

Measuring Stakeholder Perceptions of the “Social Impact” in ESG

By Cision and the Institute for Public Relations



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The opinions expressed in this report by online users do not necessarily represent the views of Cision or IPR. The appearance of social media commentary does not constitute an endorsement of these views by Cision or IPR.

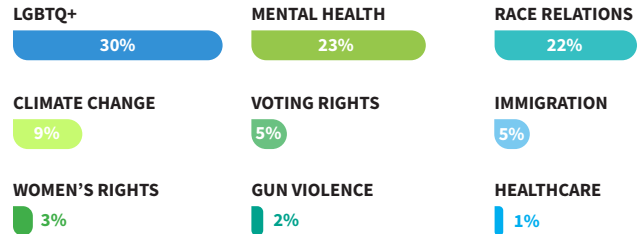
ABOUT THE STUDY

Cision and the Institute for Public Relations examined the conversation around environmental, social, and corporate governance (ESG) topics. This first report focuses on the ‘S’ in ESG — social impact. The past few years have brought a renewed focus on social issues and activism, which has had an impact on consumers’ expectations from brands. Using Brandwatch’s Consumer Research tool, we analyzed nearly 209 million online conversations across social media and online news, relating to specific social issues.

Questions addressed in this study include:

- What social issues are generating online discussion and media coverage?
- What key themes and topics emerge?
- What brands are associated with social issues most frequently and why?
- How are brand perceptions tied to action or inaction on social issues?
- How do consumers want brands to address key social issues?

Share of Conversation on Social Topics



KEY FINDINGS

- 1** **LGBTQ+ rights (30%), mental health (23%), and race relations (22%) were the most discussed topics from May to July 2021.** Across the board, opinions on issues were starkly polarized based on political affiliation. Current events — particularly legislative bills — were the most frequent drivers of conversation, driving two to five conversation spikes monthly.
- 2** **References to celebratory days and months, such as #PrideMonth and #WorldRefugeeDay, briefly increased social media chatter around social issues,** but the **discussions quickly dissipated** when those events ended.
- 3** **Companies and organizations** that celebrated events such as Pride Month **were admonished** if their words **did not match** their actions.
- 4** **Some issues frustrated online users more than others,** particularly in cases where people felt the problems were long term and they observed little improvement over time. People complained about **inaction on gun violence, climate change, race relations, and LGBTQ+ rights.** Politicians and organizations were often called on to take action.
- 5** **High-profile authors, influencers, politicians, and celebrities often shared their opinions about various social issues.** People subsequently shared those messages across social media and added commentary that indicated either solid support or disagreement with those views. People were **more likely** to share their personal stories after high-profile celebrities or other individuals indicated how a particular social issue affected them.
- 6** Across most social media platforms, **people were more likely to give their opinion about a social issue, rather than encouraging dialogue and discussion from others.** Race relations and mental health were two areas where people were **more likely** to engage in two-way conversations.

7 Most social media users are not bringing brands into their online conversations about social issues. Most engagement with brands around social issues initiated from the brand making a statement rather than an individual person bringing brands into the conversation.

8 Social issues are not mutually exclusive; much of the conversation on social issues, such as climate change, involved discussion about multiple issues at once.

9 Overall, most conversations on social issues, such as race relations, spiked with events or news and then faded across all demographics, including with high-profile individuals. However, conversation about climate change sustained more than other issues over time.



ACTION ITEMS FOR COMMUNICATORS

Communicators should follow their organization's values and purpose when speaking out about a social issue. A process or strategic plan for speaking out can help communicators prepare, including taking steps to understand the organization's position and employees' perception of key social issues. Companies should comb through their histories to see if they have supported any other brands, politicians, or figures in the past that contradict their purpose. If their actions have not always aligned with the current messages, communicators should prepare to respond to challenges.

If there is a hot button issue being discussed by the public and your brand does not take a stance, members of the public will fill the information vacuum and demand the brand takes action. Communicators can help combat these challenges by monitoring popular issues and disseminating appropriate messages in a timely manner.

Below are some specific actions communicators can take based on the social issues topic:

RACE RELATIONS

Communicators must embody authenticity regarding a desire for racial equality and ensure internally they are improving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). People will notice – and call out – any disconnect between what companies communicate and the actions they take before and after a trending event.

MENTAL HEALTH

Communicators should evaluate their organization's structural support of employees' mental health prior to participating in awareness months or weeks. Former and current employees are often compelled to share their mental health challenges brought on by their negative experiences at work and their inability to procure satisfactory support offered by the organization.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Brands that take a stance on climate change need to “walk the talk” or they will be met with doubt and criticism from the public. Communicators should ensure that their brands have taken

appropriate action to improve their carbon footprint before publishing messaging about climate change.

Because the climate change discussion is consistent and likely to stick around, brands should get involved in the conversation on a more regular basis.

IMMIGRATION

Boomers led the conversations on immigration with both positive and negative sentiments. If brands would like to take action on this topic, Boomers would be an active and engaged audience.

GUN VIOLENCE

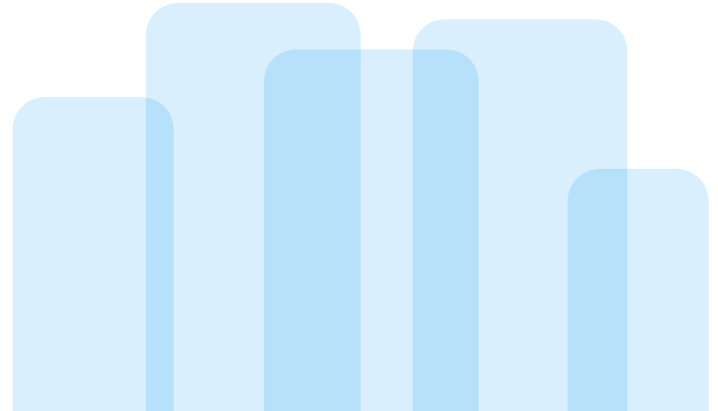
Younger demographic segments (millennials and Gen Y) are more united in their stand against gun violence whereas Boomers and Gen X often counter debate with comments regarding the Second Amendment. Therefore, communicators should take note and craft messages with this difference in mind.

People typically bring politicians into this polarizing debate more than brands. Communicators should review their organization's historical support for politicians and reexamine their record on gun control issues. The record of any politician an organization supports will reflect back on the company.

HEALTHCARE

While people did not bring specific brands into the conversation, they did comment more broadly on companies' inaction toward healthcare reform. Communicators representing brands that strongly support healthcare reform can position their organizations as leaders in this field because this is not an issue most companies have taken action to address.

Millennials and Gen Z lead online conversations on healthcare with frequent support for universal healthcare. This provides a unique opportunity for political and healthcare brands to engage Millennials as an active audience, both internally and externally, in healthcare conversations.



IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ISSUES

LGBTQ+ RIGHTS

Online conversation around LGBTQ+ issues significantly spiked (466%) at the beginning of June thanks to Pride Month. Gen Z provided the bulk of discussion with 68% of mentions. Companies and influencers contributed to the conversation with mixed results.

Burger King generated the most reach with its Pride Month tweet pledging to donate money to the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) for each chicken sandwich purchased. Reaction was mixed. Some took the opportunity to praise BK for supporting Pride Month while others accused the restaurant of promoting “cancel culture,” and said they would rather support Chick-fil-A. Another group saw the moment as an opportunity to complain about the brand’s quality of food and customer service.

Companies or influencers who did not “walk the talk” were met with backlash from online communities. Amazon was one of the top companies called out for “rainbow washing” by publicly showing support for Pride Month on their social media platforms; however, people accused Amazon of donating to anti-LGBTQ+ politicians and selling products from anti-LGBTQ+ brands, among other actions, that did not line up with their pro-LGBTQ+ messaging.

President Joe Biden’s tweet in support of transgender Americans during Pride Month was a frequently shared post and generated a high volume of online chatter. Some urged him to do more, such as passing the Equality Act.



RACE RELATIONS

When political pundits, business leaders, or celebrities posted about race-related issues, conversations around these issues on social media increased. Men were more likely to talk about race relations (66%) than women (34%). Many business executives chose to weigh in and contributed 26% of the conversation. Political affiliation did impact how the online conversation discussing racial issues was framed.

The one-year remembrance of George Floyd's murder and Derek Chauvin's sentencing were two of the highest trending events around this topic. Some people discussed the lack of meaningful progress over the past year to improve racial equality and asked followers to weigh in on what has changed. In some cases, social media generated in-depth conversation and a better understanding of the complexity of these issues.

#BlackLivesMatter and #BLM were two of the most popular hashtags. Other phrases and terms occasionally referred to in these conversations were “defund the police” and “Antifa.”

Sporting events also drew attention to race relations. Social media users mostly condemned the racist abuse suffered by three Black players following their missed penalty kicks for England in a #Euro2020 soccer match. Players taking a knee to support the #BLM movement before soccer matches also generated some conversation, most of which was supportive. People called out the U.K. government for not doing more to publicly condemn racism.



Rebekah Fenton, MD, FAAP
@RFentonMD



Question for my non-Black followers (although all are welcome to answer):

Since the murder of [#GeorgeFloyd](#) a year ago, people vowed to be more anti-racist, to read and do more, and be better. I'm genuinely curious, have your actions changed since then? I'd love to hear how.

5:59 PM · May 25, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

61 Retweets 7 Quote Tweets 409 Likes



MENTAL HEALTH

News about mental health — particularly the mental health of celebrities and athletes — drove many conversations.

News outlets and organizations talked about mental health challenges and policies on social media. While some employees shared the work their employers are doing to support their mental health, others talked about the impact of COVID-19 and work life on their mental well-being.

Insurance companies posted their support of mental health, but few consumers engaged in those conversations. When BTS band member Suga discussed his depression in an interview with Rolling Stone magazine, most fans and followers retweeted their support, and some shared their own struggles with depression.

On the other hand, when gymnast Simone Biles chose to sit out certain Olympic events, reactions were mixed. Most prominent figures and other celebrities showed their support and shared their own personal stories, calling Biles “brave.” Some were less supportive and said she let down her team and the country or that she quit too easily.

#MentalHealthAwarenessWeek was a widely used hashtag in the UK. The discussion offered an opportunity for social media users to share resources, suggestions and stories. Common terms related to mental health included “depression,” “anxiety,” “suicide,” and “mental illness.”

Microsoft, Nike, and ESPN were praised for their programming and “getting it right” during Mental Health Awareness Week/Month.

Walmart and McDonald’s were two organizations whose former and current employees shared mainly negative sentiments about employee treatment and lack of mental health benefits.

Millennials sustained conversation about mental health more than the other generations (specifically, Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Z).



Laverne Cox
@Lavernecox

@Simone_Biles you are so deeply loved and appreciated. Prioritizing your mental health is probably the most courageous thing you've done. Thank you! You are enough. You have enough. You've done enough, more than enough. #SimoneBiles 🇺🇸



Dr. Lerato Masekela @THARHealth · May 20

Where's the study that shows companies contributing to mental and physical health of their employees by driving them to work excessive hours simply because "you now work from home" & if you're not always working it means you're doing nothing at all? 🙄

Forbes @Forbes · May 25

A study shows people working from home are having sex, dating, taking naps and doing side hustles on company time t.co/DWQKQ3P



Tasha J.
@theglossier

No one should have to disclose they battle with crippling anxiety and depression in order to have their boundaries be taken seriously, I—

11:37 AM · May 31, 2021

192.3K 115 Share this Tweet

CLIMATE CHANGE

Americans called out climate change contradictions and blamed organizations, high-profile individuals, and the government for not doing more to stop it.

High-profile individuals such as Elon Musk, Bill Gates, and Sen. Bernie Sanders, weighed in on climate change, which sparked conversation throughout the months. Gen Z provided 55% of the climate change conversation, helped in part by shares and comments on Greta Thunberg's tweets on the topic.

Climate change was one of the few social issues that had consistent and sustained conversation, compared to other social issues that saw spikes in conversation during different times.

Conversations surrounding climate change also served as grounds for people to air other grievances, such as the handling of COVID-19.

Contradictory behavior spurred discontent from people, such as U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson taking a brief flight to Cornwall to discuss climate change, local governments poorly handling heat waves, and the environmental impact of bitcoin mining.



IMMIGRATION

Immigration was a politically divided topic; the Mexico-U.S. border was a key discussion driver.

President Trump's border wall continued to be a frequent topic of discussion on social media. Republicans, especially politicians, were more likely to support the wall and talk about "illegal immigrants," and their lack of support for the president.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene's frequent promotion of the border wall and criticisms of the Biden administration were widely retweeted.

Media outlets featured stories showing how companies were supporting immigrant employees.

In July, a federal judge ruled that DACA was unlawful and blocked new applications to the program. U.S. tech companies subsequently voiced their disappointment with the ruling. Although tech companies' responses were frequently shared online, they generated little organic conversation.

Some in the U.S. expressed their frustration with getting visas and green cards.

Success stories of immigrants who successfully started their own companies were shared across platforms.

International conflicts, such as those in Myanmar, Gaza, and Eritrea, generated conversations around refugees. Most posts supported refugees. #WorldRefugeeDay drew positive support across news and social channels.



VOTING RIGHTS

Two voting reform bills in the U.S. Congress, the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, generated spikes in discussion. Gen Xers contributed 39% of the conversation mostly in the form of retweets.

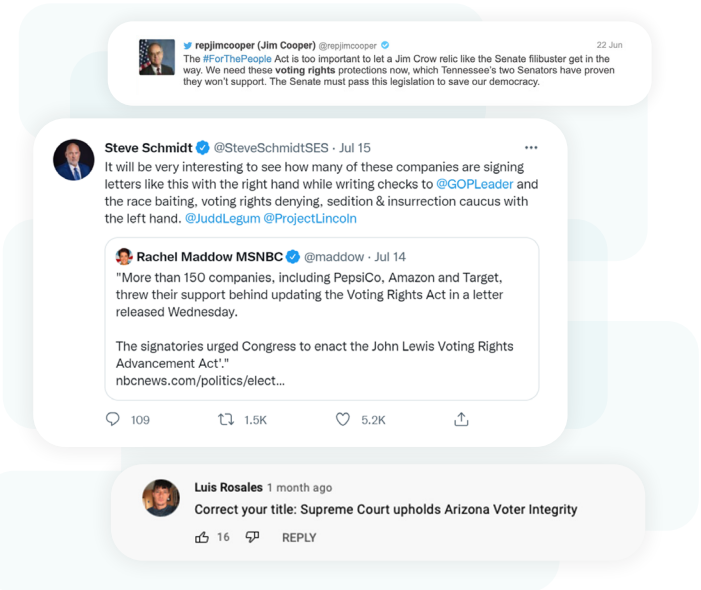
Media outlets used social platforms to spotlight companies that publicly supported, spoke out against, or remained silent on voting issues. Activists and organizations tagged the names of companies who failed to act.

While conversation was politically polarized, Democrats contributed a larger share of discussion. High-profile Democrats, including Sen. Bernie Sanders, Rep. Maxine Waters, actor Dylan O'Brien, author Ari Berman, former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, and speaker Nancy Pelosi all used the popular hashtag #forthepeopleact to further discussion of voting rights.

Specific states pushing bills for more voting restrictions generated accusations of voter suppression, threats to democracy, and racism from those opposed to these measures. Some people called for the end of the Senate filibuster, believing it to be the most effective way to push through national voting rights legislation.

On July 1, President Joe Biden tweeted about the U.S. Supreme Court's decision upholding Arizona's voting restrictions, spurring conversation from both sides of the partisan divide.

People voiced their opinions and grievances but didn't take the opportunity to expand the conversation beyond a lament. Those unhappy with the ruling demanded that President Biden expand the U.S. Supreme Court in response. Others were in favor of the Arizona voting restrictions being upheld.



GENDER ISSUES

Discrimination-related events spiked online discussions of gender issues, and people mainly showed their support of gender equality.

The #MeToo hashtag was trending after Bill Cosby's sexual assault conviction was overturned; most commenters on social media were supportive of the victims.

Twitter users in India protested gender discrimination with the hashtag #save_male_nurses after the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) imposed an 80% quota for women in nursing officer roles.

After the U.S. Senate voted against the Paycheck Fairness Act, a proposed bill to combat pay discrimination against women and LGBTQ+ workers, dismayed Twitter users took to the platform to criticize the move and voice their disapproval that it had become a partisan issue.



Mueller, She Wrote
@MuellerSheWrote



In case you missed it, all 50 senate republicans voted against equal pay for women.

8:20 PM · Jun 9, 2021



👍 24.4K 💬 703 ↗ Share this Tweet



Robert Reich ✓
@RBReich



Mitch McConnell got rid of the filibuster to steal a seat on the Supreme Court, but he used it to block equal pay for women and an independent investigation into an attempted overthrow of the U.S. government.

That should tell you all you need to know.

5:46 PM · Jun 9, 2021



👍 19.4K 💬 292 ↗ Share this Tweet



BijamiyaPhool (Phool Chand Bijarniya) @BijamiyaPhool

9 Jun

Can you identify who is male or female? Then why gender discrimination in aiums nursing officer requirement? फुल्लन है भारत @dhrashvardnan #Save_male_nurses #stop_gender_discrimination @aiunsc_official @rashtrapatibhvn @narendramodi @ArvindKejriwal <https://t.co/lD8cCVIm70>

Retweets: 72 Replies: 1 Impressions: 13237

↩ Reply ↗ Retweet ❤ Like ↗ Engage

GUN VIOLENCE

Staged events, hotly-debated legislation, shootings, and survivors' stories were the primary drivers of the polarized conversation about gun violence.

Gun Violence Awareness Day generated discussion, with people sharing pictures of themselves wearing orange in support of the issue. The five-year anniversary of the Pulse Nightclub drew calls for change.

NRA President David Keene gave a fake high school graduation speech to 3,044 empty chairs, representing those who graduated but were killed, and the story was widely shared across social media platforms. Comments were mostly divided across partisan lines.

Texas passed legislation loosening gun restrictions, which created partisan discussion on social media. Republicans mostly praised the bill while victims' families and Democrats decried its passage, often sharing statistics of gun deaths and mass shootings.

Mass shootings in San Jose and Austin caused people to demand legislators take action to help stop gun violence.



Rep. Lucy McBath [@RepLucyMcBath](#) · Jun 4
On Gun Violence Awareness Day, I wear orange for my son Jordan. Join us and [#WearOrange](#) to save lives.



0:04 120.3K views

183

1.3K

5.1K



Noel Rivera

Only a fool would give his right to defend himself away.

Like · Reply · 9w

41

↳ 2 Replies



Wendy Buehler

...no they "won't stand up". They're dead. Some were in kindergarten. They're dead. Dead, Mr. Keen. Guns are a problem.

Like · Reply · 9w

19

↳ 13 Replies

HEALTHCARE REFORM

The leading topic of healthcare conversations was the U.S. Supreme Court rejecting challenges to the Affordable Care Act in June.

Most conversation was supportive of this decision as people shared their personal experiences of how Obamacare benefited them. Others complained about their high healthcare costs as result of the ACA.

Millennials and Gen Z generated nearly 70% of the conversation about healthcare. “Medicare for All” and the need for universal healthcare were hot topics among Millennials — most were supportive of these ideas.

People commented on corporations’ lack of action to improve healthcare costs, despite having the resources to do so. Some even speculated on potential reasons companies haven’t done more to drive healthcare reform.



Samantha Liss
@samanthann

Remember when three large companies including Amazon came together to try to disrupt healthcare and lower costs? That was too difficult to accomplish but Amazon's founder was shot into space today.

9:44 AM · Jul 20, 2021 · Twitter Web App

174 Retweets 29 Quote Tweets 663 Likes



Lindsey Anderson @Jo_Lindsey · Jun 17
Replying to @BarackObama

Thank you President Obama. Without the ACA, I would be bankrupt or dead- maybe both. My boys and I are eternally grateful for the opportunity at life you gave us.

1

1

9



Dan Price
@DanPriceSeattle

Replying to @BradBaumgarten

companies don't want to lose the control/power that comes from having health insurance tied to employment. Once you give out universal health care, people can quit their shitty job without worrying about going bankrupt from losing their health insurance.

1:54 PM · Jun 24, 2021 · Twitter Web App

173 Retweets 24 Quote Tweets 1,228 Likes

05



danwon86 (DAN E. WON - 원우진) (@danwon86) 24 Jul

I just signed a @theactionnet petition: Medicare For All Movement issues Demands to the United States Government. Sign here: <https://t.co/rpuG4ez2No>

Retweets: 20 Replies: 0 Impressions: 111893 Reply Retweet Like Engage

Social Issues: Healthcare

METHODOLOGY

Cision and the Institute for Public Relations analyzed online mentions for social issue topics from May 1 to July 31, 2021, using Brandwatch's Consumer Research tool. Powered by artificial intelligence technology, Brandwatch Consumer Research analyzes online mentions and classifies keywords and phrases used online into topics. The queried topics were "race relations," "gender issues," "voting rights," "healthcare," "gun violence," "immigration," "climate change," and "mental health." The data set included 208.96 million total mentions from 75.5 million unique authors. The total online mentions comprised both news and social media mentions.



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