



# Citizen brand: The emergence of brandstanding as organizational engagement and civic duty

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of *brandstanding* has been embraced by leading public relations firms and practitioners, but is virtually absent from scholarship. This conceptual essay defines brandstanding as an organization (corporation, nonprofit, or government agency) taking a public stance on a contentious issue (generally, outside of its industry or core purpose) while articulating its corresponding values and maintaining authenticity. It further describes the phenomenon in four components: (1) organizational and stakeholder values, (2) authenticity, (3) engagement, and (4) measurement. Understanding the role of each can help PR practitioners guide organizations toward informed participation in civic discourse. While some have encouraged an approach that minimizes contention (i.e. Argenti, 2020), this essay uses moral decoupling theory to argue that reducing the distance between what they say and how they act (Dowell & Jackson, 2020; Weiner, 2021) and striving for authenticity—the continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism of an organization's stance (Morhart et al., 2015)—should be the most crucial factors in engagement decisions.

Organizations are increasingly willing to take public stances on polarizing social issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Dodd, 2018). One approach to making such engagement decisions is by attempting to find alignment and agreement among organizational, stakeholder, and societal values and avoiding issues with the potential for significant disagreement or negative organizational outcomes (Argenti, 2020). Yet, organizations have responsibilities to societies regarding shared challenges (Palazzo & Scherer, 2006), including polarizing social issues such as racial justice (e.g., Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Logan, 2019, 2021; Waymer & Logan, 2020) and LGBTQ rights (e.g., Capizzo, 2020; Ciszek, 2017; Tindall & Waters, 2012). Thus, organizational responsibility as part of civil society requires an understanding of the agonistic and dissensus-laden practices that are a part of day-to-day public relations and advocacy communication (Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek and Logan, 2018; Davidson, 2016). Recent scholarship in issues management points toward improved processes and perspectives for managing contentious social issues (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Madden, 2019). For example, corporate social responsibility (CSR) scholarship has examined the growing role of contentious issue engagement as part of corporate responsibility (e.g., Gaither et al., 2018; Logan, 2019; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006), and corporate social advocacy (CSA) has demonstrated that such

stances may have a net-positive effect on corporate sales (Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). What this emerging research does not fully take on is the question of *why* and *when* organizations should alienate some stakeholders, as well as how these emerging research streams should apply to other types of organizations beyond corporations. This essay outlines the concept of brandstanding, or an organization taking a potentially polarizing public stance on a sensitive socio-political issue not directly associated with the organization's core purpose. While the term has been championed by some practitioners and leading global public relations and marketing agencies (Hijaz, 2019; Rafferty, 2018), it has only briefly been mentioned in public relations scholarly literature (see Pratt et al., 2011).

The purpose of this theoretical essay is to define and develop the concept of *brandstanding* by connecting public relations scholarship that emphasizes an organization's civic awareness and responsibility as well as marketing and management scholarship that outlines a pragmatic rationale for engagement. The authors posit that the act of brandstanding includes four facets: (1) an awareness and expression of organizational values (Bigam Stahey & Boyd, 2006; Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994; Coombs & Holladay, 2018), (2) an appeal to authenticity (Morhart et al., 2015), (3) a conscious choice of public engagement (e.g.,

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Johnston & Lane, 2020; Morehouse & Saffer, 2019), and (4) measurement of the campaign and the issue itself (Bortree, 2014; Parcha et al., 2020). In doing so, this approach connects *brandstanding* to one of the oldest concepts in public relations: the general public (e.g., Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010; Pieczka, 2019). Accelerating complexity, differentiation, and segmentation of publics in modern societies may serve to restore the relevance of a general public from the perspective of many organizations (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010). Additionally, the potentially negative ramifications of taking polarizing public stances are presented in light of moral decoupling theory (MDT), which emphasizes that consumers may disagree morally with an organization's actions, but still value its products and services (e.g., Bhattacharjee et al., 2012; Haberstroh et al., 2017; Fehr et al., 2019). MDT explains how consumers may decouple their personal moral beliefs from their perception and understanding of the organization, potentially leading to lower-than-expected negative outcomes for polarizing issue stances (Lee & Kwak, 2016).

*Brandstanding* differs from existing conceptions of social issues management (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) and CSA (e.g., Austin et al., 2019; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Waymer & Logan, 2021) in that it (1) encompasses all types of organizational brands (for-profit, nonprofit, government, etc.), (2) prioritizes brand identity, continuity, values, and voice as part of decision-making, and (3) sees potentially polarizing organizational decisions in light of a general public or unintended publics in addition to factoring in the perspectives of immediate strategic publics and stakeholders—publics reflect a self-organizing, issue-centered nature, while stakeholders have pre-existing, functional ties to the organization or are impacted by its actions (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). Combined, these insights help scholars to better understand this phenomenon and to generate a framework to guide research as well as practical organizational engagement decisions on polarizing issues.

Practitioners benefit from a systematic approach to contentious issue engagement—seeing brandstanding from among multiple engagement choices (Capizzo, 2020). Synthesized best practices include aligning organizational actions with communication, conveying the values behind organizational actions, and measuring and reporting metrics associated with the issue—not only the organization. Organizations have a responsibility to engage in issues as part of their social license to operate (Johnston & Lane, 2018) or corporate citizenship (e.g., Logan, 2019). Additionally, research has indicated that it is not only the stance itself that matters, but how the stance is explained and supported by action (Weiner, 2021; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016). Particularly in the case of contentious social issues and social change, organizations also have the potential to make societally beneficial contributions by influencing public opinion (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020; Waymer & Logan, 2021).

## 1. Roots and components of brandstanding

### 1.1. Grandstanding, values, authenticity, engagement, measurement, and moral decoupling

The evolving nature of organizations and the marketplace today has made brands and brand identity increasingly central to organizations (Olins, 2000), creating a host of, to use Heath's (2006) terminology, "instrumental" and "symbolic" repercussions for behavior (p. 98). All types of organizations have some degree of public-facing identity that is used to differentiate them in some form of competitive marketplace (Nandan, 2005). The term has traditionally been associated (and may be most easily imagined) with corporate entities and consumer products, but is just as much a communicative reality for nonprofit organizations competing for donor dollars and grant funding. An organization's brand identity is conveyed through a variety of factors including its products or services, advertisements and public relations outreach, physical locations and spaces, digital and social media presence, as well as its actions

as a community member (Nandan, 2005). Put simply, brands should reflect both the actual and perceived behaviors and beliefs of an organization, and reduce the "say-do gap" (Weiner, 2021, p. 5). Changes in the nature of organizational value have driven this transformation. Brands can represent all types of organizations and be expressed through an organizational voice or individual personality (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 356). Consumers "often describe and think about brands in terms of human personality traits and characteristics" (Ragas & Roberts, 2009, p. 269), conceptualizing brands "so that they can help us to tell the world about ourselves" (Olins, 2000, p. 62). In these ways, brands are empowered to discuss values, rather than simply representing a product or company. A brand creates equity for an organization, based on its perception among the publics and issues existing in the public sphere at a given time (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Thus, brand equity can be understood as the balance of perceived assets and liabilities connected to a specific brand (Verma, 2021). Organizations and their brands derive legitimacy from their relationships with stakeholders and the external environment—public relations playing a crucial role in the cultivation of such relationships (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2017; Shen & Kim, 2012).

Issues monitoring and issues management functions help organizations ensure that brand equity is not lost due to a dissonance between internal/organizational values and the values of the organizational publics. Engagement can create positive or negative impacts for overall brand equity, to the degree that it creates identification with an organization rather than alienation from it (Verma, 2021). Increasingly, a brand is a centerpiece of an organization's public identity and the vehicle for communicating with internal and external stakeholder groups about shared values (Olins, 2000). In addition to corporate branding, public relations scholarship has explored nonprofit brands (e.g., Harrison, 2019; Waters & Jones, 2011) as well as national brands (e.g., De Moya & Jain, 2013; Dolea, 2015)—opening the door for expanding the CSA framework to other types of organizations.

### 1.2. Grandstanding

The root of the word *brandstanding* comes from the pejorative term *grandstanding*—"a use of moral talk that attempts to get others to make certain desired judgments about oneself, namely, that one is worthy of respect or admiration because one has some particular moral quality" (Tosi & Warmke, 2016, p. 199). In their accounting of the concept in a public affairs context, Tosi and Warmke understand *grandstanding* to have two core features: (1) a "recognition desire" (p. 201) or a need to be seen and perceived as morally respectable, and (2) a contribution to public discourse or discussion on the issue, which they refer to as a "grandstanding expression" (p. 202). When done for wholly self-serving reasons, the act can generate cynicism and "interfere with the efficacy of public discourse" (p. 209). Yet, the authors point out that grandstanding may also have a variety of positive outcomes, such as raising awareness and encouraging engagement for relevant issue discourse. While maintaining the publicity and morality aspects of *grandstanding*, usage of *brandstanding* by public relations professionals does not inherently carry the pejorative baggage of the original term and focuses on the importance of authenticity and potential positive societal impact (e.g., DiGianfilippo and Krisay, 2019; Hijaz, 2019; Rafferty, 2018). The next section will explicate the concept's central features: values, authenticity, engagement, and measurement.

### 1.3. Stakeholder and community values

Values and values advocacy have been facets of issues management since the concept's early incarnations in public relations literature (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Crable & Vibbert, 1983, 1985; Heath, 1990). Values provide insights into the expectations that must be addressed during the strategic planning process (Brummette & Zoch, 2015). Public relations scholarship has previously identified and defined the values that should guide the profession (e.g., Boynton, 2006; Fawkes, 2015; L.

Grunig et al., 2000; J. 2000; Spicer, 2000; Holtzhausen, 2000).<sup>1</sup> These include functional perspectives such as self-awareness for practitioners (Fawkes, 2015) and cooperation (J. Grunig, 2000), as well as post-modern and critical theories such as feminism (e.g., Aldoory & Toth, 2021; L. Grunig et al., 2000) and postmodernism (Holtzhausen, 2000). At the organizational level, scholars have linked values to beneficial outcomes such as organizational legitimacy (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975), effective corporate social responsibility (Hammann et al., 2009), and positive organization-public relationships (Boynton, 2006). Values are, furthermore, significant in stakeholder engagement, as the process encourages organizational (and stakeholder) learning and reflecting on each other's values to ultimately find areas of shared or unified values (Greenwood, 2007; Mathur et al., 2008).

Organizational values can drive the activities, policies, and priorities of an organization (van Rekom et al., 2006) and be used to evaluate whether the behavior of an organization aligns with how internal and external groups—be they employees, investors, local community members, or industry peers—define those values (Hassan, 2007). For stakeholders, organizational values are articulated in mission, vision, and values statements as well as represented by organizational actions, behaviors, and prioritized goals (Dobni et al., 2000). However, values are not only confined to organizational activity, but may become personified by and ingrained in the identity of individual members of the organization (Pruzan, 2001). Essentially, an organization has an identity based on its values, traditionally decided by those vested with authority and communicated top-down—though those values may be a result of a participatory process of stakeholder dialogue. The values, and thus the identity of the organization may come to be (a) accepted by employees (important internal stakeholders), (b) used by major external community stakeholders to observe the organization and (c) taken into account by consumers (crucial external stakeholders) in their decision-making (Pruzan, 2001). Shared values become the criteria agreed upon by the organization and the stakeholders as representing the organizational identity as well as the standards for evaluating the appropriateness of organizational actions and for planning the development of the organization.

#### 1.3.1. Values in issues management and CSA

Conceptualized as an issues management stance, brandstanding reflects this history of recognizing stakeholder and societal values (Freeman, 1984; Sethi, 1977). Heath (1990) established that, in the face of value dissonance among stakeholders, organizations had the options to acquiesce or accommodate to external values, use their power and resources to advocate or dominate based on the organization's position, or aim to find harmony or balance between these positions. More recent scholarship has addressed the problematization of stakeholder disagreements—or situating such disagreements among stakeholders and organizations rather than between stakeholders or one stakeholder and one organization (Capizzo, 2018). Approaches such as social issues management (SIM) have extended issues management to recognize more controversial and polarizing perspectives and issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). Through values advocacy (e.g., Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994) and organizational epideictic (Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006) SIM is inclusive of appeals to noncontroversial values as well as CSA appeals to controversial values (Dodd, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). By defining CSA as an act of taking a stance on controversial social-political issues, it addresses the need for organizations to lean in to dissonance, dissensus, and polarization of values among stakeholders (e.g., Gaither

et al., 2018; Rim et al., 2020), particularly for issues that are not high-fit—or less relevant to a company's core purpose (e.g., Austin et al., 2019; Overton et al., 2020). Brandstanding extends this understanding to include other types of organizations beyond corporations. Nonprofit organizations and government agencies (along with corporations) must develop stances and make engagement decisions on contentious issues in the context of the organization's values, their stakeholders' values, and broader society or community values (e.g., Heath, 1990; Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010). This happens in part through the prioritization of individual issues and stakeholder needs (i.e., Rawlins, 2006) as well as through broader sensitization approaches, including organizational listening (Macnamara, 2016; Place, 2019).

#### 1.4. The return of the general public as unanticipated publics

A different rationale for engagement may be found in an updated conception of the general public (e.g., Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010; Pieczka, 2019; Self, 2010) or what Warner (2002) refers to as a “social totality” (p. 413). While many public relations practitioners and scholars view public relations developed for a general public to be non-strategic—communicating with “no one important to the organization” (J. Grunig and Repper, 1992, p.118)—the concept has regained favor in more recent scholarship. Self's (2010) reexamination of the role of publics and the general public in society posits that technology has enabled a “general public” in ways not possible on a national or international scale a few years prior. There may be utility in the “social imaginary” (Warner, 2002, p. 417) or “imagined public” (Pieczka, 2019, p. 233)—where communicators understand their audience as an idea or construct (such as a nation or a society) in contrast to a more concretely geographic or interest-centered pre-existing community (see Hallahan, 2004; Valentini et al., 2012) or an issue-based public. In this reconception, the general public can function as one of a number of self-organizing publics, with internal discourse and engagement as well as fluctuating attitudes (e.g., Leitch and Motion, 2010; Leitch and Neilson, 2001). Organizations may act in anticipation of or response to this public, like any other. Kruckeberg and Vujnovic (2010) argue against the efficacy of communicating primarily with strategically segmented publics, due to the sheer volume and interconnectedness of the publics themselves. In this framework, groups have so much overlap that complete differentiation and separation of targeted messages becomes impossible for organizational communicators (Olins, 2000). Especially when utilizing public channels, including media relations and many forms of digital and social media, an imagined public must—at minimum—be considered alongside segmented publics (such as issue or community activists) and stakeholders, such as employees or nonprofit donors with existing, direct communication channels (Pieczka, 2019).

A general public approach can be identified as one that (1) seeks “harmony” with society rather than viewing the exterior world as solely a “web of strategic publics” (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010, p. 120); (2) communicates using “organic” and less organization-centric strategies (Kruckeberg, 2006, pp. 8–9); and (3) demonstrates an awareness of social responsibility, particularly toward “benign publics”—those that otherwise would not be considered prioritized or even discrete organizational stakeholders (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010, p. 121). It reminds organizational communicators that its labels for publics are often not the ones self-organizing publics would give themselves. In these ways, a general publics sensibility informs productive organizational engagement in contentious issue discourse: It postulates that community and societal values are as crucial to organizational legitimacy and social responsibility as high-priority stakeholder values. In essence, it points organizations to focus more on their own fidelity to core values than to appeasing all particular stakeholders or publics.

Functionally (i.e., from the perspective of the organization), an awareness of what has been historically referred to as a *general public* may be better understood as *unanticipated publics* (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). Unanticipated publics reflect a particular group of

<sup>1</sup> The authors find it striking that much of the discussion of “values” in public relations, particularly in relation to the values of the profession, has not been at the center of recent literature. Many significant articles were part of a special issue in the *Journal of Public Relations Research* in 2000. Perhaps it's time for a broader refocusing and recentering of “values”—and a new special issue on the topic.

message recipients who have the potential to generate either positive outgrowths or negative fallout (from an organizational perspective) to communication not intended for them:

This public can indeed be latent, with its members not realizing any need to form together until someone in it sees the message intended for another audience and seeks out similarly agitated or opportunistic and heretofore diffused souls for activation. However, latent does not always accurately describe this group. It could be just as likely that the public was already formed and now activates against the message targeted to someone else because it violates this public's expectations of fairness or justice. Similarly, that can create either positive or negative fallout for the original source, and so the poles are distinguished using the terms positive unanticipated public and negative unanticipated public. (p. 5)

This paper reflects both a specific unanticipated publics construction as well as the historically grounded general public (or community/societal values perspective) as important for understanding the motivations and limitations of organizational engagement related to divisive issues. Brandstanding requires, at root, an awareness that not all publics and not all values-oriented actions should be strategic, in the sense that it is narrowly crafted for a specific target audience. An organization's citizenship (and the public relation's functions work) must reflect a broad understanding of the web of interconnected and interdependent stakeholders and publics among which it exists, as addressed directly through network theory (e.g., Yang & Saffer, 2019).

In further conceptualizing *brandstanding*, this essay highlights the need to explore the convergence of organizational values with community values, particularly when organizations take stances on controversial issues. In instances where there is a less visible fit between an organizational stance and organizational values, aligning with societal values may prove to be a strategic way for organizations to connect with broad communities or a general public (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010). As such, *brandstanding* can have significant implications for (a) organizational identity, (b) maintaining stakeholder relationships, and (c) communicating in light of a general public and unanticipated publics.

### 1.5. Authenticity

Perceived authenticity is defined by public relations scholars as reflecting an individual's understanding of an organization's trustworthiness, transparency, and consistency (e.g., Lee & Kim, 2017; Molleda, 2010; Shen & Kim, 2012). By matching communication and action, organizations aim to be "true in substance," with meaning co-created by the organization and its publics or stakeholders (Molleda, 2010, p. 244). Multiple formulations for perceived authenticity exist in the literature. Shen and Kim (2012) operationalize authenticity as an organizational demonstration of truthfulness, transparency, and consistency. First, organizations need to be both honest in communication and *true* to themselves and their values in communication and action (Molleda, 2010). Second, they must be *transparent*, including disclosing the rationale behind their actions and taking responsibility for the consequences. Finally, they must demonstrate *consistency*, both in terms of matching communication and action as well as over time: "an organization's behavior is congruent with its values, beliefs, and rhetoric" (Shen & Kim, 2012, p. 374).

Using a combination of literature review and semi-structured interviews, Morhart et al. (2015) developed four dimensions of brand authenticity: continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolism. First, *continuity* reflects the consistency and reliability of an organization over time, including its ability to "transcend trends" (p. 202). Second, *credibility* is defined as the organization's ability to follow through on statements and promises. Third, *integrity* connects organizational values and societal virtues, demonstrating that the organization stays "true to one's morals" (p. 203) and reflects a genuineness of positive intent. In

this way, authenticity is related to the concept of *brand sincerity*, which Ragas and Roberts (2009) define as a "dimension of brand personality, under the premise that a corporation's publics may perceive a brand as caring and genuine when it focuses its communications efforts on highlighting its CSR programs" (p. 266). Sincerity, by definition, emphasizes consistency across audiences. Fourth, *symbolism* reflects the active communication and explanation of an organizational stance, particularly in ways that relate to and support the identity of publics and stakeholders.

Authenticity is an important characteristic for organizations and their survival, including when engaging in discourse around sociopolitical or civic issues, and is highly dependent on public perception. The social identities and opinions of stakeholders and publics influence an organization's perceived authenticity and perceived quality, implicating the operation and success of the organization (Kovács & Horwitz, 2020). For example, Afzali and Kim (2021) stressed the need to consider consumers' perceptions of authenticity in regards to CSR activities; the authors noted that while CSR activities have the ability to foster a positive corporate image and attitude among consumers, they can be ineffective if not perceived as authentic. When organizations take a stance on sociopolitical matters, especially controversial issues, they open the door to increased scrutiny of their motives by audiences who may be concerned about "woke washing" or inauthentic appeals to the values of social justice (Dowell & Jackson, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Sobande, 2020). The authenticity of organizational stances will be judged by whether brands are merely marketing or visibly aligning themselves as vested in issues of inequality or social justice, or whether their messages are connected to organizational purpose, values, and practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Weiner, 2021).

Organizations striving to communicate and act according to their values—in an authentic, sincere manner—must consider brandstanding and engagement in contentious discourse when relevant socio-political issues become germane to their crucial or immediate stakeholders as well as unintended publics (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). Carroll and Wheaton (2009) refer to this as moral authenticity, associating it with public judgment and assessment of sincerity in communication and action. Furthermore, organizations should expect their brandstanding efforts to be judged for authenticity by their extended network, whereby message alignment with purpose and practice will help the organizational stance stand apart from the pejorative actions of grandstanding. As such, the efforts of organizations engaged in contentious discourse may be considered brandstanding if the communication showcases consistency with other organizational aims that reflects a full commitment to the issue as opposed to jumping onto a trending topic, and if the active, detailed communication of the organization's stance is supported by capacities and efforts to follow through on promises.

### 1.6. Engagement

At its core, organizational brandstanding—including CSA stances (Waymer & Logan, 2021)—is a choice to engage in controversial, public conversations about societal issues. Engagement is defined by the centrality of communication, its focus on relationships, the occurrence of interaction and exchange, and its dynamic nature (Johnston & Taylor, 2018). In particular, Dhanesh (2017) identifies public or stakeholder engagement as a process of "open and ethical communication between interacting organizations and their publics" (p. 926). Engagement is a communicative act with varying iterations, frequencies, and impacts or outcomes (Johnston & Lane, 2020). Dialogue may be seen as an ideal form of engagement (Kent & Taylor, 2021; Lane, 2020; Taylor & Kent, 2014). In their articulation of the levels of potential organizational engagement, Johnston and Lane (2020) begin with non-interaction, moving to simple interaction, two-way communication, recurring episodic engagement, and, finally, the most robust form—relational engagement. The authors define *episodic engagement* as aligning with contributions to public deliberation and issue discourse. Such

engagement-centered “interactions therefore seek to achieve a specific outcome (for example, community support of a decision for a specific event) but with recognition of collaborative and relational considerations” (p. 7). Engagement can be cultivated among various actors in a community (digital or otherwise) through responsiveness and conscious use of a setting’s affordances as well as support and encouragement (Kent & Taylor, 2021). Depending on the circumstances, brandstanding may require both initial issue-related episodic engagement (i.e. taking a public stance) as well as relational engagement and, potentially, dialogic engagement with stakeholders and publics to develop authentic, internally consistent communication and action on the issue at hand.

In this way, public relations can facilitate engagement as part of macro-level societal interactions, reaping benefits for individual organizations in terms of enhanced understanding of and relationships with their stakeholders and communities, but also through the development of more deeply interconnected organization networks—strengthening civil society ties and building social capital (Sommerfeldt, 2013; Taylor, 2018). Listening, managing, and engaging in discourse on issues, including polarized issues is part of public relations’ role and value—holistically understanding an organization’s stakeholder environment (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). The public relations function adds value through its understanding of the multiplicity of issue-actors in a community or society, and its knowledge of stakeholders and publics central to the organization and the issue. Resulting engagement—brandstanding—can be relational or episodic, but should follow the long-term interests and values of the organization and its stakeholders to reap the benefits of genuine engagement (Johnston & Lane, 2020).

### 1.7. Measurement

Public relations has been called to move beyond tracking the organizational impacts of CSR programs and issue engagement, and toward focusing measurement and evaluation efforts on the issues themselves (Bortree, 2014). A broad perspective appeals to a wider understanding of legitimacy and responsibility for organizations in society, both for the social, discursive, and democratic responsibilities of corporations (i.e. Dodd, 2018; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Suchman, 1995) as well as the employer- and community-related responsibilities of charitable organizations (e.g., Harris et al., 2009; Herlin, 2015; Leardini et al., 2019) and civil society organizations (Brown, 2008; Meyer et al., 2013). In this light, public relations and strategic communication scholars have proposed a turn toward community and societally centered metrics and measurement (e.g., Gregory & Macnamara, 2019; Macnamara & Gregory, 2018; Volk & Buhmann, 2019) and away from myopic, rigid, and short-term understandings of organizational success in understanding their societal contributions (Van Ruler, 2019; Winkler & Etter, 2018). Measurement approaches can reflect agility—allowing for short-term sprints and redirections (Van Ruler, 2019), which may be particularly beneficial in fast-moving contentious issue environments. It can also reflect societally oriented perspectives, such as adding to the representativeness of discourse (Weder, 2021) or expanding deliberative capacity of democratic systems (Edwards, 2016).

Several lines of scholarship may be applicable to address this gap. A balanced scorecard mindset, for example, which combines organization-centered and community-centered metrics (e.g., Macnamara, 2018; Zeffass, 2008), could be applied to evaluate brandstanding’s impact on a campaign, an organization, and societal views on the issue at hand. Agonistic metrics (Davidson and Motion, 2018), deliberative capacity (Dryzek, 2009; Edwards, 2016), or social capital (Taylor, 2018) approaches could be utilized to evaluate contributions to democratic and civic discourse. In the CSA context, Parcha and Kingsley Westerman’s (2020) study on the effects of corporate stances on social issues found that CSA stances can influence individual attitudes on controversial social issues. In sum, brandstanding can influence public perceptions of issues, and public relations measurement can and should address community- and societal-scale implications of organizational

communication (Gregory & Macnamara, 2019).

At its most pragmatic, this mindset is exemplified by the Institute for Public Relations’ recent report, *The Communicator’s Guide to Research, Analysis, and Evaluation*, which provides a clear metric for this action and measurement: Reducing the “say-do gap” (Weiner, 2021, p. 5). While the public relations function cannot control all actions of the organization, it can make a difference in holding organizations accountable for what statements are made and whether there is (at minimum) a clear plan with sufficient resources to accomplish goals or address problematic issues. In helping organizations to make statements on contentious or polarizing issues, the public relations function does have control over including, for example, metrics to track progress, timelines as part of achieving objectives, and follow up, or planning future updates on organizational progress—as well as tracking change related to the broader issue, beyond organizational involvement. In this sense, measurement becomes a crucial aspect of authenticity, and practitioners have the ability to move organizations from grandstanding and toward ethical brandstanding.

### 1.8. Moral decoupling and brandstanding

Why has brandstanding become a widely used strategy for contentious issue engagement? While some scholars have cautioned against overuse of brandstanding approaches (e.g., Argenti, 2020; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016), practitioners and organizations have increasingly taken and recommended polarizing stances rather than silence (Gelles, 2017; Hijaz, 2019; Rafferty, 2018; Tokar, 2020). Dodd and Supa (2014, 2015) found that such corporate stances may actually increase purchase intent for companies, even if some consumers disagree with the stance. In a survey with a nationally representative sample, Austin et al. (2019) found that the majority of respondents agreed that corporations should have a role in addressing shared societal issues, despite the U.S. population’s overall conservative skew.

While most CSA research uses a rational decision-making approach via the theory of planned behavior (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2015; Kim et al., 2020; Overton et al., 2020; Rim et al., 2020), another potential explanation comes from Moral Decoupling Theory (MDT). This approach, developed in advertising and marketing literature, prioritizes a different psychological process, positing that consumers may disagree with a company’s behavior, but still justify purchasing its products and services (e.g., Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Fehr et al., 2019; Haberstroh et al., 2017; Kim & Krishna, 2021). Dissonance between personal beliefs and consumer behavior can cause harm to an individual’s self image, which has traditionally been explained through psychological coping mechanisms such as moral rationalization, but may be better understood in this context as a dissociation of moral judgment from performance judgment (e.g., Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Haberstroh et al., 2015). A moral decoupling perspective—distinct from rationalizing the offensive actions themselves as being somewhat acceptable—explains that a lack of alignment (or cognitive dissonance) between an organization and the individual in one area (i.e. product or service quality) is decoupled from the moral judgment about the action at hand (Lee & Kwak, 2016). Thus, personal beliefs and disagreements with an organization’s actions may not have a significant impact on future behavior for many stakeholders. MDT has the potential to apply across a diverse range of organizations (Haberstroh et al., 2017), which may include places/communities (Hankinson, 2001; Olins, 2002), nonprofits (Ewing & Napoli, 2005), and political organizations (Shepherd, 2005). While MDT was initially tested narrowly on moral transgressions for corporate leaders (i.e. Bhattacharjee et al., 2013; Haberstroh et al., 2017) it has begun to be applied more broadly, such as to the potential for the deterioration of moral responsibilities in supply chains (Eriksson & Svensson, 2016) and to corporate behaviors in a CSR space (Sendhofer, 2020). Thus, for those that disagree with an organization’s stance on a highly polarized issue, moral decoupling offers an explanation for aforementioned empirical results that demonstrated a limited negative impact for public stances on

contentious issues (e.g., Austin et al., 2019; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Rim et al., 2020).

## 2. Conceptualizing ethical and “Effective” brandstanding

Genuineness, sincerity, authenticity, and consistency (internally and over time) are pillars of both ethical public relations engagement (Johnston & Lane, 2020) and effectiveness in brandstanding. In discussing *effectiveness*, it is crucial to consider both the organization's goals and reputation as well as in its commitment to the cause itself (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). Thus, ethical brandstanding must be reflective of authentic issue engagement.

### 2.1. Facets of brandstanding

Based on this synthesis of literature, ethical brandstanding efforts must reflect (1) a genuine connection to the organization's values, its stakeholders' values, and societal values, (2) an authenticity in communication and action regarding the issue at hand, (3) high quality issue engagement representing frequent and ongoing interaction, and (4) holistic measurement of the issue itself—not just the outcomes for

**Table 1**  
Facets of ethical brandstanding.

| Facet                                                        | Explanation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | References                                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Connection to organizational, community, and societal values | Organizations should clearly define and share their own values and those of their stakeholders. In order to do so, they must listen, research, and reflect on the relative and perceived strength of values (in the context of stakeholders and publics—potentially including the general public and unanticipated publics).                                 | Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006; Boynton, 2006; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Kruckeberg & Vijnovic, 2010; Macnamara, 2016; Place, 2019; Pruzan, 2001; Wakefield & Knighton, 2019 |
| Authentic issue engagement                                   | Organizations should communicate and act authentically, reflecting <i>continuity</i> , <i>credibility</i> , <i>integrity</i> , and <i>symbolism</i> or explanation of shared values. In doing so, they also must acknowledge that authenticity will not create consensus and should accept the inevitability of dissensus as a known risk.                   | Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Holtzhausen, 2000; Lee & Kim, 2017; Molleda, 2010; Morhart et al., 2015; Shen & Kim, 2012                                           |
| Appropriate engagement depth                                 | Organizations should, at minimum, undertake episodic engagement as part of public discourse on contentious issues relevant to their stakeholders and publics. In some cases, deeper relational or dialogic engagement may be needed to maintain genuine commitment.                                                                                          | Dhanesh, 2017; Johnston & Lane, 2020; Kent & Taylor, 2021; Morehouse & Saffer, 2019, 2020; Taylor & Kent, 2014                                                          |
| Measurement of the campaign and cause/issue                  | Organizations should measure beyond organizational interests and utilize issue- and cause-centered measurement and evaluation approaches and employ civic and democratically informed tools and metrics. The public relations function should work to make measurement transparent and to reduce the distance between organizational statements and actions. | Bortree, 2014; Capizzo, 2022; Davidson and Motion, 2018; Gregory & Macnamara, 2019; Parcha et al., 2020; Weiner, 2021                                                   |

the organization.(Table 1).

### 2.2. Connection to the organization's values and community/societal values

Organizations will need to define and share their own values and those of their stakeholders, evoking an “organizational consciousness” (Pruzan, 2001, p. 276) through the reflective, purposeful establishment of values-oriented qualities like organizational identity and vision. From there, they can consider how aligning with a certain stance connects to the multiplicity of stakeholder and community values, and/or reflects general or unintended public values—where among the agonistic, conflicting societal values the organization may take a stance. In delineating their values and those of stakeholders and publics, organizations should not merely accrue and aggregate values like a checklist, but should bridge distinctions in a participatory process of meaning-making, with an awareness of power differentials and the potential for making progress on issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice (Waymer & Logan, 2021). For shared values to emerge, organizations and stakeholders must continually engage in reflexive engagement— aspiring to dialogue (Johnston & Lane, 2020; Lane, 2020)—that foregrounds the socially integrative function of values (Pruzan, 2001). In this way, organizations can incorporate the multiplicity of values evident in recent articulations of a general public (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010; Pieczka, 2019).

Furthermore, a values-oriented approach sets a clear role for communication: Internally, communication must synthesize and promote the values of all stakeholders (Hassan, 2007; van Rekom et al., 2006) and emphasize success in relation to the evaluative function of values (Dobni et al., 2000); externally, a multi-stakeholder, dialogic culture needs to be established and maintained for the development of the organization (Johnston & Lane, 2020; Place, 2019) as well to demonstrate societal contribution and organizational legitimacy (Downling & Pfeffer, 1975; Hammann et al., 2006; Suchman, 1995). Of course, choices must be made in this process, and organizations must, in essence, take sides on polarizing issues (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). But, these choices—if explained and made transparently (Morhart et al., 2015) and well as with follow-through (Weiner, 2021), do not mean that stakeholders will immediately become disaffected (Haberstroh et al., 2017). While issues shift regularly, fundamental values such as accountability, caring, competence, efficiency and fairness should ground organizational engagement with novel or seemingly novel issues (Brummette & Zoch, 2015). In this context, values advocacy can be genuine, reducing the risk for ongoing criticism, even on polarizing issues (Bostdorff & Vibbert, 1994). Organizations should transparently articulate the narrative that links their issue stance, the organizational values, and the broader community or societal values being addressed.

#### 2.2.1. Commitment to authentic communication and action

Authentic organizational engagement on sociopolitical issues should be a purpose- and values-driven approach in which the communication around a nonneutral stance aims to not only support the operation and success of the organization, but also strive for social change. Authenticity reflects the cohesion of the values communicated by the organization and its actual practices (Alfazi & Kim, 2021; Ragas & Roberts, 2009); as such, organizations need to commit to authenticity (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009), ensuring their actions include not just the messaging of advocacy but also tangible changes in practice (Molleda, 2010; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Organizations should communicate and act authentically, reflecting *continuity*, *credibility*, *integrity*, and *symbolism* or explanation of shared values (Morhart et al., 2015).

Organizational communication should showcase consistency with other organizational aims that reflects a full commitment to the issue as opposed to jumping onto a trending topic (Ragas & Roberts, 2009; Shen & Kim, 2012). This matters with employees, volunteers, donors, and other internal stakeholders as well as external stakeholders and

community members (Lee & Kim, 2017). The communication of the organization's stance is supported by capacities and efforts to follow through, ultimately highlighting the need for tangible action that upholds the values espoused in acts of brandstanding. The public relations function can lead an organization toward authentic values and actions—but it can also push an organization toward inauthentic communication, for genuine or disingenuous reasons. By emphasizing the significance of authenticity, brandstanding as an organizational strategy is not limited to spheres of discussion and publicity, but underscores the potential contribution of an organization to public interest and societal wellbeing (Dryzek, 2009; Edwards, 2016; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Spicer, 2000). Ensuring fidelity between communication and action as part of demonstrating authenticity may be the most consequential efforts of the public relations function in an issue engagement context.

### 2.2.2. *Obligation to and depth of engagement*

At heart, all organizations carry responsibilities to the communities and societies in which they exist (Valentini et al., 2012). While societal expectation for the breadth and degree of these obligations has shifted over time (e.g., Capizzo, 2020; Dodd, 2018; Logan, 2021), organizations must make thoughtful, holistic decisions about (1) how they are listening to and (hopefully) understanding their stakeholders, (2) what their specific obligations are to their stakeholders, (3) how to fulfill these obligations, and (4) how best to demonstrate and communicate that they have fulfilled them. In this space, the concept of brandstanding provides a helpful approach to engagement: the two-way function of ongoing interaction with stakeholders and communities (e.g., Dhanesh, 2017; Johnston & Lane, 2018; Morehouse & Saffer, 2019). When selecting engagement approaches regarding contentious, polarizing issues, not every organization may need to embrace a fully relational model in every scenario—episodic engagement may be sufficient given the degree of connection to the issue and importance for stakeholders (Johnston & Lane, 2018). That said, organizations would benefit from centering genuineness and authenticity in these actions and, as discussed more fully in the next section, defining and reporting clear, transparent metrics that help both internal and external stakeholders avoid the “say-do gap” (Weiner, 2021, p. 5).

### 2.2.3. *Measuring impact within and beyond the organization*

What is “effectiveness” or “success” when communicating on contentious issues? It is not as simple as increased sales for a corporation, higher donations for a nonprofit, or program usage for a government agency. There must be both long-term, organization-centered measures such as reputation, brand equity, and differentiation (e.g., Gregory & Macnamara, 2019; Weiner, 2021) as well as societal, community, and issue-centered measures (e.g., Macnamara, 2018; Parcha, et al., 2020; Zerfass, 2008). Organizations should aim to take contentious issue stances that reflect continuity, integrity, and credibility (Morhart et al., 2015) precisely because these stances are morally and ethically consistent as well as because they build trust with stakeholders and communities. Such approaches help organizations contribute to societies by fulfilling their moral legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006). Only through a holistic understanding of public relations measurement and evaluation can practitioners and organizations fully conceptualize their engagement to the cause as a whole, as well as the part they play. By both listening and measuring issues beyond organizational impacts, organizations demonstrate their authenticity and genuine commitment, as exemplified by the ongoing social and racial justice engagement of companies such as Ben & Jerry's (Ciszek & Logan, 2018) and Starbucks (Logan, 2016, 2019), even when they faced criticism or setbacks. These organizations have demonstrated their commitment over time by consistently attempting to reduce the distance between their stated values and their actions (Weiner, 2021). Measurement of the issues beyond an organization's immediate interests, and measuring with an acceptance of dissensus, allows for organizations

to see issue success truly reflect the organizational values, communication, and actions that constitute genuine engagement.

### 2.3. *Example case: are organizations living up to expectations in the wake of George Floyd's murder and the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests?*

To exemplify the facets of brandstanding, this paper briefly considers the communication behaviors of organizations in light of the 2020 protests against police brutality and structural racism (especially within, but not limited to, law enforcement). Following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, major U.S. corporations vocalized their alignment with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, including Citigroup, Netflix, Nike, and many others (Hsu, 2020; White, 2021). While corporations are often wary of this type of potentially polarizing, public stance, organizations aimed to link their values with the concerns held by their wider, societal audience about state violence against Black individuals and communities. Organizations communicated their support, particularly online, by changing their social media profile pictures to black, adding #BLM to posts and bios, penning public blog posts, and quoting leading Black authors and intellectuals such as James Baldwin (Hsu, 2020). This values-driven approach aimed to build loyalty and connection; however, audiences were quick to confront cases of misalignment between organizational support for BLM and prior representations of organizational values (Hsu, 2020; Smith, 2021; White, 2021). For instance, social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube were criticized because of their historic ineffectiveness at moderating and removing racist content—undermining their claims to support BLM (Hsu, 2020). These critiques reify the need for values-driven approaches to be transformative internally alongside external communication, especially to ethically and effectively partake in acts brandstanding.

Furthermore, communities have continued to assess the authenticity of organizational claims of support. In the immediate aftermath of various organizations communicating stances of support, many people found sentiments lacking, especially when organizations did not follow through in providing funding or substantive resources (Hsu, 2020). Internal and external stakeholders wanted tangible change, particularly from organizations that adopted or appropriated Black culture, and/or targeted Black audiences (Hsu, 2020). For example, publisher Condé Nast and several of its publications (including *Bon Appetite* and *Vogue*) were heavily criticized for making public statements in support of BLM while mistreating and silencing Black employees (Lee, 2020).

Reflecting on the claims in 2021, many commentators and journalists noted that the lack of structural change ensures the “racial reckoning” was largely futile despite some important narrative and symbolic shifts (Black & Liu, 2021; Smith, 2021; White, 2021). In fact, many organizations that perceive themselves and their stances as progressive actively lobby against (for example) federal tax increases that could provide greater physical and social infrastructure investments for underserved communities of color (Smith, 2021). Regardless of the initial messaging, powerful organizations, including corporations and nonprofits, are still dominated by older, white males (White, 2021), and many continue to suppress the wages of their disproportionately Black working-class employees (Smith, 2021). Years later, the claims of organizations are still being scrutinized because their authenticity needs to align with action and practices that reflect the communicated, shared values.

Exemplifying episodic engagement, the majority of financial donations to racial equity causes in the U.S. were contributed within the first several weeks following George Floyd's death (Smith, 2021). This new engagement, while significant, was still critiqued because of its instability, reflecting that the monetary contributions did not necessarily represent long term engagement with the issue. Affected stakeholders and their broader communities are concerned that organizations—even those who took a public stance and made tangible efforts of support—are not adequately engaged with the issue of racial equity that

entails lasting efforts with aims of impacting civil society. The engagement from corporations is perceived as episodic and limited, especially as there was the potential for a change of power in Congress in 2022 that could have returned publicly “aggressive stances” to a “defensive crouch” (White, 2021).

In terms of evaluating organizational involvement in racial issues, Black and Liu (2021) note how “the rush of corporate commitments to improve Black lives” has not fostered measurable change, including “closing regional wage gaps, representation in executive ranks on par with Black representation in the market, and creating an equitable standard of living between Black and white Minnesotans.” The highly visible communication campaigns from organizations lacked holistic measurements for societal improvement, suggesting unethical engagement. What is “effectiveness” when organizations take a stance against the killing of innocent Black men? Organizational involvement in racial issues and racist violence cannot be evaluated by reputation or brand equity - not when people’s lives are at stake.

Ultimately, the concept of brandstanding and its facets allow for deeper understanding and analysis of organizational involvement in societal issues. Specifically, by holding brandstanding as the ideal ethical option for organizations wishing to take a stance in controversial conversations, the concept can highlight areas for improvement that ensures meaningful organizational involvement for the betterment of society.

#### 2.4. Distinctiveness from existing concepts

While similar to the existing concept of CSA, brandstanding is distinct as it encompasses all types of organizations—including corporations taking CSA stances as well as nonprofits and government agencies taking potentially polarizing public stances on issues not central to their core purpose. In corporate contexts, brandstanding and CSA may be construed as a part of broader CSR efforts—particularly in light of deliberative or political CSR (e.g., Hussain & Moriarty, 2018; Palazzo & Scherer, 2006; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011)—and corporate political activity (CPA) programs (e.g., Hadani et al., 2017; Hillman et al., 2004; Lux et al., 2011). In a nonprofit context, brandstanding can align with strategies of giving assurances, in which organizations like NGOs seek to assure publics that their concerns are significant to the organization, including considerations of their diverse and marginalized identities (Iannacone, 2021). For example, in response to the murder of George Floyd, both the American Red Cross and the International Committee of the Red Cross released statements denouncing racism and acknowledging the issues of their Black publics across the globe, aligning the statement with their fundamental principles (American Red Cross, 2020; International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020). The option of brandstanding as a communication strategy aligns with nonprofit organizations’ missions of societal good (Schwarz & Fritsch, 2014) as well as proactively acknowledges the diverse identities and issues inherent in their networks (Iannacone, 2021).

That said, brandstanding is both broader in terms of organizational applicability as well as integrating MDT to explain its efficacy with potentially skeptical stakeholders. If organizations see a particular polarizing issue stance as morally preferable and in alignment with their values, they should not be afraid to take that stance in an authentic way, as it (1) reflects who the organization already is, and (2) is likely that many stakeholders and connected community members will not change their behavior relative to the organization, even if they find the stance objectionable.

#### 2.5. Practical implications

For practitioners, brandstanding represents a philosophy of engagement over disengagement for polarizing issues. When organizational values align with contentious issues that reach public prominence, this mindset encourages organizations to (1) address the “say-do gap”

between societal issues and organizational values (Weiner, 2021, p. 5), (2) ensure internal and structural support and alignment, (3) define internal and external metrics and measurement around engagement (e.g., Macnamara, 2018; Parcha et al., 2020; Weiner, 2021), (4) publicly address the issue (e.g., Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Dodd, 2018;), and (5) monitor for ongoing opportunities to support, engage, and maintain alignment with values, including those best understood as related to the general public (Kruckeberg & Vujnovic, 2010; Pieczka, 2019) and unanticipated publics (Wakefield & Knighton, 2019). This involves both internal and external commitments—addressing inequity and injustice within the organization, among its stakeholders, and, when possible, in proximate communities. Importantly, organizations must understand that brandstanding operates in an environment of dissensus (e.g., Ciszek, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Holtzhausen, 2000), and that some stakeholders will not be accepting of stances on organizational issues. Yet, organizations navigating these issues while maintaining trust and respect from stakeholders have done so by engaging authentically, when the issue aligns with organizational values and there is a clear rationale for sustained involvement (Morhart et al., 2015).

In light of MDT, practitioners should understand that, even if some stakeholders see what they consider to be morally problematic stances, the effects on behaviors (such as buying products or donating to a nonprofit) are likely to be lower than to be expected through rational estimates alone (Bhattacharjee et al., 2012; Fehr et al., 2019; Haberstroh et al., 2017). Contentious issue engagement and management is already a part of day-to-day practice for many public relations professionals, and frameworks such as brandstanding potentially valuable tools for providing guidance. Rather than pandering to stakeholders, practitioners should seek consistency both among organizational actions and organizational, stakeholder, and community values, as well as in the context of contentious issue engagement. On the whole, stakeholders and community members will be likely to trust and respect such actions if they are authentic and demonstrate commitment, even if they disagree with the stance.

Of course, there are potential downsides and challenges to brandstanding. Authenticity is a difficult aim, and many organizations should avoid taking public stances on specific issues before they are confident in their organization’s preparedness, sincerity, and commitment. Jumping into polarizing issues without first identifying and understanding the issue history, the relationship to the organization’s values, and the relationship to the organization’s actions and policies is a recipe for problematic and inauthentic engagement (Argenti, 2020), including woke washing (Dowell & Jackson, 2020; Vredenberg et al., 2020). Yet, public relations professionals have the potential to counsel organizations to improve their response to an organization’s desire for recognition (Tosi & Warmke, 2016) and to use their influence to advocate for closing the say-do gap for issue engagement and action (Weiner, 2021). In this way, practitioners can help organizations embrace their civic and citizenship responsibilities in the context of contentious issues (Logan, 2019; Waymer & Logan, 2021).

### 3. Conclusion & directions for further research

Practitioners involved in the day-to-day engagement decisions brandstanding entails would benefit from having a clearer framework and process to define, prioritize, and balance potentially disparate values. This paper serves as a starting point to address core facets of effective and ethical brandstanding that can apply across different types of organizations. While some approaches (e.g., Argenti, 2020) recommend significant caution in taking public stances on polarized issues, this framework for brandstanding—while clear-eyed about the challenges—sees the opportunity for public relations practitioners and organizations to (1) address issues of authenticity and consistency among existing organizational, stakeholder, and community values, (2) empower organizations to act and communicate based on those values, and (3) to connect and evaluate the action and communication directly

with the issues and causes at hand.

Future research could explore this framework in practice, using both qualitative and quantitative tools to examine and strengthen its efficacy for practitioners and organizations. Quantitative approach would also be beneficial to operationalize and develop scales for clearer measurement of the four variables, although much of this could be drawn from existing research in these areas. Additionally, MDT should be tested in non-corporate settings (such as large nonprofits and government agencies), although these types of organizations share many of the same brand identity characteristics with corporations.

Values are complex. For their legitimacy, organizations must balance their own interests and core functions with central tenets about their purpose and responsibilities to communities and societies. Despite the risks, organizations have spent the last decade wading progressively deeper into polarizing social issue discourse (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Dodd, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This conceptualization of brandstanding paves the way for more organizations—by number and type—to rise to evolving conceptions of social responsibility by doing their civic duty and speaking up when their most important values require it. Ethical, authentic, and professional public relations work should be at the center of helping organizations to be civic leaders and to embrace action and communication that embody their core values.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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