

The Effects of an Existing Attitude Toward a Company and an Issue Stance on Perceptions of a Corporate Social Advocacy Campaign

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Background: The corporate activism of taking public stances on controversial sociopolitical issues to engage with publics and gain legitimacy is referred to as corporate social advocacy (CSA). Some of the widely addressed issues include gun control, LGBTQ rights, and climate change, and these CSA campaigns have become increasingly common.



Why does it matter?

- The value of purpose-driven brands: Brands with a high sense of purpose have grown 2x faster than others (Kantar, 2018); academic research also has demonstrated CSA's value to companies (Dodd & Supa, 2014).
- Changing expectations of publics:
 - General public: 74% of people think CEOs should take the lead on change rather than waiting for government to impose it (Edelman, 2020).
 - Employees: 92% of employees said it was important that their employer's CEO speak out on social issues (Edelman, 2020).
 - Millennials & Gen-Zers prefer to do business with companies that take social and political stands they believe in (Kantar, 2018); 90% of Gen Z believes that companies must act to address social and environmental issues (Porter Novelli/Cone, 2019).

Rationales & Theoretical Framework

- Publics may not respond to CSA campaigns in the same way; understanding the varying effects of campaigns on different publics is crucial to developing a more strategic approach.
- Social judgment theory: people tend to accept or reject information based on their prior opinions/attitudes.
- CSA campaigns: prior opinion or attitudes—two components: attitude toward company and issue stance

Research Questions:

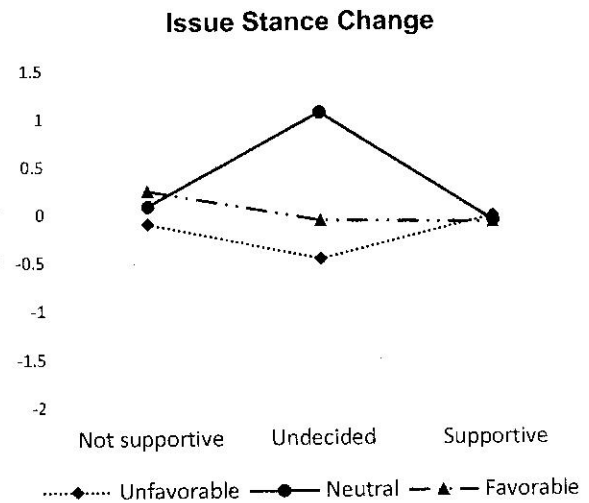
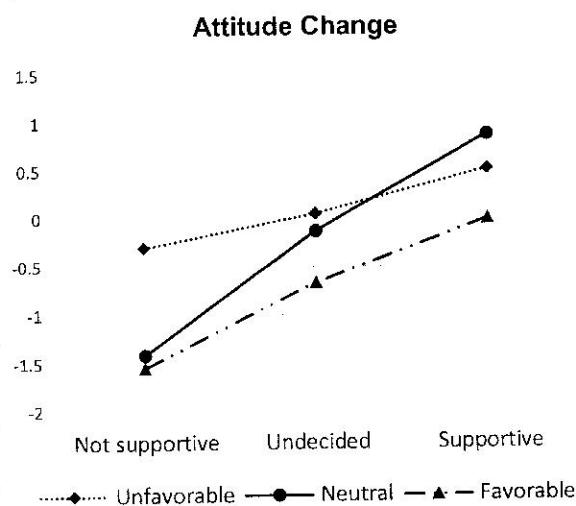
- **RQ1:** How do the public's prior attitude toward the company and their stance toward the controversial issue addressed by a CSA campaign influence their attitude change toward the company?
- **RQ2:** How do the public's prior attitude toward the company and their stance toward the controversial issue addressed by a CSA campaign influence their stance change toward the issue?

Method:

- A 3(prior attitude toward company: unfavorable, neutral, favorable) × 3(prior issue stance: supportive, undecided, supportive) between-subjects factorial design
- Online experiment via MTurk, $N = 505$
- A stimulus: a fictional news article about AT&T's support for gun control
- Measures: prior attitude toward company, prior issue stance, post attitude toward company, post issue stance
- Change in attitude/issue stance was calculated by subtracting prior attitude/issue from post attitude/issue.

Results:

		Issue Stance		
		Not Supportive	Undecided	Supportive
Prior Attitude Toward the Company	Unfavorable	Group 1 (<i>n</i> = 35)	Group 4 (<i>n</i> = 19)	Group 7 (<i>n</i> = 58)
	Neutral	Group 2 (<i>n</i> = 54)	Group 5 (<i>n</i> = 89)	Group 8 (<i>n</i> = 120)
	Favorable	Group 3 (<i>n</i> = 16)	Group 6 (<i>n</i> = 22)	Group 9 (<i>n</i> = 92)



Implications:

- There were significant interaction effects between prior attitude toward the company and prior issue stance on change in attitude toward the company and on change in issue stance.
- The neutral group in prior attitude toward the company at large had a greater latitude for acceptance of the company and the issue.
- Change in attitude toward the company:
 - The impact of prior issue stance was greater for the group with a neutral attitude toward the company than for the other groups.
 - Notably, the latitude for acceptance of the company was greatest when the prior issue stance was supportive, especially when the attitude toward the company was neutral.
- Change in issue stance:
 - The latitude for acceptance of the issue was greatest when the prior attitude toward the company was neutral and the prior issue stance was undecided.