

## REVIEW ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Grouped Stakeholders' Journeys: A Dynamic Social Impact Theory Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

While *customer journey* research is proliferating, acumen of the broader *stakeholder journey* (SJ), which addresses *any* stakeholder's (e.g., an employee's, supplier's, or customer's) journey with the firm, remains more nascent. In particular, understanding of the role of psychological mechanisms in shaping *collective* or *grouped stakeholders' journeys*, aggregated stakeholders' shared trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities, enacted through their joint engagement, which shape their shared experience with the firm (e.g., the shared journeys of employee unions or teams, customer advocacy groups, supplier collectives, competitors' organizations, or industry associations), lags behind. To bridge this gap, we adopt group-centric dynamic social impact theory (DSIT) to examine the effect of dynamic social impact (social influence) on grouped stakeholders' journey with the firm. Drawing on the 7C framework, we develop a set of propositions that explore the effect of grouped stakeholders' DSIT tenets of stakeholder consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity on their joint engagement and experience through their journey with the firm, offering novel insight. We conclude by deriving key theoretical (e.g., by inviting future empirical testing of the propositions) and practical implications from our analysis (e.g., by proposing strategies to facilitate constructive stakeholder interactions).

## 1 | Introduction

Research addressing the *customer journey* (CJ), “the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints, that makes up the customer experience” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), is burgeoning (Hamilton and Price 2019; Sheng et al. 2024). Published work has conceptualized the CJ, explored its dynamics through its different (e.g., *pre-* through to *post-*purchase) stages (Cheng et al. 2024; So et al. 2024), and assessed its theoretical associations to other concepts, including customers' brand experience, engagement, and loyalty, among

others (Shavitt and Barnes 2020; Kranzbühler et al. 2019; Vredeveld and Coulter 2019).

The CJ has also been broadened to the *stakeholder journey* (SJ; e.g., Lievens and Blažević 2021), “a stakeholder's trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities, enacted through stakeholder engagement, that collectively shape the stakeholder experience with the firm” (Hollebeek et al. 2023, 23). The SJ thus comprises *any* stakeholder's role-related journey with the firm, where *stakeholders* are “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of [an] organization's

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objectives” (Freeman 1984, 46), including its employees, customers, suppliers, competitors, and so forth. The SJ rests on the notion that each stakeholder is on their own journey with the firm, and their respective journeys may intersect with one another at relevant touchpoints (Hannay et al. 2020).

While the literature boasts a preliminary understanding of the dynamics characterizing individual SJs with the firm (e.g., those of a customer, a supplier, etc.; Hollebeek et al. 2023), acumen of the psychological mechanisms that shape or affect *collective* or *grouped* SJs lags behind, *in particular* (Harvey and Kou 2013; Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2022; Davis et al. 2022), revealing a pertinent gap in the literature. Stakeholder groups or collectives, which typically exist at the meso-level (Clemens et al. 2025; Hackman 2003), may include employee unions or teams, customer communities, segments, or advocacy groups, supplier collectives, firm departments, competitors’ organizations, and industry associations or consortiums, among others (e.g., Davis 2014). These matter, given their potentially pertinent effect on the firm and its performance (Tuckman and Jensen 2010).

Addressing this gap, we adopt dynamic social impact theory (DSIT), which takes a group focus (Latané 1981; Harton and Bullock 2007), to explore collective or grouped SJs with the firm. The theory proposes that stakeholders are continually reorganizing themselves by exerting or receiving social impact in their repeated interactions with one another (Richardson 2001), influencing their respective role-related engagement and experience (Perez-Vega et al. 2016). The adoption of a DSIT lens to explore collective SJs is important, given its capacity to uncover novel insight into grouped stakeholders’ psychological and behavioral dynamics that are expected to differ from those of individual stakeholders (Harvey and Kou 2013; Hamilton et al. 2021). Overall, following the IMPACT framework (Hollebeek et al. 2025), our adoption of DSIT reflects elevated theoretical *matching*, or a strong fit of the studied meso-foundational theoretical entity (i.e., the collective/grouped SJ) and the chosen macro-foundational theory (i.e., DSIT), suggesting the appropriateness of the theory in this context (Lim 2026).

This research makes the following contributions to the emerging SJ and its associated (e.g., CJ/stakeholder engagement) literatures. First, though prior SJ literature has primarily focused on individual stakeholders’ journey with the firm (e.g., Hollebeek et al. 2023; Turner and Derakhshan 2020), we extend this notion to grouped stakeholders and their collective journey with the company, in line with Hamilton et al.’s (2021) notion of *shared* CJs. Building on the work of authors, including Lemon and Verhoef (2016), Lievens and Blažević (2021), Hollebeek et al. (2023), and Venkatesan et al. (2018), among others, we define the *collective* or *grouped SJ* as aggregated stakeholders’ shared trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities, enacted through their joint engagement, which shape their shared experience with the firm.

Enhancing understanding of collective SJs is expected to help practitioners better manage, design, and/or coordinate different SJs, boosting the firm’s stakeholder relationship management processes and outcomes (Trianz 2022; Kumar et al. 2025). For example, designing for desirable social impact in employees’ or customers’ shared journeys allows companies like Tesla to not

only enhance these stakeholders’ perceptions and experiences but also to bring their respective shared journeys more in sync with one another, boosting the company’s efficiency (e.g., by unlocking potential cost savings).

Second, based on the notion that stakeholders can be sources or targets of social influence (Latané 1981; Roy et al. 2021), DSIT can be used to explain how grouped stakeholders and their psychological characteristics and interpersonal relationships progress through their connected journeys (Latané 1996; Harton et al. 2022). According to the theory, grouped stakeholders’ ongoing psychological, social impact-based reorganizing is characterized by four tenets, including stakeholder consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity (Latané and Bourgeois 2008; Harton et al. 2022), which we explore in a set of propositions based on the 7C framework (Hollebeek et al. 2024). By addressing the dynamics characterizing collective stakeholders’ journey with the firm our analyses respond directly to, and extend, Hamilton et al.’s (2021), Grewal et al.’s (2022), and Grewal and Sridhar’s (2021) recommended exploration of the CJ from a social influence or social impact perspective. Overall, by expanding the scope of the SJ to that of collective or grouped SJs, and by adopting DSIT to explore the dynamics characterizing grouped SJs with the firm, our work reflects MacInnis’ (2011) *integrating* purpose of conceptual research to expose novel, more systemic SJ-based insight (Welden et al. 2025).

We next review key literature on social impact theory, the CJ/SJ, and stakeholder engagement in Section 2, followed by the proposed conceptual development in Section 3. We conclude by outlining relevant implications that arise from our analyses in Section 4.

## 2 | Literature Review

### 2.1 | DSIT

Recognizing that people may exert influence on or receive influence from others in the social environment (Latané and Bourgeois 2008; Barnett et al. 2020), Latané (1981) social impact theory examines how stakeholders may be *sources* or *targets of social influence* (Harton et al. 2022; Baraiibar-Diez et al. 2020). Here, *social impact* refers to “any influence on individual feelings, thoughts, or behavior that is created from the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of others” (Latané and Wolf 1981; Latané and Nida 1981), exposing its psychological nature.

Social impact has been applied to contexts ranging from social loafing to social media interactions, opinion formation, persuasive (e.g., marketing) communications, conformity, stage fright, embarrassment, and rumor, among others (Perez-Vega et al. 2016; DiFonzo and Bordia 2011; Mullen 1985). Building on Hamilton et al.’s (2021), Grewal and Sridhar’s (2021), and Grewal et al.’s (2022) recommended social influence perspective of the CJ, we argue for the parallel applicability of social impact theory to the broader SJ. Specifically, as SJs intersect with one another at specific touchpoints (Hollebeek et al. 2023), stakeholders are able to exert influence on or receive influence from one another (Weitzner and Deutsch 2015).

As a sub-strand of the theory, *dynamic* social impact theory addresses social and psychological influence dynamics in stakeholder networks, groups, or collectives, including by highlighting social impact-based differences across majority- and minority-influence stakeholder sub-groups (Latané 1996; Seltzer et al. 2013). DSIT explains how grouped stakeholders' interactions and relationships develop through their repeated interactions over time (DiFonzo and Bordia 2011; Fink 1996), permitting the transmission of social influence to and/or from one another through their shared journey. The theory comprises four fundamental tenets, as discussed further below and summarized in Table 1.

First, *consolidation* represents “a reduction in minority size after discussion” (Latané and Bourgeois 2008, 239), exposing a key role of *majority*-influence stakeholders on the role-related opinions and engagement of minority-influence stakeholders through their journey (Harton et al. 2022). Consolidation suggests that grouped stakeholders' regular interactions contribute to their role-related opinions, beliefs, and engagement, not only becoming more uniform with one another, but also moving these closer to the majority's viewpoint (Latané 1996). For example, as their journey progresses, online brand community members tend to increasingly converge on the community's dominant sentiment (Hamilton et al. 2021), fostering closer stakeholder relationships (Taylor et al. 1973).

Second, *clustering* refers to the development of stakeholder clusters or sub-groups based on specific stakeholders' elevated physical, psychological, and/or emotional proximity, which may arise from their shared beliefs, opinions, or engagement (Latané and L'Herrou 1996). Therefore, *within* clusters of like-minded stakeholders, individuals tend to engage relatively frequently with one another (Bozkurt et al. 2021; Novak and Hoffman 2019). For example, co-workers striving for fair pay are likely to *stick together*, given their like-mindedness on this, to them, salient matter. In a cluster, stakeholders tend to be most susceptible to social influence exerted by those to whom they are closest (J. Chang et al. 2018) and/or by more influential stakeholders (Lin et al. 2019).

Third, *correlation* refers to “an emergent relationship between [stakeholder] behaviors [and] beliefs” as a result of clustering (Harton et al. 2022, 2), suggesting that the opinions and engagement of like-minded clustered stakeholders become increasingly related over time (DiFonzo and Bordia 2011). DSIT posits that this rising correlation transpires as stakeholders

influence and are influenced by one another (Latané 1996; Harton et al. 2022).

Fourth, *continuing diversity* reflects the extent to which less influential, minority-influence stakeholders are able to resist or counter (a) more influential, majority-influence stakeholder sub-group(s) (Lee et al. 2019; Latané and L'Herrou 1996). Continuing diversity rests on the psychological notion that minority viewpoints tend to persist in groups, with the strength of these depending on issues including stakeholders' interaction and communication quality, and the level of information accessibility and (a)symmetry, among others (Bergh et al. 2019; Latané and Bourgeois 2008). However, as some minority-influence stakeholders convert to the majority's viewpoint, the minority perspective may dwindle (Harton et al. 2022). High continuing diversity thus implies minority-influence stakeholders' capacity to resist the majority perspective or influence (e.g., by exercising their *veto* right to prevent a specific undesirable eventuality; Sundararajan and Tetzlaff 2018). We next review key SJ literature.

## 2.2 | The Stakeholder Journey

Though the CJ has been widely examined (e.g., Holz et al. 2024; Herhausen et al. 2019), the SJ, which broadens the CJ's scope to include *any* stakeholder's (e.g., an employee's, regulator's, or competitor's) journey with the firm (Ortbal et al. 2016), has been addressed in a relative paucity of prior research (Davis et al. 2022). Therefore, while we considered conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) of the SJ (Lim 2025), the relatively nascent state of published research in this topic area precluded us from reaching a suitable corpus of work to validly conduct an SLR (i.e.,  $\geq 36$  articles; Sauer and Seuring 2023). Instead, we organically or integratively review key SJ literature (Snyder 2019), yielding the following main observations.

First, a universal definition of the SJ is lacking in the literature. For example, while Lievens and Blažević (2021, 131) define the *stakeholder engagement journey* as “all stakeholder interactions,” including through physical and virtual touchpoints through the innovation process, Hollebeek et al. (2023) conceptualize the SJ as “a stakeholder's trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities, enacted through stakeholder engagement, that collectively shape the stakeholder experience with the firm.” Despite a level of theoretical overlap across these definitions (e.g., with both explicitly citing the key role of

**TABLE 1** | Overview—Dynamic social impact theory tenets.

DSIT tenets	Definition
Consolidation	“A reduction in minority size after discussion” (Latané and Bourgeois 2008, 239), revealing the key role of the <i>majority</i> -influence in impacting stakeholders' opinions and behavior (Harton et al. 2022).
Clustering	The emergence of stakeholder clusters, or sub-groups, which may arise based on their shared beliefs, opinions, attitudes, or their close (e.g., physical/emotional) proximity (Latané and L'Herrou 1996).
Correlation	“An emergent relationship between [stakeholder] behaviors or beliefs as a result of clustering” (Harton et al. 2022, 2), indicating that the opinions and engagement of like-minded, clustered stakeholders become increasingly intertwined over time (DiFonzo and Bordia 2011).
Continuing diversity	The degree to which less influential, minority-influence stakeholders are able to counter or resist more influential majority-influence stakeholders (Lee et al. 2019; Latané and L'Herrou 1996).

Abbreviation: DSIT, dynamic social impact theory.

*touchpoints* and *engagement*), Lievens and Blažević's (2021) proposed concept was developed in the *innovation* context (Hannay et al. 2020), while Hollebeek et al. (2023) offer a more context-agnostic journey concept. Extending the latter authors, we define the collective (grouped) SJ as *aggregated stakeholders' shared trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities, enacted through their joint engagement, which shape their shared experience with the firm*.

Second, the SJ describes stakeholders' progression through a trajectory of steps taken to accomplish (a) role-related goal(s) (Hamilton and Price 2019; Siebert et al. 2020). For example, while employees may engage with their job-related tasks to safeguard their position or to get a pay rise, suppliers may complete the required steps in their ordering, delivery, or sales cycles to secure business continuity. Once a role-related goal has been accomplished, (a) new goal(s) tend(s) to emerge, sustaining the journey's unfolding throughout stakeholders' role tenure.

Third, the SJ is made up of different *touchpoints*, physical [or] digital... interfaces that connect stakeholders to the firm, including meeting-, phone-, email-, or store-based platforms (De Keyser et al. 2020; Hollebeek et al. 2023). Touchpoints enable stakeholder interactions and engagement (Kranzbühler et al. 2019; Mele et al. 2025; Walsh et al. 2024), permitting the transmission of social influence. For example, a salesperson recommending a product to a customer not only sees the meeting of these SJs, but also allows the former to influence the latter's purchase decision-making.

Fourth, an intricate association exists between the SJ and the *stakeholder experience* (SX; Grewal and Roggeveen 2020). Extending Lemon and Verhoef (2016), Hollebeek et al. (2023) define the SX as "a stakeholder's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to [their] role-related interactions, activities, and/or relationships" through their journey, as extended to the grouped stakeholder context in this research (also see Table 2). A stakeholder's role experience may comprise positive and negative aspects. For example, employees may respond favorably to their role-related tasks, but unfavorably to red tape (Osman et al. 2019). Likewise, *stakeholder engagement*, a stakeholder's cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral resource investment in their role-related interactions, activities, and/or relationships (Hollebeek et al. 2019, 2022a; Razmus et al. 2022; Viglia et al. 2018), also exhibits critical links to the SJ (Jaakkola and Alexander 2018; Demmers et al. 2020).

Hollebeek et al. (2023) propose that stakeholders' role-related *engagement* drives their role experience or role-related responses (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), leading them to graph-stakeholder engagement (i.e., role inputs) on the *x*-axis, with their responses (i.e., role outputs) featuring on the *y*-axis, as adopted in the context of grouped SJs in this research. For example, an employee union may invest in developing more equitable or inclusive workplace protocols (role inputs/engagement), influencing its members' on-the-job responses (role outputs/experiences).

### 3 | Conceptual Development

Extending the reviewed literature, we draw on Hollebeek et al.'s (2024) 7C framework to develop a set of propositions that

outline the predicted effect of DSIT's tenets (i.e., stakeholder consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity) on their SJ-based engagement and experience. The 7C framework suggests that the core tenets of the studied micro- or meso-foundational theoretical entity (here, the meso-foundational concept of collective SJs) should be co-infused with those of the chosen macro-foundational theory (here, the DSIT tenets of consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity), yielding a total of four propositions.

Following Hollebeek et al. (2023), we map grouped stakeholders' engagement-based resource investments (role inputs) on the *x*-axis, and their experience-based responses (role outputs) on the *y*-axis (see Section 2.2). An overview of the traditional CJ, the emerging SJ, and the proposed collective (grouped) SJ concepts and their respective theoretical constituents is also presented in Table 2.

We next elucidate the predicted effect of grouped stakeholders' DSIT-informed *consolidation*, *clustering*, *correlation*, and *continuing diversity* on their journey-based engagement and experience, as also shown in Figure 1. While our analyses primarily apply at the meso-level, we shift to the individual (micro)-level as relevant (Gren 2017), as meso-level groups are comprised of micro-level or individual stakeholders (Clemens et al. 2025; Hackman 2003).

#### 3.1 | Consolidation

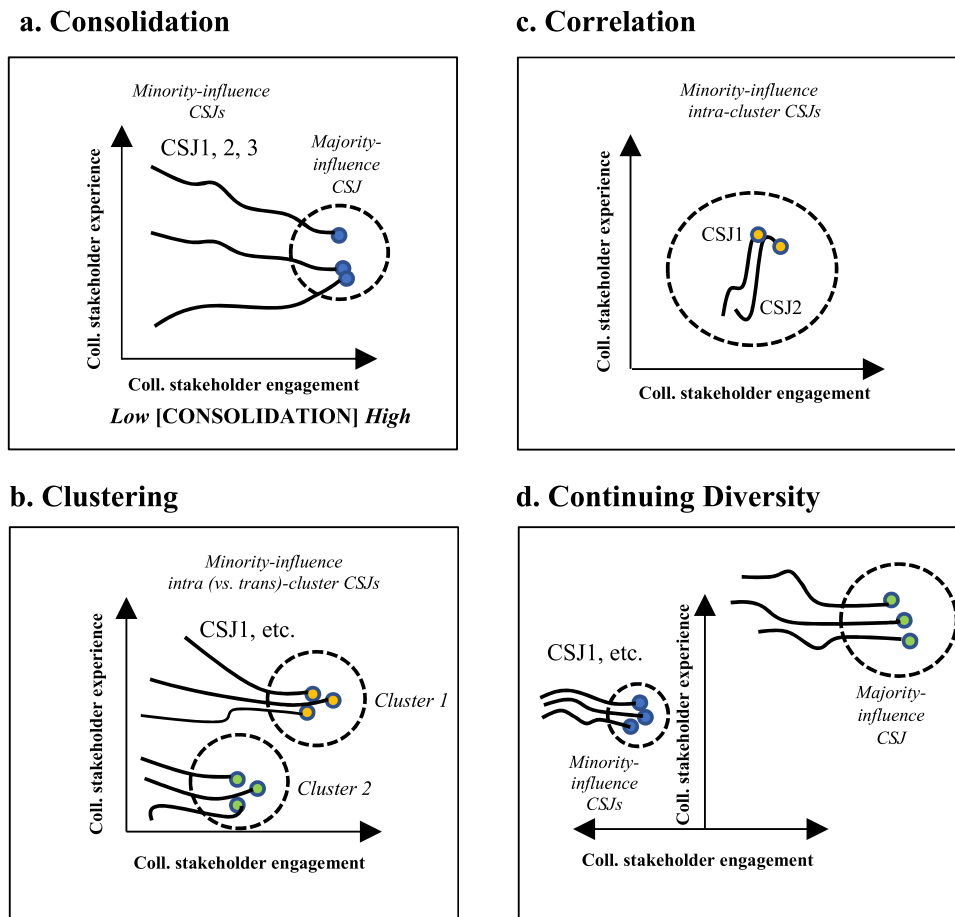
*Consolidation*, "a reduction in minority size after discussion" (Latané and Bourgeois 2008, 239), suggests that grouped stakeholders' regular meso-level interactions lead their role-related opinions, attitudes, and engagement to move closer to the viewpoint of the majority (Latané and Bourgeois 2008). In other words, minority-group stakeholders' views tend to *consolidate toward* the majority consensus as their journey progresses (Harton et al. 2022), particularly on perceived salient issues. Through consolidation, opinion majorities tend to become increasingly dominant, while opinion minorities shrink over time (Muthukrishna and Schaller 2020).

Grouped (collective) stakeholders' engagement refers to their shared cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral resource investment in their role-related interactions, activities, and/or relationships (Hollebeek et al. 2022b, 2023; see Table 2), thus likewise reflecting the meso-level. For consolidation to occur, stakeholders tend to regularly interact with their group members, revealing their typically rising collective engagement over time (Viswanathan et al. 2017), as shown by the climbing *x*-values in Figure 1a. DSIT predicts that under rising consolidation (i.e., moving from low to high consolidation), this growing engagement is likely to manifest *toward* (vs. against) the majority's viewpoint. For example, during the pandemic, most citizens received multiple inoculations of the COVID-19 vaccine, in line with their government's recommendation, illustrating their converging collective engagement toward the majority's viewpoint (Jackson 2005).

In turn, grouped stakeholders' progressively converging meso-level collective engagement tends to shape or mold their experience toward that of the majority-influence sub-group (Muthukrishna and Schaller 2020), as depicted by the *y*-values increasingly moving toward, and into, the majority cluster in

**TABLE 2** | Overview—The customer journey, stakeholder journey, and collective stakeholders' journey.

<b>Customer journey (CJ) (established concept)</b>	<b>Stakeholder journey (SJ) (emerging concept)</b>	<b>Collective or grouped stakeholders' journey (CSJ) (this research)</b>
<p>Conceptualization</p> <p>“The process a customer goes through, across all stages and touchpoints, that makes up the customer experience” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, 71).</p>	<p>Conceptualization</p> <p>“A stakeholder’s trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities, enacted through stakeholder engagement, that collectively shape [their] role-related ...experience (Hollebeek et al. 2023, 23).</p>	<p>Conceptualization</p> <p>Extending Hollebeek et al. (2022b, 2023), Lemon and Verhoef (2016), and Hamilton et al. (2021), among others, we define the collective (grouped) SJ as “aggregated stakeholders’ shared trajectory of role-related touchpoints and activities, enacted through their joint engagement, which shape their shared experience with the firm.”</p>
<p>Theoretical hallmarks</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The CJ describes the customer’s progression through a trajectory of steps in completing their goal of making a purchase (Grewal and Roggeveen 2020; Grewal and Sridhar 2021; Hamilton and Price 2019).</li> <li>2. The CJ comprises multiple <i>touchpoints</i> that enable customers to interact (engage) with the firm and its stakeholders (De Keyser et al. 2020).</li> <li>3. The CJ is intricately linked to the <i>customer experience</i> (Lemon and Verhoef 2016).</li> </ol>	<p>Theoretical hallmarks</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The SJ depicts an individual firm stakeholder’s progression through a trajectory of steps toward their role-related goal fulfillment (Hamilton et al. 2021; Lievens and Blažević 2021; Ortbal et al. 2016), taking a more relational, <i>beyond</i>-single role cycle view (vs. the CJ; Novak and Hoffman 2019).</li> <li>2. The SJ features multiple <i>touchpoints</i> that permit the intersecting of stakeholders’ journeys (Hannay et al. 2020; Hollebeek et al. 2023).</li> <li>3. Like the CJ, the SJ portrays a firm stakeholder’s role experience (Ortbal et al. 2016).</li> </ol>	<p>Theoretical hallmarks</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The CSJ depicts collective firm stakeholders’ progression through a trajectory of steps toward their role-related goal fulfillment (Hamilton et al. 2021; Lievens and Blažević 2021).</li> <li>2. The CSJ features multiple <i>touchpoints</i> that elicit grouped stakeholders’ engagement (i.e., resource investments/role inputs; Grewal and Roggeveen 2020; Hollebeek et al. 2023).</li> <li>3. Grouped stakeholders’ engagement fosters their role experience (SX; Latané 1996; Ortbal et al. 2016).</li> </ol>
<p>Key constituent concepts</p> <p><i>Touchpoints</i>: “Points of human, ... communication, spatial, and electronic interaction collectively constituting the interface between an enterprise and its customers” (Dhebar 2013, 200).</p> <p><i>Customer experience</i>: “A multidimensional construct focusing on a customer’s cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm’s offerings [in] the customer’s entire purchase journey” (Lemon and Verhoef 2016, 71).</p>	<p>Key constituent concepts</p> <p><i>Touchpoints</i>: Physical [or] digital... interfaces that connect stakeholders to the firm, including meeting-, phone-, email-, or store-based platforms (De Keyser et al. 2020).</p> <p><i>Stakeholder engagement</i>: A firm stakeholder’s cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral resource investment in their role-related interactions, activities, and/or relationships (Hollebeek et al. 2019, 2022b; Brodie et al. 2016), or their role inputs (i.e., modeled on the x-axis; Hollebeek et al. 2023).</p> <p><i>Stakeholder experience</i>: A firm stakeholder’s cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social role-related responses (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), or their role outputs (i.e., modeled on the y-axis; Hollebeek et al. 2023).</p>	<p>Key constituent concepts</p> <p><i>Touchpoints</i>: Physical [or] digital... interfaces that connect grouped stakeholders to the firm, including meeting-, phone-, email-, or store-based platforms (De Keyser et al. 2020).</p> <p><i>Collective (grouped) stakeholders’ engagement</i>: Grouped firm stakeholders’ joint cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral resource investment in their role-related interactions, activities, and/or relationships (Hollebeek et al. 2022b; Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2019), or their role inputs (i.e., modeled on the x-axis; Hollebeek et al. 2023).</p> <p><i>Collective (grouped) stakeholders’ experience</i>: Grouped firm stakeholders’ joint cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social role-related responses (Lemon and Verhoef 2016), or their shared role outputs (i.e., modeled on the y-axis; Hollebeek et al. 2023).</p>



**FIGURE 1** | Notes - DSIT: Dynamic social impact theory; CSJ: Collective stakeholder journey; Coll. Stakeholder engagement: Collective stakeholder engagement; Coll. stakeholder experience: Collective stakeholder experience.

Figure 1a. For example, standardized global inoculation protocols contribute to stakeholders' (e.g., vaccinators') converging collective role engagement, rendering their and their patients' role experience more similar to that of one another. Likewise, companies like McDonald's are known for their standardized (e.g., meal preparation) practices (Pudelko and Harzing 2008), triggering stakeholders' (e.g., employees' or customers') homogenous experience across their stores and offerings. We postulate:

**PI:** As consolidation rises, grouped stakeholders' engagement progressively converges toward the majority's viewpoint, in turn molding their SJ-based experience toward that of the majority.

### 3.2 | Clustering

*Clustering*, the development of stakeholder sub-groups or clusters (Latané and Wolf 1981), implies that stakeholders exhibiting similar beliefs or activities will congregate in clusters of like-minded individuals (Harton et al. 2022), thus also reflecting the meso-level. Muthukrishna and Schaller (2020) describe this process as stakeholders "preferentially affiliat[ing] with others who share their opinions." While stakeholders traditionally

affiliated with others in close *physical* proximity to them, today's virtual environments also permit geographically dispersed stakeholders to cluster together, including in online communities, among others (Bozkurt et al. 2021; Brie et al. 2013).

*Within* clusters of like-minded stakeholders, we anticipate individuals' micro-level engagement to increasingly be in correspondence with that of one another, as illustrated by members' comparable collective engagement (i.e.,  $x$ -values) in the clusters depicted in Figure 1b. For example, online brand community members are likely to share a passion for the brand (Baldus et al. 2015), yielding their similar (e.g., cognitive/affective) collective engagement. Likewise, in minority-influence clusters, members may *stick together* and support one another in achieving desired joint outcomes (e.g., by collectively opposing majority-imposed pressures or measures; Zinn 1979), aligning their joint engagement at the meso-level.

Given the high observed correspondence in members' *within*-cluster, role *input*-based collective engagement, their joint journey-based collective experiences or role responses are *like-wise* expected to reveal high resemblance, revealing their homogenizing or increasingly similar role experiences (Hamilton et al. 2021), as illustrated by the members' coalescing or converging  $y$ -scores in their respective clusters (Figure 1b). For example, lobbyists' investment in shared activities or events (e.g., protests) typically brings participants' experience closer to

that of one another. However, *across* clusters, grouped stakeholders' meso-level engagement is likely to differ (S. Chang and Lin 2019), as shown by the *x*-based gap between the clusters in Figure 1b. For example, cultural or racial clusters have been shown to display unique attitudinal or belief structures (Peterson 2017), yielding their idiosyncratic modes of engagement (Saren 2009; Hollebeek 2018).

Across clusters, grouped stakeholders' distinctive meso-level engagement is likely to distance or dissociate members' journey-based experience from that of one another, as shown by the departure in the depicted cluster members' *y*-scores in Figure 1b, contributing to the unique identities of these clusters (Bozkurt et al. 2021). In other words, across clusters, grouped SJs are predicted to unfold substantially differently due to their differing primary values or goals (Lou et al. 2022), *heterogenizing* collective stakeholders' *trans*-cluster role experiences by making them more unique from those of one another, as shown by the heterogeneous *y*-values for the clusters depicted in Figure 1b. We theorize:

**P2:** *Within a cluster (across clusters), grouped stakeholders' engagement tends to be in predominant alignment with that of their cluster members (diverge from that of the members of other clusters), in turn homogenizing members' within-cluster (heterogenizing members' cross-cluster) SJ-based experience.*

### 3.3 | Correlation

*Correlation*, an emergent relationship between micro-level stakeholder behaviors, "...beliefs," or engagement as a result of clustering (Harton et al. 2022, 2), reflects a developing coordination or synchronization in *intra*-cluster members' role-related resource investments (i.e., engagement). Thus, while clustering focuses on *cross*-cluster dynamics, correlation centers on stakeholders' *within*-cluster processes, which progressively synchronize as grouped SJs unfold (Yasui et al. 2021). For example, co-workers may, over time, prefer a similar lunch menu, illustrating their rising correlation in this regard. Correspondingly, their meso-level engagement is expected to become progressively coordinated (e.g., by ordering increasingly similar dishes over time), as shown by the relatively close *x*-based collective engagement values in Figure 1c.

We anticipate these grouped stakeholders' progressively synchronized collective engagement to harmonize the SX (Hänninen et al. 2019; Hollebeek et al. 2023), as shown by the increasingly similar *y*-values in Figure 1c. That is, the more attuned stakeholders' collective engagement is to that of their cluster members (Yasui et al. 2021), the more *in unison* their collective journey-based experience is predicted to be (Siebert et al. 2020). For example, political party members' *in sync* collective engagement tends to manifest through their collaborative lobbying of key issues or causes (Hughes and Dann 2009), harmonizing their shared meso-level role experience (Hänninen et al. 2019), as illustrated by the unifying collective experience (*y*-values) in Figure 1c. Therefore, as *intra*-cluster stakeholders' collective engagement becomes more attuned to that of one another, their collective role experience is predicted

to harmonize or become increasingly *in sync* with that of one another (Kim 2015). We postulate:

**P3:** *Correlation synchronizes grouped stakeholders' within-cluster engagement, in turn harmonizing their SJ-based experience.*

### 3.4 | Continuing Diversity

*Continuing diversity* refers to the extent to which less influential minority-influence stakeholders are able to resist or counter majority-influence stakeholders and their viewpoint or demands (Lee et al. 2019; Latané 1996). In other words, as long as "the majority [is] not... wiped out," continuing diversity, or stakeholders' divergent opinions, will continue to exist (Harton et al. 2022, 4), potentially raising a level of stakeholder tension or discord.

Prior research shows that grouped stakeholders rarely come to a *full* consensus (Cullum and Harton 2007), implying the typical existence of some level of continuing diversity in stakeholder collectives at the meso-level. Minority-influenced stakeholders' regular role-related resource investments tend to facilitate their resistance of the majority's influence (Sundararajan and Tetzlaff 2018), suggesting the pivotal role of engagement in the development of continuing diversity. For example, hippies primarily engage with one another through be-ins, (music) festivals, and other public gatherings, allowing them to maintain, solidify, and disseminate their sub-cultural meso-level identity and values, while resisting relevant aspects of mainstream culture (Miller 2012). That is, minority group stakeholders' meso-level engagement typically counters or resists that of the majority, implying its oppositional nature (Saren 2009; Harvey and Kou 2013).

Figure 1d depicts the majority-influence cluster's highly positively valenced engagement, as shown by its elevated *x*-values. However, the portrayed minority-influence cluster reveals more negatively valenced engagement, as shown by its more negative *x*-values. Figure 1d therefore suggests these clusters' *differentially* valenced engagement, in which the engagement of the minority-influence cluster *opposes* that of the majority cluster (Cook et al. 2017). We predict minority-influence stakeholders' meso-level oppositional engagement to progressively bond their role experience (vs. that of the majority; Scholten and Holzhaecker 2009), as shown by the close proximity of the minority cluster members' experience (*y*-values) in Figure 1d. In other words, minority stakeholders' meso-level oppositional engagement will tend to see their increasingly bonded or unified responses (i.e., experiences), given their shared beliefs or joint cause(s) (Libbey 2004; Hollebeek et al. 2024). For example, those protesting against 5G technology (i.e., revealing their oppositional engagement) will unify through their shared views and activities (Wolf et al. 2016). We theorize:

**P4:** *Continuing diversity yields collective minority-influence stakeholders' oppositional engagement (vs. that of the majority), in turn unifying their SJ-based experience.*

## 4 | Implications, Limitations, and Further Research

### 4.1 | Theoretical Implications

We adopt DSIT to explore the effect of the psychological tenets of stakeholder consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity on their journey-based engagement and experience, extending the discourse on the customer- and the stakeholder journey (e.g., Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Davis et al. 2022), customer/stakeholder engagement (e.g., Mainolfi et al. 2022; Viglia et al. 2018), and the customer/stakeholder experience (e.g., Siebert et al. 2020; Hollebeek et al. 2023), respectively. Our analyses raise pertinent implications for further theory development, as discussed further below (for an overview of sample research issues, organized by the propositions and supplemented with empirical guidance, please also refer Table 3).

First, we conceptualize collective or grouped SJs, primarily extending prior research on the customer- and the stakeholder journey (e.g., Lemon and Verhoef 2016; Hollebeek et al. 2023). The proposed theoretical expansion matters, given stakeholders' predicted unique psychological and social dynamics when acting in groups (vs. individually) through their journey (Davis 2014), which, however, remain under-explored in the context of collective SJs to date. As stakeholders often operate jointly, rather than in isolation (e.g., in employee unions/teams, customer communities, segments, or advocacy groups, supplier collectives, competitors' organizations, firm departments, and industry associations or consortiums), further exploration of grouped SJs is pertinent (e.g., Hamilton et al. 2021). Accordingly, this research generates worthwhile avenues for further theory development, including:

- How may the engagement of micro-level stakeholders influence meso-level collective SJ-based engagement and experience?
- How may stakeholders' collective engagement and experience (at the meso-level) influence broader or systemic (macro-level) engagement and experience (Pera et al. 2016)?
- How may group factors (e.g., size, composition) affect the unfolding of stakeholders' collective journeys?
- How may the dynamics characterizing specific stakeholder groups impact *other* stakeholders' collective journeys (Clark et al. 2020)?

Second, drawing on the 7C framework (Hollebeek et al. 2024), we adopt a DSIT perspective to systematically develop a set of propositions that predict the effect of the DSIT tenets of consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity on grouped stakeholders' meso-level engagement and experience through the SJ, thus extending the work of authors including Grewal et al. (2022), Grewal and Sridhar (2021), and Hamilton et al. (2021), among others. By illuminating key social influence dynamics in collective SJs, our analyses offer novel insight. Our work also raises central questions for further theory development, including:

- What is the relative importance of stakeholder consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity, and how might they interact in shaping grouped SJs?

- At what pace may stakeholder consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity develop, and what is the impact of their respective pace on grouped SJ-based engagement and experience in particular contexts?
- What is the likelihood of stakeholder clustering in particular collective SJs, and (how) might clustering impact correlation and/or continuing diversity?
- To what extent or how might changes in group composition, or different stages of group development, affect the social impact exerted or received in specific collective SJs (Tuckman and Jensen 2010)?
- How do specific touchpoints influence the core DSIT tenets in grouped SJs?

### 4.2 | Managerial Implications

This research also raises significant practical implications. First, P1 reads: “*As consolidation rises, grouped stakeholders' engagement progressively converges toward the majority's viewpoint, in turn molding their SJ-based experience toward that of the majority.*” Under rising consolidation, minority-influence stakeholders, particularly more compliant individuals (Nezlek and Smith 2017), are expected to increasingly accept or conform to pressure from the majority (Harton et al. 2022; Braun and Gillespie 2011). To minimize the risk of resentment or spurious conformity from the minority, managers are advised to implement inclusive, tailored, and transparent engagement policies and procedures (Kimbrell et al. 2022), including by implementing structured turn-taking and/or anonymous consultation and feedback mechanisms, allowing minority-influence stakeholders to express themselves without the pressure to conform.

P2 states: “*Within a cluster (across clusters), grouped stakeholders' engagement tends to be in predominant alignment with that of their cluster members (diverge from that of the members of other clusters), in turn homogenizing members' within-cluster (heterogenizing members' cross-cluster) SJ-based experience.*” Clustering suggests that like-minded, clustered stakeholders (Latané and Bourgeois 2008) tend to develop progressively similar or concordant engagement (Fryer et al. 2016; Hollebeek et al. 2023). However, across clusters, important differences are expected. We recommend managers to mitigate cross-cluster divergence by actively creating opportunities for interactivity across clusters (e.g., through joint forums/workshops), stimulating mutual understanding and minimizing excessive fragmentation of stakeholders' experiences. Moreover, we advise assessing stakeholders' engagement and experience at the cluster level (Wedel and Kamakura 2002) to ensure their (at least) adequate intensity, while also monitoring these to minimize the risk of stakeholders' siloed engagement (Tumpa and Naeni 2025).

P3 posits: “*Correlation synchronizes grouped stakeholders' within-cluster engagement, in turn harmonizing their SJ-based experience.*” Correlation implies that the opinions of clustered stakeholders become increasingly related over time (Harton et al. 2022), progressively attuning their engagement with that of one another (Visser et al. 2022) and harmonizing their meso-level role experience. As correlation increasingly

**TABLE 3** | Sample issues for further theory development and empirical guidance.

Proposition	Issues for further theory development
<p><b>P1:</b> As consolidation rises, grouped stakeholders' engagement progressively converges toward the majority's viewpoint, in turn molding their SJ-based experience toward that of the majority.</p>	<p>Sample research questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ To what extent does rising consolidation converge the collective engagement of majority (vs. minority)-influence stakeholder sub-groups across contexts?</li> <li>◦ What (e.g., consumer behavior) consequences does stakeholders' progressively converging collective engagement and their increasingly molded collective experience elicit?</li> <li>◦ What factors facilitate or decelerate grouped stakeholders' consolidation through the CSJ?</li> <li>◦ To what extent may rising consolidation foster grouped stakeholders' positive (vs. negative) collective engagement and/or experience?</li> <li>◦ Under what conditions will rising consolidation be particularly conducive to converging grouped stakeholders' collective engagement and molding their collective experience?</li> </ul> <p>Empirical guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ <i>Consolidation:</i> As established measurement scales for consolidation were not found, an opportunity exists to develop psychometrically valid scales to gauge this construct. As a proxy measure, in-population variance or consensus indices (e.g., in-group variance reduction) may also be used (Latané and Bourgeois 2008).</li> <li>◦ <i>Grouped stakeholders' engagement:</i> As measurement scales for collective/grouped stakeholder engagement were not identified, there is an opportunity to develop psychometrically valid scales to measure this construct. Alternatively, established <i>stakeholder engagement</i> scales (e.g., Bissola and Imperatori 2016; Goodman et al. 2022) may be adapted, as relevant, to gauge collective stakeholders' engagement.</li> <li>◦ <i>Grouped stakeholders' experience:</i> As a dedicated scale measuring the grouped/collective stakeholder experience was not found, future researchers may wish to develop one for this construct. Alternatively, proxy measures may be used, such as those gauging internal/external stakeholder relationships (Mazur and Pisarski 2015).</li> </ul>
<p><b>P2:</b> Within a cluster (across clusters), grouped stakeholders' engagement tends to be in predominant alignment with that of their cluster members (diverge from that of the members of other clusters), in turn homogenizing members' within-cluster (heterogenizing members' cross-cluster) SJ-based experience.</p>	<p>Sample research questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ How stable is a particular grouped stakeholders' cluster membership and how does this impact their collective CSJ-based engagement and experience?</li> <li>◦ To what extent does the observed correspondence (vs. departure) in <i>intra</i>-cluster stakeholders' collective engagement differ across (e.g., more vs. less cohesive) clusters, and how does this impact their collective role experience?</li> <li>◦ To what extent does <i>intra</i>-cluster stakeholders' corresponding (vs. departing) collective engagement fosters their positive (vs. negative) collective experience?</li> <li>◦ How does grouped stakeholders' homogeneous (vs. heterogeneous) CSJ-based collective experiences contribute to the development of the identity of their cluster?</li> </ul> <p>Empirical guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ <i>Clustering:</i> As established measurement scales for clustering were not found, an opportunity exists to develop psychometrically valid scales to gauge this construct. As a proxy for clustering, response patterns in interactive discussions or network clustering coefficients (social network analysis) may also be used (e.g., percentage change toward the majority-influence stakeholder; Harton et al. 1998).</li> <li>◦ <i>Grouped stakeholders' engagement:</i> Please refer to P1.</li> <li>◦ <i>Grouped stakeholders' experience:</i> Please refer to P1.</li> </ul>
<p><b>P3:</b> Correlation synchronizes grouped stakeholders' within-cluster engagement, in turn harmonizing their SJ-based experience.</p>	<p>Sample research questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ What factors help synchronize <i>intra</i>-cluster minority-influence stakeholders' engagement through the CSJ, and how do these harmonize stakeholders' collective experience?</li> <li>◦ Which factors may hinder the smoothening effect of grouped <i>intra</i>-cluster stakeholders' progressively synchronized collective engagement on their collective CSJ-based experience?</li> </ul>

(Continues)

TABLE 3 | (Continued)

Proposition	Issues for further theory development
<p><b>P4:</b> Continuing diversity yields collective minority-influence stakeholders' oppositional engagement (vs. that of the majority), in turn unifying their SJ-based experience.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ At low correlation, what is the likelihood of stakeholders migrating to another cluster, and how might this impact their collective engagement and experience?</li> <li>◦ At high correlation, how likely is the engagement and experience of “converted” stakeholders (i.e., to the majority’s view) to be positive (vs. negative) through the CSJ?</li> </ul>
	<p>Empirical guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ <i>Correlation:</i> As established measurement scales for correlation were not found, an opportunity exists to develop psychometrically valid scales to gauge this construct. As a proxy for correlation, the longitudinal correlation among multiple attitude dimensions may be used (Harton et al. 1998).</li> <li>◦ <i>Grouped stakeholders’ engagement:</i> Please refer to P1.</li> <li>◦ <i>Grouped stakeholders’ experience:</i> Please refer to P1.</li> </ul> <p>Sample research questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ How can the potentially detrimental effects of continuing diversity on collective stakeholders’ oppositional engagement be minimized?</li> <li>◦ How may new technology be applied to turn around the negative impact of continuing diversity on grouped stakeholders’ oppositional engagement?</li> <li>◦ How do different levels of continuing diversity impact grouped stakeholders’ oppositional engagement, and the unification of their collective CSJ-based experience?</li> <li>◦ How is continuing diversity among key stakeholders best managed or minimized?</li> </ul> <p>Empirical guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ <i>Continuing diversity:</i> As established measurement scales for continuing diversity were not found, an opportunity exists to develop psychometrically valid scales to gauge this construct. As a proxy for continuing diversity, the persistence of minority clusters or diversity indices (e.g., Rao-Stirling diversity) may be used (Latané and Bourgeois 2008).</li> <li>◦ <i>Grouped stakeholders’ engagement:</i> Please refer to P1.</li> <li>◦ <i>Grouped stakeholders’ experience:</i> Please refer to P1.</li> </ul>

Abbreviation: CSJ, collective (grouped) stakeholder journey.

synchronizes stakeholders’ engagement, we recommend managers to treat clusters as relatively coherent engagement units. Therefore, designing initiatives, messages, and incentives at the cluster level is expected to be particularly effective (Wedel and Kamakura 2002). Managers should also align their policies, communications, and interactions across journey-based touchpoints to minimize potential disruption, which may destabilize stakeholders’ synchronized engagement (Kleinaltenkamp et al. 2021).

Finally, P4 states: “*Continuing diversity yields collective minority-influence stakeholders’ oppositional engagement (vs. that of the majority), in turn unifying their SJ-based experience.*” Continuing diversity implies that minority-influence stakeholders’ viewpoints tend to persist in groups (Latané and Wolf 1981; Barnett et al. 2020), necessitating dedicated engagement spaces for minority stakeholders to prevent oppositional engagement from escalating into conflict (e.g., through advisory panels, parallel consultation processes, or protected communication avenues where minority-influence stakeholders can express their view without being overshadowed by the majority; Lee et al. 2019). These processes can also be leveraged to facilitate organizational learning, equity, and inclusion (e.g., by revealing and/or addressing specific strategic blind-spots or ethical issues; Beechler et al. 2013).

### 4.3 | Limitations and Further Research

This research also has limitations that yield further research opportunities. First, given the purely conceptual nature of our analyses, researchers are encouraged to further explore, empirically test, and/or validate the propositions in particular contexts. While qualitative research may be conducted to derive in-depth insight into the proposed dynamics (e.g., by delving into grouped stakeholders’ lived experience of specific DSIT tenets through their collective journey), quantitative analyses may be used to test the propositions.

However, as established scales for specific concepts featured in some of the propositions (e.g., consolidation/grouped stakeholders’ engagement) may be lacking in the literature to date, an opportunity exists to develop rigorous, psychometrically valid measurement instruments for these. Alternatively, to quantify specific predicted effects, proxy measures may be used. For example, to examine the role of clustering, researchers may deploy measures of network centralization (e.g., degree centralization) using social network analysis, among others. Moreover, while in-group consensus indices (e.g., James et al. 1984) may be used as a proxy for consolidation, agent-based modeling, which has been previously applied from a DSIT perspective (Shojaati and Osgood 2023), can be adopted to simulate consolidation or clustering (also refer Table 3).

Furthermore, the levels of specific variables (e.g., the DSIT tenets) may be manipulated in field experiments. For example, for consolidation, researchers may hypothesize that grouped stakeholders' attitudes strengthen over time, which may be analyzed (for instance) using latent growth curve or multilevel growth models. As the propositions imply mediation (i.e., by assessing the effect of  $x$  [a specific DSIT tenet, e.g., correlation] on  $y$  [grouped stakeholders' engagement], which is *in turn* predicted to impact  $z$  [grouped stakeholders' experience]), structural equation modeling or multilevel mediation methodology is applicable (Kline 2023). Multilevel modeling may also be applied to assess nested data structures (e.g., clustered stakeholders within specific organizations; Certo et al. 2022). To facilitate empirical testing, researchers may consider splitting the propositions into specific sub-hypotheses. For example, the following sub-hypotheses may be derived from P1:

- **H1a:** As consolidation rises, grouped stakeholders' engagement converges toward the majority's viewpoint, and
- **H1b:** Grouped stakeholders' progressively converging engagement toward the majority's viewpoint increasingly molds their SJ-based experience toward that of the majority.

To ensure robustness, it is important to control for grouped stakeholders' baseline attitudes (Sakiyama et al. 2025), employ analytic controls to isolate the effect of key variables of interest, determine the salience of the explored issue(s) to specific stakeholders, and to understand the strength of ties between particular stakeholders, as stronger bonds typically imply greater social impact (Ognyanova 2020), among others.

Second, though we adopted DSIT to explore connected SJ-based engagement and experience, other theories may be deployed to further assess grouped stakeholders' unfolding journeys, including social influence theory, social action theory, or social conflict theory (e.g., Harwood 2020; Goodwin 1987), among others. Using one or a combination of these theories, novel or refined insight may be gleaned that can be compared and contrasted with our findings.

Third, though we addressed grouped stakeholders' SJ-based engagement and experience, the composition of stakeholder groups may change over time (Tuckman and Jensen 2010), likely impacting stakeholder consolidation, clustering, correlation, and continuing diversity, as well as collective stakeholders' role-related engagement and experience through their journey. Scholars are thus encouraged to address these issues, including by conducting longitudinal panel surveys featuring repeated measures of key constructs (Menard 2002). The results may, for instance, be analyzed using cross-lagged panel models or latent growth curve models (Bollen and Curran 2006). Moreover, scholars may explore the role of potential moderators or boundary conditions in the effect of the studied DSI tenets on collective stakeholders' role-related engagement and experience through their journey, including individual (e.g., personality/perceived topic salience), ecosystem-based (e.g., network density/tie strength), or contextual (e.g., resource access/minority status stability) factors (e.g., Wise 2014), among others.

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The authors have nothing to report.

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