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

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A B S T R A C T

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 Starbuck's 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 though 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; Sprott 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 (Alhouti 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. Sprott 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 (Sprott 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, Sprott 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 (Sprott 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

argue that BESC provides an interesting moderator/boundary condition to self-congruence theory. In other words, a consumer's BESC can trump their desire for self-congruence because high BESC consumers are generally more drawn to brands with infused symbolism since such brands can be potentially used to define the self even if the brand's values do not completely align with an individual. Our line of reasoning is supported by previous work establishing that consumers higher in BESC were more drawn to national (private) label brands, noticed branded products even upon incidental exposure, and preferred brands with unique marketplace positioning (Liu et al., 2018; Sprott et al., 2009).

In contrast, for those consumers lower in BESC, we would expect more reactance toward religious (vs. non-religious) brands. Consumers with lower BESC levels typically do not appreciate the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits from including brands as part of their self-concept (Sprott et al., 2009). It is likely that these consumers would have less trust and lower overall evaluations of religious brands, especially if these brands overtly signal their values. Recent work supports this assertion in which lower BESC consumers only preferred brands with higher quality signals when faced with a self-concept threat (Liu et al., 2018). As such, consumers lower in BESC might be more brand critical, thereby considering religious brand positioning as a misleading brand strategy. Thus:

H1:. Evaluations are lower (higher) for religious (non-religious) positioned brands but only for those consumers with lower (higher) levels of BESC.

4. Religion and mediators/moderators

4.1. Trust as a mediator

Prior research has shown that trust plays an important role in response to advertising using religious and non-religious cues, with trust positively influencing product evaluations for both types of cues (Minton, 2015). Minton's (2015) research examined religious cues (e.g., a Christian fish symbol) in advertising, but their studies did not state that the business specifically carried that representative value system. Broadly, trust in marketing is connected with more positive product evaluations (Grayson et al., 2008; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). However, as discussed earlier, the motives for communicating religious values may not be perceived as authentic, may be perceived as pushy or from an extremist religious group, could be seen as just talk rather than as guiding principles driving company behavior, or could be seen as merging the sacred and secular in an unacceptable way. Given that low BESC consumers are not as drawn to the symbolic meanings behind brands (Liu et al., 2018; Sprott et al., 2009), arguably including religious values, we would expect such low BESC consumers to have less trust for religious brands in comparison to high BESC consumers. Thus:

H2. Trust mediates the relationship between religious versus non-religious brands and product evaluations, such that trust is lower (higher) for religious (non-religious) positioned brands, especially for low (high) BESC consumers.

4.2. Firm size as a moderator

Prior research shows that consumers rate products from large firms as higher quality and lower risk than products from small firms, particularly in situations of uncertainty (Han and Schmitt, 1997). In contrast, other research suggests that smaller firms can actually garner greater trust and customer satisfaction because of the consumer's ability to get to the know the owners of the business and better understand actual operating behaviors (Orth and Green, 2009). Given this, we expect that consumers would feel a greater sense of being valued by small firms, particularly for low BESC consumers who are not as drawn to the brand positioning strategies that large firms heavily rely on for consumer recognition and associations (Liu et al., 2018; Sprott et al., 2009).

There may be situations, however, where high BESC consumers actually feel more valued by large firms that use religious (vs. non-religious) brand positioning. Specifically, consumers higher in the BESC disposition will likely feel that religious brands are open-minded toward their opinions due to the value-based brand positioning in the marketplace. High BESC consumers seek to define themselves with important brands (e.g., religious brands) and will likely feel more connected to such brands, particularly when they feel the brand values them. Thus, we propose that high BESC consumers can feel a greater sense of being valued by large firms that have a religious brand positioning in thinking that they may be more open-minded toward their thoughts and feedback than non-religious positioned brands. Therefore:

H3. Firm size moderates the effect of religious brand positioning and BESC on evaluations (specifically feeling valued), such that low BESC consumers more positively evaluate small firms regardless of religious positioning, while high BESC consumers more positively evaluate large firms that are religiously positioned.

4.3. Religiosity as a moderator

We explore religiosity as a moderator in our final study in an effort to thoroughly develop a model of the relationship between BESC and religious positioning. Prior research suggests that consumers should seek congruence between their belief system and how they spend their money (Alhouti et al., 2015; Mathras et al., 2016), suggesting that low religiosity consumers should prefer non-religious positioning, while high religiosity consumers should prefer religious positioning.

Given this reasoning, we expect consumers with higher levels of religiosity, without regard for level of BESC, to more favorably evaluate religiously positioned brands since the brand associations overlap to a certain degree with their own religious values. As such, a higher religious disposition could overcome a branded disposition when presented with a religious brand. Additionally, for consumers low in BESC and low in religiosity who do not intimately tie brands into their schema (Sprott et al., 2009) we expect the opposite pattern of effects (i.e., greater preference for a non-religious positioning). In contrast, high BESC consumers should care more holistically about a brand than more surface-level features, such as religious positioning. As such, low religiosity but high BESC consumers should have more favorable brand attitudes than low religiosity and low BESC consumers who may judge brands on more surface-level features, such as religious positioning. This reasoning aligns with prior research previously discussed showing that consumers evaluate religious brands as operating by a stronger moral compass, having higher standards of operations and for employees, and providing a superior product or service in comparison to non-religious brands (Dotson and Hyatt, 2000; Minton, 2015; Taylor et al., 2010). Specifically, high BESC and low religiosity consumers may be more deeply evaluating the religious brand and coming up with these positive features of the religious brand, thereby leading to preference for the religious rather than the non-religious brand. Thus:

H4. Religiosity moderates the effect of religious brand positioning and BESC on evaluations, such that low BESC consumers that are low (high) in religiosity prefer a non-religious (religious) positioned brand, while high BESC consumers that are low (high) in religiosity unanimously prefer a religiously positioned brand, as opposed to a non-religiously positioned brand.

To test these hypotheses, Study 1a examines the interaction between religious positioning and BESC (H1) as well as the mediating role of trust (H2). Study 1b then rules out alternative explanations of religious brand positioning explicitness and product category influences. Study 2 and 3 then test potential moderating effects of firm size (H3) and

religiosity (H4), respectively.

5. Study 1A: BESC and religious positioning

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of the branded schema in consumer responses to religious versus non-religious brands (H1) as well as the mediating role of trust (H2).

5.1. Method

5.1.1. Participants

We recruited 243 participants from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 34.47, *SD* = 11.04; 46.9% female, United States only, > 95% approval). Previous research indicates that results from MTurk samples are comparable to those obtained using more representative sampling techniques (Simons and Chabris, 2012). After completing our study, each participant was provided a small cash incentive. This study featured a one-way design where participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a religious brand positioning (non-religious vs. religious) between-subjects design.

5.1.2. Procedure

Participants were first informed that they would be presented with a brand and brief overview of its practices and positioning. We developed a fictional coffee brand, Carlisle Coffee, and all participants were told that the brand is open every day, offers a variety of coffee blends, and is customer-focused. While participants were reading the brand information, they were simultaneously exposed to an image of the brand's coffee cup that included the printed brand name towards the top. We manipulated the religious brand positioning by including a Bible verse (John 3:16) towards the bottom of the brand's coffee cup, while no Bible verse was included on the cup for the non-religious brand.

5.1.3. Measures

After participants had sufficient time to examine the brand positioning of Carlisle Coffee, they were asked to complete various questions assessing the fictional brand. First, participants completed a one-item, seven-point measure for their feelings of trust towards the brand based on the information provided, adapted from prior research on religion and trust in the consumption domain (anchored by 1 = very untrustworthy to 7 = very trustworthy; *M* = 5.30, *SD* = 1.29) (Minton, 2015). Next participants indicated their quality perceptions for the brand by completing an adapted three-item, seven-point semantic differential scale (low/high, poor/excellent, inferior/superior; *M* = 5.25, *SD* = 1.20, α = 0.95). Additionally, participants reported their impression of the extent to which Carlisle Coffee's brand positioning is religious with a one-item, seven-point semantic differential scale (not at all religious/extremely religious; *M* = 4.31, *SD* = 2.28), followed by various demographic questions. Lastly, participants completed the eight-item BESC (brand engagement in the self-concept) measure (e.g., "I have a special bond with the brands that I like," "I consider my favorite brands to be a part of myself;" items anchored by 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; *M* = 4.14, *SD* = 1.53, α = 0.97) (Sprott et al., 2009) in an ostensibly unrelated survey.

5.2. Results

5.2.1. Manipulation check

An ANOVA ($F(1241) = 226.90$, $p < .001$) indicated that participants perceived the religious positioned brand to be more religious (*M* = 5.85, *SD* = 1.63) than the non-religious brand (*M* = 2.68, *SD* = 1.65). As such, the religious brand positioning manipulation was successful.

5.2.2. Trust

For our hierarchical regression model, feelings of trust towards the brand served as the dependent measure. Feelings of trust was regressed on the contrast-coded experimental brand conditions variable (non-religious = -1, religious brand positioning = 1) and mean-centered BESC in step 1, while the interaction between those variables was entered in the model in step 2. A main effect for the experimental brand condition was found, whereby participants generally had less trust for the religious (vs. non-religious) brand positioning. In addition, a main effect for BESC indicated that participants higher in BESC had greater feelings of trust. Importantly, a significant interaction between the experimental brand conditions variable and BESC emerged (see Table 1 for regression results).

Table 1
Religious brand positioning x BESC interaction on trust and quality perceptions and simple slopes for BESC.

Analysis	Trust			Quality Perceptions		
Step 1	β	*t*	*p*	β	*t*	*p*
Religious brand positioning (RBP)	− .22	− 3.60	0.01	− 0.25	− 4.32	0.01
BESC	0.26	4.27	0.01	0.36	6.17	0.01
Step 2						
RBP x BESC	0.14	2.33	0.02	0.13	2.25	0.03
BESC Simple Slopes						
Low BESC (−1 S.D.)	− 0.36	− 4.22	0.01	− 0.38	− 4.67	0.01
High BESC (+1 S.D.)	− 0.08	− 0.91	0.36	− 0.12	− 1.47	0.14

Notes: Religious brand positioning contrast-coded: non-religious (-1); religious (1). BESC = brand engagement in the self-concept (mean-centered).

To further explore the two-way interaction, we conducted two spotlight follow-up analyses examining the effect of the experimental brand condition variable at low and high levels of BESC. Following conventional procedures (Aiken and West, 1991), two regression slopes were estimated at low (one *SD* below the mean) and high (one *SD* above the mean) levels of BESC. Only one significant regression slope emerged (i.e., low BESC). Specifically, participants with lower levels of BESC had lower feelings of trust for the religious (vs. non-religious) brand. On the other hand, the lack of statistical significance of the high BESC slope across the experimental brand conditions suggests that participants with higher levels of BESC did not differ in feelings of trust for either the religious or non-religious brand. Simple slope analyses can be found in Table 1, and the interaction is depicted in Fig. 1.

5.2.3. Quality perceptions

We conducted the same set of regression analyses on quality perceptions as we did for feelings of trust. Our linear regression model revealed main effects for the experimental brand conditions variable, demonstrating lower perceived quality for the religious (vs. non-religious) brand, and for BESC, in which participants with higher levels of BESC had greater perceptions of quality. Once again, a significant interaction between the experimental brand conditions variable and BESC emerged.

To probe the two-way interaction, we carried out the same set of spotlight analyses on quality perceptions as we did for feelings of trust. As expected, the low BESC slope was significant, demonstrating that participants with lower levels of BESC perceived lower quality for the religious (vs. non-religious) brand. We also found, as predicted, that the high BESC slope was not significant; thus, participants who were more likely to define the self with important brands did not perceive a quality difference between the religious and non-religious brands. Regression and simple slope analyses can be found in Table 1, and the interaction is shown in Fig. 1.

5.2.4. Conditional mediation analysis

In order to examine whether the effect of a religious brand positioning on quality perceptions is mediated by feelings of trust, depending on an individual's level of the BESC disposition (i.e., high vs. low), we utilized model 8 of Hayes' (2013) PROCESS macro with

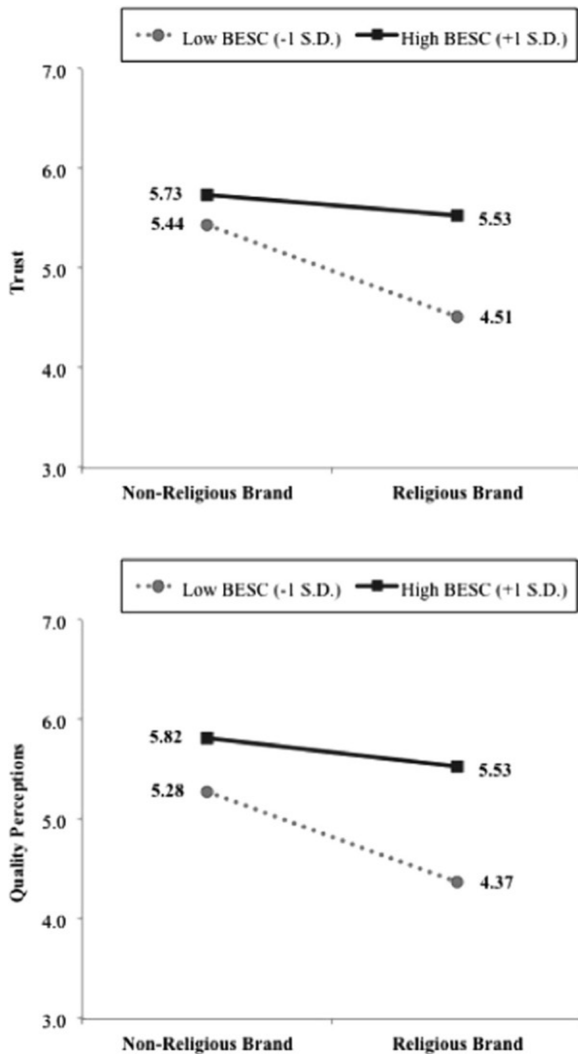

Fig. 1. The interactive effect of religious brand positioning and BESC on trust and quality perceptions.

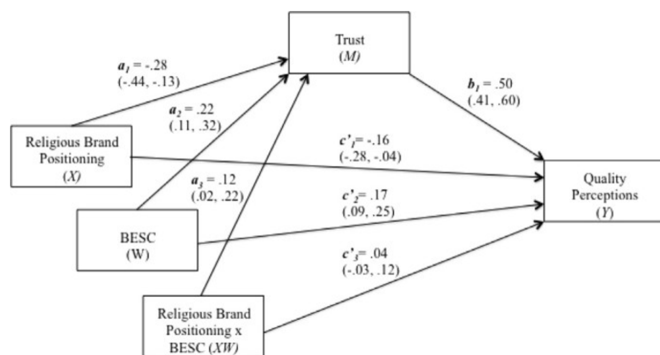

Fig. 2. Conditional mediation model comparing non-religious to religious brand positioning. Notes: Religious brand positioning contrast-coded: non-religious (-1); religious (1). BESC = brand engagement in the self-concept (mean-centered). All intervals are reported at 95% confidence levels.

bootstrapped estimates comprising 5000 samples. The experimental brand conditions variable was used as the main predictor, feelings of trust as the mediator, quality perceptions as the dependent variable, and BESC as the moderator or conditional variable (see Fig. 2). For those participants higher in BESC, the path from the experimental brand conditions variable (contrast-coded: non-religious = -1, religious = 1) to quality perceptions through feelings of trust (indirect effect) was not significant ($(a_1 + a_3W)b_1$ = -0.05,95%CI = -0.1523, .0415). Specifically, participants with higher levels of the BESC disposition did not perceive differences in quality for the religious (vs. non-religious) brand due to lower feelings of trust. On the other hand, for participants with lower levels of BESC, the indirect effect of the experimental brand conditions variable on quality perceptions through feelings of trust was significant ($(a_1 + a_3W)b_1$ = -0.23, 95%CI = -0.3680, -0.1233). Notably, compared to the non-religious brand condition, participants lower in the BESC disposition and exposed to the religious brand positioning condition had lower quality perceptions of the brand due to lower feelings of trust for the religious brand.

5.3. Discussion

We found that participants generally did not have as much trust and perceived lower quality for religiously positioned brands. This fits with prior literature showing that religion is a controversial topic and, therefore, may be less well received by consumers (Mokhlis, 2006). These findings are particularly interesting in light of prior research generally showing positive effects of religious branding (Minton, 2016; Siala, 2013; Taylor et al., 2010). As such, it may not be in a company's best interest to conspicuously advertise religious values.

Even more interesting were the results for the moderating effect of BESC. Consumers that were low in BESC were the ones that were experiencing lower trust and quality perceptions for religious brands, while these effects were not found for consumers high in BESC; thereby, supporting H1. As expected, we found that consumers higher in BESC were less reactant to religious brands. Consumers with higher levels of BESC can appreciate the positioning of religious brands since these brands could be construed as important, given the values they signal and possibly incorporated as part of their self-concepts. On the other hand, consumers lower in BESC generally do not find brands as pertinent in their lives and, as such, are more likely to be reactant to a religious brand positioning due to the intrinsic benefits of a religious brand providing minimal benefit to such consumers.

Finally, we demonstrated support for our conditional psychological process hypothesis (H2) in which religious brands had a negative influence on quality perceptions due to feelings of less trust for such brands but only for consumers with lower (vs. higher) levels of BESC. This extends prior research to show that trust is indeed critical to understand in brand evaluations (Grayson et al., 2008; Minton, 2015; Morgan and Hunt, 1994), particularly for brands with different religious positioning.

6. Study 1B: Explicit religious brand positioning and product category

Our intent for this study is to better understand our findings from Study 1 A and specifically to rule out alternative explanations for these findings. First, we explore whether consumers' overall less favorable responses to religious brands could be due to the explicitness of the religious cue used in our previous experimental study. Second, we aim to rule out the possibility that a negative reactance to a religious brand positioning might be due to a particular product category. The experimental design in Study 1B includes different levels of religious cue explicitness as well as a product category variable that presents participants either a fictional bakery or clothing brand. Lastly, we also utilize a different marketing outcome variable, namely brand attitude, to enhance the generalizability of our findings in Study 1A.

6.1. Method

6.1.1. Participants

Three-hundred and thirty-six adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated in our study and were provided a small cash incentive

(M_{age} = 35.52, SD = 11.63; 48.4% female, United States only, > 95% approval). Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 3(religious brand positioning: none, less explicit, explicit) x 2(product category: bakery, clothing) between-subjects design.

6.1.2. Procedure

In Study 1B, we generally followed the same procedures as in Study 1 A. Instead of presenting all participants a fictional coffee brand, participants in Study 1B were shown the same fictional brand of Carlisle while manipulating the product category (i.e., "Carlisle Bakery" vs. "Carlisle Clothing"). Participants were provided similar brand information from Study 1 A and were also shown an image of the brand's bag that included the printed brand name towards the top. Once again, we manipulated the religious brand positioning by including an explicit religious cue ("John 3:16") or a less explicit religious cue ("Operating Prayerfully") on the bottom of the brand's bag. The non-religious brand positioning condition did not have any cue on the bottom of the bag.

6.1.3. Measures

Once participants were given ample time to review the brand positioning, they were first asked to complete a three-item, seven-point semantic differential scale for their brand attitude (bad/good, unfavorable/favorable, negative/positive; M = 5.25, SD = 1.71, α = 0.98). Next, participants indicated the degree that Carlisle Coffee's brand positioning is religious using the same measure from Study 1 A (M = 4.46, SD = 1.99) and reported the extent to which the religious cue was subtle with a one-item, seven-point semantic differential scale developed for this study (not at all obvious/extremely obvious; M = 3.71, SD = 2.35). Participants then completed various demographic questions.

6.2. Results

6.2.1. Manipulation checks

An omnibus ANOVA (F(2333) = 51.44, p < .001) and a follow-up Helmert contrast test (p < .001) revealed that participants perceived the religious positioned brand conditions (i.e., less explicit; M = 4.94, SD = 1.94 and explicit cue; M = 5.32, SD = 1.67) to be more religious than the non-religious brand (M = 3.11, SD = 1.61). However, participants did not perceive the explicit (vs. less explicit) religious brand condition to be more religious (p > .097). As such, the religious brand positioning manipulation was successful. We also conducted a one-way ANOVA on the perceived subtleness of the religious cue for the experimental brand conditions (F(2333) = 66.77, p < .001). Helmert contrast tests indicated that participants found the cues (i.e., explicit; M = 4.77, SD = 2.05 and less explicit; M = 4.39, SD = 2.30) for the religious brands to be more obvious than the non-religious brand (M = 1.95, SD = 1.54) (p < .001), while no differences were found between the explicit and less explicit conditions (p = .148). Even though no differences were found between the religious brand conditions (i.e., explicit vs. less explicit cue), the means were in the expected direction.

6.2.2. Brand attitude

A 3(religious brand positioning) x 2(product category) ANOVA on brand attitude revealed a main effect of religious brand positioning (F (2333) = 9.53, p < .001). There was no main effect for product category (p = .116), and the interaction between the two variables was not significant (p = .868).

We ran Helmert contrast tests that revealed less favorable evaluations for the religious brands (i.e., explicit; M = 5.18, SD = 1.74 and less explicit; M = 4.80, SD = 2.03) compared to the non-religious brand (M = 5.76, SD = 1.09) (p < .001), while no significant differences for brand attitude emerged between the explicit and less explicit religious brand conditions (p = .083).

6.3. Discussion

Despite our subtleness manipulation check for the religious cues not being significantly different (i.e., explicit vs. less explicit), the means were in expected direction for the manipulation check, and the brand attitude towards the explicit and less explicit religious brand positioning were not significantly different. Taken together, there is evidence that suggests the negative reactance to religious brand positioning may not be due to the explicitness of the religious cue. We also demonstrated in this study that the less favorable responses to a religious brand positioning were unlikely due to a product category effect. Our experimental manipulation of presenting participants either a religious bakery or clothing brand did not have a significant effect on brand attitude nor was the interaction between the religious brand positioning and product category significant. Finally, we demonstrated the robustness of consumers' less favorable responses to religious positioned brands by utilizing a different marketing outcome measure in Study 1B, namely brand attitude.

7. Study 2: The role of firm size

Our intent for this study is to explore whether firm size has an impact on a consumer's response to religious positioned brands and whether such effects might be further moderated by a consumers' BESC disposition (H3); thus, providing us more insight in regards to the relationship between religious brands and the branded schema.

7.1. Method

7.1.1. Participants

Two-hundred and ten undergraduates from a large U.S. Midwestern university participated in this study in exchange for course credit (M_{age} = 20.75, SD = 1.34; 43.1% female). We opted to conduct this study in a laboratory environment to strengthen the internal validity of our studies. Participants were randomly assigned to one condition of a 2(religious brand positioning: non-religious, religious) x 2(firm size: small, large) between-subjects design.

7.1.2. Procedure

The procedure for this study was similar to our prior studies. We opted to use the fictional coffee brand (i.e., Carlisle Coffee) and same stimuli from Study 1A. Once again, we included a Bible verse (John 3:16) on the bottom of the brand's cup for the religious brand condition, while no cue was included on the cup for the non-religious brand. We manipulated firm size by presenting information depicting the size. Specifically, participants were informed that the small firm only has one location, employs only a few people, and serves approximately 100 customers per day. In contrast, participants assigned to the large firm condition read that the brand has numerous locations throughout the U.S., employs hundreds of people, and serves approximately l00,000 people every day.

7.1.3. Measures

The measures used for Study 2 were administered in prior studies except where noted. After being provided ample time to examine the experimental stimuli, participants indicated their belief of being valued by Carlisle Coffee by completing a one-item, seven-point Likert scale developed for purposes of this study ("I believe Carlisle Coffee would value my thoughts and feedback;" M = 5.06, SD = 1.09). Next, participants reported their impression of the extent to which Carlisle Coffee's brand positioning is religious (M = 4.25, SD = 1.92). Participants then completed the BESC (M = 4.35, SD = 1.27, α = 0.92) scale. Finally, participants completed various demographic questions.

Table 2
Religious brand positioning x Firm size x BESC interaction on beliefs of being valued and spotlight contrasts.

Analysis	Beliefs of Being Valued		
Step 1	β	*t*	*p*
Religious brand positioning (RBP)	0.026	0.391	0.696
Firm size (FS)	− 0.251	− 3.795	0.001
BESC	0.182	2.745	0.007
Step 2			
RBP x FS	0.142	1.249	0.213
RBP x BESC	0.034	0.385	0.701
FS x BESC	0.1411.601	0.111	
Step 3			
RBP x FS x BESC	0.230	2.171	0.031
Spotlight Analyses			
Low BESC (− 1 SD)			
No religious brand	− 0.331	− 2.665	0.008
Religious brand	− 0.475	− 3.195	0.002
High BESC (+ 1 SD)			
No religious brand	− 0.352	− 2.653	0.009
Religious brand	0.120	0.857	0.393

Notes: Religious brand positioning dummy-coded: non-religious (0); religious (1). Firm size dummy-coded: small (0); large (1). BESC = brand engagement in the self-concept (mean-centered).

7.2. Results

7.2.1. Manipulation check

An ANOVA ($F(1208) = 152.66$, $p < .001$) revealed that the religious brand positioning condition was perceived to be more religious ($M = 5.49$, $SD = 1.22$) than the non-religious brand condition ($M = 3.01$, $SD = 1.68$). As such, our manipulation for the religious brand positioning was successful.

7.2.2. Beliefs of being valued

To test H3, we conducted a three-step hierarchical regression analysis to examine the influence of religious brand positioning and firm size as well as the moderating effect of BESC on beliefs of being valued by Carlisle Coffee. We used dummy-coding for the religious brand positioning (non-religious = 0; religious = 1) and the firm size (small = 0; large = 1) conditions, while BESC was mean-centered. Next, we proceeded to create three two-way interaction effects: (1) religious branding x firm size, (2) religious branding x BESC, and (3) firm size x BESC; and a three-way interaction amongst our variables. For our regression analysis, we entered the main effects in step 1, the two-way interactions in step 2, and the three-way interaction in step 3. As shown in Table 2 (step 1), the main effects for firm size and BESC were significant. Specifically, larger (vs. smaller) firms had less beliefs of being valued, and consumers with higher (vs. lower) levels of BESC had more beliefs of being valued. Notably, the hypothesized three-way interaction was significant on beliefs of being valued. No other significant effects emerged from our analysis.

To further explore the three-way interaction, we tested the religious brand positioning x firm size interaction within low levels of BESC (-1SD) and high levels of BESC (+1SD), and consequently, the effect of a small (vs. large) firm within each of the four conditions (see Table 2 and Fig. 3). Our spotlight analyses revealed that consumers with lower levels of BESC had greater beliefs of being valued by the Carlisle brand when the firm was small (vs. large) for both the non-religious and religious brand. We also find the same pattern of effect for consumers with higher levels of BESC, but only for the non-religious positioned brand. Interestingly, for high BESC consumers, no significant differences emerge for beliefs of being valued between the small and large sized firm when presented with a religious brand.

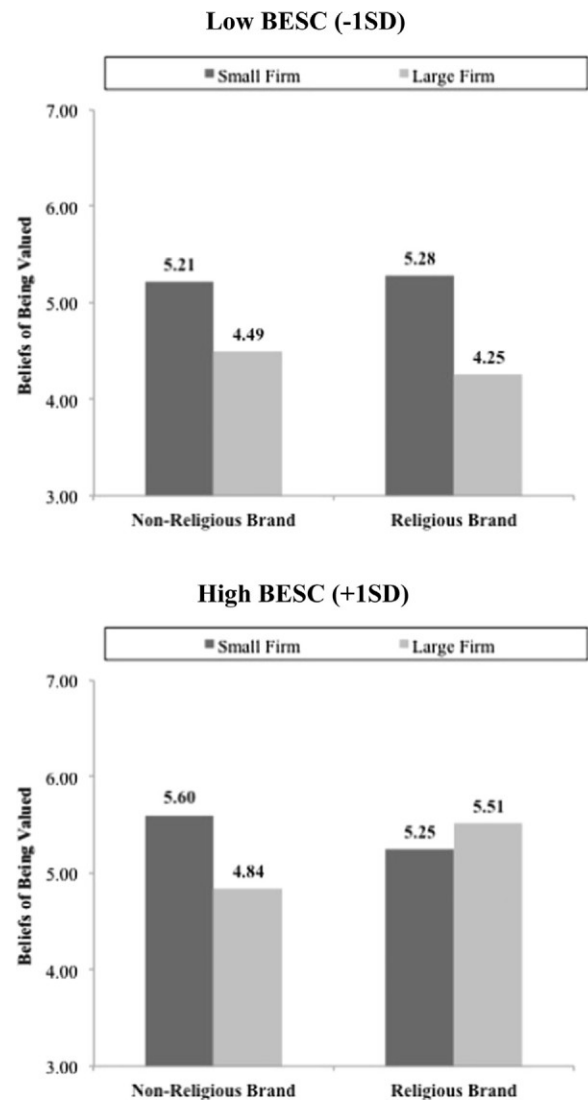

Fig. 3. The interactive effect of religious brand positioning, firm size, and BESC on beliefs of being valued.

7.3. Discussion

We demonstrated in Study 2 that there are circumstances for when consumers believe they can make a valued contribution to a brand. Our experimental study revealed that for consumers with higher levels of BESC and when presented a religious brand, beliefs of being valued by the firm are the same regardless of whether the firm is small or large. Previous research has shown that consumers, for the most part, do not believe that larger firms will take their input as seriously compared to smaller firms (Orth and Green, 2009). We confirm prior work in this area for those lower in the BESC disposition when exposed to either a religious or non-religious brand and even for those higher in BESC when presented a non-religious brand. However, we find no significant differences in beliefs of being valued by the brand between small and large firms for those with higher levels of BESC, thereby mostly supporting H3.

8. Study 3: Religiosity, branded schema, and religious brands

The purpose of this study is to further examine consumer responses to religious versus non-religious brand positions and the role of the branded schema. We extend findings from our prior studies by testing whether religiosity further moderates the interaction between religious

brands and BESC on brand attitude (H4).

8.1. Method

8.1.1. Participants

Two-hundred and forty adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk participated in this study in exchange for a small cash incentive (M_{age} = 34.60, SD = 11.96; 45.0% female, United States only, > 95% approval). Each participant was randomly assigned to a religious brand positioning condition (non-religious vs. religious) in a between-subjects design.

8.1.2. Procedure

In Study 3, we generally followed the same procedure as in prior studies. We used the same fictional bakery brand (i.e., Carlisle Bakery), brand information, and images as in Study 1B. Similar to previous studies, we manipulated the religious brand positioning by including a Bible verse (John 3:16) on the bottom of the brand's bag, while no Bible verse was included on the bag for the non-religious brand.

8.1.3. Measures

After exposure to the experimental stimuli, participants completed the same brand attitude measure (M = 6.12, SD = 1.14, α = 0.97) from Study 1B. Next, participants reported their impression of the extent to which Carlisle Bakery's brand positioning is religious (M = 4.28, SD = 2.31) using the same item as in prior studies. Participants then completed the BESC (M = 3.90, SD = 1.61, α = 0.97) scale and indicated their level of religiosity with the ten-item religious commitment inventory (RCI) scale (items anchored by 1 = not at all true of me to 5 = totally true of me; M = 1.91, SD = 1.19, α = 0.97) in what appeared to be an unrelated survey (Worthington et al., 2003). Lastly, participants reported various demographics.

8.2. Results

8.2.1. Manipulation check

In order to verify the success of the religious brand positioning manipulation, participants' impression on the extent of Carlisle Bakery's religious positioning was tested with an ANOVA. The ANOVA (F(1238) = 251.76, p < .001) revealed that the religious brand positioning condition was perceived to be more religious (M = 5.97, SD = 1.57) than the non-religious brand condition (M = 2.66, SD = 1.66). Thus, the manipulation for the religious brand positioning was successful.

8.2.2. Brand attitude

To test H4, we utilized a three-step hierarchical regression analysis. Specifically, we regressed brand attitude on the religious brand experimental conditions, BESC, RCI, and all two- and three-way cross-products. Our intent was to examine the influence of religious brands and BESC on brand attitude, further moderated by RCI. We mean-centered data on all scaled independent variables (i.e., BESC and RCI) and modeled religious positioned brands as a dummy variable (0 = non-religious, and 1 = religious). Regression model results appear in Table 3. As shown in the regression table, all of the main effects were significant. Notably, participants found the religious (vs. non-religious) brand less favorable and consumers with higher levels of BESC and RCI reported more favorable brand attitude. The two-way interaction between religious brands and RCI was significant as well as the hypothesized three-way interaction amongst all model variables. No other significant effects emerged from our analysis.

To probe this interaction further (see Fig. 4), we calculated brand attitude estimates in the experimental religious brand conditions for participants with low (-1SD) versus high (+1 SD) levels of RCI across low (-1SD) versus high (+1 SD) levels of BESC. As supported by simple slope tests, consumers lower in RCI found the religious (vs. non-religious) brand to be less favorable. Our significant slope tests indicated this to be the case for consumers lower and higher in the BESC disposition and even more so for those lower in BESC. In contrast, our simple slope tests revealed that consumers with higher levels of RCI did not evaluate the religious brand differently from the non-religious brand. The less favorable evaluations for religious (vs. non-religious) brands found amongst low RCI consumers was attenuated for those consumers with higher levels of RCI. The attenuation of less favorable brand attitude for consumers higher in RCI emerged for both low and high BESC consumers. See simple slope tests in Table 3.

Table 3
Religious brand positioning x BESC x RCI interaction on brand attitude and simple slopes for BESC.

Analysis	Brand Attitude		
Step 1	β	t	p
Religious brand positioning (RBP)	− .214	− 3.498	0.001
BESC	0.191	3.046	0.003
RCI	0.186	2.968	0.003
Step 2			
RBP x BESC	0.084	0.965	0.335
RBP x RCI	0.342	3.782	0.001
BESC x RCI	− 0.067	− 1.077	0.283
Step 3			
RBP x BESC x RCI	− 0.196	− 2.008	0.046
BESC Simple Slopes			
Low RCI (−1 SD)			
Low BESC (−1 SD)	− 0.622	− 5.491	0.001
High BESC (+1 SD)	− 0.276	− 2.230	0.027
High RCI (+1 SD)			
Low BESC (−1 SD)	0.142	1.001	0.318
High BESC (+1 SD)	0.021	0.201	0.841

Notes: Religious brand positioning dummy-coded: non-religious (0); religious (1). BESC = brand engagement in the self-concept (mean-centered). RCI = religious commitment inventory (mean-centered).

8.3. Discussion

Responses to religious versus non-religious brands for consumers with higher levels of religiosity did not differ from one another. We found this to be true for those consumers higher and lower in BESC. We expected high BESC consumers to prefer religious brands regardless of religiosity level, while low BESC consumers that were more religious (less religious) to prefer religious (non-religious) brands, and thus our results fail to support H4.

Interestingly however, the lack of a significant difference in evaluations of religious and non-religious brands for those with higher levels of religiosity represented an attenuation when comparing to the results of those lower in the religiosity disposition. Specifically, consumers with lower levels of religiosity found the religious (vs. non-religious) brand to be less favorable. Additionally, consumers with lower (vs. higher) levels of BESC found the religious brand to be even less favorable. The fact that higher levels of religiosity mitigated the less favorable responses to religious brands for those with lower levels of religiosity suggests that a value overlap (i.e., high religiosity paired with religious brands) within a consumer brand relationship can potentially overcome unfavorable responses to such brands. Moreover, the fact that consumers with higher BESC levels and lower in religiosity still found the religious (vs. non-religious) brand to be less favorable conveys the notion that religiosity trumps a branded schema when unraveling the personality traits that respond more positively to religious brands.

9. General discussion

Findings from Studies 1–3 show that religious brands do in fact influence consumer evaluations, and trust and BESC in turn influence these evaluations. Specifically, our research fulfilled the three purposes

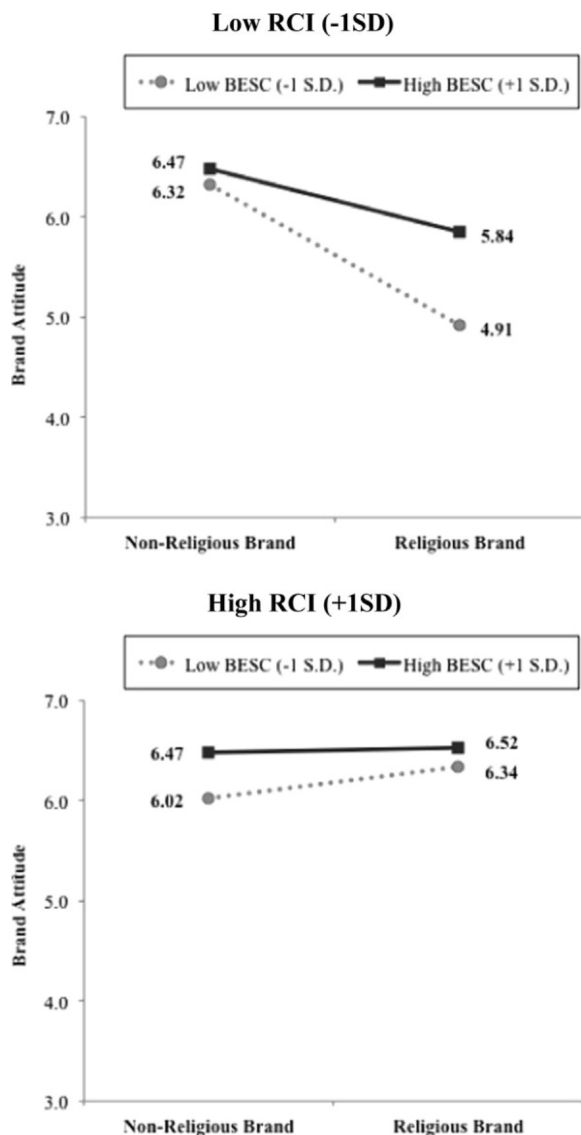

Fig. 4. The interactive effect of religious brand positioning, BESC, and RCI on brand attitude.

set forth in the introduction. First, we explored BESC as a moderator for the relationship between religious brand positioning and evaluations, finding that it is only consumers low in the BESC disposition that report less favorable evaluations for religious brands, in comparison to non-religious brands, due to less trust for such brands. In contrast, high BESC consumers do not necessarily trust either religious or non-religious brands more, nor do high BESC consumers find either brand type to be of better quality. This is surprising in showing that BESC can lead less or non-religious consumers to appreciate religious brands. Second, we tested the mediating influence of trust in the relationship between religious brand positioning and evaluations, showing that trust fully mediated this relationship. Specifically, religious brands produced lower levels of trust, which negatively influenced evaluations. Lastly, we examined moderators of firm size and religiosity to show that both factors influence brand evaluations for religious versus non-religious positioned brands, particularly for high BESC consumers.

9.1. Contributions to theory

This research also builds on signaling theory (Spence, 1973) to show that religious values communicated in branding can act as signals influencing a consumer's general evaluation of a brand. This expands on prior research examining signaling theory in marketing (c.f., Connelly et al., 2011; Ho-Dac et al., 2013) to show that brands can signal quality perceptions by communicating core values. While further research needs to expand the generalizability of our effects to other audiences, our research suggests that religious value-based signals are pervasive signals for influencing evaluations. One avenue for extending this generalizability is for researchers to look at other religious value-based signals (e.g., social media posts, commercial messages, donations to religious-based charities, etc.).

Additionally, this research provides unique insight to self-congruence theory (Rokeach and Rothman, 1965) in showing a moderating/boundary condition to congruence. Specifically, our results identified that congruence between values and consumption decisions may not be as important to high BESC consumers that instead care more about brand symbolism and a brand's meaning to one's self. As mentioned earlier, religious brands have been shown to have positive attributes in comparison to non-religious brands, such as having higher quality perceptions, operating standards, and externally-oriented core values (Dotson and Hyatt, 2000; Minton, 2015; Minton and Kahle, 2017; Taylor et al., 2010). As such, religious brands can serve as important brands to high BESC consumers, even if they have lower levels of religiosity, which may decrease their need for self-congruence. Further research is warranted to examine other ways in which BESC is a moderating variable to self-congruent situations (e.g., with political values, health values, etc.) and a construct to include in future models of self-congruence.

9.2. Implications for practitioners

Generally, our results suggest that conspicuously advertising a brand's religious positioning has the potential to negatively influence consumers' evaluations of such brands. On the surface, findings that point to less favorable evaluations of religious (vs. non-religious) brands would lead most to believe that such brands and promotion of religious beliefs should only occur in certain geographic regions (e.g., Midwestern United States). Rather, marketing managers of religious brands likely need to focus on building feelings of trust to improve brand evaluations amongst the consumers in their target market(s), particularly those consumers who are not predisposed to define their self-concept with brands. Religious brands could focus on the operationalization of their positioning by clearly demonstrating the functional aspects of their religious affiliation (e.g., paying above market wages to employees, generous consumer return policies) rather than the symbolic aspects (e.g., spiritual and prayer references) that would not likely appeal to low BESC consumers.

Given that our primary experimental manipulation of religious positioning was a Bible verse on the packaging of fictitious brands, religious brands should proceed with hesitation before integrating religious messaging into branded communications. Our findings imply that even a subtle religious cue (e.g., a message of operating prayerfully) is enough to garner a less favorable reaction from consumers.

9.3. Limitations and future research

As with any experimental design, limitations exist from our work that could be improved upon in future research. For example, our studies only manipulated one religious aspect (i.e., religious reference on packaging). Realistically, most religious brands (e.g., Chick-fil-A, Hobby Lobby) have multiple religious aspects that are recognized by consumers. However, we elected to minimize any potential demand effects by focusing on only one religious aspect. Future work should examine more than a single religious aspect in consumer response to religious brands for stronger external validity, such as examining a religious packaging reference alongside mention in marketing communication, on buildings, in expressions from leadership, etc.

Moreover, subsequent research could delve further into whether the explicitness of religious cues plays a factor in consumers' responses to religious brands in conjunction with the presentation of multiple religious aspects.

Additionally, alternative methods of measuring consumer response to religious positioning would lend more insight, such as conducting semi-structured interviews with consumers of religious brands. Further research would also benefit from understanding why consumers are less trusting of religious positioned brands. While we propose several theories as to why this may be occurring (e.g., reactance, counter-cultural, fit with ideology), further research would benefit from manipulating these constructs to better identify the specific mechanisms at play.

Additional research should examine other moderating effects of consumer response to religious versus non-religious brands. For example, research should identify how BESC's influence on consumer response differs for products that are more closely tied to a consumer's extended self (Belk, 1988) in comparison to products not as closely connected to a consumer's self-concept. Other research should also examine how BESC moderates effects of other value-based messaging, such as socially-conscious messaging as seen with Patagonia or Toms, political messaging as seen with Starbucks, or LGBTQ marketplace access rights as seen with Target.

Future research could also examine how religious positioning of non-Christian value systems influence brand evaluations for consumers of varying BESC levels. Prior research shows that perspectives of brands with messages from Western (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Judaism) and Eastern (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism) religions influence consumer response differently (Babakus et al., 2004; Minton et al., 2015). Additionally, research manipulating self-esteem would further delineate effects in our studies by determining whether a threatened self improves low BESC consumers' feelings of trust towards religious brands as a means for repairing the self-concept. In sum, our studies provide novel insight into consumer response to religious versus non-religious brands and the role of trust and BESC in this response; numerous areas of future research exist to uncover when brands would benefit or not benefit from elucidating religious values to consumers.

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