

Feeling Threatened and Thinking of Actions? Examining Consumers' Responses to Corporate Social Advocacy Messages Through Intergroup Threat Perceptions

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Drawing from intergroup threat theory (ITT), this study examines how perceptions of intergroup threats influence counter-attitudinal corporate social advocacy (CSA) messages. A 2 (issue: abortion vs. same-sex marriage) × 2 (CSA position: pro vs. anti) × 2 (message: value-based CSA vs. action-based CSA) experiment was conducted online. The results suggested that action-based counter-attitudinal CSA messages reduced consumer-company identification (CCI) more so than value-based CSA messages did, primarily through perceived symbolic threat. Compared with value-based CSA messages, action-based CSA messages increased the intention to boycott and engage in discursive activities through perceived symbolic threats and realistic threats. The two intergroup threat perceptions also explained the influence of issue-related identification on reduced CCI and the intention to participate in two types of consumer activism. The findings extend the theoretical discussion of ITT research and have practical implications for organizations engaging in CSA efforts.

Keywords: intergroup threat theory, CSA, symbolic threat, realistic threat, social activism

Corporate social advocacy (CSA) is defined as “an organization making a public statement taking a public stance on social-political issues” (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 5). Unlike traditional organizations’ political activities, such as lobbies aimed at influencing government policies to benefit the organization’s own business, CSA focuses on an organization’s efforts to promote specific values or actions based on its position on a sociopolitical issue (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). CSA extends beyond corporate social responsibility (CSR) when supporting a social cause in that (1) the advocated issue does not need to connect to the company’s business, (2) it risks alienating stakeholders who do not share the company’s stance, and (3) there is a financial consequence for the company engaging in CSA (Dodd & Supa, 2014). For example, after *Roe v. Wade* was overturned in 2022, companies, including Amazon, Disney, and Apple, announced their support for reproductive health by offering to pay for employees’ out-of-state medical abortion costs. Although taking such a stance earned these companies positive media coverage, it increased the risk of

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being sued, especially in states that allowed private citizens to sue anyone who “aids and abets” a person in getting an abortion (Jeltsen, 2022, p. 7).

Although CSA can be initiated by executives’ unscripted remarks (Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoohi, & Bierman, 2016), it should be a planned initiative by the organization (Dodd & Supa, 2014) and involve more engagement than simply making explicit and public statements (Wettstein & Baur, 2016). Companies can use advertisements or spokespersons to express their sociopolitical ideologies. They can donate to support groups that take a stand on social and/or politically debated issues. They can also express their attitudes on social/political issues by implementing policies. Thus, CSA messages can consist of value-based statements and/or action-based statements.

Individuals identify with different groups in society, such as religion, ethnicity, or organizations where they work, and derive a sense of belonging and self-worth from these groups as part of their self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). These group memberships provide a framework for individuals to understand how to act and interpret interactions and relationships with those who share the core characteristics of their group (in-group) and those who do not (out-group). When group memberships are salient (Hornsey, 2008) and/or individuals’ identification with a group is strong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals tend to demonstrate in-group bias or favoritism, expressing more positive feelings, empathy, and willingness to help to in-group members than to out-group members. In situations where relevant out-groups are perceived to impose threats or intergroup relations are contested, in-group members may display out-group derogation or hostility (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

CSA presents a context in which group identities are made salient (e.g., Xu, 2020; Xu, Lee, & Rim, 2021), and counter-attitudinal CSAs may result in certain group identities being threatened. That is, by publicly announcing its position on a controversial social/political issue, an organization voluntarily participates in acrimonious debates with social groups that hold opposing viewpoints. Previous studies have suggested that social groups can originate from shared opinions around a social issue (Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Mason, 2015). Here, the corporation that issues counter-attitudinal CSAs may be viewed as an out-group, at least to those who hold opposing viewpoints on the issue, and such messages may elicit perceptions of group identity threats among the public on the other camp.

The current study explored whether exposure to a counter-attitudinal CSA message could elicit perceptions of threats, whether preexisting identifications with the corporate or with the issue-based groups were associated with the likelihood of such perceptions, and the three outcomes of intergroup threat perceptions. We hope this examination extends the utility of intergroup threat theory to a relatively new communication context, CSA, and helps public relations practitioners consider how these socio-psychological mechanisms may affect consumers’ purchasing behaviors and brand loyalty in contemporary society.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Intergroup Threat Theory

While many intergroup relations are positive and pleasant, hostile, or even antagonistic, intergroup relations are also common. They can have long-lasting detrimental impacts on members of these groups, leading

to negative emotions toward and negative appraisals of out-group members, as well as behaviors that undermine out-group members' well-being. Stephan and Stephan (2000) proposed intergroup threat theory (ITT) to explain negative intergroup relations from a threat perspective. According to the theory, "an intergroup threat is experienced when members of one group perceive that another group is in a position to cause them harm" (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; Stephan, Ybarra, & Morrison, 2009, p. 44). Threat perception does not have to be based on the actual existence of danger/challenges to an in-group's physical well-being or its values/moral standards by an out-group. It exists as long as people feel this way (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). For instance, members of a group may view immigrants as an imposing threat to their physical safety or believe that immigrants would change the in-group members' culture, even though there is no concrete evidence to support such claims. Stephan et al. (2009) outlined several situational (such as contact) and individual-level antecedents (such as in-group identification) that may predict perceptions of threats depending on specific intergroup dynamics. Thus, in the ITT framework, perceptions of threats play a mediating role in the relationship between antecedents and intergroup relations (i.e., responses to threats).

In this study, two types of threats are investigated: a concern about physical harm, loss of resources, and power, termed a realistic threat, and the perception of conflicting values, beliefs, morality, or worldview, which gives rise to a symbolic threat (Stephan, Ybarra, & Rios, 2015). Research indicates that perceptions of both symbolic and/or realistic threats are associated with negative intergroup attitudes/behaviors. They mediate relationships between antecedents (i.e., ethnicity and national identities; positive intergroup contact) and negative intergroup orientation (see Jelić, Uzelac, & Biruški, 2020 for ethnicity groups; Schmid, Hewstone, Küpper, Zick, & Tausch, 2014, for religious groups; Caricati, 2018, for immigrant groups). Strong in-group identifiers tend to perceive stronger realistic threats (Morrison & Ybarra, 2008) and/or symbolic threats (González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008), which are associated with prejudice or discriminatory behaviors toward out-groups. Perceptions of threats also explain the relationship between intergroup contact and prejudice. Negative contact increases perceptions of threats (Aberson, 2015), and positive contact decreases them (Schmid et al., 2014). Accordingly, realistic threats in this study are conceptualized as threats to members' physical well-being resulting from the company's CSA messages, whereas symbolic threats are conceptualized as perceived values that conflict with company-endorsed values.

Antecedents of Perceptions of Intergroup Threats

Situational Factor: CSA Message as a Form of Mediated Contact

Perceptions of threats may arise from face-to-face interactions (Aberson, 2015) or media contact (Seate & Mastro, 2016). This study focuses on mediated contact. Mediated contact is defined as instances in which in-group members are exposed to information about out-group members through the media (Joyce, 2017). Research suggests that media portrayals of social groups embody both realistic and symbolic threats (Seate & Mastro, 2016). The news media could depict minority groups as presenting realistic threats, such as by associating them with poverty (Romer, Jamieson & De Coteau, 1998) or as competitors for resources in society (Dixon & Williams, 2015). Media content can also prime audiences to perceive a group as imposing symbolic threats (Conway, Grabe, & Grieses, 2007). Thus, depending on what the media content emphasizes, perceptions of realistic and/or symbolic threats may be invoked (Rios, Sosa, & Osborn, 2018). For example, a message that described crime rates and economic opportunities elicited perceptions of

realistic threat (Duckitt & Fisher, 2003), whereas a message discussing society's declining morals/values increased the perception of symbolic threat (Brambilla & Butz, 2013). In this sense, mediated contact occurs when individuals are exposed to media content that contains threatening messages, which suggests negative intergroup encounters and encourages perceptions of threats (Seate & Mastro, 2016).

Likewise, exposure to a CSA message through media platforms can be considered a form of mediated contact. When this mediated contact involves a counter-attitudinal CSA message, those who hold an oppositional attitude and feel strongly about the issue may regard such a message as a negative intergroup encounter because the message makes group membership salient from the readers' perspective (Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010), and such messages appear threatening. Existing CSA practices have implied the elicitation of perceptions of both symbolic and realistic threats. For example, when Chick-fil-A made a public stance against same-sex marriage, it communicated its conservative values. People who support legalizing same-sex marriage or generally hold liberal values may view Chick-fil-A's CSA (mediated contact) as a counter-attitudinal message framed around value differences. Conflicts in values lie at the core of symbolic threats, which may be provoked as a result. Conversely, Hobby Lobby's refusal to cover its employees' reproductive healthcare could be viewed as a policy harmful to the physical well-being of certain female employees. Consequently, female employees who support reproductive healthcare may perceive their company's CSA as aligned with harmful actions. Perceptions of danger to personal safety are at the core of realistic threats and may be elicited accordingly.

Based on previous studies on mediated contact and intergroup threat perceptions (Joyce, 2017; Rios et al., 2018; Seate & Mastro, 2016), this study proposes that those who read a counter-attitudinal CSA message emphasizing harmful actions against their group may perceive more realistic threats compared with those who read a CSA message highlighting value differences between the two groups. Conversely, those who read a counter-attitudinal CSA message stressing value differences between the groups may perceive more symbolic threats compared with those who read a counter-attitudinal CSA message implying harmful actions.

H1: CSA message type (value-based vs. action-based) is associated with perceptions of threats. Exposure to a value-based message (vs. an action-based message) would be associated with (a) an increased perception of symbolic threat and (b) a decreased perception of realistic threat.

Individuals' Group Identification: Issue-Based and Preexisting Consumer-Corporate Identities

Issue-Based Identity

Stephan et al. (2015) adopted a social identity approach and argued that people perceive threats differently depending on the strength of their identification. Drawing from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), individuals think, act, or feel by group norms, especially when group membership is made salient. This tendency is more pronounced among highly committed group members. Since high identifiers' group membership is an important aspect of who they are, they are more sensitive to possible threats from out-groups motivated by self-protection (Stephan et al., 2015).

While the notion of “groups” traditionally represents social categories in society (e.g., nationality, religion), groups can also be formed around opinions regarding social issues (i.e., opinion-based groups; Mason, 2015). When individuals begin to perceive and define themselves according to the core values of these opinion-based groups (e.g., “I am a pro-life” or “I am an anti-vaccinationist”), identification with these groups becomes part of one’s sense of self and functions as another social identity in terms of its influence and functions (McGarty, Bliuc, Thomas, & Bongiorno, 2009). That is, intergroup differentiation and its subsequent emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral reactions toward in-group (i.e., those who support their views) and out-group members (i.e., those who oppose their views) play a role in how they perceive threats to their groups.

An example is Hartmann and Tanis’s (2013) study. To the best of our knowledge, this is the only study that has argued for issue-based identification from a social identity perspective in the context of pro-life/pro-choice issues. They found that a strong identification with the group that was pro-life/pro-choice was associated with individuals’ perceptions of hostile media bias. They argued that negative media coverage could pose a symbolic threat to highly involved people. Therefore, perceptions of threats may be particularly detrimental to high identifiers, who may, in turn, adopt defensive strategies to restore their collective self-esteem.

Thus, the following hypothesis was proposed:

H2: Issue-based identification is positively associated with perceptions of (a) symbolic threat, and (b) realistic threat when participants are exposed to a counter-attitudinal CSA.

Preexisting Consumer-Company Identification

Consumer-company identification (CCI) is defined as “the degree to which consumers feel a sense of connection to a company and the degree to which aspects of the perceived organizational identity are self-referential and self-defining” (Einwiller, Fedorikhin, Johnson, & Kamins, 2006, p. 186). When a company reflects characteristics that consumers consider central to their identity, it helps in the construction of self-identity (Underwood, Bond, & Baer, 2001), hence facilitating the formation of identification with the company. Bhattacharya and Sen (2003) contended that in the current era of extensive corporate influence and consumerism, companies have become appealing and significant targets for individuals to satisfy their self-definitional needs. Individuals tend to identify with a company whose expressed values align with their sense of self to form stable and cognitively consistent social identities across situations.

When consumers learn about a company’s policies or public statements that contradict their own beliefs or identities, they may engage in resistive actions, such as boycotting the product (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Thus, CCI could be understood as an extension of one’s value-based identity, which is oftentimes made salient through sociopolitical issues. CCI may be challenged when the company with which consumers identify releases messages that contradict the values of the issue-based groups with which consumers identify. In other words, people may experience identity incoherence because both identities do not align with each other. Glasford, Pratto, and Dovidio (2008) showed that individuals experience more psychological discomfort when an in-group violates their values than when it is an out-group that violates

their values. Consumers may acknowledge this psychological discomfort and try to resolve such conflict by disidentifying with the company (Zhang & Zhou, 2023). However, it is also possible that high identifiers may engage in motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) to think favorably of the company by acknowledging fewer threats posed by the company message to reduce the effect of incompatible identities.

If CCI can be conceptualized as one type of social identity (e.g., He, Li, & Harris, 2012), theoretical links can be made between CCI and perceptions of threats pursuing ITT. Strong issue-based identification may predict stronger perceptions of threats from the out-group. However, when threatening messages (i.e., counter-attitudinal CSA messages) are issued by a company that consumers identify with, the boundary between in and out-groups becomes more complex than traditionally discussed within an ITT framework. For this reason, the following research question is proposed:

RQ1: How does preexisting CCI interact with issue-based identification in influencing (a) perceived symbolic threat and (b) perceived realistic threat when participants are exposed to a counter-attitudinal CSA?

Responses to Perceived Threats in a CSA Context

Perceived threats may elicit cognitive, affective, or behavioral responses (Stephan et al., 2015). The current study focuses on three types of responses: postexposure CCI, intention to boycott the company, and intention to participate in discursive activities, as suggested by the literature (Dodd & Supa, 2014).

When consumers feel that their self-identity is threatened by the company, they may reduce their attachment and identification with the company to reduce perceptions of threats. A counter-attitudinal CSA message that is perceived to embody a company's core value and organizational mission can alienate consumers because value is a key comparative domain consumers use to assess their identification with a company (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Driven by the need to maintain a stable and consistent sense of self, consumers may choose to decrease their CCI to maintain their issue-based group identity.

Consumers may also respond to perceptions of threats by publicly expressing their dissatisfaction discursively or behaviorally. Boycotting is a common reaction consumers choose to assert their influence. American consumers reported boycotting certain products because of the social/political values of the company (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017). Those who had strong party identities tended to punish the brands that opposed their political party than they rewarded those that supported their party (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017). Additionally, consumers seek alternative ways to respond to perceived negative media influences, such as engaging in discursive activities to share information, network with others, or mobilize and organize collective actions (Zhang, 2023).

RQ2: Does perceived symbolic threat mediate counter-attitudinal CSA messages, issue-based identity, and the moderated effect of issue-based identification and preexisting CCI's effect on (a) identification with the company, (b) boycott intention, and (c) intention to participate in discursive activities?

RQ3: Does perceived realistic threat mediate situational intergroup contact (i.e., counter-attitudinal CSA message), issue-based identification and the moderated effect of issue-based identification, and preexisting CCI's effect on (a) identification with the company, (b) boycott intention, and (c) intention to participate in discursive activities?

Figure 1 demonstrates the conceptualization model.

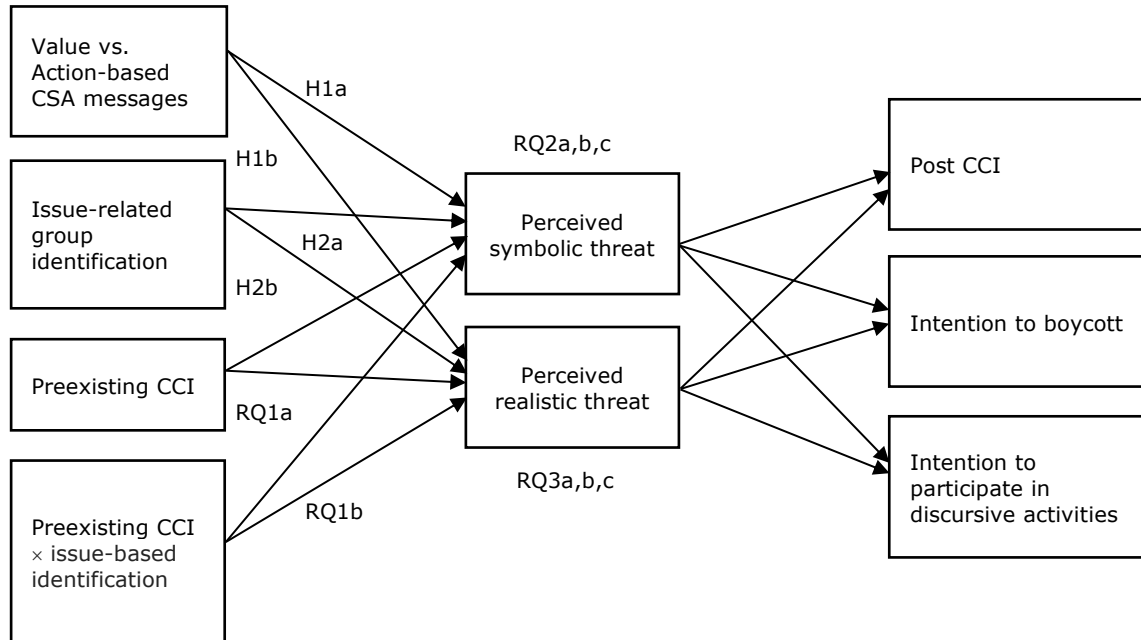


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

Method

Stimuli

Two long-lasting divisive sociopolitical issues in the United States (abortion and same-sex marriage) were selected. For each CSA message, two versions were created (i.e., pro-life/pro-choice; legalizing/against same-sex marriage). The manipulation of issue scenarios and CSA positions are not the variables of interest in this study. These conditions were created to improve the external validity of the results. The effects of scenario conditions (i.e., issues) and CSA positions (pro or against) were controlled for in the statistical analysis.

A CSA message emphasizes either the company's value (value-based CSA) or the actions the company takes to support a social drive (action-based CSA). In value-based messages, the CEO of a company takes a stance on an issue and cites the company's core values; however, no corporate actions are mentioned in the message. In the action-based messages, the CEO of the company does not mention

the corporate's values but announces concrete actions to express the company's support of a stance, such as making donations, promoting legislative efforts, or allowing employees to use paid volunteer time for political activism. Eight CSA messages, each message approximately 130 words in length, were created to look like news excerpts published in the *New York Times*.

Dunkin', a multinational coffee and donut company, was chosen as the CSA corporation in the experiment because (1) it enhanced the realism of the message and the likelihood of preexisting CCI, given its well-known brand status in the United States, and (2) Dunkin' had never taken a stance on either same-sex marriage or pro-life/pro-choice issue. Therefore, we could measure participants' preexisting identification with the brand that was not influenced by their knowledge of an existing CSA. The stimulus messages are attached in Appendix A.

Appendices are available at
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/14Bxd10a39DW7J6VL3EjJLdQ7wVPI2-4/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=108825437597959474339&rtpof=true&sd=true>

Procedure and Participants

The study was approved by the University Institutional Research Board in July 2021. Pilot tests were conducted using Amazon Mechanical Turk, a widely adopted survey-participant recruitment platform that provides better quality samples than student samples (Mason & Suri, 2012) from October 18 to October 23, 2021. The CSA messages were refined based on participants' answers to reading comprehension questions to ensure that the respondents recognized the manipulated conditions. For instance, the initial action-based CSA message supporting same-sex marriage said, "A portion of the profits from donuts sales goes to politicians who vote against LGBTQ people." It was changed to "Dunkin' will put money into legislative efforts, working in multiple states to fight against RFRA" because this version was better recognized by the pilot test participants as an action. To check participants' comprehension, a question was asked, "What content is explicitly included in Dunkin's statement?" The answers included "Dunkin' announced that the conservative value is at the core of what Dunkin' is about" and "Dunkin' will allocate funds to legislative efforts to promote laws to eliminate abortion."

The main study was conducted through Qualtrics's national market research panels from December 13 to December 30, 2021. Participants were first presented with a consent form and asked if they were older than 18 and resided in the United States. They were then queried about their recognition of Dunkin' as a company. If yes, their identification with the company was measured. Those who responded negatively were excluded from the study. Next, the participants were randomly assigned to one of the two issue groups (i.e., legalizing same-sex marriage and pro-life/pro-choice), and their attitudes toward the issue were measured with a categorical question (e.g., I support/am against abortion rights; I don't have an attitude on this issue). Participants who expressed a neutral attitude were thanked and excluded from the survey.

Next, participants were randomly assigned to view a CSA message from Dunkin' that advocated an opposing stance on the issue (abortion or same-sex marriage). Participants then responded to questions, including perceptions of threats, dependent variables (corporate identity, boycott intention, and discursive

activities), and demographic variables. Participants were debriefed at the end of the survey and told that the CSA they read was fictional. Each participant was paid \$4 for participation.

A total of 246 participants remained in the final data set after removing the participants who failed the attention check questions ($n = 65$, 20.9%; see Table 1 for the demographic information of the participants).

Table 1. Sample Demographic Information (N = 246).

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education
$M = 50.19$	Male: 78 (31.7%)	Caucasian: 200 (81.3%)	Bachelor's degree: 166
$SD = 18.07$	Female: 159 (64.6%)	African American: 17	(67.5%)
	Other: 7 (2.8%)	(6.9%)	High school diploma: 51
	Preferred not to	Asian: 4 (1.6%)	(20.7%)
	report: 2 (.8%)	Hispanic: 9 (3.7%)	Postgraduate degree: 28
		Others: (16, 6.5%)	(11.4%)
			Below high school: 1 (.4%)

Measurement

Issue-Based Identification

We adapted three items from Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears' (1995) study. Participants evaluated the degree to which they identified with people who shared a similar view on the issue assigned to them on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much; $\alpha = .91$, $M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.48$).

Consumer-Company Identification (CCI)

A five-item scale was adopted from Martínez and Del Bosque (2013). On a 7-point Likert scale, participants rated to what extent they agreed with the five statements describing their feelings toward Dunkin'. CCI was measured before ($\alpha = .89$, $M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.33$) and after participants read the CSA message ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.27$).

Perceived Symbolic and Realistic Threats

Participants were instructed to think of people who shared similar views on the issue as "my group." They evaluated the extent to which they perceived Dunkin' presented a sense of threat to their group. A 7-point Likert scale was modified from González et al. (2008). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed with SPSS Amos to test this measurement. The original model indices suggested a poor fit (Chi-square = 35.70, $p < .001$; CFI = .98; RMSEA = .12; SRMR = .05). Based on modification recommendations, one item for perceived symbolic threat (item 3, "My group's value is being threatened because of companies like Dunkin' that supports the issue") was dropped. The modified two-factor model fit results were satisfactory (Chi-square = 7.13, $p = .13$, CFI = .97; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .03). The two factors, perceived

symbolic threat ($\alpha = .87$, $M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.66$, $N = 246$) and perceived realistic threat ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.63$, $N = 246$), were significantly correlated ($r = .68$, $p < .001$).

Intention to Boycott the Company

It was measured using a three-item 7-point Likert scale adapted from Delistavrou, Krystallis, and Tilikidou's (2020) study ($\alpha = .97$, $M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.98$).

Intention to Participate in Discursive Activities

Hwang, Pan, and Sun's (2008) 7-point Likert scale was adapted to measure participants' willingness to engage in all eight activities to express their opinions on an issue ($\alpha = .94$, $M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.66$).

Issue Involvement

Due to the importance of involvement in persuasive communication (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) and consumers' reaction to CSA (Hong & Li, 2020; Xu et al., 2021), participants' involvement with the CSA issue was measured and treated as a control variable. A six-item scale of involvement (7-point Likert scale) was adapted from Zhang (2021; $\alpha = .75$, $M = 4.47$, $SD = 1.10$).

See Appendix B for specific items used in the study.

Analytical Approach

Pearson's correlations were used to explore bivariate associations between all variables (Table 2). Path analysis with structural equation modeling (SEM) was then utilized to test the hypotheses. Following the testing and confirmation of assumptions of linearity, outliers, multicollinearity, and multivariate normality, path analysis was conducted using SPSS AMOS Graphic 25. Covariance structure analysis was conducted using the maximum likelihood of estimation. Interaction terms were created by multiplying the standardized values of the variables to test the moderation effects. Bootstrapped confidence intervals (CI) were generated to evaluate mediation effects. When the lower and upper 95% CIS do not include zero, the mediation effects are supported (Preacher & Hayes, 2004).

Table 2. Correlations Between Demographic Variables, Control Variables, Independent Variables, and Dependent Variables of the Study (N = 246).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Issue	1	.07	.11	.05	-.08	-.01	.07	-.09	.13*	-.02	.13*	-.07	-.06	-.17**
2. CSA Position		1	-.29**	.28**	.06	-.03	-.08	-.03	-.10	.13*	-.02	.001	.14*	.22**
3. Age			1	-.24**	.20**	-.08	-.10	.04	-.10	.13*	-.09	.06	-.26**	-.31**
4. Gender				1	-.06	.13	-.06	-.04	-.02	-.07	.11	-.12	.05	.12
5. Education					1	.11	-.04	-.12	.13*	.01	-.001	-.12	.11	-.04
6. Issue involvement						1	-.02	.11	.42**	.38**	.44**	.02	.24**	.39**
7. CSA message							1	-.03	.19**	.28**	.08	-.08	.18**	.12
8. Preexisting CCI								1	-.08	.15*	-.003	.56**	.01	.20**
9. Perceived symbolic threat									1	.61**	.40**	-.30**	.52**	.38**
10. Perceived realistic threat										1	.30**	-.08	.55**	.48**
11. Issue identification											1	-.16*	.28**	.31**
12. Postexposure CCI												1	-.16*	-.07
13. Boycott intention													1	.63**
14. Intention to participate in discursive activities														1

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Previous studies have shown that perceptions of realistic and symbolic threats tend to be highly correlated (Stephan et al., 2009, 2015). Our factor analysis also suggested that perceived realistic and symbolic threats were correlated; therefore, we correlated the error terms of perceived symbolic and realistic threats in path analysis. The model revealed a satisfactory fit (CFI = .99; TLI = .98; NFI = .97; RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .04, Chi-square = 25.72, $p = .26$, $df = 22$). Figure 2 demonstrates the significant standardized estimates (β) of the direct effect of variables in the hypotheses. Table 3 shows the indirect effects of the independent variables through the two mediators.

Table 3. Indirect Effects of CSA Message, Issue-Based Identification, Preexisting CCI and Interactive Term of Preexisting CCI, and Identity on Dependent Variables (N = 246).

Mediator	Postexposure CCI		Boycott intention		Intention to participate in discursive activities	
	Perceived symbolic threat	Perceived realistic threat	Perceived symbolic threat	Perceived realistic threat	Perceived symbolic threat	Perceived realistic threat
CSA message	-.09**	.001	.23**	.35**	.13**	.15*
Identity	-.07***	<.001	.19***	.11**	.11**	.05*
Preexisting CCI	.04*	<.001	-.09*	.07	-.05*	.03
Preexisting CCI \times Identity	-.02	<.001	.04	.03	.03	.01

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Results

H1 suggested that those who read a value-based counter-attitudinal CSA would (a) score higher on perceived symbolic threat and (b) lower on realistic threat compared with those who read an action-based CSA message. The type of CSA message made a significant difference in perceived symbolic threat ($\beta = .16$, $p < .01$) and realistic threat ($\beta = .28$, $p < .001$; Figure 2). Specifically, participants who read a value-based counter-attitudinal CSA message reported significantly lower perceived symbolic threat ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.56$, $n = 122$) and realistic threat ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.55$, $n = 122$) than participants who read an action-based counter-attitudinal CSA message (perceived symbolic threat: $M = 5.16$, $SD = 1.56$, $n = 124$; perceived realistic threat: $M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.52$, $n = 124$). Therefore, H1a was not supported, and H1b was supported.

H2 hypothesized that issue-related group identification positively predicts perceived symbolic threat and realistic threats. The results suggested that issue identification significantly predicted both perceived symbolic threat ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$) and perceived realistic threat ($\beta = .27$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H2 was supported.

RQ1 asked if preexisting CCI moderates issue-related identification in influencing perceived symbolic and realistic threats. The results suggested that a preexisting CCI is not a significant moderator (perceived symbolic, $\beta = .07$, $p = .24$; realistic threat ($\beta = .05$, $p = .38$). However, CCI significantly predicted perceived symbolic ($\beta = -.12$, $p < .05$) threat and perceived realistic threat ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$).

RQ2 inquired whether perceived symbolic threat mediates the type of CSA message (action-based or value-based), issue-related identification, preexisting CCI, and the moderated effect of issue identification and preexisting CCI on the three outcome variables. As Figure 2 demonstrates, perceived symbolic threat was a significant predictor for postexposure CCI ($\beta = -.26, p < .001$), boycott intention ($\beta = .34, p < .001$), and intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = .24, p < .05$). As Table 3 showed, perceived symbolic threat significantly mediated the effect of CSA message type on postexposure CCI ($\beta = -.09, CI [-.19, -.03], p < .01$), intention to boycott ($\beta = .23, CI [.07, .47], p < .01$) and intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = .13, CI [.03, .29], p < .01$). That is, action-based counter-attitudinal CSA messages significantly decreased postexposure CCI while increasing intention to boycott and intention to participate in discursive activities through higher perceived symbolic threat compared with value-based CSA messages.

The results suggested perceived symbolic threat significantly mediated issue-related identification in predicting all three dependent variables, namely, postexposure CCI ($\beta = -.07, CI [-.12, -.03], p < .001$), boycott intention ($\beta = .19, CI [.09, .32], p < .001$), and intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = .11, CI [.04, .21], p < .01$; Table 3). Issue-related identification decreased postexposure CCI and increased boycott intention and intention to participate in discursive activities through perceived symbolic threat. As the moderation effect of preexisting CCI and issue-related identification was not significant, moderated mediation was not shown. Although not hypothesized, the results suggested that perceived symbolic threat significantly mediated preexisting CCI's influence on postexposure CCI ($\beta = .04, CI [.002, .09], p < .05$), boycott intention ($\beta = -.09, CI [-.20, -.006], p < .05$) and intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = -.05, CI [-.13, -.005], p < .05$).

RQ3 examines the mediating effect of perceived realistic threat. Perceived realistic threat did not predict postexposure CCI ($\beta = .002, p = .98$), however, it significantly predicted boycott intention ($\beta = .30, p < .001$) and intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = .15, p < .05$). Table 3 shows that perceived realistic threat did not mediate the CSA message type's effect on postexposure CCI ($\beta < .001, CI [-.08, .08], p = .99$). However, it significantly mediated the CSA message's influence on intention to boycott ($\beta = .35, CI [.16, .64], p < .001$), and intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = .15, CI [.20, .34], p < .05$). Perceived realistic threat did not mediate the influence of issue-related identification on postexposure CCI ($\beta < .001, CI [-.03, .03], p = .99$). However, it significantly mediated issue-related identification's influence on intention to boycott ($\beta = .11, CI [.05, .21], p < .001$), and intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = .05, CI [.01, .11], p < .05$). The moderated mediation was not significant because the preexisting CCI was not a significant moderator. Perceived realistic threat did not mediate the influence of preexisting CCI on the three dependent variables.

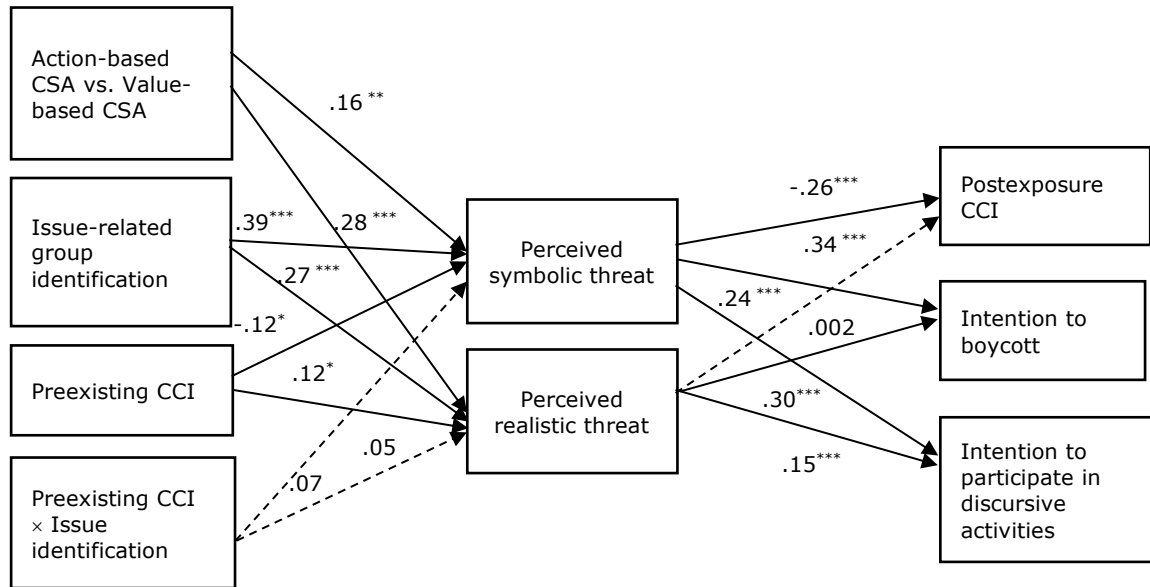


Figure 2. Direct effects shown by SEM.

Note. Standardized parameter estimates are presented. Parameters with a significance of $p > .05$ are presented by the dotted lines. (* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$).

Significant effects of control variables on dependent variables include Age \rightarrow Boycott intention ($\beta = -.15, p < .01$), Age \rightarrow Intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = -.18, p < .001$), CSA issue \rightarrow Boycott intention ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$), CSA issue \rightarrow intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = -.19, p < .001$), Issue involvement \rightarrow Boycott intention ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$), Issue involvement \rightarrow Intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = -.19, p < .001$), CSA position \rightarrow postexposure CCI ($\beta = -.004, p < .01$), CSA position \rightarrow Intention to participate in discursive activities ($\beta = .20, p < .001$).

Discussion

Antecedents of Intergroup Threat Perceptions

In contrast to previous research, we found that action-based counter-attitudinal CSA messages not only predicted higher perceived realistic threats but also higher perceived symbolic threats. This suggests that CSA messages differ from other media messages examined in previous ITT studies involving intergroup conflict events/concerns. Previous ITT studies typically used messages framed by the media (Joyce, 2017), rather than the out-groups themselves. These messages focused on either a clear threat to safety (Caricati, 2018; Schmid et al., 2014) or a clear threat to value differences (Rios et al., 2018). Consequently, the association between a message (about crimes committed by immigrants) and its intended perceptions of threats (realistic threats) was straightforward. In contrast, CSA messages were inherently value-laden and associated with an organized entity that had organizing power. Including language suggesting actions, such as donations or company policy changes, amplifies such value expression. Therefore, reading an action-

based counter-attitudinal CSA message would increase both the perceived symbolic and realistic threats to the social groups defined by the controversial issue.

Issue-based identification significantly increased perceptions of both threats. It supported Hartmann and Tanis's (2013) and Mason's (2015) argument that issue-based identification functions similarly to identities based on social categories. Individuals tend to regard others who share the same values as their in-groups and process information through in-group bias. Consequently, a counter-attitudinal message was considered an attack on the group and viewed as a threat to the group's well-being, particularly among high identifiers who projected both types of threats whenever they sensed resistance against their group. Our findings suggest that in such cases, individuals are motivated to respond.

Furthermore, we did not observe preexisting CCI either reducing or enhancing the influence of issue-related identification on threat perceptions (RQ1). While the literature suggests that in-group violations of personal values cause more cognitive dissonance (Glasford et al., 2008), it also suggests that a strong group identity motivates people to engage in motivated reasoning to reconcile incompatible identities (Kunda, 1990). CCI may interact with issue-related identification to motivate heightened threat perceptions among some participants while reducing threat perceptions among others. As a result, these moderating effects could potentially offset each other.

Although not hypothesized, preexisting CCI predicted perceived symbolic threat and realistic threat in opposite directions. From a social identity perspective, identification with an organization involves incorporating the values of the organization as one's sense of self (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Thus, when asked if Dunkin's values threatened their issue-based group, it created identity conflicts. Participants downplayed the significance of the CSA message in reconciling cognitive dissonance. On the other hand, the positive correlation between CCI and perceived realistic threat may suggest a correlation between CCI and the participants' trust in the company's ability. Zhang (2023) found that consumers perceived a more negative influence of a counter-attitudinal CSA from a more credible company. Our study shows that the more one identifies with Dunkin's, the more one may believe that proposed actions, such as donations and policy changes, become integral to the company's operations. Thus, this course of action may carry more weight in terms of potential harm to the issue-based group than words alone.

The Mediating Role of Threat Perceptions

The ITT proposes that negative intergroup contact may lead to less favorable affective reactions to out-groups through threat perceptions. Interestingly, postexposure CCI was observed to be lowered by action-based CSA more than value-based CSA through perceived symbolic threat but not through perceived realistic threat. This observation may be attributed to our definition of CCI. CCI refers to a person's perception of belongingness and emotional attachment to an organization, driven by the need to maintain a stable and consistent sense of self (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). To identify with a company, consumers want to embrace the overall values it represents. Compared with the realistic threat, a perceived symbolic threat violates the value that individuals strongly support, leading to an awareness that the reflected company's values conflict with their own identity. Therefore, perceived symbolic threat provides a stronger explanation for why action-based CSA messages reduce CCI. Given the considerably lower preexisting CCI ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.33$) compared

with issue-based identification ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.48$), participants may opt to lower their CCI identity to maintain the issue-based identity. This finding aligns with previous studies that demonstrated how CSA risks alienating the social group that does not share the corporate's stance (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014; Hong & Li, 2020; Zhang & Zhou, 2023), providing an issue-related identification explanation.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that perceived symbolic threat mediated the buffering effect of preexisting CCI on postexposure CCI. High identifiers with the company maintained a higher level of CCI after reading a counter-attitudinal CSA because they perceived the message as less symbolically threatening than the low identifiers with the company.

An ITT-based explanatory mechanism may not apply to all the variables in this study, but it appears to help theorize the following relationships. Both perceived symbolic and realistic threats significantly mediated the relationships between CSA message type and issue-based identification in predicting the two activism behavioral intentions. These results support previous research findings regarding group threats associated with collective responses to other groups, such as boycotts and warfare (Stephan et al., 2015). Previous studies also suggested that symbolic threats were more likely to increase conformity to an in-group's norms and values (Jetten, Postmes, & McAuliffe, 2002). Therefore, symbolic threats may lead to the intention to participate in boycotts and discursive activities because people aim to voice enhanced group norms and values in the public sphere.

Theoretical Implications

First, this study provides initial evidence of CSA as a possible intergroup-mediated contact. Previous studies on mediated intergroup contact have offered substantial empirical support for positive effects when individuals are exposed to positive media coverage featuring out-group members and negative assessments of out-group members when the coverage is negative (e.g., Joyce, 2017; Kim, Harwood, & Xiang, 2018; Wojcieszak & Azrout, 2016). News articles or TV programming are oftentimes used in experiments to elicit out-group emotions, attitudes, and/or cognitive evaluations. In these studies, concepts such as para-social identification or identification with in-/out-group are used to explain the said intergroup outcomes (Park, 2012). Our study provides another channel through which intergroup interactions can occur. Similar to partisan media, in which people may consider media institutions as either part of their in-group or out-group (Levendusky, 2013), we may also observe such differentiations in a CSA context. Companies endorsing or opposing an issue or group through CSA may be viewed as an in-group or an out-group for individuals, depending on their position. Companies, therefore, represent different social groups interacting through CSA efforts.

Second, traditional ITT research primarily focuses on the strength of a single identity in intergroup interactions. Our study examined the influence of the intersectionality of two social identities (i.e., issue-based and CCI), where the boundary between in and out-group might be fluid. Unfortunately, we did not find any significant interaction effects on the perceptions of threats or the three outcome variables. This may be because we chose a company for participants instead of asking them to choose the entity with which they strongly identified, which could have diluted the impact of a counter-attitudinal CSA. Another possibility is that people's issue-based identification may carry more personal relevance than their corporate consumer

identity, making it more impactful in this context. Future research should continue to investigate situations where multiple identities are at work and how individuals reconcile conflicting identities in such contexts.

Practical Implications

McGarty et al. (2009) suggested that issue-based groups are usually formed to advocate for the well-being of a social group. Our findings imply that corporations contemplating engagement in social advocacy should be aware of how their consumers align with the spectrum of various social issues. While traditional demographics, such as gender, ethnicity, and religion, remain relevant for predicting consumer behaviors, an understanding of the composition of opinion-based groups and their identities among consumers is crucial for anticipating potential pushback whenever a company engages in CSA communication.

While CSA expressing alignment with certain values or “involves philanthropic efforts in support of a case” (Endres & Panagopoulos, 2017, p. 7) is more expected now as part of corporate social responsibility, it comes at a price not only for the organization but also for general political discussion today, especially when organizations are taking concrete actions to support their positions. We found that even one-time exposure to a counter-attitudinal CSA message had a significant impact on the participants’ sentiments and intended behaviors. In addition, cultivation theory suggests that the greater the news consumption leads to a more pronounced media effect on an individual’s cognition and emotions, the more repeated exposures to CSA messages containing group-based threats may result in negative intergroup attitudes and emotions (Seate & Mastro, 2016). CSA communications can intensify the already heated conflicts between the two camps on controversial social issues by being part of the controversy rather than facilitating resolutions.

Of the three types of responses to perceptions of threat, companies may consider discursive activities to have a less direct and immediate impact on them in terms of revenue loss. However, these activities may have ripple effects on other consumers with the same issue-based identification, which, in turn, strengthens perceptions of threats and consequently results in a boycott or reduced CCI. Therefore, discursive activities on the ground or via social media may exert social influence beyond online platforms. Future research should continue to study how discursive activities are linked to boycott intention and/or CCI.

Limitations and Future Studies

The conclusion of the current study is limited by a few methodological concerns. First, participants were exposed to CSA messages in an experimental setting, which has limited external reality. Participants’ preexisting CCI, Dunkin’, was relatively low ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.33$). Results might differ if participants responded to survey questions based on the company of their choice. Relatedly, the lower CCI could be due to the age of the participants in the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 50.19$). Given Dunkin’s popularity among younger age groups (e.g., Start.io, 2022), we might observe a stronger CCI if our participants were younger. That said, the average age of our participants still falls within Dunkin’s target consumer demographics. In addition, it should be noted that depending on the issues, the model may change. Future studies should continue to examine the differences when CSAs elicit intergroup threat perceptions.

Future studies can also extend the theoretical discussions of social identity-related theories by examining the moderation effect of issue-based and CCI identities on intergroup threat perceptions and propose more hypotheses based on the social identity of the collective action model. It is hoped that by looking at consumers' reactions toward CSA messages, a better understanding of organizations' roles in contemporary society will be enabled.

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