



## Full Length Article

# Business-centered versus socially responsible corporate diversity communication. An assessment of stakeholder (dis)agreement on Twitter

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Diversity  
Social media  
Corporate social responsibility  
Diversity management  
Public relations  
Diversity and inclusion  
Corporate communication  
Online communication  
Twitter

## ABSTRACT

This study assessed the business-centered and CSR-centered diversity communication of five American corporations along with the ensuing responses on the microblogging platform Twitter, the present analysis contributes to the literature on online diversity communication and public relations. The results revealed that companies that had long-term consistency in approaching diversity as CSR received more agreeable responses than those that made swift changes in the aftermath of increased pressure from activist groups. In addition, companies that communicated to a greater degree about the impact of diversity on the bottom line engendered higher user agreement than those who discussed diversity primarily from a CSR perspective. The results shed light on the importance of message consistency throughout longer periods of time.

## 1. Introduction

Diversity in public relations represents a fairly recent research trajectory that started two decades ago in response to the studies produced in the realm of business and management. Specifically, scholars of business had been tackling diversity for more than five decades and focused predominantly on its impact on the bottom line through inclusive leadership, organizational cultures and corporate citizenship (Chen, Chen, Kot, Zhu, & Wu, 2021; Singh, 2018; Utam, Archibong, Walton, & Eshareturi, 2020). As a consequence of the intense academic critique with respect to the increasing corporate encroachment on diversity, a domain previously reserved for elected governments (Wrench, 2005), public relations scholars argued for a more ethical corporate approach that could be informed by communication professionals (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002). Namely, through the facilitation of dialogue among internal and external stakeholder groups, the input of PR practitioners may prove indispensable for the implementation of practices that benefit both society and organizations. However, public relations research in this direction has remained scant and most of the studies focused on the state of the PR profession, underrepresentation, and the challenges faced by minority practitioners. While these studies represent a paramount step toward the understanding of the field, much remains to be explored with respect to the specific public relations functions that may inform corporate diversity, the best practices that should be enacted as well as the ensuing stakeholder reactions. Several studies have recently

analyzed corporate responses to the increased activism extant in the American society. These studies tackled the PR function of corporate social responsibility (CSR) through the lens of corporate social advocacy (CSA), and corporate political advocacy (CPA). Yet, this research line is still nascent particularly with respect to stakeholder responses to such practices. Moreover, there is a scarcity of research studies that aim to understand how corporations communicate about diversity efforts on online platforms in general (Maier & Ravazzani, 2019) and with regard to activism in particular (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Providing an insight into the topic is relevant given the magnifying glass that corporations are being placed under in the US as activists pressure them to address societal issues. As a result of this pressure, corporations are presently taking stances that traditionally pertain to activist groups, nongovernmental organizations, and politicians (Olkkonen & Jääskeläinen, 2019). Due to their extensive resources, corporate conglomerates exert tremendous societal influence that may radically change the trajectory of how diversity-related causes are approached and addressed.

The purpose of the current study is to contribute to this research trajectory by focusing on the contribution of public relations practitioners to the communication of diversity in online settings. A second contribution represents the focus on the stakeholders' perceptions of corporate diversity communication that revolves around social responsibility versus the business case for diversity. These results can inform the public relations function of CSR and diversity by providing insights into how practitioners should effectively develop, implement,

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2021.102138>

Received 11 August 2020; Received in revised form 29 November 2021; Accepted 29 November 2021

Available online 15 December 2021

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and communicate about diversity.

The paper starts by discussing the main theoretical concepts that the study investigated, after which it introduces the methodology. At a later stage, it tackles the results as well as their implications. It concludes with a discussion on the limitations of the current study and provides directions for future studies (Tables A1–A4).

## 2. Literature review

In order to highlight the gap that the present research aims to fill, the following literature review places the study in the context of the public relations field. It next discusses past research on the business case for diversity and diversity as CSR, all of which led to the development of the research questions that the study explored.

### 2.1. Public relations and diversity

Public relations scholars have longed argued that, since relationship management represents the central function of the profession, practitioners could play a paramount role in a company's diversity approaches, bolstering the strategic management function of PR and making contributions that benefit both diverse stakeholders and organizations (Holtzhausen & Voto, 2002; Holtzhausen, 2013; Hon & Brunner, 2000). To date, scholarship has focused primarily on the underrepresentation extant in the public relations industry and education (Appelbaum, Walton, & Southerland, 2015; Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012; Grunig, Hon, & Toth, 2013; Mundy, 2016; Sha, 2013; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017; Waymer, 2021) and the barriers that diverse PR practitioners face in the workplace (Appelbaum et al., 2015; Gallicano et al., 2012; Mundy, 2016; Vardeman-Winter & Place, 2017). A rather nascent research trajectory tackled the precise roles that PR should perform in order to inform corporate practices of diversity, yet research in this direction has remained scant. For example, Mundy (2015, 2016) argued that practitioners could play both structural and functional roles and foster an internal culture of inclusion through employee trainings as well as the development of a positive atmosphere in the workplace. At an external level, practitioners should actively listen to and engage in dialogue with diverse communities in order to develop impactful programs (Mundy, 2016). Further, the precursors to successful dialogue on diversity were explored by Ciszek (2020) who determined trust to be a pivotal ingredient for successful dialogue with the LGBTQ + community, yet contingent on factors such as cultural competency, authenticity, and stakeholder empowerment (p. 4). In addition, the public relations function of internal communication was explored by Li, Lee, Tian, and Tsai (2021) whose study shed light on the reactions of diverse employees to workplace discrimination. The results revealed that transparent communication diminishes the impact of workplace discrimination on the employees' well-being and motivates them to embrace a problem-focused approach. By contrast, a lack of transparent communication triggers an emotion-focused mechanism of coping that involves sharing the experience with outside peers and, therefore, addresses the situation only temporarily (p. 9).

A line of research that has remained largely unexplored concerns crisis communication and diversity. For example, Brunner and Brown (2008) analyzed the topic in the context of Auburn University and the challenges its administration faced as they aimed to place their response to a crisis of underrepresentation in the context of the institution's overall operations. Moreover, as sexual harassment scandals had been ravaging the corporate world, Krishna, Kim, and Shim (2018) conducted a study that shed light on stakeholder reactions to gender discrimination scandals. They determined that the more a corporate scandal deviated from the stakeholders' own values and norms the more the latter perceived cases of gender discrimination as morally outrageous. An area that has recently attracted increased attention centers around corporate social advocacy (CSA) and corporate political advocacy (CPA), two concepts that scholars regard as either burgeoning from corporate social

responsibility (CSR) or representing an extension of it (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Lim & Young, 2021; Logan, 2016, 2019, 2021; Olkkonen & Jääskeläinen, 2019; Waymer, 2021; Waymer & Logan, 2021). In order to provide a more effective illustration of the contrast between corporate diversity programs meant to impact the bottom line and those that revolve around social responsibility, these research studies are detailed at the next stage of the literature review.

### 2.2. Business-centered diversity versus CSR-centered diversity

The business case for diversity, also referred to as the diversity management paradigm (DM), has dominated corporate approaches to differences in both theory and practice (Georgiadou et al., 2019; Koellen, 2021; Madera, 2018; Madera, Dawson, & Neal, 2018; Manoharan, Madera, & Singal, 2021). Diversity management emerged in the early 1990s in the context of increased backlash against Affirmative Action programs and as a more socially acceptable way to address diversity (Logan, 2021; Maier & Ravazzani, 2019). With a focus on the bottom line, it enables companies to gain or maintain competitive advantage through the recruitment of minorities that represent specific consumer bases, due to the enhanced creativity and problem-solving techniques that derive from diverse perspectives, and by gaining a corporate reputation for morality (Dover, Kaiser, & Major, 2019; Hoober, Masterson, Nkomo, & Michel, 2018; Koellen, 2021; Page, 2019; Rachele, 2017). Because the paradigm implies that diversity represents a means to enhance profit, it was criticized for facilitating the corporate control and management of differences whilst furthering inequality between those who "manage" and those who are "diverse" (Holck, 2016; Holck, Muhr, & Villeseche, 2016; Hubrig, Masterson, Seibert Desjarlais, Stenberg, & Thielen, 2020; Mazzei & Ravazzani, 2008). In addition, corporations were criticized for encroaching on a domain reserved for elected governments (Wrench, 2005).

In response to the profit-centered approach to diversity, several past research studies conducted predominantly in the realm of business studies stressed the need for a moral underpinning of diversity programs and discussed the importance of corporate investments in societal issues that do not necessarily influence the bottom line, but make an unequivocal societal contribution (Porcena, Parboteeah, & Mero, 2020; Wallace, Hoover, & Pepper, 2014). Such studies triggered a scholarly focus on diversity as corporate social responsibility (CSR) and were informed by the very definition of CSR whose nexus constitutes voluntary actions meant to contribute to the societal good (Barauskaite & Streimikiene, 2021). Such initiatives may indirectly lead to positive financial outcomes (Cho, Chung, & Young, 2019; Franco, Caroli, Cappa, & Del Chiappa, 2020; Singh & Misra, 2021) through reputation management and consumer loyalty (Kim & Woo, 2019; Osakwe & Yusuf, 2020) while providing a balanced approach between corporate interests and societal good. It is worth noting that a recent study revealed that CSR projects not only add to an already existing positive reputation, but also help to restore the reputation of companies that have lost consumer trust (Singh & Misra, 2021), all of which make CSR-centered diversity a topic of interest for corporations.

By contrast, the public relations scholarship rarely tackled the diversity management concept per se and oftentimes used it to refer to general corporate diversity practices (Maier & Ravazzani, 2019; Sha, 2013), potentially blurring the boundaries between the business case for diversity and diversity as social responsibility. A clear delineation between the two concepts was provided by Logan (2021) who contended that the diversity management approach was void of proactivity and potential of direct structural change (p. 982). She argued that its emphasis on financial benefits for corporations was in stark contrast with an ethical approach toward diversity that would right past corporate abuses. Logan (2021) proposed a responsible approach to race that aims to trigger equality by raising awareness of oppression, privilege, and racism while proactively addressing racial tensions. Several research studies contrasted diversity management with the role that PR

should play to address diversity as CSR. For example, [Hon and Brunner \(2000\)](#) argued that “public relations has a responsibility to diversity beyond benefits for the organization,” a responsibility that stems from its core function of balancing the interests of both organizations and their publics (p. 336). In addition, [Uysal \(2013\)](#) investigated S&P 500 companies and compared their diversity management versus CSR-centered diversity practices online. Her findings revealed the prevalence of a business-centered approach to diversity to the detriment of a socially responsible one. More recently, the way corporate social responsibility shapes the online communication of diversity programs was explored by [Maier and Ravazzani \(2019\)](#) in a study that employed a critical discourse analysis. Their results showed that social responsibility projects related to diversity were discussed at an individual (showcasing employees), communal (initiatives implemented in a community) and global level (emphasizing corporate efforts related to diverse communities abroad). Finally, CSR-centered diversity communication was globally investigated by [Zhou \(2021\)](#) in the context of the LGBTQ + movement. By analysis of Fortune Global 500 companies, Zhou’s (2021) study revealed that cultural factors (social and local) exerted influence on the extent to which corporations remained silent on LGBTQ + rights or advocated for them vocally, therefore casting doubt on the genuine corporate commitment to diversity. The results of this study leave little hope for corporate support for the LGBTQ + communities that find themselves in environments with little to no legislation to protect their rights.

As activism around diversity has been on the rise in the US, the public relations field has seen a surge of studies that tackle CSR and diversity from the lens of corporate social advocacy (CSA), sometimes referred to as corporate activism, along with studies that discussed corporate political advocacy (CPA) ([Ciszek & Logan, 2018](#); [Lim & Young, 2021](#); [Olkkonen & Jääskeläinen, 2019](#); [Waymer & Logan, 2021](#)). At times, the terms were used interchangeably ([Lim & Young, 2021](#); [Zhou, 2021](#)). [Lim and Young \(2021\)](#) distinguished among these concepts by contending that the origin of corporate social advocacy lies at the intersection of CSR, corporate political advocacy, and CEO activism. The concept of CSA emerged in the aftermath of Starbucks’ Race Together Initiative, triggered by the company’s former CEO, Howard Schultz as well as the impact the campaign had on the American society ([Lim & Young, 2021](#)). Further, [Olkkonen and Jääskeläinen \(2019\)](#) distinguished between CSA from CSR by contending that the former constitutes a form of activism that transcends the usual and voluntarily performed corporate acts that align with business profiles and values. Additionally, corporate social advocacy revolves around polarizing societal issues that corporations address using activist-like strategies that are likely to spur controversy ([Olkkonen & Jääskeläinen, 2019](#)). Developed by [Dodd and Supa \(2014\)](#) CSA originally referred to any public statement made by an organization or its leadership that connected a company to a social-political issue. In turn, the employment of CSA may positively influence brand management and consumer behavior ([Dodd & Supa, 2014](#); [Logan, 2021](#)). Since its inception CSA has spurred additional lines of research that border on the concept of CSR, among which the theory of corporate responsibility to race (CRR). CRR posits that corporations should commit to improving race relations not out of a concern for profit, but rather as a genuine contribution to the society ([Logan, 2021](#)). Specifically, [Logan \(2021\)](#) contends that a sincere commitment to addressing racial tensions enables corporations to compensate for their abusive past, as this relates to profiting off of slave labor and promoting culturally insensitive advertisements (p. 5). It is worth noting that regardless of how genuine the commitment of a corporation may be, the application of CRR is likely to trigger a positive impact on corporate revenue in the long run. As companies invest resources toward community projects, they may gain a positive reputation that exerts influence on buying behavior and consumer loyalty. A similar argument can be made with respect to CSA and, consequently, the benefits of CSR for corporations apply in the context of both concepts.

Furthermore, corporate social advocacy emerges in the literature in

connection to corporate political advocacy, and oftentimes the distinction between the two concepts remains unclear. ([Lim & Young, 2021](#)). A likely explanation for the term political advocacy represents the fact that stances on societal issues are deeply connected to the predominant political parties in the US. Hence, corporate statements on a certain societal issue form the basis for public perceptions regarding a company’s political affiliation. [Olkkonen and Jääskeläinen \(2019\)](#) view CSA as a form of political activism and argue that, by engaging in social advocacy, companies build a political identity that is likely to impact public discourse and influence policy ([Atkinson, 2017](#)). A similar argument emerged in the work of [Baur and Wettstein \(2016\)](#) and [Lim and Young \(2021\)](#) who contend that, by embracing CPA and legitimizing societal issues among various stakeholder groups, corporations intend to influence policymakers. As an example of CPA, [Lim and Young \(2021\)](#) mentioned Starbucks’ Race Together Initiative and the CEO’s statements, according to which the company succeeded in engendering consensus among employees with respect to the importance of addressing race tensions and inequality. Analogously, [Ciszek and Logan \(2018\)](#) regard CPA as a means of persuasion that differs drastically from CSR and CSA. They regard CPA as more altruistic than its counterparts and argue that, while CSR and CSA are financially motivated, in the application of CPA companies place social justice at the center of their initiatives. According to [Ciszek and Logan \(2018\)](#), despite the fact that corporations may be aware that a political stance is likely to alienate certain consumer groups, they dedicate themselves to a societal cause. This argument draws a clear distinction among the three concepts and is worth further investigation. Specifically, the public relations field needs to assess whether corporations that persuade publics and affect policy may in time gain legislative and/or competitive advantage. Since corporate political involvement represents a new phenomenon, the impact of CPA on the bottom line can only be assessed in the long-term future.

A further delineation among CSR, CSA, and CPA is revealed in studies that draw heavily on CSR literature to ascertain the degree to which corporate social advocacy is effective in triggering a positive reputation. For example, in an analysis of the impact of Ben & Jerry’s LGBTQ+’s campaign, [Lim and Young \(2021\)](#) developed the concept of CSA-brand fit by drawing on studies that had determined CSR initiatives to have a positive impact on reputation when these align with a brand’s values ([Hydock, Paharia, & Weber, 2019](#)). The researchers determined that CSA authenticity, defined as “the genuineness and consistency of the firm’s commitment to the advocated issue” (p.5) exerted an even greater influence on corporate reputation. These compelling findings merit further investigation so as to ascertain whether stakeholders who perceive CSA to be aligned with a company’s values and identity are more likely to be persuaded by the latter’s authenticity in conducting corporate advocacy.

Next, researchers applied CSA to assess Nike’s activism with respect to women and minorities ([Waymer & Logan, 2021](#)). Using a critical approach to public relations, [Waymer and Logan’s \(2021\)](#) analysis revealed that Nike’s advocacy efforts were welcomed by external stakeholders in general and by members of historically marginalized communities in particular. In addition, the results of the study imply that Nike had moved away from its troubled past by addressing its scandals of worker abuse before engaging in CSA ([Waymer & Logan, 2021](#)). These findings imply that corporate commitment to diversity, as expressed through advocacy efforts may be effective insofar as a company with a troubled past has previously addressed its transgressions. Lastly, researchers focused on political advocacy in online environments and analyzed corporate efforts that support the Black Lives Matter movement ([Ciszek & Logan, 2018](#)). Through the application of the post-modern approach of dissensus, [Ciszek and Logan \(2018\)](#) proposed antagonistic dialogue as a precursor for social change, in contrast to past principles of dialogue that encouraged mutual understanding and openness.

Drawing on the preceding studies on CSR, CPA, and CSA as well as on

literature on diversity management, the current study considers two types of corporate diversity engagement. The first one, informed by the diversity management paradigm is viewed as business-centered and conducive to immediate benefits for corporations, as diversity enables companies to better understand their consumer bases, produce more innovative products and services, and attract/retain top talent. The present study refers to this approach as business-centered diversity. By contrast, a socially responsible approach refers to corporate practices that positively impact companies in an indirect manner by enabling them to gain/retain a favorable reputation. The results of the CSR-centered diversity approach are not immediately visible and materialize in the future. Such initiatives may range from investments in marginalized communities to corporate advocacy efforts conducted on behalf of specific minority groups. In accord with [Olkkonen and Jääskeläinen \(2019\)](#) the present study considers that corporate advocacy informs the CSR projects a company engages in. Moreover, it views CSA efforts as encompassing elements of CPA as societal issues generally take on political connotations. Consequently, CSA and corporate political advocacy fall under the umbrella of corporate social responsibility. Further, corporate activism, social responsibility, and political advocacy are all bound by a focus on gaining a positive reputation as opposed to an immediate impact on the bottom line. This constitutes another reason why the present study considers CSR as an overarching theme for corporate practices of activism and political advocacy.

Taking into account the business-centered and CSR-centered diversity, the study set out to investigate the degree to which companies communicated about their business-versus CSR-centered diversity initiatives. Therefore, the RQ1 asked:

RQ1: To what extent do companies communicate about diversity from a DM perspective versus a CSR standpoint?

Because past research indicated that corporate activism may cast doubt on the companies' true commitment to societal issues ([Aronczyk, Edwards, & Kantola, 2017](#); [Olkkonen & Jääskeläinen, 2019](#)) the study aimed to additionally investigate the users' (dis)agreement to the companies' business-centered versus CSR-centered approaches. Therefore, RQ2 asked:

RQ2: To what extent do users agree or disagree to the companies' diversity initiatives, programs, and approaches?

This research question was considered paramount given the fact that addressing societal issues has historically triggered divergent public opinions that had the potential to negatively affect corporate operations. Moreover, diversity initiatives received a negative reception in the past as a result of the companies' oversimplification of societal issues that could potentially lead to the further stereotyping of minority groups ([Olkkonen & Jääskeläinen, 2019](#)).

Finally, the purpose of the third research question (RQ3) was to investigate whether there is a relationship among the companies' diversity communication (CSR-related versus business-centered) and their subsequent (dis)agreement to diversity initiatives and programs. Therefore, RQ3 asked:

RQ3: Is there a relationship among the companies' CSR-centered versus business-centered diversity communication and the users' agreement/disagreement with corporate diversity initiatives?

### 3. Methods

The study analyzed the diversity communication of five American companies: Johnson & Johnson (J&J), Mastercard, Wells Fargo, Marriott, and AT&T. Their selection stemmed from DiversityInc's top 50 companies. The top includes any firm that has at least 1000 employees in the US and is compiled yearly after companies have submitted a survey that investigates their diversity practices. The five companies were selected as the only multinational American corporations. It was considered that large corporations have more resources for diversity initiatives, including communication practices and, therefore, their selection would facilitate a deeper insight into the phenomena analyzed.

Finally, these corporations were chosen from the 2016 DiversityInc top, given that the stakeholders' expectations in terms of diversity had drastically changed around that time. Additional reasons regarding this decision are detailed in later paragraphs that discuss the period of analysis.

The analysis focused on the microblogging site Twitter. Compared to other social media platforms that have a corporate presence, Twitter was considered the most appropriate Web 2.0 medium due to the anonymity it fosters. This factor was particularly important for the study of diversity communication given the sensitivity of the topic. Additionally, Twitter is regarded as the medium where users interact with corporations to a larger extent compared to other social media platforms and for reasons that range from product complaints ([Hu, Tafti, & Gal, 2019](#); [Ibrahim & Wang, 2019](#)) to ethical corporate practices ([Araujo & Kollat, 2018](#); [Gómez-Carrasco, Guillamón-Saorín, & García Osma, 2021](#); [Raheja & Chipulu, 2021](#)).

Two data sets were collected for the purpose of this study. The first data set was collected for a period of six months, namely between December 1, 2016- May 31, 2017. This period of analysis was chosen for two reasons. First, the companies under study were facing crises or consequences of past scandals ([Breslow, 2015](#); [Egan, 2018](#); [Gibson, 2016](#); [MacAskill, 2016](#); [Stempel, 2016](#)). Therefore, they were more likely to discuss diversity and CSR, which would allow for a robust analysis. Past research determined that in the aftermath of crises, companies are prone to enact bolstering, a strategy through which they remind stakeholders of their past good deeds so as to reduce potentially negative perceptions with respect to a recent scandal ([Benoit, 2018, 2020](#)). In addition, given the agenda setting effect ([Barkemeyer, Faugère, Gergaud, & Preuss, 2020](#); [McCombs & Shaw, 2017](#)), it was considered that online users would be more inclined to respond to corporate online communication given the companies' salience in the media.

Concomitantly, American corporations faced external pressure to address diversity, as the topic had emerged at the forefront of societal discourse following the rise of Black Lives Matter (BLM). By 2016 BLM had become a prevailing movement ([Armitage, 2016](#)) that determined corporations to take a stance and support social justice initiatives proposed by the organization ([Schultz, 2017](#)).

The data collection involved corporate communication that contained information with respect to the visible layer of diversity (gender, race, age, sexual orientation, etc.) ([Smith, 1998](#); [Steuer-Dankert & Leicht-Scholten, 2019](#)) as well as user comments that constituted responses to the former. The first sample of analysis comprised N = 862 units, out of which n = 319 represented corporate tweets while user comments amounted to n = 543. Out of the total sample, n = 57 posts were made by Marriott and n = 23 by its users; n = 190 posts constituted J&J's diversity communication which triggered n = 187 user comments. Further, AT&T communicated about differences in n = 28 tweets and received n = 178 user comments while n = 32 posts were made by Wells Fargo and triggered n = 103 user comments. Finally, Mastercard's online communication entailed n = 12 posts and led to n = 52 user comments.

The second data set made use of the same companies and was collected from Twitter four years later, namely between December 1, 2020- May 31, 2021. By December 2020, there had been significant activism in the American society as a consequence of George Floyd's May 2020 death and the arrest of Derek Chauvin, a police officer found guilty of second- and third- degree murder as well as second-degree manslaughter ([Mangan, 2021](#)). While activism arose in May 2020, by December 2020 corporate America had embraced the BLM movement and committed to donating millions of dollars toward community programs whilst actively recruiting diverse employees ([Sumagaysay, 2021](#); [Togoh, 2020](#)). Therefore, the period of December 1, 2020- May 31, 2021 was considered the most appropriate for the understanding of corporate diversity efforts along with the stakeholders' reactions these ensued. The second sample of analysis comprised N = 1355 units, out of which n =



264 represented corporate tweets while user comments amounted to  $n = 1091$ . Out of the total sample,  $n = 5$  posts were made by Marriott and  $n = 35$  by its users;  $n = 52$  posts constituted J&J's diversity communication which led to  $n = 29$  user comments. Further, AT&T communicated about differences in  $n = 98$  tweets and received  $n = 461$  user comments;  $n = 53$  posts were made by Wells Fargo and triggered  $n = 310$  user comments. Finally, Mastercard's online communication entailed  $n = 56$  posts that triggered  $n = 256$  user comments.

The distinct data sets, that stemmed from two different periods of analysis enabled a comparison of corporate diversity communication and stakeholder perceptions at two crucial moments, defined by significant external activism on diversity, inclusion, and racism awareness.

The companies' online communication was coded based on past research on diversity as CSR versus diversity management. The coding procedure implied determining the presence/absence of communication that mentioned or implied that companies embraced differences in order to contribute to the communities in which they operated and with no direct financial benefits (CSR) versus to gain competitive advantage as a result of improved product placement, the attraction of top job applications, enhanced creativity, innovation, and problem solving (the business case for diversity), all of which derive from a diverse employee base. The user comments were assessed for agreement/disagreement to corporate diversity practices, approaches, and initiatives by determining whether online users expressed or implied their support for or rejection of corporate diversity practices.

To test for interrater reliability, two additional coders were assigned 20 % of the companies' online communication and user comments from each data set. They were trained in the coding procedure and given multiple corporate tweets and user comments for a preliminary analysis. These units of analysis were not part of the data set and represented posts related to diversity that companies and users made prior to the period of analysis included in the study. For the period of analysis December 1, 2016–May 31, 2017 the additional coders were assigned 20 % of the companies' tweets ( $n = 64$ ) and 20 % of the user comments ( $n = 109$ ). For this purpose, every 5th corporate tweet and every 5th user comment was selected from the sample. Interrater reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa and was reached with the second coder at  $k = .84$  for corporate tweets and  $k = .86$  for user comments. Similarly, 20 % of the data set that stemmed from the Dec 1, 2020–May 31, 2021 period of analysis was assigned to an additional coder by selecting every 5th corporate tweet and every 5th user comment from the sample. A total of  $n = 53$  corporate posts and  $n = 218$  were coded for this purpose. Interrater reliability was established at  $k = .81$  and  $k = .83$  for corporate communication and user comments, respectively. In the case of the user comments, the interrater reliability of  $k = .83$  was reached after the primary coder and the additional coder had negotiated on the meaning and interpretation of four posts. Finally, the analysis involved conducting several frequency analyses, goodness of fit and chi-square tests.

#### 4. Results/Discussion

The following paragraphs will first focus on the sample of analysis that was collected between December 1, 2016–May 31, 2017. Next, the section will introduce the findings that derived from the analysis of the data collected between Dec 1, 2020–May 31, 2021.

The first research question (RQ1) asked to what extent companies communicated about diversity from a CSR versus a business perspective. J&J's online diversity communication revealed a more extensive focus on communicating diversity from a CSR perspective ( $N = 129$ ; 34.2 %) than a business one ( $N = 104$ ; 27.6 %). The following tweet represents an example of the company's business-centered diversity communication:

"The diversity of our employees, our suppliers and partners is not just good citizenship, it's good business."- #JNJ's Alex Gorsky

AT&T took a similar approach and primarily highlighted their impact on minority communities and programs meant to foster women leadership ( $N = 22$ , 10.7 %), as opposed to showcasing the impact of diversity on the bottom line ( $N = 13$ , 6.3 %). Conversely, Marriott's communication revolved mostly around the opportunities that differences engendered for the company's success ( $N = 36$ ; 45 %), among which innovation, creativity, and problem-solving skills than around CSR-related projects ( $N = 31$ ; 38.8 %). Analogously, Mastercard mostly emphasized the impact of embracing diversity on the bottom line ( $N = 10$ , 15.6 %) whilst CSR-related initiatives were discussed to a lesser degree ( $N = 6$ , 9.4 %).

In the case of Wells Fargo, the results shed light on a relative balance of corporate tweets that tackled diversity from a CSR ( $N = 14$ , 10.4 %) versus a business perspective ( $N = 18$ , 13.3 %) as the company discussed its focus on the recruitment of minorities along with its support for women and veterans. For this purpose, Wells Fargo discussed its partnerships with nonprofit organizations, as is the case in the following post:

"We are proud to team up with @Habitat\_org to improve 100 homes with #veterans in 30 communities."

RQ2 asked to what degree user comments expressed or implied agreement or disagreement with the company's diversity approaches. In the case of J&J, the user comments that expressed disagreement ( $N = 57$ ; 15.1 %) had a higher presence than those that approved of the company's programs and initiatives ( $N = 27$ ; 7.2 %). Similarly, Wells Fargo's user communication denoted agreement to the company's diversity initiatives in solely 1.5 % of the comments ( $N = 2$ ) while the majority of the user-generated communication connoted dissatisfaction ( $N = 46$ , 34.1 %). AT&T wasn't spared the online predominance of negative reactions either as users expressed a prevalent disagreement with the company's diversity initiatives ( $N = 48$ , 23.3 %) and less than 14 % of their posts denoted satisfaction with the way AT&T embraced differences ( $N = 28$ , 13.6 %). Conversely, Mastercard's followers agreed with the company's approach to diversity in almost 40 % of their communication ( $N = 25$ , 39.1 %) and disagreed in less than 9 % ( $N = 5$ , 7.8 %). Similarly, Marriott predominantly received agreement to its approach ( $N = 5$ , 12.5 %) as opposed to disagreement ( $N = 2$ , 2.5 %).

Lastly, RQ3 asked if there was a relationship among the users' (dis) agreement to the companies' diversity initiatives, and corporate communication that revolved around CSR versus the business case of diversity. Statistically significant associations were found among the companies' business ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 862) = 26.16, p = .000$ ) versus CSR diversity communication ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 862) = 32.34, p = .000$ ) and the users' agreement with their initiatives. Similar findings emerged for the users' disagreement with corporate diversity initiatives when companies took a socially responsible ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 862) = 60.75, p = .000$ ) versus a business approach ( $\chi^2 (1, N = 862) = 49.99, p = .000$ ) to discussing differences. However, details regarding these associations did not emerge in the analysis.

The analysis revealed a trend in corporate diversity communication and the ensuing online perceptions. Companies such as J&J and AT&T communicated about diversity primarily from a CSR perspective and the users' responses revolved mostly around disagreement to their approaches. Marriott and Mastercard, whose online communication of diversity revealed a heavier business approach than one of social responsibility, engendered comments whose content exposed higher agreement than disagreement. While the disparities in the users' perceptions could be informed by additional factors, a plausible explanation could represent the users' view of what constitutes transparent corporate communication. Past studies pointed to the users' skepticism toward corporations whose mere online presence is viewed as an encroachment on a user-generated domain that companies would use for covert promotional purposes in general and to highlight their focus on CSR initiatives in particular (Cole, DeNardin, & Clow, 2017; Gruber,

Kaliauer, & Schlegelmilch, 2017; Lee, O'Donnell, & Hust, 2019; Olkonen & Jääskeläinen, 2019). It could be argued that communicating about diversity from a CSR perspective may trigger more disagreement with the companies' approach as a consequence of what users might regard as disingenuous or unauthentic communication. Conversely, inclining the balance toward the business advantage of diversity initiatives is likely to be perceived as transparent communication. Moreover, the findings showed a relative balance of CSR- and business-centered diversity communication that Wells Fargo enacted. The fact that users responded by mostly disagreeing to the company's initiatives may be considered a further illustration of their skepticism vis-à-vis the intentions behind corporate diversity communication.

During the second period of analysis, Dec 1, 2020–May 31, 2021, the companies' communication shifted considerably, as evinced in the next paragraphs. In response to the first research question (RQ1), that asked to what extent companies communicated about diversity from the perspective of social responsibility versus the impact that diversity has on the bottom line, the results revealed a higher emphasis on CSR when compared to the previous period of analysis. Moreover, in the case of Wells Fargo (N = 53, 100 %) and J&J (N = 38, 73.1 %) the only diversity communication that emerged concerned community-oriented projects aimed to showcase the companies' socially responsible approach toward differences. An example of Wells Fargo CSR-oriented diversity communication represents the following tweet:

"We are investing in six Black-owned banks as part of a \$50 million pledge to help communities that have been disproportionately impacted by the ongoing pandemic. Learn more about our effort to foster an inclusive recovery across the country."

Next, Mastercard took a social responsibility stance in almost 90 % of its diversity communication (N = 50, 89.3 %) as the company focused on illustrating its commitment to breaking social stigma in general and with respect to the issues faced by the transgender community in particular. To a similar extent, AT&T used its social platform (N = 88, 89.8 %) to predominantly advocate for social causes that had a broader community impact. For example, the company partnered with the Trevor Project, a nonprofit organization that provides crisis intervention for the LGBTQ + youth. Lastly, Marriott's less frequent diversity communication showed a slightly higher presence of CSR-centered diversity (N = 3, 7.5 %) as opposed to the impact of diversity on the bottom line (N = 2, 5%). The following post represents an example of the company's socially responsible approach:

"We believe each person deserves to be recognized for who they are and respected for their humanity and the distinct qualities that make them unique. We know there is more we can do than just condemn racism. Here are some actions we are taking: [marr.in/6016HI016K](https://marr.in/6016HI016K)"

By contrast, in the following case Marriott draws on Costan Rican culture to promote its international hotel, therefore taking a business-centered approach to diversity:

"Constan Rican culture comes to life @MarriottCR, where our picturesque courtyard is paved with hand-carved stones from the historic city of Cartago. Unwind in an atmosphere that's quintessentially Central America."

The companies' shift toward diversity as CSR represents a direct consequence of the pressure that activist groups placed on corporations in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's death. Corporations felt compelled to contribute to the economic development of minority communities and to address the specific societal causes raised by activists. However, the extent to which they addressed low wages and unequal payment remains unknown (Repko, Josephs, Lucas, Wayland, & Thomas, 2020). It is important to note that two years after the Black Lives Matter established itself as a prominent movement, a 2018 global survey conducted by Edelman revealed that 64 % of consumers would

choose companies that embrace activism over those that don't (Duarte, 2020). Consequently, it is not surprising that companies communicated predominantly around diversity as CSR.

RQ2 set out to investigate the degree to which online users expressed or implied agreement or disagreement to the companies' diversity approaches. Despite the fact that J&J communicated about diversity exclusively from a CSR perspective, its communication practices engendered more user disagreement than agreement. Specifically, 13.4 % (N = 11) of user comments expressed disagreement with J&J's diversity approaches, compared to 8.5 % (N = 7) in which online users showed their support. The discrepancies between user agreement and disagreement emerged as more conspicuous in the case of Wells Fargo, a company that also communicated about diversity solely from a CSR lens. For example, 50.7 % (N = 184) of online comments denoted disagreement, in stark contrast to 8.8 % (N = 32) that expressed agreement. As an example, consider the following response to Wells Fargo's online statement regarding Derek Chauvin's verdict and the company's avowed commitment to equality:

"From an organization who's [sic] CEO says they can't find qualified diverse talent as an excuse that under his leader [sic] diversity is not truly being addressed."

Further, AT&T's CSR-dominated communication engendered user agreement (N = 117, 20.9 %) to a larger extent than disagreement (N = 88, 15.17 %). By contrast, Mastercard, that aimed to strike a balance between CSR and the business case of diversity triggered more online disagreement (N = 93, 29.8 %) than agreement (N = 147, 47.1 %). Finally, Marriott had a higher number of posts related to diversity as CSR compared to the business case and the comments that ensued revealed more disagreement (N = 19, 47.5 %) than agreement (N = 6, 15.0 %). In sum, the companies that communicated about diversity solely from a CSR perspective triggered higher disagreement while the findings were mixed with respect to those that struck a balance between CSR-centered and business-centered communication.

The results of this study lead to several implications. First, AT&T is the only company that received more agreement during the second period of analysis, namely 2020/2021 than the other companies analyzed. It is worth mentioning that AT&T's online communication strategy remained constant. Specifically, during the 2016/2017 period of analysis, the company communicated about diversity by preponderantly emphasizing CSR and sporadically showcasing the impact of diversity on the bottom line. It could be argued that with time, the consistency of the company's online communication was indicative of its values rather than the swift changes that occurred in the macro-environment, among which pressure from activist groups and new expectations from consumers. These findings corroborate past research that found authenticity and brand-fit to represent precursors to positive perceptions of diversity messages (Lim & Young, 2021). The results were drastically different for Wells Fargo and J&J, companies that made a recent and rather extreme change in their online communication strategy. During the 2016/2017 period of analysis both companies emphasized diversity as CSR to a larger degree than the business case whilst during the 2020/2021 timeframe they engaged exclusively in CSR-centered communication. The fact that their communication practices triggered a preponderant negative online reaction could be a consequence of this drastic change and the users' skepticism with respect to corporate initiatives that emerge swiftly as a response to external pressure. In fact, the media had alluded to the fact that companies that took no position prior to the 2020 BLM activism, would face serious consumer questions about their integrity (Duarte, 2020; Repko et al., 2020; Thorbecke, 2020).

Mastercard made a similar transition, yet from a predominant business approach to diversity, present in the 2016/2017 analysis to a primarily CSR-driven one in 2020/2021. The online response was drastically different. While four years ago the company received a

primarily positive response, in the recent analysis its communication practices engendered high disagreement. Similar results were found in the case of Marriott. As the company changed its online strategy from a preponderant business approach in 2016/2017 to one that revolved around social responsibility in 2020/2021, it faced a shift in online reactions. Four years prior, Marriott generated high user agreement. By contrast, during the 2020/2021 period of analysis, the company faced an influx of negative responses.

Lastly, RQ3 asked if there was a relationship among the users' (dis)agreement to the companies' diversity initiatives, and corporate communication that revolved around CSR versus the business benefits of diversity. The chi-square tests conducted to address this question found significant relationships among the users' agreement ( $\chi^2(1, N = 1355) = 5.42, p < 0.05$ ) and disagreement ( $\chi^2(1, N = 1355) = 11.60, p = .000$ ) with the companies' business approach to diversity as well as their agreement ( $\chi^2(1, N = 1355) = 65.23, p = .000$ ) and disagreement ( $\chi^2(1, N = 1355) = 139.45, p = .000$ ) with a corporate social responsibility perspective on addressing differences. However, the nature of this relationship could not be determined.

## 5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to contribute to the understanding of corporate diversity communication in online settings with the ultimate purpose of informing the practice of public relations as a CSR function. It investigated corporate messages that revolved around social responsibility versus the business case for diversity. Recently, the public relations field has seen a trend in studies that emphasized the potential contribution of public relations to the creation of dialogue on diversity (Ciszek, 2020; Mundy, 2015, 2016; Uysal, 2013) with the ultimate purpose of developing corporate programs that are informed by primary and secondary stakeholder groups. These initiatives can contribute to the well-being of the communities in which corporations operate because they are informed by the very stakeholders impacted by certain societal issues. The present analysis represents a step forward toward engendering such a dialogue. Namely, without an understanding of how stakeholders respond to messages on diversity, public relations practitioners are unable to foster successful dialogue. The results of this study indicate that public relations practitioners should consider communicating about diversity as social responsibility without shunning from relaying its business importance for their companies. Undoubtedly, diversity should remain a matter of morality rather than a means to increase profit (Wrench, 2005).

Additionally, the findings revealed significant discrepancies between the two periods of analysis. Specifically, as activism increased in the American society, corporations changed their approach to diversity to emphasize social responsibility. This, in turn, led to negative stakeholder perceptions for the companies that during the first period of analysis stressed the benefits of diversity on their operations and switched their communication practices to CSR post 2020. By contrast, companies whose communication practices remained consistent over the two periods of analysis triggered more positive sentiment online. The results may be explained through message ingenueness and corporate identity. More precisely, if a company maintains its approach over an extensive period of time its messages may be viewed as illustrative of its identity and mission, and, hence ingenuous. Corporate identity comprises the essential values that drive daily operations and practices. When diversity represents an inherent part of the CSR value, it is applied consistently and, therefore, it is more likely to trigger positive stakeholder perceptions. Moreover, CPA and CSA may inform and shape CSR as companies adapt to the expectations and demands imposed in the macroenvironment in which they operate. Yet, while CSR has become a *sine qua non* for business success, stakeholders are aware of its business benefits and regard CSR-centered communication as disingenuous when the latter is applied suddenly and in the aftermath of increased activism. Consequently, when enacted swiftly, CSR-centered diversity might

engender reputational damage. It is possible that this swift change between the two periods of analysis was engendered by the fact that corporations treated CPA and CSA as independent of CSR rather than an intrinsic part of it. For example, while beyond the scope of this analysis, a preponderance of negative online comments denoted the users' disagreement with the corporate intrusion on a domain reserved for elected officials. These perceptions reveal that stakeholders regard the sudden implementation of CSR-centered diversity not as a natural adaptation to changes in the macroenvironment, but rather as an additional corporate function meant to alter societal and political structures. Further, the results suggest that PR practitioners should inform the development of diversity initiatives that align with the values and identity of their corporations and that are implemented consistently. Such initiatives are likely to trigger a more positive reception as a result of the stakeholders' identification with a company that renders diversity programs a natural projection of organizational mission and operations.

Theoretically, the study contributed to the present literature on diversity, corporate advocacy, and CSR by clarifying the blurred boundaries among the three concepts and by classifying diversity under the CSR umbrella.

In practice, corporations oftentimes enact CSR-centered diversity programs by rendering them an intrinsic part of their social responsibility efforts. The annual corporate CSR reports as well as the companies' official websites that introduce diversity as a CSR function attest to this practice (Maier & Ravazzani, 2019). By fragmenting the concept of CSR-centered diversity into corporate activism and political advocacy, the public relations scholarship deviates from practice and may diffuse its influence on the industry. In turn, this may lead to a less effective implementation of research findings that could otherwise engender significant societal contributions. Finally, the fragmentation may lead to a missed opportunity, as public relations is still struggling to prove that it represents a strategic management function.

The present study used quantitative methods to assess perceptions of corporate diversity and, therefore, one limitation represents the fact that quantitative methods cannot shed deeper insights into the phenomena under study. During the process of data coding the researcher gained an insight into the reasons behind the (dis)agreement with diversity initiatives, some of which alluded to the companies' reputation, past crises, as well as instances in which corporations discriminated against specific minority groups. In comments that denoted agreement to corporate diversity approaches, online users opined on the responsibility that companies have to contribute to positive changes in the society. To gain a further understanding of stakeholder perceptions, future studies should employ qualitative research methods and ascertain the major themes and subthemes that emerge in online perceptions. If such studies determine that a history of crises and a negative corporate reputation play a prevalent role in disagreement with diversity initiatives, then public relations practitioners have to convince management to first address their companies' past. This argument seldom emerged in past scholarship on corporate diversity (Waymer & Logan, 2021) and merits further investigation.

A second limitation represents the study's focus on text and its exclusion of images. Specifically, there were instances in which an image that depicted a diverse population was not accompanied by a text that referred to diversity. Therefore, the post was not included in the study. Future studies could draw on visual communication and interpretation of graphic design to shed further light on online perceptions in response to corporate diversity communication.

Finally, the companies selected for this study stem from various industries, among which financial, consumer goods, tourism, and telecommunications. This selection represents a limitation given past research that alluded to the fact that corporations from sectors that rely more on innovation (the telecommunications, the consumer goods industries) may be likely to embed diversity in their operations to a greater extent (Maiorescu-Murphy, 2019) than those who rely heavily on



**Table A1**

Average of daily corporate diversity communication and ensuing user comments.

December 1, 2016–May 31, 2017	December 1, 2020–May 31, 2021
Wells Fargo posts/ User comments 0.18/0.57	Wells Fargo posts/ User comments 0.29/1.70
J&J posts/ User comments 1.04/1.02	J&J posts/ User comments 0.28/0.16
AT&T posts/ User comments 0.15/0.98	AT&T posts/ User comments 0.53/2.53
Marriott posts/ User comments 0.31/0.13	Marriott posts/ User comments 0.02/0.29
Mastercard posts/ User comments 0.07/0.29	Mastercard posts/ User comments 0.31/1.41

\*Number of online followers per company: Wells Fargo (324.7 K); J&J (235.1 K); AT&T (899.2 K); Marriott (321.8 K); Mastercard (482.5 K).

**Table A2**

Comparison of the companies' business-centered diversity for the two periods of analysis.

December 1, 2016–May 31, 2017	December 1, 2020–May 31, 2021
Wells Fargo (N = 14, 10.4 %)	Wells Fargo N = 0; 0 %
J&J N = 104; 27.6 %	J&J N = 0; 0 %
AT&T N = 13, 6.3 %	AT&T N = 17; 3 %
Marriott N = 36; 45 %	Marriott N = 2; 5 %
Mastercard N = 10, 15.6 %	Mastercard N = 4; 1.3 %

**Table A3**

Comparison of the companies' CSR-centered diversity for the two periods of analysis.

December 1, 2016–May 31, 2017	December 1, 2020–May 31, 2021
Wells Fargo N = 18, 13.3 %	Wells Fargo N = 53, 100 %
J&J N = 129; 34.2 %	J&J N = 38, 73.1 %
AT&T N = 22, 10.7 %	AT&T N = 88, 89.8 %
Marriott N = 31; 38.8 %	Marriott N = 3, 7.5 %
Mastercard N = 6, 9.4 %	Mastercard N = 50, 89.3 %

**Table A4**

User dis(agreement) with the companies' diversity communication.

December 1, 2016–May 31, 2017	December 1, 2020–May 31, 2021
Wells Fargo Agreement N = 2; 1.5 % Disagreement N = 46, 34.1 %	Wells Fargo Agreement N = 32; 8.8 % Disagreement N = 184; 50.7 %
J&J Agreement N = 27; 7.2 % Disagreement N = 57; 15.1 %	J&J Agreement N = 7; 8.5 % Disagreement N = 11; 13.4 %
AT&T Agreement N = 28, 13.6 % Disagreement N = 48, 23.3 %	AT&T Agreement N = 117, 20.9 % Disagreement N = 88, 15.17 %
Marriott Agreement N = 5, 12.5 % Disagreement N = 2, 2.5 %	Marriott Agreement N = 6, 15.0 % Disagreement N = 19, 47.5 %
Mastercard Agreement N = 25, 39.1 % Disagreement N = 5, 7.8 %	Mastercard Agreement N = 147, 47.1 % Disagreement N = 93, 29.8 %

routine practices (the financial industry). Such discrepancies may stem from the corporations' view on diversity, which they perceive as conducive to increased innovation and creativity. The test discrepancies between business- and CSR-centered diversity future research should analyze the communication practices of multiple companies within these industries.

## Appendix

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