

## Workplace Communication IV

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To cite this article: Jantunen, S. & Hirsto, H. (2021). Acting for Change – A Communicational Perspective to Corporate Activism. In: H. Katjamäki, M. Enell-Nilsson, H. Kauppinen-Räisänen, L. Kääntä & H. Salovaara. Workplace Communication IV. Vaasa: VAKKI Publications 13. 63–80. Available at: <https://vakki.net/index.php/2021/12/21/workplace-communication-iv/>. ISBN 978-952-69732-0-3.

### Acting for Change – A Communicational Perspective to Corporate Activism

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Business corporations are increasingly engaging in social and political issues through public actions and statements that have been described as corporate activism. In this paper, our aim is to deepen the understanding of corporate activism from a communicational perspective. We approach corporate activism as a phenomenon at the intersection of the social-political orientation of corporations and the public orientation of marketing communication. Through combining insights from both perspectives, we arrive at a three-dimensional definition of corporate activism as public action that 1) entails a substantial act or change in behavior with impact beyond the company, 2) fuels attention in contemporary media, and 3) is discursively connected to corporate strategy. In the empirical part, we illustrate how these dimensions are enacted in selected cases of Finnish companies that communicate like activists, and reflected upon in consumers' assessment of the cases.

Keywords: corporate activism, corporate social responsibility, online attention economy, integrated marketing communication

## 1 Introduction

Business corporations are increasingly engaging in public debates through public actions and statements related to topical social issues in a way that can be described as corporate activism. In the US, companies like Nike and Patagonia have led the way through their public actions related to racial oppression and climate crisis. Corporate activism has started to emerge also in Finland, where, for instance, the textile company Finlayson has gained attention for its socially oriented campaigns (Oikkonen & Quarshie 2019).

Activism and advocacy take many forms, some of which are more private or back-stage while others are more public and front-stage (Wettstein & Baur 2016; Gulbrandsen et al. 2020). In this paper, we focus on the type of activism that relies on publicity. Our aim is to deepen understanding of corporate activism as a communicational phenomenon through identifying and elaborating on its key communicational dimensions relating to social change, media visibility, and corporate strategy. Our approach combines elements from different fields or research addressing the social and political orientation of business corporations on the one hand, and the public orientation of marketing communication on the other.

We start by discussing how the neighboring concepts of corporate social responsibility, corporate advocacy, and social marketing factor into and differ from our understanding of corporate activism. After that, we combine insights from integrated marketing communication with the notion of news values and their applications to social media. Drawing on these theoretical premises, we outline a three-dimensional communication-centred definition of corporate activism. Against this framework, we study a selection of cases where Finnish companies act in the way of activists, analysing public material related to these actions as well as consumers' assessments of them. The analysis illustrates and specifies how the three dimensions of corporate activism are enacted in a variety of campaigns.

## 2 The Social-Political Orientation of Corporations

The ways in which business corporations engage in social and political issues have gained considerable attention in many research fields. Corporate social responsibility, corporate social/political advocacy, and social marketing are some of the concepts used in organization, public relations and marketing studies to address the topic. While these concepts cover a wide range of the socially and politically oriented activities of companies, they have been found insufficient to account for the specificity and central features of some of the recent, high-profile corporate actions. A nascent stream of studies using the concept of corporate activism has started to take stock on this specificity (see, e.g., Eilert & Cherup 2020, Gulbrandsen et al. 2020). Eilert and Cherup (2020: 461), for example, propose a multifaceted definition of corporate activism as "a company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment".

Despite the growing interest and recent contributions to the field, we argue that the concept of corporate activism warrants further elaboration especially from a communication studies perspective. Activism, according to dictionary definitions, refers to the “use of direct and noticeable action to achieve a result, usually a political or social one” (Cambridge Dictionary 2020), or to “policy or action of using vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change” (Oxford Dictionary 2020). Drawing inspiration from these definitions, our view is that both the “noticeable” and “vigorous” dimensions, which connect closely to the communicative nature of activism, and the “direct” and “action” dimensions, which point to something tangible or substantial as essential to activism, are not sufficiently taken into account in discussions on corporate activism. In this section, we therefore review and compare the different concepts related to the social and political orientation of corporations, focusing on what they can contribute and how they might be complemented when working towards a communicative understanding of corporate activism. The approaches we discuss are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Approaches to corporate social/political engagement

	Description / definition	Examples and forms	Focus of influence
CSR	“companies integrat[ing] social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (EC 2001)	Sustainability reporting and standards, stakeholder analysis, Business-NGO partnerships	Organizational processes, stakeholder relations
Corporate political / social advocacy	Taking public stances on controversial social-political issues (Dodd & Supa 2014: 1)	Nike featuring Colin Kaepernick in a high-profile marketing campaign in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement (Hoffmann et al. 2020)	Attitudes, cultural values, public discussion
Social marketing	Using the tools of (commercial) marketing to influence individual behavior and societal structure for the benefit of the individual and society (Andreasen 1994: 110)	Anti-smoking campaigns; promotion of exercising; increasing availability of condoms (Basil 2019)	Individual (consumer) behavior and choices
Corporate activism	“A company’s willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment” (Eilert & Cherup 2020: 461)	Frida Baby taking a stance on reproductive health issues through developing products for postpartum recovery and a marketing program focusing on “demystifying” the issue (Eilert & Cherup 2020)	Public discussion on topical issues; consumption practices, organizational practices

First, in accordance with Gulbrandsen et al. (2020), we regard corporate activism as an extension of corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR may be understood broadly as a disposition that business companies are responsible for the social, economic, and environmental impacts of their operations (see, e.g. Purvis et al. 2019), and a set of institutionalized practices through which such responsibility is enacted – i.e. a company response to its societal obligations (Eilert & Cherup 2020: 462). CSR entails the idea of sustained commitment and accountability to a variety of stakeholders (see, e.g., Allen & Craig 2016). Advocacy, social marketing, and activism, in turn, may be regarded as potential ways for companies to enact particular aspects of social responsibility and to move beyond them into the domain of political activity (Gulbrandsen et al. 2020).

The concepts of corporate social advocacy (Dodd & Supa 2014) and corporate political advocacy (Ciszek & Logan 2018) may be loosely defined as an organization publicly taking a stance on a controversial social or political issue. In order to public advocacy to be efficient in contributing to social change, it needs to be perceived as consistent, plausible and authentic (Wettstein & Baur 2016: 211). Ideally, advocacy means taking a public position in a truly controversial issue in a way that entails the risk of alienating some stakeholders (Dodd & Supa 2014: 5). From this perspective, advocacy cannot rest solely on the (sometimes contradictory) demands of stakeholders and should preferably be based on the organization's core values (Wettstein & Baur 2016: 206). However, according to Hoffmann et al. (2020: 158), actions regarded as political advocacy in fact often draw upon so-called epideictic rhetoric that aims to please a wide array of stakeholders. In genuinely controversial issues, corporations may in effect resort to ambiguous messages that make them seem courageous and "activist" for specific target groups while simultaneously avoiding to alienate other stakeholders (Hoffmann et al. 2020: 164). A difference often made between corporate advocacy and CSR is the way in which the company's social orientation is connected to its business activities. While CSR focuses on ensuring the responsibility of the core business, advocacy is typically defined as taking a stance on important social issues regardless of their connection with – and therefore often unrelated to – the core business or even the industry in which the company operates (Burbano, 2019).

An aspect of activism that is, in our view, typically sidelined in both CSR and advocacy literature, is the mobilization of consumers for social change. The latter is, to some extent, the focus of social marketing, which may be loosely defined as using the tools of (commercial) marketing ethically to influence individual behavior and societal structure for the benefit of the individual and society (Andreasen 1994: 110). Importantly, such marketing tools include not only promotional campaigns but also practices of pricing and availability (Basil 2019). Hence, whereas advocacy, for instance, focuses on corporate voice, social marketing focuses on influencing individual choices. For our definition of corporate activism, this perspective complements the advocacy angle through incorporating consumers as central actors who are invited to participate in activism.

Finally, brand activism as a concept in marketing literature comes very close to corporate activism, and many researchers use them synonymously. According to Vredenburg et al. (2020: 447–448), brand activism is purpose and value driven, addresses controversial sociopolitical issues, and does this through both messaging and tangible practice. Tangible action extends activism "beyond mere advocacy/messaging" (Vredenburg et al. 2020: 448) and may include, for example, modifications of organizational practices or changes to products and services (Moorman 2020). A further basis of brand activism is the notion that big brands are significant sources of cultural power and have the responsibility to put this power in use for the "common good" (e.g. Manfredi-Sánchez 2019: 351; Moorman 2020). In this paper, we choose to use the term corporate activism instead of brand activism, as we see that it opens the scope of activism also to corporations that are not strongly brand-driven, highlights corporations as institutional actors, and frames activism as strategic organizational activity that relies on commitment by corporate management.

While CSR addresses social impacts on a broad scale and particularly from a stakeholder relations perspective, corporate activism is often enacted as a response to particular, often topical and controversial, social issues (Eilert & Cherup 2020: 462). Furthermore, while CSR practices are typically seen as intimately linked with the core business of a company, and advocacy practices as unrelated to it, definitions of corporate activism vary in this regard. Burbano (2021) defines corporate activism as being unrelated to core business. In contrast, Eilert and Cherup (2020) include in their analysis a great variety of cases, where activism is sometimes closely connected to the company's area of business. In this paper, we adopt the view that activism may or may not be thematically linked to the business of the company; however, as corporate activism by definition aims to bring about social change, merely changing operational practices within the company does not qualify as "activism" if it is not communicated in a way that aims to have an impact beyond the company. We also draw on the suggestion of Wettstein and Baur (2016: 206) to shift the perspective to how responsibility practices are related to the core values rather than core business activities of the company. In the empirical part, we draw on these ideas and focus attention on whether and how corporations and consumers discursively connect corporate activism to the core business, corporate strategy or values of the company.

From these research traditions and definitions, we can extract many elements that characterize corporate activism: willingness to drive change; acting on this willingness through tangible action and voicing a stance; and a connection to organizational purpose and values. In our view, however, existing approaches pay limited attention to the question of how these facets of activism are realized in the contemporary public arenas and the media environment in which companies operate – an aspect we will turn to next.

### 3 The Public Orientation of Organizational Communication

The rise of corporate activism takes place in a very specific cultural context, where sensitivity to public expectations is crucial. Corporations and consumers operate in an increasingly pluralist media environment, where legacy and social media are intertwined in organizing social issues (Vos 2018). In this section, we discuss two aspects of this environment: shifting consumer expectations and the attention criteria of social media.

#### 3.1 Meeting the Shifting Consumer Expectations

Consumers, in contemporary society, are increasingly aware of the social impacts of business, and make choices based on aligning their personal values with the values they associate with companies or brands. In addition, they expect brands to take a stance on sociopolitical issues (Vredenburg et al. 2020). In Finland, a survey by the consulting company Milton (Havu & Talvela 2017) shows that the majority of consumers expect corporations to participate in public discussion. Younger consumers, in particular, expect corporations to make an effort to advance social change.

The shifting consumer expectations are reflected in the blurring boundaries between CSR and marketing communication. Communicating about responsibility is no longer

limited to official responsibility reporting but takes place in multiple platforms, some of which are specifically targeted at consumers and the public. From the company perspective, integrated marketing communication is one way of taking stock of the plurality of consumer expectations and communication platforms. It refers to multichannel communication where different forms of marketing communication such as advertising, company websites, and social media publications are aligned to form a coherent and functional whole (Batra & Keller 2016: 123–124; Finne & Grönroos 2015: 445–446). In essence, then, integrated marketing communication aims to respond to the increasingly fragmented ways in which consumers encounter brands and marketing communication as they navigate the contemporary mediascape. Hence, it may be seen as a way to connect the purpose of the company or brand with the preconditions and potential of what may be called online attention economy (see, e.g. Marshall 2021).

### 3.2 Earning Attention in the Media

Corporate activism as essentially public activity depends on visibility. In marketing communication, media visibility has been grouped into owned, paid, and earned media (Stephen & Galak 2012). Paid media means activities where the corporation buys media space for its content such as advertisements, while owned media refers to publications in the corporations' own channels. Earned media, finally, refers to content and visibility that is not produced by the company but created and distributed by external parties such as consumers, legacy media, or WOM (Word of Mouth). Whereas corporations have a high degree of control over the first two forms, earned media depends on the capability of the company to arouse interest among diverse publics.

Visibility in journalistic media has traditionally been conceptualized in terms of news values (or news criteria). Many researchers have identified unexpectedness, currency, and proximity as central news values (see, e.g., McQuail 2000: 278–282, Arvidson 1995: 15). While legacy media still play an important role in setting the public agenda and organizing flows of attention, the role of social media in influencing the public agenda is growing (Vos 2018). In social media and online attention economy (Marshall 2021), traditional news values are rearticulated as what we call "attention criteria." Araujo et al. (2020), for example, have appropriated the concept of news media in a social media context, and found that social impact, proximity, facticity as well as the as well as the engagement of influential actors explain the intensity of online activity around organization-related topics.

At best, activist actions can create social media hype, defined by Pang (2013) as user-generated discussion that is triggered by a key event, creates heightened interest among other users, and is maintained by the self-reinforcing dynamic of social media. However, it has also been shown that attention in social media is not easily gained and that it often diminishes rapidly in the so-called issue attention cycle (Vos 2018). In order to arouse and maintain interest, companies' social media communication needs to both express and arouse emotions (Lee et al. 2018: 31–34), and offer content that people can identify with and attach to (Jenkins et al. 2013: 13).

### 3.3 A Communication-centered Definition of Corporate Activism

Drawing on the theoretical insights discussed above, we regard corporate activism as a specific form of social and political engagement at the intersection of the social-political orientation of CSR and the public orientation of marketing communication. From this starting point, we propose a three-dimensional, communication-centered definition on corporate activism as corporations advancing social change through public actions that 1) entail a substantial act or change in behavior with impact beyond the company, 2) fuel attention in contemporary media, and 3) are discursively connected to corporate strategy. What we mean by communication-centered is that we consider corporate activism as a dynamic entanglement of talk and action, where words and tangible action are co-constitutive and form a functional whole (see Schoeneborn et al. 2020; Gulbrandsen et al. 2020). In the next section, we elaborate on the definition and the communicational perspective through empirical examples.

## 4 Finnish Cases of Corporate Activism

To illustrate and further flesh out the three-dimensional definition of corporate activism, we analysed a selection of recent corporate activism cases in Finland and conducted a consumer survey. Our research questions were:

1. How are the three dimensions of corporate activism enacted by the case companies?
  - What sorts of substantial acts or changes in behaviour underlie cases of activism?
  - How do the acts meet the news/attention criteria and gain visibility in the media?
  - Are the acts discursively connected to corporate strategy or values, and how?
2. How do consumers perceive the three dimensions of corporate activism?
  - How do consumers assess the substantial acts or changes in behaviour?
  - How do consumers assess the relation between activism and media visibility?
  - How do consumers perceive the link between activism and corporate strategy?

We conducted a comprehensive online search and drew on our cultural knowledge and observations to seek out recent cases where corporations have taken a stand or included social or political issues in their public communication. We collected and read materials connected to such actions, including paid advertisements, company websites, media accounts, and press releases. When selecting the cases, we explored both the more evident cases of corporate activism (where companies have “taken a stand”) and cases where companies engage in more traditional social marketing or publicly oriented CSR communication. We consider also the latter as corporate activism if the companies seem to act as forerunners in their industry, or to create pressure for broader change in the field. Through assessing corporate public actions against these criteria, we arrived at our dataset of 11 cases, presented in the Appendix.

Our analysis comprises two parts. First, we studied a variety of corporate and media texts representing each of the selected cases, examining how companies communicated activist actions and behaviour, and how their campaigns gained visibility in the media. In this phase, we looked at the campaigns as a whole, making observations about their realization across different media. Second, we conducted a consumer survey to gain an understanding of how these acts, and the phenomenon of corporate activism more broadly, were assessed by consumers. The key texts mentioned in Appendix played a central role in the survey, as they were presented to the respondents as examples to illustrate corporate activism.

#### 4.1 Enacting the Dimensions of Corporate Activism

In the first phase of the analysis, we studied the selected cases, their key texts and contextual material to find similarities and differences in how corporations enacted the three dimensions of activism. This content analysis combined theory-driven and data-driven phases, as described in more detail under each section.

##### 4.1.1 A Substantial Act or Change in Behavior

Through reading the activism cases in light of the theoretical framework, it can be perceived that a substantial act or change in behavior is always at the heart of corporate activism. Substantial in this context refers to something that is not coincidental or sporadic but a decision or commitment that is purposefully enacted in various forms and through different channels or campaigns. To gain a deeper view into this central element of activism, we conducted a data-driven content analysis to identify the thematic foci as well as the type and range of impact that the campaigns claim to seek. As a result, we formed three sub-categories, i.e. types of substantial acts, which differ in terms of whether they emphasize the long-term duration of change, a specific social issue, or support for a marginalized or oppressed group.

Driving durable change refers to the efforts of companies to bring about permanent or long-lasting change in society or the company's operations. Among our empirical cases, Hesburger, through its "2030 Half Meatless" campaign, is striving for change by pursuing high sales growth for its vegetarian products while at the same time influencing consumer behavior and thereby contributing to long-term change in the fast-food industry. The way in which the long-term goal is publicly communicated creates both a commitment for the company and pressure for other actors in the field. Finlayson, in turn, aims to drive social change through a citizen initiative to create legislation against girls' genital mutilation. Hakola's "counterblow" to Black Friday, in which the company cut the amount of plastic waste instead of prices, drives durable change in the company's own operations but also works to set an example. The pursuit of social change can therefore occur on different levels. In our data, Finlayson sought change on the broadest level by targeting legislation.

Raising awareness of a social problem was the most common of the three sub-categories in our material. Its aim is to place a topic or issue on the public agenda, and at the



same time to position the company as a speaker for the topic. Six out of the eleven actions in the material sought to highlight a social problem. Each of these campaigns or actions included an act or message aimed at making some social fault more transparent. For example, Finlayson highlighted the gender pay gap in its Woman's Euro campaign, and Fazer, through the #smallpieceoflove campaign, drew attention to hate speech and aggressive discussion culture in the internet.

Supporting a marginalized or oppressed group is a widely used substantial act that underlies several actions or statements in our data. It is closely related to the notion of advocacy, because expressing support often means taking a side in a public controversy. As discussed by Hoffman et al. (2020), the pitfall of side-taking is that public stances often seek to minimize polarization by aligning with opinions that already enjoy broad support. In our material, Gay Joe represents the Pride movement that has become increasingly accepted and can hardly be considered a highly controversial issue in the Finnish context. By contrast, the open letter by Helsingin Sanomat to the president of Chechnya, which also expresses support for LGBT+ minorities, addresses an issue that is truly controversial in Chechnya, but publishing it in a Finnish media outlet is likely to reduce the controversial effect. Expressing support for oppressed groups has become a popular way for companies to take part in the social debate. However, in order to count as corporate activism according to our definition, verbal expressions of support need to rely on concrete actions or change in behavior.

#### 4.1.2 Communicating the Act in Ways that Fuel Attention in the Media

In analysing the ways in which activism seeks to fuel attention in the media, we read each key text and annotated whether it included some of the news or attention criteria discussed in the theory section. The questions we asked while annotating were: is the act related to a topical phenomenon, does it connect two or more surprising themes, and does it enable or encourage sharing or participation e.g. in social media. According to the analysis, currency, proximity, unexpectedness and emotion are the most popular attributes in communicating corporate activism from the news/attention criteria perspective. Proximity serves as an attention criterium both when a person shares the same values with a company and when a person strongly disagrees with them. Both situations evoke discussion and emotion among social media users. Currency, in turn, serves as a strong criterion in both journalistic and social media, as linking an act to a topical theme seems to be one of the most widely used tactics of corporate activism.

In our material, attention criteria were present in various ways. The Land of Free Press campaign by Helsingin Sanomat and the showcase campaign addressing Trump and Putin by Finlayson during the Helsinki Summit combined currency, unexpectedness, and focus on a known person. In Finland, it is not common for the news media to step out from its allegedly objective position and take a stand on political discussion, which makes the output of Helsingin Sanomat stand out in a way that gained media attention even abroad. Currency, in turn, is related to the Helsinki Summit, during which Helsingin Sanomat and Finlayson made their outputs. In addition, President Trump and Putin are both quite controversial characters among the Finnish public, which contributes to increasing proximity when the company criticizes their decision-making.

Hartwall's Happy Joe – Gay Joe cider gained a lot of visibility both in traditional and social media due to its currency during Helsinki Pride Week 2018. Companies' participation in Helsinki Pride is no longer surprising per se but participating in an original and engaging way may still generate attention. Although Gay Joe cider did not receive huge attention in the journalistic media, it met the criteria of a social media phenomenon and achieved significant WOM. The cider and related communications evoked emotion, provided proximity as well as an opportunity to express identity by drinking a cider with a rainbow flag or posting an image on social media.

#### 4.1.3 Discursive connection of activism with corporate strategy

As noted in the theoretical framework, some definitions of corporate activism link it strongly to the purpose, values, or strategy of the corporation. In analysing our cases, we looked for news or press releases related to the acts, where the top management of the companies commented on the actions, and identified the discursive functions of managers' statements. In eight out of our eleven cases there was a news text or press release, in which a company executive such as the CEO or communications director commented on the activist action and its background. In example 1, Creative Director of Hakola puts the launch of durable packaging in a larger context, and in example 2, Chief Design Officer of Finlayson explains the rationale for taking action in the issue of genital mutilation.

- (1) Durable bags are one way to address the ecological pitfalls of product packaging. Setting this goal makes us accountable to our customers, and we also hope to inspire other actors in the field towards more sustainable practices. For us, this is the first of many initiatives, because we want for our part to bear responsibility for the future generations. (Creative Director, Hakola).
- (2) Each mutilated girl is too much, and the current legislation is insufficient. Not one person has been convicted within the confines of current legislation, even though experts contend that mutilation of Finnish girls still occurs. I am glad that we have been able to grant visibility to the issue. For us, it is important to take concrete action based on our values, and it is a pleasure to break ground also for other companies to do good. (CDO, Finlayson)

Categorizing the statements according to their discursive functions, we found that public statements by managers were often used for the purposes of contextualization and justification. In example 1, the decision to give up disposable packaging is linked to larger-scale, longer-term goal to change not only organizational but also field-level practice. In example 2, action that is unrelated to the business area of the company is justified by connecting it to the company's values and showing example to other companies. Overall, representing specific acts of activism as a part of consistent, strategy-based effort to bear responsibility or do good, and showing top management's commitment, arise as strategies companies use to enhance the plausibility of activism.

## 4.2 Consumers' Assessments of the Dimensions of Corporate Activism

We originally conducted the consumer survey to gain a basic understanding of how consumers perceive the phenomenon of corporate activism in general, and the selected cases of activism more specifically (Jantunen 2020). In this paper, we interpret the survey results specifically from the perspective of the three-dimensional definition. Our aim in doing so is to gain a preliminary view on whether and how the dimensions we outlined feature in the broader cultural understandings of corporate activism. The survey included questions related to the case campaigns as well as to corporate activism generally. It was distributed via social media channels (Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter) and groups (e.g., groups of different cities), at different workplaces, such as marketing/communications agencies in Helsinki, and at the University of Vaasa. We got 165 answers, of which the majority were from people in the age group of 25–29 with a residence in the Helsinki metropolitan area and with a degree in higher education. The limited diversity of respondents needs to be taken into account when making conclusions from the data.

In general, corporate activism was well received. 79 % of the respondents thought that companies should take a stand on the current societal debate, even if it caused dissonance. 14 % could not say, and 7 % thought that companies should not take part. In this study, we draw on the answers to the open-ended questions of the survey. In the first, theory-driven phase, we categorized answers under the three dimensions of corporate activism. Then, within each category, we conducted data-driven content analysis to highlight recurring themes and viewpoints. It is worth noting that the survey did not address the dimensions directly, as the categories evolved in the course of the study; however, all dimensions came up repeatedly in answers to three survey questions concerning views on whether corporations should take a stand on topical debates, on what kinds of themes they should take a stand, and on companies' presumed motivations for activism.

### 4.2.1 Assessments of "Substantial Act or Change in Behavior"

Respondents regarded real, concrete actions as the most important part of corporate activism. The survey answers also indicate that consumers reacted somewhat more positively to cases where there was a concrete act involved, instead of a mere statement as in Finlayson's open letter to President of Chechnya. Examples 3–5 illustrate consumers' ways of assessing the dimension of substantial act or change in a behaviour.

- (3) Taking a stand creates a responsible image of the company and also serves as a good marketing ploy. Of course, actions mean more than words.
- (4) companies need to stand behind their promises and not just talk in vain.
- (5) Certainly, statements are good promotion, but I believe that the companies also want to achieve a real change. After all, no matter how the starting point is to polish the brand, it forces the company to continue to act according to the statement. If the audience notices that the company is not operating according to the statement, it will cause negative publicity and the business suffers. It is therefore mandatory for

the company to be somehow committed to acting in accordance with the issues advocated.

Examples 3 and 4 rely to some extent on the traditional distinction between words and actions, which typically includes an evaluative tone in that actions are considered superior to words (see Schoeneborn et al. 2020: 8). Here, words are basically seen as fairly insignificant on their own, and concrete action gains heightened importance. Example 5, in contrast, illustrates a reflective approach where words and (other) actions are intertwined in complex ways. More generally, respondents saw that communicating a stance or expressing support in words needs to be concretized as other types of actions at some point, for companies and their activism to be relevant and credible. In this way, their views are aligned with the theoretical criteria that Vredenburg et al. (2020), among others, set to activism including both tangible and intangible elements. We also found in consumer responses reflection on the relations between “talk” and “walk”, where respondents saw that communication may occur in concurrence with or before (other) actions (Schoeneborn et al. 2020; Gulbrandsen et al. 2020). In other words, respondents seemed to recognize the formative and ethically binding role of communication.

#### 4.2.2 Assessments of “Communicating the Act in Ways that Fuel Attention”

With reference to activism gaining attention in the media, two different aspects were identifiable in the consumer survey’s results. First, the respondents explicitly pointed out the connection between corporate activism and media attention. Some of them argued that the acts or statements are merely a way for companies to get public attention, but not all respondents saw that as a negative starting point. The same respondents typically associated activism with marketing communication, most of them regarding statements and acts primarily as a marketing ploy. Examples 6 and 7 illustrate this perspective.

- (6) Conflicts and distribution of opinions bring earned media visibility of which the company benefits. Of course, taking a stand requires courage because it is difficult to please everyone and it will for sure cause troubles as well.
- (7) Companies take a stand mainly due to visibility. It takes the company to the pages of newspapers and makes people aware of the company’s operations. But there are exceptions here as well, for example, I was left with an honestly sincere image of Hakola’s action, it communicated an honest desire to change things.

Other respondents brought up the cultural power of companies (see Manfredi-Sánchez 2019). Answers such as examples 8 and 9 pointed out that companies have the power to get public attention and influence consumers’ opinions, and that this power should be put to use to drive social change. Respondents also referred to factors that may increase visibility and, hence, power, such as conflict in example 9, thereby demonstrating sensitivity to news/phenomenon criteria.

- (8) Many organizations reach huge numbers of people and have already at the outset visibility, authority, and influence, so it would be a shame not to use it to advance difficult issues and to change opinions.

- (9) Companies are able to influence and change people's views. Conflicting messages bring the best visibility, which often leads also to positive results from a marketing point of view.

Hence, the respondents recognized the connection between the acts and media publicity. They observed the potential of unexpectedness or "bizarreness" of the cases and recognized that companies will gain either negative or positive publicity when communicating about dissonant subjects. On the one hand, reaching media publicity works as earned media for the companies – it is, so to say, free media space for marketing purposes. At the same time, it grants attention to the themes of corporate activism.

#### 4.2.3 Assessments of "Discursive Connection of Activism with Corporate Strategy"

While analysing consumers' assessments to the connection of activism with corporate strategy, we identified two kinds of views. First, consumers were most critical towards actions that are not clearly related to the core business of the company, as can be seen from the examples 10 and 11. This contradicts with the theoretical views according to which corporate advocacy and corporate activism are by definition detached from core business (Burbano 2021).

- (10) If it (the statement) doesn't apply to the company's own field, it's a strange attempt to get involved in the discussion.
- (11) I think companies can take a stand in a topical debate, but it would seem logical if the debate would somehow be related to the company or its industry. Otherwise, there is a risk that the statement will feel like green washing or customer acquisition.

The second view concerns the connection between company values and activism. Examples 12 and 13 illustrate the view that if the company takes a stand or action in an activist role, these should follow company values and strategy.

- (12) I am interested in the values of the company, and I am happy to support companies (as a consumer or potential future employee) whose values match to my own values. That's brand equity advertising as its best.
- (13) Companies take part in conversations that they feel are important to them and follow their values.

Example 12 illustrates a view that corporate activism is also a way of communicating the values of the company to consumers and thereby helping consumers make better and more responsible choices. This view on corporate activism – communicating values in a manner that helps consumers make sustainable choices and, at the same time, encourages them to consume a certain company's products – may be seen as combining both marketing and CSR goals. Overall, consumers seem to view corporate activism essentially as a mixture of commercial aims and the pursuit of social change, and tend to see these goals as commensurable despite some critical notions.

## 6 Discussion and Conclusion

Our aim in this paper was to deepen understanding of corporate activism as a communicational phenomenon. We combined insights from earlier literature to propose a three-dimensional communication-centered definition of corporate activism as corporations advancing social change through public actions that 1) entail a substantial act or change in behavior with impact beyond the company, 2) fuel attention in contemporary media, and 3) are discursively connected to corporate strategy.

We elaborated on and illustrated this definition through analysing a selection of corporate activism cases in Finland, asking, first, how the dimensions of corporate activism are communicatively enacted by corporations and the media and, second, how consumers perceive these dimensions. The substantial act or change in behavior, which seems to be at the heart of corporate activism, was realized in our material in three forms: driving durable social change, raising awareness of a social problem, and supporting a marginalized or oppressed group. As to fueling attention in the media, we found that currency, proximity, unexpectedness, and emotion were among the most popular attributes in communicating corporate activism. Furthermore, encouraging consumers to participate in activism through connecting with others or sharing content, worked as a social media specific tactic for generating visibility. Finally, representing acts of activism as a part of consistent, strategy-based effort and showing top management's commitment, emerged as strategies companies use to enhance the plausibility of activism.

The three dimensions emerged as discursive themes also in the consumer survey, even though the survey was not specifically designed to address them. This may be read as an indication that the dimensions are part of a broader cultural understanding of corporate activism. Overall, the survey indicated that consumers' assessments of corporate activism are mixed. Consumers recognized complex connections between talk and action in creating substantial acts, and elaborated on the centrality of media visibility for companies' efforts to exert their potentially significant cultural power. Activism related to the company's field of business was widely accepted, even though consumers were well aware that it entails marketing or promotional goals in addition to social or political goals. On the other hand, activism with no apparent connection to the business of the company created confusion. Hence, it seems that consumers view activism primarily from a marketing communication perspective.

The view of corporate activism put forth in the study highlights the inextricable, constitutive relation between talk and (tangible) action within and across the three dimensions: in forming the substantial act at the core of activism, in generating visibility in contemporary online attention economy, and in substantiating company values and leadership commitment. In this article, we have been able to touch upon these dimensions only briefly; however, the definition provides a useful framework for further exploration of corporate activism. In specific, it calls us to look more closely into the ways in which corporations orient to the requirements and affordances, and seek to harness the potential, of contemporary online attention economy, in their efforts towards social change.

Another aspect that warrants further investigation is the connection of activism to corporate strategy. In this study, we have regarded selected actions and statements as examples of activism; however, it may be disputed whether all the companies included in the study could be characterized as corporate activists in any broader sense. In our view, individual acts of activism are not sufficient to make a corporation "activist". Instead, corporate activism requires prolonged commitment to be vocal about issues that the company has identified as central to its purpose, strategy, and values. Critical perspective is crucial when assessing the ways in which commercial and social goals are interrelated in the public actions and statements of business corporations.

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Appendix 1. Cases of corporate activism analysed in the study

	Company	Campaign / year	Key text	Main message
1	Hesburger	Towards the goal: 2030 Half meatless 2019	Website	According to Hesburger's goal, half of their products will be meatless by 2030.
2	Finlayson	Open letter to the President of Chechnya 2019	Social media post	Textile company Finlayson made a statement against the actions of the President of Chechnya during Helsinki Pride. In Chechnya, gay men are tortured and persecuted while the President denies there are gay people in the country.
3	Tam-Silk	Case Ikea and Finlayson 2019	Advertisement	Finlayson and Ikea engaged in a debate about the responsibility of their textiles. Tam-Silk took part by urging the textile companies to transfer their production to Finland and continue the sustainability debate after that.
4	Hakola	Counterblow to Black Friday 2018	Press release	While many retailers lowered their prices for Black Friday, the furniture manufacturer Hakola announced to cut plastic waste instead of prices, and launched durable bags for its couches.
5	Finlayson	Stop to mutilation 2018	Website	Finlayson started a citizens' initiative to make a distinct law to prevent female genital mutilation.
6	Fazer	#smallpieceoflove 2018	Website	Fazer run a campaign to intervene hate speech and aggressive discussion culture in the internet
7	Hartwall Happy Joe	Gay Joe 2018	Press release	Hartwall's Happy Joe brand launched a limited batch of cider with the title Gay Joe with a rainbow label. The brand was also a partner of Helsinki Pride.
8	Helsingin Sanomat	The land of free press 2018	Press release and images	The leading newspaper in Finland made a statement against Trump's and Putin's actions and aspirations to restrict the freedom of press.
9	Finlayson	Helsinki Summit 2018	Advertisement	Finlayson urged President Trump and Putin with stickers on the showcase of its store to make better decisions at the Helsinki Summit.
10	Finlayson	Woman's euro 2017	Website	Finlayson's campaign raised awareness about the gender pay gap in Finland.
11	Kalevala Koru	Untamed beauty 2017	Campaign video	The campaign video of the jewelry company challenged stereotypes related to beauty and gender, emphasizing that its products are meant for people regardless of gender, ethnicity, age, or convictions.