

**The Moderating Role of Value Alignment: How Corporate Social Advocacy Survives the  
Polarized Public Responses**

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## **The Moderating Role of Value Alignment: How Corporate Social Advocacy Survives the Polarized Public Responses**

### Abstract

Both 2018 Nike's Colin Kaepernick and 2019 Gillette's commercial campaigns received backlash on social media over their stances addressing social justice issues. Drawing on legitimacy theory, we conducted two online experiments to investigate the underlying mechanisms behind the effects of polarized Twitter responses on purchasing intention. Study 1 revealed that for participants who had high and moderate value alignment with Nike, exposure to a tweet supporting Nike's advocacy campaign (vs. a boycotting tweet) resulted in higher purchasing intentions through increased online engagement. Study 2 indicated that for participants who had high and moderate levels of value alignment with Gillette, reading a supporting tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) enhanced their purchasing intentions of Gillette products through increased engagement and positive perception of Gillette's values-driven motives. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* corporate social advocacy, legitimacy theory, value alignment, online engagement, perceived values-driven motives, purchasing intention

### Executive Summary

U.S. citizens are deeply divided along many controversial issues. Prior studies have observed that a company's favor of one side of a divisive issue can generate polarized reactions (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Xu & Xiong, 2020). Consumers may respond to a company's stance by boycotting its products or advocating for the company (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Feng, 2016; Hoffmann, et al., 2020). Drawing on legitimacy theory, this study examines how polarized public responses to corporate communication on controversial social issues affect individuals' purchase intention and investigates the potential underlying mechanisms in this process.

Theoretically, our study answers a call from Dodd (2018) to further examine how companies increasingly are expected to engage in social-political issues to maintain legitimacy. Using two real corporate social advocacy (CSA) cases, this study advances scholarly knowledge on how boycotting and supporting CSA messages influence consumers' attitudes and purchasing intention. Contributing to prior studies suggesting companies who achieve alignment with customer expectations can enhance trust, and loyalty, and maximize growth potential (Roberts & Alpert, 2010), our findings reveal that individuals who strongly align themselves with companies' advocacy stances and read supporting responses yielded higher intentions of engagement. Consistent with prior studies (Afego & Aladidede, 2021; Rim et al., 2019), CSA has become an integral part of a corporate's strategic issue management and legitimacy. Corporations attempt to sustain their legitimacy by aligning their actions with stakeholders' values and expectations.

Furthermore, our findings shed light on the mediating roles of online engagement and perceived values-driven motives in affecting purchase intention (Austin & Gaither, 2016; Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Park & Jiang, 2020). We found that individuals with high and moderate value alignment and exposed to positive social media messages yielded a high likelihood of online engagement and became more likely to support the motives of brands' campaigns, which in turn promoted their purchasing intention. This finding can serve scholars well to recognize the interconnections among stakeholders, value alignment, online engagement, and perceived motives when examining how a company's advocacy actions may lead to positive financial outcomes and favorable evaluations from stakeholders, who can go beyond brand ambassadors to support the brand facing public backlash.

Practically, our study also provides knowledge for practitioners and companies. Specifically, social-political issues are polarized by nature (Coombes & Holladay, 2018; Rim et al., 2019), practitioners should be aware that involving in CSA campaigns can backfire and generate negative public responses, since stakeholders may question a corporation's motive to stake a stance on a contested social issue. These challenges require practitioners to pay attention to stakeholders' attributions for advocacy issues, emphasize formulating and addressing CSA stances that advance social good, and take a vital responsibility to be real social change agents (Winston, 2016). Corporations need to define the controversial issue in a positive manner and legitimate their involvement with that issue (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) by devoting greater efforts to convince consumers that their advocacy involvement is genuine, truthful, and consistent. The findings on value alignment show evidence to Hatch and Schultz (2008), who contend that companies who neglect the alignment between the organization and its public run the risk of falling victim to corporate narcissism.

In addition, corporations who consider engaging in social activism need to carefully assess the risk and the reward and evaluate whether the message will appeal to or alienate current and future customers. Companies taking the lead to advocate for social issues such as social justice, race, gender, and inequality can express their stand in a manner that speaks to their values or moral convictions and legitimize their positions, which can bring rewarding benefits as evidenced by the study such as increased engagement intentions, strong support of CSA motives, and enhanced purchasing loyalty, as consumers now become more politically and socially conscious, and expect companies to hold the same obligations as others of civic society (Park & Jiang, 2020).

## **The Moderating Role of Value Alignment: How Corporate Social Advocacy Survives the Polarized Public Responses**

Brands nowadays increasingly utilize social media to influence public opinion on controversial social issues (Dodd, 2018; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016). The phenomenon that corporations make public and overt declarations on social issues that are not related to their business is referred to corporate social advocacy (CSA) (Abitbol et al., 2018; Dodd, 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015; Waymer & Logan, 2021). Corporate advocacy takes many forms, including corporate statements or declarations released either internally or externally, interviews or statements by business leaders, paying for advertising, corporations spending money to lobby local and state governments, publicizing charity, and philanthropic efforts (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Dodd & Suppa, 2014; Waymer & Logan, 2021). Notable real-life examples include Nike featuring Colin Kaepernick to raise awareness about gender, race, and inequality (Kim et al., 2019) and Gillette's 2019 advertising campaign on toxic masculinity (Topping et al., 2019).

However, there is an ongoing debate about whether corporations should take a stance on public issues. On one hand, corporations are subject to the criticism of "woke washing" where companies have inconsistent records of social cause stances (Vredenburg et al., 2020), but are still involved in advocacy practices to "market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice" (Sobande, 2019, p.18). Thus, consumers become increasingly skeptical of corporations' underpinning motives in CSA efforts. On the other hand, there are increased societal expectations for companies to take a more purpose-driven approach by strategically engaging in socially responsible efforts and taking stands on controversial social issues (Dodd, 2014; Kim et al., 2019).

Studies have observed that a company's favor of one side of a divisive issue can generate polarized public reactions (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Xu & Xiong, 2020). Consumers may respond to a company's stance by boycotting its products or advocating for the company (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Feng, 2016; Hoffmann, et al., 2020). Specifically, about two-thirds of consumers around the world tend to purchase or boycott a brand because of its position on a social or political issue (Edelman, 2018). Against this backdrop, it is necessary to investigate how corporations establish, sustain, and defend their CSA legitimacy, especially when the issues they advocate may elicit divisive public responses (Afego & Alagidede, 2021; Yim, 2021).

Legitimacy literature suggests it is necessary to examine stakeholder-based factors to understand the formation and maintenance of legitimacy (Nielsen & Thomsen, 2018) because previous research demonstrated that product/service purchase behavior is positively associated with legitimacy perceptions of CSA actions (Zhang & Borden, 2022). Drawing on legitimacy theory, this study examines how corporations engage in social advocacy efforts to meet certain societal expectations and legitimize their CSA activities to bring positive business outcomes. Especially, our study investigates the potential underlying mechanisms behind the effects of polarized Twitter responses on brands' purchasing intention. Using two prominent CSA examples to explore how corporations communicate their advocacy efforts as a way of gaining legitimacy, this study sheds light on the role of value alignment, which refers to consumers' personal values aligning with the company's advocacy practices or consumers' acceptance of corporate stances (Park & Jiang, 2020), in influencing financial outcomes. This study advances emerging CSA research on legitimacy, value alignment, engagement, and perceived motivation.

### **The Rise of Corporate Social Advocacy**

Corporate social advocacy (CSA) originates from two fields in public relations: strategic issues management and corporate social responsibility (Dodd & Supa, 2015). Strategic issues management is concerned with ensuring that an organization is perceived as legitimate and operates in a way to meet certain expectations that stakeholders and society have about its behavior (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Corporate social responsibility (CSR) indicates corporations can benefit from useful social contributions relevant to their business practices (Carroll, 1979, 1999), and those benefits include enhancing an organization's image and boosting public acceptance of companies (de Bakker & den Hond, 2008). Corporate social advocacy (CSA) moves beyond corporate social responsibility (CSR) in that it represents corporate engagement in controversial social or political issues that lack direct relevance to the company (Austin, et al., 2016; Dodd & Supa, 2015).

Although CSA is related to the general phenomenon of CSR, CSA has vital characteristics (Hydock et al., 2020). For instance, unlike CSR emphasizing corporate-sponsored initiatives that benefit an organization's reputation by involving philanthropic support for various popular causes (de Bakker & den Hond, 2008; Gaither et al., 2018; Werther & Chandler, 2006), CSA deals with controversial sociopolitical issues and corporations declaring support for or opposition to one side of a contested issue (Dodd & Supa, 2014), which elicits stronger public attitude changes over the issues (Parcha & Kinsley Westerman, 2020). In this way, CSA is often considered a dimension of corporate advocacy, which refers to "the research, analysis, design, and mass dissemination of arguments on issues contested in the public dialogue in an attempt to create a favorable, reasonable and informed public opinion which in turn influences institutions' operating environment" (Heath, 1980, p.371). Second, the social-political issues that the organization advocates for or against are not always directly associated with organization's core

business. CSR fit is defined as “the perceived congruence between a social issue and a company’s business” (Du et al., 2010, p.12), while CSA fit refers to the perceived consistency between a corporations’ business and the controversial social issue it is advocating for (Parch & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). The definitions of both CSR fit and CSA fit are similar to some degree; however, the social issue for CSA fit is often controversial, while CSR fit focuses on a noncontroversial issue in which the corporation engages.

Furthermore, Ciszek & Logan (2018) contend both CSR and CSA prioritize corporate profit, and corporate activities are sanctioned and legitimized because of their potential to improve corporations’ bottom line. Specifically, based on consumers’ attitudes toward a company, stakeholder-driven intentions often lead people to view CSR as activities that achieve business goals such as increasing profits (Vlachos et al., 2009). When corporations engage in advocacy practices, consumers become skeptical about the corporations’ motivations behind CSA activities (Park, 2021). The motive of CSA is often perceived by the public to drive profits or have a marketable purpose.

More and more corporations feel increasing pressure to take social or political stands. An important factor that drives the rise of corporate social advocacy or activism is the fact that social media and internet have transformed business by making it cheaper and easier for activists to express their opinions and by making corporate activities more transparent (Davis & White, 2015). Therefore, corporate social advocacy has gradually become one essential part of many corporations’ business strategies (Browning et al., 2020).

### **Legitimacy Theory**

While CSR is often examined from the perspective of legitimacy theory (Stratling, 2007; Lanis & Richardson, 2013), CSA is also closely related to legitimacy theory which suggests that



corporations implicitly consent to meet certain expectations that society has about their behavior (Gray et al., 1988). Some corporations may undertake social activities based on direct interactions with stakeholders (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018), whereas other firms may initiate such activities to manage their societal level of legitimacy (Chen & Roberts, 2010). Both legitimacy theory and stakeholder theory are concerned with organizations and society relationships, but their approaches to manage this complex social phenomenon are different (Gray et al., 1995; Jansson, 2005). Specifically, legitimacy is considered the fundamental resource on which any organization relies for sustained existence (Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003). Conversely, stakeholder theory indicates that corporations' policies and activities should be directed toward their stakeholders, such as employees, customers, partners, the community, and local or central government in their continued existence (Jansson, 2005; Chatterji & Toffel, 2018).

Legitimacy theory concentrates on whether the value system of an organization is congruent with the value system of society (Suchman, 1995). In other words, legitimacy theory addresses whether the objective of an organization is to meet social expectations. Organizations are often perceived to be legitimate if they seek socially desirable goals in a socially acceptable manner (Epstein and Votaw, 1978). For instance, organizations aim to gain their legitimacy for sustained existence by aligning their behavior with stakeholders' expectations (Rim et al., 2019).

Dodd (2018) argued that companies today manage their business in a changing and heterogeneous environment and have to maintain their legitimacy through involvement in political discourse and democracy as a public good. Yim (2021) explored organizational legitimacy in the context of CSA and states that authentic CSA conveys clear corporate moral values and meets public value expectations. Therefore, corporations explicitly take a strategic approach to CSA, and CSA can also be employed by corporations to generate legitimacy. For instance, by engaging

in CSA activities, corporations can inform the public about changes in their operations, raise the profile of related activities, and change the public's perceptions and expectations about their performance.

However, only a few studies provide an understanding of how corporations negotiate their legitimacy by engaging with contentious social-political issues (Afego & Alagidede, 2021; Yim, 2021). By analyzing company statements, Afego and Alagidede (2021) found that corporations legitimize their stance on the issues by conveying altruistic values and showing stakeholders that their stance aligns not only with organizational values and convictions but also with the social good. The public increasingly expects companies to take a stand on addressing contentious issues. Hence, many companies now spend resources on advocacy practices, which help companies achieve legitimacy from various stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Rim et al., 2019), improve their reputation, and contribute to shaping public policy. Yim (2021) examines the preconditions of CSA legitimacy and suggests that value congruence referring to the conformity between public expectations and a corporation's performance is the primary condition. In other words, CSA legitimacy indicates organizations are seeking approval for their behavior from diverse stakeholders in society (Nielson & Thomsen, 2018) and such legitimacy is dependent on whether a company can align with the values and interests of a number of its stakeholders (Yim, 2021).

### **Polarized Responses to Corporate Social Advocacy**

CSA often generates polarized responses due to its nature of vocally promoting one side of divisive social issues (Hydock, Paharia & Weber, 2019). Some stakeholders perceive a company's sociopolitical stance or involvement as valuable, while others view it as worthless or even discriminatory (Nalick, 2016). Therefore, corporations involved in CSA encounter both risk

and reward. For instance, polarized public opinion responded to Nike's advertising campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick. Some praised Nike's advertisement as taking a stand over social justice issues (Green & Turner, 2018), whereas the ad sparked controversy, resulted in people threatening to boycott the purchase of Nike products (Taylor 2018), and drove people publicly to destroy or burn their Nike items (Bostock 2018). Social network analysis suggested Internet users have engaged in a Nike boycott by communicating with the hashtag #BoycottNike (Eschmann, et al., 2021). Similarly, Gillette faced backlash and boycott over its advertisement about toxic masculinity, a phenomenon that men use dominance, violence, and control to assert their power and superiority (Baggs, 2019; Trott, 2022). Calling for a boycott of Gillette and backlash were prevalent on Twitter, and Twitter users responded to the Gillette campaign with an opinion-related hashtag such as #BoycottGillette (Xu & Xiong, 2020).

One reason that corporations find their social advocacy efforts to be a risk is that major corporations' controversial social advocacy campaigns hardly satisfy all their diverse stakeholders, which may result in skepticism, opposition, alienation, boycott, and protest (Rim, Lee & Yoo, 2019; Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). By analyzing Ben and Jerry's support of the Black Lives Matter movement, Ciszek and Logan (2018) find Facebook users call for a boycott of the company and accused Ben & Jerry's of supporting the murder of police officers. Second, while people often question the organization's advocacy intentions and doubt its CSA impact (Gupta & Pirsch, 2006), 73% publics agree that a company can take actions that both increase profits and address systemic issues (Edelman, 2020).

In response to CSA, because not all people favor the stances the brand advocates, the active individuals may engage in boycotting or advocating for the brand (Rim et al., 2019). The fact that corporations experienced consumer backlash due to decisions to support controversial

social causes is not new (Swimberghe et al., 2011). Previous literature views boycotts from either a collective perspective, as a concerted and organized movement by a group of people, or from an individual standpoint, as a personal act of resistance against a company (Cissé-Depardon & N'Goala, 2009). Friedman (1985) stated that boycott organizers have instrumental or expressive motivations. An instrumental boycott aims to coerce the brand to change a specific practice or policy, while expressive boycotts focus on consumers expressing their anger and discontent with unacceptable corporate behaviors (Friedman, 1985). By making negative claims about the companies, boycotters' attack not only damages the brands' image and reputation but also threatens the corporations' legitimacy (Ding et al., 2020).

### **Value Alignment**

Prior studies on CSA also discover the benefits of corporations' involvement in controversial social issues, and these benefits include increasing purchase intent from consumers who support a corporation's activism and enhanced brand image (Abitbol et al., 2018; Schmidt, et al., 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014, 2015). For instance, despite concerns about consumer boycotts and public backlash, Nike's stock has risen 5% since it launched its Colin Kaepernick campaign (Kelleher, 2018). The other benefit of corporations involved in advocacy practices is to 'humanize' companies, which strengthen consumers' bond. In this process, consumers develop identification with companies by recognizing the corporation's values clearly and identifying with them via interacting or engaging with the corporation (Du et al., 2007; Park & Jiang, 2020). Consumers' identification with companies indicates individuals' interaction with companies is meaningful and companies' values become an important part of their group identities (Xu et al., 2021).

Corporations engaging in CSA provide an opportunity for consumers to identify with the brand by cultivating their ideological alignment with the brand's advocated values (Hydock et al., 2020). For instance, Gen Z consumers indicated they prefer to purchase from companies that reflect their current social values or desired identities (Morning Consult, 2023). Moreover, the self-congruity theory indicates that individuals consume products that are of value and highly consistent with their self-schema (Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Plewa & Palmer, 2014). Specifically, the extent of congruence between the consumers' self-concept and the perceived product-image affects purchase intention and consumer attitudes (Sirgy, 1982). The self-congruity theory suggests that individuals could be attracted to brands that align with their personal identities and avoid brands that are misaligned with their values (White, Argo & Sengupta, 2012). When consumers agree and align with companies' stances on controversial issues, they may perform boycott behavior, namely, consumers rally around the company and purchase more products from that company (Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021).

Nevertheless, only a few studies examine how value alignment affects consumers' attitudinal and behavioral responses in the context of CSA. Specifically, Chatterji and Toffel (2018) found that CEO activism can shape public opinion, but this effect is moderated by the alignment of consumers' political preferences with the CEO's. Gallup's (2012) research suggests that when consumers are aligned with a brand, they expressed strong purchasing intentions. Park and Jiang (2020) suggest that public-company identification had a significant relation with attitudinal loyalty. Similarly, Hydock et al. (2020) reveal that consumers become more likely to choose an advocated brand when the brand's stance is aligned with their own positions. Jin et al. (2023) demonstrate that stakeholders' value alignment is positively related to their identification and relationship with the organization.

### **Online Engagement**

The concept of engagement attracts scholarly attention in various disciplines and communication scholars consider individuals' participation in social media brand community facilitates public discussion of social issues (Fuchs, 2015; Jenkins, 2014; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) contend social media allow stakeholders to interact, share, and exchange in a manner that facilitates the formation of an online community. Putnam (1995) contends individuals' need for bonding drives them to engage in community activities, which has vital implications for online engagement as many consumers seek opportunities to connect emotionally with their favorite brands (Dessart et al., 2015).

People nowadays can engage in a brand community using simple actions, such as liking, sharing, or commenting on a relevant post with a specific hashtag (Men & Tsai, 2015). Both Nike and Gillette's advocacy campaigns have elicited polarized public responses and discussions on social media (Hoffman et al., 2020; Trott, 2022). This indicates corporations' advocacy practices "lead people to become engaged in brand-related communication on social media and become members of a brand community" (Park & Jiang, 2020). Viewed in this way, our study considers online engagement as social media interactions among users who are exposed to a corporation's advocacy messages.

Therefore, based on the perspective of legitimacy theory, the self-congruent theory, prior literature on value alignment, online engagement, and increased scholarly attention to Nike's and Gillette's CSA campaigns which stimulated polarized responses on social media (Intravia, et al., 2019; Kim et al, 2019; Xu & Xiong, 2020), our study proposed polarized public reactions towards an advocated brand interact with value alignment to affect online engagement, namely an individual exposed to positive responses will be more likely to have online engagement when

the advocated brand's stance is aligned with the individual's values. Thus, Study 1 used Nike's advocacy campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, and the following hypothesis is proposed.

H1: Value alignment with Nike will moderate the effects of divided CSA responses on engagement.

Furthermore, social media engagement serves as the most important indicator to assess the effectiveness of an organization's efforts to interact with social media users (Lim et al., 2015; Neiger et al., 2012). Lim et al. (2015) find that social media engagement exerts an influence on social presence. Hinson et al (2019) find that social media engagement acts as a mediator between brand attachment and consumer participation. Thus, our study considers when people are triggered by polarized responses to CSA and recognize the company's stance is aligned with their values, the positive response will lead to increased online engagement which further enhances their purchase intention. In this way, we propose the following hypothesis. The conceptual model of Study 1 is shown in Figure 1.

H2: Value alignment moderates the effects of divided CSA responses on purchase intention of Nike products through online engagement.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

In the context of CSA, scholars also examine the role of perceived motives and find that individuals' perceptions of a company engaging in advocacy initiatives impact their attitudes and behavioral intentions. For instance, Kim et al. (2019) show that value-driven motives increase positive attitudes toward the company's CSA efforts. Overton and Xiao (2022) suggest that the value-driven motive acts as a mediator between moral conviction and satisfaction with the company. When exposed to divided responses to CSA messages, people often focus on the

motives behind the company's advocacy activities, questioning whether a company takes a stance on social issues to benefit the company itself or to benefit society (Hydock et al., 2019).

Empirical studies have demonstrated that social media engagement acted as an important mediator in CSR communication strategies (Jiang & Luo, 2020; Park & Jiang, 2023; So et al., 2016). Park and Jiang (2020) discover a positive association between social media engagement and public-company identification. Attribution theory suggests that individuals attempt to make causal inferences about behavior (Weiner, 1986). If consumers who perceived the high congruence between the advocated issue and their values become more willing to engage with the brand, they will attribute a company's advocacy initiatives to a sincere and genuine motive to improve society, then they will develop more favorable attitudes toward the company and higher levels of related behavioral intentions such as purchase intent. This study predicted that positive responses to CSA enhance individuals' online engagement, which may also facilitate positive perceptions of the company's motive and further increases people's purchase intention. Therefore, Study 2 aims to replicate Study 1 using Gillette's advocacy campaign addressing toxic masculinity and investigate the mediating role of perceived values-driven motives in affecting purchase intention. Thus, the following hypotheses for Study 2 are proposed. The conceptual model of Study 2 is shown in Figure 2.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

H3: Value alignment with Gillette will moderate the effects of divided CSA responses on engagement.

H4: Value alignment moderates the effects of divided CSA responses on purchase intention of Gillette products through online engagement.



H5: Value alignment moderates the effects of divided CSA responses on purchase intention of Gillette products through online engagement and perceived values-driven motive.

## **Study 1**

### **Method**

For Study 1, a two-factor (divided CSA response: a boycotting tweet vs. a supporting tweet) between-subjects online experiment was conducted in early February 2020. Study 1 recruited 183 participants via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and focused on Nike's Colin Kaepernick campaign.

### ***Sample***

The resulting sample for Study 1 was 35% female, 68.9% college educated, with an average age of 34.4. The sample was comprised of 56.3% who identified as Caucasian, 33.9% as Asian, 4.4% as Black or African American, and 5.5% as another race. 43.2% reported their household annual income is above US \$50,000. On 1-7 scale, individuals leaned slightly politically left ( $M=4.92$ ,  $SD=1.76$ ).

### ***Stimuli and Procedure***

After consenting to participate in the study, participants were asked to watch the 2018 Nike 'Just Do It' ad narrated by Colin Kaepernick, who is well-known for protesting during the national anthem to raise awareness of racial oppression and police brutality. Participants were subsequently asked about their familiarity with the ads<sup>1</sup> and the extent to which they believed their social and political values aligned with Nike's commercial ad.

Then, participants were randomized to two different experimental conditions. In the condition of supporting response, 96 participants were exposed to a user tweet stating positive opinions on Nike's Colin Kaepernick campaign by using #SupportNike. In the condition of

boycotting response, 87 participants read a user tweet boycotting Nike's campaign with #BoycottNike. After reading the tweets, participants were asked about their likelihood to interact and engage with the tweet they read and their purchasing intention of Nike products. Before debriefing, participants reported demographic information and were thanked.

### ***Manipulation Check***

As for divided responses, a manipulation check confirmed that participants who encountered a supporting tweet ( $M=6.23$ ,  $SD=.089$ ) on Nike were more likely to agree the tweet supports the brand than a boycotting tweet ( $M=2.95$ ,  $SD=2.47$ ),  $t(181) = -2.15$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### ***Measures***

*Value alignment* was adapted from Kim (2019) and Park and Jiang (2020) and measured with two items on a 7-point Likert scale. Specifically, participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: "I support the messages in the commercial ad," and "My social and political values align with the commercial ad" ( $M=5.75$ ,  $SD=1.31$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha=.88$ ).

*Online Engagement*, which sought to capture individuals' likelihood to interact and engage with the tweet they read, was adapted from Triantafyllidou and Yannas (2020) and measured with five items on a 7-point scale of (a) replying to the tweet, (b) retweeting, (c) "like" the tweet, (d) ignoring the tweet, and (e) commenting on the tweet<sup>2</sup> ( $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=1.77$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha=.83$ ).

*Purchasing Intention* was adapted from Holzwarth et al. (2006) using three items: (a) I would purchase Nike products in the next following weeks, (b) I would consider buying Nike products, and (c) the probability that I would consider buying Nike products is high ( $M=5.09$ ,  $SD=1.76$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha=.93$ ).

## Results

We tested H1 using Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro, Model 1 with 5,000 bias-corrected bootstrap samples and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ) is achieved when lower bound (LL) and upper bound (UL) CI do not include zero.

We first consider the interaction effect of divided responses and value alignment on engagement (H1). As predicted, the model indicated that value alignment significantly moderated the effect of divided Twitter responses on engagement,  $F(1, 179) = 19.73, p = .004, R^2 \text{ change} = .038$ . Further analysis suggested that among participants who had high value alignment with Nike, the effect of exposure to a supporting tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) on engagement was significantly positive,  $b = 1.42, SE = 0.33, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.76, 2.08], p < .001$ . Similarly, for participants who had moderate value alignment with Nike, the effect of exposure to a supporting tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) on engagement was significantly positive,  $b = 0.76, SE = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.28, 1.23], p = .002$ . By contrast, for participants who had low value alignment with Nike, the effect of exposure to a supporting tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) on engagement was not significant,  $b = 0.06, SE = 0.34, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.61, 0.72], p = .86$ .

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

In other words, participants who possessed high and moderate levels of value alignment with Nike and were exposed to a positive tweet supporting Nike's CSA yielded higher intentions of engagement than participants who read a boycotting tweet (see Figure 3). These results support H1.

We tested H2 using Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro, Model 7. Turning to H2, which predicted value alignment moderates the effects of divided responses on purchasing intention of Nike products through online engagement. In support of H2, the indirect effect of divided

responses on purchasing intention through engagement was significantly moderated by value alignment (index of moderated mediation= 0.30,  $SE=0.10$ , 95% CI = [0.11, 0.51]. Specifically, for participants who had high value alignment with Nike, exposure to a tweet supporting Nike's CSA (vs. a boycotting tweet) resulted in higher purchasing intentions through engagement,  $b=0.81$ ,  $SE=0.22$ , 95% CI [0.38, 1.27]. Similarly, for those with moderate value alignment, reading a supportive tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) led to higher purchasing intentions through engagement,  $b=0.43$ ,  $SE=0.15$ , 95% CI [0.17, 0.73]. However, for participants possessing low value alignment, the effect was nonsignificant,  $b=0.03$ ,  $SE=0.16$ , 95% CI [-0.29, 0.36].

### Study 2

Study 2 used the same factorial design (a boycotting tweet vs. a supporting tweet) as Study 1. As for Study 2, we focused on the 2019 Gillette "We Believe: The Best Men Can Be" ad.

#### *Sample*

Participants ( $N=187$ ) for Study 2 were recruited from MTurk. The sample for Study 2 was 36.4% female, 65.8% college educated, with an average age of 34.2. The sample was comprised of 55.1% who identified as Caucasian, 29.4% as Asian, 7.0% as Black or African American, and 8.6% as another race. 47.1% reported their household annual income is above US \$50,000. On 1-7 scale, individuals leaned slightly politically left ( $M=4.88$ ,  $SD=1.77$ ).

#### *Procedure*

Participants were first presented with the 2019 Gillette 'We Believe' ad addressing negative behavior among men that perpetuate sexism, rape culture, and toxic masculinity and also called for men to take responsibility and act as protectors of the weak. Then, participants

were asked about their familiarity with the ad<sup>3</sup> and the extent to which they believed their social and political values aligned with Gillette's message.

Then, 92 participants were exposed to a supporting user tweet stating a positive opinion on Gillette's campaign by using #SupportGillette, and 95 participants read a user tweet critical of Gillette with #BoycottGillette. After reading the tweets, participants were subsequently asked about their likelihood to interact and engage with the tweet they read, their perceptions of Gillette's values-driven motives for CSA, their purchasing intentions of Gillette's products, and demographic information was collected.

### ***Manipulation Check***

In the case of Gillette's CSA campaign, participants who read a supporting tweet ( $M=6.26$ ,  $SD=0.89$ ) on Gillette were more likely to agree the tweet supports the brand than a boycotting tweet ( $M=3.17$ ,  $SD=2.51$ ),  $t(185) = -11.31$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### ***Measures***

Study 2 used the same scale and measures of variables (e.g., value alignment, engagement, purchasing intentions) that were adopted in Study 1 except for perceived motivations. Please see Table 1 for descriptive statistics and scale reliability for all measures.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

*Perceived Values-driven Motives of Gillette's CSA* were adapted from Austin et al. (2019). On a 7-point Likert scale, participants were asked to what extent they agree Gillette's campaign is (a) to change people's views on the issue, (b) to create change on the issue, (c) committed to social change, (d) committed to creating a more just society, and (e) is more concerned with social change than profits ( $M=5.40$ ,  $SD=1.24$ , Cronbach's  $\alpha=.89$ ).

## **Results**

To check if the H1 and H2 results identified in Study 1 can be replicated in Study 2, we use Model 1 and Model 7 of the Hayes (2022) PROCESS macro to test hypotheses (H3 and H4) for Study 2.

Consistent with Study 1's findings, results indicated that value alignment significantly moderated the effect of divided Twitter responses on engagement,  $F(1, 183) = 17.37, p < .001, R^2 \text{ change} = .083$ . Further analysis revealed that among participants who had high value alignment with Gillette, the effect of exposure to a supporting tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) on engagement was significantly positive,  $b = 1.46, SE = 0.32, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.82, 2.09], p < .001$ . Similarly, for participants who had moderate value alignment with Gillette, the effect of exposure to a supporting tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) on engagement was significantly positive,  $b = 0.54, SE = 0.24, 95\% \text{ CI} [0.07, 1.0], p = .024$ . However, for participants who had low value alignment with Gillette, the effect of exposure to a supporting tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) on engagement was nonsignificant,  $b = -0.47, SE = 0.34, 95\% \text{ CI} [-1.13, 0.20], p = .17$ .

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

In other words, participants who possessed high and moderate levels of value alignment with Gillette and were exposed to a positive tweet supporting Gillette's CSA expressed higher intentions of engagement compared with participants who read a boycotting tweet (see Figure 4). Thus, H3 was supported.

With regard to H4, we found that the indirect effect of divided responses on purchasing intention of Gillette products through engagement was significantly moderated by value alignment (index of moderated mediation = 0.26,  $SE = 0.07, 95\% \text{ CI} = [0.11, 0.41]$ , which is in line with Study 1. Specifically, for participants who had high value alignment with Gillette, exposure to a tweet supporting Gillette (vs. a boycotting tweet) resulted in higher purchasing

intentions through engagement,  $b = 0.51$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ , 95% CI [0.25, 0.81]. Similarly, for those with moderate value alignment, reading a supportive tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) led to higher purchasing intentions through engagement,  $b = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ , 95% CI [0.02, 0.38]. However, for participants possessing low value alignment, the effect was nonsignificant,  $b = -0.16$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ , 95% CI [-0.41, 0.08]. Therefore, H4 was supported.

Finally, Model 85 was used in SPSS PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2022) to test the H5, namely value alignment moderates the effects of divided response on purchasing intentions of Gillette products through engagement and perceived motivation. Supporting H5, results suggested that the moderated serial mediation effects of divided responses on purchasing intentions through engagement and values-driven motives which were conditional by value alignment were significant (index of moderated mediation = 0.09,  $SE = 0.03$ , 95% CI = [0.04, 0.17]).

Specifically, exposure to a supporting tweet (vs. a boycotting tweet) enhancing purchasing intentions of Gillette products through increased engagement and positive perception of Gillette's values-driven motives as supporting the social change were among participants who had high levels of value alignment with Gillette ( $b = 0.19$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ , 95% CI = [0.08, 0.33]) and moderate levels of value alignment ( $b = 0.07$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ , 95% CI = [0.01, 0.15]). By contrast, for participants who had low levels of value alignment, the effect was nonsignificant ( $b = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ , 95% CI = [-0.16, 0.03]).

### **Discussion**

Contemporary corporations are under societal pressure to weigh in on controversial social issues (Gelles, 2017) as well as experiencing pressure from consumers to support social justice. Consumers and other stakeholders expect companies that consider brand activism as a necessity,

not just a marketing strategy. As a result, corporations have to strategically respond to this new challenge and demand. Understanding the effects of corporate social advocacy is important because corporations feel pressure to take a stance on controversial social issues (Weinzimmer & Esken, 2016) and need to take a vital responsibility to be real social change agents (Winston, 2016) in influencing attitudes and shaping the future of democratic society. This study examines the impact of polarized public responses to CSA on individuals' purchase intention. The findings of our study shed light on the moderating role of value alignment and the mediating roles of online engagement and perceived motivation in this process.

The study examines the impact of CSA from the perspective of legitimacy theory and investigates what polarized public responses or societal expectations mean for corporations to legitimize their CSA activities. Specifically, it shows evidence consistent with prior research that companies involved in social advocacy often provoke polarized public reactions (Hydock et al., 2019; Rim et al., 2019; Waymer & Logan, 2021; Xu & Xiong, 2020). This study enriches the understanding of divided responses to CSA by revealing the moderating effect of value alignment. We find that individuals whose values are highly aligned with the company's CSA stance and read supportive responses yielded a higher likelihood of online engagement, suggesting that by taking a stance, companies send concrete signals to their stakeholders and thus reinforce their connection with each other (Hydock et al., 2019). This finding is important because it contributes to the literature examining advocacy fit and aligning CSA initiatives with customers (Bloom, et al., 2006; Hydock et al., 2020; Neureiter & Bhattacharya, 2021). The legitimacy of CSA activities requires companies to understand the value of aligning to the right causes and movements. Prior studies contend the advocacy efforts that companies engage in should not merely align with corporations' values, but also with the values of consumers (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020).



Aligned practice and messaging with consumers' values are important because a company's existence often depends on its ability to earn legitimacy from the community (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). Our findings confirmed previous research about building legitimacy as "a process whereby organizations seek approval for their acts from groups in society" (Kaplan & Ruland, 1991, p.320). The study added to the literature by showing in the context of polarized CSA responses, companies pursuing a sociopolitical stance can earn and strengthen their legitimacy by aligning their explicit purpose and values with public and societal expectations of contributing to social good (Dodd, 2018) because legitimacy relies on the social acceptance of organizations and their actions (Suchman, 1995). In particular, positive public responses further advance corporations' legitimacy, reputation, moral identity, and brand value propositions in a manner that aligns corporate stances with its stakeholders, which fosters public engagement. While corporations taking positions on controversial issues often encounter polarized public responses, the positive messages supporting corporate activism on social media may potentially serve as a salient signal of what the company values and believes to benefit the social good (Afego & Alagidede, 2021), and encourage people to further engage in the public deliberation and democratic process. As Scherer and Palazzo (2011) contend, corporations meet societal expectations and become politicized in two ways by self-regulating with an understanding of social responsibility and by addressing political issues in collaboration with state actors and civil society actors. In this way, corporations gradually develop into new agents of democratic processes of control and legitimacy.

In addition, our study demonstrates the mediating roles of online engagement and perceived motivation on purchasing intention. Consistent with extant research suggesting a company's stance on social issues may generate positive effects on consumer outcomes (Dodd &

Supa, 2014; Kim et al., 2019; Park & Jiang, 2020), the study identified the mediating effects of online engagement and perceived motivation on the link between divided CSA responses and purchasing intention. Specifically, for participants who had high and moderate value alignment with corporations' advocacy stances, exposure to positive responses on social media leads to increased online engagement and positive perceived motivation of companies' advocacy activities, which thereby enhance their purchasing intention. This finding implies that supportive public responses toward CSA not only allow the corporation to maintain and enhance its legitimacy and reputation but also persuaded individuals with both high and moderate value alignment to interact with the brand, support its CSA motives, and facilitate purchasing intention. The findings are in line with previous research that both online engagement and public perception of a company's motive for involving in CSA initiatives acts as key factors in shaping consumers' attitude toward the company and their behavioral intentions (Chung & Lee, 2019; Kim et al., 2019; Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020; Park & Jiang, 2020). In the CSA context, when the public actively engage with the brands on social media and believe a company's advocacy efforts are sincere, authentic, and serving the public, they may have favorable attitudes and behavioral intentions, such as purchase intention and word-of-mouth intention (Kim et al., 2019).

Overall, these findings contribute to the knowledge about how companies may legitimately engage in CSA activities by investigating the underlying mechanisms through which divided public responses affect individuals' purchasing intentions. To some degree, polarized responses to a company's advocacy activities reflect societal expectations for corporations to generate a positive impact for the broader community they purport to help. Such efforts are not only considered as companies' obligations but also as an expectation or a voluntary activity where

corporations legitimize their stand on the issues by playing an increasingly vital role as problem-solvers of the most important issues facing society (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Dodd, 2018).

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

This study answers a call from Dodd (2018) to further examine how companies increasingly are expected to engage in social-political issues to maintain legitimacy. Using two real CSA cases, this study advances scholarly knowledge on how boycotting and supporting CSA messages influence consumers' attitudes and purchasing intention. Contributing to prior studies suggesting companies who achieve alignment with customer expectations can enhance trust, and loyalty, and maximize growth potential (Roberts & Alpert, 2010), our findings reveal that individuals who strongly align themselves with companies' advocacy stances and read supporting responses yielded higher intentions of engagement. Consistent with prior studies (Afego & Aladidede, 2021; Rim et al., 2019), CSA has become an integral part of a corporate's strategic issue management and legitimacy. Corporations attempt to sustain their legitimacy by aligning their actions with stakeholders' values and expectations.

Furthermore, our findings shed light on the mediating roles of online engagement and perceived motivations in affecting purchase intention (Austin & Gaither, 2016; Gupta & Pirsch, 2006; Park & Jiang, 2020). We found that individuals with high and moderate value alignment and exposed to positive social media messages yielded a high likelihood of online engagement and became more likely to support the motives of brands' campaigns, which in turn promoted their purchasing intention. This finding can serve scholars well to recognize the interconnections among stakeholders, value alignment, online engagement, and perceived motives when examining how a company's advocacy actions may lead to positive financial outcomes and favorable evaluations

from stakeholders, who can go beyond brand ambassadors to support the brand facing public backlash.

Practically, our study also provides knowledge for practitioners and companies. Specifically, practitioners should not only be aware that involving in CSA campaigns can backfire and generate negative public responses, but also pay attention to stakeholders' attributions for advocacy issues, emphasize formulating and addressing CSA stances that advance social good, and take a vital responsibility to be real social change agents (Winston, 2016). Corporations need to define the controversial issue in a positive manner and legitimate their involvement with that issue (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) by devoting greater efforts to convince consumers that the motive underlying their advocacy efforts is genuine to ignite social change. The findings on value alignment show evidence to Hatch and Schultz (2008), who contend that companies who neglect the alignment between the organization and its public run the risk of falling victim to corporate narcissism.

Furthermore, corporations who consider engaging in social activism need to carefully assess the risk and the reward and evaluate whether the message will appeal to or alienate current and future customers. Companies taking the lead to advocate for social issues such as social justice, race, gender, and inequality can express their stand in a manner that speaks to their values or moral convictions and legitimize their positions, which can bring rewarding benefits as evidenced by the study such as increased engagement intentions, strong support of CSA motives, and enhanced purchasing loyalty, as consumers now become more politically and socially conscious, and expect companies to hold the same obligations as others of civic society (Park & Jiang, 2020).

### **Limitations**

Our study encompasses several limitations that need to be addressed. First, this study had a relatively small sample size and used a nonprobability sample based on an online panel from Amazon's MTurk, which limits its generalization. Although the study's population was not representative, the participants from MTurk are internet users and appropriate to test the impact of polarized tweets. Future research could consider using a large sample to further test the findings and examine how corporations advocate social issues and engage a divided digital audience.

Second, the current findings are only limited to Twitter, and Pew Research Center (2022) indicates about 23% of American adults use Twitter. Future research should investigate how people on other social media platforms responded to CSA activities and examine whether other factors such as perceived authenticity in affecting CSA business outcomes and organizational legitimacy, as extant literature suggested authenticity resulting from aligned, values-driven CSA messaging and practice is key to the long-term success and legitimacy of an activist brand (Alhouti et al., 2015; Hydock et al, 2020; Kim et al., 2019) and improves public trust in and satisfaction toward the organization (Lim & Young, 2021; Park & Jiang, 2020).

Third, our study did not investigate the effects of boycotting CSA responses on stakeholders who disapprove of a corporation's claim in an issue. Future research could examine stakeholders' assessments of a corporation's advocacy behaviors by using a public segmentation approach (Hong & Li, 2020), and examine how such backlash from boycotters affects perceptions of CSA legitimacy and behavioral intentions.

Last but not least, while our study used two real CSA examples (e.g., Nike and Gillette), the results may not apply to other CSA case scenarios. Future research should consider examining other popular CSA cases since more empirical studies are needed to examine the growing trend of

CSA in achieving a thorough understanding of the outcomes and ramifications of corporations in taking stances on controversial issues.

Note.

1. We measure participants' familiarity with Nike's commercial to check the success of randomization. Results indicated that there were no significant differences between participants being exposed to a supporting tweet ( $M=4.51$ ,  $SD=2.23$ ) and a boycotting tweet ( $M=4.26$ ,  $SD=2.19$ ),  $t(181) = -.75$ ,  $p=.45$ . In other words, the two groups were (in expectation) identical in terms of familiarity with Nike's commercial.
2. There are two options for retweets. Retweet the information without adding one's comments. Commenting on the tweet in our study refers to retweeting the message by adding a comment. Reply is to response to something written by someone on Twitter.
3. With regards to the familiarity of Gillette's CSA campaign, there were no significant differences between participants being exposed to a supporting tweet ( $M=4.62$ ,  $SD=2.19$ ) and a boycotting tweet ( $M=4.24$ ,  $SD=2.27$ ),  $t(185) = -1.17$ ,  $p=.24$ . The two groups were identical in terms of familiarity with Gillette's commercial.

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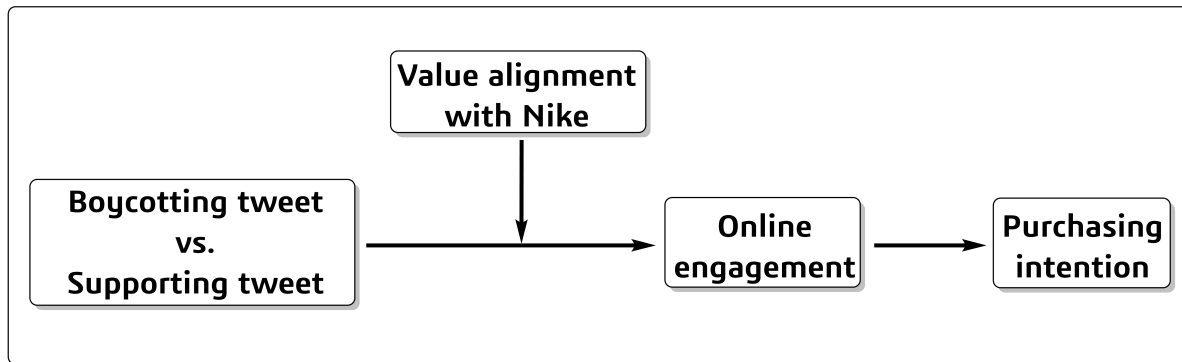
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Table 1. Descriptive and Reliability Results of Measures

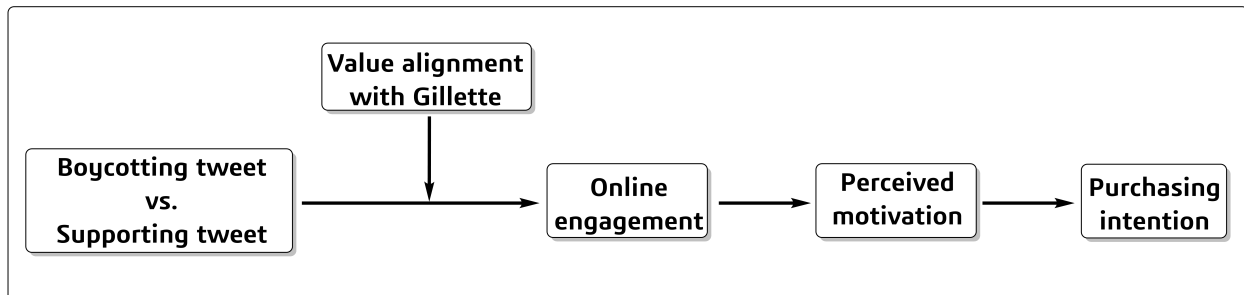
	Study 1: Nike	Study 2: Gillette
Measures		
Value alignment	$M=5.75, SD=1.31$ Cronbach's $\alpha=.88$	$M=5.74, SD=1.37$ Cronbach's $\alpha=.88$
Online Engagement	$M=3.68, SD=1.77$ Cronbach's $\alpha=.83$	$M=3.88, SD=1.70$ Cronbach's $\alpha=.82$
Perceived Motivation	— —	$M=5.40, SD=1.24$ Cronbach's $\alpha=.89$
Purchasing Intentions	$M=5.09, SD=1.76$ Cronbach's $\alpha=.93$	$M=5.29, SD=1.53$ Cronbach's $\alpha=.92$

Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Study 1



*Note.* Figure 1 describes value alignment with Nike moderates the effects of divided CSA responses on purchase intention of Nike products through online engagement.

Figure 2. Conceptual Model for Study 2



*Note.* Figure 2 describes value alignment with Gillette moderates the effects of divided CSA responses on purchase intention of Gillette products through online engagement and perceived motive.

Figure 3. The Interaction Effect of Divided Responses and Value Alignment with Nike on Online Engagement

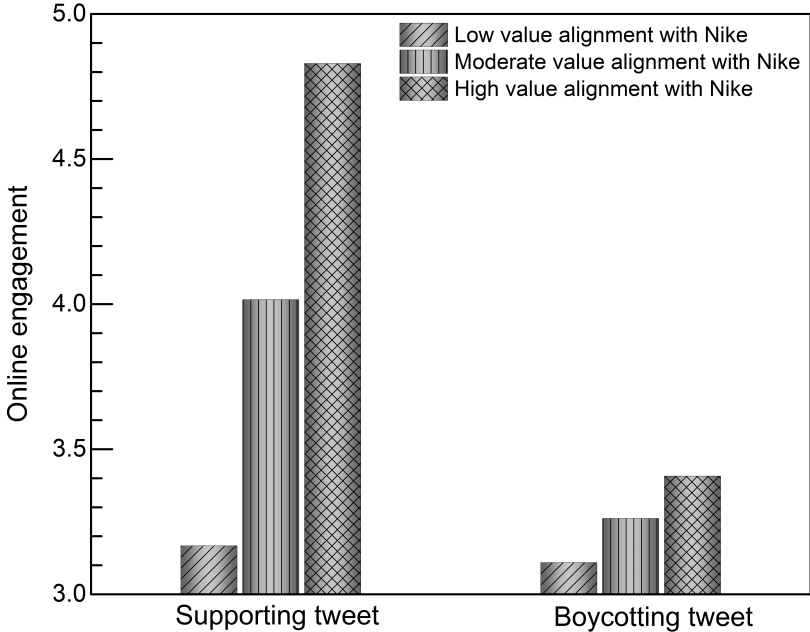


Figure 4. The Interaction Effect of Divided Responses and Value Alignment with Gillette on Online Engagement

