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# Ethical Branding in A Divided World: How Political Orientation Motivates Reactions to Marketplace Transgressions

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## Abstract

In today's marketplace, users (e.g., purchasers, influencers) are increasingly the “face” of brands to potential consumers, increasing the risk for brands should these users act poorly. Across seven studies, we document that political orientation moderates the desire for punishment toward users of ethical (vs. conventional) brands who commit moral transgressions. In response to identical marketplace transgressions, we observe that liberals punish ethical brand users less than conventional brand users. In contrast, conservatives punish the same users of ethical brands more than conventional brand users. We document that this bias stems from how people interpret the inconsistency between the ethical branding and the act of transgression, rather than from a group-identity effect, showing how it does not arise in the absence of inconsistent information or when consumers are not able to integrate the inconsistent information to their judgments. We also investigate an avenue by which firms can reframe their ethical branding to reduce this politically motivated bias. We discuss this work's implications for moral judgments, marketplace attribute formation, and the branding of ethical goods in a politically divided world.

**Keywords:** Branding, Political Ideology, Ethical Consumption, Attribute Formation, Moral Judgment

## Introduction

Picture yourself driving into a shopping mall parking area at the end of a long workday. You see that another patron has obnoxiously double-parked, occupying the last two spots available. You are forced to circle for a few long minutes before you can find a spot. Wouldn't that make you angry? Now, imagine that this person's car is a hybrid from a brand that prides itself on being environmentally friendly. How would you reconcile this apparent discrepancy between the car driver's ethical consumption choices and the inconsiderate behavior? And would this information affect your desire to see this person punished?

On the one hand, you might be tempted to forgive the driver because, despite having done something wrong, you view this person as having also demonstrated moral values by purchasing from an ethical brand (i.e., the hybrid vehicle). On the other hand, you might be tempted to punish the driver because you view this person as

hypocritical, showcasing environmental care while lacking basic respect for fellow drivers. The current research explores the conditions underlying these two reactions stemming from inferences regarding brand usage in consumer-to-consumer contexts.

Understanding consumer reactions to each other's behavior is increasingly vital for brands. In today's world of social media and influencer marketing, consumers (vs. celebrity spokespersons or carefully curated advertising) are more than ever before the face of brands—whether brands desire this or not—and consumers rely on each other to provide information about brands and to communicate brands' identity. Indeed, people make positive and negative inferences about a brand from the characteristics of a consumer who uses it (e.g., Bellezza & Keinan, 2014; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). As brands lose some control over the inferences consumers make about them, brands are at an increased risk when their users – who are (perhaps

unwilling) brand ambassadors—engage in questionable behaviors. Instances of brands actively trying to mitigate such risks by distancing themselves from some of their users are plentiful: From the Tiki Torch Company, who denounced how its products were featured prominently in the 2017 Charlottesville supremacist rallies (Schonbrun, 2017), to the manager of the ultra-premium champagne brand Cristal, who declared, in light of endorsements by the hip hop community: “We can’t forbid people from buying it. I’m sure Dom Pérignon or Krug would be delighted to have their business” (The Economist, 2006). Even the Coach brand went as far as preemptively gifting one of the protagonists of the Jersey Shore TV show with a handbag from a competitor brand to avoid unwanted negative actions that, in the brand’s mind, she was liable to engage in while using its handbag (Doonan, 2010). Thus, understanding the factors influencing consumers’ reactions to their users’ behavior is paramount for brands.

Against this backdrop, we now live in a context where even mainstream consumption choices have become morally charged (Feinberg, Kovacheff, Teper, & Inbar, 2019). Ethical branding itself appears to have reached a crossroads. Traditionally, marketers have used branding to highlight their products and services’ ethical features to appeal to a growing movement of conscious consumers. This approach has proven successful for many businesses, with the market for sustainable goods in the US alone reaching \$150 billion (Nielsen, 2018). However, voices have started to argue that ethical branding can also be a growing liability in the marketplace, as a substantial segment of consumers wish that brands would “skip the lectures” (Cross, 2017).

Consistent with this, people are increasingly politically divided on many societal issues (Pew Research Center, 2017). Because people make inferences about other consumers based on their consumption choices (Berger & Heath, 2007; Olson, McFerran, Morales, & Dahl, 2016) and because political orientation influences the way people approach moral judgments (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt & Graham, 2007), we propose a novel interaction between observer and target characteristics. As everyday consumption choices become morally charged, we document how observers incorporate cues about transgressors’ moral choices (i.e., ethical brand usage) differently depending on their political orientation. Specifically, we hypothesize and show that liberals punish transgressors who consume ethically branded

goods (vs. conventionally branded goods) *less*, whereas, in contrast, conservatives punish the same transgressor consuming ethically branded goods *more*.

We provide converging evidence that this bias in judgments toward other consumers arises because of the differences in how liberals and conservatives process information, not from merely an ingroup/outgroup reaction (e.g., Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979). We find support for our general prediction—the interaction between the target and observer characteristics in predicting punitive judgments—across a series of transgression types, product categories, and participant samples. We also document three theoretically motivated boundary conditions: the effect is muted in the absence of a consumer transgression, under conditions that prevent the integration, or if managers reframe the ethical brand positioning in a way that reduces the inconsistency.

By improving our understanding of factors influencing consumer marketplace judgments, we make five key contributions: (a) We contribute to the literature on third-party moral judgments, integrating for the first time both target (brand choice) and perceiver (political orientation) factors as important antecedents, showing their impact even in the context of everyday consumption behavior, rather than by examining rare contexts to test theory (e.g., trolley dilemmas and eating dead dogs); (b) As a result, we contribute new antecedents to the nascent literature on consumer-to-consumer punishment behaviors (e.g., Lin, Dahl, & Argo, 2013; Liu, Lambertson, Bettman, & Fitzsimons, 2018); (c) We illustrate the attributional mechanism for this politically motivated effect: it arises from how people interpret the inconsistency between moral transgressions and ethical consumption cues, leading different attributions across the political spectrum regarding the individual’s level of responsibility for the misdeed; (d) We provide insights for more effective brand management in a polarized world, by documenting communication avenues that can reduce this politically motivated marketplace hostility. (e) Finally, our inquiry answers calls for a better understanding of the impact of political orientation in consumption (Jost, 2017; Shavitt, 2017), linking it to how people interpret branding information. In the following sections, we develop a theoretical rationale for the polarizing effect of political orientation on moral transgressions in consumption contexts. We then describe seven studies that test our predictions.

## Theoretical Development

### *The Formation of Moral Judgments*

People swiftly judge others' morality and behaviors as good or bad, as part of human efforts to maintain social cohesion and order (Guglielmo, 2015). These judgments carry significant consequences for those being evaluated (Haidt, 2001). In recent years, researchers have dedicated increasing attention to understanding factors that influence judgments and responses to moral transgressions, focusing on three factors—the nature of the transgression, the characteristics of the transgressor, and characteristics of the observer—to understand peoples' reactions. We next highlight each of these in turn before integrating them to derive our predictions.

Substantial work has focused on understanding how the *transgression*—rather than the persons involved in it (i.e., transgressor and the observer)—affects moral judgment (e.g., Haidt, 2001, 2007). Such work looks at reactions to cleaning toilets with a flag, eating one's deceased dog (Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993), or to whether a trolley operator should deliberately kill one in order to save five (Greene, Nystrom, Engell, Darley, & Cohen, 2004; Thomson & Parent, 1986). Notably, this usage of rare and very improbable situations has led scholars to question the validity of such findings obtained from “decontextualized, impoverished stimuli” (Schein, 2020, p. 207), highlighting the importance of using realistic contexts for theory testing. In comparison, significantly less work in this domain has examined more “everyday” actions in moral judgment (e.g., meat consumption; Feinberg et al., 2019), and yet these transgressions are ubiquitous in the marketplace.

Research on moral judgment has also shown that the same transgression can lead to different judgments depending on the characteristics of the *target* of a given action. For example, most people answer the trolley dilemma (e.g., kill one person to save five) differently depending on whether the person to be killed is an ingroup member or not (i.e., the same nationality; Swann et al., 2014). In consumption contexts, prior work shows that others' identity cues can significantly influence judgments and behaviors (White & Dahl, 2007). In one example involving consumer-to-consumer punishment, Lin et al. (2013) show that violator hardship (e.g., unjustified adversity, such as living a life-threatening illness) can mitigate punishment behaviors. Similarly, Olson et al. (2016) show how ethical consumption choices can be viewed negatively if

the target does not have sufficient financial means, but that work is silent on how any characteristics of the observer (i.e., the individual making the moral judgment) might affect their judgment.

Finally, in a third line of work, researchers have shown that judgments and punishment decisions can also be colored by the characteristics of the *observer*, such as gender (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000), reliance on intuition and heuristics (Jordan & Rand, 2019; Ward & King, 2017), and even serotonin levels (Crockett, Clark, Hauser, & Robbins, 2010). Central to the current work, political orientation is an individual-difference variable that systematically influences people's moral judgments (Graham et al., 2009; Winterich, Mittal, & Aquino, 2016). Often conceptualized (and measured) using a single liberal-to-conservative continuum (e.g., Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Nail, McGregor, Drinkwater, Steele, & Thompson, 2009; Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018), political orientation spans beyond political party affiliation, representing a general set of beliefs and attitudes that guide thoughts, feelings, and actions (Hirsh, DeYoung, Xu, & Peterson, 2010; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003). Political orientation has been found to influence a variety of responses regarding morally imbued issues: charitable giving (Winterich, Zhang, & Mittal, 2012), recycling (Kidwell, Farmer, & Hardesty, 2013), environmentally friendly products (Haws, Winterich, & Naylor, 2014), brand imagery and ethnic stereotype activation (Angle, Dagogo-Jack, Forehand, & Perkins, 2017), and the labeling of environmental charges as taxes or offsets (Hardisty, Johnson, & Weber, 2010).

Central to our contribution, the three lines of work above have developed relatively independently. For instance, we know of no work that integrates *both* actor and observer characteristics in third-party responses to moral transgressions. We show that these factors interact and that they affect consumer reactions in everyday consumption situations.

### *Branding and Consumer Judgments*

Just as consumers imbue characteristics and personalities to brands (Aaker, 1997), a brand's associations can also signal the values that a consumer holds (Erdem, Swait, & Valenzuela, 2006). Firms often use brand messaging as a tool to communicate the values it wants users to adopt or maintain. This notion of brands as “carriers of meaning” is illustrated by research showing that even simple exposure to a brand can lead consumers to adopt the characteristics of that brand (Brasel & Gips,

2011; Cornil, Chandon, & Krishna, 2017; Fitzsimons, Chartrand, & Fitzsimons, 2008). In short, brands use consumers (and vice versa) to convey desired associations.

Thus, as consumers become increasingly aware of ethical issues, they look for brands that reflect these lifestyle choices (Sudbury-Riley & Kohlbacher, 2016). However, because ethical consumption is seen as a moral issue (Dean, Raats, & Shepherd, 2008), we propose that ethical brand consumption is ideal for studying consumer morality and transgressions. Therefore, our research contrasts ethical brands with conventional brands. We do so by relying on a well-established definition of ethicality in a branding context: a type of brand that serves its core function while focusing on not harming or exploiting humans, animals, or the environment (Crane, 2001).

To be clear, while many brands are becoming increasingly politicized (Creswell & Abrams, 2017), we are not looking at brands' political stances *per se*, but rather their positioning in the marketplace regarding ethicality. At a macro level, the literature on the topic is mixed: evidence suggests that people may naturally associate some ethical brands with a more liberal orientation, at least in cases where the ethical positioning is strongly related to the environment (e.g., Gromet, Kunreuther, & Larrick, 2013; McCright & Dunlap, 2011), but other evidence also suggests that conservative brands can be considered more moral than liberal brands (Jung & Mittal, 2020). Importantly, empirical evidence also suggests that ethical choices made by others tend to be viewed positively by *both* liberals and conservatives (i.e., found across liberals and conservatives; Kennedy & Horne, 2019; Olson et al., 2016).

Thus, ethical brands need not be associated with one side or the other of the political orientation spectrum for our predictions. That said, we observe our effect with both real and fictitious brands, showing that it can manifest without preconceptions about a brand's ideology in consumers' minds.<sup>1</sup> Prior work has found political orientation to influence branding preferences in several ways: between international versus domestic brands

(Cutright, Wu, Banfield, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2011), generic versus national brands (Khan, Misra, & Singh, 2013), and luxury versus non-luxury brands (Kim, Park, & Dubois, 2018). We instead look at how political orientation affects *reactions* to brand users (in particular, to their consumption transgressions), depending on whether the brand adopts an ethical positioning or not (i.e., conventional brands).

#### *A Divided (Psychological) World and a Desire to Punish*

We derive our prediction of biased, polarized reactions from research that shows people are motivated to see the world in ways that satisfy their needs and values (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004), selectively interpreting the information cues available in the face of discrepant information (Kruglanski, 1996). Specifically, the study of the psychological differences between liberals and conservatives has received considerable attention in recent years (e.g., Farmer, Kidwell, & Hardesty, 2020; Jost & Krochik, 2014; Jost et al., 2007; Jung & Mittal, 2020). This research shows that political orientation is associated with systematic dispositional differences in processing style, especially in managing uncertainty or ambiguity in the information. That is, the cognitive styles of politically conservative individuals are marked by more intolerance for ambiguity (Jost et al., 2007; Sidanius, 1978), need for order and closure (Altemeyer, 1998; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994), and cognitive rigidity (Rock & Janoff-Bulman, 2010) compared with those of more liberal individuals (see Jost, 2017).

An ethical brand user engaging in a moral transgression creates this very ambiguity that observers of liberal or conservative allegiance tend to interpret differently. Let us return to our opening example of someone having double-parked their car. Suppose the consumer was a user of ethically branded products. In that case, individuals could see the transgression as an aberration from one's true moral character, a view supported by ethical consumption, and thus view the transgressor *less* negatively than if (s)he used conventional brands. Such a reaction would be consistent with the idea that more liberal individuals process information more systematically and can more readily integrate differing viewpoints in their judgment (Farmer et al., 2020; Jost & Krochik, 2014). For instance, liberals may be more likely to acknowledge the ethical consumption choices as moral concerns toward the greater good (Waytz, Iyer, Young, Haidt, &

<sup>1</sup>(We report in Appendix S1 pretests on perceptions of the: ethical characteristics of each stimulus brand, importance of the transgression, political orientation of those brands, similarity of each brand with the participants, perceived political orientation of the users of those brands. We do not observe a pattern that suggests a systematic bias over and above the effect of ethical versus conventional brands in our model. Thus, the brand's political orientation alone cannot serve as a parsimonious alternate account for our effect).

Graham, 2019), thus integrating the inconsistent information in a way that results in a more lenient punishment.

Conversely, an individual could conclude that a consumer of ethical goods committing ethical transgression is indeed a *worse* person due to the inconsistency between one's projected image and actual behaviors. Such a reaction would be aligned with the need of more conservatives individuals to maintain a sense of certainty about the world, which is associated with a greater tendency to assign personal blame for bad behaviors (Everett et al., 2021) or punish those who deviate from group stereotypes (Stern, West, & Rule, 2015). While there is nothing necessarily "conservative" about conventional products and thus no positive disposition to such goods, the cognitive rigidity associated with conservatism would be consistent with more negative reactions and more difficulty in categorizing others in the face of discrepant information. In this case, we expect conservatives to integrate the information in such a way that punishes what can reasonably be construed as the hypocrisy of the ethical user (i.e., ethical consumption choices coupled with moral transgression behaviors)—leading to harsher punishment. Since the transgressions are objectively identical regardless of the user's brand choice or the perceiver's political orientation, any differences as a function of these factors (or their interaction) can be deemed a bias. Therefore, our predicted pattern would support that *both* liberals and conservatives exhibit a bias, albeit in opposite directions (see also Cohen, 2003; Ditto et al., 2019; Medlin, Sacco, & Brown, 2019).

Note that we do not argue that liberals or conservatives are any more or less ethical—In fact, research suggests that liberals and conservatives can be equally likely to support an ethical cause, as long as the cause aligns with their core values (e.g., Kaikati, Torelli, Winterich, & Rodas, 2017; Kennedy & Horne, 2019; Kidwell et al., 2013). For instance, Feinberg and Willer (2013) showed that land conservation messages could appeal equally to liberals and conservatives if they use a frame reflecting the respondents' identities (i.e., focusing on land purity appeals equally to liberals and conservatives). However, we suggest that political orientation moderates the types of attributions that people naturally form in response to the ambiguity created by moral transgressions coupled with ethical brands usage, leading them to shift between two opposing inferences (relative forgiveness and punishment).

We view punishment in a consumer context as a broad suite of possible responses where a consumer

intentionally takes active or passive steps to create an undesirable outcome for another consumer as retribution for behaviors deemed undesirable or unacceptable. We operationalize it in different ways across our studies to reflect an array of behaviors that might arise in the marketplace. Theoretically, punishment is a response that seeks to decrease an undesirable behavior by subtracting a desirable stimulus (i.e., negative punishment—e.g., withholding assistance, avoiding someone; Lin et al., 2013; Stein, Schroeder, Hobson, Gino, & Norton, 2021) or adding an undesirable stimulus (i.e., positive punishment—e.g., giving a fine; Skinner, 1938). Often done in response to perceived transgressions from some normative standard that sparks moral outrage (Liu et al., 2018; Pfattheicher, Sassenrath, & Keller, 2019), punishment serves the purpose of restoring a sense of justice and social order in society, whether it is done for selfish reasons (Darley & Pittman, 2003; Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004) or to maintain a form of social order in groups (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). Researchers have begun to examine these consumer-to-consumer punishment responses (Lin et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2018). For instance, Lin et al. (2013) found that people were subsequently more likely to punish another consumer in need if that person had jumped the queue in front of them as an airport security check or unfolded more sweatshirts than needed in a store display. We extend our understanding of the factors that influence the intensity of third-party punishment (e.g., Pfattheicher et al., 2019; Piazza & Bering, 2008) by identifying a novel interaction between consumption choices and observed characteristics. Thus, we predict:

H1: Political orientation moderates the desire for punishment toward users of ethical (vs. conventional) brands committing moral transgressions. More liberal (conservative) participants will punish less (more) those committing a moral transgression when they are ethical brand users compared to conventional brand users.

Next, we propose the process underlying the effect. Decisions regarding how others are viewed morally often stem from attributional processes (e.g., Reeder & Spores, 1983). There are two central attributions that people can make. First, actions or choices can be seen as stemming from volition, speaking to the person's character; this is an internal attribution. Second, actions and choices can be seen as arising from external circumstances beyond the person's control, speaking more to the

circumstance than to the person's character; this is an external attribution. This framework has been widely applied in various domains (Chakroff & Young, 2015; Kim, Dirks, Cooper, & Ferrin, 2006). As a singular example, take a crime committed by a youth. This action can either be viewed as evidence for the perpetrator's flawed moral character (an internal attribution) or their unfortunate upbringing, neighborhood, or peer group (an external attribution).

We expect to see shifting attributions underlying the punishment decisions. That is, we predict that liberal participants' more flexible approach to decision-making and tolerance for ambiguity will lead to a more compensatory approach. They will infer that in light of conflicting information about the transgressor (i.e., transgressions committed by users of ethical brands), the behavior must be less representative of that person's personality and must be attributed to external factors—relative to situations where the cues are not ambiguous (i.e., the transgressor uses conventional brands). Conversely, conservative participants should be less likely to use a compensatory approach when evaluating the inconsistency between ethical consumption and moral transgressions. They will be more likely to attribute this inconsistency to the transgressor's personality relative to when conventional brands are used. Formally, we test the following hypothesis:

H2: Attribution mediates the effect of political orientation on the desire for punishment toward users of ethical (vs. conventional) brands, with liberals (conservatives) attributing the consumer transgression involving an ethical (vs. conventional) brand as reflecting relatively more external circumstances (personality traits of the user), leading to less (more) punishment.

We provided three moderation tests in support of our framework. First, our argument rests on the fact that a transgression has occurred; a pure reference group account would not require this (Study 3). From a conceptual standpoint, if there is no transgression, there is no ambiguous information to reconcile; nothing is inconsistent between the user and their behavior. Second, we build on work showing that people's ability to integrate inconsistent cues in judgment diminishes when cognitive resources are depleted (Chun, Spiegel, & Kruglanski, 2002; Sherman, Lee, Bessenoff, & Frost, 1998). Cognitive taxing prevents people from assimilating inconsistent information in their judgment,

thus mitigating biases arising from its integration (Study 5). Third, because our effect suggests potential undesirable consequences for brands adopting ethical positioning, we test a managerial intervention that reduces biased reactions from consumers at both ends of the political spectrum (Study 6). That is, managers are often faced with choosing a branding that puts forward either the ethical (e.g., social responsibility) or the core (i.e., functional) features of the brand (Johnson, Mao, Lefebvre, & Ganesh, 2019). Therefore, emphasizing the core product features of an ethical brand can reduce the inconsistency between the (negative) transgression and the (positive) act of ethical consumption while maintaining the brand's ethical positioning appeal to conscious consumers. Examples of ethical brands focusing on functionality over ethicality for their product promotions are plentiful in the marketplace. For instance, while Toyota promotes its Prius model using an ethical (environmental) angle, the electric car manufacturer Tesla has always preferred to emphasize the car performance in its communications—even though both cars reduce carbon emissions. Thus, we predict:

H3: The effect of political orientation on the desire for punishment toward users of ethical (vs. conventional) brands will be mitigated under situations that reduce the ambiguity of the situation or hamper its integration in the decision-making process: (a) in the absence (vs. presence) of transgression, (b) under high (vs. low) cognitive load, and (c) by an increased emphasis on the functional features of the product relative to its ethical features.

### Overview of Studies

Study 1 shows our interaction effect between political orientation and brand usage on punishment behavior using an incentive-compatible experiment with real money. Studies 2A–2B replicate this effect using different brands and types of moral transgressions. Study 3 deepens our understanding of the necessary conditions for our effect to arise by showing that it occurs only in response to moral transgressions. Studies 4 and 5 explicitly test the process: Study 4 provides evidence that our effect occurs because of a shift in how people attribute the responsibility for the transgression, while Study 5 shows that our effect disappears when the ability to form attributions is manipulated. Finally, Study 6

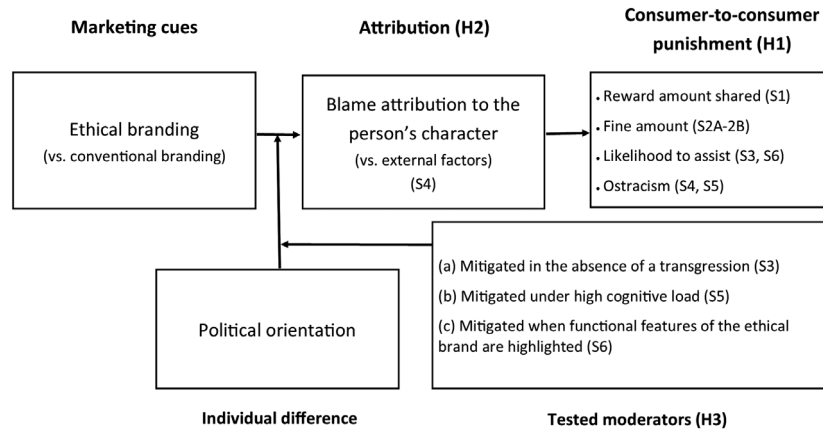


Figure 1. Conceptual model.

investigates a branding intervention to reduce the biased responses at both ends of the political spectrum. See Figure 1 for our Conceptual Model. All studies test H1; Study 4 tests H2, Studies 3 (a), 5 (b), and 6 (c) test H3.

Across the studies, we focus on moral transgressions unrelated to the brand's ethical properties, such as social transgressions committed by environmentally friendly brand users. We targeted a sample size of at least 100 per between-subjects cell net of exclusions for all online studies. For the laboratory study, we sought to solicit all participants available in the credit pool at the time. Only data points with duplicate IP addresses or obvious gibberish answers were excluded from analyses, always accounting for less than 5% of each sample. For brevity, we only report the lower-order effects that are significant (we report the full regression tables in the Appendix S1).

Note that our general prediction (H1) is inconsistent with a simple in-and-outgroup bias for four reasons: (a) If we found that in the absence of a transgression, liberals "like" ethical brand users more than conservatives, and conservatives like conventional brand users more than liberals, one could argue that to be a reference group identity effect. We do not observe this pattern of results (Study 3) supporting our account about the perceived inconsistency between ethical consumption choices and immoral behaviors; (b) Our interaction effect also occurs for fictitious brands and for real brands with well-known conservative leanings (i.e., Harley-Davidson; Study 2B), which would be inconsistent with a group-belonging effect; (c) We also address any concerns that a group-belonging effect might arise because some ethical causes

might be more associated with one end of the political spectrum or the other (e.g., sustainability, promoting traditional values) by testing our key interaction in contexts where only the label "ethical" is manipulated (Studies 1, 3, 5–6). That is, if our effect occurred because liberal and conservative participants were to interpret the word *ethical* with their own lens, we should observe an in-group effect that would result in lower punishment intentions across the ethical brand condition (i.e., a main effect, no interaction) compared with the conventional brand condition. We do not observe this pattern of results; (d) There is no precedent for political orientation interacting with views of another consumer's ethical (vs. conventional) choices. For instance, Olson et al. (2016), across their person-perception (i.e., transgression-free) studies, and Kennedy and Horne (2019), in their status perception of green behaviors studies, found no effects of political orientation on judgments of other's ethical behaviors.

### Study 1

Study 1 provides an initial incentive-compatible test of our conceptual framework. To this end, we use a consequential monetary allocation task. We predict that participants self-identifying as more liberal will punish moral transgressions by ethical brand users *less* than those performed by users of conventional brands. Alternatively, we predict that participants self-identifying as more conservative will punish moral transgressions by ethical brand users *more* than those performed by users of conventional brands.



### Method

*Participants and design.* Two hundred and eleven US participants recruited through Amazon MTurk participated in this experiment in exchange for money (56% female,  $M_{Age} = 35.3$ ). This study used a 2 (brand: conventional vs. ethical)  $\times$  continuous (political orientation) between-participants design. We measured the intensity of the punishment in the context of a dictator game, through a bonus sum allocation between oneself and the other player described in the scenario (e.g., Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1986)—such that more money kept for oneself (i.e., less for the other player) meant a more intense punishment.

*Procedure.* Participants took part in an “economic game” where they would be matched (ostensibly) with another online player, with each person assigned either the role of an Allocator or a Receiver (see Duclos & Barasch, 2014 for a similar manipulation). In this dictator-type of game, the Allocator determines how to split an endowment between themselves and the Receiver, such that the Receiver has no influence over the outcome of the game.

Before starting the game, each participant was asked to fill a short profile to share with the other player to familiarize themselves with their partner. That profile included basic demographic information, as well as a question about their favorite brand and a short statement asking them to describe “something you did yesterday.” Unbeknownst to participants, they were always assigned the Allocator’s role. They first viewed a profile of their (fictional) partner, with that person’s answers to the same questions asked of them earlier. Their partner’s favorite brand was manipulated to be either Roaster’s Blend Coffee (conventional) or Roaster’s Blend Ethical Coffee (ethical). Importantly, by using only the word “ethical” for our manipulation, we mitigate any politically charged associations that participants may infer about the brand depending on their own political leaning (e.g., environmentally friendly vs. favorable labor conditions). The other player’s statement mentioned an afternoon at the park drinking her favorite coffee, describing her love for that (ethical) coffee brand. The player also mentioned she had to leave in a hurry and, because of a failure to find a trash can, having to litter. The statement terminated with “Anyway, there are people paid to clean it up;” (see Appendix S1 for all stimuli and pre-tests).

Playing the Allocator role in the game, each participant was asked to decide on a \$1.00 bonus

allocation between themselves and the other participant, using a sliding scale. We used log-transformed scores for the inferential tests in the factorial model, reporting descriptive statistics in standard monetary units for ease of interpretation. On a subsequent page, participants were asked to rate their political orientation using an 11-point scale:  $-5 =$  extremely liberal;  $+5 =$  extremely conservative ( $M = 0.09$ ,  $SD = 3.27$ ; Amodio, Jost, Master, & Yee, 2007). They also answered some demographic questions and an open-ended question about the purpose of the survey. No participant raised suspicion that the partner players for the game were not real. All participants received the full \$1.00 bonus after participation.

### Results

We use the same analytical strategy across our studies, testing for a significant two-way interaction between brand (coded as  $-1 =$  conventional,  $+1 =$  ethical) and political orientation (centered) in predicting punishment intensity. The results for all studies are presented in Table 1 and graphically in Figure 2. In this study, ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $b = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $t(207) = 2.67$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.01, 0.05]$ ). We used the Johnson–Neyman technique to identify where the intensity differed along the political orientation continuum between the brands. Participants who rated at  $-3.27$  or below on the political orientation scale (18th percentile; more liberal) punished the ethical brand user less ( $\hat{y}_{-3.27} = \$0.19$  for other) than the conventional brand user ( $\hat{y}_{-3.27} = \$0.11$  for other). In contrast, those who rated at  $3.41$  or above on the scale (80th percentile; more conservative) punished the ethical brand user more ( $\hat{y}_{3.41} = \$0.19$  for other) than the conventional brand user ( $\hat{y}_{3.41} = \$0.28$  for other). These results support H1.

### Discussion

In Study 1, the observed interaction effect and the reversal at each end of the political orientation spectrum provide incentive-compatible initial evidence that more liberal participants punish ethical brand users committing transgressions less than conventional brand users. In contrast, more conservative participants punish ethical brand users committing transgressions more than conventional brand users. The following two studies show the robustness of this effect across various contexts, allowing us to rule out alternative explanations.

Table 1

Regions of Significance by Brand Type and Political Orientation

<b>Study 1:</b> Baseline effect; Coffee cup littering scenario; $n = 211$ , 56% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.5$ , US MTurk. DV: amount shared with other participant; Political orientation: 11-point item				
JN <sub>values</sub>	18th percentile (liberal)	80th percentile (conservative)		
Conventional brand	\$0.11	\$0.28		
Ethical brand	\$0.19	\$0.19		
Main finding: Liberals punish ethical brand users less than conventional brand users, whereas conservatives punish the same users of ethical brands more than conventional brand users				
<b>Study 2A:</b> Replication; Double parking car scenario; $n = 231$ , 60% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.6$ , US MTurk. DV: fine amount; Political orientation: 7-item Conservatism-Liberal scale				
JN <sub>values</sub>	31st percentile (liberal)	89th percentile (conservative)		
Conventional brand	\$186.66	\$90.99		
Ethical brand	\$139.69	\$182.29		
Main finding: Replication of the effect using an alternative measures and scenario				
<b>Study 2B:</b> Replication; Double parking motorcycle scenario; $n = 234$ , 53% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.6$ , US Prolific. DV: fine amount; Political orientation: 11-point item				
JN <sub>values</sub>	36st percentile (liberal)	84th percentile (conservative)		
Conventional brand	\$176.93	\$188.51		
Ethical brand	\$112.24	\$224.56		
Main finding: Replication of the effect using a historically conservative brand				
<b>Study 3:</b> Moderation by transgression presence; Coffee littering scenario; $n = 433$ , 52% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.2$ , US MTurk. DV: 4-item likelihood to assist 7-point scale; Political orientation: 11-point item				
	Transgression-present condition		Transgression-absent condition (NS)	
JN <sub>values</sub>	36th percentile (lib)	73rd percentile (cons)	-1 SD	+1 SD
Conventional brand	4.13	4.90	5.66	5.76
Ethical brand	4.53	4.36	5.96	6.03
Main finding: Replication of the effect when the transgression was present, but not in the absence of the transgression—inconsistent with a group identity effect				
<b>Study 4:</b> Mediation through attribution; Double parking car scenario; $n = 396$ , 39% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 37.7$ , US MTurk. DV: 4-item ostracism likelihood; Political orientation: 11-point item				
JN <sub>values</sub> —Punishment	17th percentile (liberal)	87th percentile (conservative)		
Conventional brand	4.67	4.86		
Ethical brand	4.19	5.35		
JN <sub>values</sub> —Attribution	29th percentile (liberal)	87th percentile (conservative)		
Conventional brand	0.91	1.54		
Ethical brand	0.21	2.21		
Main finding: Our effect is explained by a politically motivated shift in blame attribution				
<b>Study 5:</b> Moderation by cognitive load; Car parking scenario; $n = 502$ , 50% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 35.5$ , US Prolific. DV: 4-item ostracism likelihood 7-point scale; Political orientation: 11-point item				
	Low cognitive load		High cognitive load (NS)	
JN <sub>values</sub>	32nd percentile (lib)	72nd percentile (cons)	-1 SD	+1 SD
Conventional brand	4.99	4.29	4.97	4.66
Ethical brand	4.51	4.99	4.83	4.67
Main finding: High cognitive load prevents the integration of inconsistent cues, canceling our effect.				
<b>Study 6:</b> Branding intervention reducing the bias; Coffee littering scenario; $n = 186$ , 58% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 21.3$ , Canadian students. DV: 4-item likelihood to assist 7-point scale; Political orientation: 11-point item				
JN <sub>values</sub>	57th percentile (liberal)	96th percentile (conservative)		
Conventional brand	4.36	4.60		
Ethical brand	4.80	3.66		
JN <sub>values</sub>	47th percentile (liberal)	93rd percentile (conservative)		
Ethical brand with a functional focus	4.54	4.63		
Ethical brand	4.97	3.84		
Main finding: Promoting to a greater extent the core performance attributes of the brand can reduce politically motivated biases while still promoting the ethical characteristics of the brand				

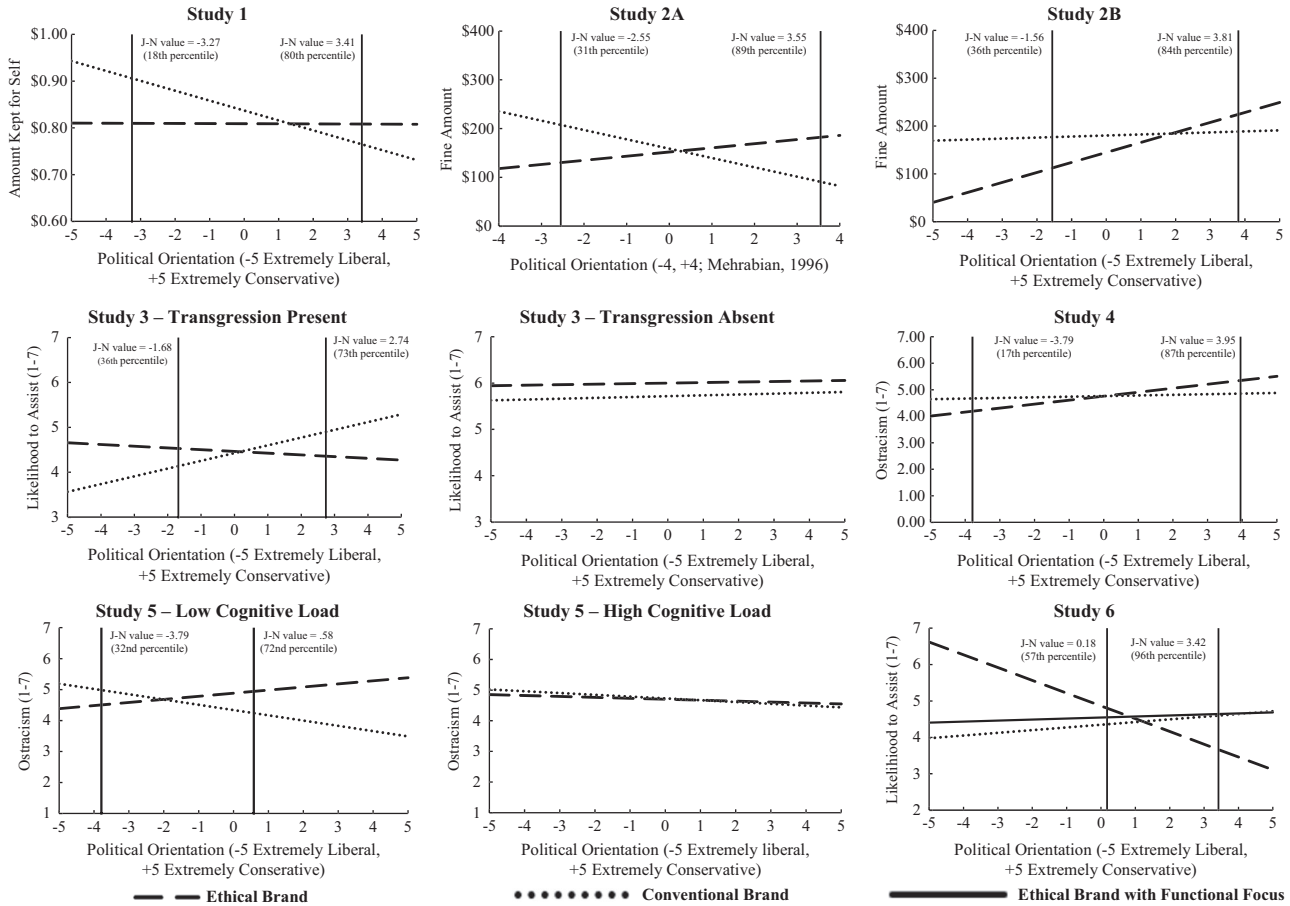


Figure 2. Summary of results by study.

### Study 2A

Study 2A extends our previous findings in several ways. It tests our effect’s robustness using a different transgression and alternative political orientation and punishment measures. The design also provides evidence against two alternative explanations: a wealth or luxury-based discrimination (e.g., Gino & Pierce, 2010), showing that this effect occurs when both focal brands are similarly expensive (i.e., cars; MSRP Prius: US\$25,700; Camry: US\$26,310; at the time of data collection), as well as a general preference for physical cleanliness among conservatives (Helzer & Pizarro, 2011), showing that this effect replicates outside of a littering context.

#### Method

**Participants and design.** Two hundred and thirty-one US participants recruited through Amazon MTurk participated in this experiment in exchange for money (60% female,  $M_{Age} = 36.6$ ).

This study used a 2 (brand: conventional vs. ethical)  $\times$  continuous (political orientation) between-participants design. The dependent variable of interest was the intensity of the user’s punishment described in the scenario (measured as a fine amount).

**Procedure.** Participants first read a scenario asking them to imagine they were looking for parking. This scenario involved either a Toyota Camry (conventional brand) or a Toyota Prius Hybrid (ethical brand). Participants read, “As you pull into a strip mall parking lot that looks full, you see that someone has irresponsibly parked their [car brand] near the store entrance, occupying the last two parking spots available. You are forced to circle for a few long minutes before you can finally find another free parking spot.” They were then asked to imagine they could give a fine to that person and indicate what fine amount would be appropriate, using a \$0–\$1,000 slider scale (henceforward log-transformed). We also provided participants with a reference point to reduce response variance,

telling them that a typical fine for jaywalking is \$100. Finally, participants completed a longer-form 7-item 9-point Conservatism-Liberal Scale (Mehrabian, 1996): -4 very strong disagreement; +4 very strong agreement, where higher scores mean a more conservative orientation (e.g., The major national media are too left-wing for my taste;  $\alpha = 0.88$ ;  $M = 0.68$ ,  $SD = 1.94$ ).

### Results

**Punishment.** Results from a regression analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction between brand (coded as -1 = conventional, +1 = ethical) and political orientation (centered) in predicting punishment intensity ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $b = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(227) = 3.21$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.06, 0.24]$ ) supporting our main hypothesis. Using the Johnson-Neyman technique to describe this interaction, we found that participants who rated at -2.55 or below on the political orientation scale (31st percentile; more liberal) punished the Prius user less ( $\hat{y}_{-2.55} = \$139.69$ ) than the Camry user ( $\hat{y}_{-2.55} = \$186.66$ ). In contrast, those who rated at 3.55 or above on the scale (95th percentile; more conservative) punished the Prius user more ( $\hat{y}_{3.55} = \$182.29$ ) than the Camry user ( $\hat{y}_{3.55} = \$90.99$ ).

### Discussion

Study 2A tests the robustness of the interaction between political orientation and brand usage on the desire for consumer punishment using an alternative consumption context, punishment variable, and measure of political orientation. To address concerns that our effect occurred because brands with environmental positioning are associated with a more liberal political orientation, we aim to replicate these results with a well-known conservative brand, Harley-Davidson, in Study 2B. Doing so would provide further evidence that this effect occurs because people interpret cues about the brand's ethical signaling rather than the brand's political positioning.

### Study 2B

Study 2B is a near-replication of Study 2A, using the same design and parking scenario but replaced the car with a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, based on the logic "Republicans have come to adopt the motorcycle—and Harley-Davidsons, especially—as a symbol of conservatism, a metaphor for the

freedom and individualism they hold sacrosanct" (Villa, 2016). We do so because replicating our effect under these conditions would be inconsistent with a group-belonging explanation (i.e., our effect occurred because the ethical brand is liberal). This study was pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/54uw7.pdf>).

### Method

**Participants and design.** Two hundred and thirty-four US participants recruited through Prolific Academic took part in this experiment in exchange for money (53% female,  $M_{Age} = 35.6$ ). This study uses a 2 (brand: conventional vs. ethical)  $\times$  continuous (political orientation) between-participants design. The dependent variable of interest was the desired intensity of the user's punishment (measured as a fine amount).

**Procedure.** As in the previous study, we used the same parking scenario, this time describing the vehicle as either a Harley-Davidson motorcycle (conventional brand) or a Harley-Davidson zero-emission electric motorcycle (ethical brand, and a real product). Participants answered the same fine amount dependent variable as in Study 2A and then rated their political orientation using the same 1-item 11-point scale as in Study 1 ( $M = -1.13$ ,  $SD = 2.88$ ). For exploratory purposes, we also recorded participants' US political party affiliation "Do you identify more as" 1: strongly Democrat; 7: strongly Republican ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 2.00$ ).

### Results

Results from a regression analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction between brand (coded as -1 = conventional, +1 = ethical) and political orientation (centered) in predicting punishment intensity ( $\beta = 0.19$ ,  $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(230) = 2.91$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.03, 0.17]$ ) supporting our main hypothesis. We also observed a main effect of political orientation intensity ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(230) = 3.06$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.04, 0.17]$ ). Using the Johnson-Neyman technique, we found that participants who rated at -1.56 or below on the political orientation scale (36th percentile; more liberal) punished the electric Harley-Davidson user less ( $\hat{y}_{-1.56} = \$112.24$ ) than the Harley-Davidson user ( $\hat{y}_{-1.56} = \$176.93$ ). In contrast, those who rated at 3.81 or above on the scale (84th percentile; more conservative), punished the electric Harley-Davidson user more ( $\hat{y}_{3.81} = \$224.56$ ) than the Harley-Davidson user ( $\hat{y}_{3.81} = \$188.51$ ). As note in

the pre-registration, for exploratory purposes, replacing political orientation with US political party affiliation ( $r = .65$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in the model resulted in a marginally significant interaction term ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $b = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(230) = 1.87$ ,  $p = .06$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.01, 0.19]$ )—suggesting a substantial, but imperfect overlap between both measures.

### Discussion

This study tests the robustness of the interaction between political orientation and brand usage on the desire for consumer punishment using brands closely associated with political conservatism, providing further evidence that our effect occurs because of the brand's ethical features, not the brand political associations. The following study further develops our understanding of this effect by highlighting a theoretically important condition for our effect.

### Study 3

We designed Study 3 to increase our understanding of the necessary conditions for our interaction effect to emerge and, as a result, to rule out several alternative explanations for our effect. Specifically, our empirical evidence so far has supported our key prediction following a transgression by the brand user. What if there was no transgression? From a theoretical standpoint, exploring this boundary condition allows us to test two alternative accounts for our proposed mechanism underlying the effect. On the one hand, if our effect arises from a motivated attributional judgment shaped by the way participants process ambiguous information, we should not observe an effect of political orientation on the desire to punish in the absence of a transgression. Such a result would suggest that there would be no reason to make internal or external attributions in the absence of ambiguity about the situation.

On the other hand, if our effect results from a group identity effect, the same pattern of effects should occur whether there is a transgression or not. Therefore, in this study, we manipulate the presence or absence of a moral transgression to better identify the most parsimonious explanation for our effect. Notably, because the measures of punishment used in our previous studies would be unsuitable in the absence of a transgression, this study uses an alternative measure of participants' punishment intentions designed for consumer-to-consumer contexts, assessing their

avoidance to assist the other consumer (Lin et al., 2013).

### Method

*Participants and design.* Four hundred and thirty-three US participants recruited through Amazon MTurk participated in this experiment in exchange for money (52% female,  $M_{Age} = 38.2$ ). This study uses a 2 (transgression: present vs. absent)  $\times$  2 (brand: conventional vs. ethical)  $\times$  continuous (political orientation) between-participants design.

*Procedure.* Depending on the experimental condition, the coffee brand was presented as *Roaster's Coffee*—"Better Tasting Beans = Better Coffee" (conventional brand), *Roaster's Ethical Coffee*—"More Ethical Beans = Better Coffee" (ethical brand). In the transgression-present condition, participants read a scenario asking them to imagine taking a walk in their favorite park, "As you are passing a bench, you notice that the person who was just there has left litter behind. He has carelessly tossed a [coffee brand] cup on the lawn, despite numerous trash cans in sight." In the transgression-absent condition, participants were asked to "stop for a moment and think about the type of people who typically opt for this brand of coffee. Who are they? What values do they believe in?" All participants answered a measure of punishment specifically designed to fit consumer-to-consumer contexts (Lin et al., 2013), reporting their likelihood to assist the brand user on a four-item scale (1: not at all likely, 7: very likely): "Return to a park management worker a wallet this person would have left behind," "Hold the door as this person would be entering a store later," "Make this person aware that he has dropped his cellphone," "Point out to the person that he has a piece of toilet paper stuck to his foot" ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ), such that low scores on that scale denote a higher likelihood to punish the brand user. On a subsequent page, we then asked participants to report their political orientation using the same 11-point 1-item measure used in Study 1 ( $M = 0.30$ ,  $SD = 2.96$ ).

### Results

Regression analysis revealed a significant 3-way interaction between brand type (coded as  $-1 =$  conventional,  $+1 =$  ethical), transgression presence (coded as  $0 =$  present,  $1 =$  absent; to highlight our key effect) and political orientation (centered) in predicting punishment intensity

( $\beta = -0.14$ ,  $b = -0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ;  $t(425) = 2.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.19, -0.01]$ ; in support of H 2) and a 2-way interaction between brand type and political orientation ( $\beta = -0.20$ ,  $b = -0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ;  $t(425) = 3.34$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $CI_{95}[-0.17, -0.40]$ ), replicating our previous results. There was also a main effect of transgression presence ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $b = 1.43$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ;  $t(425) = 10.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95}[1.17, 1.68]$ ), with overall less punishment (i.e., more helping) in the absence of transgression.

When the transgression was present, we replicated our typical interaction between the brand and political orientation (i.e., the 2-way interaction term above). That is, participants who rated at  $-1.68$  or below on the political orientation scale (36th percentile; more liberal) punished the ethical brand user less ( $\hat{y}_{-1.68} = 4.53$ ) than the conventional brand user ( $\hat{y}_{-1.68} = 4.13$ ), whereas those who rated at  $2.74$  or above on the scale (73rd percentile; more conservative), punished the ethical brand user more ( $\hat{y}_{2.74} = 4.36$ ) than the conventional brand user ( $\hat{y}_{2.74} = 4.90$ ). In comparison, there was no such 2-way interaction between brand and political orientation when there was no transgression ( $\beta = -0.01$ ,  $b = -0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(425) = .11$ ,  $p = .91$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.07, 0.06]$ )—in support of H3a.

### Discussion

Study 3 deepens our understanding by documenting a necessary condition for our effect of interest, by showing that it does not occur toward the typical user of the brand—that is, liberals do not like ethical users more, nor do conservatives dislike them—but rather is consistent with a motivated attributional account of those committing moral transgressions. Stated differently, a mere ingroup effect explanation would be inconsistent with the pattern of results observed in the absence of a transgression. Beginning in Study 4, we aim to test the attributional process underlying our effect more directly.

## Study 4

This study uses a mediational approach to test the process underlying our interaction effect. We predict that liberal participants' more flexible approach to decision-making and tolerance for ambiguity will lead to a more compensatory approach when judging transgressions committed by users of ethical brands. That is, they will punish ethical brand users less than conventional brand users because they are

less likely to deem the transgression to reflect the transgressor's personality, attributing it more to external factors. In contrast, we predict that conservative participants will punish the same transgression by an ethical brand user more because they will be more likely to attribute this transgression to the transgressor's personality. We also test this effect using an alternative punishment measure. This study was pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/86pr5.pdf>) and powered more highly than the other designs because of the mediational hypothesis.

### Method

*Participants and design.* Three hundred and ninety-six US participants recruited through MTurk participated in this experiment in exchange for money (39% female,  $M_{Age} = 37.7$ ). This study uses a 2 (brand: conventional vs. ethical)  $\times$  continuous (political orientation) between-participants design.

*Procedure.* We used the same car parking scenario as in Study 2A. After reading the scenario, we asked participants to make an attribution judgment about the transgressor's actions, informing them that a person's actions or decisions can be attributed to external factors or factors that reflect their true character. Specifically, we asked them: "To what extent the parking situation described above is attributable to external factors?" ( $-5$ : External factors might have played a role;  $+5$ : External factors did not play a role at all; see Appendix S1 for full stimuli). Then, as a measure of punishment, we asked participants to indicate the extent to which they would do the following if they saw that person in their community: (a) avoid them, (b) ignore them, (c) keep them at a distance, and (d) have nothing to do with them (1: not at all, 7: definitely;  $\alpha = 0.93$ ; Stein et al., 2021). Participants rated their political orientation using the same 1-item 11-point scale as in previous studies ( $M = 0.13$ ,  $SD = 3.26$ ). For exploratory purpose, we again recorded participants' US political party affiliation on a 7-point scale ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 2.39$ ).

### Results

*Punishment.* Results from a regression analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction between brand (coded as  $-1 =$  conventional,  $+1 =$  ethical) and political orientation (centered) in predicting punishment intensity ( $\beta = 0.13$ ,  $b = 0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t(392) = 2.57$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.02, 0.11]$ ) supporting our main hypothesis. We also observed a main

effect of political orientation ( $\beta = 0.17$ ,  $b = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $t(392) = 3.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.04, 0.14]$ ). Using the Johnson–Neyman technique, we found that participants who rated at  $-3.79$  or below on the political orientation scale (17th percentile; more liberal) punished the Toyota Prius user less ( $\hat{y}_{-3.79} = 4.19$ ) than the Toyota Camry user ( $\hat{y}_{-3.79} = 4.67$ ). In contrast, those who rated at  $3.95$  or above on the scale (87th percentile; more conservative) punished the Toyota Prius user more ( $\hat{y}_{3.95} = 5.35$ ) than the Toyota Camry user ( $\hat{y}_{3.95} = 4.86$ ). Further exploratory analyses showed that substituting political orientation for US political party affiliation in the model ( $r = .63$ ,  $p < .001$ ) resulted in a non-significant 2-way interaction term ( $\beta = 0.06$ ,  $b = 0.04$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(392) = 1.17$ ,  $p = .24$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.03, 0.11]$ )—suggesting an imperfect overlap between the two measures.

*Attribution.* Mapping closely the punishment results, the attribution results revealed a significant two-way interaction between brand and political orientation in predicting attribution ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t(392) = 3.08$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.05, 0.21]$ ) and a main effect of political orientation ( $\beta = 0.28$ ,  $b = 0.24$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t(392) = 5.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.16, 0.32]$ ) such that conservatives were more likely to assign personal blame (as also found in Everett et al., 2021). That is, participants who rated at  $-2.87$  or below on the political orientation scale (29th percentile; more liberal) were relatively more likely to attribute the event to external factors when the person drove a Toyota Prius user ( $\hat{y}_{-2.87} = 0.21$ ) compared with a Camry ( $\hat{y}_{-2.87} = 0.91$ ). In contrast, those who rated at  $2.54$  or above on the scale (68th percentile; more conservative) attributed the situation relatively less to external factors when the person drove the Toyota Prius ( $\hat{y}_{2.54} = 2.21$ ) than the Toyota Camry ( $\hat{y}_{2.54} = 1.54$ ). Exploratory analyses showed that substituting political orientation for US political party affiliation in the model also resulted in a significant 2-way interaction term ( $\beta = 0.11$ ,  $b = 0.13$ ,  $SE = 0.06$ ,  $t(392) = 2.27$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.02, 0.25]$ ).

*Mediation.* Results from a conditional indirect effect analysis revealed a significant index of moderated mediation ( $b = 0.03$ ,  $SE = 0.01$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.01, 0.05]$ ), such that we observed mediation indices of different signs whether participants were more liberal ( $-1$  SD;  $b = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.19, -0.01]$ ) or more conservative ( $+1$  SD;  $b = 0.10$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.01, 0.19]$ )—supporting H2. These results suggest that liberal participants punished the individual less because they attributed the transgressions by ethical brand users more to

external factors than conventional brand users. We observe the opposite for conservative participants, who were more likely to attribute a transgression by ethical brand users more to their personality than conventional brand users and, thus, punish them more harshly.

### Discussion

This study provides direct process evidence that our interaction effect between the observer's political orientation and the type of brand used by the transgressor arises because of a difference in attribution judgments (person vs. situation) at different points along the political orientation continuum. In the subsequent study, we continue to test our proposed attributional process via moderation.

### Study 5

This study further tests our process account by identifying a boundary condition under which this attributional process should not occur. Specifically, much previous work has linked cognitive load to attributional judgments. While inconsistent information during decision-making affects judgment through heightened attention, people's ability to integrate inconsistent cues diminishes when cognitive resources are depleted (Chun et al., 2002; Sherman et al., 1998). Similarly, in a consumer context, Main, Dahl, and Darke (2007) found that participants under high cognitive load were less likely to make attributions about the personal disposition of a salesperson flattering them (i.e., they concluded that the salesperson was genuinely friendly, not because they wanted commission). Therefore, we expect and test if cognitive busyness mitigates our interaction effect. Specifically, suppose the process is attributional, and attributions of personal (vs. situational) responsibility require cognitive resources: in that case, our interaction pattern should be attenuated under cognitive load. This study was pre-registered (<https://aspredicted.org/s7cx3.pdf>).

### Method

*Participants and design.* Five hundred and two US participants recruited through Prolific Academic took part in this experiment in exchange for money (50% female,  $M_{Age} = 35.5$ ). This study uses a 2 (brand: conventional vs. ethical)  $\times$  continuous (political orientation)  $\times$  2 (cognitive load: low vs. high) between-participants design. The dependent

variable of interest was the intensity of the user's punishment described in the scenario.

*Procedure.* We induced cognitive busyness by using a task asking participants to count the number of times they blinked their eyes (Fitzsimons & Williams, 2000; Ülkümen, Thomas, & Morwitz, 2008). We told participants that the study investigated the relationship between eye blinking and information processing for a two-part study. In the first part, we asked participants to solve six Captcha tasks. The second part contained our typical moral transgression scenario and punishment measure. We asked participants in the low-load condition to count their eye blink as they worked only for the first task. We asked those in the high-load cognition to do the same for both tasks, and participants reported following this directive (number of blinks:  $M_{\text{low-load}} = 20.18$ ,  $SD = 17.82$ ;  $M_{\text{high-load}} = 29.86$ ,  $SD = 20.40$ ,  $t(500) = 5.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ). We used the same car parking scenario as before. We asked participants to report their punishment level for that individual using the same 4-item scale as in the previous study ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ). Participants also rated their political orientation using the same 11-item 11-point scale as before ( $M = -1.53$ ,  $SD = 2.70$ ) and, for exploratory purpose, their US political party affiliation on a 7-point scale ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 1.99$ ).

### Results

Results from a regression analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction between brand (coded as  $-1 = \text{conventional}$ ,  $+1 = \text{ethical}$ ), political orientation (centered), and cognitive load (coded as  $0 = \text{low}$ ,  $1 = \text{high}$ ) in predicting punishment intensity ( $\beta = -0.12$ ,  $b = -0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(494) = 2.45$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.22, -0.02]$ ), and a 2-way interaction between brand and political orientation ( $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $b = 0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.03$ ,  $t(494) = 3.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.07, 0.20]$ ), supporting our main hypothesis. That is, we replicated our key effect under low cognitive load (see the 2-way interaction term above) where participants who rated at  $-3.79$  or below on the political orientation scale (32nd percentile; more liberal) were less likely to punish the Toyota Prius driver ( $\hat{y}_{-3.79} = 4.51$ ) than the Toyota Camry driver ( $\hat{y}_{-3.79} = 4.99$ ). In contrast, those who rated at  $0.58$  or above on the scale (72nd percentile; more conservative) punished the Toyota Prius driver ( $\hat{y}_{0.58} = 4.94$ ) more than the Toyota Camry driver ( $\hat{y}_{0.58} = 4.24$ ). In comparison, there was no such 2-way interaction between brand and political orientation for those under high cognitive load ( $\beta = 0.03$ ,

$b = 0.01$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $t(494) = .39$ ,  $p = .69$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.06, 0.08]$ )—supporting H3b.

Exploratory analyses showed that substituting political orientation for US political party affiliation ( $r = .79$ ,  $p < .001$ ) in the model led to a similar pattern of results with a significant 3-way interaction term ( $\beta = -0.11$ ,  $b = -0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $t(494) = 2.63$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.31, -0.04]$ ). Such an interaction was due to a significant 2-way interaction term between brand and political orientation ( $\beta = 0.24$ ,  $b = 0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(494) = 3.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.09, 0.27]$ ) for those under low cognitive load and a non-significant 2-way interaction term for those under high cognitive load ( $\beta = 0.01$ ,  $b = 0.00$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t(494) = 0.09$ ,  $p = .93$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.09, 0.09]$ )—suggesting a substantial overlap between the measures.

### Discussion

Study 5 deepens our understanding of the process underlying the effect by showing how it attenuates because cognitive load reduces participants' ability to act on the inconsistent informational cues (i.e., transgressor performing ethical consumption) when making their judgments—which liberal and conservative participants integrate differently into their punishment decision. The following study tests a managerial intervention that allows brands to adopt an ethical positioning while reducing politically driven biases that might arise from their users' misbehavior.

### Study 6

We propose that managers can reframe product communications to minimize the biases found on both ends of the political orientation spectrum. Namely, Study 6 investigates the impact of using conventional branding (i.e., focusing on the brand's core functional performance attributes) in promoting ethical brands. From a theoretical perspective, an ethical brand promoted using relatively more core (i.e., functional) attributes should mitigate our effect by reducing the degree of ambiguity between an ethical product and an unethical action from the consumer. From a substantive perspective, pairing ethical brands with a more conventional branding allows the brand to appeal to ethically conscious consumers and reduces the potential backlash associated with our effect of interest. This study also tests the robustness of our effect of interest outside of an American sample, using Canadian respondents.



### Method

*Participants and design.* One hundred and eighty-six undergraduate students at a large Canadian university participated in this experiment in exchange for course credit (58% female,  $M_{Age} = 21.3$ ). This study uses a 3 (brand: conventional vs. ethical vs. ethical with functional focus)  $\times$  continuous (political orientation) between-participants design. The dependent variable of interest is punishment intensity, measured as avoidance to assist the person described in the scenario (using the same measure from Study 3).

*Procedure.* We randomly presented participants with one of three versions of the same coffee brand as in Study 3. Depending on the experimental condition, the coffee brand was “Roaster’s Coffee – “Better Tasting Beans = Better Coffee” (conventional brand condition), “Roaster’s Ethical Coffee – “More Ethical Beans = Better Coffee” (ethical brand condition), or “Roaster’s Ethical Coffee – “Better Tasting Beans = Better Coffee” (ethical brand with functional focus).

On a different page, participants read and answered the same littering scenario and 4-item likelihood-to-assist measure ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ) as in Study 3, such that low scores on that scale denote a higher likelihood to punish the brand user. Finally, participants reported their political orientation using the same 11-point 1-item measure as before ( $M = -0.24$ ,  $SD = 2.05$ ).

### Results

Results from a regression analyses with two dummy coded variables (dummy 1 = ethical brand; dummy 2 = ethical brand with functional focus) revealed significant interaction effects between the brand condition and participants’ political orientation (centered). Specifically, replicating our previous findings, we observed a significant two-way interaction with political orientation between the conventional and the ethical branding conditions ( $\beta = -0.38$ ,  $b = -0.42$ ,  $SD = 0.12$ ,  $t(180) = 3.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.65, -0.20]$ ), but not between the conventional brand and the ethical brand with functional focus conditions ( $\beta = -0.04$ ,  $b = -0.05$ ,  $SD = 0.11$ ,  $t(180) < 1$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.27, 0.17]$ ); in support of H3c. There was also a significant main effect of brand condition ( $\beta = 0.23$ ,  $b = 0.62$ ,  $SD = 0.22$ ,  $t(180) = 2.81$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $CI_{95}[0.19, 1.06]$ ). When coded differently, there was also a significant interaction between the ethical brand and the ethical brand with functional focus by political orientation

( $\beta = -0.34$ ,  $b = -0.38$ ,  $SD = 0.10$ ,  $t(180) = 3.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $CI_{95}[-0.59, -0.17]$ ).

Comparing the ethical and conventional brand conditions using the Johnson–Neyman technique, we found that those who rated at 0.18 or below on the political orientation scale (57th percentile) were more likely to assist the ethical brand user ( $\hat{y}_{0.18} = 4.80$ ) compared with the conventional brand user ( $\hat{y}_{0.18} = 4.36$ ). In contrast, those who rated at 3.42 or above on the scale (96th percentile; more conservative), we less likely to assist the ethical brand user ( $\hat{y}_{3.42} = 3.66$ ) than the conventional brand user ( $\hat{y}_{3.42} = 4.60$ ). Next, when comparing those in the ethical condition to those in the ethical brand with functional focus condition, we found that those who rated at  $-0.31$  or below on the political orientation scale (47th percentile) were more likely to assist the ethical brand user ( $\hat{y}_{-0.31} = 4.97$ ) compared to the user of the ethical brand with functional focus ( $\hat{y}_{-0.31} = 4.54$ ). In contrast, those who rated at 2.93 or above on the scale (93rd percentile; more conservative), we less likely to assist the ethical brand user ( $\hat{y}_{2.93} = 3.84$ ) compared with the user of the ethical brand with functional focus ( $\hat{y}_{2.93} = 4.63$ ).

### Discussion

Study 6 suggests that managers can reduce the politically motivated biases that their consumers could be facing by promoting the core performance attributes of ethical brands to a greater extent. This supports our process account because this serves to reduce the gap between an ethical brand and the user transgression. This study also extends our political orientation effects outside of the US political context. Unlike our other studies, we note that Study 6 observes a significant forgiveness effect toward users of the ethical brand around the center point on the political orientation scale. While the different cultural context of this experiment makes it impossible to tell if the scale is interpreted in the same way by Canadians as Americans, we speculate that this outcome results from the more prominent liberal values shared by the population under study. That is, Canadian conservatives rank more toward the center of the political spectrum than US conservatives on many issues (Chinoy, 2019).

### General Discussion

Answering recent calls for a better understanding of the implications of political orientation in

consumption (e.g., Rao, 2017; Shavitt, 2017), especially with regards to ethical consumption (Oyserman & Schwarz, 2017), the present work brings together characteristics of both the observer and the target, showing how their joint interplay affects moral judgments. The results from seven studies covering different brands, types of transgressions, and samples provide converging evidence that the branding of everyday goods can affect the moral judgments of third-party consumers. We show that the direction of the response depends on the interplay between the target brand (i.e., ethical vs. conventional) and the observer's political orientation. People with liberal and conservative orientations view the same transgression differently, depending on whether the transgressor is an ethical (vs. conventional) brand user, and these judgments affect punitive motivations. See Figure 3 for a summary of this interaction effect.

This paper contributes to recent research extending our knowledge about how ideological asymmetries affect consumer decision-making (e.g., Baker, Patel, Von Gunten, Valentine, & Scherer, 2020; Irmak, Murdock, & Kanuri, 2020), showing implications for the branding of ethical consumption that span beyond simple brand preferences. Our pattern of effects shows that liberals forgive ethical brand users more than conventional brand users for moral transgressions, but conservatives punish the same individuals more (all studies). We rule out

alternative explanations relying on politically charged associations (using only the word "ethical" and fictional brands for the manipulations; Studies, 1, 3, 6). We deepen our understanding of this effect by providing evidence that it is activated by the moral transgression, not by the branding of the product alone (Study 3), is the outcome of how people interpret the ambiguous information about the brand users, leading to different attributions about their responsibility for the transgression (Studies 4–5). Finally, we also test a managerial intervention to mitigate this effect by reducing the inconsistency in the decision-making cues (Study 6).

Crucially, this research's conceptualization and development contribute by integrating moral psychology's actor and transgressor streams. In doing so, we add to the nascent literature on reactions to moral transgressions in consumption contexts, showing how third-party consumers use marketplace cues, such as ethically branded goods, to form their moral judgments.

We also highlight several reasons why our results are not readily attributed to a mere ingroup favoritism effect (e.g., Turner et al., 1979). For instance, we do not observe our interaction in the absence of a transgression (i.e., where there is no inconsistency; Study 3), but we observe it for conservative brands (Study 2B). We also do not observe only a forgiveness effect of the ethical branding when the manipulation consists of only

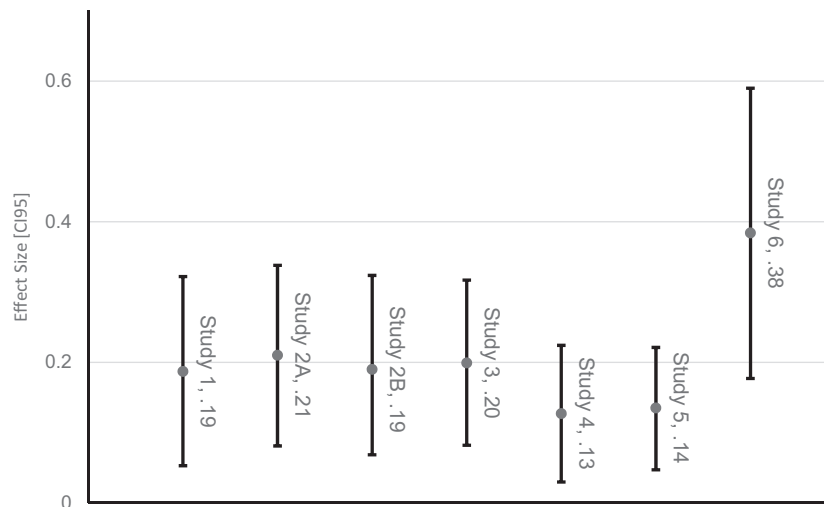


Figure 3. 2-Way interaction effect between brand type and political orientation.

Note: Represent  $|\beta|$  values for the 2-way interaction between the brand (conventional vs. ethical) and political orientation. Study 3: values represent the transgression-present condition. Study 5: values represent the low cognitive load condition. Study 6: values represent the interaction between conventional and ethical brands only. Participant samples: Studies 1–5 were US-based online respondents, Study 6 was Canadian undergraduate students. Measures of punishment: shared bonus amount in a dictator task (Study 1), fine amount (Studies 2A and 2B), likelihood to assist (Studies 3 and 6), ostracism (Studies 4 and 5).

the label “ethical” (Studies 1, 3, 6). There is also no precedent for political orientation interacting with views of another consumer’s ethical (vs. conventional) choices—and we do not find such an effect in our pre-testing of the ethical qualities of our stimuli brands. (We only found one significant correlation between the political orientation of the raters and the ethical rating of the brands in our pre-tests. For the “Roaster’s Blend Ethical Coffee” brand, we found a positive correlation with our 11-point political orientation measures suggesting that more conservatives raters found that brand to be *more* ethical—this result is again inconsistent with an in-group explanation.) We also note that our effects are inconsistent with a black sheep effect (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988), which is frequently observed when judging transgressions performed by ingroup and outgroup members. The black sheep effect would have predicted a harsher punishment for an ingroup member than an outgroup member. In any case, we observe what would be the opposite effect of the prediction from that literature as well.

To summarize, we propose a novel interaction between the target and the observer for moral judgment formation, which helps understand the complex reality surrounding ethical branding and consumer-to-consumer inferences. To our knowledge, there is no existing model of judgment that explains our effect. We integrate several foundational areas of moral judgment and human information processing. We believe that our findings offer a more nuanced understanding of marketplace morality and attributions. We study a context where consumption choices have become morally charged, and where brands seek to convey meaning to consumers but cannot control their actions.

#### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

There are limitations of the work that should be highlighted. For instance, political orientation is measured and not manipulated in our studies; thus, unmeasured third variables may have contributed to our pattern of results. One possibility is religiosity, which also contributes to how people process moral-imbued stimuli (McAdams, Hanek, & Dadabo, 2013). We also examine the ambiguity between brand choice and usage behavior. While we note that there are no systematic differences in how liberals and conservatives view the brands’ ethical positioning, our studies cannot rule out possible differences in how the act (and hence, the overall ambiguity) is viewed differently by liberals and

conservatives. Finally, while we argue that an in-group identity effect is unlikely given the pattern of results across our designs, none of the studies manipulate group identity strength, as reporting a (say) liberal political orientation does not necessarily mean one strongly identifies as such.

While the current research finds a potential benefit in adopting branding communications focusing on the product’s functional features (Study 6), future research should better understand the broader implications of this finding as brands and their relationships with consumers evolve. For instance, other research on the branding of ethical goods has also found that using multiple appeals that focus both on ethical (e.g., the product is sustainable) and non-ethical components (e.g., the product also saves you money), as opposed to communications focusing solely on the ethical component of the product, may reduce preference for the products among highly involved consumers (Edinger-Schons, Sipilä, Sen, Mende, & Wieseke, 2018). Therefore, future research should also better understand the conditions under which brand managers would do better using single versus multiple appeals in their communications. Indeed, there are many remaining questions regarding political orientation interactions and branding on moral judgments that we have hopefully seeded through our work.

In our inquiry, we identify a novel interaction to explain the formation of moral judgment in consumption. Nevertheless, our findings are situated in a context where the operationalization of both observer and actor characteristics is evolving. For instance, our results suggest that the overlap between measures of political orientation and those of US political party affiliation are not perfect—a reality that will continue to evolve along with the agenda of both dominant US political parties. Also, as more companies adopt ethical practices and ethical goods become more available than ever, consumers’ views toward ethical branding are likely to evolve. We believe that this reality opens the door to multiple opportunities for future research.

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**Appendix S1.** Web Appendix.