# The Robin Hood Effect in Transgressions Against Firms: How Political Ideology Shapes Consumer Justifications

JASON D. LIN
ANAT KEINAN
HANNAH H. CHANG
DONALD R. LEHMANN

Consumer transgressions against firms involve moral violations in which consumers take advantage of loopholes in companies' return and satisfaction-guaranteed policies or the lack of strict enforcement against password sharing, piracy, shoplifting, wardrobing, coupon stacking, promotion abuse, and fraud. Drawing on the timeless tale of Robin Hood, the legendary outlaw who stands up against injustice, the authors demonstrate that consumers use a Robin Hood justification to legitimize their transgressions against firms. Building on moral foundations theory, this research demonstrates that political ideology impacts consumers' transgression behavior and the perceived morality of these practices. Six studies show that under certain conditions in which the moral virtues of fairness and care are cued, liberals are more likely to engage in transgressions than conservatives. The studies further test factors that can intensify or mitigate consumer transgressions against firms. Findings from this research can help marketers better understand how consumers justify transgressions and how to effectively reduce these costly and pervasive behaviors.

*Keywords*: consumer transgressions, consumer morality, political ideology, fairness, ethical consumption, consumer fraud

Consumer transgressions against firms involve situations in which consumers take advantage of loopholes in companies' return and satisfaction-guaranteed policies or the lack of strict enforcement against password sharing, piracy, shoplifting, wardrobing, coupon stacking, promotion abuse, and fraud. Whereas such unethical and even illegal behaviors are prevalent in traditional retail settings (e.g., exploiting exchange and return policies, unjustified complaints to customer service, and shoplifting), the increased popularity of online shopping has afforded consumers additional opportunities to engage in moral violations against companies, including sharing passwords for accessing the brand's paid content and services, using promotional codes or links

Jason D. Lin (linjason@bu.edu) is the corresponding author and a doctoral candidate in marketing at the Questrom School of Business, Boston University, 595 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, USA. Anat Keinan (akeinan@bu.edu) is an associate professor of marketing at the Questrom School of Business, Boston University, 595 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215, USA. Hannah H. Chang (hannahchang@smu.edu.sg) is an associate professor of marketing at the Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University, 50 Stamford Road, Singapore 178899, Singapore. Donald R. Lehmann (drl2@columbia.edu) is George E. Warren Professor Emeritus of Business at Columbia Business School, 665 W 130th Street, New York, NY 10027, USA. Please address correspondence to Jason Lin. This article is based on the lead author's dissertation. The authors gratefully thank the editors, the associate editor, and the three anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful comments. This research was supported by Boston University and by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, under its Academic Research Fund Tier 2 Grant (MOE-T2EP40221-0008). Supplementary materials are included in the web appendix accompanying the online version of this article.

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intended for specific or individual uses (e.g., student discounts and special promotions for paid subscribers), misidentifying online to benefit from price discrimination and discounts, misusing coupons, and engaging in piracy. Emerging technologies, such as agentic artificial intelligence (AI), can lower search costs and automate execution, making such transgression opportunities easier to discover and enact. This trend is further exacerbated by the proliferation of instructional videos and the sharing of "hacks" by influencers who have amassed followings from advising viewers on how to engage in various transgressions such as coupon stacking and downloading paid digital content for free.

Consumer transgressions against firms have immense financial and reputational costs, and they span diverse industries and consumption behaviors. For example, the National Retail Federation estimates the annual cost of return policy abuse at $23.2 billion, and 93% of retailers indicate that retail fraud and other transgressive behaviors pose significant problems (National Retail Federation 2022, 2024). Piracy costs businesses close to $77 billion annually (US Chamber of Commerce 2025), and Netflix alone loses $6 billion a year to password sharing (Chirinos 2022). Given the significant financial costs of consumer transgressions, companies grapple with identifying loss-prevention strategies to curtail this trend. A recent report revealed that 86% of companies spend more than 3% of their revenues on anti-transgression measures (Business Wire 2025). Despite their efforts in introducing new policies (such as Netflix's measures to limit password sharing and Costco's stricter enforcement of its nontransferable membership card policies), employee training, fraud detection, security tags, and surveillance cameras, companies still lose billions of dollars each year to transgressors. Anti-piracy campaigns have also been largely ineffective, suggesting that companies need to better understand the perceived legitimacy of this widespread phenomenon.

The present research aims to understand how consumers justify their transgressions against firms and identify factors that mitigate or intensify these behaviors. Drawing on the timeless tale of Robin Hood, the legendary outlaw who stands up against injustice, we demonstrate that consumers use the Robin Hood justification to legitimize their transgressions as a morally righteous way to stand up to injustice. Because what constitutes moral (vs. immoral) behaviors is interpreted differently across ideological beliefs and because political ideology informs how consumers view power dynamics in the marketplace, we examine how political ideology impacts consumers' transgression behavior and use of the Robin Hood justification. We also investigate how contextual cues, such as company size and transgression beneficiary, intensify or attenuate these behaviors. Our work builds on moral foundations theory to demonstrate how moral virtues are used by consumers to justify unethical and immoral acts. Specifically, building on research demonstrating how moral reasoning varies across the political spectrum (Goenka and van Osselaer 2023; Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009), we demonstrate that, consistent with the moral virtues of fairness and care, liberal (compared to conservative) consumers afford greater legitimacy to transgressing against large companies and transgressions that benefit someone in need.

More broadly, we examine consumer transgressions against companies within larger cultural and economic trends in the marketplace, such as consumer resentment toward large corporations, perceptions of increasing market concentration, and the proliferation of influencers who facilitate transgression methods and techniques. Within this cultural backdrop, we argue that the Robin Hood justification allows consumers to view their transgressive behaviors as a means of challenging injustice in the marketplace, especially when their actions are seen as a way to stand up against large companies. We further demonstrate how large companies can mitigate these justifications and transgressions.

Our work contributes to several streams of research. First, extant consumer research on marketplace transgressions has examined brand transgressions against consumers (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004; Cheng, White, and Chaplin 2012; Xu, Bolton, and Winterich 2021). We augment emerging work on consumer transgressions against companies (Kim et al. 2023; Rotman, Khamitov, and Connors 2018) by conceptualizing the Robin Hood justification and demonstrating its antecedents and consequences. Second, we contribute to research on consumer morality (Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Goenka and van Osselaer 2019, 2023) by showing how consumers use moral reasoning to justify unethical practices, specifically those targeted at companies. Third, we extend recent research examining how political ideology shapes consumption preferences and behavior (Fernandes et al. 2022; Lisjak and Ordabayeva 2023; Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018) by demonstrating how political ideology affects transgression behaviors and the use of the Robin Hood justification. Findings from this research can help marketers better understand consumer transgressions and the factors that intensify or attenuate the legitimacy of these behaviors.

## CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Extant research has extensively explored brand transgressions—situations in which a brand engages in a moral violation against consumers' expectations (Khamitov, Grégoire, and Suri 2020; Xu et al. 2021). Research in this domain ranges from documenting consumer–brand relationships in response to brands behaving badly (Aaker et al. 2004; Cheng et al. 2012; Park and Roedder John 2018) to corporate social (ir)responsibility and unethical practices (Gershoff, Kivetz, and Keinan 2012; Kang, Germann, and Grewal 2016; Stäbler and Fischer 2020). However, relatively scant research (Kim et al. 2023; Rotman et al. 2018) has explored situations in which

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consumers—rather than companies—are responsible for transgressive behaviors or moral violations.

Common transgressions against companies include wardrobing (i.e., returning used, nondefective merchandise) and abuse of return policies, coupon and price discount fraud, piracy, exploiting satisfaction-guaranteed policies, password and membership card sharing, and shoplifting and theft. These transgressions result in significant annual revenue loss (National Retail Federation 2024; No Fraud 2022), and as a response, companies have implemented stricter anti-transgression policies, revised their previously generous money-back guarantees, and employed new technologies and security measures to monitor and curb such behaviors. Importantly, these transgressions impact companies across various industries, including media and entertainment, software and technology, fashion and luxury, grocery stores, and online retailers.

## Robin Hood Justifications for Consumer Transgressions

In the present research, we examine how consumers feel about committing transgressions against firms and how they justify these unethical and sometimes illegal practices. We propose that transgressions could be considered an expression of consumers' moral values and convictions. Specifically, in some contexts, consumers may feel that their transgressions serve to challenge and even correct injustice in the marketplace—a phenomenon we term the Robin Hood justification.

We draw on the Robin Hood tale, in which the heroic outlaw stands up against injustice. The unique distinguishing feature of the narrative is Robin Hood's role as a hero who rebels against injustice by stealing from an unfair and powerful entity—restoring fairness in an unconventional way (e.g., described as bandit, outlaw, stealing, bending/breaking the rules, etc.). We argue that the Robin Hood tale can be a powerful influence, consistent with literature demonstrating that storytelling and narratives can influence how consumers process, interpret, remember, and understand information (Adaval and Wyer 1998), as well as how they evaluate and perceive brands (Avery et al. 2010; Paharia et al. 2011) and consumption situations (Bublitz et al. 2016; Escalas 2004; Russell and Schau 2014). We define the Robin Hood justification as legitimizing transgressions as a morally righteous way to stand up to injustice. When consumers use the Robin Hood justification, they may view themselves as noble and rebellious heroes rather than fraudulent and dishonest consumers.

The Robin Hood justification, as a form of moral reasoning, appeals to certain moral virtues. Moral foundations theory (Haidt 2007; Haidt and Graham 2007; Haidt and Joseph 2004) outlines five sets of moral intuitions that individuals use to evaluate the morality of behaviors and values: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. Although Robin Hood is regarded as taking actions that are unlawful, he is largely perceived to be a heroic character who protects vulnerable populations through his endeavors. The themes of fairness and care in moral foundations theory are applicable and closely linked to the Robin Hood narrative. The care moral foundation centers on the desire to care for and protect individuals—especially those that are most vulnerable. Relatedly, the fairness moral foundation is associated with reciprocity and justice, which is a central idea in the Robin Hood story. Recent research has further proposed breaking the fairness foundation into equality and proportionality (Atari et al. 2023), both alluding to distributive justice.

In the present research, we argue that these moral virtues can be used by consumers to legitimize unethical and immoral acts against companies, especially among consumers who are more sensitive to fairness, care, and distributive justice, as discussed next.

## Political Ideology and Robin Hood Justifications

To understand how consumer transgressions are legitimized, we argue that it is crucial to consider the role of political ideology in transgressions against firms. We propose that transgressions could be considered an expression of consumers' moral values and convictions, and we build on recent research demonstrating that consumers' political ideology predicts their attitudes and consumption behaviors in various domains (Adaval and Wyer 2022; Jung and Mittal 2020), including those not directly related to political discourse. These include status-signaling behavior (Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018), recycling and environmental sustainability (Kidwell, Farmer, and Hardesty 2013), welfare enrollment (Goenka and Thomas 2022), perceptions of cultural appropriation (Lin et al. 2024), preference for inferior products (Lisjak and Ordabayeva 2023), reactions to bodily markets (Goenka and van Osselaer 2023), and service satisfaction (Fernandes et al. 2022; Jung et al. 2017; Shepherd, Athar, and Zaboli 2024).

Prior work demonstrates that moral reasoning is strongly associated with political ideology (Goenka and van Osselaer 2023; Graham et al. 2009; Kivikangas et al. 2021). Specifically, Graham et al. (2009) found that conservatives rely more on binding moral foundations (loyalty, authority, and purity), which focus on binding groups together and emphasize the good of the group (rather than individuals) as well as the importance of order and cohesion. On the other hand, liberals adhere more to individualizing moral foundations (care and fairness) that highlight the moral importance of the rights of individuals and are associated with the likelihood of detecting and reacting to harm caused to individuals. Given the link between the Robin Hood justification and the fairness and care moral virtues, we predict that liberal consumers will be more

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likely to utilize the Robin Hood justification for consumer transgressions against companies.

These predictions are consistent with related work on political ideology, further supporting the strong association between liberal identity and fairness concerns. Research on system justification, fair market ideology, and social dominance orientation consistently demonstrates that liberals tend to perceive more unfairness in the marketplace and believe that present social systems do not equitably serve all groups. In contrast, conservatives are more likely to subscribe to beliefs in a just world and perceive a free economic market as more just (Jost et al. 2003; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004; Ordabayeva, Cakanlar, and Fernandes 2023). Conservatives also score higher on social dominance orientation (Pratto et al. 1994; Wilson and Sibley 2013), view current systems as fair and legitimate, and use economic system justification (Jost and Thompson 2000), leading them to be less likely to adopt the Robin Hood justification—as they perceive less injustice to be challenged and corrected. Moreover, consistent with their adherence to binding moral foundations that value authority and cohesion, we predict that conservatives will be more likely to view these transgressions as moral violations rather than morally justified behaviors. As discussed next, we expect that, consistent with the Robin Hood narrative, these predictions will occur when the target of the transgression is a large company but not when the target company is small.

*Target of the Transgression.* The target of the transgression is prominent in the Robin Hood narrative. The antagonist of the story (i.e., target of the transgression) is the rich and powerful king from whom Robin Hood steals. We argue that in the context of consumer transgressions, large corporations are viewed as entities that hold immense power—much like the rich king in the Robin Hood tale. Therefore, we expect company size to be used as a key criterion for evaluating when it is legitimate or justifiable to transgress against a company. Large companies are perceived as entities that hold immense financial resources and therefore power—which is why prior research shows that consumers associate supporting small companies with the restoration of justice (Acar et al. 2021) and why positioning brands against larger competitors can be an optimal strategy (Keinan, Avery, and Paharia 2010; Paharia et al. 2011; Paharia, Avery, and Keinan 2014). We therefore argue that transgressions against large companies are more likely to be seen as morally righteous and acceptable because this is more seemingly associated with justice restoration (compared with transgressions against small companies).

Importantly, we predict that company size will be especially relevant for liberal (vs. conservative) consumers, who are more sensitive to injustice, fairness, and inequality in the marketplace. We predict that conservatives will be less likely to justify transgressions against large companies because they tend to view the current state of economic and social systems as more legitimate and just (Jost and Thompson 2000). We further predict that when the target company is small in size or when company size is not mentioned, the difference between liberals' and conservatives' likelihoods of engaging in transgressions will be attenuated. Building on recent research demonstrating that consumers low on power distance belief feel greater empathy for victims (Xu et al. 2021), liberals' transgression behaviors will be reduced when company size is not large because small companies are viewed as more vulnerable and less powerful. Thus, we predict that the Robin Hood justification will mediate liberals versus conservatives' intentions to engage in transgressions, depending on company size:

> **H1:** When the target firm is large in size, liberal consumers will be more likely to engage in transgressions than conservative consumers. This effect will be attenuated when the firm is small in size, or when firm size is unspecified (control condition).
>
> **H2:** When the target firm is large in size, the effect of political ideology on engagement in transgressions will be mediated by the Robin Hood justification: liberal (vs. conservative) consumers will be more likely to use the Robin Hood justification when the firm is large in size. This effect will be attenuated when the firm is small in size, or when firm size is unspecified (control condition).

To further contextualize why company size triggers liberals' (vs. conservatives') use of the Robin Hood justification and increased transgression behavior, we demonstrate that these justifications are driven by negative perceptions of large (vs. small) companies. Large companies or those with high market power are often viewed with skepticism and can be seen as less fair and more exploitive (Lu et al. 2020). This anti-corporate consumer sentiment (Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Paharia et al. 2014; Thompson and Arsel 2004) is echoed in public discourse, with more than 75% of Americans reporting being dissatisfied with the size, power, and influence of major corporations (Gallup 2024) and only 6% of consumers viewing large companies as more ethical compared to 50% for small companies (Orth 2023).

Consistent with moral foundations theory, we predict that liberals' (vs. conservatives') greater sensitivity to unfairness and distributive justice will evoke stronger negative inferences about large companies' moral character. Due to these prevailing moral intuitions, in contexts of power imbalance, liberals may view the powerful entity as immoral and perceive the less powerful as moral. These predictions are supported by recent research and public opinion surveys highlighting liberals' negative perceptions of corporate brands (Reich and Hanson 2024) and dislike of big business (Gallup 2022, 2024), as well as heightened attention to power dynamics in the marketplace (Lin et al.

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2024). Thus, we predict that when company size is large, liberals (vs. conservatives) will perceive the company as imbuing negative moral character (i.e., viewing the company as morally corrupt, exploitative, and unethical), invoking the use of the Robin Hood justification and increasing intentions to engage in the transgression:

> **H3:** The Robin Hood justification will be mediated by perceptions of the target firm as having negative moral character. When the target firm is large in size, liberal consumers will be more likely (than conservatives) to view the firm as having negative moral character, thus invoking the Robin Hood justification.

*Eliminating the Company Size Effect.* Given the link between company size and the use of the Robin Hood justification, transgressions against large companies are more prevalent and acceptable—and more challenging to address—than transgressions against smaller companies. Our studies explore factors that mitigate consumer transgressions. For example, many large national chains operate under a franchise model, in which individual business locations are owned and operated by franchisees rather than the corporation itself (Combs, Ketchen, and Short 2011; Kaufmann and Dant 1996). Some of the most recognized and ubiquitous brands, such as McDonald's, 7-Eleven, Zara, Pizza Hut, Dunkin, UPS, and Planet Fitness, operate under franchises, in which each individual location has an owner that oversees its day-to-day operations. Whereas large corporations might be perceived as impersonal, amorphous entities, emphasizing that they operate under a franchise structure can help make the company feel smaller, more localized, and more relatable. Although franchise locations use the larger brand's name, each location operates more like a small business, allowing each franchisee to make key decisions. As such, we predict that consumers will be less likely to transgress against a large company when the franchise model is emphasized. Moreover, in line with moral foundations theory, this consideration will be especially effective for liberal (vs. conservative) consumers, who will be more receptive to an emphasis on the independent franchisees rather than the parent corporation. The emphasis on a franchise model steers attention to the individual owners, who would be impacted by transgressions rather than the impact on the large corporation. A franchise model would represent a deaggregation of wealth, in which profits are distributed across smaller, independent operators rather than concentrated in a single, large entity (e.g., the large company). This notion may lead consumers (especially liberals) to perceive the company as less powerful and, therefore, a less legitimate target of the transgression. Thus, we predict that describing the franchise model of a large chain can help reduce intentions to engage in transgressions against them.

> **H4:** Emphasizing the franchise model of a large chain will reduce liberal consumers' transgression intentions and use of the Robin Hood justification. Although liberals are more likely to engage in transgressions against large national chains than conservatives, this effect will be attenuated when the large national chain has a franchise model.

Furthermore, because consumers (especially liberals) are more likely to ascribe negative moral character to large corporations, explicitly demonstrating positive moral character (e.g., through implementing customer-friendly policies, engaging in corporate social responsibility, etc.) may help reduce transgression behaviors. Highlighting the ways in which companies make an effort to be ethical and generous to their customers can offset feelings of unfairness and animosity felt toward large corporations. Such displays of generosity may be interpreted as countering the corporate greed often associated with large companies, restoring a sense of fairness and morality, especially for liberal consumers. This prediction aligns with existing research that has demonstrated that returnless product return policies (i.e., an example of a generous, customer-friendly policy), which signal trust in consumers and can enhance perceptions of brand warmth and increase brand support (Costello and Bechler 2025). Therefore, we predict that communicating a firm's commitment to ethical practices will attenuate liberals' versus conservatives' differential response to large companies and transgression intentions. This moderating factor not only provides additional support for our proposed serial mediation (the perceived moral characteristics of the company) but also identifies practical implications for large companies trying to mitigate consumer transgressions.

> **H5:** Emphasizing a firm's customer-friendly policies will reduce liberals' transgression intentions, especially when firm size is large. Although liberals are more likely to engage in transgressions against large firms than conservatives, this effect will be attenuated when the large firm implements customer-friendly policies.

*Beneficiary of the Transgression.* Consistent with the proposed Robin Hood justification, we further predict that liberals will be more likely to justify transgressions against large companies when certain contextual triggers are present (i.e., those that correspond with the fairness and care moral foundations). Beyond company size and the firm's characteristics and behaviors, we predict that the type of beneficiary of the transgression may impact its perceived legitimacy. When the transgression is viewed as an action that helps restore fairness and benefits the welfare of others, especially those who have limited means or individuals experiencing unfortunate situations, it will be perceived as more acceptable and justifiable. Consistent with prior findings that liberals are more likely to detect and react to harm inflicted on and injustice toward vulnerable populations (Graham et al. 2009; Lin et al. 2024; Xu et al. 2021), we predict that compared to conservatives, liberals

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will be more impacted by information about the beneficiary of the transgression. Specifically, when the transgressor comes from a low-income (vs. high-income) background, liberals (vs. conservatives) will be more likely to see the transgression as an action that serves to correct the existing unfairness and support the transgressive behavior.

> **H6:** When the beneficiary of the transgression is an individual from a low-income background, liberal (vs. conservative) consumers will be more likely to support the transgression. This effect will be attenuated when the beneficiary is an individual from a high-income background.

Figure 1 summarizes our conceptual model, and table 1 provides an overview of the studies that test our hypotheses across various consumption contexts and product categories.

## OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We examine our proposed conceptual model across different consumer transgressions and diverse consumption contexts, including consumer piracy, coupon fraud, misuse of on-site amenities, and abuse of the company's return and satisfaction-guaranteed policies. Study 1 examines how the interaction between political ideology and company size (small company vs. large company vs. control condition in which company size is not specified) impacts consumers' transgression behavior and use of the Robin Hood justification. Study 2 extends these results to consequential choice, and study 3 demonstrates that the interaction effect between political ideology and company size is driven by inferences about the moral character of the company—liberals (compared to conservatives) are more likely to perceive large corporations as morally corrupt and consequently justify transgressions against them. Building on these insights, studies 4 and 5 test factors that could mitigate consumer transgressions. Study 4 examines how liberals' (vs. conservatives') transgression behavior is impacted by emphasizing a large chain's franchise model. Study 5 tests the impact of highlighting a customer-friendly policy and further investigates the proposed psychological mechanism with mediation by moderation. Study 6 investigates another moderating factor impacting the Robin Hood justification, the beneficiary of the transgression. In this study, we show that liberals (vs. conservatives) are more likely to justify transgressions by consumers from a low-income (vs. high-income) background. Across all studies, we recruited US participants; our sampling criterion included a balanced number of conservatives and liberals, and participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions.

## STUDY 1: THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY AND COMPANY SIZE ON TRANSGRESSION BEHAVIOR

Study 1 compares liberal versus conservatives' transgression behavior and use of the Robin Hood justification. We predict that when the target of the transgression is a large company, liberal consumers will be more likely to indicate intentions to engage in the transgression than conservatives. However, we expect this effect to attenuate when the target of the transgression is a small company or when company size is unspecified, as liberals can no longer use a Robin Hood justification. Accordingly, we test whether the interaction effect between political ideology and company size is mediated by the Robin Hood justification.

### Method

Participants were 412 conservatives and 403 liberals recruited from Prolific ($M_{age}$ = 39.0, 56.0% female) for a 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 3 (company size: small company vs. control vs. large company) between-subjects design. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: large company, small company, and a control condition in which company size was not specified. All participants were asked to imagine coming across a website about shopping tips. To manipulate company size, participants in the large-company condition were told that the website was titled, "The Frugal Shopper: What Smart Shoppers Should Know about Large Multibillion-Dollar Corporations," whereas participants in the small-company condition were told that the website was titled, "The Frugal Shopper: What Smart Shoppers Should Know about Small Companies." Participants in the control condition were told that the website was titled, "The Frugal Shopper: What Smart Shoppers Should Know." All participants were then told that the website shares tips on applying a single-use coupon multiple times on the same product to obtain it practically for free.

To measure transgression intentions, after reading about the website, participants responded to three bipolar items measuring their intentions to use the website's tips: "I would not use it" (1) to "I would use it" (7), "I would not be interested in reading it" (1) to "I would be interested in reading it" (7), and "I would discourage others from using it" (1) to "I would encourage others to use it" (7; $\alpha$ = 0.91). Next, three items measured Robin Hood justification on a seven-point scale anchored at "people do not have/people have a moral right to do it," "it is a bad/good way to respond to injustice in the marketplace," and "it is a bad/good way to stand up against injustice" ($\alpha = 0.94$). Finally, political ideology was measured using both a continuous measure, ranging from "very liberal" (1) to "very conservative" (7), and a dichotomous measure, asking whether they lean more toward the "liberal" or "conservative" side of the political spectrum. These measures of political ideology were highly correlated ($r = 0.92$, $p < .001$). We use the dichotomous measure in all subsequent analyses; similar results were obtained with the continuous measure.

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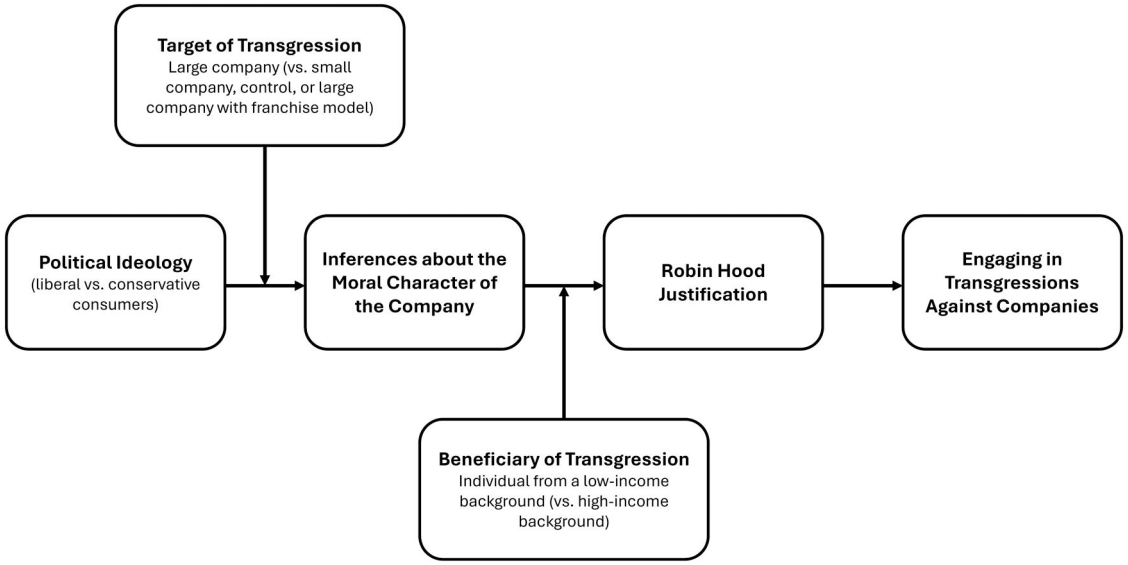
**FIGURE 1**

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK.




## Results

*Intentions to Engage in the Transgression.* All analyses were based on a 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 3 (company size: small company vs. control vs. large company) between-subjects design. Central to our theorizing and consistent with hypothesis 1, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) on intentions to engage in transgressions revealed a significant interaction ($F(2, 809) = 7.65$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.019$). The analysis also revealed a significant main effect of company size ($M_{\text{small-company}} = 3.05$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 3.34$ vs. $M_{\text{large-company}} = 3.79$, $F(2, 809) = 9.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.022$). There was no main effect of political ideology ($p = .856$). As shown in figure 2 (top panel), in the large-company condition, liberals indicated higher intentions to engage in the transgression ($M = 4.18$) than conservatives ($M = 3.44$, $t(270) = 2.92$, $p = .004$). In the control condition, however, there was no significant difference between liberals ($M = 3.22$) and conservatives ($M = 3.46$, $p = .352$), and in the small-company condition, liberals indicated lower intentions to engage in the transgression ($M = 2.76$) than conservatives ($M = 3.35$, $t(263) = 2.41$, $p = .016$).

Figure 2 further demonstrates that liberals' transgression intentions were significantly impacted by company size ($F(2, 400) = 16.97$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.078$). Liberals in the large-company condition ($M = 4.18$) indicated higher intentions to engage in the transgression compared to both the control ($M = 3.22$, $t(262) = 3.72$, $p < .001$) and small-company ($M = 2.76$, $t(255) = 5.67$, $p < .001$) conditions. Liberals in the control condition indicated marginally higher intentions to engage in the transgressions than those in the small-company condition ($t(272) = 1.96$, $p = .051$). In contrast, conservatives' transgression behavior was not significantly impacted by company size ($p \geq .679$).

*Robin Hood Justification.* We next conducted a similar two-way ANOVA on the Robin Hood justification, which also revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(2, 809) = 9.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.024$). A significant main effect of company size ($M_{\text{small-company}} = 2.52$ vs. $M_{\text{control}} = 2.92$ vs. $M_{\text{large-company}} = 3.31$, $F(2, 809) = 11.91$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.029$) also emerged. There was no main effect of political ideology ($p = .581$). In the large-company condition, liberals indicated higher agreement with the Robin Hood justification ($M = 3.75$) than conservatives ($M = 2.91$, $t(252) = 3.30$, $p = .001$), as shown in the bottom panel of figure 2. In the control condition, there was no significant difference between liberals ($M = 2.92$) and conservatives ($M = 2.91$, $p = .996$), and in the small-company condition, liberals indicated lower agreement with the Robin Hood justification ($M = 2.21$) than conservatives ($M = 2.83$, $t(256) = 2.83$, $p = .005$).

Liberals' use of the Robin Hood justification was significantly impacted by company size ($F(2, 400) = 21.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.096$). Liberals in the large-company condition ($M = 3.75$) indicated higher agreement with the Robin Hood justification compared to both the control ($M = 2.92$, $t(249) = 3.26$, $p = .001$) and small-company ($M = 2.21$, $t(231) = 6.35$, $p < .001$) conditions. Liberals

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**TABLE 1**

OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

| Study | Objectives and hypotheses | Type of transgression | Key results |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Study 1:** the impact of political ideology and company size on transgression behavior | Test hypothesis 1 (interaction between political ideology and company size moderator) and hypothesis 2 (mediator—Robin Hood justification). | Coupon fraud (applying a single-use coupon multiple times on a single product to obtain it practically for free) | When company size is large, liberals (vs. conservatives) are more likely to transgress and are more likely to use the Robin Hood justification. This effect reverses when the company is small—liberals (vs. conservatives) are less likely to transgress against the company. |
| **Study 2:** choice of website that facilitates or advocates against consumer transgressions | Test hypothesis 1 (interaction between political ideology and company size). Examine when consumers support versus oppose transgressions against firms. | Promotion abuse (taking advantage of discounts intended for others) and piracy (obtaining free access to paid content) | When the target company is large, liberals choose the website facilitating (rather than opposing) transgressions. In contrast, conservative choose to support the website advocating against transgressions. When the target is a small company, both groups oppose transgressions. |
| **Study 3:** how company size impacts inferences about the moral character of the company | Test hypothesis 1 (interaction between political ideology and company size), hypothesis 2 (Robin Hood justification), and hypothesis 3 (serial mediation—moral character of the firm). | Restaurant patrons engaging in transgressions (e.g., not being charged for all items, using expired coupons, taking extra items) | Liberals (vs. conservatives) ascribe negative moral character to large firms, leading to the use of the Robin Hood justification. This effect (significant difference between liberals and conservatives) attenuates when the company is small. |
| **Study 4:** eliminating the company size effect by emphasizing a franchise model | Test hypothesis 1 (interaction between political ideology and company size) and hypothesis 4 (emphasizing the franchise model of large retail chain). | Retail shoppers engaging in wardrobing (returning an item after use), not being charged for items, and using deals intended for others | Emphasizing that a large company operates under a franchise business model reduces transgression intentions and attenuates the observed differences between liberals and conservatives in transgressive behaviors toward large companies. |
| **Study 5:** examining the impact of customer-friendly policies on transgression behavior | Test hypothesis 1 (interaction between political ideology and company size) and hypothesis 5 (customer-friendly policy). | Fitness center customers taking home amenities and toiletries that are intended to be used on-site only | Emphasizing a company's customer-friendly policy reduces transgression intentions and attenuates the observed differences between liberal and conservatives in transgressive behaviors toward large companies. |
| **Study 6:** the role of transgression beneficiary | Test hypothesis 2 (Robin Hood justification) and hypothesis 6 (beneficiary of transgression). | Abusing satisfaction-guaranteed policy (false claims/complaints) | Liberals perceive transgressions by consumers from a low-income background as more justifiable compared to conservatives. The effect attenuates when the transgressor comes from a high-income background. |
| Netnographic analysis of discussion forums on piracy (in General Discussion) | Examine how consumers justify their transgressions in an unobtrusive and naturalistic environment. | Pirating video games, movies, and software | Consumers use Robin Hood justifications and emphasize companies' size and moral character. |

in the control condition indicated higher agreement with the Robin Hood justification compared to than those in the small-company condition ($t(264) = 3.29$, $p = .001$). For conservatives, however, there were no significant differences in using the Robin Hood justification between conditions ($p \geq .730$).

*Moderated Mediation.* To test the mediating role of the Robin Hood justification, we performed a moderated

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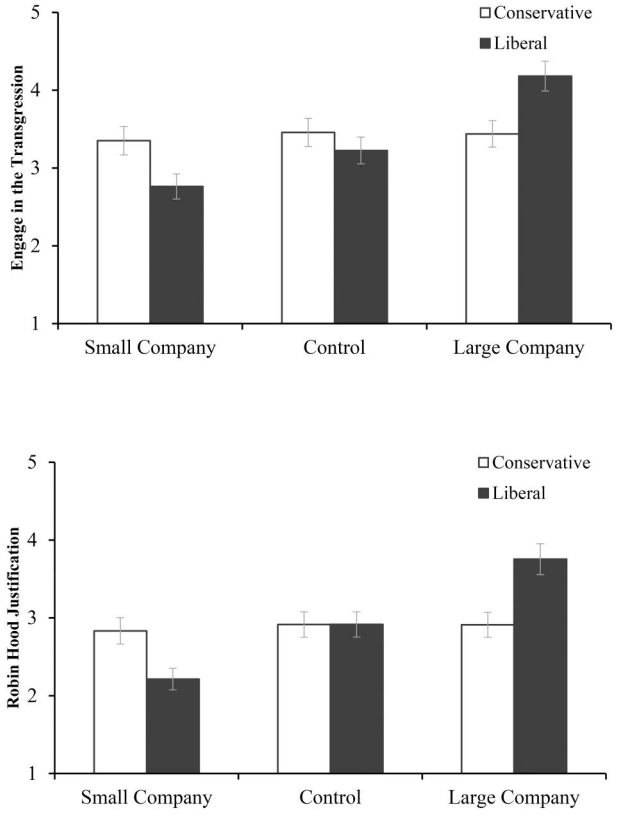
**FIGURE 2**

STUDY 1: INTENTIONS TO ENGAGE IN THE TRANSGRESSION (TOP PANEL) AND ROBIN HOOD JUSTIFICATION (BOTTOM PANEL).




mediation analysis at a confidence level of 95% with 10,000 bootstrap resamples (model 8; Hayes 2022). With political ideology as the independent variable ($X$), company size as the moderator ($W$), Robin Hood justification as the mediator ($M$), and intentions to engage in the transgression as the dependent measure ($Y$), the analysis revealed a significant index of moderated mediation ($a \times b = 0.57$, standard error [SE] = 0.13; 95% confidence interval [CI] = [0.317 to 0.840]), supporting hypothesis 2. This effect was conditional such that the moderated-mediation path was (a) significant and positive in the large-company condition ($\beta = 0.63$, SE = 0.18; 95% CI = [0.282 to 0.989]), (b) non-significant in the control condition (95% CI = [–0.150 to 0.269]), and (c) significant and negative in the small-company condition ($\beta = –0.51$, SE = 0.16; 95% CI = [–0.827 to –0.203]). These patterns demonstrate that when the company is large in size, liberals are more likely than conservatives to use Robin Hood justification and thereby more likely to engage in the transgression. However, this effect attenuates when the company is small or unspecified.

*Ancillary Analyses.* We conducted additional analyses to assess the robustness of the results. First, we examined whether the results hold using the continuous measure of political ideology (1 = "very liberal" to 7 = "very conservative"). A regression analysis with political ideology as a continuous variable ($M = 3.97$), company size as a variable coded 1 for small company, 2 for control, and 3 for large company, and the interaction between them, yielded the same pattern of results. For both the dependent variable and the mediator, we obtain significant interaction effects ($p < .001$ for both), consistent with the analyses conducted with the dichotomous measure of political ideology. Second, we examined whether the results hold while controlling for age and gender. We repeated the ANOVA analyses with gender and age as covariates and obtained the same pattern of results, with significant interaction effects for both the dependent variable and mediator ($p < .001$). We conducted similar robustness analyses in all other studies, and the substantive results remained.

## Discussion

Study 1 demonstrates that liberals are more likely to transgress against large companies compared to conservatives and are more likely to use the Robin Hood justification when the target company is large. However, this effect attenuates when the company size is unspecified or small: there was no difference between conservatives and liberals in the unspecified company size condition and lower transgression intentions among liberals (vs. conservatives) when company size is small. The reversal in the small-company condition (liberals less rather than more likely to transgress compared to conservatives) is consistent with recent research demonstrating that consumers low on power distance belief feel greater empathy for victims (Xu et al. 2021). The observed reversal suggests that liberals have greater empathy toward small (but not large) companies compared to conservatives. They may also exhibit greater sensitivity toward protecting small companies, which are viewed as more vulnerable and less powerful and thus as a less legitimate target of the transgression. Although liberal consumers were strongly impacted by company size, conservative consumers were not influenced by the company size manipulation (none of the pairwise differences were significant). This finding suggests that liberal consumers are more sensitive to power dynamics in the marketplace. Consistent with research on moral foundations, conservatives may rely on binding moral foundations (e.g., whether the transgression violates rules or company policies), whereas liberals adhere to individualizing moral foundations (care and fairness), protecting the less powerful. In study 2, we examine real choice of supporting a website that facilitates consumer transgressions. Building on study 1, we predict that although liberals will be more likely to support the transgressions website in the large-company

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condition compared to conservatives, the effect will reverse for small companies, for which liberals will be less likely to support consumer transgressions than conservatives.

## STUDY 2: CHOICE OF WEBSITE THAT FACILITATES OR ADVOCATES AGAINST CONSUMER TRANSGRESSIONS

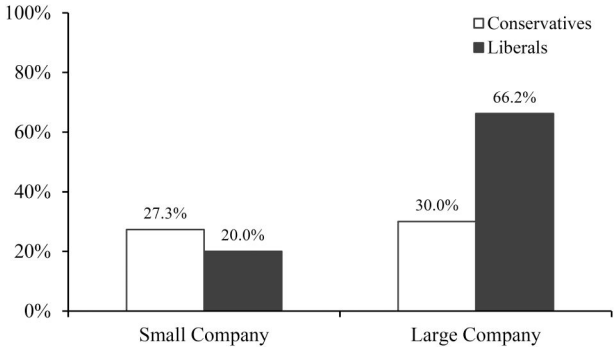
Study 1 examined consumers' interest in using a website that facilitates transgression behaviors. In study 2, we describe two websites: one that facilitates transgressions against firms (i.e., informs consumers about transgression opportunities) and one that advocates against these transgressive behaviors. We then examine respondents' consequential choice of supporting either a website (i.e., crowdfunding; Chang, Mukherjee, and Chattopadhyay 2023; Mukherjee and Chang 2019) that facilitates transgressions or a website that advocates against consumer fraud and the abuse of company policies.

### Method

Participants were 300 conservatives and 301 liberals recruited from Prolific ($M_{age}$ = 40.9, 58.9% female) for a 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 2 (company size: small company vs. large company) between-subjects design. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: large versus small company. All participants read that we are interested in whether they would support or oppose taking advantage of loopholes in companies' rules and policies (e.g., taking advantage of discounts intended for others or obtaining free access to paid content). They then read that although such practices save consumers money, they violate the rules and policies of the company and impact the profits of companies. To manipulate company size, the companies were either described as large corporations or small companies. Participants were then asked to indicate which website they prefer to crowdfund. Specifically, they were informed that one participant would be selected and given $10 of crowdfunding money to fund one of these websites. Participants indicated their choice between a website that helps consumers engage in these practices by informing them about such loopholes that can save them money when buying from these companies ("transgression website," coded as 1) and a website that advocates against consumer fraud and abuse of company policies when buying from these companies ("anti-transgression website," coded as 2). They were also given the option to indicate they were not sure (coded as 3). All participants, including those who indicated they were not sure, were included in the following analysis.

**FIGURE 3**

STUDY 2: PERCENTAGE OF PARTICIPANTS CHOOSING THE TRANSGRESSION WEBSITE.




### Results

*Website Choice.* A chi-square test confirmed that the company size manipulation significantly impacted participants' choice between a website that facilitates transgression behavior or one that advocates against such behavior ($\chi^2(2) = 18.45$, $p < .001$). Specifically, in the large-company condition, 48.2% of respondents chose to crowdfund the transgression website, 38.2% chose to crowdfund the anti-transgression website, and 13.6% indicated they were not sure. Conversely, in the small-company condition, only 23.7% of respondents chose to crowdfund the transgression website, 60.7% chose to crowdfund the anti-transgression website, and the remaining 15.7% indicated they were not sure.

Consistent with hypothesis 1, in the large-company condition, there was a significant difference between conservatives and liberals ($\chi^2(2) = 41.26$, $p < .001$). The majority of liberals chose to support the transgression website (66.2%), as shown in figure 3. A much smaller percentage of liberals chose to support the anti-transgression website (22.5%). In contrast, a majority of conservative participants supported the anti-transgression website (54.0%), and a smaller percentage chose to crowdfund the transgression website (30.0%).

In the small-company condition ($\chi^2(2) = 6.58$, $p = .037$), a majority of both conservatives (62.0%) and liberals (59.3%) chose to crowdfund the anti-transgression website. Consistent with study 1, a smaller percentage of liberals (20.0%) chose to support the transgression website compared to conservatives (27.3%).

### Discussion

Study 2 examined promotion abuse and piracy, building on study 1, to demonstrate the impact of company size on real choice. The results revealed that when the targeted

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companies are small in size, the majority of both liberal and conservative consumers would opt to support an anti-transgression website, with a smaller percentage of liberals (vs. conservatives) choosing to support the transgression website. When company size is large, however, we see that the same pattern of results only holds for conservatives. In contrast, the majority of liberals in the large-company condition chose to support the transgression website. In study 3, we further examine transgression intentions and the Robin Hood justification, as well as testing for a serial mediation, investigating whether liberal and conservatives' diverging behaviors and justifications are driven by differences in their perceptions of large and small companies.

## STUDY 3: HOW COMPANY SIZE IMPACTS INFERENCES ABOUT THE MORAL CHARACTER OF THE COMPANY

Study 3 tests the underlying inferences about the moral character of a company that might trigger the use of the Robin Hood justification. We predict that when the target company is large, liberal consumers will be more likely to view the company as having negative moral character, thus invoking the Robin Hood justification. In contrast, we predict that this reaction would not occur when the target company is small. We also test the full mediation path to further examine how the use of the Robin Hood justification impacts intentions to engage in the transgression, testing hypothesis 1, hypothesis 2, and hypothesis 3.

### Method

Participants were 302 conservatives and 300 liberals recruited from Prolific ($M_{age}$ = 34.8, 52.7% female). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: large versus small company. In the large-company condition, participants were asked to imagine a national fast-food chain that makes billions of dollars in profits every year. In the small-company condition, participants were asked to imagine a small, independent local fast-food restaurant. All participants were next provided with a list of behaviors that may technically be against the company's policies, even though many consumers engage in them: "take extra seasoning or spices to use at home," "take extra napkins to have in your car/bag," "take small condiments and use them for food not purchased at the restaurant," "not correct them if they forgot to charge you for something," and "use an expired coupon to get a meal discount." They were asked to indicate how likely they were to engage in each of the transgressions on a seven-point scale from "not at all likely" (1) to "very likely" (7), which served as the key dependent measure ($\alpha = 0.81$). Next, participants responded to the three Robin Hood justification items ($\alpha = 0.86$) using the same items as in study 1. Finally, three items assessed inferences about the moral character of the company, testing hypothesis 3. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they think the restaurant is morally corrupt, exploitative, and unethical, each on a scale from "not at all" (1) to "to a great extent" (7; $\alpha = 0.93$).

### Results

*Intentions to Engage in the Transgression.* A 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 2 (condition: small vs. large company) ANOVA on intentions to engage in transgressions revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 598) = 7.17$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2_p = 0.012$), supporting hypothesis 1. Significant main effects of political ideology ($M_{conservative} = 3.06$ vs. $M_{liberal} = 3.41$, $F(1, 598) = 10.77$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.018$) and company size ($M_{small\text{-}company} = 2.84$ vs. $M_{large\text{-}company} = 3.64$, $F(1, 598) = 46.40$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.072$) also emerged. In the large-company condition, liberals indicated higher intentions to engage in the transgression ($M = 4.01$) compared to conservatives ($M = 3.30$, $t(296) = 3.89$, $p < .001$), as shown in the top panel of figure 4. In the small-company condition, however, there is no significant difference between liberals ($M = 2.88$) and conservatives ($M = 2.81$, $p = .639$).

*Robin Hood Justification.* We next conducted a similar two-way ANOVA on the Robin Hood justification, which revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 598) = 14.44$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.024$), supporting hypothesis 2. The analysis also revealed a significant main effect of company size ($M_{small\text{-}company} = 3.55$ vs. $M_{large\text{-}company} = 4.00$, $F(1, 598) = 10.43$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.017$). The main effect of political ideology was not significant ($M_{conservative} = 3.75$ vs. $M_{liberal} = 3.80$, $p = .603$). In the large-company condition, liberals indicated higher agreement with the Robin Hood justification ($M = 4.33$) than conservatives ($M = 3.71$, $t(296) = 2.99$, $p = .003$). On the other hand, in the small-company condition, liberals indicated lower agreement with the Robin Hood justification ($M = 3.32$) compared to conservatives ($M = 3.79$, $t(283) = 2.36$, $p = .019$), as shown in the middle panel of figure 4.

*Moral Character of the Company.* A two-way ANOVA on the moral character of the company yielded a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 598) = 17.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .029$), supporting hypothesis 3. The analysis also revealed significant main effects of political ideology ($M_{conservative} = 2.88$ vs. $M_{liberal} = 3.17$, $F(1, 598) = 7.08$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2_p = 0.012$) and company size ($M_{small\text{-}company} = 2.56$ vs. $M_{large\text{-}company} = 3.49$, $F(1, 598) = 54.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.083$). In the large-company condition, liberals held more negative inferences about the moral character of the company ($M = 3.95$) than conservatives ($M = 3.07$, $t(296) = 4.56$, $p < .001$), as illustrated in the bottom panel of figure 4. In the small-company condition, there was no significant

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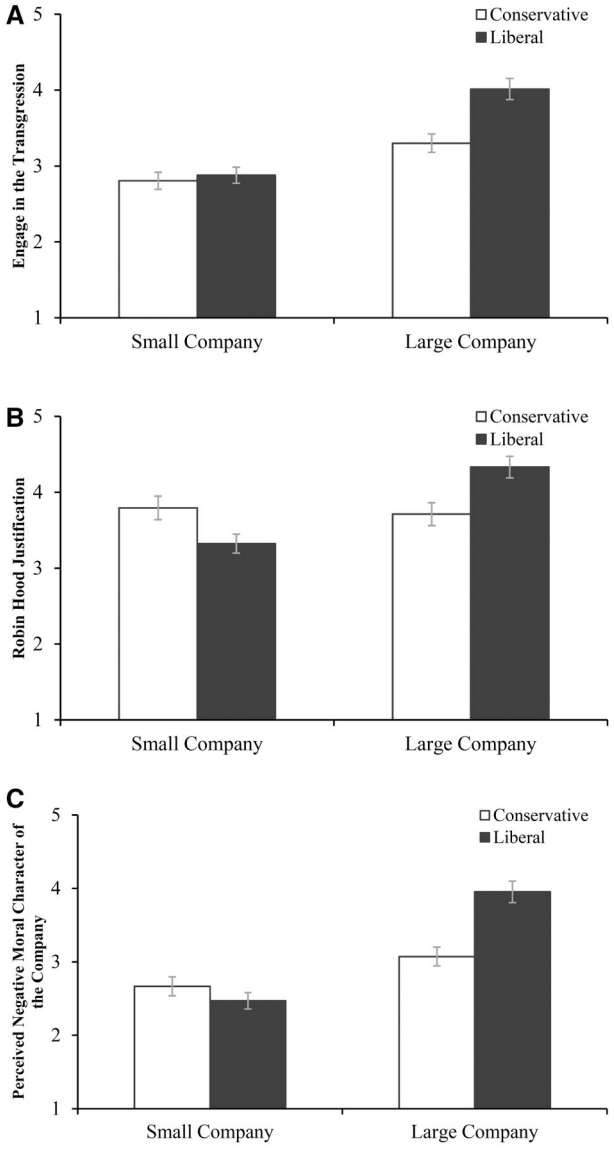
**FIGURE 4**

STUDY 3: INTENTIONS TO ENGAGE IN THE TRANSGRESSION (TOP PANEL), ROBIN HOOD JUSTIFICATION (MIDDLE PANEL), AND PERCEIVED MORAL CHARACTER OF THE COMPANY (BOTTOM PANEL).




difference between liberals ($M = 2.47$) and conservatives ($M = 2.67$, $p = .247$).

*Moderated Serial Mediation.* To test the underlying mechanism, we performed a moderated serial mediation analysis at a confidence level of 95% with 10,000 bootstrap resamples (model 85; Hayes 2022), with political ideology as the independent variable ($X$), company size as the moderator ($W$), moral character of the company as the first mediator ($M_1$), Robin Hood justification as the second mediator ($M_2$), and intentions to engage in the transgression as the dependent measure ($Y$). The analysis revealed a significant index of moderated serial mediation ($\beta = 0.07$, SE = 0.03; 95% CI = [0.030 to 0.127]). The moderated serial mediation path is conditional such that there is a significant index in the large-company condition ($\beta = 0.06$, SE = 0.02; 95% CI = [0.026 to 0.101]) but not in the small-company condition (95% CI = [–0.039 to 0.009]).

## Discussion

Study 3 demonstrated that the use of the Robin Hood justification is triggered by consumers' inferences about the moral character of the company, depending on whether the target company is large or small. In particular, the results revealed that liberal (vs. conservative) consumers were more likely to utilize the Robin Hood justification when the company size is large, further supporting hypothesis 2. The results of a moderated serial mediation analysis also provided process evidence for the role of perceived negative moral character of the company in determining when the Robin Hood justification is used, supporting hypothesis 3. In study 4, we build on our findings regarding the impact of company size to examine whether highlighting a franchise business model could reduce intentions to engage in transgressions, such as returning an item to the store after using it.

# STUDY 4: ELIMINATING THE COMPANY SIZE EFFECT BY EMPHASIZING A FRANCHISE MODEL

Many large retail and restaurant chains operate under a franchise business model. Franchise businesses are prevalent across industries including fast food (e.g., McDonald's and Taco Bell), gas stations and convenience stores (e.g., 7-Eleven and Shell Gas), apparel retail (e.g., Gap and Zara), gyms and fitness studios (e.g., Planet Fitness and Pure Barre), and coffee and ice cream chains (e.g., Dunkin and Baskin-Robbins), among others (e.g., UPS, ACE Hardware, and Re/Max). In study 4, we examine how emphasizing this franchise model affects consumer transgressions against large chains, testing hypothesis 4. Because franchise models have individual business owners operating in different locations, highlighting this business model should reduce the tendency for consumers to view the business as a large corporation. This study compares liberal and conservatives' intentions to engage in transgressions when the franchise model of a large company is highlighted, compared to the large-company condition in which franchising is not mentioned. To examine the relative effectiveness of emphasizing the franchise, we also include a small-company condition. Study 4 explores consumer

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transgressions in the context of apparel retail. This consumption context lends itself to costly transgression behaviors, including wardrobing (e.g., returning a clothing item to the store after using it) and the fraudulent use of store promotions (e.g., using a discount or promotion intended for others).

## Method

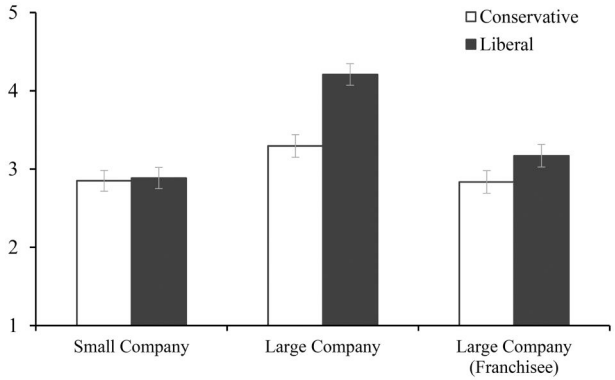
Participants were 397 conservatives and 403 liberals recruited from Prolific ($M_{age}$ = 43.4, 61.9% female) for a 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 3 (condition: small company vs. large company vs. large company with franchise model) between-subjects design. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: small company, large company, and large company with a franchise model ("franchise"). Participants in the small-company condition were asked to imagine they were shopping for clothes at a small, independently owned retail store. In the large-company condition, participants were asked to imagine shopping for clothes at an apparel retail chain, which is owned and managed by a very large company. In the franchise condition, participants were also asked to imagine shopping for clothes at an apparel retail chain. However, they were told that the brand has a franchise model, which means, "every store is an independently and locally owned small business. A franchisee essentially operates an independently owned and managed business under a larger brand's name, making them a small and local business owner." After reading the scenario, participants were asked to indicate their likelihood of engaging in the following transgressions if they were to shop at this store, each from "not at all likely" (1) to "very likely" (7): "not correct them if they forgot to charge for a small item," "not correct them if one item was accidentally charged a lower price," "take advantage of a promotion/discount that was not intended for you," "return an item to the store after using it once," and "benefit from a promotional deal that is not directly intended for you" ($\alpha = 0.86$).

## Results

A 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 3 (condition: small company vs. large company vs. large company with franchise model) ANOVA on intentions to engage in transgressions revealed a significant interaction ($F(2, 794) = 5.07$, $p = .007$, $\eta^2_p = 0.013$), supporting hypothesis 4. A significant main effect of political ideology ($M_{conservative} = 2.99$ vs. $M_{liberal} = 3.44$, $F(1, 794) = 14.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.017$) and a significant main effect of condition ($M_{small\text{-}company} = 2.87$ vs. $M_{large\text{-}company} = 3.77$ vs. $M_{franchise} = 3.00$, $F(2, 794) = 23.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.055$) also emerged. In the large-company condition, liberals indicated significantly higher intentions to engage in transgressions ($M = 4.21$) than conservatives ($M = 3.30$, $t(264) = 4.58$, $p < .001$), as shown in figure 5. In the small-company condition, there were no significant differences between liberals and conservatives' intentions ($M$s = 2.89 vs. 2.85, $p = .852$). Moreover, in the franchise condition, there was no significant difference between liberals and conservatives' intentions to engage in transgressions against the company ($M$s = 3.17 vs. 2.84, $p = .102$).

**FIGURE 5**

STUDY 4: INTENTIONS TO ENGAGE IN TRANSGRESSIONS.




Importantly, emphasizing the franchise reduced intentions to transgress against the large chain. Compared to participants in the large-company condition ($M = 3.77$), participants indicated lower intentions to engage in transgressions in the franchise condition ($M = 3.00$, $t(533) = 5.29$, $p < .001$). Although emphasizing the franchise was also effective for conservatives ($M_{large} = 3.30$ vs. $M_{franchise} = 2.84$, $t(259) = 2.25$, $p = .025$, Cohen's $d = 0.279$), it was much more effective in reducing liberals' intentions to engage in transgressions against the chain ($M_{large} = 4.21$ vs. $M_{franchise} = 3.17$, $t(272) = 5.22$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.630$).

## Discussion

In study 4, we demonstrate that describing the large company as a franchise significantly attenuated consumers' intentions to engage in transgressions against the company. This study further shows how company size differentially influences the extent to which conservatives and liberals intend to engage in transgressions against companies. These results highlight an important benefit of communicating a large chain's franchise business model: although liberals indicated they would transgress against the apparel retail chain, when the retail chain was described as having a franchise model, liberals' intentions to engage in these transgressive practices decreased. In the next study, we further examine another consideration for large corporations that do not have a franchise business model.

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## STUDY 5: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF CUSTOMER-FRIENDLY POLICIES ON TRANSGRESSION BEHAVIOR

Study 5 extends to another context, gyms, in which consumers often transgress by taking toiletries or amenities home. We examine whether implementing generous, customer-friendly policies (e.g., making it easy to cancel gym memberships) could reduce intentions to transgress against a large corporation, testing hypothesis 5. Because this consideration manipulates the perceived moral character of the company, this study further establishes our proposed process with mediation by moderation. Although liberals are more likely to engage in transgressions against large firms than conservatives, we expect this effect to be attenuated when the large firm implements customer-friendly policies. Consistent with previous studies, we expect the significant effect of political ideology to be further attenuated and even reversed in the small-company conditions. When a small company implements customer-friendly policies, we also expect liberals to be less likely to engage in the transgressions. Overall, we predict that regardless of company size, liberals will be more impacted by such policies that communicate the firm's positive moral character.

### Method

Participants were 608 conservatives and 643 liberals recruited from Prolific ($M_{age}$ = 39.6, 59.3% female) for a 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 2 (company size: small company vs. large company) × 2 (policy: easy cancel policy vs. control) between-subjects design. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: small company/control, large company/control, small company/easy cancel policy, and large company/easy cancel policy. In the small-company conditions, participants were asked to imagine that they go to a small, local gym that is independently owned and managed. In the large-company conditions, participants instead were asked to imagine that they go to a very large gym chain that is owned and managed by a very large corporation that has thousands of gym locations and millions of members worldwide. Next, to manipulate the perceived moral character of the company, participants in the easy cancel policy conditions read that the gym strongly believes it is wrong to exploit customers and is known for having customer-friendly policies. If someone wants to discontinue their gym membership, they would be able to do so immediately at any given time. In the control conditions, no additional information was provided. After reading the scenario, participants were asked how likely they would be to take home mini toiletries and amenities that are meant to be used on-site only, on a seven-point scale from "I would not take any home" (1) to "I would take some home" (7).

### Results

We first conducted a 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 2 (company size: small company vs. large company) × 2 (policy: easy cancel policy vs. control) ANOVA. The analysis yielded two significant main effects of the two manipulations: company size ($F(1, 1243) = 43.00$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.033$) and customer-friendly policy ($F(1, 1243) = 16.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.013$), suggesting that both emphasizing a small company's size and emphasizing a customer-friendly policy can be effective in reducing transgression behavior. The main effect of political ideology was not significant ($p = .133$).

The analysis also yielded two significant two-way interactions. Consistent with hypothesis 1, the results revealed a significant interaction between political ideology and company size ($F(1, 1243) = 8.93$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2_p = 0.007$). When company size is large, there is a significant difference between liberals ($M = 3.15$) and conservatives ($M = 2.69$, $t(626) = 2.86$, $p = .004$). However, this difference is attenuated in the small-company condition ($M_{liberal} = 2.16$ vs. $M_{conservative} = 2.31$, $p = .302$). Consistent with hypothesis 5, the results also revealed a significant interaction between political ideology and customer-friendly policy ($F(1, 1243) = 5.10$, $p = .024$, $\eta^2_p = 0.004$). The three-way interaction and the interaction between company size and policy were not significant.

Figure 6 demonstrates the effectiveness of the customer-friendly policy within each size condition. For the large company (see left panel of figure 6), the control condition replicated our previous results: liberals ($M = 3.58$) indicated significantly higher intentions to engage in the transgression compared to conservatives ($M = 2.87$, $t(307) = 3.00$, $p = .003$). This effect attenuates in the easy cancel condition, in which there is no longer a significant difference between liberals ($M = 2.74$) and conservatives ($M = 2.50$, $p = .264$).

For the small company (right panel of figure 6), the control condition replicated our previous results: no significant difference between liberals ($M = 2.31$) and conservatives ($M = 2.40$, $p = .673$). In the easy cancel condition, liberals ($M = 1.90$) indicated lower intentions to engage in the transgression compared to conservatives ($M = 2.30$, $t(293) = 2.12$, $p = .035$). Overall, liberals were more affected by the customer-friendly policy (both in the large- and small-company conditions), as they are more sensitive to the care and fairness moral foundations.

### Discussion

Study 5 demonstrated the impact of implementing customer-friendly policies on consumers' transgression behavior. Overall, the condition that yielded the highest transgression intentions was liberals in the large-company/control condition, and the condition that yielded the lowest transgression intentions was liberals in the small-company/

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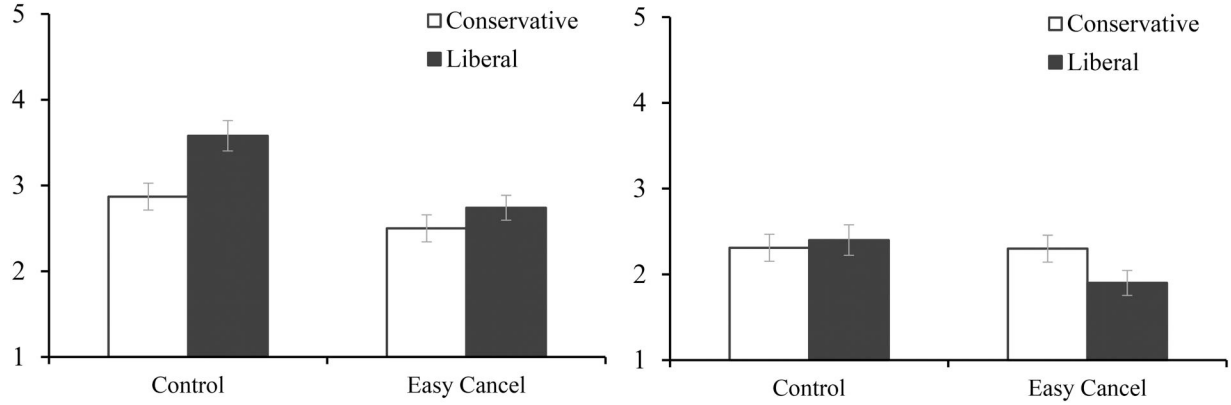
**FIGURE 6**

STUDY 5: TRANSGRESSION INTENTIONS AGAINST A LARGE COMPANY (LEFT PANEL) AND SMALL COMPANY (RIGHT PANEL).




easy-cancel-policy condition. These results demonstrate that both emphasizing a small-company size and emphasizing a customer-friendly policy can be effective and significantly reduce transgression behavior, providing support for hypothesis 5. These factors are also especially effective in preventing transgression behavior among liberal consumers. Because the implementation of a customer-friendly policy is also a manipulation of moral character (i.e., the gym strongly believes it is wrong to exploit customers), this study also tested the process through mediation by moderation.

## STUDY 6: THE ROLE OF TRANSGRESSION BENEFICIARY

In study 6, we vary the background of the transgressor (high vs. low income), allowing us to delve into its impact on use of the Robin Hood justification for consumer transgressions against companies, testing hypothesis 6. Given that conservative and liberal consumers differ in their perception of injustice in the marketplace and in the moral foundations they subscribe to, we expect liberal (vs. conservative) consumers to be more likely to support transgressions when the transgressor is from a low-income background but not when the transgressor is from a high-income background. This study extends to another common consumer transgression: taking advantage of and abusing a satisfaction-guaranteed policy to obtain a free product.

### Method

Participants were 313 conservatives and 308 liberals recruited from Prolific ($M_{age}$ = 40.0, 56.5% female). Respondents were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions: high-income or low-income beneficiary. All participants were asked to imagine that Jenny, a 23-year-old, ordered a pizza for delivery, and that although the pizza arrived on time and was warm, she took advantage of the restaurant's satisfaction-guaranteed policy and asked for a new free pizza. To vary beneficiary background, participants in the high-income condition read that, "she comes from a high-income family, who provides for all her needs," whereas those in the low-income condition read that, "she comes from a low-income family and provides for all her family's needs." After reading the scenario, participants were asked to indicate whether they support Jenny's decision to take advantage of the satisfaction guaranteed policy from "not at all" (1) to "to a great extent" (7) and whether they would discourage or encourage Jenny to engage in this behavior from "definitely discourage" (1) to "definitely encourage" (7; $r$ = 0.82). Finally, participants responded to the same items for Robin Hood justification as in the previous studies ($\alpha$ = 0.91).

### Results

*Intentions to Support the Transgression.* A 2 (political ideology: conservative vs. liberal) × 2 (background: high income vs. low income) ANOVA on intentions to support and encourage the transgression revealed a significant interaction effect ($F(1, 617) = 12.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.020$), supporting hypothesis 6. The main effect of background was marginally significant ($F(1, 617) = 3.81$, $p = .051$, $\eta^2_p = 0.006$), and the main effect of political ideology was not significant ($p = .235$). In the low-income condition, liberals indicated higher intentions to support and encourage the transgression ($M = 2.87$) than conservatives ($M = 2.19$, $t(311) = 3.47$, $p < .001$), as illustrated in the top panel of figure 7. However, in the high-income condition, the effect attenuated and even reversed. Liberals were directionally

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less likely ($M = 2.08$) than conservatives ($M = 2.42$) to support and encourage abusing the company's policies ($p = .115$), suggesting that liberals are not supportive of such unethical practices when the transgressor comes from a position of privilege. Next, comparing how participants responded by political ideology, liberals in the low-income condition ($M = 2.87$) indicated higher intentions to support the transgression compared to those in the high-income condition ($M = 2.08$, $t(306) = 3.98$, $p < .001$). Conservatives, however, did not respond differently between the two conditions ($Ms = 2.19$ vs. 2.42, $p = .284$).

*Robin Hood Justification.* A similar two-way ANOVA on the Robin Hood justification revealed a significant interaction ($F(1, 617) = 5.93$, $p = .015$, $\eta^2_p = 0.010$). The main effects of background ($p = .633$) and political ideology ($p = .142$) were not significant. Importantly, in the low-income condition, liberals indicated higher agreement with the Robin Hood justification ($M = 2.97$) than conservatives ($M = 2.42$, $t(312) = 2.88$, $p = .004$), as shown in the bottom panel of figure 7. However, liberals ($M = 2.56$) and conservatives ($M = 2.69$) responded similarly in the high-income condition ($p = .513$). Next, comparing how participants responded by political ideology, liberals in the low-income condition ($M = 2.97$) indicated higher agreement with the Robin Hood justification compared to those in the high-income condition ($M = 2.56$, $t(306) = 2.08$, $p = .038$). Conservatives, however, did not respond differently between the two conditions ($Ms = 2.42$ vs. 2.69, $p = .171$).

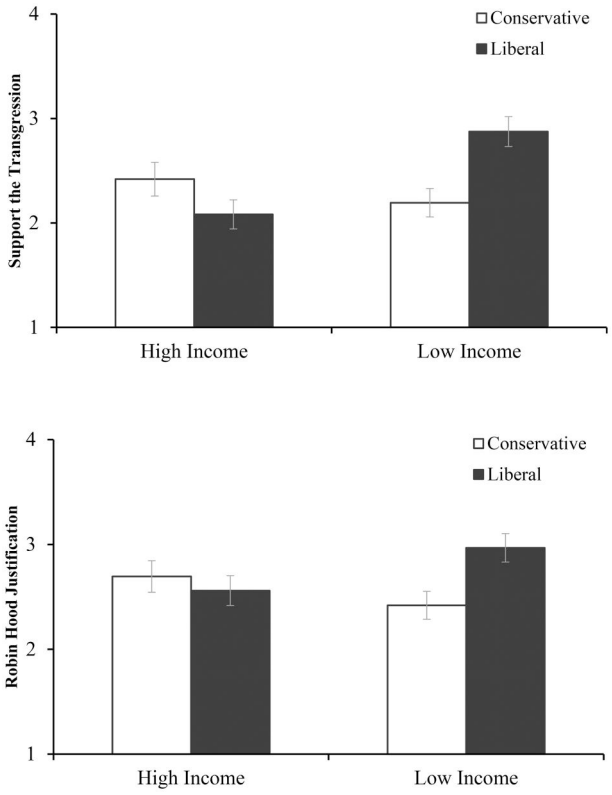
*Moderated Mediation.* We performed a moderated-mediation analysis at a confidence level of 95% with 10,000 bootstrap resamples (model 8; Hayes 2022). With political ideology as the independent variable ($X$), background as the moderator ($W$), Robin Hood justification as the mediator ($M$), and intentions to support the transgression as the dependent measure ($Y$), the analysis revealed a significant index of moderated mediation ($a \times b = 0.57$, SE = 0.24; 95% CI = [0.116 to 1.042]). This effect was conditional such that the moderated-mediation path was (a) significant in the low-income condition ($\beta = 0.46$, SE = 0.16; 95% CI = [0.145 to 0.770]) but (b) non-significant in the high-income condition (95% CI = [–0.463 to 0.218]). When the transgressor is not from a low-income background, the significant and positive effect indicates that political ideology affects intentions to support the transgression through the Robin Hood justification. This difference is not observed when the transgressor is from a high-income background.

## Discussion

Study 6 showed that, consistent with the Robin Hood justification and hypothesis 6, liberals perceive transgressions by low-income consumers as more justifiable, compared to conservatives. However, when the transgressor comes from a high-income background, liberal consumers no longer justify and support the transgression. This study also demonstrated that a transgressor's background is more likely to impact liberals than conservatives.

**FIGURE 7**

STUDY 6: INTENTIONS TO SUPPORT THE TRANSGRESSION (TOP PANEL) AND ROBIN HOOD JUSTIFICATION (BOTTOM PANEL).




Taken together, these results demonstrate the use of the Robin Hood justification in marketplace transgressions. In the general discussion, we review additional moderating and contextual factors that may impact the use of this justification and, more broadly, consumers' intentions to transgress against companies.

# GENERAL DISCUSSION

Despite the prevalence of consumer transgressions in the marketplace, as well as their direct impact on and threat to companies' profitability, the phenomenon has received limited attention in consumer research. We draw on the timeless Robin Hood narrative to conceptualize the Robin Hood justification and demonstrate that political ideology impacts consumers' transgression behavior and use of the Robin Hood justification. We show that when the target of

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transgression is a large company, liberals are more likely to transgress against the company and use these justifications. However, when the company size is small or unknown, this effect is attenuated (studies 1 and 2). The reversal we observed in the small-company condition (liberals being less rather than more likely to transgress compared to conservatives) suggests that although liberals justify transgressions against large companies, they have greater empathy (compared to conservatives) toward small companies and greater desire to protect small businesses.

We further demonstrate that liberals' use of the Robin Hood justification when transgressing against large companies is driven by their perception of large companies as having a negative moral character (study 3). Moreover, we show that when large national chains emphasize their franchise business model (study 4) or highlight company policies that reflect a positive moral character (study 5), liberals significantly reduce their intentions to transgress against the large chain. We examine additional factors that trigger the Robin Hood justification and find that liberals (vs. conservatives) are more likely to justify transgressions against companies when the beneficiary of the transgression comes from a low-income (vs. high-income) background (study 6). Together, these studies demonstrate the antecedents and consequences of consumers' use of the Robin Hood justification in transgressions against companies.

## Theoretical Implications

Our conceptualization of the Robin Hood justification offers new insights into consumer morality (Bhattacharjee, Berman, and Reed 2013; Campbell and Winterich 2018; Goor, Keinan, and Ordabayeva 2025; Lee and Winterich 2023) and factors impacting moral reasoning (Goenka and van Osselaer 2019, 2023; Goenka, Sen, and Thomas 2025). We demonstrate that, paradoxically, moral virtues are used by consumers to justify unethical and immoral acts. Importantly, we demonstrate the Robin Hood effect in the context of understanding how political ideology impacts consumption decisions (Lisjak and Ordabayeva 2023; Ordabayeva and Fernandes 2018) and transgressions against firms. We show that liberals' emphasis on the care and fairness moral virtues impacts the use of the Robin Hood justification to legitimize transgressions. More broadly, we extend research on moral disengagement (Bandura et al. 1996) and neutralization techniques (Matza and Sykes 1957) by demonstrating that consumers' use of moral justifications is context dependent and identifying the contextual cues and consumer characteristics that evoke the Robin Hood justification. Moreover, our research demonstrates a unique context in which individuals driven by care, empathy, fairness, and justice are more rather than less likely (Detert, Treviño, and Sweitzer 2008) to morally disengage from their transgressive behaviors.

Additionally, we contribute to literature on the use of narratives and storytelling in marketing (Bublitz et al. 2016; Escalas 2007; Russell and Schau 2014) by demonstrating how the Robin Hood narrative is used in the marketplace. The Robin Hood narrative is often used in politics by candidates from both sides of the political spectrum (Benning 2017; Rose 2018), but we demonstrate that it is also relevant and impactful in brand perceptions and consumption behavior. Specifically, we demonstrate how the Robin Hood justification is used to legitimize unethical and even illegal consumption practices and helps consumers view themselves as noble and rebellious heroes rather than fraudulent and dishonest consumers. Thus, we extend past literature on how stories and narratives associated with the brand can impact consumers' attitudes and willingness to support it (Avery and Keinan 2015). Narratives are often cocreated by consumers and the media and deserve significant attention via examining the ways in which these narratives are crafted, co-opted, and internalized. Research in this domain can further examine how the use of various metaphors and narratives helps excuse and justify harmful and unethical actions (e.g., other moral narratives and archetypes) and identify additional contexts in which narratives are used to present unethical consumption and marketing practices in a positive light.

Past literature on transgressions and unfairness in the marketplace has focused on brand transgressions against consumers (Aaker et al. 2004; Kang et al. 2016; Park and Roedder John 2018; Xu et al. 2021) and brands' unfair practices (e.g., price discrimination; Bolton and Alba 2006; Bolton, Warlop, and Alba 2003; Campbell 1999) and unfair production methods (Gershoff et al. 2012; Keinan, Crener, and Goor 2020; Paharia 2020). In contrast, the present research examines transgressions performed by consumers, in which companies are the targets of unethical practices. Examining these consumption practices, and in particular consumer characteristics that impact willingness to engage in transgression behaviors, offers important implications for marketers and policy makers and fruitful directions for future research, as discussed next.

## Practical Implications

Consumer transgressions cause obvious problems for firms, which lose millions of dollars to transgressions like coupon fraud, piracy, and the abuse of return policies. Companies institute new policies to curb these problems—for example, through anti-piracy campaigns and the enforcement of new, stricter regulations. Our research provides firms and managers an explanation for why consumer transgressions might be so prevalent in certain cases. As firms navigate consumer responses, it is important for them to consider how their actions and messaging impact consumers' willingness to engage in and support transgressions against them. Our studies identify marketing messages and

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company actions that could potentially reduce the perceived legitimacy of transgression against companies, including corporations and large national chains. Although the Robin Hood narrative has broad appeal, we identify important factors that impact the use of Robin Hood justifications and consumers' intentions to transgress against companies. We show that highlighting a national chains' franchise model or consumer-friendly company policies can significantly reduce intentions to engage in transgressions, particularly among liberal consumers.

Policy makers and marketers should also be mindful of the Robin Hood narrative when discussing consumer transgressions in the media and in their public messages and policies. Even when policy makers and companies attempt to enforce policies and curb transgressions, they often describe them using language that reinforces the Robin Hood narrative. For example, when Netflix attempted to combat password fraud, they referred to it as "password sharing" rather than attaching negative terms such as "theft," "fraud," "transgression," and "stealing." Labeling unethical and illegal behaviors such as software piracy as "sharing" can make consumers feel like Robin Hoods and make these behaviors seem socially acceptable and even desirable.

Our conceptualization of the use of Robin Hood justifications can also help policymakers understand the social acceptability of other types of unethical and fraudulent behaviors, such as tax fraud and the abuse of social welfare and governmental assistance, as well as offer insights into liberals versus conservatives' attitudes toward instituting and enforcing laws against consumer transgressions and various fraudulent behaviors. These insights may also help provide context for the differences in reactions to policy positions based on political ideology (e.g., universal basic income, health care reform, corporate regulation). More broadly, our research highlights the appeal of the Robin Hood narrative, which still resonates with many consumers (and liberals in particular) and can be leveraged to gain support for various causes, social enterprises, and political campaigns. Both for-profit and nonprofit organizations (such Robinhood Markets Inc. and the Robin Hood Foundation) successfully use the Robin Hood narrative in their branding and marketing messages, positioning themselves as the hero rather than the villain in the Robin Hood tale. Similarly, both liberal and conservative politicians have tried to position themselves as Robin Hoods who fight against a morally corrupt and powerful entity, varying the overpowering villain (big business vs. big government), depending on their political views.

## Future Research on Consumer Transgressions Against Firms

Consumer transgressions against firms are important and understudied in consumer research. We next outline research directions that can further inform marketing and public policy.

*Transgressions by Paying Customers Versus Nonpaying Individuals.* An important distinction to consider is whether the transgression is performed by customers of the company versus nonpaying individuals. Paying patrons (e.g., hotel guests or gym members taking additional amenities and toiletries) may feel more entitled to transgress compared to those who are not current customers. Indeed, viral TikTok videos feature restaurant patrons showing off large items they stole from restaurants (serving plates, glassware, etc.), with some describing it as "taking souvenirs." It would be interesting to examine how paying consumers decide where they draw the line—at what point taking items from a restaurant (e.g., the type or quantity of items) becomes unacceptable. Similar distinctions can be examined in retail contexts: wardrobing (return fraud) may seem more acceptable if the consumer has purchased and kept other items from this retailer. Similarly, in pirating digital content, obtaining a password, software, or copyrighted digital media content from someone who paid for it may feel more like sharing than pirating, whereas obtaining it from someone who does have legal access to it may be harder to justify. Moreover, for paying customers, engaging in a transgression against the brand may also serve as a way to resolve a dissonance the consumer may experience when buying from a brand that is not aligned with their personal values.

*How Do Consumers Become Aware of Transgression Opportunities?* Future research could build on the diffusion of innovations and social contagion literature to examine how consumers learn about and adopt these actions. Because consumers get information about transgression opportunities from online influencers, or people posting videos bragging about their transgressions, future research can explore reactions to these videos (which ones go viral and which generate positive vs. negative reactions) and attitudes toward digital influencers who recommend, encourage, or prescribe this kind of behavior. It would also be interesting to examine the linguistic choices and euphemisms used by influencers and their followers to describe these practices. For example, in a case of coupon fraud that inspired the 2021 film *Queenpins*, three women built a website called the "Savvy Shopper Site" (as opposed to using any language that would indicate transgressive activity) to sell fraudulent coupons (Lang 2021). Similarly, when a TikTok user took advantage of Costco's generous policies (Chang 2023) to return a couch after two years, CBS News described the behavior as "testing the limits of the policy" (Cerullo 2024). Building on these observations, we conducted an additional study and found that consumers were not only more likely to engage in the behavior and find it more acceptable but were also more likely to have positive attitudes toward the influencer when this behavior

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was described by the influencer as "frugal" shopping rather than "sneaky" shopping. Future work on the relationship between influencers and consumer transgressions might also explore how suggesting the transgression (e.g., providing information about how to misuse coupons) differs from providing access to the behavior (e.g., posting fraudulent coupons). Looking at how brands or other stakeholders discuss transgressions could also be worthwhile. For example, under what circumstances would direct language (e.g., describing transgressive behaviors as stealing) feel more self-serving or patronizing?

*Effortful Versus Effortless Transgressions.* Future research could also investigate the dynamics behind the type of transgressions performed against firms. For example, does the amount of effort or work involved with engaging in the transgression affect the use of the Robin Hood justification? Whereas generally greater effort in engaging in illegal transgressions is viewed as more negative, in the context of restoring fairness, greater effort might actually make the consumer's behavior seem more heroic and admirable.

Along these lines, consumer transgressions can be passive (e.g., not updating student status for special discounts after graduating from college) or active (e.g., a nonstudent enrolling in special student discounts). Transgressions vary in degree of severity and might be planned and premeditated or impulsive and spontaneous. How might these circumstances or the context under which they are performed moderate consumers' likelihood of engaging in transgressions? How does the skill, expertise, or knowledge required for transgressing affect the behavior's perceived social acceptability? Building on the status signaling (Bellezza, Paharia, and Keinan 2017; Goor, Keinan, and Ordabayeva 2021) and symbolic consumption literature (Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan 2014; Keinan, Bellezza, and Paharia 2019), future research could also examine positive and negative inferences about others who engage in transgressions and when consumers not only engage in transgressions but also brag about their behaviors. It would also be important to understand the social norms surrounding how common a transgression is perceived to be.

Relatedly, future research can compare digital versus physical transgressions. With digital transgressions, there is more room for ambiguity when describing unethical or illegal behaviors. Because many transgressions are committed online and consumers are likely to be informed about opportunities online by influencers and peers, it is important to examine transgression behavior within the unique virtual, digital context. Another way in which digital transgressions differ from physical ones is that in a digital context, consumers do not have to directly engage or interact with company representatives (Kim et al. 2023). With the increasing adoption of AI-enabled technologies such as chatbots and service agents (Castelo, Bos, and Lehmann 2019; Chang and Mukherjee 2023a), it could be fruitful to delve into how the automatization of these services and the growing interest in the metaverse marketplace (Hadi, Melumad, and Park 2024) impact the frequency and legitimacy of consumer transgressions in these emerging contexts.

*Which Consumers Are More Likely to Engage in Transgressions?* Finally, exploring additional individual differences (beyond political affiliation) and consumer populations would also be worthwhile. Psychological reactance (Fitzsimons and Lehmann 2004) and beliefs in karma (Kopalle, Lehmann, and Farley 2010; White, Norenzayan, and Schaller 2019) could impact transgression behavior, as well as psychological entitlement (Goor et al. 2020), decision-making style (Chang and Hung 2018; Hong and Chang 2015), brand patriotism (Bellezza and Keinan 2014), and ability to afford the product (Keinan, Kivetz, and Netzer 2016). Moreover, future research can test whether the findings hold in collectivist cultures or less politically polarized contexts, as well as expand the examination of political ideology to explore moderates and other ideological subgroups such as libertarians. Sensation-seeking tendencies may also impact these behaviors and the response to highlighting the risk involved in engaging in the behavior or the likelihood of being caught and punished. Examination into the emotions or affective states (Chang and Pham 2013, 2018) triggered by transgressions would also be worthwhile, including consumers' feeling of guilt and regret (Keinan and Kivetz 2008; Kivetz and Keinan 2006) and sense of accomplishment (Keinan and Kivetz 2011). Relatedly, future research can explore how social dynamics, such as performing the transgression independently or in a group, impact this behavior. Table 2 outlines additional research directions and questions.

As a psychologically rich phenomenon, embedded in cultural, economic, and social forces, with substantial implications for managers and public policy, consumer transgressions against firms lend themselves to a multimethod research approach. Various qualitative (e.g., in-depth interviews, content analysis) and quantitative (e.g., secondary data, field experiments, observational studies; Chang and Mukherjee 2023b) methods can enrich and deepen our understanding of the phenomenon. For example, netnographic analysis (Kozinets 2016) of anonymous online discussions can address these important but sensitive questions, exploring how consumers feel about and justify their transgressions. We examined six Reddit discussions forums related to piracy (with titles such as, "Do you feel bad about piracy sometimes?" "Do you guys ever feel guilty pirating stuff?" and "How do you deal with the guilt of being a pirate?") and indeed found that many respondents spontaneously brought up moderating factors and circumstances that make this behavior more or less acceptable, predominantly company size. For example,

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**TABLE 2**

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON CONSUMER TRANSGRESSIONS AGAINST FIRMS

| Characteristics of the transgression |
|---|
| • How do consumers learn about transgression opportunities (peers, online, media, etc.)? |
| • How does the source of information about opportunities to engage in transgressions impact the legitimacy of and intentions to engage in such transgressions? |
| • How are public versus private transgressions (transgression observed vs. not observed by peers) perceived? |
| • Are intentional versus unintentional, or premeditated versus spontaneous, transgressions less justifiable? |
| • What is the impact of effortful versus effortless transgressions, or skill required, to engage in transgressions? |
| • How does the severity (extent of legal, ethical, and economic ramifications) impact transgressions? |
| • What is the impact of the way transgressions are discussed in media or by firms, influencers, peers, etc.? |
| • What is the reason for engaging in a transgression (save money vs. punish the company)? Is the transgression (in)directly related to a brand transgression? Is the consumer being purposely vindictive? |
| • What is the type of product involved in the transgression (utilitarian/necessity vs. hedonic/indulgent)? Is the counterfactual paying full price for the product or not buying the product at all? |
| • Is the transgression committed in digital versus physical context? Do digital transgressions seem more acceptable and less harmful to the company? |
| **Characteristics and actions of the company** |
| • What is the impact of policies and messages aimed to mitigate consumer transgressions? |
| • What is the impact of monetary and/or legal sanctions? |
| • What is the impact of campaigns by the brand versus a third party? |
| • Does emphasizing negative impact on the firm's shareholders versus employees reduce transgression likelihood? |
| • How do consumers respond to the company's efforts to mitigate transgressions (e.g., antipiracy campaigns, crackdowns on password sharing)? When do these mitigation efforts backfire? |
| • Does anthropomorphizing the brand reduce intentions to transgress against it? |
| • How do consumers justify transgressions that take advantage of AI-enabled versus human customer service? What about transgressions that take advantage of a firm's mistakes (e.g., loopholes/bugs in the system)? |
| • Are there additional positive externalities of CSR efforts and goodwill in preventing transgressions? |
| **Characteristics of the consumer** |
| • How do cultural differences in views toward authority impact the acceptability of transgressions? |
| • How do differences in karmic beliefs, religiosity, and moral identity impact transgression behavior? |
| • How do differences in sensation-seeking, reactance, and skepticism toward firms impact transgressions? |
| • What is the impact of psychological entitlement, self-monitoring, tightwads/spendthrifts, and frugality? |
| • How does the type and number of transgression beneficiaries impact consumers' justifications? |
| • Do differences in utilitarian versus deontological reasoning impact transgression behavior? |
| • Are there generational differences in justifications? |
| • What is the impact of prior experience with the company (loyalty, familiarity, self-brand connection)? |
| **Additional research questions** |
| • When and why might consumers choose to discourage/report/"turn in" other consumers who transgress? |
| • When and why do consumers choose to incite/enable others to engage in transgressions? |
| • What are the antecedents and consequences of the perceived ubiquity of the transgressions? |
| • What other narratives and metaphors might consumers use to justify transgressions against firms? |
| • Can transgressions have a positive impact on the company (e.g., increase brand awareness)? |
| • When and how do consumers brag about engaging in transgressions against firms? |
| • How do consumers assess the perceived impact of their transgressions and how are these perceptions impacted by motivated reasoning? |
| • How do consumers assess the perceived risk of engaging in these transgressions? |

AI, artificial intelligence; CSR, corporate social responsibility.

forum users indicated, "I am happy to pirate anything from the big media companies," "I never feel guilty when I skip out on paying the big publishers. In fact, I feel the opposite," and "try this brother: if you steal from huge corporates, you're just being Robin Hood. (just imagine this to justify yourself), if it hurts too much, don't pirate indie games." Other factors that were mentioned included the price of the product, ability to afford the product (e.g., "If you're broke it's okay"), using the pirated product for a short period of time (e.g., for demo purposes), and pirating older video games that consumers no longer buy. Many forum participants also discussed the moral character of the company. For example, "Soulless corporations that only see people as just another commodity," "I have a rule kinda with piracy I don't pirate indie games but if it's a triple A game from a somewhat greedy company I don't care at all," and "Big corporations don't give a damn about you, why would you care about them?" Such discussion forums

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can thus examine transgressions in an unobtrusive and naturalistic environment.

Despite their prevalence, considerable media attention, and economic costs, consumer transgressions remain understudied in consumer research. Exploring when, how, and why consumer transgressions occur in the marketplace can offer vital theoretical and managerially relevant insights. By better understanding their consumers, firms can develop strategies to mitigate and reduce the frequency of these costly transgressions. We hope the current research will inspire more work on the psychology behind the social acceptability of transgressive behaviors toward companies, as well as the role of narratives in marketing and consumption.

## DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

The first author collected data on Prolific for studies 1–6 and retrieved data from online discussion forums (reddit.com). The authors jointly designed the studies and analyzed the data. All data were collected and analyzed between 2024 and 2025. The data are stored in a project folder on ResearchBox.

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