Cognitive Dissonance Drives Politically Motivated Consumption As Evidenced Through Asymmetric Willingness to Sacrifice Utility

Chris Hydock, Georgetown University, USA
Anne Wilson, Georgetown University, USA
Kurt Carlson, Georgetown University, USA

The research examines Politically Motivated Consumption (PMC). Three experiments document the impact of taking a political stance on consumer behavior. The research elucidates the asymmetrical effect of congruity vs. incongruity on the likelihood of engaging in PMC and identifies cognitive dissonance as the driver of this phenomenon.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
In recent decades, there has been an increasing level of concern surrounding the impact brands have on society. Corporate influence has traditionally been realized through business practices and philanthropic initiatives, such as the use of fair trade labor, the adoption of environmentally friendly packaging or products, or donating to charitable causes. More recently, brands have been actively contributing to American political discourse by expressing their stance on divisive political issues. Despite this growing trend, there is little research specifically examining consumers’ reactions to brands’ political statements.

This research examines Politically Motivated Consumption (PMC), defined as the decision to base one’s consumption on the political ideologies of a brand with the intent of supporting or opposing the brand. Consumer responses to political and social issues have previously been studied as political consumerism. PMC is a sub-set of political consumerism; it is specifically a consumer response to a political stance. Political stances are unique because they induce a dichotomous response, unlike cause-related marketing, corporate social responsibility, or unethical business practices, which engender univalent support or opposition.

Cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) is proposed as the driving mechanism behind PMC. That is, consumption decisions are guided by consumers’ desire to “preserve a consistent, stable, predictable sense of self” (Aronson 1968) and avoidance of conflict. When a brand’s political stance is inconsistent with a consumer’s ideology, there is a potential for conflict between the consumer’s beliefs and their behavior of “consuming the brand”. This dissonance is evidenced in two ways: consumers avoid consuming from a brand with incongruent beliefs or they reduce their favorable attitude toward the brand.

Dissonance theory further predicts that consumers will react asymmetrically depending on their agreement with a brand’s stance. Consumers whose ideology is incongruent with a brand’s stance will react more strongly than those whose ideology is congruent with a brand’s stance. This unequal response occurs because failing to consume from a brand with a congruent stance does not induce the same direct conflict as consuming from a brand with an incongruent belief.

In experiment 1, consumers considered a hypothetical scenario in which a real restaurant they reported being loyal to made a political statement. Consumers who disagreed with the political stance of the brand reported a decrease in attitude toward the brand while those who agreed with the political position of the brand did not have more positive attitudes than consumers in the control condition. The results suggest that when consumers learn that a brand they like takes a political stance with which they disagree, consumers experience conflict and attempt to reduce dissonance by adjusting their attitude toward the brand.

In experiment 2, consumers made a choice between two unknown brands. Each decision set included one option that offered a higher utility vs. another lower utility option that enabled consumers to engage in PMC (by consuming a congruent brand, or not consuming an incongruent brand). Consumers exhibited a willingness to take the lower utility option in order to engage in PMC. The likelihood of engaging in PMC was moderated by the difference in utility between the two options. As predicted, consumers were more likely to engage in PMC when a brand made a stance incongruent with their own beliefs than when a brand made a stance congruent with their own beliefs. These findings indicate that consumers anticipate conflict between beliefs and behaviors and make consumption decisions with the aim to avoid dissonance.

Experiment 3 replicated the results of experiment 2 in a natural choice context. The experiment also demonstrated that consumers’ likelihood of making a dissonant-avoidant choice by engaging in PMC was moderated by the extent to which they felt the political issue at hand was important to their self-identity. Additionally, self-reported anticipated conflict of failing to engage in PMC fully mediated the relationship between agreement with a political stance and choice.

In experiment 4, chose between two products, then later learned that they either chose a product from a brand with an incongruent political beliefs to their own, or that they failed to select a product from a brand with congruent beliefs. Consumers who chose a product from a brand with incongruent political ideologies to their own reported more conflict and greater discomfort than those who failed to choose a product from a brand with congruent ideologies. Further, consumers who selected a product from an incongruent brand exhibited greater compensatory behavior than those who failed to select a product from a congruent brand. The results indicate that experienced cognitive dissonance demonstrated by compensatory behavior parallels anticipated dissonance shown through conflict-avoiding choices (experiment 2 and experiment 3).

Taken together, the results of the four experiments point to cognitive dissonance as a driver of PMC. Consumers are more likely to avoid a product made by a brand with incongruent political beliefs than to purchase a product made by a brand with congruent beliefs. This asymmetrical reaction occurs because purchasing from an incongruent brand induces more conflict between one’s self concept and behavior than failing to purchase from a congruent brand. Future research should examine this mechanism as a possible explanation for other consumption behaviors, particularly in the realm of political and ethical consumerism.

REFERENCES