

RESEARCH REPORT

Speedy activists: How firm response time to sociopolitical events influences consumer behavior

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Abstract

Organizations face growing pressure from their consumers and stakeholders to take public stances on sociopolitical issues. However, many are hesitant to do so lest they make missteps, promises they cannot keep, appear inauthentic, or alienate consumers, employees, or other stakeholders. Here we investigate consumers' impressions of firms that respond quickly or slowly to sociopolitical events. Using data scraped from Instagram and three online experiments ($N=2452$), we find that consumers express more positive sentiment and greater purchasing intentions toward firms that react more quickly to sociopolitical issues. Unlike other types of public firm decision making such as product launch, where careful deliberation can be appreciated, consumers treat firm response time to sociopolitical events as an informative cue of the firm's authentic commitment to the issue. We identify an important boundary condition of this main effect: speedy responses bring limited benefits when the issue is highly divisive along political lines. Our findings bridge extant research on brand activism and communication, and offer practical advice for firms.

KEYWORDS

brand activism, branding, communications, sociopolitical issues, text analysis

INTRODUCTION

Following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, many organizations turned to their social media platforms with statements supporting Black Lives Matter (BLM), a decentralized political and social movement that “seeks to highlight racism, discrimination, and inequality experienced by black people” in the United States (Campbell, 2021). Social media posts—which often include images, text, or both—ranged from plain black squares and solidarity statements to donation promises and expressions of outrage about racial injustice. Posts also ranged in their timing, from being published at the very start of the protests to months afterward. In an unprecedented move, corporate America seemed to publicly align itself, on average, with the BLM movement rather than stay silent (Hsu, 2020). When organizations take stances on sociopolitical issues, prior work suggests that they signal their stance authenticity through

the content of their public messaging (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020). In the current research, we argue that an equally (if not, more) important signal of firm stance authenticity is response time. How do consumers react to firms that respond quickly versus slowly to sociopolitical events?

The desire to be and seem authentic—a subjective judgment about individuals or groups about the consistency within a position they hold (Moorman, 2020)—is especially strong in times of change and uncertainty (e.g., Fritz et al., 2017), as in the case of major sociopolitical events. Some research has suggested that firms can combat impressions of inauthenticity by increasing the alignment between the firm's stance, actions, and public messaging (Becker et al., 2019; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). We define stance authenticity as the perceived authenticity with which a firm holds its position on a particular sociopolitical issue. Prior research has examined how increasing

the strength of a brand's message through the words used or actions described can lead to increased perceptions of stance authenticity (e.g., Windscheid et al., 2016). For example, on the messaging side, sensitive disclosures by brands can be perceived as more authentic (e.g., Jiang et al., 2022), and the use of personal pronouns can signal the desire for close relationships with customers (e.g., Berger & Packard, 2023). On the action side, describing concrete steps has been shown to be perceived as authentic in pursuit of higher-order values, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions or increasing the number of women on executive boards (e.g., Matsumura et al., 2014; Windscheid et al., 2016). Yet, it remains unclear whether (and how) a firm's response time affects consumer perceptions of stance authenticity, or their subsequent consumption decisions.

In general, people use response time as a heuristic to infer others' motives. For example, observers hold beliefs that individuals who react quickly hold strong motives or convictions that allow them to react swiftly and confidently, whereas those who react slowly need to carefully consider whether to act (Critcher et al., 2013). Still, in cases where deliberation is valued, responding slowly can be optimal. For example, shorter response times for complex, consequential decisions suggest carelessness, as observers infer contemplation as a signal of deliberation and due diligence (Evans & van de Calseyde, 2017; Kupor et al., 2014; Wakimoto & Fujihara, 2004). On an individual level, taking time to respond in interviews signals more sincerity (Kraut & Lewis, 1982), and appearing to calibrate thought processes about a situation leaves better impressions on the observer (Kupor et al., 2014). At an organizational level, business decisions, such as launching products, can also benefit from delays, as they suggest that the firm may be collecting more data or cares to competently address consumer pain points (Wilcox et al., 2009). Long queues and delays can signal to consumers that an announcement or service is worth waiting for (e.g., Buell, 2021; Lu et al., 2013; Veeraraghavan & Debo, 2009). Likewise, firms that undergo slower organizational transitions, such as reducing how much waste they produce, are viewed as more committed to the cause (Jago & Laurin, 2019) because slower change can suggest greater expenditure of effort toward the goal (Buell & Norton, 2011; Kruger et al., 2004).

Taken together, prior work suggests that it may be sensible for firms to respond slowly to a sociopolitical event because consumers will view the time lapse as a signal of deliberation, care, diligence, or effort. However, while prior work underscores the benefits of individual and firm deliberation on consumer inferences, we predict that in the context of brand activism—firm reactions to sociopolitical events—response time may operate differently. Here, we focus on a firm's initial public-facing message (more specifically, social media post) as its response to the event. By response time, we mean the amount of time that elapses from when a sociopolitical event occurs

and when a firm posts its first public-facing message about the event. The interplay between response time and inferences about authenticity relates to a growing literature that asks whether brands and firms should engage in brand activism (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Chatterji & Toffel, 2019), which has largely focused on the risks of alienating consumers who do not agree with a particular stance (De Freitas et al., 2022; Hydock et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022) and implications that a brand is inauthentically capitalizing on social issues (Frake, 2017; Wang et al., 2022; Yeomans et al., 2022).

In the context of brand activism and social responsibility, we predict that more deliberation signals a lack of conviction about the issue at hand, and faster responses will be viewed more favorably. This prediction mirrors recent findings that fast response times in conversation provide an honest signal of engagement and connection (Curhan et al., 2022; Packard & Berger, 2021; Templeton et al., 2022) or remorse (Brooks et al., 2014; Schweitzer et al., 2015). Fast decisions are viewed as reflecting intuition—which is quicker, effortless, and driven by spontaneous emotions (Oktar & Lombrozo, 2022)—as opposed to deliberation—which is slow, effortful, and driven by calculated judgment (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996; Lieder & Griffiths, 2017; Sloman, 1996; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). We investigate firm responses to sociopolitical events. We examine whether a firm's response time serves as an informative cue of its authentic commitment to the issue (which we term “stance authenticity”), and how speed of response shapes consumers' sentiment and purchasing intentions toward the firm. We conceptualize firm response time as the amount of elapsed time between a sociopolitical event and the firm's public response to the event (e.g., on social media). Taken together, we hypothesize:

- H1.** Consumers will express more positive sentiment and greater purchasing intentions toward companies that respond more quickly to sociopolitical events.
- H2.** Faster responses to sociopolitical events signal greater stance authenticity.
- H3.** Consumer perceptions of stance authenticity will mediate the relationship between firm response time to sociopolitical events and consumer purchasing intentions.

The alignment between firm and consumer views matters. Previous work finds that consumers admire categorical brand activism (taking a stance vs staying silent), but only when they do not oppose the firm's stance on an issue (Garg & Saluja, 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). People form particularly strong negative impressions of those who disagree with them

on moral issues and even use these differences to justify acts of aggression (Skitka, 2010). Consumers react negatively when a firm shows support for a stance on a divisive political issue (Weber et al., 2023); however, the extent to which issue disagreement affects whether the firm's disclosure is perceived as authentic is unclear. Some research in interpersonal settings has shown that those who demonstrate that they care about a social issue are viewed as more trustworthy than those who do not, even when they hold opposing views. That is, positive perceptions of care about a social issue can transcend specific disagreements because conviction alone signals moral character (Kreps & Monin, 2014; Van Zant & Moore, 2015; Zlatev, 2019). In the context of brand activism, we hypothesize that consumers' personal views may influence their temporary purchasing intentions, but will not harm global perceptions of firm authenticity:

H4. The public divisiveness of the sociopolitical issue (issue divisiveness) will moderate the effect of both firm response time and perceived stance authenticity on consumer purchasing intentions.

See Figure 1 for our full theoretical model. We examine our hypotheses across four studies with diverse methods, relying on data from both natural settings and online experiments. Study 1 examines consumer sentiment toward Fortune 500 firms' Instagram posts about a sociopolitical issue (Black Lives Matter) across naturally occurring response times following a real sociopolitical event (the death of George Floyd). We analyzed over 26,000 Instagram user comments. Study 2 investigates causality by manipulating firm response time while testing the mediating role of perceived firm authenticity. Study 3 replicates these results in an incentive-compatible design. Study 4 explores whether firm response time interacts with sociopolitical issue divisiveness. All study materials, anonymized data, and analysis code are available on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/wea4c/?view_only=91b3c34f739b44778d8d6d0eae6f54e2.

STUDY 1: INSTAGRAM FIELD DATA FROM FORTUNE 500 COMPANIES

Study 1 leverages automated text analysis of social media data (Berger & Packard, 2022), to explore how the timing of firms' public Instagram messaging in the wake of a major sociopolitical event, the death of George Floyd, predicts the consumer sentiment.

We focus on Instagram for several reasons. Instagram creators can publish content on up to 10 square slides filled with visual imagery, text, or both. Additionally, Instagram allows creators to include a text caption of up to 2200 characters, over seven times the text limit of Twitter (character limit: 280). User comments to companies that post on Instagram tend to react directly to their posts rather than complaining or asking questions (Jackson, 2015). For these reasons, many companies publish Instagram content related to sociopolitical issues, especially on relevant holidays or following salient events (Nguyen, 2020).

Method

Sample

We scraped Instagram posts by Fortune 500 companies in a month-long period following George Floyd's death (from May 25 to June 30, 2020). To be included in our sample, companies needed to post on Instagram about BLM on or after May 25, 2020, and have received at least 30 original comments on the post within the day after its publication; this approach prevented our sentiment measures from being biased by a few particularly vocal users. In total, 74 companies met these criteria, comprising our sample. All results remain robust when including companies with fewer comments—see Appendix S1 (MDA) for details. We scraped the 26,984 comments reacting to these posts, as well as the comment's timestamp and whether it was a direct comment or reply to another comment. Our analyses focus on direct comments, not replies, given that these are reactions to companies' posts rather than to other consumers.

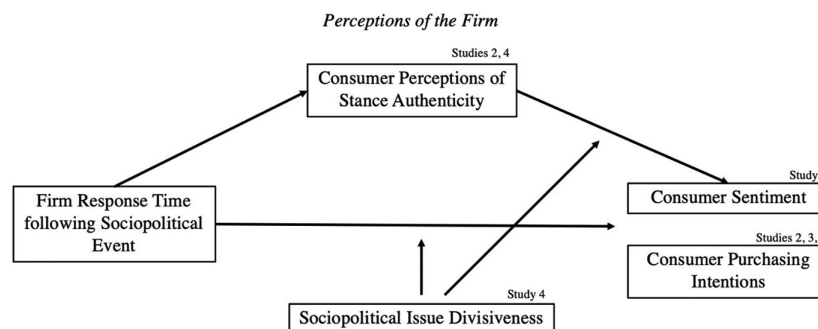


FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

Procedure

We examined consumers' reactions to firm Instagram posts based on the company's response time, while controlling for features of the post itself, including perceived authenticity of the post. A post's message authenticity was the average of ratings by a minimum of four human annotators (see Appendix S2). For our outcome variable, we calculated each comment's sentiment likelihood along three dimensions: positive/negative, supportive/unsupportive, agreeing/disagreeing. A comment's sentiment was calculated using a pre-trained deep learning transformer-based Natural Language Inference model ("facebook/bart-large-mnli") called BART, developed by Facebook AI and published by Hugging Face (Lewis et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2017).

The BART model was pre-trained on a large English-language corpus of unannotated data using self-supervised learning, where it learned to reconstruct original text that had been arbitrarily corrupted (Lewis et al., 2020), and was fine-tuned on the Multi-Genre Natural Language Inference dataset (Williams et al., 2017). BART was adapted to be used as a zero-shot learning classifier, which estimates how likely the specified text data align with or contradicts hypothesis labels (classes) set by the user (Yin et al., 2019). These labels can include categorizing the emotion of the text (e.g., happy, sad), the topic (e.g., politics, sports), or any other aspects of the text (Yin et al., 2019). Zero-shot models have recently gained attention in social science research with the release of GPT-3 and have been shown to outperform crowdsourced workers on text annotation tasks (Gilardi et al., 2023).

We ran this model on each user comment. Our model's hypothesis was: "The sentiment of this comment is {}", and the candidate labels were: positive, negative, supportive, unsupportive, agreeing, and disagreeing. For each of the sentiment labels, we took the average across each post's comment's sentiment likelihood to get an average comment score on a per-post level. Although less commonly used in social science research, we find that this deep learning model outperforms the commonly used "bag-of-words" model, LIWC (e.g., Berger & Packard, 2022; Yeomans et al., 2023)—see Appendix S2 for discussion. Unlike "bag-of-words" models, our deep learning model recognizes non-standard English (e.g., slang, misspelled words, and emojis), and is sensitive to sources of meaning other than the words themselves (e.g., word order, punctuation, filler words). Table 1 provides some example Instagram comments from our dataset that could not be accurately classified by LIWC but were accurately classified by our BART model.

Results

Our dependent variables were consumer comments' sentiment likelihoods (estimated), and our independent

variable was firm post response time (days since George Floyd's death). We controlled for several aspects of post content, including post length (i.e., number of words in the caption and photo) and (human-rated) message authenticity of the post. We also controlled for aspects of the firm, including the number of followers at the time of the data pull and the firm's industry.

We found significant effects of response time on all sentiments, except for agreement (See Table 2). Slower response time was associated with more negative consumer sentiment, supporting H1. Specifically, as time elapsed since George Floyd's death, user comments were significantly more likely to be negative ($b=1.30$, $SE=0.41$, $p=0.002$), unsupportive ($b=1.30$, $SE=0.40$, $p=0.002$), and disagreeing ($b=1.25$, $SE=0.38$, $p=0.002$). The opposite was also true. As time elapsed since George Floyd's death, user comments were significantly less likely to be positive ($b=-1.08$, $SE=0.39$, $p=0.008$) and supportive ($b=-0.89$, $SE=0.35$, $p=0.014$). Directionally, comments were also less likely to be agreeing ($b=-0.09$, $SE=0.11$, $p=0.41$). Furthermore, all results hold when we control for various other aspects of the statement itself, such as the count of "we" language (e.g., we, together, us), mentions of unity or solidarity (e.g., "We stand in solidarity against racism, social injustice, and inequality"), and mentions of donations (See Table 3). All results hold when using sentiments calculated with LIWC (See Table 4). Even when controlling for the non-action-related text (e.g., "we" words) and action-related text (e.g., mentions of donations) signals in the message, we find that response time *still* matters. In the Appendix S2, we present the regression results that consider the interactions between response time and both action-related and non-action-related signals in the Instagram message.

Discussion

Study 1 finds that firm response time to sociopolitical events predicts consumer sentiment, even while controlling for aspects of the post (e.g., number of words, post's authenticity) and aspects of the firm (e.g., number of followers, firms' industry). Though correlational, this suggests that consumers are sensitive not only to whether firms release sociopolitical statements (e.g., Hydock et al., 2020), but also *when* they do so. It is important to note that Instagram boasts over 2 billion monthly active users and their userbase leans liberal (Rodriguez, 2021). The userbase consists of about 49% Democrats and 30% Republicans, making it the social media platform with the largest partisan gap (Pew Research Center, 2021; Vogels et al., 2021). While we were unable to capture the political preferences of each commenting user, the following studies (Studies 2–4) unpack these correlational findings with controlled experiments, including a balanced sample of Democrats and Republicans (Study 4).

TABLE 1 Comparison of sentiment scores for a sample of Instagram comments estimated by BART (deep learning model) and LIWC (bag-of-words model).

User-generated comment	LIWC positive tone score	BART positive sentiment likelihood score	LIWC negative tone score	BART negative sentiment likelihood score
Preach 🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏🙏	0	99.70%	0	0.26%
Come throughhhh @[Company Name] ♥️	0	99.87%	0	0.27%
Ok but what does that mean @[Company Name]? You helping Kap pay for legal fees? Is your CEO at a protest? Have you created a petition? The tweets are nice but c'mon. Your platform is too large.	5.41	5.32%	0	99.63%
No lives matter y'all just want attention don't forget it's just a stream application	0	0.08%	0	99.84%

TABLE 2 Regression for each sentiment label on response time and message authenticity (human-rated) with message and firm-aspect control variables (Study 1).

Dependent variable (comment sentiment)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Negative	Unsupportive	Disagreeing	Positive	Supportive	Agreeing
Response time (days)	1.304** (0.410)	1.300** (0.402)	1.249** (0.385)	-1.077** (0.393)	-0.887* (0.349)	-0.090 (0.109)
Message authenticity	-0.051 (0.158)	-0.073 (0.154)	-0.104 (0.148)	0.094 (0.151)	0.069 (0.134)	0.013 (0.042)
Num words in statement caption	-0.058 (0.031)	-0.055 (0.031)	-0.061* (0.030)	0.047 (0.030)	0.031 (0.027)	0.007 (0.008)
Num words in statement photo	0.028 (0.026)	0.028 (0.026)	0.031 (0.025)	-0.025 (0.025)	-0.021 (0.022)	-0.002 (0.007)
Log (Num Instagram followers)	2.601 (1.452)	2.824 (1.421)	2.656 (1.362)	-2.496 (1.391)	-2.134 (1.234)	-0.717 (0.387)
Obs.	74	74	74	74	74	74
R-squared	0.41	0.42	0.43	0.38	0.37	0.33
Within R-squared	0.26	0.27	0.29	0.22	0.19	0.09
Incl. industry fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

STUDY 2: CAUSAL EFFECT OF FIRM RESPONSE TIME

This study examines the causal effects of firm response time on consumer reactions in a controlled, pre-registered experiment. We assess consumer reactions to a firm that releases a statement (supporting BLM) after some experimentally manipulated delay relative to the sociopolitical event in question (the death of George Floyd), controlling for characteristics of the firm's statement. We manipulate the response delay in a continuous manner, allowing us to investigate whether there is a continuous or discrete relationship between response time and brand attitudes. Finally, we measure whether response times affect perceptions of authenticity, and whether these perceptions mediate the effect of response time on consumer reactions.

Method

Participants

US participants ($N=800$, 42.38% female; age: $M=37.39$, $SD=13.52$) were recruited through Prolific Academic to complete an online study in exchange for compensation. To be eligible for this and all subsequent studies, participants needed to: have a study approval rating of at least 95%, have participated in at least 50 previous studies, and reside in the United States at the time of the study.

Procedure

This study was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/K9Z_54L). Participants read statements released by two hypothetical e-commerce firms, Company A

TABLE 3 Regression for each sentiment label on response time, message authenticity (human-rated), and additional message and firm-aspect control variables (Study 1).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Dependent variable (comment sentiment)	Negative	Unsupportive	Disagreeing	Positive	Supportive	Agreeing
Response time (days)	1.411** (0.430)	1.394** (0.421)	1.345** (0.402)	-1.165** (0.413)	-0.945* (0.368)	-0.100 (0.116)
Message authenticity	-0.086 (0.173)	-0.110 (0.170)	-0.138 (0.162)	0.119 (0.167)	0.082 (0.148)	0.017 (0.047)
Num words in statement caption	-0.022 (0.051)	-0.025 (0.050)	-0.030 (0.048)	0.017 (0.049)	0.011 (0.044)	0.003 (0.014)
Num words in statement photo	0.084 (0.061)	0.077 (0.059)	0.082 (0.057)	-0.071 (0.058)	-0.050 (0.052)	-0.007 (0.016)
Num “We” words	-0.551 (0.543)	-0.486 (0.532)	-0.487 (0.508)	0.461 (0.522)	0.295 (0.465)	0.049 (0.146)
Mentions unity/solidarity	2.352 (6.117)	2.587 (5.991)	4.355 (5.721)	-0.703 (5.885)	-0.988 (5.240)	-0.135 (1.650)
Mentions donation	2.473 (5.730)	2.675 (5.612)	2.164 (5.359)	-1.837 (5.513)	-0.848 (4.909)	-0.228 (1.545)
Log (Num Instagram followers)	2.336 (1.493)	2.580 (1.462)	2.409 (1.396)	-2.286 (1.436)	-2.002 (1.279)	-0.694 (0.403)
Obs.	74	74	74	74	74	74
R-squared	0.43	0.43	0.44	0.39	0.38	0.33
Within R-squared	0.28	0.29	0.30	0.23	0.20	0.09
Incl. industry fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

and Company B. Participants read that Company A released their statement on May 26, 2020, approximately 1 day following George Floyd's death, and that Company B released their statement on a randomly assigned date ranging from 2 to 31 days following George Floyd's death (presented between-subjects). Instagram statements were based on real, common BLM statements from firms in Study 1. The order of the Instagram statements that each participant saw was counterbalanced between subjects, to control for the statement's text content.

Following the manipulation, participants were asked to pick between Company A and Company B (i.e., “Would you rather purchase from Company A or Company B?”). Participants were asked to rate their attitudes toward each company overall on a 4-item, 7-point bipolar scale (adapted from Mitchell, 1986): bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, unpleasant/pleasant, negative/positive. A composite of these items was used for overall attitudes ($\alpha = 0.98$). Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they thought each company was authentic in their statement about combating systemic racism and injustice (0 = “Not at all authentic”, 100 = “Completely authentic”), and whether they thought each company was committed to combating systemic racism and injustice (0 = “Not at all committed”, 100 = “Completely committed”). Throughout the manuscript, a composite of perceived

authenticity and commitment items was used to capture overall perceptions of stance authenticity ($\alpha = 0.94$). A post hoc factor analysis revealed that the items load onto one factor of stance authenticity—see Appendix S2 for details. The measures were presented in counterbalanced order. Participants also completed basic demographics items (e.g., age, gender, education, ethnicity, political affiliation/ideology) in this and all experimental studies.

Results

Consumer choice

A logistic regression found that participants' likelihood of choosing Company B was predicted by response time condition, controlling for stimuli order assignment. Participants were significantly less likely to purchase from Company B than Company A as time progressed from George Floyd's death ($b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.024$), lending additional support to H1—see Table 5. All results hold when controlling for basic demographics, such as age, gender, education, ethnicity, and political affiliation ($b = -0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $p = 0.039$). See Figure 2 for the fitted line on a scatterplot of choice on response time condition. Detailed analyses of attitudinal-dependent measures can be found in the MDA.

TABLE 4 Regression with comment sentiments estimated using LIWC (mean positive minus negative tone) on response time and various message and firm-aspect control variables (Study 1).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Dependent variable: positive – negative tone in user comments (LIWC)				
(Intercept)	7.063*** (0.766)	6.790*** (1.830)		
Response time (days)	-0.136 [±] (0.072)	-0.167* (0.073)	-0.169* (0.076)	-0.202* (0.077)
Message authenticity		0.005 (0.029)	0.018 (0.029)	0.017 (0.031)
Num words in statement caption		0.011 [±] (0.006)	0.006 (0.006)	-0.007 (0.009)
Num words in statement photo		-0.003 (0.005)	-0.009 [±] (0.005)	-0.027* (0.011)
Num “We” words				0.175 [±] (0.097)
Mentions unity/solidarity				-1.223 (1.108)
Mentions donation				0.269 (0.973)
Log (Num Instagram followers)			-0.114 (0.266)	-0.100 (0.257)
Obs.	77	77	77	77
R-squared	0.05	0.10	0.39	0.43
Within R-squared			0.15	0.22
Incl. industry fixed effects	No	No	Yes	Yes

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: [±] $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Stance authenticity

To assess perceptions of stance authenticity, we calculated a difference score between judgments of Company B and Company A, representing the magnitude of Company B's disadvantage on each dimension relative to Company A (the control condition of reacting after 1 day). We regressed perceived stance authenticity on response time condition (the number of days Company B took to respond), controlling for stimuli order assignment. Participants were significantly less likely to perceive Company B's stance as authentic ($b = -0.41$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$) as more time progressed from George Floyd's death, supporting H2—see Table 5 and Figure 2b. These results were robust to basic demographics ($b = -0.39$, $SE = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$).

Mediation

We test the proposed causal process and estimate a mediation model with response time condition as the independent variable, the difference score of perceived stance authenticity as the mediator, and consumer choice as

the dependent variable. We found a significant indirect effect for stance authenticity (effect estimate = -0.08 , $SE = 0.02$, 95% CI = $[-0.12, -0.04]$). In line with H3, these results indicate that the effect of response time on firm choice is underpinned by consumer perceptions of stance authenticity.

Discussion

Study 2 demonstrates that the slower firms respond to a sociopolitical event (i.e., the death of George Floyd), the less likely consumers are to purchase from the firm. This outcome was driven by the tendency to infer that faster firm responses reflect more authentic dedication to the stance made in the sociopolitical statement.

STUDY 3: INCENTIVE-COMPATIBLE CONSUMER CHOICE

Study 3 tests whether the previous results hold in a preregistered, incentive-compatible experiment. We explored

TABLE 5 Consumer choice and brand attitudes on continuous time condition (Study 2).

	Consumer choice (logit)		Stance authenticity (OLS)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Days since George Floyd's death	-0.020*	-0.019*	-0.412***	-0.393***
	(0.009)	(0.009)	(0.102)	(0.102)
Stimuli Assignment	-0.870***	-0.929**	-6.799***	-6.634***
	(0.155)	(0.161)	(1.741)	(1.741)
Party: Republican		-0.114		0.246
		(0.240)		(2.780)
Party: Democrat		-0.741***		-6.918***
		(0.186)		(2.064)
Party: Other		-0.366		-1.103
		(0.465)		(5.339)
Party: No Preference		-0.803		-5.303
		(0.426)		(4.424)
Constant	0.043	0.220	0.550	21.122*
	(0.175)	(0.931)	(2.065)	(9.998)
Obs.	800	799	800	800
LR χ^2 test	37.88	74.83		
R-squared			0.04	0.08
Pseudo R-squared	0.04	0.07		
Adj. R-squared			0.04	0.06
Incl. demographic controls	No	Yes	No	Yes

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

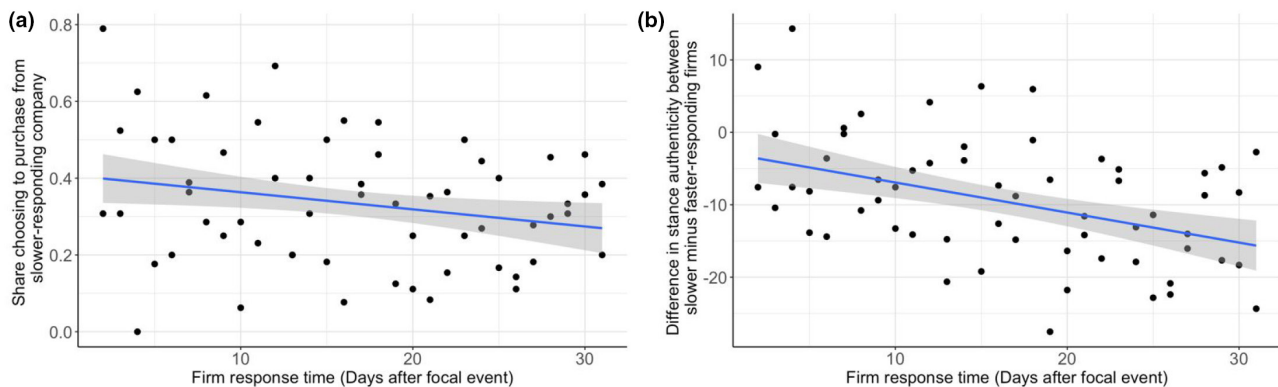


FIGURE 2 (a) Consumer choice on continuous time condition (Study 2). (b) Perceived stance authenticity difference on continuous time condition (Study 2).

consumers' willingness to spend resources on companies that respond faster versus slower to a sociopolitical issue.

Method

Participants and procedure

The study was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/4LW_8R8). US participants ($N = 450$, 52.44% female; age: $M = 36.74$, $SD = 12.91$) were recruited through Prolific

Academic to complete an online study in exchange for compensation. Participants read three real Instagram statements from Amazon, Walmart, and Target about the BLM campaign following George Floyd's death. We experimentally manipulated the response time of these statements. Participants learned that each company published its Instagram post after 1 week, 1 month, or never (presented in randomized order, within-subjects). After reading the Instagram statements, participants were informed that they received a \$0.15 bonus, and that there was an opportunity to trade their \$0.15 bonus for

up to five raffle tickets (each costing \$0.03) to win a \$100 gift card from any of the three companies of their choice.

Results

Our dependent measure was the number of raffle tickets purchased (i.e., revealed brand preference through choice). On average, across conditions, participants allocated 1.29 raffle tickets to Amazon, 0.60 raffle tickets to Walmart, 0.72 raffle tickets to Target, and kept 2.39-worth of raffle tickets for themselves.

We regressed the number of raffle tickets purchased on timing condition (post timing: never, after 1 week, after 1 month), with “never” as the baseline condition—see Table 6. We included participant and company fixed effects to control for random assignment and differences in statement content. Participants were more likely to purchase raffle tickets for the company that reacted after 1 week compared to the baseline of not reacting at all ($b=0.44$, $SE=0.13$, $p<0.001$) and compared to the company that reacted after 1 month ($b=0.28$, $SE=0.12$, $p=0.035$). We had predicted that reacting after 1 month would be better than not reacting at all, although with smaller effects than reacting after 1 week. Notably, however, we found no difference in raffle tickets purchased for the company that reacted after 1 month versus not at all ($b=0.16$, $SE=0.12$, $p=0.21$). All results hold when excluding participants who failed the comprehension check, and when controlling for basic demographics (including political ideology).

TABLE 6 Regression using number of raffle tickets on statement condition (Study 3).

	(1)	(2)
	Number of raffle tickets	Number of raffle tickets
Statement condition: Never (baseline)		
Statement condition: After 1 week	0.439** (0.135)	0.454** (0.138)
Statement condition: After 1 month	0.157 (0.124)	0.174 (0.127)
Constant	0.223* (0.113)	0.203 (0.114)
Obs.	1350	1293
R-squared	0.30	0.30
Adj. R-squared	-0.05	-0.06
Incl. company fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Incl. participant fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Excl. failed comprehension check	No	Yes

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$, *** $p<0.001$.

Discussion

Study 3 replicates the results from Studies 1–2 using a mixed-design raffle ticket paradigm that incentivized participants to reveal their purchasing intentions. Our results replicate that firm response time matters: participants exhibited greater brand preference for firms that released a statement faster (after 1 week) than slower (after 1 month) or not at all. Furthermore, we found no benefit for responding after 1 month versus not responding at all, which suggests diminishing returns for late responders: a late response may be indistinguishable from never responding at all.

STUDY 4: ISSUE DIVISIVENESS

Studies 1–3 show that firm response time following sociopolitical events matters, and that faster response times are perceived as more authentic in the declared stance. However, these studies focused on participants who largely supported the sociopolitical stance expressed by firms. In Study 4, we investigate whether the effects of firm response time depend on the divisiveness of the sociopolitical issue, with an equal number of US Democrat and Republican participants.

Method

To understand sociopolitical issue divisiveness, we ran a pretest measuring divisiveness of various issues among US Democrat and Republican participants—see Appendix S2 for details. Based on the pretest results, we chose one highly divisive issue (supporting a vaccine mandate as a condition for employment) and one less divisive issue (supporting Ukraine in the Russo-Ukrainian crisis).

Participants and procedure

This study was preregistered (https://aspredicted.org/B51_H68). US participants ($N=1202$, 48.34% female; age: $M=41.19$, $SD=14.04$) were recruited through Prolific Academic to complete an online study in exchange for compensation. We evenly recruited Democrat and Republican participants. Participants were randomly assigned to a 2 (divisiveness: high vs. low) \times 2 (timing of Company B's statement: fast vs slow) between-subjects design, with an equal number of Democrats and Republicans assigned to each experimental condition. All participants read that Company A and Company B both released sociopolitical statements on Instagram about an issue that was either high or low on divisiveness. Participants always read that Company A released its statement 1 day following the focal event, which was Biden's speech calling for a vaccine mandate (July 30,

2021), the divisive issue, and the day that Russia invaded Ukraine (February 25, 2022), the less divisive issue. Participants read that Company B released an Instagram statement either 1 day or 30 days following the event. The statements from both companies voiced concern over Biden's vaccine mandate (a stance met by greater disagreement), and support for Ukraine (a stance met with less disagreement). The presentation order of Instagram statements for each issue was counterbalanced between subjects.

Participants completed the same dependent measures as in Study 2 (presented in randomized order), except that we replaced the consumer choice item with a measure of purchasing likelihood for each company (0 = "Not at all likely", 100 = "Completely likely"). As in Study 2, participants rated their attitudes toward each company ($\alpha=0.98$), and the extent to which they thought each company was authentic and committed in its statement stance ($\alpha=0.83$). The order of all dependent measures was counterbalanced.

Results

As in Study 2, we calculated a difference score between judgments of Company B and Company A on each of our DVs.

Purchasing likelihood

A full-factorial ANOVA on the difference score of purchasing likelihood revealed significant effects of issue divisiveness ($F(1, 1170)=7.86, p=0.005$), response time

($F(1, 1170)=16.76, p<0.001$), and political affiliation ($F(1, 1170)=4.78, p=0.029$), while controlling for stimuli order assignment. Only the interaction between issue divisiveness and response time was significant ($F(1, 1170)=4.05, p=0.045$). For the less divisive stance (supporting Ukraine), purchasing likelihood was higher if the firm responded earlier ($M_{\text{early}}=-1.16, SD=26.55$) than later ($M_{\text{late}}=-10.91, SD=29.88; t(590)=4.19, p<0.001, d=0.34$)—see [Figure 3](#). However, the same planned comparison revealed no significant difference in timing for the more divisive stance supporting vaccine mandates ($M_{\text{early}}=0.87, SD=23.45; M_{\text{late}}=-2.23, SD=25.93; t(608)=1.55, p=0.12, d=0.13$). These results suggest that the effect of response time is stronger for sociopolitical issues that are low (vs high) in terms of divisiveness. Our supplemental analyses (see [Appendix S2](#)) suggest that the effect of divisiveness is robust to consumers with different political orientations.

Stance authenticity

A full-factorial ANOVA on the difference score of stance authenticity revealed only a significant effect of issue divisiveness ($F(1, 1170)=10.43, p=0.001$) and response time ($F(1, 1170)=38.52, p<0.001$), while controlling for stimuli order assignment. For the less divisive issue (supporting Ukraine), perceived stance authenticity was higher when the firm responded earlier ($M_{\text{early}}=-1.93, SD=25.27$) than later ($M_{\text{late}}=-13.02, SD=0.34; t(590)=4.83, p<0.001, d=0.40$)—see [Figure 4](#). Notably, this pattern was true for the high divisiveness issue as well ($M_{\text{early}}=2.23, SD=21.70; M_{\text{late}}=-5.42, SD=27.95; t(608)=3.77, p<0.001, d=0.32$).

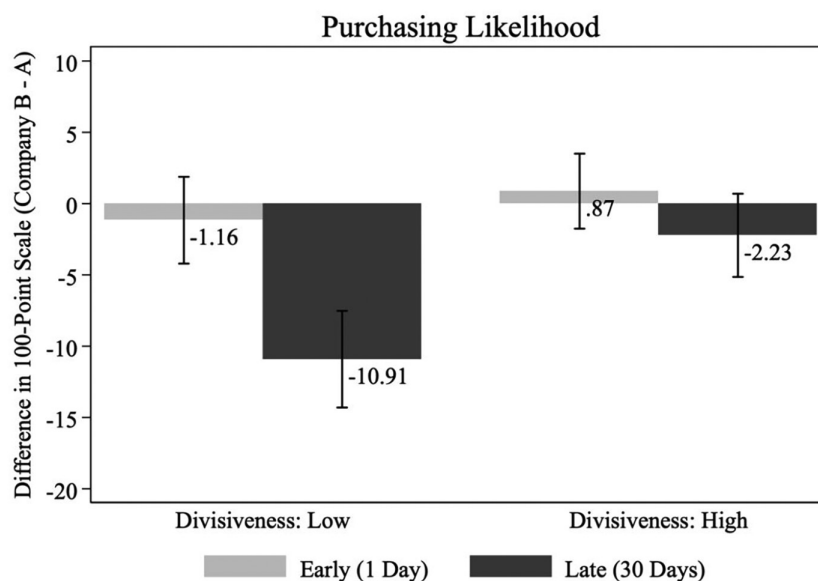


FIGURE 3 Mean purchasing likelihood difference score by issue divisiveness and response time. The black lines through each bar show the 95 percent confidence interval around each estimated mean.

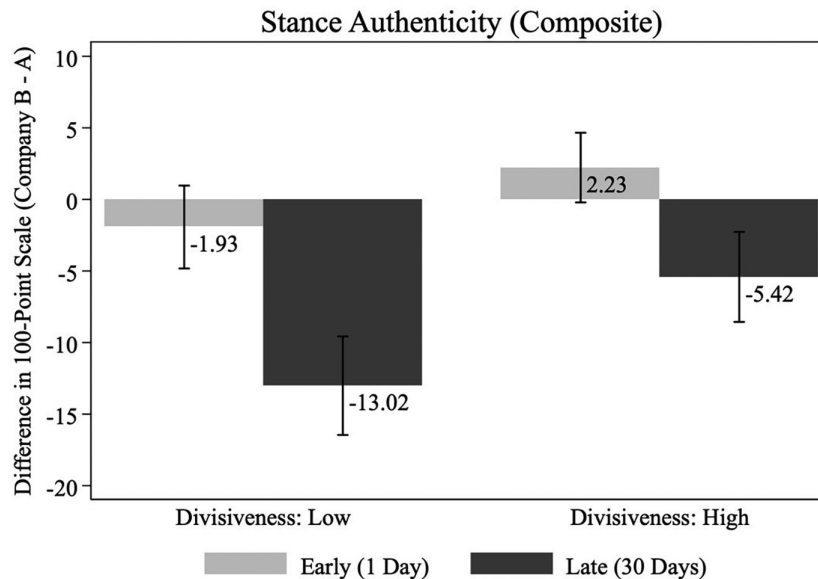


FIGURE 4 Mean stance authenticity difference score by issue divisiveness and response time. The black lines through each bar show the 95 percent confidence interval around each estimated mean.

Moderated mediation

We conducted moderated mediation analysis with PROCESS Model 15 and 5000 bootstrap samples (Hayes, 2017). The index of the overall model was significant (moderated mediation index=4.69, 95% CI: [2.66, 7.19])—see Figure 1. The indirect effect of response time on purchasing likelihood through stance authenticity perceptions was significant when issue divisiveness was low (effect=-7.65, 95% CI: [-10.24, -5.06]). When issue divisiveness was high, the indirect effect remained significant but was smaller in comparison (effect=-2.96, 95% CI: [-4.95, -1.23]). Taken together, these results suggest that slow (vs fast) response time decreases consumers' perceptions of firm stance authenticity, which in turn decreases purchasing likelihood when issue divisiveness is low (vs high). See Appendix S2 to view effects and PROCESS output.

Discussion

Study 4 finds that the effect of response time on brand impressions may depend on sociopolitical issue divisiveness. Fast response times are beneficial on uncontroversial issues, signaling greater stance authenticity, but these effects are mitigated for highly divisive issues. At the same time, divisiveness did not affect perceptions of stance authenticity. Early responses are perceived as highly authentic, supporting H4. Even when consumers may not agree with a firm's stance, they still view fast-responding firms as more authentic.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across four studies, with real consumer reactions to Instagram posts and follow-on experiments to disentangle causality, mechanisms, and a boundary condition, we find that the timing of firms' responses to sociopolitical events matters. Participants had more positive impressions of and willingness to purchase from firms that responded quickly in the wake of sociopolitical events—even when controlling for the non-action and action-related signals in the firms' messaging. Faster responses were viewed as more authentic—likely because they give the appearance that the firm did not need to deliberate about its stance.

For issues low in divisiveness, faster statements resulted in greater purchasing intentions, but this was not true for statements on highly divisive issues. Yet, both fast and slow response times result in robust impressions of authenticity regardless of issue divisiveness. Taking a fast stance on divisive issues, while polarizing, is not all bad—consumers still view the brand's stance as authentic, even when they disagree with the firm's position. Since these traits are important inputs to inferences of integrity-based trust (Mayer & Davis, 1995; Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002), consumers may be inclined to experience more trust toward brands that respond more quickly.

Our findings contribute to nascent work on the factors influencing whether consumers respond favorably to brand activism (Ahmad et al., 2022; Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Even controlling for action-related text and non-action-related text in

a message, we find that firm response time is a critical signal of a firm's authentic stance on an issue (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Our findings are constrained by several limitations that offer fruitful avenues for future research. For example, more research is needed to understand whether the effect of response time on brand impressions and purchase intentions persists over a longer time horizon. Additionally, our Instagram data sample (Study 1) was limited by the number of Fortune 500 companies that released a statement following George Floyd's death. Companies may engage differently across social media platforms depending on users' demographics, and more research is needed to understand how consumers react differently across platforms.

Our results offer concrete recommendations and warnings for practitioners. Perceptions of response time are inherently relative, as consumers may judge a firm's responsiveness compared to the speed of other firms' response times. A firm that is slow to react to an issue might be able to reframe its response time relative to competitors. Separately, there may be ways that companies can take a delayed stance without being perceived as less authentic. For example, a firm could immediately release a generic statement with a promise to supplement it with a more detailed or deliberative plan in the future. This approach may allow firms to reap the competitive advantage of speedy response time, as well as the benefits of more deliberative decision making. While we leave these interventions for future scholarship, the current findings underscore that brand activism is not just a matter of taking a stance, but doing so *quickly*.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Study materials, data, code, and pre-registration documents are available on the Open Science Framework: https://osf.io/wea4c/?view_only=91b3c34f739b44778d8d6d0eae6f54e2

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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