

Corporate Sociopolitical Activism – Advances from European Scholarship

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Corporate Sociopolitical Activism – Advances from European Scholarship

Session chair: **Dr Ludovica Scalco**, University of Manchester

- “What Drives Brand Activism for Peace”

Eleni Tsoukoku, *University of Strathclyde*

Kemefasu Ifie, *Loughborough University*

Klaudia Kania, previously *Loughborough University*

- “Corporate Sociopolitical Activism - Business Issue Ownership, Public Issue Perception, and Consumer Reactions”

Elina Sanchez Garcia & Torsten Bornemann, *Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany*

- “The Role of Empowerment in Consumer Response to Brand Activism”

Junan He, *Manchester Metropolitan University*

Eva Kipnis, *University of Bradford*

Lien Monkhouse, *University of Sheffield*

Fraser McLeay, *University of Sheffield*

- “Unwrapping the Impact of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism on Value, Brand, and Relationship Equity”

Ludovica Scalco, *University of Manchester*

Koen Pauwels, *Northeastern University*

Anders Gustafsson, *BI Norwegian Business School*

This special session focuses on Corporate Sociopolitical Activism (CSA), a rapidly expanding and increasingly salient organizational practice that continues to generate controversy and societal polarization (Schoenmueller et al., 2023). While CSA first gained prominence in the United States, Europe has similarly witnessed intensifying public debates and political divisions surrounding issues such as LGBT rights, racial equality, and immigration (Edelman, 2023). Although European firms engage in CSA less frequently than their U.S. counterparts, notable instances – including corporate withdrawals from the Russian market following the invasion of Ukraine and Ben & Jerry’s vocal criticism of UK immigration policies – demonstrate that the phenomenon is both present and consequential in the European context.

As such, we propose a special session that brings together Europe-based scholars to share their research, offer regionally grounded insights, and foster dialogue on the distinct dynamics of CSA across European markets. Through this session, we aim to strengthen the network of European researchers working on CSA and encourage future collaborations that deepen theoretical and empirical understanding of this evolving phenomenon.

The studies featured in this session examine CSA’s antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives, jointly illustrating the multifaceted nature of firms’ engagement in sociopolitical issues. Tsoukoku, Ifie, and Kania investigate the intrinsic, extrinsic, and hybrid drivers of peace-oriented brand activism, offering a nuanced conceptualization of motivational pathways. Sánchez Garcia and Bornemann explore how perceived corporate competence to participate in sociopolitical debates shapes public attitudes, behavioral intentions toward activist firms, and broader perceptions of controversial issues and political positions. He, Kipnis, Monkhouse, and McLeay examine the psychological benefits customers derive from CSA – specifically a sense of empowerment – and identify these benefits as key mechanisms underlying consumer responses to corporate activism. Finally, Scalco, Pauwels, and Gustafsson analyse brand-level consequences of CSA across brand categories, distinguishing activist stances based on issue polarization and event visibility.

Collectively, these studies provide timely insights into when, how, and to what extent corporate engagement in sociopolitical issues may be beneficial or detrimental, thereby informing both scholarly debate and managerial practice.

The special session will consist of four traditional 15-minute research presentations, followed by a panel discussion in which presenters will reflect on the current state of CSA research, identify pressing open questions, and outline promising avenues for future inquiry.

The short abstracts of the papers are outlined below:

- “What Drives Brand Activism for Peace”

Eleni Tsoukoku, *University of Strathclyde*

Kemefasu Ifie, *Loughborough University*

Klaudia Kania, *previously Loughborough University*

In response to recent geopolitical conflicts, brands have often engaged in visible public initiatives to support peace or oppose conflict, with important consequences for their reputation, stakeholder relationships, and market performance (Astvansh et al., 2025). This research examines the emerging phenomenon of Peace Brand Activism (PBA) by investigating the so far under-explored reasons that drive brands to engage in and communicate peace-oriented initiatives (Tsoukoku et al., 2025). Drawing on a qualitative approach, the study uncovers a range of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, as well as hybrid motivations, that inform PBA approaches. The findings contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of brand activism in the context of anti-war and peace-related issues and offer practical guidance for managers seeking to evaluate and navigate brand decisions in the context of contemporary conflicts.

- “Corporate Sociopolitical Activism - Business Issue Ownership, Public Issue Perception, and Consumer Reactions”

Elina Sanchez Garcia & Torsten Bornemann, *Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany*

This research examines an overlooked consequence of CSA: its potential to shape public perceptions of the focal sociopolitical issues themselves. Building on issue ownership theory (Petrocik, 1996), we introduce the construct of Business Issue Ownership (BIO) – the extent to which the public views businesses as competent actors in addressing specific sociopolitical issues. We conceptually develop BIO by linking it to Carroll’s (1979) framework of corporate responsibilities and stakeholder management research (Homburg et al., 2013), proposing that some issues, and certain framings of those issues, inherently elicit higher BIO than others.

Across five empirical studies, we investigate the implications of BIO for public issue perceptions and consumer responses to CSA. A representative German survey establishes baseline BIO levels across a wide set of issues. We then analyze online user reactions to CSA statements on immigration, using LLM-assisted coding to detect issue stances and punitive intentions. High-BIO rationales yield more constructive immigration perceptions and reduced intentions to harm the firm. Three experiments ($N \approx 1,500$) further show that high-BIO CSA reframes issue attitudes, influences voting intentions, and mitigates negative consumer reactions, mediated by the plausibility of the rationale. However, when firms adopt anti-immigration CSA, high-BIO rationales lose plausibility. The findings extend CSA research and issue ownership theory while offering actionable implications for firms engaging in contested sociopolitical debates.

- “The Role of Empowerment in Consumer Response to Brand Activism”

Junan He, *Manchester Metropolitan University*

Eva Kipnis, *University of Bradford*

Lien Monkhouse, *University of Sheffield*

Fraser McLeay, *University of Sheffield*

Brands increasingly extend their purpose into sociopolitical domains through brand activism (BA) – a public stances on contested issues such as social justice (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Although BA has become globally prominent, its effects remain inconsistent, ranging from positive consumer reactions to significant backlash. We argue that these mixed findings stem from an overlooked mechanism: the psychological utility consumers derive from BA. Building on this premise, we advance sense of empowerment (SE) as a central utility mechanism shaping consumer responses.

Using a mixed-methods sequential exploratory design, Study 1 draws on 32 UK interviews and identifies SE as the core mechanism underpinning positive evaluations of BA, influenced by issue–brand fit, perceived altruistic motives, and self–brand values congruence. Study 2 develops and validates SE and BA scales ($N=711$), demonstrating via CFA their discriminant validity and showing through sequential regressions that SE fully mediates BA’s effects on brand affect, word-of-mouth, and purchase intention. Study 3 ($N=1042$) tests the structural model, revealing both

direct and indirect effects of BA on SE and showing that values congruence conditions the BA-SE relationship.

This research advances BA scholarship by identifying empowerment as a key psychological mechanism explaining divergent consumer responses. Managerially, it highlights the importance of value alignment, credible issue–brand fit, and altruistic motives, while cautioning against BA initiatives misaligned with local norms or community needs.

- “Unwrapping the Impact of Corporate Sociopolitical Activism on Value, Brand, and Relationship Equity”

Ludovica Scalco, *University of Manchester*

Koen Pauwels, *Northeastern University*

Anders Gustafsson, *BI Norwegian Business School*

Amid rising polarization and stakeholder scrutiny, corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA) on salient, controversial issues, particularly diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), has become a strategic consideration for brands (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Yet existing literature, often constrained by single-brand or experimental designs, offers mixed evidence on CSA’s impact of DEI stances. This study addresses these limitations through a multievent, multibrand panel analysis of 285 DEI-related activist stances from 61 global brands, linked to weekly Twitter-mined brand reputation data and YouGov data on purchase intentions. We construct a novel CSA index that captures both the visibility and partisanship of each DEI stance, enabling a nuanced assessment of CSA intensity. Drawing on the customer equity framework (Rust et al., 2021), we disentangle the effects of DEI activism stances across value, brand, and relationship equity. The results show that activist stances on DEI enhance brand and relationship equity, especially for modern, global, and politically moderate brands, but do not affect value equity. Purchase intentions increase even without significant shifts in reputation. Media visibility, issue controversy, and brand–image congruence moderate these effects. The findings challenge the narrative of broad backlash and clarify when, how, and for whom DEI activism stances enhance brand outcomes. The study advances CSA research and offers actionable guidance for navigating the contested sociopolitical environment.

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