of interviewees said they were very involved. Among interviewees, there is a strong positive correlation ($r=0.71$) between being involved in CSA decision-making and being involved with CSA strategy. Multiple interviewees discussed how, because CSA issues are very divisive, public relations’ role is to help the organization understand how their stakeholders may respond to the CSA. According to Public Relations Professional D:

We certainly would not stand for discrimination or violence... but we're not going to go out and make a political statement about something that we're not involved with on a day-to-day basis because we will not risk the livelihood of our franchisees by being polarizing in any way, shape, or form (personal interview, October 4, 2024).

The public relations professionals who were not involved in developing the CSA strategy indicated it was because their organization either did not feel the pressure to engage in CSA or if they did, the choice was not to engage, and thus, a go-forward strategy was not required.

When asked how and to what extent they or their public relations team members are involved in implementing CSA-related tactics, all interviewees stated they and their team were heavily involved, save for those whose organizations do not engage in CSA. Public Relations

Professionals A, H, and L all mentioned listening and responding to feedback as critical tactics. When Organization H receives feedback from its employees, “the goal is to respond to everybody, and at least let them know that we value their feedback, no matter what it says” (Public Relations Professional H, personal interview, October 11, 2024).

Some interviewees also believe that public relations should play a role in influencing the business tactics that back up CSA-related communications. According to Public Relations Professional O, public relations professionals should act as the internal agitator who advocates for change. “There's a role to be played in the transition from doing the right things into doing things right. But ultimately that needs to be carried out by the business” (Public Relations Professional O, November 15, 2024).

Barriers to CSA Decision-Making and Strategy Development

In the survey, 12% ($n=10$) of respondents reported barriers that prevent public relations professionals from participating in their organization’s decision to engage or not engage in CSA. Responses were collated into four main themes: CSA is not a priority for the company; the decision sits with the CEO or another executive outside of public relations; public relations does not have the capacity to support CSA decision-making; and public relations is not empowered to support CSA decision-making. One respondent outlined this barrier accordingly:

Our organization’s leadership does not understand communications. It doesn’t understand what a communications department does and should do. Leadership sees us simply as doers, not advisors, and not as a management function. As a result, our communications have room for improvement, but our hands are tied (Survey Participant #120, personal communication, October 1, 2024).

Two key themes emerged when interviewees were asked what barriers they faced—either currently or in the past—to participating in CSA decision-making or strategy development. First, public relations professionals discussed whether they faced barriers to being at the decision-making table. 40% ($n=6$) of interviewees stated they had never faced barriers to being at the decision-making table in their current organization because the organization valued public relations. Some indicated that their function's perceived value is inherent to the organization; others said public relations professionals must earn this position through relationship building and consistently demonstrating their value. According to Public Relations Professional G, the proverbial seat at the table is not a right:

We're people of influence, not people of control. So our responsibility is to provide the very best counsel and advice that we can based on our knowledge, instincts, research, and data... that's the best way to be at the table: provide value in everything we do (Public Relations Professional G, personal interview, October 11, 2024).

Another public relations professional explained that their previous leader had earned the trust of the dominant coalition. However, when this leader left, so too did the trust, resulting in barriers for the team. Public Relations Professional H stated that in 2020, the principal barrier was that the organization did not have an internal or external public relations team. Following the organization's poorly received response to the murder of George Floyd in 2020, Public Relations Professional H took it upon themselves to advocate for change, including reaching out to the CEO directly. This ultimately led to the creation of their role leading internal communications for the organization and being part of the CSA decision-making, strategy development, and tactics.

The second theme focused on the barriers that hinder the CSA decision-making itself. A common sentiment among interviewees was since CSA is emotionally charged, it can be

challenging to make an objective decision. Interviewees indicated that overcoming the barrier to decision-making requires shifting the conversation from emotional to rational by focusing on what is best for the business, educating the decision-makers, and being persuasive. “You’ve got to make sure that you’re thinking about the business as a whole” (Public Relations Professional K, personal interview, October 16, 2024). For several interviewees, understanding what is best for the business can be achieved with a clear decision-making framework.

RQ2: How and to what extent do public relations professionals balance the interests of their organizations’ multiple stakeholder groups when engaging (or not engaging) in corporate social advocacy?

Spanning Boundaries, Balancing Expectations

The survey revealed that 73% ($n=60$) of public relations professionals often or always consider their stakeholders’ expectations when making decisions about engaging or not engaging in CSA (see Table 7 for the extent to which public relations professionals consider their stakeholders’ expectations in their CSA decision-making). Additionally, there was a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.48$) between public relations not participating in the organization’s decision to engage or not engage in CSA and stakeholders’ expectations never being considered when choosing to engage or not engage in CSA.

Table 7

Survey Question: In Your Organization, How Often Are Your Stakeholders' (e.g., Customers, Employees, Shareholders) Expectations About Your Social or Political Positions Considered When Making Decisions About Engaging or Not Engaging in Corporate Social Advocacy?

Answer (N=82)	<i>n</i>	%
Never	2	2%
Rarely	3	4%
Sometimes	12	15%
Often	25	30 %
Always	35	43%
Unsure	5	6%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%

When asked how and to what extent they and their organizations consider the perspectives of their key stakeholder groups when deciding to engage or not engage in CSA, 87% ($n=13$) of interviewees indicated stakeholders' perspectives matter, and one-third ($n=5$) stated that stakeholders' perspectives are the number one consideration. "We may personally be inclined to support one side or another, but when we do that, we're taking [a] great risk of alienating and not taking into consideration the views and opinions and thoughts and perspectives of people" (Public Relations Professional G, personal interview, October 11, 2024).

Employees emerged as a critical stakeholder group when making decisions around CSA, with 40% ($n=6$) of interviewees mentioning employees unprompted; of those who mentioned employees, all but one ($n=5$) stated employees were the most important stakeholder group.

According to Public Relations Professional I:

We obviously think about the customer. But we have 100,000 [employees] and keeping them engaged and feeling proud and energized to serve the customer means that we've got to really listen to them. And what they think is a priority and [we] respond to that (personal interview, October 11, 2024).

Some interviewees noted that it was relatively new for employees to be the most important stakeholder group; “we, unfortunately, used to put our customers first, before our employees. And now we're kind of trying to pivot and switch, and it's working in our favour” (Public Relations Professional H, personal interview, October 11, 2024).

Although most interviewees indicated that stakeholders’ perspectives are considered when making decisions related to CSA, they also mentioned that those opinions are not the only factor and will not necessarily sway the organization’s decision. “We consider the stakeholder groups, and we then use all of those as input to go back to that foundation of what are the values and the business interests of [our organization]” (Public Relations Professional A, personal interview, October 2, 2024). Public Relations Professional N approaches stakeholder opinions cautiously, stating, “we [bowed to pressure] a few times, and I always regretted it. Always. Always. Because it's not the right reason to do something” (personal interview, November 13, 2024).

Use of Decision-Making Frameworks

The survey revealed that the extent to which public relations professionals use ethical decision-making frameworks for CSA varies greatly, with 20% ($n=16$) stating that frameworks are always used and 11% ($n=9$) stating that frameworks are never used, as outlined in Table 8.

There was a slightly strong positive correlation ($r=0.55$) between public relations professionals who never use ethical decision-making frameworks and those whose organizations never engage in CSA. Additionally, there was a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.41$) between never using ethical decision-making frameworks and public relations professionals not participating in the organization’s decision to engage or not engage in CSA. There was also a

moderate positive correlation ($r=0.40$) between never using ethical decision-making frameworks and stakeholders' positions on social or political issues never influencing action.

Table 8

Survey Question: In Your Organization, How Often Are Ethical Frameworks (e.g., Decision Trees, Alignment to Organizational Values) Used for Making Decisions About Engaging or Not Engaging in Corporate Social Advocacy?

Answer (N=82)	<i>n</i>	%
Never	9	11%
Rarely	18	22%
Sometimes	14	17%
Often	11	13%
Always	16	20%
Unsure	14	17%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%

When asked about their organization's process for deciding whether to engage or not engage in CSA, one-third ($n=5$) of interviewees indicated they had a formal decision-making framework in place. Interviewees who use formal frameworks do so to help guide the discussion and make decisions that are objective and rational as opposed to subjective and emotional.

“[CSA] needs a process... you need to know why you're doing what you're doing, and why you would not be doing some things... I think you need something very objective” (Public Relations Professional N, personal interview, November 13, 2024). In addition to a framework guiding organizational decision-making, it also enables the organization to rationalize its decision to its stakeholders, especially those who may not agree. “You know you're going to get mud slung your way, but you're grounded in something” (Public Relations Professional M, personal interview, October 24, 2024).

Interviewees also suggested that although they are a useful tool, frameworks alone cannot make the decision; they require discussion and flexibility given the nuances and complexity of CSA. Moreover, frameworks are not perfect. When discussing their organization's response to

Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel, Public Relations Professional A stated, "even though we have a checklist, we weren't perfect in our execution, and we didn't get it right out of the gate" (personal interview, October 2, 2024).

Although not every interviewee uses a formal decision-making framework, 73% ($n=11$) stated that cross-functional discussions or debates were part of their decision-making process; in many cases, public relations led the discussion. Two interviewees said that, although the organization did not have a formal framework, they viewed issues through the lens of the organization's corporate values. Those not using a formal decision-making framework or informal processes fell into one of two categories. Either issues were managed on a case-by-case basis, so a consistent framework or process would not apply, or a framework or process is not necessary because CSA is not an issue within their industry or organization.

The Question of Ethics

The question of what role ethics plays, if any, in organizational decision-making generated a range of responses and initial confusion among some interviewees. Some interviewees interpreted this question as how and to what extent they involve their organization's ethics team in their decision-making. Many were surprised this was even a question given their perspective that ethics should be foundational to all decision-making, including around CSA. "[Ethics is] just inherent in almost every conversation we have around almost every topic... it's right at the table from the very start" (Public Relations Professional I, personal interview, October 11, 2024). One interviewee said they had embedded the question of ethics into their formal decision-making framework. Ultimately, however, 80% ($n=12$) of interviewees indicated they approach CSA through an ethical lens.

Those who spoke more specifically about the ethics of CSA touched on a variety of topics, including the importance of partnering with ethical organizations when translating CSA into action. Some articulated the importance of decoupling the ethics of the issue from the ethics of your decision; simply because an issue is unethical does not mean staying silent is unethical. In fact, the opposite could be true:

I think it's unethical for companies to speak on matters that they don't have a proper reason for speaking [on], or for involving themselves in the conversation for a quick media hit. And I think sometimes when companies take positions purely for what they think will be reputational gain, it backfires (Public Relations Professional M, personal interview, October 24, 2024).

Finally, some interviewees touched on the importance of being honest about where you can have an impact. “The first step is [to] understand what's expected of you and where you can have the greatest impact” (Public Relations Professional O, personal interview, November 15, 2024).

Reputation, Reputation, Reputation

The survey results indicated that organizational reputation is a significant consideration when deciding to engage in CSA, with 86% ($n=70$) stating reputation was always or often considered (see Table 9 for the extent to which public relations professionals consider reputation in their CSA decision-making). Additionally, survey data showed a slightly moderate positive correlation ($r=0.34$) between public relations professionals participating in the organization's decision to engage or not engage in CSA and reputation always being considered in the decision-making.

Table 9

Survey Question: In Your Organization, How Often is Organizational Reputation Considered When Making Decisions About Engaging or Not Engaging in Corporate Social Advocacy?

Answer (N=82)	<i>n</i>	%
Never	1	1%
Rarely	1	1%
Sometimes	5	6%
Often	17	21%
Always	53	65%
Unsure	5	6%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%

When asked what role organizational reputation plays, if any, in their organization's decision to engage or not engage in CSA, most interviewees ($n=12$) indicated it was a significant or the most significant factor. One interviewee stated they had embedded the question of potential reputational impact into their formal decision-making framework. Overall, a common theme among interviewees was the importance of understanding the impact engaging or not engaging in CSA would have on the organization's reputation during the decision-making process. Depending on the issue, negative reputational impact might be worth it: "some things are worth standing into the fray and taking a bit of a backlash" (Public Relations Professional G, personal interview, October 11, 2024).

In addition to considering the impact of CSA on organizational reputation, Public Relations Professional A pointed out that having a strong reputation to start is necessary for your CSA's credibility. As they stated in their interview:

If you don't have a strong reputation, you should really be careful about being so proactively out there on things, because, again, that can make you a target [as] you may or may not be able to back up your position (Public Relations Professional A, personal interview, October 2, 2024).

Four interviewees discussed how, although they consider reputation when deciding whether to engage or not engage in CSA, it was not the only or most important factor. These interviewees weighed the reputational impact against other considerations—including the expectations of stakeholders, such as employees—and whether the issue aligns with company values. For those who indicated that organizational reputation was not considered, this was because there was no pressure to engage in CSA or because, although reputation was important, other organizational priorities trumped potential reputational impact when making CSA-related decisions.

RQ3: How and to what extent does public relations' involvement in corporate social advocacy impact the corporate social advocacy's authenticity?

Say What You Do, Do What You Say

The survey revealed a strong positive correlation ($r=0.65$) between stakeholders' positions on social or political issues never influencing communication and stakeholders' positions on social or political issues never influencing action. Likewise, there was a strong positive correlation ($r=0.66$) between stakeholders' positions on social or political issues always influencing communication and stakeholders' positions on social or political issues always influencing action. Similarly, interviewees stressed that communication must mirror action. "If you've got a difference between what you say and ... what you're doing, then you got problem inherently" (Public Relations Professional I, personal interview, October 11, 2024). Additionally, some interviewees suggested that by aligning communication with consistent as opposed to one-off actions, you can make a genuine impact or drive change, which ultimately builds trust among stakeholders. "We know it takes a long time to really drive change, and that's what advocacy is all about" (Public Relations Professional A, personal interview, October 2, 2024).

To Thine Own Self Be True

Multiple interviewees indicated that although public relations should consider stakeholders' perspectives and be aware of public opinion, that alone should not influence communication or action. "We're not going to be bullied into taking a position to something [that] just doesn't make sense for us to take a position on" (Public Relations Professional I, personal interview, October 11, 2024). Moreover, interviewees spoke about how, by grounding decisions in the company's strategy or values instead of stakeholder opinion, the organization could avoid the perception that it is choosing sides.

A Recipe for Authentic CSA

The correlation analysis of interview responses revealed several ways in which public relations' involvement in CSA may impact the CSA's authenticity (see Table 10 for the correlations between public relations professionals' involvement factors and CSA authenticity).

Table 10

Correlations Between Public Relations Professionals' Involvement Factors and CSA Authenticity

Variable	<i>r</i>
Public relations professionals are involved in the decision to engage or not engage in CSA	0.61
Public relations professionals are involved in the CSA strategy development	0.58
The most senior public relations professional reports directly to the CEO	0.41
Ethics is considered in the CSA decision-making	0.61
Use of decision-making frameworks	0.29

Note. CSA = corporate social advocacy

RQ4: How and to what extent does public relations' involvement in corporate social advocacy enhance organizational reputation?

CSA's Impact on Reputation

Of those who answered the survey question, half of the respondents ($n=36$) indicated that engaging in CSA had had a positive impact on their organization's reputation. 14% ($n=10$)

believed CSA had no impact, 7% ($n=5$) believed it had a negative impact, and 25% ($n=18$) were unsure (see Table 11 for survey respondents' assessment of CSA's impact on organizational reputation). Eleven survey participants skipped the question altogether.

Table 11

Survey Question: In Your Opinion, Engaging in Corporate Social Advocacy Has Had:

Answer ($N=71$)	n	%
A positive impact on your organization's reputation	36	51%
No impact on your organization's reputation	10	14 %
A negative impact on your organization's reputation	5	7 %
Unsure	18	25%
Prefer not to answer	2	3%

There was a weak negative correlation ($r=-0.23$) between ethical frameworks never being used in CSA decision-making and the opinion that engaging in CSA has positively impacted organizational reputation.

When asked for their opinion on how CSA had impacted their organization's reputation, 53% ($n=8$) of interviewees stated CSA had had a positive impact on reputation, and 33% ($n=5$) stated the impact was neutral. One interviewee stated they were unsure but optimistic; another indicated that previous CSA strategies had negatively impacted reputation, but that was now turning positive thanks to the consistency provided by their decision-making framework, to which they rigorously abide. This is a stark contrast to the experience of Public Relations Professional F, who felt his reputation was damaged when he was pressured to make a decision contrary to the organization's previously communicated decision-making framework. According to Public Relations Professional F, the subsequent backlash was "probably one of the hardest things I've had to deal with personally in my career in terms of losing control of an issue" (personal interview, October 10, 2024).

Data is Power

Although interviewees were asked their opinion on how CSA has impacted organizational reputation, three pointed to data on the subject. According to these interviewees, data is valuable as it helps public relations earn its proverbial seat at the decision-making table because they are speaking the same language as the rest of the business. “Having the data is critical to justifying your value as communications...[data] raises the credibility of the comms function in the organization” (Public Relations Professional B, personal interview, October 4, 2024).

Public Relations: The Reputational Steward

Survey data revealed a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.43$) between public relations being involved in the organization’s decision to engage in CSA and the opinion that previous CSA efforts have had a positive impact on organizational reputation. Conversely, there were slightly moderate negative correlations between public relations being involved in the organization’s decision to engage in CSA and the opinion that previous CSA efforts had no impact ($r=-0.30$) or a negative impact ($r=-0.31$) on organizational reputation.

The correlation analysis of interview responses indicated a slightly strong positive correlation ($r=0.53$) between public relations reporting directly to the CEO and previous CSA strategies positively impacting organizational reputation. There was also a moderate positive correlation ($r=0.38$) between public relations professionals being involved in CSA strategy development and the opinion that previous CSA strategies had a positive impact on organizational reputation. However, there were weak positive correlations between previous CSA strategies having a positive impact on organizational reputation and authentic CSA ($r=0.22$) and ethics considered as part of the decision-making ($r=0.13$).

Discussion

RQ1: How and to what extent are public relations professionals involved in their organization's corporate social advocacy strategies?

CSA: An Opportunity for Autonomy

The survey indicated that 83% ($n=68$) of public relations professionals are part of the decision to engage or not engage in CSA. When broken down by specific CSA-related roles, results showed that public relations professionals' role in CSA is more likely to be tactical than strategic. The tactics are certainly important: by leading the tactics, public relations professionals can engender stronger public support by communicating the organization's intrinsic motives (Byun & Mann, 2024). Additionally, those listening to and responding to feedback are helping mend relationships with stakeholders who may disagree (Byun & Mann, 2024). However, this emphasis on tactics is consistent with Bowen's (2008) findings that public relations professionals are often relegated to communicating a decision once it has already been made.

Although a greater emphasis on tactics was prevalent in the survey, this was not the case among interviewees; 13 of 15 interviewees indicated they were very involved in the organization's decision to engage or not engage in CSA. The discrepancy between interviewees and survey respondents may be because only one-quarter ($n=21$) of survey respondents were the most senior public relations professional in their organization, whereas almost all the interviewees were the most senior public relations professional in their organization; survey respondents who are not the most senior public relations professional may not be fully aware of their leader's involvement in CSA. For the two interviewees not involved in the decision, their lack of involvement is not because of barriers but because the question of whether to engage in CSA does not come up at their organization.

Approximately half ($n=46$) of the survey respondents indicated their public relations leader reports directly to the CEO, and only one-fifth ($n=3$) of interview participants either reported directly to the CEO ($n=2$) or their public relations leader did ($n=1$). This signals limited autonomy based on the theory that, for public relations to influence strategy and help the organization achieve its goals, public relations should report directly to the CEO and be a member of the dominant coalition (Bowen, 2004, 2006, 2008; Grunig & Grunig, 2013). Moreover, theory suggests that sublimation under another function limits public relations' ability to conduct proper environmental scanning or form strong relationships with stakeholders through two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig, 2006). However, although interview participants who reported directly to the CEO believed their structure was ideal, when it comes to CSA, reporting to someone other than the CEO or being sublimated under another function does not necessarily limit public relations' autonomy. Although 56% ($n=46$) of survey respondents indicated the most senior public relations professional in their organization reported directly to the CEO, 83% ($n=68$) stated that public relations participates in the organization's decision to engage or not engage in CSA. Similarly, although only three interview participants belong to organizations where public relations reports directly to the CEO, all but two interviewees—those whose organizations do not engage in CSA—said they were very involved in the organization's decision to engage or not engage in CSA. Although positive, the weak correlation ($r=0.25$) between interviewees reporting directly to the CEO and involvement in CSA decision-making is further evidence that public relations professionals do not necessarily need to report to the CEO to have autonomy to make decisions related to CSA.

There are a few explanations for this finding. First, sublimation under another function is not necessarily limiting so long as the organization knows what it stands for. Whether public

relations can succeed when reporting to another function “really comes down to the company or the brand knowing who they are... that makes all the difference in the world versus a company that's not extremely clear on who they are as a brand” (Public Relations Professional M, personal interview, October 24, 2024). Second, being sublimated within a team that includes other functions related to CSA, such as ESG or DEI, may enhance public relations’ boundary-spanning abilities. Of the 12 interviewees whose public relations team did not report directly to the CEO, 6 of them were on teams that included some form of ESG, community impact, or DEI. “[Having] those functions together could really drive impact on behalf of the organization” (Public Relations Professional K, personal interview, October 16, 2024). Third, just because public relations is not a formal part of the dominant coalition does not necessarily mean they lack access, and serving as the ethical conscience of the organization requires access to the dominant coalition (Ryan & Martinson, 1983), not necessarily permanent membership. Despite reporting to marketing and being several layers removed from the CEO, Public Relations Professional D believes they have a seat at the decision-making table through their leader, stating “[it has] been really helpful... to have an immediate throughline to the decision-maker” (Public Relations Professional D, personal interview, October 4, 2024). This access to the dominant coalition and seat at the decision-making table for CSA may be related to the fact that CSA is so divisive that it is considered a form of issues management (Ashby-King, 2023; Dodd & Supa, 2015) and a “highly specialized task of corporate communications” (Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021, p. 9). When the organization considers CSA as a form of issues or crisis management, CSA serves as an opportunity for public relations professionals who may otherwise face barriers to the dominant coalition to prove their value (Flynn, 2012) by managing problems, building relationships with key publics through symmetrical communication, and providing sound ethical counsel (Bowen,

2006, 2008). As Public Relations Professional G stated, “the best way to be at the table [is to] provide value in everything we do” (personal interview, October 11, 2024), and perhaps helping the organization navigate CSA can provide this opportunity. For example, by counselling the CEO in the wake of George Floyd’s murder in 2020, Public Relations Professional H demonstrated not only their value but also the value of public relations, which led to the creation of their team and role leading internal communications.

Choosing to Stay Silent

Although most public relations professionals surveyed and interviewed stated that their organization does engage in CSA, 13% ($n=11$) of survey respondents and 20% ($n=3$) of interview participants stated that their organization never engages in CSA. One interviewee explained that they do not engage out of prudence; it is a form of risk management. Additionally, there was a slightly moderate positive correlation ($r=0.35$) between organizations that never engage in CSA and organizations where public relations does not participate in the decision to engage in CSA. There are two probable explanations for this correlation: first, because public relations professionals are not involved in the CSA decision-making, there is no one advocating for change within the organization and society (Berger, 2005). Second, and perhaps more likely, public relations does not participate in the decision to engage in CSA because there is no pressure from stakeholders to do so and, as such, no decision to be made. The slightly strong positive correlation ($r=0.55$) between public relations professionals who never use ethical decision-making frameworks and those whose organizations never engage in CSA reinforces this explanation; if there is no pressure to engage in CSA, no decision is required, and no decision-making framework is needed. Two interviewees indicated their organization does not engage in CSA as there is an absence of pressure to do so. “We’re not getting pressure from anybody to

jump into anything, at least in the last 18 months that I've been at this [organization]" (Public Relations Professional F, personal interview, October 10, 2024). Given this, engaging proactively is considered too much of a risk, especially when the organization is already managing issues related to its core business. "I think part of the reason we don't engage in a whole lot of corporate social advocacy is because we are in an industry that has become an issue in and of itself" (Public Relations Professional C, personal interview, October 4, 2024).

Public Relations Professional C's and Public Relations Professional F's organization's unwillingness to proactively engage in CSA indicates that for these organizations—and perhaps others—CSA is a reactive response to maintain legitimacy among stakeholders (Sauter & Jungblut, 2023). As there is no social and societal responsibility to fulfill, the organization does not need to engage in CSA to maintain its legitimacy. This, however, may be short-sighted given the potential benefits of proactively engaging in CSA, including financial gains (Edelman, 2022; Rappaport & Mauboussin, 2022; Taylor, 2024a) and attracting and retaining talent (Edelman, 2021b, 2022; Taylor, 2024a). Additionally, just because stakeholders are not pressuring these organizations now does not mean it will not happen in the future. These organizations could learn from those who formalized their CSA process only after stakeholder pressure began. "After [the murder of] George Floyd... a lot of [companies] were being tasked with, 'you need to speak on something,' and I do think a lot of organizations started formalizing the process" (Public Relations Professional K, personal interview, October 16, 2024). By putting a process in place before the question of CSA arises, the organization will be better prepared to diffuse ethical and political issues if they surface (Taylor, 2024a).

RQ2: How and to what extent do public relations professionals balance the interests of their organizations' multiple stakeholder groups when engaging (or not engaging) in corporate social advocacy?

Considering Stakeholder Expectations

Survey and interview data indicated that most public relations professionals consider their stakeholders' expectations when deciding to engage or not engage in CSA. Multiple interviewees discussed how, because CSA issues are very divisive, public relations' role is to help the organization understand how their stakeholders may respond to the CSA. According to Public Relations Professional A:

When it comes to divisive issues, we're very, very thoughtful around making sure that we know if you're going to be advocating on behalf of something, there's going to be a bunch of stakeholders that aren't going to like it. So the tilt has to be that we believe it's the right thing to do, and we are comfortable with the risk of alienating some because we think it's more important to stand for that principle because of our value system and the stakeholders that would expect this out of us (personal interview, October 2, 2024).

This perspective is consistent with the theory that because they are boundary spanners (Bowen, 2006, 2008), public relations professionals are well-positioned to influence strategy and decisions as they relate to relationships with stakeholders and offer advice on social and ethical decisions (Murray & White, 2005).

However, interviewees also indicated that although stakeholders' perspectives are considered, they do not necessarily influence the organization's decision to engage in CSA, its communication, or its action. Multiple interviewees spoke about the importance of aligning communication and action with company culture and values. This perspective is consistent with

Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) definition of authentic brand activism, which is “the alignment of a brand’s explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice” (p. 445). This is especially important for organizations with a heterogenous customer base (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021), as articulated by Public Relations Professional K, “we open our doors to everyone, and so we know anything we will say will most likely end up isolating half of the population. So we need to protect ourselves in that sense” (Personal Interview, October 16, 2024).

The Call is Coming from Inside the House

Although CSA involves making an external, public statement (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015), interviewees identified employees as a critical stakeholder group they consider when choosing to engage or not engage in CSA. For some, this was a new perspective. “COVID [and]... all of those major world events not only changed communication. It changed how communication views—and how organizations view—their stakeholders, particularly internal and employees” (Public Relations Professional M, personal interview, October 24, 2024). This experience is consistent with the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer findings, which indicate that in 2021, employees surpassed customers as an organization’s most important stakeholder group (Edelman, 2021b). Given employees’ increasing expectation that their employers address social issues (Edelman, 2021a) combined with the rise in employee activism (Reitz & Higgins, 2024), it follows that organizations are engaging in CSA to maintain legitimacy among their employee stakeholders (Sauter & Jungblut, 2023).

Frameworks Work—As A Starting Point

The correlations found within the survey indicate that decision-making frameworks are more likely to be used when public relations professionals participate in the organization’s

decision to engage or not engage in CSA. This suggests that when organizations are using frameworks, public relations professionals are the ones implementing them. Additionally, the survey suggested that stakeholders' positions on social or political issues are more likely to influence action when frameworks are used, which is consistent with Bowen's (2004) theory that using a decision-making framework brings forward multiple perspectives, including those of your stakeholders. However, public relations professionals' use of formal decision-making frameworks is inconsistent.

The interviewees who use formal frameworks recognize their benefits; a common theme among interviewees is that CSA decisions can be emotionally charged as people hold strong personal opinions about the issues. This can lead to conflicts over whose values are right (Bowen, 2004; Farmer, 2018; Gower, 2017), as articulated by Public Relations Professional L upon reflecting on navigating CSA at a previous organization in 2020, "I lost many friends during that time... it was hard" (personal interview, October 17, 2024). Similarly, after telling their team that they would not be moving forward with a specific CSA initiative that appeared performative, "one of the employees posted on Instagram that I was essentially racist because I didn't want to support this" (Public Relations Professional D, personal interview, October 4, 2024). Using a decision-making framework helps protect the organization and the public relations professional because it takes the emotion out of the conversation and turns it into a rational decision. "These sorts of topics can be so sensitive... we needed to find a way to bring some objectivity into the discussion and make sure we were equipped to have those sorts of discussions" (Public Relations Professional K, personal interview, October 16, 2024). This perspective is consistent with Bowen's (2005) theory that frameworks offer rationality and create consistency in ethical decision-making, which drives trust and bolsters relationships with

stakeholders. This erosion or strengthening of trust was observed in the stories shared by Public Relations Professionals F and H, respectively. Public Relations Professional F experienced significant backlash when they acted contrary to their framework; by speaking out on an issue outside their framework, they set the expectation that they would speak out on all issues (Taylor, 2024b). Doing so angered stakeholders who, after advocating for a particular issue previously, had been told the organization would not speak out because it did not align with the framework. Conversely, Public Relations Professional H is rebuilding trust by refusing to waver from their framework, even when asked by a c-suite executive to do so; the framework enables them to solve the dilemma of whose values are right or wrong without relying on individual decision-making—including by an executive—ensuring consistency (Gower, 2017). Through their framework, Public Relations Professional H takes a deontological ethical approach; although they consider the outcome, the intent behind the decision trumps the outcome (Bowen, 2023). This process enables them to influence consistent communication and action, which engenders trust and improves organizational reputation, as predicted by the literature (Bowen, 2005; Coombs, 2007; Murray & White, 2005; Sisson & Bowen, 2017).

Multiple interviewees discussed the importance of ensuring the CSA aligned with organizational values, consistent with Wettstein and Baur's (2016) first condition to consider before speaking out on a controversial issue. Furthermore, aligning the issue to shared values—such as positioning the Israel-Gaza conflict as a humanitarian issue rather than an argument over which side is right, as suggested by Public Relations Professional B—can help the organization avoid being perceived as choosing sides. By shifting the conversation from CSA to values advocacy, public relations professionals can appeal to shared, non-controversial values (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994) and diffuse the emotion.

According to several interviewees, even when the organization decides not to engage in CSA, using the framework is a valuable exercise. First, it helps the organization prepare for future issues. “[The process] better prepares you for how you might be drawn into a particular issue, even when it's unexpected” (Public Relations Professional A, personal interview, October 2, 2024). Second, even if the organization chooses not to move forward with CSA, the process opens the door to engaging directly with stakeholders. When describing their experience working directly with an activist employee, Public Relations Professional N noted the employee “didn’t need a memo; she needed help” (personal interview, November 13, 2024). Similarly, Public Relations Professional H recommended their chief human resources officer call an employee who was upset with the organization’s response to a geopolitical issue and “just listen” (Public Relations Professional H, personal interview, October 11, 2024). Although this employee’s expectations for CSA were not met, by connecting with the employee directly and listening to their perspective, the employee received meaningful support (Ashby-King, 2023) and heard that their views were taken into consideration (Reitz & Higgins, 2024). Consistent with the literature, using a decision-making framework enabled both Public Relations Professionals N and H to provide an ethically defensible rationale for their decision (Parsons, 2016) and maintain relationships with those who disagreed (Bowen, 2004; Gower, 2017).

However, frameworks alone are not the answer, especially given the complexity and nuances of CSA. Since frameworks are not perfect, as described by Public Relations Professional A’s experience in their organization’s response to the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, several public relations professionals prefer to approach issues on a case-by-case basis. “The way we decide on what we are going to do and not do... there's not one formula. The issues are so complex, and every issue has a different implication for our business” (Public Relations

Professional L, personal interview, October 17, 2024). Among interviewees, more common than the use of formal frameworks was bringing multiple perspectives together to engage in discussion and debate. This use of two-way symmetrical communication and focus on dialogue helps decision-makers avoid ethical relativism (Grunig & Grunig, 1992) and drive meaningful change (Grunig, 2001). Overall, the process of discussion and debate is consistent with Bowen's (2004, 2006) position that bringing forward multiple perspectives provides a deeper understanding of the issue, which ultimately enhances ethical decision-making (Bowen, 2008; Grunig, 2006).

Ethics (Should) Underpin Everything

Consistent with Parcha and Westerman's (2020) perspective that deciding to engage in CSA must be approached ethically, there was near consensus among interviewees that ethics should underpin CSA. "If it's not an ethically based, principle-based conversation that you're having around these types of issues, then you're missing the mark in my view" (Public Relations Professional G, personal interview, October 11, 2024). Although one public relations professional interviewed indicated the question of ethics was baked into their decision-making framework, most public relations professionals interviewed did not view the question of ethics as a separate step in making decisions related to CSA, but it was critical, nonetheless.

One possible explanation for this is that the public relations professionals interviewed are serving as the ethical conscience of their organization (Bowen, 2006, 2008; Gower, 2017; Ryan & Martinson, 1983) by advocating for ethical practices (Berger, 2005). Public Relations Professional O referred to themselves as the "internal agitator" (personal interview, November 15, 2024), which is consistent with Holtzhausen's (2000) and Berger's (2005) perspectives that public relations should serve as an internal activist. Public relations professionals can help their

organizations make more ethical decisions by advocating for stakeholders internally (Bowen, 2006, 2008). When Public Relations Professional K described how they brought together the cross-functional group to discuss questions of CSA, they illustrated how they are serving as a boundary-spanner, another key element of serving as the ethical conscience of the organization. However, it is important to consider rival explanations; as the interviewees were self-reporting on their and their organizations' ethics, it is unlikely they would consider themselves unethical, or if they did, admit it in their interview.

In terms of making an ethical decision related to CSA, several public relations professionals discussed the importance of understanding whether their CSA will have a genuine, positive impact. As part of their decision-making framework, Public Relations Professional A asks, "do we believe that there's something tangible we can do to support the issue or advance the issue?" (personal interview, October 2, 2024). Similarly, Public Relations Professional O advised that "the first step is [to] understand what's expected of you and where you can have the greatest impact and then bring that into the business and agitate for activity and change" (personal interview, November 15, 2024). This is consistent with Taylor's (2024b) position that to be an ethical business, organizations must be honest with where they can have a genuine impact. It also prevents organizations from confusing their stakeholders and undermining organizational legitimacy by weighing in on too many issues (Yim, 2021).

Finally, several public relations professionals cautioned against conflating the ethics of the issue with the ethics of CSA. From their perspective, simply because an issue is unethical does not mean that an organization is behaving unethically if it does not speak out. Some interviewees posited the opposite perspective: speaking out on an issue that you have no business speaking out on is unethical. "If we don't believe that [meeting the stakeholder's expectation] is

an authentic action for the company or leader to take, we won't do it. We really believe in authenticity. It's part of our ethics and our values” (Public Relations Professional L, personal interview, October 17, 2024). This is consistent with Vredenburg et al.’s (2020) position that engaging in inauthentic CSA is unethical as the organization is making false claims and reinforces Bowen’s (2023) position that public relations professionals can make ethical decisions by leading with good intentions.

Reputation Rules the Day

Both the survey data and interviews indicated that organizational reputation is a significant consideration when deciding to engage or not engage in CSA. This is perhaps because the public relations professionals surveyed and interviewed understand that a positive reputation is critical for organizational success (Barnett et al., 2006; Coombs, 2007; Deniz, 2020; Farmer, 2018; Gibson et al., 2006; Murray & White, 2005). Additionally, CSA is part of the social-rational dimension of reputation, which comprises social responsibility and public image (Aula & Heinonen, 2016), and loss of social reputation is significantly harder to overcome than functional or financial reputation (Eisenegger, 2008). Thus, a CSA misstep is arguably more dangerous to reputation than poor financial performance.

The collective concern about CSA’s potential impact on reputation among survey participants and interviewees may also be related to the participants’ experience and understanding of their responsibilities as public relations professionals. As per the literature, public relations is widely considered the function that protects the organization’s reputation (Bowen, 2008; Murray & White, 2005; Sisson & Bowen, 2017). This perspective is corroborated by the survey data, which showed a slightly moderate positive correlation ($r=0.34$) between public relations participating in the organization’s decision to engage or not engage in CSA and

reputation always being considered in the decision-making. In other words, when public relations is at the table, reputation is more likely to be discussed.

Scenario planning—considering the potential response and subsequent reputational impact of engaging or not engaging in CSA—is common among interviewees’ CSA decision-making processes. This is consistent with Coombs and Holladay’s (2017) and Rim et al.’s (2020) recommendation that public relations professionals advise the dominant coalition of the potential benefits and risks of engaging in a divisive issue. The reputational impact can range from very positive, such as improving stakeholder perception and enhancing legitimacy (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Liu & Getz, 2024) to very negative, including stakeholder alienation (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Rim et al., 2020; Taylor, 2024b; Wettstein & Baur, 2016) and calls to boycott (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The risks are compounded by the fact that, regardless of the issue, stakeholders have become increasingly wary of the authenticity of CSA messages (Hong & Li, 2020; Taylor, 2024b). Although the potential impact may not influence their ultimate decision, because CSA is inherently polarizing, organizations must be aware of and be prepared to manage potential backlash (Coombs & Holladay, 2017; Rim et al., 2020). Or as Public Relations Professional M said, “you do need to have courage to say, ‘Okay, we know that this is the right decision, and some people aren't going to like it’” (personal interview, October 24, 2024).

Public Relations Professional A posited that a strong reputation is not the result of CSA but rather a precursor; without a strong reputation, your organization’s CSA would have no credibility. This is consistent with Mirzaei et al.’s (2022) findings that only brands with a long history of supporting sociopolitical causes can wade into trending CSA issues without looking opportunistic. Additionally, engaging in CSA is even riskier for those organizations who do not

have a solid reputation to start, a perspective consistent with Coombs' (2023) caution for organizations engaging in CSR: when organizations promote their actions as responsible, and stakeholders can prove otherwise, the reputational damage is greater than had the organization not engaged in CSR in the first place. When organizations make strong, divisive statements, they may draw attention to dissenting activist stakeholders, threatening organizational legitimacy (Dodd & Supa, 2015).

Four interviewees indicated that, although reputation is important, it is not the most important consideration when choosing to engage or not engage in CSA. These interviewees stated that stakeholder expectations and alignment with company values were more important. This is an interesting perspective given both these factors arguably contribute to the social-rational dimension of reputation (Aula & Heinonen, 2016), and reputation is ultimately the stakeholders' perception of the organization (Aula & Heinonen, 2016; Barnett et al., 2006; Coombs, 2023; Deniz, 2020; Fombrun, 2018; Gibson et al., 2006). One possible explanation is that, although meeting stakeholder expectations and being consistent with company values may ultimately contribute to a strong reputation, these interviewees consider these to be factors they can control in the decision-making process, whereas reputation is the outcome of stakeholders' collective perception of their decisions.

RQ3: How and to what extent does public relations' involvement in corporate social advocacy impact the corporate social advocacy's authenticity?

Mind the Factual Gap

The survey and interviews indicated that public relations professionals strive for their organization's communication to be consistent with its actions. The survey data revealed that if stakeholders' perspectives influence communication, they also influence action; conversely, if

stakeholders' perspectives do not influence communication, they also do not influence action. The importance of this consistency was a common theme among interviewees, indicating interviewees are addressing factual gaps by ensuring there is no discrepancy between what the organization says and how it acts (Yim, 2021). This aligns with Lim and Young's (2021) position that public relations managers can help organizations achieve authentic CSA by ensuring words and actions are consistent.

Those interviewees who advocated for consistent action to drive change and build trust among stakeholders are advocating for authentic CSA, which Lim and Young (2021) define as "the genuineness and consistency of the firm's commitment to the advocated issue reflecting the organizational true identity" (p. 5). Moreover, they avoid potential accusations of virtue signaling by speaking out in a way that is consistent with actions, positioning, and culture (Mirzaei et al., 2022). "You've got to be in it in a committed way, or... they'll catch you. They'll know that it's not sincere" (Public Relations Professional A, personal interview, October 2, 2024). Doing so may help protect organizational reputation as "exemplary reputation management means fulfilling the functional and social expectations of key stakeholders without betraying one's own identity" (Eisenegger, 2008). Perceived authenticity has been found to be the strongest predictor of reputation (Young, 2021), and misalignment between CSA and organizational image can damage reputation (Hong & Li, 2020).

Mind the Conformity Gap

In addition to aligning words and actions, multiple interviewees indicated that public relations should advocate for the opinions of their stakeholders and the public. "The way that I always approach [providing stakeholders' perspectives] is just context and education" (Public Relations Professional L, personal interview, October 27, 2024). By doing this, public relations

professionals are addressing potential conformity gaps, which exist when the organization's behaviour does not abide by how society believes it should behave (Yim, 2021). Ultimately, by helping their organization understand their stakeholders' perspectives and navigate potential conflicts, they create a more transparent and democratic organization better suited to influence societal change (Berger, 2005).

Achieving Authentic CSA

Correlation analysis of interview data suggests that when public relations is involved in their organization's decision to engage or not engage in CSA and the subsequent strategy development, the CSA is more likely to be authentic. Based on their responses, 60% ($n=9$) of interviewees engage in a process that leads to authentic CSA. This is because these public relations professionals are addressing both the factual and conformity gaps required to achieve authentic CSA (Yim, 2021). In addition to considering the perspectives of their stakeholders and society in deciding whether to engage or not engage in CSA, their CSA communication is consistent with their organization's actions, and it ultimately aligns with the organization's strategy or values. As Public Relations Professional D stated, "whatever you do, being true to who your brand is, and then being able to [take] action... and get your team to rally behind [the issue] is critical, or else it's just words" (personal interview, October 4, 2024).

The weak positive correlation ($r=0.29$) between using decision-making frameworks and achieving authentic CSA indicates that implementing decision-making frameworks may support achieving authentic CSA. However, public relations professionals' ability to balance closing both gaps is likely more related to approaching CSA through an ethical lens; the interview data correlation analysis revealed a strong positive correlation ($r=0.61$) between those who consider ethics in their CSA decision-making and those engaging in authentic CSA. Public relations

professionals interviewed are addressing both gaps by advocating for ethical practices and promoting change within the organization and society (Berger, 2005) while, at the same time, being honest about where they can have an impact (Taylor, 2024b) and avoiding false claims (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Achieving authentic CSA may be easier for public relations professionals who report directly to the CEO, as indicated by the moderate positive correlation ($r=0.41$) between reporting directly to the CEO and authentic CSA. This is perhaps because public relations professionals who report directly to the CEO have earned the CEO's trust by demonstrating their value; they have achieved "a gradual acceptance of [public relations'] counsel, based on proving their worth through the knowledge they have brought to the table" (Bowen, 2008, p. 289). Therefore, they are better positioned to persuade the organization to address conformity gaps while avoiding factual gaps. "A lot of times you're the conscience of the organization. You have to have your ear to the ground. You have to know what's going on—if you're doing your job well—internally and externally" (Public Relations Professional M, personal interview, October 24, 2024).

RQ4: How and to what extent does public relations' involvement in corporate social advocacy enhance organizational reputation?

CSA's Impact on Reputation

Approximately half of the survey respondents and interviewees agreed that their organization's previous CSA initiatives positively impacted their organization's reputation. Although reputation may be an important or the most important factor when deciding whether to engage or not engage in CSA, the outcome—the impact on the organization's reputation—is difficult to control. This is consistent with the literature: in some cases, engaging in CSA can bolster reputation (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Liu & Getz, 2024); other times, it can undermine or

damage organizational reputation (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Jungblut & Johnen, 2021; Rim et al., 2020; Sauter & Jungblut, 2023; Taylor, 2024b; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). This inconsistent and relatively unpredictable outcome reinforces that organizations must approach these issues with caution and strategically, a process that public relations can support.

The weak positive correlations between previous CSA strategies positively impacting organizational reputation and authentic CSA ($r=0.22$) and ethics considered as part of the CSA decision-making ($r=0.13$) indicate that, although perceived authenticity has been found to be the strongest predictor of reputation (Young, 2021), authentic and ethical CSA does not necessarily enhance organizational reputation. There are multiple explanations for this. First, reputation is ultimately about stakeholders' perceptions of the organization (Aula & Heinonen, 2016; Barnett et al., 2006; Coombs, 2023; Deniz, 2020; Fombrun, 2018; Gibson et al., 2006). Although ethics and reputation management are interwoven as ethical decisions ultimately support a positive reputation (Bowen, 2008; Farmer, 2018), a positive reputation cannot be built through one single action or communication but is rather about consistency (Coombs, 2007; Murray & White, 2005; Sisson & Bowen, 2017). Thus, if CSA or lack thereof is a relatively new practice for an organization, the impact on reputation may yet be seen. By consistently engaging in authentic CSA, organizations would arguably strengthen their reputation over time as per the principles of consistency and authenticity as reputation builders (Fombrun & van Riel, 2023).

Second, reputation is built across multiple dimensions (Eisenegger, 2008; Fombrun & van Riel, 2023; Heinonen, 2016). Arguably, CSA would not impact several dimensions, such as the products and services and financial performance dimensions of the Harris-Fombrun quotient (Fombrun & van Riel, 2023) and Aula and Heinonen's (2016) financial-rational dimension, which comprises measures of the company's financial success and growth. Thus, although

authentic and ethical CSA may ultimately contribute to a positive reputation, the organization's reputation is influenced by a *super rival*, which is a force that is larger but includes CSA (Yin, 2018).

Finally, it is worth noting that survey participants and interviewees were asked their opinions on how and to what extent their organization's previous CSA strategies had impacted reputation. Although three interviewees' responded based on data, the remainder based their answers on their opinions. In addition to their opinions being subjective, they represent only one estimation, and corporate reputation is "the overall estimation in which a company is held by its constituents" (Fombrun, 2018, p. 105).

CSA: Sounds Like a Job for Public Relations

The correlation analysis of survey data suggested that when public relations is involved in their organization's decision to engage in CSA and the subsequent strategy development, the CSA is more likely to positively impact organizational reputation. This is consistent with the theory that public relations is the function that protects a company's reputation (Bowen, 2008; Murray & White, 2005; Sisson & Bowen, 2017), as articulated by Public Relations Professional A:

We are also responsible for managing... the company's reputation. So we are called upon to understand how people perceive [the organization], and we advise on things that we can do to help create positive reception to [the organization]" (personal interview, October 2, 2024).

Again, it may be easier for public relations professionals who report directly to the CEO to lead CSA which positively impacts the organization's reputation, as indicated by the slightly strong positive correlation ($r=0.53$) between public relations reporting directly to the CEO and

previous CSA strategies positively impacting organizational reputation. This may be because public relations professionals who report directly to the CEO can influence strategy and policy (Bowen, 2006), allowing them to influence CSA that supports multiple dimensions of reputation.

Conclusion

Thesis Revisited

The purpose of this capstone was to further the research on CSA, specifically how and to what extent public relations professionals are empowered to use ethical decision-making frameworks to influence authentic CSA that supports organizational reputation. The researcher first developed a normative theory by studying academic literature on CSA, public relations excellence, ethics, and reputation. Doing so led to two propositions: first, when public relations professionals are given the autonomy to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to be authentic. Second, when public relations professionals have influence over their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to have a positive impact on organizational reputation. Together, the propositions formed the following thesis: when public relations professionals are given the autonomy and have the influence to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to be authentic and positively impact the organization's reputation. Guided by this thesis, the researcher tested the normative theory practically by conducting a survey and in-depth interviews with public relations professionals.

The survey and interviews surfaced several insights that support the individual propositions, although not the thesis in its entirety. First, most public relations professionals surveyed and interviewed are empowered to participate in their organization's CSA strategy—even if their reporting structure would suggest otherwise. This is likely because CSA is often

reactive and thus considered a form of issues management (Ashby-King, 2023; Dodd & Supa, 2015), providing public relations professionals the opportunity to prove their value to the dominant coalition (Flynn, 2012). The fact that the two interviewees whose organizations do not experience stakeholder pressure to engage in CSA are choosing not to engage further reinforces that engaging in CSA may be a reactive rather than proactive strategy. Although reporting to the CEO is not a requirement for participating in CSA strategy, it may be easier for public relations professionals who report directly to the CEO to achieve authentic CSA and CSA that positively impacts organizational reputation as they can more easily influence organizational decision-making.

Second, when public relations professionals participate in the decision to engage in CSA and the subsequent strategy development, the CSA is more likely to be authentic. Moreover, public relations professionals who approach CSA decisions ethically are more likely to achieve authentic CSA. Yet their use of formal decision-making frameworks was inconsistent and not necessarily an indicator of authentic CSA. However, frameworks are a valuable tool in the decision-making process: frameworks help move the discussion from emotional and subjective to rational and objective, and they help organizations maintain consistency.

Third, public relations professionals seriously consider reputational impacts related to CSA and can support organizational reputation by participating in the decision to engage in CSA and subsequent strategy development. However, simply because the CSA is approached ethically and is authentic does not necessarily mean it will bolster the organization's reputation.

Ultimately, organizational reputation is comprised of multiple dimensions (Eisenegger, 2008; Fombrun & van Riel, 2023; Heinonen, 2016) and is decided by an organization's stakeholders—how they perceive the organization—not the organization itself (Aula & Heinonen, 2016; Barnett

et al., 2006; Coombs, 2023; Deniz, 2020; Fombrun, 2018; Gibson et al., 2006). Thus, public relations professionals cannot control the organization's reputation. They can only control the process that may contribute to a positive reputation: approaching CSA through an ethical lens, which helps public relations professionals recognize and close factual and conformity gaps and achieve authentic CSA (Yim, 2021).

Although the researcher's thesis was ultimately left unproven, the researcher achieved the objective of surfacing practical recommendations that public relations professionals can use to promote ethical and authentic CSA and support organizational reputation (see appendix B).

Limitations

This capstone research has several limitations. First, the researcher's sample sizes for both the survey ($N=82$) and interviews ($N=15$) were small, and obtained through convenience, purposeful snowball sampling (Stacks, 2017). Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the broader population of public relations professionals. More specifically, because the research questions were based on the potential experiences of public relations professionals who work in-house at publicly traded or privately held corporations, the results do not apply to those public relations professionals who work in public relations agencies or the public sector.

Second, when looking for potential interviewees, it was often challenging to determine who was the most senior communicator in the organization as titles were inconsistent, with few organizations having a chief communications officer. To navigate this limitation, the researcher relied on public relations professionals self-reporting that they were the most senior public relations professionals in their organization.

Third, the researcher personally collected and analyzed the data and did not engage support to double-check the data analysis; thus, mistakes are possible. Moreover, when

determining whether an organization's CSA was authentic, the researcher was considering the organization's overall approach instead of specific instances, and relying entirely on the interviewees' perspectives, which may include bias. As such, the researcher was hesitant to define organizations that did not indicate they were engaging in authentic CSA as inauthentic, thus those organizations' CSA authenticity was coded as unknown. Additionally, the researcher relied on public relations professionals self-reporting and providing insights on their organization's approach to CSA, which likely included biases and inaccuracies. The researcher observed this in the discrepancies between the answers to survey questions six and seven. In question six, 83% ($n=68$) of survey participants answered *yes* to the question, *in your organization, does public relations/communications participate in your organization's decision to engage or not engage in corporate social advocacy?* In question seven, however, only 60% ($n=49$) of survey participants selected *decision to engage in CSA* when asked the question, *in your organization, what role(s) does public relations/communications play in corporate social advocacy (CSA), if any? Select all that apply.*

A fourth limitation was a lack of common definitions between the literature and the practicing public relations professionals. One interviewee whose definition of public relations differs from that of the literature and researcher's working definition stated, "as far as CSA goes, it's not a PR exercise, period, end of story. And if it is, you're not even out of the blocks" (Public Relations Professional O, personal interview, November 15, 2024). The researcher needed to provide the interviewee with additional context, including the relevant definition of public relations that was guiding this research. Similarly, several interviewees indicated that, although they were engaging in CSA, they had never heard the definition. "I didn't quite know that [corporate social advocacy] is the term that we use for it. I had to look it up, to be honest"

(Public Relations Professional J, personal interview, October 16, 2024). Additionally, the definition of CSA is problematic since an issue considered divisive or unrelated to core business to some may not be viewed the same way by others. Overall, the lack of commonly understood definitions made comparing responses challenging.

Fifth and most important, the researcher recognizes that a *societal rival* or “social trends, not any particular force or intervention” (Yin, 2018, p. 173) may account for the results of this capstone research. While conducting the research, the social and political environment shifted toward more conservative values, from multiple American companies reversing their ESG and DEI commitments (Conn, 2024; Gibson, 2024; Meyersohn, 2024) to Donald Trump’s decisive American election win in November 2024 (Lovelace, 2024). Therefore, results are a function of when data was gathered and may no longer be relevant. See appendix A for the researcher’s epilogue on how and to what extent this social and political shift may impact a corporation’s—and public relations’—approach to CSA.

Finally, the researcher has inherent biases. The researcher sought to minimize the impact of any bias on the research, including by being open to and incorporating feedback from MREB and the professor and supervisor of this capstone research; abiding by best practices when drafting survey and interview questions and conducting data triangulation; and always remaining aware of potential bias throughout the research process.

Areas of Future Research

This capstone surfaced opportunities for future research. First, to protect the anonymity of the interviewees and their organizations, the researcher did not incorporate any documentation analysis, such as communication materials that would corroborate the interviewees’ responses, social media comments revealing stakeholder sentiment, or third-party reputation rankings such

as those conducted by the Harris Poll or Léger. Thus, the researcher's normative theory would benefit from being tested through a case study of specific organizations, allowing for documentation analysis. Second, a content analysis of how CSA has evolved since 2020 may reveal how and to what extent the *super-rival* explanation of social and political trends is influencing the reputational impact of CSA. Third, this research uncovered that not all organizations face the same pressure to engage in CSA. Public Relations Professional G theorized that consumer-facing businesses that represent society more broadly experience greater pressure from stakeholders to engage in CSA. However, Public Relations Professional N, who is in the same industry, albeit with a smaller organization, does not experience significant pressure to engage in CSA. Therefore, how and to what extent certain organizations and industries face pressure to engage in CSA is perhaps a worthwhile area of study. Finally, the explanation building conducted in this research revealed that, although CSA involves making a public statement (Dodd & Supa, 2014), employees are a driving force behind whether an organization decides to engage in CSA. Further research on the relationship between employee activism and CSA is required. It is also worth exploring public relations' relationship with human resources and if it should be akin to Grunig and Grunig's (2013) position on how public relations should work with marketing: "as equal partners in management" (p. 69).

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Appendix A

Epilogue

Less than two weeks after I officially chose to study public relations' role in corporate social advocacy (CSA) for my capstone research, I was scrolling through my LinkedIn feed and saw the news that Tractor Supply Co. (TSC) was shifting its environmental, social and governance focus—including backtracking on its diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) commitments (Tractor Supply Co., 2024). TSC's announcement came after weeks of criticism from conservative stakeholders, instigated by conservative activist Robby Starbuck (Alsharif, 2024).

Although TSC's announcement felt like a watershed moment at the time, it was not the start of the social and political pendulum swing toward more conservative values. The reprisal against woke companies that had been simmering for several years (Guynn, 2023a, 2023b) turned to a boil with Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' Stop W.O.K.E Act (Staff, 2021) and the United States Supreme Court's ruling against affirmative action, which made it illegal for higher education institutions to consider race in their admissions (Kramer, 2024; Totenberg, 2023). TSC's decision was also not where this pendulum swing stopped. Following TSC's announcement, Starbuck and conservative activists turned their ire toward other companies they perceived as woke. As a result, Ford Motor, Lowe's, Harley-Davidson, John Deere, and Walmart—among others— all reversed course on their DEI initiatives in 2024 (Conn, 2024; Gibson, 2024; Green & Kang, 2024).

Then, the pot boiled over. In November 2024, Donald Trump's decisive victory in the 2024 American presidential election (Lovelace, 2024) is perhaps best described as a milestone that could “yank the pendulum right out of the ceiling” (Public Relations Professional O,

personal interview, November 15, 2024). From Trump's selection of anti-vaccine activist Robert F. Kennedy Junior for health secretary (Livesay et al., 2024) to his allegiance with Elon Musk, who has frequently spoken out against what he perceives as woke values and language (Blau & Palmer, 2024), it is evident that the United States is "moving into a new era politically, economically and perhaps culturally" (Carter, 2024a, para. 10). For example, almost immediately following Trump's re-election, the National Football League told its players they were not to make political statements when visible to fans or a television audience on game days (Williams, 2024). Former South Carolina Governor and United Nations ambassador Nikki Haley stated that the American people wanted to see businesses go back to doing business and stop engaging in identity politics (Edelman, 2024) during a US election virtual briefing hosted by Edelman. Canada is not immune to this shift either, especially Canadian companies with operations in the United States (Milstead & Jones, 2024). Here at home, the Alberta Conservative Party's and Pierre Poilievre's disparaging of DEI and ESG programs demonstrate that "the signs of some tumult are already here" (Milstead & Jones, 2024, para. 9).

Since this pendulum swing occurred while I was conducting my capstone research, many people, including myself, asked me what would become of CSA in this new era. Are my findings even relevant now?

To answer this question, I first returned to the definition of CSA. CSA is defined as "an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues" (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5) that are unrelated to its core business (Rim et al., 2020; Sauter & Jungblut, 2023), and controversial and divisive by nature (Dodd & Supa, 2015; Hong & Li, 2020; Sauter & Jungblut, 2023). Moreover, it is critical to remember that CSA can encompass both progressive and conservative issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). If progressive values aim to

move society forward, such as implementing DEI initiatives, and conservative values aim to return society to the way things were, then an organization announcing it is reversing its DEI programs is, in and of itself, an example of CSA—it just happens to be a conservative example. Although CSA has primarily revolved around progressive issues over the past four years, it is important not to conflate CSA with progressive activism; in other words, CSA can manifest as both promoting and rejecting a program such as DEI. As Public Relations Professional O said, “companies were scrambling to be on the right side of history three years ago; now they are scrambling again, but it looks different” (personal interview, November 15, 2024). If authentic CSA occurs when an organization achieves high consistency with its actions and high congruence with society (Yim, 2021), perhaps the companies reversing their DEI programs in 2024 were engaging in fake stand-taking in 2020. Although their actions were consistent with society’s expectations at the time, the organization was not being authentic to itself. “They didn’t want to do it, and now DEI is being completely dismantled because it [was] virtue signalling” (Public Relations Professional M, personal interview, October 24, 2024). For the organizations engaging in fake stand-taking, it was tempting—perhaps even welcome—to reverse course when the predominant societal pressure shifted.

But what about those organizations whose CSA efforts have been authentic? As the predominant societal and stakeholder pressure shifts to being more conservative, organizations previously engaging in authentic CSA in support of progressive issues may now feel pressured to engage in fake stand-taking: aligning to a more conservative society’s expectations while being inconsistent with their own value system (Yim, 2021). This could create a backlash from their employees whose expectations are no longer met, driving even more aggressive employee activism. As these organizations begin to ask themselves whether the “struggle and commitment

and cost and vulnerability of communicating [is] worth it—in a world where certain policies and governments are contrary to what we were all told to do for years” (Public Relations Professional O, personal interview, November 15, 2024), they will simultaneously be struggling to meet the expectations of their employees, whom this research revealed to be a critical stakeholder when it comes to CSA. In the same US election virtual briefing, Richard Edelman agreed with Nikki Haley but with one caveat: there will be certain issues that you need to talk to your employees about, and sometimes, those issues will be very controversial (Edelman, 2024). Additionally, if progressive CSA becomes less common, it may re-emerge as a differentiator (Vredenburg et al., 2020) for those organizations who continue engaging in progressive CSA in a more conservative and less-crowded CSA environment.

Despite the notable pendulum swing, a 2024 public affairs pulse survey conducted by Morning Consult indicated that among Americans, public support of corporate engagement increased across 11 of 12 social issues surveyed, including progressive issues such as ending discrimination based on race, gender, or sexual orientation; and supporting legal access to abortion (Pinkham, 2024). However, researchers observed large gaps—specifically related to access to abortions and discrimination by gender identity—when they analyzed the data by political affiliation. In Canada, the Randstad Canada 2025 salary guide indicated that fostering diversity and inclusion at work is among the top five trends to expect in 2025 (Randstad Interim Inc., 2024). These two studies signify that some stakeholder groups still want progressive action. When conservative activism meets progressive activism, especially from employees (Carter, 2024b), organizations may find themselves facing a new, arguably more challenging CSA landscape. Public relations professionals will need to help their organizations and executives navigate it ethically, authentically, and in a way that protects organizational reputation.

Overall, this research remains relevant given how pendulums work: by nature, they swing. The 2020-2021 period was not the first rise of progressive activism or what some perceive to be as woke; in fact, similar social phenomena occurred following the First World War and Great Depression, the draft rule changes of the 1960s and 1970s, and the job losses and immigration law changes of the 1980s and 1990s (Prideaux et al, 2024). Thus, studying this period is worthwhile as the cyclical nature of history suggests we may see this again.

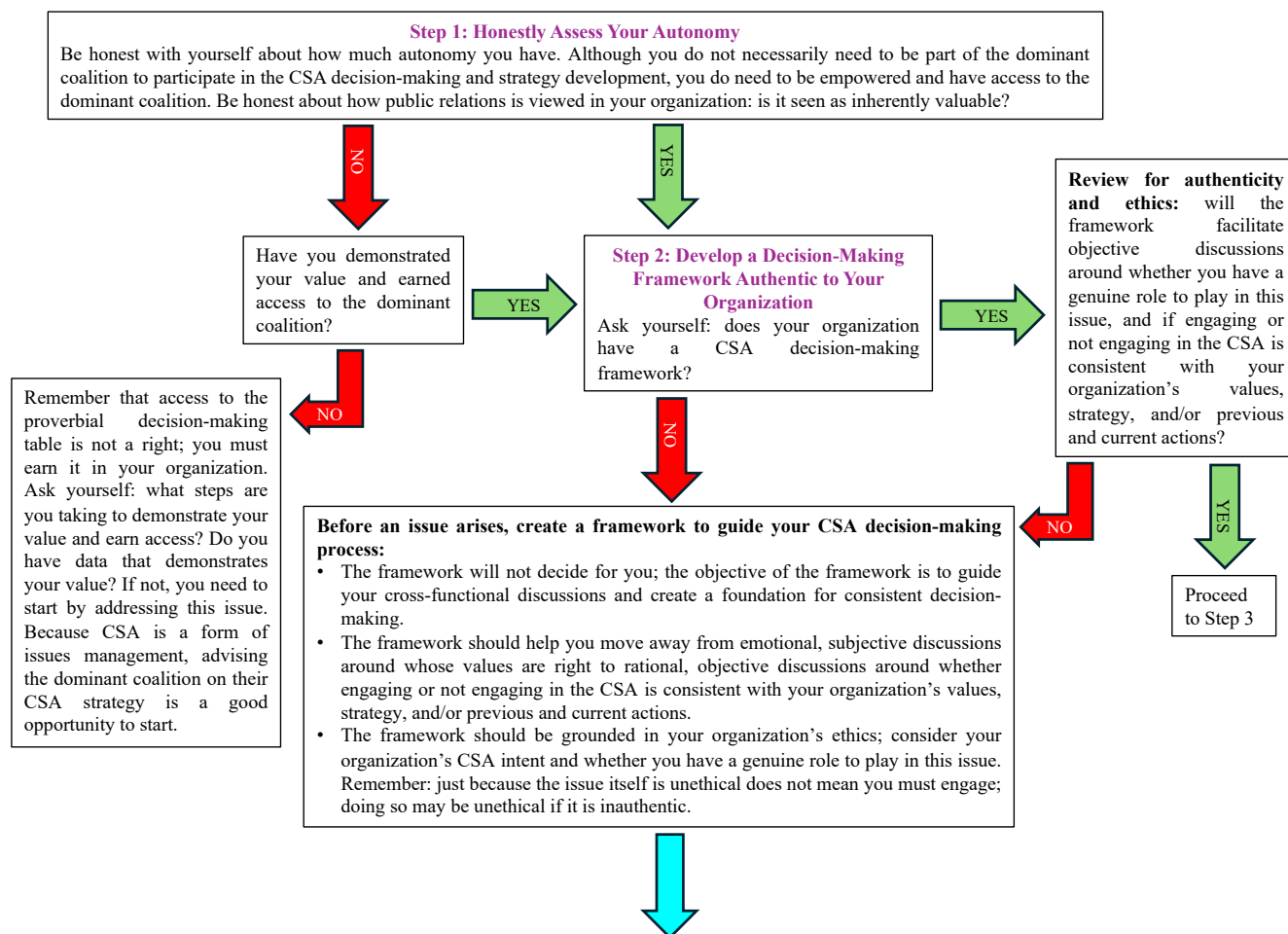
Although how CSA evolves in this new era is yet to be seen, public relations professionals should expect that, regardless of where the pendulum is on the social and political spectrum, CSA will keep us busy and—if we are ethical and authentic—valued by our organizations.

Appendix B

Practical Recommendations for Public Relations Professionals

The insights gleaned through this capstone research informed the following recommendations. The researcher developed this process for public relations professionals seeking to help their organizations achieve ethical, authentic corporate social advocacy (CSA) that may contribute to a positive organizational reputation.

Authentic CSA Decision Tree



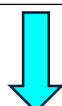
Step 3: Socialize Your Framework

- Your framework is meant to support consistent decision-making. Thus, before you put your framework into action you need to ensure your organization is aligned. Circulate the framework for review among those in your organizations who are typically involved in the CSA decision-making (e.g., human resources, marketing, legal, DEI, etc.), take their feedback seriously, and discuss if necessary.
- Once the cross-functional team is aligned, present the framework to the dominant coalition—including your organization's ultimate decision-maker—for review and approval. When doing so, clearly explain the framework's purpose to ensure everyone understands the importance of consistency in driving a positive organizational reputation.



Step 4: Use Your Framework to Guide Two-Way, Symmetrical Communication

- When the question of whether to engage in CSA arises, gather diverse but relevant voices from within your organization to discuss and debate, using the framework as a guide. The voices around the table should represent not only your organization and its values but also those of your critical internal and external stakeholders to understand whether the decision to engage or not engage in CSA is congruent with the expectations of your stakeholders and society.
- Scenario plan by considering what will happen if you do and do not speak out and how relevant stakeholder groups will respond to each scenario. Weigh the risks and come up with solutions:
 - ❖ If you decide to engage in CSA but choosing a side will alienate too many stakeholders, try appealing to shared, non-controversial values (e.g., human rights).
 - ❖ If you are willing to alienate stakeholders by engaging or not engaging in CSA, be honest about this outcome and plan to mitigate the backlash from stakeholders who disagree with your decision.



Step 5: Make a Recommendation

Based on the outcome of Step 4, make a formal recommendation to your organization's final decision-maker. In addition to explaining your decision, be clear about the potential outcomes and stakeholder reactions. If your decision will make some stakeholders unhappy, be honest about this and share your mitigation plan.



Did your decision deviate from your framework?

YES

You must explain why to both the decision-maker and your stakeholders. Then proceed to Step 6.



Step 6: Communicate

Once a final decision has been made, communicate the decision to your stakeholders. Provide context to help stakeholders understand how and why you arrived at your decision. Even if you choose not to engage in CSA, communicate directly with stakeholders pressuring you to do so. Even though they may disagree with your final decision, you are more likely to maintain your relationship with them through two-way, symmetrical communication.



Step 7: Listen & Learn

After you communicate the decision, monitor stakeholder response. Review negative feedback and follow up as necessary. Remember that CSA is challenging; if you make a mistake, make it right and learn from it.



Step 8: Continuous Monitoring

Frequently revisit this process to ensure your framework is current and internal stakeholders are aligned.

Appendix C

McMaster Research Ethics Board Approval Letter



McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)
 c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
 MREB Secretariat, GH-305
 1280 Main St. W.
 Hamilton, Ontario, L8W 4L8
 email: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca
 Phone: 905-525-9140 ext. 23142

CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Today's Date: Sep/09/2024

Supervisor: Dr. Terence Flynn

Student Investigator: Graduate Student Julia Wilkinson

Applicant: Julia Wilkinson

Project Title: How and to what extent can public relations influence authentic corporate social advocacy that enhances organizational reputation?

MREB#: 7195

Dear Researcher(s)

The ethics application and supporting documents for MREB# 7195 entitled "How and to what extent can public relations influence authentic corporate social advocacy that enhances organizational reputation?" have been reviewed and cleared by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants.

The application protocol is cleared as revised without questions or requests for modification. The above named study is to be conducted in accordance with the most recent approved versions of the application and supporting documents.

Ongoing clearance is contingent on completing the Annual Report in advance of the yearly anniversary of the original ethics clearance date: Sep/09/2025. If the Annual Report is not submitted, then ethics clearance will lapse on the expiry date and Research Finance will be notified that ethics clearance is no longer valid (TCPS, Art. 6.14).

An Amendment form must be submitted and cleared before any substantive alterations are made to the approved research protocol and documents (TCPS, Art. 6.16).

Researchers are required to report Adverse Events (i.e. an unanticipated negative consequence or result affecting participants) to the MREB secretariat and the MREB Chair as soon as possible, and no more than 3 days after the event occurs (TCPS, Art. 6.15). A privacy breach affecting participant information should also be reported to the MREB secretariat and the MREB Chair as soon as possible. The Reportable Events form is used to document adverse events, privacy breaches, protocol deviations and participant complaints.

Document Type	File Name	Date	Version
Interviews	Interview Guide	Aug/10/2024	1
Consent Forms	Consent - Oral Consent Script	Aug/10/2024	1
Consent Forms	Consent - Letter of Information_Consent - Interview	Aug/10/2024	1
Consent Forms	Consent - Oral Consent Log	Aug/17/2024	1
Recruiting Materials	Recruitment - Social Media post	Aug/19/2024	2
Consent Forms	Consent Preamble & Post Study Actions for Survey	Aug/19/2024	2
Test Instruments	Survey Questions_v2	Aug/19/2024	2
Recruiting Materials	Recruitment - Email Script sent direct to participants	Aug/19/2024	2
Recruiting Materials	Recruitment - Email Script to survey participants	Sep/06/2024	1
Recruiting Materials	Recruitment - Snowball Script_v2	Sep/06/2024	2
Consent Forms	Consent - Letter of Information_Consent - Survey V2	Sep/06/2024	2
Response Documents	Summary of Revisions for MREB 7195 Wilkinson	Sep/06/2024	1

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Appendix D

Survey Questions

1. Are you currently employed in a public relations/communications role at a publicly traded or privately held corporation in Canada or the United States?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

Note: this is a screening question; participants who answer “no” or “prefer not to answer” will be thanked and the survey will end.

2. How many years of public relations/communications experience do you have?

- 0 – 5
- 6 – 10
- 11 – 15
- 16 – 20
- 21+
- Prefer not to answer

3. Are you the most senior public relations/communications professional in your organization?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

4. In your organization, does the most senior public relations/communications professional currently report directly to the CEO?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

Note: this is a skip pattern question; participants who answer “yes” will move on to question 5, participants who answer “no”, “unsure”, or “prefer not to answer” will move on to question 4B.

4B. In your organization, who does the most senior public relations/communications professional report to? Please provide their title and the name of their business unit.

[Open-ended]

5. Corporate social advocacy, or CSA, is when an organization externally communicates its position on a divisive social or political issue that is not directly related to its core business (e.g., 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, pro-life stance). In the last year, how often has your organization engaged in corporate social advocacy?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very Often
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

6. In your organization, does public relations/communications participate in your organization’s decision to engage or not engage in corporate social advocacy?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

Note: this is a skip pattern question; participants who answer “yes”, “unsure”, or “prefer not to answer” will move on to question 7, participants who answer “no” will move on to question 6B.

6B. What barriers does public relations/communications face, if any, from participating in your organization’s decision to engage or not engage in corporate social advocacy?

[Open-ended]

7. In your organization, what role(s) does public relations/communications play in corporate social advocacy (CSA), if any? Select all that apply.

- Decision to engage in CSA
- Development of CSA strategy
- Development of CSA-related communications materials, such as media statements or social media posts
- Monitoring stakeholder response to CSA
- Issues and/or crisis management related to CSA
- Other: please list _____
- None
- Prefer not to answer

8. In your organization, how often are ethical frameworks (e.g., decision trees, alignment to organizational values) used for making decisions about engaging or not engaging in corporate social advocacy?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

9. In your organization, how often is organizational reputation considered when making decisions about engaging or not engaging in corporate social advocacy?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

10. In your organization, how often are your stakeholders' (e.g., customers, employees, shareholders) expectations about your social or political positions considered when making decisions about engaging or not engaging in corporate social advocacy?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

- Always
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

11. In the last year, what types of social and/or political issues has your organization communicated its position on externally, if any?

[Open-ended]

12. In your opinion, engaging in corporate social advocacy has had:

- A positive impact on your organization's reputation.
- No impact on your organization's reputation.
- A negative impact on your organization's reputation.
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

13. How often do your stakeholders' (e.g., customers, employees, shareholders) positions on social or political issues influence your organization's communication?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

14. How often do your stakeholders' (e.g., customers, employees, shareholders) positions on social or political issues influence your organization's actions?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always
- Unsure
- Prefer not to answer

Thank you very much for taking part in my study, your information will be very helpful.

If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview, please click this link to be taken to a secondary survey to enter your email address.

1. Are you willing to participate in a follow-up interview with the researcher and/or would you like to receive a copy of the results?

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to answer

Note: this is a skip pattern question; only participants who answer “yes” will move on to question 1B.

1B: Thank you! Please select all that apply:

- I am willing to participate in a follow-up interview with the researcher
- I would like a copy of the results
- Prefer not to answer

1C: Please provide your email address:

[Open-ended]

Appendix E

Letter of Information/Consent: Survey

Study Title: How and to What Extent Can Public Relations Influence Authentic CSA That Enhances Reputation?

Student Investigator:

Julia Wilkinson
Department of Communication Studies
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(437) 229-6937
E-mail: wilkij22@mcmaster.ca

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Terry Flynn
Department of Communication
& Media Arts
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 26977
E-mail: tflynn@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to participate in this study about the freedom and influence public relations professionals have in guiding their company's corporate social advocacy (CSA) efforts. I want to learn about your experiences with CSA, which is when an organization speaks out on a divisive social or political issue not directly related to its core business. I want to learn about what challenges you face, if any, when navigating CSA, how you make decisions around CSA and the results of your CSA strategies. My goal is to create a helpful guide that public relations professionals can use to promote ethical and genuine CSA that enhances their company's reputation.

I am doing this research as part of my capstone through McMaster University's Master of Communications Management program under the supervision of Dr. Terence (Terry) Flynn.

What will happen during the study?

You will complete a short survey through the online platform, Lime Survey. In the survey, you will be asked to answer questions about your experience working in public relations/communications, including your seniority within and the structure of your public relations/communications function within your organization. You will also be asked about your organization's approach to corporate social advocacy, and public relations/communications role therein, and your opinion on the outcome of these efforts. You will also be asked if you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview with me.

Below are examples of the survey questions:

1. How many years of public relations/communications experience do you have?
2. Corporate social advocacy, or CSA, is when an organization externally communicates its position on a divisive social or political issue that is not directly related to its core

business (e.g., 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, pro-life stance). Since 2020, how often has your organization engaged in corporate social advocacy?

3. In your organization, does public relations/communications participate in your organization's decision to engage or not engage in corporate social advocacy?

Are there any risks to doing this study?

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may feel anxious answering some of the questions. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

The research will not benefit you directly. I hope what is learned through this study will help organizations better navigate the increasingly complex challenge of whether to speak out on social or political issues.

Who will know what I said or did in the study?

You are participating in this research anonymously. No one, including me, will know that you participated, unless you choose to provide your email address for a follow-up interview with me. If you provide your email address, your responses will be anonymized. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. Only my supervisor and I will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to tell them. Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. The survey data will be kept in a password-protected computer which only I will have access to. Once the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to be part of the study, you can end the survey for whatever reason, even after giving consent. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

Once you have submitted your responses for this anonymous survey, your answers will be put into a database and will not be identifiable. This means that once you have submitted your survey, your responses cannot be withdrawn from the study because I will not be able to identify which responses are yours.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study completed by approximately February 1, 2025. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know. I also plan to publish the results of my study on my personal LinkedIn page at www.linkedin.com/in/juliar-wilkinson.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

<p>Julia Wilkinson Wilkij22@mcmaster.ca 437-229-6937</p>
--

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance under project 7195. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Office
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
E-mail: mreb@mcmaster.ca

Appendix F

Survey Consent Preamble and Closing Statements

PREAMBLE

This survey is administered by Julia Wilkinson, a Master of Communications Management student in the Department of Humanities at McMaster University. The purpose of the survey is to conduct research about the freedom and influence public relations professionals have in guiding their company's corporate social advocacy, or CSA efforts. Information gathered during this survey will be written up as a capstone research paper. What I learn from this survey will help me understand how public relations/communications professionals can contribute to CSA efforts that are authentic and enhance organizational reputation.

People participating in this study must work in public relations/communications at a publicly traded or privately held corporation in Canada or the United States. The survey should take approximately 10 minutes to complete. You are free to complete this survey or not. Once you have started the survey, you are not required to complete it and can leave at any time by clicking the "quit" button. To learn more about this study, particularly in terms of any risks or harms associated with the study, how confidentiality and anonymity will be handled, withdrawal procedures and, how to obtain information about the study's results, please read the [Letter of Information](#).

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the [McMaster Research Ethics Board](#) (7195). If you have any concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone 1-(905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
E-mail: mreb@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT STATEMENTS

Having read the above preamble and the linked Letter of Information, I understand that by clicking the "Yes" button below, I agree to take part in this study.

YES I agree to participate in this study.

NO I do not agree to participate in this study.

If participant clicks “no”:

Thank you. You have decided not to participate in this study. No data has been collected from you.

STUDY WITHDRAWAL

If the participant clicks the “quit” button:

Thank you. You have decided to quit this study. None of your responses will be collected or stored.

SUBMISSION OF COMPLETED ONLINE DATA

Thank you very much for taking part in my study, your information will be very helpful.

If you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview and/or receive the results of this study, please click this link to be taken to a secondary survey to enter your email address.

Appendix G

Letter of Information/Consent: Interviews

Study Title: How and to What Extent Can Public Relations Influence Authentic CSA That Enhances Reputation?

Student Investigator:

Julia Wilkinson
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Faculty Supervisor:

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Department of Communication
& Media Arts
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 26977
E-mail: tflynn@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to participate in this study about the freedom and influence public relations professionals have in guiding their company's corporate social advocacy (CSA) efforts. I want to learn about your experiences with CSA, which is when an organization speaks out on a divisive social or political issue not directly related to its core business. I want to learn about what challenges you face, if any, when navigating CSA, how you make decisions around CSA, and the results of your CSA strategies. My goal is to create a helpful guide that public relations professionals can use to promote ethical and genuine CSA that enhances their company's reputation.

I am doing this research as part of my capstone through McMaster University's Master of Communications Management program under the supervision of Dr. Terence (Terry) Flynn.

What will happen during the study?

You will participate in one 60-minute, one-on-one interview with me over the online platform Zoom. I will take notes during the interview. With your consent, I will record the audio of our interview for transcription purposes. During the interview, I will ask you a series of questions about how your organization makes decisions about whether to engage in CSA. I will also ask you questions about your involvement in your organization's CSA efforts and your perception of how CSA impacts organizational reputation. Below are examples of questions that I will ask you:

1. How and to what extent are you involved in your organization's decisions to engage or not engage in corporate social advocacy (CSA)?
2. What is your/your organization's process for deciding whether to engage or not engage in CSA?
3. What role does organizational reputation play, if any, in your/your organization's decision to engage in CSA?

Are there any risks to doing this study?

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. First, you may feel anxious answering some of the questions. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. Second, there is the potential for Zoom to experience a data breach. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

The research will not benefit you directly. I hope what is learned through this study will help organizations better navigate the increasingly complex challenge of whether to speak out on social or political issues.

Who will know what I said or did in the study?

You are participating in this study confidentially. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. No one but my supervisor and me will know whether you were in the study unless you choose to tell them. Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me. The information/data you provide will be kept in a password-protected computer which only I will have access to. Once the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed.

All data collected using McMaster's online platform (Zoom) are securely protected through McMaster's service agreements with this platform. Our Zoom meeting will require a password, and the waiting room will be enabled. All Zoom recordings are saved to McMaster's Zoom site and then will be downloaded and saved on my password-protected computer. Once this is completed and secured, I will delete the recordings saved on McMaster's Zoom site.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you decide to be part of the study, you can stop (withdraw) from the interview for whatever reason, even after giving consent, part-way through the interview, or up until December 31, 2024, when I expect to be submitting my capstone. If you choose to withdraw from the study during the interview, please tell me during the interview. If you choose to withdraw from the study after the interview is complete, please email me and ask me to withdraw your information. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study completed by approximately February 1, 2025. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you. I also plan to publish the results of my study on my personal LinkedIn page at www.linkedin.com/in/juliawilkinson.

Questions about the Study: If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me at:

<p>Julia Wilkinson Wilkij22@mcmaster.ca 437-229-6937</p>
--

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance under project 7195. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Office
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
E-mail: mreb@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Julia Wilkinson, of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until December 31, 2024.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

Consent Questions:

1. Do you agree to participate in this study?
2. Would you like a copy of the study results? If yes, what email address should we send them to?
3. Do you agree to audio recording?

Appendix H

Oral Consent Script: Interviews

Study Title: How and to What Extent Can Public Relations Influence Authentic CSA that Enhances Reputation?

Oral Consent Script

To be used in conjunction with letter of consent.

Introduction:

Hello. I'm Julia Wilkinson. I am conducting research about the freedom and influence public relations professionals have in guiding their company's corporate social advocacy, or CSA efforts. This interview is part of my capstone research at McMaster University's Master of Communications Management program in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. I'm working under the supervision of Dr. Terry Flynn of McMaster's department of Communications Studies and Media Arts.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research.

Have you had time to read the Letter of Information I sent you?

If yes:

Great, then I would like to take a moment to review some main points from the Letter of Information before we continue.

If no, researcher will proceed to go through the full LOI in detail with the participant and confirm the important points about voluntary participation and withdrawal listed below.

Confirm the following to the participant:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary.
- If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.
- You can decide to stop at any time, even part-way through the interview for whatever reason.
- If you decide to stop during the interview, I will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point, whether returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.
- Following the interview, you can ask to remove your data from the study up until December 31, 2024.
- This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Do you have any questions or want me to go over any study details again?

Consent questions:

Do you agree to participate in this study?

If yes,

- Would you like a copy of the study results? If yes, what is the best email address to send them to?
- Do you agree to audio recording?

If no, "Thank you for your time."

Appendix I

Interview Questions

Study: How and to What Extent Can Public Relations Influence Authentic CSA that Enhances Reputation?

Julia Wilkinson, Master of Communications Management Student
Department of Humanities – McMaster University

Information about these interview questions: This gives you an idea what I would like to learn about your role in your organization’s corporate social advocacy efforts. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just “yes or no” answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking such as: “So, you are saying that ...?”, to get more information (“Please tell me more?”), or to learn what you think or feel about something (“Why do you think that is...?”).

1. How is the public relations/communications function structured in your organization?
2. Who do you report to?
3. How and to what extent are you involved in your organization’s decisions to engage or not engage in corporate social advocacy (CSA)?
4. When your organization chooses to engage in CSA, how and to what extent are you involved in developing the CSA strategy?
5. When your organization chooses to engage in CSA, how and to what extent are you or members of your public relations/communications team involved in implementing CSA-related tactics, including developing and distributing communications, monitoring the response, and conducting issues or crisis management as needed?
 - a. [For interviewees not involved in decision-making and/or strategy development]: What barriers do you face, if any, to participating in the CSA decision-making and/or strategy development?
 - b. [For interviewees involved in decision-making and/or strategy development]: What barriers did you face, if any, to participating in the CSA decision-making and/or strategy development, and how did you overcome them?
6. What is your/your organization’s process for deciding whether to engage or not engage in CSA?
7. How and to what extent do you/does your organization consider the perspectives of your organization’s key stakeholder groups when deciding to engage or not engage in CSA?
8. What role does ethics play, if any, in your/your organization’s decision to engage in CSA?
9. What role does organizational reputation play, if any, in your/your organization’s decision to engage in CSA?
10. How and to what extent does your organization align its communication to the expectations of your key stakeholders and society?

11. How and to what extent does your organization align its actions to the expectations of its key stakeholders and society?
12. In your opinion, has your organization's previous CSA strategies had a positive, negative, or neutral impact on your organization's reputation?

END

Appendix J

Chat GPT-3.5 Prompts and Responses

Date: November 23, 2024 @ 3:30 p.m.

Prompt 1:

What do you make of this correlation analysis:

	Reports to CEO: Yes	Involved in Decision: Yes	Involved in Strategy: Yes	Framework Used: Yes	Ethics Considered: Yes	Reputation: Positive Impact	Reputation: Neutral Impact	Reputation: Unsure/Unclear	Authentic: Yes	Authentic: Unsure
Reports to CEO: Yes	1									
Involved in Decision: Yes	0.25	1								
Involved in Strategy: Yes	0.353553391	0.707106781	1							
Framework Used: Yes	-3.43458E-17	0.353553391	0.2	1						
Ethics Considered: Yes	0.25	0.583333333	0.353553391	0.353553391	1					
Reputation: Positive Impact	0.534522484	0.133630621	0.377964473	0.188982237	0.133630621	1				
Reputation: Neutral Impact	-0.353553391	-0.353553391	-0.7	-0.2	-1.96262E-17	-0.661437828	1			
Reputation: Unsure/Unclear	0.25	0.25	0.353553391	-1.96262E-17	-0.166666667	-0.467707173	-0.353553391	1		
Authentic: Yes	0.40824829	0.612372436	0.577350269	0.288675135	0.612372436	0.21821789	-0.288675135	0.068041382	1	
Authentic: Unsure	-0.40824829	-0.612372436	-0.577350269	-0.288675135	-0.612372436	-0.21821789	0.288675135	-0.068041382	-1	1

ChatGPT:

This is a correlation matrix showing the relationships between different variables in your dataset. Here's a quick interpretation:

- **Diagonal Values (1s):**** These represent perfect correlations, as each variable is compared to itself.
- **Positive Correlations:**** Values closer to +1 (e.g., 0.707 between "Involved in Decision" and "Involved in Strategy") indicate strong positive relationships, meaning as one variable increases, so does the other.
- **Negative Correlations:**** Values closer to -1 (e.g., -0.7 between "Involved in Strategy" and "Reputation: Neutral Impact") indicate strong negative relationships, meaning as one variable increases, the other tends to decrease.
- **Weak/No Correlations:**** Values near zero (e.g., -3.43458E-17 for "Reports to CEO" and "Framework Used") suggest little to no linear relationship between the variables.

Key Observations:

- ****"Involved in Decision" and "Involved in Strategy":** Strong positive correlation (0.707), indicating that decision involvement often coincides with strategic involvement.
- ****"Ethics Considered" and "Authentic: Yes":** Moderate positive correlation (0.612), suggesting ethical considerations are linked with perceived authenticity.
- ****"Reputation: Positive Impact" and "Authentic: Yes":** Weak positive correlation (0.218), showing only a slight relationship between positive reputation and authenticity.
- ****"Reputation: Neutral Impact" and "Involved in Strategy":** Strong negative correlation (-0.7), indicating a perception of neutrality may arise when strategic involvement is limited.

Red Flags or Interesting Points:

- The tiny values like `-3.43458E-17` are effectively zero due to computational precision limits.

- **"Authentic: Yes" and "Authentic: Unsure":** Perfect negative correlation (-1), which is expected since these are likely mutually exclusive responses.

Let me know if you'd like a deeper dive into any of these relationships or guidance on interpreting specific results!

Prompt 2:

Thank you. What correlations are relevant to proving the thesis: when public relations professionals are given the autonomy and have the influence to use ethical decision-making frameworks in guiding their organization's CSA efforts, the CSA is more likely to be authentic and positively influence the organization's reputation.

ChatGPT:

To address your thesis, the following correlations from your matrix are particularly relevant:

**1. Correlations Indicating PR Professionals' Autonomy and Influence**

- **"Reports to CEO: Yes" and "Involved in Decision: Yes" (0.25):**
 - A moderate positive correlation indicates that reporting directly to the CEO is somewhat associated with being involved in decision-making. This implies some level of autonomy and influence.
- **"Involved in Decision: Yes" and "Involved in Strategy: Yes" (0.707):**
 - A strong positive correlation shows that involvement in decision-making aligns closely with strategic involvement, supporting the idea that PR professionals with influence are also active in strategic CSA efforts.

**2. Correlations Showing Use of Ethical Frameworks**

- **"Framework Used: Yes" and "Ethics Considered: Yes" (0.353):**
 - A moderate positive correlation suggests that the use of ethical frameworks is linked to ethical considerations in CSA efforts.
- **"Reports to CEO: Yes" and "Framework Used: Yes" (-3.43458E-17 \approx 0):**
 - No meaningful correlation here might suggest that reporting to the CEO alone doesn't directly predict the use of ethical frameworks. Influence likely depends on other factors.

**3. Correlations Linking Ethics and Authenticity**

- **"Ethics Considered: Yes" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.612):**
 - A strong positive correlation indicates that considering ethics in CSA is closely linked to perceptions of authenticity, aligning with your thesis.
- **"Framework Used: Yes" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.289):**
 - A weak-to-moderate positive correlation shows some alignment between the use of frameworks and authenticity, but the connection isn't as strong as ethics considerations.

4. Correlations Linking CSA and Reputation

- ***"Reputation: Positive Impact" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.218):**
 - A weak positive correlation indicates that authenticity contributes somewhat to positive reputation but is not the sole driver.
- ***"Ethics Considered: Yes" and "Reputation: Positive Impact" (0.134):**
 - A weak positive correlation suggests that ethics considerations might influence reputation positively, but the relationship is not robust.
- ***"Reputation: Neutral Impact" and "Involved in Strategy: Yes" (-0.7):**
 - A strong negative correlation implies that a lack of involvement in strategy is linked to a neutral (non-distinctive) reputation, highlighting the importance of PR's strategic influence in building a strong reputation.

Key Takeaways:

1. **Strongest Evidence for Thesis:**
 - The strong correlation between "Ethics Considered: Yes" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.612) directly supports your argument that ethical decision-making enhances authenticity.
 - The strong link between "Involved in Decision: Yes" and "Involved in Strategy: Yes" (0.707) supports the need for PR professionals to have strategic involvement to influence CSA effectively.
2. **Moderate Support:**
 - The moderate correlations between "Framework Used: Yes" and both "Ethics Considered: Yes" (0.353) and "Authentic: Yes" (0.289) suggest that ethical frameworks contribute to ethical and authentic CSA but may not be the sole driver.
3. **Areas to Explore Further:**
 - The weak correlations involving reputation ("Reputation: Positive Impact" and ethics/authenticity) suggest other factors may also play a significant role in influencing reputation through CSA.

Would you like suggestions for interpreting these findings in your capstone or ideas for further analysis?

Prompt 3:

Thank you. can you please update using the following definitions for the degree of correlation: - High Degree: Values between ± 0.50 and ± 1 suggest a strong correlation. - Moderate Degree: Values between ± 0.30 and ± 0.49 indicate a moderate correlation. - Low Degree: Values below ± 0.29 are considered a weak correlation.

ChatGPT:

Using your updated definitions for the degree of correlation, here's a revised interpretation of the correlations relevant to your thesis:

1. Correlations Indicating PR Professionals' Autonomy and Influence

- ***"Reports to CEO: Yes" and "Involved in Decision: Yes" (0.25):**
 - **Low correlation**: Reporting to the CEO has only a weak association with involvement in decision-making, suggesting that autonomy might not be guaranteed by organizational hierarchy alone.
- ***"Involved in Decision: Yes" and "Involved in Strategy: Yes" (0.71):**
 - **High correlation**: Strong evidence that being involved in decision-making aligns with involvement in strategy. This supports your argument that influence is crucial for PR professionals' roles in CSA.

2. Correlations Showing Use of Ethical Frameworks

- ***"Framework Used: Yes" and "Ethics Considered: Yes" (0.35):**
 - **Moderate correlation**: The use of ethical frameworks moderately predicts whether ethics are considered in CSA efforts.
- ***"Reports to CEO: Yes" and "Framework Used: Yes" (-3.43458E-17 \approx 0):**
 - **No correlation**: Reporting directly to the CEO has no meaningful connection with the use of ethical frameworks, indicating other factors may influence this relationship.

3. Correlations Linking Ethics and Authenticity

- ***"Ethics Considered: Yes" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.61):**
 - **High correlation**: Strong support that ethical considerations in CSA are closely linked to authenticity, directly aligning with your thesis.
- ***"Framework Used: Yes" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.29):**
 - **Low correlation**: Weak evidence that using ethical frameworks is associated with authenticity, suggesting frameworks alone may not ensure authenticity.

4. Correlations Linking CSA and Reputation

- ***"Reputation: Positive Impact" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.22):**
 - **Low correlation**: Weak evidence that authenticity alone drives a positive reputation. Other factors likely contribute to reputation outcomes.
- ***"Ethics Considered: Yes" and "Reputation: Positive Impact" (0.13):**
 - **Low correlation**: Ethical considerations in CSA have a weak association with positive reputation, which suggests a complex relationship between ethics and reputation.
- ***"Reputation: Neutral Impact" and "Involved in Strategy: Yes" (-0.7):**

- **High negative correlation**: Strong evidence that a lack of involvement in strategy is linked to perceptions of neutrality in reputation, emphasizing the importance of PR professionals' strategic involvement.

Summary of Key Findings:

Strong Evidence for Your Thesis:

1. **"Involved in Decision: Yes" and "Involved in Strategy: Yes" (0.71):**
 - Highlights the critical need for PR professionals to be strategically involved to influence CSA efforts effectively.
2. **"Ethics Considered: Yes" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.61):**
 - Strongly supports the idea that ethical decision-making enhances CSA authenticity.

Moderate Evidence:

1. **"Framework Used: Yes" and "Ethics Considered: Yes" (0.35):**
 - Ethical frameworks moderately contribute to ensuring ethical considerations in CSA.

Weak Evidence:

1. **"Framework Used: Yes" and "Authentic: Yes" (0.29):**
 - Suggests that while frameworks are relevant, they are not the primary driver of authenticity.
2. **"Ethics Considered: Yes" and "Reputation: Positive Impact" (0.13):**
 - Indicates that ethics alone weakly correlate with positive reputation, pointing to the importance of other factors.

Would you like suggestions on how to frame these findings in your capstone, or help interpreting other variables?

Prompt 4:

What about: "Reputation: Positive Impact" and "Involved in Strategy: Yes"

ChatGPT:

The correlation between **"Reputation: Positive Impact"** and **"Involved in Strategy: Yes"** is **0.38**, which, based on your updated definitions, indicates a **moderate correlation**.

Interpretation:

This suggests that involvement in strategy moderately contributes to achieving a positive reputation through corporate social advocacy (CSA). It aligns with your thesis by emphasizing that PR professionals' strategic involvement plays a meaningful role in shaping outcomes that positively impact the organization's reputation.

Relevance to Your Thesis:

1. ****Supports Influence:**** This result highlights that PR professionals' strategic influence is tied to reputation outcomes, supporting your thesis that influence within the dominant coalition (e.g., involvement in strategy) is critical for effective CSA.
2. ****Connects to Outcomes:**** It reinforces the idea that autonomy and strategic involvement don't just enable CSA but also help achieve positive reputational impacts for the organization.

Would you like further insights into connecting this finding to your broader research?