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The Power of Controversy: The Interplay of Public Opinion and
Individuals' Pursuit of Uniqueness

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which opinion climate perceptions affect consumers' purchase intentions for brands that engage in controversial socio-political issues. Additionally, the moderating effect of individuals' needs for (non)-conformity, namely consumers' Need for Uniqueness and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence, is examined. An experimental study, in which the degree of public opinion was manipulated, provides evidence that individuals who share a brand's socio-political view, have a higher purchase intention if the perceived majority agrees or the public is evenly divided, as compared to individuals that only share their opinion with the perceived minority.

Keywords: Consumer Behavior, Controversial Brands, Uniqueness, Social Influence

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1. Introduction

In recent years, an increasing number of brands have actively participated in public discussions on socio-political issues, adopting a polarizing stance (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020). Notable examples that have been widely reported in the media include Nike's commercial featuring former NFL player Colin Kaepernick taking a knee during the U.S. national anthem to protest for social justice and racial equality (Draper & Creswell, 2019). Patagonia's bold stance on environmental protection "The President Stole Your Land" campaign, which opposed President Trump's executive order to reduce the size of national monuments by nearly 2 million acres (Andrews, 2017) led to a spike in consumer perception of Patagonia to its highest level of the year (Marzilli, 2017). With 86% of respondents wanting companies and CEOs to publicly speak out about societal issues, brands like Patagonia are seemingly trying to capitalize on customer expectations of brands to enter the sociopolitical domain, filling the void in leadership by governmental leaders (Edelman, 2021).

While some instances of businesses, taking a socio-political stance have been resulting in resounding success, such as short-term sales increase following the Nike campaign (Faw, 2021) or generation of brand equity (Korschun et al., 2020) others have not. Despite growing and articulated preferences for brands that take a stand, previous studies have shown that consumer attitudes do not translate into actual purchases, nor do they have a positive effect on the company's stock market (Villagra et al., 2021). Socio-political stances can divide consumer opinions (Moorman, 2020) even leading to public backlash and membership cancellations, a reaction experienced by retailer Costco after it asked its customers to wear face masks in support of public health efforts (Taylor, 2020). The discrepancy between consumers' expressed desire for brands to publicly advocate for societal causes, and their actual unwillingness to purchase

(Bhagwat et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) has been understudied in the academic literature of brands that take a controversial stance. This study proposes a conceptual model that investigates why consumers do not act upon their stated positive attitude.

Whether consumers articulate their opinion in public depends not only on their attitude per se but also on their environment, the social influence (Latané, 1981). Purchase decisions are often influenced by social norms – informal rules about what is considered appropriate or expected behavior in society. Especially when it comes to controversial and morally charged topics (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015), consumers experience a strong social pressure to “fit in” by following unconscious perceptions of what is popular or unpopular (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). Drawing on the Spiral of Silence Theory, the tendency to express a political opinion is affected by observations of the perceived opinion environment. As the mere purchase of a brand, known to support a controversial issue, can be understood as a socio-political statement, public opinion is a conspicuous force in customers’ purchase decisions. If individuals believe their opinion is unpopular, they tend to be discouraged from publicly expressing it to avoid public rejection, while the perception that it is popular tends to have the opposite effect (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993). Therefore, the following research paper proposes that perceived public opinion might influence consumers’ purchase intention of brands that take a controversial stance, specifically consumers may avoid purchasing brands that support an unpopular or non-conforming issue.

Motivations for acquiring products depend on individuals’ tendency towards conformity and non-conformity. Clark and Goldsmith (2005) argue that the closest estimates are customers’ Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (SII) and the Need for Uniqueness (NFU). Within this perspective, especially in uncertain environments – likely caused by controversial situations – consumers high in Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence are potentially more likely to seek information from the majority, by efforts to gain social acceptance and decrease feelings of

uncertainty (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Smith et al., 2007). However, some individuals also deliberately adopt non-conforming behaviors to reflect personal individuality and signal higher status. Therefore, it can be assumed that individuals with a high Need for Uniqueness might prefer brands that take stance on controversial issues, as a means to differentiate themselves against others (Tian & McKenzie, 2001).

Despite brands increasingly getting involved in social and political debates, research on how, why, and when this strategy is effective is limited. For brand managers and marketers, it is crucial to understand psychological processes that lead to changes in the behavior of individuals, intervening between consumers' positive attitudes and their intention to purchase. Thus, this research paper aims to analyze the impact of public opinion on purchase intentions of brands that take a side in socio-political issues, considering the moderating effect of consumers' Need for Uniqueness and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence.

2. Literature Review

Existing literature has explored the impact of brands taking a public stance on controversial socio-political issues, including potential increases in purchase intent from consumers supporting the brand's views (Abitbol et al., 2018; Dodd & Supa, 2014) to negative word of mouth (Skarmeas & Leonidou, 2013). Vahdati and Voss (2019) associate controversy with uncertainty, as controversy puts ambiguous and conflicting ideas into the mind of the consumer (Erdem & Swait, 2004; Lowry & Johnson, 1981). In an uncertain and ambiguous decision context, consumers are more likely to accept others' opinions as valid representations of reality, and consequently, consume in conformity with others to reduce uncertainty (Turner et al., 1987). Specifically, this research paper argues that consumers will be reluctant to support brands that take stands on politically charged social issues when they perceive that only a minority agrees with the brand's view.

According to Jackson (2005) apart from external conditions like social impact, influences at an individual level related to personal traits can similarly facilitate or constrain purchase intentions. Individuals that have a high Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence, subsequently have a higher desire to do what is socially acceptable and therefore avoid uncertainty (Bearden et al., 1989; Bearden & Rose, 1990). However, several authors have also postulated consumers' pursuit of differentness (Tian et al., 2001) as a driver to purchase unconventional products that may cause social controversy (Butcher et al., 2017; Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2018).

In the setting of controversial brands, no research has been conducted on the relevance of social norms, the influence of others, as well as individuals' need for non-conformity. Alongside these assumptions, the following sections aim to generalize, critically examine, and elaborate on their theoretical underpinning.

2.1 The Concept of Controversy

By definition, controversial issues have competing incompatible viewpoints, lack general agreement, are politically sensitive, and provoke strong emotions (Nalick et al., 2016). For the purpose of this study, controversial brands are defined as brands that publicly take a stand (statements and/or actions) in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial socio-political issue (Brown & Schau, 2001). According to Nalick et al. (2016), socio-political issues can be described as "salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion" (p. 386) is polarized, causing conflicting attitudes. What represents a divisive socio-political cause may change over time (DiMaggio et al., 1996) and is dependent on cultural beliefs and norms (Singh & Chahal, 2020).

2.2 The Influence of Opinion Climate on Consumers

Based on the expressive nature, purchase behavior in reaction to a brand that takes a stance towards a socio-political issue is considered a form of public opinion expression. Some scholars identify it as a form of conscious consumption, as it allows consumers to express their

attitudes and believes publicly (Kam & Deichert, 2020; Klein et al., 2001). Consumers' decisions to reveal their opinions and attitudes through the purposive selection of a product by a controversial brand are bound to social norms (Hayes et al., 2013). Social norms can be understood as general societal expectations, unwritten beliefs shared by a society or group that define what is considered to be normal and acceptable behavior (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018). This effect of other people on the behavior, opinions, and attitudes of individuals has been elaborated in the Social Impact Theory (Latané, 1981; Nowak et al., 1990) According to Latané (1981), the amount of influence individuals' experience in a social situation depends on social approval either at a proximal (e.g., close friends and parents) or distal level, referring to the perception of what others ought to approve or disapprove.

Generally, social norms assist individuals to determine if their behavior is socially acceptable or not (Cialdini et al., 1990). According to the Social Impact Theory, if the size of a social presence increases an increasing impact on individuals' behavior can be investigated (Latané, 1981). They are likely to be influenced by the opinion of the majority views, the public opinion. In this social-psychological context, *public opinion* can be understood as a belief of what the majority attitude might be. It is the aggregate of individual views interpretation about a particular issue held by a group of people (Fields & Schuman, 1976). Especially issues that are “emotional, value-loaded, and evoke the perception of right and wrong” (Perry & Gonzenbach, 2000) – controversial issues – can produce the Spiral of Silence effects.

The Spiral of Silence Theory posits that people only publicly express their stance on controversial issues unless they believe their view is shared with the perceived majority (Noelle-Neumann, 1974, 1993; Sunstein & Hastie, 2015). Contrary if they share opinions with the minority, they tend to adopt strategies of opinion expression avoidance (Matthes, 2015; Matthes et al., 2018b). In response to this opinion incongruity with others, individuals feel pressured into engaging in a socially accepted behavior, which is mainly driven by their

fundamental desire to “fit in” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bond & Smith, 1996), or by a fear of being isolated (Cheng, 2018; Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Anticipation of social rewards (Bicchieri, 2006), and the feeling of belonging or to be “accepted in the society” (Park & Lessig, 1977) can also influence people to withhold their attitude or opinion in public. Both, consumers’ perceived public approval (Dalisay, 2012) as well as perceived public controversy (Wojcieszak, 2011) have been found to predict public opinion expression (Matthes et al., 2018a). Therefore, this study will operationalize the degree of controversy, or size of social presence as the degree of public support brands gain for their stance on a socio-political issue. Following this logic, this work hypothesizes that the perceived degree of public support might impact individuals purchase intention of controversial brands:

H1: *When people agree with the brand’s stance, people will express higher purchase intentions for the brand if they feel that the majority of people also agree, compared to a minority, or a situation in which the public is evenly divided. When people disagree with the stance, people will simply have lower purchase intentions as compared to people who agree.*

2.3 Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

According to Bearden et al. (1989), the likelihood that an individual will let perceived majority opinion impact their consumption decisions is dependent upon their Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (SII). SII is defined as “the need to identify or enhance one’s image with significant others through the acquisition and use of products and brands, the willingness to conform to the expectations of others regarding purchase decisions, and/ or the tendency to learn about products and services by observing others and/ or seeking information from others” (Bearden et al., 1989, p.474). Deutsch and Gerard (1955) differentiated between two forms of social influence: informational and normative. Informational influence refers to the likeliness of individuals to use social cues and information obtained from others as guidance when it comes to product/service choices. Especially when being confronted with controversy, they

might feel genuinely uncertain about what attitudes are correct and therefore the majority opinion is adopted. Beyond these informational influences, normative influence refers to an individual's tendency to comply with social norms to avoid non-conformity in group settings. To demonstrate belonging and reduce social tension, individuals adopt the majority position in public (Bearden et al., 1989). They conform to social norms to gain acceptance and recognition in groups and to reduce generalized feelings of uncertainty (Smith et al., 2007) or social anxiety about being rejected (Mutz, 2002; Wooten & Reed, 2004). Individuals' needs to fit in varies across people and cultures, as it is affected by personality and demographics. As individuals grow older, the influence of others plays a more significant role (Mangleburg et al., 2004). However, also cultural conditioning and socialization processes influence a person's relationship with others (Mourali et al., 2005) like living in an individualistic or collectivistic culture (Hofstede, 2011).

As possessions help in asserting one's affiliation with groups, people's need to be "accepted in the society" can be satisfied by consuming brands, products, or styles that are approved by others (Park & Lessig, 1977). In the context of brands taking a stand on controversy, socio-political issues, public opinion is polarized. It can be assumed, that individuals with a high SII seek social assimilation, as they are strongly influenced by the fear of negative judgments of others (Lennox & Wolfe, 1984) It can be assumed that even if individuals have a positive attitude towards the brand's socio-political stance, they have a low intention to purchase in response to dissenting opinions by the perceived majority, as they might only be exposed to the risk of social rejection. Only if individuals' opinion is shared with the majority, they might consider revealing their true opinion by purchasing a controverse brand. Therefore, this study argues that consumers SII will moderate the formation of behavioral intentions in the context of controversial brands:

***H2:** There will be a three-way interaction effect between consumer personal stance, degree of public support, and consumer's susceptibility to interpersonal influence (SII) on purchase intention. When people with a high SII agree with the brand's stance, people will express higher purchase intentions for the brand when they perceive that a majority of people agree as well, as compared to when only a minority agrees with the stance or compared to when the public is evenly divided. This effect is less strong among people with lower SII.*

2.4 Consumers Pursuit of Uniqueness

Although the Spiral of Silence Theory focuses on motives of social approval (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), other research suggests that people's motives to differentiate themselves from others and to be unique can be equally strong (Shukla, 2010; Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Lynn and Harris (1997) normative influence does not influence consumers with a high Need for Uniqueness (NFU). Tian and McKenzie (2001) defined this NFU as "pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods to develop and enhance one's self-image and social image" (p. 52). Tian and McKenzie (2001) developed a three-dimensional construct of NFU by investigating different degrees of social distinction: (1) "creative choice counter-conformity" reflects consumers that seek unique brands more than most others but still make choices that are appreciated by like-minded peers; (2) "unpopular choice counter-conformity" refers to consumers that purchase products that deviate from group norms, risking social disapproval; and (3) "avoidance of similarity" describes consumers that are not interested in sustaining to conventions and discontinues the use of mainstream items to re-establish differentness (Tian & McKenzie, 2001).

Consumers with a high NFU react negatively to similarities with other people which leads to a loss of interest in products or brands that are commonly used by others (Chan et al., 2012). Purchasing scarce or differentiated products helps them to express their unique self-and social image (Clark et al., 2007; Lynn & Harris, 1997; Tian & McKenzie, 2001). These consumers

prefer to own or purchase items that signal a level of autonomy – a trait that can be associated with the attribute of coolness (Warren & Campbell, 2014). People nowadays use the term "cool" when they come to encounter something unique (Belk et al., 2010). Coolness is an abstract and subjective attribute (Leland, 2004) that changes over time (Wooten & Mourey, 2013). Brand coolness is closely associated with autonomy, the extent to which a brand deviates from conventions and norms (i.e., is rebellious; Bruun et al., 2016; Read et al., 2011), attempts to be different (i.e., is original; Bruun et al., 2016; Sundar et al., 2014), and behaves consistently and true towards itself (i.e., is authentic; Read et al., 2011). In the context of controversial brands, the literature suggests that polarization enhances the uniqueness of the brand (Berendt et al., 2018). Especially brands opposed by the perceived majority are preferred by consumers with a high NFU as they help them to establish their dissimilarity from others. Thus, the following hypothesis describes the moderating role of NFU:

***H3:** There will be a three-way interaction effect between consumers' personal stance, degree of public support, and consumer's Need for Uniqueness (NFU) on purchase intention. When people with a high NFU agree with the brand's stance, people will express higher purchase intentions for the brand when they perceive that a minority of people agree, as compared to when the majority agrees with the stance or compared to when the public is evenly divided. This effect is less strong among people with lower NFU.*

2.5 The Effect of Media Usage

Not only individuals' personal networks but also news media use plays an important role when forming an interpretation of the current public opinion. Moy et al. (2001) posit that media serves the function of conveying "information to audience members on the climate of opinion regarding an issue" (p. 11) which influences individuals' perception of public opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Considering that mass media shapes the agenda of public discussion by conveying information about the climate of opinion, most studies found a positive relationship

between the use of news media and individuals' willingness to speak out (Moy et al., 2001; Neuwirth, 2000; Willnat, 2002). Therefore, news media and in specific, the engagement in discussions on current socio-political controversies, will be examined in this study to identify potential influences on purchase intentions towards controversial brands.

3. Methodology

This study was carried out as an experiment administered via an online questionnaire, studying the probability of a change in an independent variable – consumer personal stance on LGBTQ+ rights – causing a change in the purchase intention of consumers towards a brand advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, the dependent variable (Saunders et al., 2016). To answer the research questions and hypotheses related to the moderated relationship between socio-political stance and purchase intention, a conceptual model with three moderators was tested. In this model, the degree of public support is the primary moderator, and consumers Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (SII) and Need for Uniqueness (NFU) operate as the secondary moderators (Figure 1).

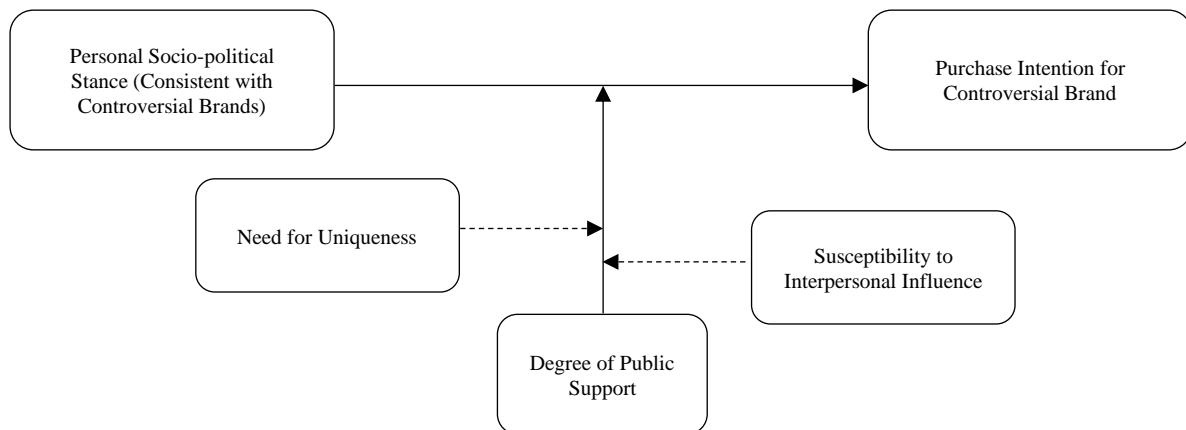


Figure 1. Conceptual model: three-way interaction effect of degree of public support, consumers SII and NFU on the relationship between socio-political stance (conforming with the brand) and purchase intention for the controversial brand.

3.1 Design of Research Tool

The online questionnaire (see Appendix A) was created using the survey software Qualtrics. After the original questionnaire was formulated in English, it was decided to translate the questionnaire to German. The similar sentence structure in German and English facilitated the back-translation process and the translators' familiarity with the content and concepts ensured a high translation quality (Brislin, 1970).

The first page of the survey included a consent form, describing the task, risks, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and rights. First, a controversial scenario by a fictitious brand X was constructed, that was loosely based on the campaign by Absolut vodka "Kiss with Pride", portraying same-sex kisses in support of equal love and LGBTQ+ rights (McCarthy, 2017). Despite the relatively high acceptance of gay rights within Europe, LGBTQ+ rights were chosen as the socio-political issue because it appeared to be a debate that still divides the public (Faiola, 2021). Therefore, brand X can be considered a controversial brand as it can cause public disagreement due to its active support of LGBTQ+ rights. The approach, to test the effects for a fictitious brand X rather than for an established brand, was deliberately chosen to avoid biases related to personal brand associations and prior experience (Smith et al., 2008).

It is important to emphasize that the following study examines the effects of different degrees of controversy rather than comparing a controversial condition to a non-controversial scenario. Three different conditions were defined, manipulating the degree of controversy, specifically, participants received the results of an alleged opinion poll with different degrees of public support towards LGBTQ+ rights. The controversial condition described a situation in which the public is evenly divided, furthermore a minority condition and one majority condition were designed. An even distribution was guaranteed by adding a randomizer to the Qualtrics survey flow that randomly presented question blocks to participants (Qualtrics, 2021). Next, participants were given a manipulation check question to assess participants' attentiveness to

the intervention. Failed manipulation checks may indicate inconsistent and careless respondent behavior, providing a rationale for discarding careless responses and reducing statistical noise (Oppenheimer et al., 2009).

The survey measures were developed from prior validated scales whose applicability is well established; however, it was ensured that they suit the context of the study. All items in the study, except demographic information, used seven-point Likert scales, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (7). The dependent variable, purchase intention, was assessed on a three-item scale adapted from Spears & Singh (2004). To measure the variables, Need for Uniqueness (NFU) and Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (SII), reliable and valid scale items were adapted from existing literature. NFU was measured using a short-form version of (Tian & McKenzie, 2001) scale by Ruvio et al. (2008), containing a three-dimensional 12-item scale that assesses (1) “creative choice counter-conformity” (2) “unpopular choice counter-conformity” and (3) “avoidance of similarity”. Consumers’ SII (normative and informational) was measured by a nine-item scale, a shorter version of the original twelve-item scale developed by Bearden et al. (1989). In the case of this present study, where the socio-political issue that a fictional brand addresses are related to equal rights for LGBTQ+ people, customers’ preexisting attitudes and perceptions about the support of LGBTQ+ rights are worthy of attention. A three-item scale has been proposed to measure consumers’ attitudinal approval or degree of support towards same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights. Respondents were asked if they “support same-sex marriage and LGBTQ rights “if they “believe it is important to support” or if it is “relevant to actively promote equal rights regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity “.

Exploratory and demographic variables. Next, to assess participants’ perception of the brand, the variable brand coolness was included, to analyze potential underlying reasons for people with a high Need for Uniqueness to choose a brand opposed by a majority. Brand

coolness, as a measure of the brand image, was assessed by a four-item scale. Participants were asked if they perceive brand X as cool, authentic, rebellious, or original (items adapted from Bruun et al., 2016; Read et al., 2011; Sundar et al., 2014). Lastly, demographic variables, such as gender, age, education, and nationality were measured, as these factors relate to the tendency of individuals to express their opinion (Moy et al., 2001). A three-item scale examined the involvement in public debates on socio-political issues on a 7-point Likert scale, considering that news media use is related to individuals' willingness to voice their opinion (Moy et al., 2001; Neuwirth, 2000). This measure was intended to investigate a potential influence of participants' involvement in socio-political discussion – how well consumers inform themselves and follow public debates – on the purchase intention for brands that support LGBTQ+ rights. These questions were followed by the assessment of demand characteristics, asking participants if they reveal their expectancies about the purpose of the experiment. Answers of participants that can guess the purpose of the study might distort outcomes, as they might inadvertently adapt their answers to please the researcher (Orne, 1962).

3.2 Procedure of Data Collection

The study used a non-probability sampling technique, namely snowball sampling, as it is the most cost-effective and least time-consuming of all sampling techniques (Bryman, 2012). The questionnaire was initially shared with a small group of people – the researcher's personal network – and asked them to forward the questionnaire to others (Bryman, 2012). This resulted in a sample of 293 participants, that agreed to voluntarily participate and fully completed the online questionnaire. First, survey participants were presented with the following controversial scenario:

Imagine that brand X, a global fashion brand, launched an awareness-raising campaign in support of LGBTQ+ rights. The campaign ran in many different countries featuring evocative images that captured same-sex couples kissing. The images were spread

through social media adverts and billboards as well as the company's website and owned social media channels. The campaign #equallove wants to raise awareness about the discriminations and inequalities LGBTQ+ people still face today considering that in more than 70 countries worldwide, it's still a crime to be gay. With its launch, brand X pledged to donate 1% of all sales to LGBTQ+ organizations around the world that conduct legal action for their rights and protection.

Next, participants received a text containing the results of an alleged public opinion poll in which the level of support for LGBTQ+ rights was manipulated. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: minority, majority, or controversial. The controversial group was given a scenario where the public was evenly divided:

50% of participants do not want brands to support LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex marriage through donations and evocative campaigns that spark discussions about discrimination and gay rights. Therefore, after releasing their campaign featuring same-sex couples kissing, brand X received not only public praise but also backlash.

This scenario was adapted accordingly for the two remaining experiment groups (majority vs. minority) stating that either “87% of participants want brands to support” brands or “87% of participants do not want to support” them, receiving either “mostly public praise” (majority) or “mostly public backlash” (minority). Next, participants were given a manipulation check question, asking them to recall how many people want brands to support LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex marriage.

This section was followed by questions measuring four constructs with potential cause-effect relationships: purchase intention, participants' Need for Uniqueness, their Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence as well as their stance towards LGBTQ+ rights. Afterward, the explanatory variable brand coolness was measured. Finally, four questions determined the demographics of the respondents (gender, age, education, nationality). The survey ended with

a question assessing the degree to which participants are informed about current socio-political debates (explanatory variable) and an open question asking if participants to share their guesses about the purpose of the study.

4. Results

Survey data that has been collected via Qualtrics was analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). After the data was derived from the survey, it was necessary to perform data checking and cleaning to increase data validity. This process resulted in the elimination of respondents that did not complete the questionnaire ($n = 217$) and respondents that failed the manipulation check, translating into 183 complete and valid answers.

Among the participants included in the final sample, 62% were female ($n = 113$), 37% male ($n = 68$) and the remaining preferred not to state their gender ($n = 2$). Respondent's age ranged from under 18 to 74, with the majority of 70% between the age of 18 – 34. Compared to the OECD average in tertiary education of 39% (OECD, 2020), participants' level of education was comparably high with 45.9% of participants that received a bachelor's degree (see Appendix B for all demographics).

4.1 Validity and reliability test

As all variables were measured using multiple-item scales, internal reliability and convergent validity were attained through a Cronbach's alpha α test, confirming consistency and coherence of the items within each scale (Field, 2013). Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.939 for personal socio-political stance towards LGBTQ+ rights (3-items) to 0.796 for the assessment of brand coolness (3-items). All the remaining Cronbach's alpha coefficients also exceeded the threshold value of 0.7 (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994) indicating the internal consistency of measures (NFU (12-items) = 0.846, SII (9-item scale) = 0.809). Also, both measures of the exploratory variables brand coolness (3-items) ($\alpha = 0.796$) and involvement in socio-political discussion (3-items) ($\alpha = 0.866$) were internally consistent.

4.2 Hypothesis Testing

H1: Overall, individuals' socio-political viewpoint on the support of LGBTQ+ rights and purchase intention of controversial brands were found to be positively correlated, $r(183) = .34, p < .001$. The first hypothesis proposes a two-way interaction effect between the independent variable (X), *personal socio-political stance* (level of advocacy concerning LGBTQ+ rights), and the multi-categorical moderator, *degree of public support* (minority, majority, controversial), on the dependent variable (Y) *purchase intention*. To conduct this moderation analysis, Model 1 of the PROCESS macro based on multiple linear regression was used (Hayes, 2013). Model 1 without the interaction of the moderating variable is significant, $R^2 = .127, F(2, 180) = 13.137, p < .001$. This reaffirms that if consumers' viewpoint and a brand's stance towards a socio-political issue are congruent, consumers are more likely to purchase the brands. In contrast, participants that disagree with a brand's stance have a lower purchase intention. To analyze the multi-categorical moderator, the variable was recoded into three dichotomous dummy variables:

(1) *minority vs. majority*: The moderation effect of the interaction between consumers socio-political stance and purchase intention did not account for significantly more variance ($F\text{-change}(3,115) = 3.21, p = .076$) than without the interaction ($R^2 = 0.27, F(3, 115) = 3.00, p = .033$), however it is marginally significant. The conditional effect of personal socio-political stance on purchase intention showed that there is a difference in significance comparing the two conditional effects of the moderator (minority, majority). Only under the majority condition there is a significant effect ($B = .388, t(115) = 2.92, p = .004$) whereas the minority condition shows no significant effect ($B = .053, t(115) = .409, p = .68$). This indicates that, when the public is divided, people are more likely to purchase a controversial brand if the majority agrees with the socio-political stance and less likely to purchase when the majority disagrees.

(2) *minority vs. controversial*: The overall two-way interaction model accounted for only 17% of the variance in *purchase intention* ($F(3, 113) = 8.15, p < .001$). The interaction between participants' stance towards LGBTQ+ rights and the dichotomous moderator *degree of public support* was found to be significant ($F\text{-change}(3, 113) = 7.37, p < .05$). The conditional effect of X on Y shows, that the minority condition has no significant effect ($B = .05, t(113) = .425, p = 0.67$), however the controversial condition, stating that the opinion of the public is split between supporters and opponents of brands that support LGBTQ+ rights, shows a significant effect ($B = .49, t(113) = 4.93, p < .001$). Illustrating that people are less likely to buy a controversial brand if only the minority agrees with their opinion, compared to when the public is polarized or evenly divided.

(3) *majority vs. controversial*: The model shows ($R^2 = 0.49, F(3, 126) = 13.33, p < .001$) that this sample shows no statistically significant interaction between *personal socio-political stance* and *degree of public support* ($F\text{-change}(1, 126) = .47, p = .49$). These findings indicate that there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that there is a significant difference between the two conditions. This means, other than hypothesized, if the majority agrees with a brand's stance compared to a controversial scenario where people's opinion is evenly divided, individuals do not express a higher purchase intention.

This result implies that H1 can be partially validated, according to the present sample, public opinion on socio-political issues does influence the purchase behavior of consumers. The relation between *personal socio-political stance* and *purchase intention* was only significant among participants under both, the controversial condition and majority condition, indicating that higher levels of support concerning the socio-political stance of the controversial brand lead to higher levels of intention to purchase. However, no significant difference could be identified comparing the controversial and majority condition. Indicating that there is no difference in the intention to purchase, comparing situations in which the public is evenly

divided and situations in which the majority supports a brand's stance. Whereas individuals that believed their opinion belonged to the minority had a lower purchase intention.

H2: Personal socio-political stance will influence purchase intention for controversial brands under the condition that consumers' stance matches the public opinion. H2 posited that this positive moderation is strengthened by high Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence. To test the following hypothesis, the three-way moderation model was analyzed using Hayes PROCESS macro (Model 3). In this model, the multi-categorical variable *degree of public support* was the primary moderator (M), and participants' *Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence* was added as the secondary moderator (W). According to the aforementioned procedure, the multi-categorical primary moderator was recoded into dichotomous variables. All three models with the dichotomous moderator (1) *minority vs. majority* (1) *minority vs. majority* (F-change (1,111) = 1.23, p = .27), (2) *minority vs. controversial* (F-change (1, 109) = 2.51, p = .116) and (3) *majority vs. controversial* (F-change (1,122) = .078, p = .78) showed no significant three-way interaction. Hence, H2 was not supported as there is no significant moderated moderation of individuals' *Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence*, by the *degree of public support* on the interaction between *personal socio-political stance* and *purchase intention*.

H3: Lastly, it was hypothesized that a high Need for Uniqueness will positively moderate the interaction between personal socio-political stance and purchase intention under the condition that consumers' opinions do not match the public opinion. The same analysis was conducted (Hayes model 3) to assess potential three-way interaction effects. Each model consisted of the secondary moderator (W) Need for Uniqueness and used one of the three dummy variables for a degree of public support as the primary moderator (M). This analysis revealed that all three models with the dichotomous moderator (1) *minority vs. majority* (F-change (1,111) = .91, p = .34), (2) *minority vs. controversial* (F-change (1, 109) = .57, p = .45)

and (3) *majority vs. controversial* (F -change (1,122) = .29, $p = .58$) showed no significant three-way interactions. This suggests that under no condition of public support (minority, majority, controversial) does an individual's Need for Uniqueness mediate purchase intention for controversial brands.

4.3 Exploratory Analysis

Turning to the demographic characteristic of respondents, a notable finding is age is a significant predictor of participants' support for LGBTQ+ rights, $F(1,181) = 29.64, p < .001$. The older participants are, the lower their support for LGBTQ+ rights. The remaining demographic variables have no significant influence on the independent and dependent variables.

5. General Discussion

The present study verifies, that supporters of LGBTQ+ rights appear to support brands that take a stance towards the socio-political issue, as their intention to purchase is positively influenced. This assumption is in line with Swimberghe et al. (2011), assuming that, when brands get involved in divisive socio-political discussions, the congruence between the brand's stance and consumers' viewpoint towards the cause will influence their reaction toward the brand. Hence, on the other hand, if consumers' opinion is misaligned with the brand's controversial stance, there are likely to abandon purchase decisions. Consequently, this suggests that controversies might positively affect purchase intention, leading to a larger customer base, when brands and customers support the same cause. Misalignment with a brand's disruptive view, on the other side, is likely to lead to customers' refusal to purchase.

Influence of public opinion. The results illuminate the significance of public opinion on the purchase intention for controversial brands, as a conforming opinion does not fully explain consumers' intention to purchase. Most consumers, despite holding a positive attitude toward brands stance on a socio-political issue make purchase decisions depending on the perceived

opinion climate. Holding back on purchasing controversial brands can rise if the brand's controversial stance is not popular among members of society. Publicly supporting a brand that advocates a controversial socio-political view might come with a considerable risk of social judgment. Consumers might experience an undesirable state of uncertainty about what attitudes are correct and therefore the majority opinion is adopted rather than risking isolation for expressing an unpopular opinion. This translates in the context of controversial brands to a decrease in purchase intentions if public opinion is at odds with an individual's opinion. Contrary, participants were positively swayed by opinion polls, indicating that the majority opinion matches personal views. However, no significant difference was found between a majority situation and a situation in which the public was equally divided. This indicated that only when consumers' view that is aligned with the brand stance, receives substantial public disagreement, their confirming opinion does not result in a higher purchase intention.

Influence of consumers' Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (SSI). The performed analysis does not provide sufficient data to support those individuals with a high SII have a higher purchase intention when their personal stance is in line with the majority opinion. These findings are contrary to Bearden et al. (1989), which considers SII a stable personality characteristic, referring to the extent to which consumer's consumption behavior is influenced by others. This indicates that the extent of majority influence is not influenced by the degree of individuals' susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

Influence of Need for Uniqueness (NFU). The findings add to the existing literature on controversial brands as consumers NFU, often considered as an anti-conformity trait, has not been found important in predicting purchase intentions. Contrary to expectations, consumers with a high NFU are not motivated by the incongruent opinion climate to voice their socio-political views by purchasing a controversial brand. Whether their personal views are conflicted or aligned with public opinion the effect of NFU on willingness to purchase became irrelevant

or at least significantly weakened. Despite the findings by Chan et al. (2012), stating that consumers with a high NFU experience unsatisfactory self-evaluation when following the masses, findings did not provide sufficient data to support this hypothesis.

Influence of age. In the current research, gender, and education had no impact on neither purchase intention for controversial brands nor on the degree of support for LGBTQ+ rights. Age was the only demographic factor that influenced consumers' stance towards LGBTQ+ rights. This finding is in line with recent surveys, suggesting that younger generations were more accepting of homosexuality (Poushter & Kent, 2020).

5.1 Managerial Implications

For this reason, it is crucial to emphasize that communication and marketing managers must be considerate when getting socio-politically engaged. First, brand managers should assess the climate among existing consumers, regarding their perception of the core socio-political issue before taking a public stance on it. This reaffirms the importance of having a clear understanding of a brand's target audience. Especially taking stance on a divisive issue, when a 'wrong' stand can alienate customers and hurt a brand, managers are encouraged to create targeted campaigns that appeal to the relevant audiences. Experimentation and A/B testing are potential methods that may help to understand the impact of marketing actions on customers to mitigate the potential negative effects. These measures are of high potential but according to the 2020 CMO Survey results, only utilized by about 46% of brand managers (Moorman, 2021).

The data also suggest that consumers are influenced by the perceived majority opinion. Since conformance is important, it is advisable for brands to create an environment to develop positive attitudes among consumer groups. Brands can effectively use social media or various digital media to bridge socio-political divides. Particularly in situations of uncertainty or ambiguity, consumers engage in increasing information search (Urbany et al., 1989). A brand

can address this need by creating forums, online communities, or a knowledge base, containing numerous explanatory and support references. Homogenous opinion climates in these (online) communities may encourage interactions with cause supporters pushing audiences toward opinion conformity. This is in line with Osuna Ramírez et al., (2019) suggesting that “the need for consistency and the support of the relevance of the brand’s positioning from the followers is key for securing the strength and the further growth of the polarizing brand” (p.28). These followers or supporters of the brand’s stance develop a sense of belonging amongst each other (Lau et al., 2017; Suhay, 2015). These like-minded people form community-like bonds that can further stimulate consumers’ participation and engagement with the brand.

5.2 Limitations and Direction for Future Research

The following study has some deficiencies that should be addressed in future studies. First, the sample failed to represent the general public with almost 80% of respondents being German citizens that are highly educated and between 25 – 34 years old. The nationality of participants might also influence their tendencies of conformity or non-conformity to the majority opinion. The fact that most participants belonged to individualistic cultures might have influenced findings. Reflecting on this, a replication of this study should aim at broader generalizability to see whether the effects remain consistent. Furthermore, the sample displays an unrepresentative high mean average for support of LGBTQ+ rights ($M_{LGBTQ+} = 5.76$, $SD = 1.49$). Therefore, this study is unable to draw reliable conclusions on unfavorable respondents.

Second, the chosen controversial issue, LGBTQ+ rights, presents generalizability issues. According to Judge and Zapata (2015), people are more likely to be influenced by others if the issue is of personal importance to them. Therefore, the findings might be influenced by the fact that consumers do not perceive LGBTQ+ rights as personally relevant. Thus, future research might want to examine the role of personal importance concerning socio-political issues.

Considering the findings of this study, future research could be expanded by accurately investigating the influence of peer groups on consumers' purchase intention of controversial brands. There is evidence suggesting that the magnitude of interpersonal closeness and proximity to a group may correlate with the extent of influence on individuals' attitudes and behavior (Neighbors et al., 2010). Oshagan (1996) suggests that "reference groups take primacy over societal majorities in influencing individual opinions" (p. 349). It can be assumed that the climate of opinion in close reference groups such as family and friends is more important for opinion formation than the majority opinion expressed by unknown others. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the influence of peer groups in the context of controversial brands has not yet been explored in detail in the literature, highlighting the need for future lines of research.

Worthwhile issues to further explore in the context of controversial brands could include the effect of peer communication through social media. This study found no sufficient evidence that engagement and exposure to socio-political issues influence the likelihood of consumers to purchase controversial brands ($r(183) = .102, p > .05$). However, according to Wang et al. (2012), the frequency of peer communication may be correlated with the degree of perceived social influence and thus, the tendency to speak up. The more people interact and communicate with peers about socio-political issues, the more they may be influenced by the majority opinion. This is especially interesting in the context of social media, as online platforms are the main medium to share opinions and communicate, consequently shaping consumers' opinions about current socio-political issues.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Survey Questionnaire (English)

Q1. Brand Scenario

Please read the following scenario carefully, before answering the subsequent questions.

Imagine that brand X, a global fashion brand, launched an awareness-raising campaign in support of LGBTQ+ rights*.

The campaign ran in many different countries featuring evocative images that captured same-sex couples kissing. The images were spread through social media adverts and billboards as well as the company's website and owned social media channels.

The campaign #equallove wants to raise awareness about the discriminations and inequalities LGBTQ+ people still face today considering that in more than 70 countries worldwide, it's still a crime to be gay. With its launch, brand X pledged to donate 1% of all sales to LGBTQ+ organizations around the world that conduct legal action for their rights and protection.

*LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or sometimes questioning), and others. The "plus" represents other sexual identities

Q2. Degree of Public Support (randomly assigned to conditions: majority, minority, controversial)

According to a recent public poll by a nonprofit research firm, 87% of participants want brands to support LGBTQ rights and same-sex marriage through donations and evocative campaigns that spark discussions about discrimination and gay rights. Therefore, after releasing their campaign featuring same-sex couples kissing, brand X received mostly public praise.

OR

According to a recent public poll by a nonprofit research firm, 87% of participants do not want brands to support LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex marriage through donations and evocative campaigns that spark discussions about discrimination and gay rights. Therefore after releasing their campaign featuring same-sex couples kissing, brand X received mostly public backlash.

OR

According to a recent public poll by a nonprofit research firm, 50% of participants do not want brands to support LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex marriage through donations and evocative campaigns that spark discussions about discrimination and gay rights. Therefore, after releasing their campaign featuring same-sex couples kissing, brand X received not only public praise but also backlash.

Q3. Manipulation check

Can you recall how many participants of the aforementioned poll want brands to support LGBTQ+ rights and same-sex marriage?

- 1) The minority
- 2) The majority
- 3) 50%
- 4) I don't remember

Q4. Purchase Intention

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

(1-Strongly disagree; 7-Strongly agree)

If I needed or wanted a t-shirt and brand X was available in my country at a good price,

...

- 1) ... I would have very high purchase interest.
- 2) ... I would probably buy a t-shirt by brand X.
- 3) ... I would definitely buy a t-shirt by brand X.

Q4. Need for uniqueness (1-4 Creative Choice Counter Conformity, 5-8 Unpopular Choice Counter; 9-11 Avoidance of Similarity)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

(1-Strongly disagree; 7-Strongly agree)

- 1) I often combine possessions in such a way that I create a personal image that cannot be duplicated.
- 2) I often try to find a more interesting version of run-of-the-mill products because I enjoy being original.
- 3) I actively seek to develop my personal uniqueness by buying special products or brands.
- 4) When it comes to the products I buy and the situations in which I use them, I have broken customs and rules.
- 5) I have often violated the understood rules of my social group regarding what to buy or own.
- 6) I have often gone against the understood rules of my social group regarding when and how certain products are properly used.
- 7) I enjoy challenging the prevailing taste of people I know by buying something they would not seem to accept.
- 8) When a product I own becomes popular among the general population, I begin to use it less.
- 9) I often try to avoid products or brands that I know are bought by the general population.
- 10) As a rule, I dislike products or brands that are customarily bought by everyone.
- 11) The more commonplace a product or brand is among the general population, the less interested I am in buying it.

Q4. Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence (1-6 Normative Influence; 7-10 Informational Influence)

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

(1-Strongly disagree; 7-Strongly agree)

- 1) I rarely purchase the latest fashions until I'm sure my friends approve of them.
- 2) It is important that others like the products and brands that I buy.
- 3) When buying products, I generally purchase those brands that I think others will approve of.
- 4) If other people can see me using a product, I often purchase the brand they expect me to buy.
- 5) I like to know what brands and products make a good impression on others.

- 6) I often identify with other people by purchasing the same products and brands they purchase.
- 7) To make sure I buy the right product or brand, I often observe what others are buying and using.
- 8) If I have little experience with a product, I often ask my friends about the product.
- 9) I often consult other people to help choose the best alternative available from a product class.
- 10) I frequently gather information from friends and family about a product before I buy it.

Q5. Assessment of personal sociopolitical stance

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

(1-Strongly disagree; 7-Strongly agree)

- 1) I support initiatives that support same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights.
- 2) I believe it is important to support same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights.
- 3) It is relevant to actively promote equality for LGBTQ+.

Q6. Assessment of brand coolness

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

(1-Strongly disagree; 7-Strongly agree)

- 1) I believe brand x is a cool brand.
- 2) I believe brand x is original.
- 3) I believe brand x is rebellious.
- 4) I believe brand x is authentic.

Q7-10. Demographics

- 1) Gender
- 2) Age
- 3) Education (completed)
- 4) Nationality

Q11. Involvement in socio-political discussions

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

(1-Strongly disagree; 7-Strongly agree)

- 1) I stay up to date concerning current socio-political issues.
- 2) I like to follow public debates on societal issues.
- 3) I pay attention to social-political initiatives.

Q12. Suspicion of hypotheses being tested

What do you think is the purpose of this study?

Appendix B

Sample demographics (n= 183)

