



Faith-filled brands: The interplay of religious branding and brand engagement in the self-concept

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Religious brands
Brand relationships
BESC
Self-concept
Religion
Religious positioning

ABSTRACT

While prior research has shown that religion influences consumption, research has yet to adequately examine how the branded-self influences response to religious brands. Consumer response to religious brands was examined in three experiments. In Study 1a, consumers had less trust and lower quality perceptions for religious brands, with this effect only emerging for participants with lower levels of brand engagement in the self-concept (BESC). In Study 1b, consumer reactions toward religious brands did not differ by degree of religious cue explicitness or product category. Studies 2 and 3 then explore the moderators of firm size and religiosity, revealing that high BESC consumers believed they would be valued by a religious brand regardless of size and that higher levels of religiosity could attenuate lower evaluations of religious brands for consumers low and high in BESC. Findings are discussed in light of the branding, religion, and self-concept literature.

1. Introduction

Brands are increasingly seeking ways to communicate core values, whether it be Target's perspective of transgender bathroom access or Starbucks' outspoken perspective on political issues. Another area where brands communicate values systems is with religious beliefs, which are important to understand given that religion serves as one of the most prominent sources or core values for many consumers and businesses (Mathras et al., 2017). Brands such as Chick-fil-A are well known for their religious value systems, while other companies (e.g., Tyson Chicken, Alaska Airlines) express religious values more subtly (Nisen, 2013). Subtle expressions of religious value systems can occur through sharing profits with religious charity, being closed on a weekend day to observe the Sabbath day, or printing scripture references around a business or inconspicuously in marketing communications. Despite many brands communicating religious value systems, research understanding response to religious versus non-religious brands is lacking (Minton, 2016; Shachar et al., 2011).

Brands can no longer ignore conveying stances on sensitive issues, such as religious beliefs, due to consumers' desire (and sometimes demand) for transparency and authenticity of brands they purchase (Morhart et al., 2015). Additionally, understanding the factors that underlie response to religious versus non-religious brands (e.g., self-brand connections) provide critical insight to why these effects are

occurring. For example, trust has been shown to influence a religious consumer's response to religious cues in advertisements (Minton, 2015), but research has yet to adequately examine consumers' trust response that occurs in evaluation of brands positioned broadly as religious or non-religious. Other research suggests possible moderating effects of religiosity (with higher religiosity consumers generally more positively evaluating religious positioning; Taylor et al., 2010) and firm size (with firm size having a great influence on consumer evaluations when the firm is engaged in a dissonance-producing activity, arguably including religious positioning; Han and Schmitt, 1997).

Moreover, given the relational focus and self-defining aspects of an individual's religion (Mathras et al., 2016; McCullough and Willoughby, 2009; Minton and Kahle, 2014; Shachar et al., 2011), a logical extension of response to religious brands lies in the importance of such brands to the self-concept. Particularly, research would benefit from exploring how consumers define religious versus non-religious brands as part of the self because of the inherent expectation that religious brands target core value systems more so than non-religious brands, which provides direct connection to the self. We turn to brand engagement in the self-concept (BESC; Sprott et al., 2009) to gain insight on whether the disposition to define the self with important brands influences response to religious versus non-religious brands. Prior BESC research has primarily focused on consumer responses, depending on the level of the brand engagement disposition, to broad brand

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phenomena (e.g., recall of brands in one's cabinet, incidental brand exposure, brand loyalty; [Sprrott et al., 2009](#)), but this research has yet to address brands expressing value systems, as is the case with religious brands.

Therefore, this research seeks to fulfill three purposes: (1) explore the novel moderator of BESC in evaluations of religious versus non-religious brands, (2) identify what mediates the relationship between religious positioning and BESC through to brand evaluations, namely examining trust, and (3) test other moderators influencing this relationship, inclusive of firm size and religiosity. In the next conceptual development sections, the relevant literature on religion and branding is reviewed before hypotheses are proposed.

2. Religion and branding

Religion is an indelible force in society ([Mathras et al., 2016](#); [Mittelstaedt, 2002](#); [Schmidt et al., 2014](#)), with religious values and religious references increasingly being seen incorporated into marketing efforts ([Minton, 2015](#); [Nisen, 2013](#)). We conceptualize religion here as referring to the values and beliefs that guide one's sense of purpose and meaning in life, often being rooted in belief in a God or other divine being ([Schmidt et al., 2014](#)). The relationship between religion and branding is diverse. Some researchers argue that this relationship rests in how religions are brands that can be marketed ([Alserhan, 2010](#); [Einstein, 2008](#)). Others suggest that religion and brands are substitutes for one another, with both providing consumers a sense of self-worth ([Shachar et al., 2011](#)). Yet others see religion as a value system that can be communicated by brands in marketing communications ([Minton, 2016](#); [Taylor et al., 2010](#)).

According to signaling theory ([Spence, 1973](#)), religious values communicated alongside branding elements should provide consumers key information in evaluating new products and services. Signaling theory suggests that business actions produce signals that inform consumers of product or service quality and other related business outcomes ([Boulding and Kirmani, 1993](#)). These signals help to reduce information asymmetry ([Connelly et al., 2011](#)), which aids in consumer decision making and business evaluations. While information/signals can better inform consumers ([Ariely, 2000](#); [MacInnis et al., 1991](#)), this information can also negatively influence consumer evaluations when it goes against a consumer's ideology ([Taylor et al., 2010](#)) and threatens their self-concept ([Fetscherin and Heinrich, 2015](#); [Sirgy, 1982](#)). Here, a consumer's religious affiliation and level of religiosity could be considered moderators to response to religious branding, such that religious branding should have a positive effect when branding is consistent with one's beliefs but a negative effect when branding is inconsistent with one's beliefs ([Minton, 2015](#); [Taylor et al., 2010](#)), thereby following suit with self-congruence theory ([Rokeach and Rothman, 1965](#)). This can be seen in the case of Chik-fil-A where many religious consumers were loyal to the company, even while other consumer groups called for boycotts of the brand due to support of staunchly religiously-related causes ([Nisen, 2013](#)). However, consumers with specific levels of religiosity are harder for businesses to target with broad marketing and advertising efforts without having overlap in targeting non-religious consumers as well ([Minton and Kahle, 2014](#)).

It is expected that brands overtly communicating religious values will also generate lower product evaluations in comparison to brands not communicating religious values. This is expected for several reasons. First, the growing negative sentiment toward religious groups in general ([Gallup, 2017](#); [Pew Research Center, 2014](#)) is likely to translate into negative sentiment toward brands communicating religious values. Second, consumers may question the sincerity of motives for overtly communicating religious values ([Alhouthi et al., 2015](#); [Halstead et al., 2009](#)), perhaps with the thought that motives behind such claims are purely profit-driven. Third, overtly communicating religious values may be perceived as pushy or as generated by more of a religious extremist background in needing to communicate religious values in

secular marketing communications ([Minton, 2015, 2016](#)), thereby leading consumers of all religious backgrounds to like the brand less. Alternatively, it is possible that consumers could see such mention of religious values as a positive feature in highlighting a higher quality product or service, higher standards for business, or more truthful/honest business practices ([Minton, 2015](#); [Taylor et al., 2010](#)).

3. Brand engagement in the self-concept (BESC)

Religion and its value systems influence an individual's relational nature and also help define a person's self-concept ([McCullough and Willoughby, 2009](#); [Shachar et al., 2011](#)). Given that the self can effect judgments and decisions ([Markus, 1977](#)), a brand connected to the self will undoubtedly influence consumer behavior. [Sprrott et al. \(2009\)](#) extended the work on consumers' self-brand connections by developing an individual difference measure of brand engagement in the self-concept (BESC), defined as a consumer's general propensity to incorporate important brands in the self-concept. An important distinction exists between BESC and related branding constructs, such as self-brand connections (c.f., [Escalas, 2004](#); [Escalas and Bettman, 2003](#)) and attachment to possessions ([Ball and Tasaki, 1992](#)). While other self-brand constructs are often focused on relationships with a *specific* brand or object, BESC is considered a generalized tendency for consumers to define the self-concept with important brands ([Sprrott et al., 2009](#)). As such, BESC addresses an inherent limitation associated with prior self-brand relationship work, providing a broader understanding of the relationships between consumers and *multiple* brands in their lives.

Studies involving the BESC construct have demonstrated the influence of viewing self-brand connections as a more integral piece of a consumer's self-concept. In particular, [Sprrott et al. \(2009\)](#) showed that consumers with higher (vs. lower) levels of the BESC disposition accessed their favorite brands more easily from memory than their least favorite brands. In addition, consumers higher (vs. lower) in the BESC disposition had better recall of branded products they own and more focus for incidental brand exposure ([Sprrott et al., 2009](#)). Recently, BESC research has shown that consumers with a stronger tendency to define the self with important brands preferred national as opposed to private label brands ([Liu et al., 2018](#)). In sum, BESC experimental studies support that consumers construe their self-concepts in terms of (multiple) favorite brands and such construal can have important implications for marketers.

We extend previous findings for the BESC construct by further understanding consumer responses to religious (vs. non-religious) brands. As discussed, consumers higher (vs. lower) in the BESC disposition generally evaluate brands more favorably, notice brands in the marketplace with a greater likelihood, and gravitate towards brands with a distinct positioning. Overall, consumers with a tendency to define the self with important brands should find brands that express their value systems and core beliefs (e.g., religious brands) more aligned to their innate branded-self disposition. Consumers with higher BESC levels should have less reactant responses to religious brands, even if such views of the particular brand do not align with the consumer's personal viewpoint. It may seem at first that a religious brand would not represent an important brand for these high BESC, low religiosity consumers. However, we argue that these consumers can find religious brands important with the clear religious symbolism used and the positive features associated with religious brands. For example, prior research has identified that consumers can see religious brands as providing a higher quality product or service, having higher operating standards, and having a stronger moral compass leading to more positive business behaviors and community contributions in comparison to non-religious brands ([Dotson and Hyatt, 2000](#); [Minton, 2015](#); [Minton and Kahle, 2017](#); [Taylor et al., 2010](#)).

Additionally, some could argue that high BESC, low religiosity consumers preferring religious brands is in contrast to self-congruence theory ([Rokeach and Rothman, 1965](#)) as discussed earlier; however, we

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