

How to Radicalize the Moderate Consumer

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Abstract

When corporations take strong political stances on controversial issue, who precisely is contributing to oppositional backlash? Those who feel subjectively ambivalent about a given topic might perceive staunch, one-sided messages as overly simplistic, and may therefore feel compelled to set the record straight by providing the opposite perspective. Across two studies, we tested the hypothesis that those high in ambivalence about the death penalty would respond more oppositionally to a one-sided versus balanced tweet. We found that, indeed, whereas those low in ambivalence engaged in pro-attitudinal word of mouth regardless of tweet they received, those high in ambivalence only responded more pro-attitudinally when they received the one-sided tweet (and not when they saw the balanced version). The implications for brands that seek to engage in socially conscious marketing strategies are discussed.

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In the spring of 2019, the men's razor brand, Gillette, launched a highly politicized commercial that took a staunch position on the topic of sexism and workplace sexual harassment, unequivocally stating that men should hold each other accountable and work to end the current culture of toxic masculinity. Given the divisive nature of the topic of sexism (with many believing that sexism is not a problem or is being overblown), this commercial garnered a wave of backlash among those who felt Gillette was attacking men. Indeed, the commercial has been viewed on YouTube (where the commercial was posted) millions of times, and at various points in time has had up to ten times more "dislikes" than "likes" (Baggs, 2019). Many have speculated that brands like Gillette that have been taking political stances on controversial issues in recent years (e.g., Nike's endorsement of Colin Kaepernick) have done so with the deliberate intention of inciting backlash (Hoffman, 2014; Taylor, 2019). However, the targets among whom backlash is most likely to be garnered are not well understood. As taking political stances on current issues is becoming more popular among large corporations (Taylor, 2018), it seems critical that we gain an understanding of how different types of people (with different types of attitudes) are likely to be impacted by controversial ad campaigns.

For many, staunch political positions may be un-persuasive especially if the message is perceived as overly "one-sided". Past research comparing one-sided to more balanced or two-sided messages has found that, overall, consumers tend to be more favorable toward two-sided messages (Hovland et al., 1953). For instance, advertisers that provide two-sided versus one-sided messages regarding a product are seen as more trustworthy, which increases their persuasive effect (Kamins et al., 1989; O'Keefe, 1999), especially if consumers perceive that the advertiser is acknowledging their product's short-comings (Pechmann, 1992). Further, when

advertisers provide one-sided messages (Priester, Petty, & Park, 2007), consumers anticipate that there is another side to the issue that the source is strategically omitting, thus making the one-sided message less persuasive.

In particular, those who feel ambivalent about polarizing topics (i.e., they feel mixed or two-sided), might be especially unreceptive to staunch, one-sided political messages. Subjective attitudinal ambivalence is characterized by feeling torn regarding one's attitude or position on a given topic (Priester & Petty, 2001). Of note, though ambivalent individuals feel torn between different issue positions, they still might favor one side of the issue. Thus, any individual can favor one attitude position, even if they feel deeply torn about the matter. Nonetheless, those who are ambivalent are likely to perceive merit or validity in both sides of a divisive issue (Tourageau, Rasinski, Bradbur, & D'Andrade, 1989). It follows, therefore, that the ambivalent might perceive a one-sided message as overly simplistic and facile. That is, if consumers perceive that an advertiser is only acknowledging or representing one side of (what is perceived to be) a two sided issue, they may feel distrust toward the source of the message and be unpersuaded. Among those who perceive that only a two-sided message would capture their position on an issue, any staunch message – be it pro-attitudinal or counter-attitudinal – might be perceived as inaccurate and overly simplistic. Thus, a staunch, one-sided message might elicit backlash among the ambivalent, regardless of the position taken.

There is a growing body of evidence in both the marketing and social psychological literatures that has found uncongenial messages elicit oppositional advocacy and word of mouth behaviors. For our purposes, we will define advocacy as any attempt to persuade others to adopt a particular position (Cheatham & Tormala, 2015) and word of mouth behavior, more specifically, as a subset of advocacy that only includes persuasion through verbal or written

communication (rather than, say, putting a sign on one's lawn). Past research in the attitudes and persuasion literature has found that when individuals disagree with a message (i.e., the message is counter-attitudinal) they often voice their opposition and engage in counter-arguing (Petty, Wells, & Brock, 1976). To that effect, when individuals feel highly certain about their disagreement with an issue, they are likely to engage in advocacy on behalf of their attitudes, (Cheatham & Tormala, 2017). Within the marketing domain, when individuals disagree with product reviews, they are more likely to engage in product reviewing themselves (Nagle & Riedl, 2014). In particular, when individuals encounter strong and persuasive counter-attitudinal messages, they feel compelled to verbally respond in opposition (Akhtar, Paunesku, & Tormala, 2013). It therefore stands to reason that a similar phenomenon might occur among those who are highly ambivalent about a particular topic: when they are presented with a staunch, one-sided message, the ambivalent are likely to disagree with this message, as they see the issue as two-sided. Thus, for the ambivalent, any one-sided message might likewise elicit strong opposition and negative word of mouth behavior.

In general, the ambivalent are often slow to take action, and are less likely to behave in an attitude-consistent manner compared to those who feel one-sided about the issue (Hanze, 2001). However, it seems possible that exposure to a staunch univalent position might be sufficient to rouse ambivalent consumers into responding decisively. In particular, when ambivalent consumers perceive that a source of a message is staunchly one-sided about an issue, consumers may feel it is incumbent upon them to set the record straight, and provide the opposing position. Thus, a one-sided message may beget an oppositional one-sided response from ambivalent individuals, in the attempt to provide a balance of perspectives. The ambivalent might therefore appear similar to an unambivalent consumer who is providing a one-sided

response because they disagree with a message they just read. Of course the distinction between the ambivalent and unambivalent consumer in these instances is that the unambivalent consumer truly believes only their (one-sided) position to be correct, whereas the ambivalent believes both the one-sided message they received and the one-sided message they are providing to be simultaneously accurate.

In the present work, we sought to understand how ambivalent consumers respond to staunch, one-sided stances. Specifically, we examined word of mouth behavior in response to a one-sided versus balanced message about a controversial topic. Across three studies, participants saw either a one-sided (counter-attitudinal) tweet about the death penalty or they saw an evenly balanced tweet about the topic. Participants then got the opportunity to respond to the tweet by sending back articles to the tweeter (in Study 2, half the participants merely chose articles to read themselves). We predicted that when individuals were high in ambivalence regarding the death penalty, they would respond to a staunch, one-sided (vs. balanced) message (regardless of the position taken) with a greater proportion of articles arguing the opposite position of the tweet. Because we predicted that this oppositional responding stems from a perception that any one-sided message regarding the death penalty is inappropriate, we only expected ambivalent consumers to choose oppositional articles when responding to the tweeter. When merely choosing an article for themselves to read, we did not expect the ambivalent to respond in opposition.

Study 1

We first tested whether ambivalent individuals responded in opposition to one-sided (vs. balanced) counter-attitudinal tweets regarding the death penalty (a highly divisive topic in current popular culture). Although ambivalent individuals might perceive merit in both sides of a

given topic, they still likely have a favored side of the issue, and so a message arguing the less favored position would still be considered counter-attitudinal. Consistent with past research, we expected that the unambivalent would be constant in their position, and therefore, regardless of the message they received (whether it was counter-attitudinal or balanced), we expected them to send pro-attitudinal articles to the tweeter. When individuals were ambivalent, however, we suspected that they would only respond pro-attitudinally when they received a one-sided tweet, but that they would respond in a more even-handed manner when they received the balanced tweet. That is, we predict that a one-sided tweet would be considered objectionable and overly simplistic, which would elicit a one-sided response in the attempt to provide a balance of perspectives.

Method

Participants. We recruited 212 participants in Study 1 through Amazon's *Mechanical Turk* web service, in exchange for \$.50. We excluded 4 participants (1 from the one-sided condition, 3 from the balanced condition) from the study for scoring too low on our attention check (or omitting the question): a 1 on a 5-point scale measuring how seriously they took the study, with "1 – not at all seriously – skimmed through everything or responded at random" anchoring the low end, and "5 – Very seriously – thought carefully about all the prompts and answered all the questions" anchoring the high end. We excluded an additional 8 participants who did not complete enough of the study to be assigned a condition.

Procedure. Participants reported their overall attitude toward the death penalty, as well as their preferred side of the issue (on a dichotomous scale). Next, participants reported various features of their attitude, including subjective ambivalence. Participants then saw a tweet about the death penalty that was either staunchly counter-attitudinal or evenly balanced, depending on

condition. Participants then got the opportunity to send back to the tweeter as many articles as they wanted from a list of ten articles that varied in position (five were pro death penalty and five were anti death penalty). Finally, participants completed a measure of political orientation and a manipulation check, after which they were thanked and debriefed.

Independent variables.

Attitudes measure. Participants rated their attitudes toward recycling using three 9-point semantic differential scales, with “bad”, “dislike”, and “negative” anchoring the low end (“-4”), and “good”, “like”, and “positive” anchoring the high end (“+4”).

Issue position. Participants chose the position they favored regarding the death penalty on a dichotomous scale, with “anti death penalty” anchoring the low end and “pro death penalty” anchoring the high end.

Tweet. We created two tweets that, in one condition was counter-attitudinal and extremely one-sided, and in the other condition was fully balanced. We stated that the tweet was from an anonymous twitter user’s account. In the one-sided condition, those that were pro death penalty received: “Capital punishment causes people to be killed. That’s pretty much all there is to it”. Those that were anti death penalty (in the one-sided condition) received: “Capital punishment prevents people from being killed. That’s pretty much all there is to it”. In the balanced condition, participants received: “No easy answers on this one. There are some good reasons for capital punishment but it comes with a cost”.

Dependent variables. Participants in all conditions saw a list of ten fabricated articles (in a randomized order) that they could send back to the tweeter in response. Participants were told that they could send as many as they wanted. Five of the articles were pro death penalty (e.g.,

“Capital punishment deters murder”) and five articles were anti death penalty (e.g., “Why I protest capital punishment”).

Manipulation check. To ensure that participants perceived the tweets as intended, they reported how much the tweet seemed to be one-sided versus two-sided, on a 9-point scales anchored at “completely one sided” and “completely mixed”: “Overall, would you say that the tweet that you read was more one-sided or more mixed?”

Results

Manipulation check. Data were submitted to a t-test analysis to determine whether the tweets were perceived as intended. Participants who received the one-sided tweet perceived it to be more one-sided ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 2.10$) than participants who received the balanced tweet ($M = 5.41$, $SD = 2.05$), $t(210) = -10.15$, $p < .001$.

Word of mouth effects. To test whether the effect of a one-sided versus two-sided message on word of mouth is moderated by degree of subjective ambivalence, we subjected the data to a multiple regression analysis. Oppositional word of mouth was calculated as a proportion of total articles chosen that were pro-attitudinal (vs. counter-attitudinal). Proportion of oppositional word of mouth (i.e., degree of pro-attitudinal response) was regressed on tweet type (one-sided vs. two-sided), subjective ambivalence, and the interaction thereof. There was a significant main effect of subjective ambivalence, reflecting past work that has found ambivalence curbs action and response, $B = -.01$, $t(173) = -1.83$, $p = .04$, 95% CI: [-.03, -.0003]. There was no main effect of tweet type, $p = .96$. Additionally, and most relevant to our hypotheses, there was a marginal interaction between tweet type and subjective ambivalence, $B = -.02$, $t(173) = -1.83$, $p = .07$, 95% CI: [-.04, .002] (Fig. 1). In support of our hypothesis, participants with low subjective ambivalence (1 SD below the mean) showed no effect of one-

sided (vs. two-sided) tweets, $p = .55$; whereas among participants with high subjective ambivalence, (1 SD above the mean), those that received a one-sided tweet provided a far more pro-attitudinal response than those who received a balanced tweet $B = 6.18$, $t(173) = -3.17$, $p = .002$, 95% CI: [-.19, -.04].

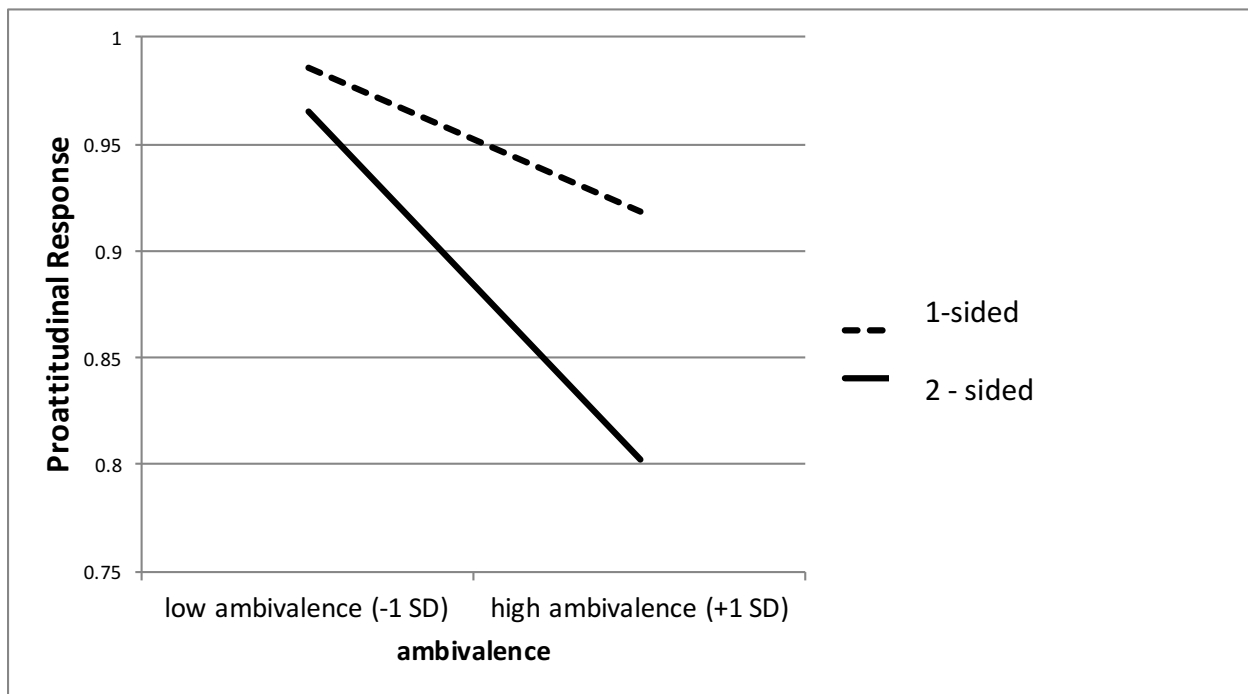


Figure 1. The effect of subjective ambivalence and tweet type on degree of pro-attitudinal response.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 provide support for the hypothesis that when individuals are high in ambivalence, a staunch one-sided message elicits oppositional responding. Among those low in ambivalence regarding the death penalty, there was no effect of message type, and these individuals responded by sending pro-attitudinal articles back to the tweeter, regardless of whether the message was one-sided or two-sided. This pattern of results supports the notion that those low in ambivalence always engage in pro-attitudinal word of mouth, but for the ambivalent consumer, a provocation of some sort is required to prompt such a univalent response. The

results of the present study support the notion that a staunch one-sided message is sufficient provocation to elicit this oppositional word of mouth behavior.

Study 2

Although the results of Study 1 suggested that, consistent with our hypothesis, ambivalent consumers responded in opposition to staunch, one-sided messages, we wanted to ensure that these findings were due to ambivalent participants seeking to provide a balance of perspectives. That is, we wanted to rule out the possibility that participants were merely more inclined to send the opposing articles to the tweeter in the one-sided message condition because they had internally resolved their ambivalence. To test this distinction, we manipulated whether participants were choosing articles to send back to the original tweeter or whether they were simply choosing articles to read themselves. If participants were merely resolving their ambivalence (and therefore choosing pro-attitudinal articles to send to the tweeter for the same reasons as the unambivalent participants) in the previous study, then even when just selecting articles to read themselves, the ambivalent participants should also choose a high proportion of pro-attitudinal articles. If this is the case, we should see no difference between the condition where participants are choosing articles to send to the tweeter versus to read themselves. However, if participants are instead trying to supplement what they see as a biased stance, then participants should only select highly pro-attitudinal articles in response to a one-sided message when they are sending articles to another individual, and not when just choosing articles to read themselves.

Method

Participants. We recruited 396 participants in Study 1 through *Mechanical Turk*, in exchange for \$.50.

Procedure. The procedure of Study 2 largely mimicked that of Study 1, with a few key differences. The largest distinction between Study 2 and Study 1 is that here, half the participants were selecting from 10 articles to send back to the tweeter (target is other condition) and half the participants were selecting from these articles to read themselves (target is self condition).

Results

Manipulation check. Once again, data were submitted to a t-test analysis to determine whether the tweets were perceived as intended. Participants who received the one-sided tweet perceived it to be more one-sided ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 2.01$) than participants who received the balanced tweet ($M = 5.79$, $SD = 2.51$), $t(210) = -15.65$, $p < .001$.

Word of mouth effects. Once again, we regressed proportion of oppositional word of mouth (i.e., degree of pro-attitudinal response) on tweet type (one-sided vs. two-sided), subjective ambivalence, and the interaction thereof. We ran this regression analysis on both those in the target is self and the target is other conditions. First, just looking at those in the target is other condition, there was a non-significant, but directionally consistent main effect of subjective ambivalence, $B = -.01$, $t(191) = -1.38$, $p = .17$, 95% CI: $[-.03, -.0004]$. There was no main effect of tweet type, $p = .55$. Additionally, and most relevant to our hypotheses, this time there was a significant interaction between tweet type and subjective ambivalence, $B = -.03$, $t(191) = -2.35$, $p = .02$, 95% CI: $[-.05, .004]$ (Fig. 2 and 3). Replicating Study 1, participants with low subjective ambivalence (1 SD below the mean) showed no effect of one-sided (vs. two-sided) tweets, $p = .91$; whereas among participants with high subjective ambivalence, (1 SD above the mean), those that received a one-sided tweet provide a far more pro-attitudinal response than those who received a balanced tweet $B = -.16$, $t(173) = -3.29$, $p = .001$, 95% CI: $[-.25, -.06]$. When examining the same analysis for those in the target is self condition, we found that no main effect

was significant ($ps > .25$), and most noteworthy, the ambivalence by tweet type interaction was also not significant ($p = .52$).

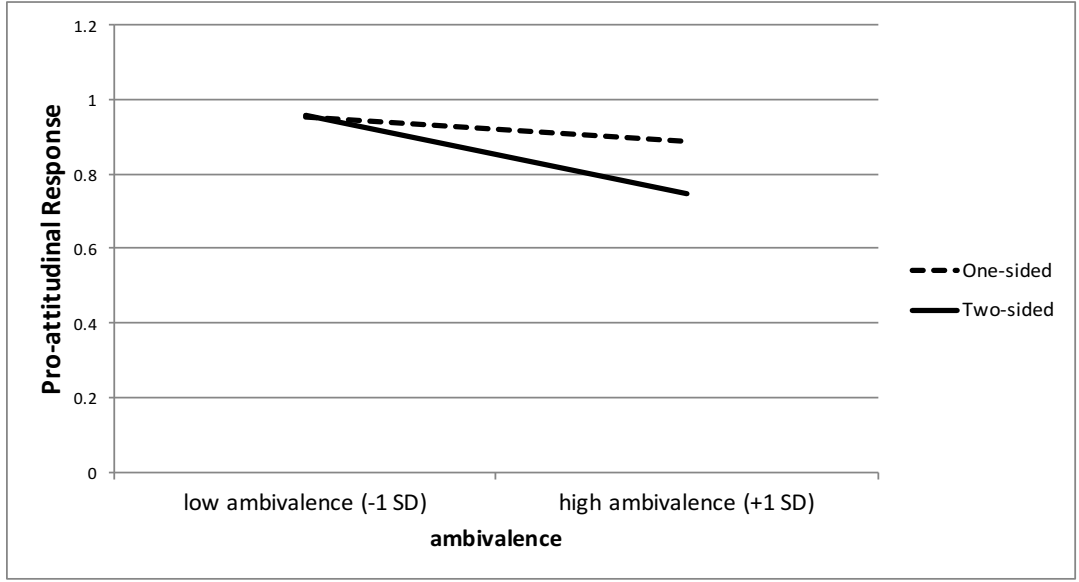


Figure 2. The interactions between subjective ambivalence and tweet type on word of mouth when target is other.

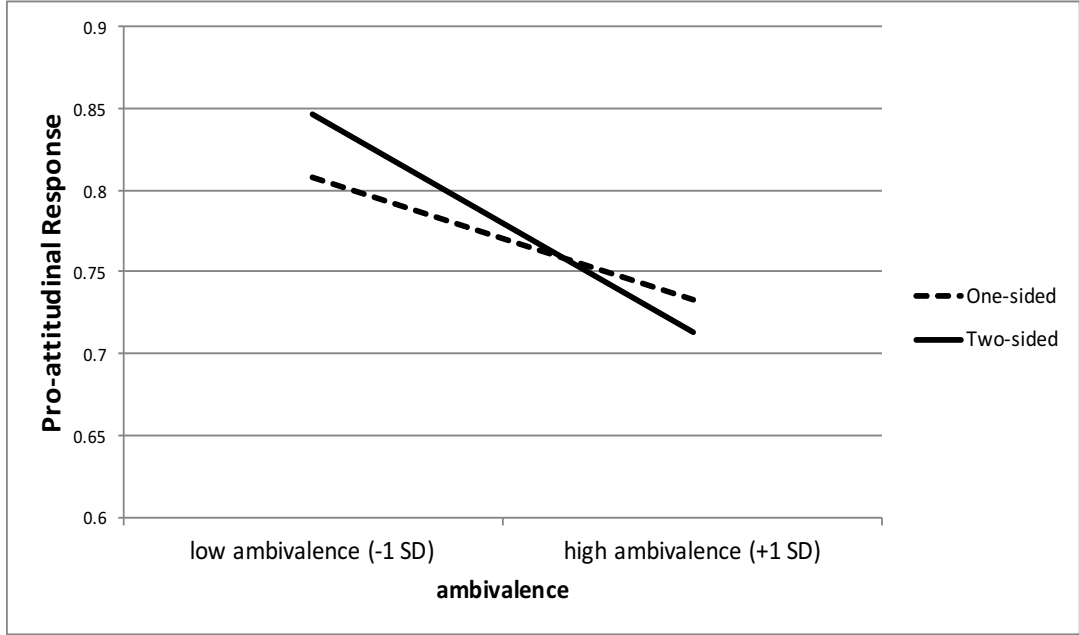


Figure 3. The interactions between subjective ambivalence and tweet type on word of mouth when target is other.

Discussion

In Study 2, we replicated the findings of Study 1: when participants were sending articles to the source of the tweet they viewed, ambivalent participants engaged in far more oppositional word of mouth (i.e., they sent back pro-attitudinal messages) when they received a one-sided versus two-sided tweet. However, when ambivalent participants were merely choosing the articles to read themselves, we did not see this same pattern of results. This discrepancy in results between the articles one chooses when sending them back to the source versus simply reading them suggests that participants are not choosing pro-attitudinal articles because they are resolving their ambivalence, but rather participants are trying to communicate oppositional information to the source of the one-sided tweet. That is, because they view the source of the tweet as touting inaccurate information, consumers are attempting to set the record straight by providing a balance of perspectives.

General Discussion

Across two studies we found consistent evidence that, as we predicted, staunch one-sided messages elicit one-sided responding from ambivalent individuals. Across both studies it seemed that for those low in ambivalence, the type of message they received was irrelevant to how they responded, which was to always send back pro-attitudinal articles to the tweeter. However, among highly ambivalent individuals, it was only when they viewed a staunch, one-sided tweet that these participants chose one-sided, pro-attitudinal articles to send back to the tweeter. The present work also ruled out the possibility that participants were simply choosing one-sided articles to send back to the tweeter because they had fully resolved their ambivalence, as Study 2

found that participants only chose one-sided articles when sending them back to the tweeter, and not when simply choosing articles to read themselves. Thus, it would seem that participants chose one-sided messages in an attempt to set the record straight and provide a balance of opinions to the source of the one-sided message.

Some possible limitations of the present work include the fact that our studies were restricted to a twitter context. It could be that contextual factors specific to twitter (the condensed messages, the public nature of the forum, etc.) might make it conducive to our particular pattern of results. However, it seems that our findings – that one-sided messages elicit oppositional responding from the ambivalent – should hold beyond a twitter contest, and if anything, we might expect a magnified effect in contexts where the source of the one-sided message has few restraints on message length. Nonetheless, it would be theoretically important to examine whether the present findings generalize to other non-twitter contexts, such as an in vivo conversation. Another potential limitation of the present research is that the source of the twitter message is always anonymous. Although we chose to keep the source anonymous so as to control for any pre-existing attitudes or assumptions about particular individuals or corporations, it would be more ecologically valid to examine how individuals respond to a corporation on twitter about which they have particular expectancies (e.g., how do individuals respond to a corporation or organization providing a one-sided message if that message seems to go against their own interests? Perhaps in this context, ambivalent consumers would be less inclined to respond oppositionally because they assume the company has already considered the side that promotes their own interests). Future research will examine how different types of knowledge about a source can influence consumers' response patterns.

This work has quite broad implications for marketers and consumers alike. Although it is likely fairly intuitive that those who oppose a given position will respond negatively to one-sided messages, marketers may not realize that they might be provoking one-sided responding among mixed audiences as well. Thus, when an issue is fairly divisive or controversial there is a high likelihood (as many are likely to feel ambivalent on the matter) that a one-sided message will garner oppositional responding and a potential wave of backlash. Although backlash is not necessarily bad or undesirable, it seems that it would behoove marketers to know *when* certain messages or ad campaigns are likely to elicit backlash and among whom. In this way, backlash can be incited deliberately and in ways that could benefit sales or reputation of a particular company, rather than being an unwieldy reaction that corporations cannot predict. As brands become more socially conscious, it seems that eliciting backlash will sometimes be unavoidable – thus all the more reason for brands to attempt to shrewdly navigate the circumstances under which, and populations for whom, inciting backlash might be beneficial versus detrimental.

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