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The effects of political ideology and brand familiarity on conspicuous consumption of fashion products

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ABSTRACT

From the lens of conspicuous consumption, this research examines the interactive effect of brand logo size and political ideology on consumers' intentions toward fashion products. Specifically, in a series of four studies, we address how consumer political ideology influences intentions toward items displaying smaller, inconspicuous logos versus larger, conspicuous logos for unfamiliar and familiar brands. We show that liberal consumers are more likely to prefer a large (rather than small) logo when a brand is unfamiliar. We suggest that liberals' greater desire for product uniqueness elevates their risk propensity, which in turn increases preference for conspicuous consumption when familiarity with a brand is low. We show that this effect occurs only for unfamiliar brands; when brand familiarity is high (i.e. a popular or well-known brand), consumer political ideology reverses consumer preference for conspicuous consumption, replicating prior work. Our results suggest that, by manipulating their logo size, new brands may effectively target consumers based on their political ideology.

KEYWORDS

Political ideology; conspicuous consumption; brand prominence; logo design; brand familiarity

Introduction

Consumer intentions such as likelihood to visit a store or purchase a product are arguably some of the most important factors in determining a new fashion brand's success or failure. Attributes such as quality (Dhaoui, 2014), price (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004), and brand image (Martín-Consuegra et al., 2018; Panchal & Gill, 2020) are important determinants of positive consumer intentions. Furthermore, consumers rely on heuristic cues such as product attributes to form opinions about both products and their owners. For example, logo size, a form of brand prominence (Han et al., 2010), may act as a signal of dominance (Panchal & Gill, 2020) or a way of demonstrating power over others (Koo & Im, 2019). Logo size may also interact with attributes such as brand personality (Cai & Mo, 2020) to influence consumers' evaluations.

Existing literature has identified a number of factors influencing consumers' relative preference for prominent logos, including implicit ignorance in social settings (Lee & Shrum, 2012), high need for status (Han et al., 2010), and conservative political ideology (Goenka & Thomas, 2020). Building on Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al., 2009), Goenka and Thomas (2020) demonstrated that consumers identifying with traditionally conservative values (e.g. respect for authority, in-group allegiance, and purity) have greater preference for large logos.¹ The aim of the present research is to explore a boundary condition to reverse this result, making liberals – instead of conservatives – display an increased preference for large logos. The proposed boundary condition is brand familiarity, that is, the extent to which consumers are familiar with a given brand (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Luffarelli et al., 2019).

Literature review and hypotheses development

Conspicuous consumption and brand prominence

Conspicuous consumption is defined as the consumption of ostentatious goods with the intention of increasing one's social status (Veblen, 1899/1994) in the eyes of both the consumer and the surrounding others (Eastman et al., 1999). Many view conspicuous consumption as a "showy behavior" (Lee & Shrum, 2012, p. 532); thus, consumers who engage in such publicly visible consumption are often considered attention seekers (Griskevicius et al., 2007; Veblen, 1899/1994). Prior literature has identified a number of factors influencing

consumers' tendencies to engage in conspicuous consumption, including evolutionary motives (Griskevicius et al., 2007), need for self-integrity (Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010), incompleteness with respect to specific identity attainment (Braun & Wicklund, 1989), feelings of powerlessness (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008), and income inequality (Walasek & Brown, 2015).

Brand prominence, which describes the relative degree of visibility of a brand's mark (Han et al., 2010), plays an important role in conspicuous consumption. Consumers tend to use varying degrees of brand prominence in order to demonstrate their affinity with or difference from other consumers (Berger & Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2010). According to the framework introduced by Meyer and Manika (2017), brand prominence encompasses several variations, including brand visibility which has three dimensions: presence versus absence of the brand logo, size of the logo, and the logo's degree of visual clarity. In the current research, we focus specifically on logo size (an operationalization of brand conspicuousness) and the interactive role it plays with consumers' political identity in predicting intentions toward brands.

Political ideology

Political ideology, an individual difference of growing importance which shapes consumers' preferences (Jung & Mittal, 2020), is commonly thought to follow a left-right or liberal-conservative continuum. Differences along this continuum can be seen in personality traits, cognitive styles, motivations, moral foundations, neurological structures, preferences, and behaviors (Carney et al., 2008; Graham et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2003; Jung & Mittal, 2020; Kanai et al., 2011; Kidwell et al., 2013; C. H. Kim et al., 2018; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018). Prior work has demonstrated liberal consumers' penchant for novelty seeking (Jost et al., 2003), open-mindedness (Carney et al., 2008), and acceptance of social norm violations (Duckitt & Sibley, 2010). For example, liberals display greater preference than conservatives for user-designed products (Paharia & Swaminathan, 2019). Meanwhile, conservative consumers are more likely to adhere to traditionalism, are less open to new experiences (Jost et al., 2003), and are motivated to avoid losses and negative outcomes (Janoff-Bulman, 2009). Compared to liberals, conservatives are concerned with maintaining the status quo, preserving the familiar (Jost et al., 2003), and following social norms (Fernandes & Mandel, 2014). These tendencies translate into conservative consumers' inclinations for

established brands (Khan et al., 2013). Practically, managers may use the differences inherent in political ideologies to segment and target when developing marketing strategies (Jung & Mittal, 2020).

Desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity

Liberals display a greater desire for expressing uniqueness than do conservatives, as reflected in their preferences for products that differentiate them from other consumers (Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018). In contrast, conservatives place a higher value on conformity and in-group similarity (Graham et al., 2009; Kidwell et al., 2013). According to Moral Foundations Theory, conservatism is linked to “binding” people together, whereas liberals are more concerned with “individualizing” (Graham et al., 2009, p. 1030; Kidwell et al., 2013). For example, conservatives use more first-person plural pronouns (e.g. we, our, us, ourselves) than liberals (Sterling et al., 2020). In contrast to conservatives, liberals believe in low power distance (Paharia & Swaminathan, 2019) and prefer equality over hierarchy (C. H. Kim et al., 2018). These beliefs lead to liberals’ increased preference for horizontally (rather than vertically) differentiated products that enable liberals to signal that they are different from (rather than better than) other consumers (Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018). When individuals desire uniqueness, they tend to display risky behavior, which can itself be a form of self-expression (Cantarella & Desrichard, 2020) that enables one to stand out from the crowd (Boverie et al., 1994). Given the positive association between uniqueness-seeking and risk-taking (Cantarella & Desrichard, 2020), we expect that liberals’ desire for product uniqueness will in turn positively influence their propensity to take risks.

Existing research suggests that the association between political ideology and risk-taking might be domain specific, such that conservatives take greater risks in financial domains while liberals are less risk averse in ethical, recreational, or social domains (Choma et al., 2014). Given this lack of association between consumers’ political ideology and their *general* propensity to engage in risky behaviors, we do not expect that political ideology will influence consumer outcomes through risk propensity directly. Instead, we predict a serial mediation through consumer desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity. Specifically, we hypothesize that liberals’ increased desire for product uniqueness will inflate their general risk propensity.

We argue that this elevated risk propensity will then positively influence liberals' preference for conspicuous consumption (operationalized as positive behavioral intentions toward a large logo) of unfamiliar brands. Namely, trying on or purchasing a product featuring a large logo of an unfamiliar brand might constitute a rather bold move typical of consumers who prefer to stand out from the crowd and, as a result, are more willing to take risks. Building upon the literature discussed above, we argue that uniqueness-seeking liberals might be more likely than orthodox conservatives to make such a move. Thus, we predict that liberals (vs. conservatives) will display greater preference for large logos of unfamiliar brands, and this effect will be serially driven by liberals' heightened desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity. We expect this result to reverse for small logos of unfamiliar brands, which might be more appealing to conservative consumers. Thus, we formally suggest:

H₁: For unfamiliar brands, there will be an interactive effect of consumers' political ideology and logo size on behavioral intentions toward a product:

H_{1a}: Liberal consumers will display higher intentions toward products displaying large logos than small logos.

H_{1b}: Conservative consumers will display higher intentions toward products displaying small logos than large logos.

H₂: For unfamiliar brands, the effect of political ideology on behavioral intentions toward products displaying large logos will be serially mediated by consumer desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity.

Brand familiarity as a boundary condition

Consumers use cues to signal information about themselves that may not be easily observable to others. This signaling can vary in strength depending upon whether it is conspicuous or inconspicuous (Sheehan & Dommer, 2014). Brand prominence, including logo size, signals status (Han et al., 2010), which is more important to conservatives than to liberals (C. H. Kim et al., 2018; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018). Accordingly, previous research suggests that conservatives,

and not liberals, prefer large logos (Goenka & Thomas, 2020). However, existing research fails to explore the role of brand familiarity (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Luffarelli et al., 2019) in the context of political identity and logo size, having observed conservatives' elevated preference for large logos only in relation to established, well-known brands (Goenka & Thomas, 2020). While we maintain that this effect will be reversed for unfamiliar brands, we also seek to replicate prior findings by Goenka and Thomas (2020) by exploring the interactive effect of logo size and political ideology for familiar brands. We also aim to extend this line of literature by examining this effect for new brands that look similar to established brands. Given the similarities between established brands and new brands that aim to imitate established brands in terms of design, we expect the effect for new brands looking similar to familiar brands will replicate the effect for familiar brands. Together, we predict:

H₃: For familiar brands (as well as for new brands that look similar to familiar brands), there will be an interactive effect of consumers' political ideology and logo size on behavioral intentions toward a product:

H_{3a}: Conservative consumers will display higher intentions toward products displaying large logos than small logos.

H_{3b}: Liberal consumers will display higher intentions toward products displaying small logos than large logos.

Overview of studies

The above predictions are tested across four studies. In Study 1, we test the interactive effect of political ideology and logo size on behavioral intentions toward an unfamiliar brand. The underlying mechanisms, desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity, are tested in Study 2. Next, in Study 3, we use an unfamiliar brand that is imitative of a familiar brand to examine whether we can reverse the effect. Finally, in Study 4, we attempt to replicate the effect observed for unfamiliar imitative brand with a familiar brand.

Research methods

Study 1

Method

The objective of this study was to test the interactive effect of logo size and consumer political ideology on purchase likelihood of an unfamiliar brand. First, we developed a fictitious brand, Luxy, to serve as the unfamiliar brand. Two versions of social media posts were created about a t-shirt made by Luxy. The social media posts contained an image of a t-shirt (adapted from a real social media post; see Appendix A). The t-shirt displayed a Luxy logo, and the two conditions differed only in size of the logo placed on the center of the t-shirt. In a pretest, seventy-two participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk; $M_{\text{age}} = 40.31$, 47.2% female, U.S. residents) evaluated these two stimuli in a between-subjects design (small vs. large logo). Participants rated their familiarity with the brand (Unfamiliar/Familiar) and the size of the logo (Small/Large), each on 7-point bipolar scales. Results revealed that participants were unfamiliar with the brand ($M = 1.71$, $t(71) = -12.76$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, those who evaluated the large logo perceived it as larger ($M_{\text{large}} = 5.83$) than did those assigned to the small logo condition ($M_{\text{small}} = 4.64$, $F(1, 70) = 17.07$, $p < .001$).

In the main study, 200 participants were recruited from MTurk ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.41$, 33% female, U.S. residents) and randomly assigned to either the large or small logo condition. Participants were asked to imagine scrolling through their social media feed and viewing a tweet displaying the t-shirt. Participants were then asked to rate their likelihood of purchasing the t-shirt on a 3-item 7-point bipolar scale (Unlikely/Likely, Definitely would not/Definitely would, Improbable/Probable; $\alpha = .91$). Next, they completed a 7-item assessment of political ideology, with higher scores representing liberal ideology and lower scores representing conservative ideology (see Appendix B; adapted from Nail et al., 2009; $\alpha = .71$). Finally, age and gender were recorded.

Results and discussion

We analyzed consumer purchase likelihood in a political ideology by logo size regression. There was a significant effect of logo size ($\beta = -.65$, $t(196) = -2.22$, $p = .03$) and a nonsignificant effect of political ideology ($\beta = .06$, $t(196) = .92$, $p = .36$). The interaction between logo size and political ideology was significant ($\beta = .73$, $t(196) = 2.50$, $p = .01$). Next, we used Johnson-Neyman technique to find regions of significance. This technique is used with

two predictor variables (one categorical and one continuous) to identify regions along the continuous variable for which simple effects of the categorical variable are significant (Johnson & Neyman, 1936; Spiller et al., 2013). Using this technique, we found two regions of significance: political ideology below 1.98 and above 5.38 (see Figure 1). When political ideology was more conservative (below 1.98), there was a higher likelihood of purchase when the logo was small than when the logo was large. When political ideology was liberal (above 5.38), there was a higher likelihood of purchase when the logo was large rather than small. Further analysis showed that the effect was driven by the large logo (95% CI: .06 to .56). These results support H_1 , H_{1a} , and H_{1b} and provide initial evidence that, when a brand is unfamiliar, liberals have greater purchase intentions when the logo is large rather than small. However, their conservative counterparts demonstrated the opposite preferences.

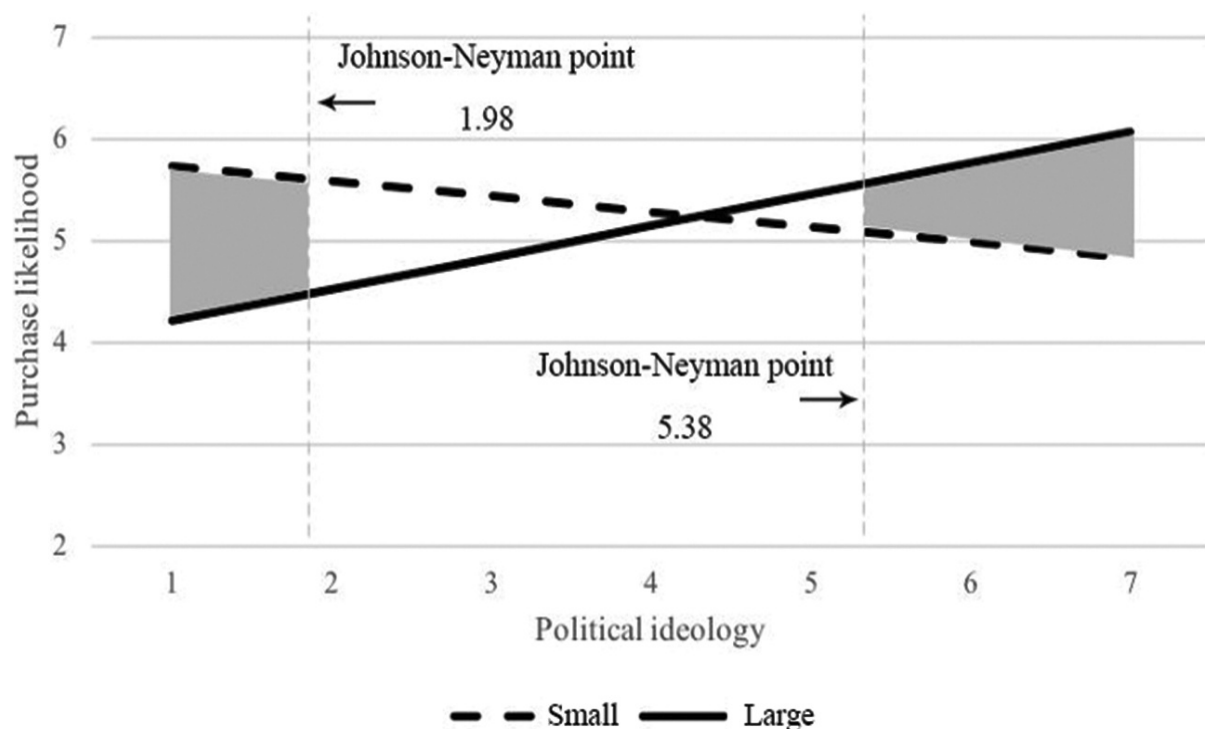


Figure 1. Study 1 results- interactive effect of political ideology and logo size for unfamiliar brand.

Study 2

Method

The objective of this study was to test the underlying mechanism. More specifically, the study was intended to examine the reasons for liberals' positive behavioral intentions toward a large logo. We used a different product category (scarves) and a fictitious brand (Dulcet) for this study (see Appendix A). First, forty-three participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.42$, 39.5% female, U.S. residents) from MTurk participated in a pretest in which they evaluated familiarity with the brand and the perceived size of a large logo. Participants indicated that Dulcet was an unfamiliar brand ($M = 1.91$, $t(42) = -8.13$, $p < .001$). Size perception was as intended, such that participants perceived the logo to be large ($M = 5.70$, $t(42) = 7.73$, $p < .001$).

Eighty-nine MTurk workers participated in the main study ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.28$, 29.2% female, U.S. residents). They were told to imagine that they were scrolling through their Twitter feed and saw a tweet from Dulcet featuring a photo and a description of a scarf (see Appendix A). Afterward, participants indicated their likelihood to visit a store to try on the Dulcet scarf on a 2-item 7-point bipolar scale (Unlikely/Likely, Improbable/ Probable; $r = .88$). Next, they completed the political ideology scale used in Study 1 (7 items; $\alpha = .73$). Participants indicated their desire for product uniqueness on a 3-item scale (unique, special, and unorthodox; 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much; $\alpha = .88$). They also indicated the extent to which they wanted to take risk when they were considering the scarf on a 4-item scale (inspired by Zhang et al., 2019, 1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much, $\alpha = .96$). Finally, demographic measures were collected.

Results and discussion

A simple regression was conducted with political ideology as the independent variable and likelihood to visit the store as the dependent variable. There was a significant main effect of political ideology on likelihood to visit ($\beta = .21$, $t(87) = 2.02$, $p = .05$). Next, we examined whether desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity serially drove the effect (see Figure 2). Political ideology was significant in predicting desire for product uniqueness ($\beta = .28$, $t(87) = 2.71$, $p = .01$), while desire for product uniqueness was significant in predicting risk propensity ($\beta = .83$, $t(86) = 13.29$, $p < .001$). When the risk propensity was added to the model, political ideology was no longer significant ($\beta = -.02$, $t(85) = -.38$, $p = .71$) in predicting likelihood to visit, while risk propensity was significant ($\beta = .52$, $t(85) = 5.02$, $p < .001$). We conducted a mediation analysis using PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2018), with political

ideology as the independent variable and likelihood to visit as the dependent variable. Desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity served as mediators. Bootstrapping analysis provided evidence that desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity jointly mediated the effect of political ideology on likelihood to visit (95% CI: .04 to .42; 5,000 resamples). A separate analysis was conducted to see whether risk propensity directly mediated the effect of political ideology on likelihood to visit the store. Bootstrapping analysis showed that the effect was unlikely to be directly driven by risk propensity (95% CI: $-.05$ to $.29$; 5,000 resamples). These results lend support to H₂, suggesting that liberals' higher desire for product uniqueness prompted them to take more risks, thereby increasing their intentions to visit the store to try on a scarf of an unfamiliar brand.

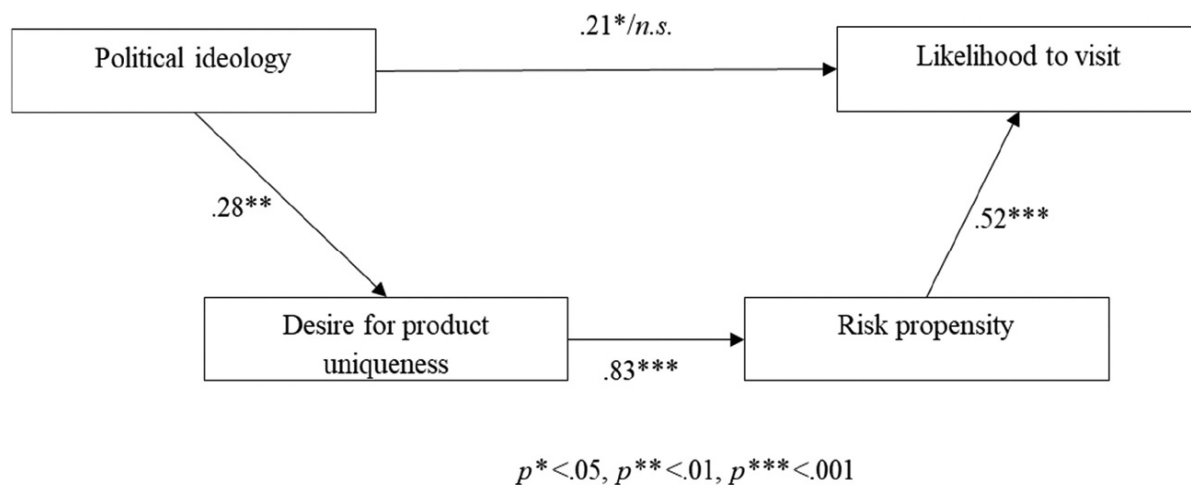


Figure 2. Study 2 results- serial mediation through desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity.

Study 3

Method

The objective of this study was to test the interactive effect of logo size and political ideology on purchase intentions toward an unfamiliar brand which has a similar logo to that of a familiar brand. We developed a fictitious brand “Grazia” which had a logo similar to that of Gucci, a luxury fashion brand (see Appendix A). For the new brand, we created two black t-shirts with varying logo sizes. These t-shirts were randomly presented to participants in two social media posts featuring similar content as in Study 1.

In a pretest, seventy-two participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 39.90$, 54.2% female, U.S. residents) evaluated the social media posts with respect to brand familiarity and logo size. Results confirmed that participants considered Grazia to be an unfamiliar brand ($M = 1.14$, $t(71) = -34.77$, $p < .001$), and perceived large logo as larger than the small one ($M_{\text{large}} = 4.84$, $M_{\text{small}} = 1.93$, $F(1,70) = 104.97$, $p < .001$).

The main study followed the same procedure as Study 1. Two hundred and eight participants completed the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.33$, 49.5% female, U.S. residents). After viewing the post, participants indicated their purchase intentions (3 items; $\alpha = .98$). The study concluded by measuring participants' political ideology (7 items; $\alpha = .84$) and collecting demographic information.

Results and discussion

As in Study 1, we conducted a regression analysis with political ideology, logo size, and their interactive effect on purchase intentions. There was a significant effect of political ideology ($\beta = .16$, $t(204) = 2.44$, $p = .02$), while the effect of logo size was not significant in predicting purchase intentions ($\beta = .27$, $t(204) = 1.27$, $p = .21$). The interactive effect was significant in predicting the dependent variable ($\beta = -.48$, $t(204) = -2.29$, $p = .02$). We conducted further analysis using Johnson-Neyman technique (Spiller et al., 2013), which revealed one region of significance: political ideology above 3.98 (see Figure 3). When political ideology was more liberal, there was a higher likelihood to purchase when the logo was small rather than large. Further, this effect was driven by the small logo (95% CI: .18 to .69). Taken together, Study 3 found evidence supporting H_3 and H_{3b} . However, H_{3a} was not supported.

Study 4

Method

The purpose of this study was to test the interactive effect of logo size and political ideology on behavioral intentions toward a familiar brand. We chose Gucci as the familiar brand and created stimuli similar to those used in Study 3 (adapted from a real social media post; see Appendix A). First, we pretested the brand familiarity and logo size with seventy-four MTurk participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.81$, 47.3% female, U.S. residents). As expected, participants confirmed that they were familiar with Gucci ($M = 5.36$, $t(73) = 8.97$, $p <$

.001), and perceived the large logo as larger than the small one ($M_{\text{large}} = 5.58$, $M_{\text{small}} = 2.17$, $F(1,72) = 190.25$, $p < .001$).

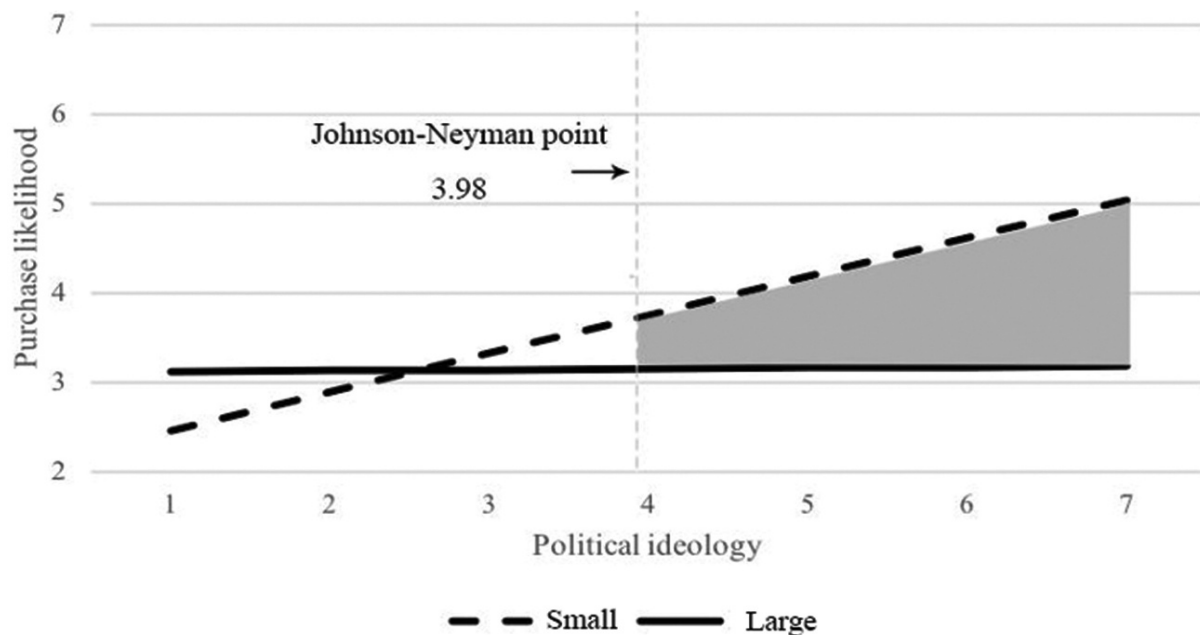


Figure 3. Study 3 results- interactive effect of political ideology and logo size for imitative unfamiliar brand.

Study 4 followed the same procedure as Study 1. One hundred and ninety-one participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.15$, 31.9% female, U.S. residents) completed the study on MTurk in exchange for a nominal fee. They indicated their purchase likelihood (3 items; $\alpha = .93$) after viewing the social media post. Political ideology (7 items; $\alpha = .69$) and demographics were captured in the second half of the survey.

Results and discussion

We conducted a regression analysis as in Study 1. Both the effect of logo size ($\beta = 1.25$, $t(187) = 4.11$, $p < .001$) and the effect of political ideology ($\beta = .26$, $t(187) = 3.88$, $p < .001$) were significant in predicting purchase likelihood. The interaction between the two was also significant ($\beta = -1.20$, $t(187) = -3.93$, $p < .001$). The main analysis was followed by the Johnson-Neyman technique (Spiller et al., 2013). Two regions of significance were observed: one below political ideology of 4.44 and one above 5.74 (see Figure 4). When political

ideology was more conservative (below 4.44), participants had a higher likelihood of purchase when the logo size was large than when it was small. Liberals (above 5.74) had a higher purchase likelihood when the logo size was small rather than large. The effect was driven by the small logo (95% CI: .53 to 1.09). These results provide support for H₃, H_{3a}, and H_{3b}.

Conclusion

While prior work suggests that conservative consumers prefer conspicuous consumption, the current research introduces a boundary condition to this effect. Specifically, we suggest that, for an unfamiliar brand, political identity influences consumer intentions toward products displaying large versus small logos differently. Study 1 demonstrates that liberal (conservative) consumers prefer large (small) logos for unfamiliar brands, while Study 2 shows that this result is jointly driven by liberals' elevated desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity. This effect is reversed for familiar brands (Study 4) and partially reversed for unfamiliar brands that imitate familiar brands (Study 3).

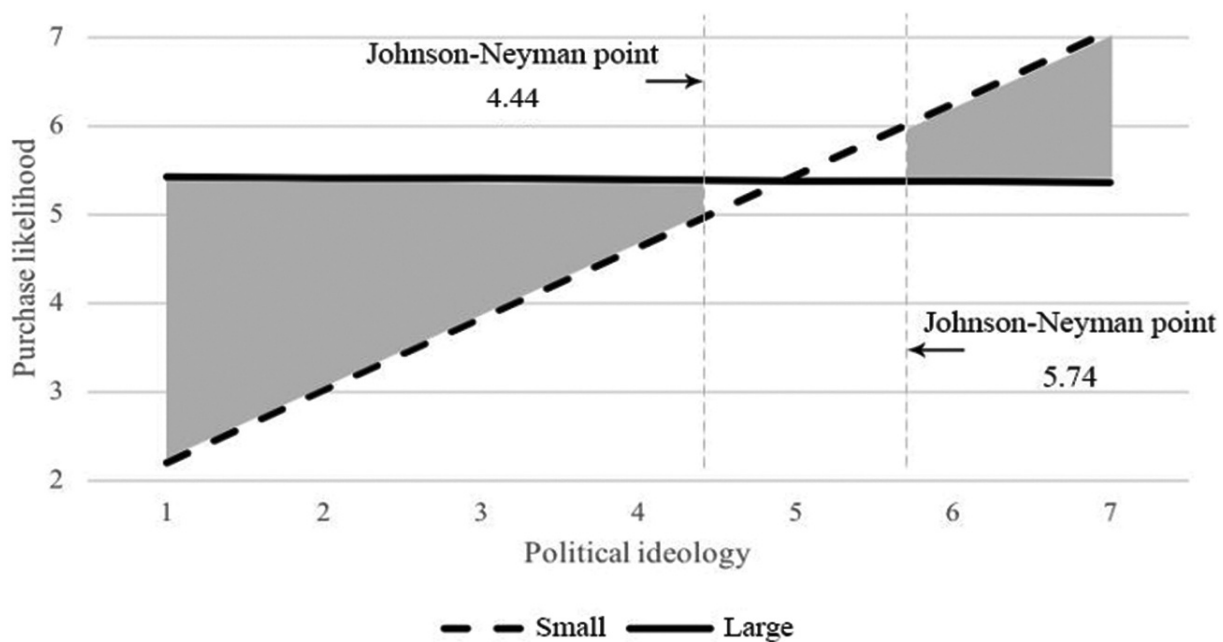


Figure 4. Study 4 results- interactive effect of political ideology and logo size for familiar brand.

The current work makes theoretical contributions to the nascent literature in three important but under-examined areas of consumer behavior research: political ideology, conspicuous consumption, and fashion marketing. Answering calls for a greater understanding of the influence of political ideology on preferences and behaviors (Jung & Mittal, 2020), we introduce a finding that runs counter to prior literature, which has suggested that conservatives are more likely to conspicuously consume (Goenka & Thomas, 2020). Practically, by identifying a condition in which liberals, rather than conservatives, opt for conspicuous consumption, our findings suggest that new fashion brands should consider their target market when placing their logo on products. Consumers' political identity has been identified in previous research as a construct influencing preferences and purchasing behaviors (Carney et al., 2008). For example, political ideology shapes consumers' preferences for luxury fashion items (clothes and eyewear; J. C. Kim et al., 2018); thus, this research offers a practical approach to market segmentation for new fashion brands. These findings support an approach that accounts for political ideology in predicting consumers' likelihood to conspicuously consume fashion products. Importantly, data on political ideology are easily accessible to managers via geographic segmentation (Jung & Mittal, 2020) or consumers' social media behavior and other digital footprints (J. C. Kim et al., 2018).

Despite these contributions, the current research is limited in that our studies only contained social media posts. Future research may examine how the interactive effect of a fashion brand logo and consumer political ideology within different communication modes may influence perceptions and outcomes. Furthermore, while we demonstrated the predicted effect with two types of products, t-shirts and scarves, future research may test whether the effect holds for other garment categories as well as accessories such as handbags, shoes, belts, and eyewear. Third, while we established serial mediation through desire for product uniqueness and risk propensity, further research may probe into additional mechanisms that might co-determine the outcome (Kirmani, 2015).

The current research offers an initial examination of the interactive effect between logo size and consumer political ideology in the fashion marketing context. However, much remains to be done to explore this interaction in more detail, and so we encourage scholars to further probe into the role of political ideology in conspicuous consumption.

Note

1. See Study 2 in Goenka and Thomas (2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A: Study Stimuli

Study 1 Stimuli



Small logo



Large logo

Study 2 Stimulus



Large logo

Study 3 Stimuli



Small logo



Large logo

Study 4 Stimuli



Small logo

Large logo

Appendix B: Political Ideology Measurement

This measurement is adapted from Nail et al. (2009).

Please indicate the degree to which you are for or against the following (1 = Strongly Against, 7 = Strongly Favor):

Capital punishment (reverse coded) Abortion

Gun control Socialized healthcare Same-sex marriage Illegal immigration

Democrats