Conceptualizing and Measuring "Corporate Social Advocacy" Communication: Examining the Impact on Corporate Financial Performance

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ABSTRACT

This research takes a two-fold approach to understanding organizational stances on social-political issues (termed *corporate social advocacy or CSA*). First, CSA is conceptualized within public relations, noting how it may span the boundaries between two key areas of scholarship and practice: issues management and corporate social responsibility. Second, using the theory of planned behavior as the underpinning for consumer purchase intention, this research examines how organizational stances on social-political issues (gay marriage, health care reform, and emergency contraception) impact corporate financial performance. This research uses an experimental methodology and nationally representative sample of U.S. consumers to demonstrate that CSA has tangible outcomes for organizations. In short, the study finds that greater agreement with a corporate stance results in greater intentions to purchase; whereas lesser agreement with a corporate stance results in lesser intention to purchase. The conceptualization and empirical results of this research provide support for further examination of CSA alongside existing public relations scholarship, as well as an area for independent exploration.

Keywords: advocacy, corporate social responsibility, public relations, purchase intention, strategic issues management, theory of planned behavior

INTRODUCTION

Public stances regarding controversial social-political issues by executive leaders of major organizations (termed *corporate social advocacy* by the authors of this research) seem to be increasingly commonplace. Recently, for example, megabrands Amazon,

Ford, Microsoft, and Starbucks have taken public stances in support of gay marriage rights. Brands such as Chick-fil-A and Barilla, on the other hand, have publicly taken the opposite stance regarding gay marriage (Arnold, 2012). Likewise, the reputations of Papa John's, Applebee's, and Denny's have been impacted by executive remarks in opposition to the Affordable Care Act (i.e., "Obamacare") (Popken, 2012). Similarly, the National Rifle Association has recently made public a list of more than 100 organizations and celebrities that support gun control, including Levi Strauss & Co., Hallmark Cards, and Ben & Jerry's among several others (Allen, 2013).

Public declarations surrounding social-political issues may be proactive organizational initiatives with planned communication or unintentionally spoken by organizational leadership, prompting reactive communication. Regardless, the outcome from the standpoint of consumer perceptions is the same: The organization has become aligned with these positions (Park & Berger, 2004). Headlines such as the following found in well-known media to include Forbes, U.S. News & World Report, and the Huffington Post, respectively, exhibit organizational alignment with issues and potential impact: "Barilla earns gay boycott, learns taking sides is bad for business" (Heller, 2013), "Chick-fil-A's Controversial Gay Marriage Beef" (Cline, 2012), and "Starbucks enters same-sex marriage boycott wars" (Fiorella, 2013).

The current research, then, is two-fold in that it first conceptualizes *corporate social advocacy (CSA)* within existing public relations literature, noting how it may span the boundary between two areas: strategic issues management and corporate social responsibility. Second, this research expands on previous research by the study's authors (Dodd, 2010; Dodd & Supa, 2011, 2013, 2014) regarding SIM, CSR, and consumer purchase intention. Using Ajzen's (1985, 1991) theory of planned behavior as the theoretical underpinning for consumer purchase intention, this research examined how organizational stances on social-political issues has an impact on organizational goals, specifically the financial bottom line. This may be considered a particularly salient approach as organizations seek to achieve multiple and often competing financial and social-political goals that impact stakeholders in a variety of ways.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research surrounding strategic issues management and corporate social responsibility pervade the public relations literature, as well as that of other related academic fields from which this literature draws. The current research examines these two areas and specifies how *corporate social advocacy* may serve to span the boundaries between these two oft-studied areas and corporate financial performance.

Strategic Issues Management

Strategic issues management (SIM) is broadly defined as "the amalgamation of organizational functions and responsive culture that blends strategic business planning, issue monitoring, best-practice standards of corporate responsibility, and dialogic communication needed to foster a supportive climate between each organization and

those people who can affect its success and who are affected by its operations" (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, pp. 8-9). Central to SIM is the concept of organizational legitimacy, defined as a "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995). In short, SIM allows that organizational behavior is legitimized by stakeholder perceptions of how that behavior fits within societal and/or stakeholder group beliefs about the ways in which the organization *should* behave.

Relevant to the current conceptualization, organizations create shared views with stakeholders about what may be an ever-changing standard by which organizational actions may be deemed acceptable or "socially responsible." In other words, stakeholder perceptions regarding organizational engagement in and stances on social-political issues may differ among stakeholder groups and across individuals, ultimately impacting organizational goals. Positions on issues impact the brand equity of organizations or "its authority to speak on some matter and the power resources it can bring to bear on a market purchase, share value, or a governmental policy" (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 358). Consumer-based perspectives of brand equity allow that public relations professionals play a key role in the management of brand awareness and positive attitudes aimed at building strong brand equity, despite a deficiency of research demonstrating public relations outcomes to this extent (Heath & Palenchar, 2009; Keller, 1993).

Further, Grunig and Repper (1992) differentiate stakeholders from publics in that publics "arise on their own and choose the organization for attention" (p. 128). Organizational engagement in CSA may not only impact those who share a functional linkage with the organization (consumer "stakeholders"), but also may result in the formation of or change in the dynamic of publics. For example, the taking of a public stance on a highly polarizing social-political issue has the potential to simultaneously isolate stakeholders and attract activist groups.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is broadly defined as the organization "incurring responsibilities to society beyond profit maximization" (Pava & Krausz, 1995, p. 1). Or, more specifically, CSR is defined as "the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole" (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 8).

Although it has been reasoned that the core of CSR is concerned with responsibilities beyond profit maximization, the relationship between an organization's involvement in socially responsible activities and its effects on corporate financial performance have been a topic of research for some 35 years (Brower & Mahajan, 2012; Margolis, Elfebein, & Walsh, 2009; Roman, Hayibor, & Agle, 1999; Griffin & Mahon, 1997; McGuire, Sundgren, & Schneeweis, 1988; Bowman & Haire, 1975). This relationship

has received such enduring attention as "socially responsible behavior is an economic imperative in today's marketplace" (Sen & Morwitz, 1996, p. 27), and companies that "do good" are expected to "do well" (Simpson & Kohers, 2002). Margolis, et al. (2009) performed the most comprehensive meta-analysis to-date of 214 studies linking CSR to financial performance, concluding that the overall effect is positive, but small.

The debate surrounding CSR and financial performance may more rightly be a result of differences in ideology about stakeholders (i.e., stockholders as the only stakeholders) and/or confounding the relationship between CSR as a strategic management function and "simple" philanthropy. Researchers have further posited that the discrepancies in the financial outcomes of CSR activities are a result of theoretical shortcomings (Schuler & Cording, 2006) and model misspecification (McWilliams & Siegel, 2001). Specifically, it is argued that other assumptions relevant to the impact of CSR on financial performance include: "(a) reducing the propensity and rationale for overlegislation/overregulation, (b) temporarily protecting reputation during a crisis and reducing various costs such as litigation, and (c) increasing the likelihood that nonprofits and governmental agencies get funding because they are accomplishing a mission that stakeholders support" (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, p. 128).

Regardless, it seems financial performance remains a guiding evaluative criterion for the effectiveness of CSR both in scholarship and practice. Carroll (1991) posed that CSR is understood as a pyramid where economic responsibilities are the necessary foundation required to meet other obligations in ascending order. In an analysis of data from 706 firms across 21 years, Duhé (2009) concluded that corporate insiders identify reputation (a concept that falls squarely within the purview of public relations) as consistent with the following three attributes: management quality, financial soundness, and social responsibility. Duhé went on to demonstrate that these attributes made consistently positive contributions to several measures of firm financial performance. Relatedly, Beauchamp and O'Connor (2012) analyzed CSR statements from *Fortune's* "America's Most Admired Companies" list, concluding that the majority of statements fell within the category defined as "economic responsibility." They state, "CEOs in this study did not communicate CSR as a voluntary, goodwill gesture. Rather, CSR was communicated as a requirement to provide shareholders with a return on investment" (p. 495).

Further, as notable for the current research, Robinson, Irmak and Jayachandran (2012) showed that when consumers had a choice in supporting a specific cause based on their purchase, they were more likely to make that purchase. Cornwell and Coote (2005) found that a positive relationship existed between corporate sponsorship of nonprofit organizations that consumers identified with and consumer purchase intention. And, Kim and Lee (2012) analyzed purchase intentions of consumers related to the CSR initiatives of organizations in socially-stigmatized industries (fast food and alcohol). The authors determined that consumer engagement in the issues addressed by organizational CSR activities resulted in significantly greater purchase intentions for the organization's products. Strategic communication research has similarly demonstrated a positive, predictive relationship between CSR-related behaviors and consumer

purchase intention (Baksh-Mohammed, Callison, & Choi, 2012; Lee & Shin, 2010; Kim & Lee, 2009; Prabu, Kline, & Yang, 2005; Jacobs, 1995).

Corporate Social Advocacy as a Link

Corporate social advocacy (CSA) refers to an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues. Whether these stances are planned, as in the formal output of communication, or not, as in the case of a CEO making an off-the-cuff remark to a journalist: the outcome is the perception by the public that the organization is linked in some way with the issue (Park & Berger, 2004). CSA materializes as an area worthy of specific analysis within the existing issues management and corporate responsibility scholarship in three primary ways: (a) the social-political issues addressed by organizations are divorced from issues of particular relevance to the organization; (b) engagement in the social-political issues is controversial and serves to potentially isolate organizational stakeholders while simultaneously attracting activist groups; and, (c) as a result, there is a particularly necessary emphasis on financial outcomes for the organization. For example, Starbucks engages in environmentally friendly business operations across four areas "of relevance" to the organization (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, pp. 130-131). It makes strategic sense for Starbucks to engage in CSR initiatives surrounding their existing business operations, as in the case of forest conservation. Likewise, engagement in environmental conservation efforts is not controversial, nor does it have the potential to outrage stakeholder groups or incite boycotts.

CSA, then, refers to instances such as Starbucks' recent public stance in support of gay marriage, or Chick-fil-A, which has publicly taken the opposite stance on the issue. Further, profits in the millions from both organizations are allocated to relevant advocacy groups. Although financial support of advocacy groups is not a necessary construct of CSA, the two are often linked.

In January 2012, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz announced support for the legalization of same-sex marriage in Washington State. Following the announcement, the advocacy group, National Organization for Marriage, implemented a "Dump Starbucks" boycott with a petition signed by some 56,000 people. Schultz later defended the company's support for the issue when complaints were raised by an investor at a shareholder meeting: "Until January a year ago, we existed without making gay marriage a core value of our company. Hence, we did quite well." Schultz dismissed the shareholder's complaint, stating: "If you feel respectfully that you can get a higher return [than] the 38% you got last year, it's a free country. You could sell your shares at Starbucks and buy shares in other companies" (Smith, 2013).

Similarly, in July 2012, Chick-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy made clear in an interview with the media the company's support for the "traditional family," opposition to gay marriage legislation, and support for anti-gay marriage advocacy groups. As a result, former governor and Fox News Host Mike Huckabee called for "Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day" on August 1, 2012. More than 125,000 people signed up to participate in the event, and

representatives from Chick-fil-A reported that the organization had a record sales day (Smith, 2013). On the other side of the issue, supporters of same-sex marriage staged protests and a "Kiss-Day" at Chick-fil-A locations across the country. Politicians in cities including Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. spoke out against the organization; with some saying Chick-fil-A is not welcome in their cities (Pagliery, 2012).

In order to examine the impact of CSA on organizations, this study examines the fledgling concept through the lens of purchase intention grounded in the theory of planned behavior. In this way, organizations that either actively participate in CSA, or those that have the public perception of being associated with a particular stance on a controversial social-political issue, might realize the very tangible result of such communication that falls squarely within the public relations professional's expertise.

Theory of Planned Behavior and Purchase Intention

Public relations research has demonstrated that "the relationship that exists between an organization and key public members influences key public members' perceptions, attitudes, evaluations and intended behaviors" (Bruning & Ralston, 2000). Therefore, the theory of planned behavior works well in identifying and understanding the relationship between CSA and consumer purchase intentions. The theory is "based on the assumption that human beings usually behave in a sensible manner; that they take account of available information and implicitly or explicitly consider the implications of their actions […] the theory postulates that a person's intention to perform (or not to perform) a behavior is the most important immediate determinant of that action." (Ajzen, 2005, p. 117). And, "Generally speaking, people intend to perform a behavior when they evaluate it positively [attitude toward the behavior], when they experience social pressure to perform it [subjective norms], and when they believe that they have the means and opportunities to do so [perceived behavioral control]" (Ajzen, 2005, p. 118). Meta-analytic research across some 25 years has demonstrated support for the theory of planned behavior as a valid predictor for hundreds of behavioral outcomes, including consumer purchase intentions (Ajzen, Brown, & Carvajal, 2004; Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002; Hrubes, Ajzen, & Daigle, 2001; Conner & McMillan, 1999; Courneya, 1995; Giles & Cairns, 1995; East, 1993; Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Ajzen & Madden, 1986).

Further, consumer purchase intention should be considered a particularly valuable outcome resulting from public relations professionals' work as conceptualized in the current research. Not only do existing SIM and CSR literature identify financial outcomes accordingly, but also public relations scholars have conceptualized it as such and called for more attention to identification of the specific ways in which public relations activities contribute to bottom-line outcomes for organizations. While financial outcomes are traditionally considered the territory of advertising and marketing communicators, this line is increasingly blurred, and "turf wars serve only to obstruct the productive discussion of new trends and the application of new strategic approaches" (Kim, 2001, p. 90). Stacks (2011) conceptualizes the link among nonfinancial outcome variables that result from public relations work (e.g., relationship, reputation, trust,

credibility) and serve to impact organizational financial objectives or return on expectations that impact return on investment. Kim's (2001) scholarship identifies the positive relationship between public relations activities aimed at reputation and organizational financial performance. He argues, "Without applying the same criteria applied in other fields, communication activities cannot prove themselves against their contribution to organization goals with the resulting impact for the bottom-line" (p. 95).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current research seeks to determine how CSA impacts organizational financial goals via consumer purchase intentions. In order to do this, the researchers identified organizations that had taken opposing public stances on three controversial social-political issues: gay marriage, health care reform, and emergency contraception. The following research questions were posed:

> **RQ1:** How, if at all, is consumer purchase intention affected by corporate social advocacy?
> **RQ2:** Will the categorization of congruent and incongruent consumer attitudes toward social-political issues with organizational stances result in significant differences in consumer purchase intention?

METHOD

In order to address these questions, this study employed an experimental survey design among a probability U.S. sample of consumers where participants were randomly exposed to one of six potential CEO prompts (i.e., Starbucks, Chick-fil-A, Walmart, Whole Foods, Hobby Lobby, and Nike) indicating an accurate organizational stance on one of three social-political issues (i.e., gay marriage, health care reform, and emergency contraception). The online survey was administered via Qualtrics survey software. The survey link was distributed to a random national sample of U.S. consumers, ages 18 and older, who are panel participants of a private research firm. Participants received an honorarium from the research firm for completing the survey. The data collection period lasted 48 hours (June 17-19, 2013) until the 500 participant quota was reached. An additional 19 responses were received before the survey was closed by the firm, for a total of 519 completed surveys.

Participants were first asked questions regarding general beliefs about corporate social responsibility, purchasing from socially responsible organizations, organizational stances on social political issues, and past behaviors.

Participants were then randomly exposed to one of four potential prompts:
(1) a control group that focused on general attitudes toward CSR; or experimental group regarding attitudes toward one of the following social-political issues:
(2) gay marriage,
(3) health care reform, or
(4) emergency contraception.

Next, for those participants not in the control group, they were further prompted with one of two potential organizational stances on the social-political issue. Participants were again randomly assigned to the organizational stance that was demonstrated by the presentation of a CEO statement on the issue.

Finally, participants were asked to self-identify demographic information to include: age, gender, marital status, children, education, race/ethnicity, income, and political affiliation. Comprehensive demographic information was collected because previous research by the study's authors has indicated the possibility of segmenting and targeting stakeholders with CSR communication based on such variables (Dodd & Supa, 2011). Responses were entered into SPSS for Windows, and analyzed based on the theory of planned behavior model presented by Azjen (1985, 1991). Figure 1 visually demonstrates the placement of participants in experimental (tier 1 and 2) and control conditions.

Experimental Tier 1: Measurement of Attitudes toward Social-Political Issues

The 17-item Attitudes Toward Same Sex Marriage Scale (ATSSM) was developed and validated by previous research (Pearl & Galupo, 2007), but also demonstrated acceptable Cronbach's alpha reliability in a large pilot study conducted by the authors of the current research. Likewise, the alpha reliability for the ATSSM measure in the current study was found to be acceptable (alpha = .978) and would not have been improved with the deletion of any items. However, unlike the ATSSM, previously validated measures do *not* exist for the issue of health care reform. Thus, based on prior attitudinal research surrounding the issue of health care reform ("Kaiser Health Tracking Poll," 2012; Sussman, Blendon, & Campbell, 2009), otherwise known as the Affordable Care Act or "Obamacare," a 9-item attitudes toward health care reform scale was developed by the current study's researchers. The measure demonstrated acceptable reliability (alpha = .842) for the current research and would not have been improved by more than .03 with the deletion of any item.

Likewise, for the issue of emergency contraception, little prior scale development and validation existed. However, the researchers were again able to rely on several research pieces that involved attitudinal measures of abortion and emergency contraception used in alternative research to serve a variety of goals (Campbell, Busby, & Steyer, 2008; Corenblum & Corfield, 1976; Embree, 1998; Harper & Ellerston, 1995; "Harris Interactive Poll," 2000; Sorhaindo, Becker, Fletcher, & Garcia, 2002; Wheeler, Zullig, Reeve, Buga, & Morroni, 2012).

The researchers found that organizational stances on emergency contraception existed, and the primary point of controversy surrounding emergency contraception resided in attitudes toward abortion among those who consider emergency contraception, otherwise known as the "Plan B" pill to be a form of abortion. Campbell, Busby, and Steyer (2008) explain, "The topic of [emergency contraception] involved moral implications for patients concerning their beliefs about the beginning of life. A public

opinion poll of more than 15,000 people showed that almost 50% of the population believe that life begins at conception, or when the sperm and egg join" (p. 25). And, therefore, for these individuals, use of emergency contraception may constitute abortion. Thus, a 12-item attitudes toward abortion scale was developed by the researchers based on existing research and related measures. The measure demonstrated acceptable reliability (alpha = .962) for the current research and would not have been improved by more than .04 with the deletion of any item.

Experimental Tier 2: Organizational Stance

After participants were randomly assigned to one of three potential social-political issues and responded to the associated attitudinal measure, they were then randomly exposed to one of two potential prompts regarding corporations and their advocacy efforts with regard to the associated social-political issue. For gay marriage, participants received a paraphrased CEO statement for either Starbucks or Chick-fil-A (pro- and anti-, respectively). For health care reform, participants received a paraphrased CEO statement for either Walmart or Whole Foods Market (pro- and anti-, respectively). And, for the issue of emergency contraception, participants received a paraphrased CEO statement for either Nike or Hobby Lobby (pro- and anti, respectively). CEO statements, while paraphrased, were well-researched, and the researchers believe accurately represent publicly made CEO statements or available organizational stances on the associated social-political issue. Generally, statements described the organization's viewpoint on the social-political issue and noted support for a relevant third-party organization. Participants placed in the control group condition received a definition and description of corporate social responsibility.

Participants were then prompted to respond with their agreement on a 5-point Likert scale to items—that differed only in regard to the condition (social-political issue and CEO statement that preceded them)—regarding the theoretical underpinning: (a) attitudes toward purchasing from the organization (10 items, alpha = .883); (b) subjective norms surrounding purchasing from the organization (9 items, alpha = .897); and (c) perceived behavioral control of purchasing from the organization (6 items, alpha = .775). According to the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen 1985, 1991), the combination of these items with previous behavior, which was assessed generally for all participants prior to placement in either tier one or two experimental conditions, comprises intention to perform a behavior (i.e., purchase from the organization in this case). The outcome variable, intent to purchase from the organization was measured with four items (alpha = .927) alongside the prior noted theoretical tenants.

General Perceptions of CSR Control Group

For the control condition, participants received a definition and description of corporate social responsibility. Otherwise, theory of planned behavior and purchase intention variables differed only in that they were assessed in regards to a "socially responsible organization" in general. Because the same level of organizational specificity was not used in the control group and the conditions are meant to be compared, it was important

to assess scale reliabilities separate the experimental condition data. Reliabilities were found to be acceptable across control group variables: (1) attitude toward behavior (10 items, alpha = .778); (2) subjective norm (9 items, alpha = .797); and (3) perceived behavioral control (6 items, alpha = .737). The outcome variable, intent to purchase from a "socially responsible organization" was measured with four items (alpha = .851) alongside the prior noted theoretical tenants as in the experimental conditions.

Data Collection and Screening

Ultimately, the survey received 519 completed responses. Because responses were obtained via a private research firm, all responses received were complete (none were missing more than 10% of the responses), and once results approached the contracted sample size (n=500), the survey link was expired by the firm. For the six experimental organizational conditions, there were approximately 60 participants each (120 per social-political issue). And, the control condition included 140 participants because there were no second tier organizational conditions to which participants were additionally placed. For seven conditions, 500 participants allows for generalizability at the 95% confidence level (Stacks, 2011) and places a reasonable amount of participants in each experimental condition for comparison purposes; that is, around 60 per condition (with a minimum estimated Cohen's d calculated sample size of 64 per condition). This approach allows researchers to reliably draw comparisons among the social-political issues in regards to the impact of communicating CSA on consumer purchase intention.

Participant Demographics

Due to the representative distributive panel sampling by the firm, participant demographics are meant to be representative of the "general" U.S. consumer population (aged 18 and older). See Table 1, which demonstrates the demographic items and breakdown relative to the current research. The researchers believe the demographic representation acquired for this research to be both diverse and representative.

Past Behavior

It was reasoned that past behavior may also serve as a relevant variable for understanding the relationship between organizational stances on social-political issues and consumer purchase intention. Specifically, it was reasoned that past behavior could serve as a surrogate measure of attitudes toward the organizations and products used in this research (prior the experimental prompt). Thus, behavior was assessed for the past 12 months, generally in regards to behaviors relevant to the organizations used in the experimental conditions (e.g. drinking coffee, eating fast food, shopped at large discount stores, etc.) and specifically, in regards to purchasing from those organizations. These items preceded placement in experimental conditions at tier one or two in order that participants' responses were not biased by other survey questions. Overall, participants showed moderate levels of frequency with which they indicated performing the behaviors on a 5-point Likert scale.

Manipulation Checks

For the experimental conditions, three additional items were included to be used as manipulation checks for the general believability of the constructed CEO statements, past reputation of the organizations, and previous knowledge of the organizational stance on the issue. For the experimental conditions, these items included the following: "This statement is an accurate depiction of [the organization's] values" ($\bar{x}$=3.58, SD=0.98); "I was previously aware of [the organization's] stance on this issue" ($\bar{x}$=2.75, SD=1.31); and, "This stance matches [the organization's] reputation" ($\bar{x}$=3.41, SD=0.98). Overall, participants generally indicated agreement that the CEO statement was an accurate depiction and matched the reputation of the organization. However, participants indicated low agreement to having had previous knowledge of these organizational stances on the issue. This mirrored prior pilot study results by the study's authors (Dodd & Supa, 2013).

RESULTS

This research sought to explore the impact of organizational stances on social-political issues (*corporate social advocacy*)—particularly among the issues of gay marriage, health care reform, and emergency contraception as used in this study—for organizational financial goals.

The first research question sought to determine how, if at all, consumer purchase intention is affected by corporate social advocacy. In order to answer this question the experimental condition datasets were combined and the mean theory of planned behavior measures in combination with scores on the social-political issue measure and past behavior were regressed on the purchase intention measure. The linear combination of items was significant $F(5, 301) = 247$, $p<.000$. The sample multiple correlation coefficient (R) was .90, which indicates that approximately 80% of the variance in purchase intention can be accounted for by the aforementioned theory of planned behavior and CSA constructs as answered to in response to the social-political issues of gay marriage, health care reform, and emergency contraception. Each mean theory of planned behavior measure was a significant contributor ($p<.000$) to purchase intention with attitude toward behavior, subjective norm, and perceived control contributing in higher amounts, respectively. Further, attitudes toward the issue and past behaviors were also significant predictors of purchase intention ($p <.05$). *Thus, RQ1 may be answered affirmatively such that the overall model demonstrated significance, as well as each variable contributing to it, including the CSA (attitudes toward social-political issue) variable.*

This may be used in comparison to results of the control group where participants were not prompted with a CEO statement or asked to complete an attitudes toward social-political issue measure. When the mean theory of planned behavior measures in combination with scores on past behavior were regressed on the purchase intention measure (absent a CEO prompt and social-political issue measure), the linear

combination of items was significant $F(4, 107) = 39.99$, $p<.000$. The sample multiple correlation coefficient (R) was .77, which indicates that approximately 60% of the variance in purchase intention can be accounted for by the aforementioned theory of planned behavior and past behavior measures. While attitude toward the behavior, subjective norm, and past behavior were significant contributors to purchase intention ($p<.05$), the theory of planned behavior measure regarding perceived behavioral control was not a significant predictor ($p >.05$).

In comparison to the experimental conditions, then, there is a 20% reduction in the variance explained and not all theoretical variables demonstrated significant predictive utility. Thus, the addition of the CEO prompt and an attitudinal social-political issue measure explains a greater amount of variance in purchase intention and RQ1 is further answered accordingly: *The addition of organizational stances on social-political issues to the regression model implied a stronger predictive relationship for consumer purchase intention than the control group.*

For research question one, experimental datasets were combined. However, it was reasoned by the researchers that extrapolating experimental data into congruent and incongruent consumer attitude categories for comparison would allow a greater understanding of corporate social advocacy and its impact on financial performance. Thus, experimental data was categorized based on the match or mismatch of participant attitudes toward social-political issues with the organizational CEO stance to which they were exposed. Participants were placed into two categories based on a combination of the CEO prompt condition and scores for the issue measure to which they were exposed. Those participants with mean scores greater than 3.01 were categorized as having a positive attitude toward the social-political issue; whereas participants with mean scores less than 3.01 were categorized as having a negative attitude toward the social-political issue.

These categorizations were then cross-indexed with the CEO prompt condition received by participants. For example, participants whose mean scores on the Attitudes Toward Same Sex Marriage (ATSSM) issue measure were greater than 3.01 (positive attitude toward gay marriage) and were placed in the Starbucks condition (pro-gay marriage stance) as well as participants whose mean scores on the ATSSM measure were less than 3.01 (negative attitude toward gay marriage) and were placed in the Chick-fil-A condition (anti-gay marriage stance) were categorized as having a matching position. And, vice versa such that participants whose means scores on the ATSSM measure were greater than 3.01 (positive attitude toward gay marriage) and were placed in the Chick-fil-A condition (anti-gay marriage stance) as well as participants whose mean scores on the ATSSM measure were less than 3.01 (negative attitude toward gay marriage) and were placed in the Starbucks condition (pro-gay marriage stance) were categorized as having a mismatched position. The resultant categorizations resulted in a congruent position category (n=199) and incongruent position category (n=191).

Research question two sought to determine if the categorization of congruent and incongruent consumer attitudes toward social-political issues with organizational

stances would result in significant differences in consumer purchase intention. Results of the one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) found significant differences between congruent and incongruent categories for consumer purchase intention: $F(1, 382) =$ 18.89, $p<.000$. Participants demonstrated a significantly greater purchase intention when exposed to corporate social advocacy messages that matched their own attitudes toward the social political issue than when they were exposed to corporate social advocacy messages that did not match their own attitudes toward the social political issue: congruent ($\bar{x}=3.35$, SD = 1.12) and incongruent ($\bar{x}=2.84$, SD=1.17). *Thus, RQ2 may be answered such that purchase intentions are greater when organizational stances toward social-political issues are congruent with consumer's own attitudes toward the issue than when they are incongruent.*

DISCUSSION

The current research contributes to existing literature with a two-fold approach that first conceptualized *corporate social advocacy (CSA)* within existing public relations literature, noting how it may span the boundaries between two key areas: strategic issues management (SIM) and corporate social responsibility (CSR). And, second, this research has demonstrated that the CSA construct when applied to the issues of gay marriage, health care reform, and emergency contraception among a national random sample could significantly impact the financial performance of organizations used in this research. The combined conceptualization and empirical results of this research provide support for further examination of CSA both alongside existing public relations scholarship as an aspect of issues management and corporate social responsibility, as well as an independent construct.

First, in regards to the conceptualization, this research has noted how CSA may span the boundaries among existing areas of public relations scholarship, and also as an emergent area for future public relations research. When organizations or organizational leadership take stances on polarizing social-political issues, it seems rightly understood as a form of advocacy, often aimed at public policy change. Coombs and Holladay (2012) explain that the method by which CSR concerns are prioritized "are tinged with subjectivity grounded in managers' personal beliefs, values, and experiences" (p. 54).

It is reasoned that within some contexts, engagement in CSA impacts perceptions of social responsibility. Likewise, such efforts may be understood *not* as an obligation or expectation among stakeholders, but as a voluntary activity where the intended outcome may be aimed at betterment of society at-large, again impacting perceptions of social responsibility. The process by which the decision to take an organizational stance and communication of that stance as perceived by stakeholders as "desirable, proper, or appropriate" (Suchman, 1995) fits squarely within an SIM approach. This may also be considered the case whereby stances are communicated by organizational figureheads, separate a formal organizational process, and whereby crisis communication activities may ensue.

Next, the current research used consumer purchase intention as the outcome variable of interest in order to demonstrate how CSA impacts organizational financial outcomes. This may be considered a particularly salient approach as organizations seek to navigate how their perceived values and activities impact stakeholder groups who may often have competing goals. For organizational leadership and stockholders, there may be no higher-level goal than can be found in supporting financial performance. Organizational leadership may perceive the intent of engagement in CSA to be "good" because it is their perception (or personal values) that such engagement may achieve a betterment of society. But, the fact remains that engagement in CSA does impact financial objectives for the organization. Depending on the stakeholder group, it is reasoned that the financial impact has the potential to be either positive or negative and perhaps, in some contexts, the impact offsets itself leaving the ability to advocate "freely." This might also be understood in relation to the more than 35 years of research surrounding the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives on similarly financial-based outcomes.

Important questions, then, remain that might be answered using case study, survey, or experimental analyses of the ways various stakeholders are impacted by organizational stances and different outcome variables for examination. For example, what are the perceptions of employees who have a congruent or incongruent attitude with the organizational stance? How is employee goodwill impacted by such stances? Or, what are the perceptions of third-party suppliers, politicians, manufacturers, etc. associated with the organization? How are relationships and policy impacted by such stances? More broadly, the corporate social performance of organizations in light of social-political stances may be examined as it has been in the existing CSR literature (e.g. via reputation indices). And, the role of legitimacy and crisis communication as impacted by organizational stances on social-political issues is a worthy area for further examination, specifically as related to SIM.

The major limitation of the current research is the potentially elevated salience of social-political issues in the minds of participants. Participants responded to attitudes toward social-political issues measures before being exposed to the experimental organizational stance conditions. As a result, a response bias might have been created because the social-political issues were front-of-mind for participants when responding to the planned behavior items that followed. Future, more directed research should seek to address this issue by parsing out individual variables for examination.

Practical Implications

Public relations practitioners have long sought for the "value-added" paradigm in their efforts. In fact, one of the major critiques of the field is the failure to show direct financial impact on an organization. This study demonstrates that CSA, as a conceptualized function of public relations, has that ability. The impact of CSA on the conscientious consumer could in fact have a great impact on that consumer's intent to purchase from the organization. Further research is needed to determine if this is unique to the particular issues used in this research or if there are wider-reaching consequences for

CSA. Thus, future research is needed to understand if similar results would be achieved if issues were less controversial and polarizing or less salient among participants. Based on the results found in this study; however, it seems clear that when an organization either willingly takes a stance on a public issue, or is somehow associated with having a viewpoint on an issue, there are financial repercussions.

Corporate social advocacy clearly falls in the wheelhouse for public relations practitioners. And, while purchase intention is typically a marketing or advertising measurement, its use here is indicative of the potential financial consequences of failing to "connect" with stakeholders. The authors of this study recommend that prior to involving an organization in a CSA message strategy, careful consideration of the potential impact of stances on a social-political issue is measured against organizational goals. Indeed, for organizational leadership societal change and the ability to enact that change may weigh heavier in the long-term than financial outcomes. It is anticipated that involvement in controversial social-political issues will have long-lasting impacts to reputation, realizing organizational outcomes from consumers for long after issues may be resolved. For example, the long term impacts for Chick-fil-A in states that have since legalized same sex marriage could be measured at this time. Future, longitudinal research may seek to study such impacts.

In today's environment, remaining neutral or having the perception of remaining neutral is becoming increasingly difficult (DiStaso & Messner, 2010). A social media post, an off-the-cuff remark during an interview, or even "private correspondence" may find its way to the public sphere via a traditional journalist, a whistle-blower, or a social media user. While this study's authors do not necessarily advocate that all organizations must contribute to the public sphere in this way, we do recommend that all organizations prepare for the time when their consumers, the media and the public have perceived that they have done so. And, for those organizations that do choose to wade into the sea of public opinion, the authors of this study recommend that they do so with the full knowledge of the potential impact on their financial performance.

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Figure 1
Potential Experimental Conditions & Condition Distribution
Tier 1: Social-Political Issue
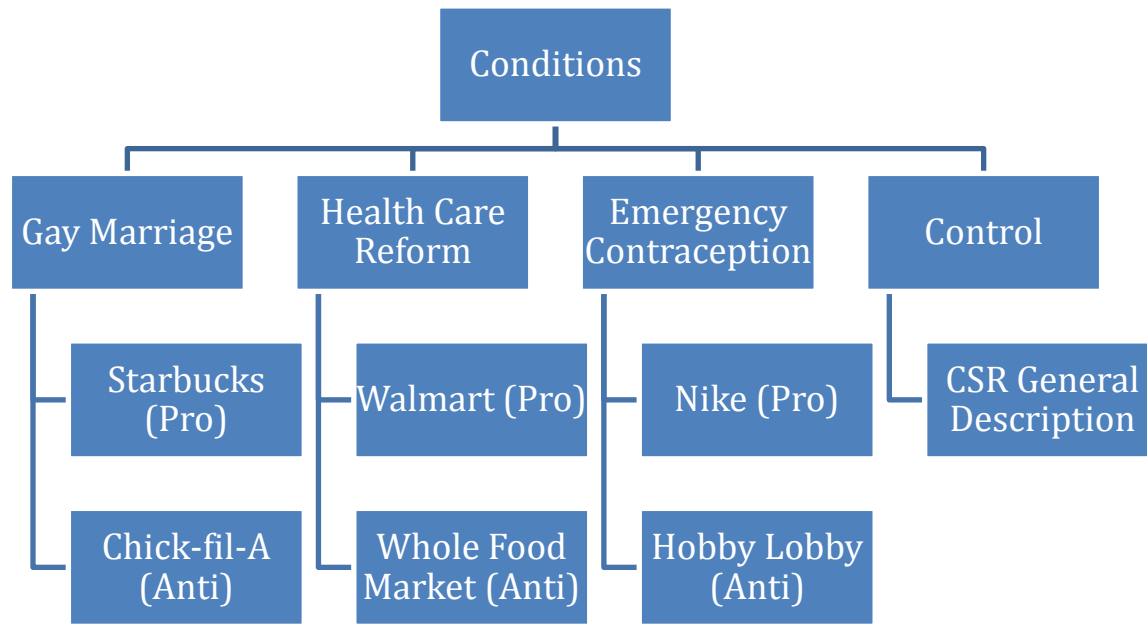Tier 2: Organizational Stance

Table 1: Demographic Distribution

Demographic Variable	N	Percent
Gender		
Female	269	51%
Male	259	49%
Age		
18-25	105	20%
26-35	123	23%
36-45	110	21%
46-55	99	19%
56 or older	94	18%
Marital Status		
Single	208	39%
Married	254	48%
Divorced	56	11%
Widowed	12	2%
Children		
Yes	270	52%
No	250	48%

Education		
High school	174	33%
Associate's degree	109	21%
Bachelor's degree	136	26%
Graduate degree	64	12%
Currently attending college	44	8%
Racial Background		
Asian	35	7%
Black	72	14%
Hispanic	39	7%
White	368	70%
Other	12	2%
Annual Income		
$25,000 or less	139	26%
$25,001 – 50,000	156	30%
$50,001 – 75,000	86	16%
$75,000 or more	110	21%
Prefer not to answer	35	7%
Political Affiliation		
Democratic party	198	37%
Republican party	122	23%
Independent party	85	16%
Other party	6	1%
No political identification	120	23%

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