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How Liberals and Conservatives Shop Differently

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After the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, in February 2018, Dick's Sporting Goods announced that it would no longer sell semiautomatic rifles in its hunting and fishing stores (it had already stopped selling them at its main stores after the December 2012 Sandy Hook School shooting). The company has gone on to destroy the guns it pulled from its shelves, rather than selling them back to the manufacturers. CEO Ed Stack told The New York Times, "We're going to take a stand and step up and tell people our view and, hopefully, bring people along into the conversation." While some consumers threatened to boycott the retailer, the company's stock is up, and public perception of the brand is more positive overall.

Dick's is not alone. The charged political atmosphere is increasingly influencing the marketplace, and retailers are having to figure out where they stand. Consumers are putting more pressure on companies to choose sides (a recent survey showed that 66% of consumers want companies to take a stand on social and political issues), and customers are increasingly interpreting company actions through a political lens.

In part, this reflects rising polarization overall. According to recent reports, the polarization of political attitudes in America has been on the rise over the last two decades, reached new heights during President Obama's administration, and has become even larger during President Trump's first year in office. Rising political divisions shape where individuals prefer to live, the types of people they surround themselves with, and how they interact with their parents, children, neighbors and partners. In this era, it seems, everything is political – including shopping.

But our research suggests American consumers' brand preferences are shaped not only by where companies stand on politically polarizing issues, but also by consumers' own political affiliations and subtle brand associations. In a series of studies that I have conducted with

Daniel Fernandes, a colleague from the Catholic University of Lisbon, we found that consumers' political ideology shapes how they choose to differentiate themselves from others in the marketplace.

People (of all political persuasions) have a fundamental desire to stand out from the crowd and to showcase their identity to others (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). From fast cars and expensive watches to unique clothes and the latest gadgets, consumers use products to signal that they are more affluent, powerful, creative, or hip than others. In turn, brands use market positioning and ad taglines to cue different identities that consumers may wish to adopt. While some products clearly cater to consumers' desires to signal their superior qualities and positions to others (take Mercedes's claim "A Class Ahead"), others speak to consumers' desires to express their uniqueness from others (take Apple's famous tagline "Think Different" or Vans' slogan "Off The Wall"). In our work, we find that conservative and liberal ideologies lead consumers to systematically choose different strategies to distinguish themselves in the marketplace.

In our research, conservatives tended to differentiate themselves through products that show that they are *better* than others - for example, by choosing products from high-status luxury brands. In contrast, liberals tended to differentiate themselves through products that show that they are *unique* from others - for example, by choosing products with unconventional designs or colors. These distinct preferences emerged across multiple studies in which U.S. participants (university students who completed surveys in the lab, adults who took surveys online, and members of a research panel) indicated their political ideology and made real or hypothetical choices between products.

In one study, participants chose between coffee mugs that would be customized with their names and the message "Just Better" or "Just Different." Conservatives were 2.2 times more likely than liberals to choose the mug that signaled superiority ("Just Better") over the one

that signaled uniqueness (“Just Different”). In another study, participants could win a gift card from one of two brands as a reward for participation – Ralph Lauren, which based on our numerous pretests of consumers’ brand perceptions generally signals superiority, and Urban Outfitters, which based on our pretests generally signals uniqueness. Conservatives tended to prefer Ralph Lauren, whereas liberals tended to prefer Urban Outfitters.

These patterns emerged regardless of whether political ideology was captured by a simple dichotomous scale (“How would you categorize your political identity: liberal or conservative?” from Tetlock, Hannum, and Micheletti 1984), a single question (which asks people to locate themselves on a scale from 1 = “extremely liberal” to 9 = “extremely conservative” from Jost 2006), or a scale that measured people’s attitudes toward various topics (capital punishment, abortion, gun control, socialized healthcare, same-sex marriage, illegal immigration, and Democrats from Nail et al. 2009). Similar results emerged even when we temporarily made a conservative or a liberal identity salient to participants by asking them to recall a time when they were interacting with someone who was more liberal or someone who was more conservative than them.

The results were also consistent across income brackets. For example, in one study participants from different annual income brackets were asked to rate their interest in wearing a red outfit to a professional networking event. They were told that most people would wear black to the event and hence that a red outfit would make them stand out. However, half of the participants were primed to think that red would signal superiority after reading a magazine article which claimed that red was increasingly regarded as the “color of success, prosperity, and accomplishments in the 21st century,” whereas the other half were primed to think that red would signal uniqueness after reading an article which claimed that red was regarded as the “color of originality, rebelliousness, and edge in the 21st century.” Regardless of their income bracket, conservatives were more interested in

wearing the red outfit when they thought that red signaled superiority (rather than uniqueness), and liberals were more interested in wearing the red outfit when they thought that red signaled uniqueness (rather than superiority).

We hypothesized that these differences in product preferences might emerge because of different beliefs about social hierarchies. Conservatives tend to endorse social hierarchies as reflecting legitimate differences in people's skills and work ethic. As a result, conservatives view products that signal superiority as legitimate reflections of their favorable individual qualities such as hard work and motivation. On the other hand, liberals tend to oppose hierarchical social structures, believing that everyone works hard and that some people attain high positions in society because of luck or connections. As a result, liberals try to break away from traditional hierarchical structures and to signal their unique identities in alternative, non-conventional ways. To test this explanation, in multiple studies, in addition to measuring participants' preferences for superiority-signaling and uniqueness-signaling products, we also measured participants' beliefs about the social hierarchy (using a validated scale from Pratto et al. 1994, which included items such as "some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups" and "inferior groups should stay in their place"). The results confirmed that hierarchy beliefs account for conservatives' and liberals' distinct choices of self-differentiating products. This ultimately means that if conservatives' and liberals' perceptions of hierarchical structures can be reconciled, at least temporarily, the differences in their product preferences may also be bridged.

These findings encourage marketers to think about how they position their products. Brands that emphasize superiority or luxury may be appealing to conservatives, while brands that signal distinctiveness or unusualness may be resonating with liberals. Furthermore, our findings suggest that different products may do better in conservative or liberal regions, or when they are advertised in conservative or liberal media, depending on their product positioning. For example, our analysis of over 130 million searches on Google across

conservative and liberal U.S. states showed that searchers' interest in Ralph Lauren (and in similar superiority-signaling products and concepts) was higher across conservative states, whereas interest in Urban Outfitters (and in similar uniqueness-signaling products and concepts) was higher across liberal states.

Ultimately, this work introduces a new, political lens for understanding key differences in consumers' purchase decisions, and it can shine a new light on how certain differences in preferences (in the store, and, maybe, at the kitchen table) can, at least temporarily, be bridged.

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