

# Militant Consumers: A Consumer-Centered Exploration of Communal Identity and Brand Politicization in Polarized Social Environments

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## Acknowledgements:

Linda Hamdi-Kidar and Mathieu Alemany-Oliver, thank you for your guidance and support

## Cite as:

Tadlock Steven, Hamdi-Kidar Linda, ALEMANY OLIVER MATHIEU (2025), Militant Consumers: A Consumer-Centered Exploration of Communal Identity and Brand Politicization in Polarized Social Environments. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 54th, (125873)

Paper from the 54th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, Spain, May 25-30, 2025



# **Militant Consumers: A Consumer-Centered Exploration of Communal Identity and Brand Politicization in Polarized Social Environments**

## **Abstract:**

Consumer identity is becoming increasingly impacted by brand politicization and social polarization. This study examines consumer identity and brand politicization in polarized environments through an expansion of the Hirschman (1970) framework (exit, voice, and loyalty) to include an aggressive consumer behavior as a response to brand action. Using the Bud Light community's response to a marketing partnership with a transgender influencer, we analyze consumer reactions via netnography and interviews. Three consumer types emerge: Loyalists (loyalty), Separatists (voice/exit), and Militants (aggressive voice/exit). Militants represent a novel category of extreme dissent, targeting broader socio-political issues. The findings reveal that brand politicization intensifies identity-based conflicts, challenging community cohesion.

*Keywords: Consumer Identity, Brand Politicization, Social Polarization*

*Track: Marketing Strategy & Theory*

## 1. Introduction

In today's increasingly polarized society, brand politicization can conflict with consumers' identities. Consumers need balance and consistency between their identity and the brands with which they engage (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). For example, in 2018 Nike faced a Conservative-led boycott after partnering with Colin Kaepernick, an athlete who protested police brutality during the playing of the national anthem (Scrimmage, 2018). The resulting *firestorm*, a period of intense negative word-of-mouth (Pfeffer, Zorbach, & Carley, 2014), illustrates how social polarization through political ideological alignment can shape perceptions of brand politicization.

Albert Hirschman's (1970) seminal framework provides a lens for understanding consumer responses to dissatisfaction through exit (abandonment), voice (vocal criticism), and loyalty (continued support). Subsequent research has expanded this model to better understand consumer complaint behavior (Huefner & Hunt, 2000; Istanbulluoglu, Leek, & Szmigin, 2017) and its connection to political ideology (Jung, Garbarino, Briley, & Wynhausen, 2017). Since consumers use ideologies and brands to shape identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2004; Cova, Kozinets, & Shankar, 2007; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012), any dissonance can significantly impact identity work and identity projects. Thus, there is a call to better understand community cohesion and how consumers integrate brand politicization into their identity projects in a polarized social environment (Veresiu, 2023; Dessart, Cova, & Davignon, 2024). To address this call we ask, how do consumers integrate brand politicization into their identity projects in a polarized social context?

We explore this question through a netnographic study and interviews with members of the Bud Light brand community, following a social media firestorm over the beer brand's partnership with a transgender influencer. Our findings reveal that brand politicization intensifies identity-based conflicts with three emergent consumer types: Loyalists (loyalty), Separatists (voice/exit), and Militants (aggressive voice/exit), who represent a new category of extreme, politically motivated dissent, and target broader socio-political issues.

## 2. Literature: Political Ideology and Communal Identity

Political ideologies deeply influence consumer perceptions, shaping responses to brands' socio-political actions within ideological frameworks (Jost, 2017; Adaval & Wyer, 2022).

Consumers' identity work is often differentiated through the incorporation of ideology and product choice (Ordabayeva & Fernandes, 2018; Briley, Jung, & Danziger, 2019), thereby providing a basis for social and communal identity projects (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). In pre-existing social media echo chambers, or *echoverse* environments (Hewett, Rand, Rust, & Van Heerde, 2016), negative reactions to brand stances can quickly escalate into perceived identity threats, magnified by politicized interpretations (Lee & Jang, 2010). The emergent narrative reinforces adversarial perceptions among consumers who see brands as agents of forced change (Desmond, McDonagh, & O'Donohoe, 2001; Pecot, Vasilopoulou, & Cavallaro, 2021). Political ideology, then, influences the threat response and frames how consumers will evaluate current and future brand actions (Jost, 2017), resulting in real world punishments in the form of protests and boycotts (Thompson, 2014), further increasing social polarization.

Consumers choose brands as symbols of their identities, either through conspicuous or inconspicuous means (Berger & Ward, 2010). These symbols serve as extensions of the consumer's personality and reflect their desired self-image in order to communicate their identities with others (Deutsch & Theodorou, 2010; Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012), often using the brand as mediator to moral conflict (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010). Choosing brands that reflect the opportunities and constraints of society allows consumers to craft narratives which create and express collective, communal identities (Zukin & Maguire, 2004; Shankar, Elliott, & Fitchett, 2009). This interaction allows consumers to then form communities that feed identity projects through recognition and belonging fit their distinctive identities (Thompson, 2014) and further provides the foundation for communal identity.

Through communal consumption and communication, consumers begin integrating individual and ideological elements via shared practices and narratives (Schau, Muñiz Jr., & Arnould, 2009; Schau & Akaka, 2021). For instance, marginalized communities have historically used communal consumption as a means of identity expression, such as through boycotts and conspicuous consumption (Lamont & Molnár, 2001; Thompson, 2014).

However, when brands adopt political stances that conflict with the identity projects, potentially destabilizing communal cohesion (Thompson, 2014). This allows for a countercultural narrative, giving space for vocalized dissatisfaction (Istanbulluoglu, Leek, & Szmigin, 2017; Jost, 2017), which can take the form of online retaliation (Huefner & Hunt, 2000) or violence directed

toward the brand and other consumers (Kähr, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, & Hoyer, 2016; Dessart, Cova, & Davignon, 2024).

### **3. Methods**

#### *3.1 The Bud Light Case*

Anheuser-Busch, subsidiary of AB InBev, cemented Budweiser and Bud Light as iconic brands which anchor the American cultural identity (Holt, 2004). Bud Light in particular has become a brand that is interwoven into the identities of American consumers and is generally regarded with a sense of warmth and humor; thereby, becoming a totemic symbol of the traditional American way of life and as such, offers its community respite from societal tensions (Holt, 2004). In April 2023, Bud Light's campaign featuring a transgender influencer, perceived as an identity threat, especially among Conservative consumers, sparked a firestorm which led to a protest and boycott, and manifested aggressive, destructive behaviors from the community.

#### *3.2 Netnography*

Given the brand's broad appeal, the Bud Light community is not confined to a single social media platform. Following Kozinets' (2002) criteria for community selection, we gathered data from the Bud Light brand community on Reddit, a widely used social media discussion forum. Keyword searches were filtered by date and comment count to identify relevant posts. This process revealed numerous posts across 51 subreddits, from which 20 were selected based on engagement, forming a final dataset representing 14 subreddits and 14,105 individual comments. We used an iterative process to develop the initial codes and used Atlas.ti to assist in the thematic coding process, following Kozinets and Seraj-Aksit's (2024) research with AI-assisted netnography. This allowed for an inductive approach to better refine the codes and themes in the data.

#### *3.3 Interviews*

A total of 19 interviews were conducted, including seven with industry experts, allowing us to triangulate the findings of the netnography. Interview participants were chosen using purposeful, voluntary, and snowball sampling. Following previous research (Muñiz & Schau, 2005; Meek, Ogilvie, Lambert, & Ryan, 2019), the interviews were conducted over Zoom, an instant messaging system or email, as per the participant's request. All interviews were completed three months prior to the 2024 presidential election in the United States.

#### 4. Findings: Community Schism Dynamics

The Bud Light case showcases the dynamics of identity and political ideology in a polarized market environment, illustrating how deeply the brand was interwoven with a "working-class American" identity that emphasized patriotism and traditional values. As Redditor20-1 described, "[*Budweiser and Bud Light*] are as American as they get." This alignment fostered a sense of belonging and shared values among the community. However, the partnership with a transgender influencer disrupted this narrative, as the tonal shift was perceived as incompatible with Bud Light's established identity. This dissonance was amplified by the ensuing firestorm, further polarizing the community along political ideology lines, ultimately fueling aggressive and destructive consumer behavior.

The controversy caused a schism in the brand's community, leading to three distinct consumer types: Loyalists (loyalty), Separatists (voice/exit), and Militants (aggressive voice/exit). **Loyalists** viewed the controversy as a misstep but maintained their incorporation of the brand into their identity. As Interviewee2 stated, "*Even if you don't drink it, it is still part of your identity.*" Communal consumption allows the Loyalist to align their individual identity work with their social and communal identity project. Political ideology played a minor role, if at all, in the Loyalist position. Social polarization, however, was often highlighted. As Interviewee10 noted, "*The brand was tone deaf to a huge part of their former customer base. There was a far better way to show inclusivity of the trans community.*" Others criticized the campaign as divisive, with Interviewee11 observing, "*Instead of finding ways to unite individuals over a drink, they intentionally selected a polarizing issue.*" However, some Loyalists leaned into the polarizing behavior, engaging in conspicuous consumption as a counterprotest to the "bigoted behavior" of Separatists and Militants.

In contrast, **Separatists** immediately abandoned the brand, seeing the campaign as incompatible with their identity and values. Unlike Loyalists, Separatists perceived no distinction between the brand's messaging and its moral position, viewing the campaign as a forced imposition of values. Separatists' vocalizations highlighted conflicting moral positions with the brand and society, often through aggressive language. As Redditor3-1 commented, "*I'm not angry. I'm just not going to drink a beer that sponsors a narcissistic freak that degrades women.*" Such emphasizes the consumer's view of morality in society and its importance to their identity. Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest the existence of reluctant Separatists. On an individual

level, these consumers maintain the same affinity for the brand as the Loyalists, but their local communal network does not allow for conspicuous consumption as it conflicts with the overall identity work of the group. This suggests community and political ideology play a more significant role in their identity project.

The **Militants**, an extreme offshoot of the Separatists, engaged in aggressive and destructive behavior and began targeting other brands and consumers based on ideological perceptions. Militants mobilized through social media to organize protests and campaigns against progressively minded entities. A key element to their vocalization is a perception of moral identity under siege, where campaigns promoting inclusivity, or “wokeness”, are seen as erasing traditional identities. Redditor15-1 reflected this sentiment, stating, “*Biological women are being told that a biological man is a better woman than they are.*” This narrative of identity erasure fueled language steeped in disinformation, such as claims of the “*chemical castration of children,*” as posted by Redditor3-2. A sentiment continued by Interviewee3, “*They can't have their own children, so they'll just come get our children.*” Militants see their actions as a defense against an imposed moral shift, justifying subversion, retaliation and violence to preserve their identity and community.

## 5. Discussion

Our findings allow us to expand upon Hirschman’s (1970) typology and illustrate how consumer identity is impacted by brand politicization in polarized environments, see Table 1.

	Loyalists (Loyal)	Separatists (Voice/Exit)	Militants (Aggressive Voice/Exit*)
<b>Definition</b>	Consumers maintain loyalty despite disagreements, viewing controversies as isolated missteps	Consumers actively reject the brand due to perceived ideological misalignment and express dissatisfaction	Consumers engage in destructive or violent behavior targeting the brand resulting from dissonant identity cues
<b>Core Traits</b>	Passive acceptance; dismiss controversies; continue brand usage	Critically vocal; prioritize identity preservation; disengage from the brand	Defend traditional identities; employ symbolic or physical retaliation
<b>Illustrative Behaviors</b>	Continue purchasing and using the brand; trivialize issues (e.g., “It’s just a beer”)	Switch to competitors; share critical opinions online or in social spaces; disengage entirely	Online violent language and imagery; engage in offline destructive or violent behavior

Table 1. Expanded Consumer Typology Based on Hirschman (1970) Framework

While Loyalists and Separatists exhibit expected patterns of support or rejection, Militants emerge as a distinct novel subgroup, characterized by aggressive and destructive behaviors rooted in their need to protect their identity against perceived ideological threats. Militants, then, represent a physical manifestation of countercultural resistance, mobilizing against brands they perceive as imposing cultural or political changes.

This expanded typology highlights the increasing dominance of political and ideological affiliations in identity work and identity projects. For Militants, the brand is a proxy for larger socio-cultural battles. This allows them to maintain their identity projects while resisting problematic brand actions (Zukin & Maguire, 2004). In effect, Militants are engaging in identity work at the macro level (i.e., group and market), rather than for themselves.

The Militant perspective equates brand politicization with undesired and unrequested changes to their social networks, as evidenced in the inclusion of politically-centered talking points in their overall discourse (e.g., “woke mind virus”). This type of co-creation of meaning follows the findings of Schau and Akaka (2021) as Militants are forming community around their shared experience and identity projects. The availability of a counternarrative provides a frame for the transfer of social pressures of conformity and volatility to the market. In line with Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler (2010), the Militant’s self-portrayal of the moral protagonist allows them to use contrary brand actions to craft a myth which places showcases them as defenders of the social identity.

The conservative ideological stance of the Militant is also interesting as it is counterintuitive to expectations. Conservative ideology has a fundamental belief in fairness and balance. From a market and consumer perspective, Conservatives are less likely to voice complaint (Jung, Garbarino, Briley, & Wynhausen, 2017). However, our findings suggest that Conservatives are engaging in conspicuous aggression and violent behavior, with social polarization appearing to be the main catalyst.

Our findings suggest that politically polarized identities are not only influencing consumer-brand relationships but also intensifying communal schisms within brand communities. This raises critical questions about how political ideology and social polarization shape consumer behavior and contribute to extreme responses to brand politicization. Further exploration is needed to understand how political identities influence transformations from loyal community members to militant anti-brand operatives. By examining these dynamics, researchers can better



understand the role of identity in consumer-brand relationships, offering insights for managing brand politicization in increasingly polarized markets.

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