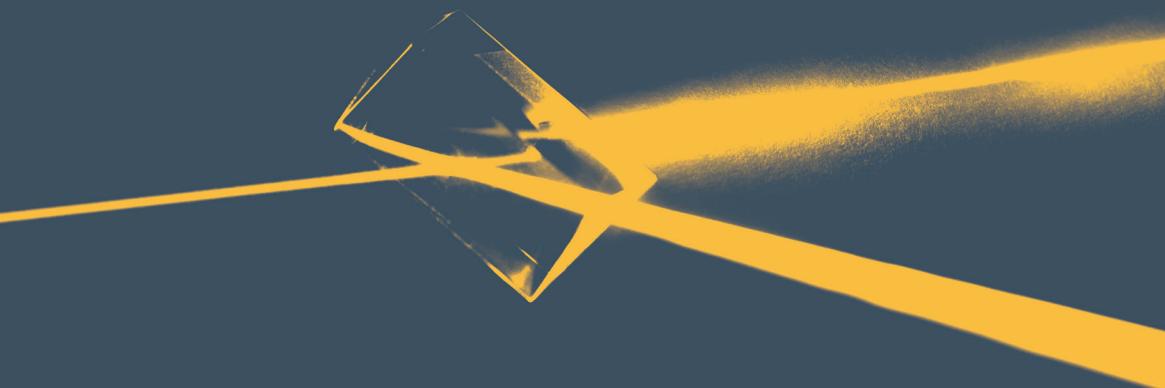


# The Empathy Delusion

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## Introduction

In 2018, Reach Solutions adapted ground-breaking frameworks from cognitive and personality psychology to highlight the differences between people working in advertising and the modern mainstream. We discovered that people in ad land unconsciously see, experience and interpret the world differently to large swathes of the UK population.<sup>1</sup>

**We challenged our industry to think and behave differently. The industry's response? Empathy - we're good at it, we simply need to turn it up a notch**

We challenged our industry to think and behave differently. The industry's response? Empathy - we're good at it, we simply need to turn it up a notch.

However, the science shows that building empathy is hard. And it's not all about feelings and emotion. Putting yourself in someone else's shoes requires deep self-awareness and considerable mental effort. But humans are cognitive misers,

<sup>1</sup>'Why We Shouldn't Trust Our Gut Instinct' Reach Solutions/ house51 <https://www.reachsolutions.co.uk/sites/default/files/2018-1/Reach%20Solutions%20Why%20We%20Shouldn%27t%20Trust%20Our%20Gut%20Instinct%20White%20Paper.pdf>

driven by emotion and intuition. And marketers are only human. Do we really have the tools to walk the talk?

## The Culture War

To say we live in interesting times would be an understatement. Brexit continues to lead the national conversation, and has come to represent what many perceive to be a clash of cultures. It's not just Brexit. Climate change, #metoo and fierce debates focused on myriad intersections of individual and group identities illustrate a culture war being fought on many fronts. These issues tend to be dominated by feelings, emotion and intuition, rather than rational debate.

In this climate, displaying high levels of empathy presents a challenge to us all. Our ability to rise above our emotions and intuition is vital to creating advertising which resonates with mainstream audiences. Unfortunately, our research suggests this may be a challenge the advertising and marketing industry is failing to rise to.



## Exploring our capacity for empathy

To explore advertising and marketing's capacity for empathy, we've turned to cutting edge moral psychology. In this white paper we are asking people working in the advertising and marketing industry to consider the deepest questions about their identity, ethics and morals.

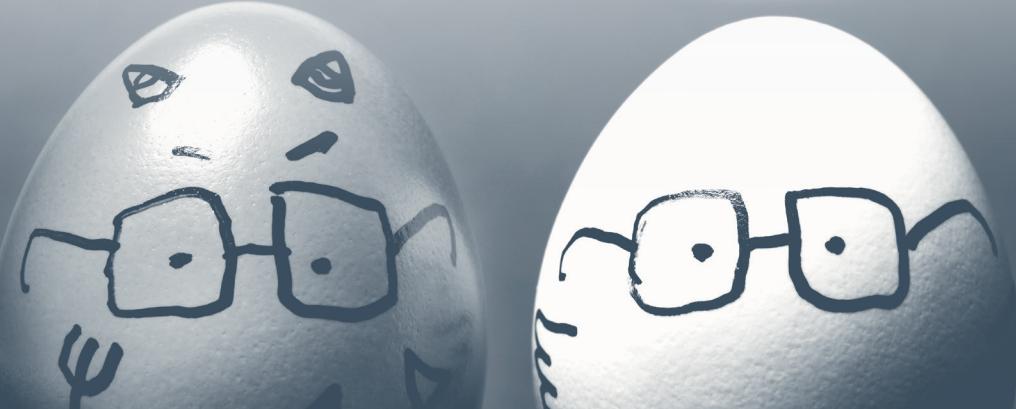
### We started with one key hypothesis:

- People in the advertising and marketing industry and the modern mainstream have different 'moral foundations' and (unconscious) intuitions about what is right and wrong.

**Morality: 'A set of personal or social standards concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour'**<sup>2</sup>

Our results confirm this and highlight significant implications for our industry. Our argument is that these moral differences create a substantial barrier to connecting with mainstream audiences. It's not just about how a lack of understanding influences the day to day decision making and outputs of the advertising and marketing industry. We'll show that divergent beliefs about what is right and wrong cause us to discriminate based on the most culturally salient issue of our time (i.e. Brexit).

When it comes to a culture war, people in the marketing and advertising industry tend to be marching to the same beat. But we'll argue that we can only build empathy by challenging our assumptions and learning to respect, fully acknowledge and recognise the ethics of mainstream audiences.



## Methodology

Quantitative survey of 2,019 nationally representative UK adults and 199 advertising & marketing professionals in March 2019

Nb. people could select more than one role/area

This white paper addresses the differences between the advertising and marketing industry, and the modern mainstream (n=1,063)

The modern mainstream is defined as the middle 50% in terms of household income (£20k-£55k) and represent over 50% of brand buyers across 3,500 brands<sup>3</sup>

### Breakdown of Advertising & Marketing sample

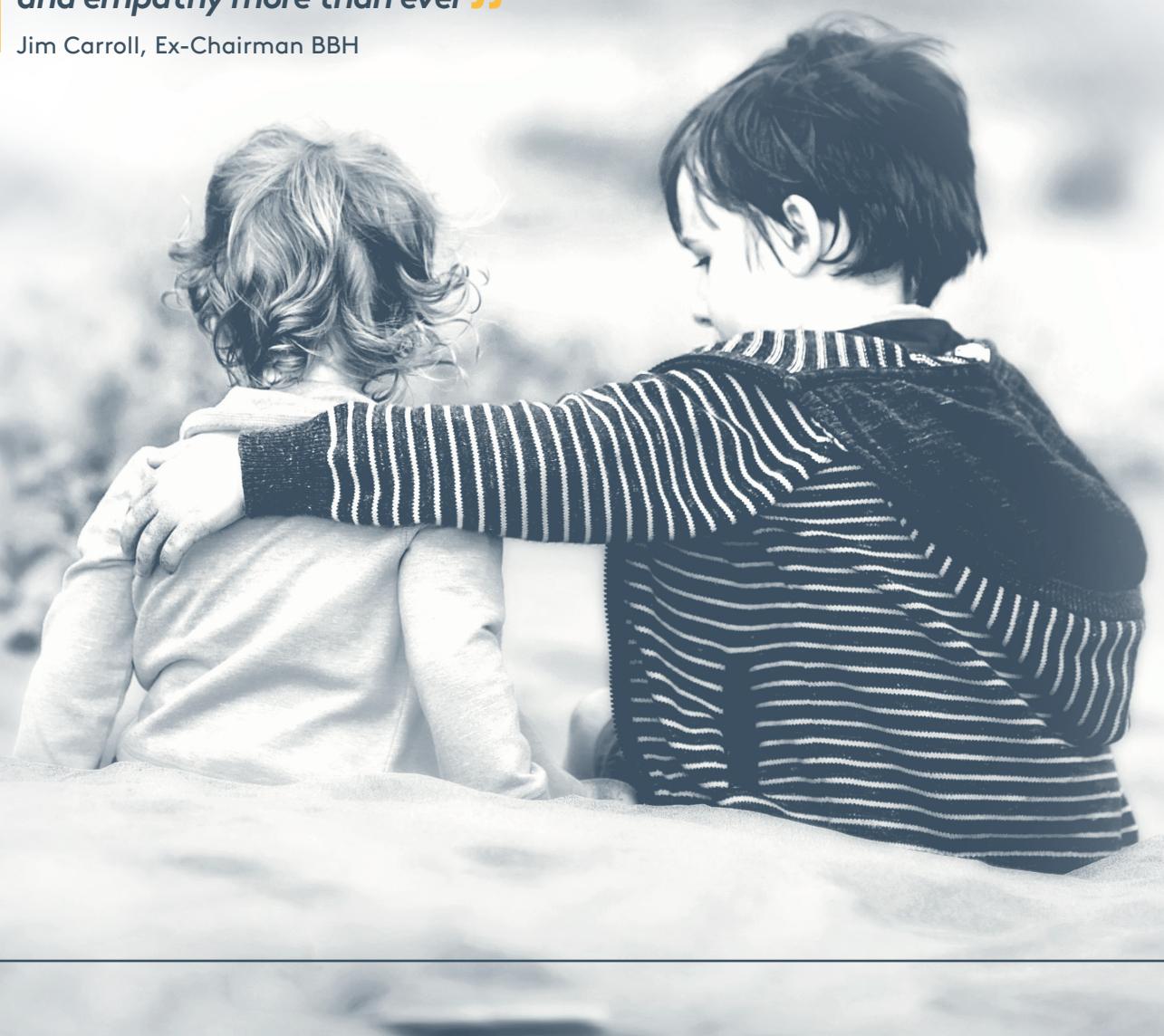


<sup>2</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/morality>

<sup>3</sup> Kantar GB TGI 2019 Q1 (October 2017-September 2018)

**“The successful agencies of the future will be those that integrate technological excellence with profoundly human qualities: combining efficacy with empathy... I suspect that we'll need appetite and empathy more than ever”<sup>4</sup>**

Jim Carroll, Ex-Chairman BBH



## We're not that special

The twin cultural shocks of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump provided a welcome dose of reality for the advertising and marketing industry. Although we have always operated in a bubble, these events have made many recognise the extent to which the industry has lost touch with mainstream audiences. As a consequence, talk of a need to maintain and develop our ‘human understanding’ and ‘empathy’, has dominated much of the discourse over the last few years.

Many believe the solution is to get out into the real world and spend time with ordinary people. Ogilvy’s Get Out There scheme is one of many examples. Launching in early 2017,

they announced they would be sending planners across the country to ‘go out into the streets and talk to people. Real people’.<sup>5</sup> ‘Going rogue’ was how they described it. Although well intentioned, this approach makes the basic assumption that people working in advertising and marketing generally have high levels of empathy. All we need to do is send planners out into the wild and they’ll do their thing! This could be because the industry likes to think it selects people who are strong in empathy traits, or that it has a culture of empathy which trains people in this skillset. But is this assumption correct? Do we really have a special aptitude for understanding others?

<sup>4</sup><https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/appetite-empathy-important-ever-success/1446440>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/planning-wild-ogilvy-planners-getting-connect-real-people/1421098#>

We measured people in our industry and the modern mainstream's ability to understand other people's emotions and perspectives. Respondents were shown 14 statements from a trait empathy scale developed by academic psychologists. Half related to 'perspective taking' (e.g. before criticising somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel in their place), and half related to 'affective (emotional) empathy' (e.g. other people's misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal). They rated each statement on how well they felt it described them.

We found that, generally, levels of empathy are fairly low. Only 29% of the modern mainstream have high levels of perspective taking and affective empathy (% scoring 4+ on 5 point scale). We also discovered that people working in advertising and marketing have no special aptitude for understanding others – scoring 30% on the same scale. This means we are no better at understanding other people's emotions and perspectives than the mainstream. This represents a major problem for an industry whose very success depends on a detailed and thorough understanding of the people it seeks to influence.

In an attempt to understand why this might be, we turn to the subject of morality.

**The industry has no special aptitude for understanding others**

% with strong perspective taking (net 4-5): the ability to understand other people's emotions and perspectives



## Taking a deeper look at the morality and cultural competence of marketing

Our starting point for exploring the morality and ethics of our industry was Jonathan Haidt's bestselling book *The Righteous Mind*. As a leading social psychologist, Haidt has been at the forefront of popularising the idea of WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic) morality and psychology. Haidt identifies five moral foundations and shows that, although WEIRD morality is dominant in political, cultural, media and professional elites in the United States, WEIRD people are actually statistical outliers whose moral foundations are unrepresentative of the general population.

The moral foundations fall within two categories – Individualising (focused on welfare/rights of the individual) and Binding (focused on loyalty, authority and the 'ethics of community').



**Empathy: 'The ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation'.<sup>6</sup>**

# The Five Moral Foundations

## Individualising: focused on welfare/ rights of individuals



### Care/Harm

Caring, Kindness



### Fairness/Reciprocity

Justice, Trustworthiness

## Binding: ethics of community



### In-Group Loyalty

Group pride, Self sacrifice



### Authority/Respect

Obedience, Deference



### Purity/Sanctity

Chastity, Piety, Cleanliness

We take out two key principles from Haidt's moral foundations theory:

① Our morals get edited as we develop within a particular culture.

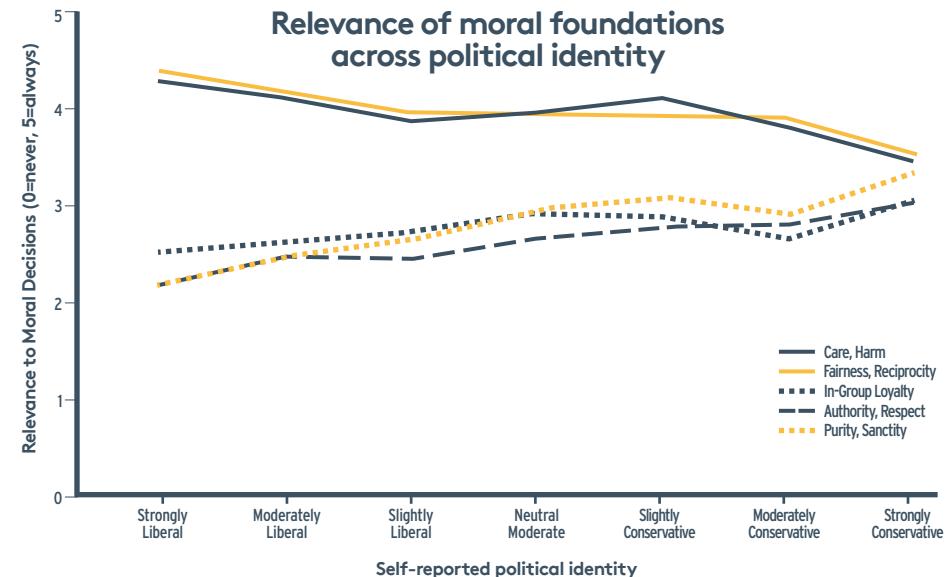
Morals are a set of social standards, which means they are socially functional. We use morals to identify our in-groups and demonstrate our personal worth and ability to fulfil a useful role within these groups.

② Moral evaluations are driven by intuition and work at an unconscious level.

They are very difficult to override through rational discourse. Haidt wrote that "*The conscious brain thinks it's the oval office, but it is actually the press office*".<sup>7</sup> As Rory Sutherland eloquently explains, "*We believe we are issuing executive orders, whilst most of the time we are actually engaged in hastily constructing plausible post rationalisations to explain decisions taken somewhere else, for reasons we don't understand*".<sup>8</sup>

Through extensive research, Haidt proves that people who self-identify as Conservatives (in the US parlance) regard all five moral foundations as equally relevant to decision making. Liberals place much greater importance on the individualising foundations (Care/Harm and Fairness/Reciprocity) whilst downplaying the relevance and importance of the binding ethics (In-Group Loyalty, Authority/Respect and Purity/Sanctity).

<sup>7</sup>Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind*. Penguin Books  
<sup>8</sup>Sutherland, R. (2019) *Alchemy*. Penguin Books, London



Haidt argues that an over reliance on moral intuitions is driving political polarisation in the US. As it turns out, it appears to be a bigger problem for Liberals than it is for Conservatives. There is growing evidence that Liberals find it harder to connect with people on the other end of the political spectrum. One such example comes from the Pew Research Centre, which found that 13% of Republicans agreed it would put a strain on a friendship if a friend voted for Hilary Clinton. Over twice as many Democrats (35%) said the same in relation to a friend voting for Donald Trump.

A similar pattern has emerged in the UK. One in five (19%) of those who identify as Conservative would be upset if their child married a Labour

voter, whereas 28% of those who identify as Labour would be upset if the situation was reversed.<sup>9</sup> Research published recently by the University of Kent found that 80% of leave voters would have a remaine as friend, but only 61% of remainers would have a leaver as a friend.<sup>10</sup>

## A similar pattern has emerged in the UK



Of those who identify as Labour would be upset if their child married a Conservative voter



Of those who identify as Conservative would be upset if their child married a Labour voter

In *The Righteous Mind*, Haidt argues convincingly that Liberals find it more difficult to tolerate alternative points of view because they have narrower moral foundations. This is a problem of perspective taking. They simply don't see the same relevance for other points of view based on community ethics. For the first time outside the world of

academia, we measured the UK modern mainstream population (and our sample of marketing and advertising people) against the same moral foundations framework developed by Haidt.<sup>11</sup>

 The framework is based on two elements:

**1 When deciding if something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking?**

Whether or not someone suffered emotionally

Compassion for those who are suffering is the most crucial virtue

Whether or not some people were treated differently than others

When the government makes laws, the number one principle should be ensuring that everyone is treated fairly

Whether or not someone's action showed love for his or her country

I am proud of my country's history

Whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority

Respect for authority is something all children need to learn

Whether or not someone violated standards of purity and decency

People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed

Whether or not someone cared for someone weak or vulnerable

One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal

Whether or not someone acted unfairly

Justice is the most important requirement for a society

Whether or not someone did something to betray his or her group

People should be loyal to their family members, even when they have done something wrong

Whether or not someone conformed to the traditions of society

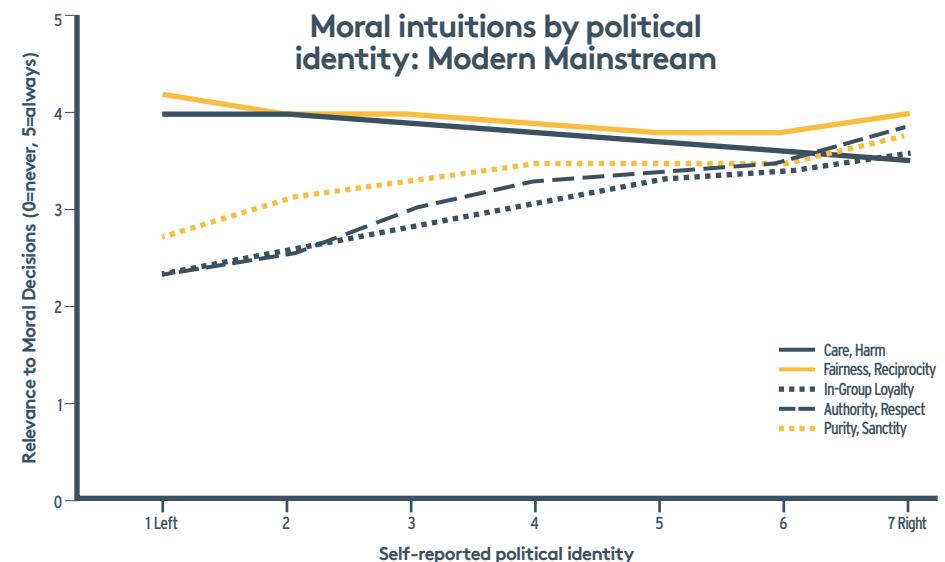
Men and women each have different roles to play in society

Whether or not someone did something disgusting

I would call some acts wrong on the grounds that they are unnatural

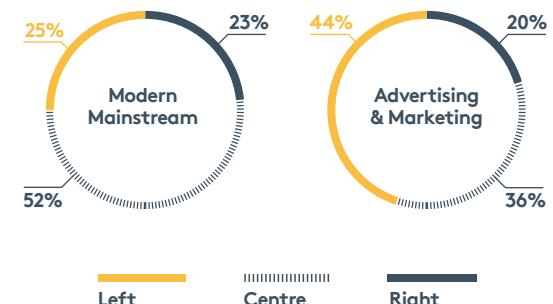
<sup>11</sup>The framework is available here: <https://www.moralfoundations.org/questionnaires>

Our results mirror Haidt's findings. People who identify as right leaning emphasise all moral foundations (more or less) equally while those on the left place more importance on the individualising foundations.



With stark differences in moral intuition between left and right, we wanted to understand how this applies to people working in the advertising and marketing industry. Perhaps unsurprisingly, we're much more likely to self-identify on the left of the political spectrum. It would therefore stand to reason that we would see a similar pattern of difference in moral foundations between ourselves and the mainstream.

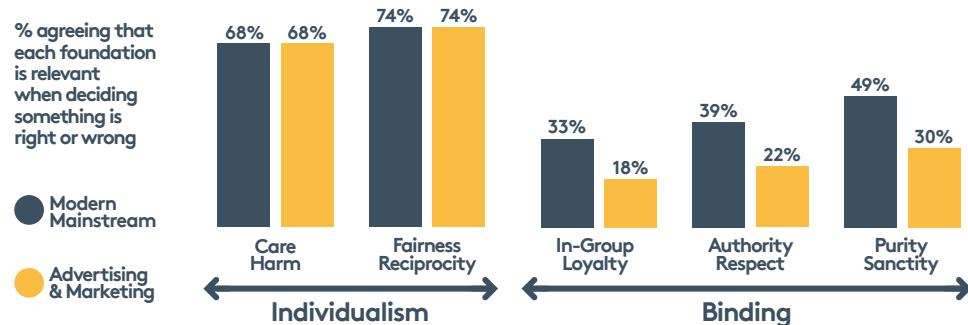
**We self-identify on the left**



Source: Reach Solutions/house51  
Base: Modern Mainstream (n=1,063), Advertising & Marketing (n=199)

## The industry uses different ethical and cultural settings to the modern mainstream

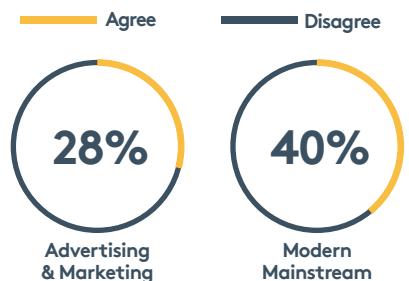
This is exactly what we found. Whilst marketers and the mainstream place equal importance on the



individualising ethics, the industry places significantly less emphasis on the binding ethics than the modern mainstream do. This reveals an advertising and marketing industry who are using different ethical and cultural settings to large swathes of the population, underpinning a profound disconnect with the people it seeks to influence.

Responses to individual statements in Haidt's framework reveal the extent of the differences between our two samples.

Women have different roles to play in society



I am proud of my country's history



Source: Reach Solutions/house51 Base: Modern Mainstream (n=1,063), Advertising & Marketing(n=199)

I would call some acts wrong on the grounds they are unnatural



It's important to point out that these differences are not simply a function of our industry's political identity or ideological preferences. Our data shows that people at both ends of the spectrum in the advertising and marketing industry have more polarised moral preferences.

Marketers and advertising people on the left discount the relevance of binding ethics more than the left leaning mainstream do. It's a similar story on the right. Those in our industry who do identify on the right, value binding ethics less than the right wing mainstream do.

Crucially this shows that, in terms of moral foundations, people in our industry don't even connect fully with the political and ideological tribes they claim to identify with. The focus on individualism in marketing is so pervasive it creates a disconnect at both ends of the political spectrum.

But how much does this really matter? Does it really affect how our industry behaves and engages with those who have different moral intuitions? We decided to test this using the biggest issue of our time, and one of the most famous experiments in behavioural economics.

## Relevance of Binding Ethics



## The Dictator Game

The dictator game is a simplified version of the ultimatum game first proposed by Daniel Kahneman, Richard Thaler and Jack Knetch.

In our version of the dictator game survey respondents were asked to imagine they had been paired with an anonymous partner (i.e. another survey participant) and that they had been given £50 to share between themselves and the other player. It's called a dictator game because the first player gets to decide how much of the money they want to keep for themselves and how much (if any) they want to transfer to the person they've been paired with.

**The dictator game has featured prominently in behavioural economics literature and has been used to highlight some key fallacies of standard economic theory**

The dictator game has featured prominently in behavioural economics literature and has been used to highlight some key fallacies of standard economic theory. Standard economics insists that people are self-interested utility maximisers. This predicts that in the dictator

game utility maximising players will offer the lowest amount possible (in our game = £1) to the other player.

However, in the real world, people prefer fairness. 77% of the modern mainstream offer an equal share (£25) to the (unknown) person they are playing with. Interestingly, people working in advertising and marketing are slightly, but significantly, less likely to offer an equal share – only 69% offered £25.

There is rich academic literature which has used the dictator game to explore political polarisation and the impact of identity on people's social preferences (i.e. sharing behaviour). In a nutshell, there is strong evidence that people depart from the fairness default when they are asked to play the game with someone who has a different identity or perceived set of beliefs or values.<sup>12</sup>

We decided to explore what would happen if we introduced an additional identity variable into our dictator game. As we noted earlier, Brexit has become a shorthand for a deep divide between opposing economic and cultural tribes in the UK. So, we asked our survey participants to play two further rounds of the dictator game:

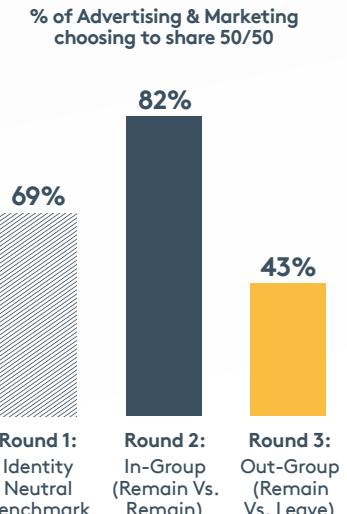
- **In-group round- i.e. playing with someone who voted the same way as them in the 2016 EU Referendum (e.g. remain v remain)**

- **Out-group round- i.e. playing with someone who voted the opposite way in the 2016 EU Referendum (e.g. remain v leave)**



We then compared sharing behaviour in these rounds to our initial (identity neutral) benchmark round. As we have just seen, 69% of advertising and marketing people would choose to share an equal amount in the identity neutral benchmark round. When marketers and ad people who voted remain are told they are playing with a fellow remainner, the proportion willing to share an equal amount rises to 82% (social scientists refer to this positive shift in behaviour as 'in-group love').

However, when 'remain' marketers and ad people are told they are playing with a 'leaver' (i.e. their out-group), we see a dramatic impact on willingness to share. Just 43% of 'remain' marketers are willing to share 50/50 with a 'leaver'. This represents a drop of 39 percentage points! This departure from the fairness norm is a clear sign of a tendency to punish or discriminate against those holding opposing beliefs. Whilst we see a similar pattern of polarising behaviour in the modern mainstream sample, the drop is less pronounced between the in-group and out-group conditions – 31 percentage points.



Source: Reach Solutions/house51  
Base: Modern Mainstream (n=1,063), Advertising & Marketing (n=199)

<sup>12</sup>Iyengar and Westwood 'Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines, New Evidence on Group Polarisation, American Journal of Political Science 2015

## Marketers are heavily influenced by identity in the dictator game

Is this surprising? After all, we're only human. And, as such, we may expect that people in our industry are strongly influenced by intuitions and herd behaviour. But remember, there is a persistent belief in the industry that we have stronger empathy or that we are trained to overcome our biases. But it turns out we are more likely to be driven by these biases than the modern mainstream! There is no evidence of greater empathy or capacity for perspective taking when it comes to the biggest social, political and cultural issue of the day.

Using Haidt's moral foundations framework we've shown that people working in the advertising and marketing industry have different ethical settings to the modern mainstream. Using the dictator game we've shown that we are more likely to let our identity and intuitions about what is right and wrong impact interactions with people who don't share our views. For an industry that prides itself on empathy and human understanding, this is an extremely worrying set of findings.



**Using the dictator game we've shown that we are more likely to let our identity and intuitions about what is right and wrong impact interactions with people who don't share our views**

## Our morality and intuitions are reflected in day to day practice and decision making

Here are 3 examples to consider:

### ● Social virtue as a marketing strategy:

This current marketing trend (commonly referred to as brand purpose) is highly seductive to our industry on a personal level. People in marketing and advertising are surely part of the 'aspirational class' that Elizabeth Currid-Halkett describes in her fascinating book *The Sum of Small Things*. This group defines themselves via shared cultural capital, and seek to signal social position via shared knowledge and values (sound familiar?). The acquisition of goods fits into this framework.

*"In decisions big and small they strive to feel informed and legitimate in their belief that they have made the right and reasonable decision based on facts (whether regarding the merit of organic food or electric cars)."<sup>13</sup>*

Setting aside the erroneous belief that decisions are based on facts, this suggests that the major driving force behind virtue strategies is not the needs of the mainstream, it's the assumptions and needs of the people in the advertising and marketing industry. Let's not forget, we are an elite subset of the population. Most in the mainstream remain motivated by

<sup>13</sup>Currid-Halkett, E. (2017). *The Sum of Small Thing - A theory of the aspirational class*. Princeton University Press

materialism (simply because they have less stuff and don't take it for granted) and compensatory consumption of brands and goods that they believe 'symbolically compensate' for their perceived status deficits.

So the inherent risks and limitations of virtue based marketing strategies are clear.

Our research shows that we downplay the relevance of mainstream ethics. If we insist that brands should use social virtue as a marketing strategy, we need to be more mindful of our moral intuitions. Crucially, there also needs to be much greater scrutiny of our interpretation of social virtue. Using virtue to stand out is of little value if all it means is projecting our values onto others. Marketing strategies driven by narrow foundations only serve to widen the cultural gap between brands and the very people they are seeking to engage.



Our enquiry into the moral intuitions of marketers also serves to reinforce two key points that we made in last year's Gut Instinct white paper.

#### ● Targeting ourselves:

In response to Gut Instinct, Mark Ritson wrote a column reminding the industry of the first rule of marketing - 'you are not the customer'.<sup>14</sup> The academic evidence and our own research continues to suggest that marketers and ad people find this a hard principle to live by.

Our argument is that we, like everyone else, prefer to talk to people we are familiar with and understand. Witness the industry's continued fixation with targeting 18-34 ABC1s which is surely driven more by the composition of our industry than the demographic reality of our aging population and the massive concentration of wealth and spending power in the older generations.

Our moral intuitions reinforce this tendency. Giving free rein to our moral intuitions creates a narrow view of the target in our minds. We repeatedly and unconsciously gravitate towards a demographic group that we intuitively know will see the world as we do.

#### ● Hyper targeting:

In Gut Instinct we showed that the modern mainstream are more driven by holistic cognition (i.e. they unconsciously pay more attention to social context and relationships between people) whereas marketers and ad people are driven by analytical thinking, seeing the world as discrete and autonomous and focused on individuals.

We made a direct connection between our 'thinking styles' and the current pre-occupation with hyper targeted advertising and personalisation. We argued that a failure to take account of the mainstream's holistic thinking style means that hyper targeted advertising is ignoring the power of context and social proof.

Our current research provides further evidence of how our industry's fixation with individualism and standing out misses the mark. Adapting an experiment from Stephens et al's excellent paper 'Choice as an Act of Meaning', we asked our modern mainstream sample to imagine two scenarios:

- ① Someone you know bought the same car as you
- ② Someone you know bought the same shoes as you

We find that over 80% of the modern mainstream endorse the following statements in response to these scenarios:



Cars and shoes are categories that are routinely marketed using individualistic messaging and increasing levels of personalisation. The underlying assumption in our industry is that people's product choices are motivated by a need to stand out and signal their unique personality and identity. But our results are consistent with the academic literature. The modern mainstream have no problem with being similar to others. In fact, owning the same stuff as other people makes them feel good. For the majority, feeling 'special' comes from being the same as others rather than being unique.

Our exploration of moral foundations and people's attitudes to choice emphasises the importance the mainstream place on binding ethics and social proof. This reinforces our point that highly atomised strategies based on hyper targeting and personalisation are failing to leverage these powerful drivers of behaviour.

Source: Reach Solutions/house51  
Base: Modern Mainstream (n=1063)

<sup>14</sup><https://www.marketingweek.com/2018/07/10/mark-ritson-the-first-rule-of-marketing-is-you-are-not-the-customer/>



## Our conclusions

In 2017 our research showed how advertising had lost relevance with large swathes of the UK.<sup>15</sup> Last year our *Gut Instinct* study used cognitive and personality psychology to diagnose some of the unconscious drivers of this disconnect.

This year, we've challenged marketing and advertising's exceptionalism and the empathy delusion. Furthermore, we've identified the role that our moral intuitions play in driving a wedge between us and the mainstream audiences we seek to engage.

## Balance the EQ

There's been much handwringing among the media elites on both sides of the Atlantic about populism and the rise of Brexit and Trump, and why more 'moderate' messages are struggling to cut through. In

*The Righteous Mind*, Haidt argues that Conservatives find it easier to cut through than Liberals precisely because they play to Middle America's broader moral foundations. Haidt uses the analogy of a graphic equaliser to reinforce his point. Liberals have two moral foundations (Harm and Fairness) turned up high and have the others dialled way down. Conservatives have all five on an equal setting. And this is a tune that tends to resonate more with the mainstream. Our research shows that the UK advertising and marketing industry are dancing to the same tune as the US Liberals. And, as a result, face the same challenges to connect.

So our industry needs to balance the equaliser (EQ).

But, let's be clear, this is not about abandoning our personal moral codes and ethics or pandering to people's baser instincts. Of course we shouldn't tolerate or encourage injustice or prejudice. And the mainstream agree. We've shown that they share our focus on fairness and preventing harm. So, on these foundations, we are preaching to the converted! It's just that people in advertising and marketing seem unable to reciprocate when it comes to what Haidt describes as the 'ethics

of community' i.e. a wide range of entirely legitimate and positive mainstream codes about tradition, group loyalty and sanctity that remain strongly relevant for the mainstream. The moral bias of people in our industry, means we tend to view these mainstream concerns with suspicion. So, we need to develop a more pluralist outlook.

## Key considerations

### 1 Let the media do the talking

So, how does our industry communicate that we 'get it' and that our brands are relevant to mainstream lives? For the most part, the industry tends to be seduced by the direct approach. We strive to identify a relevant message and we build a campaign to tell our chosen demographic (typically ABC1 18-34) about why it matters to us and why it should matter to them (see brand purpose).

The economist John Kay is the chief exponent of an alternative route. In his book *Obliquity* Kay explains why our goals are best achieved indirectly. Evidence of obliquity abounds. Kay shows how the happiest people are not necessarily those who focus on happiness, the most profitable companies are not always the most profit-oriented etc.

So, consider this - perhaps the most relevant brands aren't those who are banging on about how relevant they

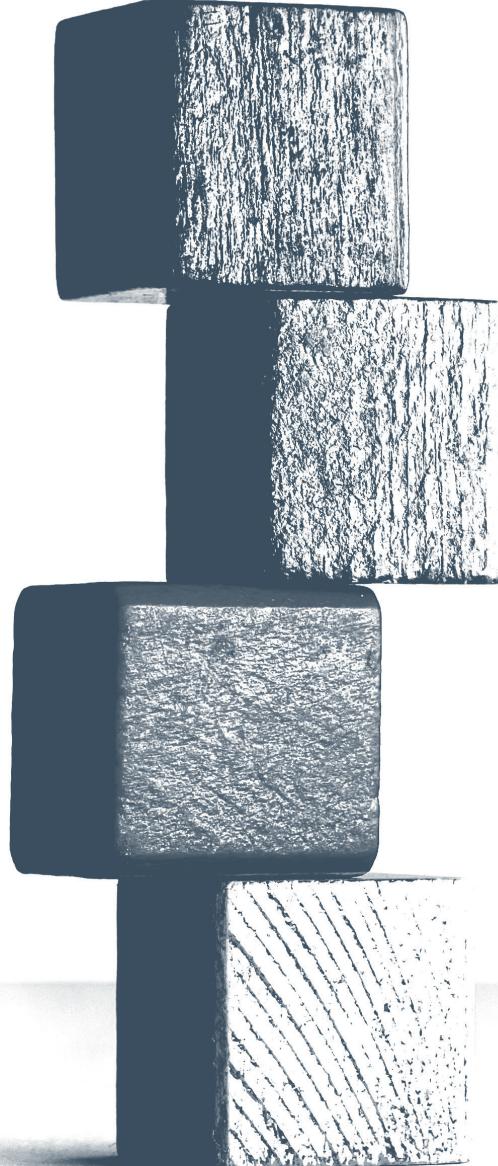
are. There's a wealth of evidence, including our own recent work, on how different media channels foster a sense of community and thereby proving the environment and context in which people interact with brands is absolutely critical.

People are cognitive misers. In the real world they simply don't waste precious cognitive resources worrying about what a brand thinks or believes. But, the science shows that people do unconsciously 'incorporate brands into the self'.<sup>16</sup> Brands can build relevance, identification and shared values implicitly by being associated with the things, and being found in the places, that people do care about.

**So, consider this - perhaps the most relevant brands aren't those who are banging on about how relevant they are**

Over reliance on explicit messaging, narrow targeting and direct strategies like social virtue are likely to be insufficient because they exclude too many people. A broadly targeted and diverse mass-media strategy offers a powerful, indirect way of building a truly plural brand with broad cultural relevance.

<sup>15</sup> [https://www.reachsolutions.co.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/TMS%20When%20It%20Fails%20Down%20White%20Paper\\_0.pdf](https://www.reachsolutions.co.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/TMS%20When%20It%20Fails%20Down%20White%20Paper_0.pdf)



## ② Build moral availability and ethical entry points

We've built an argument for pluralist advertising and marketing using the moral psychology framework found in Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*. Can this really help us grow our brands? Let's consider some parallels between Haidt and, arguably, the dominant contemporary marketing paradigm Byron Sharp's *How Brands Grow*.

Sharp shows that brands grow by maximising relevant associations and building mental availability. (He's just a bit narrow about the range of associations he allows!) In marketing terms, Haidt's application of moral foundations theory to political communication is basically an argument for maximising moral availability. And his argument for 'balancing the moral EQ' shows us the importance to brands of maximising ethical entry points (across both individualising and binding morality).

In our age of culture war and affective polarisation, it's not clear that a) unconsciously projecting our moral intuitions onto others or b) consciously taking sides is good marketing. These are, inevitably, narrowly targeted strategies.

So-called 'traditional' media offers an oblique route to maximising moral availability. Established media have spent decades building strong identities based on shared

values and ethics. Brands can maximise ethical entry points and mainstream relevance by maximising coverage across diverse, trusted media.

## ③ Empathy is hard

Empathy is much harder than we think. We need to dispense with the complacent exceptionalism that has our industry assuming that we are naturally good at empathy. We are only human. And many powerful (system 1) forces are getting in our way. Confirmation bias is strong and morality is socially functional. As people working in advertising and marketing, our moral intuitions are bound up with group belonging. So, psychologically, it is very difficult to associate ourselves with any message or media that challenges our identity.

But to build empathy we need to slow down. Perspective taking is crucial to identifying relevant comms strategies and the value of placing brands in divergent (media) contexts and environments.

We don't need to feel the same as the mainstream. But we do need the courage to understand and connect more deeply with them.

<sup>16</sup>Trump, R. and Bucks, M. (2012). Overlap Between Mental Representations of Self and Brand. *Self and Identity*. 1(4) 454-471

<sup>17</sup>Kahneman, D. (2012). *Thinking Fast and Slow*. Penguin Books

<sup>18</sup><https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/21/opinion/sunday/a-chat-with-maya-angelou.html>



**“ The way to block errors that originate in system 1 is simple... recognise the signs, slow down and ask for reinforcement from system 2 ”<sup>17</sup>**

Daniel Kahneman



**“ I think we all have empathy. We may not have enough courage to display it ”<sup>18</sup>**

Maya Angelou

## And finally

How do we build this capability in our industry?

We are getting better at turning the behavioural lens on ourselves. Awareness of unconscious bias and bias training are becoming a feature in many of our businesses. But it's also unrealistic to rely on individuals to monitor and challenge their own behaviour when we know that unconscious intuitions, social context and norms are such strong drivers of behaviour.

This inevitably highlights the importance of the culture of advertising and marketing, and the social composition of our industry.

We've long recognised that shared values and a strong culture are vital components of an effective business. But recruiting for culture fit has significant downsides. It risks supporting the status quo. And placing too much focus on 'in-group love' makes it harder to champion the out-group (e.g. the mainstream).

To counteract bias, we need to be continually exposed to divergent social cues and behavioural norms. But this is not about going on more safaris to see the weird and wonderful animals that live beyond the M25. It's about building greater demographic, cultural and cognitive diversity in our workplaces. This is the route to stronger empathy and more effective, culturally competent advertising and marketing.

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# The Empathy Delusion

**Reach**Solutions

# The Five Moral Foundations

**Individualising:**  
focused on welfare/  
rights of individuals



**Care/Harm**  
Caring, Kindness



**Fairness/Reciprocity**  
Justice, Trustworthiness

**Binding:**  
ethics of  
community



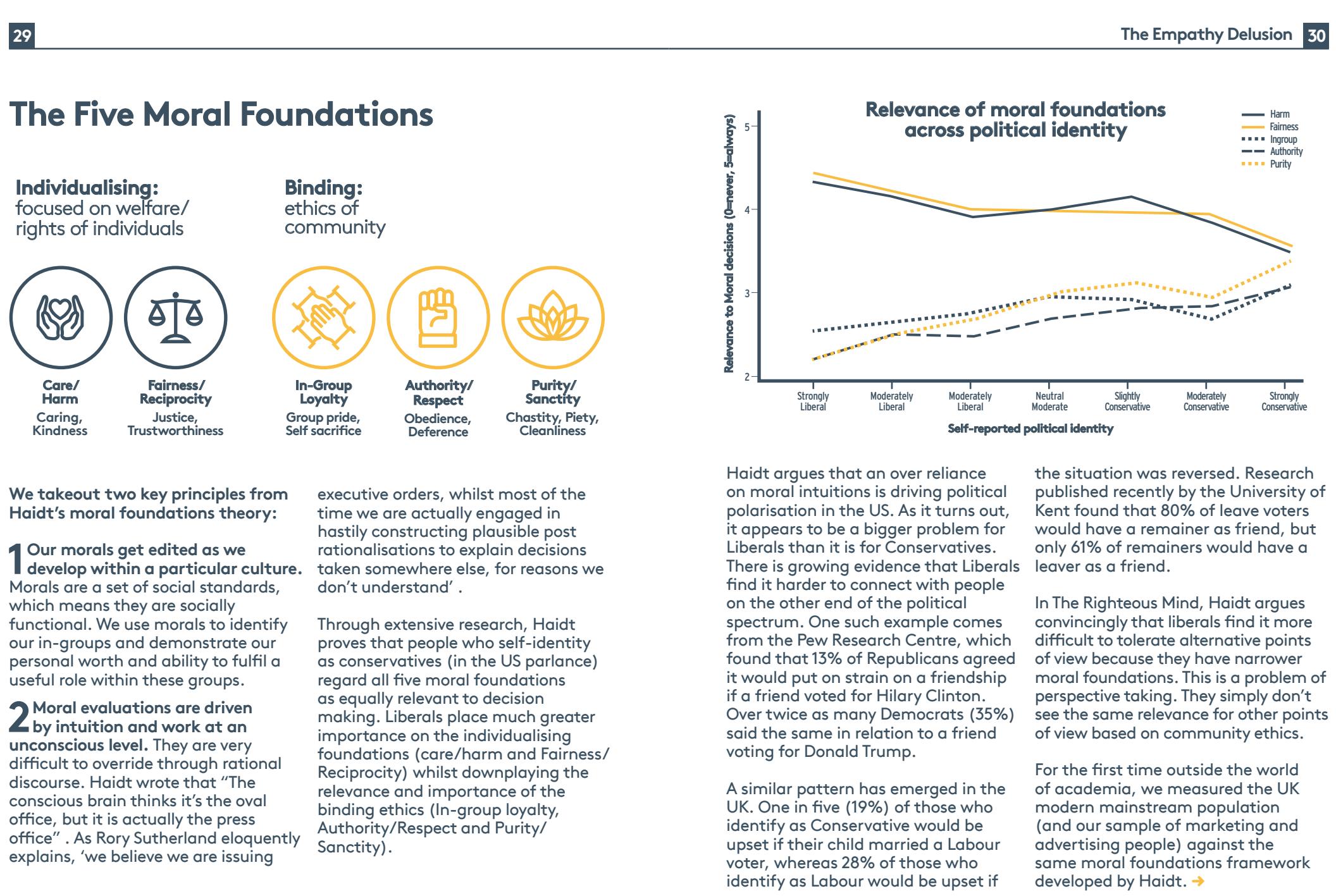
**In-Group Loyalty**  
Group pride, Self sacrifice



**Authority/Respect**  
Obedience, Deference



**Purity/Sanctity**  
Chastity, Piety, Cleanliness



We take out two key principles from Haidt's moral foundations theory:

**1 Our morals get edited as we develop within a particular culture.** Morals are a set of social standards, which means they are socially functional. We use morals to identify our in-groups and demonstrate our personal worth and ability to fulfil a useful role within these groups.

**2 Moral evaluations are driven by intuition and work at an unconscious level.** They are very difficult to override through rational discourse. Haidt wrote that "The conscious brain thinks it's the oval office, but it is actually the press office". As Rory Sutherland eloquently explains, 'we believe we are issuing

executive orders, whilst most of the time we are actually engaged in hastily constructing plausible post rationalisations to explain decisions taken somewhere else, for reasons we don't understand'.

Through extensive research, Haidt proves that people who self-identify as conservatives (in the US parlance) regard all five moral foundations as equally relevant to decision making. Liberals place much greater importance on the individualising foundations (care/harm and Fairness/Reciprocity) whilst downplaying the relevance and importance of the binding ethics (In-group loyalty, Authority/Respect and Purity/Sanctity).

Haidt argues that an over reliance on moral intuitions is driving political polarisation in the US. As it turns out, it appears to be a bigger problem for Liberals than it is for Conservatives. There is growing evidence that Liberals find it harder to connect with people on the other end of the political spectrum. One such example comes from the Pew Research Centre, which found that 13% of Republicans agreed it would put on strain on a friendship if a friend voted for Hilary Clinton. Over twice as many Democrats (35%) said the same in relation to a friend voting for Donald Trump.

A similar pattern has emerged in the UK. One in five (19%) of those who identify as Conservative would be upset if their child married a Labour voter, whereas 28% of those who identify as Labour would be upset if

the situation was reversed. Research published recently by the University of Kent found that 80% of leave voters would have a remaine as friend, but only 61% of remainers would have a leaver as a friend.

In *The Righteous Mind*, Haidt argues convincingly that liberals find it more difficult to tolerate alternative points of view because they have narrower moral foundations. This is a problem of perspective taking. They simply don't see the same relevance for other points of view based on community ethics.

For the first time outside the world of academia, we measured the UK modern mainstream population (and our sample of marketing and advertising people) against the same moral foundations framework developed by Haidt. →

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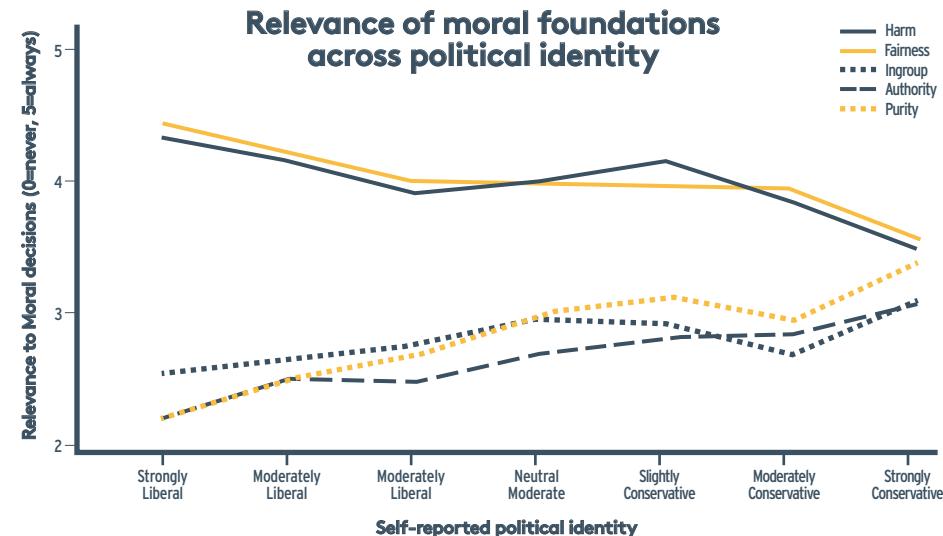
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