



The Effects of Social Identities and Issue Involvement on Perceptions of Media Bias Against Gun Owners and Intention to Participate in Discursive Activities: In the Context of the Media Coverage of Mass Shootings

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how news audience's predispositions (value and outcome involvement, political and gun ownership identities) predicted perceived media bias in mass shooting coverage against gun owners and intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues. Republicans, strong identifiers of gun ownership, and those who perceived the outcome of tightening gun ownership would affect their lives predicted perceptions of media bias. Strong party identifiers, gun ownership identifiers, and those who displayed outcome involvement predicted intention to participate in discursive activities. Perceived media bias was not found to predict the intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues. The results extended the theoretical discussion of corrective action hypothesis and increased our understanding of both individual-level (personal involvement) and social-psychological level (social identities) factors relevant to biased media perception.

Americans are seeing the most devastating era of mass shootings in modern history. According to *ABC News* (Keneally, 2019), mass shootings resulting in the death of four or more people across the U.S. had reached an average of one every 15 days in 2019. Each gruesome mass shooting was followed by heated debates in the media and among legislators and the public – whether it was

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people with mental illnesses or gun owners and gun ownership that were responsible for the occurrence of mass shootings (McGinty et al., 2014).

Frequent news media coverage of mass shootings not only generates attention to these crimes (Kissner, 2016), but also shapes our understanding of mass shootings and the discussion of preventative measures (Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). However, although news frames can lead the audience's attention to "a particular problem to be remedied by particular means" (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009, p. 1406), news audiences do not passively accept messages from the media. Rather, they make an active judgment by relating them to their own lives (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014), or interpreting them through the lens of their important values and identity (Lin & Haridakis, 2017). In many cases, these predispositions may function as a filter to influence audiences' perceptions of how news media cover political issues. For example, people frequently complain about media as being biased against their positions or their group or favoring the opposing positions/groups over theirs (i.e., Hostile media perceptions; HMP). Perceptions of media bias, influenced by people's predispositions, can lead to a range of negative effects, such as waning political participation (Moy et al., 2005) and distrust of campaign news (Ladd, 2010). Conversely, people may also be motivated to discuss issues and/or participate in activities to express their opinions when they perceive media bias against their groups/positions (Rojas, 2010).

Although previous studies have documented the influence of individual predispositions on perceptions of media bias and political participation, very few studies have examined social-psychological factors, such as social identity, and individual-level factors, such as issue involvement, simultaneously. It is also unknown whether these predispositions may motivate political participation directly or whether such influences occur through perceptions of media bias.

Synthesizing the hostile media perception, social identity theory, and issue involvement, the current study examined two types of predispositions – gun-related social identities and involvement with issues related to gun ownership – in predicting people's perceived media bias against gun owners in the news coverage of mass shootings. We also examined whether participants were motivated to engage in discursive activities in response to their social identities or issue involvement, or through their perceptions of media bias, as suggested by the corrective action hypothesis (Rojas, 2010). We hope that the results of this study will increase our understanding of how news audiences make sense of the news coverage of a highly controversial social/political issue, and whether perception of media bias is one of the factors that motivate opinion expressions in the public sphere.

Literature review

Gun-related identities and issue involvement related to gun ownership: Predictors of perceived media bias against gun owners

Ho et al. (2011) defined perceived media bias as “an individual’s belief that the news media provide unbalanced treatment toward a political issue or party, regardless of any real political biases portrayed in the media” (p. 348). Research has suggested that myriad factors, such as conversations with like-minded others (Eveland & Shah, 2003), identification with social groups (Gunther, 1992), and political trust (Lee, 2005, 2010), are associated with perceptions of media bias. Perception of media bias has also been recognized as an intergroup phenomenon (e.g., Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Lee, 2005; Perloff, 2015). For instance, Vallone et al. (1985) suggested that partisans may perceive neutral news coverage as biased against their political party and overestimate the power of the coverage in swaying non-partisans in a direction that is hostile toward their party.

Social identity theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) posits that our identification with social groups not only influences our thoughts and behaviors, but also influences our expectations and evaluations of those who are in our groups versus those who are not. In situations where our social identity is made salient, our sense of self is transformed from an individual self to a collective self. SIT suggests that positive social identities increase our self-esteem, whereas negatively viewed social identities may pose threats to it (Branscombe et al., 1999). Depending on our level of identification with the group, we respond to these threats differently, such as disassociating ourselves from the group, displaying outgroup derogation, or engaging in defensive behaviors. When the media coverage of an issue that is closely associated with the interests or ideology of a group makes the group identity salient (Perloff, 2015), high identifiers, compared with low identifiers, may be more susceptible to the belief that media coverage is biased against their group.

People’s positions on gun-related issues in the context of mass shootings depend largely on the social group with which they identify and the extent to which they support the positions held by the group. It can be assumed that those who strongly identify with a social group may be more likely to take the same position held by their group. Two social identities – political identity and gun ownership identity – are relevant here (specifically, affiliation with and the strength of this social identity). First, research found that people’s political affiliation and political ideology predicted their position on gun control issues (e.g., Wozniak, 2017). For example, conservatives, Republicans and Independents were more likely to oppose gun control laws than Democrats. Group associations, rather than individuals’ concerns for crimes, played a significant role in public opinion about gun issues. Moreover, given that

politically, the U.S. gun culture is mostly associated with the Republican party (Gimpel, 1998) and access to guns has been one of the party's policy platforms, we anticipate those who strongly identify with the Republican party may be more likely to support their party's positions on gun-related policies. Thus, the strength of identification with the Republican party may also influence perceptions of media bias.

Second, gun ownership (e.g., Seate et al., 2012) was found to influence people's attitude toward gun control issues. Possession of guns is thought of as a cultural symbol of liberty (Melzer, 2009). Thus, gun ownership "offers social identity; a longstanding ethos immersed in conservative ideology" (Joslyn & Haider-Markel, 2017, p. 433). Gun owners may view media coverage of mass shootings as being negatively biased against their group when the message is framed around accessibility to guns because such messages may be viewed as an identity threat to gun owners (Branscombe et al., 1999).

Taken together, Republicans, and especially those strong Republican party identifiers, and those who strongly identify with gun ownership are the ones who exhibit perceptions of hostile media bias. Therefore, we proposed:

H1: Political party interacts with identification with the political party in influencing perceptions of media bias. Specifically, strong Republican identifiers are more likely than weak Republican identifiers, and Democrat identifiers (weak or strong) to perceive news coverage of mass shootings about gun owners as biased.

H2: The more individuals identify themselves as gun owners, the more likely they are to perceive the news coverage of mass shootings as biased against gun owners.

The level of perceived media bias is also contingent upon issue involvement (e.g., Chia et al., 2007; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Hansen & Kim, 2011). Johnson and Eagly (1989) distinguished three types of involvement, namely value involvement, outcome involvement, and impression involvement. Cho and Boster (2005) posited that these three types of involvement were activated by three distinct dimensions of self-concept. *Outcome involvement* is elicited by the perceived importance of future consequences of a subject issue. *Value involvement* is activated when a subject issue is linked to important values that define the self. *Impression involvement* is concerned with others' perception of the self. Outcome involvement was associated with information-seeking because it promoted issue-relevant thinking (Petty et al., 1981). Value involvement was related to attitude extremity. People with high value involvement with an issue were resistant to persuasion (Cho & Boster, 2005). Impression involvement was associated with an increased level of self-monitoring, which pertains to the need to please others and conform to the social situation (Briggs

et al., 1980; Dillard & Hunter, 1989). Because outcome and value involvement were more closely related to opinion extremity and information seeking, Cho and Boster (2005) suggested that political involvement was more likely to be evoked by these two types of involvement (see also Choi et al., 2009).

Individuals' involvement with an issue has been repeatedly found to be a significant predictor of perceived media bias, although the type of involvement was not consistently defined (Hansen & Kim, 2011). Choi et al. (2009) tested outcome and value involvement in predicting HMP toward the reporting of a National Security Law in Korea. The results suggested that value involvement weighed more than outcome involvement in predicting HMP. It is possible that U.S. news audiences can be involved with gun issues for both outcome and value concerns. According to Wozniak (2017), people's attitudes toward guns and gun control can be explained by two perspectives. From a self-interest perspective, gun owners will oppose any gun ownership ban because it not only threatens their rights to own firearms (the gun ownership perspective, e.g., Celinska, 2007; Kleck et al., 2009), but also hinders their ability to fight crimes (self-protection/crime control perspective, e.g., Robbers, 2005; Wolpert & Gimpel, 1998). From a symbolic value perspective, gun control debates directly tap into important aspects of American culture (Celinska, 2007; Wolpert & Gimpel, 1998), such as support for individual rights and liberty (e.g., Celinska, 2007; Kleck et al., 2009; Wolpert & Gimpel, 1998), and the romanticized social and moral order of "being tough" (Kohn, 2004, p. 110). Although the term "involvement" was not used, a self-interest perspective is similar to the notion of outcome involvement, whereas the symbolic value perspective suggests value involvement. Thus, it is likely that a stronger involvement with gun ownership will influence individuals' perception of mass shooting news:

H3: Individuals' outcome involvement with gun ownership is positively associated with their perceptions of the media bias against gun owners in mass shooting news.

H4: Individuals' value involvement with gun ownership is positively associated with their perceptions of media bias against gun owners in mass shooting news.

Predictors of intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues

The second goal of the current study was to examine the predictors of intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues. From a social identity perspective, identification with one's social group results in

intergroup differentiation, which is manifested in in-group favoritism and out-group derogation. In politics, such manifestation could mean political engagement to ensure that a party's candidate, ideology, and issues are supported. Greene (2004) argued that individuals' strong political identity should lead to a strong commitment to their party's well-being, such as voting for their party's candidate, attending rallies, or persuading others to vote for their party. For example, Porter (2013) found that young adolescents' political identification predicted their engagement in traditional political actions, such as contacting a political representative about an issue and expressive political actions, such as discussing political issues through the internet.

Given that members of both parties have been heavily involved in the discussions of gun-related issues, and that it is the strength of individuals' identification with their political party that is associated with their participation in political activities, the following hypotheses were posed:

H5: The more individuals identify with their political party, the stronger their intention is to engage in discursive activities concerning gun issues.

H6: The more individuals identify themselves as gun owners, the stronger their intention is to engage in discursive activities concerning gun issues.

The political discussion arises from concern about current issues as reported by the news media (Mondak, 2010). From an involvement perspective, individuals are more likely to pay attention to and engage in policy debates when the issue directly influences their lives (Anand & Krosnick, 2003; Krosnick, 1990). Studies of voting suggested that, as voters attend to and develop attitudes toward policies that they consider personally important, they are more likely to express their opinions to elected representatives through discursive activities such as supporting advocacy organizations and letter writing (Krosnick & Telhami, 1995). Data from 29 U.S. public opinion surveys conducted between 1997 and 2007 suggested that even with low-level general news exposure, citizens still attended to the news that contained personally relevant information, which enabled democratic accountability (Bolsen & Leeper, 2013). Lu (2019) found that incidental exposure to dissonant political information about relevant issues on Facebook triggered corrective participation when Facebook users felt angry and anxious. Based on the above discussion of involvement and political engagement, we proposed the following:

H7: Individuals' outcome involvement is positively associated with participants' intention to engage in discursive activities concerning gun issues.

H8: Individuals' value involvement is positively associated with participants' intention to engage in discursive activities concerning gun issues.

Individuals' perceptions of media bias may motivate them to engage in political discussion for ideological reasons. This proposition is theorized as a "corrective action hypothesis" (Rojas, 2010). It asserts that when people process information inconsistent with their preexisting views, even if it is merely perceived, they believe that others are likely to be influenced by such information, and hence become more likely to voice their opinions in public to correct the undesirable influence from the media. Perceptions of media bias were found to positively relate to political discussion with like-minded people (Eveland & Shah, 2003), and to the intention of seeking diverse viewpoints in the political discussion (e.g., Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Barnidge et al., 2015). Rojas's (2010) study with a national sample collected in Colombia suggested that perceptions of media bias are positively related to a series of offline and online political behaviors. Most recently, Barnidge et al. (2020) examined data from 17 countries and found an overall positive relationship between perceptions of media bias and political actions. Based on this line of research, we proposed:

H9: Perceived media bias toward gun owners in mass shooting news positively predicts intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues.

Previous studies suggest that social identities and involvement are possible antecedents for perceptions of media bias, and perceptions of media bias may motivate individuals' engagement in political discussions. Thus, it is possible that perceptions of media bias mediate the influence of identities and involvement on intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues. Therefore, we asked the following research question:

RQ1: Does perceived media bias mediate the relationships between (a) political party identification, (b) gun ownership identification, (c) outcome involvement with gun issues, and (d) value involvement with gun issues and intention to participate in discursive activities?

See Figure 1 for the conceptual model.

Method

Procedure and participants

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of North Carolina A&T State University on November 13, 2018. An online survey was conducted using Qualtrics' national market research

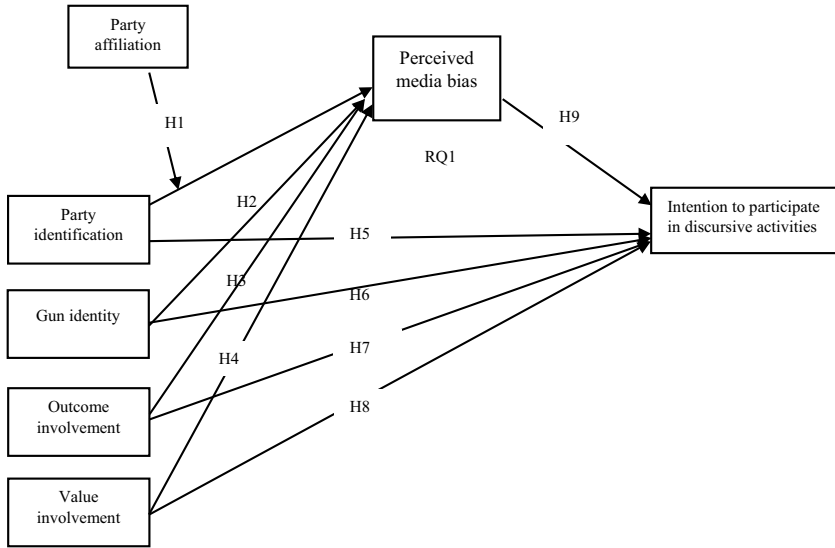


Figure 1. The proposed model of the study.

panels. Participants' IP addresses were checked to identify duplication of the surveys. To improve sample representativeness, quota sampling was employed to match the national census data in gender, race, and education. Participants were recruited during two weeks (January 22 to February 4) in early 2019. They were first presented with a consent form, at the end of which they were asked if they were older than 18, residing in the US, and self-identified as a news consumer.

Based on the median time spent on the questionnaire of a soft launch of 30 participants, those who spent less than 469 seconds on the survey were excluded. A total of 394 participants completed the survey. Eighteen surveys were randomly deleted due to over quota on demographics, and 76 were removed from the final sample for failing the attention check questions or not spending up to the required minimum time (i.e., 469 seconds). The final sample consisted of 300 participants with 150 males (50%) and 150 females (50%). Four participants did not report a valid age, leaving 296 participants ranging from 18 to 91 years old ($M = 46.59$; $SD = 17.54$). The majority of the participants were White ($n = 186$, 62%), followed by Hispanic ($n = 51$, 17%), African American ($n = 37$, 12.3%), Asian ($n = 16$, 5.3%), others ($n = 6$, 2.1%) and Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ($n = 2$, .7%).

Measurement

Gun ownership identification

Three items from Greene's (1999) group identification scale were used to measure the strength of gun ownership identity. Participants were asked to rate items on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). The items included (1) "I identify with people who have guns"; (2) "I see myself as someone who supports gun ownership"; and (3) "I feel strong ties with people who have guns" ($\alpha = .91$, $M = 3.97$, $SD = 1.93$).

Political party affiliation

Political party was measured by asking participants "Which political party do you belong to or most closely identify with?" Among the 300 participants, 127 (42.3%) reported being Democrats, 96 (32%) reported being Republicans, 65 (21%) reported being independent and 12 (4%) reported being others. We then asked a follow-up question "If your answer to the question above is Independent or Other, please indicate if you identify more with the Democrats or the Republicans." Together, 177 (59%) participants were Democrats or Democrat-leaners and 122 (40.7%) were Republicans or Republican-leaners.

Party identification

Three items from Greene's (1999) group identification scale were used to measure the strength of political party identity. Participants were asked to rate how much they identified with the political party they felt close to or belong to on a 7-point scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much; e.g., "I identify with other members in my political party") ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 4.55$, $SD = 3.97$).

Involvement with gun ownership

We adapted a scale from Choi et al. (2009) for value and outcome-related involvement. The factor analysis of the original study generated five items measuring value involvement and four items for outcome involvement. The current study replaced the subject in the items with participants' involvement with gun issues. For the value involvement items, participants were asked to what degree they thought passing gun laws to tighten gun ownership conflicted with their values (e.g., "the values that are most important to me are what determine my stand on gun ownership"). For the outcome involvement items, participants were asked to what degree they thought passing gun laws to tighten gun ownership would influence their lives. An example item was "It is easy for me to think of ways in which tightening gun ownership affects my life." Participants were asked to rate their agreement to these statements on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 =

strongly agree). We conducted a factor analysis with the nine items and report the results in the section describing the analytical approach.

Perceptions of media bias against gun owners

The scale was adapted from Tsftati (2007). On a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from “1” (strongly disagree) to “7” (strongly agree), participants were asked to rate to what extent they agreed with the five statements measuring perceptions of media bias against gun owners in mass shootings news. Items included: (1) “The current U.S. news coverage of mass shootings ignores the rights of gun owners”; (2) “The current U.S. news coverage of mass shootings presents gun owners as primitive”; (3) “The current U.S. news coverage of mass shootings presents gun owners in a negative manner”; (4) “The current U.S. news coverage of mass shootings presents gun owners in a distorted way”; and (5) “Most people working in the U.S. news media belong to social groups that are hostile to gun owners” ($\alpha = .91$; $M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.60$).

Intention to engage in discursive activities concerning gun issues

A scale was adapted from Hwang et al. (2008) measuring participants’ willingness to engage in discursive activities. On a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (not willing at all) to 5 (very willing), participants were asked how willing they would be to take part in eight activities if they had a chance, including (1) “signing a petition representing my position on gun issues”; (2) “attend to public forums where citizens discuss gun issues”; (3) “let my opinion about gun issues be posted on the web page of an organization that I support”; (4) “meet with an elected official to discuss gun issues”; (5) “do some volunteer work related to the gun issues for a group that I support”; (6) “look for more information on gun issues”; (7) “talk about gun issues with others who may have a different view”; and (8) “talk about gun issues with others who share my views” ($\alpha = .92$, $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.17$).

News media use

Previous studies have indicated that news media use is significantly related to HMP (e.g., Hwang et al., 2008; Tsftati, 2007), thus, attention paid to the news was measured and controlled in the analysis. Participants were asked on a 5-point scale (1 = not at all; 5 = a great deal) about how much attention they paid to the news coverage of mass shootings ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.08$).

Analytical approach

First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on the involvement scale using SPSS AMOS (version 25.0). We tested the original two-factor model based on Choi et al. (2009) and the results did not yield a good fit (χ^2

Table 1. Factor loadings for cognitive involvement with gun control issue.

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2
Overall question: In terms of the gun laws in the United States, to what degree do you think passing new gun laws tightening gun ownership would influence your life?/have a conflict with your value?	Outcome involvement ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.61$, $N = 300$)	Value involvement ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.36$, $N = 300$)
My life would be changed if gun ownership is tightened	.70	
It is easy for me to think of ways in which tightening gun ownership affects my life	.84	
Changes concerning gun laws and policies affect me	.71	
The values that are the most important to me are what determine my support on gun ownership		.83
Knowing my position on gun policies is central to understanding the kind of person I am		.75
My position on gun policies reflects who I am		.77

(26) = 172.84, $p < .01$, CFI = .83, RMSEA = .10, SRMR = .09). The regression coefficients suggested that factor loadings of one item from the value involvement factor (“My position on gun ownership has little to do with my beliefs about how life should be lived”) and two items from the outcome involvement factor (“Tightening gun control has little impact on my life,” and “All in all, the effect of tightening gun control on my life is little”) were lower than .40. The modification indices suggested cross-loaded errors of these three items. Therefore, they were removed from the model and a two-factor model was tested again and found to yield acceptable fit ($\chi^2(23) = 7.16$, $p = .13$, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .05, SRMR = .005). Factor loadings for outcome involvement ($\alpha = .79$, $M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.61$) and value involvement ($\alpha = .83$, $M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.36$) ranged from .70 to .84. This two-factor model was aligned with the original outcome vs. value construct (see Table 1).

To test our hypotheses and research question, first, Hayes (2018) PROCESS Macro (Model 7) was used. In this model estimation, political identification was entered as the X variable. Perception of media bias was entered as the mediator, while the political party was entered as the moderator. The intention to participate in discursive activities was entered as the Y variable. This moderated mediation model tested the moderated effect of political party and identification with the party on perceptions of media bias, and the mediated effect of party identification on the intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues through perceptions of media bias. PROCESS Model 4 was applied to test the mediation effect of gun identity, outcome involvement, and value involvement on the intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun ownership through perceptions of media bias. The PROCESS macro uses an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression-based path analysis to test conditional indirect effects. Variables are standardized before the interaction terms are created. Statistically significant interaction terms indicate the presence of

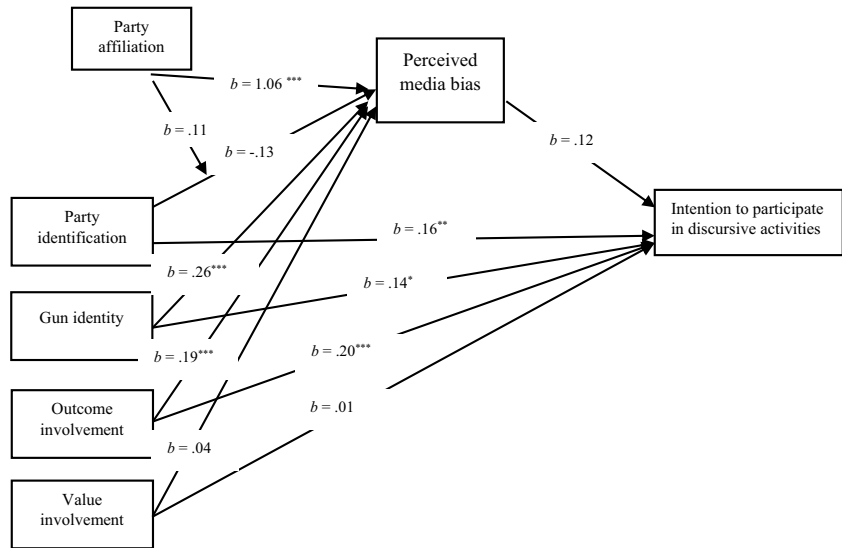


Figure 2. Tested moderated mediation model predicting intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues ($N = 300$).

Age, education and attention to news were entered the model as covariates.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

moderation. Indirect effects are interpreted as statistically significant when the bootstrap analysis with 5,000 iterations and bias-corrected estimates generate 95% upper or lower confidence intervals (CI), not including zero (Hayes, 2018). For both mediation and moderation analyses, PROCESS generates unstandardized regression coefficients. Age, gender, education, and news attention were entered as covariates to control the potential confounding effects.

Results

The results were presented in Figure 2. H1 proposed that participants' political party affiliation interacted with the strength of their party identification in predicting perceptions of media bias against gun owners, in a way that strong Republican identifiers were more likely to perceive media bias. The results suggested that political party affiliation itself was significantly associated with perceptions of media bias ($b = 1.06$, $SE = .17$, $p < .001$). Specifically, Republicans or Republican-leaners ($n = 123$) reported stronger perceptions of media bias in mass shooting news against gun owners ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 1.43$) than Democrats or Democrat-leaners ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.44$). However, political party affiliation did not interact with

the strength of party identification in predicting perceptions of media bias. Therefore, H1 was not supported.

H2 predicted that strength of gun identification was positively associated with perceptions of media bias against gun owners. This hypothesis was supported ($b = .26$, $SE = .04$, $p < .001$).

H3 and H4 predicted that as participants' levels of outcome involvement and value involvement increased, they were more likely to perceive media biased against gun owners in mass shooting news. The results suggested that outcome involvement significantly and positively predicted perceptions of media bias ($b = .19$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$), whereas value involvement did not. Therefore, H3 was supported and H4 was not supported.

H5-H8 examined whether the strength of party identification, the strength of gun ownership identification, outcome involvement, and value involvement were associated with intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues. The results indicated significant direct effects for the strength of party identification ($b = .16$, $SE = .06$, $p < .01$), the strength of gun ownership identification ($b = .14$, $SE = .05$, $p < .05$), and outcome involvement ($b = .20$, $SE = .06$, $p < .001$) in predicting intention to participate in discursive activities. However, value involvement was not a significant predictor. Therefore, H5, H6, H7 were supported, while H8 was not supported.

H9 proposed that perceptions of media bias predicted intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues. This relationship was not significant. Therefore, H9 was not supported.

As perceived media bias did not predict intention to participate in discursive activities concerning gun issues, it did not mediate the effect of the antecedents on the intention to participate in discursive activities, which answered RQ1.

Discussion

The role of social identity

To start with, participants' political party significantly predicted their perceptions of media bias against gun owners. Specifically, Republican participants were more likely to exhibit such perceptions. As aforementioned, gun culture in the United States was mostly embraced by the Republican party (e.g., Gimpel, 1998). While there has been a serious call to change gun policies to restrict gun accessibility, reasons such as the NRA's political power in influencing policymaking and even political candidates' positions on gun issues, the Republican party's defense of the Second Amendment, and the unwillingness of a Republican-controlled Senate to consider gun control proposals, have been cited in the media to explain the repeated

occurrence of mass shootings. Hence, it is possible that Republicans feel particularly under attack more than Democrats when they are exposed to news coverage about mass shootings.

Moreover, Republicans may see criticisms related to gun owners (as we measured in this study) as criticism for their in-group, and therefore perceive the news coverage as biased. In fact, Oh et al. (2011) found that Republicans tended to express hostile media perception more than Democrats. That is, they tended to believe that the media had a liberal and pre-Democratic bias (Lee, 2005). Hence, the significant effect of the political party on perceptions of media bias could be a “spill-over” effect from considering gun owners as their in-group.

Even though political party affiliation was associated with perceptions of media bias, identification with a political party (i.e., the strength of such identification) was not a significant predictor of perceptions of media bias. The interaction effect (i.e., political party \times party identification) was also not significant. It is possible that positions on gun-related issues, particularly in the context of mass shootings, are so central to the Republican party that they are widely shared among Republicans, regardless of their level of identification. According to Pew Research (December 17, 2019), ideological differences between Republicans and Democrats were particularly noticeable for two issues, guns and race, among others. Thus, self-identification of being a Republican or Republican-leaner may be sufficient enough to evoke an intergroup lens to interpret the news coverage of mass shootings and gun owners.

Even though the strength of identification with a political party did not predict perceptions of media bias, the strength of identification with gun ownership did. This result aligned with the theoretical proposition of social identity theory in that individuals are motivated to process intergroup-related information differently, depending on the strength of their in-group identity. Those who view their gun ownership as part of who they are may engage in self-stereotyping by embracing the values of gun rights. Thus, they may perceive news media coverage as biased against their group. Branscombe et al. (1999) suggested that high identifiers tended to react to threats by either defending their group or derogating the out-group. In this sense, high identifiers of gun ownership may perceive the current news media environment to be threatening to the values of their group (e.g., self-sufficiency, defender of the Second Amendment, law-abiding citizens), and react to the threat through perceptions of media bias. Future research should consider whether perceptions of social identity threats as suggested by Branscombe et al. (1999) or symbolic threats as suggested by intergroup threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) mediate the relationship between the strength of gun ownership identification and perceptions of media bias.

Strong identification with a social group also predicted the intention to participate in public discussion on gun issues. This finding should not be surprising. Given that participation in discursive activities requires more effort than attitudinal expression, people who strongly identify with their social groups are more likely to take the time to sign a petition, talk about gun issues with others or post opinions about gun issues online. Those who strongly identify with the Republican party and those who strongly identify with gun ownership may feel the need to defend their constitutional right and political values. Similarly, but motivated by different reasons, strong Democrat identifiers may wish to advocate for stricter gun control laws, and therefore, they engage in discursive activities to express their opinions about gun issues.

The role of two types of involvement

The current study also displayed an effort to capture the slippery concept of involvement, by testing different types of involvement in relation to perceptions of media bias and political participation. Outcome involvement was a significant predictor for both the perception of media bias and intention to participate in discursive activities, while value involvement was not. This finding suggested that involvement due to a concern about the consequence of gun policy change, rather than involvement due to conflicts with personal core values, served as a more important filter to evaluate news coverage about gun owners. This finding, however, contradicted Choi et al.'s (2009) finding that value involvement was a significant predictor of HMP while outcome involvement was not. As participants in the current study reported a higher degree of value involvement ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.36$) than outcome involvement ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 1.61$), the lack of a significant effect should not be attributed to neutral or apathetic attitudes toward the gun-related issues. That said, previous studies suggested that the type of involvement individuals have may vary depending on the nature of a political issue (Shavitt, 1990; Zhang, 2020). Individuals' involvement in gun-related issues might be driven more by a consideration of self-interest than by their core values. Another possible explanation for the finding here is that the measurement items did not specify the kinds of values when measuring value involvement. While some people view gun rights as security or freedom, others may associate guns with senseless killings and violent deaths (Blanco, 2016). Not specifying values when measuring how participants were involved with gun policies might reduce the predicting power of value involvement on the two outcome variables in the current study.

In addition, Carsey and Layman (2006) suggested that the influence of party identification on individuals' views on a political issue depends on

how salient people perceive the issue in their lives (i.e., personally relevant to the well-being of their lives). If people do not consider a particular issue as personally relevant, party identity may take precedence in forging views. However, for those who find personal relevance to the issue, their personal values may take precedence over their party identification. Future studies should examine the role of personal relevance of the political issue and the ways in which it interacts with issue involvement and social identities in shaping the news audience's perceptions of media bias and motivating political participation.

Overall, the results suggested that strong identifications with social groups (such as the Republican party or gun ownership) and issue involvement contribute to perceptions of media bias, and should be considered in addition to the influences from news frames in the news reports. Moreover, these same influences, particularly identification with a political party, seem to also motivate political engagement, which is critical to the healthy functioning of democracy. While we do not wish to see more mass shootings for such debates to occur, we deem such debates on gun-related issues necessary and potentially influential on public opinions and legislative processes.

Rethinking the corrective action hypothesis

The “corrective action hypothesis” suggests that people are motivated to correct the potential negative influence of biased media content by expressing their own opinions in the public sphere (Rojas, 2010), and previous studies have supported this prediction (e.g., Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Bernhard & Dohle, 2015; Gunther & Storey, 2003). However, the current study did not find such support. The means of both perceptions of media bias ($M = 4.42$, $SD = 1.60$) and intention to engage in discursive activities ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.17$) were above the mid-point, but they were not significantly related ($b = .12$). These findings suggested perception of media bias was not the motivation for participants to engage in discussion to “correct” the influence of the “perceived” biased media content.

Previous studies also have suggested that perceived negative media impact on others is another critical factor in predicting corrective actions (e.g., Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Bernhard & Dohle, 2015; Gunther & Storey, 2003; Rojas, 2020). The idea is that people will not feel the need to correct the media content unless they perceive the negative media impact is powerful on others. Moreover, the theory of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974) recognized that some people express their opinions regardless of the perceptions of opinion climate. The current study did not measure the perceived media impact or perceived opinion climate, thus, we do not know whether the non-significant relationship between perceptions of media bias and the intention

to participate in discursive activities was due to a low level of either element. With that being said, the lack of correlation between perceptions of media bias and intention to participate in discursive activities suggested the importance of individual-level factors in influencing political participation. The significant individual-level factors such as social identities and involvement with news issues are at work directly predicting political discussion rather than through perceptions of hostile media bias. That is, when an issue is extremely controversial and is essential to one's identity and belief, actions will be taken.

Limitation and future study

First, although we tried to match gender, ethnicity, and age of the national population in our sampling process to improve the representativeness of our sample, a generalization of our findings is still limited as paid participation does not generate a random sample in a strict sense. Second, as aforementioned, the measurement of value involvement needs to be further specified to capture the effect of different dimensions of value involvement concerning gun issues. Despite these limitations, this study extended the discussion of perceptions of media bias with a much-debated political issue. The findings supported the assertion made by other media theories, such as Uses & Gratifications, that individuals are active media users and their individual characteristics and social/cultural-related predispositions play a significant role in how they make sense of the media content. The findings also highlight the respective contributions from social-psychological level (social identities) factors and individual-level (personal involvement) factors relevant to perceptions of media bias that should be simultaneously considered in future research. It is also important to continue exploring other individual characteristics that may be associated with perceptions of media bias. For example, future study should examine specific media programs or outlets individuals use to gather information about gun-related issues in the context of mass shootings, and whether exposure to ideologically-congenial news sources versus ideologically-uncongenial news sources may influence individuals' judgment of media bias (e.g., Lin & Haridakis, 2017; Lin et al., 2016). In addition to tapping into the concept of selective exposure, it may also be fruitful in our understanding of perceptions of media bias in the current context by examining viewers' intentional avoidance of exposing themselves to certain media outlets or programs and how that may be associated with their judgment of media bias.

An understanding of the influence of people's group identities and involvement related to this issue is the necessary first step to identify ways to build consensus between people who support restricting gun access and people who do not. Intergroup researchers have used

a common in-group identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) to reduce bias between two groups that may have different positions on issues or have been historically in conflict with each other. Future studies may identify news coverage that incorporates personal involvement concerns, and also connect opposing viewpoints to reach some degree of consensus on gun violence issues, which can facilitate bipartisan policy proposals to mitigate repeated occurrences of gun violence in the United States.

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