Making a Statement:

Consumer Response to Brands’ Social and Political Messages

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Abstract

In a highly politicized world, it is not uncommon to see a brand putting forth a message in support of a certain social or political cause or taking actions that support those causes or beliefs. The purpose of this pilot study was to explore how consumers respond to brands with social or political messages in their marketing communications and activities. Based on the theoretical conceptualization of public advocacy and social identity theory, the researcher developed hypotheses that people would respond positively or negatively to a brand depending on the social and political content of a brand’s message. An online survey was administered to a convenience sample of the population to collect quantitative and qualitative information pertaining to people’s perception of brands with social and political messages and how they would respond to those brands. The hypotheses were not fully supported due to lack of validity for the survey instrument. However, the researcher could fail to reject the hypotheses due to lack of statistical significance in the responses. Thematic analysis also showed support for the hypotheses and other findings in the literature review.

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In a politicized society, brands are increasingly adopting social and political messages in their marketing activities and communications (Gilliland, 2018). Some consumers may respond well to these messages, and some may not. Companies need to understand consumer attitudes toward political and social messages in marketing activities so that they may understand how to connect with the audiences that matter to them. Companies also need to understand the implications and consequences of putting out these kinds of messages. On the other hand, it is important for consumers to be more aware of the role of business in society and understand how they, as consumers and citizens, can encourage businesses to promote societal good.

This poses the research question: How do consumers respond to a brand that puts forth a social or political message in its marketing activities and communications? This research will address these topics through the lens of social identity theory and public advocacy. These concepts intersect into a theoretical framework that encompasses consumers and corporations, the two primary groups at the focus of the research topic. Social identity theory relates to how consumers identify and affiliate themselves with certain demographics, ideologies or other affiliations in society. Public advocacy describes the role of businesses in promoting and supporting social good and meeting the interests of stakeholders, especially when it involves advocating for a position on issues that pervade society and business.

Literature Review

**Corporate Social Responsibility**

The matter of businesses adopting a social or political message begins with the role of business in society. Primarily, companies exist to sell and provide goods and services to people. However, consumers are also citizens and expect more of brands and companies than just delivering goods and services. People expect brands to act as responsible members of society and demonstrate that they are doing more than just trying to make more money (Alcañiz, Cáceres, & Pérez, 2010; Dodd, 2018). Also, a brand needs powerful symbolic value to have an advantage in today’s competitive market. Conventional marketing methods are not likely to suffice (Alcañiz et al., 2010; Dodd, 2018; Yang & Hsu, 2017).

The term corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to an organization’s long-term commitment to being socially, environmentally and ethically responsible in its practices (Alcañiz et al., 2010). Organizations may carry out these responsibilities through initiatives and practices that include philanthropic involvement, ethical business practices and environmental protection and responsibility (Dodd, 2018, p. 223). CSR activities include transparency of financial practices, fair treatment of customers and businesses and carrying out labor practices that are fair and safe. (Golodner, 2016). CSR also involves sustainable consumption and use, meaning that a company’s goods and service meet basic needs, improve the quality of life and minimize the use of irreplaceable natural resources (Golodner, 2016). Golodner (2016) describes this sustainability and CSR execution as an interdependent effort of producers and consumers. Corporations must do all that they can to be environmentally responsible and be accountable for their decisions and actions, and consumers must act to ensure accountability.

When embedded into a company’s marketing activities, CSR may be beneficial for a company. For example, CSR advertising helps develop brand value and identification by promoting a company’s sustainable development endeavors and may encourage purchase behavior in consumers (Alcañiz et. al, 2010; Yang & Hsu, 2017). Advertising is such a major component of CSR because advertisements act as information carriers from companies to consumers and can communicate any information that companies choose to disseminate, including information regarding commitments and values (Bachnik & Nowacki, 2018). CSR may also help develop trust in consumers. Bachnik and Nowacki (2018) continually cite trust as the most important factor in consumer-company relationships as trust influences a consumer’s purchasing decisions and brand loyalty. Research has also established that CSR allows companies to remain relevant in today’s market (Alcañiz et al., 2010; Dodd, 2018; Yang & Hsu, 2017). According to Dodd (2018), companies are legitimized through their CSR initiatives when they meet or exceed the expectations of their stakeholders. Fair treatment of customers and vendors, ethical business practices and environmentally responsible actions are only few examples of what a corporation’s CSR may include. However, what else those responsibilities may entail varies depending on theory, practice and/ or discipline (Dodd, 2018, p. 223). More specifically to the research topic, does CSR extend to companies taking a stance on social and political issues, especially those that are often considered controversial?

**Social and political issues in CSR.** Taylor (2014) discusses whether CSR means that corporations need to take a stance on social issues. This author reviews a case study from the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. The Russian government and other prominent Russians, including President Vladimir Putin, had been known for their actions that opposed gay and lesbian rights. Global sponsors such as McDonald’s and Coca-Cola released anti-discriminatory statements, but LGBT groups criticized the sponsors and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) because the groups considered the sponsors’ actions insufficient. The sponsors faced more pressure from the groups to either withdraw sponsorship and/or condemn the Russian laws opposing LGBT rights. For LGBT groups, the actions of the sponsors needed to reaffirm their anti-discriminatory claims in order to be considered legitimate.

Conventionally, most marketers are considered wise by avoiding taking a stance on controversial social issues (Taylor, 2014, p. 12). Though this is a considerably safer approach, Taylor (2014) believes that the Olympics controversy demonstrates that it can be a complicated issue. In any case, CSR must be an evolving process, because as society changes, the preferences, needs and interests of stakeholders change along with it (Bachnik & Nowacki, 2018; Dodd, 2018; Taylor, 2014). A substantial change is that people expect businesses to make statements through their activities about what those businesses align with socially or politically (Dodd, 2018). In fact, Dodd (2018) believes the fact that brands are engaging more and more in social and political issues indicates a shift in society’s expectations as brands’ activities are directed toward change in society, whether manifested through attitudinal and behavioral change or even change in policy.

An example of this is a 2017 advertisement that was created in response to a Texas bill. White (2017) describes how GDS&M, an advertising agency in Texas, teamed up with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and developed an ad campaign with the tagline “I pee with L.G.B.T.” in response to a state bill that would require transgender people to use the restroom according to the gender on their birth certificates when in public schools or other government-funded buildings. According to Duff Stewart, chief executive of GDS&M, the goal of the video was to encourage people to reach out to their legislators in Texas to stop the bill. This ad shows how a business may blatantly take a stance in its advertising or other activity and, as Dodd (2018) states, aim at a societal-level outcome (p. 223).

Dodd (2018) proposes that corporations are expected to contribute to society by promoting democracy as a public good and engaging in political and social discourse (p. 235). Because of globalization and post-nationalist values, the role of business in society is increasingly being redefined. Companies must be ready to accommodate these types of changes in their marketing activities and meet the expectations of their stakeholders by considering cross-cultural factors and stakeholder interests (Alcañiz, Cáceres, & Pérez, 2010; Bachnik & Nowacki, 2018; Dodd, 2018; Taylor, 2014).

Because public relations is the industry that involves relationships between a corporation and its stakeholders, public relations is a key component of the theoretical conceptualization of public advocacy (Dodd, 2018; Selin, 2018). Therefore, according to Dodd (2018), it will be the role of the public relations function in business to discover how businesses can develop activities and practices that will contribute to the public good for the sake of stakeholders. Because marketing communications and activities encompass a set of processes and activities designed to persuade and inform customers, public relations may merge with advertising when it comes to meeting stakeholder interests in promoting their views and beliefs (Dodd, 2018; Selin, 2018).

Ultimately, the theoretical conceptualization of public advocacy as outlined by Dodd (2018) concedes to the argument that CSR does extend to companies taking a stance on a social or political issue.

**Controversy in CSR.** A brand’s social or political message may be one that stirs controversy, though this may not always be the case with all advertisements or communication with those messages. For example, Yoplait’s “Mom On” ad campaign sends a message that mothers should do what they find best for themselves and their children despite common criticisms about actions such as public breastfeeding, having a career, being a “stay-at-home mom” and wearing certain clothing. In the video ad, mothers confidently act for themselves and their children while sharing criticizing comments about a mothers’ actions when it comes to raising their children. (Gilliland, 2018). Stella Artois also does not engage with controversy but uses its “Buy a Lady a Drink” campaign to raise awareness of the global water crisis, while also stating its commitment to help alleviate the problem (Gilliland, 2018). These are examples of Bachnik and Nowacki’s (2018) working definition of socially responsible advertising. Socially responsible advertising consists of marketing activities that do not generate widely negative responses and do not violate ethical values or ideals shared by customers. However, with a brand that chooses to engage with a topic that tends to draw polarizing views, controversy may be inevitable.

Chen and Berger (2013) define controversy by a Merriam-Webster (2003) definition as a discussion that draws the expression of opposing views (p. 581). The authors clarify this definition by stating that many topics have opposing views but are not controversial. For example, a group of people may have different opinions on which hand soap smells the best but will not consider the topic controversial because hand soap does not matter much to people (Chen & Berger, 2013, p. 581). Furthermore, controversy may be subjective and depend on the culture involved with the matter at hand. In their example, a draft pick may be controversial to sports fans, but not controversial to those who aren’t fans of sports. They explain that even though other topics such as social or political issues tend to be widely controversial, the controversy can still be culturally subjective. For example, abortion is a politically controversial topic in the United States, whereas it was not a widely controversial issue in Sweden as of 2008 (Chen & Berger, 2013).

Controversial advertising may be considered advertising that opposes the interests of consumers (Bachnik & Nowacki, 2018). For the purpose of the present research, the researcher will deem controversial advertising to use the definition provided by Chen and Berger (2013) and assume controversial advertising to mean advertising that opposes consumer interests. This may mean that consumers’ views and beliefs are opposed, or their ideals are violated. Bachnik and Nowacki (2018) found that the perception of a company’s controversial advertising depends on factors like the company’s size, market position, and business activity. They also discovered that companies are willing to risk creating controversial advertisements if it means that their business will benefit and that their recipients will receive the message positively. Greater awareness of the company, the chance to effectively impact recipients and the opportunity to be noticed and remembered are among companies’ primary motivations for pursuing controversial advertising.

Bachnik and Nowacki (2018) assert that controversy in advertising may produce both positive and negative feedback and must be carried out with caution. Asscher (2017) also makes this point, advising that brands take a stand for what their management believes or what they believe collectively but do so cautiously in consideration of the target audience. Messages should be meaningful and authentic, and brands should not trivialize issues while trying to capitalize on them (Asscher, 2017). When a company commits to CSR in marketing activities, they must consider that their primary stakeholders are customers but also members of society (Bachnik & Nowacki, 2018). According to Taylor (2014), when dealing with an issue in which more than one culture may be involved, especially in a global sense, marketers must consider that norms may not always be shared cross-culturally. Even without global considerations, norms and values may not be shared within one nation’s subcultures or groups. Also, different consumers are affected to different degrees. Taylor (2014) concludes that in the end, a corporation’s activities are likely to offend some stakeholders, especially when multiple interests are involved. Beyond the potential of offending some stakeholders, a company’s engagement with CSR activities does not guarantee trust or a favorable reputation.

**Criticism of CSR.** A company’s reputation may be damaged when its CSR activities do not align with its claims. Research points to consumers’ tendency to not readily accept what corporations may claim in their CSR communications and activities. According to Yang & Hsu (2017), some consumers tend to believe that some advertisement claims are not authentic and may be defensive in accepting those claims. Consumers may be skeptical toward advertising in general because they find the content untrustworthy. Pavitt (2012) also refers to skepticism about CSR practices as some view a company’s practices against its CSR claims and find those claims to be unsubstantiated (p. 22). Furthermore, CSR is often criticized for trying to take advantage of a certain societal problem for the sake of generating capital (Alcañiz et al., 2010; Pavitt, 2012; Penny, 2014; Pennamore, 2018).

Penny (2014) cites an example from the 1920s with women and cigarettes. At first, women were seen as unladylike for smoking cigarettes. With the help of Edward Bernays, labeled the “father of public relations,” a tobacco company managed to turn cigarettes into a symbol of women’s empowerment by the mid-1920s and more women were buying cigarettes (Chakraborty, 2014). By Penny’s (2014) interpretation, this was one of the first times that feminism was appropriated to sell things that people do not need. She further asserts that capitalism has stripped away the original intentions of feminism and women’s liberation by way of advertisements that subvert these ideas and use them to sell products. Penny (2014) states that despite any use of progressive ideals in advertising, larger issues remain to be confronted, and those are often the problems that many would rather not discuss. The trivialization of important issues is a risk that brands take in putting forth social and political messages, especially in advertising and especially when messages are controversial (Asscher, 2017; Penny, 2014).

Another example is a Ram truck 2018 Super Bowl commercial that used a voiceover of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in a 60-second advertisement (Pennamore, 2018). This ad was criticized by many, including Dr. King’s daughter, Bernice King, and scholars who believed that using Dr. King’s speech for selling goods opposes the beliefs he held in his lifetime. Just as Penny (2014) described the use of feminism in ads, critics considered the Ram truck ad an “appropriation of King’s legacy” (Pennamore, 2018, p, 9).

In yet another example, a Pepsi ad was criticized for failing to properly address inequalities faced by many people around the globe and presenting an oversimplified solution (Asscher, 2017). In the ad, reality TV star Kendall Jenner leaves a photo shoot to join a group of protesters walking down a street in a peaceful demonstration. She makes her way to the front of the crowd, approaches a police officer and gives him a Pepsi. After the officer sips the Pepsi, the crowd cheers triumphantly. According to Smith (2017), critics of the ad accused the brand of appropriating racial protest movements. Bernice King responded also to this ad on Twitter by sharing a photo of Dr. King peacefully protesting and being pushed by police. In the tweet, she expressed, “If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi” (King, 2017).

Brands have the power to put out social or political messages; subsequently, consumers have the power to respond to those messages.

**Political Consumerism and Consumer Power**

Through previous research, Kelm and Dohle (2018) found that political consumerism has existed for years as consumers have made efforts to advocate for civil rights and reprove unfavorable corporate behavior. Gotlieb (2015) describes it as “existing at the intersection of political and consumer behaviour” (p. 552). Nonomura (2017) defines political consumerism as a consumer’s decision to boycott or “buycott” products or services based on that consumer’s ethical or political considerations. By standard definition, a boycott is an organized withdrawal from an organization or institution as a way to exert pressure on the organization to meet the demands of those who ostracize it (Nonomura, 2017, p. 235). A consumer boycott may be defined as the refusal to purchase a product or service from an organization as opposition to actions that the consumer does not agree with. Conversely, a buycott is when consumers act deliberately to support an organization whose actions they consider to be favorable or in alignment with their own values and beliefs. Consumer boycotts may be organized officially within organizations, but social media has also increased the spread of stated boycott intentions and participants may also garner support from those who share similar interests.

Makarem and Jae (2016) found five categories of causes that motivate boycott behavior: political causes, human rights causes, animal rights and environmental protection causes, business strategy and corporate causes and corruption causes (p. 210). They suggest that boycott behavior is an individual response to an organization’s actions although boycotts seem organized and carried out collectively. Gotlieb (2015) makes a similar point, saying that political consumerism participants boycott with publicly shared interests or self-interest. Two examples of boycotting and buycotting centered around the same topic presented themselves in 2018.

Colin Kaepernick, former NFL quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, kneeled during the national anthem during a football game in 2016 to protest racial injustice and became a controversial figure thereafter. Kaepernick also lost his job in the NFL (Draper & Belson, 2018). However, Nike used Kaepernick as the face of its 30th year anniversary in 2018 in its ad campaign (Draper & Belson, 2018). Kaepernick first debuted the ad campaign on his personal Twitter account, which featured an image of his eyes and the words, “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” (Arnold, 2018; Draper & Belson 2018). Arnold (2018) shared a sample of responses of both support and opposition from Twitter, with Kaepernick receiving praise and support from some people and criticism from others. According to Draper & Belson (2018), political conservatives strongly opposed the ad campaign because they felt that Kaepernick’s actions disrespected the military. Some even went as far as burning and destroying their Nike apparel to show their disdain for the company having Kaepernick as the face of its campaign (Arnold, 2018; Draper & Belson 2018). The hashtag “Nike Boycott” also surfaced on Twitter as people shared photos and videos of their destroyed apparel and expressed their intentions to boycott the brand (Draper & Belson. 2018). The other side of political consumerism, buycotting, is demonstrated in an example that followed.

Jaffe (2018) examines how the executive team of a veteran-owned apparel company used the aftermath of Nike’s controversial ad campaign to generate profits for that business. Tyler Merritt, owner of Nine Line Apparel, prepared a response to the ad that would support his own patriotism. Days after Nike released its campaign, Merritt and his team created shirts with the tagline “Just Stand” and Merritt appeared on the Fox & Friends news program with the shirts and shared his personal story. According to Jaffe (2018), the shirts became a bestseller and the company’s online sales increased substantially after Merritt’s television appearance. This can be considered an example of buycotting because people showed their support for a brand that aligned with their causes by purchasing from that brand. The team of this veteran-owned company took advantage of a business opportunity in a politically heated climate, and the actions proved useful for the business.

**Motivations.** Participating in political consumerism could be done either in isolation as a single or temporary act, or as part of a broader movement. (Gotlieb, 2015, p. 552). Therefore,Gotlieb (2015) believes that it is important to understand the factors that drive political consumerism among citizens, especially young citizens, in order to understand the potential for civic participation. The author focused her research on symbolic, rather than functional and experiential, motivations for participating in acts of political consumerism. The functional motivations for using a product are strictly related to the usefulness and quality of the product. Experiential motivations relate to the user’s personal experience and feeling with the product. In focusing on the symbolic motivation for using a product, the goal was to understand how participation gratifies internal needs that are important to a consumer.

Makarem and Jae (2016) specifically discuss consumer motivations to boycott, dividing motivations into two categories of instrumental and non-instrumental motivations. Consumers with instrumental motivations have specific goals and desire to influence and effect change. Their purpose in boycotting is to motivate corporations to change behaviors or policies. Makarem and Jae (2016) state that instrumental motivations may also stem from psychological needs. Conversely, consumers who boycott with non-instrumental motivations seek to express dissatisfaction with a corporation. These consumers may vent their frustration through boycotting or feel some moral obligation to boycott. In the example of the Nike ad campaign, some tweets contained some expression of disappointment with the brand (Arnold, 2018; Draper & Belson, 2018). Some also may desire to punish the target company or see the business fail as a result of their displeasure. Beyond motivations, emotions also affect boycott behavior as consumers can express themselves emotionally through their boycott. Furthermore, the intensity of emotion and message may be a predictor of boycott behavior if the reasoning behind the boycott is strong (Makarem & Jae, 2016).

Through their analysis of over 1,400 tweets, Makarem and Jae (2016) found that instrumental motivations took precedence over non-instrumental and mixed motivations. They also find that non-instrumental motivations, which tend to be more emotional, often elicit more non-instrumentally motivated messages. However, because non-instrumental motivations typically lack clear goals, instrumental messages prove to be more effective in consumer boycotts.

Nonomura (2017) cited the growth of boycotts and buycotts as forms of political participation. Political consumerism may be considered a more individualized approach to participation as marginalized citizens find their political voice in their buying power when other forms of political expression are less accessible. Nonomura (2017) found that age can be a predictor for participation in political consumerism, but not to the extent of other factors such as socioeconomic status, income and education. Knowledge based on level of education appeared to be a key predictor for participation in political consumerism. Furthermore, Kelm and Dohle (2018) found that people’s political interests and orientation are stronger determinants of whether or not they are political consumers. Nonomura (2017) also associates political consumerism with post-materialist values, meaning that consumers value their own individuality over commodities. The types of values associated with post-materialism include justice and equality, values that resonate more with younger people (Nonomura, 2017, p. 236). This author further suggests that consumers’ politically motivated behaviors such as buycotting and boycotting are reaffirmed through corporations’ CSR activities because corporations seek to commoditize those demands by implementing more ethically and morally responsible practices. Corporations can garner support from their stakeholders by meeting those stakeholders’ CSR demands.Political consumerism empowers citizens and consumers to act against corporate behavior they deem unfavorable (Nonomura, 2017).

Kelm and Dohle (2018) sought to explore and understand the role of online and offline communication in influencing political consumerism activities. Additionally, Makarem and Jae (2016) studied consumer boycotts in-depth through exploratory content analysis on Twitter to increase understanding of the motivations behind boycotts and the causes that fuel them. Consumers have a level of power and influence that is demonstrated through their ability to demand change from corporations, join with like-minded individuals, influence others and even respond individually to businesses. Social identity theory helps explain how and why consumers align themselves with others who are like-minded.

**Social identity theory**

Henri Tajfel’s social identity theory helps explain how people may see themselves as individuals or as part of group and the behaviors that stem from that perception (Ellemers, 2019). Tajfel found through minimal-group studies that categorizing individuals into groups may be enough to make people think of themselves and others in terms of group membership (Ellemers, 2019). In social identity theory, one’s social identity is born of three psychological processes: social categorization, perceiving oneself and others as group members; social comparison, the process of determining the value of a group relationally with other groups; and social identification, knowledge of oneself in relation to other groups and other people within one’s group (Ellemers, 2019). The theory also comprises of two types of behaviors, interpersonal and intergroup behavior. A person’s behavior may be determined by a one’s individual character and motivations or group membership character and motivations, which are known as interpersonal behavior and intergroup behavior, respectively (Ellemers, 2019).

Under social identity theory, there are also consequences associated with one’s perceived group identity. People may tend to seek out favorable traits of the groups to which they belong (Ellemers, 2019). It is also possible to focus on the negative characteristics of outgroups or minimize the positive characteristics of the outgroups (Ellemers, 2019). According to the theory, these perceptions can also affect the distribution of materials that may be shared between groups and the evaluation of products shared between groups. By social identity theory, people also reaffirm their values by communicating and connecting with others within the ingroup. Social identity theory may also point to how consumers support brands that align with their own causes and values because they seek out resources in which the positive traits of their groups are identified.

**Consumer Empowerment and Influence**

**Consumer empowerment.** Online information and communication play a key role in an age where many are getting information from the Internet and interacting online. The availability of information and the ease of access to that information has proven to be a game changer for the relationship between corporations and consumers in the era of Web 2.0 (Selin, 2018). Selin (2018) refers to Web 2.0 as social media. According to this author’s definition, social media are “online technologies and applications in which people share their views and experiences [and]… can be also stated as the medium in which different contents, such as texts, audios and videos, are broadcast” (p. 49). Categories of social media environments include “e-mail groups, blogs, forums, corporate intranets, extranets, instant messaging services, [and] social network sites” (Selin, 2018, p. 49).

Selin (2018) states that social media is a compelling tool for users because the nature of social media is similar to the way that civilizations were formed: it includes sharing and exchanging ideas and opinions, cooperation, thinking, connecting with potential friends or allies and performing speeches or debates (p. 49). Meanwhile, businesses enjoy the benefits of social media because it helps meet marketing objectives at a low cost. Companies can develop and maintain brand identity, offering content with social value and communicating directly with consumers (p. 49).

According to Kelm and Dohle (2018), the Internet has provided greater access to information for political consumers, whether they are seeking out like-minded individuals or looking for ways to support their cause (p. 1524). Whereas in the past a company may have been able to hide certain things and pick and choose the information they wanted people to know, such is not the case now (Pavitt, 2012). In fact, consumers are able to seek out information at their pleasure. While there has not yet been enough research to examine the relationship between online media usage and political consumerism, Kelm and Dohle (2018) gather from previous research that compared to nonpolitical consumers, political consumers use online media for information more often (p. 1526). Even more so, they can easily spread that information (Kelm & Dohle, 2018; Makarem & Jae, 2016; Pavitt, 2012; Selin, 2018).

**Influence between consumers.** Consumers also have the power to come together with people who are similar in attitudes and beliefs (Pavitt, 2012; Kelm & Dohle, 2018). Pavitt (2012) mentions that new technology allows users to seek out contributors who share interests and can help keep certain issues alive in the public domain (p. 22). Web 2.0 and the availability of information to consumers both online and offline enables boycotters and buycotters alike to seek and access information that best fulfills their purposes, even though news and information about boycotting seem to appear more often because it fulfills the news value of negativity (Kelm and Dohle, 2018, p. 1526). Political consumers tend to actively communicate with others about politics and their political consumerist behavior both online and offline more than nonpolitical consumers (Kelm and Dohle, 2018, p. 1527). By studying boycotts and buycotts separately rather than together, Kelm and Dohle (2018) discovered that communication activities influence boycotts more than buycotts. The authors believe that face-to-face communication offline influences political consumerism activities more, possibly because it eliminates the anonymity that can exist on the Internet and thus presents more social pressure to act in a certain way (Kelm and Dohle, 2018, pp. 1538-1539). The authors find that the intensity of online communication and information influences political consumerism. In addition to empowering consumers for themselves and influencing other consumers, the presence of technology that fosters online communication makes it easier for consumers to hold corporations accountable.

**Corporate accountability and communication.** Pavitt (2012) cites examples of how social media and user-generated content exposed corporations whose activities did not align with their CSR claims. Following the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the company put out digitally-enhanced images that portrayed a false image of the ocean that made it appear blue rather than polluted by oil. Bloggers reported the false nature of the photos and it was shared on social media, forcing BP to remove the photos from their website (Pavitt, 2012, pp. 22-23). A contest for YouTube that General Motors (GM) intended to use to get their supporters involved turned into a forum for environmentalists and activists to call out the harmful effects of the Chevy Tahoe as it was contributing to global warming (Pavitt, 2012, p. 23).

Online communication also provides a way for consumers to connect with corporations. With expressed opinions online, consumer feedback is easily accessible (Makarem & Jae, 2016, Selin, 2018). Sentiment analysis enables companies to gauge the opinions of consumers. Most sentiment analysis online is automated, measuring reactions by the use of emoticons, mining opinion words, and identifying other emotional expressions such as capitalization or exclamation marks. However, because automated sentiment analysis may miss the context of the expression (such as a sarcastic remark or slang words), Makarem and Jae (2016) used human sentiment analysis in their study, which enabled them to understand the context of the message in their analysis of tweets. Human sentiment analysis, when accompanied by corporate response, can be another way for businesses to engage with consumers. For example, Jaffe (2018) discusses how Kaila Donaldson, who runs Nine Line Apparel’s Facebook page, uses social media to gauge how audiences may respond to their apparel and engage in conversations with potential customers. According to Jaffe (2018), the primary goals of the Facebook page are to encourage new business and engage in conversations that give insights into the target audience’s thoughts and behaviors. Selin (2018) states that one of the benefits of institutions using social media is the ability to observe consumer behavior.

Much of the literature has demonstrated that some people see brands as morally responsible for engaging in social issues while others think brands are taking advantage of cultural issues to make more money and do not always trust brands’ motivations. As demonstrated by the theoretical conceptualization of public advocacy (Dodd, 2018) and other literature concerning CSR (Alcañiz et al., 2010, Yang & Hsu, 2017), people do expect more from businesses than simply selling products and services; however, society’s response remains split on the issue. Researchers have considered whether consumers will choose to boycott or buycott a brand’s products or services based on those consumers’ political and social attitudes and beliefs. The pre-existing literature also addresses consumers’ motivations for political consumerism and helps to explain underlying psychological processes that may be at work, such as one’s political ideologies and affiliations as well as group identity and perception.

However, there is a gap in the research that does not address other responses. With online information and communication, consumers may express opinions and beliefs online through blogs, social networks, or other forums for user-generated content. While a consumer may not respond to a brand’s social or political message monetarily, they may post online or share information or stories about that brand. Through stories and posts shared online, or even their own posts, people can express their satisfaction, dissatisfaction or other opinion of a brand’s message.

This calls for primary research that would examine the proposed research question: How do consumers respond to a brand that puts forth a social or political message in its marketing activities and communications? The theoretical conceptualization of public advocacy and social identity theory have been proposed as the theories to underpin the research topic. Based on the literature review and the proposed theories, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: People, who feel that a brand’s message supports a social or political cause that

offends, opposes or does not align with their own views, will express that they would

negatively respond by way of interpersonal communication, online communication,

and/or boycotting that brand’s products or services.

H2: People, who feel that a brand’s message supports a social or political cause that

aligns with their own views, will express that they would positively respond by way of interpersonal communication, online communication, and/or buying that brand’s

products or services.

Method

The researcher used a quantitative survey that included some qualitative questions as the methodology to test the proposed hypotheses. The survey instrument is a questionnaire that was developed using Google Forms. The questionnaire contained 16 Likert scale statements, four open-ended questions, two ordinal questions and one nominal question (see Appendix A). The survey allowed the researcher to collect information on the attitudes of consumers in relation to how they may respond to social or political messages in marketing activities and communications. The purpose of the Likert statements was to allow the researcher to gauge the general attitudes of the respondents. The open-ended questions allowed the researcher to collect rich data on respondents’ beliefs and attitudes and also get more specific responses to learn what specific social and political issues the respondents may be aware of and what turns consumers away from brands. An application was submitted to Spring Hill College’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the researcher was given approval to proceed with the survey (see Appendix B). The survey remained open for three weeks upon being distributed.

The survey’s respondents consist of a convenience sample of the population reached through two Snapchat posts, four Facebook posts, collection of e-mail addresses and a biweekly Spring Hill College institution-wide email that appeared for two weeks. The survey originally received 105 responses total, with 90 responses to Q17, 86 responses to Q18 and Q19 and 85 responses to Q20. Responses were exported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The researcher separated the open-ended responses to the survey into a separate sheet for thematic analysis (see Appendix C). Upon reviewing the responses in the spreadsheet, the researcher found that two of the responses to the survey were duplicates and deleted the duplicates. After the duplicated responses were deleted, there remained 103 overall responses, with 88 responses to Q17, 84 responses to Q18 and Q19 and 83 responses to Q20.

The researcher reviewed the responses to the open-ended questions using thematic analysis. First, responses to the questions were overviewed to allow the researcher to become familiar with the responses. Codes were identified and categorized into themes for each separate question. Following this, the researcher identified larger themes in the responses to answer the research question.

The researcher used the IBM SPSS Statistics 24.0 software to analyze the responses to the quantitative portion of the survey (see Appendix D) The researcher named the questions according to the numeric order of the questions in the survey (Q1, Q2, Q3, etc.). The questions were then labeled according to constructs of the hypotheses and research question. Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4 were labeled SocAwa to point to how people perceive social identity and awareness of issues that may affect them or the groups they identify with. Q5 and Q6 were labeled Loyalty to point to people’s brand loyalty and brand preference. Q7, Q8 and Q9 were labeled CSR to point to perception of brands acting responsibly and whether that responsibility extends to putting out messages about social and political causes. Q10, Q14, Q15 and Q16 were labeled BranOpp to point to consumers’ responses to brands with opposing social or political views. Q11, Q12 and Q13 were labeled BranSup to point to consumers’ responses to brands with supporting social or political views. Finally, Q21, Q22 and Q23 were labeled Age, Gender and Education, respectively.

First, frequency tests were run on all variables to get a measure on how the respondents answered the questions. Next, descriptive statistics were run on all scale variables to determine more specific measures of the responses and determine the variation in responses. Reliability tests were run on all scale variables together and then on scale variables grouped together by construct. The researcher then ran multiple crosstabs on the questions to help determine if the hypotheses were supported and also to test Nonomura’s (2017) claims about age, gender and education as predictors for political consumerism and issue awareness. First, all variables for constructs CSR (Q1, Q2 and Q3), BranOpp (Q10, Q14, Q15 and Q16) and BranSupp (Q11, Q12 and Q13) were crossed with Age (Q21), Gender (Q22) and Education (Q23) to better understand how respondents within each category answered the questions. Three crosstabs were run specifically to test the hypotheses. First, Q3 (SocAwa3) and Q4 (SocAwa4) were crossed with Q12 (BranSup2) and Q13 (BranSup3). Next, Q3 and Q4 were crossed with Q14 (BranOpp3) and Q14 (BranOpp4). Finally, Q2 (SocAwa2) and Q10 (BranOpp1) were crossed with Q8 (CSR2) and Q9 (CSR3).

Results

**Quantitative analysis.** The 103 respondents were from a convenience sample of the population reached through Facebook, Snapchat, Spring Hill College’s internal e-mail and requesting email addresses. Questions to demonstrate the demographic data of the respondents included age, gender and education. Since the sample is convenience sample, the results are not able to be applied to a specific population. A summary of responses in Google Forms and frequency tests showed that 75 of the respondents were female (73%) and 28 were male (27%). Eighty-six of the respondents were between ages 19 and 24 (84%); seven were between ages 25 and 36 (7%); five were between ages 37 and 49 (5%); and five were age 50 or older (5%). Cumulatively, about 92% of the respondents reported having some level of higher education, including some college, associate degree, bachelor’s degree, master’s degree and doctorate. No respondent reported a level of education less than a high school diploma or GED. The researcher chose to collect data about the respondents’ gender, age and education to test Nonomura’s (2017) claims about political consumerism being more common among women, those who are more educated and younger people.

According to the descriptive statistics for all scale variables, each scale question had a minimum of one (strongly disagree) and a maximum five (strongly agree). The standard deviations for the scale questions ranged between .624 and 1.25, and the mean for the scale variables ranged between 2.89 and 4.70. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for all scale variables.

Table 1

![A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated]()

Nearly all of the mean numbers for the scale variables BranOpp and BranSup were around 3.0. The standard deviation for seven out of eight of these variables is also above one. This demonstrates that many people gave a response of three (neutral) for these questions and that there was likely a high variation of responses between one (strongly disagree) and five (strongly agree). A visual representation of the summary of responses to Q15 in Figure 1 is an example of the variation in responses for these questions.

A screenshot of a cell phone

Description automatically generated

Figure 1

The reliability test run on all scale variables yielded an alpha coefficient of .712. However, the alpha coefficient value would have fallen below .7 if certain variables were removed. The initial alpha coefficient values for each construct were as follows: SocAwa, .609; Loyalty, .851; CSR, .570; BranOpp, .471; and BranSup, .747. When reliability tests were run by construct, the variables in three of the five constructs did not demonstrate internal consistency reliability, which means that the instrument overall does not seem valid. With the removal of SocAwa1 from the SocAwa construct, the alpha coefficient value was .711. When CSR1 was removed from the CSR construct, the alpha coefficient value was .784. When BranOpp3 and BranOpp4 were removed from the BranOpp construct, the alpha coefficient value was .748. Since these questions needed to be changed, this instrument would need refinement in order to be used again in the future.

In the crosstabs that were run to test the hypotheses, all Pearson’s Chi-Square tests except between Q9 and Q10 resulted in p > 0.5, which demonstrates that most of these variables did not seem to have a mathematical connection to one another. The Pearson’s Chi-Square value for Q9 and Q10 resulted in p ≤ 0.5 with a value of 0.019, indicating statistical significance. Additionally, all crosstabs with Pearson’s Chi-Square tests for CSR, BranOpp and BranSup with Age, Gender and Education resulted in p > .05 except Q2 (CSR2) and Q22 (Gender), which resulted in .048. These crosstabs were not performed to test the hypotheses, but to test Nonomura’s (2017) ideas that education would be a stronger predictor for political consumerism than age. Based on the results of the crosstabs to test the hypotheses, the research can fail to reject the null hypotheses.

**Qualitative analysis.** The open-ended questions were analyzed by recurring themes. Q17 asked respondents what would make them no longer purchase from a brand to which they had once been loyal. Q18 asked respondents what social, political and environmental issues they feel strongly about. This question did not link directly to boycott behavior, but it allowed the researcher to gain an understanding about what specific issues respondents are aware of and feel strongly about. Q19 asked respondents how feel when a brand shows support for views that align with their views, and Q20 asked respondents about how they feel when a brand shows support for views that don’t align with their views. The researcher gathered six themes from the analysis of the open-ended responses.

The first theme shows that people tend to feel strongly about human rights and human issues. Codes within this theme included gender discrimination, reproductive rights, police brutality, immigration, the criminal justice system, gun rights, LGBT issues, racial discrimination, healthcare access and poverty. People also expressed concern about cheap labor and how companies treat their employees. Within some categories of human issues, some respondents expressed views that were almost completely opposite or different from other respondents. For example, some people expressed that they were pro-choice or that they supported a woman’s legal right to an abortion. Other respondents expressed that they were pro-life or anti-abortion. Chen and Berger (2013) cited that abortion is often a polarizing topic, and the responses about abortion seem to be consistent with that finding. Animal cruelty and animal rights, environmental protection, climate change, global warming were also prevalent topics in the category of what issues people care about.

The second theme, which stems directly from the first, is that discrimination and unfair treatment toward employees, consumers or other groups are likely to motivate people to stop purchasing from a brand they may be loyal to. This appears to be consistent with Makarem and Jae’s (2016) findings that human rights issues are among the top motivations for boycotting a brand’s products or services. Some people also expressed that they would stop purchasing from a brand if they learned of practices that were harmful to the environment or to animals. Some people also expressed that public views that do not align with their beliefs would be enough to make them stop purchasing from a brand. While a brand’s beliefs may not be widely considered unethical or discriminatory, the brand’s actions may still cause someone with opposing views to no longer purchase from that brand if that consumer feels strongly about a topic. In one specific example, a respondent stated, “I have stopped purchasing from several different brands just based on the kinds of things they support. I love Girl Scout cookies, but Girl Scouts fund Planned Parenthood which supports abortion which I am highly opposed to.”

A third theme that the researcher discovered in the analysis is that not all people are completely opposed to companies that have different social and political views. Some respondents expressed that they could respect views different from their own and do not mind that brands use their platforms to start conversations. Many people also responded that their decision to purchase from brands with opposing views depends on the view. This could mean that people are still open to purchasing from a brand if they do not find that brand’s views to be too offending. For one, a brand’s viewpoint is controversial it draws opposing views. However, because controversy is subjective (Chen & Berger, 2013), different people who share the same views may respond differently to the same brand with messages that oppose those views. Using the example of Girl Scouts, respondents *x* and *y* may both be opposed to abortion. However, respondent *y* may not find the topic as controversial as respondent *x* and therefore continue to purchase Girl Scout cookies. This would not mean that *y* does not still hold *y*’s views about abortion. It would just demonstrate that *y* does not feel as inclined to boycott Girl Scouts as *x* does. Another person responded that reconciling beliefs with purchase decisions is difficult. This respondent stated the following:

What I say would make me stop vs. what would actually make me stop are so different. I'd like to think that clear, documented harm would be enough to discourage use. But I'm still on social media despite proof that it increases depression and social anxiety, I still eat at Chick-fil-a despite their stated anti-LGBTQ stance, I'm still part of a Catholic college despite proof of child abuse, I still participate in Mardi Gras despite the clear racist segregation. The socialized structures we live in are so hard to not engage in that it makes it challenging to commit to your values. There is no reasonable alternative to the capitalist structure that perpetuates the political power of corporations in the US. (see Appendix D)

A fourth theme discovered in the analysis was that some people seem to only use products and services for functional benefits. Within this theme, people responded that they would stop purchasing a product or service because of decrease in quality, increase in price, finding a superior alternative or no longer needing a product. One respondent says, “I purchase products solely to use them, nothing to do with the companies' political views.” Some also expressed that they do not purchase a brand based on the views that the brand expresses and that no circumstances based on those would cause them to stop purchasing from a brand or start purchasing from a brand.

The last theme gathered from the analysis was the skepticism of motivations and opposition to brands putting out social and political messages. For the responses that can be categorized in this theme, people expressed that they would rather not be exposed to a brand’s social and political views and that those views should be kept private. Some respondents expressed that brands may not have genuine motivations in promoting certain beliefs in those brands’ activities and communications. One respondent stated, “I typically question whether or not their intentions are in the right place- are they saying this and espousing these beliefs to gain money and prestige? Or do they truly stand by these beliefs? Basically, I REALLY question their motivation.” This aligns with criticisms that CSR is just another way for companies to make more money (Alcañiz et al., 2010; Pavitt, 2012; Penny, 2014; Pennamore, 2018).

Discussion

The purpose of this pilot study was to examine the research question: How do consumers respond to a brand that puts forth a social or political message in its marketing activities and communications? Ultimately, the hypotheses were not fully supported due to the lack of internal consistency reliability of the instrument in the quantitative analysis. The instrument would need to demonstrate greater validity in order to have a reliable measure of the responses. However, the researcher could fail to reject the hypotheses based on the Pearson’s Chi-Square tests, and many themes gathered from thematic analysis reaffirm several findings in the literature review although some of the themes do appear to support the hypotheses. Still, this is a limitation because qualitative data is not a valid measure in itself due to biases in responses. However, the data is still valuable because the responses gathered were useful not only for providing the researcher with specific responses, but the responses may also be used to help refine the instrument for future studies.

As previously mentioned, many respondents answered neutral to questions about how they may respond differently to brands with supporting views and brands with opposing views. The hypotheses may have been better shown to be supported or not supported had more respondents chosen to agree or disagree with statements. However, the high volume of “neutral” responses may be reconciled with a recurring theme found in the open-ended responses to Q20, which asked how respondents felt with brands’ opposing views. Many of the respondents expressed that a brand’s expression of an opposing view may not always affect their purchasing behavior. While some respondents specifically expressed that a brand’s messages will have no effect on their purchasing behavior and other respondents expressed that those messages would make them stop purchasing from the brand, many of the respondents said that it depends on what the message content is.

This pilot study had many limitations that may be improved or further developed for future research purposes. First, it would be useful to refine the questions to help ensure internal consistency reliability. Three of the five constructs of scale variables needed to have at least one variable removed from the equation in order to yield a sufficient alpha coefficient to demonstrate reliability. For future use, either those questions needed to be rephrased, or a different question pertaining to those constructs should be asked of respondents. Also, the questions take the symbolic value of products and services into account more than the functional and experiential use. Political consumerist beliefs may hold that the symbolic use outweighs the functional and experiential use (Gotlieb, 2014). Still, this study may benefit from having a distinction between these separate values of a product. It could help companies create a better balance on what aspects of their products and services they may focus on in their integrated marketing efforts.

While the instrument of the pilot study needs refinement for future use, this study overall has many implications for managerial use. First, it demonstrates that companies benefit from demonstrating responsibility and fairness in practice, whether it relates to humane treatment of employees and consumers or participating in fair business practices. Also, it shows that brand loyalty may be strengthened whenever a brand chooses to engage with social or political causes that are meaningful to stakeholders. However, it is also important to understand that a brand’s actions must be consistent with that brand’s message that support that cause, or else the brand risks being seen as inauthentic by the consumer. Going forward, brands will likely continue to use messages related to social or political causes.

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