Academic Affairs Excellence Awards

Application Form

Name: Whitney Ginder

Rank: Associate Professor of Marketing

Department: Management, Marketing, and Logistics

Award applying for:
(Check one)

	Excellence in Teaching Award*
	Excellence in Online Teaching Award*
X	Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavors Award*
	Excellence in University Service*
	Excellence in Scholarship of Teaching & Learning Award*
	Department/Program Excellence Award^
	Irene Rose Community Service Award^
	Laurie Hendrickson McMillian Faculty Award^

*college selection required before being forwarded to university
^university awards
College nominees' final applications received by Center for Teaching and Learning (ctl@gcsu.edu) by March 1.

Please insert the required documentation in the pages below for the award category you have noted above. Detailed information associated with each award is available online at the Center for Teaching and Learning website.

DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT,
MARKETING AND LOGISTICS
GEORGIA COLLEGE & STATE UNIVERSITY

Letter of Nomination:
Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavors Award

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to support Dr. Whitney Ginder's application for the Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavors Award. Dr. Ginder has a proven track record of production for the previous five years and is very deserving of this honor on the basis of quality and potential impact.

Dr. Ginder has had six peer reviewed publications and five presentations in the past three years alone. I should emphasize that she has published research in a number of highly-respected journals in her field, including the *Journal of Business Ethics*, the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, and *Sustainability.* All of these journals boast impressive impact factors and citation metrics, further supporting the quality of her production and its potential impact in the field. I believe this indicates that the theoretical foundations of her work are sound and reflective of current thinking in the field, and the methodologies utilized were appropriate and well-executed. All reflect well on Dr. Ginder's skill as a researcher and a scholar.

It is also important to note that Dr. Ginder was first author on three of the six publications, including those appearing in the previously mentioned *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* and the *Journal of Business Ethics*. As a point of additional emphasis with regard to impact and quality, the latter is a very highly regarded outlet in business and management and one of the leading journals dedicated to the publication of ethics-related research.

Her attention to ethics and corporate social responsibility topics also is worthy of separate mention and emphasis. In an era in which motives, values and practices are questioned, and sometimes questionable, work that highlights and helps us understand more about proper and improper decisions is valuable in its own right. Equally significant is that her research can be brought into into the classroom to enrich discussion and learning and to influence the next generation of business leaders. The importance of this process cannot be understated.

In sum, both in terms of quality and quantity, I find Dr. Ginder's research to be worthy of recognition. I endorse her application without reservation and respectfully ask for your support and recognition of her efforts.

Very truly yours,

William J. Donoher, Ph.D., J.D.
Professor and Chair
Dept. of Management, Marketing & Logistics
J. Whitney Bunting College of Business
Georgia College & State University
Milledgeville, GA 31061

GEORGIA COLLEGE
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February 27, 2023

Committee Members for the
Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Award
Georgia College & State University
Milledgeville, GA 31061

Dear Committee Members:

Please accept this letter of unequivocal support for **Dr. Whitney Ginder**, Associate Professor of Marketing, in nomination for the **Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Award** at Georgia College & State University.

Dr. Ginder's scholarly activity and productivity reflects an intentional and well-developed pipeline of research that is highly relevant to practice and theory. Her research in consumer behavior and social media marketing also builds upon her teaching expertise, which reinforces student learning in these areas.

With a remarkable six peer-reviewed journal articles, along with five conference presentations since 2020, Dr. Ginder demonstrates deep commitment to the teacher-scholar values espoused by colleagues at Georgia College. She leads the way in scholarly productivity in the College of Business and Technology. Her work has been widely cited and has appeared in top journals such as the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* and the *Journal of Business Ethics*, and has received attention from academics and practitioners with coverage in *Ad Age*, *Bloomberg*, and *Financial Times*. Dr. Ginder also has two manuscripts under review in top-ranked journals including *Business & Society* and the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*.

As a thought leader in her field, Dr. Ginder is the epitome of who we strive to recruit and retain on our faculty. We are so privileged to have her as a teacher-scholar at Georgia College. She is an outstanding colleague who helps further our scholarly reputation here and abroad. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I may provide any additional information to support her nomination for the Excellence in Scholarship and Creative Endeavors Award. Dr. Ginder is very deserving!

Sincerely,

Dr. Micheal T. Stratton
Dean and Professor of Management
J. Whitney Bunting College of Business and Technology

DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT,
MARKETING AND LOGISTICS

February 28, 2023

Research Honors Committee Members:

I've taught and researched in marketing at Georgia College & State University for nearly two decades. I have *never* seen a research output that could even compare with the work by Dr. Whitney Ginder. Hers is a uniquely skilled voice that has produced a body of research that is exceptional. Not only for its quality, but also because of its prolific nature. In a relatively short time, her work has had a dramatic impact on the discipline. As part of the Business college we are held to accrediting standards that have been set by an international body that vets journals for quality and impact. Our AACSB accreditation research metrics, as do many other business schools, use the Australian Business Dean's Council (ABDC) as a gold standard for strength of research. It's an excellent way to demonstrate her work in a broader context.

Depth of Scholarship: I'm certain this committee is familiar with impact factors, but you may not be familiar at a Marketing-specific level. My training was old school, I was taught that the goal at an R1 was JM (the Journal of Marketing) and JMR (the Journal of Marketing Research). JM, in any given year, has recently ranged from an impact factor of 6 to as high as 15, JMR is five or six. Those impacts are R1 goals. Looking up a more general rule returned this: *"In general, the impact factor of 10 or higher is considered remarkable, while 3 is good, and the average score is less than 1."* Dr. Ginder's peer-reviewed journal work is *remarkable*. I've seen research packages that contain a sea of minor papers that often don't have the weight of even one extremely widely cited article. In only the last three years, Dr. Ginder has published *six* significant works, **further, she was first author on half of those, an important distinction. On all of those papers she's first or second author.** Even more compelling is that the articles on which she was first author are the most impacting ones. One of those works has an impact factor of about 11. More than the number value itself, the paper is of extraordinary impact and quality. *Despite it only having been released in 2022 it is already sitting on 13+ citations!* She also has an impact factor of 6+ for the Journal of Business Ethics and already has 53+ citations (*I'm adding the "+" because these numbers are growing rapidly*). They're being downloaded thousands and thousands of times. Her strongest paper has an impact of a JM, and her second a JMR. More importantly, these articles are getting even more traction based on their sharing, downloads, and particularly in citations, which are remarkably high for papers that have been published so very recently. She has gone on to publish four additional papers, all since 2020. Again, these others are far from minor papers. They've landed at some of the top journals for their content areas.

Breadth of Scholarship: Not only is Dr. Ginder's work of exceptional quality, its breadth is remarkable. She's working on issues of social concern such as Sustainability, Corporate Social Responsibility, Ethics, and even issues around racial and social justice, and college student health and well-being. While she often applies these works within a theoretical framework, they're directly applicable to our discipline. Her work is not only relevant in the field, it's societally relevant and making a difference. For example, *based on the paper to the American College Health Association, the organization created metrics for breaking out LGBTQ+ data* to share with member task forces and committees. Her work covers a great deal of ground, not only across disciplinary constructs, but within each of the works itself.

Relationship to the discipline: She is covering the forefront of new and important areas of marketing that need academic examination. She and her co-authors are addressing cutting edge-issues. In fact, terminology that she is introducing is becoming an accepted means of discussing the topics about which she is writing.

Top researchers are reading these major papers and incorporating her insights into their own work, furthering the impact on her areas of study. Dr. Ginder's publications from 2021 and 2022 have citation levels that attest to the relevance and importance of her research in the field. Her intellectual rigor and the quality of her research is clear. While I realize that it can be difficult to go through entire journal papers while doing review, a closer examination of even a few of these publications conveys the exceptional quality of her work, as well as the wide-ranging impact of her conclusions around each research area.

Types of Achievement: As I'd noted previously, the American College Health Association (ACHA), the organization that administers and reports the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) data, has changed its data reporting on LGBTQ+ people based on the paper we worked on. That type of real-world impact is absolutely recognized. Her research has also been of such high quality that she was awarded the competitive CoBT Summer Research Grant. That $9000 grant is awarded to support scholars whose work can create genuine impact and change. Further, her work has been recognized at the University level as significant, where, given the prolific and impacting nature of her work, she has been awarded a Research Sabbatical for AY 23-24. I don't know of any other CoBT professor who was similarly recognized so early in their academic career here. *Ever.*

In summary, Dr. Ginder is nothing short of a Rock Star. We're fortunate to have her creating a stronger name for the research that comes out of Georgia College & State University. I'm fortunate to work with someone whose research skills not only inform the field, but also improve the work of the colleagues around her, myself included! She has set a high bar for publication, and for herself, that is on par with research level institution expectations, all while still taking the insights that she has gained from that work and bringing them into her classrooms. Her research's real-world, peer-reviewed results have been dramatic and have made, and continue to make, a powerful impact in our discipline and our society.

As someone who has had the good fortune to work with her on academic research, I have no doubt at all that *she is an ideal candidate for this award* at the University level and beyond. Her determination and detailed process are of an exceptional methodologist, and her eye on societal issues applies that skill to current and relevant content.

It's an honor to nominate her.

Sincerely,

Joanna Schwartz
Professor of Marketing

UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH CAROLINA

February 27, 2023

Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavors Award – Dr. Whitney Ginder

Dear Award Review Committees:

I am pleased to recommend Dr. Whitney Ginder as an exceptional candidate for the Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavors Award at Georgia College. I had the pleasure of working with Whitney as a co-chair for her dissertation committee during her time at Auburn University, and I can attest to her passion and excellence in both teaching and research.

Whitney's academic performance and work qualities were in the top 2% of students I have encountered throughout my tenure at Auburn University and the University of South Carolina. She consistently demonstrated exceptional critical and analytical skills, which are essential factors for scholarship. She is capable of handling diverse subjects with incomparable quality, and her first paper written as part of an independent study was published in *Psychology & Marketing*, a prestigious journal in the Marketing discipline.

Her research focuses on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) positioning/communication strategies and consumer evaluations, which is an important but still under-researched area in the consumer and marketing literature. To my best knowledge, her dissertation research was the first empirical study that proposed the comprehensive theoretical framework for various CSR positioning strategies, including hot topics such as CSR-washing and CRS-hushing. Whitney's work is thorough and theory-driven, and provides deep practical implications for marketers and policy makers. Over the past five years at Georgia College, she has demonstrated a strong track record of publication. She published six articles, including A-ranked journals such as the *Journal of Business Ethics,* a globally leading journal in the field of business ethics (ranked 2 out of 56 journals), and the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, which boasts an impressive impact factor of 10.972, making it one of the highest-ranked journals in the retailing discipline. She was the first author in three publications and the second author in two publications, demonstrating her leadership in research. Additionally, she presented five academic papers at major national/international conferences and has two papers currently under review in *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing* and *Business & Society*, both of which are A-ranked journals.

Whitney is a reliable and dedicated teacher and researcher who continuously strives to be a productive and effective educator in our discipline. She is intelligent, self-motivated, and hard-working. Her dedication to research and teaching, excellence in scholarship, and strong work ethic are highly respected and valued by her students, peers, and professors. I believe that her ongoing strive and passion to be an ethical and respected scholar and educator make her an outstanding candidate for this prestigious award in your institution. Winning this award will motivate her to pursue her scholarship and be a great reward and recognition for her hard work.

In conclusion, I strongly endorse Dr. Whitney Ginder for the Excellence in Scholarship & Creative Endeavors Award at Georgia College. I have no doubt that she will continue to excel in her academic and research pursuits, and this award would be a well-deserved recognition of her accomplishments. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about her. Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,

Sang-Eun Byun, Ph.D. | *Associate Professor of* ***Retailing***
College of Hospitality, Retail, and Sports Management
University of South Carolina
4010F Carolina Coliseum, Columbia, SC 29208
Office: 803.777. 3098 | Fax: 803.777.4357
Email: sbyun@mailbox.sc.edu

Publications (all subject to anonymous peer-review process):

1. **Ginder, W.**, & Byun, S.-E. (2022). To trust or not to trust? The interplay between labor-related CSR claim type and prior CSR reputation of apparel retailers. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 65.* https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2021.102875
    - Selectivity and Competitiveness: **A journal ABDC list, Impact factor: 10.972;** Cite score: 11.4
    - Dissemination: This article has had 13 citations.
    - Scope: "The journal is an international and interdisciplinary forum for research and debate in the rapidly developing - and converging - fields of retailing and services studies. It focuses particularly on consumer behaviour and on policy and managerial decisions, encouraging contributions from academics across a wide range of relevant disciplines."

2. Mann, M., **Ginder, W**., & Byun, S.-E. (2022). Highs and lows of cannabis decriminalization: Twitter analysis and ethical and regulatory implications for retailing and marketing. *Journal of Global Marketing*, *35*(1), 57-75. https://doi.org/10.1080/08911762.2021.1958971
    - Selectivity and Competitiveness: **B journal ABDC list**; Cite score: 3.7; 86K annual downloads/views
    - Dissemination: This article has had 5 citations.
    - Scope: "Advances cutting-edge research on global marketing theories and practices, and marketing challenges and opportunities for firms, industries and governments."

3. Mann, M., Byun, S.-E., & **Ginder, W**. (2021). B Corps' social media communications during the COVID-19 pandemic: Through the lens of the triple bottom line. *Sustainability,13*(17). https://doi.org/10.3390/su13179634
    - Selectivity and Competitiveness: **Impact factor: 3.889**; Cite score: 5.0
    - Dissemination: This article has had 6 citations.
    - Scope: "Sustainability is an international, cross-disciplinary, scholarly, peer-reviewed and open access journal of environmental, cultural, economic, and social sustainability of human beings."

4. **Ginder, W.**, Byun, S.-E, & Kwon, W.-S. (2021). Effects of internal-external congruence-based CSR positioning: An attribution theory approach. *Journal of Business Ethics, 169, 355-369.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-019-04282-w
    - Selectivity and Competitiveness: **A journal ABDC list; Impact factor: 6.331; FT 50 - This journal is one of the 50 journals used by the Financial Times in compiling the prestigious Business School research rank; Clarivates Journal Citation Reports® Ranking by Category: Ethics 2/56 and Business 54/154; 3,530,909 downloads (2021)**
    - Dissemination: **This article has had 53 citations and has been accessed 5,473 times.**

- Scope: "The Journal of Business Ethics publishes only original articles from a wide variety of methodological and disciplinary perspectives concerning ethical issues related to business that bring something new or unique to the discourse in their field. From its inception the Journal has aimed to improve the human condition by providing a public forum for discussion and debate about ethical issues related to business."

5. Schwartz, J., & **Ginder, W**. (2021). NCHA variable combination as a method to undertake LGBTQ+ student sub-population analyses. *Journal of American College Health*. https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1950730
    - Selectivity and Competitiveness: Journal metrics: **Impact factor: 2.394**, Cite score: 3.8; 534K annual downloads/views
    - Dissemination: This article has had 5 citations.
    - Scope: "This prize-winning journal covers developments and research in this broad field, including clinical and preventive medicine, health promotion, environmental health and safety, nursing assessment, interventions, management, pharmacy, and sports medicine. The journal regularly publishes major articles on student behaviors, mental health, and health care policies and includes a section for discussion of controversial issues."

6. **Ginder, W.**, & Kwon, W.-S. (2020). Hopping on the boycotting bandwagon on Facebook: Because of others, the issue, or self-enhancement? *Journal of Customer Behaviour, 19*(4), 375-400. https://doi.org/10.1362/147539220X16045724282132
    - Selectivity and Competitiveness: C journal ABDC list
    - Scope: "jcb is the home of readable radical research in the fields of marketing, branding and consumer/customer behaviour."

Conference Presentations (all subject to anonymous peer-review process):

1. Johnson, O., & **Ginder, W.** (2022). Responding to macro-environment crises: Examining retailers' Instagram responses following George Floyd's death. *International Textile and Apparel Association Conference*, Santa Fe, NM.

2. **Ginder, W.**, Tatgenhorst, M., & Johnson, O. (2021). Consumer perceptions of corporate social justice: Insight on woke-washing vs. authentic activism. *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference*. Virtual. (work involving mentored undergraduate research)

3. Johnson, O., & **Ginder, W.** (2021). Retailers' response to a racial reckoning: Analysis of corporate social justice communication on social media. *Association for Consumer Research Conference*. Virtual.

4. Miller, A., **Ginder, W**., Schwartz, J., & Owen, A. (2020). Developing an LGBTQ-friendly College of Business: A roadmap for change. *Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society Conference*. Virtual.

5. **Ginder, W.**, Kwon, W.-S., & Byun, S.-E. (2019). Consumers' response to consistency-based corporate social responsibility (CSR) positioning: What are the strategic and ethical implications? *American Marketing Association Consumer Behavior Special Interest Group (CBSIG) Conference*, Bern, Switzerland.

Summary of Scholarly Work:

Depth of Scholarship/Breadth and Scope: During the past five years, I have had six peer-reviewed publications and five conference presentations. According to the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) Journal Quality List, two of these manuscripts were published in A journals. **I was also the first author on both of these A publications**. As further evidence of the quality of these journals, the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* has an impact factor of nearly 11.00, which is significantly higher than almost three-quarters of the marketing journals that are ranked as A* (the top ranking currently achieved by only 7 journals). In support of the breadth and scope of my work, this article which was just published in 2022 has already been cited 13 times. Additionally, the *Journal of Business Ethics* is one of the 50 journals used by the *Financial Times* in compiling the prestigious Business School research rank, and it earned the second highest ranking by Clarivates Journal Citation Reports® for journals in the ethics category. This article, which has been cited 53 times, examines the topics of greenwashing and its newer opposite—greenhushing—which is an emerging area of research that has been garnering increasing scholarly attention in top journals as well as coverage in outlets such as *Ad Age*, *Bloomberg,* and *Financial Times*. In addition to my A publications, my remaining articles fall within the B or C categories from the ABDC list or have impact factors ranging from 2.4 - 3.9. I also have two manuscripts that are currently under review at A journals (*Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*: Impact factor of 6.343; *Business & Society*: Impact factor of 6.740). In addition to my published work, my research has been presented at numerous conferences, including several international conferences, thus helping increase awareness of Georgia College & State University on an international scale and bolster our scholarly reputation.

Relationship to the Discipline: As will be discussed further in my synopsis explaining the synergy between my teaching and research, my scholarly work explores the intersection of business and society, with a focus on corporate social responsibility (CSR), business ethics, and consumer behavior. My work investigates pressing societal concerns, such as sustainability, human rights, and social justice, among other topics.

Types of Achievement: In addition to my work being published in highly regarded journals with increasing numbers of citations and downloads, my research has received recognition both internally and externally. I was recently awarding a competitive research grant ($9,000) from the CoBT and was just awarded sabbatical for the upcoming academic year; this was the first year I was eligible to apply for sabbatical. These recognitions clearly attest to the quality, rigor, and value of the research I am conducting and publishing. Moreover, based on my research published in the *Journal of American College Health*, the American College Health Association adopted our methodology and changed its approach to data reporting about LGBTQ+ people.

Synergy Between Teaching and Research:

My research stream focuses on the intersection of business and society, with a particular focus on topics related to corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability, brand/consumer activism, social justice, and other sociopolitical issues that are of concern for businesses, consumers, and public policy makers. Using multiple approaches, such as experiments, surveys, content analysis, social media sentiment analysis, and focus groups, my research generally investigates the aforementioned topics from the perspective of real-world marketing and communication strategies currently being used by businesses and/or consumer behavior in response to those marketing strategies. As such, I am able to integrate my research expertise and study outcomes into the content of my marketing courses.

My most widely cited research published in the *Journal of Business Ethics* focuses on the ways in which various CSR positioning strategies impact consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions. My conceptual model tested the effects of novel and timely topics such as CSR-washing (i.e., the deliberate misrepresentation/exaggeration of CSR initiatives conveyed to the public) and CSR-hushing (e.g., the deliberate under-communication/reporting of CSR initiatives conveyed to the public). This research contributes to the marketing and ethics literature in numerous ways. These studies were the first to examine how consumers perceive the emerging topic of greenhushing. This is a phenomenon that has been receiving increasing coverage from major outlets like *Ad Age*, *Financial Times,* and *Bloomberg*, yet few academic studies have investigated the effects of such practices on consumer perceptions and behavior. In addition to exploring this concept in the context of sustainability-related practices and communication, my research also was the first to extend it to other CSR domains such as companies' supply chain transparency and LGBTQ+ initiatives, thus theoretically introducing and empirically testing concepts like gay-washing and fair-washing. My expertise in this area and my novel findings have led to research-informed teaching in several of my courses. For instance, business ethics, sustainability, CSR, and public policy are key topics discussed in my Consumer Behavior (MKTG 3162) course, which is required for all marketing majors. While the textbook provides surface-level coverage of many of these topics, I am able to augment this discussion based on my background and expertise in this area. I can share my findings from this research and prompt discussion about the ethical implications of practices like CSR-washing and CSR-hushing and the importance of reading CSR-related marketing materials with a critical eye. Moreover, the extension of this phenomenon to the context of supply chain transparency is a topic that is covered in my Fashion Merchandising (MKTG 4505) and Retailing Management (MKTG 3167) courses when we cover the units focused on CSR, sustainability, and responsible sourcing. My most recent work published in the *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* builds on the previously discussed research to examine the interplay between labor-related CSR claim types (e.g., substantive vs. associative) and the prior CSR reputation of apparel retailers in influencing consumer perceptions of message sincerity, message skepticism, and retailer trust. This work further informs the CSR and supply chain transparency topics included in my fashion and retailing courses.

My research also investigates brand and consumer activism, topics that are becoming increasingly important in our digital age. Discussion related to the potential risks and/or rewards when companies join cultural conversations and social movements is a clear fit in my Consumer

Behavior (MKTG 3162) and Principles of Marketing (MKTG 3161) courses. I am able to incorporate my work on companies' sociopolitical activism in the domains of LGBTQ+ rights, Black Lives Matter, and cannabis decriminalization into course content, discussions, and activities, which has stimulated research interest among students in my classes. The lectures about my research have inspired students to want to pursue undergraduate research with me as their mentor. As a result, one of my students and I conducted a study exploring consumer perceptions of corporate social justice activism. Given the novel insight we provided about consumer perceptions of woke-washing vs. authentic activism, the work was accepted and presented at the international *Australian and New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference* and is currently under review for potential publication in the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*.

Many of my recent studies have focused on social media, which is an increasingly important topic that is covered in all of the courses that I teach. I have conducted social media research concerning companies' communication strategies as well as how social media platforms are being used by consumers. For example, my research has covered timely topic like companies' social media communication strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic and the use of social media for brand activism, while it has also explored consumers' use of social media for their own activist efforts. This area of research ties nicely back to content and coursework included in several courses such as my Consumer Behavior (MKTG 3162) and Principles of Marketing (MKTG 3161). My findings inform discussions about what social media marketing approaches are most effective but also stimulate dialog about the ethical implications of social media on consumer-wellbeing.

Lastly, in addition to incorporating my research topics and findings into my courses, I am also able to share how varied research designs and methodologies can be used to answer critical questions about marketing and consumer behavior. As mentioned before, my research uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative approaches, including emerging methods like social media sentiment analysis. I am able to extend my academic research expertise to the context of how different research methodologies can be used by businesses and other organizations for the purposes of marketing research and consumer behavior research, topics that are significant in my Principles of Marketing (MKTG 3161) and Consumer Behavior (MKTG 3162) courses.

In conclusion, my varied research approaches and the timely topics that my research investigates have led to numerous opportunities for research-informed teaching. Not only does my research explore and answer pressing questions that have managerially and societally relevant implications, the interdisciplinary lens I use for my scholarship embodies our liberal arts mission in a way that makes me a more effective teacher-scholar who hopes to inspire the next generation of ethically-minded and responsible businesspeople and citizens.

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To trust or not to trust? The interplay between labor-related CSR claim type and prior CSR reputation of apparel retailers

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ABSTRACT

Prevalent human rights violations in supply chains have tarnished apparel retailers' reputations, heightening skepticism toward CSR communication. We examine the effect of labor-related CSR claim type (associative vs. substantive) on message credibility, skepticism, and retailer trust. Moreover, to determine whether CSR reputation plays a role in vulnerability to criticism, we investigate how a retailer's prior CSR reputation moderates the effect of CSR claim type on consumer evaluations. Applying the framework of decoupling and cognitive dissonance theory, we propose hypotheses and test them with an online experiment. We reveal that associative CSR claims, which communicate image-oriented rather than concrete information, significantly diminish message credibility and retailer trust, while triggering skepticism. A significant interaction effect further demonstrates that when a retailer's prior CSR reputation is negative, associative claims exacerbate message credibility. Our findings also indicate that positive CSR reputations do not always create a buffering halo effect. We discuss implications to develop optimal CSR communication strategies for apparel retailers.

1. Introduction

The apparel retail industry has faced increasing scrutiny regarding corporate social responsibility (CSR) and supply chain transparency. While tragedies like the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh prompted concerns about human rights violations (Cheng, 2015), the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated issues of workers' rights abuses as many apparel retailers canceled orders and factories reduced wages and exposed workers to unfair working conditions (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2021). Leading global apparel retailers, including Nike, The Gap, H&M, Zara, and Uniqlo, have long suffered reputational damage for human rights violations (Guilbert, 2018; Kitroeff, 2019; Paton et al., 2021). Regardless of whether companies have come under fire for unfair labor practices, many apparel retailers have been criticized due to the lack of transparency in CSR communication (Fashion Revolution, 2021).

In response, apparel retailers are making efforts to engage in more transparent labor practices by enacting their own codes of conduct or seeking third-party certifications, such as Fair Trade (Fair Trade Certified, 2020; Rashid and Byun, 2018). However, even for companies that are proactively working to improve supply chain practices, uncertainty still arises regarding the best method to inform stakeholders, especially given heightened consumer skepticism regarding CSR communication (Connors et al., 2017; Orazi and Chan, 2020). Practices such as greenwashing, which occurs when companies use vague and misleading communications intended to project an environmentally-friendly façade (Parguel et al., 2011), have eroded consumers' faith in CSR communication (De Jong et al., 2020; Ginder et al., 2019).

Regarding types of CSR communication, companies often employ either substantive claims, which are more concrete and verifiable, or associative claims, which are more image-oriented and less tangible in nature (Carlson et al., 1993, 1996). The literature suggests that the choice of claim type can impact communication effectiveness, leading to differing consumer perceptions, attitudes, and purchase intentions (Chan and Lau, 2004; Chan et al., 2006; Musgrove et al., 2018). However, previous studies have limited the differential effects of CSR claim types to the environmental context (Chan and Lau, 2004; Chan et al., 2006; Musgrove et al., 2018); there is a need for expanding our understanding of practices such as fairwashing whereby companies employ vague, misleading, or deceptive messages about their human rights or labor practices. Furthermore, with rising scrutiny and skepticism toward CSR communication in the apparel retail sector (Cernansky, 2021;

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Fashion Revolution, 2021; Vatamanescu et al., 2021), it becomes imperative to not only assess the effectiveness of different labor-related CSR communication strategies, but also to determine whether a retailer's prior CSR reputation serves as a protective mechanism or if it increases vulnerability to criticism. Although several studies suggest that prior reputation plays a role in consumers' perceptions of CSR initiatives (e.g., Bartels et al., 2020; Bögel, 2019; Castaldo et al., 2009; García-De los Salmones and Perez, 2018; Woodroof et al., 2019), how a retailer's prior CSR reputation interplays with different CSR claim types to influence consumer evaluations is underexamined, particularly in the context of labor-related CSR practices.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is threefold: (1) to examine the differential effect of labor-related CSR claim type (associative vs. substantive) on consumers' evaluations of message skepticism, message credibility, and retailer trust, (2) to investigate whether a retailer's prior CSR reputation (positive vs. negative) moderates the effect of the CSR claim type on consumer evaluations, and (3) to assess the extent to which perceptions of message credibility and skepticism affect consumers' trust in the retailer.

To accomplish the above objectives, we first review the theoretical background and relevant literature to propose hypotheses about consumers' evaluations of labor-related CSR communication. In particular, we discuss the phenomena of CSR decoupling and cognitive dissonance theory as the major conceptual foundations of this study. Next, we empirically test the proposed relationships by employing a between-subjects online experiment. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the study's findings, limitations of the study, and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. CSR decoupling: from greenwashing to fairwashing

CSR transparency entails open, honest disclosure to various stakeholders regarding key information about human rights, environmental, and sustainability impacts (Fashion Revolution, 2021; Modi and Zhao, 2020). Spurred by globalization and advanced communication technology, the demand for transparency related to apparel supply chain practices has intensified, which has led to greater scrutiny of human rights issues, such as ensuring that fair wages and regulated work hours are provided (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Fashion Revolution, 2021).

Despite the importance of greater transparency and protection of human rights in apparel supply chains, misleading practices such as decoupling continue to proliferate, leading many consumers to doubt the credibility of CSR communication (De Jong et al., 2020; Ginder et al., 2019). CSR decoupling refers to discrepancies "among CSR policies, implementation of CSR programs, and CSR impacts for various environmental and social issues" (Graafland and Smid, 2019, p. 231). Decoupling can lead companies to engage in external communications that are more symbolic rather than substantive (Meyer and Rowan, 1977) because the policies that are communicated do not result in the promised implementation (Bromley and Powell, 2012). A growing body of work highlights that greenwashing, which can be a result of decoupling, comes in different forms and does not always entail blatant lies or deception to be misleading to consumers; rather, many cases of decoupling and greenwashing are more subtle and nuanced and includes half lies, vague promises, and misrepresentations intended to enhance the company's image (De Jong et al., 2020; Gatti et al., 2021; Seeling et al., 2019).

In the context of labor-related practices, such ambiguous messages can take the form of fairwashing (Ginder et al., 2019). While much work has explored decoupling and variations of greenwashing within the environmental CSR domain, there is a need to extend these theoretical constructs to examine the implications of decoupling and fairwashing in the domain of labor-related CSR communication. Misleading CSR communications create a range of detrimental effects, ultimately damaging consumer evaluations of the company (Aji and Sutikno, 2015; Ginder et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019) and harming investing intentions (Gatti et al., 2021).

2.2. CSR claim types

Carlson et al.'s (1993) content analysis has served as a theoretical foundation for classifying and empirically studying the effects of different claim types that are employed in companies' sustainability communications. This typology suggests that environmental communication includes four orientations: (1) product-oriented, which emphasizes the environmentally beneficial aspects of their products, (2) process-oriented, which highlights the company's environmentally-friendly manufacturing and operational practices, (3) image-oriented, which merely connects the company with an environmental cause or initiative without the inclusion of explicit action on behalf of the company, and (4) environmental fact, which features environmental information that may be educational and useful yet is not clearly tied to the company's environmental efforts. Carlson et al. (1996) classified the first two orientations, product and process, as substantive claims which more explicitly exhibit the company's actions that are beneficial or at least minimize harm to the environment; these efforts are more tangible and concrete (e.g., "20 percent of the raw materials used in producing this product are recycled"). On the other hand, the latter two orientations, image-oriented and environmental fact, have been classified as associative claims that portray an eco-friendly impression without offering evidence of the company's environmental contributions or actions (e.g., "We are committed to preserving our forests"). Empirical research indicates that the claim type influences how consumers respond to CSR communication. For example, several studies have revealed the strength of substantive claims for generating more favorable consumer evaluations, including attitudes toward environmental advertising, attitudes toward the brand, and purchase intentions (Chan and Lau, 2004; Chan et al., 2006; Teona et al., 2020).

A few studies including Joireman et al. (2018) have examined similar contexts such as the use of concrete versus vague language to find that concrete claims can counteract skepticism. However, this research stream has focused on CSR communication in general or environmental communication more specifically; no studies have empirically extended this analysis to the context of labor-related CSR communication. In this regard, Ginder et al. (2019) highlight that consumers have differing sensitivities to CSR claims depending on the CSR domain. Given the heightened scrutiny over human rights, there is a need to assess how apparel retailers can avoid fairwashing and optimally approach labor-related CSR communication in a way that will inhibit message skepticism and strengthen message credibility and retailer trust.

2.3. CSR claim type and message skepticism

Skepticism is a person's propensity to question or doubt. While some skepticism is more dispositional, other states of skepticism are situational (Forehand and Grier, 2003). Situational skepticism has been examined in the context of consumer reactions to marketing communications wherein consumers distrust a company's advertising, promotional, or public relations efforts (Bartels et al., 2020; Connors et al., 2017). Research indicates that CSR communication may be more vulnerable to skepticism because unverifiable claims are often used (Connors et al., 2017; Orazi and Chan, 2020). Although consumer skepticism toward CSR communication has garnered growing academic attention, how certain CSR claim types might minimize or exacerbate skepticism perceptions has not been fully examined in empirical studies. However, prior literature supports the notion that associative claims may be subject to greater scrutiny since they include image-oriented, less tangible information, which can be perceived as vague, deceptive, and misleading (Carlson et al., 1996; Musgrove et al., 2018). Research suggests that consumer skepticism can be minimized by using claims that include more objective, concrete, and verifiable information (Connors et al., 2017; Joireman et al., 2018), whereas it can be activated when consumers question the company's CSR motives or distrust the claims they are making (Ginder et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2015; Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013). For instance, tactics such as greenwashing engender greater skepticism (Aji and Sutikno, 2015; Nguyen et al., 2019). Therefore, given the less tangible, verifiable nature of associative claims, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. An associative CSR claim will generate higher perceptions of message skepticism than a substantive CSR claim.

2.4. CSR claim type and message credibility

Credibility includes perceptions of believability based on trustworthiness and expertise (Erdem and Swait, 2004). MacKenzie and Lutz (1989) define advertising credibility as "the extent to which the consumer perceives claims made about the brand in the ad to be truthful and believable" (p. 51). This construct has been studied in the context of environmental advertising (Ganz and Grimes, 2018; Tucker et al., 2012) and can be extended to other forms of CSR communication (Gruber et al., 2017). Ganz and Grimes (2018) found that specific green claims were seen as more credible than vague claims. Similarly, Gruber et al. (2017) revealed that including precise information, like facts and figures, rather than simply indicating concern for or commitment to CSR improves credibility perceptions; thus, more concrete messages, such as those featuring substantive claims, are likely to generate greater credibility perceptions, while the vague nature of associative claims is subject to being perceived as misleading and deceptive (Carlson et al., 1993). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2. An associative CSR claim will generate lower perceptions of message credibility than a substantive CSR claim.

2.5. CSR claim type and retailer trust

The literature suggests that trust is critical for strengthening brand-customer relationships and purchase intentions (Nuttavuthisit and Thøgersen, 2017; Wang and Chen, 2019). Enhancing trust is particularly important during situations in which the consumer faces uncertainty and perceived risk (Oghazi et al., 2018), such as in response to transparency-related CSR communication that cannot be easily verified. Trust is especially crucial in these contexts because it can affirm consumers' confidence in the effectiveness of purchasing socially responsible goods, such as fair trade products (Tong and Su, 2018; Wang and Chen, 2019).

Furthermore, research indicates that certain CSR communication strategies might be more effective in establishing consumer trust. For example, Robinson and Eilert (2018) found that CSR messages with greater specificity engendered stronger consumer trust, which was corroborated by Atkinson and Rosenthal (2014) who revealed that more detailed and substantial product labeling on environmentally-friendly goods generated greater trust. On the other hand, communication strategies such as greenwashing in the environmental CSR domain and fairwashing in the labor domain can lead consumers to question companies' motives (Ginder et al., 2019) which could diminish consumers' brand trust. Similarly, in the context of apparel companies, exposure to communications featuring greater transparency and disclosure about their supply chains enhanced consumers' trust (Lee et al., 2018), brand equity, and purchase intentions (Kim et al., 2020). Therefore, it is expected that substantive CSR claims, which employ greater precision and evidence of verifiable impact, will prompt greater trust, whereas associative CSR claims, which are image-oriented and less tangible in nature, will risk damaging brand trust. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. An associative CSR claim will generate lower retailer trust than a substantive CSR claim.

2.6. The moderation effect of a retailer's prior CSR reputation

Fombrun (1996) defined corporate reputation as "a perceptual representation of a company's past actions and future prospects that describe the firm's overall appeal to all its key constituents when compared to other leading rivals" (p. 72). Included in the conceptualization of a company's reputation is the way in which its past CSR involvement is perceived. Prior reputation can serve as an important schematic framework within which new information is processed and assessed (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990). Accordingly, consumers' reactions to CSR communication are influenced by their existing CSR associations and perceptions of the company's reputation (García-De los Salmones and Perez, 2018; Lee et al., 2019). This reasoning aligns with cognitive dissonance theory, which posits that when two pieces of information are incongruent, individuals seek to restore harmony by using dissonance reduction techniques, such as changing or trivializing one of the dissonant elements (Festinger, 1957). Thus, according to cognitive dissonance theory, if a consumer had a negative perception of a company's CSR reputation, then exposure to their CSR communication touting their responsible deeds would be inconsistent with their prior beliefs, thus causing tension. To reduce that cognitive discomfort, consumers are likely to minimize or be more critical of the CSR communication that is dissonant with their existing beliefs, which may cause them to view the CSR message and company more harshly.

In line with this theorizing, research suggests that companies with poor reputations may experience a CSR backfire effect wherein the CSR communication results in negative evaluations (Woodroof et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2006), while companies with positive reputations may experience a halo effect in which their favorable reputation protects them from scrutiny (Kim and Woo, 2019). In a similar vein, several studies indicate that positive CSR reputations can enhance consumers' trust in fair trade and organic products (Castaldo et al., 2009; Tong and Su, 2018), while Bögel (2019) found that trust in a company's CSR activities is weakened when the company has a negative reputation. Furthermore, Bartels et al. (2020) showed that when companies with favorable fair trade reputations engage in labor-related CSR communication, consumers perceived the messages with less skepticism.

Accordingly, we expect that consumers' perceptions of a retailer's prior CSR reputation will moderate the effect of the CSR claim type on message skepticism, message credibility, and retailer trust. While the literature suggests that engaging in any CSR communication might be risky if the company has an unfavorable reputation, the type of CSR claim that is employed may serve to minimize or exacerbate this effect. Given the vague, potentially misleading nature of associative claims (Carlson et al., 1993, 1996), it is anticipated that featuring such a claim when a company is perceived as having a poor CSR reputation could increase consumers' scrutiny, leading to stronger message skepticism and weaker message credibility and retailer trust than would be the case if the retailer had a favorable CSR reputation. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Consumers' perceptions of a retailer's prior CSR reputation (negative vs. positive) will moderate the effect of CSR claim type on perceptions of (a) message skepticism, (b) message credibility, and (c) retailer trust.

2.7. Influence of message skepticism on retailer trust

Extensive research highlights the negative implications that can ensue as a result of skepticism, including lower levels of consumer-based retailer equity, a greater propensity for unfavorable word-of-mouth (Skarmeas and Leonidou, 2013), less favorable attitudes (Chaabane and Parguel, 2016), lower purchase intentions (Leonidou and Skarmeas, 2017; Orazi and Chan, 2020), and weakened consumer advocacy intentions (Bartels et al., 2020). Moreover, message skepticism can directly influence retailer trust. Research suggests that when consumers experience skepticism toward a company's messages, this weakens their feelings of trust (Aji and Sutikno, 2015; Minton, 2019). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5. Perceived message skepticism will negatively affect retailer trust.

2.8. Influence of message credibility on retailer trust

Perceived message credibility has been linked to the subsequent formation of favorable attitudes toward the message and the brand, and it can be a critical determinant of message persuasiveness (Connors et al., 2017; Tucker et al., 2012). Research suggests that perceptions of credibility could enhance consumers' trust, attitudes toward the brand, and purchase intentions (Connors et al., 2017; Orazi and Chan, 2020; Wang and Chen, 2019). For instance, when company logos or websites are perceived to have greater credibility, consumers' trust is enhanced (Lowry et al., 2014; Rashid and Byun, 2018). Similarly, in the context of retailers' social issue advertising, stronger perceptions of message credibility generated greater trust in the retailer (Didier and Lombart, 2018). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6. Perceived message credibility will positively affect retailer trust.

Fig. 1 presents the research model of this study and includes all hypothesized relationships proposed in this study.

3. Method

3.1. Experimental design and stimulus development

This study employed an online experiment with a between-subjects design. Experimental studies are one of the most common and powerful methods of investigating the effect of different CSR communication strategies on consumer evaluations (De Jong et al., 2020; Ginder et al., 2019). CSR claim type (associative vs. substantive) was manipulated following experimental studies conducted in the environmental marketing literature (e.g., Chan and Lau, 2004; Chan et al., 2006; Musgrove et al., 2018). Specifically, the substantive CSR claim was manipulated by including both product- and process-oriented communication (Carlson et al., 1993; Chan et al., 2006) that highlights the specific, concrete ways in which the company's labor-related CSR initiatives have provided tangible benefits and outcomes. Alternatively, the associative claim was manipulated by including both image-orientated and labor-related CSR facts (Carlson et al., 1993; Chan et al., 2006) that can be loosely associated with CSR commitment yet lack the concrete, verifiable information included in the substantive claims. In addition to following the manipulation procedures of the studies previously mentioned, preliminary online research was conducted to assist in the creation of the experimental stimuli. Numerous apparel retailers' websites (e.g., H&M, Nike, The Gap, Patagonia, etc.) were analyzed to ensure that the manipulations of CSR claim type had sufficient ecological validity and accurately reflected realistic labor-related CSR communication currently in use by apparel retailers.

Two pretests were conducted using convenience samples of undergraduate students enrolled in a major southeastern university in the U.S. The purpose of the first pretest ($n = 68$) was to identify an apparel retailer whose CSR reputation varied in terms of consumer perceptions. Participants were asked to list three apparel retailers that have a good reputation for socially responsible business practices and three apparel retailers that have a bad reputation. Based on the pretest results, brand X was the apparel retail brand that had the greatest variability in CSR reputation perceptions and was therefore chosen to be featured in the subsequent studies (although the name of the retailer included is not identified in this paper, the actual name of this retail brand was used in our stimuli). We chose the brand with the greatest variability in CSR reputation perceptions so that we could divide the sample into two groups to test a moderation effect.

The purpose of the second pretest ($n = 122$) was to assess the effectiveness of the manipulations of the CSR claim types. For the substantive claim, participants were presented with the following content: "*Brand X admits that garment production often takes place in countries where human rights violations are a risk. Therefore, implementing factory auditing is imperative for firms to ensure workers are protected and factories are regulated. By working with the Fair Labor Association (FLA), a non-profit organization dedicated to improving working conditions, Brand X has eliminated excessive overtime by 70% and other overtime has been paid at 125%.*" Participants in the associative claim condition were presented with the following information: "*Brand X admits that garment production often takes place in countries where human rights violations are a risk. Therefore, implementing factory auditing is imperative for firms to ensure workers are protected and factories are regulated. By joining the Fair Labor Association (FLA), a non-profit organization dedicated to improving working conditions, Brand X has become aware of the significance of factory monitoring and is committed to fair labor standards.*" Participants were shown one of the two claim manipulations followed by the manipulation check measures. A one-way ANOVA revealed that the claim type manipulation was successful ($F_{1, 120} = 29.116, p < .001$).

3.2. Measures

To ensure the effectiveness of the experimental manipulation, six semantic-differential scale items adapted from Chan and Lau (2004) were used. Using a 7-point scale, participants indicated their level of agreement with statements regarding the message claim (e.g., *least*

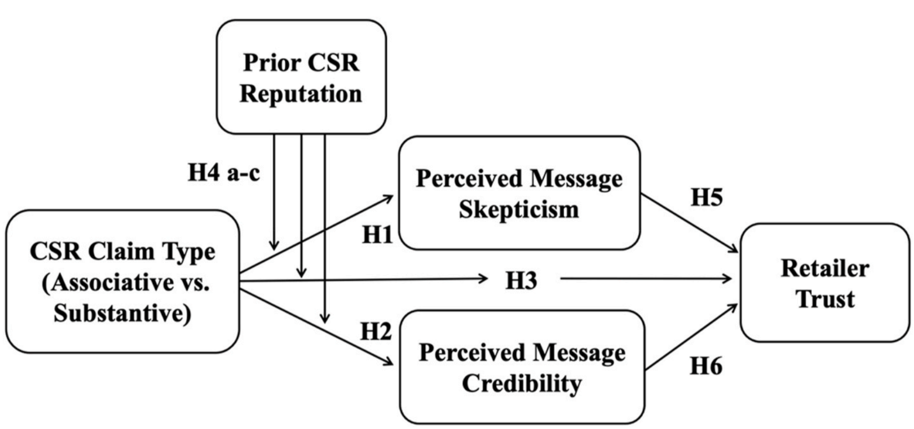

Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

substantive – most substantive; *least specific – most specific*). Prior perceptions of brand X's CSR reputation were measured using three items adapted from Pérez (2009) (e.g., *Brand X acts with society's interests in mind*; *Brand X acts in a socially responsible way*). Perceived message skepticism was measured with four items adapted from Mohr et al. (1998) (e.g., *This message misleads rather than informs consumers*; *This message exaggerates*). Perceived message credibility was measured with four items adapted from Flanagin and Metzger (2007) (e.g., *This message is believable*; *This message is trustworthy*). Lastly, retailer trust was measured with ten items adapted from Herbst et al. (2012) (e.g., *I trust brand X*; *Brand X has integrity*; *Brand X is an honest brand*). All scales other than the manipulation check were measured with 7-point (1 for *strongly disagree* and 7 for *strongly agree)* Likert scale items.

3.3. Sample and procedure

The main experiment and questionnaire were created using Qualtrics software. The targeted population of this study was adult consumers who reside in the U.S., are at least 19 years old, and are familiar with brand X. Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is an online crowdsourcing platform where consumers can be accessed to virtually perform research-related tasks in exchange for compensation (Amazon Mechanical Turk, n.d.). According to prior research, samples obtained from MTurk are comparable to those acquired using traditional, more representative sampling techniques (Daly & Nataraajan, 2015; Mortensen and Hughes, 2018). To enhance the reliability of the data, we included three attention check items, such as "*What year is it currently?*" and "*The previous company scenario that you read was about the retailer Y.*" Participants who did not pass the above screening questions or failed to accurately answer the attention check questions were terminated from survey completion.

After successfully completing the screening questions, participants first answered the CSR reputation perception items. Based on their beliefs and perceptions about brand X, they were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statements. They were then randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions, which featured either the associative or substantive labor-related CSR claim information. Participants were asked to imagine that they were scrolling through brand X's website and came across the claim regarding the company's socially responsible business practices. After reading the message, they were presented with the manipulation check items followed by the items used to measure message skepticism, message credibility, and retailer trust. At the end of the questionnaire, they answered demographic questions. Out of 181 completed samples, inattentive responses, such as failing the attention check questions and answering the same way for each question, were removed. A total of 119 consumers (*Mdn* = 39; 69 females and 50 males) comprised the final useable sample for data analysis. A majority of the participants were White, non-Hispanic (69.7%) and had household incomes lower than \$50,000 (57.1%) or between \$50,000 and \$99,999 (34.5%). Participants had varying education levels, with more than half (53.7%) holding a Bachelor's degree or higher.

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and validity

Before testing the hypotheses, the reliability of the scales was assessed. All scales' Cronbach's alphas were over 0.90, and the factor loadings for all retained items were above 0.81, showing strong reliability of the scales (Nunnally, 1978). Due to low factor loadings, a few items were dropped. For message credibility, the item "*The message is not biased*" had a factor loading of 0.641 and was dropped from further analyses. Similarly, two reverse coded items measuring retailer loyalty (factor loadings of 0.571 and 0.648) were dropped, and one retailer trust item, "*Brand X is predictable*" with a factor loading of 0.586 was dropped.

Table 1
Scale properties.

	# of items	Factor loadings	Cronbach's alpha
Message Skepticism	4	>.81	.908
Message Credibility	3	>.90	.917
Prior Retailer Loyalty	6	>.81	.943
Prior CSR Reputation	3	>.96	.966
Retailer Trust	9	>.78	.961

Table 1 shows the retained number of items, the factor loadings, and Cronbach's alphas for each scale. Mean scores from each scale were used for hypotheses testing. To test a moderation effect of prior CSR reputation of the retailer, the respondents were split into two groups based on a median split (*Mdn* = 4.33): a negative perception group ($n = 57$, 47.9%) and a positive perception group ($n = 62$, 52.1%).

4.2. Hypotheses testing

To test H1 through H4, a one-way MANCOVA was conducted with CSR claim type as a fixed factor and perceptions of message skepticism, message credibility, and retailer trust as dependent variables. Prior loyalty for brand X was entered as a covariate because we used an existing company for our stimuli, and the participants' prior retailer loyalty could contaminate the effect of the treatment variable. The MANCOVA results indicated that the prior loyalty for brand X was significant (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.607$, $F_{3,112} = 24.130$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.393$). Controlling for the effect of the covariate, the main effect of CSR claim type was significant (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.879$, $F_{3,\ 112} = 5.120$, $p < .01$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.121$). Furthermore, the CSR claim type X prior CSR reputation interaction effect was significant (Wilk's $\lambda = 0.913$, $F_{3,\ 112} = 3.570$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.087$). The results of the univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) (see Table 2) showed that CSR claim type had a significant main effect on perceptions of message skepticism ($F = 15.123$, $p < .001$), message credibility ($F = 5.163$, $p < .05$), and retailer trust ($F = 5.163$, $p < .05$). Specifically, perceptions of message skepticism were significantly higher for the associative claim ($M = 4.039$) than the substantive claim ($M = 3.252$), whereas perceptions of message credibility and retailer trust were significantly lower for the associative claim ($M_{Credibility} = 4.655$; $M_{Trust} = 4.736$) than the substantive claim ($M_{Credibility} = 5.089$; $M_{Trust} = 5.053$). Therefore, H1 through H3 are supported.

A significant interaction effect between CSR claim type and prior CSR reputation was found only for perceptions of message credibility ($F = 5.672$, $p < .05$). When the retailer's prior CSR reputation was negatively perceived, the effect of CSR claim type on perceptions of message credibility was greater than when the prior CSR reputation was positively perceived. Estimated marginal means and standardized errors for

Table 2
Univariate ANOVA results.

Effect and Dependent Measures	SS	*df*	*F*	*p*	Partial η^2
CSR Claim Type					
Message Skepticism	18.074	1	15.123	.000	.117
Message Credibility	5.490	1	5.163	.025	.043
Retailer Trust	2.936	1	5.485	.021	.046
Prior CSR Reputation					
Message Skepticism	5.411	1	4.528	.036	.038
Message Credibility	14.694	1	13.818	.000	.108
Retailer Trust	23.327		43.587	.000	.277
Claim Type x Reputation					
Message Skepticism	.002	1	.002	.965	.000
Message Credibility	6.032	1	5.672	.019	.047
Retailer Trust	1.453	1	2.715	.102	.023
Error					
Message Skepticism	136.243	114			
Message Credibility	121.231	114			
Retailer Trust	61.011	114			

the interaction effect are presented in Table 3 and Fig. 2. Based on these results, H4b is supported, and H4a and H4c are rejected.

H5 and H6 test the effect of perceptions of message skepticism and message credibility on retailer trust. Prior to these tests, correlations among four variables (a covariate, two predictor variables, and a dependent variable) were examined to check the assumption of multicollinearity. All correlations were smaller than 0.736, and VIF (variance inflation factor) values were below 3.0 (Hair et al., 1995), indicating the multicollinearity assumption was met (see Table 4). Next, a two-stage hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted with retailer trust as the dependent variable (see Table 5). At stage one of the regression, prior retailer loyalty was entered to control for the effect of a covariate (Model 1). At stage two, two predictor variables (perceptions of message skepticism and message credibility) were entered (Model 2). The results showed that Model 1 with prior retailer loyalty was significant, F (1, 117) = 123.929, $p < .001$, accounting for 51.4% of the variation in retailer trust. Model 2 with prior retailer loyalty and perceptions of message skepticism and message credibility was significant, F (3, 115) = 104.257, $p < .001$, explaining 73.1% of the variation in retailer trust. The change in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = 0.217$) was significant, F (2, 115) = 46.369, $p < .001$. Specifically, when the significant effect of prior retailer loyalty ($\beta = 0.717$, $p < .001$) was controlled for, perceived message skepticism significantly decreased retailer trust ($\beta = -0.157$, $p < .05$), while perceived message credibility significantly increased retailer trust ($\beta = 0.387$, $p < .001$). Therefore, H5 and H6 are supported.

5. Discussion

We examined how different labor-related CSR claims that are used by apparel retailers interact with a retailer's prior CSR reputation to influence consumers' message skepticism, message credibility, and retailer trust. In line with the CSR decoupling and greenwashing literature (De Jong et al., 2020; Guerreiro and Pacheco, 2021; Orazi and Chan, 2020), we reveal that associative CSR claims, which lack transparency and employ vague promises, trigger message skepticism while diminishing message credibility and retailer trust.

Furthermore, drawing from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), we demonstrate a significant interplay between CSR claim type and the retailer's prior CSR reputation for message credibility perceptions; when a retailer's prior CSR reputation is negatively perceived, consumers' evaluations of message credibility rate more negatively for associative claims. This finding implies that consumers are more critical of CSR messaging that contradicts previously held beliefs about the retailer. On the other hand, we did not find hypothesized effects for message skepticism or retailer trust. Although contrary to our theorizing, this finding corresponds with some studies suggesting that despite the benefits positive CSR reputations can deliver, the higher expectations that consumers have for companies with favorable CSR reputations can sometimes backfire leading to greater scrutiny (Janney and Gove, 2011; Peasley et al., 2021). These findings imply that communicating transparency via substantive CSR claims is optimal regardless of prior CSR reputation, and more notably, positive CSR reputations may not always provide a buffering effect against vague or optics-focused communications when it comes to human rights and labor practices.

Finally, we found that the extent of retailer trust is determined by the joint influence of message credibility and skepticism perceptions. This finding demonstrates that CSR communication effectiveness can be maximized by enhancing message credibility while minimizing message skepticism, both of which are fundamental for strengthening consumers' trust in and purchase preferences for ethical and socially responsible products (Bartels et al., 2020; Bögel, 2019). This finding also highlights that a lack of transparency in labor-related CSR communication can easily trigger skepticism, making apparel retailers vulnerable to criticism.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Despite increasing stakeholder scrutiny about apparel retailers' human rights violations, the scholarly literature in this area is scarce. To our best knowledge, this is the first study to theoretically extend Carlson et al.'s (1993) CSR claim typology beyond the environmental domain to the understudied and increasingly scrutinized context of labor-related CSR communication. Our contribution to the labor-related CSR literature is critical given that consumers demand more information about retailers' supply chain practices (Modi and Zhao, 2020; Rausch et al., 2021; Vatamanescu et al., 2021), and consumers' sensitivities to CSR communication tend to vary depending on the featured CSR domain (e.g., environment vs. labor) (Ginder et al., 2019).

Further, in line with the research that has examined the impact of environmental communication, we substantiate the merits of using substantive claims, which include more concrete, verifiable information (Joireman et al., 2018; Kang and Atkinson, 2021). We find that substantive claims improve credibility perceptions and retailer trust while inhibiting consumer skepticism, thus expanding our understanding of these important mechanisms in crafting successful CSR communication campaigns. Our findings theoretically contribute to the CSR decoupling (Bromley and Powell, 2012; Graafland and Smid, 2019; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) and greenwashing (De Jong et al., 2020; Gatti et al., 2021) literature by testing the nuances of misleading and misrepresentative communication approaches in the context of fairwashing. Congruent with prior theorizing, messaging does not have to be blatantly dishonest to negatively impact consumers' perceptions; simply lacking transparency, incorporating image-building mechanisms, and making vague commitments can have unintended consequences (De Jong et al., 2020; Gatti et al., 2019).

Moreover, our study adds to the body of work investigating the influence of prior CSR reputation on consumers' processing of CSR communication. Supported by cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), the significant interaction effect of prior CSR reputation on message credibility implies that associative claims tend to receive more scrutiny for retailers with negative prior CSR reputations, significantly harming perceived credibility of CSR messages. Although we find that associative claims are viewed as credible as substantive claims when a retailer has a positive CSR reputation, our study demonstrates that regardless of CSR reputation associative claims do trigger more skepticism and diminish trust in the retailer as compared to substantive claims. Therefore, contrary to some previous research (Bartels et al., 2020; Girardin et al., 2021; Tong and Su, 2018), it seems positive CSR reputations do not always provide a buffering halo effect, and when it

Table 3
Estimated marginal means for the interaction effect of CSR claim types and prior CSR reputation.

Dependent Variable	CSR Claim Type	Prior CSR Reputation	Mean	Std. Error
Message Skepticism	Associative	Negative	4.287[a]	.214
		Positive	3.792[a]	.203
	Substantive	Negative	3.491[a]	.212
		Positive	3.013[a]	.205
Message Credibility	Associative	Negative	4.029[a]	.202
		Positive	5.282[a]	.192
	Substantive	Negative	4.914[a]	.200
		Positive	5.264[a]	.193
Retailer Trust	Associative	Negative	4.120[a]	.143
		Positive	5.351[a]	.136
	Substantive	Negative	4.659[a]	.142
		Positive	5.447[a]	.137

[a] Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: Prior Retailer Loyalty = 4.5978.

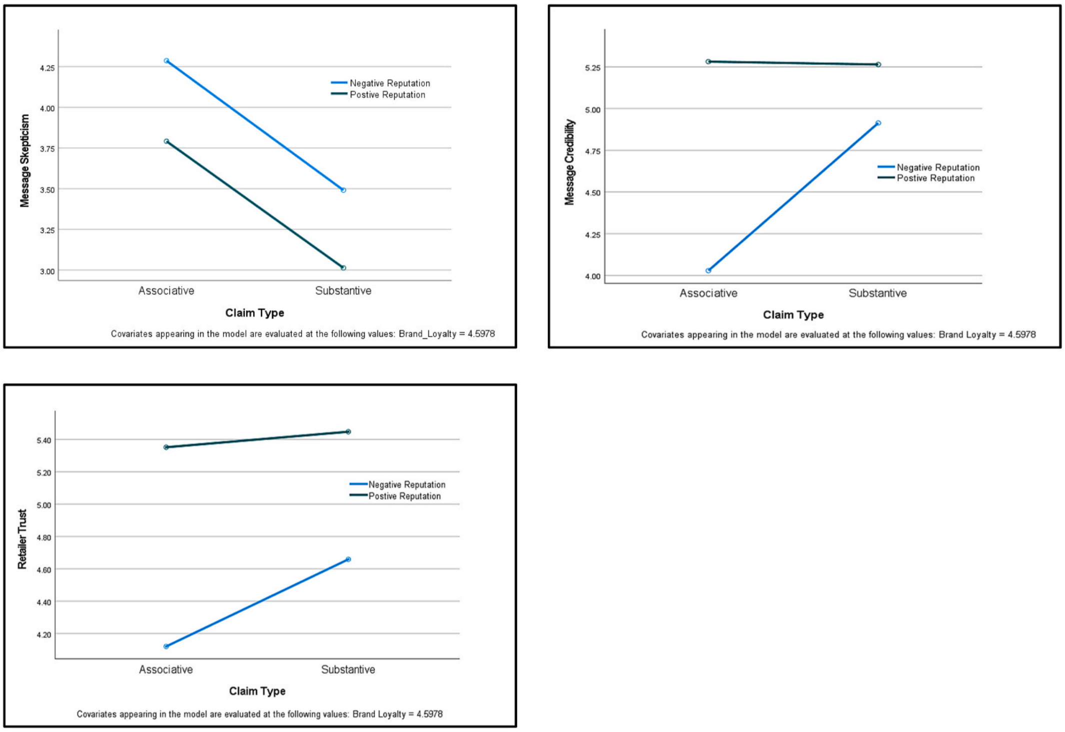

Fig. 2. Claim type X prior CSR reputation interaction effects.

Table 4
Pearson correlations and VIF.

	Prior Retailer Loyalty	Message Skepticism	Message Credibility
Retailer Trust	.717	-.648	.699
Message Credibility	.393	-.736	
Message Skepticism	-.413		
VIF (DV: Retailer Trust)	1.231	2.269	2.227

Table 5
The effect of message skepticism and message credibility on retailer trust.

Variable	β	*t*	*R*	R^2	ΔR^2
Step 1 (Model 1)			.717	.514	.514
Prior Retailer Loyalty	.717	11.132***			
Step 2 (Model 2)			.855	.731	.217
Prior Retailer Loyalty	.500	9.322***			
Message Skepticism	-.157	2.154*			
Message Credibility	.387	5.367***			

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

comes to labor-related CSR communications, apparel retailers would be wise to focus their efforts on transparent substantive claims. These findings are in line with Peasley et al.'s (2021) assertion that a strong CSR reputation will not always provide immunity from criticism when the company is irresponsible or fails to live up to CSR standards.

5.2. Managerial implications

Building on the preceding discussion, there are several notable managerial implications revealed in this study. First, our findings provide guidance for apparel retailers to create more compelling, persuasive, and transparent CSR messages related to human rights and labor practices. Our findings caution against using vague, image-focused communications, particularly for retailers with negative CSR reputations. Consumers desire information that will assist them in making more responsible consumption decisions, such as eco-labels and information concerning societal issues like fair wages, production, and working conditions (Byrd et al., 2021; Rashid and Byun, 2018; Rausch et al., 2021). Retailers should communicate content that transparently highlights the results of CSR initiatives in ways that can be verified and substantiated.

Moreover, given that prior reputation can play a role in how consumers process new CSR information from the company, retailers would benefit from actively monitoring their CSR reputations and adjusting course as necessary (Su et al., 2017). Social listening and reputation monitoring, using tools such as Google Alerts or Keyhole, could be implemented by retailers to periodically assess how consumers perceive their CSR reputations and communicated messages. If retailers have a poor reputation regarding social responsibility, the use of substantive claims represents a better choice to enhance message evaluations. In the long-term, companies with unfavorable CSR reputations might also want to consider alternative approaches to enhance consumers' perceptions, such as certifications and partnerships to use in conjunction with substantive CSR claims (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2011; Rashid and Byun, 2018). Although external sources of information, such as favorable press coverage, tend to enhance credibility perceptions, company-controlled outlets, such as corporate websites, in-store promotions, and social media, remain fundamental for relaying transparent CSR information (Gruber et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2019; Wang and He, 2022; Zafar et al., 2021).

Lastly, while the push for supply chain transparency in the apparel retail sector is not a new phenomenon, the need for research in this realm has been intensified due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only has exploitation of vulnerable workers worsened during the pandemic (Asia Floor Wage Alliance, 2021), research also indicates that consumers now want greater transparency and enhanced communication from companies (Vatamanescu et al., 2021). From a public policy perspective, these findings highlight the importance of effective CSR communication campaigns to bolster consumer trust in products sourced/produced via transparent supply chains. As stakeholder concerns regarding human rights violations continue to intensify (Cernansky, 2021; Modi and Zhao, 2020; Raucsh et al., 2021), it is essential that retailers, non-profit organizations, and policy makers partner with one another to educate consumers on the benefits of buying responsibly produced and sourced goods. In order for consumers to modify purchasing behaviors, they must believe the CSR claims that retailers make and trust in the retailer that they will actually fulfill their promises. Awareness, education, and trust are integral for motivating more responsible supply chains and consumer behavior.

5.3. Limitations and recommendations for future research

Although the findings from this study provide important contributions, several limitations must be noted. First, the study is limited by its experimental design. While care was taken to enhance the ecological validity of the stimuli, there are limitations posed by the nature of the manipulations. For instance, the experimental stimuli featured only textual content; in practice, visual components are also often included. Thus, future research should investigate the interaction effect between the textual and visual components used in CSR communication, such as CSR certification logos and labor-related images. Second, the study is limited by the small sample size. Third, the generalizability of the findings is limited due to the study's focus on one apparel retailer. Although this enabled the examination of prior CSR reputation perceptions and the impact of retailer loyalty was controlled for, future research could test this model using various retailers or could feature a hypothetical company to control for other company-related effects. Moreover, there is a need to extend this line of questioning to examine the role of the retail sector's reputation. For example, fast fashion retailers have faced greater scrutiny for their supply chain practices (Kitreoff, 2019); thus, investigating the role of the type or the perceived reputation of the retail sector could expand our understanding of the phenomenon. Fourth, our study is limited to only perceptual consumer outcome measures. Although research suggests that consumer trust is a critical variable in the chain of effects that lead to purchase intentions for fair trade products (Rashid and Byun, 2018; Wang and Chen, 2019), it would be beneficial for future research to incorporate additional dependent variables or field experiments which could improve the fidelity of this inquiry (Morales et al., 2017).

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study addresses significant gaps in the literature by examining how apparel retailers with varying CSR reputations can most effectively craft labor-related CSR messages that will minimize consumers' message skepticism while bolstering message credibility and retailer trust. By theoretically extending the decoupling, greenwashing, and CSR claim typology from the environmental communication literature to this novel yet critical context, we find that associative labor-related claims significantly diminish message credibility and retailer trust while triggering skepticism, thus leading apparel retailers to be vulnerable to CSR criticism. Further, by applying cognitive dissonance theory to investigate the interplay between CSR claim type and prior CSR reputation, our finding demonstrates that vague, image-focused labor claims further jeopardize retailers with negative reputations by exacerbating message credibility. Moreover, our findings imply that positive CSR reputations do not always provide immunity from scrutiny, and regardless of CSR reputation, substantive claims which include greater specificity and tangible results are optimal to ensure transparency in labor-related CSR communication.

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Article

B Corps' Social Media Communications during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Through the Lens of the Triple Bottom Line

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic and rising demand for transparency has heightened the importance of sustainability communications on social media to generate deeper stakeholder engagement. Although B Corporations (B Corps), businesses committed to the triple bottom line (TBL), could serve as a catalyst for sustainable development, little is known about how they communicate on social media during a crisis. Therefore, we examined social media communications of B Corps to (1) identify salient topics and themes, (2) analyze how these themes align with the TBL, and (3) evaluate social media performance against industry benchmarks. We focused on the apparel, footwear, and accessories (AFA) sectors in the U.S. and chose Twitter, a platform known for crisis communication. Using a qualitative method, we found four topics and 21 underlying themes. Topics related to social/environmental issues and COVID-19 were most dominant, followed by product/brand promotions. Further classification of specific themes and cases from a TBL perspective demonstrated that, overall, B Corps in the AFA sectors leveraged various approaches to promote balance between each TBL dimension. Lastly, although collectively B Corps exceeded some of the Twitter industry benchmarks, at an individual level, most brands had room for improvement to build a stronger community and promote synergy among the three pillars of the TBL.

Keywords: triple bottom line; B Corporations; COVID-19; social media; communication

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1. Introduction

"*Serving a global community of people using businesses as a force for good.*"—B Lab

A growing emphasis on stakeholder values of social and environmental responsibility and the triple bottom line (TBL) thinking led to the emergence of B Corporations (hereafter B Corps) in 2006 [1]. The TBL posits that sustainability encompasses three pillars including social, environmental, and economic dimensions, and businesses should incorporate all three dimensions [2]. B Corps are social enterprises that are committed to the TBL and certified by B Lab, a non-profit organization that assesses corporations' overall impact of their decisions on their workers, customers, community, and the environment. As of July 2021, 4049 corporations in 77 countries are certified [3]. The assessed impact comprises a range of factors, including but not limited to, supply chains, raw materials, charitable contributions, and employee benefits, which are reinforced by transparency and accountability measures [3]. Because B Corp certification is reassessed every three years, substantial effort and continuous commitment are required to become and maintain the status of a certified B Corp. Therefore, certification signals sustainability as a "core value" or "way of doing business" and can help companies develop an authentic, purpose-driven corporate identity and differentiate from corporations engaging in "greenwashing" and/or "woke washing" [3,4].

Moreover, the COVID-19 global pandemic has accelerated consumer demand for authentic, sustainable, and inclusive business practices. A recent IBM study that surveyed 14,000 adults from nine countries indicated that environmental issues are more important to them as a result of COVID-19, and specifically, they highly valued safeguarding freshwater supplies, reducing pollution, protecting ecosystems and species, and addressing climate change [5]. The IBM study further noted that consumer demand has accelerated sustainable investments grounded in environmental, social, and governance factors in portfolio selection, which led to an increase in investment by 96% from 2019 to 2020.

This shift is likely to boost stakeholders' interest in B Corps as their brand purpose and values are embedded in responsible and ethical practices. As a result, communicating sustainability to the public is becoming more critical for transparent and legitimate communications [6,7]. Social media is increasingly serving as one of the primary channels to communicate with stakeholders about corporate values and initiatives and build a reputation [8]. For example, a study found that when companies promote corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives on social media they can shift consumers' sentiment about the corporation from neutral to positive [9]. This effect can be particularly pronounced for B Corps, given their authenticity and commitment for the greater good. Additionally, because the majority of B Corps are small to medium-sized businesses [3], social media is integral for communication as it offers low barriers to entry to reach a large audience around the globe [10]. Furthermore, the interactive nature of social media allows businesses to measure engagement with corporate communication and build relationships with different types of stakeholders [11,12].

Although B Corps could serve as important "catalysts" for social and environmental changes [1], little is known about how B Corps communicate and perform on social media. More importantly, there is no known study that examined how or whether messages that sustainable businesses, such as B Corps, communicate on social media support the TBL. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled concerns about fundamental problems rooted in society and the environment. Given that B Corps prioritize creating value for non-shareholding stakeholders, including employees, the community, and the environment [1], understanding how they navigate a crisis and communicate on social media is particularly relevant and meaningful to further the success of the B Corp model and to promote sustainability on a global scale. Furthermore, the TBL provides a comprehensive framework to implement and communicate sustainability to stakeholders. This framework can be used to evaluate the range of individual B Corp's social media communications to identify the strengths and the areas of improvement which could help them improve communication effectiveness via higher visibility and engagement. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how B Corps communicate on social media in the face of a global crisis. Specifically, using a qualitative research method, we explore the following research questions:

(1) What are the major topics and underlying themes in B Corps' communications on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the most frequently communicated messages? How are sustainability messages communicated on social media?
(2) How are B Corps' social media communications aligned with the TBL framework? Are there any specific dimensions (social, environmental, or economic) of sustainability that are more prominently featured on social media than others?
(3) How do B Corps perform on social media in comparison to the industry benchmarks? Are there any patterns in social media performance metrics by the brand's follower size or overall B Impact Score?

Among various social media platforms available, this study analyzes B Corps' communications on their corporate Twitter accounts. We chose Twitter, a text-based platform, as it has been noted as the most suitable for analyzing messages, and corporations often use Twitter to promote their sustainability-related information [11,12]. Twitter has also been identified as an effective platform for crisis communication; however, much research has focused on brands' use of Twitter to deal with internal corporate crises (e.g., product recalls, scandals). Thus, there is need to explore companies' communication strategies in times of collective crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, we focus on the apparel, footwear, and accessories (AFA) sectors in the U.S. The AFA sectors are replete with ethical transgressions across the supply chain, ranging from labor to environmental abuses. Moreover, the apparel/fashion sector accounts for 10% of carbon emissions; it is the second-largest consumer of water, with textile dyeing specifically being the second-largest polluter of water [13]. To make matters worse, the demand for clothing has accelerated in recent decades. Consumers bought 60% more clothes in 2014 than in 2000, and 57% of the discarded clothing ends up in landfills. Given the magnitude of the environmental consequences of the AFA sectors, B Corps can catalyze positive change and a sustainable future. Therefore, by targeting B Corps in the AFA sectors, we can evaluate their focused messages in social media communications and identify opportunities to improve shareholder engagement and advance sustainability development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Triple Bottom Line Framework

As per the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainability can be defined as "*meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*" [14] (p. 16). Corporations committed to sustainability leverage the TBL framework to examine the impact of their businesses. The TBL, also known as Triple-P (People, Planet, and Profit), posits that businesses should be responsible for their social and environmental impact in addition to economic performance [15]. The social, or "people", dimension focuses on building social capital through positive relationships with various stakeholders. It includes improving lives of people through fair treatment or welfare policies, contributing to the communities, providing educational opportunities to their stakeholders, and more [15]. The environmental, or "Planet", dimension focuses on securing or expanding natural capital by improving the health of the planet by doing no harm or minimizing the impact on the environment [15]. It includes preserving natural resources, protecting the land, air, and water, reducing waste, producing sustainable materials or products, and using renewable energy [16]. The economic, or "Profit", dimension pertains to the overall economic equity for the society the company serves, not just internal profits of the company [15]. It includes improving the benefits of their offerings, promoting sales and brand image, reducing production costs, and contributing to the economic growth of the communities, such as creating jobs [16–18]. Therefore, sustainable corporations leverage the TBL to drive positive change by evaluating a comprehensive set of social, environmental, and economic impacts on a broad range of stakeholders, including employees, community members, customers, activists, and regulatory institutions [19].

However, balancing the triple bottom lines can be challenging, as economic, social, and environmental dimensions can be conflicting at times. Walker et al. [20] note that businesses should embrace the tensions between the three dimensions and develop synergies between them. Walker et al. [20] found that high performance in one dimension is correlated with high performance in other dimensions, regardless of external shocks/economic conditions (e.g., great recession). Furthermore, they found a significant increase in the market valuation of businesses (i.e., economic capital) when they used creative and synergistic solutions to address all three aspects of the TBL.

While the TBL encourages businesses to incorporate the three pillars into their agenda, not all businesses fully leverage it. Particularly, when the TBL is used as an accounting/reporting tool, non-financial impact can be difficult to report, and companies may pick what they want to report rather than presenting the complete picture [21]. In such cases, companies can use the TBL as a smokescreen to signal sustainable business practices but may not actually consider the TBL to inform business decision-making or to drive positive change. In a recent commentary, Elkington [2], who coined a concept of the TBL in 1994, stresses that corporations should account for the full cost of doing business, and B Corps hold promise in their commitment to the TBL as they focus on a "best for the world" outlook.

2.2. The B Corp Certification

B Corp certification entails several steps, including meeting the basic standards of the performance assessment (B Impact Assessment), fulfilling all legal requirements, and undergoing transparency and verification procedures. For approved companies, annual certification fees vary by geographic region and annual sales volume. For example, companies with annual sales lower than USD 150,000 pay USD 1000 per year, while companies making between USD 750 million and USD 999.9 million pay USD 50,000 annually [3]. The certification is coordinated by the B Lab which is overseen by multiple governing and advisory bodies [3]. Specifically, the B Impact Assessment required for B Corp certification breaks the social and environmental impacts of a business into five impact areas, including governance, workers, community, environment, and customers. First, governance impact examines whether the company has a social/environmental mission and how it engages stakeholders to achieve this mission. It evaluates the overall mission, ethics, accountability, and transparency within the company. Second, workers impact area focuses on the overall work environment. It measures compensation, benefits, training, work culture, worker health, safety, and more. Third, community impact addresses a company's supplier relations, diversity, and engagement with the local community as well as charitable giving and addressing social issues. Fourth, environmental impact focuses on environmental performance of a company by assessing its facilities, materials, emissions, resource and energy use, as well as the environmental impact of its supply chain. It also evaluates whether the product of a company addresses environmental issues, such as reducing waste and wildlife conservation. Finally, impact on customers focuses on the public benefit of the products a company offers. It assesses if products provide a solution for a social or environmental issue, such as public health, preservation of the environment, and so on [3]. To be certified as a B Corp, a company is required to achieve a minimum of 80 points out of 200 available on the B Impact Assessment [3]. The B Corp impact assessment categories and underlying attributes demonstrate the complexity, commitment, and resources needed to fully integrate the three pillars of sustainability in the business. Therefore, to incorporate sustainability as a core value, companies must consider it from the perspective of the three dimensions of the TBL and the various stakeholders impacted by the TBL.

2.3. Sustainability Communications on Social Media

Communication of a firm's sustainable practices influences consumers' brand choices and purchase decisions by enhancing brand visibility, reputation, and trust [22,23]. Companies have used various means to communicate their sustainability, including websites, CSR reports, and social media [23–25]. In particular, social media is an important platform to examine sustainability communication because there is representation from a global audience, and it provides an avenue for stakeholders to co-create communication and express their opinions, experiences, and values, which can help build a stronger community and develop more effective communication strategies to promote sustainability [24,26].

However, companies have a fragmented understanding of how to strategically communicate their sustainability-related information or effectively persuade their various stakeholders [23]. Previous research focusing on communication strategies has used the public relations model of one-way communication and two-way communication as a framework. For example, Etter [27] examined three CSR communication strategies on Twitter: broadcasting, reacting, and engaging. Etter [27] found that despite the ease of facilitating two-way communication on social media, most companies used Twitter for broadcasting to disseminate information to stakeholders (one-way communication), followed by the reacting strategy (e.g., replies), and only a few companies used the engaging strategy to proactively reach out to their stakeholders and engage them in a dialogue. Consistently, within the context of Facebook, Cho et al. [22] found that corporations engaged in the informing strategy more often than they used the interaction strategy. As such, despite the effectiveness of interactive communication on positive stakeholder outcomes, these studies suggest that corporations do not fully leverage the interactive nature of social media [10,22,27]. Etter [27] attributed this to corporations' reluctance to communicate and engage with consumers regarding CSR-related issues. This reluctance is also reflected in the findings of Cho et al. [22] and Artemova [11], wherein they found that non-CSR messages (e.g., product/service/corporate information) generated more engagements than CSR messages. These results may indicate that, in general, consumers are naturally attracted to promotional content that is relevant, interesting, and rewarding. However, simply sharing promotional content or delivering sustainability content may not be effective enough to generate deeper levels of consumer engagement or participation.

Furthermore, several studies pointed out fundamental problems of sustainability communications, such as consumers' lacking awareness and knowledge of firms' sustainability practices and consumers' underlying attitudes toward external CSR communications. For example, in a study of German travelers, Tölkes [28] found that 43% of them were not aware of companies' sustainability practices. In a study of the five most sustainable brands in Finland, Artemova [11] found that only 16% of the content these brands communicated on social media contained sustainability messages. The lack of companies' commitment or consumer engagement can be also partially attributed to consumers' skepticism toward CSR or sustainability claims. Studies report that companies often face scrutiny as consumers tend to have high skepticism toward external sustainability claims, questioning the company's internal or moral motivation [29]. Therefore, many companies are hesitant to communicate their practices [11] or intentionally avoid external CSR claims, thus taking a position of greenhushing. Greenhushing can cause consumers to question the company's motives and triggers perceived hypocrisy due to the absence of clear communication to the public, which negatively affects consumer behavior, such as purchase intentions [30]. Growing concerns about consumers' negative attitudes or criticism toward CSR or sustainability communication highlight the importance of transparent and authentic communication of corporate responsibility and sustainable practices [11,22].

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Brand Selection

We identified certified B Corps listed on the B Corp's Directory (www.bcorporation.net) (accessed on 1 June 2020). As of June 2020, there were 46 certified corporations in the AFA sectors in the U.S. Using Keyhole, a social listening and analytics software program, we downloaded posts generated on the corporate Twitter accounts from 11 March 2020 to 11 September 2020. This timeframe was selected to analyze B Corps' messages for a six-month period beginning from the World Health Organization's official announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic. Of the 46 brands, 12 brands were excluded because they did not have a Twitter account (n = 6), their Twitter accounts had been inactive (n = 3), or the brands did not create any posts on Twitter during this period (n = 3). In total, 34 brands were included for the thematic analysis.

3.2. Data Coding and Analysis

Using the qualitative content analysis method, we identified patterns in B Corps' communications. We included original tweets only, excluding brands' replies, quoted tweets, or retweets. During the six-month timeframe, these brands created 2392 tweets in total. To balance the brand representation in our data, we included up to the 10 most engaging tweets from each brand, which yielded a total of 315 tweets. These top posts were selected based on engagements (likes and retweets) to examine the key content that resonated most with each brand's target audience.

We used a grounded theory approach in analyzing themes and patterns in the Twitter posts. First, one of the investigators created an initial coding scheme by using an open coding method and coded tweets into first-level concepts. This was based on tweets from the first five brands in the sample list and entailed reading the data several times to create distinctive labels that reflected the underlying concepts. Then using a constant comparison approach, we identified and refined the emerging themes, wherein two other investigators coded the same posts independently using the initial coding scheme. From this first-order coding, we then conducted axial coding to identify codes related to the first-level concepts. The coding scheme was expanded and revised as we analyzed new posts and found new categories. Based on the discussions, revisions were made to make clear distinctions among the coding categories. Three investigators coded all posts independently and discussed any differences in coding until a consensus was reached. When a post covered more than one category in our coding scheme, up to three different codes were assigned to a single post. For example, Allbirds' tweet "*To our US healthcare community—we want to thank you for being on the front lines and helping to keep our communities healthy. We hope a pair of Tuke Matcha Wool Runners on us might be a small token of our appreciation*" was given two codes, one corresponding to recognition of healthcare workers and a second code regarding COVID-19 related donations. On average, each post was assigned 1.84 codes.

4. Results

4.1. Sample Profiles

Among the 34 B Corps, the overall B impact scores ranged from 80 points to 151 points, with 80 being the minimum score required for the B Corp certification (*M* = 95.79, *SD* = 19.41) (see Figure 1). When comparing specific impact area scores (i.e., governance, workers, community, environment, and customers), the community impact (*M* = 35.05, *SD* = 18.74) yielded the highest scores for 19 brands (55.89%), as compared with the environment impact (*M* = 22.36, *SD* = 11.85) for eight brands (23.53%), and the workers impact (*M* = 20.08, *SD* = 5.97) for two brands (5.88%). The governance impact showed the lowest score (*M* = 14.44, *SD* = 3.10), and no brand achieved the highest score in the governance category. Moreover, for most of these brands, the consumer impact was not assessed; therefore, the scores were not available. Dhana Inc. had the highest overall and community scores (overall = 151.9, community = 110.4, environment = 26.6, workers = N/A), closely followed by Patagonia (overall = 151.4, community = 63.8, environment = 43.5, workers = 20.8). ChicoBag, on the other hand, had the highest environment score (overall = 114.6, community = 24.5, environment = 52.2, workers = 19.6), and AMS Fulfillment had the highest workers score (overall = 85.2, community = 15.0, environment = 14.2, workers = 40.7). TOMS had the highest governance score (overall = 121.5, governance = 18.8, community = 48.1, environment = 22.4, workers = 27.4).

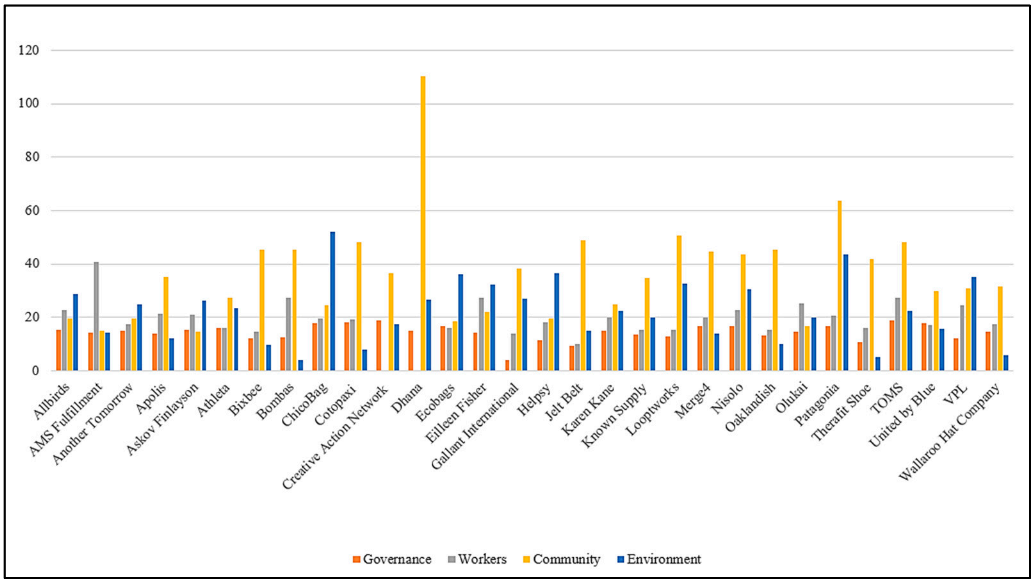

Figure 1. Overall B Impact Scores and Impact Area Scores by Company.

4.2. Thematic Analysis

To answer Research Question 1, we examined thematic patterns in B Corps' communications on Twitter and found four major topics: social and environmental, COVID-19, product/brand promotion, and general topics (see Table 1). Among these topics, social and environmental was the most frequently mentioned topic (36.24%, f = 212), followed by COVID-19 (34.70%, f = 203), product/brand promotion (24.44%, f = 143), and general topics (4.62%, f = 27). Below we provide detailed accounts of the various themes underlying each of the four topics and highlight representative posts for each theme. Topics and themes are discussed in order of frequency.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis—Frequency of Codes for Each Topic.

Topic	Theme	Frequency
Social & Environmental (f = 212)	Sustainable materials/products/practices	61
	Education and stakeholder engagement in sustainability	51
	Miscellaneous causes	19
	Racial issues	18
	Environmental issues	16
	Sustainability activism	13
	Cause-related donation/fundraising	13
	B Corp promotion	11
	Media engagement and/or collaboration to promote sustainability	10
COVID-19 (f = 203)	COVID-19 related donations/fundraising	52
	Community engagement	35
	Worker appreciation	28
	Public health/safety advocacy	28
	Product/promotion realignment	27
	COVID-19 related collaboration and partner/influencer engagement	17
	Store operation/production/distribution realignment	16
Product/Brand Promotion (f = 143)	Collaboration and partner/influencer/media engagement	56
	General product/brand promotion	53
	Sales promotions	29
	Other	5
General Topics (f = 27)	Generally relatable/motivational content (unrelated to the above three topics)	27

4.2.1. Topic 1. Social and Environmental

Nine underlying themes corresponded to the social and environmental messages. Under this topic, promoting sustainable products/practices and educating/encouraging stakeholders to participate in sustainability were the two most frequently mentioned themes. Various causes including racial and environmental issues were commonly communicated. There were also noticeable messages regarding activism, cause-related donations/fundraising, B Corp promotion, and media engagement/collaboration for a cause.

> **Theme 1.** Sustainable Materials, Products, and Practices. Content featuring sustainable products and practices was the most salient theme under the social and environmental topic. There were 61 tweets. This theme includes messages promoting the use of sustainable materials, such as organic cotton, upcycled, repurposed, or re-engineered materials, or products made through sustainable or transparent practices. We found that the majority of these messages were informational, communicating about how their products are sustainably or ethically made or how they support or engage in fair trade or transparent supply chain practices. For example, Nisolo Shoes highlighted their initiative to go carbon neutral "*In celebration of the 50th anniversary of #EarthDay, we're thrilled to announce that Nisolo is going carbon neutral! Today, we're committing to offsetting the full scope*

of our environmental impact through the pursuit of Climate Neutral Certification". In another tweet, Gallant International Inc. promoted fair trade and ethical sourcing practices: "*Fair Trade is more than a label. We are the farmers, the workers, the artisans, the fisherman. We are a global movement. Our mission? Make the right choice an obvious one . . .* "

Theme 2. Education and Stakeholder Engagement in Sustainability. In total, 51 tweets shared educational content and/or engaged stakeholders in social/environmental sustainability. These posts presented news, opinions, and other informational resources to educate various stakeholders about sustainability. Some of them featured or promoted interviews, webinars, forums, or livestreaming. While most messages focused on educating stakeholders and raising awareness about the issue being discussed, some aimed at meaningful engagement by encouraging stakeholder participation or action in sustainable practices. The most frequently mentioned educational content was environmental issues. For example, Helpsy increased awareness regarding a clothing reuse and recycling initiative via the tweet, "*Want to learn more about the future of clothing reuse and recycling from the experts? Check out Karine Vann's interview with Helpsy Co-Founder Dan Green at @WasteDive.*" Similarly, ChicoBag encouraged stakeholders to get involved in eco-friendly campaigns through the following tweet: "*Sick of seeing beaches and rivers full of plastic and trash? Angry about the pollution and neglect our earth suffers daily?...Then it's time to #effsingleuse. The 5th initiative of our Pledge to the Planet commitment is our #EffSingleUse campaign...*"

Theme 3. Miscellaneous Causes. The third most salient theme corresponding to environmental and social issues highlighted a range of different causes in 19 tweets including voting (related to the presidential election), small business support, gender equality, LGBTQ, hunger/poverty, refugees, health, and made in the USA. Among these causes, the right to vote and small business support were most frequently mentioned. For example, Patagonia tweeted, "*The right to safely vote is fundamental to a healthy democracy and it is under attack*", and in another tweet, Nisolo Shoes supported small businesses impacted by COVID-19, "*Nisolo means not alone. Today we're joining forces with other small businesses and fellow @BCorporation to introduce you to brands we believe in and show our support so we can come out of this on the other side, together. #IStandWithSmall*".

Theme 4. Racial Issues. Among various causes, B Corps addressed racial issues most frequently. There were 18 tweets focusing on this issue. This was not surprising given the Black Lives Matter movement. Companies expressed their grief in response to the tragedy of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others who lost their lives. Several tweets expressed their support for black leaders and black-owned businesses, in addition to encouraging people to speak up and take action to support racial equality and justice. For example, Bombas tweeted, "*#BlackLivesMatter. Bombas stands with our Black employees, partners and the Black community as a whole. We must all take action for justice against inequality and racism.*" Messages such as these align with the social responsibility embodied by B Corps.

Theme 5. Environmental Issues. In addition to racial issues, environmental issues were mentioned very commonly. Among the 16 tweets, initiatives and messages related to Earth Day or Month were most prevalent, but several companies raised awareness of additional issues, such as climate change, pollution, and environmental legislation. For example, ChicoBag highlighted the pollution in the oceans in the tweet, "*Did you know we are dumping the equivalent of a garbage truck full of plastic into the ocean every minute? #savetheplanet #plasticpollution #didyouknow #plasticfreejuly*".

Theme 6. Sustainability Activism. Thirteen tweets corresponded to activism in sustainability. Several companies acknowledged the work of activists or tangible initiatives for policy shaping. Most of these tweets recognized activists who addressed racial or gender issues. For example, Another Tomorrow tweeted, "*Today we launch WOMEN FOR TOMORROW, an ongoing series honoring incredible women who inspire us as people and in their work changing the landscape in their fields in service of a better tomorrow.*" Several tweets promoted companies' activism for environmental causes. For example, Patagonia tweeted, "*@Interior's decision to open the Arctic Refuge for drilling ignores science & the downward spiral of the oil market, and fails to protect polar bear & caribou habitat. We stand with Gwich'in who rely on this sacred place to sustain their culture & way of life...*".

Theme 7. Cause-related Donations/Fundraising. We found 13 tweets that communicated donations or fundraising for a certain cause. For this theme, we separated COVID-19 related donations or fundraising which will be covered in the next topic. While some of these were informational, telling their audiences about what and how they donated for a certain cause, more posts encouraged stakeholders to participate in donations or fundraising. For example, Oaklandish tweeted, "*Thank you to everyone who has purchased this tee, let's keep it going! We just donated $4742 to #sooakland's campaign to rebuild Black-owned businesses in Oakland!...*" In terms of method of donation, we found that these companies often used in-kind contributions, such as donating their products instead of cash or used a donation-with-purchase method. For example, Bixbee highlighted their buy-one-give-one model with this tweet: "*What makes our backpacks unique you might ask?...For every backpack purchased, Bixbee proudly donates a schoolbag with supplies to kids in need around the world*".

Theme 8. B Corp Promotion. B Corps were promoted in 11 tweets, wherein companies mentioned the purpose of B Corps in promoting sustainable business practices or mentioning @BCorp to increase the awareness of B Corps. Additionally, several companies actively promoted their B Corp certification status, which can serve as a sustainability cue to reinforce a sustainable brand identity. For example, ChicoBag tweeted, "*We've been recognized as a Certified @BCorporation since 2013, which means we're now in our seventh year of doing business better. B Corp businesses have to meet the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance*".

Theme 9. Media Engagement and Collaboration for a Cause. There were 10 tweets that engaged partners or influencers for a cause by collaborating or tagging them in their messages. For example, Another Tomorrow tweeted, "*Thank you to @marinaa9214 and @marieclaire for including #AnotherTomorrow in your roundup of sustainable fashion brands. #conscioussourcing*". To spread awareness and resources related to causes such as cancer awareness, supporting small businesses, and climate change, several companies engaged partners. For example, Wallaroo Hats shared the following tweet in partnership with the Melanoma Research Foundation: "*...Facts from the Melanoma Research Foundation (MRF) @CureMelanoma Melanoma FACT: Melanoma is not just a skin Cancer. It can develop anywhere on the body. Eyes, scalp, feet, mouth,* etc. *Stay Safe.*" In another example, Nisolo Shoes tweeted, "*Today we're joining forces with other small businesses and fellow @BCorporation to introduce you to brands we believe in and show our support so we can come out of this on the other side, together. #IStandWithSmall*". Askov Finlayson leveraged Mary Heglar to raise awareness regarding climate change: "*Climate change threatens the people and planet we love. @MaryHeglar's words remind us that we have to do whatever we can to protect our home—because home is always worth it*".

4.2.2. Topic 2. COVID-19

There were seven themes focusing on COVID-19. The most prevalent theme was COVID-19 related donations and fundraising, followed by messages regarding community support and connection. There were also frequent communications regarding public health messages to encourage consumer participation, realignment of production, various marketing mix messages (products, promotion, store operations, and distribution), and numerous collaborations to tackle COVID-19 related needs.

Theme 10. COVID-19 Related Donations/Fundraising. Fifty-two tweets corresponded to COVID-19 related donations and fundraising. This theme includes messages that highlight the companies' efforts intended to combat COVID-19 and assist those most impacted by the pandemic. In addition to sharing their own charitable initiatives, many companies encouraged their followers to participate as well. For example, Bombas tweeted, " . . . *Bombas is teaming up with Village Den to collect critically needed items to donate to those who need them most. Let us know what giving back looks like in your community by tagging your post with #givelocal and @bombas*". Some of larger companies, such as Toms, used profit-based donations as shown in this tweet: "*For every $3 we make, we're donating $1 to the TOMS COVID-19 Global Giving Fund—created to support long-time Giving Partners on the frontlines of COVID-19...*" On the other hand, the majority of B Corps used either a form of in-kind donations with goods or donation-with-purchase promotions. Several companies, including Allbirds, Apolis, and Bombas, donated merchandise such as masks, shoes, and socks to frontline workers and used Twitter as a platform to inform and engage the public regarding these initiatives. Another major trend was the donation of goods to recognize and show appreciation for healthcare workers, which is also related to Theme 3. For example, Bombas shared, "*We donated 15,000 pairs of socks to Founders Give, an organization that delivers much-needed items to those working in NYC's hospitals. We hope that these socks will give nurses a little comfort as they continue to keep our communities safe.*" In addition, many companies were involved in charitable initiatives that helped local communities and hard-hit industries, such as contributions to food banks and organizations assisting the hospitality sector. Lastly, several brands, such as Looptworks and United by Blue, demonstrated their sustainable brand identities by incorporating upcycled and salvaged materials in the goods that they were donating. For example, Looptworks tweeted, "*From excess @United Airlines uniforms to 7500 face masks. We had the honor of upcycling masks out of United's excess retired uniforms...*".

Theme 11. Community Engagement. In total, 35 tweets incorporated empathetic messages intended to support and connect with the community. Tweets corresponding to this theme focused on building a sense of community by providing emotional support, encouragement, and advice. For example, Olukai shared an uplifting message and music to help followers persevere through tough times: "*Aloha means love, compassion and peace; we could all use a little more of that these days. That's why we've created a playlist to bring aloha vibes to you at the touch of a button—a 'play' button, that is. Listen now...*" Other companies shared informative or encouraging messages with their followers that were also closely aligned with the brand's product offerings. For example, Athleta tweeted, "*Need to connect to your body—and other humans? Grab your crew on video chat and break a sweat together. Screenshot and share the fun with @athleta and #HomeBodies—Invite your friends and get moving!*" In addition, companies shared a variety of resources to help their customers navigate these unprecedented times, including information on parenting, working remotely, and being mindful.

Theme 12. Worker Appreciation. Another prevalent theme related to COVID-19 included 28 tweets that acknowledged healthcare workers, frontline staff, and employees. As discussed in Theme 1, the majority of tweets not only expressed gratitude but also donated merchandise, discounts, or other goods to these individuals as a token of appreciation. For example, Allbirds tweeted, "*To our US healthcare community—we want to thank you for being on the front lines and helping to keep our communities healthy. We hope a pair of Tuke Matcha Wool Runners on us might be a small token of our appreciation...*" In addition to expressing thankfulness to healthcare workers, other brands took the opportunity to recognize additional industries and groups most impacted by the pandemic, including essential workers like grocery store employees and those working in the hospitality industry. For example, Askov Finlayson shared, "*COVID-19 has impacted all of us, but our friends in the hospitality industry have been hit especially hard, both here in Minnesota and across the country. We've seen firsthand the devastating effect this crisis is having on the lives of service professionals and wanted to help...*" Likewise, *Olukai* tweeted, "*Whether you're a health care worker, EMT, grocery clerk or delivery person, we would be honored to support you with a free pair of shoes. Visit ... to request your free pair*, *or pay it forward to someone deserving...*".

Theme 13. Public Health/Safety Advocacy. Another common theme included 28 tweets that amplified public health/safety messages related to COVID-19 and encouraged civic participation. Many of these messages focused on encouraging followers to engage in prosocial behaviors to help curb the spread of COVID-19, such as staying home, social distancing, and wearing a mask. For example, Wallaroo Hats tweeted, "*Happy Saturday Wallaroo Family! The Wallaroo Team is just checking in on you. Adventure Responsibly. Follow the recommendations and restrictions of local governments and health officials. Wash your hands, practice social distancing, and keep yourself healthy.*" In addition to messages encouraging responsible behavior for the greater collective good, other companies promoted consumer participation in COVID-19 related causes or user-generated content (UGC). For example, Therafit Shoe challenged followers to get involved by making homemade masks with this tweet, "*Hospitals NEED your help solving the shortage of N95-type masks during the current COVID-19 pandemic. A homemade mask is a perfect alternative! Don't have a sewing machine, look on YouTube for a Glue Gun option!..*".

Theme 14. Product/Promotion Realignment. In total, 27 tweets related to product/promotion realignment. Many companies shared information regarding COVID-19 related products or promotions. Companies manufactured additional products that were needed during the pandemic, such as masks. For example, ChicoBag tweeted, "*Calling all planet saving pioneers! We've got a mask you can't resist: Reusable, Washable, Breathable, Ethically-made. Save the people. Save the planet. Shop yours now*..." As shown in this tweet, B Corps emphasized the sustainable materials and production practices used in their COVID-friendly products. Some companies also highlighted how their merchandise was appropriate for the new normal of working from home. For instance, Tuckerman Co. shared this relatable message, "*Working from home? Comfy, yet professional for those zoom calls*..." Some companies featured alternative promotional messages due to COVID-19, such as this tweet from BTS Lingerie, "*For Mother's Day this year we are encouraging gift cards, since we don't have control over shipping turnarounds and rely mainly on the post office and international post for free shipping these have all experienced delays and slowdowns due to increased volume during the pandemic*." Finally, some companies, such as Cotopaxi, promoted the sale of COVID-19 related products along with a donation: "*These days, not all heroes wear capes, but they do wear masks. Buy our new llama mask t-shirt*, *and a portion of sales will go to help hard-hit populations struggling to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic...*".

Theme 15. COVID-19 related Collaboration and Partner/Influencer Engagement. Seventeen tweets featured some form of collaboration and/or engaged external partners and influencers. Companies using this tactic tagged various organizations, individuals, and companies typically with the goal to fundraise for COVID-19 relief efforts or to discuss COVID-19 related initiatives. For example, Cotopaxi tweeted, "*Take Note. Do Good. We've joined forces with the @utahjazz to help fight COVID-19 in our home state. All proceeds from this #OneUtah t-shirt will be directed through @siliconslopes Serves to local partners on the battle's frontlines...*" Similarly, Looptworks highlighted several sustainable partnerships with prominent companies, such as Starbucks and United Airlines, as shown in this tweet: "*Through our partnership with @united, we diverted 12,284 pounds of uniforms from landfills to make 7500 face coverings to be worn by staff and passengers...*".

Theme 16. Store Operation/Production/Distribution Realignment. Many companies shared updates regarding realignments to store operations, production, and distribution plans. In total, 16 tweets related to this theme, with a majority of these focusing on changes to store hours and operations and a shift from typical production practices to making masks and other essential items. For example, Patagonia tweeted, "*Dear Patagonia community, As COVID-19 spreads—and is now officially a pandemic—we are taking additional safety measures to protect our employees and customers. The scale of impact is still unknown, and we want to do our part to protect our community...*" Similarly, Eileen Fisher tweeted, "*Starting today, we are temporarily closing our stores for two weeks. As conditions continue to evolve, we will monitor the advice given by expert agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization to determine when it's safe to reopen.*" Given the need for masks, some companies announced recruiting additional workers to accommodate the shift in production. For instance, Looptworks tweeted, "*No matter what you call yourself, we're looking for you! We are rapidly hiring for the Looptworks Seam Team to assist in mask making efforts...*" Lastly, some companies addressed issues with shipping and delivery delays related to COVID-19.

4.2.3. Topic 3. Product/Brand Promotion

In total, 143 tweets corresponded to product/brand promotion. These promotions focus on highlighting their products, brand name, or value, rather than addressing sustainability or COVID-19 related issues. We found three underlying themes, including collaboration and engagement with partners/influencers/media, general product/brand promotion, and sales promotions.

Theme 17. Collaboration and Partner/Influencer/Media Engagement. The most common theme involved collaboration and/or engagement with a partner, influencer, or the media. Among these 56 tweets, 30 featured engagement with a partner or an influencer, while another 26 promoted the brand via a collaboration. B Corps engaged with a variety of individuals and groups, ranging from partners and influencers to major media outlets and other B Corps. For example, VPL NYC shared a tweet promoting that they were featured in Business Insider, while Eileen Fisher highlighted their participation in the Business of Fashion's summit on building a responsible fashion business. In addition to partnering with other B Corps, influencers, and organizations, many companies used collaborations to extend their reach and reinforce their brand values and sustainable identities. For instance, Athleta promoted their partnership with Olympic athlete Allyson Felix through this tweet "*Legacies aren't created overnight. They're built by showing up—-to train, strengthen, move in a bold direction. Introducing the first-ever limited edition Allyson Felix + Athleta collection—-by female athletes, for female athletes. @allysonfelix*".

Theme 18. General Product/Brand Promotion. A total of 53 tweets promoted new products/collections or shared content related to their brand value or mission. Pictures of featured merchandise and links directing consumers to their websites were commonly used tactics, while a few brands also highlighted user-generated images and reviews of merchandise. Many companies simply promoted their merchandise and product features like this tweet from Jelt Belt, "*The new Jelt Venture. Made extra wide, extra strong and extra durable for extra adventures*." In addition, some companies promoted their products along with product donations to people in need, as shown in this tweet from Bixbee: "*What makes our backpacks unique you might ask? Swipe to see! For every backpack purchased, Bixbee proudly donates a schoolbag with supplies to kids in need around the world. #OneHereOneThereMission*".

Theme 19. Sales Promotions. There were 29 tweets corresponding to sales promotions. Many companies promoted sales by using special offers, discounts, contests, or giveaways. Numerous brands highlighted limited-time free shipping and special discounts. For example, Parker Clay tweeted, "*Hang in there. We love you guys so much we've decided to celebrate the launch of our bone collection and our community coming together during this time by offering 25% off sitewide!...*" Some price promotions highlighted the company's sustainability or tied messaging to COVID-19, such as this tweet from Known Supply, "*Upgrade your Work From Home outfits with comfort & sustainability. Get FREE shipping on all styles when you use code 'STAYHOME'...*" Others, such as Parker and Clay, highlighted price promotions with social impact as shown in this tweet: "*Give $50 Get $50—This is the last week of this promotion for our VIPurpose™ Members. Click the link in our bio to spread the word about our impact in Ethiopia …* " In addition to price promotions, other tweets related to this theme promoted giveaways and contests, and many incorporated guidelines that required participants to follow the brand and retweet the message, thus enabling the brand to extend their reach on social media. For example, Merge 4 tweeted, "*WEEKLY GIVEAWAY, This week's giveaway winners will win all 4 BRAND NEW @sandiegozoo socks!! These rad styles donate a portion of sales toward @sdzglobal conservation efforts, To Enter: FOLLOW @Merge4_ & RETWEET!...*".

Theme 20. Other. Lastly, there were five miscellaneous tweets that highlighted CEOs, production processes, and manufacturing. Specifically, AMS Fulfillment and Wallaroo Hats highlighted features published regarding their CEOs, and Tuckerman & Co tweeted three posts highlighting their factories and production processes with the hashtag #FactoryFriday.

4.2.4. Topic 4. General Topics

The last theme in the data pertained to general topics such as motivational content, personal stories of founders, recognizing employees, and other relatable content, such as major holidays. Of these 27 tweets, the most prevalent topic was the sharing of motivational content, which often included uplifting and engaging images and messages, such as pictures of sunsets and dogs or inspirational quotes. For example, to encourage more mindfulness and self-care, Tribe Alive tweeted, "*A serene escape. Remember to take a moment for yourself today. Whatever it looks like—meditation, reading your favorite book, a breath of fresh air, calling someone you love. Take care of the wonderful, important person that is you...*" Several companies highlighted major holidays, while others shared engaging content like this tweet from Cotopaxi: "*If there's one made up holiday we can get behind, it's #NationalPuppyDay. Today, we thank the good boys and girls out there for making us smile even when things get ruff...*" Overall, many of these messages reflected the pandemic situation in some way.

4.3. Analysis of B Corps' Social Media Communications within the TBL Framework

To examine how B Corps' social media communications are aligned with the TBL (Research Question 2), we classified the underlying themes of each topic according to the three pillars of the TBL (see Figure 2). Given that the TBL seeks to promote synergy among the three dimensions, we considered intersections among the dimensions and categorized the themes into three main dimensions and four intersections. When the messages regarding sustainable products or practices did not specify their impact, we distinguished them based on the cases that clearly communicated whether their sustainable practices addressed a social (e.g., fair trade, ethical sourcing) or environmental (e.g., upcycled materials, carbon neutral) dimension. Furthermore, we separated messages related to COVID-19 as a special case to illustrate how B Corps coped with a crisis and communicated different areas of sustainability amid the pandemic.

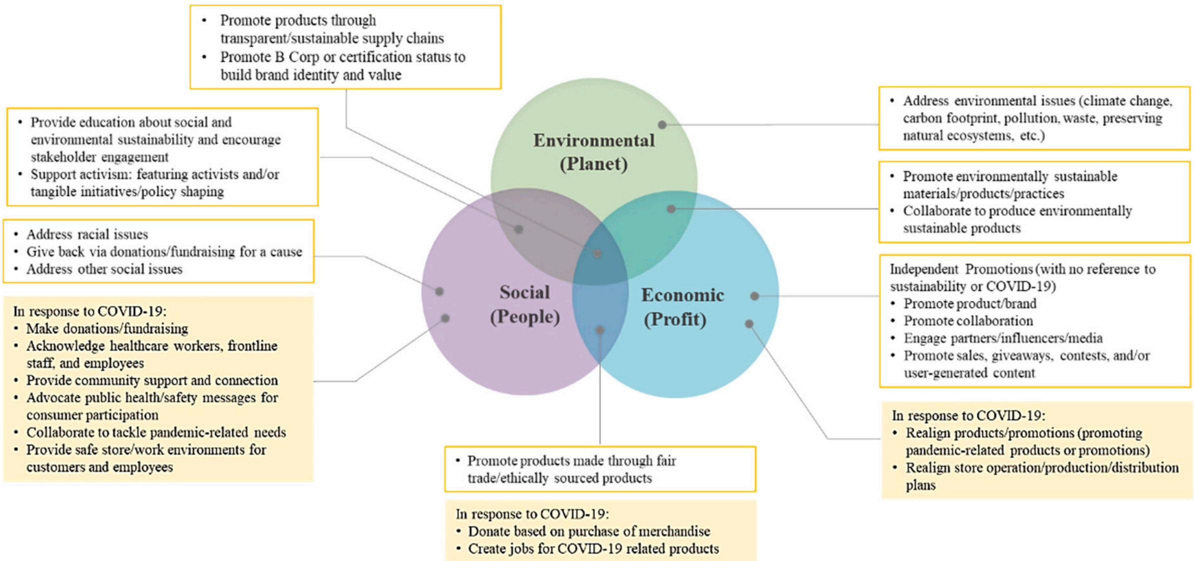

Figure 2. AFA B Corps' Social Media Communications during COVID-19: Through the Lens of the TBL.

As shown in Figure 2, B Corps used a range of approaches to address the three pillars of the TBL. For example, raising awareness, taking a position, and encouraging affirmative actions regarding racial inequality were salient social issues communicated by B Corps. Several corporations addressed climate change, pollution, waste, etc. to increase environmental awareness and encourage positive action from stakeholders to preserve the planet. Corporations also promoted their products and brand values to grow profitability by using various sales promotion tactics or engaging the media, partners, influential accounts or customers through user-generated content. More interestingly, we found examples of strategies that addressed multiple dimensions of the TBL, for example, promoting products made through sustainable/transparent practices to address profitability as well as the environmental and social aspects of the TBL. Promoting the B Corp model and certification was another example that addressed the synergy among the three aspects of the TBL. Therefore, B Corps in the AFA sectors are collectively attempting to support and communicate the three pillars of the TBL and leverage strategies to promote balance between each dimension. However, when we closely examined each individual company, we found that not all B Corps addressed all three pillars of the TBL. For example, as depicted in Table 2, Bixbee, Parker Clay, Merge4, and Wallaroo Hat Company primarily utilized Twitter for product/brand promotion.

Table 2. Impact and Social Media Performance [a].

Company Name	Overall B-Score [b]	Highest Impact Area [c]	Dominant Topics of Most Engaging Posts	# of Followers	Posts/Week [d]	AER/Post [e]
TOMS	**121.5**	C	COVID-19; Product/Brand Promotion	1,874,384	**5.96**	0.001%
Patagonia	**151.4**	C	Social & Environmental	498,890	**5.63**	**0.274%**
Oaklandish	83.7	C	Product/Brand Promotion	69,105	**6.08**	**0.064%**
Athleta	84.3	C	Product/Brand Promotion	48,486	**4.42**	0.025%
Allbirds	89.4	E	COVID-19; Social & Environmental	25,922	1.50	**0.631%**
VPL	**103.5**	E	COVID-19	25,226	0.21	0.008%
Nisolo	**115.4**	C	Social & Environmental; COVID-19	17,243	1.25	0.015%
Bombas	89.2	C	COVID-19; Product/Brand Promotion	16,406	2.33	**0.111%**
Karen Kane	85.3	C	General Topics	16,270	**11.96**	0.013%
Cotopaxi	93.6	C	COVID-19	14,518	0.67	**0.099%**
United by Blue	84.1	C	Social & Environmental	12,104	**6.21**	0.030%
Eileen Fisher	**96.2**	E	Social & Environmental	11,603	**3.38**	**0.091%**
Therafit Shoe	80.5	C	Product/Brand Promotion	8220	**6.04**	0.003%
Apolis	82.7	C	Product/Brand Promotion; Social & Environmental	6425	0.42	0.006%
ChicoBag	**114.5**	E	Social & Environmental	6070	0.96	0.027%
Olukai	81.2	W	COVID-19	5576	0.33	**0.159%**
Between the Sheets	N/A		Social & Environmental	5377	0.29	0.027%
Helpsy	85.6	E	Social & Environmental	5358	0.17	**0.107%**
Creative Action Network	**113.1**	C	Social & Environmental	4807	**8.17**	0.045%
Ecobags	91.3	E	Social & Environmental	4029	0.25	0.041%
Askov Finlayson	80.7	E	Social & Environmental	3734	0.67	**0.260%**
Looptworks	**111.5**	C	Social & Environmental	2376	**3.25**	**0.231%**
Bixbee	81.5	C	Product/Brand Promotion	1715	1.83	0.017%
Dhana Inc.	**151.9**	C	Social & Environmental	1699	0.75	0.006%
AMS Fulfillment	85.2	W	COVID-19; Social & Environmental	1440	1.21	0.007%
Wallaroo Hat Company	81.1	C	Product/Brand Promotion	828	1.79	**0.079%**
Tribe Alive	N/A		Product/Brand Promotion; Social & Environmental	734	**8.33**	0.027%
Known Supply	86.9	C	COVID-19; Social & Environmental	453	1.08	**0.662%**
Parker Clay	N/A		Product/Brand Promotion	442	**8.17**	0.050%
Jelt Belt	83.3	C	Product/Brand Promotion	428	0.75	0.014%
Merge4	**98**	C	Product/Brand Promotion	357	**3.00**	**1.894%**
Tuckerman & Co.	N/A		Product/Brand Promotion; Social & Environmental	330	1.79	**0.155%**
Gallant International	86.7	C	Social & Environmental	145	0.63	**0.503%**
Another Tomorrow	80.3	E	Social & Environmental	43	0.21	**6.047%**

[a] The company list is sorted by the number of followers. [b] Overall B Impact Score is verified by B Lab. The mean is calculated based on the available scores (M = 95.79; SD = 19.41), and B Corps above the mean are bolded. [c] Highest Impact Area is identified based on the scores for the five impact areas (C for Community; E for Environment; W for Workers). [d] Posts include original tweets made by the company from 11 March 2020 to 11 September 2020. [e] Average Engagement Rate per Post is calculated as the total number of engagements per post divided by the number of followers (expressed as a percentage). The number of posts per week of the industry benchmark in 2020 was reported as 2.4 on Twitter. The average engagement rate of the industry benchmark during the study time period was reported as 0.058%. B Corps above the industry benchmark are bolded.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic immensely influenced how B Corps addressed the TBL. In the social dimension, B Corps focused more on community support to build resilience through giving, empathy, and community engagement. They also showed appreciation to healthcare workers, frontline staff, and employees and adapted operational policies for better, safer store/working environments for their employees and customers. In the economic dimension, business activities from production to promotions to distribution were realigned to cope with the pandemic situation. Some of them developed collaborations or engaged influential profiles to increase stakeholder engagement and the visibility of the brand. Additionally, B Corps leveraged strategies that intersected with the economic and social aspects of the TBL, for example, giving consumers the opportunity to purchase products to fund donations of products to those in need, as well as creating jobs to serve increasing demand related to COVID-19.

4.4. Analysis of B Corps' Social Media Communications within the TBL Framework

To answer Research Question 3, we examined Twitter performance among the B Corps and in comparison with the industry benchmarks. To compare, we highlighted (in bold) companies above the industry benchmarks in Table 2. The highest number of followers was 1,874,384 and the lowest was 43 (*Mdn* = 5368). While 12 brands (35.29%) had greater than 10,000 followers, nine brands (26.47%) had fewer than 1000 followers. The average number of weekly posts that B Corps created during the six months and the number of followers varied significantly across the brands. The average weekly posts ranged from 0.17 posts to 11.96 posts (*M* = 2.93, *SD* = 3.06). Karen Kane created the highest post volume (11.96 posts/week), followed by Tribe Alive (8.33 posts/week). As of January 2020, the fashion industry's benchmark for the weekly post number on Twitter was 2.4 posts [31]. On average, B Corps in the AFA sectors posted slightly above the industry benchmark. However, 13 brands (38.24%) posted none to one post per week, overlooking the importance of consistent communication with their audience during a difficult time.

The average engagement rate per post (AER/Post) is calculated as the total engagements per post divided by the number of followers (expressed as a percentage) where engagements are measured by the number of likes and retweets each post received. B Corps' AER/Post was 0.35% (*SD* = 1.07). The fashion industry's benchmark for Twitter AER/Post during the same study timeframe was 0.06% [32]. Collectively, B Corps in our sample far exceeded the industry benchmark in terms of AER/Post. However, given that most B Corps are small businesses and many of these brands' follower size is much smaller than larger businesses, AER/Post can be higher. Engaging the audience becomes harder as the follower size increases, and a popular account is likely to attract automated bot social accounts [33]. For example, TOMS had the highest follower size, but their AER/Post was 0.001%. In contrast, Another Tomorrow had the lowest follower size of 43 but had the highest AER/Post, 6.047%, meaning that although this brand had very few followers, their followers were actively engaged with the brand's posts. In addition to the follower numbers, AER/Post decreases when the number of posts gets higher. For example, while Another Tomorrow's AER/Post was 6.047% with 0.21 tweets per week, Karen Kane's AER/Post was 0.013% with 11.96 posts per week. These examples indicate that simply increasing the number of followers or weekly posts does not result in a higher engagement rate. These results also highlight the importance of creating quality content that truly resonates with their target audience to enhance the average engagement rate.

To further examine Research Question 3, we qualitatively examined if brands with large followers exhibit any patterns in the topical focus of the most engaging tweets (i.e., focusing on social/environmental issues, COVID-19, or product/brand promotion), weekly post volume, or AER/Post. First, we found no association between the number of followers and topical focus. For example, TOMS and Patagonia were the brands with the largest followers, but while TOMS mostly engaged with content related to COVID-19 and product/brand promotion, Patagonia mostly engaged with social and environmental issues. However, when we compared the brands by B impact scores, brands with high impact scores (except TOMS) tended to engage more with environmental and social issues, as opposed to content related to product/brand promotion or COVID-19 (see Table 2). For example, Dhana Inc. and Patagonia earned the highest area scores on the community impact, and their Twitter communications also highlighted a number of social and environmental causes, including Black Lives Matter, workers' rights, and environmental activism. Second, although there was no strong association between the number of followers and the number of weekly posts, many brands with relatively larger followers (e.g., TOMS, Patagonia, Oaklandish, Athleta, Karen Kane, etc.) tended to post more frequently than the industry benchmark. Third, as discussed above, a higher number of followers was not translated into a higher AER/Post. For example, TOMS with the largest following had one of the lowest AER/Post. On the other hand, Bombas and Eileen Fisher had a fraction of TOMS's follower number but had much higher AER/Post that exceeded the industry benchmark.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Using a qualitative research approach, we examined how B Corps in the AFA sectors in the U.S. leverage social media to communicate and engage with their stakeholders, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. We focused on B Corps' communications during this challenging time because the pandemic has been marked with an increased emphasis on sustainability among consumers [5].

Consistent with B Corps' commitment to sustainability and creating positive change in the community/society, we found that social and environmental issues and COVID-19 were the two dominant topics communicated on social media, followed by product/brand promotion and general messages. We further identified a range of underlying themes that emerged from each topic. The topic corresponding to social and environmental messages had nine themes, including communicating about sustainable products or practices, raising awareness regarding sustainable issues through education and stakeholder engagement, addressing social issues such as racism, discussing environmental issues, supporting activism, and promoting B Corp and certification. The COVID-19 related topic included a variety of business decisions or activities to cope with the crisis, ranging from realignment strategies in production, operations, promotions, and distribution to supporting community resilience through donations/fundraising, community support, and engagement. On the other hand, messages corresponding to the product/brand promotion topic focused on general promotional messages without direct reference to sustainability or COVID-19. Specifically, B Corps promoted their offerings through collaborations, engaging partners/influencers/media, and engaging consumers through sales/discounts, giveaways, contests, and user-generated content. Finally, B Corps occasionally shared general messages by means of relatable events, stories, or photos. Based on the thematic analysis, we draw theoretical and practical implications of this study by applying the TBL and examining Twitter performance.

5.1. Theoretical Implications

The findings of our study provide several theoretical implications. First, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to examine B Corps' social media communications through the lens of the TBL framework. The importance of sustainability communications on social media is rapidly growing due to the need for transparent and legitimate communications with internal and external stakeholders [6,7]. Our qualitative approach contributes to the sustainability communication literature by highlighting the importance of aligning social media communications with the TBL to achieve long-term sustainability.

Second, the TBL social media communication framework developed in this study is grounded in multiple real-world cases of B Corps which represent the AFA sector in the U.S. Our qualitative data and theoretical analysis fill a gap in the literature because there have been limited documentations on B Corps' sustainability models and communications [34]. We found that, collectively, social media communications of B Corps address interactions among the three dimensions of the TBL, but individually, each corporation has potential to further develop synergy among the three pillars of sustainability. To this end, the framework developed in this study can serve as a guide or starting point for corporations to address and conserve various types of natural, social, and economic capital. This framework can be used to help B Corps or other sustainability-driven businesses, individually or collectively, to evaluate whether their communications on social media aligned with the TBL and identify the strengths and the areas to improve for effective communications.

Lastly, findings from this study attest that exogenous shocks, such as COVID-19, do not divert attention from the significance of the TBL. Instead, such shocks can reinforce and offer new and creative opportunities to address the TBL. This is critical given the position of B Corps as the trailblazers of positive change. Their communication to stakeholders can be instrumental in developing benchmarks and stakeholder expectations that businesses should not focus on profits alone even during a crisis. Our findings highlight that corporations have obligations to address all three pillars of the TBL creatively and in ways that create value, even when tensions exist between the dimensions [20,34].

5.2. Practical Implications

Sustainability communications on social media allow stakeholders to better understand B Corps' purpose and initiatives and directly engage with them. Corporate transparency and engagements in communications can further support consumer decision-making and drive sustainable actions [35]. Although B Corps in the AFA sectors collectively or on average met or exceeded industry benchmarks, we found that many of them did not fully leverage Twitter, and their individual performance showed somewhat weak presence in terms of the follower size, weekly post numbers, and/or AER/Post. Lee et al. [36] found that corporations with higher CSR ratings tend to have a larger following on Twitter and grow their account faster than corporations with lower ratings. Similarly, it was expected that B Corps with higher B impact scores have larger followers and communicate more frequently with their audiences. However, in our data, there was no clear sign that B impact scores are positively associated with the number of followers or the frequency of posts. Although the number of followers is one of the vanity metrics and cannot be used as a metric to determine the success of an account or a campaign, companies should make continuous efforts to grow their followers and reach their target audience. We suggest that especially high performing B Corps focus on building their community by improving the frequency of communication and actively engaging them with content that resonates with the interests of various stakeholders.

In addition, while we did not formally code for one-way vs. two-way communication, in our analysis, we found that the majority of the tweets focused on broadcasting/one-way communication rather than two-way communication. Previous studies have shown that messages that engage stakeholders in dialogue can be more effective than pushing information in one way [10,12]. Moreover, companies increasingly engage partners, influencers, or third-party actors to increase engagement and reach a wider audience [37]. In our data, we noticed that some brands often engage mass media or journalists to acknowledge their mentions in the press as well as bring the public's attention to their commitment to sustainability and to promote their brands/products, as well as COVID-19 related messages. Companies could also utilize interactive methods to make content more engaging and entertaining, such as motivating consumers to share their content, hosting contests or promotions, polling consumers, and creating sustainability-related conversations, which could improve engagement [11,12].

Furthermore, social media can be strategically used to support or improve an organization's TBL [38]. Even though social media offers a viable channel to disseminate organizational values and initiatives, the message content communicated on social media can vary in its effectiveness for engaging and building trust with stakeholders. In terms of message content, some companies heavily focused on educational content or information sharing about their sustainability performance. While this is certainly necessary to increase awareness and make a positive impact, companies may consider balancing the content to meet the interests of various internal and external stakeholders by providing a combination of promotional (economic), social, and environmental topics. This can be helpful in increasing stakeholder awareness regarding responsible business practices and driving positive change.

Lastly, previous studies also warn that external communication of sustainability could invite more skepticism by consumers, the media, and other external stakeholders [6], thus leading some companies to engage in greenhushing. However, companies can reduce such risks and gain positive public perceptions by including third-party endorsements or certifications or engaging independent organizations, activists, or influencers in their communications of sustainability [22,23,37,39]. In this regard, given that B Corp certification is granted to businesses that meet the highest standards of sustainable practices [3,34,39], certified B Corps have a competitive advantage to build a stronger community rooted in transparency. However, because many consumers are still not familiar with B Corp certification [39], B Corps should create more clear and engaging communications on social media to enhance the value of B Corp certification and strengthen organizational identity.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations which can provide foundations for future research. First, we focused on B Corps' communications on Twitter, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Each platform has unique characteristics and focuses on different functionalities. For example, according to Kiezmann et al. [40], while Twitter is known for conversations, Facebook is characterized by relationship building and Instagram by identity building. Increasingly, more businesses utilize various social media platforms to reach wider audiences, tailoring social media content to enhance customer engagement and experience. Therefore, it would be beneficial to explore how B Corps communicate their messages and promote their brand identities across different social media platforms.

Second, this study focused on the apparel, footwear, and accessories sectors. Considering that each industry poses unique problems and issues corresponding to sustainability [25], there is a need to examine diverse industries and compare communication strategies across different industry sectors, thus providing more comprehensive and integrated implications. Moreover, identifying similarities and differences among different industry sectors can promote industry collaborations or synergy to discover creative solutions for sustainability.

Third, in this study we focused on message content, but future research may investigate the interaction of message content and different media formats (e.g., images, videos, links, text, and combinations) or tactics (e.g., the types or number of hashtags, tagging) as these message attributes can impact consumer engagement. Lastly, this study employed a qualitative method to examine an under-researched phenomenon of B Corps' social media communications during a crisis. Future research should integrate a quantitative approach to extend our findings and investigate consumer evaluations of various message strategies in sustainability communications on social media. With the further extension of the study to different industry sectors, platforms, message strategies, and methodologies, we believe that future research can contribute to building a comprehensive theoretical framework that promotes balance among the three pillars of the TBL and improves transparency in social media communications among sustainability-driven businesses.

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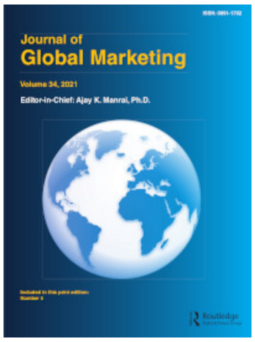

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Highs and Lows of Cannabis Decriminalization: Twitter Analysis and Ethical and Regulatory Implications for Retailing and Marketing

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ABSTRACT
We examined public reactions to the U.S. House vote to decriminalize cannabis at the federal level. Using Twitter data, we analyzed public sentiment, top hashtags used, and underlying themes in the discourse. Users with a wide range of profiles were engaged in this chatter, predominantly expressing positive sentiment with various thematic hashtags. The conversations were centered around five major topics: commentary on the House vote, legalization impediment in the Senate, expungement of marijuana-related criminal records, medical use of marijuana, and social and economic impact of the bill. We discussed ethical and regulatory implications for retailing and marketing.

KEYWORDS
Twitter; cannabis; decriminalization; legalization; marketing

Introduction

Shifts in social norms and changes in the perceived harmfulness of cannabis have led to a dramatic evolution in public discourse. In a 2020 Gallop Poll, 68% of U.S. adults supported legalization as compared to 12% support in 1969 when Gallop first measured public opinion regarding the legalization of cannabis (Brenan, 2020). Currently, there is more support for cannabis legalization in the United States than at any other point in history. Riding on this growing support, on the 4th of December 2020, a Democrat-controlled House of Representatives voted to decriminalize cannabis via the MORE (Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement) Act (Walsh, 2020). Although the House vote does not formally legalize cannabis at the federal level, it cleared the deck to deliberate the bill in the Senate. At the state level, Washington and Colorado paved the way to legalization in 2014. As of June 2021, 18 states, two territories, and Washington, DC, have legalized recreational use of cannabis, while 27 states and the District of Columbia have decriminalized some marijuana possession, meaning that certain small amounts intended for personal consumption are not subject to harsh legal sanctions such as jail time (NCSL, 2021). Accordingly, the landscape of the cannabis market is shifting dynamically with growing legalized sales.

As policy moves toward federal legalization and loosening restrictions on recreational cannabis, there are important regulatory considerations and marketing implications which to some extent will be impacted by public opinion and discourse (Burnstein, 2003; Kelly et al., 2021). Twitter data is particularly beneficial in uncovering timely insights grounded in public discourse which is not limited to elites, political activists, and lobbyists (Allem et al., 2020). Previous research attests to the efficacy of Twitter in gathering public opinion and predicting outcomes in a variety of contexts including public health, political issues, and stock market movements (Ceron et al., 2015; Pagolu et al., 2016; Vidal-Alaball et al., 2019). For example, Vidal-Alaball et al. (2019) noted that Twitter can serve as an effective tool to gauge public sentiment as it gives access to a large audience and provides real-time feedback on an issue. Analogous to other mediums of communication, Twitter messages can exert significant social influence on the target audience via cognitive, emotional, and behavioral changes.

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When persuasive messages are tweeted and shared by a number of people, a social norm can emerge regarding a certain issue and can serve as cues on how to think, feel, or act regarding the issue (McNeill & Briggs, 2014). Thus, Twitter analysis is particularly useful for a topic such as cannabis legalization as it has been debated among stakeholders and policy makers, and public opinion can be helpful in guiding policy making (Ceron et al., 2015).

Furthermore, young consumers between the ages of 18 to 29 are the heaviest users of social media across major social platforms including Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2021). Specifically, this age group accounts for approximately 42% of the Twitter users in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2021). As social media continues to become one of the primary platforms for consumers, especially young, impressionable consumers, to access news and share opinions on critical social and political issues, there is a need to understand what information is being shared and what the policy and marketing implications might be. For instance, scholars highlight a concern that marijuana-related Twitter chatter, especially among influential Twitter users, can lead to social contagion and increased usage among impressionable youth (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2015). However, few studies have examined how evolving cannabis policy has impacted sentiment and public discourse, particularly on Twitter, a platform that reflects real-time trends (Draanen et al., 2020). Also, consumers frequently use hashtags to identify and participate in public conversations and/or discursive protests on social media (Johnson et al., 2019; Yang, 2016). From a research perspective, hashtags are an effective tool to identify trending topics and analyze diverse perspectives expressed along with the hashtag (Johnson et al., 2019), but few studies have examined hashtags included in cannabis-related tweets.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore public reaction and discourse on Twitter concerned with the House vote to decriminalize cannabis at the federal level and uncover ethical, regulatory, and managerial concerns regarding marketing and recreational use of cannabis. Specifically, this study aims at answering the following research questions: 1) What are the general sentiments expressed on Twitter chatter in response to the House vote on the decriminalization of cannabis? 2) What are the most frequently used hashtags, and what are the trends in the hashtags the public used? 3) What are the salient themes that emerged in the Twitter chatter, and 4) How do the emergent themes relate to marketing and public policy?

Literature review

Given that the first wave of state legalization started in 2014, the marketing literature corresponding to cannabis is in a nascent stage (Olsen & Smith, 2020). To explore the extant literature on the topic, we used cannabis-related keywords (e.g., cannabis, marijuana) in combination with keywords related to marketing, retailing, advertising, and public policy to identify peer-reviewed, academic articles that have been published since 2014. In particular, we focused on articles that featured the aforementioned keyword combinations in the article abstracts and that focused on topics related specifically to cannabis marketing and public policy. After excluding irrelevant articles that addressed topics such as drug testing and employment, the use of cannabidiol during pregnancy, and JUUL marketing, we reviewed 34 articles. We found that most cannabis research has originated from public health and substance-use publications (e.g., *American Journal of Public Health*, *Addictive Behaviors*), while only a few were published in marketing-specific journals, including the *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *Journal of Macromarketing*, and *Marketing Letters*. We provide an overview of this literature in Table 1, and in the following sections, we contextualize the previous work into three categories: legalization, consumer perceptions, and marketing and public policy.

Legalization of cannabis

There have been growing calls for the legalization of cannabis as 91% of U.S. adults agree that cannabis should be legal for either medical and/or recreational use (Green, 2021). While the medical use of cannabis has been dominant, non-medical or recreational cannabis is expected to be the

Table 1. Overview of the relevant cannabis literature.

Authors	Key Findings	Data source	Context	Journal
Allem et al. (2020)	• **Prevalent topics** included cannabis use, initiation, processed products, and health and medical benefits. Social bots contributed to posts regarding medical benefits.	Twitter	Public health	*American Journal of Public Health*
Leung et al. (2019)	• **Public health impacts** of cannabis **legalization** may include higher prevalence of cannabis use, with little change in adolescent usage.	Literature review	Public health	*Current Addiction Reports*
Barry and Glantz (2018; 2016)	• Colorado, Washington, Alaska, and Oregon's **cannabis policies are in line with alcohol policies**, which may prioritize profit over public health and do not address the opportunity for big-box retailers/monopoly.	State regulations	Public health	*American Journal of Public Health*
Nathan et al. (2017)	• **Doctors** are increasingly **becoming pro-legalization** with measures in place to control the industry and protect public health. Some recommended measures include detailed labeling, marketing restrictions, prohibiting ads that would attract adolescents, child-resistant packaging, and funding research from the tax revenues.	Editorial	Public health	*American Journal of Public Health*
Alvaro et al. (2013)	• Older **adolescents** are more likely to use marijuana or be open to it and resolute nonusers reacted more favorably to the **anti-marijuana ad**. However, the ad did not predict later intentions of use.	Survey	Public health	*Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*
Baumgartner and Peiper (2017)	• Stochastic block modeling was used to **identify cannabis user type** and offer implications for **digital intervention** for targeted user-types, e.g., high-risk populations, such as adolescents and specific consumer blocks.	Twitter	Public health	*Substance Abuse: Research and Treatment*
Kelly et al. (2021)	• **State regulations** lack federal oversight and follow a self-regulation model. Marketing practices, such as packaging and promotion, may impact adolescent use and associated outcomes e.g., driving under influence, self-medication.	State laws	Public policy & marketing	*Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*
Kees et al. (2020)	• The study identified key **public policy** considerations which include reducing consumption among vulnerable groups, optimizing regulations of marketing activities, and educating consumers.	Commentary	Public policy	*Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*
Berg et al. (2018; 2017)	• Cannabis **retail stores** in Colorado **verified age** and used surveillance cameras, posted **interior marijuana ads**, and only 42% had **health warnings** displayed.	Retail store observation	Retail policy	*Addictive Behavior*
Caulkins et al. (2018)	• With legalization, **prices fluctuated** at the processor and retail levels. **Edibles** explain a small share of consumer spending, and **inhalation extracts** have a larger **market segment**. Processor businesses face more competition as compared to retail.	Seed-to-sale data	Retail policy	*International Journal of Drug Policy*
Hunt and Pacula (2017)	• Online dispensary price analysis and consumer survey indicated **higher dispensary prices** than illegal sources.	Survey & dispensary website	Retail	*Journal of Primary Prevention*
Leos-Toro et al. (2020)	• Very few consumers understood **THC labeling** and potency levels, but interpretive information helped identify THC levels.	Survey	Marketing	*Drug and Alcohol Dependence*
Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2019)	• Most **dispensary websites** did not **verify the age** of users to access the information on the site. Several dispensaries offer **price promotions, loyalty programs, online ordering,** and **home delivery**. Less than half of dispensaries share **side effect information**.	Dispensary website	Marketing	*Prevention Science*
Fiala et al. (2018)	• Over half of survey respondents reported seeing **marijuana advertisements** on the storefront, street side, and billboards, within the past 30 days.	Survey	Marketing	*American Journal of Public Health*
Krauss et al. (2017)	• Over 60% of **marijuana users** are white males with a median age of 23. Over 60% lived in a state where marijuana use is legal. Over 50% used marijuana purely recreationally. 48% heard and saw **marijuana advertising** within the past 30 days, primarily on social media.	Survey	Marketing	*Drug and Alcohol Dependence*

(Continued)

fastest-growing segment by 2027 (Grand View Research, 2020). At the federal level, cannabis is illegal in the United States and is categorized as a Schedule 1 drug with a high potential of abuse

Table 1. (Continued)

Klein (2017)	• **Cannabis entrepreneurs are critical in transforming the industry from one that is stigmatized to one that is legitimate. Their collective identity and resistance to the dominant logic play key roles in social transformation.**	Interviews	Marketing	*Journal of Macromarketing*
Olsen and Smith (2020)	• **Discusses need for more cannabis marketing research, particularly in the areas of segmentation, distribution channels, market entry, and product portfolios.**	Commentary	Marketing	*Marketing Letters*
Zhu et al. (2021)	• **Intrinsic product attributes** outweighed extrinsic attributes in terms of importance when buying marijuana. Quality was the most important factor. THC was preferred by recreational users, while CBD was preferred by medicinal users.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*International Journal of Drug Policy*
Fataar et al. (2021)	• As more **states legalize** marijuana, consumer **perceptions** become **more positive**. Illegal marijuana is perceived to be less expensive; obtaining legal cannabis is safer and of high quality.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*Addictive Behaviors*
McFadden and Malone (2021)	• Most respondents viewed cannabis as a **low-risk drug** with a decreased chance of abuse as compared to prescription medications and alcohol or Schedule 2 drugs. Consumers are using cannabis as **a treatment for anxiety and pain relief**, and the majority support legalization.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*Addictive Behaviors*
Draanen et al. (2020)	• The 2017-2019 Twitter data in Canada and the U.S. showed that users in the **less restrictive environments** expressed **more positive sentiments** than users in the more restricted environments.	Twitter	Consumer perceptions	*JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*
Simkins and Allen (2020)	• **Consumers' perceptions** of product quality, their opinion leadership status, and social acceptability significantly influence the **destigmatizing** of **marijuana** and product adoption.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*Innovation: Organization & Management*
Lewis and Sznitman (2019)	• Seeking and scanning for **information** about medicinal cannabis from **online sources** generated a more **positive opinion** toward medical cannabis and cannabis legalization as opposed to mass media.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*International Journal of Drug Policy*
Reboussin et al. (2019)	• **Edible consumption** increased among non-daily marijuana users but remained stable among daily users. Although **smoking marijuana** was still the most prevalent mode of consumption, it declined for both daily and non-daily users.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*Drug and Alcohol Dependence*
Resko et al. (2019)	• 48% of the sample who supported **marijuana legalization** noted that marijuana is less dangerous than other substances and cited criminal justice reform and tax revenue as the benefits of legalization. 42% who opposed legalization noted the harms associated with marijuana use.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*Substance Use & Misuse*
Giombi et al. (2018)	• The study examined **consumer perceptions of edibles,** major reasons for preferences and concerns in the legalized states. Edibles were preferred mainly due to no smell and no secondhand smoke. Effect unpredictability and inconsistent product distribution were the major concerns. No health risks expressed for edibles.	Focus groups	Consumer perceptions	*Substance Use and Misuse*
Gaede and Vaske (2017)	• University students in Colorado who consume marijuana thought that **legalization** would have a more positive **impact on tourism** than non-consumers of marijuana.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*Tourism Analysis*
McGinty et al. (2017)	• Pro-legalization arguments such as **increasing tax revenue**, creating a profitable new industry, reducing **prison overcrowding**, and lowering **law enforcement costs** had varying degrees of **persuasive strength** across the respondent groups. The highest rated anti-legalization argument was a conflict between state and federal regulations and failure to eliminate black markets.	Survey	Consumer perceptions	*Preventative Medicine*
Lamy et al. (2016)	• There were more tweets regarding **edibles** from **legalized states**, and most tweets expressed **positive perceptions**. Negative perceptions included the side effects of edibles due to higher THC levels.	Twitter	Consumer perceptions	*Drug and Alcohol Dependence*

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2015)	• **Pro-marijuana tweets** were more prevalent than anti-marijuana tweets. Most pro-marijuana users were **younger and African American**.	Twitter	Consumer perceptions	*Journal of Adolescent Health*
Thompson et al. (2015)	• **Adolescents** who use and post on **Twitter** are exposed to positive discussions and **perceptions of marijuana,** which normalizes its use. However, health risks are not discussed. Adolescents are comfortable posting about their usage of marijuana, and some parents seem to be supportive.	Twitter	Consumer perceptions	*Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*
Mortensen et al. (2020)	• Conservative **news outlets** depicted **stereotypes** more frequently than liberal or neutral outlets and were least likely to visually portray marijuana users as ordinary people. Politically neutral news outlets were least likely to perpetuate criminal and pot-culture stereotypes and were also most likely to use normalizing images to portray marijuana users.	News stories	Media	*Visual Communication*
McGinty et al. (2016)	• The most frequent **anti-legalization arguments** in the media focused on the potential **negative public health** consequences of the policy, including detrimental effects on youth health, development, and educational attainment. The most frequent **pro-legalization arguments** include reductions in **criminal justice** involvement/costs and **tax revenue**.	News stories	Media	*Preventative Medicine*
Smart et al. (2017)	• The **composition and variety of products** have changed as the marijuana market has grown. Cannabis flower accounts for 2/3 of total sales, but the market has declined nearly 23% with the emergence of cannabis extracts. The market share of high-THC strains has grown to nearly 93% of sales. Prices have gone down with legalization.	Public traceability data	Industry	*Addiction*

and no currently accepted medical use. However, 18 states including Colorado, Washington, Alaska, Nevada, California, Illinois, Maine, Vermont, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, New Mexico and Oregon, have legalized adult use (NCSL, 2021). With the move to the legalization of cannabis for non-medical or recreational use, one primary regulatory goal is to transition from the illicit cannabis market to the legal distribution of cannabis via retail stores and dispensaries (Fataar et al., 2021).

As a growing number of states weigh legalization, the pro- and anti-legalization debates focus on several themes. The advocates of legalization note criminal justice issues including racial disparities in cannabis-related arrests and overcrowding of prisons. Nathan et al. (2017) report that as per federal data, more arrests are made for marijuana possession than arrests for all violent crimes combined, and African Americans are four times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession than Whites despite no higher rates of use. Additionally, the economic benefits from increased tax revenue, job creation, and elimination of black markets are mentioned as pro-legalization arguments. Resko et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study with a sample from Michigan and identified several other reasons for public support which included marijuana being perceived as less harmful than other psychoactive substances, such as alcohol, cigarettes, and opioids, the financial cost of criminal justice, medical benefits, and marijuana being ubiquitous despite being illegal.

On the other hand, anti-legalization arguments center around public health, particularly youth health and well-being and marijuana-impaired driving (McGinty et al., 2016, 2017). Some studies suggest that marijuana can impair brain development (Nathan et al., 2017). Resko et al. (2019) also noted the perception of marijuana as a gateway drug and the normalization of use due to legalization as additional grounds for opposition to legalization. Some states have attempted to address some of these anti-legalization arguments as they seek to legalize cannabis. For example, Oregon's retail cannabis regulations address youth well-being risk by restricting advertising content on TV, radio, billboard, print, and online that is not relevant for audiences younger than 21, and requiring ads to specify "for adult-use only" (Fiala et al., 2018).

Consumer perceptions

Given that cannabis laws are rapidly evolving, public sentiment and opinion are likely to shift in response to new legislation. Draanen et al. (2020) analyzed cannabis-related tweets from 2017 to 2019 in Canada and the United States, and overall, they found that users in the less restrictive environments (e.g., where cannabis is legal for adult recreational use) expressed more positive sentiments in their tweets than users in the more restricted environments (e.g., where cannabis use is fully illegal or legal for medical use only). Their findings indicate a correlation between legalization of cannabis and positive sentiment and conversations among the public. Furthermore, legalization has influenced the types of cannabis products that are consumed. Several studies found that edible marijuana products have become more popular in the legalized states (Goimbi et al., 2018; Lamy et al., 2016). For example, Goimbi et al. (2018) found that consumers, especially females, tend to prefer edibles to smoking mainly because there is no smell nor secondhand smoke. However, delayed effects and inconsistent dosing and package/serving size were noted as major concerns, which further influenced regulations regarding labeling and sales of edibles in certain states.

Understanding consumer perceptions regarding the legalization of cannabis can play a critical role in shaping the legal retail market. Fataar et al. (2021) found that while consumers perceived legal cannabis to offer comparable or higher quality, purchase convenience, and safety, consumers perceived legal cannabis to be more expensive than illegal cannabis, and this perception was more acute among frequent cannabis users. Although research from several states with mature legal cannabis markets suggests that legalization may lead to lower cannabis prices in the long run (Caulkins et al., 2018; Hunt & Pacula, 2017), price may be a significant barrier to entry at the early stage of the legal cannabis market. Accordingly, regulators are expected to face challenges in determining the optimal marketing mix components that will encourage existing cannabis consumers to switch from the black market to legal retail outlets (Fataar et al., 2021).

Research suggests that the youth population is more likely to express support/positive sentiment regarding legalization. According to data from 2014 and 2015, Twitter influential users involved in marijuana-related conversations tend to be young adults and African American consumers, and these users tend to express positive sentiment and support the use or legalization of marijuana (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2015). Specifically, Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2015) found that although pro-marijuana tweets are significantly more prevalent than anti-marijuana tweets, this trend correlated to the age of users; only 11% of pro-marijuana messages were shared by users aged 25 years or older, and 89% were from users under the age of 25. This finding may highlight the need to target public education efforts toward younger markets, where favorable cannabis sentiment seems to be the highest (Bull et al., 2017).

Marketing and public policy

There are challenges in developing marketing regulations due to scientific uncertainty regarding benefits and risks associated with the use of cannabis (Kees et al., 2020). Many advocates for legalization compare cannabis to alcohol and tobacco, touting its less harmful health effects; researchers have also looked to these commercialized products for guidance on the potential marketing and policy implications once cannabis legalization becomes more widespread. For example, Berg et al. (2017) highlight retail marketing strategies in the alcohol and tobacco industry to draw lessons for cannabis marketing and public policy. Specifically, research within the context of tobacco and alcohol notes the role of physical retail locations and their marketing strategies in promoting the use of alcohol and tobacco. In this vein, they analyzed the practices of physical dispensaries and found that most dispensaries enforced minimum age requirements, and nearly half promoted various health claims as well as health warnings. Price promotions, in-store advertising, and social media promotions were commonly used, and novel goods such as edibles were frequently promoted (Berg et al., 2017).

In addition to offline retail marketing, digital marketing can be used to market cannabis. However, it has several unique challenges. Given that cannabis is a Schedule 1 drug at the federal level, platforms such as Google and Facebook prohibit cannabis advertising (Kees et al., 2020). This leads to policy and marketing implications because federal restrictions may also make it difficult to disseminate educational content. From a marketing perspective, cannabis providers may leverage their website as a marketing tool. To this end, promotional tactics used on cannabis dispensary websites can provide some insight into digital marketing approaches. For example, in a study investigating the promotional tactics used by online cannabis dispensaries, Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2019) found that three-quarters did not verify age to ensure that the consumers are older than 21. They also found that marijuana dispensaries use a variety of promotional tactics on their websites, and almost half of the dispensaries used price promotions such as coupons, while a smaller percentage offered loyalty programs. This is in line with Berg et al. (2017) findings from physical dispensaries.

However, according to Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2019) findings, less than half of the analyzed dispensaries provided information about potential side effects of their products or warnings about appropriate use of the product (e.g., do not drive while impaired). On the other hand, 67% touted various health claims related to the effectiveness of cannabis in treating the symptoms of many medical conditions, such as appetite loss, pain, and anxiety. While these claims had varying degrees of scientific verification, a challenge for cannabis promotion exists due to the inconclusive findings related to both medical and recreational use of marijuana (Kees et al., 2020). Regulations must ensure that consumers are not being misled about either the potential benefits or risks of the marijuana products they consume.

Methodology

Data

We collected public posts on Twitter using the keyword "marijuana" on the 4th of December 2020. We chose this date for data collection as it coincided with the House vote to decriminalize marijuana and expunge nonviolent marijuana-related convictions at the federal level (Walsh, 2020). We collected 62,666 posts using Keyhole, social listening and analytics software. These posts included original tweets and replies ($n = 15{,}698$, 25%) and retweets ($n = 46{,}968$, 75%). We removed the repeated posts from retweets and used original tweets and replies for the main analysis.

Analysis

All quantitative analyses were done using R version 3.6.1. To prepare data for analysis, we cleaned the tweets by pre-processing text, including converting all tweets to lower case, and removing extra-spaces, URLs, non-English letters or space, and stop words such as "I", "a", "the" and so on. Then we inspected the most frequently occurring words and conducted a word cloud analysis to create a visual representation of the most relevant words in the data. We also conducted a hashtag analysis to find the most commonly occurring hashtags and identify trending topics. Hashtags can be used to analyze diverse perspectives the public expressed on social media and gauge participation in political consumerism (Johnson et al., 2019).

To explore the overall sentiment of the tweets, we conducted a sentiment analysis using the Syuzhet package in R and the National Research Center's (NCR) emotion lexicon. The NRC lexicon categorizes words in a binary format (yes/no) to calculate the presence of eight emotions in each tweet: anticipation, joy, trust, surprise, anger, disgust, fear, and sadness (Mohammad & Turney, 2010). It also classifies each tweet as negative or positive sentiment based on the sum of the sentiment values associated with words. For example, in the phrase "perfect but noisy" the word "perfect" is associated with anticipation, joy, and trust and is assigned a score of +3 (all positive emotions), and noisy is associated with "anger" and has a sentiment value of −1, which gives the overall sentiment of $+3-1 = +2$, which is positive sentiment for the phrase (Naldi, 2019).

Following the sentiment analysis, we conducted the topic analysis to find the underlying themes in the tweets. First, we used the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), an unsupervised probabilistic model that generates topics from the text. LDA looks for word co-occurrences within the text and clusters the words under their respective topics and provides probabilities of each word belonging to the topic (Blei, 2012). To run the LDA, we must manually specify the number of topics and balance granularity versus generalization (Liu et al., 2017). While specifying a greater number of topics achieves granularity, the differences between the topics can get blurred. On the other hand, specifying a smaller number of topics can overly generalize the underlying themes. Therefore, manually inspecting and comparing the number of topics (e.g., 3, 5, vs. 7) are used to determine the number of topics and evaluate underlying themes in the topic models (Draanen et al., 2020). We analyzed three different LDA models with K, or the number of topics = 3, 5, and 10. We then used the most frequent words under each topic to determine the most semantically cohesive topic models for each LDA model. After careful inspection of the words under each topic, we determined the LDA model with five topics balanced granularity and generalization most effectively.

Furthermore, we conducted a bigram analysis to understand the context of the tweets. Specifically, we extracted bigrams from each tweet and generated frequency counts of the most commonly occurring bigrams to identify patterns of word usage. We also extracted bigrams of the most commonly occurring words in our LDA model. For example, we extracted every word that occurred with medical, house, and federal. By doing so, we were able to assess the references made along with words such as medical. As an example, we generated 299 bigrams that included the word medical; in these bigrams, the word benefit occurred 10 times indicating that the medical benefits of marijuana occurred together 10 times in the tweets.

We also conducted a profile analysis by generating word clouds and frequent terms filtered by the number of followers to understand who participated in the Twitter conversation regarding the legalization of marijuana. Lastly, we conducted a manual content analysis of the 1,000 most engaging tweets to more deeply examine the conversations and identify representative posts for each theme that emerged from the data.

Table 2. Equality analysis of participation.

User Group (Post Frequency)	User		Tweets	
	n	Share	*n*	Share
One time (1)	10,451	85.82%	10,451	66.58%
Light (2-5)	1604	13.17%	3902	24.86%
Medium (6-20)	112	0.92%	978	6.23%
Heavy (21-50)	11	0.09%	367	2.34%
Total	12,178		15,698	

Results

Profile analysis

We analyzed the equality of participation to examine if the conversation regarding cannabis legalization was driven by a group of interested users or the public. As shown in Table 2, the share of users and messages (frequency of unique posts created by each group of users) indicate that the deliberation regarding cannabis legalization on Twitter was dominated by the public and light users.

Furthermore, we filtered the tweets based on the number of followers and found that the majority of users in our data had fewer than 10,000 followers. For each segment of users, we extracted the most frequent terms from the bios to gauge user profiles within each segment. As shown in Table 3, user profiles with greater than 100,000 followers primarily included large media accounts, such as CNN, Reuters, The Hill, ABC News, NBC, USA Today, and CSPAN, and political organizations, including House Republicans, Senate Republicans, and House Judiciary Democrats. User profiles between 100,000 and 10,000 followers included national and local media organizations, such as ABC News 4 and FoxNashville; politicians and senators from various states, including Texas and New Jersey; cannabis/marijuana-related accounts, such as Cannabis Training University, Drug Policy Alliance, The Cannabist, and CelebStoner; and additional influencer accounts commenting on the legislation. User profiles with fewer than 10,000 followers were a broad representation of values, including Black Lives Matter, political inclination (e.g., Democratic, Republican, Trump, MAGA, resistance, voteblue), religious affiliations (e.g., Christian, atheist), familial roles (e.g., mom, father, husband, wife), and age.

Additionally, for each segment of users, we conducted the topic analysis to assess thematic differences in the tweets. The topic analysis with k = 5

Table 3. Profile segments based on number of followers.

No. of Followers	*n*	Share	Most Frequent Terms in User Profiles	Themes
100,000 and above	811	5.17%	breaking, hill, news, policy, political, reporters, source, Washington, stories, team	Media - national, politicians
10,001 100,000	1773	11.29%	attorney, black, rights, trump, twitter, CBS, central, coverage, local, advocate, cannabis	Media - national & local, politicians, influencers, marijuana-related accounts, political inclination
1,001 10,000	4580	30.90%	BLM, resistance, rights, atheist, country, DMS, dogs, politics, Christian, family, love, MAGA	Black Lives Matter, political inclination, religious affiliations
1,000 and below	8284	52.64%	world, change, community, marijuana, welcome, fun, sh**, talk, mother, old, year, hard, stay, work, education	Community-based, familial roles, age, occupational information

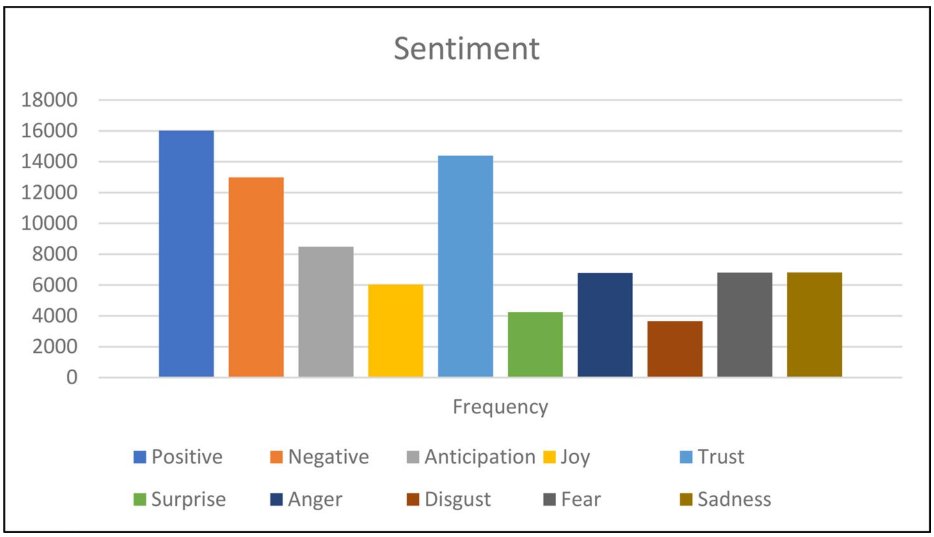

Figure 1. Sentiment analysis for all tweets.

yielded a similar distribution of themes as in the overall data set. We found no significant differences in the discourse between the different segments.

Sentiment, related keywords, hashtags analysis

First, the sentiment analysis of all tweets indicated greater usage of words associated with positive sentiment ($n = 16{,}013$) as compared to negative sentiment ($n = 12{,}988$). Trust ($n = 14{,}393$), anticipation ($n = 8{,}484$), and fear ($n = 6{,}806$) were most frequently mentioned sentiments along with the words used in the tweets (see Figure 1). Although the sentiment analysis is not indicative of support or opposition to the decriminalization/legalization of cannabis, the overall results imply greater use of words representing positive sentiment values than negative sentiment values in the public discourse on Twitter. In addition to the sentiment analysis performed in R, we manually analyzed the 1,000 most engaging tweets that were initially classified as either positive or negative sentiment by Keyhole. The intention was to assess whether the tweets in either category tended to be in favor of or opposition to cannabis decriminalization and legalization. We found that only 23 posts expressed opposition to legalization; eight tweets were from users with 10,000 followers, and 15 tweets were from users with fewer than 1,000 followers. We reviewed the user profiles and found that the most common theme in the user characteristics gleaned from profile descriptions was regarding political affiliations, such that 15 profiles expressed conservative or republican political leaning. The analysis also revealed that many tweets coded as negative sentiment were actually in support of the policy reform, but most users were expressing negative sentiment because of their frustration, anger, or disappointment with the government's decisions. For example, some tweets expressed anger about the disproportionate impact that cannabis laws have had on people of color, while others shared disappointment and frustration that the MORE Act would likely die in the Senate.

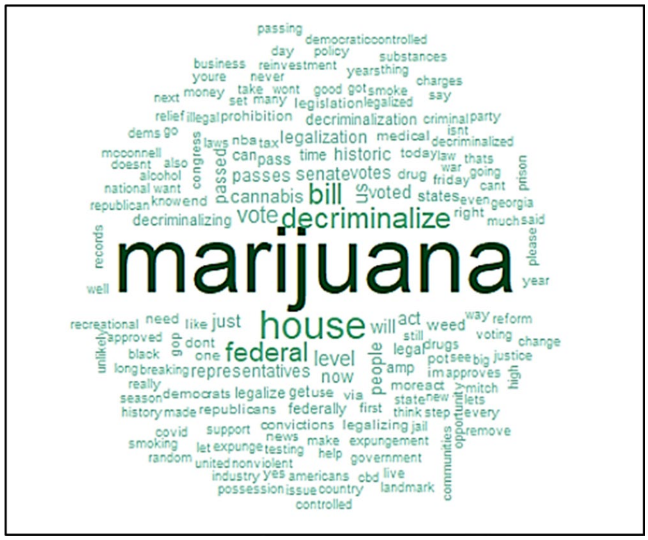

Figure 2. Word cloud analysis for frequently mentioned words related to marijuana.

Next, we conducted a word cloud analysis to examine keywords and hashtags related to marijuana. As shown in Figure 2, in addition to our search term "marijuana" ($n = 13{,}475$), the most frequently mentioned words include "house" ($n = 5{,}035$), "decriminalize" ($n = 3{,}632$), "federal" ($n = 3{,}559$), and "bill" ($n = 3{,}093$). The hashtag analysis indicated that the most frequent hashtags included #marijuana ($n = 899$), #cannabis ($n = 482$), and #moreact ($n = 433$) (see Figure 2). As shown in Table 4, we found five underlying themes in the hashtags: 1) marijuana-related terms, including #cannabis, #CBD, #weed, and #maryjane; 2) pro-marijuana hashtags including, #legalizeit, #endcannibasprohibition, #legalizecannibas, and #decriminlizemarijunana; 3) related community/organization, including #nba, #business, and #cannabiscommunity; 4) news/media mentions, including #breaking, #smartnews, #foxnews, #wsj, and #nytimes; and 5) policy maker mentions, including #house, #congress, and #moscowmitch. A hashtag #covid was also mentioned ($n = 27$) as part of the conversation expressing disagreement with the House's priorities during the pandemic, but it did not emerge as a salient theme.

Table 4. Thematic analysis for frequently mentioned hashtags.

Themes	Related Hashtags and Frequencies
Marijuana-related terms	#marijuana (899), #cannabis (482), #cbd (140), #weed (156), #thc (71), medicalmarijuana (68), #hemp (38), #pot (29), #maryjane (28)
Pro-marijuana	#moreact (433), #legalizeit (78), #endcannabisprohibition (56), #legalizecannabis (43), #decriminalizemarijuana (43), #legalizemarijuana (38), #legalmarijuana (36), #legalize (35), #decriminalize (34)
Related communities/ organizations	#nba (54), #business (50), #rwbbrands (25) #cannabiscommunity (84), #cannabisvoterproject (34), #cannabisculture (30), #weedlife (28)
News/media mentions	#breaking (105), #smartnews (93), #cannabisnews (76), #foxnews (63), #wsj (46), #nytimes (46), #reuters (41), #forbes (41), #ihub (41), #marketwatch (39), #cnn (38), #bet (33), #news (32), #latimes (30), #hempnews (30), #espn (27), #vireohealth (26), #benzinga (26), #wgn (25), #cse (25)
Policy maker mentions	#house (31), #congress (28), #moscowmitch (25)

Topic modeling

We used the LDA to derive five topic models which had good coherence and described the underlying themes (see Table 5). We manually reviewed the models and determined descriptive labels based on domain knowledge gleaned from the previous research on the legalization of marijuana. The five themes included: 1) commentaries on the House vote, 2) legalization impediment in the Senate, 3) expungement of marijuana-related criminal records, 4) medical use of marijuana, and 5) social and economic impact of the bill. It is important to note that tweets can be multidimensional, in that a single tweet can include words that touch upon various topics such as expungement of criminal records and social and economic impact. To fully contextualize the topics, we provide a brief overview of each topic based on manual content analysis of the tweets as well as a bigram analysis of the most representative words in each topic (see Table 6).

Table 5. Topic labels and top words with beta values.

Topic	Theme	Top 10 related words
T1	Commentaries on the House Vote	decriminalize (0.117); house (0.115); vote (0.099); federal (0.085); bill (0.075); pass (0.065); level (0.039); represent (0.025); history (0.022); approve (0.015)
T2	Legalization Impediment in the Senate	marijuana (0.087); legal (0.082); state (0.027); senate (0.019); republican (0.017); time (0.015); democrat (0.014); American (0.009); issue (0.007); mcconnell (0.006)
T3	Expungement of Marijuana-Related Criminal Records	marijuana (0.182); cannabis (0.033); act (0.025); expunge (0.018); weed (0.017); today (0.0163); congress (0.013); nba (0.012); moreact (0.011); gop (0.010)
T4	Medical Use of Marijuana	like (0.018); people (0.016); medical (0.0129); smoke (0.012); want (0.011); year (0.011); right (0.009); alcohol (0.008); good (0.008)
T5	Social and Economic Impact of the Bill	marijuana (0.085); drug (0.026); use (0.020); tax (0.013); people (0.013); law (0.012); criminal (0.012); help (0.010); step (0.008);war (0.007); business (0.007); black (0.006); prison (0.006)

Commentaries on the house vote

This topic was related to the House of Representative's vote to pass the MORE Act bill. The words corresponding to this topic noted the "landmark" and "historic" significance of the vote to pass the bill, end the prohibition of marijuana, and provide a pathway to decriminalization. Additionally, there was discussion regarding the partisanship in the vote; all but five Republicans were noted to have voted against it, and all but six Democrats were reported to have voted yes. Several users expressed concern regarding the fate of the bill due to a lack of Republican support, and some called to question the hypocrisy of the party for supporting free-market capitalism yet refuting this sector which could have a significant economic impact. On the other hand, a small number of users who opposed the bill expressed frustration that those in Democratic leadership, such as Nancy Pelosi, were focusing their efforts on cannabis reform while the country and many of its citizens were still reeling from the hardships caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These tweets highlighted that Congress should be focused on economic recovery, including helping working families and small business owners. Finally, some tweets noted that the cannabis debate should not

Table 6. Representative tweets corresponding to each topic.

Topic Theme	Example Tweets
Commentaries on the House Vote	• Wow, history has been made in the world of Cannabis today. Today the House of Representatives voted to pass the MORE Act, decriminalizing marijuana on a federal level. A huge step in ending marijuana prohibition and a historic step forward in the cannabis industry. • House just passed legislation to decriminalize Marijuana in America. The failed war on drugs has ruined lives, families, and communities. We must end it. Forever. • House votes to pass a bill to decriminalize marijuana and erase nonviolent federal marijuana convictions! Its lit or what?? • You are voting on MARIJUANA today instead of helping millions of Americans who are struggling. SHAME ON YOU Americans need #ReliefNow @USHouse @ HouseDemocrats @HouseGOP @ SpeakerPelosi @senatemajldr @ stevenmnuchin1 #COVID19.
Legalization Impediment in the Senate	• JUST IN: The U.S. House passes a bill that would legalize marijuana and remove it from federal drug schedules under the Controlled Substances Act. It's unlikely to get a vote in the Senate as Mitch McConnell and other Republicans don't favor legalization. • The House voted for the decriminalization of Marijuana. Whoop. I can't get excited about anything the House passes because we all know the bill will go to die on McConnell's desk. We need to take control of the Senate FFS. Hear that Georgians?
Expungement of Marijuana-Related Criminal Records	• Supporting the Marijuana Opportunity Reinvestment and Expungement (MORE) Act is a leap toward justice. Our marijuana laws disproportionately harm individuals of color, leading to convictions that damage job prospects, access to housing & the ability to vote. #MOREAct • Legalizing marijuana is worthless if you don't expunge the convictions of those who went to prison for it.
Medical Use of Marijuana	• Give everyone access to marijuana for medical purposes. Help combat the opioid crisis by providing a safe pain management alternative. Repair some of the damage done by criminalizing behavior that shouldn't have been, damage disproportionately done to Black & brown people. • The House has approved a bill to decriminalize marijuana at the federal level. It's time. Most states allow it medically, and more are allowing recreational use. #LegalizeMarijuana • I'm gonna say something that needs to be said: I don't drink or use marijuana, but after my severe illness, I do have mild neuropathy in my legs. Like hot stabbing pains. I can understand why so many, in worse shape, need THC. Texas laws on medicinal THC are ridiculous. • The fight to #EndCannabisProhibition is a #PublicHealth issue too. #Veterans often report using cannabis in place of alcohol or other substances to ease chronic pain or #PTSD. In states that legalized, opioid death rates have dropped significantly.

(Continued)

Table 6. (Continued)

Social and Economic Impact of the Bill	• For too long, discriminatory marijuana policies have reinforced systemic racism for Black and brown people. This legislation has the potential to help right those wrongs in so many disadvantaged communities and power the restorative justice process! • Legalize marijuana. Expunge nonviolent marijuana convictions. Invest in Black and Brown communities to repair the harm elicited by the war on drugs. • The #MOREAct is long overdue. Today, I'm voting to: Federally decriminalize marijuana, Begin expunging federal convictions, Tax marijuana and invest profits in communities hurt by the War on Drugs, and Allow #MedicalMarijuana access @DeptVetAffairs • The bill also would open up more opportunities for marijuana businesses, including access to Small Business Administration loans to help ensure that minorities can take part in an industry dominated by white farmers and growers. • The marijuana bill: Better to tax marijuana like alcohol than keep it illegal, which amounts to an infinite tax. Better to have some regulation of marijuana than the current maximal regulation: prohibition. Better to let people buy marijuana than put people in prison for it. • Draconian marijuana laws contribute to racial inequality. By passing the MORE Act: The House just took a historic step toward finally ending the federal prohibition on marijuana, advancing criminal justice reform, and helping level the economic playing field.

be a partisan issue, and some highlighted unlikely commentary from Republican legislators, such as Matt Gaetz from Florida, who have been strong proponents of the bill.

Legalization impediment in the senate

The topic corresponding to the legalization of marijuana mostly discussed the impediment to legalizing marijuana at the Senate level. Several users expressed skepticism regarding the future of the bill in the Senate and commented on Republicans,' specifically Mitch McConnell's, lack of support to decriminalize marijuana at the Senate level. Some users indicated the importance of Democratic control of the Senate to ensure the bill is passed into law. In particular, many tweets noted that the fate of the bill could rest in the hands of Georgia voters who would be determining two Senate seats that were pivotal for securing a Democratic majority. Overall, users expressed disappointment regarding the possibility of the MORE Act bill not becoming a law due to a lack of support from Republican senators. Some called to question why a party claiming to represent citizens' personal liberties would fight to keep restrictive laws in place, while other tweets highlighted that Congress needed to listen to the voters who generally support decriminalization measures.

Expungement of marijuana-related criminal records

This topic mostly corresponded to expunging previous criminal records related to marijuana. Several tweets focused on the social and racial injustice in previous criminal charges and suggested that those who are serving sentences in prison for marijuana-related crimes should be released and their criminal records be expunged. Tweets expressing support for the bill noted that this legislation and potential cannabis decriminalization at the federal level could be a critical step in criminal justice reform and ending the years-long War on Drugs. Many tweets noted that to fully rectify the disproportionate impacts on underrepresented communities, legislation must right the wrongs of the past and ensure that criminal records are expunged and those who were impacted receive restitution.

Medical use of marijuana

The topic regarding the medical use of marijuana mainly discussed the use of marijuana as a safe alternative for pain management. Some users compared the use of marijuana with alcohol and other opioids and argued that marijuana is a safer alternative. In line with this discussion, some users highlighted the medical and mental health benefits for particular groups, such as treating post-traumatic stress disorder among veterans. It also triggered conversations regarding legal access to medical marijuana in various states and statistics about the general support for medical marijuana among citizens. Additionally, several users cited the medical benefits of marijuana to justify the decriminalization and legalization of medical cannabis at the federal level. Some tweets cited research regarding the medicinal benefits of marijuana, while others highlighted the need for additional empirical research to confirm the benefits and bolster the case for cannabis policy reform.

Social and economic impact of the bill

The last topic mainly corresponded to the House vote as a step to address social inequity associated with marijuana-related criminal charges among people of color, with a particular focus on African American citizens. Tweets noted that the War on Drugs had racist roots that disproportionately impacted communities of color. Some underlying words also indicated legalization could be a path to generate revenues from taxation and new business opportunities. These tweets noted that a regulated industry could provide tax revenue, reduce law enforcement costs, and provide jobs. Some tweets highlighted the need to reinvest the revenue back into the communities that have been most damaged by marijuana policing. In opposition to these arguments, some tweets claimed that the benefits of tax revenue did not warrant the potential negative societal implications, while other tweets noted that legal cannabis should not be taxed at all or should be taxed at the same rate as other products rather than having an added "sin" tax.

Discussion and implications

In this study, we analyzed marijuana-related posts on Twitter in response to the House vote to decriminalize marijuana and expunge nonviolent marijuana-related convictions. Users with varied profiles, ranging from individuals to opinion/political leaders to national/local media accounts, were engaged in the conversation, predominantly expressing positive sentiment toward the decriminalization of cannabis. Our results revealed that several hashtags, including #marijuna, #cannabis, and #moreact were most prevalently used. These three hashtags are topically relevant and enable users to increase the visibility of posts discussing this trending topic that has both political and personal relevance for many users. Some users included these hashtags along with personal opinions and feelings regarding the House vote, while others, such as journalists, included them along with legislative updates informing the public about the House decision. Five major hashtag themes also emerged from the data: marijuana-related terms, pro-marijuana, related community/organizations, news/media mentions, and policy maker mentions. These themes align with prior hashtag research that has explored the role of hashtags in online political activism and consumerism (Johnson et al., 2019; Yang, 2016). We see that many users include politically charged hashtags, such as #endcannibasprohibition, #legalizecannibas, and #decriminlizemarijunana, which enable users to mobilize citizen action and encourage more grassroots efforts. On the other hand, we also see use of prevalent hashtags among many media outlets, journalists, and politicians. The use of hashtags from these user categories enables them to increase reach and engagement, thus enhancing visibility for their media organizations or political agendas. Sentiments expressed in tweets and hashtags can play an influential role in organizing public discourse and shaping public perceptions (Johnson et al., 2019). Particularly when messages and hashtags become widespread, they can shape descriptive social norms (McNeill & Briggs, 2014). When a large number of individuals indicate their support for legalization on Twitter, it can create a norm for others who share a social identity with the specific group (expressing support) and are linked together in the Twitter network (McNeill & Briggs, 2014), therefore, further perpetuating the trend toward support for legalization of cannabis.

Furthermore, we found that there were five underlying themes in the Twitter chatter, including *commentaries on the House vote*, *legalization impediment in the Senate*, *expungement of marijuana-related criminal records*, *medical use of marijuana*, and *social and economic impact of the bill*. Many tweets related to *commentaries on the House vote* in support of the MORE Act and the federal decriminalization of cannabis. While many tweets shared breaking news about the vote, many users shared tweets that reflected favorable sentiment and support for this legislation. Our data highlights changing cannabis discourse on both the federal and individual levels with growing support and positive public opinion. However, several tweets demonstrated widespread skepticism about whether the legislation would advance to and eventually pass in the Senate. The theme involving *legalization impediment in the Senate* demonstrates that despite evolving public opinion on cannabis decriminalization and legalization, there remains a divide among citizens, politicians, and advocacy groups. At the time of writing, legislation that would end the federal prohibition on marijuana has yet to be deliberated in the Senate. However, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and two other Democratic senators have vowed to push forward the legislation, and with a Democratic majority in Senate and some bipartisan support, proponents are more hopeful (Fertig, 2021). While it is not yet clear what exactly the bill would entail, there will likely be efforts to change the status of marijuana under the Controlled Substances Act and to enact more comprehensive reform that addresses banking regulations and restorative justice issues (Nunley, 2021). With the movement toward potential decriminalization and possible legalization at the federal level, there are many policy decisions related to commercialization, regulation, and marketing that will need to be established. While the specifics have yet to be determined, the states that have passed recent reforms, such as New York and New Jersey, can provide a framework for how legislation is addressing a variety of ethical and regulatory considerations for retailing and marketing.

The theme corresponding to *medical use of marijuana* is supported by the findings in Cavazos-Rehg et al. (2015) and Resko et al. (2019) studies; they found that support for marijuana legalization is often rationalized by citing the medical benefits of marijuana use and that it is less harmful than other psychoactive substances including alcohol, opioids, and cigarettes. While research supports the positive implications of cannabis use for some medical conditions, the public perceptions regarding marijuana being medically beneficial, natural, and harmless can pose a public health concern. The potential of consumers, particularly young and impressionable consumers, relying on Twitter as a source of information and knowledge without fully understanding the impact of recreational use, calls for public-health campaigns to increase product knowledge and awareness of the impact of marijuana on health and well-being. As an example, a study by Consumer Brand Association (2019) found that 62% of American consumers have heard about CBD (cannabidiol) but were mistaken or unsure about what it does and if it is safe to consume. Many consumers do not know the difference and impact of CBD vs. THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) and assumed CBD is the same as marijuana and can give a "high" sensation. Additionally, there is a lack of understanding of potency, THC content, and various strains available in the recreational market. To some extent, the status of marijuana as a Schedule 1 drug at the federal level and the associated stigma can be a barrier for consumers' inclination to seek out product knowledge. Moreover, research highlights concern regarding social bots on Twitter perpetuating unsubstantiated health claims about marijuana (Allem et al., 2020). Given the lack of consumer knowledge and growing sales of recreational marijuana, there is a need for clearly articulated regulations and public-health campaigns to inform and educate consumers and ensure consumer well-being especially among vulnerable populations (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2019). Additionally, the responsibility lies with the cannabis industry to carefully design marketing materials that not only promote the products but also educate the user. For example, packaging with information regarding serving size, potency levels, and THC content is important. While several states such as Colorado and Nevada mandate some of these cues, not all states have clearly articulated the guidelines.

Other important themes in our data, *the expungement of marijuana-related criminal records,* and *social and economic impact of the bill* point to the criminal injustice and disproportionate negative impact of the criminalization of marijuana on certain communities. These themes raise several important ethical issues that warrant policy making. The data revealed that users consistently highlighted the negative implications that the War on Drugs had for people of color. As National Public Radio (NPR) recently reported, there is growing consensus across the political spectrum and among law enforcement that the War on Drugs was ineffective in curbing drugs as well the opioid crisis (Mann, 2021). Thus, there is debate regarding how states can right some of the wrongs that the War of Drugs waged against communities of color. What is the role of marketing and public policy in this process? For example, how do we ensure Black and brown youth under 21 don't continue to be disproportionately targeted for possession even in the legalized states? Research finds that marijuana dispensaries are disproportionately located in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods with larger minority and youth populations (Morrison et al., 2014; Shi et al., 2016; Thomas & Freisthler, 2016, 2017). Therefore, how do marketing and public policy intersect to ensure that ethical target marketing is used in the cannabis industry and to regulate the placement of dispensaries so that disadvantaged, minority, and low-income areas are not disproportionately targeted?

As the cannabis debate continues, some states, regardless of their decriminalization and legalization statuses, have passed legislation that at least reduces criminal penalties for marijuana-related offenses, and most offer record clearing laws that might apply to cannabis; however, there might be a need to better inform the public of these expungement relief options, as was addressed in the 2020 New Jersey legislation. Furthermore, there are ethical concerns regarding marijuana monopolies vs. a truly equitable cannabis industry. For example, ACLU New Jersey Executive Director Amol Sinha noted that, "the 'yes' vote is only the first step toward justice, lawmakers must create an inclusive, racially just, equitable cannabis industry, enable robust expungement of records, and invest revenue in the communities hit hardest by unjust drug law enforcement, especially Black and brown communities." Some states have included provisions in state bills to address some of these racial inequities. For example, the New Jersey bill outlines expunging previous criminal offenses related to marijuana possession (S21 ScaSca 2 R, 2021). Additionally, it mandates that at least 15% of the total cannabis licenses would be issued to certified minority businesses. Similarly, the New York bill establishes a goal to grant 50% of adult-use cannabis licenses to social and economic equity applicants which include individuals from communities disproportionately impacted by cannabis criminalization, minority- and women-owned businesses, distressed farmers, and service-disabled veterans (S. 854 A, 2021). Further prioritization will be given to applicants with lower incomes and those who have had prior marijuana-related criminal offenses themselves or who have a loved one who has (S. 854 A, 2021). The New Jersey bill also specifies that the Cannabis Regulatory Commission would sponsor seminars and informational programs targeted toward minorities to provide support and training, while the New York bill indicates that an incubator program will be established to provide similar services (S21 ScaSca 2 R, 2021; S. 854 A, 2021). Moreover, concerning general social and economic impact, the New York bill stipulates that 40% of tax revenue will be granted to eligible schools, 40% will be provided to the community grants reinvestment fund which will reinvest the funds in communities disparately impacted by past federal and state drug policies, and 20% will be used given to the drug treatment and public education fund (S. 854 A, 2021).

Our findings provide a lens to view pro-marijuana public discourse at a critical time as the movement to decriminalize and legalize is gaining momentum across the country. Users exposed to the pro-legalization messages that were revealed in our study may be provided with a new perspective on the multifaceted cannabis debate. Most messages certainly did not glamorize marijuana use, but they draw attention to the realities of its criminalized status and the far-reaching implications this has had for certain communities. This Twitter chatter informs youth, among other populations, about the societal implications of the cannabis debate. With pro-legalization momentum growing, the extant literature on the phenomenon along with our findings highlight the need to more effectively implement science-based public health campaigns that educate the public without stigmatization and shame.

Limitations and future research

There are several limitations to this study. First, we used Twitter data which can introduce selection bias as users with strong opinions may be more likely to post on the issue. We attempted to address this limitation to some extent by analyzing the equality of participation. Second, even though we analyzed a significant number of tweets, they were all posted on a single day in response to the House vote. Finally, as noted by Allem et al. (2020), Twitter data can suffer from the influence of social bots, which can spread unsubstantiated claims.

Future research can address the role of education and public awareness campaigns in dissipating the lack of product knowledge and potential effects of cannabis consumption, especially among young, impressionable consumers. Additionally, future research can examine the role of marketing attributes including packaging and labeling in informing consumers regarding the impact and risks associated with consumption of different cannabis products such as edibles. Such research has the potential to not only foster the safe transition to legal retail consumption but also inform public policy making and safeguard consumers' well-being. Empirical research confirming the medical benefits of cannabis can be helpful for cannabis policy reform. Finally, research focusing on racial inequities of cannabis policy and enforcement can address this important issue to foster a more equitable society. For example, future research can examine existing policies and regulations from the legalized states to uncover how each state addressed racial inequities, if there are any gaps, and how future policy can address these gaps.

In conclusion, this study is one of the few to examine public discourse regarding cannabis decriminalization/legalization. While this study focused on the United States, our findings can provide implications for global contexts as many countries around the world have legalized medical use of cannabis and some are experimenting with recreational legalization. For example, in 2020, the Swiss parliament passed an amendment to launch pilot trials to gather scientific intelligence to inform the legalization of the recreational cannabis market (Federal Council, 2021). The Swiss parliament rationalized the amendment citing widespread consumption despite a legal ban, a thriving black market, and concern for user safety. These issues are comparable to those highlighted in this study. Therefore, this study, including the research methodology for using social media data, can inform future work to gather and analyze real-time consumer/market intelligence in other countries facing legislative debates over legal cannabis markets. Twitter analysis can be particularly useful in uncovering public sentiment, voices, and topics of importance from a wide audience, which can further inform regulation to allow for marketing and retailing of cannabis that addresses ethical issues that are important to various stakeholders.

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ORIGINAL PAPER

Effects of Internal–External Congruence-Based CSR Positioning: An Attribution Theory Approach

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Abstract

Although corporate social responsibility (CSR) appears to be mutually beneficial for companies and consumers, the modern marketplace has left both parties in vulnerable positions. Consumers are increasingly subjected to incongruent CSR messages such as *greenwashing*, while companies are trapped in a strategic positioning dilemma with regard to how to most effectively and ethically approach CSR communication. This has led some companies to instead adopt a strategically silent approach, such as *greenhushing*. To capture this CSR positioning dilemma and test the positioning effects on consumers' attributions, this study applies attribution theory to conceptualize four distinct CSR positions (uniform, discreet, washing, and apathetic) which reflect varying combinations of congruence or incongruence between a company's external CSR communication and its actual internal CSR actions. Using an online experiment, the effects of the CSR positions on consumer attributions for intrinsic and extrinsic CSR motivations and purchase intentions were tested across three CSR domains: environmental; labor; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) inclusion. Overall, the findings attest to the significant effect of internal–external congruence-based CSR positioning on how consumers respond to CSR communication. Importantly, the results indicate that discreet positioning is perceived similarly to uniform positioning, while misleading and unethical tactics such as CSR-washing are sure to backfire. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords Corporate social responsibility (CSR) · Attribution theory · Incongruence

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR)has become a prominent ethical issue within the modern marketplace, and research indicates that many consumers respond more favorably to socially conscious companies (Ellen et al. 2006; Nyilasy et al. 2015; Saeidi et al. 2015). However, as more companies begin to incorporate CSR communication within their marketing and public relations (PR) campaigns, there is also increasing consumer skepticism regarding firms' motives for CSR (Leonidou and Skarmeas 2017; Nyilasy et al. 2015; Parguel et al. 2011; Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). In addition to the use of CSR communication as a means for positive impression management, *CSR-washing*, or the phenomenon where a company presents itself as being more socially responsible than it actually is, has intensified the level of wariness some consumers have toward CSR publicity. For example, consumers often observe companies unethically misleading consumers about their environmental practices or the environmental benefits of their products or services (TerraChoice 2010), which is referred to as

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corporate greenwashing. Although previous research on such incongruences between a company's social responsibility words and deeds has been primarily confined to environmental contexts, with the increasing demand for CSR, accounts of CSR-washing have proliferated across many CSR contexts, ranging from fairwashing in the labor-related CSR domain (Queinnec and Bourdon 2010) to gaywashing in the diversity domain of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) inclusion (Ginder and Byun 2015).

As a result of increasing accounts of CSR-washing and mounting public skepticism toward CSR communication, some companies are opting to approach CSR in a more quietly conscientious manner by limiting or avoiding explicit communications and publicity regarding their CSR involvement (Lindsey 2016; Vallaster et al. 2012). Within the context of environmental sustainability, some companies have begun to engage in a form of greenhushing, whereby they deliberately engage in fewer pro-sustainability communications than they actually practice (Font et al. 2016; Stifelman 2008). This strategic silence has been largely attributed to growing distrust among consumers and to companies' fear of consumer and activist backlash (Carlos and Lewis 2018; Lindsey 2016; Stifelman 2008). Yet, knowledge is scant regarding how consumers react to such practices.

To address this gap in the literature, this study proposes four strategically and ethically distinct CSR positions (uniform, apathetic, discreet, and washing positions) which reflect varying combinations of congruence or incongruence of the company's external CSR communication and actual internal CSR actions. The *uniform CSR* position is adopted when a company's CSR-related external communication accurately reflects its internal CSR actions (i.e., the company is internally practicing CSR as well as externally communicating its CSR practices for marketing or PR purposes). Conversely, the *apathetic CSR* position occurs when a company is internally not involved in a CSR domain as well as externally not claiming that it is. Within both the uniform and apathetic positions, a firm's internal CSR actions/inactions and external CSR/non-CSR communications are congruent. On the other hand, companies in the discreet and washing positions are displaying incongruence between their external claims and internal actions. The *discreet CSR* position occurs when a firm's internal CSR actions are not touted through consumer-directed communication efforts. Thus, although the company is involved in CSR, it does not publically promote its CSR. Conversely, the *CSR-washing* position occurs when a company misleadingly claims to engage in CSR although it does not actually participate in the marketed behavior.

Given that today's business environment is replete with corporate examples from all of these four CSR positions, understanding consumers' perspectives on these diverse ethical positions revolving around the internal–external congruence or incongruence between corporate CSR claims and actions is much needed to frame this phenomenon in the business ethics discourse. In an attempt to address this need, we applied attribution theory as a guiding theoretical framework to model the effect that the four aforementioned CSR positions have on consumers' attributions regarding the company's intrinsic CSR motivations, extrinsic CSR motivations, and purchase intentions (see Fig. 1) and tested the model experimentally. This is the first study to conceptualize and empirically examine the effect of these four internal–external congruence-based CSR positions. Furthermore, considering the multifaceted nature of the CSR construct (Peloza and Shang 2011; Wang et al. 2016), the proposed model is tested across three CSR domains—environmental, labor, and LGBT inclusion—to further explore any domain differences in the effect of CSR positions.

This study offers significant theoretical contributions to the existing CSR and business ethics literature while providing important practical implications to aid firms in developing more effective and ethical CSR action and communication strategies. The dilemma of internal–external congruence-based CSR positioning represents varying approaches to the managerial paradox, which embodies both ethical and strategic considerations for companies. Given that the business ethics literature tends to neglect consumers' perspectives (Shabbir et al. 2018), this study broadens our understanding on consumers' responses to companies' approaches to dealing with this ethical and strategic dilemma within the CSR domain. In particular, by applying attribution theory, this research provides new knowledge regarding consumers' motive attributions and behavioral intentions following exposure to ethically ambiguous CSR contexts.

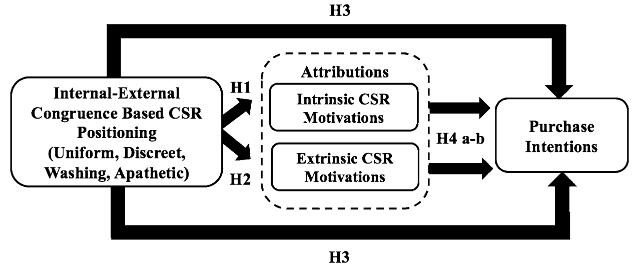


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses Development

The Impact of Internal–External Congruence-based CSR Positioning

According to attribution theory, consistency refers to the degree to which an individual's behavior occurs across different occasions and/or modalities (Kelley 1967, 1973). Some scholars have examined CSR consistency within the scope of a firm's history of involvement in a particular CSR domain (Laczniak et al. 2001; Leonidou and Skarmeas 2017; Vanhamme and Grobben 2009). In this case, companies that have an extensive past in CSR are seen as more consistent than those who have only been sporadically involved. In this study, on the other hand, we conceptualize *CSR congruence* as the degree to which a company's CSR position is congruent between its external CSR claims and internal CSR actions. Four distinct CSR positions which reflect varying combinations of congruence or incongruence of a company's external CSR communication and internal CSR actions were examined (see Fig. 2).

As previously noted, CSR-washing refers to the failure of a company to practice what it preaches in regard to social responsibility, and in 2015, Volkswagen took a ride down this slippery slope with its diesel deception scandal (Gelles 2015). In an effort to appear to go green, the company spent $77 million on consumer-directed marketing of its allegedly environmentally friendly diesel cars; however, it was later revealed that 11 million of these diesel engines had been equipped with software that would cheat the emissions testing to mislead its consumers and fake compliance with the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Clean Air Act (Gelles 2015). The example of Volkswagen is an illustration of an unethical corporate scandal at its highest severity and depicts a classic case of corporate greenwashing. In addition to outright lies, companies have been accused of slightly less-flagrant forms of greenwashing when their green communications incorporate vague terminology, lack substantive evidence, or provide irrelevant information intended to deceive (Kangun et al. 1991; TerraChoice 2010).

In the wake of increasing consumer skepticism and corporate transgressions, some companies are remaining strategically silent with regard to prosocial claims, CSR certifications, and voluntary environmental reporting (Carlos and Lewis 2018; Font et al. 2016; Lindsey 2016). For example, research in the hospitality industry reveals a phenomenon referred to as greenhushing, wherein businesses intentionally under-publicize sustainability practices (Font et al. 2016). Similarly, Lindsey (2016) suggests that some corporations such as Wal-Mart are actually leading the way in terms of sustainability efforts, but in an attempt to ward off potential criticism and consumer and activist scrutiny, they employ a discreet CSR communication approach which lacks overtly green branding and marketing strategies.

Conversely, in terms of apathetic positioning, there are companies that lack both internal and external CSR engagement. For instance, Dillard's department store has a history of not publicizing voluntary environmental initiatives, and in 2015, a request by stockholders to publish a sustainability report was defeated (BusinessWire 2015). At the same time, the company was not actively implementing specific socially responsible practices such as recycling within certain stores and divisional buying offices.

Lastly, many companies exhibit the characteristics of uniform positioning. For example, IKEA has engrained sustainability into its core values. The company engages in corresponding activities, such as the exclusive use of LEDs and the implementation of wind and solar power (Kowitt 2015), and uses these practices in its green marketing campaigns. Similarly, through a plethora of internal policies and public initiatives, outdoor retailer, Patagonia, stays true to its core mission which includes minimizing environmental harm and maximizing social wellbeing (Patagonia, n.d.). The company also uses this positioning as a significant pillar of its marketing, branding, and publicity strategies (MacKinnon 2015), thus demonstrating characteristics aligning with the uniform CSR position.

Despite the growing attention that the idea of CSR congruence or incongruence is garnering, there has been no empirical research that examines consumer attributions

Fig. 2 Internal–external congruence-based CSR positions

		Internal CSR action	
		Yes	No
External CSR claim	Yes	**Uniform Position** Internal-external congruence	**Washing Position** Internal-external incongruence
	No	**Discreet Position** Internal-external incongruence	**Apathetic Position** Internal-external congruence

and behavioral intentions in response to these four forms of CSR positioning. Further, as suggested by Leonidou and Skarmeas (2017), there is a need to build on the current attribution theory research in the context of CSR to further explore concepts such as the fundamental attribution error and discounting principle. Attribution theory is rooted in Heider's (1944) work on social perception and phenomenal causality. In response to environmental and cognitive disequilibrium, locating a causal origin can allow people to restore balance to their social- and self-perceptions (Heider 1944). Attribution theory posits that an event or stimulus acquires meaning from attribution to its origin, which is thought to be derived either from intrinsic, dispositional causes, or from extrinsic, situational causes (Heider 1944; Kelley 1967, 1973).

In the CSR context, intrinsic motivation refers to consumer inferences that the company engages in CSR due to dispositional factors (Heider 1944) such as concern for the CSR domain, societal benevolence, or ethical obligation (Vlachos et al. 2013). Ellen et al. (2006) conceptualized that firms' CSR motives can be either self- or other-centered. Further, the other-centered motives can have two dimensions: values-driven (i.e., the firm engages in CSR because it believes in helping others) or stakeholder-driven (i.e., the firm engages in CSR because it knows that its stakeholders care about it) (Ellen et al. 2006). Ellen et al.'s values-driven CSR motives address the intrinsic pleasure of doing good things for the society and thus are closely aligned with the concept of intrinsic motivations of CSR in this study. Ellen et al. (2006) reported that values-driven motive attributions of a firm's CSR increased consumers' purchase intent while stakeholder-driven motive attributions decreased it. Research investigating the impact of greenwashing on consumer attributions has indicated that CSR communication coupled with good sustainability ratings leads to higher perceived intrinsic motives than when it is combined with poor sustainability ratings (Parguel et al. 2011). Thus, when there is congruence between a company's CSR performance and its CSR communication, consumers more strongly perceive that the company is communicating about its CSR initiatives due to a genuine consciousness compared to when there is incongruence between CSR performance and communication.

Attribution theory-related literature demonstrates a fundamental tendency for individuals to make dispositional inferences rather than considering alternative situational factors when interpreting others' behavior. The prevalence of this attributional phenomenon, referred to as the correspondence bias (Gilbert and Malone 1995) or fundamental attribution error (Jones and Harris 1967; Ross 1977), has been widely documented. Given that dispositional attributions are common unless enough evidence for alternative, situational causes is presented, discreet positioning, where the company engages in CSR without the potential self-serving benefits that may ensue due to publicizing about it (i.e., potential alternative cause), is likely to be attributed to intrinsic motivations. Further, when consumers are exposed to information demonstrating that a company has uniform CSR positioning, they would make a dispositional attribution, perceiving this congruent CSR behavior of the company as more intrinsically motivated than when the company does not engage in CSR behavior, such as those with an apathetic or a washing position. On the other hand, conditions which present conflicting evidence and thus evoke suspicion about the existence of an alternative cause may mitigate the occurrence of the correspondence bias (Fein 1996; Fein et al. 1990). According to the discounting principle (Kelley 1972), consumers tend to discount or minimize an intrinsic attribution when alternative reasons are perceived. For example, in the case of washing positioning, the discounting principle would suggest that when CSR-related marketing is present but the corresponding actions are absent, consumers tend to question the company's motives, arriving at less favorable dispositional attributions about its CSR communication. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1 Consumer attributions for intrinsic CSR motivations will significantly differ based on the company's CSR position. Specifically, companies with a uniform or discreet position are perceived to have stronger intrinsic CSR motivations compared to companies with an apathetic or washing position.

Alternatively, extrinsic CSR motivations refer to consumer attributions that a company's CSR is motivated by environmental or situational factors (Heider 1944), such as pressures for increased profits and greater market share or competitive forces (Vlachos et al. 2013). This definition of extrinsic motivations addresses firms' use of CSR as a means to achieve external goals. Therefore, extrinsic motivations can be reflections of self-centered motives. Ellen et al. (2006) conceptualized two self-centered motives (egoistic and strategic motives) consumers may attribute to CSR. Strategic motives reflect desires to achieve typical business goals, whereas egoistic motives refer to more blatant self-serving desires (Ellen et al. 2006). Consumers tend to respond negatively to egoistic motives but may accept strategic motives as an aspect of normal business practices (Ellen et al. 2006).

Given their use of external CSR communication, companies with a washing or a uniform position are expected to be perceived as having greater extrinsic CSR motivations than firms with a discreet or an apathetic position (i.e., those not engaged in externally publicizing their CSR or lack thereof). The incongruity between words and deeds that is observed in cases of CSR-washing is expected to prompt suspicion (Skarmeas and Leonidou 2013). Such suspicion may trigger more deliberative attributional involvement and elaboration of motives (Fein 1996; Fein et al. 1990), whereby the propensity for committing the fundamental attribution error (i.e., dispositional attribution) is diminished. Similarly, Chen and Chang (2013) found that greenwashing reduced consumers' trust, which could be related to enhanced skepticism toward the firm's extrinsic motivations.

Although uniform companies are congruent in their CSR positioning, the use of CSR publicity is expected to induce perceptions that the company is also extrinsically motivated. Prior research has suggested that consumers acknowledge the coexistence of mixed CSR motives (Ellen et al. 2006); therefore, uniform companies may be perceived as having both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. This suggestion is further supported by the discounting principle (Kelley 1972) because consumers may minimize a company's favorable CSR performance when CSR marketing is encountered. The presence of CSR communication may lead consumers to question the company's motives and may result in greater attributions of extrinsic CSR motivations. This rationale is supported by prior research (Dean 2003/2004) which compared motive attributions between cause-related marketing (i.e., a case in which the company stands to make money) and unconditional donations (i.e., a situation in which the company provides money without expecting something in return). The results revealed that consumers tend to question the company's motives more when the company is positioned to benefit from the initiative, as may be the case in uniform positioning.

Conversely, given that discreet companies function in a quietly conscientious manner (Vallaster et al. 2012) and are not actively publicizing their good deeds, they are less likely to directly benefit from their CSR initiatives, which may lead to lower attributions of extrinsic CSR motivations. Further, as opposed to companies that engage in washing, these firms have not publically espoused to values that contradict their actions, and perceptions that the company is motivated by extrinsic pressures or by any deceptive intentions are unlikely. Moreover, along the same postulating as the intrinsic CSR motivations, apathetic firms are less likely to be perceived as extrinsically motived to associate themselves with CSR. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2 Consumer attributions for extrinsic CSR motivations will significantly differ based on the company's CSR position. Specifically, companies with a uniform or washing position are perceived to have stronger extrinsic CSR motivations compared to companies with an apathetic or discreet position.

Research indicates that patronage intentions are enhanced by positive perceptions of a company's socially responsible practices (Groza et al. 2011). Thus, it is expected that uniform and discreet firms will benefit from stronger consumer purchase intentions, while apathetic and washing firms will experience weaker purchase intentions. On the other hand, the greenwashing literature (Chen and Chang 2013; Nyilasy et al. 2014; Parguel et al. 2011) suggests that companies with a washing position are likely to experience the lowest purchase intentions. Research reveals that greenwashing is linked to greater perceptions of risk and confusion which can minimize consumer trust (Chen and Chang 2013). Moreover, incongruent CSR communication such as greenwashing has been shown to harm consumers' attitudes toward the brand and subsequent purchase intentions (Nyilasy et al. 2014). Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3 Consumers' purchase intentions will be highest for companies with a uniform or discreet position, followed by those with an apathetic position and then those with a washing position.

In addition to providing theoretical support for the proposed antecedent and attribution relationships, attribution theory can facilitate our understanding of the consequences of causal attributions (Kelley 1967, 1973; Kelley and Michela 1980). For example, when a person's irritating or malicious behavior is attributed to his or her dispositional characteristics, observers tend to have a more negative reaction than if such behavior were attributed to external, situational factors; on the other hand, the inverse tends to occur with positive, desirable behaviors (Kelley 1971; Kelley and Michela 1980). Thus, in the context of CSR positioning, attribution theory suggests that when consumers attribute a company's CSR performance to extrinsic motivations, subsequent consumer reactions are likely to be less favorable, while CSR that is attributed to the company's intrinsic motivations will be perceived more positively (Kelley 1971, 1973). Indeed, the extant CSR literature lends empirical support to this theoretical connection. Attributions that are perceived as more intrinsically motivated enhance CSR beliefs (Du et al. 2007), attitudes toward the company, purchase intentions (Ellen et al. 2006; Groza et al. 2011; Parguel et al. 2011), trust, recommendation intentions (Vlachos et al. 2009), and repeat patronage (Walker et al. 2010). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4 (a) The stronger the attributions for intrinsic CSR motivations and (b) the weaker the attributions for extrinsic CSR motivations, the greater consumers' purchase intentions.

The Role of the CSR Domain

While three CSR domains (an environmental domain, a labor domain, and a LGBT inclusion domain) primarily serve the purpose of stimulus sampling, there is also a need to investigate any differential outcomes that may occur based on the featured CSR context. According to Kelley and Michela (1980), actions and underlying motives that are perceived to be more distinctive within society often enable the perceiver to have greater attributional confidence regarding others' motivation. Thus, variations may exist in the type of attributions that are made across the three featured CSR domains. For example, behavior that tends to be perceived as more contentious, such as supporting LGBT issues, and might be enacted despite outside opposing pressures may be perceived as more revealing of the company's intrinsic motivations. Conversely, given the pervasiveness of environmentally friendly company practices, such actions may not be seen as highly distinctive and, therefore, may be perceived to be more extrinsically motivated. Given that much of the extant CSR research focuses on rather narrow conceptualizations of the CSR phenomenon (Oberseder et al. 2013; Peloza and Shang 2011; Wang et al. 2016), exploring the potential variability due to the featured CSR domain can provide important findings for companies in terms of strategically selecting social initiatives. Therefore, the following research question (RQ) is addressed:

RQ Does the effect of internal–external congruence-based CSR positioning on consumers' attributions for intrinsic and extrinsic CSR motivations and purchase intentions vary across different CSR domains?

Method

Experimental Design

This study employed a 3 (*CSR domain*: environmental, labor, LGBT inclusion) × 4 (*internal–external congruence-based CSR position*: uniform, apathetic, discreet, washing) between-subjects experimental design. Three CSR domains were used to serve the purpose of stimulus sampling, as well as to investigate the potential for domain-related differences.

Stimuli

The CSR positions were manipulated using hypothetical scenarios that featured information about a fictitious company's external and internal actions/inactions related to the randomly assigned CSR domain. Scenario-based manipulation methods have been commonly utilized by other scholars (e.g., Brown and Dacin 1997; Parguel et al. 2011; Wagner et al. 2009) in the marketing and consumer behavior research disciplines. The CSR position manipulations were modeled after previous experimental research on greenwashing (Parguel et al. 2011) and CSR inconsistency (Wagner et al. 2009).

The first part of the scenarios addressed the external action/inaction of the fictitious company with regard to the assigned CSR domain. Participants in the discreet and apathetic positions were told that the company had never publically expressed its support for the CSR domain, whereas those in the uniform and washing positions were told that the company publicized its support for the CSR domain through its marketing and PR activities. In particular, the scenarios focused on external CSR communication through advertising imagery, social media campaigns, and sponsorships, all of which have been shown to be significant sources through which consumers are exposed to information about companies' CSR practices (Schmeltz 2012). Then, to address the internal action/inaction of the company, the scenarios featured a fictitious CSR report posed to be published by a third-party, nonprofit organization which monitors companies' CSR in the assigned domain. The information revealed in this report was either congruent or incongruent with the company's publicized support for the CSR domain, depending on the assigned CSR position condition. The scenario was presented with a participant direction: "The following is a description of a hypothetical company named Company X, which sells consumer products. After carefully reading the description of the company's external and internal actions/inactions related to [CSR domain], please respond to the questions that follow." One of the twelve scenarios was randomly presented to each participant.

Across all experimental conditions, efforts were made to maintain as much uniformity as possible in the selected wording of the written scenarios. In terms of the particular CSR domain information that was featured, extensive research on current industry CSR practices and publicity was undergone. For example, websites from numerous companies, such as Nike, Wal-Mart, Target, Apple, Patagonia, and Zara, were examined to identify information regarding companies' publicized CSR activities and internal CSR polices. Information related to each CSR domain was also obtained from various accrediting bodies, monitoring agencies, and third-party sources, such as *Newsweek's Green Ranking* (Corporate Knights Capital 2015) and Interbrand's *Best Global Green Brands* report (2014) for the environmental domain, the Fair Labor Association (Fair Labor Association, n.d.) for the labor domain, and the Human Rights Campaign (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.) website and the 2016 Corporate Equality Index (CEI) (Human Rights Campaign Foundation 2015) for the LGBT inclusion domain.

The initial set of 12 scenarios was pretested using a student sample ($n = 222$). Pretest participants reviewed three scenarios corresponding to the three CSR domains for one of the four CSR positions to which they were randomly assigned. Each scenario was followed by three questions.

The first question asked participants to select which CSR domain (among the three domains, plus an additional option of "I do not recall") the scenario they just read was about. The second question assessed whether participants clearly understood the company's external and internal practices intended for the CSR position scenario by asking them to choose among (1) "Company X internally and externally supports the [CSR domain]," (2) "Company X does not internally nor externally support the [CSR domain]," (3) "Company X internally supports the [CSR domain], but it does not externally publicize its support for the [CSR domain]," (4) "Company X externally publicizes its support for the [CSR domain], but it does not internally support the [CSR domain]," and (5) "I do not recall." Finally, an open-ended question was given to allow participants to leave verbal comments on any unclear or inappropriate item or direction wordings (i.e., suggestion for improvement). Pretest results revealed that the majority of the participants correctly identified the CSR domain in the scenarios (79%); however, many pretest participants were not able to choose accurately the internal and external CSR behavior option intended for the scenarios, with only 30–63% accuracy rates depending on the position/domain. Thus, based on the participant comments and unsatisfactory pretest results, several changes were implemented to improve the clarity and content of the written scenarios to be featured in the main experiment. To further focus attention to the external and internal distinction, bolded and underlined headings were also added to the scenario content to emphasize whether each paragraph was addressing the company's external or internal CSR actions/inactions. Throughout the scenarios, certain key terms such as *never* and *not* were also underlined to focus attention on the company's inactions related to the CSR domain. The modified scenarios used in the main experiment are presented in the Online Appendix.

Measures

The main experiment measures included manipulation check items, dependent measures, and demographic items. First, two manipulation check items were used. The first manipulation check item addressed the CSR domain by asking, "which of the following topics was discussed in the description of Company X that you just read?" Participants were given three response options: (1) "inclusion of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community," (2) "the avoidance of child and sweatshop labor," and (3) "environmental sustainability." The second manipulation item assessed whether participants recognized the assigned CSR position by asking, "What did the description of Company X say about the company's external and internal actions/inactions related to [CSR domain]?" Participants were presented with four answer choices: (1) "Company X externally publicizes its support for [CSR domain] and internally supports [CSR domain]," (2) "Company X does not externally publicize its support for [CSR domain] and does not internally support [CSR domain]," (3) "Company X does not externally publicize its support for [CSR domain], but it does internally support [CSR domain]," and (4) "Company X externally publicizes its support for [CSR domain], but it does not internally support [CSR domain]."

With regard to dependent measures, consumer attributions for intrinsic CSR motivations were measured with three items: "Company X is genuinely concerned about [CSR domain]," "Company X feels morally obligated to support [CSR domain]," and "Company X hopes to give something back to the community by supporting [CSR domain]." Consumer attributions for extrinsic CSR motivations included three items: "Company X feels competitive pressures to show concern for [CSR domain]," "Company X hopes to increase its profits by being supportive of [CSR domain]," and "Company X hopes to attract more customers by supporting [CSR domain]." Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation items were adapted from Vlachos et al. (2013) and rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 for *strongly disagree* and 7 for *strongly agree*). Intention to purchase from the company was measured using three 7-point semantic-differential scale items (*not at all likely—very likely*, *not at all probable—very probable*, *not at all possible—very possible*) adapted from Homer (1995), which asked participants to rate their likelihood of purchasing from Company X if it were a real company.

Sample and Procedure

A U.S. national sample of consumers aged 19 or older were recruited via email invitations sent to a consumer panel from a sampling company; age and gender quotas representative of the general U.S. population were employed. Participants first completed screening questions for the quota implementation. After passing the quota screening, participants were presented with one of the 12 experimental stimuli, randomly assigned to them, followed by manipulation check items, dependent measures, and demographic items.

Out of 1284 participants who met the quota requirements, 504 did not correctly answer at least one of the two manipulation check items (i.e., chose the wrong CSR domain and/or the wrong internal/external action/inaction response). Participants' incorrect answers to the manipulation check items implicate that they did not carefully read their assigned experimental scenario (i.e., their data were invalid) and thus were excluded from the final data (for similar manipulation check procedures, see Jeong et al. 2013; Parguel et al. 2015). Another 171 participants who did not complete the survey were further excluded, leaving a final usable sample size of 609 who were 19-85 years old ($M = 44.8$, $SD = 14.9$) and included 330 females and 279 males. A majority of the participants were non-Hispanic White (76.8%) and had at least some college or technical school education or higher (78.4%). Participants represented diverse household income levels: 48.5% earned $49,999 or less, 37.6% earned between $50,000 and $99,999, and 13.9% earned $100,000 or greater.

Results

Manipulation Check

As mentioned above, the responses to the two manipulation check items that matched the participants' assigned CSR domain and position conditions were taken as evidence for successful manipulation of the two experimental factors.

Validity and Reliability

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess the measurement quality. The Chi square statistic indicated an imperfect fit ($\chi^2 = 37.623$, $df = 11$, $p < .001$); however, the incremental fit indices (CFI = .99, TLI = .98, NFI = .99) and the RMSEA value (.06) suggested a good model fit. All factor loadings were well above .70 and significant. In addition, the average variance extracted (AVE) of all scales were greater than .50 as well as greater than their shared variances with the other scales, indicating their convergent and discriminant validity, respectively (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Cronbach's αs for all scales were .95 or greater, indicating the internal congruence of the scales (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). Item scores from each scale were averaged to construct the variable scores for hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis Testing

To test H1 through H3, a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with CSR position and CSR domain as fixed factors and attributions for intrinsic CSR motivations, attributions for extrinsic CSR motivations, and purchase intentions as dependent variables. MANOVA results indicated significant main effects of the CSR position (Wilk's $\lambda = .331$, $F_{9,1448} = 92.419$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .308$). As will be further examined in the discussion of the research question findings, MANOVA results also revealed a significant main effect of the CSR domain (Wilk's $\lambda = .974$, $F_{6,1190} = 2.608$, $p < .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .013$) and a significant CSR domain × CSR position interaction effect (Wilk's $\lambda = .919$, $F_{18,1683} = 2.819$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .028$).

Follow-up univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) results (see Table 1) revealed that the CSR position had a significant main effect on attributions for both intrinsic and extrinsic CSR motivations as well as purchase intentions.

Table 1 Univariate ANOVA results

Effect and dependent measure	SS	*df*	*F*	*p*	Partial η^2
CSR position (P)					
Intrinsic attributions	773.33	3	134.51	< 0.001	.403
Extrinsic attributions	604.56	3	112.23	< 0.001	.361
Purchase intention	783.84	3	107.44	< 0.001	.351
CSR domain (D)					
Intrinsic attributions	16.66	2	4.35	0.013	0.014
Extrinsic attributions	1.26	2	0.351	0.704	0.001
Purchase intention	11.18	2	2.30	0.101	0.008
P × D					
Intrinsic attributions	23.26	6	2.02	0.061	0.020
Extrinsic attributions	25.70	6	2.39	0.028	0.023
Purchase intention	65.16	6	4.47	< 0.001	0.043
Error					
Intrinsic attributions	1144.07	597			
Extrinsic attributions	1071.97	597			
Purchase intention	1451.89	597			

Furthermore, the CSR domain had a significant main effect on attributions for intrinsic CSR motivations, whereas the CSR domain × CSR position interaction had a significant effect on attributions for extrinsic CSR motivations and purchase intentions.

Table 2 presents the cell means and standard deviations, while Fig. 3 plots the cell means of all three dependent variables. According to the post-hoc comparisons conducted following Tukey's procedure, the uniform and discreet positions each produced stronger attributions for intrinsic CSR motivations than each of the apathetic and washing positions ($p < .001$ for all four pairwise comparisons), which supported H1. Moreover, there was no significant difference in attributions for intrinsic CSR motivations between the uniform and discreet positions ($p = .989$), whereas the apathetic position was perceived as less intrinsically motivated than the washing position ($p < .001$).

Post-hoc comparisons further revealed that consumers attributed stronger extrinsic CSR motivations in each of the uniform and washing positions compared to each of the discreet or apathetic positions ($p < .001$ for all four comparisons; see Table 2 for position means), which supported H2. In addition, the washing position was perceived as more extrinsically motivated than the uniform position ($p < .001$), whereas the discreet position was perceived as more extrinsically motivated than the apathetic position ($p < .001$).

In support of H3, consumers' purchase intentions were lower in the washing position compared to the apathetic ($p < .05$), discreet ($p < .001$), or uniform ($p < .001$) positions (see Table 2 for position means). The apathetic position produced lower purchase intentions compared to the

Table 2 Means and standard deviations

Dependent variable	CSR domain	CSR position[a]				
		Uniform	Apathetic	Discreet	Washing	Total
Intrinsic attributions	Environmental	5.06 (1.34)	2.24 (1.40)	5.33 (1.21)	2.84 (1.36)	3.91 (1.89)
	Labor	5.45 (1.26)	3.01 (1.87)	5.17 (1.20)	3.50 (1.38)	4.25 (1.81)
	LGBT inclusion	5.50 (1.19)	2.57 (1.77)	4.52 (1.32)	3.59 (1.37)	4.20 (1.75)
	Total	5.09 (1.32)	2.55 (1.68)	4.95 (1.09)	3.62 (1.39)	4.21 (1.68)
Extrinsic attributions	Environmental	4.96 (1.33)	2.65 (1.62)	3.74 (1.49)	5.89 (0.92)	4.29 (1.82)
	Labor	4.69 (1.22)	3.47 (1.82)	3.84 (1.19)	5.61 (1.03)	4.43 (1.59)
	LGBT inclusion	4.96 (1.29)	2.88 (1.58)	4.11 (1.22)	5.69 (0.96)	4.47 (1.56)
	Total	4.88 (1.68)	2.98 (1.71)	3.92 (1.32)	5.74 (0.97)	4.39 (1.68)
Purchase intention	Environmental	5.36 (1.30)	3.04 (1.54)	5.68 (1.08)	2.54 (1.34)	4.22 (1.89)
	Labor	5.95 (1.43)	3.39 (1.99)	5.06 (1.61)	2.61 (1.74)	4.27 (2.17)
	LGBT inclusion	5.36 (1.76)	4.04 (1.71)	5.06 (1.57)	3.45 (1.56)	4.58 (1.81)
	Total	5.54 (1.52)	3.43 (1.78)	5.29 (1.44)	2.87 (1.59)	4.35 (1.96)

[a]Means are reported along with parenthesized standard deviations

uniform and discreet positions (both $p < .001$), while there was no significant difference in consumers' purchase intentions between the uniform and discreet positions ($p = .474$).

Lastly, H4 was tested using simple linear regression analyses, which revealed that attributions for intrinsic CSR motivations (std. $\beta = .712$, $p < .001$) positively predicted purchase intentions, whereas attributions for extrinsic CSR motivations negatively predicted purchase intentions (std. $\beta = -.195$, $p < .001$). Therefore, all hypotheses were supported.

CSR Domain Differences

To answer the research question regarding CSR domain differences, the ANOVA results including the significant main effect of the CSR domain for the intrinsic CSR motivation attribution and the significant CSR domain × CSR position interaction effect for the extrinsic motivation attribution and purchase intention were further examined through additional analyses. First, results from post-hoc comparisons employing Tukey's procedure revealed that the environmental domain generated lower intrinsic motivation attributions than the labor ($p < .05$) or LGBT inclusion ($p < .01$) domains (see Table 2 for domain means), whereas the intrinsic motivation attribution mean scores did not differ between the labor and LGBT inclusion domains ($p = .821$).

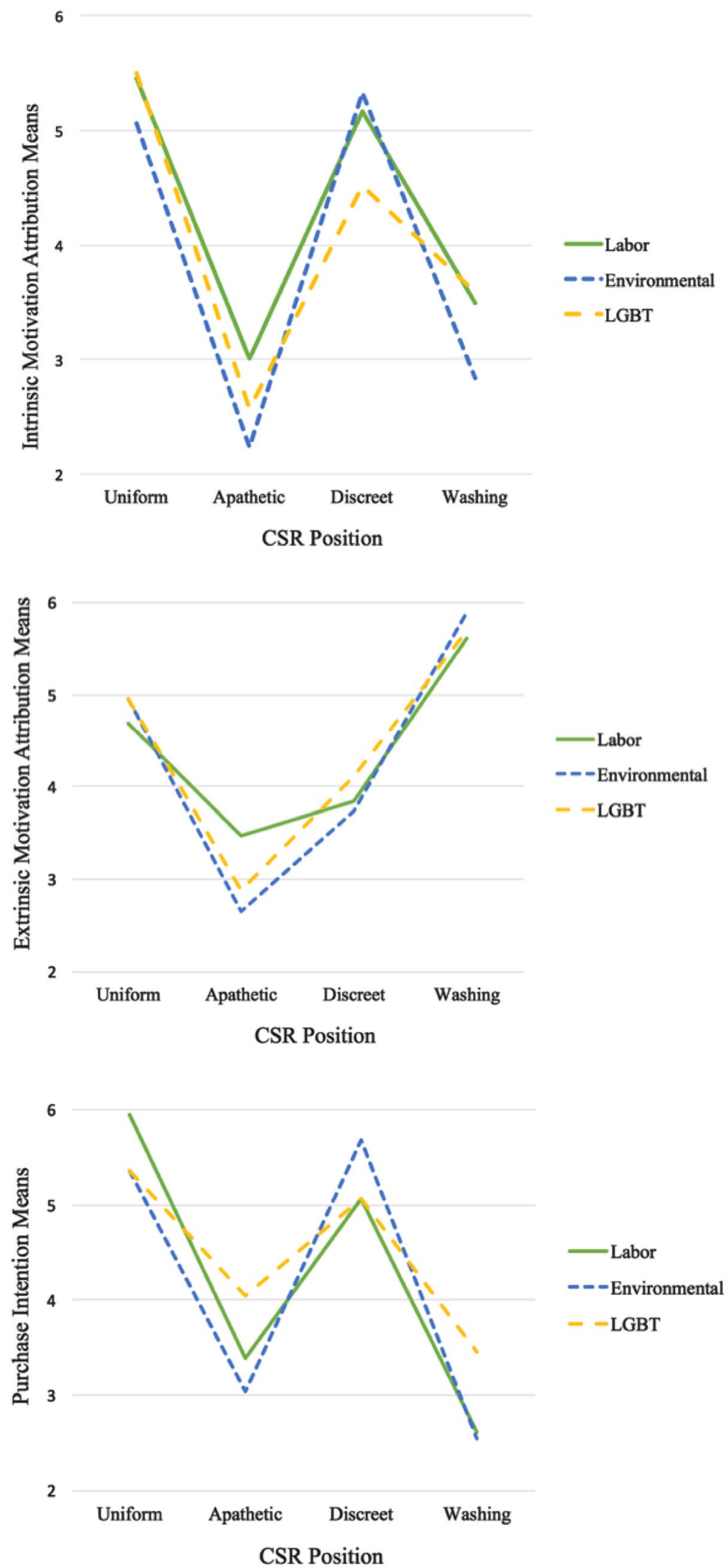
For the extrinsic CSR motivation attribution, the CSR domain × CSR position interaction effect was further examined through simple effect analyses and pairwise comparisons within each CSR position. Results revealed a significant simple effect in the apathetic position condition ($F_{2,148} = 3.314$, $p < .05$), where stronger extrinsic attributions were observed within the labor domain than the environmental ($p < .01$) or LGBT inclusion domains ($p < .01$) (see Fig. 3 and Table 2 for cell means). However, for the other three CSR positions, there was no significant difference in extrinsic attributions among the three CSR domains.

Simple effect analyses were also run to delve into the CSR domain × CSR position interaction effect on purchase intention. Results indicated a significant simple effect within all four CSR position conditions (washing: $F_{2,138} = 5.013$, $p < .01$; apathetic: $F_{2,148} = 3.890$, $p < .05$; uniform: $F_{2,181} = 2.986$, $p < .05$; discreet: $F_{2,138} = 2.997$, $p < .05$). Post-hoc cell comparisons (see Fig. 3 and Table 2 for mean scores) further disclosed that for the apathetic and washing positions, the labor ($p < .010$) and environmental domains ($p < .05$) had a lower purchase intention than the LGBT inclusion domain. For the discreet position, purchase intentions were stronger within the environmental domain than the LGBT inclusion ($p < .05$) or labor domains ($p < .05$). Lastly, within the uniform position, the labor domain produced stronger purchase intentions than the environmental ($p < .05$) or LGBT inclusion domains ($p < .05$).

Discussion

Although several studies have investigated CSR incongruence in the form of greenwashing (e.g., Chen and Chang 2013; Nyilasy et al. 2014; Parguel et al. 2011), this study is the first to conceptualize and systematically manipulate the dimension of congruence/incongruence between CSR claims and CSR actions to empirically examine the four distinct forms of internal–external congruence-based CSR positions. As proposed, participants exposed to information about companies with the uniform and discreet CSR positions perceived the firm to be more intrinsically motivated than those exposed to the apathetic and washing positions. In regards to extrinsic motivation attributions, the uniform and washing positions were perceived to be more extrinsically

Fig. 3 CSR domain × CSR position cell means



motivated than the apathetic and discreet positions. Results also revealed that firms engaging in washing behavior were viewed as more extrinsically motivated than uniform firms. Moreover, consumers' purchase intentions were the weakest in the washing position, followed by the apathetic position, whereas discreet and uniform positioning produced equally favorable purchase intentions. With regard to the relationship between motive attributions and purchase intent, the results revealed that the attribution of intrinsic motives played a much stronger role than that of extrinsic motives in predicting consumers' purchase intent, although both were statistically significant. The findings of this study are discussed in light of their theoretical and managerial implications in the sections that follow.

Theoretical Implications

First, this study contributes to the business ethics literature by explicating consumer repercussions that may ensue as a result of the four CSR positions that embody companies' varying approaches to reconciling the ethical and strategic dilemma surrounding CSR action and communication. The findings of this study illustrate that despite producing high extrinsic motive attributions, the uniform position leads to similarly favorable purchase intentions compared to the discreet position. These findings attest to the multidimensional nature of consumer attributions and suggest that consumers are able to recognize and reconcile the coexistence of a firm's intrinsic and extrinsic motives. Specifically, both the uniform and discreet positions incorporate internal CSR actions and thus produce high intrinsic motive attributions. When consumers can recognize the firm's intrinsic motives, the existence of an extrinsic motive may not be regarded as being unethical, in light of Ellen et al.'s (2006) two self-centered motives of CSR. Ellen et al. (2006) contend that consumers tend to respond positively to strategic motives and negatively to egoistic motives, although both are self-centered motives. For a firm with the uniform position, because consumers perceive high intrinsic motives based on its internal CSR action, they may judge its extrinsic motive perceived from its external CSR communication to be strategically driven rather than egoistically driven, leading to equivalently positive purchase intents toward a firm with a uniform position compared to a discreet position.

On the other hand, this research finding also supports the negative consequences that ethically dubious behavior such as CSR-washing can have on consumer evaluations of the firm. Because of the lack of internal CSR actions, consumers are not able to perceive intrinsic CSR motives of a firm that engages in CSR-washing and thus are likely to attribute the firm's deceptive external CSR communication to egoistically driven extrinsic motives (Ellen et al. 2006), which negatively influences their purchase intent. This discussion is of significance within the business ethics discourse as it supports the theorization of the multifaceted nature of motive attributions and suggests consumers' intricate judgment of the ethical and strategic dualities based on the firm's internal–external CSR congruence/incongruence. The findings extend our understanding of consumers' ethical judgement making regarding firms' motives for CSR by validating the literature (Ellen et al. 2006; Groza et al. 2011) that suggests consumers are accepting of the simultaneous existence of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for CSR and supporting the notion that consumers acknowledge that commercialistic and compassionate motivations can coexist.

At the same time, this study also has larger overarching implications for business ethics and society as a whole. Socially responsible businesses serve as pioneers that help to shape the status quo and set standards for responsible and ethical business practices. Although the finding that uniform and discreet CSR positioning may generate similarly favorable consumer outcomes has interesting implications for corporate strategy, should practices such as greenhushing become more pervasive, there may be negative repercussions in terms of inspiring more ethical and socially responsible behavior among both consumers and companies (Carlos and Lewis 2018; Stifelman 2008). Thus, a shift toward strategic silence and discreet CSR presents the risk of inadvertently stifling the sustainability movement and prosocial progress.

Second, this research offers significant theoretical contributions to the CSR literature. The primary theoretical contributions are the introduction and empirical examination of four distinct internal–external congruence-based CSR positions, which have significant implications in terms of consumer behavior and CSR management. The CSR positions theorized in this study extend prior work related to greenwashing (Leonidou and Skarmeas 2017; Nyilasy et al. 2015; Parguel et al. 2011) and greenhushing (Carlos and Lewis 2018; Font et al. 2016) to provide a more exhaustive and systematic framework through which the intersection of firms' external CSR communication and internal CSR platforms can be conceptualized and tested. The results corroborate prior research (Nyilasy et al. 2015; Parguel et al. 2011) that warns of the dangers of unethical and deceptive tactics such as CSR-washing, while providing new insights concerning the potential for comparable efficacy between uniform and discreet CSR positioning. These findings are of particular significance given that they provide preliminary evidence to suggest that CSR publicity may not be an unequivocally effective or essential marketing strategy for all companies and that adopting a strategically silent approach might be more advantageous.

Next, by applying the constructs and postulates of attribution theory within a new framework, this study extends the applicability of the theory within the scope of the business ethics literature. The findings from this study verify the basic tenets of attribution theory in that individuals use information regarding the congruity of others' behavior to arrive at inferences concerning the intrinsic or extrinsic origins of that behavior (Kelley 1967, 1973). Through the introduction and empirical examination of four internal–external congruence-based CSR positions, this study sheds light on the role of congruence between one's (internal) action and (external) communication as a new antecedent impacting the attribution process and extends our understanding of how the fundamental attribution error and discounting principle function to shape consumer attributions and subsequent behavioral reactions under varying levels of internal–external congruence/incongruence. The findings of this study suggest that people can recognize the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of an actor (e.g., a company) and intricately reconcile the meanings and weights of these two motivations to determine their behavioral intention toward the actor given information on the actor's internal–external congruence/incongruence.

Finally, by testing the model within three distinct CSR domains, this study addresses concerns raised by other scholars (e.g., Oberseder et al. 2013; Peloza and Shang 2011; Wang et al. 2016) regarding the narrow conceptualizations of CSR that have been used in prior research; thus, these results help to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon. In particular, few studies have examined CSR domains related to fair labor or LGBT inclusion, and this is the first research to empirically test the implications of fairwashing and gaywashing, filling an important void highlighted in the literature (Ginder and Byun 2015). The domain-related differences revealed in this study contribute to the CSR literature by suggesting that not all CSR domains are created equally in the eyes of consumers. Perhaps due to the divisive climate surrounding LGBT issues, it appears that taking an apathetic or washing stance may not be as damaging to consumer reactions compared to apathy or washing that occurs within the environmental and labor domains. Moreover, within the environmental domain, the findings of this study indicate that consumers may be becoming increasingly suspicious of green marketing strategies, such that, in some cases, discreet positioning may be more effective. These findings seem to attest to the potential consumer acceptance of a movement toward greenhushing and strategic silence within the marketplace.

Managerial Implications

This study offers a number of significant implications for practitioners. The findings reveal that consumers are perceptive of the congruence or incongruence between external CSR claims and internal CSR actions. This study is the first systematic empirical study, to the researchers' best knowledge, to shed light on the consumer-related implications of a firm's discreet CSR position, which has been sporadically addressed in the literature in such terms as greenhushing (Font et al. 2016), strategic silence (Carlos and Lewis 2018), and quietly conscientious CSR (Vallaster et al. 2012). This study discovers that in terms of intrinsic attributions and purchase intentions, consumers respond similarly to companies with uniform and discreet CSR positions. Thus, given that the discreet and uniform approaches produced similar efficacy in terms of inspiring positive consumer outcomes, these findings might suggest that companies may be wiser to adopt a more discreet and modest approach to CSR communication, rather than directly utilizing their CSR practices in marketing or PR. This study also reveals that discreet positioning evokes lower extrinsic motivation attributions than uniform positioning. However, given that the higher extrinsic motivation attributions within the uniform position do not lead to lower purchase intentions compared to the discreet position, this result may suggest that consumers realize and tolerate the coexistence of CSR motives that simultaneously serve values-driven and strategic functions for the firm; therefore, marketing managers may not necessarily need to conceal the strategic aspects of their CSR (Ellen et al. 2006). From a managerial perspective, these findings indicate that both discreet and uniform approaches may be different means to the same end, so firms should strategically evaluate how CSR communication fits within their overall integrated marketing communications plan.

Furthermore, this study extends the body of knowledge regarding what factors contribute to unfavorable consumer reactions to CSR and corroborates prior research (Chen and Chang 2013; Nyilasy et al. 2014) that suggests manipulative maneuvers such as CSR-washing are likely to backfire. Moreover, the findings seem to indicate that CSR apathy is a better strategy than being dubbed as disingenuous. Therefore, given that negative CSR perceptions have been linked to greater corporate financial risk (Mishra and Modi 2013), companies should not jump on the CSR bandwagon until they more strategically assess their internal CSR practices as well as the potential negative effects of consumers regarding their CSR communication as just a marketing ploy. Further, how utilizing CSR in communication fits within the company's overall branding and marketing strategies should be carefully considered (Du et al. 2007; Vallaster et al. 2012), as should the suitability of the selected CSR domain. Given the CSR domain differences that were revealed in this study, it is advisable for companies to ensure the chosen CSR domain is appealing to the target market and aligns with their values.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study provides important implications regarding the impact of congruence or incongruence between CSR claims and actions, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the external validity is limited by the experimental design using a fictitious company in the scenario-based stimuli. Future research using authentic companies through field experiments or industry case studies would be beneficial to enhance the ecological validity.

Second, the dependent measures of this study are limited to consumers' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation attributions and purchase intentions. Future research could expand beyond the attributional constructs included in the current study to examine a more complex, multidimensional CSR attribution model, such as that which was proposed by Ellen et al. (2006) (i.e., values-driven, stakeholder-driven, egoistic, strategic motives), and other ethical judgment variables. Further, research is needed for the moderating role that other company-related variables (e.g., corporate ethics, reputation, credibility) may play in the revealed relationships.

Third, the manipulation check revealed a relatively high rate of incorrect responses due to the lack of attention to our text-based scenarios. Although these participants were screened out in this study, this may reflect the real-world challenges of CSR communication. According to Golob et al. (2017), with the development of digital media, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw consumers' attention and engage them in a company's communication. Thus, the findings must be interpreted with caution in light of this limitation.

Fourth, although featuring three CSR domains fills important gaps in the literature (Oberseder et al. 2013; Peloza and Shang 2011; Wang et al. 2016), there is a need to examine effects of additional CSR contexts and varying rhetorical tactics (Schmeltz 2012). For instance, in the environmental domain, the inclusion of more controversial language such as global warming or climate change may be perceived differently than topics such as recycling or alternative sources of energy (Lindsey 2016). Further, CSR-washing can range from vague messages that are somewhat misleading to those that are blatantly deceitful, and discreet positions can involve a wide range of internal CSR actions. Therefore, testing the impact of additional CSR contexts described using varying message tactics or different degrees of internal–external incongruence would extend our understanding of the mechanism by which the congruence-based CSR positions affect consumer responses.

Next, as noted by Schmeltz (2012), differing channels of CSR communication (e.g., social media, websites, packaging) and message strategies may be perceived differently and could lead to varying CSR position effects. Further, factors (e.g., credibility, CSR expertise) that are related to the third-party source through which consumers learn about the company's CSR action information could also play a role in the revealed relationships. These areas warrant future research.

Finally, despite using a national sample that is fairly representative of the general U.S. population, compared to national averages, this study included more consumers making a household income from $50,000 to $99,999 and fewer making $100,000 or greater (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2015). The sample was also composed of a slightly lower proportion of individuals possessing a bachelor's degree than is found among national averages (Ryan and Bauman 2016). Lastly, given that CSR polices, approaches, and consumer expectations differ cross-culturally (Matten and Moon 2008), caution should be exercised in generalizing the findings beyond the U.S. population, and future research is needed to test the applicability of the model using more diverse, international consumer samples.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest Whitney Ginder, Wi-Suk Kwon, and Sang-Eun Byun declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Hopping on the brand boycotting bandwagon on Facebook: Because of the issue, others, or self-enhancement?

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Abstract This study examines the influences of boycott issue importance, others' boycott participation (i.e., the number of 'likes' on the brand boycott Facebook page), and scope for self-enhancement on consumers' intentions to participate in brand boycotts on Facebook. Results of an online experiment revealed that others' participation and boycott issue importance positively impacted consumers' perceived scope for self-enhancement as well as their active boycott participation intentions. Further, perceived issue importance also positively influenced passive boycott participation intentions. In addition, scope for self-enhancement mediated the effects of others' participation and boycott issue importance on both active and passive boycott participation intentions. Findings aid in enhancing brands' understanding of what drives consumers to engage in virtual brand boycotting within digital media environments and may be used to develop more successful mediation strategies. This study empirically extends traditional consumer boycotting theory to virtual environments and reveals the potential for different boycott motivations within socially dynamic, digital environments.

Keywords Brand boycotting, Facebook, social media, self-enhancement, consumer activism, experiment

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INTRODUCTION

Research suggests that consumers are increasingly buying – or boycotting – based on beliefs; 64% of polled consumers worldwide claimed that they would buy or boycott a brand exclusively due to its stance on social or political issues (Edelman, 2018). A consumer boycott is defined as "an attempt by one or more parties to achieve certain objectives by urging individual consumers to refrain from making selected purchases in the marketplace" (Friedman, 1985, p. 97). Although consumer boycotts date back to the 14th century (Klein et al., 2004) and have been used in response to macro- and micro-consumer issues, ranging from civil rights transgressions and environmental infractions to labour violations and price disputes (Friedman, 1985; Klein et al., 2004), social media have democratised how and by whom communication is transmitted, thus empowering more brand boycotts to be propagated across cyberspace. From the anti-Trump #GrabYourWallet campaign to the #JustBurnIt movement targeted at Nike (Bostock, 2018; Westervelt, 2017), many consumers are harnessing the power of the Internet to garner attention and support for various causes.

Although the traditional view of boycotting entails the organised withholding of consumption in an effort to achieve a communal goal (Friedman, 1985), social media have enabled new manifestations of consumer boycotting in which consumers can organise and participate in brand boycotts within virtual brand communities. An online brand community is usually formed among admirers of a brand (Jang et al., 2008). However, consumer confluence can also be driven by resistance to a brand; this may lead to the formation of an anti-brand online community whose members share a collective aversion towards the brand (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). In particular, one form of an anti-brand community, virtual brand boycott groups, is increasingly surfacing within social networking sites (SNSs), such as Facebook, where users of the SNS can participate *actively* by liking the boycott page, sharing the boycott page with their friends, and posting pictures, videos, comments, messages, events, and other boycott-related materials on the SNS (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017). On the other hand, SNS users also may *passively* participate in a virtual brand boycott through behaviours such as viewing boycott materials posted on social media and clicking on the link to boycott materials (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017). These quieter virtual boycott participants may not be as visible as active participants, but are likely to account for a majority of boycott participants in the real world, making it necessary to empirically analyse a more holistic view of boycott participation than has been previously examined. Therefore, in this study, we operationalised virtual brand boycott participation intentions by measuring participants' willingness to participate actively or passively in the virtual brand boycott presented in our experimental stimuli in the form of a Facebook News Feed. Virtual brand boycotts represent one of the ways in which online/social media firestorms, or the "sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative word-of-mouth and complaint behaviour against a person, company, or group in social media networks" (Pfeffer et al., 2014, p. 118), can manifest. Social media provide a dynamic, highly visible platform where consumers can share negative sentiment about brands with other consumers, and such online firestorms can have deleterious consequences for targeted brands; 58% experience harm to short-term brand perceptions, and 40% endure long-term negative repercussions (Hansen et al., 2018). Moreover, research indicates that stakeholder activism on social media can damage stock market performance for targeted firms (Gomez-Carrasco & Michelon, 2017).

Given the managerial relevance, several studies have begun exploring phenomena of negative social media communications about brands, such as social media firestorms, collaborative brand attacks, and virtual brand boycotting (Hansen et al., 2018; Pfeffer et al., 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016); however, they primarily relied on qualitative analyses or focused on the macro-level mechanisms behind the phenomena. Acts of collective consumer action would not exist without the individual consumers who decide to participate. Therefore, a need exists to better understand the psychosocial factors that motivate individual consumers to participate in these phenomena. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, only one study (Johnen et al., 2018) has examined online firestorm participation from the consumer perspective, while empirical consumer studies applying traditional boycotting theory to the virtual domain are lacking. Although research has been conducted to examine motivations to join traditional consumer boycotts, this is among the first studies to conceptualise and empirically examine virtual brand boycotting that occurs within a SNS such as Facebook. Given that the unique structure of social media enables more public visibility and a greater propensity for boycott message virality (Pfeffer et al., 2014) than may have occurred in traditional boycotting contexts, this study fills an important gap in the extant literature.

Among numerous motivators for consumers' boycott participation, three of the most notable that have emerged in the literature are 1) the importance of the issue in question for the boycott, 2) the degree of others' participation, and 3) perceived scope for self-enhancement through boycott participation. First, boycott research conducted within non-digital media contexts indicates that an individual's concern for the issue about which the boycott is formed is a primary determinant of participation intentions (Albrecht et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2002). However, the role of boycott issue importance has not been fully investigated within the context of virtual brand boycotts, where its role may differ from those of other more socially salient antecedents; a gap addressed by this study. To operationalise the construct of boycott issue importance, we measured participants' perceived importance of the boycott issue (e.g. sweatshop labour, gay rights) featured in a mock Facebook News Feed in their assigned experimental stimulus.

Another strong antecedent for the consumer's decision to participate in a boycott is the degree to which others are participating. In particular, a greater number of boycott participants may prompt a bandwagon effect that can signal the popularity or credibility of the boycott and encourage other consumers to join (Albrecht et al., 2013; Sen et al., 2001). Within the context of virtual brand boycotts initiated on Facebook, the *number of likes* that the brand boycott page has received can function as a cue to inform consumers of the extent to which others are involved in the boycott (Albrecht et al., 2013; Johnen et al., 2018). Thus, in this study, we extend the construct of others' boycott participation to the under-examined domain of digital media by operationalising it as the high versus low numbers of likes on a Facebook News Feed from a brand boycott Facebook page used in the experimental manipulation and examining its potential bandwagon effect.

Furthermore, previous research has also linked brand boycott participation to factors related to consumers' self-enhancement goals (John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). Brand boycott participation may be viewed as enhancing one's social image in the eyes of other consumers by publicly associating with a worthy issue or dissociating from an unworthy one and improving one's self-esteem as a moral, conscious consumer (John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). Further, a substantial amount of research has revealed the significant role of psychosocial motives for social media use (Bareket-Bojmel et al., 2016; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012), sharing word-of-mouth (WOM) on social media (Eisingerich et al., 2015), and engaging in online firestorms (Johnen et al., 2018). Thus, there is an especially germane need to incorporate the scope of consumers' self-enhancement motives in the investigation of virtual brand boycott participation, where it is expected to play a more prominent role than it may have in traditional boycotting contexts. The construct of scope for self-enhancement, in this study, was operationalised by measuring participants' perception of the degree of self-enhancement they expected from participating in the brand boycott presented in the experimental stimulus.

Given the proliferation of consumer activism and boycotting that has occurred via online platforms like Facebook and the negative implications that can ensue, it is necessary to understand what factors motivate consumers' willingness to hop on the boycotting bandwagon. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate antecedents driving consumers' participation in virtual brand boycotts that occur on the SNS Facebook. Specifically, we examine how the perceived boycott issue importance, number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page, and perceived scope for self-enhancement from boycott participation influence consumers' intentions to participate in the virtual brand boycott on Facebook. Moreover, given the unique psychosocial nature of social media, we investigate the potential mediating role that scope for self-enhancement plays in the relationships of issue importance and the number of likes to consumers' intentions to participate in the brand boycott on Facebook. Notably, this study seeks to discover how the conspicuous nature of SNSs may make self-enhancement a more direct driver of consumers' participation in virtual boycotting than factors such as other boycott participants or the importance of the boycott issue itself, which may be contrary to findings from traditional boycotting contexts. Findings from this study can enable brand managers to develop a more comprehensive understanding of consumers' boycotting motivations, and armed with this knowledge, they can more effectively analyse SNS-based anti-branding consumer activities and craft more successful response strategies to minimise brand damage.

The remainder of this study is structured as follows. First, we present the current literature on brand boycotts and social media. We then discuss empirical and theoretical literature that explains the three antecedents of consumers' brand boycott participation on Facebook and propose hypotheses. This discussion will be followed by a description of the method used to test the proposed hypotheses. We then present the findings. Finally, we discuss the implications of the findings, along with limitations and recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Brand boycotting and social media

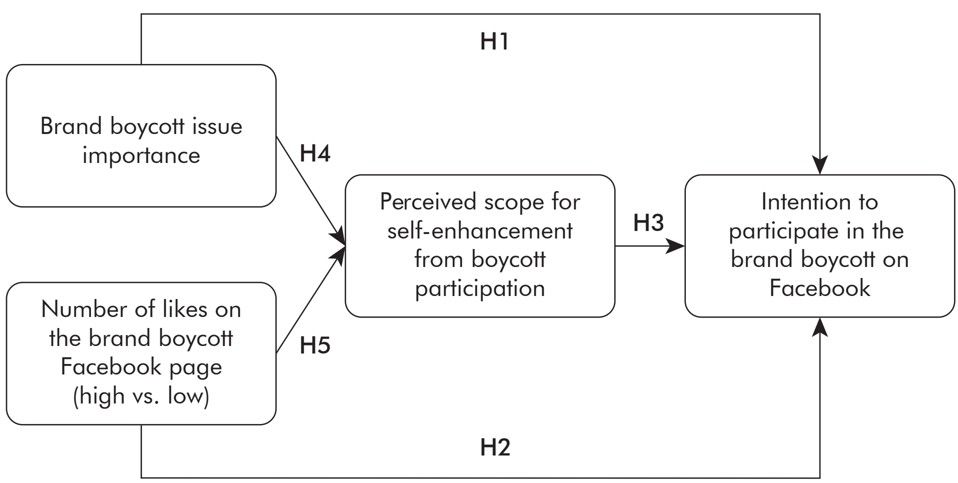
Consumer boycotts can occur in two primary forms: marketplace-ends boycotts, which aim at economic or marketing policy changes; and marketplace-means boycotts, which pursue political, social, or ethical changes (Friedman, 1985; Sen et al., 2001). Regardless of the underlying aim of the boycott, social media channels, such as SNSs, are increasingly enabling boycott movements to be rapidly and globally diffused through electronic WOM among interconnected consumers (Albrecht et al., 2013; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; McGriff, 2012). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of internet based applications that builds on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and it allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (p. 61). SNSs, such as Facebook, are social media applications where site members can create profiles, interact with other community members, (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), and form online brand communities. Although the original conceptualisation of online brand communities centered on the idea of brand fans creating virtual spaces to build social relationships with other brand fans (Jang et al., 2008), the guiding premise can apply to anti-brand communities, such as virtual brand boycott groups, that seek to diffuse anti-brand sentiment and encourage boycott participation. Just as in the context of traditional brand boycotts, virtual brand boycotts on SNSs have materialised in response to various business, social, and political issues, ranging from SeaWorld and the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, which are boycott targets for animal cruelty (Min-ho, 2018; PETA, 2018), to H&M and Gucci, which are being boycotted for their use of racially offensive marketing practices (McDermott, 2019). Within these virtual brand boycott groups, members participate by liking, commenting, posting, and sharing boycott-related content.

As previously noted, virtual brand boycotts are illustrative of online firestorms, the larger phenomenon of a modern, digital form of brand crises that poses different managerial challenges than traditional "offline" brand crises (Hansen et al., 2018). The recent literature has proposed and examined a few manifestations of this phenomenon, namely consumer brand sabotage (CBS) and a collaborate brand attack (CBA). CBS refers to "a deliberate form of hostile, aggressive behaviour on the part of a consumer, designed to harm a brand" (Kähr et al., 2016, p. 25), and in the digital age, this sabotage increasingly occurs via the Internet. CBS is distinct from brand boycotting, in that its primary goal is to cause damage to the brand, with no intention for reparation of the consumer-brand relationship in the future, and that it often refers to an act of an individual consumer (Kähr et al., 2016), as opposed to an organised movement by a group of consumers in brand boycotts. CBS is often driven by strong negative affect and perceived threats to one's identity (Kähr et al., 2016), whereas consumer boycotts generally seek to achieve some type of instrumental, and often times, prosocial objective (Friedman, 1985; Sen et al., 2001). Another type of social media firestorm are CBAs, which Rauschenabel et al. (2016) define as "joint, event-induced, dynamic, and public offenses from a large number of Internet users via social media platforms on a brand that are aimed to harm it and/or to force it to change its behavior" (p. 381). Rauschenabel et al. (2016) theorise that CBAs may be triggered by a brand's unethical behaviour, issues in its core business, or poor communication and magnified by factors such as interest group involvement and censoring behaviour on behalf of the brand; however, individual difference characteristics that might motivate some consumers to join the attack while others choose to refrain (Rauschnabel et al., 2016) are largely unknown, a gap which is filled by the current study.

Virtual brand boycotts on Facebook are a specific manifestation of more comprehensive constructs, such as social media firestorms and CBAs; yet, they differ in that they are created, maintained, and participated in via virtual communities, and the community's primary objective for spreading anti-brand sentiment is to encourage other consumers to refrain from purchasing the brand. Much of the CBA and online firestorm literature focuses on attacks that are launched on the targeted brand's social media platforms, as opposed to online communities that are created to leverage the attack. For example, Johnen et al. (2018) examined consumers' motivations to participate in an online firestorm, but their conceptualisation of an online firestorm was limited to a singular negative comment on the targeted company's Facebook page, which then triggered further negative commentary from other Facebook users. Thus, there is a need to examine motivations to join virtual brand boycott communities where members may participate in a variety of ways and may continue to do so for a longer duration than might typically occur for other types of online firestorms.

Although virtual boycotts share similarities with traditional, offline boycotts, new challenges arise when brand crises move to online platforms, and unique dynamics of social media may lead to differing participation motives among consumers. Unlike traditional media, social media enable a greater volume of communications that spread with stronger velocity (Hansen et al., 2018; Pfeffer et al., 2014). Specialised tools on social media, such as the like and share options, allow users to participate with minimal effort, which can amplify the circulation and perceived magnitude of anti-brand messages (Pfeffer et al., 2014). Further, these technological artifacts, such as the number of likes, serve as bandwagon heuristics that might lead consumers to perceive that the majority of likeminded people have the same opinion (Johnen et al., 2018), and this can encourage greater participation. Thus, the phenomenon of consumer boycotting involves dynamic psychosocial mechanisms that are simultaneously individual and social – particularly in a communal, conspicuous environment such as Facebook. Although the literature has examined boycotting motives in offline contexts and has begun to explore the triggers for related online phenomena, research is still needed to better explicate virtual brand boycott motivations from the consumer perspective. In this study, we propose and test three antecedents to consumers' intention to participate in a virtual brand boycott on Facebook – issue importance, number of likes, and perceived scope for self-enhancement – which reflect potential sources of individual and social motives of brand boycotting. The conceptual framework in Figure 1 captures the relationships among the constructs in this study.

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model and hypotheses



Brand boycott issue importance

Brand boycott issue importance refers to the degree to which a consumer cares about harmful implications that a brand's violation has for various stakeholders (e.g. employees, consumers, society). Many studies cite the personal importance of the boycott issue as a primary factor influencing the willingness to participate in a brand boycott. For example, Albrecht et al. (2013) revealed that a consumer's involvement in the boycott cause is the most significant factor influencing boycott participation intentions, while Klein et al. (2002) discovered that consumers were more willing to express anger and participate in boycotts when they believed the boycott issue was especially abhorrent. Clearly, when the issue for which the brand is being boycotted is at odds with one's values, the willingness to participate in the boycott may be amplified, whereas for individuals who lack an interest in the issue, participation is unlikely (Albrecht et al., 2013; John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2002, 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986), people seek to maintain consistency between their beliefs and behaviour. Thus, consumers who personally believe that it is important to support a cause are more likely to be motivated to maintain this belief by engaging in congruent behaviour such as boycotting a brand perceived to have behaved against the cause. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1 *The greater the perceived importance of the issue addressed by the brand boycott, the greater the intention to participate in the brand boycott on Facebook.*

Other consumers' boycott participation: Number of likes

Based on critical mass theory and bandwagon theory, traditional consumer boycotting research has indicated that other consumers' boycott participation positively influences an individual's boycott participation and cooperation (Albrecht et al., 2013; John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2001). Critical mass theory proposes that as group membership intensifies, momentum is created that encourages additional membership and increased potential for group success (Oliver et al., 1985). Traditional boycotting research has pointed to a consumer perception of a "strength in numbers" phenomenon (Sen et al., 2001, p. 402), or the belief that a larger group has more mobilising power to achieve a goal than does one individual (John & Klein, 2003). The literature also suggests that a larger number of boycotters may signal a greater potential for the consumer to actually make a difference through joining the boycott (Klein et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2001), and perhaps enjoy the "thrill of victory" that ensues from being a member of a successful boycott (John & Klein, 2003, p. 1203). Further, bandwagon theory suggests that individuals tend to rally in support of behaviours or perceptions that are believed to be popular among the majority (Leibenstein, 1950). Indeed, greater participation among other consumers may induce heightened perceptions of social acceptance of the boycott or social pressure to join (John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004), thus triggering a bandwagon effect.

Numerous studies indicate that cues within virtual environments, such as the number of online reviews, star ratings, friends/followers, or reviewers' expertise, can prompt consumers to form quality, popularity, or credibility impressions (Fu & Sim, 2011; Metzger et al., 2010; Sundar, 2008; Zhu et al., 2014). On Facebook, the number of likes serves as one of the most immediately noticed heuristics to signal others' favourable responses to a post or a page (Seo et al., 2018). Technological artifacts, such as likes and comments, are proposed to be one of the unique factors that help to amplify the spread and magnitude of online firestorms (Pfeffer et al., 2014). Although Johnen et al. (2018) suggest that a greater number of online firestorm participants can signal the consensus of moral concern with likeminded others and the potential for social recognition, they find that, as compared to a moderate number of firestorm participants, a large number of firestorm participants can deter others from participating. However, based on traditional boycotting research and findings from prior research in online contexts, this study adopts a different operationalisation of boycott participation intentions that includes both active and passive forms of participation and proposes that a greater number of other boycott participants actually intensifies individuals' willingness to participate. In other words, the number of likes on the brand boycott page can serve as a bandwagon heuristic to indicate the degree of social acceptance the boycott is garnering, which is expected to positively influence consumers' intention to participate, leading to the following hypothesis:

H2 *Consumers' intention to participate in a brand boycott on Facebook will be greater when there is a high (vs. low) number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page.*

Perceived scope for self-enhancement

In addition to stimulating corporate and social change, brand boycotting can also serve self-enhancement motives (John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). Scope for self-enhancement refers to the intrinsic benefits of boycott participation which can include alleviating feelings of guilt, improving self-esteem, and enhancing one's self- and social-image (John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). Klein et al. (2002) suggest that boycott participation can be motivated by a desire for "clean hands" (p. 366); consumers participate to feel good about themselves and avoid guilt from non-participation. Further, this motive can be heightened by social factors. Research suggests that group affiliation is often encouraged by the need for self-enhancement (Brewer & Brown, 1998), and it is through group membership that individuals distinguish between in-group and out-group members (i.e., ethical consumers who boycott vs. unethical consumers who do not). Therefore, boycotting can enable consumers to engage in a type of virtue signaling that lets others know that they are "kind, decent, and virtuous" (Bartholomew, 2015, para. 2). SNSs like Facebook provide an outlet for personal and social enhancement, and many of the activities in which users engage, such as displaying likes and dislikes, joining SNS groups, or engaging in social WOM, serve as a form of self-presentation and identity maintenance (Eisingerich et al., 2015; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). Research reveals that consumers' intentions to join and support social causes are stronger on a SNS than in non-virtual environments, and this greater willingness is argued to be driven by positive impression management motivations (Jeong & Lee, 2013). Indeed, social media provide an apt environment for users to engage conspicuously in virtue signaling, which can satisfy self-enhancement motives (Bartholomew, 2015; Johnen et al., 2018). Thus, participating in a virtual brand boycott on Facebook may offer an opportunity to pursue various self-enhancement motives, leading to the following hypothesis:

H3 *The greater the perceived scope for self-enhancement from brand boycott participation, the greater the intention to participate in the brand boycott on Facebook.*

The mediating role of perceived scope for self-enhancement

The literature also suggests relationships among the three antecedents to the brand boycott participation intention on Facebook, in that perceptions of boycott issue importance and others' participation (i.e., number of likes) may influence the consumer's perceived scope for self-enhancement from boycott participation. Klein et al. (2004) suggest that when the perceived egregiousness of the firm's actions was high, scope for self-enhancement from boycott participation increased. Boycott participation functions as a mechanism through which consumers can feel good about themselves and avoid shame or guilt from noninvolvement (John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004). Based on self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1986), it is plausible that consumers who believe that they are advocates for a particular cause are likely to see participating in a boycott about a brand perceived to have behaved against the cause as an opportunity to enhance their self-image as an ethical person. Research also suggests that a need for external consistency may motivate boycott participation (Klein et al., 2002), and this need for consistency across beliefs and behaviours is expected to be stronger for those who are highly involved with the boycott issue. This need for external consistency and the potential for greater self-enhancement are expected to be more prevalent in a conspicuous environment like Facebook, where consumers can more publicly align with boycott issues that are important to them. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4 *The greater the perceived importance of the issue addressed by the brand boycott, the greater the perceived scope for self-enhancement from brand boycott participation.*

Moreover, research suggests that the perceived psychosocial benefits from virtual boycott participation might increase as other boycotters' participation rises because a larger number of participants can signal boycott efficacy or the eventual thrill of victory (Albrecht et al., 2013; John & Klein, 2003; Klein et al., 2004; Sen et al., 2001), and being a member of a successful group can be both individually and socially fulfilling (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). By indicating that the boycott is popular, a greater number of other participants may intensify the pressure to conform to the majority view (Klein et al., 2004), which may prompt a bandwagon effect (Leibenstein, 1950; Sundar, 2008). On Facebook, the number of likes on a brand boycott Facebook page signals other Facebook users' advocacy for the boycott, which can amplify consumers' view that participating in a successful group can offer an opportunity to enhance their self-esteem as an ethical person and social-image in the eyes of their Facebook friends. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5 *Perceived scope for self-enhancement from brand boycott participation will be greater when there is a high (vs. low) number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page.*

As previously noted, boycotting can be intrinsically motivated because it satisfies a consumer's moral and altruistic obligations, thereby enhancing one's self-concept and esteem (John & Klein, 2003). Similarly, it can minimise the guilt and dissonance that may accompany apathy and inaction (John & Klein, 2003). However, in addition to fulfilling an innate need to do the *right thing*, boycotting also serves social needs and can be used to enhance one's social identity. Consumers who participate in brand boycotts on Facebook are demonstrating a form of conspicuous virtue signaling

(Bartholomew, 2015) and anti-branding whereby they publicly distance themselves from a brand that is in opposition to their sense of self- and social-identity (Kozinets & Handelman, 1998). Within the context of virtual brand boycotts, however, the nature of group membership and boycott participation is uniquely public, and this conspicuousness is expected to contribute to virtual boycotting being more distinctly self-enhancing than traditional boycotting contexts. Indeed, research reveals that participation in online firestorms is strongly linked to a need for social recognition (Johnen et al., 2018). Given the literature and hypotheses suggested earlier on the positive influence of issue importance and number of likes on perceived scope for self-enhancement from boycott participation, as well as the relationship between consumers' perceived scope for self-enhancement and their intention to participate in a brand boycott on Facebook, we propose that within the socially-dynamic domain of Facebook, the perceived scope for self-enhancement will mediate the effect of issue importance and the number of likes on boycott participation intentions, leading to the following hypothesis:

H6 *The effects of (a) the number of likes on the brand boycott Facebook page and (b) the perceived importance of the issue addressed by the brand boycott on consumers' intention to participate in the brand boycott on Facebook are mediated by the consumers' perceived scope for self-enhancement from brand boycott participation.*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research design and stimulus development

Data were collected through an online experiment. Experimental manipulations were executed employing visual stimuli that simulated Facebook News Feeds of existing brand boycott pages based on a 2 (number of likes: low vs. high) × 4 (brand boycott cases: Chick-fil-A, Burger King, Gap, Walmart) between-subjects design. Although the variation in brand boycott cases was not a hypothesised variable in this study, we used four, instead of one, brand boycott cases for the purpose of stimulus sampling to enhance the generalisability of the study findings across diverse brand boycott contexts. In an effort to enhance the ecological validity of the study, existing marketplace-means boycotts on Facebook were selected for the stimuli according to the following procedures and criteria. First, prominent brand boycott Facebook pages with high levels of engagement and large user followings were identified through searches. From the identified pages, the researchers attempted to include diversity in terms of the brands, product categories, and boycott issues featured in the stimuli, which resulted in the selection of boycott Facebook pages of two restaurant brands (Chick-fil-A and Burger King) and two retailer brands (Gap and Walmart). Further, the featured boycott cases differed in terms of the social desirability (sweatshop labour and employee treatment) or political polarisation (anti- or pro-gay issues) of their boycott issues, which were expected to help assure variability in participants' perceptions of boycott issue importance. Chick-fil-A was the target of a brand boycott on Facebook due to the company's donations to anti-lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups (Rhone, 2012), whereas Burger King became a brand boycott target following the launch of its Proud Whopper in support of the LGBT community (Peterson, 2014). Clothing retailer, Gap, was the target of a brand boycott on Facebook due to the company's alleged use of sweatshop labour and poor factory working conditions (O'Donnell, 2013), while Walmart was a boycott target based on accusations of low employee wages (Berfield, 2015). Although calls for brand boycotts have occurred across numerous SNSs, given that Facebook continues to be the platform with the most active users (Gramlich, 2019), it was selected as the focus for this study.

Previous experimental research on consumer boycotting manipulated others' boycott participation by showing participants the percentage of potential boycotters who intended to participate (Sen et al., 2001). Adapting this method, this study operationalised others' boycott participation by manipulating the *number of likes* presented on the visual stimuli. The stimuli were developed by editing authentic images taken from the selected brand boycott Facebook pages as they would appear on the Facebook News Feed on a smartphone screen. On the News Feed image of each of the four brand boycott Facebook pages, the number of likes was manipulated using Photoshop, resulting in a total of eight stimuli. The image of the friend who liked the brand boycott page was altered to a generic user image, and all other information irrelevant to the brand boycott was removed to reduce any confounding effects.

To calibrate the stimuli, a pretest was conducted with a convenience sample of 128 undergraduate students. Many pretest participants failed to notice the number of likes information from their stimulus image. To address this issue, the difference in the number of likes between the low- and high-likes conditions was made more extreme. In the main experiment, the low-likes stimuli presented 23 likes (decreased from 1,995 likes used in the pretest stimuli), while the high-likes stimuli displayed 256,415 likes (increased from 16,995 likes used in the pretest stimuli). Further, the font used for the number of likes was bolded and made larger, and participant directions were worded to encourage a careful scrutiny of all aspects of the stimulus Facebook News Feed image including the number of likes.

Sample and procedure

A convenience sample of 185 students at a Southeastern United States university participated in the main experiment for extra credit. Participants first completed a prior brand loyalty measure intermingled with other filler items irrelevant to this study. Then, they were shown one of the eight stimuli, randomly assigned to them. Participants then completed a questionnaire which included measures of message strength, followed by measures of boycott participation intention, scope for self-enhancement, and boycott issue importance, and boycott case prior awareness, manipulation check items, and demographic items, presented in this order. Among the 185 participants, three left more than 20% of the items unanswered and were excluded from the final sample, resulting in a usable sample size of 182 (22-24 participants per experimental cell).

A majority of the participants were between 18 and 23 years of age (91%), with the mean age being 21.1 ($SD = 3.59$), and 86.3% of these were Non-Hispanic White and 62.9% were female. Although the predominantly young, female student sample limits the generalisability of findings, adults ages 18 to 29 account for the largest proportion of Facebook users, and Facebook users consist of more women than men (Gramlich, 2019). Additionally, consumers who engage in social and political activism, such as boycotting, tend to skew younger and female (Anderson et al., 2018). Therefore, the larger percentage of young, female participants is somewhat representative of the general Facebook population as well as brand boycotter populations.

Measures

Because the boycott news feed messages featured on the stimuli were not written uniformly by the researchers but were taken from actual boycott Facebook pages, their potential persuasiveness or message strengths could differ. Thus, to control for its potential confounding effect, message strength was measured as a potential covariate, using five 5-point semantic differential scale items (*bad arguments – good arguments*, *not convincing – convincing*, *not believable – believable*, *weak – strong*, and *unpersuasive – persuasive*). Further, because real-world boycott cases were used for the stimuli, participants' existing relationship with the brand and knowledge of the brand boycott case may impact the results; therefore, a single question asking participants' prior awareness (yes/no) of their assigned brand boycott case and a 10-item measure of prior brand loyalty adapted from He et al. (2012) (e.g. "I prefer the [product/service] of [brand name] to the [product/service] of other brands," "I have repeatedly found [brand name] is better than other brands") were included to assess their potential confounding effects.

Perceived boycott issue importance was measured using three semantic-differential scale items adapted from Sen et al. (2001), which asked participants to indicate the degree to which they cared about the issue on which the boycott was focused. Perceived scope for self-enhancement from brand boycotting was measured with four 5-point (1 for *strongly disagree* and 5 for *strongly agree*) Likert scale items adapted from Klein et al. (2004) to fit the boycott issue contexts of the present study (see Appendix A).

For measuring intention to participate in the brand boycott on Facebook, 18 items were generated, including 16 items adapted from Junco (2012) and two items developed by the researchers. Junco's (2012) original items assessed levels of engagement in Facebook activities, which can range from posting status updates and tagging pictures to playing games and creating events. For the current study, Junco's (2012) wording of the Facebook activities was adapted to fit the context of participating in a brand boycott on Facebook. Further, two additional items were created to capture intention to like the brand boycott page and intention to click on the link to visit the brand boycott page on Facebook. The intention items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 for *strongly disagree* and 5 for *strongly agree*). Given the significant modifications and new additions to the scale, the scale properties were explored through the aforementioned pretest data (n = 128) for stimulus calibration. Results from exploratory factor analysis (EFA), using the principal components analysis procedure with varimax rotation, for the 18 participation intention item suggested two factors labeled as active (Cronbach's α = .97) and passive (Cronbach's α = .86) participation intentions. Five of the 18 items were deleted due to low factor loadings (< .70). Among the retained 13 items, 10 items loaded on the active participation intention factor, which indicated intention for more dynamic, conspicuously visible involvement in the brand boycott on Facebook, such as posting photos, videos, and comments on the brand boycott Facebook page. The remaining three items loaded on the passive participation intention factor, which indicated more inconspicuous involvement in the brand boycott on Facebook, such as clicking on the link to the boycott page and viewing its posts. Therefore, the refined 13-item scale was adopted in the main experiment to measure boycott participation intention (see Appendix A).

Two manipulation check items were used. One 5-point Likert-type scale item (1 for *very few* and 5 for *very many*) assessed the overall perception of the number of likes the participants recalled, and the other item asked participants to recall the number of likes from the stimulus image by choosing one answer among three options ("*more than 100,000*," "*fewer than 100,*" and "*I did not see the number of likes*"). Finally, several demographic items were asked. For multi-item scales, items were presented in random order within each scale.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Measurement validity and reliability

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with a maximum likelihood estimation method was conducted on Amos 24 for the message strength measure and all dependent measures, including the two participation intention factors and the scope for self-enhancement and issue importance scales, using the main experiment data. All factors were specified with reflective indicators. The CFA model fit was acceptable ($\chi^2 = 587.21$, $df = 265$, $p < .001$; CFI = .94, TLI = .93, IFI = .94; RMSEA = .08). All items had factor loadings greater than .70 for their respective factors, and the average variance extracted (AVE) for each factor fell between the range of .64 and .82 (see Table 1), which is greater than the suggested minimum requirement of .50 for convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). None of the squares of factor correlations (SFC) were greater than the AVE of each scale (see Table 1), indicating discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Cronbach's α of all three scales exceeded .80, indicating high reliability. The scores of the items loading on each factor were averaged for each participant to serve as the respective factor score for further analysis.

Manipulation check

Results from the first manipulation check item confirmed success of the number of likes manipulation by showing that those in the high-likes condition recalled a significantly greater number of likes on the post ($M = 3.9$, $SD = 1.05$) than those in the low likes condition ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 1.17$; $t_{180} = -8.18$, $p < .001$). Results from the second manipulation check item also demonstrated that participants' number of

TABLE 1 Measurement Validity and Reliability Statistics

Scale	AVE[a] and SFC[b] SSE	API	PPI	II	MS	Cronbach's α
Scope for Self-Enhancement (SSE)	**.64**					.87
Active Participation Intention (API)	.47	**.82**				.98
Passive Participation Intention (PPI)	.33	.40	**.68**			.86
Issue Importance (II)	.25	.06	.20	**.79**		.92
Message Strength (MS)	.23	.16	.30	.34	**.78**	.95

[a] AVEs are presented in diagonal cells and bolded.

[b] SFCs are presented in off-diagonal cells.

likes and their response to this item were significantly associated ($\chi^2 = 69.71$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). Specifically, the high-likes group was more likely to recall that the number of likes on their stimulus was more than 100,000 ($f = 50$) than that it was fewer than 100 ($f = 5$), while the low-likes group was more likely to recall that the number of likes on their stimulus was fewer than 100 ($f = 45$) rather than that it was more than 100,000 ($f = 4$). Interestingly, a considerable number of participants in both the low- and high-likes groups did not remember seeing the number of likes on their assigned stimulus ($f_{\text{low-likes}} = 43$, $f_{\text{high-likes}} = 37$).

Message strength was compared among the stimuli. Results revealed no significant difference in message strengths between the two levels of number of likes ($t_{180} = 1.39$, $p = .59$; $M_{\text{high-likes}} = 2.61$, $M_{\text{low-likes}} = 2.69$) as well as among the four brand boycott scenarios ($F_{3,\,178} = 2.37$, $p = .072$; $M_{\text{Walmart}} = 2.88$, $M_{\text{Gap}} = 2.83$, $M_{\text{Burger King}} = 2.43$, $M_{\text{Chick-fil-A}} = 2.47$); therefore, it was deemed unnecessary to use the message strength covariate for hypothesis tests.

Hypothesis testing

To test the effects of perceived boycott issue importance and the number of likes on intention to participate in the brand boycott on Facebook (Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively) and on perceived scope for self-enhancement (Hypotheses 4 and 5, respectively) together, a 2 (number of likes) × 4 (brand boycott case) two-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) with issue importance as a covariate was performed for three dependent variables: scope for self-enhancement, active participation intention, and passive participation intention. MANCOVA results indicated a marginally significant main effect of the number of likes (Wilk's $\lambda = .960$, $F_{3,\,171} = 2.40$, $p = .07$, partial $\eta^2 = .040$), a significant main effect of brand boycott case (Wilk's $\lambda = .882$, $F_{9,\,416} = 2.44$, $p = .01$, partial $\eta^2 = .041$), as well as a significant effect of issue importance (Wilk's $\lambda = .723$, $F_{3,\,171} = 21.81$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .277$). But, the number of likes × boycott case interaction effect was non-significant (Wilk's $\lambda = .969$, $F_{9,\,416} = .60$, $p = .80$, partial $\eta^2 = .010$).

The follow-up univariate ANCOVAs (see Table 2) revealed significant positive effects of the issue importance covariate for both active ($\beta = .15$, $p = .006$) and passive ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$) boycott participation intentions as well as for scope for self-enhancement ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypotheses 1 and 4 respectively. The ANCOVA results also indicated a significant main effect of the number of likes on active boycott participation intentions but no significant effect on passive boycott participation intentions, thus partially supporting Hypothesis 2. Further, in support of Hypothesis 5, the ANCOVA results showed a significant main effect of the number of likes on scope for self-enhancement. Although not hypothesised, boycott case conditions had a significant effect on the scope for self-enhancement. Post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni procedures revealed that the Burger King boycott case produced a significantly higher perception of the scope for self-enhancement than did the Walmart and Chick-fil-A boycott cases. The marginal means of all three dependent measures for the high- and low-likes conditions and the four boycott cases after controlling for the issue importance covariate effect are provided in Table 2. The remaining boycott case effects on the two participation intention measures and the boycott case × number of likes interaction effects were all non-significant according to the ANCOVA results.

Although prior brand loyalty and prior boycott case awareness were initially considered as potential covariates for this analysis, their effects were found non-significant from both the multivariate analysis (prior brand loyalty: Wilk's $\lambda = .956$, $F_{3,\,169} = 2.58$, $p = .06$; prior boycott case awareness: Wilk's $\lambda = .997$, $F_{3,\,169} = 0.17$, $p = .91$) and the univariate analyses for all three dependent variables ($.06 < p < .85$) and thus were eliminated from the analysis.

TABLE 2 Univariate ANCOVA Results and Marginal Means

	ANCOVA Results					Marginal Mean[b]					
						No. of Likes		Boycott Case			
Dependent Measure	**Effect**	*df*	*F*	*p*	**Partial** η^2	**Low**	**High**	**Chick-fil-A**	**Gap**	**Burger King**	**Wal-mart**
Active Participation Intention	Number of likes	1	4.832	.029	.027	1.57	1.81	1.48	1.78	1.83	1.66
	Boycott case	3	2.102	.102	.035						
	Number of likes × boycott case	3	0.982	.403	.017						
	Issue importance	1	7.665	.006	.042						
Passive Participation Intention	Number of likes	1	1.018	.314	.006	2.17	2.32	2.18	2.18	2.33	2.28
	Boycott case	3	0.295	.829	.005						
	Number of likes × boycott case	3	0.171	.916	.003						
	Issue importance	1	31.405	< .001	.154						
Scope for Self-Enhancement	Number of Likes	1	6.069	.015	.034	1.82	2.07	1.75	2.10	2.20	1.71
	Boycott case	3	5.695	.001	.090						
	Number of likes × boycott case	3	0.597	.618	.010						
	Issue importance	1	48.526	< .001	.219						
	Error[a]	173[a]									

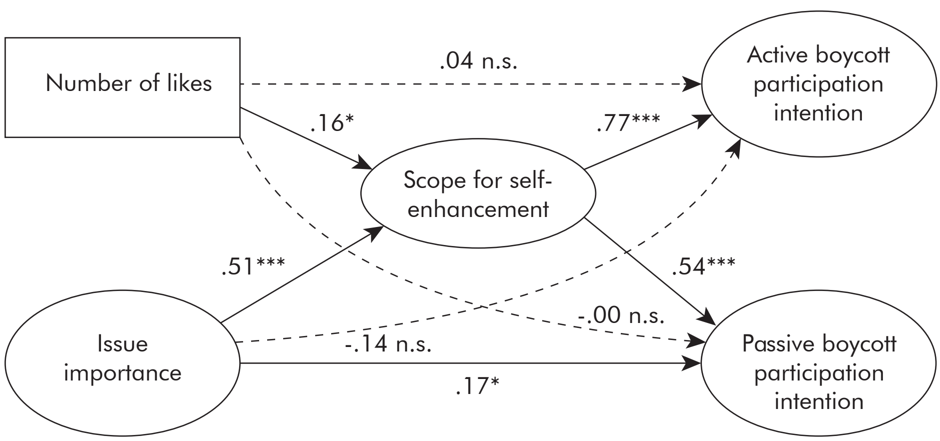
[a] The same error *df* for all ANCOVAs.

[b] Calculated at the issue importance (covariate) value of 2.2436.

To test the relationship between scope for self-enhancement and boycott participation intentions (Hypothesis 3) and the mediating role of scope for self-enhancement for the effects of the number of likes and issue importance (Hypothesis 6), structural equation modeling (SEM) was run using Amos 24 with the maximum likelihood estimation procedure and 500 bootstrap samples. All indicators in the model were reflective. Figure 2 presents the structural model with standardised coefficients. Incremental fit indices of the model indicated an acceptable fit (CFI = .92, TLI = .91, IFI = .92). Although the chi-square test results did not support a perfect fit ($\chi^2 = 499.99$, $df = 184$, $p < .001$) and the RMSEA (.097) was above the usual standard for an adequate fit (< .08) (MacCallum et al., 1996), given that these two fit indices are largely subject to the sample size (Chen et al., 2008), we adopted Browne and Cudeck's (1993) recommendation of RMSEA of .10 as the cutoff point for an unacceptable model and moved forward with this model for the hypothesis tests without further model adjustments. The path coefficients from this SEM model revealed that scope for self-enhancement was a significant positive predictor for both active ($\gamma = .77$, $p < .001$) and passive ($\gamma = .54$, $p < .001$) boycott participation intentions (see Figure 2), supporting Hypothesis 3.

The SEM model further revealed that the indirect effects of the number of likes were significant for both active (indirect effect [IE] = .122[.035, .235], $p < .05$, variance accounted for [VAF] = .76) and passive (IE = .085[.026, .163], $p < .05$, VAF = 1.00) boycott participation intention, supporting Hypothesis 6(a). The indirect effects of issue importance were also significant for both active (IE = .394[.257, .535], $p < .01$, VAF = 1.53) and passive (IE = .274[.162, .399], $p <$

FIGURE 2 SEM results with standardised coefficients



Note: Solid arrows = significant paths, dashed arrows = non-significant paths. * p ‹ .05, *** p ‹ .001, n.s. = not significant (p › .05)

.01, VAF = .62) participation intentions, supporting Hypothesis 6(b). According to Hair et al.'s (2017) guidelines, a VAF value greater than .80 indicates full mediation, while a VAF value between .20 and .80 suggests partial mediation. Based on these guidelines, scope for self-enhancement fully mediated the effect of number of likes for passive boycott intention but partially mediated both the effect of number of likes for active boycott intention and that of issue importance for passive boycott intention. Because scope for enhancement is an *inconsistent mediator* for the effect of issue importance on active boycott intention, meaning that the sign of the direct effect (-) of issue importance was opposite to that of the indirect effect (+) (MacKinnon et al., 2007), Hair et al.'s (2017) guidelines do not apply for this mediation effect, which had the VAF value that was larger than 1. However, the fact that the direct effect of issue importance on active boycott intention, which was significant in the aforementioned ANCOVA results (see Table 2), became non-significant with scope of self-enhancement as a mediator in the SEM model (see Figure 2) corroborates the significant mediation test result.

Finally, in order to examine whether the results would be different without the participants who failed the number of likes manipulation check (i.e., 80 who could not recall and 9 who incorrectly recalled the number of likes in their stimuli), we re-tested all hypotheses after eliminating these participants' data. The results were consistent with the earlier findings for all hypotheses but Hypothesis 2. The main effects of the number of likes from the ANCOVA results were non-significant for both active and passive boycott intentions without these participants, rejecting Hypothesis 2, whereas this effect was significant for active boycott intention in the first set of results when these participants were included in the data.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this study, three sources of motivation (i.e., the issue, others, and self-enhancement) to engage in brand boycotts on Facebook were tested. The results illuminate the interplay among issue importance, degree of others' participation, and scope for self-enhancement as primary mechanisms motivating consumers' virtual brand boycott participation intentions. Within the uniquely conspicuous, communal domain of social media, virtual boycott participation intentions tend to fall within two primary behavioural categories – active boycott participation (visible to others) and passive boycott participation (invisible to others) – and the findings of this study indicate that active and passive boycott participation intentions may have somewhat different motivations. First, scope for self-enhancement serves as the strongest boycott motivator, functioning as both a direct antecedent and a mediating mechanism to predict active and passive boycott participation intentions. On the other hand, the perceived importance of the brand boycott issue directly influences consumers' passive participation intentions; however, its influence on the active boycott participation intentions is mediated by perceived scope for self-enhancement. In other words, issue importance draws consumers' attention to the brand boycott on Facebook to the extent that they would click on and view the page, whereas more active forms of participation via visible actions (e.g. liking, sharing, commenting, publishing user-generated content) in support of the boycott require consumers to perceive that such active participation would enhance their self-identity. One mechanism by which consumers assess the scope for self-enhancement is through others' participation.

Our findings indicate that the number of likes, as a signal of the degree of others' participation, influences consumers' participation intentions by enhancing their perceived scope for self-enhancement from participation in the boycott on Facebook.

Theoretical implications

This study provides several important theoretical implications. First, this research extends the traditional boycotting literature to the domain of social media and reveals the significant impact of scope for self-enhancement on consumers' intentions to participate in virtual brand boycotts. These findings support the contention that participation in brand boycotts may serve as a form of self- and social-identity enhancement (Klein et al., 2004; Kozinets & Handelman, 1998), and corroborate Johnen et al.'s (2018) findings regarding the central role of social recognition in people's willingness to join an online firestorm.

Second, the way that the virtual boycott participation construct is conceptualised and operationalised in this study helps to extend and complement the emerging body of work in related areas. In our study, a virtual brand boycott is positioned as an online anti-brand community that is formed in social media but that is unaffiliated with the targeted brand's owned social media pages, which differs from the contexts employed in existing studies of CBS by an individual social media user (Kähr et al., 2016) or online firestorms that occur in a brand's social media page (Johnen et al., 2018). Further, the existing literature has rarely operationalised virtual brand boycotts or related phenomena from the perspective of the consumer, with the exception of the work by Johnen et al. (2018), and has not done so employing a multidimensional operationalisation. For example, Johnen et al. (2018) measured the online firestorm participation simply as the likelihood of leaving a comment, whereas our research reveals two distinct domains of virtual boycott participation (active vs. passive) that stem from different consumer motivations, each of which poses unique challenges for how firms should best respond to these digital brand crises. The multidimensional nature of the boycotting intention construct revealed in our study provides important theoretical implications because it suggests that there are a variety of means through which consumers can be involved in virtual boycotts, and not all are equally evident.

Next, this is the first study, to our knowledge, to empirically link others' boycott participation and perceived issue importance to active versus passive boycott participation via scope for self-enhancement. In doing so, this study not only contributes to the traditional boycotting literature, but it also reveals potentially different motivations for active versus passive boycott participation intentions that may be unique to socially dynamic, digital environments. The majority of the activities comprising active participation intentions, such as posting or tagging, are those that are more conspicuous and likely prone to be affected by perceived scope for self- and social-enhancement, as well as others' participation. On the other hand, the passive participation intention activities are more inconspicuous and less susceptible to a bandwagon effect and thus are influenced more strongly and directly by the perceived importance of the boycott cause itself, as opposed to others' boycott participation.

Finally, this work extends several important theories to the emerging, understudied context of consumer boycotting behaviour within digital environments. By applying bandwagon theory and critical mass theory, this study synthesises the literature on traditional consumer boycotting with the work exploring consumer behaviour on social media to illuminate how others' boycott participation can take the form of online heuristics that impact boycott participation intentions. Notably, our findings regarding the effect of the number of likes diverges from Johnen et al.'s (2018) work, which revealed that a higher number of participants actually decreased consumers' willingness to participate in an online firestorm on Facebook. Thus, given our different manipulations (our high-likes condition = 256,415, while Johnen et al.'s high-likes condition = 5,010) and contexts (online brand boycott community in our study vs. a brand's social media page in Johnen et al.'s study), the discrepant results from the two studies illustrate a need for future research to flesh out boundary conditions for the way that online heuristics, such as the number of likes, impact other consumers' participation intentions. Additionally, although many participants did not remember the number of likes they saw on the Facebook stimuli, the number of likes effects still persisted, especially for active boycott participation intentions and scope for self-enhancement. This result suggests the potential subliminal impact that the number of likes may have on consumer psychology in processing communications on social media, which extends the literature on the nonconscious mere presence effect to digital media contexts (Argo et al., 2005; Bargh, 2002). Our findings further validate prior research that suggests that by joining boycotts, consumers may seek to do more than achieve instrumental objectives, like punishing the brand or supporting an important boycott issue; boycotting may also fulfill intrinsic motives that bolster one's confidence and self-concept. Moreover, boycotting on a public site such as Facebook provides consumers with a more visible platform upon which they can signal in-group and out-group statuses for other friends and followers to observe, thus enhancing their social standing.

Managerial implications

Despite the emergence of digital brand crises as a critical managerial concern, the effectiveness of targeted brands' response strategies is currently lacking (Albrecht et al., 2013; Pfeffer et al., 2014). Findings from this study can aid in enhancing brands' understanding of what drives consumers to engage in different aspects of brand boycott activities in digital media environments, which may also apply to broader phenomena including social media firestorms and CBS. Although managerial efforts often focus on proactive social media marketing strategy objectives, like generating sales and improving brand image, in times of crisis, companies would be wise to monitor and evaluate external social media activities and respond reactively as well (Felix et al., 2017). Social media are not one-sided, and consumers may engage in ways that reflect poorly on the company. To effectively deal with being the target of a social media boycott, brands should assess the tone and language that are used in consumers' anti-brand messaging on social media. For instance, online firestorms featuring higher-arousal emotion words tend to increase the message virality (Herhausen et al., 2019), and given the significant role of others' boycott participation, it is imperative that companies respond promptly and appropriately (Pfeffer et al., 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016) to try to deter more users from hopping on the boycotting bandwagon. Empathy and acknowledgement are shown to lessen firestorm virality (Herhausen et al., 2019), while tactics such as counterstating, or attempting to refute or downplay the triggering offense, increase momentum (Rauschnabel et al., 2016), which could therefore ignite a stronger bandwagon effect among other consumers.

Moreover, the differing motivations between active and passive boycott participation intentions also have significant managerial implications. In terms of social media marketing strategy, the findings reveal that there may be more than what meets the eye when it comes to assessing Facebook metrics; although the number of likes or shares for a brand boycott page have important implications, so too do users' more inconspicuous activities. By illuminating the differing degrees of boycott page participation, the findings indicate that in the context of virtual brand boycotts on Facebook, companies must gauge both visible and seemingly invisible metrics to truly understand the reach and potential impact of the boycott. Further, by comparing the extent to which social media users actively versus passively participate in the boycott, companies may garner insight as to whether they are more highly motivated by other virtual boycotters or by their commitment to the boycott issue. With a better understanding of the underlying boycott motivations, targeted brands can more effectively craft response strategies and mediation approaches. For instance, the tone, messaging, and tactics that might be most effective could differ depending on whether boycott participants were motivated more by other users or their connection with the boycott issue.

Moreover, the significant role of scope for self-enhancement has important implications for developing effective response strategies. For instance, Rauschnabel et al. (2016) found that the simple act of acknowledgment in response to a CBA was one of the most effective tactics, and this strategy aligns with Herhausen et al.'s (2019) findings that empathising and apologising tend to slow the rate of firestorm virality. Similarly, Lappeman et al. (2018) found that brand reputation was enhanced when companies facing an online firestorm replied to each consumer complaint individually rather than replying to a cluster of complaints simultaneously; thus, even in the wake of negative communications, companies can use social media marketing strategically to attempt to build, maintain, or repair relationships with stakeholders (Felix et al., 2017). Moreover, tactics such as acknowledging and personally responding to attackers attest to the importance of social recognition (Johnen et al., 2018), not only in encouraging consumers to participate in boycotting and firestorms, but also in best practices for mitigating these situations.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

Although this study provides significant theoretical and managerial contributions that enhance our understanding of why consumers participate in virtual brand boycotts via Facebook, several limitations must be noted. However, with these limitations come fruitful avenues for future research. First, by enlarging the font of the number of likes used on the visual stimuli, the ecological validity of the findings might be somewhat compromised, and caution must be exercised in extrapolating the findings on the number of likes effect. Given limitations regarding the external validity of the current controlled experimental study, future research could track real online brand boycotting behaviour to show the relationship between others' participation (i.e., the number of likes) and additional Facebook analytics that measure boycott engagement, such as the number of views, comments, shares, sentiment analysis, or frequency of the use of emoticons. This type of analysis could enhance external validity by providing another method to assess the relationship between the number of likes and the general scope of participation in the boycott. Moreover, as previously noted, our results regarding the number of likes effect differed from that of Johnen et al. (2018), and this discrepancy warrants further inquiry.

Another limitation stems from the unintended brand boycott case effects on participants' scope for self-enhancement. Scope for self-enhancement was stronger in the Burger King boycott for the brand's pro-LGBT activity, as compared to the Chick-fil-A boycott for its anti-LGBT activity and the Walmart boycott for its labour issue. Thus, future research is needed to address possible differences across boycott causes that vary in terms of socio-political polarisation (e.g. LGBT rights) or a social desirability bias (e.g. sweatshop labour). Future research is also needed to better understand how the brand and boycott issue effects may interplay and in which cases and for which consumers one (i.e., brand loyalty vs. cause loyalty) might exert a stronger influence than the other.

Finally, although it was beyond the purview of the current study, it is theoretically and managerially imperative that future research addresses the link between participation in virtual brand boycotts via Facebook and the actual withholding of consumption among those virtual brand boycott members. In addition to measuring real online brand boycotting behaviour as noted earlier, future research could also assess real offline boycotting behaviour, such analyses could help firms to understand whether or not there is a potential disconnect between consumers' online and offline behaviour. Yet, even if being the target of a brand boycott via Facebook may not lead to consumers actually refusing to buy the brand, there is a need to delve deeper into the intangible effects that virtual boycotts can have on brand image or brand equity.

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APPENDIX A: Measurements

Variable and Items
Intention to participate in the brand boycott on Facebook[a]
Passive participation intention
I would click on the Facebook link to explore the boycott (brand name) page.
I would view photos on the boycott (brand name) Facebook page.
I would view videos on the boycott (brand name) Facebook page.
Active participation intention
I would send Facebook messages to my friends about the boycott (brand name) page.
I would create events on Facebook that are related to the boycott (brand name) page.
I would post videos on the boycott (brand name) Facebook page.
I would post comments on the wall for the boycott (brand name) Facebook page.
If they were available, I would play games related to the boycott (brand name) page on Facebook.
I would post photos on the brand boycott (brand name) Facebook page.
I would tag photos on the boycott (brand name) Facebook page.
I would comment on pictures posted on the boycott (brand name) Facebook page.

I would comment on statuses posted on the boycott (brand name) Facebook page.
I would use Facebook chat to discuss the boycott (brand name) page.
Scope for self-enhancement[a] (Cronbach's α = .86)
I would feel uncomfortable if other people who are boycotting saw me purchasing at Gap/Walmart (or consuming Burger King/Chick-fil-A).
I would feel guilty if I shopped at Gap/Walmart (or ate at Burger King/Chick-fil-A).
My friends/family are encouraging me to boycott (brand name).
I would feel better about myself if I joined the "Boycott (brand name)" community.
Brand boycott issue importance (Cronbach's α = .92)
Chick-fil-A
To what extent are you concerned about firms funding anti-gay rights campaigns? (1 – Not concerned at all, 5 = Very concerned)
How bothered are you by the reported donations Chick-fil-A has made to anti-gay rights organisations? (1 = Not bothered at all, 5 = Very bothered)
How important is it to you that firms such as Chick-fil-A avoid funding anti-gay rights campaigns? (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Very important)
Burger King
To what extent are you concerned about firms marketing to LGBT consumers? (1 – Not concerned at all, 5 = Very concerned)
How bothered are you by Burger King introducing LGBT-targeted promotions such as the "Proud Whopper"? (1 = Not bothered at all, 5 = Very bothered)
How important is it to you that firms such as Burger King avoid marketing to LGBT consumers? (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Very important)
Gap
To what extent are you concerned about firms using sweatshop labour in their manufacturing? (1 – Not concerned at all, 5 = Very concerned)
How bothered are you by the reported use of sweatshop labour used by Gap? (1 = Not bothered at all, 5 = Very bothered)
How important is it to you that firms such as Gap avoid using sweatshop labour in their manufacturing? (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Very important)
Walmart
To what extent are you concerned about Walmart providing low wages to its employees? (1 – Not concerned at all, 5 = Very concerned)
How bothered are you by the reports that Walmart's policies increase its employees' reliance on governmental assistance such as food stamps and Medicaid? (1 = Not bothered at all, 5 = Very bothered)
How important is it to you that firms such Walmart provide a living wage to employees? (1 = Not important at all, 5 = Very important)

[a] The featured brand name differed per brand boycott condition.

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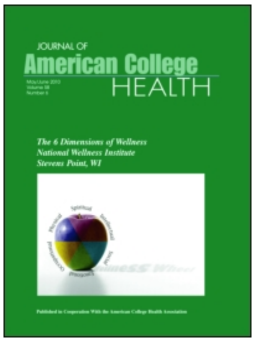

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NCHA variable combination as a method to undertake LGBTQ + student subpopulation analyses

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MAJOR ARTICLE

NCHA variable combination as a method to undertake LGBTQ + student subpopulation analyses

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Combine National Collegiate Health Assessment (NCHA) measures indicating LGBTQ+membership into a single variable in order to analyze health responses of this group as compared to their cisgender, heterosexual (cis-het) peers. **Participants**: Students at a liberal arts university who completed the Spring 2019 NCHA-II study (n=1107). **Methods**: Four different NCHA sexual orientation and gender identification variables were combined, creating a new variable to examine the campus LGBTQ+student sub-sample as a single, complete group. That group was then compared to cis-het students across multiple variables. **Results**: LGBTQ+students reported statistically significant differences for key variables such as suicide attempts, suicidal ideation, and self-harm, as well as for stressors that impact academic success such as discrimination. **Conclusions**: This analysis indicates that the challenges campus LGBTQ+students face are much different than their cis-het peers. Support from campus community members is suggested to reduce negative impacts for these students.

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Introduction

It has been well-established that lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, transgender, nonbinary, and queer people, as well as others who comprise the LGBTQ + population,[1] suffer significant health disparities compared to the population overall. Previous research on subpopulations of this LGBTQ + group has found that lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people are at a higher risk of depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal ideation, and other mental health disorders.[2–5] In particular, these differences are acute among youth populations and those in colleges and universities,[4–7] as well as among those who identify as bisexual,[8,9] transgender, nonbinary, or queer.[9–11] In general, college students face difficulties in adapting to their newfound autonomy and the adjustments of campus life, which can lead to a variety mental health issues;[12,13] however, LGBTQ + college students are particularly at risk because they often face additional challenges in understanding their own sexualities and/or gender identities, while also facing discrimination for that identification from others in the campus population and from their families.[14,15] For that reason, many LGBTQ + students are not "out" at all or are "out" only on campus in an effort not to alienate their families, whom the students often believe, and with good reason, might reject or abandon them because of their LGBTQ + identity.[15] Furthermore, LGBTQ + students must navigate decisions regarding identity disclosure to new peers, roommates, and faculty on campus.[15] Given the mental health disparities and unique challenges that LGBTQ + students experience, there is a need for colleges to adequately account for and assess this population and its needs. Only then can truly informed and inclusive policies and practices be developed.

While a great deal of research has been done to better understand these disparities among college students, that work has typically included only subpopulations of the overall LGBTQ + community. An excellent resource for that analysis has been the National Collegiate Health Assessment (NCHA) II data set, but it has four separate variables that relate to gender and sexual orientation, and previous analyses have only included subgroups from one of those four variables, such as specific analysis of lesbians or transgender students. To do breakout analysis of the entire group requires a data manipulation, undertaken here, that combines those four variables into a single LGBTQ + variable that can include all members of that subpopulation. The resultant variable can be particularly beneficial at the individual campus level where smaller subpopulations, such as transgender students, might otherwise have been left out of a school's breakout analysis.

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Minority stress theory is among the related previous research that can be used to better understand the unique challenges that LGBTQ + college students experience and the subsequent disparate outcomes they endure with regard to their mental health, as compared to their cisgender, heterosexual (cis-het) peers.[16] The LGBTQ + population, which is comprised of sexual and gender minority individuals, encounters significantly greater stigma, prejudice, and discrimination than the dominant majority groups experience.[6,7,17] According to minority stress theory, these socially stressful conditions can lead to internalized homophobia, fears of not being accepted, and hiding one's identity, thus leading to a higher prevalence of detrimental mental health outcomes,[16] and these experiences may be exacerbated during emerging adulthood and one's transition to college.[15] Indeed, prior research shows that not only do LGBTQ + students experience more victimization like assault and discrimination,[3] they also disproportionally deal with a variety of mental and physical health issues. For example, as compared to cis-het college students, those identifying as LGBTQ + reported worse mental and general health outcomes across a range of measures, such as feelings of belonging, sleep problems, social functioning, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.[4,5,8,18–20] Additionally, non-heterosexual student populations reported higher rates of nonmedical use of prescription drugs,[21] alcohol-related negative consequences,[22] and significantly greater non-suicidal self-injury behaviors (e.g., cutting, punching, biting) than heterosexual peers,[2,8] and had stronger tendencies toward suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts.[3,18,19]

Studies exclusively examining transgender and nonbinary students find an even bleaker picture. In general, transgender and gender nonconforming individuals experience higher rates of diagnosed depression, mental distress, and certain chronic health conditions, such as coronary heart disease.[23] They are also eight times more likely to have dealt with severe psychological difficulties as compared to the general U.S. population and are nearly nine times more likely to have attempted suicide in their lifetime.[24] More than half of transgender youth have experienced microaggressions, such as being verbally harassed, while nearly one quarter experienced physical assault,[24] and for those students who experienced bullying, depressive symptoms were significantly greater.[25] Among transgender and questioning youth, lifetime suicide attempt rates are significantly higher,[11] which is a trend that persists into college.[10] Within college student populations, rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-injury, and suicidality were two-to-four times higher for gender minority students than for cisgender students.[26]

Although a number of studies demonstrate the disproportionate mental health outcomes that are experienced by the general LGBTQ + population and by LGBTQ + college students more specifically, a number of relevant sub-groups are not always included in the analyses. In these LGB studies the most common exclusions are those who identify as transgender, nonbinary, intersex, pansexual, and asexual; however, a comprehensive analysis of the LGBTQ + subpopulation is incomplete without those inclusions. With regard to the population in general, difficulties arise with accurately accounting for the proportion of individuals that identify as LGBTQ+, which can have detrimental public policy implications.[27] For instance, although the 2020 U.S. Census for the first time will provide more inclusive options to assess the nature of cohabitating couples (i.e., "same-sex husband/wife/spouse" and "same-sex unmarried partner"), the survey still does not explicitly measure sexual orientation or gender identification.[28] Assessing the size of the LGBTQ + population is further complicated by inconsistencies in the way LGBTQ + categories are defined and measured, as well as by the way that people self-identify and their willingness to self-disclose.[27]

The challenges of measuring the general LGBTQ + population also raise many of the same concerns regarding accounting for, and adequately meeting the needs of, the LGBTQ + population in colleges and universities. Although there are numerous demographic categorizations that campuses use to better address underserved populations, LGBTQ + status is information on which few schools have collected comprehensive data. In the university under examination (and, in fact, in that entire state university system) there have been no quantifiable measures used to collect data on the student LGBTQ + population. It is very difficult to know if a population is being adequately served if it cannot even be identified. Although the number of higher education institutions that systematically collect sexual orientation and gender identity information, such as on applications for admissions or on optional post-admission forms, is increasing, there has not been widespread adoption of such practices among all higher education institutions.[29] Further, even when such practices are in place, the stigma and discrimination that the LGBTQ + student population faces may deter students who do identify as LGBTQ + from acknowledging that in a survey. These same students may be even more unlikely to self-identify if they are not "out" or are still questioning their sexual orientation or gender identification, so even if questions regarding LGBTQ + status were included on university questionnaires, it is likely that not all students would answer candidly or that items may not be worded in an inclusive or exhaustive manner, so the questionnaires would still only capture a subset of the LGBTQ + population.

For that reason, the NCHA II data set is a particularly useful tool. The NCHA survey is conducted by the American College Health Association (ACHA) to collect data on college students' health habits, behaviors, and attitudes across a range of areas, and the results are used to improve campus policies, programming, and resource allocation.[30] Prior research has confirmed that the NCHA is highly reliable and valid,[31] and it is one of the most widely utilized instruments for analyzing health indictors among college student populations.[32,33] Further, it provides significant value by allowing researchers and school administrators to assess links between certain demographic characteristics, such as sexual orientation, and health indicators, thus enabling universities to improve their policies and programming to better meet the needs of at-risk populations.[33]

A significant number of academic studies utilizing the NCHA have been published, and a range of topics has been examined.[33] These studies have investigated concerns such as college student substance use/abuse,[20,22] sexual health,[34–36] and mental health,[37,38] among various other topics. Prior studies have also focused on particular student subpopulations such as self-identified females,[8,39] Asian Pacific Islanders,[36] or members of the Greek life community.[40] Of particular interest during the past decade have been analyses of health outcomes among many of the different subsets within the LGBTQ + community. Some studies have used this data to assess mental health outcomes for LGBQ students in general,[3,41] while others have focused on a narrower selection of subpopulations or a single subpopulation, such as students identifying as transgender or those identifying as lesbian or bisexual.[8,10,42] Similarly, others have analyzed LGBQ student outcomes among those who are also veterans or athletes.[18,19]

In their 2018 study, Bourdon et al[43] found increases in the proportion of students who identified as gender or sexual minorities, and the researchers largely attributed this change to revisions that were made to the NCHA instrument (from 2014 to 2016) which provided more exhaustive options to allow students to accurately self-identify. However, although improvements to the instrument have been made over time, ironically, the NCHA data set cannot address an examination of the entire LGBTQ + community overall without some data manipulation. The NCHA survey includes questions that allow for researchers to do breakout samples on four different, but related, identifying variables: biological sex, transgender identification, gender identity, and sexual orientation. While these variables each yield valuable information in understanding the subpopulations within the LGBTQ + community, none of them is able to provide a comprehensive analysis of the group as a whole. In line with this concern, based on their systematic review of articles that have utilized the NCHA data, Rahn et al[33] bring to light limitations related to how the instrument measures certain variables. For instance, they suggest that rather than measuring gender as “male,” “female,” or “transgender,” a more suitable approach would be to include a follow-up item assessing “sex assigned at birth.” This limitation of the NCHA instrument has evolved over time. The current study seeks to partially mitigate this concern by adopting an alternative method of manipulating the data and by combining variables in the data to offset limitations on the way the variables are included.

There are benefits and disadvantages of aggregating LGBTQ + identities into a single variable. A significant benefit of including all LGBTQ + identities into one variable, rather than the four variables in the NCHA data set, is that when combined into a single group, it proportionally and inclusively represents all members of the student LGBTQ + population rather than just subsets. This type of examination allows for understanding the shared impacts of entire campus LGBTQ + communities, and the particular manipulation of the NCHA data that is used in this study is an approach that has not been adopted by previous research. Furthermore, by considering this community as one group, it allows for a larger, representatively proportional breakout sample size, which adds integrity in statistical analysis of that group. A disadvantage of only examining aggregated group data is that the challenges faced by any of these specific identities may be unique to that particular identity. Those differences only come to light through disaggregation of data, but for most universities, a dataset that breaks out these individual groups, such as looking specifically at the lesbian or transgender or asexual subpopulation, delivers a sample size that is not robust enough to draw actionable conclusions on a campus level. While it is important to consider LGBTQ + data at a national level, there is also a unique benefit in analysis at the campus level, as is undertaken in this study. It gives tangible data about how an individual campus is meeting the needs of its LGBTQ + students. Campus diversity officers and administrators need data that is stable, of significant size, and that demonstrates statistically significant results. While transgender students, for example, typically experience discrimination at levels higher than other groups,[6,24] they also represent a relatively small subpopulation on campus.[10,42] Yet, to even aggregate people who are transgender together in the same data variable is limited by the flawed assumption that the obstacles for transgender women are the same as for transgender men.[33] It also disregards that those challenges also differ for people who identify between the ends of the gender spectrum such as gender queer, nonbinary, trans masculine, and trans feminine. Acknowledgement of these identities is important, but expecting tangible data on a campus level is unlikely. These are groups that are better understood using the overall NCHA population sample. While those overall data are useful, they fail to provide a campus barometer of how a specific university is doing to address its students. While the overall LGBTQ + student population does have many differences, it also shares a number of commonalities, so examination of this group in aggregate at the university level can be enlightening because it allows for an understanding of their needs and challenges as a group and gives universities actionable, campus-specific data that can drive decision-making to mitigate some of the negative experiences for this group.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to determine whether a campus level analysis of a comprehensively combined LGBTQ + variable can yield resultant information that provides actionable insights into the campus LGBTQ + subpopulation in a way that can benefit campus administrators, counselors, and other members of the community charged with impacting campus policies regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. In particular, the research examined whether the LGBTQ + student subpopulation in a single campus sample exhibited different outcomes with regard to overwhelming anxiety, suicidality, self-harm, academic outcomes due to stressors (e.g., stress, discrimination), traumatic or difficult problems (e.g., family problems, sleep difficulties), and university health services needs as compared to their cis-het peers.

Materials and method

Participants

On a campus of approximately 6000 students, 1107 students participated in the Spring 2019 NCHA study, with three of those students only partially completing the survey. In the sample, 90.4% of the students reported being between the ages of 18–22, with 95.1% of the sample reporting as within the 18–24 age range. The racial/ethnicity profile of the sample was 87.0% White, 6.1% Black, 5.3% Hispanic, 2.5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 4.9% multi-racial or other. Racial totals sum to greater than 100% because students may report more than one racial/ethnicity identity. The majority of students ($n = 922$, 84.3%) identified as non-LGBTQ+, or cis-het, while 15.7% of students ($n = 172$) responded positively to one or more classifications that are considered subsets of the LGBTQ + population. While the vast majority, 93.2% of the students, were seeking undergraduate degrees, the spread of "year in school" shows relatively insignificant skew. First, second, third, and fourth-year undergraduates are all well-represented. The sample did also comprise a subset of students seeking graduate degrees or giving other responses. These additional students were included in the sample and analysis because LGBTQ + bias is not expected to be limited strictly to the undergraduate population.

For the sexual orientation measure, more than half of the students reporting non-straight/het orientation ($n = 92$) chose the primary identification of bisexual, with another significant group ($n = 16$) identifying as pansexual. While this is a sample rather than a census, this data set has provided a better snapshot of the composition of the university LGBTQ + distribution than had been previously known. In the study overall, biological sex is skewed female (79.6% versus 20.4% identifying male). This is partially explained by a campus population that generally skews female, with 63.8% of enrolled students identifying as female during the 2018–2019 academic year.[44] There is also a well-established pattern of under-representation of males,[45,46] particularly in the 18–24 demographic,[47] to engage in optional research data collection. There is, however, no indication that the identifying characteristics of the study would skew participation to over-represent the LGBTQ + population, so the 15.7% representation of the LGBTQ + population has provided a reasonable estimate of the relative campus overall LGBTQ + population.

Measures

The NCHA data set includes an extensive collection of measures, including some of the most comprehensive reporting of a variety of LGBTQ + characteristics undertaken in large sample college data administrations. These characteristics are represented through four separate measures in the NCHA questionnaire.[48] The first of those is biological sex, (question RHQ47A – "What sex were you assigned at birth, such as on an original birth certificate?").[49] While sex assigned at birth does not appear to indicate LGBTQ + status, it does so because it is asked as a binary. Since some transgender people report biological sex as birth sex and report the variable gender identity (RNQ47C – "What term do you use to describe your gender identity?") as different, anyone who does so is included in the LGBTQ + category. Sexual orientation (RNQ48 – "What term best describes your sexual orientation?") includes a variety of options; the only cis-het option of those choices is RNQ48 = 9 (straight/heterosexual), so any respondent with an RNQ48 response ≠ 9 is included in the LGBTQ + category. This measure fails to capture trans individuals who identify as heterosexual, so using this measure alone would be an inadequate single variable to examine this group. Similarly, transgender status (RNQ47B – "Do you identify as transgender?") is a binary. Anyone who reports "yes" as transgender identified is included into the LGBTQ + category. Taken together, these respondents were combined into a single variable to represent a binary of LGBTQ + versus people who responded that they were not LGBTQ+; as such, they can be examined in cross-tabulations and multivariate statistical methods for between group comparisons. Three respondents in the sample were re-coded as missing data for the gender identity variable because they listed identities such as "attack helicopter," indicating that the question should be omitted.

Since the a priori belief, as supported by the literature,[14,50] was that underrepresented racial and ethnic groups are more likely to experience discrimination, a control sample was also run to compare White students to their peers from underrepresented racial groups. This is a standard and useful way for campus diversity offices to examine these same variables in regard to racial affiliation. In a campus with a significant Black or Hispanic/Latinx population, it can be useful to examine those specific measures. Because the campus under examination has comparatively low racial minority representation, individual racial identities did not have adequate sample sizes for breakout, so White identifying students were compared to students who did not identify as White. The most straightforward implementation of that was to use variable NQ54A (White vs. nonwhite).

These measures were then compared across a variety of health, behavioral, and psychological variables, with a primary focus on suicidality, self-harm, stress, and need for campus counseling, as well as variables within the categories of academically impacting events and issues that were "traumatic or very difficult to handle," whether there was a perceived academic impact or not. Because some measures in the data set, such as "seriously considered suicide," are broken into single answer categories "any time in the last 30 days," "any time within the last twelve months" (answers exclusive of students who replied yes to other answers), or the option "ever seriously considered suicide," these variables were converted into binaries to be able to give more robust analysis of the comparison data. Research has shown that LGBTQ + individuals respond that they have attempted suicide at some point in their lives at a higher rate than cis-het individuals,[26] with the attempted suicide rate among transgender adults 18+ at 40%,[24] so recognizing the risk factors and triggers and mitigating negative impacts at this point in a student's life can be lifesaving.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was run on the data using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Comparison of means using Pearson chi-square testing was used to identify factors for LGBTQ + students that were statistically significantly different from their peers. As a means of recognizing the severity of these differences as compared to an alternate campus subpopulation, those same analyses were run for White versus nonwhite students. Given the sensitive nature of certain topics, there were items that some of the participants declined to answer. Therefore, the following analyses present slight discrepancies across the total sample sizes included in each of the various categories. Further, since numerous measures had multiple responses, those responses were routinely combined in ways that could allow for direct analysis of specific questions of interest. Table 1 shows a standard NCHA response spread.

While the response options create opportunities for useful analysis to recognize the important distinctions between having felt anxiety within the last two weeks as opposed to the last year, to examine students who have felt overwhelming anxiety in discreet cells, for any time in the past twelve months, it is necessary to create a dummy variable that combines the first two responses as "no anxiety within the past twelve months" and the last three responses as "yes, experienced anxiety in the past twelve months." In this manner, 2×2 crosstabs were created that allowed for direct issue chi-square testing of the questions of interest. This was well-suited for the data, which was primarily nominal and ordinal.

Results

Through creation of an LGBTQ + variable and by analyzing those students using direct comparison over key issues, such as suicidality, self-harm, academic impacts, traumatic or difficult issues, and health services impacts, the results were clearly statistically significant. Given the significance of those differences, the same analyses were run for nonwhite versus White students to determine if these disparities were as significant for another underrepresented campus population. The results in this study do not focus on every statistically significant impact that was found because statistically different values were found throughout the areas of NCHA coverage, with extensive differences typically returning p values of $p \leq .000$. For that reason, the focus of the analysis was on items that were either considered most impacting or most actionable.

The suicidality numbers showed significant differences across the LGBTQ + versus cis-het student sample. All examined suicidality variables, seriously considered suicide in the last month, year, or ever, were significantly more impacting across the LGBTQ + sample at the $p \leq .000$ level. The numbers were so high for LGBTQ + students that despite being only 15.7% of the sample, the disparity caused a substantial increase in the overall sample total. Those differences were not found in examination of the nonwhite versus White student

Table 1. Overwhelming anxiety crosstab with answers not combined.

	Sexual orientation/gender identity		
Question	LGBTQ+ ($n = 172$)	Non-LGBTQ+ ($n = 920$)	Total ($n = 1092$)
Ever felt overwhelming anxiety			
No, never	7.0% (12)	21.7% (200)	19.4% (212)
No, not in the last 12 months	5.8% (10)	11.6% (107)	10.7% (117)
Yes, in the last 2 weeks	48.3% (83)	31.5% (290)	34.2% (373)
Yes, in the last 30 days	19.2% (33)	13.9% (128)	14.7% (161)
Yes, in the last 12 months	19.8% (34)	21.2% (195)	21.0% (229)

comparisons. The results for "attempted suicide within the last twelve months" and "ever attempted suicide" were similarly significant, again at the $p \leq .000$ level (Table 2).

Results for LGBTQ + students' likelihood of self-harm was also significantly different from their cis-het peers. The differences, again at the $p \leq .000$ level, indicated that LGBTQ + students are more than four times as likely to have inflicted self-harm over the previous twelve months than their cis-het peers. No statistically significant differences were found comparing the nonwhite versus White student samples (Table 3).

Academic impacts were similarly profound. All measures were statistically significant at the $p \leq .01$ level, with most items significant at the $p \leq .000$ level. These measures addressed issues of discrimination, relationship difficulties, roommate difficulties, stress, and anxiety at levels that impacted academic performance. As reference, data is also included for students who responded that those negative impacts were experienced but did not impair academic performance. In this data, it is also seen that nonwhite students experienced levels of discrimination that impacted performance at an even greater rate than LGBTQ + students ($p \leq .000$) (Table 4).

In acknowledgement that not all of the challenges faced by students relate to academics, and to further examine some of the antecedent factors that inherently impact issues, such as self-harm, suicidality, and need for counseling, a category of variables describing traumatic or difficult problems that students face, such as stress, academic challenges, intimate relationship problems, finances, health concerns, and sleep issues, were considered. While finances were also a statistically significant issue for nonwhite versus white students, LGBTQ + students experienced statistically significant differences in many of these categories, typically at the $p \leq .000$ significance level (Table 5).

Lastly, given the differences in the lived experience for LGBTQ + students, it was anticipated that there would be a significantly greater expression of negative psychological impacts and greater need for counseling services for the LGBTQ + subpopulation than for cis-het students. These analyses also were significant at the $p \leq .000$ level and demonstrated a greater need as a group for university health counseling than for cis-het students (Table 6).

Comment

This study corroborates prior research regarding the disparate mental health outcomes experienced by LGBTQ + college students as compared to their cis-het peers.[4,5,9] As rooted in minority stress theory,[16] many LGBTQ + college students continue to bear disproportionate social and psychological burdens that could potentially be reduced by changes in campus policies, programming, and climate. Policies can range from increased training for counselors to procedures for housing changes to

Table 2. Suicidality comparisons for LGBTQ + and nonwhite students.

	Subgroups				
		Sexual orientation/gender identity		Race	
Question	Campus total ($n = 1096$)	LGBTQ+ ($n = 172$)	Non-LGBTQ+ ($n = 921$)	Nonwhite ($n = 140$)	White ($n = 956$)
Seriously considered suicide					
Any time in the last 30 days	4.4%	12.2%***	2.7%	3.6%	4.5%
Any time in the last 12 months	13.5%	36.0%***	9.1%	13.6%	13.5%
Ever seriously considered suicide	29.7%	64.0%***	23.2%	27.1%	30.1%
Attempted suicide					
Any time in the last 12 months	1.9%	6.4%***	1.0%	2.1%	1.9%
Ever attempted suicide	12.9%	32.6%***	9.1%	14.3%	12.6%

Note. "Last 12 month" data aggregates 2 week/30 days/12 months. "Last 30 day" data aggregates 2 week/30 days. "Ever attempted/considered" aggregates all answers except no/never.
*$p \leq .01$, **$p \leq .005$, ***$p \leq .000$.

Table 3. Self-harm comparisons for LGBTQ + and nonwhite students.

	Subgroups				
		Sexual orientation/gender identity		Race	
Question	Campus total ($n = 1097$)	LGBTQ+ ($n = 172$)	Non-LGBTQ+ ($n = 922$)	Nonwhite ($n = 140$)	White ($n = 957$)
Intentionally cut, burned, bruised, or otherwise injured yourself					
Any time in the last 30 days	2.8%	7.6%***	1.8%	2.1%	2.9%
Any time in the last 12 months	8.5%	22.7%***	5.7%	7.9%	8.6%
Ever intentionally injured yourself	25.1%	51.7%***	20.1%	18.6%	26.0%

Note. "Last 12 month" data aggregates 2 week/30 days/12 months. "Last 30 day" data aggregates 2 week/30 days. "Ever intentionally" aggregates all answers except no/never.
*$p \leq .01$, **$p \leq .005$, ***$p \leq .000$.

Table 4. Academic impact comparisons for LGBTQ + and nonwhite students.

Question	Campus total ($n = 1104$)	Sexual orientation/gender identity: LGBTQ+ ($n = 172$)	Sexual orientation/gender identity: Non-LGBTQ+ ($n = 922$)	Race: Nonwhite ($n = 140$)	Race: White ($n = 957$)
Academic performance has been impacted by					
Anxiety	32.9%	53.8%***	28.9%	30.4%	33.3%
Discrimination	0.9%	2.9%**	0.5%	3.6%***	0.5%
Relationship difficulties	12.1%	18.2%*	10.8%	10.9%	12.2%
Roommate difficulties	9.5%	15.4%**	8.5%	6.5%	10.0%
Stress	38.4%	51.2%***	35.9%	35.3%	38.8%
Experienced, but academics not necessarily impacted					
Roommate difficulties (any answer but no)	37.8%	47.3%**	36.1%	40.6%	37.4%
Discrimination (any answer but no)	6.2%	25.7%***	2.6%	16.7%***	4.7%

*$p \leq .01$, **$p \leq .005$, ***$p \leq .000$.

Table 5. Traumatic or difficult problems comparisons for LGBTQ + and nonwhite students.

Question	Campus total ($n = 1096$)	Sexual orientation/gender identity: LGBTQ+ ($n = 172$)	Sexual orientation/gender identity: Non-LGBTQ+ ($n = 922$)	Race: Nonwhite ($n = 140$)	Race: White ($n = 957$)
Within the last 12 months, traumatic or very difficult to handle					
Academics	53.2%	66.5%***	50.8%	56.1%	52.7%
Family problems	29.4%	49.7%***	25.5%	32.6%	28.9%
Intimate relationships	33.8%	43.3%**	32.0%	37.9%	33.2%
Other social relationships	33.8%	50.9%***	30.5%	35.5%	33.6%
Finances	31.6%	50.3%***	28.2%	42.9%**	29.9%
Personal appearance	34.0%	51.5%***	30.7%	30.9%	34.5%
Personal health issue	24.7%	42.4%***	21.3%	28.1%	24.2%
Sleep difficulties	37.3%	51.5%***	34.5%	42.1%	36.5%
Other	10.3%	22.3%***	8.0%	13.4%	9.9%

*$p \leq .01$, **$p \leq .005$, ***$p \leq .000$.

Table 6. University health service need comparisons for LGBTQ + and nonwhite students.

Question	Campus total ($n = 1104$)	Sexual orientation/gender identity: LGBTQ+ ($n = 172$)	Sexual orientation/gender identity: Non-LGBTQ+ ($n = 922$)	Race: Nonwhite ($n = 140$)	Race: White ($n = 957$)
Ever used university health counseling	25.0%	45.3%***	21.3%	25.7%	24.9%
Ever diagnosed with depression	25.8%	45.0%***	22.1%	18.0%	26.9%
Described health as good, very good, or excellent	84.5%	66.1%***	87.9%	79.4%	85.2%
Experienced tremendous stress within the last 12 months	13.1%	25.0%***	10.8%	15.0%	12.8%

Note. "Last 12 month" data aggregates 2 week/30 days/12 months. "Ever used/diagnosed" aggregates all answers except no/never.
*$p \leq .01$, **$p \leq .005$, ***$p \leq .000$.

creation of LGBTQ + Centers on campus. Programming and climate can be anything from funding for LGBTQ + groups and bringing in diversity speakers to providing ways to change names or pronouns so students show up correctly on class rolls and in online classroom platforms. To our knowledge, this is the first study to aggregate NCHA gender and sexual orientation variables in this way to analyze campus-level mental health disparities for the LGBTQ + subpopulation. Undertaking this data manipulation method can be beneficial for other universities seeking to better understand this unique subpopulation.

Using the NCHA data in this way gives administrators information regarding a campus group that is typically difficult to measure and assess in terms of need. Despite the increased emphasis on diversity and inclusion, both societally and on college campuses, the LGBTQ + segment has been largely unmeasured and, therefore, largely underserved. Campus diversity measures are typically grounded in standard metrics that have been trended over time. The LGBTQ + campus population, however, goes largely unreported and non-trended and is often estimated by the number of people who participate in campus Pride organizations or through items on housing questionnaires. Neither gives accurate measures, and when there is data collection, it cannot be assumed that people will provide full disclosure when responding. For those reasons, the NCHA data is a valuable tool to better understand the size, composition, and needs of this campus group. Data-driven diversity efforts are ineffective when the groups in need are omitted from data collection. A campus cannot address a problem that it does not realize that it has.

The university under analysis had trended the aggregated campus numbers for multiple NCHA administrations, typically with very little movement for the major variables under consideration. Those numbers were also typically compared to national baselines indicating that the university had experienced health impacts across its student population that were consistent with national expectations. For example, this university had last administered the NCHA two years before, in 2017. Students reporting self-harm (i.e., intentionally cut, burned, bruised, or otherwise injured themselves) returned a value of 20.6% for the NCHA national 2017 data set,[51] while the examined university's 2017 number was lower than that at 20.4%. However, in the 2019 administration, that number increased to 25.1%. The 2019 cumulative national data was not available when the campus released its own internal results, but a reasonable expectation was that the campus's increase was potentially reflected in the overall 2019 national sample. Among campus cis-het students, indication of self-harm was 20.1%, while among the LGBTQ + respondents, that number was 51.7%, a rate more than two and a half times higher for LGBTQ + students than their cis-het peers. Without breakout analysis, that number would not only be diluted through its aggregation with the rest of campus, it would not even be known.

Similarly, students who responded that they had ever attempted suicide in the national 2017 NCHA report was 9.9%; the sample university's 2017 number was similar at 10.7% and then posted a troubling, but modest, increase to 12.9% in 2019. As would be expected, the increase was enough to make suicide awareness a greater priority on campus. At the same time, however, the 12.9% number represented the aggregated NCHA campus sample. Disaggregating the data, cis-het students reported 9.1% for that metric. LGBTQ + students, on the other hand, reported nearly four times higher than cis-het students at 36.2%, and almost three times the overall aggregated campus value. The differences cited helped demonstrate to campus administration the disparity of experience that LGBTQ + students have faced in their education and in their lives. Therefore, this analysis creates a tool that universities can use to recognize the importance of these differences and work to address the causes and mitigate the negative impacts they create.

Prior research highlights the significant role that school administrators and the campus community can play in supporting LGBTQ + students and lessening the negative impacts that were found in the current study. Including sexual orientation and gender identity in the institution's nondiscrimination policy provides a sense of security, but it also signals the school's values of and commitment to diversity and inclusion.[52] The presence of an LGBTQ + resource center and LGBTQ + student organizations help students to cope with challenges and find community,[52,53] while supportive faculty and an inclusive curriculum are integral to improving the LGBTQ + student experience.[54] Practices such as asking students their chosen name and the pronouns they use, as well as ensuring that intake forms and other written communications use inclusive language are also recommended.[55,56] The data indicated a need for increased LGBTQ + training for members of counseling services, a need that corroborates findings from prior research.[57–59] The analysis also led to recommendations that counseling seek out team members with specific specialization in working with LGBTQ + students since they make up a disproportionate percentage of students who take advantage of the university counseling services. This was one of the most directly actionable aspects of the results of this analysis.

Another actionable result was that housing coordinators were alerted to the significant negative roommate difficulties that LGBTQ + students experienced at nearly double the rate of their cis-het peers. The department used that information to create systems to mitigate those impacts. Universities may lack institutional practices to adequately address housing issues for LGBTQ + students and in particular for transgender and gender nonconforming students.[60–62] Additionally, this issue is made more complex since some students do not necessarily acknowledge or even realize their LGBTQ + identification until they find it to be something they express once they are away at college. It is further complicated in that many students who do accept themselves as members of the LGBTQ + community cannot specifically make housing requests because the housing is either arranged by parents who are shielded from that knowledge or because the student has concerns that such a request might in other ways "out" them to family or friends who they prefer to not know.[15] Knowledge of the differences in these housing experiences can create the opportunity to find solutions that might not have been considered previously.

Limitations

The NCHA data set is exceptional, but it is not a census, so even though the sample size accounted for almost 20% of the total student population, it is not comprehensive. It is possible, even likely, that students with health issues were more likely to respond to a health assessment. That is not an invalidation of the study but certainly a limit of its scope. Another limitation is that while students demonstrated candor in responses about their behaviors, it cannot be assumed that that level of honesty applied to all questions for all participants. As previously noted, some students protect their privacy and will not acknowledge LGBTQ + status. For some respondents, the questions themselves had potential legal implications if the data were used incorrectly. A significant level of trust is required in responding accurately to questions as legally implicating as whether a student has driven a car after five or more drinks within the last 30 days or if in the last 30 days has taken LSD or PCP, heroin, crystal meth, or engaged in other felony-level behaviors. To the study's credit, there is an indication that there is trust in reporting these issues, but to assume it was consistent across all respondents would be idealistic.

It is important to note that by creating a single group the response differences of subpopulations that may experience greater impacts, for example, trans and non-binary students are necessarily diluted. However, this limitation does provide a picture of the entire LGBTQ + group. It is necessary at the campus level because group subpopulations would otherwise be disregarded since their sample sizes in breakout tend to be too small for quantitative analysis.

Future research

There are several clear implications for future research resulting from this study. The first is that other universities, given the guidance to create and analyze these variables, can use current NCHA datasets within their own campuses and have a significant improvement in understanding their own campus specific student LGBTQ + subpopulations. In doing so, and in analysis of data from previous NCHA administrations, this enables the opportunity to create trend data at a campus level for these measures to get an idea not just of how a campus stands on LGBTQ + areas of concern, but also how those measures are changing over time. For example, if issues with LGBTQ + students in campus housing are noted as significant, this provides a vehicle for determining if changes that are implemented in response are creating a positive effect.

One option that many campuses take advantage of already is to use NCHA to compare their universities to national norms, but a comprehensive variable examining LGBTQ + status does not exist in that national reporting. A clear research void is the lack of those national numbers that could be used as a comparison set to campus results. The creation of a national baseline analysis across the entire NCHA dataset is needed. Examination of a dataset including only Spring 2019 would allow for a baseline set of almost 68,000 respondents.[63] By combining all of the 2015–2019 NCHA-II administrations, without school duplication, that dataset becomes a powerful resource that can be used to better understand national and regional norms. This method can also enable campuses to compare their results to a baseline to better understand where they can do better to adequately support this subpopulation. This could also allow for the option of creating a synthetic version of a university baseline that could adjust for campus compositional factors.

The progression of the questionnaire to the NCHA-III maintains a nearly identical manipulation to the combinations performed on the NCHA-II. In the NCHA-III the Sex Assigned at Birth question includes an intersex option that groups with LGBTQ+. Similarly, the options for the Gender Identity question have also expanded to include agender, gender fluid, intersex, and non-binary. For that question, any option other than male or female fits into that LGBTQ + group, as would someone listed as male or female that did not report the same gender assigned at birth. Similarly, for sexual orientation, the non-LGBTQ + answer remains straight/heterosexual.[64]

Conclusions

Given the strength of significance in the disparities for LGBTQ + students compared to their cis-het peers, as indicated by this sample, undertaking an analysis of this nature can provide campuses with important information. To do so not only creates a clearer picture of a campus's LGBTQ + population and the issues those students face, it also creates concrete data that can be used, when appropriate, to argue for additional resources to address areas where campuses are experiencing shortfalls. The issues at hand go beyond student success to include self-harm and suicidal ideation, so any analyses that lead to better understanding of these issues can result in changes that can potentially change college success outcomes and possibly even save lives.

Conflict of interest disclosure

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