Finding Brands and Losing Your Religion?

Keisha M. Cutright 1 Tülin Erdem 2 Gavan J. Fitzsimons 3 Ron Shachar 4

¹The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104, kcut@wharton.upenn.edu

²Stern School of Business, New York University, New York, NY 10012, <u>terdem@stern.nyu.edu</u>

³Fuqua School of Business, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, gavan@duke.edu

⁴Arison School of Business, Interdisciplinary Center (IDC), Herzliya, Israel 46150, ronshachar@idc.ac.il

2

Abstract

Religion is a powerful force in many people's lives, impacting decisions about life, death

and everything in-between. It may be surprising then to learn that something as seemingly

innocuous as brand name products can undermine an individual's commitment to religion. We

demonstrate that when brands are highly salient, individuals are more likely to devalue religious

commitment than when brands are not salient. We find that this is true when brands are

incorporated into one's expression of the self and are thus able to satisfy similar self-expressive

needs as religion.

Word count = 2,864

Key words: religion, brands, self-expression

Whether you consider it to be a source of deadly extremism or the pathway to humanity's highest potential (Pargament, 2002), few will deny the power of religion. In the United States, the most religious of developed countries, 71% of people are "absolutely certain" that God or another universal spirit exists (Pew Research Center, 2010) and 59% say religion plays a "very important" role in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2002). In many developing nations, religious beliefs are even stronger. Greater than 90% of people in many areas of Africa, Asia and the Middle East say that religion plays a "very important" role in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2002). It is no wonder then that psychologists have been interested in the underpinnings of religion since the foundation of the discipline itself (Gorsuch, 1988; James, 1902; Leuba, 1912; Starbuck, 1899) and continue to stress its importance (Baumeister, 2002; Sedikides, 2010). We suggest that one way to better understand religion and the broader psychological needs with which it is associated is to investigate what weakens it. What leads individuals to turn their backs on an omnipresent God? Another omnipresent force may be a viable culprit: brand name products.

In this research, we ask: Can brand name products influence individuals' commitment to their religion? Religious commitment is the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs and practices and uses them in daily living (Worthington et al., 2003). It is considered to be one way by which individuals meaningfully position themselves in the world and express their identity while connecting with others (King, 2003). While one might initially scoff at the idea that something as simple as brands could impact something as important as one's religious commitment, the notion is not far-fetched when you consider important ways that the two can be linked. In particular, choosing and using brands has been found to serve similar self-expressive functions as committing to one's religion. Brands, like religion, help

individuals express themselves by articulating their self-worth (Allport & Ross, 1967; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010; Shachar, Erdem, Cutright, & Fitzsimons, 2011), communicating aspects of their identity to others (Aaker, 1999; Berger & Heath, 2007; Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Kleine, Kleine, & Kernan, 1993; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010), and signaling desired affiliations (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008; Granqvist, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2010; Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010). Further, recent research has supported the notion that more religious people tend to choose fewer branded products (Shachar et al., 2011). But, might brands actually have the power to lower one's religious commitment?

Leveraging prior research that demonstrates that individuals devalue objects that are associated with needs that have been satisfied (Brendl, Markman, & Messner, 2003), we reason that when brands are salient, religious commitment will be lower than when brands are not salient. This is because they both often satisfy a need to express the self. Importantly, we expect that the salience of brands will result in lower levels of religious commitment only when brands allow individuals to say something about who they are (Belk, 1988). Otherwise, brands are unlikely to be viewed as acceptable self-expression substitutes for religion.

In what follows, we test our basic hypothesis that the salience of brands leads to lower levels of religious commitment relative to a neutral state. As religious commitment has long been considered a multidimensional construct that can be assessed based on 1) religious beliefs and 2) religious activities (Glock & Stark, 1968; Worthington et al., 2003), we use measures that address both of these dimensions to test our hypotheses.

Study 1

Study 1 tested our hypothesis that when brands are salient, individuals will report lower religious commitment than when they are not. Participants were 71 students (34 female; ages 18-32). The experiment consisted of two between-subject conditions: high versus low brand salience.

In the high brand salience condition (i.e., the "brand" condition), participants chose between two branded products, 10 different times. For example, in one choice, they decided between a red Adidas shirt and a green Adidas shirt. In another, they chose between a white Starbucks mug and a brown one. In the low brand salience condition (i.e., the "non-brand" condition), participants chose between the same pairs of products except the brand names were removed. We refer to this task as the "product choice task" in the remaining studies (see Table S1). We expected this task to be a powerful context with which to test our hypothesis because research has shown that (at least in the United States) choice is an important facilitator of self-expression (Kim & Drolet, 2003). We expected that when individuals made choices among brands, they would be able to express the self with the traits and personalities of the brands. Pre-testing results (available from the authors) confirmed that individuals in the brand condition felt a greater sense of self-expression than individuals in the non-brand condition.

After making their choices, participants completed the dependent measures. The first was a standard summary measure of religious commitment ("Religious Commitment Scale") that captures the degree to which individuals have incorporated religious values, beliefs and practices into their daily lives (Worthington et al., 2003). Participants rated their agreement on a seven point likert scale to 10 statements such as "My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life" (α = .97). This scale was chosen not only because it is a brief, reliable measure of the religious commitment construct and leverages several items that have been useful in

prior research, but also because it has been validated among several religions. Our second measure of religious commitment evaluated the importance of attending religious services. Religious service attendance is considered to be the most common form of "public" religious commitment and is thought to be the gateway to other forms of religious commitment (Finney, 1978; Payne & Elifson, 1976). Participants indicated how important it is to attend religious services (7 pt scale, not at all important—extremely important) and how often they should attend religious services (6 pt scale: never—more than once a week) (Inglehart, 2000). Responses were formed into a standardized religious service attendance index (α = .94).

Participants then indicated how the choice exercise made them feel via the PANAS scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). No significant differences in positive or negative mood emerged (Fs < 1). Finally, no significant interactions with demographic measures such as religious affiliation were revealed in this or the remaining studies.

Results and Discussion

Consistent with our hypothesis, participants in the brand condition reported lower religious commitment (M = 1.31, SD = .42) than participants in the non-brand condition [M = 2.14, SD = 1.23; (F(1,69) = 14.14, p = .0004); d = .90]. The brand condition also reported lower importance of religious service attendance (M = -.67, SD = 1.55) than the non-brand condition [M = .35, SD = 1.88; (F(1,69) = 6.25, p = .01); d = .60].

Study 2

In the prior study, we used an inherently self-expressive context to reveal the hypothesized effect of brands: choice exercises that allowed people to express themselves with brands. In the next study, we wanted to more explicitly demonstrate that the relationship between brands and religious commitment exists only when brands are incorporated into one's expression of self. Thus, Study 2 was designed to manipulate the degree to which products are incorporated into the self by altering individuals' physical relationship with the product. We hypothesized that wearing a brand would provide a strong opportunity for individuals to incorporate the brand into one's expression of self (Gino, Norton, & Ariely, 2010; Park & John, 2010), while simply looking at the product would not. Accordingly, we expected that when individuals wore a branded product (versus a non-branded product), religious commitment would decline. We did not expect this relationship to exist when individuals simply looked at the brand. (Of note, in the prior study, the brand condition also 'looked' at brands as opposed to wearing them, but they were making choices that allowed for self-expression.)

Participants were 141 university students (83 female; ages 18-38). The design was a 2(brand salience: brand vs. non-brand) x 2(self-expressive context: high vs. low). In half of the sessions participants came into the lab and were given an Apple-branded lanyard ("brand" condition). In the remaining sessions, participants were given a plain black lanyard ("non-brand" condition). After receiving their lanyards, half of the participants were told to wear and evaluate the lanyard (high expression). The remaining participants were told NOT to wear it; just to look at it and evaluate it (low expression). A manipulation check using the Self-Brand Connection Scale (Escalas & Bettman, 2003) indicated that individuals were more likely to incorporate the product into the self when they were in the high expression (wear) condition than when they were in the low expression (look) condition. Next, individuals completed the

two dependent measures used previously to assess religious commitment: The standard Religious Commitment scale (α = .91) and the measure of public religious commitment (α = .90). Participants then completed mood and demographic measures. As it relates to mood, an unexpected main effect of brand condition on positive emotions emerged (positive and negative mood were both higher for the brand condition). Thus, the results below control for positive and negative mood.

Results and Discussion

There were no main effects of brand condition (F(1, 135) = .33, p = .57) or self-expressive context (F(1,135) = 1.88, p = .17) on the Religious Commitment scale. However, a significant interaction of the two conditions emerged (F(1, 135) = 7.07, p = .01). In the high self-expression condition (i.e., wearing the lanyard), individuals in the brand condition (Apple) reported lower religious commitment than individuals in the non-brand condition [(F(1, 135) = 4.37, p = .04); $M_{brand} = 1.66$, SD = .72; $M_{non-brand} = 2.00$, SD = .86; d = .43]. In the low self-expression condition (i.e., looking only), individuals in the brand condition reported religious commitment that was not significantly different (they were directionally higher) than individuals in the non-brand condition [(F(1, 135) = 2.55, p = .11); $M_{brand} = 2.13$, SD = 1.09; $M_{non-brand} = 1.74$, SD = .80]. This pattern of results was nearly identical when the importance of religious service attendance was the dependent variable. This study therefore reiterates the notion that brand salience leads to lower levels of religious commitment, but only when brands are incorporated into expressions of the self.

In the final study, our objective was to present evidence suggesting that brands only have the power to reduce religious commitment when individuals' beliefs about brands' abilities to express the self are intact. When such brand beliefs are threatened, individuals' religious commitment is expected to return to baseline levels. This is in line with research suggesting that people respond to threats by heightening their support of an acceptable substitute (Kay et al., 2008; Heine et al., 2006, Baumeister & Leary 1995; Inesi et al., 2011). In other words, when the value of brands is threatened, individuals should heighten support for a substitute—in this case, their religious commitment. However, we also wished to demonstrate that not just any threat to brands would cause people to return to religion. Instead, the threat must be relevant to brands' self-expression abilities. To test this idea, we threatened people's beliefs that brands could help them meet either a self-expressive goal or a non-expressive goal. The self-expressive goals were about using brands to express self-worth, express one's identity, or express one's personal affiliations and sense of belongingness. The non-expressive goal was about lowering product risk and increasing certainty by buying brands. We focused on certainty as the "nonexpressive" domain because research suggests that both brands and religion help reduce fears of negative outcomes (Kay et al., 2008; Keller, 2003). Thus, it is feasible that brands could serve as substitutes for one another in this non-expressive domain and threatening brands in this way could cause individuals to return to their religious commitment. However, given our hypothesis that religious commitment and brands are substitutes specifically for self-expressive needs, we did not expect to see religious commitment rebound in such a way when a non-expressive need was threatened.

To test these predictions, we recruited 131 adults online (74 female; ages 18-79). Participants were assigned to one of six conditions where they made a series of choices. In one of these conditions, participants made their choices among brands exactly as they did in prior studies, with no additional messaging following the choices (i.e., "brand/no threat" condition). In another condition, they made choices among non-branded items as in the non-brand manipulation of prior studies ("non-brand/no threat" condition). However, in three conditions participants made choices among brands and then received a "self-expressive" threat regarding brands after making their choices. They were told that people are not as successful as they think in 1) expressing self-worth with brands ("brand/self-worth threat" condition), 2) expressing their identities with brands ("brand/identity threat" condition) or 3) affiliating with others through brands ("brand/affiliation threat" condition). In a final condition, participants received a non-expressive threat after making choices among brands and were told that people are not as successful as they think in judging product quality through brand names ("brand/certainty threat" condition). (See online supplement for details.) The Religious Commitment scale and the importance of religious service attendance were the dependent variables.

Results and Discussion

Results revealed a significant main effect of condition (F(5, 125) = 2.80, p = .02) on the Religious Commitment scale. We replicated previous findings whereby the "brand/no threat" condition reported lower religious beliefs than the "non-brand/no threat" condition [(F(1, 125) = 4.26, p = .04); $M_{\text{brand/no threat}} = 1.48$, SD = .67; $M_{\text{non-brand/no threat}} = 2.24$, SD = 1.27; d = .85]. However, when brands experienced a self-expressive threat, individuals' religious commitment returned

to baseline. Specifically, the "brand/no threat" condition exhibited lower levels of religiosity than the "brand/self-worth threat" condition $[(F(1, 125) = 10.16, p = .002); M_{brand/no threat} = 1.48, SD = .67; M_{brand/self-worth threat} = 2.62, SD = 1.29; <math>d = 1.11]$, the "brand/identity threat" condition $[(F(1, 125) = 5.96, p = .02); M_{brand/id threat} = 2.34, SD = 1.16; <math>d = .91]$, and the "brand/affiliation threat" condition $[(F(1, 125) = 5.44, p = .02); M_{brand/affiliation threat} = 2.32, SD = 1.29; <math>d = .82]$. The only threat that did not lead individuals to return to a higher level of religious commitment versus the "brand/no threat" condition was the non-expressive threat—the certainty threat $[(F(1, 125) = .57, p = .45); M_{brand/certainty threat} = 1.76, SD = .84]$. The results were consistent when religious service attendance was the measures of religious commitment.

These results illustrate that brands lose their power to reduce religious commitment when their self-expressive abilities are threatened. Given that this is not true for all threats, the results cannot be attributed to a basic consistency account that would suggest that individuals report lower religious commitment after brands are salient only because they do not believe religious commitment is consistent with brand-related values. If it were merely about consistency, then being primed with a brand should not have differentially impacted religious commitment as a function of whether or not the brand was threatened in a way that was relevant to self-expression.

General Discussion

In summary, these studies have demonstrated that individuals' commitment to religion often wavers when brands are incorporated into the self and used as tools for self-expression. It seems that what many consider sacred is often treated as merely a means to an (expressive)

end. Furthermore, these findings imply that religious commitment is less stable for many people than they might assume, so much so that it can be shaken by something as seemingly trivial as brands.

Many interesting questions are raised by these findings. For example, in what ways are brands unique in serving as a substitute for religion? Would devotion to a sports team or other groups have similar effects? At least one account suggests that brands and religion lead to similar areas of brain activation and that this is distinct from the effects of other groups (Lindstrom, 2010). Other research, however, draws clear parallels between the effects of religion and other social activities (Wann, Melnick, Russell, & Pease, 2001). One may also wonder about functions of religion besides self-expression. We do not argue that self-expression is the only or even the main function of religiosity. Perhaps when other functions of religion are salient (e.g., moral guidance), religious commitment is more stable, even in the face of brands. We look forward to research that further explores these and many other questions involving the interwoven roles of both religion and brands in individuals' lives.

Supplementary Material

Table S1: Example Choices



Study 3 Manipulations

Participants read the following after making their choices for each of the six conditions:

Brand/ No threat- We are interested in your responses. We will come back later and ask you questions about your choices after we've allowed enough time to pass.

Non-brand/No threat- We are interested in your responses. We will come back later and ask you questions about your choices after we've allowed enough time to pass.

Brand/Self-worth threat: We are interested in your responses because research has shown that people are becoming very accustomed to trying to express their feelings of self-worth through brands. Unfortunately, research has shown that people are not nearly as successful as expressing their perceptions of self-worth through brands as they think they are. We will come back later and ask you questions about your choices after we've allowed enough time to pass.

Brand/Self-identity threat: We are interested in your responses because research has shown that people are becoming very accustomed to trying to express who they are and how they wish to be perceived by others through brands. Unfortunately, research has shown that people are not nearly as successful as expressing their desired identity through brands as they think they are. We will come back later and ask you questions about your choices after we've allowed enough time to pass.

Brand/Affiliation threat: We are interested in your responses because research has shown that people are becoming very accustomed to trying to affiliate with other people that are important to them through brands. Unfortunately, research has shown that people are not nearly as successful at affiliating with others through brands as they think they are. We will come back later and ask you questions about your choices after we've allowed enough time to pass.

Brand/Certainty threat: We are interested in your responses because research has shown that people are becoming very accustomed to trying to judge product quality through brand names. Unfortunately, research has shown that people are not nearly as successful as judging quality through brands as they think they are. We will come back later and ask you questions about your choices after we've allowed enough time to pass.

References

- Aaker, J. L. (1999). The malleable self: The role of self-expression in persuasion. *Journal of Marketing Research*, *36*(1), 45-57.
- Allport, G. W., & Ross, J. M. (1967). Personal religious orientation and prejudice. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 5(4), 432.
- Baumeister, R. F. (2002). Religion and psychology: Introduction to the special issue. *Psychological Inquiry*, *13*(3), 165-167.
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(3), 497.
- Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 139-168.
- Berger, J., & Heath, C. (2007). Where consumers diverge from others: Identity signaling and product domains. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 34(2), 121-134.
- Brendl, C. M., Markman, A. B., & Messner, C. (2003). The devaluation effect: Activating a need devalues unrelated objects. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29(4), 463-473.
- Center, Pew Research (2002). What the World Thinks in 2002: The Pew Global Attitudes Project
- Center, Pew Research (2010). Religion in the Millenial Generation.
- Chapman, K. J. (2001). Measuring intent: There's nothing "mere" about mere measurement effects. *Psychology and Marketing*, 18(8), 811-841.
- Epley, N., Akalis, S., Waytz, A., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2008). Creating social connection through inferential reproduction. *Psychological Science*, 19(2), 114.
- Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. R. (2003). You are what they eat: The influence of reference groups on consumers' connections to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 13(3), 339-348.
- Finney, J. M. (1978). A theory of religious commitment. Sociology of Religion, 39(1), 19-35.
- Fitzsimons, G. J., & Williams, P. (2000). Asking Questions Can Change Choice Behavior: Does It Do So Automatically or Effortfully? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied, 6*(3), 195.
- Gino, F., Norton, M. I., & Ariely, D. (2010). The Counterfeit Self. *Psychological Science*, *21*(5), 712.
- Glock, C. Y., & Stark, R. (1968). American piety: The nature of religious commitment. *Berkeley: The University of California*.
- Gorsuch, R. L. (1988). Psychology of religion. Annual Review of Psychology, 39(1), 201-221.
- Granqvist, P., Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2010). Religion as attachment: Normative processes and individual differences. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 14*(1), 49.
- Group, F. I. N. I. o. A. W. (1999). Multidimensional Measurement of Religiousness/Spirituality for Use in Health Research.
- Heine, S. J., Proulx, T., & Vohs, K. D. (2006). The meaning maintenance model: On the coherence of social motivations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*(2), 88.
- Hogg, M. A., Adelman, J. R., & Blagg, R. D. (2010). Religion in the face of uncertainty: An uncertainty-identity theory account of religiousness. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(1), 72.
- Inesi, M. E., Botti, S., Dubois, D., Rucker, D. D., & Galinsky, A. D. (2011). Power and Choice. *Psychological Science*.

- Inglehart, R. (2000). Codebook for World Values Survey. Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research.
- James, W. (1902). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. New York: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Kay, A. C., Gaucher, D., Napier, J. L., Callan, M. J., & Laurin, K. (2008). God and the government: Testing a compensatory control mechanism for the support of external systems. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(1), 18-35.
- Keller, K. L. (2003). Strategic Brand Management: Building, Measuring, and Managing Brand Equity (Vol. 787): Prentice Hall Upper Saddle River, NJ.
- Kim, H. S., & Drolet, A. (2003). Choice and self-expression: A cultural analysis of variety-seeking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85*(2), 373.
- King, P. E. (2003). Religion and identity: The role of ideological, social, and spiritual contexts. *Applied Developmental Science, 7*(3), 197-204.
- Kleine, R. E., Kleine, S. S., & Kernan, J. B. (1993). Mundane consumption and the self: a social-identity perspective. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 2(3), 209-236.
- Leuba, J. H. (1912). A Psychological Study of Religion. Oxford, England: Macmillan.
- Pargament, K. I. (2002). The Bitter and the Sweet: An Evaluation of the Costs and Benefits of Religiousness. *Psychological Inquiry*, *13*(3), 168-181.
- Park, J. K., & John, D. R. (2010). Got to Get You into My Life: Do Brand Personalities Rub Off on Consumers? *Journal of Consumer Research*, *37*(4), 655-669.
- Payne, B. P., & Elifson, K. W. (1976). Commitment: a comment on uses of the concept. *Review of Religious Research*, 209-215.
- Sedikides, C. (2010). Why does religiosity persist? *Personality and Social Psychology Review,* 14(1), 3-6.
- Sedikides, C., & Gebauer, J. E. (2010). Religiosity as self-enhancement: A meta-analysis of the relation between socially desirable responding and religiosity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 14*(1), 17.
- Shachar, R., Erdem, T., Cutright, K. M., & Fitzsimons, G. J. (2011). Brands: The Opiate of the Nonreligious Masses? *Marketing Science*, 30(1), 92.
- Starbuck, E. (1899). Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Study of the Growth of Religious Consciousness London: Walter Scott Publishing Co.
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *54*(6), 1063-1070.
- Worthington, E. L., Wade, N. G., Hight, T. L., Ripley, J. S., McCullough, M. E., Berry, J. W., . . . O Connor, L. (2003). The religious commitment inventory-10: Development, refinement, and validation of a brief scale for research and counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 50(1), 84-96.
- Ysseldyk, R., Matheson, K., & Anisman, H. (2010). Religiosity as identity: Toward an understanding of religion from a social identity perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(1), 60.