Ironic Consumption

CALEB WARREN*

GINA S. MOHR

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Caleb Warren (calebwarren@arizona.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Eller College of Management at the University of Arizona. Gina S. Mohr (gina.mohr@business.colostate.edu) is an Associate Professor of Marketing at Colorado State University. The authors thank Chris Blocker, Martin Reimann, Derick Davis, Josh Edwin, and a stellar review team for feedback on the paper, and John Yi, Aaryn Brewer, Jeni Schmidt, Brady Hodges, Dian Wang, Matthew Farmer, Allison Boehm, Liang Huang, and Shruti Koley for research assistance. Address correspondence to Caleb Warren, 1130 E. Helen St., McClelland Hall 320, P.O. Box 210108, Tucson, Arizona 85721-0108; calebwarren@arizona.edu. Supplementary materials are included in the web appendix accompanying the online version of this article.

IRONIC CONSUMPTION

Abstract

Ironic consumption refers to using a product (brand, style, behavior, etc.) with the intent of signaling a meaning (identity, message, belief, etc.) that reverses the conventional meaning of the product. We report five studies showing that people are more likely to think that a consumer is using a product ironically when the product is incongruent with the consumer's known identity or beliefs. The impression that ironic consumers make on an observer depends on the observer's relationship with the consumed product. When a consumer uses a product associated with the observer's in-group (e.g., wearing a "Powered by Kale" shirt in front of a vegan), observers have less favorable impression of the consumer if they believe he or she is using the product ironically. Conversely, when a consumer uses a product that is not associated with the observer's in-group (e.g., wearing a "Powered by Kale" shirt in front of a meat-eater), observers have a more favorable impression if they believe the consumer is using the product ironically. Collectively, our studies suggest that consumers can use products ironically to selectively signal one meaning to an in-group (who is likely to detect irony), and another to out-groups (who are unlikely to detect irony).

Keywords: irony, identity, signaling, impression management, symbols

Products, including brands, styles, and consumption behaviors, are symbols with recognizable meaning (Keller 1993; Levy 1959; McCracken 1986). Bentleys are associated with wealth, wedding rings with marriage, and the Lone Star flag with Texas. Consumers regularly use products to signal a personality trait, identity, message, or belief that is conventionally associated with the product (Berger and Heath 2007; Escalas and Bettman 2003; Holt 1995). Driving a Bentley says, "I'm rich;" wearing a wedding ring says, "I'm taken;" and waving a Lone Star flag says, "Don't mess with Texas." Publically consuming products in this manner helps consumers communicate their taste, their values, the groups that they belong to, who they are, and who they want be (Arsel and Bean 2012; Belk 1988; Holt 1995).

Sometimes, however, consumers use a product with the intent of signaling a meaning that is opposite from the meaning typically associated with it. Young, urban consumers (aka, hipsters) revalue items (e.g., trucker hats, Pabst Blue Ribbon beer) and activities (e.g., bingo, knitting, unicycling) that have acquired an outdated or negative connotation (Arsel and Thompson 2011). Similarly, high status consumers attempt to signal an elite identity by adopting low status products (e.g., ripped jeans, macaroni and cheese) alongside conventional status symbols (e.g., designer shoes, lobster; Bellezza and Berger 2018; Brooks 1981). Other consumers derisively use products to criticize the beliefs that the product conventionally expresses, such as when a drug user mocks an anti-drug program by wearing a D.A.R.E. tee-shirt or a liberal makes fun of Donald Trump by wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat (Parker 2015). Finally, consumers attempt to re-appropriate products that have undesirable meanings for amusement or fun. They wear "ugly Christmas sweaters" in December, emulate infamous cultural figures (e.g., Bill Cosby, Cecil the dead lion) on Halloween, and watch reality shows (e.g., "The Jersey Shore," "The Bachelor;") and movies (e.g., "The Rocky Horror Picture Show,"

"The Room," "Showgirls") that they consider "trashy" or "bad" (Klein 2000; McCoy and Scarborough 2014).

In each of these examples, rather than embracing the meaning conventionally associated with a product, consumers are using the product ironically. Ironic consumption refers to *using a product (object, brand, style, behavior) while attempting to signal an identity, trait, or belief that is opposite from the perceived conventional meaning of the product*. There is little debate about the conventional meaning of many products. For instance, most people recognize that wearing a New England Patriots jersey or a Bernie Sanders tee-shirt signals support for the Patriots or Bernie Sanders, respectively. In other cases, however, there is less agreement about what the product signifies. For example, some consumers believe that drinking Pabst beer shows that they are rural, white-sock-wearing blue-collar country music lovers (McDill and Holyfield 1973), whereas others believe that drinking Pabst shows that they are sticking it to the man by resisting the commercial corporate hegemony (Walker 2003). What matters, according to our definition, is the meaning that the people engaging in or observing the consumption behavior believe to be conventional. If a consumer is drinking a Pabst in a bar where everyone associates Pabst with blue-collar country music lovers, then drinking a Pabst in this particular bar while trying to signal a sophisticated urban identity would be ironic.

Although there is an established literature on sincere symbolic consumption – that is, using products to signal an identity, trait, or belief that is conventionally associated with the product (Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Levy 1959; Veblen 1899) – far less is known about ironic consumption. The purpose of this research is to explore ironic consumption as a signaling practice. Signaling practices are social in that they involve both a consumer, who sends a signal by using a product, and observers, who interpret and react to the signal. To understand how

observers interpret and react to ironic consumption, we investigate two questions. One, when do observers perceive that a consumer is using a product ironically rather than sincerely signaling the product's conventional meaning? And two, how does using a product ironically influence the impression that a consumer makes on others? By answering these questions, our research offers insight into the potential benefits, as well as the risks, associated with ironic consumption.

IRONY LITERATURE

There is a rich stream of research on irony in both linguistics (e.g., Attardo 2000; Grice et al. 1975) and psychology (Clark and Gerrig 1984; Lucariello 1994; Sperber 1984). The meaning of irony varies depending on whether it refers to Socratic irony, dramatic irony, situational irony, or verbal irony (Kreuz and Roberts 1993). Socratic irony, which is often used as a teaching tool, refers to pretending to be ignorant about a given topic, whereas dramatic irony refers to when the audience is aware of something that a character in the story either is not aware of or ignores (Kreuz and Roberts 1993). Situational irony, on the other hand, refers to an event that is the opposite of what is, or might naturally be, expected (Lucariello 1994). Examples include a fire station burning to the ground or a pop song titled "Ironic" that confuses the meaning of irony (Morisette 1995). Finally, verbal irony refers to a statement that has a literal meaning that is different from (and typically antithetical to) the meaning the speaker intends (Attardo 2000; Reyes and Rosso 2012). Examples include stating, "what a beautiful sunny day" during a monsoon, or saying, "this cake is terrible" while joyously devouring the entire thing.

Of the different types of irony described in the literature, ironic consumption is most similar to verbal irony. Consumption behaviors, like verbal statements, carry meaning (Levy 1959). They signal information about the consumer's preferences, identity, lifestyle, and beliefs (Berger and Heath 2007; Holt 1997; Mick 1986; McCracken 1986). Driving a Toyota Prius is not

merely a way to commute to work, but also a way for the driver to communicate that (a) she likes the Prius brand and (b) has similar characteristics (e.g., is environmentally conscious) and values (e.g., liberal) as other Prius drivers (Griskevicius, Tyber, and Van den Bergh 2010).

Just as verbal irony occurs when a speaker says one thing but means something else, ironic consumption occurs when a consumer uses a product, style, or behavior that carries one meaning while attempting to signal an opposite meaning. Ironically saying, "Donald Trump is an ideal commander-in-chief," implies that the speaker does not actually think that Trump is a good president. Analogously, ironically wearing a Donald Trump hat implies that the consumer does not actually support Trump. In sum, ironic consumption parallels linguistic irony by inverting a conventional meaning, but this meaning is expressed through consumption rather than words.

The literature has discussed several different ways that consumers use products while attempting to signal something opposite from the products' conventional meaning. Although they go by different names, these different practices all fall under the umbrella of ironic consumption. The practice of "parody display" (Brooks 1981) or "slumming" (Heap 2008) is one way that consumers use products ironically. Parody display and slumming refer to when high status consumers adopt products that conventionally signal a low status position, such as when a wealthy consumer wears torn blue jeans or a fancy restaurant serves hot dogs and potato chips (Bellezza and Berger 2018; Bourdieu 1984; Brooks 1981). Ironic consumption also includes adopting a "kitch" or "camp" sensibility, which refers to using or appreciating cultural products that seem entertaining, fascinating, or humorous because they are bad (Binkley 2000; Sontag 1964). For example, the literature notes that consumers sometimes enjoy the poor production, ridiculous script, or general lack of substance in TV shows (e.g., "Jersey Shore"), movies (e.g., "The Room"), music (e.g., the Monkeys), clothing (e.g., double-knit polyester), and theme parks

(e.g., Disneyland; Klein 2000; McCoy and Scarborough 2014; Thompson 2000). Finally, ironic consumption includes a range of practices that consumers perform in attempt to resist or re-appropriate the meaning of a product, such as when consumers voluntarily embrace a stigmatized product (e.g., veiling by urban Turkish women) or engage in a behavior that challenges a prescribed identity (e.g., women competing in a rough and aggressive sport like roller derby; Arsel and Thompson 2011; Holt 2002; Sandikci and Ger 2010; Thompson and Ustuner 2015). Despite the various examples of ironic consumption that appear in the literature, the conditions under which observers perceive ironic consumption, and the impressions that they form of the consumer, are still unknown.

WHEN IS IRONIC CONSUMPTION PERCEIVED?

Both verbal and consumption irony occur in a social system in which one person (the speaker or consumer, respectively) attempts to communicate to other people (observers) by inverting the conventional meaning of a symbol (words or products, respectively). A challenge with ironic communication is that observers may not detect the irony. The people you pass on the street, for example, may not realize that your gaudy scarf is intended to be ironic and instead think that you actually are a stuffy, scarf-loving parvenu. We are not aware of research examining how often observers perceive ironic consumption, but there is ample evidence that people struggle to detect verbal irony. Ironic statements take longer to comprehend and are more difficult to understand than literal statements (Burgers et al. 2012; Schwoebel et al. 2000). We similarly expect that people may have difficulty detecting ironic consumption.

An important question, thus, is under what conditions do observers think that another consumer is being ironic? In order for people to perceive verbal irony there must be some reason to discount or disregard a literal interpretation of the verbal statement (Giora and Fein 1999).

One reason to doubt the validity of a literal interpretation is if a statement is different from what is normally expected (Reyes and Rosso 2012; Reyes, Rosso, and Veale 2013). Indeed, people perceive verbal irony when they think that an utterance is the opposite of what the speaker intends (Utsumi 2000), just as they perceive situational irony when an occurrence is the opposite of what they would normally expect (Lucariello 1994). We similarly predict that people will perceive ironic consumption only when they infer that the meaning associated with a product is inconsistent with the beliefs or identity that a consumer typically wants to express (i.e., an incongruent product).

When are observers likely to infer that a product is incongruent with the consumer? One factor that should influence whether or not a product seems incongruent is the other products that the consumer is using. Specifically, observers should be more likely to perceive irony when a consumer is using products associated with inconsistent or conflicting meanings. For example, an audience should be more likely to think that a consumer is ironically displaying a bumper sticker supporting a conservative politician (e.g., Donald Trump) when the consumers is driving a vehicle associated with liberals (e.g., a Toyota Prius) rather than a vehicle associated with conservatives (e.g., a Hummer). Consistently, there is some evidence that consumers who use products ironically tend to mix and match products with inconsistent meanings. For example, high-status consumers who adopt low status products tend to display both low and high status products together (Bellezza and Berger 2018). We predict that observers will similarly be more likely to perceive irony when a consumer uses products that have conflicting meanings.

H1: Observers will be more likely to perceive that a consumer is using a product ironically when the meaning of the product is inconsistent, rather than consistent, with the meaning of the other consumed products.

Another factor that should influence observers' likelihood of inferring that a consumer is using an incongruent product is the relationship between the observer and consumer. Observers and consumers can be close friends, distant acquaintances, or even total strangers. Because we know more about our friends than strangers, it should be easier to recognize that a product is inconsistent with a consumer's identity or beliefs when we have a closer relationship with the consumer. Consequently, observers should be more likely to perceive that a consumer is being ironic when the consumer is a close friend rather than a distant acquaintance or stranger. For example, if you see a friend who you know loathes pop music wearing a Justin Bieber tee-shirt, you will recognize that the shirt is incongruent with his identity and likely infer that he is wearing it ironically. Conversely, if you don't know the consumer who is wearing a Justin Bieber tee-shirt, then it will be difficult to tell if he is wearing the shirt because he is a Belieber (i.e., a Bieber fan) or if he is being ironic. Social closeness carries with it the knowledge of the tastes and preferences of the consumer. Thus, observers who are more socially close to a consumer have more knowledge about her taste and identity. This knowledge allows the observers to recognize when a behavior diverges from the consumer's taste and identity, which should cause them to infer that the consumer is being ironic. Alternatively, when the relationship between the observer and consumer is more distant, observers will not have the knowledge about the consumer's taste and identity, which limits their ability to perceive ironic consumption.

H2: Observers should be more likely to perceive that a consumer is using a product ironically when they have a closer rather than more distant relationship with the consumer.

Our hypothesis that ironic consumption is more likely to be perceived by socially close rather than distant observers raises an interesting possibility: consumers may be able to use irony to signal one meaning to their friends, who are likely to realize the consumer is being ironic, and

a different meaning to acquaintances and strangers, who are unlikely to pick up on the irony. For example, if liberal Libby were to wear a "Make America Great Again" hat, people who are close to her would probably realize that she was wearing the hat ironically, whereas those who don't know her will probably think that she supports President Trump.

But why would a consumer want to signal different meanings to different audiences? One reason could be that sincerely consuming a product can make a favorable impression on some observers, but an unfavorable impression on others (Arsel and Thompson 2011; Sandikci and Ger 2010). Wearing a Donald Trump hat (sincerely), for example, might help Libby make friends with her conservative co-workers, but will probably not help her bond with her liberal friends. By negating the meaning conventionally associated with a product, ironic consumption could potentially allow consumers to make one impression on observers who detect the irony and a different impression on observers who think the consumer is being sincere. This raises our next research question: How does recognizing ironic consumption change the impression that the consumer makes on observers?

WHAT IMPRESSION DO IRONIC CONSUMERS MAKE ON OTHERS?

Two streams of literature suggest that the effect of ironic consumption on the impression that observers form of the consumer depends on whether or not the observer identifies with the product being consumed. Sincerely consuming a product signals that the consumer is part of the same in-group as others who use the product (Berger and Heath 2007; White and Dahl 2006; Douglas and Isherwood 1979). However, because irony negates the conventional meaning associated with a product, consumers who use a product ironically are effectively saying, "I'm not like other consumers who use this product." Moreover, people have a more favorable impression of members of an in-group than members of an out-group (Efferson, Lalive, and Fehr

2008; Tajfel 1982). Thus, people who identify with a product should evaluate consumers more favorably when they think the consumer is using the product sincerely rather than ironically. For example, wearing a Trump hat suggests that Libby belongs to a group of like-minded Trump supporters, but wearing the hat ironically suggests that she is not part of this group. Therefore, Trump supporters should have a less favorable impression of Libby when they think she is wearing the hat ironically rather than sincerely. Conversely, being seen as ironic should mitigate unfavorable impressions from people who don't identify with the product. For example, Trump haters should have a more favorable impression of Libby if they think she is wearing the Trump hat ironically rather than sincerely.

The humor literature similarly suggests that the impression that ironic consumers make will depend on the extent to which observers identify with the product being consumed. Irony is closely associated with humor (Dynel 2014; Gibbs et al. 2014). However, because irony generally communicates a negative evaluation (Roberts and Kreuz 1994; Sperber 1984), a consumer who uses a product ironically could also be seen as criticizing or insulting people who identify with the product. For example, by wearing a Trump hat ironically, Libby is signaling that she thinks poorly of Trump and, by extension, his supporters. Ironic consumption could thus be interpreted as a group-identity violation, which could potentially offend observers who identify with the insulted group (Liu et al. 2018). Insults are more likely to seem funny rather than offensive to those who do not identify with the insulted person, object, or idea (La Fave et al. 1976; McGraw and Warren 2010; Wolff, Smith, and Murray 1934). Therefore, observers should be more likely to find an ironic consumer humorous if they don't identify with the product being consumed. For example, people who don't support Trump, compared to those who do, will be more amused by a consumer ironically wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat.

Because being seen as humorous typically leads to more favorable impressions (Bitterly, Brooks, and Schweitzer 2017; Butzer and Kuiper 2008; Warren, Barsky, and McGraw 2018), the humor literature also predicts that ironic consumers will make a more favorable impression on observers who identify less with the product being consumed.

We therefore hypothesize that the impression that ironic consumers make on observers will depend on the extent to which the observer identifies with the product consumed. Perceiving a consumer as being ironic should result in the consumer making a less favorable impression on observers who identify with the product being consumed, but a more favorable impression on observers who don't identify with the product being consumed.

H3: The effect of ironically consuming a product on the impression that a consumer makes on observers will depend on the extent to which the observer identifies with the product; observers who identify more with the product will have a relatively less favorable impression of a consumer using the product ironically rather than sincerely.

Ironic consumption might be especially likely to improve impressions of consumers who want to criticize or express a negative opinion about something. In the 1970s, for example, the punk band the Sex Pistols criticized Pink Floyd, a rock band that was very popular at the time, by wearing a shirt that said, "I hate Pink Floyd." Expressing contempt for a popular band may have helped the Sex Pistols make a favorable impression on other punks who also hated Pink Floyd, but it probably didn't help the Pistols appeal to the 40 million people who purchased *Dark Side of the Moon*. Would ironically wearing a Pink Floyd shirt, instead of sincerely wearing the "I hate Pink Floyd" shirt, have allowed the Sex Pistols to criticize Pink Floyd to other punks while making a better impression on Pink Floyd fans?

There are two reasons why we hypothesize that criticizing something (e.g., Pink Floyd)

by ironically consuming a supportive product (e.g., a Pink Floyd tee-shirt) will result in the consumer making a more favorable impression than sincerely consuming a critical product (e.g., an "I hate Pink Floyd" tee-shirt). One, as previously discussed, observers might fail to detect the irony, in which case Pink Floyd fans might think the consumer shares their affinity for the band. Two, even if observers do realize that the consumer is being ironic, irony may provide a less offensive means of criticizing the product (or the meanings it represents). Just as ironic insults (e.g., ironically saying, "what a beautiful shirt!") are perceived to be less negative than literal insults (e.g., sincerely saying, "your shirt is ugly;" Dews and Winner 1995; Dews et al. 1995), ironically consuming a supportive product should seem less negative than sincerely consuming a critical product. Consumers who broadcast negative or critical opinions often make a worse impression on observers (Forest and Wood 2012; Kaiser and Miller 2001). By tempering the criticism, ironically consuming a supportive product may result in the consumer making a more favorable impression on observers compared to sincerely consuming a critical product. Ironic consumption could also be viewed more favorably because irony often involves humor (Dynel 2014; Gibbs et al. 2014), and humor helps people make a more favorable impression while expressing criticism (McGraw, Warren, and Kan 2015; Smith, Harrington, and Neck 2000).

H4: Ironically consuming a product with a supportive message will result in the consumer making a more favorable impression than sincerely consuming a product with a critical message.

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

To answer our research questions, we conducted an exploratory survey and four experiments. The open-ended survey identified different types of products that people consume ironically and the various reasons why observers think that consumers decide to use products ironically. Studies 1 and 2 test H1 and H2 by investigating when observers are likely to infer that

a consumer is being ironic. Study 3 tests H3 by assessing impressions of a consumer after manipulating whether or not the consumer uses the product ironically and whether or not the observer identifies with the product. Finally, Study 4 tests H4 by comparing observers' impressions of a consumer who uses a supportive product ironically with impressions of a consumer who uses a critical product sincerely.

PILOT STUDY

We conducted an exploratory study to get an initial sense of whether and when people in an online sample perceive ironic consumption. The study also identified examples of ironic consumption and explored potential motivations for consuming ironically.

Method

We recruited 356 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). We blocked 54 participants who did not pass a comprehension check from completing the remainder of the study (see web appendix). We also eliminated data from one participant who cursed at us rather than answer any of the open-ended questions. The final sample included 301 participants (99 male, 201 female, 1 did not report gender; average age = 37).

After completing the comprehension check, participants were asked to describe an example of ironic consumption and tell us (a) what product was being consumed, (b) who was consuming it, and (c) why it was being consumed (see web appendix for complete instructions). Participants also indicated whether they had ever noticed each of the following people consuming a product ironically: (a) "myself;" (b) "people I personally know well;" (c) "famous people;" (d) non-famous people who I don't know well;" (e) "fictional characters;" or (f) "never noticed anyone using a product ironically." To provide a comparison for the examples of ironic consumption, we next asked participants to think of an example in which they observed someone

sincerely consuming a symbolic product. They answered the same questions as they did for the products consumed ironically. Finally, participants reported their gender, age, race, education level, and native language.

Results

First, we examined which types of people respondents recognized as consuming ironically. Although only 25% of participants indicated that they have consumed a product ironically themselves, all but one participant (99.7%) recognized other consumers using products ironically. Participants were most likely to perceive ironic consumption in their friends or people they know well (66%), followed by distant acquaintances (55%), famous people (47%), and fictional characters (29%). In contrast, a majority of participants (77%) reported having consumed a product symbolically themselves. Most also recognized symbolic consumption in other types of people, regardless of whether they were people they knew well (87%), distant acquaintances (71%), famous (72%), or fictional (52%).

Next, we coded the open-ended responses to identify (a) patterns or themes in the types of products consumed ironically, (b) motivations for consuming symbolic products ironically, and (c) motivations for consuming symbolic products sincerely (see web appendix for details). Table 1 illustrates examples of each type of ironic consumption as well as the frequency with which each consumption type appeared in our data. Finally, we coded why participants thought that others engaged in ironic and sincere symbolic consumption. As illustrated in table 2, respondents reported different reasons for ironic, compared to sincere, consumption. The most common reason for consuming ironically was to criticize some person, group, issue, belief, or institution. Participants were also more likely to infer that people consume products ironically, rather than sincerely, to be humorous and to attract attention. In contrast, participants were more

likely to think that consumers use symbolic products sincerely, rather than ironically, in order to express their liking for the product or association with others who use it (i.e., "taste"), to express support for some person, group, issue, belief, or institution, and to experience the hedonic benefits associated with using the product (i.e., "enjoy").

Discussion

Consistent with our theorizing, the pilot study revealed that most participants viewed ironic consumption as a way that people express criticism for the meaning conventionally associated with a product, whereas they viewed sincere symbolic consumption as a way that people attempt to identify with or express support for the meaning conventionally associated with a product. In addition, we found that most people recognize that others ironically consume products, at least on occasion. The data are consistent with our prediction (H2) that observers are more likely to perceive irony in their friends or people they know well. However, this evidence is based on self-report data, so we will conduct a stronger test of this prediction in studies 2 and 3. The data also indicate that a majority of respondents viewed ironic consumption as a form of criticism. This raises a question, which we address in study 4, of how does ironic consumption compare to more direct (sincere) criticism? Finally, the study revealed that people perceive ironic consumption in a variety of products. In particular, respondents reported others ironically consuming products featuring politicians (e.g., Donald Trump paraphernalia), social messages (e.g., an anti-drug tee-shirt), and entertainment figures (e.g., a Justin Bieber tee-shirt). Our subsequent studies adopt stimuli from the examples mentioned here.

STUDY 1: POLITICAL BUMPER STICKERS

The primary aim of study 1 was to investigate the conditions under which people recognize that another consumer is being ironic. Specifically, the study tested the hypothesis that

observers are more likely to perceive irony when a consumer uses a product that is incongruent with the identity signaled by the other products the consumer is using (H1). We tested this hypothesis by asking participants to indicate why they thought a consumer was displaying a bumper sticker that expressed political beliefs that were either consistent or inconsistent with the other products being consumed. We predicted that participants would be more likely to perceive irony when the political beliefs associated with the bumper sticker were incongruent with the beliefs associated with the other products.

Method

We recruited 299 MTurk workers located in the United States to participate in the study. Four did not pass a reading check and were dismissed from the study before being assigned to a condition, leaving 295 valid observations (142 male, 153 female; mean age = 36.1, range = 18 to 83; 53% college graduates). Participants completed the study in December 2015 during the middle of a presidential primary race that featured two popular "outsider" candidates: democrat Bernie Sanders and republican Donald Trump.

The study used a 2 (target consumer: liberal, conservative) x 2 (sticker: congruent, incongruent) design. Specifically, we varied whether the consumer used "liberal" products, a Toyota Prius with a peace symbol, or "conservative" products, a Hummer with an NRA logo. Orthogonally, we varied whether the consumer displayed a bumper sticker that was either congruent or incongruent with the other products. In the conservative-congruent condition the target consumer displayed a Donald Trump sticker on a Hummer with an NRA logo. In the conservative-incongruent condition, the Hummer instead displayed a Bernie Sanders bumper sticker. Similarly, in the liberal-congruent condition, the target consumer displayed a Bernie Sanders sticker while driving a Toyota Prius with a peace sign. Finally, in the liberal-incongruent

condition, the Prius displayed a Donald Trump bumper sticker. (See table 3 for the stimuli.)

The study began with a reading check (see web appendix). Participants who passed the reading check were then directed to the main study, where they read: "You can tell a lot about a person from the products that he or she uses. In this study, we want to know what you would infer about a person based on the type of car they drive and the stickers that they use to decorate their car." Participants then viewed a picture of the back of a car. Depending on the experimental condition, the car was either a Toyota Prius or a Hummer with either a Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump bumper sticker (see table 3).

After viewing the picture of the car, participants reported why they thought the consumer was displaying the bumper sticker. We measured irony perception in two ways. We initially asked a general, open-ended question: "Why do you think this person put the sticker on his or her car?" Two coders, who were blind to the participant's condition and the study's hypotheses, coded whether or not the participant thought the target consumer was being ironic. The coders agreed in 97% of the cases. A third coder resolved the discrepancies for the remaining 3% of the cases. We subsequently measured irony perception more directly by asking participants to indicate the extent to which they disagree (coded 1) or agree (coded 7) with the following statements: "He is being ironic," and "He is displaying the bumper sticker ironically" ($r = .95$, $p < .001$). We also asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agree with the following motivations: "He genuinely likes the politician," "He wants to show his support for the politician," "He is displaying the sticker as a joke," and "He is trying to be funny." We averaged the first two items to create a measure of sincere consumption ($r = .91$, $p < .001$), and the latter items to create a measure of attempted humor ($r = .96$, $p < .001$). We report the results of these additional measures in table A1 in the web appendix.

As a manipulation check, participants indicated the extent to which the sticker seemed incongruous on the following seven-point scales (1=disagree; 7=agree): "It is unexpected;" "It is incongruous with the car and the other sticker;" "It is different than the stickers typically on this type of car;" "It doesn't make sense for him to have this sticker;" and "It seems wrong;" (α = .94). Participants also completed exploratory measures that assessed their impression of the consumer and their identification with the politician featured in the bumper sticker. Finally, they reported their demographic information. We describe the exploratory measures and discuss their relationship with irony perception in the section titled, "Correlational Effects on Impressions of Ironic Consumers," which appears before study three.

Pretest

We conducted a pretest with 99 participants on MTurk to ensure that the Hummer and Donald Trump sticker were affiliated with a conservative identity whereas the Prius and Bernie Sanders sticker were affiliated with a liberal identity. Pretest participants viewed pictures of the Hummer with an NRA logo, the Prius with a peace symbol, the Trump bumper sticker, and the Sanders bumper sticker (order counterbalanced) and indicated the political affiliation of the typical person who owns each product on two seven-point scales: -3 (liberal) to +3 (conservative); and -3 (democrat) to +3 (republican). T-tests comparing the ratings of political affiliation with the scale midpoint (i.e., "0") confirmed that participants associated the Hummer (M = 1.90; t = 12.58, p < .001) and Donald Trump (M = 2.21; t = 17.41, p < .001) more with conservatives than liberals. In contrast, they associated the Prius (M = -1.58; t = -11.60, p < .001) and Bernie Sanders (M = -2.14; t = -16.32, p < .001) more with liberals than conservatives.

Results

We assessed the effectiveness of the manipulations by assessing the extent to which the

bumper sticker seemed incongruent with the consumer. Consistent with the results of the pretest, study participants considered the Trump sticker more incongruent with the Prius than the Hummer (M = 4.80 vs. 2.30; $F(1, 291) = 85.80$, $p < .001$). In contrast, they considered the Sanders sticker more incongruent with the Hummer than the Prius (M = 4.34 vs. 1.72; $F(1, 291) = 96.64$, $p < .001$).

We first tested irony perception by assessing when participants were most likely to spontaneously mention irony when asked why the consumer was displaying the bumper sticker. Overall, irony was rarely perceived. However, consistent with H1, participants were more likely to perceive irony when the bumper sticker was incongruent with the other products the consumer was displaying. In particular, 20% of participants perceived irony when the Prius featured a Trump sticker, but only 1% perceived irony when it featured a Sanders sticker ($\chi^2 = 13.57$; $p < .001$). Analogously, 16% of participants perceived irony when the Hummer featured a Sanders sticker, but only 4% perceived irony when it featured a Trump sticker ($\chi^2 = 6.09$; $p = .01$).

The closed-ended ratings of irony detection showed a similar pattern. A 2 (consumer: liberal, conservative) x 2 (product: incongruent, congruent) ANOVA showed a strong main effect such that the incongruent sticker seemed more ironic than congruent sticker (M= 3.48 vs. 1.87; $F(1,291) = 63.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .18$). There was also a small but significant main effect of consumer ($F(1,291) = 8.20$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .03$), but irony perception was higher when the sticker was incongruent regardless of whether the consumer drove a Hummer (M= 3.85 vs. 2.07; $F(1,291) = 38.94$, $p < .001$) or a Prius (M= 3.10 vs. 1.67; $F(1,291) = 24.91$, $p < .001$; interaction: $F(1,291) = .75$, $p = .39$).

Discussion

Study 1 offers support for H1 by illustrating that people are more likely to infer that a

consumer is being ironic when her or she is consuming products with an inconsistent meaning. The study also revealed that most people did not infer that the consumer was being ironic, regardless of whether or not the bumper sticker was congruent with the consumers' other products. Our second hypothesis suggests that irony perception may have been low across the board in this study because it is difficult for people to detect irony when they don't personally know the consumer. Without intimate knowledge of a consumer, as well as his or her beliefs and desired identity, it might be tough to decipher whether the consumer is using a product ironically. Our next study directly tests whether people are more likely to perceive irony when they have a close relationship with the consumer.

STUDY 2: JUSTIN BIEBER TEE-SHIRT

We hypothesize that observers are only likely to infer that a consumer is being ironic if they know the consumer well enough to realize that a product they are using is inconsistent with their beliefs or desired identity. People are far more likely to be aware of the beliefs and desired identities of friends and family (i.e., socially close consumers) than acquaintances and strangers (i.e., socially distant consumers). It follows that people should be more likely to perceive ironic consumption when they have a closer relationship with the consumer (H2). Study 2 tested this hypothesis by asking participants why they think a consumer is wearing a Justin Bieber tee-shirt. The study manipulated the participant's relationship with the consumer, who was either a distant acquaintance with unknown beliefs, a close friend who has the same beliefs as the participant, or a close friend whose beliefs were not specified. Because most of the college students in our sample do not personally identify with Justin Bieber or his music, we reasoned that participants would perceive that their friends who share their beliefs would be wearing the shirt ironically. We included the "close friend with unspecified beliefs" condition to examine if participants

would infer that they are aware of the beliefs of a close friend, even if those beliefs were not explicitly stated. We thus predicted that participants would be more likely to perceive irony when the consumer was a close friend than a distant acquaintance, regardless of whether or not the study explicitly stated that the participant was aware of this friend's opinions and beliefs.

Method

We recruited 321 students at a the University of Arizona (186 male, 135 female; mean age = 20.5, age range: 18 to 29) to complete the study in exchange for credit in an undergraduate marketing course. The study randomly assigned participants to one of three conditions: distant acquaintance, close friend with similar beliefs as the participant, or close friend with unspecified beliefs. We did not exclude any responses.

Participants imagined interacting at a party with person wearing a pink Justin Bieber tee-shirt (see web appendix). Depending on random assignment, participants imagined that this person was either a distant acquaintance (distant condition), a close friend who shares their beliefs (close similar condition), or a close friend with unspecified beliefs (close unspecified condition). Participants in the "distant" condition read, "Imagine that you are at a party and you see a distant acquaintance, a person who is of your same gender, who you occasionally interact with but whom you do not know well. Although you recognize this person, you are not close enough with them to know anything about their personal opinions, tastes, or beliefs." Participants in the "close similar" condition read, "Imagine that you are at a party and you see a good friend, a person who is of your same gender, who you regularly interact with and whom you know well. You are close with this person and know that they have the same personal opinions, tastes, and beliefs as you." Participants in the "close unspecified" condition read only the first sentence indicating the person was a good friend, but didn't read the second sentence about this person's

opinions, tastes or beliefs.

After viewing the picture of the tee-shirt, participants were asked, "Why do you think this person is wearing a Justin Bieber tee-shirt?" They answered the question by checking one or more of the following motives (presented in this order): "He/She is a Justin Bieber fan;" "He/She wants to be like other Justin Bieber fans;" "He/She likes Justin Bieber's music;" "He/She thinks the shirt is attractive;" "He find the shirt comfortable," "He is wearing the shirt ironically," and "Other." If participants selected "Other," the survey asked them to describe what other motive the consumer had for wearing the shirt. The primary dependent measure was the percentage of participants who indicated that the consumer was wearing the shirt ironically. After completing this measure, participants reported their impression of the consumer and the extent to which they identify with Justin Bieber. We discuss the effects on impressions in the section titled, "Correlational Effects on Impressions of Ironic Consumers." Finally, participants reported their gender, age, race, education level, and native language.

Results

As we predicted, most of the participants in our sample did not identify with Justin Bieber (M = 2.66 out of 7; less than 17% scored higher than the scale midpoint). Thus, participants who infer that the consumer shares their beliefs, which we predicted would be more common when the consumer is a friend than a stranger, should be more likely to think that the consumer is wearing the shirt ironically.[1] Indeed, the likelihood that participants perceived irony

[1] We also tested whether individual differences in identification moderated the effect of the relationship on irony detection. The effect of relationship on irony detection was directionally stronger for participants who identified less with Justin Bieber, but the interaction was not significant, $\chi^2(2) = 2.91$, $p = .23$, most likely because very few participants identified with Justin Bieber. By manipulating identification with the consumed product, Study 3 offers a stronger test of whether the observers' identification with the product moderates the effect of relationship on irony detection.

depended on their relationship with the consumer wearing the tee-shirt ($\chi^2(2) = 9.85$, $p = .007$). Consistent with H2, participants were more likely to perceive irony when the consumer was a friend rather than an acquaintance, regardless of whether they explicitly read that their friend holds the same beliefs and opinions as them (57% vs. 37%; $\chi^2(1) = 9.12$, $p = .003$) or the beliefs and opinions of the friend were not mentioned (52% vs. 37%; $\chi^2(1) = 5.21$, $p = .02$). Conversely, participants were less likely to infer that the consumer was a Justin Bieber fan when they imagined the consumer being a friend rather than an acquaintance (unspecified friend = 63%; specified friend = 49%; acquaintance = 81%; $\chi^2(2) = 24.08$ $p < .001$). Table A2 in the web appendix reports each of the inferred motives across the three conditions as well as which of these contrasts are significant.

Discussion

In order to recognize that a product is incongruent, observers need to be aware of the consumers' tastes, beliefs, and desired identity, and this is more likely when the observer and consumer are socially close. Consequently, participants in study 2 were more likely to think that a consumer wearing a Justin Bieber tee-shirt was being ironic when they imagined the consumer being a close friend rather than a distant acquaintance. The increase in irony perception occurred regardless of whether or not participants were explicitly informed of this friend's beliefs, which we interpret as evidence that participants assumed that, in the absence of other information, they would be aware of (and share) their friends' beliefs.

The finding that people are more likely to perceive ironic consumption in socially close rather than distant consumers is interesting because it suggests that consumers may be able to ironically use a product as a way to selectively signal one meaning to close friends and another meaning to people they don't know well, as only the former are likely to detect irony. This

selective signaling strategy could be especially effective if observers systematically differ in how they respond to a consumer who they think is being ironic. As outlined earlier, we hypothesize that the impression that ironic consumption makes on observers will depend on whether the observer identifies with the consumed product (H3). For example, conservatives should have a less favorable impression of a consumer with a Donald Trump sticker if they think that the consumer is being ironic rather than sincere. Conversely, liberals should have a more favorable impression if they think the consumer is displaying the Trump sticker ironically.

CORRELATIONAL EFFECTS ON IMPRESSIONS OF IRONIC CONSUMERS

Our initial experiments were not explicitly designed to test the hypothesis that impressions of an ironic consumer depend on the extent to which an observer identifies with the consumed product. The studies did, however, measure irony perception, identification with the consumed product, and impressions of the consumer. We therefore conducted an initial exploratory test of H3 by assessing the correlational relationship between these three measured variables in studies 1 and 2.

We measured impressions of the consumer in study 1 with eight agree-disagree items intended to assess the observer's general attitude towards the consumer (e.g., "I like him/her;" α = .97), the extent to which he or she seems humorous (e.g., "He/She seems like a funny person;" α = .95), and the extent to which he or she seems admirable (e.g., "I admire him/her;" α = .96). Because the items were highly correlated (α = .96) and loaded onto a single factor in a principle components analysis, we averaged them to form an overall measure of the extent to which the observer holds a favorable impression of the consumer. Study 2 assessed impressions of the consumer on six semantic differential scales following the prompt, "I would consider this person:" The scales included items assessing general attitude towards the consumer (e.g.,

less/more likable) and the consumer's sense of humor (e.g., less/more funny). Again, the items were highly correlated ($\alpha = .92$) and loaded onto a single factor, so we combined them to form overall measures of the extent to which the observer holds a favorable impression of the consumer. All items used a seven-point scale with 1 coded as a less favorable impression and 7 as a more favorable impression.

We measured identification with the product in study 1 by asking participants to indicate the extent to which they identify with the politician featured in the bumper sticker (either Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump, depending on the condition) on a seven-point scale anchored by "not a lot" (coded as 1) and "a lot" (coded as 7). We measured identification in study 2 using semantic differential items (e.g., "I do not identify with Justin Bieber" / "I identify with Justin Bieber;" 1 = lowest identification, 7 = highest identification; $\alpha = .91$).

We analyzed the data by regressing overall impressions of the consumer on the dichotomous measure of whether or not the observer perceived irony (0 = no, 1 = yes), the extent to which the observer identified with the product (mean-centered), and the interaction between irony detection and identification. When they did not perceive irony, participants had a more favorable impression of the consumer the more that they identified with the product that the consumer was using (Study 1: $b = .41$, $t = 11.31$, $p < .001$; Study 2: $b = .36$, $t = 6.11$, $p < .001$). However, in each study, a significant interaction between irony perception and identification indicated that the positive relationship between identification and impression was attenuated when participants perceived irony (Study 1: $b = -.45$, $t = -3.81$, $p < .001$; Study 2: $b = -.21$, $t = -2.38$, $p = .02$). As illustrated in the floodlight analyses in figure 1, participants who did not identify with the product being consumed had a more favorable impression of the consumer when they perceived irony than when they did not perceive irony. Conversely, participants who

identified with the product being consumed had a less favorable impression of the consumer when they perceived irony, although this effect was only directional in study 2, in part because few participants identified with Justin Bieber.

In sum, the data from studies 1 and 2 were consistent with H3: the impression that ironic consumers make on others depends on whether the audience identifies with the consumed product. However, as the studies were designed to examine when people perceive ironic consumption, rather than the effect of ironic consumption on impressions, they measured rather than manipulated irony perception. These studies therefore only provide correlational evidence for H3. Our next two studies address this limitation by manipulating both whether a product is consumed ironically and whether participants identify with the product being consumed.

STUDY 3: "POWERED BY KALE"

Study 3 had two objectives. The first objective was to examine how ironic consumption influences observers' impressions of the consumer. The second objective was to provide more direct evidence that observers perceive irony when they know that a product conveys beliefs that are incongruent with the consumer's beliefs. Participants initially read about an encounter with a consumer wearing a tee-shirt and indicated whether or not they thought the consumer was being ironic. The participant either did or did not identify with the message expressed by the tee-shirt. Additionally, the consumer was either a distant acquaintance, a close friend with similar beliefs as the participant, or a close friend with opposite beliefs as the participant. We predicted that participants would perceive irony either when a friend with similar beliefs wore a tee-shirt that the participant didn't identify with or a friend with dissimilar beliefs wore a tee-shirt that the participant did identify with. In the final part of the study, participants learned that the consumer either was or was not being ironic and reported their impression of him. We expected to replicate

the finding that participants would have a more favorable impression of a consumer ironically wearing a tee-shirt when they don't identify with the shirt, but a less favorable impression of the consumer when they do identify with the shirt.

Method

Sample. Six-hundred thirty-nine participants recruited on MTurk completed the study for a small payment. The sample had the following demographic characteristics: 320 men, 319 women; age range from 19 to 86 (average = 36.7); 57% college graduates; 81% white, 6% African-American, 7% Asian, 4% Hispanic; and 99% native English speakers. We limited participation to respondents in the United States, and did not exclude any respondents.

Stage 1. The experiment included three stages. The first stage elicited one social issue with which participants identified, and a second issue with which they did not identify. Specifically, participants read, "First, we'd like you to tell us a little bit about what type of person you are, and what type of person you are not, by answering the questions below." Participants indicated which of the six statements in table 4 was "most true" of them, and then which statement was "least true" of them.

Stage 2. The second stage of the experiment was described as an "Impression Study." Participants imagined attending a party at which they see a person named John. We manipulated participants' relationship to John such that they either read that John was a distant acquaintance, a close friend who has "the same personal values, tastes, and opinions as you do," or a close friend who has "the opposite personal values, tastes, and opinions as you do." Before proceeding, we asked participants to think about their relationship with John and how they would likely interact with him at the party. Participants next described how they would greet John at the party, and something that they might discuss. The purpose of these two questions was to increase the

strength and psychological realism of the relationship manipulation. We neither coded nor analyzed the responses.

Participants next imagined encountering John at the party. They read, “As you and John approach one another, you notice John’s tee-shirt.” Participants then viewed one of the six tee-shirts pictured in table 4, each of which corresponded to a position on one of the six aforementioned social issues. We manipulated whether John was wearing the shirt that supported the social issue that participants most strongly identified with or least strongly identified with before measuring whether participants thought that John was wearing the shirt ironically. Specifically, participants answered, “Why do you think that John is wearing this tee-shirt?” by selecting one or more of the following statements: “He believes and agrees with the shirt’s message;” “He wants to fit in with others who believe and agree with the shirt's message;” “He thinks the shirt is attractive;” “He finds the shirt comfortable;” “He is wearing the shirt ironically;” and “Other (please explain).” Stage 2 of the experiment thus measured irony perception after manipulating the participants’ relationship with the consumer and their identification with the consumed product using a 3 (relationship: distant, close with same views, close with opposite views) x 2 (product identification: high, low) between-subjects design.

Stage 3. After indicating why they thought John was wearing the tee-shirt, participants read that they started talking to John at the party, saying, “Nice shirt.” We varied John’s response to manipulate whether he was wearing the shirt ironically or sincerely. In the sincere condition, John responded: *“Yeah... this shirt is great," he says sincerely. "I like wearing it because it shows what I believe."* In the ironic condition, John responded: *“Yeah... this shirt is great," he says sarcastically. "I like wearing it to be ironic.”*

After viewing the tee-shirt a second time, participants indicated their impression of John

on the seven-point semantic differential items from study 2 (e.g., "less likable" to "more likable;" $\alpha = .97$). Participants also indicated how they would respond to John on four behavioral intention measures (e.g., "I would try to hang out more with John;" $\alpha = .91$; scale from 1 [definitely not] to 5 [definitely]). Participants subsequently completed a check of the identification manipulation. Specifically, they answered, "What is your personal opinion of the shirt John was wearing," by completing four items (e.g., "This shirt shows who I am") on a scale from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)" ($\alpha = .96$). Finally, participants indicated their gender, age, race, educational level, and native language.

Results

Manipulation check. The identification manipulation worked as expected. A 3 (relationship: distant, close dissimilar, close similar) x 2 (identification: low, high) x 2 (consumption: ironic, sincere) ANOVA revealed a large main effect of the identification manipulation on the extent to which participants identified with the tee-shirt ($M = 1.52$ vs. 3.42; $F(1,627) = 555.20$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .47$). The ANOVA also revealed several other significant effects, including a main effect of relationship ($F(2,627) = 3.85$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .01$), a main effect of irony ($F(1,627) = 9.45$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .02$), a relationship-by-identification interaction ($F(2,627) = 5.64$, $p = .004$, $\eta^2 = .02$), and a consumption-by-identification interaction ($F(1,627) = 6.48$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$); however, all of these effects were far smaller in magnitude (none explained more than 2% of the variance) than the main effect of identification (which explained 47% of the variance). Moreover, contrast tests confirmed that participants identified more with the product in each of the six high identification conditions than in any of the six low identification conditions (p-values < .001; see table A3 in the web appendix for the means).

Irony Perception. We examined when participants were most likely to infer that the

consumer was being ironic using identification and relationship as crossed factors in a logistic regression. To interpret the effects of relationship, we broke this factor into two orthogonal contrasts, one representing the difference between a distant acquaintance and a friend (averaged across the similar and dissimilar conditions) and the other representing the difference between the similar friend and dissimilar friend.

First, we examined whether irony perception depended on whether the consumer was a friend (averaging across the similar and dissimilar conditions) or an acquaintance. Consistent with H2, participants were more likely to perceive irony when the consumer was a friend (37%) than an acquaintance (24%; expB = .48, Z = 2.43, p = .02). The greater likelihood of perceiving irony in a friend over an acquaintance was similar regardless of whether or not participants identified with the product (ExpB = -.21, Z = -1.06, p = .29).

Next, we examined whether irony perception differed depending on whether the friend had similar or dissimilar views as the participant. Consistent with the prediction that irony perception requires knowing that the consumer's beliefs are inconsistent with the meaning of the product, whether participants were more likely to infer irony in a similar or dissimilar friend depended on whether the participant identified with the product him or herself (expB = -2.07, Z = -8.71, p < .001). Specifically, when participants identified with the tee-shirt, they were less likely to perceive irony when they had similar rather than dissimilar views as the consumer (14% vs. 55%; expB = -2.00, Z = -5.96, p < .001). Conversely, when participants did not identify with the tee-shirt, they were more likely to perceive irony when they had similar views as the consumer (63% vs. 17%; expB = 2.13, Z = 6.37, p < .001; see figure 2a).

Impressions. A 3 (relationship: distant, close dissimilar, close similar) x 2 (identification: low, high) x 2 (consumption: ironic, sincere) ANOVA revealed main effects of identification

($F(1,627) = 5.37$, $p = .02$, $\eta^2 = .008$) and consumption ($F(1,627) = 8.02$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2 = .013$), both of which were qualified by the predicted identification-by-consumption interaction ($F(1,627) = 148.87$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .19$). Although participants' relationship with John influenced their likelihood of perceiving irony (as discussed in the previous paragraph), once participants knew whether or not John was wearing the shirt ironically, their relationship did not influence their impression of him (main effect: $F(1,627) = 2.20$, $p = .11$; relationship-by-identification interaction: $F(1,627) = .42$, $p = .66$; relationship-by-consumption interaction: $F(1,627) = 2.32$, $p = .10$; three-way interaction: $F(1,627) = 1.71$, $p = .18$). Because the relationship factor did not influence impressions, we collapsed across this factor to interpret the identification-by-consumption interaction (see figure 2b). Consistent with H3, participants who identified with the tee-shirt had a less favorable impression of John when he was wearing the shirt ironically rather than sincerely ($M = 3.22$ vs. 4.97; $F(1,635) = 117.48$, $p < .001$). Conversely, participants who did not identify with the tee-shirt had a more favorable impression of John when he was wearing the shirt ironically ($M = 4.37$ vs. 3.28; $F(1,635) = 42.47$, $p < .001$). Table A3 in the web appendix provides the means and standard deviations for all of the conditions in the study.

Behavioral Intentions. We predicted that a more favorable impression of John would correspond with more interest in continuing to interact with him. In line with this prediction, participants' intention to continue interacting with the consumer showed a similar pattern as their impression of him. A 3 (relationship) x 2 (identification) x 2 (consumption) ANOVA revealed a significant identification-by-consumption interaction ($F(1,627) = 86.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .12$). Participants who identified with the tee-shirt were less interested in continuing the interaction if John was wearing the shirt ironically ($M = 3.05$ vs. 4.09; $F(1,635) = 90.33$, $p < .001$), whereas participants who did not identify with the tee-shirt were more interested in continuing the

interaction if John was wearing the shirt ironically (M = 3.63 vs. 3.23; $F(1,635) = 42.47$, $p <$ .001). Relationship had a main effect ($F(2,627) = 25.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .08$), indicating that participants had more interest in continuing to interact with a friend who shared their views (M = 3.88) than either a friend with dissimilar views (M = 3.39) or a distant acquaintance (M = 3.24). However, the relationship factor did not interact with either of the other factors (relationship-by-identification interaction: $F(1,627) = .01$, $p = .99$; relationship-by-consumption interaction: $F(1,627) = 1.30$, $p = .27$; three-way interaction: $F(1,627) = 2.07$, $p = .13$).

Discussion

Study 3 confirmed that observers were more likely to perceive ironic consumption when the consumer was a friend with beliefs that were inconsistent with the meaning of the product. Importantly, the data also provided support for H3. Ironically using a product resulted in the consumer making a less favorable impression on observers who identify with the product, but a more favorable impression on observers who don't identify with the product. For example, ironically wearing a shirt that supports feminism makes a consumer seem less likable to feminists but more likable to chauvinists.

STUDY 4: LOVE, IRONIC LOVE, OR SINCERE HATE?

Consumers ironically use products to criticize the product's message, meaning, or users. Does ironic consumption give consumers a way to criticize something while making a more favorable impression on observers? Study 4 attempted to answer this question by comparing the impression that observers form of a consumer who ironically wears a product with a supportive literal meaning (e.g., ironically wearing an "I love Pink Floyd" tee-shirt) with a consumer who sincerely wears a product with a critical literal meaning (e.g., sincerely wearing an "I hate Pink Floyd" tee-shirt). Because irony often evokes humor, softens criticism, and makes statements

seem less negative (Dews and Winner 1995; Dews et al. 1995; Dynel 2014), we hypothesized that ironic consumption would yield more favorable impressions than sincere critical consumption (H4). Similar to study 3, study 4 also compared impressions of consumers who ironically use a product with consumers who sincerely use the same product. We again expected to find that the impression made by a consumer who ironically rather than sincerely uses a product would depend on whether or not the observer identifies with the product (H3). Observers who identify with the product should have a more favorable impression of consumers who use the product sincerely, whereas observers who do not identify with the product should have a more favorable impression of consumers who use the product ironically. In contrast, we expected that ironically consuming a supportive product would result in a more favorable impression than sincerely consuming a critical product regardless of whether or not the observer identifies with the product.

Method

We recruited 555 participants from MTurk (all in the USA; 53% male, 47% female; mean age = 40) to participate in the study in exchange for a small payment. The study used a 3 (consumption: sincere support, ironic support, sincere criticism) x 2 (product identification: high, low) between-subjects design. We did not exclude any responses.

The study initially asked participants to name two bands, singers, or musicians: "one band, singer, or musician [hereafter 'bands'] who you relate to or identify with" and one "who you don't relate to or identify with." Next, participants thought of a peer who they suspect does not listen to one of the bands that they nominated, described this person, and indicated his or her gender. Subsequently, participants imagined that they encountered this peer at a social event. The peer was wearing a tee-shirt of either the band that the participants said they identified with or

the band that participants said they did not identify with, depending on the identification condition (see web appendix for complete materials).

Participants imagined asking why this peer was wearing the shirt. Both the peer's shirt and his or her response varied depending on the consumption condition. In the sincere support condition, the peer was wearing a tee-shirt that said, "I love [the band]," and responded, "Their music has started to grow on me. I'm wearing the shirt to show everyone how I feel." In the ironic support condition, the peer was wearing the same tee-shirt, but responded, "I don't listen to their music. I'm wearing the shirt to be ironic." Finally, in the sincere criticism condition, the peer was wearing a tee-shirt said, "I hate [the band]," and responded, "I don't listen to their music. I'm wearing the shirt to show everyone how I feel."

Participants subsequently indicated how this conversation would influence their impression of their peer on a series of seven-point agree-disagree scale items. As in the previous studies, we measured the extent to which the peer seemed likable (likeable, interesting; $r = .85$) and humorous (funny, humorous, good sense of humor; $\alpha = .97$). Because the literature suggests that warmth and competence represent two basic dimensions on which we form impressions of others (Fiske, Cuddy, and Glick 2007), we additionally measured impressions of the peer's warmth (warm, kind, and friendly; $\alpha = .97$) and competence (competent, intelligent, and confident; $\alpha = .90$). The eleven items measuring likability, humor, warmth, and competence were highly correlated ($\alpha = .97$) and loaded onto a single factor in a principle components analysis, so we combined them to form an overall measure of the extent to which the observer holds a favorable impression of the consumer. (We report the effects on each of these impressions separately in Table A4 in the web appendix.) Participants also reported their intentions to continue having a relationship with their peer by indicating the extent to which they

agreed with the following statements (five-point scales): "I would invite them to the next party I was having," "I feel closer to them after this interaction," and "I would want to spend more time with them;" ($\alpha = .90$). We report responses to this measure in figure 3 and table A4 in the web appendix.

Participants subsequently completed a manipulation check by answering, "to what extent do you personally identify with" both of the bands that they nominated on a seven-point scale with end-points labeled "not at all" and "a lot," respectively. They also reported their attitude towards both of the bands they nominated on three semantic differential items (I dislike them/I like them; they make bad music/they make good music; and not my type of music/my type of music). We used only the item measuring "identification" to assess the effectiveness of the manipulation, as attitudes towards the band offer a less direct proxy of identification. Finally, participants reported their gender, age, race, education, and native language.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation Check. The identification manipulation worked as expected. A paired-sample t-test indicated that participants reported identifying more with the high-identification band than the low identification band ($M = 5.81$ vs. 1.64; $t = 54.32$, $p < .001$).

Impressions. We analyzed the impressions of the peer using a 3 (consumption: sincere supportive, ironic supportive, sincere critical) x 2 (identification: high, low) between-subjects ANOVA. The analysis revealed main effects of both consumption ($F(2,549) = 28.65$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .08$) and identification ($F(2,549) = 19.86$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .03$), qualified by an interaction ($F(2,549) = 16.94$, $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .05$).

To interpret the results, we used planned contrasts to separately compare (a) ironic support with sincere support, and (b) ironic consumption with sincere criticism. The first

comparison lets us test H3 by assessing whether the impression that a consumer who ironically (rather than sincerely) uses a product depends on whether or not the observer identifies with the product. The second comparison lets us test H4 by assessing whether ironically consuming a product with a supportive meaning (e.g., ironically wearing an "I love X" shirt) results in more favorable impression than sincerely consuming a product with a critical meaning (e.g., sincerely wearing an "I hate X" shirt). Specifically, we examined the effects on the overall impression measure using the following contrasts: the identification manipulation (-1= low identification; 1 = high identification); comparison A (1 = ironic love; -1 = sincere love; 0 = sincere hate); comparison B (1 = ironic love; -1 = sincere hate; 0 = sincere love; and two contrasts representing the interactions between identification and comparisons A and B.

Comparison A: Ironic vs. Sincere Love. Overall, participants had a more favorable impression of their peer when he/she wore the "I love ___" shirt sincerely rather than ironically (M = 5.09 vs. 4.36; $F(1,549) = 20.86$, $p < .001$). However, consistent with previous studies, the effect of ironically wearing the shirt depended on whether or not the participant identified with the band on the tee-shirt ($F(1,549) = 27.02$, $p < .001$). When participants identified with the band, they liked the peer less when he wore the supportive tee-shirt ironically rather than sincerely (M = 3.78 vs. 5.31; $F(1,549) = 48.70$, $p < .001$). In contrast, when participants did not identify with the band, they reported a more favorable impression of their peer when he/she wore the supportive shirt ironically rather than sincerely, although, unlike in the previous studies, this difference was not significant (M = 4.93 vs. 4.83; $F(1,549) = .19$, $p = .66$). Because it is difficult to interpret directional results, we conducted a replication study in which we crossed whether a consumer wears a band tee-shirt ironically vs. sincerely with whether or not participants identify with the band. This supplementary study replicated the finding that participants who do not

identify with the band on a tee-shirt have a more favorable impression of a consumer who wears the tee-shirt ironically rather than sincerely (see the web appendix for details).

Comparison B: Ironic Love vs. Sincere Hate. Not surprisingly, participants had a more favorable impression of the peer when they did not identify with the band that the peer was criticizing (across the ironic love and sincere hate conditions: $M = 4.76$ vs. 4.18; $F(1,549) = 20.20$, $p < .001$). Importantly, and consistent with H4, participants showed more a favorable impression of a consumer who wore the shirt with an ironic supportive message ("I love __") compared to the sincere critical message ("I hate ___; across the identification conditions: $M = 4.36$ vs. 3.93; $F(1,549) = 6.01$, $p < .05$). The interaction was not significant ($F(1,549) = 0.18$, $p = .68$), which indicates that ironically wearing the "I love ___" shirt resulted in a more favorable impression regardless of whether or not participants identified with the band on the shirt.

Discussion

Study 4 demonstrated a benefit of criticizing something through ironic consumption rather than using a product with a more directly critical message. Consistent with H4, compared to consuming a product with an overtly critical message, ironically consuming a product with an ostensibly supportive message resulted in the consumer making a more favorable impression on observers, regardless of whether or not the observer identified with the product or its meaning. Although our study directly manipulated whether or not observers perceived ironic consumption, the potential benefits of ironic consumption on impression management may be even larger when observers need to infer whether or not the consumer is being ironic, especially if observers who identify with the product are less likely to detect irony than observers who do not identify with it. For example, if Pink Floyd fans are unlikely to realize that Johnny is wearing his "Pink Floyd" shirt ironically, then Johnny may be able to criticize Pink Floyd to his in-group, who are

unlikely to be Pink Floyd fans, while avoiding scorn from the rest of the Pink Floyd-loving world, who don't realize that he is wearing the shirt ironically. One limitation of the study, however, is that a tee-shirt saying "I hate X" is a very strong form of criticism. The impression management benefits of ironic consumption compared to direct criticism may be smaller when the product is less extreme in its criticism (e.g., a shirt that says, "I do not like X."). Although our study illustrates that ironic consumption can help consumers make more favorable impressions than using directly critical products, future research will need to assess whether this result generalizes across different types of directly critical products.

GENERAL DISCUSSON

Consumers use products to communicate what they believe, who they are, and who they want to be (Belk, 1988; Berger and Heath 2007; Douglas and Isherwood 1978; Levy 1959). Although consumers typically use products to signal a meaning that is conventionally associated with a product (e.g., wearing a Justin Bieber shirt to show that you are a Belieber), they sometimes use products ironically by attempting to signal a belief or identity that is antithetical to the product's conventional meaning (e.g., wearing a Justin Bieber shirt to criticize Bieber).

Sending a social signal requires an audience to detect and interpret the signal. The signaling process is more complex with ironic consumption than sincere consumption because the former involves attempting to reverse the meaning conventionally associated with a product. Importantly, observers do not always decode this reversal. Our studies reveal that observers are only likely to perceive irony when they infer that the meaning of the product is incongruent with the identity or beliefs of the consumer. For example, observers are more likely to think that their friends, rather than distant acquaintances, are listening to Justin Bieber or wearing an anti-drug tee-shirt to be ironic, but only if they know that their friends dislike Justin Bieber and like drugs,

respectively. The implication of this result is that the intended audience for ironic consumption is not the general public, but instead a select group of insiders (Brooks 1981).

After decoding the meaning of a consumer's signaling behavior, observers respond by updating their impression of the consumer. Whether ironically consuming a product results in a more or less favorable impression depends on the extent to which observers identify with the product being consumed (H3). For example, consumers who ironically wore a shirt advocating feminism seemed less likable and less humorous to feminists, but more likable and humorous to chauvinists. Because irony softens the sting of criticism, ironic consumption can also be an effective way for consumers to maintain a favorable impression while criticizing a person, issue, social institution, or belief. For example, consumers who ironically wore a shirt saying "I love Nickelback" (or a different artist) were perceived to be more likable, humorous, and warm than consumers who wore a shirt saying "I hate Nickelback" (or a different artist), regardless of whether or not the observer was a fan of the artist. As the next section discusses, ironic consumption may be an especially effective tool for consumers who want to express criticism to a select audience rather than to everyone.

Ironic Consumption as Selective Signaling

Collectively, our findings suggest an important reason why consumers might choose to use a product ironically rather than sincerely. Ironic consumption lets consumers signal one meaning to an in-group of close friends, who are likely to detect the irony, and a different meaning to the general population, who will likely think the consumer is using the product sincerely. Using ironic consumption to selectively signal a meaning could be an especially useful impression management strategy for consumers who are part of a sub-culture or minority group. Consider, for example, a liberal consumer who lives in a part of the country where most people

are conservative. Wearing a Greenpeace tee-shirt, displaying an Amnesty International sticker, or adopting another product signaling liberal beliefs would risk sending a negative impression to the conservative people with whom the consumer regularly interacts. On the other hand, ironically wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat, displaying a pro-gun sticker, or adopting another product associated with conservative beliefs might help the consumer make a favorable impression both on conservatives, who would fail to detect the irony, and the consumer's close liberal friends, who would detect the irony. One opportunity for future research is to investigate the prevalence and effectiveness of ironic consumption as a means of selectively signaling different beliefs or identities to different audiences.

Ironic Consumption as Status Signaling

The literature suggests that another reason why consumers ironically use products is to signal social status (Brooks 1981; Bellezza and Berger 2018). Ironically adopting products associated with lower status consumers, like graffiti, Western movies, or "comfort" foods like chicken and waffles and tuna-noodle casserole, might help distinguish knowledgeable consumers both from lower class consumers, who genuinely like the products, and less knowledgeable upper-class consumers, who don't know the product exists or how to consume it ironically (Bourdieu 1984; Johnston and Baumann 2014). A recent series of studies supports the idea that high status consumers often adopt low status products as a way to distinguish themselves from middle-status consumers (Bellezza and Berger 2018). Ironic consumption may offer a way to inconspicuously signal status to a narrow in-group of knowledgeable consumers while avoiding undesirable outcomes (i.e., unwanted attention or envy) that could result from broadcasting the signal to a wider audience. Consistent with this notion, high status consumers tend to prefer luxury brands with smaller logos, which offer a muted status signal detectable only to other

knowledgeable consumers, to luxury brands with more prominent logos (Berger and Ward 2010; Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010).

Ironic Consumption as Disapproval Insurance

Another potential benefit of ironic consumption is that it gives consumers a way to hedge against disapproval or criticism that might otherwise come from using a product with an undesirable meaning. Consumers sometimes enjoy using products that carry a stigmatized or socially undesirable meanings (Arsel and Thompson 2011; McCoy and Scarborough 2014; Sandikci and Ger 2010). Sincerely listening to music (e.g., Nickelback) or television (e.g., Jersey Shore) that people consider trashy risks making you seem unsophisticated or shallow. But, consuming these products ironically offers way to enjoy them while distancing yourself from the undesirable symbolic connotations that they typically carry (McCoy and Scarborough 2014). Irony thus provides a face-saving means for people to consume stigmatized products that they enjoy (e.g., Arsel and Thompson 2011). As Mach (2014) puts it, "irony is a really convenient way of allowing yourself to like things that normally wouldn't be cool to like."

In other situations, a consumer might not know what others will think about a product that they use. This risk is especially acute with unconventional or radically different consumption behaviors, like wearing a tie-dye tuxedo or listening to experimental lute music. Defying convention can make consumers seem prestigious (Bellezza, Gino, and Kienan 2013) and cool (Warren and Campbell 2014), but it can also evoke disapproval and scorn (Fehr and Fischbach 2003; Schachter 1951). Consumers might not know whether wearing a tie-dye tuxedo or listening to the experimental lute music will help them start a cool, new trend or make them a laughingstock. Irony makes it easier for consumers to try new things (products, styles, behaviors, etc.) by insulating them from the risk of disapproval. If the tie-dye tuxedo or experimental lute

music catches on, consumers can claim that they are using the products sincerely and reap the social rewards associated with instigating a cool trend. On the other hand, if observers think that the tuxedo is ugly or the lute music is lousy, consumers can claim that they were being ironic and not suffer the consequences typically associated with committing a cultural faux pas.

Can Ironic Consumption Facilitate Symbolic Change?

By insulating consumers from potential criticism, irony might make consumers more willing to adopt products with unconventional or undesirable meanings. As new consumers begin to adopt a product, its meaning changes (Berger and Heath 2007; McCracken 1986; Simmel 1957). For example, Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and trucker hats, which previously had an older, uncool image, became fashionable in the early 2000s when celebrities and young, urban consumers started using the products (Walker 2003). Although many of these consumers initially drank Pabst and wore trucker hats ironically, their adoption ended up giving the products a more youthful and urban image. This rejuvenated image resulted in a new wave of consumers who started drinking Pabst beer and wearing trucker hats sincerely in attempt signal the product's new, more desirable meaning. Ironic consumption may thus offer an instrument for symbolic and cultural change. Ironic consumption lets consumers reinterpret a product's meaning, thereby giving them the ability to change, repurpose, or simply laugh at brands, styles, behaviors, and practices that have become associated with controversial, unpopular, or undesirable meanings.

DATA COLLECTION INFORMATION

The pilot study was collected on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) in November 2017 by the first author. Both authors analyzed the data. Study 1 was collected on MTurk in December 2015 by the first author. The first author analyzed the data. Study 2 was collected from an online undergraduate student subject pool at the University of Arizona in March and April of 2017. The first author analyzed the data. Study 3 was collected on MTurk in December 2016 by the second author. The first author analyzed the data. Study 4 was collected on MTurk in May 2017 by the second author. The first author analyzed the data. Study 5 was collected on MTurk in October 2017 by the second author. The second author analyzed the data.

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Table 1. Examples of ironic consumption recalled in the pilot study.

Type of Ironic Consumption	Example(s)	Frequency
Entertainment	"I once saw a guy wearing a Justin Bieber shirt to make fun of girls that were obsessed with him" Wearing a Twilight shirt despite hating "cheesy romantic fantasy flicks"	25%
Political / Social Message	A liberal friend dressing up as Donald Trump for Halloween An avid drug-user wearing a D.A.R.E. tee-shirt	17%
Religious Symbols	An openly pagan person "wearing a number of crucifixes, crosses, and other Christian jewelry"	13%
Children's products	"A large bearded man in a fedora wears my little pony shirts to make fun of 'bronies'" (*also gender category) Adults watching *SpongeBob SquarePants*	6%
Sports products	Wearing a NASCAR shirt Ohio State / Michigan example in Table 2	6%
Technological products	An "Apple fan boy wearing a Galaxy watch"	5%
Gendered products	"A masculine friend that wore a sparkly pink tee-shirt" "a big guy came into the barber shop wearing a pink princess backpack." (*also children category)	5%
Unconventional Use	Drinking Folgers coffee in a Starbucks mug	5%
Accidental	A consumer who wore a "Star of David" necklace because he thought it was a pentagram that signals paganism	4%

Table 2. Inferred reasons why consumers use products ironically and sincerely in the pilot study.

Motive	Example (Product/Brand; condition)	Ironic	Sincere	χ^2 (p<)
Criticism	"Kanye West wore a Donald Trump hat. It was at one of his concerts and he was doing a lot of anti-government music." (Trump hat; ironic)	58%	2%	226.44 (.001)
Humor	"A person I know was wearing a Jonas Brothers T-shirt. He is a friend of mine, and he wore it to a social gathering we were going to in an effort to be funny." (Jonas Brothers shirt; ironic)	22%	1%	68.93 (.001)
Distinction	"My son's friends who all graduated from Georgetown University which is very elitist and upscale like to go out and drink Pabst Blue Ribbon beer which is very cheap and lowly brand." (PBR; ironic)	10%	14%	2.70 (.10)
Attention	"A friend of mine who is an Ohio State fan wore a Michigan shirt to work on the Monday after Ohio State beat Michigan in football. Everybody knows he hates Michigan but he did it so that people would ask him about the game...." (Michigan Shirt; ironic)	9%	4%	7.86 (.01)
Taste	"A friend wearing a t-shirt with Marvel comics characters on it. They like Marvel comics." (Marvel; sincere)	5%	54%	170.26 (.001)
Enjoy	"...seeing these decorations [stickers and posters from a Youtube video producer] around her bedroom will remind her of the content she enjoys watching and will give her a positive feeling." (Stickers; sincere)	3%	8%	7.22 (.01)
Change	"I know for a fact that he used the crucifix ironically as he used it to represent death as in a tombstone and not as a religious symbol." (Crucifix; ironic)	2%	0%	3.60 (.06)
Support	"I have walked around with coffee in a Starbucks takeout cup to symbolize that I support Starbucks over Dunkin Donuts." (Starbucks; sincere)	1%	25%	72.46 (.001)
Function	"I have a family member that uses Doterra essential oils and she feels that they work for their functional use as well as uses them symbolically because she likes to be healthy and believes they are for natural uses." (Doterra; sincere)	1%	5%	5.76 (.05)

Table 3. Stimuli in study 1.

Conservative/Congruent	Conservative/Incongruent
	
Liberal/Congruent	**Liberal/Incongruent**
	

Table 4. Participants in study 3 indicated which of these statements were most true (high identification) and least true (low identification) of them. Each statement was associated with a different tee-shirt that expresses a similar sentiment.

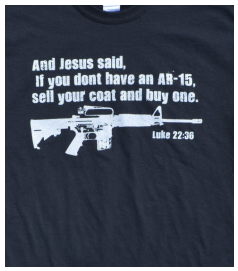
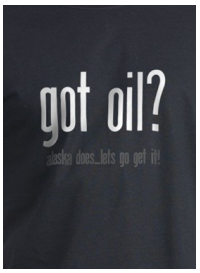
Statement					
I am a gun person. I think more people should own guns.	I am a vegetarian and/or vegan. I like kale.	I am an environmentalist. I think that we need to do more to protect the planet.	I am pro-oil. I support more drilling on US lands.	I am an anti-drug person. I think drugs are bad.	I am a feminist. I think we need to do more to establish equal opportunities for women.
Percent who identified most (left) / least (right) with the statement					
14% / 29%	6% / 27%	36% / 3%	8% / 21%	22% / 8%	15% / 13%
Corresponding Tee-shirt					
					

Figure 1: Floodlight analyses showing the irony detection-by-identification interactions in studies 1 (left) and 2 (right). The dotted lines indicate the Johnson-Neyman points, which separate regions in which there is a significant difference from regions in which there is not.

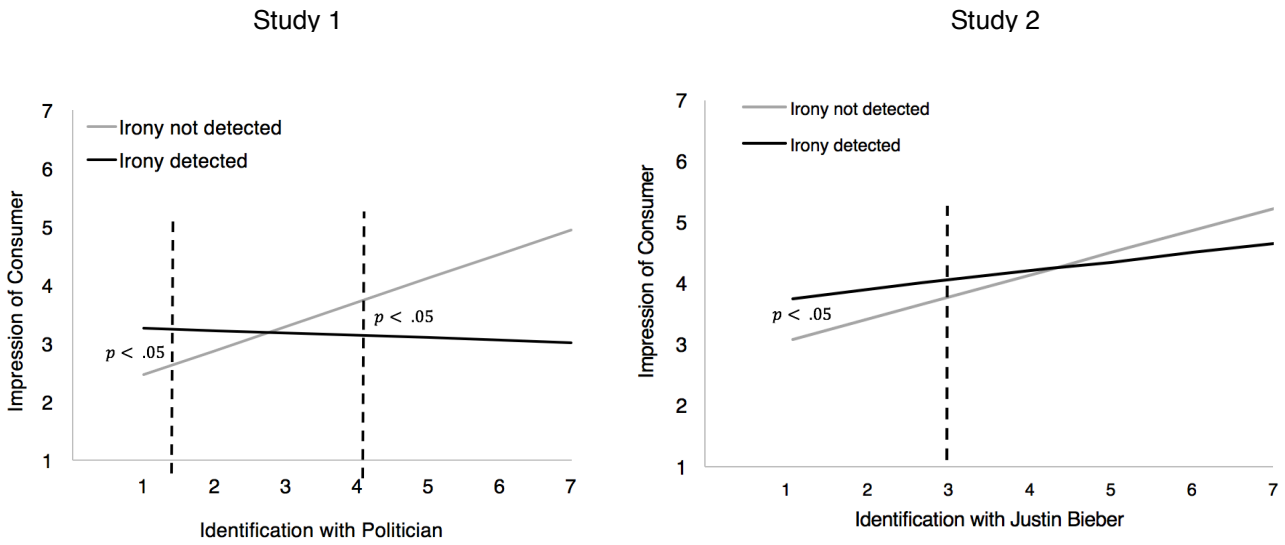
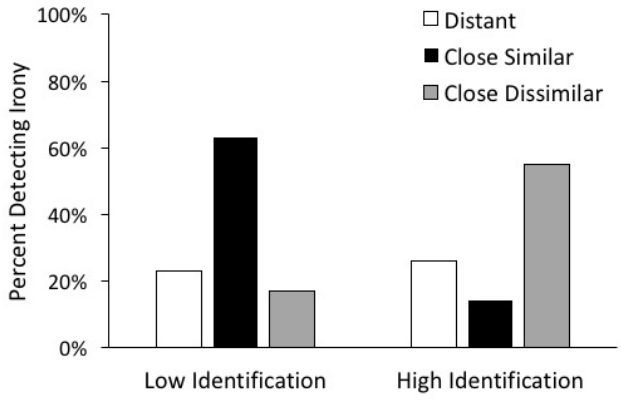


Figure 2. (a) The percentage of participants who thought that the consumer was wearing the shirt ironically, depending on their relationship with the consumer and their identification with the issue on his shirt; (b) The impression that participants had of this consumer after learning that he was wearing the shirt ironically or sincerely.

(a)



(b)

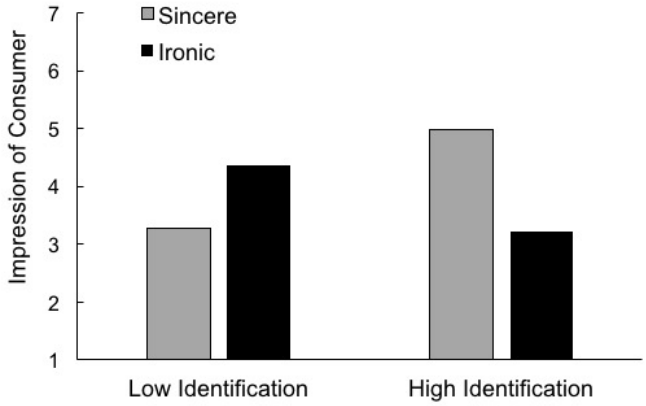


Figure 3. (a) The impression that participants had of a consumer and (b) their intention to continue a relationship with this consumer in study 4.

(a) **(b)**