



Care-based corporate sociopolitical activism: identifying dark sides and envisioning an ethical framework[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Although corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA) has gained traction in research and practice, little is known about its potential dark sides – especially from the consumer's perspective. We address this gap by examining how CSA can burden or harm consumers, beyond typical economic risks to firms. We identify and categorise six dark sides into two overarching themes: (1) emotional and cognitive burden (individual level) and (2) public division and harm (societal level). These underscore the ethical complexities of CSA and the need for a revised, more responsible approach. Inspired by emerging CSA practices that prioritise empathy and connectedness over neoliberal logics, we introduce an 'ethics of care' to the CSA literature as an alternative moral guideline. A care-based CSA approach is proposed, including an audit tool and strategic solutions to manage negative consequences. This reimagines CSA as a form of moral responsibility that emphasises relationships, interdependence and responsiveness in ethical deliberations.

1. Introduction

A succession of global crises, the deepening of public polarisation, and a hypercompetitive marketplace have incited organisations to take positions on pressing socio-political issues (Brower, 2023; Kapitan et al., 2022). This strategy – known as corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA) – involves a firm publicly demonstrating its values via speech or actions that support or oppose a partisan issue (Bhagwat et al., 2020). We use this terminology herein and are also informed by work on adjacent concepts such as corporate activism (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020), brand activism (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) and corporate political advocacy (e.g., Hydock et al., 2020).

How CSA is employed has both business and societal consequences. Some scholars and practitioners have been optimistic that this strategy offers a vehicle for businesses to drive positive change (Podnar & Golob, 2024). Yet, CSA has emerged under the prevailing neoliberal political-economic system, where market logics dominate and reinforce self-interested and rational motivations, such as profit maximisation, the commodification of social justice issues (Sobande, 2019) and individualised consumer governance (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Thus, CSA

attends to environmental, political and social betterment, but remains primarily concerned with a firm-centric perspective and growing equity, thereby reproducing and enabling assumptions, behaviours and values associated with capitalist markets (Spry et al., 2021).

CSA typically prioritises profit, efficiency, consumerism, reputation and power (e.g., investor reactions; Bhagwat et al., 2020 and market share; Hydock et al., 2020). Nike's support for Black Lives Matter (BLM) evinces this by centring the brand while sidelining the BLM movement and the Black communities impacted by racism, ultimately framing social justice through a neoliberal lens that privileges market values over systemic change. When employed as a marketing tool (Lee et al., 2024a), CSA commodifies notions of empathy and community to the extent that a political statement or expression of support becomes a promotional platform (Sobande, 2019). In effect, CSA becomes another way for firms to marketise care, which can have negative cumulative consequences – *dark sides* – for society (Chatzidakis et al., 2025).

Emerging perspectives advocate for an alternative approach to CSA, emphasising empathy over efficiency, and relationships over transactions. HoMie is a Melbourne-based streetwear label taking a stand on the human right to safe housing, with a mission to support youth

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affected by homelessness or hardship. Their flagship social impact program, The HoMie Pathway Alliance, provides participants with paid opportunities to gain qualifications, work experience and personal development, removing barriers to long-term success. Crucially, HoMie embeds principles of responsibility (extending to trained partner retailers like Nike, Country Road and Sportsgirl) to promote participants' holistic development and empowerment (HoMie, n.d.). Equally, the recent response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine highlights the value of care-oriented approaches with grassroots, volunteer-led initiatives providing essential support, focusing on maintaining lives and promoting recovery and resilience, in contrast to firms' calculated decisions to withdraw from the region (Fotaki, 2023). Such examples highlight an opportunity for organisations to challenge prevalent approaches to CSA and consider addressing societal issues through relational, community-driven initiatives.

Although CSA could benefit from various ethical frameworks, such as deontological ethics and virtue ethics (Chakrabarty & Bass, 2015; Schwartz & Carroll, 2003), this study advocates for an ethics of care as an alternative moral framework for corporate social action (Branicki, 2020; Tronto, 1993). This perspective is valuable but underexplored in the CSA literature, where connection and responsibility are central to consumer-brand interactions but remain largely overlooked. Unlike other ethical frameworks, an ethics of care deals with complex relationship systems that have parallels with the varied issues and stakeholders CSA attends to, facilitating its practical application in this context. A care-based ethic also enables CSA-organisations to express empathy, compassion and humanity towards stakeholders and foster meaningful engagement with them in ways other ethical approaches may not.

This paper seeks to problematise the dominant neoliberal framing of CSA by identifying its dark sides for consumers and ultimately, advancing a care-based ethical framework of CSA, characterised by attentiveness, empathy and mutual respect, as one meaningful and equitable path forward. Formally, we answer the research question: *What are the dark sides of CSA for consumers under neoliberalism, and how can firms adopt an ethical framework to mitigate these dark sides and cultivate care in their approach to CSA?* To do this, we employ an 'envisioning' approach to conceptualisation (MacInnis, 2011). This entails 'identifying' the dark sides of CSA to which consumers might be exposed, defined as the 'broad umbrella to embrace a large and heterogeneous group of negative consequences of an economic and/or non-economic nature, affecting individuals and/or organisations and involving market actors and/or non-market actors' (Cova et al., 2021, p. 484). The wider negative consequences of CSA for consumers, who are often the primary target of these campaigns, have received little serious study. This work aims to surface those overlooked outcomes and offer a new perspective for understanding CSA, which is the intention of identifying conceptual work (MacInnis, 2011).

This creates an impetus to reconfigure the way we think about CSA, in light of the identified dark sides. 'Revising' conceptual work gains insight from alternative frames of reference and modifies the identified entity (CSA), accordingly (MacInnis, 2011). Our specific conceptual approach follows Jaakkola's (2020) 'theory adaptation', which aims to 'develop contribution by revising extant knowledge – that is, by introducing alternative frames of reference to propose a novel perspective on an extant conceptualisation' (p. 23). As firms seek to act as credible moral authorities by engaging in sociopolitical issues (Hoppner & Vadakeppatt, 2019), research on CSA has largely adopted an instrumental focus on business outcomes and stakeholder engagement (Brower, 2023). Despite the ethical tensions this creates for stakeholders (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020), little attention has been paid to developing ethical frameworks to guide CSA, highlighting a critical gap in the literature.

Specifically, this is addressed herein by comparing past ethical theories that have been discussed but not explicitly conceptualised in CSA studies, and subsequently applying an 'ethics of care' lens, which refers

to 'a way of living one's life driven by feelings of responsibility for enhancing the well-being of others and being sensitive to the interpersonal consequences of one's action and choices' (Thompson, 1996, p. 401). Through the novel perspective afforded by this conceptual approach, we uncover care ethics as a promising theoretical framework to undergird CSA, what we term care-based CSA. To put this alternative path of care-based CSA into practice, we provide a CSA Audit tool and a detailed set of strategic solutions.

2. Dark sides of corporate sociopolitical activism

2.1. Conceptual approach

Applying MacInnis' (2011) envisioning conceptualisation approach to our research question, this involves identifying ('seeing that something exists' i.e., dark sides of CSA) and revising ('seeing what has been identified in a different way' i.e., an ethical and caring approach to CSA). Research has focused on challenges and risks of CSA, but these have centred on the firm perspective, highlighting negative outcomes such as adverse investor reactions (Bhagwat et al., 2020), perceptions of woke-washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and negative market responses (Brower, 2023). Even when CSA problems arise from customer-related factors, such as a misalignment with customers' ideologies, the consideration has been for marketing and performance outcomes such as brand attitudes, behavioural intentions and firm sales (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021).

Conversely, we focus on the negative impacts experienced by consumers, which have not been marshalled and deeply understood in the literature. Although Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) study consumers and their employment of anti-brand activism strategies, they focus on the agency of consumers to engage in resistance and political consumerism efforts. In contrast, our study shines a light on the burdens or tensions that CSA places on consumers, taking a critical perspective in order to advance an ethical framework of CSA as a promising pathway.

To undertake the 'serious study' of dark sides (MacInnis, 2011), we first performed a comprehensive review of, and immersion in, the literature spanning CSA and adjacent activism terms. We derived six negative consequences of CSA that could be characterised as dark sides experienced by consumers, according to Cova et al.'s (2021) definition. We then developed our understanding of these dark sides and their impacts on consumers by reviewing relevant complementary literature (e.g., media studies, political science) to intersect them with the CSA literature. Finally, to provide greater meaning and a sense of structure, we categorised the six dark sides into two overlying themes corresponding with levels. The first theme, 'consumers' emotional and cognitive burden' reflects how CSA can negatively affect consumers on an individual level, making them feel disconnected, misrepresented or personally burdened by expectations to act. In contrast, the second theme called 'public discourse and harm', reflects broader societal impacts that consumers experience and witness, deepening social divisions and normalising toxic discourse that consumers experience collectively. See Table 1 below.

2.2. Consumers' emotional and cognitive burden (individual level)

Alienation: Mirzaei et al. (2022) caution that activism should be sufficiently inclusive of people with different views, social values and political ideologies, otherwise consumers may feel attacked, betrayed or ignored by woke campaigns. CSA evidently damages relationships with consumers who disagree with the stance taken and who perceive the brand's entry into social and political arenas as a major transgression (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Haupt et al., 2023). This can differ for market-driven versus values-driven organisations, as consumers will perceive market-driven firms as hypocritical for taking a stance and values-driven firms for staying silent (Korschun et al., 2019). Also, consumers with

Table 1
Dark sides of corporate sociopolitical activism.

Categories	Dark sides	Description	Indicative literature
Emotional and cognitive burden (Individual level)	Alienation	Consumers who oppose CSA or the specific stance taken by the firm feel distanced, betrayed or even attacked by the activist corporation and its supporters.	Bhagwat et al., 2020; Haupt et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2020
	Exclusion	Consumers in the very public the corporation seeks to reach or represent in activist campaigns do not see their identity, perspective or lived experiences being visible or valued.	Burgess et al., 2023; Kipnis et al., 2021; Tressoldi et al., 2023
	Responsibilisation	Consumers feel pressured to act but feel their efforts are disproportionate to those of the company or the issue at hand that requires structural or systemic change (beyond individual action).	Cherrier & Türe, 2023; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Giesler & Veresiu, 2014; Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021
Public division and harm (Societal level)	Intensified polarisation	Consumers experience heightened divisions as a result of corporations becoming symbols of political ideological identity and prompting consumers to take sides on divisive issues.	Brower, 2023; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Ulver, 2022; Weber et al., 2021
	Hateful discourse circulation	Consumers being exposed to hate speech or discriminatory discourse, which is catalysed and even normalised by a corporation taking a stand on a contentious issue.	Andersen & Johansen, 2024; Batista et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2025; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022; Wannow, 2024
	Oversimplification of solutions	Consumers are misled as complex issues are depoliticised or trivialised and presented as easily solved, typically through purchase and consumption.	Döbbe & Cederberg, 2024; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Podnar & Golob, 2024; Rogotzki & Rudeloff, 2025

liberal (versus conservative) political ideologies exhibit stronger beliefs that companies should take political stances (Ketron et al., 2022).

Because CSA attends to partisan issues, it draws out ‘counterparties’ (Hydock et al., 2020) that may feel alienated or even vilified by the firm’s stance. Consumers who find themselves the ‘odd ones out’ may experience negative physical and psychological effects (Lewis & Vredenburg, 2023). Taking a position on a controversial issue necessarily means brands express a viewpoint shared by only some consumers, causing others to be opposed (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020) or to feel marginalised (Haupt et al., 2023), which can motivate the immersion of oneself in an echo chamber (Boulianne et al., 2020). Alienation therefore intersects with several other dark sides uncovered below. For instance, individual feelings of being attacked may be

enabled by echo chambers, either actively sought or passively shaped by algorithms, which amplify existing views and filter out opposing ones. This can contribute to the demonisation of out groups and fuel polarisation and populism, which threaten society (Boulianne et al., 2020).

Exclusion: The era of overt exclusion in the marketplace has largely passed, but the less visible and no less harmful ‘failure to include’ endures (Henderson & Williams, 2013, p. 3). This dark side refers to the exclusion of the very consumers that the activist corporation claims to represent and promote in its campaign. For example, Tressoldi et al. (2023) found that even when companies take an activist stance on LGBTQIA + issues, consumers within the community often experience negative feelings – because when activism appears inconsistent with corporate practices, it not only amounts to rainbow-washing but also reinforces the heteronormative norms and identity binaries they face every day.

CSA is part of the wider push for brands to approach diversity (Burgess et al., 2023). Diversity involves recognising and representing a broad range of multiple intersecting identity differences, such as race, gender and ability (Leslie, 2019). In marketing, this encompasses inclusive practices that aim to serve marginalised groups and challenge marketplace discrimination (Kipnis et al., 2021). When campaigns contain stereotypical and non-representative themes, it can contribute to the dissemination of discriminatory beliefs as well as the harmful judgements and inequalities imposed on marginalised groups (Burgess et al., 2023). Despite the fact the Pride movement celebrates LGBTQIA + diversity, its use in CSA campaigns can overlook intersecting forms of exclusion – such as race, body size, disability, religion, or class – leaving out some community members who feel their lived realities are neither visible nor valued. Pride events are often criticised for homogeneity (e.g., Tressoldi et al., 2023).

Responsibilisation: In some cases of CSA, responsibility is not adequately taken on by companies. It is also shifted onto consumers, who are positioned as the ones expected to act in response to the campaign. This gives rise to the dark side of consumer responsibilisation, whereby individuals are increasingly expected to tackle complex social issues, like climate change and income inequality, through their personal purchasing decisions (Eckhardt & Dobscha, 2019). Such responsibilities were once managed by governments, and their transfer to individuals reflects neoliberal approaches of dispersing responsibility away from the state (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Though mobilising consumers to participate in collective social change efforts is a positive and intended goal of CSA (Kumar et al., 2025), responsibilisation occurs when companies shift the burden of addressing grand challenges onto consumers, often without matching it with meaningful action themselves (Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021).

The Starbucks’ #RaceTogether campaign asked barista employees to start up conversations about U.S. race relations with consumers (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). By encouraging customers to discuss race during routine transactions, the campaign shifted responsibility away from corporate action and onto individuals, many of whom felt unprepared or unwilling to engage (Logan, 2016). Starbucks received support from its consumer base, which is predominantly politically liberal leaning (Ketron et al., 2022). Instead of implementing structural changes to combat racial injustice, Starbucks relied on symbolic activism borne by consumers (and employees), thereby responsibilising them with driving social change.

With the growth of socially oriented marketing strategies, consumers now face pressures to act responsibly and discharge care in a range of situations (Yang & Makkar 2024). Amid widespread CSA around the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum, a disproportionate cultural load was borne by some Indigenous Australians, who were called upon to defend their positions and explain their history and rights (Anderson et al., 2023). This has broader applicability to other countries with colonial pasts and First Nations people who have been dispossessed, such as Canada. The indiscriminate responsibilisation of consumers may exacerbate inequalities and create conditions for over-

responsibilisation of some, or superimposed responsibilisation with overlapping and potentially conflicting duties (Cherrier & Türe, 2023). An incapacity to take on the duties that come with such consumer responsibilisation may then lead to guilt or shame for individuals (Chatzidakis et al., 2025).

2.3. Public division and harm (societal level)

Intensified polarisation: Polarisation stemming from CSA is a critical concern due to its negative effects on consumer psychology and welfare (Weber et al., 2021). Polarisation is often discussed at the population level or considered from a firm's perspective, framed as a trade-off between consumers who are attracted versus repelled by a company's stance (Hydock et al., 2020), but it has visible impacts on consumers too (Weber et al., 2021). It biases cognition, heightens political identity salience and reshapes group dynamics. When brands take public stances on divisive issues (Moorman, 2020), they often tap into consumers' personal beliefs and identities (Garg & Saluja, 2022). This can expose and exacerbate societal divides (Lewis & Vredenburg, 2023) and impede progress on important issues (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020), especially in digital environments, which intensify and polarise consumers' negative reactions (Kumar et al., 2025).

As political polarisation grows and creates a binary of 'for or against' and 'us versus them', more people tend to adopt extreme views, linked to stronger negative emotions and greater hostility towards out groups (van Prooijen et al., 2015). Negative attitudes impede acceptance of issues, especially when they are reinforced by politically homogenous communities (e.g., Eagly & Chaiken, 1998). Overall, CSA can intensify polarisation by signalling alignment with contested values, deepening divides between opposing groups and contributing to a marketplace shaped by division rather than dialogue. Polarisation in turn can reduce openness, increase resistance to social change and hamper societal cohesion.

Hateful discourse circulation: CSA plays a key role in shaping public moral discourse on issues (Branicki et al., 2021). Though firms may expect this to have the positive effects of bringing attention and awareness to an issue (Vredenburg et al., 2020), CSA campaigns by their very nature attend to partisan issues, where the value of solving the issue is questioned and the appropriate solution is debated (Moorman, 2020). For consumers, pushback from segments of the firm's audience who hold opposing views can escalate to heated, often hateful actions (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). Incivility is also known to arise from brand activism (Batista et al., 2022). CSA often intensifies around major political events as brands seek to align themselves with a side and therefore can contribute to the hateful discourse that flows. The 2016 U.S. Presidential Election and 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice referendum both illustrate how influential figures and brands can shape public sentiment, sometimes putting into motion trickle-down racism and discrimination (Anderson et al., 2023; Jardina & Piston, 2023).

Further, the firm's activist message can be weaponised by groups who co-opt or reinterpret the communicated stance to serve alternative agendas. For instance, hateful or extremist groups might use the brand's message to validate their perspectives. This was evident for Bud Light, where hate groups exploited messaging relating to trans inclusion and a social media firestorm ensued, with evidence of extensive personal attacks, anti-trans harassment and a marked increase in hate speech directed at trans influencer, Dylan Mulvaney (De Loera, 2023). Hate speech targeting minority groups – especially on social media – is a serious issue impacting consumers and society (Laaksonen et al., 2020). Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) found that consumers sometimes use anti-brand activism strategies by co-opting campaign hashtags in unrelated contexts to mock sociopolitical issues, their supporters and those directly affected (e.g., immigrants and advocates of liberal immigration policies), without engaging with the campaign itself (i.e., instead targeting those affected by the campaign's issues, such as immigration). Their study highlights the prevalence of critical and hostile responses

catalysed by CSA. It echoes cases, such as Gillette's stance on toxic masculinity, and brands aligning themselves with the LGBTQIA+ community, triggering negative reactions from heterosexual consumers (Tressoldi et al., 2023). CSA, which projects the values of entities with significant market and cultural authority (Moorman, 2020) arguably has capacity to legitimise and embolden those with exclusionary perspectives to circulate these sentiments amongst the collective. This normalises discriminatory discourse at a societal level.

Oversimplification of issues: A further repercussion of CSA may be the oversimplification of complex issues. Podnar and Golob (2024, p. 102) caution the marketisation of activism may lead to an 'appearance of manageability'. Firms may even monetise solutions to the focal issues of CSA campaigns – which are often those deemed grand challenges or wicked problems – by directly equating purchase to support, despite the fact complex and multifaceted efforts are required to produce change. Döbbe and Cederberg (2024) highlight how a climate crisis campaign promoting chicken consumption, over beef, sparked scepticism due to perceived oversimplification. Similarly, Pepsi came under scrutiny for their ad in which Kendall Jenner joins a BLM protest and dispels tension by offering police a branded beverage (Rogotzki & Rudeloff, 2025), minimising the complexity of racial injustice. The contradiction of executing activism campaigns in a corporate setting may lead to trivialisation (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020) and the depoliticisation of issues by framing them as solvable through moralised consumption choices (Rogotzki & Rudeloff, 2025). This distracts from the need for structural reforms and accountability from powerful entities.

3. Ethical frameworks of corporate sociopolitical activism

CSA inherently links with ethical theories. Brower (2023) argues that CSA is the next wave of differentiation and institutional evolution in the CSR domain. Taking a stance can result in either positive or negative outcomes for certain stakeholders and society more broadly (Hoppner & Vadakepatt, 2019). CSA aims to drive societal change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020), but the focus on the marketability of the focal issue often overshadows deeper care for all stakeholders (Podnar & Golob, 2024). This raises an ethical dilemma about whether CSA is leveraged for predominantly instrumental reasons (Branicki et al., 2021). To act as credible moral authorities in moral marketplaces, which is a driving force of CSA (Hoppner & Vadakepatt, 2019; Lee et al., 2024a), firms need to purposefully incorporate an ethical framework. Omitting the ethical context from the study of so-called transformative marketing strategies is a significant oversight, as this shapes and directs firm motivations, purpose and practices, and ultimately determines the delivery of intended outcomes (e.g., well-being; Parsons et al., 2021). However, research has yet to fully consider the ethical dimensions of CSA that accommodate the divisive nature of the focal issues and shepherd stakeholders with care. We first analyse existing ethical frameworks, ultimately arguing an ethics of care lens enables a detailed understanding of CSA's nature and consequences, without which CSA's ethical repercussions remain unclear.

3.1. Past theories of ethics and CSA

Several theories of ethics have been studied in CSA research and adjacent areas (e.g., CSR), such as teleology (utilitarian) ethics, deontology ethics and virtue ethics (Warren, 2022; Van de Ven, 2008). These ethical theories provide different perspectives to evaluate corporations' values and moral behaviours. Teleology (utilitarian) ethics emphasises the impacts and consequences of corporate social initiatives and their importance in maximising public welfare (Schwartz & Carroll, 2003), hence the ends justify the means for evaluating the morality of a company's action. Teleologism focuses on the costs and benefits (i.e., the consequences) of the outcome, rather than of the action itself (Chakrabarty & Bass, 2015). Teleology reasoning therefore encourages firms to engage in activism when it yields reputational or financial

benefits such as market share and loyalty (Mkrtchyan et al., 2024). This can result in strategically selective activism. Saluja and Chan (2025) argue that a brand could be driven by utilitarianism or consequentialism when it chooses to engage in activism that is popular and that transcends consumer political orientation. In such cases, the brand may be perceived as aligning with mainstream attitudes and trending causes. Conversely, when a brand takes a position that challenges public opinion, it may be viewed as ‘bold’ or ‘courageous’ – as if it is standing up against what is popular or widely accepted (Lee et al., 2024b). Such moral deliberation in activism can appear opportunistic and performative (Bogicevic et al., 2023) as it often fails to reflect a corporation’s genuine intent towards social betterment. Instead, it may serve to deepen perceptions of corporate hypocrisy (Korschun et al., 2019).

Deontological ethics, originating from Kantian moral philosophy, is driven by adherence to institutional rules, regulations, norms and laws (KoeHN, 1995). In socially driven corporate initiatives, deontology provides guidance as to how ethical an organisation is based on institutional, legal and social standards of acceptable behaviour, rather than the moral outcomes desired by an organisation (Chakrabarty & Bass, 2015). However, due to the complex nature of CSA and its implementation across diverse social, cultural and institutional contexts, achieving ethical absolutism of appropriate or inappropriate firm behaviours can be impractical, rigid and inflexible. Firms that adopt deontological ethics are more focused on their sense of obligation or duty towards society, which rests upon reactive rather than proactive actions in their social responsibility, without a clear regard for behaviours that may improve society (Chakrabarty & Bass, 2015). This may result in box-ticking approaches where companies do ‘just enough’ to appear ethical, thereby commodifying activism (Sobande, 2019).

Virtue ethics, based on Aristotle’s moral philosophy, emphasises an internal moral character of individuals or organisations as a driving force for ethical behaviour. In the context of CSA, this approach is viewed as ethically driven political engagement. It involves taking direct political action based on moral convictions, justifying interventions on ethical grounds (Pullen & Rhodes, 2014). However, virtue ethics, including CEO activism (Branicki et al., 2021; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021) has been criticised as overly idealistic (Schultz & Seele, 2020). Organisations often struggle to act virtuously due to diverse values and characteristics of their leaders and employees (Van de Ven, 2008). For example, Tesla’s CEO faced scrutiny over his environmental activism, particularly when his actions or statements become overly political, calling into question the sincerity of his commitment to green causes (Millman, 2023).

Ethics of care emerged as an alternative moral guideline for corporate social action. Ethics of care is a feminist ethical approach to a normative moral theory (Branicki, 2020; Held, 2006). The theory – employed across such disciplines as education (Noddings, 2013), psychology (Gilligan, 1982), social policy (Sevenhuijsen, 2003) and political science (Tronto, 1993) – posits that care is the foundation for moral judgement and action, emphasising relationships, interdependence, mutuality, responsiveness and dependencies in ethical deliberations. Gilligan (1982) offers a dynamic contextualised approach to moral reasoning that acknowledges the complexities of human relationships and experiences, and places value on maintaining care for all (Place, 2021). Tronto (1993) argues that everyone may benefit from a caring approach since an ethics of care analyses real-world environments that determine relationships. This theory asserts the application of care should account for context and come from personal concern for others’ specific circumstances that other ethical frameworks ignore.

An ethics of care is a novel approach to examining CSA issues because it offers relational and empathetic insights often absent from other ethical frameworks. Unlike utilitarianism, which is outcome driven, or deontology, which is rule-bound, care ethics centres on moral reasoning within specific contexts prioritising compassion, empathy and attentiveness to situational needs (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006). It also differs from virtue ethics, which can be overly idealistic, one-sided and

inward-looking, by emphasising the interdependence between organisation and those receiving care (Pettersen, 2008). Using an ethics of care perspective moves CSA from making bold public statements or aligning with trending social causes to a way of cultivating genuine, empathetic relationships and compassion with targeted communities, employees and other stakeholders. Ensuring care is the bedrock of CSA can encourage corporate empathy, humanity and attentiveness, which affected groups are more likely to resonate with and support (Branicki, 2020; Dong et al., 2024; Kong & Belkin, 2021). Empathy, in particular, plays a vital role in sociopolitical engagement, as it enables corporations to approach emotionally charged, historically complex and identity sensitive issues with the respect and nuance they require (Scalvini, 2024). When corporations acknowledge and respect the lived experience of affected communities, they foster authenticity and trust, which are essential for meaningful engagement rather than performative advocacy.

What makes an ethics of care most appropriate in the context of CSA is its repositioning of activism as relational, emotionally attentive and an ethically embedded practice, rather than a strategic or reputational tool. In pursuit of positive social change, activist corporations often rely on moralising narratives and emotionally uplifting messaging to cultivate empathy (Hopkins, 2015). Empathy and emotional connection are important in corporate communications, particularly in managing socially disruptive situations or sensitive topics (Branicki, 2020; Simola, 2003). However, such ‘feel good’ narratives have been scrutinised, especially when firms attempt to leverage empathy for selective causes, or the oversimplification of complex social issues through marketable narratives, potentially obscuring deeper inequalities and corporate complicity (Scalvini, 2024). Ethical decisions should include ‘the thoughts and emotions of those individuals interacting communicatively with one another’ (Gilstrap & Minchow-Proffitt, 2017, p. 172); an ethics of care encourages this with interdependence largely being established through emotional ties (Held, 2006).

Taken together, a care ethics approach offers three insights into care-based CSA: (1) organisations can move beyond episodic or performative empathy towards sustained caring relationships with communities affected by their actions; (2) interdependence can be nurtured through emotional attentiveness; and (3) the ongoing practice of care is of importance to CSA. This requires that we deconstruct an ethics of care theory to undertake a granular, theory-driven examination of CSA through this lens, discussed next.

3.2. Conceptualising an ethics of care

Ethics of care is understood as a ‘moral reasoning that derives from a concern for others and a desire to maintain thoughtful mutual relationships with those affected by one’s actions’ (Derry, 2005, p. 65). It shows that everyone, including corporations, has a responsibility for sustaining these reciprocal relationships. We explain the ethics of care as embodying four core tenets. First, an ethics of care conceives of human beings as distinct, unfinished entities that are involved in relationships with those around them; each of these relationships has varying degrees of interdependence and mutual influence (Yang & Makkar, 2024). This perspective places emphasis on social connectedness and shared responsibility to care for others, animals and the environment (Barnett et al., 2005; Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2013). By acknowledging that all stakeholders affected by CSA are part of a network of relationships and interdependencies, companies can justify activism that goes beyond profit motives and are popular in societal discourse (Saluja & Chan, 2025). Care ethics also challenges individualism, which assumes people are rational, autonomous, fully developed, self-sufficient and skilled decision-makers (Held, 2006; Sander-Staudt, 2018). Instead, care is understood as a moral orientation ‘embedded in other sorts of social practices – being a good parent, a caring partner or a good friend’ (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 46). Individuals are dependent on the care of others to develop their abilities and identities, and this occurs

symbiotically (Gilligan, 1982).

The second tenet highlights the importance of partiality and particularity (Pettersen, 2008; Sander-Staudt, 2018). Individuals have impactful, distinct relationships with those around them, whereby they prioritise those personally closest to them in ethical reasoning. Individual experiences are unique and situational, with ethics of care applied to actual rather than hypothetical situations, paying homage to the particularity of human beings and their experiences (Pettersen, 2008). Care, therefore, is context-specific and grounded in the uniqueness of individuals. For CSA, this emphasis on partiality is reflected in how companies choose to support causes that resonate with the values and realities of their key stakeholders. Rather than broad and impersonal activism, corporations are encouraged to engage with issues that hold personal relevance to their communities, employees and consumers (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). This requires listening closely to those within immediate circles and responding to their specific challenges. This departs from ethical approaches that emphasise justice and fairness driven by objective and formal logic, as well as individual rights and obligations.

The third tenet centres on the value of fulfilling one's needs holistically. Rationality is informed by meeting one's physical, mental and emotional needs in order to care for oneself and others. Care cannot be applied equally to all persons – it is a finite resource to be extended to every present interpersonal relationship (Noddings, 2013). This tenet rejects individuals being tasked with caring for others or society without caring for themselves (Pettersen, 2008). Instead, care ethics endorses the right of each person to have their needs met (Simola, 2003). This would mean that CSA-firms must not only consider the external impact of their activism but also ensure that they are fostering supportive internal environments for their employees and stakeholders (Nair et al., 2022). For example, before championing mental health causes or Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) movements, firms should examine whether their own workplace practices reflect these values and develop such competency.

The final care tenet argues that the 'main moral injunction is to maintain care relations in a way that is responsive to all within one's web of relations, including oneself' (Sander-Staudt, 2018, p. 194). This focuses attention on solutions to address individual needs within a situation without the risk of uneven contribution by one particular party (Sander-Staudt, 2018). Manning (1992) proposed extending ethics of care into the public realm, arguing that humans have a responsibility to engage at the collective level when individual efforts are not sufficient. In other words, ethics of care is not limited to intimate networks (e.g., families, neighbourhoods) but can extend to broader social and market systems. Thus, scholars have turned the dial of an ethics of care approach towards a 'wider duty, obligation, commitment and responsibility to those in need of (or more dependent on) care' (Shaw et al., 2017, p. 263).

In the context of CSA, an ethics of care can help organisations understand how to engage in care within the market when it comes to sociopolitical issues and the targeted/represented communities they aim to support. It also provides a theoretical connection as to how an organisation's ethical culture can contribute to a shared sense of ethics at the societal level (Tronto, 2000). Importantly, an ethics of care approach is more complex than simply being sensitive to others' needs or having an awareness of a principle of justice. Care involves a complex sequence of thoughts and activities that 'develop adequate responses to moral problems and to the moral dimension of experience' (Edwards, 2009, p. 239). In this way, care becomes a dynamic, ongoing practice that shapes how firms act with empathy, accountability and relationship integrity in their CSA efforts.

4. Advancing a care-based approach to corporate sociopolitical activism

4.1. Overview of care ethics phases

Although an ethics of care constitutes a unique and comprehensive moral standpoint as a situated practice, it must also enact other fundamental moral concepts, such as justice and responsibility (Held, 2006; Sevenhuijsen, 2003; Tronto, 2013). Tronto (1993) views an ethics of care as a dynamic four-staged process for meeting others' needs: (1) attentiveness (i.e., 'caring about', which recognises the necessity of care through attentiveness to the needs of others); (2) responsibility ('caring for' or taking care of, which involves taking responsibility to respond to these needs and formulating a plan to do so); (3) action and competence ('caregiving', which calls upon the ethical quality of providing care competently to fulfil others' needs) and (4) responsiveness ('care-receiving', where understanding the response to care determines whether the need was carefully and conscientiously fulfilled). Tronto's four principles highlight how an ethics of care goes beyond attentiveness to needs towards a responsibility for enriching relationships with others. The four-staged process shows care is a situated practice (Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2016) that requires ethical deliberation (Weiskopf & Willmott, 2013). Leveraging this established staged process as an alternative frame of reference, we will now critically analyse how care can be operationalised in CSA activities to provide a novel perspective. Next, we present a CSA Audit, which organisations can undertake to assess the presence of CSA dark sides in their current practice, followed by strategic solutions that can be implemented as part of a care-based approach to CSA. Both are structured according to Tronto's care phases.

4.2. CSA audit

Following the identification of CSA dark sides and revised understanding of CSA through the application of an ethical care lens, we introduce what we term 'care-based CSA' as an alternative path to cultivate caring practice that mitigates burdens and tensions for consumers. To this end, we propose firms complete a care-based CSA Audit (Table 2) to systematically assess their (un)caring CSA practices. The audit lays out a set of diagnostic questions firms must ask at each phase of care to assess the extent to which the activities remain true to the tenets of care and therefore avoid negative consequences of CSA activities. With each phase, we pay particular attention to the CSA 'care recipient' and possible uncaring practices that have harmful consequences for targeted individuals and communities. After the audit, which is intended as a tool that evaluates current practice, we develop detailed strategic solutions for the future.

4.3. Strategic solutions

Here we articulate concrete avenues for firms to practice 'care-based CSA'. In considering how care can be strategically infused within CSA, it should be noted that care cannot be 'romanticised' and that it is more likely to be 'filled with inner contradictions, conflict and frustration than it is to resemble the idealised interactions of mother and child or teacher and student or nurse and patient' (Tronto, 2000, p. 64). Care requires an investment of labour as well as know-how and complex judgements (Tronto, 2000). It is from this viewpoint we outline practical actions for firms' implementation of care-based CSA to limit negative consequences.

4.3.1. Care about (Phase 1)

Tronto's (2013) first phase – caring about – centres on *attentiveness* to the needs of others, marking the ethical starting point of care. In care-based CSA, this calls for companies to develop a deeply attuned awareness of the lived realities and systemic injustices faced by the communities they claim to support. Attentiveness should not be treated

Table 2
Care-based corporate sociopolitical activism audit.

Phases of care	Audit questions
Care about	● Does the issue align with the firms' values, identity and history, and will the firm hold themselves accountable for care long-term? ● Whom could the CSA campaign (e.g., stance, content, partner) potentially help/harm and include/exclude, directly and indirectly? ● How is the target or represented population of the CSA campaign marginalised, oppressed, stigmatised and/or excluded? ● How has the CSA target or represented population reacted to similar activities that led to care and/or negative consequences?
Care for	● How will care be strategically invested in and actioned? ● Will partners be engaged to care for the issue (who and how)? ● How will the boundaries of responsibility for CSA be negotiated with others (e.g., media, not-for-profits, employees, government, policymakers, consumers)? ● How is ambiguity or use of negative stereotypes in imagery and discourse in CSA campaigns (e.g., statements, actions) being identified and addressed?
Caregiving	● Whose power is enhanced/harmed by the CSA activity? ● How does the CSA campaign intend to discharge care – when, where and for whom it is needed? ● What competencies (e.g., financial, knowledge) are needed to carry out CSA activities efficiently and effectively to meet the care needs of the targeted or represented population? ● What are the most valuable ways in which care can be given by the firm to avoid negative consequences? ● How will adjustments be made to ensure appropriate care is discharged in the moment to those who need it? ● What is the firm's longer-term plan for ongoing care provision?
Care receiving	● How will the firm monitor the impact of CSA, including positive (care) and negative consequences? ● Is care received as anticipated, benefitting the targeted or represented population? ● Is care received considerate of the well-being of all or the few? ● What impact might CSA activity have on wider sociocultural discourses that pertain to the population targeted/represented? ● Does potential for care to be received via CSA outweigh the potential for negative consequences to emerge? What trade-offs might occur? Who might be the recipient of those consequences?

as peripheral or symbolic but must be structurally embedded, for example, through the formal integration of these social concerns into the organisation's mission, vision and strategic goals. Such embedding acknowledges not only the temporality of change but also recentres on those who are vulnerable – including humans, the environment and animals. This phase reframes initial stages of CSA from strategic cause selection to a moral act of noticing and acknowledging harm, inequality or marginalisation. When corporations skip or superficially engage in this phase, the result is often tokenistic activism or cause commodification – early indicators of dark sides, which can impact consumers individually, by emotionally or cognitively burdening them, and collectively, through harmful societal divisions and discourse. In contrast, when caring for others takes centre stage, it reinforces that key stakeholders (including CEO, employees, shareholders) must keep them front of mind.

This practical action addresses the 'opportunism effect' amongst firms adopting CSA relating to topics in the zeitgeist (Anisimova et al., 2025). It redirects corporations towards a care lens, which involves active listening to unspoken needs (Parsons et al., 2021), rather than being driven purely by alignment with corporate identity or improvements to the bottom line (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020). Companies could practice greater empathy and active listening (e.g., social media listening) by responding meaningfully to the communities they claim to support. This would help minimise alienation and exclusion amongst consumers, who may be surprised or vilified by the activist stance, as well as the risk of intensified polarisation, which can arise from hasty or ill-considered engagement in complex issues and impacted communities.

The first step to building empathy and trust is through immersive engagement with the individuals and communities that are the focus of CSA. This involves moving beyond superficial gestures to actively listen to stakeholders' experiences, understand their needs and collaborate on solutions that address these challenges. To frame these efforts in terms that resonate with corporate processes, co-design workshops and journey mapping provide practical tools for narrowing the distance between the firm and its stakeholders. For example, Unilever (2023) has employed co-design workshops with farmers in developing regions to better understand their challenges and work together to improve sustainability and livelihoods. Companies can thereby minimise the occurrence of dark sides, especially exclusion, alienation and the misalignment of solutions with problems, including the responsabilisation of consumers to address complex, multi-faceted problems. These approaches also ensure that the next caring phases are informed by the lived realities of affected stakeholders rather than abstract assumptions, signalling a genuine attentiveness towards care provision.

4.3.2. Care for (Phase 2)

Caring for (Tronto, 2013) connotes a shift to actively taking responsibility for addressing and meeting care needs (Parsons et al., 2021). CSA involves 'caring for' by moving beyond seeing the need for care to assuming responsibility to meet that need, namely in the form of symbolic messaging, concrete commitments or corporate action directed at sociopolitical issues and affected/represented populations (Ahmad et al., 2024; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021). As this phase relates to organising the care and the interdependent nature of caring (Parsons et al., 2021; Tronto, 2013), firms must exhibit self-knowledge in evaluating their capacity for extending care beyond self to others. Critically, firms must truly step into their sense of duty to avoid overly burdening consumers with responsibility for the intended change – an identified dark side of CSA. Checking that the focal issue of CSA can be supported without the need for consumers to purchase products or services is an effective litmus test for organisations to ensure that they are not responsabilising consumers for care provision. The second way in which companies can fulfil their sense of duty is to leverage their power to orchestrate market-based solutions to care. The market is the source of problems in care provision, but it also holds potential as an actor to solve problems (Parsons et al., 2021). For example, instead of relying on consumers to address issues of food insecurity, as happened with Panera Cares where customers were tasked with conspicuously choosing their price and the inclusion of a donation (Eckhardt & Dobscha, 2019), firms can build relationships with other market actors to facilitate the delivery of care.

SecondBite does this as a charitable organisation that 'rescues' food from corporate partners ranging from supermarkets, farmers markets and major manufacturers, then delivers them to charity partners to get food and drink to those in the community who need them most (Stephens et al., 2020). By leveraging their influence and infrastructure, SecondBite harnesses what is needed from the powerful players in the market, rather than consumers who may themselves experience vulnerability. In doing so, they mitigate the dark sides of oversimplifying solutions and consumer responsabilisation by employing systemic intervention and market orchestration to address complex societal issues, rather than seeking once-off consumer donations. Though we acknowledge that this is a charitable organisation whose primary purpose is to promote and support its chosen cause, activism is an increasingly adopted strategy within the third sector (Lee et al., 2024b), representing different ways of doing things from which commercial businesses can draw inspiration.

4.3.3. Caregiving (Phase 3)

Tronto's (2013) third phase – caregiving – speaks to the action of care (Shaw et al., 2017) and calls upon the ethical quality of *competence*. This phase requires consideration of how care proceeds and practices of care are enacted (Parsons et al., 2021), asserting the caregiver must

possess the technical (e.g., skills, knowledge, finances, resources) and moral aptitude to administer functional practices of care ‘in the moment’. This means noticing care needs and actioning care, whenever needed. Firms are recommended to consider the specific, unique needs of people in their own context, rejecting one-size-fits all solutions (Pettersen, 2008).

In the activism literature, these notions are perhaps best represented by ‘moral competence’, which refers to the company’s ability to pass accurate moral judgements (Sibai et al., 2021). CSA-firms must clearly connect their benevolence (attentiveness and responsibility i.e., a desire to do good) and beneficence (competence i.e., doing good) (Shaw et al., 2017). Consumers should observe firms demonstrating their moral competence to administer care as and when it is needed, even when this is not the efficient or profitable path. This can help prevent dark sides, namely the oversimplification of complex issues as easily solvable through purchase and consumption and relatedly, the responsabilisation of consumers to address structural or systemic issues through their individual actions and choices. Instead of evoking universal or vague messaging, which can occur in CSA, firms should strive for specificity and depth, engaging directly with the complexity of the issue or population at hand. Gillette’s 2019 toxic masculinity campaign employed abstract critique where constructive dialogue could have enabled a tacit and nuanced response to the care needs of those excluded from dominant but harmful models of masculinity. This would not only alleviate the risk of individual consumers experiencing feelings of alienation and exclusion but also of the wider circulation of hateful discourse that further entrenches divides and exacerbates polarisation.

Firms must establish systems and practices that enable care provision in real time. CSA tends to be once-off or periodic, meaning the discharge of care occurs at a time determined by the corporation’s campaign schedule. A care lens means CSA should start when care is needed and continue as long as that care need exists, remaining partial to those closest to the firm and particular to their circumstances – not when care becomes popular and ripe for commodification. Organisational change is essential to caregiving becoming a central aspect of operations, particularly within the firm’s CSA campaigns. Tronto (2000) holds that firms have resource capacity – finances, human resources, ability, power, influence, voice – representing a technical competence for care that can be operationalised in their caregiving attempts. This can begin with purposeful recruitment strategies, such as creating employment pathways for consumers experiencing vulnerability. Training programmes equip employees with the skills and empathetic understanding to support these groups effectively. Furthermore, firms can integrate employee volunteering programs to provide time, resources and leadership (Knox, 2020) to enable participation in community engagement during work hours, rather than placing the responsibility on them to do so independently. HoMie, our opening example of inspiring care-based CSA, exemplifies how firms can integrate care into their operations through its Pathway Alliance Program, an accredited retail education and employment initiative for young people experiencing homelessness or hardship. Such approaches hold promise to mitigate dark sides by showing that wicked problems (i.e., housing security) require embedded and thoughtful organisational models and relatedly, that individual consumers could not be expected to possess and exert the level of competence required to tackle a major social challenge.

4.3.4. Care receiving (Phase 4)

Care receiving (Tronto, 2013) involves intended recipients being able to consume the care in order to evaluate its quality and whether their care needs are met. Thus, a form of *responsiveness* as an ethical element to the action of care (i.e., via caregiving) is sought. A care lens involves listening to and addressing both the spoken and unspoken needs of people (Parsons et al., 2021). Responsiveness by those receiving care is not always possible or even likely in some circumstances, such as in the protection of animals. Nonetheless, we recommend firms pursue responsiveness from care recipients in innovative ways that explicitly

account for the state of the care recipient and their ability to respond when assessing the efficacy of caring actions (e.g., Tronto, 2013). These methods could include digital care diaries, storytelling platforms, or even emoji-based feedback tools or wearable and ambient sensors that passively capture everyday experiences and emotional responses. Such approaches reduce the reliance on formal evaluations or verbal feedback, which many care recipients may find difficult or burdensome. Immersing caregivers (such as organisational staff) in simulated care journeys can also offer valuable reflections on what the care experience might feel like from the recipient’s perspective. This would help lessen the risk of dark sides such as alienation and exclusion amongst intended care recipients by understanding their perceptions and feelings.

Evaluating how care is received from an individual level, and the level of impact at a societal level, would not only support a firm’s goals of learning what is (and is not) working but also hold firms accountable to the causes and communities they are serving. This is a particularly important step given that social impact is defined as ‘beneficial outcomes resulting from prosocial behaviour that are enjoyed by the intended targets of that behaviour and/or by the broader community of individuals, organisations, and/or environments’ (Esteban-Sanchez et al., 2017, p. 1103). Currently, social impact is assessed through perceptual-based (e.g., Fortune Reputation Survey) or performance-based (e.g., Toxic Release Inventory or corporate philanthropy) sources of data, with an evident lack of examination of success in terms of actual contribution to societal betterment (France et al., 2024). By embracing rigorous measurement and reporting, firms can demonstrate accountability, build trust and ensure their future efforts are impactful rather than performative. Crucially, as with any strategy, evaluation involves monitoring and being agile in adapting as needs arise during execution of CSA to pre-empt dark sides, rather than watching failure emerge and addressing negative consequences – such as consumer experiences of alienation or exclusion – in the future. Beyond individual level dark sides, this could help mitigate the flow-on effects to societal level concerns of hateful discourse circulation and extreme public polarisation.

The first step in evaluation and monitoring is cultivating a culture of introspection within the firm. Employees across all levels should ask critical questions such as: What change is needed, and what constitutes meaningful change? How can we measure this? What outcomes do we aspire to achieve? This introspection should be supported by robust tools and processes, such as audits (e.g., the CSA Audit presented here) and scorecards, that require evidence of progress on the sociopolitical issues the firm has committed to addressing. For example, evaluating executive decisions, marketing strategies, supply chain processes, and corporate culture through the lens of these commitments ensures that every organisational action contributes to dismantling barriers and creating access and opportunities for those affected by these issues. Firms must also proactively question whether their actions are likely to cause the burdens and harms to consumers and society at large that characterise the dark sides of CSA by reinforcing systemic inequities or harming the very groups they aim to support. This aligns with ethics of care that asserts that the well-being of all must be considered and not just the few (Place, 2021).

A second approach involves external advocacy to institutionalise evaluation across industries. Firms can initiate and participate in lobbying efforts to influence lawmakers and policymakers to enforce stricter reporting requirements on corporate actions and outcomes. Indeed, policymakers should be considering how firms can be accountable in their new roles of activists. As CSA continues to receive uptake, it is valuable for policymakers to implement systems which evidence impact for the environment and society, as a natural (more proactive) extension of the existing required sustainability reporting. These measures ensure that companies are held accountable for demonstrating tangible progress, thus reducing the risk of woke-washing or other deceptive practices that fail vulnerable groups. Such an approach to evaluation could disincentivise the pursuit of market-

based solutions that contribute to a perceived oversimplification of the problem and the responsabilisation of consumers to fix it. Patagonia, by contrast, exemplifies a robust approach to evaluation with its regular reporting on environmental and social initiatives, supply chain transparency and environmental footprint assessments, all of which underlie its radical activism (Spry et al., 2021).

5. Discussion

This research sought to identify potential dark sides of CSA as experienced by consumers and revise current understanding of CSA by showing how firms can approach it from an ethics of care perspective. This led to envisioning what we term ‘care-based CSA’, aimed at mitigating dark sides and cultivating a more responsible approach to CSA. In detail, we identified six dark sides: alienation, exclusion, responsabilisation, intensified polarisation, hateful discourse circulation and the oversimplification of solutions. These dark sides, which manifest across individual and societal levels – categorised as consumers’ emotional and cognitive burdens and public discourse and harms, respectively – reveal the limitations of the neoliberal assumptions that underscore much of the existing CSA research. This in turn highlighted an opportunity to integrate ethical theories, which have been referenced but not explicitly conceptualised in CSA studies, to counteract possible dark sides resulting from CSA. CSA studies have focused largely on business outcomes and stakeholder engagement (e.g., Brower, 2023), with limited attention to ethical frameworks – despite the tensions such activism creates (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). By adopting a feminist, care-centred perspective, this study followed Tronto’s (2013) care phases and advanced care-based CSA as a dynamic, multi-phase process (rather than a static endeavour). It emphasised the need for activist corporations to adopt relational practice and continually reassess their caring responsibilities while balancing social and business objectives. We also elaborated in depth the practical implementation of care-based CSA, proposing actionable pathways in the form of the CSA Audit of current practice and strategic solutions that provide phase-by-phase advice for the future.

5.1. Implications for theory and practice

This study contributes to the CSA literature in three innovative ways. The first contribution offered in this study is the illumination of six potential dark sides of CSA, which were identified in the process of envisioning care-based CSA. This responds to calls for a more nuanced interrogation of CSA as necessarily desirable at the societal level (Brower, 2023; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). These dark sides reveal burdens or tensions consumers might face as relatively less powerful market actors across two categories and levels: (1) consumers’ emotional and cognitive burdens (individual level), and (2) public division and harm (societal level). This paper extends existing scholarship on risks inherent to CSA, which has up to this point focused on such consequences as the reputational damage when activism misaligns with audience values (Whitler & Barta, 2024) or the strategic failure dependent on whether the activism is driven from the top-down versus bottom-up (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). Our research shifts focus to negative flow-on effects experienced by consumers, namely alienation, exclusion, responsabilisation, intensified polarisation, hateful discourse circulation and the oversimplification of solutions.

By doing so, we show that when CSA efforts are poorly executed, they can create a lose-lose situation (Brower, 2023), damaging both the targeted consumers and the companies’ own legitimacy and social impact. Our research demonstrates that corporations often selectively and calculatedly choose the issues they support (Taylor, 2024). This selectiveness privileges commercialisation (Sobande, 2019), where problems and populations that are not ‘trendy’ are excluded or neglected. Moreover, CSA contributes to the wider problem of consumers being responsabilised (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) to address sociopolitical issues

through their individual, moralised consumption choices. Thus, our approach builds upon recent work (e.g., Gonzalez-Arcos et al., 2021) that reveals unforeseen consequences for consumers when companies choose to attend to their societal responsibilities in new ways.

Second, we advance care-based CSA, which is enabled by introducing an alternative frame of reference, namely an ethics of care (Tronto, 2013). This spotlights activist institutions’ caring responsibilities that often remain unclear under the neoliberal assumptions that dominate marketing scholarship and practice (e.g., Brower, 2023; Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Scalvini, 2024). We drew on established conceptual approaches of envisioning (MacInnis, 2011) and theory adaptation (Jaakkola, 2020), which both emphasise the value and originality in problematising a concept (i.e., CSA) and utilising different theory to revise extant knowledge and divergent thinking to envision a new reality. Specifically, we envision four distinct phases of care-based CSA. These align with Tronto’s (2013) care phases and accordant with these, care-based CSA is conceived as a dynamic, ongoing practice that is infused with empathy, accountability and relational integrity, helping to mitigate CSA’s negative consequences. This focus helps progress our understanding of CSA by shifting the lens from a dominant neoliberal, outcomes-driven perspective to one grounded in relational and moral obligations.

By applying an ethics of care, this paper foregrounds the emotional, social and structural responsibilities that activist institutions have toward affected communities. Such responsibilities are often obscured when CSA is evaluated only through strategic or instrumental frames. This reframing allows for a more ethically grounded critique of CSA and opens space for imagining forms of activism that are more inclusive, accountable and responsive to the needs of those most impacted. Because research recognises CSA’s strategic benefits such as enhancing reputation (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019), building brand equity (Lee et al., 2024b) and securing self-interested gains (Schmidt et al., 2021), CSA is often framed as an optional activity rather than a systemic responsibility. Firm’s intention to care for communities and causes that align with their personal sense of responsibility is often one-sided (Branicki, 2020) with activist corporations being calculative (Moorman, 2020) and driven primarily by a desire to capitalise on the zeitgeist, creating a strong negative bandwagon effect (Wang et al., 2022). This research challenges these assumptions by demonstrating that a care-based, socially interdependent perspective can be just as viable and valuable (Fotaki, 2023) as economically driven models in harnessing the transformative power of activism. Drawing on Tsui’s (2013) call for more caring organisations, we contend that embedding care into CSA practices is aligned with the broader vision of ‘marketing for a better world’ (Chandy et al., 2021).

Third, for practitioners, we make care-based CSA actionable by advancing the CSA Audit and offering strategic solutions to support its practical implementation. Not all corporations and CSA campaigns are equal – and so evaluating current practices and getting a clear picture of the starting point must be sufficiently flexible. We therefore developed a care-based CSA Audit that embeds principles of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness. It is a diagnostic tool to guide firms in assessing their current activism and tailoring their future activism, helping them navigate complex socio-political terrains with greater accountability. This audit tool is designed to assess how caring a company’s CSA campaigns are and provide a structured, reflective framework for evaluating the ethical depth, relational sensitivity and social impact of their activism efforts. This is an important baseline from which to move forward with CSA with the detailed strategic solutions we outlined. In practical terms of how firms can operationalise care, we have purposefully developed the strategic solutions to correspond with Tronto’s (2013) four care phases. It serves to shift the focus of CSA towards relational ethics, emphasising empathy, responsiveness and interconnectedness. Yet, in terms of taking these higher-level aims and intentions and making them actionable, grounding our strategic solutions in Tronto’s (2013) care phases deconstructs care-based CSA into

four stages that each contains specific, theory-driven recommendations and provides a roadmap for practitioners to mitigate dark sides.

This would help organisations move beyond performative gestures by identifying areas where care for communities, stakeholders and broader societal well-being can be meaningfully embedded. This is an important consideration given the CSA literature is replete with warnings of the risks of woke-washing (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020) and mere signalling of a position (Brower, 2023). Our approach offers a novel perspective to what we already know about authentic activism. That is, corporations need to exhibit bravery (e.g., Lee et al., 2024b) and a willingness to sacrifice financial gains in pursuit of genuine social impact (Mirzaei et al., 2022), and to go beyond discussions of demonstrable commitment to the activist stance through visible actions (Ahmad et al., 2024). Care-based CSA encourages organisations to be more attentive, empathetic and intersectional in their discharge of care via CSA initiatives and to cultivate their relationships as caregivers with care-receivers (consumers targeted by or represented in CSA campaigns). Care-based CSA indicates that companies have great potential to act as caregivers, not only creating sustainable and commercially viable practices, but also genuinely inclusive and caring. Care-based CSA, including the implementation of the audit and strategic solutions detailed herein, in turn, promotes a practical approach beyond performative activism and towards fostering genuine, caring relationships between corporations and society.

5.2. Limitations and future research

We conclude with consideration of limitations and fruitful avenues for future research. First, our work has only started to critically examine CSA, delineating dark sides that have not previously been surfaced and making the case for ethical frameworks to be explicitly considered in this literature. Here, we identify and categorise six dark sides supported by evidence and examples, and we encourage researchers to uncover others as this domain evolves alongside the practice of CSA across geopolitical and sociocultural contexts. Second, extended empirical investigation of the proposed dynamics, outcomes and relationships of this paper would rigorously test the ethical implications of CSA. Third, whereas the majority of CSA research has privileged the perspective of the firm/investor/brand, a focus in future studies on the wider stakeholder set would help to make their experiences as the intended audience for CSA more visible. Most pertinent may be individuals and communities as care receivers and employees and suppliers who may be engaged to act as caregivers.

Last, the ‘envisioning’ (MacInnis, 2011) and ‘theory adaptation’ conceptual approaches (Jaakkola, 2020) taken in this paper have been inspired by other marketing researchers that are challenging the mainstream marketing literature by illuminating dark sides (e.g., Cova et al., 2021) and bringing in alternative perspectives (including an ethics of care, Parsons et al., 2021). These approaches provided a method of sorts to seriously study the dark sides that can occur with CSA and to shift the perspective to care-based CSA as an alternative path forward for some organisations. We encourage researchers working on CSA and in other pockets of the scholarly field to consider bringing in new theories to provide a different frame within which they can problematise phenomena, as original conceptual work in marketing is important and timely.

Equally, there are new insights to be gained from integrating other theoretical perspectives (than ethics of care) with CSA. The goal of this paper was not to identify *all* possible consequences of CSA. It was to focus on the promise of care principles (e.g., empathy, social connectedness, relationship interdependence), which are emerging in the practice of CSA as a departure from rational and transactional approaches that are accordant with neoliberalism. An ethics of care was essential to the advancement of care-based CSA in this paper, yet it remains for future research to make visible other potentialities and repercussions of CSA through the application of other lenses. Given the

sociopolitical issues with which CSA engages, some of the most promising theories to consider include Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality and Post Colonial Theory.

To close, this paper argues that an ethics of care offers a practical and context-sensitive lens for addressing the moral complexities of CSA. Unlike prior abstract or binary moral framings (e.g., right versus wrong), which often lead to empty ‘speaking up’, we align with the notion that meaningful engagement must be context dependent (Podnar & Golob, 2024). A care-based CSA approach shifts the focus from doing the right things to doing things right – prioritising relational responsibility, attentiveness and responsiveness over symbolic gestures.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Amanda Spry: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Zoe Lee:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Marian Makkar:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Cassandra France:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. All authors contributed equally to the article.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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