The positioning of CEOs as advocates and activists for societal change: reflecting media, receptive and strategic cornerstones

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to take stock of current knowledge on chief executive officers (CEOs) speaking out on societal issues and to position the phenomenon with and against the relevant literature on CEO communication. Ultimately, the paper seeks to arrive at a better conceptual understanding of CEO advocates and activists from a communication science perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is conceptual and considers findings from the literature on personalization, reputation, issues and topic management.

Findings – The paper reflects media, receptive and strategic implications for CEO advocates and activists and derives four workable propositions. It lays the foundation for treating CEO advocacy and activism as a form of strategic topic management that harnesses personalization to address a new set of stakeholder demands.

Practical implications – The insights gained from this paper may help researchers and practitioners understand when CEOs should speak up, what to communicate and how. The human element behind this kind of communication echoes new expectations, demands and values from stakeholders, shareholders and society at large.

Social implications – Understanding the specific interdependencies between personalization, reputation, issues and topic management underlying CEO advocacy and activism can help to improve a CEO's relationship with stakeholders and guide the public discourse to actively bring about positive societal change.

Originality/value – The paper fills a gap by providing an understanding of advocate and activist CEOs from a communication science perspective. The insights from this paper can be used as a starting point for further research on this subject.

Keywords CEO advocacy, CEO activism, Personalization, Reputation, Issues management, Strategic communication

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Nowadays, it is not uncommon for chief executive officers (CEOs) to make their positions on societal issues known. For example, Marc Benioff, founder and CEO of the tech company Salesforce, led a corporate boycott against the state of Indiana upon the passage of a controversial law that would have allowed businesses to deny their services to LGBTQ customers (Benioff, 2015). Benioff's headline-making engagement not only inspired other CEOs to side with him [1], but it also increased the company's revenue by up to 25% in the

following year (Chon, 2019). It was a different story, however, for former Starbucks CEO Howard Schulz who told investors who oppose same-sex marriage to sell their stocks at the company's annual meeting in 2013. His actions were met with an activist boycott and financial repercussions in the first full quarter after the incident (Allen, 2013). It seems, when weighing in on divisive sociopolitical issues, CEOs have as much to gain as they have to lose from their goodwill.

In the extensive academic and professional literature on corporate reputation, a wide body of research exists on how the reputations of CEOs and their companies are intertwined (e.g. Gaines-Ross, 2003; Schwalbach, 2015). However, still absent from the literature are examinations of overall reputational dynamics explaining why reactions to CEOs promoting societal interests can cut both ways, as indicated in the anecdotal evidence. Therefore, the key contribution of this paper lies in reflecting the phenomenon of CEOs wading into public commentary alongside media, receptive and strategic touchstones to uncover possibilities, pitfalls and paradoxes that arise when CEOs decide to speak out on personal grounds.

The article is organized as follows. To get a better conceptual grasp of CEOs championing sociopolitical causes, the paper delineates the phenomenon from similar concepts by reflecting upon the current discussion in the field. What follows is an overview of common constructs, their applied definitions, the theories from which they originate and their research context. In an effort to advance the understanding of reputational implications, this paper addresses research in the area of *personalization, strategic issues management and topic-based strategic communication*. Against this backdrop, implications are discussed alongside the triad of the media, the organization and the public, as this triangle forms the cornerstone for CEO positioning. The paper ends with relevant conclusions, conceptual limitations, societal discussions and potential avenues for future research.

Literature review
A great deal of the early research on CEOs promoting sociopolitical agendas was provided by public relations firms and research consultancies, including Weber (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018a, b, 2019), Global Strategy Group (2016, 2018), Miltton (2017), Edelman (2018), APCO Worldwide (2018) and RepTrak (2020). Notably, most of these studies apply a practical lens, indicating how corporate leaders elevate awareness on hot-button issues. Within scholarly research, much of the investigation has been carried out by a body of research that spans the perspectives of *business* (e.g. Wettstein and Baur, 2016; Weinzimmer and Esken, 2016; Melloni *et al.*, 2019; Hydock *et al.*, 2019; Hoppner and Vadakkepatt, 2019; Larcker *et al.*, 2018; Brown *et al.*, 2020; Branicki *et al.*, 2021), *management* (e.g. Nalick *et al.*, 2016), *law* (e.g. Wolfe, 2019; Lin, 2018), *marketing* (e.g. Mikeska and Harvey, 2015; Korschun *et al.*, 2016; Korschun *et al.*, 2020) and *public relations* (e.g. Dodd, 2018; Gaither *et al.*, 2018; Austin *et al.*, 2019; Yim, 2019; Rim *et al.*, 2020; Ihlen, 2020). In addition to the CEO, some scholars have also put their research lens on other entities such as the brand (e.g. Kotler and Sarkar, 2017; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Shetty *et al.*, 2019; Moorman, 2020) or the corporate organization itself (e.g. Eilert and Nappier Cherup, 2020). With such research diversity, terminological variations and conceptual differences have inevitably emerged.

Even though the terms *CEO activism* or *corporate social advocacy* appear to be innately used by many today, numerous other labels like *corporate political activism* have also been proposed to describe how corporate titans pursue activities outside of their primary business domain. Table 1 gives an overview of common constructs, their applied definitions, the theories from which they originate and their research context. Each of these constructs has its own theoretical underpinning, albeit mainly referring to the same "corporate action" (Gaither *et al.*, 2018, p. 179). Moreover, contemporary research generally fails to clarify the notions of

social and *political*. The attributes are either not defined at all, are used interchangeably, are omitted, or are taken as given. Another still disputable question encompasses the consideration of CEOs' sociopolitical involvement as integral to corporate social responsibility (CSR). While most scholars underscore that it is distinctive to what has traditionally been considered CSR, others argue that it may set the agenda for a combination of research fields (e.g. Dodd and Supa, 2015) or even an entirely new area of academic study (e.g. Nalick *et al.*, 2016; Dodd, 2018). Still others point out that sociopolitical responsibility may be treated as a CSR subset if CSR is shifted from an activity-based perspective to a more *value-driven* approach grounded and expressed through corporate character and culture (Wettstein and Baur, 2016). A novel perspective has been proposed by marketing scholars Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020) who, in turn, suggest that companies leverage activism to advance societal change when traditional CSR approaches fail to do so.

Leaving this terminological and theoretical heterogeneity aside, a few characteristics reoccur in most research on the subject after all. First, there are different *corporate entities* (e.g. the CEO, the brand, the company) promoting societal issues not directly related to the company's core business; instead, they are controversial, emotionally contested and bear the potential for financial repercussions (Dodd and Supa, 2015; Nalick *et al.*, 2016). Second, by championing social and political causes, CEOs have come to make their *personal values* openly known (Grazzini *et al.*, 2020); commonly through the social web, media interviews, or other publicly accessible channels. Lastly, as CEOs have taken stands in many forms, scholars have started to recognize conceptual differences between advocacy and activism. For Clemensen (2017), *advocacy* has a positive connotation in that it refers to non-confrontational, publicly accepted issues that the company is advocating for. *Activism*, in turn, is more negative, as it typically implies taking a stand *against* a somewhat divisive issue. Gaither *et al.* (2018) differentiate between *speaking out* on an issue (advocacy) and *acting on* an issue (activism), while Korschun *et al.* (2016) postulate that activism transcends advocacy beyond speaking out for a cause to *how* social issues should be publicly addressed. Hence, CEOs speaking out on personal grounds may bring significant differences in meaning. Distilling those differences would not only result in more conceptual understanding (Gaither *et al.*, 2018) but also in the introduction of an overarching terminology for all kinds of involvement of corporate leaders in pressing societal issues.

The present paper focuses on the advocate or activist behavior of the CEO, not the brand or company. Given the conceptual differences between advocacy and activism, the term *corporate sociopolitical responsibility* will be used here in its broadest sense to capture all CEO stances and actions on hot-button issues in a single overarching term. The modifier *sociopolitical* aims to summarize a wide range of contentious societal issues whose resolution constitutes the backbone of society. Since environmental sociologists hold the view that environmental problems are simultaneously social problems (e.g. Pellow, 2016), ecological issues can also be summarized under the attribute "sociopolitical". Furthermore, emphasizing the attribute points out decisive differences to already established concepts such as *corporate social responsibility* (CSR), *political corporate social responsibility* (PCSR) or *corporate political activity* (CPA), while simultaneously allowing for lexical consistency in the field. It is important to stress that this article departs from the introduction of a new term as doing so would require a separate manuscript altogether. Much more research would be needed to foreground its conceptual development – particularly its (un)relatedness to CSR and CSR terminology literature and the necessity to explore why other terms and their definitions are dismissed beyond what has been summarized in Table 1. Therefore, the term *corporate sociopolitical responsibility* offered at this point is kept necessarily broad as it shall serve as a starting point for further terminology research on this subject.

Construct	Definition	Relevant theory	Research field	Indicative literature
CEO activism	"CEO activism involves a public act by an individual to take a side on a topical, political, or social issue" (Chatterji and Toffel, 2017, p. 7)	Traditional nonmarket literature	Business, Law	Chatterji and Toffel (2017), Melloni et al. (2019), Larcker et al. (2018), Wolfe (2019), Brown et al. (2020)
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 and Nappier Cherup, 2020, p. 461)	Institutional theory	Business	Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020), Vredenburg et al. (2020)
Corporate political activism	"(. . .) corporate political activism takes a more negative approach, typically speaking out against or in response to political issues that tend to be more controversial, such as making a negative statement in response to legislature passed on a controversial issue like gay marriage" (Clemensen, 2017, p. 14)	Corporate social responsibility	Public Relations	Clemensen (2017), Gaither et al. (2018)
Brand activism	"(. . .) a communication strategy whose aim is to influence the citizen-consumer by means of messages and campaigns created and sustained by political values" (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019, p. 348)	Corporate political activity	Marketing	Kotler et al. (2017), Manfredi-Sánchez (2019), Shetty et al. (2019)
Brand political activism	"(. . .) public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name" (Moorman, 2020, p. 388 f.)	Political activism	Marketing	Moorman (2020)
Corporate social activism	"Contemporary corporate social activism (. . .) shifts businesses from their traditional singular, amoral purpose of profit maximization to a new multivariate aim that takes into greater consideration social impact and social value on an equivalent or nearly equivalent basis as profit maximization" (Lin, 2018, p. 1593)	Public-private convergence, the rise of corporate social responsibility, expansion of corporate political rights	Law	Lin (2018)

Table 1.
An initial overview of
common constructs

Construct	Definition	Relevant theory	Research field	Indicative literature
Corporate political advocacy	"(...) voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same" (Wettstein and Baur, 2016, p. 200)	Corporate social responsibility	Business	Wettstein and Baur (2016), Hydock et al. (2019)
Corporate social advocacy	"(...) the taking of a public stance on a controversial social-political issue by corporations, most often in the form of a CEO statement" (Dodd and Supa, 2015, p. 287)	Corporate social responsibility, strategic issues management, stakeholder theory	Public Relations	Dodd and Supa (2014,2015) Dodd (2018), Gaither et al. (2018), Austin et al. (2019) Yim (2019), Rim et al. (2020)
Corporate political activity	"The new, more public, face of CPA is no longer restricted to lobbying behind closed doors. Rather it increasingly involves communications and actions that can be quite public" (Grazzini et al., 2020, p. 3)	Corporate political activity	Marketing	Korschun et al. (2020), Grazzini et al. (2020)
Corporate sociopolitical involvement	"(...) some firms have, in recent times, engaged in sociopolitical issues that are divisive, unsettled, emotionally charged, or contested. We refer to firm participation in these types of issues as sociopolitical involvement (SPI)" (Nalick et al., 2016, p. 384)	Agency, stakeholder, social movement, upper echelons, Institutional theory	Management	Nalick et al. (2016)
CEO political behavior	"We define CEO political disapproval as negative social evaluations of the publicized CEO activities and/or behaviors that indicate the CEO's political values and/or beliefs. We also define political behavior as active participation in public policy. Political behavior, thus, includes voicing as well as acting out political values and/or beliefs" (Mikeska and Harvey, 2015, p. 77)	Attribution theory	Marketing	Mikeska and Harvey (2015)

Table 1.

Personalization

There is no widely agreed explanation as to why CEOs wade into public discourse. Some scholars suggest that globalization, pluralization, increased corporate power and pressures, and the erosion of traditional institutions have paved the way for corporate politicization overall (Dodd, 2018). However, for the most part, research seems to agree that the nature of the issues is becoming more social and value-based (e.g. Coombs and Holladay, 2018; Wettstein and Baur, 2016), thus gaining importance in the eyes of stakeholders.

Whenever society suffers consequences from far-reaching sociopolitical or technological shifts, it is all too common to look for someone to shoulder the responsibility (Weber, 1985). Pillorying an individual is rather easy compared to attacking an abstract entity. At the same time, however, the level of complexity in the (re)solution of hot-button issues that people do not comprehend rationally but feel strongly about emotionally is scaled back (Eisenegger, 2010). Quite generally, personalized narratives are closer to the recipients' real-life experiences. Therefore, pinning responsibility on a person is more likely to enhance attention, trust and reputation than anonymous matters. By this logic, the question to ask is: "As brands seek to 'personalize' their relationships with consumers, is adopting a political orientation part of closing the deal?" (Chatterji and Toffel, 2016, p. 2).

Theoretically, strategic communication will position the CEO alongside the media, the public and the organization by leveraging "(...) both persuasive and collaborative communication activities to increase awareness of the highest representative of the organization among all stakeholders and differentiate him or her from others in a credible way in the public sphere" (Zerfass *et al.*, 2015, p. 3). However, this triad not only forms the cornerstone for CEO positioning but also resonates with the classification of media, organizational and public personalization (Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011). To examine this parallel, we need to turn to the theory of neo-institutionalism.

Neo-institutionalism regards organizations as being embedded in social and cultural environments that are essential for the legitimacy of the organization (Deephouse and Suchman, 2008). The function of CEO communication, then, lies in maintaining these organization–environment relations. As legitimacy is an attribute of the organizational environment, stakeholders constantly evaluate organizations (Fredriksson *et al.*, 2013). The traditional journalistic print and broadcast media (from this point forward, used interchangeably with the term media) facilitate and reinforce this evaluation through their coverage because they seek to captivate the audience's attention to cope with the market. Arguably, they may leverage personalization news factors to attract more readers, viewers, or followership. In this sense, personalization is not only an incidental news factor but also a stylistic device to convey complex topics in a storytelling format. That said, personalization affects media coverage concerning both the selection of information and the presentation of content (Bentele and Fähnrich, 2010). To deal with the media, CEO communication becomes an integral part of a company's communication strategy. And to deal with the increased news personalization, CEO communication begins to follow the selection and interpretation routines of the media by using the CEO to shape the narrative for a more personalized representation of the company (e.g. Sandhu and Zielmann, 2010). Consequently, companies treat personalization as a communication strategy to reduce complexity and provide the company with a recognizable face. Given this increased media and organizational personalization, the public will start to pay attention to person-orientated communication (Imhof, 2010). Conversely, both organizations and the media engage in personalization because they assume a substantial person orientation of the audience (Eisenegger, 2010).

In the following, the extent to which the elements of the media, the public and organizational personalization interact when CEOs decide to share personal positions on burning societal issues will be examined.

Media implications
CEOs often personify their organizations through their visibility in the news coverage (Meng and Berger, 2013). Recently, Denner *et al.* (2018) identified relatively strong personalization patterns in German news articles for CEOs presented as individualists, planners, or spokespeople, thereby adding to the body of knowledge on the personalization of companies in the media (e.g. Park and Berger, 2004; Brettschneider and Vollbracht, 2011).

Given their selection and presentation logic, it seems plausible to argue that the media is the main driving force for organizational and public personalization. However, critics contend this argument to be too shortsighted. They suggest reflecting upon neoliberal business models as highly favorable for personalization because they encourage charismatic leadership (Imhof, 2010). Moreover, the Internet adds support for a departure from media hegemony as it has democratized the way information is being shared. First, it provides corporations more channels to communicate with the public directly and set their corporate agenda (Zhang, 2017). Second, the public can also bypass the media by leveraging digital ways of communication, mobilization and organization on behalf of a cause (Rim et al., 2020).

In the context of sociopolitical responsibility, CEOs indeed tend to favor the unmediated communication opportunities of the social web for sharing public statements on sociopolitical issues rather than waiting for discourse to be driven by news coverage (Larcker et al., 2018). Even if the incident rate of CEO communication over social networking sites may be statistically relatively low (Kubowicz Malhotra and Malhotra, 2016), experimental findings reveal how a CEO's sociopolitical tweets can stimulate purchase intentions (Dodd and Supa, 2015; Grazzini et al., 2020), sway public opinion in the same way as prominent politicians do (Chatterji and Toffel, 2017) and enhance perceptions of authenticity (Yim, 2019). This effect seems particularly relevant for companies that need to attract young talent, often referred to as Millennials, who prefer applying for a job or buying a product or service from a company whose CEO supports societal interests instead of remaining a neutral bystander (Weber, 2017). It might become even more critical for Generation Z representatives as they appear to feel bound to individual business leaders and companies concerned about the values of diversity and inclusion (Lewis, 2021). In this light, sociopolitical responsibility may present the company as an employer with a human spirit, which helps attract and retain employees who long to find sincere purpose in their day-to-day jobs. Besides image improvement, borrowing sociopolitical ideas from social movements may boost sales (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019), open up new market segments, raise competitive advantages, or overall help to "win" in the marketplace (Moorman, 2020, p. 290). In this sense, Nalick et al. (2016) consider sociopolitical responsibility a constant adaptation to stakeholders' requirements and pressure. Even if getting involved with sociopolitical issues might lead to short-term risks (e.g. Brown et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2019), the firm bets that stakeholders will eventually side with the firm's position in the medium or long run. Simply put, there is a higher need for immediate reactions to a broader set of stakeholder interests. This high-speed timetable leads to a new personalization hierarchy with the stakeholders usurping the media as the main driving force. Formally:

Proposition 1. Because the traditional journalistic print and broadcast media are losing their dominance to a new set of stakeholder demands, CEOs need to adapt their narratives to this shift.

Receptive implications
With stakeholders looking at CEOs to advance the social good, the question arises as to what aspects determine the stakeholder perception of CEOs and how they relate to the CEO's reputation as advocates or activists for social change. Following the lead of earlier sociologists, Eisenegger (2010) proposes a reputation theory that can be applied to any role carrier, hence also to the CEO. To begin with, he differentiates between *subject personalization,* where persons take the role of active speakers and *object personalization,* where they are objects of communication. To lay the foundation for the stakeholders' perception, we will turn to object personalization first.

Object personalization follows a three-dimensional reputational approach grounded in the three-world concept as part of Habermas' theory of communicative action (1984). *The objective world of the truth*, *the normative world of the good* and the *subjective world of the beautiful* (Habermas, 1984, p. 75 ff.) each comprises its own demands that role carriers need to fulfill. Thus, the CEO equally acts in the mode of *cognitive-functional personalization*, *normative-social personalization*, or *expressive-charismatic personalization* (Eisenegger, 2010, p. 19). In the context of sociopolitical responsibility, one might intuitively argue for CEOs promoting societal interests to be considered as part of *normative-social personalization* as typical sociopolitical issues such as racism, diversity, or environmental protection often encompass questions of ethical standards, integrity, responsibility, or other norms that hold society together. However, considering the polarizing nature that also lies at the heart of these issues, shouldering sociopolitical responsibility means courting controversy and taking partisanship on issues that match the values espoused. That said, stakeholders might evaluate the CEO less on the rightness and morality of the issue itself but more so on his or her individual, very personal conviction *toward* the issue. Hence, as sociopolitical issues are a matter of personal conviction, the reputation assessment style may be rather emotional. Therefore, sociopolitical responsibility can be regarded as a form of expressive personalization. It may even qualify as charismatic if the CEO in question is believed to possess extraordinary talents, as is often the case with tech company founders. Marc Zuckerberg, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, or Elon Musk have all been praised for their visionary personalities, which might eventually encourage a fusion of the CEO's identity with the company's identity. Put differently, in the process of charismatic personalization, high-ranking representatives themselves may become the message (Eisenegger and Konieczny-Wössner, 2010); their positions on societal ills may become the actual communication narrative that takes on a life of its own. However, such expressive-charismatic personalization does not come without risks. As it is not based on a functional or normative order but on a person (Weber, 1985), the company depends on the CEO's praise and blame. This hyper-personalization prohibits coherent and predictable reputation building and may remain somewhat volatile and fragile instead. Formally:

Proposition 2. When exposing personal convictions on sociopolitical issues, a CEO's sociopolitical responsibility may take the form of expressive-charismatic personalization as the CEO's personal convictions become a crucial criterion for building a reputation. In its extreme form, it may lead to hyper-personalization. Then, the CEO's personal convictions on sociopolitical issues become a narrative in itself that may overshadow the actual issue the CEO is advocating for.

Strategic implications

Similar to objective personalization, subjective personalization can be divided into different dimensions. The CEO can either act in the role of the *organizational representative* or the *private individual*, providing either an *official standpoint* or a *personal opinion*. The combination of these characteristics constitutes four distinct dimensions of which *personal-official subject personalization* is relevant for this paper, as by definition, "[t]he person portrays him- or herself and speaks as a private person, but with the motive of exerting opinion-forming influence on official (e.g. political) issues" (translated from Eisenegger, 2010, p. 16). Even if CEOs may have different motivations for putting themselves in an activist spotlight, by extending their purview to sociopolitical topics, they possess the ability to leverage their resources and market power to direct the conversation to the issue they advocate. However, as experience demonstrates, CEOs are advised to consider where to shine

their attention spotlight when preaching through the company megaphone. For instance, when former Starbucks CEO Schulz called out his baristas to write #RaceTogether on Starbucks cups to elicit a debate on race, he was met with widespread criticism, ridicule and a boycott (Abitbol *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, CEOs, companies and brands who rushed to respond to the Black Lives Matter protests were challenged to disclose the numbers of employed black people at the executive level (Duarte, 2021). Against this background, it seems helpful to ponder more generally on the role of the issue.

According to Coombs and Holladay (2018): "Highly polarizing social issues are a form of wicked problems because various stakeholders will disagree over the issue's resolution. This means the role(s) of firms in helping to address social issues is likely to be contentious" (p. 79). In contrast to the traditional cyclic model of issues management, controversial issues do not transcend different phases but need to be addressed with appropriate communicative tasks. As non-resolvable static constructs, they require somewhat fluid communication management.

Empirical research suggests that when actions turn into political activism, stakeholders are likely to evaluate the company regarding its core values (Gaither *et al.*, 2018). As a matter of fact, this is mainly the case for value-driven companies, as hiding behind corporate neutrality may violate stakeholder expectations and give rise to a higher level of perceived hypocrite (Korschun *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, CEOs should thoughtfully consider the "issue fit" between a company's image, positioning and target market and the issue's image and its impacted stakeholders. Often, the tone is the message as the strength of a stance ultimately determines how much attention the CEO receives and whether relations with stakeholders might alienate or not (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt, 2019). Against this background, Vredenburg *et al.* (2020) distinguish purpose- and values-driven, controversial, contested, polarizing, progressive and conservative issues. The latter two are subjective and determined by political ideology, religion and other beliefs. Applying further insights from electoral research, another distinction can be made between valence and positional issues. Valence issues are issues with broad consensus regarding the ultimate objective to be achieved. Actors no longer argue about the rightness of the issue (e.g. equal pay between men and women) but rather about *who* is the most suitable and competent actor for its solution. For positional issues, it is the opposite case. Here, the issue itself is the subject of controversial discussion (e.g. same-sex marriage or gun control) (Stokes, 1963). Since the issues a CEO gets involved with vary in their degree of polarization, CEOs are advised to take up focused dedication to strike the right balance between speaking up on valence issues and taking a firmer stance by matching words with deeds on positional issues. Reflecting upon the considerations of Clemensen (2017) (advocacy = positive and activism = negative), Gaither *et al.* (2018) (advocacy = speaking out on an issue and activism = acting on an issue) and Korschun *et al.* (2020) (advocacy = what and activism = how), advocacy may be more likely to succumb to comprehensive agreement on the rightness of the social cause, whereas the higher degree of controversy for positional issues may require concrete action for the issue to be at least temporarily resolved. Consequently:

Proposition 3. The divisiveness of the issue determines the CEO's commitment to the issue.

Underestimating the issue may not only violate stakeholder expectations, but it may also become a competitor's chance to improve its market position (Weinzimmer and Esken, 2016), as was the case with Guido Barilla when he stated in a radio interview that he would "never do a spot with a homosexual family" (Heller, 2013, p. 1). More interesting than the stakeholder alienation and boycott was the speed of reaction with which competitors responded. A topic only mentioned in a radio interview created momentum for competitors to position themselves favorably. Even though this incident does not reflect sociopolitical

responsibility in the proper definition of the phenomenon, it offers important implications. Contrary to traditional issues management, a company may transform issues into narratives that did not exist before. Simply put, it is up to the company to choose the issues. Adding to Coombs and Holladay (2018), it can therefore be argued for sociopolitical responsibility not to be siloed within traditional issues management but to allocate the communication management behind sociopolitical responsibility within topic-based strategic communication defined as "the management of strategy-critical narratives and media content that defines the company's identity as perceived by its stakeholders or publics" (Ninova-Solovykh *et al.*, 2019, p. 4; see also Seiffert-Brockmann and Einwiller, 2020). Since social megatrends are generally challenging to operationalize, CEOs who thematize their personal values create an opportunity to manage topics that are or may become relevant to the company proactively, independently and in a timely and approachable manner harnessing the means of personalization. Thus, CEO advocacy or activism can function as strategic or at least strategically intended public storytelling to enhance one's reputation. Therefore:

> *Proposition 4.* Sociopolitical responsibility veers from traditional issues management into a new category of topic-based strategic communication that harnesses personalization as a way to address company-relevant topics.

Conclusion and outlook

This paper has derived media, receptive and strategic implications for CEOs who decide to play in sociopolitical arenas by combining insights from personalization, issues and topic management research. First, it has been proposed that it is not so much the traditional journalistic print and broadcast media but rather a set of new stakeholder demands pushing CEOs into the social and political limelight. Building upon personalization literature, for employees, consumers and the public, what CEOs expose of their inner world becomes the key criterion of building a reputation. In this sense, sociopolitical responsibility may be regarded as a form of expressive-charismatic personalization. However, as this is considered a very volatile form of reputation building, CEOs have to be cautious not to put themselves on top of the issue they advocate. Hyperpersonalization may cost authenticity. Supporting insights from previous research, CEOs are advised to synchronize the issues they advocate with the values their company represents so as to uphold authenticity further. It is also essential to understand that the issues CEOs support are not amicably resolvable. CEOs will alienate those stakeholders who disagree.

Following the literature on issue typology, sociopolitical issues may vary considerably in their degree of polarization. While various sides in some disputes will reach some consensus (valence issues), for others the controversy is not solved (positional issues). And therein lies the rub. CEOs should strike the right balance between speaking up on valence issues (advocacy) and taking a firmer stance by matching words with deeds on positional issues (activism) to reap the rewards and mitigate the risks. However, some advantages are worth mentioning. Corroborating insights from personalization research, the fact that the CEOs communicate and not their public relations (PR) departments creates the opportunity to personalize relationships with supportive stakeholders and position rather complex topics proactively, strategically and competitively by harnessing the means of personalization. Supporting previous work on strategic communication management, building a reputation as a CEO advocate or activist should not be siloed within traditional forms of issues management but instead embedded within topic management.

Still, the implications also have some limitations. Perhaps most importantly, as sociopolitical responsibility is a constant process that might, or most likely, continue to

evolve with stakeholder expectations or the (non)resolution of sociopolitical issues, the proposed framework is temporal. Moreover, it has put a strong focus on *reflecting* personalization implications on media, perceptive and strategic levels, suggesting a departure from the conventional wisdom in this area. However, the *interplay* between those three cornerstones and their implications for practice could have been elaborated more fully. Moving forward, future studies should continue to explore this relationship. Furthermore, the general question remains as to how far involvement in sociopolitical matters is strategically plannable with or by practitioners and to what extent it is more of a spontaneous engagement driven by the CEO's personality and, if so, how this impacts the reputation building. On a similar note, exploring differences between CEO founders and non-founders as well as cultural, institutional, environmental or industrial (e.g. business-to-business vs. business-to-customer) differences might not only facilitate sociopolitical responsibility but also affect the reputational dynamics behind it. Although the paper has argued that CEOs who promote sociopolitical issues lay out their convictions, one major drawback of this approach is that it underemphasizes the interdependencies between a CEO's and a company's reputation. As the CEO is also the "company's first citizen" (Gaines-Ross, 2003, p. 219), he or she never acts as a private person alone but also as an economic representative. Thus, it stands for debate to what extent CEOs are, in fact, detached from their companies when taking sociopolitical responsibility and whether their decisions to wade into the sociopolitical territory are instrumentally rather than genuinely motivated. Exploring these reputational relations might offer more in-depth knowledge about whether CEOs delving into the sociopolitical space matter also to the company's bottom line and the overall corporate reputation. In addition, more research is required to explore whether the same implications work for other entities such as upper, middle and lower management, the company or the brand.

Putting these limitations aside, learning the lessons embodied in each cornerstone of the personalization triad may help researchers and practitioners understand when CEOs should speak up, what to communicate and how. The human element behind this kind of communication may have an impact beyond reputational favorability by guiding the public discourse and actively bringing about positive societal change by opening up transparent and inclusive dialogue with different – even vulnerable – minorities (Korschun *et al.*, 2020). However, in a time of clicktivism and slacktivism where everyone feels devoted to a higher purpose, CEOs must construct the narrative carefully. Skeptics are quick to point this out: "Should a billionaire who rode technology to wealth and fame be trusted to help fix the problems his industry has exacerbated?" (Associated Press, 2019, p. 1). Scholars have already criticized how corporate organizations are cannibalizing issues that generally fall into the domain of NGOs and activist groups (Cova, 2020) or leveraging social movements to generate profits, even depoliticizing its underlying social demand (Zeisler, 2016 in Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

Moreover, it is important to stress that increased personalization tendencies carry the risk that political decisions might no longer be based on sound reasoning but on personal characteristics. In these changing times, the persuasiveness and rationality of an argument matters less than the identity of its originator (Eisenegger, 2010). One of the most significant implications for public relations research is that CEOs seem to becoming more and more chief communication officers, driving strategic communication rather than being its object of positioning (Zerfass *et al.*, 2015). As De Bussy (2013) has anticipated, "Rather than focus on the representation, power and behavior of public relations specialists within the dominant coalition, the values of strategic public relations management could be internalized by other (often more powerful) organizational leaders" (p. 82). CEOs taking sociopolitical responsibility seem to, at least, play right into this expected shift.

Notes

1. For example Tim Cook from Apple (Cook, 2015).

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