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# Why Take A Stand?

## Investigating the Organizational Drivers behind Corporate Social Advocacy

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Abstract: In recent years, many companies have publicly taken stances on controversial socio-political issues through Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), despite the risks of consumer backlash, accusations of inauthenticity, and uncertain outcomes. This thesis investigates the motivations behind such engagement, seeking to explain why firms pursue CSA despite inconclusive evidence of positive market effects. Drawing on Stakeholder Theory, Shareholder Theory, and Institutional Theory, we develop an integrative framework to explore the various drivers that shape CSA in practice. Through interviews with communication professionals and corporate representatives in Sweden, we identify three broad categories of drivers influencing CSA engagement: organizational and environmental context, intentional strategic drivers, and unintentional influences. Our findings reveal that CSA is rarely the result of a single clear rationale but instead emerges from a mix of internal values, commercial ambitions, and legitimacy concerns shaped by institutional pressures. Moreover, CSA decisions are often influenced by interpersonal dynamics, external partners, and individual advocacy, making them less predictable and more complex than commonly portrayed in the literature. By shifting the focus from outcomes to the underlying reasoning and organizational processes, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of why companies take public stands, contributing both theoretical insights and practical guidance for navigating advocacy in polarized environments.

Keywords: Corporate Social Advocacy, Brand Activism, Strategic Communication, Socio-Political Stance-taking, Marketing Communications.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The 2024 U.S. presidential election was an event that garnered the attention of the entire world, exemplifying the surge in political engagement on a global scale (Henley, 2024; International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024; Riccardi, 2024). Recent studies reveal a steady increase in political engagement, especially among younger generations, with 15% of Gen Z adults attending protests compared to the 8% of Millennials and Gen X (Statista, 2024). Additionally, global protest participation increased by more than 11% between 2009 and 2019, reflecting broader political activism worldwide (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021). However, this increase in political engagement is also accompanied by a heightened degree of polarization, where the animosity between those with opposing views is as strong as ever (DeJong, 2023; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2025). This is a phenomenon that is occurring all over the world (Blazina, 2022), and it may have changed the way we interact with each other, as well as how we interact with companies.

The rise in political engagement (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021; Statista, 2024) and polarization (Blazina, 2022; DeJong, 2023; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2025) has contributed to a shift in consumer behaviour, as more individuals are becoming self aware about their consumption and use their purchasing power to express socio-political values. Consumers are thus applying more pressure on companies, from large corporations to smaller businesses, to align with their values. One way of doing so is by initiating boycotts against companies, or buycotts supporting them. A 2025 poll revealed that 40% of Americans change their spending habits due to political beliefs, with 24% discontinuing their purchases at previously favored stores (i.e., boycotting) due to political beliefs (Aratani, 2025). Another study showed that 64% of consumers will either boycott or buycott a brand based on where they stand in a particular social or political issue (Edelman, 2018). This is especially pronounced within Gen Z consumers (Aratani, 2025; Edelman, 2018), which indicates that this trend will grow steadily among the coming generations. With the help of social media, these initiatives have become more organized and effective, having significant impacts on companies in terms of financial, brand reputation, and other key aspects (Shahid et al., 2024). Today’s polarized political landscape, where companies are facing significant consumer

pressure (Aratani, 2025; Edelman, 2018), forces them to consider how they should align themselves in response to socio-political issues. Thus, illustrating how the boundary between business and politics is becoming increasingly blurred.

Despite some companies facing backlash for inadvertently associating themselves with political issues (Shahid et al., 2024), some companies actively choose to create such associations with marketing campaigns and communication efforts. To better understand why companies voluntarily engage in this could be investigated from the perspectives of the economists Milton Friedman (1970) and Edward Freeman (1984) in their famous debate on shareholder versus stakeholder value. This debate is to this day dividing the world of business. In 2019, The Business Roundtable (a group of top U.S. CEOs) redefined corporate purpose to emphasize stakeholder value, signaling a shift away from strict shareholder primacy (Business Roundtable, 2019). Hence, it seems that Freeman's (1984) view is gaining more traction during the 21st century. Stakeholder focus, as discussed by Freeman (1984), is mostly expressed in terms of companies undertaking CSR initiatives. Patagonia is a famous example of a company largely driven by the stakeholder view, with their mission statement "We're in business to save our home planet" (Chouinard, 2022). However, there are also several examples of the shareholder view (Friedman, 1970) being present for modern companies. One such example is Amazon, which received negative attention for its labour practices (Peters, 2024) and high-emission delivery model (Taft, 2024), signaling their tendency to prioritize profit and cost savings at the expense of other stakeholders, such as employees or society at large.

These two companies show that these two opposing views still divide modern companies and that both can lead to success. Despite the stark differences between these two companies, what unify them is that they both are engaging in controversial, contemporary marketing campaigns and communication efforts, not clearly linked to their core business. This is what Parcha (2023) refers to as Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) campaigns. In Patagonia's "The president stole your land" campaign, they took a strong opposing role against the U.S. government's decisions to reduce national monument protections (Gelles, 2018). Similarly, Amazon took a political stand by publicly supporting the Equality Act, U.S. legislation aimed at strengthening protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Amazon, 2021).

Another reason why companies would voluntarily engage in CSA could possibly be understood through Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which emphasizes how organizational behaviors are influenced by external societal pressures and expectations rather than purely internal strategic decisions. According to DiMaggio and Powell (1983), companies often adopt behaviors common within their industry or societal environment in an attempt to gain legitimacy. In today's politically charged and socially conscious environment, companies may feel compelled to publicly engage in CSA due to coercive pressures from regulatory bodies, mimetic pressures to imitate successful competitors, or normative pressures arising from professional standards and societal expectations.

CSA campaigns are becoming more popular (Pollack, 2024), and it even unifies two extremes of the shareholder versus stakeholder value debate (Freeman, 1984; Friedman, 1970). Hence, it begs the question of what the motivations are behind these campaigns. Do companies make them in the hopes of generating more sales and thus driving profitability, aligning with the shareholder view? Or do companies make them because it aligns with their mission and thus deserves priority over financial returns, aligning closer to the stakeholder view? Simultaneously, the rise of CSA initiatives could reflect companies' efforts to align themselves with widely accepted norms and trends, resonating with Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), even in cases where direct economic benefits or clear alignment with stakeholder values are uncertain.

## 1.2 Problem Discussion

Many studies have been conducted with the aim of measuring the effect on customer responses to CSA campaigns. Although many differing studies have been conducted with this aim, the results are varying, and it is not properly established whether CSA campaigns lead to overwhelmingly positive or negative market responses (Hydock et al., 2019; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Kim et al., 2024; Klostermann et al., 2021; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021; Sanchez et al., 2022).

In a series of studies conducted by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), it was concluded that CSA had a net negative effect on brand perception. The studies showed that customers who were in disagreement with the brand’s stance on CSA substantially developed negative attitudes towards the brand, while the attitudes of those who were in agreement with the

stance-taking of the brand were barely affected (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Jungblut and Johnen (2022) make the same point, that the negative effects of boycotts outweigh the positive effects of buycotts when companies engage in CSA, and thus CSA is to be considered a risky strategy. They argue that this is partly explained by the fact that boycotting is usually a collective action, drawing media attention, which can impact brand perceptions, whereas buycotting is often an individual action. Jungblut and Johnen (2022) further go on to argue that the more polarized a certain issue is, the more amplified the negative effect it will have on the brand if it is incorporated into CSA. Neureiter and Bhattacharya (2021) add nuance to this by demonstrating how CSA campaigns aligned with the values of their core customer base can lead to short-term financial gain, using Nike and the Colin Kaepernick campaign as one example. In line with Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) and Jungblut and Johnen (2022), Klostermann et al. (2021) argue that CSA generally leads to negative brand perceptions. Klostermann et al. (2021), however, attribute the differences in effects of CSA on whether multiple brands take the same stance simultaneously, in which case the negative effects of CSA are mitigated, as responsibility is diffused among multiple companies. Additionally, it is attributed to the scale of the CSA effort (Klostermann et al., 2021). High-effort actions, such as policy changes and financial contributions, if generally perceived as negative, lead to increasingly negative effects on brand perception as opposed to low-effort actions, such as making a public statement (Klostermann et al., 2021).

From a purely financial perspective, Sanchez et al. (2022) demonstrate that CSA can positively impact financial return, so long as the company is not operating in a controversial industry (eg, alcohol, tobacco, and gambling). However, if the CSA is centered around issues regarding social rights, such as immigration and sexual orientation, it can have negative effects (Sanchez et al., 2022). So, despite varying results regarding companies' engagement in CSA, it can at least be concluded that there is no clear correlation between positive market responses and CSA. As such, from a shareholder view (Friedman, 1970), CSA campaigns should be regarded as a highly risky strategy. With more support for a negative correlation between CSA and positive market responses, it would even be directly irrational for shareholder-oriented companies to engage in CSA.

Simultaneously, existing research indicates that if not executed correctly, a CSA campaign might not be perceived as genuine by customers, employees, and other relevant stakeholders (Hydock et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2024; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020;

Neureiter and Bhattacharya, 2021). Kim et al. (2024) explain how perceptions of “corporate hypocrisy”, when CSA efforts are perceived as inauthentic and hypocritical by stakeholders, can arise. This is explained by the CSA campaign having a “low fit” with the organization's core business and its stated values (Kim et al., 2024). Moorman (2020) makes the same point by explaining that in order for CSA to land well with stakeholders, a company must have a good understanding of its own identity as well as its stakeholders' expectations. Moorman (2020) also highlights the fact that some companies might feel a genuine responsibility to contribute to society, thus engaging in CSA, but lack clear guidance on exactly how to act. This can result in the CSA effort, despite being genuine, not being perceived as such by stakeholders (Moorman, 2020).

Adding onto the arguments presented by Kim et al. (2024) and Moorman (2020), Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) argue that if a company’s CSA-efforts do not appear as sincere, which can happen when companies retract statements and issue apologies when faced by backlash, they alienate stakeholders on both the supporting and opposing side, thus appealing to none of their stakeholders. Hydock et al. (2019) also make the point that at least a part of a brand's stakeholders could be alienated when they choose to do CSA, in line with Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020). Neureiter and Bhattacharya (2021), who, as previously mentioned, highlight the fact that CSA can cause short-term financial gain if aligned with key stakeholders, also point out that it could cause societal divisions and long-term instability irrespective of the company's intentions. This is especially relevant for brands with heterogeneous stakeholder groups (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021). Thus, from a stakeholder view (Freeman, 1984), CSA campaigns are also to be seen as a risky strategy.

As political polarization increases (Blazina, 2022; DeJong, 2023; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2025), it could even be theorized that the negative effects of CSA observed in some studies (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Klostermann et al., 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021) could become even more severe (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022). Despite this, CSA campaigns are common for modern profit-seeking companies (Pollack, 2024). Also, companies can face the risk of being perceived as engaging in “corporate hypocrisy" (Kim et al., 2024) when doing CSA. As such, it seems to be risky for companies to do CSA even when it is done with the sole motive of appealing to stakeholders (Hydock et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2024; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021). Due to the inconclusiveness of the positive impacts of CSA, there is a

need to better understand why companies engage in CSA and what guides the decision-making process regarding such campaigns.

## 1.3 Purpose & Contribution

This study aims to contribute to both academic research and practical business strategy by deepening the understanding of why companies engage in CSA, despite the risks associated with potential customer backlash, strengthened by political polarization. Existing literature has extensively explored the effects of CSA on customer responses (Hydock et al., 2019; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Kim et al., 2024; Klostermann et al., 2021; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021; Sanchez et al., 2022). This research has not been able to fully explain why companies engage in CSA, even when finding negative effects on market responses with regard to CSA. Despite these findings, companies continue to make such campaigns, suggesting that the explanation may lie beyond immediate market outcomes. Hence, there remains a gap in understanding the underlying motivations behind these campaigns, which would be in the interest of practitioners and academics to better understand.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research seeks to bridge the gap between CSA and Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), Shareholder Theory (Friedman, 1970), and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Rather than focusing on outcomes, this study explores the underlying motivations behind CSA initiatives: whether or how they are driven by (1) profit-maximizing motives when doing CSA, aligned with Shareholder Theory, (2) by stakeholder aligning motives, aligned with Stakeholder Theory, or (3) by conformity to external expectations, aligned with Institutional Theory. By investigating how and why companies engage in CSA despite its associated risks through a new lens, by using these three theoretical perspectives, this research contributes to a more integrated understanding of corporate decision-making in politically charged contexts. In doing so, we also investigate how these perspectives may interact in a CSA context, possibly revealing overlapping, conflicting, or reinforcing logics that influence strategic choices in practice.

From a practical perspective, this study aims to offer insights for corporate executives, marketing professionals, and communication strategists navigating the complexities of socio-political engagement. By examining the underlying motivations behind CSA, this

research seeks to clarify when and why companies choose to take public stands on controversial issues. The study is expected to support practitioners in making them more informed about what objectives CSA campaigns can fulfil, as well as how to align advocacy efforts with broader corporate strategy, stakeholder expectations, and brand positioning, while also anticipating potential risks such as backlash or perceptions of inauthenticity.

### 1.3.1 Research Question

We will thus try to understand why companies engage in CSA despite risks associated with political polarization and potential customer backlash. Our research question is, therefore: *Why do companies actively engage in Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) in their marketing communications despite it being a risky strategy?*

## 1.4 Delimitations

As CSA is inherently political, the findings of this study are consequently tied to the cultural and political landscape of Sweden. The definition of CSA used in this thesis, made by Parcha (2023), entails that the message of a campaign must be controversial. What is to be considered as controversial is highly context dependent, and hence we chose to focus on the geographical context in which we have the most cultural and political knowledge. Consequently, the empirical data collection has been limited geographically to Sweden, focusing exclusively on interviews with representatives from companies operating within this context. This is also done because the sample of companies engaging in CSA is limited, and us being based in Sweden facilitates our access to relevant interviewees. Consequently, while some references to global trends and examples outside Sweden occur in the introduction, the core empirical insights and theoretical discussions center around Swedish corporate practices.

Furthermore, the cultural and political landscape is not only tied to the geographical context, but this landscape can also change over time. In this study, we only investigate CSA decision-making processes taking place during recent years, acknowledging that the findings are situated within a specific temporal context. The insights from this research should be seen in light of the constantly changing and evolving environment in which these decisions are made.

We have also limited our scope to only investigate campaigns involving for-profit organizations. NGOs and other non-profit organizations are excluded from our study, as their engagement with socio-political issues is typically central to their mission rather than a strategic extension of a commercial brand. Unlike for-profit firms, they are not directly subject to shareholder pressure or market-based performance metrics, and their motivations for advocacy tend to be mainly value-driven rather than profit-oriented. Including such organizations would therefore introduce fundamentally different logics that fall outside the focus of our research.

# 2. Literature Review

In the following chapter, we begin by defining marketing campaigns, their strategic objectives, and key actors (2.1). Next, we explore Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), differentiating it from related concepts and highlighting associated outcomes (2.2). We then contrast Shareholder and Stakeholder Theory perspectives (2.3) and introduce Institutional Theory (2.4). Lastly, we synthesize these theories into an integrative framework to analyze corporate engagement in CSA (2.5).

## 2.1 Marketing Campaigns

### 2.1.1 Definition, Objectives & Strategic Importance

Kotler and Keller (2016) define marketing campaigns as coordinated, strategic efforts to promote a specific company goal, such as raising awareness of a new product or capturing customer feedback. Furthermore, they note that effective marketing campaigns should be aligned with the firm's broader corporate objectives in order to ensure consistency and strategic coherence. This, in order to create a brand image that is unified and coherent.

The primary objectives of marketing campaigns can vary depending on the strategic goals of an organization. It could be to enhance *brand awareness and positioning*, as enhancing brand recognition and positioning the company in the competitive landscape is crucial in fostering consumer loyalty and trust (Kapferer, 2008). The objective could also be *customer acquisition and retention* (Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009). Another common objective of marketing campaigns is to achieve direct *sales and revenue growth*, as businesses often use

performance metrics, such as return on investment (ROI), in order to measure campaign effectiveness (Petersen & Kumar, 2009). Another increasingly relevant objective of marketing campaigns is *advocacy*, as campaigns nowadays are often used to address and highlight social and political causes, strengthening a company's commitment to broader societal values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). This is a concept that will be developed further on in this chapter when the concept of Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) is expanded on.

According to Varadarajan (2010), in large organizations, marketing campaigns are essential strategic tools, serving as the operational link between overarching corporate goals and customer engagement. Varadarajan (2010) emphasizes that campaign planning and execution must reflect the organization's long-term vision and market positioning.

### 2.1.2 Key Actors in Campaign Development

The development of a marketing campaign within a large organization requires multiple actors, each playing an important part in shaping and executing the strategy (Janssen et al., 2021; Katsikeas et al., 2016). Successful marketing campaigns require efficient collaboration in order to ensure alignment with corporate objectives, regulatory compliance, and audience engagement. The actors involved in marketing campaigns can be categorized into *internal actors* and *external actors*, with each contributing specific resources and expertise to the development and execution of marketing campaigns. This is highly relevant, since involving multiple actors, with various perspectives and incentives, can create a complex environment for campaign development.

Starting with discussing the *internal actors*, marketing and brand managers are responsible for ensuring brand consistency and alignment with corporate objectives. They work closely with executives and senior leadership, who provide strategic direction as well as budget approvals necessary for executing campaigns (Katsikeas et al., 2016). In terms of *external actors*, many companies also collaborate with communication agencies as well as media agencies to execute campaigns through multiple channels, including digital, print, and broadcast media (Katsikeas et al., 2020). Additionally, consumers and brand advocates play an essential part in a campaign's success through feedback, engagement, and word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM), amplifying the reach and impact (Janssen et al., 2021).

## 2.2 Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA)

As discussed previously, one of the most common objectives when organizations conduct marketing campaigns is advocacy. Advocacy can come in different forms and relate to various issues, oftentimes social or political (Vredenburg et al., 2020). We will now hone in on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Corporate Political Activities (CPA), Brand Activism, and Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA).

### 2.2.1 Defining Terms

There are multiple ways that earlier literature has defined the phenomenon of using socio-political issues within marketing campaigns. Often, different terms are used to describe very similar concepts with only slight differences. Moreover, some researchers use the same term with varying definitions. Hence, we will now explain what terms are used, how they are commonly defined, and how they are related to each other.

*Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)* is a broad concept that refers to a company's commitment to ethical behavior, sustainability, and social well-being beyond its financial and legal obligations. CSR encompasses corporate efforts to improve environmental sustainability, labor rights, ethical supply chains, and community engagement (Velte, 2022). CSR typically focuses on responsible business practices without directly addressing controversial socio-political issues

*Corporate Political Advocacy (CPA)* takes this a step further in terms of advocacy, by explicitly involving companies in political discourse, including endorsing candidates, influencing policy, or lobbying for specific legislation (Weber et al., 2023). CPA extends beyond the general ethical responsibilities of CSR by taking clear political stances, often leading to increased scrutiny and consumer polarization. Wettstein and Baur (2016) define CPA as "voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals with the aim of persuading others to do the same." This makes CPA a strategically provocative and high-risk endeavor compared to CSR due to its explicit political nature and potential to alienate consumers with opposing views.

*Brand Activism*, while related, is distinct from CPA as it represents corporate engagement on socio-political issues primarily through public campaigns or statements rather than direct

political involvement. Unlike CPA, Brand Activism typically refrains from endorsing specific political actors or policies directly. Cammarota et al. (2023) define Brand Activism as "business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform with the desire to improve society." Companies engaging in brand activism take explicit stances on issues such as climate change, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice, often using their platforms to drive societal change without directly influencing political policy or elections.

*Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA)* is, in many regards, very similar to Brand Activism. CSA specifically describes a corporation's decision to publicly support or oppose controversial social issues, aligning itself with societal movements rather than explicit political campaigns or legislation, such as with CPA (Dodd & Supa, 2014). However, CSA is distinct in that it focuses on issues that are not directly linked to the company's core business operations (Parcha, 2023). While Brand Activism can be used broadly, including by non-profit organizations whose core mission inherently involves social change (Cammarota et al., 2023), CSA explicitly involves corporations taking stances on issues not directly related to their primary business activities. Consequently, CSA carries risks of consumer backlash due to perceived misalignment between a company's stated values and actual practices (Kim et al., 2024). CSA thus occupies a unique position, responding to heightened societal expectations for corporate involvement in contemporary social justice issues without direct political involvement (Rim et al., 2024).

Given our focus on the risks associated with using socio-political stance-taking as a marketing tool, CSA is the most appropriate term for our study. Moving forward, we will adopt Parcha's (2023) definition of CSA, which states that CSA occurs when a firm takes a stand on an issue that is: (1) contemporary, (2) controversial, and (3) not clearly linked to the corporation's business. Although we have defined these concepts distinctly, it is important to acknowledge that existing literature sometimes uses these terms interchangeably or with overlapping meanings. Therefore, in this paper, we also refer to studies that may label the phenomenon differently, provided they examine it in a way that aligns with Parcha's (2023) definition of CSA.

### 2.2.2 The Implications of CSA

Although engagement in CSA could have positive impacts for organizations, it could also inadvertently have very negative ones, as outlined in the Problem Discussion (section 1.2). Prior research consistently points to the risks associated with CSA, particularly in terms of consumer backlash and potential damage to brand perception. CSA initiatives can polarize audiences, often generating both boycotts and buycotts, with negative responses frequently outweighing the positive ones due to the collective visibility of boycotting behaviors (Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). These concerns are intensified when campaigns lack authenticity or appear misaligned with a firm's core values, increasing the risk of perceived corporate hypocrisy (Kim et al., 2024; Moorman, 2020).

While a full overview of these risks has already been addressed earlier, it is important to reiterate that firms engaging in CSA could potentially face reputational and financial consequences, especially when stakeholder expectations are misunderstood or when campaigns are perceived as opportunistic (Hydock et al., 2019). Given these potential risks, firms must carefully assess the potential consequences before engaging in CSA in order for it to have the intended impact.

## 2.3 Stakeholder Theory vs. Shareholder Theory

In the domain of corporate governance and business ethics, the contrast between Shareholder and Stakeholder Theory has long served as a focal point for understanding how organisations define and discharge their responsibilities. On one side, Shareholder Theory, prominent in works by Friedman (1970), prioritises the goal of maximising returns for shareholders above all else, arguing that corporate management has a duty to deploy organisational resources strictly in pursuit of this objective. On the other side, Stakeholder Theory, most notably advanced by Freeman (1984), challenges this shareholder-centric paradigm by suggesting that corporations should serve a broader set of stakeholders, that includes not just shareholders but also employees, customers, suppliers, and the wider community.

### 2.3.1 Shareholder Theory

Shareholder Theory emerged from an economic perspective that underscores efficiency and agency considerations. Friedman's (1970) position emphasises that corporate executives function as agents of the shareholders, carrying obligations to fulfil shareholders' interests,

primarily manifested as profit maximisation. According to Friedman's (1970) argument, extending the scope of corporate responsibility to social or ethical issues effectively becomes a form of taxation without representation, thereby undermining the principles of a free market. This stance aligns closely with agency theory, as outlined in Jensen and Meckling (1976), which maintains that managers must align their decisions with shareholder interests to mitigate agency costs and prevent managerial self-serving behaviours. In theory, if managers remain dedicated to enhancing shareholder value, the corporation will allocate resources in ways that uphold economic efficiency.

However, critics have raised questions about the underlying assumptions and implications of Shareholder Theory. DesJardine et al. (2022) contend that an unwavering focus on shareholder interests can inadvertently spawn negative externalities, such as environmental harm and labour-related grievances, which may not be immediately visible in quarterly financial statements. Schaefer (2008) argues that Shareholder Theory overlooks the moral duties of the owners themselves, implying that shareholders bear ultimate responsibility for the ethical or unethical outcomes of the enterprises they fund. Goranova and Ryan (2013) also highlight a tension inherent to shareholder activism, observing that when activist shareholders pressure companies primarily for short-term gains, firms may sacrifice long-term viability or broader social considerations. These critiques reveal a growing discomfort with any framework that focuses solely on short-term, profit-driven metrics without acknowledging the wider societal ramifications.

Thus, from the perspective of Shareholder Theory, the decision to engage in CSA would be driven primarily by expectations that such activities enhance profitability and shareholder value, either directly or indirectly through reputation enhancement, brand differentiation, or mitigation of potential risks. This aligns with Friedman's (1970) argument, suggesting that managers will engage in CSA only when they perceive a clear link to shareholder interests, reflecting a strategic calculation designed to enhance corporate efficiency and market positioning. Such an approach suggests that firms might view CSA as strategically valuable, specifically because it can enhance long-term shareholder interests, addressing concerns raised by critics like DesJardine et al. (2022) and Goranova and Ryan (2013).

### 2.3.2 Stakeholder Theory

In contrast to this profit-centred model, Stakeholder Theory proposes a more encompassing understanding of corporate purpose. Freeman (1984) portrays the corporation as embedded in a network of relationships with various groups whose interests must be addressed to ensure organisational survival and success. Freeman (1984) further argues that recognising stakeholders' legitimate stakes fosters trust, cooperation, and ultimately a more resilient corporate structure.

Such a broad-based approach has prompted discussions about how exactly firms can integrate stakeholder insights into everyday operations. Laplume et al. (2008) examine how Stakeholder Theory not only fits the ethical aspirations of many organisations but also enriches strategic decision-making by foregrounding relationship-building and reputation management. Jensen and Sandström (2011) observe that Stakeholder Theory acknowledges the complexities of power relations that can influence corporate outcomes, implying that effective stakeholder management can confer both legitimacy and long-term viability. Proponents maintain that by inviting stakeholders into the dialogue, companies can better anticipate potential conflicts and adapt more skilfully to a rapidly evolving business landscape (Laplume et al., 2008).

Yet Stakeholder Theory is not exempt from its own critiques. Jensen (2002) argues that without a singular goal, such as profit maximisation, companies can find it difficult to navigate among multiple, potentially contradictory, stakeholder demands. This lack of a straightforward prioritisation mechanism might dilute a firm's strategic direction and could even enable executives to cloak personal agendas under the umbrella of stakeholder interests (Schaefer, 2008). Goranova and Ryan (2013) caution that firms attempting to serve too many stakeholders might face strategic drift, eventually undermining competitiveness in the marketplace.

Thus, according to Stakeholder Theory, companies would engage in CSA primarily because it allows them to manage stakeholder relationships proactively, align their actions with broader societal expectations, and ultimately secure long-term organizational success. CSA activities are viewed as a way to anticipate and manage potential stakeholder conflicts, thus reinforcing legitimacy and trust. This rationale directly reflects Freeman's (1984) emphasis on

stakeholder management as central to organisational effectiveness and resilience, effectively responding to criticisms posed by Jensen (2002) regarding the complexity of managing diverse stakeholder interests.

## 2.4 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory provides a framework for understanding how organizations develop structures, behaviors, and decision-making processes in response to external pressures and societal expectations rather than solely based on economic efficiency. It highlights the role of institutions, rules, norms, and belief systems that shape behavior over time, and how organizations conform to these institutional pressures to gain legitimacy and ensure survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

One of the core concepts within Institutional Theory is institutional isomorphism, which refers to the process by which organizations within a field become increasingly similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified three mechanisms of isomorphic change: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive isomorphism arises from formal pressures, such as government regulations and legal requirements, that compel organizations to adopt specific structures or policies. Mimetic isomorphism occurs when organizations, faced with uncertainty, imitate successful or established models, often without clear evidence of effectiveness. Normative isomorphism stems from professionalization, where industry standards, professional associations, and educational systems create shared understandings of what constitutes appropriate organizational behavior (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Building upon these foundations, Beckert (2010) challenges the prevailing emphasis on isomorphic processes by highlighting the role of institutional divergence, arguing that institutions do not always converge toward homogeneity but can evolve in diverse directions based on contextual factors. While traditional institutionalism focuses on forces that promote stability and similarity, Beckert (2010) stresses that institutional change can occur when competing interests, power struggles, and strategic agency disrupt established norms. This perspective introduces a more dynamic understanding of institutions, emphasizing the conditions under which divergence occurs despite isomorphic pressures.

Institutional Theory also explores the role of institutional logics, which provide overarching belief systems that influence how organizations interpret their roles and responsibilities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Historically, organizations have operated under a market logic, prioritizing competition, efficiency, and profitability. However, other logics, such as state-driven regulations, professional norms, or societal expectations, can reshape how organizations define success and legitimacy. The coexistence of multiple institutional logics often creates tensions within organizations, requiring them to navigate conflicting demands and selectively adopt practices that balance legitimacy with strategic goals.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) introduced the idea that organizations often adopt institutionalized structures as myths and ceremonies, meaning that formal policies and governance structures are sometimes decoupled from actual practices. Organizations may implement widely accepted norms or policies not because they improve efficiency, but because they enhance legitimacy within their institutional environment. This phenomenon underscores the distinction between symbolic conformity and substantive change, where organizations outwardly comply with institutional expectations while internally maintaining different approaches to operations.

Institutionalization, the process by which norms and behaviors become deeply embedded and taken for granted, is central to Institutional Theory. Once a practice becomes institutionalized, it is no longer questioned, even if its original justification is no longer relevant. Kondra and Hurst (2009) emphasize the connection between institutionalization and organizational culture, arguing that institutions shape not just formal structures but also deeply ingrained cultural norms that influence decision-making at all levels. They highlight how cultural norms become self-reinforcing through professional networks, training programs, and socialization, making institutional change difficult unless external pressures force reevaluation (Kondra and Hurst, 2009).

The concept of deinstitutionalization is critical for understanding institutional change. While institutions tend to persist, they are not static, they can erode or be replaced over time due to shifts in external pressures, competing logics, or organizational agency (Oliver, 1992). Beckert (2010) further emphasizes how institutional divergence can occur, complementing discussions on deinstitutionalization (Oliver, 1992), by showing that the same forces that drive institutional convergence can also facilitate divergence, particularly when organizations

resist dominant institutional pressures or when alternative institutional models gain legitimacy. This perspective aligns with the idea of institutional entrepreneurship, where actors within organizations actively work to reshape institutional norms by advocating for new practices or challenging existing frameworks (DiMaggio, 1988).

Thus, from the perspective of Institutional Theory, companies would engage in CSA primarily as a response to institutional pressures, aiming to conform to societal norms, industry expectations, and regulatory demands to secure legitimacy and ensure long-term survival. This engagement may not necessarily stem from an intrinsic motivation to create social impact, but rather from a strategic need to maintain conformity, manage external perceptions, and navigate the tensions among multiple institutional logics that define appropriate organizational behavior.

## 2.5 Theoretical Framework

This thesis employs an integrative theoretical framework composed of Shareholder Theory (Friedman, 1970), Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to comprehensively analyze why companies actively engage in CSA, despite the inherent risks posed by political polarization (DeJong, 2023; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2025) and potential stakeholder backlash.

These three theoretical perspectives, though distinct, are not mutually exclusive and can interplay in complex ways. To clarify their interactions, this study proposes an integrative quadrant model (see Figure 1). This model situates CSA drivers on two intersecting axes: the motivation axis, ranging from values-driven (stakeholder focus) to profit-driven (shareholder focus), and the institutional pressure axis, ranging from high institutional conformity (high institutional pressure) to strategic independence (low institutional pressure). This model enables a systematic analysis of motivations for CSA by clarifying how strategic economic considerations, organizational values, and external institutional pressures influence organizational actions.

This integrative framework outlines four possible motivations for why companies engage in CSA despite its risks. The framework distinguishes between companies' primary motivations, profit-driven or values-driven, and the extent of institutional pressure they face. First,

*profit-driven firms with strategic independence (Q1)* may theoretically engage in CSA opportunistically to access value-driven market segments or differentiate their brand, although in the absence of strong institutional drivers or internal value alignment, such initiatives are expected to be more selective and tactical (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sanchez et al., 2022). Second, *values-driven firms operating with strategic independence (Q2)* may engage in CSA proactively to strengthen internal cultural coherence and foster alignment with stakeholders who share their values, using advocacy as a strategic tool for stakeholder management rather than responding to societal pressure (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Laplume et al., 2008). Third, *profit-driven firms under high institutional pressure (Q3)* may engage in CSA as a pragmatic response to external demands, aiming to protect or enhance legitimacy while primarily pursuing financial objectives (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Moorman, 2020). Finally, *values-driven firms facing high degrees of institutional pressure (Q4)* are theorized to engage in CSA when internal commitments align with external expectations, reinforcing organizational legitimacy and trust (Kim et al., 2024). These four quadrants aim to provide a theoretical basis for understanding the diverse motivations that may drive CSA engagement, offering different hypotheses for why firms may undertake advocacy initiatives despite the risks involved.

Ultimately, this integrative framework aims to provide nuanced insights into corporate motivations behind CSA campaigns, clarifying why firms engage in risky advocacy initiatives in politically polarized environments. By synthesizing Shareholder Theory, Stakeholder Theory, and Institutional Theory, the framework contributes both theoretically and practically, enhancing understanding of corporate decision-making processes and aiding executives in navigating the complexities of socio-political marketing strategies.

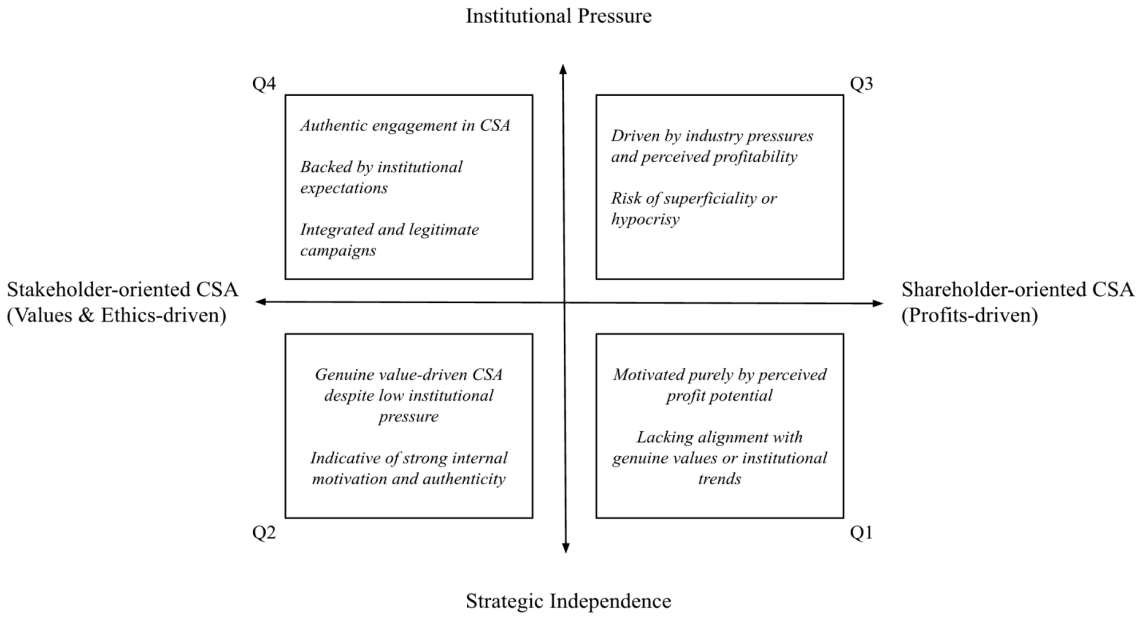



*Figure 1: CSA Quadrant Model*

# 3. Methodology

In the following chapter, we present the research methodology used to investigate why companies engage in CSA despite its associated risks. We begin by outlining the research design (3.1). We then describe the data collection process (3.2), covering how interview participants were sampled and how the interviews were conducted. Next, we explain the data analysis process (3.3), detailing how the Gioia methodology was applied to develop themes from the interview data. Finally, we discuss considerations related to research quality (3.4) and ethical procedures (3.5) undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness and integrity of the study.

## 3.1 Research Design

What inspired this study is the observation that CSA has largely been examined through quantitative methods. These approaches often aim to indirectly infer the underlying motivations for CSA by examining correlations with profitability or market performance. However, such studies yield inconclusive findings, suggesting that the relationship between CSA and financial outcomes is neither straightforward nor sufficient to explain why firms engage in these practices. In response, our study adopts a qualitative research design to gain deeper insight into the motivations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative methods alone. As such, this thesis takes an interpretative stance (Bell et al., 2022) in an

attempt to uncover the subjective meanings, internal deliberations, and institutional pressures that drive CSA, dimensions that are often overlooked in positivist frameworks.

Given the limited understanding of the underlying drivers of CSA beyond financial incentives, this study is exploratory in nature and employs an abductive approach (Bell et al. 2022), starting by observing the prevalence of CSA and seeking to explain it by drawing on existing theories not typically applied in this context. The study iterates between theory and data in the sense that the theories applied are contrasted and integrated based on the data. As the findings are analyzed, we are able to return to our theoretical framework and understand what aspects of each theory are able to explain the prevalence of CSA, and also how these theories interact.

The study builds on data captured from semi-structured interviews with professionals within organizations that have experience with CSA. Although this study draws on data from multiple organizations, it is best understood as a cross-sectional design rather than a multiple-case study (Bell et al., 2022). The primary focus is not on the unique context of each individual firm, but rather on identifying patterns and commonalities across a broader sample of companies engaging in CSA. The aim is to produce general insights into the motivations or possible pressures that underpin CSA, rather than to provide in-depth case analyses of specific organizational contexts. In this way, the study treats the sample of firms as a whole, allowing for an exploration of shared drivers and institutional dynamics influencing CSA at a particular point in time.

## 3.2 Data Collection

### 3.2.1 Interview Sampling

The sampling procedure adopted for this research was purposive sampling (Bell et al., 2022), aimed at ensuring participants possess experiences and insights relevant to our research objectives. Initially, our approach followed a fixed and a priori purposive sampling strategy (Bell et al., 2022), focusing on organizations with visible CSA campaigns. We did so by screening for campaigns that fall under Parcha's (2023) definition of CSA. Since the second criterion of Parcha's CSA definition requires the issue to be controversial, this meant that we had to apply our own subjective judgment to assess what could reasonably be considered controversial. We were aware that this could possibly be a source of sampling bias (Bell et al,

2022) and counteracted this by actively keeping the definition of controversial as broad as possible. This allowed us to target participants most likely to inform our research question while minimizing the risk of sampling bias. However, due to low response rates and a limited number of clear CSA examples, our strategy evolved into a more contingent and sequential sampling process (Bell et al., 2022). As responses from clearly identified CSA-engaging organizations became scarce, we broadened our criteria by reaching out more generally to individuals involved in marketing and communications, allowing them to assess whether their experiences were relevant to our study. This shift enabled us to access professionals who may have been directly involved in CSA-related decisions, even if the campaigns were not initially apparent to us.

To enrich the perspective, we also deliberately aimed for a balance between internal organizational representatives and external communication agency professionals. The latter group offered valuable insights based on their work with multiple brands, providing a broader understanding of CSA-campaign development across industries. This deliberate mix enhances the depth and breadth of our data.

Additionally, elements of snowball sampling (Bell et al., 2022) emerged as early participants helped us connect with others. This was especially useful in accessing individuals who might otherwise have been difficult to reach. For practical reasons, we primarily reached out to Swedish-based organizations or to Swedish departments in larger international organizations for the reasons already explained under Delimitations (section 1.4). The full list of our interview sample, which accounted for 18 interviews in total, is presented in Appendix B.

### 3.2.2 Interview Design

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews to gather rich and contextually grounded insights (Bell et al., 2022). The interview guide was designed to address themes such as motivations for engaging with socio-political issues, perceived risks and benefits, and organizational responses to backlash or support (see Appendix C). Interviewees were allowed the freedom to focus on topics most relevant to them, rather than being constrained by a rigid questionnaire format. Additionally, we made iterative changes to our interview guide in order to refine and capture relevant topics we previously had not anticipated, in the course of conducting interviews.

This approach balanced consistency across interviews with the flexibility to adapt follow-up questions to each participant's responses, accommodating for differences in industries, organizational characteristics, as well as the roles of the participants. The sequence of questions was also varied, as permitted within the semi-structured format (Bell et al., 2022), depending on the natural flow of the conversation. The flexibility of our interview design proved especially valuable, as different participants emphasized different aspects of CSA depending on their organizational role and context.

Interviews were carried out primarily via video conferencing platforms such as Google Meet and Microsoft Teams, as well as through phone calls, each lasting between 24 to 59 minutes. The interviews were all conducted in Swedish, with the exception of one. All interviews were audio recorded with explicit participant consent and transcribed in their original language verbatim, ensuring accuracy and facilitating thorough analysis. The transcripts were subsequently translated to English as quotes were presented within the empirical results of this thesis.

## 3.3 Data Analysis

Given the exploratory nature of this study, we applied the Gioia methodology to systematically develop concepts from the interview data. This approach was selected because it supports the generation of grounded, empirically derived insights, while maintaining analytical rigour in the study of complex, socially constructed phenomena (Gioia et al. 2023), such as CSA.

Our analysis began with a close reading of the transcripts to identify all instances where a potential driver for CSA could be present. At this stage, we coded broadly and inclusively, aiming to capture both explicit and implicit meanings. Importantly, we set aside our initial theoretical assumptions in order to remain open to alternative explanations. This reflects our abductive approach (Bell et al., 2022), in which we allowed patterns and themes to emerge from the data while remaining open to interpretations that might challenge or extend our existing theoretical framework. As the analysis progressed, we moved between the data and our interpretations, grouping first-order codes into second-order themes and, ultimately,

broader aggregate dimensions. This iterative process helped refine and structure the data while preserving a clear link between participant language and theoretical development.

The use of the Gioia methodology allowed us to capture both more explicit explanations for CSA efforts, but also less expected rationales that might not be immediately visible through the lens of existing theory on CSA. The approach was therefore well aligned with the aims of our study, which sought to explain not only what firms say about their engagement in CSA but also the underlying reasoning that informs those decisions.

## 3.4 Quality Considerations

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of our qualitative research, we draw on Lincoln and Guba's framework, as presented by Bell et al. (2022), for evaluating qualitative studies. They propose four key criteria: *credibility, transferability, dependability,* and *confirmability*. These criteria provide a structured lens through which the quality of our study on CSA can be assessed.

*Credibility* concerns the internal validity of the study and addresses the extent to which our findings accurately reflect the perspectives of the participants. One way to ensure credibility, outlined by Bell et al. (2022), is through respondent validation. We decided not to directly involve our respondents during the process of turning the interview transcripts into research findings, however, we offered to send our completed thesis to all of our interviewees. This gives us as researchers increased accountability for ensuring congruence between our findings and their responses, thus indirectly improving credibility. Furthermore, when there was ambiguity in responses during the interviews, we addressed this by summarizing and reflecting back our understanding of participants' statements. This allowed interviewees the opportunity to confirm, clarify, or elaborate on their responses.

Another important aspect for the overall quality of the thesis is *transferability* (Bell et al., 2022). Given the context-specific nature of qualitative research, we recognize that our findings are not universally generalizable. Bell et al. (2022) propose thick descriptions of context as a method of addressing this limitation. However, the anonymization of our interviewees greatly hindered this possibility. Instead, we improved transferability by making our sample diverse in terms of industries, organizations, and the nature of CSA messaging,

thereafter focusing our findings on themes that were recurring across multiple differing contexts. Furthermore, we enhanced transferability beyond industrial and organizational boundaries by clearly limiting our sample to specific geographical and temporal contexts, thereby allowing readers to assess the applicability of our findings to other settings with similar characteristics.

To ensure *dependability* (Bell et al., 2022), we have documented the research process in a transparent and traceable manner. This includes a transparent discussion about the selection process for interviewees, the disclosure of our interview guide, and the iterative stages of our data analysis based on the Gioia methodology. Although we did not implement a formal peer audit, we maintained regular discussions with our supervisor throughout the research process, which functioned as an informal review of our procedures and interpretations (Bell et al., 2022).

Finally, *confirmability* (Bell et al., 2022) ensures that our findings are shaped by the data rather than researcher biases or assumptions. To ensure confirmability, we kept interviews open to new perspectives not initially covered in our interview guide and adapted the guide as new themes emerged. This flexibility was especially important given the exploratory nature of our thesis. While turning these interviews into findings, we improved confirmability by having collaborative coding discussions between the two authors, thus making personal biases more visible. CSA having political elements makes confirmability especially important, as findings could be susceptible to political biases. We tried to limit this by keeping our sample diverse in terms of CSA messaging.

## 3.5 Ethical Considerations

In order to follow ethical standards, we made sure all of the interviewees were well informed of the topic of the interview and they received clear information about the study's aims and context prior to each interview. Consent to our use of the data was obtained in verbal agreement with each participant. We ensured that participants were aware their contributions would remain anonymous and that data would be presented in a non-identifiable form. The personal identities of the interviewees were kept confidential from anyone except the authors and the concerned faculty of Stockholm School of Economics. Furthermore, all the

information that could tie our research to personal identities was to be deleted promptly after the completion of the thesis.

# 4. Empirical Data

After having conducted 18 interviews and completed our data analysis process through Gioia's methodology, we identified three recurring themes: *Organizational and Environmental Context*, *Intentional Strategic Drivers,* and *Unintentional Influences* (see Figure 2). In this chapter, these themes will be elaborated on by exploring each one of them one at a time.

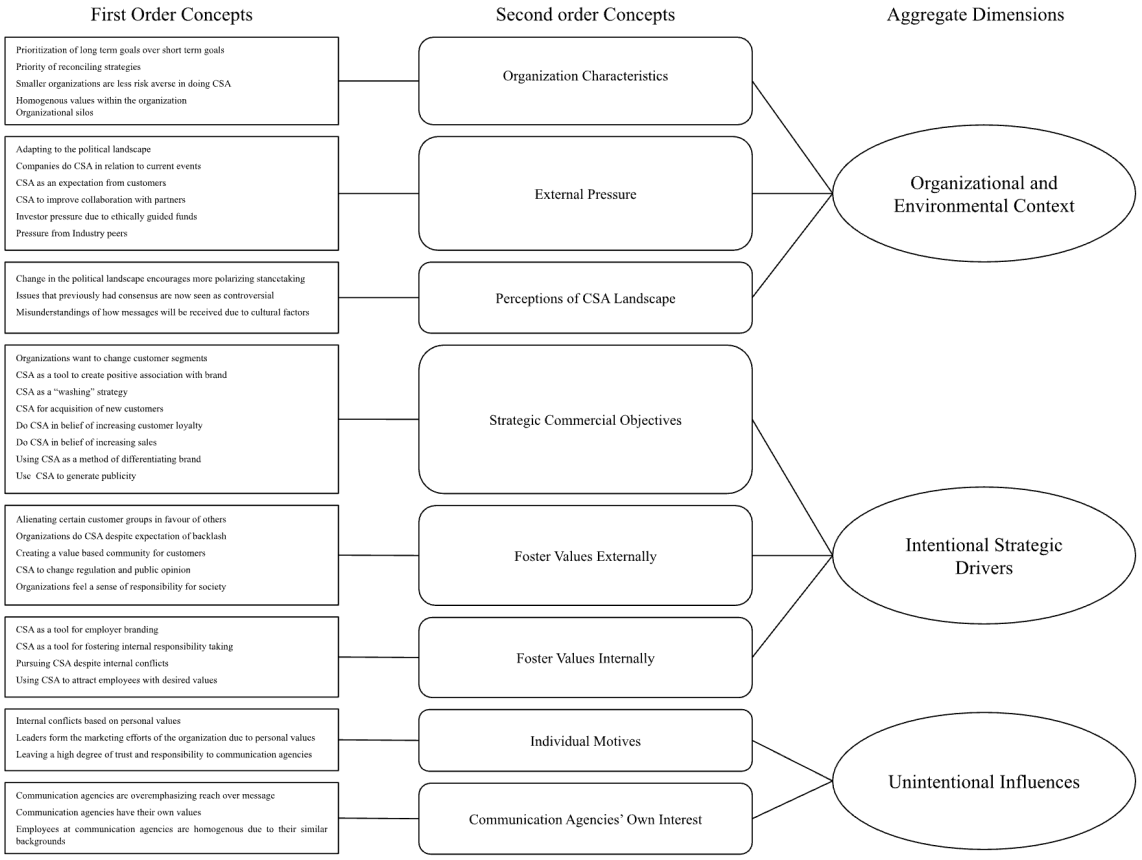



*Figure 2: Data Analysis Structure*

## 4.1 Organizational and Environmental Context

The Organizational and Environmental Context theme encompasses a set of conditions that shape how CSA decisions are made, emerging from both the internal structure of the firm and

its surrounding environment. The included second-order concepts, *Organizational Characteristics*, *External Pressure*, and *Perceptions of CSA Landscape*, collectively highlight the situational context in which firms operate. They are grouped together because they all describe enabling or constraining conditions that exist prior to, or alongside, intentional strategic reasoning for engaging in CSA.

### 4.1.1 Organization Characteristics

A number of the interviewees emphasised the importance of the specific characteristics of the company when asked why they would engage in CSA. This included the size of the firm, as multiple interviewees, particularly those from communication agencies. One interviewee described this by stating:

> *"There's always some kind of 'challenger' in every category. In this case, it was Klarna that entered and did things very differently. Their communication was very clear, but they weren't activistic." - Interviewee 4*

Another Interviewee argued that companies that are not market leaders may benefit the most from engaging in CSA, explaining:

> *"My friend who works in advertising always said that his dream client is the number three player in a market. The third largest actor in a market […], they stand to gain from attracting activist consumers. […] I mean people who strongly identify with certain values on a spectrum." - Interviewee 2*

Value alignment within the organization was also described as an important factor. Interviewees noted that a clearly articulated and widely shared set of values enables companies to reflect these values in their CSA activities. Conversely, organizational fragmentation, where different departments operate with misaligned priorities, was seen as a barrier to consistent and credible CSA engagement. These points were illustrated as follows:

> *"I believe that in our case, it's very clear what values we stand for from the beginning. […] One understands what to expect when joining the company as an employee. Our themes are also very much aligned with those values. That's*

*probably why there isn't much discussion about whether this is the right path to take." - Interviewee 6*

*"Many know what they're doing, many don't. This is a general organizational issue, that companies often work in silos, especially large ones" - Interviewee 2*

Several interviewees also stressed the importance of aligning all strategies within the organization when working with CSA, describing how these strategies must reinforce each other to avoid conflicting signals. This was expressed in the following way:

*"I'm of the opinion that business strategy, sustainability strategy, and brand strategy really need to come together as one, you can't have them floating around separately. You can't say, 'Here's our business and operations, and then we have a bit of sustainability over here, and then we sprinkle on some nice brand attributes.'" - Interviewee 1*

*"If you're going to do it [public stance-taking], then it should be part of the strategy, and that it should not happen over a single quarter, but over several years. And it goes without saying that you need to have thought it through." - Interviewee 18*

Finally, one interviewee explained the level of involvement that external communication agencies have in the development of CSA campaigns:

*"What's difficult for them is very much the internal deliberation, what are we willing to take a stand on, and what are we not? And I feel that's something we're best equipped to judge ourselves. That's hard for them to determine on our behalf. They can suggest a theme we might address based on how they perceive us, but ultimately, it's always our own values and judgment that guide what we do." - Interviewee 6*

### 4.1.2 External Pressure

Many interviewees described experiencing pressure to engage in CSA, originating from various actors and conditions in their external environment. Several highlighted customers as the primary source of such pressure. One interviewee noted that this pressure often takes the form of general expectations rather than specific demands, explaining:

> *"I would rather say that sometimes there's perhaps an expectation that one should take a stand on certain issues, but not always a clear idea of how or why it should be done." - Interviewee 4*

Another interviewee expressed a similar view, suggesting that consumers increasingly expect brands to articulate a clear position on societal issues:

> *"I believe that today's consumers expect companies and brands to stand for something. So I think brands that don't stand for anything at all are becoming less and less relevant." - Interviewee 6*

Interviewees also explained that companies need to continuously adapt their engagement in CSA based on shifts in the socio-political landscape, which influence customer attitudes and expectations. One interviewee described this dynamic as follows:

> *"And the time we're in right now, when it comes to sustainability, is one where the winds are starting to shift a bit. So it will be interesting to see what that means for Europe and Sweden as well. But ultimately, we exist for our customers. If our customers change and start valuing or demanding something different, then of course we need to stay true to our values, but also be highly attentive. Because our primary mission is to create value for our customers." - Interviewee 6*

In addition to customer expectations, interviewees mentioned that pressure can also come from partners, investors, and sponsors. This was described as particularly important for organizations seeking to attract or retain large corporate collaborators. One interviewee explained:

*"There's been a noticeable shift in the business world, sponsors and partners are setting completely different demands now. It's not like it was 15 years ago, when a company would just pour in money and be satisfied. Especially if you want to stay relevant and attract the bigger companies, you have to engage with these issues. Otherwise, they'll just go to another sports club or organization and invest their sponsorship there." - Interviewee 7*

Some interviewees also highlighted that firms face pressure from competitors and other actors in their industry to engage in CSA. As more firms publicly take positions on socio-political issues, others may feel compelled to follow in order to meet evolving industry norms or avoid appearing passive or outdated in comparison. One interviewee described how companies often become more attentive to these pressures when competitors start incorporating advocacy into their regular communication:

*"Of course, you pay attention to the competitors or even other industries. If they start to act, start to be seen, and include this in their usual communication and messages. Then I think you will wake up more." - Interviewee 16*

Interviewees further described a perceived pressure to align campaigns with cultural or calendar-based events, such as awareness days or holidays. Some framed this as an external expectation, while others described it as an internalized routine. One interviewee reflected on this practice:

*"A big part of it is setting up an annual cycle and a calendar, marking different holidays. We have International Women's Day, Easter, Ramadan, Christmas, and Black Friday. And then you make a plan saying, 'Here, we need to run tailored campaigns.' And that's something that's always been done, it just continues." - Interviewee 2*

### 4.1.3 Perceptions of CSA Landscape

Some interviewees highlighted that companies' perceptions of the broader CSA landscape influence how they approach advocacy efforts. One recurring observation was that the current

political climate appears to encourage stronger and more visible stance-taking. One interviewee argued that societal forces are increasingly normalizing such engagement, stating:

> *"We're clearly at a turning point, moving from a time when strong forces tried to counteract polarization to a moment where powerful forces are now encouraging it. So it's not unlikely that it could become more common. And that doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing, it might simply mean that it becomes more acceptable to show where you stand on an issue. It won't be as charged." - Interviewee 1*

Interviewees also noted that issues previously considered uncontroversial are now becoming increasingly politicized. One interviewee reflected on how this shift has changed how companies perceive the risk associated with certain advocacy efforts:

> *"I think we're going to see people who may start viewing campaigns as even louder, even more aggressive, and even more value-challenging. And I think my main point is that things which previously weren't points of conflict have now become exactly that." - Interviewee 2*

## 4.2 Intentional Strategic Drivers

The Intentional Strategic Drivers theme brings together second-order concepts that reflect deliberate and goal-oriented motivations for engaging in CSA. The concepts *Strategic Commercial Objectives*, *Foster Values Externally*, and *Foster Values Internally* are united by their focus on purposeful reasoning by firms, where CSA is used as a means to achieve specific outcomes.

### 4.2.1 Strategic Commercial Objectives

Most interviewees mentioned at least one objective directly linked to commercial outcomes, while some described multiple. Both company representatives and communication agencies identified strategic commercial success as a key objective of CSA campaigns. Some interviewees expressed these objectives in fundamental commercial terms, such as increasing sales or improving customer loyalty. One interviewee described this view:

*"Well, we're a commercial actor that's publicly listed and has high growth ambitions. So essentially, even though it might sound very noble to say we're values-driven, fundamentally, we're here to grow, make money, and sell" - Interviewee 6*

Another interviewee argued similarly that even companies without a history of political engagement often view CSA as a business opportunity:

*"I think it's purely business-driven reasons behind it, that companies make an assessment that engaging in these activities could make them more attractive, increase their sales, or enhance customer loyalty, or whatever goal they're aiming for. That's what I believe." - Interviewee 1*

While some interviewees pointed directly to sales and loyalty, others described commercial objectives in more general terms, such as improving brand perception or strengthening customer relationships. One interviewee explained this perspective:

*"If we can't see that it has an impact, a positive impact, on our business, or in marketing terms, increased brand liking or strengthened preferences, or if we can't generate engagement and get people to appreciate what we're doing, then we wouldn't be doing it. So there always needs to be a business rationale behind it." - Interviewee 1*

Beyond general commercial benefits, some interviewees highlighted brand differentiation as a more specific strategic goal. One interviewee described this as:

*“It can differentiate the brand and demonstrate that it has a greater purpose beyond just selling, and some brands really have that, the sense of humanity or activism, in a way” - Interviewee 4*

Beyond the strategic commercial objective of brand differentiation, several interviewees talked about how CSA can result in a change of target customer groups. One interviewee described it as:

*“You might lose some customers on one side, but you'll gain stronger relationships with other customers on the other side. It's a bit of a gamble, I'd say.” - Interviewee 5*

One interviewee also reflected on how CSA messaging can serve as a form of “washing” strategy, masking internal inconsistencies or misconduct, thereby protecting the organization from reputational risks that might undermine its commercial potential.

*"Internally, they hired a lot of young women and quite simply treated them like crap. Outwardly, it was the perfect organization, promoting women, 'women can', and a sense of community [...] So it really was a false facade." - Interviewee 11*

Finally, several interviewees described how CSA could enable brands to shift or expand their target audience. One interviewee reflected on this by noting:

*“If you take a strictly cynical view, you might conclude there's now a backlash coming from the group that previously chose us, the tech optimists who've embraced climate change as reality but don't believe innovation is the way to solve it. That’s probably the typical former Tesla customer. And cynically, you might have concluded that the people buying the most expensive cars today, those gigantic Dodge pickups costing millions, or extremely fuel-intensive vehicles, would never consider an expensive electric car. Yet they're significant car buyers. So then, you might assess, well, we need to shift target groups here. " - Interviewee 2*

### 4.2.2 Foster Values Externally

Although related to the previously discussed strategic commercial objective of differentiation, several interviewees described how CSA can also be used to shift or shape customer groups without necessarily linking it to clear commercial outcomes. This makes it a distinct strategic driver. One interviewee described how CSA is sometimes used to build value-based communities rather than targeting traditional customer segments defined solely by commercial factors:

> *"The advantage is that it results in more emotional messaging that creates engagement. People no longer see us or our communication merely as advertising for a particular product, instead, it provides meaning for many, a context they can take part in, and sparks a desire to contribute in some way." - Interviewee 6*

Some interviewees took this reasoning further by describing how CSA can be used not only to unite people who share certain values but also to distance the brand from audiences with conflicting values. One interviewee reflected on this dual effect:

> *"The downside is that we might also alienate those who disagree, or who hold different values. When a company takes a stand, you have to accept that there will always be some who appreciate it and others who don't. It's difficult to please everyone." - Interviewee 6*

Others suggested that the alienation of certain customer groups might not only be an acceptable risk but could even be a deliberate objective. One interviewee explained:

> *"I'd rather have 100 extremely loyal customers who share the same values as I do, than a thousand disloyal ones who don't really care either way." - Interviewee 5*

Similarly, one interviewee acknowledged that although they anticipated backlash before launching their CSA initiative, the organization proceeded regardless, accepting that public reactions would be mixed:

> *"But the thing is, there are certain issues out there, important societal issues, where people have different opinions about what should be done. So we did have a bit of a sense that there would be some buzz or pushback about why we are going to do this." - Interviewee 7*

Another type of driver described by some interviewees did not appear to be clearly linked to either positive or negative reactions from external audiences. Instead, it was framed as a

general responsibility toward society and the community in which the organization operates. One interviewee highlighted this perspective:

> *"We are a societal actor and manage a significant amount of capital. We have existed as a group for over 250 years, and we're an established part of society. […] so for us, engaging with societal issues comes naturally. " - Interviewee 6*

### 4.2.3 Foster Values Internally

Interestingly, although not part of the original interview guide, several interviewees made connections between CSA and its internal implications for the organization. While CSA campaigns are primarily designed to target external audiences, it became evident that many interviewees also recognized potential internal effects. One interviewee explained how employees are considered an important target group for CSA communication, describing how such initiatives can support employer branding:

> *"Many have reported that their own employees are among the most important target groups. And we're also talking about potential new hires. Working on the employer brand is incredibly important. And when it comes to the employer brand, I often think that taking responsibility for societal development becomes even more crucial. It might not matter that much when you're choosing between two products in a grocery store, but when you're deciding where to work, then it really does. It's about feeling that this company, this organization, shares values that align closely enough with your own for you to feel like you'll enjoy going to work." - Interviewee 3*

There were also examples of how organizations used CSA as a method of attracting their desired type of employees. This interviewee described their reasoning behind a campaign on equality, with the motive of attracting more female employees to their industry:

> *"If we are going to cut through the noise, we have to talk about what we think is important. We see this as a question of gender equality, it has to be both men and women building society, it can't just be men. So it's a matter of gender equality. Then we said, well, that means we're taking a stand, we are taking a stand for this issue." - Interviewee 9*

In addition to attracting and retaining employees, some interviewees described how CSA can help strengthen the internal culture of the organization. They argued that external messaging also influences employees, and that CSA, if implemented effectively, can foster a greater sense of shared responsibility. One interviewee described this as:

> *"I also believe that if it's done well, it can be important internally, it can become a carrier of internal culture." - Interviewee 4*

Finally, interviewees noted that CSA can expose internal value conflicts when initiatives are met with resistance within the organization. One interviewee explained how such resistance can surface tensions that must then be addressed:

> *"But there may have been forces internally who didn't feel that this was an issue the organization or company should take such a public stand on. Still, at some point, the decision was pushed through anyway, and the internal consequences were handled because it was considered important enough to stand by." - Interviewee 5*

## 4.3 Unintentional Influences

The Unintentional Influences theme captures the more indirect or emergent influences that shape CSA decisions, often outside of formal strategic planning. The second-order concepts *Individual Motives* and *Communication Agencies' Own Interest* are grouped here because they both highlight how CSA can be shaped by actors or dynamics that are not part of a company's centralized decision-making structure. These influences may not be explicitly planned for, but still impact the trajectory of advocacy efforts. This theme allows us to account for the less structured and more contingent elements of CSA development.

### 4.3.1 Individual Motives

When discussing the decision-making process behind CSA, several interviewees highlighted the influence of individual motives within organizations. Specifically, they pointed out that employees, particularly in leadership or key decision-making roles, may push for advocacy based on their personal values, beliefs, or agendas, which can sometimes lead to internal conflict. This was described by one interviewee as follows:

*“There’s always a power struggle, not least a struggle over values, in big companies.” - Interviewee 2*

Building on this, several interviewees emphasized that senior leaders such as founders, CEOs, or management teams often have a strong personal influence on CSA decisions. These decisions may reflect individual convictions as much as organizational strategy. This dynamic was described by two interviewees:

*“It’s important to understand that the business assessment extends beyond the consumer. It can involve a management team where the founder, CEO, and major shareholder have made it a matter of principle, ‘either we do this, or you do it without me’." - Interviewee 2*

*“I see it like this, since I’m one of the founders, I find it difficult to draw a clear line between the company’s values and my own personal values." - Interviewee 5*

Another aspect mentioned by interviewees was the high level of trust and responsibility that companies often place on communication agencies when developing CSA campaigns. One interviewee explained how, in cases where marketing managers have multiple responsibilities, agencies may be given considerable freedom to shape the communication:

*"Then there are other clients who aren’t as focused on communication specifically. The marketing manager or marketing director typically has a lot on their plate. Ideally, they’re working with all four Ps, and communication isn’t always at the top of their priority list. In those cases, if there’s an established trust, which everyone aims to build, they often find it quite convenient to leave that part to the communication agency and just have regular check-ins." - Interviewee 1*

Another interviewee elaborated that companies generally do listen to agency advice, partly because they risk becoming too close to their own brand and losing perspective on how their communication is perceived externally:

> *“They do. Not always, but they do, because what happens to them, sometimes, they breathe and live their brand and their organization. So you become a little bit blind to what you hear, what you say.” - Interviewee 13*

### 4.3.2 Communication Agencies’ Own Interest

While communication agencies often operate on behalf of clients, several interviewees emphasized that agencies themselves are not neutral actors. Agencies may have their own commercial or ideological interests that influence the development of CSA campaigns. Some interviewees described how agencies may recommend CSA to clients because it aligns with the agency’s own commercial goals, such as winning creative awards and gaining high reach and visibility, or building their reputation as a progressive and socially engaged agency. One interviewee explained:

> *"That’s their [the agency’s] job, to have their finger on the pulse and sense what can create buzz and what can break through the noise. Because it’s harder today to reach out and break through. But if you are controversial in exactly the right way, you get much greater reach. It’s as simple as that." - Interviewee 10*

Interviewees also reflected on how communication agencies may have their own ethical boundaries. Several explained that agencies might decline work that conflicts with their internal values. One interviewee described this as follows:

> *“[...] but if we had accepted such an assignment, and it then turned out that we had someone within the organization, who had in one way or another gotten themselves into debt, what would that signal?" - Interviewee 5*

Additionally, one interviewee discussed the homogeneity often found within communication agencies, particularly regarding educational background and professional experience. This homogeneity can lead to similar values and perspectives being reinforced across the agency, potentially limiting critical debate about the campaigns being developed. The interviewee explained:

*"For us, there aren't really a lot of internal conflicts, but that's because we're such a homogenous group […]. A lot of people in my industry have gone to Berghs too, and even though they often come in with completely different experiences and backgrounds, they're all exposed to the same lecturers, the same companies, the same world, so the end product they deliver ends up being quite similar. And when we then have a couple of employees from one school, let's say, that also means there isn't much conflict, because everyone agrees with each other. I think that's a big problem, especially when we talk so much about inclusion and bringing in different perspectives." - Interviewee 4*

# 5. Discussion

We will now analyze the findings of our study by applying the theoretical framework developed in section 2.5 (see Figure 1). The empirical results will be discussed through the four distinct quadrants, based on two dimensions: the primary motivation behind companies' engagement in CSA, whether values-driven or profit-driven, and the degree of external institutional pressure they experience, whether high or low. Each quadrant represents a different logic behind CSA engagement. To understand these differences, we apply Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) to interpret values-driven behavior focused on stakeholder alignment, Shareholder Theory (Friedman, 1970) to understand profit-driven behavior aimed at maximizing shareholder value, and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) to analyze the role of external pressures such as societal expectations and industry norms. We proceed by analyzing each quadrant individually, linking empirical findings to theoretical perspectives, in order to address the broader research question: *Why do companies actively engage in Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) in their marketing communications despite it being a risky strategy?*

We start by analyzing the lower right quadrant of our framework, firms operating under ***profit-driven motives with low institutional pressure (Q1)***. Theoretically, the lower right quadrant suggests a logic where firms, free from institutional pressure, engage in CSA purely as a calculated commercial decision, aiming to maximize profits by independently assessing the risks and rewards. Much of the existing CSA literature seems to implicitly adopt this view, focusing on direct financial outcomes (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Jungblut & Johnen, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2022). This reflects a shareholder-oriented perspective

(Friedman, 1970), where engagement in social issues is justified only as it enhances shareholder value. From a Shareholder Theory perspective, CSA would thus be framed strictly as an investment decision, evaluated based on its expected returns rather than its social impact. However, when comparing this theoretical assumption to our empirical findings, a critical tension emerges. Despite the widespread theoretical framing, we struggled to find strong empirical support for companies engaging in CSA from a purely profit-driven, strategically independent logic. While "Strategic Commercial Objectives" were frequently cited as motivations, they were rarely the sole or even dominant driver. Instead, commercial interests were often intertwined with values-based commitments and stakeholder expectations.

Moreover, our "Organizational Characteristics" and "Perceptions of CSA Landscape" findings indicated that companies understood the reputational risks of engaging in CSA and generally sought to minimize them by ensuring alignment with internal values and stakeholder expectations. This behavior does not fit neatly into the lower right quadrant's pure profit-maximization logic, where strategic independence would imply a more detached, opportunistic approach to advocacy. Thus, although the lower right quadrant exists conceptually and has shaped much of the academic discourse around CSA, our empirical findings suggest it is not commonly reflected in real-world practice. By critically examining the lower right quadrant, we uncover a major gap between theoretical expectations and practical realities, enriching our understanding of why firms engage in CSA despite the risks. This discrepancy also highlights the limits of a strict Shareholder Theory lens (Friedman, 1970), as firms appear increasingly responsive to reputational dynamics and legitimacy concerns that extend beyond immediate profit calculation.

Continuing the analysis from the lower right quadrant, we now turn to the lower left quadrant of our framework, companies that engage in CSA based on ***values-driven motives with low institutional pressure (Q2)***. From this perspective, firms act autonomously, unpressured by institutional forces, and are motivated not by direct profit maximization but by the desire to align CSA with their internal identity and stakeholder values. From a Stakeholder Theory perspective (Freeman, 1984), such engagement reflects a deep commitment to maintaining trust and coherence with key stakeholder groups, rather than focusing narrowly on financial returns. This approach enables them to use CSA as a tool for fostering alignment and

cohesion across their stakeholder relationships, rather than responding to societal expectations at large.

Our empirical data provides more substantial support for this quadrant than for the lower right quadrant. Findings in "Foster Values Internally," "Foster Values Externally," and "Organizational Characteristics" highlight how companies view CSA as a mechanism to clarify, express, and reinforce internal values, both within and beyond the organizational boundaries. Importantly, this engagement is not positioned as a form of moral obligation toward society in general, that kind of reasoning is more characteristic of the upper quadrants (Q3 and Q4), where institutional expectations or broader societal roles play a larger part. Rather, the logic here is instrumental, albeit not in a directly commercial sense. Here, CSA is used to cultivate internal cultural clarity, attract like-minded employees, and solidify relationships with consumers who share the company's values. This strategic use of CSA is particularly evident in cases where organizations sought to deliberately shape the composition of their customer base or employee pool. Through values-based advocacy, companies positioned themselves to appeal to stakeholders with whom they desired stronger identification, sometimes even at the cost of excluding or alienating others. Such selective stakeholder engagement aligns with Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which emphasizes that firms prioritize those stakeholder groups deemed critical to organizational survival and success. This fits with the view of CSA as a tool for stakeholder alignment, rather than for mass-market appeal or compliance with external norms. It reflects an inwardly defined strategy. CSA becomes a lever to strengthen organizational identity and build emotional resonance with strategically relevant groups.

However, even in this quadrant, the absence of institutional pressure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) complicates the rationale for engagement. Without societal expectations compelling them to act, companies that choose to engage in CSA are doing so with intentional strategic discretion. The risk of backlash or brand misalignment remains, yet these firms accept those risks because they view CSA as essential for achieving long-term cohesion between internal values and stakeholder perception. This aligns with Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), which emphasizes the importance of cultivating trust-based relationships with key stakeholder groups. Even in the absence of formal pressure, these companies act in accordance with stakeholder expectations, signaling alignment through advocacy. Importantly, this engagement is still calculated, it is not about promoting social change for its

own sake, but about creating cultural clarity and community around the brand. In summary, the lower left quadrant highlights that companies may engage in CSA as part of a strategic effort to shape internal and external stakeholder alignment around a coherent set of values. This helps explain why they might accept the risks of CSA despite lacking either external pressure or immediate financial incentives. It adds an important piece to our overall understanding of CSA engagement by showing how advocacy can be used not for societal transformation, but for internal cultural and strategic consolidation.

Now we move on to the findings related to the two upper quadrants (Q3 and Q4) of our model, which describe companies engaging in CSA from either a profit-driven or a values-driven orientation, under high degrees of institutional pressure, starting with the upper right quadrant: ***profit-driven with high institutional pressure (Q3)***. In this quadrant, the primary approach is CSA as a means to achieve strategic commercial goals such as brand differentiation, customer acquisition, and market expansion, while simultaneously responding to strong institutional pressures. There was also strong representation for this perspective in our findings. Findings under "Strategic Commercial Objectives" show that many organizations see CSA not as a moral obligation, but as a tool to strengthen brand loyalty, target emerging customer segments, and signal relevance in competitive markets. Shareholder Theory (Friedman, 1970) provides the primary explanation for this orientation. According to this view, managers are obligated to maximize shareholder value and will only engage in social or political advocacy when it is expected to deliver long-term financial benefits. CSA is thus interpreted as a branding strategy, aimed at enhancing firm reputation, customer engagement, or market position, rather than an expression of intrinsic corporate values.

However, Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) also plays a critical role. Findings under "External Pressure" and "Perceptions of the CSA Landscape" illustrate that companies operate in environments where consumers, investors, and business partners expect social advocacy. Coercive pressures from investors, normative pressures from evolving consumer expectations, and mimetic pressures to follow industry peers, seem to drive firms to engage in CSA even if it is not organically aligned with their internal priorities. Additionally, findings under "Communication Agencies' Own Interest" highlight that agencies sometimes promote CSA initiatives, not solely based on organizational strategy, but based on their own interest in pursuing award-winning or socially visible campaigns. This external shaping of CSA strategies introduces an additional layer of institutional influence, where communication

agencies act as normative carriers of what is considered "appropriate" branding behavior (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Firms may therefore adopt CSA campaigns under the dual influence of both direct external pressures and subtle communication agency biases, further blurring the boundary between strategic calculation and externally constructed legitimacy norms. This external shaping can subtly push profit-driven companies toward advocacy themes that carry reputational risks if stakeholders perceive a misalignment with corporate behavior.

Moreover, “Individual Motives”, also captured under “Unintentional Influences”, add yet another layer of complexity. Even within commercially motivated firms, individuals, especially those in marketing or leadership roles, may personally advocate for CSA initiatives based on their own social or ethical values. This dynamic can be understood through the lens of agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976), which highlights how managers may sometimes pursue actions that are misaligned with strict shareholder value maximization. Furthermore, drawing on the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988), individuals within firms can act as change agents who promote new practices or values, even if these initiatives initially sit outside the organization's formal strategic logic. Such personal initiatives may create internal tensions between commercial strategies and social convictions, subtly influencing the company's approach to CSA. This reinforces the initial concern, as discussed in Key Actors in Campaign Development (section 2.1.2), namely that the involvement of multiple actors with varying motives and perspectives in the development of CSA campaigns entails complexities and can thus result in unintended outcomes.

The final quadrant, ***values-driven with high institutional pressure (Q4)***, is characterized by companies engaging in CSA as a genuine extension of their internal values and mission, while still responding to significant external pressures to act. This perspective was strongly reflected in our empirical findings. Insights under “Organizational Characteristics” and “Foster Values Internally” reveal that these organizations display a strong alignment between their business strategies, brand positioning, and internal values, suggesting that CSA is rooted in a stakeholder-oriented logic (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) explains this behavior as firms striving to satisfy a broader set of stakeholders, not only shareholders but also employees, customers, communities, and regulators, to ensure long-term legitimacy and resilience. Companies perceive CSA as essential for maintaining trust, strengthening internal cohesion, and fulfilling their perceived social responsibility.

Nevertheless, Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) remains crucial even for values-driven firms. Under "External Pressure" and "Perceptions of the CSA Landscape", the findings show that consumer expectations, investor demands, and societal shifts make advocacy not just desirable but necessary for preserving legitimacy. Coercive pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) from capital providers and normative pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) from shifting public opinion push even authentic firms toward more visible and strategic expressions of their values.

The findings under "Communication Agencies' Own Interest" highlight that communication agencies also play a role for values-driven firms, as discussed in the previous quadrant. Even organizations deeply committed to certain causes must navigate external interpretations shaped by agencies, ensuring that their messaging resonates externally without diluting internal integrity. The influence of agencies here emphasizes how even values-driven CSA is subject to a broader field of external legitimacy demands (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In addition, our findings show that agencies themselves sometimes expressed that their own internal values influence their decision-making when developing campaigns. This raises the risk of a value-based conflict, where the organization's intended message may be diluted or reshaped by the agency's values, potentially leading to misalignment between the company's original intentions and the final public messaging.

# 6. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore a central paradox in contemporary marketing: *Why do companies actively engage in Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) in their marketing campaigns, despite it being a risky strategy?* By combining Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), Shareholder Theory (Friedman, 1970), and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), and applying them through an integrative framework, this study has provided a nuanced understanding of the drivers that underlie CSA engagement.

The findings show that the decision to engage in CSA is rarely driven by a single theoretical rationale or strategic objective. Rather, companies operate in a complex landscape where internal values, commercial objectives, and institutional pressures intersect. Through the model introduced in this thesis, we demonstrate that companies may adopt CSA for various

reasons: to strengthen internal cultural alignment, to appeal to values-based consumer segments, to comply with stakeholder and investor expectations, or to build brand differentiation in saturated markets. Our results suggest that purely profit-motivated CSA, especially under conditions of low institutional pressure, is rare in practice. Even when commercial objectives are central, they tend to be embedded within broader legitimacy concerns and stakeholder considerations. At the same time, companies that appear values-driven often act strategically, leveraging CSA to foster emotional resonance with their audiences or to attract like-minded consumers and employees. These hybrid motivations reveal a level of strategic ambiguity, where firms must simultaneously communicate authenticity and pragmatism to multiple stakeholders.

Crucially, Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) proved central to understanding these dynamics. Many of the companies in our study were not simply reacting to external demands, but rather internalizing societal norms, mimicking peer behavior, or adapting to the expectations of key stakeholders like consumers, investors, and communication agencies. This shows how legitimacy concerns are embedded in both overt strategy and subtle organizational routines, often shaping CSA decisions even when explicit pressure is absent. Moreover, the presence of unintentional influences, including individual motivations and the normative role of communication agencies, revealed that CSA is not always the outcome of deliberate planning. Instead, it may emerge from interpersonal dynamics, internal advocacy, or creative framing by external partners, further complicating the idea that CSA is a rational, top-down strategy.

In light of this, the answer to our research question cannot be reduced to a single logic. Companies engage in CSA not because they are acting irrationally or ignoring its risks, but because it serves as a multi-dimensional tool: to express organizational identity, manage stakeholder expectations, respond to institutional demands, and at times pursue competitive advantage. While the risks of polarization and backlash are real, the perceived benefits of CSA might be greater than what is typically highlighted within the current CSA discourse.

## 6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to the theoretical understanding of Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) by interrogating and enriching the application of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984),

Shareholder Theory (Friedman, 1970), and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in the context of socially and politically charged marketing strategies. By situating CSA within an integrative framework (see Figure 1) that considers both internal motivation and external institutional pressure, we offer a more dynamic view of corporate behavior than what is commonly assumed in these individual theories.

We deepen the application of Stakeholder Theory by illustrating that stakeholder alignment is not merely about inclusion, but also about selective identity-building. Rather than giving all stakeholders equal importance (Freeman, 1984), several companies in our study deliberately used CSA to attract value-aligned consumers and employees, sometimes even at the cost of alienating others. This adds nuance to existing stakeholder literature by revealing how CSA can function as a form of boundary-setting, not just relationship-building. In doing so, our findings extend Stakeholder Theory to account for strategic stakeholder differentiation, where firms do not attempt to please all, but instead cultivate depth and cohesion with key audiences through values-based messaging.

Moreover, we contribute to Institutional Theory by demonstrating how CSA reflects both compliance with and construction of institutional norms. While our findings confirmed the influence of coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), they also revealed how actors such as communication agencies and individual managers actively shape what is considered legitimate advocacy. This implies that institutional conformity is not simply reactive, rather, it can be co-created and strategically steered.

## 6.2 Managerial Implications

This thesis provides several important implications for managers tasked with navigating the increasingly complex and high-stakes domain of CSA. While CSA has often been treated as either a reputational risk or a branding opportunity, our findings suggest that this oversimplifies the strategic realities companies face. Instead, we argue that CSA requires a deep and deliberate approach, one rooted in organizational self-awareness, strategic alignment, and stakeholder consideration.

A central insight emerging from our study is the importance of establishing a clear and credible rationale for engaging in CSA. Whether motivated by values, profit, or a

combination of both, managers must ensure that the organization's internal justification for advocacy is not only well-defined but also meaningfully communicated. A lack of clarity in motivation increases the risk of being perceived as opportunistic or insincere. Our findings show that stakeholders, particularly consumers and employees, scrutinize not just the causes a company supports, but the consistency between advocacy and the company's identity. For this reason, CSA must not be treated as an isolated campaign, but rather as a strategic extension of the firm's values, culture, and long-term positioning. Managers must therefore move beyond treating CSA as a short-term, reactive branding exercise. CSA that lives only in the marketing department is vulnerable to being perceived as inauthentic, while CSA that is embedded throughout the whole organization has the potential to drive real strategic value.

Moreover, our findings challenge the assumption that CSA should always aim for broad consensus or public approval. In many of the cases we examined, firms used CSA to deliberately position themselves with particular stakeholder groups, such as values-aligned consumers or like-minded employees, even at the risk of alienating others. In this sense, CSA becomes not a tool for appeasement, but a mechanism for stakeholder selection and identity reinforcement. Managers should therefore recognize that not all backlash is strategically harmful. In some contexts, taking a stand may strengthen trust and cohesion among core stakeholders, even as it provokes disapproval from peripheral audiences.

The role of internal and external actors also emerged as a crucial dynamic in shaping CSA outcomes. Communication agencies and individual employees can all significantly influence the development and direction of advocacy efforts. This highlights the need for managers to anticipate and manage the multiple voices involved in CSA, rather than assuming top-down control is sufficient. In practice, CSA is often the result of distributed decision-making, shaped by the interpretations, values, and incentives of various actors. Ensuring alignment among these groups is essential for maintaining strategic coherence and reputational consistency.

## 6.3 Limitations

While this study provides meaningful insights into how companies engage with CSA, it is not without limitations. These limitations are important to acknowledge, as they shape the scope and interpretation of our findings. First, the sample size and cultural context of the study limit

the generalizability of our conclusions. Our empirical material is based on interviews conducted primarily within a Swedish context. Sweden, as part of the Nordic region, is characterized by a high degree of institutional trust, stakeholder orientation, and relatively progressive public discourse (OECD, 2024; Thomsen, 2016). These contextual features likely influence how CSA is perceived and practiced. As such, our findings may not fully translate to firms operating in more polarized, market-driven, or culturally distinct environments. We do not claim statistical representativeness, but rather aim to provide theoretically informed insights grounded in our specific context.

Second, several of our interviewees displayed internal contradictions or speculative reasoning when speaking about CSA. In some cases, participants spoke about projects they were not directly involved in, or about CSA in more general terms, rather than drawing from personal experience. This introduces a level of interpretive uncertainty, as we were not embedded within the organizations ourselves and therefore could not directly observe internal decision-making processes. These accounts reflect subjective interpretations rather than objective facts, and we acknowledge that participants' narratives may have been shaped by certain biases, such as self-censoring and giving socially desirable accounts (Bell et al., 2022). CSA is still an emerging practice in the Swedish business landscape, as highlighted by several of our interviewees and based on our observations, and few companies have carried out fully developed, public-facing CSA campaigns. As a result, several of our interviews addressed hypothetical considerations or organizational debates rather than concrete cases of implementation. This speculative orientation provides insight into how firms are currently grappling with CSA, but it also limits the extent to which we can draw conclusions about actual outcomes, stakeholder reactions, or long-term effects.

Third, our decision to analyze CSA using Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), Shareholder Theory (Friedman, 1970), and Institutional Theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) enabled a structured and multifaceted view of corporate motivation and constraint. However, we recognize that this theoretical framing may have also simplified the complexity of the phenomenon. In addition to this, we also acknowledge that our quadrant model (see Figure 1), while analytically useful, imposes a structural logic onto a phenomenon that is often fluid, contested, and context-dependent.

## 6.4 Future Research

Our study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of CSA by proposing an integrative quadrant model (see Figure 1) that distinguishes between internal motivations (values- vs. profit-driven) and the degree of external institutional pressure firms face. While this framework has proven analytically fruitful, it also raises several questions and opportunities for further research that future scholars could explore.

First of all, there is room to explore how intra-organizational dynamics, such as power asymmetries, internal dissent, or organizational silos, shape the development and execution of CSA-campaigns. Our findings hint at the influence of individual actors and interdepartmental alignment, but we did not investigate these dynamics systematically. Future studies could draw from organizational behavior to better understand how internal politics, cultural alignment, or leadership structures condition CSA outcomes. Our cross-sectional study, while not generalizable to all contexts, provides valuable insights into the broader motivations and pressures driving CSA at an organizational level. To gain a more detailed understanding of the intra-organizational dynamics behind these decisions, future research could adopt a case study approach with individuals as the primary unit of analysis. Additionally, it could be valuable to conduct an ethnographic study using direct observations rather than interviews, as this would allow researchers to capture real-time behaviors and negotiations, providing deeper insights into how CSA decisions are actually made in practice, beyond what participants are able or willing to articulate retrospectively.

Comparative research across different institutional environments also holds promise. Our sample is grounded in the Swedish business context, where stakeholder capitalism is more embedded and social trust is relatively high (OECD, 2024; Thomsen, 2016). Similar studies conducted in more polarized or market-oriented contexts, for example, the United States (DeJong, 2023; Turner-Zwinkels et al., 2025), could illuminate how institutional logics, stakeholder expectations, and advocacy risks vary across geographies. This would help assess the generalizability of our findings and identify how context shapes CSA strategies.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Use of AI

During the course of this thesis, we made limited and carefully considered use of AI tools to support various stages of the research process. These tools were used to assist with practical and exploratory tasks. At the outset of the project, we used Consensus, an AI-powered research tool, to help us identify and explore earlier academic studies related to our topic. This helped guide our initial literature search, particularly in mapping out relevant themes within the fields of Corporate Social Advocacy and strategic communication. However, all selected sources were critically evaluated and integrated manually, and our theoretical framework was developed through independent review and synthesis of the literature.

To support the transcription process for our interviews, we used Turboscribe, an AI-based transcription tool. While this significantly sped up the conversion of audio recordings into text, we carefully reviewed and edited each transcript to ensure accuracy, correct any misinterpretations, and preserve the integrity of the participants' responses. We also used ChatGPT, mainly to brainstorm ideas, as well as in specific moments of the writing process, to explore different ways of framing certain arguments, and test how theoretical discussions might be structured more clearly. In later stages, we occasionally used it to rephrase isolated sentences for clarity or improve the academic tone of specific parts. Additionally, we used the tool to simulate critiques and counter arguments, which helped us think more critically about the limitations and assumptions in our work.

While AI tools were helpful in specific parts of the process, we remained mindful of their limitations. The main risks we identified included factual inaccuracies and the potential for over-reliance. To mitigate this, all AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, revised, and used only to support, not replace, our own analysis and writing. Despite these limitations, the use of AI tools provided practical value by streamlining routine tasks and offering new ways to frame and reflect on our arguments.

## Appendix B: List of Interviewees

| Interviewee ID | Type of Organization | Role | Interview Length |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Communication Agency | Brand and Communications Strategist | 51 Minutes |
| 2 | Communication Agency | Founder and Communications Strategist | 59 Minutes |
| 3 | Communication Agency | Founder and CEO | 29 Minutes |
| 4 | Communication Agency | Planner | 32 Minutes |
| 5 | Communication Agency | Founder and Brand Strategist | 35 Minutes |
| 6 | For-Profit Organization | CMO | 27 Minutes |
| 7 | For-Profit Organization | Head of Social Responsibility | 26 Minutes |
| 8 | For-Profit Organization | Founder and CEO | 30 Minutes |
| 9 | For-Profit Organization | CMO | 31 Minutes |
| 10 | For-Profit Organization | Board Professional | 30 Minutes |
| 11 | For-Profit Organization | Marketing Manager | 24 Minutes |
| 12 | For-Profit Organization | Founder and CEO | 39 Minutes |
| 13 | Communication Agency | Marketing Director | 34 Minutes |
| 14 | Communication Agency | Creative Director | 24 Minutes |
| 15 | For-Profit Organization | CEO | 35 Minutes |
| 16 | For-Profit Organization | CMO | 38 Minutes |
| 17 | Communication Agency | Art Director | 32 Minutes |
| 18 | For-Profit Organization | CMO | 40 Minutes |

# Appendix C: Interview Guide

**Interview Guide: Final Version**

*Introduction*

- Presentation of authors, the study, and concepts (especially CSA).
- Inform and get consent from the interviewee to record.
- Ensure that they will remain anonymous and that their data will be handled in accordance with GDPR.

*Background*

- Can you briefly describe your role and area of responsibility within the organization?

*Perceived occurrence and effect of CSA*

- Do you feel that your organization engages in CSA?
- How do you generally perceive that consumers react when organizations engage publicly in social or political issues?

*Overall motivations*

- What advantages and disadvantages do you see with organizations engaging publicly in social or political issues?
- How do you evaluate the success of a CSA campaign?
- How important is it for you that public stances on social or political issues are genuine?

*Decision-making process*

- Are there internal conflicts or discussions in connection with decisions about CSA? If so, how are these handled?
- Do you experience pressure within your industry to conduct CSA campaigns?
- Have stakeholders, such as customers, employees, and investors, influenced your decision to take a stand on certain issues?
- Do you feel that it is more often communication agencies or companies themselves that advocate for this type of campaign?

*End comments*

- Ask if the interviewee wants to add anything.
- Thank them for their participation.