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Organizational readiness for issue polarization: how corporate political engagement can optimize organization-stakeholder issue discussion in social media environment

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Abstract

Purpose – As a sticky crisis challenge, toxic polarization continues to mutate and confront organizations and democratic society. How corporations engage stakeholders in social-political issue communication without exacerbating the situation unexpectedly, has become a critical question for corporate communicators and crisis managers. Taking a readiness approach to proactively manage polarization-triggered threats as corporations are engaged in social-political issue communication on social media, this study examines whether and how corporations might contribute to alleviating socio-political issue polarization and facilitating stakeholder issue engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is a 3 (corporate political engagement approach: pro-issue stance vs anti-issue stance vs political CSR) × 2 (stakeholder comment valence: positive vs negative) × 2 (issue: gun control vs refugee immigration) mixed-design online experiment conducted among 1,589 US adults.

Findings – Our findings reveal both challenges and opportunities should a corporation choose to explicitly communicate its issue stance with stakeholders on social media: On one hand, it unavoidably increased stakeholders' perceived issue polarization; on the other, the increased issue polarization perception seemed to motivate stakeholders to engage more in social-political discussion led by the corporation.

Originality/value – Our findings showcased what type of corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues is more expected in terms of its impact on perceived polarization or political discussion among stakeholders, contributing theoretically and practically to organizational readiness for social-political issue polarization challenges.

Keywords Corporate communication, Corporate political engagement, Social media, Negative comments

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Growing politicization and polarization are more concerning than ever in the current social environment (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021) and constantly mutating in the wide array of sticky crisis challenges (Crisis Communication Think Tank [CCTT], 2022). For organizations to be ready for managing toxic polarization as a sticky crisis challenge, there are several key considerations based on the research insights from political communication and crisis management. First, when stakeholders are actively engaged in some socially important issues, it is not a good idea for them to watch things play out because they are expected to play a role, and sometimes, their discourse is unavoidably related to those controversies

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(Coombs and Holladay, 2018; van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021). Second, organizational efforts, especially those from corporations, might help alleviate the disruption of the public sphere caused by polarization (Coombs, 2023). As the trend of decreasing political trust accompanies growing expectations of corporations (Edelman, 2024), corporations could leverage their influence on publics to promote open dialogue and mutual understanding through their communication on socio-political issues. Third, when organizations explicitly pick a side on a controversial issue, they are likely to alienate those who hold an opposite stance and thus reinforce polarization (Parcha, 2023). As a result, how to address polarization challenges and optimize corporate political engagement, including whether and how to speak up on socio-political issues, has become a key element in organizational crisis readiness consideration (Jin *et al.*, 2024). To date, a clear understanding of how organizations can play a meaningful role in alleviating polarization and further facilitating deliberative democracy (Ferraro, 2019), when involved in contentious issue communication with stakeholders, is lacking as evidenced in a scarcity of empirical examination.

Two considerations might help streamline the assumptions. First, the impacts of organizational online engagement in politicized issues could be contingent on the specific forms or strategies that they take (Wettstein and Baur, 2016). Second, the consequences of organizational actions could be further confounded by today's social media environment. Given the controversial nature of socio-political issues, hostile responses (e.g. negative or skeptical comments on social media) could easily arise alongside organizational communication efforts (Parcha, 2023). Researchers have been concerned that negative and skeptical comments could impair the intended message effects (Chen *et al.*, 2017). When communicating controversial socio-political issues on social media, corporations should also take into account the potential influence of negativity and skepticism on user comments.

To advance our understanding of whether and how different types of corporate engagement in socio-political issues on social media can lead to differentiated stakeholder responses, the current study aims to examine (1) whether different approaches of corporate engagement in controversial socio-political issues (i.e. corporate political advocacy [supporting or opposing an issue] vs political CSR) could exert differentiated effect on how stakeholders perceive and behave in the polarized social environment and (2) whether the effects of corporate political engagement will be impacted by the types of social environment (e.g. hostile debates with overwhelmingly negative or skeptical user comments vs more civil forums). To this end, corporate engagement in two controversial socio-political issues, gun control and refugee immigration, was examined using a 3 (corporate political engagement approach: pro-issue stance vs anti-issue stance vs political CSR) $\times$ 2 (stakeholder comment valence: positive vs negative) $\times$ 2 (issue: gun control vs refugee immigration) mixed-design online experiment among US adults. Drawing from literature on corporate political engagement, this study aims to fill the gap by showing how corporations, another important politized actor in deliberative democracy (Ferraro, 2019), might serve as a source of perceived polarization and shape stakeholders' political engagement. The findings help advance the understanding of organizational readiness for threats, conflicts, risks, crisis and sticky crises (e.g. Jin *et al.*, 2024) in an increasingly polarizing society and media environment, as well as provide practical implications as to how corporations can better manage issue polarization triggered or amplified threats in order to contribute to deliberative processes on social media.

Literature review

To ground the understanding of potential threats and opportunities corporations face in an increasingly polarized environment in interconnected theoretical frameworks, this study is constructed upon theories and empirical findings in three main research areas: corporate political engagement, stakeholder online engagement and issue polarization. The following review of literature lays the foundation for our examination of corporate issue communication outcomes in social media environment as a function of different corporate political engagement

approaches, corporate political advocacy (i.e. taking an explicit stance to support or oppose a specific issue) or political CSR (i.e. promoting open dialogue and mutual understanding).

Corporate engagement in socio-political issues

As suggested by the concept of issue arena, corporations, like other social actors such as politicians and journalists, may influence the discussions surrounding socio-political issues (Luoma-aho and Vos, 2010 from van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021). Instead of organization-centric perspective that identifies key stakeholders, the issue-centric perspective focuses on the interaction between stake and holders in the complex mediatized society where the interests of corporations and publics sometimes may conflict (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021). In the mediatized environment where society expect corporations to be more accountable in socio-political issues, corporations can actively engage in controversial socio-political issues through several different approaches such as corporate political activity, political corporate social responsibility (political CSR) and corporate political/social advocacy (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021; Wettstein and Baur, 2016). One major difference between corporate political activity and the other types of socio-political engagement is its starting point of business interests (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021; Wettstein and Baur, 2016). For corporations that engage in corporate political activities (e.g. lobbying to impede harsh regulation and policy), their chief concern and impetus are their own interests rather than any social goods (Lock and Seele, 2016; Weber *et al.*, 2023). A typical example of corporate political activity is that a company makes an effort to advocate for a specific policy because it will benefit its industry. In contrast, political CSR and corporate political/social advocacy share the commonality of being established upon the promotion of social interests (Wettstein and Baur, 2016). Although the business nature of corporations makes impossible a complete erasure of an economic spirit behind those actions (Wettstein and Baur, 2016), a motivation beyond private interest is still a remarkable indicator of those two types of political involvements. This study will focus on these two ways of engagement that put social goods as a priority, given our interest in understanding how corporate engagement drives public discussion.

Corporate political advocacy. Explicit stance-taking is a defining point of corporate political advocacy (Dodd and Supa, 2015; Weber *et al.*, 2023), implying a stance advocated in the public spotlight rather than a game with political institutions behind the curtain (Wettstein and Baur, 2016) and an abandonment of neutrality in responses to controversy (Austin *et al.*, 2019). Corporate political advocacy, also known as corporate social advocacy, was defined as "voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same" (Wettstein and Baur, 2016, p. 200). On top of that, relative to corporate political lobbying, corporate political advocacy is not for self-serving purposes, and hence the stance it advocates for usually does not have a direct relevance to its core business (Wettstein and Baur, 2016). In the polarized environment, corporate political advocacy based on its inherent value has been considered as a recommended response strategy when confronting a divided public (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021).

Although the choice of advocating for a specific socio-political stance is made in light of the divided social environment, corporations' involvement could also exert impacts on the environment either directly or through its influence on other social actors. For example, Parcha (2023) proposed that the relationship between corporate political advocacy and political polarization is symbiotic. While corporate political advocacy is one of the corporate responses to political polarization, the latter could be raised by the former. The influence of corporations on polarization mainly comes from corporation's inherent influence as a political actor (Ferraro, 2019) and the controversial nature of political advocacy (Parcha, 2023). The impact of corporate political advocacy on political polarization could be broken down into two levels. Individual-wise, the outcomes of corporate political advocacy associated with polarization include approval of the supported stance, disapproval of the opposed stance (Hydock *et al.*, 2019), political

participation and discussion (DiRusso *et al.*, 2022; Zhang, 2023). Corporation-wise, advocating for a particular stance could shape a corporate image associated with political leaning (Democratic vs Republican; Parcha, 2023). Incorporation of corporations into group divides could serve as an exemplar that boosts the perceptions of categorization, a psychological factor leading to polarization (Westfall *et al.*, 2015).

Political corporate social responsibility. Corporations can also play a role in promoting open dialogue and mutual understanding, which can be traced back to the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), another type of corporate behavior in responding to political polarization. As CSR is understood as an umbrella term that encompasses various corporate practices that demonstrate corporations' taking responsibility for their social and environmental influence (Frynas and Stephens, 2015), political CSR is also an umbrella concept (Scherer *et al.*, 2016) that has a concentration on the political implications associated with CSR activities (Frynas and Stephens, 2015). Sample political implications include engagement in public deliberations and contribution to collective decisions (Scherer *et al.*, 2016). The legitimacy of political CSR lies in the contribution to the resolution of public issues, such as playing a role in educating governance, reducing health inequality and conflict resolution (Scherer *et al.*, 2016).

In the context of politicization, political CSR was defined as "a form of (global) dialogical governance, whereby corporations play an active role in the regulation of market transactions and seek to impact socio-political situations for the better" (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021, p. 6). Like corporate political advocacy, political CSR also emphasizes an overt political engagement with motives beyond self-interest (Wettstein and Baur, 2016). However, two corporate behaviors have recognizable differences. Specifically, while corporate political advocacy joins the conflicting situations and promotes one stance over the other, political CSR emphasizes a balance of interests where the corporation remains neutral and doesn't lean toward any side (Wettstein and Baur, 2016). Compared to corporate political advocacy which alienates some groups and individuals who have a disagreeing stance, political CSR aims to promote open dialogue and mutual understanding and play a role in negotiation (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021).

As corporate political advocacy and political CSR differ in their goals, they are likely to generate distinct impacts on the polarized social environment through its influence on individual perceptions and behaviors. We will focus on perceived polarization, a perceptual level of indicator of political polarization and political discussion, a behavioral level concept that has great implications for polarization, and examine how those two ways of corporate political engagement might contribute in a distinct manner.

Perceived polarization and its formation

Polarization refers to a division in attitudes about politicized issues between social groups within the general public (Enders and Armaly, 2019). One of the main manifestations of political polarization is perceived polarization (Weber *et al.*, 2021). Perceived polarization could carry two layers of meanings (Yang *et al.*, 2016). One refers to the perceived distance between oneself or one group and the average position of members from the outgroup (Enders and Armaly, 2019), and the other considers a bystander perspective as it focuses on the perceived distance between different politicized groups to which one does not belong for their issue stances (Yang *et al.*, 2016). Perceived polarization and actual polarization do not always overlap as a gap between them has been observed, that is, stakeholders are likely to overestimate the degree of polarization (Westfall *et al.*, 2015). However, because individual actions tend to be more directly affected by their understanding of reality than the actual reality, perceived polarization could be more influential than actual polarization (Enders and Armaly, 2019).

Given that people likely hold a perceptual polarization deviated from reality, researchers have explored the internal and external factors that might shape people's perceived polarization. According to Westfall *et al.* (2015), people's perceived polarization could be shaped by three psychological factors: categorization, partisan identification strength and attitude extremity. Specifically, people will further perform a self-categorization through

which they assign themselves to a specific group based on the categorization (Van Boven *et al.*, 2012), and those who strongly identify with one particular group may feel a greater distance from the other group (Westfall *et al.*, 2015). Besides, the perceptual polarization could also be a projection of one's attitude extremity as the more extreme one's issue attitude is, the stronger extremity that the person will perceive the public have (Van Boven *et al.*, 2012; Westfall *et al.*, 2015). Perceived polarization could also be shaped by people's external exposure. For example, Chen *et al.* (2022) found that incidental exposure to information contradictory to one's pre-existing attitude on social media could indirectly affect perceived polarization. An international survey found that traditional news media (e.g. newspaper and television) usage and online news consumption were related to perceived polarization (Yang *et al.*, 2016). As the relationship between the exposure to politicized actors (e.g. social media and mass media) and perceived polarization has been well explored, the impact of another politicized actor (i.e. organizations) is still missing. Thus, we attempt to examine how corporate engagement in socio-political issues could play a role in cueing perceived polarization.

To our knowledge, no empirical research to date has tested this effect. Conceptual work (e.g. Parcha, 2023) proposed that corporate political advocacy might amplify the polarization. As perceived polarization is an important component of polarization, corporate political advocacy might also increase people's perceptual polarization. It is likely that a corporation that participates in the contentious discourse could serve as an exemplar that reinforces perceived categorization in terms of the specific issue when people link the corporate image with a certain ideological or partisan group. Since corporations could also engage in contentious issues through political CSR, will two types of participation exert different effects on perceived polarization? We pose our first research question:

RQ1. How, if at all, do corporate political advocacy (i.e. supporting or opposing a social-political issue) and political CSR (i.e. calling for open dialogue on the focal issue) lead to varied levels of perceived polarization?

Stakeholder engagement in political discussions

There is no clear-cut answer to whether political deliberation or discussion is an effective solution to polarization so far. Empirical findings showed that discussions with opinion opponents could either reinforce polarization (Wojcieszak, 2011) or depolarize (Fishkin *et al.*, 2021). Despite the mixed evidence, political discussion holds a high level of relevance in addressing polarization. Polarization, as a conflict centered on opposing political beliefs, is subject to decrease through the communication between conflicting parties given that communication and deliberation usually serve as a starting point in conflict resolution (Barthold, 2020; Wojcieszak, 2011). Political discussions provide opportunities for people with opposing beliefs to interact and communicate with each other, which fosters open-mindedness and mutual understanding.

Corporate engagement in socio-political issues could impact individual behaviors associated with polarization, such as political participation (DiRusso *et al.*, 2022), and engagement in discursive activities (Zhang, 2023). Although political discussion is an important component of deliberative democracy, there is limited evaluation regarding how exposure to corporate communication of contentious issues will influence individual political discussions and the underlying mechanisms (Zhang, 2023). Especially on social media, little is known about whether users would be motivated to talk with others to express their position and persuade those who hold inconsistent standpoints or to build a stronger connection with their like-minded group after viewing corporate participation in contentious issues. To get a clearer picture of how corporate political advocacy and political CSR messages will impact people's intention to engage in political discussions and whether their impacts differ, we further ask:

RQ2. How, if at all, do political CSR and corporate political advocacy lead to varied levels of intention to engage in political discussions?

Given perceived polarization's effect on politicalized behavior, it is likely that viewing corporate politicized communication will affect political discussions through its influence on perceived polarization. Mixed evaluations exist regarding the link between perceived polarization and individual political behaviors, and the contention revolves around whether perceived polarization may keep stakeholders from political engagement or facilitate their participation (Linde, 2020). One line of research found that perceived polarization had a positive relationship with individual political participation and voting-related behaviors (Bordalo *et al.*, 2020; Enders and Armaly, 2019; Van Boven *et al.*, 2012). Some other studies suggested pessimistic consequences of perceived polarization in terms of political disengagement (Enders and Armaly, 2019; Linde, 2020). A finding pertaining to issue polarization is that a negative relationship exists between perceived polarization and expectations of public deliberation (Hwang *et al.*, 2014). As low expectations of deliberation might discourage people from deliberative discussions, perceived polarization might make conflict resolution even more challenging (Hwang *et al.*, 2014). Given the mixed findings concerning the political consequences of perceived polarization, we ask the following research question:

RQ3. How, if at all, do corporate political advocacy and political CSR lead to varied levels of intention to engage in political discussions through affecting perceived polarization?

The effects of corporate engagement in socio-political issues will be examined in a social media environment because social media is a venue where lots of discussions surrounding corporate engagement in social issues occur (Rim *et al.*, 2020). When evaluating the effects of corporate communication on social media, it is significant to take into account the potential impacts of negative or skeptical user comments.

Comment negativity effect

In today's online environment, negative comments seem to be inevitable as social media sites are overflowing with disagreement, conflict, uncivil language and negative effects. The hostile media landscape is closely connected with political polarization. Public sphere put forward by Habermas describes an area where individuals and groups deliberate on social issues, build mutual understanding and streamline democratic policymaking (Brüggemann and Meyer, 2023). However, polarization makes the public sphere disconnected or disrupted where voices with extreme attitudes become centralized and the negativity toward outgroups gets amplified (Brüggemann and Meyer, 2023). In this context, even if a corporation's expressions about polarized issues align with the majority of its stakeholders' expectations, it still exposes the corporation to the risk of receiving negativity from those who perceive the corporation as an outgroup. After all, there is no uniform voice among publics on polarized issues.

Due to the controversial nature of socio-political issues, corporate communication might alienate some public and thus receive some negative comments. In this way, when stakeholders view corporate communication of controversial issues on social media, they might read some negative responses to the posts as well. Empirical studies found that exposure to negative or skeptical comments could impair the intended message effects, as originally effective messages can lead to negative message evaluations and weaker or undesired effects when presented with negative comments (Boot *et al.*, 2021; Chen *et al.*, 2017). Specifically, Chen *et al.* (2017) found that negative comments nullified the psychological associations that the message strategy intended to make in the context of corporate communication. Boot *et al.* (2021) found that negative comments significantly increased people's negative judgment about post content. Therefore, it is important to consider whether the message effect could be altered by comment negativity, which could help build a more accurate estimation of message effects in the real world. The undesired effects led by comment negativity could be explained

by negativity bias. Negativity bias refers to the phenomenon where negative information has been placed more weight in recipients' information processing and decision-making compared to positive information (Meffert *et al.*, 2006). Positive comments were found to have a lower influence compared to negative comments (Boot *et al.*, 2021). To obtain a better conception of how negativity bias might play a role in individual's processing and response to corporate communication of controversial socio-political issues, the study will test whether the effects of corporate messages will be moderated by comment negativity. Therefore, we pose the following research question:

RQ4. How, if at all, is the effect of corporate engagement in socio-political issues (corporate political advocacy vs political CSR) on intention to engage in political discussions through perceived polarization moderated by comment negativity?

Method

To answer the above research questions, a 3 (corporate political engagement approach: pro-issue stance vs anti-issue stance vs political CSR) × 2 (comment negativity: positive vs negative) × 2 (issue topic: gun control vs refugee immigration) mixed-design online experiment was conducted among US adults, with issue topic as a within-subject factor. Both gun control and immigration are hot-button issues that, with deep political divisions, catch public attention (Hulse, 2018; Newport, 2022). This study was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at a large public university in the United States.

Participants

Data collection was performed by Qualtrics, a professional research firm, in 2023. Using a proportional quota sampling method to match the age, gender and education ratios of the US population, 1,589 participants completed the study (mean age = 48.7 years, SD = 17.1; 53.7% female; 69.8% Caucasian).

Experimental design

After reading the digital consent and agreeing to participate, participants were directed to a short introductory paragraph talking about the societal debate over a controversial political issue (i.e. gun control and refugee immigration). Following the introductory paragraph, they were randomly assigned to one of six conditions through Qualtrics's randomization feature. Six conditions involved a Facebook post released by a company, advocating the organizational stance for the social issue, and five comments from Facebook users, showing their support or opposition to the company's post. After reading their assigned material, participants were asked about their perceived polarization of the issue, and their intention to engage in the political discussion. The order of presenting topics (i.e. gun control and refugee immigration) was also randomized.

To ensure ecological validity, both companies' post content and user comments were adapted from real organization announcements. Meanwhile, to avoid the potential confounding impact that individuals' pre-existing attitude toward or personal experience with a particular corporation have on their responses, a fictitious US-based retail company was proposed as the source of the corporation's post. However, to ensure the relevancy of the corporation in individuals' daily life, a brief description of the corporation was provided prior to presenting its post to enhance the perception of the corporation's involvement in the specific issue. In the gun control issue, the fictitious corporation was described as "a major retailer of firearms and ammunition."

Corporate political engagement. Corporate engagement in political issues was manipulated as the company's Facebook post, advocating their stance on gun control or refugee immigration issues. Three varied stances regarding the political issue were developed: supporting the issue (i.e. gun control or refugee immigration), against the issue and political

CSR (i.e. calling for open dialogue). Depending on the stance, the company's action such as hiring refugees or stopping servicing automatic firearms (support), first hiring American people or funding pro-gun groups and organizing in-person town hall meetings (political CSR) was highlighted in the post.

Comment negativity. Five comments from anonymous users were presented on the same page, following the company's Facebook post. In the positive comment conditions, three comments supported the corporation's claim on pro-issue, against-issue or political CSR while two comments opposed it. In the negative comment conditions, the ratio was reversed.

According to the manipulation check, the manipulations of organizational stance in the Facebook post and comment negativity) are successful (see Tables 1 and 2).

Dependent variables

Perceived polarization. Participants were asked to illustrate how they perceive the issue of supporting gun control and supporting refugee immigration regulation was on a 7-point scale position, where "1 = Strong conservative, 4 = Neutral, and 7 = Strong liberal" (adopted from Chen *et al.*, 2022). By folding the scales, higher value indicated greater perceived polarization (range 1–4, Gun control: $M = 2.39$, $SD = 1.10$; Refugee immigration: $M = 2.38$, $SD = 1.05$).

Political discussion intention. Participants were asked to evaluate their intention to discuss the political issue (i.e. gun control and refugee immigration) after reading the assigned material, on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1 = Strongly disagree" to "7 = Strongly agree." Sample items, adapted from Molina and Jennings (2018) and Hmielowski *et al.* (2022), include "I wanted to contribute to the discussion," and "I want to participate in similar discussions in the future." Higher value indicated the higher intention to engage in political discussion (Gun control: $\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.47$; Refugee immigration: $\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.47$).

Table 1. Manipulation checks for corporate political engagement

Manipulation check items	Manipulation: organizational stance CSA: against gun control *N*	 %	 CSA: support gun control *N*	 %	 Political CSR *N*	 %
Is against gun control, and support gun right	381_a	71.9%	56_b	10.6%	59_b	11.1%
Supports gun control	104_a	19.6%	429_b	81.2%	128_a	24.1%
Support open dialogue on gun issue	45_a	8.5%	43_a	8.1%	344_b	64.8%
Significance	Pearson χ^2 (4, N = 1,589) = 1136.27, $p \leq 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.60$					

Manipulation check items	CSA: against refugee immigration *N*	 %	CSA: support refugee immigration *N*	 %	Political CSR *N*	 %
Is against gun control, and support refugee immigration	397_a	75.3%	28_b	5.4%	59_c	10.9%
Supports refugee immigration	76_a	14.4%	451_b	86.4%	110_c	20.4%
Support open dialogue on refugee immigration	54_a	10.2%	43_a	8.2%	371_b	68.7%
Significance	Pearson χ^2 (4, N = 1,589) = 1370.43, $p \leq 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.66$					

Note(s): Each subscript letter denotes a subset of organization stance categories whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the 0.05 level

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Table 2. Manipulation checks for comment negativity

Comment valence	Manipulation: comment valence *n*	Mean	SD	*t*	df	*p*
Topic: gun control						
Positive	772	4.04	1.971	−10.39	1,587	<0.001
Negative	817	5.00	1.703			
Topic: refugee immigration						
Positive	796	4.20	1.971	−10.34	1,587	<0.001
Negative	793	5.11	1.703			

Source(s): Authors' own creation

Results

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA), controlling for age, gender and political ideology, was conducted to examine the effect of corporate engagement in political advocacy and political CSR on participants' perceived polarization (RQ1) and political discussion intention (RQ2). PROCESS macro (model 4 and model 8), with 5,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2013), was performed to answer RQ3 (mediation model) and RQ4 (moderated mediation model). SPSS (version 28.0) and PROCESS (Version 4.2) were used to conduct all analyses mentioned above.

The main effect of corporate political engagement

In the topic of gun control, ANCOVA results reported a significant effect on participants' perceived polarization $F(2, 1573) = 17.71$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.024$. A Bonferroni post hoc test illustrated that the engagement in the corporate political advocacy led to higher perceived polarization of the gun control issue among participants than the corporation's engagement in political CSR (i.e. calling for open dialogue; $M = 2.18$, $SE = 0.05$), $p < 0.001$. Among corporate political advocacy engagements, the corporation's anti-gun control stance ($M = 2.59$, $SE = 0.05$; $p = 0.037$) led to higher perceived polarization than pro-gun control stance ($M = 2.42$, $SE = 0.05$). However, there was no significant difference in individuals' political discussion intention among three types of corporate political engagements, $F(2, 1573) = 0.49$, $p = 0.610$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.001$.

In the topic of refugee immigration, ANCOVA results revealed a significant difference in perceived polarization, $F(2, 1573) = 34.83$, $p < 0.001$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.042$. A Bonferroni post hoc test showed that the engagement in political CSR (i.e. calling for open dialogue; $M = 2.08$, $SE = 0.04$) led to lower perceived polarization among participants compared with the engagement in corporate political advocacy, either supporting or opposing the gun control policy, $p < 0.001$. However, there was no significant difference between the corporation's pro-gun control stance ($M = 2.50$, $SE = 0.04$) and anti-gun control stance ($M = 2.56$, $SE = 0.04$; $p = 0.94$). Meanwhile, there was no significant difference in participants' political discussion intention among three types of corporate political engagements, $F(2, 1573) = 0.46$, $p = 0.632$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.001$.

The mediation effect of perceived polarization on political discussion

Through the post-hoc analyses, RQ3 further examines if the perceived polarization mediated the relationship between corporate political engagement and participants' political discussion engagement. Using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2013), we performed two mediation models, with the corporation's engagement being indicator coded (1 = stance supporting the issue, and 2 = political CSR) and the stance against the issue as the reference category, for both gun control and refugee immigration issue.

In the topic of gun control, the results revealed a negative indirect effect of organizational stance on individuals' political discussion intention, mediated by perceived polarization [supporting: point estimate = − 0.01, 95% *CI* [−0.03, −0.00]; political CSR: point estimate = − 0.03, 95% *CI* [−0.07, −0.00]. Specifically, exposure to the corporate advocacy for supporting gun control or corporate political CSR (versus opposing condition) significantly decreased one's perceived polarization toward the issue, which positively influences one's intention to discuss the political issues.

In the topic of refugee immigration, a similar negative indirect effect was detected on the relationship between corporate political CSR (vs opposing condition) and political discussion intention through perceived polarization, point estimate = −0.06, 95% *CI* [−0.10, −0.03] (see Table 3).

Comment negativity and conditional effect

Using PROCESS model 8, which examines the moderation effect of comment valence between the corporate political engagement and participants' perceived polarization and between corporate political engagement and individual political discussion, independent variable consisted of the indicator coded corporate political engagement (1 = stance supporting the issue and 2 = political CSR), and the moderator was the comment valence (0 = against the organization and 1 = supporting the organization).

In both topics, the moderation effect of comments negativity was nonsignificant on perceived polarization when the corporation supported the issue or called for dialogue (versus opposing the issue), neither on political discussion intention. However, exposure to comments supporting the corporation (vs opposing the corporation), no matter its stance on the gun control issue significantly increased participants' intentions to discuss the issue. In other words, the effect of a corporation's online political engagement in social issues on participants' related perceived polarization and discussion intention occurred regardless of the comment valence.

Discussion

Through mediatization, various social systems, including media and corporations, have adapted to the media logic, actively engaging in politicized issues for social good and to avoid

Table 3. Mediation on political discussion intention via perceived polarization (RQ2)

Dependent variable (Y)	Corporate engagement (X)	a (X-M)	b (M-Y)	Indirect effect	Direct effect c'
Political discussion intention (Gun control)	Supporting the issue	*0.41 (0.07)***	*0.08 (0.03)**	*0.03 (0.02)*	−0.06 (0.09)
				[0.004, 0.066]	[−0.24, 0.11]
	Political CSR	*0.25 (0.07)***		*0.02 (0.01)*	−0.10 (0.09)
				[0.002, 0.043]	[−0.28, 0.07]
Political discussion intention (Refugee immigration)	Supporting the issue	*0.48 (0.06)***	*0.13 (0.04)****	*0.07 (0.02)*	−0.06 (0.09)
				[0.02, 0.11]	[−0.24, 0.11]
	Political CSR	*0.43 (0.06)****		*0.05 (0.02)*	−0.10 (0.09)
				[0.02, 0.09]	[−0.28, 0.07]

Source(s): Authors' own creation

the violation of public expectations of legitimacy. Following the stakeholder-centric perspective, corporations make the decision on whether and when to engage in socio-political issues by listening to stakeholders' voices. However, blind engagement in polarized issues without foreseeing their potential outcomes can make organizations unexpectedly face backlash from stakeholders (CCTT, 2022). Moreover, corporations' various engagements may interact with the stakeholders' engagement, influencing the issue salience and consequently co-creating the meaning of issues. To better prepare organizations for preventing spiraling crisis and promoting social good, it is important to examine whether (or not) and how corporate political engagement would impact the existing dynamic information environment, thus influencing politicized social conflicts. While studies have well understood how social media and mass media facilitate the formation of polarization, little is known about how corporations, as another political actor, contribute to the polarization process, even though polarization is a crucial sticky crisis challenge and a key factor to consider in strengthening organizations' crisis readiness (Jin *et al.*, 2024). As stakeholders' expectations for organizations (including corporations) to be involved in controversial political and social issues increase, the positive effect of such engagement on corporate reputation (e.g. Lim and Young, 2021) and sales goal (e.g. Martinez, 2018) has been repeatedly highlighted by scholars and practitioners. However, its effect beyond the brand good or corporate image has yet to be fully understood. The crux of this study was to (1) explore how corporate engagement in political issues contributes to public responses (i.e. polarization perception and political discussion), and (2) understand whether (or not) negative or skeptical comments on social media influence the impacts of corporate political engagement. An online experiment with US adult samples was conducted in two contexts: gun control discussion and refugee immigration issue.

According to our findings, when a corporation chooses to engage in political advocacy by taking an explicit stance—whether supporting or opposing controversial political issues such as refugee immigration and gun control—it is inevitable to contribute to the perceived polarization among stakeholders. In contrast, corporate engagement in political CSR aimed at fostering mutual understanding rather than taking a stance, resulted in significantly lower perceived polarization. It confirms Parcha (2023)'s proposition that the society's political polarization might be reinforced through corporations' engagement in various types of corporate political advocacy. Although the polarization discussed in this study is the perceived polarization that is not completely equal to actual polarization, the perceived polarization was found to be more impactful in influencing stakeholders' attitudinal and behavioral responses (Enders and Armaly, 2019) and our findings suggested corporations can play a role in increasing or decreasing the perceived polarization when it comes to public political debate.

Furthermore, our study also found that the impact of corporate political engagement on perceived polarization may depend on stakeholders' perception of how much control a corporation has over the issues. In the context of issues with external control like gun control, where corporations were perceived to have limited control on supporting or opposing the issue through cooperation policies, the corporation's stated stance against the issue resulted in more perceived polarization than the stated stance in supporting the issue. However, in the context of issues with internal control like refugee immigration, where cooperation was perceived to have more control on how to support or oppose the issue by hiring policy, the corporation's stated stance did not differ as to where they stand. Additionally, regardless of the socio-political issue types, the political CSR that promotes open dialogue resulted in less perceived polarization. It is in line with the predicted function of political CSR in the polarized world that regulates market transactions through negotiation (van der Meer and Jonkman, 2021).

Beyond the perceived polarization, our results also showed that stakeholders' intention to discuss the political issue would be motivated when the related perceived polarization increases as associated with their exposure to particular corporate engagement. It is consistent with the optimistic line of research that suggested the positive effect of perceived polarization on stakeholders' political participation (e.g. Bordalo *et al.*, 2020; Enders and Armaly, 2019; Van Boven *et al.*, 2012). Such a positive effect was found in both gun control and refugee

immigration contexts. One potential explanation is that the distorted or polarized perception of the political issue would result in issue salience, which increases the perceived importance of the issue and consequently motivates political engagement (e.g. Bordalo *et al.*, 2020). It is also possible that people whose perceived polarization would increase as a result of exposure to corporate political advocacy engagement were politically active instinctively. Such external stimulus further energized their political activity, motivating them to discuss the issue with other people, trying to sway others' belief. Westfall *et al.* (2015) explained that the politically active individuals were more inclined to see polarization and meanwhile contributed to political participation.

Considering the conflict-laden environment on social media, this study further examined whether negative comments would disrupt corporations' social-mediated political engagement. Surprisingly, comments negativity, in this study, did not interfere with the effects of corporate political engagement on stakeholders' political perception and discussion, even though previous studies have proposed that the predicted positive outcome of corporate political engagement might be impaired by negative sentiments shown in the negative and skeptical comments (e.g. Boot *et al.*, 2021). One potential explanation is that the effect of comment negativity on shaping ones' perception and engagement in the issue is limited and indirectly through their evaluation of a social media post, which was not examined in this study. After all, previous studies, such as Chen *et al.* (2017) and Lee (2012), have confirmed that the perceived valence of comments following the social media post or news articles would influence stakeholders' evaluation of the above message. However, examination on whether (or not) and how such impact on message evaluation would consequently influence stakeholders' understanding of the issue and even further political behavioral intentions lacked. Hence, future studies should be conducted to further understand how comments influence the way that social media posts shape stakeholders' understanding and engagement in the issue. Additionally, our results found that the comments against the corporations' stance on gun control directly led to fewer political discussion intentions among stakeholders, even though they did not interact with the main post. It echoes Ziegele *et al.* (2014)'s exploratory qualitative result about the limiting effect of negative comments on the discussion intention because people tended to believe negative comments were able to stimulate meaningful discussion.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study shifts from the traditionally organization-centric approach to issue-centric approach, focusing on the interaction between corporations and the public in socio-political issues. It examines the effect of corporate political engagement at the individual level, providing insight into the role that corporations can play in shaping publics' perception and discussion engagement in controversial political issues.

Theoretically, this study first empirically examined the relationship between corporate political engagement and perceived polarization. Our results support the hypothesis that corporate political advocacy may contribute to polarization. Second, this study compared the effect of corporate political advocacy and political CSR. Despite previous discussion surrounding the pros and cons of corporate political advocacy and political CSR, the empirical comparison between the effect of these two types of corporate political engagement in one context is limited, let alone in the context of two different political issues. On one hand, the findings from this study confirmed that engaging in political CSR, negotiating with the public for better socio-political situations can lead to less perceived polarization. On the other hand, the higher perceived political polarization due to the exposure to corporate political advocacy may consequently contribute to the political polarization. However, whether the political engagement facilitated by the perceived polarization is appropriate and expected, which may favor healthy political participation and decision was not answered in this study. In addition, the mechanism behind the polarization and political engagement has yet to be fully explored. More studies are needed to understand how and why perceived polarization favors political

discussion and what type of political discussion can be motivated by perceived polarization. Finally, the results of this study downplayed the interaction effect of comments' negativity with social media posts on publics' perception and engagement in political issues, even though it might influence publics' evaluation of the post as suggested in previous studies (e.g. Lee, 2012). The mechanism behind the comment effects needs to be further mapped.

Practically, the results from this study provided rigorous and evidence-based guidance on what type of political engagement that corporations can make for social good when they are expected among stakeholders. It is recommended that (1) when the upside of perceived polarization, such as fostering appropriate political discussion, can be anticipated, corporations may consider engaging in corporate political advocacy by taking an explicit stance on controversial issues, to promote one's perceived polarization of the issue; (2) when the optimistic effect of perceived polarization is unclear, corporations should opt for political CSR to encourage open dialogue and mutual understanding for better societal situation, to limit publics' perceived polarization of the issue. In addition, negative and skeptical comments about corporate political engagement are unavoidable on social media, even though the engagement is congruent with stakeholders' expectations and social norms. However, the limited impact of comment negativity found in this study suggests that corporations can actively and confidently engage in the socio-political issue without worrying about scattered opposing views, as soon as the engagement aligns with expectations.

Limitations and future directions

This study is limited in several points, directing to directions for future studies. First, only two political issues were tested in the study. Even though these two issues can be divided in terms of participants' perceived controllability, other controversial socio-political issues such as protecting the environment, protecting same-sex marriage and abortion and expanding voting right, which were found to split the country to a larger extent, should also be considered in future research. Second, the measurement and conceptualization of political discussion are broad. Although we captured participants' intention to contribute to political discussion on the focal issues in this study, we did not specify whether such contribution would be in a good or problematic manner (e.g. civil vs uncivil) or whether such contribution would only limit to some specific group of people (e.g. friends and family members). Further studies should further detail the discussion behavior. Third, given the primary objective of this study was to explore the role of corporate engagement in the polarizing process, rather than the role of stakeholders (e.g. individual characteristics), we controlled for political ideology in our analysis instead of including it as a moderator. Future studies intended to investigate the influence of stakeholders' political ideology or party affiliation might consider its moderating role. Lastly, in manipulating comments negativity, we used the combination of both positive and negative comments for the purpose of ecological validity and used the ratio of 2:3 where the stance proposed in three comments reflected the manipulation purpose. However, we did not examine other ratios with more comments for manipulation purposes or fewer noise comments. In the real social media environment, the ratios can be far more diverse, and whether (or not) such ratio differences will influence the impact of comments should be further discussed and examined.

Conclusion

In the current polarized society, corporations are inescapable to disclose and act on controversies due to either stakeholder expectations or media pressure. Grounded in existing studies on corporate political engagement and polarization, our study examines the causal path between corporate political engagement and stakeholders' political discussion through perceived polarization, providing research-supported insights into how corporations could contribute to the deliberative processes. Our findings showcased what type of corporate engagement in controversial social-political issues is more expected

in terms of its impact on perceived polarization or political discussion among stakeholders, contributing to the understanding of organizational readiness for social-political issue polarization challenges.

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