



Perceptions about corporate positioning on controversial sociopolitical issues: Examining big pharma engagement with patient advocacy

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ABSTRACT

There is evidence of the perception that business is not doing enough to address societal problems. As a result, some companies have used corporate activism to demonstrate their support for causes and position themselves on specific issues. These positioning efforts are at the heart of public relations activities with the potential to create changes in socially constructed realities. This research examines the relationships between pharmaceutical companies and patient advocacy, focusing on analyzing companies' engagement in controversial sociopolitical issues. An ethnographic study was conducted for six months — including document analysis, 33 interviews, and participant observation — with a Portuguese patient advocacy group. The CSR domains on the websites of seven pharmaceutical companies were also analyzed. Findings suggest that despite financial and technical support, the pharma companies do not publicly engage with the patient advocacy group's main struggles for human rights. Changes in the companies' positioning may improve the perceptions of these stakeholders about their engagement with causes and encourage more robust partnerships toward social change.

1. Introduction

The ideal of universal human rights is one of the most relevant social and political legacies of the 20th century (Clapham, 2015). In the scope of this legacy, the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was established in 2015 as "a plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity" (United Nations, 2021). However, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights implies a wide variety of other rights that are very divisive and controversial (Moyn, 2010). Even though it is generally accepted that corporations are responsible for respecting human rights, too many times big companies still operate in a context that fails to meet human rights standards set by the United Nations (Bacchi, 2018). Large international enterprises, including the pharmaceutical industry, have severe reputational problems related to the challenging and complex balance between their primary purpose (i.e., profit) and the way they address societal problems (Leisinger, 2005; Gallup, 2019). There is recognition that these matters are related to the "public's perception" (Caliber's Global Pharma Study, 2020).

Many patient advocacy groups defending the needs of people with a particular disease maintain relationships with the pharmaceutical industry, and the sector uses patient advocacy groups as a channel to communicate with other stakeholders such as governments and the

media. In addition, pharma companies are prolific financial donors to patient organizations (Kang et al., 2019), ensuring that new drugs arriving on the market meet the needs of patients, thus supposedly fulfilling their responsibilities to society. This research examines whether pharmaceutical companies are perceived by patient advocacy groups as genuinely engaged in their struggles for human rights.

This paper conceptualizes public relations as an "art of perception." This perspective allows us to look at public relations as an activity with the potential to interfere and create changes in realities that are socially constructed based on symbolic interactions. In the context of business, public relations contributions to issues related to human rights and sustainability are often associated with corporate social responsibility (CSR). However, in the current highly volatile media environment, CSR communication strategies are often perceived as just dealing with image cleaning without a more robust commitment to socio-political causes and issues. Public relations professionals need to deal with these new reputational risks. In this context, some companies have advanced further in their socially responsible initiatives. They are supporting controversial causes related (or not) to their core business, producing forms of corporate activism on which the present research focuses.

An ethnographic study was conducted—including document analysis, 33 interviews, and participant observation—with a patient

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advocacy group, "Portuguese Activist Group for HIV/AIDS Treatment" (GAT), for six months (January–June 2021). In addition, the CSR domains on the websites of the seven pharmaceutical companies that support GAT were also analyzed.

Findings suggest that despite financial and technical support, the pharma companies do not publicly engage with GAT's advocacy for breaking the stigma and stereotypes that affect people infected by HIV or at risk of becoming infected (migrants, prisoners, sex workers, drug users, gay men, and others). The results indicate that the study participants perceive the pharma companies that financially support GAT as mainly concerned with exchanging business-related interests. The companies presented a transactional vision of their engagement in social responsibility and sustainability while avoiding engagement in human rights sociopolitical issues considered controversial.

The data obtained allow a practical understanding that these companies' financial and technical support does not replace (in the minds of stakeholders) the strength of their public endorsement and advocacy on complex sociopolitical and global concerns related to human rights (corporate activism).

2. Public relations as an "art of perception"

Aligned with the critical school of PR—which includes authors such as [Adi \(2020\)](#), [Coombs and Holladay \(2012a, 2012b\)](#), [Demetrious \(2006, 2013\)](#), [Edwards and Hodges \(2011\)](#), [L'Etang \(2009, 2015\)](#), [O'Brien \(2018, 2020\)](#) and [Weder \(2021\)](#)—this paper conceptualizes PR as an "art of perception" with the capacity to influence the maintenance or disruption of social structures ([Leaf, 2014](#)). To achieve specific goals, organizations, companies, countries, and individuals face situations where it is necessary to change perceptions. Although this term can be associated with a manipulative dimension, there is nothing inherently wrong, illegal, or immoral with the management of perceptions as it is present, in a more obvious or subtle way, in many, if not all, forms of interpersonal, organizational, and social communication. The way the facts are presented and perceived is "what counts whenever a problem must be solved, or an opportunity maximized," and different audiences perceive the same messages differently ([Leaf, 2014](#), p. 258).

The challenges of describing perception are related to classical philosophical concerns relevant to communication studies about the existence of a "reality." The interpretations of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology ([Rogers, 1997:137-202](#)), popularized by [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#), explain that reality is not something external to the human but rather something that human beings' actively build. The role of objectivity and subjectivity in understanding human behavior was developed by Alfred [Schutz \(1967\)](#) and systematized by [Berger and Luckmann \(1966\)](#), with the conviction that reality and the consciousness that people have of it is a product of society. Therefore, people build and shape society and are influenced and shaped by it.

On how social reality is apprehended and constructed, [Searle \(1998\)](#) explains that there are phenomena in the world independent of human representations of them, such as hydrogen atoms, tectonic plates, viruses, trees, and galaxies. On the other hand, phenomena such as money, property, marriage, wars, and football matches depend on conscious human agents and a reality structured by language as an element of mediation between individuals. What shapes a given reality or determines the construction of social reality will then be the sum of "collective intentionality," "assignment of functions," and "constitutive rules" ([Searle, 1998:110-116](#)).

The Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) theoretical perspective understands organizations as discursive constructions ([Taylor, 2006](#)), achieved through conversations between people ([Van Ruler, 2018: 369](#)). Communication is then the process that constitutes organizations. Evidence from [Roper's \(2005: 145\)](#) research indicates that "discursive repositioning is a key function of public relations practice" and that public relations practitioners are "discourse technologists." Public relations use language as an element of mediation between

individuals, organizations, and other social actors. For better or worse, the positioning of words and actions influences the intended outcomes of communication efforts and leads to a better understanding of socio-political processes ([Moghaddam & Harré, 2010](#)).

The historical analysis of public relations practice reveals the significant connections that exist between the activity and the "human imagination" ([Brown, 2004](#), p. 382), presenting "practitioners as performing the function somewhere between priest and magician" ([L'Etang, 2008](#), p.252). Public relations tools allow organizations and individuals to process intentional representation in contested environments in which information flows are "constructed and managed, and consensus, consent, and legitimation obtained or lost in relation to others" ([Berger, 1999: 186](#)). These deliberate representations are intentional expressions used to influence others. Positioning in public relations can be defined as the "strategic attempt to demarcate and occupy a place of intentional representation in the contested space where meanings are constructed, questioned and reconstructed" ([James, 2011:98](#)). The balance of influence inherent to public relations practices can be seen as games of strategy influenced by the perceptions that the different players involved in the interactions have of each other ([Murphy, 1991](#)). "In game theory, a strategy is never considered in isolation: The point is to model which action is best, given the probable moves of the other player" ([Murphy, 1991](#), pp. 117).

Perceptions of how companies handle and take ownership of different issues affect corporate reputation ([Cha et al., 2010](#); [Meijer & Kleinnijenhuis, 2006](#)), and perceived authenticity in the engagement with issues considered controversial is the strongest predictor of corporate reputation ([Lim & Young, 2021](#)). Competition between companies is currently intensifying to position themselves at the top of consumers' minds regarding a specific issue through creating distinctive advocacy messages ([Hong & Li, 2020](#)). This positioning efforts on specific issues (issues management) is a crucial area of public relations research and practice and expresses itself as an art of perception management. This research examines whether these groups perceive pharmaceutical companies financially and technically supporting certain patient advocacy groups as genuinely involved with their human rights causes and issues.

3. Public relations and corporate activism

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is the framework that allows companies to manage sustainability and social justice issues for the benefit of communities and is also a central area of public relations activity. The concept refers to the duties that companies, as social actors, have towards all those involved, directly or indirectly, in their economic activities ([Dănescu & Popa, 2020](#); [Rasche et al., 2017](#)). The [European Commission \(2011, p.6\)](#) assumes that CSR is the "corporate behavior which integrates social, environmental, ethical, consumer, and human rights concerns into their business strategy and operations."

The current highly volatile media environment represents new reputation risks for companies regarding their CSR strategies. With more fragmented and critical audiences' companies face frequent claims of "greenwashing" or "whitewashing," meaning that they resort to misinformation or strategic partnerships to convey an image of social responsibility that does not correspond to reality ([Weder et al., 2019](#)). However, there is evidence that perceived corporate reputation could be improved with authentic CSR engagement ([Afzali & Kim, 2021](#); [Joo et al., 2019](#)) and that there is a positive correlation between the perception of fit between a company and a cause with corporate reputation ([Hong & Li, 2020](#)).

In this context, some companies have advanced socially responsible initiatives, supporting controversial causes related (or not) to their core business. They aim to influence social change or legislation positively. The label for this form of corporate activism has been corporate political advocacy (CPA) or corporate social advocacy (CSA) ([Dodd & Supa, 2014](#); [Wettstein & Baur, 2016](#)). This viewpoint argues that businesses

should publicly communicate their positions on sociopolitical issues and try to engage different public types on complex subjects (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Corporate activism is a component of public relations practices and implies the acceptance that not all stakeholders will agree with the ideologies and values publicly endorsed by an organization (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; DiRusso, 2021).

CPA and CSA are emerging as an innovative, dynamic communication trend, confronting public relations with corporate activism—that is, corporations taking public stances on political (Wettstein & Baur, 2016) and social (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Hong & Li, 2020) issues. This position can be a difficult decision because it suggests that implicit political values on behalf of companies are likely to precipitate divergent customer reactions. As a result, CPA and CSA practices simultaneously raise "disapproval and boycotts from those that oppose the company's position, but approval and buycofts from those that support the company's position" (Hydock et al., 2019, p. 76).

This form of advocacy demands that companies go beyond concerns about doing no harm and that they must publicly assume the defense of specific causes, which, in the context of this study, are critical to advancing the defense of human rights and the United Nations 2030 agenda. Examples of this type of corporate activism are the support of Ben & Jerry's for the Black Lives Matter movement (Ciszek & Logan, 2018); the support of Starbucks, Google, Microsoft, and Ben & Jerry's for the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US (Wettstein & Baur, 2016); and Gillette's videos about toxic masculinity in response to the #MeToo movement (DiRusso, 2021).

Nevertheless, a company must be careful when deciding which issues to advocate. The criteria for making this selection are (a) consistency—the issue must be consistent with the values of the company; (b) plausibility—the topic chosen must be part of a long-term commitment to specific causes or issues, and (c) authenticity—supporting a cause implies more concrete actions than words. Only within these criteria will a company's advocacy for a cause be credible (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 211). An experiment by DiRusso (2021) provided several key takeaways for companies planning social advocacy communication, pointing to the utility of negatively toned messages about highly salient social issues.

This form of corporate activism is one new dimension of influence management and has the potential to become a relevant area for establishing companies' CSR and reputation approaches (Monaghan & Monaghan, 2014; Peterson & Pfitzer, 2008).

4. Materials and methods

GAT is a nonprofit NGO based in Portugal founded in 2001. This organization works with groups of HIV-infected or at-risk people (migrants, prisoners, sex workers, drug users, gay men, and others). GAT advocates for legal and political changes within the scope of human rights and the 2030 Agenda—namely, the third objective of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. GAT activity highlights the territories where third-sector organizations mix with social movements (Ferreira, 2004). GAT's mission is to advocate and work with other stakeholders for social changes that positively affect the health, rights, and quality of life of people with HIV-associated diseases, especially those from the most vulnerable groups.

The data for this article were collected through an ethnographic approach to GAT's organizational and communication dynamics. Ethnography is a qualitative method for data collection based on "participant observation (experiencing), interviewing (enquiring) and studying materials prepared by others (examining)" (Wolcott, 2009, p. 10), paying attention to the details in the expressions of culture as framed in their context (Ybema et al., 2009). This methodology is best suited for looking at public relations as an "art of perception" because ethnography is "a way of looking" (Wolcott, 2008, p.43) and "a way of seeing" different realities (Wolcott, 2008, p.69). According to a series of

previous conceptual assumptions, the ethnographer chooses which elements to highlight from his observations and how to relate and infer from them (Wolcott, 2008).

Ethnography has brought relevant developments to sociocultural traditions in public relations research (Everett & Johnston, 2012; L'Etang et al., 2012; Xifra, 2012). When researchers look for descriptive inferences to identify the interactions between an organization's culture and social environment, ethnography has been identified as a methodological imperative in the field (Everett & Johnston, 2012). In public relations research, ethnography examines how a group understands and experiences its environment and seeks to adapt to it (Sutton & Anderson, 2004; Winthrop, 1991).

Within ethnography, the amount of time the researcher should spend in the field has not been determined; however, some authors have defined a period from three months to two years, depending on the research design (Everett & Johnston, 2012; Fetterman, 1998; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This study's data were collected over six months—January to June 2021—by the author as part of her doctoral research. The methods used for data collection were adapted to the organization's reality and the interviewees, considering the confinement and restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic during part of the observation period. Between January and April 2021, GAT's teams and the interviewees worked from home, communicating through videoconferences on platforms such as Zoom.

The field diary² was fed with the register of meetings and conversations and the monitoring of GAT actions via Facebook (the online social network where they are active) and through attending their online events, such as live talks and conferences on different topics. GAT's (2021) activity plan and other documents were also analyzed, including press releases, petitions, sponsorships, and campaign information on their website.³ From April onwards, it was possible to follow GAT's work in the field, in rallies, and in other in-person events (that allowed the insertion of more complete photographic records in the field diary and face-to-face collection of testimonies). In addition to informal daily conversations, 33 semi-structured interviews were conducted with GAT activists on different topics, including the history of their relationships with companies in the pharmaceutical industry. During the fieldwork, a representative of the pharmaceutical industry—a consultant from a communications and public relations company of one of the pharmaceuticals that financially supports GAT—was also interviewed.

Ethical considerations, mainly related to managing the observer-participant relationship, must be addressed during all stages of ethnographic research (Fetterman, 1998). This issue was addressed by making the researcher's role explicit through all interactions and asking permission to record the conversations and quote the people involved. The researcher's role and the investigation's objectives were explained in the document for informed, clarified, and free consent to participate in the study, signed by Ricardo Fernandes, GAT Executive Director.

The CSR domains on the websites of the seven companies in the pharmaceutical industry that are formal supporters of GAT (Abbvie; Alere/Abbott; AstraZeneca; Farmoz/Grupo Tecnimed; Gilead; Janssen; MSD)⁴ were also analyzed. This examination sought to determine which campaigns and social issues promoted by GAT during the observation period were also present on the websites of these companies and whether the support for patient advocacy groups like GAT is framed as CSR communication.

This paper intends to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the study participants perceive the relationship

² A document (141 pages) in which all information and interactions are noted daily; the GAT field diary is written in Portuguese, and the excerpts from the field diary in this article were translated by the author.

³ GAT—Grupo de Ativistas em Tratamentos: <https://www.gatportugal.org/>

⁴ GAT's work is carried out with the financial support of the following entities: <https://www.gatportugal.org/sobre/apoios.8>

between patient advocacy groups and pharmaceutical companies?

RQ2: What were GAT's issues and campaigns during the observation period?

RQ3: How did GAT's pharmaceutical company supporters engage with their issues and campaigns during the observation period?

This investigation seeks to articulate the empirical data in light of the existing theories about the phenomena under observation. A very high volume of data was obtained through ethnographic immersion, which required a careful selection process for meaning units. Converting data through description, analysis, and interpretation is not a linear process in ethnographic approaches (Wolcott, 2009). In the first stage of description, fieldwork observation data were documented in the field diary, and the researcher transcribed all recorded interviews as they were undertaken (Baszanger & Dodier, 2004).

The relevant information from the ethnographic approach to GAT was selected using three main selection criteria/categories related to the research questions: (a) understanding of the relations between patient advocacy groups and pharmaceutical companies; (b) identification of GAT's issues and campaigns; and (c) engagement with GAT's issues and campaigns by their supporters from pharmaceutical companies.

5. Ethnography results

5.1. Characterization of relationships with the pharmaceutical industry

5.1.1. Origins

In an interview on January 12, 2021, the Executive Director of GAT, Ricardo Fernandes (RF), explained that the beginning of GAT's relationship with the pharmaceutical industry is related to the existence of a mechanism called *community advisory boards* (CABs). CABs are a formal mechanism to promote community and civil society engagement and representation in clinical trials and drug development dialogs with pharmaceutical companies. RF clarified: "we called the industry (...) to talk about what products they have under development, what stage the product is at, and present us with clinical data about this development. And then we trained our activists in these very specialized topics so that they can ask questions, and what often happened was those activists, patient representatives, often said we do not want this drug, we want treatments with fewer side effects, we do not want three doses a day or pills the size of an orange, or this medicine already exists in competition." The meetings of these activists with the industry were at the origin of the creation of the association itself, which was formally registered in 2003. "At that time, we asked the pharmaceutical companies we met (usually a one-day meeting) to pay for the hotel and food, the regulator [National Authority of Medicines and Health Products – Infarmed] was informed of these meetings to keep everything inside of the law," RF explained.

5.1.2. Financing

Concerning the sources of funding for the association, in the same interview, RF noted, "when we started, maybe we were a little bit dependent on the state, then maybe there was a time when we were extremely dependent on the industry, and then we learned with the economic crisis that culminated with the coming of the Troika (2011–2014). Nowadays we have a budget of almost 2 M Euros, which is a very balanced budget, the industry represents less than 20%, the state will be around 40%, and this budget comes from an agreement we have with the Portuguese state to provide services—that is, we are paid to provide tests, which is also our victory. The rest of the budget comes from studies, partnerships with Foundations, competitions, and other small mixed sources. We now consider ourselves completely independent from an ideological point of view, either from the industry or the state. In other words, if we have to get angry—and it has already happened, for example, in the context of the treatment for Hepatitis C: we closed all communication with the state and the company publicly marketing the drug at that time (...). We lost some funds, but it is

important for our culture not to stop ourselves from doing our job because there will be consequences. That is part of our activist work, and we have to adapt. We learned that we must be more self-sufficient and not put all our eggs in one basket (...). We seek to create win-win situations, being very attentive to ethical issues and respecting the principles of transparency. All the support we receive from the industry is registered on the Infarmed website to ensure no conflicts of interest in our strategy of working in partnership with various entities of different sectors. To avoid conflicts, we receive money from the entire industry, not just one company."

5.1.3. Communication

Concerning relational and communicational dynamics, the executive director of GAT, RF, continued: "The pharmaceutical industry has a vested interest in us testing for HIV: the more we test, the more people consume their products. The industry also lends us their communication companies that they pay for and that often do not have that much work, and so we sometimes work with their PR agencies, depending on the issues and campaigns we are running."

According to the field notes from March 3, 2021, during an interview with Margarida Santos (MS), one of the coordinators of the "More Participation, Better Health"⁵ project (which has increased support from the Presidency of the Portuguese Republic and is an example of collective action in health), it was possible to see that the pharmaceutical industry plays a significant role in funding the public health debate. As MS explained: "Professionalism, and its due return, is directly related to the motivation and willingness, over time, that people have in order to do things. So, we started with the candidacy for a prize that Roche⁶ launched in 2015. We won the first prize of 15,000 euros. So, we already had a start there. This entire project has been financed with the strong support of the pharmaceutical industry." (...) "GAT is certainly critical of the pharmaceutical industry, but it knows it depends on the industry (...). This huge dependence is not for lack of looking for other sources. (...) We came to think about it and, in addition to the pharmaceutical industry, we contacted several companies via social responsibility projects, but we always had negative answers."

During an interview held on March 4, 2021, with Raquel Cordeiro (RC), a consultant from a communications and public relations company of one of the pharmaceutical firms that financially supports GAT, it was possible to understand that part of the support that the pharmaceutical industry gives to patient associations involves support in communication and PR. RC explained, "here I speak as a pharmaceutical industry representative. If we want to draw attention because there is some medicine that patients need (because it is innovative, has fewer side effects, and all that), we as an industry cannot do it because it is considered a promotion, and the law does not allow it. However, if we resort to a patient association, and the patient association makes this public communication, we often have huge media attention. (...) Ricardo Fernandes from GAT is a good communicator, and this is an asset for us (the pharmaceutical company). He is a person with immense availability. He speaks well, knows how to explain a little about everything, and can talk about more technical issues (...). As for GAT activists, even with the huge support the industry gives them, their communicative approaches seem to me a bit aggressive, as their big fight is not these 'quiet' topics, like the European Test Week, where we support them as representatives of the pharmaceutical industry. The great struggles of GAT are the extremely fracturing and controversial issues related to the rights of LGBTI [lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex] communities and related others."

⁵ "MAIS PARTICIPAÇÃO, melhor saúde": <https://www.participacaoaude.com/>

⁶ Roche Portugal - <https://www.roche.com/careers/our-locations/europe/portugal.htm>

5.2. Identification of GAT issues and campaigns

5.2.1. #Zerodiscrimination campaign (#zerodiscriminação⁷)

The campaign aims to raise awareness of the impact of stigma, improve knowledge about HIV infection and contribute to making Lisbon a city that does not discriminate against people living with HIV. In partnership with the Lisbon City Council, it included a cycle of #zerodiscrimination Conversations (field diary for March 2021) to give positive visibility to those living with HIV.

5.2.2. International condom day

GAT and AHF (AIDS Healthcare Foundation Europe) teamed up with *Drag Taste*⁸ to listen to Grandmother Teresa Al Dente's important advice. The campaign's central message was a call for consistent condom use. The fun, creative, and exuberant way of transmitting the message generated highly positive comments on GAT's Facebook page, such as: "Wonderful! What a perfect idea!"; "Very professional show!" and "Very well achieved!"

5.2.3. Support do not punish campaign

This global campaign was carried out as part of the Global Day of Action for More Humane Drug Policies⁹ (June 26, 2021), which calls for the implementation of more humane drug policies focused on health, risk reduction, and minimization of damages related to the consumption of psychoactive substances and defense of the rights of drug users. The campaign was carried out in partnership with various activist collectives (field diary 23.06.2021 and 23.06.2021).

5.2.4. The Lisbon Gay Pride Parade (Marcha do Orgulho LGBT)

GAT publicized and expressed support on Facebook for several campaigns by ILGA Portugal¹⁰ and the #ContinuamosAMarchar initiative of the Lisbon Gay Pride Parade. On June 16, 2021, the General Directorate of Health canceled the march due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization of the event (with GAT support) considered the cancellation: "a hidden form of limitation of rights, in this case, the demonstration," because the authorities notified them only on the eve of the event¹¹ and massive sports gatherings took place during the same period of pandemic restrictions¹².

5.2.5. Spring European Testing Week 2021

European Testing Week is a Europe-wide campaign that encourages public and partner organizations, communities, and public health institutes throughout the WHO European Region to unite for one week, twice a year, to scale up voluntary testing for viral hepatitis, HIV, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).¹³

⁷ Campanha. #ZERODISCRIMINAÇÃO - <https://www.lisboa.pt/lisboa-semsida/zerodiscriminacao>

⁸ Drag Taste Experiences: <https://dragtaste.com/>

⁹ Support Don't Punish Campaign: <https://supportdontpunish.org/>

¹⁰ ILGA Portugal Association - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Intervention: <https://ilga-portugal.pt/>

¹¹ RTP, 19 June, 2021, 11h10 - "Marcha do Orgulho LGBTI+ foi cancelada, organização critica DGS", (translation: LGBTI+ Pride March was canceled, organization criticizes DGS), https://www.rtp.pt/noticias/pais/marcha-do-orgulho-lgbti-foi-cancelada-organizacao-critica-dgs_v1328953

¹² Diário de Notícias, 12 May, 2021, 01h17 - "A festa que quebrou todas as regras sem se ouvir uma palavra a Cabrita", (translation: The party that broke all the rules without hearing a word from Cabrita), <https://www.dn.pt/sociedade/a-festa-que-quebrou-todas-as-regras-sem-se-ouvir-uma-palavra-a-cabrita-13710603.html>

¹³ Spring European Testing Week 2021: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/media-centre/events/events/2021/05/spring-european-testing-week-2021>

5.3. Pharmaceutical companies' public engagement with GAT's issues and campaigns

GAT receives formal financial support from seven companies in the pharmaceutical industry: Abbvie; Alere/Abbott; AstraZeneca; Farnoz/Grupo Tecnimede; Gilead; Janssen; MSD. During the period of ethnographic immersion, it was possible to verify that:

1. Several Portuguese public figures (academic researchers, politicians, lawyers, health professionals, and peer association activists) participated in GAT-promoted online and offline events. Representatives of the pharmaceutical industry did not participate in these events.
2. The technical magazine available on the GAT website (currently discontinued) called *Actions & Treatments* (Ações & Tratamentos¹⁴) was edited, printed, and distributed with the financial support of the national branches of AbbVie, Gilead, Janssen, MSD, and Reckitt Benckiser Healthcare.
3. GAT's, 2021 activity plan (p. 19) only mentions one pharmaceutical company (Abbvie) under the topic "knowledge production," regarding an investigation of the treatment of hepatitis C infection in a community center with people who use/have used drugs.
4. As RC had already explained, during the Spring European Testing Week 2021, which started on May 14, 2021, public support from pharmaceutical companies (AbbVie, Gilead, Janssen, and ViiV Healthcare) was more visible, including in communication materials (Fig. 1).

5.4. CSR campaigns on GAT-supporting pharmaceutical companies' websites

The CSR domains on the websites of the seven pharmaceutical companies that formally support GAT were examined: Abbvie¹⁵; Alere/Abbott¹⁶; AstraZeneca¹⁷; Farnoz/Grupo Tecnimede¹⁸; Gilead¹⁹; Janssen²⁰; and MSD.²¹

5.4.1. Abbvie

"Support to Patient Associations and Organizations" (including GAT) is framed as part of CSR in an essentially financial informative logic. There are no references to any of the GAT's subjects or campaigns.

5.4.2. Abbott

The strengthening of "civic and social organizations and creating partnerships to solve complex and global problems" is framed with CSR as philanthropic actions under the Abbott Fund. However, there is no concrete reference to patient advocacy groups, nor any reference to any of GAT's subjects or campaigns previously identified.

5.4.3. AstraZeneca

Financial support for patient organizations during 2019 is framed as part of the CSR for "community support" in an essentially informative

¹⁴ Ações & Tratamentos: https://www.gatportugal.org/public/uploads/publicacoes/revista_acao_tratamentos/AcaoTratamentos32.pdf

¹⁵ Abbvie - <https://www.abbvie.pt/responsibility.html>

¹⁶ Abbott - <https://www.pt.abbott/about-us/responsibility/abbott-fund.html>

¹⁷ AstraZeneca - <https://www.astrazeneca.pt/astrazeneca-portugal/o-nosso-apoio-a-comunidade.html>

¹⁸ Grupo Tecnimede - <https://www.tecnimede.com/pt>

¹⁹ Gilead - <https://www.gilead.com/purpose/sustainability/un-sustainable-development-goals> || <https://www.gilead.com/purpose/partnerships-and-community>

²⁰ Janssen - <https://www.janssen.com/portugal/apoio-associacoes-de-doentes-em-portugal>

²¹ MSD - <https://msd.pt/homepage/literacia-em-saude/> || https://www.vihda.pt/?utm_source=msd.pt&utm_medium=site&utm_campaign=MED_HIV_PublicBanner-msdpt

1ª-4ª SEMANA EUROPEIA DO TESTE
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INTERVENÇÃO COMUNITÁRIA

Os parceiros da Rede de Rastreio Comunitária disponibilizam vários serviços: distribuição de preservativos, gel lubrificante e material para consumo de substâncias, rastreios rápidos, acesso a consultas médicas para diagnóstico e tratamento no Serviço Nacional de Saúde e programas de substituição opióide. Devido às medidas de segurança Covid-19, ligue para obter informação detalhada. Leve máscara.

- 1. Abraco Aveiro**
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- 3. Abraco Funchal**
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Tel.: 262 781 706 | Tel.: 936 027 603 | 936 027 596
facebook.com/acompanh
Área de Intervenção: Alcabala/ Bombarral/ Caldas da Rainha/ Nazaré/ Óbidos/ Peniche
- 5. Agência Piaget para o Desenvolvimento**
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- 13. Associação Positivo**
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Área de Intervenção: Lisboa e Península de Setúbal
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Parceiros
ISPU, PUS, EuroTEST, CMA, LISBOA, MISERICORDIA, SEXUAL, SETUBAL, Apoio ao GAT, abbvie, GILEAD, janssen, viiv

Fig. 1. Flyer for Spring European Testing Week 2021 (pharmaceutical logos below).

logic. There are no references to GAT's subjects or campaigns previously identified.

5.4.4. Grupo Tecnimede

There is no specific domain on the site dedicated to CSR. In addition, there are no references to any of GAT's subjects or campaigns previously identified.

5.4.5. Gilead

CSR falls within the domain of "sustainability" on the website, with specific reference to the UN Sustainable Development Goals; patient advocacy groups are referred to indirectly as "Partnerships for the Goals." In the domain of "Partnerships and Community" and under the campaign of *On World AIDS Day, Honoring Those Who are "Fearless for All,"* there are references to advocacy campaigns and first-person storytelling that include some of the most affected minority groups that GAT supports, such as transgender people.

5.4.6. Janssen

CSR falls within the domain of "sustainability" on the website, without reference to patient advocacy groups. "Support to Patient Associations in Portugal" is mentioned in a specific tab with an informational framework on financial support. There are no references to GAT's subjects or campaigns previously identified.

5.4.7. MSD

Support for patient advocacy groups is not included as a CSR. However, the company's initiatives in this area fall under "Health Literacy." From this tab, there is a specific website with "Information about HIV," where it is possible to find first-person storytelling that includes, for example, same-sex couples; this is the closest example of the inclusive and anti-discrimination concerns of GAT campaigns and issues.

6. Discussion

This study intended to understand better the perceptions of the relations between patient advocacy groups and their pharma company supporters through the ethnographic analysis of one case study. In response to research questions, the pharma companies have played a decisive role (regarding financial and technical support) in the appearance and history of GAT. However, according to the participants' perceptions in the study, these relationships can be characterized as essentially transactional. The companies provide financial and technical resources to this patient advocacy group, and GAT appears as a public relations asset (image, reputation, and bridges with patients) to their pharmaceutical company supporters.

The identification of GAT campaigns revealed how human rights activist groups strategically use communication to build discourse and influence public interest and policy. However, the public engagement of the pharmaceutical companies in GAT's issues and campaigns appears to be weak from a communicative point of view, and it is not framed systematically as part of their CSR approaches. The examination of the CSR domains on the websites indicates that the pharmaceutical companies that frame their support to patient advocacy groups as part of their CSR and/or sustainability approaches do so essentially in an informational and transactional logic—that is, most support is financially framed.

Except for two indirect references (Gilead and MSD) to issues related to the rights of transgender and gay people, there is no evidence of the availability of these companies to go further in their socially responsible initiatives, supporting controversial causes related (or not) to their core business. Although the companies have supported GAT for several years, they do not engage with GAT's main struggles for human rights and the so-called controversial sociopolitical issues like homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and women's rights (Guterres, 2021). In this case study, most pharma companies that financially support GAT are perceived as mainly concerned with exchanging interests related to their core

business. Most companies presented a transactional vision of their engagement in social responsibility and sustainability while avoiding engaging in controversial sociopolitical issues. The data obtained allow a practical understanding that these companies' financial and technical support does not replace (in the minds of stakeholders) the strength of their public endorsement and advocacy on complex sociopolitical and global concerns related to human rights (corporate activism).

Public relations as an "art of perception" represents a challenge for corporate communicators in listening, understanding, and responding to what values and emotions inspire and motivate people to relate to an organization. It emphasizes that the compatibility between economic pursuits and engagement in societal issues should be clearly expressed and communicated. According to the latest edition of the *Edelman Trust Barometer* (2022), respondents believe business is not doing enough to address societal problems. The report shows testimonials from employees (p.61), clients (p.62), and shareholders (p.63) who left organizations because "they remained silent on a controversial societal or political issue" that these publics believed "had an obligation to address publicly." Lim and Young (2021, p.8) found that "the greater the perceived fit between a firm's identity and the promoted social issue, the more positive evaluations about the firm's CSA engagement." Thus, the lack of fit between these companies' financial and technical support and the patient advocacy groups' perception of their authentic engagement with their causes represents a challenge and an opportunity for companies and public relations professionals.

This research was limited to data from one case study; therefore, the results are not presumed to be generalizable; however, it sheds light on how some companies in highly competitive industries continue to position themselves and are perceived by stakeholders in terms of their engagement in controversial human rights causes.

7. Conclusions

Baur and Wettstein (2016) believe that CPA is CSR's new challenge because there is a growing involvement of business in politics. For example, the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, led to an unprecedented economic, cultural, and scientific boycott by countries, companies, and people. The editor of PRNews said that this context makes clear that "companies must take political stands" (Arenstein, 2022).

The study results show how the pharma company supporters of GAT are still attached to communication styles about CSR and sustainability that are mainly concerned with sharing information about their support in areas that directly impact their businesses without having to risk too much. Furthermore, the participants in this study show an understanding that this brings them business and reputation benefits. So, these relationships are perceived as a "useful" deal for both parties. There are, though, changes taking place in Portugal regarding the public positioning of companies in controversial sociopolitical issues.

In June 2021, the Portuguese bank Santander painted its logo on social media with the colors of the rainbow in support of fighting discrimination against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community. This initiative to position the company on a controversial matter led to an unusual avalanche of reactions divided between support and censorship (Santos, 2021).

Parcha and Kingsley (2020) claim that a "corporate statement on a controversial social issue is effective in changing an individual's attitude toward the issue depending on how much the issue is relevant to the individual's goals and/or if other corporations support the corporate statement" (p. 350). Apparently, "corporations are making conscious efforts to improve their social responsibility by taking stands on controversial social issues," but "corporate social irresponsibility is still occurring" (p. 377).

Essential questions about the balances and imbalances resulting from the attribution and/or appropriation of, even more, powers of social intervention to corporations remain topics for future research (Parcha &

Kingsley, 2020). On the other side, corporate activism is an approach that must be considered and planned strategically, considering each specific context and its relevance to the business's missions. Otherwise, it can represent an additional risk for companies without advancing, in turn, the intended spheres of sustainability and social justice.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Research ethics

A written informed consent for publication was obtained from by the organization and the individuals who agreed to collaborate in the investigation.

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