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Issue contention and consumers' reactions to corporate social responsibility: Challenging the dyadic assumptions

Sifan Xu *, Moonhee Cho

Tombras School of Advertising and Public Relations, University of Tenneseee, Knoxville, USA

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ABSTRACT

Two experiments (one fictitious on environmental CSR and one real-life on a company's social advocacy on gun violence) were conducted to examine how issue contention affects consumers' reactions to corporate social responsibility (CSR). Results of the two experiments suggest that while issue contention does not lower consumers' agency, it makes consumers less likely to engage the organization based on their values and beliefs (i.e., symbolic avoidance) regardless of the organization's viewpoints. The results also suggest that this effect does not directly extend to actual purchase intention, which indicates that actual purchase intention is confounded by both symbolic interactions and tangible factors such as price and corporate expertise. Results of the two experiments provide important implications for public relations research, challenging the dyadic assumptions of organization-public interactions and relationships and calling for further attention on inter-publics and inter-organizations dynamics.

Past research has noted that organization-public relationships are rarely dyadic (Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Xu, 2020), meaning that organization-public relationships are in a constellation of connections between and among organizations and diverse groups of people. The relationships between a particular group and a focal organization do not exist in vacuum, and are affected by group dynamics and interorganizational relationships (Heath, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2015). One way for organizations to establish close connections with diverse groups of publics is through supporting causes and issues that matter to these publics. While organizations have become more engaged in these issues, conflicts of values and division of opinions present increased risks for organizations (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016). Polarization of social values and opinions also leaves even traditionally "safe" topics such as gender equality and environmental issues contentious (e.g., Bolsen & Druckman, 2018; Hart & Nisbet, 2012; Hoffarth & Hodson, 2016; Xu & Zhou, 2020). With such challenges in mind, the current research seeks to understand how such differences and conflicts affect consumers' responses to corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts.

It should be noted that there are two important concepts related to companies staking their positions into sociopolitical issues, corporate social responsibility and corporate social advocacy (CSA). CSR is well defined and conceptualized as it is related to companies supporting prosocial causes beyond producing goods and services for profits (Schwartz & Saiia, 2012). Corporate social advocacy, in contrast, involves more risks as the practice usually involves more controversial sociopolitical issues (Hong & Li, 2020; Waymer & Logan, 2021). However, CSA and CSR are similar in that both practices are centered on organizations showing support to important issues. As mentioned above, given the politicization and polarization of many social issues in the United States, understanding how groups' interactions related to an issue affect consumers' reaction to companies' involvement is paramount. In short, the distinction between CSR and CSA is less of a focus in the current study than an understanding of how group dynamics such as group contention on issues may lead to nuanced reactions. The results of the study can further expand understandings of companies' CSR activities, and more importantly, provide empirical evidence to the growing recognition in public relations research that the effects of CSR on publics' perceived connection to organizations are dynamic and non-dyadic (Iannacone, 2021; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Yang & Taylor, 2015).

Two experiments in different issue settings were conducted. Issue contention, broadly speaking, can be defined as competition of ideas, values, opinions, and perspectives among diverse groups (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). We first tested the effects of issue contention, operationalized as salience of opinion differences, on various outcome variables with a fictitious company in the environmental CSR context, one of the most popular CSR initiatives by companies (Babiak &

* Correspondence to: 476 Communications Building, 1345 Circle Park Drive, Knoxville, TN 37996, USA.
E-mail address: sifanxu@utk.edu (S. Xu).

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Trendafilova, 2011). Then we used a real-life scenario in the second study regarding Walmart's policies to restrict gun sales, and issue contention was operationalized as dissensus around the policies. Results from this research provide both theoretical and practical implications on organizations' CSR on controversial social issues. The innovative aspects of the current research lie in its acknowledgement that individuals' response to an organization's CSR manifests not merely vis-à-vis the organization itself. Instead, such response is influenced by competition and polarization of ideas and shifting sociopolitical contexts.

Despite the limited scope of the current investigation focusing on consumers, the study results provide valuable implications for understanding that consumers' reactions to a focal organization's CSR initiatives are influenced by inter-organizations' and inter-publics' dynamics. The results of the current investigation provoke public relations scholars to consider the effects of interorganizational and interpublic relationships on CSR outcomes, even in cases that attempt to isolate the effects of a particular organization's CSR efforts. Practically speaking, the study results provide more insights for practitioners regarding benefits as well as risks on companies' engagement on social issues. Though companies still benefit from CSR activities, issue polarization and controversies can potentially affect how consumers establish value-based connections to companies.

1. CSR signaling and CSR risks

A myriad of studies have demonstrated CSR can increase consumers' affinity with the company (Garcia-De los Salmones & Perez, 2019; Lee & Shin, 2010; Overton et al., 2021), enhance company reputation (Lii & Lee, 2012; Pérez, 2015), boost employee engagement and recruitment outcomes (Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018; Song & Tao, 2022), and improve investment (Oh et al., 2013). Most CSR research acknowledges that CSR achieves its intended purposes by signaling a distinctive, attractive company/brand identity to better engage and connect with various stakeholders (Du et al., 2010; Martínez et al., 2014). Through CSR, a company associates itself with certain values that may appeal to key stakeholders who accept such values as worthy and attractive, which then may lead to a stronger sense of connectedness (Xu, 2020).

This correspondence of values can cultivate organizational identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Lin et al., 2011). However, studies examining consumers' responses to CSR overwhelmingly assume that consumers make decisions only based on their current judgment on the organization itself and/or individual tendencies (Lee, 2017). This assumption does not reflect reality well, where companies often find themselves challenged by other organizations, activist groups, and influential individuals, and social groups often have competing opinions and ideas at an issue domain, even in cases where issues are not contentious on the surface. For instance, when examining Gillette's "The Best Men Can Be" campaign, Xu and Xiong (2020) found that many social media users participated in the heated online discussion because of other users' responses. These users might be initially indifferent about the brand or this campaign, but later became invested because of the other group's reactions. As a result, some users' reactions had less to do with the campaign itself, but they reacted to the campaign because of the presence of incompatible values exhibited by other users.

In fact, risks of CSR activities are exacerbated because of conflicting opinions, values, and ideologies in societies (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). These conflicting opinions and values in turn intensify competition of ideas and the notion of what is right or wrong (Baldassarri & Gelman, 2008). Even seemingly "safe" pro-environmental stances can be made complicated given the shifting sociopolitical landscape, where people on the political spectrum possess different views on private companies' responsibilities about the environment (Bolsen & Druckman, 2018). In such a polarized context, companies face a Catch-22 situation. Remaining silent may anger the general public but siding with either one group alienates the others. It is therefore important to understand how corporate values signaled through CSR, once contested, affect consumers' responses and intentions.

2. Challenging the dyadic assumptions

Many scholars in public relations have argued that the dynamics between a particular public and a focal organization, and the outcomes of such dynamics, need to be examined not in isolation but in relation to other groups and organizations (Heath, 2013; Sommerfeldt & Kent, 2015; Yang & Taylor, 2015). However, empirical research incorporating such perspectives is still scant. We rely on two theories to identify the potential consequences of groups and organizations' dynamics on consumers' reactions CSR: intergroup threat theory and risk avoidance. Insights from the two theories help to unpack the actions social groups may take when uncertainty and risks imposed by issue contentions manifest.

2.1. Intergroup threat

Intergroup threat theory (cf. Stephan & Stephan, 2000) posits mainly two types of threats social groups face: symbolic threats and realistic threats. Symbolic threats are threats to a group's religion, worldviews, beliefs and/or values. These threats are heavily value-based, unlike realistic group threats including physical and material harm that endanger a group's physical or economic well-being (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Social issue contentions in the current research fit squarely into the profile of symbolic threats, where groups vie ideologically. A central proposition of intergroup threat theory, which is heavily influenced by social identity theory, is that individuals are motivated to increase their social groups' esteem, and they orient themselves to mitigate any potential threats to their group status (Stephan et al., 2009; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

So far, research applying intergroup threat has shown a key adjustment that groups make when facing symbolic threats—increased ingroup mobilization (Riek et al., 2006). Group members facing threats can exhibit a tendency for group cohesiveness and solidarity (Flade et al., 2019; Karasawa et al., 2004), and ingroup members perceive each other having increased similarity. Furthermore, research that integrates social identity theory into stakeholder theory also stipulates that when stakeholder groups are from the same category (i.e. both groups are consumers of an organization), the competition may increase due to the overlapping status (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003). Increased competition therefore may lead to increased mobilization around group values to improve cohesiveness and solidarity.

Combining insights from both intergroup threat theory and the notion of increased competition of similar stakeholder status, we speculate that issue contentions lead to increased in group mobilization. Yet, increased group mobilization is hard to operationalize and measure in the CSR context. However, research has suggested that agency plays an important role in group mobilization (Thomas et al., 2020). In other words, group mobilization and group cohesiveness manifest in a group's comfort and confidence in their values and beliefs, which is reflected through their willingness to be open about their thoughts and opinions on the issue.

H1. : Issue contentions lead to consumers being more likely to vocalize their opinions on the issue.

2.2. Risk avoidance and value-based purchase decisions

There are many existing perspectives on how uncertainty and risk avoidance play out in consumer behaviors. One of the most well-known theories related to risk avoidance is cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). Research on consumer behavior has adopted the theory to understand how consumers react when facing inconsistency and uncertainty. For example, Featherman and Pavlou (2003) showed that a

lack of information and perceived risks led to consumers' avoidance of e-services adoption. Risks alter consumers' intentions and behaviors, and a convenient approach for consumers in such cases is to reduce uncertainty by avoiding (Bruce, 2014), especially considering that consumers usually have alternatives for companies and brands. As a result, a general hypothesis is that when consumers experience any level of discomfort when it involves brands, products, and companies, they adopt an avoidance-based approach.

To examine this potential avoidance effect because of issue contention, we focus on value-based purchase decisions as a key variable. Value-based purchase decisions involve individuals consuming to signify their values and identities when they interact with brands, products, and organizations (Bhattacharjee et al., 2014; Dimitriadis & Papista, 2011). A theoretical foundation can be found in self-expansion theory (Reimann & Aron, 2014) and extended self (cf. Belk, 2013), according to which consumers rely on consumption to signal and even construct self-identity and actively integrate relevant brands for self-definitional purposes. Yet, using brands or companies as extension of self comes with an important catch. When companies' images are at stake, from a risk avoidance perspective consumers may avoid dealing with organizations that can potentially jeopardize their status (Bruce, 2014). In addition, Seth et al. (2020) also showed that avoidance can be conveniently triggered by consumers' tendency to maintain status quo. Therefore, we speculate that issue contention among consumer groups may lead to consumers being less inclined to make purchase decisions to signal their values and satisfy their self-definitional needs when interacting with brands.

H2. : Issue contention lowers consumers' value-based purchase decisions.

To further confirm that issue contentions affect consumers' symbolic interactions related to corporate social values, we expect that issue contentions not only affect consumers' value-based purchase decisions, but also their perceived identity similarity to the organization. Identity similarity is an integral part of feeling close and related to an organization, which provides a foundation for company-consumer identification (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Identity similarity connotes that individuals feel the organization is able to represent who they are and what they stand for (Berger & Heath, 2007). Many CSR activities aim to establish a unique and distinct corporate identity that helps the organization connect with various stakeholders (Chernev & Blair, 2015; Marin & Ruiz, 2007; Xu, 2020). To further test the notion that consumers may adopt an avoidance-based approach when issue contentions arise, an additional hypothesis is proposed, where consumers refrain from extending their identity to an organization, which is reflected in lower perception of identity similarity with an organization, regardless of what the organization stands for. The development of this hypothesis is in line with the logic presented for H2, as consumers become less likely to extend themselves through companies for validation when they face ideological challenges.

H3. : Issue contentions decrease consumers' perceived identity similarity to an organization, regardless of the organization's CSR activities.

Many previous studies have attested that CSR increases consumers' actual purchase intention and bring financial benefits to companies (see a recent meta-analysis by Zasuwa, 2017). However, it is unclear whether issue contentions can alter consumers' actual purchase intention based on companies' CSR activities. If we follow the assumption that issue contentions prompt consumers to avoid interacting with at-risk organizations and companies, their purchase intention involving the organization may also be affected.

H4**:** Issue contentions decrease consumers' actual purchase intention with the company.

3. Study I

In the first study, a fictitious tech company was used, and we chose to use the environment as the issue context. This issue context was chosen because environmental CSR and environmental issues are one of the most popular CSR activities (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011). In addition, environmental issues are contentious but not as contentious as other political issues. Therefore, if significant effects were detected in this issue context, they may also be held valid in other contexts. As a result, we followed a 3 (contention, no contention, control) x 3 (environmental CSR presence, environmental CSR absence, and control) between-subjects experimental design. Inspired by the approach in Florack et al. (2003) and value conflict research (Kouzakova et al., 2012), issue contention was made salient by asking participants to recall a moment and write a paragraph about the experience where their viewpoints on environmental issues were challenged. The non-contention group was asked to discuss their thoughts on environmental issues, without being prompted to think about the other viewpoints. No prompt was given to the control group at all.

For the organization's CSR, a fictitious tech company was used and the company offers cloud storage service. In the environmental CSR condition, participants were asked to read a press release discussing the organization's goal and efforts to fully convert all its energy to renewable sources by 2024. In the other condition, to maintain the same length, a press release on why it is not yet possible to convert all its energy to renewable sources was provided for the participants. The two press releases were constructed similarly. The control group was presented with the first paragraph from the press release as company facts to only give participants some background information on the fictitious company. The stimuli can be found in Appendix A in the supplemental materials.

3.1. Participants

Participants were recruited on MTurk and paid 1.5 dollars to participate in the study. After deleting participants who did not pass the attention checks, a sample of 339 participants was retained. Among these participants, 185 were males, 147 of them were females, and 7 did not answer. The majority of the participants self-identified as white/Caucasian (n = 272), 32 participants self-identified as Black/African American, 15 as Hispanic or Latino, 6 as Native American or Alaska Native, 23 as Asian, and 3 as Other. Participants were allowed to choose multiple categories. The average age of the sample was 35.10 (SD = 10.63).

3.2. Measures

Vocalization was measured based on a modified scale of information forwarding, one of the most active communicative behaviors regarding an issue exhibited by publics that requires the greatest agency (see Kim & Grunig, 2011). As noted in their study, information sharing is less active compared to information forwarding, given that sharing connotes reactions to other people's comments and information forwarding is "to disseminate his or her problem perception and preferred way of problem solving to other communicators" (p. 127) on a voluntary basis. Information forwarding therefore suggests how vocal and comfortable the individuals are with their position and reflects how likely an individual is to make his or her thoughts and opinions heard, consistent with the study's purpose to test whether consumers' agency is affected. A total of 7 items on a Likert scale of 1–7 (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree) were used to measure how vocal participants were in terms of their opinions (Cronbach's alpha =.83, M = 5.35, SD = 1.03).

Value-based purchase decisions were measured based on a scale of the green consumption values (Haws et al., 2014). Example items included, "I will use my buying power to let the company know how I feel," "I will show how I feel about environmental issues through

whether I support or oppose the company," "My values and beliefs are definitely a consideration when making a purchase decision involving the company," and "Whether I support or boycott the company is an important reflection of how I feel about environmental issues." The average on these items was taken to represent a consumer's value-based purchase decisions, Cronbach's alpha = .96, $M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.54$.

Purchase intention was measured using the existing items from Coombs and Holladay (2007) and Lin et al. (2011) with three items on a 7-point Likert scale. The average on these items was taken, Cronbach's alpha = .84, $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.53$.

Identity similarity was measured following Bhattacharya and Sen (2003). Five items on a 7-point Likert-scale were used (Cronbach's alpha =.95, $M = 4.52$, $SD = 1.69$).

Given that the study context is based on environmental CSR, a person's degree of *environmentalism* was measured and used as a covariate, based on the scale developed by Whitmarsh and O'Neill (2010). This scale measured a person's environmental ideology on two dimensions: concerns about environment/environmental issues and self-identity as an environmentalist. A total of 12 items on a 7-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) were used. The average of all 12 items was used for each participant's environmentalism (Cronbach's alpha =.96, $M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.39$). All items are included in Appendix B.

3.3. Manipulation check

To test whether issue contention was successfully manipulated between the contentious group and non-contentious group, we asked the participants after they provided their responses whether they felt that their beliefs were under attack, $F(1, 226) = 127.45$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .361$, that people have very different beliefs when it comes to environmental issues, $F(1, 226) = 126.16$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .358$, and whether their values were threatened $F(1, 226) = 53.29$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .19$. The results indicate successful manipulation. Note that participants in the control group were not asked to respond to such questions because asking their opinions on environmental issues itself would be considered priming and counter the purpose of the control group. (Table 1).

4. Study I results and discussion

Regression models were fitted and the results are shown in Table 2 and Fig. 2. H1 predicted that issue contention would increase consumers' willingness to vocally express their opinions. An omnibus F-test showed that consumers were more likely to vocalize their opinions under issue contention, $F(2, 289) = 3.41$, $p = .034$. The omnibus F test showed a non-significant interaction effect, $F(4, 289) = 2.25$, $p = .064$. Post-hoc analysis showed that the issue contention group was only significantly different from the control group, not from the group where participants were asked to reveal their viewpoints. The study results suggest that they were as much likely to express and vocalize their opinions as when they were directly asked so, and that issue contention did not lower their willingness to express their opinions. H1 was partially supported.

H2 predicted that issue contention would lower consumers' value-based purchase decisions. The results indicate that consumers were less inclined to making value-based purchase decisions involving the organization when they face contention, $F(2, 324) = 4.31$, $p = .014$, compared to both the control group and the non-contention group. H2 was supported. Not surprisingly, environmental CSR had a positive effect on consumers' value-based purchase decisions, $F(2, 324) = 7.05$, $p = .001$. The interaction effect was not significant, $F(4, 324) = 0.54$, $p = .71$.

The results for identity similarity were in line with the results for value-based purchase decisions. Issue contention had a negative effect on making consumers feel similar to the company, regardless of its CSR status, $F(2, 324) = 4.93$, $p = .0078$. The enactment of environmental CSR indeed led to increased perceived identity similarity among consumers, $F(2, 324) = 9.52$, $p < .001$, meaning that consumers in general were likely to perceive organizations that are environmentally conscious more reflective of their values. Such results supported H3. The interaction effect was not significant, $F(4, 324) = 1.42$, $p = .23$.

Finally, for actual purchase intention, only the effect of environmental CSR was significant, $F(2, 324) = 5.71$, $p = .0036$. Issue contention's effect on purchase intention was not significant, $F(2, 324) = 2.62$, $p = .074$, neither was the interaction effect, $F(4, 324) = 1.03$, $p = .39$. H4, which predicted issue contention would lower purchase intention, was not supported. This indicates that consumers' actual purchase decisions may be a separate process from value-based decisions. We further discuss this result in the following discussions section.

Table 1
Study I Regression results.

	Vocalizing Opinions	Value-Based Purchase Decisions	Identity Similarity	Purchase Likelihood
Issue Contention				
No Contention	0.443*	0.149	-0.000513	0.0101
	(0.213)	(0.305)	(0.338)	(0.318)
Contention	0.515*	-0.680*	-0.911**	-0.620
	(0.211)	(0.308)	(0.341)	(0.321)
CSR				
CSR Presence	0.222	1.152***	1.487***	1.091***
	(0.222)	(0.311)	(0.345)	(0.325)
Control	0.373	0.418	0.563	0.454
	(0.215)	(0.309)	(0.343)	(0.323)
Issue Contention x CSR Interaction				
No Contention x CSR Presence	-0.394	0.100	0.200	0.412
	(0.300)	(0.427)	(0.473)	(0.445)
No Contention x CSR Control	-0.369	-0.205	0.0747	-0.111
	(0.303)	(0.433)	(0.479)	(0.451)
Contention x CSR Presence	-0.00618	0.507	1.054*	0.827
	(0.305)	(0.436)	(0.483)	(0.455)
Contention x CSR Control	-0.644*	-0.00308	0.344	0.126
	(0.298)	(0.434)	(0.481)	(0.453)
Environmentalism	0.402***	0.388***	0.210***	0.166**
	(0.0358)	(0.0519)	(0.0575)	(0.0542)
Constant	4.992***	3.445***	3.946***	3.741***
	(0.155)	(0.222)	(0.246)	(0.231)
R-squared	0.333	0.299	0.283	0.222

Note. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$ Standard errors in parentheses. Control group in issue contention and CSR absence group were used as reference groups. Though certain individual coefficients in issue contention x CSR interaction were significant, all F-tests of the interaction effects indicated non-significant results.

4.1. Polarizing effect of issue contention

In the previous regression models, we treated a person's environmentalism as a control variable. Here we further tested how it interacted with issue contention and environmental CSR on these outcome variables, and namely how the effects of envrionmentalism might be moderated by issue contention or CSR practice. As a result, in the subsequent regression models, we included two-way interactions of environmentalism and issue contention; environmentalism and CSR; and the three-way interaction of all three variables.

As shown in Table 2, results from these regression models indicated that three-way interactions were all significant, except for the outcome variable vocalizing opinions. We plotted the effects (coefficients) of environmentalism on value-based purchase decisions, perceived identity similarity, and purchase intention in Fig. 1 to show how the effects of environmentalism on these outcome variables were moderated across issue contention and CSR experimental groups. The main focus in the figure should be given to the solid blue line (CSR presence) and the solid

Table 2
Study I regression models including three-way interaction of issue contention, CSR, and individual environmentalism.

	Vocalizing Opinions	Value-Based Purchase Decisions	Identity Similarity	Purchase Intention
Issue Contention				
No contention	0.400	0.168	0.0951	0.0546
	(0.216)	(0.296)	(0.313)	(0.302)
Contention	0.501*	-0.561	-0.643*	-0.430
	(0.213)	(0.299)	(0.316)	(0.305)
CSR				
Environmental CSR	0.198	1.167***	1.587***	1.149***
	(0.224)	(0.302)	(0.319)	(0.307)
Control	0.347	0.421	0.653*	0.500
	(0.217)	(0.300)	(0.317)	(0.306)
CSR x Issue Contention interaction (Omitted, non-significant)				
Environmentalism	0.490***	0.338*	-0.101	-0.0166
	(0.106)	(0.147)	(0.156)	(0.150)
Issue Contention x Environmentalism Interaction				
No Contention x Environmentalism	-0.220	0.118	0.137	-0.174
	(0.163)	(0.224)	(0.237)	(0.228)
Contention x Environmentalism	-0.164	-0.564**	-0.676**	-0.593**
	(0.151)	(0.212)	(0.224)	(0.216)
CSR x Environmentalism Interaction				
CSR x Environmentalism	-0.0168	0.266	0.725**	0.502*
	(0.155)	(0.217)	(0.230)	(0.221)
CSR control x Environmentalism	-0.0581	0.341	0.606**	0.531*
	(0.150)	(0.205)	(0.217)	(0.209)
Three-way interaction (Issue Contention x CSR x Environmentalism)				
No Contention x CSR x Environmentalism	0.286	-0.287	-0.448	-0.294
	(0.223)	(0.311)	(0.329)	(0.317)
No Contention x Control x Environmentalism	0.196	-0.695*	-0.534	-0.200
	(0.222)	(0.306)	(0.323)	(0.312)
Contention x CSR x Environmentalism	-0.0512	0.691*	0.788*	0.696*
	(0.209)	(0.291)	(0.308)	(0.296)
Contention x CSR control x Environmentalism	0.192	-0.0544	0.225	0.359
	(0.224)	(0.313)	(0.331)	(0.319)
Constant	5.014***	3.429***	3.842***	3.680***
	(0.157)	(0.217)	(0.230)	(0.222)
R-squared	0.350	0.374	0.415	0.335

Note. Three-way interaction F-test: $F(4, 281) = 1.08$, $p = .36$ for vocalizing opinions, $F(4, 316) = 4.16$, $p = .0027$ for value-based purchase decisions, $F(4, 316) = 4.40$, $p = .0018$ for identity similarity, $F(4, 316) = 2.97$, $p = 0.020$ for purchase intention.

black line (CSR absence), and one can identify the moderating effect along the x-axis from no issue contention (the mid-point) to issue contention (the end point). When there was no issue contention, the effects of environmentalism on these outcome variables did not differ that much, whether CSR was present or not. However, when there was issue contention, the gap between the two effects of a person's environmentalism on outcome variables widened. In other words, issue contention polarized the effect of environmentalism on outcome variables, where people who were more environmentalist further supported companies that connected to their values and alienated those that do not.

5. Study I discussion

The results of the study indicate that issue contention does not affect consumers' agency and comfort in their own viewpoints, regardless of the organization's CSR stance. Yet, issue contention alters consumers' value-based purchase decisions. More specifically, issue contention makes consumers less likely to make purchase decisions based on their viewpoints and beliefs. Given that conflicting values do not affect consumers' agency and comfort in vocalizing their opinions, we argue that conflicting values are likely to prompt individuals to mobilize around already established values and beliefs while avoiding external organizations that may negatively interfere with their identity and opinion signaling. Such results are consistent with previous studies' finding that consumers typically adopt an avoidance approach (Bruce, 2014).

Value-based purchase decisions and perceived identity similarity with the organization are similar concepts in the sense that they are both symbolic gestures that are separate from consumers' direct experience such as price and products and services quality. The presence of contention did not directly alter actual purchase intention. Given such results, consumers' actual purchase intention can be driven by factors outside the company's CSR dimension. Though the current investigation explored only whether CSR and issue contention had direct impact on purchase intention, future studies can examine and even isolate the effects of these symbolic interactions on actual purchase intention through studying mediating variables.

6. Study II

We further replicated the results in Study I using a real-life scenario. In the second study, we first asked participants to read the memo (condensed) sent out by Walmart's CEO regarding the company's decisions to reduce ammunition sales and ban concealed carrying at all Walmart and Sam's Club stores nationwide. We then asked the participants to write down one or two sentences on how they think about the decision and indicate their attitude by choosing whether they are supportive, neutral, or against the decision. The open-ended question also served as an attention check and quality control measure. Responses with non-sensical answers to this question were filtered out.

We then manipulated issue contention by having two fictitious newspaper articles. Issue contention was manipulated slightly differently from the first study. In the first study, contention was manipulated directly onto individuals, while Study II on the organization. This on one hand was to triangulate our results, and on the other hand was to accurately proximate consumers' real experience, as few may experience issue contention more directly in real life. However, the essence of the manipulation in Study II was the same with Study I, which was to make contention (or more specifically opposition to ideas and opinions) more salient.

One article described a gun rights nonprofit organization's opposition to Walmart's decision and calling for a boycott, along with a quote of a fictitious Twitter user's tweet to represent an opposing sentiment. Therefore, participants who were in favor of the Walmart's decision faced issue contention when they were assigned to read this article. To maintain the same length, the other article described a gun safety nonprofit organization's applause of Walmart's decision and calling for consumers' show of support, along with a quote from the same fictitious Twitter user's tweet to encourage people to support Walmart's decision. Participants who were against the decision by Walmart faced issue contention when they were assigned to read this article. The stimuli are included in Appendix A as supplemental materials. Given that participants who were indifferent about the decision were not likely to be affected by either article, we did not include them in the final dataset for analysis ($n = 46$). As a result, the study followed a 2 (in favor vs. oppose) x 2 (contention vs. no contention) experimental design.

6.1. Participants

Participants for the main study were recruited on MTurk. Quality filters (the number of HITs more than 500, approval rate greater than 98% and based in the U.S.) were in place. After deleting participants

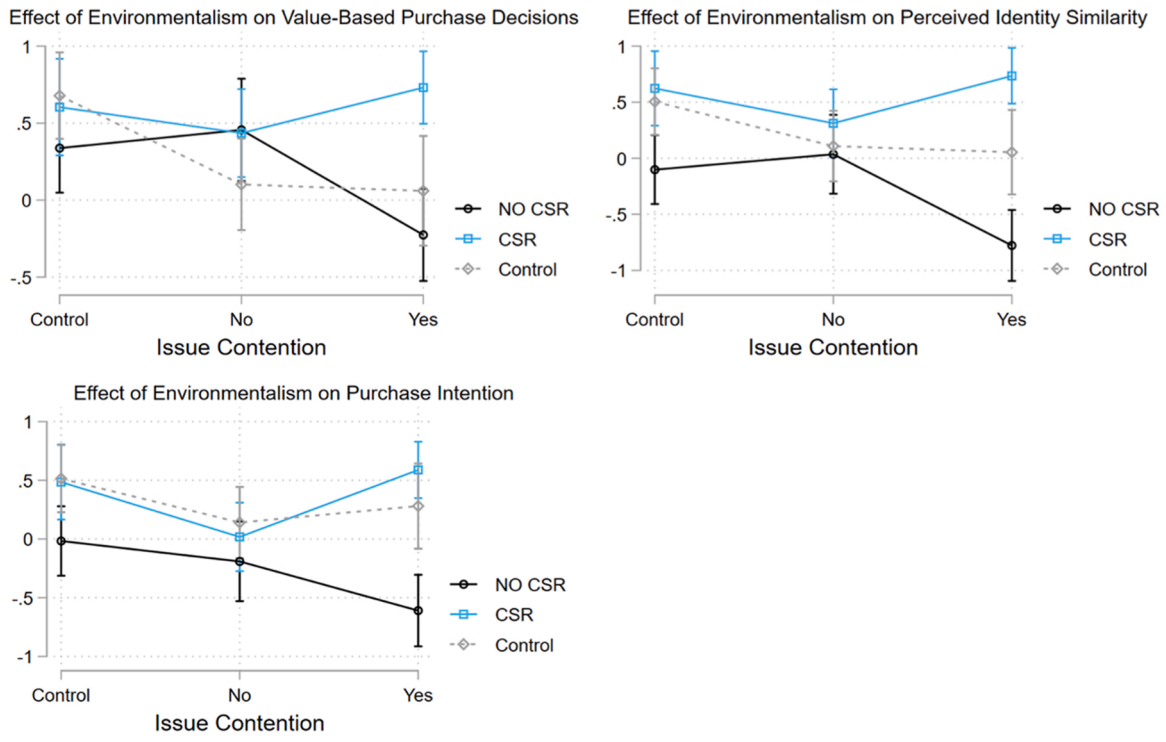

Fig. 1. Effects of personal environmentalism on outcome variables by issue contention and by CSR. Note. The dot is the effect (coefficient) of environmentalism on the outcome variable by CSR and issue contention groups.

who did not pass the attention checks in the study, a sample of 293 participants was retained ($n_{contention} = 148$, $n_{\text{no contention}} = 145$; $n_{\text{support}} = 203$, $n_{\text{neutral}} = 46$, $n_{\text{against}} = 44$; $M_{\text{age}} = 40.77$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13.01$; $n_{\text{female}} = 144$, $n_{\text{male}} = 148$; $n = 236$ White/Caucasian, $n = 28$ Black/African American, $n = 16$ Latino/Hispanic, $n = 22$ Asian/Asian American, $n = 3$ Native American, $n = 4$ Other). Note that as mentioned in the last section, given that the newspaper articles were not able to manipulate indifferent consumers' issue contention, we did not include their responses (n = 247 for final analysis).

6.2. Measures

Vocalizing opinions (Cronbach' alpha =.94, $M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.43$), *value-based purchase decisions* (Cronbach's alpha =.96, $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.73$), and *purchase intention* (Cronbach's alpha =.90, $M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.62$) were all measured using the same items as in Study I. In addition, similar to Study I, given that gun issues are related to political ideology, we measured participants' political viewpoints by using the well-established *conservatism* scale by Eaves et al. (1997). The scale has 28 items covering a variety of concepts such as "immigration," "death penalty (reversely coded)," "pacifism," "Republicans (reversely coded)," "Democrats," "federal housing" and "abortion" on a 3-point scale (Yes = 1, Maybe = 2, No = 3). The sum of the scores on all 28 items was used to measure political ideology ($M = 48.38$, $SD = 9.61$). This scale highly correlated with the self-reported political ideology scale (from 0 extremely liberal/left-leaning to 10 extremely conservative/right-leaning), $r = .76$.

7. Study II results

ANCOVA was conducted and Type III sum of errors were utilized for the unbalanced design of the current study. Cell means, counts, and standard deviations can be found in Appendix C. Given the unbalanced design, we paid particular attention to whether the homogeneity of variance assumption was satisfied. The assumption was met for vocalizing opinions, Levene's test $F(3, 243) = 0.46$, $p = .71$, value-based purchase decision, Levene's test $F(3, 243) = 1.40$, $p = .24$, but not for purchase intention, Levene's test $F(3, 243) = 3.91$, $p < .01$. Purchase intention was highly left skewed, and after we transformed the variable by taking $\lambda = 2$ in Box-Cox transformation, the transformed variable met the homogeneity assumption, Levene's test $F(3, 243) = 0.47$, $p = .71$.[1]

As shown in Table 3, for vocalizing opinions, an ANCOVA model with political conservatism as a covariate was significant $F(4, 242) = 6.77$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .057$ and showed a significant main effect of issue contention, $F(1, 242) = 4.41$, $p = 0.037$, $M = 5.06$ in contention group compared to $M = 4.63$ in the non-contention group. The main effect of attitude regarding Walmart's decisions and the interaction effect of attitude and issue contention were not significant. Consumers were

Table 3
Results in Study II.

Effect	*df*	*F*	*p*	η^2
Differences in vocalizing opinion				
Attitude	1, 242	1.00	0.32	–
Contention	1, 242	4.41*	0.037	0.018
Attitude x Contention	1, 242	0.23	0.80	–
Differences in value-based purchase decisions				
Attitude	1, 242	1.05	0.31	–
Contention	1, 242	4.81*	0.029	0.019
Attitude x Contention	1, 242	0.09	0.77	–
Differences in purchase intention				
Attitude	1, 242	31.93***	<0.001	0.12
Contention	1, 242	< 0.01	0.999	–
Attitude x Contention	1, 242	0.01	0.92	–

Note. All models included political conservatism as a covariate.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$

[1] The study result remained the same regardless of transformation, but the transformed variable was able to meet the homogeneity of variance assumption of ANOVA, which made the result unbiased.

more likely to express their opinions when conflicting values were present, supporting H1. This lends further support to the result in Study I, and the main effect is shown in Fig. 2.

For value-based purchase decisions, an ANCOVA model with political conservatism as a covariate showed a significant model, $F(4, 242) = 2.73$, $p = 0.030$, $R^2 = 0.043$. As Table 3 shows, contention significantly lowered consumers' value-based purchase decisions, $F(1, 242) = 4.81$, $p = 0.029$, $M = 3.81$ in the contention group compared to $M = 4.46$ in the non-contention group. Neither the main effect of attitude nor the interaction effect was significant. The results further supported H2 in Study I. The main effect of contention on value-based purchase decisions is shown in Fig. 2.

Finally, for actual purchase intention, $F(4, 242) = 9.56$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.14$, only consumers' attitude with Walmart's decisions played a significant role, as shown in Table 3 and Fig. 2, $F(1, 242) = 31.91$, $p < 0.001$, $M = 31.1$ for people who supported the decisions and $M = 16.98$ for those who did not. Neither issue contention nor the interaction effect was significant. The results in Study II further confirmed those in Study I, where issue contention did not play a significant role in altering consumers' actual purchase intention.

8. Study II discussion

Study II results confirmed all the major findings in the first study. More specifically, issue contention does not lower consumers' agency in affirming and expressing their opinions and beliefs. However, it prompted consumers to avoid interacting and dealing with a company based on their values (i.e. their symbolic interactions), regardless of their attitude about companies' stance or CSR activities. However, the effect of issue contention did not extend to their actual purchase intention, which in the study was only affected by consumers' attitude. In short, the same finding that consumers showed restraint when it comes to using companies as a conduit to express their values and viewpoints when issue contention arises, and that actual intention was less affected provides more convincing evidence that (1) issue contention affects consumers when it comes to how they interact with companies in values-based and beliefs-based dimensions, and that (2) actual purchase intention is influenced by factors beyond consumers' beliefs and values alone. Given that it was tested in the context of a real-life event, the second study as a robustness check provided more confidence in the experimental results in Study I.

9. General discussion and implications

9.1. Symbolic avoidance when dealing with contentions

In today's society, many issues are politicized and polarized. Corporations face pressure to speak out about social and political issues. This project attempts to address the question of how consumers react to a company's CSR initiatives when contentions arise. Results based on two studies suggest that issue contention affects actual purchase decision and value-based purchase decisions in different ways. More specifically, issue contentions make consumers less likely to engage with organizations based on their values and beliefs (as demonstrated by the negative main effect of issue contention on value-based purchase decisions in both studies and perceived identity similarity). Past research indicates that consumers relate to companies to advance their self-definitional needs (Bhattacharjee et al., 2014; Belk, 2013; Xu, 2020), but this process is conditional upon how contested individuals feel about the issue. Given that exposure to contentions does not negatively affect individuals' willingness to vocalize their opinions in both studies, we suggest that symbolic avoidance happens not because consumers lack agency or confidence in their own opinions, but because they avoid the possibility of using an organization as a conduit to express or validate their beliefs.

In other words, consumers may still interact with the company based on companies' transactional value (i.e., quality of service and products) and actual corporate ability (Tao, 2018), but the effects of companies' value signaling through CSR and engagement on certain issues may diminish and consumers refrain from signaling their own values and

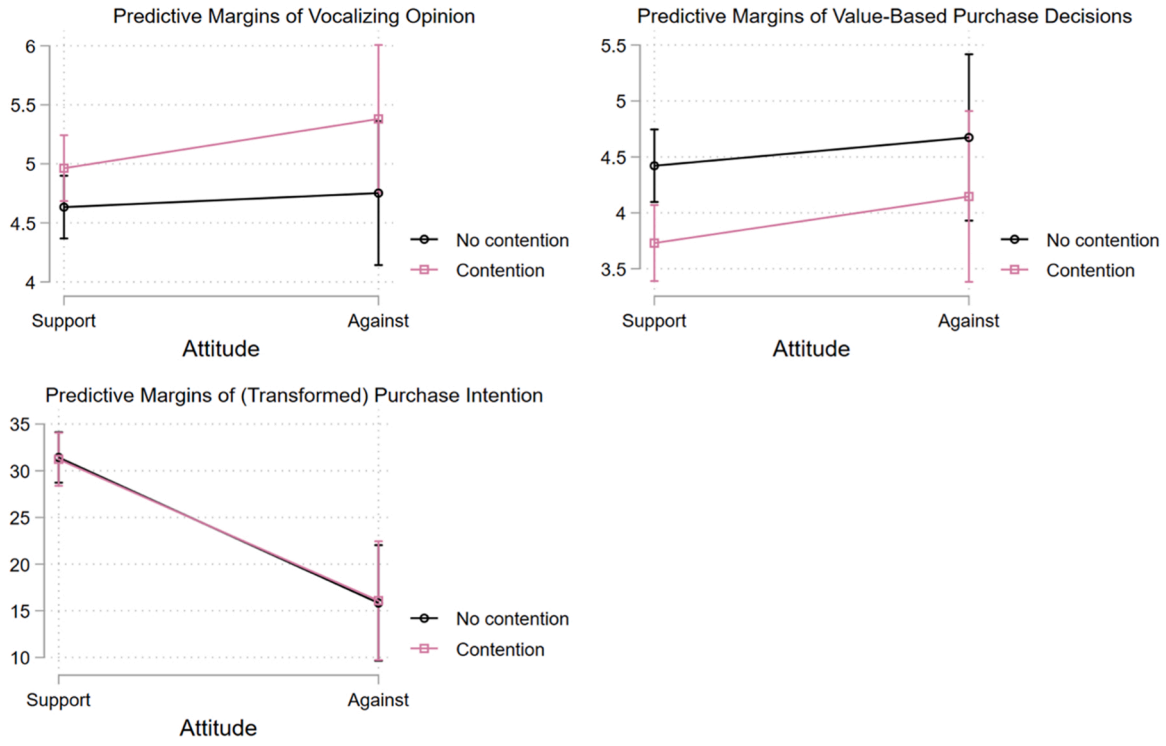

Fig. 2. Study II predictive margins of outcome variables by attitude and issue contention. *Note.* All interaction effects were not significant but accounted for in the graph when calculating the predictive margins.

identity through interacting with the company. Such avoidance tendency when facing issue contentions is compatible with intergroup threat research. Intergroup threat motivates individuals to increase group cohesion and further alienate outgroup members (Halabi et al., 2008; Riek et al., 2006; Stephan et al., 2009). Issue contentions, resembling symbolic threats, prompt the consumers to shift their priority. Contrary to previous research suggesting that consumers rely on companies, brands, or products to serve their self-definitional needs (c.f. Bhattacharjee et al., 2014; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003), the study results provide a key exception: when their values or identities are challenged, they are less likely to use companies as conduits for such purposes and are cautious when it comes to consuming for identity and value validation. The results overall strongly suggest that intergroup dynamics are important to consider in the context of consumers' consumption and symbolic interactions.

9.2. Moving beyond an isolated, singular approach to organization-public interactions

Research has established that consumers' identity and values play an important role in consumption (Lee & Shin, 2010; Overton et al., 2021; Romani et al., 2016). It makes intuitive sense that issue contentions, when in essence a challenge and symbolic threat to individuals' beliefs and values, can alter individuals' actions. Particularly, the lowered value-based purchase decisions of consumers when facing issue contentions, and the potential moderating role of issue contention on the effects of a person's environmentalism on how they symbolically interact with an organization call for much-needed attention in the current approaches in public relations research.

Research often isolates a particular consumer group based on their personality traits or identity to understand their connections to organizations. Involving issue contention is an attempt to understand how dynamics within consumer groups can affect consumers' interactions with a company. Such insights extend to organization-public relationships research that currently overwhelmingly focuses on studying the effects of companies' or organizations' initiatives on one targeted group or public. Many public relations scholars have already argued that research on organization-public relationship and interactions need to move beyond a dyadic approach (Heath, 2013; Iannacone, 2021; Xu, 2020; Yang & Taylor, 2015). The study results provide further evidence that a particular public's action taking and intentions are influenced by complex inter-organizational and inter-publics dynamics. Theoretically speaking, the study results point to a promising direction of using social identities and social groups to further unpack the nature of organization-publics relationships and the potential outcomes of companies' CSR and CSA efforts. An identity-based model of OPRs that can greatly complement the current conceptualization and understandings of how groups of people feel connected to organizations.

9.3. Symbolic interactions as a separate process

The study results also reveal that issue contentions may not translate directly to lowered purchase intention or financial consequences. Previous research suggests that perceived value fit and perceived motives are among the most important indicators of consumers' purchase intention when consumers are made aware of a company's CSR initiatives (Barone et al., 2000; Romani et al., 2016). Therefore, consumers' actual purchase intention may be more affected by their direct interpretation of the CSR initiatives, compared to peripheral factors such as issue contention. Furthermore, the dual process model of consumers' decision making (see David et al., 2005) indicates that consumers evaluate a company based on two dimensions: exchange and citizenship dimensions. Even though purchase intention can be influenced by both, issue contention should mostly affect consumers' decision-making process associated with the citizenship dimension instead of the exchange intention that is based on companies' utilities such as the quality of the product or the price. In other words, it is not to negate that value-based purchase decisions can still lead to changes in purchase intention, but issue contentions may only affect value-based purchase decisions (in the citizenship dimension noted in the model related to corporate social values) and overall issue contentions' effects may not extend to consumers' actual purchase intention (that may be more affected by the exchange dimension determined by utilities and domain expertise). It warrants further research to "decouple" the dynamics of influences of issue contentions in these two dimensions of companies' activities.

However, the significant three-way interaction effects in Study I indicated that the effect difference of environmentalism between CSR presence and CSR absence group became greater when issue contention arises. The results suggest that though individuals avoid interacting symbolically based on their values and beliefs in general with organizations when such values and beliefs are challenged, their sense of agency is not affected and they tend to withdraw even more from organizations that do not support their beliefs. This avoidance in general, alienation in particular tendency that consumers take to approach an organization when their viewpoints are contested warrants further attention in research on CSR.

10. Limitations and directions for future research

There are several limitations to the current investigation. First, the current study limits its scope to U.S. consumers, and the polarization of gun control issues and environmental issues may be unique to the U.S. context. Future research can test whether the same avoidance-based pattern exists in other country or issue contexts. Another limitation is related to its methodological approach. Although experimental research design has the strength of inferring causality among testing variables, items are all self-reported by the participants. We recommend future research conducts experiments based on direct observation, which can provide more reliable results. In addition, we used opinion vocalization, more specifically information forwarding, as a proxy variable to understand whether individuals' agency was affected. Other related variables should be tested in future studies to further confirm the results. Finally, issue contention can be operationalized in a variety of different ways. The current study operationalized it as competition of ideas, and the first study manipulated contention by priming participants to think about related experiences (more related to interpersonal contexts), which may not be perfect to examine how contention affects consumers' agency in other settings. Studies that adopt other ways to operationalize this concept, particularly through direct observation, can greatly enhance the external validity of the experimental design.

Conflicts of interests statement

We, Sifan Xu and Moonhee Cho, authors of the manuscript titled *Issue Contention and Consumers' Reactions to Corporate Social Responsibility: Challenging the Dyadic Assumptions, confirm that we have no conflict of interests to disclose. The authors have no affiliation with any organization with a direct or indirect financial interest in the subject matter discussed in the manuscript.*

Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102274.

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Sifan Xu (University of Maryland, Ph.D.) is an assistant professor in the School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His research focuses on the role of social identity/identification in socially mediated contexts and crisis/risk communication. In particular, he is interested in how individuals' social identities and identification manifest into publics' perception of CSR initiatives and social media discourses.

Moonhee Cho (University of Florida, Ph.D.) is an associate professor in the School of Advertising and Public Relations at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Her primary research focuses on organization-public relationships and engagement, nonprofit public relations, social movement, and strategic use of social/digital media.