

## Who Speaks Matters: The Effect of Insider Versus Outsider Activism on Consumer Responses to Company-Directed Activism

NEDA NINOVA-SOLOVYKH

INGRID WAHL

SABINE EINWILLER

University of Vienna, Austria

Companies have been criticized by employees and activists alike for their insufficient engagement with social and environmental issues. This study examines how consumers respond to public company-directed activism depending on who the activists are, what rhetoric they use, and how consumers perceive the particular issue raised. The results of an online experiment ( $N = 303$ ) focusing on climate change show that insider activists are evaluated as more legitimate than outsider activists. Outsider activists using aggressive rhetoric are ascribed the least legitimacy compared with outsiders using peaceful rhetoric and insiders regardless of their rhetoric. Furthermore, consumers' perceived problem and involvement recognition regarding climate change positively influence their evaluation of activist legitimacy. Activist legitimacy, in turn, leads to more negative general attitudes toward the target company and thus higher intentions for negative word of mouth (NWOM). Consumers' perceived problem, involvement, and constraint recognition also directly affect their NWOM intentions.

*Keywords: employee activism, rhetoric, legitimacy, consumer attitudes, NWOM, situational perceptions, experiment*

Since the early 1990s, big companies worldwide have regularly become the target of activists urging corporate change (Bartley & Child, 2014). Expectations for companies include greater social and environmental responsibility, with pressure coming from inside and outside. Both insiders (i.e., employees and shareholders) and outsiders (i.e., social movement organizations, NGOs, and consumers) can call on companies to change undesired business practices that influence climate and social well-being (Vasi & King, 2012).

In recent years, more employees, especially in the United States, have publicly expressed their concerns about how their employers handle social and environmental issues. Popular examples include the 2018 large-scale walkouts of Google employees revolting against the company's disregard of sexual

---

Neda Ninova-Solovykh: neda.ninova@univie.ac.at

Ingrid Wahl: ingrid.wahl@univie.ac.at

Sabine Einwiller: sabine.einwiller@univie.ac.at

Date submitted: 2024-10-24

Copyright © 2025 (Neda Ninova-Solovykh, Ingrid Wahl, and Sabine Einwiller). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <https://ijoc.org>.

harassment allegations, the continuing X campaign by Amazon Employees for Climate Justice, and, more recently, Disney employees demanding their employer take a stronger stand against legislation limiting classroom instruction on gender identity and homosexuality. Hence, insiders increasingly engage in actions typical for outsider activists. Employees also use various rhetorical strategies, sometimes being particularly provocative and hostile. From an employee behavior perspective, this type of activism is viewed as disruptive because it is visible to the public and can generate reputational costs for the target company (Briscoe & Gupta, 2021).<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, it is a subject of growing interest among communication scholars (Krishna, 2021; Ninova-Solovykh, 2023).

People can show different responses to company-directed activism. In particular, different evaluations of activists' legitimacy to demand social change, stemming from activists' relationship with the target company and the rhetoric used, can lead consumers to think differently of and act differently toward the target company. Furthermore, not everyone exposed to activism will care equally about the issue raised; instead, some people may be inattentive or cynical about it (Hallahan, 2001), leading to more negative evaluations of the activists and more positive responses toward the target company. Consumers are easily exposed to disruptive events like activist campaigns and, at the same time, are critical for a company to maintain its reputation (Walsh & Beatty, 2007). However, consumer responses have only been rarely examined in activism research, with few notable exceptions (Bartley & Child, 2011; van den Broek, Langley, & Hornig, 2017).

The present study aims to examine how activist type (i.e., insiders versus outsiders) and activist rhetoric (i.e., aggressive versus peaceful) affect consumers' evaluations of activist legitimacy (i.e., activist-related response) and, subsequently, consumers' general attitudes and negative word-of-mouth (NWOM) intentions toward the target company (i.e., company-related responses). In addition, consumers' situational perceptions regarding the activist issue are considered as factors influencing both activist- and company-related consumer responses.

## **Literature Review and Hypotheses**

### ***Activism and Legitimacy***

Activism is the process by which special-interest groups exert pressure on companies to change policies, practices, or conditions that the activists find problematic (Smith, 2013). Gaining legitimacy is a key priority of activists when it comes to agitating the public in their favor (Vrikki, 2018) and increasing the responsiveness of their targets (Eesley & Lenox, 2006). Consumers considering activists legitimate can put additional pressure on companies to respond. This article focuses on legitimacy as an individual perception followed by a judgment (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). It builds on Suchman's (1995) definition of legitimacy as an "assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially

---

<sup>1</sup> Insider (or employee) activism differs from whistleblowing, which describes an individual employee bringing claims of illegal, illegitimate, or immoral organizational practices to the attention of authorities. Whereas whistleblowers tend to act alone, activists often engage in collective efforts (see Briscoe & Gupta, 2016), yet both activists and whistleblowers can act outside the organizational system.

constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (p. 574). While the social context also provides relevant perceptual inputs, people's legitimacy evaluations are primarily driven by their individual perceptions of the entity's properties and behaviors (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Actions can be planned to produce positive legitimacy evaluations, for example, through protest PR techniques (Göncü, Saka, & Sayan, 2018), issues management (Woods, 2019a), high-quality evidence (Taylor, Hajmohammad, & Vachon, 2021), or the juxtaposition of radical and moderate tactics to make mainstream activist demands seem more reasonable by comparison (Derville, 2005). At the same time, certain predefined activist characteristics are also relevant for consumers' legitimacy evaluations.

### ***Activist-Related Response: Evaluation of Activist Legitimacy***

Activists being company insiders or outsiders is an important relationship-based property, which may result in different legitimacy evaluations. Employees have been described as "the quintessential insiders" (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016, p. 19) who possess substantial knowledge about their employing company while being relatively dependent on it. In the eyes of consumers, this can provide employees with a greater right—and competence—to critically engage in corporate affairs than outsider activists. Furthermore, employee activists are committed to both a social issue and their company (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) in that they remain loyal to their employer despite publicly expressing disagreement with its practices. This can generate more understanding for employees as activists compared to outsiders who put the entire focus on the issue and treat companies as enemies (Woods, 2019b). Moreover, employees daring to speak out despite job-related risks can create a sense of urgency and strengthen consumers' perception of employees' efforts as necessary, thus resulting in stronger support. Hence, activists who are presumably better informed about internal affairs and personally related to the target company should be accorded greater legitimacy by exposed consumers, as expressed in the following hypothesis:

*H1: Consumers exposed to insider activism will evaluate activists as more legitimate than those exposed to outsider activism.*

Rhetoric is a crucial element of activist behavior that could also influence consumers' legitimacy evaluations. Generally, activists should present their messages in a way that allows them "to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198). In particular, confrontational rhetoric is often claimed to contribute to social movement outcomes. According to Cathcart (1978), to attain legitimacy, activists need to create dialectic tension with institutions and strip them of their legitimacy. Furthermore, as stories concerning conflict, drama, and extreme behavior are viewed as particularly newsworthy (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017), activists are often tempted to select tactics with more negative than positive overtones to attract attention.

However, aggressive rhetoric centered around confrontation and hostile criticism is a double-edged sword. While extreme actions that are harmful to others or highly disruptive can increase activists' public visibility, they can also appear too drastic, antagonistic, and therefore inappropriate. Thus, confrontational engagement (Briscoe, Gupta, & Anner, 2015) and radical protests (Lizzio-Wilson et al., 2022) are perceived as less legitimate and, subsequently, less effective than more moderate forms of activism. In social

psychology, this phenomenon is known as the *activists' dilemma* (Feinberg, Willer, & Kovacheff, 2020). We hypothesize as follows:

*H2: Consumers exposed to aggressive activist rhetoric will evaluate activists as less legitimate than will those exposed to peaceful activist rhetoric.*

Insider and outsider activists' rhetoric might also evoke differing responses toward activist legitimacy. Employees are generally assumed to be trustworthy and credible communicators (Lee & Tao, 2020; van Zoonen & van der Meer, 2015). In contrast, typical activists are often ascribed negative stereotypes such as being eccentric, militant, and annoying. This can be partially attributed to the increased engagement in civil disobedience among (climate) activists and the media's tendency to cover radical forms of protest (Stenhouse & Heinrich, 2019). Hence, the use of aggressive rhetoric by outsiders can reinforce existing negative associations, which in turn can undermine their legitimacy. Therefore, we suggest an interaction effect, as hypothesized below:

*H3: Aggressive rhetoric by outsider activists will have a stronger negative effect on consumers' legitimacy evaluation than both peaceful rhetoric by outsiders and insiders, and aggressive rhetoric by insiders.*

In addition to activist type and activist rhetoric, certain consumer characteristics may also influence consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy. Consumers' situational perceptions about the activist issue are assumed particularly relevant because they can strengthen consumers' social identification with the activists based on shared concerns (see Jiménez-Moya, Miranda, Drury, Saavedra, & González, 2019). This is supposed to be the case when consumers belong to an active public (Grunig, 1978; Grunig & Hunt, 1984), for instance, when they (a) recognize an issue as a serious problem (i.e., problem recognition), (b) perceive that the issue has considerable implications in their lives (i.e., involvement recognition), and (c) feel unrestricted in their possible actions toward the issue (i.e., constraint recognition). Activists themselves tend to be characterized by particularly high problem and involvement recognition and low constraint recognition, thus organizing themselves to influence others through action (Grunig, 1992). Consumers with similar situational perceptions as activists are assumed to perceive activists' efforts as necessary and adequate, resulting in a higher legitimacy evaluation. This is reflected in the following hypothesis:

*H4: Consumers' perceived (a) problem recognition and (b) involvement recognition will increase and (c) constraint recognition will decrease their evaluation of activist legitimacy.*

#### ***Company-Related Responses: General Attitudes and NWOM Intentions***

When activists lack legitimacy, they can barely pose a direct risk to target companies, as observers may dismiss or oppose their actions. Conversely, legitimacy can increase activists' impact even when they lack power and resources (Eesley & Lenox, 2006). Activists perceived as legitimate are expected to resonate better with exposed consumers than activists who are perceived as illegitimate,

resulting in more negative responses toward the company. Such responses can create reputational risk, putting pressure on companies to respond to activists' demands.

Company-related consumer responses critical to corporate reputation are consumers' general attitudes and NWOM intentions. Attitudes are defined as a disposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an object, person, institution, or event (Ajzen, 2008). Consumer attitudes, in particular, result from summary evaluations of a given company (Einwiller, 2013), and it is reasonable to assume that a disruptive event such as an activist protest can affect these attitudes by providing new reference points for evaluation. In the context of online campaigns, van den Broek et al. (2017) demonstrated that exposure to activism negatively influenced consumers' general attitudes.

NWOM represents "a customer's effort to share negative or unfavorable feedback or opinions with friends, family, and others" (Balaji, Khong, & Chong, 2016, p. 529) with the intent to denigrate a company or product (Richins, 1984). Grappi, Romani, and Bagozzi (2013) demonstrated how irresponsible corporate behaviors—which activists are mainly concerned with—can cause NWOM. Furthermore, NWOM has been shown to have considerable unfavorable consequences for companies (e.g., Barhorst, Wilson, & Brooks, 2020; Luo, 2009).

We argue that consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy is crucial for the emergence of both negative attitudes and NWOM intentions toward the target company. Our corresponding hypothesis reads as follows:

*H5: Activists' legitimacy will (a) lower consumers' general attitudes toward the target company and (b) increase consumers' NWOM intentions. Furthermore, activist legitimacy mediates the effect of activist type and activist rhetoric on consumers' company-related responses.*

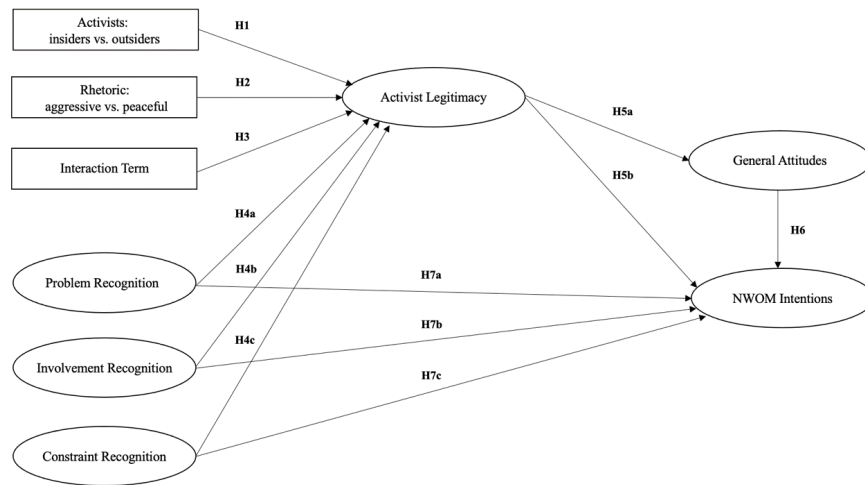
Consumers' attitudes toward the target company are also likely to affect their NWOM intentions, as general attitudes are seen as good predictors of behavioral intentions, subsequently leading to behavioral action (Ajzen, 2008; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). It is assumed that the more positive consumers' general attitudes toward the target company are, the less willing they are to negatively communicate about the company. Thus:

*H6: Consumers' positive general attitudes toward the target company will decrease their NWOM intentions.*

Consumers' situational perceptions regarding the activist issue can also directly influence consumers' communicative intentions toward the target company. When consumers are indifferent about the issue raised, activists' efforts are less likely to stimulate NWOM. Situational theories (Grunig, 1979; Kim & Grunig, 2011) postulate—and empirical studies (e.g., Chon & Park, 2020; King, Halversen, Morrow, Westhoff, & Brubaker, 2023) demonstrate—that people are more encouraged to communicate the higher their perceived (a) problem and (b) involvement recognition are, and the lower their perceived (c) constraint recognition is. In line with these findings, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H7: Consumers' perceived (a) problem recognition and (b) involvement recognition will increase and (c) constraint recognition will decrease consumers' NWOM intentions.*

Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized model.



**Figure 1. Hypothesized model.**

## Method

### Sample

A total of 303 people participated in the study. Ten participants whose completion time was less than 225 seconds (i.e., less than 50% of the median time) were removed (see Greszki, Meyer, & Schoen, 2015) as well as all cases containing missing values, resulting in a final sample of 279 participants.

Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 81, with an average age of 44.5 years ( $SD = 14.4$ ). Almost half of the participants were female (46.2%). The majority, 64.2%, were White/Caucasian. Asked for their highest educational qualification, 11.5% said they had a high school diploma / GED; 14.3% attended college, but earned no degree; 9.0% held an associate degree; 40.1% a bachelor's degree; 20.8% a master's degree; 2.5% a professional degree; and 1.5% a doctorate. In addition, 53.4% had professional experience in the retail sector. Only 6.5% of respondents were members of an activist group / social movement organization, 55.2% have boycotted a company once or several times, and just 10.4% have participated in a public protest against a company.

### Procedures

To test the proposed hypotheses, a randomized between-subjects online survey experiment with a 2 (insider versus outsider activists) x 2 (aggressive versus peaceful rhetoric) full factorial design

was conducted. The study received approval from the university's institutional review board and targeted people ages 18 and older living in the United States. Based on these criteria, Prolific distributed invitations to potential participants during one week in February 2024. Participants received \$9/hour as an incentive.

Only after giving their consent were participants allowed to proceed with the experiment. First, they provided information about their country of residence and age; second, they answered questions about their perceived rebelliousness; third, they indicated their situational perceptions of the activist issue; fourth, they were randomly allocated to one of four experimental conditions.

All four experimental conditions started with a short description of the fictitious retailer DailyGoods. Participants were asked to imagine being regular customers of the company for several years. They were then presented with information about a public protest against DailyGoods for the company's climate policy. We manipulated the activist type by terming protesters either employees (for the insider condition) or activists (as typical activists are usually outsiders). Regarding activist rhetoric, the aggressive condition contained more confrontational and hostile language than the peaceful condition. The presented protest form was the same in both conditions (i.e., civilized demonstration in front of the company's headquarters). Except for the manipulations concerning activist type and activist rhetoric, all vignettes remained consistent in length and format (see Appendix).

Fifth, participants replied to items gauging the study's dependent variables; sixth, they answered the manipulation check questions; seventh, they responded to items on sociodemographics, consumer behavior, and activism-related characteristics. The survey ended with a detailed debriefing.

### **Measurements**

The scales used were rated on a 7-point answering format with 1 = "strongly disagree" / "very unlikely" and 7 = "strongly agree" / "very likely." For consumers' general attitudes toward the target company and the manipulation check of activist rhetoric, semantic differentials of opposing characteristics with 1 = negative attitudes / aggressive rhetoric and 7 = positive attitudes / peaceful rhetoric were used.

#### *Activist Legitimacy*

Two items were adopted from the study by Meier, Gerke, Müller, and Mutz (2023) and adapted to fit the current context. To better capture the construct, we also added one self-designed item ("I think that the measures taken by the protesters are appropriate").

#### *General Attitudes*

A scale developed by Spears and Singh (2004) was used, and an additional item ("untrustworthy-trustworthy") was included to fully assess the concept.

### *NWOM Intentions*

We adopted a scale by Coombs and Holladay (2009) and added one self-designed item ("I would post negative comments about DailyGoods on the Internet / social media").

### *Situational Perceptions*

Participants' perceived problem, involvement, and constraint recognition regarding climate change was assessed. For this, we adapted items from previous studies drawing on the situational theory of problem solving (Chen, Hung-Baesecke, & Kim, 2017; Kim & Grunig, 2011).

### *Manipulations Checks*

For the manipulation of activists being insiders or outsiders, participants had to answer the question "Which group(s) protested against DailyGoods?" by choosing one of four options (employees only / activists only / various groups / don't remember). For the manipulation of activist rhetoric, four pairs of opposing characteristics were used (e.g., aggressive-peaceful; confrontational-dialogue-oriented).

### *Control Variables*

Age, gender, and education were shown to affect how much legitimacy people grant to social protest actions (Olsen, 1968). Thus, we included these variables as controls together with respondents' work experience in the retail sector. Additionally, we gathered information on respondents' membership in an activist group / social movement organization (1 = yes, 2 = no), previous participation in a boycott as well as previous participation in a public protest against a company (1 = "no, never," 2 = "yes, once," 3 = "yes, several times," 4 = "prefer not to say"). We further assumed that respondents' personality, particularly their tendency to engage in nonconforming behaviors (i.e., rebelliousness), could also affect their answers. It was measured with 10 items from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP; Goldberg et al., 2006). Table 1 presents the items used as well as information on reliability and validity.

**Table 1. Measures, Factor Loadings, Reliabilities, and Validity.**

Construct/Indicators	SL	$\alpha$	CR	AVE
<b>Activist Legitimacy</b>		.92	.93	.86
I believe that these protesters are allowed to publicly criticize the company on relevant issues.	deleted			
I support this action of the protesters.	.98			
I think that the measures taken by the protesters are appropriate.	.88			
<b>General Attitudes</b>		.97	.97	.84
unappealing–appealing	.90			
bad–good	.94			
unpleasant–pleasant	.92			
unfavorable–favorable	.93			
unlikable–likable	.94			
untrustworthy–trustworthy	.88			
<b>NWOM Intentions</b>		.87	.88	.71
I would say negative things about DailyGoods and its products to other people.	.92			
I would encourage friends or relatives NOT to buy products from DailyGoods.	.92			
I would recommend DailyGoods to someone who asked my advice. (r)	deleted			
I would post negative comments about DailyGoods on the Internet / social media.	.66			
<b>Problem Recognition</b>		.96	.96	.87
I think that climate change is a serious problem.	.94			
Government and business should take this problem more seriously and take action.	.96			
Something should be done immediately to improve this problem.	.97			
About this issue, I see a huge gap between what it should be and what it is now.	.86			
<b>Involvement Recognition</b>		.93	.93	.78
I feel closely connected to this problem.	.88			
This problem affects me substantially.	.92			
This problem seriously affects someone close to me.	.88			
I feel deeply involved in this problem.	.85			
<b>Constraint Recognition</b>		.83	.83	.62
If I want, I can make my opinions and ideas on this problem matter to those addressing it in government or business.	.75			
I have many constraints on this problem, which is only controlled by politicians and business leaders. (r)	deleted			

I feel that my opinion will be reflected in making decisions on this problem.	.77
I feel that I can make a difference and improvement of the problematic situation related to climate change.	.84

*Note.* *SL* = standardized loadings,  $\alpha$  = Cronbach's alpha, *CR* = composite reliability, *AVE* = average variance extracted, (*r*) indicates recoded items; all standardized loadings are significant on a level of  $p < .001$ .

## Results

### Data Analysis

To test the hypothesized model, a two-step structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis using AMOS 26 under maximum likelihood (ML) estimation was performed following Kline (2011). First, the measurement model was tested based on the a priori theoretical conceptualizations of the constructs. Second, we tested the structural model and the hypothesized relationships between the variables. In both steps, the cutoff criteria proposed by Hu and Bentler (1999) served as reference points for the evaluation of the data-model fit ( $CFI/TLI \geq .95$ ,  $RMSEA < .06$ ,  $SRMR < .08$ ). For all other analyses, IBM SPSS (version 28) was used.

### Manipulation Checks

A chi-square test of independence examined whether participants correctly recognized the protesters as insiders (i.e., employees) or outsiders (i.e., activists). From those who were assigned the insider condition, 107 correctly answered the question with "employees only"; only six wrongly stated "activists only." Conversely, 118 participants from the outsider condition gave the correct answer, and 10 wrongly answered "employees only." A total of 38 respondents, almost evenly spread between the two conditions, answered "various groups" and "don't remember." The relation between the assigned condition and how participants responded to this question was significant,  $\chi^2(3, N = 279) = 181.965, p < .001$ . Thus, the manipulation of activist type (insiders versus outsiders) was successful.

Furthermore, participants exposed to aggressive activist rhetoric ( $M = 3.27, SD = 1.65$ ) compared with those assigned to a peaceful rhetoric condition ( $M = 5.10, SD = 1.55$ ) described the protest as significantly more aggressive,  $t(277) = -9.53, p < .001$ . Thus, the manipulation concerning activist rhetoric as aggressive versus peaceful was also successful.

### Measurement Model

After deleting a few indicators that showed unsatisfactory factor loadings during the initial confirmatory factor analysis (see Table 1), the final measurement model reached a good model fit ( $\chi^2 = 342.668, df = 194, p < .001, SRMR = .042, RMSEA = .053$  [90% CI: .043, .062],  $CFI = .977, TLI = .973$ ). The remaining indicators exceeded the minimum threshold of 0.60 and in most cases the conservative threshold of 0.70 (cf. Chin, 1998).

Strong reliability and convergent validity were found for all constructs (see Table 2). Cronbach's alpha and composite reliabilities ranged from 0.83 to 0.97, all exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70. In addition, all average variance extracted (*AVE*) scores were above the cutoff criterion ( $> 0.50$ ) for convergent validity (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2019). For a rigorous assessment of discriminant validity, we applied two techniques using Gaskin, James, and Lim's (2019) plugin: the common Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981) and the more recently proposed heterotrait-monotrait (*HTMT*) ratio of correlations (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015; Voorhees, Brady, Calantone, & Ramirez, 2016). For all dyads of constructs, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was fulfilled (i.e., all square roots of the *AVE* are higher than the correlations between the scales for all dyads). Furthermore, the *HTMT* ratio was below the conservative threshold of 0.85, which indicates discriminant validity across all measurements (see Table 2). Altogether, the constructs exhibit solid measurement properties.

**Table 2. Information on the Measurement Model's Discriminant Validity.**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) <b>Activist Legitimacy</b>	.93	.45	.47	.70	.59	.20
(2) <b>General Attitudes</b>	-.45 ***	.92	.57	.38	.35	.08
(3) <b>NWOM Intentions</b>	.51 ***	-.62 ***	.84	.38	.57	.29
(4) <b>Problem Recognition</b>	.70 ***	-.37 ***	.40 ***	.93	.77	.30
(5) <b>Involvement Recognition</b>	.60 ***	-.35 ***	.56 ***	.76 ***	.88	.50
(6) <b>Constraint Recognition</b>	-.21 ***	-.07	-.26 ***	-.31 ***	-.51 ***	.78

Note. Values below the diagonal are the correlations between the constructs; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .010$ , \* $p < .050$ , † $p < .100$ ; the italicized values depicted in the diagonal represent the square root of *AVE*, and values above the diagonal are the *HTMT* values (heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations).

### Structural Model

The structural model demonstrated a good fit to the data ( $\chi^2 = 491.023$ ,  $df = 288$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $SRMR = .058$ ,  $RMSEA = .051$  [90% *CI*: .043, .059],  $CFI = .972$ ,  $TLI = .966$ ).<sup>2</sup> For reasons of model parsimony, only the significant paths from the control variables to the endogenous variables were retained in the final model (significant effects are reported in the annotations of Figure 2).

### Hypotheses Testing

H1 addressed the effect of activist type (i.e., insiders = 1 versus outsiders = 2) on consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy. A significant effect supporting H1 was found ( $\beta = -.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ; i.e., insider activists are evaluated as more legitimate than outsider activists).

<sup>2</sup> The model without control variables also showed good fit indices:  $\chi^2 = 444.653$ ,  $df = 251$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $SRMR = .062$ ,  $RMSEA = .053$  [90% *CI*: .045, .061],  $CFI = .974$ ,  $TLI = .969$ .

H2 assumed an effect of activist rhetoric (i.e., aggressive = 1 versus peaceful = 2) on consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy. The effect was not significant and, thus, does not support H2 ( $\beta = -.18, p = .17$ ; i.e., activist rhetoric does not affect whether activists are evaluated as legitimate).

H3 proposed an interaction effect of activist type (i.e., insiders versus outsiders) and activist rhetoric (i.e., aggressive versus peaceful) on consumers' legitimacy evaluation. A significant positive effect in support of H3 was found ( $\beta = .43, p = .02$ ; i.e., consumers exposed to aggressive rhetoric from outsider activists evaluate activist legitimacy lower than under any other condition [see Figure 3]).

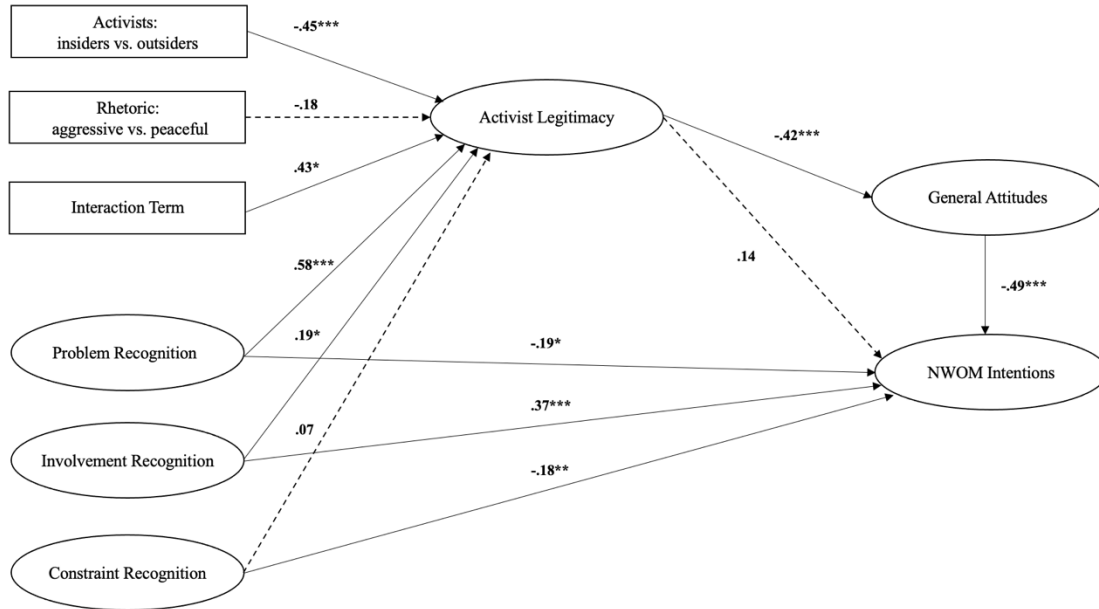
H4a–c addressed the effect of consumers' situational perceptions (i.e., perceived problem, involvement, and constraint recognition) on consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy. In support of H4a, consumers' perceived problem recognition positively affected their legitimacy evaluation ( $\beta = .58, p < .001$ ; i.e., the more consumers recognize the activist issue as a serious problem, the more positive their evaluation of activist legitimacy). Furthermore, consumers' perceived involvement recognition also positively affected their legitimacy evaluation ( $\beta = .19, p = .03$ ), which is consistent with H4b (i.e., the more consumers perceive themselves involved in the issue, the more legitimacy they ascribe to the activists). The effect of consumers' perceived constraint recognition, however, was not significant ( $\beta = .07, p = .23$ ); thus, H4c is rejected (i.e., consumers' legitimacy evaluation is not influenced by consumers' perceived constraint recognition).

H5a–b addressed the effect of consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy on consumers' general attitudes and NWOM intentions toward the target company. Activist legitimacy had a significant negative effect on consumers' general attitudes, supporting H5a ( $\beta = -.42, p < .001$ ; i.e., the more activists are evaluated as legitimate, the worse consumers' general attitudes toward the target company). However, the effect of activist legitimacy on consumers' NWOM intentions was not significant ( $\beta = .14, p = .05$ ), thus dismissing H5 (i.e., consumers' legitimacy evaluation does not directly affect their NWOM intentions toward the target company).

H6 suggested an effect of consumers' general attitudes about the target company on their NWOM intentions. A significant negative effect in line with H6 was found ( $\beta = -.49, p < .001$ ; i.e., the more positive consumers' general attitudes toward the target company, the less consumers intend to negatively communicate about the company).

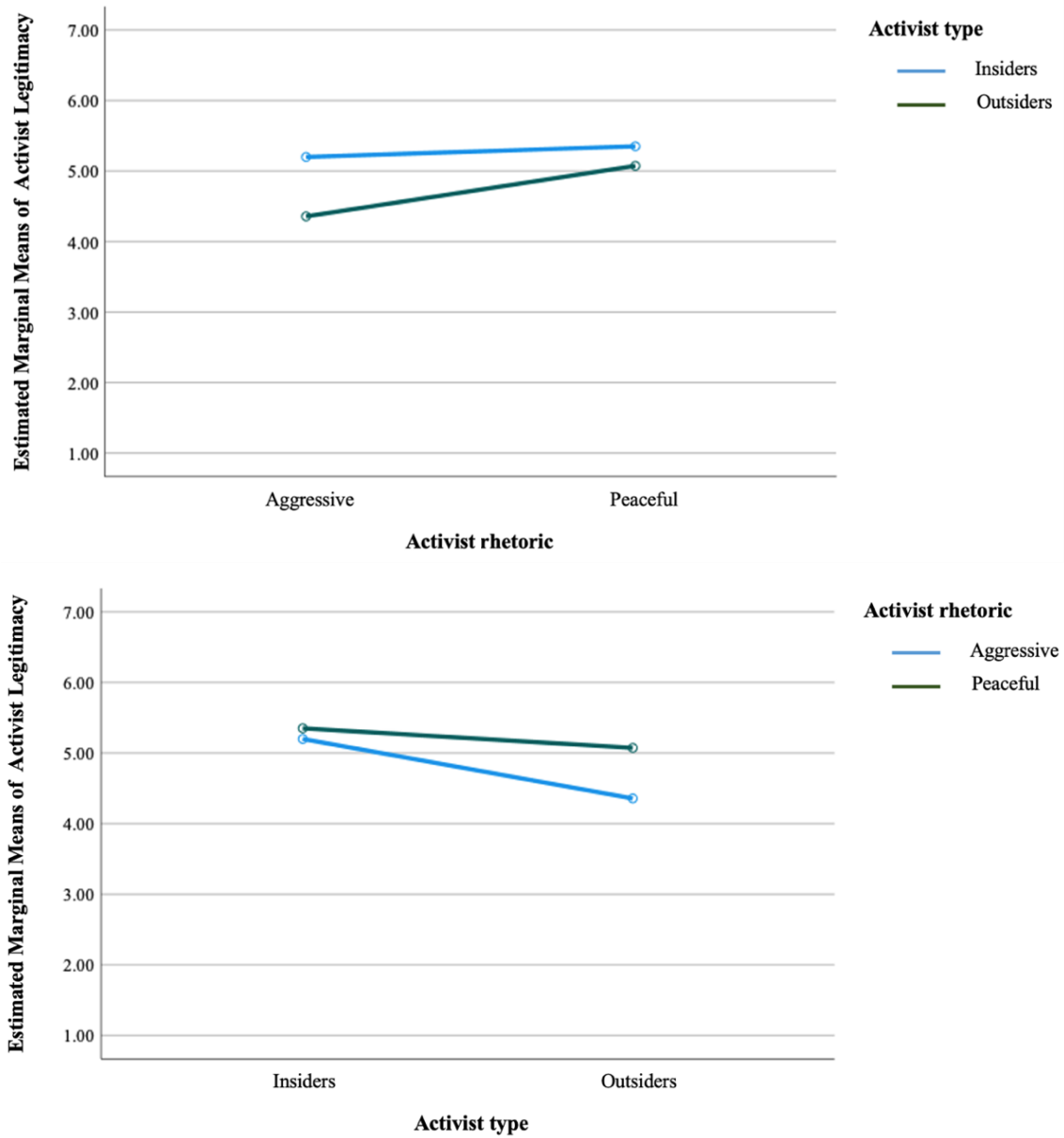
H7a–c posited that consumers' situational perceptions of the activist issue (i.e., perceived problem, involvement, and constraint recognition) would directly affect their NWOM intentions toward the target company. The effect of consumers' perceived problem recognition on their NWOM intentions was significant, but negative ( $\beta = -.19, p = .03$ ), thus rejecting H7a (i.e., consumers' recognition of the issue as a problem does not increase their intention to negatively communicate about the company). Furthermore, in line with H7b, consumers' perceived involvement positively affected their NWOM intentions ( $\beta = .37, p < .001$ ; i.e., consumers' intentions to negatively communicate about the company increase the more they perceive themselves to be involved in the issue). Moreover, consumers' perceived constraint recognition negatively affected their NWOM intentions ( $\beta = -.18, p = .003$ ), thus supporting H7c (i.e., the more consumers perceive their possible actions as restricted, the less they intend to engage in NWOM against the company).

*R-square* values for the endogenous variables are as follows: For activist legitimacy  $R^2 = .59$ , for consumers' general attitudes toward the target company  $R^2 = .23$ , and for consumers' NWOM intentions  $R^2 = .60$ .



**Figure 2. Structural model with standardized path coefficients.**

Note.  $\chi^2 = 491.023$ ,  $df = 288$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $SRMR = .058$ ,  $RMSEA = .051$  [90% CI: .043, .059],  $CFI = .972$ ,  $TLI = .966$ . Activists: insiders = 1, outsiders = 2; rhetoric: aggressive = 1, peaceful = 2. The following significant effects emerged for the control variables: boycott (yes vs. no) → activist legitimacy ( $\beta = -.09^*$ ), boycott (yes vs. no) → general attitudes ( $\beta = .16^{**}$ ), rebelliousness → activist legitimacy ( $\beta = .12^{**}$ ), rebelliousness → NWOM intentions ( $\beta = .22^{***}$ );  $***p < .001$ ,  $**p < .01$ ,  $*p < .05$ .



**Figure 3. Interaction effects.**

Note. Covariates are estimated as follows: boycott (yes vs. no): 1.45, rebelliousness: 2.80, problem recognition: 5.58, involvement recognition: 4.05.

**Specific Indirect Effects**

In a final step, all specific indirect effects within the model were tested for their significance using a bootstrapping procedure ( $N = 5,000$  samples) and user-defined estimands (see Table 3). Activist legitimacy mediated the effect of activist type ( $\beta = .19, p = .001$ ), the interaction of activist type and activist rhetoric ( $\beta = -.18, p = .02$ ), perceived problem recognition ( $\beta = -.24, p < .001$ ), and perceived involvement recognition ( $\beta = -.08, p = .04$ ) on consumers’ general attitudes toward the target company. Furthermore, there was an indirect effect of activist type ( $\beta = -.15, p = .001$ ), the interaction of activist type and activist rhetoric ( $\beta = .15, p = .01$ ), perceived problem recognition ( $\beta = .20, p < .001$ ), and perceived involvement recognition ( $\beta = .06, p = .03$ ) on consumers’ NWOM intentions mediated by activist legitimacy and consumers’ general attitudes toward the target company.

**Table 3. Specific Indirect Effects.**

Specific indirect effect	95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals		Standardized estimate	
	Lower limit	Upper limit		
TYPE → LEG → ATT	.08	.34	.19	**
TYPE → LEG → NWOM	-.49	.003	-.20	.53
TYPE → LEG → ATT → NWOM	-.31	-.06	-.15	**
RHET → LEG → ATT	-.03	.20	.08	.14
RHET → LEG → NWOM	-.28	.03	-.08	.21
RHET → LEG → ATT → NWOM	-.18	.02	-.06	.12
INTER → LEG → ATT	-.37	-.03	-.18	*
INTER → LEG → NWOM	-.003	.24	.09	.07
INTER → LEG → ATT → NWOM	.03	.34	.15	*
PR → LEG → ATT	-.34	-.16	-.24	***
PR → LEG → NWOM	-.001	.18	.08	.05
PR → LEG → ATT → NWOM	.11	.33	.20	***
CR → LEG → ATT	-.09	.03	-.03	.28
CR → LEG → NWOM	-.01	.05	.01	.31
CR → LEG → ATT → NWOM	-.02	.08	.02	.25
IR → LEG → ATT	-.17	-.004	-.08	*
IR → LEG → NWOM	-.003	.07	.03	.10
IR → LEG → ATT → NWOM	.01	.15	.06	*

*Note.* TYPE = activist type (insiders vs. outsiders), RHET = rhetoric (aggressive vs.. peaceful), INTER = interaction type\*rhetoric, LEG = activist legitimacy, ATT = general attitudes, NWOM = negative word-of-mouth intentions, PR = problem recognition, CR = constraint recognition, IR = involvement recognition; \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .050$ .

**Discussion**

This study examined how consumers respond to public company-directed activism. For this, the activists’ type (i.e., insiders versus outsiders) and rhetoric (aggressive versus peaceful) were manipulated.

As for consumer responses, we focused on consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy (i.e., activist-related response) and their general attitudes and NWOM intentions toward the target company (i.e., company-related responses). Furthermore, we considered consumers' situational perceptions of the activist issue (i.e., perceived problem, involvement, and constraint recognition). Regardless of activist rhetoric, consumers respond more negatively to the target company when they are exposed to insider compared with outsider activism. Perceived problem and involvement recognition also affect consumers' company-related responses. For these effects, consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy plays a crucial mediating role. Furthermore, consumers' perceived problem, involvement, and constraint recognition directly affect their NWOM intentions.

In particular, our results indicated a consistent main effect of activist type and an interaction effect of activist type and activist rhetoric on consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy. Employee activists are seen as more legitimate than outsider activists. This can be explained by consumers ascribing considerable insider knowledge to employees as company members (Briscoe & Gupta, 2016). Consumers may also perceive that employees' interests are more closely aligned with those of the company (Vasi & King, 2012); thus, employee activists' actions are perceived as more appropriate and receive more support.

Outsider activists using aggressive rhetoric are evaluated as less legitimate than outsider activists resorting to peaceful rhetoric and insider activists regardless of their rhetoric. It is worth noting that the stimulus material reflected the reality of mainstream activist protests, which are most common and known to generate greater public support than other PR tactics like humiliation (Jahng, Hong, & Park, 2014). The presented rhetoric was noticeably more confrontational in the aggressive than in the peaceful condition, but was by no means inflammatory or violent. Hence, in both cases, activists' rhetoric may have been perceived as socially acceptable. This could explain the nonsignificant main effect of activist rhetoric on consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy. However, significantly less legitimacy was granted to outsiders using aggressive rhetoric. This condition was probably strong enough to trigger existing negative associations that consumers may have with typical activists, but not with employees (Stenhouse & Heinrich, 2019).

Activist legitimacy leads to more negative attitudes toward the target company and, subsequently, higher NWOM intentions. Taken together, this indicates that employees are better accepted as an oppositional force to corporate practices, which, in turn, translates into more unfavorable company-related consumer responses. This corresponds with prior research demonstrating—also in the context of environmental issues—that insider activism is more influential than outsider activism in shaping negative perceptions about a company's practices and policies (Vasi & King, 2012).

Furthermore, our findings show that consumers' situational perceptions of the activist issue can affect their company-related responses. On the one hand, there is an indirect effect mediated by consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy; on the other, there is a direct effect on consumers' NWOM intentions. Activists were evaluated as legitimate the more consumers recognized the activist issue as a problem and felt involved with it. These perceptions have probably created a link with the activists, thus leading to greater solidarity with their actions. This is consistent with prior research on the role of social identification in the formation of activist legitimacy (Jiménez-Moya et al., 2019). Surprisingly, consumers' perceived constraint recognition was unable to predict their legitimacy evaluation. This is in contrast with Jiménez-Moya et al.'s

(2019) finding that the perception of whether the system is changeable positively affects activist legitimacy. However, consumers' support for activists' collective effort may be unrelated to consumers' feeling that they can individually improve problem solving.

Consumers' perceived problem and constraint recognition decreased their NWOM intentions, while involvement recognition increased them. This partly supports previous findings on the role of situational perceptions and partly contradicts them, as perceived problem recognition is known to positively influence people's communicative action or, in some cases, to have no effect (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Chon & Park, 2020). Our result regarding the negative effect of perceived problem recognition on consumers' NWOM intentions could be issue- and country-specific. In the United States, there is a considerable number of people who deny climate change, and also the levels of disinformation around this topic are considered high (Uteuova, 2024). In such circumstances, even when consumers recognize climate change as a problem, they may be reluctant to speak up to avoid awkward conversations. If consumers feel deeply involved, however, this could help them overcome this concern and put extra effort into NWOM.

Finally, our results reveal that consumers' favorable attitudes toward the target company decrease their NWOM intentions. Moreover, activist legitimacy can only encourage consumers' NWOM by first evoking unfavorable attitudes toward the target. This reinforces the importance of attitudes for consumers' behavioral intentions (Ajzen, 2008).

### **Implications, Limitations, and Future Research**

Our research contributes theoretically to the field of activism and offers implications for both corporate behavior regarding activism and the communication practice of activists. This study adds to the literature on how activist legitimacy is linked to companies' responsiveness to activist demands (Eesley & Lenox, 2006; Taylor et al., 2021) by highlighting the role of consumers. Activists who are evaluated as legitimate and thereby encourage consumers to think and speak negatively about the company may pressure the target company to change. Thus, for target companies to adequately react, consumers' evaluation of activist legitimacy must be considered. In this regard, consumers' situational perceptions of relevant social issues appear crucial along with the activist type and rhetoric. Systematically segmenting consumers based on their perceived problem, involvement, and constraint recognition (see Grunig, 1978; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) could assist companies in anticipating consumers' activist- and company-related responses. This would allow them to more critically assess the reputational risks associated with activism.

Comparing public insider and outsider activism represents an innovative approach. Previous research has considered activism by internal and external actors separately (Dixon, Marin, & Nau, 2016) or compared the effect of internal and external actions by insiders and outsiders, respectively (Vasi & King, 2012). When employees speak out, they activate other mechanisms of influence and can reach broader audiences than those inside the company. Based on their insider status and thus their higher levels of legitimacy, employees also have a stronger negative influence on consumers' company-related responses than outsider activists have. Therefore, employee activists have higher chances of achieving their goals because the pressure they can exert on companies is stronger (King, 2008). Of course, outsider activists still matter in other ways. For example, typical activist groups are often part of influential

networks, allowing them to better mobilize resources and strategically plan their actions. Moreover, insider and outsider activists can engage in coordinated and collaborative efforts to advance their common causes (Schifeling & Soderstrom, 2022). At the same time, there has been a notable retreat by companies from social and environmental commitments following a recent backlash by conservative activists in the United States (e.g., Sherman, 2025; Will, 2024). Hence, outsiders can also provide momentum to insider activists by presenting opposing interests and pressuring companies to make anti-sustainability decisions. Especially in companies that have previously invested significant resources in building a reputation as responsible corporate actors, this could further strengthen consumers' perceptions of employees as legitimate agents of social change.

Outsider activists face a dilemma about their rhetoric. If it is peaceful, activists can retain their legitimacy, but will remain less visible; however, if it is aggressive, they may be able to attract more public attention, but risk losing some of their legitimacy (Feinberg et al., 2020). For insider activists, the rhetoric poses no such dilemma. Even when they confront their target companies more aggressively, they can still count on considerable consumer support. This gives employee activists a distinct advantage: Using aggressive rhetoric allows them to capture the attention of influential third parties (e.g., the media) and thus intensify the public pressure on companies.

However, employees' aggressive rhetoric must be kept within reasonable boundaries to avoid backfiring (Curtin, 2016). First, adopting a rhetoric that is very radical in style could appear antagonistic and disproportionate and thus reduce their legitimacy in the eyes of consumers. Second, companies may perceive highly aggressive rhetoric as a form of betrayal. This may cause resistance instead of a positive response (Briscoe et al., 2015) and also impair the employee-organization relationship. In contrast, employees can strengthen their legitimacy by remaining critical, but moderate in their demands and public rhetoric. In the presence of more radical campaigns by outsiders, insider activists' efforts can appear more reasonable and appropriate (see Derville, 2005).

As always, the study at hand also has some important limitations. For reasons related to the internal validity and use of a fictitious scenario, the experimental setting could not fully address the dynamics surrounding real activist campaigns. People usually learn about such events from various sources and can discuss them in personal conversations and on social media, which helps (re-)shape attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, activists normally engage in multiple activities and combine different communication strategies, thus providing more comprehensive insights into their demands, suggestions, and relationships with their targets. Companies, in turn, are likely to react shortly after an activist action, thereby considering their issue- and activism-related history. Moreover, responses to activism do not emerge in a vacuum but also depend on existing media narratives and previous interactions with the target company. Therefore, to better mirror consumers' experiences after exposure to activism, future research should pay more attention to the complexity of the media environment and the interplay of different actors and strategies. Closely related to this, it would be interesting to examine whether violent rhetoric could significantly downgrade consumers' legitimacy evaluations, particularly about insider activists. Finally, future research would benefit from replicating this study using more niche or controversial issues.

### References

- Ajzen, I. (2008). Consumer attitudes and behavior. In C. P. Haugtvedt, P. M. Herr, & F. R. Kardes (Eds.), *Handbook of consumer psychology* (pp. 525–548). New York, NY: Routledge.  
doi:10.4324/9780203809570
- Balaji, M. S., Khong, K. W., & Chong, A. Y. L. (2016). Determinants of negative word-of-mouth communication using social networking sites. *Information and Management*, 53(4), 528–540.  
doi:10.1016/j.im.2015.12.002
- Barhorst, J. B., Wilson, A., & Brooks, J. (2020). Negative tweets and their impact on likelihood to recommend. *Journal of Business Research*, 117(4), 727–739. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2020.01.054
- Bartley, T., & Child, C. (2011). Movements, markets, and fields: The effects of anti-sweatshop campaigns on U.S. firms, 1993–2000. *Social Forces*, 90(2), 425–451. doi:10.1093/sf/sor010
- Bartley, T., & Child, C. (2014). Shaming the corporation: The social production of targets and the anti-sweatshop movement. *American Sociological Review*, 79(4), 653–679.  
doi:10.1177/0003122414540653
- Bitektine, A., & Haack, P. (2015). The “macro” and the “micro” of legitimacy: Towards a multi-level theory of the legitimacy process. *Academy of Management Review*, 40(1), 49–75.  
doi:10.5465/amr.2013.0318
- Briscoe, F., & Gupta, A. (2016). Social activism in and around organizations. *The Academy of Management Annals*, 10(1), 671–727. doi:10.5465/19416520.2016.1153261
- Briscoe, F., & Gupta, A. (2021). Business disruption from the inside out. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 19(1), 48–54. doi:10.48558/4EHP-4D02
- Briscoe, F., Gupta, A., & Anner, M. S. (2015). Social activism and practice diffusion: How activist tactics affect non-targeted organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 60(2), 300–332.  
doi:10.1177/0001839215579235
- Cathcart, R. (1978). Movements: Confrontation as rhetorical form. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 43(3), 233–247. doi:10.1080/10417947809372383
- Chen, Y. R., Hung-Baesecke, C. J. F., & Kim, J. N. (2017). Identifying active hot-issue communicators and subgroup identifiers: Examining the situational theory of problem solving. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 94(1), 124–147. doi:10.1177/107769901662937
- Chin, W. W. (1998). Commentary: Issues and opinion on structural equation modeling. *MIS Quarterly*, 22(1), 7–16.

- Chon, M. G., & Park, H. (2020). Social media activism in the digital age: Testing an integrative model of activism on contentious issues. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *97*(1), 72–97. doi:10.1177/1077699019835896
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2009). Further explorations of post-crisis communication: Effects of media and response strategies on perceptions and intentions. *Public Relations Review*, *35*(1), 1–6. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.09.011
- Curtin, P. A. (2016). Exploring articulation in internal activism and public relations theory: A case study. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *28*(1), 19–34. doi:10.1080/1062726X.2015.1131696
- Derville, T. (2005). Radical activist tactics: Overturning public relations conceptualizations. *Public Relations Review*, *31*(4), 527–533. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2005.08.012
- Dixon, M., Marin, A. W., & Nau, M. (2016). Social protest and corporate change: Brand visibility, third-party influence, and the responsiveness of corporations to activist campaigns. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *21*(1), 65–82. doi:10.17813/1086-671X-21-1-65
- Eesley, C., & Lenox, M. J. (2006). Firm responses to secondary stakeholder action. *Strategic Management Journal*, *27*(8), 765–781. doi:10.1002/smj.536
- Einwiller, S. (2013). Corporate attributes and associations. In C. E. Carroll (Ed.), *The handbook of communication and corporate reputation* (pp. 293–305). West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. doi:10.1002/9781118335529.ch25
- Feinberg, M., Willer, R., & Kovacheff, C. (2020). The activist's dilemma: Extreme protest actions reduce popular support for social movements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology: Interpersonal Relations and Group Processes*, *119*(5), 1086–1111. doi:10.1037/pspi0000230
- Fishbein, M., & Ajzen, I. (1975). *Belief, attitude, intention, and behavior: An introduction to theory and research*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Fornell, C., & Larcker, D. F. (1981). Evaluating structural equation models with unobservable variables and measurement error. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *18*(1), 39–50. doi:10.2307/3151312
- Gaskin, J. E., James, M., & Lim, J. (2019). *Master validity tool* [AMOS Plugin].
- Goldberg, L. R., Johnson, J. A., Eber, H. W., Hogan, R., Ashton, M. C., Cloninger, C. R., & Gough, H. C. (2006). The International Personality Item Pool and the future of public-domain personality measures. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *40*(1), 84–96. doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2005.08.007

- Göncü, B., Saka, E., & Sayan, A. (2018). Reading Gezi Park protests through the lens of protest PR. In A. Adi (Ed.), *Protest public relations. Communicating dissent and activism* (pp. 150–169). London, UK: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781351173605
- Grappi, S., Romani, S., & Bagozzi, R. P. (2013). Consumer response to corporate irresponsible behavior: Moral emotions and virtues. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(10), 1814–1821. doi:10.1016/j.jbusres.2013.02.002
- Greszki, R., Meyer, M., & Schoen, H. (2015). Exploring the effects of removing “too fast” responses and respondents from web surveys. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 79(2), 471–501. doi:10.1093/poq/nfu058
- Grunig, J. E. (1978). Defining publics in public relations: The case of a suburban hospital. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 55(1), 109–118. doi:10.1177/107769907805500115
- Grunig, J. E., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Grunig, L. A. (1992). Activism: How it limits the effectiveness of organizations and how excellent public relations departments respond. In J. E. Grunig, D. M. Dozier, W. P. Ehling, L. A. Grunig, F. C. Repper, & J. White (Eds.), *Excellence in public relations and communication management* (pp. 503–530). New York, NY: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203812303
- Hair, J. F., Black, W. C., Babin, B. J., & Anderson, R. E. (2019). *Multivariate data analysis* (8th ed.). Boston, MA: Cengage.
- Hallahan, K. (2001). The dynamics of issues activation and response: An issues processes model. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 13(1), 27–59. doi:10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1301\_3
- Harcup, T., & O’Neill, D. (2017). What is news? *Journalism Studies*, 18(12), 1470–1488. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193
- Henseler, J., Ringle, C. M., & Sarstedt, M. (2015). A new criterion for assessing discriminant validity in variance-based structural equation modeling. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 43(1), 115–135. doi:10.1007/s11747-014-0403-8
- Hu, L. T., & Bentler, P. M. (1999). Cutoff criteria for fit indexes in covariance structure analysis: Conventional criteria versus new alternatives. *Structural Equation Modeling: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 6(1), 1–55. doi:10.1080/10705519909540118
- Jahng, M. R., Hong, S., & Park, E. H. (2014). How radical is radical? Understanding the role of activists’ communication strategies on the formation of public attitude and evaluation. *Public Relations Review*, 40(1), 119–121. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2013.11.004

- Jiménez-Moya, G., Miranda, D., Drury, J., Saavedra, P., & González, R. (2019). When nonactivists care: Group efficacy mediates the effect of social identification and perceived instability on the legitimacy of collective action. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 22(4), 563–577. doi:10.1177/1368430217751631
- Kim, J. N., & Grunig, J. E. (2011). Problem solving and communicative action: A situational theory of problem solving. *Journal of Communication*, 61(1), 120–149. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2010.01529
- King, B. G. (2008). A political mediation model of corporate response to social movement activism. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 53(3), 395–421. doi:10.2189/asqu.53.3.39
- King, J., Halversen, A., Morrow, O., Westhoff, W., & Brubaker, P. (2023). Communicating about mental health during a pandemic: An examination of active and aware publics on Twitter. *International Journal of Communication*, 17, 631–648.
- Kline, R. B. (2011). *Principles and practice of structural equation modeling*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Krishna, A. (2021). Employee activism and internal communication. In L. R. Men & A. T. Verčič (Eds.), *Current trends and issues in internal communication—Theory and practice* (pp. 113–129). Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1007/978-3-030-78213-9
- Lee, Y., & Tao, W. (2020). Employees as information influencers of organization's CSR practices: The impacts of employee words on public perceptions of CSR. *Public Relations Review*, 46(1), 1–13. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2020.101887
- Lizzio-Wilson, M., Thomas, E. F., Louis, W. R., Amiot, C. E., Bury, S. M., Molenberghs, P., . . . Crane, M. F. (2022). Do the means affect the ends? Radical tactics influence motivation and action tendencies via the perceived legitimacy and efficacy of those actions. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 52(4), 695–717. doi:10.1002/ejsp.2847
- Luo, X. (2009). Quantifying the long-term impact of negative word of mouth on cash flows and stock prices. *Marketing Science*, 28(1), 148–165. doi:10.1287/mksc.1080.0389
- Meier, H. E., Gerke, M., Müller, S., & Mutz, M. (2023). The public legitimacy of elite athletes' political activism: German survey evidence. *International Political Society Review*, 45(4), 472–489. doi:10.1177/01925121231186973
- Meyerson, D. E., & Scully, M. A. (1995). Tempered radicalism and the politics of ambivalence and change. *Organization Science*, 6(5), 585–600. doi:10.1287/orsc.6.5.585

- Ninova-Solovykh, N. (2023). Employee activism: When employees speak out publicly against their employer. In N. Rodríguez-Salcedo, A. Moreno, S. Einwiller, & M. Recalde (Eds.), *(Re)discovering the human element in public relations and communication management in unpredictable times (Advances in public relations and communication management, Vol. 6)* (pp. 139–160). Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited. doi:10.1108/S2398-3914202306
- Olsen, M. E. (1968). Perceived legitimacy of social protest actions. *Social Problems, 15*(3), 297–310. doi:10.1525/sp.1968.15.3.03a00030
- Richins, M. L. (1984). Word of mouth communication as negative information. *Advances in Consumer Research, 11*, 679–702.
- Schifeling, T., & Soderstrom, S. (2022). Advancing reform: Embedded activism to develop climate solutions. *Academy of Management Journal, 65*(6), 1775–1803. doi:10.5465/amj.2019.0769
- Sherman, N. (2025, January 10). Meta and Amazon scale back diversity initiatives. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgmy7xpw3pyo.amp>
- Smith, M. F. (2013). Activism. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of public relations* (pp. 6–8). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. doi:10.4135/9781452276236
- Snow, D. A., & Benford, R. D. (1988). Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization. *International Social Movement Research, 1*, 197–217.
- Spears, N., & Singh, S. N. (2004). Measuring attitude toward the brand and purchase intentions. *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising, 26*(4), 53–66. doi:10.1080/10641734.2004.10505164
- Stenhouse, N., & Heinrich, R. (2019). Breaking negative stereotypes of climate activists: A conjoint experiment. *Science Communication, 41*(3), 339–368. doi:10.1177/1075547019848766
- Suchman, M. C. (1995). Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches. *Academy of Management Review, 20*(3), 571–610. doi:10.2307/258788
- Taylor, K. M., Hajmohammad, S., & Vachon, S. (2021). Activist engagement and industry-level change: Adoption of new practices by observing firms. *Industrial Marketing Management, 92*(4), 295–306. doi:10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.05.007
- Uteuova, A. (2024, February 14). Nearly 15% of Americans don't believe climate change is real, study finds. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/feb/14/americans-believe-climate-change-study>

- van den Broek, T., Langley, D., & Hornig, T. (2017). The effect of online protests and firm responses on shareholder and consumer evaluation. *Journal of Business Ethics, 146*(2), 279–294.  
doi:10.1007/s10551-017-3653-9
- van Zoonen, W., & van der Meer, T. (2015). The importance of source and credibility perception in times of crisis: Crisis communication in a socially mediated era. *Journal of Public Relations Research, 25*(5), 371–388. doi:10.1080/1062726X.2015.1062382
- Vasi, I. B., & King, B. G. (2012). Social movements, risk perceptions, and economic outcomes: The effect of primary and secondary stakeholder activism on firms' perceived environmental risk and financial performance. *American Sociological Review, 77*(4), 573–596.  
doi:10.1177/0003122412448796
- Voorhees, C. M., Brady, M. K., Calantone, R., & Ramirez, E. (2016). Discriminant validity testing in marketing: An analysis, causes for concern, and proposed remedies. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 44*(1), 119–134. doi:10.1007/s11747-015-0455-4
- Vrikki, P. (2018). The beginning of the end. Telling the story of Occupy Wall Street's eviction on Twitter. In A. Adi (Ed.), *Protest public relations. Communicating dissent and activism* (pp. 222–247). London, UK: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781351173605
- Walsh, G., & Beatty, S. E. (2007). Customer-based corporate reputation of a service firm: Scale development and validation. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 35*(1), 127–143.  
doi:10.1007/s11747-007-0015-7
- Will, G. F. (2024, September 20). Those beloved progressive initials, DEI and ESG, have lost their gleam. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/09/20/progressives-dei-esg-policies-retreat/>
- Woods, C. L. (2019a). From an "outside group" to a catalyst for corporate change: Examining activists' legitimation strategies. *Public Relations Review, 45*(2), 332–347.  
doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.02.001
- Woods, C. L. (2019b). "We really have to hit them where it hurts": Analyzing activists' corporate campaigns. *Journal of Public Interest Communications, 3*(1), 117–140.  
doi:10.32473/jpic.v3.i1.p117

## **Appendix**

### **Vignettes**

#### **Now please imagine the following situation.**

DailyGoods is an American retail corporation specializing in selling products for the general public such as household goods, electronics, and toys. The company has more than 190,000 employees and 1,000 stores throughout the United States. In 2023, DailyGoods earned revenues of \$56.19 billion. In the last couple of years, you have been a regular customer of DailyGoods.

A week ago, a group of **[employees/activists]** gathered in front of DailyGoods headquarters to protest the company's climate policy. The **[employees/activists]** were **[aggressively shouting, "DailyGoods, shame on you!" / peacefully calling, "DailyGoods, care more!"]**. **[Employees'/ Activists']** posters read, for example, **["Stop destroying our planet!" or "Your inaction is killing our hope for a better future" / "Use your power to save our planet" or "Your actions could give us hope for a better future"]**. The **[employees/activists]** **[insisted/suggested]** that a company of this scale **[must/should]** become carbon-neutral by 2030. The **[employees/activists]** declared their plan to continue the public **[confrontation/discussion]** until DailyGoods commits to real change.