Spiral of Silence or Social Loafing? A Parallel Mechanism to Explain Why People Defend Their Stances on Controversial Sociopolitical Issues

CHENG HONG
California State University Sacramento, USA

CONG LI
University of Miami, USA

Using spiral of silence and social loafing theories, this study proposed a parallel mechanism to explain why people defend their stances on controversial sociopolitical issues through political consumption behaviors (i.e., boycott and buycott) when they read about corporate advocacy messages on social media. A 2 (personal stance: supporting vs. opposing gun control) × 3 (other Instagram commenters' stances: majority supporting gun control vs. majority opposing gun control vs. balanced opinions) between-subjects quasi-experiment was conducted to test the mediating effects of feeling of being in the majority opinion group and feeling of others not contributing enough on boycott/buycott intentions. Results showed that people defend their stances through boycott/buycott actions, because of the feeling of being in the majority opinion group.

Keywords: spiral of silence, social loafing, gun control, boycott, buycott

The increasing polarization of public opinions in American society is driving business corporations to engage in contentious sociopolitical issues. In a research project conducted by APCO Worldwide (2018), more than 90% of American consumers expect companies to take an active role in sociopolitical issues. They may need to go beyond making profits and play a more important role in pushing social changes (Gartenberg & Serafeim, 2019). As a matter of fact, nowadays many companies are involved in public discussions of social and political issues. Among various communication strategies used in these discussions, advocacy advertising on social media is an emerging phenomenon. The purpose of this advertising approach is to present the corporation's viewpoint on a controversial sociopolitical issue to not only the policymakers but also the mass public (Waltzer, 1988). For instance, Airbnb (2017) aired a YouTube video "We Accept" in response to refugee bans; Madewell created an Instagram post to celebrate Pride Month and support the LGBTQ+ community.

As companies engage in public discussions of controversial sociopolitical issues via advocacy advertising, individual consumers may react differently. Empirical studies have shown that when individuals

Cheng Hong: c.hong@csus.edu
Cong Li: congli@miami.edu
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are in line with the advocated position in an advocacy ad, they tend to "reward" the company by showing a positive attitude toward the ad and the brand (Bravo & Lee, 2019). However, when people see a conflict between their own sociopolitical stances and the company's stance, they are likely to take actions to "punish" the company. Such rewarding (i.e., "buycott" behavior that people purposely purchase a company's product or service to show support) and punishing (i.e., "boycott" behavior that people purposely avoid purchasing a company's product or service to show resistance) activities are often labeled as political consumption behavior, driven by social, political, or ethical considerations (Baek, 2010). Furthermore, companies often use social media platforms to deliver their advocacy advertising messages, where the online public can respond to these messages by leaving comments (Makarem & Jae, 2016). The effect of such comments remains largely unknown, especially when they contain explicit suggestions of boycott or buycott behavior. In particular, how will a person react to a company's online advocacy advertising message when most commenters show a tendency to boycott (or buycott), and how will this effect change if one's personal stance is consistent (or inconsistent) with the company?

The primary goal of this study is to address the abovementioned research questions. For testing purposes, the issue of gun control and the clothing company Levi Strauss & Co. (Levi's) are selected to create experimental stimuli for this study. Gun control is a topic that attracts heated public discussions and debates in the United States, and Levi's is a company that has been actively involved in this issue. In late 2016, a customer walked into a dressing room at a Levi's store in Georgia with a loaded gun and accidentally shot himself in the foot. Since then, Levi's has been advocating for ending gun violence and putting stronger gun laws in regulation (Peters, 2019). The current study is designed to examine how likely people will be to boycott or buycott Levi's, depending on whether they agree or disagree with Levi's stance on gun control and whether most social media comments suggest boycotting or buycotting Levi's because of its stance on gun control. Drawn from the theoretical frameworks of spiral of silence and social loafing, a parallel mechanism model is proposed to explain people's boycott/buycott intentions. Based on the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993), people are more likely to express their stances when they feel their opinions are shared by the majority. On the other hand, according to the social loafing theory (Karau & Williams, 1993; Klein, Smith, & John, 2004), people are more likely to defend their stances through boycott/buycott actions when they feel they are the opinion minority. Both mechanisms are tested in this study, with the feeling of being in the majority opinion group and the feeling of others not contributing enough as the two mediators.

The unique contribution of this study is to test the proposed parallel mediation mechanism model and discuss why people defend their stances on controversial sociopolitical issues via boycott/buycott actions under the influences of personal stance, company stance, and other social media commenters' stances. Such an examination will facilitate an understanding of consumers' responses toward corporate advocacy messages and other people's expressed stances on social media. According to the spiral of silence theory, people would be motivated to express their opinions on a controversial subject because they feel the majority is on their side (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). Based on the social loafing theory, individuals feel responsible to argue against the majority if others on their side are not influencing the opinion environment in the way desired by themselves (Karau & Williams, 1993; Klein et al., 2004). The consequence of these psychologies is that people are unlikely to change their stances. To a certain extent, the polarization of

opinions on controversial issues such as gun control reflects a state of equilibrium, which people may subconsciously seek to reach.

Literature Review

Boycott and Buycott: Being Expressive and Instrumental

As political consumption behaviors, boycott and buycott are both instrumental and expressive in nature (Kam & Deichert, 2017; Klein et al., 2004; Makarem & Jae, 2016). When consumers boycott or buycott a company to influence the company's policy, change the situation, and even impact the whole society, such behavior is instrumental (Klein et al., 2004). When consumers boycott or buycott to express their values, attitudes, individuality, and emotions, the expressive nature of such behavior is reflected (Kam & Deichert, 2017; Makarem & Jae, 2016). In the context of corporate advocacy advertising, companies take stances on controversial sociopolitical issues; as a response, consumers, because of their various sociopolitical opinions and ideologies, react differently. Prior empirical research has shown that when a brand and its consumers share a stance on a sociopolitical issue, consumers tend to favor the brand and show their support toward the brand through purchases (i.e., buycott); however, when there is a discrepancy in sociopolitical stance between the brand and consumers, consumers will disfavor the brand and take boycott actions (Baek, 2010; Swimberghe, Flurry, & Parker, 2011). Both boycott and buycott reflect ethical consumption (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001) and conscious consumption to "express values of sustainability, social justice, corporate responsibility, or workers' rights and so on" (Carr, Gotlieb, & Shan, 2012, p. 224). Based on their conceptual connections, prior research has considered boycott and buycott as two opposite ends of political consumption behavior (Baek, 2010; Newman & Bartels, 2011).

Consumption decisions of boycott/buycott are not only contingent upon consumers' own sociopolitical stances compared with the target company's stance but also dependent on others' influences. To investigate this influence and capture both the expressive and instrumental nature of boycott/buycott behavior, this study adopts two theoretical frameworks, one being spiral of silence and the other being social loafing. On the one hand, consumers take boycott/buycott actions as ways to express their own sociopolitical stances on the target company's advocated issue. Meanwhile, the presence of others' viewpoints may influence a consumer's boycott/buycott decision. The spiral of silence theory, concerning a person's expression of opinions under the influence of others (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993), is therefore considered as a relevant framework to examine the expressive nature of boycott/buycott behavior. On the other hand, boycott/buycott behavior toward a company tends to form a collective action that aims to impact a company's policy. This phenomenon is especially prominent on social media since boycott/buycott behavior can transform into hashtag activism through which individual consumers aggregately exert pressure on the target company or show support toward it (Yang, 2016). When it comes to an individual's willingness to contribute to a collective boycott/buycott endeavor with the presence or absence of others' boycott/buycott efforts (Karau & Williams, 1993; Klein et al., 2004), the social loafing theory is a relevant framework, as it particularly focuses on the instrumental nature of boycott/buycott behavior.

Spiral of Silence Theory

To address the expressive nature of boycott/buycott behavior, prior opinion dynamics research that investigated the change, formation, and dissemination of opinions was reviewed. According to the literature, social norm, conformity, obedience, and herd behavior can be used to explain opinion conformity behavior; the bandwagon model, threshold model, and critical mass model may be applied to examine the aggregate dynamics of opinions (Zhang & Fung, 2020). Among various theories that capture opinion dynamics, the spiral of silence theory, which concerns the influence of major opinion of the public on controversial issues (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993), is relevant to our study context. Based on this theory, whether people express their opinions about controversial and morally laden issues in public depends on their observations, assessments, and perception of their opinion environment (Fox & Holt, 2018; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993; Saffer, Yang, & Qu, 2019). Specifically, when individuals find their opinions are in line with the majority, they tend to speak out their own voices; however, if they find their viewpoints are not shared by the majority, they tend to remain silent (Chen, 2018; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). These arguments have received empirical evidence across various sociopolitical issues, including police discrimination, abortion, environmental activism, gay marriage, interracial marriage, and immigration (Fox & Holt, 2018; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Hayes, 2007; Ho & McLeod, 2008; Lee, Detenber, Willnat, Aday, & Graf, 2004; Yun & Park, 2011). Meta-analysis results also indicate a positive relationship between perceived opinion support and one's willingness to speak out; namely, the more support a person receives for his or her opinion (i.e., an opinion in line with the majority), the more likely this person will speak out (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997; Glynn & Huge, 2014; Matthes, Knoll, & von Sikorski, 2018). The empirically supported association between perception of the majority opinion and willingness to express one's own opinion is considered as the basis of the spiral of silence theory (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Miyata, Yamamoto, & Ogawa, 2015).

The phenomenon of spiraling to silence becomes more prominent in the computer-mediated communication (CMC) context (Chen, 2018; Fox & Holt, 2018; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015; Yun & Park, 2011). Compared with face-to-face interactions, CMC allows communicators to use anonymous or fictitious identities, obtain more control over the communicated content, and connect with various networks of individuals (Fox & Holt, 2018). Consequently, for those individuals who use social media to express their taken or planned boycott or buycott actions, the behavior of creating posts or leaving comments, likely with #boycott or #buycott hashtags, becomes a method of expressing their sociopolitical stances, not only within their own networks but also in the whole social media community. Based on the spiral of silence theory, individuals, driven by the inherent fear of isolation and perceived social costs that it may entail (e.g., criticism, scrutiny, social sanction, and ostracization from one's network), will constantly observe, survey, and assess their opinion environment on a social media platform and decide whether they should express their opinions through political consumption behavior. Specifically, when people feel they are in the majority opinion group on social media, they are more willing to express their opinions by boycotting or buycotting the target company; when an incongruent opinion climate is observed, they tend to remain silent (Fox & Holt, 2018; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Instagram, a popular social media platform, is used in our experimental design. A two-way interaction and a mediation process are proposed accordingly:

H1a: *People who support gun control will be more likely to buycott Levi's when most of Instagram commenters support gun control, while people who oppose gun control will be more likely to boycott Levi's when most of Instagram commenters oppose gun control.*

H1b: *The interaction effect between personal stance on gun control and Instagram commenters' stances on boycott/buycott intention described in H1a will be mediated by the feeling of being in the majority opinion group.*

Social Loafing Theory

The instrumental nature of boycott/buycott behavior can be explained by the social loafing theory. One key argument of this theory is that people working in a team will be motivated to make individual contributions if they find they are alone (Karau & Williams, 1993; Klein et al., 2004). Specifically, when the number of others making individual contributions decreases, one feels more responsible to take actions toward the direction the group desires (Fischer et al., 2011; Garcia, Weaver, Moskowitz, & Darley, 2002). In contrast, if there is a good number of people making contributions, a person tends to reduce his or her own contribution to free ride others' efforts (Fischer et al., 2011; Harkins, Latane, & Williams, 1980).

The relationship between group size, diffusion of responsibility, and social loafing has been well demonstrated by empirical evidence in various settings. For instance, at the workplace and in the context of e-mail requesting for help, it has been found that more responses can be obtained when the e-mails are addressed to a single recipient (vs. multiple recipients) and that these received responses are more helpful and lengthier (Barron & Yechiam, 2002; Lewis, Thompson, Wuensch, Grossnickle, & Cope, 2004). In a philanthropy setting, a person's intention to make donations will be reduced with more bystanders (one vs. more than one; Fischer et al., 2011; Garcia et al., 2002). Prior research has also shown that individuals reduce their efforts when they find they are not alone in physical activities such as rope pulling, shouting, and clapping (Ingham, Levinger, Graves, & Peckham, 1974; Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979); simple mental tasks such as solving word puzzles, brainstorming, and ranking lists (Karau & Williams, 1993; Laughlin, Hatch, Silver, & Boh, 2006; Littlepage, 1991); and complex tasks such as crisis mapping (i.e., in a crisis mapping task, individuals collaborate to monitor, classify, and map real-time information shared by affected populations during a humanitarian crisis, typically a natural disaster such as an earthquake or a hurricane; Mao, Mason, Suri, & Watts, 2016). The phenomenon of social loafing is found to be aggregated in the CMC setting (Shiue, Chiu, & Chang, 2010). Studies about social loafing in online settings have examined the phenomenon of lurkers in online community participation (Lin & Huang, 2009), and how the feature of anonymity of online setting can potentially reduce social loafing through its positive impact on social ties (Shiue et al., 2010).

In the context of this research, boycott/buycott behavior can contribute to a collective goal, aiming to change the current situation in society. Connected social media users can initiate a boycott or buycott campaign as one collective action with the help of hashtags that directly indicate boycotting or buycotting behavior (Becker & Copeland, 2016; Copeland, Hasell, & Bimber, 2016). Indeed, hashtags (e.g., #BoycottUber, #SupportHomeDepot) are playing an increasingly important role in political consumerism and online protests (Johnson, Hall-Phillips, Chung, & Cho, 2019). When individual citizens jointly express

their planned or taken boycott or buycott actions toward a company, they tend to use hashtags to facilitate social interactions, arrange conversations on social media, and invite others to join the movement (Johnson et al., 2019). Prior research used the term hashtag activism to reflect this phenomenon (Yang, 2016). Given that political consumption in the form of hashtag activism on social media is built on individuals' contributions to a collective goal, the social loafing theory is applicable to investigate political consumption behavior. In particular, when people are in the minority group (vs. the majority group), they will feel that there are not enough people making impacts on the sociopolitical issue of interest toward the direction they desire on social media. As a result, they are more willing to take responsibility to defend their opinions via boycott/buycott behavior. This process can be explained by a person's estimation of others' contributions (i.e., whether others are making enough efforts toward the collective goal). Thereby, the second set of hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: *People who support gun control will be more likely to buycott Levi's when the minority of Instagram commenters support gun control, while people who oppose gun control will be more likely to boycott Levi's when the minority of Instagram commenters oppose gun control.*

H2b: *The interaction effect between personal stance on gun control and Instagram commenters' stances on boycott/buycott intention described in H2a will be mediated by the feeling of others not contributing enough.*

A Parallel Mechanism Model

Although the two sets of proposed hypotheses are based on two different theoretical frameworks, they are complementary to (not competing against) each other. The two theories (i.e., the spiral of silence and social loafing) address the expressive and instrumental nature of boycott/buycott behavior, respectively. Applying the logic based on the spiral of silence, when people perceive the majority opinion is on their side, they psychologically feel being in the majority group, thus are more likely to speak up and defend their stances. Using the theoretical reasoning of social loafing, when people perceive that the majority opinion is not on their side, they psychologically feel others in their opinion group are not contributing enough, thus they are more responsible to speak up and defend their stances. No matter which psychological path occurs, the consequence of people's actions seems to be the same: They are likely to defend their stances (instead of changing them) by taking boycott/buycott actions. In conclusion, this study adopts the spiral of silence and social loafing theories to investigate consumers' psychological mechanism when they read a corporate advocacy post on social media, along with other social media commenters' messages. A visual display of this proposed parallel mechanism model can be found in Figure 1.
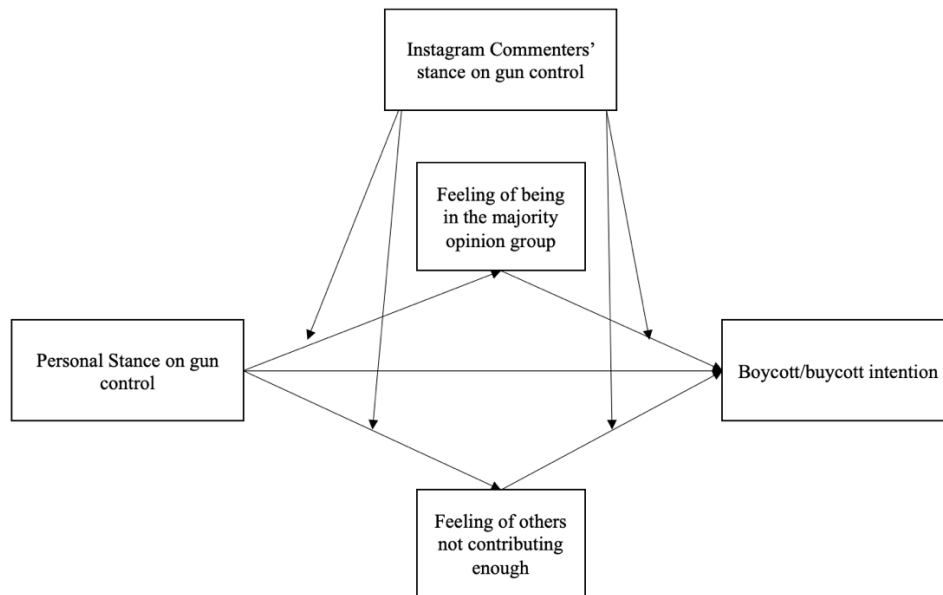
Figure 1. Proposed parallel mechanism model.

Method

To test the hypotheses, a 2 (one's personal stance on gun control: supporting gun control vs. opposing gun control) × 3 (Instagram commenters' stances on gun control: majority supporting gun control vs. majority opposing gun control vs. balanced opinions) between-subjects quasi-experiment was conducted. This study is a quasi-experiment because participants' personal stances on gun control were measured instead of being manipulated and randomly assigned. The study questionnaire was created by using Qualtrics, and a link was distributed through the Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) website. MTurk has been regarded as a reliable venue to collect data for social science research (Mason & Suri, 2012). An approval rate of 95% and above was requested from MTurk participants with the location being the United States.

Experimental Participants

Attention-check questions were included in the study questionnaire. Moreover, participants with the same MTurk ID or IP address were not allowed to take the study more than once. A final sample of 268 complete responses was retained. Among these participants, 140 claimed that they support gun control and 128 indicated that they are against gun control. In the final sample, 157 participants (58.6%) identified themselves as male; 106 participants (39.6%) identified as female; two participants chose "prefer not to say"; and three participants identified as nonbinary. Participants' average age was 37.33 (SD = 11.78). Most participants were non-Hispanic Caucasian (n = 196, 73.1%), and most had a bachelor's degree (n = 126, 47.0%).

Experimental Stimuli

In this experiment, one fictitious Instagram post by Levi's was created according to Levi's advocacy on the gun issue in the real world. This post read, "We NEVER stand by silently. Parenting with @everytown for Gun Safety, we are supporting #guncontrol! #Liveinlevis." A picture of a gun and Levi's jeans was presented in the post. All study participants were directed to read this post.

To manipulate Instagram commenters' stances on gun control, three different versions of comments were created. Participants were told that these comments were left under Levi's Instagram post that they just read. To avoid confounding effects of user identity-related variables, Instagram commenters' usernames were blurred, with their profile pictures being either scenery or sign. Each version consisted of nine user comments. In the first version, most comments (i.e., eight comments) showed support for Levi's on gun control. Example comments were "As a supporter of gun control, Levis not only got my business but my family's and friend's business. #supportguncontrol"; "Keep supporting gun control! #supportlevis"; and "For community safety, buy from Levis!" There was only one comment that did not show support toward Levi's: "I'm buying Wranglers all day!" In the second version, most comments (i.e., eight comments) were against Levi's or gun control. Examples included "As a supporter of arm rights, levis lost not only my business but my family's and friend's business. Just plain dumb. #BoycottLevis"; "Stop supporting gun control! #boycottlevis"; and "For 2nd Amendment, stop buying levis!" In this version, there was only one comment that supported Levi's: "I'm buying Levi's all day!" In the third version, stances were balanced, with four comments supporting gun control and Levi's, four comments opposing gun control and Levi's, and one comment saying that "I don't have a stance on gun issue." Hashtags indicating commenters' taken or planned boycott/buycott actions were intentionally included as they suggested a collective activism cause that participants might want to join.

Experimental Procedure

After showing consent to take part in the study, participants were directed to the study questionnaire. First, they were asked to indicate their stances on the issue of gun control, choosing from support gun control, support gun rights, and no opinion. Participants who chose "no opinion" were filtered out of the study. There are two reasons why no-opinion participants were not included in this study. Foremost, prior research has indicated that public opinions on the gun issue are polarized, and very few people stay neutral on this issue (Petit, Li, & Ali, 2021). In a 2017 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, about half of the respondents (51%) said it was more important to control gun ownership, while the other half (47%) attach more importance to the right to gun ownership (Gramlich, 2018). Moreover, one premise of the spiral of silence theory is that the publicly discussed issue should be controversial and morally laden in nature (Fox & Holt, 2018; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993), meaning that when testing this theory, individuals holding opposite viewpoints on the same issue are the focus.

After participants reported their personal stances on gun control, they were exposed to Levi's Instagram post. An instructional manipulation check question was included in the questionnaire, asking, "What do you think is the stance of Levi's on the gun issue?" Only those who chose "supporting gun control" had their responses retained in the final sample. After reading the post, participants were randomly assigned

to one of the three versions of Instagram comments. Afterward, they were asked about their boycott/buycott intentions toward Levi's. They also responded to the questions that measured the feeling of being in the majority opinion group and the feeling of others not contributing enough. Demographic information was collected at the end.

Study Measures

Based on the logic of the spiral of silence theory, participants were asked about their feeling of being in the majority opinion group by indicating the extent to which (from 1 to 7) they thought most social media users shared their opinions about the gun issue (Dalisay, 2012). Based on the reasoning of social loafing theory, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which (from 1 to 7) they thought most social media users were contributing collectively to the gun issue in the direction they desired. This was reverse coded as the feeling of others not contributing enough. Boycott/buycott intention was a one-item measure with 1 being "boycott a great deal," 4 being "do nothing," and 7 being "buycott a great deal" (Newman & Bartels, 2011; Shah et al., 2007). Before answering this behavioral intention question, participants were provided with definitions of boycotting (i.e., Boycotting is defined as a consumer's purposive avoidance of the product/service from a company because the consumer does not agree with the company's social, ethical, or political values) and buycotting (i.e., buycotting is defined as a consumer's purposive purchase of the product/service from a company because the consumer wants to show his or her support toward the company's social, ethical, or political stance).

Results

The first set of hypotheses proposed a two-way interaction effect between one's stance on gun control and Instagram commenters' stances on boycott/buycott intention, which would be mediated by the feeling of being in the majority opinion group. The second set of hypotheses proposed the same two-way interaction effect on the dependent variable, but the process would be mediated by the feeling of others not contributing enough. To test these two sets of hypotheses, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with personal stance on gun control and Instagram commenters' stances on gun control as the independent variables and boycott/buycott intention as the dependent variable. Results showed that support for gun control significantly and positively impacted intention to buycott Levi's, $F(1,262) = 97.3$, $p < .001$ and the interaction effect was also significant, $F(2, 262) = 5.43$, $p = .005$. Furthermore, to test the mediation effect, the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was employed. Specifically, PROCESS model 58 was adopted with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Statistical significance ($p < .05$) was achieved when the lower bound (LL) and the upper bound (UL) CI did not include zero. A person's stance on gun control was the predictor (X), with 1 representing supporting gun control and 0 representing opposing gun control. Boycott/buycott intention was the dependent variable (Y). The feeling of being in the majority opinion group (M1) was the mediator in the first model based on the spiral of silence theory. The feeling of others not contributing enough (M2) was the mediator in the second model based on the social loafing theory. Instagram commenters' stances on gun control served as the moderator in both models. This variable was converted into two dummy variables by PROCESS. The first dummy variable (W1) was based on the spiral of silence theory, with 1 being most commenters supporting gun control and 0 being all

else. The second dummy variable (W2) was based on the social loafing theory, with 1 being the minority commenters supporting gun control and 0 being all else.

In the first model testing the spiral of silence theory, there was a significant interaction between personal stance and Instagram commenters' stances on the feeling of being in the majority opinion group, $F(2, 262) = 68.41$, $p < .001$. Specifically, when most Instagram comments were against gun control, the impact of personal stance on the feeling of being in the majority opinion group was significant and negative, $B = -2.43$, $SE = .33$, $t = -7.40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-3.08, -1.78]$, indicating that participants who opposed gun control would consider themselves being the majority. In contrast, when most Instagram commenters showed support for gun control, the impact of personal stance on the feeling of being in the majority opinion group was significant and positive, $B = 3.05$, $SE = .34$, $t = 8.92$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[2.37, 3.72]$, suggesting that participants who supported gun control would feel they were in the majority opinion group. This interaction effect was visually displayed in Figure 2.
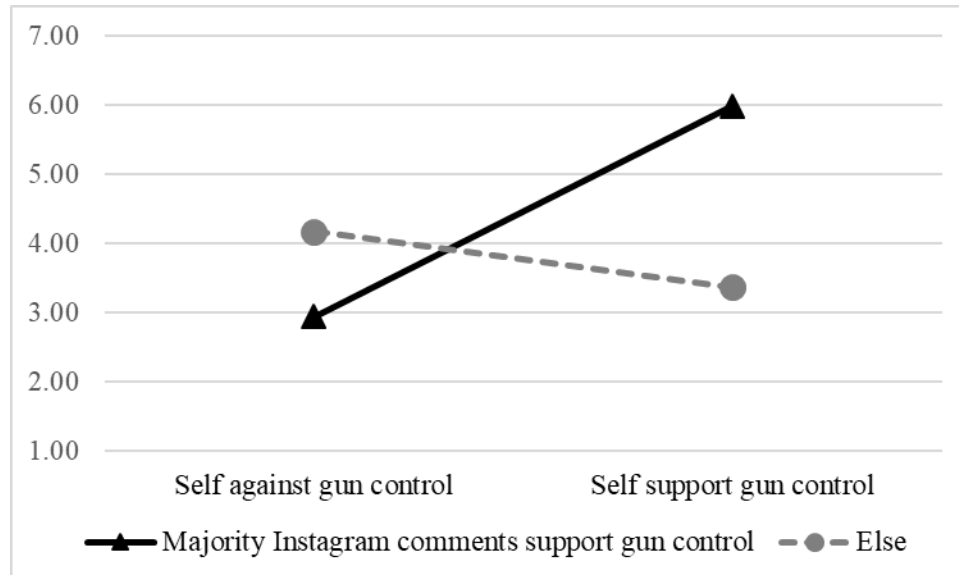

Figure 2. Interaction effect of one's personal stance and Instagram commenters' stances on the feeling of being in the majority opinion group.

There was also a significant interaction effect between the feeling of being in the majority opinion group and Instagram commenters' stances on the dependent variable of boycott/buycott intention, $F(2, 261) = 9.29$, $p < .001$. Specifically, when most Instagram comments showed support for gun control, the impact of the feeling of being in the majority opinion group on boycott/buycott intention was positive, $B = .28$, $SE = .08$, $t = 3.45$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[.12, .43]$, suggesting that the more one felt being in the majority group (when most Instagram comments were supportive of gun control), the more likely he or she would buycott Levi's. On the other hand, when most Instagram comments were against gun control, the effect of the feeling of being in the majority opinion group on boycott/buycott intention was negative, $B = -.20$, $SE = .08$, $t = -2.66$, $p < .001$, 95% CI $[-.35, -.05]$, showing that the more one felt in the majority group

(when most Instagram comments opposed gun control), the more likely he or she would boycott Levi's. Based on these results (see more detailed information in Tables 1 and 2), H1a was supported.

Table 1. Conditional Effects of Personal Stance (X) on Feeling of Being in the Majority Opinion Group (M1) for Different Levels of Instagram Commenters' Stances on Gun Control (W).

Predictor	Moderator	Mediator (M1)	B	SE	Bootstrap	
					LLCI	*ULCI*
Personal stance	Instagram commenters' stances are balanced	Feeling of being in the majority opinion group	.92	.33	.26	1.57
Personal stance	Majority of Instagram commenters support gun control	Feeling of being in the majority opinion group	3.05	.34	2.37	3.72
Personal stance	Majority of Instagram commenters oppose gun control	Feeling of being in the majority opinion group	−2.43	.33	−3.08	−1.78

Table 2. Conditional Effects of Feeling of Being in the Majority Opinion Group (M1) on Boycott/Buycott Intention (Y) for Different Levels of Instagram Commenters' Stances on Gun Control (W).

Mediator	Moderator	Dependent Variable	B	SE	Bootstrap	
					LLCI	*ULCI*
M1	Instagram commenters' stances are balanced	Boycott/buycott intention	.27	.11	.04	.49
M1	Majority of Instagram commenters support gun control	Boycott/buycott intention	.28	.08	.12	.43
M1	Majority of Instagram commenters oppose gun control	Boycott/buycott intention	−.20	.08	−.35	−.05

The mediation effect model was statistically significant on boycott/buycott behavior intention, R^2 = .32, $F(6, 261) = 20.87$, $p < .001$, explaining 32% variance. Personal stance on gun control exerted a significant and positive impact on boycott/buycott intention, B = 1.26, SE = .21, t = 5.93, $p < .001$, 95%CI [.84, 1.68]. The mediator (M1), feeling of being in the majority opinion group, also had a significant and positive impact, B = .27, SE = .11, t = 2.35, p = .02, 95% CI [.04, .49]. Therefore, H1b was supported.

When the mediator was the feeling of others not contributing enough, the results showed a significant interaction effect between personal stance and Instagram commenters' stances on the mediator, $F(2, 262) = 73.48$, $p < .001$. Specifically, when most Instagram commenters supported gun control, the impact of personal stance on the feeling of others not contributing enough was significant and negative, B = −3.35, SE = .35, t = −9.70, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−4.03, −2.67], meaning that participants who opposed gun control would be more likely to feel that others were not contributing enough. Conversely, when most Instagram comments were against gun control, the impact of personal stance on the feeling of others not contributing enough was significant and positive, B = 2.45, SE = .33, t = 7.37, $p < .001$, 95% CI [1.80,

3.11], indicating that participants who supported gun control were more likely to feel that others were not contributing enough. This interaction effect was shown in Figure 3.
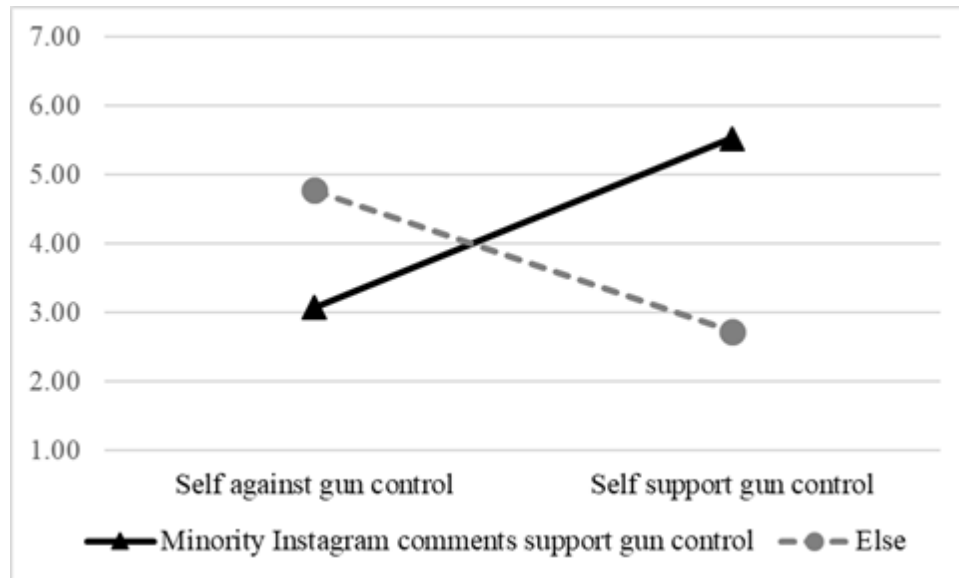

Figure 3. Interaction effect of one's personal stance and Instagram commenters' stances on the feeling of others not contributing enough.

There was also a significant interaction between the feeling of others not contributing enough and Instagram commenters' stances on boycott/buycott intention, $F_{(2, 261)} = 6.73$, $p < .001$. To be specific, when most Instagram commenters showed support for gun control, the impact of the feeling of others not contributing enough on boycott/buycott intention was significant and negative, $B = -.27$, $SE = .08$, $t = -3.43$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−.43, −.12], meaning that the more one felt others were not contributing enough (when most Instagram comments supported gun control), the more likely he or she would boycott Levi's. When most Instagram comments were against gun control, the impact of the feeling of others not contributing enough on boycott/buycott intention was significant and positive, $B = .16$, $SE = .08$, $t = 2.08$, $p = .04$, 95% CI [.01, .31], suggesting that the more one felt others were not making contributions (when most Instagram comments opposed gun control), the more likely he or she would buycott Levi's. Detailed results can be found in Tables 3 and 4. Based on these results, H2a was supported.

***Table 3. Conditional Effects of Personal Stance (X) on Feeling of Others Not Contributing
Enough (M2) for Different Levels of Instagram Commenters' Stances on Gun Control (W).***

Predictor	Moderator	Mediator (M2)	B	SE	Bootstrap	
					LLCI	*ULCI*
Personal stance	Instagram commenters' stances are balanced	Feeling of others not contributing enough	−.63	.34	−1.30	.03
Personal stance	Majority of Instagram commenters support gun control	Feeling of others not contributing enough	−3.35	.35	−4.03	−2.67
Personal stance	Majority of Instagram commenters oppose gun control	Feeling of others not contributing enough	2.45	.33	1.80	3.11

***Table 4. Conditional Effects of Feeling of Others Not Contributing Enough (M2) on
Boycott/Buycott Intention (Y) for Different Instagram Commenters' Stances on Gun Control
(W).***

Mediator	Moderator	Dependent Variable	B	SE	Bootstrap	
					LLCI	*ULCI*
M2	Instagram commenters' stances are balanced	Boycott/buycott intention	−.15	.10	−.36	.05
M2	Majority of Instagram commenters support gun control	Boycott/buycott intention	−.27	.08	−.43	−.12
M2	Majority of Instagram commenters oppose gun control	Boycott/buycott intention	.16	.08	.01	.31

However, the mediation model with the feeling of others not contributing enough was not significant. Personal stance on gun control exerted a significant and positive impact on boycott/buycott intention, B = 1.32, SE = .22, t = 6.15, *p* < .001, 95% CI [.90, 1.74], but the mediator (M2) was not a significant predictor, B = −.16, SE = .10, t = −1.46, *p* = .15, 95% CI [−.36, .05]. Therefore, H2b was not supported.

Discussion

This study found an interaction effect between personal stance on gun control (support vs. oppose) and Instagram commenters' stances on gun control (majority support vs. majority oppose vs. balanced opinions) on boycott/buycott intention. Because of the expressive and instrumental nature of boycott/buycott behavior, the frameworks of the spiral of silence and social loafing were used to investigate the psychological mechanism of such an interaction effect. Although both theories predicted the same pattern of results, mediation analyses showed more support for the spiral of silence theory. Through these findings, this study advances the explanatory power of the spiral of silence and confirms the expressive nature of boycott/buycott behavior in the context of CMC and corporate advocacy advertising.

A Parallel Mechanism Model

Empirical studies have found that people's personal stances (supporting gun control vs. opposing gun control) can determine their intentions to boycott/buycott a company that supports gun control (Baek, 2010; Swimberghe et al., 2011). However, people's purchase decisions are also under the influence of others in the surrounding environment. The influence from others might be even more prominent in online settings (Fox & Holt, 2018; Shiue et al., 2010). In particular, the spiral of silence theory argues that people are more likely to express their opinions when they find the majority group is with them (Chen, 2018; Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993), while the social loafing theory indicates that people are more likely to join a collective action to defend their stances when they find they are the minority opinion group (Karau & Williams, 1993; Klein et al., 2004).

Based on these two theories, a parallel mechanism model was tested. Significant interactions between participants' personal stances and Instagram commenters' stances were found on two proposed mediators (i.e., the feeling of being in the majority opinion group and the feeling of others not contributing enough). Moreover, these two mediators influenced participants' boycott/buycott intentions, respectively. These findings showed that people are likely to experience two parallel processes when they decide whether and how they express their sociopolitical stances through boycott/buycott behavior. The first process, based on the spiral of silence theory, is that when individuals feel they belong to the majority opinion group, they are more likely to engage in boycott/buycott to demonstrate their own sociopolitical stances. There were two possible situations of being in the majority group in the context of the current experiment, one being that a participant and most Instagram commenters both supported gun control and the other being that a participant and most Instagram commenters both opposed gun control. In the former situation, people would buycott Levi's; in the latter situation, they would boycott Levi's.

The second process, according to the social loafing theory, is that when individuals feel others are not making enough contributions toward the direction they desire, they are more likely to take boycott/buycott actions to defend their own sociopolitical stances. In other words, people feel more obligated to share responsibility when there are not many people in their opinion group. There were also two possible situations of this in the context of the current research, one being that a participant supported gun control, but most Instagram commenters opposed it, and the other being that a participant opposed gun control, but most Instagram commenters supported it. In the former situation, participants tended to buycott Levi's; in the latter situation, they were more likely to boycott Levi's.

This parallel model makes an initial effort to examine the mechanism in which individuals defend their stances, through political consumption behavior on social media, when faced with corporate advocacy posts and other users' comments. The experimental results suggest that individuals' decisions of boycott/buycott are not only affected by the consistency between their own sociopolitical stances and the target company's stance, but also by how others express similar or dissimilar stances. It is worth noting that the mediating analyses showed support for the feeling of being in the majority opinion group, but not for the feeling of others not contributing enough. In other words, the data from this experiment provide more support to the spiral of silence theory instead of the social loafing theory in terms of explaining why people boycott or buycott a company for its sociopolitical stance. A possible explanation is that

boycott/buycott behavior on social media may not be a team effort in the strictest sense. The collective goal of boycott/buycott a company for a certain course may not seem clear to social media users because they are not necessarily in the same social network or group. Thus, it is possible that the impact of one's estimate of others' contributions to the desired goal is overridden by his or her personal stance.

Boycott and Buycott: Expressive or Instrumental?

The spiral of silence theory captures the expressive nature of boycott/buycott behavior, while the social loafing theory addresses its instrumental nature. As the mediation analysis results showed more support for the spiral of silence theory, the expressive nature seems to be more salient when boycott/buycott behavior occurs online. Rather than spending (or not spending) actual money on a company's product, posting comments on social media can also be considered as a new form of boycott/buycott behavior and is purposely expressive. These boycott/buycott comments are usually embedded with hashtags and contain messages that indicate one is currently boycotting or buycotting the target company or planning to do so in the near future. Therefore, through boycott/buycott behavior, consumers can show their personal viewpoints on social and political issues (Johnson et al., 2019; Kam & Deichert, 2017), especially on social media where individual users are connected to each other.

The instrumental function of boycott/buycott behavior is to influence a company's policy or even the general opinion environment. Such aspect of political consumption behavior was not found to be salient in the current study context of corporate advocacy on social media. A possible reason is that the collective goal of influencing company policy or sociopolitical opinion environment may not seem as clear and straightforward as it is in other social loafing related contexts such as crisis mapping tasks, solving word puzzles, brainstorming, and ranking lists (Karau & Williams, 1993; Laughlin et al., 2006; Littlepage, 1991; Mao et al., 2016). Unlike online knowledge-contribution communities where collective goals and rules are set and people are tied together closely (Lin & Huang, 2009), consumer activism or political consumption through boycott/buycott behavior on social media is loosely organized and connected with a few hashtags. In such circumstances, individuals may not be strongly motivated to engage in boycott/buycott behavior even when they feel others are not contributing enough to this collective goal. Finally, it should be noted that the spiral of silence theory and the social loafing theory were used as two major theoretical frameworks in this experiment because of their particular relevance to the study context, but other alternative frameworks may also be able to address the expressive and instrumental nature of boycott/buycott behavior.

Practical Implications

In today's increasingly polarized society, not only companies but also individual consumers are expressing or defending their sociopolitical stances on social media. The findings of this study provide practical implications. First, when a brand decides to take a stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue, it may need to survey its consumers on their stances before making communication strategy plans. This is because the personal stance is a significant predictor of an individual's boycott/buycott intention. Moreover, it should be noted that a person's boycott/buycott decision may be contingent on others' opinions. Therefore, brands need to monitor the progress of consumer activism on social media. It is interesting that people may

subconsciously seek a state of equilibrium when it comes to a controversial subject such as gun control. If a brand makes a strong and clear stance on the issue publicly, it is likely that it will "gain" half of the consumers but "lose" the other half. That is to say, the company will end up seeing some consumers buycotting its product or service while other consumers take boycott actions, no matter what stance the company takes.

Limitations and Future Studies

Several limitations of this study need to be addressed. Firstly, only one sociopolitical issue (i.e., gun control), one company (i.e., Levi's), and one stimulus post were examined in this experiment. To cross-validate the findings of this study and make the conclusions more generalizable, various controversial sociopolitical issues (e.g., abortion, immigration), different brands, and multiple experimental stimuli should be included in future studies. In addition, this study adopted Instagram as the social media platform where people might boycott or buycott a brand. It is necessary to test different social media platforms such as Twitter that might have a different opinion environment when it comes to discussions of sociopolitical issues and boycott/bucyott behavior.

Moreover, this study measured the outcome variable (i.e., boycott/buycott intention), and the mediators (i.e., the feeling of being in the majority opinion group, the feeling of others not contributing enough) with single self-report items. Although consumers can express their values and attitudes via political consumption (Johnson et al., 2019), some may consider their purchasing behaviors personal and private, thus unsuitable for self-reports. Future studies may consider adopting multiple-item measures or assessing people's actual boycott/buycott behaviors in a nonobtrusive way. Also, we manipulated the majority and minority opinion environments by varying the number of comments supporting or opposing gun control (i.e., eight comments vs. one comment). Although this manipulation carried good face validity, it would be clearer if a manipulation check question was asked to ensure the participants were aware of their opinion environment.

In terms of the statistical analysis, our study did not include control variables that might potentially affect individuals' boycott/buycott decisions such as prior buycott or boycott experience. We recommend future research to examine the effect of such variables. Finally, our study did not investigate individuals who hold neutral opinions on the gun issue. Future research may consider examining this group of people about their responses to companies' advocacy initiatives and others' polarized opinions.

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